

Third Act



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A Double Portrait

Written by
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"The most important kind of freedom is to be what you really are. You trade in your reality for a role. You give up your ability to feel, and in exchange, put on a mask." ~ Jim Morrison

February, 1878

As Mary Ann stumbled toward her seat of the Moscowbound train her face was ashen, and each breath she took only intensified the feeling of cold dread that had taken permanent residence in her body. Feverish, fearful, haunted greyish blue eyes stared at her from every window, mirror and silver polished surface of the now moving train. They were her eyes. They reflected the intensity of despair and terror raging inside her frail, battered body. An attempted murder can do that to a person and Mary Ann was lucky she was still alive, although bruised, scared and fleeing. The other three actresses attacked in the weeks before were not so lucky. They were all dead. She sat opposite Alfred, The Earl of Kent, still pretending they didn't know each other. She picked up a few-day-old copy of Berliner Zeitung from the small table between them. The front page headline hit her like the blade that slashed her upper right arm more than a week ago:

4 Morde in London - keine Verdächtigen

She wasn't fluent in German but she understood enough of the article to learn that the case of the 'English Theatre Murderer' still wasn't solved. Fortunately for her the article also neglected to mention that the fourth murder was a failed attempt and that the victim survived. Knowing that the news became less accurate and detailed as they crossed The Channel was a small consolation for Mary Ann. Perhaps she was safe after all. For the first time in three days since she had left London she felt a small glimmer of hope that she might survive. Folding the newspaper and nodding to Alfred she leaned her head on the head rest and closed her eyes. She wanted a moment to gather her thoughts, to picture her future, and above all rest.

The latter was clearly impossible as she soon fell into a restless sleep filled with yet another nightmare. Flashes of the life she was fleeing from filled her dreams: a mixture of images of theatres, costumes, dressing rooms, audiences, their shouts and applause and then terrors of the dark backdoor alley, the glint of the blade and the shadow of a black hooded figure wielding it ... She jerked back to consciousness, fighting for breath, feeling her erratic heartbeat pounding in her ears. A figure loomed over her and she stifled a scream forming in her throat at the last moment. Alfred's quiet and calming voice reached her and it took another moment for her to make sense of what he was saying. "Marion? It's alright. It was just a nightmare." He looked at her with a worried and somewhat sad expression. She somehow forced herself to calm down. She hated seeing her cousin like this. He had been nothing but kind to her and without him she would have never been able to leave England at such a short notice. She at least had to put him at ease. Gathering her senses and putting all of her years of acting into practice she mustered a slight smile and replied: "Yes, it was. It's over now. I am fine."

"Do you need anything? Some tea perhaps?" "I would only like to rest. Will I ever sleep again without ..." she stopped herself at realization of what she had just said. This honest confession would only make Alfred more worried. But it was too late to take it back and hot tears suddenly sprang to her eyes. Alfred calmly extended his hand, his worried frown even deeper. He pulled her from her seat and led her out of the carriage into the next one where sleeper cars were. He silently unlocked one of the doors and handed her the key. Mary Ann was surprised. They had agreed it would be safer to pretend they didn't know each other and spend the journey on second class seats. The idea of having a sleeping compartment to herself, being alone and not having to constantly worry about other people appealed to Mary Ann but she was not sure it was wise.

As if Alfred had known what she was thinking, he explained: "We've left Berlin now, no need to pretend anymore. No one is looking for you here. You saw the newspaper. I borrowed the *Gazeta Wroclawska* while you were asleep and there is no mention of either the murders or the missing London actress. The farther East we are the less people know about what happened. There is no need to hide anymore." She didn't know what to say. The news was supposed to calm her down but it seemed that there was nothing anyone could ever say to her that would chase away the constant anxiety and fear. She nodded nevertheless and took the key, thanking Alfred for his thoughtfulness. His smile was weak and a little sad when he said: "It will get better, I promise. Now, enjoy some privacy and try to rest. If you can't sleep, you can write a letter to Ivan. We won't be able to send it but it might put your mind at ease. I have often found it calming to pour my thoughts on paper. It is freeing."

Just before she closed the door he added: "I'm staying next door if you need anything. Or you can find me in the restaurant carriage." He left her then and she was finally alone. Unable to look at the reflection of her haunted eyes and drawn face one more time she closed the curtains and collapsed on the small bed. The moment her head hit the pillow her thoughts became a chaotic mess again. Even though Alfred's words were undoubtedly supposed to calm her down, they instead brought up more questions. He had hinted at a matter she had been avoiding since leaving London three days ago. She sat on the bed, feeling cold and bone-deep tired. She unlaced her half boots and lay back on the bed without bothering to undress. She was too cold and too tired.

She hated that her mind kept going back to that terrible night two weeks ago and the events that followed but it was as if though her subconsciousness was trapped in a loop and refused to let go. What bothered her to no end was that it was not just the attempt on her life and not knowing who or why, it was the events that followed. She could still vividly see every detail of that ghastly evening before her eyes: the glint of the blade, the muffled screams and the sound of heavy boots on the cobblestones. She knew she should call herself lucky to be alive and thank god for the drunken lord leaving a nearby brothel, who saw the attack, chased away the killer and saved her life. And Mary Ann was indeed grateful. However, she was not lucky. Her wound taken care of she and the nobleman reported the incident to the police and it should have been over. Mary Ann, a rising theatre star of Haymarket Theatre and a protegee of W. S. Gilbert, was supposed to go back to her life spent between rehearsals, performances and quiet walks in the park close to her recently acquired town house, being careful not to walk narrow dark alleys late at night, regardless of how faster they took her home.

She spent a couple of days believing that would be the case, her only worry that the murderer was still roaming the streets of London. She even managed to forget about it for a moment or two since her parents, Gilbert and her loving sister kept her company and did everything in their power to make her feel safe and loved. Then the scandals struck. In a matter of days Mary Ann Bessy Terry came from a surviving murder victim to a suspect and a ruined woman of a dubious character. The town house on Grower Mews that had been left to her in his will by Charles Chetwynd-Talbot, 19th Earl of Shrewbury was claimed by his son and heir Charlie. Spreading gossip in the scandal sheets of an affair between Mary Ann and his deceased father was supposed to tarnish her reputation and provide Charlie with grounds for annulment of his father's will.

Her sister Ellen tried to comfort Mary Ann by convincing her that it would all blow over. An actress's reputation was always a somewhat dubious one anyway, so the scandal should not have any long lasting effects. Actresses were only a step above prostitutes in the puritan Victorian society and thus being gossiped about and accused of affairs was hardly unusual. Ellen knew that all too well. She had had her share of stains on her reputation but it was the price she willingly paid as long as she could stay with her greatest love - theatre. Love that her sisters as well as their parents shared.

Passion for acting burnt equally bright in Mary Ann and yet it hurt to have her reputation dragged through the mud so publicly. What hurt her more than anything was that none of it was true. She had never had an affair with Charles and would never dream of being with a married man. What made the situation almost laughable was the fact that his wife knew that and even considered Mary Ann a dear friend. Not publicly, of course, as it was unfit for a noblewoman to socialize with the working class women, but privately Lord and Lady Shrewbury had respected and admired Mary Ann. Sadly, they had both been dead by then and there was no one to prevent Charlie from getting his way. While waiting for the scandal to blow over, hoping she might be able to keep the house after all, she found some consolation in Gilbert's assurance that none of that would affect her acting career. He believed in the old unspoken rule that any sort of publicity in the arts world was good publicity - even the scandals.

Secretly Mary Ann had to agree with him as the theatre was full every night and after every performance there were many more bouquets and even invitations to balls and recitals waiting for her in her dressing room. One night, however, an unannounced guest was waiting for her as well. Robert. Marquess of Salisbury. Her former lover. Seeing him after two years was unpleasant. They had been lovers once but Mary Ann insisted he stopped seeing her as soon as he got engaged to Lady Veronica Lakely. After a few angry outbursts and futile attempts of convincing her otherwise he gave up and she hadn't seen him since. Until he suddenly appeared in her dressing room that night.

Bile rose in her throat when she remembered his once handsome face contorted with despise. He reeked of stale beer and cheap perfume and his whole demeanour screamed aggression and danger. She could feel her body shake even now as she remembered how he insisted she become his mistress again. Then he bargained. He would set her up in his own townhouse as his concubine. When she firmly refused again he threatened. He would feed the society more scandal - on their liaisons, her smoking, stories of dead actresses being her most hated competition and even claims that her sister Kate's daughter was Mary Ann's bastard child. For the first time in her life she felt scared inside a theatre. Her dressing room was suddenly no longer her safe haven but felt like a cage and she a bird unable to escape the threats of her captor. She knew she could scream, which would probably alert someone and Robert could not

hurt her physically. She said as much and his face, already grotesque, full of spite and ugly transformed into a mask of pure evil. He left her shaking, cold fear trickling down her spine. That night she waited for Gilbert to finish with preparations for the following evening's performance to walk her home.

The following day turned her whole life into a beginning of a neverending nightmare. Robert's words were far from empty threats. He made true on his threats. In less than a week Mary Ann was not only labelled a ruined woman unfit to ever walk the London society but also a suspect in the murders of the three young actresses killed in the previous weeks. Robert masterfully fed bits of her deeds, either completely untrue or extremely exaggerated, to the scandalsheets and the police. To cover his tracks and ensure he was not the only source of lies he also had Charlie, Lord of Shrewbury, and Francis, Earl of Moray, who had indeed been Mary Ann's lover when she was a debutante actress in Manchester, help weave the web of her doom. Despite her family and Gilbert's unyielding support life became impossible. Moreover, her life was once again in danger. Since she was now a suspect the police were not looking for the real murderer. If he wouldn't manage to get to her, she would be hanged for the murders herself. And as much as her family and friends wanted to help her there was nothing they could do. Mary Ann had to leave England to save her life. Whether the truth would ever be revealed or whether she would ever be able to return was of no importance.

In the early Tuesday morning, grim and foggy to fit the mood and her daunting prospects, Mary Ann Bessy Terry boarded a train to Harwich to cross the sea to Holland and in Hook she boarded a train first to Berlin and then to Moscow. Sir Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, Earl of Kent, her distant cousin was her only protector. He arranged for her to flee to Russia. She would disappear from England, from theatre and the society and hopefully it would save her life. And ruin it at the same time. The price for her life and safety was marriage to a Russian nobleman Ivan Tereschenko.

Mary Ann tried desperately to focus on something other than the misery that had engulfed her life but deep down she knew she would not and could not ever forget that horrific time. No matter how hard she tried to think of other things or relieve happier memories of her life, her thoughts and dreams always found a way to that night and the days that followed. She was starting to believe it would never be truly over. Even the distance she had travelled by ferry and train hadn't helped. She may have left London, her house, her career, her life and even her name behind but the nightmarish events would not be erased easily. To further her distress she now had to come to terms with marrying Tereschenko. The idea of marriage was almost as frightening to her as murder. To Mary Ann both notions represented the end of sorts. It was a matter of saving her life in the physical form while sacrificing her life in every other aspect.

As an actress she was an independent woman, She could drink, smoke, travel without her husband's or her father's permission, socialize with men and women of any class, have lovers and above all she could earn money she controlled. All of that, however, she was perhaps willing to sacrifice bar one: theatre. And yet this was the sacrifice she had to make.

Shivering from cold, or perhaps dread – she wasn't sure what had been worse during the lengthy train ride – she wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and rubbed her hands to warm her numb fingers. She sat at the tiny writing desk and stared at a piece of parchment as if though it held the key to her future. The prospect of losing her freedom, of becoming someone's property, of sacrificing all she was to become a wife was a thought that scared her as much as the fear of death. But she had to think about it. The wedding was only a few days away for it had been decided she would marry the day she arrived in Moscow. Marriage would give her protection. Only to her it also meant it would steal her freedom. For she had been free until a couple of weeks ago and she had never been able to imagine her life any other way.

In Victorian society of that time it was believed that freedom was a burden too great for a woman to bear, therefore marriage was a socially acceptable norm to relieve the weaker sex of the unbearable consequences of being free. Marriage was thus the career goal of most women, regardless of the fact they would find it ultimately a restrictive, confining institution. Among nobility, matches were often arranged through parents, who chose husbands from the same class or better, seeking aristocratic backgrounds that would add to a family's social and financial status. Character was of lesser importance, if considered at all. Mary Ann, however, felt exactly the opposite. She didn't desire money or social status. Her career's goal was to remain an actress and to become an even better one. And if she would ever marry – and she had been sure she never would ever since she was nineteen and experienced the pain of a broken heart – it would be for love. Since she had come to believe lately that eternal love was an illusion she was content with her life as it was. She welcomed companionship and satisfied her bodily desires when an opportunity arose but kept ideas of the sublime where she could control them – on theatre stage. Theatre was her eternal love. Her future husband was her future doom.

She poured all of her thoughts on paper and had soon written numerous pages. It seemed the floodgate of her fears, insecurities, desires, hope and inner struggle had opened. Alfred had been right – writing did help. It was almost freeing. It was not a love letter to her future husband, of course, but it was a letter nevertheless.

She kept writing for the rest of the journey, finding solace in sharing her thoughts with ... She smiled as she realized she shared them with herself. These were letters to her. They were a tribute to her past life, to Mary Ann Bessy Terry who was disappearing with every yard along the railroad to Russia. But at the same time she would be kept alive on those pages. No one but her would ever read those words and knowing that finally made her feel she had something to hold on to. A part of her would be kept intact.

When she stepped onto the platform of Moscow Passazhirskaya railway station a week later, still pale and cold and scared, she welcomed the fresh cold Russian winter air nevertheless. Her body relaxed slightly for the first time in so many weeks and she was pleasantly surprised when a slender dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty welcomed them. It was Varvara Khanenko, her future husband's older sister.

MOSCOW

February - May, 1878

V

ARVARA KHANENKO, or Varya , took an instant liking to Mary Ann. The woman looked terribly pale, she had dark circles under her eyes and was visibly tired. Regardless, Varya recognized beauty and only hoped Mary Ann's would be restored as soon as she got settled into her life in Russia. She extended her glowing hand and was glad to see that her future sister-in-law's handshake was firm. The polite greeting in perfect Russian surprised her and she laughed not caring one bit about a few admonishing looks of passing women. Varya was not subtle and it was only one of her many endearing traits.

Taking Mary Ann's hand Varya led the way from the train station, Alfred following a step behind. She complemented Mary Ann's Russian but switched to impeccable English after a few obligatory polite phrases not to tire her more than necessary after the long journey and an ordeal she knew Mary Ann had gone through. Varya knew better than to bring any of that up, though. Being a practical woman she went straight to the point. First she presented Mary Ann with her new identity – from now on she would be called Elizaveta Tereschenko. She would marry her brother Ivan in a few hours and would from then on use her Russian name and her husband's surname.

Varya, always an observant person, noticed Mary Ann paled even more as the wedding was mentioned and she understood all too well. When she married her husband Bogdan a few years ago she was a nervous wreck. Her knees shook so hard she barely made it down the aisle even though Bogdan had been the love of her life and a truly wonderful man. Their marriage was founded on love, partnership and friendship and she would never have it any other way. So she could not even begin to comprehend what Mary Ann must have been feeling hours away from marrying a person she had not known, had never even met. Varya's consolation was telling Mary Ann as much as she could about her brother during the short carriage ride to Metropol Hotel where Alfred would be staying for the duration of his visit to Moscow.

While Alfred stayed in the lobby reading the daily newspapers, Varya ushered Mary Ann to Alfred's suite to get her ready for the wedding ceremony. The hotel was spectacular and so was the room Mary Ann found herself in. It was big and bright with luxury ceiling moldings, bay windows with stained glass decorations, antique furniture, walls upholstered in silk. A bath was brought in and Mary Ann gladly stripped off her clothes and immersed her perpetually cold body into warm scented water. Varya brought her box of creams, oils and lotions and they had a nice chat about what was the trick of having smooth, soft, silky skin and which treatment worked best. If it wasn't for nerves playing havoc with her body and mind Mary Ann would surely enjoy the easy way in which Varya treated her and talked to her. As it was, however, time was moving too fast and she felt the end was nearing much too quickly.

Bathed, dried, her body lathered with coconut butter and sandalwood, her auburn hair twisted into a simple knot at the nape of her neck, Mary Ann stared at her reflection in the mirror. The haunted look in her eyes was still lingering and her face was pale despite Varya's best efforts to tint it with Pear's Almond Bloom and rouge. She looked frail and petite. She realized she must have lost weight as her ribs and hip bones were almost visible through her alabaster skin. Varya must have noticed how skinny she was as well and it was kind of her not to say anything. At least until Mary Ann put on the dress Varya had made for her for the wedding. It was loose and wide on Mary Ann and Varya's frown made her uncomfortable. There was nothing to be done, though. Mary Ann's few dresses she had brought with her were not classy enough for a wedding ceremony and were furthermore not fit for cold February in Russia. So the beautiful dark blue velvet gown over ivory underdress paired with black boots and gloves would have to do. She could only hope the churches were not as cold and dreary as they were in England. As if though Varya had been reading her thoughts she opened another box and pulled out a long dark grey suede coat lined with silver fur and a matching silver fur hat. It was a pre-wedding present from Ivan.

It made the ride to Andonikov Monastery of the Saviour, the oldest church in Moscow, warmer but no less frightening. Countless times Mary Ann, now Elizaveta, thought of bolting but there was nowhere to go. Alfred's and Varya's presence was somewhat reassuring and yet even their kind and calming words could not dispel the fear of the unknown. Regardless of what anyone said about Ivan, they were only words. She needed to see and get to know the man and yet at the same time seeing him for the first time scared her to no end. Barely noticing the beautiful winter sun or the buildings, squares and streets they passed on their way to the church, she could only pray it would all be over quickly.

The ceremony was rather long but to Elizaveta it was all a blur. Later on she remembered her surprise at seeing Ivan for the first time – tall, lean, with broad shoulders and long legs, light brown, sun-kissed hair cropped short and beautiful, deep amber eyes and strong jaw adorned his face. Ivan Tereschenko was young and good-looking. She learnt from Varya that he was a year younger than Elizaveta and had not intended to marry yet. This was surely a piece of information to remember, Elizaveta thought and then the ceremony began and all she could focus on was intently looking at Alfred, Varya and Ivan who nodded at her when it was her turn to say Yes. She had been learning Russian for years, at least every summer when visiting Alfred in Kent, and she had tried to read works by Gogol, Pushkin and Lermontov, but she was by no means fluent in it. She had never spoken Russian to a Russian until she met Varya and even if she had, it would have been no help to her while taking her marriage vows – the Russian Orthodox wedding ceremony performed by Reverend Konstantin was in Church Slavic. She found it terribly odd that she left the church a married woman – Elizaveta Terschenko – without even understanding how and when exactly it had happened. Thinking about it this way was the case with most of her life for the past weeks, so she should hardly be surprised. She almost mused at the cynical train of thought.

Varya and her husband, Alfred, and the newly-wed couple, Elizaveta and Ivana Tereschenko, went for a quick luncheon to Yar restaurant at Kuzentsky Most. The food was as impressive as the interior with its impossibly high ceilings and marble columns. It was abnormally big, probably able to seat at least 300 people. Elizaveta was relieved when they were ushered into a private room, which was as imposing as the main hall but much smaller. Luncheon was less of a blur than the wedding ceremony and yet Elizaveta was still tense. She was feeling utterly lost. She tried desperately to form pleasantries in Russian in her head but it seemed any ability she had had for the language had thoroughly left her. If she was honest with herself she was just as likely unable to speak in English. Even though Varya, Bogdan and Ivan occasionally lapsed into Russian, they tried to stick to English. She appreciated the thoughtfulness but could not make herself to participate in the conversation which she would find pleasant and interesting at any other time. Bogdan was talking about his latest acquisition of paintings and sculptures from Paris and plans for visiting Italy, Alfred was asking Ivan about the sugar business his family had been running very successfully for more than 15 years and all Elizaveta could do was pick at her food, pretending she was listening. She put all of her effort into plastering a pleasant, kind and meek expression on her face while her insides were churning with tension, anxiety and fear. She was not sure why she still felt so utterly afraid.

When coffee and tea was served, Bogdan stood up and sat at the white grand piano placed at the other end of the room. He beckoned her over and she went. He sat at the piano and began playing. He was a skilled pianist, she could tell that after a few chords, and the tune was calming. She could not recognize the author but it soothed her nerves a little bit.

Bogdan beckoned for her to sit next to him and she tensed. She used to play the piano but now was not the time. She could barely contain the shaking of her fingers from being visible. But instead he only made room for her on the long piano bench to talk to her, never ceasing to play.

“Elizaveta,” he looked at her with calm, kind dark eyes. His voice was soothing, friendly. “I can only imagine how hard it must be. But you need to know you are among friends. I cannot make any promises as to what will happen in London but here you are safe. Ivan is truly a good man. Varya likes you immensely and she is desperate for a friend here in Moscow as she gets tired of being surrounded by males, regardless of how fond she is of us.” Elizaveta could only nod. Bogdan continued: “Alfred is staying here as long as you need. I don’t know if he has told you this but he is pursuing a business venture in Moscow and St. Petersburg, so it should be weeks before he can return.” This time she almost smiled a little. It felt comforting to know a familiar face, a relative, no matter how distant, would be here. Sensing she was becoming slightly more at ease, Bogdan continued: “We will let you and your new husband alone for the afternoon. I know you’re tired but Ivan wants to take you for a walk around Moscow. Trust me, fresh air will do you good. It will also give the servants time to prepare the town house. And Varya to order new dresses for you.” She wanted to protest but he stopped her. “Trust me, I know my wife. When she sets her mind to something, there is no way around it. Give her the pleasure of pampering you. It will make her immensely happy.” This time Elizaveta smiled. It was a weak, shy smile but in turn she was rewarded with Bogdan’s wide and honest grin. It was clear he loved Varya dearly and for the first time Elizaveta’s mind stopped whirling and she could see that she truly was accepted into the family, no matter what horrific circumstances had brought her to it.

Ivan then interrupted the conversation. He stood next to them, his hand on Elizaveta’s shoulder. “I have not danced with my wife yet and it is a custom I would dearly like to uphold. Bogdan, can you play something resembling a waltz?” Bogdan nodded, flexed his fingers and waited for Elizaveta to accept Ivan’s extended hand and let him lead her to the open space in the middle of the small room. They danced. Ivan Tereschenko was an accomplished dancer and so was she. Despite her nerves she managed not to stumble on her feet and towards the end she felt her body relax in his strong and yet comforting arms. They didn’t talk but he smiled at her encouragingly a few times and finally she felt that perhaps her future would be less of a nightmare than her old life had been in the end.

Later in the afternoon Elizaveta almost fully relaxed. They had walked what seemed for miles around Moscow, which shouldn’t be surprising as everything in the city was wide and vast and majestic. Ivan explained the sights, the history, showed her the shops, the cafes and other gathering places and overall acted as a perfect tour guide. As the daylight started waning they sat down at a quaint little café to warm up. Ivan ordered coffee for himself and tea for her.

She didn't object. It was surprising, though, that what they brought was a red, slightly sour beverage that tasted unlike anything she had ever expected. Ivan mused and explained it was hibiscus and was good for the stomach. She was grateful. She hadn't been eating much in the past weeks and she often felt weak and her stomach hurt. The concoction helped.

As soon as Elizaveta, or Lizzie, as he nicknamed his wife in his head, looked more energized, Ivan braced himself for the conversation they had to have. He had practised it in his head numerous times but it didn't make it any easier. He was never a very eloquent man to begin with and in the presence of this woman, his wife, he sometimes felt like a shy schoolboy. He had no idea why. It was true, she was a beautiful woman, that much was clear despite her clearly exhausted and tormented face and perpetual fear in her eyes. But Ivan was no stranger to beautiful women. And that was one of the things he decided to be honest about. If they were to have any sort of a decent marriage it was best to come clean. It was the only way to make sure Elizaveta in turn would confide in him as well.

Buying some time he took a cigarette from a silver case in his breast pocket and lit it. Taking a few puffs he contemplated how to begin the story of Ivan Tereschenko, a painter and a rake. Elizaveta was fiddling with her tea cup, waiting. She was watching the man intently, unable to take her eyes off his face for some reason. It was obvious to her he was about to tell her something that made him ill at ease.

Not finding an opening that would satisfy him Ivan simply plunged into the story. He briefly described his family and Kiev, where he grew up, his love of art and painting, the success of the sugar manufacturing business, the history of his family's noble title, his travels in Europe and then stopped again. His cigarette finished, his fingers fumbled for something, anything to do with his hands. What he was about to say next was harder than he thought. "Lizzie, you don't mind me calling you Lizzie, do you?" When Elizaveta shook her head but didn't say anything though clearly surprised at the nickname, he continued: "I know I am not a husband you ever wanted. I don't know whether you ever dreamed of marriage or not but I know I haven't, at least not yet. However, I promised Alfred years ago when he helped me out of a sticky situation in Paris that I would help him if he ever needed me to. And I never go back on my word. It is one of my rare redeeming qualities."

Elizaveta listened intently. For the first time in weeks her mind wasn't scattered between countless other thoughts and fears. He had her full attention. Finally, some of her questions would be answered and perhaps even some of her fears would either materialize or be put to rest. Knowing that Ivan wanted to marry her as little as she did pained her a little, though. She admonished herself. What did she expect? That the man wanted a wife because he believed in some fairy tale notion of an arranged marriage that can later turn out to be a love match?

That was foolish. She knew all too well that nobility more often than not married for titles or money but she had neither, so it shouldn't be a shock to her that there was no romance behind Ivan's reasons. Romance and love only happened on stage, rarely in real life. She knew that. It was the reason why she couldn't stop mourning her career. Acting in the greatest love stories ever written, no matter how tragic they were, satisfied the romantic bone in her body. But not anymore, she reminded herself and forced her attention back to Ivan.

"Nevertheless, I married you willingly and I intend to do everything to make this arrangement work. We both know it is foolish to talk about love but I honestly hope we might build a sound relationship based on companionship or even affection." He paused and then finally blurted out: "And you should know I have a reputation of a rake. You will hear that sooner or later and though I may not be proud of it, I have no intention of hiding it from you or denying it." She was completely still, the expression in her wide, bright eyes unreadable.

After what seemed an eternity she finally cleared her throat and said, her voice quiet and calm: "My Lord, I may not know a lot about Russian society but I wager it is not that different from England in some respects. I understand marriages among aristocracy are a necessity and I am grateful you have ensured my safety by marrying me despite the fact there is nothing you could possibly gain from that contract. I am also aware that men are granted a much greater freedom in marriage and I do not expect you to change your life for me more than you already have. I will perform all of my wifely duties as agreed, at least I assume that is what I vowed to do in the church ..." she smiled at that. It was a small tilt of the corners of her lips and Ivan was sure he caught a little flash of sarcastic humour in her eyes. He wanted to say something but her firm and resonating, yet still very quiet voice, continued: "I do hope, however, just as you do that we might develop an amicable companionship over time. If you are anything like your sister and your brother-in-law I can only look forward to it."

Then they sat in silence, mulling over each other's words. There was nothing more to say. Elizaveta was glad Ivan was honest with her. She was no longer sad at giving up her life and no longer feeling her marriage was the end of something. She was simply too tired for that. It seemed that all of her energy had left her and all she could do was give up and accept whatever came her way. The whirlwind of emotions had exhausted her so much she was no longer even afraid of the upcoming wedding night.

A few hours later when Elizaveta was sitting at her vanity in her bedchamber the feelings returned. She slowly brushed her hair, staring at her reflection in the mirror but not really seeing it. She was cold and nervous again. She wore a kaftan and long loose trousers and a pair of the thickest woollen socks she had ever seen underneath her dressing robe and despite the fire blazing in the fireplace, it seemed her bones would never stop rattling with cold. She stood up, quickly braided her hair into a loose braid and nervously walked around the room. It was beautiful and big – like everything in this country it seemed. It was obvious the Thereschenko townhouse in Tverskaya Ulitsa was not often used but the servants had cleaned it, built fires and tried their best to make it comfortable. The walls in her room were adorned with lavender wallpaper and silver stucco, furnished sparsely but tastefully.

She gasped when she had first been shown to her bedchamber that evening. It was imposing and yet cozy. The four poster bed was made of massive wood and covered with a beautiful purple quilt with intricate silver pattern. All of her cosmetics were already on the silver gilded vanity and the massive wardrobe contained the few dresses and nightgowns she had brought. On the bed was a package containing a kaftan and a note. The note was from Ivan, written in elegant, exact handwriting:

Dear Elizaveta.

I hope next time I give you a gift I will have known you well enough to grace you with something your heart truly desires. For now I have settled for practical.

This is a kaftan – a garment that used to be worn in most parts of Russia but has sadly gone out of fashion. Some of us still wear it at home and I hope you will find it comfortable. The colours represent the Tereschenko family crest.

Yours truly,

Ivan

The kaftan was beautiful. It was made of blue velvet with golden yellow trimmings on the wide sleeves, around the neckline and on the hem. It was paired with wide trousers that were tied with a yellow golden string around the ankles. The best part was that the insides were lined with silk. Beneath Ivan's gift there was a small pouch containing a few pairs of hand-knit woollen socks and beautiful dark blue slippers with a note from Varya:

For cold Russian nights

She dressed, she brushed her hair, she tried to walk off the cold and the nerves, her fear returned. This time she could easily identify the cause of fear: it was her wedding night. She was no timid virgin not knowing what to expect but despite her reputation she was not a scarlet woman either. Most actresses were believed to be fallen women and she never cared much about it. She had only been with two men. Now she wished she had been a courtesan as the press had called her in England for she would surely find it easier to go through the ordeal. She could not imagine doing the deed with someone she was not at least infatuated with. Regardless of how good-looking, attractive and very likeable Ivan was the intimacy of the wedding night scared her.

Unable to calm her nerves by pacing she sat on the bed and waited. There was a knock on the door. She jumped up, her heart suddenly racing. "Come in," she called in Russian, her voice strangled. Ivan opened the door, but only slightly, and his head poked into the room. He smiled. "Care to join me for a drink in the parlour?" Numb and confused she nodded and walked into the parlour that separated their respective bedchambers. The place was small and friendly. Fire was blazing in the fireplace and bathed the dark blue walls with orange glow. Ivan motioned for her to sit and she chose a striped blue and white sofa. He poured a transparent drink into two glasses and handed her one before sitting in an armchair with equal striped pattern across from her. There was a small round coffee table to their right and he put the decanter with the drink on it, next to a wooden box.

Elizaveta smelled the drink and a strong smell of spirit hit her nostrils. She looked up to see Ivan smiling with a glint in his eyes. "It's vodka," he said. "It's strong and you may not like the taste but it will warm you." She took a small sip and grimaced. Ivan laughed, a loud, relaxed, booming laughter. Her eyes watered but she could not help smiling herself. He walked to the side table again and brought her a glass of water to flush down the taste of vodka. Sitting back into the armchair he took a cigarette from the wooden case on the table and lit it. He drank his glass dry in one gulp and settled comfortably in the armchair, one leg crossed over his knee. He was wearing a kaftan as well, only his was crimson red with golden yellow details.

"Talk to me," he said. "I want you to be comfortable, I really do, but I don't know what to do if you don't help me." The directness and honesty surprised her. He was so unlike any other member of aristocracy she had ever met. So were Varya and Bogdan. Perhaps she should be more at ease around him after all. Taking another sip of her drink she felt warmth slowly permeating her body and her cheeks flush. She smiled. An honest, open, relaxed smile for the first time since Ivan had met her. Then it was her turn to surprise him: "I hope it is not too unorthodox, my lord, but may I have a cigarette, please?"

Ivan's booming laughter filled the small space again and he extended the box to her. She took a cigarette, lit it with a match and enjoyed the almost forgotten drags of smoke. Like many women she had secretly indulged in smoking from time to time. In private, of course, and never in front of a man, she realized. Ivan surely had a strange effect on her. Feeling bold, probably from vodka, and the fact that her aristocratic husband clearly enjoyed her outrageous behaviour she started talking. She told him almost everything about her life as Mary Ann Terry, her parents and sisters, the boarding school, her first professional stage performance in Manchester so many years ago, her uprising career in London under the wing of Gilbert and how her whole family had been theatre performers. Her face lit up when she talked about theatre, there was passion in her eyes when she recollected the thrill of playing a role and there was also sadness at reminding herself once again how that life was over.

She was silent for a while, enjoying the warmth from the fire and alcohol, lost in thoughts and at ease. Ivan interrupted her thoughts. "Lizzie," he said, his voice quiet and a little strained. "There are things you should know about me." She looked at him and patiently waited. He cleared his throat, took a deep breath and started pacing in front of the fire. "I have a reputation of a rake." He paused again but continued pacing. "And I suppose it is true. I have spent most of my adult life painting and enjoying company of women. More than I should, I suppose." Elizaveta waited for him to continue but when the silence dragged on she forced herself to say: "If you are trying to tell me you have no intention to change your ways, I understand. You have told me about your reputation already. Saving me from the gallows was a favour I can never repay, so I am hardly in a position to make any demands as to your fidelity in this marriage."

Ivan stopped pacing and stared into the fire, his back facing her. He seemed tense and his fingers were holding the glass so tight his knuckles turned white. He finally turned and Elizaveta almost jumped. His eyes were blazing. He was angry, no, livid. She couldn't understand why but she was too shocked at his reaction to utter another word. Finally he exhaled slowly and spoke, his voice measured and forcibly calm. "Is that what you think of me?" When she didn't answer, he continued: "I suppose there is no reason you shouldn't. Let's be honest, we both know what aristocratic marriages are like and I can hardly blame you for thinking I would want to continue with my rakish ways. This marriage is purely a business agreement after all. I owed Alfred my life and could not deny him anything." He sat down then and looked at her. "But is this what you want? From what I've read you never wanted to marry as you feared it would rob you of everything you hold dear. And yet you have been robbed of your career either way and only married because it was the lesser evil. Don't you want to at least try and be ... well, perhaps not happy but at least content?"

Elizaveta suddenly felt very nervous. She was confused and had no idea what he wanted. Or what he was talking about. Then suddenly something registered in her tired brain. “Wait, what do you mean? You read that ...?” It made no sense and yet Ivan smiled. It was a miniscule, sad smile. “Yes, I’m afraid I have. Alfred has given me one of your letters. It is clear you never intended me to read them and as much as I’m sorry I have invaded your privacy I am also glad I have done so. It feels like I know you.” He expected her to be disappointed, annoyed, even angry, but he never expected an empty glass flying towards his head as his words sank in. He ducked and the object missed him by merely an inch and crashed into the wall behind him. Elizaveta was on her feet, pacing furiously around the room, clenching her fists, an expression of pure fury on her face and betrayal in her tearful eye. She didn’t shout though. Instead she addressed him with a low, exaggeratingly calm, almost menacing voice that sent cold chill down his spine.

“So that is the big story, is it? I should know, shouldn’t I? I have seen it, no, acted it on stage night after night. A woman betrayed and manipulated like a puppet countless of times. Always by men who either openly threaten her or seduce her with lies. I must say, my lord,” she spat the last word with venom, “I almost prefer the former kind.” She stopped behind her chair then and grabbed the head rest so that her fingernails dug into the silk upholstery. “You are right, this is a business agreement. I have chosen the lesser evil. And even though I am a woman I intend to keep my word. I am your wife and shall act accordingly. You as my husband will no doubt do the same. You will fulfil your duties as all aristocrats do to ensure an heir and continue on your rakish way. It is after all a privilege granted to men. Having said that, however, I should be bluntly honest with you in that regard as well. I do not care how many women you’ve had or how many you intend to have in the future. Since you had no problems invading my privacy in the past I shall spare you the need to do so in the future. You, my lord, have married an actress accused of murder. I am not a murderess but I am all other things believed of my kind: I swear, I drink, I smoke and I have enjoyed the company of men out of wedlock. I am positive I have not sinned as much as you but I have had my share of lovers.” When Ivan didn’t respond but only stared at her with surprise, she added: “Therefore, I hope you will not be disappointed with the damaged goods on your wedding night.” She turned around to leave when he was suddenly behind her and grabbed her by the shoulder. He spun her around and held her so that his face was only a few inches away from hers. It was his turn to be furious. “Lady Elizaveta Tereschenko, I will apologize for many things countless times again if I have to but not tonight as you are clearly too upset. I will not, however, under any circumstances, force my wife into my bed because it is her duty. That is what I have been trying to tell you.”

Elizaveta was breathing heavily. Despite his words, which were undoubtedly supposed to be reassuring, she was still too hurt and angry to think straight and so she hissed back: "Fine. I suppose it doesn't matter then that a marriage is not valid until consummated. I guess one of your many mistresses can perform the act in my stead." At that Ivan abruptly released her and stepped back. He was looking at the floor, trying to calm his equally rapid breathing. He finally looked up and forced the words through clenched teeth: "I have never bedded an unwilling woman and I'll be damned if I shall start with my wife. Being married is a solution and a burden for both of us. And we shall consummate the marriage." He paused and looked at her intently for a few long moments. "When you are willing."

With an unladylike snort Elizaveta turned on her heel and went to her bedchamber. Just before she exited the parlour she couldn't help the final remark: "I hope you are a patient man then."



"Curatin call!" The voice resonated in the backstage of Haymarket Theatre. It was dark, candles cast an eerie glow on the actors' faces, the wooden floor boards creaked slightly and then the glint of the blade and the shadow of a black hooded figure wielding it ... She woke up screaming. Before she could force herself to stop, realizing it was just another nightmare; warm arms were around her chilled shivering body, caressing her, comforting her, soft, low voice murmuring it was over. Elizaveta couldn't stop the tears streaming down her face as she was gasping for breath, deafened by thundering of her heartbeat. Slowly, very slowly, she calmed down enough to stop shaking and open her eyes.

Ivan was holding her, looking down at her with worry and sadness clearly visible in his expression and his eyes. She tried to say something but he wouldn't let her. "It's over, Lizzie. You're safe. Here." He pulled another blanket around her and brought her a glass of water. She fell back on the pillow more tired and than ever but afraid to go back to sleep as another nightmare would surely torment her. As if knowing all that Ivan sat next to her, his head leaning on the head board and pulled her body towards him so that her head was resting on his chest. He was slowly stroking her hair and her eyes were becoming heavy again. His warm body and the tender stroking motions were incredibly comforting. Just before she drifted back to sleep he murmured: "I will not let anyone hurt you. You're safe with me."

When she woke up next morning the sun was up and the curtains were open to let some light into the room. She stretched and wondered how long she had been sleeping and when Ivan had left her bed. As she got up she realized her maid was already in the room setting up a tray with coffee. She thanked her and drank a cup while admiring the view from the window. It was magnificent. Moscow's many churches, towers and buildings that could easily rival Buckingham palace itself in size created the atmosphere of splendour and grandeur. Getting dressed and going downstairs to breakfast she realized the house was as grand as the street below. For a moment she felt small and a little lost in this big townhouse but the feeling passed as Varya rushed down the hall to her and hugged her briefly. It was almost noon and Elizaveta was a little embarrassed at how long she had slept but nobody seemed to mind. Bogdan and Varya joined her at breakfast to keep her company and explain their plans for the following week. Ivan had already had breakfast and was in his studio. She felt a stab of regret again as Varya explained how devoted Ivan was to painting. She could understand it all too well – painting for him was what theatre was to her. Sadly, it would be no more.

She couldn't wallow in her misery for long as Varya insisted they went shopping and afterwards for a walk and by the time all of Varya's errands were complete it was dark and time for dinner. After dinner she changed in her bedchamber and after taking a few deep breaths joined Ivan in their parlour. She felt terribly guilty for her harsh words the night before but Ivan behaved as if nothing had ever happened. They shared a glass of sherry and a cigarette and talked for a very long time. He was easy to talk to, especially when the topic of the conversation was art. It seemed, Elizaveta smiled inwardly, that they had a lot in common after all.

That night she was so tired she fell asleep on the sofa and was disturbed only when she felt strong arms carrying her to her bed. Those arms then gently caressed her and she slept peacefully until the morning. This soon became a routine - she spent most of her days with Varya and every night Ivan slept in her bed. The nightmares still didn't stop but they were far less frequent and even when she woke up screaming and petrified, Ivan's soothing voice lulled her back to sleep. He never pressured her to talk about the horrid dreams or the events that were the reason for them and she appreciated that more than he knew.

A week after her arrival Bogdan announced at breakfast that they were going to the theatre that night. Elizaveta was conflicted. On one hand theatre was something she had missed so much she almost felt physical pain at times and yet she wasn't sure she could bear watching a play without breaking down. The day went by in a blur and by the time they arrived to The Maly Theatre she felt she could faint for the first time in her life from sheer excitement. They were seated in a box and her heart was about to jump from her dress as the curtain finally lifted.

Pushkin's Boris Godunov was they play she had started reading on the train to Moscow and she could only wonder if it was a coincidence that Ivan had taken her to that particular performance or if he did so intentionally. He had been nothing but kind and considerate for the whole week and she found herself drawn to him and looking forward to their evenings spent discussing art in their private little parlour. Taking her to see Boris Godunov was like giving her back her life. Only it was upside down as she was a spectator and not an actor. During the play she could live with that. The actors were very good, the setting was spectacular and overall she could not find a single fault in the performance.

As soon as the curtain fell, though, the magic was gone and bone-shattering sadness filled Elizaveta. It dawned on her that her life was indeed over in a way. No matter how hard she tried to convince herself she had a new life and would make the best of it, the sadness inside her kept growing until she was on the verge of tears. Becoming a spectator of what used to be her profession was like saying goodbye to the love of her life.

That night she didn't join Ivan in the parlour but instead cried herself to sleep. She soldiered on through the next day and the one after that but any calms that had managed to settle into her in the past week was gone. Instead all Elizaveta felt was numbness. She did her best to pretend, all the time knowing that the only role she would ever play for the rest of her life would be pretending her heart was not broken. Marry Ann Terry, a rising theatre star was no more. Instead the actress was replaced by Lady Elizaveta Tereschenko, a part not intended for the stage but for life.



Almost a month after the beginning of her new life Lizzie spent the day on her own in the house at Tverskaya Ulitsa. Ivan and Bogdan had business meeting that would take them away for most of the day and Varya was visiting a distant cousin a short carriage ride outside of Moscow. Despite March the weather was still cold and dreary and it had been raining heavily for a few days. Alfred's visit for tea was a welcome distraction. They talked about his business and how she had settled into her new family but he seemed reluctant to inform her of any new developments pertaining the murder investigation. She decided not to push him but instead promised herself to start reading the papers more regularly. Her reading and speaking of Russian had become almost fluent as she had spent many hours reading Russian novels and had practised with servants and Ivan. Her writing still needed some work, though.

Alfred's next question caught her completely off guard. "Why don't you go out more?" he asked. When she started explaining it was not true, he dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "You know that is not what I mean. Why don't you go society? You are a lady and from what Varya tells me you have been invited to practically every recital, ball and theatre in Moscow, yet you linger here like a recluse." She didn't know how to respond. How could she tell him that being with Ivan, Varya and Bogdan made her feel safe but just the thought of meeting strangers made her sick with fear. Besides, her only visit to the theatre so far had made her so ... Alfred waited patiently but when she failed to form a single word in reply he sighed and got up to leave. Waiting for the butler to bring his hat and coat he looked at her seriously and said: "Lizzie, do not mourn what you have lost for longer than absolutely necessary. In the process you may start losing what you have now and might have in the future."

Although she couldn't quite make sense of Alfred's cryptic message, it made her think. Perhaps she should be more sociable. She knew Ivan and Varya had been making various excuses for her and Ivan not accepting the countless invitations and they didn't seem to mind but perhaps it was time she indulged them. So she agreed to attend a recital the following evening as Ivan's wife. Ivan seemed please and Varya did exactly what was expected. She took her shopping.

The dress was truly spectacular; Lizzie had smiled when she saw her reflection in the Cheval mirror two days later. It was emerald green with black lace and a black underdress. The choice was unusual as Russian ladies normally wore white or beige underdressed but Varya was sure Lizzie could get away with it as she was English. It seemed Russian society tolerated certain foreign customs even though they may frown at them. Lizzie's maid did her best to braid and pin and curl her mass of long, thick auburn hair and she had to admit that the result was lovely. Though Varya and other women always spent a lot of time on

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their coiffures every morning, Lizzie mostly wore her hair in a simple chignon. Tonight, however, she was a completely different person. Though she had never been vain she couldn't take her eyes off of her reflection. Fortunately her admiration of herself was interrupted by Ivan. He suddenly stood behind her and smiled appreciatively. She blushed, almost cursing loudly. Ivan had had an unusual effect on her at times. He made her slightly weak at the knees and she had caught herself thinking of him more and more with every passing day.

To make matters worse he brought her another present and when she opened a little black box an emerald necklace and a matching pair of earrings glinted in the orange glow of the fire. Speechless, not even able to utter a *spasiba*, she could only stare at him like a fish out of a bowl. Wordlessly, he turned her towards the mirror again and put the necklace around her neck. She put on the earrings with slightly shaking hands and stared at her reflection.

Ivan said in a low, raspy voice that sent a shiver down her spine: “Emeralds bring out the blue in your eyes.” It was true. She was beautiful. That surprised her as she had never thought of herself that way. She knew she was convincing on stage and could make the audience believe her to be anyone – even a beautiful or a young innocent woman – but in real life she always felt she was average at best. The woman looking back at her at that moment, however, was stunning to say the least. If Ivan’s look was to be trusted, he felt the same way.

They stood there, husband and wife, a beautiful image of a beautiful couple. Ivan was mesmerized at how beautiful Lizzie was. He forced himself to look away. His thoughts had been filled with images of her every waking hour and standing so close to her was beginning to seriously test his control. He had never before been so attracted to a woman and not pursue the feeling. He was afraid he could not hold his feelings at bay for much longer but he had sworn she would come to him. So he waited. And made sure he spent most of his day locked in his studio working. This evening, however, had already proven to be difficult. He shuddered at the thought of how much harder it would get.

Just as he feared by the time they returned to the townhouse, Ivan’s self-control was in tatters. He had spent the evening fighting the sudden urge to punch every man who looked at his wife for longer than two seconds and he seriously considered challenging a few of them to a duel when they kissed her hand all too intimately for his taste. By the time the recital was over he wanted to grab Lizzie to take her home and never let her see another man in her life. Fortunately, they sat together at dinner and he soothed the jealous bursts raging inside him by preventing anyone else from talking to her but him. He was well aware of how juvenile and possessive his conduct was but at that moment he would happily trade his title for his blue-eyed brunette’s attention. Lizzie didn’t seem to mind he made sure to ignore all other guests at the table with the exception of Alfred and the elderly Count Vorontsov. She listened to his funny remarks about other guests and when she laughed his heart almost burst out of his shirt. He made her blush on a few occasions and although she dismissed it as the room being hot he hoped that was not so. He wanted to be the sole cause of her blushing and laughter. When images of his lovely wife sleeping in her arms brought a smile to his face he caught Alfred’s all-knowing look and quickly turned his face into a serious grimace. He was falling in love with his own wife and for some reason he wasn’t sure anyone else should know that. At least not until Elizaveta realized it.

The evening finally came to an end and Ivan couldn’t wait to be alone with his wife. Being back at the house, however, he was suddenly uncertain. Despite their easy camaraderie Lizzie never showed any deeper affection. At the Vorontsky’s recital it felt almost as if they were a loving and devoted couple and yet ... What if it was all in his head? Suddenly he believed that proclaiming his love was a bad idea. Besides, he swore he would only act on any intimate part of

their marriage when she wanted to. Although he was sick of waiting and worried that it might take a long time before Lizzie would come to him, his stubbornness won. He kissed his wife's hand good night and left her in the parlour announcing he would go to sleep. He turned away from her so abruptly that he missed the look of shock and deep disappointment in her face soon replaced by an angry glint in her eyes.

Unable to fall asleep for quite some time he gave up and went to the parlour to drink himself to sleep if necessary. The scene that appeared in front of his eyes robbed him of all words. Lizzie had obviously had trouble sleeping herself and he walked in on her spread over the sofa, a glass of vodka in one hand and a cigarette in another. A book lay open next to the sofa on the floor and a few pieces of parchment and a quill and ink were set on the coffee table. What rendered him speechless, however, was seeing her in a flimsy, almost transparent night gown, her hair loose, her feet bare and her face with slightly pink cheeks stained with tears. Her eyes were closed and it took her a moment or two to react to the sound of the door opening. When her teary eyes focused and bored into him, she burst into tears in earnest. She sat up, her hands covering her face and cried. Ivan had only seen such heart wrenching, soul tearing crying once before when his and Varya's grandmother had died.

All lusty thoughts left him immediately but he was completely lost as what to do. He slowly moved towards Lizzie, sat next to her on the sofa and gently put her arm around her shoulders, slowly stroking her hair and her back. She didn't lean into him but after a while her sobbing ceased and her body stilled. They were silent for a while and then Ivan brought a basin filled with water and a cloth to her so she could wash her face. Her eyes were still red and puffy but she felt slightly better. He waited. Finally she sneaked a peak at him from beneath her long eyelashes and apologized for crying. Ivan was more confused by the second. "Have I done something to upset you?" he asked. She stiffened and held her breath. Then she forced a smile that could have fooled most people but not him. "Of course not, my lord. I should probably thank you for a lovely evening." No matter how well she played the part he could detect an unmistakeable hint of sarcasm in her words. Besides, she only ever called him my lord when she wanted to put some distance between them. He didn't like that one bit. He felt sorry for her despite having no clue what had caused such deep grief and pain, but what confused him most was her stand-offishness. They had had a marvellous evening, they laughed, danced, talked and flirted and he behaved like a perfect gentleman despite the fact that he wanted to be anything but. And yet she was angry with him.

He felt headache starting to form behind his eyes. He stood up to pour himself a drink but suddenly turned around and faced Lizzie. His sudden movement surprised her and she looked up and directly into his eyes. All rational thought left him and suddenly he was kneeling in front of her, his right hand holding her head, his lips pressing against hers. She tensed at first but soon her body melted into his and she kissed him back.

MOSCOW - ST. PETERSBURG

June, 1878

Folding the *Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia*, Elizaveta's favourite illustrated journal with articles about culture, science, politics, wars, and novels, she looked across the table at the restaurant carriage of the train to St. Petersburg at her husband and smiled contentedly. His eyes flashed up and butterflies formed in her belly instantly. There was no mistaking the mischievous glint in Ivan's eyes and he actually winked at her. Blushing, she lowered her eyes and pretended to look through the window to study the scenery passing them by.

Her mind wandered off and flashes of the past weeks painted a serene smile on her face: a mixture of images of Maly and Bolshoi Theatre, costumes, balls, long walks along the Neva River ... all of them accompanied by Ivan's face, the touch of his hands, kisses ... She snapped back to reality, enjoying the feeling of warmth flooding her. Despite all odds she had fallen in love with her husband. She loved replaying the night they finally consummated their marriage in her head. She always blushed fiercely when she remembered how wonderful and passionate yet gentle and deep their first kiss was. What made her blush, though, was Ivan's raspy voice when he had broken the kiss after what seemed an eternity and asked: "Do you want to be my wife in earnest?" Blushing, she relished the thought of how right she was to utter a quiet, shaky "Da" that was the beginning of the following weeks of married bliss.

Finally she found another love in her life. To be honest, she still mourned the loss of her theatre career deep down but the pain was dulled by the excitement and sheer joy of being a wife – loved and cherished and respected. Lulling of the train reminded her of how weeks ago she she had been on an entirely different train, facing uncertain dreary future, mourning the loss of her life and freedom, whereas now she was looking forward to the future, confident that life would bring many more exciting moments. Always with Ivan by her side.

She could not stop admiring the man that had saved her not only in the purely physical sense but also given her new life substance, joy and a sense of peace. He had also given her freedom. Not only had he never behaved as though she was his legal property and his subordinate, as he had every right to, he considered her his equal and never once expected her to be an obedient wife with the sole purpose of fulfilling her husband's need and her duties. It took Lizzie a while to truly accept her newly granted freedom but when she finally did life was even better than the one she had left behind in London. She could go wherever she wished, socialize with whomever she wanted and was for all intents and purposes an independent woman. As far as other socially unacceptable liberties were concerned she had no need for them anymore. She indulged in all of them in the privacy of their home.

When Ivan announced he was going to St. Petersburg to attend a gallery opening for which he contributed two of his paintings she accepted his invitation to accompany him without a second thought. Varya and Bogdan had left a week prior to that to return to Kiev to plan another one of their many art projects but Alexandra Ivanovna Strelkova, an accomplished older actress Lizzie had befriended in Moscow travelled in the same train. Alexandra, or Lesya, took an instant liking to Lizzie and being a very intelligent and insightful woman she

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never questioned her why she had left her acting career behind. It seemed that was the case with almost everyone Lizzie had become acquainted with. No one ever prodded much into her past but simply accepted that she used to be an English actress and was now Tereschenko's wife. The title and the fact that her husband was a very liberal man afforded her many privileges that she never thought a lady could even begin to imagine. During one of their intimate moments Lizzie confided in Ivan all of her fears, insecurities and why she could not shake off the always present air of sadness that almost engulfed her at times. After her bout of crying after the recital Ivan truly did everything to gain her unconditional trust and she let her final masks fall and revealed her deepest and most hidden fears and dreams to him.

"I have always dreamt of a knight in shining armour, of love so deep and intense it makes the rest of the world fade away, of kisses and caresses so passionate I would be swept off my feet ... But I knew it came with a price. The price was freedom. I had seen it many times with my sister, ladies of the nobility, other professional actresses ... So, you see, I decided to be practical and forget the dream as it was too costly. Besides, I got to live most of my fantasies on stage every night ... under the lights that erased everyone else and left me standing in the centre of my own private stage world of fairy tales." The moment she finished she realized she should have confided in Ivan weeks ago. He understood completely and without ever bringing the subject up again he did everything in his power to be exactly that – her knight in shining armour. Furthermore, he put all of his efforts into restoring the fairy tale world of theatre life for her.

It was impossible for her, of course, to go back to acting because despite the liberal family that the Terschenkos were that would be unheard of and at the same time it would be too dangerous as she could be discovered, regardless of how far away London was. She could, however, help with management of the plays and assisted directors in Maly Theatre when putting a play on stage. She had mastered the language uncannily quickly and her experience was invaluable in coaching young actresses and providing a different and fresh point of view to directors and playwrights, especially Ostrovsky. She soon became a respected persona in the theatre world of Moscow and felt a stab of sadness at the thought of leaving it behind.

And yet she wouldn't. Lesya, already one of the most famed tragediennes in Russia was to begin her engagement in Alexandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg in autumn and Ostrovsky provided the first play of the new season. They wanted to do it with Lizzie's help. Ivan agreed in a heartbeat and Lizzie fell in love with him even deeper at that moment.

Musing she peeled her eyes off the window and decided to go to their private compartment to catch some sleep. Though their quarters were the best on the train and surprisingly comfortable she hadn't slept much. The nightmares were mostly gone but Ivan was a persistent lover. It was not long after she had left him in the restaurant carriage that he joined her in bed and she realized that the memories of this particular train ride would be more or less about one and the same thing. Lucky for both of them they would arrive to St. Petersburg the following day.

ST. PETERSBURG

September, 1878

A manuscript of *Poslednyaya zhertva*, Ostrovsky's play that would be the opening of the new season of Alexandrinsky Theatre in less than 24 hours in Elizaveta's hands was creased from being handled so many times. On a few pages the original text was barely discernable as there were so many notes and comments added in Lizzie's elegant cursive writing. She stretched and sighed when she finally put the manuscript in her reticule and bade goodbye to the cast. This was the final rehearsal and though they had worked diligently for most of the summer Lizzie could not shake off the nervous feeling of anticipation that had been increasing as the premiere was getting closer.

It was almost midnight when she left the theatre but since the night was warm she decided to walk home to stretch her legs and organize her thoughts. The play was brilliant and it didn't matter that the press had already attacked Ostrovsky for writing yet another unoriginal story. She believed most of the stories were more or less the same anyway; it was how they were presented that mattered. Alexander himself once told her that most of his plots were borrowed as they were made up by life itself. »A dramatist does not invent stories but writes of things that have happened, or could have happened,« he always said and after reading *The Last Victim* for the first time she was in awe at how realistic and enticing the play was. The play shook her to the core as parts of it read very much like her own life. It was a story of a real actress Yulia Linskaya who had left the theatre to marry a rich man, then became a rich widow and finally, robbed by her lover, died in poverty.

Walking towards Trinity Square and the Tereschenko townhouse she was so immersed in her thoughts she had taken a shortcut through numerous dark alleys without paying much attention to how poorly lit some of them were. A silver glow of a blade slashed the air in front of her eyes suddenly and the world froze in front of her eyes. So did the blood in her veins and her body. She was unable to move regardless of how her brain screamed at her to run. The blade missed her but the black hooded figure looming over her mancingly raised it to strike again. A high-pitched scream pierced the night but Lizzie was still frozen. It was as if though time around them stopped and all that was left was her immovable body and the attacker.

The scream affected the devil wielding the blade, though and he turned around and ran, his coat billowing like a devil's cape. Lizzie slowly sank to her knees and blackness engulfed her.

When she woke up in her bed with Ivan holding her hand and Alexander sitting in a chair on the other side of the bed she coughed and her eyes teared. The smell of camphor made her nauseous and she almost gagged when a hand of an unfamiliar grey-haired bearded old man with round spectacles pressed a glass into her hands and urged her to drink. She gulped down what tasted like sugary water and she felt some colour return to her cheeks.

"You are a lucky woman, Lady Elizaveta," the man said. He gathered his medical bag, nodded to Ivan and Alexander and headed for the door. Ivan called after him: »Doctor Petrushev, wait. I will walk you to the kitchen and see if Olya can find some of her onion pirozhki.« He assured Lizzie he would be back in a moment and hurried after the doctor. She jumped out of bed and paced the room shaking. Alexander tried to calm her down explaining what had happened after she had lost consciousness but it had the opposite effect. The attacker fled and she was brought home in Lord Tsvetkov's carriage. A young maid had seen the attack through the kitchen window of Tsvetkov's residence and chased the devil away with her screaming. She then watched guard with the help of the footman and the butler that came running from the house after hearing her screams while another footman was sent for Lord Tsvetkov. The elderly lord recognised Lizzie as Thereschenko's wife and ordered for her to be taken home in his carriage.

As for the news of the attacker there were none. Alexander told her they decided against involving the *politsiya*. He didn't explain why. He didn't have to. Lizzie knew all too well that involving the law enforcement would lead to questions they couldn't answer without revealing her past and risk her being sent back to England where she was still the primary murder suspect for all she knew.

There wasn't much to say. She plastered a brave smile on her face and assured Alexander that she would be in the theatre in the afternoon and he left. She spent the evening in Ivan's arms unable to either sleep, talk to him or stop thinking. The nearly forgotten feeling of impending doom returned and chilled her bones despite the warm summer night. After a sleepless night the same haunted look she used to be all too familiar with took residence in her eyes yet again. Ivan was constantly at her side, the excitement at the opening of the play she had helped shape and put on stage was gaining momentum, Lesya's final rehearsal performance was impeccable, numerous missives from friends and Ivan's relatives wishing her and Alexander good luck arrived at the house and Ivan had promised her a surprise waiting for her after the premiere. Yet all of that lost its appeal. Time around her resumed ticking away hours, minutes and seconds to her big evening but her body remained frozen as if though it had never left that alley and she was yet again a silent observer of events unfolding in front of her eyes like illustrations on the pages of *Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia* journal.

She spent the afternoon in a daze. She got dressed in a magnificent blue satin dress over a bright yellow silk underskirt, deciding to wear the Tereschenko family crest colours as a tribute to her husband's unconditional support and encouragement. As always before an important event Ivan had presented her with a gift and a note:

My dearest Lizzie,

So many things have gone astray for you and you have been brave and conquered every time. I need you to know that will all be alright as it once was. Therefore enjoy the play tonight and dream of things to come and your bright future in the theatre with me by my side. The amber pendant used to be my great-grandmother's and though it is not a precious stone in itself it has been precious to women in my family for decades – it is known to soothe, calm and energize the wearer at the same time. It is said to help manifest desires and heighten intellectual abilities, clarity of thought, and wisdom. It is your turn to wear it as Varya – who, sends her best, of course – has already benefited from it immensely and we feel you need it and deserve it now.

Always yours,

your loving husband Ivan.

Wrapped in silk paper was a lovely amber pendant in the shape of an oval. It hung from a simple thin silver chain. Elizaveta put the necklace over her head and tucked it underneath her bodice so that it was hidden in sight. The warm stone and the sentiment behind it soothed her nerves a little and she forced a smile when she met Ivan to be escorted to the theatre.

The premiere was a success unlike any other in Alexandrinsky Theatre if the guests and the press present at the party afterwards hosted by Lady Anna Davidovna Abamelik-Lazareva were to be judged by. Ostrovsky and Lesya were received as guests of honour and were not left a minute alone. Lizzie was likewise the centre of attention and it seemed every member of St. Petersburg elite, press and theatre world wanted her to comment on the event and pay her a compliment. She should have enjoyed herself immensely and take pride in her achievements but a small voice of fear wouldn't stop gnawing at her insides.

At some point during Lesya's performance she started to relax and it seemed her body shook off the deathly grip of terror. Ivan's reassuring hand on hers, not caring what anyone thought of such public displays of affection, was like a lifeline she held onto for dear life. As the curtain fell and the applause erupted around her she felt she finally surfaced from the depths of despair and anxiety and took a deep breath. The opening night was over and there had been no further attempts on her life. Unable to force herself to go backstage and congratulate Lesya, Alexander and the rest of the cast she sent them a note praising their work and promised proper congratulations at the party. Walking into the dark halls of the theatre leading to actor's private dressing rooms and leaving through the back door was an image from her nightmares and after the repeat performance of the night before she was sure she would never again be able to feel safe there. Everything changed. A place where her former life was most comfortable had once again been turned into its opposite.

As soon as Ivan thought they had stayed at the party long enough not to be considered impolite he thanked Lady Lazareva and ushered Lizzie to his carriage. She sat in the carriage next to him, her head leaning on his shoulder, her hand safely tucked between his and willed the nightmare of last night away. It took all of her energy but she somehow managed to relax and focus her mind on where they were going. When the carriage stopped at 38 Moskaya ulitsa she looked around her in confusion. They stood in front of a house that as much as it was beautiful, it was only a house. A now closing café occupied the ground floor and two more floors above were dark. Ivan ignored her confusion and led her through the door, up the stairs to the second floor. He opened a double door and she could not make out anything in the dark. "Wait her," he whispered to her and entered the room, moving around it without once hitting anything as stumbling though it was dark, the only light source a weak street lamp casting an almost indiscernible glow to the hall. She was about to call out to him when two paraffin lights that Ivan had lit illuminated something at the far end of a high-ceilinged hall.

It was her. A woman with long auburn hair and deep blue-gray eyes set in a pale but healthy face. The hair was barbed and draped across her left shoulder. She was perched on the edge of a blue and white striped chair wearing a dark green dress over a black silk underdress. A big emerald was nestled at the hollow of her neck just above the neckline of the dress.

She looked thoughtful and content yet there was fire in her eyes. Not smiling but serious and yet the whole image expressed the air of ease, even mischief and something else. Something she couldn't identify but beckoned her closer like a mystery waiting to be solved. She had never seen anything so alluring in her life and as desperately as her mind trying to register why the woman looked so much like her, she couldn't. She had seen her reflection in the mirror countless times but she has never looked like that.

Unaware that she had walked the hall and now stood only a few feet from what was clearly a lifesize portrait of her she asked: "Who is she?" and felt ridiculous the moment the words were out. Ivan stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulder. "It is you, Lizzie," he whispered into her ear. His voice was low and deep but contained raw emotions she had never heard before. She turned around to face him and was met by a look so filled with emotions her head spun. He kissed her, pouring all of the emotions he could never express with words into the kiss. Her cheeks flushed, her heart racing and her head still spinning she managed: "Is that how you see me?" Ivan seemed surprised and it took a moment for him to respond: "That's how I see you, that's how I have always seen you." After a pause he asked: "Don't you like it?"

"What? Of course I do, it's the most beautiful portrait I have ever seen. But she's beautiful." "So are you, my darling," Ivan whispered into her neck and held her tight. After a while he let her go. "I'll go down to the café to get us some champagne. We have to toast to the portrait that will be the centerpiece of the Blue Hall Gallery." Right before he exited the hall he turned around: "While you admire the painting, you may want to look at the portrait on the other side as well." He winked at her and left.

Lizzie walked around the painting and on the other side there was another portrait, the same size, the same painter, different woman. The woman looking at her from the second portrait was also a brunette with grey-blue eyes and alabaster skin but the look in her eyes was haunted, filled with dread and terror. Her posture screamed weakness and fear. It was Mary Ann Terry. The painting showed exactly what she looked like and felt the day she was married in Moscow, the day Ivan saw her for the first time. The difference was incomprehensible. Looking at the reminder of what her life had become and what Ivan helped her change caused all fear and anxiety leave her and she felt it truly was all over. She closed her eyes to gather her thoughts and calm the storm of emotions. She walked back to the other side to look at the painting of Elizaveta Tereschenko. Ivan was right. This was her; on the other side was Mary Ann Terry.

The sound of the silver blade and the ominous steel blue glint in the weak glow of the paraffin light stopped time. The black hooded figure had sliced the portrait of Mary Ann Terry and the glowing hand was suspended in the air ready to strike again. Lizzie screamed and stood still but the moment when the time and her body froze only lasted a split second this time.

She turned on her heels and ran to the door screaming for help. She reached the door, slammed it shut behind her and stumbled in her flight down the dark staircase. Darkness enveloped her once again. She turned on her heels and ran to the door screaming for help. She reached the door, slammed it shut behind her and stumbled in her flight down the dark staircase. Darkness enveloped her once again.

When she regained consciousness her first thought was of Ivan. The only person in the room was Doctor Petrushev and she struggled to free herself of the sheets and blankets and get out of bed. The doctor's old wrinkled hand gently pushed her back. »Now, now, my child, easy. Your beloved husband is right next door talking to the police. Do not fret and stay still as I do not want to reset your broken arm again.« She looked down and realized her left arm had indeed been heavily bandaged and throbbing with pain. Doctor Petrushev set a brace around her neck to hold the injured arm and instructed her to wear it at all times so as not to bump the arms and make more damage. She hardly listened to his instructions about what she could do about the pain and how long it would take for the fracture to heal. She was desperate to see her husband was well and find out what had happened.

When Ivan walked into her bedchamber her heart skipped a beat and when he embraced her she wanted to stay in his arms forever and never let him go. He looked incredibly tired, there were dark circles under his eyes, at least two-day old stubble on his chin and his usually immaculate clothes were rumpled and specked with blood. Not knowing what to ask first her mouth half open while searching for words, Ivan finally smiled at her. It was a tired but so very reassuring gesture. "Rest, Lizzie, and when you feel up to it join me in the drawing room downstairs. Lesya will help you dress."

A few hours later, cleaned, dressed in her blue kaftan, snuggling under a blanket, a cup of tea in her hands and Ivan's calming gaze never leaving her face she learnt how lucky she was indeed as Doctor Petrushev had said. The black hooded murderer with the silver blade had been one Benjamin Wallis responsible for the murders of three women in London and guilty of all three attempts on her life. After Ivan's influence, power and financial incentive made sure the Russian *politsiya* employed all legal and illegal means of interrogation the man told a story that could rival the works of Shakespeare or Pushkin. Master William himself would undoubtedly find it a perfect plot for a play had he not been dead for centuries. Fortunately for Elizaveta it was a tragedy with a happy end.

ST. PETERSBURG - KIEV

October, 1878

Stumbling from their sleeper compartment on the Kiev-bound train Elizaveta suppressed a smile as she passed people immersed in the latest issue of Izvestiya, a daily broadsheet whose circulation had increased during the last week. Not wanting to draw attention to herself she sat down and hid herself behind her own copy of the newspaper. Ivan was still asleep in their compartment and she finally decided to read the whole story – at least as the press saw it.

The Theatre Killer Captured

The Jealousy Lady's Plan Revealed

Actresses Bella Goodall, Lydia Thompson and Fanny Davenport were brutally murdered in the vicinity of London's prominent Haymarket Theatre in February this year.

All three died from stab wounds.

Mary Ann Bessy Terry, 26, was destined to be the fourth victim but the three attempts on her life by Mr. Benjamin Wallis, an assassin hired by no other than Lady Veronica Grascoyne-Cecil, Marchioness of Salisbury (nee Lakely), were fortunately unsuccessful. Mr. Benjamin Wallis shall be judged and prosecuted by the authorities of St. Petersburg and the same fate awaits the Jealous Lady in London.

What police said appeared to be a "jealousy" murder, cost three women their lives and Lady Elizaveta Terschenko, formerly Mary Ann Terry, her career.

The bodies of Actresses Bella Goodall, Lydia Thompson and Fanny Davenport were found sprawled not far away from the backstage door of the Haymarket Theatre in London last winter. Mary Ann Terry was attacked in the same area but was saved by a passing lord.

Soon after the last London attack, police threatened to arrest Mary Ann Terry as she had gone from being a victim to their primary suspect in a matter of days, courtesy of Robert Arthur Talbot Gascoyne-Cecil, Marquess of Salisbury and Charles Chetwind-Talbot, Earl of Shrewbury. While the latter man's motive to tarnish Mary Ann Terry's reputation is clear – he hoped to regain the property left to the actress in his father's will, Lord Salisbury's motive was only revealed a week ago in a letter to the Chief Constable of the London Police. The letter had been sent by no other than the Earl of Shrewbury and it contained all the details of the plot to destroy Mary Ann.

The most surprising fact in the story of misuse of power and disregard for human life and dignity is undoubtedly the role Lady Veronica Gascoyne-Cecil, Marchioness of Salisbury, now known as the Jealous Lady. Unable to accept the fact that her husband had once allegedly had an affair with the intended victim she devised a plan to destroy the woman she saw as her competition and the reason for her clearly unhappy marriage.

The murderer was caught after he had attacked Mary Ann Terry, now a wife of Lord Ivan Tereschenko, at the Blue Hall Gallery in St. Petersburg a few days before the opening of the gallery's first exhibition which was going to feature a double portrait of Tereschenko's wife as the centrepiece. He was caught by Lord Tereschenko himself and we are glad to report that Lady Elizaveta has only suffered a broken arm.

The opening of the Blue Hall Gallery was a success and many private collectors have already offered an outrageous sum for the double portrait of the above mentioned lady, despite the fact that the canvas is severely damaged as it had been stabbed with the murder weapon intended to kill her. Lord Tereschenko claims he shall never sell the paintings.

Lord and Lady Tereschenko are glad that the justice will be served and are going to spend the winter at Tereschenko residence in Kiev before undoubtedly continuing their respective careers in the art world.

Elizaveta almost laughed out loud. Gilbert was right after all when he said that any publicity was good publicity. Which reminded her she had a letter to write. More than one, in fact. She would start with Gilbert and then her family, then Alfred, who was still in Moscow ... She smiled. It seemed she only ever wrote letters on a train. Except that these will actually be sent as she had nothing to neither fear nor hide anymore.

Suddenly a memory flashed through her mind – her unsent letters to Ivan. She kept them and she still clearly remembered how furious she was when she found out Ivan had read one of them. Perhaps she would carry on the tradition of writing letters to him as well. Only this time she would willingly let him read them.

ABOUT

GALINA MARX GARIN



Galina Marx Garin is a philosopher-poet in combat boots, armed with a pen, a playlist full of metal, and a suspicious amount of caffeine.

She writes steamy, smart, and slightly unhinged stories about beautiful disasters who fall in love (sometimes accidentally, often loudly). When she's not plotting emotional chaos on the page, she's mentoring improv misfits, learning Arabic, or sparring with corporate nonsense and a left hook.

Want more lust, laughs, and literary rebellion?

Find Galina at www.galinamarxgarin.com or follow the madness on Instagram @gmgauthor.