

## The Hand that Rocks the Cradle

January 2022 – Commission

### Chapter One

The cold wind whistled through the darkening sky, setting the gloomy trees tossing their branches restlessly as if in defiance at the gathering night. It was another chilly night on the outskirts of the sprawling capital city, and few souls were brave enough to venture forth at a time like this. It was much better to stay inside where it was a tiny bit warmer, and maybe just a little bit safer...

But through the gloom strode a solitary figure, seemingly oblivious to the awful weather around her. Her head, hooded in shadow under a tattered jacket, turned now and again from side to side, as though anxious not to be seen. If anyone had been nearby to notice, caught in the dim light of a nearby streetlight they would have seen a spark of nervous fear in her blue eyes. But no one was there to see her, nor to mark her disappearance as she flitted out of sight once more in the shadows.

Yet the girl remained very much real. Katarina, her mother had named her nearly twenty years ago – and simply Katya to her friends. A college student she was... or rather, had been until eight short months ago. She'd been so full of hopes and dreams and ideas of what she wanted to be, too. So bright, so talented, her teachers had said. And then... well, the Changes had happened. After that, there wasn't much going to university for anyone, including Katarina.

She ran over the phrases in her mind now like a mantra, a magical charm to keep herself warm against the chilling world around her. They were the words she would use to write a history someday: a history of the Changes and the bad times their poor country had entered. A history of the criminal who had done such things to his country and people, and whom she hated with a smoldering passion that kept her warm even when their meager fireplace no longer could.

"It was on the eighteenth of July, 2019 that tragedy struck our nation. The beloved president Alexei Rudawski and his talented wife Lyuba passed away, victims of a horrific plane crash that left their people bereft of all hope and any future. For though Alexei had been a great man and a kindly father to his people, as a father to his own son he had not succeeded. Anton, as every one of his people knew, was hopeless: inexperienced, capricious, selfish and reckless beyond belief... and with a glimmer of cruelty in his eyes that boded ill for the constitutional monarchy that now reluctantly looked to him as its leader..."

She froze and glanced fearfully at a sudden thump and creak in the shadows to her left. But it was only a half-rotten branch from the pine above, and she breathed once more as she resumed her

cautious steps. Hmm, where had she been? Ah, yes...

"Nor did they have long to wait for evidence of their new leader's ruthless drive for power. The Cabinet he dissolved within his first week as president. 'Supreme Leader,' he styled himself: someone who knew best what his country needed, and who would put up with no timid counsels from what he saw as weak, meddling, corrupt bureaucrats. And soon as the reins of power were his, he set to work: not to improve the country or to maintain its vibrant culture or build up its thriving economy, but to rape and to pillage and to exploit it for his own personal profit."

Her breathing quickened as she raced across an empty street and slipped back into the sheltering cover of the bushes on the other side. God, how fired up she always got at this part of her narrative!

"And exploit and pillage and rape he did... literally. People began to disappear: first his political opponents, and then acquaintances, and at last even those who had thought they were his friends. But every last one of them had one thing in common: they were men. And by the time one year under Supreme Leader Anton Rudawski had elapsed, scarcely one in ten of the nation's men were still to be found. For he saw all other men as rivals, competitors for the one natural resource of the country that he intended to exploit for himself and himself alone...

"The women."

Katarina shuddered, less from the cold than from the torrent of painful memories swirling through her mind. The day her father had gone to work, and never come back. The frantic wails and cries of her mother, knowing full well that nothing short of a miracle would ever allow her to see her husband again. The dark, scarcely-to-be-believed whispers they'd heard in the days that followed: of the prison camps, the forced labor to which all the men of the country were being put...

No, she had to be strong. She had to tell her story, to keep it and her memories alive until the day she could get her revenge.

"By the time of the despotic new leader's twentieth birthday, he had single-handedly destroyed the livelihood, economy, and social wellbeing of his little country. For without half of its workforce, the factories could not operate. Without most of its farmers, it lacked for food. And without the majority of its coal and oil workers, what was left of the people resigned themselves to dark nights and cold winters for the rest of the foreseeable future..."

She spied a faint glow off at the far end of the darkened common, and drew a shaky breath. That

must be- that was- It must be the person she was looking for. At least, she hoped so...

But still in her head seethed more images, more words, more hatred. "Not that the Supreme Leader cared. His people might be living in misery and in prison camps, but not he. He lived the life of a spoiled, pampered playboy. While the remaining women of the nation drank their meager soups, he guzzled champagne by the bottle. While they wailed the loss of their hapless husbands, he lolled beside his trophy wife in oblivious, hedonistic pleasure. While they huddled close for warmth and comfort, he romped with a half-dozen strippers and hookers every night, demanding their bodies and their groveling affection to satiate his grotesque lusts. While..."

She wanted to continue – to say something about his abominably hypocritical purity laws, the intent of which seemed to be to outlaw any form of sexual expression whatsoever for everyone except himself – but she was almost there. That light was just there by the fence- the figure holding it-

"Fine evening for a smoke," Katarina spoke, the syllables of the passphrase she'd been instructed to use unexpectedly loud in her ears. If this was the wrong person- if she'd been mistaken- well, surely no one would suspect her real intention... right?

The light, a battered flashlight held in an equally battered glove, flickered briefly up to the figure's face. "For now, yes, but there's rain coming soon." The impassive eyes under the hood regarded her for a moment before turning away with a flash of blonde hair and a wave of the gloved hand. "Here, come along."

Katarina's heart was racing as she followed the figure across the road, down a deserted alleyway, and across a dingy concrete courtyard. "Up we go," came the order, and over the wall her guide slipped with practiced ease. Over she slipped too, after a bit of nervous scrabbling and an inelegant tumble down the other side into a pitch-black mass of bushes. And then at last, when she was least expecting it, came a sudden halt. A hole in the ground before her was opening, her guide sliding the bunker door open on noiseless hinges. "It's down here. Be quick now!"

Katarina never forgot that descent down the ladder: the glow of light far below, the icy cold of the bars of the ladder, the murmur of voices drawing closer and ever louder. Once at the bottom, her guide slipped down beside her and took her by the hand. "Welcome to the Resistance, sister," she murmured, tossing back her hood to reveal a handsome profile and dirty blonde hair. "You can call me Anya. Now, hurry up – the meeting's just starting!"

And what a meeting it was. For ranged round the little room, crammed more tightly than Katarina

would have imagined possible, were dozens and dozens of women: tall women, short women, middle-aged and elderly and some maybe even younger than she was. Each of these women, she knew without speaking, was there with a fierce purpose. They had lost their husbands, their sons, their fathers. They had suffered, and protested, and been silenced. And from the hungry, fiery looks in their eyes, they were all united in one thing: they wanted revenge.

But of all the women there in that close-packed room, one stood out even to Katarina's unfamiliar eyes: the slim young woman in the center of them all with flaming red hair and green eyes that could not be mistaken for any other. And as she got to her feet and flashed a searching glance round the suddenly quiet room, Katarina's jaw slipped open with shock.

It was her, no doubt about it. It was Julia: the Supreme Leader's very own wife.

Perhaps the Resistance was a bigger deal than she'd thought.

*(To be continued!)*