

CHAPTER ONE

*Baku, Azerbaijan. South-west outpost of the Russian Empire.
November 1890.*

KLARA KNEW TO BE ON HER GUARD BECAUSE NIKOLAI HAD warned her. He'd be carrying something valuable, the old man had said. Something men will kill for – it was why he'd given her the Smith 'n' Wesson revolver. The weapon felt heavy in her pocket, solid metal banging against her leg as she moved. *You are the last man in the world I want to meet, Anton Nikolayevich Sabroski.* She drew a shawl over her hair and draped it over her thin shoulders as she glanced about. The man who had been outside the house had followed her. Overweight, ill-dressed, lumbering along in her peripheral vision, a glowing red dot between his fingers. There were others, but she'd grown used to the masquerades: the Okhrana secret police, the gendarmes, the oil spies, pickpockets (she'd been one herself) and assorted villains. The man who caught her interest was tall and well-built and overly muffled – something about the way he held himself seemed familiar.

She took a deep breath. Dusk had crept over the Baku harbour, the crescent-shaped bay filling up with fishing boats and steamers making ready for the night. Being out at night was a risk for a young, unaccompanied, European female. But Klara was used to keeping to the shadows. The ancient city of Baku, on the edge of the Caspian Sea, was ideal for anyone who wanted to remain unseen, perfect for outcasts and runaways and those hiding from hunters. A call to prayer arose from a mosque, then another, then another, until the dusk was filled with the overlapping of songs.

Somebody poked her hard in the back and she spun round. A ragged child handed her a note and held out its hand. Klara took a kopek from her pocket. She read. A bold hand. Written in Russian.

The docks. Second cargo shed.

Her heart quickened. Was it a trick? She looked this way and that, but there was nobody obvious and no sign of glowing-red-dot man. Peddlers and merchants packed their wares. Wagons creaked, donkeys brayed, horses pawed the ground. Lights dotted the hillside and the ominous Maiden Tower loomed up from the walled fortress of Baku's old city, the *Icheri Sheher*.

She would risk it.

She secured the revolver, gathered up her dress and ran, darting and hurling herself into doorways and archways to draw breath and check. She ran until she reached the loading bays and found a hiding place. She took out the gun and stood still to catch her breath. Then she slipped between the shadows until she reached the second cargo shed.

The man she guessed was Anton Nikolayevich was sitting on a crate talking to a fisherman. He was wet through. He had no overcoat or hat, his jacket was ripped and a streak of blood ran

down the side of his face. He was drinking from the fisherman's flask. Cautiously she emerged. 'Anton Nikolayevich?'

The man jerked his head up and one hand flew to his pocket but came away empty. He cursed. 'Who are you?'

Anton had brown deep-set eyes, too many lines for a young man, and long wavy hair tied back.

'My name is Klara. Your father, Nikolai Mikhailovich... he sent me.'

He scowled at her before handing the flask to the fisherman.

She motioned. 'Hurry. There might be... trouble.'

He stood at that. Awkwardly, as his right leg was bleeding. He picked up a battered travelling case. 'Why didn't my father come?'

'He can't. Nikolai doesn't go anywhere any more.'

'Why?'

'He's unwell.'

He drew closer, towering over her, dripping seawater and blood tinged with rum. 'Do you have a means of transport?'

'By the garrison. A gig... What happened to you?'

'I took a beating... from men who knew no better.'

He limped alongside her, his soaking jacket glancing her arm. It was completely dark now. The cargo area of the docks was heaped with canvas sacks, wooden barrels and long iron pipes to trip over. She felt a shiver up her spine. A bell tolled from the Armenian church on the hill.

'Give me your gun,' he said. 'We're being followed.'

'Where's yours?'

'Lost.'

Reluctantly, she gave him the revolver. Anton took it, checked the cartridges before taking hold of her arm. Despite his injuries, he moved at considerable speed, gathering her and his bag at a pace.

They hadn't gone far when they were ambushed by an explosion of street children in rags around them. Little hands snatched at the travelling case and pulled at the man's pockets and

his belt. Klara batted them away. Anton raised the weapon, more for show than a threat, and the children shrieked when they saw the gun and scattered like mice.

‘How did you find me?’ he demanded.

‘A note. From a child.’

‘These ones, no doubt.’

She flushed. ‘Just be thankful somebody came to get you.’

They reached the gig. Klara hooked up the horse, took the reins and drove along the embankment. She beat a path between wagons and donkeys, a Turk in a fez carrying a trunk on his back. Two shrouded women shouted as they sped past, spraying dirt.

‘What are you carrying that’s so valuable?’ Klara shouted. ‘A sack of diamonds?’

He ignored her as he looked left then right. Suddenly he grabbed the reins, forcing the horse to veer to the right.

‘What are you doing!’

‘Get down.’ He pushed her into the well of the seat. Klara had just enough time to witness a covered wagon roll across their path before a grinding noise filled her ears. Anton pulled hard right on the reins, and the gig bumped as it scraped along the side of the cart. The horse whinnied and struggled to free itself.

Then came a blur of violence.

A man’s arm in a fitted jacket; breeches tucked into black boots. An arc and thwack of a cane, then a cry, an animal snort. The gig rocked and screeched sideways but remained miraculously upright. The stranger on the horse reached down and snatched at the travelling case but Anton Nikolayevich was too quick. He wrenched it away and swung it hard into his attacker’s face. The horse reared and the stranger fell.

‘Drive,’ he ordered, thrusting the reins into Klara’s hands before slumping into his seat.

The residential streets were quiet. As they approached the grand house on Nikolaevskaya Street, a watchman unlocked the iron gates and guided the horse into the courtyard. Klara's head spun. Anton Nikolayevich was far more dangerous than she'd realised. He would draw attention to her, to Ivan, which would be the end of them both. The protective blanket that Nikolai provided had gone. She watched him climb out of the gig and limp his way to the door.

Why did you have to come back?

He hadn't said another word to her. It was as if she didn't exist to him. She knew he had dismissed her as a nobody, a servant, a paid messenger.

But oh how wrong he was.