

## *Chapter 1*

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I HAVE BEEN BLESSED BY SEVERAL GOOD FORTUNES, AND I HAVE NO doubt that it is this constellation of luck and circumstance—at least, in part—that allows me to write these words. But foremost among my various and undeserved gifts I count my aunt Eugenia (Countess Menshova to most), for if it were not for her sardonic manner and low tolerance for insincerity, my debut at the St. Petersburg season—and my life thereafter—would have been very different.

Aunt Eugenia had taken care of my mother and me since my Papa had passed on to the mysterious afterlife I had only vague notions of at the tender age of eight. Unfortunately, Papa's passing was not sudden. He had started to succumb to increasingly frequent coughing and fainting spells when I was just an infant. His failing health ensured that I had no memory of his face since he spent most of his time in Switzerland, in successively more expensive and desperate treatments. Time was not the only thing of which the disease robbed our family—the cost of the treatments was such that after my father's passing at some Swiss resort, our fortune was nil, and entered the realm of negative numbers once his body was transported home and interred in the family crypt, just three hundred miles from St. Petersburg in the village of Trubetskoye.

My mother and I were destitute—save for the family manor house, which would have had to be sold at auction, were it not for my mother's trusting love for her sister Eugenia, and Eugenia's clear-eyed practicality. Aunt Eugenia had inherited most of the money

on my mother's side of the family. (Their father, an unsentimental man, decided that since my mother was married and Aunt Eugenia was not, that it was Eugenia who would benefit from being named heiress to the title and its monetary accompaniment.) She and my mother decided to pool their resources and save the manor from such indignity. Aunt Eugenia moved to Trubetskoye and set about buying back and administering the estate, hiring help, fixing the manor house, and leasing the land, all the while pouring her own not inconsiderable resources into the enterprise. In a sense, she took over Papa's role in my young heart as well, and provided as admirable a model of masculine virtue as one could hope. The fact she wore a corset and a severe black dress was entirely coincidental.

After Papa's death, my mother had faded both spiritually and physically, acquiring an inspired look one usually imagined in angels or ancient Christians, and while she was never much involved in the daily life of the estate to begin with, she withdrew even further away from mundanity, drifting through the brightly lit spacious rooms of the Trubetskoye Manor, pale fingertips of her left hand trailing along the light-colored paneling of the walls, while her right hand tortured either a lacy handkerchief or a string of rosary beads, a relic from some distant and Polish relative. She only took interest in the news of the St. Petersburg season. This, I think, is what kept her alive—her desire to see me at the Winter Palace and gossip. She delighted in any news from Emperor Constantine's court, as she delighted in all of his reforms—for he had never forgotten the Decembrists and their families, the ones to whom he owed his throne. He always sent us cards for Christmas and Easter, even after my Papa had passed on.

Ever since I was very young, I had known about reforms—everything changed so fast. Even Aunt Eugenia, interested in the news from the court only if it concerned her directly, used to say

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that the Emperor's name was ill-fitted to his feverish rush to change change change the ancient injustices that plagued the land.

I was born seven years after the serfs were freed, but ten years later the adults were still talking about the families who had lost their fortunes. The serfs of the Trubetskoye estate were freed with the rest, but quite a few had remained as renters; the rest of the estate was worked by hired labor and, as Aunt Eugenia used to say, the raising of the downtrodden necessitated some sacrifice. Both she and my papa, when he was still alive, had foresight enough to send a few especially bright newly liberated young men to a vocational school. As a result the Trubetskoye now enjoyed its own engineering staff, enough to modify the machinery to do something Aunt Eugenia tried to explain to me on many occasions, but my mind invariably started to drift the moment she mentioned the dreaded word "efficiency."

My education was also Aunt Eugenia's concern—at least she was the one to interview the applicants for the enviable position of my governess, and she dealt with a long procession of French, German, and English noble-but-destitute maidens with her habitual ruthlessness. The winner who emerged from what I imagined as a gladiatorial pit was a long-nosed Englishwoman with closely set eyes who reminded me of a herring. Her name was Miss Chartwell, and from the day I was eight to the day I was eighteen she taught me English, cursive writing, natural history, and calculus.

Perhaps it is worth mentioning that my youth was not just a jumble of family strife and nation-wide reformism—there were also long summers spent playing in the fields, fishing, and befriending the children of the renters, and reading James Fenimore Cooper; there were equally long winters when frost painted the windows with fantastical white flowers while the coal fire blazed in the copper stove, and my mother and her sister sat amiably side by side: one

knitting, the other checking over the accounts. They still live like this in my mind's eye, the two aspects of contented domesticity—caring and wisdom, twin guardians of my childhood happiness.

I remember the second winter after Aunt Eugenia took over the household's reins. I played with my mother's cat Murka in front of the roaring fireplace. My mother looked up from her knitting, her dark-hooded eyes smiling at me, the skin around them folding into unfamiliar happy creases. "You're getting so big," she said, wistful. "Soon, I'll be escorting you to the balls in St. Petersburg."

I smiled, happy to see her thinking and talking of me instead of my dead papa. "Am I pretty, Mama?" I asked, coquettish.

She smiled still, but remained silent, and I could see that her eyes were troubled. She stopped rocking in her rocking chair.

Aunt Eugenia interfered with her usual bluntness. "There are better things to be than pretty, Sasha," she told me. "Don't you let anyone tell you otherwise."

"What is better than beauty?" I asked, breathing deeply to stave off the impending heartbreak.

"Not being a fool," Aunt Eugenia said. She was not a great beauty, with her long narrow chin and small beady eyes, her thin hair slicked into a paltry bun. But when she said it, I could see that she would have felt the same way if she were a golden-haired full-lipped nymph. "And if I were you, I would start paying attention to your lessons."

"I am paying attention," I said, indignant as only a ten-year-old child can be in the face of a just accusation.

Aunt Eugenia smiled then, her chin growing even pointier, and turned to my mother. "What do you think, Irina?"

My mother resumed her knitting and rocking; it was difficult to believe that this dark-haired, fragile beauty was related to Eugenia. "I think women in our family are late bloomers," she said. "You

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watch and see—the girls who are pretty now will be sows in a few years, and my little frogling will become a pretty young lady. Remember the story of the Ugly Duckling?”

Aunt Eugenia and I nodded in unison. Eugenia smiled impishly and said, “Then again, some ugly ducklings grow up to be ugly ducks—not to be helped, that. But having a brain and a heart . . . well, that’s the sort of thing a young lady doesn’t have to wait for.”

Is it any wonder that I took her words more deeply to heart than my mother’s?

WHEN I TURNED EIGHTEEN, I WAS JUDGED TO BE READY FOR MY debut—even Eugenia nodded and conceded there was nothing to be gained by delaying it further. I was not so much excited about the balls and the season as I was about getting to visit St. Petersburg again—even though we had an apartment there, we spent all of our time in Trubetskoye, and visited only rarely. I missed the leaden Neva and the spire of the Admiralty piercing the fat low winter clouds, and I could not wait to walk those broad and impossibly straight streets, blown through by the cold autumn winds.

Despite my mother’s predictions, I had not achieved beauty. Rather, my appearance had become stuck between my aunt’s sharp features and my mother’s dainty ones—neither an ugly duck nor a swan, I could only claim awkwardness as one feature that belonged to me and no one else.

Then there was the matter of a dress; my mother fully intended to fret about it until Eugenia rolled her eyes and hired a village seamstress. “Here,” she told the large, red-handed and rough-knuckled woman as she gave her the money. “Make something not embarrassing.” The woman nodded while I secretly doubted the effectiveness of such low-aiming instruction. But to my surprise, the dress turned out to be foam green, simple, and beautiful in

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a manner of Grecian shifts (if Grecians were to wear corsets and crinolines under theirs.) Thus accoutered, I was ready for anything fine society was prepared to throw at me.

I CONFESS TO SOME ANXIETY AS EUGENIA'S CARRIAGE LEFT THE familiar backwater of Trubetskoye and clanked along the too-wide ruts toward the capital. Squeezed between my mother's warm soft shawl and my aunt's sharp elbow, I had all the time in the world to think and fret, even as Miss Chartwell's fish eyes watched me from the seat opposite ours where she was losing a silent and undignified battle with hat boxes and suitcases that had not fit on the carriage roof.

I felt an impostor, somehow—as if my papa's sacrifice and service had expired the day he had died, and now my mother and I were nothing, just poor relations leeching off of my aunt's kindness; as if my family's past did not entitle me to a place at the emperor's season; as if I did not stand to inherit two titles. All of that was no more than dust to me, and the closer we got to the icy, stony beauty of St. Petersburg, the more perturbed I felt.

Fortunately, my mother and Eugenia's exclamations brought me out of the tar pit of excessive self-reflection.

"It changes every time I come by," Eugenia said. "Every time."

"Indeed," my mother said peering through the window on her side of the carriage. "I guess it is a good thing that the emperor is taking care of the roads." She smiled at me and leaned back into the cushions to allow me a view out of the window.

The road I remembered as being insubstantial and barely passable in the spring floods was being widened—a crew of freedmen labored next to the road, shattering stone with heavy hammers; another crew collected the resulting gravel and loaded it into long, open carts. I surmised the carts would then be sent to pave the road—it

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was still dirt at our present location, but noises ahead signaled it was paved not too far from there.

Roads and highways and railroads were the emperor's latest obsession. Eugenia had shrewdly observed he had to do something with all the freedmen, now that the fields were modernized and required fewer workers than before. My mother approved of the emperor's actions as she approved of everything he did—he was her connection to my dead papa, his protégé of sorts, even though such an imaginary inversion of power was ridiculous.

To Eugenia, the relentless reformism seemed to signal something beyond imperial magnanimity— I swear she could see farther into the future than any of us with her small beady eyes. “I do insist,” she said, and seemed to look past the freedmen on the road's side and past the stone slabs, past the carts and sharp gravel, “that soon enough St. Petersburg will rival the capitals of Europe—London, Paris, all of them—as a beacon of progress and industry.”

“You do babble so, Genia,” my mother said.

“It's not babbling,” Eugenia said. “I want to see this country ascend from the mire of poverty and superstition, for us reach for the light of reason . . .” She caught herself and let her voice trail off.

My aunt was entirely too infatuated with reason, as my mother used to say. She herself viewed rationality as a masculine domain, and occasionally hinted it was not my aunt's lack of beauty but her excess of imagination that doomed her to spinsterhood. My mother seemed to think it should be a lesson to me—at least, the specter of remaining an old maid only surfaced in conversation when I was willful or spent too much time catching frogs and climbing trees with the renters' children. Yet my mother did not seem convinced by her own words—or at least, let them be undermined by the obvious and unrepentant love she had for her sister.

We stopped for the night in the small town of Tosno. At least I remembered it as small from a few summers ago, but soon discovered it had increased considerably in size, not in small measure due to a factory that had sprung up at what had once been its outskirts.

“What does it make?” I asked Eugenia as we watched through the windows of the small hotel at tall smokestacks disgorging clouds of sulfurous steam into the evening sky.

“I am not sure,” Eugenia said. “But we can go and find out.”

My mother begged off the expedition, citing fatigue, but Eugenia and I walked down the winding dirt street past wooden cabins comprising most of the town’s residential buildings. The paint on the dwellings’ walls was peeling and discolored, and the acrid air made my eyes water. Even the trees lining the streets were blackened and mostly dead, their branches twisted like pleading fingers reaching for the sky.

The factory was still spitting out smoke and steam when we arrived at its vast doors. I worried that Eugenia, always keenly interested in things that clanged and were made of metal, would drag me inside the horrid building and make me walk across the floors where, surely, rude men swore at each other and operated dangerous-looking machines.

But she never had a chance, because the gates swung open and out came a throng of bearded, half-naked men who shouted excitedly, and pulled on long metallic ropes. There were dozens of them, all straining against thick twisted cables that sang like strings. Eugenia pulled me out of the way and we watched as the factory groaned and opened its doors wider, allowing the men to drag its strange creation forth into the last burnished rays of a setting sun—not quite a ship but a winged golden balloon as large as a three-storied house.

The egg-shaped balloon strained against the containing net. A basket, woven from strips of birch bark, like the lapti on the workers’



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feet—dangled under it. Tall wings rose from its sides, bracketing both the balloon and a metal cage containing a chugging smoking engine that clung to the basket like a fungal growth.

“It doesn’t look like it needs an engine,” I whispered to Eugenia.

She shook her head. “Don’t be a fool, Sasha, of course everything needs an engine. How will it be propelled, change direction? A balloon is just the wind’s toy. An airship has its own mind, though this one could be a tad more balanced.”

A few of the men jumped into the dangerously swaying basket, the sweet aroma of birch sap mixing with the noxious smell of sweat and burning peat. The rest let go of some of the ropes, pulling the net off the airship, and the contraption soared. The basket hung lopsided, but this did not deter the men inside it. They operated the iron levers sticking through the bars of the cage that contained the engine, making it chug faster. Other levers lifted and lowered the golden wings allowing the airship to execute slow, swooping turns.

The men on the ground cheered, and Eugenia—quite unlike herself—clapped. The rising wind got hold of the ship and pulled it over the factory, toward the narrow strip of the forest, until its golden glow was hidden from view behind the treetops. The sun had sunk below the horizon, and Eugenia took my arm.

“Let us return to the hotel, Sasha,” she told me. “There won’t be anything else exciting here today.”

The next day, at breakfast, we heard the innkeeper talking about a fire ball crashing in the fields just outside of town and the peat fires that started last night just a few miles to the west. Neither Aunt Eugenia nor I mentioned the airship and its fate to my mother.

IT TOOK US FOUR DAYS OF BEING SHAKEN ALONG THE RUTS AND staying in inns before we arrived at the severe glory of the capital. Eugenia had arranged for the hiring of staff who had uncovered

furniture, cleaned, provisioned the place, and laid fires to warm the house in anticipation of our arrival, but it took another day of unpacking and arranging before we were settled in our St. Petersburg quarters. It took even longer before I was allowed to go for a walk along the Neva's embankment.

Oh, but the wait only made it more rewarding—as I strolled across the drizzle-slicked stones of the embankment, a sense of historical *gravitas* washed over me: these were the stones my papa's feet walked over, and the emperor's, and Peter the Great's; every important person who had ever lived in this city, every prominent player in the tragedies of our national life had left invisible footprints here.

I looked at the slick surface of the river and noticed it churn, water frothing white and green as bottle glass until a heavy brass hull, patina-covered, breached the surface. It looked like a monstrous sinking boat that was going the wrong way. A pair of binoculars mounted on a long pole swiveled toward me, and almost immediately the round cover on the convex back of the boat started turning. A few passersby stopped and clustered closer to the water, pointing and gasping. I had to push through the small crowd to get a view of the goings on.

When it opened, a very ordinary-looking freedman, dressed in linen shirt and matching trousers girded with a piece of rope, stepped out of the hatch just as I managed to work my way to the front of the crowd, inches away from the gray stone wall and the black water lapping at it.

"How do you do, miss," the freedman said to me. He then proceeded to walk the length of the monstrous contraption to adjust one of the mismatched knobs studding its tail end like a lace-maker's bobbins. He fiddled with one knob and then another one, as I watched in mute fascination, until he returned to the hatch and

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climbed inside. The green brass shuddered and several of the bobbins exhaled white clouds of steam. The water hissed and bubbled as it lapped against the knobs, and the boat soon sunk under the water and disappeared from view, leaving only a short-lived white-crested wave in its wake.

Afterwards, I walked along the Nevsky Prospect, the heart of the city laid out so vast, flayed open for the Kazan Cathedral and its square, and I gawped at the rearing horses guarding the Anichkov Bridge. Then I stopped to look at the stately, simple lines of Beloselsky-Belozersky Palace. I tried to guess what silent and luxurious life teemed behind those tall vaulted windows of the second story, who were the shadows sliding past the lacy white curtains like fishes under ice.

I could lose myself in these streets, and even as the rain grew heavier I dawdled, reluctant to go back to our quarters by the Moyka River, not too far from the Yusupov Palace. I had decided to go to St. Isaac's Cathedral and the Senate Square tomorrow; no doubt, both my mother and Aunt Eugenia would be interested in visiting the place of Papa's triumph.

However, upon my return I learned that Eugenia had other plans. Normally my mother and my aunt would arrange for an audience with the emperor, but because of my impending debut and associated emergencies—a tear in one of my silk slippers, a length of soutache coming undone along the front of the dress—they had been unable to arrange for an audience before the ball. The ball at the Winter Palace was two days hence, and preparations had to be made. Additionally, my aunt was still overseeing getting the apartment and menus in order. Thus my aunt felt any honoring of Papa's death had to wait until after the ball.

The hired maid turned out to be handy with a sewing needle, and thanks to her the clothing emergencies were solved with just

a modicum of anxiety, letting us all fret about other matters. I was mostly worried about meeting my peers—even though Miss Chartwell did her best to impart the necessary knowledge of English (no one spoke Russian at the court since Emperor Constantine contracted a profound case of Anglophilia) and manners, I was still more used to the company of peasant and engineer children. I suspected that the young ladies of my own age and social standing would have a much less interest in the life of our estate than I did. Even my treasures, the books by James Fenimore Cooper, were unlikely to interest them.

Meanwhile, my mother seemed to grow even more despondent, the present receding as the deluge of memories of the house and familiar sights of the capital assaulted her. She mopped at her eyes with her handkerchief and drifted from one well-lit room to the next, pausing only in front of the wide bay windows to catch a glimpse of the pavement's rain-slicked stones and the gleaming of St. Isaac's across the river.

Aunt Eugenia was also lost in thought—she had retreated to her room and muttered darkly there, pacing all the while. I suspected that her discontent had to do more with the present state of affairs rather than the memories of the past youth. She seemed to be embroiled in preparations for the ball—her dress of black silk, decorated with charcoal-gray diamonds sewn onto a ribbon that ran all the way down the front was both beautiful and severe—much more elaborate than her usual clothing, and I was flattered that she would go to such length for me.

As it turned out, it wasn't my debut Aunt Eugenia was preparing for.

THE DAY OF THE BALL WAS GLOOMY, BUT IT MATTERED LITTLE as all of society headed for the Winter Palace. The Neva swelled

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with rain and turned leaden like a corpse, and small white-crested waves lapped at the mottled walls of the embankment. The squares and throughways were choked with the multitude of carriages and horses, and for a while I thought we might never arrive to the palace—I blushed when I realized the thought filled me with relief. I tried hard not to pick at the length of soutache twisting and winding down the front of my dress, and instead played with lace rosettes along my neckline and worried at the buttons of my long gloves.

My mother kept looking at the torrents of rain outside the window, and Aunt Eugenia frowned at her private thoughts. In her black and gray, she was formidable—and a stunning contrast to my mother who wore youthful dark rose and an overabundance of lace and ribbons. Between the three of us, she was dressed most as a debutante.

But, to my disappointment, we somehow managed to arrive at the palace and ascended its grand staircase, chandeliers blazing over the crowd—bright dresses and dark suits, with the occasional royal blue of officers' uniforms and the white of pelisses. There were bare shoulders and enough lace to wrap the Earth three times over. There was an overabundance of glossy marble, too much light and sparkling jewels. My head spun. If not for the strong, dry hand of my aunt steadying me, I would have lost my footing and tumbled gracelessly down the marble staircase. We entered the ballroom arm in arm—or rather with me leaning on her strong, square hand, her surprisingly small birdlike bones belying her evidently supernatural power.

We were announced and joined the overwhelming crowd. There were many young women who smelled of exotic flowers and looked like them too with their bright-colored dresses and pleated lace sewn onto every available surface. Their bodices

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and bell skirts were stiff with embroidery, and next to them my non-embarrassing dress looked plain, yards of soutache notwithstanding. I even saw a few wearing real orchids pinned to their hair and bodices.

“Goodness,” Eugenia whispered. “While we were in our provinces, half of St. Petersburg lost its mind, and now they fancy themselves a greenhouse.”

I snickered and immediately felt better. My mother had drifted off to greet some people she recognized, leaving me in Eugenia’s uncompromising care. I expected a round of introductions and perhaps some dancing—the orchestra was tuning itself, with low melodic yowls of violins and shy exhalations of trumpets—but instead, Eugenia steered me toward the far end of the ballroom, where a clump of royal blue uniforms betrayed the presence of the emperor and his Polish wife.

He was sitting in a tall chair, not a throne by any means, but imposing enough to suggest it; his wife, a stately woman with watery eyes, sat next to him, with everyone else standing in a semicircle. General Pestel, much older than I remembered him, smiled at Aunt Eugenia.

She nodded, but her eyes and her glare were for the emperor alone. In his blue uniform jacket and white trousers, he looked like an elderly officer; his wig, desperately out of style, gave him an appearance of vulnerability—so light and fine, like the fuzz on a duckling. His pale blue eyes looked past me and at Eugenia, and I could have sworn that for a moment he looked . . . not fearful exactly, but apprehensive.

“Dear Countess Menshova,” he said to her. “How good it is to see you! And this”—he nodded at me, smiling beatifically—“must be the Trubetskaya girl . . . I mean, young lady.”

I curtsied and blushed.

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“Indeed,” Aunt Eugenia said, frowning. “A daughter of one of your officers, still waiting for you to wake up and perhaps do something useful with your reforms.”

At that moment, I rather resented Aunt Eugenia dragging me into the imperial circle of attention with such a pronouncement. “I . . .” I stammered.

This was clearly not about me, as the emperor did not even glance in my direction. “Countess,” he said. “There is no reason for you to be unhappy—your niece will not be hampered by the inheritance laws. You yourself have not been so encumbered.”

“I was lucky not to have competition from male heirs,” Eugenia parried. “But even then, if it weren’t for my father’s kindness and forethought, the Menshov lands would be in the hands of some cousins thrice removed.”

The emperor shrank deeper into his chair, looked very old, and murmured something conciliatory. By then, those who were queued behind us waiting to up to pay their respect to the emperor had clustered closely around us, and I found myself quite mortified, the center of a sizeable crowd that surrounded Eugenia, me, and the emperor with his retinue. Even I knew this was not a proper way to make one’s debut.

Aunt Eugenia drew closer, her bony finger in his face. “You better fix those laws so that I never see another deserving woman tossed out of her house and sent to live with her relatives,” she said.

“But my dear,” the empress said. “Most women are not equipped to run an estate. Why, just look at your own sister.”

A terrible smile spread across my aunt’s features; she no longer looked plain but petrifying, a Fury of old come to avenge the crimes committed against widows and orphans. “Please do not fault my sister for not knowing the things she was never taught,” she said,

still addressing Constantine, “and I shall never fault your brother for not learning what he was taught.”

I could not help but notice that one of the officers, wearing an especially ostentatious pair of epaulettes, turned crimson. I pegged him for Prince Nicholas.

But Eugenia was not yet finished with the emperor. “That reminds me,” she said. “You’d best make sure your university starts accepting young ladies, to better prepare them for the rigors of governance. Then you can change the law with no worries.”

With that, she turned abruptly, her black skirt swirling, and dragged me along with her. The silence behind us was all the more profound as the orchestra started playing the first bar of a waltz, a waltz, I realized, I would never dance, because now I was the niece of the crazy Countess Menshova who—unorthodox even in her youth—had finally fallen off her rocker in her dotage, and spoke of governing as if it were her birthright. Elizabeth and Catherine the Great notwithstanding, everyone seemed to agree that Eugenia was too bold, and they whispered and stared at us. I could not stop blushing.

My mother, oblivious as always, wandered over to us, and smiled at me. “Look at that,” she whispered proudly. “All the eyes are on my little duckling.”

Before she had a chance to insist that I should go and dance with some nice young man or another, two officers approached us.

“Countess Menshova,” one of them said. “The emperor is concerned that the excitement of the season has reflected poorly on your nerves—he fears you are overwrought. Perhaps you would be more comfortable at home.”

The other said nothing, but his posture indicated that if Aunt Eugenia did not leave, he would not hesitate to forcibly exorcise her from the premises. We had no choice but to follow this polite but firm advice.



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“Come along, Sasha,” Eugenia said. “Apparently, age and wisdom do not always nest together.”

Before that day, I had never considered that dying of embarrassment was not just a figure of speech but a distinct possibility.