

**The past is our roots
The present our survival
The future our hope**

PROLOGUE

2001

Nadia Larsen glanced at her watch. She would be in Warsaw, Poland in two hours. Her mother and sister had already arrived from Tel-Aviv, Israel and would be waiting for her at the airport. Together they would fly to Wroclaw, Poland to meet for the first time her father's secret family.

A raindrop hit the window next to her. She leaned closer and traced its path with her finger. If only her heart would calm down and her mind would allow her to rest. Nadia closed her eyes. *I'm scared Papa. What if your Polish family rejects us once we meet? What if I've opened wounds that cannot be healed? I didn't mean to hurt Mama when she heard of your first wife and two sons. She cried, not for herself, but for them and you . . . what you must have suffered. I don't understand her ability to forgive so easily. You abandoned them Papa. You shut them out as if they never existed. What if it had been me?*

Nadia turned away from the window and withdrew a leather bound album from the empty seat next to her. She placed it on her lap and stared at the photograph of Grandfather Tomasz, handsomely dressed in a Polish uniform with high boots, a heavy coat, and fur cap. A smile slowly spread across her face. He was young and dashing, an unruly bachelor, arrogant in his noble stance. Exhausted, Nadia reclined her chair and closed her eyes. She imagined the Polish countryside and the family estate in Dworzec, before her father was born.

PART ONE

Eastern Europe

**Even at the worst there is a way out,
a hidden secret that can turn failure into
success and despair into happiness.
No situation is so dark that there
is not a ray of light.**

Norman Vincent Peale, 1898-1993
American Writer and Minister

CHAPTER ONE

1909

**Dworzec, (Poland) Russia
Village of Kamien Szlachecki**

Tomasz Adam Dabrowski stood in the hallway outside the entrance of the family library and gathered his bearings. His head still pounded from last night's vodka and his stomach churned from *s'ledzie* - herring, onion, and apple in rich cream. At an indecent hour past dawn, the sleep he had anticipated had been cut short. The maid had awakened him with a scribbled note from his father. *Meet me in the library as soon as you are dressed.* The urgency of the message had made Tomasz uneasy. What family obligation would he now be expected to fulfill? Straightening the jacket of his riding attire, he entered the library with a proud carriage and a confidence he didn't feel.

Romuald Dabrowski Jr. remained focused on the newspaper he was reading. He pretended not to notice his son's silent entrance. Pride and ego filled him as Tomasz seated himself in the chair across from him. Unlike his other children, Tomasz mirrored what he stood for, perhaps at times more rebellious and high spirited, but nevertheless every inch a Dabrowski, a true aristocrat.

Fingering the edge of his perfectly trimmed mustache, Romuald mentally weighed his decision of last night. He had no choice, time was running out. Since the passing of his father, Romuald Sr., a crushing vulnerability had overtaken him. It

created a gripping fear that he had never before acknowledged – the certainty of death. Little comfort came from his Orthodox Christian upbringing for he was a man who questioned all things including the existence of God. His faith had turned out to be more of a convenience than one of dependency or service to others. He felt no shame in his lack of spiritual character or in the need to change what was ingrained from birth. After all he was a Dabrowski, part of the privileged class. They had survived generations of unbeatable odds by using their intellect and necessary connections to rise above Poland's history of outside control and restrictions. His eldest son, Romuald III, a brilliant engineer, was the first generation of males to not possess the temperament of the name he carried. He grew up a silent and obedient child, detached and unaffected by the demands placed on him by the family. He had married well, as was expected, but all he could produce were daughters. Sniffling, whinny creatures whenever they visited. Before Romuald's death he had to be assured of the next generation of Dabrowskis. Tomasz was his answer. He would hate him for what he was about to do, as he had hated his father, but he knew Tomasz's loyalty to the family was as his own and in time he would forgive him.

Tomasz stretched out his long legs, grateful that his father's attention was still on the morning newspaper. He had always made him wait. It was part of the process of being dominated by a father who generally was unsympathetic to feelings other than his own. It had rained during the night and the room was stuffy from closed windows and the lack of ventilation. Tomasz rolled the black leather riding crop between his fingers. He was anxious to be outside where the smell of earth and sky blended across the Polish countryside. The air would be invigorating. After last

night's unforeseen episode with Natasha, it was just what he needed. The lady of easy virtue had never failed to give him pleasure, but this time his satisfaction had not come from her, but through the thought of another. Somehow Kazimiera had entered his heart and she wasn't so easy to dismiss like all the others.

Father and son sat in silence a moment longer, each unaware that their thoughts were linked and would mesh the future of the Dabrowski dynasty. Romuald pursed his lips, a habit when deep in thought. If he pushed Tomasz too far his plan would backfire. He must trust the moment. The clever and sensual Kazimiera Maria nee Tyszecka had captured Tomasz's attention longer than any other woman. She intrigued his willful son while her wealth, aristocratic bloodline, and family estate outside Brest-Litovsk intrigued him. She was a poet, an artist, highly educated, attractive, and admired for her social etiquette and flawless parties. At times Romuald found her to be most irritating, more often than not, too outspoken and opinionated, but he had to admit that her mere presence lit up a room and her ability to inspire stimulating conversation was admirable. Most well bred Polish women understood that silence in the presence of men was a necessary part of good breeding, but that was why Tomasz enjoyed Kazimiera's company. Few women challenged him.

Romuald removed his spectacles and rubbed his eyes. He was fifty-six, trim and fit, carrying the sharp handsome features of the Dabrowski men. His father had carefully charted his life, a Dabrowski tradition, and his marriage to Maria nee Kos'ciuszka had been a wise and prestigious union. She was the great-great-great-

granddaughter of Joz'ef Tomasz Kos'ciuszko, the brother of Tadeusz Kos'ciuszko, a Polish son of liberty and a hero of the American War of Independence.

At an early age Romuald had learned that obedience was the key to his father's approval, the only way to receive the attention he craved as a boy. By the time the old man had died, Romuald had sired and raised four children. He had cloned his father's behavior and became obsessed with wealth and the privileged life, focusing on his nobility as a landowner and his inherited honorary position with the tsar of Russia. Maria, his illustrious wife, fit comfortably in his world and supported his political and social ambitions.

Tomasz shifted from one thought to another as he stared out the window past his father's massive desk, now cluttered with territorial maps of the surrounding area. He was worried about his family's safety and his own future. Unrest across Russia was widespread since the 1905 Revolution and the Russo-Japanese War, where the fall of Port Arthur, a Russian naval base was lost to Japan. The country was shifting into anarchy with violent strikes, organized massacres, and killings of landowners and industrialists. Social tensions were rising between classes and between races, and a hatred spoken from the mouths of respectable men flowed without pause.

As a child, Tomasz had listened in rapture to the stories of past tsars and now as a man in his thirties he found Nicholas II to be politically naïve and Alexandra's interest with Grigory Rasputin, a Siberian peasant, to be an unwise association. The duality of Rasputin's nature created controversy and skepticism among those who rose above a society that found this saint to be an exotic diversion to their trite, meaningless lives. He preached a doctrine that stirred people to do ungodly acts for

the salvation of sin. Tomasz had met the heralded “miracle worker” during an afternoon tea in Petrograd, before the ragged, unkempt *moojik* had been accepted into the Romanov family. His actions and the vulgarity in which he had spoken were not that of a Holy Man. The Russian Empire was deteriorating and its downfall could be Poland’s ruin.

“Tomasz. Tomasz!” Romuald’s voice held annoyance, bringing Tomasz back to the present.

“Yes Papa.” Tomasz sat up, giving a start, like a caught school boy.

“What is the matter with you? I am speaking and you’re not listening.”

“Sorry Papa.”

Romuald made a disgruntled noise. He would give Tomasz a moment to refocus before giving him his decision. “As I was saying, I read in the newspaper, some deputy from Germany warned that Russia might create new threats to the liberty of Krako’w. What do you think?”

Morning politics had always been a topic of discussion in the Dabrowski household. “You know how I feel. For centuries Russia has taken our lands and tried to destroy our spirit. The Romanovs are cursed. Their monarchy is an oppressive, obsolescent institution which fails its people.”

Romuald nodded then spoke reflectively. “You’re right, but our history cannot be changed. Poland at one time was the largest country in Europe and now we no longer exist on the map. It is not easy to free yourself from powerful adversaries that lock you within their boundaries. It is a wise man that chooses to use his inherited right as a nobleman to benefit himself and his country. The tsar’s have always

favored the Dabrowski family. Nicholas I gave your grandfather documentation that secures our position as nobleman and gives us the privilege of increasing our boundaries as landowners.”

“Does it never bother you that we are Poles with Russian citizenships? That our land is controlled and divided by a Russian monarchy that is answerable only to God?”

Romuald slapped the arm of his chair with the flat of his hand. “Of course it bothers me. But if you wish to survive you have to see beyond your restrictions. We are the ruling class, the hope for a future Poland. Be grateful you were born a Dabrowski and not some peasant who will have no say in the politics and future of this country.”

“And what will happen when the Romanov family falls and the monarchy no longer exists? Do you think our documentation will then continue to give us our inherited right? It could be our demise.”

“The revolutionary tendencies within Russian society have been suppressed. Fear has created a stalemate.” Romuald shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “As long as Russia holds us by the throat we have no choice. You must learn patience Tomasz. It is necessary to ride the tide of events. Germany is our greatest threat. A major conflict is inevitable and when the time is right, Poland will regain its liberty.”

“Yes, but at what cost? I ache for freedom, but freedom comes with sacrifice. What will we have to give up, to get Poland back?”

Romuald’s eyes became indifferent. He admired Tomasz’s pride and passion, but not his sharp tongue. He raised his hand before his son could speak again and

ended the discussion. “Politics is not why I’ve summoned you here this morning. I’ve something far more important to discuss with you. A decision has been made.”

Tomasz lifted his left eyebrow, feeling a cold sweat overtake him. He resented the word summoned. “What decision?”

“I need grandsons and since your eldest brother is inept, it becomes your responsibility. I’ve decided you’ll marry.”

Tomasz laughed incredulously. “You’re kidding, Papa. You know I have no wish to marry and be obligated to a wife and family. My heart is in the land and enterprise. I was thinking we should get into the brewery business. I have made some inquiries. I could study . . .”

“You have no choice.”

“I am not a child that you can command. My life is my own.”

“Your life is that of a Dabrowski. You have a duty. You above all the others understand this.”

“And if I refuse.”

“Everything can change, including the comforts that the Dabrowski family provides. I would think your choice to be Kazimiera, but she is almost your age and may not be suitable for child bearing.” A smug smile began to form on Romuald’s lips. “My suggestion is Izabella Orłowska. I’ll admit she’s a little stout and is not as attractive as Kazimiera, but she’s young and comes from a good family. Their lands join ours to the east. Choose wisely for I will not accept a commoner.”

Tomasz’s jaw tightened. He stared at his father whose eyes told him there was no further discussion. Angry and hurt he rose from the chair, clicked the heels of his

boots together and bowed arrogantly before leaving the room. He was too choked to speak. Damn his brother for having Pola and Danuta. If he had sons like he was supposed to, this would not be his burden. Tomasz's hands felt clammy and he wiped them on his riding pants. He stormed past his brother Henryk, whom he hadn't seen in months. Was Papa threatening to disown him? Impossible. He was the favored one in the family always getting whatever he wanted. He could argue with Papa, break all the rules when no one else could. Was he ready for a life long commitment? He feared that kind of intimacy. He thrived on his independence, doing what he pleased when he pleased. Life was less complicated when you had only yourself to worry about. Besides, he could never marry someone he didn't love and respect.

Henryk watched his older brother rush past him without a word. He frowned. Tomasz was seldom derailed by Papa's moods. Something was going on and he was sure to hear of it. It had been over two months since he had last been home. Perhaps it would be best to meet with his mother first before sharing the reason for his unexpected visit. Quietly he stepped past the open doors to the library on his way to his room.

"Henryk. Is that you?" His father's voice was clear and sharp, the edge of exasperation still apparent.

Henryk entered the library with an appeasing smile. He was shorter than his brothers, more squarely built with the blue eyes and sandy hair of his mother. His calming manner was a comfort to the patients he treated as a medical doctor, and his

observant eyes, though gentle, missed nothing. “Papa, how are you?” He kissed his father’s cheeks, and sat where Tomasz had been moments before.

“What brings you home this weekend?” asked his father. “Did your mother know you were coming? It doesn’t matter. Old friends will be joining us for dinner. They’ll be pleased to see you.”

“I have good news. The hospital in Wlodawa has accepted my application.”

Apolonia the youngest in the family entered with her arms outstretched. “I swear I was not eavesdropping. This is wonderful news.” Henryk quickly rose and kissed his baby sister who was now thirty. “When do you start at the hospital?” she asked.

“In two days.”

“Then we have time to get caught up before I leave for Wilno.” Apolonia’s eyes sparkled with intrigue.

“Wilno . . . What will you do in Lithuania?”

“One of the banks offered me a high ranking position.”

“What is it?”

“Supervisor.”

Henryk’s face glowed with pride. “I’m so pleased.”

“Enough Apolonia,” her father interrupted. “I want to hear about Henryk. It won’t be long before he’s running the hospital.”

Henryk gave his sister an apologetic look. She squeezed his arm and sat on the rug by his feet, ignoring her father’s indifference toward her. The severe style of her long brown hair, neatly knotted at the nap of her neck, enhanced a wide brow and

strong nose. In contrast to a warm and generous smile, dark sad eyes glanced at her father. It was not easy being his daughter. She was dismissed whenever her brothers were present and ignored when they were not. Her mother had coddled her as a child, thankful for the female companionship, but the majority of Maria Dabrowska nee Kos'ciuszka's world was wrapped up in her husband's political and social ambitions. While growing up, the only way Apolonia could improve her low self-esteem was to avoid her father through the opportunity of education. As time passed, she became fluent in four languages and graduated with an MA from the University of Petrograd.

Henryk waited for his father to finish speaking then asked about Tomasz. "So where is Tomasz off to? He appears upset."

"He's going riding with Kazimiera. He's fine, just moody."

What was Papa up to, thought Henryk. Tomasz was seldom moody. He was direct and good-natured. Today he was angry.



Beneath a canopy of trees, Kazimiera walked her chestnut mare along side Tomasz's gray dappled stallion. They followed the path to the river where wild flowers covered the earth in a perfusion of color. It was July, usually the hottest month in Poland, but the summer had emerged more pleasant than usual with an occasional downpour of rain.

Kazimiera breathed in the scented air and tucked a loose strand of dark hair beneath a feathered moss green hat that matched her riding skirt. Lifting her blue

eyes, she caught Tomasz staring at her. He looked like the weight of the world was on his shoulders. Not far from the river's edge he let go of the reins, allowing the horses to graze at leisure while he took Kazimiera's arm. A comfortable silence continued between them as they walked toward a cluster of giant oak.

Tomasz stared at the River Bug. The murky, rough waters had captured his mood as angry currents flowed from last night's storm. Every thought that passed through his mind he battled with. Finally he spoke more to himself than to Kazimiera. "I feel as if life keeps beating down on me, altering my path. I'm stuck, locked within the boundaries of my family, just as these muddy banks contain the River Bug." Tomasz turned to Kazimiera. "Does that make any sense?"

"Yes," she said reassuringly, then avoided saying more by turning back to the river.

She knew him well, thought Tomasz. She never pushed him to tell her anything and because of that he often found himself confiding what he would share with no one else. Over the past year their attraction for each other had shifted into a deep friendship, one that was more common among men than between a man and a woman. Often they argued politics or read together in a comfortable silence beneath the shade of a tree. Kazimiera's instincts at cards had outbluffed many a hand, and she could sit a horse better than most men. She was a good listener and you could change her mind with reason not assumption. Yes, she was the only one he could share his misery with. He trusted her.

"Papa gave me an ultimatum this morning."

Kazimiera lifted her eyes to his. So this was what had upset him.

“Since my brother, Romuald, is not producing sons it is now my responsibility.” Tomasz dug the toe of his boot into the ground. The sarcasm left his voice and what remained was bitterness and hurt. “He insisted that I marry and if I don’t he threatened to disown me.”

Kazimiera touched his arm. “Did he actually say that?”

“No, but it was clear. Why can’t I let go of him, Kazimiera? I tell myself just turn your back and walk away. I’m thirty-four years old, quite capable of being independent. I don’t need to oversee the Dabrowski lands. What’s wrong with me? The rest of the family has broken free. My brother, Romuald, avoids him, busy with his engineering career, as does Apolonia who is always studying in Petrograd. Henryk appeases him because that is his nature, but he’s never home. Mama will always indulge him. And me, I love being a Dabrowski and all it entails. I want to preserve the land that is rightfully ours.”

“Your father knows this. Be careful Tomasz. You have never gone against him. The others broke away because he always had you. If he thinks your choices come from defiance, he’ll feel betrayed, and then who knows what he’s capable of doing.”

Tomasz’s frown deepened. “I never thought of it that way. There are so many questions that I wish I had answers to.”

“Like what?”

Tomasz struggled with his thoughts. “I was raised in a privileged society of money, power, and manipulation. So I ask myself, do I take my father’s abuse because I love him and don’t wish to hurt him or because I fear losing all that he

gives me? I enjoy my position in life. I relish the luxuries that money and power can provide. What kind of man does that make me?”

“You’re a good man, Tomasz. Don’t be so hard on yourself. The more your father tries to control you the more out of control he feels. That is why he threatens you with ultimatums. It was probably the same way with his father.”

Kazimiera touched Tomasz’s cheek. His dark auburn hair had fallen forward covering his brow. She brushed it to one side. She loved this man. She didn’t know when it had happened, it just had. But Tomasz could never be a permanent part of her life. Her fate had been decided fourteen years ago. Kazimiera struggled with her next words. She didn’t want to say them, but she had to. “Then perhaps you should marry. Your father knows you are the only one left that is invested in the Dabrowski heritage.”

“He wants me to marry Izabella Orłowska?”

“Izabella?” Kazimiera was incredulous.

“Yes. Our lands join to the east. She’s a cow.”

Kazimiera laughed and Tomasz followed. “Yes she’s a little chubby, but she has a lovely laugh and . . . and a beautiful smile.”

“How charmingly tactful you are.” Tomasz took Kazimiera’s hand and tenderly kissed the inside of her wrist. It was a moment of intimacy, a subtle shift in their relationship, and Kazimiera caught her breath. *Please God don’t do this to me. Don’t have him ask me what I fear the most. I can’t tell him the truth. I can’t.*

Tomasz continued to hold her hand. Then he placed it over his heart and stared into her upturned face. She couldn't hide the frown of panic. "What is it?" he asked gently.

Kazimiera pulled away. She hugged herself as if the warm morning had turned cold. "It's nothing." *Please God don't be so cruel. If he marries another I loose him and if he learns my condition the outcome will be the same. Why can't you leave our lives as they are?*

With her back to him, Tomasz found courage. After today, he could no longer live under the roof of his father. Out of anger and hurt a new life and direction had presented itself and he was going to take it. He would marry Kazimiera, continue to buy land, and perhaps a brewery. He would settle down. His father was right he needed to take advantage of the privileged life that was given to him. He placed his hands on Kazimiera's shoulders and pressed her against his chest. She didn't resist. He lowered his mouth to her ear and inhaled the clean scent of her hair, the smell of lavender. "Marry me," he whispered his voice husky. "I can't think of anyone I would rather spend my days and nights with. You make me feel complete."

Kazimiera's shoulders slumped as she tried to step away. His words were breaking her heart, but Tomasz held her close.

"Do you think you could love me?"

She nodded yes, silencing unbearable sobs.

"Then will you marry me?"

She shook her head no.

Tomasz stepped back and stared at her. "You don't mean that."

Her voice broke. “I do.” But she wouldn’t turn to look at him.

Tomasz felt betrayed. How could she not want to marry him?

The color drained from Kazimiera’s face. She had wounded his pride and in the awkwardness of the moment she knew she would rather suffer her shame than to further hurt him. As she turned, her hand reached out for his arm. Tomasz pulled away and lifted his hand to silence her, a gesture so like his father’s. Somehow she had to make him understand. Wiping the tears from her eyes, she pulled herself together, and with trembling lips she said, “I can’t give you what you want. I can’t give you children.” It was out. She had finally said it. Tomasz remained silent. “I was eighteen, riding through the fields, miles from home. My horse stumbled. We fell together. I lay on the ground for hours unable to move. Finally Papa found me and brought me home. Forgive me Tomasz. I’m sorry. I never thought our relationship would come to this. We were both set on not marrying. I love you, but I can’t give you what you want. What all men want?”

Suddenly Tomasz was angry with her. “How do you know what I want? I’m not like other men.”

“Don’t shout at me.” His anger had ignited hers. “You just said you couldn’t give up your inheritance . . . your life style. Grandsons are needed now. The Dabrowski name must live on. And you stand there angry with me thinking I don’t know what you want. What could be clearer . . . you stupid, stupid man!”

“Stupid!” he shouted back. No one had ever called him that and for a second he was speechless.

They stared at one another helpless and defiant until Tomasz pulled her into his arms and kissed her. When their lips parted, he rested his forehead against hers. “I would never hurt you.”

“I know. I’m sorry I called you stupid.”

Tomasz looked deeply into her eyes. They were bluer than the sky, almost violet like the flower. She was his reflection the tender side of himself that he had always feared as weakness, but in truth was his strength. “I love you,” he whispered. “I’ve loved you for a very long time. I just didn’t understand myself until now.” Tears surfaced, clouding Kazimiera’s eyes. Tomasz held her close. “If children are not our fate then it’s God’s plan. No one will ever know what you have shared with me this day. I don’t care about a family. You are all that matters to me. I’ll handle Papa. It serves him right for trying to control my life. Please Kazimiera, I need you. Our love is the only thing that is real to me.” Tomasz bent his head and kissed the tears from her eyes, Kazimiera too emotional to speak.

Beneath the branches of a giant oak they lay on a blanket wrapped in each others arms. After a while Kazimiera’s thoughts became grounded and the reality of their commitment took hold. She sat up and asked. “What if you loose everything? You could grow to hate me.”

“Never.” Tomasz pulled her back against him. “Now that I know what Papa is capable of, I’ll make sure we have enough. I want to be there for my parents. I don’t want to loose them, but that will be their choice.” He kissed her forehead. “Besides

my brother Romuald may surprise Papa with a grandson and if not him there is always Henryk or Apolonia. He'll come around in time . . . you'll see."

"I'm not so sure," Kazimiera whispered, more to herself.

Suddenly Tomasz chuckled. "Papa will think I'm the perfect son marrying you, when in reality I may be ending the Dabrowski legacy. Everything I thought I wanted has changed in one afternoon. How ironic life is."

Kazimiera played with the button on Tomasz's shirt. "Are you sure I am what you want?"

"I've never been surer of anything else. You make me feel invincible as if life has no limits."

Kazimiera smiled and nestled her head against Tomasz's chest and soon a peaceful feeling subdued her worries. She closed her eyes and listened to the soothing sounds of nature and to the beat of Tomasz's heart. Never in her life had she imagined such a gift of happiness.