

**THE
DICTATOR'S
WIFE**

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H
REVIEW



CHAPTER ONE

2018

The past rarely comes for us politely. She springs out from a half-seen face in the street, assaults us in a once-familiar hall. A sudden visitor, not so much knocking at the door as smashing a fist through the frosted pane.

I raised the teacup to my lips, turned the newspaper page, and there she was, her amber eyes turned to black and somewhere the scent of decaying flowers. Only later, after I had swept up the shattered china, did I realise why I had not spotted the obituary at once. Twenty-five years ago the dictator's wife would have commanded the cover. Now she had been bumped to page three.

I put the paper in the bin, then took it out again, the dark web of ink at odds with the Devon sun. This time I was not imagining it: the whiff of something rotting. The funeral was in three days.

'I'll have to go, you know,' I said to the cat. He glared up at me as if asking why I would do such a thing. I did not reply, though the answer burned nevertheless.

To make sure she is dead.



The plane was small and not busy. I sat in a row on my own, along from some eastern European women visiting home, the glaring yellow of the airline's livery reflecting unfavourably off their tired faces. Long before the dawn clawed at the grubby hotel curtains, I was up and dressed.

I felt the churchyard before I saw it. A hush surrounded it, silencing the gathering crowd. Some observers crossed themselves; others hesitated, hands frozen before their hearts. I stepped through the gate and braced myself: nothing, only the shrieks of the crows in their shabby black. Was I free, at last, of her influence? Perhaps. But I had long since learned that enslavement may be just as imperceptible as freedom.

I found a space among the mourners. They watched with their whole bodies, these people, I remembered now. In this particular corner of eastern Europe, the eyes were larger, darker, with the look of animals calculating whether to run. When I had last come to this country, twenty-five years ago, I had disliked that I was born one of them, a watcher. Here, too, I had learned to be glad of it. It had saved me more than once.

It was surprisingly warm in the sunshine, and as we waited, I began to sweat. In Devon it was winter, but in Yanussia spring had sprung like a trap, though snow lurked still in the shadows of the gravestones. I removed my coat, then my jumper, quickly, uneasy about obscuring my vision. As I did so, the crowd gave a sigh. I wrenched the wool over my head and saw the church doors open.

She who carries the scar remembers; she who gives the scar forgets. An old Yanussian saying, and as I watched that plain wooden box, utterly free of adornment, I remembered. No wonder the government had arranged the First Lady's funeral in such haste. They would all be trying to forget, to purge themselves of the woman whose influence still ran liquid in their veins, who had burrowed into their very

marrow. In the trees the crows screamed, but the ensnared faces around me did not look up. I heard someone mutter a single word, and now at last I felt it, that odd mixture of enchantment and dread.

Vrăjitoare. Witch.

Only when the coffin crossed the churchyard boundary, bound for the cemetery, did the mourners exhale, hardly knowing why. I crushed a small heap of snow with my foot. It was over. Marija Popa was gone, her secrets departed with her. Death is a great leveller: it makes everyone uninteresting. The men are always kind and funny, the women beautiful. What happens to the dull, the ugly and the cruel? Perhaps they live forever.

I turned to leave, but as I did so, among the smartly dressed mourning party . . .

‘Pavel?’

It was him. Older, stooped, but distinctly him. He turned – not, it seemed, because he wanted to, but because he was compelled. To my amusement, the dyed black hair still clung on grimly, though the underlying colour must long ago have bleached to white.

‘Laura Lăzărescu,’ he said. ‘Those dark eyes. My God. What are you doing here?’

‘Same as you.’ I indicated the mourning party. ‘Only from the outside.’

Cristian Pavel, consummate insider. Of course my old boss had wangled himself an invitation. He blended in perfectly, with his immaculately cut coat and shining shoes, while my hair was mussed and my arms full of clothing. Even as I stood there, my jumper detached itself and fell to the floor. I scabbled for it, my fingers accidentally making contact with his foot, and rose to find him staring at the point where my skin had met the polished leather. I strangled a smile: he hadn’t changed.

But I had. ‘Coffee?’

‘Actually, I’ve got a drinks thing . . .’

‘Pavel.’ My voice was calm, but its undercurrent forced him to meet my eye. I admired the imperceptibility of his hesitation.

‘All right. One moment.’

Pavel never was able to resist a challenge. He insinuated himself back into the throng, a crow returning to its murder. Several business cards changed hands. The man retired from the law twenty-five years ago, for heaven’s sake. What did his card even say? But there is a certain breed of person who sees a funeral as a networking opportunity, and I felt suddenly grubby, loitering among the gravestones. Her husband wasn’t buried here; rather in a far grander cemetery beside statesmen, kings and other notables who had taken the wound of the world and rubbed salt in. Those iron eyes now terrorised only worms; safely interred was that heavy jaw, set against a universe he must have believed had wronged him, or how else could he have done the things he did? I wondered why his widow had not been granted the next-door plot. I would have been the last to suggest Marija Popa deserved more, yet I could not help but feel that this mean little church was cheating her – that if only she had died young and beautiful, they would have laid on the cathedral and throngs of weeping faithful. Like Evita, although Marija would have mocked the comparison. As it was, she had made the mistake of growing old, even unattractive. That surprised me. It was unlike the First Lady not to play a role to the bitter end.

Why had I asked Pavel for coffee? What on earth would we say, could we say, to one another? I sensed the bodies encrusting the earth beneath our feet, their blue-white eyes upturned towards me. Pavel was unaware of my secret, but the dead knew, they all knew, what I had done for the dictator’s wife . . .

‘Laura? Let’s go.’ Pavel had returned, tucking his cards away. He didn’t offer me one.

We walked onto the Boulevard Unirii, rimed with litter and old snow; the pressure in my head gradually lessened, like the retreating toll of a bell. The city of Poartă had been known, once, as Little Paris, but that was before its alleys were torn open to boulevards, its townhouses mushroomed into monstrous apartment blocks. Yanussia was a tiny country, squashed between Romania, Hungary and Serbia, yet Constantin Popa had decided to build a capital fit only for giants. Before his rule, the country had had modest aspirations, chiefly farming, drinking and spying on neighbouring Romania, which treated it as an irksome younger brother. In the 1848 revolutions, both nations fought for independence from Imperial Russia: Yanussia won where the other regions failed, a fact that apparently surprised them just as much as everyone else.

‘Look,’ Pavel said suddenly. Above, between us and the sky, spiked the chimneys of the old iron mill. I remembered smoke pouring out at all hours of the day, but now it was empty, its blast furnace stilled, its chimneys greening and silent. An old communist joke, what the Soviets called *anekdoti*, drifted in. Who had told it? Sorin, probably, in a lighter moment.

A factory inspector is conducting his assessment. He asks one worker, ‘What do you do here?’

‘Nothing,’ the worker replies.

The inspector turns to another. ‘And what about you?’

‘Nothing.’

The inspector frowns. In his report he writes, ‘The second worker should be fired for unnecessary duplication.’

No, I probably hadn’t laughed even then. Still, it looked like the grand tradition of people pretending to work in return for the authorities pretending to pay them had finally ground to an end. On a wall someone had sprayed furious

graffiti. *Turn Up*, it said. A modest ambition. Dreams had shrunk since 1989.

I allowed Pavel to herd me down a side street. He must have been at least eighty, yet his gait was still of someone with places to be. We ducked into a small café, one of those faux-Italian affairs with wipe-down tables, stainless-steel chairs and posters of the usual film stars on the walls. I grated my way into a seat, Sophia Loren pouting down. Her haughty expression reminded me of Marija, and I averted my gaze. It was an unlikely choice for Pavel. I would have expected the bar of some Westernised hotel. I wondered whether his tastes had changed, but then I realised: he did not want to be seen with me.

‘You saw last year’s Supreme Court ruling,’ he said without preamble. ‘About the government keeping her jewels.’

‘Yes. Couldn’t prove she’d acquired them legally.’ I sighed. ‘What was she, eighty-three? What good were diamonds by then?’

‘You expected her to give them up?’

I gazed at the cup before me, the steam making the tabletop waver strangely. ‘No. I suppose not.’

‘You wouldn’t have. If you were her.’

It was such a curious thing to say that I could not think how to respond.

‘I haven’t forgotten what you were like, you know. Truculent. Always fighting, until the end.’ A half-smile. ‘As your boss, it could be very annoying.’

A minute passed in silence before he said, evenly, ‘First time back?’

‘Yes. You?’

He took a careful sip and nodded.

‘I would have thought she’d have asked you to visit.’ I winced at my own bitterness, but to my surprise he responded by dropping the mask for the first time.

‘Why would she? It was all over.’ He looked, suddenly, old, the shadows catching up with him like they do on elderly faces, lines webbing across the sockets. So he too had been discarded. Poor Pavel.

Why had he really come? Had that been social climbing at the graveside, or a man burying himself alive in ritual? Had we both in fact returned for the same reason: to verify that those amber eyes had not caused Death to forget his duty? I didn’t think Pavel the type to believe in ghosts, yet the Black Widow brushed the earth away from our most secret parts, the parts we hid even and above all from ourselves. Her genius was to make the disinterment feel natural. Even . . . desirable.

The dead were very close now, their long fingers brushing my skin. I knew who they were and what they wanted, what they had always wanted.

Tell him. Tell everyone.

Could I share it, the thing I had carried in my breast for twenty-five years? Few of us have looked the Devil in the eye and turned her away, and Pavel, above all, would understand the nature of the power I had found myself up against. If law taught me anything, it was that people rarely act from natural evil or malice. There are a million little steps to the cliff edge, and even in the leaping moment, the slightest twinge in the muscle or eddy in the wind may change the outcome utterly.

Of course, gravity has only one plan for us. But there are many ways to fall.