



In the early 1900s in Russia, a Romanov relative to Tsar Nicholas II takes a young orphaned girl nine hundred miles south of St. Petersburg to a monastery to hide the painful secret that connects them.

DANGEROUS SECRET

By Susan I. Bodinet

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DANGEROUS SECRET



A Novel By

SUSAN I. BODINET

Dangerous Secret

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This is a work of historical fiction, based on actual persons and events. The author has taken creative liberty with many details to enhance the reader's experience. The protagonist is a fictional person, as are several characters introduced to advance the story.

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CHAPTER 1

In April 1906, four-year-old Oranca opened the door to her mother's small apartment in the poor section of St. Petersburg, Russia to find a tall, thin woman dressed in black and wearing a hat with netting that shadowed her face.

The finely-dressed woman came to see Oranca's young mother, whose worsening health made it impossible for her to work at her seamstress job for the past two months.

"Let the lady in," mother said, as she struggled to sit up in bed.

Suspicious of the stranger, Oranca watched as the woman stood over her mother's bed speaking in hushed tones. Each time she overheard her name being mentioned, Oranca grew more anxious.

The room grew quiet before her mother motioned Oranca to sit on the bed. She cradled her daughter's face in her hands and looked into her eyes. "I expect you to be a good girl." She turned away as a coughing fit seized her before she continued. "It is time for you to go. This lady will take care of you."

Shocked by her mother's instructions, Oranca began to cry.

"No tears, Dear," mother said and kissed her. "Always remember that I love you."

Leaving with just the clothes she was wearing and a tattered coat on her back, Oranca took one last look over her shoulder at her

mother, then silently and dutifully held the lady's gloved hand and stepped outside.

Confused by the bustling crowd, and frightened of the noise coming from the giant black machine belching clouds of steam, Oranca clung to the stranger who had taken her away from the only home she had ever known.

After the train left the station and gained speed, Oranca stood and stared—transfixed by the blurred scenery outside the window of the private compartment.

Timidly, Oranca turned and peered at the woman, but the steady click of train wheels caused her to drift towards slumber.

The lady's commanding voice interrupted the rhythmic sound. "Sit down, Oranca. We have a long journey ahead of us."

"Will my mother come for me when she gets better?"

The lady was silent for some time before answering. "I promised your mother I would see to your welfare."

Oranca opened her mouth to ask more questions, but could not form another word. Soon after, she sat down and fell asleep.

Elizabeth Fedorovna Romanov watched the sleeping child while recalling her memories from the last two years. After her husband's tragic death, she had been relieved that the rumors had died along with him.

She was foolish the time she went to the dress shop to see the toddler playing at the foot of the young woman's sewing machine. Elizabeth could not deny the baby's lineage when the child smiled up at her. *She has my husband's hazel eyes!*

The winter after Sergei's death, Elizabeth had received a letter from the seamstress that further changed the direction of her life.

CHAPTER 3

Over the years, Oranca flowered into a beautiful young girl. Against her better judgment, Sister Masha favored her above the others. She marveled at Oranca's delicate china doll appearance. The creamy complexion on her small heart-shaped face highlighted her sparkling hazel eyes which were framed in thick dark lashes. Sister Masha pleaded with Mother Superior to spare Oranca's chestnut brown hair from being cut short—as long as it was kept clean. Her hair was the one thing Oranca could claim as her own. Each inch that her locks grew, she seemed to gain more confidence. However, being younger and shorter, she was often teased by the other orphans. Smart but bashful, she still clung to the nuns for attention and protection.

Sister Masha's fondness for Oranca did not go unnoticed by Mother Superior. The administrator of the orphanage and monastery, Mother believed nuns should not become attached to the children, but practice restrained interaction. She was uncomfortable showing her own emotions. The humble, devout existence she now imposed on herself, served as a strong antidote to her lavish past. However, Mother knew that God expected she must practice unconditional love to all His children. But, she felt a particular resistance toward Oranca.

Many nights during those first years, Oranca would lay awake with thoughts about the mysterious lady who deposited her at the orphanage. Still frustrated, she would finally cry herself to sleep.

Finally, at seven years of age, she voiced the questions that ceaselessly occupied her mind. Too afraid to ask Mother Superior, she chose the more approachable Sister Masha. Mustering her courage, Oranca asked, “Why was I brought here?”

Having anticipated that question, Sister Masha had a prepared answer. “The lady who brought you to us knew we would take good care of you.”

Her voice trembling, Oranca asked, “But, why did my mother let me go?”

“Your mother was very ill. She agreed that it was best for you to come here.” Sister Masha prayed that answer would be sufficient.

Oranca found it hard to accept that her own mother released her willingly to a stranger. But now, it was difficult for her to direct anger towards the shadowy figure she remembered as her mother.

“Do you know the name of the lady who left me here?” asked Oranca.

Sister Masha replied firmly, hoping to deflect more questions, “Child, I believe God wanted you to be with us. It is not for me to question His reasons.”

That same conversation was repeated frequently over the next couple of years— with one or two new questions added. Sister Masha remained evasive, hoping Oranca would tire of the same answers and give up.

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After each occasion, Sister Masha felt it her duty to report it to Mother Superior. “Oranca asked again about the lady who brought her here.”

“Can she not accept God’s will?” replied Mother.

“Like many orphans, Oranca is curious about her past.”

“We both know that information could cause her more harm than good,” said Mother Superior. “I would rather not confirm any speculation already circulated. This matter shall remain closed.”

In 1914, when Oranca was twelve, she changed her strategy and turned to Greta, the novitiate, who would soon take her vows. Greta felt like her big sister. Over the years, she defended Oranca from those who teased her for her diminutive size. Though Mother Superior warned Greta not to get attached, Greta believed God would not want her to hold back her love to anyone—including Oranca.

When Oranca pressed her for information about the lady who abandoned her at the monastery, Greta revealed what she knew about the long-kept secret. She explained to Oranca that her situation was quite different from the other orphans.

“An older nun who passed away years ago, told me that a wealthy lady from an important Russian family brought you here,” Greta said. “After making a generous donation to the monastery, the lady insisted that she not be named. The old nun knew the lady, but would not tell me who she was.”

Oranca pleaded for more information, but Greta said she could be denied her vows, or even face expulsion from the monastery, if anyone learned she had told Oranca even that much.

“I do not understand,” Oranca said through her tears. “Why would the lady take me from my mother, but not raise me, or even visit me all these years?”

Regretting she had caused more anguish for Oranca, Greta informed her, “But, I was told the lady follows your development. She just does not want to be known.”

Stunned, Oranca became even more confused by Greta’s last comment. “Why does she check on me, even now, yet not want to meet with me?”

Flustered and unable to answer that, Greta hoped Oranca would accept her advice. “You must trust that God has set you on this path in life.”

If this is to be my path, did that mean I should serve Him in some way? In prayer Oranca asked. *Do You want me to become a nun?* No revelation came.

Not long after her conversation with Greta, certain personal changes began to take place and a new challenge diverted Oranca thoughts.

Where did these feelings come from? Odd aches and pains periodically washed over her. Outwardly, her hazel eyes were still framed by thick lashes, ivory complexion and her long hair, but much to her relief, she had grown to the height of five feet—one inch. The other changes, like her swelling breasts, had been perplexing. Her body seemed out of control, leaving Oranca scared—believing she was seriously ill.

“The menses you now experience is a natural function for all girls,” said Sister Masha.

On the contrary, Oranca believed this was God's punishment for girls who doubted Him. Each month, the ache she felt deep inside her body prompted her to pray even more, to cleanse her wandering mind.

Confusing thoughts and feelings cropped up when Yuri, the oldest orphan boy, relentlessly teased her and pulled her hair. Whether Oranca worked in the garden, or cleaned up after meals, the gangly fifteen year old boy was often by her side.

Now, during morning school, Oranca helped the nuns by reading to the younger children. She noticed how the little ones enjoyed it when Yuri showed up, performing funny antics. When he was not being too annoying, she even laughed.

One warm spring afternoon, Yuri approached Oranca in the garden, "You must see what I found!"

Oranca admonished, "You should be picking potatoes and carrots, like the rest of us."

"Come with me to the edge of the forest," said Yuri, then he took off running.

Oranca followed him, but looked back. *Did anyone see us leave?*

At the wide stream just before the trees, Yuri grabbed her hand to help her cross the water. His grip felt surprisingly strong. She did not mind that he continued to hold her hand when he guided her to a large structured opening on the side of the hill.

"It is an abandoned mine," Yuri said.

"How do you know that?"

He rubbed his other hand over the chiseled rock edges, "Because someone carved it out with tools. I want to show you something inside."

“But, it is so dark in there.”

Yuri pulled her inside, “Only a few more steps.”

At ten feet, they were stopped by randomly placed planks of wood which boarded up the entrance to the mineshaft.

“Peek between the boards and squint,” he said. “Look at the dark, thin shapes hanging from the ceiling.”

It took awhile before her eyes adjusted to the eerie cavern, “What are they?”

“Bats—ugly little creatures—like flying rats. They sleep upside down in the day and fly around at night, swooping down to catch their prey.”

Just when Oranca turned away at the thought of flying rats, something caught the ends of her long hair on the back of her head. She screamed and ran in terror out of the mine—the sound of many flapping wings behind her.

Not caring if Yuri followed her, Oranca quickly came to the stream, and jumped as far as she could to make it to the other side. One of her feet landed on a moss-covered rock and she slipped into the water. As she pulled herself up onto dry land, she saw that the bottom of her skirt was completely soaked. At the same time, she heard a familiar sound and turned to see Yuri laughing.

When he saw her eyes fill with tears, Yuri jumped over the stream and held both her shoulders. “Are you hurt? I only meant it in fun,” he said apologetically.

Her reaction turned from helpless to anger. “How could you be so mean? I could have been bitten by a bat, or twisted my ankle,” she said glaring at him.

Speechless, they stared at each other.

Suddenly, Yuri bent down and kissed her. Her indignation melted into a fluttery feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“I really like you, Oranca. I promise I will not scare you again.”

Just then, the monastery bell rang announcing the evening meal.

Oranca jumped back and gasped. “I am late! I should have been back to set the table for supper.”

She turned and ran down the hill, through the vineyard towards the monastery. Her mind raced to think of an excuse for being tardy, and how to explain her wet skirt to Sister Masha. But, the lingering fluttery feeling in her stomach overrode her thoughts.



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