

## *Chapter One*

On Friday, just past noon, after the sun had rolled past its lofty zenith and begun sliding sedately toward the western edge of the valley, Anatolia Sevoyants lay down to breathe her last.

Before departing for the next world, she thoroughly watered the kitchen garden and scattered food for the chickens, leaving a little extra since the birds couldn't go around unfed – how could she know when the neighbors would discover her lifeless body? After that she took the lids off the rain barrels that stood under the gutters; this was in the event of a sudden thunderstorm, so that streams of water pouring down wouldn't erode the foundation of the house. Then she rummaged around the kitchen shelves awhile, gathering up all the uneaten supplies – flat little bowls with butter, cheese, and honey; a hunk of bread; and half a boiled chicken – which she brought down to the cool cellar. She also pulled her “grave clothes” out of the wardrobe: a woolen dress with a high neckline, long sleeves, and a small white lace collar; a long pinafore with satin-stitched pockets; flat-soled shoes; thick knitted socks (she had suffered from

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ice-cold feet her entire life); along with meticulously laundered and ironed underclothes, as well as her great-grandmother's rosary with the little silver cross, which Yasaman would know to place in Anatolia's hand.

She left the clothing in the most visible spot of the guest room, on a heavy oak table covered with a coarse linen cloth (if one were to lift the edge of the cloth, one would make out two deep, distinct marks from axe blows). She placed an envelope with money to cover funeral expenses on top of the pile, pulled an old piece of oilcloth out of the chest of drawers, and went into the bedroom. After she turned down the bedding, she cut the oilcloth in two, spread one half on the bottom sheet, lay down on it, and covered herself with the second half. Then she threw a blanket on top, folded her arms across her chest, and settled comfortably on the pillow, nestling into it with the back of her head. She gave a deep sigh and closed her eyes before getting right back up to fling both sashes of the window wide open, propping them with geranium pots so they wouldn't slam shut. Then she lay back down. Now she needn't worry that her soul would wander the room, lost, after it had departed her mortal body. After freeing itself, it would dart out the open window immediately, toward the heavens.

There was a highly significant and sorrowful reason for these painstaking and extensive preparations: Anatolia Sevoyants had been bleeding profusely for two days now. She was stunned on first discovering inexplicable brown spots on her underclothes, but then she examined them carefully and burst into bitter tears when she was certain they were really blood. Ashamed of her fear, she gave herself a talking-to and hastily wiped away tears with the edge of her kerchief. What good was crying?

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It wouldn't change anything. Death hits everyone differently: it will stop one person's heart but steal another's mind with a sneer. It had apparently decreed that Anatolia would depart due to blood loss.

Anatolia had no doubt the ailment was incurable and progressing rapidly. There was, after all, a reason it had struck her uterus, the most useless part of her body. It seemed to be hinting that this was retribution being sent down because she had been unable to fulfill her primary destiny: giving birth to children.

Once Anatolia had forbidden herself to cry and fret, she calmed down and resigned herself to the inevitable surprisingly fast. She rooted around in the linen trunk, took out an old sheet, cut it into several pieces, and made herself something akin to sanitary pads. Toward evening, though, the discharge became so plentiful that it seemed as if a large, inexhaustible vein had burst somewhere inside her. She was forced to put into service the small supplies of cotton wool she had stored away. The cotton wool threatened to run out very soon, so Anatolia took apart the edge of a quilt and pulled out several clumps of sheep's wool, which she washed thoroughly and spread on the windowsill to dry. She could have gone to see Yasaman Shlapkants, who lived right next door, to ask for some cotton wool, of course, but Anatolia didn't consider that. What if she couldn't keep a grip on herself, burst out crying, and told her friend about her fatal illness? Yasaman would immediately become alarmed and tear off to see Satenik and ask her to send an express telegram to the valley for an ambulance. Anatolia had no intention of visiting endless doctors who would torment her with painful and useless procedures.

She had decided to die with her dignity and tranquility intact, in peace and quiet, within the walls of the home where she'd lived her difficult, futile life.

She went to bed late and spent a long time going through the family album, where faces of loved ones who'd been swallowed by the river of oblivion looked especially wistful under the meager light of a kerosene lamp. "We'll meet soon," Anatolia whispered, stroking each photograph with fingers coarsened from burdensome rural chores. "We'll meet soon."

Despite her downcast and anxious condition, she went to sleep easily and slept through until morning. She was awakened by the rooster's alarmed cry: the muddled bird was bustling around noisily in the coop, impatiently awaiting the moment he would be let out to stroll through the beds of the kitchen garden. Anatolia assessed the state of her body and established that the condition of her health was completely tolerable; other than the ache in her lower back and a slight dizziness, nothing seemed to be amiss. She rose cautiously, went to the privy, and confirmed with a wicked sort of satisfaction that there was even more blood than before. She went back inside and put together a feminine pad from a clump of wool and a scrap of fabric. If things kept going like this, all her blood would flow out by the next morning. This might be the last sunrise she ever saw.

She stood on the veranda for a little while, soaking up the solicitous morning light with her whole being. Then she went over to say hello to her neighbor and ask how things were. Yasaman had a big laundry day going and, as it happened, she'd just put a heavy tub of water on the woodstove. They talked about this and that, discussing everyday things while

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the water heated. The mulberries would ripen soon so the trees would need to be shaken and the berries gathered; then they would use some berries to boil up syrup, dry others, and leave the rest in a wooden barrel to ferment, for use in mulberry home brew. It was also already time to harvest horse sorrel – it would be too late in a week or two because the plant coarsens quickly in the hot June sun, making it unsuitable for eating.

Anatolia left her friend's house after the tub of water boiled. She needn't worry now; Yasaman wouldn't remember her until the next morning. She would be busy with the laundry until then: washing, starching, bluing, hanging it in the sun to dry, carrying it inside, and ironing. Only toward late evening would she get things under control. And so Anatolia had plenty of time to depart for the great beyond in peace.

Reassured by this development, she spent the morning leisurely doing humdrum chores, and only after noon, once the sun had crossed the sky's canopy and begun sliding sedately toward the western edge of the valley, did she lie down to breathe her last.

Anatolia was the youngest of Kapiton Sevoyants's three daughters and the only one in his entire family who had managed to live to an advanced age. Anatolia had celebrated her fifty-eighth birthday in February and this was unheard-of, an altogether unprecedented occasion for her family.

She didn't remember her mother well because she had died when Anatolia was seven years old. She'd had almond eyes with an extraordinary golden hue, and thick honey-colored hair. She was named Voske, meaning "golden one", very much in keeping with her appearance. Voske would plait her wondrous hair into a tight braid, arranging it in a heavy bun at the nape

of her neck using wooden hairpins, and then go around with her head slightly tilted back. She often ran her fingers along her neck, complaining that it was going numb. Once a year, Voske's father sat her by the window, carefully combed out her hair, and neatly cut it to the level of her lower back – she wouldn't allow him to cut it any shorter. (Years later, Voske also refused to cut off her daughters' braids, since long hair was supposed to protect them from the curse that had been swirling around the family for nearly eighteen years, ever since the day she had married Kapiton Sevoyants.)

Voske's older sister, Tatevik, had in fact been supposed to marry Kapiton. Tatevik was sixteen at the time and fourteen-year-old Voske, the second marriageable girl in Garegin Agulisants's large family, had taken an especially active part in preparing for the festivities. According to a time-honored tradition in the mountain village of Maran, where Tatevik and Kapiton had lived their entire lives, the bride's family was expected to host the first part of the wedding festivities, the groom's family the second. But the heads of Kapiton and Tatevik's families, two wealthy and respected lineages in Maran, decided to work together and host one large party in the meidan, the central square. The festivities promised to be extraordinarily lavish.

Kapiton's father wanted to dazzle the imagination of his many guests and so sent his two sons-in-law to the valley to invite musicians from a theater to the wedding. The men returned tired but satisfied and announced that the prim musicians had immediately consented (who ever heard of such a thing as inviting a theater orchestra to a village!) when they learned of the generous honorarium of two gold coins for

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each of them, plus the week-long supply of provisions that Kapiton's brothers-in-law promised to deliver to the theater by cart after the festivities ended. Tatevik's father arranged his own wedding surprise by inviting the valley's best-known dream interpreter. For a fee of ten gold coins, he agreed to practice his craft throughout the day, asking only for help delivering the equipment he would need for his work: a tent, a crystal ball on a massive bronze stand, a table for fortune-telling, a wide ottoman, two flowerpots with a spindly plant of a hitherto unseen species that gave off a cloying scent, and two peculiar candles made from special kinds of wood pulverized to dust. The candles had already been lit for several months, spreading a musky aroma of ginger, and they kept burning and burning. In addition to the Maranians, fifty residents of the valley, predominantly respected and prosperous people, were invited to the wedding. The newspapers even wrote about the upcoming celebration, which promised to turn into quite a memorable occasion; these articles were especially prized because the press had never before mentioned festivities for families lacking noble origins.

But then something happened that no one could have predicted. Four days before the nuptials, the bride took to her bed with a fever and was tormented by delirium all day before passing away without regaining consciousness.

Some mysterious portal must have opened wide over the village of Maran on the day of Tatevik's funeral, releasing sinister dark forces. What else, if not black magic, could account for the inexplicable behavior of the heads of the two families: they held brief deliberations immediately after the funeral service and decided not to cancel the wedding.