

THE FIREBIRD

SUSANNA KEARSLEY

CHAPTER 1

HE SENT HIS MIND in search of me that morning.

I was on the Tube, a half a minute out of Holland Park and in that muzzy not-awake-yet state that always bridged the time between my breakfast cup of coffee and the one that I'd have shortly at my desk. I nearly didn't notice when his thoughts touched mine. It was a rare thing these days; rarer still that I would let him in, but my own thoughts were drifting and I knew that his were, too. In fact, from what I saw of where he was—the angle of the ceiling and the dimly shadowed walls—I guessed that he was likely still in bed, just waking up himself.

I didn't need to push him out. Already he was drawing back, apologizing. *Sorry*. Not a spoken word, but still I heard the faint regretful tone of his familiar voice. And then he wasn't there.

A man sat heavily beside me, squeezed me over on the seat, and with my senses feeling raw already, even that unwanted contact was too much. I stood, and braced myself against the bit of wall beside the nearest door and forced myself to balance till we came to Bond Street. When the doors slid open, I slid safely back into the comfort of routine, my brisk steps keeping pace with everybody else as we became a texting, talking, moving mass that flowed together up and out and through the turnstiles and emerged onto the

pavement where we went our separate ways, heads down and purposeful.

The morning was a lovely one for August. The oppressive sticky heat had given way to fresher air that promised warmth but didn't threaten, and the sky was a pristine and perfect blue.

I barely saw it. I was thinking of that shadowed room, a grayer light that spoke of clouds or maybe rain, a hand that had come lazily in view, to rub his eyes while he was waking. It had been his left hand, and there'd been no rings on it. At least, I didn't think I'd seen a ring on it.

I caught my thoughts before they had a chance to wander further and betray me. *Doesn't matter*, I reminded myself firmly, and to make quite sure I heard myself I said the words aloud: "It doesn't matter."

I could feel the glances of the people walking closest to me, wondering if I were off my trolley, and I flushed a little, tucking my head well down as I came round the corner and into South Molton Street, a little pedestrian haven of upscale shops, cafés, and galleries. Everything always seemed quieter here, with the mad rush of Bond Street behind me. I carried on down past the graceful old buildings with beautiful doors to the one with the freshly white-painted façade where an expensive-looking brass plaque with fine lettering read: *Galerie St.-Croix, Fine Russian Artefacts and Art, Third Floor*.

The naming of the gallery had been one of Sebastian's little vanities—in spite of his French surname, he was English through and through, born of a line that likely traced its Hampshire roots back to the Conquest. But Sebastian knew his business, and to art dealers like him, it was essential to create the proper image.

I was part of that, I knew, because I had the proper look,

the proper pedigree, the right credentials, and I always dressed to fit the part. But when he'd hired me two years ago, he'd also made no secret of the fact that it had been for my abilities—not only that I held a master's degree in Russian Studies and the History of Art, but also that I spoke fluent Russian besides, and my organized nature appealed to his strong sense of order, and I had, what he'd called then, “potential.”

He'd worked to transform me, to mentor me, teaching me how to get on the right side of the bid at an auction, and how to finesse our more difficult clients. I'd come a long way from the rather unworldly young woman I'd been when he'd taken me on.

He had transformed the gallery building as well. We were on the third floor, in a space that today was as richly detailed as a penthouse. Even the lift was mirrored, which this morning didn't thrill me.

I was frowning as it opened to the elegant reception room where a flower-seller painted by Natalia Goncharova hung above the desk at which our previous receptionist had sat. She'd had to leave us unexpectedly, and I'd been interviewing this past week to fill the vacancy, while Sebastian and I shared out the extra duties.

It was not an easy thing to hire a person who could suit Sebastian's tastes, aesthetically. He wanted something more than simple competence, or class. He wanted someone who embodied what the Goncharova painting did—the painting he had hung above that desk, where it would be the first thing noticed by each customer who stepped into the gallery.

He'd had offers for it. Several of our clients could afford to pay a million pounds with ease, but then Sebastian didn't need the money.

“If I sell the thing,” he'd told me once, “then I'll have

only satisfied one client. If I leave it where it is, then every one of them will think it can be theirs one day.”

It didn't work with art. It wasn't a coincidence that many of our loyal and best customers were women, and they looked upon Sebastian as they did that Goncharova flower-seller, as a prize that could be won, with time and effort.

In fact, as I passed by his glass-walled office on the way down to my own, I saw he had a woman with him now. I would have left them to their business, but he saw me and beckoned me in, so I pushed the door open and joined them.

Sebastian's smile was all professional, with me, and even if it hadn't been, I would have been immune to it. He was too rich to be my type. A gold watch flashed beneath his tailored sleeve as he leaned forward, looking so immaculate, I half-suspected that he had a team of stylists working on him every morning, from his polished shoes right to the tousled toffee-colored hair that had been combed with just the right amount of carelessness.

“Nicola,” he introduced me, “this is Margaret Ross. Miss Ross, my associate, Nicola Marter.”

Miss Margaret Ross was not what I'd expected, not our usual sort of client. For one thing, she was plainly dressed but dressed with so much care I knew she'd taken pains to look her best. And although I was usually quite good at guessing ages, I had trouble guessing hers. She had to be a decade older than myself, so nearing forty at the least, but while her clothing and the way she held herself suggested she might be still older, there was something in her quiet gaze that seemed distinctly youthful, even innocent.

“Good morning.” She was Scottish. “I'm afraid that I've been wasting Mr. St.-Croix's time.”

Sebastian, ever charming, shook his head. “No, not at all.

That's what I'm here for. And even if it can't be proved, you still have a fascinating story to tell your grandchildren."

She cast her eyes down as though she were hiding disappointment. "Yes."

"Tell Nicola." Sebastian's tone was meant to salve her feelings, make her feel that what she had to say was fascinating, even if it wasn't. He was good that way. To me, he said, "She brought this carving in for an appraisal."

It looked to me, at first, an undistinguished lump of wood that curved to fit his upraised palm, but when I looked again, I saw it was a small carved bird, wings folded tightly to its sides, a sparrow or a wren. Sebastian was saying, "It's been in her family... how long?"

Margaret Ross roused herself to his smooth prompting. "Nearly three hundred years, so I'm told. It was given to one of my ancestors by Empress Catherine of Russia. Not Catherine the Great," she said, showing her knowledge. "The first Catherine."

Sebastian smiled encouragement. "Peter the Great's widow, yes. So, the 1720s sometime. And it very well might be that old." Holding the carving as though it were priceless, he studied it.

Margaret Ross told him, "We call it the Firebird. That's what it's always been called, in our family. It sat under glass in my grandmother's house, and we children were never allowed to come near it. My mother said"—there was the tiniest break in her voice, but she covered it over—"she said, with Andrew gone—Andrew's my brother, he died in Afghanistan—with him gone, and me not likely to have any family myself now, my mother said there was no point in the Firebird sitting there, going to waste. She said I should sell it, and use all the money to travel, like I'd always wanted to do."

“Miss Ross,” said Sebastian, to me, “lost her mother quite recently.”

I understood his manner now, his sympathy. I told her, “I’m so sorry.”

“That’s all right. She had MS; it wasn’t the easiest life for her. And she felt guilty for having me there to look after her. But,” she said, trying to smile, “I looked after my aunties as well, till they passed, and she was my own mother. I couldn’t have left her alone, could I?”

Looking again at her eyes, I decided their youthfulness came from the fact that she’d never been able to live her own life as a woman. She’d put her own life in limbo while caring for others. I felt for her. And I felt, too, for the mother who’d hoped that her daughter would sell their one prized family heirloom, and finally have money and comfort to live just a little. To travel.

“The thing is,” Sebastian said, kindly, “without any documentation or proof, what we dealers call provenance, we simply can’t know for certain. And without that provenance, I’m afraid this poor creature has little real value. We can’t even tell if it’s Russian.” He looked at me. “Nicola? What would you say?”

He passed it to me and I took it, not thinking, forgetting my mind had already been breached once this morning. It wasn’t until I was holding it, light in my hands, that I realized I’d made a mistake.

Instantly I felt a warmth that had nothing to do with the carving itself. I closed my eyes to try to stop the vision, but that only made it worse. I saw a slanting fall of light, with fine dust dancing through it. Two women, one aging but lovely, with heavy black eyebrows; the other respectfully bent, perhaps kneeling, her young face upturned in uncertainty. “My

darling Anna,” the first woman said to the other in elegant Russian, and smiled. “You were never a nobody.”

I opened my eyes quickly, maybe a little too quickly, but to my relief no one seemed to have noticed. “I really don’t know,” I said, giving the small carved bird back to Sebastian.

He looked at it with a commendable blend of admiration and regret.

“The trouble is,” he told our would-be client, “it’s so difficult to date this sort of thing with any certainty. If it *is* Russian, it was very likely peasant-made; there is no maker’s mark or factory stamp to go by, and without any documentation...” He raised one shoulder slightly in a shrug that seemed to speak to the unfairness of it all. “If she had brought you back an icon, now, this ancestor of yours, or some small piece of jewelry—*that* I might have helped you with.”

“I understand,” said Margaret Ross. Her tone was bleak.

Sebastian turned the little carving over in his hands one final time, and I knew he was searching for some small thing to praise, to let this woman down as gently as he could. “Certainly it’s very old,” was what he ended up with, “and I’m sure it’s had a few adventures.”

Margaret Ross wasn’t sure about that. “It’s been sitting there under that glass for as long as I’ve known it, and likely it sat there a good while before that.”

The twist of her faint smile held sympathy, as though she knew how that felt, to be there on the mantelpiece watching the bright world pass by, and I saw the small sag of defeat in her shoulders as, accepting Sebastian’s return of the carved bird, she started to carefully wrap it back up in its layers of yellowed, creased tissue.

Impulse drove me to ask aloud, “What was her name?”

She looked up. “Sorry?”

“Your ancestor. The one who brought your Firebird back from Russia.”

“Anna. That’s all we know of her, really, we don’t know her surname. It was her daughter married into the Ross family, that’s how the Firebird came down to us.”

Anna. Something tingled warmly up my arm. *My darling Anna...*

“Because maybe,” I suggested, “you could try a bit of research, to establish some connection between her and Empress Catherine.”

From Sebastian’s glance I couldn’t tell if he was grateful or annoyed, but he chimed in with, “Yes, if you were able to find proof of any kind, that would be useful.”

Again that faint twist of a smile that spoke volumes about how much hope she held now of discovering that. She admitted, “My granny tried once, so she said, but no joy. Common people, they don’t make the history books. And on our side of the family, there’s nobody famous.”

I saw the warm smile in my mind. Heard the voice. *You were never a nobody.*

“Well,” said Sebastian, beginning to stand, “I am sorry we couldn’t be more of a help to you. But if you’ll leave us your address, we’ll keep it in mind, and if ever a client requests something like it...”

I felt like a traitor, as Margaret Ross stood, too, and shook both our hands. The feeling held as we escorted her back out into reception, and Sebastian, with full chivalry and charm, gave her his card and wished her well and said good-bye. And as the lift doors closed he turned to me and, reading the expression in my eyes, said, “Yes, I know.”

Except he didn’t.

There was no way that he could have known. In all the

time I'd worked for him I'd never told him anything about what I could do, and even if I'd told him, he'd have rubbished the idea. "Woo-woo stuff," he would have called it, as he'd done the day our previous receptionist had told us she was visiting a psychic.

"No," she'd said, "she really sees things. It's this gift she has—she holds a thing you've owned, see, like a necklace, or a ring, and she can tell you things about yourself. It's called psychometry." She'd said the term with confident authority.

Sebastian, with a sidelong look, had said, "It's called a scam. There is no way that anyone can be a psychic. It's not possible."

I'd offered him no argument, although I could have told him he was wrong. I could have told him *I* was psychic, and had been for as long as I remembered. Could have told him that I, too, saw detailed visions, if I concentrated on an object someone else had held. And sometimes, like today, I saw the visions even when I didn't try, or concentrate, although that happened very, very rarely now.

The flashes of unwanted visions had been more a feature of my childhood, and I had to close my eyes and truly focus now to use my "gift"—my curse, I would have called it. I had chosen not to use it now for years.

Two years, to be exact.

I'd chosen to be normal, and I meant to go on being normal, having the respect of those I worked with, not their nudges or their stares. So there was no good reason why, when I sat down at the computer in my office, I ignored the string of waiting emails and began an image search instead.

I found three portraits, different in their poses and the sitter's age, but in all three I recognized the woman easily because of her black hair, her heavy arching eyebrows, and her warm dark eyes. The same eyes that had smiled this

morning in the brief flash of a vision I had viewed when I had held the wooden Firebird.

There could be no mistaking her: the first Empress Catherine, the widow of Peter the Great.

“Damn,” I whispered. And meant it.