FIREBIRD

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Barrington Stoke

For Sara. You know all the reasons why.

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PROLOGUE

I am not a traitor.

I have been asked to defend myself to this tribunal, and I am going to do so plainly. I will speak of things that are now forbidden, for which I ask your pardon. Nothing I say will go beyond these walls.

I am Anastasia Viktorovna Nabokova. Anastasia is the name of a saint, Anastasia the Healer. Anastasia was also an empress, the first wife of Czar Ivan the Terrible. And it is the name of the youngest of the four murdered daughters of Nicholas II, the Russian empire's last Romanov czar. I don't think our glorious leader Stalin would approve of the name Anastasia. It is a holy name and a royal name, and we are no longer supposed to worship the saints and the czars and the Romanovs. Those are relics of Imperial Russia, and they died when the Soviet Union was born.

But Anastasia means resurrection – rebirth. I think it is a good name for a girl who is fighting to save her nation from an invading army.

That is what I am doing.

I am not holy, nor am I royal, and everyone calls me Nastia because it is shorter. But I am still proud of my name. Nastia is not the name of a traitor.

It is true I landed my plane behind enemy lines. I am a pilot in the Soviet Air Force, and I landed my Soviet Yak-1 fighter aircraft in territory held by the German fascists. I risked them taking my plane and learning specialist secrets of our country's top aircraft engineers. I also risked being taken prisoner myself and being tortured for information about our air force.

In any case, I accept that I took this risk and that perhaps I did not act with full responsibility.

Stalin's Order Number 227 of July 1942 forbids us to retreat. If we do, or if we allow ourselves to be taken prisoner by the enemy, we are considered guilty of treason and will be shot. The order tells us: *Not one step back!* We shout this to each other for encouragement. And we whisper it to ourselves

between combat missions – in the brief hours when we are able to rest. *Not one step back!*

But any act of cowardice might be a step back. Any mistake could get you shot.

It is true that I am not the same person I was before the war. But I am not a coward, I am not a traitor, and I did not run away.

Let me tell you how I became a pilot and why I landed my plane behind enemy lines – and what I did afterwards.

And then you can judge for yourself.

PART 1: EARLY SUMMER, 1941

Leningrad, on the ground

CHAPTER 1

It was June. It was a sunny day and it was my afternoon off. That was the day the war started.

I was on the Neva River, where it flows through the city of Leningrad, past apartment buildings and colourful church domes. I shouted instructions at my rowing club team as we sat in our eight-man boat.

I had finished high school and was working as a full-time instructor at the Leningrad Youth Aeroclub. I lived at the aeroclub now – this was my first job away from home. I had a salary and my own bunk in the clubhouse and an instructor's uniform. I took most of my meals there, except once a week when I visited my parents. Other girls flew at the aeroclub as students, but I was the only woman who worked there, apart from the Chief Flight Instructor.

The other young instructors, all boys, became my friends. Most of us had been in school together but not all in the same year group. Eight of

these boys were in the First Neva Rowing Club. They were training to qualify for the regional championships, and because I am not very big they asked me to be their cox. I thought I would like going along in their boat – steering and telling these eight big boys what to do. I was flattered that they thought I could make sure they were safe on the river. So I said yes.

On the day the war started, I was crouched in the stern of our boat as usual. The rudder strings were in my hands as I faced my crew. We were all fully focused on shaving a few seconds off our current racing speed.

I shouted at them: "Next – stroke. Full – pressure. In – three. In – two. In—"

I broke off in the middle of the countdown. I'd heard something.

The boys kept rowing. I hadn't told them to stop.

Without me yelling at them, the only sounds were the creak of the seats in the boat, the splash of water and the crew's grunts of effort.

But now they could all hear the noise that had stopped me in the middle of my command.

It was an announcement being broadcast on the city's loudspeakers. We couldn't make out the words, but there was a frightening urgency in the tinny ring of the announcer's tone.

The boys at the oars heard it too.

Big Stefan, our reliable stroke, was sitting facing me. He was the oarsman who had to set the rhythm for the team. Stefan gave me a concerned, questioning frown.

I shouted, "Hold her up!"

The crew reacted with practised control. They stopped rowing at once and feathered their oars as one machine – not eight individual men. But I was too intent on listening to the broadcast to take pride in their smoothness. We glided on the water as the boat slowed down.

We all had our heads raised, staring at the sky as if we might see an answer there. We strained to hear the words of the loudspeaker as it blared the announcement out across the city.

Big Stefan was always slow to get excited, but even he turned his head away from me to look backwards. So did everybody else. Now we could all see what was ahead of us.

"Sounds like an emergency," Andrei said. He liked to know what was going on at all times. "A train wreck, maybe?"

"No ..." Ivan replied. He was a worrier.

"No," I repeated.

My crew all looked back towards me, waiting for a command. Their oars were still feathered in the water, and the boat had nearly slowed to a halt. Soon we'd start drifting downstream if I didn't give them another order. I was the one who told them what to do. They trusted me.

I knew we were all thinking the same thing, but the eight boys were waiting for me to say it out loud.

So I did.

"We are at war."

I didn't need to shout at them the way I did when we were rowing. I didn't need to raise my voice at all, because my team were all silent now, and still – a strange moment of calm in the June sunlight with the water of the Neva flowing over their oars.

Everything was about to change.

"We are at war with Germany," I said calmly, and I was amazed to hear myself saying these words. It seemed as if I had been waiting all my life to say them.

"*We're finally at war*."