

Chapter One

Good morning, Inga. Did you have a good rest? Good. Yes, sleeping in the woods is easy. I honestly don't know how people can sleep through the noise of a city or a town. I see you've made some notes, which tells me you have questions. And rest assured that I'll answer them in time. Some will be resolved as I continue the story. Others will have to wait. Sit down now and have some *zupa ze moreli*. It's is a special soup I made just for you. See how pretty, all golden with lemon and apricots and honey from the sacred bees. Wait! It still needs some whipped sour cream. There. Now it's ready. Have some coffee too. Be careful, though. It's still a bit too hot.

Now let me see, I believe we stopped at the rite to celebrate my becoming a woman. Did I tell you the story about building this house? No I didn't think so. Well I guess that's where I'll start.

We waited for the day of the moon's first silver grin, since that is the time when hope becomes beginning. Everybody came. Władysław, the alpha wolf and Bogumiła, his mate, brought their pack to dig the root cellar and the well. Dobiesław and Danuta pressed their beaver clans to work to cut wind-felled trees into logs, which Bronisława, the bear, and her two grown cubs, Czarownica and Rościśław carried to the site. Dobiesława, Czarownica's playful cub, skittered under their feet. Stretching himself to his full impressive height and pointing to the left then to the right and sometimes in both directions at once, Tranoc, his sleeves rolled up to the elbows his shirt pulling out from the waistband of his pants, detonated commands as if the house were meant for him.

I would have laughed at his antics if I had not been confused about having a place of my own. I wanted the house. I had daydreamed about it from the day my childhood crush, Jochen, and I dug our way through Mama's flowers to squirrel under the new fence and made our great escape for the woods. I had fantasized about it even before I'd met Tranoc and my teacher Matka Lasu.

On the other hand, I resented it because I'd have to leave the home I loved with Tranoc and my teacher. And so I felt as I had when the neighbors had come to put the fence up around my parents' house. Though the fence had been erected to cage me in, and I was sure that the cottage was meant to push me out, the sense of helpless outrage was the same.

"Why can't I live where I want?" I groused while Matka Lasu and I gathered stones for the foundation. I hefted a rock the size of a cat into Tranoc's little cart.

"Who says you can't?" She nudged some leaves with her toe and picked up a plum sized piece of schalenblende. Brown and beige striped and at home in Germany, it had no place in the Polish soil. She handed it to me. "This one would look pretty embedded with your chimney stones." I huffed and stamped my foot. "Kochanie, there's no law that says you have to move."

For the first time I noticed that her hair was all gray and that the lines of her smile did not smooth away when her face relaxed back to a neutral expression.

"One day you'll want a place where you can have some privacy."

"I won't!" I pouted and stamped my foot again. "I hate this house!" I lied kicking the cart's wheel. "I want to keep on living with Tranoc and you!"

“Then you shall.” She brushed a silver hair wisp from her face and plunked another rock into the cart. “But why don’t we build the place anyway in case somebody else wants to live there?”

I hadn’t considered that somebody else would want to live in the house I had designed. Suddenly possessive of the home I had toured in a trance before my Woman Ritual, I gnawed my thumbnail and scraped the ground with my foot and wrestled with the longing to stay with them while having the new cottage for myself. “Maybe I could mostly live with you and visit the new place from time to time?”

A peach colored thomsonite caught my eye. Roughly trapezoid shaped and the size of a wren, it glinted on the shadow-stripped forest floor. It belonged in Russia or in Germany and shouldn’t have been just beneath the leaves. I suspected that Tranoc had planted it there and had covered it lightly so I’d find it.

“Exactly so,” my teacher beamed, her brown eyes going to blue, the crinkles at her eyes and mouth creeping toward each other. “You’d come and go as you chose. That’s precisely what I mean!”

I showed her the stone.

“It looks like Tranoc’s been here.”

Having settled the problem of where I would live, I searched with more attention for any special stones that Tranoc might have hidden for me, though I still wasn’t sure if he or Matka Lasu had been the one to scatter them about. I found a piece of amber as big as my head and a zincite the size of my fist. While deposits of both were commonly found deep within the Polish soil, they should not have lain among the leaves and the green shoots probing their way into spring. Nor should they have been perfect orbs. On our way back we discovered a chunk of carnelian leaning against a boulder and a few paces later a piece of cobalite, both stones from Africa. Only Tranoc had traveled around the world. Only he would have had access to those stones. If my teacher had left them I knew she’d have done it by pilfering them from his collection. And she wouldn’t have taken anything of his unless he had given permission.

“Did you find any stones that caught your eye?” he winked when we arrived back at the site. “No! Those logs go over there!” He swept his arm to the right then, glancing at the bears, he flashed a gap-tooth grin at me.

“Nothing special,” I teased. “Just ordinary rocks.”

His jaw dropped. He frowned. I had his absolute attention. Shoving his rumpled ever-present cap to the back of his head, he grated his scalp, his glance flitting from me, to the cart, and back to me. I shrugged again and ordered the giggles bubbling behind my teeth to settle in my throat or, better, in the pit of my belly. They would not be contained. Tickling my tongue, they sputtered from my lips. Head tilted, he laughed, clapped his hands then chafed his palms.

“You got me, Funny Bunny!” In two long steps he had draped himself over the cart. He plucked the apple of zincite and handed it to me. The humor evaporated from his face and a father’s affection glimmered from his eyes.

“Do you know what this is?”

The stone stung my hands with the scintillation of a star. Reflexively I dropped it back in the cart and checked my palms for blisters or chars. I nodded. My hands were both whole and pink.

“And you know about its magic?”

Matka Lasu had taught me everything I knew about women's mysteries and the plants and the beasts, but Tranoc was our resident expert on stones. All the wisdom I possessed about rocks and stones I had gleaned from his patient instruction. Again I nodded, preparing myself for a quiz.

Instead he gathered my hands in his and went on. "You'll need this to synthesize your physical power, your psychic energy, and your creativity. You'll draw on it to organize like-minded people so your work can be successfully done." Looking back at the cart, he petted the stone. It sizzled to his touch. "Embed it in your chimney low enough that you can touch it. This stone will serve you well. All of them will." He mounded the planted gems at my feet. "They all should be part of your hearth." He barked another order then returned to me. "And Judy? No rock is ordinary."

Working through the grumbling of our overburdened muscles, Matka Lasu and I went out for seven days searching for stones that would be part of my house, welcoming those that agreed to come along and leaving those that didn't want to move. Each day we came back from a farther place to pile my treasures at the site. Along with the gray and tan rocks of the woods we found a fire orange hopeite from Africa and a green diabanite from Germany. Satisfied that we'd found all of Tranoc's secret gifts and longing to rest our quivering arms, we rested on the eighth day to take stock of what we had.

The pile of rocks was pathetically small. Astonished at how much timber and stone was needed to construct a simple house, I consulted Tranoc's plan again and again, willing the cottage to need less.

I imagined the sacred forest cleared like a field because of my rapacious demands. I visualized Matka Lasu in bed with muscle cramps from lifting far too many stones. I saw construction ending at three-quarters of a house because we'd run out of building supplies. Fretting about the irreparable harm I would do to build the dwelling of my dreams, I gnawed my thumbnail and pouted and twirled a strand of hair.

"Don't worry, Funny Bunny." Tranoc patted my cheek. "The woods will still stand and plenty of rocks will work themselves up through the soil. We haven't taken anything without permission, and after we're through you won't notice any change."

He was right. Days later when we had all that we needed, the forest looked the same as it had when we'd begun. But I could barely move my arms.

Working with mortar that the wasps had made, Tranoc and the bears laid the foundation stones. I hectored my thumbnail while they worked, fussing that the hole would be too big. Yet, once the stone walls were as tall as my knee, I complained that it would be too small. I badgered Tranoc and the bears and Matka Lasu, even paced the foundation for myself. Everything was as the plans prescribed. Nonetheless, I became such a constant irritant that Tranoc suggested I go visit the fairies, effectively banishing me from the site.

Anger at being banned from my own house quarreled with the pleasure of adventure. Though I knew the fairy town was somewhere in the woods, I didn't have an inkling how to get there. I had asked many times, had even secretly searched, but having no idea what signs to look out for, I had wandered around in fruitless circles.

The fairy Małgorzata fluttered in the place behind my eyes before she actually flicked into view. She was dressed all in turquoise, her little white light glinting like quicksilver in the tree-latticed sun. I laughed when I noticed she was wearing pants. My friend Bożena had set the fashion in the woods, and, after she'd made patterns so we

could sew our own, Matka Lasu and I nearly always wore pants. The fairy women and girls had embraced the trend too, except for Małgorzata, who had clung to her skirts. The turquoise fairy alit on the crown of Tranoc's cap, barely taller than the feather poking from its braided band. Her giggling was as tuneful as the rippling of a wind chime caught in a gentle April rain.

"Tranoc tells me that you're ready to see what we have done." She tossed her head to the left, and a wayward yellow curl tumbled down over her eye. She blew it out of the way. It plopped back down again. She sighed and tucked it behind her ear.

"Well look at you! The final hold out gives in!" I reached my palm out and she fluttered over to it, landing with a pirouette and bow. "You look amazing! I really expected to see Heidi in pants before you'd even think about it!"

Though Heidi had changed herself into a girl for the celebration of my womanhood, she'd shrunk back to her form as a hand-sized figurine, her body and baby blue ankle-length dress returned to their original china.

Małgorzata scrunched her shoulders and shook her head but grinned at the compliment. "I doubt that I'll wear them when the weather gets hot. But for winter and spring they're warmer than skirts." She clapped her hands. "But that's not why I'm here." She smacked her palm to a titter. "You have to see what we've made!"

Leaping into flight she snapped her fingers and I stood inside a magic azure bubble. I slapped my hands over Heidi to keep her in my pocket, and fell back on my haunches when the fairy jerked us forward. As she'd done many times, she towed my bubble through the woods by a slender silver cord tied to her waist.

When we stopped and she'd folded the bubble up until it had disintegrated into her hands, we stood in front of a nondescript birch. I had probably passed it a hundred times before without ever taking note. It was an ordinary tree, maybe older than most, but nothing about it drew attention. Małgorzata clapped her hands to the left then to the right. Then she clapped three times at the tree. A door opened inward, its entryway just tall enough for me if I went down on all fours.

"This is it," she announced, going in ahead of me and flitting near my ear while I checked the ceiling's height and discovered that I could comfortably stand. Leading me down the damp stone stairs, she chattered so quickly I couldn't catch her words.

The risers were shallow, but the long rough-cut treads required two paces to cross. My heels clicked on the stone. The echo was annoying. Though I sat on a step to untie my shoes, the fairy stood on top of the knot. "Let them be," she reassured. "The echo doesn't bother us."

I'd expected the underground staircase to be dark, but, while I couldn't see a lantern or a candle or a torch, light splattered from the lofty root-vaulted roof. I'd expected the air to be musty and dank, but the place smelled of lilies and thyme. I pressed my palm to the dribbling earthen wall then smelled it. It was saturated with the scent.

A hallway, its floor made of roots, rocks, and earth, meandered from the foot of the stairs. And along its rock walls, time-dyed rugged wood doors as tall as cathedrals beckoned me. Dawdling in front of the one nearest me and fondling the knob, I poked my head into the room, ignoring Małgorzata's eager prattle.

A slender runner of hall light unfurled across the floor to the corner where a child cowered in a woman's arms. Their terror gusted at me like a swarm of stinging gnats. I blinked and the people and the painful fear were gone. I threw the door shut, filled my

lungs with a deep cleansing breath and then bullied it open again. Nothing, not even a table or chair, interrupted the chamber's rough-hewn brownness. Knowing I'd just witnessed a moment in the future, I tucked it in my heart and promised to remember as I followed the still bragging Małgorzata to the door at the far end of the hall.

The door glided open at the fairy's command and the smell and the noise of the work inside assaulted me like a summer storm. I smacked my hands to my ears. The hammering stopped. Saws stopped in mid saw. Silence overtook the din. Even the air stood still, and I realized the fairies were all holding their breath. Infected with the virus of their anticipation, I held my breath too. All eyes were on me. I didn't know what to do.

Sawdust, bits of wood, and scraps of dark blue cloth littered the barn-size floor. Małgorzata spread her arms and with a thespian bow invited me into the room. Afraid that I might step on a necessary swatch or a vital length of wood or kick a crucial implement, I didn't know where to step. I shuffled as I entered so the worst I would do would be to nudge some of the clutter aside.

Show her!" she directed, flitting over and around me so fast that her gossamer wings were a blur.

The crowd of fairies fell open like wheatgrass in the wind, displaying a dark blue wingback chair. The same style as the green ones in Matka Lasu's house except that its cushions were still fat, its flawless beauty siphoned a long breath from my lungs. I wondered whom the perfect chair was for.

"It's for you! Do you like it?"

Other than at the elegant lunch at the Feldens' with my mother before I broke for the woods, I'd never seen a chair that wasn't saggy or torn. I couldn't speak. My breath still fizzling from my lips, I reached my hand out but I could not touch the prize.

"Try it!" she suggested. "Let's see if it fits."

She expected me to sit in the thing!

"You're going to get tired if you never sit or sleep." She nodded toward a bed frame as broad and as long as the one that occupied my parents' room.

I'd imagined my bed as a simple pine thing like the one in Matka Lasu's house. But the frame they had made had been carved of ash and was curved at the head and foot like a sleigh. I could not imagine the work they had done to sculpt such a tightly grained wood. In truth I still can't, and even to this day I marvel every time I lie in it. A half-stuffed mattress drooped over a table in the corner, and the unpainted legs of a kitchen table had been carefully tucked against the wall next to it.

Suddenly I had to touch everything—the bed frame, the mattress, my beautiful chair, and the cleverly turned table legs. I stroked wood they had sanded river stone smooth. I let the mattress fabric trickle through my fingers like milk. And I sat in my lapis colored chair. My feet barely touched the floor. Nonetheless, I felt as regal as a diamond drizzled czarina. Małgorzata clucked and the rest of the fairies joined her in a droop of disappointment.

"She needs a footstool," her uncle Lubomir worried. Fingering his lavish auburn beard, he was already calculating what they would need to construct the unanticipated piece. "It's all right," he nodded, his frown smoothing to a smile. "We'll be fine if we can manage two more meters of cloth."

From behind me an eager chorus of voices assured that the fabric could be made. Ludmiła, the matriarch of the clan, clapped her hands and then patted her green-trousered hips, her white braid lazily on her shoulder like a snake.

“Well let’s go,” she demanded. “There’s enough work to do. There’s no room here for idle hands.” She slapped a square of sandpaper onto my hand.

Lubomir showed me how to sand the wood, and I discovered that I had a talent for the task. Breathing deeply of the sweet smell of newly cut wood, I smoothed the bumps and little ridges from the table legs, delighting in my power to change roughly turned legs into perfect matching works of art. And when I was through, four chair legs waited for me.

What the fairies lacked in size they made up for in numbers. A half dozen of them worked the treadle of the lathe so that when I had sanded the legs for the chair, four others had been added to the job. I lost all track of time in the work room of the fairies. When fatigue overtook me, the mattress was stuffed, the extra cloth had been woven, and the table and two chairs were ready to be assembled.

When I awoke, Małgorzata was dressed all in green, her turquoise pants abandoned for an apron and old skirt. She led me to an ante-room where the lily-thyme scent mingled with the odor of paint. Four naked kitchen chairs stood like soldiers in a row, two fairies already painting one of them.

“Choose a color,” one of the painters instructed pointing to a row of pots filled with yellow paint.

Laughter tripped on my tongue and almost made it past my lips, before I understood that yellow really was the only choice. I dipped the brush into a pot and sang the simple song Matka Lasu had taught me about yellow’s magic powers:

Yellow’s for wisdom, for youth, and for light.
It’s for love that we celebrate by day and by night.
It commemorates joy and a good harvest too.
And it brings hospitality and kindness to you.

Always ready to pick up a catchy tune, Małgorzata joined in and soon so did the others. Other workers came in, and before I had drawn a single yellow line on the bottom of a seat, everyone was singing my song.

I don’t know how many days I stayed with the fairies, eating without tasting the food that appeared, working until I dropped where I was and sleeping until the sawing woke me. When we finished I had an enormous bed, two overstuffed chairs, one slightly smaller than the other, an ottoman, a table and four matching kitchen chairs with two coats of yellow paint, a maple chest of drawers, and a matching little table for between the perfect lapis colored chairs. I spent the evening bouncing on the bed, testing the chairs and the ottoman, and opening and closing bureau drawers.

But disappointment discolored my moment of joy. I was sorry to see the woodworking end. I would miss the aromas of newly sawed wood and of varnish and of paint meandering through the ambient fragrance of lilies and thyme. I would miss the feel of sandpaper in my hand. I would miss the monotonous rhythm of the work, the hypnotic rasping of the wood beneath my hands, the satisfaction of breathing in cadence with the strokes so that wood, sandpaper, and artisan surrendered to each other and

melded to a single entity. So, though thrilled with the furniture we had made, I felt wounded, as if I had been hacked away from the gratifying call to create.

For the first time I slept on my big double bed though without any blankets or pillow. And for the first time I realized how warm the room was in spite of the lack of a woodstove or hearth. I fended off sleep for as long as I could, puzzling over the source of the heat and awoke in Matka Lasu's narrow bed, sure that I had had a convoluted dream but unable to remember more than snatches.

"Visiting the fairies is like crossing through the veil," my teacher consoled as, seated on the bed, she petted my pillowed hair. "Most people who go can't remember a thing. That's one of the devices the fairies use to keep their town and little ones secure. But you are becoming an *anarkhara* now, and a wise woman knows how to use the proper tools to shatter the enchantment of forgetting."

She was right, though I needed more than a year to reconstruct the memory. I found snippets in my dear friend, the spider's eyes, other scraps of it in meditation. When I remembered to ask, I found some shreds in my dreams. And I chronicled the remnants and the other odds and ends in my *lechebnik*, my book of shadows. Then, like a seamstress assembling a quilt, I stitched all the pieces together. But I have gotten ahead of my tale.

When we returned to the construction, I had a better idea of how long I had been away. The shell of the house was entirely built. The log walls were up; the chimney was constructed; and the wood shingle roof was in place. The doorway was open, but an arched maple door lay on the ground near four of the windows that Tranoc and my teacher had made. The three windows in bedroom had already been installed, and I wondered where they'd gotten the glass.

But all questions skittered from me when I entered the house. Only the sub-flooring had been laid, and I didn't see the planks that would make the final floor, but the hearth step was there, and above the firebox three gray and tan stones protruded from the hearth ready to support a still-missing mantelpiece. The magic stones that Tranoc had planted in the woods gleamed at eye level from the chimney. I went over and touched them. They all radiated heat, but the zincite, having found a home with the others, had cooled to a comforting warmth.

I, on the other hand, didn't feel at home. I felt like a visitor touring the house, unable to grasp that a dwelling so fine could really be meant for me. The empty rooms seemed huge in the unfiltered light of the still leafless early spring woods. I worried that I would never fill the place up, would never make it feel like a home.

Paradoxically I wondered what memories the walls would sing or moan in the solitary nights. This would be the place where I would laugh with those I loved, where I would argue with them, where I would grieve over their deaths. This would surely be the place where I would die.

I examined the blue veins reassuringly mapping the backs of my hands. Perfect full moons stopped in mid ascendancy on the horizons of my cuticles. A stubby white scar shone on my thumb's first knuckle. Several pink nicks splattered over my wrist. They were healing too and would also leave scars, and for the first time I felt reverence for the body's cunning knack of mending life's big and little tears.

I turned my hands over and inspected my palms. My lifeline was long, as Matka Lasu told me often, and with the arrogance of youth, I formulated an image of living

forever in my prime. My love line was short though unusually deep, and I told myself again that it would grow. I touched my thumb to my four fingers and marveled at the tasks that opposable digit let me to do.

What would I do with these self-healing hands that promised endless decades of vigor and youth, with these thumbs that gave me such astonishing potential to make the world a better place? What fissures would I heal with these magnificent hands while residing in this beautiful house? A sense of urgency shoved me forward by my shoulders. The house and my adult life had to be built, and I wanted it done right away.

“Hello the manor lady!” Bożena twittered like a chaffinch from somewhere in the woods.

For a breath we all looked at each other in shock, then in greed, as if each would grab the last of a dessert. Smashing into each other, we raced to the exit, all three of us squeezing through the doorway at once.

Wearing bottle green pants and a lemon-lime blouse as if she embodied the potential of spring, she giggled and waved from a fairy cloud of blues and purples and yellows and reds. Her hair was cut to her chin and waved around her face, just a little tag of curl flirting at her neck’s nape. I’d never seen a woman with hair so short, yet I thought she looked extremely chic. Laughing, she threw her arms out to us and ran from the fairies to me. She smelled of roses and lilacs.

“A little birdie told me you could use a new floor,” she giggled, waving at Pieg, the buck, who was pulling the fairy cart. Like sunshine on water, the sparkling love of life glinted in her periwinkle eyes.

“How did you do that?” I touched her yellow hair and found that it was sticky and stiff.

“You don’t want to know!” Spreading her arms, she laughed and turned to model the style. “They’re called Marcel waves, and they take too much work. I’m sorry I cut it this short. But everyone’s doing their hair this way, and I really do like the look.” She shrugged. “Hair grows. I can always change my mind.”

“I like it!” Matka Lasu touched the stiff and sticky waves, and I knew she was planning to experiment on me. I shot her a look. Though I liked it on Bożena, I didn’t want the bother for myself.

“Where do you want the planks for the floor?” The young woman patted Pieg as he and the cart arrived with the fairy entourage.

All eyes were on Tranoc, who was running the show. Knocking his cap to the side of his head, he raked his hair and stroked his beardless chin. “Can you leave them in the cart?”

The fairies all nodded.

“Good! Then we can take them in as we need them and avoid getting in each other’s way.” He looked at the windows still lying on the ground and then at the cart full of planks. “The windows will be quicker. Let’s do them first.” Then turning to Bożena, “What are you doing here?”

“Oh thanks! I’m glad to see you too!”

“No, why aren’t you teaching or studying or something or working at the rental library?” Unhitching Pieg, Tranoc patted his rump and thanked him for his help with the house.

“Oh, I quit all that.” She flicked her wrist as if dismissing all the jobs that filled her life with so much joy. Then her giggles erupted, giving her away. “Pani Olszanski is visiting her brother so she closed the school today and tomorrow. I have to be back by one o’clock, though, to get to the library. My shift starts at two, but I still have some time.” She checked a watch I hadn’t noticed before. “And I figured with no morning classes to teach I could come and see Judy’s new house. Can I help with the windows? I’m good with a hammer.”

She and Matka Lasu installed the windows while Tranoc, the fairies, and I laid the bedroom floor. The broad pine boards were as smooth as baby lips. I couldn’t keep my hands from stroking them. A vapor of a memory curled around my head then dissipated with my breath. The moment had passed, and I focused on the work, drawing a curious satisfaction from a task I felt I had done some time before. When we broke for lunch my new kitchen windows and the two in the living room glinted in the sun. The bedroom was finished with a new wide-plank pine floor, and we praised ourselves for a job well done.

“We’ve done a good morning’s work!” Tranoc tugged on his cap. “I think we deserve something special for lunch. Will you join us?” He turned to Bożena.

She consulted her watch, and I thought I could learn very quickly to hate that contraption. “I still have an hour.”

“And I happen to have a pot of lentil soup up my sleeve.” My teacher winked and invited the fairies to come, but they preferred to go back to their home.

“I wonder where they live,” the woman idly asked, patting her Marcel waves in place. Of course, she couldn’t know that in a couple of years she would know their home as well as her own.