

# THE TSARINA'S DAUGHTER

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*In your end lies your beginning. No man shall disappoint you as  
woman will. An angel will speak to you. The lightest load will be  
your greatest burden.*

Prophecy of the Golosov Ravine

# Prologue

IN THE WINTER PALACE, ST NICHOLAS' DAY,  
6 DECEMBER 1741

My little cousin Ivan is innocent – he is a baby, and as pure as only a one-year-old can be. But tonight, at my order, the infant Tsar will be declared guilty as charged.

I fight the urge to pick him up and kiss him; it would only make things worse. Beyond his nursery door there is a low buzzing sound, like that of angry bees ready to swarm the Winter Palace. Soldiers' boots scrape and shuffle. Spurs clink like stubby vodka glasses and bayonets are being fixed to muskets. These are the sounds of things to come. The thought spikes my heart with dread.

There is no other choice. It is Ivan or me. Only one of us can rule Russia, the other one condemned to a living death. Reigning Russia is a right that has to be earned as much as inherited: he and my cousin, the Regent, doom the country to an eternity under the foreign yoke. Under their rule the realm will be lost; the invisible holy bond between Tsar and people irretrievably severed.

I, Elizabeth, am the only surviving child of Peter the Great's fifteen sons and daughters. Tonight, if I hesitate too long, I might become the last of the siblings to die.

*Curse the Romanovs!* In vain I try to bar from my thoughts the prophecy that has blighted my life. Puddles form on the parquet floor as slush drips from my boots; their worn thigh-high leather is soaked from my dash across St Petersburg. Despite my being an Imperial Princess – the Tsarevna Elizabeth Petrovna Romanova

– no footman had hooked a bearskin across my lap to protect me against the icy wind and driving snow while I sat snug in a sled; I had no muff to raise to my face in that special graceful gesture of the St Petersburg ladies, the *damy*. My dash towards my date with destiny had been clandestine: snowfall veiled the flickering lights of the lanterns and shrouded the city. Mortal fear drove me on, hurrying over bridges, dodging patrolled barriers – the *shlagbaummy* – and furtively crossing the empty prospects, where my hasty passage left a momentary trace of warmth in the frosty air.

This was a night of momentous decision-making that I would have to live with forever. An anointed and crowned Tsar may not be killed, even once he is deposed, as it sets a dangerous precedent. Yet he may not live either – at least not in the minds of the Russian people or according to the diplomatic dispatches sent all over Europe.

What then is to become of the boy?

I feel for Ivan's limp little hand. I simply cannot resist – never could – nuzzling his chubby, rosy fingers, which are still too small to bear the Imperial seal. We call this game a butterfly's kiss; it makes him giggle and squeal, and me dissolve with tenderness. I drink in his scent, the talcum powder blended for his sole use in Grasse – vanilla and bergamot, the Tsar's perfume – carefully recording it to last me a lifetime. The men outside fall quiet. They are waiting for the decision that will both save and damn me. The thought sears my soul.

In Ivan's nursery, the lined French damask drapes are drawn. Thick, pot-bellied clouds hide the December new moon and stars, giving this hour a dense and dreadful darkness. During the day, the seagulls' cries freeze on their beaks; the chill of night grates skin raw. Any light is as scarce and dear as everything else in St Petersburg. The candle-sellers' shops, which smell of beeswax, flax and sulphur, do brisk business with both Yuletide and Epiphany approaching. On the opposite quay, the shutters on the flat façades of the city's palaces and houses are closed, the windows behind them dark. They are swathed in the same brooding silence as the Winter Palace. I am in my father's house, but this does not mean that I am safe. Far from it – it means quite the opposite. The

Winter Palace's myriad corridors, hundreds of rooms and dozens of staircases can be as welcoming as a lover's embrace or as dangerous as a snake pit.

It is Ivan or me: fate has mercilessly driven us towards this moment. The courtiers shun me: no one would bet a kopeck on my future. Will I be sent to a remote convent, even though I do not have an ounce of nun's flesh about me, as the Spanish envoy, the Duke of Liria, so memorably recorded? I had once been forced to see such an unfortunate woman in her cell; as intended, the sight instilled a terror that would last me a lifetime. Her shorn head was covered in chilblains and her eyes shone with madness. A hunchbacked dwarf, whose tongue had been torn out, was her sole companion, both of them shuffling about in rotten straw like pigs in their sties. Or perhaps there is a sled waiting for me, destination Siberia? I know about this voyage of no return; I have heard the cries, seen the dread and smelled the fear of the banished culprits, be they simple peasants or even the Tsar's best friend. By the first anniversary of their sentence, all had succumbed to the harsh conditions of the East. Maybe a dark cell in the Trubetzkoi Bastion, the place nobody ever leaves in one piece, will swallow me; or things will be simpler, and I am fated to end up face down in the Neva, drifting between the thick floes of ice, my body crushed and shredded by their sheer force.

The soldiers' impatience is palpable. Just one more breath! Ivan's wet-nurse is asleep, slumped on her stool, resting amidst his toys: the scattered pieces of a *Matryoshka* doll, wooden boats, a mechanical silver bear that opens its jaws and raises its paws when wound up, and a globe inlaid with Indian ivory and Belgian *émaillé*. One of the nurse's pale breasts is still bare from the last feed; she was chosen for her ample alabaster bosom in Moscow's raucous German Quarter. Ivan is well cared for: Romanov men are of weaker stock than Romanov women, even if no one ever dares to say so. I celebrated his first year as a time of wonder, offering my little cousin a cross studded with rubies and emeralds for his christening, a gift fit for a Tsar, and put myself in debt to raise an ebony colt in my stables as his Yuletide present.

Ivan's breathing is growing heavier. The regiment outside his door weighs on his dreams. As I touch his sides, his warmth sends a jolt through my fingers, hitting a Gold in my heart. Oh, to hold him one more time and feel his delightful weight in my arms. I pull my hands back, folding them, though the time for prayers has passed. No pilgrimage can ever absolve me from this sin, even if I slide across the whole of Russia on my knees. Ivan's lashes flutter, his chin wobbles, he smacks his pink and shiny lips. I cannot bear to see him cry, despite the saying of Russian serfs: 'Another man's tears are only water.'

*The lightest load will be your greatest burden.* The last prophecy is coming to pass. Spare me, I inwardly plead – but I know this is my path, and I will have to walk it to the end, over the pieces of my broken heart. Ivan slides back into slumber; long, dark lashes cast shadows on his round cheeks and his tiny fists open, showing pink, unlined palms. The sight stabs me. Not even the most adept fortune-teller could imagine what the future has in store for Ivan. It is a thought that I refrain from following to its conclusion.

Beyond the door utter silence reigns. Is this the calm before the storm my father taught me to fear when we sailed the slate-coloured waters of the Bay of Finland? His fleet had been rolling at anchor in the far distance, masts rising like a marine forest. 'This is forever Russia,' he had proudly announced. 'No Romanov must ever surrender what has been gained by spilling Russian blood.' In order to strengthen Russia, Father had spared no one. My elder half-brother Alexey, his son and heir, had paid the ultimate price for doubting Russia's path to progress.

Steps approach. My time with Ivan, and life as we know it, is over. I wish this were not necessary. There is a knock on the nursery door, a token rasp of knuckles; so light, it belies its true purpose. It is time to act. Russia will tolerate no further excuses. The soldiers' nerves are as taut as the springs in a bear trap. I have promised them the world: on a night like this, destinies are forged, fortunes made and lost.

'Elizabeth Petrovna Romanova?' I hear the captain of the Imperial Preobrazhensky Regiment addressing me. His son is my godchild, but can I trust him completely for all that? I feel as if I

am drowning and shield Ivan's cradle with my body. In the gilt-framed mirrors I see my face floating ghostly pale above the dark green uniform jacket; my ash-blonde curly hair has slid down from beneath a fur cap. On a simple leather thong around my neck hangs the diamond-studded icon of St Nicholas that is priceless to me. They will have to prise it from my dead body to take it from me.

I am almost thirty-two years old. Tonight, I shall not betray my blood.

'I am ready,' I say, my voice trembling, bracing myself, as the door bursts open and the soldiers swarm in.

*Everything comes at a price.*