



INTERREGNUM, 1725

He is dead. My beloved husband, the mighty Tsar of all the Russias, has died – and just in time.

Moments before death came for him, Peter called for a quill and paper to be brought to him in his bed-chamber in the Winter Palace. My heart almost stalled. He had not forgotten, he was going to drag me down with him. When he lost consciousness for the last time and the darkness drew him closer to its heart, the quill slipped from his fingers. Black ink spattered the soiled sheets; time held its breath. What had the Tsar wanted to settle with that last effort of his tremendous spirit?

I knew the answer.

The candles in the tall candelabra filled the room with a heavy scent and an unsteady light; their glow made shadows reel and brought the woven figures on the Flemish tapestries to life, their coarse features showing pain and disbelief. The voices of the people who'd stood outside the door all night were drowned out by the February wind, rattling furiously at the shutters. Time spread slowly, like oil on water. Peter had imprinted himself on our souls like his signet ring in hot wax. It seemed impossible that the world hadn't careened to a halt at his passing. My husband, the greatest will ever to impose itself on Russia, had been more than our ruler. He had been our fate. He was still mine.

The doctors – Blumentrost, Paulsen and Horn – stood silently around Peter's bed, staring at him, browbeaten. Five kopeks-worth



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of medicine, given early enough, could have saved him. Thank god for the quacks' lack of good sense.

Without looking, I could feel Feofan Prokopovich, Archbishop of Novgorod, and Alexander Menshikov watching me. Prokopovich had made the Tsar's will eternal and Peter had much to thank him for. Menshikov, on the other hand, owed his fortune and influence entirely to Peter. What was it he had said when someone tried to blacken Alexander Danilovich's name to him by referring to his murky business dealings? 'Menshikov is always Menshikov, in all that he does!' That had put an end to that.

Dr Paulsen had closed the Tsar's eyes and crossed his hands on his chest, but he hadn't removed the scroll, Peter's last will and testament, from his grasp. Those hands, which were always too dainty for the tall, powerful body, had grown still, helpless. Just two weeks earlier he had plunged those very hands into my hair, winding it round his fingers, inhaling the scent of rosewater and sandalwood.

'My Catherine,' he'd said, calling me by the name he himself had given me, and smiled at me. 'You're still a beauty. But what will you look like in a convent, shorn until you are bald? The cold there will break your spirit even though you're strong as a horse. Do you know that Evdokia still writes to me begging for a second fur, poor thing! What a good job you can't write!' he'd added, laughing.

It had been thirty years since his first wife Evdokia had been banished to the convent. I'd met her once. Her eyes shone with madness, her shaven head was covered in boils and scabs from the cold and filth, and her only company was a hunchbacked dwarf to serve her in her cell. Peter had ordered the poor creature to have her tongue cut out, so in response to Evdokia's moaning and laments, all she was able to do was burble. He'd been right to believe that seeing her would fill me with lifelong dread.

I knelt at the bedside and the three doctors retreated to the twilight at the edge of the room, like crows driven from a field: the hapless birds Peter had been so terrified of in the last years of his life. The Tsar had called open season on them all over his Empire. Farmers caught, killed, plucked and roasted them for reward. None of this helped Peter: silently, at night, the phantom bird would slip

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through the padded walls and locked doors of his bedchamber. Its ebony wings blotted up the light and, in their cool shadow, the blood on the Tsar's hands never dried.

His fingers were not yet those of a corpse, but soft, and still warm. For a moment, the fear and anger of these past few months slipped from my heart like a thief in the night. I kissed his hands and breathed in his familiar scent of tobacco, ink, leather, and the perfume tincture that was blended in Grasse for his sole use.

I took the scroll from his hand. It was easy enough to slide it out, although my blood thickened with fear and my veins were coated with frost and rime like branches in our Baltic winter. It was important to show everyone that I alone was entitled to do this – I, his wife, and the mother of his twelve children.

The paper rustled as I unrolled it. Not for the first time, I was ashamed of my inability to read. I handed my husband's last will to Feofan Prokopovich. At least Menshikov was as ignorant of its contents as I. Ever since the days when Peter first drew us into his orbit and cast his spell upon us, we had been like two children squabbling over their father's love and attention. *Batjuschka* Tsar, his people called him. Our little father Tsar.

Prokopovich must have known what Peter had in mind for me. He was an old fox with a sharp wit, as comfortable in earthly as in heavenly realms. Daria had once sworn that he had three thousand books in his library. What, if you please, can one man do with three thousand books? The scroll sat lightly in his liver-spotted hands now. After all, he himself had helped Peter draft the decree that shocked us all. The Tsar had set aside every custom, every law: he wanted to appoint his own successor and would rather leave his empire to a worthy stranger over his own, unworthy child. Alexey . . .

How timid he had been when we first met, the spitting image of his mother Evdokia, with his veiled gaze and high, domed forehead. He couldn't sit up straight because Menshikov had thrashed his back and buttocks bloody and sore. Only when it was too late did Alexey grasp his fate: in his quest for a new Russia, the Tsar would spare no one, neither himself, nor his only son. *You were no blood of my blood, Alexey, no flesh of my flesh . . .* And so I was able

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to sleep soundly. Peter, though, had been haunted by nightmares from that day on.

My heart pounded against my lightly laced bodice – I was surprised it didn't echo from the walls – but I met Prokopovich's gaze as calmly as I could. I clenched my toes in my slippers as I could not afford to faint. Prokopovich's smile was as thin as one of the wafers he would offer in church. He knew the secrets of the human heart; especially mine.

'Read, Feofan,' I said quietly.

'Give everything to ...' He paused, looked up and repeated: 'To ...'

Menshikov's temper flared; he reared as if someone had struck him with a whip, like in the good old days. 'To whom?' he snarled at Prokopovich. 'Pray tell, Feofan, to whom?'

I could hardly breathe. The fur was suddenly much too hot against my skin.

The Archbishop shrugged. 'That's all. The Tsar didn't finish writing the sentence.' The shadow of a smile flitted across his wrinkled face. Peter had liked nothing better than to turn the world on its head: and, oh, yes, he still had a hold on us from beyond the grave. Prokopovich lowered his gaze. I snapped back to life. Nothing was decided. Peter was dead; his successor unnamed. But that didn't mean I was safe. It meant quite the opposite.

'What – that's it?' Menshikov snatched the paper out of the Archbishop's hands. 'I don't believe it!' He stared down at the letters, but Prokopovich took the scroll from him again.

'Oh, Alexander Danilovich. That's what comes of always having had something better to do than learn to read and write.'

Menshikov was about to give a stinging reply, but I cut him off. Men! Was this the moment for rivalry? I had to act fast if I didn't want to live out my days in a nunnery, or be forced aboard a sledge to Siberia, or end up face down in the Neva drifting between the thick floes of ice, my body crushed and shredded by their sheer force.

'Feofan – has the Tsar died without naming his heir?' I had to be sure.

He nodded, his eyes bloodshot from the long hours of keeping vigil at his lord's bedside. In the manner of Russian Orthodox

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clerics, he wore his dark hair plain; it fell straight to his shoulders, streaked with grey, and his simple, dark tunic was that of an ordinary priest. Nothing about him betrayed the honours and offices with which Peter had rewarded him; nothing apart from the heavy, jewel-studded cross on his breast – the *panagia*. Feofan Prokopovich was old, but he was one of those men who could easily serve many more Tsars. He bowed and handed me the scroll. I thrust it into the sleeve of my dress.

He straightened up. ‘Tsarina, I place the future of Russia in your hands.’ My heart skipped a beat when he called me by this title. Menshikov, too, raised his head, alert, like a bloodhound taking scent. His eyes narrowed.

‘Go home, Feofan, and get some rest. I’ll send for you when I need you. Until then, do not forget that the Tsar’s last words are known only to the three of us,’ I said. ‘I hope you will serve me for many years,’ I added. ‘I bestow upon you the Order of St Andrew and an estate outside Kiev with ten – no, twenty – thousand souls.’ He bowed, looking content, and I thought quickly about whom to send into exile, whose property I would have to sequester, in order to reward Prokopovich. On a day like today, fortunes were made and lost. I gestured to the servant standing guard next to the door. Had he understood our whispers? I hoped not.

‘Order Feofan Prokopovich’s carriage. Help him downstairs. No one is to speak to him, do you hear?’ I added in a whisper.

He nodded, his long lashes fluttering on his rosy cheeks. A handsome young boy this one was. His face suddenly recalled that of another. One I’d thought the most beautiful I’d ever known. Peter had put a brutal end to that. And afterwards, he’d ordered that the head, that same sweet head, be set at my bedside, in a heavy glass jar of strong spirit, the way apples are preserved in vodka in winter. The wide eyes stared sadly out at me; in the throes of death the lips, once so soft to kiss, now shrivelled and drained of blood, had pulled back from the teeth and gums. When I first saw it and, horrified, asked my lady-in-waiting to remove it, Peter threatened me with the convent and the whip. And so there for a time it had stayed.

Feofan Prokopovich laughed softly, his face splitting into so many wrinkles that his skin looked like the parched earth after

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summer. ‘Don’t worry, Tsarina. Come, boy, lend an old man your arm.’

The two of them stepped out into the corridor. The footman’s pale, narrow-legged silk breeches clearly showed the outline of his muscular legs and buttocks. Was there any truth in the rumour that Prokopovich liked young men? Well – each to his own. I blocked the view of the Tsar’s bed with my body. Pale, frightened faces turned to gaze into the room: both noblemen and servants sat there like rabbits in a snare, craning their necks, awaiting their destiny. Madame de la Tour, my youngest daughter Natalya’s scrawny French governess, was hugging the little girl close. I frowned. It was much too cold in the corridor for her and she’d been coughing since yesterday afternoon. Her elder sisters Elizabeth and Anna were there beside her, but I avoided their eyes. They were too young; how could they understand?

Nobody knew yet whether I was the one they had to fear. I searched the crowd for young Petrushka, Peter’s grandson, and the Princes Dolgoruki, his followers, but they were nowhere to be seen. I bit my lip. Where were they . . . busy hatching plans to seize the throne? I had to lay hands on them as soon as possible. I snapped my fingers and the closest guard leapt to attention.

‘Send for the Privy Council – Count Tolstoy, Baron Ostermann and Pavel Jagushinsky. Look sharp, the Tsar wants to see them,’ I said loudly, making sure that my last words were heard the entire length of the corridor.

Menshikov pulled me back into the room, closed the door and sneered his disbelief at my audacity.

‘Come,’ I said curtly. ‘We’ll go next door, to the little library.’ Menshikov picked up his embroidered coat of green brocade from the chair in which he had kept watch at Peter’s bedside for the last days and weeks. A peasant household could easily have lived for two whole years on just one of the silver threads woven in its cloth. His ivory-handled walking stick he clamped into his armpit. In the hidden door that led to Peter’s small library I turned to the doctors. ‘None of you may leave this room and you are to summon no one.’

‘But . . .’ Blumentrost began.

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I raised my hand. ‘It cannot become known that the Tsar has passed away. Not yet.’

Peter would have approved of my tone.

‘As you command.’ Blumentrost bowed.

‘Good. You shall be paid later today. The same goes for your colleagues.’

Menshikov swayed a little. Was it tiredness that made him unsteady on his feet, or fear?

I walked ahead of him into the cosy little library. Menshikov followed, but only after seizing the tall carafe of Burgundy he had been drinking from, as well as two Venetian goblets. ‘This is no moment to be either sober or stingy,’ he said with a lopsided smile before kicking the door shut like a common innkeeper. The fire had burnt down in the grate, but the wood-panelled walls retained its heat. The colourful silk rugs we had brought back from our Persian campaign – easily adding a dozen baggage carts to our train – depicted all the flowers and birds of God’s creation in their full splendour. The plain chairs standing by the desk, the fireplace and near the shelves, had all been made by Peter himself. Sometimes I would hear him lathing and hammering far beyond midnight. Carpentry drove out his demons and gave him his best ideas, he used to say. His ministers feared nothing so much as a night Peter spent doing carpentry. He would fall asleep, exhausted, across his workbench. Only Menshikov was strong enough to hoist the Tsar onto his shoulders and carry him to bed. If I were not there waiting for him, Peter would use the belly of a young chamberlain as his pillow. He always needed skin against his skin to keep the memories at bay.

The high windows were draped with lined curtains that he had bought as a young man on his visit to Holland, long before the Great Northern War, those two decades of struggle for survival and supremacy against the Swedes. The shelves sagged beneath the weight of the books, which I was told were travelogues, seafaring tales, war histories, biographies of rulers and books on how to rule, and religious works. He had leafed through each and every one of them time and time again. It was a world where I could never follow him. Scrolls still lay open on his desk or piled up in heaps

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in corners. Some books were printed and bound in thick pigskin; others were written by hand in monasteries.

On the mantelpiece stood a model of the *Natalya*, Peter's proud frigate, and above it hung a painting of my son, Peter Petrovich. It was painted months before the death that broke our hearts. I had avoided this room for years because of it, the painting was too real; as if at any moment my son would throw me the red leather ball he held in his hands. His blond curls tumbled onto a white lace shirt; his smile hinted at a row of little teeth. I would have given my life to have him here, now, and to be able to declare him Tsar of All the Russias. Still a child, certainly. But a son of our blood, mine and Peter's. A dynasty. Isn't that what every ruler wants? Now there are only daughters left, and a dreaded grandson, little Petrushka.

The thought of Petrushka took my breath away. At his birth Peter had cradled him in his arms and turned his back on the unhappy mother. Poor Sophie Charlotte. She had been like a nervous thoroughbred, and like a horse her father had sold her to Russia. Where was her young son now? In the Dolgoruki Palace? In the barracks? Outside the door? Petrushka was only twelve years old and Peter hadn't even granted him the title of Tsarevich, but I feared him more than I feared the Devil.

In the library, Menshikov conceded: 'You did well, calling for the Council and getting rid of Feofan, the old fool.'

I turned to look at him. 'We're the fools. I hope he keeps his word.'

'What promise did he give you?' Menshikov asked, astonished.

'You see! You only hear what is spoken, but so much more than that is said.' I seized him by the shirt collar and hissed: 'We're both in the same boat. God have mercy on you for every second you waste right now. I saw neither Petrushka nor his charming friends in the corridor, did you? And why is the rightful heir to the Russian Empire not here at his grandfather's deathbed, where he belongs?'

Menshikov looked uncertain; he wiped his forehead.

'Because he's with the troops at the Imperial barracks, where soon they'll hoist him on their shoulders and give him three cheers when they find out the Tsar is dead. What will happen to us then? Will Petrushka remember the people who signed the judgment on

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his father, albeit with just a cross next to their name because they couldn't write?'

I let go of him. Menshikov refilled his goblet and took a long slug of wine, his hands trembling, strong fingers weighted down with heavy rings. His natural wiliness was blunted by fatigue, but I was not yet finished with him: 'Siberia will be too good for us in their eyes. The Dolgorukis will feed the four winds with our ashes. No one but us knows that the Tsar is dead,' I whispered. 'That buys us time.' Time that might save us. We couldn't keep the Tsar's death secret for too long; it would be out by morning, when a leaden dawn broke over Peter's city.

Menshikov, the man who had turned so many battles in his favour, whose neck had slipped so many times from even the most perilous of nooses, seemed dazed. My dread was contagious. He sat heavily in one of the armchairs, which Peter had brought from Versailles, and stretched out his still-shapely legs. A marvel that the dainty piece of furniture was able to bear his weight! He took a few sips and then turned the coloured glass this way and that in front of the fire. The flames warmed the goblet's smooth, tinted surface; it looked as if it were filled with blood. I sat down opposite him. Tonight was no time for drinking games.

Menshikov raised his goblet to me in jest. 'To you, Catherine Alexeyevna. It was well worth gifting you to the Tsar, my lady. To you, my greatest loss. To you, my greatest gain.' Suddenly he laughed, so hard that his wig slipped down over his eyes. It was like the sound of wolves in winter: high and scornful. He pulled the wig off and flung it away. I calmly took his insolence while Peter would have had him flogged for it. Menshikov was suffering like a dog: it was his lord and love, too, who had died. What was in store for him now? His suffering made him unpredictable. I needed him; desperately. Him, the Privy Council, and the troops. The Tsar's last will and testament was wedged up my sleeve. Menshikov's face was red and bloated under his shaggy, still dark-blond mop of hair. He stopped laughing and looked at me over the rim of his glass, his gaze unsteady.

'Here we are. What an extraordinary life you've lived, my lady. Divine Will is the only explanation for it.'

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I nodded. That's what they say about me in all the courts of Europe. My background is the running joke that always puts envoys in a good mood. But for Peter, whatever he willed at any given time was normal and so nothing was extraordinary any longer.

Suddenly, Menshikov's glass slipped from his fingers, his chin dropped onto his chest and the wine spilt, leaving a large red stain on his white lace shirt and blue waistcoat. The last weeks, days and hours caught up with him. A moment later, he was snoring and hung as limp as a rag doll in the chair. I could grant him some rest before Tolstoy and the Privy Council arrived. Then he would be carried back to his palace to sleep off his stupor. Menshikov already held the Order of St Andrew, as well as far more serfs and titles than I could grant him. There was nothing left to promise him. He had to stay of his own accord: *Nothing binds people more powerfully than fear for their own survival, Catherine*, I could hear Peter say.

I walked over to the window, which looked over the inner courtyard. The golden icons sewn to the hem of my dress tinkled with each step. When little Princess Wilhelmine of Prussia saw the way I dressed on our visit to Berlin, she had laughed out loud: 'The Empress of Russia looks like a minstrel's wife!'

I pushed aside the heavy curtain that kept at bay the inky chill of a St Petersburg winter night – our city, Peter, our dream! Alexander Nevsky Prospect and the Neva were shrouded in the darkness that now held you forever in its arms, the darkness that hid the breathtaking beauty of what you had created: the icy green shade of the waves blending to perfection with the rainbow hues of the flat façades of both palaces and houses, such a novelty twenty years ago. This city that you raised out of the swampy ground, by the sheer strength of your incredible will and the suffering of hundreds of thousands of your people, nobles and serfs alike. The bones of the forced labourers lie buried in the marshy earth as the city's foundations. Men, women, children, without names, without faces; and who remembers them in the light of such magnificence? If there was a surfeit of anything in Russia, it was human life. The morning would break wan and cool; then, later,





the palace's bright, even façade would reflect the day's pale fire. You lured the light here, Peter, and gave it a home. What happens now? Help me ...

Candlelight moved behind the windows of the fine, tall houses, gliding through rooms and corridors as if borne by ghostly hands. In the courtyard below a sentry stood hunched over his bayonet, when with a clatter of hooves – sparks flying off the hard cobblestones – a rider dashed past him and out through a gate. My fingers clenched the catch of the window. Had the doctors obeyed my order? Or had the rider left to confirm the unthinkable? What would happen to me now? *Volya* – great, unimaginable freedom – or exile and death?

My mouth was dry with fear: a feeling that knots the stomach, turns sweat cold and bitter and opens the bowels. I hadn't felt it since – stop! I mustn't think of those things now. I could only focus on one thing at a time, whereas Peter, like an acrobat, would juggle ten ideas and plans.

Menshikov was mumbling in his sleep. If only Tolstoy and the Privy Council would come. The whole city seemed to be lying in wait. I bit my fingernails until I tasted blood.

I sat down again close to the fire and took off my slippers, stiff with embroidery and jewels. The warmth of the fire made my skin prickle. February was one of the coldest months in St Petersburg. Perhaps I should order some mulled wine and pretzels instead of the Burgundy; that always gave me a swift boost. Was Peter warm enough in the room next door? He couldn't stand the cold and we had always been freezing on the battlefield. Nothing is frostier than the morning after a battle, be it lost or won. I could only keep him warm at night when he sought refuge in the folds of my flesh.

People asleep look either ridiculous or touching. Menshikov, snoring open-mouthed, was the latter. I drew Peter's last will from my sleeve and the scroll lay in my lap, so close to the flames. Its letters blurred as my tears came: real, heartfelt tears, despite the sense of relief. I still had a long day and longer weeks ahead of me and I would need to shed many more tears. The people, and the

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court, would want to see a grief-stricken wife with tousled hair, scratched cheeks, a broken voice and swollen eyes. Only a show of love and grief from me could make the unthinkable acceptable, my tears more powerful than any bloodline. So I may as well start weeping now. The tears weren't hard to summon: in a few hours I might be either dead, or wishing I were, or else I'd be the most powerful woman in All the Russias.