



ANASTASIA NIKOLAEVNA

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Peterhof

"The whole country has gone mad overnight!" I tell Aleksei. "Everywhere you turn, it's war fever and God-save-the-tsar. Now I have to leave the *dacha* and go to the stinking city for the official declaration of war on Germany? I'd rather go to the beach."

"But Nastya, the soldiers—" Aleksei's ankle twitches, and his face crimps like he's been pinched from the inside. "The soldiers have to see the tsar before they leave for the front. Papa will give them courage," he says, sadly stroking the ribbon of the Legion of Honor the French president sent him just a few days ago.

"Poo. I don't see why *I* have to go. Mama will make us all wear dresses like lace curtains, and those huge hats that make me look like a *galushka* next to our sisters. And whoever felt brave after looking at a boiled dumpling?" I

flop Joy's curly ears up over his head. Aleksei smiles a little, at last. "At least if you could go, I wouldn't be the shortest one. I'd rather stay here than go to that musty old Winter Palace."

I know how much Aleksei wants to go to the ceremony. His ankle is still as knobbly as a potato, and the soldiers can't see him all pale and weak like this, no matter what. It's impossible for him to go, and if I can't stay at Peterhof with him, I have to cheer him up as much as I can before I leave.

"I'll be bored to death. They'll snap pictures of us like we're a troupe of caged baboons, and Mama won't even let us bring our Brownie cameras. I'd like to stick my lens in *their* faces for a change." Aleksei doesn't answer, so I arch my eyebrow and say, "They'll sing that same old song again."

"What song?"

He knows perfectly well what song. Our national anthem, "God Save the Tsar." It's a game we play. "Papa's song. I wonder if the band gets as tired of it as I do?"

Aleksei smirks. "I bet they don't have their own words to it like you."

"I bet they do! I bet they're the only people in all of Russia who have to listen to it as much as us." I make my voice deep and trumpety, puff out my belly like a bass drum, and strut around the room, making up a new verse.

*"Here comes the tsar again!
Strike up the tune, boys.
Why must we play him
that sa-a-ame old song?"*

“Surely the tsar could hear
a-a-anything he wants to!
 Why don’t we *pla-a-ay*
‘Kali-i-inka’ instea-a-ad?”

The doorknob clicks, and when I turn around, there’s Olga with one fist propped on her hip, grinning like a cat with a canary jammed in its mouth. “Anastasia Nikolae-vna, if I told Mama what you were doing instead of getting dressed—”

“But you won’t tell. That’s Tatiana’s job,” I say, and flick out my tongue.

She swats at me, but I duck to Aleksei’s side, kiss him good-bye, and dart out the door.

St. Petersburg

When we step from the launch onto the streets of the capital, there’s already a crowd waiting to gawk as if the six of us were made of gold instead of ordinary leather. I do feel like a *galushka*, wrapped up in a tablecloth of a dress and a hat like a platter of flowers. The people jostle to see Papa, then turn toward Mama, next in line, but by the time they get to the back, they’ve seen too many lace-encrusted grand duchesses to care about me, the only one still stuck in skirts above the ankle.

Aleksei was right. They want him. Their eyes walk up and down the procession, wondering where the tsarevich is this time. I wonder what kind of ridiculous stories they’ll

imagine to explain him away. Some of them will be even worse than the truth, I bet.

The crowd elbows and cranes, and I wish I could ogle right back at them. Ahead of us, Papa takes Mama by the hand instead of offering her his elbow, which sends my eyebrows reaching to meet my fringe. Mama is usually so stiff and proper in front of people: Empress with a capital *E*. But today she holds hands with Papa all the way across the red carpet and into the Winter Palace, just like they do at home.

Inside, it's horrible. The halls are stuffy and crowded with overdressed courtiers. The women have red eyes and sloppy handkerchiefs, and the men sweat under their collars as they fiddle with their swords and ribbons. My mouth opens at the sight of nasty old Aunt Miechen standing at the far end of the hall with tears running down her face.

"Anastasia, close your mouth." Maria giggle-snorts. Before I can point out Aunt Miechen, Tatiana gives us both a deadly look over her shoulder, and I promise myself I'll get even with her later.

When the crowd in the Nicholas Hall catches a glimpse of Papa and Mama, a "Hurrah!" rises up that shakes the heavy frowns from all their faces. Papa stops for half a step, then begins nodding his head at them, smiling a little. Mama has her best Empress Face pasted on. She stands tall and nods along with Papa, never letting go of his hand until they reach the altar. I can tell she'll have one of her foul headaches by the time we get back to the *dacha*, especially since no one—not even an empress—can sit down during Liturgy.

Before us stands the seven-hundred-year-old miraculous

Kazan icon of the Mother of God, and the metropolitan and bishops in their best gold mitres sparking with jewels. Satin rustles and swords clink as we kneel on the hard parquet floor, and the Liturgy begins.

I should close my eyes like everyone else, but instead I watch Papa's face turn pale and tight, and see Mama try so hard to hold a calm expression that the rest of her body almost quivers. The service seems to calm the crowd around us, but my skin's creeping. It doesn't make any sense.

When we rise, Papa marches to the altar and announces, "Officers of my guard, here present, I greet my entire army, united as it is, in body and spirit standing firm as a wall of granite, and I give it my blessing. I solemnly swear that I will never make peace so long as the enemy is on the soil of our Holy Motherland. Great is the God of the Russian Land!"

In front of me, Olga lets out a sob just as a cheer rolls up from the crowd. I grab Maria's hand and bite my lip. For ten whole minutes the hall quakes with the sound of the people crying and shouting. As we make our way toward the balcony, everyone rushes us, their voices hoarse and wet, dropping to their knees and stretching out to touch us as we try to pass. Papa's whole face freezes. General Voiekov barks at them all to stay back and make way, but Mama steps forward and puts her hand on his arm.

For once, she looks just like our mama. Her face isn't all tight and blotchy. Tears stand on her cheeks, but she smiles and goes ahead, letting the people kiss her hands and dress. Papa doesn't make a peep as she floats from one person to the next. Some of the women shake and sob, so Mama holds

them to her for the length of a hiccup or two before she passes. Behind her, the people bow and make the sign of the cross over us, and suddenly my mouth feels dry as wallpaper.

At the French doors to the balcony, Papa and Mama join hands again and face the crowd along the river Neva. The riverside roars so loud when they see our parents, my sisters and I hang back in a clump, peeking through the curtains at the thousands of upturned faces. I see Papa's mouth move when he tries to speak, but we can't hear his voice even though we're only a few steps behind him. He tries two more times to call out to the people, but the balcony and the windows rattle with the noise from below. Instead Papa bows his head and slowly makes the sign of the cross over them. Like a wave from the water, they fall to their knees on the cobblestones, and for the first time in my life, I see tears streaming down my golden papa's face and into his beard.

From the streets below, five thousand voices break into song, the words washing over us all as my sisters and I kneel too:

*God save the tsar!
Mighty and powerful!
May he reign for our glory,
Reign that our foes may quake!
O orthodox tsar!
God save the tsar!*

With my face hidden against Olga's shoulder, I cry without knowing why.