PART II.

WAR, 1914
I will not forget that summer, when everyone was bursting with pride to be a Russian.

Huge crowds had been gathering for hours along the Neva River. Our launch could hardly maneuver through the hordes of boats, every shape and size filled with cheering people waving flags. There were more crowds on the quay when we stepped off the boat. Our carriages inched toward the Winter Palace while police guards struggled to hold back the throngs.

“Batiushka, Batiushka!” they cried. “Little Father, lead us to victory!”

The feverish excitement, more intense than even at the tercentennial celebration, did not die down. I’d been to so many celebrations, attended so many ceremonies, that the attention paid to my father was nothing out of the ordinary, often seeming very ho-hum. But this was different. The fervor of the people sent chills down my spine. I could tell by the look on my sisters’ faces that they felt it, too.

Inside the Winter Palace we worked our way slowly through the crowd. Some people fell to their knees, tears streaming down their faces, and reached out to kiss Papa’s hand, and Mama’s, too. We reached a huge hall where an altar had been set up. Papa signed a paper, a manifesto declaring Russia’s war on Germany and Austria, and after a choir sang the Te Deum—the hymn of praise that’s always sung on important occasions—Papa repeated an oath, swearing
in a firm voice never to make peace so long as a single enemy remained on Russian soil.

Suddenly everyone in the hall, thousands of people, began to sing, “Save us, O Lord.” I carried a linen handkerchief in my left hand—we had been taught by our governesses to do this whenever we were out in public—and I was glad I had mine when the tears began again to run down my cheeks.

Papa decided that he and Mama should go out on the balcony to greet the enormous masses that packed the square. “The people want another chance to see their Batiushka and Matushka,” he said. Mama thought we should stay behind. With some difficulty we crept close to the doors that opened onto the balcony to watch and listen. A sea of people roared when my parents stepped out, and the roaring didn’t stop, even when Papa raised his hand and tried to speak. Then that enormous crowd began to sing the imperial anthem:

*God save the Tsar, Mighty and powerful, Let him reign for our glory...*

I looked around and saw that everybody in the great hall was weeping and smiling at the same time. “You see?” said Olga standing close beside me. “You see why I will never leave Russia?”

And I did see. I understood.

The next challenge was to get back to our launch. The Cossack guards had to shove back the crowd to let our carriages through, but the people were in such a jubilant mood that they didn’t seem to mind. Not everyone was jubilant, though—we heard later that an angry mob had rushed to the German Embassy and attacked it, pulling down two huge bronze horses from the roof and making a complete mess of the inside. The Germans were now Enemy Number One.

“Everyone hates Cousin Willy,” I said.
Tatiana told me to hush, because Mama’s brother, Uncle Ernie, the grand duke of Hesse, was German and lived in Germany, and she was worried about him.

We were happy to get back to Peterhof after such a tremendously exciting day. Alexei was waiting for us and wanted to hear about everything that had happened that day. Dr. Botkin and Gleb and his sister, Tatiana, had been with us, and Gleb was pleased to provide every detail. His usually pale cheeks were flushed with excitement. “The Germans don’t know how to fight!” Gleb assured my brother. “They only know how to make sausages! All we have to do to win is to throw our caps at them.”

That made Alexei laugh and clap his hands. But he was still upset that he had missed such a glorious event. “Don’t worry,” I assured him. “There’s sure to be a lot more.”

I hoped Gleb was right, that victory would be easy—and quick, too.

We’d been waiting for Grandmère Marie to arrive at Peterhof from a visit to England, and when she did, she was exhausted and in a fury. “I have never been so terrified in my life,” she told us. Her train had been stopped in Berlin, and a howling mob had attacked it, smashing the windows, ripping down the blinds in her car, and screaming curses at her.

“That cursing and shrieking pack of rabble tried to grab me! Thank God the police arrived in time to save me. And that barbarian, Willy, wouldn’t allow me to cross Germany! Can you imagine the effrontery? What a vulgar and detestable man! He ordered my train diverted to the Danish frontier. That horde of madmen threw stones as we left the station. The damage to the train is considerable. You can see if for yourself. Willy didn’t dare keep me, but he did detain Felix and Irina. Xenia is beside herself—as you can imagine—and I don’t know where they are
now. Oh, this is just too, too horrid! I have hated Germany for fifty years, and now I hate it more than ever.”

We were distressed by our grandmother’s story, and worried about Felix and Irina, who were still on their honeymoon when “that barbarian” refused to let them go. It was a relief when we finally learned that Felix’s father had arranged for them to return to Russia by way of Finland.

Alexei had been promised a tenth birthday celebration when Grandmère Marie came, and she did not disappoint him. She had arranged for a Shetland pony with a small pony cart to be sent by ship from England. The gift arrived in time, and Alexei was delighted and soon became totally absorbed in thinking of a name for the little pony. “He’ll be a friend for Vanka,” Alexei said, Vanka being the donkey Papa had gotten Alexei when he was five. There was also cake and ice cream and a serenade by the balalaika orchestra, but all the while Papa had to attend to a constant parade of generals coming out from St. Petersburg.

“All we have to do is throw our caps at them,” I said, quoting Gleb.

“If only that were true,” Papa said, and for a moment I wondered if Gleb and the generals were wrong.

The next week we went to Moscow. It was an ancient tradition for the tsars to go to the Kremlin in the old capital to ask God’s blessing on any war they were entering. Alexei was going with us to Moscow—he seemed much better—and he was beside himself with excitement. That morning we attended services in the white-and-gold chapel at Peterhof where all of us children had been christened. Later in the day we boarded the imperial train that rolled quietly through the night and arrived in Moscow the next morning.
It seemed as though everyone in the entire city had come out to greet us. It looked like a million Russians were out there, hanging out of windows and over the edges of balconies, balancing on the limbs of trees—anywhere they could find—to cheer and wave banners. All the church bells were ringing like mad, and whenever we passed a church the priest came out to bless Papa.

We entered the walls of the Kremlin through the Iberian gate, the way tsars always entered the city, and our carriages delivered us to the Grand Palace. The imperial apartments were so much different from our cozy rooms at Tsarskoe Selo: a fireplace carved out of alabaster, desks and tables inlaid with jade and topaz, porcelain clocks from France, and gold everywhere—not exactly homelike, and not a place I’d ever want to live.

We were hardly settled when Alexei began to complain about his leg hurting, so much that he was afraid he wouldn’t be able to walk to the cathedral the next day. He couldn’t bear the thought. “I must walk tomorrow!” he kept saying, gritting his teeth, his face was twisted with pain. “I must!”

My parents were in despair. They were determined that Alexei’s future subjects would not be allowed to believe that he was an invalid, but when we awoke the next morning, it was obvious that walking was impossible. “Never mind,” Papa told Alexei. “You will be present at the ceremony. Our biggest, strongest, handsomest Cossack guard will carry you, and you’ll see everything.”

At eleven o’clock we left the imperial apartment and climbed the fifty-eight steps of the Red Staircase for St. George Hall, which was huge, the biggest in the palace. “Lucky you,” I told Alexei, in the arms of the Cossack. “You get to be carried.”
Mama’s sister Ella—Grand Duchess Elisabeth, who’d become a nun after Sergei was murdered—had joined us, dressed in her pale gray habit. “She looks so elegant in that robe, and she doesn’t even have to wear a corset with it,” I whispered to Marie. “Or bother deciding which jewels to wear. It’s almost enough to make me consider becoming a nun myself.”

Marie giggled, and Tatiana hissed, “Hush!”

Standing in the center of the enormous hall, Papa read out a proclamation in a firm voice: “From this place, the very heart of Russia, I send my soul’s greeting to my valiant troops and my noble allies. God is with us!” It was a solemn occasion, the most solemn in the world, but somehow I just couldn’t stop grinning—proud to be Russian, proud to be the daughter of the Batiushka and Matushka.

A bridge connected the palace to the Cathedral of the Assumption on the opposite side of the Palace Square, filled with more cheering crowds—the people would surely be hoarse by the end of the day—and after lots of prayers and hymns, incense and candles, we could finally go back to the palace for luncheon. A good thing, because I was starving.

The next day Alexei had an adventure that he didn’t want to repeat. He and Zhilik had gone out for a drive in a motorcar to a scenic spot above the city. On the way back through narrow streets jammed with peasants someone recognized Alexei and began to shout, “The heir! The heir!” Suddenly they were surrounded by crowds blocking their way, wanting to see the tsarevitch. They climbed up on the steps of the car, scrambling to reach him. Alexei had never had anything like this happen to him.

“He was frightened at these exuberant demonstrations,” Zhilik reported. “Neither the driver nor I knew what to do. The moujiks meant no harm, but we were trapped. Then two huge policemen ran up, shouting and waving, and the crowd fell back and slowly drifted away.”
“They wanted to touch me, as though I was a religious icon, something holy!” Alexei said. “It was embarrassing. I didn’t like it.”

Five days after we’d left Peterhof for Moscow, we went home to Tsarskoe Selo. All anyone talked about now was war. The trips to St. Petersburg and Moscow had been thrilling, but my sisters and I felt anxious. It was terribly confusing.

In our schoolroom Pyotr Petrov focused our attention on the map of the world. Out came his pointer. “The French and the English are our friends—the Serbians, too, of course—and the Germans and the Austrians are our enemies. The other countries are neutral.” That included Switzerland, where Zhilk was from. “Monsieur Gilliard had thought to go home,” Petrov said, “but it is nearly impossible to get there, for all communications have been cut, and if he did manage to get home he would have no chance of getting back here before the end of the war.”

“But Pyotr Vasileivich,” I reminded him, “everyone says the war will be over by Christmas! That would not be such a long time to be away.” I liked Zhilk very much, and would miss him if he went home, but I would not miss a few months of French lessons.

Petrov hung his pointer on its hook. “I pray that those who are so optimistic are also correct.”

Papa had appointed Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich—Papa’s distant cousin, but we called him Uncle Nikolasha—to be commander-in-chief of the army. But we learned that this was just temporary. “Until I can get to Stavka and take command,” Papa said. Stavka was the command headquarters, and Papa told us it near Bialowieza, our hunting lodge in Poland.

Marie and I lay on our beds, whispering in the dark. “What do you think will happen now?” Marie asked, and I could tell that she was close to tears. She was always very emotional.
“I don’t know,” I said.

I did not want to tell her what I had read in Olga’s secret diary. I still glanced at it now and then—not as often as I had when she was madly in love with Voronov, because her entries after he married someone else weren’t as interesting—but when she wrote this she was obviously upset:

_I’m so worried about this war. Mother and Father received a letter from Father Grigory, who is in his village and recovering from the awful attack by that crazy woman. The letter made Father so angry he wanted to tear it up but Mother wouldn’t let him. She showed it to Tanya and me, and I’m writing here what I can remember:_

"A terrible storm cloud lies over Russia. Disaster, grief, murky darkness and no light. A whole ocean of tears, there is no counting them, and so much bloodshed. I can find no words to describe the horror. Russia is drowning in blood. Disaster is great, the misery infinite."

What if Father Grigory is right? I can’t bear to think of it.

Marie was still asking questions in a worried whisper. “Papa’s going to be leaving soon for Poland,” she said. “How long do you think he’ll be gone?”

“I really don’t know, Mashka,” I said, rolling away so that my back was to her. I was still thinking about what I’d read in Olga’s diary. Russia is drowning in blood.

“Mama says we must say our prayers and trust in God,” Marie said sadly. I could tell that she was close to tears. “Do you think God will help us?”

“Of course He will,” I said. Disaster is great, the misery infinite. “Now let’s go to sleep. Aunt Olga is coming tomorrow.”
Soon Marie’s breathing had deepened, but I lay staring into the darkness, my thoughts churning. *Maybe Father Grigory is wrong; it isn’t going to be a disaster. Russia will triumph.* *Father Grigory doesn’t know everything.*

Our aunt’s Saturday visit wasn’t like any of her earlier visits. She was flushed with excitement. For one thing, Papa had changed the name of St. Petersburg, which was a German name, to Slav Petrograd. “Much more patriotic,” he said, smiling.

“Talk about patriotism!” Aunt Olga remarked. “I’ve witnessed the most extraordinary sights for the past week: the thrilling sight of men going to war. Every day from early morning until after sunset, hundreds and hundreds of men marching down Nevsky Prospect to the Warsaw Station to board a train for the front. People walk beside them, cheering them on. They’re fighting for Holy Russia and for the tsar, Nicky!”

Papa nodded. “Yes, it’s such a powerful sight. I would have done anything in my power to avoid this war, but I am deeply moved by the dedication of the men.”

This was a conversation between Aunt Olga and my parents. I was sitting on the floor with my brother, playing with his toy soldiers, marching them back and forth as he issued commands. But I was also trying to hear what the adults were saying. “My Hussars have been called up,” said Aunt Olga. “The regiment is being sent to the front in the southwest. Kolya is going with them, of course.” She said it quietly, very matter-of-factly, but my ears perked up, and I turned slightly in order to hear better. Alexei noticed—he always noticed if you weren’t focusing completely on him—and started to protest, but I shushed him. Kolya, I knew, was her lover, and I wanted to hear what was said.

“Of course,” Papa said. “It’s his duty.”
Her voice rose slightly. “Before he left, Colonel Kulikovsky told me that the junior officers were asking if they shouldn’t pack their dress uniforms for the victory parades. Kolya told them the proper uniforms would be sent along later.”

I remembered what Gleb Botkin had said—*The Germans can’t fight. They only know how to make sausages.* Now his two older brothers, Dmitri and Yuri, were at the front, and Gleb was deeply disappointed that he was too young to fight.

I was very happy when Dmitri Pavlovich arrived, proudly wearing the Cross of St. George, a military honor, on his chest. I hadn’t seen him for a long while, and I’m afraid I did grin too much when he was around, because later Tatiana remarked in her stern governess voice, “You make it so obvious that you have a crush on Dmitri.” He had been at *Stavka* with Nikolai Nikolaievich, the commander-in-chief.

“What a giant of a man!” Dmitri said enthusiastically. “He’s nearly seven feet tall. And such a commanding presence!”

“Appropriate for a commander,” Mama said sourly. She didn’t much like Uncle Nikolasha and made no secret of it. Father Grigory didn’t trust him, she said.

That was at luncheon. Dmitri and Papa talked for a long while—I don’t know about what—and I think he would have stayed longer had we not been expecting a visit from Father Grigory. Dmitri was one of the people who didn’t like Father Grigory and didn’t hide his dislike, and naturally that offended Mama, who couldn’t bear to hear the slightest criticism of a man she believed could work miracles.
But Father Grigory was very late arriving, and Mama began to fret. Papa, too. I wanted to see him and wished I could stay to overhear the conversation, but our parents decided that we should go to our rooms since the visit was going to be so late.

Shura was surprised to hear this as she brushed my hair for the night. “Nobody ever keeps the tsar waiting!” she said. “It’s the height of ill manners.” Shura’s name was in the column of those who didn’t like the starets, but said nothing so as not to anger Mama and perhaps be dismissed from her position.

In the days that followed, Papa got ready to leave for Stavka, and Anya moved from her little cottage into rooms in our palace, to keep Mama company and to keep her spirits up while Papa was away. On the morning he was driven off in his motorcar, we all cried because our dear Papa was going away, but Mama cried most of all.
Chapter 12. Tsarskoe Selo, Autumn 1914

Almost over night our lives changed completely. Mama decided to open hospitals to care for the wounded. She developed a plan for turning our huge palaces, which she had never liked anyway, into hospitals: the Catherine Palace, right there in Tsarskoe Selo; the Winter Palace in what was now called Petrograd; and a couple of palaces in Moscow—all became medical units to care for the wounded with space for the soldiers’ wives and mothers to stay when they came to visit. She sent our Dr. Botkin to Yalta to open hospitals on the estates of wealthy families. She also created smaller medical facilities called lazarets. Feodorovsky Gorodok, the tiny old-fashioned village that Papa had built in Tsarskoe Selo to remind him of “old Russia” became one of the lazarets. And she organized special trains to bring the wounded men to the hospitals from the front.

I was amazed at what had come over Mama. Mama, who had always spent most of the day reclining in her mauve boudoir, suddenly announced that she and Olga and Tatiana were going to become nurses and actually work in those hospitals. They would have two months of training to become qualified, with classes in the morning and actual duties in the wards in the afternoon.
“And what about Mashka and me?” I asked. “Aren’t we to become nurses, too?” I could not bear the thought of being left out of what seemed such a great adventure.

“You girlies are too young to be full-fledged sisters of mercy,” Mama said firmly. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t both serve proudly and usefully. You will be patronesses at the lazaret at Feodorovsky Gorodok. That will give you plenty to do, and I’m sure you will do a great deal of good.”

So that is what we did, although we didn’t have uniforms, and that was a disappointment. We were practically the only people in the whole imperial compound who were wearing ordinary clothes. Mama and our older sisters wore long gray dresses and white aprons with a big red cross on the chest and white wimples that covered the head and neck. You could hardly recognize them when they were in uniform, as they now were every day.

“That’s the whole point,” Tatiana said. “In uniform, everybody is the same. We’re not there as the empress and the grand duchesses. We’re there as Russian nurses.”

My mother and older sisters came home exhausted every day. They did really hard, awful work—cleaning bedsores and changing bandages and even helping with the surgeries.

“Sometimes the doctors have to cut off an arm or a leg without enough anesthetic,” Olga said, her face white with tiredness and misery at the sights she had witnessed. “The doctors are so tired they can hardly stay on their feet. And yet every hour more trains arrive from the field hospitals at the front, more filthy, moaning men are carried in, and we get to work and clean them up for the nurses to examine and the doctors to operate on. Mama is so brave—she holds the cone over their noses and drips ether onto it to put them to sleep, but sometimes there isn’t enough and they scream in agony. And then she helps to carry away the mangled flesh or the
amputated hand or arm—.” My sister shuddered. “And the smell! You can’t imagine the smell, all those infected wounds.”

“I think I’d throw up,” I whispered.

Olga forced a wan smile. “At first I did,” she admitted. “I threw up more than once. But you get used to it after a while.”

“Some of them are screaming and praying to die,” Tatiana said. She had kicked off her shoes and was unrolling her stockings. They were spattered with something dark. “Then we sit with them while they’re dying. It’s the saddest, most awful thing you can imagine.” She shook her head, as though ridding herself of the terrible sights and sounds. “Oh, I do hope it will be over soon. But I’m afraid it won’t.”

Marie and I did not witness grisly wounds and horrible surgeries. The wounded men in the lazarets had already been treated, and while they might have been suffering and in pain, most of them were able to talk and were glad for the company. When Alexei was able, we took him with us to visit with the wounded soldiers, who seemed absolutely overjoyed to see us, especially the tsarevitch. I liked to read to the men—they said I read very well, that I was a good actress and it was almost like being at a play when they listened to me read. That was very nice to hear. I thought that maybe, when the war was over, I would consider becoming an actress as well as an artist.

But there was a down side as well: Sometimes the very soldiers I had been reading to on a Thursday got much worse and died on Friday. And I had not had a chance to say goodbye—only to promise that I would return to read another chapter the next day, but when I did, the nursing sister told me the soldier had died. I could not help it—I burst into tears. That was very unprofessional.
I think the efforts of my sisters and me were appreciated. Some of the soldiers couldn’t believe that the empress was actually there, present, sleeves rolled up, getting her hands dirty. And many of them were grateful. But, I learned, many of the men were not.

I came to know this from reading Olga’s diary, much different from what it had been in the past when she was unhappily in love. It was easy now to have a chance to read it without the risk of getting caught, because she was gone so much. A couple of times she even forgot to put it away in a “safe” hiding place.

One must pity Mother. She works very hard at the hospital, spares herself nothing, allows that no duty is beneath her. Many of the soldiers adore her for it, they call for her, kiss her hand if they can. But there are many others who despise her and make no secret of it, because she was born a German. Mother is Russian to the very depths of her being, of her soul, but they don’t know that, or don’t want to know it. And I’m afraid it’s not just a few ignorant soldiers who feel this way. Mother is a quiet person, and she has not won the hearts of the Russian people the way that our grandmother has, and Grandmère Marie wasn’t born here either! The people truly adore Father, but they are suspicious of Mother and even dislike her and she has done nothing to deserve that.

I read this passage in Olga’s diary and felt so awful that I began to cry. Mama never hurt anyone. She is so good, and people don’t realize how good she is. Reading this made me feel sorry for every naughty thing I ever thought of saying to my poor, darling mother.

A couple of very amusing things happened about this time. Tatiana may have actually fallen in love! The object of her affections was an officer named Dmitri Malama, who was seriously wounded. She met him while caring for him in the hospital. They began talking about
animals, apparently Tatiana had told the lieutenant that she thought French bulldogs were irresistibly adorable, and the next thing we knew, a French bulldog arrived at our palace. Tatiana wasn’t sure Mama would approve and wrote our mother a letter, explaining that when Dmitiri asked if she’d like to have one, she immediately said yes. But Mama didn’t say no, the dog arrived and Tatiana named him Ortino. Mama’s dog Eira took great exception to this rival, but Olga’s cat, Vaska, took to chasing the newcomer around the palace, knocking things over, getting into all sorts of mischief. Tatiana doted on that little dog, but he was not well trained and my sister began keeping a little shovel handy to clean up his messes.

We missed our Papa very much and took turns writing to him every evening, trying to find funny things to tell him that would cheer him up. My favorite thing was to complain about my sisters, but everyone was so busy, helping with the war effort, that I didn’t see much of them and therefore had to work hard to think of something worthy of complaint. Besides their nursing duties both Olga and Tatiana had organized committees to help the wounded soldiers, and they often had meetings to attend.

We were almost too busy to celebrate Olga’s nineteenth birthday. At the last minute we organized a nice dinner for her, but it was nothing like the grand dinners we once enjoyed.

Meanwhile, Anya was being particularly annoying again. She always did expect a lot of attention, and even though she also helped at the hospital sometimes, she acted offended if Mama didn’t spend a lot of time every day with her, as she used to. But now Mama was up and dressed at seven o’clock and on her way to the hospital at the Catherine Palace every morning at nine, and by the end of the day she was ready to drop. Sometimes she assisted at as many as three surgeries in a row, each one lasting a couple of hours. And besides, Father Grigory had been coming out almost every day from St. Petersburg (now called Petrograd, although I had a
hard time remembering to call it that) and spending plenty of time with Anya, who was having
trouble with her leg and acted as if she, too, was a wounded soldier who needed to be pitied and
fussed over. I personally got sick of it.

Papa never stayed long at Stavka, because Uncle Nikolasha was in charge there. Mama
got very excited whenever we expected Papa’s return, almost the way Olga used to be when she
thought she’d be seeing Lieutenant Voronov. But he didn’t stay home at Tsarskoe Selo either
before going back, especially if Alexei seemed to be doing well.

We got little news that was actually good. We could see for ourselves that the Germans
knew how to do much more than make sausages. They knew how to fight. Wounded soldiers
were pouring into the hospitals where Mama and Olga and Tatiana worked every day, along with
many others, including Tatiana Botkin. They came in huge numbers to the smaller lazarets where
Marie and I did what we could to make the suffering men feel a little better, a little less alone.

We heard the wounded talking about those who hadn’t been so lucky, the ones who had
been killed. “Mowed down like wheat,” one soldier muttered, turning his head toward the wall.
“Our officers are so brave,” he said. “And perhaps so foolish. They order us to crawl forward,
always forward, bellies on the ground, while our leaders stand up and walk straight toward the
enemy. They say it would be cowardly for them to take cover. And the Germans shoot them
down like ducks in a shooting gallery.”

We had learned to our great sorrow that Dr. Botkin’s eldest son, Dmitri, a lieutenant in
the Cossack regiment serving on the eastern front, was among the dead.

On one of his home visits, Papa told Mama and Olga that so many of his officers had
been killed already that he’d ordered fifteen thousand university students to take special training
to become lieutenants. “I told my young lieutenants that I had not the slightest doubt of their
bravery and courage, but I needed their lives—they are of no use to Russia if they are dead—and to take care for themselves. Then I reminded them of the value of prayer before going into battle. ‘With prayer you can do anything,’ I said, and I believe they took it to heart.”

Just before Christmas we learned that the officials of the church had decided to ban Christmas trees, because they were a German custom. We were disappointed, because lighting the trees had always been a part of our family celebration. Mama was furious. “I’m going to find out the truth of who gave that order and make a row about it,” she said. “Why take away the pleasure of a beautiful tree from the wounded and children because it originally comes from Germany? The narrow-mindedness is too colossal!”

I was not at all sure Mama could actually make a row, as she called it. So many people believed that because she was born in Germany, she was German. They called her Nemka, “German woman,” and thought she was a traitor. Obviously, these people didn’t know Mama!

Aunt Olga told us about French-speaking friends of hers who had been called Nemtsy, Germans, and hissed in shops by people who didn’t understand any language but Russian. And Alexei’s governess, returning from Petrograd, reported one of the stupid stories circulating there. “A certain nobleman, walking through a grand salon of the Winter Palace, encountered the Tsarevich, who looked terribly upset. The nobleman asked him what was wrong, and the boy replied, ‘When the Russians lose a battle, Papa cries. When the Germans lose a battle, Mama cries. But when am I supposed to cry?’”

Papa was home for Christmas and we were grateful for that. We did manage to have a small tree, just for ourselves, but Papa said it was perhaps wiser not to have any large public tree, ridiculous as that seemed. Our celebration on Christmas Eve was just as it had always been—the
traditional table with bowls of *kutya* that Papa loves, and the usual almond soup and roast carp. And we attended mass at midnight in the chapel, as we always had. But one thing was different: we didn’t go out on the balcony to greet the people who used to gather to wish us a joyous Christmas. Papa explained that many Russians were upset about the war, and it seemed better not to make public appearances until the mood of the people improved.

I felt sad about that, but I felt even worse when I’d read what Olga had written in her diary—the secret one, not the one in which she still dutifully wrote about attending midnight mass and having a visit from our cousin Irina and Felix Yussoupov on Christmas Day.

*All the good feelings we had last summer when we went to Petrograd and Moscow and a million people had cheered until they were hoarse—all that has vanished.* Irina told us that in Petrograd some of the noble families with German-sounding names are having to dig up documents proving that they’re descended from Catherine the Great. And the orchestras in Petrograd are no longer allowed to play any music by Bach, Brahms, or Beethoven. Felix said he witnessed the windows of German bakeries being smashed.

No one mentioned it, but obviously the war had not ended by Christmas. Maybe, I thought, they meant *next* Christmas.
In January an awful thing happened that had nothing to do with the war. The train on which Anya Vyrubova was traveling from Petrograd to Tsarskoe Selo was wrecked. She was nearly dead when she was dragged from under the demolished carriage and took her to the hospital in the Catherine Palace. Her legs were crushed and her head and back were badly injured. Mama and Papa rushed to her bedside—Papa had not yet returned to Stavka—and the doctors told them, “Do not disturb her. She’s dying.”

Mama’s first thought was to send for Father Grigory. For some reason a whole day passed before he got the message, but when he did, he borrowed a car and rushed to the hospital. The four of us were in the room, praying with Mama and Papa, and Anya had been moaning and muttering, calling for Father Grigory, when he arrived. He nodded to Papa and Mama and went straight to Anya’s bedside, took her hand, and spoke to her. “Annushka! Annushka, rise!”

At first nothing happened. Sweat was pouring down his face. None of us dared to breathe. Then, the miracle: The third time Father Grigory called her name, Anya opened her eyes. When he ordered her to get up, she actually tried to do it, and when he commanded her to speak to him, she murmured something I couldn’t hear. It was the most amazing thing I’d ever seen.
Mama was weeping, tears pouring down her cheeks. “Father Grigory, I beg you to tell me! Will she live?”

Father Grigory nodded wearily. “God will give her back to you if she is needed by you and the country. If her influence is harmful, He will take her away. But she will be a cripple for the rest of her days. Now you must excuse me,” he said and staggered away, exhausted by the effort he’d made, and Mama collapsed into Papa’s arms.

Soon after that dramatic scene, Papa left again for Stavka, and Anya was eventually well enough to leave her hospital room at Catherine Palace and move back to her quarters in Alexander Palace. Now Mama had Anya to look after as well as her work with the wounded soldiers.

About the only good thing about Papa being away so much was that we had almost unlimited use of his huge swimming bath. Alexei loved it, too. And Tatiana’s silly dog, Ortino, was a witness to our cavorting, barking his head off.

It was a sad, sad day when one of Mama’s patients died, a young officer named Grobov. Mama was extremely upset by this. It was not that she wasn’t confronted daily with death in the course of her work at the hospital, but she had become quite attached to him, and now he was gone. The same thing had happened to Marie and me. We read to the soldiers at the lazaret, and helped them write letters to their families—sometimes I wrote the letters for them, because many of the soldiers were simple peasants who had never been taught to read or write.

And we were all quite put out that Anya demanded so much of Mama’s time and energy, always complaining that she wasn’t getting any attention, no one came to visit her, she needed to have her wheelchair pushed here and there. And then she pretended to faint! Father Grigory often
came to see her and then spent a lot of time with Mama, discussing what should be done about
Anya, about the war and what Papa should be doing, even who should be in charge of what.
Mama missed Papa terribly, and she wrote him long, long letters, passing along to him a lot of
the advice Father Grigory gave her.

I wrote him long letters, too, but mostly just telling him what we were learning from our
tutors--not much, in my case. Sidney Ivanovich (Mr. Gibbes, our English tutor) said I was
“lacking motivation and self-discipline,” which I believe meant “lazy” while they continued to
torment Marie and me with math, English, French, and so on. That same huge map that Pyotr
Petrov, our Russian teacher, had hung on the wall of our schoolroom became the center of a
daily examination of the progress of the war. One sixth of the world was Russian, but now we
focused on the part west of the Ural Mountains, as well as Hungary, Austria, and Poland, where
the fighting was taking place. We had boxes of pins—white for the Russian army, black for the
Germans, yellow for the Austrians—and as the news came in, we moved the pins. It was terrible
to see the black pins advancing and the white ones retreating, and I wanted to beg Petrov not to
make us do it.

The winter was long, cold, and gray with not much fun in it. We did have visitors from
time to time—Mama’s friend, Lili Dehn, sometimes came out from Petrograd. Her little boy,
nicknamed Titi, sometimes came with her. Titi was four years younger than Alexei and
worshipped my brother, following him around like a slave. There were no more gay weekend
parties with Aunt Olga—she was now a nurse, too—and no more of our formal lunches with
Grandmère Marie, who had left St. Petersburg and moved to Kiev. Mama and Big Pair were at
the hospital most of the time, although Mama had not been feeling well and often had to stay in bed.

During those cheerless months Olga’s secret diary was so gloomy I could hardly bear to read it—mostly reports about defeats of the Russian army. We learned that the *Standart* and Grandmère Marie’s *Polar Star* had been taken to Helsinki, because the admiral believed the Finnish harbor would be safer there from German attack. Their crews were reassigned, Lili Dehn’s husband was now the captain of a Russian destroyer and Lieutenant Voronov had been sent to a ship to lay mines underwater in the Baltic that would blow up German ships. There would be no wonderful visit to Livadia at Easter, and unless there was a miracle before summer, no delightful cruises on the *Standart*.

We did have some good war news in March. Fresh recruits had arrived at the front, and Uncle Nikolasha led the army to a brilliant victory, capturing lots of prisoners and big guns at a fortress in Galicia. Papa was so pleased that he presented Uncle Nikolasha with a beautiful gold sword decorated with diamonds.

That year, 1915, the gorgeous Fabergé eggs that Papa always commissioned as gifts for Mama and Grandmère Marie were designed to honor the women in Papa’s family who had become Red Cross nurses. The “surprise” inside the white enameled egg were five tiny portraits on ivory of Mama, my two older sisters, Papa’s cousin Marie Pavlovna, and Aunt Olga, who had also become a nurse and was working at the hospital she’d established near her villa, Olgino, in southwestern Russia. All were wearing their white nurses’ wimples. It was the plainest of all the eggs Papa had ever ordered, and Mama pronounced it “beautiful in its simplicity, and absolutely appropriate to the times.”
Spring wore on, and again news about the war turned abysmal. Any victories were at huge cost of lives and didn’t last. We began suffering one defeat after another. I could see that as the black pins of the enemy on our map moved closer to Russia. No one actually talked to us, the Little Pair, about the losses, but we had ears to hear, and what we heard was that more than a million men had been killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. Mama seemed either to be consumed by her nursing duties at the hospital, writing long letters to Papa, or in deep conversation with Father Grigory. They blamed what was happening to the Russian army on Uncle Nikolasha.

Tatiana Botkina had the horrible experience of seeing her brother Yuri’s mangled body brought to the hospital where she worked with Mama and my sisters. He survived only a few days, and his sister was with him when he died. We observed a deep change in Dr. Botkin after the loss of his two older sons. How could it be otherwise? And Gleb, always a fun-loving, good-humored boy, became more serious, and the stories he made up were less fanciful and much darker.

Aunt Ella, Mama’s sister, sometimes left her Convent of Martha and Mary and fled to the peace and quiet of Tsarskoe Selo for a short visit. “The mobs are running wild in Moscow,” she told us. Her hands trembling when she reached for her cup of tea. “They hate everything German, burning down houses and shops belonging to people with German names. They rushed the gates of the convent and accused me of hiding German spies. They said I was hiding our brother Ernie.”

“But he’s not even in Russia!” Mama said. “He’s an officer in the Kaiser’s army.”

“So I informed them, but they wouldn’t believe me—even when I invited them to come into the convent and have a look around, so they could see for themselves.” Her face was drawn, and she had dark circles beneath her eyes. “‘Get the German woman!’ several shouted. ‘Take her
away!' Then someone threw a stone. It didn’t strike me, I was afraid the next one would, but I refused to back down. A company of our soldiers arrived just in the nick of time and broke up the crowd.”

We were silent, too shocked to say a word. Marie crept closer to our aunt and reached for the pale hand that lay limp in her lap.

“They shout insults wherever I go,” she continued. “They call for Rasputin to be hanged. They shout for Nicky to be deposed and Nikolasha to be made Tsar Nicholas the Third.”

Mama, white-lipped, could barely speak. “And me?” she managed to say. “What do they say about me?”

“That you should be shut up in a convent,” Aunt Ella whispered.

_and my sisters and me? And Alexei?_ I wondered, but I couldn’t bring myself to ask.

Summer came. Three of us had birthdays—Tatiana her eighteenth, a week later I was fourteen, and the week after that Marie turned sixteen. I can’t say that we “celebrated” the birthdays—“observed” is a better word—but we did have nice little family dinners with Aunt Olga and Grandmère there for each of us, and Marie received her special necklace of sixteen diamonds and sixteen pearls. The chef produced a tasty meal in spite of the shortages of food that were beginning to appear, and Alexei serenaded us with his balalaika. I made the mistake of reminding everyone of the wonderful party we’d had at Livadia for Olga’s sixteenth birthday four years earlier. I didn’t mean to make everyone sad, especially Olga, who was probably thinking of Pavel Voronov when she suddenly burst into tears and rushed away from the table. I
thought she was probably still in love with him—hopeless, of course, since he was now married
to someone else.

Papa came home to Tsarskoe Selo at the beginning of July and stayed through most of August, and for a little while things seemed almost normal for our family. In fact, one very funny thing did happen: Prince Carol of Romania came to visit—the very same Carol who had been considered a year earlier as a possible husband for Olga. He was no longer just a crown prince but a full-fledged prince since his grandfather had died and his father had succeeded as king of Romania.

When Olga heard that he was coming, she suddenly had a full schedule of meetings involving her various war projects. “I will have absolutely no free time to spend with him,” she announced. “I’m terribly sorry, Father,” she added.

“You don’t sound the least bit sorry, Olya,” I said, which was the truth, but that drew disapproving frowns from Olga and Mama.

When he arrived, accompanied by a huge suite of courtiers, mostly old men and ladies and nobody young and interesting, I thought he was just as irritating as he’d been when we first met him at Constanta the previous year. I expected the whole thing to be hugely boring.

Romania was neutral, with part of the country sharing a border with Russia and another part bordering Austria-Hungary. Papa believed that King Ferdinand had sent Carol to discuss Romania joining Russia to fight against Germany. But that wasn’t the real reason Carol had come to visit.

Marie came shrieking into our bedroom with the news. “Carol asked Papa if he would consent to let him marry me!”
“Prince Carol wants to marry you, Masha?” I asked. My mouth was probably hanging open.

“You needn’t act so surprised that someone would want to,” she huffed. “Anyway, Papa just laughed and reminded him that I’m still just a schoolgirl and not in any way ready to marry or even to consider an engagement.”

“Well, congratulations, dear sister. You’ve had your first proposal.”

She grinned mischievously. “He still has that mop of uncombed hair,” she said. “But if you’re lucky, Nastya, he’ll be back again in two years to ask for your hand.”

I could hardly wait for his visit to end and hoped we had seen the last of him.

One warm August afternoon as we were having tea with Anya on Mama’s balcony, Papa appeared suddenly, looking pale as a ghost, a telegram in his trembling hand.

“Nicky, what’s wrong?” Mama cried.

“Warsaw has fallen,” he said hoarsely. He sank down onto a chair, tears in his eyes, and buried his face in his hands. “It cannot go on like this,” he said. “It simply cannot.”

Before the day was over, Papa had decided that his place was with the army. At the end of August he kissed us all goodbye and left for Stavka with the guard saluting, flags waving, and church bells ringing jubilantly. He intended to spend all of his time at headquarters, which had been moved from Poland where the advancing German army had taken over the area. The new location was Mogilev, a Russian town on the banks of the Dnieper River. At the old Stavka Papa had lived aboard his imperial train. His new quarters were in a mansion on a hilltop overlooking the river.
Barely a month later there was another big change: Papa sent Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaivich to the Caucasian front to lead the fight against the Turks, who were on the side of Germany and Austria. Papa was taking over as commander-in-chief of the army.

Mama was pleased. She had never liked Uncle Nikolasha, mostly because Uncle Nikolasha despised Father Grigory and had made no secret of his opinion.

This was what Olga thought about the situation:

*It’s quite amazing. Some people hate Rasputin—Grishka, as we call him—and think he has too much influence on Mother, who then has too much influence on Father, none of it good. Grishka did everything possible to win over Uncle Nikolasha’s favor, even offering to go to the front to bless icons for the soldiers, but, according to gossip, Uncle Nikolasha told him: “Good! Come here, and I will hang you.” Could he really have said that?*

*Whether it’s true or not, the story got back to Mother, and no doubt that’s why she urged Father to dismiss Nikolasha and take command himself. Mother, of course, depends upon Grishka entirely, thinks he is a saint who gives only the best advice. Anya absolutely worships him, and I understand why—he did seem to perform a miracle when she was so badly injured. Among our servants who are willing to express an opinion, there are some who adore the starets, others who despise him. Aunt Olga disapproves of Papa’s decision, and so does Grandmère Marie and probably our other relatives as well. They believe Papa is needed here, as sovereign of the people, and not at the front, because he’s not really a military man. But none of this means a thing to Mother, agrees with everything Grishka says.*

*I continue to hear stories from the servants that he has improper relations with many of the great ladies of Petrograd and Moscow and who knows where else. Grigory’s behavior*
toward me and my sisters is always correct, but I do get the awful feeling that he is undressing me with his eyes.

Now that Papa had moved his headquarters and taken command of our army, he and Mama began to talk about allowing Alexei to join Papa in Mogilev. They discussed it for days. Papa thought it would be good for Alexei to see more of the country he would some day rule, to be exposed to masculine influence instead of being surrounded by females who treated him like a china doll. Although Mama was deeply afraid that something awful might happen to Alexei, that he would seriously injure himself again, she also believed the presence of the eleven-year-old tsarevich would do a tremendous good for the morale of the troops, and also for Papa.

So it was decided. They left for Mogilev in October, with Alexei’s two doctors, Derevenko and Federov; his two sailor-bodyguards, Derevenko and Nagorny; and dear Zhilli—Monsieur Gilliard—as his tutor, because Mama insisted that he not fall behind in his studies.

I envied my brother. Marie and I were still spending long hours at the lazaret, reading to the wounded men, writing letters for them, even teaching some of them to read, and simply keeping them company. How lonely those men must have felt! When we got back to Alexandra Palace, we passed our exciting evenings knitting woolen socks and sewing shirts for the soldiers. I didn’t dare complain about the dullness of it without risking a ferocious frown and a barrage of sharp words from Tatiana, all about “duty” and “sacrifice.”

Life was somewhat more exciting for Marie. A soldier by the name of Demenkov had caught her fancy. I began to notice that at certain times of the day she stationed herself by the window, and when a particular guard passed by, she waved to him. “That’s Kolya,” she told me dreamily. “My Kolya.”
We were thrilled when Mama announced, not long after Papa and Alexei had left for Mogilev, that we were going to visit them. We were to do it quickly, because Papa had written that he intended to take Alexei on a long tour of the battlefront, from end to end. Alexei, who had been marching around at Mogilev, kitted out in the uniform of an army private with leather boots up to his knees, must have been beside himself with joy at the prospect. I couldn’t blame him; if it had been permitted, I would have gladly gone with them, but of course that was out of the question.

Anya traveled with us. I found this more than slightly annoying, but I learned that Olga had an even stronger opinion:

*I’m not sure why Mother has insisted on including Anya on this excursion, because Anya, who since her accident is plumper than ever, wears the most dreadful clothes and hats, needs a crutch to get around, and—this is what is so embarrassing—behaves like a schoolgirl with a crush whenever she is around Father. I suppose the best thing about Anya, from Mother’s point of view, is that she shares Mama’s devotion to Grishka. He can do no wrong! And not all of Mother’s friends share that opinion. Aunt Ella has deep reservations about Rasputin and has spoken about them, as does Grandmère Marie, but Mama won’t hear of it.*

We traveled to Mogilev on the imperial train, a day’s journey, and the train was our home once we’d reached our destination. The mansion where Papa and Alexei stayed was too crowded to allow for visitors. Alexei could not wait to show us his quarters: he shared Papa’s bedroom, sleeping on an army cot next to Papa’s and closest to the stove.

Papa was always busy during the mornings of our visit, meeting with the officers, reviewing troops, and so on. Mama seemed perfectly content to sit looking out over the river. Sometimes Mama asked to be driven around the town of Mogilev and out into the countryside,
taking two of us with her and stopping now and then to visit with the peasants. When the weather
was mild, the officers organized hikes and picnics for us, and one day we boarded a launch and
took a long, leisurely cruise on the Dnieper.

Usually around one o’clock several motorcars arrived at the railroad siding and drove us
to the mansion for luncheon with the officers. Afterwards, we were taken on tours of the area and
had a chance to speak with the soldiers. Meanwhile, another fleet of cars had been sent to our
train to fetch our maids and the dresses and jewels Mama wanted us to wear for dinner with the
officers—nothing too bright or elaborate, she said, because this was wartime and we weren’t
attending a ball, but she thought our presence was good for the men’s morale. Our biggest
problem was finding a place where we could change into our finery—this was, after all, a male
domain, and privacy was at a premium.

During this visit Marie met a lieutenant who was serving as officer of the day at
headquarters. His name was Nikolai Dmitrivich Demekov, and the next thing I knew, my sister
was showing serious symptoms of being in love. Somehow she managed to arrange opportunities
to run into him. “Kolya” became part of our regular conversation, as in “Kolya says” this, and
“Kolya did” such-and-such. Of course I missed no opportunity to tease her about him.

At the end of ten days we boarded our train again, feeling quite sad, for the trip back to
Tsarskoe Selo. It was so hard for Mama to leave Alexei behind, although she must have been
pleased to see how happy he was with his life there—the life of a man. She also had a hard time
leaving Papa, because she was always very lonely without him. And Marie was downcast as
well, for obvious reasons.

We were welcomed back by our pets—Mama’s dog Eira, Olga’s cat Vaska, Alexei’s dog
Joy, and my spaniel, Jimmy—but learned the sad news that Ortino, Tatiana’s French bulldog
given to her by her friend, Dmitri Malama, had sickened and died while we were gone. Poor Tatiana! She had so loved that misbehaving little dog! But Malama had already been informed of the death, and before Tatiana had even dried her tears, a replacement bulldog had arrived at the palace. She named the new puppy Ortino the Second.

I asked Tatiana, “Do you love Dimka as much as you love the puppies he’s given you?”

Tatiana glared at me and answered in the stern voice that had earned her our nickname, “the Governess.” “What a stupid question, Nastya! Loving a dog is not the same as loving a person.” Then she softened a little, picked up the new Ortino, and nuzzled him. “This is not a good time for falling in love,” she said. “Dimka is going to the front, and who knows when I’ll see him again.”

I knew what she meant: she might have said, “If I’ll see him again.” Men were dying by the thousand. Every day in the lazaret Marie and I visited wounded soldiers who in the morning were murmuring their thanks to us for helping them write a letter or reading them a letter they had received, letters full of love and longing, and by afternoon were dead, a white sheet pulled over their faces. It was enough to break your heart, over and over. Not a good time for falling in love.

A few weeks after our visit to Mogilev an urgent telegram arrived from Papa. Alexei had a nosebleed—the result of a terrific sneezing fit while they were traveling to Galicia to inspect regiments of the Imperial Guard. The bleeding wouldn’t stop, and he was being brought to Tsarskoe Selo. We were with Mama at the station to meet the train when it arrived near midnight. Alexei’s bandages were soaked with blood, and he was so pale it looked as though he might be dead, except that his eyes were huge with fright. The doctors did everything they could
think of, cauterizing the tiny blood vessel in his nose, but nothing seemed to help. The bleeding
went on and on. We thought certainly that this was the end and that Alexei was going to die. In a
panic, Mama sent for Father Grigory.

We were kneeling around Alexei’s bed, praying with all our hearts, when Father Grigory
quietly entered the room. Mama uttered a low moan, but Father Grigory laid a hand on her
shoulder, and with the other hand he made the sign of the cross as he gazed down at my brother.
“Don’t be alarmed,” he said gently. “Nothing will happen.”

After a moment he turned and walked out of the room without another word and left the
palace. Minutes later Alexei was sleeping peacefully. The bleeding had stopped. The crisis was
past.

Perhaps Rasputin, hated by so many people, actually was a miracle worker. Or maybe it
had just taken a while for the doctors’ efforts to succeed. I didn’t know. All I knew for certain
was that Alexei was alive, and he was getting better.
Chapter 14. Tsarskoe Selo – 1916

On New Year’s Day, at Mama’s urging, Alexei began to keep a diary, “just like Papa does.” Marie volunteered to help him with it, but she had a hard time convincing him to stay with it. Also, he had a curious habit of writing about things he had done before he actually did them, like describing what he’d eaten for dinner before he’d even sat down at the table. He claimed that he didn’t always have time later, and anyway, what difference did it make? Writing in a diary every single day was boring, he said. “My life is boring,” he complained, adding wistfully, “unless I’m at the front with Papa, and then it’s not.”

The important thing, Papa told him, was to be diligent about it. “Someday,” he said, “your future subjects will want to know what your life was like before you became their tsar.”

I saw Olga and Tatiana exchange furtive glances, and I could guess what they were thinking: Will Alexei live long enough to become tsar?

Papa returned to Mogilev after Christmas, and we resumed writing him letters every day. Marie asked Papa to give her regards to Kolya. She even signed her letters “Mrs. Demenkov,” which I thought was supremely silly, even as a joke.

Alexei did not go back to Mogilev with Papa, and that made both of them very sad. It always took Alexei a long time to recover from those awful setbacks. Who could imagine that a
person could die from a sneeze! By February, though, he was much stronger and able to go out to play in the snow. Papa had come home for a few days, and he was outside with all of us when Alexei sneaked up behind me and bombarded me with a snowball. Papa yelled at him, something he hardly ever did.

“For shame, Alexei! That was cowardly, attacking from behind. How was Nastya to defend herself? You’re behaving like a German!”

Alexei apologized, and I could see that he felt horrid. No one wanted to be compared with a German.

The one person whose mood suddenly improved was Marie. Demenkov had been reassigned to the palace guards, and could now be seen from Mama’s balcony, where Marie found constant excuses to stand, just waiting for a chance to wave and grin at him and even shout down at him. One day she persuaded Anya invite him to tea, and we were all present to observe her flirting. There was nothing subtle about it. And she was overjoyed when she spotted him in church and got to talk to him when we came out. He was not the handsomest man I’d ever set eyes on, being somewhat chubby, but he did seem pleasant and sweet.

With Papa away again at Mogilev, everything seeming so difficult, it must have still have been on Mama’s mind that she should be planning for our futures. Marie, only sixteen, was still too young to be a concern, but Tatiana would soon be nineteen, and Olga was twenty, old enough to marry. If it had been a challenge before the war to come up with approved suitors, it was now just about impossible. Prince Carol had been firmly rejected.

Then, out of the blue it seemed, Olga got another marriage proposal. This one was from Grand Duke Boris Romanov, a son of Papa’s oldest uncle, who was thirty-eight years old and
going bald, with a reputation for flirting with married women and doing all sorts of things that shocked and appalled Mama. Boris even has a son my age, but he hadn’t married the boy’s mother and he’d never been included in any of our family gatherings. “Many a woman has shared Boris’s life!” Mama said when Boris’s mother sent the proposal in her own name as well as his.

It was well known that although he was a military man and supposedly in charge of a Cossacks regiment, he had so far avoided doing any actual fighting. “All Boris cares about is taking his pleasure wherever he can find it,” Mama sniffed.

Her answer, of course, was definitely No.

Mama and Boris’s mother could not stand each other. They were exact opposites. His mother, Grand Duchess Marie Pavlovna, ranked third in the Empire, after Mama and Grandmère Marie, and she loved to entertain at great parties in her grand palace on the Neva. “That woman is always looking for ways to raise the standing of her profligate sons,” Mama said bitterly. “But she will not do it through any daughter of mine.”

With Papa away at headquarters, the rest of us did our best to get along without him. Mama and Olga and Tatiana put in long days at the hospital, Marie and I spent mornings with one or another of our tutors and afternoons with the soldiers in the lazaret—and Marie longed for a glimpse of her Kolya. She had begun having conversations with him on the telephone, forbidding me to come anywhere near while she murmured and giggled into the receiver. “This is private, Nastya!”

Their little romance came to an end when Kolya received his orders to go to the front. She decided to make him a shirt, and every evening for a couple of weeks, Marie concentrated
on her sewing. When she’d finished the shirt, she wrapped it with one of her handkerchiefs dabbed with a few drops of her lilac-scented perfume to remember her by. She arranged to spend a few minutes alone with him, and I suspect that they kissed and made promises to write. For days after their last visit she looked so sad and puffy-eyed that I couldn’t even tease her that Nikolai Demenkov would likely go into battle smelling like a flower.

The most important part of our day involved listening to reports of the war, and then moving the pins on the map. For a time the pins moved in the right direction. We were all so buoyed and cheerful when we got good news—we were winning the war! But the good news didn’t last, and everything began to go wrong again. Workers were striking, there were shortages of food, revolutionaries were stirring up trouble, and everyone seemed unhappy with everyone else.

We didn’t see much of our cousin Dmitri Pavlovich, which I thought was a shame, because he was so amusing, so charming—even Mama said so. She had always been quite fond of him. But she complained about him, too, and she told Papa he should order him back to his regiment, because he was spending too much time in Petrograd, drinking and carousing with Irina’s husband, Felix Yussoupov.

Olga had a very low opinion of Felix, saying that he was nothing but an idler. He had gotten out of joining the military through a law that exempted only-sons, although he did enter the Cadet Corps and even went through officers’ training and dressed in a brown uniform—but avoided joining a regiment. Olga had visited his wife, our cousin Irina, at their main palace on the Moika River, and noted that Felix had converted one wing into a hospital for wounded soldiers. “Probably Mama shamed him into doing even that much,” Olga said.
But in March we did have a visit from another Dmitri—Dmitri Malama—who had given Tatiana her adored Ortino. He stayed for only an hour, and he seemed to spend most of that time charming Mama. It’s hard to say what Tatiana was thinking during the brief hour that Dimka sat beside her in Mama’s boudoir with Ortino romping around and her three sisters watching every move, listening to every word.

Mama called him “my little Malama,” and later she described him to her friend Lili Dehn, telling Lili, “What an adorable boy he is still, even though he’s become a man. I must say he would have made a perfect son-in-law. Why are foreign princes not as nice as he is?”

In April we would have usually expected to have Papa with us, but he could not leave Mogilev, even for Easter, and I felt guilty for being so upset that he felt he had to spend all his time with his troops. The Fabergé eggs that year were positively ugly: it was made of steel and mounted on four bullet-like things. Papa called it a Military Egg. Surely he didn’t have such an awful looking thing sent to Grandmère Marie. She’d have hated it.

In May Mama was finally persuaded to let Alexei join Papa at Stavka. Alexei was overjoyed—not only to be back with Papa and the men, but to be promoted from private to corporal and have a second stripe sewn on his sleeve. We missed Alexei, but we had another little boy to fuss over: Titi. His father, Captain von Dehn, had been sent on a special mission to Japan, and Mama volunteered to take responsibility for Titi while Lili traveled by train to visit her husband in Yokohama. Olga and Tatiana decided that long hair was no longer appropriate for an eight-year-old boy. They sat Titi at their dressing table in front of a mirror, draped him in a sheet, and sent for the court hair-dresser. Titi hesitated, unconvinced that it was a good idea.

When he began to cry, we bribed him with one of Alexei’s toy boats. We assured him that he would look manly.
“Like Alexei Nikolaivich?”

That convinced him. Titi’s hair was cut, and Mama sent Lili Dehn a telegram, informing her of the big event.

Father Grigory was spending more and more time with Mama, and Mama kept telling us that she didn’t know what she’d do without his advice. “Your papa relies on me to keep things going as smoothly here as possible,” she told us. “He has so much to do as commander-in-chief of the army—someone at home has to attend to the behavior of some of those awful men in the Duma, who seem to try to do everything they can to thwart him at every turn. And just as Papa relies on me, I rely on Father Grigory to suggest which ministers can be most helpful and which ministers are a hindrance and must simply be sent on their way.”

We listened and nodded, but nobody said anything—at least not in my hearing. But I discovered later that Olga had serious worries:

_I hope the advice he gives Mother is good, because she does just what he says. She writes long, long letters to Father every day, so I have to believe he knows what is happening and doesn’t disapprove._

_Mother seems blind to everything going on around her and deaf to what so many are saying. At the hospital many of the soldiers, even those to whom she has been kind, speak about her disrespectfully. Even the doctors! She works so hard, poor thing, and to hear her referred to as Nemka—the German woman, and not as Her Imperial Highness, is painful. And they laugh behind her back, sometimes forgetting that I am there, or maybe not even caring if I hear, that she and Rasputin are doing the most disgusting things together, and I don’t mean just discussing the war and the Duma._
Tanya and I have discussed trying to speak to her, to warn her about what people are saying, but my sister believes it would do no good and will only anger her. Mother believes in Rasputin without reservation, and I feel helpless to do anything. I suggested speaking to Father when he comes home next, but Tanya thinks he already knows what lies people are repeating and feels powerless to stop the lies and to stop Mother’s reliance on Grigory.

I read that passage and could do nothing but sit there and cry my eyes out, forgetting that I might be discovered at any moment with Olga’s secret diary in my hands. But I had begun to feel that it didn’t matter if I was caught. Maybe my older sisters would realize that I was no longer an infant and should be included in conversations about matters that at fifteen I was certainly old enough to understand. Marie was a different story. She still believed absolutely in the goodness of Father Grigory, the man of God and a worker of miracles.

I put Olga’s diary back where she kept it hidden, and as I did so I wondered if she already knew I was a regular reader, and it was her way of letting me know what was going on without actually talking about it.

The war news was often very gloomy, but that fall there was one bright spot. At least I thought it was a bright spot! Aunt Olga finally persuaded Papa to allow her to divorce Uncle Petya and to marry her Kolya—Nikolai Kulikovsky, the cavalry officer she’s been in love with for years and years. They were married in November in the Church of St. Nicholas in Kiev. Unlike her first elaborate wedding, this was a simple ceremony. Grandmère Marie was there—she was living now in her palace in Kiev—Aunt Xenia, Uncle Sandro, and the officers of Aunt Olga’s Akhtyrsky Regiment, as well as nurses from the hospital she had founded. She sent us a
photograph taken afterward. She wore a plain white wool dress with a little white embroidery, a
wreath of flowers on her head and a plain, short veil. Kolya, of course, was dressed in his dark
blue uniform.

I wished desperately that we had been allowed to go to that wedding, but Mama wouldn’t
hear of it. “Had she chosen to marry in Petrograd—better yet, here in Tsarskoe Selo—it might be
a different story,” she said. I wondered about that. I could tell by the tight line of her lips that she
didn’t approve of the marriage. “Olga Alexandrovna has not been the least bit discreet about her
affair with Kulikovsky,” Mama said. “They’ve been carrying on quite openly for years.”

After the war, I hoped, Mama would have gotten over her disapproval, and we’d meet
Uncle Kolya. Maybe Aunt Olga would be invited bring her new husband to Alexander Palace, or
to Livadia, or on the next cruise of the *Standart*. I was sure we’d love him, if Aunt Olga did.

Around the time Papa’s sister Olga was getting married, Mama’s sister Ella came to
Tsarskoe Selo from her convent in Moscow, planning to spend several days with us. We saw so
few people that we were all pleased to have her come. Mama arranged to take time away from
her hospital duties to have a nice luncheon for her. Olga and Tatiana were there, too. Naturally,
the talk throughout the meal was mostly about the war, the shortages in Moscow, the mood of
the people, the anti-German sentiments that were often aimed at her. Mama just picked at her
food, as she always did, but I ate my share and then some. The coffee had been served when
Aunt Ella brought up the subject of Father Grigory.

“I beg you, Alix, to consider not just your own devotion to Grigory Efimovich, to you a
*starets*, a holy man, a man of God—“
“There is nothing to consider,” Mama interrupted. “He is all that you have said I believe he is. There is no doubt of his miraculous ability to heal. You know what he has done for Alexei—he’s well enough to stay with Nicky at Mogilev—and for Anya Vyrabova as well.”

Aunt Ella leaned forward, attempting to say something, but Mama held up her hand and continued. “In addition, he offers me excellent advice whenever I ask for it. As you know, while Nicky is at the front, I have tried to help him by taking over some of his responsibilities here at home, replacing ineffectual ministers with those Father Grigory agrees with me are more appropriate. Since Nicky cannot be two places at once, this is a great help to him and to Russia.”

“You speak absurdities. Nicky knows exactly where his duties lie, and I support him in that. And Father Grigory supports me.” She said this in a tone that we, her daughters, understood that meant, This conversation is over.

“And that is what is particularly alarming,” Aunt Ella continued, ignoring Mama’s tone of finality. “Rasputin is thoroughly despised by almost everyone. He is not seen as a man of God but as a ruffian who consorts with prostitutes, drinks and carouses. You’ve no doubt heard the rumors that his relationship with you is physical.” Aunt Ella glanced at us, but she didn’t stop. “He is suspected of being a German spy. You and I know that none of this has even a grain of
truth, but I don’t believe you realize, Alix, how your association with this man is damaging the reputation of the tsar almost beyond repair. Rasputin is taking the Romanov dynasty to ruin, and you are doing nothing to stop it.”

“Enough!” Mama cried, slamming her fists on the table so hard that the silverware rattled—and I jumped. “Not one more word, Ella! Everything you have said about Father Grigory is slander and completely baseless. You and I have no more to say on this subject.”

“I will not be silenced,” said Aunt Ella calmly. “You must hear the truth, and I believe there is no one better suited than I, your own sister, to speak it.”

“It is not the truth, not a word of it, and since you will not respect my wishes to speak no more on this subject, I must ask you to leave.”

“Perhaps it would have been better if I hadn’t come,” Aunt Ella said sadly.

“Yes,” Mama replied. She called a servant, instructed him to summon a carriage to take Aunt Ella to the train, and rushed out of the dining room.

We four sisters stared miserably at our aunt and at Mama’s empty place at the table. No one dared to say a word. Tears were pouring from Marie’s famous “saucers.” When Aunt Ella reached out to take her hand, Marie shrank away. Aunt Ella sighed and rose from her chair and walked slowly around the table, laying a hand on each of our heads and whispering a blessing. Then she left without another word. Marie was sobbing loudly, Olga buried her head in her hands, Tatiana pulled out a cigarette and lit it, a habit she had recently acquired. I waited for somebody to say something, but no one did. Eventually we left the table, and my older sisters got ready to return to the hospital. When I asked Marie if she was coming to the lazaret, she shook her head.

“Maybe later,” she said. “It’s all so sad.”
It was snowing hard when I left Alexander Palace for the Feodorovsky Gorodok lazaret.

We did not speak again of Aunt Ella’s visit.

We were looking forward to Papa and Alexei coming home for Christmas, but just before they were due to arrive, something terrible happened that shattered Mama’s world. It wasn’t that anything happened to Papa, or to Alexei—as she feared it would—or even to one of us. It was Father Grigory. He had disappeared.

First Anya came with a strange story. She had gone to Father Grigory’s apartment in Petrograd to deliver a gift to him from Mama. He mentioned that he was going to Felix Yussoupov was sending a car for him at midnight. He’d been invited to the main Yussoupov palace in Petrograd to be introduced to Princess Irina. Mama knew that Grigory often spent time with Felix, but Anya’s story puzzled her. For one thing, midnight was an odd time to visit anyone. And besides, Irina was at the Yussoupov palace in Crimea.

“None of this makes sense,” Mama said, but I could see that she was troubled.

The next morning Mama received a telephone call from the Minister of the Interior; gunshot had been heard at the Yussoupov palace, and one of Felix’s friends, quite drunk, had bragged to a policeman that he had killed Rasputin. Mama’s already pale features turned deadly white. She looked as though she was going to faint. But she calmly ordered the minister to investigate—perhaps it was a mistake, she said—and wrote immediately to Papa, begging him to come home immediately.

I knew what she was thinking. Father Grigory often told her, “If I die or you desert me, you will lose your son and your crown within six months.”
Mama believed that. Now it seemed to be happening. “He’s dead,” she murmured over and over. “Murdered. I’m sure of it.”

We sat with Mama and Anya throughout the day, weeping and praying. Still there was no word from Father Grigory. Rumors flew. Not only was Felix Yussoupov involved—he even boasted about it, saying that he had done it for the good Russia—but so, too, was Dmitri Pavlovich. Our cousin Dmitri, who’d spent so much time with us, who’d danced the Boston with me, an assassin! I refused to believe it. We heard that his father, Grand Duke Pavel, had asked him to swear on a holy icon and a picture of his dead mother that he had not murdered Rasputin, and he had sworn it. Mama did not believe him—she’d warned Papa that Dmitri was on the wrong path. She ordered him and Felix to be held under house arrest.

Father Grigory’s body was found under the ice of the Neva River. He had been dead for three days. The authorities said he had been poisoned and then shot, tied up and shoved through a hole in the ice. Somehow, they said, he’d survived all that and died by drowning.

Papa arrived home. He ordered Dmitri to leave Petrograd immediately and to join the Russian troops fighting in Persia, not even allowing him a chance to say goodbye to his father and receive his blessing. Felix and Irina were sent in disgrace to one of the fifty-seven Yussoupov palaces, I’m not sure which.

On one of the saddest days I had ever endured, Father Grigory was buried. One bright winter morning, dressed in black mourning clothes, we drove in an automobile to the unfinished chapel that Anya was having built in an imperial park at some distance from Tsarskoe Selo. A grave had been dug in a corner of the park, an open wound in the sparkling white snow. The starets’s body in a plain wooden coffin arrived in a police motor van. Anya was there, and Lili Dehn joined the seven of us—not because she worshipped Grishka, although he had once cured
Titi when he was very sick, but because she truly loved Mama. Before the coffin was sealed, Mama placed on the dead man’s breast an icon that we had all signed and a letter she’d written to Father Grigory. I don’t know what she’d written in that letter. She’d brought some white flowers and gave some to each of us to scatter on the coffin after it had been lowered into the grave.

And that was the end of Grigory Efimovich Rasputin, our Father Grigory.
The year 1917 did not begin well. We were all deeply shaken by the murder of Rasputin. Mama’s world had been turned upside down. Not only did she no longer have the advisor she’d come to depend on while Papa was away at the front, but she did not have the comfort of knowing that Father Grigory alone could do for Alexei what none of his doctors seemed able to do.

Papa didn’t return to the front in January but spent long days shut up in his study, poring over his maps, planning the army’s next moves. Our “Ethiopian,” the American Negro Jim Hercules, stood guard at his door, hour after hour. Jim knew us well—before the war he used to bring us guava jelly from his home in a place called Alabama. But he would not let us in to see Papa, even for a minute. It had never been that way in the past. “Strict orders from His Imperial Majesty,” Jim told us stiffly. Then he grinned. “Papa says no.”

When he did come out, he looked tired. He was always thin, but he seemed to have lost weight. He smoked constantly. This was not the Papa I knew. Both of my parents were different people.

During this time various Romanov relatives were coming to talk to Papa, and I could tell by their faces that there were disagreements of some kind. Uncle Sandro came from his home in
Kiev to speak with Papa. He was Irina’s father, and he must have felt terrible that Felix, his son-in-law, had done such an awful, horrible, unforgivable thing to Father Grigory.

We all had lunch together—Uncle Sandro, Papa and the five of us, but not Mama, who was in her boudoir. All of us, even Alexei, made the greatest effort to be cheerful. At one point Uncle Sandro attempted to introduce a serious subject. We assumed it would be about Felix, but his name was not even mentioned.

“The problem of railways has reached crisis point,” he said, leaving his food barely touched. “It’s necessary to discuss this, Nicky. We’re on the verge of a catastrophe, there is no more coal or food, we are living from day to day, everything is in complete disarray—“

Papa smiled, a thin, unhappy smile, and held up his hand. “Not now, Sandro,” he said. “This is neither the time nor the place for such a discussion. My son and certainly my daughters have no need to be involved in such unpleasant conversations. You’ve told me that you want to talk to Alix about some of the problems facing our beloved country, and she has agreed to do that. But for now—“ and here was that sickly smile again—“out of consideration for my children, I suggest that we enjoy our coffee and put aside such matters until a later time.”

I glanced at my sisters. Olga was frowning, that thin frown line had appeared between her eyebrows, Tatiana’s face was a perfectly expressionless mask, Marie reached for another sweet. Alexei leaped into the conversation. “Uncle Sandro, you should come to Stavka with Papa and me. We’re going back next week, aren’t we Papa? And it’s so much fun, being with all the soldiers!”

It was hard to believe, but Uncle Sandro didn’t obey Papa and stop talking about “unpleasant matters,” and he barely acknowledged what Alexei had just said. “It’s not just a few
extremist revolutionaries and troublemakers who are dissatisfied, Nicky. You must listen to the ministers, the members of the Duma, the Russian people!”

Papa had risen to his feet. “That’s quite enough, Sandro. I believe the empress is ready to receive us.” He forced a smile. “Excuse us, please, my darlings,” he said and steered our uncle out of the dining room.

Alexei was incensed. “He’s rude!” he grumbled.

“Perhaps he’s also right,” Olga said softly—so softly I may have been the only one to hear.

What a terrible day! Uncle Sandro came and had lunch with us and then went to meet with Mother. Father was with them. I stood outside the door to her boudoir and tried to overhear their conversation, but their voices were too quiet—until my uncle began to argue, his voice growing louder until he was almost shouting. “You must stop interfering, Alix! I say this as your friend of many years, but you refuse to listen. You are doing great harm to your husband and to Russia. Everyone opposes what you are doing. You must stop at once and allow Nicky to share his powers with the Duma.”

I couldn’t hear Mother’s reply, but I could guess what she was saying, because I have heard her say it many times: “The tsar is the autocrat, the absolute ruler by divine right. All power is vested in him, as it should be, and he answers to no one but God. Certainly not to the Duma!”

Tanya happened to come along just then and demanded to know why I was eavesdropping. I hushed her and told her to listen. Sandro was roaring, “I have been silent for thirty months, while you and Rasputin took over the government. You and Nicky may be willing
to die, to let the monarchy die, but what about your family? You are dragging all of us down with you.”

Tanya and I started to cry, and neither of us waited to hear any more. Uncle Sandro’s visit was a lot like Aunt Ella’s visit—very upsetting but accomplishing nothing.
PART III.

REVOLUTION 1917
Chapter 16. Tsarskoe Selo – March 1917

Butter Week almost didn’t happen, at least not the way it once did. The cooks did manage to get enough for the blini I deeply loved to overeat, but they did say with relief that it was a good thing the Great Fast was now beginning, and for the next forty days we’d be eating very simply, even sparingly. “By Easter, by Pascha, things will certainly be better. We’ll celebrate with a grand feast.”

Late in February Papa decided to go back to Mogilev. It was bitterly cold, but all of us bundled in furs and gathered to watch him drive off. Alexei was weeping with disappointment that he was not going with him. The guards saluted smartly, frost glistening on their mustaches, and church bells rang out as they always did to mark the tsar’s departure. I thought their clamor sounded mournful.

Within hours after Papa had gone, Olga and Alexei began complaining of headaches. When Dr. Botkin made his daily visit to check on Mama, he took their temperatures, peered into their throats, and diagnosed measles. Mama recalled that a week earlier some boys from the military school had come to play with Alexei, and one of the cadets was coughing and looked flushed.
“I should have sent him away,” Mama said. “He was coming down with measles, and Alexei caught it. Now, Olga too, is ill, and it’s only a matter of time until the rest have it.”

Tatiana and Anya were the next victims. Marie and I tried to do what we could to help, bringing hot tea for Mama to give to the patients, fetching hot water bottles one minute and ice bags the next. We weren’t allowed in the sickroom.

Mama asked Lili Dehn to come out from Petrograd to spend the day, for we all needed cheering. But it didn’t turn out that way. Usually when Lili came for a visit, she brought delightful pastries for our afternoon tea from a shop near her mansion, but this time there were no pastries—only disturbing news.

“People have broken into the bakeries, yelling that there is no bread and grabbing whatever they could get their hands on,” she told us when she’d removed her fur cloak and boots and the tea had been poured. “The Cossacks arrived to drive them off, but only after they’d done a lot of damage. And the Cossacks weren’t using their whips—the Duma had ordered them not to interfere. Now the strikes are spreading, and nobody is doing anything to stop them.”

Mama shrugged it off. “They’re just a lot of hooligans trying to make trouble, Lili.”

Lila frowned. “You’re awfully isolated here,” she said. “I don’t think you understand how bad it is in the city. It’s been so cold and the snow is so deep that the trains haven’t been able to bring coal and flour into Petrograd. People are hungry, and they’re angry. They’ve taken to the streets and brought the city to a standstill. I had trouble getting to the train station.”

“Nicky knows about it. He’s ordered troops from the garrison here in Tsarskoe Selo to settle things. We have nothing to worry about.” She sounded completely confident, and I decided to stop worrying.
But as the day went on, the news kept getting worse: The soldiers garrisoned at Tsarskoe Selo had defected. Many other units were going over to the revolutionaries. The railway workers would not let any troops arrive.

I started worrying again. Lili did, too. Her son, Titi, was at home in Petrograd with his governess.

Lili decided not to try to get back to Petrograd but to stay the night with us. To keep us occupied, she and I worked on a jigsaw puzzle, the pieces spread out around us on the carpet, while Mama talked to Count Benckendorff, the Grand Marshal who was in charge of everything that went on in the palace. I was working on a part of the sky in the puzzle; most of the puzzle seemed to be either sky or ocean. When Mama finished her conversation, she dropped into a chair nearby and watched us. She was wearing her white nurse’s uniform, but she wasn’t nursing soldiers—she was caring for her sick children, plus Anya, who seemed to require more of Mama’s attention than any of the others did. Mama looked exhausted.

“How are you feeling, Nastya?” she asked. I said I felt fine. “No headache or sore throat or fever?” I repeated that I felt fine. “I want you to get plenty of rest,” she said. “Be a good girly and go to bed now, please.”

I started to protest that I wasn’t at all tired. I wanted to stay and listen to the conversation, although I didn’t tell her that, but Lili shook her head and gave me a look, and I dragged myself away. I believed that Mama was going to tell Lili something—something probably important—that she didn’t want me to hear.

I went looking for Shura. Many of the servants had families in Tsarskoe Selo, and they always knew more about what was going on than we did. Shura was often with our tutor, Zhillik, who would no doubt have found out something; he always did. When I found Shura warming my
nightgown by the stove, her eyes were puffy from crying. I begged her to tell me what she knew as she helped me prepare for bed.

She began to brush my hair in long, slow strokes. “I can tell you this much: your papa ordered a train to take all of you away, but your mama has refused to leave with so many of you sick.” Shura paused, hairbrush in midair. “She says she will wait for your papa to come home. He’ll be here tomorrow morning.”

“It’s serious, isn’t it, Shura?”

“Yes, dear child, it’s serious.”

“But why do so many people hate us?”

She continued brushing. “It’s true, many people are angry. But many others are devoted to the emperor and the empress, and they—we—will remain loyal, no matter what.” Suddenly she dropped the hairbrush and rushed out of my room.

Marie’s bed, opposite mine, was still empty. Where was she? I put on my robe and considered what to do.

I wished I could talk to Olga, but Mama had given instructions that I must not go into her room. I’d had no chance to read her secret diary since she’d fallen sick. Probably, I thought, she’d been feeling too bad to write in it for the past several days. It was possible that she didn’t even know what was going on—about the angry crowds in Petrograd, about Papa wanting us to leave on a train and Mama refusing. But maybe she’d scribbled a few lines.

Disobeying Mama’s orders, I crept from my room to Olga and Tatiana’s room and quietly opened the door. A small lamp with a scarf thrown over the shade glowed in a corner. I stepped closer to Olga’s bed.

“Olya?” I whispered. “Olya, are you awake?”
No answer, and no sound from Tatiana, either. My eyes adjusted to the dim light, so that I could make out the row of books on the shelf next to Olga’s bed. I counted four from the left and slid out the notebook with the leather cover that disguised it as a book of devotions. Concealing the book beneath my robe, I hurried back to my own room. In the minute or two that I was out of our bedroom, Marie had come in. She sat at her desk, writing a letter. Probably to her Kolya, I thought, who was now at the front.

“Where have you been, Nastya?”

“Oh, just walking around.” It sounded so stupid she would have been foolish to believe it, but Marie nodded and went back to her letter.

I stuffed the stolen book under my pillow. I was pretty sure Marie hadn’t noticed, but now I’d have to wait until she was asleep or had gone to the toilet so that I could read Olga’s most recent secret entries—if there were any.

Fortunately, I didn’t have to wait long. Unfortunately, though, I discovered that I had taken the wrong book. The one I opened when it felt safe to do so actually was a book of devotions. If I’d been sensible, I would have spent the rest of the evening reading the prayers.

Mama had been trying to reach Papa, who was supposed to be on his way home.

“There’s no way to communicate with us from the train,” Mama said. “If only I had some way to find out where he is!” She sounded fretful, worried but calm.

Then Count Benckendorff came to tell us that the railway lines around Petrograd had been seized by the revolutionaries. The servants rushed in with rumors that a horde of drunken soldiers was coming to seize “the German woman” and “the heir.” In every story the size of the
mob grew bigger and bigger—was it just a few hundred drunken soldiers or a mob of thousands? No one knew for sure. I was really frightened, but Mama seemed to be perfectly calm. “We must not be afraid,” she told us. “We are in God’s hands, and tomorrow when the Emperor comes, and I know he will, all will be well.”

Count Benckendorff had arranged for fifteen hundred men from the marine guard that had always been our guards when we were on the Standart to defend the Alexander Palace. Hour after hour we waited nervously for the revolutionary mob to attack, but when the sun set at around four o’clock nothing had happened. I watched from the window. The bitter cold grew even colder. Our soldiers built fires to keep warm, and a kitchen was set up to feed them hot food. We felt reassured by this homely scene—not exactly safe, but reassured.

I had begun to feel a little sick—a headache, a scratchy-feeling throat, maybe a slight fever. Marie looked at me. “Are you getting sick?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m fine, too,” Marie said. I wondered if she was also lying.

We watched a while longer. I thought maybe if I lay down for a while, the headache and fever would go away. Then Mama came and asked Marie if she would go out with her and speak with the soldiers. “To encourage them,” Mama explained. “To thank them for their loyalty.”

Marie glanced at me. “I’ll stay here,” I said.

My head throbbing, I stayed at the window as my mother and my sister, swathed in thick fur coats and boots, scarves and gloves, went out into the palace courtyard. Count Benckendorff was with them. I wanted to curl up in my bed and pull a blanket over my head, but I had to stay at the window and watch. Some of the soldiers were kneeling in the snow with their rifles raised,
and more soldiers stood behind them, also ready to fire. Mama and Marie walked up and down between the rows of soldiers, Mama stopping often to talk to the men.

When Mama and Marie came back inside, Mama looked almost happy. “They’re our friends!” she said. “I’ve told the officers to bring the men into the palace to warm themselves with hot tea.”

I slept only fitfully that night, hearing gunshots off and on. I did not feel well, and too much was going on. A huge gun had been set up in the courtyard—what a surprise that would be for Papa! Mama assured us that Papa would certainly arrive by six that morning. We were up and ready to greet his train. Everything would be better once he was here, I felt sure. Papa still had not come, and we didn’t know where he was. His train was due, but it did not arrive. Telegrams she had been sending to Papa, one after another, were returned, undeliverable.

“The train is never late,” I said, fighting down my fear. “Never.”

The marine guard that had been protecting us were now deserting, going over to the other side. Suddenly we had neither electricity nor water. The elevator now didn’t operate, and Mama, whose room was on the first floor, had to be half-carried up the stairs to our bedrooms on the second floor, where Olga and Tatiana and Alexei lay ill. We lit candles in our rooms, but the halls were dark as night. Servants went out to break the ice on the pond and brought it in to melt it for drinking.

I willed myself not to get sick, but I knew that I was. Maria looked feverish, too.

Now the worst possible thing happened, and we learned about it this way:

Some of our servants who had gone into Petrograd, before the trains were stopped, had made their way back to Tsarskoe Selo, some borrowing horses, others walking the whole way.
Exhausted and with blisters on their feet, they came to Mama’s rooms and wordlessly handed her leaflets that were being distributed all over Petrograd.

“I do not believe it!” Mama cried shrilly. “I will not believe it!”

Marie took the leaflet from Mama’s hand and read it. Weeping, she handed it to me.

The leaflets announced that Tsar Nikolas Alexandrovich had abdicated, Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich had renounced his claim to the throne, and Provisional Government had been established.

*Abdicated?* What did it mean? What had Uncle Mishka to do with it? What was a Provisional Government? *Papa* was the government—he was the tsar!

Except that now, apparently, he wasn’t any more. How could that be?

Lili Dehn took it upon herself to explain it to Marie and me. “It means that your father has given up his throne, relinquished his power. He is no longer the emperor.”

“But what about Alexei? Isn’t he the tsarevich? Isn’t he suppose to be the next tsar, after Papa?”

“Yes, we all hoped and prayed that he would be. I don’t know exactly what happened, but I believe your papa understood that Alexei is too young to be tsar, and he is often ill, and it would be better to pass the crown to your father’s younger brother, Mikhail Alexandrovich, who is in line after Alexei. For whatever reason—perhaps he was forced to do so—he has also given up his claim. And now some sort of government is taking over.” She was weeping when she explained all this to us. But maybe it wasn’t even true! Lili had only read a leaflet, a meaningless piece of paper!

*Oh, if only Papa would come quickly!*
That evening Uncle Pavel, father of my cousin Dmitry who had killed Father Grigory, came to see Mama. Lili and I were in the next room. We were keeping our hands busy with knitting, though I was by then feeling too poorly to keep my mind on my work but would not yet admit that I, too, was sick. We could hear voices in the next room, rising and falling, but we could not make out what was being said. Then the door opened, and Mama came in. We stared at her. She looked terrible, I cannot even describe the look of agony on her face. Lili had more presence of mind than I did, and she jumped up and ran to catch Mama in her arms before Mama could collapse.

“Abdicated!” she cried. “He has abdicated!”

I knew now what the word meant, but I could not imagine what it meant for us, that Papa was no longer the Tsar of All the Russias. Lili helped Mama to a chair and knelt beside her, stroking her hand. Mama made a great effort to pull herself together. “It’s God’s will,” she said in a weak and trembling voice. “God brings this to us in order to save Russia, and that’s all that matters.” She swallowed hard. “And my poor darling Nicky! He’s back at Mogilev. The train was stopped at Pskov, and that’s where he...where he signed the papers. And I’m not there with him, to help him, to console him.” Her voice faded to nothing.

She made a little gesture, waving us away. “I need to be alone for a little,” she said. Then she added, “And Lili...Nastya...say nothing to the other children just now, will you? They’re so sick, they shouldn’t be disturbed.”

Lili nodded, I did too, and we left the room and quietly shut the door. We sat down together in the drawing room. “What’s going to happen now, Lili?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “I don’t know.”
Chapter 17. Tsarskoe Selo – April 1917

What happened next was that we all became prisoners. Everything was kept from us at first, until Mama decided that we were well enough to be told. I was only dimly aware of what was happening, because I was now sick with measles, like my brother and sisters and Anya. Marie had developed pneumonia, on top of having measles. Tatiana and I both had ear infections that hurt badly, and Tatiana could not hear at all for a while.

Someone called General Kornilov told Mama that she was under house arrest, and that Papa had already been arrested at Mogilev, but he would arrive the next day, and he would also be a prisoner. The general informed the people who were staying with us that they could stay—but they would also be under house arrest—or they could leave, but if they chose to go they could not return.

Most of the members of Papa’s and Mama’s suite—the ladies in waiting and the official guard—quickly left. Anya stayed, and Count Benckendorff and his wife, Baroness Buxhoeveden. So did Lili Dehn and our tutor, Zhilik. Also Dr. Botkin and his children, Gleb and Tatiana.

“But what about Titi?” Mama asked.
“He’s with my maid, Anna,” Lili said. “She will do anything for him. And I have asked my father to come to stay with them until I return.”

The doors to the Alexander Palace were all locked at four o’clock, except for one door at the main entrance and another entrance near the kitchen. Both doors had guards, and we were told that we had to stay inside and would not be allowed to go out.

We were gradually recovering from our illness, and Dr. Botkin did his best to care for us. But the soldiers! They were just terrible! These soldiers, whoever they were, weren’t at all like the soldiers Marie was so fond of—not at all like her Kolya, who had not been heard from in months, and we feared that he’d been killed. These soldiers were disgraceful. They were dirty, they didn’t bother to shave or comb their hair, their boots were filthy, their jackets were unbuttoned, and they roamed through the palace, looking into our rooms and touching our things without any permission or sense of decency. When Dr. Botkin came to examine us, to listen to our hearts and look into our throats and our ears, the soldiers walked right in! Dr. Botkin shooed them out, and they’d stand in the doorway and stare at us. It was disgusting.

It seemed that one bad thing after another was happening to us. Alexei had always depended on his loyal sailors, Nagorny and Derevenko. For years these two men had done everything for my brother, assigned to keep him as safe as possible, from hurting himself, distracting him, amusing him. And now, suddenly, Andrei Derevenko turned against him. Anya witnessed what happened and told us what she had seen: Derevenko sprawled in a chair, shouting orders at Alexei, “Bring me this! Do that! And be quick about it! Who do you think you are?”
Alexei must have thought it was some sort of game, and he hustled around, trying to do what he’d been told. When Papa confronted him, the disgruntled sailor stormed out.

Nagorny, bless him, was furious at Derevenko’s behavior, and promised to remain.

Easter 1917: everything was different. The Great Fast was ending.

Mama and Papa must have decided that a normal routine was the best way to cope with our new situation. This meant that “the children” would once more be tutored. The adults divided up the teaching chores: Papa taught history and geography—we still had Petrov’s maps—and Mama taught religion. Gilliard was still trying to pound French into our heads. Baroness Buxhoeveden instructed us in English and piano, Mlle. Schneider—dear Trina, who had abandoned her efforts to teach us German—was now put in charge of arithmetic. Countess Hendrikova volunteered to give art lessons. The one person missing from our prison school was Mr. Gibbes, our English tutor.

“Where is Sidney Ivanovich?” Alexei asked.

“He was in Petrograd when the new government took over,” Papa explained. “I’m told that he came back to Tsarskoe Selo, but he isn’t allowed to enter Alexander Palace, or to see us or talk to us.”

“Why?” Alexei wanted to know.

“I have no idea. Maybe they think he would help us escape.”

This amused my brother. None of us could imagine the Englishman doing anything of the sort. “The men who are making us prisoners must be very stupid.”

“Possibly,” Papa agreed with a little smile.
I enjoyed the art lessons and could have done without the rest of the instruction, except from Papa, who was always very kind and gentle and made me want to please him, and sometimes Mama, who was stern and kept us focused steadily on our lessons.

Olga was not at all interested in being a student again. She wanted only to be left alone to read. I suspected that she had resumed writing in her secret notebook, but I had a difficult time finding where she was hiding it and how she was disguising it. She had good reason for keeping it a deep, dark secret. What I read there shocked me.

Have my parents lost their minds? The situation is ridiculous. Father is no longer the Tsar, he is “Citizen Romanov,” and he seems not to mind too much. He sits and smokes and says that when the weather is warmer we will have a garden. Mother looks angry most of the time and seems to think we are still “children.” When she talks about us, it is always “the children.” I am twenty-one, an adult by anyone’s definition, Tatya will soon be twenty, and Mashka eighteen. Nastya is going on sixteen and smokes—she thinks no one knows, but I’ve seen her. I was sixteen when I fell in love with Pavel, and I wonder whether our Nastya has ever been in love. I pity any man she marries—she’ll make one joke after another and tease him until he begs for mercy. Tatya sometimes weeps for Dimka—“our little Malama” as Mother calls him, as though he, too, were nothing but a child—because we have not heard from him for months and Tatya fears he is dead. Mashka mopes and writes letters to her Kolya, also not heard from in much too long. And yet our mother, who was only a year older than I am when she and Father married, compels us to spend our time in the schoolroom with tutors who would probably love to escape from us as much as we yearn to escape from them. The world is falling own around us, and Mother still chooses what we are to wear each day!
So—I would drive any man to madness! I would force the poor fellow to beg for mercy! I threw many fierce glances at my eldest sister, but I could scarcely confront her without revealing that I was the Great Snoop, the Colossal Invader of Privacy. And so I swallowed my fury, at least for the present.

Some things went on as before, but with some difference. The Great Fast would soon end with Holy Pascha, the celebration of Easter. We used to be in Livadia for Easter, but there would be no Livadia this year. Papa ordered Fabergé eggs for Mama and Grandmère Marie, as always, but only my grandmother’s was delivered. It was not like the other eggs, with lots of gold and jewels. This egg was quite plain, made of a special kind of birchwood with scarcely any trimming on the outside. The surprise inside was a tiny mechanical elephant studded with diamonds. But the problem was how to get it to her. Papa was deeply worried about our grandmother. She had traveled from Kiev on her train to visit him at Mogilev for a few days just before he came home and then had gone back to Kiev, but he had no way of communicating with her. He sent it off to Uncle Mishka, who was living in his palace in Gatchina, and asked him to deliver it to their mother.

Mama did not get her egg. It was supposed to be made of blue glass and decorated with tiny diamond stars with a clock hidden inside, but it had not been finished.

We would celebrate Easter at Tsarskoe Selo. I thought we’d attend all the Holy Week services at Fyodorovsky Cathedral, where we always worshiped, but that was forbidden. Instead, Mama had arranged everything that was needed in our small chapel in the palace.

Of course I remembered that Grandmère Marie had always promised me that we would celebrate my sixteenth birthday in Paris. Foolishly, I still clung to that promise. I wondered how we would travel there—I thought that we might go by imperial train. But
was there such a thing now as an imperial train? People came to speak to Papa, and they weren’t sure how to address him. I remember one day when a man named Kerensky came to see Papa.