

THE WITCH'S DAUGHTER

Imogen Edwards-Jones



An Aria Book

UNCORRECTED MANUSCRIPT

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To the handsome Kit Craig and the wonderful Annabel
with love

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Grand Duchess Militza Nikolayevna – second eldest daughter of King Nikola of Montenegro; she was one of twelve children, only nine of whom survived into adulthood.

Grand Duke Peter Nikolayevich – cousin to Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, married to Militza.

Princess Marina Petrovna of Russia – eldest daughter of Grand Duchess Militza and Grand Duke Peter

Prince Roman Petrovich of Russia – only son of Grand Duchess Militza and Grand Duke Peter.

Princess Nadezhda Petrovna of Russia – the youngest daughter of Grand Duchess Militza and Grand Duke Peter, her twin sister Princess Sofia Petrovna of Russia died in childbirth.

Grand Duchess Anastasia (Stana) – third eldest daughter of King Nikola of Montenegro.

George Maximilianovich, 6th Duke of Leuchtenberg – Stana's first husband.

Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolayevich (Nikolasha) – brother of Grand Duke Peter Nikolayevich, commander in chief of the Russian army, viceroy of the Caucasus, and cousin to Tsar Nicholas II; second husband to Stana.

Tsar Nicholas II (also called Nicky) – reigned as emperor of Russia from 1894 to 1917.

Tsarina Alexandra Fyodorovna (née Princess Alexandra of Hesse-Darmstadt, also called Alix) – empress of Russia.

Their children:

Olga

Tatiana

Maria

Anastasia

Alexei, the Tsarevich

Dowager Empress Maria Fyodorovna (née Princess Dagmar of Denmark, also known as Minny) – widow of Alexander III, mother to Tsar Nicholas II.

Grand Duchess Elizabeth Fyodorovna (Ella) – elder sister of the tsarina; married to Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, uncle to the tsar.

Grand Duchess Vladimir, Maria Pavlovna (also known as Miechen) – one of the richest women in all Russia.

Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich – husband to Maria Pavlovna and uncle to the tsar.

Count Felix Sumarokov-Elston – married to Princess Zinaida Yusupova, the richest woman in all Russia; father of Prince Nikolai Felixovich and Prince Felix Felixovich.

Prince Felix Yusupov – married to Princess Irina Alexandronva, daughter of Xenia (Tsar Nicholas II's sister) and Alexander Mikhailovich (Sandro); one of the murderers of Rasputin.

Anna Vyrubova (née Taneyeva) – the tsarina's best friend.

Dr. Shamzaran Badmaev – (otherwise known as Dr. Peter Badmaev)—apothecary, philosopher, and purveyor of fine drugs; born in Tibet.

Grigory Yefimovich Rasputin (Grisha) – man of God, hierophant, and holy satyr from Siberia.

Yekaterina Konstantinovna Bresko Breskovskaya – (otherwise known as Catherine Breshkovsky) rebel, political prisoner and 'Grandmother of the Revolution.

Bertie Stopford – Albert Henry Stopford, antiques dealer, diplomatic courier and best friend of Grand Duchess Vladimir, whose jewels he smuggled out of Russia. He served time in Wormwood Scrubs for homosexuality and died in 1939. He is buried in Bagneux, France.

Prince Oleg Konstantinovich of Russia – fiancé to Princess Nadezhda of Russia, a poet and considered the cleverest of his seven siblings he was the only member of the Imperial Family to die on the battle of fields of WWI. He was 21 years old.



After witnessing an admirable performance of the Revolution with the keenest enjoyment, the intellectuals wanted to fetch their warm fur-lined overcoats and return to their fine comfortable homes: but the coats had been stolen and the houses burned.

Rosanov – *The Revolution anTempd the Intellectuals*

There is no more Russian nobility. There is no more Russian aristocracy... A future historian will describe in precise detail how this class died. You will read this account and you will experience madness and horror...

The Red Newspaper (Petrograd)

No. 10, 14 January 1922

'Paris for lunch, dinner in St Petersburg.'

Kaiser Wilhelm II

PROLOGUE

31 August 1914, Znamenka, Peterhof

Militza and Peter sat down to breakfast, at opposite ends of the highly polished dining table and drank their coffee in total silence, save for the ticking of the large, baroque mantel clock. The clock stood on an equally large baroque table between the two sets of French windows that looked out on to the immaculately curated garden, the avenue of evergreens and the Gulf of Finland beyond. The sweet smell of cut grass floated in on the warm, late-summer breeze that wafted through the open doors. A soft-shoed butler served the Grand Duke Peter Nikolayevich his buttered toast and black cherry jam, while the Grand Duchess Militza Nikolayevna was content with her usual raw eggs. It was an old habit. The Grand Duchess Vladimir, the self-appointed doyenne of all things fashionable, had once been overheard extolling the virtues of such a healthy breakfast and soon the whole court, including the Tsarina herself, had followed suit. Militza no longer knew what Tsarina Alexandra, Alix, had for breakfast, or for lunch for that matter – those days were long gone. But she had kept

up the habit all the same. What better way to start the day than consuming the ancient symbol of new life?

She cracked open two eggs into her glass, splitting the shells with her long, sharp thumb nails. Puncturing the two yolks with a silver fork, she whipped them into a light froth, tapping and tinkling the sides of the glass as she did so. She looked down the length of the table. Her husband would normally complain, in jovial tones, about the noise and her 'filthy habit', but today he was silent. He was reading a pile of dispatches from the front. They'd arrived overnight, bound in black ribbon, sealed with red wax and encased in a leather envelope. His pale eyes were unblinking behind his slightly smeared spectacles, his mouth was immobile, his lips, below his stiffly waxed upturned moustache, were tight, only his left hand was shaking. Militza picked up the glass, opened her throat, and swiftly swallowed the medicinal cocktail back in one.

'Everything all right?' she asked, dabbing the corners of her mouth with a white linen napkin.

Peter did not reply. He wasn't being rude, he just didn't appear to hear her. She glanced down at the folded newspaper next to her on the table and smoothed it flat. *Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolayevich leads from The Front!* proclaimed the headline. *Two Russian armies poised to take Eastern Prussia*, read the subheading underneath. She continued further down the page. The Germans were amassing on their western front, the Russians were lunging over the border, they outnumbered the enemy two to one. Victory was inevitable...

'I see your brother is marching the troops out earlier than expected,' remarked Militza, nodding at the newspaper. 'I

thought they didn't have enough guns or, more's the point, enough boots? Isn't that what you said? Not enough equipment? Not enough training? But they seem to have launched an attack anyway. Extraordinary.' She shook her head. 'Peter!'

'Sorry.' He looked up from his papers, his face blanched, his eyes red and brimmed with tears. 'Fifty thousand,' he mumbled, shaking his head. 'Fifty thousand. How is that possible?'

'Fifty thousand what?'

'Dead... Russian dead. Ninety-two thousand taken prisoner. Cavalry, Cossacks, horses. Five infantry corps, four cavalry divisions, a whole army... annihilated.'

'In one battle?'

'It appears so.' His voice was barely audible. 'The Germans are calling it the Battle of Tannenberg, revenge for their loss five hundred years ago.' He shook his head again. 'And what revenge...'

'Mama, Mama, Mama!' Cries and footsteps clattered down the parquet corridor. 'Have you heard! Have you heard?'

Nadezhda burst through the double doors into the dining room; the sudden draught blowing the papers in front of her father off the table and up, swirling, into the air. Dressed in a white chiffon day dress, her long dark hair hanging loose around her shoulders, her normally pale cheeks were pink from running.

'Oleg is here, and he's told me everything! They shot the wounded in cold blood as they lay stuck in the mud, they put bullets through the heads of the horses. Thousands of screaming men and horses, driven into two huge swampy

lakes to drown. It took them eight hours to kill them all. They were twitching and moaning, stuck in the quagmire, unable to move.'

'Oleg,' nodded Militza, smiling, fighting to maintain her composure as her heart beat wildly in her chest. 'How very lovely to see you.'

'Grand Duchess Militza Nikolayevna,' replied the young man bowing in the doorway, his hand placed across his chest. 'Grand Duke Peter Nikolayevich.' He bowed again, turning towards the other end of the table.

Dressed in his scarlet and blue guard's uniform and tight, red-striped breeches and knee-length highly polished leather boots, Oleg's face still shone with the golden glow of youth. His blond hair, shorn against his head, only emphasised his earnestness and made him appear younger than his twenty-one years. Nadezhda stood next to him, her sharp features quivering with indignation and outrage.

'Tell them,' she said, taking hold of his arm. 'Tell them what you told me.'

'You can keep your stories, Oleg,' said Peter, getting out of his chair. 'I have urgent matters to attend to.'

'Papa!' Nadezhda fixed her father with a glare.

Of their three children, Nadezhda was most like her mother. Not physically. The eldest, Marina, was more like Militza in appearance, with the same black hair from the Black Mountains of Montenegro. Nadezhda was dark too, but she had the look of her father, tall and slim like a reed in the wind, she hailed more from the Russian north than the temperate climes of the Balkans. But Nadezhda had her mother's heart, her mother's soul, her mother's gifts, and the same black eyes.

Peter sat slowly back down, his papers still scattered all over floor.

'Oleg had a telephone call this morning from his brother Kostya at the front. Did you know five Konstantinovich brothers have enlisted in the war?'

'I did,' Peter nodded.

'Much to Marva's misery,' added Militza.

'Anyway, what did Kostya tell you, my love?' prompted Nadezhda.

Oleg paused. Although he had known both Militza and Peter his entire life, their country estates – Znamenka and the Konstantin Palace – were close to each other and, as children, his large family of eight siblings, including six brothers, were always back and forth, playing tennis, swimming in the waves, climbing trees, putting on plays with Marina, Roman and Nadezhda, and what he had to say was so appalling, he did not want to upset his future parents-in-law. His engagement to Nadezhda was unofficial, but he was determined to marry her. Even if he did have to wait the two years, that everyone had insisted on, until she turned eighteen.

'Go on,' nodded Militza.

'It was as if the gates of hell had swung open, so Kostya said, and all that is evil and pestilent was released,' he began, glancing from one end of the table to the other. 'There were thousands of them, our soldiers, our army, stuck in the mud, unable to move, exhausted by the struggle, or by the loss of blood, or the agony of their wounds. Our boys baked in the sun, their mouths gaping, their eyes frying, with nothing to drink. The Germans left them to die. But three days later some of them came back, out of compassion, pity, or most

likely irritation. The moans and cries were travelling across the plain and they could not sleep. They came to find the bodies still twitching and the horses still breathing. Mostly the wounded were too tired to plead for their lives. A bullet through the brain would put an end to their pain. It took the Germans eight hours to kill all our soldiers, wandering between the corpses, picking off them off one by one, as they clung to life, caked in mud, just about breathing.'

'Tell me it isn't true,' whispered Militza, rising out of her chair.

'Papa?' Nadezhda looked at father.

Peter shook his head. 'It's all in there.' He indicated to the papers on the floor. 'Our appalling defeat. So many Russian lives lost. Of the 150,000 who went into battle only 10,000 souls returned. And General Alexander Samsonov...' He stopped. The story was too painful to tell.

'What happened to the general?' snapped Nadezhda.

'He was so ashamed of the defeat, and the loss of his men, he walked into the woods and shot himself,' continued Oleg.

'Killed himself?'

Militza covered her mouth in horror. Samsonov was a hero in the Russo-Japanese War. Samsonov was the commander of the fiercely loyal Semirechyenskoe Cossacks. She'd met him at court, they'd dined together at the Yacht Club. He'd made her laugh.

'He's a true man of honour,' added Oleg. 'He went off on his own. His troops only knew what had happened when one shot rang out.'

'What a terrible waste of young men,' said Militza. 'What a terrible waste of lives.'

'What has the great Uncle Nikolai got to say about this?' asked Nadezhda, staring hotly at her father.

'Nadya,' hushed Oleg.

'What?' Nadezhda spun around. 'My uncle, the brilliant Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolayevich, is in charge of this war. He's commander in chief of the whole army! My uncle's in charge of all the bloodshed. *He* chose that we fight the Germans.'

'The Tsar chose to enter this war,' corrected Peter. His voice was quiet and yet clear.

'And your big brother is helping him,' hissed Nadezhda, her face flushed with fury. 'There's only one person who can stop this horror. One man.' She raised her slim index finger. 'One person who truly understands the Russian people and how they suffer. Rasputin!'

'We don't talk of *that* man in this house.' It was Peter's turn to glare at his daughter.

'We're the only house that doesn't!' Nadezhda's pretty little mouth curled with disdain, her reddened cheeks burnt bright.

'Don't talk to your father like that,' admonished Militza.

'Don't talk to me like I am a child!'

'Then don't behave like one.'

'Go to your room!' Peter stood up.

'I am sixteen years old!'

'If I have to repeat myself the consequences will be dire.' Peter pointed his finger slowly and directly at the door.

'Not as dire as this war!' Nadezhda turned around and marched out of the dining room, slamming the door behind her.

Oleg remained. Rigid with embarrassment, his lips

were pursed, his eyes, as clear and as blue as a Siberian sky in winter, were wide with astonishment. He knew his beloved had a hot head and a passionate heart, that's why he'd fallen so deeply in love with her in the first place, but he'd never seen her behave as petulantly as this. Maybe the families had been right to make him wait two years. Maybe she was a little too childish for marriage just yet. Although, now, with the advent of war, with everything else in such a state of flux, one less uncertainty might have been comforting.

'I apologise for my daughter's lack of patriotic fervour,' said Peter, as he bent down to pick up his papers.

'Allow me, sir,' said Oleg, kneeling down next to him.

'It's her *fervour* we should be watchful of,' retorted Militza, reaching for her small dark blue glass bottle on the table and squeezing some steadying cocaine elixir into the pipette before releasing the drops directly in her mouth. 'And you, Oleg, I presume will be staying with us a little longer?' she asked, again patting the corners of her mouth her linen napkin.

'I have my mobilisation papers.' He smiled.

'But you're not long recovered from pneumonia and pleurisy. You've only just returned from Bari. And your parents are only just back from Germany, and we all know how difficult that journey was. Stuck behind enemy lines, as war was declared. How is your father?'

'A little better,' said Oleg. 'Still confined to his rooms.'

'And you are still so very thin.' She looked him up and down.

'But well enough for the front.' Oleg stood up and smoothed down his trousers. 'I want to fight for my country.'

I want to fight for the Tsar and Mother Russia. The people need to know that the Imperial House is not scared to send its sons in to battle. And I am not scared to die.'

'No one is scared to die, until they stare death straight in the face,' replied Militza.

"It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live." Oleg was pleased with his erudition.

'Marcus Aurelius.' Militza nodded, acknowledging his quotation. 'All very noble, I am sure. But it is those left behind who truly feel the pain.'

Oleg's pale face and clear blue eyes shone, bathed in the morning light. His soul was so pure, his spirit so guileless and his innocence so luminous he could easily, Militza thought, be taken for an angel. Not worthy of this dark depressing world full of war and death and misery. She smiled. What a beautiful soul he was.

Little did she know that this was the last time she'd ever see him alive ever again.

Oleg was to be mortally wounded less than one month later. His riderless horse would be found pawing the ground next him on the muddied, bloodied battlefield, his broken body brought back from the front as they fought to save his life. He would be returned to his parents in a coffin, pulled by a gun carriage, covered in flowers. The only member of the Imperial family to be killed in battle during the whole of the war.

'I am so happy,' he'd said, with his dying breath as he seeped gangrene and putrefaction. 'It will encourage the troops to know the Imperial House is not afraid to shed its blood.'

Nadezhda's scream on receiving the news of her beloved's death was so long and loud and piercing Militza imagined it to be the sound of a soul being wrenched in two. Such was her grief, such was her misery that Nadezhda took to her bed and did not rise again from it for six whole months. Just as the war ravaged Russia, so heartache consumed Nadezhda; it ate away at her body and sucked her flesh of all its force. She lay like a husk in the crepuscular darkness of her bedroom, hovering between life and death, tormented by the throes of Limbo, haunted by the images of the battlefield and the screams of the dying. And all the time Militza prayed. She and Stana chanted and mixed herbs and tinctures and called upon Spirit and the thousands of wise women who'd come before them to help. Those mavenes of the soul who'd been burnt, ducked and drowned, they asked them to rise up and come to their aid in their hour of need. Just as they had begged the Four Winds once before for help, they called on all that they knew, all that they had, to save her.

Nadezhda called for Rasputin in her delirious sleep. Even Peter suggested they contact the Mad Monk, ask him to come to their aid. He owed them that much. But Militza would rather dance with the Devil himself than abase herself in front of that man. If Spirit wanted to take her daughter, the combined forces of she and her sister Stana would be powerless to stop it. What would be, would be.



Who, having raised his hands against the Lord's
Anointed, will remain unpunished?

1 Samuel 26:9

CHAPTER 1

30 December 1916, Petrograd

It was dark; dawn would not raise its head and the moon resolutely refused to show its face, as the *droshky* pulled up outside the palace on Petrovksy Embankment. Militza had said nothing to the driver. She'd kept her eyes down, while her scratched, freezing hands shook uncontrollably on her lap. Her back was rigid and her black sable-lined cloak draped closely around her face. She tried not to move. She wanted to remain as anonymous and as unmemorable as possible, a vague shadow of a figure for whom Dr Stanislaus de Lazovert had hailed a taxi at 6 a.m.

He'd been the only one brave enough. The others had thrown themselves into the shadows as the *droshky* appeared through the gloom, moving slowly and silently, its wooden wheels slicing its way through the snow-covered street. Militza could hear them panting with fear, she saw the flashing glint of terror in their eyes as they flattened themselves against walls and doorways on Petrovsky Prospekt, desperately hoping not to be seen. But it was the doctor who stepped forward into the streetlight and

mumbled something along the lines of 'allow me' before cupping his leather-gloved hands and hollering.

The driver was half asleep. His frost-blown nose was just visible over his scarf. His tired horse snorted clouds into the silence. The driver coughed and eyed her up and down as the doctor said the address and, on seeing the cloak and the shine of her jet evening bag, he immediately demanded double the fare. They were all at it these days. Bread was triple the price and vodka was impossible to find; even the most basic of supplies had to be bought on the black market. The good doctor agreed the price because Militza couldn't speak – her mouth was dry, her cracked lips were parched and her heart was pounding uncontrollably in her chest. What had she done? Try as she might she could not unsee what she had seen. She climbed unsteadily up the steps into the small carriage, sat rigidly on the black leather-buttoned seat and closed her eyes. But the horror, his face, those pale eyes, the sign of the cross and the look he'd given her as he slowly sank into the depths of the freezing Neva, weighed down by the sodden fur of Prince Yusupov's coat: they were images imprinted on her soul. No matter how tightly she shut her eyes, they would not disappear. Every night she would see them. Every night she would see his face and hear his whisper. And, she knew it then, he would haunt her forever.

'Right here please,' she said, rapping the roof of the carriage with her knuckles.

'I could take you in,' he shouted down, straining his head to glance in through the steamed-up window.

'The street is fine,' she mumbled, opening the carriage door. 'I don't want to wake the house.'

She pulled herself off the seat and stepped down, her

frozen toes could not feel the snow through her sodden silk slippers.

'Thank you,' she said, careful not to catch his eye as she fumbled through her handbag. She pulled out some roubles that immediately sprang through her fingers and tumbled into the snow. 'Sorry.' She bent down slowly, hardly able to move. The strain of lugging the body, wrapped up in a curtain, and throwing it over the railings of the bridge, had taken its toll. Not that she had done much of the heavy lifting. Vladimir Purishkevich, Lieutenant Sergei Mikhailovich Sukhotin and Dr Stanislaus de Lazovert had thrown the corpse off the bridge, while Militza and Prince Dmitry Pavlovich had looked on. But the panic before – loading the car and tearing the blue curtains off the wall of the Yusupov Palace – had exhausted her. She was now cold and stiff and it was hard for her to move. She realised, also, as she scrubbed about in the snow picking up the furls of money, that she had lost her gloves. Black kid. Monogrammed. In golden thread. Her distinctive initials were sewn into the backs of the wrists.

'Here,' she said, handing the fistful of money up to the driver. 'Take it all.'

He didn't need asking twice. His heavily mittened hand snatched the wad of roubles and shoved them quickly into his greatcoat pocket. He didn't even count them.

'Good night,' she said.

'Is it?' he replied and, with a shake of the reins, he was off.

Alone in the street, Militza stood, staring into the darkness. She inhaled the cold, sharp air deep into her lungs and then slowly exhaled. The enormity of what she

had done was only just beginning to hit her. The Devil was dead. The horned satyr she and Stana had called upon all those years ago, when desperate and demoralised, that Holy Monster of depravity who'd been carried to them by the Four Winds, was no more. Why was she not more relieved? Elated even?

Fate had dealt her the cards and she had snatched at them with both hands. She'd met Oswald Rayner in the Yacht Club for a reason. He'd drunk too much cognac and told her the game was afoot and Prince Yusupov was planning to pull off the most important political assassination of the century with some wine and cakes, like a child in a fairy tale. Fate had brought her to the palace that night and Fate had made her pull the trigger.

She slowly pushed at the wrought-iron gates of the palace. Black and embossed with the Nikolayevich coat of arms, they squeaked in the cold. A dog barked his response from over the other side of the wall. She ran swiftly across the courtyard. Should she ring the enormous doorbell and wake the house? Or hope the door to the entrance at the side was open?

It was almost 6.30 a.m.; the kitchen maids were surely up. Militza tried the handle to the side door and thankfully it turned. She slipped quickly through the double doors and, silent as a shadow, made her way along the unlit corridor towards the hall. All she had to do was fly up the stairs to her bedroom and pretend that she had been there, asleep, for the whole night. If she could only make it there, unseen, she'd have an alibi, even if the *droshky* driver were to remember her. No one would doubt the word of a Grand Duchess.

The hallway was dark, the servants had yet to turn on the lights. Militza slowed her pace and rose up on her toes; she lifted her snow-dampened skirts and held her breath, terrified to make a sound. She approached the long divan at the bottom of the stairs; she had a foot on the bottom step. Suddenly, something leapt up in the blackness. A giant dark shadow with whip-long hair and a rustle of skirts sprang from the divan, throwing a thick cloak to the floor. Militza flattened herself against the marble banister, her heart pounding, her eyes firmly shut, not daring to look.

'Is that you?' hissed a voice.

There was a click of a lamp switch and a bright blinding light. Her sister Stana was standing by the divan still wearing the dark green silk dress she'd worn out to dinner at the Yacht Club the night before. Her long black hair hung in strands around her shoulders, her face was as white as wax and just as luminous. She had clearly not slept and had been waiting all night, coiled like a cobra, for her sister to return.

'And?'

'And what?' replied Militza, dazed by her sister's appearance.

'Has he gone?'

'Who?'

'Rasputin.' Stana stepped forward and grabbed her sister by the shoulders, staring feverishly into her black eyes. 'Did you throw him into the river?' she whispered, gripping the shoulders even tighter. 'Did you drown him? Is he dead? Did you make sure the water filled his lungs and the ice froze his blood and his breath left his body? Did you make sure the ripples closed over his face and that he shall never... ever... be made a saint?'

'I did.' Militza was shivering. With cold? Or the memory?
'I watched him sink, I watched him open his eyes and smile.
And worse...'

'How can there be anything worse?'

'I watched him forgive me.'

'I don't understand.'

'He forgave me, you, us... both of us. He made the sign
of the cross as he sank into the depths. I heard his soul
scream as he disappeared down into the deep.'

Stana shook her head. 'So he went to the Devil.' She
stared at her sister. 'The Beast was happy to collect one of
His own.' She inhaled deeply. Her mouth hardened with
resolve. 'So that's it then.' She smiled. 'It's over.'

There was a noise at the top of the stairs and the two
sisters looked up. Standing on the landing in her white lace
nightgown, her dark hair tied loosely at the nape of her
neck, was a beautiful young woman. Nadezhda. She looked
like a ghost. Her pale skin and sharp features shone in the
half-light from her upstairs bedroom. She stared down at
her mother, a frown on her eighteen-year-old face.

'What are you doing?' she mumbled, as if still half asleep.

'Why are you awake?' responded Militza, keeping her
tone light, hoping to reassure her daughter and send her
back to bed.

'I couldn't sleep.'

'Oleg?' asked Militza.

'Not tonight,' she replied. 'Tonight was different, Mama.'
Her eyes were wide and glassy. 'Tonight I had a terrible
feeling something had happened... It was as if I was gasping
for air, struggling, drowning and so terribly... terribly cold.
It was a horrible dream, Mama, truly horrible.' She placed

a fine hand on the white marble staircase and began to walk down. 'What's happened?' she asked, taking in the scene below her. 'Why are you up? Why are you both dressed? What did I miss?'

'Nothing, my love,' reassured Militza.

'Nothing,' agreed Stana. 'We've just been out, and we are back very late. They had some gypsy dancers at the Yacht Club and your mama and I could not resist. It's been so long... what with war... we thought...'

'Gypsy dancers at the Yacht Club? How bizarre. Was Rasputin there?'

'No.' Militza could feel the sudden rush of blood to her cheeks at the mere mention of his name. 'Why would he be there?'

'Only he loves gypsies, he loves dancing. Life. I'm surprised.' She shrugged. 'Oh, what a horrible dream that was,' she added with a shiver. 'So very vivid, Mama, it really was, as if I were drowning in the river just outside there.' She pointed towards the locked front door. 'Weighed down by a giant fur coat.'

Suddenly the double front doors burst open with a smash and clatter of broken glass and the hammering of wood on wood, as a tornado of wind and snow tore through the hall. Nadezhda screamed, her hair flew around her face, her white lace nightie swirled around her knees in the maelstrom. Both Militza and Stana stood stock-still, their fists clenched, their eyes fixed at the entrance, too terrified to move. Surely he couldn't be back? Surely he was dead at the bottom of the river, never to resurface? Surely not even he could cheat death for the fifth time? Gutted by a whore, beaten by a priest, poisoned by cakes, shot through the head

and drowned. The wind swirled up and up, through the house, rattling the chandeliers that sang like tinkling glasses at a ball. The curtains bellowed and ballooned and a lamp crashed to the floor. Nadezhda's high-pitched screeching continued to echo and bounce off the marble columns and porphyry pillars in the hall.

'I do apologise,' came a voice from the threshold. A silhouette of a man swiftly removed his hat. 'I only gave the door the gentlest of pushes...' He walked urgently towards them. 'How are you? Are you all right? What happened? Did you—'

'Mr Rayner!' Militza interrupted, raising her gloveless hand sharply in the air, for fear the man might say more. 'I don't believe you have met my daughter? Nadezhda.'

'Your daughter?' Rayner looked confused as he slammed the front doors and scanned the snow-scattered, darkened hall. His hair was immaculately parted down the middle and greased flat over his skull. His white shirt, just visible below his buttoned, fur-collared coat, looked freshly laundered and ironed. Unlike Militza and Stana, Oswald Rayner appeared to have gone home to change after the murder.

'Yes.' Militza smiled tightly, rubbing her scratched and scraped hands together before clasping them behind her back. 'My daughter.'

'Mama! I am not dressed for visitors,' replied Nadezhda hotly, pulling the frills of her nightdress tightly around her neck.

'Princess.' Rayner bowed, fiddling nervously with his brown felt hat. 'How very delightful to make your acquaintance.'

'Sir.' Nadezhda smiled briefly, before glancing furiously across at her mother.

'Now run along, dear, and back to bed,' said Militza.

'But—'

'But nothing,' insisted Militza, waving her hand dismissively.

Militza's reply was sharp and Nadezhda knew better than to respond. Her mother was not someone you crossed, even if she were still wearing an evening gown at six forty-five in the morning and had cuts and scrapes on her hands. Her mother's appearance was posing more questions than answers. But it could wait. She turned to go back up the stairs.

'Rasputin is missing,' blurted Rayner.

'No!' Nadezhda gasped as she paused on the third step. She looked back at her mother, whose face remained inscrutable.

'Missing?' Militza's voice was barely audible.

'Bertie Stopford left me a message at five thirty this morning.'

'Five thirty?' asked Stana, glancing across at her sister and then at Rayner.

All three of them were thinking the same thing.

Grigory Yefimovich Rasputin was surely dead by 5.30 a.m. on 30 December 1916. Militza had fired the bullet into his brain, right through his frontal lobe, using Oswald Rayner's gun. The only .455 Webley revolver in all of Russia. Standard issue for British Secret Service. Standard issue for a British secret agent. Rayner: the fluent Russian speaker. The spy. Best friend of Prince Felix Yusupov in whose palace Rasputin had been shot. Best friends since

Oxford University, best friends since they both joined the Bullingdon Club, the only 'murderers' to do so in its entire history, since it was founded in 1780. She had shot him and then helped the Grand Duke Dmitry Pavlovich shove the bound and hooded body, wrapped in Yusupov's fur coat and the blue velvet curtain ripped from the walls of the Yusupov Palace, into the car. The car that wouldn't start properly, the car that stopped and stalled all the way to the Bolshoi Petrovsky Bridge. But what time did they get to the bridge? Was even he alive then, despite the shot through his head? What time did they throw him over the railings into the frozen river? What time was it when his bloodied galosh flew off, the one they left on the opposite riverbank? What time was it that she watched him sink to the bottom of the river, weighed down by the coat? When she saw him open his pale blue eyes and stare into her soul and make the sign of the cross as he disappeared into the depths?

'Five thirty,' confirmed Rayner. 'Bertie has some friends in the secret police and they said he went out last night after midnight and has not returned. Yet. His daughter called them, worried, or was it her friend? Anyway, he's missing.'

'He's probably drunk. Have they checked the Islands?' asked Nadezhda. 'He so loves going there. He's there a lot. Or maybe church? He could be praying, praying for Russia?'

'Go to bed,' hissed Militza in the direction of the stairs.

'I am only trying to help,' protested Nadezhda.

'I am sure you are,' replied Stana. 'But your mother is tired and now she is very worried about her friend.'

'Friend!' Nadezhda laughed. 'Everyone knows Mother despises Rasputin and has done so for years. Ever since

he banished you and Uncle Nikolasha to the Caucasus. Actually, even before then. You hate him. You all hate him. You all despise him, you want him dead, everyone knows that!

'Your mother doesn't despise Rasputin,' retorted Stana, her hands on her hips, her long dark hair Medusa-like on her shoulders. 'Now go to bed.'

'It's only because you don't understand him, no one does really,' said Nadezhda. 'You're all too blind. You, most of Petrograd and the entire city of Moscow hate him too. In fact, every soul, all the way to the striking sailors in Vladivostok, can't stand him. He's the most hated man in Russia.'

'I'm sure he'll be found soon. He's probably asleep somewhere,' said Militza through tight lips. 'Now, you go back to bed and rest, and perhaps Mr Rayner might like to join us for a cup of coffee, or tea, or something a little more fortifying on this cold morning. I most certainly need a little something. It's been a very long night.'

'I would be delighted,' replied Oswald Rayner, with a curt, polite bow as he looked Militza directly in the eye.

And so the three conspirators retired to the Blue Parlour for refreshments.

It was about 12 p.m. when the telephone calls started. The rumour mills were clearly working overtime. Everyone knew Militza was staying with her sister Stana at the palace on Petrovsky Embankment. It was a new palace, built by Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolayevich as a wedding gift for Stana. Large, Italianate, with a view of the Neva and the

Winter Palace the other side of the river, they had all been living together while their husbands, Nikolasha and Peter, were in the Caucasus, helping with the war.

And the calls were numerous. Militza and Stana refused to take them. Militza instructed Natalya, her long-serving lady's maid, to say that she was unwell and not available to postulate on the sudden disappearance of the Tsarina's friend. Brana, the crone whom the sisters had brought with them from Montenegro all those years ago, was dispatched to find a bottle of Vin Mariani in the cellar, a cocaine-laced wine that Militza had ordered in case of fatigue. For both she and Stana found themselves immensely fatigued. In fact, Militza was numb. For someone normally so sharp and bright, the broken woman sitting on the divan, staring into the flickering fire, deathly grey and with a tremor in her shoulders, was unrecognisable. Stana was only marginally more animated. Oswald Rayner was worried, deeply worried. In his limited experience, getting away with murder required a little bit more verve than this.

'Ladies,' he hissed, as Brana left the room, having served three large goblets of Vin Mariani. 'We must come up with a plan.'

'What do you mean?' asked Stana, picking up her glass of wine. 'There were no witnesses. We shall be fine.'

'My good lady,' replied Rayner, taking a cigarette out of a small silver case, 'there are always witnesses to a murder.'

'Don't be foolish, Mr Rayner,' she retorted with an irritated shake of her head. 'My sister and I dined at the Yacht Club last night and came straight home. It's dangerous to be out in Petrograd these days, what with the war and everything – why should we do anything else?'

'Of course, of course, of course you did,' he agreed, sucking speedily on his cigarette. 'Wise, most wise. Stick to that. Keep it simple. I like it.'

'It was anything but that,' mumbled Militza, draining her glass of wine.

'But what?' asked Stana.

'Simple,' she replied.

The slate grey sky had already succumbed to darkness when, at about 3 p.m., the Honourable Albert Stopford burst through the doors of the Blue Parlour on the first floor of the Nikolayevsky Palace on Petrovsky Embankment. A tall, slim, elegantly dressed Englishman with thin mousy hair, a long sharp nose and large limpid eyes the colour of the English Channel, he bristled with energy and wit and although he'd only recently arrived in the city, he was already inordinately popular, especially with the inordinately grand Grand Duchess Vladimir who simply would not, could not, go out to dinner without him.

A famed dancer of the cotillion and the French quadrille, pedigreed and penniless, Bertie was a man of few obvious means but extensive connections. And no one quite knew what he was doing in Petrograd at the height of the war. He was reportedly an antiques dealer specialising in Fabergé and Cartier, which was possibly why the Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna Vladimir enjoyed his company so much, for there was little else she loved more in the world. And Bertie was an ace at helping her dispose of her dear departed husband's palace-load of money. Although this by no means explained his close friendship with Oswald

Rayner and his numerous other powerful contacts at the British Embassy. Truth be told, Bertie Stopford was one of those Englishmen who put a great deal of effort into appearing to be a great deal more foolish and frivolous than they actually were.

'Rayner!' he exclaimed as he walked through the door. 'Your Royal Highnesses.' He bowed beautifully, swiftly smoothing his moustache between his right thumb and forefinger. 'I do apologise for this intrusion and for persuading your servants to allow me up here. They were hugely reluctant, but I am afraid I have been searching the city for my friend here. I have been to Donon's, the Yacht Club, the Villa Rhode and an all-too-brief luncheon at the embassy with Sir George Buchanan and General Hanbury-Williams, which is no mean feat, may I say, as they are not the sort of chaps who would settle for two courses and a kummel. But I have news. News that cannot wait. Rasputin is dead!'

'Missing,' corrected Rayner.

'No. Dead! Most certainly dead and Prince Yusupov and his lover Prince Dmitry Pavlovich are in the frame.'

'His lover?' queried Stana, little astonished.

'Lover, madame, yes.' He nodded slowly and bowed again just in case. 'My friend in the police is adamant. There were shots fired. There is blood all over the courtyard next to the Yusupov Palace. They tried to explain it away. That they'd shot a dog. A hound. A beautiful hound. But my friend in the police said there was too much blood in the snow for a hound.'

'But it might not necessarily be Rasputin,' suggested Rayner.

'Oh, but it is. Yusupov admitted as much, and anyway Felix was the one who sent a car to collect Rasputin from his apartment at midnight last night to meet Princess Irina at the palace on Moika.'

'But who'd believe such a thing? Irina is in the Crimea, I saw her only recently,' said Stana.

'Precisely!' declared Bertie. 'A trap!'

'A trap indeed,' muttered Militza.

'They were not alone,' continued Bertie. 'There were others. Carousing was heard. *And* there were women.'

'Women?' asked Rayner.

'Two,' he confirmed, sticking two fingers in the air, by way of illustration. 'Two women were seen leaving the palace in the early hours. They are keen to identify them, obviously.' He tapped his two fingers together. 'Two.' He glanced across at Stana and Militza who stared back at him. Their dark eyes were blank. 'I do apologise,' he nodded slowly, lowering his eyes, contemplating a further bow, 'but I have been assured by the police that, on account of their clothing, they were ladies of the night.'

'Ladies of the night,' repeated Militza, a frown flickering across her face.

'Prostitutes,' explained Bertie. 'A couple of old prostitutes.'

'Prostitutes?' Stana's voice betrayed her surprise.

'Prostitutes.' Rayner nodded enthusiastically. 'Mostly likely those old gypsy whores you can pick up at the Rhode.'

'I do apologise,' Bertie said again. 'Such language... but it gets worse.' His voice fell to a whisper. 'The Tsarina has been informed and she is distraught, she's had to be sedated. A whole vial of Veronal. She is inconsolable. After all, he was her only friend, after Anna Vyubova obviously, but

she is stricken by grief, screaming and wailing apparently, terrified about what will happen next.'

'What will happen next?' asked Rayner.

'What Rasputin said? What he predicted would happen?' He looked at each of them, an eyebrow raised in expectation. 'In the letter?'

'What letter?' asked Militza.

'The letter!' Bertie found it hard to conceal his delight. 'The letter he wrote to the Tsar?'

'Rasputin wrote a letter to the Tsar?' asked Rayner.

'Full of predictions,' added Bertie. 'I have a copy. My friend in the police.' He tapped his trouser pocket and pulled out an envelope. 'Here. It was intercepted and they made a copy, several copies, in fact.'

'Really?' Stana sounded surprised.

'Of course.' Bertie shrugged. 'What do you think the secret police are doing outside his apartment all day, if they are not reading his post and making copies? Anyway, here it is. This is what he predicted about his own death before the year was out. Before tomorrow, in fact. Tomorrow is New Year's Eve. Obviously.' He cleared his throat, flapped out the paper in front of him and began to read.

'I feel that I shall leave life before January 1st. I wish to make known to the Russian people, to Papa, to the Russian Mother and to the Children what they must understand. If I am killed by common assassins, and especially by my brothers the Russian peasants, you, the Tsar of Russia, will have nothing to fear for your children, they will reign for hundreds of years.

But if I am murdered by boyars, nobles, and if they

shed my blood, their hands will remain soiled with my blood for twenty-five years and they will leave Russia. Brothers will kill brothers, and they will kill each other and hate each other, and for twenty-five years there will be no peace in the country. The Tsar of the land of Russia, if you hear the sound of the bell, which will tell you that Grigory has been killed, you must know this: if it was your relations who have wrought my death, then none of your children will remain alive for more than two years. And if they do, they will beg for death as they will see the defeat of Russia, see the Antichrist coming, plague, poverty, destroyed churches, and desecrated sanctuaries where everyone is dead. The Russian Tsar, you will be killed by the Russian people and the people will be cursed and will serve as the devil's weapon killing each other everywhere. Three times for 25 years they will destroy the Russian people and the orthodox faith and the Russian land will die. I shall be killed. I am no longer among the living. Pray, pray, be strong, and think of your blessed family.'

There was silence in the Blue Parlour, save for the gentle crackle of the dying fire.

'They haven't found a body, have they?' said Rayner, injecting his voice with a little optimism.

'Not yet,' agreed Bertie, plucking a cigarette from the silver box in front of him. 'My Grand Duchess Vladimir thinks it's only a matter of time. But the real question is, who actually killed him? If they are related to the Tsar, if they are noble, if they are royal, if they are a boyar, then, that is what Rasputin predicted.'

'What nonsense,' said Rayner. 'Superstitious nonsense.'

'Prince Felix Yusupov is of noble blood, he is a prince *and* he is related to the Tsar by marriage to his niece.' Bertie's index finger was raised by way of correcting his friend.

'What if it wasn't him?' asked Rayner.

'Well,' replied Bertie with a shrug as he lit his cigarette, 'let's hope they are not of noble birth.' He exhaled. 'Because that would be bad. Awfully bad.'

They sat in silence contemplating the fate of Russia, the fate of the Tsar and his family.

'Do you remember the words of Papus?' Stana turned slowly towards her sister; her eyelids flickered as all the blood drained from her face.

'No,' Militza whispered under her breath.

"'Rasputin is a vessel like Pandora's Box,'" began Stana, her hands shaking on her lap as she spoke, "'which contains all the vices, crimes and filth of the Russian people. Should the vessel be broken we will see its dreadful contents spill themselves across Russia.'"