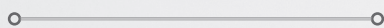


PART I



A RUSSIAN FAIRY TALE





ONCE UPON A TIME . . .



BEYOND THE SUNRISE, halfway to the moon, and so very far away it would make your feet weep to think about it, lies a land vast in size and deep in sadness. From where we sit, on the far edge of history, we can see across Time itself, and yet this land is so big we struggle to see all of it at once.

Nevertheless, here it is: Here's a river as wide as a sea, and into it flows a stream as wide as a river. In summer salmon leap through the cool fresh water, in winter the ice is as thick as a house is tall.

There's a forest as large as a country, and in the heart of the forest is a single hut, from where we see a man, an old man with a great gray beard, staggering out in the winter-deep snow. He carries an ax slung on his back, for he's a woodcutter, and

despite the snow, he has to keep his orphaned grandchildren warm. He doesn't see the bear padding through the snow just half a league away, but neither does the bear see him, and in the remote depths of the forest, half a league is as good as a thousand.

There! Away at the sunset edge of the land; soldiers! Soldiers in the millions, fighting a great war, which seems to be without end. We know that it will end one day, when enough of them are dead, but the soldiers do not. They have fought for so long they have forgotten what it is they are dying for. Look! Another one is killed; the top of his head blown clean off by a bullet at close range. His hot red blood freezes before it even reaches the ground.

And there's a man, a young man, a stranger to the land, who is foolish enough to think he can walk across its endlessness.

Remember him. He carries a small leather suitcase in one hand and a strange but sturdy wooden box in the other. In his heart there is pain, but in his head there is wonder; wonder and a delightful tumble of words he has been trying to learn. Russian words.

For this is Russia.

A MAGICAL LAND



THE WOODCUTTER, HAVING MISSED THE BEAR, came home to his grandchildren, his little boy and girl, and, because nothing made them happier in the world, he told them a fairy tale.

As always, the moment he came through the door stamping the snow off his boots they jumped up and began to pester him for a story.

“All in good time, little pigeons,” he laughed, “just as soon as we’ve had our soup!”

So they ate their steaming soup and thick black bread, and when they were done, Old Peter the woodcutter told his grandchildren a fairy tale. The tale he told them is the one I am telling you now, and it’s the story of the Tsar, the man who ruled over the whole great country.

Just the word *Tsar* tells you how powerful he was, because of where it comes from. Some people spell it *Tsar*, others *Czar*,

and if spelled that way you begin to see another word, the word from which it grew: Caesar. Those Roman emperors ruled many lands, but our Tsar holds sway over one hundred and eighty million people. Imagine. One hundred and eighty million people, maybe three times the number that Augustus or Marcus Aurelius ruled.

An empire this large needs a powerful Tsar. That is what the Tsar's father told him when he was just a little boy, a little boy called Nicky. And when Nicky's father, Alexander, was little, that's exactly what his father had told him, too. This is the truth and they know it, because God has told them so.

How else could you rule a land so very, very big? Only a sharp and decisive man, with a single vision, can keep hold of something as massive as Russia, and as magical. For it is not simply its size that makes it so cumbersome, but its superstition. Even the Imperial symbol is a mythical beast—a fabulous double-headed eagle that looks both ways at once.

Up in the city, on the banks of the mighty river Neva, sits the Chamber of Wonders created by Peter the Great; a museum he founded in an attempt to dispel the superstitions of the peasants.

There, hidden in drawers and on display in glass-fronted cabinets, are hideous things. Monsters, freaks, and ghouls. Stuffed and mounted, a sheep with two heads, and snakes with two tails. Monkeys with three arms, a stillborn lamb with eight legs. These are the stuff of nightmares and they are also the seed of fairy-tale monsters, but they are nothing to what is in that final cabinet, the one in the corner of the room. You saw it from the edge of your eye as you came in, saw the crowds flocking

around it, heard their awed silence. Even now you find your feet pulling you over to it unwillingly, your eyes refusing to shut though your heart is praying they will close forever.

There in the case: dead things. Things that might have lived once, maybe for a year, maybe just for an hour, maybe born dead. Their skin bleached by preservative salts; their faces contorted as if shrieking in horror at themselves, screaming for all eternity as if they caught sight of their reflection in a looking glass. Their faces scream as the crowd should, but does not. Babies with two heads, like the sheep. Unborn Siamese twins, with two legs but two heads and four arms. A fetus with no head at all, but countless arms, like an octopus.

Peter, the Great, the modernizer, decreed that all these monstrosities should be brought to his city, to show they were natural, not magical. He wanted to show that in the vastness of his empire there was nothing but nature's law. He wanted science to spread light like the sun over the winter forest. But his efforts achieved exactly the opposite, and people gasped and crossed themselves and pressed their noses against the glass until it became opaque with grease.

He tried to take the magic from Russia, but the magic would not go. Even the names of places tell you that magic is as much a part of this land as the soil or the river water: Irkutsk. The Caspian Sea. The Sea of Okhotsk, the Sea of Japan. Kazan, Murmansk, Kharkov, and Vladivostok.

There is magic in those words, just as there was tragedy in the blood of the Tsar and his family.

A tragedy that was a hundred years in the making.

LIFE AND BLOOD



THERE WAS TRAGEDY all across Europe. Tragedy in the shape of war.

If you looked at the family trees of the royal houses of Europe, you would find more threads between them than in a busy spider's web. The Tsar had a cousin who was a king of another country. His name was George. Nicholas, the Tsar, and George had another cousin, William, the Kaiser, who had gone to war against Nicholas's and George's countries. It made no sense, but then when has a war made sense?

Let me return to the fairy tale, of the Tsar and his people. The Tsar was in trouble, for his was a story nearing its end.

For three centuries the Tsar's family had ruled like gods over their empire. From time to time there had been an outbreak of

opposition, as some foolish soul tried to upset the old order, but each and every time, that order had been restored.

So the Tsar lived with his family still. He had a wife, Alexandra, who he called Alix, just as she called him Nicky from the time when they had fallen in love. They lived in a beautiful palace; in fact, they lived in many beautiful palaces. Each was more sumptuous than the other, but there was one special palace, prized the highest: Tsarskoe Selo. Here they lived with their beautiful children, four daughters—Olga, Tatiana, Maria, Anastasia—and their only son, the boy of great sorrow, Alexei.

Alexei, who carries his sorrow, and Russia's tragedy, in his blood.

They wanted for nothing. In the same way that the Tsars and all their families had wanted for nothing down the centuries, every wish that could be dreamt of the Tsar granted his blessed wife and children.

Our woodcutter and his grandchildren could never have begun to even imagine the splendor of the imperial palaces. Where the woodcutter had three spoons, of wood, one for himself, one for his grandson, Vanya, and one for his granddaughter, Maroosia, the palace had a thousand spoons of silver. Where the woodcutter had three chairs, the palace had four hundred, of gold. And where he had the clothes he stood in and the boots he wore, the Tsarina had ten thousand dresses of satin and silk. Of billowing satin and silk, too, were the coverings for the beds in the royal chambers, where the woodcutter and his grandchildren had a single old woolen blanket each. The Tsarina had jewels, too! Ropes of pearls, long strings, with

the most perfect moon-white pearls to hang about her pretty neck. And diamonds! Diamonds by the bucketful, which she kept in a peculiar, small, green leather case.

Even when they sat down to take tea, they did it in style. The Tsarina had a favorite little samovar in which they boiled water for their tea, or rather, their servants did. But the Tsarina loved to pour the hot water into the cups herself, because the samovar was special. It was solid silver, and shone like the white sun low over a frozen lake on a winter's morning, and on its side were her initials in English, the language she and Nicky would write to each other in: *AR*, Alexandra Romanov.

The woodcutter knew none of this, but went through the woods each day, still unaware of the lurking bear.

And the children? What of them? The Tsar's children had everything they could ask for. Each had a whole room of toys to play with, and they shared not one but a whole stable of rocking horses. Far away in the forest Vanya and Maroosia had nothing, but still they were happy, as they had each other, and their little black cat and tall gray wolf-dog to play with. And they had Grandfather to feed them and keep them warm and tell them fairy tales at bedtime.

I said that the Tsar's children had rocking horses, but that is not quite true; the girls had horses, Olga and Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia, but their young brother, Alexei, did not. Nor did he have a bicycle of his own, nor a bat and ball. He was not allowed to run and play as his sisters did, and he was not allowed to play with the palace dogs.

And why? Not because his mother and father loved him any

less than his sisters, but for a different reason: the tragedy in his blood. For there in his veins, passed down from his grandmother, now long dead but once the queen of the British Empire, skulked an evil disease.

The disease was a strange thing that no one could explain. Maybe even strange enough to put Alexei into Peter's Chamber of Wonders, if he were to die. For when the young Tsarevich cut himself, the bleeding would not stop.

Maybe it doesn't sound so serious. You or I might cut ourselves, nicking our hand on the tooth of the saw as we cut logs for the fire. We might take God's name, but think no more of it. You or I might catch the back of our hand against the bread knife as we pass a hunk of black bread across the table in the hut. We might sing to ignore it, but think no more of it. In a few moments the cut would stop bleeding, and we would go on with our soup and stories.

But the Tsarevich, little Alexei, was different. If he cut himself, no matter in how small a way, there would be pandemonium in the palace. His mother would shriek and call for the nurses, the nurses would come and call for the doctors and all would fly around in useless panic, as the cut refused to heal and slowly, but surely, the boy's blood would pour from his body.

One day, Alexei scratched his ear on a thorn. It took three days for the blood to stop. So, as he grew, he was forbidden from doing anything that might endanger him. No rocking horses, no rough games, no running. No fun.

There could be no risk to his life. He was not the first in his family to suffer from the disease. There was an uncle who'd had

it, too. Alexei had never known him, because at the age of three he'd fallen through a window. His body bled on the inside, and he never recovered. The Tsar and the Tsarina determined that this must never happen to their son, their only son, and therefore the only future Tsar of Russia. He had to live, so that one day he would rule the empire, as his family had done for three hundred years.

He *had* to live.

IN THE NAME OF THE TSAR



THE TSAR WORRIED. He worried like no other Tsar before him. He looked inward and he worried about his family, about Alexei and his strange blood. He looked outward and he worried about his empire.

What he saw disturbed him.

There was deep poverty and famine. People were going hungry and were growing angry. Small disturbances on the farms where the peasants worked got out of hand, there had been riots and soldiers had been sent to restore order.

It had happened during his grandfather's time, and his father's. Trying to make the workers' lives better, they had decided to introduce reforms, to give them certain freedoms so that they might earn just a bit more money, to allow them to sell some of what they grew rather than giving it all to the landowner.

The Tsar looked at his people and what he saw disturbed him. He saw clearly what was wrong.

His father and his grandfather had been weak.

They had been indulgent, and now the people were trying to take more than they were entitled to.

“I will never agree to what they want,” he declared, “because I consider it harmful to the people whom God has entrusted to me.”

He knew what he had to do.

He repealed the reforms and sent soldiers to quell any trouble as soon as it started.

The people’s hunger grew worse, and as winter began to bite at their heels, they grew cold, too. Death rode through Russia on a pale horse, taking everyone he could with sickness and famine, and the people grew afraid, and with their fear came more anger. Though the Tsar believed he had restored order, he had not stopped the dark mutterings in hidden corners of his empire.

Seeing the trouble that was boiling up, one young priest decided he had to act.

“Father,” the people called him, though he was father to no one.

“Father,” they said, “what shall we do? Our children are starving, and dying. We are starving and sick. But what can we do? We are nothing. The Tsar owns us as he would a horse, but cares less for us than those beasts. Help us, Father!”

The young priest heard them and replied.

“We will act, together. Let us go into the city hand in hand,

to the very gates of the palace. This Sunday, one hundred thousand of us must march and there we will make our case to the Tsar.”

The people looked at him uncertainly, for though they wanted to believe they could do such a thing, they couldn't believe it was possible. The priest, whose name was Georgy, saw the doubt on their faces.

“Believe me,” he said. “Go to your families now, and to the houses of your friends, and tell them that there must be one hundred thousand of us when Sunday comes. Tell them this, and there will be.”

So they went and told their friends and their families, and everybody told someone else that Sunday would be the day when their lives would change, and in the meantime, Georgy thought about what he had started. What would happen on Sunday? Suppose no one came? Suppose everyone came? It was his doing. He had given the people hope and it was his responsibility. Suppose the Tsar didn't take any notice of them?

But he had to. He had to! And just in case he didn't, Georgy decided to write a letter to the Tsar, to give him on the day. It would be as if one hundred thousand people had handed the letter to the Tsar personally. No one could ignore a letter like that.

On Saturday night he sat down to write it. It was a long letter, polite and respectful, and it was passionate and proud. He asked the Tsar to care for his people, to see their troubles and to take them away, to bring good things to Russia.

When he had finished writing, Georgy sat back in his chair. He had written for an hour and it was late. He rose and took his candle to bed, blew it out and lay in the dark, dreaming of the day to come, and dreamed that no one came. In his sleep, he alone stood quaking before the Tsar, and when he handed over the letter, he saw with horror that he was holding a blank sheet of paper.

The priest need not have worried.

When Sunday came, it was possibly more than one hundred thousand people who flocked into the streets of the city. They joined in a massive throng, and began to walk toward the Winter Palace. As they went, they sang, and the crowd was so very large that many different songs were all sung at once. Here and there the words and melodies mixed with each other, but no one cared. There were women and children in the crowd, too, and there was laughter and hope and comradeship. A tired mother gratefully let her daughter ride on the shoulders of a tough old veteran, the washerwomen from the Neva walked like princesses alongside the sailors, until at last the one hundred thousand surged into the Palace Square, so that Georgy could hand his letter to the Tsar.

In the square, the Tsar had his answer already waiting. Even before Georgy had a chance to hand over his letter, the Tsar gave his reply.

A thousand soldiers stood outside the palace gates.

A thousand soldiers knelt in the snow, and lifted their rifles to their shoulders.

A thousand shots scorched the air, and the blood began to flow.

They screamed and they ran.

The young priest ran, too. As he ran, the letter fell from his hand, where it was trampled underfoot by one hundred thousand pairs of feet.

CRUEL TALES



SOME FAIRY TALES ARE CRUEL, like the last one. Sometimes there is no happy ending, where the brave young peasant marries the beautiful princess, and wins a trunkful of treasure to boot. What happens in a fairy tale is no more or less in anyone's control than what happens in life. What should have happened in the last story? How should it have ended?

Maybe it was not the end of the story at all. Perhaps the Tsar thought it was, but didn't realize that what he had done would lead to a very different ending indeed.

Even in a tale with a happy ending, there may be sadness on the way. Think of Vanya and Maroosia. They are happy children, they love their grandfather, and they love their little cat and big dog. But they have no parents. Their parents died years before our story starts. What awful thing takes both parents away from their children? Maybe you don't want to know,

and maybe it doesn't matter. But it was the Tsar who killed them.

Not with his own hands, but just as surely, the Tsar killed their parents. He made serfs of them, made them move to work on his lands, and then worked them so hard that Father died of exhaustion and Mother died of a broken heart.