

THIRTEEN  
YEARS LATER

Also by Jasper Kent

## TWELVE

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JASPER KENT  
THIRTEEN  
YEARS LATER  
Russia, 1825



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# THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE, 1825



# AUTHOR'S NOTE

## Distances

A verst is a Russian unit of distance, slightly greater than a kilometre.

## Dates

During the nineteenth century, Russians based their dates on the old Julian Calendar, which in 1825 was twelve days behind the Gregorian Calendar used in Western Europe. All dates in the text are given in the Russian form and so, for example, the Decembrist Uprising is placed on 14 December, where Western history books have it on 26 December.

## Names

Names used are transliterations of the Russian spellings. For historical figures, these transliterations can be unfamiliar to readers used to the more common Western renderings. The main examples are:

Pyotr Alekseevich—Tsar Peter I (the Great)

Yekaterina Alekseevna—Tsaritsa Catherine II (the Great)

Pavel Pyetrovich—Tsar Paul I

Aleksandr Pavlovich—Tsar Alexander I

Nikolai Pavlovich—Tsar Nicholas I

Aleksandr Nikolayevich—Tsar Alexander II

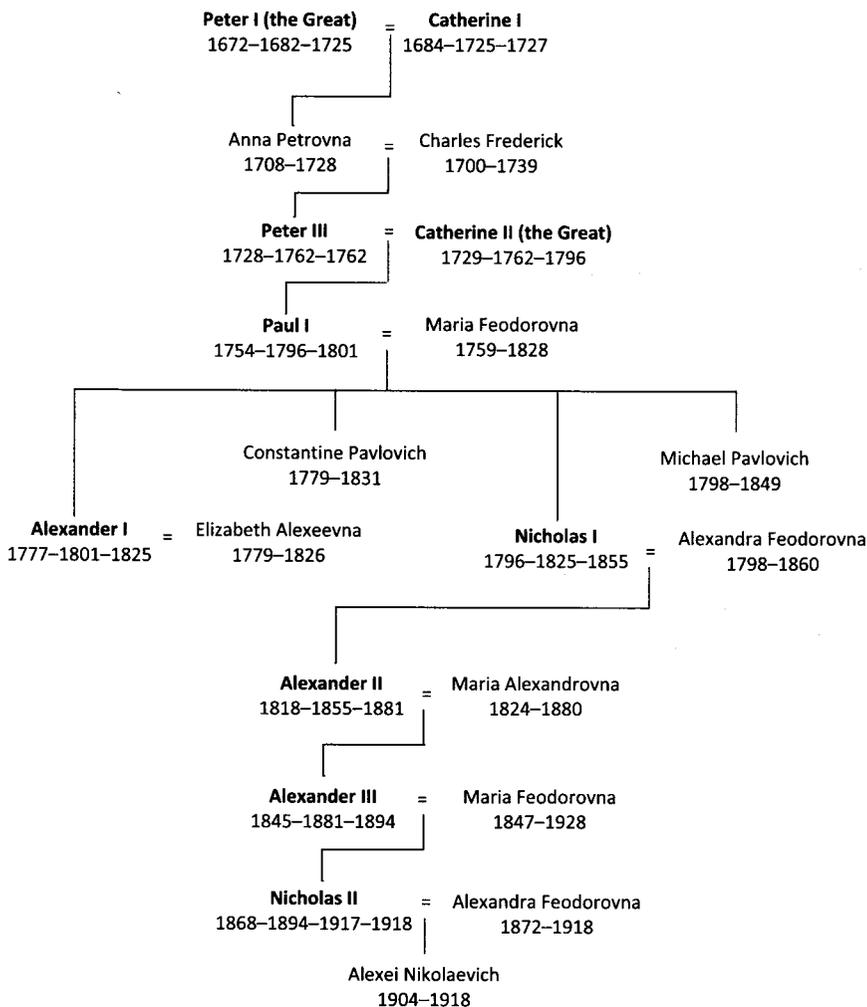
I would like to say a sincere thank you to Mihai Adascalitei for his help with the Romanian language.



# SELECTED ROMANOV FAMILY TREE

Reigning tsars and tsaritsas shown in bold.

Dates are birth-[start of reign]-[end of reign]-death.





# THE DECEMBRISTS

**O**n 14 December 1825 (26 December) a crowd of three thousand men—overwhelmingly members of the military—assembled in Saint Petersburg’s Senate Square to oppose the succession of Tsar Nicholas I. The origins of the revolt lay in 1814, when victorious Russian troops, led by Nicholas’ predecessor Alexander, occupied Paris, having pursued the French all the way from Moscow. The nation that they found, even in defeat, seemed to many a utopia of liberty and enlightenment—at least in comparison with their own country. At the same time Alexander, who had once been hailed as a modernizer, began to turn towards more conservative policies. For a decade resentment festered. Revolutionary societies formed and re-formed, but took no action. The death of Alexander, a thousand miles away in Taganrog, was the flashpoint. With confusion as to which of Alexander’s brothers—Constantine or Nicholas—was to succeed, the revolutionaries seized their one, slim chance.

The uprising was quickly suppressed. Loyal troops, at the tsar’s direct orders, opened fire on the rebels, scattering them into flight across the capital. Many were killed and more arrested. Five of the leaders were hanged and a further 284 were exiled to Siberia. Ever after, Nicholas referred to them as “*mes amis du quatorze*.” It was only after Nicholas’ death in 1855 that the exiles—those who were still alive—were allowed to return to the west.

In 1925, one hundred years after the uprising, Senate Square was renamed Decembrists’ Square, in memory of that first Russian revolution. In July 2008, the name was changed back to Senate Square.



# PROLOGUE

## SAINT PETERSBURG—1812

**T**he metropolitan spoke:

*“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in Him will I trust.*

*“Surely He shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with His feathers, and under His wings shalt thou trust: His truth shall be thy shield and buckler. Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day.*

*“Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.”*

Suddenly the chapel seemed empty; empty of noise, empty of its congregation, empty of the metropolitan himself. Aleksandr perceived only the words, surrounding him not as sounds but as creatures—angels sent by God, sent to convince him of what he must do. And what he had to do was so simple: to trust in God.

That the metropolitan had chosen this day to read those words hinted that God had not trusted Aleksandr to understand His meaning. He had read the exact same words yesterday, quite by chance—or, as he now realized, by design. A clumsy accident had caused a Bible to be dropped to the floor and to fall open at that same text, the ninetieth psalm. And the psalm was but the last of three signs. Aleksandr had read it even then with understanding.

## THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

*Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.*

“The destruction that wasteth at noonday.” It was clear what that was: Bonaparte—a man who had laid waste to the whole of Europe and who now planned to destroy Russia too. Planned to? He had already made himself a home in the Kremlin.

“The pestilence that walketh in darkness” was something different, something Aleksandr had almost forgotten, but never completely. He had learned of the pestilence at his grandmother’s knee, and had never doubted her, as other enlightened grandsons might have doubted stories told them by their frail *babushka*. Yekaterina had never been frail. She had said that a traveller would come to avenge the Romanov Betrayal, and one such had come, just a week before.

That had been the second sign.

He had called himself Cain, but he was merely the emissary of another. Simply to mention the name of that other—a name Yekaterina had whispered to her grandson many years before—had been enough to allow Cain a private audience with Aleksandr. It had caused consternation amongst many, that this stranger should be so trusted by the tsar even at his country’s darkest hour. It was not trust, though, but fear that had persuaded Aleksandr.

And yet he had discovered that in truth he had little to fear from Cain or his master, just as his grandmother had assured him. All that Cain had to offer was a bargain—a bargain that promised to save Russia from Bonaparte. And Aleksandr had no reason to doubt that it could. But the cost would have been too great. Yekaterina’s strength flowed through Aleksandr, flowed in his veins, and he found it easy to resist, easy to spurn perhaps the last hope that his country had.

Cain had taken the news calmly but he had promised Aleksandr that the offer would be made again, in circumstances when the tsar would be more inclined to agree. More inclined than now, when his country was overrun by a foreign invader? It seemed unlikely, but he doubted Cain as little as he had doubted his *babushka*.

## JASPER KENT

The first sign had come in a vision.

Aleksandr had expected a visitor, but Cain's had not been the face he had been anticipating. Alone in his study he had been forewarned, even before Bonaparte had reached Moscow. It was not the first time he had seen through the eyes of another, but it was, so far, the most vivid.

It began with his hands. He had merely glanced down at them, but even a glimpse was enough to tell him that they were no longer his own. His fingers had become broad, squat and coarse, with dirty nails—something that for Aleksandr was inconceivable. Then he noticed he was not alone, nor was he any longer in the palace, but in a dimly lit corridor. There were four men with him but, still gazing at his own fingers, he did not see them clearly. He held the hand of one of them in his, and soon looked up to glimpse the man's face before kissing him on each cheek, perhaps bidding him farewell.

He perceived the man's jaw tighten as his lips came close, as if he were resisting the urge to recoil from some fetid stench. For the first time Aleksandr noticed a foul, metallic taste on his tongue, and wondered if it might not be his own breath that was so repellent. As he stepped away, he saw the man's face in detail for the first time. He was a little younger than Aleksandr, in his early thirties, clean shaven, with blue eyes and brown hair that extended in sideboards a little way down his cheeks. The jaw was square and solid. It was an unremarkable face, but one which Aleksandr would never forget.

He stepped back, releasing the man's hand and again glancing at his own. It was now that he saw what Yekaterina had so long ago told him to beware: a ring, in the form of a dragon with a body of gold, emeralds for eyes and a red, forked tongue. Its tail entwined his middle finger. Aleksandr mouthed the name his grandmother had whispered to him, the name of the man through whose eyes Aleksandr was now seeing, just as his great-great-grandfather had once seen.

He reached out to touch the dragon ring, but as he did so, it vanished. His fingers were once again elegant and slender. He was in his palace.

Aleksandr understood what he had seen—or thought he did; a master sending away his servant. It would not be long before that servant came to

## THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

Aleksandr. And so a servant did come, but when he did, his face had been nothing like the one Aleksandr had seen in his vision. He had been mistaken, but it made no difference. He had sent Cain away, and now he knew that he had done the right thing—the psalm told him so.

The metropolitan carried on reading, but Aleksandr no longer paid him any heed. Instead, he gazed at the floor of the chapel and made a silent promise to the Lord. What he had been, he would be no more. God would deliver him—would deliver Russia—and Aleksandr would make Russia into the country the Almighty wanted it to be. He would be delivered from the destruction that wasteth at noonday, and from the pestilence that walketh in darkness—the terror by night.

Within days, the good news arrived. Bonaparte and all his men—what was left of them—had abandoned Moscow and were heading west. The Russian army would deal with them, with the help of the Russian winter. And the Lord would ensure, Aleksandr felt certain, that the winter would be a bitter one. Far more than ten thousand would fall at his right hand. Aleksandr no longer had to fear the destruction. Now he could do God's work.

And as for the pestilence, Aleksandr still feared that and awaited its advent, but it was not a threat that was to be faced by him, or by Russia, until thirteen years later.

# PART ONE



# CHAPTER I

“**I**T MUST BE BY HIS DEATH.”

Ryleev spoke quietly, hiding neither his passion nor his distaste for his own words.

“It’s not personal; it’s *what* he is, not *who* he is,” he continued. He looked around the room, judging the reactions of the dozen or so men whom he was addressing, reactions with which he must already have been well familiar. “He’s the tsar.” It was an unnecessary clarification, but it added to the enormity of what Ryleev was suggesting.

Some in the room nodded with hesitant acceptance. Some avoided his gaze. Others faced it, demonstrating by the fact they had the stomach to look their leader in the eye that they also had the stomach for his plan.

Aleksei Ivanovich Danilov was among those who allowed Ryleev’s eyes to fix on his. He revealed nothing—years of deceit had taught him how to make his eyes the barrier, not the window to his soul. In his time he had stared into eyes behind which there lay no soul whatsoever, and learned from that too. Ryleev’s gaze lingered momentarily longer on him, as though he were aware that he would detect nothing, but then moved on. Still no one commented on what he had said.

“It’s changed him, being tsar—changed his nature,” he continued.

“It was the war that did that,” said a voice from the back. “We all went to France and saw what liberty really meant. Aleksandr saw it too. Saw what it would mean for him. He was terrified by it.”

“He *should* be terrified by it,” said another.

“He will be.” This time Aleksei recognized the quiet voice as belonging to Pyotr Grigoryevich Kakhovsky. He had only recently returned to Petersburg, but had quickly become involved with the Society.

Not for the first time, Aleksei noted how much older he himself was than all the others gathered in the room. It was true they all remembered the fall

## THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

of Paris in 1814, and most could recall Napoleon's occupation of Moscow in 1812, but it would have been their first campaign. By 1812, Aleksei was already a toughened warrior.

"But you raise the problem yourself, Kondraty Fyodorovich," he said, addressing Ryleev. "It's not who he is; it's what he is. We may kill Aleksandr, but the tsar will still live. The serfs will still serve. The censor will still censor. We won't have a *duma*, we'll just have Tsar Konstantin instead of Tsar Aleksandr—and for all his faults, I know which I'd prefer."

Even as he spoke, Aleksei was glancing around his confederates in the comfortable, decadent salon and wondering which of Aleksandr's failings it was that caused them most offence. They were not serfs themselves—nothing like it. Many had estates upon which hundreds of men were bound in labour. Nor were they aristocrats, for the most part, though there were princes amongst them. They were dressed either as gentlemen or as soldiers, and all sat on the elegant French chairs or leaned against the expensively papered walls with the air of men who fitted into society. What they shared was a simple conviction—almost a sense of embarrassment—that compared with the rest of Europe, Russia was still in the Dark Ages.

"We're lucky that Aleksandr has no children—only brothers to succeed him," said Kakhovsky. Aleksei shot him a questioning look. Kakhovsky smoothed his moustache in a way that hinted at a repressed anger. "I'd have less stomach to kill children," he explained.

"Even the death of Grand Duke Konstantin may be unnecessary," interjected Ryleev. "If we can act quickly enough, we can take power—either with Konstantin as a puppet, or without him. And then we'll free the serfs, and set up the *duma*, and publish whatever the hell we please."

"Why wait then, for God's sake?" exploded Kakhovsky. "The tsar's had his chance. They all have. We have to act! You think Brutus sat around like this, discussing what would happen after Caesar's death?"

Aleksei suspected that was precisely what Brutus had done, but didn't mention it. It was a bad analogy anyway. "And did it do Brutus any good?" he asked. "Who took power in the end? Augustus was Caesar's nephew. Brutus helped to found a dynasty, not destroy one."

## JASPER KENT

“And there lay Brutus’s error,” said Ryleev, his manner calming the mood. “It is not ‘we’ who will be doing the killing. Whoever carries out that task will be a *garde perdue*; a separate body able to take the blame for what has to be done and allowing those of us who envisage a new order to take power.”

“Taking the blame,” said Kakhovsky, his wrath now expressed as a growl rather than a roar, “but what about the punishment?”

“To be forever devoured by Satan, like Brutus was?” asked a voice. Aleksei smiled to himself; whatever the politics of this group, it was pleasant—and, in Russia, rare—to be amongst a group of men who would have no trouble understanding the reference to Dante.

Ryleev smiled too, but his expression was enigmatic. “Those who claim power will be magnanimous to those who brought about their rise to power. But in the eyes of the people, the two must be separate.”

It was Aleksei who asked the all-important question, though he had already heard rumours as to the answer.

“When?”

The room quietened. All eyes turned to Ryleev.

“It’s too late for this year,” he said. “In the next few days, the tsar will be leaving for Taganrog.”

“Why’s he going there?” asked Kakhovsky.

“We don’t know,” admitted Ryleev. “He claims it is for the tsaritsa’s health, but I find that hard to credit. There are some secrets that even our most well-placed sympathizers are not privy to. But he’ll be close to the Crimea and the Black Sea. My guess is he wants to strike a deal with the Turks.”

“Not standing by the Greeks, then?” said Kakhovsky. “They’re Christians at least.”

“They’re revolutionaries,” explained Ryleev. “If he helped them to throw off the Ottomans—well, what example would that set?”

“One more reason to get rid of him quickly.”

Ryleev nodded. “It will happen,” he said. “And it will happen next year. We may be thirty-seven years behind the French, but no one will blame us for that. 1826 *will* go down in history as the year of the Russian Revolution.”

## THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

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The meeting broke up early and Aleksei headed home. The sun was bright and warm, as befitted a city like Petersburg, and served only as a reminder of how unRussian a place it was. He walked home along the bank of the Yekaterininsky Canal, his path meandering with that of the waterway. He knew that his wife, Marfa Mihailovna, was expecting him not to be late and that the party which she had planned required his presence—if not his active participation—for its success, but even so, he did not walk too briskly. The reason for the party added a certain irony to the discussions that had just been taking place. Today was 30 August; the feast day of Saint Aleksandr Nevsky, and hence Tsar Aleksandr's name day. Many houses in Petersburg would be holding similar soirées.

The meeting of the Northern Society, as it styled itself, had taken place at the home of Prince Obolensky, in the shadow of the golden domes of Saint Nikolai's. Aleksei had been a member for a long time, almost from its foundation in 1816, when it had gone by the name of the Union of Salvation. Many of the members had come to the organization through Freemasonry, having been initiated into lodges in Paris, but Aleksei had little enough stomach for genuine Orthodox ritual, let alone the pseudo-religious twaddle that was practised in the lodges. It had not been a bar to him joining the Union. The name had changed many times since then, but the aspirations had not—they had merely become more focussed. Once, its political aims had been vague; progressive, certainly, but with the intention of having some influence on the reforms which, back then, Aleksandr was still believed to be planning. For many, Aleksei among them, philosophy and literature had been favoured over politics as matters of debate, and discussions of Brutus and Dante and the like had abounded. When the subject matter of the discussions had changed, many had left, but Aleksei had chosen to remain.

"They're the three greatest heroes of Christianity," said Maksim Sergeivich, his voice kept low.

He had said it a long, long time before, but Aleksei could place it pre-

## JASPER KENT

cisely. They had both been lying on their stomachs on a hot, dry hillside a little to the west of Smolensk, in August of 1812, just days before the city would be abandoned to the French. Maks had died scarcely a month later. “Maks had died”—expressing it that way made it all so simple. “Aleksei had left Maks to die” was more accurate. “Aleksei had left Maks to be slaughtered” was the phrase that best fitted the facts.

But in Smolensk, neither of them would have dreamed of the eventual manner of Maks’ death, nor of its proximity. They had been observing the French lines, Aleksei peering through his spyglass, looking for signs of the advance they knew would soon come. Somehow the conversation had turned to Brutus, Cassius and Judas, the three traitors who, in the ninth circle of Dante’s Hell, were each consumed throughout eternity by one of the three faces of a Satan himself encased up to his chest in ice. That any of these three could be a hero of Christianity was patently ridiculous, and yet Aleksei knew Maks would not have made the statement without there being a compelling argument behind it.

“I don’t think many theologians would agree with you there,” Aleksei had said, looking down and making a brief note of what he could see of the enemy’s deployments.

“Really?” said Maks. “Perhaps I’m wrong.” Anyone who did not know him might have been convinced.

“Go on then,” said Aleksei. “Start with Judas.”

“That’s the easy one.” Maks turned onto his side, instinctively sliding a little way down the hillside to avoid any chance of being seen. “Without Judas, there would have been no arrest at Gethsemane. Without the arrest, no trial. Without the trial, no crucifixion. Without the crucifixion, no resurrection, and without the resurrection, no Christian religion.”

“That doesn’t quite make him a hero. He didn’t act for good reasons.”

“His reasons are debatable,” Maks explained, characteristically pushing his spectacles up over the bridge of his nose. “The gospel of John even has it that Christ *selected* him as the betrayer, and that Satan only entered into him after that, which looks like collusion to me. And yet Christ sits up there at the right hand of God, and Judas ends up in Hell.”

## THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

Aleksei had heard this line from Maks more than once over the years since they'd first met; both recruited by Vadim Fyodorovich to a small band to carry out "special duties." It was Vadim who had sent them out there, and was waiting back in Smolensk for their report, along with Dmitry Fetyukovich, the final member of the group.

"So what about Brutus and Cassius?" pressed Aleksei. "Weren't they dead before Christ was even born?"

"When I was a kid," replied Maks, though Aleksei questioned—would always question—whether he wasn't still a kid, "I used to marvel at the coincidence that the establishment of the Roman Empire and the birth of Christ were separated by less than thirty years; the political foundation of the Western world and its religious foundation, at the same instant in historical terms. What an age to have been alive! But, of course, it was no coincidence. Rome conquered Europe and delivered both its politics and its religion. OK—Christianity was lucky to be one of the several Roman religions to gain ascendancy, but it wasn't luck that got it spread across the empire. That was military might. And there wouldn't have been a Roman Empire if Brutus and Cassius hadn't tried to prevent there being one."

"So again, they're heroes, but not by their own intent," said Aleksei.

"Dupes, really. We know Christ's plan was to die. Maybe Caesar decided it was best to go out on a high note and engineered things the way he wanted them. For both, death made them greater than they had been in life."

"For Christ, perhaps, but Caesar's death was pretty final."

"*Julius* Caesar's was, but Caesars have been doing well enough out of it ever since; and kaisers, and tsars."

"Maybe," said Aleksei, "although you can't put the spread of Christianity down just to the Romans. Christianity goes beyond Europe, which they never did."

"Carried by the British Empire to the north of America and by the Spanish to the south. It's still the same mechanism."

"And what about the Russians? The Roman Empire never got this far."

But Maks never answered. He had crawled forward once more to examine the French camp, and had seen something which Aleksei had not. "My God," he said. "They're moving."

## JASPER KENT

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The canal disappeared beneath Nevsky Prospekt, under a bridge far wider than it was long. Aleksei turned off the embankment and onto the city's wide thoroughfare, heading westward into the setting sun. Ahead of him the yellow plaster walls of the Admiralty marked the end of the Prospekt, and behind him—several versts behind him—the Nevsky Monastery stood at its beginning. Maks came to his mind less often these days, but was still a frequent visitor. Maks would have been at that meeting tonight, Aleksei was certain—had he lived. He would have been a founder member of the Union of Salvation and would have stuck with it through thick and thin. Some even said he'd have been in charge today, instead of Ryleev. He'd certainly have better understood the implications of what they were planning. Ryleev was just a poet playing at politics.

But Maks had not lived long enough to join with the rest of them in the occupation of Paris in 1814, though he had probably seen the city earlier. The reason Aleksei was so sure Maks would have been a member of the Northern Society was the same one that had condemned him to death in 1812: he was a French spy. The irony of that particular recollection of him—the discussion of Judas and Brutus and Cassius—was that his execution had been carried out by a man who had taken on the name of Christ's betrayer, albeit in its Russian form—Iuda.

But Iuda too had died, a few months after Maks, and the eleven monstrous creatures that had accompanied him—*voordalaki*, who drank the blood of Russians and French alike—had perished also. Iuda himself had been no vampire, but he had been in good company with them. Whatever it was that had driven him to inflict suffering on his fellow man was something more perverse than the mere need for blood, but just as despicable. He was dead though, long dead, and his name was no longer of any interest to Aleksei. He turned off the wide avenue and into Great Konyushennaya Street, where his apartments stood. He could see the light from the tall first-floor windows, and the sound of voices already spilled from within.

He climbed the stairs up from the street and entered his home of almost twenty years, dismissing thoughts of the name Iuda from his mind and

## THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

turning to a different name which, today at least, was of more concern to him. That name was Vasiliy.

It took Aleksei more than a moment to recognize either his drawing room or his wife. Both had undergone a transformation that was evidently intended to please the evening's guests. On consideration, Aleksei preferred what Marfa had done with herself to what she had done with the room. Usually their home was tidy and simple, its comfortable size and central location being expression enough of the degree of wealth required to maintain it. Today, however, it seemed everything they owned was on show. The best crockery and cutlery covered every available flat surface, far more than was needed for the number of guests expected. The only exception was the harpsichord, which neither he nor Marfa would ever dare sully with such clutter.

Marfa herself had opted for simplicity, and a beautiful simplicity at that. She wore a cream satin dress, decorated with only a few tasteful blue ribbons. Her hair was up, adorned with a silver tiara. She was going to be forty in a month's time, but few would suppose it. The fact that she was a little plumper than when he had first known her only served to hide any wrinkles she might have developed. Her hair was still the same dark chestnut it had always been, and few other than her maid and Aleksei himself would have guessed at the efforts she made to keep it so.

He bent forward to kiss her on the cheek and she stepped away from the woman she had been speaking with—whom Aleksei did not recognize—to talk to her husband.

"Have you seen Dmitry?" she asked.

"Is he not here yet?"

"I wouldn't have asked if he was." Her voice revealed the mild, familiar irritation born of a long marriage.

"He'll be here," said Aleksei, kissing her again. "He loves his mother."

He almost pushed her back to her conversation and turned to eye the room, ostensibly looking for anyone to talk to, but in fact looking for one guest in particular.

## JASPER KENT

### *My Darling Vasya . . .*

The rest of the letter had made clear that there could be no mistaking what Marfa had meant by “darling.” Aleksei had found the letter, unfinished, folded inside a copy of Diderot’s *La Religieuse* in her writing desk two nights before. It was not the kind of book he would have expected her to read—and he knew she would never have expected him to glance at it, which was perhaps why she had trusted it as a safe hiding place. He had not been deliberately spying on her—in fact, he’d been trying to find inspiration for a gift for her upcoming birthday—but espionage was his profession, and so when he had found the letter, he had not hesitated to read it.

There were three Vasiliys at the party, though Aleksei did not know the names of all the men present. He had known none of them ever to use the diminutive “Vasya.” Vasiliy Pyetrovich was a soldier, like himself—a major in the Moskovsky regiment. He had married only six months before, and his wife, who clutched his hand and never moved from his side as they circulated amongst the guests, was clearly showing the rapid results of their union. Vasiliy Andreevich was a *chinovnik* in the Admiralty, with a reputation as a womanizer. Indeed, Aleksei had met his latest mistress; she was twenty-two years old and stunningly attractive. With all respect to Marfa, Aleksei doubted that she would have caught Vasiliy Andreevich’s eye. Vasiliy Borisovich was a striking fifty-year-old of no profession. He lived off his family’s estate of five thousand souls—described in the Russian manner of the number of serfs owned, where in the West, as Aleksei well knew, his wealth would be measured by area of land. But however wealthy and attractive he might be, he was an unlikely match for Marfa; he was—as most in the room knew and few cared—a homosexual.

Besides, Marfa’s letter had given Aleksei no reason to suppose that Vasiliy would be attending the party. That she wrote to him at all might imply that he did not live in Petersburg, though there had been no clue as to an address.

“You know Yelizaveta Markovna, don’t you, Lyosha?” Marfa’s question distracted him from his thoughts. He turned to see the woman he was being introduced to.

## THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

“Of course I do,” he replied with an enthusiasm that belied the haziness of his memory of the woman. “Delighted to see you again.”

“You too, Colonel Danilov. You must be so proud of Dmitry Alekseevich’s commission,” said Yelizaveta Markovna, in a voice whose pitch wavered randomly, as though she were almost uncontrollably excited. “We always said he’d make a soldier—just like his father.”

Aleksei smiled and nodded politely. “Very proud,” he said, wondering why his voice so utterly failed to convey the sincerity of his feelings. Perhaps it was Yelizaveta Markovna’s mistaken conception that Dmitry was entering the same profession as Aleksei. Aleksei knew he had not been a real soldier for a very long time. He noticed both Marfa and Yelizaveta Markovna looking at him, expecting him to say more, but suddenly their heads turned away from him, across the room, to the source of a sound.

It was the harpsichord; the first notes of a sonata by Mozart. The fingers that danced over the keys, deftly sounding melody and countermelody, belonged to Dmitry. He had not announced himself to his parents, but had headed directly for his favourite seat. All in the room gravitated towards him. Aleksei stood at the back of the crowd, scarcely able to see his son, but listening intently. It was a beautiful sound, but what impressed him even more than the music was the easy charm with which Dmitry engaged his listeners. Aleksei was no musician, but if he had been, then playing even the simplest piece would have taken his attention utterly. In contrast, Dmitry smiled at his audience, laughed at their comments and even replied to their questions. When he moved to a new piece—Scarlatti this time—he did so as if it had been a request rather than his own choice, though Aleksei had heard requests only for more Mozart and a few for Beethoven. He was, Aleksei knew well, a showman—something Aleksei could never be. He envied his son for it, but also saw how it could be a weakness, how it would mean that Dmitry would never be a great musician.

When Dmitry stopped playing, an hour and a half later, so the party stopped too. Many had left already, but a core had remained to listen. It was still early, for Petersburg—not yet two in the morning. Aleksei caught in his wife’s eye a hint of disappointment that their party did not go on as long as

## JASPER KENT

the “real” parties in the city. The reason was known to both of them, but not discussed. The guests at those parties did not have to work in the morning. Tomorrow—today—was Monday, and government departments had to be run, shops opened, troops drilled. Even those who did not have to work—men such as Vasiliy Borisovich, whose serfs would be set to their tasks by other, more honoured serfs—knew that there were still better parties to be visited before dawn.

“You were superb,” said Marfa to her son, when only the three of them remained.

“Absolutely,” said Aleksei, but he knew that his voice again sounded unconvincing. His sentiment was sincere, but he had never been good at giving compliments, even to—especially to—his own son. “I don’t know where you get it from,” he added, for want of anything to say.

The implication struck Aleksei immediately. His wife had been unfaithful to him with this Vasiliy. How far back did that go? How many others had there been before? Dmitry had been born in 1807, less than ten months after Aleksei and Marfa had married, at a time when Aleksei had been almost constantly on the march. When he had made it home, it had been only for a few days at a time.

But there was no doubt that Dmitry was Aleksei’s son. To look at them now, even though Dmitry was eighteen and Aleksei forty-four, the similarities were unmistakable. Both had the same square face and flat chin. Their nostrils flared when they laughed or became angry in a way that caused many to remark upon the resemblance. Dmitry wore his hair shorter and it was naturally darker and straighter. He was considerably taller, taller than most of his countrymen, while Aleksei had a heavier build, though at eighteen, he remembered, he too had been skinny. A life in the army had forced muscle and sinew on to those bones. He hoped the army would do the same for his son—he knew that a life sitting at the harpsichord would not.

It was only Dmitry’s eyes that were his mother’s. They were the same dark brown that expressed everything that his—or her—face tried to hide. Aleksei’s own eyes were blue and—he prided himself—inscrutable. Only one man had ever seemed capable of divining his thoughts, and that man was

## THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

long dead, his frozen corpse lost amongst so many others as it floated down the Berezina. Even then, Aleksei knew, Iuda had not been able to see into his soul, simply to think like him. From the same starting point he had unerringly managed to reach the same conclusion. That was even more frightening. As for Dmitry, perhaps his eyes too would become opaque as he learned with time to hide his innermost self from others. Aleksei hoped he would never need to, but if he did need to, that he would succeed.

“But you know what you’re going to allow me to do with it,” came Dmitry’s voice bitterly. He had replied to Aleksei’s statement almost instantly, and yet even in that instant, Aleksei’s mind had wandered. Dmitry brought him back to a conversation that he never enjoyed, not in any of the dozen times they had had it.

“Mitka, don’t start this again,” he said.

“Why not? Because it’s something that *you* never dreamed of doing?”

The “why not?” of it was clear enough to Aleksei, though he would never say it. “We’re not rich, Mitka,” he explained instead. “You have to live.”

“I’m not asking you for money,” insisted Dmitry. He paused. Money was precisely what he had asked Aleksei for a few months earlier, when this great decision of his life was being made. If Dmitry had been older, or if the two of them had been less close, then a smile would have broken out. Aleksei thought of another Dmitry, Dmitry Fetyukovich, after whom his son had been named. They had had some terrible arguments, but the last expression that had ever passed between them had been a smile.

“Beethoven’s made money,” said Dmitry, changing tack. Aleksei had met Beethoven, briefly, in Vienna in 1817, and heard him play, even though by then he was totally deaf. He knew from that encounter that fame and wealth are all too easily associated in the public mind. Beethoven was not poor, but much of his income came from constant work in both composition and performance, both of which became ever more difficult as his deafness increased. But it was not that which convinced Aleksei that his son could not be a success as a musician. He had heard Beethoven play. He had heard his son play. There was no comparison. Dmitry might scratch a living as a performer in some hostelry. He might even make it to the heights of the pit of an Austrian

## JASPER KENT

opera house. Either way, he would earn his real living—a meagre one at that—by teaching. There was nothing wrong with that, but the disappointment would destroy Dmitry, Aleksei was sure. Better to nip it in the bud.

But he explained none of this to his son. “Beethoven’s German. So was Mozart, more or less. Germans and Italians have a chance. The West’s like that. You’re Russian, for Christ’s sake.”

“Have you *heard* of Frederic Chopin?” asked Dmitry, in the way that Aleksei had observed so many children do, in hopeful expectation of their parents’ ignorance. Aleksei had heard of him, not least through Dmitry’s obsessive reverence.

“He’s not Russian.”

“He’s Polish,” shouted Dmitry, “which is as good as—for now. He played for the tsar when he was just eleven. He’s destined to be a new Mozart.”

“Mozart was buried in a pauper’s grave,” said Aleksei to his son. “Do you want to spend your life in poverty?”

Dmitry slammed the lid of the harpsichord shut. “There are some things more important than money!” he shouted, and stormed out. Aleksei heard the door close behind him with a thud.

“He only says that because he’s never been short of it,” said Marfa. “That’s thanks to you.”

But Aleksei knew his son was right. There were plenty of things in Aleksei’s own life that were more important than money—that was why he spent so many roubles trying to keep hold of them.

Marfa put her arm round his waist and rested her head on his shoulder. “Let’s go to bed,” she said. “He’ll have calmed down in the morning.”

Aleksei considered, but he was too annoyed for sleep. “You go,” he said. “I’ll be with you soon.” He watched her depart and understood that it was not Dmitry with whom he was angry. Nor—justified though he might be—was it with Marfa. The bitterness inside him could only be directed at one cause, not even at a person, but merely a name: the faceless Vasilii.

Aleksei gazed out across the Neva. He was at the very heart of Petersburg. This was the point where the river split into two, the Great and Lesser Nevas,

## THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

part of many divisions as it formed a delta and flowed into the Gulf of Finland. It was a magnificent site. In almost every respect, Aleksei preferred Moscow to Saint Petersburg, but compared to the Neva, the Moskva was a mere ditch. The late-summer sun glistened on the rippling waters that stretched out in a vast azure expanse. The Danube itself could make no claim to be blue in comparison with this. Directly in front of him, at the point of the fork where the rivers divided, stood the two red lighthouses that guided ships into port. Beyond that, north of both rivers, was the Peter and Paul Fortress, founded by Pyotr the Great 122 years before, giving birth to the city itself. Rising from within the walls of the fortress was the yellow-and-gold spire of the Cathedral of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, beneath which lay the tombs of the tsars.

Aleksei turned and looked around. He could see all along the English Quay, the Winter Palace in one direction and the Admiralty and Senate Square in the other. The city was busy, but he did not see the man he was expecting. He looked at his watch. It wasn't quite four in the afternoon, so his contact was not late. Aleksei turned back to the river, leaning forward and resting his hands on the low wall, his fingers splayed out to support his weight—five on his right hand and three on his left. He had been without those two fingers of his left hand now for fifteen years—almost the whole of his son's life.

Dmitry had finally come home in the early hours of the morning, but they had not spoken. There were only a few weeks left to do so before Dmitry had to go and join his regiment in Moscow. Perhaps it would be better to leave things. Dmitry would enjoy the army life, Aleksei was sure, and with luck his resentment would evaporate as he began to immerse himself in it. But Aleksei had often failed to understand his son's character. For the first nine years of his life, Aleksei had only been home briefly and occasionally. Marfa and Dmitry could only know part of the reason.

Up until the French invasion, Aleksei had been a member of an elite band: himself, Maks, Dmitry Fetyukovich and their leader, Vadim. That much was no secret, nor was, in general terms, what they did, though Aleksei rarely shared the details of the spying and the sabotage he undertook, some-

## JASPER KENT

times with his comrades, sometimes alone; never of the assassinations. Then Dmitry Fetyukovich had introduced twelve new allies to the cause. The Oprichniki—that's what they'd called them, after Russia's once-feared secret police. Aleksei had soon discovered their true, inhuman nature, but by then it was too late. Aleksei had been the only survivor—out of either the Oprichniki, or his three friends. He had returned to the regular army, but there was little work left to be done. Bonaparte was already routed.

Peace in Europe had allowed him to spend more time in Russia and, of that, more time in Petersburg, but Aleksei wondered whether even by then it had not been too late. He tried to recall his own father, but the memories were foggy. He had been young—much younger than Dmitry was now—at the time of his father's death. But at least there was a memory of someone; someone who had been present almost every day amongst Aleksei's earliest recollections. He regretted that he had not ensured such a place in his own child's memories. At least he might learn from his mistakes with Dmitry.

"Aleksei Ivanovich." The voice came from his right. He glanced sideways, to confirm who was speaking.

"Yevgeniy Styepanovich," he said, looking out across the water and making no further movement to acknowledge the presence of another. Yevgeniy Styepanovich looked upward, switching his gaze between the high buildings around them, and then squinting, as if trying to focus on the clock on the Admiralty tower. Aleksei suspected that anyone who saw them would not be in the slightest doubt they were talking to one another, but Yevgeniy insisted on at least the formalities of a secret rendezvous.

"Well?" said Yevgeniy.

"I need to see him," replied Aleksei.

"In person?"

Aleksei nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"The official line is that he's already left."

"And has he?"

Yevgeniy paused. Aleksei could sense his eyes glancing towards him, assessing him. Yevgeniy's fingers fiddled with the braid of his uniform before he spoke. "He's left the city, yes, but he's still nearby."

## THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

“Where?”

“Right now, he’s in Pavlovsk, visiting his mother.”

“And later?”

“He’ll be at the dacha on Kamenny Island, but he won’t want to see you there.”

Nor I him, thought Aleksei. There would be far too many people. “Anywhere else?” he asked.

“He’ll visit the monastery before he goes.” Yevgeniy blurred the words out quickly, as if it lessened his betrayal.

“Which monastery?” asked Aleksei.

“Which monastery?” The sarcasm of Yevgeniy’s voice betrayed a hint of scorn. “*His* monastery,” he said.

Aleksei nodded again. It was an odd way to describe it, but it made sense. And Yevgeniy had been right to be sarcastic—there was no question as to which monastery. “When?” he asked.

“In the early hours. Can’t you just give me a message?”

“No,” said Aleksei thoughtfully. “I have to speak to him.”

Even before the words had left his lips, Aleksei sensed he was alone again. He turned and saw the tall figure in the uniform of a lieutenant general making its way back towards the Winter Palace. Aleksei himself chose to head in the opposite direction, walking downstream alongside the Neva. He had plenty of time before he needed to be at the monastery. He passed the Admiralty and found himself in Senate Square. The Isaakievsky Bridge, floating on the river on its pontoons, stretched north over to Vasilevskiy Island. Aleksei turned away from the river and strode into the square.

He stood at the foot of the statue and looked up. The massive block of granite—the Thunder Stone—that formed its pedestal towered above him. The horse’s bronze hooves kicked at the air. Here was Pyotr the Great—founder of the city. That, to Aleksei’s mind, as a lover of the old capital, had been his only error. Beyond that, the epithet “great” truly applied. He had dragged his reluctant country out of its miserable isolation—dragged it both to the West and to the future. Subsequent tsars and tsaritsas had wavered, but none had been able to halt the momentum which Pyotr had begun.

## JASPER KENT

Trampled under the feet of the horse upon which Pyotr rode was a serpent. It symbolized—so the sculptor, Falconet, had claimed—treason, crushed by Russia’s rightful emperor. But for Aleksei, the whole image seemed designed to pose Pyotr as Saint George slaying the dragon. True, Saint George had little specifically to do with Petersburg. He was the patron saint of Moscow—but the images and icons of him that were scattered throughout the old capital generally took the same basic form: the saint on horseback, victorious, as the beast writhed in its death throes beneath. Admittedly the beast would have wings and the saint would carry a spear, but these were mere details. Aleksei’s mind turned inevitably to Zmyeevich—the “son of the serpent,” if his name was taken literally—who had led the twelve Oprichniki to Russia in 1812. Aleksei could picture the ornate ring that Zmyeevich had worn—a golden serpent with green eyes and a protruding red tongue. He would have liked to compare himself to Saint George, or to Pyotr, but he had never defeated or even confronted Zmyeevich, who had slithered back to his own land.

Aleksei looked up at the statue again, at the tsar’s small features. Perhaps the similarity to Saint George was unintentional. Why should Pyotr, the founder of this city, be associated with the patron of Moscow? True, the saint appeared on the escutcheon of the Romanov coat of arms, but again that was due to the connections with Moscow. Anyway, Pyotr had had no choice in the design of the statue; that had been down to his successor Yekaterina, again given the epithet “great,” who had commissioned it. But the same question could be asked of her. That the serpent represented treason made more sense—that, after all, was what every tsar and tsaritsa should fear. And not without reason.

Aleksei walked away, going south across the square, his thoughts set upon that evening’s rendezvous.

“They plan to kill you, Your Majesty.”

The voice spoke quietly, but did not whisper. It came from the darkness to the left. The man who uttered the words must have been an arm’s reach from the tsar, but he had not seen him. Aleksandr had deliberately let the

## THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

metropolitan get ahead of him, so that he might be for a moment alone in the bowels of the monastery—a moment of solitude being all that a man in his position could ever hope for.

“Show yourself,” he said firmly. The confidence in his voice was real, born of years of power. Some might think it foolhardy, but it was here that he felt safest of all. This was the monastery of Saint Aleksandr Nevsky, a saint whose name the tsar bore, in the place where the Lord had revealed Himself to the tsar, through His word, at the time of Russia’s direst need. If God was going to protect him anywhere, it would be here.

A face appeared from the gloom. It was a face that was familiar to him, though he could trace its changes over the years. The jaw was still broad, though the skin had gained some wrinkles. The man still wore sideboards, but the light-brown hair was now flecked with grey. When Aleksandr had first seen that face, through monstrous eyes that were not his own, he had felt sure it was the image of an enemy. He had seen it in the flesh many times since, and was now convinced that it belonged to an ally.

“Colonel Danilov,” he said, offering his hand.

Danilov bent forward and kissed it. Aleksandr looked down on him with a certain distaste. He was, after all, a spy. It was not a gentleman’s profession, but it was a necessary one. It was best to treat such a man, much like any other soldier, as a tool, to be directed rather than embraced. And yet the vision of him that Aleksandr had seen in 1812 proved that Danilov was more than just a soldier or a spy. Time would reveal the truth.

“I had to speak with you before you left,” said Danilov.

They first had met, in the flesh, just days before Napoleon’s abdication—his initial abdication, in 1814—on the recommendation of Aleksandr’s deeply missed field marshal, Prince Barclay de Tolly, who had told him that Danilov, then a captain, had been one of those who had helped to save Moscow. Aleksandr had flinched as he saw that face for a second time, but had not mentioned his recognition of it, nor had he done so since. Danilov had said nothing either, though his presence in Moscow at its darkest hour, just when Aleksandr had seen the apparition, could have been no coincidence. He spoke French perfectly—not the way Russians spoke it perfectly, even the tsar

## JASPER KENT

could manage that, but the way the French themselves spoke it. Aleksandr had wanted to get a feel for how the people of Paris were thinking, and Danilov was the ideal man to discover it. He had done his job well, and had continued to work directly for the tsar ever since—though the enemy had changed.

“It’s certain then?” said Aleksandr. “Assassination?”

Danilov nodded. “It’s too late for reform now. It won’t assuage them.”

The man was no politician. Aleksandr had learned long ago that reform only encouraged revolutionaries and he’d learned also that reform was not what his people wanted. Above all, they—the Russians, the whole of Europe—craved peace. Aleksandr had given them that, for a decade now. For all but a few of his subjects, it was reason to love him.

“Who will do it?” he asked, leaning forward slightly and tilting his head to listen; since childhood his left ear had perceived almost nothing.

“They talk of a *garde perdue*—a separate group to do the job, without those in charge taking the blame.”

It was sensible—that was how Aleksandr would have done it. Somewhere inside him a voice commented that that was how he had done it, but he dismissed the idea. He had never dreamed it would be necessary for his father to be killed.

“How long do I have?”

“At least until next summer.”

“They won’t attempt anything while I’m in Taganrog?”

“I doubt it,” replied Danilov. “The Southern Society is based mostly around Tulchin and Kiev, and that’s still a long way away.”

“Can we be sure they trust you? They could be feeding you a line.”

“If they are, you’ll know soon enough.” Aleksandr found Danilov’s grim sense of humour distasteful at the best of times, but he understood it had been forged out of experience. From what he had heard, Danilov had been part of a squad of sixteen when the French invaded—four officers and twelve men. By the time Napoleon had departed, he was the only survivor.

They fell into silence. Aleksandr pondered the implications of what he had been told. He’d allowed these societies to grow—both in the north and

## THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

in the south—when he could have crushed them at any time. But to destroy them too soon would have been fruitless. They would have scattered and re-formed. Now, though, the time was approaching when he would deal with them all—before they could move against him.

“I will act when I return from Taganrog,” he said. “I’ll need names by then.” He didn’t reveal to Danilov just how many names he knew already. What would be the benefit?

“Unless I can diffuse the situation.”

It was understandable that Danilov saw hope of redemption in these men—he had fought alongside many of them. For Aleksandr a quiet resolution seemed neither probable nor desirable. But if that hope was the price of Danilov’s loyalty, it was unwise to disabuse him of it.

“I think you’ll find that impossible, Colonel,” said Aleksandr, “but my prayers will be with you if you can.”

Danilov saluted and the tsar returned the gesture, then he turned and disappeared into the darkness of the passageway. The sound of approaching footsteps came from another direction. Aleksandr turned to see that the metropolitan had come looking for him. He straightened his jacket and marched briskly along the corridor to the front of the monastery.

Outside, his calèche was waiting for him, its three horses shaking their manes as if impatient. It was a humble carriage, but best suited for the journey. His wife, the Tsaritsa Yelizaveta, would follow later in grander style. A small crowd of monks had gathered, and was now joined by the metropolitan.

Aleksandr leapt nonchalantly onto the calèche and hid the pain it caused in his legs and back. He rarely forgot his forty-seven years, but on those occasions when he attempted to, his body soon reminded him. He raised a hand and waved at the assembled holy men.

“Pray for me,” he said. “And for my wife.”

With that, he heard the sound of the driver’s whip and the carriage began to move. Amongst the crowd, he noticed the shadowy figure of Colonel Danilov observing the departure. There was a man he hoped would do more than pray for his safety.

The tsar remained standing as the calèche drove away. His escort was

## JASPER KENT

small and did not block his view. Behind him, the Nevsky Prospekt led straight to the centre of Petersburg, just five versts away. Ahead of him, almost fifteen hundred versts hence, lay Taganrog, and what else, he knew not.

He remained upright, with one foot inside the carriage and one on the running board, looking back the way they had come. Only when the towers of the monastery, lit solely by the stars and the candles that shone dimly from its windows, had vanished from view did he sit down.

The writing was in French. The destination was Ragusa, on the Dalmatian coast. The message was brief:

*I have heard from Saint Petersburg. He is on his way.*