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Ice is scraped from the carriageway in readiness, but it is still treacherous and the tsar must tread with care.

At eight o'clock the guard at the commandant's entrance to the Winter Palace came smartly to attention and the doors swung open for the Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias. A tall man with the bearing of a soldier, Alexander II was in his sixtieth year, handsome still, with thick mutton chop whiskers and an extravagant moustache shot with grey, a high forehead and large soft brown eyes that lent his face an air of vulnerability. His appearance was greeted by a murmur of excitement from the small crowd of the curious and the devout waiting in the square. On this iron grey St Petersburg morning, the islands on the opposite bank of the Neva were almost lost in a low April mist, and tiny drops of rain beaded the tsar's fur-lined military coat and white peaked cap. As was his custom, he walked alone but for the captain of his personal guard who followed at several paces. Head bent a little, his hands clasped behind his back, a brisk ten minutes to clear his thoughts before the meetings with ministers and ambassadors that would fill the day.

From the north-east corner of the square he made his way into Millionnaya Street and on past the giant grey granite Atlantes supporting the entrance to the New Hermitage Gallery his father had built for the royal collection. Then to the Winter Canal and the frozen Moika River, its banks lined with the

yellow and pink and green baroque palaces of the aristocracy. A carriage rattled along the badly rutted road, sloshing dirty melt water across the pavement and the tsar's cavalry boots. At the Pevchesky Bridge, he turned and the square lay open before him again, the stone heart of imperial Russia: to his right the Winter Palace, and to his left the vast yellow and white crescent-shaped building occupied by the General Staff of his army. A score or more of his people stood at the corner of this building, stamping their feet, blowing vapour into balled hands, waiting for a glimpse of their 'Little Father'. From this group, a tall young man in a long black uniform coat and cap with cockade stepped forward and walked towards the tsar. His features were half hidden by the upturned collar of his coat and a thick moustache. He stopped beneath one of the new electric street lamps at the edge of the square and, as the tsar approached along the pavement, gave a stiff salute. Something in his demeanour, in his wide unblinking eyes, caught and held the tsar's gaze and brought to his mind a childhood memory of a bear he had seen cornered by hunting dogs. He walked past but after a few steps this uneasy thought made him turn to look again.

In the young man's hand was a revolver. Struggling to balance it. Struggling to aim. Barely more than an arm's length away. A flash. Crack. Flakes of yellow plaster splintered from the wall on to his shoulder. Crouching, spinning, the tsar began to run, weaving like a hare, to the left then to the right, and as he did so time wound down until it was without meaning. Shouts and screams reached him as a muffled echo at the end of a long tunnel. He could hear distinctly only the pounding of his heart and again the sharp crack, crack of the revolver. It was as if there were only the two of them in the square: Alexander, the Emperor of Russia, stumbling towards his palace, and a young man with a gun in his trembling hand. He was conscious of the short shaky breaths of the assassin and the scuffing of his boots

on the setts behind him. Crack. A shot passed through his flapping greatcoat and he swerved to the left again. On and on the madman came with his arm outstretched. Another crack, and a bullet struck the ground a few feet in front of him. Was this an end to joy, an end to love? Breathless with fear, lost in this tunnel. For what purpose? Who could hate him so much?

Then someone was at his side, a hand to his elbow, and time seemed to turn again.

‘Your Majesty—’

Shaking like a leaf in an autumn gale.

‘I . . . I am all right.’

It was just a few seconds. That was all. Slowly, the tsar turned to look over his shoulder. His pursuer was on the ground, curled into a tight ball, kicked and punched by the police. The revolver lay close by. Something obscene. Cossack guards were running from the palace and a calèche was drawing to a halt a few yards from him. An old woman, tightly wrapped in black rags, had fallen to her knees and was rocking a prayer of thanks. She clutched at his coat as he brushed past.

‘Thank God! Thank God!’ And she crossed herself again and again.

As he stepped into the carriage there were angry shouts. The tsar turned to see the assassin dragged senseless to his feet. He did not notice the young woman with dark brown hair who was walking away from the gathering crowd. No one paid her any attention. She walked with a straight back and a short purposeful stride. Her clothes were faded and a little old-fashioned but she wore them well. At the edge of the square she stopped for just a moment to pull an olive green woollen shawl over her head and across her nose and mouth. Her face was hidden but for her eyes, and they were pale grey-blue like the sky on a summer afternoon or the colour of water through clean ice.

At the end of the Nevsky Prospekt she took a cab. Her driver

guided his horse with great care, for the city's main thoroughfare was bustling with trams and carriages, merchants to the Gostiny Dvor trading arcade, uniformed civil servants to their ministries. The droshky came to a halt just before the Anichkov Bridge. The young woman paid the driver with a five kopek coin, then walked across the bridge towards the pink and white palace on the opposite bank of the Fontanka River. At the first turning to the right beyond it she paused to look back along Nevsky, then, lifting her skirt a little to lengthen her stride, she hurried into the lane. Sacks of wood were being unloaded from a wagon, and she passed an old man pulling a barrel organ, its mechanism tinkling in protest. A small boy in a red shirt was playing on a step with a kitten and a yard keeper scraped hard ridges of ice from the pavement in front of his building. Before a handsome blue and white mansion, she glanced up and down the lane then stepped forward to ring the door bell.

The dvornik, who was paid to fetch and carry for the building, showed her up to an apartment on the second floor. The door was opened by a short, plump man in his late twenties, well groomed in a sober suit and tie. He had a round fleshy face, a neat beard and black hair swept back from a high forehead.

The dvornik gave a little bow: 'A lady to see you, Alexander Dmitrievich. She won't give her name.'

Alexander Dmitrievich Mikhailov must have recognised his visitor, though he could see only her eyes, because he stepped aside at once to let her into the apartment. Three more young men were sitting at a table in front of the drawing-room window. She collapsed onto a chair beside them.

'The tsar lives.' She paused to let her words resonate, then said, 'He fired five times but by some miracle . . .'

'Five times.'

' . . . and they have taken him. He's alive and they have taken him.' Her voice cracked a little with emotion.

Then a flurry of questions. Quietly, calmly she told them of what she had seen, of the tsar stumbling towards his palace, of shots fired at almost point blank range.

‘Will he speak to the police?’

‘He will say nothing.’

For almost an hour they talked of what happened in the square. What filthy luck. Was it the gun or simply fear that caused him to miss? Only when they had examined every detail did Alexander Mikhailov remember to offer her some refreshment. Mikhailov served tea from the brass samovar bubbling in the corner of the room. Fine Indian tea. He made it in a silver teapot and poured it into glasses delicately decorated with gold leaf. Settling back at the table, he was reaching for his own when there was a hammering at the door.

‘The police!’ he hissed at her. ‘You were followed!’

Jumping to his feet, he reached into the drawer of the desk behind him and took out a revolver. His comrades were too shocked to move.

Then from the stair they heard the voice of the dvornik: ‘News, Your Honour! News!’

He was wheezing on the step, his little eyes bright with excitement, clutching at his straggly beard.

‘Murder! They tried to murder His Majesty. This morning in the square. A madman. There are soldiers everywhere.’

When the door had closed Mikhailov turned to her. ‘Go. Go now.’

Gendarmes were stopping the horse-drawn trams in the Zagorodny Prospekt and emptying their passengers on to the pavements. A security barrier had been placed at the edge of the Semenovskiy Parade Ground and she joined the crush of people edging slowly towards it. Red-coated Cossacks trotted down the prospekt from the direction of the station, their swords at the ready. There was an air of collective hysteria as if the

city was preparing to repel a foreign army. She could see it in the faces of the people about her, the peasant clutching the ragged bundle of food he was hoping to sell in the Haymarket, a priest in a long black robe muttering a prayer, the old lady with frightened children at her skirts.

Opposite the railway station, the bells of the new cathedral were chiming frantically as if to summon divine retribution. At the barrier, a harassed-looking lieutenant in the green and gold of the Semenovskiy Regiment was inspecting papers.

‘And why aren’t you in your classroom this morning, Miss Kovalenko?’

‘I was visiting a sick friend in the city.’

The young lieutenant examined her face carefully then smiled, captivated for a moment perhaps by her eyes: ‘All right, let Anna Petrovna pass.’

And slipping through the barrier and past the soldiers on the pavement, she hurried into the ticket hall of the station.

In the House of Preliminary Detention across the city, the would-be assassin was stretched full length on a prison pallet, eyes closed, his breathing a little laboured, a rough grey blanket pulled to the chin. There was an angry graze on his left cheek and some bruising about his eyes but nothing that could account for the pain that was drawing his lips tightly from his teeth in an ugly grimace. A prison guard stood against the bare brick wall close by, and, at the door, two men in the dark green double-breasted uniform jackets and white trousers of the Ministry of Justice. On the left breast of the shorter man the twinkling gold star of the Order of St Vladimir and at his neck its red enamel cross.

‘He says he’s a socialist revolutionary and an atheist.’ The city prosecutor’s voice was thick with contempt. ‘A proud enemy of the government and the emperor.’

In his twelve years at the ministry Count Vyacheslav von

Plehve had acquired a reputation as the state's most brilliant and ruthless young lawyer.

'His name is Alexander Soloviev,' he continued. 'And this will amuse you, Dobrshinsky: he was a law student. Yes – a law student.'

The count's companion was of lower rank, a Class 6 civil servant, his name familiar to only a few, but those who knew of Anton Frankzevich Dobrshinsky's work as a criminal investigator spoke of him with respect – if not with warmth.

'Will he cooperate?'

'As you can see, he's not in a fit state to be questioned properly.' Von Plehve turned away from the prisoner to beat on the door with a chubby fist: 'All right.'

It swung open at once and both men stepped out on to the first floor of the wing. The prison was built on the new American model, with cells opening on to a concertina of wrought-iron landings and steps about a central five-storey hall. A vast whitewashed, echoing place that in the four years since it had opened had held political prisoners from every corner of the empire.

The count took Dobrshinsky by the elbow and began to steer him gently along the wing. 'He tried to kill himself. Cyanide. They managed to remove the phial. He's sick but he'll live. His Majesty has let it be known he's going to ride through the city in an open carriage to show himself to his people. He's convinced God has saved him . . .' He stopped for a moment and put his hand on Dobrshinsky's arm, '. . . but this is just the beginning. Believe me. Soloviev was not alone.'

Dobrshinsky nodded slowly. He was a tall man in his early thirties, thin with a pinched face and sallow skin, small dark brown eyes and an unfashionably modest moustache. There was something watchful, a little vulpine in his manner.

' . . . it's already been agreed.' Von Plehve turned to make eye contact. 'You will take charge of the investigation. It's simple enough to state: find who's behind this.'

Dobrshinsky frowned and pursed his lips.

‘Of course,’ said the count, ‘I know what you’re thinking. Yes, it’s like fighting a Hydra. But there will be new security measures.’

‘As Your Worship wishes.’

‘My dear fellow, it’s not my wish. It’s the wish of the emperor’s council.’

The barred gate at the end of the wing swung open and the guards stepped aside to let them pass. The count’s carriage was waiting at the bottom of the prison steps. In the far distance, the sun’s rays were breaking through cloud, bathing the blue and white baroque facade and domes of the Smolny Cathedral in a rich golden light.

‘Perhaps the Almighty did come to the aid of His Majesty,’ said the count as he settled on the seat of the open carriage. ‘But will he next time?’ He paused then leant forward earnestly, his left hand gripping the door: ‘Who are these terrorists, Dobrshinsky? Who are they? What kind of fanatic tries to murder his emperor then kill himself?’

A snap of the driver’s whip, and his carriage pulled away from the pavement. Dobrshinsky watched it turn right in front of the munitions factory on to the Liteiny Prospekt and disappear from view. What kind of fanatic? He felt sure he knew: a new kind who would stop at nothing, a terrorist who was prepared to take his own life and the innocent lives of others. The count was right: Soloviev was not alone. Somewhere in this city of almost a million souls there were others intent on murder in the name of freedom and progress. In time they would be hunted down, but how much time did he have?