

Prologue

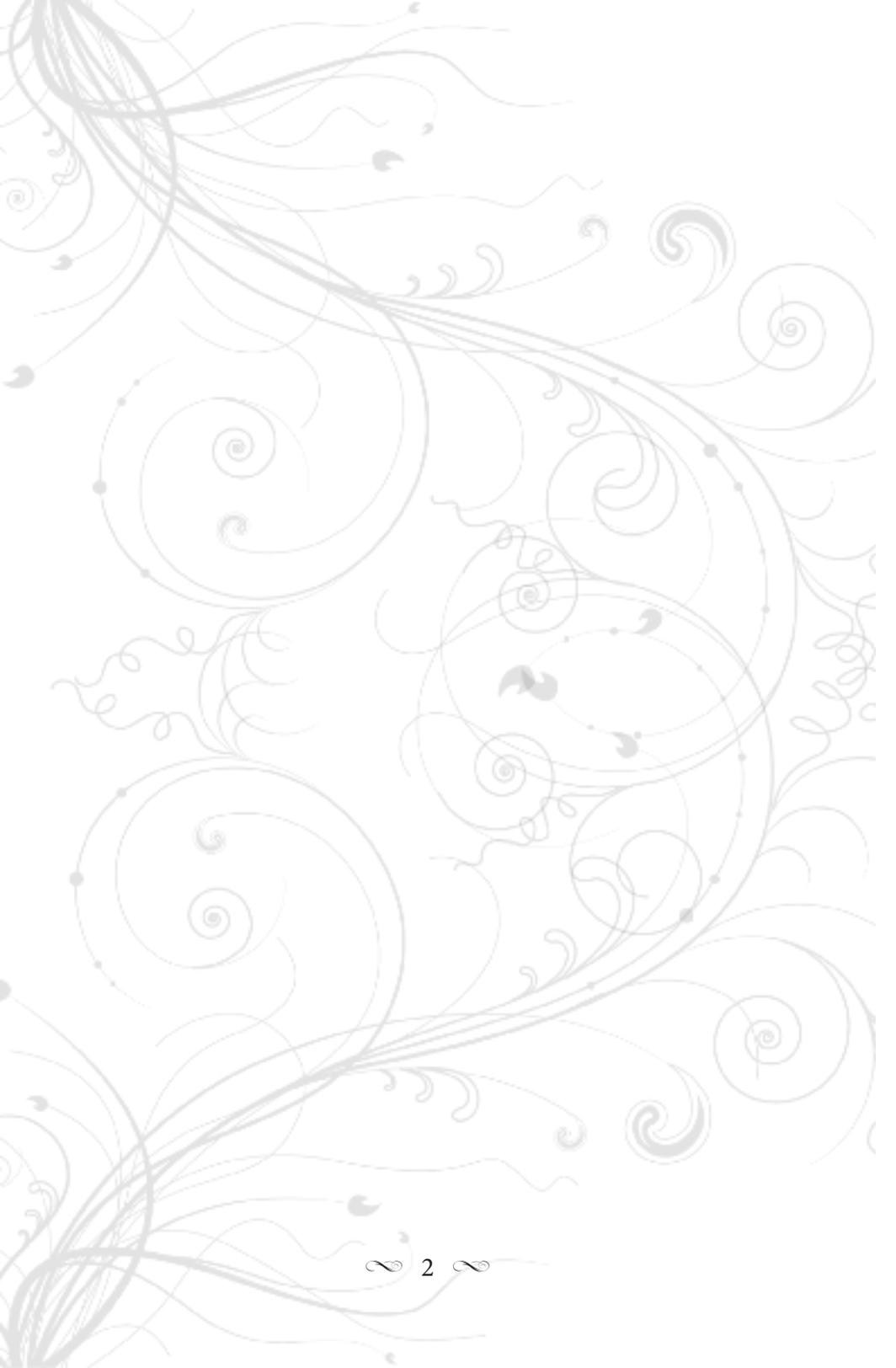
And then he does the most dangerous, reckless thing he ever could have done.
He kisses me.

The moment our lips touch, the last fraying strands of my self-control snap and I reach up, clasping my hands behind his neck and pulling him against me. There's no reason, no judgment—only gentle waves of relief. I'm lost in the ocean of his embrace, drowning in him. I could live a hundred lifetimes inside his kiss, and it would never be enough. One single thought surfaces through the tide of emotions.

"Of the entire universe, I only wanted you," I whisper the words against his lips, a solemn pledge.

His hands slide up my back and into my hair, working it loose with his fingers until it falls in brown waves across my shoulders. I sigh against his mouth and he responds by pulling away just a bit, laying a kiss on the tip of my nose, my forehead, and beside my eye, before returning to my lips.

"You have ruined me," he whispers against my mouth, his voice thick with desire.



Chapter ONE

The sled is cramped; my legs and back ache in protest as we cut through the deep snow. I pull back the heavy damask curtain covering the small window. Outside the landscape is barren and desolate. Nothing but stark white snow for miles, interrupted by the occasional leafless tree. Though the horses race forward across the plain as fast as they are able, the trek has been long and the snow deep so they snort with exertion. We'd had to abandon our more spacious carriage in Livonia and continue the rest of the way in this small sled. Across from me, my mother carefully stitches on her small linen even as each bump threatens to destroy the colorful tapestry she's creating. She hasn't spoken to me in two days, not since I'd finally grown weary of her constant chatter about how different and lavish life would be at a *real* court and reprimanded her harshly.

I sigh deeply. Perhaps the rolling hills of Anhalt-Zerbst are not as grand as the palaces of Berlin, where she grew up in the home of our wealthiest aunt, but

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it was my father's land and my only home. Never have I missed it more than I do on this journey, the dangerous trek through the depths of Russia in the coldest months of winter. I have acquired a constant shiver and my toes and fingers never seem to thaw. Still, it was only Mother's callous remarks about my father that had provoked me to speak rudely to her, and she is making me pay for it now, making the already cold interior of the carriage seem absolutely frigid with her indifference.

Letting the heavy damask curtain fall back into place, I sit back, stretching beneath the thick, fur blanket heaped over my legs. Closing my eyes, I rest against the seat, and I can almost feel the warm summer sun on my face. Days of running through the field with my darling little brother and sister, as we chased down chickens that had escaped the coop, float through my mind like soap bubbles. I remember sitting on the edge of the creek for hours, slipping off my shoes, letting my toes soak in the water. And sometimes Gretchen, my good friend, would come and bring flowers to weave into my dark hair or a flask of wine from her father's stock for us to drink until our heads were light as a feather. It never mattered much to me that she was the daughter of the local innkeeper and I was the daughter of the prince. We were innocent of such things, much to my mother's chagrin. I can't help but smile at the memories. As they come, I try to hold them close, weaving them

around me like the fragile threads under my mother's fingers.

Such happier times, though not so long ago, seem to me now as if they occurred in another lifetime.

Everything changed when I turned fourteen. Though still a girl by any accounts, Mother was desperate to see me wed. I didn't learn until much later of our family's dire financial situation, or that Father was in danger of forfeiting his family properties.

She had first tried to wed me to young Peter, then heir to the Swiss throne. But when he abdicated to move to Russia with his aunt, all hope of that union seemed lost. Mother had been forced to offer me to my uncle, an old man with missing teeth and thin, white hair. He'd come for a visit that summer and while I had thought it an innocent visit, his intentions toward me became painfully obvious. I can still remember the stench of brandy and tobacco on his breath as he'd cornered me one evening and forced a kiss upon me.

It had taken all my will not to retch on his golden slippers.

I cried into my pillow all night when Mother told me he asked for my hand in marriage. I screamed, raged, and begged—something that did not bode well in her eyes. When the letter arrived from Empress Elizabeth of Russia, we had both been deeply relieved to say the least. I cling to that feeling now, as we trek across the tundra, snow falling all around us.

Finally, after what feels like hours, I sit forward.

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I'm so desperate for conversation that I ask the only question that I think might appeal to my stoic mother.

"Mother, tell me, how long do you think we are to remain at the Winter Palace?"

Her eyes flicker up to me, sparkling. She is beautiful, for all her flaws of character. Her hair is brown like mine, and perfectly smooth. Her skin is a pale crème like fresh milk, and her eyes are wide and dark blue like a storm at sea. There is absolutely nothing that makes her happier than planning what, in her mind, will be a fine royal union, and that happiness makes her even lovelier. As she answers, I would swear she is actually glowing.

"If I have my way, you will never step foot on Prussian soil again," she answers confidently. "Empress Consort," she muses wistfully, "just as I should have been."

I wish I could share her enthusiasm. Gretchen's warm smile and twinkling laugh invade my thoughts once more, and I have to force them away. It won't do to dwell on those childhood memories now. Not when my mother has made my options very clear.

"It's not an engagement," I say softly. "Not officially."

Empress Elizabeth's letter had been vague at best. A simple invitation for my mother and me to join her at Russian Court. There was not even a hint of what my mother longed for so desperately—a marriage between myself and Peter, once heir to Sweden and now the future King of Russia. Still, Mother packed

us up immediately and we made for St. Petersburg even through the blistering winter, hoping to make our arrival by Peter's sixteenth birthday.

"Not yet, perhaps. But the empress favors our family—my family, that is—and she knows the best way to secure her throne is by securing her bloodline. And for that, she needs not only Peter as heir, but for Peter himself to have an heir. And for that, she will need you."

Or another princess. I don't say the words, but they buzz in my head like honeybees. The prince's birthday celebration is sure to be filled with eligible ladies from every corner of the kingdom, each vying for a place beside him. I myself have met Peter only once, when we were ten years old. He was bratty and insufferable as all boys are, but even at that age, he had subtle nobility about him, a tilt of the chin, and a confidence in his gait that only royals possess.

Deep in the back of my mind, I couldn't help but wonder what sort of man Peter had become. Is he kind? Handsome? Strong? Wise? In my mind, I allow a vague image of him to form. Surely, he would be handsome, as were the other men in his family. And even in the remote area of my home, word of his skill in the hunt and his predilection for archery were well known. Certainly, he will be a good husband and a fair and just king.

While I daydream, Mother begins to drone on about the lavish balls that we will attend, and

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the frivolous and silly-sounding customs I will be expected to learn to fit in at Royal Court. I lay my head back gently as she speaks, the sound of her voice soothing after such a long silence. The sled bucks and I fly forward into her lap, spilling the contents of her sewing basket.

“What in the world?” she demands as I right myself. “Why have we stopped?”

I draw back the curtain and our escort, General Pitankin, rides past the window, his chestnut mare jerking the reins skittishly.

“Stay inside,” he commands.

My mother grabs a dainty, blue fan from the seat beside her and begins fanning herself despite the cold.

“I’m sure it’s just beggars. I believe these woods are filled with them,” she offers as if to console me.

Outside, the general yells something in Russian. I curse myself mentally. If only I had thought to learn Russian along with French and German, I wouldn’t feel quite so foreign now. Still, if Mother is successful in her ambitions, I will learn the language soon enough.

There are sounds of a scuffle, and the unmistakable ring of a steel blade being drawn from its sheath. The sled rocks sideways as someone knocks into it. Mother lets out a startled squeal. I lean forward, peeking out the curtain, and see the general and another of our guards on the ground, unmoving. Quickly, I lift the hem of my brown, wool gown and slip a knife from

my boot. Mother opens her mouth, I'm sure to chastise me for such an unladylike thing as having a knife hidden on my person, but I silence her with a finger to my lips. While my mother had been determined to groom me to be a proper lady, my father was content to let me join him in hunting, fencing, and even knife throwing. The small blade in my hand is one of many he's gifted me over the years, and the hilt is warm and comforting in my palm.

The sled rocks again, and I hear the stomp of boots as the thieves begin pulling our trunks from the back. They won't find any riches, only recently altered dresses and sturdy undergarments we've brought with us. Any jewels Mother might have brought are most likely hidden down the front of her corset—and there would be few of those at that. Despite being the ruler of our province, my father has no kingly riches. Our wealth lies in our title alone—a fact Mother never allows him to forget.

Soon, they are muttering in disappointed tones. I know they will come for us next; there is nothing left for them now but to amuse themselves with us. Nodding to Mother, who looks like she's about to faint, I quietly slip out of the opposite side of the sled and slink around its wooden bow, knife in hand. Snow crunches beneath my boots, but the restless stomping of the horses obscures it. I know I'm no match for them on fair terms, but if I can surprise them, then we have a chance of escape.

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I see two pairs of legs standing beside the sled. Then I hear the door fly open, and my mother screams. Lunging forward, I slice into the first thief's thigh, high up where I know the blood will flow too quickly to stop. The knife is sharp enough that it takes him a moment to realize what's happening. Climbing to my feet, I lunge at the next man, who is much quicker than I hoped, and he waves off my attack. I spin, a move I've practiced more than once with the butcher's children when we used to play wooden swords, and crouch below his grasp, slicing a line through his gut. The smell is thick and sour as his innards spill out, sloshing to the ground as he falls. I gag, and bile rises in my throat. My eyes water immediately, and it's all I can do not to collapse to my knees.

I'm so busy trying to get myself together that I don't see the third man coming. Before I can think to fight him off, two strong arms coil around me as my mother continues to scream. He squeezes, and I can't breathe. The knife falls from my hand as I thrash wildly. He's yelling at me in his foreign tongue, but I can't even draw breath to tell him that I don't understand. Just as my vision begins to explode with light, I manage to kick the side of the carriage hard enough to topple us both into the new-fallen snow. He falls flat to his back, and I crash on top of him. I hear the air violently rush from his lungs, and he releases me. Rolling to my feet, I scoop up the knife and run as fast as my numb feet will carry me.

SHERRY FICKLIN

The woods are thick and blanketed with snow. I'm light enough that I don't sink too deep as I fly through the forest, but behind me, I hear the crunch of the snow as my attacker pursues, each step slow and labored.

Good. Let him chase me. I can get him away from my mother, then, hopefully, double back and grab her. We will unhitch the sled, and she and I can ride on to St. Petersburg with just the horses. The sky is grey and the air frigid in my lungs. Each breath burns, and then expels in a ball of steam out of my mouth. Still, I run. Turning to spare a glance over my shoulder unbalances me and I fall, slipping down the slope of a hill, tumbling into a deep snow bank. I lay there for a moment, trying to catch my breath and staring at the sky above me, and I listen for his footsteps.

There's nothing.

Rolling onto my side, I peek up. The snow is deep, well over my knees, and I struggle to get back to solid ground. A patch of pine trees offers respite. The snow around them is shallow, and I take a minute to brush the ice from my hair. It has fallen free from its elegant braid and dangles in wet clumps around my face. Still, I have somehow managed to hold onto the knife.

In the distance, I hear a gun shot. The sound echoes through the bleak forest like cannon fire. I turn without hesitation and run back toward my mother, cursing my stupidity. What had I been thinking leaving her alone like that? The bandit must have doubled

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back to her, thinking me long gone. As I make my way up the steep hill, I slip and fall to my knees in something slimy and wet. It isn't snow but mud, a small spring of warm water bubbling up from the ground. Somehow, the snow had hidden it from my sight, but now, it's all down the front of me. The water and mud pulls down on my already-ruined gown, as if trying to hold me to the earth. I frown at the sight. Poor Mother. She'd paid the seamstress what little money we had to refashion this dress for me. It had been one of her old walking gowns but the seamstress had added lace and a beautiful yellow sash, all of which was now covered in muck. With haste, I untie the sash and slip the bulky gown over my head. The chill is immediate, but still, I feel lighter, light enough to run once more. I run my hands over my corset and decide to rid myself of it while I'm at it. Using the knife, I quickly cut the strings and discard it. Not only can I take a real breath, but also my petticoat is clean and white as snow, helping me blend in. Scrambling back to my feet, I press forward. As soon as I appear over the ridge, I see a man standing at the edge of the cliff not five feet to my left. He looks over, his eyes locking with mine.

He doesn't look like a bandit, I realize. He wears a long, black brocade jacket with golden embroidery; a black, fur hat stuffed on his head makes his blue eyes glow like azure. He's clean, calm, and holding a rifle—which is pointed at me for only a moment before he

lowers it, a confused expression on his face. I hold out my tiny blade in front of me, as if it would do any good. He cocks his head to the side curiously before addressing me in perfect German.

“Princess Sophia? I’m Sergei Salkov of Her Majesty’s Imperial Court. I’m here to rescue you.”

Just as the words leave his mouth, something moves in the corner of my eye. The bandit who has been chasing me rushes forward from behind a thick tree, right toward Sergei. The tall, scruffy man is draped in heavy furs and even at full speed, he’s moving too slowly to cross the distance between them before I turn the knife in my hand and throw it. It lands with a dull thud in the center of his chest. He swears loudly and then falls forward, the snow around him turning to crimson slush.

As gently as possible, I wrap my arms around my waist and hug myself, rubbing the exposed skin to stave off the frigid cold. I glance up and see Sergei has his rifle lowered at the ground and is staring at the now-fallen bandit. Then he’s looks back at me with his mouth twisted into a funny grin.

Not sure what the protocol is for meeting a stranger in my undergarments, I dip into a formal curtsy. “It is a pleasure to meet you, sir, but I think perhaps you are a bit late for that.”