



1

Katinka Dashkova wanted to live, so she held her breath. She had no choice. If she was to survive, she must be quiet as stone, as still as the statues decorating the great rooms of the Winter Palace. One ripple of the curtain behind which she crouched and he would find her.

She was trapped in a deadly game of hide and seek. The urge to open a finger-sized gap in the heavy red curtain and risk a peek out into the Tzar's private dining room tingled along her arms, heading for her fingers. She wanted to see; to see when he came into the room, to see if he really was holding a knife.

The 'game' had begun on the top floor of the Palace. Katinka, or Kat to her handful of friends, had just stepped out of the stairway that led from her

sleeping quarters in the attic. The man yelled when he saw her.

“Death to the Tsar’s Circus!”

Kat decided that was all she needed to hear and took flight. It always surprised people how light she was on her feet. She was used to the way people looked at her and didn’t see her. Why couldn’t they see her dancing feet, her blue eyes, her shiny hair, her smile as wide as the river Neva that flows past the palace and divides St Petersburg? In their twisted minds she was ‘a freak’ because she belonged to the Tzar’s collection of people who were different. He called them my Circus of Curiosities. They came from all over his vast empire. To her friends she was Kat, to everyone else she was a person without a name. Everyone but the Tzar, Peter the Great, the all-powerful ruler of Russia, the keeper of life and the bringer of death. He called her Katinka and liked to watch her dance, usually in this room and once in front of the entire Court.

But Peter was dead – greatness doesn’t make you immortal – and the Empress, the Tzarina, wanted rid of people like her.

Kat twisted her head so she could snatch a look at her pursuer, the man who wanted to kill her. Her

glance revealed he was red-faced, short, fat and round. It was like being chased by a dangerous dumpling.

Where to go? Where to run to? If only she could clear her head – she was blessed with a memory that required only a single look at something to store it in her mind. That was in normal times. It was, she was discovering, rather more difficult to think straight running for your life.

In normal circumstances she knew the Palace, knew every nook and cranny. One night, when she had given up chasing sleep around her head, she tried to draw a map of every room because Kat liked to be precise about things but dawn came before she finished.

She dashed down the stairs and into the shadowy courtyard. She saw no-one, and if she shouted no-one would come to help. Who would dare defy the wishes of the Tzarina?

“I want them all gone – hunt them out,” the Tzarina had declared, “remove them from every nook and cranny they have crawled into in my palace.”

The noblemen of the Court turned it into a game. They liked to live in a world where people’s lives meant nothing. So they decided to hunt down the

living members of Peter the Great's Kunstkamera, his Circus of Curiosities.

Officially, they were to be rounded up and sent to Tzarevna Praskovia Ivanova, Peter's niece, daughter of Ivan V, a shy woman who had always found it difficult to make up her mind on anything and who now looked after the dead Tzar's human collection. She, as much anybody did, cared for them.

But if any of the Curiosities suffered an 'accident' during the round-up then these things couldn't be helped. That's what the not-so-noble nobles decided, and the Tzarina turned a blind eye because she had an Empire to rule and a throne to protect. After all accidents, as everyone knows, do happen.

On the other side of the courtyard, the door to the Tzar's quarters was open and, not stopping or caring how unusual that was, Kat darted in, raced through to the dining room and tried to make herself invisible behind the curtain.

"Ah-ahhhhhh witch – I have you!"

The curtain was ripped back and there he was and, yes, he did have a knife. Kat stared at it.

The man raised the knife but he was out of breath. Dumplings aren't designed to run. Kat seized her

chance and dived between his legs. She threw herself into the curtains disguising the far door (Peter, it's said, preferred rooms to have at least two doors so there was always another way out), scrambled for the handle and plunged into the near darkness of the neighbouring room.

She lost her footing and skidded across the smooth wooden floor. She scrambled on all fours towards the far wall. The dumpling leapt in front of her, the knife glinted in the candlelight as he raised it once more.

A sudden shadow flickered across the candle mounted on the wall by the door.

"Oooooooffffftttt," said the dumpling.

Kat looked up in time to see him stagger against the wall and slide to the floor. His knife clattered to the ground. He finished in a sitting position, head lolling forward, tongue hanging out the corner of his mouth, his many chins disappearing into his chest and large belly. She noticed how little his legs were. They looked too small to carry such a weight.

Kat let her breath out in a great sigh. She looked into the dark alcove to one side of the door, a space usually occupied by one of Peter's bodyguards.

“Have you killed him? There’ll be all sorts of trouble if you have.”

“He’ll live.”

The voice that answered was that of a boy, a teenage boy, but the figure who stepped forward into the half-light was that of a man, and a man about the height of Peter the Great himself.

“Oh, Alexei, I’m sorry – thank you.”

Kat sprang to her feet and hugged him as best she could. They were the same age, 14 at their last birthday, but Alexei towered head, shoulders and chest above her.

“Saw him go after you, followed,” said Alexei. He stopped talking as if that was all the explaining he needed to do. He was a boy of few words, using them carefully as though scared they might run out and he would be left with nothing to say.

Strictly speaking, Alexei wasn’t part of the *Kunstkamera*. He was being trained as the Tzar’s bodyguard. Peter the Great liked his bodyguards to be giants. Alexei’s father was seven feet, two inches in his socks, and Alexei was heading the same way.

Alexei’s problem was the same as Kat’s – the Tzar was gone. And with the death of, to give him his full

title (take a deep breath), the Most Excellent and Great Sovereign Prince Peter Alekseevich, Ruler of all Russia, Tzar of Kazan, Tzar of Astrakhan, Tzar of Siberia, Sovereign of Pskov, Great Prince of Smolensk, Tversk, Yugorsk, Permsky, Vyatsky, Bulgarsky, Sovereign of the Northern Lands, the Iverian Lands, Ruler of the Georgian Kings, of the Circassian and Mountain Princes – with his death so it seemed went their futures.

“What’s happening, Alexei? What’s going to happen to us?”

Alexei glanced through to the dining room. He shrugged. The dumpling groaned.

“Come,” said Alexei.

“Where?” wondered Kat.

Alexei shrugged again. He had run out of words.