

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Nadya's Quest

Lisette Allen

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BLACK
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Chapter One

St Petersburg. Summer 1788.

IT WAS PAST ten at night, but the sky was still a glimmering vault of palest blue over the rooftops of St Petersburg. On the far bank of the wide River Neva, the slim spire of the St Peter and St Paul fortress seemed to shimmer in the sultry haze.

For hours now, desultory groups of people had been thronging the wide granite embankment beside the river, some in search of cooling breezes drifting in from the sea, others hoping listlessly for some entertainment to while away the long summer evening. A few ships plied their way with effort up the slate-coloured expanse of the Neva estuary, their sails hanging almost limp in the oppressive heat.

A flash of colour, of movement. A girl came into view, her full, red peasant skirt a swirl of life amongst the drabness of the dawdling crowds; her striking face alive and purposeful, her glossy dark hair braided and coiled at the nape of her neck. She was pushing her way with quiet but steady determination through the idle crowds that had gathered outside a riverside tavern, while clutching a small, silk-wrapped parcel close to her vividly embroidered bodice.

A group of sailors, noisy from the home-brewed *kvas* they had been swilling, eyed her approvingly as she hurried past. 'How much, then, sweetheart?' one of them called, because the only women out here on their own at this time of night were whores. The girl turned on him, her wide, dark-lashed eyes flashing proudly above distinctive high cheekbones

that betrayed more than a hint of Tartar blood. She said something in a low, clear voice that had the man staggering back towards his companions, and the other sailors laughed at him.

‘She’s just a peasant,’ the man muttered, still wincing from the softly spoken insult. ‘A drab little peasant.’

‘A pretty one, though, eh?’ his companions chuckled, their eyes still appreciatively following the slender figure of the dark-haired girl, whose red skirts swirled around her soft felt boots as she hurried on along the embankment in the direction of the Admiralty. ‘Pity you couldn’t afford her. She’ll be after richer pickings tonight.’

Just then a hint of a breeze shimmered up the wide Neva from the sea, bearing the mingled scents of canvas, and tar, and salt, and the pine resin of the timber yards that lay upstream. For a moment the girl in the red skirt hesitated and gazed out across the ruffled waters of the estuary, some loose strands of her dark hair curling in delicate tendrils around her face. She seemed to be watching a small red-sailed trading vessel making its way slowly into harbour for the night, seagulls swooping and clamouring in its wake. Then she turned purposefully to continue her journey, pushing her way through the idlers and street vendors who thronged the riverside, and clutching her little silk parcel in her arms as if it were the most precious thing in the world.

A sudden burst of noise on the quayside ahead of her made her stop once more, suddenly alert. The sound of raised voices and the clatter of muskets jarred on the sultry night air. The bored, hot crowds that a few moments ago had been idling languidly along the river’s edge seemed to suddenly spark with life. As one, they moved eagerly towards the centre of the disturbance, which turned out to be the small trading vessel that the girl had been watching earlier. It was attempting to berth for the night, alongside the other ketches and galleys that were already moored; but even as its sailors were attempting to tie up the ropes, the

red-coated soldiers of the St Petersburg militia were jumping threateningly aboard, their muskets pointed at the bemused foreign crew. The sailors, half-naked, slick with sweat from their efforts to bring their ship into harbour, argued back, angry, unable to understand. The crowds continued to gather, eager for fun.

The dark-haired girl was caught up against her will in the seething mass of sightseers. Struggling to see what was happening because she wasn't tall, she caught the arm of a stout fruit seller who had abandoned her nearby stall to come and watch. 'Please. What is happening?'

The woman glanced at her impatiently, then looked at her again, with more interest this time. 'Why, it's Nadya, isn't it? Nadya, the Polish seamstress who works for that old skinflint Madame Rostova in the Gostiny Dvor?'

The girl nodded impatiently. 'Indeed, I am Nadya. But can you tell me why they're arresting those sailors? What crime have they committed?'

'They've done nothing, I suppose, except to try to bring Swedish timber into port.'

The girl frowned as she continued to gaze at the hastily moored ship. 'But it's only a small trading vessel. Why are they treating the sailors so roughly?'

The fruit-seller laughed her coarse laugh. 'Where have you been, my little Nadya? Too busy with your silks and satins that they say the fine ladies of Petersburg pay fistfuls of roubles for! I wish I had your talent! Too busy to realise what's going on, eh? Well, war with Sweden is threatened - didn't you know? Those sailors are Swedish, every one of them - and they're not going to be given the chance to sail home and fight for their king. It's our Empress Catherine's latest orders. All Swedish vessels are to be seized, and the sailors too.' She chuckled and pointed her stubby finger at the young seafarers who were being driven, still protesting, down on to the quayside. 'And, knowing our lusty Empress,

she wouldn't mind a taste of this lot herself. Look at them. Did you ever see such a bonny bunch of lads?'

She wasn't alone in her appreciation. The crowds whistled and called out encouragement as the soldiers, having driven all the ship's crew on to the wharf, lined them up and started to rope them together, using their fists and the butts of their guns to subdue their captives. The seafarers were quite unarmed, and clad only in loose canvas breeches. Their calves and feet were bare. Their sinewed brown torsos gleamed with sweat as they vociferously continued to protest their innocence, but the soldiers just laughed and pressed on in their work of tying their wrists together.

'That's the way, soldiers!' called out someone from a gathered cluster of street women. 'Parcel them up, and take them as a gift to our gallant Empress!'

'Why take them to her?' protested another woman raucously. 'Why can't we have a taste of those fine sailor lads ourselves? Why should she have all the fun?'

The crowd was growing dangerously heated as people continued to pour in from the nearby taverns and wine booths. Nadya found herself trapped, half-suffocated in the seething, jeering throng. She struggled to fight her way out, but it was impossible: she was too slight. She was being pressed, inch by inch, towards the line of soldiers, who were forced to turn and face the heated, unruly crowd to keep them from their prey. Within seconds, Nadya was so close to the captive sailors that she could smell the perspiration on their roped bodies, and see the desperate defiance in their eyes. They were all fair-haired, all young; and there was one, with vivid, uncompromising blue eyes, who made her spine tingle, because he was gazing at her as if no-one else existed.

All the time the swelling crowds, desperate for amusement and not realising the growing danger, were continuing to press in from behind. The captain of the militia, the sweat rolling down his cheeks, barked to his men

to form a defensive ring around the seafarers and he raised his musket threateningly at the crowd. 'Stand back!' he yelled, his gruff voice cracking with fear. 'Stand back, or I'll shoot the lot of you, by God!'

But his panic-stricken words were lost in a fresh surge of eager onlookers. Those who were crushed between the soldiers and the mob fought desperately to get out of reach of the threatening muskets; and in the turmoil Nadya, struggling to stay on her feet and not fall beneath the trampling feet all round, lost her hold on her precious parcel. It landed on the bare granite cobbles, beside the booted feet of one of the tense soldiers. Desperately she made to retrieve it; but the soldier, seeing her sudden movement towards him, swore loudly at her and lifted the butt of his gun to strike her. Nadya barely had time to anticipate the vicious attack when someone stepped swiftly, protectively in front of her and felled the cursing soldier with a thudding blow from his fist.

Nadya scrambled dazedly to her feet with her parcel in her hands, and gazed up at the man who had saved her from the soldier's gun. He was one of the seafarers, the one she had glimpsed earlier with the vivid blue eyes; he had not yet been tied up. A mistake, that. He looked powerful, dangerous, his fists still bunched in readiness. Standing protectively in front of her, his long, sun-streaked hair rippling to his bare brown shoulders and his eyes a deep, hypnotic blue, he spoke to her quickly, in fluent Russian.

'You'd best get away from here while you can. If I'm not mistaken, all hell is about to break loose.'

He was not mistaken. The red-coated soldiers, realising with stunned disbelief that the Swede had managed to fell their armed companion, were already lunging towards him, and one of them swung his rifle butt so that it landed with a sickening thud against his exposed ribs. The man staggered, then regained his balance; it had been a vicious blow, and those in the crowd who had witnessed it erupted with anger.

‘Leave the sailor lads alone, blast you!’ called out a voracious-looking woman to the soldiers. ‘What harm have they done you? Let them free. They’re a damn sight prettier than you are!’

‘Yes, let us have them!’ screamed another of the painted whores who trawled the harbourside at night. ‘We’ll teach them some respect for Mother Russia. I’ll have that handsome blue-eyed one, the one you’re trying to knock about, you great brutes. I’ll give him something to remember. In front of you all, if you like!’

The mob surged forward again, roaring out its approval. The captain and his men struck out wildly at the rampaging crowd. The sailors who had not yet been roped up quickly untied their companions, before turning their fists on the soldiers and knocking their guns to the ground, while the crowd pressed around rapturously.

‘Let us have a taste. Let us have a taste of the gallant sailor lads!’

Then, abruptly, the sharp crack of a musket penetrated the rabble’s high-pitched din. Someone screamed, and another soldier fired his gun into the air. The crowd, panicking, pressed backward, trying to escape from the confined space. Nadya, bruised and breathless, found herself being forced along the chaotic embankment like a piece of bobbing driftwood in a turbulent sea. Sobbing with effort, she struggled towards the shelter of a cluster of big wooden barrels that had been stacked up on the wharf, and the mob swept on past as she sank down gratefully behind them, protected by their bulk. Her lungs heaved as she gasped for breath, and her nostrils were assaulted by the faint stench of salt fish that had once filled the barrels; but she didn’t care. The barrels, lashed together with ropes, provided a dark little haven as the mob roared and trampled past her, followed by the ominous rattle of sporadic musket shots as the soldiers came in ragged pursuit. Murmuring a

silent prayer of relief under her breath, Nadya pushed her little parcel into a deep pocket in the folds of her skirt.

And then, she jumped to her feet, her heart thudding against her ribs as a quietly sardonic voice from the shadows behind her murmured, 'Well, sweetheart. This gives us a breathing space, no more. They'll be searching every inch of the quay soon. What do we do next?'

Nadya whirled round, at the same time pulling out the vicious little knife she always kept tucked into the top of her boots. It was the seafarer with the blue eyes and long sun-streaked hair; the man who had saved her from the soldier who'd been about to hit her. He was hiding here already, only in her haste she had not noticed him in the shadows. Her blade wavered uncertainly. And at that same instant she heard what he must have already heard: the muffled sound of tramping feet, ominously rhythmic, coming along the embankment from the direction of the militia garrison. Reinforcements, to subdue the wild Petersburg mob and drag the seafarers into captivity.

She tilted her chin defiantly, her green eyes flashing, as the little knife danced a warning in her hand. 'You'll have to help yourself, stranger. The militia is on its way. It's everyone for himself now.'

He shrugged his wide shoulders resignedly. His voice seemed almost amused as he murmured, 'If it's each for himself, then you'd better be on your way too, sweetheart. That little knife won't get you far against a platoon of soldiers.'

Nadya hesitated, gazing up at his hard, suntanned features. The soldiers were coming this way, getting steadily nearer, sweeping up the remnants of the crowd as they came. A few of the fugitives were running past, crying out in fear. The barrels offered only a few more moments' shelter. Soon it would be too late for either of them to run anywhere.

He put his hand on her shoulder, a warning. 'Go,' he said urgently. 'I can look after myself.'

No doubt about that. His muscles were smooth and tensely powerful beneath his silky brown skin. Nadya felt a shivering of lust, a sensation she had almost forgotten. She smothered it quickly. The soldiers, when they came, would recognise him instantly as the cause of all the trouble and he wouldn't stand a chance. They were almost upon them now. Already the tramp of booted feet was driving out all other sounds.

Nadya moved. With swift, accurate strokes, she slashed with her little knife at the ropes that bound the heaped-up barrels, and shoved at them with her booted foot. With a rumbling clatter that built to a crescendo, the barrels spilled across the embankment, bouncing and rolling towards the river, and the soldiers, their passage temporarily barred, cried out angrily as they jumped out of the way. From Nadya's shoulder came the murmur, 'Well done. I'm impressed.'

Quickly she slid her knife back into the top of her boot. 'Don't be,' she said. 'That's brought us a few minutes, no more. Hurry. Follow me.'

She knew that along here the wharf was lined with tumbledown fishermen's sheds, dark, mouldering and barely used. Swiftly Nadya ran to one of them, pulling the stranger after her, her feet stumbling over the discarded ropes and nets that littered the grimy floor. Trying not to think about rats, she struggled with the door but had to leave it half-open, because it was hanging off its hinges. Fortunately there was still enough darkness in here to hide them from the dangerous St Petersburg twilight. Hastily she led the stranger into the shadows.

And then, too late, she realised that the hut was not empty. In the far corner, on a makeshift bed of tattered sacking, a woman was crouching intently over the outstretched body of a man. At first Nadya thought she was robbing him, but then she realised her mistake. The man's tattered coat and boots lay discarded on the floor; he

groaned incoherently as the woman fondled him, his big hands reaching for her heavy breasts. He appeared to be hopelessly drunk. No doubt the woman, one of the poorest of the dockside prostitutes, would give him what he wanted, then strip him of every kopek he owned and leave him lying in an alcoholic stupor. Neither of them had even noticed Nadya and her companion come in. Nadya, the colour high in her cheeks, stepped back quickly towards the door. 'I've changed my mind. We can't stay here.'

But the Swedish sailor's hand was round her wrist, a manacle of iron. 'We can't go out there, either. They'll be here any minute. Can't you hear them?'

Heart pounding anew, Nadya listened. The barrels hadn't held up their pursuers for long. She heard the sound of soldiers' heavy feet, coming steadily nearer. Her companion was already pulling her back into the dark shed and pressing her against the roughcast wall. 'Better get ready for them, sweetheart,' he murmured, and, gripping her shoulders with his strong hands, he bent his head to kiss her. Nadya cried out and twisted in his grip, pushing him away desperately, but he caught her hands and pushed her back against the wall.

'Don't be a fool,' he hissed. 'If they come in here then we're lost - unless we have a good excuse to be here in the first place. Like *them*.' He gesticulated fiercely at the couple on the floor behind them. 'Don't you see, this is the only way?'

He kissed her again; and Nadya, her brain reeling, was devastated by his touch. His mouth was warm and strong against her lips, caressing her, tantalising her. As his hands slipped down to clasp her narrow waist and pull her close against his half-naked body, his tongue probed deeper between her parted lips, stroking, exploring. Nadya trembled. A long time, oh, a long time since she had felt like *this*. Her breasts were separated from the hard pressure of his superbly muscled chest by only the thin cotton of her

bodice; and as he crushed her relentlessly to him, she felt her nipples stiffen and peak, the little nubs of dark pink flesh sending tingling sensations of delight down to her lower abdomen. His tongue stretched and curled lazily within the velvety softness of her mouth, and Nadya felt herself melting with heat, felt the licking of white-hot desire at her loins as the blond seafarer steadily caressed her. In the darkness at the back of the shed, she glimpsed the woman groping the man into readiness, could hear muffled grunting as the woman climbed astride his prone figure, rucked up her skirts and eagerly lowered herself on to him, making little whimpering sounds as he penetrated her. Nadya heard the whore's cries of delight, and her own senses swam with dizzying lust for the stranger who embraced her.

There was a harsh banging on the half-open door, and a soldier pulled it open, peering impatiently into the darkness within. 'Can't see a damn thing,' he muttered. 'Yes, I can. By Christ, there's more of them at it in here. The place is swarming with the vermin. Prostitutes, two kopeks a time. Filth.'

Another soldier hovered impatiently at the entrance, lantern in hand; the first soldier grabbed it off him and swung it inside, and they both exclaimed and grinned at the drunken couple copulating in the corner, oblivious of their audience. One of the soldiers licked his lips as he watched the woman thrust her dangling breasts into the man's mouth. Then he turned towards Nadya and her companion, holding the lantern closer to them and saying with relish, 'Well, what about you two? Are you going to get it up her, or what?'

Nadya went cold. She felt the Swedish sailor's arms tense around her; then he said calmly, in fluent Russian, 'Soldier, I've paid good money for this doxy. I'd prefer to take my pleasure in my own good time. Do me the favour of leaving us in peace, will you?'

The soldier hesitated, his eyes hot on Nadya's slender figure. 'I'd like to see you do it to her,' he said, with stubborn persistence. 'She looks a lot prettier than the rest. I'd like to see you fuck her.' But then the man behind him called out, 'Ah, leave them be! They're nothing but drunken, poxy termagants down here - everyone knows that. Come on, let's look elsewhere for the troublemakers from that damned ship, before the captain finds us here.'

The soldier was obviously reluctant to go and his eyes returned hungrily to the noisily thrusting couple in the dark corner, who were still drunkenly unaware of their audience. But at last his companion dragged him away, and the flickering lantern faded, leaving them in darkness once more. The smell of sex permeated the tawdry little hovel. Deliberately, the blond seafarer pulled Nadya back into his arms. 'They're still watching from just beyond the doorway,' he murmured warningly in her ear. He kissed her again, his tongue plunging into her mouth with deliberate eroticism; while at the same time his hands cupped the twin curves of her sleek buttocks, pulling her insistently towards him and grinding her gently against his loins. From the shadows, Nadya could hear the sound of the burly man on the sacks groaning aloud as the woman feverishly rode him; she couldn't see him, but she remembered the vivid sight of his angrily thrusting penis as the woman caressed it, and she felt the blood surge thickly in her own veins with the heat of her own arousal. She ran her fingers hungrily across the blond stranger's wide back, feeling how the sinews of his powerful shoulders tensed and coiled beneath his sun-browned skin as he continued to caress her, his lean hips still moving purposefully against hers so that she could feel the thrusting, heated hardness of him beneath his rough breeches. This was getting dangerous.

She struggled for breath beneath the languorous onslaught of his kiss. Her secret parts, she knew with shame, were moist and swollen with need. Through her

heavy-lidded eyes, she could just glimpse the brutish thrustings of the drunken couple in the corner; she could see the woman gasping in delight as the man pawed feverishly at her breasts, could see her lifting herself high above him so the glistening, hairy root of his penis was briefly exposed, before she drove herself back on to him, riding him frantically with hoarse shouts and gasps. And Nadya, dizzy herself with lust, was suddenly aware that the nameless man she was with was pulling at her hardened nipples with strong, cunning fingers through the dangerously thin fabric of her bodice, while at the same time pressing his hard thigh against the moist flesh at the top of her legs; and Nadya forgot about the lurking soldiers, forgot the tawdry shabbiness of the hut, forgot everything except her longing to have this beautiful blond stranger take her now, penetrate her secret parts, ravish her with the magnificent male shaft that she could feel nudging with such controlled purposefulness against her melting loins . . .

She gasped and closed her eyes at the infinitely sweet sensation, like honey, flooding her veins. And the blond man, as if knowing her desperate need, held her very steady with one hand round her small waist, while with the other he began to squeeze her nipple with a hard, deliberate caress that sent shafts of dark pleasure-pain flooding through her. Clutching desperately at his wide shoulders, Nadya began to climax silently, helplessly in his arms, pressing herself against the hardness at his loins until her soaking clitoris was rubbed into searing pleasure. The waves of exquisite release rippled through her as she clenched her body tight against her secret, devastating orgasm.

He didn't realise. Dear God, she hoped he didn't realise what had just happened to her, or she would die of shame.

He let her go. She pulled herself abruptly away from the wall and pushed her loosened hair back from her warm cheeks. The couple at the back of the shed were silent at last, the man snoring in a drunken stupor.

Her stranger had moved to the door and was looking out, wary and alert. 'They've put extra soldiers round our ship,' he was saying thoughtfully. 'They'll be guarding the whole area well. Looks as if I'll have to find somewhere else to spend the night.'

Nadya pretended to be engrossed in smoothing down her rumpled skirt. 'You could find another woman, I suppose,' she said coldly. 'There are plenty of them in the taverns along the riverside. You'd have to pay this time, though.'

He turned again to look at her, and as the pale evening light flooded the doorway, she saw his suntanned face twist slowly into a brilliant smile. 'Why,' he said, his blue eyes glinting with mischief, 'I do believe you're angry with me, *karesta*. I wonder why? I thought you quite enjoyed our little deception. Don't worry, I don't expect anything else from you. St Petersburg is unknown territory to me, but I expect I'll survive.'

Nadya could think of nothing but those wonderful blue eyes burning into her. Damn it, why should she help him again? She had repaid her debt. Why did he unsettle her so badly? She wasn't used to feeling like this. Men, she could take or leave. At least, *most* men . . .

'Well, goodbye,' he said simply, and started to walk out of their hiding place towards almost certain capture.

'Wait!' The word sprang hoarsely from Nadya's lips. He turned, his expression questioning, as she went on with attempted indifference, 'You don't know Petersburg, don't know where to go. The soldiers will spot you immediately if you're wandering around on your own. You can come with me, if you like. I have an urgent appointment to keep - I was on my way there when all this happened. You can be my escort.'

'An appointment?' He was watching her with alert eyes.

'Yes!' she replied defiantly. 'I'm on my way to see a client, the Countess Dubrayinska. I have something for her. She is

expecting me. No-one will think of looking for you there. She has a house by the Fontanka Canal, not very far from here.'

'A countess?' he murmured. 'You impress me yet again, *karesta*. But perhaps I need to be attired a little more correctly?'

Quick as a flash, Nadya moved across to the snoring couple in the corner and snatched up the man's discarded coat and boots, which she handed silently to her companion. Nodding his thanks, he put them on, the long coat and shabby leather boots somehow emphasising his magnificent physique instead of disguising it; and Nadya, checking quickly that there were no soldiers in their path, led the way along the now silent embankment. Twilight still haunted the streets of the city. It was the time of the white nights, and there would be little more than an hour's darkness tonight. The wide expanse of the Neva glittered opalescently, and on the far bank the grim walls of the fortress of St Peter and St Paul loomed up in stark warning. That was where this man would have ended up, had she not helped him. Where he probably deserved to end up . . .

Hurrying on, almost as if she hoped to lose him, Nadya led the man quickly past the silvery canals, past the grand stuccoed mansions of the first Admiralty quarter where the wealthy elite of the court made their homes. St Petersburg, city of light and waterways. How beautiful it all was, thought Nadya to herself, with the vivid pastels of the palaces reflected in the still water, and the brightly painted little boats tied up to the quays, at rest for the night. She had come to the city prepared to hate it, but something about this northern capital, built less than a hundred years ago by captive armies of serfs upon the bare, hostile swamps that surrounded the mouth of the Neva, had somehow captured her heart. She had been told much about what to expect on her long journey from the steppes of Poland. A tradesman's wife, who had let Nadya ride in her cart from Vilnius to Ostrov, had told her bitterly that Peter the Great had

enslaved armies of serfs to build it, who had died in their thousands. And yet it was so beautiful . . .

She saw the stranger pausing to gaze at the Sheremetyev Palace beside the Fontanka, its yellow and white facade reflected like a mirage in the cool grey evening waters of the canal. Perhaps he, too, was captivated by the city's beauty. Then he said thoughtfully, almost to himself, 'They say that the city is built on the bodies of dead serfs. A hundred of them for every square metre.'

Her shock at his words, which almost echoed her own thoughts, must have shown in her face, because he said lightly, 'Or so legend has it. Take me to your Countess Dubrayinska.'

Nadya nodded quickly and moved on. She knew instinctively that he was hiding something from her, that he was not what he appeared to be. But what did it matter to her? She didn't even know why she was helping him. Apart from the fact that he had aroused her to a few moments of stunningly shameful passion in his arms, he was nothing to her, nothing at all. And she certainly wouldn't expose herself to humiliation by asking him any foolish questions.

After all, she had her own secrets to keep.

'He's got a lovely stout weapon, this one, Anna darling,' murmured the young woman, sinking to her knees in a rustle of satin and silk as her skirts spread out on the rich Aubusson carpet. 'And it's much, much longer than the one we saw earlier. The best so far this week, I'd say.' Carefully she held up a little silk measuring ribbon, pressing it against the loins of the man standing in front of her. He was fully dressed in court uniform, but his breeches had been opened, and his erect phallus was on display. He shuddered a little at the brief caress, but then was silent. He couldn't see what was happening, because he was blindfolded with a silken scarf, and a similar scarf had been used to lightly tie his hands behind his back.

Countess Anna Dubrayinska gazed thoughtfully at the man in question, and moved a little nearer to him, her long silk robe trailing on the floor. 'He's well endowed, Kitty, but so are a thousand young men in St Petersburg. We need something more. Something really special.'

The tall Italianate windows that flooded one side of the exquisite first floor salon with pearly evening light had been left slightly open to counter the languid summer heat. A faint breeze drifting along the Fontanka Canal stirred the transparent silk draperies that hung at the casements, and made the flames of the flickering candelabra jump and dance.

Something really special. The countess, who had arranged this intimate gathering, let her smooth little hand caress the man's exposed member very lightly. He flinched at the exquisite torment, and his angry penis jerked upwards in reaction. Anna moistened her lips.

'He's got certain assets,' she said thoughtfully as her two female companions waited in silence for her verdict. 'Where did you find him, Kitty?'

'He's a new clerk in the Admiralty,' murmured the plump blonde woman on her knees, still gazing avidly at the man's rigid erection. 'He's perfect, don't you think? He speaks French fluently, and he tells me he's read lots of books. You know how our Empress likes enlightened conversations.'

Anna said, 'Not her first priority, Kitty dear. She prefers, I believe, a big, long-lasting prick.'

Kitty laughed. 'Preferably a Russian prick, of course. You know how they're supposed to be the best of all.'

Anna nodded and stroked the ridged hardness of the man's phallus with a dreamy expression in her eyes. 'This one's certainly a prime example. If I can provide the right man for Catherine's bed, then I'll be amply rewarded. All my troubles will be over.'

The third woman, a thin redhead who reclined on a little gilt couch in the shadows, adjusted her loose silk boudoir

robe so that her small but exquisite breasts were half-exposed, and spoke.

‘Perhaps Catherine’s appetite is flagging, Anna. She is almost sixty, after all. Her current lover, young Mamonov, could be proving too much for her.’

It was Kitty, still kneeling, who turned to the other woman swiftly. ‘Too much for her? It’s the other way round, they say. Young Mamonov is the one who’s flagging. Catherine is still voracious, absolutely voracious in bed. You saw her the other day, Helene, when her eye fell on those two new English diplomats for the first time?’

‘I heard talk. She got them?’

‘No,’ breathed Kitty, her eyes alight. ‘But I did. They were wonderful.’

‘Both together?’

‘Oh, yes. One of them in my mouth, while the other, the one with the fattest cock, pleased me quite deliciously.’

Princess Helene’s pale eyes glittered. ‘Your tastes are too simple, Kitty. Couldn’t you think of anything a little more refined? I could. I would have made them wait, made them cry out while I devised ways to heighten their pleasure.’

The bound man, listening avidly, groaned aloud at all this, and his penis strained darkly. He tried to pull his wrists free of their binding, but the countess rapped out sharply to the big manservant who stood by the door, quite silent. ‘Hold him, Nikolai! Make sure he doesn’t try anything!’ And then she sighed and moved across the room towards a big gilt mirror, idly primping her hair as her two friends continued their desultory murmuring.

Countess Anna Dubrayinska felt tired. Was her own sexual appetite flagging, she wondered? She was bored; bored with the same old gossip, bored with the predictable succession of anxious young men who had been produced for her here tonight and on previous nights. She wanted someone different, someone who wouldn’t just wait in passive obedience while his endowments were discussed; someone

who would knock the overprotective Nikolai aside, and embrace her, and ravish her . . . She frowned at herself in the mirror. She was almost thirty, but still beautiful, she hoped, with her light brown hair powdered and drawn up into intricate ringlets. Her face was still delicate and smooth-skinned, with her cheeks just a little flushed from too much champagne. She always forgot things when she'd had too much champagne, but sometimes that was useful. Abstractedly she caressed her breasts beneath her embroidered silk robe, affirming to herself that they were still high and firm, watching herself in the mirror as the big, dark berries of her nipples tightened and pushed against the straining fabric.

She sighed aloud, feeling the heat of desire coursing through her body, and gazed into the mirror at the silent, blindfolded man whom the eager Kitty had brought for her. He'd been blindfolded from the moment he had stepped into Kitty's carriage because it was essential to Anna that these sessions were conducted in the utmost secrecy. If word got out of what she was planning, if the Empress heard of these intimate interviews before the time was right, then she, Anna, would be ruined indeed.

The man was almost unbearably aroused. She could smell the male musk emanating from the heavy pouch of his testicles, which Kitty had playfully pulled out from the tight bracket of his satin breeches so they bulged forth like some purple, wicked fruit. She could see a glistening drop of moisture at the tip of his hugely thrusting penis. Her breasts tingled and, moving back towards him, she slowly gripped the man's shaft and rubbed her fingers up and down its velvety length.

'Dear God,' said the man between gritted teeth. 'Oh, dear God . . .'. And Nikolai, standing silent guard behind him, warningly tightened his grip on the man's bound wrists.

It was time. The perspiration was standing out on the man's brow. He wouldn't last much longer. 'Kitty,' said Anna

coolly, 'you brought him, didn't you? It's time now for you to show us what he can do.'

Kitty nodded and hurried towards him, reaching out for his springy cock with trembling fingers.

And then, the peace of the pale St Petersburg night was suddenly shattered by the explosive rattle of gunfire.

The countess turned quickly to her servant. 'In heaven's name, Nikolai, what's happening outside? Find out for me, will you?'

He went swiftly out through the big mahogany doors, and she waited anxiously in the hallway for his return. He was back within minutes.

'No cause for alarm, countess,' he reassured her quickly. 'There's been some trouble down by the river, that's all. The militia has arrested the crew of a foreign trading vessel, and the mob got excited. Some of them are milling down the Nevsky. Just a rabble of drunks and whores from the harbour, up to their usual tricks.'

Anna nodded, her hand still on the door, distracted. Rabble. Whores and drunks. How exciting, she thought, and a thousand erotic pictures floated before her mind.

'Stay beside me, Nikolai,' she said abruptly, and the manservant, his dark eyes burning, bowed his head obediently and followed her back into the room.

The others had already forgotten about the gunfire. Anna's two friends had forced the man back against a low ebony couch, his wrists and feet pulled apart. He lay sprawled and groaning, his rigid penis quivering with need. Helene, laughing softly, was teasing him with her breasts, rubbing their lush fullness against his blindfolded face and thrusting her swollen brown teats alternately into his mouth, while he sucked and licked avidly. Kitty watched them for a while, her mischievous eyes alight. Then she suddenly reached to cup his agonised balls with her fingers, and dipped her head to take his rampant shaft in her mouth.

The man was unable to last long. His buttocks thrust wildly, and Kitty struggled to cope with the flood of semen as he rammed his spasming rod hard into her mouth. Anna watched, her throat dry, her breasts tightening. 'Quickly, Nikolai,' she grated out, lowering herself on to a velvet armchair and pulling her silk robe apart to display her voluptuous sex. 'Quickly.'

The big footman dropped instantly to his knees, his eyes alight, and used his protuberant tongue to rasp slowly, thoroughly at the silky pink folds of flesh that were exposed between her spread thighs. The countess shuddered and grasped his broad shoulders, feeling the lust gather like flames in her loins. 'Harder, Nikolai . . .'

With a grunt, he used his big, strong tongue to pleasure her to the utmost, thrusting its stiffened length up inside her hot passage, probing with deep, lascivious strokes as she thrust herself hard against his bony face and began to shudder into orgasm. Her head was thrown back, her eyes closed in rapture. Did Nikolai but know it, Anna was imagining herself down by the embankment, in one of the rough taverns, surrounded by the sweaty, noisy mob. As Nikolai's bristled lip brushed her clitoris, she imagined herself picking out a big, rough man, and paying him a few kopeks to pleasure her sweatily in some dark corner, imagined his big, meaty penis spasming inside her . . .

She writhed, whimpering, as Nikolai's long, agile tongue rasped deep within her and brought her to an exquisite climax of pleasure. Her whole body shimmering with satisfaction, Anna opened her eyes dazedly. For the man on the couch, the pretty young man whom Kitty had brought, it was all over as well. He was asleep. He was a disappointment, the Admiralty clerk, lacking the necessary stamina for the task she had in mind. And he was the last one to be interviewed tonight. Tomorrow, they would have to begin their secret search all over again.

Feeling a stab of regret that her quest was still incomplete, Anna fondled the adoring Nikolai's dark head as he laid his cheek against her rounded belly. Then she gazed out through the windows, where the languid breeze stirred the pale silk hangings. In the eerie lightness of the July night, beyond the rooftops of churches and palaces, she could see the slim golden spire of the Admiralty rising into the pale vault of the sky; and against the far horizon, beyond the great basin of the Neva, she could glimpse the flickering of the aurora borealis, casting its haunting light over the distant northern wastes.

She sighed, suddenly feeling too sober, and pushed Nikolai gently to one side to reach for more champagne.

The champagne, like a lot of things, had not been paid for. Only this morning, the countess had received a discreet note from her banker, telling her exactly how much she owed. It had frightened her. She had torn the note up quickly, and tried to forget it; but it was still there in her mind, nagging at her, reminding her of the urgency of her task: she needed to find someone new, original, mysterious.

Someone worthy to share the bed of an Empress.

Chapter Two

NADYA REACHED UP to pull at the heavy bell rope for the third time. She was only too conscious of the tall, fair-haired seaman standing silently behind her in the enclosed courtyard, his blue eyes gleaming with a hint of mockery at the apparent failure of her quest. There must be someone in. There must be. She was more than anxious to get inside, because a short while ago she had heard the rattle of gunfire again, and knew that away from the shelter of this private courtyard, the mob were still out on the streets. She stepped back, her green eyes shadowed with consternation, and gazed up at the pale cream stucco of Countess Dubrayinska's imposing mansion, wondering if she had imagined the faint glimmer of candlelight from the first floor windows.

She hadn't. At long last came the sound of heavy footsteps moving slowly towards the big front door. She let out a tiny sigh of relief and turned quickly to the man, who had told her on the way here that his name was Axel. He had told her nothing else. She said quickly, 'When the countess admits us, you must say nothing. Leave everything to me. You understand?'

Her companion bowed his head slightly, and again she thought she saw a glimmer of amusement in his unsettling blue eyes, a twist of humour in that strong yet sensual mouth that reminded her all too vividly of his devastating kiss. Well, damn him. If it wasn't for the help she'd offered him, he would be on his way to the dungeons across the river, about to have his ribs laid bare by the knout-master's