

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Thirteen Years Later

Jasper Kent

About the Book

Beware the pestilence that walketh in darkness - the terror by night...

1825, Russia has been at peace for a decade. Bonaparte is long dead. For Colonel Aleksei Ivanovich Danilov life is comfortable; the twelve monstrous creatures that he fought all those years ago are defeated. His duty is still to his tsar, Aleksandr the First, however today the enemy is merely human.

But Aleksandr can never be at peace. Revolt is growing within his own army, yet his true fear is of something far more terrible, something that threatens to bring damnation down upon him, his family and his country: a promise sealed in blood ... and broken a hundred years before.

Now the victim of the Romanovs' betrayal has returned to demand what is his. For Aleksandr, knowing this chills his very soul. For Aleksei, it seems the vile pestilence that once threatened all he held dear has returned, thirteen years later...

Contents

Cover
About the Book
Title Page
Dedication
Author's Notes
Selected Romanov Family Tree
The Decembrists
Map
Prologue

Part 1

Chapter I
Chapter II
Chapter III
Chapter IV
Chapter V
Chapter VI
Chapter VII
Chapter VIII
Chapter IX
Chapter X
Chapter XI
Chapter XII
Chapter XIII

Part 2

Chapter XIV
Chapter XV
Chapter XVI

Chapter XVII
Chapter XVIII
Chapter XIX
Chapter XX
Chapter XXI
Chapter XXII
Chapter XXIII
Chapter XXIV
Chapter XXV
Chapter XXVI
Chapter XXVII
Chapter XXVIII
Chapter XXIX

Part 3

Chapter XXX
Chapter XXXI
Chapter XXXII
Chapter XXXIII
Chapter XXXIV
Chapter XXXV
Chapter XXXVI
Chapter XXXVII

Historical Note
Epilogue
About the Author
Also by Jasper Kent
Copyright

THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

Jasper Kent

*For
H.E.C.*

AUTHOR'S NOTES

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

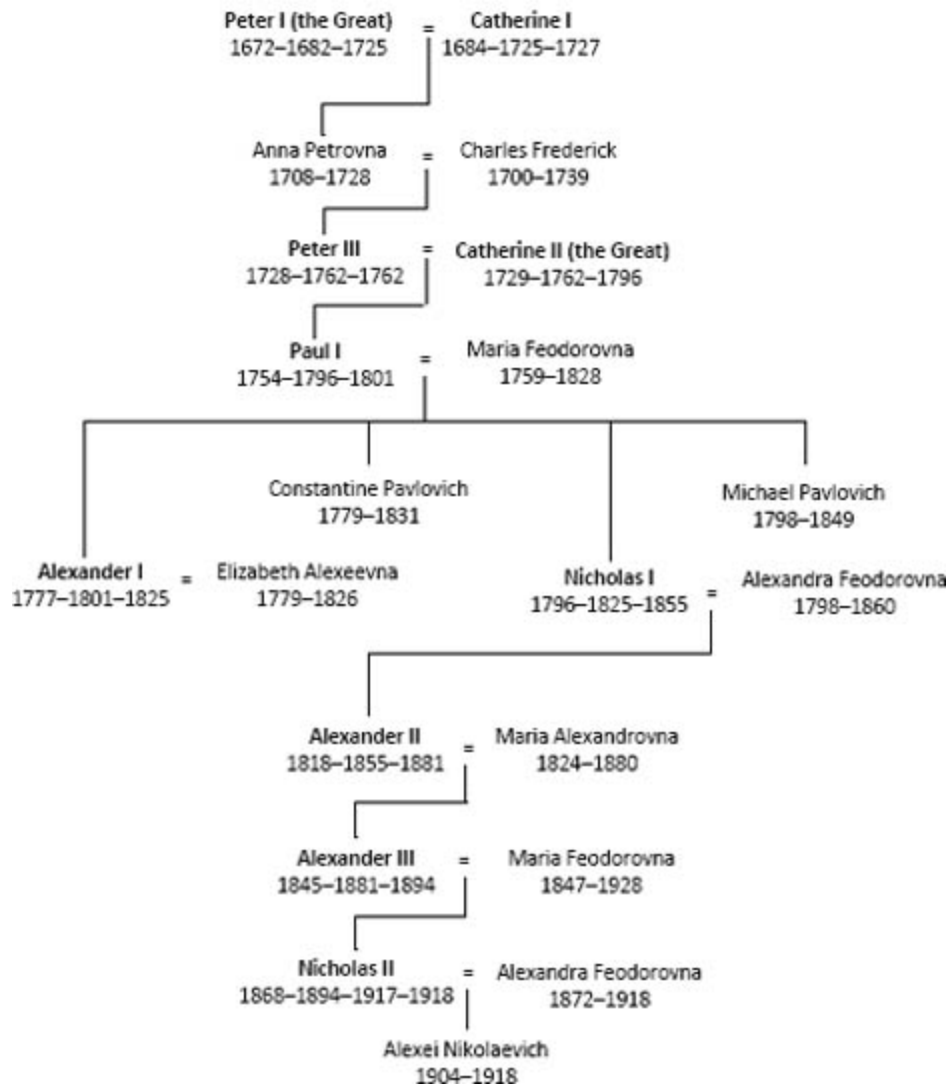
Aleksandr Nikolayevich - Tsar Alexander II

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

On 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.

THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE, 1825



PROLOGUE
Saint Petersburg - 1812

The 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.

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*.

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 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

'IT 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 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.’

‘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.’

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 un-Russian 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 precisely. 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 on to 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.'

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.'

The canal disappeared beneath Nevsky Prospekt, under a bridge far wider than it was long. Aleksei turned off the embankment and on to the city's wide thoroughfare, heading westwards 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 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.

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.

'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 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 long dead, his frozen corpse lost amongst so many others as it floated down the Berezina. Even then, Aleksei