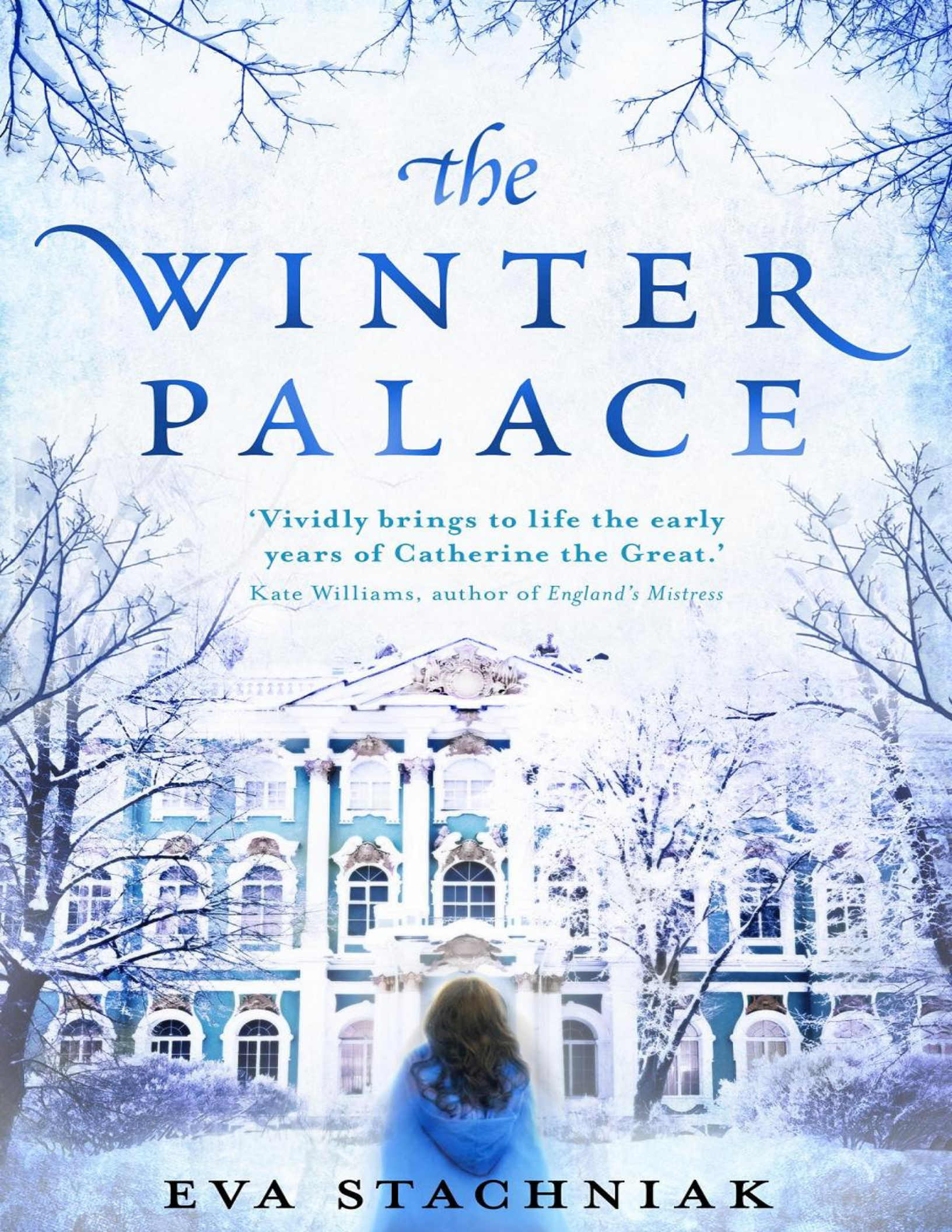
the WINTER PALACE

'Vividly brings to life the early years of Catherine the Great.'

Kate Williams, author of *England's Mistress*



EVA STACHNIAK

About the Book

The story of Catherine the Great's ruthless rise to power, seen through the eyes of a young girl groomed as the Empress's spy in eighteenth-century Russia.

When Vavara, a young orphaned Polish girl, is brought to serve at Empress Elizabeth's glittering, dangerous court in St Petersburg, she is schooled by the Chancellor himself in skills from lock-picking to love-making, learning above all else to stay silent – and listen. Soon, she is Elizabeth's 'tongue' – her secret eyes and ears.

Then Sophie, a vulnerable young princess, arrives from Prussia as a prospective bride for Peter, Elizabeth's nephew and heir. Set to spy on her by the Empress, Vavara soon becomes her friend and confidante, and helps her navigate the illicit seductions and the treacherous shifting allegiances of the court. But Sophie's destiny is to become the notorious Catherine the Great. Are her ambitions more lofty and far-reaching than anyone suspected, and will she stop at nothing to achieve absolute power?

Bursting with dazzling period detail on life at court – the fashions, the food and the décor – this tale of passion, betrayal and revenge shows how the legend of Catherine the Great was born, and gives an irresistible peek through the keyhole at one of history's most turbulent and seductive dramas.

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The Russian Court
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Also by Eva Stachniak

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The Winter Palace

Eva Stachniak

For Szymon and Chizuko

St. Petersburg, October 17, 1756

Three people who never leave her room, and who do not know about one another, inform me of what is going on, and will not fail to acquaint me when the crucial moment arrives.

—from the letter of Grand Duchess of All the Russias (later Catherine the Great) to Sir Hanbury-Williams, British Ambassador to the court of Empress Elizabeth

THE SPIES YOU learn about are either those who get exposed or those who reveal themselves. The first have been foolish enough to leave a trail of words behind them; the second have reasons of their own.

Perhaps they wish to confess because there is nothing else they have but the arid memories of their own importance.

Or perhaps they wish to warn.

I was a *tongue*, a *gazette*. The bearer of "the truth of the whispers." I knew of hollowed books, trunks with false bottoms, and the meanders of secret corridors. I knew how to open hidden drawers in your escritoire, how to unseal your letter and make you think no one had touched it. If I had been in your room, I left the hair around your lock the way you had tied it. If you trusted the silence of the night, I had overheard your secrets.

I noticed reddened ears and flushed cheeks. Slips of paper dropped into a musician's tube. Hands too eager to slide into a pocket. Too many hurried visits of a jeweler or a seamstress. I knew of leather skirts underneath fancy dresses that caught the dripping urine, of maids burying bloodied rags in the garden, of frantic gasps for air that could not frighten death away.

I couldn't smell fear, but I could see the signals it sent. Hearts speeding up, eyes widening, hands becoming unsteady, cheeks taking on an ashen hue. Words becoming abrupt, silences too long. I had seen it grow in rooms where every whisper was suspect, every gesture, or lack of it, was noted and stored for future use.

I had seen what fear could do to your heart.

ONE

1743–1744

I COULD HAVE warned her when she arrived in Russia, this petty German princess from Zerbst, a town no bigger than St. Petersburg's Summer Garden, this frail girl who would become Catherine.

This court is a new world to you, I could have said to her, a slippery ground. Do not be deceived by tender looks and flattering words, promises of splendor and triumph. This place is where hopes shrivel and die. This is where dreams turn to ashes.

She has charmed you already, our Empress. With her simplicity, the gentle touch of her hand, the tears she dried from her eyes at her first sight of you. With the vivacity of her speech and gestures, her brisk impatience with etiquette. *How kind and frank Empress Elizabeth Petrovna is*, you have said. Others have, too. Many others. But frankness can be a mask, a disguise, as her predecessor has learned far too late.

Three years ago our bewitching Empress was but a maiden princess at the court of Ivan VI, the baby Emperor, and his Regent Mother. There had been a fiancé lost to smallpox, there had been other prospects derailed by political intrigues until everyone believed that, at thirty-two and without a husband, the youngest daughter of Peter the Great had missed her chance at the throne. They all

thought Elizabeth Petrovna flippant and flighty then, entangled in the intricacies of her dancing steps and the cut of her ball dresses—all but a handful who kept their eyes opened wide, who gambled on the power of her father's blood.

The French call her "Elizabeth the Merciful." For the day before she stole the throne of Russia from Ivan VI, she swore on the icon of St. Nicholas the Maker of Miracles that no one under her rule would ever be put to death. True to her word, on the day of the coup, she stopped the Palace Guards from slashing Ivan's infant throat. She plucked the wailing baby Emperor from his crib and kissed his rosy cheeks before she handed him back to his mother and packed them both off to live in prison.

She likes when we repeat that no head has been cut off since the day she took power but forbids us to mention the tongues and ears. Or the backs torn to meaty shreds by the knout. Or the prisoners nailed to a board and thrown into a freezing river. Mercy, too, knows how to deceive.

Here in the Russian court, I could have warned the pretty newcomer from Zerbst, life is a game and every player is cheating. Everyone watches everyone else. There is no room in this palace where you can be truly alone. Behind these walls there are corridors, a whole maze of them. For those who know, secret passages allow access where none is suspected. Panels open, bookcases move, sounds travel through hidden pipes. Every word you say may be repeated and used against you. Every friend you trust may betray you.

Your trunks will be searched. Double bottoms and hollowed books will not hold their secrets for long. Your letters will be copied before they are sent on their way. When your servant complains that an intimate piece of your clothing is missing, it may be because your scent is preserved in a corked bottle for the time when a hound is sent to sniff out your presence.

Keep your hands on your pockets. Learn the art of deception. When you are questioned, even in jest, even in passing, you have mere seconds to hide your thoughts, to split your soul and conceal what you do not want known. The eyes and ears of an inquisitor have no equals.

Listen to me.

I know.

The one you do not suspect is the most dangerous of spies.

As soon as she seized the throne of Russia, Empress Elizabeth made no secret of her resolve to rule alone, without a royal husband. Since she would have no children to succeed her, she sent for her sister's orphaned son, Karl Peter Ulrich, the Duke of Holstein. When the young Duke was brought to her, lanky and bone-thin, his eyes bloodshot with exhaustion after the long journey, she pressed him to her heaving bosom. "The blood of the Romanovs," she announced, as he stiffened in her arms. "The grandson of Peter the Great." She presided over his conversion to the Orthodox faith, renamed him Peter Fyodorovich, and made him the Crown Prince. He was fourteen years old. She didn't ask him if he wished to live with her. She didn't ask him if he wanted to rule Russia one day. Now, right after his fifteenth birthday, she didn't ask him if he wanted a bride.

Princess Sophie Fredrika Auguste Anhalt-Zerbst. It was her portrait that arrived first, and I recall the grand moment of its unveiling. Portraits of this kind are not meant to render a likeness, but to entice.

"Her?" I heard Chancellor Bestuzhev say when the Empress mentioned Sophie for the first time. "But why her?" The Chancellor mentioned the need of crafty ties, and hedging one's bets. Europe required a careful balance of power, he cautioned. The Prussians were growing too

strong as it was. “Your Highness should consider a Saxon princess.”

The Empress stifled a yawn.

“I’ve not decided anything yet,” Elizabeth told him. Her nephew Peter was sitting at her feet, his long white fingers turning the turquoise ring around, as if he were tightening a screw.

In the weeks that followed I heard Sophie’s father referred to as a prince of quite exceptional imbecility, a Prussian general not able to control his foolhardy wife for whom the shabby Court of Brunswick had become the measure of all grandeur. The Anhalt-Zerbsts were well connected but poor, shamelessly clamoring for Empress Elizabeth’s attention, reminding her that she once almost married one of them, this tenuous link to Russia their only real hope of attaining significance.

When a footman parted the red velvet curtain, we saw a portrait of a slim and graceful figure standing by the mantel, a girl of fourteen, summoned from her studies. We saw the pale-green bodice of her gown, the dainty hands folded on her stomach. Whatever rumors may have reached us, Princess Sophie was not a cripple. No childhood illness had deformed her spine. There was an air of lightness around her; she seemed on the verge of breaking into a cheerful dance. Her chin was pointed, her lips small but shapely. Not quite pretty but fresh and playful, like a kitten watching a ball of yarn unfurl. The painter made sure we would not miss the exquisite pallor of her complexion, the softness of her eyes, the blue flecks of her pupils so striking a contrast to her raven-black hair. Nor could we overlook her ardent will to please.

Murmurs, hesitant and vague, filled the room. Courtiers’ words mumbled and slurred so praise could still be retracted, blame turned into a veiled compliment. *The art of deception*, I thought, the eyespots on a butterfly’s wing flickering for a lifesaving second. Grasshoppers that

change their color with the seasons to match the fading leaves.

The grand gentlemen and ladies of the court were still looking at the portrait, but I knew there was something far more important to watch. The face of the Empress of Russia taking her first measure of this princess child who, if she willed it, would become her nephew's bride. The face I had learned to read.

There was a sigh, a slight twitch of Elizabeth Petrovna's lower lip. A moment of pensiveness, the same that descended upon her before the time of prayers. A tear slowly rolling down her rouged cheek.

My eyes returned to the portrait, and I knew what the Empress had perceived. In the painted features there was a slight but unmistakable hint of manliness, a distant echo of another, older face. The fiancé long dead. A memory that lingered and still moved her to tears.

"Lord be merciful. . . ."

When I heard the Empress of All the Russias whisper the prayer for the departed souls, I knew the Anhalt-Zerbsts had scored their first victory.

The chorus of voices rose, still hesitant, still unsure. No courtier wanted to risk Elizabeth's wrath. Like me, they had seen objects flung at anyone near her, a powder box exploding in a cloud of white dust, a silver statue of Amor and Psyche making a jagged dent in the floor. Like me, they had seen the quivering stump inside a mouth from which the tongue had been cut.

"Her dress is green," the Grand Duke Peter said. In German he drew out the vowels in an almost musical manner. It was only in Russian that he sounded awkward and harsh.

All eyes turned to him.

The Duke himself was dressed in a green velvet suit, embroidered with gold. At that time his face was not yet marred by smallpox. It was lean and pale but not

unpleasant. The day before I had seen him stare at his hand, examining each finger as if it held some mystery worth pondering.

“What do you think, Peter?” Elizabeth asked the Grand Duke. I watched her smooth the sleeve of her dress, the rich burgundy brocade gown, play with the pearls that adorned it. “Does she look anything like this picture, Peter?”

“This is a good likeness,” the Grand Duke said. “This is how I remember my cousin Sophie.”

“Your *second* cousin, Peter.”

“My second cousin,” he agreed. “She is not a cripple.”

“Who said she was a cripple?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Who told you she was a cripple, Peter?”

“I don’t remember. My Blackamoor heard it. But it’s not true. Sophie is very strong. In Eutin, she outran me every time we raced in the garden.”

“Such display of vigor might not be such a good sign, Your Highness,” Chancellor Bestuzhev remarked.

I looked at him. At the gray powdered curls of his wig, the bushy eyebrows, the soft lines of his smooth face. His velvet jacket was new, I noted, smartly cut, becoming. It was the color of dry blood. A miniature portrait of the Empress was pinned to his chest. More than once, I had seen the Chancellor leave Elizabeth’s bedroom at dawn, his clothes rumpled, buttons undone, embers flickering in his black eyes.

A slippery eel? An old fox?

Had he missed what I had just seen? Was he still hoping the Empress had not set her mind on Sophie?

“Why not, my dear count?” Her Majesty frowned.

“Strong legs? A pointed chin? Women like that tend to be bossy. I’ve formed this opinion based on significant personal experience, Your Highness,” Chancellor Bestuzhev continued, with a gracious bow. A slight titter traveled

through the back of the room. The Chancellor's wife, known for her frequent storms of rage, had been endowed with a pointed chin.

Like an actor contemplating his next triumph, Bestuzhev added, "Experience I'd be pleased to tell Your Highness about at another, more opportune, time."

The Empress turned away from him.

"I've decided to invite Princess Sophie here," she said. "With her mother. Nothing official. The Anhalt-Zerbsts have received enough favors from me to show their gratitude."

I could see shoulders dropping in relief. Courtiers hurried to express their agreement, to offer reasons why they thought the Empress had made an excellent choice.

She was very cheerful that day. The embroidered trim of her gown shimmered as she moved, and I remember wondering who would get it, for the Empress never wore the same dress twice.

The portrait of the little German Princess with an eager smile was moved aside. Stretching on the daybed the footmen had fetched for her, Empress Elizabeth ordered Count Razumovsky to sing. There was no impatience on her face when he plucked the strings of his favorite bandura to tune it. She didn't even scold the Grand Duke when he stuck his thumb in his mouth, probing his gums. A week before, he had lost another rotting tooth.

If Chancellor Bestuzhev was disappointed about the imperial decision, he did not show it. I saw him bend to murmur something into Elizabeth's ear. She smacked him playfully with her folded fan. He took her hand in his and kissed it. Slowly, his lips lingering over her fingertips.

I didn't look away.

I was sixteen then, rosy-cheeked and nimble, and already stripped of illusions, one of the countless, nameless girls in the Empire of the East. Pretty enough to pinch or pat on her buttocks as she passed by or to whisper lascivious words into her ear. I knew that "a ward of the

Crown” was but a fancy name for a beggar whose luck could run out at any time.

So many of us, orphaned or abandoned, were left at the Empress’s feet. Clamoring for a nod of her head or her amused grin. For a chance, however slight, that she might think us worthy of another look. That we could be of use.

Count Razumovsky, a Ukrainian choirboy who had once charmed his Tsarina with his hooded black eyes and rich baritone, cleared his throat. The Emperor of the Night, we called him, the most forgiving of all Elizabeth’s lovers. The thick curtains were drawn, the candles lit. In the flickering light, Elizabeth’s face took on a silvery glow, and the room filled with the soothing, mournful chords of her favorite *duma*.

> *If you find someone better, you will forget me;*
> *If you find someone worse, your thoughts will bring me back*.

My father was a bookbinder. In Poland, where we came from, there was not enough work for him—a young man with a wife, children, and an ambition to move up in the world.

We would have gone to Berlin, where my father had once been an apprentice, had it not been for Prince Kazimierz Czartoryski, Castellan of Vilnius, who had given him his first commission. Impressed by my father’s craft, the Prince promised to remember him. He kept his word. When Empress Anne of Russia wanted precious old volumes restored, the Prince said, “I know just the man. An artisan of true grace and imagination, especially skilled in gold tooling.”

It was the spring of 1734. I was seven years old and my baby brother had just been born.

“Tell him to come to St. Petersburg,” the Empress said. “Here a good man always has a future.”

A city willed by one man, my father called St. Petersburg. The new capital of Russia, he told me, had been built in defiance of the unruly waves of the Neva and the ruthless darkness of northern winters.

We came by ship in the fall of 1734. Only three of us. My baby brother had been buried in the Warsaw cemetery. Yet another son who would not grow to learn his father’s trade and inherit his father’s business.

“This is our chance,” Papa told us, pointing at the flat line of the land from which, out of the morning haze, I discerned wavering shapes of buildings as if drawn by a child’s hand. Behind us, all I saw was the ship’s foamy wake.

“God willing,” Mama said, her voice softened with hope. In Warsaw, a fortune-teller had told my mother that she would live long enough to see her daughter marry a great and powerful man. “A noble,” the woman had said, giving Mama a lingering look. It was all hidden in the crisscrossing lines of Mama’s palm, loss that would come and go, joy that would shine after a long journey. My father frowned when he heard these predictions, but Mama was so happy that she gave the woman a silver coin.

My mother was of noble blood, although her family was too poor to make much of their status. “A house, a barn, a few cows,” my father used to say and laugh. “You could tell they were not peasants, for before your grandfather set off to plow his few acres, he put on his white gloves and his saber.”

My father liked to talk of the day he surprised my mother in a relative’s parlor, as she was bending over a length of lace, needle in hand. He had been summoned to pick up some old books for binding, and Mama had been

sent there by her widowed mother in hope of better prospects. Feeling his eyes on her, she faltered and pricked her finger. “You frightened me,” she exclaimed, and sucked on her wound.

He fell in love that very instant.

When he returned, a few days later, he gave her a book he had bound himself. *La Princesse de Clèves*, Mama told us, teasing him laughingly about his choice, proud of her polished French. The story of a wife in love with another man? A husband spying on his wife? What were you thinking then, she would ask Father.

He wasn’t thinking. He was besotted. He wanted no one else but her.

“A clever girl like you shouldn’t be mending lace,” he had said that day.

She took the book he’d brought. He watched how reverently she opened the gilded pages. How she raised her eyes to take in his smart figure, compact and fine-boned, his brown, determined eyes. The silver buttons he had polished. The hands that knew how to give a new life to a tattered volume eaten with mold. She listened when he told her of Berlin, where he had seen his first cameo bindings and where he had heard his first opera.

“A bookbinder’s wife,” my grandmother said and sighed when, a few weeks later, my father asked her for my mother’s hand. My grandmother didn’t care for my father’s learning, or his skills. He was in trade. Her only daughter was going down in the world. It was to appease her that my parents named me after her. She died before my first birthday.

Barbara, or *Basieńka*, my mother called me. In Polish, as in Russian, a name has many transformations. It can expand or contract, sound official and hard or soft and playful. Its shifting shape can turn its bearer into a helpless child or a woman in charge. A lover or a lady, a friend or a foe.

In Russian, I became *Varvara*.

Days after we arrived in St. Petersburg, my father began working for the Imperial Library. “The writings of wise and learned men,” he called it. “A collection worthy of a great monarch.” Peter the Great had amassed fifteen thousand books during his grand tour of Europe; many of them were now in dire need of my father’s skills.

My mother was beaming with pride. Her mother had been wrong. She had chosen her husband well. What was impossible in Poland would be possible here in Russia. Empress Anna had asked to see the new bindings as soon as they were finished, and in her mind’s eye Mama already saw me at court, catching the eye of some noble.

“She is still a child,” my father protested.

“More time for you, to make a name for yourself,” Mama would retort. For her the tattered, moldy volumes from the Imperial Library were a promise, a sign of future favors, so richly deserved.

By the end of our second year in St. Petersburg, we were living in our own house. True, it was on Vasilevsky Island with its long-abandoned, silt-choked canals, with its brush-covered fields where wolves still roamed at night, but it was far better than what we had in Warsaw.

The house was wooden but spacious, with a cellar for my father’s workshop. He took on apprentices. We had maids and footmen, a cook, a carriage and a sleigh. My mother hired a French and a German tutor for me, and then a dancing and deportment master who assured her that he had once taught Countess Vorontzova’s niece. When the time came, Mama was determined her daughter would be ready for a good marriage.

Every day, as soon as my lessons ended, I sneaked into my father's workshop. Seated on a small stool in a corner, I watched the slow, deliberate movements of Papa's hands as he chose the right piece of leather from the pile he kept by the door. "The best part of a skin is near the backbone," he would tell me. "The rest is not as even in color." I loved watching when he placed the pattern for the binding on the leather, moved it so as to avoid imperfections, and, using the softest parts of the skin, finally cut it.

He had shown me books touched by lesser craftsmen, books he was now obliged to repair. "This should never have happened," he would say, shaking his head and pointing to where gold leaf had come unglued or had tarnished from too much heat. His secrets were simple. The sharpness of a paring knife, he would tell me, was far more important than the strength of the hands. Like his apprentices, I was to learn that forcing a dull knife would only damage the leather.

"Will you remember what I'm teaching you, Barbara?" he wondered.

Breathing in the workshop odors of vinegar and soot and glue, I promised that I would.

"Having aspirations," my mother called it. She was a practical woman. Her dreams were always rooted in possibility. Wasn't her husband a man of exceptional talents? Empress Anna had not yet received him, but hadn't a princess of the court summoned him to the Winter Palace once already?

It was Mama's favorite story. In a small garret room in the upper reaches of the palace, Princess Elizabeth had handed my father her treasure, a tattered prayer book with large letters that did not strain her eyes. "A gift from someone dear to me," she'd told him. "I don't even know if it can be repaired."

Gingerly, my father took the book and caressed the cracked leather of its cover. He examined the rubies and sapphires that made the shape of a cross, pleased that none were missing. He took note of the loose pages and thinning stitches.

“Yes,” he told Princess Elizabeth. “It can.”

She kept looking at him.

“Not a speck will be lost,” he promised the Princess, extracting a handkerchief from his breast pocket and wrapping the book.

Over the next two weeks my father polished and secured each jewel, glued in loose pages, and stiffened the fragile covers. When the layer of grime was wiped off, the leather turned out to be mostly undamaged. Good calfskin, the color of rust, he would say, needed but a touch of birch oil to last forever. In the end it was the prayer book’s gilding that suffered the most from time and touch, but gold tooling was my father’s greatest skill. When he finished, no one could tell where old pattern ended and new began.

Elizabeth took her prayer book in her hands, turning the pages, carefully at first, marveling at how sturdy they were. The daughter of Peter the Great put her hand on Papa’s shoulder and let him see the tears of gratitude that shone in her eyes.

It had happened before, Mama reminded us. Serve the Tsar well, and you can rise through the Russian Table of Ranks. Promoted to the fourteenth grade, a commoner becomes a noble. A minor noble at first, but when he reaches the eighth grade, his noble status extends to his wife and children.

“And then?” I’d ask.

“A princess of the court always needs beautiful and clever girls to serve her, Barbara. Once you are at the Winter Palace, nothing is impossible.”

The Imperial Library was housed in the west wing of Kunstkamera, the Tsar's museum, for it was not just learned books that Peter the Great wanted to display but also his curiosities. There were precious stones and fossils, herbaria with plants from the New World, and his collection of monsters: glass jars with specimens of human and animal deformities the Tsar had ordered his officials to bring him from all across Russia.

"A museum is a temple of knowledge," my father told me, "a lit lamp that sends its rays into the darkness, the proof of the infinite variety of life."

For Peter the Great had a mission—to enlighten his people. There was no evil eye, no spells capable of transforming a healthy fetus into a monster, because, as the Tsar's words inscribed on a Kunstkamera wall declared, *The Creator alone is the God of all creatures, not the Devil*.

"A cursed place," our maids called the museum, crossing themselves every time they passed the Kunstkamera's heavy doors. They spoke of rooms in which eyes of the dead stared at the living, where body parts were waiting for their rightful owners, who would—they believed—come to fetch them and give them the burial they deserved.

Year after year, every Monday morning, my father went to Kunstkamera to select the books he would work on that week. When he returned home, his garments smelled of mold and dust. The maids soaked them overnight before washing, and said that they still stained the water black. I saw them cross themselves the Orthodox way, with three fingers touching, left shoulder first, before they picked up my father's clothes. "The Devil's work," they said, "never brought anything good."

"Are you not afraid of monsters?" I asked my father once.

Papa answered with his own question. "How can anything on this earth be unnatural, excluded from the laws of creation?" In his eyes I saw a flicker of

disappointment in me. “You should never say the word *monster*, Barbara.”

I thought about this a lot. I still do. I watch for words that shape our thoughts, our destiny.

A tongue.

A gazette.

An Empress.

A spy.

Six years after we arrived in St. Petersburg, Empress Anne died, having named baby Ivan VI her successor and her German minister, Biron, Regent. The Palace Guards did not approve. Scheming foreigners, they muttered, were taking hold of Russia, grabbing what wasn’t theirs. What would they do next? Strike out at the Orthodox faith? The Regency swiftly passed from Biron to the baby’s mother, Anna Leopoldovna, but the rumors of foreign masters did not stop. When a year later, on November 25 of 1741, Princess Elizabeth, the only surviving child of Peter the Great, stormed the Winter Palace, Russia rejoiced. It was high time, everyone said, for a wholly Russian princess to claim what was still left of her inheritance.

As soon as Princess Elizabeth seized the throne she had exiled the German advisers. A triumphant decree announced the end of “degrading foreign oppression.” Another imperial ukase forbade anyone to mention Ivan VI’s name. All coins with his image had to be returned to the mint and exchanged for new ones. Anyone defying Elizabeth’s order would have their right hand cut off. By April of 1742, the princess who once asked my father to bind her precious prayer book was crowned the Empress of All the Russias.

“Go to her,” my mother urged my father. “Remind her who you are. Offer your services at her court.”

My father hesitated. Even though the work at the Imperial Library ended with Empress Anne's death, he had built up enough of a reputation to get plenty of private commissions. "We are doing fine," I would hear him tell Mama. "We are happy. What else do we need?"

"Do it for your daughter's sake," she replied. "So that we won't have to worry for her future."

Papa did not refuse my mother's bidding, but he always found reasons for the delay. The Empress was getting ready for a pilgrimage. The Empress was weakened by the Lenten fasts. Easter was coming. The court was awaiting the arrival of the Empress's nephew; the court was too busy with the coronation; too many petitioners were lining up outside the Throne Room.

And then on a bright April morning, when Mama came to my bedroom to wake me, I saw her falter, clutch her hand to her stomach, and wince. "It's nothing, Basieńka," she assured me, forcing a smile. "I must've eaten a bad oyster." The whites of her eyes were flecked with red.

"I'm better already," Mama said, as she helped me put on the morning dress the maid had laid out. "Hurry up, Papa is waiting for us."

Our Easter had passed, but in the old-style Orthodox calendar, the Holy and Great Friday was still a week away. Our maids were already fasting, while we sat down to our usual breakfasts.

That April morning, the kitchen smelled of fresh coffee and burned bread. The scullery maid, ordered to warm up a loaf on the stove, had left it on for too long, and the thick slice on my breakfast plate had a hard, charcoal crust. Papa told me to scrape the char off with a butter knife. I did, but it still tasted bitter.

After breakfast, my father went downstairs to his workshop and I waited for Mama to ask me to read from one of her favorite French novels while she embroidered

my new dress. But she didn’t. A shadow descended on her face. She moaned.

“It’s nothing.” Words broken in mid-breath, clipped with pain.

I remember the faint squeak of doors leading to the room where rows of bottles filled with herbal infusions stood on a shelf, each labeled in my mother’s neat handwriting. I remember the sharp scent of mint on the glass stopper I held as Mama measured out thirty drops that sank into a lump of sugar, staining it green. She let the sugar dissolve in her mouth before swallowing it and then, still trying to smile, she adjusted the golden chain with a Virgin pendant on my neck. As she led me to the parlor, I thought of how soft and warm her hand was, with tapered fingers, just like mine.

In the parlor Mama said that she needed to lie down, for just a short while. I shouldn’t bother Papa, for he had important work to do. Without him, the apprentice would surely damage the bindings.

“I’ll feel better before the cannon is fired at Petropavlovsky Fortress at noon,” she whispered. “I promise.”

“Can I lie beside you?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, and made room for me on the ottoman. I must have looked frightened, for she stroked my cheek and made me swear I would not worry. I was fifteen years old and didn’t know of promises that cannot be kept, of shivers that would not go away.

By the evening she was dead.

In the days after my mother died I tottered through hushed rooms, frightened and lost. Silence rang in them, but I was consumed by a belief that I could still catch her if I hurried. Sometimes I could feel her presence, her silky kiss, the gentle squeeze of her hand. “I have something to tell you, Basieńka,” her soft voice promised. “Something important. Something you need to know.”

I didn’t turn in the direction of the whisper. I didn’t want to see that she was not there.

It was in the long empty days after Mama’s death that I learned to listen.

“Take them,” I heard a servant urge another, pointing at my mother’s knit silk stockings embroidered with roses. “Master won’t know!”

Balls of dust gathered in the corners while the maids gossiped in the alcove as if I was not there. In the street I saw a woman wearing my mother’s bonnet and her sash. Two of Mama’s silver jugs had also disappeared.

People betray themselves so carelessly in front of children. Clues drop like fairy-tale bread crumbs that mark a path through the forest. Sometimes they whisper, but my hearing has always been superb. Sometimes they switch languages, but I have always been clever with words.

“What does it matter?” Papa said, when I begged him to search the maid’s trunk. “It won’t bring your mother back, will it?”

The maid who took the knit stockings sickened first. She complained of pains in her stomach, and her face flushed beet-red with fever. “Nothing good ever comes from working for foreigners,” her father muttered when he came with a hay cart to fetch her body. Before leaving, he spat on the ground and waved a fist at my father and me. Then the butcher’s apprentice, two houses away from us, woke up with his back covered in a red rash, as if the bathhouse demons had flayed his skin.

It was all our fault, I would overhear in the days that followed. Poisonous, hushed voices stalked me in the kitchen, the alcove, our garden with its flimsy fence.

We were foreigners. Roman Catholics, Poles. We didn’t eat carrion or beaver tails as other Latins had done, but we were up to no good. We had come to Russia with falseness

in our hearts, wishing to convert Russians to our Latin faith.

The maids recalled my mother's sins. Hadn't she said that there was nothing wrong in depicting the face of God the Father? Hadn't she scolded me when—in my innocence—I crossed myself in the Orthodox way like them, with three fingers touching, from left to right? Was it a wonder that she was struck dead? "Just as she reached for bread," I heard the maids gossip. "On the day of *our* fast."

I do not recall when I heard the word *cholera* first, but suddenly everyone repeated it. A furtive, menacing word I thought it, like a curse, drawing a circle around Papa and me that few dared to cross. Before leaving, the cook asked to have her last month's wages forwarded to her brother-in-law. A footman packed his trunk and departed the same day. Two of the maids followed. Then the oldest and most experienced of Papa's apprentices disappeared. Deliveries were left at our doorstep; people crossed to the other side of the street at the sight of us. Many of Papa's clients avoided us, too, and soon my father had to let the remaining apprentice go.

"It's nothing but fear," Papa kept telling me. "We have to be strong, Barbara. This will pass."

I tried to believe him.

Cholera did not strike us, as the maids predicted, and there was no epidemic. No one else died in the following month, or the month after that. By mid-summer the talk subsided, yet our fortunes did not improve. Since we could no longer afford tutors, my father made me read passages from his German books as he worked, correcting my pronunciation. I thought them tedious, the descriptions of differences between grades of leather, or types of precision tools, but I didn't complain. As soon as I had finished reading, he

showed me how to keep accounts, and I was glad to be of help.

"A few more lean months, Barbara," Papa would say, each time I finished adding up his meager commissions. In the evening, sipping his favorite drink, hot milk sweetened with honey, topped with a thick layer of melted butter and sprinkled with crushed garlic, he assured me that soon he would be back on his feet. He had not lost his skills, had he? The new Empress was Peter the Great's daughter. Soon, in Russia, books would be important again.

One morning in October, after I finished my daily reading, I watched my father bend over his workshop table in silence, to apply gold-leaf lettering to the spine of a book. He had often shown me how a shadow was cast on each side of the spine where it curved to the sides. These shadow lines marked the limits of the space that could be used for the letters. If gold tooling were to reach beyond them, after the book had been held open a few times, the gold would crack.

"I've been at the palace," Papa said. He paused before he continued. "Just as Mama wanted."

I held my breath.

"There were many petitioners. I lined up for hours before I was allowed into her presence. I didn't tell you before, for I wasn't sure it would make any difference. But your mother was right. The Empress had not forgotten the prayer book I restored for her when she was still just a princess."

He told Elizabeth of Mama's death, of how cholera had decimated his business and depleted his savings. "But it did not break my spirit, Your Majesty, or my faith in Russia," he assured her.

The new Empress was pleased. So pleased that she ordered her Quartermaster to send my father the Court Journals to bind. And she had asked about me.

“Bring your daughter here so I can see her,” she had commanded.

My father turned his face away when he said these words, so I could not see the expression on his face, but his movements were unusually hesitant.

I still remember the title of the book my father was working on that day. Tacitus, *The Annals and the Histories*. It was the only title I ever saw him work on where the letters crossed the shadow lines.

In the middle of November, seven months after my mother died, on a murky day veiled in chimney smoke, my father took me to the palace. The hackney coach took the Isaakovsky pontoon bridge, which—by the end of December—would be replaced by the winter ice road across the river. Nestled against my father’s side, I imagined the Empress smiling at me, extending her hand to be kissed. Inside the carriage, the fur blanket gave off a faint smell of birch tar and kvass.

Before we set off, my father sat me on his lap and kissed the top of my head. He said that he wished to secure my future in case God called him, like Mama, before his time.

“You have no one but me to look after you, my child. I cannot sleep in peace when I think I might die and leave you all alone,” he whispered.

He held me tightly. I breathed in his smell, not the familiar whiff of vinegar and glue but the rare scent of eau de cologne and snuff.

Empress Elizabeth. I thought of angels when I first saw her, of the glittering messengers of God, their winged arms herding lost children to safety. In a silvery dress, a single white feather crowning her forehead, she floated on the aroma of orange blossoms and jasmine.

“Come here, child,” she said, her voice especially sweet as she pronounced that last word.

I hesitated. One does not approach angels without fear.

“Go on,” my father urged me, his hand pushing me forward.

I walked reluctantly toward the Empress of All the Russias, my gaze cast downward, fixed on the hem of her dress sewn with gold thread and pearls. I prayed the curtsy I had practiced for days did not betray my unease.

The Empress took my chin in her hands and raised my eyes to meet hers. “What a pretty smile,” she murmured.

I felt her fingers on my cheeks, a smooth, soft caress. I let her words thicken around me, like the warmth radiating from the white-and-blue-tiled stoves of the palace. My father had told me that the Empress had a good heart, that she, too, knew how it felt to lose a mother and fear the future. Didn’t she bring her sister’s orphaned son to her own court? Hadn’t she just made him Crown Prince?

“What’s your name, child?” she asked.

“Barbara,” I said.

“Varvara Nikolayevna, Your Highness,” my father corrected, offering my name in the Russian way, with his name echoing after mine.

“Your father has asked me to take care of you if he dies, Varvara. Is that what you, too, wish?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” I said.

“Very well, then,” the Empress said to my father. I saw her folded fan touch his shoulder. “I’ll take good care of her. You have my promise.”

My father stood a little stooped and motionless as the Empress departed, with courtiers crowding upon her, praising her benevolence. He lowered his head when a few of them stopped and inspected me through their monocles, the looks you give a caged bird. His hand when he squeezed mine was cold and moist with sweat.

Did he guess what would happen to me?