



RICOCHET

KELLYN CARNI



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For my grandmother, Mary Black.

And for anyone who ever wished things had turned out differently.



SAINT PETERSBURG

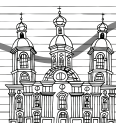


PETER & PAUL
FORTRESS



WINTER PALACE

NEVA RIVER



CHURCH OF THE SAVIOR ON SPILLED BLOOD

TSARSKOE SELO



ALEXANDER PALACE



1918

**THE RUSSIAN
EMPIRE**

SAINT PETERSBURG

TSARSKOE SELO

LUGA

MOSCOW

YEKATERINBURG





CHAPTER ONE

“Obviously, at that moment they did not imagine what awaited them . . . But the daughters had on bodices almost entirely of diamonds and [other] precious stones. Those were not only places for valuables but protective armor at the same time.”

—Yakov Yurovsky’s account of the execution of the imperial family

SILENCE FILLED THE CELLAR in the moments before the gunfire. Sweat beaded on my forehead, my skin prickling with giddy anticipation. We were getting out. Over a year of imprisonment, and we were finally getting out. I suppressed my smile, only because of the worry that creased my father’s brow as he paced. He still held his chest high, despite losing his crown, his palace, his freedom—but his unease shadowed the room, hanging heavily in the stale air.

Beside me, my younger brother shifted in his chair as our mother ran her hand absently through his hair like she had when he was little. “Soon, Alexei, my love. We’ll be safe soon.”

My sisters huddled together against the wall, too nervous to speak. Maria caught my eye, softening her gaze as though to say, “Us, too, Anastasia. She means us, too. We’ll all be safe soon.”

We would be safe. We would be free. We would be out of the Bolsheviks’ captivity, out of this dreadful Ipatiev House, perhaps even out of Russia. Leaving my country, my kingdom, my home—it would have been

unthinkable before the rebellion. I yearned to go back to how things were, back when my father still reigned. To go back to our comfortable home in the Alexander Palace, taking springtime rides through the countryside and summer trips to the Crimean shore. Back to freedom. Back to living.

But we'd been ousted from our palace. For a year and a half, we'd been prisoners. We'd been dragged from Tsarskoye Selo to Siberia to Yekaterinburg, and confined within the miserable walls of the Ipatiev House with nothing but each other. Hundreds of years of Romanov tsars, and now here we sat, captives in a musty old cellar. So now, leaving was our only hope.

An hour earlier, guards had burst into the bedroom I shared with my sisters, roused us from our sleep, and ordered us to ready ourselves for an immediate departure. My sisters and I had clambered from our beds in a flurry of excitement and confusion. Had our royal English cousins sent for us at last? Or would we be escaping under cover, taking new identities? Maria was certain it was the former. Even in our haste, she'd combed her golden hair and donned her finest gown, ready to impress the London nobles. But Olga and Tatiana had used those precious minutes to prepare for a life on the run, quickly stuffing their bodices with diamonds and rubies and emeralds.

In my jittery excitement, I'd done neither. I'd scrambled into my usual plain navy dress and left my thick sandy hair unkempt. The only jewel I'd bothered with was my garnet necklace, hidden beneath my collar as always. A palace in England, a hideaway in Poland—it didn't matter. Wherever we went, however we got there, we were getting out.

Catching Maria's eye from across the room once again, I offered what I hoped was a comforting smile. We were finally, *finally*, getting out. The cellar door lurched open and a guard appeared in the doorway. Not one of our usual guards. No, the man in the doorway was unfamiliar, his expression one of cold disdain. A rifle hung at his side, a spiked bayonet capping its end.

My father stopped pacing. My sisters watched eagerly, and my mother brought her hands to her heart in an unspoken prayer. I took Alexei's hand,

shifting in front of him instinctively. But the guard looked past my siblings, my mother, and me—addressing my father when he spoke.

“You are to be executed.”

Hope froze in my veins.

My father whirled to face him, stunned. “What—”

But the guard raised his rifle without hesitation, without flinching, and the sharp drum of gunshots cut the silence of the cellar. My father staggered. Dropped to his knees. Crumpled to the floor as the guard filled his chest with bullets. I screamed—or was it my sisters? The room filled with shrieking and slamming and bullets, bullets, bullets as more guards stepped through the door, firing their guns.

Alexei’s hand tightened in mine and my heart pounded against the coolness of the garnet necklace, concealed under my dress. My forehead burned as the screams dissolved into the ringing in my ears. My vision became a tunnel, blurring away the sight of my mother and sisters collapsing to the floor in a sea of bullets and blood. I only saw the barrel of a gun, pointed straight at my chest, and the guard’s finger, pulling the trigger.

The impact bore into my chest with unimaginable force. Then the room faded, and I was floating in a sea of perfect darkness. Sinking in an endless soundless swamp. Thick nothingness surrounded me, filled me, and swallowed me whole.



CHAPTER TWO

"Life is just one small piece of light between two eternal darknesses."

—*Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov

NOT DEAD.

No, the wall of darkness before me was just the backs of my eyelids, too heavy to wrench open. Uneven floorboards dug into my spine as cool air nudged me awake. I shivered, and the corner of my mouth twitched upward.

Not dead, because neither Heaven nor Hell ought to be so drafty.

It had been a nightmare, then, surely. The cellar, the bullets, my sisters screaming . . . I was waking up, so it must have been only a terrible dream.

My whole body felt heavy, as though I'd been dragged by a weak magnet through a pit of sand. It wasn't unlike the morning after my fifteenth birthday—the last one before my family was imprisoned—when my sister Maria and I had snuck a bottle of wine for ourselves, drinking the entire thing in our shared bedroom. But there had been no wine, not in that miserable Ipatiev House. So why was I so groggy?

My sternum ached, like I'd been punched in the chest. A bruise was forming there, just behind the garnet necklace hidden beneath my dress.

The thin gold chain was cool against my neck, the gemstone sitting heavily against my chest. The garnet necklace—a secret I’d kept even from Maria.

The floorboards creaked beneath me as I shifted. I peeled my eyes open, and inhaled sharply as my own gray-blue eyes stared back at me. No, not my eyes—

“Alexei, you scared me. You don’t just hover over someone as they’re waking up, you little creep.”

My brother raised his brows as he rose to stand, appraising me with disapproval. “It’s about time you woke up. I’ve been awake for . . .” he fumbled for his heirloom pocket watch out of habit, furrowing his brow as he remembered that the Bolsheviks had taken it, just as they’d taken his kingdom. “I’ve been awake for a while, anyway. And in case you haven’t noticed, we are not in the Ipatiev House.”

I glanced around, my eyes widening as I took in the dingy walls and stark furnishings. He was right. This was not the Ipatiev House, the fortified mansion we’d been imprisoned within all those months. Somehow, we’d awoken in a neat but shabby sort of cabin, clearly someone’s home. The main room was nearly empty, but for a wooden chair and a crooked table, set with a single plate and a half-burned candlestick.

“Has one of our guards snuck us out, then? Is it . . . is it just us?” I glanced around again, seeing no sign of our parents or sisters, nor the guards. Pulling myself to my feet, I stepped across the small room in just a few strides, peering down the short hallway leading to the bedroom. “Maria? Tatiana? Olga?” Where were they? Where were we? “Mother? Papa?” I looked to Alexei, bewildered, but he only stared at me.

“Ana.” His hard tone softened. “Do you . . . do you not remember what happened?”

We’d had a meager dinner, the seven of us, and gone to bed. Then I’d had a horrible nightmare and woke up here. It had been a nightmare, hadn’t it? The cellar, the bullets, the screaming . . . the gun pointed right at my chest. My throat tightened. I could still see it all so clearly. As though . . . as though it had been real.

My eyes met Alexei's. Steely blue shields, well-practiced in hiding his emotions. He was only thirteen, but so hardened. Perhaps because he'd confronted his own mortality at such a young age, his hemophilia having pushed him to the brink of death again and again. He would have died years ago, were it not for Rasputin.

My eyes, however, were not shields. Alexei could see my thoughts written clearly on my face. He nodded.

"You do remember."

"No." I shook my head, willing my words to be true. "No, it—" my voice cracked, the words coming out in a broken whisper. "It was a bad dream." But tears welled in my eyes as I relived the nightmare—no, the memory.

The cellar. The guard, addressing my father with his casual announcement.

"You are to be executed."

My father, startled, having no time to respond before the guards fired their guns.

The bullets. Everywhere, bullets and blood.

My sisters, my parents . . . gone.

But Alexei and I, here.

Through tear-filled eyes, I looked again to my brother, his own eyes soft, his hard shell melted by my grief. He held my gaze, his chin quivering just slightly. A moment of understanding passed between us.

It was just us.

I studied Alexei, then. He was no longer my baby brother, to be pampered and doted upon. He was no longer my little playmate, my tenacious partner in crime. He'd grown into a brooding teenager. The months of confinement had brought me closer to my sisters. But Alexei . . . he'd withdrawn. And as we stood there, staring at one another in the wake of our family's massacre, I didn't know what to say.

Alexei looked away first. He swallowed, tightening his jaw as he studied the floor. "I don't know if one of the guards snuck us out. I don't know how we got here. But I think we'd better get out while we can."

With that, Alexei moved toward the door, his limp more pronounced in his exhaustion. Truthfully, he looked quite pathetic. Weakened by the extended bed rests that had become more frequent as he'd gotten older, his arms and legs were too thin. He stood with his weight off his left knee, where it had never truly healed after his hemorrhage at Spala. Since Rasputin's death, since our imprisonment, Alexei had suffered these last few years. He'd become more difficult to protect, more resistant to being coddled, and therefore more prone to injuries that would be but minor bruises for a non-hemophilic boy.

But Alexei stood proudly, still. What he lacked in a tsarevich's appearance, he made up for with his superior attitude. "Well, Anastasia, aren't you coming?"

With a final glance around the stark cabin, I followed him out the door.



THE RESIDENTIAL STREETS were empty during the brief dark hours of a July night. We wandered in numb silence, passing more small cabins scattered amongst gardens and pastures and pine trees. The fresh air was foreign to my lungs—too clear, too cool. For a year and a half, we'd been confined within walls, without sunshine, without moonlight, without feeling the crisp coolness of a gentle breeze. But we'd been together. Our whole family. I shivered, wrapping myself with my arms as I walked.

There was no way to know how long we'd been unconscious, but as Yekaterinburg was not a sprawling city, we couldn't have been taken too far from the Ipatiev House. And while neither of us knew where we were or where we were going, we had to keep moving. One foot in front of the other, creating more space between ourselves and the trauma behind us.

Alexei broke our silence, speaking rather matter-of-factly. "I saw each of them shot. Father. Olga and Maria, standing together. Tatiana and . . ." His voice shook just a bit. "And Mother." My throat tightened as he described the scene I so badly wished to erase from my mind. But Alexei continued.

“And even as I sat there holding your hand, I saw a guard point his gun at you. And he fired.” Cocking his head to the side, he eyed me searchingly. “You were *shot*, Ana. But you survived.”

I could still see the barrel of that gun, pointed at my chest. The guard’s finger, pulling the trigger. I shuddered, my heart quickening. Yes, I was shot. The garnet clanged against the stone-sized bruise on my sternum as we walked, a constant reminder.

Taking a deep breath, I reached beneath the collar of my dress and lifted the garnet by its golden chain. Then I gave the gemstone a little squeeze and opened my palm, exposing the secret I’d carried for nearly two years. Alexei’s eyes widened and he opened his mouth to speak, but I beat him to it.

“The guard pointed his rifle right at my chest. The bullet struck here,” I pressed my finger to the garnet, “but it ricocheted and that’s the last I remember before waking up in that cabin.” I raised an eyebrow at Alexei, meeting his incredulous stare with my own. “Why weren’t you . . .” I trailed off, the words sticking in my throat. *Shot. Killed. Executed, like the rest of our family.*

Squaring his shoulders, Alexei held his head high as he eyed the necklace curiously. “Destiny, I suppose.”

Despite the weight in my chest, I snorted. “Of course, my tsarevich.” Our father’s abdication, our imprisonment, our family’s execution . . . what would it take for Alexei to accept that the throne would never be his? But it wasn’t the time to push the issue. I fiddled with the garnet necklace, inwardly debating whether to tell Alexei the rest of the story. Clearing my throat, I decided the information was quite pertinent.

“So, Alexei. About this necklace . . .” I paused, unsure how to begin.

“Rasputin gave it to you,” Alexei said flatly.

“I—how did you know?”

“Maria told me. She saw him, when he snuck into your shared room—Said she saw him hand you a jewel in the moonlight. Said he whispered something to you and left.”

“I—well, yes. Yes, Rasputin did whisper something. But it didn’t make any sense.” I paused, baffled that Maria had known, that she hadn’t said anything—or at least, not to me. Alexei was looking at me expectantly, so I continued. “He said, ‘When the time comes, *malenkaya*, you’ll escape. Take it, and promise you’ll find me.’”

Like a shadow in the night, he’d appeared at my bedside, placing his hand on my shoulder and drawing me into the waking world. It was before my father’s abdication. Before those so-called revolutionaries forced us into imprisonment. Back when I was a princess, not a prisoner. I’d had no idea what Rasputin might have meant, when he pressed the garnet necklace into my hand and whispered those words. Though I was startled, there was a soft kindness in the shadowed lines of his face and an air about him that comforted me. I’d drifted back into peaceful sleep, and would have thought it a dream had I not awakened with the garnet still clutched in my palm, like a child with a doll.

Since that night, I’d worn it every day, as one does when a mysterious healer appears in the night to gift one a necklace.

Alexei shrugged. “Well, the first bit was true enough. The time came, and we escaped. But I don’t think we’ll be finding Rasputin.”

I winced. He was right. My mother and father had trusted Rasputin fully—he was, after all, Alexei’s savior—but no one else had. I’d heard the whispers, that his powers were unnatural and unholy. Rasputin had been shot down by the Bolsheviks just a month before the self-righteous *svolochy* forced my family into confinement. “*I promise*,” I’d whispered back that night. “*I’ll find you*.” A promise I would never be able to keep.

We were just rounding a bend along the path as the rising sun burst from the horizon, silhouetting the city before us. The July sunrise was a rare sight, the sun peeking back around the top of the globe at too early an hour for witnesses. I was lost in thought—how could the sunrise be so beautiful in the wake of such tragedy?—when Alexei stopped short.

“This is not Yekaterinburg.”

I stopped, too. “What?”

“Look. You can see the Neva River, the canals winding through the city. You can see the Winter Palace, there in the distance.” He shook his head in disbelief. “We’re in St. Petersburg.”

“That’s absurd, Alexei . . . How? How could we have traveled across all of Russia in our sleep? It’s illogical, it’s—”

My declaration of impossibility was cut short, however, by a round of gunshots erupting from an alleyway between storefronts. “Get down,” I instructed rather unnecessarily, as I hugged my brother to the ground. I did so gingerly, even in my panic, wrapping him in my arms and landing him on top of myself before rolling him away from the sound of the bullets. A bullet would kill him undoubtedly, but even a tackle to the ground could injure him fatally. He wouldn’t stop bleeding, not without Rasputin.

A second round of gunfire answered the first, as black-haired soldiers emerged from the alleyway. One of them yelled something—was it in Japanese?—and the unit sprinted down the street. More bullets, as opposing soldiers shot after them. What the hell were Japanese soldiers doing in St. Petersburg? Had the war progressed so drastically?

“We’ve got to try and crawl to the buildings, Ana. We need cover, we . . . we must be in the middle of some military operation. *Pizdets*—” Bullets shattered a nearby storefront window in an explosion of broken glass.

Bullets, flying across the street, whizzing over our heads as we sprawled on the ground. Bullets, filling my father’s chest as he dropped to his knees. A burning pain scorched through my skull as I shook the image from my mind. Move. I had to move. No way had I survived execution to die in the street.

We crawled on our bellies across the brick-lined road, moving as quickly as we could toward the alcove by the doorway of the nearest shop. More gunfire, but growing distant. We reached the storefront and Alexei scrambled into the little nook by the doorway, audibly exhaling. I clenched my jaw and pressed myself against the brick pillar, shielding my little brother from the street. A moment passed. Quiet. I sighed then, too, and slumped to the ground.

“What *was* that—” I started.

Alexei interrupted me, stammering over his words as he pointed over my head.

“It’s a . . . Ana. Look . . . look up.”

As I craned my neck to look skyward, my eyes widened at what I saw.

An enormous armored airship hovered above us, its metallic plates glowing orange in the rusted light of the sunrise. The long barrel of a mounted weapon swiveled around, as though seeking its target, and cast a sharp beam of red light directly at my chest. I peered downward, frozen in fear as a red dot of light appeared, bright against my navy dress as it mirrored the garnet beneath.

Perhaps I was going to die in the street, after all.

I squeezed Alexei’s hand, found his eyes, and was for once speechless, not knowing how to say good-bye in the seconds preceding our most certain deaths. But there wasn’t time anyway, because then—

BANG.

The bullet pounded the garnet into the bruise on my sternum as I screamed, and then everything went dark.



CHAPTER THREE

“The question is, what do we consider supernatural? When, not a living man but a piece of stone attracted a nail to itself, how did the phenomena strike the first observers? As something natural? Or supernatural?”

“Well, of course; but phenomena such as the magnet attracting iron always repeat themselves.”

—The Professor and Sahatof, *Fruits of Culture* by Leo Tolstoy

ALEXEI POPPED HIS EYES open, muscles tensed, immediately on alert. But the room was dark and quiet. There were no soldiers, no guns, no armored airship targeting him. There was only the even tide of Anastasia’s breathing as she slept, and the soft whine of the wooden floorboards as Alexei scrambled to sit. He hurried to his feet and in his excitement, he forgot himself, moving too quickly. His bad knee buckled, nearly dropping him to the floor, but he didn’t stop to scowl. He was elated. It was just as he’d hoped.

Again, the garnet was shot. And again, they awoke on the cabin floor.

They would need a gun, then, he supposed.

His crooked gait evened as he hurried toward the bedroom, his heart pounding wildly. Rasputin had been right. There would be a way. There *had* to be a way. There had to be a world where his blood was not cursed, where his family still reigned, where his crown was not stolen.

Crouching by the bed, he swiped his hand beneath the mattress, fumbling blindly until his fingers brushed the cool metal of a handgun. He’d

been around weapons plenty. Learned to shoot, as any tsarevich should. But his hands trembled as he gripped the handle, tracing his quivering finger along the barrel. When had he last held such power in his hands? A lifetime ago, before the Bolsheviks came, he supposed. *Before Father gave up my throne*, Alexei thought bitterly, *throwing away my birthright to appease those self-righteous traitors*. Alexei bristled, remembering how childishly he'd sobbed when his father had told him.

"I've abdicated," he'd said.

Alexei's jaw had dropped. There had been a nasty rebellion—a series of them, he supposed—but he had never expected to hear those words. He'd assumed his father was doing *something* to maintain his authority. He was astonished. Horrified. His father was no longer tsar. Then he'd gasped, his face lighting with realization. *If my father is no longer tsar . . .*

"So I'm . . . I'm tsar? Tsar of all of Russia?" His voice had raised with excitement, already envisioning his coronation.

His father had frowned, pain filling his eyes as he spoke. "For our family's safety, I've abdicated myself, and on your behalf, as well."

"You . . . How . . . how could you?" Alexei had stuttered, the weight of the words crushing his soul. His destiny, shattered. His idol, deposed. Over the months that followed, his disillusionment had festered into resentment. He still hadn't forgiven his father, even as he'd watched him die. And now he didn't know what to feel, as shock and grief and anger and hunger all tangled in his chest.

"Alexei?" Anastasia's voice called from the other room, groggy and confused.

His eyes didn't leave the handgun. "In here, Ana."

So much power, there in his hands. The power to end lives. For a moment, an image of the cellar flashed through his mind. The guns, firing at his father, his mother, his sisters. But he pushed the image away, burying it deep within his gut. He steeled himself, focusing once more on the gun in his hands. The gun and the power it held, not just to end lives.

No, with the garnet, the gun held a power far greater than death.



CHAPTER FOUR

“Two fixed ideas can no more exist together in the moral world than two bodies can occupy one and the same place in the physical world.”

—*The Queen of Spades* by Alexander Pushkin

“ALEXEI, BE CAREFUL WITH that thing—we’ve been here for what, five minutes? And you’ve found a gun?” I had followed his voice, ambling into the bedroom. My eyelids weighed a ton, my body aching as though I’d slammed through a wall. And my mind was reeling. Somehow, we’d been transported yet again to the shabby little cabin. To the very same square of uneven wooden floor. It had happened again.

He didn’t look up, absorbed in his methodical search through the closet. “And ammunition, hopefully.” He paused, glancing at me. “Seems we ought to have one, if that’s how this works.”

My brother could be such a prat. He was clever, and he loved to make a show of just how much cleverer he was than everyone else. I rolled my eyes. “Go on and tell me, then. Tell me what in the world you’re talking about.”

Taking an exasperated tone, he enlightened me. “Well clearly something magical is happening when Rasputin’s necklace is shot. It’s happened twice now. So, we need a gun. And ammunition. Aha!” His hand landed on a small metal tin, its contents clinking as he waved it triumphantly.

It was my turn for exasperation. “Magical? Alexei, *that’s* your explanation?”

“Twice the gemstone was shot. Twice we’ve woken up in this place. Magical, you could say. Or metaphysical, maybe.”

I rolled my eyes again, opening my mouth to argue, but Alexei continued, twirling the gun in his hands as he paced the room. “Rasputin was tending me once—I was bleeding too much again. And I was . . . sad. I was realizing that I might not live to be tsar, that I might not live long at all.” His eyes met mine. “So our old friend was trying to comfort me, I suppose. He told me unfathomable things. About infinite worlds, infinite possibilities. He said that every version of reality we could imagine exists, in side-by-side worlds. So in another reality, or in many, I would live to be tsar.”

I understood. The old starets had told me these things, too. But he’d also told me many things that I hadn’t believed.

“Think about it,” Alexei went on. “From Yekaterinburg to St. Petersburg? Japanese soldiers? An iron-plated battle blimp in the street? And now, we’ve awakened *here* again. We’ve traveled to a parallel universe, Ana.”

There was such hunger on his face. He wanted so badly for it to be true. For there to be some world in which his own blood didn’t betray him. A world in which his kingdom hadn’t rejected him. A world in which he would be tsar. I couldn’t blame him. What wouldn’t I give for a world in which my parents were alive? A world with my sisters. Where I wasn’t a prisoner, but a person. A world that still wanted me.

My eyes softened for a moment as I studied Alexei. Shaking my head, I frowned. “If that were possible—which it’s not—what then? What would we do?” I was thinking aloud, truly. Alexei couldn’t have an answer for such a loaded question. Without our parents, our sisters, our home . . . we were lost. What would we do with ourselves, in an alternate world?

“Well, *I* would find a way to my throne. Just like Rasputin said. Every version of reality we can imagine exists, in side-by-side worlds. So in some world, I can be tsar.” He shrugged, feigning nonchalance, but desperate longing haunted his eyes. “I want to find that world.”

“I would save them.” The words surprised me as they tumbled from my mouth, but I felt their truth. “I mean hypothetically, if anything was possible—I would save our family. I wouldn’t let it fall apart. I would do whatever it took, to keep them alive.”

Alexei looked down, perhaps a bit ashamed that he hadn’t said the same.

I kept talking, as I tend to do, in an attempt to assuage his guilt. “But it doesn’t matter anyway. Because we *can’t*—” I paused, sniffing the air. “Alexei . . . do you smell smoke?” The smell was quickly overwhelming. Alexei was holding his shirt collar over his nose, while I was reaching for the door to air the place out. Where was it coming from? As my hand wrapped the metal doorknob, I reeled back and shrieked, my hand immediately blistering. I kicked the door hard, it easily fell open, and my jaw dropped at what I saw.

The whole world was on fire. Outside of the cabin, it was a burning wasteland. My eyes darted to take it all in, my mouth hanging open. What buildings remained were toppling, consumed in flames. The streets were mostly empty of people—just blackened corpses. Nearby was a woman’s scorched remains, the singed scraps of a brown woolen dress curling into ashes. The cabin we stood within was alone untouched by the raging fire—but the flames were leaping toward us rapidly.

“Anastasia! The garnet! Again!” Alexei grabbed my hand, pulling me toward him as he drew the gun. What did we have to lose? I looped the chain around my free wrist and slammed the garnet on the table. Alexei met my eye, and I nodded.

BANG. For a moment, everything went black, and then . . . I awoke. My body felt heavy. The floor beneath me, creaky. I blinked my eyes open, finding myself on the cabin floor once more.

It worked.



BANG, HEAVY, CREAKY, blink, bang, heavy, creaky, blink—the cycle repeated, each world as wrong as the last. It was always the cabin. Always the gun.

Sometimes it began as the first world had: an empty cabin, seemingly peaceful at first. But then a Bolshevik would arrive home, or a knife-throwing Kazak, or once, a crying baby that Alexei simply didn't want to deal with.

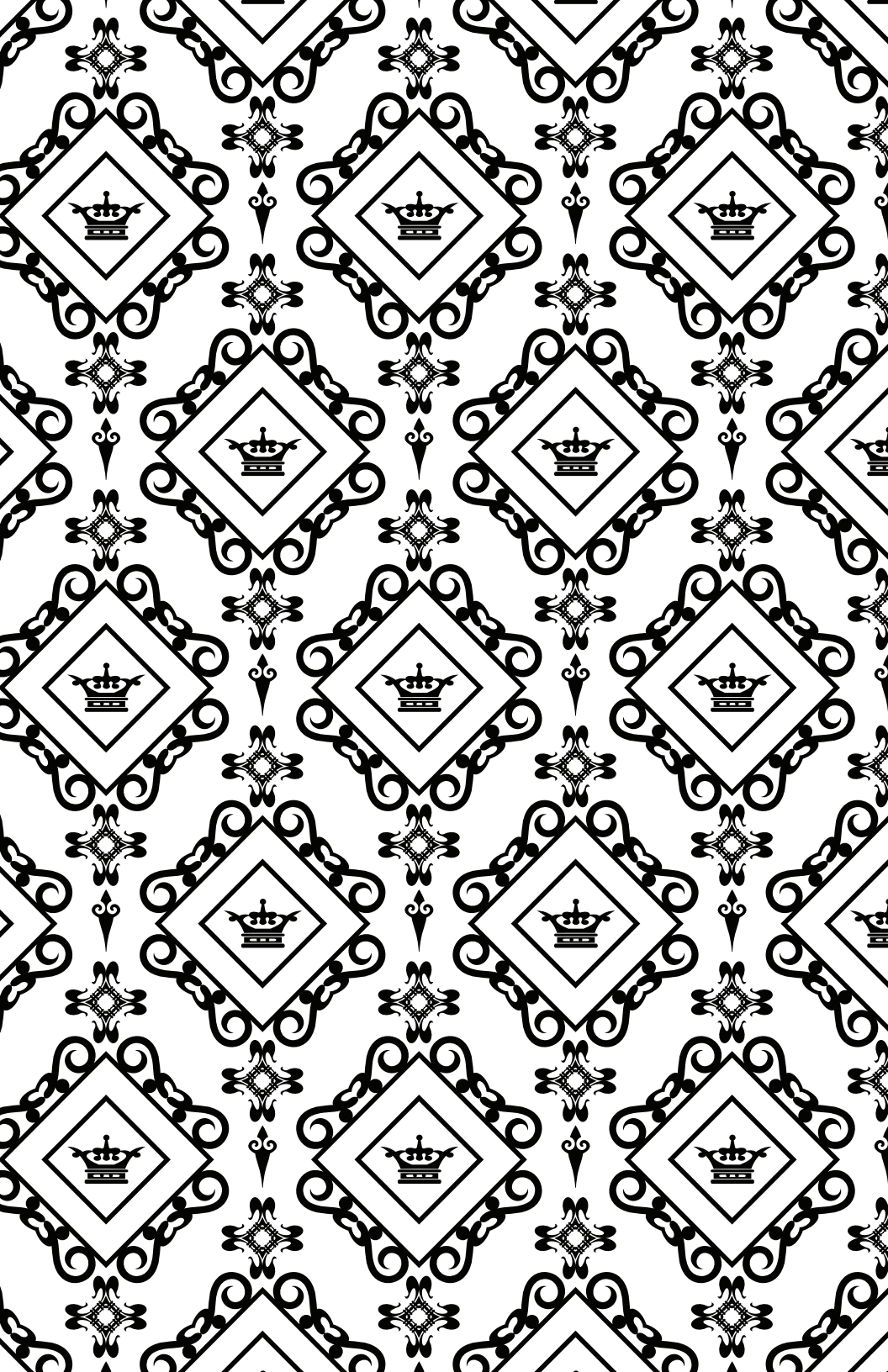
There were other times that we arrived in the midst of some postapocalyptic hellscape, not unlike the raging fire. In one world, exploding boulders were raining from the sky, and I had to laugh at the ridiculousness as I quickly produced the garnet, Alexei pulling the trigger without hesitation. *Bang, heavy, creaky, blink*—and we'd arrived in the middle of a shoot-out within the cabin. The shooters' eyes had widened in disbelief when we'd magically appeared on the cabin floor. Immediately alert, I had clenched my brother's hand and swung the garnet by its chain, intercepting a bullet in the crossfire. *Bang, heavy, creaky, blink*—the next time, the cabin had existed in an otherwise empty void, floating in nothingness.

There were times when I'd marveled at Alexei's marksmanship, each shot finding the garnet with precision. As though drawn to the jewel. As though the garnet wanted the bullet, *wanted* to be used. I'd voiced such to my brother, to which he'd scoffed. "You speak as though the gemstone has sentience. I—we are in control, Anastasia. We are. You've just never seen me shoot."

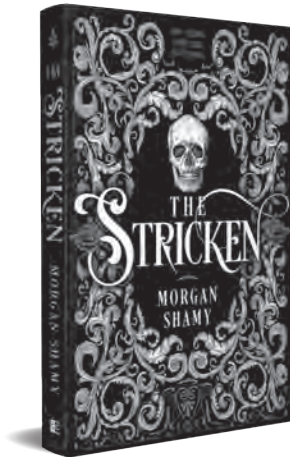
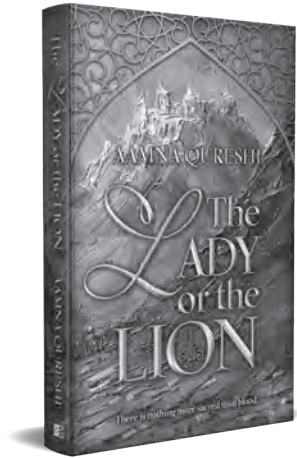
I'd sighed and extended my hand, dangling the jewel by its chain as Alexei pointed the gun, pulling the trigger yet again.

As we bounced through dimensions, my mind went to Lower Dacha—our little palace by the sea. When we weren't at the Alexander Palace, we had bounced from one grand home to another, but my favorites were those on the water. "Find a flat one," Maria had instructed me, as we stood together on the rocky shore. And I had found the flattest stone—it was like a large coin—and I had whipped my wrist to fling it along the water's surface. The rock had skidded along the top of the water for as long as it could, bouncing across the surface until eventually it ran out of momentum and sunk to the bottom of the sea.

Bang, heavy, creaky, blink.

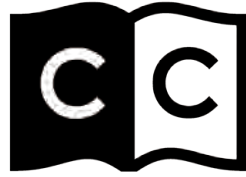


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HISTORY GOT IT WRONG. I SURVIVED.

ANASTASIA ROMANOV and her younger brother Alexei escape their family's execution when a bullet strikes Anastasia's garnet necklace, transporting them to a parallel universe. This alternate Russia is a second chance. Anastasia wants to save her family, Alexei wants to be tsar, and they plan to travel the infinite multiverse to find a world in which both are possible.

Until they meet Lev. When the kind but dutiful-to-a-fault soldier mistakes Alexei for the tsarevich of this dimension, he resolves to return him to the Winter Palace. There, Alexei eagerly impersonates his doppelganger, playing the role that was stolen from him in his own world. To maintain his façade, he must deceive everyone—including Anastasia.

Anastasia just needs time to grieve and heal after losing everything that defined her. But Alexei's lies lead Anastasia on an adventure through an alternate Russia. With rebellion brewing, she is determined to save this world's Romanovs—and Alexei—before they meet the same fate as her own family.



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