PART ONE

ANASTASIA

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I

"My God, What a Disappointment!"

It was at the height of St. Petersburg's famous White Nights, when the sun barely disappeared for a few hours from Russia's capital, that the artillery thunder began. Night had come and gone in less than a few hours, leaving the sky over the placid Gulf of Finland awash in crimsons, blues, and pearls as dawn crept over the land. Alarmed by the crack of guns, crows cawed protests into the northern morning; a few early travelers, passing along a road fringed by a tall iron fence, also heard the echoes and momentarily stopped. On the other side of that fence sprawled the imperial estate of Peterhof. Here, sentries in blue uniforms patrolled through groves of pine, oak, and beech trees, holding tight to the reins lest their mounts become too restive or spooked by the noise. And along the edge of the water, rising against rows of reeds that gently waved in the soft wind, carriage wheels crunched over graveled drives leading to a rambling Italianate villa, where lights had burned since three that morning.

Those within the Lower Palace, as the building was called, already knew what those awakened by the guns firing a salute from the nearby naval base at Kronstadt did not: at six that morning—June 18, 1901—a fourth child had been born to Nicholas II, tsar of all the Russias, and his wife, Empress Alexandra. When the artillery count reached 101 shots, people paused; even those just starting their day twenty miles east in St. Petersburg could hear the thud of cannon. All Russia knew that the empress was expecting: after three imperial daughters—Olga, born in

1895, Tatiana in 1897, and Marie in 1899—everyone hoped for a son, an heir to the Romanov Dynasty, whose birth would be greeted by a thunderous 300 salvos. But on that morning there was no 102nd shot; the empress had given birth to yet another girl.

"My God, what a disappointment!" recorded Nicholas II's sister Grand Duchess Xenia Alexandrovna in her diary on hearing the news.[1] These words summed up the general feeling within the imperial family and across the Russian Empire. But if the parents were disappointed, they hid it well. In his diary, Nicholas wrote only of "a feeling of calm," and noted that his wife "felt quite cheerful."[2] It may have been unspoken, but both parents were keenly aware of the succession laws. Emperor Paul, who hated his mother, Catherine the Great, dictated that females could inherit the Russian throne only after all male members of the Romanov Dynasty. If Nicholas and Alexandra had no son, the crown would pass to his brother, Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich, then to his uncles and to their sons, to great-uncles and to second cousins; only the deaths of all of these forty or so male relatives would allow for the succession of the new infant or her sisters.

The imperial couple temporarily set aside such worries twelve days after their new daughter's birth when, on a glorious summer morning, the infant was christened with all the pomp and ceremony demanded by her style of imperial highness and position as a grand duchess of Russia. A string of crimson and gold carriages, carrying members of the imperial family and their guests, rolled through the park at Peterhof, passing between rows of crisply drawn sentries and alongside fountains glistening in the morning light. At intervals rode scarlet-coated Cossacks and members of the Chevalier Garde in white tunics and silver-gilt cuirasses, their ranks interrupted by marching regimental bands and by courtiers adorned with orders and awards. Finally, after much anticipation, the gilded carriage bearing the new grand duchess appeared, its six white horses led by scarlet-and-gold-liveried grooms bedecked in powdered wigs; only the parents were absent from this spectacle, forbidden by Orthodox custom from attending the solemn rite.[3]



Empress Alexandra with the newborn Anastasia, 1901.



The imperial family after the christening of Anastasia, 1901.

A fanfare of trumpets greeted the procession when it reached the eight-hundred-foot-long Great Palace at Peterhof; within, hundreds of aristocrats and courtiers crowded the elaborately decorated halls, medals shining against broadcloth tunics and jewels scintillating on gowns of silver tissue and velvet. Footmen and chamberlains, adjutants and ladies-in-waiting cleared the way for Princess Marie Golitsyn, the empress's mistress of the robes, who held the infant on a cushion and carried her along a ribbon of crimson carpet to the cathedral. As a choir chanted and fragrant smoke from incense curled toward the gilded dome, Father Ioann Yanishev, personal confessor to the imperial family, took the baby from the pillow, removing the white lace christening gown before dipping her into the font three times.[4] As if prompted by some unconscious glimpse of her future, Nicholas and Alexandra gave their new daughter a name that meant Resurrection, and she was christened Anastasia.

"Once upon a time . . ." runs the fairy tale. For Anastasia, the fairy tale began with this elaborate ceremony, which embodied all the splendid privilege of the Russian Court. Related by blood and marriage to the royal houses of Great Britain, Denmark, Romania, Germany, Spain, and Greece, she was born into a lavish world of palaces and liveried servants, gold-braided courtiers and sleek yachts, loving parents and a devoted family—everything necessary to the traditional, heartwarming conclusion. For Anastasia, though, there would be no happy ending; her fairy tale went horribly awry, its peaceful promise shattered by war and revolution. In its place arose a new tale that gave resonance to the meaning of her name, in which hope triumphed over despair, and desire transcended brutal reality. There was even a Prince Charming said to have come to Anastasia's rescue. It all coalesced to form a powerful

myth, a modern legend, a new fairy tale that, in its traumas, seemed to encapsulate the turmoil of the twentieth century.

Looking back after a century, it is difficult to imagine the opulent life into which Anastasia was born. The almost barbaric, Byzantine splendor of the imperial court endowed her life with all of the fantastic elements demanded of any good fairy tale. Nicholas II was undoubtedly the wealthiest monarch in the world. He ruled a sixth of the land surface of the globe as autocrat, responsible to no one. Instead of one palace, he owned more than thirty; there were country estates in Finland, Poland, and the Crimea; huge timber and mineral reserves in Siberia and the Caucasus; five yachts and two private trains; hundreds of horses, carriages, and new motorcars; accounts stocked with gold bullion in Moscow, London, and Berlin; thousands of works of art, including important paintings by Van Dyke, Raphael, Rembrandt, Titian, and da Vinci; crowns, tiaras, necklaces, and a fortune in jewelry; and a priceless collection of objets d'art and Easter eggs by famed jeweler Peter Karl Fabergé. Cared for by a small army of cooks, maids, footmen, chamberlains, gardeners, chauffeurs, carpenters, grooms, and valets, tended by devoted courtiers who kissed their hands, and protected by thousands of soldiers and police officers, the Romanovs wanted for nothing.

And, at least at the beginning of Nicholas II's reign, there was every hope that he would rule Russia evenly and gently, in keeping with his placid character, steering it with wisdom and foresight through the unknown waters of the early twentieth century. The eighteenth ruler in a Romanov Dynasty that included such larger-than-life figures as Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, Nicholas was young, handsome, and exceptionally polite when he came to the throne in 1894 following the premature death of his father, Alexander III. The country was backward and already straining under modern pressures and expectations. The vast majority of the emperor's subjects were peasants, loyal but illiterate, consumed by the constant struggle to simply survive; then there were the workers, thousands of wretched beings who toiled in danger and misery in the great industrial factories. A small middle class had developed intellectuals and sent its sons to universities, where they readily found sympathetic comrades filled with their own horrible stories of hardship. And at the very apex of the country, separated by comforts and languages, ensconced in privilege and often more concerned with pleasure than with progress, stood the elite: the military officers, the bureaucracy, the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, the courtiers, the aristocracy, and the imperial family itself. Surely, people thought, this system could not last. The antiquated autocracy Nicholas II inherited survived only by force of character and by a tradition that insisted the emperor alone was

responsible to himself and to God for governing this enormous cauldron of simmering discontent.



Nicholas II, about 1900.

But then the shy, gentle, and polite Nicholas II did something that quite confounded those who hoped that such an educated, modern young man would recognize the impossibility of continued autocratic rule. Just a few months after taking the throne, he made it clear that he would never share his power with an elected assembly and that the pace of needed reforms would be miserably slow. Clinging to the idea that he had been ordained by God to rule according only to his own conscience, he saw himself as *batushka*-tsar, father of the Russian people, a benevolent and all-knowing schoolmaster suddenly confronted with a classroom of unruly pupils who needed his wisdom and his whip to maintain order. Ambition clashed with reality, and as the twentieth century began, the rumblings grew louder, the demands for reform more insistent, as the country careened from disaster to disaster: tsarist ministers and officials fell victim to a growing revolutionary movement; war between Russia and Japan ended in humiliating defeat; soldiers and sailors mutinied, peasants looted estates, and pogroms erupted with the tacit and often overt approval of the government; and by 1905, strikes and unrest had paralyzed the country. Faced with this tumult, Nicholas II reluctantly bowed to pressure and created a parliament, the Duma. This was a concession wrested rather than granted, and Nicholas could never reconcile himself to the idea that he had signed away his autocratic powers.



Empress Alexandra, about 1905.

An uneasy peace settled over the country in these years after the turn of the century. Thoroughly disillusioned, Nicholas II increasingly withdrew from his public duties, finding comfort only in his wife and children. It was a passion shared by his wife, Empress Alexandra.

Born a princess of the German Grand Duchy of Hesse und bei Rhein, and a favorite granddaughter of Queen Victoria, Alexandra—Alix, or "Sunny," as her husband called her—was a great beauty when they married in 1894; together Nicholas and Alexandra seemed to embody the very image of the prince and princess who would indeed live happily ever after. But beneath this veneer lay something unsuspected: excessively shy, serious, and high-minded, Alexandra possessed the steely character her husband lacked. She passionately believed in the Orthodox faith she embraced upon her marriage, but she found in its mystical doctrines justification for an increasingly extreme view of her husband's power; like Nicholas, she refused to acknowledge that the autocracy had ended, insisting that the emperor make no popular concessions. It was one of the great ironies of the tale: the granddaughter of Queen Victoria, the most powerful democratic monarch on the face of the earth, soon became even more convinced of a divinely mandated autocracy than her own husband.

Nicholas rarely protested his wife's interference and admonitions. Beyond the realm of politics, the imperial couple at least fully inhabited the roles assigned to them by the fairy tale: they were indeed hopelessly, devotedly in love with each other, their marriage a triumph over familial objections and circumstance. "Even after many years," recalled one relative, "they were like young lovers."[5] For each, this marriage became their principal comfort in increasingly uncertain times, but the warm and loving empress remained hidden, unknown to Russia. Instead, aristocratic St. Petersburg saw only a woman they deemed a humorless prig, someone who despised the empty social life and lavish balls that filled the long winter days; Alexandra never bothered to conceal her disapproval of this frivolity, and soon she alienated society and even most of her husband's extended family. Knowing that she was disliked and increasingly unwell, she led her husband into a cloistered world that insulated them from scandalous gossip and unwholesome thoughts but also isolated them from the realities of a changing world.

Alexandra's mysticism increased after 1904, when she finally gave birth to the long-awaited son and heir, Tsesarevich Alexei. The public rejoiced, but within six weeks his parents learned that he suffered from hemophilia, passed on to him by his mother, who had inherited the defective genes through Queen Victoria. This discovery cast a pall over the lives of Nicholas and Alexandra; rather than admit that their only son was prey to such a devastating illness, they kept Alexei's hemophilia a state secret. His sisters were told, as were a few servants, courtiers, and intimate family members, but most of Russia knew only that their future emperor was frequently unwell. There was no cure, and almost any bump or fall could result in a potentially fatal internal hemorrhage.



Anastasia in Russian court dress for the christening of Tsesarevich Alexei, 1904.

Hoping to prevent such incidents, the imperial couple charged two sailors, Andrei Derevenko and Klementy Nagorny, with keeping a constant watch over their fragile son, but the uncertainty took an emotional and physical toll on the parents, particularly Alexandra, who knew that she was unwittingly responsible for Alexei's suffering. In the absence of scientific hope, Nicholas and Alexandra turned to religion, seeking comfort in the ministrations of a series of questionable seers and holy men, desperate for a miracle. They found their miracle in 1905, when they first met the infamous Siberian peasant Gregory Rasputin.

The thwarted ambitions, strikes, wars, unrest, assassinations, aristocratic animosity, Alexei's illness—it all coalesced to drive Nicholas and Alexandra into retreat, to an idyllic world of bourgeois values and familial love carved from a privileged backdrop of imperial palaces. Fifteen miles south of St. Petersburg, cocooned within two dozen modestly decorated rooms in a wing of the yellow and white neoclassical Alexander Palace at Tsarskoye Selo, the Romanovs lived a confined, isolated existence. Sentries patrolled the perimeters of the imperial park, footmen stood at attention in the palace's marble halls, and courtiers bowed, yet somehow Nicholas and Alexandra created a life for their children that, in comparison with that of many of their European cousins, was almost stunning in its lack of artifice.

While pompous Russian aristocrats condemned the empress as a bourgeois German hausfrau, domestic cares ensured that her children were brought up in a warm and loving environment. She could be frustratingly obsessive and smothering, but Alexandra also was a tactile mother whose devotion to family life stood in contrast to the deliberate distance maintained by many royal women of the era. She kept her children's bassinets in her bedroom when they were infants, and bathed, changed, and nursed them herself. But her somewhat anachronistic attitudes, seriousness, and high-minded ambition often made it difficult for Alexandra to indulge her children's natural spirits, and most people agreed that with the exception of Tatiana, they all favored their father.[6] In her teenage letters to Nicholas II, Anastasia was effusive, calling him her "Golden, Good, Darling Papa," writing, "I want to see you so much," and signing, "I kiss you 1,000,000 times, your hands and

feet."[7] Unfortunately, as one courtier recalled, "In ordinary times, the Tsar did not see much of his children. His work and the demands of court life prevented him from giving them as much time as he would have wished."[8]

Instead, with the empress often unwell and the emperor occupied with work, the children were largely brought up by a series of English nurses. For a time, Alexandra's former nanny Mary Anne Orchard supervised the imperial nurseries and selected the Russian women who served below her.[9] At the time of Anastasia's birth, Margarette Eagar was the principal nanny, but she left the court in 1905, and her position went to her colleague Alexandra Tegleva. Known to the children as "Shura," Tegleva—along with several Russian girls—saw to their daily needs, nursing them when they were unwell and pampering them with doting attention. Later, as her two eldest daughters matured, Alexandra appointed a young woman named Sophie Tiutcheva as their governess, although she eventually fell out with the empress over Rasputin's visits to the nurseries.[10]

Secluded and largely unknown, the four grand duchesses became ciphers, their appearances in public rare and often restricted to a select audience of courtiers and aristocrats. Their father's subjects saw their faces in formal photographs and souvenir postcards, but very few outside the insular universe of Tsarskoye Selo knew anything of their real lives. Denied friends and social opportunities, they existed in an artificial sanctuary that tended to magnify ordinary clashes and the insecurities of youth as they struggled to win approval and establish a sense of their own identities.

Olga, the eldest of the four daughters, was generally thought to be the most intelligent of Nicholas and Alexandra's children. A deeply religious, sensitive young woman, Olga possessed a stubborn streak and tendency to depression that occasionally led to clashes with her mother. In temperament and appearance she most resembled her father, whom she adored.[11] In contrast, Tatiana, the second of the girls, was closest to her mother, and her siblings nicknamed her "the governess." Naturally thin and elegant, Tatiana had her mother's refined features and unquestioning acceptance of their extraordinary privilege. Even so, she was essentially modest by nature, and while she enjoyed what little she was allowed to experience of society, she disliked the ceremonial etiquette that accompanied her rank: she once kicked a lady-in-waiting out of embarrassment for publicly referring to her as "Your Imperial Highness."[12]

Being closest in age, Olga and Tatiana formed a natural bond, and within the family they were informally called "the big pair," while the two youngest grand duchesses became "the little pair."[13] Marie, the third daughter, also was the most beautiful. Her thick golden hair

and large blue eyes won her many admirers; her cousin Prince Louis of Battenberg—the future Lord Mountbatten—was so taken with her that until his 1979 assassination by the IRA, he kept a photograph of her beside his bed.[14] Unpretentious and simple in her tastes, Marie was content to dream of one day marrying and of raising a large family.[15]

The youngest of the four daughters and destined by history to become the most famous, Anastasia, said one courtier, was "quite unlike any of her sisters, with a type of her own."[16] Lili Dehn, one of the empress's closest friends, called Anastasia "pretty" but noted that "hers was more of a clever face."[17] Her hair was dark blond with a slight golden tinge, and her features "were regular and finely cut."[18] Above all else, it was her gray-blue eyes—"of great luminescence," as Tatiana Botkin, daughter of the imperial family's chief physician, Eugene Botkin, recalled—that attracted attention, vibrant "wells of intelligence," according to Dehn, that were constantly moving and glowed with mischief.[19]

This impression—that with Anastasia mischief was always lurking just beneath the surface—was one that the little girl herself cultivated from an early age. Perhaps, as the youngest of four girls and the least important of five children, she consciously grasped at opportunities—no matter how inappropriate—to assert her individuality, for she was certainly very different from her sisters in behavior and temperament. There was something altogether irrepressible about her spirited energy, as if she knew no boundaries and feared nothing. Her aunt and godmother Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna nicknamed her "Shvibzik" (Imp), and Anastasia fully lived up to the designation.[20] From an early age, said Dr. Botkin's youngest son, Gleb, Anastasia "undoubtedly held the record for punishable deeds in her family, for in naughtiness she was a true genius."[21]



Anastasia in her mother's boudoir at the Alexander Palace, about 1910.

Anastasia loved to disappear in the vast imperial park, hiding from concerned sentries until

worry forced her out of hiding; she climbed trees to dizzying heights, refusing to come down until ordered to do so by her father, and she made faces at the stony-faced guards.[22] Visiting cousins feared her: one, Princess Nina Georgievna, declared Anastasia "nasty to the point of being evil," while her sister Xenia Georgievna called her "wild and rough," and remembered how she would "often scratch me and pull my hair" if she disliked the outcome of a game.[23]

It was all distinctly unroyal behavior, but Anastasia usually managed, through charm or through a startling frankness, to get away with such antics. They became an expression of personality within the rarefied and sheltered environment of the Russian court, a subtle rebellion against the regularity and oppressive strictures of life at Tsarskoye Selo. Tradition ruled in the Alexander Palace. Her father may have been the wealthiest sovereign in the world, but as soon as Anastasia outgrew the crib, she shared a bedroom with her sister Marie, an unpretentious chamber made comfortable with overstuffed furniture, chintz fabrics, and walls bedecked with icons, watercolors, and favorite photographs.[24] Like her sisters, she slept on a narrow, folding army camp bed, a tradition within the Romanov family dating back to the childhood of Alexander I and meant to instill character and guard against indulgence.[25] The same concerns dictated cold baths each morning, although the warm baths permitted at night took place in a solid silver tub engraved with the names of all the imperial children who had used it.[26] Anastasia and her sisters helped maids clean their rooms, and in a further effort to prevent them from being spoiled, servants and courtiers referred to them using their Christian names and patronymics—Anastasia Nikolaievna—rather than by their titles or styles.[27] Each month came a modest allowance, out of which Anastasia could purchase any gifts or personal items, including her favorite Coty perfume, Violette.[28] "In this way," recalled one courtier, "their mother hoped to make them realize the value of money, a thing that princes find hard to understand. But etiquette prevented their going into any shops but those of the stationers at Tsarskoye Selo and Yalta, and they never had any clear idea of the value and price of things."[29] It was all very simple, especially compared to many other royal households, but it also was very studied, an echo of the simplistic charade enacted by Marie Antoinette in Le Hameau at Versailles before the Terror swept the Bourbons from their throne.

Days passed with a comforting regularity at Tsarskoye Selo. If, beyond the protected confines of the imperial estate, Russia seethed with danger and discontent, here there were only smiling and obsequious faces. Aroused from slumber, the grand duchesses crept down the narrow wooden staircase connecting their rooms to those of their mother to

bid Alexandra good morning before returning to their own apartments for breakfast. Nicholas would already be at his desk, and although he might join his children for a walk in the park, sometimes accompanied by the empress, the family often came together for the first time each day at four, when they all gathered for tea in Alexandra's famous Mauve Boudoir. This, too, was ruled by tradition: the regulations, set down in the reign of Catherine the Great, dictated the number and type of rolls, plates of bread, and pastries placed on the table. Alexandra complained that "other people had much more interesting teas," but that even as empress she was "unable to change a single detail of the routine of the Russian Court."[30] Alexandra poured, and handed around plates of tiny sandwiches and pastries; for the children there was cocoa and little vanilla-flavored wafers called *biblichen*. Nicholas smoked and read aloud, the empress and her eldest daughters embroidered, and Anastasia played games with Alexei on the sage-green carpet.[31]

These quiet scenes of domestic, thoroughly middle-class harmony were often repeated in the evening, usually with the addition of the empress's great friend Anna Vyrubova, a "sentimental and mystical," naive young woman whose devotion to Alexandra was rivaled only by her uncritical belief in the infamous Rasputin.[32] The family might listen to the gramophone—recordings of Wagnerian operas were a favorite—or to Nicholas as he read from Russian or English novels, the empress inevitably busy with needlework and the girls carefully pasting photographs they had taken with their Kodak box cameras into leather-bound albums.[33] On other evenings films would be shown in the palace's large semicircular hall: newsreels, something for the children, and perhaps an American or European silent comedy or serial. All were carefully screened to ensure that no offending scenes existed, although inevitably the censor missed a passionate kiss or meaningful glance that sent the imperial children into howls of laughter.[34]

For all of this apparent idyllic domesticity, one thing was missing: Anastasia had no real friends. As a young girl, she pathetically dragged around a well-worn, one-armed, one-eyed, bald-headed doll she had named Vera, and looked to her siblings and the family's pets for comfort.[35] In their isolation, the grand duchesses found comfort and companionship with each other, and with the courtiers and servants around them. Anastasia Hendrikova, a countess who served their mother, was a particular favorite, as was Baroness Sophie Buxhoeveden, who was appointed a lady-in-waiting to the empress in 1913 at age twenty-eight, but they could not take the place of real confidantes.[36] The grand duchesses, noted imperial tutor Pierre Gilliard, "by force of circumstances," learned "to be self-sufficient" in "a life deprived of outside amusements."[37]

The blame lay with the empress. Alexandra, Anna Vyrubova remembered, "dreaded for her daughters the companionship of oversophisticated young women of the aristocracy whose minds, even in the schoolroom, were fed with the foolish and often vicious gossip of a decadent society."[38] There were, it is true, infrequent visits with the children of Nicholas II's eldest sister, Grand Duchess Xenia Alexandrovna; with Prince George and Princess Vera, the youngest children of Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich, who lived at Pavlovsk, near Tsarskoye Selo; and with Princesses Nina and Xenia Georgievna, daughters of Grand Duke George Mikhailovich, second cousin to Nicholas II, but such occasions were sporadic and provided only momentary diversions rather than true companionship. Alexandra, said Vyrubova, "discouraged" even these innocent encounters, deeming many of her husband's relatives "unwholesomely precocious in their outlook on life."[39]

Recognizing the isolation of her nieces and their inability to enjoy any meaningful social life, Nicholas II's youngest sister, Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna, tried to step in and provide them with a modicum of diversion. Unhappily married to a homosexual prince, the rather plain and unassuming Olga Alexandrovna shared her goddaughter Anastasia's intense dislike of the rigidity of imperial life and the crushing etiquette of the Russian court. Her answer was to take the grand duchesses away for days at her palace in St. Petersburg, and to lunches with their grandmother Dowager Empress Marie Feodorovna. Olga also organized small parties, teas, and dances for her nieces, and the grand duchesses looked forward to these Sunday afternoons, when they could mingle with other young men and women invited by their aunt, dance, and play games with carefree abandon.[40] They all, Olga Alexandrovna later recalled, "enjoyed every minute of it," especially Anastasia. "I can still hear her laughter rippling all over the rooms. Dancing, music, games—why, she threw herself wholeheartedly into them all."[41]

It was the only apparent flaw in the fairy tale, this lack of friends and influences outside the palace, this isolation imposed by the empress upon her daughters. In a very real way, the grand duchesses were prisoners in a gilded cage. "More than her sisters," recalled one courtier, "Anastasia chafed under the narrowness of her environment."[42] Still, little could be done. The same sentries, special details of police, sailors from the Garde Equipage, and members of the Cossack Konvoi Regiment who patrolled the palace grounds to ensure her safety also trapped her in this stifling universe. Such protections were unfortunate but necessary. The Russian throne was an unstable institution, the empire a place where discontent constantly threatened to erupt into violence. It had happened before, with unnerving frequency: Peter

the Great had his son and heir Alexei tortured to death; Catherine the Great came to the throne in a conspiracy that resulted in the murder of her husband, Peter III; and Paul I was killed by a group of aristocrats. And it was not just the distant past: in 1881, when the future Nicholas II was just twelve, he had stood at the bedside of his grandfather Tsar Alexander II, watching as he bled to death from a terrorist bomb; less than a quarter century later, Nicholas's uncle and brother-in-law Grand Duke Serge Alexandrovich was literally blown to pieces by revolutionaries. There had already been half a dozen unsuccessful attempts to assassinate Nicholas II by the time Anastasia turned ten. At times, violent strikes and unruly riots left the imperial family confined to their estates; even when they left this protective cocoon and traveled across the vast Russian Empire, they did so in a heavily armored train of royal blue carriages shadowed by a second, identical string of railway cars designed to confuse any would-be revolutionaries.[43] This terrible uncertainty became the leitmotif of Anastasia's fairy tale, an unseen yet very real danger that lurked just beneath the glittering surface of her privileged world.