The Lieutenant's Lover

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Extract

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To my beloved N.

'All shall be well
And all shall be well
And all manner of things shall be well.'
Mother Julian of Norwich

RUSSIA, 1917

ONE

1

Misha always remembered the moment.

Weeks of war had passed without fighting, just orders to advance, followed almost immediately by orders to retreat. And then one night, on another interminable journey in a troop train, it happened.

It was long past midnight. The train slowed and stopped. The little country platform filled with food vendors selling hot tea, boiled beef, rye pancakes. Misha clambered out to get some clean air and pace the stiffness out of his legs.

As he walked up and down, it began to snow. Small flakes at first, so light they hardly seemed to descend. But within minutes, the flakes had grown into big white feathers. They still seemed to fall so slowly that they

were hardly coming down at all, but the ground quickly spread with white. Misha liked the snow, and went on pacing just as before. All around, sounds became softer, rounded, muffled.

Then a new vendor came onto the platform with a bundle of papers. There was a sudden eddy of excitement, men shouting, commotion. And Misha was caught up in it. Acting by some automatic instinct, he'd reached in his pocket for a kopeck or two and snatched a newspaper from the pile. And there, under the lamplight and the falling snow, he had read the headline:

'BOLSHEVIKS SEIZE POWER IN PETROGRAD. WINTER PALACE STORMED.'

That was all. There was a full article beneath the headline, one part fact, three parts sensational speculation. But Misha didn't read a word of it. He didn't have to. He was the son of a wealthy industrialist and landowner, at a time when owning industry and land had become suddenly dangerous.

The Tsar was overthrown. The workers had taken over.

Misha knew that his world had changed, utterly and for ever.

2

Tonya too remembered the moment.

The water butt on the landing had been frozen over, but at this time of year the ice wasn't yet thick. A couple

of axe-blows was enough to break the surface, and she'd filled the enamel jug, feeling it grow suddenly heavy as the water rushed in. She carried it through to the apartment beyond the landing.

In the living room, a cast-iron stove leaked heat and smoke in equal measure. The room was dim. In the corner by the stove, a man sat and watched Tonya enter and shrug off the thick coat which she wore over her nurse's uniform.

'Not working, Father?'

He grinned, showing a mouth that held just four teeth, and not one of them a beauty. 'Why work? It's the revolution.' Pleased with his answer, he repeated the word, dragging it out, giving a final kick to the final syllable, *revolutsya*, *revolutsy-a*.

To begin with, Tonya had ignored him. There was the fire to stoke, water to boil, soup to make, her elderly grandmother, Babba Varvara, to care for. She didn't know what he was talking about, but then again as his excuses for not doing his job as a railwayman were innumerable, she didn't care much either.

But then the old man had nudged the table. There was a newspaper lying there. Tonya remembered picking it up almost angrily, irritated at the interruption. And there it was, in simple words, black on white. The Winter Palace was stormed. The Tsar was captured. The workers were in control.

For a moment, perhaps only a second, Tonya remembered thinking that this must be good news. She was a

worker, wasn't she? If their class was victorious, then things would get better wouldn't they? She looked back at her father, who grinned again. His mouth was like a black hole thumbed into the dark grey shadow of his face.

'*Revolutsy-a*,' he repeated, nastily. '*Revolutsy-a*.'

The word was ominous, and it sounded like death.

TWO

1

Misha had stood beneath the lamplight, reading and rereading that headline, ignoring the snow that fell continuously on his arms, head and neck. And then, after perhaps twenty minutes of shocked thought, he'd jerked his head up. It had become obvious that his time in the army was over, that it was his duty to desert, to seek out his family, to see that everyone was all right.

Nothing had been easier. He'd simply walked down the platform, away down the track out of the lamplight. He'd sheltered there in the bushes till the train whistled and moved off, taking his commander and fellow soldiers with it. When day had come, he'd wound a dirty bandage around his head and darkened it with blood from a dead pigeon. Going back to the railway station, he'd

barged and begged his way onto the first train that came along. It had taken three weeks to cross the country. He'd had to evade the military police, to bribe guards, to walk long distances wherever the train services had completely stopped working. But he'd done it. He'd come home to Petrograd, the city of his birth.

The family home, a big mansion on Kuletsky Prospekt, stood in front of him. At first glance, nothing had changed. The great sweep of steps was still there, the iron railings, the glittering expanse of windows. But something was wrong. The lanterns on either side of the front doors were unlit. A narrow pathway had been trampled through the snow on the steps, but the snow hadn't been cleared, nor had sand been scattered to avoid slips.

Feeling strange, as though in a dream, he approached his own front door and stepped inside. The moment that his foot crossed the threshold, he knew that the world, *his* world, had changed for ever.

The old house, once grand and silent, was aswarm with people. There were families, families of *workers*, in every room. The house was occupied and carved up like any tenement block. In the drawing room, where countesses had once danced, crude wooden partitions chopped the room into three. A stove burned smokily in the fireplace. A washing line hung over the marble mantelpiece. There were beds, and not even beds, mere piles of straw covered over with dirty sheets heaped up around the walls. Misha noticed a woman, dressed in black, grinning at him as she stirred a cooking pot.

Around her neck she wore what looked like a gigantic diamond, and he realised that the room's chandelier had disappeared, its crystal pendants stripped and scattered. He stared at her in shock, until she began to cackle. He walked abruptly on.

In every room, it was the same. It wasn't like a tenement block, it was worse. The great house had never been intended for more than a few occupants and its plumbing and drainage were overwhelmed. The stairway had become a urinal. Pails of faeces were slopped from windows or just left slowly freezing for the next person to deal with. The house rang with arguments, songs, whistles, babies howling, children yelling, neighbours bickering.

Misha entered every room in turn. Nobody stopped him or told him to leave. He recognised nobody. Nobody recognised him. No servant from the old days, no groom or footman, certainly not his father, mother or sisters. He felt gathering dread. On the ground floor, nothing. On the first floor, also nothing. The second and third floors were likewise empty of any trace of his family or staff. As he climbed to the fourth and final floor, a floor once reserved for servants, he was convinced of the worst.

At the top of the final flight of stairs, the corridor branched off in two directions. One corridor looked and smelled like everything else in the house: the same ill-dressed, chattering horde. The other corridor was different. Its mouth was blocked off by a makeshift barricade: a door torn from its hinges, behind it a wardrobe, an

ebony chest, a silk damask chaise longue, a card table, a bookcase. There was a gap barely big enough for a human to pass through. Misha stared at the ridiculous fortification in astonishment, and sudden joy. He put his hand to the torn-off door, knocked loudly and began to squeeze through.

He was just sucking in his belly to get past an awkwardly placed chair leg, when there was a sudden movement in the half-dark beyond. A hand grabbed him and yanked. He tumbled forwards. There was the click of a pistol being cocked and a shouted warning.

'Easy, easy,' said Misha, speaking as calmly as he was able.

Further on down the passage, a door swung open releasing some daylight into the gloom. Turning slowly, Misha looked up. The family's old coachman, Vitaly, recognised his master and pulled his pistol away in a flurry of apology. One of the ladies' maids had been standing behind Vitaly with an antique carbine. She too dropped her weapon.

'Mikhail Ivanovich! Mikhail Ivanovich!'

'Vitaly! Thank God. Mother, is she—?'

But he didn't have to finish. His mother, Emma Ernestovna, a woman of forty-two, but more stately, more queenly than her age, came rushing out. She was dressed as no one these days was dressed: a long gown in violet silk, fur-trimmed at the neckline.

'Misha, my boy!'

She ran to him, her hands out for him to kiss. He

kissed her as she wanted, then embraced her properly, kissing her on both cheeks. He didn't let go, but asked the questions that drummed inside him.

'Father? Natasha and Raisa? Yevgeny?'

Yevgeny, Misha's six-year-old brother, answered the last question by emerging from somewhere like a bullet and hugging his legs.

'Hello, Yevgeny. You've grown,' Misha said, hoisting him up.

His mother watched distractedly. 'Yevgeny, yes, he's here. Natasha and Raisa, bless them, in Switzerland – we think – it all depends on the trains – I haven't had a telegram – we should have had a telegram – what do you think? – Your sisters, really . . .'

'I'm sure they're fine. No telegrams would have come through anyway. And Father?'

'Your father?' She spoke the words as though struggling to remember someone she'd once known. 'He's very well. He's in Zhavalya. On business. Urgent business. He must have been detained. He's in Zhavalya. He must be. He wouldn't leave us here like this.'

Misha listened to his mother, hearing her words and not hearing them at the same time. Zhavalya was the family's country estate, about two thousand kilometres east of Moscow. But Misha knew his father wasn't there. He couldn't be. Not now, not in winter, now with revolution surging around the capital city and his family unprotected.

'In Zhavalya?' he said blankly.

But he didn't mean anything by his question. He knew

the answer. If his mother were telling herself this lie, then it could only mean that his father was dead. That the dominating industrialist, the man of business, his distant but not unkind father had been murdered. And in that same moment, literally from one moment to the next, Misha realised that his childhood was over. He had become a man, the head of the household.

Everyone now depended on him.

2

Pavel was gone.

Kiryl, Tonya's father, either didn't know where his son was, or more likely wouldn't say. But the boy was just fourteen and delicately built. Two winters ago, he had caught typhus, at the same time as their mother had died of it. He had survived, but only just and Tonya knew she couldn't let him wander the streets, out late and alone. She put on coat, hat, gloves and scarf.

'I'm going to look for Pavel,' she said. 'We can eat when I get back.'

'Comrade citizen Pavel, you mean,' said her father.

Tonya ignored him and hurried out. A thin snow was falling, but nothing substantial, just tiny round specks flung around in a piercing wind. Her father's last comment could have meant nothing at all, just another one of the old man's jokes, but it had possibly been intended as a clue. She hurried through the streets, feeling her breath beginning to freeze on the brim of her cap.

After walking for twenty minutes, she came to the intersection of Sadoyava Triumfalnaya and Sadoyava Karetnaya. There was a large building with a broad fanlight over a lighted porch. Outside there was a pile of logs, guarded by a soldier with a rifle.

'Is this where the meeting is?' she asked.

He nodded. 'Inside. It's been going two hours already.'

'Those logs . . . ?'

'. . . are red logs. For the Petrograd Soviet.'

The soldier might have meant his answer, or he might just be getting ready to haggle. Tonya thrust her hand in her pocket and brought out a lump of sugar as big as her fist. It was damp, grey and sticky, but good currency all the same.

'I've got sugar.'

The soldier shook his head. 'The logs belong to Comrade Lenin. You need to ask him.'

Tonya stuffed her sugar away, unbothered by the rejection. In this strange new world, money was no longer reliable. In a city where food and fuel were desperately short, Tonya now always carried something with her, in case she came across a good opportunity to trade. Most times she failed, sometimes she got lucky. It was just a question of being always ready to try.

She went on into the building. Down in the basement, there was a meeting of the Borough Housing Commission. At the front of the room, there was a kind of podium, planks stretched across wooden egg crates. The podium was dominated by a speaker, hatless and wearing an

unbuttoned leather jerkin. The man caught sight of Tonya as she entered. She knew he'd seen her, because his eyes fixed on her, but there was no change in his voice or posture. His presence commanded the room. He was strikingly good-looking with dark curly hair, worn short, and a lean, handsome, intelligent face. The only bad feature he possessed was a nose that had been badly broken. Though still narrow, it bent sharply where it had been struck.

The man, Rodyon Leonidovich Kornikov, was Tonya's cousin and a rising star in the new Bolshevik administration. He fixed his eyes on her, then directed his glance deliberately across the room, before bringing it back to her. He never stopped speaking for a second. His sentences came out perfectly, without mistake or hesitation. Tonya looked over to where the man had indicated. Pavel was there, his eyes shining unhealthily, his coat unbuttoned like the man on the platform. Tonya pushed her way across to him.

'Pavel! You'll freeze.'

The boy, a fourteen-year-old, began buttoning up almost as soon as he saw his sister, and he let her adjust his hat and scarf. But he still kept his eyes on the platform where Rodyon was winding up.

Tonya turned her attention from Pavel to her cousin. Rodyon spoke of the necessity of establishing revolutionary principles 'from the first winter on; from the worst slum outwards'. The broken nose in his perfect face served to draw attention to his handsomeness, adding something

mesmerising to his features. He finished speaking, to a scattering of applause.

Pavel turned to his sister.

'Wasn't he good? When I'm older—'

'When you're older you can go out on your own. Right now, you need to stay warm.'

Pavel shrugged. His eyes still shone as though fevered. Rodyon barged through the crowd towards them, stopping in front of Tonya.

'Comrade!'

'Rodya! It's all very well for you to march about like you don't feel the cold. You should think about Pavel. He copies you.'

'He will be a good citizen one day. Enthusiastic.'

'If he doesn't catch his death first.'

Rodyon smiled. He had perfect teeth, white and even.

'Well, comrade,' he said to Pavel. 'Your sister's right. You should stay warm too.'

The boy nodded.

'Are you all right for things? Food and everything?'

'We don't have any wood. We'll have nothing at all to burn by the end of the week.'

'You have your allocation of course?'

'If it comes. Last time there was nothing.'

'That can't be helped. You can't rebuild a house without knocking down a wall or two.'

'They're not walls. They're your precious comrade citizens.'

Rodyon smiled. He was an important man, the Housing Commissar of the Petrograd Soviet.

'I can't help you. Everyone's in the same situation.'

Tonya shrugged. She hadn't actually asked for help, but didn't say so.

'But if you want . . . Uncle Kiryl is still a thief, I suppose?'

Tonya nodded. Her father, Kiryl, worked on the railway and stole coal. An accomplice threw shovelfuls off the train as it entered the station. Kiryl collected the bits up in a sack and sold it on the black market. 'He only gets vodka and tobacco. He wouldn't even think of bringing the coal home.'

'But still, you have things to trade.'

'Yes.'

'Then come with me on my tour of inspection tomorrow. You never know what you'll find in these places once owned by the bourgeois.'

'Thank you.'

He shook his head. 'No thanks and no favours. When we have things running properly, you won't be short of logs.'

He held Tonya's eyes one last time. Rodyon was a long-time Bolshevik, with two spells in prison to his credit. His nose had been broken in a brawl with police and he was rising fast under the new regime. He had also, for the last two years, been paying careful court to Tonya. He had been constant and, in his way, generous, but Tonya never quite knew whether he was sincere. She

wasn't sure if she was his only girl, or if Rodyon would ever lose his heart to a woman. He seemed too self-possessed for that, too important.

She felt suddenly uncomfortable with him and looked away. But logs were logs, and if Rodyon could help her get some, then she would certainly do as he suggested.

'Till tomorrow then,' she said.

3

Misha made changes.

He made them fast, over the tears and protests of his mother and the servants. He began with the barricade at the mouth of the corridor.

'It has to come down. Now. You think the red militias will be stopped by a chaise longue and a couple of armchairs? Nonsense. It has to come down. Vitaly, come here. I want you to dismantle this thing. That horrible old wardrobe is no good for anything. We can use it for firewood. Those other pieces you can share out among the others.

'Next the windows. They're hopeless. They need fixing properly. We don't have any putty, of course. But how do you make putty? It's chalk and oil, isn't it? Linseed oil. I saw chalk in Yevgeny's room. We'll use that. Seraphima, do you know where we can get linseed oil? If we can't get the oil, ordinary flax seeds will do. We can press them for oil. And in the meantime, curtains.

Do we have any fabric? No? Then use the hanging in mother's room—'

'The tapestry, Misha! No! It's French, you know. Your grandmother—'

'It's thick and it's heavy. It'll do. Use the carpet too if you have to.'

And on it went.

The fireplaces were useless, so Misha stole some empty oil cans and turned them into stoves. He dismissed the servants. He exchanged the ebony chest for a sackful of millet flour, which would see them through winter. He made an inventory of their remaining valuables and concealed them beneath the floorboards.

But problems remained.

Firewood was the worst. They had terribly little, and decent firewood seemed almost impossible to obtain. And the next thing was his mother. She couldn't adjust to the new conditions. She was always sick with one thing or another. It wasn't just physical illness, it was a sickness that penetrated her soul. Misha was certain that if he couldn't find a way to get her into a place of safety, then she wouldn't survive. Yevgeny too was having his childhood stolen. It seemed clear that the best thing for all of them was to escape Russia, to make their way to Switzerland to join Natasha and Raisa there. But how to do that, with no money, no friends, no help . . . ?

It was as he was thinking about that precise problem one evening that inspiration came to him.

He had gone, as he had done often enough already,

over to the glass cabinet and taken out a bundle of papers: his father's papers that his mother had managed to salvage. He turned the papers in his hand. Although only a few months old, they seemed as ancient as Egyptian papyrus. Stock certificates. Title deeds. Bank statements. Holdings of land. Everything represented by those papers had been swept away, almost literally overnight. On the top of the pile, there was a coloured picture postcard of General Kutuzov, the victor of the Battle of Borodino a hundred years earlier and a particular hero of Misha's father. It was odd seeing the card. It was almost as though these stock certificates and the struggle against Napoleon both existed in the same far distant past.

But as well as certificates of ownership, the bundle contained letters from lawyers, accountants, brokers. And a persistent theme ran through them. From about February 1917, his father seemed to have started selling assets. Stocks, bonds, land, anything. There were no huge sales. The country was at war with Germany and Austria, after all. It would have been impossible to sell up completely, even if he had wanted to. But there was a steady stream of sales and yet no evidence from the bank statements that his savings accounts had increased by even a rouble. And yet there were hundreds of thousands of roubles involved. Though Misha had reviewed the papers a dozen times already, he was struck by a sudden thought.

'Mother? These papers. Where did you get them?'

'Oh, your father's study of course. Where else?'

'*Where* in his study? His desk? His cabinet?'

'Oh yes. His desk, the cabinet. Luckily we had the keys. But we had to work fast. One day, we had everything, the next it was a knock at the door and this horrible young man with a leather coat telling us about the new decrees.'

'You had the key. Who else?'

'Oh, your father, silly! How else could he have opened them?' Emma Ernestovna laughed out loud.

'His secretary, I suppose?'

'Leon? I suppose.'

'And how did you happen to have one? Did he give it to you?'

'Oh no, not me. Why should I have a key to his cabinet? Maria Fedorovna, the housekeeper, had a set of keys. That cabinet! Japanese lacquer. So nice, but the polishing!'

'Maria Fedorovna had a key, did she?'

Misha's mother said something in reply, but he was no longer listening. He felt a sudden shock of excitement. Because it was inconceivable that his father would have left his most important documents in a place where a servant could have access to them. It was almost as if the bundle that his mother rescued had been a decoy to draw attention away from the real ones. Misha jumped up.

'Excuse me.'

He ran out, down the corridor and downstairs. His father's study had been on the ground floor, behind the drawing room, a place of high bookshelves, cigar smoke, polished wood and leather. Of course, it wasn't like that

now. Two families had been allocated the room, and seemed to fight bitterly over the use of every square inch. A china pisspot tucked behind a curtain constituted the hygiene arrangements. A trail of slops led from there to the nearest window. But that wasn't what caught Misha's notice.

What caught his eye was a grey steel safe, bolted and cemented into the wall behind the panelling. The safe had only been exposed when the room's inhabitants had begun ripping up the panelling for firewood. The plaster around the safe had been smashed off. Misha could see the pale marks where sledgehammers had struck. But the safe had withstood the assault. Steel bars protruding from the side of the safe were deeply set into the masonry. Misha had never known of the safe's existence. Its sudden exposure reminded him of what his family must have been through in those first weeks of revolution, before his arrival home. No wonder his mother was in a state of collapse. Anyone would be.

He looked up, snapping himself out of this unhelpful change of thought. Both families, fourteen or fifteen people in all, were staring at Misha, grinning. They knew who he was, as did all the occupants of the house. An old man, a grandfather spat in the fireplace and cackled, 'Come to say goodbye, eh?'

'I'm looking for logs. You don't have any, do you?'

The old man wasn't deterred. He nodded back at the safe. 'They're coming to take it away next week. They're going to put a tractor in the yard out there, run chains

in through the window, then bang! Out it comes. It's full of gold, they say.'

'When are they coming?'

'Tuesday. Wednesday. Who knows?'

That gave Misha three days, maybe four. Except he didn't know the codes and he wasn't a safe-breaker.

4

Tonya went with Rodyon the next day.

The Petrograd Soviet had issued a stream of housing decrees, making bold statements about minimum space requirements, light requirements, heat requirements, water and sewerage requirements. It was Rodyon's job to see those decrees were implemented, or at least not wildly breached. All morning, Tonya watched him stride around his domain, backed by a flurry of lesser officials. And he did stride. He seemed to fly through his duties. Those with surplus space were reprimanded, spare rooms reallocated, disputes settled.

And, Tonya noticed, he was fair. He never victimised the rich. He dealt with them the same way as he dealt with everyone. And he lived by the standards that he set others. Like everyone else, he was thin and hungry, and Tonya could tell from his clothes that he slept in them for warmth.

All morning, they strode around. Tonya didn't find any opportunities for barter. She didn't know why she was here. She felt cross with Rodyon for wasting her day.