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By Rosemary Rogers

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Editorial Review

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The only one who could help Brianna Quinn is her guardian, Stefan Summerville, but his servants refuse to accept any of her letters. So when Brianna discovers Stefan will be attending one of London's notorious courtesan balls, she sets out to meet him there. Concerned about the series of "accidents" that seems to be plaguing his twin brother, Edmond Summerville has been impersonating Stefan to keep him safe. When Brianna mistakes him for Stefan at the ball, Edmond sees the perfect opportunity to test his theory that their cousin is trying to kill Stefan by convincing Brianna to become Stefan's new betrothed. The only thing that Edmond didn't factor into his plan was that he might fall in love with his faux fiancée. International intrigue in a plot against the Russian czar and a tempestuous romance between two equally stubborn protagonists are the primary ingredients in Rogers' latest vividly detailed, wildly passionate Regency romance. --John Charles

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Russia, 1820 Tzarskoye Selo

The journey from St. Petersburg to Tzarskoye Selo was hardly an arduous one during the short summer months when the roads were fair and the brisk breeze held a pleasant scent of wildflowers and rich earth.

Which was precisely why the Emperor had left the Summer Palace two days earlier, claiming that such fine weather was too fleeting not to enjoy a few days away from the pressures of Court.

Lately Alexander Pavlovich would use any excuse to flee his heavy duties, but so far as Lord Edmond Summerville was concerned, it was an Imperial pain in the ass.

Coming over the slight swell in the road, he turned his black charger on the path to Ekaterinsky, the larger of the two palaces that sprawled with a majestic beauty across the Russian countryside.

Catherine the Great's masterpiece was a stunning sight. Over a thousand yards long with narrow wings, it was three stories high and painted a bright blue that contrasted pleasantly with the five golden domes that marked the chapel. Along the front was a line of draped female figures that glowed with a gleaming bronze in the sunlight.

Edmond did not allow his hard pace to slow as he entered the courtyard through the gilded gateway to halt directly before the entrance.

His arrival brought a dozen footmen rushing forward, taking command of his mount and that of his outriders. As the younger son of a duke, Edmond was accustomed to the pomp and ceremony that surrounded royalty and barely noted the scurrying servants as he made his way up the marble stairs and stepped into the vast vestibule.

There he was met by one of Alexander's more trusted companions attired in a dark gold coat and striped waistcoat that would have been perfectly suitable in any London drawing room. European fashions were always preferred among Russian aristocracy.

Herrick Gerhardt was of Prussian descent and had arrived in St. Petersburg when he was barely seventeen. He possessed a gaunt countenance, a thick crop of silver hair, and piercing brown eyes that held a cold,

ruthless intelligence.

This was a man who did not suffer fools gladly and had made countless enemies among the Russian court for his brutal ability to see through their treacherous deceptions.

His love of his Emperor was unquestionable, but his talent at diplomacy was sadly lacking.

"Edmond, this is a most unexpected surprise," he said in the perfect French spoken by all the Russian nobles, his gaze searching Edmond's starkly chiseled features, the vivid blue eyes that were such a stunning contrast to his thick raven hair and arched brows, and the wide mouth that was missing his usual charming smile.

Despite being the son of an English duke, Edmond possessed the high Slavic cheekbones of his Russian mother, as well as her cleft chin, which had been driving women to distraction since he left the nursery. He also possessed a love for his mother's land that his elder twin brother would never comprehend.

Edmond offered a respectful nod of his head.

"I fear I must beg a few moments with the Emperor."

"Is there trouble?"

"Only of a personal nature." The restless fear that had plagued him since receiving his brother's latest missive clenched at his heart. "I must return to England without delay."

The older man stiffened, his thin face hardening with displeasure. "This is an ill time for you to leave the side of the Imperial Highness," he chided sternly. "It was assumed you were to travel with him to the Congress of Troppau."

"An unfortunate necessity, I fear."

"A great deal more than unfortunate. We both know that there is growing distrust of Metternich and his increasing influence on the Emperor. Your presence would assist in keeping the Prince at a distance."

Edmond shrugged, unable to feel any disappointment that he would be missing the conference of the Quadruple Alliance in Opava. For all his love of politics and intrigues, he despised the stifling formality of diplomatic gatherings. What could be more tedious than watching puffed-up dignitaries strutting about and pinning medals upon each others' chests?

Serious negotiations were best done behind closed doors and far from the public view.

The fact was that without Britain or France in attendance, the Congress was doomed from the beginning.

Not that he was about to mention his doubts in front of Gerhardt. The Emperor was set on this mission, and it was expected that his loyal subjects would cheer his strong determination to squash the revolution in Naples.

"I believe you overestimate my influence," he instead murmured.

"No, I am well aware you are one of the few confidants that Alexander Pavlovich still trusts." Gerhardt regarded Edmond with a fierce scowl. "You are in a rare position to assist your motherland."

"Your confidence in my meager skills is flattering, but your own presence with the Emperor will dampen the ambitions of Metternich far more than my own humble self."

A hint of frustration tightened Gerhardt's thin face. "I must remain here."

Edmond arched a brow. It was rare for the older man not to be at the side of his Emperor at such an important gathering.

"You suspect trouble?"

"So long as Akartcheyeff is left in charge of the country, there is always danger," he muttered, not bothering to hide his distaste of the man who had risen to such lofty ranks despite his lowly birth. "His devotion to his Emperor is beyond question, but he will never learn that you cannot use force to earn loyalty. There is a powder keg beneath our feet and Akartcheyeff might very well be the spark that ignites disaster."

Edmond could hardly deny the danger. He, better than anyone, understood the smoldering dissatisfaction with the Czar that infected not only the masses, but several aristocrats as well.

The last thing he desired was to leave during this volatile time, but there was no choice.

"He is...unfortunately brutal in his dealings with others," Edmond admitted, "but he is one of the few Ministers who have proven his integrity cannot be swayed."

Stepping even closer, Gerhardt pitched his voice so it would not carry to the two footmen on duty beside the door.

"Which is why it is so important that you remain at Alexander Pavlovich's side! Not only do you have the ear of the Emperor, but your...network will learn of any dangers long before any official report is put on my desk."

Gerhardt's delicate mention of the web of thieves, prostitutes, foreigners, sailors and more than a few nobles brought a smile to his lips. Over the past eight years, he had managed to create a connection of spies that kept him aware of brewing trouble the moment it began to stir.

It was an invaluable asset to Alexander Pavlovich. One that he had come to rely upon, as did those who considered it their duty to keep him safe.

"I will ensure that my associates keep in close contact with you," he promised, his expression somber, "but I cannot postpone my return to England."

Realizing that Edmond would not be swayed, Gerhardt stepped back, his brow furrowed with concern.

"Should I offer my sympathies?"

"Not if I can prevent it, my friend."

"Then God go with you."

With a bow, Edmond turned and with swift steps headed toward the Main Staircase, a magnificent work of marble that towered for three stories. For most guests to the Palace it was the extensive collection of Chinese porcelain vases and plates displayed along the walls that captured their attention, but Edmond had always been captivated by the warm glow of sunlight that was reflected in the rich marble. A true architect could breathe life into a building without the fuss of ornamentation.

From there he moved through the Portrait Hall where the painting of Empress Catherine I held a fitting place

of glory amid the seeming endless gilded carvings, then through another hall, to at last reach Alexander Pavlovich's private study.

In contrast to the lavish public rooms, Alexander had chosen a chamber that was refreshingly small and comfortable with a view of the beautiful gardens. Ignoring the guards who stood at impassive attendance, Edmond entered the room and performed a deep bow.

"Sire."

Seated behind the rigidly tidy desk, Alexander Pavlovich, Imperial Highness, Emperor Czar, lifted his head and offered that singularly sweet smile that never failed to remind a person of an angel.

"Edmond, join me," Alexander commanded in French.

With his Hessians clicking against the inlaid wooden floor, Edmond moved to settle his tall, lithely chiseled form in one of the mahogany carved and gilded wood chairs, his gaze covertly studying the man who had earned his unwavering love and loyalty since the battles against Napoleon in 1812.

The Emperor possessed the imposing form of his Russian ancestors that had grown a bit stout over the passing years, and the fine, even lines of his mother's countenance. The golden hair had receded, but the blue eyes remained as clear and intelligent as in his youth.

It was the air of weary melancholy, however, that Edmond silently considered. It was growing worse. With every passing year, the once eager, impractical idealist determined to alter Russian's future was becoming a defeated, withdrawn man who was riddled with such distrust, of himself and others, that he retreated more and more from the Court.

"Forgive me for my intrusion," Edmond began gently.

"There are many who I consider an intrusion, but never you, my friend." He waved a hand to the ever-present tray on his desk. "Tea?"

"Thank you, no, I do not desire to keep you from your work."

"Always work. Work and duty." Alexander heaved a sigh, precisely laying down his quill before leaning back in his chair. Like his father, Czar Paul, Alexander possessed a preference for a simple, military-style attire, relieved only by his Cross of St. George. "There are nights I dream of simply walking away from this palace and disappearing among the mobs."

"Responsibility always comes with a heavy price," Edmond readily agreed. There had been more than one night he had dreamed of becoming lost among the crowds. A simple, uncomplicated existence was a rare gift that few appreciated as they should.

"A ...

Users Review

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Kara Corbett:

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