

St. Catherine's Crown

Excerpt

Ipatiev House, Ekaterinburg, Siberia, 17 July 1918

The family rushes to dress and pack a few personal belongings. "Put on your blue dress," Alexandra whispers to Anastasia as they pass in the upstairs hallway. When the family arrives in the cellar, the sergeant tells them that their transportation will arrive shortly. A Cheka guard brings a chair for the Empress. For a moment, Alexandra's heart fills with hope. If the Czech Legion and White Army are so near, rescue might be imminent. Soon they might all be free, on their way to England. She was right, she thinks, not to send Anastasia away on her own. Now the family will be together. She puts an arm around her youngest daughter's waist. Thanks be to God.

Suddenly a squad of Cheka soldiers with their rifles at port arms marches single file and at double time into the cellar. After the last soldier is in position, the first sergeant commands, "Squad, halt! Right face." The soldiers turn to face the Romanovs. After a moment, the sergeant shouts, "Squad, ah-ten-hut!" The sound of rifle butts hitting the concrete floor reverberates throughout the cellar.

Several minutes later, Major Vasili Yurovsky enters. He is the senior Cheka officer in the area. He wears the summer grey short-sleeved tunic uniform with red piping and his major's pips on the shoulder boards.

"Present. Arms!" commands the first sergeant.

The soldiers bring their rifles to the present-arms position to salute their commanding officer.

In return, Major Yurovsky returns a snappy hand salute.

The Czarevich giggles in delight at the military prompt.

However, fear and concern race through the rest of the Romanov family. Alexandra knows exactly what is happening. The Czar, Anastasia, and her three sisters wonder what this military demonstration has to do with their rescue by the Whites or the Czech Legion.

"Order arms!" commands the sergeant. The soldiers return their rifles to their right side. The pounding of the rifle butts hitting the concrete floor sends chills through the Romanovs, causing them to wonder what is happening.

Yurovsky orders Alexandra to stand. The indignity of this crass Bolshevik officer ordering the Empress of All the Russias to comply with his command is unthinkable. She stares with smoldering hostility at Yurovsky. But, no longer enjoying the resources of royal status, she complies. After a moment or two she slowly moves a few paces to her left, next to Anastasia.

With his arms akimbo, Yurovsky walks down the line of the imperial family. He stops in front of each person and looks intently into their eyes. All but the Empress turn away from him. Summoning all her courage, she returns her most imperious glower of disdain. He smiles faintly at her feeble attempt at bravado.

The Czarevich is dressed in his sailor uniform. Maintaining proper military protocol, he salutes Yurovsky. The major stares at him contemptuously and does not return the salute.

This military display does not look like a rescue to the four daughters. Extreme apprehension engulfs Maria and Tatiana. Unsure of what is happening and fearing the worst, they cannot control their fear and sob softly.

Major Yurovsky turns to the first sergeant and snaps, "On my orders!"

"As you say. Sir!"

Yurovsky moves to the cement steps and climbs three. "Port arms!" he shouts. He surveys the scene to ensure that the Romanovs are positioned correctly and that his soldiers are ready.

Satisfied that the staging is correct, Yurovsky commands, "Fix bayonets!"

There is a loud clanging of metal as the soldiers snap their bayonets onto their rifles.

Anastasia now understands with crystal clarity the task that her mother assigned to her so long ago. They are not going to be rescued, and she and her family are going to be murdered by the Bolshheviks. An overwhelming fear of death engulfs her. Her family is in this cellar for an execution. She fights to be brave and to hold back her tears. Her mother cannot help her.

“Load!” The soldiers pull back the bolts of their rifles, then jam the bolts forward, loading a round into the rifles’ chambers. The metal-on-metal clicking sends a vibration of horror through the cellar.

The other three daughters begin to sob and make the sign of the cross as they realize their fate is death. Alexandra commands, “Be brave. You are Romanovs. Saint Nicholas will guide you.”

The Czar has been standing silently, as if he were in a dream. Aroused by the loud clicking of metal, he exclaims, “What!”

“Aim!” The riflemen select the nearest target.

The Romanovs see the loaded rifles with bayonets pointed at them. Their fate is all too clear.

Cries. Screams.

“Fire!”