

ANNA

A Biographical Novel of Lev Tolstoy

by John Struloeff

Chapter 1

The engine shed in Yassenki was a low, gray building made of slatboard next to the rail line. A set of tracks emerged from beneath the door and angled onto the main set that led north. The door was slightly ajar. Several lines of footprints in the snow led across the tracks and to the doorway. Lev tied off his horse and followed the prints to the open doorway.

A police inspector and two men in business suits stood near a make-shift table in the center of the room where a figure lay draped in a white sheet. Above their heads hung a lamp burning brightly to illuminate their faces in the dark shed. Dark smears of blood stained the sheet from beneath. The form of the body beneath the sheet was misshapen, as if two women lay together.

A fourth man, a doctor named Andreev, was unloading utensils from his bag, laying them in a row beside the covered head. He had examined Lev on several occasions for minor ailments, although the two men did not know each other well.

Lev's shoe scuffed on the gravel, and all four men looked at him, startled.

"Count Tolstoy," the policeman said.

"I hope you are well today," Lev answered and stepped up next to him. "Gentlemen," he said to the others. They each bowed their heads slightly, but this was an unusual circumstance, and so they added nothing more.

Both of the two men in suits were holding notepads and pencils. Lev recognized one of the two as a journalist who occasionally worked in Tula. The other man appeared to be the doctor's assistant. Lev withdrew his own notebook from his pocket and marked the date: *January 4, 1872*.

The doctor gripped the top of the sheet.

"Ready," he said in a quiet voice.

He drew the sheet down to expose the woman's head and neck. The right side of her head was missing, severed in an almost clean line, leaving her nose intact. She was a young looking woman with black hair and delicate features. Gray and purple tissues hung like a fringe where her cheek and eye were missing. Her hair was tousled and drawn around to the right, matted with her blood and the damp mix of brain matter and other tissues. A smooth, round span of blackened blood the size of a dinner plate lay next to her head. Her eyelid was partially open, exposing a green iris. Her skin was pale and translucent, a blue hue beneath her cheek.

"The woman has been identified as Anna Stepanova Pirogova," the doctor continued. He took a metal prong and inserted it into the exposed areas of the inner flesh of her face, touching section of bone, examining cavities. Then he held her head gently with both hands and shifted it to the side to better examine the uninjured sections of her face and neck. "There appear to be no other injuries to her head and neck but the damage inflicted by the crushing force of the wheels."

Pencils from the other men scratched on their notepads.

The doctor drew the sheet farther down. The woman still wore her dress, which was mostly black with patches of burgundy. She was clearly a woman of high society, but now with her head crushed, her womb flattened.

The doctor withdrew the sheet and folded it at her feet.

With a pair of scissors, he cut down the center of her dress, drawing the fabric aside, exposing her collarbones housed beneath waxen skin, then her breasts, the areoles brown and firm, her upper ribs, the cage of bones suspending the slightly deflated skin. Her lower ribs were crushed flat, and as the doctor cut the fabric down her lower abdomen, the skin frayed to an end, so that only stretched entrails, grayish blue, were connecting her body to her legs. Both legs, while spotted with small bruises, appeared whole and healthy.

Her pubic area appeared to be missing, disintegrated by the weight of the wheels.

At this point, the doctor cut her chest open, and after a bit of labor, which brought beads of sweat to his temple, removed her heart. He held it in his hand like a large egg.

"The heart appears to be of average weight. The tissue appears healthy."

He cut farther down her abdomen, peeling back the wet flesh. The other organs for which he searched were missing.

Lev's hand shook as he jotted these details. He didn't know what to write down. A pressure had grown in his throat, as if someone were squeezing it.

"I see no reason to suspect this is anything but a suicide," the doctor continued. "There is no violence except that which was caused by the train. Her body is healthy, and she is young. Thirty-two, is it?"

"Thirty-five," his assistant corrected him, still scribbling notes.

The other men, including Lev, stood awkwardly. It had been more than a decade since Lev had had a death in his family. Years more since he'd seen the sickening violence of a battlefield. Down to his core he felt cold.

He returned home. His wife, Sonya, was sitting at the dining table with their oldest son, Sergey, flipping through a picture book. For a time, Lev said nothing. He filled a cup of tea from the samovar and sat at the far end of the table, sipping the hot liquid. The image of Anna lay on the table before him, and he sat staring at her.

"Dear?" Sonya said. She knew where he had gone.

Lev looked at his son, who was still reading the story amusedly. This was not the time to describe a gruesome scene.

"I'm not hungry," he said, answering a question she hadn't asked. "Soup will be enough."

"Are you ill?"

"I suppose I feel something coming on," he said.

He rose and walked down the stairs to his study.

Notebooks and tomes were stacked on his desk. He set his tea cup on a silver plate and sat down in the half-darkness. He looked beyond the books, through the glass doors of his balcony, down the row of birch trees that lined his drive and farther to the village on the distant hill. The sky had the dull, gray look of winter. The cold that had settled into his body at the autopsy was still chilling him. He tried to shake the memory. He massaged the areas above his ears where he believed memory lay, and it only slightly calmed his inner tension.

In the past weeks he had been sketching dresses from the time of Peter the Great, and he pulled these papers from their folder and began flipping through them to distract his thoughts. He had drawn the dresses onto women dancing, sometimes with men in uniform, sometimes alone. Most could have been scenes from *War and Peace*, their dresses a century older but not startlingly different. And now it was another fifty years later, and still, little had changed. He took his fingertip and touched the paper, tracing the shallow grooves he'd made with his pencil, trying to understand the fullness of the dresses, the delicacy of the lace on the cuffs, the taut lines along the chest.

He emerged from this other world only when the cook's wife came to get him for dinner. The dining room, just above his study, was in the new wing of the house, built with their recent wealth from the publication of *War and Peace*. The new dining table, which seated twenty, was half full that night, yet still crowded – his wife, his four oldest children, his old aunt's companion, Natalya Petrovna. The fifth child, Marya, was just under a year old. She was in a distant room with the children's nurse, Hannah, awaiting Sonya's breast. Still other servants were eating in other rooms.

Everyone but Lev was chatty, telling stories, asking for food to be passed, Sonya chastising Ilya for not eating his carrots, Natalya Petrovna reminding their girl, Tanya, to drink enough water with her bread. Lev noticed Sonya looking at him. He could only offer her tired glances from under his brows.

He held his tongue through dinner. After the meal was finished and a few sips of tea drunk, he gave hugs to his children, kissed old Natalya's cheek, and went to his study to dress in his night clothes while Sonya offered her breast to little Marya. After a time, he went up the stairs and to their room.

A lamp was lit. She was seated at her bureau in front of the mirror when he entered their bedroom. Her deep brown hair, released from its tight bindings, shimmered like chestnut in the light. She brushed it softly and watched him cross the room to their bed. She was pregnant again. They had come to the conclusion of her pregnancy together, not more than two weeks before. Her monthly bleeding had dried up, and she had grown sensitive to the smell of pork, vomiting several times. Her nipples had changed hue, as well, darkening slightly. The fetus was likely three or four months old.

Lev lay back on the bed where he could smell the scent of her hair on her pillow. She expected the story from him. When he had left earlier they had both only heard the rumors of what transpired.

"I couldn't recognize her," he said. "She could have been any woman I had seen five minutes before on the street."

Sonya looked at herself in the mirror, drawing the brush through her hair. "But you've seen her many times."

"She was terribly mutilated."

The steady strokes of her brush stopped.

"Are they sure it was her?" she asked.

"Bibikov's footman identified her. She had sent a note with him before she died. He recognized her clothing."

"Was Bibikov there?" she asked.

He could see half of her face reflected in the mirror, and she looked down, not meeting his gaze.

"No," he said.

"Why?" she asked. "Why wouldn't he see her?"

He closed his eyes, envisioning Anna running from Bibikov's house into the snow, distraught at his betrayal, carrying her small bundle of clothes. "He had fallen in love with a new woman."

"With whom?"

"I don't know," he said. "But now he wants to marry her."

"Marry her!" Sonya said. She looked directly through the mirror into his eyes.

"I haven't spoken with him in months. It was last summer, and only in passing. I only know about his plans from something the police inspector said. He hadn't mentioned this woman the last time we spoke."

"Was he involved with what Anna did?" she asked.

"No," he said. "She was alone."

Sonya finished brushing her hair and then rose and came to the bed to lie next to him. Her body was warm against his side. She smoothed his hair with her palm. He saw again the sheet being pulled back from Anna's face, the blue-white patches of skin.

She set her hand on his chest and then lay her head on his shoulder. "Your heart is pounding," she said.

Down the hall, one of their children began crying. Sonya moved, as if to get up. There were footsteps, the squeak of a door as the nurse went into their room. The crying grew louder, then softened. It was young Leo, two years old, who had begun to have nightmares and would often awaken now shortly after falling asleep. Sonya shifted back, and they lay quietly for a time, feeling each other's warmth.

She turned her head to look at him. "How did she die?"

He turned to meet her gaze and saw the lamp reflecting its bright fire in her eyes.

"She threw herself under a train."