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The Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Peter the Great*, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, and *The Romanovs* returns with another masterpiece of narrative biography, the extraordinary story of an obscure young German princess who traveled to Russia at fourteen and rose to become one of the most remarkable, powerful, and captivating women in history. Born into a minor noble family, Catherine transformed herself into Empress of Russia by sheer determination. Possessing a brilliant mind and an insatiable curiosity as a young woman, she devoured the works of Enlightenment philosophers and, when she reached the throne, attempted to use their principles to guide her rule of the vast and backward Russian empire. She knew or corresponded with the preeminent historical figures of her time: Voltaire, Diderot, Frederick the Great, Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, Marie Antoinette, and, surprisingly, the American naval hero, John Paul Jones. Reaching the throne fired by Enlightenment philosophy and determined to become the embodiment of the "benevolent despot" idealized by Montesquieu, she found herself always contending with the deeply ingrained realities of Russian life, including serfdom. She persevered, and for thirty-four years the government, foreign policy, cultural development, and welfare of the Russian people were in her hands. She dealt with domestic rebellion, foreign wars, and the tidal wave of political change and violence churned up by the French Revolution that swept across Europe. Her reputation depended entirely on the perspective of the speaker. She was praised by Voltaire as the equal of the greatest of classical philosophers; she was condemned by her enemies, mostly foreign, as "the Messalina of the north."

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