Deleted from UIL 1/29/04

Saturday, 9/20

Three hundred miles away and six thousand feet up in the Sierra, Nina stayed up too late playing with Matt and Andrea's new baby, June, then couldn't sleep because of the wrestling match she was undergoing in her heart. Nothing instilled more hope, fear, and confusion in a woman galloping toward middle-age, with one almost grown child, than the damp, delicious smell of an infant. The next day, Saturday, on the late side of the morning, she and Bob set off to visit her old office at the Starlake Building.

"Did you rent it out, or what?" Bob asked as they headed down Al Tahoe toward South Lake Tahoe Boulevard. They were on the California side of town, away from the Stateline gaming clubs, and with summer gone and winter not here, the tourists had gone home. Which was loopy, because the aspen had begun their annual change of clothes into bright oranges and pinks; the air was clean as a Brillo pad, and the motels were offering lodging at half-price.

"I made a deal with another lawyer to finish up some business for me in return for a short lease."

"Oh. Until when--December?"

"Actually, she has it until January."

"We can't come back until after Christmas?"

She didn't know how to answer the question. Sure, they could come back. She could help the nice lady who was using her offices find other suitable digs. They could move back to the cabin, leave Paul behind. Bring him along. Anything was possible.

"Speaking of Christmas," she said, even though they

had not been, “what do you think you want this year?”

Now here was a tantalizing topic with a more than desultory appeal. Bob had a hundred ideas. They studied possiblities all the way to the parking lot behind her building.

“Want to come in?” she asked.

“Is anyone there?”

“Probably not,” she said, “because it’s the weekend, but I have a key. I’m just doing a quick check. Got to make sure the lady hasn’t made too many changes.”

He fired up his iPod and installed headphones over his ears. “I’ve seen it.”

She went through the outside door across from the old amusement park and knocked. Nobody answered. Her key worked fine. Inside, the familiar tilted. Sandy’s Washoe Indian baskets had been replaced by modern art prints and a few small movie posters. Otherwise, the place remained theirs but not theirs. Immaculate and organized, the offices felt weird. She no longer knew many of the files locked into the cabinets by her desk, she thought, walking through the door to her inner sanctum. The sun gleamed off the distant lake as she peeked through the closed blinds. Evidently Carly Ann Moffatt preferred keeping them shut.

She hated the quiet, controlled peace of the place. She felt emotionally destabilized, seeing it.

Shoot.

Locking the door behind her, she wished she hadn’t come.

Bob was happy to hear the car start. They drove on to their cabin on Kulow Street, off Pioneer Trail.

Four decrepit vehicles lined the street in front, and down the steep driveway, another one listed left.

Bob, excited up to the point where they arrived on the

street and saw their old home surrounded by this junk, said, “Uh, oh.” Hitchcock, delighted to find himself on familiar ground, demanded an immediate walk. Ominously quiet now, Bob offered to take him and set off running down the street without waiting for her permission. She knew where they were going without asking. They were going to their favorite place in the forest, Big Rock, where she had brought him since he was a toddler to play in the pine needles and climb on the granite.

Nina knocked on the door.

An overfed man answered, a spider tattooed on his temple. He wore a sleeveless undershirt of the type known as “wifebeaters” and rumpled boxers. She couldn’t find anywhere to look at him that didn’t seem obscenely intimate. Her eyes settled finally on his midsection, also overexposed, which featured intertwined, writhing serpents in green and red.

She wondered why he needed to advertise his toughness, then remembered Andrea saying he had been in prison. She supposed it paid to look hard in prison. But this look limited him permanently, placing him squarely outside of the mainstream. How would he work? Who would hire him?

She would not. She would never trust a man who showed snakes squirming on his stomach.

And what the hell was he doing there? The wife was supposed to be hiding out from him at Nina’s, according to Andrea.

Andrea, who worked part-time at the women’s shelter in town, had arranged for Grace and her four children to stay in Nina’s house while Nina was away because the shelter couldn’t accommodate such a large family for long. Grace had told Andrea she needed a place to hide while she figured out how to rid herself of Tattoo. Apparently, like many women, she was not ready or able to disentangle

herself from her husband easily.

Was she okay?

"Yeah?" he said. I'm going to have to speak to her and make sure, Nina thought.

"Um."

"Yeah?"

"This . . . is my house!" she blurted.

"Yeah? You're the owner?"

"Yes."

He opened the door wide. "Well come the hell in!" he said, with a great big smile. "I'll just bet you Grace has something good boiling." In the background, louder as he opened the door, a children's television show blared.

Suddenly extremely nervous, Nina hesitated. "I'm just here to pick up a few things we have stored in the room below the deck."

"The storage room?"

Grace appeared, as graceful as you could be under circumstances where you never got a decent haircut, where you were poor, where you were beaten by a bastard. She had babyspit on her shoulder and an eggy diaper tucked into her waistband. In the background, someone cried.

She had once been a pretty woman, Nina decided, examining Grace's face, but she wasn't pretty today. She hunched like someone unwell or incredibly aged. With one hand, she pulled her hair down around her red and blue face, as if she could hide the damage. "Oh, hi, how are you. Andrea said you might stop in. I hate telling you this," she said.

"We were ripped off!" said Tattoo, who had no such qualms. "We came back one night kinda late. You know, spent some time at the casinos, makin' up." He nuzzled Grace, who shied away from his touch. "I guess you know Grace was, uh, mixed up with the weirdos at that damned

shelter."

Grace continued her policy of looking ill. Nina just felt it.

"Well, the good news is, we're back together now. Everything's going great. Bad news is, some asswipes ripped us off."

"I just hoped to pick up a few things." Nina backed away from the door and down the porch. She didn't want to go into the house. Followed closely by Tattoo, she walked down the driveway to the backyard area below the deck, where, in June, she and Bob had carefully stowed all the important things they could not do without.

"It's a damn shame," Tattoo said. "Lock broke and stuff."

"When did this happen?" Nina asked.

"Coupla weeks ago. Maybe two."

"You called the police?"

"Don't make me laugh," said Tattoo. "Why should they give a goddamn about a skateboard and bunch of cheapskate mementos?" Seeing her face, he added, "No offense. It's just, whoever broke in didn't make so much on the deal. A lotta risk for not much return, if you get what I'm saying."

Nina ducked under the deck and reached the door to the storage area, heartbroken. Sure enough, she found the lock lying on the ground, open, the door hanging open, and, inside, the contents of their boxes looted or strewn on the ratproofing.

"Well, shit," she said under her breath. Tattoo hadn't bothered to duck in. He knew damn well there was nothing to look at.

Her first thought was, she could never tell Andrea about the robbery.

Nina did have to tell Andrea about Tattoo's brutal

reappearance in Grace's life. Meanwhile, she repacked the boxes with what was left and got him to take them up to the car, a task he cheerfully undertook, chatting all the time. Trudging back up the driveway, past the dilapidated car in the driveway, which was on concrete blocks, with loose tires propped against the side of the house, and past the home she so loved, she tried to figure out how to tell Bob. She could only hope Tattoo had made enough money to give his wife and kids a decent meal or two.

Funny how much losing stuff hurt. It was only stuff. Memories, yes, her mother's things, yes, those things were irreplaceable, but on the whole, what had they lost? They had stored no diamonds. Bob's skateboard was gone, along with his electric bass, his CD player, and much of his music collection, all of it probably sold for a fraction of its value. Her small collection of French and German pitchers was gone. The tablecloths she had inherited from her mother, custom crochets, they had not survived the purge.

Tattoo probably got a few bucks for each of those beautiful, intricate designs.

But the photo albums were intact, only a little the worse for lying on the dank concrete. Her favorite comforter, Bob's old stuffies, those made it. Bob's collection of rare music that would have been impossible to reproduce because it didn't fit popular taste, had been undisturbed.

She wouldn't mind so much, she thought, Tattoo bringing up the rear as she stuffed the car, looking down the street for her son and her dog, if Grace and her children were all right.

But they were not.

"Asswipes!" Tattoo repeated, practically pushing her into the Bronco, his deep-set eyes glittering. "You

wouldn't think it could happen in this neighborhood."

Only if you passed the key along, Nina thought. Only if you abandoned your home, and let strangers in, and tried to help. Nina started to roll up the window, when Tattoo suddenly said, "Ma'am?"

"Yes?"

"I didn't have nothing to do with your stuff getting stolen. I'm sorry about that."

"Whatever." She clicked the electric button again, but he wasn't finished.

"I love her. We're working things out. Please don't kick us out. I know that's what you're thinking. We don't have anywhere to go."

"What about her black eye?"

"I never touched her. Honest. I don't do that. I'm in Anger Counseling."

"The condition for letting Grace and the kids stay there was that you wouldn't be there."

"I'm a man, so I can't be broke, I can't be hungry, I can't need help and company? Grace is fine with having me here. My kids miss me. If she's fine with it, why don't you just leave us alone. We'll work out some rent thing."

"It's not going to happen," Nina said. "You have two weeks. I'm sorry."

"Bitch!" He flipped her off, then turned his back on her and marched back across the little yard toward the porch. From the back he was just another vulnerable human being, his hair thin on top, his baggy underwear comical, his calves skinny.

She found Bob at the end of the street, sweating from his exertions. When he saw the back seat full of boxes, he and Hitchcock climbed into the front seat together, never asking her anything. She told him little. They left immediately, stopping only to buy him a new skateboard.

Bob didn’t even seem to care. He was sliding into a depression from seeing his old neighborhood and his cousins. Because of her negligence, his treasured bass had been stolen. She patted his hand as she drove. Regret grew like a sad garden in her.

Christina's Story

St. Petersburg, Russia, 2001

They met in St. Petersburg on the banks of the Neva River, close to the Peter and Paul Fortress, three of them, on a cold January day. Although they knew each other and had met in secret for years through letters, computer correspondence, and phone calls, they greeted each other only by their first names and their patronymics, the long habit of security being impossible to break. Sergey Andreovich, Ilya and Viktor had grown up in a Russia that watched and listened, and they hadn't yet forgotten the lessons of their history.

"You're late," Viktor Vladimirovich said to Sergey, leaning against the wall that overlooked the glassy, frigid river, his full lips pursed into a what appeared to be a permanent smirk. He wore a gray wool scarf over his head to guard against the wind, and Sergey noticed the

chic reptile-hide boots with points so sharp they looked like they had walked straight from Italy and onto his feet. He came from one of the oldest moneyed families in St. Petersburg. The family's fortune, weak for decades, had surged upwards recently, ballooning like a street party with free booze, drunk on crooked deals with the new government, deals forged by Viktor. "Who do you think you are, keeping us waiting?"

"Viktor, relax," Ilya Pavelovich, Sergey's close friend, said firmly. Tall and younger than Viktor, more aristocrat than merchant, he was in his thirties. He wore a black topcoat buttoned shut over jeans and a pair of trainers. His family could claim connections back to Nicholas II, and now ran the largest media conglomerate in all the Russias, a deal made during an auction in the nineties involving crooked banks, bribed government officials and the tacit acceptance of a beaten-down populace.

"Do you think I'm late to annoy you?" Sergey asked Viktor, "What is fifteen minutes? Why not greet me in the usual way?"

"Zdravstvuetye," said Viktor, taking Sergey's rough hand between his two lotioned ones. "I forgive you."

A kiss along with a slap, so Viktor. Ilya kissed him, greeting him with real warmth. Sergey smiled at Ilya but not Viktor. Younger than Ilya by three years, he was

thirty-four. Tall, slim, with dark hair that didn't lie flat and Slavic planes to his face, he had such deep-set blue eyes that his schoolmates had called him "Rasputin." He had come to stomp his freezing feet and listen in a place that held no microphones. "A business proposition," Ilya had said. Their fathers had done business together before, business that was never shown on any books.

Their families had taken advantage of the rule of law during the changeover to privatization, which meant that, as favorites with money to "invest" they now owned a large chunk of the former union's reserves of oil, coal and natural gas. They might not have the class or tradition behind them, but they didn't give a damn about that. When the Soviet parade dissolved, they darted down like those birds, collecting fish while they were still abundant.

Now, they had money and power. And they were determined to gain even more.

Ilya, trained as a lawyer, maintained an airy diffidence about money and pretended to be above low wrangling, but when it came to making money or losing it, or gaining power, or a foothold in powerful places, he would do anything. In spite of the tightness of the communist grip, Ilya had traveled widely in his business. Connected, although not sympathetic, to Gorbachev, and later tight with Yeltsin, he had seen the beauties of Paris and the big money flash of New York. He wanted to

see it here, in St. Petersburg, his city.

Viktor prided himself in grubbing in any low place that might prove advantageous to him personally, to his family, or to his cronies. He would do anything, sometimes too conspicuously. A risk taker, Sergey's father had warned, someone to treat with care.

And Sergey--Sergey was just getting started in life. He still wasn't sure what to make of it. Afghanistan had taught him a lot about death, though, and survival.

A few brave birds flew close to the streaked-gray water, and the three watched uneasily, Viktor not ready to talk. He pulled out a silver flask and offered it around, then dumped some vodka down his throat, taking a sniff of his coat sleeve as a finish.

"I wish we didn't have to involve you," he said finally, pulling a gold-tipped cigarette from an embroidered case. Balding, as thin as the reeds that clogged the banks of the river in the summertime, forty-two going on sixty, he smoked incessantly, and when he wasn't smoking, he was coughing. How can he walk in those boots, Sergey thought, and wondered for the hundredth time if Viktor was homosexual.

"Sergey has the connections," Ilya said impatiently. The cold had brought out the high color of the old nobility in his cheeks. It was a wonder his family hadn't been thoroughly wiped out in the purges of the thirties.

“Without him, we have nothing.”

“A good position for me,” Sergey said.

“I’m not sure about you,” Viktor said. “Your family may have background but you are nothing but a soldier. This work requires sophistication. Cunning.”

“What choice do we have?” Ilya intervened. “Sergey was educated in the U. S. He speaks English like a native, and we don’t. Besides you’re a desk man, Viktor. You go no farther than that damned dacha you brag about.”

Sergey sat down on the wall that hung over the river and looked all the way up it until he could see no more. “These are interesting times,” he said. “Did you know that’s a curse in some places? ‘May you live in interesting times.’”

Their expressions told him they didn’t.

“Now what’s this plan you’ve cooked up between you? It’s starting to snow again and we are looking rather obvious out here.”

“At a family dinner recently, a Viennese couple related an amazing story about Tsar Nicholas II and his family.” Ilya said.

“Yes, yes,” Sergey said. “You know my mother was a cousin. I grew up on these tales.”

“Something to hide,” Viktor said. “It’s disreputable, being a Romanov.”

“It doesn’t seem to matter much anymore,” Sergey said.

“With the communists out of power, and Putin’s people running Parliament, nobody cares about the Romanovs. They belong to the past.”

“Not so, my friend,” Ilya said. “The people are sick of gray authority which feeds them no better than the Tsar. Did you know there is talk of sainthood for Nicholas? Oh, yes, the Church is rehabilitating him. And if you talk to the old ladies, they remember the Little Father with love these days. Russia is not stable since the fall of communism. Crazy things are under discussion.”

“For instance,” Viktor said, taking up the thread, “the foreign press had been talking up distant Romanov family members. Are there hopes for the old dynasty?”

“I know all this,” Sergey said. Why, a distant cousin Sergey had rolled around on the grass with in his youth, had been photographed in Vanity Fair recently as a royal. What a fucked-up world, where deposed ruling families became fodder for decadent fantasy ages after their downfalls.

“We need someone who is close to the family,” Ilya, eager, leaned against the stone fence with his barely-exposed nose tipped into the wind. “And that’s you.”

“Ilya, we’ve been friends a long time,” Sergey said. “You know I’m an outcast. I don’t go to the best parties, and if I do, I stand on the sidelines. I’m too involved in business to care about this dead family history.”

“Don’t worry,” Ilya said. “Nobody expects you to drape your chest with medals and anoint yourself a noble. Although you do have a drawerful of medals. I’ve seen them.”

“That’s a relief,” Sergey said. “Now let’s hear the rest of your fairy tale.”

“We want you to contact someone,” Ilya said.

“Who?”

“An American,” said Viktor. “We believe this person is the Romanov next in line after Tsar Nicholas the second. A direct descendant, Sergey.”

“Ha, ha.”

“It’s true, Sergey, just listen,” Ilya said.

“You’re not resurrecting that old Anastasia shit again,” Sergey said. “I thought we were leaving the Romanovs out of this.”

“You, we wish we could leave out of it. This person lives in the U. S. in a place called Monterey, California,” Viktor said. “It is a village between San Francisco and Los Angeles, I believe.”

Sergey shook his head in disbelief. “Plenty of pretenders around who might enjoy founding a new Romanov dynasty,” he said. “If you must spin demented fantasies, why not spin one about a Russian who lives within a thousand miles of here?”

Viktor shrugged, folding his empty cigarette packet

and stuffing it into his pocket. “First, there’s the question of credibility. Now. I take you back to this couple from Vienna.”

“Yes?”

“Their name was Heinzelman. The wife lived longest and died only recently. Her husband was a writer, a diarist.”

“Another fool expecting posterity to give a damn what he ate for dinner,” Sergey said. “It’s such pathetic human conceit.”

“He never let his wife read the diaries when he was alive,” Viktor said, smoke furling around his fuzzy beige pate. “But of course the first thing she did when he died was read them.”

“Naturally. She could finally satisfy herself about who he was screwing on the side,” Sergey said.

“His story was pretty interesting. He said that in 1917, the year that the Tsar and his entire family were supposedly murdered by the Bolsheviks, one got away, hid in Finland, and ended up in America. The Chekist, Nikulin, shot him at two paces, but failed to kill him. It’s been reported that this child of Nicholas was wearing a diamond shield made out of family jewels. The bullets failed to penetrate.”

“Who supposedly lived?” Sergey asked.

“Alexis Nicholaevich. Son of the Tsar.”

“The tsarevich?” Sergey had a good laugh. “Well, you

have cheek, I give you that. Putting aside the fact that Alexis was hemophiliac, and wouldn't have lived long anyway, it's a preposterous lie," Sergey said. "Everyone knows the entire family perished. Why, in 1996, they did DNA testing on the remains!"

"Wrong," Viktor said.

"Wrong?"

"Yes. Two bodies were never recovered, one female, one male. Nicholas's daughter Maria, so say the scientists. And her brother, Alexis. They were supposedly burned, but the remains have never been located or identified. Check anywhere. Go on line. You'll see I'm telling the exact truth."

Sergey couldn't help smiling. "You're hunting wild geese as usual, Viktor."

"But I'm a good hunter, admit it, Sergey." Viktor smirked back. "And a crack shot."

"Who is this American you think has something to do with all this?"

"It's a woman," Ilya said.

"Why do you imagine she has anything to do with the tsarevich?"

"Frau Heinzelman told this story at a party my parents gave right before she died," Ilya said. "According to her, Alexis Nicholaevich was smuggled out, wounded but not dead. This was 1917. The Heinzelmans took care of him for

nearly two years, then emigrated to Finland and from there to the U. S. That's where he grew up. They faked his papers and history, gave him a new name, a new birthday a few years before his own, and smuggled him to some friends. Anyway, he grew up, married and had two children."

"And she knew this how?"

"Her husband kept the secret of the identity of the child his whole life. Until she read her husband's diaries, she never knew who the child she had taken in was. She told my mother that her husband thought the child would be swiftly assassinated if the secret came out, no matter where he was."

"What about the tsarevich's hemophilia?" Sergey asked. "Rasputin? All that faith healing and such? These people die young, don't they? How could Alexis live to escape, marry, and father children?"

"I can't explain that part," Ilya said. "Maybe they found a cure? I only know I knew this Frau Heinzelman all my life, and believe me, she had no imagination. According to her, the child they saved took the name Constantin Zhukovsky. He died in 1978. His oldest child is a woman named Christina Zhukovsky, currently age forty-three."

"The younger one is a son. Alex Zhukovsky is a professor at a local college," said Victor.

"And Christina? Who is she?" Sergey asked.

“Nobody yet. A mouse,” Ilya answered.

“And we like mice.” Viktor wore an evil smile.

“You want me to go there,” Sergey guessed.

“Go there, and bring Christina back.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We can use her,” Viktor said patiently.

“How?”

“First,” Ilya said, “we put an end to specious claims by other family members by showing up with the woman who is the true, indubitable heir. Second, we use her to advance our own interests.”

“This is foolishness,” Sergey said, making a noise with his mouth. “She’s American. Nobody wants the Americans in charge. I know Putin looks friendly, but he’s ex-KGB, a spy, a master at deceit. He won’t invite American investment, except under the tightest strictures. He wants to hold onto power. He won’t want to be squished under their weight.”

“American is good. American is naive. Hopeful,” Ilya said.

“And rich as hell,” Viktor said. “An American heir to the throne of Russia! It makes my heart go pit-a-pat.”

Sergey shook his head. “You think the Russian people want an American in charge . . . ever? You are the naif.”

“This isn’t about leadership. This is about consolidating power. We feel, with her on our side, we

will strengthen our negotiating position with those in power . . . "

Ilya interrupted. "What Viktor is saying is that he'll make a bundle by scaring the politicians into being his buddy." He stepped away, splayed his hands and said, "She could be good looking, without the glasses and fixed up. We'll get her on the France Deux channel. With my connections, she'll be big as Princess Diana was. And whether or not we have any independent TV here by then, she will be an astounding story for our people. And we'll be on the inside."

Sergey shook his head. "Don't you ever have enough money, Ilya?"

Ilya frowned. "Do you, Sergey?"

"No. But insecurity is a way of life with me."

"Don't tell me you can't see the possibilities here?"

Sergey thought. "I see only trouble."

"Get her," Viktor said. "Make her your friend. Bring her back. We'll show her how aligning her interests with ours makes sense."

"The plan is," Ilya said, "she comes here. We spend some time getting to know her. If we decide we can trust her, we introduce her to the press. She'll be our mouthpiece in some cases, and serve as a useful distraction for the government. We don't need them enacting repressive laws when we're finally making some

progress in the country. We finish up a few deals we've been working on, make some money, consolidate our positions before anything too dramatic can happen to stop us."

Sergey folded his arms and shook his head again. "You are mad," he said.

"Don't think there aren't some supporters who would like a return to the Romanovs, Sergey," Ilya said. "They worry about Putin. He might be very repressive. They want their freedom!"

"Freedom to pillage and make money," Sergey said, "a worthy cause.

"You're so honorable?" Viktor jeered. "With your family connections, parents scavenging for rubles in Putin's pocket."

"She might be able to arouse the romantic factions who see this government as backward," Ilya went on calmly, "stall some of the more stifling reforms, at least temporarily. Long enough for us to take advantage before the tough guys stop us."

"Viktor, you're a lunatic. Ilya, you're a dreamer," Sergey said.

Viktor shrugged. "I've been called worse. I prefer lunatic to thug."

"Tell me you're not really thinking this nonentity, this American woman will step in as leader of Russia,"

Sergey asked.

"Of course not. The Romanovs were finished at Ekaterinenberg. We're thinking, this will be quick, and there's money in it for us. We have two deals in the works. Ilya's trying to get a lock on a few radio stations that are stupidly holding out for local control, and we're working on a development deal in downtown Petersburg, high-rise European style lofts for the wealthy that will solidify my financial positional once and for all.

"So far, there are no laws in place to stop us, but there are nasty rumblings. Things that are making us very nervous, various laws that will impede or stop us altogether. Until we meet her, of course, we don't know exactly how we can use her, but at the very least, she's a bargaining chip. We might even make a few deals with people who matter that will allow her to return to her quiet little life in California without any fanfare at all."

"Plenty of people don't want to see the Romanovs here or anywhere else," Ilya said. "They might pay to have her disappear again, so her home so far away might even turn out to be an advantage. She can go back and bury herself."

"We cash in however we can . . . "

"Viktor's got lots of ideas about how we can use her," Ilya interrupted him. "We just think her existence alone will make a few powerful people nervous, which is how we

prefer them."

"We use her," Viktor continued, annoyed, "then toss her aside, if you really want to know."

"Will you do it?" Ilya asked. "Get her. Bring her here?"

"For how much?" asked Sergey.

"What do you want? Cash up front."

"No," Sergey said thoughtfully. "It's a new world. In this world, we deal in the long term. Let's talk percentages." They were crazy, he thought, but what was the harm? He would go to California, a lovely place and flirt with a woman, all expenses paid.

He had nothing to do at the moment. His girlfriend, Larisa, had walked out on him the week before, and his new job running his father's launderettes could wait, could definitely wait a long time.

The next part of their deal took much, much longer. Viktor and Ilya were consummate businessmen and wrangled more viciously than flea market vendors over every ruble, even the ones they might never even see.

The deal made, out came the flask again. "Now, to celebrate. Let's drink to the end of horseshit. Let's drink to hope, prosperity, and . . . " Ilya said.

"And Stolichnaya flowing from every spigot," Viktor said, taking the flask.

"I drink to the improbable resurrection of Mother

Russia," Sergey said when it was passed to him. "I hear the church bells going ding-ding, ding-dong..."

"I drink to stimulation of a budding entrepreneurial spirit," Ilya suggested, leaning his head far back to take the final drops. Snow fell onto his lips and he licked the flakes. "And to fairy tales."

"Finish it with a drink to this American woman," Sergey said. "Long may she not rule."

Sergey located her at a coffee shop she frequented on Alvarado Street in Monterey. She wore jeans, a floppy sweater, and glasses as weak as watered-down alcohol. He showed up for three nights in a row, as did she. The fourth night, a Friday, while a mad poet raved on stage, he asked if he could sit next to her. The room, pressed with people, noisy, and smelling of curry, drove them together.

She removed her glasses and introduced herself. "Christina Zhukovsky," she said. In spite of his fundamentally skeptical nature, her saying that gave him a chill. Could she be the granddaughter of Nicholas II, the last tsar? Perhaps it was the effect of this soft, mild countryside, this pleasant wealth and security everywhere. He loved being back.

Removing his fake glasses, he set them down on the table and introduced himself. "I studied at Amherst," he

said, “and USC. I wanted to be a film director, but sadly, I now know I am not. Now I hang with people who understand I’m nothing more than a wannabe.” He did not tell her about his life after college, the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya which he knew about in close-up, the ferocity of the killing, the land mines, the wasted villages.

She identified with that, she told him. She told him she enjoyed sitting and talking with someone who still read books, and who spoke Russian. They watched a group of four boys in their twenties jump around the tiny stage, tossing words around like oranges. They tried to make sense of it. “They have the spirit but not the talent,” Sergey told her after a few patient minutes.

Laughing, she agreed. The pictures he had seen did not do her justice. She had a sweet face and a remarkably insightful mind.

She told him she volunteered at a preschool and at a senior center.

“I teach an exercise class at the senior center.” She told him a few stories about the people there, the lady who played basketball from a wheelchair and never missed a shot, the two who still played tennis, only the whole game took place in slow motion.

“You seem to like what you do.”

“Kids and old people operate on a very essential level. There’s no pretense. Everyday life is what matters

to them."

"Is that what matters to you?"

She blushed. "Well, if I had to criticize one single thing about my life, I would say I probably should have achieved more. I think I have it in me but it's easier to stay comfortable than to be challenged."

He liked the answer. He could play on that answer.

Christina was an essentially shy woman. Never having been married, she had also never had a serious love affair, although she was engaged briefly. She confessed she had broken it off before she ended up having to meet his eyes over coffee in the morning.

So Sergey took his time, whittling away at her defenses, trying to get at the woman behind those silly glasses of hers. He came over to her place on Eighth Street, bringing beef, wrapping it in batter and cooking it with Afghani spices for lunch. After many weeks of this gourmet flirtation, he took her to bed. He had never waited so long, which added an unusual piquancy to the evening. He had experience, and he called upon it to give her the time of her life.

He thought she liked it. She asked him back again. And again.

As their relationship progressed, it was Sergey's impression that Christina was going through all these things for the first time. Her emotions boomed like

thunderstorms overhead pouring rain, and balmy white clouds backlit by sunshine. She would endure frustration and turmoil, as long as joy waited around the corner for her.

When Sergey, after giving careful thought to his timing, announced he had to return to Petersburg and asked her to come, too, she surprised him by saying yes immediately. She resigned from her activities. She sublet her apartment. She said, obliquely, goodbye to her brother.

And they flew away from her secure, shy little mouse-life.

Met by Viktor and Ilya, ensconced in a decent one-room apartment, they continued their bedtime experiments. After a month, he judged it time to move to the next level.

They were in a cafe with graffiti on the walls, too arty and colorful to be real. He bought them both coffee, then told her he had a confession to make. He had met her intentionally, that day in Monterey. He had gone to America to meet her, in fact. She was a special person to the Russian people.

At first, she took his story for a joke. Sergey was her Russia, and she didn't mind being special to him, she told him. Playing with the collar of his shirt, she had asked if she could cajole him back to their room and bed before he left to conduct his mysterious business of the

day. She tried to kiss him. Gently, he pushed her away. He made her sit across the table and listen to him.

His story all boiled down to her father, Constantin Zhukovsky, that gregarious man of her memory. Her father, Sergey explained, was not page to the Tsar, he was in fact, the last tsarevich, Alexis, son of Nicholas the Second, the last Tsar of Russia.

She laughed for a long time. "You sound so much like Papa, coming up with this stuff," she said.

Sergey continued patiently. Of course, this news seemed absurd to her, an American girl. How could she believe it? And could she ever register the extreme responsibility of her position? He doubted it, even as he continued the story.

As he talked on, seriously, gravely, Christina got agitated. "Stop this now."

"I am serious."

"Please, you are upsetting me."

But he prevailed. Solemn, calm, and most of all, convincing, he made her open her mind to the concept.

"How did you find out? Why now?" she asked.

The story had come out only recently, and he explained about the diary.

"You think I'm . . . " The disbelief saturating her words would be hard to eliminate, but he did his best. "The granddaughter of Nicholas the Second?"

Yes, he said. She, Christina Zhukovsky, was the granddaughter of Tsar Nicholas II, the last emperor. She, among all the Romanovs remaining in the world, was the true heir to the throne of imperial Russia.

The story that unfolded was bizarre, yet Sergey remained unshakable on every point. She laughed whenever he left a quiet space, and when he was stern with her, forcing her to take him seriously, she cried. She remembered the story her father told her, she told him. For a long time, he pretended he was a page, but once he let slip that he was something more, something much more.

Had he meant for her to know this incredible legacy someday? Hadn't he just been inventing stories for a troubled child who had lost her mother too young? How had he survived, if he had hemophilia?

She had many reactions that morning. He did what he could to convince her, then left her to stew. Months passed before he made real headway with her. She resisted; he broke her down. He spent most nights with her, although on other nights, he made excuses. Finally, one day, he told her the rest: she was needed. There were people, monarchists, who wanted her to remain Russia as head of a movement to restore the monarchy. They would support her, and see her put into her proper role as head of state.

"You consort with crazies," she said. "It's Viktor and Ilya, isn't it? Those clowns."

“No, Christina. I am dead serious.”

“I’m not Russian!” she said.

“Oh, yes you are.”

“Born in America!”

“That does not change a thing.”

“I’ve been to the shops. I’ve waited in line. I’ve listened. Maybe people are mad about what’s happening politically, but that doesn’t mean a whole country’s going to go nuts for this foreign--interloper!--who has shown up out of the blue to stick her nose in where it isn’t needed or wanted. I’m American, Sergey, the wrong person to look at for answers, not that I couldn’t give them! We’re good at that, giving advice where it isn’t wanted, but the world’s wising up to us. Don’t tell me the Russian people need an imperialist from the west to step in and tell them how to run their country! They would laugh me out of the country. Or worse, take me seriously and . . . ”

He found her appealing and not that difficult. She was no match for his patience, and, face it, he was enjoying this love affair. He loved her soft skin, her naive hopefulness. He loved her optimism, and the way she sang in the morning, off-key but sincere. Sometimes he even flirted with the idea of returning to the States with her and forgetting all this.

Once in awhile, he returned home to visit his son and his estranged wife, and the full weight of his guilt and

duplicity weighed him down, but most of the time, he ignored those worries and concentrated on the money and on Christina, who was light and airy, like California in his memory.

She continued cautious, but in bed at night he whispered to her about the good things she could do, about the power, about the respect. He nurtured the ambition within her, and watched it blossom. She allowed him to break through her defenses. Because she was in love, she succumbed to his seductions. Swayed by his personal charisma and pleas, in the end she was swept away in the fantasy.

One night she was especially quiet. In bed, she told Sergey, "I remember that name, Papa mentioned that name long, long, ago."

"What name?"

"Heinzelman."

Sergey felt a deep thrill throughout his body. Shit, it could all be true!

"And something else. Sometimes I see Papa so plainly going to his treasure box and taking out his shiny things. One of them was his medal. He said his father had it specially made for him to cheer him up because he was so often sick.

"I hope you love your Papa like I loved mine," he told her once. She had carried a vision of this unknown

grandfather from childhood, a gentle, kind man who gave his little boy presents, but only now did she tell Sergey.

Every Sunday during those months, Viktor and Ilya came for dinner, sometimes bringing friends. At first Christina thought, well, isn't this pleasant. Sergey has invited his friends, and I will cook them good food and show them that we have a happy life. But an undercurrent of doubt tainted all their interactions. Viktor, too loud and bold to be contained in a mere kitchen, held such ardent, even radical political opinions, he scared her.

Ilya flirted, but the flirtation, such as it was, consisted of a dream that she was a Russian woman, with Russian hopes, and a weirdly disproportionate sense of her own importance.

"Tell them I'm nobody," she told Sergey. "It's like having dinner with people who, at first glance, appear normal, and then you find out it's a festive little event taking place in an asylum. They puff on those cigarettes and blow smoke rings until I can't see across the room anymore. They place me in the center of this fringe universe they're concocting."

"They believe you are in the center," Sergey would say.

One Sunday night, she refused to cook. "I don't want

those people here."

"And why not?"

"The way they look at me. So hungry. They want to eat me alive!"

Sergey laughed, he coaxed, but nothing he said could convince her otherwise. They canceled the dinner. After three weeks of this, he put his foot down. She must have these friends to dinner. He insisted.

What did that mean, his insistence?

She found out soon enough. The two men, cronies by their sides, showed up the next Sunday. Sergey gave them drinks, but they all sat there in the living room, as demanding as unfed cattle. She made corn bread and a bean dish, which they all ate. She watched them eat, horrified, compromised, as though she was involved with a dark sexual situation with these men. The next day, she bought her ticket home.

"You can't leave," Sergey said. "I love you. And whether you like it or not, you are important to this movement. These men have sacrificed plenty because they believe you can . . . "

"What--get them laid? Or some fabulous position in a new government?" she scoffed. "It took me a while to work it out, but I think I've got it now. You're a bunch of scheming crooks, even you, Sergey. I don't know why you needed me here, but this isn't really my place at all."

“You owe me a lot.”

“Come back with me, then. I need to think, to get some peace from this screwy universe here.”

“I can’t do that. You know I have my job, my life. Ilya and Viktor--they feel the time is close to introduce you to the world--“

“Not on their terms. Not as their lackey.”

“What are you talking about, Christina! You think I--“

She closed her eyes and said, “You are the only man I have ever loved, Sergey. Thank you for everything.”

“Don’t talk like this. Come, let’s have a drink. Forget this mood.”

That night, they had the best sex they had ever had.

The next morning before he awoke, she was gone.

Sergey wrote her a letter a week. Through her brother, she got a job at the college near Monterey.

Her apartment, sublet for the time she was gone, needed work. She put in the time evenings, weekends, any void moment when she could hear his voice, or smell his scent. She shopped for new furniture. She bought Chinese screens with pelicans on them and a shiny gold finish to hang over the fireplace. If she didn’t expect a call, she didn’t answer the phone.

A few months after she left St. Petersburg, the doorbell rang. Christina had been busy that night. She had

gathered old cashmere sweaters owned by her, by her mother, and by her father, and was trying to fashion a quilt out of them. She didn't sew very well, but she knew how to create a finished edge, and she tried hard to keep her stitches neat. The colors were understated, subtle, taupes, beiges, browns, but she had only to touch the surface to understand she had something fine and long-lasting.

She would put the quilt on her bed in the wintertime, and she would remember, she promised herself, remember her mother, her wrinkly forehead and her burned dinners, and her father and his wild tales.

Dropping a stitch, poking herself with the needle because she was so startled, she moved toward the door, sucking her finger. She opened the peephole, and looked out.

"Christina," was all he said.

"Sergey?" She hadn't seen him for weeks. Although she thought of him all day long, she didn't remember the longer, badly-cut hair or the short beard, or the urgency in his eyes. She saw the smile she could already feel like a hot fire on her face. "What has happened?" She opened the door, and he came in.

He hugged her. She hugged him back. She did not allow him to kiss her, but turned away toward the kitchen, and offered him something to drink. He accepted it.

“It’s not the same without you,” he said, after they caught up.

“Why didn’t you tell me you had a child?”

“How did you know?”

“I asked Ilya.”

“And he told you about my wife, too?”

She nodded.

“So that was it.”

“Yes.”

“I was a coward. I didn’t want to lose you. She and I are, well, here you would call it separated. But she does not want a divorce. So yes, I am married. You know the worst about me now.”

She wet her lips, thinking he was telling her yet another lie. Separated? Unlikely. Why didn’t he understand that she deserved honesty?

Sergey walked out to the deck. She followed him. “I can see why you love it here,” he said, breathing in the salt and moisture of the seaside. “We don’t feel the sun as closely as you do.”

“I’m happy to be back,” she said. “But I haven’t ruled out returning.”

“No,” he said. “And that’s why I’m here. I understand you’ve been in contact with Giorgi Popov.”

“Father Giorgi?” she asked, surprised. “Well, yes. He’s with my father’s church in San Francisco. He cares

about what's happening in Russia."

"Sure he does," Sergey said. He didn't touch her the way he used to, he just put a finger on her cheek as he spoke. "You wouldn't know about him."

"Know what? He's a highly respected priest!"

"No," Sergey said. "His father was respected. Giorgi's kept on because his father was important in the American Orthodox Church movement to break from the Soviet Union. He hangs on, and harbors regressive notions."

"He preaches."

"On weekdays, for small groups. He's a renegade. The church isn't sure what to do with him. Although he attended the right schools, and has all the credentials, he is an enemy of Russia."

"No more than Viktor and Ilya."

"I want to know about your contact with Giorgi. He has friends in Russia, people I don't like," he said.

"We have some common goals, and that's the extent of it. He supports some non-profit organizations that want to do some good over there. Do you have a problem with that?"

"I have a problem with the ropes he ties to any help he might offer."

"What do you know about it?"

"Christina, what do you know?"

"He's a good person, a religious man. He wants to help the Russian people." She offered to make him dinner, but

he declined, looking tired. “I cook a mean chicken,” she said, an old line he would recognize, but which he pointedly ignored. It meant she cooked a chicken that had no business being sold for food in the first place, but that she could make do.

“I can see I’m getting nowhere with you, but please, let me offer you some advice before I leave you alone, okay? Please understand, this is nothing to do with Ilya or Viktor, or whatever you think they wanted to get out of you.” By now, Sergey was standing, no longer pretending to drink her tea.

“They were using me.”

“Whatever,” he said. “In some ways, you’re right. Ilya and Viktor are small men who want to be important, and they saw that a contact with you, a true Romanov, the heir to the royal family, might at least get them the publicity they need to advance some of their business interests. But Giorgi’s even more dangerous. The orthodox church in America has split with the Russians. He claims to want to consolidate the two again, but his real agenda is power. That’s all he wants. If anyone’s using you, Giorgi is. He may look innocent, and sound that way, but he’s good at that. He’s spent his life representing what appears to be innocent interests.”

She laughed. “The pot calls the kettle black. You don’t like it, that he’s my friend.”

“Obviously.”

“Well, I never liked Ilya or Viktor, so we’re even.”

“You have a point. But what people believe, what they support, that’s the important thing.”

She shook her head. “No. If you connect; that’s what counts.”

Sergey rubbed his forehead. He let his eyes close. She came close and allowed him to put his arm around her waist. “You smell like lilacs. Christina, do you--did you love me?”

She sighed. “Yes.”

“If that’s true, and given what you say, well then, why not trust me?”

“I said I loved you. That has nothing to do with trust.” Sure, she was excited that he had come all this way for her, excited at his nearness, but trust? No.

“Listen,” he said, taking her into his arms. “I will be absolutely frank. Ilya and Viktor sent me to meet you in the beginning. I fell for you. Now you know everything.”

She shook him off and went back into the kitchen, where she poured steaming water into a cup and dropped a tea bag in. “No, I don’t. I still don’t understand why they wanted me involved. They come from the most powerful families in your country. They don’t need anyone’s help.”

“Putin is putting his friends in place. He’s gathering

power, like you gather pieces of quilt," he said, holding up a square, "finding it wherever it falls. There are rumors he's after the money, that the richest factions are in danger from him! There will be another era of authoritarianism, Christina."

"Is that better than a new oligarchy? Naked capitalism and corruption?"

"What about a constitutional monarchy?"

She was quiet.

"Like Queen Elizabeth."

"I've dreamed about it, but Sergey, make no mistake. I have no grand delusions. I want to understand my place, not necessarily to change the world. I discuss these things with Father Giorgi. I will not discuss them with Viktor and Ilya."

"Finally, you've decided to take this seriously," Sergey said. "That's something."

"Why did you come?" Christina said. "I take it this is no romantic gesture." Drinking her tea, she watched him narrowly. She was no longer in love, and she understood him less than ever. She watched him hesitate, choose his words.

"I don't think you realize there's no going back. People know about you. You aren't in charge of your own destiny anymore."

"What a load of crap," she said, emboldened by her

time alone.

"Christina, this is a warning. You need our protection."

The cold in his voice froze whatever lingering feelings she had. "I want you to go."

"I suppose I loved you too," he said. His eyes frightened her. He turned and left. She ran to the window to make sure, and that night she secured the apartment carefully.

The next morning she called Father Giorgi. "I have an idea," she said. "I know some people at my college who would like to organize a symposium, something to do with how Russia and America can collaborate on a new economic era of prosperity equally good for both."

"I'm listening," Giorgi said.

"They'll get them all over here, the pundits, the intellectuals, the politicians, not just from Russia but from all over the former Soviet Union and the world. We will solicit speeches, controversy, publicity. We'll tell the Americans and other participants they have an opportunity to network with powerful Russian business interests. They'll be seeing cash registers pinging.

"Meanwhile, we'll advise the Russian on how to take the money without taking a hit in terms of ownership of business, land and resources. And we will milk them all for money."

She could almost hear him nodding. “It’s a good idea, Christina. Your father was right when he called you a quiet leader.”

“Not so quiet these days,” she said. “I want to do something for those people. I would like to make my mark. Call it a Romanov legacy, call it whatever you want. I want to help.”

“So you have decided to go ahead?”

“Yes.”

“That is wonderful. This is an incredible moment.”

Christina felt it then, the weight of her decision. She would allow the world to see who she was. She would dedicate her life to helping the Russian people, and to destroying the power of the Putins as well as the oligarchs. She felt exalted, like a supplicant at church on Easter Sunday when the choir sang so triumphantly.

“There is one more thing you should consider,” Giorgi said. “I’ve said it before.”

“My father’s bones,” she said.

“Yes. Proof positive.”

“Perhaps.”

“Let’s see how the symposium goes, then you can revisit the idea.”

“Maybe.”

“Oh, I think you will. I am very, very happy at your decision, Christina.”

“I have to go.”

“Be careful. Guard your precious self.”

Christina hung up, thinking, I have gone with you, Giorgi, but it will be you helping me, not the other way around. Her life had changed forever, and she would trust no one.

March 2002. Rain fell, then the ice plant bloomed purple flowers on the hillsides along the coast. The first morning of the symposium, Christina dressed carefully, forsaking her usual jeans and blouse for a suit jacket and slacks. She felt serious, and she wanted them all to feel as serious.

She arrived very early, by seven o’clock. In the function room at the college, a few sleepy students lackadaisically unfolded stacked metal chairs. “How many?” one asked her, but she didn’t know. She had definite yesses from two hundred, but expected more.

“Set up another fifty,” she said.

The keynote speaker was scheduled for nine, but he arrived late, which was fine. Most of the crowd milled around the atrium, sampling the local bakery delicacies, happy or unhappy to see each other, making connections.

The arrivals were mostly jet-lagged, she knew, so she had advised Vassily to keep his talk short.

He didn’t. For over an hour, while the recently

arrived Russians struggled to stay awake, he spoke of economic opportunities to be found in the new Russia. He pontificated on financial liaisons, and benefits to and fro. The Americans, full of coffee, nodded approvingly, while those who had flown for a long time seemed befuddled.

After the keynote speech, everyone broke off into focus groups, drifting into classrooms that had been hijacked for the purpose, murmuring at the pretty weather, smelling the nearby sea, no doubt, and wishing they were out there instead.

During the noon break, she spotted him. He was with a group of smokers, a dead giveaway that they weren't local. Their clothes were the same but somehow different, actually ironed and cared for in a way that seemed almost incongruous in studiously casual California.

"Sergey," she called to him, her arm raised.

He glanced over, but seemed deep in conversation. He did not return her wave, so she walked closer.

He walked away, across the street, toward buildings that had nothing to do with the symposium.

"Sergey?" she called again, but he disappeared in the direction of the small buildings that housed the romance language department.

She gave up and sat down on a bench near, but not directly in the line of fire from symposium attendees,

opening the paper bag she had brought from home. She pulled out a yogurt, nuts, raisins and a piece of semisweet chocolate, thinking, well, if symbolism exists, it certainly has a lot to say about my life, a simple, yogurt-eating woman with flashes of uncontrollable indulgence.

Father Giorgi sat down beside her. "You saw him," he said.

"Sergey? Yes."

"I don't know how to tell you this. I don't have the gift of delicacy. Sergey Krilov has been given instructions. I have heard this from a good source in Petersburg."

"Yes?"

"You don't believe me."

"What's it matter what I believe, Giorgi? I'm not with him anymore."

"The thing is . . . " Giorgi began. He cleared his throat. "See, Christina, us Americans, we are kind of sweet people. We don't understand people like Sergey."

"I know a few things," she said. "He loved me. he wouldn't hurt me. Nothing you can say is going to convince me of anything else." She let the cool ocean air ruffle her hair. The priest looked incongruous in his cassock and sunglasses.

Giorgi nodded vigorously. "Oh, yes," he said. "Yes, he

loved you! And now, Christina, he is going to hurt you! Or his friends will. You must watch out."

She finished her lunch and put all her trash into her paper bag, twisting the neck of the bag neatly shut.

"Thanks! Oh, that's so comforting!" She walked over to an overflowing trash can and stuffed her bag on the top of it. It fell to the ground. She picked it up and tried again. Giorgi stood up and took her hand.

"Christina, I'm trying to warn you because I care about you, and I'm afraid. He's a killer. He's killed before."

"He wouldn't hurt me," she said, "that way."

"He would."

She turned her back on him, rushing back to the meeting. For the next hour and a half, she sat through two speakers, her mind elsewhere. During the next break, she stayed in the lobby, mingling.

She was finding lining up support remarkably easy. Money flowed around them all like air, oxygenated by the proximity of the beautiful Pacific Ocean, floating in on all these hot ideas. She got three more financial pledges. Giorgi would be pleased.

She herself was becoming confused again. She was operating on some preordained plan--was it really her plan? Was she being manipulated, now, by the Church?

She felt the absurdity of it, the quixotic aspect of

all this. The dinosaur returns, but there are no more volcanoes, the jungle is gone, there is only scorched earth and a suspicious populace.

Russia would go its ineluctable way. How dare any of them presume otherwise? She was nobody, nothing. Her father would have a good laugh at her presumption, spank her good, and put her to bed early to teach her a lesson, if he were here to make judgments.

Sergey touched her elbow.

"Go away."

"Come with me for a moment?" He bent his head toward a dark hallway.

"No." She held a paper cup with Napa Valley white wine in one hand. She took a drink. "I'm told you are dangerous to me, and you know something? I believe it might be so. All this money here, all these ardent people, they scare me," she said. "I don't think I realized people were so eager for change they will toss coins to any monkey that dances in their direction."

"I need you to listen to me," he said in a low voice. "I'm here as a friend, but Christina, this is the last time we'll meet this way."

"Good."

"I'm begging you to quit. Giorgi Popov is not reliable. He has the wrong friends. They're using you."

"That has a familiar ring," she said. "Sergey, did it

ever occur to you for one second that I, Christina Zhukovsky, used you, and that I'm now using Giorgi and his pals?"

"No."

She laughed. "Americans don't like your kind of male," she said. "So old-fashioned."

"You're nothing alone, and, Christina, that may be your only hope. Drop Giorgi. Drop these causes. Go back to your work, love, marry a good man. Otherwise . . . "

"Are you threatening me? Because if you are, I laugh in your face, you shit, you married man, you cheating bastard. I'll never believe another word you say."

"Christina," he pleaded, "Please. I care about you. Let it go. Give the money to Giorgi. He can't do a thing without you. You're the figurehead. You'll get him the publicity he wants. You'll make him. But these aren't your causes."

"What about my father? How can you say this is not my cause? You, who brought me in to all this?"

"Constantin's dead. You're not--yet."

She threw what was left in her cup in his face, and was deeply gratified to witness his utter shock.

Two hours later, the day wound down. She said goodbye to the last of the day's speakers, contacted all but one of the people scheduled for tomorrow to confirm their presence, and found the last presenter at an impromptu

gathering of people who favored reinstatement of some abandoned socialist goals, that had sprung up outside under an oak tree.

He knew when he was supposed to speak the next day, he told her, and he knew where. What he did not know, he said grandly, was what he might say. He wanted to maintain an open mind, and there was so much excitement today. He thanked her profusely for bringing together such a spectacular meeting of the best minds, east and west. "We need such communion," he said. "Our future rests in understanding."

She couldn't help glowing at the compliment. Deeper than any wild hopes she might entertain about doing big things for the Russian people as an individual, lay the hope that the symposium, by itself, had intrinsic value. At least she could feel good about today and tomorrow.

She had left her coat in her brother Alex's office, so she walked across the street and down the small hill, cutting between two buildings, toward it. Night was falling, and the landscape drained of color while, one by one, lights flickered on, pale yellow against a swooping blackness. She walked slowly, admiring the burning western sky on one side, and the undeveloped land beyond, clattery with crickets, where signs warned visitors of vague, undefined hazards left over from the days when the college was a military reserve.

Someone was running behind her. She ignored the rapid steps. Someone in California was always running. She could step outside her apartment to get the paper at six in the morning on a rainy Sunday, and someone would be trotting by, dripping wet. The footsteps approached, less regular than the usual jogger, but purposeful. She moved to the right of the sidewalk, as per protocol, waiting for the athlete to pass by.

He rammed into her. A thousand times, she had lost her balance in exactly this way, and a thousand times, she had caught herself. This time, a curb appeared out of nowhere, and when she tried to regain her footing, instead she went down as hard as an elephant missing its two front legs. The runner leaped onto her back, slamming her face into the asphalt. "You get just one warning. This is it. Next time, we kill you." To make his point most emphatically, he lifted her head and pushed it into the street three times. He lifted it again. She heard a shout, a familiar voice. The hands that held her neck in a stranglehold let go. The pressure left her back.

Sergey helped her up. "Oh, Christina, oh, no," he said. "You see what's happening? They'll kill you!"

"Let go of me," she said, trying to shake him off.

"But--you think I . . . I saw what happened. I was worried about you. I was watching. I'm here to help!"

"Let me go!" She yanked herself away. Bleeding,

limping, crying, she made her way to her brother's office. Alex Zhukovsky sat at his desk below a window studying some papers. "My God, Christina!" he said. She fell into his arms. "Should I call the police?"

"No!"

He sat her down in his chair and ran for water and a cloth. "You need medical attention. What happened?"

"Find me some alcohol."

He fluttered around. "I can't find any. We'll just have to use water until I get you to a doctor."

"Some of that vodka you hide in your desk."

He got the bottle out and poured some on to a paper towel.

"In a glass!"

"Oh!" He found a coffee cup, wiped it, and poured her a little.

"More."

He poured more. "Christina, what's going on? Who hurt you?"

She set the empty cup down on his desk. They both watched a blob of blood drip down its side. "We have to get out of here."

"We'll go to my house," he said. He found her jacket and put it on her, then helped her get up. "You can stay there until the conference is over, and all these people go home. Stay until you feel safe. My car's right out

front."

They walked outside together.

"You need to tell me what's going on," he insisted. She stood by his car, swaying, wiping blood off her face with her sleeve. "I want to call the police. I will call them." He pulled out a cell phone.

"No," she said, grabbing his arm. "Listen."

"Who did this?" Alex unlocked the door to his car, but she didn't get it. "Is it something to do with your job, or the conference? That man--the one you wouldn't talk about? The one you followed to Russia?"

"I hardly know where to start." Pressing a wet handkerchief to her cheek, she tried to tell him the whole story, starting with her trip to Russia. She knew Alex had always wondered, and she had wondered at his discretion. He had never asked her about that time.

Alex, excitable in true family fashion, interrupted with questions until she held a hand up and made him stop. "You have to hear me out to the end, okay?"

When she finally stopped, he said, "To think Papa and I always thought you were the smart one."

"And now you don't? Now you know me for a dope?"

"This is fantasy."

"They aren't stupid, Alex. And neither am I."

"You know, Chrissie, it's understandable. Mother favored me. You've spent your life looking for approval

elsewhere."

"I need a gun," she said.

"You need the help of the police. You need a psychiatrist."

"And I need something from you. Something you won't want to do."

At this point, he forced her to get into his car. Once they reached his house, he directed her right into the bathroom, where he bathed her cuts and marveled at her face. "You've got one plum ripening right here," he said, touching the side of her cheek gently, "and one up here," he pointed at the top of her forehead. "I'm amazed to see your nose isn't broken. Don't tell me you're going back to the symposium tomorrow."

"I am in charge. Of course I'm going."

She tossed the wet, bloody rag into the sink and went into his living room, and then out to a backyard deck.

"What have you got to drink?"

"Tea," he said.

"Alex. I can barely walk. My back hurts, my face aches, I'm a wreck. Get me a drink."

"How about a nice hot cup of soup?"

"You see? This is why we can't be friends! Even though I'm older than you, you treat me like a punk kid."

"Not at all," he said, flushing. "Will wine do?"

"Of course." She sat down on a cold metal chair,

immediately regretting that she had gone into the backyard instead of settling somewhere more hospitable. He brought her an obscenely generous goblet full of red wine, apparently trying to make amends.

"I'm sorry you're hurt. Tell me, what can I do to help?"

"There is something," she said. "Now before you say no, I want you to realize I spent the whole ride over here thinking about this. I know it's going to scare you because it scares me. But it's one way to put all doubts to rest."

"Oh?"

"Help me get Papa's bones."

Alex, interrupted in the middle of pouring himself a much more modest second glass of wine, set the bottle down. "Christina, this is macabre."

"Now you listen. I know that I could get my blood tested, but only Papa can show the direct descendency. I know some people involved in the Romanov movement in Russia who can help me get the blood comparisons we need."

"I'm afraid these people have sent you right over the edge."

"Alex, Papa told me himself. He told me about the Heinzelmans, and the hardships. It must be true."

"A fairy story like the one about the little girl made out of snow you obviously took to heart! Well, remember

what happened to her, okay? She let emotion rule her, and died sadly, too young. This is--so dangerous. Your thinking. The whole thing." He stomped around, making a circle in the small room and returning to where he started, in her face. "And by the way, Tsar Nicholas II's family are dead. There was enough news about it."

"I've explained about that."

"Papa exaggerated, Christina. He made shit up. If he'd been one of those old guys that hung around bars, you wouldn't give these stories of his a second thought."

"He didn't lie to me."

"What about the illness Alexis Nicholaevich had? How do you explain that?"

"Papa died of a blood ailment."

"He was in his seventies. People with hemophilia do not live so long. The tsar's son had hemophilia."

"Alex, there's an explanation, even though I don't know it yet." She looked at him and decided. "I'm going ahead with or without your help. Maybe I'll drop the idea of proving anything with the bones. Maybe I'll just get my own blood tested, because that will establish a direct link, I believe. Not as good a proof, no, but something. You know we've raised a few hundred thousand dollars at this symposium? There are many people who want order restored to Russia. They're sick of the corruption that so many people have accepted, like it's our heritage."

“Our heritage? Wake up! You were born and raised right here in California!”

“If it’s my destiny to do something important, something that will help get that country out of the trouble it’s in, I’m not running away.”

They argued. Within minutes, what had been a civilized conversation between two adults degenerated into shouting. They quickly descended into old roles, Alex, the little brother, Christina, the imperious older sister who would not, could not give him the respect he deserved.

“Okay, Christina, I’ll do it,” he finally said, blood vessels popping on his face, “if only to show you what a farce this whole thing is! We’ll dig up poor Papa’s bones, but here’s the deal. You have to swear to me when they turn out to have nothing to do with this insane fiction you’ve dreamed up, you’ll leave it. Get back to a normal life. Drop these unsavory friends of yours. Straighten up. Get married . . . “

“No need to get extreme,” she said, wincing and smiling at the same time.

“Promise me you’ll get normal. No more--jumping over bonfires.”

“Fine. I promise.”

“Meanwhile, I can’t do it myself.”

“What?”

“I just can’t. I loved him, too. I can’t look at him.

So our alternative is to find someone we can trust. Who will do it?"

"I'll find someone," she promised. "Meanwhile, do you have a gun?"

"No." It came out like a groan.

"Don't be so afraid," she said, putting a hand on his arm.

"It is hubris. Remember the story of Icarus, who thought he could fly? His wings melted and he fell into the sea."

"At least he tried. A good life can be dangerous," she said. "I learned that in Russia."

Two weeks went by. Her injuries healed and she heard no more from Sergey or his friends, but Christina jumped at every noise. When leaves blew over the rooftop, she winced. When distant sirens started up, she listened for evidence that they were approaching, coming her way. She couldn't wait to get her hands on that gun the guy had promised her.

Saturday night came, a hard night for a single woman. She turned on the TV and poured herself a Courvoisier in an elegant, cut glass. She had raised so much money in pledges at the symposium. Even Father Giorgi had been impressed by the strength and disparate nature of the people opposing the current regime. He had phoned her a

few minutes before, totting up the amounts, breathless to make the announcement to the world. She had told him, we are digging up the remains. After the tests . . .

In spite of her exaggerations to Alex, she did not expect to follow in the muddy footprints of her grandfather, Tsar Nicholas II, although she had read extensively on the man, and had spent sleepless nights analyzing his failures as a military leader and as a man. One thing she had learned from her time in Petersburg, the people had a resilience and intelligence that would shock the world, if they had a clue about it.

She had a real plan now, which she had not even shared with the priest. She still felt the need pulling her toward Russia. With her name proved, she would be swimming in publicity, and able to start a dialog about some issues that were being ignored: integrity in government, an end to the corruption that was keeping the people so far down. Possibly people would view her as a force like the ACLU, a champion for human rights. She would like that. With money and her name behind her, they would have to listen.

I will change my name to Romanova, she thought. And--the ex-King of Bulgaria had done it, returned from exile, run for prime minister and won--stranger things happened every decade in Russia.

And then I will get the rules changed, so that I can

run for President.

Why not? The modern way to rule was to get elected. What a novel and exciting alternative she would present! She was young yet, she could afford to move smoothly upward for a decades, still. There was no denying destiny.

She flipped through the news channels, knowing she was waiting. After a few minutes, she heard his knock.

The home security man stood in the doorway. "Can I come in?" he said. "It's freezing out here."

"You've got it?"

He nodded, showing her a paper bag he was carrying, and followed her inside.

"What kind is it?"

"An old .38. Freshly cleaned. One bullet can kill a man, especially if you know where to hit. I'll show you its idiosyncrasies."

"Want one of these?" She gestured with her glass.

He smiled. "Sure."

She went into the kitchen and pulled another glass off the shelf. It looked a little dusty, so she rubbed it with a cloth until it shone, laughing nervously at herself, thinking, here's my gun dealer, but I sure don't want to serve him good brandy in a dusty glass. She had already washed her glass and put it away. She could use some tea, she thought, reaching around in the cupboard. She would

get that going right after he left.

She poured him a very short shot because she didn't want him to stay longer than necessary, and carried it into the living room.

"What the hell!" She almost dropped the glass.

He had his arm pushed way at the back of her desk drawer, and a sheaf of papers in the other hand. He closed the drawer slowly, watching her, and moved toward her, from the living room into the kitchen.

Her gun dealer--she couldn't take the time to think. She didn't want him trying to explain anything away. She realized that if she wanted to live, she had to get this man out of her house immediately. She threw the glass at him. It connected with the side of his head. "Ouch! Shit!"

He was bleeding. Good. "Get out of my house!"

"Sorry. I'm going. I'm going." He picked up the bag he had come with, the gun still in it, as she watched in fright, and walked toward the door. He rattled the bag toward her. "Don't you want the gun?"

She picked up a marble sculpture of the three graces from a side table that must weigh fifteen pounds and held it high, watching the bag in his hand with fierce intensity. "Don't move that bag or I'll break your head with this! Now, turn around and get out of here."

And he left. Just like that. What he had intended, she didn't yet know.

When he left, she double-locked the door and rested against it, panting, waiting for her heart to return to her chest and resume a more normal rhythm. What was that all about? Who was he? Why had he been snooping in her files?

He didn't seem to be connected to the Russians. If only she had managed to get the gun first.

She spent the next few minutes cleaning up, making his visit as invisible as possible. She bagged the broken glass.

Most likely, some innocent, if rude, curiosity had overtaken him while she was in the other room. He couldn't have expected to find anything much in the short time she was in the kitchen, could he? At worst, he had just hoped to find some cash or jewelry, something he could steal, then sell quickly.

The thought buoyed her. In fact, he probably didn't intend anything. He was just a clod. The more she thought about it, the more sorry she was she had let him leave without getting the gun. She would feel so much safer.

A few minutes later, she heard the door knocker again. Was he back? She pulled her robe around tighter, peered through the peephole, and asked, "Who is it?"

"Let me help you. Please, let me in."

She squinted, trying to see better, but really, all she could see was a golden pool of light, a person in

sweats with a hood, the face shadowed.

She opened the door a crack. “I still want it,” she said, “but you can’t come in.“

He pushed the door hard and she fell back. Seizing her, he pulled her into the kitchen, holding her like a doll though she was struggling for her life. He threw her to the floor. She tried to get her breath for a scream, while some astonished, disconnected part of her thought, who is this American. Why? Why?

His fingers on her throat closed off her air.

She closed her eyes and saw the wolf there, the one that tore the goat to bits.

How sad. Her story would be tragic, like Papa’s.

“People die, Christina,” she heard her Papa say.

She relaxed into the dark inevitable.

THE END