

Last Train Out

by William Arthur Holmes

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For Tara and Elizabeth

The following is *very* loosely based on our own adoption experience, with a “what if” look at a future “homeland tour.” This is just me facing my greatest fears, worrying about everything that could possibly go wrong. Let's hope it's not a self-fulfilling prophecy!

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Zenya

Fifteen years ago

Zenya was two-and-a-half when two very strange people came to visit at her orphanage in Astrakhan, Russia. They talked funny, she thought, as if *almost* able to speak properly, but only a few words and with such horrible accents, it was difficult to understand them. She assumed they were stupid. *Glupy*, in Russian. They were there to see her, though – just her! – so she let it go.

She was devastated when they stopped coming after just one week. It was not fair! They had been coming every day, and she had bows in her hair and wore a pretty dress every time! She thought they were the ones! Guess not.

After a couple months – which is forever at that age – the memory of her visitors faded as that famous Russian winter approached and she blended back into daily life at *Dome Rebyenka* (Baby Home) No. 1 on the eastern outskirts of town. Someday, she would have her very own grown-ups to take care of her, she just knew it! They needed to hurry up and arrive, though.

Sure enough, one day as she and a dozen other children sat noisily in kid-sized chairs along the back wall of the playroom, those same two wonderful strangers reappeared. And, their smiles lit up the playroom!

Zenya's exuberance then collapsed into a withering pout as she remembered the abandonment felt last time they left her behind. *They better not do that again!*

She waited to see her visitors' reaction to this calculated pout of hers. She had to make sure it had the proper impact. Once satisfied that her point had been made, she allowed one of the caregivers to walk her to her visitors.

Her gray eyes twinkled with delight upon realizing all she had to do was point at various toys – even the ones she didn't particularly like – and her visitors would dutifully pick them up and give them to her. The *power* she had over these people was intoxicating!

When the man asked in that strange accent, “*Tee hoachesh ee-grut?*” (You want to play?), she of course said, “*Da!*” (Yes!)

That was when she knew she had found her forever parents. Her world – *the* world – was once again as it should be... or, would be after she made a few improvements, of course.

Missing

Present day

Halfway into the long drive from Louisville, Kentucky to Saint Louis, Missouri, Clay Desno is looking forward to a hot shower and a cold beer, but he's in no hurry. He just bought a brand-spanking-new Chevy pickup, "fully loaded," and is following the dealer's advice to keep his speed down until the odometer reaches at least 500 miles.

He's never had a "factory-fresh" car before. Always bought used. Then again, he's never done so well "playing the ponies" before. On a whim, he had driven to Louisville for the Kentucky Derby. While there, he won several large bets and, by the end of the day decided – on another whim – to splurge and buy a new truck. As he told the car salesman, "You only live once, right?!"

Clay is feeling pretty good about life, singing along – badly – to Tom Petty's *American Girl* blasting from the speakers. When his phone rings, he reluctantly turns the volume down to answer it.

It's his soon-to-be-ex-wife, Pamela, the inspiration behind most of his recent whimsical behavior.

"Have you seen Jenna?!" she shrieks without saying hello.

"I've been out of town," he groans. Privately, he's thinking, *What knock-down, drag-out fight have you two*

had now? Aloud, he says, “She’s probably just out with friends. Want me to try calling her?”

“Could you? I thought she might have gone to the Derby with you, after all, but obviously not. She’s not there with you now, is she?”

“No, Pamela, she’s not here.”

“Okay, well, I haven’t seen or heard from her...” she stammers, “since yesterday.”

“Yesterday?!” Clay grips the steering wheel tighter. “And you’re only now...?! She could be...!”

“I know, I know. Please just come home, Mud Man?”

It must be serious, he thinks to himself, *if she’s calling me Mud Man*. She only uses that nickname when trying to soften him up. Before he knows it, Clay has his new Silverado doing 90 miles an hour.

After hanging up, he shakes his head. He should have predicted it would come to this. Those two have been at each other’s throats since Jenna hit her teens. His own relationship with their daughter has not been without turmoil, but has at least been much less dramatic. With those two, it was not unheard of for household items to go flying.

One thing Clay and Pamela could agree on was that ever since Jenna became a teenager, it was as if an internal switch was flipped. Almost overnight, it seemed, she became the hellion that she is today.

At Pamela’s house in the Glendale suburb of Saint Louis—*his* old house – Clay doesn’t even notice the unmarked, unoccupied Crown Victoria on the street out front as he pulls into the driveway. Hurrying out of the truck, he takes his usual shortcut to the porch – the space between the drive-

way and first of three rose bushes. His wife, daughter, and everyone else were content to take the main, paved walkway up to the door. It was only a few extra feet, but Clay had made such a habit of cutting through the bushes that Pamela made him put down a couple of decorative, octagonal pea-gravel steps. It was just one of their many battles over the years.

Without knocking, he bursts into the house he once called home. Inside, he is confronted by Detectives Wilson and Cheval. The latter is so surprised by the intrusion he pulls his gun.

“Don't shoot him!” Pamela says from behind the detective. “Not fatally, anyway.” She moves to place a hand upon the detective's shoulder, then stops herself for fear this might cause him to pull the trigger.

“This,” she explains, “is the ex-husband I've been telling you about.”

“Not exes yet, Pam,” Clay smiles as he reflexively raises his hands in the air. “And don't believe whatever she's been saying about me, officers.”

“Detectives,” Cheval corrects him, sliding his gun back into its holster.

Whatever, Clay thinks as he steps past the detective. *If anyone's an intruder here, it's these detectives, not me!*

Aloud, he asks Pamela, “Any word yet on Jenna? She hasn't returned my calls or texts.”

Pam shakes her head, no.

“Has anyone checked her bedroom?” he continues. “Recently? She might've snuck back in. It's what I used to do to at her age.”

When everyone stares blankly at him, Clay shakes his head and says, "I'll go look."

The other detective, Wilson – tall, thin, blonde man a year or two older than Cheval – puts up a hand and says with a friendly smile, "We only just got here, ourselves. *I'll* check. You stay down here, please."

Watching him climb the stairs, Clay feels useless. *I need to be doing something!* He and Pamela had stupidly believed they could trust Jenna with her phone, so it has no tracking software. They have called everyone they can think of, with no luck. With the police now involved, of course, they are doing all they can, short of sending out search dogs.

He flops onto the couch. Pamela always hated how Clay would throw himself onto the furniture like that. "Can't you be more civilized?" she would complain. "You're like a teenager." To this, he would usually shrug, which infuriated her even more.

She is holding her tongue now, choosing instead to glare at him as she and Cheval stand together by the dining room table.

"What?" Clay asks. She shakes her head and looks for something else to occupy her gaze.

Detective Cheval picks up where Pamela left off, and a staring contest ensues. Clay is the first to look away and realizes that the couch he is sitting on is new. All the furniture is. Tufted upholstery, it's called, though to him it simply looks old-fashioned. A new coat of paint on the walls, too. A soft yellow color has replaced the light brown.

His attention eventually returns to Pamela herself, and he decides it's good to see her, despite the circumstances.

It has been months since they were last in the same room together. He almost forgot how much (in happier times) he loved those intelligent blue eyes, smiling face, long mane of wavy auburn hair now pulled back into a ponytail. He cannot help but smile, if only fleetingly, forgetting for the moment all the reasons they are no longer together.

Feeling the weight of his stare, Pamela snaps at him, “What?!”

Clay recoils.

She hadn't meant to snap like that, but just a second earlier Detective Cheval's hand had brushed up against her butt cheek, and she was trying to decide if it was an accident and whether or not she enjoyed it.

Oblivious to all that, Clay is once again focused on the décor. There is a black and white family portrait on the wall, featuring a smiling Pamela and Jenna... but no Clay. He then turns toward her just as Cheval is pulling a chair out and offering his assistance as she takes her seat at the dining room table.

Pamela smiles warmly before casting a smirk and an arched eyebrow at Clay.

At some point while racing over here, Clay found himself looking forward to saving the day. Finding Jenna. Being the hero. Being *Pamela's* hero... somehow. But, now he has been beaten to the punch by these detectives, Cheval in particular. She has obviously chosen the detective as her hero.

Too many angry words had passed between them. Even Clay can see that she is moving on with her life. Buying new furniture. Posing for family portraits without him. Flirting with *other* knights in *shinier* armor.

“Why call *me*,” he asks aloud as Cheval takes a seat next to her at the table, “if you're just gonna call the *cops*, anyway?”

“I'm sorry,” Pamela is sarcastic, “should I *not* have called you?!”

With a friendly pat on her hands, Cheval intercedes, “Come on, you two. This is not helping. Your daughter is missing. We need to work together.” Pamela nods and takes a firm grasp of the detective's hand.

Clay studies him, wondering what had transpired between these two before he arrived. They are awfully chummy. The man is younger and better-looking than Clay, but that's not saying much these days. There is a palpable animosity between the two men.

Clean-shaven with short dark-brown hair and eyes, Cheval has squeezed his athletic frame into a dark gray suit, lavender shirt, top button undone, no tie, and – as Clay can see under the table – matching lavender socks. He's dressed like “Crockett” or “Tubbs” in *Miami Vice* from twenty years ago. That look might still work in south Florida, Clay thinks, but this is suburban Saint Louis. *Maybe he's gay!*

As the partner, Detective Wilson – wearing dark blue slacks, plaid tie, white short-sleeved shirt and no jacket – descends the stairs, Cheval asks him, “Anything?”

Wilson shakes his head, “no.”

Clay thinks Wilson looks like a Mormon missionary, a look which, sadly, never worked anywhere outside of 1960s corporate America.

“Would you care to join us at the table?” Cheval asks Clay politely, despite the palpable tension between them. “We have a few questions.”

“No, I'm good here,” Clay says from the couch, just to be difficult. He knows they are only doing their jobs, but he does not appreciate the implication that he might be involved in his own daughter's disappearance.

They had implied no such thing, but that is how Clay sees it.

Wilson slides into a chair at the foot of the stairs, strategically positioning himself between Clay and the front door.

Clay keeps an eye on Cheval's hands under the table, guessing he'll play “bad cop.” He is disappointed when there is no “good cop, bad cop” charade. Both detectives are irritatingly polite and professional throughout the questioning.

“When did you leave town?” one of them asks Clay.

“Where have you been?” asks the other.

“Why Louisville?”

“Seems like a long way to go to buy a new car.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“Didn't know there was a local minor league soccer team to be head coach *of*,” Cheval says with a smirk.

Detective Wilson ends with, “Please don't leave town again until Jenna is found.”

With all questions more or less answered, the detectives fold up their notepads and prepare to leave.

Clay finds it odd that Cheval, a detective, would be unaware of his soccer team, or any semi-pro sports team in town. *Dude was just messing with me*, he decides, and lets

it go as he disappears into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. *These cops need to be out looking for Jenna*, he thinks, *not here asking stupid questions and implying that I'm a suspect!*

The detectives assure Pamela that they will be “looking into the matter” as she walks them to the door. Cheval leans in conspiratorially and hands Pamela his business card.

“Call me any time,” he says with a smile.

Wilson cringes at his partner's incessant womanizing. Pamela is flattered, but in no mood to be womanized.

Wilson picks up the soda can that Clay had been drinking from and surreptitiously seals it in a baggie to test later for fingerprints and DNA.

Pamela hears the back screen door slap up against its frame. *Did Clay just escape out the back?*

The detectives had been treating him like a suspect, but that never occurred to her until just this moment. Clay loved their little girl more than anything else on Earth, but he also had a temper. It never got to the point of violence, but could be pretty scary, nonetheless.

She now finds herself wondering if he *did* have anything to do with Jenna's disappearance. It *is* suspicious how he just happened to be out of town when Jenna went missing. She is about to express her concerns to the detectives when the front door bursts open.

Jenna has arrived. Laughing and stumbling over each other as they enter, blonde-haired Jenna and her mostly-brunette “posse” pull up short upon seeing the somber adults in front of them in the foyer.

Pamela closes her eyes briefly in relief and exclaims, “Jenna!” Toward the heavens, she mouths, *Thank you!* She would hug and kiss her wayward daughter but knows Jenna would be mortified by such overt affection in front of her friends. Pamela is left standing there bursting at the seams with joy.

The still-giggling Jenna points at the detectives and asks, “So, what’s with the 5-O?”

Pamela despises the *thug-speak* Jenna tends to include in her vocabulary – depending on who she is hanging out with – but she says nothing.

“You must be Jenna,” Detective Cheval oozes what he thinks is charm. “And I see you’re wearing a green silky top, and white Capri pants.”

Jenna gives him a dirty look and steps away from him.

“Your mother couldn’t remember exactly *what* you were wearing,” Detective Wilson explains with a smile. “My partner here is not as creepy as he sounds. Not this time.” He winks at the cringing Cheval.

Jenna nods absently. With her pretty face, blonde hair, and now-green eyes – that have morphed from their original gray over the years – she is used to men giving her lascivious looks.

Seeing the body language and stressed-out look on her mother’s face finally, Jenna asks, “Whoa, who died?”

“No one, honey,” Pamela says with a laugh, unable to keep from hugging her. “And no one has ever been happier to have their little girl back home!”

“Geez, mom,” Jenna is thoroughly embarrassed, as expected.

“Jenna!” Clay rushes into the living room with a shout.

“Dad!” Jenna is surprised. “I didn't know you were home! I saw your truck but thought it was *Barry's*.” The name “Barry” drips with derision. “I usually try to *sneak* in when *he's* around. Talk about creepy.”

Pamela wonders what Barry has ever done that creeped Jenna out, but says nothing. There is no hesitation from Jenna as she and her father rush into each other's arms and hug tightly.

Clay lifts her off her feet and spins her around like a small child.

Pamela knows Jenna has always preferred Clay over her from the moment they met at the orphanage, but in all these years – with people saying “She's just a daddy's girl! It's normal!” – it has never gotten any easier to accept. After failing to conceive their own child, it was Pamela's idea to adopt a child, not Clay's, after all. If either parent should be second fiddle, she thinks it should be Clay.

“Who's *Barry*?” Clay asks Pamela, mimicking Jenna's inflection as he lowers her to the ground. Jenna throws her father's hands out to his sides and pirouettes away like a ballerina like she used to do when she was small, before self-consciously glancing out the corner of her eye at her friends.

“Just someone I've been spending time with,” Pamela says, in no mood for a public discussion of her love life.

“A *lot* of time,” Jenna adds with a smile.

“Anyway,” Clay changes the subject. He doesn't want to hear about Pamela's love life, either. “Where have you *been* this whole time, Jenna? We've been worried sick!”

“Good to see you, too, Dad!” says Jenna.

“You know I love you, honey,” Clay continues, “but you've done this, what, three times now? Do we have to send you to a boarding school where there's no chance of escape?”

“How about prison?!” she counters, sneaking a smile at her friends. “The cops are already here. I'll just go with them!”

“Works for me!” Clay says, suddenly angry but not meaning a word of it.

He is looking for a reaction from Pamela when he realizes her hair is not just pulled into a ponytail. It's twelve inches shorter. “Your hair! You chopped it completely off!”

“Not completely,” Pamela replies with a smile. “You like it?” She knew he wouldn't.

“I *told* her not to do it,” Jenna adds, happy to not be the topic of discussion, for the moment.

Detective Wilson interjects, shaking his head, “Well, if there's nothing else, Ms. McGill...?”

“McGill?!” Clay interrupts. “You've gone back to your maiden name already?!”

Pamela shrugs, hoping it irritates Clay as much as his own shrugs used to irritate her.

Once the detectives and Jenna's friends are gone, Clay and Pamela are sitting on opposite ends of the same couch. Jenna is draped sideways across one of the chairs, with her legs dangling over the side. Normally, Pamela would complain about Jenna's posture – not to mention this abuse of her new furniture – but she is too drained to argue.

“We're still going to Russia, right?” Jenna then sits up excitedly as she broaches the subject of their impending “homeland tour.” They are due to leave next week.

“Ah, geez,” says Clay. “Let us recover from this latest drama before we have to think about that?”

He is not looking forward to returning to a country he never enjoyed in the first place. He was beginning to hope that this little episode would be the perfect excuse to call the whole thing off.

To be fair to Russia, Clay knows he must never forget that their last visit was not a vacation. It was not even a business trip. It was the second of two requisite trips for the purpose of adopting a child – a beautiful little girl – and it came with an inordinate amount of stress, uncertainty, and time spent dealing with Russia's infamous bureaucracy. He and Pamela were too focused on the adoption process the entire time to properly appreciate their host country as typical tourists might have.

He laughed now at how well their experience summed up Russia fairly well: You never know what you'll get. Or, as Winston Churchill famously said, “Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.”

They had gone over there expecting to meet and adopt a brown-haired four-year-old boy, only to end up with a two-year-old blonde girl. And, while Clay was pleasantly surprised at the time, Pamela was ecstatic. *Beyond* ecstatic.

During that second, final visit – after the court appearance in which the adoption was approved – there were two weeks of limbo spent waiting for the official paperwork to be finalized. Pamela and Clay were convinced that those

two weeks were a cynical ploy to keep adoptive parents “in country” and spending as much money as possible.

The new parents came out of the experience hoping – half jokingly – to convince their daughter that she was born in The Bahamas so they could “return” there when the time came for this homeland tour. No such luck.

In Pamela's living room now, Clay says to Jenna, “Think about it, honey. The three of us... together in Russia... after all this?”

“I'm with your father on this,” Pamela says. “I don't even want to *think* about that right now.”

“You see there?!” Jenna laughs triumphantly. “I've already got you two agreeing on something! I should be a marriage counselor or something! But, seriously, it's all arranged and paid for. We can't back out now!”

Clay knows she's right. He had concerns about the trip before any of this latest drama, but now keeps that to himself. There is no point worrying aloud and putting such thoughts out there.

Their current situation reminds him of one of his soccer matches. There, as coach, he makes plans and sets goals, of course, but once the game starts you just deal with whatever comes up, make adjustments, and hope for the best. That's all he can do here.

Clay is back at work on the soccer field the next day telling his assistant coaches every possible thing they might need to know while he is absent. As his players perform drills nearby, Clay and the other coaches shout corrections and encouragement at them. When one of the players misses a

wide-open header into the net, Clay shouts “You can do better, Justin! See the ball, *be* the ball!”

He is still shaking his head when another unwelcome call from Pamela comes in. She again forgoes the customary hello and announces, “I won't be making the trip. Sorry, but you and Jenna will be on your own in Russia. I feel terrible, but there's no way around it.”

“What?! How convenient!” Clay snaps before lowering his voice and turning away from his fellow coaches. “Well, I guess now you, Barry, and *Miami Vice* can have quality time together while *your daughter* and I are trying to stay in one piece on the other side of the world!”

Clay always regrets such outbursts, but she caught him at work in “coach” mode. If a key player had come to him just prior to a match with such an excuse, the words out of his mouth would have been a lot worse.

“A little melodramatic, aren't we?” Pamela says with a smirk. “It's not a war zone over there.”

He ignores her. As head coach of a soccer team, Clay is good at dealing with young men, not women, especially his head-strong young daughter. He is more upset at the prospect of going it alone with her so far away from “civilization.” He and Pamela have always agreed it is best to have their little darling outnumbered. Double-teamed, as it were. That concept alone, in fact, is what kept the unhappy couple together longer than they might have otherwise.

More than anything else, though, he was hoping this homeland tour could double as a “marriage reconciliation tour.” As he hangs up, Clay makes a mental note to stop saying things he later regrets. He thought he had already overcome this failing, but obviously not.

Until his daughter came into his life, he almost never acknowledged even *having* character flaws. Like a walking, talking, full-length mirror, however, Jenna had made him aware of a wide variety of unsightly personality blemishes over the years.

He must set a better example.

On departure day, Jenna is in the shower when Clay comes to pick her up. *That girl lives in the shower*, he thinks. He once looked forward to a much lower water bill after she moved out, but now that is Pamela's problem.

He kills time snooping around her bedroom; nothing too intrusive, just your normal parental snooping. She has left a Russian genealogy web page up on her computer screen. It is written in Cyrillic, which might as well be hieroglyphics to Clay. On a notepad to the right of the keyboard Jenna has scrawled several names, also in Cyrillic; some scratched out, some circled. Clay had no idea she could read and write Russian so well.

She comes out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel just as Clay is trying to get a closer look at her Cyrillic scribbling. "A little privacy, please!" she snaps and quickly turns off the monitor and flips the notepad face-down with one hand while keeping her towel up with the other.

"OK," he puts his hands up in surrender. "But, is there anything you need to tell me? You know I hate surprises, especially in foreign countries!"

"Nothing at all!" she says a little too forcefully. "Why do you ask?"

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“Who's Maksim?” he asks. He had deciphered that much from the scribbling on the notepad. The fact that it was underlined several times brought it to his attention.

“Just this guy,” she says unconvincingly. A guilty look crosses her face. “A pen pal helping me to learn Russian.”

It is obvious she is not being completely forthcoming, but Clay lets it go. Girls like to have their little secrets, he tells himself. Let her have this one.

It can't be anything too terrible.

Homeland Tour

From Saint Louis to New York to Moscow to Astrakhan, the much-anticipated (or dreaded, depending on who is asked) trip begins. The last visit to Astrakhan lasted twenty-eight days and felt like an incarceration. Under normal circumstances, they might have behaved more like typical tourists –sight-seeing, and all that – but neither Pamela nor Clay saw that as an option. The never-ending below-freezing temperatures made sight-seeing unbearable. Sure, they could stay indoors with museums, and such, but felt their time would be best spent staying in one spot, keeping things simple, just puttering around the hotel while getting to know their two-year-old bundle of joy.

It is proving difficult, but Clay is now trying to keep a good attitude, trying to find a bright side to everything that comes up. Before any trip, he tends to worry, though he likes to call it “maintaining a heightened awareness of anything and everything that could possibly go wrong.” That’s not worry, he says, that’s preparedness!

He spends most of the eleven-hour flight across the Atlantic convincing himself that their time in Russia will go as “smooth as glass,” his favorite saying. They’ll be fine. It’s like being thrown into the water. Once you’re in, it’s sink or swim. And he has never been the type to sink.

Now he’s conflicted. Should his mantra be “smooth as glass” or “sink or swim?” *So many metaphors to choose from.* It doesn’t matter. What does matter is that he keeps a positive attitude.

This calls for some visualization exercises. With his eyes closed, listening to the audio portion of the adoption video he made fifteen years prior – with its wide variety of music genres – he envisions himself and Jenna as just another couple of tourists in Russia. The audio is setting the tone, the expectation level. Everything is going smoothly, he predicts confidently, same as it did the first time. Jenna is getting this itch out of her system.

He had done this exercise at home – envisioning the three of them returning as one big happy family – but, with Pamela now out of the picture they will be returning as a happy father-daughter team. That's the new plan. *Go team!*

Jenna, meanwhile, is thinking through her own plans for Russia – most of which have not been shared with her father. She wonders if Maksim has found what she asked for. She also wonders if he is as cute in person as he is online.

Just prior to landing in Moscow, Clay is idly thumbing through his passport when he notices that his tourist visa is good for only one week. “That can't be right,” he mumbles. He knows that Jenna's is good for 30 days.

“*Govna!*” he uses a recently-learned Russian expletive, followed by, “*No bueno!*”

“Wait,” Jenna feigns confusion, “are we going to Russia or Spain? Ooh, can we go to Spain after?!”

Clay rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

Upon arrival at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport that evening, Clay is apprehensive. Fifteen years ago he was afraid to go anywhere in Russia without his “papers.”

Never sure of the consequences if caught lacking, he didn't want to find out then and doesn't want to find out now. He knew it might be an unfounded fear stemming from the anti-Russian propaganda Americans endured while growing up during the Cold War – and again now – but the thought of green-and-red-uniformed Russian officials throwing him into the gulag was, and still is, a very real concern.

The jet has stopped moving, and the captain has turned off the “fasten seat belts” sign. Everyone is getting up to leave. Clay is in the aisle seat, with an empty one between him and Jenna in her window seat. He lets her out ahead of him, and is about to fall in behind her, when something sparkles in the corner of his eye. He glances over to see that she has left a bracelet on her seat.

“Jenna, wait, your bracelet!” She either ignores or doesn't hear him over all the chattering of passengers getting up and pulling their bags down from the overhead compartments. He reaches over to retrieve the piece of jewelry. Several passengers get ahead of him, rushing to deplane, and there are now a dozen people between him and Jenna.

She looks back, smiles and indicates through exaggerated pantomime that she will wait for him at the gate. Her antics make him laugh despite himself.

As she disappears into the crowd, off the plane and out of sight, he is still smiling until a moment of panic hits him. It makes no sense. He'll see her again in a minute. *When is panic ever logical?* These mini panic attacks have been happening more and more lately.

You need to get over it! he scolds himself as he stuffs the bracelet into his pants pocket and hurries to catch up with her.

Jenna, on the other hand, is positively glowing, she is so happy to be back in Russia. As she emerges out of the jet-way into the open spaces of the international terminal, she falls in love with the cacophony of swirling humanity as she joyously breathes it all in.

Finally back in my mother country! she thinks. *I'm back home!*

“It's a shame no one put up a 'Welcome Home' banner,” she jokes once her dad rejoins her. Clay laughs. He is happy she is enjoying herself, but even happier to have her back within sight.

As he made clear to her earlier, this trip is *entirely* for *her* benefit. *He* would have preferred The Bahamas, or almost anywhere else, but at least for this visit to Russia, it's summertime and will be just ten days, not twenty-eight.

She studies the hairstyles and attire of everyone, especially the women, her competition. She listens to the many languages, not just Russian, being spoken around her as she soaks in all the sights, smells and sounds.

The terminal's impossibly-tall windows let in all of the sunlight, making the colors around her that much more brilliant. She is surprised by the brightness of the sun, given that it is past 8 p.m. Then she remembers how close they are to the North Pole.

Who would have thought an airport could be so enchanting? she thinks. Aloud, she says, “Hey, isn't this where that whistle-blower Edward Snowden landed?”

“I think so,” Clay answers absently. He can't relax. *How are we going to get through Passport Control, he wonders, when they see our visas are not for the same duration?!* He hopes they will not care, but when dealing with bureaucrats, one should assume the worst. *Prepare for the worst and hope for the best,* he likes to say. In this case, he assumes they *will* make things difficult. It's what bureaucrats do, especially in this country.

Clay walks in a straight line, following signs as they progress forward, while his daughter spins slow circles with every new thing that catches her attention. This continues for several yards before they find themselves descending stairs into the Passport Control area.

After a few minutes, the Americans are at the front of the line. With a gulp, Clay steps up to the booth to face his “executioner” – a bored young man dressed in a white shirt, green tie and matching jacket, and sitting on a stool behind bullet-proof glass. The man is in absolutely no hurry as he takes Clay's passport. Everything is in slow motion. Clay gets the impression the slow pace is not in the spirit of thoroughness, but in the interest of slowness itself. If someone is in a hurry and these proceedings are interfering with that, Clay guesses this officer would consider that a bonus.

Meanwhile, the traveler at the front of the line to their right is busy digging through one of his bags, failing to notice that it is his turn to step forward. People behind him are saying “Next!” in several languages which the man apparently does not speak. Jenna sees this, smiles mischievously, and takes his place at that window, because she can. The dour, middle-aged woman behind the glass sees what Jenna has done, but does not seem to care.

A moment later, with a sigh of relief, Clay's fears are proved to be unfounded as he and Jenna are allowed to progress unmolested into “glorious” Mother Russia. After Baggage Claim and another paperwork checkpoint through which they are mercifully waved forward without inspection, Clay and Jenna weave their way through the crowd of *other* people's families, friends, lovers and connections.

Clay scans the signs held aloft, hoping for one with his name on it, but there is none. He had arranged to meet an interpreter/guide upon arrival. Jenna was missing her “Welcome Home” sign, and now Clay sees nothing with *his* name on it.

“We'll just have to get used to the fact that no one gives a damn,” he jokes.

Jenna is not listening. She is intent on soaking in all things Russian and not Dad-related.

After twenty minutes of fending off swarming cabbies and their persistent offers for a ride, Clay is ready to give in and say yes when an attractive, thirty-something, hazel-eyed, brunette woman in tight pants and heels approaches.

Yes! he thinks to himself.

The woman has an uncertain smile, as if not sure she has found the right man. She holds up a photo and compares Clay's visage against it. After a moment, she smiles wide and introduces herself as Sofia Ponomaryova, their long-awaited interpreter/guide. “Please call me Sofia,” she says. One of the few things she learned in her last-minute training was that most Americans prefer informality. Something else she was told, explicitly, was to make physical contact

with Clay as much as possible. When she made a face and asked why, she was told, “Just do it!”

Clay expects her to apologize for her tardiness, but she does not. Instead – standing much too close, with no sense of personal space – she tilts her head back and smiles up at Clay. Involuntarily taking a step back, Clay smiles and introduces himself as “Clay... as in 'mud.'”

Sofia stares blankly. The corners of her mouth come down briefly before she forces the smile back into place. Jenna takes pity and explains with a laugh, “My father is trying to be funny.”

“Ah, yes, of course,” Sofia laughs unconvincingly, not getting whatever humor might have been hidden within Clay's words.

When Clay tries to say “Pleased to meet you” in Russian, he actually says, “I have a camel!”

Jenna laughs out loud before covering her mouth.

Again, Sofia is confused. “Another joke?” she asks Jenna for help.

“What did you *mean* to say, Dad? Just say it in English.”

Clay explains, everyone laughs, and he changes the subject. “Now that we've had a good laugh at my expense, let's get down to business. My visa only seems to be good for one week.”

“Oh, that is not long enough,” Sofia states the obvious with great confidence, once again stepping in too close. She stands beside him with her hip pressing against his leg as she takes his passport for a closer look.

“I never noticed,” he says, “until the flight coming over.” He is conflicted with the impulse to step back to a

more respectable distance versus his animal instinct to get closer to this increasingly attractive woman. It has been so long since he has been intimate with a woman. The top of her head is right under Clay's nose. Her hair smells nice.

“You are right,” Sofia speaks, breaking the spell. “This is terrible. We must take care of this immediately.” She finally breaks contact with him. “Russia is not a country to be without proper paperwork.”¹

“So I've heard.”

Sofia is now accompanied by a man who Clay can only assume is their driver – a plump, pinched- faced, dark-haired man half again as old as Sofia. Clay had not noticed him until now. Together, they lead the way to the outside parking lot. They are speaking in hushed tones when Jenna overhears the word “*mudak*,” meaning “jerk” (to put it mildly). She is not sure to whom Sofia is referring until the driver looks guiltily at Jenna.

They cannot possibly be referring to me! Jenna thinks. *I've been on my best behavior the entire few minutes they've known me.*

¹ , the animal instinct wins out.

Now beyond her father's peripheral vision, Jenna mer- rily watches his interaction with Ms. Ponomaryova

With a furtive glance around – oblivious to Jenna's spy- ing – he inhales deeply, breathing in as much of Sofia's scent as he can.

A voice in his head – sounding a lot like his wife – says, *Sniff her butt while you're at it, you dog!*

Jenna's eyes go wide with surprise before she turns away in embarrassment.

The driver's expression changes into a very open and friendly one as he addresses Jenna. "I am sorry," he says in English, "but my associate Ms. Ponomaryova did not properly introduce us. My name is Vitaly. I will be your driver."

He does not reveal his last name. With a friendly smile, he asks Jenna in Russian, "Do you speak Russian?"

"*Nee mnoga*" (Not much), Jenna lies. She has always had a knack for languages, and Russian has become a strong second tongue for her.

"Know any bad words?" he persists in English. "I always want to learn bad words of languages." He winks at Clay. Clay frowns. Sofia gives Vitaly an exasperated look.

"You mean like '*mudak*'?" Jenna replies in perfect Russian, smiling. "Yes. I am familiar with that one."

Sofia turns away, her face beet red. Clay knows only one expletive, used earlier, and is thus blissfully ignorant of the content of this conversation. She takes him by the arm and, with her most endearing smile says, "You have hired me as your guide. So, please, let me guide you!"

"Like a seeing-eye dog," Jenna mutters under her breath. Vitaly chuckles.

"Please do," says Clay. If he didn't know better, he might think he was smitten. *More like desperate*, the voice in his head rebukes him.

Approaching the parking lot as Jenna is stepping off the curb, Vitaly quickly, almost violently, grabs her by the arm. Clay begins to protest until he realizes Vitaly has just saved her from being hit by a car. Shouting insults at the offending driver – a fellow cabbie – Vitaly turns to Jenna and

says, “You must watch for crazy drivers. You are in Moscow now – the big city!”

“Good to know,” Jenna says with a smile. “*Spaseeba.*” (Thank you.)

“I’d forgotten about that,” Clay chimes in. “Russians are the craziest drivers.”

“Not as bad as New York!” says Vitaly, now obliged to defend his countrymen. “I know. I made a visit to my cousin last year. I was almost killed! Two times!”

“But that’s New York,” Clay argues. “If you’re not almost killed at least once, you never really visited.”

Getting into Vitaly’s cab, Sofia instructs Jenna to sit up front to allow her and her father “some privacy” in back. Jenna does not normally tolerate being ordered around, but is happy to keep her distance away from whatever is going on between this woman and her father. It was bad enough seeing her mother actively dating since the separation; but even worse watching her father do all the stupid things best left to teenagers like herself.

Vitaly unintentionally gives them all a lesson in Russian curse words as he navigates Moscow’s horribly congested traffic on the way to the hotel. Sofia acts as a counter-balance to Vitaly by happily reciting the many virtues of the “world’s greatest city,” her home, Moscow. She occasionally tells Vitaly which exit to take in order to pass through more interesting scenery, and Vitaly only occasionally vetoes her, citing traffic issues.

Every chance she gets, as instructed, Sofia physically touches Clay. His shoulder, arm, knee... his upper thigh. Clay cannot recall a more enjoyable taxi ride.

In Moscow, near Red Square and the Kremlin, Clay and Jenna are at an outdoor table having a late dinner. The underground mall is directly beneath them. Sofia is off somewhere taking care of Clay's visa problem – without him, which makes no sense, but this is Russia, where not much of anything makes sense.

As Jenna and Clay sip their soft drinks – with Clay wishing his was a beer – he cannot help but notice the absurd number of beautiful women passing by. It is as if a fashion show has just let out. He remembers this from last time. There are so many attractive Russian *women*, but the *men*? Not so much.

Jenna warns her father. “You know she's just playing you, right?”

“Who, Sofia? Don't worry about me. I'm a big boy. But, what does she have to gain by 'playing' me?”

“Money, favors, lure you into a dark alley and steal your wallet; whatever. But, why did you hire her? Between the two of us, we speak enough Russian to get by.”

“I don't know. I guess she's my security blanket.”

Under *the blankets is where you want to be with her*, Jenna thinks but keeps that to herself.

What Clay doesn't say is that while *Jenna's* language skills may be enough to get by, *his* are not good at all. And what if – God forbid – she goes missing here in Russia? He would be up a creek without a paddle, or whatever the Russian equivalent is.

A man and his toddler daughter pass by, evoking an old memory. “Remember,” Clay begins, “and this is going *way* back to those first few months we were home from Russia,

but you always wanted to go outside? Even when it was freezing?”

“Freezing temperature to Russian girl,” Jenna jokes in a fake Russian accent, “like springtime to anyone else.” Dropping the accent, she adds, “But, no, I don't remember that.”

“You always wanted to go *somewhere*,” he continues. “I guess *that* hasn't changed. But you would say in Russian with that charming little smile, '*Pajoom!*' I didn't know what it meant, exactly, but could guess it meant 'come on!' Well, I recently learned that I was right, though it's pronounced '*pa idyem.*'”

“O... kay...” she says in that “why should I care?” tone of voice.

“I know,” he admits, “that was out of the blue. It just came to me, and I had always wondered, so thought I would share.” It is now his turn to do a fake voice as he adds in his best throaty, overly-dramatic movie-trailer voice, “It's like a puzzle from long ago, finally solved!”

“Whatever, Dad,” she rolls her eyes. “But just so you know, I was saying it right. That was my Astrakhan accent.”

At the curb of their hotel, Sofia is first out of the cab and leading the way to the front desk. Jenna leaves her father to deal with the luggage so that she can run past Sofia and be first inside. She is tired of following Sofia's lead. At the counter, in impressive Russian, Jenna introduces herself and asks if their rooms are ready.

Sofia smiles knowingly and watches in amusement. Jenna has, naturally, singled out and is dealing with the

only male behind the counter, ignoring the three young women. Sofia is smiling because she knows this young man will not be of much help, no matter how cute he is. He is the bellhop who just happened to be behind the counter when Jenna arrived and zeroed in on him.

Clay trudges in, loaded down with luggage, smiling wearily after a difficult navigation through the hotel's double set of doors. The bellhop apologizes and explains that he would have helped had Jenna not intercepted him.

The bellboy then says with a pout to Jenna that he has a depressingly limited role here at the hotel. There is so much more he could do, he says, if they would only let him.

Jenna, now realizes the boy's lowly status, but maintains a cool exterior, feeling foolish for wasting her time. She turns, reluctantly, to one of the female desk clerks. The pretty, dark-haired young woman – whose name tag reads “Marina” – pretends to not have already heard Jenna's entire story as Jenna repeats it.

Clay is honestly impressed that she is taking charge. He wants to encourage such initiative, and so lets her take care of the arrangements while he strolls around the lobby. When Sofia joins him he asks if she would like to have a drink at the hotel bar later. Jenna can stay up in the room, he says.

With a smile, Sofia avoids the question and informs him that she has just overheard Jenna reserving two *separate* rooms, and made sure the bellhop knew which one Jenna would be in. He returns to the counter, exasperated, and explains to Jenna that they only need one room. If she's worried about privacy, he says, she can change in the

bathroom. “Or, I can stand out in the hall while you change. I don't care, but I'm not going to spend all my money on this... 'vacation' paying for separate rooms.”

With faux-remorse, Jenna says, “Oops! My bad!”

Sofia waits patiently by the elevators. The waning sun now casts her in a subdued light perfectly accentuating her delicate features. Every man who walks by, Clay included, gives her a look or a smile. Clay rejoins her and asks again about that drink. He is not normally so aggressive, but something about being on the other side of the world in the company of a beautiful woman – knowing that Pamela is moving on with her own love life – has made him eager to try a new approach to things.

Sofia is again declining his offer, explaining, with apologies as Jenna catches up to them, that she simply *must* get back to her sick mother as soon as possible. She is kind enough to verify that the Americans' accommodations are confirmed for the night, but it is time to go. She kisses Clay once on each cheek and promises to pick them up in the morning.

Seeing the look in her father's eyes, Jenna feigns a gag reflex at both of them. With their guide now gone, Jenna says, “Pfft! Sick mother. Right. I can't tell you how many times I've used that line. 'I simply *must* get back to poor ol' mumsy!’” she uses an English accent for some reason. In her normal voice, she adds, “With moves like that, Dad, how did you and mom *ever* hook up?”

Clay tries to ignore the comment, but knows she's right. He could never be accused of being smooth with the ladies, but hopes she is wrong this time. He smiles at the thought.

Last Train Out *by William Arthur Holmes*

Jenna knows that smile. Sofia must have whispered something in his ear, and he believed whatever she said. Men are so easy to manipulate. Of course, that has always worked well for her, but she expects her own father to display a little more skill with women. It's embarrassing.

Sofia returns to Vitaly, waiting outside in the cab. "Done for the night?" he asks as she gets in.

"Yes!" she exhales. "I had no *idea* being a tour guide could be so exhausting! Let's go home!"

Finally, Vitaly thinks silently, I have you all to myself!

Smithereens

The next day at Sheremetyevo's domestic terminal – a run-down old Soviet-era thing, nothing like its more modern international terminal – Clay and Jenna are dropped off and left to fend for themselves until Sofia can return from “an important errand.”

One of the baggage inspectors – a large, middle-aged woman – yells at Clay for placing an item in the wrong spot. He had forgotten about this typical Russian rudeness coming from those who deal with the public. Luckily, this and the tendency to run people down in the street are the only unattractive qualities he can think of with regard to Russians, otherwise perfectly wonderful people. *No worse than New Yorkers*, he agrees with Vitaly's earlier sentiment.

The woman then yells at him again for not moving through the line fast enough. This time he laughs and says, “*Eez veneetya!*” (Excuse me!).

Jenna steps in. As she and her father are leaving, she snaps at the woman in Russian, “I can see why they keep you here in the domestic terminal away from the more civilized travelers.”

Clay is oblivious to this parting shot, though he does wonder why Jenna is grabbing his arm and urging him away as quickly as possible.

A few minutes later, Clay spots Sofia down the hall talking to an unfamiliar man. “*There's* our so-called guide,” he snorts.

Seeing Clay, the man scowls, turns, and escapes around a corner. Sofia smiles and waves before the man's arm reaches out and pulls her back, out of sight.

“Boyfriend, I guess,” Clay says to Jenna as he turns around. She is not there, and he panics a second until spotting her a short distance away.

Dressed in a flower print blouse, blue jeans, sandals, and her purse across her shoulder, she is window-shopping at one of the airport stores. She glances in his direction and smiles a particularly sweet and charming smile.

She is such a beautiful young lady, he thinks. If she only knew how important she is to me. God help me keep the boys down to a manageable few.

He is waving and smiling at his precious child when the unthinkable happens. At the far end of the hallway near her, there is a massive explosion. The last image he has of her – before the entire space fills with black smoke – is one of her throwing her arms up to cover her face, then crumpling to the floor.

Debris is everywhere. Bits of ceiling tile, fixtures and live electrical wires are falling down around him as he sprints toward his stricken daughter. The smoke clears just enough for him to locate her prone body sprawled several yards away from where she had been moments earlier. Another wave of smoke then obscures everything again.

An involuntary “No!” escapes his lips as he navigates through the now-frantic crowd.

Airport security and black-clad military personnel are soon swarming the area. They have materialized out of nowhere, like ethereal beings, from the clouds of smoke.

Kneeling down as he reaches Jenna, Clay sees that she is remarkably intact, almost unscathed. She is dead, though. He is sure of it. Tears pour down his cheeks as he cries out, “Jenna! What have they done?!”

He moves in to check for a pulse, but stops himself when he sees eye movement beneath her lids. He catches his breath. She then opens her eyes and coughs.

“You’re alive!” he shouts. He lifts her head onto his lap and holds her still, afraid to move her. “Jenna,” he asks through dissipating tears, “are you okay? Are you hurt?”

She shakes her head, no. That she can shake her head at all is a good sign but he doesn’t know which question she is answering. He rephrases it. “*Where* does it hurt?”

“*Ya ne bol’na*” (I’m not hurt) she replies in Russian. He thinks he understands, but why is she speaking Russian?

She tries to stand up. “Careful,” he says in English, before adding in Russian, “*Astarozhne.*” She allows him to help her up, only to then fight him off so she can walk unassisted. Under her own power, she lasts just two steps before clutching his arm and allowing him to lead her back to the bench where he had earlier set their bags.

He now feels like a football blocker protecting her against the melee of panic-stricken travelers. “I was a good blocker back in the day,” he says aloud, but Jenna is not listening.

The bench is occupied except for a little bit of space at one end. “Just enough room,” Clay jokes, “for a skinny-butt girl like you.”

Something is missing, he thinks. “Our bags! I left them right here! Son of a...” his voice trails off. “My phone was in there!”

Before leaving home, Clay had bought each of them a disposable international “burner” phone, giving them the option to *not* use their “real” phones, should they choose, in this part of the world infamous for its hackers. “It’s always good to have options,” he said at the time. It is his “real” phone that is now missing. Jenna should still have both of hers.

She only gives him a confused look. A moment later, he is on one knee with one hand absently on *her* knee, scanning the area for their bags and maybe a place to get her something to drink. “Are you okay?” he asks again.

Her response is to push his hand off her knee. His feelings are hurt, but he lets it go. *She is still in shock*, he tells himself. *There’s no telling how she might react to things.*

Both of them are trying to come to grips with what has just happened – is *still* happening – when a security guard walks up and hands Jenna a bottle of water. She gladly accepts, in flawless Russian, saying, “Exactly what I needed! Thank you!”

Other than “thank you,” Clay does not know what she said, though his feelings are hurt once again. She is being friendlier with this stranger than she is with *him*. The man asks in Russian, “And you, sir? Are you okay?”

It takes Clay a moment to translate this in his head. “Yes,” he says in English, nodding, before adding in Russian, “*Spaseeba.*”

“*Americansky?!*” the man asks with a friendly smile.

“*Da.*” (Yes.)

The man reaches into his backpack for another bottle of carbonated water and hands it to Clay. Clay prefers “still” (non-carbonated) water, but beggars can’t be choosers. It

will serve to wash the smoke and dust from his throat. With another smile, the security man says “*da zvedanya*” (goodbye), and moves on.

Clay is trying to think of something besides asking how she's feeling to say to Jenna. He settles on complimenting her Russian language skills. She eyes him warily while drinking her water. She has not looked at him like this since they first met at the orphanage. It is disconcerting. *What did that blast do to her?*

Then, as mysteriously as it had started, it stops. A more familiar look returns to her eyes, and she asks in English, “What happened, Dad?”

“*There's* my American daughter!” Clay sighs with relief. “Don't you remember, honey? There was a bomb. And then some ass... someone stole our bags.”

Shaking her head, she says, “Bomb?” But Clay does not have to explain. She can see the destruction for herself.

“That's twice now in the past two weeks where I thought I'd lost you,” he continues. “We're not taking any more chances. Forget this 'homeland tour!' Let's just go home!”

“But we *are* home, papa!” Jenna replies. She has not called him “papa” since the age of three.

“Home, my butt,” he says. “This isn't home. You don't see an Ace Hardware or even a Starbucks anywhere, do you? I've barely seen anything in our own alphabet.”

“We passed at least one Starbucks on the way over here,” she counters, “and a KFC and Subway, all of them in the English alphabet.”

He shakes his head, knowing he will lose this argument, and changes the subject. “Where's Sofia?”

“I am right here,” the woman in question smiles as she comes up from behind them.

“Where have you been?” Clay asks.

She holds up a Starbucks latté as proof of where.

“It took you all this time to get coffee?”

“I had to... um...” she struggles for an explanation, but is rescued when two soldiers – a man and woman – show up, barking out orders. Clay notices several teams like them; each pair apparently tasked with herding travelers out of the terminal.

Clay and his group are complying with their marching orders when he says, “Wait, our luggage!”

“You said it was stolen,” Jenna is confused, still groggy.

“Those were our carry-on bags. I'm talking about the suitcases.”

“Forget it,” says Sofia. “The explosion came from someone's luggage at our gate. It is all now... what is the word... smithereens.”

Clay and Jenna both wonder how Sofia could be privy to such information. She sees the question in their eyes, and addresses Clay. “We are at war, Mr. Desno... Clay,” she lightly caresses his arm, which noticeably soothes his nerves. “No one knows,” she continued, “who is involved, exactly. We must all be careful.”

Jenna has tears in her eyes as Sofia speaks of terrorism. This sort of thing is not supposed to happen in her beautiful Russia. Seeing this, Clay wraps a comforting arm around her.

“Did you notice,” she then whispers into her dad's ear, “how Sofia never said whose side *she* is on in this so-called 'war?'”

This makes Clay suspicious for a moment before dismissing the idea as silly.

At the exit, everyone is scrutinized and scanned by a hand-held wand, then sniffed by a bomb-sniffing dog. Clay remembers a documentary he saw on these dogs bred in Russia specifically for this task. Neither he nor the dogs' handlers, however, are now in the mood for a conversation on the subject. At random intervals, people are pulled aside for further questioning, but apparently no one in Clay's group is deemed suspicious. That, alone, makes Jenna even more leery of Sofia. Are they getting special treatment because of their? If so, why?

By the time they are outside on the sidewalk, Jenna seems to have made a complete recovery. In the short time it takes to exit the building, she has stops leaning on Dad; stops crying; and, her more typically confident, determined look has returned to her eyes. She surprises Clay when she insists, "Despite everything, Dad, we *must* keep going. Now, more than ever! We must go to Astrakhan."

He shakes his head and begins, "I really don't..."

"But we've come this far!"

He shakes his head again.

"...spent all this money," she continues, "gone to all this trouble. To turn around now would be a travesty!"

"A travesty?" he asks. "You've taken too many drama classes."

They are now in the parking lot, standing like castaways on a four-inch-high concrete island. Clay is waving

at and getting no response from any cabs. He wonders aloud if there is a *Russian* way to successfully hail a cab.

Jenna smiles at the thought of pretending to know the answer. She comes up with an embarrassing way for him to hail a cab, but thinks better of it and refrains from saying anything. She is still trying to convince him to stay in Russia. Pulling a prank now would not help her cause.

Why is it, she wonders, suddenly philosophical, the greatest opportunities in life so often present themselves only when it is completely inappropriate to take advantage?

“You’ll make a great lawyer someday, honey,” says Clay. “You’re so persistent and good at arguing your case.” He knows she had not made an especially strong case, but his coaching instincts compel him to give words of encouragement, nonetheless. She *is* persistent, he has to give her that.

She smiles and looks up at him. “So... what’s your answer?” She holds her gaze for maximum effect.

After a moment under her withering stare, Clay, with a defeated groan, caves in. “All right, all right, we’ll continue on to Astrakhan! Can’t let the terrorists win, and all that, right?”

“Yes!” she says, pumping her fist. She then does a little impromptu dance, chanting, “*Continuing on to As-trakhan! Continuing on to As-tra-khan!*”

Clay sincerely hopes he does not regret his decision. Turning to Sofia, he asks, “Is there at least a *train* we can take?”

She is on the phone and does not immediately answer. Once she does, she seems offended. “Of *course* there is a

train, but it will be a 20 to 30 hour trip, depending on your train.”

“Twenty to thirty hours?!” Clay exclaims. “Don't you have bullet trains here like in Europe?”

“This *is* Europe,” Sofia says, again insulted. To herself, she mutters in Russian, “Stupid Americans don't know simple geography!” She glances at Jenna in case she overheard, but Jenna is not listening. To Clay, she adds, “The *Sapsan* – our bullet train – does not go to Astrakhan, but there is an *express* train. It will take 20 hours.”

“'Express' train taking 20 hours?” Clay is incredulous. “I am not going to sit on a train for 20, let alone 30 hours! Do these people on these trains ever go crazy and just jump...?”

He makes an attempt at humor, but his voice trails off. After surviving a terrorist attack, the thought of anyone jumping off a train or being injured in any way is just not funny.

“Americans are too impatient!” Sofia scolds him. “Besides, you don't have *any* bullet trains in your country!”

“Good point,” Clay has to admit. “Aren't there three or four major airports in Moscow?”

“Yes,” she says. “Domodedovo might have a flight to Astrakhan.”

“Book it!” he says without hesitation.

“I am not your travel agent,” Sofia again scolds him. To herself, she wonders how much longer she can keep up this façade as his dutiful courtier.

“I'm sorry,” he apologizes. “I got excited. Will you *please* call a travel agent and have it arranged?”

“Yes,” she smiles. “And thank you for apologizing. Most men do not know how.” Again, she touches his arm, but this time it is *she* who enjoys it, and she is genuinely surprised.

Seeing this, Jenna chimes in, “Back home, he’s *always* doing something he has to apologize for. So, yeah, he’s gotten pretty good at it.” And she smiles that charming little smile like just before the explosion.

Clay hopes that smile will not be forever tied in his mind to the horrifying image of her falling to the floor in a cloud of smoke. Getting a little choked up now, he says in a sober, appreciative tone, “I’m glad to see you’re back to your smart-ass old self, Jen.”

A few minutes later, a taxi pulls up and offers them a ride. Clay steps down from their little concrete island. He has his hand on the door handle when Sofia stops him. “This is not our ride.”

She tells the cabbie through the open passenger window to move along, but the man is insistent. “Come on, get in!” he shouts, almost angrily, before smiling as if belatedly remembering his manners. Clay cannot see the man’s face from this angle, or know what he is saying, but his tone has convinced Clay he will take Sofia’s advice and *not* get in.

“Why can’t we take this one?” Jenna asks.

“You want to ride with a crazy cabbie who yells at his customers?” Clay asks. Jenna shrugs.

Another cab then shows up, honking his horn at the first one to get out of the way. Sofia leads the Americans to this second cab, saying, “*This* is our ride.”

The first cabbie shouts something ugly out the window, then speeds off. Neither Jenna nor Clay ever got a good look at him, but Sofia did. He is familiar from somewhere, though she can't quite place him. It is not from anywhere good, she knows that much.

Sofia slides into the front seat in this second cab while Clay and Jenna pile into the back. Their driver is the now-familiar Vitaly.

"Jenna and... Americansky!" Vitaly greets them with a forced, patronizing cheeriness.

Funny how he remembers her name but not mine, Clay thinks. They were in his cab just this morning on the way here from the hotel. Vitaly did seem a bit preoccupied this morning, Clay now recalls. He was quiet between the hotel and airport, not cursing anyone in traffic.

Vitaly could have told Clay his silence this morning was due to his own hurt feelings after Sofia snubbed his amorous advances last night, repeatedly. But, he would never reveal such a thing, least of all to this American tourist. Vitaly was now slightly cheered to have Sofia riding up front with him. Perhaps she has reconsidered his proposition?

Hope springs eternal, a trait that Clay and Vitaly share in regard to Sofia.

Clay might normally have replied to Vitaly's *"Americansky!"* with his own sarcastic *"Russky!"* but he decides against it. The bomb blast has knocked the humor right out of him. He simply nods and smiles.

To Jenna, Clay says, "All of our stuff is gone. I mean *all* our stuff, other than our cash – and passports, thank God

– and the clothes on our backs. We'll have to buy everything all over again.”

“Let's go shopping!” Jenna says happily. Clay looks at her with amazement. Half an hour ago she was nearly killed, then speaking Russian in some sort of altered state, and now she is “all about the shopping” as if nothing happened.

“I have to admit,” Clay says, “the thought of shopping – which you *know* I hate – does sound appealing.” He hopes it will help return them to some sense of normalcy.

Sofia hopes Clay will find it in his heart to buy *her* a few things, but she doesn't dare ask. “We should wait until we get to Astrakhan before buying too many things,” she offers sensibly. “Travel lightly until we reach our destination.”

“Good idea,” Clay agrees, then, in gallows humor, adds, “No point buying more luggage and filling it with stuff, only to have it blown to smithereens again at the next airport, right?” Vitaly laughs uproariously, but even Clay doesn't think it was *that* funny.

“Wait, 'we?'” Jenna refers to Sofia's comment. “She said 'we.' She's coming with us?”

“If we're staying in Russia,” says Clay, “yes, she's coming with us.”

“Oh, right. Security blanket. What about Vitaly?” Jenna asks sarcastically. “Him, too?”

“I don't know,” says Clay. “Vitaly, can you fly a plane?” Vitaly shakes his head. “Then, no,” says Clay.

“What about your 'sick' mother?” Jenna asks Sofia.

“Oh, she is *much* better now!” Sofia replies evenly, controlling her tongue. “Thank you for asking!”

Jenna rolls her eyes and drops the subject. Sofia smiles as if winning a major battle.

Vitaly drops them at the curb at Domodedovo Airport on the other side of town. As Clay and Jenna get out and start down the sidewalk, Clay's usual airport-induced trepidation is now multiplied times ten. He turns to see where Sofia, his security blanket, is.

He can see her and Vitaly through the back window of the cab, still inside. Vitaly is holding her by the wrist, which she has apparently raised up as if to strike him. They are speaking passionately about something. She is now trying to pull away. Her words are growing angrier and louder.

Clay starts back toward the cab to help just as she frees herself from Vitaly's grip. She slams the door behind her, and is now rejoining the Americans, rubbing her wrist all the while.

Loudly, through the rolled-down passenger window, Vitaly shouts at them all, "Watch out for bombs!" And he cackles at his own joke.

They all turn and glare at him. Remembering his vow to not say things he regrets, however, Clay takes a deep breath and remains silent. Sofia is shaking her head, also silent. It is Jenna who responds with a very crude Russian epithet.

Vitaly's jaw drops, he gives them a dismissive wave and speeds off, thoroughly insulted.

"I hope you told him he was not funny," says Clay.

"Pretty much, yeah," says Jenna with an impish grin.

“It was quite a bit stronger than that,” says Sofia, also clearly offended.

Seeing Sofia's reaction, Clay asks Jenna, “Try not to say things like that, whatever it was, okay? I don't want people accusing us of being ugly Americans.”

Too late, Sofia thinks. Aloud, she defends Vitaly, despite what just occurred between them. “I think Vitaly was trying to add to Clay's joke about any new luggage being blown up, but it came out badly.”

She is surprised to find herself defending him but, like any man, he is unable to control his desires. His infatuation with her is sweet, she decides. Almost expected.

“Oopsies,” says Jenna, now feeling like an ass.

None of them notice the crazy, angry cab driver – the *other* crazy, angry cabbie from earlier – now easing to a stop along the curb a few car lengths away. He watches them enter the terminal, then gets on his phone to report back.

Inside their second Moscow airport of the day, Clay spots a security guard on an upper level crosswalk. The man is dividing his attention between Clay's group and some sort of device in his hand. He looks like the guard – the one who gave them a bottle of water – at the other airport. Clay is about to say something, but Sofia and Jenna are too preoccupied with the devices in their own hands.

“No wonder terrorists get away with planting bombs,” Clay declares to no one. “Nobody's paying attention to the world around them!”

He decides to have some fun at the security guard's expense. Clay smiles and waves when the guard next looks

up. The guard cringes and looks away, either not wanting to be recognized, or having no idea why someone is waving at him. Most likely, the latter.

Probably not the same guy. Security guards pretty much all look alike in those uniforms, and he is too far away to be sure. The device in his hand is probably just a phone. And, like every other male passerby, he is simply attracted to the two beautiful women flanking Clay.

Not everyone in Russia is a spy!

Astrakhan

Their second attempt at a flight to Astrakhan is mercifully uneventful... except for the weirdness upon arrival at Baggage Claim. There, inexplicably, Clay's and Jenna's carry-on bags have magically reappeared. It is common practice here to seal one's luggage in plastic wrap to prevent theft. Entire suitcases encased in what looks like Saran wrap. The Americans' luggage is among the very few items *not* so-wrapped, which makes it stand out.

Clay would have walked right past them if they were not directly in front, as if on display. *What the...?*

Seeing what her father is seeing, Jenna immediately digs into hers. She is looking for her make-up kit and hairbrush. Clay is afraid his bag will explode. It doesn't, but his smart phone is no longer in there.

There *is* an unopened water bottle that had not been there before. Jenna's contains one as well, which she is now happily guzzling. "Exactly what I needed!" she says with a smile, repeating the same words used when accepting that Moscow security guard's offering. "I was parched!"

Clay shakes his head and smiles. There is absolutely nothing cautious about his daughter. Everything she does is full speed ahead.

"You need to relax," she admonishes her father. "Ever since that bomb, you've been uptight."

Clay cannot help but laugh. "Yes, bombs have that effect on me!"

“Do they give you flashbacks to the war, or something?” she asks quite seriously.

“What war?”

“I don't know,” she says, “the *war*. There's always a war.”

“Yes, unfortunately, there is always a war somewhere. But, no, I was never in any war... unless you count marriage to your mother!”

He laughs. She doesn't.

Clay has almost no recollection from that last trip of the airport's surrounding area and terrain. He does remember their arrival being at night. He had been gaping out the window like a typical slack-jawed tourist until a teenager in a passing vehicle mocked him for it. Leaving Astrakhan, however, he was so absorbed with their new child, it was all just a blur. It is still daylight now, but there is not much to look at. *Maybe that explains my lack of recollection?*

Astrakhan is in the southwest of the country on the Volga River delta where it dumps into the Caspian Sea. The terrain between the city and the airport is just a lot of flat marsh land. The fishing and duck hunting is good, drawing Russians from all over the country, but it is not much to look at.

The town itself is not much to look at, either, as Clay recalls. The lack of rain keeps the area dry and dusty, but he tries not to dwell on negative thoughts. *Must be positive!* he reminds himself.

It is early evening by the time the now-battle-hardened Americans arrive at their hotel overlooking the river. Jet

lag and stress make it feel like the middle of the night to Clay, but Jenna is ready to hit the town.

Ah, to be young again, Clay thinks. For the sake of a good night's sleep, however, he vetoes Jenna's plans. They can hit it hard in the morning, he says.

Remembering Jenna's shenanigans at the Moscow hotel, Clay takes charge at the front desk and gets them checked into their suite: *One* two-room suite.

God, I'm getting old, he tells himself. First, he's thinking *Ah, to be young again*, and now he using words like *shenanigans!*

Their suite would never be confused with a suite at The Plaza, but Clay had insisted before leaving home that they stay at *this* hotel, same as before. He wanted a familiar “home base” to ensure his hoped-for “smooth as glass” experience in Astrakhan.

Looking around now, though, this place has been renovated so extensively that it could be any hotel anywhere. There is none of the typical earth tones found in older Russian décor. Everything is post-modern black, blue and white.

In the lobby, Clay notices several sour-faced, thick-necked middle-aged men with five-o'clock shadows. They are dressed entirely in black. There's nothing post-modern about these guys. They're right out of an old gangster movie. The thing about the men in this town, Clay remembers, is that the younger ones in their twenties and early thirties seem normal (according to his Western perspective). The more mature men – Clay's age, give or take – however, have a strong tendency to look like thugs. The

truly elderly men do at least return to Western European norms once they get past those awkward middle-age years.

Clay hates thugs – any sort of bully type, really – and often feels the childish urge to punch them in the face. Not being an especially large or tough guy, however, he wisely resists such temptation. Usually. There was that *one* time, but he was drunk. Generally, he is smart enough to walk away before anything stupid happens. Being in a foreign country now, with ladies present, Clay chooses discretion and ignores the men.

As Sofia bids him “*adieu*,” kissing him once on each cheek, Clay jokes, “I love it when you speak French!” She does not get the *Addams Family* reference. Clay then offers to share his hotel room with her.

Jenna and Sofia both gasp.

Realizing how that must sound, Clay quickly explains, “No, no, I will sleep on the couch. You and Jenna will each have your own bedroom. It's just that we never discussed your accommodations here in Astrakhan, Sofia.”

“Um, thank you, no,” Sofia explains as sweetly as she can. “I will be staying with friends across town. I am sorry. In all of the excitement, I forgot to mention it.” She giggles at Jenna, who is at a distance with her arms crossed.

Jenna responds with a sarcastic, mocking giggle before turning away.

“Yes, of course. Friends,” Clay struggles to save face. To himself, he thinks, *Smooth, dumb ass*.

As Clay and Jenna enter their suite, he notices the mirrored sliding closet door to his left. Most of the hotel may have changed, but this closet door is the same as what he cap-

tured in an old photo of Jenna at the age of two. She was flopping on the floor at the time, throwing a tantrum. He now laughs at the memory. Jenna asks what's so funny, but before he can answer, there is a knock at the door. Assuming it is one of the hotel staff, Clay opens it.

A week from now, he will wish he never opened that door.

A tall, skinny, dark-haired young man – a boy, really – is standing in the doorway. Clay gets the impression that he interrupted him rehearsing something. His head is down while mumbling to himself. A hallway light directly overhead then goes out, leaving him in partial darkness. Both men's attention is drawn briefly to the offending light before they return their attention to each other.

“You have literally darkened my doorway,” Clay jokes, still trying to get a good look at the kid's face. “Can I help you?” Judging by his attire, the boy cannot be with the hotel staff unless this place has absolutely no dress code.

The boy then forces an over-the-top salesman's smile just as Jenna is maneuvering from behind her father to see who it is. The boy's smile grows from ear to ear upon seeing her. Clay is not sure if this is because she is so pretty, or if the kid knows her... somehow.

“I am Maksim,” the boy says in thickly-accented English.

Clay notices a fairly prominent inch-long vertical scar on the boy's left cheek, and a spot of white in his otherwise dark brown hair. “Ah, yes, the mystery man,” he nods knowingly, remembering that name from Jenna's handwritten notes. He narrows his eyes at him.

“Maksim!” Jenna squeals.

When Clay, consciously or not, stands to block the door, Maksim asks, “May I come in?”

“Come in, please,” says Jenna. “Come in!” She is beside herself with excitement.

“We've been in town five minutes,” Clay says to her, “and you've already got boys knocking on our door?” Neither of them is listening to him. “I could strip naked and run up and down the hallway,” Clay jokes, “and neither of you would notice.”

“Okay, Dad,” Jenna replies absently, not listening. “Could you get me a Coke while you're out?”

“What does he mean by 'mystery man'?” Maksim whispers to Jenna. “And, is he a nudist?”

“Ignore him,” Jenna says. “He is constantly telling jokes that are not funny.” Maksim glances back and smirks at Clay.

Clay shuts the door, mercifully still fully clothed. Jenna is leading Maksim into her bedroom, but Clay is able to herd them back toward one of the two couches in the main room.

Taking a seat across from them, Clay lets out a great sigh of relief as he takes off his shoes and socks. “My feet are killing me!” he says. The teenagers are still not listening.

Jenna had not planned to reveal this so soon, but with the three of them now staring at each other, she goes ahead. “Dad,” she begins hesitantly, glancing at his feet, hoping they don't stink, “I have something to tell you.”

Clay cringes. “Yes?”

“Maksim and I...” she begins.

“Yes?” Clay cannot stand the suspense. His first thought, despite the fact that they are only now meeting in person, is, *Please don't say you're pregnant!* Aloud, he says, “Go on.”

“...have been emailing each other,” she continues, “for about a year now.”

With another sigh of relief, Clay says, “Oh, yeah, I already knew that.”

“Yes,” she continues. “What you probably *didn't* know is that Maksim has been helping me with my 'Who's Your Daddy?' project.”

“Your what?” Clay asks.

“Well, it should be called 'Who's Your Daddy & Mommy' project,” she explains, “but that's not as fly.” When Clay stares at her, awaiting further explanation, she adds, “That means 'cool' or 'catchy.'”

“I'm aware of what 'fly' means, more or less. Go on.”

“I'm trying...” she explains, “...*been* trying to find my birth parents. My *Russian* parents. And Maksim's helping me.”

“Oh, that,” says Clay. “Yeah, I figured as much.”

“You did not!” she is incredulous.

“I did,” he insists. “I never thought it would have such a 'fly' title, but, yeah, I'm not as dumb as I look. It sounds like your mom – your adoptive mom, your *real* mom as far as I'm concerned – has rubbed off on you. She's always assigning 'campaign names' to her projects. I used to like that about her. But, why did we have to come all the way to Russia for this? You can do all this through the Internet and DNA tests now.”

“Mom was the one who came up with the 'Who's Your Daddy' title,” she says, conveniently ignoring that last question.

“Wait,” says Clay. “Your mom has known about this for a year, and she never told me?!”

Jenna nods. Clay rolls his eyes, but before he can launch into one of his anti-Pamela rants, she continues, “This 'homeland tour' was Maksim's idea.”

“So, *this* is the bast... guy I have to thank for us being here!” Clay glares at Maksim. The low esteem in which Clay already holds the kid plummets even further. He reminds himself to stay calm. Deep breaths. Zen. No point arguing the need to be in Russia. *We're here now. Deal with it.*

“Zen always makes me hungry,” he says finally. “Let's go to dinner.”

The next morning, Sofia and Maksim rejoin the Americans for the surprisingly good free breakfast that the hotel offers to its guests. Clay has arranged for a cultural/historical tour of Astrakhan afterward, but Jenna could not care less about any of that. She wants to visit her old orphanage immediately after breakfast.

They are all still at the table when Sofia hangs up the phone and happily gives Jenna the bad news: Even if they wanted to skip the historical tour and go directly to the orphanage, there are no visitors allowed until after noon.

“Does that mean literally after 12 noon or just some time in the afternoon?” Jenna wants to know. “Who did you talk to?”

“The orphanage director herself.”

“Give me the phone,” Jenna demands. “I’ll talk to her.”
To Clay, she adds with a smile, “I can be very persuasive!”

“Tell me about it,” Clay agrees.

“You have your own phone,” Sofia complains and grips it tighter.

From her own phone, Jenna dials the number and lets the phone ring seven times – she counts the rings – without an answer. She hangs up and gives Sofia a dirty look. Sofia had expected this, and now smiles. The orphanage director had told her that she was too busy to talk. Sofia knew the next person who called her would get no answer or, at best, the answering machine.

Clay observes their power struggle while trying not to take sides.

“Exactly *when* in the afternoon did they say we could visit?” Jenna repeats her earlier question.

Sofia shrugs. Clay nods to himself, remembering that this is the Russian way: Leave everyone guessing... all the time... about everything. He reluctantly adds it to the list of irritating Russian cultural tendencies, but reminds himself how short that list is. *Must not let negativity seep in.*

Jenna has no choice but to wait until this afternoon for her orphanage visit, but now feels the need to take charge of something... anything. The point is that everyone must know she is in charge.

“*Pajoom!*” (Come on!) she says with a mischievous grin, purposely mispronouncing it for her father's benefit. “Maksim, you drive!”

“Where are you going?” Clay asks. “We signed up for that tour!” Getting no response, Clay shakes his head. He might try to insist upon her obedience, but this is *her* trip.

He's just a chaperon, really. Secondly, it is not especially important that they follow any specific itinerary. Life is more fun with spontaneity. Lastly and most decisively, there is no point arguing with Jenna when she gets this way.

On their way out, Jenna stops for a croissant at a shop in the hotel lobby. "We just had breakfast," says Clay.

"Still hungry," Jenna shrugs. Outside, she is tripped up by a protruding flagstone, and drops half the croissant. Cursing her own clumsiness, she stops to pick it up.

"Leave it!" says Maksim, as if speaking to a dog, as he and Sofia continue toward his car at the curb. His car is actually straddling the curb.

Smelling or seeing the croissant, a stray husky-lab mix dog appears out of nowhere. Russia is full of such strays. Maksim spins and kicks at it, but misses the dog.

"Hey, be nice!" Jenna shouts as she bends down to pet the *sabaka*.

"*Astarozhne!*" (Careful!) Clay warns in Russian. "Great," he scolds himself, "now *I'm* speaking Russian without thinking about it." *What is it about this place?*

"He's fine," Jenna says of the dog. She gives it her entire croissant, not just the dropped half. It wags its tail while eating the morsel. She would have expected it to wolf it down, but the dog is a surprisingly delicate eater.

Jenna fishes a lavender bandanna from her purse and ties it loosely around its neck. "This will let everyone know that this dog belongs to someone, so maybe they'll be nice to him." She gives Maksim a dirty look.

At the latter's car, Clay opens its back door and says, "Ladies?" The dog jumps in instead.

Maksim is horrified to see the animal inside his beloved car, and he makes that clear. Jenna shouts him down, then, very calmly and sweetly turns to the presumptuous canine and ushers it out the door.

“Come on, Carlton,” she says. “No ride for you today.”

“Carlton?” Clay asks.

“He looks like a Carlton,” Jenna explains. “Elderly and dignified, yet friendly. Carlton.”

With the dog out of the car, Maksim is considerably more calm. Jenna sits next to him and pats his leg while speaking to him softly. Clay wonders if the kid realizes she is handling him the same as she handled Carlton, with similar results.

“Not a dog lover, I guess,” Clay whispers to Sofia, happily alone in the back seat with her. “I prefer Carlton.”

She giggles. Maksim gives him a dirty look in the rear-view mirror, leaving Clay to wonder if he has supersonic hearing or was going to glare, anyway, no matter what. Probably the latter.

Jenna pouts through the window at “Carlton's” sad old face as they leave. The dog follows behind for several yards before giving up.

Sofia is so used to playing tour guide that she now dutifully reads from a brochure she found in the hotel lobby. “As-trakhan,” she recites, “was once an important stop in Golden Horde territory on the famous Silk Road!” Clay nods. Jenna rolls her eyes. “It sits,” Sofia continues, “atop what used to be the city of Atil, the capital of Khazaria.”

“Atil?” Clay is honestly interested. “As in Attila the Hun?”

She shrugs and continues, “Khazaria is, arguably, the ancestral home of most modern Jews, the Ashkenazim, which qualifies Astrakhan as a truly historically significant city!”

Everyone agrees – or pretends to agree – that this is interesting, but Maksim takes it one step further. “We are more than an anecdote in a tourist pamphlet! My people will rule the world once again!”

“And who, exactly, are *your* people?” Jenna wants to know. “Are you saying you're Jewish, Khazarian, both, or what?”

Maksim has nothing more to say as he glares ahead through the windshield.

“He's trying to tell us,” Clay says with a laugh, “that he is a direct descendant of Attila the Hun.”

Maksim gives another dirty look in the mirror.

“Astrakhan is a delta city,” Sofia continues her narration, “straddling eleven islands where the Volga River empties into the Caspian Sea.” She is enjoying herself for the first time in quite a while. She thinks she might have a future as a tour guide.

“Canals and bridges criss-cross this charming city,” the brochure continues, “While Saint Petersburg likes to call itself the Venice of the North, Astrakhan has been called the Venice of the South, or, the City of Bridges.”

Clay has never been to Saint Petersburg or Venice, but something tells him neither city has anything to worry about from Astrakhan. It is a nice enough town, and legitimately world-famous for its caviar – as well as being regionally renowned for its watermelon – but has never been

considered a “hot ticket” destination for most foreign tourists.

Jenna and her entourage – the girl does best with an entourage – stop at a farmer's market. Several vendors are selling watermelon, caviar, or both, among other things. Jenna entertains herself by irritating these and other sellers by haggling over things that she has no intention of buying. “*Skolka?*” (how much?) Clay hears her say repeatedly.

“I'm pretending to be Russian,” says Jenna.

“Pretend all you like,” Sofia snaps at her. “You are not Russian. Do not even try.”

Clay wants to remind her that Jenna was born in this town, or at least somewhere nearby, but he lets it go. Jenna ignores Sofia completely.

She takes a “selfie” with Maksim, and texts it to her mom back home with the message, “Haven great time! Wish u were hear!” Spelling is not one of her strengths, and the phone's auto-correct is no help. Clay will soon find himself wishing he had that picture, but she sends it only to Pamela.

They next visit a small store and, as is the local custom to protect against theft, everyone must stash any shopping bags into lockers provided in the small entrance ante-room. Each unused locker has an orange, numbered key in it. *Like at the gym*, Clay thinks, as he takes and puts everyone's things into one.

The four of them then spread out to navigate the narrow aisles. Sofia and Clay take one aisle, with Jenna and Maksim choosing another. The ever-present security guard –

every Russian business open to the public seems to have its own security guard – must choose which pair to follow, and he chooses Jenna and Maksim. *Wise choice*, Clay thinks.

Their next stop is a small park with a lake in the middle that locals call Swan Lake. Here, the foursome happens upon “performance art” in action. On cue, a couple of dozen young people in a small area lie down next to each other and “take a nap.” Twenty-some people, in the middle of the day, in a public park, lying down and taking a nap.

Three local police officers are standing by, apparently wondering what is going on. Jenna *et al.* watch the nappers in rapt attention, waiting for something else to happen. Nothing does. After a few minutes, the show is over. Everyone gets up, dust themselves off, and strolls away, satisfied in having performed their daily quota of whatever that was.

Jenna and Clay give their respective escorts a questioning look. Maksim and Sofia both shrug. “Your guess is as good as mine,” says Maksim.

Sofia adds, “Yes, this is not something we Russians typically do. Trust me.”

They finally arrive at their destination: *Dome Rebyenka* (Baby Home) No. 1. There is nothing impressive about the place except that this is where Clay's, Pamela's and Jenna's lives all took a decidedly good turn fifteen years ago. It hasn't always been easy, to say the least, but it has to have been a change for the better. Clay's greatest hope now is that by coming here in person, Jenna will better appreciate the life she has now, compared to where she came from.

The orphanage is tucked in behind a five- or six-story block of Soviet-era apartment buildings on the outskirts of town. Though it is a little bit run-down, the neighborhood does not feel unsafe. Clay remembers that about it from last time. Unlike in The States, where the poor side of town translates to the “get the hell outta here” part of town, it is not like that in Astrakhan. Not in this neighborhood, at least.

Clay finds himself getting emotional standing in front of the old building with Jenna beside him. Last time they were here, Jenna – Zenya, at the time – was crying as she left the orphanage behind forever.

Clay is now the one with tears in his eyes, but they are both in awe, as if pilgrims arrived at Mecca. Clay has been imagining this for years – usually in nightmares – since before he even knew they would *do* a homeland tour.

“It’s a cliché,” Jenna comments on the building, “but it looks smaller, doesn’t it?”

Clay smiles and nods. “Funny how that works.”

Maksim intrudes upon their reverie when he shouts from the parking lot, announcing that he will be joining them.

“No, get back in the car!” Clay shouts at him. He had said on their way over that he did not want Maksim inside the orphanage, and Jenna did not want Sofia inside with them.

Jenna had tried to soften the blow at the time, being a bit more diplomatic, saying, “No offense, but it will be strictly father-daughter time.”

Jenna now enters the old building first, followed closely by Clay. The familiar smell of disinfectant hits Clay's nostrils, and he is transported back in time fifteen years. He almost wishes Pamela was here. Almost.

Just a few steps inside past the entryway, they sit on opposite ends of a bare, industrial-strength metal bench. They have to put blue paper booties over their shoes. It's required. Clay has a grin on his face as he looks over at Jenna, but she does not look especially happy. Enchanted, perhaps. Maybe even a little bit uneasy. Either way, she is not saying a thing, which Clay finds noteworthy in itself.

There is no time to reminisce. As they stand up, properly "bootied," a young, crying toddler collides with Jenna. The little girl stops crying and tugs at Jenna's pant leg. Jenna picks her up.

"Well, hello little one!" Jenna says in Russian. "What is your name?"

"Zenya," says the little girl.

Jenna gasps. That name sounds so familiar, though she does not remember it as her own original nickname. Smiling – now teary-eyed, though not entirely sure why – Jenna continues speaking Russian. "Everything is going to be okay, Zenya. Your parents will come for you just as mine came for me." She nods in Clay's direction.

The little girl takes a moment to assess Clay as Jenna translates everything she said to the girl. Clay reaches out and shakes the girl's tiny hand. "Very nice to meet you!"

The girl does not understand a word of it, but a beautiful smile and laugh indicates her approval. "I think she likes you!" Jenna says.

“Well, *da!*” he says, as if it's a given. He suddenly wonders if “*da!*” is where Americans got the word “duh!”

After a moment, a flustered nurse arrives to quite grumpily, almost angrily, pull the child from Jenna's arms. She says something that Clay does not understand.

Jenna rolls her eyes. “Fussy old nurse-maids!”

“Old?” says Clay with a laugh. “The woman is thirty-something.”

“Like I said, old,” Jenna smiles. “But for you, Dad, she would be a hot younger woman! I didn't see a ring on her finger. Want me to hook you up? *Anyone* is better than that bitch, *Sofia*.”

“Um, no, that's okay,” says Clay. He notices Jenna is using the same derisive tone with the name “Sofia” as she had with “Barry” back home. She is obviously not going to approve of anyone that either of her parents wants to date.

Waving goodbye to little Zenya, Jenna suddenly feels dizzy. “I have to sit down,” she says.

Clay stands by her for a moment, concerned. When she lies down on the bench and closes her eyes, Clay goes looking for that “old” nurse, or anyone else who might help.

Jenna hears voices, Russian voices. She opens her eyes and looks around. No one is there. Maybe it is just some of the orphanage staff whose conversations are echoing down the hallways. She then discounts the idea when the voices are as clear as if whispered directly into her ear. She is not dreaming. She has had realistic dreams before, but nothing like this. Her eyes are now wide open.

As soon as she closes her eyes again, she feels as if she is being held aloft. She has never left the bench and is far

too big these days for anyone to be carrying her like this. She *must* be dreaming, she decides, but has no desire to wake up.

It is a beautiful young blonde woman holding her, swinging her around, laughing, whispering sweet nothings. Tears now stream down Jenna's cheeks, but she is laughing. Pure joy bursts from her very core as she realizes who this woman is. She has not laughed like this since she was an infant in her Russian birth-mother's arms.

The woman beams brighter than ever and confirms, *Yes, I am Svetlana Nadezhda Luganskaya, your mama.*

Jenna starts bawling. *Mama! Where have you been?! I've been looking all over for you! You left me and never came back!*

The woman is now crying, as well. *I am so sorry, Zenya. I never meant to. It could not be helped.*

What do you mean?

There is something I have wanted to tell someone since I... left, Svetlana says, ignoring the question, bursting with excitement. *When your body dies, you feel like you have awakened from a dream, as if your life on Earth was just a dream!*

Hmmm, says Jenna, not sure what to make of that.

Your new parents love you very much, my dear, Svetlana returns to more practical matters. *They will never be as good as me,* she jokes, *but it will break their hearts if you do what I can see you are planning to do.*

But they're so mean sometimes, Jenna complains. *And stupid,* she adds, regressing back to her toddler mentality when she considered pretty much everyone “stupid.”

Stay away from Maksim, Svetlana warns. Most of all, stay away from your father. He is a very bad man.

Dad?

No, your Russian father.

Who is my Russian father?

He does not deserve to be called your father! Svetlana says angrily. Sorry, I did not mean to... If you only knew...!

Tell me!

Someone is now tapping Jenna on the shoulder. “Jenna, wake up! Are you okay? Jenna!”

“*Meenya zavoot Zenya,*” (My name is Zenya), she says upon opening her eyes.

Clay is taken aback by her speaking Russian again. He smiles and says, “Yes, honey, that was your nickname. It's short for Eugenia. We changed it to 'Jenna,' remember?”

She sits up and realizes she has been on the bench this entire time. The indentations in her arms from the metal mesh prove it. Her mama, Svetlana, is gone. The woman had been saying something. Something about a dream. Something about her father. Was it all just a dream?

The sense of calm and tranquility that she was enjoying earlier is now gone, shattered by her mother's outburst at the end. She slowly adjusts to the drab polished concrete floor and featureless walls that now surround her. Clay and that grumpy old nurse are standing in front of her.

Her adoptive father looks worried. He has been talking, but she missed whatever was said. The nurse looks disgusted, as if finding a homeless person asleep on her bench.

“I've come to the right place,” Jenna says in Russian.

“Congratulations, you can read a map!” the nurse is sarcastic. Clay has no idea what either of them is saying. Jenna does not mention anything about her birth-mother.

What Clay *does* comprehend is that Jenna is very deeply disturbed, enough to revert back to speaking Russian. Worst of all, she is once again looking at him as if he is a complete stranger.

Not again! he thinks. Aloud, he says, “It’s time to go back to the hotel.” He had not intended to make this such a quick visit but, given her behavior, it seems best.

“*Pakah!*” Jenna says. (Bye!)

“When I say it’s time to go back,” Clay clarifies, “I mean it’s time for *us* to go back.”

“Okay,” Jenna replies with a laugh, “you and this nurse can go back to the hotel. Have fun!”

Clay is not amused. An argument ensues. Increasing histrionics by Jenna and loud counter-arguments from Clay are such that the orphanage doctor on duty has come to see what the problem is.

Jenna begs in Russian for the doctor to allow her to spend the night at the orphanage. “Just one night?” she asks. “It would mean so much.”

This is against the rules, the doctor knows, but with Jenna being so young and pretty – and begging, which he finds irresistible – he agrees to let her spend the night. “We have an extra room,” he says with a lascivious twinkle in his eye.

“We do?” the nurse asks, then shakes her head remembering the doctor was the same way with her when *she* first arrived.

Clay insists if Jenna is spending the night, then so is *he*.

“Please,” she argues, “just let me do this! One night alone! It is perfectly safe here. I need to reconnect. It’s important to me.”

The old saying “Set your loved ones free; if their love is true, they will come back to you” comes to mind. A certain amount of flexibility is required in situations like this. That, and a soft touch.

He never noticed the lecherous look in the doctor’s eyes. If he had, this would have been an easy decision in the opposite direction. But, as it is, he very reluctantly lets Jenna have her way. He hates it, and can guess that most parents would never do it, but Jenna has always been an incredibly independent spirit. He loves that about her and has always tried to encourage it... to an extent.

You just have to give them their space sometimes, he is still arguing with himself, *no matter how much it kills you*. He just hopes it doesn’t literally get her killed.

Struggling for a sense of clarity, feeling as if punched in the stomach by this latest episode in the pantheon of Jenna’s melodrama over the years, Clay, with one last exhalation, walks dejectedly out the orphanage door.

Heartbreak

Clay wakes up the next morning with a couple of things he hasn't had in a while: A massive hangover, and a woman in his bed. Lifting the sheets, he confirms with a proud grin, that he and the woman are naked.

The day before, after walking out of the orphanage without Jenna, he was surprised to see Maksim's car still in parking lot. He had assumed the punk would leave him behind once Jenna texted to say she was staying.

Its windows were too dark to see inside, so Clay tried the back door. It was locked, but the front passenger door was unlocked, and he climbed in. That's when he discovered Maksim and Sofia in the backseat together. She sprang upright, startled, wiping her mouth. Maksim quickly zipped up his pants, cursing in Russian all the while.

“If you two are finished,” Clay reflexively turned away from such an unfortunate sight, “please take me back to the hotel. Jenna will not be joining us. Yes, I am sure. Let's go!”

What happened next, though still murky, is slowly returning to Clay as he now lies in bed with Sofia. Someone – he cannot remember who – showed up and drove him back to the hotel. The athletically-built man with short-cropped hair had identified himself as a friend of someone, but Clay can't remember who that was.

Once inside the hotel lobby – dumped there, still in a bit of a daze after Jenna's latest stunt – Clay was waiting for

the elevator when Sofia ran up to him, catching her breath. “How about that drink?” she said.

If he had stopped to think about this chain of events, he might have turned her down, but he has never turned down a beautiful woman asking to have a drink with him. And so it was that he downed several vodkas with beer chasers at the hotel bar.

Never much of a drinker in the first place, he *still* does not enjoy vodka, not even sharing one with a beautiful woman in Russia. This, he decides, is a sure sign that he does not belong here.

The rest of the night was a blur.

As he and Sofia climb out of bed the next morning, Clay announces his intention to return to the orphanage. Coming out of the shower twenty minutes later, wrapped in a towel, Sofia does not share Clay's urgency. “You need food in your stomach after last night,” she says. “And, as you Americans say, your daughter needs her space. She will still be there.”

On the way to the orphanage, Sofia makes excuses to delay their arrival. First, it's for cigarettes, and he has never seen her smoke. Then, she claims to need a soda, which she barely touches. Finally, she has to use “the toilet.”

Fed up, Clay finally says, “Next time we stop, I will leave you there. The only thing we *need* to do is to go get my daughter!”

“Typical man,” Sofia shoots back. “Now that you have had me in bed, you think I am, what do you say, your bitch?”

“Don't make this about you,” Clay snaps at her, “or I *will* drop you in the middle of nowhere. By the way, can't you people use the word 'bathroom' or 'restroom' instead of 'toilet?' 'Toilet' is so... crude.”

“What do you mean 'you people?'”

“Hey, I know,” he ignores her attempt at being offended, “from now on, you can say you need to 'powder your nose.’”

“Now *you* are lecturing *me* on culture?” She is insulted... again. Striving for American-style sarcasm but not quite pulling it off, she adds, “That is funny, ha-ha. I might now *ask* to be dropped somewhere. But I promised to stay with you, and that is what I will do. I am a woman of my word.”

“I don't remember you promising anything,” says Clay. “I'm not even sure we had sex. For all I know, I passed out, you stripped me naked and made it *look* like we had sex so I would feel beholden to you. And, when I tried to follow you into the shower, you locked the door! If we'd really had sex already, you would have let me in.”

She smiles and bites her lip. “You think highly of yourself, don't you?”

Clay drops the subject. He has more important things to do.

~

His heart sinks when they return to the orphanage where the “fussy old nurse-maid” from yesterday informs them that Jenna has run off. He glares at Sofia for making them late. She looks away. The nurse adds that they would have missed her, anyway. She has been gone for several hours.

“Why would she leave?” Clay is heart-sick. “Where would she go? I'm the only family she has here!” He is on the verge of tears.

Awaiting Sofia's translation but seeing for herself the pain in Clay's eyes, the nurse sympathizes. “I am sorry to say, but your daughter attacked the doctor during the night and ran off with a young man.”

Clay wants to shout at the woman that what she just described is impossible. Even in her current state, Jenna would *never* attack anyone. “Are you sure you translated that right?” he asks Sofia. She nods, yes. “What exactly does she mean by 'attacked?'”

Sofia gets clarification and relays it to Clay. “She says your daughter stabbed the doctor with a pair of scissors!”

“Oh my God,” Clay mutters in disbelief, trying to wrap his head around this.

Don't shoot the messenger, he reminds himself. The nurse is merely relaying what happened, or at least what the doctor *said* had happened.

Clay describes Maksim for them, assuming he is the “young man” mentioned. Sofia translates, adding details like Maksim's facial scar; the unusual spot of white in his hair; and the leather “ankle strap” shoes he always wears. Another caretaker appears, having just finished her shift. She confirms that Clay and Sofia have perfectly described the boy last seen with Jenna.

Clay wonders if his daughter had left willingly. Even if she *had* attacked the doctor – who *must have* deserved it – she specifically promised him back home she would never run off in Russia. Of course, his assumptions are based on

the “old” Jenna, the American Jenna, not this alternate personality she has transformed into.

Clay asks to see the doctor who Jenna had “attacked,” but he is in the hospital... as a patient. “Well, good!” Clay replies, surprising himself.

He wonders if he has forever lost his sweet little girl to this violent, emotionally-unbalanced hellion she has turned into. *Is this really any different from what most fathers of teenage girls go through?* he asks himself. *Yes*, he answers, *this is very different*. Sure, she has always been a little trouble-maker, but nothing like this.

“She gets it from me,” it occurs to him, now thinking out loud. “First I compliment her for cussing out Vitaly back in Moscow, and now I'm *happy* that she's put someone in the hospital!” Sofia does not translate this last bit to the orphanage staff.

~

Clay has no choice but to go looking for Jenna. When she fails to return any of his calls or texts, it is just like when she went missing back home. He calls Pamela to let her know what's going on, but there is no answer. With the nine-hour time difference, he can only guess she is in bed, asleep.

~

He gets it half right. She is in bed, but neither asleep nor alone.

~

Despite Sofia's companionship – or maybe *because* of it – Clay now badly misses Pamela. She has always been the

one better-equipped to deal with their daughter. She would have a few ideas on how to handle a *missing* Jenna... like calling the police and filing a report as she did in Saint Louis. Would that even work in Russia? Do they care about missing persons here, let alone tourists? There is a certain callousness to these people, Clay thinks.

He asks Sofia if they should get the police involved. She merely shrugs. Does Sofia care?

You're on your own, buddy, he tells himself. This woman is nothing more than a useful tool. A very attractive and occasionally agreeable woman, sure, but if he had some kind of magical, real-time translation device to fit in his pocket – like a smartphone would do in the very near future – he would replace her immediately. He knows that's harsh, as Jenna would say, but their relationship is not what it used to be.

Think! he think-shouts at himself. *Jenna is with Maksim. Find him, you find her.* Aloud, he asks Sofia, “Do you know where Maksim lives or works?”

“No.”

He gives her a look. “You had sex with him in the back seat! You don't even know where he hangs out?”

She shrugs again. This is her response to everything lately. He should have vetted both her Maksim more thoroughly, he knows, but never anticipated this situation. Never thought Jenna would run off. He believed her when she promised to explicitly *not* do that. In hindsight, of course, he realizes how naïve and stupid that was, but if you can't trust your own daughter's promise – and his own judgment – what's the point of anything?

Clay learns first-hand that there is nothing more desperate, more heart-wrenching than searching for a child – *his* child – gone missing. Being halfway around the world makes it excruciating. Jenna suffered from separation anxiety as a kid – common with adoptees – but now Clay is the one suffering. He consoles himself with the thought that at least she ran off *with* someone. She's not alone. True, it is the idiot Maksim, but it was of her own volition. She wasn't kidnapped.

He is left asking random strangers on the street, through Sofia, if they have seen Maksim or Jenna, and this is going about as well as one might expect. Clay has no idea Sofia is introducing herself to these people as his wife, and referring to Jenna as her step-daughter.

She suggests they put up “lost” fliers with Jenna's picture, but he rules that out when he cannot find a single photo of her in his wallet. If he had his regular cell phone, there were plenty on that.

“How can you *not*,” Sofia asks, “have a picture of your own daughter?”

“I don't know,” Clay gets defensive. “Real men... *American* men... don't carry mementos like that.” As soon as he says it, he realizes it's not true, but that's the story he's going with.

Sofia rolls her eyes.

Even if he had a photo, Clay decides, putting up “lost” fliers is not a good idea. Anyone who sees the flier, then spots Jenna, might decide she's an easy target.

He appreciates the energy Sofia is now putting into the search, but has no idea why she was stalling their arrival at

the orphanage earlier that morning. He also wonders if she is now purposely withholding information.

It is unbearable having no idea what Jenna is thinking, what she might do next, where she has gone, and what might happen to her along the way. The only thing to do is to keep looking... and hoping.

He has never felt more alone. He pulls his arms in close to his body, with his hands stuffed into his pockets. It's something he does when under extreme stress. His fingers then make contact with Jenna's bracelet at the bottom of his pocket, and he gasps in recognition and pulls it out. He *does* have a memento! Just not a very useful one.

Holding the bracelet in his hand like a precious jewel, he wonders if this is the last vestige of Jenna that he will ever see. This sends tears down his cheeks, and he has to stop and lean against a street sign until the feeling passes.

Get a grip! he scolds himself. He has never been a crier, but he has never lost a child before. This has left a gaping wound.

He then notices strangers following him and Sofia. He worries it might be because he is American and they hate Americans here. Several of them do give disparaging looks.

When he asks Sofia if this is the case, she scoffs, "Oh, please, you are being ridiculous." She then explains that these people – complete strangers – are now helping them by asking everyone around them if they have seen Jenna or Maksim. Out of sheer decency, she says, people are helping him find his daughter.

They *are* appalled, she adds with a mischievous grin, that he does not have a single photo of her in his wallet.

It brings more tears to his eyes, but these are the good kind. Speaking loud enough for all to hear, with a hand on his heart, Clay says, “*Spaseeba! Spaseeba!*” (Thank you! Thank you!) Several of them smile, nod or wave.

~

Sofia leads him and their new posse – *It's my turn to have a posse*, he thinks with a pitiful laugh – to a local police station to file a missing person report. The crowd of helpful strangers disperses upon seeing that the matter is now in the authorities' hands. Inside the station, Clay and Sofia are discouraged by the response to their plight. He thinks he catches a glimmer of recognition from one of the officers as Sofia mentions Maksim's name, but it might only have been the gleam of lust. The man has been undressing Sofia with his eyes throughout the conversation.

As they exit the station, Clay bumps into a much taller man coming from the opposite direction. They exchange pardons in their respective languages, and Clay does a double-take.

“No way,” he says as the man walks away. “Did you see that guy?” he asks Sofia. She shakes her head, no. “He looks just like Liam Neeson.”

“Who?”

“Liam Neeson... the actor in those *Taken* movies? The ones where his daughter keeps getting kidnapped... I guess. I only saw the first one.”

She shakes her head. “I do not watch American films.”

For a second there, Clay considers chasing after the man to get his advice on his current predicament – that's how desperate he is – but drops the idea when a woman across the street catches his eye. He might not have noticed

her had she not looked directly at him. She resembles their former translator, Vika, from fifteen years ago: Straight, dark, shoulder-length hair; petite figure; pretty; friendly, smiling eyes. If it is her, she has aged very well, he thinks, but that would fit her personality. Always very reserved, careful, and eminently practical.

Everyone seems familiar all of a sudden, it occurs to him as he chases after Vika or her *doppelgänger*. She then vanishes into the crowd, though, and he throws up hands. Even if it *was* Vika, he doesn't know how she might have helped.

~

Vika Karimova has been tracking Jenna and Clay since the moment they arrived in Astrakhan. The transmitters – smaller than a grain of rice – that her man Gennady slipped into their water bottles in Moscow and again at the Astrakhan airport – are still broadcasting their respective locations from somewhere in their respective digestive tracts. It is not perfect technology. People do sometimes pass the transmitters through their systems. But these newer bugs act like actual insects and latch onto whichever internal organ they settle upon.

She is ashamed for allowing herself to be spotted just now by Clay. Having been an FSB “stringer”/contractor for almost two decades, she should have never been so careless. Any sense of superiority that she might have felt over Gennady for *his* being spotted by Clay (and waved at) in Moscow has been lost. She had given Gennady a tongue lashing over that, but now she has done virtually the same thing.

At least *she* wasn't waved at, she consoles herself. There was something about Clay just now – his desperation, perhaps – that held her attention just a second too long. She was, after all, instrumental in facilitating his and Pamela's adoption of Jenna. It was a beautiful moment they had all shared: Taking a little girl out of an orphanage and into the loving arms of her forever family. They all have, or at least had, a personal connection.

To see the despair now in Clay's eyes made her sad. She slipped up. Colleagues have long criticized her for being too soft, too caring, too human. Maybe they are right.

Having followed her quarry's movements since they arrived in town, it piques Vika's curiosity when she sees where and with whom Jenna has been hanging out.

After what seems an eternity of fruitless searching – from inside the taxi as well as on foot – Clay lets Sofia talk him into stopping for lunch. She leads him into a dark hole-in-the-wall diner.

One wall of the restaurant is adorned with red silk banners with gold tassels on light-brown, intricately-patterned wallpaper. Very Russian, Clay thinks. The other wall consists of diagonal wood slats, positioned at opposite angles within each new section, giving it a rustic, horse stable look.

Clay, however, could not care less about the decor. Finding Jenna is all that matters. He stares long and hard at everyone in the restaurant as he follows Sofia and the hostess through the narrow restaurant to their table near the back. A few patrons seem uncomfortable with Clay's penetrating, slightly-crazed stare.

At his table, Clay's meal of *borscht*, beet salad and pork sandwich with a beet on top is surprisingly good. *These people sure like their beets*, he thinks. Back home – on his home planet, it feels like – Clay hates beets. Finding himself liking them now tells him that he must have gone insane... like Jenna. There is no other explanation.

He smirks humorlessly at the thought of a fictional billboard: *Welcome to Russia! You must now go insane*. His phone then rings. This “burner” phone provides no caller ID, but Jenna, Pamela and Sofia are the only ones who have the number.

“Oh, thank God, Jenna,” he answers it, “where have you been?”

It's not Jenna. A man on the other end of the line growls in Russian, “We have your daughter!”

Clay understands only “*doach*” (daughter). “*Moy doach?!*” he asks.

“*Da, vasha doach, glupy Americansky!*” (Yes, your daughter, stupid American), says the man.

Clay understands every word, and his world falls out from under him. A gasp escapes his lips and a lump forms in his throat.

After a moment, he swallows hard, and anger rises up within him to overpower his fear. By the time he speaks again, there is murder in his voice.

“Put my daughter on the phone!” he growls. Everyone within earshot in the tiny restaurant turns to look at him. Sofia is aroused by the venom in Clay's voice, and she latches onto his arm.

There is a pause as a second man gets on the phone. This one, laughing and sounding younger, says in Russian,

“Pay us one million dollars, or you will never see the girl again!”

Having no clue what the man said, Clay hands the phone to Sofia. “You talk to these people. Find out what they want.”

“Allo?” says Sofia, taking the phone.

“Remember our agreement!” the younger man says to her, and hangs up before she can respond or even recognize his voice. It sounds as if he is disguising it, but she has made only one agreement lately, which tells her who the caller is. She stops herself from saying his name aloud.

Clay, along with everyone else in the restaurant, is staring at her. The restaurant's security guard is now moving toward them.

“Well?” Clay asks Sofia. “What did he say?”

“Nothing,” Sofia lies. “He simply hung up.” And she shrugs her shoulders.

“How am I supposed to pay their ransom?”

When she shrugs again, Clay regurgitates – as well as he can – what *he* was told. He tries to approximate the Russian words spoken to him.

Several nearby diners are openly listening as Sofia translates it for Clay.

“One million dollars?!” he shrieks. “I don't have that kind of money!”

“You don't?”

“No! If you thought I was rich, you will be very disappointed.”

“But you said you were a football... soccer head coach,” she says. “Head coaches make a *lot* of money! Everyone in America makes a *lot* of money.”

“Not me,” Clay corrects her. “I’m a *minor league* soccer coach, which is not a real money-maker in the U.S. I can barely pay the bills.” He stands up in disgust and throws a few ruble notes on the table. “The credit card bills for *this* little trip to paradise will take the rest of my life to pay off.”

Clay glares at the security guard on his way out, if for no other reason than because the man is big, ugly, Russian... and breathing.

Sofia takes a portion of Clay's money off the table and stuffs it into her purse. There is barely enough to cover the total. The food was good, she thinks, but the service did not warrant a tip.

The security guard smiles and admires Sofia from behind as she walks away. Aroused as she was a moment ago by the venom in Clay's voice, only to be ignored, she now smiles at the guard's unabashed ogling. At least *someone* appreciates her.

Other than ensuring his own basic survival to continue the search, Clay's every thought and movement is about Jenna now. Several hours into the search with his daughter still missing, Clay leaves another voicemail update for Pamela. He is beside himself wondering why she never answers her phone. She must know by now their daughter is missing.

Sofia once again talks him into stopping for a meal, and he is again too tired to put up a fight. He thought he was in good shape, but there is a big difference between working out in a gym or running around on a soccer field versus traversing a city, half of it on foot, worried sick, looking for a lost child. He is physically and emotionally drained.

In the middle of dinner, Sofia catches sight of Maksim through the window across the street. Her eyes flash in recognition. She wants to say something, but the man's last words were clear: "Remember our agreement."

Clay is not paying attention. He is lost in thought, absently watching their server fill their water glasses. The Russian word "вода" (water) is embossed on the carafe. Clay suddenly realizes this must be where the term "boda bag" (flexible water pouch used by hikers) comes from. He figures some Russian fur trapper etched these letters onto his water pouch a couple hundred years ago; English-speaking people saw this; misread and mispronounced it; and a new "English" term was born: *Boda bag*.

"Who cares?!" he yells at himself, then immediately cringes. He didn't mean to say it out loud. This, he decides, is further proof of his imminent insanity. Sofia turns away from the window to see what Clay's problem is. He takes a peek out to see what she was looking at... and sees Maksim. His eyes go wide. He almost knocks the decanter out of the waiter's hand as he points and shouts, "There he is!"

Sofia pretends to be surprised while silently cursing herself for choosing a table by the window. Clay again throws money on the table, hoping it's enough, and bolts out the door. With apologies to the waiter, Sofia again re-locates Clay's "over-payment" into her purse, and follows him out the door.

She finds herself relieved that Clay has finally found Maksim. She has been increasingly uneasy – almost guilty – about her involvement, minimal as it has been. The onus is now off her and on Clay to catch Maksim and figure out

what has become of Jenna. Either way, she hopes this means her role as Clay's dutiful companion has at last come to an end. She can relax.

Let the men have their little chase now, she thinks. *Men love the chase*. If Clay can catch up to Maksim, the two stupid men can have even more fun beating each other up. *Men are so stupid*. She hates herself for needing them, but such is her life. There is no point thinking too much about it. She just needs to find one to take care of her, buy her nice things once in a while, and not beat her too often. Maybe she will find someone here in Astrakhan, she hopes. The locals are much nicer and the weather is much better than Moscow.

Maksim is on his mobile phone when he sees Clay chasing after him. With a giggle, he stuffs the phone into his back pocket and dashes inside what looks like a hardware store. Close behind, Clay thinks, *Great, a store with potential weapons on display, just hanging there!* Then he realizes this might work to his advantage. If he can get his hands on an ax...

In one of the aisles, Clay comes upon three middle-aged thugs blocking his passage. He bursts through the line of men, but one of them trips him. He lands awkwardly, smashing into nearby shelves. He has a flashback to breaking tackles in his school football days.

Barely maintaining his balance, he flips off his aggressors, and continues after his prey who has by now disappeared around a corner. Clay never noticed, but crashing into those shelves a second ago has put a bloody gash in his forehead.

Clay finds himself in a dark hallway... unarmed. The aisle containing his hoped-for “garden weaponry” was the one with the thugs. They blocked any chance he might have had at grabbing something useful.

In this dark hallway, boxes are stacked to the ceiling on either side, leaving barely enough room for an adult to walk through. Clay wipes what he thinks is sweat off his forehead. The store's back door clicks shut just as Clay comes around a corner. He flings the door open and steps out into the alley, prepared to see Maksim running away. But Maksim is nowhere to be seen... until Clay is tackled from behind just as he turns around.

Embarrassed for being outmaneuvered by a kid, Clay finds renewed strength. He throws Maksim off him and adopts a stance learned years ago in karate. *OK, you're in the stance*, he tells himself. *Make some moves!* But he can't remember any moves. He was never an especially adept student. He barely attained Yellow Belt before quitting in favor of something much more interesting – dating Pamela. What was the likelihood, he thought at the time, of ever getting into a real fight, anyway? He certainly never expected something like this.

The old goons from inside the store then join the fight, unseen from behind and coming toward Clay. The biggest one – a mountain of a man – wraps his arms around the American, pinning his arms to his sides. Maksim steps in front and pummels Clay like a punching bag. The blood from Clay's forehead finally reaches his lips.

Clay uses the mountain man as a fulcrum. Whipping his right leg up, Clay puts a foot *hard* into Maksim's crotch as if it were a soccer ball. Maksim flops to the ground,

screaming. This makes Clay happy on several levels. If this asshole and his daughter have been having sex – and they are unsupervised teenagers of the opposite sex, so, they probably are – a good kick in the groin will at least put a temporary stop to that.

The “mountain man” releases his grip on Clay just long enough to spin him around and punch him hard in the jaw. Another goon takes his turn, kicking him in the ribs as he goes down. Clay has never had his jaw or ribs broken before, but he can guess that he has now.

He slowly regains his feet – managing a few more swings and kicks – but is hampered by his now-broken ribs and the need to keep one hand on the gash in his forehead to staunch the bleeding. Most of his own punches hit nothing but air. There is no avoiding the simple fact that he is outnumbered. He doesn't make it past Round One.

The last thing he sees after hitting the pavement again is Maksim getting back on his feet, hovering over him and laughing. Clay recognizes that laugh from the kidnapper's phone call – the younger, second voice. The kidnapper then kicks him in the solar plexus, knocking him out.

Entanglements

That prospective new client of Pamela's who caused her to miss the homeland tour has once again postponed their meeting, this time until next week. Pamela insists it will have to wait until she returns from Russia, then, where she has a "previous engagement." The client is okay with this – impressed, even, by her globetrotting – but her boss, CEO Barry ("*not* Barney") Miller, is not happy.

She is not concerned with his happiness as she interrupts his meeting with Richard Cohn, Regional VP of Talent Acquisition – or whatever his title is these days. Overpaid, full-time suck-up is his real job. He spends half of his time in Barry's office, probably under the desk, she thinks with a smile.

"The competition will steal your new client away!" Barry says to Pamela after the initial "I'm in a meeting!" "I don't care!" greetings.

She thinks he is being overly dramatic for Richard's benefit, playing the part of the in-charge boss. She curses her bad timing and lack of decorum, but "desperate times call for desperate measures," and all that. If it was just the two of them, he would be more easily persuaded.

"No, Pamela," Barry continues, "I can't let you go. This presentation must happen whenever, wherever and however the client wants; and *you* need to be the presenter. It will bring in millions every year!"

"You think I don't know that?" Pamela argues. "But this is my daughter we're talking about, Barry, gone missing in Russia! I'd say that's just *a little* more important than

a *prospective* client with a *possible* contract! Anyway, they said they're okay with waiting until I get back. I guess if you're desperate, Richard here might stumble his way through the presentation for you."

"Thanks for the ringing endorsement, Pamela," Richard sneers. "But the boss is right. I can't sell it like you can. You've got other... attributes I don't have," he looks her up and down. "Besides, it's your baby."

"Funny you should use those words," she says. "It's my baby Jenna that I'm worried about!"

"Your husband," says Barry, "whatshisname, Brick, he's over there. *He* can take care of things. *He* can go to the authorities and have them find your daughter just as easily as you can. She's probably just out partying again like last time. It runs in the family!" He gives her a wink.

"My husband's name is Clay," she says, now glowering at him, "and no, he apparently *can't* take care of things. He's more useless than Richard here. And there *are* no proper authorities, Barry! It's Russia! Everyone is completely corrupt!"

Tears are welling up in her eyes. All she knows – all she has heard – is that Jenna has gone missing again. That's bad enough, but her phone has been dead, leaving her completely unaware of the more recent ransom call. The next words from her mouth spew out before she can stop herself: "My daughter needs me, you son-of-a-bitch!"

"Hey, now, Pammie," Barry warns her. "Remember who you're talking to!"

"I'm sorry, but... Did you just call me 'Pammie?!'"

To Richard, Barry confides, "This is why women never rise above the glass ceiling. Too emotional."

“Oh... my... God,” says Pamela, sounding more like her daughter than the smooth corporate professional that she is... normally. “You're making me choose between my job and my daughter?! Well, adios, then!”

“Don't you mean *dass vedanny?*” Richard adds, thinking he is speaking Russian.

“Sucking up to the boss must be one of those 'duties to be named later,' eh, Richard?” Pamela counters on her way out. To Barry she says, “But, y'all need to lawyer-up, 'cuz this ain't over!”

“It ain't?” he mocks her speech, which tends to get provincial when upset. He then adds with as bored a voice as possible, “We have attorneys on retainer.”

“Bastard could not care less!” she mutters to herself on her way out.

Richard follows her. Beyond the boss's earshot, he says, “Makes you wonder what good it did sleeping with him, eh, Pammie? May I call you Pammie?”

“No! May I call you Dick?!” She then does something she would never do, normally, but at the moment it feels like the right thing to do. She grabs a half-full coffee cup off the nearest person's desk.

“Hey! My spit cup!” says the cup's owner. His words don't register with Pamela until it's too late as she empties its contents onto Richard's crisp, formerly-white dress shirt.

When she realizes she has dumped tobacco spit on him, she laughs and says, “Ooh, that shirt is ruined, isn't it?!” With a wicked smile, she then adds, “That was so unlike me!”

~

As soon as she gets home, Pamela recharges her phone then flips on the laptop on the kitchen counter to send another email to Vika. She never got a response to her first one. At the time, it was an innocent attempt at having lunch in Astrakhan to show off their beautiful daughter, now all grown up. She thought it would be nice to “catch up” with the woman who was so instrumental in their successful adoption so many years ago. But, that was when it would be the three of them returning to Astrakhan as a family.

Her follow-up message is much more dire. She lost Vika's phone number long ago, never had her street address, and now can't recall her last name, if she ever knew it. The email user name does not divulge anything useful. Pamela can only hope it is still a valid account.

She would have contacted someone from the adoption agency, but they went bankrupt years ago following a corruption scandal. She considers cc'ing the US Consulate on the email but decides against it. Not only would they *not* care – if a human even read it – but, in her professional experience, involving government officials in anything almost always makes things worse. Most government officials, unfortunately, are good at keeping their jobs... and almost nothing else.

Her cell phone starts vibrating and playing a cacophony of ringtones as it comes back to life with all of its messages finally arriving. That is when she hears Clay's voicemail in which he is clearly distraught while describing their daughter's kidnapping. When she sees the “haven great time” text and picture from Jenna, she breaks down and cries.

She feels staggeringly guilty for using her scheduling conflict as a convenient excuse to *not* join them on their

trip. She could have worked it out and joined them, she knows, but after Jenna's most recent disappearing act – her third in the past twelve months – combined with the aggravation and stress caused by her legal separation from Clay, Pamela simply needed a break from the both of them. Let Clay deal with Jenna 24-7 for a while, she figured. Maybe they would come back from Russia appreciating *her* a little more.

Apparently, that was too much to ask. But there is no time for that. She needs to be strong. She needs to keep it together and call her travel agent.

The agent tells her she has missed today's last flight to Moscow on her usual airline but might catch another one with another airline. The only catch is that she won't be able to use her frequent-flier mileage. It will cost nearly \$1,000 more than it otherwise would have.

Pamela makes a nice salary. She's comfortable, but spending an extra grand here or there is not something she does lightly. Even so, there is not the slightest hesitation when she says, "Get me on whatever flight gets me to Russia the fastest."

Before hanging up, the travel agent casually mentions that there is an official U.S. State Department warning against travel to Russia due to the recent bombing at the airport.

"The airport?!" Pamela is taken aback. That hits close to home, but it also steels her resolve. Puffing out her chest and scoffing as if facing down a corporate opponent, she says, "The way I'm feeling right now, honey, the State Department best be warning the Russians that *I'm* coming!"

Hostage

Clay awakens to find himself bound and gagged on the floor of what looks like a storeroom. Judging by the light shining through the one small window, he guesses it is now morning, the next day. The opening is up too high and too small, unfortunately, to offer any chance of escape.

He feels drugged. Beyond that, all he knows for sure is that he physically hurts all over, especially in the face and ribs. He can feel the swelling.

A large, dark-haired man then opens the door. He has a red hard-plastic box in one hand and a huge knife in the other.

So, this is how it ends, Clay thinks to himself, but the man surprises him when he tosses the plastic box at him. Clay is too slow to react and it hits him in the chest.

The man laughs and says, “*Yeda.*”

Doesn't 'yeda' mean bear? Clay wonders. It doesn't, but Clay decides that it does. Not sure why someone would say “bear” in this situation, he assumes the man is introducing himself.

“Bear” puts a six-pack each of water and beer into a refrigerator. Clay never noticed the fridge until that very moment.

Seeing that Clay is still bound and gagged, the man reaches down and slices open Clay's plastic restraints, and leaves without another word.

Clay gingerly examines his “gift.” The box has three *matryoshka* nesting doll stickers, in decreasing size, on the outside. *Russia is like a matryoshka doll*, Clay mentally

paraphrases *Forrest Gump*. *You never know what you'll get.* Inside the box, he is pleasantly surprised to find food. *Oh, that's right, 'yeda' means food, not 'bear.'*

The meal consists of several meat-filled dumplings, a sealed plastic bowl of borscht (no spoon), a piece of dark bread, and a travel-size bottle of vodka. *How nice,* Clay thinks to himself. *Yes, they beat me and lock me in a closet, but they serve a balanced meal!* It is more like dinner than breakfast, but he is starving and eats it.

“Bear” returns a couple hours later to snatch Clay's lunch box and again leave without a word. As the door closes, Clay can hear a hushed young woman's voice speaking Russian to the man. The voice is too quiet to recognize or understand.

A couple hours after that, Clay's attempts to find a way out of his prison are interrupted when Bear returns with the same lunch box, refilled with the same items. The gang must have knocked over a lunch truck, Clay thinks, and this is what they feed their prisoners.

“There is no way out,” Bear says in Russian, guessing what Clay has been up to. Clay understands nothing the man says until he is asked if he needs to “use the toilet.” Recognizing the word “toilet,” Clay nods and follows him out the door and down the hall to what Bear might consider a restroom. The smell confirms it.

Glancing around the room after his eyes adjust to the darkness, Clay sees nothing but a small dark room with a hole in the middle of the floor. There is a light bulb hanging down on a long cord. It's off and Clay sees no way of turning it on. There is an almost-empty roll of toilet paper – single-ply – in a dispenser on the wall. Flies are now

buzzing around Clay's head. A diagonal metal rail to hold onto is fastened to the wall. "So it's a wheelchair-*friendly* room with a hole," Clay says aloud to no one. Bear is out in the hall, not listening.

~

Clay survives the bathroom break, but would love a hot shower right about now. Pamela's words come to mind, "It's not a war zone over there," at which he now scoffs and says, "I beg to differ!"

After returning to his "holding cell," with Bear having just left the room, the door reopens. Clay looks up from what has become his spot – an ugly green but surprisingly comfortable overstuffed chair. He is shocked by who enters.

~

"Jenna? What the...?"

"Are you okay?" she asks. "Are you hurt?"

"Yes!" says Clay. It hurts to talk. He never noticed before just how much a person uses their jaw and ribs when speaking.

"Yes hurt or yes okay?"

"Hurt."

"Where?" They are repeating the scene from the airport bombing, with roles now reversed.

"Everywhere!" he growls, though it sounds more like "evweh." When Maksim enters, Clay points his finger and says, "Dis bast'd jumped me!"

"Yes, I'm sorry about that," says Jenna. "Maksim is sorry, too. You startled him."

“T'uh!” Clay scoffs, glaring at his attacker. “Dudn't look sorry, but he will be as soon as I...” Clay struggles to rise, only to grimace in pain and collapse back into his chair. “I tink my ribs... and jaw... are boken,” he says. “Tried to tell Bear, but he dudn't peak English.”

“Bear?” she asks, having difficulty understanding him. Clay explains how he came up with that name, Jenna nods, and again apologizes. “I need to explain a few things,” she says and hands him a bottle of water.

Clay can see she is concerned, but it feels more like the professional concern of a doctor or nurse, not a daughter. She is deadly serious. *What the hell happened to her?*

To lighten the mood, as is his wont, staring at the water bottle's label, Clay says, “I prefer 'still', not sparkling water.”

“First of all,” she ignores the attempt at humor, “I was never kidnapped. That ransom call you got was Maksim's idea of a joke.”

Clay's jaw would have dropped if it was not so swollen. He had already guessed it was Maksim, but had no idea it was a joke. *Sick bastard.*

The sick bastard smirks.

“He hung up before I could take the phone away from him,” she continues. “I wanted to call you back. I really did. But I wasn't ready to talk yet. Kinda ironic, though, that *you* were the one who ended up kidnapped?”

If she laughs, Clay thinks, I will strangle her.

She doesn't. “Second of all,” she continues, “things have changed. *I've* changed.”

“Ya think?!”

She does not appreciate the interruption. “Back at the orphanage...” she pauses to find the right words “...it's like a switch was flipped. I met my mother, my Russian mother, my *real* mother.”

“Your *real* mother,” Clay says angrily, “is back in Saint Louis worried sick about you!” He can only assume Pamela is worried sick. *Where the hell is she?*

“No,” Jenna shakes her head sadly. “My Russian mother's name was Svetlana. I saw her at the orphanage.” She smiles at the memory.

“She works at the orphanage?”

“No!” she shouts impatiently before more calmly adding, “She visited me. Her *spirit* visited me. She is no longer with us.”

“What are you talking about?” Clay asks. He knows perfectly well what she is saying. The woman's ghost came to visit. He simply doesn't want to hear it. It dons on him then that, ever since she entered the room, she never once called him “Dad” or even “Papa.” She *has* changed, and not for the better. *It's just a phase*, he tells himself. She will snap out of it soon enough, like she did back at the airport.

Jenna explains that it feels like nothing has changed except that she is now finally free to drop the facade she has been keeping up all these years. She feels reunited with her true self.

“Oh my God,” Clay says, exasperated. “And you think I get too 'New Age-y'? Can you hear yourself? 'Reunited with your true self?’”

Again, Clay understands what she is trying to say, but he is *not* going to encourage this train of thought. “You are

being completely selfish!” he shouts. “Do you know what you've put me through?! God only knows what your mother is going through.”

She eyes him coldly, unmoved. A middle-aged man then enters the room. Clay can see at a glance that the man is a thug – just one more angry thick-necked middle-aged punk dressed entirely in black.

In life, one occasionally meets someone who instantly inspires an instinctive enmity for no apparent reason. For Clay, this is one of those moments. “You people are like cartoon characters,” he says to the man, not knowing or caring if he understands English.

The man looks askance at Clay as if at a chained dog. He then barks in Russian at Maksim, “*Davai!*” (Let's go!)

Like a chained dog, Clay feels like biting anyone who might come within reach. Maksim and the “cartoon character” leave the room, but remain just outside the doorway, waiting for Jenna.

“I have to leave,” she says to Clay. “Sorry, but we have to keep you here for a while. There should be water and beer in the fridge. Help yourself.”

“What do you mean you have to leave?!” Clay asks. “Where are you going? Who are these people? What *the hell* is going on?!”

Jenna then delivers – again, coldly and matter-of-fact – the most devastating news Clay has ever received.

“I am staying with Maksim and his father, Dmitry Shepkin, the man you called a cartoon character. I have changed my name back to Eugenia Luganskaya, my birth-mom's surname since she and my father were never officially married. And... uh... sorry, but I have renounced

you and mom as my parents. I am now an emancipated minor.”

She dumps all of this on him in a matter of seconds before the door closes behind her.

“Wait, what?!” says Clay. He is in too much physical pain to get out of his chair fast enough to keep the door from closing. Once he does get to it, it is locked.

Easing back into his chair, Clay realizes she must have planned all of this before they ever left Saint Louis. The “emancipated minor” thing alone would require dealing with Russian officials, and absolutely *nothing* official here is done quickly. *Were her “altered state” episodes, he wonders, just an act, too?*

Trying to digest it all, with nothing else to occupy his time, Clay makes another attempt at finding his belongings amid the clutter. Specifically, he wants to find his throw-away phone, but, again comes up empty.

If he felt stronger, he would launch himself against the door, but that is out of the question. The memory of Jenna as a toddler squeezing through the pet door back home comes to mind, but this one has no pet door. Even if it did, Clay would never fit through, so that's not going to happen.

He is stuck here, and Jenna... well, Jenna is not his little girl anymore. She said so herself.

Tears are in his eyes as he stands in front of the refrigerator. A beer sounds good right about now. *Might as well get drunk*, he thinks, as he opens it.

Within, he finds bottles of *Stella Artois* and a couple of domestic brands, *Baltika* and *Zhigulevskoye*, he has never heard of. In no mood to support anything Russian, he opts for the Belgium-made *Stella*. He is a million miles away as

Last Train Out *by William Arthur Holmes*

he opens it, unexpectedly remembering a Belgian soccer mate, Etienne, he had as a teenager. He does not even remember drinking the beer.

Rescue

Pamela has arrived in Astrakhan. She finds Clay's hotel easily enough and introduces herself to the pretty girl behind the counter. She remembers how Russian hotels only seem to hire the prettiest girls to work the front desk. Forcing a smile, Pamela explains that her name should be on the reservation. The girl says her name *is* on the reservation, but they have her down as already arrived.

“Well, I am obviously *just now* arriving,” Pamela says as sweetly as she can. “See my passport? That's me! Now, would you please give me the key?”

“I am sorry,” the girl says in very good English, “but I cannot. We have you marked as already checked-in.”

“So you've said,” says Pamela, with pursed lips. “I think I know what the problem is here.” She pulls out two 1,000 ruble notes – \$30-\$80, depending on exchange rates – and hands it to the girl. Careful to see that no one is watching, the girl smiles, takes the bribe, and hands Pamela the requested key card.

Pamela gathers up her bags and hurries to the elevator. Riding the incredibly small, cramped car to the fourth floor, she is taken back to when they first adopted Jenna all those years ago. After the judge had approved their adoption petition, they spent the next ten days in this hotel with Jenna, awaiting their paperwork to be finalized.

Jenna had absolutely *loved* this elevator. At the age of two, it must have been like magic. You get into this little room on *one* floor, press a button, feel the sensation of go-

ing up or down, and the next thing you know you are on another floor! Amazing!

With such memories stirred up, the thought of her beautiful daughter now kidnapped in this most foreign of countries is just too much to bear. Alone in the elevator, Pamela starts bawling. Huge, agonizing sobs wrack her entire body as the incredibly slow car makes its way upward. When the door opens at her floor, finally, she barely notices. It is only after it begins to close again that she sticks her leg out to keep it open.

Back home, that would have tripped a sensor and instantly reopened the door. Not here. It closes on her leg and stays there. A moment of panic hits, but she has the good sense to press that button with the international symbol for “open the damned door”: a vertical line separating opposite arrows pointed outward.

The door reopens. That moment of panic did at least serve to snap her out of her crying jag. Now laboring down the hall with her luggage, still wiping away tears, Pamela eventually finds Clay's room. She enters and throws her coat on the couch and bags on the floor. She wants to collapse onto the couch, but forces herself to remain standing.

The room overlooks the Volga River, and she is drawn to the window. Leaning on the sill, she is looking down at the river, lost in thought, when someone enters from behind. She smiles hopefully and spins around, hoping it is her darling Jenna.

It's not. It is a fashionably-trashy, thirty-something, hazel-eyed brunette woman in tight pants and spike heels. Sofia.

“You've got the wrong room,” Pamela says more angrily than she meant to.

“I am with Clay,” Sofia explains.

“He's not here,” Pamela is now unapologetically rude. She cannot help but notice Sofia's garish attire. Jenna had texted about this woman, and Pamela now agrees Sofia might have been quite attractive if not such an obvious slut.

“You'd best run along now, honey,” says Pamela. “I think your pimp is looking for you in the lobby.”

Sofia curses in Russian, then forces a smile and asks, “Where is Clay, please?”

“I said he's not here. I was hoping *you* could tell *me* where he is.”

Vika Karimova has the good timing to arrive at that very moment. She knocks on the door frame and slides past Sofia into the room. Pamela smiles with relief. Vika is a sight for sore eyes. She has visibly aged, but it *has been* fifteen years. Her big, dark eyes have grown even friendlier over the years.

A good sign, Pamela thinks. Aloud, she says, crying as they hug, “It's so good to see you! What have you been up to?”

“Oh, this and that,” says Vika. “Just life, you know. And you?”

“Same-ol', same-ol',” Pamela lies, then adds as if it is to be expected. “Clay and I are divorced, of course.”

“I am so sorry! That is too bad.” Vika seems sincere. She then nods in Sofia's direction. “Who is this?”

“Call girl, by the look of her,” Pamela says purposely loud enough for Sofia to hear.

“I am Clay's translator and guide,” Sofia, with pursed lips, explains. “Who are you?!”

“I am his wife!” Pamela growls.

“Ah, yes, 'the ex-bitch,' as he calls you.”

“That's right, I am the ex-bitch.”

“And I am the *ex-bitch's* translator and guide,” Vika announces happily, joining in the fun.

“Vika!” Pamela objects.

“Sorry,” Vika apologizes. She knows perfectly well who Sofia is, having tracked her from the moment she approached Clay in Moscow. She is simply playing the part of the blissfully ignorant civilian translator. “Where is Mr. Desno?” she asks Sofia in Russian, almost shouting.

Given Vika's tone, Sofia infers that she is more than she pretends to be. So many people are more than they pretend to be. “I do not know,” she answers in English, raising her eyebrows to convey her innocence, then adds with a wicked smile at Pamela, “We were having an intimate, candle-lit dinner when Clay saw Maksim on the other side of the street. He chased after him, and that is when I lost him.”

“So you were the last person to see Clay alive,” says Pamela.

“Yes,” Sofia admits before correcting herself. “No, I suppose Maksim was the last. I stayed behind.”

“You were *so* brave,” Pamela is sarcastic, sure that Sofia is guilty of something.

“When he did not return,” Sofia continues, “I came here to find him.”

~

An indeterminate amount of time and several beers later, and feeling much better about his predicament – or, rather,

having dulled the senses enough to no longer acknowledge that a predicament even exists – Clay starts to wonder what became of Sofia. *Maybe she called the police, he hopes, and they're on their way right now to rescue me!*

Another several beers after that, however, with no one crashing through the door to save the day, he begins to lose hope. None of the visualization exercises that he ever conjured up predicted *this* scenario.

His negativity does not last long, though. *I am Clay Desno! Minor league Coach of the Year nominee last year! Hope springs eternal! There's a solution to every problem. For every attack, there's a counter-attack!*

He manages to convince himself that Jenna does not hate him. She is simply sowing her wild oats, and her “oats” are wilder than most. A *lot* wilder. She, like most teenagers, wants her freedom and doesn't want to wait a minute longer. Being in a foreign country and conveniently able to speak the language has provided her that opportunity. She is merely taking advantage of the cards she's been dealt. Looking at it that way, Clay is proud of her resourcefulness.

That's right, proud!

Then it hits him. He's been drinking all this beer but is locked in here with no bathroom. Now *that* is a predicament.

~

“You insist on speaking English,” Vika says to Sofia. “You are Russian, are you not?”

Sofia nods, yes. But there is no time to elaborate before an incoming text from Clay to Pamela interrupts them. “Well, speak of the devil...” says Pamela.

The cryptic text reads: “Held by Maksim. Found Jenna. Insane.”

“He's found Jenna!” says Pamela. “But, this has to be a sick joke. He says he's being 'held.' Held hostage? And this is the second time I've heard of this 'Maksim' person. Who is he? And which one of them is 'insane?’”

“Maksim is the boy who Jenna, poor thing, wants to be her boyfriend,” Sofia tries to make it sound like Jenna is lucky to have a boyfriend at all.

Pamela thinks Sofia is making it much too easy to hate her.

Vika reads the text and shakes her head. She has known all along where Jenna and Clay are. And, given that their coordinates have been actively moving, she can deduce they are both still alive. Not necessarily doing well, but alive.

“Let *me* see!” says Sofia.

“Never you mind,” says Pamela, putting the phone back into her purse.

Sofia pouts.

Vika advises Pamela to text Clay back and have him use his phone's GPS app to tell them his coordinates. “Good idea!” Pamela gushes as she pulls the phone back out of her purse. “You should be a detective!”

Vika smiles. When there is no response from Clay, however, she frowns. There is the possibility that Clay's GPS *tracker* is alive, but not Clay. That text could have been sent from his phone by anyone. “Do *you* think Clay sent that text?” she asks Pamela.

“Yes, don't you?”

“Does it sound like him,” Vika clarifies, “like something he would say?”

“Hard to say with so few words,” says Pamela, “but if I had to guess I would say yes.”

~

Clay is still very much alive. He finally found his throw-away phone. It was in an interior pocket of his jacket. The jacket itself was hidden in the fridge. *Maksim, you sick bastard.*

He is trying to find the GPS function on the phone, as per Vicka's instructions, when Maksim and a couple of other goons show up. Maksim snatches the phone out of his hand while the others go straight for the few beers remaining in the fridge.

Maksim reads the Americans' text exchange. He compliments the clever GPS idea as he tucks the phone into his back pocket. “Nice phone,” he says. “I will keep it.”

“I don't know, Maxi Pad,” Clay comes up with a new nickname. “It's in English. Can you read English?”

“I will sell it online,” Maksim smiles, “with all of your personal data still on it! I hope for your sake you do not use it for online banking!”

“There's nothing personal on it, dumb ass,” Clay scoffs. “It's a throw-away phone.”

Ignoring Clay's insults, Maksim sniffs the air. “It smells like piss in here!”

“Well...” Clay tries not to smile. He glances at the men by the refrigerator, each now popping open a beer. “You locked me in here with all that beer, but no bathroom, so...”

The men thought nothing of how easily the bottle caps come off the beer bottles. When they each take a swig from their respective bottle, only to immediately spit it out in disgust, Clay laughs out loud. It hurts too much to laugh like this, and he tries to stop, but it is extremely difficult.

“Someone pissed in our beer!” one of the goons exclaims. Clay had finally managed to stop laughing, but this makes him crack up all over again. He does not know what was said, but the look on the man's face says it all. The smarter one of the two goons points at Clay and says, “I will kill you!”

Maksim wants to laugh at his associates' misfortune, but knows they might kill *him*, as well. He steps aside and lets them take their anger out on Clay.

They beat Clay mercilessly until Maksim's father, local crime boss and “cartoon character” Dmitry Shepkin, shows up. “Stop!” he orders. “We need the American alive!”

When his henchmen explain what Clay had done to them, the elder Shepkin laughs almost as hard as Clay had. “Good one!”

Finally catching his breath, wagging a finger at Clay, he says in Russian, “I have not laughed that hard in years! Just for that, I might let you live!” Clay barely understands a word of it.

To his men, Shepkin shouts, “*Davai!* I have someone I actually *want* dead!” They leave Clay battered and bloody on the floor.

~

Vika's bosses gave her the go-ahead to organize a team to pay Dmitry Shepkin a visit the next morning. She has a warrant for his arrest based on Jenna's abduction. If it turns

out Jenna was *not* abducted and has been hanging out with the Shepkin gang voluntarily, there is not much Vika can do about it. She hopes the latter is not the case, for she would dearly love to place handcuffs on the Shepkins.

Contrary to popular belief, Russia's FSB and organized crime truly are sworn enemies... most of the time. Nothing is absolute in Russia, but the Kremlin knows all too well that it was organized crime – in the form of corrupt officials conspiring with oligarchs, each with his own army of lawyers, bookkeepers and hit men – who plundered and nearly tore Russia apart after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Vika's assembled team consists of several semi-retired intelligence, military and police officers. Along with those, she has included a couple members of the most-dreaded of all Russians – bureaucrats. Her right-hand man, Gennady – who followed Clay and Jenna to Astrakhan – has invited a trusted acquaintance of his own to join them. Vika is completely unaware of this particular addition to the team.

Normally, such a “visit” to a known gang lord's compound would involve a SWAT team, but Vika has carefully selected her team based on personal experience with the Shepkins. She trusts each member of her team with her life, even the bureaucrats. And that's good because it might come down to that.

Thanks to the tracking devices, Gennady and Vika know exactly where to look for Jenna. Gennady will drive the lead car while Vika rides with Pamela in the backseat of the second car.

Pamela is feeling a bit superior to Clay at the moment. She was smart enough to call for help, while Clay appar-

ently tried to go it alone to rescue their daughter. She used to admire that about him.

His method, she thinks, is not much different from how men will refuse to stop and ask directions when lost. True, her “cavalry charge” is using minivans and bureaucrats instead of soldiers on horseback, but with Vika's team surrounding her, Pamela is confident that they will soon have Jenna safely back.

It is a beautiful morning. Not too hot, not too cold. Perfect weather for a cavalry charge. Pamela removes her wind-breaker, folds it neatly, and places it beside her. The front door windows of both vans are rolled down to let the fresh air in. A catchy, upbeat tune comes on the radio. Pamela's driver cranks up the volume.

Being silly, he is moving the steering wheel back and forth to the beat of the music. Pamela normally would have smiled at him but, under the circumstances, she wishes he was taking things more seriously.

Within view of Dmitry's compound, Gennady stops the front car and gets out. He puts up a hand for Pamela's driver to stop. From the backseat, Pamela wonders what is going on. Is Gennady going to scold his counterpart for being too silly? He casually walks up to their car, now stopped as her driver sticks his elbow out the window.

In back, but on the opposite side of the car from Pamela, Vika watches Gennady closely. *Why is he approaching the driver instead of her?* she wonders. *This is not part of the plan.*

Gennady pulls out a gun and shoots the other driver at point-blank range. Pamela screams as blood spatters onto her. The driver slumps onto the front passenger who re-

flexively pushes him back over to his side. Pamela tries to lock her door, but there are no visible locks.

This model of minivan has passenger doors on both sides of the vehicle. Vika is able to escape out her side, and is quickly on one knee with her gun out and in position to fire.

With the dead driver's foot no longer pressing the brake, the car lurches into the front car. The occupants of that vehicle roll up their windows and lock their doors. It's an instinctive response, but won't do them any good. The windows are not bullet-proof.

Pamela tries to escape out Vika's door, but Gennady is too quick. He slides her door open behind her. She turns toward him in stark terror with her hands up in surrender. He is calm and smiling as if about to have a pleasant conversation.

A pedestrian then steps out of the shadows nearby. Pamela catches the movement in the corner of her eye and looks there. Gennady does not bother to turn. He knows who it is.

Two gunshots ring out, and a look of shock crosses Gennady's face. He loses his grip on Pamela's door as he turns to see who has just shot him in the back. His gun drops to the ground and he collapses immediately after.

With Gennady no longer obstructing her view, Pamela gets a good look at her savior. She cannot believe her eyes.

It's Jenna.

Jenna feels as if she is floating, in a dream, a crazy dream. In her mind, she is now at the carnival in an elaborate

shooting gallery. The targets are not ducks but cardboard cut-outs made to look like bad guys, monsters, and cartoon characters.

Dmitry Shepkin is there in her dream, just behind her, encouraging and complimenting her skills. “You can do it,” he says softly. “Kill the bad guys. You will win that big stuffed-toy on the shelf!”

She is past the age of caring about stuffed-toys but plays along because that is the game. It's fun. Shoot the targets, win a prize. She also loves her new father, so she shoots Gennady in the back, as requested.

Seeing him fall to the ground gives her pause, though. Something is not right. This is too real. In her head, Dmitry himself then becomes a cartoon character. She wonders why the phrase “cartoon character” associated with him is so familiar.

She walks slowly, calmly up to Gennady now sprawled on the ground, face-up, eyes blinking, still alive. He gives her a look of disgust, but is unable to move. Standing over him, not looking at Pamela, Jenna recognizes Gennady from the Moscow airport. He was the one who gave them that bottled water.

She purses her lips as if contemplating her next move, but there is no question what needs to be done. She needs to finish him off. Those are the rules.

With a grim resolve, aiming her gun at Gennady's head, she says, “It's too bad. He was so nice at the airport.”

Her mother then ruins everything by speaking. Jenna had forgotten Pamela was there, just a few feet away. “Jenna!” Pamela snaps at her daughter. “What are you doing?!”

“Aw, mom!” says Jenna. “Just let me finish the job! Those are the rules!”

“Those are *not* the rules.” Pamela has no idea what might be going through her daughter's head, but she has always been good at thinking on her feet and is now rolling with it. “You've already shot the man. He is wounded and can't hurt us now. You've *done* your job!”

Vika pops up on the other side of the van, gun in hand, silent. The van is low-profile for its type, and Jenna is tall enough to see across its roof. She now zeroes in on Vika, her new target. From inside the vehicle, Pamela turns to see what Jenna is looking at. Vika's torso is pressed up against the other side of the van. Pamela guesses she is standing on the running board, but cannot see that Vika is pointing a gun at her daughter.

Tense seconds pass before a look of recognition finally crosses Jenna's face. She vaguely remembers “Miss Vika” from childhood, and she smiles. Vika forces a return smile. All the while, they keep their guns pointed at each other.

Jenna's smile then disappears and she is now angry at Miss Vika. She is the one who physically carried her away from the safety and comfort of the orphanage – away from all she knew – into the arms of those two foreigners, the ones she now calls Mom and Dad.

Jenna is feeling dizzy now, as she did back at the orphanage. Her birth-mother Svetlana comes into view. She is holding up a hand, saying *nyet, nyet, nyet!* Jenna cannot hear the words, but understands.

So much has happened these past few moments. Conflicting thoughts, strong emotions and violence have taken their toll on her. Jenna can feel the energy draining from

her body. Her vision is getting blurred. She lowers her gun.

Vika is controlling her own barely-perceptible breathing. She can see that Jenna is struggling with something internally, but remains calm and professional with her gun trained on her target. Jenna shakes her head as if trying to clear her thoughts, lifts up her gun, and Vika does not hesitate.

From inside the car, all that Pamela hears and sees is a gunshot followed by her darling Jenna collapsing to the ground. “My God, no!” she shrieks and jumps out of the car. She rushes to her daughter's side and, there in the middle of the street, props her into a sitting position.

Jenna has landed on something uncomfortable. She rises up a few inches to see what it is. It's her gun. Pamela spots it first and immediately snatches it and sets it on the ground behind herself, as if hiding a toy from a misbehaving child.

It takes a moment before she sees her daughter's wound. The bullet only grazed her, but it is still a horrifying sight for a mother to see. She picks up the gun, runs back to the van, tears a sleeve off her wind-breaker, and throws the gun into her purse. Turning the wind-breaker sleeve inside out in order to better soak up the blood, she returns to wrap Jenna's wound with it.

Vika circles around the back of the vehicle. She had purposely shot the gun out of Jenna's hand. What she had *not* intended was for the bullet to ricochet into the girl's shoulder, sending her crashing to the pavement. Vika is as relieved as anyone to see that Jenna is okay. It's just a nasty scrape. She can only guess her target fell to the ground

more from shock than the impact of the bullet. She has learned from personal experience that, no matter how tough or street-wise a person thinks they are, a real live gunfight has a profound and lasting effect on them.

But what the hell got into Gennady? she now wonders. For that, Vika has no answer.

~

Dmitry is watching it all from his upstairs window as the scene plays out on the street below. He shakes his head at Gennady's failure, but is impressed with Jenna's performance. She shot the wrong person... unless she was *aiming* at Gennady, then it was a good shot. *One has to give credit where it is due.*

She had been instructed to shoot everyone *other than* Gennady and his other mole, but she is too strong-willed. There was no way for him to gain complete control over her in the short time given. He is very good at what he does, but no one is *that* good. Still, he thinks Jenna shows great potential. If they both survive what comes next, she might go far in his organization if he has more time to work on her.

~

Vika is not the only one who has spent some time in the KGB/FSB. Dmitry was there with a specialty in psychotronics: controlling human behavior through a combination of drugs, hypnosis and electronic gadgetry emitting various microwave and electromagnetic radiation.

A bit of a *wunderkind* back in the day, he and his fellow students used prostitutes as their "field" test subjects. When he got into the habit of sampling those drugs and

prostitutes himself, however, Dmitry was kicked out of the program. Still, it was not until he was discovered practicing his *current* criminal work that he got kicked out of the FSB entirely.

~

Jenna leads Pamela, Vika and their surviving crew to Dmitry's compound to get Clay. Two from Vika's party are tasked with staying behind to deal with Gennady and the dead driver. The remaining two follow Pamela and Vika.

Jenna suddenly forgets where Dmitry's compound is. Her mind is playing tricks on her but, after a moment of confusion, she remembers and leads them to Clay's storage room. She swipes her keycard across the reader and breathes a sigh of relief when it works. Pamela follows her into the small room while Vika and her team stand guard outside the door.

Pamela and Jenna both gasp upon seeing Clay's swollen, bruised face. He is curled into the fetal position in his favorite chair, unaware that he is being rescued.

He is dreaming that he is back home in Saint Louis. His old hound dog Goober is still alive. They are taking a nap together on the back porch. Clay is on the porch couch, with Goober on the porch itself, close enough so that Clay can scratch behind his ears. Such a great porch. Such a great dog.

When he hears someone enter the room, he is surprised Goober hasn't barked to warn him. He is usually so good at that. Too good, sometimes. Clay opens his eyes and, with a groan, remembers where (and when) he is. Not bothering to see who's there – he assumes it is his captors returning to

pummel him some more – Clay mumbles defiantly, “Han't learnt yer lesson yet?!”

Once he does turn toward the door, he is shocked to see Pamela come into view, followed by Jenna. He would smile if that didn't hurt so much.

“You weren't kidding,” Pamela refers to his text about being held captive.

“Nunt,” he tries to say “nope.” He has never in his life been so happy to see her. He grabs hold of her arm like a drowning man to a lifeline.

“Dad!” Jenna cries, inserting herself between him and Pamela. “Are you alright?”

Clay eyes her warily. “Depends who's asking, the American Jenna or the Russian, Eugenia? I can't tell anymore.”

“It's me, Dad. Jenna! I'm so sorry. I feel pretty weird right now, actually,” she giggles, “but it's me.” She is on her knees at his side. “I want to hug you but I'm afraid I'll hurt you.”

You have already hurt me, he glares at her, *...betrayed me worse than you'll ever know!* He hopes she can see that on his face. Aloud, he keeps it positive. “*There's my American girl,*” he uses the same words as the last time she snapped out of one of her spells. He wishes she would stop with these damned spells.

He moves to pat her on the head, but his hand is killing him. Holding it now with his other hand, he says with a wince and a grin, “I think I broke my hand on someone's face.”

He finally notices the crude bandage around Jenna's shoulder. A spot of blood is seeping through. "What happened?!"

"Long story," says Pamela. "I'll tell you later." She is not ready to talk about it. "I think she'll be okay once we can put something on it and wrap it better."

"Never mind me," Jenna says with a smile. "We need to get Dad cleaned up!" She gets up off her knees to go find a clean towel. Finding one, she soaks it in a bucket of hot water from the faucet next to the refrigerator. She hands it to Pamela for Clay and returns to the fridge.

"Don't drink the beer!" Clay warns.

"Wasn't gonna," says Jenna. "I was looking for a bottle of water. But, what's wrong with the beer?"

He explains what he had done. Everyone has a good laugh... until realizing it was this prank that got him so thoroughly beaten.

"I told you," Pamela scolds him softly, "your sense of humor would get you killed!"

"You should see the other guy," he jokes. Having been unconscious, he is oblivious to the shootout that transpired out on the street.

"Jenna, honey," says Pamela, "please find a second towel and soak it in hot water for yourself?"

~

With Clay and Jenna both now cleaned up a bit, they head out. Pamela and Jenna prop Clay up from either side until both women cringe, stop, and quickly take his arms off their necks.

“Sorry, Mud Man,” Pamela explains, “but you smell awful, like you've been rolling around in the mud, *literally*, if not worse.”

“Sorry!” says Clay. “There were no showers in my luxury suite! So, don't hold me up then. But, if you could just stay close and make sure I don't fall over, that'd be great.”

Entering the alley, he sees Vika. “So that *was* you!” he says. She nods and smiles. To Pamela and Jenna, he says, “Don't take this the wrong way, but it's embarrassing that I had to be rescued by a bunch of women. Don't tell the guys back home, okay?”

Jenna nods in agreement, pauses, and asks, “What guys?”

“*Any* guy you meet!” he says, and they all laugh.

Vika and her associates follow the Americans down the narrow alleyway to an adjacent building. Pamela absently notices that this is probably the cleanest alleyway she has ever been in.

There is a doorway and awning with an elevator leading to Dmitry Shepkin's residence. They are stopped by one of Dmitry's guards. Vika is surprised Jenna is the one leading them here. This was where she planned to go... on her own.

Clay notices that this guard is young and surprisingly unthuggishly-dressed, wearing jeans, sneakers, and a striped collared shirt. He looks fresh out of high school, though he does have a scar on his face. The scar, he now notices, is in the same spot as Maksim's... and everyone else who took a swing at him lately. It must be a gang marking, he decides. *Gangsters are so stupid.*

From a phone on the wall beside the elevator, the kid calls up to his boss for instructions. To Jenna in Russian he says, “Boss says you are cordially invited up, but only the Americans. He says *you* can translate?”

“‘Cordially invited,’ Vika smirks out the side of her mouth. “What’s to stop him from taking them all hostage,” she asks the young guard, “or shooting them as they get off the elevator?”

The guard relays this into the phone, but Dmitry cuts him off. “I heard the bitch. Put me on speaker.”

“My team and I are coming with them...” Vika insists, “...armed.”

“Why are we visiting Dmitry at all?” Jenna asks.

“I was wondering the same thing,” says Clay, “but you’re the one who led us here.”

“I did?” Jenna asks, confused. She now remembers that she did, but has no idea why.

Always the practical one, Pamela moves closer to Jenna, puts an arm around her shoulders, and offers, “If you were staying there, honey, you probably have to go up and get your things.”

Jenna nods. That makes sense, but there is more to it than that. On one level, she feels a strong pull toward Dmitry but, also, there is an equally strong revulsion. Her reaction to this conflict is to vomit. She barely misses Clay’s shoes.

Pamela rushes to Jenna’s aid, looking for something to wipe her mouth with. “She can use her sleeve,” Clay offers, seriously.

“Don’t...” Jenna puts up a hand. “I’m fine.”

“We go up there,” Vika returns everyone's attention to the business at hand, “get Jenna's things, and come right back down.”

“I'm not going up there,” Clay interjects. “You and your people go visit that low-life, keep him distracted, while the rest of us get the hell out of town!”

“Jenna has to get her things,” Pamela argues.

“*Forget* her things!” says Clay. “We can buy *new* things! I can't believe you want to pay this guy a visit like he's some kinda friendly neighbor. He's a *mob boss*! He kills people. He's the one who had me beaten up! Twice!”

“Actually, no, Dad,” Jenna disagrees. “The first time, it was Maksim. The second time, it was the guys whose beer you peed in. And, Dmitry *is* the one who saved you from *them*. Remember?”

“Besides,” says Pamela, “we've got Vika and her people with us, all heavily armed. We'll be fine! Y'all *are* heavily armed, right?”

Nodding at Pamela, Vika says, “It's up to you, but I do have some *very* interesting information to share with everyone... especially Mr. Shepkin.”

“Let them all come up, then!” Dmitry barks through the phone in Russian. “As long as they keep their guns in their holsters, I promise not to shoot anyone. I just had the place remodeled. Bullet holes would not match the décor!”

Vika translates with a professional chuckle, pretending that she does not despise everything about the man. She fully expects him to try something stupid.

Jenna nods. “He *did* just have it remodeled.”

“A mob boss with style and a sense of humor?” Pamela asks.

Last Train Out by *William Arthur Holmes*

“Those are the worst kind,” says Vika. “They fool themselves into thinking they are civilized.”

Clay is still shaking his head. “This has got to be the stupidest thing I've ever done, but I guess you're gonna do this, no matter what I say. And, I can't let you all go up there alone, so let's go. *Davai*, as they say.”

Reveal

As they get off the elevator at the second floor, there is no one there to greet them. The lift door opens directly into the living room. There is no elevator lobby. Clay looks around nervously, expecting someone to jump out at them. To Jenna, he says, “Okay, go get your stuff and let's go.” He wants to get in and out. Quick.

“No,” she says, “I want to hear what Vika has to say!”

“She can email us,” he insists. “Come on, let's go!”

“I'm not going anywhere until I hear what Vika has to say!”

As much as Clay loves his daughter – and he loves her as much as life itself, or did until this latest stunt – she inspires a level of anger in him sometimes that no one else ever comes near. This is one of those times. It requires every ounce of restraint to control himself, but he holds his tongue, sighs deeply, finds a seat, and hopes for the best.

As everyone takes a seat on their choice of several couches and chairs throughout the spacious living room, Clay stage-whispers to Vika, “This better be good.”

She smiles reassuringly.

The angry exchange between Jenna and Clay a moment ago does not affect Jenna in the slightest. They have been doing that her entire adopted life. What she is concerned with now is the hold that Dmitry still has over her. He has her hooked like a fish on a line and, try as she might, she cannot quite locate the hook.

Clay also questions whether Jenna has truly snapped out of whatever spell she has been under. Will she ever

come back to him mind, body and spirit? This is another reason he didn't want to come up to Dmitry's lair, but he didn't want to say so in front of her. She *claims* to be her old self again, but he finds it difficult trusting anything she says anymore. That, alone, makes him sad.

Pamela is wondering about some of the same things that Jenna and Clay are, but, in an effort to maintain her sanity, has chosen to suppress such concerns. She studies the décor, instead.

There is a lot of white. The walls, archways, railing along sections of raised flooring, and pillars are all white. Those pillars are thicker than normal, made that way, perhaps, to better hide behind in a shootout. There are black and red accents with gold trim throughout Dmitry's residence. If she had to guess at a name for this style he has chosen – other than garish – she would call it Russian/Egyptian hybrid.

Maksim and several of Dmitry's henchmen enter next, including the “beer” drinkers who are now glaring at Clay. Maksim makes it a point – with a smirk at Clay – to take a seat next to Jenna on the couch. When he sees her badly-wrapped wound, he summons their “battlefield” medic, Vladimir, over to tend to her.

The rest of the henchmen remain standing, spread out across the room. They are not here to socialize.

Astrakhan's self-professed Number One gang leader, Dmitry Shepkin, then makes a grand entrance. At least, he clearly *hopes* it is a grand entrance. Wearing a black tracksuit and smug grin, taking long, slow strides, his back is ramrod-straight as he peers down upon his now-seated guests. He always has guests seated prior to his entering

the room. It forces them to look up to him. It seems silly, he knows, but it is amazing what can be accomplished with such “silly” manipulation tactics.

From her chair closest to the elevator, on Shepkin's left, Vika smirks. She is unimpressed with the man before her. She is all too familiar with Dmitry and his ilk. He might have made a better impression, she thinks, if he had worn proper clothing instead of this 1980s New York gang banger-style tracksuit. *Emperor's New Clothes* comes to mind.

Across the room, now standing next to the bar, Dmitry drapes one leg over a bar stool, half on, half off it. For her part, Pamela notices, despite Dmitry's somewhat cartoonish attire, that he does have a certain presence. He is very much a “there, in-the-moment” sort of person who seems able to soak in every molecule of his immediate surroundings.

“Love what you've done with the place!” says Pamela. Her corporate survival instincts are kicking in. When you find yourself in an adversarial boardroom, it is wise to quickly determine who is in charge and immediately get on their good side, usually with compliments. Works like a charm, especially with men like Dmitry. If there is no one clearly in charge, she often takes that upon herself, though Dmitry is clearly in charge here. These simple rules have gotten her where she is today in her career... assuming she has a career when she gets home.

“Thank you!” Dmitry is pleasantly surprised, hearing Vika's translation. “You are not being sarcastic, are you? I *despise* sarcasm.”

“I’m completely serious,” Pamela clarifies. “I would love the nickel tour.” Vika has to ask Pamela to clarify “nickel tour.”

Clay is impressed with Pamela's aplomb. His own aplomb fell out and shattered into a million pieces a while back somewhere on the streets of Astrakhan.

“Maybe later,” Dmitry says with a dismissive wave, though he is intrigued. With a smile, he adds, “You are Jenna's adoptive mother, yes?”

“*Da!*” says Pamela, using one of the four or five Russian words in her vocabulary. She finds herself reluctantly drawn to him.

“You must be very proud,” he says, through Vika. “She is so beautiful, and smart! And,” he adds with a wink and another smile, “I can see where she gets her style and charm!”

“Get a room!” Jenna says in Russian.

“Not a bad idea,” Dmitry laughs, now eyeing Pamela like a piece of meat. No translation necessary.

Everywhere I go, Clay thinks, men are hitting on my wife! Pamela smiles at Clay as if overhearing his thoughts.

Dmitry has been keeping a close eye on his man, Vladimir, diligently tending to Jenna's wound. To Jenna, in Russian, he asks softly, “What is going on there?”

“Not sure, actually,” she replies in Russian. “Got shot somehow.” She shrugs it off as if this is a common occurrence. Dmitry nods. It *is* a common occurrence in his world.

“What does that plaque on the wall say?” Pamela asks Dmitry, pointing at an ornately-framed quote.

Before Vika can translate, Jenna speaks up. "'Violence, when done properly, is a work of art' – Dmitry Shepkin."

Dmitry smiles upon translation. Pamela's jaw drops.

With both Clay and Dmitry watching the "medic" treat and wrap Jenna's wound, their eyes inevitably make contact. The two of them then begin a strange little competition in which the objective seems to be: whoever watches Jenna the closest – whoever appears to be the most concerned – wins. Clay would get up and sit next to his daughter, but it hurts too much to move.

Dmitry doesn't need to move. As Pamela has intuited, he is so in tune with his surroundings that he can let his eyes do the walking. When he does this, it is as if he is physically standing in that spot. It can be quite disconcerting to those around him. He is fully aware of that, and enjoys it tremendously. One drawback from his perspective is that, early on, he could never sneak up on anyone. They always felt him coming. Through practice, however, he has mastered it to the point that sneaking up on people is now one of his favorite things.

He and the last true friend he ever had – before he killed him – used to have staring contests. These were not the usual kind, however. They would pick an attractive woman across the room, preferably not facing them. They would then go to opposite corners of the room, and commence staring at her, typically undressing her with their eyes, imagining all sorts of kinky activities, until she inevitably turned to look. Whoever she looked at first was the winner. Bonus points were given according to the level of "creeped-out" look on her face.

It was a strange thing to do but that, in a nutshell, summed up Dmitry.

Jenna has been doing her best to hold still throughout the treatment of her wound, but she finally cannot take it one moment longer. “Okay, you're done!” she shouts at Vladimir. “Go away!” Her outburst startles both Clay and the medic.

She immediately apologizes in Russian. “I'm sorry, Vladimir. You're only trying to help. Do you have any painkillers? I *might* get irritable without them.”

He smiles and starts looking for said medication.

“I have painkillers,” Dmitry offers from across the room.

“Uh, no thanks,” says Jenna. She no longer trusts anything coming from him. Looking at Clay while addressing Vladimir, she says, “Whatever drugs you've got, give some to my Dad.”

Vladimir looks to Dmitry for approval. Dmitry shakes his head, no. He is deeply offended that Jenna has rejected his own offer. To someone unseen in the shadows, he barks, “Put some finger food and drinks out for everyone! What am I paying you for?”

An attractive woman in a skimpy outfit then appears. Pamela recognizes the uniform from last time she visited Luxor Hotel in Las Vegas. She also recognizes the woman now wearing it. It is Sofia.

“Quickly!” Dmitry snaps. “I need you as my translator, too!” Pointing at Vika, he adds, “I do not trust this bitch.”

Vika smiles and gets up from her chair.

No one translated any of that, but Clay is dumbfounded by the sight of Sofia. The woman is clearly humiliated. Jenna smirks and leans toward Clay to say, “Oh yeah, I meant to tell you.”

Dmitry stuffs his hands in his jacket pockets impatiently, raises his eyebrows, and says to Vika, “It is very unusual for you to visit me like this. What is this 'interesting' news you claim to have?”

Vika nods and begins her presentation, now standing behind her chair, as if for protection. “First of all, if our American friends have not yet figured it out, Dmitry Shepkin is a local crime boss.” After translation, Dmitry smiles proudly. “As to Maksim, he is of course Dmitry's son. He met Jenna online. The boy spends most of his worthless life recruiting women online to work as 'actors' in Dmitry's porno films, or as prostitutes, or both. His title in his father's organization,” she adds with a laugh, “is VP of Talent Acquisition.”

Pamela cannot help but laugh out loud. That is her corporate colleague – the suck-up, Richard's – title back home. She covers her mouth. “Sorry, go on.”

“Orphans and the less-fortunate are a prime resource for these people,” Vika continues, almost spitting in disgust. “And, that is why I have been working so many years to get as many orphans adopted as possible.” She smiles at Clay and Pamela. “Maksim promises them acting and modeling careers. And the Shepkins do have a small number of legitimate clients, for appearances' sake, but most of their 'clients' are porn stars and prostitutes.” To Clay, she adds,

“That is what Sofia was doing in the back of Maksim's car: 'auditioning' for a part in a film.”

“She's still auditioning, apparently,” says Clay, gesturing in Sofia's direction. His jaw is loosening up, which allows him to speak more clearly now. “But that *is* how they do it in Hollywood. I played for an L.A. soccer team briefly in my twenties, and, in the off-season, got somewhat familiar with the inner workings of Hollywood. Let's just say that the 'casting couch' applies to men *and* women. And that might be the *only* reason I'm not a movie star today.”

Everyone but Pamela and Dmitry laughs. Pamela knows that humor is Clay's way of dealing with stress. So, when he starts cracking jokes, her polite smile often comes across as more of a cringe. Dmitry's reason for not laughing is that he does not laugh at jokes from people he dislikes.

Clay asks Vika, “But how did you know about Sofia and Maksim in the backseat?”

“We have been following you and everyone associated with you from the moment you arrived in Russia. Closely. Maksim was going to shoot you that day for interrupting that 'audition,' by the way. My man, Gennady, disarmed him and drove you back to the hotel. He saved your life.”

At the mention of Gennady's name, she looks down, again wondering what happened to him. She had to assume it was Dmitry who got to him. “Sofia followed you to the hotel, which is when *your* party started. I suppose she was determined to party with *someone*. I didn't know until this very moment that she was working for Dmitry.”

Dmitry smiles at the disgusted look on Vika's face in conjunction with her speaking his name.

"I *told* you she was playing you!" Jenna says to Clay.

"Oh, honey," Pamela says with a smile, "women have been 'playing' your father his entire life."

Clay shakes his head, but she is probably right.

"Also," Vika says to Clay, "sorry, but I had Gennady slip you a Rohypnol – the 'date rape' drug? – at the hotel bar that night so you that would not have any recollection of him being there. I'm sure you understand."

"Not really, no," Clay shakes his head. "But at least I know now why I couldn't remember anything. I drank too much, too, but have never had memory loss like that." Looking at Sofia, he adds, "So, maybe Sofia *was* telling the truth," to which she shoots him an "I told you so" look, then turns away.

Placing her hands upon the shoulders of her chair from behind, Vika continues. "As I said, Maksim ran into Jenna online while she was at home, making inquiries into her parentage. He took a special interest in her and convinced her to come to Russia. I learned of this through a genealogist friend...."

"This is all very boring!" Dmitry bellows. "You promised something interesting!"

"I'm getting to that," Vika smiles. Turning toward the Americans, she asks, "Whose deep, dark secret would you like to learn first: Maksim's or Dmitry's?"

Clay votes for Maksim. Pamela chooses Dmitry. Looking to Jenna, Vika says, "You are the tiebreaker."

"Maksim," Jenna says without hesitation.

Vika continues. “Okay then. Maksim...” she pauses to give Jenna an apologetic look, “is Jenna's brother. Half-brother, to be more precise, and has known this since before she came to Astrakhan.”

Clay and Pamela cringe. Jenna's mouth drops and her eyes go wide. Dmitry keeps his usual poker-face thin smile.

“You do not know *what* I knew,” Maksim defends himself, “or *when* I knew it!”

“You admitted to it,” Vika counters, “to one of your online friends. Nothing you say online is truly private. As my American friends would say, young Shepkin, you are one sick puppy.”

Maksim laughs nervously.

“You mean I've been...” Jenna exclaims with a shudder. She consciously edits out the worst part. “...with my own brother?!”

“*Half*-brother!” Clay interjects. He thinks he is helping.

Jenna does not hear him. Silently, she thinks, *And Dmitry's my father?* She then abruptly turns and vomits on Maksim before retreating to a different couch.

Maksim immediately pulls off his shirt and throws it on the floor.

“Is that where that belongs?!” Dmitry scolds him like a typical parent berating a slovenly child.

To Pamela, Clay snorts, “He sounds like *us* talking to Jenna!” He is eager to change the subject away from his daughter's sex life. That she even *has* a sex life is bad enough. He feels like a complete failure as both a father and human being right now.

Dmitry barks at Sofia to clean up the vomit. She is appalled, but dutifully complies.

Maksim picks up his shirt, as instructed, but does not put it back on. Looking around with an impish grin, he then takes the opportunity to flex his muscles for the ladies a bit before taking a seat on the arm of Jenna's couch, still shirtless.

She glares at him.

“What?” he asks, clueless as usual.

She angrily pushes him to the floor, pounces on him, and starts punching wildly. He laughs at first, but Jenna does not punch like a typical girl. She now vents upon him the full fury of her own confusion, frustration and disgust.

No one moves to stop it. It is too entertaining to see him get his butt kicked by a girl. Clay is happy to see that her Brazilian jiu-jitsu training, unlike his own karate training earlier, is working for her. He shadowboxes – all that he can manage – along with her. It *should* bother him, he thinks, that a 17-year-old girl is able to beat up someone who he could not, but it doesn't. He is quite proud of his daughter... on this score, at least.

Once Jenna climbs off Maksim, leaving him on the floor, whimpering, Clay gets up and slowly hobbles over to help the boy back onto his feet. Everyone is impressed with this kind gesture... until Clay summons every last ounce of strength to kick him in the ribs. Maksim squeals and flops back down upon the floor.

“Now we're even,” says Clay, “*mudak!*”

Oblivious to Maksim, Jenna is now staring at Dmitry so intensely that even he – with his impregnable veneer –

grows uncomfortable. She is trying to wrap her head around the fact that she has been living in his house this whole time without knowing that he is her birth-father. She has felt a connection to him from the moment she first lay eyes on him, but she attributed that to his magnetic personality. He is a natural leader, and she has always been drawn to that type. She had also, almost immediately, figured out that he is a liar, manipulator and hardened criminal, but that certain kinship with him was always there. Now she knows why.

Coming up here just now, she had fully intended to do as Clay had asked: get her things, hear what Vika had to say, then leave... forever. But, everything is now changed. Her mind is made up.

She will stay in Russia. She will endure her adoptive parents' wailing, gnashing of teeth, and accusations. It won't matter. Dmitry, flaws and all, is her birth-father. There is no denying that now, and that means something.

She does not approve of his line of work – though the power it gives him is enticing – but if he will allow it (and is not thrown in prison) she will try to ignore his livelihood, and learn to live in Astrakhan as a Russian girl.

She needs to see this thing through. In the short time that she has been here, it has surprisingly quickly become a second home. She is meant to be here.

If Maksim tries to resume their previous relationship, of course, she will knock the crap out of him as she did just a moment ago. The thought of him touching her again sends a shiver through her entire body, but she forces such thoughts from her mind. She has inherited Dmitry's strong will and ability to marshal her own thoughts.

Vika has been keeping an eye on Dmitry the entire time. She expected him to intervene when Clay attacked Maksim, but he was surprised when he remained focused solely on Jenna.

After a moment, she asks, "Is everyone ready to hear *Dmitry's* deep dark secret?" Dmitry shifts in his chair but seems otherwise unconcerned. She feels a bit like the host of one of those American talk shows in which the guests attack each other.

"In the short time that Dmitry has known Jenna," she continues, "he has become genuinely fond of her. He might even have plans for her in his organization. Am I right, Dmitry?"

"You and I are not on a first name basis, Miss Karimova," he shrugs, "but, please continue."

"I am sure you have already guessed," she says to the Americans, "but Dmitry is Jenna's birth-father."

Clay audibly moans. He was holding out hope that Maksim and Jenna were half-siblings through the mother, not the father. He has never met and therefore cannot hate the birth-mother as much as he now hates Dmitry. "This is like *Star Wars*," he says, "where Darth Vader tells Luke, 'I am your father.'"

"Would you stop with the jokes?" Pamela snaps at him.

"I'm not joking," he says. "It really does remind me of that."

She shakes her head and turns away.

Vika finally steps out from behind her protective chair and gestures for her team to stand up. Dmitry and his men perk

up and arise as well. “The show is over, folks,” Vika says to the Americans. “Time to go, please.” She gestures toward the elevator.

“That's it?” Jenna stands in disbelief. ““Oh by the way, Dmitry is your father,' and that's it? Time to go? There has to be something you're not telling us.”

Vika shrugs, playing dumb.

“Now I *know* there's something!” Jenna smiles. “You're not a good liar, Miss Vika.”

“Please, Jenna, take your parents downstairs. One of my people is waiting for you. Dmitry and I have official business to discuss.”

Dmitry smiles, able to translate those last words himself. In his line of work, “official business” is code for money changing hands, agreements made, business as usual.

Jenna crosses her arms and sits back down. “I'm not leaving.” She is adamant. “Dad, mom, you go ahead. I'll meet up with you in a minute.”

Clay and Pamela are shaking their heads. “If *you're* staying,” Clay speaks for both of them, “*we're* staying.” And they sit back down, completely unaware of Jenna's decision to stay in Russia.

“Just go ahead and get this over with, Vika,” Clay instructs her. “When Jenna gets like this, there's no talking her out of it.”

“All right,” Vika sighs, “if you insist, but please do not interfere.” She pauses to ensure that she and her team are ready to respond with deadly force if necessary. She wishes the Americans were out of the room, but that is apparently not going to happen.

“We have irrefutable evidence,” she continues after a moment, with another apologetic look at Jenna, “that Dmitry Ilyovich Shepkin murdered Jenna's birth-mother, Svetlana Nadezhda Luganskaya.”

Pamela gasps. Clay shakes his head. Even Sofia puts her hand to her mouth in surprise, feeling sorry for Jenna for the first time.

Jenna shrieks like a banshee and launches herself out of her chair toward Dmitry. Sofia laughs out loud, she is so surprised. Attacking Dmitry is something that *she* has wanted to do from the moment she met him.

Like Maksim before him, Dmitry's initial reaction to Jenna's attack is to laugh. Unlike with his son, however, Dmitry's men intervene on his behalf, and Jenna is quickly subdued.

“Why!?” she asks through her tears. “How could you do that!?”

Dmitry does not answer.

Vika is pleasantly surprised by the opportunity Jenna has inadvertently created. With a nod of the head, she and her people are able to nab the nearest bad guy and place cuffs on them all. Jenna's convenient distraction has allowed her team members to catch and disarm Dmitry and his men without much of a fight.

That was easy, she thinks, and makes a mental note to remember the tactic for the future. In the meantime, she and her people – all well-versed in hand-to-hand combat and a myriad of weaponry, including the bureaucrats – keep their guns trained on Dmitry and his people.

A moment later, four heavily-armed uniformed soldiers pour out of the elevator. Clay eyes them warily, wondering who they belong to.

“I invite you into my home,” Dmitry shakes his head at Vika, “and *this* is how you repay me!?”

She shrugs and smiles, which answers Clay's question. Pamela then, sounding disappointed and echoing Vika's thoughts, says, “That was almost *too* easy.”

Vika suddenly feels weak and disoriented, and it is quickly growing progressively worse. She looks around and sees that everyone is appears to be feeling the same way. *What is going on?*

Dmitry's hands, she notices, are in his pockets. And, he seems immune to these effects.

“Put your hands where I can see them!” she points her gun and shouts at him.

The moment that his hands are in the air, her weakness and disorientation quickly fades. *How odd.* “Check his pockets!” she orders one of the soldiers.

The soldier soon pulls out what looks like an extra-thick smart phone. Vika snatches it out of his hand and tucks it into an interior pocket before anyone can get a good look at it.

“What was that?” Pamela asks.

Vika only shakes her head. She does not know what it is, but instinctively hides it from American eyes. She loves Pamela and Jenna, but, if this device happens to be some sort of exotic secret weapon that Dmitry has stolen from the Russian military through his old contacts, Vika's duty as a good Russian is to conceal it from American eyes.

Dmitry sneers and shakes his head at Vika. *She is such a good girl.* And, for him, this is not a compliment.

Now that the show is truly over, Jenna and Sofia retreat to their respective rooms to grab their things. Jenna had, just moments ago, resolved to stay in Astrakhan with Dmitry. Now, as she gathers up her things, everything has changed. Her entire world has flipped once again with the revelation that he murdered her birth-mother, Svetlana. She has no choice but to rejoin her adoptive parents and return to the States.

This emotional roller coaster makes her feel like vomiting again, but there is nothing left to throw up.

As Clay and Pamela stand in the living room waiting for Jenna to come out, they hear her shout from inside her bedroom, “Let go of me! Dad!”

Sofia is at that moment coming out of her own room, only to stop and slink back inside to safety.

Clay tries immediately to respond to his daughter's cry, but cannot move quickly. He has taken just a few steps when Jenna reappears in the living room. She is being held by a man – presumably one of Dmitry's – with a gun to her head.

“Let Mr. Shepkin go,” the man addresses Vika, “or I kill the girl!”

“No!” Pamela shouts as she involuntarily lunges forward.

Sofia comes out from behind the man with her own gun pointed at Jenna's captor. "You shoot her," she says coolly, "and I shoot you!"

A look of surprise, then disgust crosses the man's face. He looks to Dmitry for instructions. Dmitry seizes the opportunity to look like the hero. "None of this is necessary, Pavel," he shakes his head, as if surprised and truly disappointed by all of this. "Put down the gun before Jenna gets hurt. I will be out of jail and back in my own bed by tonight."

Pavel promptly lets Jenna go, as ordered.

After a moment, Pamela says to Dmitry, "Thank you."

"She is *my* daughter, too," Dmitry says with a smile. "Come back tonight for a drink, and we will have a nice conversation." He looks to Sofia to translate, but she refuses. Vika reluctantly translates.

Pamela's initial smile devolves into a cringe and a shake of her head. "Uh, no thanks."

Arrested

Vika's soldiers push the now-handcuffed Dmitry, Maksim, and their henchmen into the cramped elevator. Everyone else follows after it returns a moment later.

The elevator walls and ceiling are lined with mirrors, giving its occupants nowhere to hide, exactly as Dmitry wanted. Seeing her own reflection now, Sofia realizes with disgust that she is still wearing the God-awful Luxor outfit. In front of everyone, she strips down to her underwear, reaches into her bag, and changes into something else. The men in attendance all appreciate the unexpected show.

“Thank you,” Jenna says to Sofia.

“Yes,” Clay agrees, “thank you!”

“What are *you* thanking her for,” Pamela asks, “the striptease, or for saving Jenna back there?”

Clay rolls his eyes and changes the subject. “Hey, Vika, what about the bombing back in the Moscow airport? Ever find out who did that?” He watches Sofia for a reaction. He is unconvinced that she was not involved, though she does now appear to be as clueless as everyone else.

Vika shakes her head. “We don't know. I was hoping Dmitry was behind it, but it looks like it was Chechen terrorists.”

“What *is* their problem, anyway?” Clay spits in disgust. “How does terrorism help their cause? I never understood that thinking.”

“Their goal is to have their own homeland, separate from Russia,” Vika says simply. “They think terrorism is their only weapon. If we don't give them their own coun-

try, they will keep terrorizing innocent civilians. Your CIA helps them, by the way.”

“They're not *my* CIA,” says Clay. “But I already knew what the terrorists were thinking. What *I'm* saying is that they'll never get what they want through terrorism. All it does is piss people off!”

“I know,” she agrees, but is in no mood to elaborate or argue. It has been a long day. With her adrenaline now wearing off, she would like nothing better than to wander off and take a nap somewhere, but there is still much work to do.

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Downstairs in the alley, Vika makes sure that Dmitry and his gang are safely ensconced in the “*avtozak*” – the Russian version of the paddy wagon. With that out of the way, she selects one of her crew, Sergei, to take the Americans back to their hotel.

Standing in front of the minivan's sliding door, Pamela finds that she is unable to get back inside. There is nothing physically stopping her. The problem is that it was not so long ago that she thought Gennady was going to kill her inside one of these as she sat in the backseat on their way to rescue Clay.

When Clay asks her what is going on, she explains exactly all of the above. “Forget it, then,” he says. “Let's walk! I've been doing a lot of walking lately, anyway.” With his trek across the city in search of Jenna still fresh in his mind, he gives his daughter a glance. “I've gotten to where I sort of enjoy it.”

“Are you sure?” Pamela asks. “That was before you were beaten up... twice. And this is *you* we're talking

about,” she laughs. “You could talk yourself into 'sort of enjoying' standing in line at the DMV.”

“I’m sure, I’m sure,” says Clay.

They start walking, but Clay has no idea which way leads them back to the hotel. As they emerge from the alleyway onto the sidewalk of the main street, he looks in both directions. Most of the streets have sidewalks, but that is not the case farther down.

His ribs start to hurt again, and he reluctantly admits, “I won’t be able to walk more than a few blocks.”

Their driver, Sergei, following along slowly as if anticipating this, honks his horn and waves them over with a smile. A moment later, the Americans are once again piling into the minivan.

Pamela goes last. Holding onto the sides of the open door, she launches herself inside to join her husband and daughter. As she lands between the two of them, she has an epiphany. This is a microcosm of their relationship: Father and daughter happily together (when not arguing) while Pamela feels almost like an outsider forcibly inserting herself into the mix. That was why she insisted that she and Jenna be the ones who stayed together during the trial separation while Clay had to find new accommodations. As much as Jenna needed to reconnect with her birth-mother here in Russia, Pamela felt the need back home to reconnect with Jenna... without Clay.

Pamela tries to convince herself now that, with this one small act of getting into the van accomplished, maybe she can do the same on a larger scale and be a more integral part of Jenna’s (and Clay’s?) life once again. That’s the hope, anyway.

“What are you smiling at?” Clay asks.

“Just happy to have the three of us together again,” she says and grabs his hand. Clay takes this as his cue to drape his arm across her shoulder.

“Unh!” she cringes. “Arms down! Arms down! You still reek!”

“Right,” Clay apologizes. “I forgot.”

Their driver, Sergei, laughs as he watches them in the rear-view mirror.

On the way back to the hotel, Jenna tries to explain to Clay that his captivity was for his own good. She was keeping him safe and out of the way, “And, yes, it was a bit of pay-back for that time you locked me in my room all day with no phone or computer!”

“I *told* you that would come back to bite you!” Pamela chimes in with a laugh.

“I never said ‘no *computer*,’” Clay corrects her. “I said ‘no *Internet*.’ Besides, you weren’t locked in. The lock is on the inside.”

Ignoring this last point, Jenna exclaims, “Well, what good is a computer without the Internet?”

Clay can remember a time when people connected to the Internet through their phone line using something called a “modem,” complete with that iconic squawking sound. A personal computer was still considered useful back then, even without an Internet connection. None of this is verbalized, however, for fear that words like “shenanigans” and “ah, to be young again” might slip out.

“So, you were holding me in that storage room,” he seeks clarification, “as a sort of preemptive witness protection program?”

“Hey,” Jenna adds, “at least I let *you* have your phone. I knew you'd text mom, but I am *truly sorry* for the beatings. I had no idea until it was too late.”

You should have guessed that would happen, he wants to say. Instead, he says, “Forget about it. I'm just glad to hear you refer to her as 'mom' again. Maybe our Russian nightmare is over.”

They are almost to the hotel. Strangely, next to this nice, modern hotel sits a couple rows of run-down, two-story public tenement housing blocks. They are separated by a sidewalk down the middle, with dirt on either side where grass should be. They are completely out of place and probably not long for this world before being torn down to make room for something new, given all the renovation going on around town. For now, at least, they are inhabited.

It is to one of these tenements that their driver, Sergei, has been instructed to take the Americans. His orders – called in to him at the last moment while Clay and company were trying to walk back to the hotel – are to drop Clay and Pamela off at one of these residences, forcibly if necessary, return “the girl” to Dmitry's compound, and await further instructions.

He drives slowly to one of the more out-of-the-way units, and stops. His contact inside sneaks a peek out the window between the curtains. Sergei has never met this man but recognizes his slow nod of the head as his signal.

Sergei is supposed to salute back as his signal that everything is still a “go,” but he is having second thoughts. He just stares at the man. He does not know what might become of Clay and Pamela, but can guess the worst.

He hopes he is wrong, but with Shepkin one should always assume the worst. Sergei is the one who Gennady had, unknown to Vika, brought along with him. He is Dmitry's other mole, and this is a test to see if he has what it takes to be a full-fledged member of the gang.

This is no way to live, he thinks. *So much killing, so much death*. He is sick of it. He has already repaid the favor owed to Gennady that got him into this mess. Besides, with Gennady shot and possibly not surviving, what is the point? *To hell with Gennady and Dmitry!*

He needs to swallow his pride, Sergei decides, go back to the oil rig, and ask for his old job back. Anything, even *that* job and *that* boss, is better than being a criminal and accessory to murder.

“Is something wrong? Why are we stopping here?” Clay asks, but Sergei does not speak English.

Jenna asks him the same question in Russian. He shakes his head, *nyet*. He has made up his mind. He puts the car back in gear and takes them the rest of the way to the hotel and drops them at the curb.

Apparently – and luckily for the Americans – he does *not* have what it takes to be a member of the Shepkin gang. He is not quite desperate or depraved enough.

Pamela gives him a quizzical look and a smile, but says nothing as she climbs out of the van. She soon forgets about it, having no clue how close they just came to being killed.

Back inside the hotel and now walking through its lobby, a security guard's gaze lingers at the sight of Clay's battered appearance. Clay nods, hoping to be ignored. Directly in front of the Americans is a Russian family: a man roughly Clay's age accompanied by his daughter, wife, and the girl's presumed grandmother (*babushka*). They are coming out of one of the hotel's interior restaurants when the little girl, not paying attention, walks right into Clay's party. Seeing his beaten face, her parents, with worried looks, quickly coax the girl back in line.

Clay smiles. Oblivious to their revulsion at the sight of him, he now feels a connection to this Russian family, as if seeing his own family in them. None of the Russians physically resemble any of the Americans, but in the greater scheme of things, he decides, they are very much alike.

The recent horrific experiences have brought out the philosopher in him. One might think he would hate all Russians by now, but he does not. Yes, they can be harsh – sometimes brutal – like their weather, but underneath the gruff exterior there is a warmth and sense of decency. They have a cultural identity and a certain resilience, too, that Clay admires.

Is this Stockholm Syndrome? he wonders. No, he still hates the Shepkin gang with every fiber of his being. The simple answer is that he is merely happy to be alive. *Anything* normal or mundane – like this Russian family in front of them – is a beautiful sight to see right now. Being back in the hotel, his second home, is a bonus.

Up in their suite, Clay and Pamela take turns asking Jenna to explain what has been going on these past few days. Vika had explained a few things at Dmitry's, but the biggest question – why? – remains unanswered.

“So what *was* all that,” Pamela asks gently, “with you being in Dmitry's gang? That is so unlike you. You hated gangs back home. And, that was *not* you who shot that Gennady person. It was like an evil spirit took over your body or something.”

Jenna gives a disapproving look. “It wasn't quite that cray-cray, Mom,” she shakes her head. “I'm pretty sure I was just drugged and hypnotized.”

“'Just' drugged and hypnotized?” says Pamela. “By Dmitry?”

Jenna nods.

“That doesn't explain why you freaked out at the orphanage before that, though,” says Clay. “You demanded to spend the night, and then you stabbed that doctor.”

Pamela gasps. She had not heard about that.

“Or,” Pamela adds, “how you were such a good shot out there on the street.” She keeps coming back to the shooting, as if unable to accept that her daughter could do such a thing.

“I 'freaked out' at the orphanage,” Jenna explains, “because I had just met my mother... my *Russian* mother... or at least her spirit.” She smiles at Pamela. “I was emotional. I think that's normal. Anyone would have been. As for the doctor, though, Maksim did that. He snuck into my room that night, and we were... um... hanging out...”

Clay and Pamela do not like the sound of that.

“I know, I know,” Jenna continues, putting up her hands. “God, do I know. I’m scarred for life! Anyway, the doctor snuck into my room. He was probably going to rape me. I remember he made a lot of noise with the doorknob. Anyway, Maksim picked up a pair of scissors and stabbed him in the back. The doctor thinks *I* did it because he never saw Maksim.”

“But you were speaking Russian again at the orphanage,” Clay counters, “like you did after the bomb at the airport. Was the Russian-speaking real or fake?”

“Both,” says Jenna. “Like I said, I had just met my birth-mother in a sorta dream. We ‘spoke’ Russian. After I woke up, or whatever you wanna call it, I just felt like speaking Russian. It felt more natural. It will always be my first language.”

“Okay,” Clay tries to believe her. “But what about...” he pauses, not sure he wants to tug on this next thread.

“Being such a good shot?” Jenna asks. “I don’t know. I’ve been wondering about that, myself. I have shot a gun before, you know, back home and then again after I hooked up with the Shepkins. I honestly have no recollection of shooting anyone, though. Everyone says I did, so I guess I did. But I don’t remember it.”

“You must’ve blocked it out,” says Clay. “But what I was going to ask about was you declaring yourself an emancipated minor.”

“*What?!*” Pamela shrieks. This is the worst thing she has heard all day in a day full of horrible revelations. Jenna being *under* 18 is one of the reasons Pamela agreed to let her go on this homeland tour at all. She thought her age would prevent her upon arrival in Russia from saying

something like, "Hey, I'm 18. I can do whatever I want! See ya!" It never occurred to her she would be so conniving as to have herself declared an emancipated minor. Pamela now feels almost as if *she* is the one who was shot.

"Something like that has to be planned *way* in advance," Clay continues. "Nothing official around here happens quickly."

"Oh that," Jenna giggles. "Actually, around here, when you're a crime boss like Dmitry, you *can* get anything done quickly, *especially* official things." Paraphrasing Dmitry, she says, "'Put a little money into the right hands and, *voilà*, mission accomplished.' The emancipated thing was Dmitry's idea, by the way. I only went along so I could join his organization."

"Organization," Clay scoffs, "like it's a corporation or something."

"Not much difference between some gangs and some companies these days," Pamela has to agree. She then adopts a softer tone and asks cautiously, "What else did you have to do to join his organization?"

"Nothing sexual, mom," Jenna rolls her eyes. "He was actually very protective that way. He even forced me and Maksim to sleep in separate bedrooms with an armed guard at my door!"

"He must have already known you were his daughter," Pamela smiles.

"To be in the gang," Jenna continues, "I had to prove I could fire a gun. And I had to take a math test, if you can believe that. He wants his people to be quick with math if you suddenly find yourself in a negotiation. 'Everything is a negotiation,' he says."

“Yep, he *is* your father,” Pamela observes. “*You* are all about the negotiation.”

“He was a sperm donor!” Clay growls. “Not her *real* father! You can't inherit *character* traits from someone you've never met!”

“Sorry, honey,” Pamela pats Clay's hand. “I meant no offense.”

“I just wanted you to know where I stand,” he has to laugh, embarrassed by his own outburst, “for the next time we argue about 'nature versus nurture.’”

Pamela scoffs and shakes her head.

“I was on the ‘accelerated’ program,” Jenna continues, “but have only been here a few days. Wow, it's only been a few days. Feels like weeks, doesn't it?”

“Tell me about it,” Clay agrees.

“I don't know what else he is involved in,” Jenna continues, “other than the 'entertainment' industry.' Possibly computer hacking, judging by how much time Maksim spends online.”

“Maksim is too stupid to be a hacker,” Clay disagrees. “He's probably just watching porn.”

“You don't have to be smart to be a hacker,” Jenna explains. “You can buy these kits that get you into all kind of things. Scary stuff, which reminds me, we need to keep some cash at home for *when*, not if, your online bank account is broken into.”

“After this trip,” Clay jokes, “I won't have any money left in my bank account, anyway.”

After a moment of quiet, Pamela finally verbalizes what they are all thinking, “When's the next flight outta here?!”

There is a knock at the door. “That must be our ride to the airport!” Clay jokes. It's not, it's the police.

“Miss Eugenia Luganskaya, please,” says the lead officer.

“I need to stop opening this door,” Clay says to himself. To the officers, he says, “There is no one here by that name.”

Looking at Jenna now standing behind her father, the officer points his finger and says, “This one. She is...” he turns to his partner for translation, but none is forthcoming. He reluctantly asks Jenna in Russian, “How do you say emancipated minor?”

Jenna translates for Clay, and now her mom, who has come to the door to see what is going on.

The cop then states in stilted English, “Miss Eugenia Luganskaya, you are under arrest for the attempted murder of Gennady Lebedev. Mr. Lebedev was a federal officer.”

“Who?” Clay feigns ignorance. His first thought is *What about the orphanage doctor?* Not that he cares, but why are they not mentioning *his* attempted murder by Maksim?

“How *is* he, anyway?” Jenna asks guiltily. “Gennady, I mean.” She gets no answer.

“She was only defending me, her mother,” Pamela exclaims as she latches onto Jenna's arm, “from that 'federal' officer!”

Jenna pushes her mom away. Pamela is surprised, but soon realizes what Jenna is up to as she reaches for the lead officer's gun, but it is a feint. When the man moves to protect his firearm, Jenna kicks him hard in the crotch. Like

father, like daughter. The man yelps as he reels backward into the hallway.

“You'd think they'd wear protective cups,” Clay says with a wicked grin.

The cop's partner lunges forward to get Jenna's hands behind her back. Clay kicks this one's hands, allowing Jenna to retreat further inside the room. The lead officer – now recovered from Jenna's kick – and a previously unseen third officer now join the scrum. The three of them together eventually get Jenna handcuffed. The one who Clay had kicked in the hands is glaring at him. The look on his face makes it clear that he wants to drag Clay along with them, but Jenna is their target. No room for anyone else.

Outside the hotel, at the curb, Clay sees Jenna smiling as they put her into the police vehicle. He is immediately suspicious. *Is this another one of her scams?* he cannot help but wonder.

Then he sees what she is smiling at. On the other side of the vehicle, just a few yards away, that dog “Carlton” is cautiously wagging its tail. *Leave it to Jenna*, he thinks with a laugh, *to smile at a stray dog while being thrown into the back of a police car.*

Vika and the two remaining members of her team return in time to see Jenna being put into the back of the police van. This van is not an *avtozak*, the paddy wagon type, but a simple passenger van also used by the police.

As soon as she spots Vika, Pamela says, “I demand to see someone from the U.S. Embassy!”

“The nearest embassy is in Moscow,” Vika replies absently, distracted. Something is not right.

“So, we go to Moscow!” says Pamela.

“Can't we just make a phone call?” Clay is the sensible one for a change.

“Your embassy is closed until further notice,” says Vika, “due to recent tensions between our two countries. Nobody knows when it will open again.”

“Closed because of recent tensions?” Clay asks. “Isn't that pretty much when we *need* an embassy the most?”

“One would think,” Vika admits, “but these are politicians.” She has not taken her eyes off the police van. Then it hits her. She grabs Pamela's hand as she runs back toward her own car, waving Clay over to join them. “Come with me! Now!”

“What, what is it?” Pamela asks, almost crying.

“That is *not* a police van,” says Vika. “Get in!”

Climbing in last, Clay says in exasperation, “This trip wouldn't be complete without a car chase, right?” Back home, if someone had abducted his daughter right in front of him, he would not be making jokes. But now, after everything they have been through, no longer surprised by anything, it seems appropriate somehow. He does not realize it yet, but this is a very Russian attitude to take.

A couple miles down the road, the men in the impostor vehicle spot Sofia on the sidewalk. She is walking back to Clay's hotel. With Dmitry and Maksim now presumably behind bars, she has nowhere else to go. She would have joined the Americans for the ride back to the hotel earlier, but did not want to impose.

The fake police van screeches to a stop, the door slides open, two men jump out and drag Sofia, screaming, inside.

She is thrown in next to Jenna, whose hands are bound with plastic zip-tie handcuffs.

There are three men: the driver, a passenger up front, and one in back with the women behind the metal mesh partition. Up to this point, they have not been traveling fast, still maintaining the charade as a legitimate, slow-moving police vehicle.

After openly kidnapping Sofia, however, they drop the façade. The driver tries to turn on his flashing lights and siren, but those are not working. He curses his bad luck.

Vika guesses that they are headed to the police station to retrieve Dmitry. She calls ahead to those accompanying the elder Shepkin.

There is no answer.

Jenna speaks quietly to their escort in back. She does not want anyone up front to overhear. “You’re cute!” she says with a flirtatious grin. She says this in English so that, even if she is overheard by those up front, they might not understand her. “Wanna get naked?” she says with a giggle, unable to keep a straight face.

When the man only looks at her in confusion, she knows he does not speak English. That is all she was trying to determine. Even a gay man would have had *some* kind of response.

Jenna turns to Sofia and whispers in English, “OK, here is the plan. I have my own Russian bank account. Set it up a year ago through Maksim, and have been making deposits ever since. There should be a few thousand dollars in it by now. I won’t be able to access it from back home because

of all the regulations, though, so I might as well give it to you.

“There is a Russian saying,” she waxes poetic. “When the last tree is cut down, and the last fish is caught, only then will we realize we cannot eat money.”

“I know the saying,” Sofia is unimpressed, in no mood for poetry. With a condescending smile, she adds, “But if you set up the bank account through Maksim, I am sorry, honey, but the account is now empty.”

“No, the money is in there,” Jenna continues. “I verified it first thing after leaving the orphanage. Anyway, dye your hair blonde, use the fake ID that Dmitry gave me, and it is all yours... *if* you do this one last thing for me.”

“So,” Sofia remains incredulous, but plays along, “what is your brilliant plan?”

They have finished discussing most of the details when their captor intervenes. “Hey, hey,” he says in Russian. “You must disperse! There is no talking allowed between prisoners!”

The prisoners dutifully comply. Jenna moves and sits next to the sliding door, where she pretends to pout. Sofia takes a seat next to their jailer. After a moment, she smiles, introduces herself, and strikes up a conversation. Learning that his name is Piotr, she continues to flirt, talking about nothing, as charming as can be, suggestively touching him in all the right places like she did with Clay.

She then complains about how hot it is in this “stuffy old van” and unbuttons the top few buttons of her blouse. This gets Piotr's full attention.

There is no time for a slow seduction, so she climbs onto his lap. Piotr is smart enough to know she is manipulating him, but he is perfectly okay with that. The men up front are not paying him enough, anyway. This will be a nice fringe benefit.

The distraction allows Jenna – hands still bound in front of her – to open the sliding door and jump out. The vehicle is still moving, but she has been keeping a close eye through the front windshield. She times her jump for when they slow down for a turn, and the side of the road is clear enough to avoid landing in or on anything painful or disgusting.

She scrapes one of her palms and an elbow upon impact, but otherwise lands well – tucking and rolling as she was taught in her jiu-jitsu training. She then quickly blends into the crowd on the street... as well as someone in handcuffs jumping out of a moving vehicle *can* blend, anyway.

The kidnappers slam on the brakes. This sends Sofia flying off Piotr's lap into the metal screen partition. The impact knocks her unconscious. Piotr leaves her there in order to jump out capture Jenna.

Vika's van is too far behind and around the corner for anyone to have seen Jenna jump out. They do see the kidnappers' van stopped, however. Piotr is outside looking for something.

Vika's driver slows down as they approach. As it slowly passes by, Pamela catches a glimpse of a girl's golden locks. That is all she sees, but in that moment her motherly instincts tell her it is Jenna. She just *knows* it. “Jenna!” she shouts at the top of her lungs.

Their driver stops the car. Clay spins around to get a better look. When he sees Jenna, he also shouts her name.

Jenna stops and turns. Several people turn and look, out of curiosity. Within moments, Jenna is inside the good guys' van and into her parents' loving arms. Vika pulls out a knife and slices through Jenna's zip-tie handcuffs. This allows Jenna to reciprocate her parents' hugs.

"Okay!" says Clay after a moment, "Now can we go to the airport?!"

Vika shakes her head, no. "After kidnapping Jenna and Sofia," she explains, "although Sofia was probably an afterthought, I don't think it is safe for you at the airport. Dmitry has obviously mobilized his people with some of them probably at the airport. I have a better idea. You might not like it, but it is more likely to get you safely out of town."

"More likely?" Clay asks. "That's the best assurance you can give?" He says it with a nervous laugh as if joking, but he is deadly serious.

Pamela gives him a dirty look. "Give the woman a break, Clay. She's in the middle of saving our lives."

"I cannot make any promises," Vika shakes her head, "but, for now, we must pretend we are still chasing Dmitry's men." She nods in the direction of that van.

The impostors see Jenna getting into Vika's van. Piotr quickly climbs back into his own vehicle, and the chase is back on. Vika's driver keeps pace as both vans speed through town.

"Hey, Jenna," Clay observes after a while, "we're finally getting that cultural tour of Astrakhan I promised!"

Look, there's that museum. And there, between those buildings, that's the opera house!"

Pamela shakes her head, adding, "Don't blink, you'll miss it."

Vika whispers something into her driver's ear. He nods. They are now just a few car lengths behind the impostors. Both vehicles speed through the intersection. Luckily for pedestrians, it is on a green light. Vika's driver makes a quick right turn. Too quick. Their van is briefly up on two wheels.

Vika shouts and points at the elevated side of the van, "Everyone to that side!"

Everyone does as ordered and they are soon back on all fours and speeding down another street.

Vika checks her watch, again asking the driver something in Russian. Jenna overhears "train schedule," "Sochi" and "Baku." The driver is shrugging his shoulders and mumbling in return about schedules.

Baku? Baku, Azerbaijan? Jenna wonders.

A moment later, they are in front of the train station, where the Americans are dropped off with instructions to take the next train out. It is unlikely, they are told, that Dmitry will be expecting this.

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Last Train Out by *William Arthur Holmes*

About William Arthur Holmes

Originally from Sacramento, California, I have been calling Tennessee home for the past 20+ years. I am married, with a young daughter, an old pug and one cat.

Available titles are *Temporary Insanity*, *Lottery President*, *Operation Detour*, *Last Train Out*, and *Another Way: Beyond the Status Quo*, which can all be found at williamarthurholmes.com

