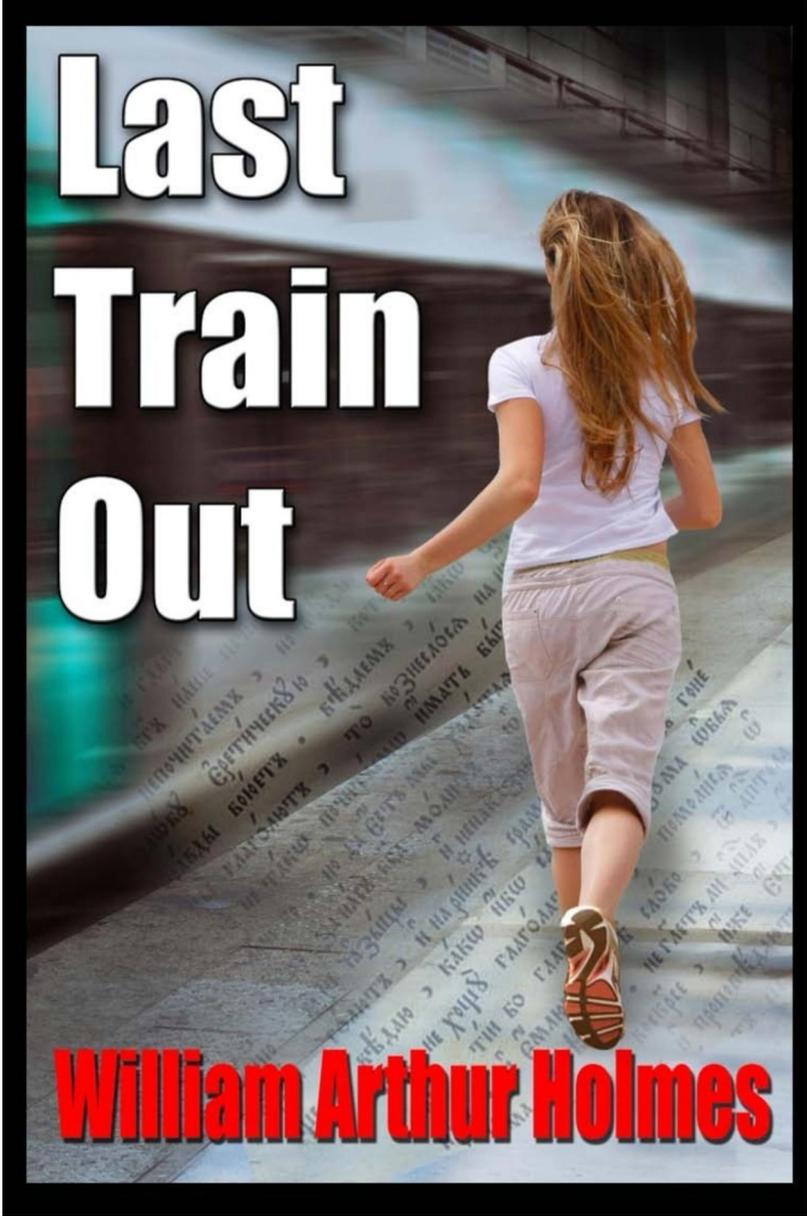


Last Train Out



William Arthur Holmes

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 her orphanage in Astrakhan in the southwest corner of 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. *Gloopy*, 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 infamous 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 she felt last time. They better not do that again!

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

She looked deep into the eyes of her visitors, and allowed a controlled smile. She was still unsure about these two. Spying a stuffed toy tucked away on a shelf to the right, she tried to reach it. The man smiled as he stuck out his hand and gave it to her. She had already lost interest, but found a colorful book behind him on another shelf and tried to reach that. This time, it was the woman who got it for her.

Zenya took the book, turned a couple of pages as if studying its contents, then dropped it on the floor for the woman to pick up and put back on the shelf.

Zenya's gray eyes twinkled with delight when she realized that all she had to do was point at various items beyond her reach – even the ones she didn't particularly like – and her visitors would dutifully give them to her.

The power she had over these people was intoxicating! She would remember this, always.

When the man asked in that strange accent, "*Tee hoachesh eegrut?*" (You want to play?), she of course said, "*Da!*" (Yes!) And that was when she knew she had found her forever parents. Her world – *the* world – was once again as it should be!

Missing

Present day

Halfway into the long drive back from Louisville to St. Louis, Clay Desno is looking forward to a hot shower and cold beer, but he's in no hurry. He just purchased a brand-spanking-new Chevy Silverado 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 bought a brand new car before. Always used. Then again, he's never done so well playing the ponies before.

On a whim Friday afternoon, he had driven four hours to Louisville for the Kentucky Derby. It was all too last-minute for him to get a seat in the grandstands, and he resigned himself to suffer through the typical drunken buffoonery of the infield crowd. It wasn't so bad, though, once he got into the swing of things. He had cleaned up his act

since marrying Pamela, but there was a time when he would have fit right in with these folks.

His winnings for the day – thanks in part to a hot tip from a drunken stable employee – were so good he splurged on a new pickup truck on his way back to the hotel. As he told the salesman, "You only live once, right?!"

Worried about parking his new toy overnight in the hotel parking lot, exposed, Clay considered driving all night to get back home, but in the end decided against it. He would get a fresh start in the morning.

He is feeling pretty good about life now: playing the ponies; buying a new truck; singing along to Tom Petty's *American Girl* as he heads home; basically, doing whatever he wants because he no longer has a wife around to stop him. *Life is good!*

When his phone rings, he sees it is his soon-to-be-ex, Pamela. He lets it ring, trying to decide if he should let it go to voicemail. At the last second, he turns the volume down and answers, "Hello?"

"Have you seen Jenna?!" Pamela shrieks on the other end, not bothering to say hello.

"I've been out of town," he exhales. He wants to ask, "What knock-down, drag-out fight have you two gotten into now?" They have been at each other's throats almost constantly the past few years. What he actually says is, "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, but... she's not with you now, is she?"

"Wait, let me check under the seat," he rolls his eyes. "No, Pamela, she's not here. Otherwise, I wouldn't have offered to call her."

"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 calling?! She could be...!"

"I know, I know. Please just come home, Mud Man?"

Must be serious, he thinks, *if she's using that old nickname*. It was a play on the name "Clay" she came up with early in their relationship. More recently it's only been used when trying to soften him up.

After hanging up, he shakes his head, thinking he should have known it would come to this. His two favorite females have been fighting like a couple of alley cats since Jenna hit her teens, with Clay playing referee. Almost to the day, when she hit thirteen it was like a switch had flipped and she became the hellion she is today.

His own relationship with their daughter has not been much better, but at least there's less drama. When those two go at it, household items tend to get airborne.

Before he knows it, Clay has his new Silverado doing 90 miles an hour, headed west.

At Pamela's house in the Glendale suburb of St. Louis – *his* old house – Clay doesn't 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 driveway and first of three rose bushes. Everyone else is content to take the paved walkway up to the door. It is only a few extra feet, but Clay likes to cut through the bushes. The first time Pamela saw him do it, she let it go. After the third or fourth time, however, she made him put down a couple of decorative, octagonal pea-gravel steps in the dirt so that he at least would not track dirt into the house.

Without knocking, he bursts into the house that 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 shouts from behind the detective. "Not fatally, anyway." She moves to place a hand upon the detective's shoulder before stopping herself for fear that this might cause him to pull the trigger.

"This," she explains, "is the ex-husband I've been talking about."

"Not exes yet, Pam," Clay smiles and raises his hands in the air. "And don't believe whatever she says about me, officers."

"Detectives," Cheval corrects him as he slides 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."

He almost adds "I'm getting worried" but doesn't come right out and say it because something comes over a man when dealing with other men, especially strangers, in front of his wife or girlfriend. He feels the need to be strong, unwavering, impervious. *Worry is for women*, he might say to himself in such situations. Either way, he is not about to look weak in front of these two detectives.

Pam shakes her head, no. She has not heard anything further.

"Anyone check her bedroom?" Clay continues. "Recently? She might've snuck back in. It's what I used to do at that age." Pamela raises an eyebrow at this little tidbit from Clay's past. When both detectives stare blankly back at him, Clay shakes his head and says, "I'll go look."

Detective Wilson – the taller, thinner, blonder, slightly older one of the two – puts up a hand and says with a friendly smile, "We only just got here, ourselves, Mr. Denso..."

"Desno," Clay corrects him automatically, used to the mispronunciation.

"Anyway," Wilson continues, "I'll go check. You stay down here."

Watching him climb the stairs, Clay feels useless. *I need to be doing something!* he shouts at himself. He and Pamela thought they could trust Jenna with her phone, so they never installed any sort of tracking software. Since she

went missing, they called everyone they could think of, with no luck. With the police now involved, of course, the authorities are doing all they can do, short of sending out search dogs.

He flops onto the couch.

Pamela always hated that. "Can't you be more civilized?" she had complained more than once. "You're like a teenager." To this, he would shrug, which infuriated her even more.

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

"What?" Clay asks about the look on her face. She shakes her head in dismissal and looks for something else to occupy her gaze.

Detective Cheval picks up where she left off, and a staring contest ensues between him and Clay. Jenna's father is the first to look away and, as he turns, realizes 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. There is a new coat of paint on the walls, too. A soft yellow has replaced the light brown.

Eventually returning his attention to Pamela, Clay decides it is good to see her, despite the circumstances. It has been months since they were in the same room together. He almost forgot how much he loved those intelligent blue eyes (in happier times), that smiling face and her 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, it is now Pamela's turn to say, "What?!"

Clay recoils at her tone.

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

Clay resumes his focus on the décor. There is a black and white family portrait on the wall, featuring a smiling Pamela and Jenna... but no Clay. He turns back 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 had found himself looking forward to saving the day. Finding Jenna. Being the hero. *Pamela's* hero... somehow. But now he has been beaten to the punch by this Cheval dude.

Even Clay can see she is moving on with her life. Too many angry words had passed between them, and she is now buying new furniture, posing for family portraits without him, and flirting with other knights in shinier armor.

"Why call me," he asks 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?! When I searched the entire house, looking for her, thinking she'd been... kidnapped!" she barely gets that word out without crying, "I called *everyone!*"

"Come on, you two," Cheval plays mediator with a friendly pat on her hand. "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 transpired between these two before he arrived. They are awfully chummy. The man is younger and better-looking than Clay, but he would be the first to admit that's not saying much these days.

There is a palpable animosity, however, between him and Cheval. 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*, Clay thinks. That look might still work in south Florida but this is suburban St. Louis. *Maybe he's gay!*

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

Wilson shakes his head, "no."

Clay decides 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, not in here asking stupid questions and implying that I'm a suspect!*

The detectives assure Pamela 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 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 she never considered him one until just this moment. Clay loved their little girl more than anything on Earth, but he also had a temper. It never got to the point of violence but could be pretty scary, nonetheless.

She now wonders if he had 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 she 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 5-0?"

Pamela despises this thug-speak that Jenna uses when hanging out with certain people, 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," Detective Wilson explains with a laugh, "couldn't remember exactly what you were wearing. My partner here is not as creepy as he sounds. Not this time." He winks at the now-cringing Cheval.

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

Noticing the body language and stressed-out look on her mother's face, 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!" she 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 to creep 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, after all, not Clay's. If either parent should be second fiddle, 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. Remembering her audience, however, she self-consciously glances out the corner of her eye at her friends.

"Just someone I've been spending time with," Pamela says. She is 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. He is angry but does not mean a word of it. He is looking for a reaction from Pamela when he realizes her hair is not 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 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 this abuse of her new furniture, but she is too drained to argue.

"We're still going to Russia, right?" Jenna sits up as she broaches the subject of their impending "homeland tour." They are due to leave next week, and she cannot hide her excitement.

"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 this little episode would be an excuse to call the whole thing off.

To be fair to Russia, Clay knows he must never forget that their visits were not vacations. Not even business trips. They were for the purpose of adopting a child – a beautiful little girl – and 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 to properly appreciate their host country as tourists.

They both laughed at how well their experience summed up Russia itself, though: You never know what you'll get. Or, as Winston Churchill 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 final visit – after the court appearance in which the adoption was approved – they had to endure two weeks of limbo holed up in their hotel waiting for the official paperwork to be finalized. They had convinced themselves those two weeks were a cynical ploy by the government to keep adoptive parents "in country" and spending as much money as possible.

On the flight home and still recovering from the ordeal, Pamela suggested they convince their daughter she was born in The Bahamas so they could "return" there when the time came for this homeland tour. She was joking. Clay thought it was a great idea.

Years later during Jenna's rebellious teen phase before they had separated, Clay said to Pamela, "Maybe we should've lied to her from the start."

"To who? About what?"

"To Jenna about being her adoptive parents. We should have made up an elaborate story and told her we are her birth parents but had to leave her behind while on a secret mission somewhere. We're spies, you see," he continued the fantasy while Pamela listened, politely incredulous, "and we had dangerous work to do but didn't want her to get hurt. We just happened to be in Russia when she was born, so that's where we put her."

Pamela thought this was stupid, but humored him. "Well, for one, she would have asked years later why we didn't at least drop her in the south of France or somewhere trendier than Russia. Either way, what good would it do to make up a story like that?"

"A lot of our problems with her, mainly the defiance," he continued seriously, "might stem from a certain lack of respect. Remember I told you about that time one of the Russian hotel maids had a conversation with Jenna? I didn't understand most of it, but after one question, Jenna looked at me and said "*gloopy*," which I know means "stupid" in Russian. I could tell by the woman's reaction, she was embarrassed. That "*gloopy*" was definitely directed at me."

"I'd forgotten about that," Pamela nodded.

"It's like we're not entirely legitimate in her eyes because we're 'only' her adoptive parents. Like students not respecting the substitute teacher, or players not fully respecting an interim coach. Know what I mean? If we had

her believing from the start that we were her birth parents, it might've helped. That's all I'm saying."

"So," she teased, "you're a psychologist now?"

"Yes, actually. As a head coach, you have to be part psychotherapist."

"I think you're reading too much into that '*gloopy*' thing, but it's a moot point, anyway. And, from everything I've read about adoption, honesty is the best policy. You just tell the truth and let the chips fall where they may."

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

"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! 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 where, as coach, he makes a plan and sets goals. Once the game starts, of course, 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 in Russia."

He ignores this. As a head coach, he is pretty good at dealing with young men, but not women, especially not his head-strong "drama queen" young daughter. He is more upset at the thought of being alone with her, having to han-

dle her all by himself, so far from "civilization." If there was one thing that he and Pamela agreed on, it was that it was always best to have their little darling outnumbered. Double-teamed, as he would put it. That concept alone might have been what kept the unhappy couple together longer than they might have otherwise.

More than anything else, though, he sincerely wanted this homeland tour to 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 overcame this failing years ago, but apparently not. He gives himself credit, at least, for recognizing the problem, which, as they say, is the first step on the road to recovery.

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

He knew he had to do better.

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 hi-

eroglyphics to Clay. On a scratch pad to the right of the keyboard Jenna has scrawled several names, also in Cyrillic; some scratched out, some circled.

She always had a knack for languages. She was speaking fluent Russian when they met her, after all, then switched to English impressively fast during her first year in the States. Clay thought she had lost her Russian language skills, but apparently not. Lost or not, she has done well relearning it all.

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?"

"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 St. 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 like typical tourists – sight-seeing, and all that – but neither Pamela nor Clay saw that as an option due to the never-ending below-freezing temperatures. Sure, they could stay indoors with museums and such, but felt their time would be best spent in one spot, keeping things simple, just puttering around the hotel and 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 might come up. Before any trip, he tends to worry, though he likes to call it 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 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 all that anti-Russian propaganda Americans endured during (and after) the Cold War, 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 space 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 Clay rejoins her. He laughs, 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 to go almost anywhere else, but at least for this visit to Russia it is summertime and will be just ten days, not twenty-eight.

She studies the hairstyles and attire of everyone, especially the women. She listens to the many languages, not just Russian, being spoken all around her as she soaks in 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 natural light, given that it is past 8PM, until 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 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 for this gig was that most Americans prefer informality. She was also told, explicitly, to make physical contact with Clay as much as possible. When she made a face and asked why, she was told, "To make him fall in love, silly."

"I am not a call girl!" she had protested.

"You are whatever we need you to be," she was told. And those were her last in-the-flesh instructions. Everything else from that point forward would come remotely "by phone, text or carrier pigeon."

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

She 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 he tries to say in Russian, "It is a pleasure to meet you," what he actually says, due to mispronunciation and intonation, is "I will pleasure you!"

Jenna laughs out loud before covering her mouth.

"Another joke?" Sofia 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. Her hip is pressed against his leg as she takes his passport for a closer look.

"I never noticed," he says, "until the flight coming over."

It has been too long since he has been intimate with a woman, and he is now conflicted. On one hand, politeness dictates that he should step back to a more respectable distance. His animal instincts, however, tell him to let this increasingly attractive woman snuggle up as close as she wants.

The top of her head is right under his nose. Her hair smells nice.

"You are right," she says. "This is terrible. We must take care of this immediately." She then breaks contact with him, snapping the spell. "Russia is no place to be without proper paperwork."

"So I've heard."

A plump, pinch-faced, dark-haired middle-aged man half again as old as Sofia steps forward. Clay had not noticed him until that moment, but assumes he is their driver.

The Russians are speaking in hushed tones as they lead the Americans to the outside parking lot. Jenna overhears the word "*mudak*," meaning "jerk" (to put it mildly), spoken by Sofia. Jenna is not sure to whom the woman is referring until the driver looks guiltily at Jenna.

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

The driver's expression then changes into a more 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 give his last name. With a friendly smile, he asks in Russian, "Do you speak Russian?"

"*Nee mnoga*" (Not much), Jenna lies.

"Know any *bad* words?" he persists in English. "I always want to know the bad words." 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 now 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 – sounding a lot like Pamela – 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 realizing that Vitaly has just saved her from getting hit by a car.

Shouting insults at the offending driver – a fellow cabby – 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.)

"St. Louis is a fairly big city, too," Clay chimes in. Vitaly scoffs. "But," Clay continues, "I'd forgotten Russians are the *craziest* drivers."

"Not as bad as New York!" Vitaly now feels obligated to defend his countrymen. "I know, how do you say, in-person. I visited to my cousin in 'the Big Apple' last year and

was almost killed! Two times! Twice?" Sofia nods. "Yes, twice."

"That's New York," Clay admits, softening his tone. "If you're not almost killed at least once, you never really visited." He doesn't want to get into a pissing contest over whose cities are bigger and more dangerous, and so drops the subject.

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 from whatever is going on between this woman and her father. It was bad enough seeing her mother actively dating after the separation, but now 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. Vitaly generally takes her advice but sometimes vetoes her directions when traffic issues warrant.

Sofia, as instructed, physically touches Clay every chance she gets. 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 without their Russian escorts at an outdoor table having a late dinner. The underground shopping mall is directly beneath them. Sofia is off somewhere taking care of Clay's visa problem – without him, which makes no sense to him – 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 Russian well enough 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 again? 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 in Clay. "Remember," he 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 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 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 she can run past Sofia and be first inside. She is tired of following Sofia's lead. *She always did want to be 'line leader' in elementary school*, Clay thinks with a laugh.

At the counter, Jenna introduces herself in Russian and asks if their rooms are ready. Sofia, standing just behind her, smiles 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 restocking supplies 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 exterior, then interior, set of doors. In Russia, like anywhere that gets serious winters, these redundant doorways are a must for keeping the heat in and the cold out.

The bellhop rushes up to Clay and apologizes, explaining that he would have helped had "that girl" not intercepted him.

"It's okay," says Clay. "'That girl' is my daughter."

"I am so sorry," the bellboy again apologizes. With a pout in Jenna's direction, he explains to her, in Russian, 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 young man is "just" a bellhop, and she should not be wasting her time with him. Maintaining a cool exterior, she turns toward 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 impressed that she is taking charge and wants to encourage such initiative, and so lets her take care of the arrangements while he strolls around the lobby perusing his surroundings. 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 overheard Jenna reserving two *separate* rooms, and made sure the bellhop knew which one *she* would be in. He returns to the counter, exasperated, and explains to his daughter that they only need the one room. If she's worried about privacy she can change in the bathroom, he says.

"Or, I can stand out in the hall while you change. I don't care, but I am 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 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 walks up and 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 while mocking Sofia. 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, though he hopes she is wrong this time. He smiles at the thought.

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 who has been waiting patiently 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!" Vitaly is happy to, at last, have her all to himself.

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, that and the tendency to run people down in the street are the only unattractive qualities he can think of in regard to Russians. Otherwise, they are a perfectly wonderful people. No worse than New Yorkers, at least, he agrees with Vitaly's earlier sentiment.

The woman yells at him again for not moving through the line fast enough. This time he laughs and says, "*Eez ve-neetya!*" (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 – she is throwing her arms up to cover her face, then crumpling to the floor.

Debris is everywhere. Bits of ceiling tile, lighting 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 like ethereal beings out of the clouds of smoke.

Kneeling down as he reaches Jenna, Clay sees that she is remarkably intact, almost unscathed, but he fears the worst. "God, no," he gasps. 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. 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 and, in flawless Russian, says, "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 to say to Jenna besides asking how she's feeling. 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 girl!" 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 she can see 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 stopped leaning on Dad; stopped 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-tra-khan! 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 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 is genuinely surprised by it.

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 cabby 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 cabby 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 cabby 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 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 "*American-sky!*" 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 tenfold. He turns to see where his security blanket, Sofia, 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 arguing about something. She is now trying to pull away. Her words are growing angrier and louder.

Clay starts back toward the cab to help, but Sofia has now freed 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 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 the two of them. She appreciates his infatuation with her. It is sweet, and not unexpected. "I think Vitaly was trying to add to Clay's joke about any new luggage being blown up, but it came out badly."

"Oopsies," says Jenna, now feeling like an ass.

None of them notice the crazy, angry cab driver – the *other* crazy cabby, 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 hair-brush. 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 airport is just a lot of flat marsh land. The fishing and duck hunting in the area is well-known, 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. He then stops and shakes his head at himself. *God, I'm getting old*. First, he thinks *Ah, to be young again*, and now he is 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 that their experience in Astrakhan would be "smooth as glass."

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

In the lobby, there are several sour-faced, thick-necked middle-aged men with five-o'clock shadows, 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 the younger ones in their twenties and early thirties seem normal (from 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. And now, being in a foreign country, 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 immediately how that must have sounded, Clay 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, Sofia, while here in Astrakhan."

"Um, thank you, no," Sofia declines 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.

Jenna, who is at a distance with her arms crossed, responds with a sarcastic, mocking giggle before turning away.

"Of course. Friends," Clay struggles to save face. To himself, he thinks, *Smooth move, 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 captured 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 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 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 knows he can insist on it, but it is not especially important that they follow any specific itinerary. Life is more fun with spontaneity. Besides all that, he knows there is no point

arguing with her when she gets this way, and he was hoping to leave the screaming matches behind.

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 – 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, Khazar, 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, "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 St. 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 St. 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. "*Stoy eta?*" (what is this?)

"I'm pretending to be Russian," says Jenna.

"Pretend all you like," Sofia snaps at her, "but you are not Russian. Do not even try."

Clay wants to remind her 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, what Clay would call a "convenience store" back home, without the gas station. And, as is the local custom, everyone must stash their shopping bags into lockers provided in the small entrance ante-room to protect against theft. Each unused locker has an orange, numbered key in it. *Like at the gym*, Clay thinks, as he chooses one and puts everyone's things into it.

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 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 one minute, exactly, 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.

"Yes," Sofia adds, shaking her head, "this is not something we Russians typically do. Trust me."

They finally arrive at their destination: *Dome Rebyenka* (Baby Home) Number 1. There is nothing impressive about the place except that this is where Clay, Pamela and Jenna's lives all took a decidedly good turn fifteen years ago. Those years haven't always been easy, to say the least, but it has been a learning and character-building experience. 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. The neighborhood is a bit run-down but does not feel unsafe. Unlike in The States where the "poor side of town" translates to the "get the hell outta there" part of town, it is not like that in Astrakhan. Not this neighborhood, anyway.

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 arriving at Mecca. Clay has been imagining this for years, since before he 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!" Clay shouts at him. "Get back in the car!" He thought they had made it clear on their way over that they did not want Maksim or Sofia inside the orphanage with them.

"No offense," Jenna tried to soften the blow, "but it will be strictly father-daughter time."

Jenna enters the old building first, with Clay close behind. The smell of disinfectant hits Clay's nostrils and he is transported back fifteen years. He almost wishes Pamela was here as that same old rush of excitement hits him as they were about to meet their child for the first time.

Just a few steps inside past the entryway, they are instructed to sit on a bare, industrial-strength metal bench to put blue paper booties over their shoes. Clay has a grin on

his face as he looks over at Jenna on the opposite end of the bench.

She does not look especially happy. Enchanted, perhaps. Maybe even a little uneasy. Either way, not saying a thing.

As they stand up, now properly "bootied," a young, crying toddler collides with Jenna. The little girl stops crying and tugs at Jenna's pant leg until Jenna picks her up.

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

"Zenia," says the little girl.

Jenna gasps. That name sounds so familiar, though she does not immediately 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, Zenya!"

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

"Well, *da!*" he says, as if it's a given, then wonders if "*da!*" is where Americans got the word "duh!"

After a moment, a flustered nurse quite grumpily, almost angrily, pulls the child from Jenna's arms. She says something 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," Jenna smiles, "old. 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 Sofia."

"Um, no, that's okay," says Clay, noticing that she used the same derisive tone with the name "Sofia" as she had said "Barry" back home. She will not approve of anyone new who either of her parents wants to date.

Waving goodbye to little Zenya, Jenna suddenly feels dizzy and says, "I have to sit down."

Clay stands next to her for a moment, concerned. When she lies down on the bench and closes her eyes, he 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 the orphanage staff conversations, she thinks, echoing down the hallway. No, that can't be it. The voices are now as clear as if whispered in her ear. She has had realistic dreams before, but nothing like this. Her eyes are wide open. She is not dreaming.

As soon as she closes her eyes, she feels as if she is being held aloft. She never left the bench and is too big these days to be carried her like this. She must be dreaming, she decides, but, if so, has no desire to wake up.

It is a beautiful young blonde woman holding her, swinging her around, laughing, whispering sweet nothings. Tears are now streaming 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 now beams brighter than ever and confirms, *Yes, I am your mama. Svetlana Nadezhda Luganskaya at your service!*

Mama! Jenna starts bawling. *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 leave you, but 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 life on Earth is just a dream!*

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

Your new parents, Svetlana returns to more practical matters, *love you very much. They will never be as good as me, of course, she laughs, 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.

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

Dad?

Your Russian father.

Who is my Russian father?

He does not even deserve to be called that! Svetlana snaps. 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 here. It's short for Eugenia. We changed it to 'Jenna,' remember?"

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

The euphoria she felt in that dream is now gone, shattered by Clay waking her up. She slowly adjusts to the drab polished concrete floor and featureless walls that now sur-

round her. Her adoptive father and that grumpy old nurse are standing in front of her.

Clay 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, Svetlana.

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

"It's time to go back to the hotel," he says. He never meant for this to be 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 comes 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 as she remembers him hitting on her when she first arrived.

Clay insists that 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."

An old saying comes to Clay: "Set your loved ones free; if their love is true, they will come back to you." He knows a certain amount of flexibility is sometimes required. He also knows he was probably a little *too* flexible with her, growing up, but that's water under the bridge.

He never notices the lecherous look in the doctor's eyes. If he had, this would be an easy decision in the opposite direction. But, as it is, he reluctantly lets Jenna have her way. He can guess most parents would never do it, but Jenna has always been an incredibly independent spirit. He loves that about her – to a point – and hates his own decision, but he lets her spend the night.

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 nauseous from this latest episode of "Jenna drama," with one last exhalation Clay walks dejectedly out the orphanage door.

Heartbreak

He 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. It is Sofia.

The day before, after walking out of the orphanage without Jenna, he was surprised to see Maksim's car still in the 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 while cursing in Russian.

"If you two are, uh, finished," Clay reflexively turned away, "please take me back to the hotel. Jenna will not be joining us. And, to answer your next question, Maksim, yes I am sure. *Davai!*"

What happened next, though still murky, is slowly returning to Clay as he lies in bed with Sofia. Someone – he cannot remember who – showed up and drove him back to the hotel. The man identified himself as a friend of someone, but Clay cannot remember who. All that he remembers about the man is his athletic build and short-cropped hair.

Inside the hotel lobby – dumped there, in a daze – Clay was waiting for the elevator when Sofia ran up to him. Catching her breath, she said, "How about that drink?"

If he had stopped to think about this, 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.

Not much of a drinker in the first place, he still does not enjoy vodka, not even when sharing it with a beautiful woman in Russia. This, he decides, is a sure sign he does not belong here.

The rest of that 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 repeatedly makes excuses to delay their arrival. First, it's for cigarettes, and he has never seen her smoke. Then she "needs" a soda, which she barely touches. Finally, she has to use "the toilet."

Fed up, Clay says, "Next time we stop, I will leave you there. The only thing we need to do is 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," he 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, 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."

She smiles and bites her lip.

"And," he continues, "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."

"Not necessarily. In the shower is maybe the only time I have any real privacy."

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

~

When they return to the orphanage, his heart sinks when the "fussy old nurse-maid" from yesterday informs them 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 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.

He describes Maksim for them, assuming he is the "young man" mentioned. Sofia translates, adding several details such as Maksim's facial scar; the unusual shock 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 left willingly. Even if she had attacked the doctor – who must have deserved it – she had specifically promised back home that 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 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 now violent, emotionally-unbalanced hellion she has turned into. *Is this really any different than 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 she's put someone in the hospital!" Sofia does not translate this 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.

~

Clay badly misses her, despite Sofia's companionship. Or, maybe *because* of it. Pamela has always been the one better-equipped to deal with their daughter. She would have a few good ideas how to handle this situation... like calling the police and filing a report as she did in St. Louis. *Would that even work in Russia?* Clay wonders. *Do they even care about missing persons here, let alone tourists? There is a certain callousness to these people.*

He asks Sofia if they should get the police involved. She merely shrugs, leaving him wondering if even *she* cares. *You're on your own*, he tells himself, deciding that Sofia 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 in his pocket – like a smartphone app that would not be invented for a few years yet – he would replace her immediately. Their relationship is not what it used to be.

Think! he shouts internally. *Jenna is with Maksim. If you find him, you'll find her.* Aloud, he asks, "Do you know where Maksim lives or works?"

"No."

He gives her a look. "You had sex with him in the back seat of his car yesterday! You don't even know where he hangs out?"

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

He learns first-hand that there is nothing more desperate, nothing more heart-wrenching than searching for a child – *his* child – gone missing. Being halfway around the world surrounded by uncaring foreign assholes makes it excruciating. Jenna had suffered from separation anxiety as a kid – common with adoptees – but now Clay is the one suffering. He tries to console himself with the thought that

she at least ran off *with* someone. She's not alone. True, it is that idiot boy, Maksim, but it was of her own volition. She was not kidnapped. No one means to do her any harm... as far as he knows.

He is left asking, through Sofia, random strangers on the street if they have seen Maksim or Jenna, and it is going about as well as one might expect. He doesn't realize 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 on it, but that is not an option because Clay cannot find a single photo of her in his wallet. His regular cell phone had plenty of photos, but that was lost in the airport bombing.

"How can you not," Sofia asks, "have a picture of your own daughter?"

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

She 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 is an easy target.

He appreciates the energy Sofia is now, finally, putting into the search but has no idea why she was stalling earlier. 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 deep into his pockets. It's something he does when under stress. His fingers make contact with Jenna's bracelet – the one she left on the plane – at the bottom of his pocket. 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 he will ever hold. The thought sends a tear down his cheek, 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, and is not happy with his mishandling of the situation. Then again, he has never lost a child before, and it has left a gaping wound.

He then notices that strangers are following him and Sofia. He worries it might be because he is an American and they hate Americans here. Several of them do give disparaging looks. He asks Sofia about it, and she scoffs.

"Oh, please, you are being ridiculous. These people – complete strangers – are now helping us, asking everyone around them if they have seen Jenna or Maksim. Out of sheer decency," she says, "people are helping us find your daughter! Don't give me this 'anti-American' crap. Please.

"Several of them *are* appalled, though," she adds with a grin, "that you do not have a single photo of Jenna in your wallet!"

Clay cannot help but smile. Turning and speaking loud enough for all to hear, with a hand on his heart, he says to his anonymous posse, "*Spaseeba! Spaseeba!*" (Thank you! Thank you!)

Several of them – except for some of the older men – smile, nod or wave. It is a nice moment, and Clay decides he needs to remember this. There *are* decent people in the world, after all, even in Russia.

~

Sofia leads him and their band of helpers – *Jenna's not the only one who can have a posse*, he gives a fractured laugh – to a local police station to file a missing person report. The crowd disperses upon arrival at the station house. The matter is in the authorities' hands now.

Inside the station, Clay and Sofia are discouraged by the response to their plight, or lack thereof. He catches a glimmer of recognition from one of the officers at the mention of Maksim's name, but decides it is more likely the gleam of lust at the sight of Sofia. The man has been undressing her with his eyes the entire time.

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* that's what keeps happening. I only saw the first one."

She shakes her head. "I do not watch American films."

Clay considers chasing after the man to get his advice on his predicament – that's how desperate he is – but drops the idea when someone across the street catches his eye. He might not have noticed the woman had she not looked directly at him. She resembles their former translator, Vika, from fifteen years ago when they first met Jenna – or, *Zenya*, as she was called. She has the same straight, dark, shoulder-length hair; petite figure; pretty face; friendly, smiling eyes. If it is her, she has aged well.

Everyone seems familiar all of a sudden, it occurs to him as he chases after Vika or her *doppelgänger*. When she vanishes into the crowd, however, 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 location 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 live 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 a Federal Security Service (*Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti*, or "FSB") contractor for almost two decades, she never should have been so careless. Any sense of superiority over Gennady she may have felt – he was spotted and waved at by Clay in Moscow – has been lost. She had given him 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, the facilitator of 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 décor. 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 at the thought of a fictional billboard: *Welcome to Russia! You must now go insane.*

His "burner" phone rings. It 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, gloopy 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 recog-

nize 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

Last Train Out by William Arthur Holmes

recognition. She wants to say something, but the man's last words were clear: "Remember our agreement."

The rest be found at Amazon, SmashWords, Apple, etc. via [William Arthur Holmes.com](http://WilliamArthurHolmes.com).

About William Arthur Holmes

Originally from Sacramento, California, I have been calling Tennessee home for almost half my life now. I am married, with a young daughter, an old cat, an even older pug, and now a Boston terrier. My available titles are *Temporary Insanity*, *Lottery President*, *Operation Detour*, *Last Train Out*, *Another Way: Beyond the Status Quo*, and *The Lazy Pug Cafe*. They can all be found at Amazon, SmashWords, Apple, etc. via [William Arthur Holmes.com](http://WilliamArthurHolmes.com).

