

GOLD TRAIN

"Brilliantly written - a MUST read"
The Kindle Book Review

Accidental Spy
Russia Adventure

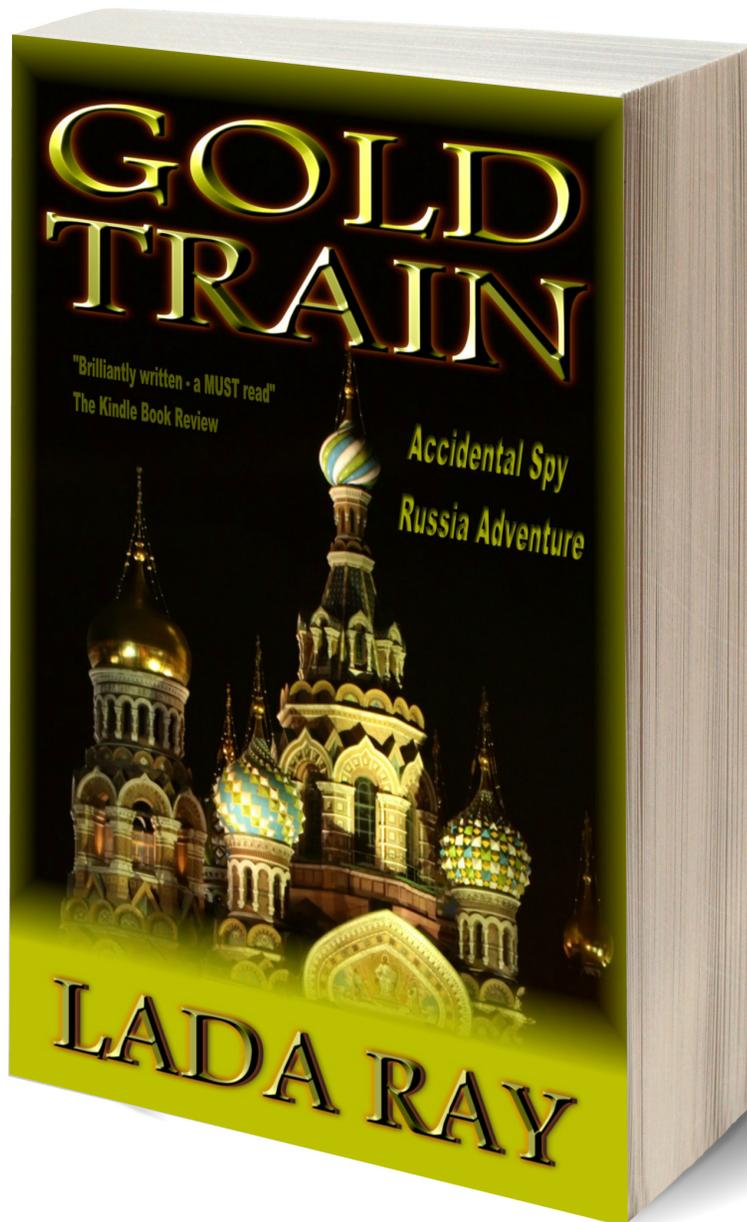


LADA RAY

GOLD TRAIN

Accidental Spy Russia Adventure

2nd EDITION



GOLD TRAIN

Accidental Spy Russia Adventure

Lada Ray

Ray House
EARTH SHIFT

Lada Ray

PRAISE FOR GOLD TRAIN

FIVE STARS

"Brilliantly Written - A MUST Read. This book had it all, not only a great mystery and action, but a little romance and even some humour. The story is fantastic - layers that go deeper and deeper... Superb, fast paced and well written... one of those books that gets you thinking about things - even after you finish reading." -- *The Kind Book Review*

FIVE STARS

"Highly anticipated follow up adventure by novelist Lada Ray, Gold Train certainly delivers with dramatic thrills and spills. The action follows journalist Jade Snow as the sexy super sleuth goes international. Truth, justice and the American way... superman can take lessons from this reporter! Easily 5 stars all the way, highly recommend for all you politicians out there." -- *Jasper Snieder*

FIVE STARS

"One of the coolest, most explosive and passionate novels I read in a very long time! Has you hanging on the edge of your seat! Read it and you'll see what I mean!" -- *A reader*

FIVE STARS

"Jade Snow is to journalism, what Jason Bourne is to action and espionage. Gold Train is an absolute must read."

What evolves is a brilliantly crafted thriller with murder, mystery, espionage and captivating twists and turns throughout. The author takes us on a tantalising, rip roaring, dangerous, action packed, yet passionate journey across modern day Russia.

Jade Snow is to journalism, what Jason Bourne is to action and espionage. The author has managed to develop a character with a fascinating thoughtful purpose. "Gold Train" is an absolute must read, the author goes beyond the obvious and whisks us along into the heart-stopping world of Jade Snow with breath-taking appeal for the next paragraph and page. The author's knowledge and comprehension of the Russian political scene brings a very credible and believable level of authenticity to the plot. A mesmeric thriller, "Gold Train" is marvellous book which has something for every reader. It leaves you wanting and calling for the next instalment in the adventures of International Journalist extraordinaire - Jade Snow.

-- *J.J. Collins, Author, Famine to Freedom, The Irish in the American Civil War (London, UK)*

FIVE STARS

"A Race for Gold! Fast paced thrill ride filled with great characters you will love and villains you will hate. This is definitely one to read!" -- *Kate's Reads*

FIVE STARS

"An amazing timeless story!" -- *Madeline Walsh (New York)*

FIVE STARS

"On top of breakneck action, the ending blew my socks off. It was 100% an original book. It's even inspired me to learn Russian." -- *Rachel's Book Reviews*

FIVE STARS

"Solid Gold Thriller. If you enjoyed the charming young detective, Jade Snow, in Stepford, USA, you will absolutely love her next adventure in Gold Train. Read Gold Train and be transfixed as Jade stays one step ahead of her adversaries through quick thinking and bold actions. Lada Ray takes you inside the grand houses of Russia to witness an unfolding mystery you will not soon forget." -- *Jason Sullivan, Author, The Dark Yergall*

K Daugher

I really liked this book alot! It was easy reading, not a lot of characters to keep straight and an exciting story line.

Melody Grundy

Very well written, again a great piece of paranormal fiction. The author also does a very good job of introducing Russian life for American readers.

The Raven

Makes you think it could all be real!

Without question, my favourite of the three Jade Snow novels. In this, the second full instalment of the Accidental Spy Series, we continue to follow captivating protagonist Jade Snow, as she takes her talents from America to Eastern Europe.

Sherry Fundin

Once I read her book THE EARTH SHIFTER, I was eager to read more from her.

I love treasure hunt stories and I love Lada Ray's writing so I was really looking forward to reading this. It was not what I thought it would be (more of a spy thriller than treasure hunt), but I was not disappointed. I have read several of her books and love the way she blends the historical with fiction and the paranormal. The words flow smoothly as the story unravels. Her writing grips me as soon as I open the book and the ride to the end is full of murder, conspiracy, intrigue, passion, betrayal, loss and sorrow. I look forward to reading many more books from Lada Ray.

Impressive and exciting read!

This is a fast-paced mystery thriller that is based on historic events. If you like gripping stories that have layer after layer of intrigue...then you will love this one. Who knows when you might meet your own mysterious stranger who will change your life forever, and have your own love affair? I hope you step

away from the brake and get back to full speed with the sight and promise of something that is unobtainable in Lada Ray's intriguing "GOLD TRAIN". -- *Jeannie Walker - Award Winning Author of "Fighting the Devil" - A True Story of Consuming Passion, Deadly Poison, and Murder*

Mr. Blues

For readers who like travel adventures. The author weaves a compelling tale, and sweeps you along as you learn about the people, local customs, exotic foods and government espionage! A perfect mystery, I was entranced to the explosive end. Expands your horizon about what it means to be a citizen of the world. What more can you ask for in a classy historical thriller? A thrill ride you won't soon forget!

1EarthUnited blog:

Brilliantly written, I've reread it after many years and fell in love with the story all over again. One of the best international spy thrillers, characters, plot, action, romance, intrigue, cliff hanger... destined to be a classic, your book has it all!

By Lada Ray

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- Stepford USA (Accidental Spy Small Town Adventure 1)

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Ray House
EARTH SHIFT
2nd edition

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Begin your love affair with Russia!

Gold Train



Based on true historic events

RAY HOUSE, New York, NY

It all begins with one secret phrase scribbled in a black, leather-bound journal of an assassinated Russian journalist. This sets off an epic treasure hunt, which along the way uncovers a major international conspiracy, and begins an undying, yet forbidden passion between two unlikely people that will defy reality, time and space.

Full of tantalizing twists and turns, action and revelations throughout, the book's unexpected culmination and ending will leave you speechless!



Prologue

August 1918, Russia

The steam locomotive's driver distinctly saw two tiny figures running towards the train on railroad tracks: children, no more than ten or eleven. The driver exchanged a bewildered glance with his young assistant and the fireman.

Steam engine's whistle pierced the stillness of the forest. But the children neither stopped, nor turned away. The driver pulled the whistle lever harder - again and again - but the children still kept running towards them, waving their hands and yelling something. What, he couldn't hear over the deafening roar of the engine.

Why weren't they stepping off the tracks? Why weren't they afraid of the giant, black, steam- and fire-breathing locomotive pulling twelve fully loaded carriages? With a pang in his heart, the driver recalled his own grandchildren, a boy and a girl aged eight and ten - thank goodness, safely back home. Damn civil war! Even children didn't act as children should!

He knew, if he didn't do something immediately, the multi-ton iron monster he commanded would squash the children's little bodies like a couple of insects.

But that meant disobeying strict orders.

"Full stop!" he yelled at the top of his lungs and threw his entire weight on the emergency brake. If he acted quickly, he might still be able to avert the collision!

"What the hell is going on here?!" the driver heard a thunderous voice. A broad-shouldered man, who was black-clad head to toe - leather jacket, tall boots, *galife* trousers, cowhide belt with attached holster - stormed into the locomotive's cabin, hastily pulling out a shiny, black Mauser revolver.

"Comrade Commissar," choked out the driver, still pulling on the emergency brake with all his might, "there are children on tracks!"

With relief, he felt that the huge machine started ever so slowly, ever so grudgingly, losing speed.

Commissar threw a lightning-fast glance at the tracks, noted quickly approaching children and frowned.

"Comrade Lenin's personal directive was," he said in a dangerous voice, "no stopping under any circumstances!" He pointed his revolver at the driver. "Step away from that brake and get back to full speed, NOW!"

"But the children!" cried out the driver in despair, refusing to believe that this kind of cruelty was possible from one of his revolutionary comrades.

"Full speed, or you die," said Commissar through clenched teeth.

"I am sorry, Comrade Commissar," the driver shook his head. "But I can't do that."

At that moment, as the locomotive's huge body started finally coming to a screeching halt, the driver noticed with surprise the two children on tracks suddenly jump aside and nimbly disappear into the darkness of the trees.

"Traitor! Saboteur!" yelled Commissar and pulled the trigger.

The old locomotive driver felt something hot hit his chest and fell to the floor like a heavy sack.

"Back to full speed if you want to live!" Commissar pointed his Mauser at the blanched driver's assistant and at the fireman covered in black soot.

Both men worked feverishly, hands trembling, feeding heaping shovels of coal into the demanding fiery beast, slipping on bloody floor and throwing surreptitious glances at the immobile figure unceremoniously hauled by Commissar into the cabin's corner.

The giant locomotive started slowly, reluctantly moving.

"Faster, faster, sons of bitches!" yelled Commissar. "Remember what precious cargo you are carrying! Faster, I said, unless you want to end up like this traitorous scum!"

They worked as fast as they could, but not fast enough.

Through the steam engine's noise, they heard the rhythmic drumming of horse hooves accompanied by the horsemen's war cries.

"Faster, faster, you, bastards!" thundered Commissar, waiving his Mauser.

Urgent gunshots told them that the elite Red Guards regiment assigned to guard the train was engaged in a battle against the attackers.

"Damn, they are boarding the train!" roared Commissar. "Faster, please, dear brothers," he added desperately, throwing a pleading glance at the driver's assistant and the fireman.

The two men nodded, working as hard as humanly possible, while Commissar disappeared into the belly of the train.

At last, the locomotive regained its original speed and they paused, wiping the dripping sweat, listening. All of a sudden, it seemed awfully quiet inside the train, and deciding that Commissar and his Red Guards managed to fend off the attack, the young driver's assistant cracked a rare smile and the fireman's sooty face answered in like. About to return to their duties, they heard heavy footsteps and waited for Commissar to open the door. He would be in a good mood now; he would be happy with their work...

"Stop the train, sons of bitches - NOW!!!" roared a voice.

The man who stepped through the cabin's door, his gold epaulets gleaming, wasn't the Commissar at all.

"The Whites!" croaked out the driver's assistant.

The imposing man in Tsar's Army uniform with gold colonel's stars waved his Smith & Wesson in front of their noses.

"Yes, the White Guards, you Red filth! And unless you do exactly as I say..."

Out of a corner of his eye, the colonel noticed the young man's move. His Smith & Wesson fired, and the driver's assistant sank to the floor. The red-hot poker slipped out of his fingers and fell with a loud thud.

"Can *you* drive the train?" The colonel pointed his revolver at the fireman.

Cautiously, the fireman shook his head, standing as still as possible so that not to anger the colonel any further.

"Then what do I need *you* for?" asked the colonel tauntingly. The Smith & Wesson went off one more time and the fireman's blackened face hit the floor.

"Red filth," murmured the colonel and spat on the dead man's body.

As darkness fell, a different kind of train snaked on a remote dirt road hidden somewhere in the vast forests of middle Russia, the train of horse carriages stretching for kilometers, all loaded with precious cargo.

By dawn, not a single piece of the mysterious cargo remained on the train. Only the slaughtered bodies of the Commissar, the Red Guards and train crew were left behind.

The ancient forest stood silent, sole witness and record keeper, as it always did.



Chapter 1

October 2011, New York

Russia had been on my *must do* list since I was nineteen. But somewhere between writing about the Iraqi war, chasing the Taliban for the documentary of a lifetime, marrying Paul, nearly getting killed during my Stepford, USA adventure, developing a psychic gift and having a baby, it had become little more than a remote dream...a whisper relegated to the forgotten storeroom of my mind.

My name is Jade Snow, I am an international journalist, at least I used to be. At present, I am a stay-at-home mom complete with my cute as a button thirteen-month-old daughter, Lara, and a beautiful, super-intelligent calico cat named Princess Lily. My husband, Paul, is a prominent journalist with *Time* magazine. We met in Afghanistan when he saved my crew and me from an ambush. Guilty, as charged; as independent as I am, deep down, I've always been a sucker for a white knight in shining armor.

We were married a month later, then Lara came along. And now Paul was enjoying adventures at the hottest spots on the planet for both of us. As for me... I usually watched him pack for his next trip at our spacious Upper West Side apartment and I can't honestly say that the green beastie of envy had never entered my mind.

Blame my gypsy-like adventurous side on my international heritage. English, Spanish, and even Viking blood runs through my veins. And a whole one quarter of it is Russian. My English and Viking sides have contributed to my reddish-auburn hair, my Spanish side gave me a great tan, while my Russian side is responsible for the unusual blue-green color of my eyes that, according to my husband, look like a clear turquoise ocean on a sunny day.

When I was little, my beloved Grandma Anastasia told me tales of Moscow's golden domes and magical royal balls at St. Petersburg's Winter Palace. She went on and on about Barbie-like ladies in gorgeous gowns and handsome prince charmings in tuxedos and epaulets. Grandma Anastasia was one of the so-called *White Russians*: her parents ran away from the Bolshevik revolution and the Civil War. Grandma was born and grew up in Spain, where she married a Spanish professor and with him came to live in New York.

My parents, who were international journalists and progressives, approved of Grandma's Russian language and history lessons, although strongly disapproved of what they called *brainwashing the child with all that silly, old royal stuff*.

But they honestly needn't bother. I was in no danger of being brainwashed, and I could care less about gowns, grand balls and prince charmings. Once, for my sixth birthday Grandma's old friend, a distinguished New York lawyer Boris Goncharov, brought me a beautiful and expensive doll, which was the envy of all my friends. To be polite, I pretended to play with it for all of five minutes. After that, it lay forgotten, until my mother fished it out from under my bed and donated it to a children's hospital.

That was the last time anyone ever attempted to give me a doll. My choice toys included world globes and National Geographic subscriptions. My favorite past time was tracking my parents' journeys by marking each exotic destination with a tiny flag on an oversized world map hanging in my room. And I could listen for hours to stories about remote and dangerous locations where their work had taken them.

My parents were killed in South America when I was barely a teenager.

In those difficult times, Grandma Anastasia was my rock and my anchor. She set aside her extensive social calendar and visits to a spa and took over as my surrogate mother, and when necessary, as a surrogate father, too. She saw me through my first year at Columbia University. Then, in the middle of my second year, her poor old heart just gave up... and she died.

I was devastated. And it was only thanks to my best friend, Rachel Weise, who literally spoon-fed me for a month that I survived and went on to finish my international journalism degree with honors. Come think of it, Rachel's success with her first "patient" solidified her decision to become a psychotherapist. And it was then that I made myself a solemn promise to visit Grandma Anastasia's Russia. I owed it to her memory.

At thirty, I still haven't fulfilled that promise.

But I haven't given up either. All these years, I kept polishing up my Russian and kept in touch with Russian events via the Internet. My famous intuition was telling me that the semi-forgotten promise would one day escape my mind's dusty storeroom. One day, it would be front and center.

What I had no way of knowing was *how* soon it would happen and how *front and center* it would become...

That morning, I'd just completed my daily exercise, mainly consisting of pushing a stroller and pursuing my little daughter around Central Park. At thirteen months, Lara discovered the delights of chasing pigeons and squirrels, which meant I had to chase after her.

Paul was preparing for a new assignment to Somalia and had left to his office early. As usual before a new and dangerous trip, my husband was fully absorbed in his own world and didn't notice anyone or anything around, a behavior I came to be used to. I opened the door into our apartment, put Lara into her playpen, washed the dishes after Paul's breakfast, made the bed, and was about to enjoy my morning cup of tea when the phone rang.

"Hello," I said, wondering who might be calling at this hour. All my friends worked during the day; alas, I was the only stay-at-home mom. Perhaps, Paul forgot something?

"Hellou," answered a heavily accented female voice. "May I speak viz Jade Snou, please?"

"Jade Snow speaking."

"Zhis is Svetlana from Moskva."

"Svetlana?" I asked, confused. "Moscow?"

"Yes, Svetlana Svistunova, juurnalist from Moskva. You emailed me tree veeks ago about Gold Train."

Then, I finally recalled. "Yes, yes, of course, so good of you to call!"

"Don't mention it," said Svetlana formally, and added, "please forgeeve my Engleesh, I am afraid it is not verree guud."

"Oh, no," I rushed to assuage her, "your English is fine!" It was a white lie, so sue me! "But if you like, we can speak Russian," I proposed. "I need to practice anyway."

"You speak Russian?" asked Svetlana, sounding relieved. "*Zdorovo! Davaite togda po Russki!*"

I switched to Svetlana's mother tongue. "Yes, my Grandma Anastasia was Russian and she taught me for years."

"Your Russian is very good," she said. "But the reason I am calling is because I am the journalist who broke the Gold Train story."

Three weeks ago, during one of my Internet research expeditions, I stumbled upon a story reported in the Russian press. It was the story that really intrigued me...

It happened back in 1918, during the bloody Russian Civil War. Due to the relentless attacks by the Whites, who wanted to restore the monarchy, the Bolsheviks were about to lose the city of Kazan, some eight hundred kilometers east of Moscow. The Bank of Kazan was the depository of the Gold Reserve

of the Russian Empire. Together with silver and platinum, it was one of the largest, if not the largest, precious metals reserves of its day. By Lenin's personal decree, a train was sent to retrieve the gold and transfer it to a secret location. However, somewhere en route the Russian Empire's Gold Reserve vanished without a trace.

The author, Svetlana Svistunova, told the whole story in vivid details. She hinted that the gold wasn't lost or taken out of the country, as many believed. In the end, she announced that she was closing in on the Gold Train discovery and that soon she would be releasing part two of her investigative report in which she would propose a theory as to where the gold was hidden.

Being a sucker for tantalizing mysteries, I couldn't get this one out of my head. It occurred to me that if we collaborated with Svetlana in her investigation we could sell this sensational story to an American publication. I could see the headlines: "The Treasure of the Millennium!" "Lost Gold Of The Russian Tsars, Found At Last!" "The World's Largest Treasure!" And "Brilliant Journalist, Jade Snow, Receives Pulitzer Today For The Incredible Mystery Of Tsar's Gold!" All right, perhaps not...

Still, I saw this as a chance to restart my journalistic career, which came to a screeching halt after I became pregnant with Lara. I wasn't used to complaining as I was brought up by both my parents and Grandma Anastasia to see the best in people and things. Some call it rosy glasses, and others optimism. It was this relentless and stoic optimism that got me through every trial of the past.

On the surface, everything looked simply terrific in my life: a successful and famous husband, adorable baby daughter and fabulous apartment on Upper West Side. But my gypsy soul desperately longed for something it had been denied – the danger and excitement of unpredictably sweet adventures. I kept brushing aside this longing, telling myself that I was now a married woman and a mother, and that my responsibility was to stay with Lara. But more and more often, rebellious thoughts popped into my mind that *Paul* didn't have to stay home, that *he* jet-setted the world, and that I rushed into the marriage which started out as a cool adventure for us both, but turned into a jail sentence for me. No matter how much I chased away these treacherous thoughts, I felt at times that if the steam weren't let out I would simply explode from the build up of internal pressure. Perhaps, I thought wistfully, this was my chance to finally stretch my legs and taste freedom (of course, if Paul's travel schedule allowed it). And somewhere deep down - secretly - I also hoped that maybe, just maybe, this could be a way to start fulfilling my promise to revisit Grandma Anastasia's motherland.

It was a long shot, but I am allowed to dream, aren't I?

I was bursting with news when Paul came back from work. I told him about the Gold Train and about Svetlana's call.

"Perhaps," I shared my dream with him, "if I worked together with her, I could sell the story to an American magazine. Svetlana said she'd gladly collaborate in exchange for my help in her investigation, English translation and royalties."

Paul listened, silently observing stars in my eyes...and I felt comprehension dawning in his. Next morning at breakfast, he spoke little and seemed absent-minded. At lunch, he called me.

"Sweetheart," he said in a mysterious voice. "Could you come by my office as soon as possible? My boss wants to talk to you."

"Your boss wants to talk to *me*?" This sounded so unexpected that I was stunned. "B... but I can't leave Lara!"

"Don't worry. Just get dressed. I already called Dolores, she's on her way." Dolores was Lara's nanny, who came by three times a week so I could take care of other things.

"It's good to see you, Jade," said *Time* magazine's editor-in-chief, George Bollinger. "Paul is telling me that you are ready to rejoin the ranks of international journalists?"

"He speaks the truth, George!" And I told him the whole story.

After a pause, he said, “Tell you what. Russia is changing rapidly and we are looking to capture these changes as they occur. After the end of the Cold War interest in Russia has waned, but now it’s picking up again. We are planning an expose, a series of articles that showcases Russia old and Russia new. The Gold Train story could be part of the series. If you can leave in two days, the assignment is yours and you may also include your Russian journalist friend as your collaborator. But you have to be ready to leave by Thursday. What do you say?”

I opened my mouth at such speedy turn of events and had a lot of trouble shutting it again.

“I...I... um...” I stumbled.

“George,” Paul came to the rescue, “Jade will be ready in two days, I guarantee it. I will stay with Lara.”

“But what about your Somalia trip?” I said.

“That’s not a problem,” Paul responded lightly. “Alison always wanted to do that one. Don’t worry,” he added, seeing me frown. I knew how important this assignment was to my husband. “There will be plenty of other trips after your return.”

“But what about...” I was stalling, still trying to wrap my mind around what was happening.

“I already talked to Dolores,” Paul interjected quickly. “She agreed to come in every day, for as long as you are in Russia. And I can work from home.”

Seeing me still hesitate, Paul added, “This is your chance to restart your career. Go for it, darling. We’ll be fine, I promise.”

It appeared that Paul has thought of everything. And clearly, I ran out of excuses. I looked at George Bollinger, who nodded encouragingly; then at Paul, who shone with a happy smile – and felt my eyes starting to sting.

George was giving me a chance of a lifetime and Paul was ready to sacrifice his own assignment, so I could rekindle my career. I couldn’t let them down!

“Thank you, George! You won’t regret it,” I said, feeling wings sprouting behind my back.

At home, I said *thank you* to Paul in a very different way. We made love late into the night and long after he fell asleep I couldn’t wipe blissful grin off my face.

I was back! I’d be writing and traveling again. George Bollinger hinted that if they liked my work he’d hire me as *Time* magazine’s freelance contributor. He might even make Russia one of my regular destinations! I’d be able to work part time, while still raising Lara. It seemed, my dreams were finally coming true and my life was taking the right turn.



Chapter 2

I was busy packing when I heard a buzz.

Who could it be? I thought, pressing the intercom button. Whoever it was, their timing was atrocious as I still had tons to pack.

“Hello, Jade!” came what sounded like an old man’s voice.

Could it be a voice from the past?

“Uncle Boris?” I said into the speaker. “I can’t believe it! Is it really you?”

“That’s me all right!”

“Please, come on up! Carlos, please let him in.”

“Sure thing, Ms. Jade,” responded the security guard.

I opened the door, grinning ear-to-ear. The man, who stood in the doorway, still had remnants of that regal posture I remembered from the old days and a luxurious mane of hair, now completely white. But he moved with difficulty and his breathing was heavy just walking from the elevator to my door. Last time I saw Boris Goncharov at Grandma Anastasia’s funeral. It appeared since then old age had finally caught up with him.

When I was little, Boris and Grandma Anastasia were very close. He was a long-time president of the Russian Royal Society, of which Grandma was also a lifelong member. I didn’t pay much attention to that kind of stuff back then, and my parents disapproved of all her Royal Society friends as a matter of principle. Then, although nothing was ever said, I knew that she broke up with the Society, much to my parent’s relief. But even if they had a falling out, Boris still was Grandma’s old friend. I recalled the doll he once gave me. It was an expensive gift and he meant well. When I was little, I called him Uncle Boris, the Russian way. To me, he still *was* Uncle Boris.

“Now, let me look at you,” he said, stopping to catch his breath. He gave me an admiring gaze, his eyes pausing on my breasts, which filled up since my pregnancy, and proceeded to skim the rest of my curves, quite a change from my old, stick-like figure. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that Grandma Anastasia’s old buddy was checking me out!

“Uncle Boris!” I wagged my finger at him.

“Sorry,” he said, still staring at me and not looking sorry at all. “When I look at you, I feel forty years younger. You’ve really blossomed, my dear. You are looking more and more like your Grandma Anastasia, and she was *the* original beauty in her day.”

“It’s good to see you, Uncle Boris!” I gave him a hug.

“I’ve heard that you are going to Russia. Is that true?”

“Yes! *Time* magazine hired me to do a series about Russia old and Russia new, so to speak.”

“Fascinating,” said Uncle Boris pensively.

“Is there something you wanted, Uncle Boris? Don’t get me wrong, I am very happy to see you, and your showing up now must be interpreted as a good omen for my trip,” I simply couldn’t resist a chuckle, “but I am awfully behind on packing and the plane won’t wait. So, I’m afraid we’ll have to make it quick...”

“Yes, of course. I understand and won’t take much of your time. “Here,” he handed me a small package wrapped in gold silk and tied with an exquisite gold ribbon.

“I want to ask you to pass a small gift to a friend in St. Petersburg. Her name is Vera Golitsina. She is a very old and dear friend and I thought she might like what’s inside. It’s a jewelry box,” he added by way of an explanation.

Typical Uncle Boris! What a sweet man! He thought his friend would like some exquisite little trinket, so he’d spare no effort or expense to bring her joy.

“No problem,” I said. I took the golden package and put it on top of my nearly packed suitcase.

At that moment, Lara ran into the living room with Dolores hot on her heels.

“And this must be little Lara,” beamed Uncle Boris, picking her up, with difficulty. “She looks a lot like you, just as beautiful and just as hard to catch.”

I giggled, delighted at the memory. He should know. When I was little, Grandma would often take me for walks to Central Park. After Antonio, her husband and my grandfather died, Boris would often accompany us. He’d bring Grandma gorgeous bouquets, which usually lay forgotten on a bench as they both were busy chasing me around the park. Like mother, like daughter...

After he left I finished packing. Then, I barely squeezed Uncle Boris’s package into a corner of my suitcase. In the end, I had to make a choice between bringing a book to read and Uncle Boris’s gift to some woman I’ve never met.

A bit frustrated that I had to sacrifice valuable space, I wondered what could be so special about this jewelry box that Uncle Boris couldn’t simply FedEx it? Trying to save money? Unlikely, not really his style. If anything, he’d always been overly generous.

What then? Probably doesn’t trust to mail it. And lo and behold, he heard on the grapevine that good old Jade was leaving to Russia. Why not ask her? He knew I wouldn’t say *no* for the old times’ sake. It appeared in his mind I seemed a perfect courier. The Boris Goncharov I remembered was sharp, always in control and at times too controlling. But he would’ve never asked someone to deliver a gift if he could just mail it.

I shook my head. Pity, Uncle Boris has truly aged... he even behaved like a helpless old man. But a promise is a promise. After all, it’s just a little box and I could certainly indulge Grandma’s old buddy. I stared at my full suitcase. A momentary curious thought was to open the little golden box and see what was really inside. But then I saw Grandma’s face, which was looking at me disapprovingly. “I taught you better than that,” her voice rang in my head, making me blush. The high-minded upbringing I received wouldn’t allow me to do such dishonorable thing as opening someone else’s private correspondence, and I knew that was exactly why Uncle Boris entrusted me his little parcel.

Ah well, it was certainly safe with me. I resolutely closed my suitcase and put the whole thing out of my mind, concentrating on what needed to be done next. At last, I stood in the doorway, suitcases at my feet. Lara, sensing my imminent departure, started crying and attempted to wiggle out of Dolores’ arms. Princess Lily brushed her silky body against my legs, her tail nervously thrashing, her meows echoing Lara’s cry.

I picked up my baby daughter, holding her close.

“Darling,” I whispered in her ear. “Mommy loves you very much. Mommy needs to go on a little trip now, more like a vacation really, nothing to worry about. But Daddy will stay with you, and Dolores, and Lily. And I’ll be back as soon as I can, promise!” I kissed Lara tenderly all over her rosy cheeks and button-like nose, which made her giggle with delight. Then, I gave her back to Dolores.

“Now it’s your turn, young lady,” I said, picking up Princess Lily. I stroked her fur and scratched her neck, just as she liked it. Lily’s silky fluff felt incredibly good and I didn’t know which one of us was enjoying it more. “Listen, you be a good girl and watch over Lara while I am away, all right?” I said to her.

Princess Lily fixed her two shimmering turquoise eyes on me. “You can count on it,” her glance said. We stared at each other like that, her green turquoise into my green turquoise; people had always said our eyes perfectly mirrored each other.

“You just be careful,” she transmitted telepathically.

“Don’t worry, I will! Besides, this trip is more like a vacation,” I responded in like.

As usual, no one but the two of us seemed to notice this telepathic exchange between a feline and a human. I preferred it that way, as a little secret between Lily and me.

Paul and I got into my Land Rover and rode to the Kennedy Airport in silence, holding hands. Just outside the airport’s busy lobby, he gave me a long and passionate kiss. We stood like this, amidst the rumble of passing luggage carts and the honks of taxis, for what seemed like an eternity.

Then he whispered into my ear, “I love you, and believe in you. Good luck!”

“I love you, too,” I whispered back.

“Jade, Jade!”

I turned in the direction of the voice.

“Rachel!” I waved to my best friend, who was hastily paying the cab.

“Upph,” she said, catching her breath, “hardly managed to get away from my patients! But I couldn’t let you go without a hug, could I?”

“So glad you made it,” I said, glowing.

She hugged me and said, “You just be careful there. For what it’s worth, I’ve heard that Russia is a dangerous place for journalists.”

“Don’t worry,” I waived her remark aside. “I’m sure it’s not true. American media always sensationalizes things. Besides, this trip is more like a vacation, really.”

I finished saying the words and frowned. Weird... *This trip is more like a vacation, really* seemed to have become my mantra of late. But I had no time to ponder on the significance of that as I had a plane to board. So I put the beginnings of a thought, stirring somewhere in the depths of my psyche, on the back burner. There would be time to meditate on that later.

Once on the plane, I reclined my business class seat (courtesy of *Time* magazine) as far as it would go. Through the entire Red Eye flight to Moscow, I dreamed of steam locomotives, royal balls and golden domes. Next morning at six, Moscow time, as the world started waking up to a new day, I paused at the exit of the Sheremetievo-2 Airport, inhaling the brisk morning air that smelled and tasted very unlike the New York air I was accustomed to.

I was in Moscow. I was in Russia... I finally made it.



Chapter 3

“I am so happy you came,” Svetlana greeted me. “Now I can finally share my thoughts and suspicions with someone.”

“Don’t you talk about it with your colleagues and friends?” I asked, surprised.

“Yeah, sure,” she hesitated. “Well, it’s just that...”

“Just that?”

“Well, you know how it is,” she went on. “Everyone has lives to live and things to do in the present. They all seem to think I’m obsessed. To them, the Gold Train story is stuff of urban legends that has no bearing on today.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” I said, nodding. “Been there, done that.” We exchanged a glance and at that moment the initial bond between us got stronger.

We sat in the living room of Svetlana’s neat flat and drank tea with delicious Russian cake. The small dining table was full of delicacies: caviar, *Oliviere*, a famous Russian salad, appetizing-looking smoked white fish that melted in your mouth, French wine, Italian salami, Swiss cheese, Greek olives and Russian *blinchiki*.

“I’ve been working on this story for over a year,” said Svetlana. “Lots of things are still not making any sense, but I’ve accumulated a lot of material. Now, it’s the matter of reconciling it. All my findings are in this notebook.”

She opened one of the drawers in her desk. Inside it, she showed me a protrusion, which turned out to be another, secret, drawer. Like a magician, she then opened the secret drawer by inserting her index finger between the boards in a specific way. I observed her manipulations with interest, wondering where she was going with this. After the secret drawer was opened, she reached with her hand towards its ceiling and pulled at something hard. I heard a ripping sound and a black, leather-bound notebook appeared in Svetlana’s hand.

“What was that ripping sound?”

“It’s the new German double-strength adhesive tape,” she explained. “I wanted you to see where the notebook was so you knew how to get it, just in case.”

“In case of what?”

“In case if anything happens, that’s all.” Svetlana shrugged her shoulders as if to say, *no big deal, just a general precaution*.

“But listen, I have a great idea,” she continued quickly, and I got a distinct feeling that she wanted to change the conversation. “We’ll have plenty of time to go over my notes tomorrow, it takes three hours and forty five minutes to get to St. Petersburg on *Sapsan*. Today, we’ll celebrate your arrival! I’ll show you around Moscow and we’ll do something fun. What do you say?”

“I say let’s do it,” I responded enthusiastically. But I couldn’t shake the impression that Svetlana wasn’t telling me everything. And why did she keep her notebook hidden like this? Was she afraid of something? Or someone? Her behavior was a bit odd, but I decided that there would be plenty of time to figure it out later. Today, I was about to finally see Moscow!

It was an amazing day. Svetlana knew the city inside out and showed me all the cool spots off the beaten tourist path, which, I am sure, I would’ve never been able to find on my own.

Of course we did all the usual, too. How could I miss the Kremlin and Red Square, the amazing St. Basil's Cathedral, Bolshoi Theatre that just re-opened after a massive renovation, or the gorgeous Moscow Metro! We strolled across Red Square, marveling at the mile-long line of people from all corners of the globe, waiting to enter Lenin's Mausoleum.

"This hasn't changed much," remarked Svetlana. "Although they keep talking about closing the Mausoleum and moving Lenin's body somewhere else... When I was barely six, my parents took me to see Lenin for the first time. We had to stand in a line that wrapped around the Kremlin."

Svetlana waited patiently as I paused in awed silence, eyes closed, next to the famed Kremlin Wall, my hands on its ancient red brick. I stood like this for a while, drinking in the incredible energy and unique history of the place.

"Always wanted to touch the Kremlin Wall," I exhaled, finally opening my eyes. My Russian friend smiled at me indulgently.

Then, we had an early dinner at the Pushkin Café and after that Svetlana took me to the Old Arbat, Moscow's pedestrian artist district. Due to cold weather, very little art was on display in the streets as most people crowded the local bars and cafes.

We had a few cocktails at the bar and as darkness descended on Arbat its exquisite old lanterns lit up, creating a spectacularly mystical backdrop. Light snow started falling on the quiet street and all of a sudden we were transported into a magical fairy tale. We giggled, feeling pleasantly tipsy yet at the same time delightfully alive, and decided to take a nice evening walk. As we rounded the corner onto an adjacent street we noticed a glittering sign that read:

RADA
Famous Gypsy Psychic and Fortuneteller

"You know," said Svetlana, her eyes shining with tipsy excitement, "I've always wanted to get my fortune told."

"Why not," I agreed, grinning. "Let's hear how we'll meet a tall, dark and handsome prince and how our lives will be showered with gold."

Svetlana laughed. "You are probably right, it's silly. But to tell you the truth, the way my life is going, I wouldn't mind hearing about a handsome prince. Too much work and too little play, if you know what I mean. I don't care if she embellishes things a bit. The thought is what counts. It'll warm my heart..."

And still giggling, we entered the Gypsy's abode.

Rada turned out to be a tall, thin woman of undetermined age, with huge black eyes and dressed in a somewhat traditional Gypsy outfit, with a wide skirt and colorful blouse, but of the highest quality and tastefully put together. On her index finger she wore a large ring that shimmered in the candlelight with mysterious green and blue fires; her neck was adorned with an exquisite matching necklace with teardrop stones set into it.

Since I was a guest, Svetlana let me go first. Rada gave me a penetrating look, then spread her tarot cards and said, "You are in for a big adventure. Beautiful ball, palaces and treasure await you. And you will meet a tall and handsome Russian prince."

"Don't you mean, tall, *dark* and handsome?" I couldn't resist the 'wise Alec' remark.

Rada lifted her huge, bottomless eyes and looked at me without a hint of irritation. "Tall - yes, handsome - yes. But not dark. Blue eyes, light hair," she concluded resolutely.

I blinked, trying to decide whether to laugh or to get annoyed at this revelation.

Meanwhile, Rada went on, seemingly undaunted. “There is mortal danger too,” she said, frowning. “Whatever you do, stay away from dark, underground spaces. But don’t worry, you’ll get help, so everything will turn out all right. In the end, you’ll find something extremely valuable, but lose something even more valuable in return.”

Rada ended her reading on that cryptic note and I just couldn’t help but roll my eyes and exchange a glance with Svetlana. See, what did I tell you? Typical Gypsy stuff. I felt annoyed at Rada. Who does she think she is? Advertising herself as if she was the best thing since sliced bread. And what a ridiculous thing to predict for me! A Russian prince? I ask you! She isn’t too sharp, this supposed psychic: hasn’t even noticed my ring and hasn’t realized that I am happily married, with a small child to boot. What would I want with a blue-eyed prince? I have my very own, tall, dark and handsome back in New York, thank you very much!

And what’s with this cryptic stuff, *you’ll find something extremely valuable, but lose something even more valuable in return?* Please! My skeptical side was in uproar and my first impulse - being an impatient American and all - was to demand my money back and leave with a bang!

But then, I took another look at Svetlana and felt guilty. Sure, if I were there alone, it would have been the end of my encounter with Gypsy magic. But it was now Svetlana’s turn and I couldn’t just tell my gracious hostess, “Enough with all this silliness, let’s go!” Not after she dedicated the whole day to me and allowed me the first reading with Rada. It wasn’t her fault that the Gypsy didn’t live up to my overblown expectations. It’s supposed to be *entertainment*, I reminded myself.

Meanwhile, Svetlana’s ear-to-ear grin, if at all possible, got even bigger. Unlike me, she apparently didn’t forget that it was just entertainment. She gave me a look that clearly said, just let me hear my-very-own-prince-charming-prediction and then we’ll leave. Feeling ashamed of myself, I sat down and prepared to listen to Svetlana’s session.

If she promises her a prince too, then she’s definitely a fraud, I decided.

At precisely that moment, Rada turned to me with a sad smile and added, “There is one more thing. You won’t be able to make your trip tomorrow, due to an event beyond your control.” She lifted her huge eyes shimmering like two pieces of black coal, eyes that rather uncomfortably reached into the deepest hidden crevices of my soul and whispered, “I am so very sorry.”

I sat, still trying to wrap my mind around this last revelation, when Rada started Svetlana’s reading. My Russian friend sat across from the Gypsy, shining like a new silver ruble with delighted anticipation. I tuned in.

“You are on the verge of a very important discovery,” announced the Gypsy. “Your dedication to your work is bordering on obsession and you’ll be happy to know that you’ve already uncovered something that will be of great help to others. But...” she paused, “it won’t be your destiny to get to the bottom of this story that is so important to you.”

Svetlana’s face underwent a transformation. “Why?” she asked, a worried frown spreading across her forehead.

And again, the Gypsy’s bottomless eyes fixed on Svetlana, then on me, and her red lips uttered almost inaudibly, “Because you won’t live to finish your work. Someone else will do it for you.”

There were no jokes on the way back to Svetlana’s apartment. Still pale, she put water on the stove, made tea, took out of the fridge the remnants of my welcome cake, sliced some fresh lemon and cut some Russian bread, Swiss cheese and Italian salami. We sat at her tiny kitchen table and sipped green tea.

“Cheer up,” I said. “I am telling you, its total hogwash! That Gypsy should be taken to court for lying and scaring people. Look what she told me: that I would meet a prince and attend grand balls.

How do you like that! She doesn't even realize I am a happily married woman with a small child back home."

"That's true," said Svetlana, color slowly returning to her face. "You hardly appear to be interested in that kind of stuff."

"See what I mean!" I exclaimed, seizing on my initial success and trying to expand my advantage. "Nothing to worry about! Tomorrow morning we'll be on our way to St. Petersburg and everything will be back to normal."

"Right," agreed Svetlana, almost her normal self. "Except," she frowned again, "there *is* some truth to what she said."

"What do you mean?"

"See, I... I've been receiving death threats demanding that I drop my Gold Train investigation."

"Death threats?" I said, not quite believing my ears. "Oh, my god! Are you sure?"

"Of course I am sure! Look!" And she pulled out of her bag several notes with - what else - real death threats made out of cutout newspaper words. "If you don't drop this, you'll be very sorry!" "Forget the Gold Train, or die!" And other such nonsense.

I stared at the notes. If this was a joke, it wasn't a funny one.

Aloud, I said, "Svetlana, did you contact the police?"

"Yes." She nodded. "Unfortunately, they didn't take it seriously. They think someone's playing a prank. In their mind, the Gold Train story is ancient history, so who would want anyone dead because of it? I have to say, Russian police isn't always up to speed. It's not like your American police."

Not like American police... Yeah, right. I recalled my previous adventure in the idyllic town of Stepford, USA, an adventure, which almost cost me my life, together with Lara's when I was still pregnant with her, an adventure that involved two corrupt senior cops.

"Believe me," I said, shaking my head. "US cops are no better, and probably much worse..."

"But how could that be?" exclaimed my naïve Russian friend. "All American shows portray cops as such efficient and justice-oriented people!"

"Efficient and justice-oriented," I snorted sarcastically. "Efficient - perhaps, power hungry - definitely, justice-oriented - debatable."

"Here there is so much criticism of police that every TV program and newspaper is full of it. That's why we are having a police reform. Everyone wants them to change. But no one's talking about any police reform in America. How come?"

"I can't believe the words are coming out of my mouth," I said. "I mean, this contradicts all the stereotypes we grew up with, but if there is a police reform here, it just shows that this society is vibrant and forward-looking. There is no talk about any changes in the US not because they are not needed, but because cops are part of the system and the system doesn't want to change."

"Aaaah," said Svetlana, comprehension registering in her eyes. "That sounds familiar. We went through something like this back in the 1980s."

I nodded, thinking that it was amazing how misconceptions about each other still persisted in both Russia and the US. Except, in the US they erred on the side of negative (Russia is evil, undemocratic and lacks freedom) and in Russia they erred on the side of positive (everything is champagne and roses in the good old USA, where roads are paved with gold).

Speaking of gold... The Gold Train that is.

"Look," I said. "I am kind of tired after my overnight flight and a whole day of excitement in Moscow. I'll be heading back to my hotel now to get a good night sleep. I'll see you tomorrow, bright and early, at the train station. You must promise that you'll lock the door very carefully and won't let

anyone in! Tomorrow, come straight to the station and we'll discuss what to do about these threats on the train. Deal?"

"Deal!" Svetlana sounded relieved.

Back at the hotel, despite being exhausted, I couldn't get the Gypsy's warning and Svetlana's clouded face out of my mind. But, I reminded myself, if I wanted to be in good shape tomorrow, I would need a good night's rest. What was the point in worrying about something I couldn't change? Tomorrow we'll discuss everything on the train. Till then, I set aside all extraneous thoughts, took a nice, hot shower and had some chamomile tea with honey. Then I tucked myself into bed and fell asleep almost immediately.

The alarm woke me up at six and I promptly put on my clothes, gulped up some coffee, picked up my overnight bag and took a taxi to the Leningradsky Train Station. *Sapsan*, the futuristic high-speed train, was leaving to St. Petersburg at seven fifteen. I waited for Svetlana on the platform until five to seven. When she didn't show, I started getting concerned.

Something urged me to contact her immediately. Except... Between sightseeing, the Gold Train story and Svetlana's death threats, I forgot to buy a local cell phone. I dashed to the nearest booth selling pre-paid cell phones, paid and quickly dialed her home number. No answer. I dug out her cell phone number and dialed that, too. It went straight to the message. Perhaps, she was in no reception zone? That at least meant she was on her way. Relieved, I left a brief message that I was waiting for her on the platform and returned to my vigil.

The last boarding call.

I took out my ticket. It seemed clear Svetlana wasn't going to make it. Was she stuck in traffic? Did she oversleep? And should I go without her?

That was problematic. I didn't know anyone in St. Petersburg, except the lady to whom I was supposed to pass Uncle Boris' golden package. But as I understood, that lady was quite old. She could be indisposed, or not very friendly, or in no condition to show me around. For this trip, I counted on Svetlana. She was to be my connection, my pass to all the places I was longing to explore. Besides, we were supposed to look into evidence she uncovered in St. Petersburg. How could I possibly do all that without her?

I stared at the ticket. First class wasn't cheap and it was extremely tempting to simply jump on the train. Technically, I could go by myself. Svetlana would call me later in St. Petersburg. She knew my hotel, and besides, she could always catch another train and join me later. Why should I change my plans if she was so irresponsible? I didn't really know her much; after all, I've only just met her yesterday.

You do know her, another voice objected. *You know, she in fact, is very responsible. So, if she hasn't shown up, something happened. It also means that she may need your help.* Obliging, into my mind drifted the Gypsy's warning. Then I recalled the death threats.

"Ready to board?" asked the train conductor, holding out her hand for my ticket.

I looked at the ticket, then at the conductor, then at the train. And made my decision.

"Thanks," I said, "but I've changed my mind. Some other time, perhaps." The conductor shrugged her shoulders, eying me with, *ah, it's one of those crazy Americans*, look on her face. The next thing I knew, the slick and beautiful high-speed train, something I was really looking forward to experiencing, took off without me. I gave its disappearing rear a final, longing glance and reluctantly headed back through the station and onto the street. I caught a taxi and gave the driver Svetlana's address.

"It better be good, Svetlana," I murmured to myself. "You owe me big time, my dear Russian friend." And then, another thought struck: *the Gypsy said I would miss my St. Petersburg train.* A chill went through my body. What else might she be right about? All of a sudden, I was truly worried.

Oh, just stop it, Jade! Clearly, it's nothing more than a simple coincidence! I tried to talk myself into calming down, but something unspoken nagged and nagged somewhere next to my heart, all the way to Svetlana's place.

It took the taxi over half an hour to navigate all the traffic jams of central Moscow, but when I was on the verge of losing my patience we finally arrived.

I entered the inner courtyard of Svetlana's building. The normally deserted space turned out to be full of people. There was a police car with a couple of uniformed officers. At that moment, another police car arrived, its siren on. Two more policemen stepped out of it and headed towards the building.

What could've happened here? was my first thought. The second thought made me blanch. All of a sudden, I urgently needed to get to the source of this disturbance and started elbowing my way through the crowd. The area was already sealed and I couldn't get any closer, but I knew right away that something was terribly wrong. The newly arriving captain was giving orders, but I wasn't looking at him. My eyes were glued to the motionless form lying haplessly by the building entrance. Svetlana!

My eyes stinging, I ducked under the police tape and headed straight for the captain, who must have been in charge of this investigation.

"Hey, where do you think you are going?" said a uniformed police sergeant, blocking my way.

"I am a friend of the victim and I have important information," I whispered, trying not to break down.

"Pavel," nodded the captain. "Let her through."

"Thank you," I said, my lips trembling...and then, I couldn't hold it any longer.

The captain looked at me and led me to Svetlana's apartment and into Svetlana's tiny kitchen, where he put a kettle on the stove and took two cups out of a cabinet. Watching him go through the same routine Svetlana performed just last night brought a fresh round of stinging to my eyes. The captain found some tea leaves and poured water into my cup.

"My name is Captain Davidenko," he said, handing me the cup.

"Thanks," I said gratefully. "I am Jade Snow."

"So, what did you want to tell me?"



Chapter 4

I sipped my tea, thinking how much could I tell this guy? The previous day's events went through my mind: a day in Moscow with Svetlana, the Gold Train story, the Gypsy's dire predictions and Svetlana's death threats.

I summed him up appraisingly: fish-like, almost transparent gray eyes, calm and steady; light hair, not blond, but rather very light brown; neither tall, nor short, neither skinny, nor fat. An average, non-descript appearance, the kind you won't notice in the crowd, a nice guy, reliable and reasonably intelligent.

"I don't know where to begin," I said, throwing a searching glance around the familiar kitchen.

"Begin where it's comfortable for you," said Captain Davidenko reassuringly, taking out some note paper and a pen.

"All right," I nodded, squirming in my kitchen chair.

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

"Um...do you mind if we move to the living room? This chair is a bit uncomfortable."

I felt him mentally lifting his eyes to the ceiling, as if to say, "God, why do I have to deal with one of those fickle Americans?" But I was okay with that. My plan was that we would move to the living room and when he wasn't looking, I'd retrieve Svetlana's Gold Train notes from the hiding place she showed me yesterday.

"*Ladno*," he said, nodding. "Living room it is."

We sat at the dining table, me - sipping tea, him - taking his notes. I told him about how Svetlana and I met, about the Gold Train and about our trip to St. Petersburg, for which Svetlana failed to show up. While telling the story, I was throwing surreptitious glances around, trying to figure out how to create a long enough distraction to get to Svetlana's notebook. He didn't seem to notice and kept diligently writing down everything I said.

"If that's all," he finally said, "I thank you for all your help. And you'll excuse me, I have to get back downstairs."

"No," I shook my head vigorously, "this is not all. There is much more."

"More?" He said doubtfully. "Okay, I am listening."

I knew I couldn't stall much longer. I needed to start telling him the real story.

"Captain," I said, "before I left yesterday, Svetlana said that she'd been receiving death threats warning her to drop the Gold Train investigation, or else. She was afraid. Before leaving last night, I made her promise that she'd lock and bolt the door and would not let anyone in."

"Do you know if she had registered a complaint with the police about these threats?"

"She told me that the police didn't take it seriously, thinking it was a prank."

"Right," he nodded. "But are *you* positive it wasn't a prank?"

That was a good question. Was I? I recalled Svetlana's scared face when she showed me the death threats.

"I can't be one hundred percent sure," I responded slowly, "but I think it's for real. I have a gut feeling that those people are serious." I stopped at that because, for obvious reasons, I wasn't going to tell him about the Gypsy, nor was I planning on disclosing where Svetlana's Gold Train notes were.

Ever since the Stepford, USA story, my distrust of law enforcement ran deep, whether it was American or not.

On the surface, this guy seemed straight as an arrow, but there was no way of knowing for sure, was there? Besides, Svetlana seemed skeptical of the Russian police, so why should I trust them more than she did? What if he was as corrupt as the Stepford cops I had the unfortunate displeasure of meeting?

Meanwhile, Captain Davidenko stopped writing and looked me in the eye.

“I see,” he said. “Is there anything else you want to add to this?”

“No.” I hesitated for just a split second before shaking my head. Did he notice? I hoped not. “I think that’s about it.”

I was getting desperate. I really needed to be alone in this room for at least thirty seconds. I knew exactly where to look for the notebook, but I couldn’t do it in his presence. I was convinced that those who killed Svetlana would be back for it.

Why didn’t they try to obtain it before? Good question. Perhaps they tried, but someone spooked them? However, I knew they’d be back for sure. There were only two options: tell Captain Davidenko about it and safeguard the notebook that way, or steal it and hide it where only I could reach it. I definitely preferred the latter, but so far, I wasn’t able to come up with an excuse to be left alone in the room. In despair, I mentally lifted my eyes to the ceiling and asked God for help, “Please God, let him be distracted by someone so I could get to Svetlana’s notebook.” At that very moment, there was a knock on the door.

“Comrade Captain,” I heard the sergeant’s voice.

“Yes?” He got up, stepped out of the apartment and engaged in a hushed exchange with the sergeant.

Tiptoeing quickly and silently across the room, I opened Svetlana’s desk. Next, I inserted my index finger between the boards, like Svetlana had done yesterday, and pried open the small secret drawer, trying to make no noise. I felt for the notebook with my hand. Just like yesterday, it was taped to the ceiling of the drawer. I gripped it as hard as I could and yanked it towards me with all my might. The sticky tape being ripped made what seemed like a deafening noise, causing all the blood drain from my heart. I froze, listening and praying no one noticed.

The captain and the sergeant were still talking as if nothing happened. I breathed a huge sigh of relief, hid the notebook in my bag and promptly sat back in my chair. And that’s when I noticed that I broke my nail, which was hanging by the thread on my scraped and bleeding index finger. I just intended to lick the blood off, when Captain Davidenko returned. I quickly hid the finger behind my back.

“I thank you for your testimony,” he said. “But the evidence that has surfaced so far indicates that the victim was shot as a result of an armed robbery gone wrong. When she exited her apartment this morning the robber, reportedly of Chechen nationality, was waiting by the entrance. When she resisted, he shot her. A witness saw him ripping gold earrings off her and searching her body for valuables. When the criminal noticed the witness, he quickly grabbed the victim’s purse and overnight bag and sprinted away. We have the perpetrator’s description and are currently on his trail. We’ll let you know when something surfaces. It seems an open and shut case, but if you remember anything else, please give me a call.”

With these words, he handed me his card and threw the door open, waiting for me to vacate the apartment.

Obediently, I headed for the exit, but paused in the doorway. “Captain Davidenko,” I said. “I think you are making a huge mistake. This is not a simple robbery. I feel it in my gut.”

“Terrific,” he said in a manner which for this man was the closest it would ever get to a sarcasm. “And what do you want me to do with your gut feeling? File it together with evidence into the case? Present it in court? Or report it to my boss?”

He paused and gave me a probing look. “Unless you are not telling me everything?” I held his glance, with some difficulty. What could I say, the man *was* perceptive. And perhaps I was wrong not to trust him with more? I had mixed feelings about this and decided that I could always go back and talk to him...should I change my mind later.



Chapter 5

Back in my hotel room, I took a hot bath that helped me get back to my senses. Then the evening came and it got worse again. The Gypsy's prediction and the last night's conversation with Svetlana kept replaying in my mind. With it, came guilt. If only I was more attentive to what the Gypsy said, if only I took the death threats more seriously! I could have asked Svetlana to stay at my hotel, or I could have stayed with her in her apartment!

And what would that accomplish - a new, reasonable thought drifted into my mind - except making me a target along with her? No, that wasn't a very good solution and I hardly could have helped her that way. But now I could at least try and help with the investigation into her death.

I went to bed absolutely exhausted, but my sleep was strewn with nightmares in which I was chased by some wild-looking Chechens, and Russian cops laughed me in the face in response to my complaints.

I woke up in sweat and having gulped up a cup of cold water, dialed Captain Davidenko with trembling hands.

"It's Jade Snow, the witness from yesterday Svetlana's...um... murder," I said.

"How can I help you?" he responded.

"I am just calling to see if you've found anything new. And whether you've changed your mind about the robbery?"

"Not really," he said impatiently. "All our findings have confirmed the robbery version of the events."

"That's a pity," I said, utterly disappointed. It occurred to me that Svetlana was right and Russian cops really weren't good at their job. This guy didn't even bother checking out my version of events; he was completely and stubbornly stuck on that bogus armed robbery story, whether it made sense or not!

"Look," he said shortly. "I appreciate your concern, but we are professionals here and know what we are doing. I would advise you to leave this to us, go back to your sightseeing, or to whatever it is you came here to do, forget about the whole thing and let us handle the investigation!"

Wow! That's what I called being brutally rebuffed. I hung up and stormed out of the hotel in an extremely foul mood. I wasn't excited to be in Moscow any more, just lost, angry and confused. I was convinced that Svetlana's death wasn't due to a random mugging. Moreover, there was definitely a connection to the Gold Train. But no one would believe me and I knew no one in this country, except the woman, who was killed yesterday.

Furious and miserable, I wandered the streets of Moscow aimlessly. But today was nothing like the exciting sightseeing tour Svetlana arranged for me on the day of my arrival. I walked past the landmarks we had visited with her, yet seeing places where we laughed so happily just a couple of short days ago made me feel more and more miserable. That's the cafe where Svetlana and I had a fabulous cup of coffee, and this is a cool medieval museum where we'd stopped, and this is where we boarded the palatial Moscow Metro the other day. The more of the familiar landmarks I stumbled upon the worse I felt.

Exhausted of seeing reminders of good times with Svetlana and desperate to get my mind off her tragic death, I made a sharp right into a quiet side alley, away from the always noisy Tverskaya Street, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Finally, I was in a place I didn't recognize. With some strange, dark pleasure, I meandered deeper and deeper into the narrow, gloomy alleys I've never seen before. I left into another alley, equally devoid of people, a right onto a side street, followed by another turn into an even darker and more desolate little alley. It felt strangely good to be away from the noise and traffic, away from painful reminders of my late friend. I wandered for a while and then, at last, woke up from my stupor, realizing that I managed to get lost in this expansive city of eleven million people.

I was in a large courtyard surrounded by old, imposing buildings and right across the street from me was a deserted park. I started walking towards it, hoping to find someone to ask for directions back into the comforting bustle of the city center.

I thought I saw someone's shadow ahead and lengthened my stride. My purse, which during my travels was usually placed securely under my left arm, kept getting in my way and slowed me down, so I switched it to my right hand, swinging it freely with every step.

I crossed the narrow road and stepped into the park alley, attempting to catch another glimpse of the human form I saw earlier, when all of a sudden two men wearing face masks sprang out of the nearby brush and attacked me. One grabbed me and held me down, while another attempted to pry my purse out of my hand. I was stunned for only a second. Then my long-brewing, unexpressed anger took over.

What? *They* just killed my friend and now *they* are attacking me? Who exactly were *they*? And what connection, if any, these two particular attackers might have had to Svetlana's death? I had no idea, but such insignificant details weren't about to stop me. It was time for action and I was simply furious. I'll show *them*!

With a war cry of the Apache Indians, I kicked one of the attackers with my heavy-duty walking boot where it hurts most (thank you, Columbia Footwear!) As he doubled over, howling, I prepared to use my yogic training to slither out of the second attacker's grip, when apparently sensing it, he painfully twisted my arm back and upwards as a preventive measure. Meanwhile, the second attacker was coming back to his senses way too quickly and I realized that my outlook was rather gloomy.

As I was preparing to go down fighting, something changed. All of a sudden, my attackers looked alarmed. I noticed a man who came out of nowhere and charged in our direction. The next second, he sent the rogue, who was twisting my arm, spinning into the asphalt with a well-positioned blow.

I exhaled, straightening out my numb arm, and turned to my savior to thank him, but he was already engaged in close combat with the second attacker who had just recovered from my kick. But my rescuer sent him another well-positioned blow. The man gasped and holding on to his reddened cheek, turned around and deserted the battlefield in a hurry, followed by his limping accomplice.

My rescuer turned to me, breathing heavily, sweat glistening on his brow. His lip was bloody, but he was smiling with the sexiest smile I've ever seen.

"Are you okay?" he said.

"I am fine." I gave him a return smile of gratitude. "I want to thank you for saving me!"

"It's nothing." He shrugged with the same smile and a twinkle in his absolutely gorgeous blue eyes. "I am just glad I got here on time."

"Yes, you certainly did," I said, grinning back at him like an idiot.

"By the way, my name is Alexei," my handsome rescuer said.

"I'm Jade," I echoed.

"Pleasure to meet you, Jade."

"You have blood on your lip," I said, shaking off the spell and reaching for a tissue in my bag. I wiped off the blood and rinsed his lip with bottled water I always carried in my purse. He allowed me to perform the whole procedure and as I leaned close, his scent and these amazingly bright blue eyes made my head spin.

I threw out the tissue into a nearby trash bin and said to hide my embarrassment, “Um... can I buy you a cup of tea or coffee? I think we both could use some. This is the least I can do.”

“Sure,” he nodded. “I know just the place, right around the corner.”

We walked through the park and bending the corner, emerged onto a lively street lined with cafes and restaurants. I still couldn’t get over how deathly quiet and deserted the alley was so near a major street. Moscow was indeed the city of contrasts: noisy and quiet, in your face and retrospective, old and new – all at once.

My gallant rescuer held the door for me as we entered a small café. We found a quiet table and ordered tea and sandwiches.

“So...you are from America?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Your Russian is excellent.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“So, what brings you here?”

“You mean to Moscow, or to that alley?”

He smiled, “Both, I guess.”

I took a long sip of tea, considering how much I could tell him. The cafe was cozy and quiet, the tea warmed me up and calmed me down. I gazed at this gorgeous man sitting next to me, into his steady eyes, at his wonderfully reassuring smile, at his broad shoulders and muscular arms and I wanted not only to tell him everything, I had a strong urge to crawl into the security of his embrace and hide from all the events that I’ve become a part of in just a few short days.

At this point, he was the only person I knew here. He saved me from those rogues who tried to mug me in broad daylight; he was handsome, honest, reliable. I wanted to know him better and I desperately wanted to share my theories, suspicions and conclusions with anyone who’d listen. I was hoping he would, since no one else did.

And so, the floodgates opened. I told him everything about Svetlana and the Gold Train, about the Gypsy and Svetlana’s death threats, about our trip to St. Petersburg that never happened just like the Gypsy predicted, and about Svetlana’s murder, which I believed was connected to the Gold Train. The only thing I didn’t mention, for reasons I couldn’t quite grasp, was Svetlana’s notebook.

By the time I finished, I felt as if an immense load was lifted off my shoulders.

“That’s quite a story!” he said, shaking his head.

“Isn’t it?”

“So, what are your plans?” he asked.

“I suppose I’ll have to conduct an independent investigation into Svetlana’s death, since the authorities don’t seem interested. The story of my life,” I said, recalling my previous adventures, as a strange sense of *déjà vu* made me shudder. “It’s not the first time that I have to conduct an independent investigation into a crime that authorities conveniently ignore or, worse, are a part of.”

Alexei gave me a long, strange look that I was unable to read.

“Listen,” he said. “I have a vacation coming up. As a matter of fact, it starts in a couple of days. I just need to go on a quick business trip. If you can wait just two short days, I am all yours. I’ll help you with your investigation. I know my way around, I know local customs, besides,” he sized me up with those incredible blue eyes and chuckled, “the way you tend to get in trouble I think you’ll need a bodyguard.”

I felt a tingling sensation of warmth spreading through my veins.

“A...are you sure?” I said, not quite believing my luck. “Don’t you have plans for your vacation? Don’t you have something else to do?”

“Of course, I do,” he said lightly. “But plans are made to be broken. Besides,” he added seriously, “I think, right now, it’s more important that I help *you*.”

“So, does that mean you believe my story?” I asked quietly.

“I do,” he said simply.

I was still incredulous. “You don’t think I am some crazy American with some crazy tale that has no bearing on reality?”

He laughed. “Crazy American – maybe, crazy story – perhaps. But those were real attackers and they didn’t behave like muggers either. My instinct is telling me there is something more to this story than meets the eye. And if that police captain didn’t believe you, then he is just dumb.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Handsome, noble and smart! And doesn’t mind helping me. Clearly, I’ve struck gold!

For the first time since last morning I felt like things were going in the right direction. The gloom and doom cast by Svetlana’s death somewhat dissipated and I was starting to feel like my old self again.

“So, I’ll see you in two days then,” I murmured, grinning happily. “Just as well, I did promise to deliver a gift from Grandma Anastasia’s old friend. Silly really. This friend, Boris Goncharov - Uncle Boris, as I called him when I was little - could’ve just as easily FedEx’ed it, but he’s old, you know, so I figured why not indulge him for old times’ sake.”

As I finished these words, Alexei again gave me an unfathomable look and I blushed, thinking that my tongue was getting really untied around him. I shouldn’t burden him with all that silly stuff about Uncle Boris. Of course, he was too polite to say anything...

Or perhaps, his look meant something else? There weren’t too many people I couldn’t read, but Alexei seemed more and more like an enigma and I was starting to wonder: what was really hiding behind this sexy and self-assured exterior?

I was about to ask him why he looked at me like this... when he said in a velvety baritone, “I can’t wait to see you again.” He reached for my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. At his touch, my heart skipped a beat and I promptly forgot my question.

After that, Alexei took me back to my hotel. In the lobby, I extended my hand to shake his, instead, he took mine and kissed it. My lips parted all by themselves and I gave a slight gasp, nothing more than a whisper, as an excruciatingly sweet electric shock passed through my body when his lips touched my skin. Flushed and flustered, I said goodbye and we parted, having agreed to meet again in two days.



Chapter 6

Attempt number two! Again, I set my eyes on a trip to St. Petersburg, while awaiting Alexei's return. After all, I did promise to deliver that parcel from Uncle Boris. Besides, it wouldn't hurt to do some additional research in Russia's northern capital. I packed my bag and bought a ticket, this time not for *Sapsan*, but for an overnight express.

The other first class seat in the sleeper compartment was taken by a kindly older lady, who was telling me about her daughter marrying a wonderful guy and a successful St. Petersburg architect. She was coming to visit them, and they sent her a first class ticket (how very nice of them), otherwise, she could've never afforded it.

The lady, whose name was Natalia Vasilyevna, told me that she was a retired teacher - Russian language and literature - and showed me pictures of her grandchildren together with family pets, followed by the photos of her daughter and son-in-law and the images of the rest of her extended family. Judging by the pictures, they were a good-looking and happy family. I looked at the photos distractedly, thinking how much I missed Lara and Lily, and of course, Paul.

We made our beds and as I was getting ready to turn in, she reached for her bag and took out a stack of books to read.

"See, my son-in-law wrote this," she said, proudly showing me one of the books in her stack. The book was entitled, *The Old Treasures of the Russian Church Architecture*.

To be polite, I flipped through the book, which contained photos and descriptions of various old churches and monasteries. I returned the book to the stack, while Natalia Vasilyevna made herself comfortable on her bunk bed, opened a novel, perched a pair of half-moon glasses on top of her nose and immersed herself in reading.

I decided to take the cue from her and reached inside my bag for Svetlana's black leather notebook, which I didn't risk leaving at the hotel. Because of all the mind-boggling events of the past couple of days, I never got a chance to even glimpse its contents and now it occurred to me that I should use this rare opportunity of peace and quiet to try and read it. I skimmed through pages, which contained a lot of numbers and mysterious letters. None of them rang a bell. About to give up, I noticed that one of the pages was folded, so I opened it and read:

Accts wrong t out c or bur Bkl ~ some bw M & SP

I re-read the mysterious phrase three times, and then it hit me. Of course! We did talk about it with Svetlana when she showed me whereabouts of the black book. This should read: "Accounts are wrong that all of the treasure was taken out of the country or buried in Lake Baikal. At least some of it is hidden between Moscow and St. Petersburg."

Great, but where? My eyes scrolled down to the bottom of the page and peered at the strange numbers and abbreviations scribbled by my lost friend:

St Dob 100 - 3 l r r st o mon ch 2 d l

I frowned. Whatever she was trying to communicate here, she completely lost me. I returned the black book back into my bag, deciding that there would be time to decipher Svetlana's code later. Yawning, I suddenly realized how tired I was.

"You are young and should get your beauty rest," spoke Natalia Vasilyevna with a teacher's authority. "Me - I have trouble sleeping at my age. Reading is my only cure." She turned off the compartment's lights and switched on her night light instead.

"Good night," I said, making myself comfortable in the starched linens of my bunk bed.

I woke up to the rhythmic rocking, just as the train was approaching St. Petersburg and the gray light of an early morning streamed into the compartment's window. No wonder it felt so cozy despite the morning chill. While I was asleep, Natalia Vasilyevna added an extra blanket on top of mine.

"Good morning," she said. "Sleep well?"

"Not too bad," I admitted, stretching.

"I got you some tea." And she pointed at the glass of amber liquid in a traditional Russian silver holder, which was part of the service provided by the Russian trains. Next to it on the table was a jar of buckwheat honey and a travel tin with homemade cookies.

I sipped tea and munched on a cookie, imagining that I was back in my childhood, traveling through Russia with my beloved Grandma Anastasia. I felt comfortable with this woman and it occurred to me that I could really trust her.

Meanwhile, Natalia Vasilyevna started packing and I helped her collect all of her books. As I did, an inspired idea came to me. When she turned away, I quickly reached into my own bag and added to the bottom of her stack one more book, bound in black leather. Then, I helped put the entire stack back into her bag.

Natalia Vasilyevna's whole clan - her smiling daughter, good natured, bespectacled son-in-law and laughing grandchildren - came to greet her in St. Petersburg. She introduced me to her daughter, whose name was Olga, and to her son-in-law, by the name of Kirill, and they invited me to stop by any time. She made me promise that if I needed anything, absolutely anything, I'd give her a call. I carefully tucked their phone number and address into my purse and caught a taxi to visit Uncle Boris's friend.

Turned out, she lived in an old, stately building with Atlases supporting the entrance, located in the heart of the historic district, just a few blocks from the Nevsky Prospekt and within walking distance to the Hermitage.

"Jade Snow to see Ms. Golitsina," I announced to the important-looking security guard.

He nodded. "She's expecting you. Second floor to the right."

The woman who ushered me inside the dramatic living room, with extremely tall and ornate ceilings, was old to be sure, but still sharp and well preserved. She was dressed in a real Chinese silk gown exquisitely embroidered with Oriental designs. The quality was exceptional, such that you can't find nowadays. The apartment was decorated with expensive antiques and lots of Oriental silk: silk tablecloths, silk draperies, silk wall hangings and even a silk chandelier. It was a kingdom of silk.

"You have exquisite taste," I said. "I haven't seen this many gorgeous Oriental things in one place for a long time."

"Thank you," said the woman, obviously pleased. "Many of these were collected when my family had to emigrate from Russia after the Bolshevik revolution," she explained. Then she checked herself. "But I shouldn't bore you with all this..."

She extended her delicate palm with age spots, but flawlessly groomed and with a large sapphire and diamond ring adorning her ring finger. "Vera Golitsina."

"Jade Snow," I said, touching her thin hand just slightly, for fear of breaking it. "I brought you a hello from Boris Goncharov in New York."

“*Charmant*,” said the old lady in nasal French. Then, she smoothly switched to Russian. “Oh, dear, dear Count Goncharov. How is he?”

“He’s fine,” I said. “He also asked me to bring you this.” And I handed her Uncle Boris’s golden package.

“Oh, thank you so much,” said Vera Golitsina, her eyes lighting up. “I was so hoping to get it soon!”

She set the package aside without opening it.

“So, you are the granddaughter of dear Anastasia?”

“That’s right.”

“Oh, dear, dear Anastasia. She was one of my very best friends, did you know?” she uttered confidentially. “Although, we haven’t seen each other ever since I moved back to Russia and she, of course, stayed in America, to be with you. It was hard to say goodbye, but I missed my Motherland so much...”

“So, you also lived in the USA?” I asked. “I had no idea.”

“Oh, yes,” responded the old lady with a vague smile. “We were all very good friends and members of the American Chapter of the Russian Royal Society - Anastasia, Count Goncharov and I. Didn’t your Grandma tell you?”

“Um... I really...” I started. In truth, I recalled that Grandma did try to tell me something. But I inherited my progressive parents’ condescending attitude towards the Royal Pain Society, as they called it. It was never discussed at home and the relief was universal when Grandma finally parted with it. And now, as I was trying to remember any details, I drew a blank.

But why not indulge the old lady? It’s nothing off my back! After all, she knows better what kind of relationship she had with my Grandma Anastasia. They were friends and contemporaries, weren’t they?

I smiled. “Of course, Grandma Anastasia told me a lot about you and your friendship! What a pity you didn’t get a chance to see her after you moved back to Russia.”

As I talked, the old lady watched me very closely, then nodded approvingly and smiled. I got a vague feeling that she may have known, or at least suspected, that I wasn’t telling the truth, but for some reason was happy with my answer. Somewhere, deep in my mind a tiny question mark appeared and started growing. Then, my eyes drifted and stopped on Uncle Boris’s package. I wondered why didn’t my hostess open it? Didn’t want to get distracted while entertaining a guest, or didn’t want me to see what was inside?

“But you are probably tired,” said Vera Golitsina quickly, noticing my eyes on the mysterious package. “First of all, make yourself comfortable. How long are you staying?”

“Two days,” I said.

“Oh, that’s marvelous! This is going to be your room.” She pointed at the door, left of the living room.

“Thanks,” I said, “but I don’t want to inconvenience you. I should stay at the hotel.”

“Nonsense,” she responded. “Why should you stay at a hotel when I have everything you need here?”

I didn’t quite know how to respond to that, so I just blinked.

“We, Russians, are very hospitable,” she went on, ushering me into my new room. “You’ll like it here, I promise!”

I thought, why not? She was an old family acquaintance after all.

“Make yourself at home,” she added with a welcoming smile. “Tea will be ready in fifteen minutes.”

I set my travel bag on the ornate parquet floor, next to a comfortable-looking bed with a tall mahogany headboard. By the window, draped with flowing white curtains and overlooking a lovely square, I noticed a small writing desk and a couple of inviting chairs with a coffee table and a torchiere in the corner. I opened an exquisitely carved wardrobe and hung my coat, cashmere sweater and travel slacks. Next, I changed into an oversized cotton sweater and comfortable jeans, and joined her for tea at the round teak table covered with an elegant tablecloth and set for two.

“So Jade, what brings you to Russia?” Vera Golitsina asked, pouring me some tea into a delicate china cup.

I considered my response. She seemed like a very nice old woman, hospitable and probably trustworthy, but why should I burden her with the Gold Train story? It’s enough that Svetlana already paid for it with her life and that I told the whole story, apart from the notebook bit, to Alexei. Clearly, there was danger involved and I didn’t want this genteel lady sitting across from me at the table to get in the middle of it.

“I always wanted to see Russia,” I said, “the land of my ancestors on Grandma Anastasia’s side. *Time* magazine wants me to write a series of articles about Russia old and Russia new. So, here I am.”

She contemplated me for a moment. “You know what, something just occurred to me! How would you like to see something of Russia old and Russia new, all in one place and at the same time?”

“Sure,” I said. “I am open to all kinds of interesting things. That’s what I am here for - to explore Russia and write about it. As a matter of fact, I am hoping to come back here again. If my editors like what I write, perhaps I can make Russia one of my regular destinations.”

“Russia your regular destination?” said the old lady excitedly. “Oh, that would be just marvelous!”

“Yes,” I nodded, a little surprised at her super-enthusiastic reaction. “That *would* be fun.”

“Right,” she nodded. “I think you’ll really like what I want to show you.”

“Okay,” I said. “What do you have in mind?”

“See,” she explained, “I am Co-chair of the Russian Royal Society. It includes members of the Russian royalty and the noble men and women.”

“Royal Society – here, in Russia?” I said. “I thought that Russia didn’t like royalty. Wasn’t it wiped out after the 1917 Revolution?”

“Not really. Some perished during the Civil War, but most left Russia and emigrated to Europe, America, and even Asia. But many of us returned to our Motherland after the Communist plague was finally destroyed!”

“Riiiiight...” I said, curious about the intensity of hatred in the old woman’s voice.

Realizing that she might have overdone it, Vera Golitsina flashed me a charming smile and added, “Didn’t your Grandma Anastasia tell you her own story?”

“Sure, she did,” I nodded. “But I have to confess, I was young at the time and wasn’t paying too much attention.”

“Sounds familiar.” She gave me a wink. “My grandkids were the same way, until they reached a certain age. Then all of a sudden, grandma, tell us about Tsar Nicholas, tell us about the royal balls, tell us about court life... Where did the interest come from! And now, they are ardent supporters of the Royal Society.”

“So, your ancestors were members of the Royal Court?” I asked, more to be polite.

“Yes,” the old lady responded proudly. “My full name is Her Highness, Duchess Vera Golitsina. The Dukes Golitsin were close allies and staunch supporters of the Russian throne for many years. Both my mother and grandmother were ladies-in-waiting to the Empress. In fact,” she sat up proudly in her chair, “my grandmother was first lady-in-waiting to Empress Alexandra.”

“I had no idea,” I murmured – again, with a forced, but polite smile.

“Yes,” she continued. “But you surely know your own family history?”

I wrinkled my forehead, honestly trying to remember all those fairy tales Grandma Anastasia told me when I was little, all that grand ball - prince charming nonsense young girls are supposed to like. I wasn't like other girls and a trip to Disney World would have never made me jump for joy. But I'd be sure to have stars in my eyes if I was promised an adventure at some remote and mysterious place you could hardly find on the map.

“Um...” I said, as nothing particularly interesting from Grandma's stories came to me.

Vera Golitsina laughed. “No need to think that hard, you'll get wrinkles on your pretty forehead. Let me enlighten you.”

“Okay,” I answered sheepishly, preparing for a tedious lecture on my ancestral roots.

“Your Grandma Anastasia's full name was Her Highness, Countess Anastasia Rosanova. Her family was very prominent at court and she had royal blood. Which means, my dear, that you too have royal blood, and that you could even be in contention for the Russian throne, if a dozen or so direct descendants were unable to fulfill their duties!” She finished this proclamation with a broad smile, as if she just offered me an oversized piece of chocolate mousse cake.

“Um...wow!” I said without particular enthusiasm.

“If Russia was a monarchy, of course,” she added as an afterthought.

“Of course...” I said, unable to hide the irony in my voice.

But Vera Golitsina didn't seem to notice. “Yes!” she went on enthusiastically. “This means that I can immediately introduce you to our Royal Society and that you can attend tonight's Annual Grand Ball! Isn't that exciting!”

“Wh... What ball?” I said, getting alarmed at such unexpected turn of events. I didn't come here for any balls. I wasn't really ready for any balls. I came here to explore, write, and find answers. My friend was just killed. I had a mystery of the Gold Train to solve. I certainly wasn't in a mood for dressing up like a Barbie Doll and making a fool of myself at some stuffy, old ball!

“Wait,” I said, attempting to be firm, without offending my overly zealous hostess. “Thank you for your hospitality, but I have no time for a ball just now. I need to work. I am here to watch, explore and write, not to...” I stopped, because I didn't know how to tell this nice old lady that I found balls to be a royal waste of time - pun intended.

“I know exactly how you feel,” she nodded, her sharp eyes staring into mine. “But I don't think you'll find our grand ball to be a waste of time. You said that you came here to explore Russia old and Russia new? I promise that you'll find incredible manifestations of both at our ball.

“Many people, both here and abroad,” she continued, “would give anything to be invited. Tickets are sold out six months in advance. I am inviting you to a sold out grand ball at the Menshikov Mansion, one of the most gorgeous restored historic mansions of St. Petersburg! It belongs to Yury Gurevich, one of the richest Russian oligarchs, one of the most successful “New Russians,” as they call them, who is on the *Forbes* world's richest people list. You'll be able to see an incredible array of characters, exquisite décor, a revived unique tradition from times past – something you'll never be able to experience anywhere else. Surely, you won't turn down such unique opportunity?”

I had to agree, the way she put it, I'd be an absolute damned fool to turn it down. But what a crafty old lady! For some reason she really wanted me there. I couldn't exactly say why, but I saw an ulterior motive in her shrewd eyes. Why was she so interested in me? It definitely was more than just famed Russian hospitality. There was something else...

Being such a sucker for mysteries, I wanted to solve this one. What did this old woman, whom I've never seen before in my life and who claims to be my late Grandma's best friend - a claim I, alas, could not verify - want with me? I had to get to the bottom of this!

“You are right,” I said. “This would be a terrific opportunity for me to observe various facets of Russian life. Thank you for the invitation.”

“Wonderful,” she exclaimed excitedly. “Now, we need to find you a suitable gown.”

And before I got the chance to say that I wanted something simple, she added playfully, “You want to look your absolute best for a meeting with your Prince Charming.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it, as it hit me - the Gypsy had said, *you’ll go to a ball, where you’ll meet your Prince Charming.*

This was getting too freaky even for me.



Chapter 7

Next thing I knew, I was inside a lavishly decorated women's apparel store, complete with marble statues and gold sconces, where I was supposed to pick up my ball gown. Salespeople were bending backwards trying to please me and drove me nuts, muttering things like: "This way, Your Highness," or, "Try this on, Countess." I attempted to explain that I was neither Countess, nor Highness, but it seemed my protests had no effect. Exhausted, I finally shut up, resigning to the fact. I went through the motions of trying on a royal gold dress, then a royal purple dress. After a while, I settled on a royal blue dress (the word "royal" seems to be attached to every color here) with low back and simple, elegant lines.

I twirled in front of the mirror, to the salespeople's approving ohs and ahs. I had to admit, the dress fit me like a glove and its color accentuated the blue-green of my eyes, while complimenting my reddish-auburn hair. Now, there was a small matter of the price. My eyebrows shot up when I saw the price tag - \$8,000! That would eat up a good portion of my expense account. Together with the matching high-heeled shoes and a small party purse, it came to \$8,900. But there was nothing to it but to pay up. I've already made a commitment and now I hoped this event would justify the exorbitant expense.

Duchess Vera approved of my new gown. There was another surprise awaiting me – her personal hairdresser, who just finished her hair and was on a standby to do mine. I opted for a simple do, as natural as possible, and breathed a sigh of relief as soon as the ordeal was over.

Then, I dressed and waited for Vera. She came out in an elegant beige silk dress, with gorgeous diamonds around her neck and a mink cape over her shoulders.

"Ah, very good," she gave me a sweeping glance of approval. "But you do need something else."

She reached into her jewelry cabinet and chose a necklace with faceted blue topaz stones set into it. The stones sparkled like a million stars. I caught my breath – the necklace was old and exquisite.

"One more thing," said Vera, opening a Chinese wardrobe and draping my shoulders with a flowing purple cape made out of the finest velvet.

"Thank you," I said, running my hand through the sumptuous fabric of the cape. "It feels wonderful."

"Enjoy!" said Duchess Vera, smiling. "It's pretty light for this season, but not to worry, we'll only have to walk to the car awaiting us at the entrance."

"I'm not afraid of a little bit of cold," I assured her.

"Great!" she concluded, looking me over with a satisfied smile. "In that case, you are ready!"

I peered at myself in the mirror. Gazing back at me was a glamorous high society socialite, straight from Monaco or Hollywood's Red Carpet. The woman in the mirror simply wasn't me.

Vera glowed. "You look exactly like a countess of royal blood should look. Absolutely regal."

I didn't say anything to that. I still wasn't sure what I was doing going to that ball. And now, I felt like I was inside some borrowed body, wearing someone else's dress, \$8,900 hole in my budget notwithstanding.

The Menshikov Mansion dazzled with its grand entrance and enormous crystal chandelier, which sparkled with dozens of blindingly bright lights. We were announced as Her Highness, Duchess Vera Golitsina and Her Highness, Jade Snow, Countess Rosanova. I had a strong urge to laugh, but held the

impulse out of consideration for my hostess, who was positively glowing as she accompanied me up the sweeping marble staircase, as if displaying the most precious jewel in her collection.

Inside the ballroom, where ladies in elegant gowns danced with tuxedo-clad gentlemen to the accompaniment of a live orchestra up on the balcony, Duchess Vera led me to three people standing just inside the entrance. My eyes quickly took in the odd group: a compact, unsmiling man with an oversized hawkish nose and calculating eyes, next to whom was a stiletto-heeled beauty queen in a dazzling golden dress, which in my estimate, cost more than most people make in a year. The woman, who towered over the man, made up for his lack of cheerfulness with the most dazzling smile, to match her dress.

Next to them was a dark haired man with wild-looking black eyes and a wild beard, but dressed in a tux in the spirit of the occasion. The wild-looking man, who obviously belonged in jeans and boots, kept fidgeting with the neck of his dress shirt and lapels of his tux jacket as if attempting to free himself from bondage, which made me wonder what such specimen was doing at this glamorous ball.

“Duchess Golitsina!” The unsmiling man bent at the waist and kissed Vera’s hand. “We are honored. Welcome to our ball!”

“Delighted to be here, Mr. Gurevich,” replied Vera. “Mrs. Gurevich, what a lovely dress!”

“And who is this charming young lady?” asked Yury Gurevich.

“This is my guest, Her Highness, Countess Rosanova, visiting us from New York,” said Vera significantly.

At these words, Yury Gurevich fixed me with a long, penetrating stare.

“It’s a great honor to receive you, Your Highness,” said Mrs. Gurevich with a light curtsy.

I flinched and said, “Jade - please.”

“Jade,” she repeated slowly. “What a beautiful name.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Jade, allow me to introduce you to our guest, Mr. Suleimanov,” said Yury Gurevich. “He’s visiting from the Chechen Republic, in the south of Russia.”

The wild-eyed man gave me a crooked half-smile, half-scowl.

“Pleasure, Mr. Suleimanov,” I said, although the feeling I experienced more resembled repulsion.

“The pleasure is all mine,” said Mr. Suleimanov, and bent to kiss my hand.

My sense of repulsion deepened when his moist, warm lips touched my skin. I clenched my teeth and slipped my hand out of his clutch as quickly as I could.

At that moment, one of the gentlemen on the dance floor approached our little group with a bow. “May I have this dance?” he addressed me. I quickly nodded, glad for the opportunity to get away from the unpleasant encounter.

We danced to the Strauss’s Blue Danube and after that, another gentleman invited me to a tango. When it was over, I was immediately snatched up by another partner, for yet another waltz. After that, came a dance I didn’t recognize, but it was simple enough and my partner danced so well that I managed to get through without major incident. As we danced, my partner of the moment would whisper sweet nothings into my ear, which after a while started getting on my nerves.

Deciding that I’ve had enough dancing and whispering, I made up some sort of excuse and slipped out of my partner’s grasp. After that, I gave the grand ballroom a sweeping glance, hoping to find Duchess Vera. But she was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, in the shadowy corner of the cavernous space, I noticed a conspicuous group of high society beauties clustered around a tall man in a tux.

“Ah, Prince, you must promise me the next waltz,” tweeted one of the young socialites.

Prince, I snorted to myself. How do you like that!

“But Prince, you already promised *me* the waltz,” objected another young woman in a gleaming white dress. The man in a tux, whose face I couldn’t see because his back was turned towards me, whispered something into the woman’s ear. In response, she blushed and fixed him with an adoring smile. Something about how he leaned towards her seemed familiar. I saw this man somewhere, but I wasn’t sure where.

“Yes Prince, and the second tango is mine, remember?” said another beauty, ogling him seductively. The man leaned next to her ear and said something, which caused her to nod enthusiastically.

I’ve definitely seen this back before! I was sure of it!

I started toward the group in order to take a look at his face and solve this mystery once and for all, when I overheard more chattering, “Ah, Prince, I’m charmed,” “Prince, you positively need to come with me and Anna to the concert tomorrow,” “Prince, will you be attending the reception at the Duke’s house on Saturday?” More beauties of all ages were flocking to the mystery man, who was politely nodding to each. I stopped in my tracks. The last thing I wanted was to be swept into the whirlwind of all these society bees buzzing around this guy, as if he was pure honey.

The mystery of the man in a tux could wait, I decided, making an abrupt u-turn to go in search of Duchess Vera. In fact, I thought with alarm, I haven’t seen her ever since our arrival. She didn’t just leave me here all by myself, did she? Or alternatively, perhaps she found a cozier spot somewhere else in this oversized mansion?

Either way, I needed to get away from all these Casanovas and society bees. Perhaps, I’d find Vera in one of the many adjacent rooms? If not, I’d at least explore the building and take a breather. Without further ado, I quietly slipped out of the ballroom and went on with my exploration.

There certainly was no shortage of magnificent, lavishly decorated rooms in this place. I opened a few doors and peaked in. The corridor kept going and going and I felt that I’d either fallen into Alice’s rabbit hole or that I was lost in an ever-expanding *Tardis*.

Finally, I encountered a back stairwell leading to the upper levels. I climbed the stairs and ended up in a much simpler area, which was practically devoid of decorations. The spacious landing was dark. The only streaks of light in this space came from the seams of the large double door, which was solidly shut. I thought that I’ve seen enough and whatever this place was, it wasn’t interesting. Ready to turn back, I suddenly overheard muffled voices coming from behind the closed door.

“...Jade Snow?” a commanding man’s voice asked, speaking Russian with a British accent. “What makes you so sure she’ll agree?”

“Leave it to me,” said the confident voice, which I recognized as Duchess Vera’s. “I am working on it.”

“Okay,” the man’s voice responded. “But make sure she’s ready. Time is of absolute essence!”

“Don’t worry, I am on it,” said Duchess Vera.

“Time to move on to the next topic,” said another man’s voice irritably. That voice I recognized as well. It belonged to the ball’s host, the infamous Russian oligarch, Yury Gurevich.

I felt my cheeks burning from the previous exchange, in which my wonderful hostess and some unknown guy were seemingly manipulating my life behind my back, so I took off my shoes and stealthily tiptoed to the door. Holding my breath, I pressed my ear against it. But they already seemed to be talking about something else.

“...I don’t think it’s going to work,” said unfamiliar man’s voice. “The Chechens are unreliable. I had a run in with one of them just two days ago. They promised full service, but only managed partial. Yet, they demanded full pay, regardless.”

“They didn’t find it?”

“According to them, they were spooked by a witness.”

“Can we trust them in our Great Cause, that’s the question?”

“We are still in need of their brand of... um... expertise. After we are finished with the next stage, then we’ll...deal with the problem.”

“So, what about our promise to give them independence?” piped in another man’s voice.

“What promise? What independence?” Was the mocking response, followed by peals of laughter.

“The notebook must be found,” came the commanding voice, putting an end to the merriment. “If they refuse, tell them, we’ll withhold payment. And if they want anything to do with the gold, they better do what they are told!”

All of a sudden, I felt like a computer search engine tagging key words. Notebook... Chechens... two days ago... spooked by a witness... didn’t find it... gold. If I didn’t know any better, my charming hostess and her High Society friends had a hand in Svetlana’s murder!

Incredulous, I pressed my ear tighter to the door and held my breath, hoping and praying that I was wrong. But they were now talking about some kind of trip that “the custodians needed to take to the monastery.” I exhaled, deciding that I misunderstood the previous exchange.

Still, a big question mark lingered. I did hear them say my name and decided to find out more. Why were they so interested in me? I stood very still, trying to catch the rest of the conversation, when I noticed a shadow creeping silently up the dark stairs. I just barely had enough time to hide behind the antique wardrobe in the corner when a tall man, resplendent in his tux, appeared in my view. He tiptoed very carefully to the door, pressed his ear to it and froze, listening.

I stood in my corner, contemplating the irony. I had to hide from some unknown guy who, it appears, was engaged in the same exact activity I was engaged in just a minute ago. All that was well and good, but I had to figure out what to do next. There was no way I could slip past him unnoticed, meanwhile, my feet were starting to feel the chill of the bare floor, besides, I desperately needed to use the ladies’ room.

Trying to decide whether I should just come up to this intruder, scare the living daylights out of him and, taking advantage of the confusion, make my escape, I looked at him closer. Even in the darkness of the landing something about his athletic silhouette seemed familiar. I was sure it was the same Casanova I’ve seen in action in the ballroom, the one to whom those society bees referred as Prince.

I wondered, what made him abandon his ever-expanding fan club? What kind of agenda caused him to come up to this dark and dusty landing and eavesdrop on a secret meeting, where mysterious clandestine plans were being discussed? As I pondered the strangeness of the situation, the man turned. His face caught a ray of light seeping through the crack in the double door... and my jaw dropped.

It was Alexei, my knight in shining armor, who saved me from the muggers in Moscow! So, that was his business trip. Liar! Holding my shoes and party purse in my left hand, I surreptitiously tiptoed straight behind him and tapped him on the shoulder.

He reacted silently and turned with lightning speed.

A split second later, my right hand was in an iron grip and twisted behind my back. Alexei’s other hand covered my mouth. Simultaneously, he tipped me back forcefully, as if in a tango - the maneuver that subdued me completely. The whole thing happened so abruptly that I swooned, as he captured my breath. I stared straight up into Alexei’s handsome face, now positioned just a few inches above mine. His gorgeous blue eyes registered a momentary shock. I was glad I wasn’t the only one.

“Jade?!” he mouthed and immediately restored me to the proper upright position.

I exhaled and straightened out, trying to get back to my senses. Once my head stopped spinning, I put a finger to my lips and beckoned him to follow me. Alexei, whose face almost immediately snapped back to its usual expression of inscrutable calm, nodded and followed without a word. By the stairs, I

motioned to him to follow me down. He nodded again, silently. What could I say, it was a pleasure doing business with such an intelligent man.

We quietly descended the stairs and found an empty room. When the door closed I put my shoes back on and said, frowning: "What are you doing here?"

Alexei met my blazing gaze. "I could ask you the same question," he said calmly.

"I asked you first."

"I am here on an assignment and if you are not careful, you'll blow my cover."

"Why should I care," I snapped at him, "when apparently everything you told me about your background is a lie?"

"You *should* care, because it concerns you very directly."

"What concerns me directly?" I was starting to lose my patience. It appeared that not only those people behind closed doors were busy deciding my life for me, but this man whom I used to trust, was doing the exact same thing! "Is this another one of your tricks? What game are you playing?"

"No tricks, no games," he said. "Just the truth. If you want to find out who killed your friend, then we need to work together."

I was furious! Turns out he knew all along about Svetlana. Turns out he wasn't sincere when I was aching all over and pouring my heart out to him in that little cafe!

"So, you knew all along," I said, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice. "You just pretended to be my friend in order to worm your way into my confidence! Is that it?"

"Please understand, I..."

"Perhaps, you also staged that mugging to get me to trust you?!" I interrupted heatedly.

I looked him straight in the eye. He met my glance and didn't waiver, but somewhere deep down, behind the calm and confident façade, I read the terrible truth. Yes, it was staged. That was all I needed to know. This man, who I thought was my only friend here, the man I thought could do no wrong, was a fraud, just like my new friend, Vera Golitsina.

I turned on my heel and briskly headed for the exit.

"Jade, wait!" he called after me. I quickened my step and almost ran through the Grand Ballroom, Alexei in hot pursuit.

"Prince Alexei, remember, you promised me the next dance," I heard a coquettish voice. "Don't stray too far."

Something in that phrase made me turn and look back.

"Of course, Countess," responded my lying knight in shining armor, smoothly pausing to address the richly dressed woman and ceremoniously kissing her hand. "How could I forget!"

"Prince Obolensky," said an imposing man in epaulets. "We are counting on you for a nice game of poker at midnight."

I didn't need to listen to the rest of this conversation. Everything was clear! My knight in shining armor was just an illusion - in reality, he was one of these pretentious royals, who all seemed to have some sort of secret agenda!



Chapter 8

More furious than ever, I stormed out of the ballroom and grabbed my velvet cape, just as a liveried lackey opened the front door for me with a formal bow. It was good to breathe in the fresh night air after all that royal stuffiness inside. I decided to take a walk. For about three or four minutes it felt good. In five minutes, the raging fire inside me was all but extinguished by the cold winds blowing from the Neva River. In ten minutes, I could feel the chill through the thin fabric of my dress and light cape; my feet in high heels ached; I still didn't get a chance to go to the ladies room and was generally starting to feel quite miserable. In twenty minutes, my body was trembling like a solitary leaf in the freezing wind.

I should really go back to Vera's place, I thought, my teeth chattering. Must get my stuff and move out of her apartment as soon as possible. I looked around. Not a single taxi. I prepared to walk back to the mansion and ask them to call car service when a slick, black BMW came to a halt next to me and Alexei, resplendent in his tux, jumped out.

"I am very sorry," he started. I turned away from him and started walking in the opposite direction.

"Please get in the car, Jade! You'll catch a cold," he tried again.

"What do *you* care!" I snapped back.

"I *do* care," he said.

I did a double take. Something in his voice wasn't phony, something in it was real. In fact, he sounded quite sincere.

"Please get in the car," he pleaded. "I'll take you anywhere you want to go. And then, I promise I'll leave if you want me to."

I considered my options. Walking all the way back to the mansion? Way too far. Waiting for a taxi here, in this cold? That could be a long and fruitless wait, and I indeed could catch a cold or worse, pneumonia. Getting in the car with this guy? Probably the only option, but could I trust him? I looked again into those magnificent eyes, shimmering like two blue flames in the light of the nearby lantern, and decided to take my chances.

"All right," I said sternly. "You can take me home, but no tricks!"

"No tricks, straight home," he repeated obediently, with a relieved smile.

I started melting, despite myself. After all, it was the same smile that greeted me back in Moscow, the one that made me spill the beans about the Gold Train and Svetlana. This sexy smile made me feel warm and secure. Again, I had an inexplicable and totally crazy urge to get close to this man, to lean on his strong shoulder and hide behind his broad back. *Wake up, Jade*, I chided myself mentally. *What are you doing?* I took a deep breath, willing myself to get back to reality. I am a married woman, with a little child and a husband back home, I reminded myself. After the tragic and surreal events of the past few days, in this country, which at times felt like a magical fairytale, and at times like a confusing nightmare, it was very hard to keep in focus my past life back in New York, which seemed so far and away. *Must think of Lara and Paul... Lara and Paul... Must focus...*

I gave Alexei Vera's address and relaxed in the warmth of the car to a soft, romantic music. Ten minutes later we stopped by the Atlases supporting the entrance into Vera's building. No tricks.

Alexei jumped out and gallantly opened the door for me. I got out of the car and immediately froze again. He helped me to the building entrance and that's when I remembered that I didn't have the key. I peered inside the glass door, but the lights were dimmed in the deserted entry hall where due to the late

hour there was no guard on duty. I pushed the telecom button, but got no answer. Clearly, Duchess Vera wasn't back yet. The chill of the night was really getting to me now and my teeth started chattering again.

"She isn't home yet and I don't have the key," I said miserably.

"These balls usually last till five or six in the morning," explained Alexei. "And Duchess Golitsina is a well-known socialite. She probably won't be back till then."

That wasn't good. Not at all! I was bound to turn into an icicle well before morning. It seemed I had no option but to ask my enemy - the enemy with the sexiest smile I've ever seen - to take me back to that damn mansion. I didn't want to appear as if I depended on him for anything, but...

I already started opening my mouth to ask, when he spoke.

"Look, I realize that we've gotten off on the wrong foot. But you are freezing! Let me help!"

"Wh-what d-do yo-ou s-suggest," I said, moving my tongue with enormous effort.

He took one glance at me and started taking off his tux jacket. "You need to warm up immediately," he said firmly, putting his jacket over my impossibly thin velvet cape.

Actually, what he just said made perfect sense, unless I wanted to freeze to death.

"Please, don't be stubborn. I know just the place. It's warm and there is hot tea, or if you wish, something stronger. I am taking you there!"

His jacket, warmed by his body heat, was doing its magic and I was starting to feel better.

"B...but wh...at about you? You'll freeze!" I said, not being able to tear my eyes off the contours of his muscles visible even through the fabric of his snow-white dress shirt.

"I am hot-blooded." He laughed. "But *you* need to get out of the cold immediately."

"Okay," I agreed. "Let's go."

As he drove, I held my hands to the heating vent, trying to defrost. Alexei turned the heat all the way up and I was starting to feel sleepy.

"So, where are we going?" I said as soon as my teeth stopped chattering.

"To my hotel suite," he responded quietly.

"Hotel suite? Wait, I don't know if I..." I started to protest.

"Relax. I just want to make sure you are all right. I can even leave, if you like, after I settle you down, of course."

"Leave? But where will you go?"

"That's not important. The important thing is to get you comfortable and warm. You really gave me a scare, you know, when you stormed out like that, in these little shoes and hardly wearing anything at all. St. Petersburg's climate is very tough."

I listened to the comforting sound of his voice as my eyes started closing and thought, *why not go to his place - it's warm and comfy... And he'll be there.*

Alexei's hotel suite was indeed cozy and luxurious. I took a long, steamy shower to warm up, changed into a plush robe and made myself comfortable on his oversized sofa. Alexei was busy opening a bottle of red wine. "Drink this, red wine will warm you up."

I drank the dark liquid, enjoying the flow of warmth through my veins. He refilled my glass. I emptied that one too, feeling relaxed and pleasantly tipsy.

Meanwhile, he took out another bottle, this time Kremlevskaya Vodka, and poured some into my glass, and his.

"Vodka opens your blood vessels," he explained. "Drink it to make sure you don't get a cold. Then, you can sleep it off."

I followed his advice and emptied the vodka glass. My head was now swimming, but it was a nice, if a bit disorienting feeling.

“I like your place,” I said with a drunken grin. “It’s very cozy.”

“I am glad you approve. Make yourself comfortable. The bedroom is that way and if you need anything, just call room service and charge it to the room.” He opened the wardrobe door and hung his tux jacket. Then he put on a puffy sports jacket, right over his dress shirt, and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” I asked, moving my tongue with difficulty.

“I told you, you are safe here. You can have a nice sleep in and tomorrow morning I’ll take you back to Vera’s place.”

“Where are *you* going to sleep?” I insisted.

“That’s not important.”

“No, it is important,” I said, and hiccupped. “T...to me. You’ve b...been so nice. And this is your suite. Please don’t g...go. S...stay!”

“Okay,” he said and took off his jacket, remaining again just in his white dress shirt and black tie. “If you like.”

“Yes,” I whispered. “I like that very much.”

He reached for my glass, leaning dangerously close, and filled it again with red wine. His scent was intoxicating, but also, incredibly fresh and cool. I inhaled and closed my eyes, as he sat next to me on the sofa. The wine and vodka made me feel like I was floating in space, space filled with soft music and dimmed lights. Alexei emptied his glass and spoke, his breath tickling my face.

“Would you like to go to bed? I could take the couch.”

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head, which made me even dizzier. But I didn’t care. “Let’s just sit here together.”

He took my hand and cradled it in his strong palm.

“It’s getting warm in here.” He tried to loosen up his tie, but unsuccessfully.

“Let me help you,” I said and sat up on my knees on the sofa.

Despite my drunken state, the tie came off easily enough. After that, for some reason, I decided to help him with his shirt. I unbuttoned it, one button after another, slowly revealing his broad, muscular chest. Then, our lips met of their own accord and the next thing I knew, we were locked in one long, succulent kiss. My head spun faster and every cell ached in delicious anticipation as I opened my robe and let his body embrace mine. The tingling of unexpressed passion was almost unbearable.

He caressed my neck and shoulders, then his lips moved to my breasts. They touched the right nipple and I cried out as electric charge pierced through my body. His tongue slowly circled my nipple, then his lips closed around it and sucked hungrily. I arched my back to meet him fully and his arms wrapped me so tight I could hardly breathe.

Next, the room, the sofa, St. Petersburg – everything disappeared. My eyes closed as my body fell into his rhythm. Jade Snow stopped being - we dissolved into each other. Meanwhile, the ball of primal fire inside us kept growing and growing... And then, the anticipation was too much. We couldn’t hold it any longer and the next moment we both exploded in one single, otherworldly crescendo.

After that, he carried me into the bedroom. In bed, he covered my whole body with tender kisses - breasts, neck, hips, stomach. Then, his arm wrapped protectively around me, we pressed our bodies against each other and fell into a deep and restful sleep.



Chapter 9

My eyes flew open. Through the splitting headache, I recalled the events of last night: the ball, freezing, confused and alone in the cold St. Petersburg night, Alexei coming to the rescue, his hotel suite, lots of wine and vodka, presumably to warm up. Then... then... I felt my ears starting to burn. I couldn't believe what I've done next! It wasn't really like me. I... I loved Paul, didn't I?

"Jade, are you awake?" Alexei's buttery baritone floated into the bedroom and although my eyes were open for the past fifteen minutes, I didn't say anything. Instead, I closed them and pretended to be asleep, frantically going in my mind through different how-to-slip-out-unnoticed scenarios. Maybe he'll just leave and go to do whatever it is he came to do in this city so I could make my escape, I thought hopefully.

He tiptoed to the bed and leaned close to me. His scent drifted into my nostrils, tickling my senses and driving me crazy with desire. It cost me all my self-control to hold it together as I concentrated on breathing as evenly and naturally as possible. I think I passed the test of a sleeping person, because he kissed me on the cheek and quietly shut the bedroom door. I exhaled and sat up. Then, I heard him ordering breakfast.

My plan was to grab my things the moment he stepped out of the room, slip out quietly, catch a cab, get my stuff from Vera's and escape to Moscow. It looked like I had no luck in this fairytale beautiful city. Well, unless I call unlucky the best sex of my life. The treacherous thought came as I felt color spreading to my cheeks. The best sex of my life... Mmm... I licked my dry lips. Granted, sex with Paul was always good, but all too often he was so very, very far away, while I was home alone with the baby. How I needed him yesterday, how I needed to be "saved."

Saved... I guess every woman, no matter how emancipated and independent, sometimes still needs her knight in shining armor, her very own prince to rescue and sweep her off her feet. What's fifty years of modern sex equality conditioning versus thousands of years of genetic memory?

And so, Alexei became that prince I needed deep down so badly. And let's face it (the thought I tried to chase away crept back into my mind) it *was* the best sex of my life!

But no, it would never do, I admonished myself, tiptoeing to the door to listen. No more lapses of judgment! I must get back to Moscow as soon as possible and focus on things that needed to be done. My story, investigation into Svetlana's death - no more adventures of the sexual nature! Going forward, I'm all business.

I heard breakfast being brought in.

"Jade," called Alexei from the sitting room. "Are you awake, sleepy head? Breakfast is here."

I sighed. There was no point in stalling any longer.

"Yes, I am up," I responded, and having put on my royal-blue evening gown with the mismatched terry robe thrown on top of it, emerged out of the bedroom.

"Good morning," I mumbled. It felt awkward seeing him in broad daylight after what happened between us last night and I tried not to look at him.

"Good morning!" He smiled, but somehow, I got the feeling he was equally uncomfortable.

"Breakfast?" He pointed at the room service on the white-clothed table.

"Thanks," I said. "I am not really hungry."

"I'll take you to Vera's right after breakfast," he said.

He poured me some tea and I sipped it slowly, feeling terrible. Well, not about the sex with him. That was really, really, really... amazing – truly and incredibly amazing! Not only was it the best sex I've ever had, but probably the best I'll ever experience. I knew I'd always treasure that night, which was unlike any other night of my life.

But I felt awfully confused and guilty about cheating on Paul, something I'd never done before and never intended to do. Yet it happened. Alexei was so handsome, so desirable, and I was so cold and miserable... Svetlana's murder, Vera's betrayal, the intrigue and secret dealings behind the closed doors of that creepy mansion, where I was cast in the role of a sucker, Alexei's unfathomable mystery, plus the underlying fear of what I've gotten myself into... all that combined played a nasty trick on me.

What kind of an excuse is that? I chided myself sternly. *I am a married woman, who loves her husband and her little daughter... I should've known better. I had no business sleeping with Alexei, however handsome and desirable he might have been and however miserable and cold I was!*

Speaking of which, why did I get the impression that he felt guilty or regretful, as well? Was it because he didn't plan it either or was it because I busted him yesterday at the ball? Perhaps, he was afraid of my questions about what he was doing there? Well, why not live up to his expectations? It for sure beats reveling in my guilt!

Having rediscovered my purpose, I felt better.

I peered at Alexei. It was difficult to look at him without falling under his charm again and I had to force myself not to avert my eyes. I opened my mouth... but instead of the tough question, my lips stretched into a smile and I uttered, "I had a good time."

"Me too," he echoed and looked directly at me for the first time. These blue eyes, these sensuous lips, this great body... Last night was coming back to me so vividly that I once more started feeling all moist and tingling.

Oh no, I said to myself. Not again! I must be businesslike. As I thought that, our eyes locked into a tight embrace and my head immediately began to spin. There was so much tenderness in his glance... I must've imagined that he felt any regret at all. What I noticed was probably the fear I'd start asking some uncomfortable questions!

I steeled myself: after all, the best defense is a good offense.

"Speaking of which," I said in a completely different tone. "I still don't quite understand what you were doing at the ball. I thought you were on a business trip before taking a nice vacation to help me solve Svetlana's murder. What am I missing?"

He contemplated me, apparently weighing how to react, then his lips stretched into a smile and he started laughing.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"You are a very determined woman," he said, shaking his head. "A third degree, no less. I don't envy your future husband."

"My husband..." I started, then stopped and automatically looked down at my ring finger. I took off my ring and, to be on the safe side, left it in the hotel safe back in Moscow after Svetlana's murder. For the first time, I realized that he didn't really know I was married. He probably thought I was single and available, just like him. Then, it occurred to me that he expertly diverted my attention from the main subject.

"Smart," I said. "But you can't divert my attention that easily. Could you answer my question, please?"

"I belong to the Monarchist Society." He shrugged his shoulders. "So naturally, I was invited to the ball. Along with you, I might add. A better question I think is what were *you* doing there?"

"Vera invited me, dragged me there really, insisting I would find it interesting."

“And did you?”

“Not really. I felt it was not my cup of tea, so to speak. Besides, I didn’t appreciate them deciding my life for me behind my back.”

“Deciding your life? What do you mean?”

“They were talking about me behind that door where I caught you eavesdropping.”

“And how do you know what they were talking about, unless you were eavesdropping, too?” he said shrewdly.

“Touché.” I laughed, eyeing him carefully. How much should I tell him? Conventional wisdom said, don’t be too open with strangers. On the other hand, the devil’s advocate in me objected, he wasn’t really a stranger. He saved me from those muggers, then he saved me from the cold and last night, we were together. Any closer and we’d be married.

Married?! I caught myself, utterly appalled at my Freudian slip. What am I talking about? I must be out of my mind!

I decided to share what was really bothering me and said, “True, I did eavesdrop a little. I was exploring the mansion when I overheard voices, then I heard my name. I decided to listen, until you spooked me.”

“You must have very good ears,” he remarked, “if you heard your name through the door while simply walking past.”

“Not bad,” I admitted. “Never had a reason to complain.”

“So, what else did you hear?” he asked casually.

“Can you believe it! They were talking about how they needed a courier from New York and how I would be ideal! The nerve of them! I wonder if that little package I delivered to Vera from Uncle Boris gave them this crazy idea...” I stopped at that, realizing that every time I asked a question, Alexei managed to turn the tables. As a result, I already spilled the beans about everything, yet learned absolutely nothing about his own clandestine plans. To my dismay, as far as coaxing the information out of a subject, he could run circles around me - and I was hardly a novice at this fine art.

“I see,” he said distractedly, his eyes acquiring a faraway look.

“But I should be going,” I added hastily, deciding that I wouldn’t be able to fish anything else out of this expert at diversion. “It’s getting late and I really need to pick up my stuff from Vera’s.”

“What are your plans afterwards?”

“I want to return to Moscow as soon as possible. I think I’ve had enough of St. Petersburg for now. I want to get going with Svetlana’s investigation.”

“As I promised you before, you can count on me.”

I contemplated him silently. Could I accept his help after everything that happened?

“You can trust me,” he said, as if reading my thoughts.

“Thank you,” I replied, making up my mind. I did need his help if I wanted to get anywhere. “It’s a deal.”

“Let me take you to Vera’s,” he offered. “After that, we can go to lunch together before leaving back to Moscow.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I should go alone. There is something I must discuss with her and I have no idea how long it’ll take.”

In truth, there was nothing I wanted more than to be with him every second of the day. But I couldn’t! When he was around, the temptation was simply too much. I had to limit my exposure to Alexei, otherwise I didn’t think I could resist the nuclear reaction between us. And I was absolutely determined to never, ever allow the repeat of yesterday’s unforgivable lapse in judgment.

“As you wish,” he said. “I’ll be waiting for you. Be back soon!”

“Ok,” I said, as he helped me with my cape. His hands paused on my shoulders, and from that touch my heart came to a halt. In that moment of suspended reality I almost forgot what I was supposed to do next. Forcefully yanking myself out of that alternate realm I kept landing in when Alexei was around, I concentrated on the task at hand.

“I’ll take you downstairs,” he said.

“No,” I said resolutely, as the thought of being alone with him in the elevator made my heart skip a beat. “I’ll go by myself. See you soon!”

And I hastily exited his suite.



Chapter 10

As I waited for the elevator, I decided to take a look at my flushed face in the cosmetics mirror I carried in my purse. And that's when I realized that I left it in Alexei's suite. All my money and documents were in the purse too, which meant I had to go back and face him once more. And although seeing that sensuous smile again was too much to endure, there was no way around it.

Reluctantly, I retraced my steps to his door. My hand on the doorknob, I was about to turn it, when I overheard Alexei's voice. He seemed to be talking on the phone to someone he called Comrade General. I stopped, puzzled and without thinking, cupped my ear firmly against the door, an old sound-amplifying trick of spies and domestic servants of all times and cultures.

As Alexei's phone conversation progressed, I liked it less and less.

"She has left to get her things from Vera Golitsina. But I am pretty confident I got her," he said quietly.

Then he paused, listening.

"No, not really. I believe we are good," he responded to some unknown question.

"*Slushayus*! Yes, I'll keep you posted."

Again, there was a pause. Then, Alexei said, "Yes, I realize that we are running out of time. I appreciate your confidence in me, Comrade General!"

I stood by the door frozen, digesting the new and very unpleasant turn of events, when I heard his footsteps. He was heading towards the door. I crossed my arms and waited. When he opened the door, his face registered a momentary surprise, but immediately snapped back to its usual, composed expression.

"Jade, what are you still doing here?" he said evenly.

"I had to come back," I said and resolutely stepped into the room.

He let me through and closed the door. "Why, what happened?" Did I see a shadow of concern on his face or was I imagining it?

"You happened, you treacherous louse!"

"What are you talking about?" he said, frowning.

"I heard everything," I said, my eyes narrowed.

"You and your damn hearing," he said, shaking his head in exasperation. "You had to ruin a perfectly good operation, didn't you?"

I briskly walked to the sofa and sat down. "You better tell me everything I want to know," I said sharply. "What game are you playing? What is your real name? Who is Comrade General? Why are you running out of time and why do you need me?"

I knew it was a gamble to talk like that to a man who was reporting to some *Comrade General* and who appeared to be involved in some kind of high stakes game where I was to be a pawn. But I never appreciated being taken for a sucker. I've never been a pawn in anyone's game and never intended to be. Besides, I had a hunch that, for whatever reason, these people really needed me. I was taking a risk, but it was a well-calculated risk.

He eyed me carefully, apparently considering his options. I met his glance with a confident stare. I think I was putting up a very good front, considering that my stomach was doing nervous flip-flops. He blinked first. I assumed it was because he desperately needed me for something.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll level with you. But it’s a very involved conversation.”

“I’ve got time,” I said, bluffing the confidence I didn’t feel.

“Lucky you,” he murmured. “That’s one thing I haven’t got.”

“What do you mean?” I asked sharply. “And who do you work for?”

“All right,” he said, apparently making up his mind. “I’ll tell you.”

“I am all ears.”

“I work for the FSB, the Russian equivalent of the CIA, if you will.”

“I know what that is,” I snapped. “It’s the agency that replaced the old KGB.”

“Right,” he nodded. “I have been on this case for almost a year now, but we’ve got intel that it’s about to explode.”

“What case?” I said, getting annoyed. “What’s about to explode?”

“You do realize,” he said, “that you are twisting my arm. This is top secret information. I am not authorized to disclose any of that to a civilian and a foreign national at that.”

“If you want my help and it looks like you want it badly,” I retorted, “you’ll have to tell me everything.”

“Jade,” he started again, now in that soft, but oh, so manly baritone that made me forget everything, and looked straight at me with those damn blue eyes that had the power to bewitch. “Don’t you think if it were my choice I wouldn’t tell you everything?”

“So, do!” I shrugged, refusing to be bewitched this time.

“I want to, I really do,” he uttered with a tortured look on his face. “I’d do anything for you!” I blinked at that statement. Was it my imagination or did he really mean it? Holy... If it was genuine, then it was my chance to pounce.

“Alexei,” I said firmly. “You must tell me everything! For start, what’s your real name? And why does everyone call you Prince Obolensky?”

He sighed. “I guess I have no choice. My real name is Alexei Moguchev.”

“So, you aren’t really Prince Obolensky,” I said, feeling irrational disappointment that my Prince Charming turned out to be a castle in the sand, after all.

“Not technically.”

“What do you mean, not technically? You either are or you aren’t!”

“Very long ago, before the 1917 Revolution, my great-great-grandmother, when she was barely eighteen, worked as a chamber maid at the Obolensky estate. She was very beautiful. The old Prince Obolensky fell in love with her and they had an affair. When she got pregnant, he sent her away to Moscow. Prince Obolensky paid for the child’s expenses, including his education, but all in all they lived modestly. Despite his partially exalted birth, my great-grandfather always felt he belonged on the other side of the tracks. So when the revolution came, he sided with Lenin. You are looking at the descendant of a long line of Russian intelligence and KGB operatives. My family had always served and protected the Motherland. That’s what I do.”

I realized that I was absorbing this unbelievable family history with my mouth open and promptly closed it.

“And even though I always knew about this other part of my heritage,” continued Alexei, “I never used it until this assignment came along. You know, the Royal Society is very strict. They only want what they deem genuine royals and nobles among their ranks. The Society maintains an extensive DNA bank with samples drawn from both the living descendants as well as the bone samples from the historic graves of Russia’s nobility. I did DNA testing to prove that I was an Obolensky. And DNA doesn’t lie.”

“So, what does all this have to do with me?”

“We received data that you may have some useful information pertaining to the case I’ve been working on. So I pretended to rescue you from the muggers...”

“I know,” I interrupted, “we’ve already established that it was all a setup!”

“True,” he nodded. “But you have to believe me, if something like this really happened, I’d never hesitate to help!”

“Did you follow me to St. Petersburg? And to the ball?”

“No, that was a coincidence. We didn’t know you’d be there. Remember, I told you from the very start that I was going on a business trip.”

I had to admit, he had a point. Apparently, his was a planned attendance, while mine was a last minute decision. All right, I’ll let him off the hook there.

“And what happened last night between us,” I continued my interrogation, “was that staged too?”

“No!” he shook his head earnestly. “You must believe me! I would never do anything like this! It’s not like me at all.”

I sized up his perfectly ripped body and handsome face that exuded enough sex appeal for fifty men. Somehow, I doubted it.

“But,” he went on, “I want you to know that I don’t regret what happened between us!”

“I do!” I said angrily.

He recoiled, an expression of hurt on his face.

“You deceived me!” I said.

“I didn’t mean to,” he whispered. “I am very sorry.”

“Sorry my ass!” I was livid.

“How can I make it up to you?”

“You can tell me what case you are working on!”

“Okay,” he sighed in resignation. “It’s the Gold Train case.”

“I see,” I said slowly, as it finally clicked into place. “So, that police captain wasn’t that dumb, after all.”

“That’s right.” Alexei nodded. “When you told him your story, on a hunch, he alerted us because it seemed to him it could be our neck of the woods. He is sharp and I am thinking about hiring him away from the police. I think he’ll do well in our department. What d’you think?” He said confidentially, as if asking an opinion from a trusted advisor.

“I think you are ri...” I started, but quickly realized that he again almost succeeded in changing the direction of our conversation. Almost... not quite.

“Look,” I said. “I really don’t care who you hire to work for you. What concerns me right now is that you lied and deceived me.”

“I said I was sorry. You *are* very important to me.”

“Yeah, right,” I said sarcastically. “Of course, I am important to you. You need me for some reason to help you with your case.”

“No,” he said, peering at me with his magical eyes, now burning with hot, blue flames. “You have no idea how important you are to me.” He took my hand and placed it firmly against his heart. His chest was like a rock and his heartbeat was fast and strong. Despite myself, I felt our hearts starting to beat in unison. It was very hard to stay focused.

“No idea!” he repeated, and let go of my hand.

I sat still, tingling from his touch and not knowing what to say.

“But Jade,” he started again, and this time, the look in his eyes was serious and straightforward. “I have a very important job to do; so important that the fate of my country, and perhaps of the whole world, may hang in the balance. And I do need your help. I am *asking* for your help.”

“You are asking for my help,” I said, cradling my hand that still had his imprint on it, “and I want to believe you. Yet, you lied to me more than once in the few days we’ve known each other. You wormed your way into my confidence and seduced me, seemingly under false pretenses. You spied on me and to top it all off, you are not telling me everything about the case. So, how *can* I trust you?”

He sighed. “I told you as much as I could. The rest is top secret and I simply can’t release this information without authorization. I’ll try to get clearance as fast as I can, but till then, will you please trust me? I am running out of time.” He said that last bit almost pleadingly.

I contemplated my answer for a moment. “I hear you, but I can’t help you under these circumstances. Too many unanswered questions, too many red flags. Sorry and goodbye!”

Without another look at him, I grabbed my purse, walked out the door and headed downstairs. The front desk called me a taxi and I went straight to Vera’s place.

When Vera saw me, a relief registered on her face.

“Thank God you are back,” she said. “I didn’t know what to think! What happened? Where did you disappear? I wanted you to meet some very interesting people!”

Yeah, right... The interesting people she was talking about were undoubtedly those who wanted to use me as a pawn in yet another game, the game that had nothing to do with me, in the country I didn’t belong and defending alien ideals.

I gave her a tired smile. “Thank you Vera, I am fine. I wanted to leave early, so when I couldn’t find you at the ball I decided to spend the night at a hotel. And thank you for your hospitality. I actually need to return to Moscow as soon as possible. I’ll go to my room and pack now.”

“Are you sure?” she said, taken aback. “Do you really need to leave this soon? After all, I did promise you a good time. I wanted you to meet some very important people. As a matter of fact, I am throwing a little party tonight for a few select friends. It’s very exclusive and I’d love to have you there.”

Here we go again! My worst friend, Duchess Vera, was determined to drag me into her circle, kicking and screaming. I knew she had some kind of secret agenda for me, just like my best enemy, Alexei.

But what an irony! Coming to the country where I hardly knew a soul and promptly becoming more popular than I’ve ever bargained for, so popular in fact, that it could be hazardous to my health.

I forced a smile and pretended to be impressed. “Thank you so much, Vera. It sounds very interesting. But I have to return to Moscow. Something has come up for the story I am writing, an interview I can’t pass up. That’s the life of a journalist for you.” I gave a fake sigh. “I’ll take a rain check, okay?”

Vera didn’t look particularly happy. “If you must,” she said reluctantly. “But when do you think you may be ready to come back? You haven’t seen the real St. Petersburg yet.”

Oh my, but she was desperate to get me into her net!

“When? Oh, I don’t know,” I said evasively. “Possibly, in a week or two.”

“But you must come sooner than that!” she exclaimed. “I’d really love to show you Russian treasures. There is so much to experience! Tell you what, I’ll get you a first class plane ticket and send a car for you at the airport in Moscow and also, from the airport to my apartment, as soon as you are done with your interviews. This way you won’t have to take a train, plus, you’ll save time and money! Deal?”

She was way too anxious to get me back into the fold and I didn’t like it. But aloud I simply said, “All right.”

My gracious hostess with ulterior motives gave a visible sigh of relief.



Chapter 11

On the sleeper express back to Moscow, I noticed a strange man spending an awful lot of time next to my compartment. I thought that was odd and decided to check if I was just being paranoid or that I was indeed being followed. I pretended to head to the restroom, but instead, slipped into the connector area between two carriages. There, I stood quietly in the corner waiting, as a woman in a silk robe opened the door into the restroom and went in.

I could see through the glass screen that the man followed me along the narrow passage and pretended that he was waiting his turn. A couple of minutes later, the woman in a robe came out. The man looked surprised and quickly dashed inside to check that I wasn't hiding somewhere, which obviously was impossible, since these accommodations are so incredibly tiny.

I watched as he re-emerged into the corridor, throwing confused glances in both directions and trying to figure out which way I could've disappeared. At that moment, I opened the connector door and casually walked past him as if I'd just returned from visiting another carriage. The man seemed to relax and slowly followed me back.

I went inside my compartment and locked the door. There was no doubt – I was being followed and very sloppily at that. But by whom? I didn't want to think it was Alexei who sent this idiot. No, it wasn't him. He'd definitely send someone brighter. But if it wasn't him, then who? Could it be my tricky hostess, Duchess Vera? All this was starting to sound like a nightmarish spy movie.

Once we reached Moscow, I got off the train and headed for the Leningradsky Railway Station exit. The plan was to dissolve into the passenger crowd that arrived together with me from St. Petersburg and then, when my crowd merged with the crowds spilling from other trains, try and lose this unpleasant tail. I felt like a genuine spy, maneuvering between the throngs of people, changing directions and pausing behind a kiosk that sold newspapers and snacks, in order to check up on my tail. After that, with one last glance around and despite myself enjoying this new game, I headed towards a side exit instead of the main station entrance, confident that I lost the unwanted company.

I was so proud of myself that I didn't notice two men shadowing my every move to perfection. When I was about to reach the exit, an inconspicuous door opened in the nearby wall, two men smoothly took me by the elbows and dragged me silently to that door. Everything happened so fast that by the time I opened my mouth to scream, the door had already shut with a thud and we emerged into a long corridor, which they quickly dragged me through. On the other side of the corridor, behind another door, I saw a back alley where a large van with darkened windows and running motor awaited our arrival.

The third man emerged out of the van and disregarding my loud protests, slipped a hood over my head. I could breathe comfortably through the slits, but was unable to see a thing. I tried to kick and scream as they lifted me into the van and seated me forcefully inside. When I punched one of them I heard a crunch, accompanied by a yelp and a swear. After that, they tied my wrists and feet.

"I am a US citizen and accredited journalist!" I said. "I demand that you let me go immediately, whoever you are, unless you want a big international scandal on your hands!"

There was no answer.

"I demand that you let me go immediately!" I said again, louder.

Still, no reaction.

I filled my lungs with as much air as I could and yelled, "Help, help! I've been kidnapped!" I don't know who I hoped would hear me, as we were moving through the city at a very high speed, judging by how the van swayed and screeched on turns. But I couldn't just sit and take it on the chin. I had to do something! I had to resist this violence!

"Please, Ms. Snow, don't scream," said one of my kidnappers politely. "Otherwise, we'll be forced to gag you too, and we'd really like to avoid that."

I fell silent, trying to make sense of these words. Who were these well-mannered kidnappers? But at that moment, the van apparently arrived at its destination because after a quick exchange with a guard we drove into what felt like a courtyard. The door opened, my feet were untied and I was helped out of the vehicle. Then, I was carefully led inside and seated in a comfortable armchair. The hood came off and I saw myself in a large and rather stylish room with plush sofas, chairs and a coffee table set with tea and pastry.

The man who stood by the window came into view. He wore a well-tailored gray suit and a frown. He looked me up and down and said, pointing at my tied hands, "Is this really necessary?"

"Sorry, Vasily Anatolievich," said one of my kidnappers sheepishly, as the other one hastily untied me. "We had to, she punched Andrei on the nose. I heard a crack myself. Hopefully, it isn't broken. I sent him to see the doctor."

"Punched on the nose? Understandably," responded the man with a sly grin. "You'd punch too if you were being kidnapped."

Then he approached me, his arms open wide in a traditional disarming gesture of famed Russian hospitality. He said, smiling, "I sincerely apologize for the way we had to bring you in, Ms. Snow. I am sure when you hear about our reasons you'll understand and won't fault us." Then, he took my hand and kissed it.

I yanked my hand out of his fingers. "I am not interested in this show, Vasily Anatolievich, or whoever you are," I said furiously. "I am not accustomed to being kidnapped and if you think I am going to melt just because you've kissed my hand, you are in for a huge disappointment."

"Ha, ha, ha! You are exactly as he described," said the man, rubbing his hands in delight. "Exactly!"

"I demand that you let me go immediately," I said coldly, wondering who was the *he* the man in gray suit was referring to. "Otherwise, I'll contact the American Embassy and your government will have a big scandal on its hands!"

The door opened and another man stepped in.

"Come in, come in," said Vasily Anatolievich with the same broad smile. "Look who we have here."

The new arrival moved into the light and my jaw dropped... again.

"Alexei!" I exclaimed.

"Jade!" he croaked out.

"Ah, very good!" nodded the man in gray suit, satisfied. "You obviously recognize each other. This makes everything much easier."

"You, conniving, crazy maniac, you son of..." I hissed at the man I was desperately in love with just yesterday. I tried to stare Alexei down with all the hatred I could muster and if looks could kill, I am sure his body would be lying lifeless at my feet.

"Permission to speak freely, Comrade General?" said Alexei, his face pale.

"Go ahead," said Vasily Anatolievich magnanimously.

"Jade," Alexei addressed me. "I didn't know they would bring you in. I wasn't told. Please confirm my words, Comrade General!"

The General frowned. “This is correct, Ms. Snow. Lieutenant Colonel Moguchev didn’t know. I felt it would be... eh... counterproductive – and I was right.”

“Lieutenant Colonel?” I remarked sarcastically. “So, how many women did you have to deceive in order to get to this level?”

It didn’t escape my attention that the two young officers, who were my kidnappers, exchanged an amused glance, hardly able to keep their faces straight. Meanwhile, Alexei said nothing, but did an intake of breath, his handsome face turning crimson.

Comrade General threw the two officers a disapproving glance and continued in a sharp, commanding tone. “I need you to listen to me carefully, Jade,” he said. “This is neither a joke, nor a game. I already apologized about how you were brought in and I won’t do it again. If I wanted to arrest you as part of a conspiracy that threatens the very existence of the Russian Federation, I could. I have more than enough evidence for that. For example, the parcel you delivered from Boris Goncharov to Vera Golitsina contained a secret communication for the terrorists. But I *didn’t* arrest you. Because we need your help and because we have Lieutenant Colonel’s word that you can be trusted.”

“Look,” I said, trying to sound much braver than I felt, because his tone made me pay attention. He wasn’t kidding – there was something subversive I got unwittingly entangled in, even though I personally did nothing wrong. And in a case like this, foreign national or not, they had the right to detain me. But he said they wouldn’t arrest me because they needed my help. That was good – very good!

“I didn’t do anything, and you know it,” I went on. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t be talking to me like this.”

“True,” nodded the General readily. “You are not only beautiful and gutsy, but smart. Exactly as Alexei described you.”

I threw a sharp glance in the traitor’s direction (who’s been now officially demoted from Prince Charming). He squirmed under my gaze, his face, if at all possible, turning even more crimson. I realized that Comrade General was trying to butter me up, which meant they really needed me badly. It appeared my cause wasn’t the lost one. Besides, I was curious to hear more.

“I am listening,” I said.

“Good,” the General said, nodding. “Jade, how much do you know about the Gold Train?”

“Not very much. Primarily, what Svetlana told me.”

“Ah yes, the journalist killed by the Monarchists. I am very sorry about her death.”

“Wait,” I said, as the terrible thought that I’ve been chasing away since the ball, came back. “Are you saying that the Monarchists, like the delicate, elderly socialite Duchess Vera, have blood on their hands?”

The General read between the lines. “I know you saw the glamorous side of the Monarchists: the balls, beautiful women and gallant gentlemen. But behind all that façade, a dangerous conspiracy is brewing, the conspiracy to overthrow the legitimate government of the Russian Federation and to restore the monarchy.”

“But how would they ever accomplish that?” I objected skeptically. “They are just some obscure organization. How would they be able to overtake this giant machine, this huge state of which you are a part? The Russian state isn’t perfect – show me the one that is – but it’s obviously strong. Having been here for a very short time I can already see that.”

“You are right, our state is very strong,” said the General with pride. “Russia has fended off many invaders and enemies and it never surrendered. But this is a different matter. These are enemies from within. They are hoping to start a new civil war. Last time we had a revolution and civil war the country was completely devastated; families torn apart, siblings fighting siblings, sons against fathers, wives against husbands. The society was completely disrupted and it took a long time to rebuild any normalcy

and trust. That's why Stalin was able to rise to power, and that's what we are trying to avoid at all cost, Jade!"

"I see." I nodded. "However, I still don't get it. In order to pull something like that off, your Monarchists would need tremendous financial backing, I mean billions upon billions of dollars! Sure, they do count some wealthy people in their ranks, but that doesn't seem enough. They'd have to buy loyalties, bribe everyone left and right, as well as grease certain useful connections. They'd have to buy weapons and munitions, build infrastructure, buy property and technology, feed and clothe an army, make sure all the logistics are taken care of – things like that. Where would they acquire that kind of resources?"

"Ah, I am glad you mentioned it," said the General, nodding. "The answer is simple: the Gold Train."

"The Gold Train? I don't quite..."

"Jade, you're smart. Put the two and two together."

"I'll try."

"Svetlana was killed by the Monarchists when she got too close to the Gold Train mystery. Why? Because they knew exactly where the treasure was hidden and they couldn't afford anyone discovering its true whereabouts."

"But I thought that a Chechen national killed Svetlana," I said, grasping at the last straw.

"Jade, who do you think finances Chechen terrorists' subversive activities here?"

"I am no expert, but I thought it was financed from abroad."

"You are right. But recently we acquired new intel suggesting they switched masters. They still get financing from abroad, but now they work mostly for the Monarchists. We understand they promised them a Muslim state and independence after the restoration of the monarchy is completed, not that they'd ever follow through on their promise."

"It makes sense," I murmured, recalling the exchange I overheard at the ball. "What independence? What promise?" and the laughter that accompanied the joke.

Great, just great! How do you ever get yourself mixed up in these things, Jade? To think that I came all the way to Russia to reconnect with the world of my ancestors, to explore, to write...instead, as usual, look what I've gotten myself into!

"So, Comrade General," I said, not even trying to hide the irony in my voice, "what do you need *me* for?"

"We need your help," said the General gravely. "See, it took Alexei almost a year to get close to them. But not close enough. He still wasn't able to penetrate their inner circle. Meanwhile, for you it would be easy. Vera Golitsina already trusts you and she is the co-chair of the Monarchist Central Committee. We need you to stay close to the decision makers and let us know when and where they are planning to strike."

"I see."

"And there is another problem," continued the General, "the one, for which your friend Svetlana paid with her life."

"The Gold Train." I nodded.

"Right. So far, we've been unsuccessful in locating the treasure, which has been dormant all this time. But we have a hunch that the Monarchists are about to start dipping into it in order to finance the whole thing. When they do, they're bound to leave a trail. We need you to keep your eyes and ears open. Because if we take away their financial muscle, they won't be able to wreak havoc they are planning."

“And the treasure wouldn’t be a bad find for the Russian Federation either, right?” Again, I couldn’t resist a ‘wise Alec’ remark.

“Yes, we could use it,” responded the General seriously, disregarding my tone. “Any state could use that kind of money, don’t you think? Tsar’s gold belongs to the Russian people and the Russian people made their choice a long time ago: they decided to leave the old monarchy in the past!”

The General sat down next to me on the sofa, poured some tea into a cup and offered it to me. I accepted the cup and thanked him.

“Jade, I know you love Russia. You probably heard from your Grandma Anastasia what the country and her family had to go through during the Civil War. If her family didn’t have to emigrate you might have been born here, in Russia. Please, help us! Don’t let them turn back the clock! Don’t let another generation suffer a brutal civil war!”

He finished this proclamation with great conviction and looked at me inquiringly.

I returned his gaze; then my eyes rested on Alexei, who watched the whole scene silently, his arms crossed. Then, I looked down at my hands, which were now free, and again at the General.

“I understand,” I said slowly, “where you are coming from. I even believe you to a degree. But I don’t have any independent information that what you are saying is true. I am not accusing you of lying, but where I come from, independent, verifiable sources of information are a must.”

“Independent and verifiable?” retorted the General. “Give me a break! Next, you’ll start preaching to me about merits of Western democracy and how we are falling short!”

“No,” I shook my head seriously. “I won’t start preaching about merits of Western anything. That’s not the issue.”

“Then what is? Your friend died because she knew too much, for God’s sake! You saw what happened to her! I’ve just explained the whole story to you, and I took a huge risk. After all, you are a civilian, a foreigner, and a journalist to boot - and this is top secret information concerning Russia’s national security!”

The General was sounding a little annoyed and I was getting a little apprehensive.

“I am not questioning what you’ve told me,” I said, to appease him. “And I do appreciate your trust. But if you really want my voluntary help and not hold me prisoner, why this masquerade? Why kidnap me? Why bring me here? Why not talk to me like a human being?”

“I’ve already apologized,” said the General shortly. “Look, it wasn’t my first choice to do that. But you parted on bad terms with Alexei when he was careless enough to let you overhear what you weren’t supposed to know.”

“Don’t you think,” I interrupted, “that even if I didn’t overhear him, I would’ve felt betrayed when I found out later, anyway?”

“You are missing the point, my dear,” said the General. “Didn’t you notice that the Monarchists were following you? Didn’t you see the tail? I know you did, because you tried to lose them.”

“So... it *was* them?” I murmured. “I wondered.”

“Obviously, it was them! You wouldn’t have noticed our people – and you didn’t, because they are professionals.”

“Touché,” I agreed. I never did notice the other two.

“That’s why we had to act surreptitiously. Semyon here,” a nod towards my kidnapper, “had to make a split-second decision, because you did indeed lose the tail for a moment and we could at least remove you to a safe location where they wouldn’t witness our contact. Do you understand now?”

I nodded.

“We never dreamed of kidnapping you. We just wanted a chance to talk without them knowing... because if they did, that could ruin everything. And I mean, everything!”

“So,” I said quietly, “are you saying I am not a hostage?”

“Of course not!”

“And I am free to go any time?”

“Certainly you are, but...”

“All right then,” I said briskly, getting back to my feet. “In that case, it’s been nice chatting with you all. You can rest assured that I won’t breathe a word to anyone about what I’ve heard here, but I really need to be going.”

I started walking to the door, all the time expecting someone to stop me. The young officer, my kidnapper, made a step to block my passage. But the General just said one word: “Semyon!” and shook his head. The officer stepped back. The way to freedom was clear. I opened the door.

“Ms. Snow,” called out the General.

I turned around, my heart beating fast. “Yes?”

“If you change your mind, be sure to give me a call.” And he extended an inconspicuous card with just a single phone number on it. “But remember, time is short.”

I nodded and walked through the corridor to another door, which opened without a hitch.

I was in a giant courtyard. I inhaled the fresh air deeply, then again and again, until my head was spinning from all that oxygen. But I didn’t mind. At least I could again see the sun, the sky and the trees. I deliberately walked to the automatic gate, with two officers on both sides watching my progress. The gate opened to let me through and I walked out of the famous Lubyanka, the former KGB Compound, now the FSB Headquarters, free at last.

Rounding the corner, I hailed a taxi, which took me back to my hotel.



Chapter 12

I stepped inside my hotel room, put the “Do Not Disturb” sign on the door and locked it very carefully. I needed some time to think and meditate. After a long and luxurious bath, I ordered dinner and lounged on the sofa, flipping through channels and thinking.

It was hard not to like Comrade General, despite the way he brought me in. Smart, powerful, can take a calculated risk, heart seems in the right place...In a word, my kind of a guy. Admittedly, I came here to relax and have fun. But what can be better fun than a little adventure? Just imagine! I pictured myself telling my grandchildren how I worked as a secret spy for the legendary KGB, I mean, FSB! That’s the stuff of spy thrillers and legends – and what a story!

I felt my inner pendulum swinging in the direction of collaborating with my interesting kidnapers.

But, I reminded myself, there was the question of Alexei. That treacherous bastard, I thought angrily. And to think that I trusted him with all that stuff about Svetlana and with my feelings and...and that I...that I... I felt awfully betrayed. And they want me to work with him? No way!

Now, the pendulum swung decidedly against helping the FSB.

But then again, there was the question of preventing a major civil war. I recalled my Grandma Anastasia’s stories of loss, suffering and betrayal, and of how her own family had to abandon everything behind and leave Russia in the middle of the night, all this, because neither side was ready for concessions. And now, it could happen again.

The 1917 Russian Revolution and subsequent Civil War had changed the balance of power in the world, facilitating revolutions in other countries. The General didn’t say any more, but I read between the lines. I knew history, the real history of the twentieth century my parents taught me. Back then, during the 1918 Russian Civil War, the Western Powers, USA, Great Britain and France, motivated by their fear of communism and their own geopolitical interests, openly backed the Whites. Meanwhile, Germany, suffering losses in World War I and assured that Russia would exit the war, was secretly helping Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

The allies of World War I became enemies and distrust between the two worlds, communist and capitalist, deepened to the point of no return. As the two opposing ideologies collided in a deadly embrace, as the clandestine war raged on the world’s invisible fronts, Hitler was allowed to rise to power. What followed was the deadliest century human civilization had ever known.

And what if it happened again? Even though Russia wasn’t communist any more, the rivalry and geopolitics of the West has not changed. What if the United States and Britain decided to intervene on the side of the Monarchists? The Russian Federation, with its nuclear capacity, wouldn’t just shrivel up and die! And this would mean nuclear war! In fact, this would mean World War III!

What if the General was right and I did have the means to prevent that kind of scenario? What was my petty resentment of Alexei compared to the global disaster I could help avert?

The pendulum started swinging again towards helping Comrade General.

But, my skeptical side objected, it’s unclear if he is telling the truth, and only the truth. He may be playing me for a sucker and there is no way I can verify all this information. The Monarchists could be a totally innocent bunch and the FSB could just be out to get them. After all, look at the KGB’s history, at least the way it’s taught to us in the West. Granted, they’ve changed the name, but where is the

guarantee their methods have changed much? The General sure made a great impression on me, but it could all be an act.

I thought of Duchess Vera. She certainly was a busybody and not what I'd call the loveliest person I've ever met, but she also was an old lady. What if they arrested her and threw her in jail? And what if she's innocent? I couldn't just serve her on a platter to the FSB!

The pendulum again swung in the opposite direction.

I shook my head. There was no way I could make this decision tonight. One, I had to sleep on it, and two, I needed more information.

Tomorrow... tomorr... I'll go and... My eyes closed and I fell asleep.

I woke up late the next morning, took a quick shower and went to the nearby cafe for breakfast. It was half past ten, the official breakfast hour was over and the café was deserted. I almost finished my coffee with Russian pancakes – yum – still not being able to make up my mind about the previous day's adventures, when all of a sudden...

"Hello, Jade," said a voice. I lifted my eyes off my plate and almost choked on a pancake. Sitting opposite me was Duchess Vera accompanied by two very muscular-looking dudes clad in black leather and dark shades.

Duchess Vera put a finger to her lips and mouthed, "We need to talk to you right away."

"Who is *we*?" I said.

"I'll explain later," she replied evasively, throwing surreptitious glances around. "Let's go!"

"First off," I said, not too happy with this kind of a greeting, "I am in the middle of a breakfast. Secondly, I want to know who *we* is, before I go anywhere."

"We," she whispered impatiently, "is the Monarchist Organization. And this is urgent. We need to go now."

I tried to protest, but the two athletic dudes lifted me easily off my chair, pretending to hug me, and escorted me out of the café. Duchess Vera hastily left a few bills on the table and followed our procession. I was steered firmly towards the black Mercedes SUV with tinted windows, and forcibly shoved in. Once inside, my kidnappers of the day seated me on a comfortable seat and blindfolded me. Next, they tied my hands and I felt the car move.

I opened my mouth to protest again, but one of the athletic dudes warned me to keep it shut, if I didn't want to be gagged. I obliged because I decidedly preferred my breathing unobstructed.

In about forty five minutes we have arrived. I was led out of the car and up a few stairs. Inside the building, the elevator door opened, then closed behind us. We rode what felt like a few floors up. Another set of steps and my kidnappers took off the blindfold and untied my hands.

I looked around. We were in the middle of a large and richly decorated room where the electric lights were on despite the sunny day, and heavy curtains drawn to completely cover the windows.

"Ah," said the man I recognized as Yury Gurevich, who was sitting behind a magnificent Renaissance desk. "Here is our little American friend."

"What do you want?" I uttered coldly.

"What do *I* want?" he replied in a mockingly shocked voice. "All I want is the power in this beautiful country of ours to be restored to its rightful owner, Tsar and Emperor of All Russia, of whom I am just a humble servant."

"Jade," chimed in Duchess Vera, "I want to explain something to you."

"Okay," I said. "Since I am a prisoner here, why don't you!"

"No, no," objected Vera. "You certainly aren't a prisoner. You are a guest!"

"Guest?" I said, raising my eyebrows. "Do you always blindfold and kidnap your guests?"

"No, no..." Vera started again.

“Enough of this,” said Yury Gurevich in a thunderous voice, getting up from his chair and banging his fist on the desk.

I watched him curiously. He was a famous oligarch, one of the richest men in Russia and his name was constantly in papers. *Yury Gurevich built a new stadium, Yury Gurevich bought a Spanish football team, Yury Gurevich has divorced his wife* and right next to it, *Yury Gurevich is about to marry again*. He was in the news so much that even I, a foreigner who had no interest in some oligarch’s goings-on, had heard about him. This man was rather short of stature, but behaved as if he was a giant and I couldn’t help but wonder whether he was suffering from the Napoleon complex.

“Duchess Vera tells me that you are of royal blood,” he said sharply.

“So what if I am? Are you jealous?”

“Jealous?” he laughed, apparently amused. “I hold strings to the largest conspiracy in modern history. Without my financial backing and my connections they would be nowhere. And you think I am jealous?”

“You sure act as if you were,” I retorted.

“And you act as if you weren’t of royal blood,” he responded in a dangerous voice. “If you are who you say you are, then you should be keen to help our cause, because you’d be restoring your heritage. So, your resistance makes me think that you are not...”

“I am who I say I am,” I interrupted him. “And who are you to tell me what to do?”

“I don’t like your tone,” hissed Yury Gurevich. “And you better be careful...”

“Wait, Yury,” interjected Duchess Vera hastily. “Jade is who she says she is. I can vouch for that. And we are here to fill her in on what’s happening and to ask for her help, not to argue.”

“True,” agreed the oligarch grudgingly. “But she is not as cooperative as you said she would be.”

“Excuse me,” I said, “but I don’t take kindly to people blindfolding and kidnapping me during my breakfast.”

“I apologize,” said Duchess Vera hurriedly, trying evidently to prevent yet another outburst from Yury Gurevich.

“Jade,” she continued quickly, to avoid any more interruptions. “I again apologize for the way you were brought in. But it couldn’t be helped. We couldn’t wait because time is short.”

I stared at her. Was she kidding me? I was having a major sense of déjà vu. Only yesterday, I’ve heard the exact same words from my other kidnappers – her biggest enemies, and today I clearly found myself between the rock and the hard place.

“We need a courier,” said Duchess Vera, “who’d deliver some important information to us from New York, our headquarters, and back. Would you be ready and willing to fulfill this mission?”

I gazed at her incredulously. Boy, but these people presumed a lot! A courier, who’d risk her life to deliver some kind of stuff to them so they could start a civil war in Russia?

“What’s in it for you?” I addressed the oligarch, disregarding Vera.

“Patriotism, pure and simple.”

“And lots of lucrative contracts from the future Tsar’s government,” I added. “And perhaps, a Minister of Finance seat. Or who knows, a Prime Minister or Chancellor’s seat, or whatever it will be called in your version of Russia.”

“Smart girl,” he responded with a crooked smile. “But without my money and connections they’d be nowhere.”

“That goes without saying.” I nodded seriously. He gave me a penetrating stare, as if suspecting some double meaning.

“I will need to sleep on it,” I said. “Right now, I must get back to my hotel. I am tired.”

I looked him straight in the eye – a dangerous, take-no-prisoners eye – with confidence I really didn't feel. But I held the eye contact, until he nodded imperceptibly.

The two athletic dudes opened the door and one of them blindfolded me again.

“Is this really necessary?..” started Vera.

“Vera, shut up!” was the thunderous response, and Vera said no more.

I was led out of the room into the familiar elevator, back into the car and forty five minutes later, out of the car. The blindfold came off and the Mercedes SUV sped away, turning the corner with a loud screech. I was left in the middle of the street, blinking in the bright sun. Once again, I stood in front of the cafe where I was kidnapped this morning. It was already afternoon.



Chapter 13

I had no appetite, so I went straight to my room, again hung the “Do Not Disturb” sign and locked the door. I needed to think. I opened a bottle of red wine and sat on the sofa. This was a predicament with huge potential consequences not just for me, but for the whole country of Russia and possibly for the entire world. I sipped the wine and stared out the window of my hotel room. Down there, on a lively Moscow street, the day went on as if nothing happened, as if no catastrophe was on the horizon. But I knew better...unless I did something to prevent it.

And that’s when I remembered the Gypsy’s strange prophecies, which were materializing one by one. She predicted that I would miss my St. Petersburg train and that I’d go to a ball and meet a prince. With the thought of Alexei, my heart immediately jumped in my chest and I involuntarily pressed my hand against it, as if afraid this vital organ might inadvertently escape from my body’s confines.

Clenching my teeth, I willed myself to get back on topic. So, what else did Rada say? Yes, she said that Svetlana would not be able to complete her investigation, that someone else would do it for her. Now I finally understood the glance she gave me while uttering these words. That someone who’d finish Svetlana’s work was *me!*

The question was, what other predictions were about to come true? What was I to expect going forward?

Suddenly, I knew exactly what to do next. I needed to see Rada urgently! She would have all the answers! I hastily put on my coat, grabbed my purse and dashed out. The front desk called car service and twenty minutes later I was opening the door into the Gypsy’s parlor.

Rada just finished reading for another client. She noticed me and nodded, as if expecting my arrival at this particular hour all along.

“Now you see...” she murmured with a mysterious smile. “I knew you’d be back!”

“Rada,” I said, feeling a newly found respect for this strange woman. “I was wrong to doubt you. Several things you predicted already came true.”

“So,” said Rada with a mischievous smile, “he *is* the one, isn’t he?”

I felt my face turning pink, as Alexei’s image obligingly floated into my mind.

“But how did you know...” I started, then quickly corrected myself. “I guess that’s a silly question. Of course you knew, you are psychic! When you predicted it, did... did you also realize I was married?” I just couldn’t resist asking this question, which was on my mind a lot lately.

“Of course,” she shrugged her shoulders. “But what has happened - what is happening to you - it is Destiny. You have to understand that Destiny brought you here, to Russia. You are here because the world needs your help. *He* needs your help.”

If she for a moment thought that such sweeping statements would make me feel better, she had another thing coming. I gulped and said miserably, “But I don’t know what to do. I am torn! Can you help me understand?”

Rada took my hand and pressed it silently against my heart. Her bottomless eyes looked straight into mine and I, like the last time, had a feeling that she was rather uncomfortably reaching into the deepest secret compartments of my soul.

“You need to trust what’s in here,” she said. “You have all necessary information to make the right decision. *All* necessary information! Over here,” she touched my heart, “over here,” she touched my

head, “and over here,” and she pointed at my eyes. “You are much more like me than you allow yourself to believe. Don’t underestimate your psychic ability! Trust your intuition and your heart. That’s where all your answers lie.”

“But you don’t understand!” I exclaimed, frustrated with all that cryptic stuff, when all I wanted was a straight answer. I wanted to be told what to do next, dammit! “I need to make a decision, and it’s way too hard! I don’t know what to do!”

“You *will* make the right decision,” she said in a confident voice, “and sooner than you think. After you do, follow through on that decision to the very end. Don’t waiver, don’t get scared. Remember, it is your Destiny - and your Destiny will protect you!”

“Thank you... I guess,” I said, seeing that this was all I would ever get out of her.

“Don’t mention it,” she replied.

“One more thing,” I said, preparing to leave. “You said I would find something very valuable, but lose something even more valuable in return. What did you mean?”

“You’ll see,” she responded with enigmatic smile. And on that cryptic note, I exited Rada’s parlor.

I took a walk around the night Arbat in order to get my thoughts together. It was almost eleven, Moscow time, when I got back to the hotel. A nice shower helped me wash off the imprint of all the strange events I experienced lately. My hand picked up the phone, my tired mind recalling my New York number, but as I was preparing to dial it, my eyelids grew heavy, the phone slipped out of my hand and I fell into a restless sleep.

I woke up with a start and immediately looked at the clock. For some reason I had a strange feeling that time was short and that I needed to do something very urgently. Six a.m., Moscow time, which meant that it was nine p.m. in New York.

Without thinking, I reached for the phone and dialed home.

“Hello,” said Paul’s voice.

“Darling,” I said, “it’s so good to hear your voice!”

“Jade, sweetheart,” exclaimed Paul, “where have you been? I’ve been trying to reach you for three days!”

“Oh, the usual - interviews, research, that sort of thing.”

“So, how is it going over there, in the good old Moscow?” he said playfully. “Is it living up to your expectations?”

“And then some. In fact...” I started, but mid sentence changed my mind and stopped. It occurred to me that telling Paul what happened would serve no purpose. What if he decided to come to my rescue and fly down here? I wasn’t ready to face him just yet... not after that night with Alexei. I needed more time to disentangle this confusing situation. As of now, his presence would only complicate matters. Or, what if he demanded that I drop everything and return to the safety of home? That I couldn’t do either, because I couldn’t leave my unfinished business here. Rada said that I had to come up with decision on my own. So why burden him with problems only I could solve?

“In fact...” prompted Paul.

“In fact... it’s amazing here,” I said in an exaggeratedly joyful voice. “I met a lot of very interesting people and got a ton of material for the story. Everything’s super!”

I might have overdone it a little, because Paul said, “Is everything all right, sweetheart?”

“Yes, of course,” I said in a perky voice. “Great!”

“Are you sure?” he said doubtfully. “Do you need my help?”

“No,” I said firmly. “I am fine and everything is going fine.”

“Glad to hear that,” said Paul - and I exhaled.

“Listen,” I said. “Is Lara awake? I’d love to talk to her!”

“Yes, she just ate and Dolores is about to put her to bed.”

I heard an exchange between Dolores and Paul. Then Dolores said, “Here is the little one, Ms. Jade.”

I pressed my ear closer to the phone and heard Lara’s breath. “Sweetheart,” I said softly, my eyes filling with tears. “Hi darling, this is Mama.”

“Mama?” responded Lara’s little voice, as I felt tears streaming down my face.

“Yes darling, yes, my precious, this is Mama!”

“Mama, Mama,” said Lara and started crying.

“I love you, baby,” I whispered. “I love you with all my heart.”

I kept talking to my little daughter for another minute or two, after which Paul took the phone and said, “Lara seems a little upset. She misses you awfully.”

“I know,” I said. “I miss her terribly, too. I miss all of you! Speaking of which, where is Princess Lily?”

“Here she is. Just appeared out of nowhere as I was talking to you and is rubbing against the phone. No doubt wants to talk to you, too. Sometimes I think this cat can read minds,” Paul said in a joking voice.

You have no idea, I thought.

“Lily,” I said, “how are you?”

“Mrrreow,” responded Lily, which meant that everything at home was under control.

“I miss you so much,” I said.

“Mrrreow, mrrreow,” said Lily. Translation: *I miss you, too! When are you coming home?*

“I’ll be back as soon as I can, but I still have a lot to do, so it’s hard to tell.”

“I understand,” said Lily in her feline dialect, “I sense danger, so please be very, very careful. And don’t worry about home, I’ll take care of everything here!”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’ll be careful, I promise!”

“Thank you for letting me hear Lily’s voice,” I said to Paul. “I missed that.”

“No problem,” he said. “Her meows can be very comforting. Lara likes them too.”

As usual, Paul had no idea that those were not mere meows. But it seemed like my smart little daughter was already developing her own communication channel with Lily. Good!

“Sweetheart,” continued Paul. “I believe in you. You are a beautiful, wonderful and very talented woman! Go, get’em!”

“Thank you, darling,” I whispered, my eyes turning misty again. “I needed to hear this!”

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you,” I responded.

I hung up the phone, feeling that immense load I was carrying on my shoulders just got lighter. I so needed this call, this opportunity to say goodbye to all of them. After all, because of what I was about to do, this could be the last time I’d ever talk to my family.



Chapter 14

It wasn't an easy decision. When I recalled Yury Gurevich's distrustful, dangerous eyes, I knew that saying no to his "invitation" to join the Monarchist cause could be hazardous to my life. But I refused to be intimidated or coerced. Of course, I could always walk away from this whole situation. I could just catch a flight back to New York and hope that the long arm of Yury Gurevich, or that of the FSB wouldn't reach me there. I had to admit that for a moment and a half this solution sounded kinda tempting. But what if by running away to New York I led them straight to my family? What if I put my baby at risk?

And what would I tell George Bollinger, *Times* editor-in-chief, about the assignment I failed to complete – that I ran away from some imaginary danger? That would immediately put an end to my newly budding career.

Besides, I'd never forgive myself if I walked away from the Gold Train mystery. Never! It was a once in a lifetime opportunity and I had to make it work! I had to find out what really happened to the Gold Train, and it looked as if the Monarchists had a pretty shrewd idea where the treasure was.

And to top it all off, there was a no small matter of preventing a potential civil war, not to mention, getting to the bottom of Svetlana's death.

All in all, there was no way I could bail. I had to stay and untie this Gordian knot – at whatever the cost!

I picked up the phone and dialed Comrade General's number.

"I need to talk," I said. "Pick me up in ten minutes by the back door."

The same van with darkened windows pulled up to the hotel's back entrance. I jumped in and the van took off. No hood this time... We arrived at the familiar monstrosity of a building, once feared both here and abroad. This time, the General met me in his office.

"I agree to help," I said.

He extended his hand, "Welcome aboard."

"On one condition," I said. "Svetlana's killer must be brought to justice."

"That goes without saying." The General nodded. Then he added, "Say hello to your partner in crime." A tall figure, black-clad and sexy beyond imagination, stepped out of the corner's shadow and I swallowed hard. I suspected something like this would happen, but still my heart beat faster. I managed a cool nod, while he greeted me with a broad smile.

I simply couldn't help it as my heart kept pounding. In a black shirt with open collar and black slacks, contrasting his light hair and blue eyes and highlighting his perfect body, he looked way too sexy to be allowed to be anyone's partner! I willed myself to focus. Going forward, we are just co-workers; nothing more, nothing less.

"Lieutenant Colonel will fill you in on all the details," said the General.

As usual, Alexei opened and held the door for me and I caught myself thinking that I could get used to this kind of treatment, that old-world chivalry that was all but extinct as a result of sexual harassment lawsuits and feminist movement in the blessed US of A.

I followed Alexei to his slick BMW with darkened windows, feeling like a veritable Bond girl and tingling all over.

“I thought,” he said, still grinning broadly, “we should go for a walk and after that, to a nice dinner somewhere private, where I’ll give you a recap of the whole story.”

“Just don’t think you’ve scored or something,” I said, more to settle my own nerves than because I was still mad at him. “And wipe that smirk off your face, will you? It’s business, and nothing more!”

He nodded, as the automatic gate opened and we drove out onto the sunny Moscow street. A twinkle in his eye said that he understood much more than was said.

Alexei’s car came to a stop at Sculpture Park, an ancient city’s brand new attraction, where scores of Soviet statues, including Stalin, Lenin and Felix Dzerzhinsky, the KGB’s first boss, found their final resting place.

“That’s a perfect place for a walk,” said Alexei. “I don’t believe we’ll be bumping into any of our Monarchist buddies here.”

“Good choice,” I said with a chuckle. “I wanted to explore it anyway.”

We strolled past the giant “Glory to the USSR” plaque, Stalin’s statues, some missing a nose or a body part, and Lenin’s monuments, curiously intact (either because they were solidly built or because Lenin still preserved a certain measure of respect from his people). We walked along this green and quiet burial ground of the eventful recent past, in a city that had seen it all... and I couldn’t help but marvel at the turn of fate that brought me here.

“Ready for a recap?” asked Alexei.

I took a long look around to capture this moment in my memory forever, and nodded resolutely. This was the moment I officially became one of the many anonymous soldiers in the great, secret war: I became the FSB’s double agent.



Chapter 15

Later, we sat in a small and very private cafe in the Sokolniki district. Alexei chose a perfect table, secluded, yet affording the view of the entire room, along with the entrance. I couldn't have chosen a better spot myself.

The cafe was nearly deserted. There was only an elderly man sitting in a corner and a young couple smooching publicly at a table nearest the entrance. The young woman, who couldn't have been any more than twenty, giggled loudly, while the old man in the corner shook his head disapprovingly. It appeared the couple was so immersed in their activities they failed to notice anyone around.

I found myself unwittingly staring at them and thinking that the girl was very pretty, when our eyes met and she gave me an almost imperceptible wink. After that, she went on smooching as if nothing happened.

"Did you see that?" I whispered to Alexei, all of a sudden alarmed. "That girl just gave me a wink! Do you think it's innocent... or maybe they are..."

"They make a good team, don't they?" replied Alexei. "She is actually twenty nine, but looks much younger."

"Do you mean they are...?"

"Of course."

"Boy, you guys are good!" I said in awe.

"That's what we do."

"Who else?"

"The old man in the corner and some people outside."

"I didn't spot anyone outside, and I'm a pretty good observer."

"I know you are a good observer. That's why we picked you," retorted Alexei. "But that's actually the point; they are supposed to be invisible so that even the best of observers can't detect them. You didn't think we'd meet here without plenty of advance planning, did you? We can't take even the slightest chance any of your Monarchist buddies might spot us."

"It makes perfect sense."

"Besides," he added, "can't take a chance that something might happen to you. You are too important..." he swallowed hard and finished, "to me."

I opened my mouth to say something in return, but instead, just stared into those astonishingly blue eyes, as he gazed back into mine. Our eyes locked in that familiar embrace and it seemed nothing in the world could break us apart. We sat like this, silently exploring each other, peering into the very depths of each other's souls, souls which at that very moment stood wide open in this remote cafe, surrounded by people watching over us, and yet, alone in the whole wide world.

"Are you ready for your order?" said a young waiter, giving us a knowing smile.

I reluctantly tore my eyes away from Alexei. I didn't know what it was about this man that made me fall in love with him over and over again, every time deeper and deeper, no matter how much I resisted. And I didn't know what it was about Russia, which felt like the most romantic country I've ever seen – and I've seen them all. Romance was in the air here or, perhaps, in the water?

We ordered *blinchiki*, traditional Russian stuffed pancake wraps, me – with *tvorog*, the Russian-style soft cheese that I positively fell in love with, Alexei – with salmon. We munched on our pancakes and discussed the plan of action.

“So, I am thinking,” I said, “I’ll contact Vera today and tell her that I agree to be their courier. For some reason she really wants me in. Maybe in memory of her friendship with Grandma Anastasia, although I know she’s not telling me the whole truth about their relationship. I think they had a falling out when I was still young. I don’t remember much because my parents didn’t approve of Grandma’s royal friends, and so we never really talked about them.”

“That’s interesting,” said Alexei. “If your Grandma had a falling out with Duchess Vera, it must have been before Vera moved back to Russia. And she’s lived here since 1994.”

“That sounds about right,” I said, nodding. “But in any event, I’ll contact her today. Then, I think she’ll want to drag me back to St. Petersburg for all kinds of events she was planning for me before I escaped from her clutches. I’ll have to think over my wardrobe, of course.”

“About that,” said Alexei. “We’ve approved your budget.”

“I get a budget?” I said, giggling. “How boringly mundane.”

“It may be mundane,” he replied seriously, “but necessary. You will have expenses and you need a solid amount for that. If you have to bribe someone or buy something quickly you can’t be thinking: can I afford this? or will *Time* magazine approve this expense?” It didn’t escape my attention that Alexei was amazingly well informed about my assignment and financial circumstances.

“True,” I said. “But you’ve got to admit, it does sound kinda funny.”

“Ha, ha,” he said, without cracking a smile. “And now back to business.”

“Right,” I agreed. “That ball gown did make a hole in my budget.”

“But you looked magnificent in it,” he said, a dreamy smile shaping his sensuous lips. “As of now, you don’t have to worry about your expenses. Here is your new Visa.”

And he handed me a credit card.

“What’s the limit?”

“There’s no limit.”

“No limit? Wow!”

“Within reason, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Cash. Rubles.” He handed me a thick stack. “Dollars.” He handed me another stack. “And euros, just in case.” Yet another stack.

“How much altogether?” I asked, my eyebrows shooting up.

“10,000 dollars, 10,000 euros and 500,000 rubles.”

“Wow!” Was all I could say.

“If you need to replenish the supply, just let me know.”

“Okay.”

“Now, when you make contact with the Monarchists, here is what I want you to do...”

We sat in the little Sokolniki café for another two hours, discussing strategy, working out passwords and emergency signals, and generally finessing the details of the operation.

Later, a non-descript car took me back to the hotel. I locked the door to my room, again hung the “Do Not Disturb” sign and dialed Duchess Vera.

“I’m in,” I spoke into the phone.



Chapter 16

“I am so glad,” said Vera. “Just don’t go anywhere! Stay right where you are! I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Do me a favor,” I said, as memory of the recent encounter made me cringe. “Whatever you do, make sure you come by yourself. I don’t want to see Gurevich, nor his goons.”

“Of course, of course,” agreed Vera hastily. “I want to apologize again for what happened the other day. I want you to know that I was against it, but Gurevich insisted. And so I came with them, to make sure they treated you right. I am so sorry for...”

“There is no need,” I interrupted. “Please come over and we’ll discuss everything over a cup of tea.”

“Of course, of course,” she said. “I’ll be there in one hour, depending on the traffic.”

I hung up the phone and gave my room a sweeping glance. One hour... This was probably my last chance at privacy. I had one hour to finish up everything I needed to do.

Earlier, I bought a box of thin, but super sturdy German zipper plastic bags and adhesive tape that didn’t get affected by water or heat. I placed the bags and the tape on the table. Next to them, I laid out thread, needles and a pair of small, sharp scissors. Next to all this, I placed the stacks of dollars, euros and rubles, courtesy Alexei and Company.

I divided each stack into four equal portions and wrapped three portions of each currency into zipper plastic bags, flattening them to let all the air out and zipping each bag carefully. Next, I took out of the wardrobe my black puffer jacket and the cashmere coat and with scissors undid part of the lining in both. I hid one set of rubles, euros and dollars inside the jacket’s filling and distributed another set of currencies along the coat’s hem, securing all items with tape. After that, I sewed in the lining on both items. Finally, I smoothed out the surfaces of my outerwear and satisfied with the results, hung them back in the wardrobe.

Next, I took out my overnight bag, which I borrowed from my husband for this trip. The bag was especially made for travel to dangerous places, which were the majority of Paul’s destinations, and it included a secret compartment where I kept some documents and a few valuable items. I placed the third set of currencies into the secret compartment, carefully locking it back into place. The rest of the money I deposited into my purse, together with Alexei’s Visa card.

Now, I was prepared for all kinds of financial contingencies.

After that, I dug out of my wallet a piece of paper with Natalia Vasilyevna’s phone number on it.

“Hello, Natalia Vasilyevna,” I said into the phone. “This is Jade Snow, your travel companion from the St. Petersburg express!”

“Jade!” she exclaimed. “Finally! I was so hoping you’d call! I didn’t know how to contact you. You inadvertently left your black book with me. Apparently, it got mixed in with my books and somehow made its way into my luggage.”

“Oh, I’m so happy you have it,” I said, faking a sigh of relief. “I didn’t know where to look for it. I am so glad I didn’t lose it, after all!”

“No, you didn’t lose it,” said my travel companion reassuringly. “I’ve been keeping it safe for you, hoping you’d call.”

“I don’t know how to thank you!” I said, the gratitude in my voice absolutely genuine.

“Don’t mention it,” replied my kindly friend. “I figured it must be an important notebook, what with all those abbreviations and symbols inside. Must be some of your journalistic information...”

“Something like that,” I responded evasively and Natalia Vasilyevna didn’t press.

“So, when do you want to pick it up?” she asked. “And while you’re at it, why don’t you stay for dinner? My family really liked you, you know. They made me promise that when you called, I’d extend their personal dinner invitation.”

They were so sweet that I didn’t know what to say. “This is so nice of you,” I finally uttered, feeling my throat constricting. “Are you staying in St. Petersburg for a while?”

“Yes, they need help with the children, so I’ll be here for at least a few more weeks.”

“I’ll definitely take you up on your invitation,” I said, “but I am currently in Moscow. I’ll be returning to St. Petersburg soon, so could you keep my notebook safe till then?”

“It’ll be my pleasure,” she said. “You can keep it here for as long as you want!”

After hanging up the phone, I memorized Natalia Vasilyevna’s phone number and address, after which I burned the piece of paper.

Now, having taken all necessary precautions, I was ready to face Duchess Vera.



Chapter 17

“I am so sorry...” Vera took a step into my hotel room and immediately started apologizing again. “Forget it.” I waived her apology aside.

As I predicted, Vera was keen to drag me back to St. Petersburg, explaining that that’s where all the action was.

The day after I agreed to be their courier, she purchased two first class airline tickets and after a short flight we were back in St. Petersburg, riding in a taxi to Vera’s place. This time, I brought most of my luggage, as it appeared that I’d be making the gorgeous city on Neva River my new home, at least for the time being.

I dropped my bags on Vera’s intricate parquet floor and surveyed the room. It was the same room I stayed at last time: the imposing bed complete with Egyptian cotton linens, pretty comforter and inviting pillows, the familiar antique writing desk, a set of armchairs alongside the coffee table, and a *torchiere* next to the window overlooking the park; all that, in the heart of the historic district, just a few blocks from Nevsky and within walking distance to the Neva Embankment, Hermitage and some of the most picture-perfect views in the world.

Home, sweet home!

Vera had prepared a big agenda for me and kept dragging me to various social events and parties, proudly introducing me to assorted barons, countesses and dukes. We also did some shopping since I had to scale up my wardrobe, in order to cope with all these outings.

She took me to a score of luxury boutiques, where the sales people bent backwards and called me ‘Countess,’ and where you were expected to shell out thousands of dollars without a second thought. After a few of such trips, I finally rebelled and said that I had enough to wear for now and if there was anything else I needed in the future, I’d be sure to let her know. Vera sighed and left me alone, at least on that count.

She also introduced me to a few of the so-called New Russians, the *nouveau riche*, who, as I suspected, were a part of the financial backing of the Monarchist cause. I tried to commit to memory any names that stood out and paid attention to any potentially interesting conversations, in order to pass all that information to Alexei. My memory, generally pretty good, really got a workout with this flood of new data pouring at me every day. It was too risky to write anything down, so I had to play the role of Johnny Mnemonic for now.

Earlier in Moscow, Alexei and I had worked out a system of signals and passwords, in case I needed to pass information. I had two points of contact: the nearby supermarket and a florist’s shop. I also memorized a phone number, which I was to call if I needed to request an emergency meeting.

Sometimes I wondered if so many layers of security were really necessary. I thought I was quite safe under Duchess Vera’s wing. Who would ever suspect me, an American, a countess of royal blood and Vera’s very own protégé... working for the FSB? Besides, who were the Monarchists? Just a bunch of pitiful conspirators, nothing more. Who were they against this giant machine, the Russian State?

But Alexei had overruled my objections and made me swear that I’d observe all the necessary precautions or the whole thing was off. I certainly wasn’t about to back away now, so of course I promised to behave.

I knew I was one of the many cogs in this huge operation, perhaps an important cog, but just a cog, nevertheless. Somewhere out there in the shadows, many people were involved in surveillance, data gathering, monitoring, security and communications. Meanwhile, Alexei shuttled between St. Petersburg and Moscow, coordinating the whole thing and keeping it humming. I missed him terribly, but every day I felt his invisible protective presence. And when it was especially hard, all I had to do was think about him and I felt better.

I thought a lot about my little Lara, too. How many times I wanted to pick up the phone and listen to her voice, how much I longed to talk to her! But I couldn't... I had to cut all communication with home because of the risk of leading Gurevich or the Chechens to my family if something went wrong with my mission.

Meanwhile, I haven't forgotten about my *Time* magazine assignment either. In between parties and intel gathering I tried to spend as much time as possible exploring the historic St. Petersburg, the Hermitage, the golden domes, the unique system of draw bridges, the beautiful Metro, as well as the forward-looking St. Petersburg, like the giant Gazprom Tower in the new Gazprom City. The original proposal was to build the 300 meter, 3 billion dollar tower based upon cutting edge green design, right in the center. But the project ended up being relocated to the outskirts of the city to avoid damaging St. Petersburg's carefully preserved, historic skyline.

I also remembered to keep my eyes and ears open in regards to the Chechens. Whenever I saw Mr. Suleimanov, I felt involuntary shivers. I couldn't quite understand why. Was it because deep down I knew that he was involved with Svetlana's murder, or because I felt what was to come?

Suleimanov showed up at most of the events Duchess Vera dragged me to, and I always made it a point to listen in on his conversations in the hopes of hearing something to do with Svetlana's case. I was confident that one of his thugs had her blood on his hands, but the question was, which one? I was determined to find out and bring him to justice.

Shortly after our arrival Vera and I were at a party, which took place at the Menshikov Mansion. Yury Gurevich was there, as well as Suleimanov and another Chechen guy, apparently his first lieutenant.

After about half an hour of chatting and socializing I noticed that Vera had disappeared. Suleimanov, Gurevich and a few other guests were also gone. I slipped out of the room, pretending I was going to the ladies room, but instead, took off my shoes and silently climbed the stairs to the familiar back landing. Sure enough, the landing itself was dark, but a sliver of light peeked through the double door of the Monarchists' secret meeting room.

I tiptoed to the door and pressed my ear against it.

"We received a message from the Queen of England," said the same commanding voice I'd heard last time, "who sends us her support and admiration for our sincere efforts to restore the rule of God's appointee, Emperor of All Russia. We also received some positive indications from the CIA and MI6. They are promising us all the support and expertise we need. In our struggle, God is on our side!

"Back in 1918," continued the commanding voice, "the Bolsheviks had announced the 'Red Terror!' We will now respond with the 'White Terror' in the year 2011!"

"I agree," responded Gurevich's voice. "November seventh, the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution is approaching. We must celebrate it in style! Mr. Suleimanov, are your men ready?"

"My men," responded Suleimanov sharply, "are always ready! But nothing will happen until our demands are met: political asylum for my people in England, who've been wanted for terrorism in ungodly Russia..."

"It's done," said the commanding voice. "A request has been sent and MI6 guarantees speedy asylum approvals for your eagles."

“Also,” continued Suleimanov, “my men and I require better accommodations...”

“This has been taken care of, as well,” said Gurevich. “You and your men will be staying at one of my houses near the city. It’s very private, with excellent security. You can be sure that no one will find you there.”

“Next, we want the gold you promised us!”

“That will be taken care of as soon as we are able to get to it ourselves. It’s not that simple.”

“I don’t care,” said Suleimanov stubbornly, “whether it’s simple or not! We won’t move a muscle until we have our gold!”

“I understand,” replied the man with the commanding voice, except now his voice sounded buttery, almost seductive. “But consider this, Mr. Suleimanov. Where are you going to hide your gold now? Soon, the entire FSB, together with the police, will be on your trail. Meanwhile with us, you know the gold is well protected. Trust me, it would be much better if we delivered our payment to you later, when it’s safe to do so.”

There was silence, and then Suleimanov said grudgingly, “You better deliver on all your promises. And that also goes for your promise to grant us a Muslim State and independence!”

“You have my word as a nobleman!” responded the commanding voice emphatically.

“Good,” said Suleimanov. “Because otherwise you’ll have to deal with my eagles.”

“Your threat is absolutely unnecessary,” said the commanding voice evenly, but I detected a veiled warning in it.

“This is not a threat,” replied Suleimanov in an oily voice. “Just a friendly reminder.”

There was a moment of silence, in which I imagined those two staring each other down.

Then, the commanding voice said, “When are you ready to begin?”

“Sooner than you think,” retorted Suleimanov.

I cupped my ear, hoping to hear more about what they were planning... when I heard footsteps. Somebody inside that room was walking towards the door. I hastily tiptoed to the stairwell and almost ran down the stairs. I heard the door open upstairs, as someone stepped out of the room. I quickly put my shoes back on and rejoined the party, pretending that I’ve just returned from the ladies’ room.

Vera, Suleimanov and the rest of the conspirators re-emerged about half an hour later, all very somber looking. I tried to figure out which one of them was the man with the commanding voice, but no one seemed to match. It appeared whoever that man was, he wasn’t among the guests, which meant that he came in and left by the back door.

Vera was silent all the way back to the apartment. I felt tired and went to bed as soon as we got in. The next morning, I woke up at dawn, got dressed and quickly ate breakfast. I had important information that I needed to pass on. It was time for me to pay a visit to the flower shop located not far from the Sportivnaya Metro station.

“Leaving this early?” asked Vera, emerging out of her bedroom.

“Yes,” I said. “The weather seems very nice. I am going to take a walk and explore the city a bit for my *Time* piece.”

“Ah, that’s a pity,” said Vera. “I’ve been planning such an interesting trip for you today to the town of Pushkin, where the Katherine Palace is located! It is one of the most enchanting royal palaces, and in addition to the beautiful grounds and art, it also houses the famous Amber Room. You are going to love it! How soon do you think you may be back?”

“Sounds wonderful, Vera,” I replied. “I’ll try to be back as soon as possible.”



Chapter 18

I found the flower shop and relayed all the information to my contact, a smiling older woman with serious eyes. She assured me that everything would be passed on immediately.

“And these are for you.” She picked several large, blood-red carnations and wrapped them up.

“They are beautiful,” I said. “But I shouldn’t. I’m going to take a walk to the Metro and I don’t know if the flowers would survive in this cold.”

“Russian carnations are tough enough to withstand the St. Petersburg weather. Besides, I wrapped them in special thermal paper for you. They’ll be fine.” And she handed me the flowers.

I thanked her and leisurely headed back to Vera’s.

I was descending the escalator into the St. Petersburg’s stately Metro rivaling the sumptuous Moscow Metro. I couldn’t get enough of this miracle of architecture, the deepest underground transportation system in the world, and enjoyed it every chance I got. The exquisite gilded lanterns lining up the arched escalator tunnel cast a mysterious glow, which seemed more and more surreal as I moved deeper underground, all the way underneath the Neva River bed.

One of the amazing facts about the Russian Metro was that during World War II it doubled as a bomb shelter. It was by far the most luxurious and esthetically pleasing bomb shelter in the world.

I was nearly a quarter of the way down when my cell phone rang.

“Jade,” said Duchess Vera’s voice. “I was wondering, how soon will you be back?”

“Soon,” I responded. “I am at the Metro right now.”

“At the Metro?!” exclaimed Vera. “But why there?”

“Because I am heading back to you,” I said, frowning. Her reaction to my simple statement seemed awfully strange.

“But why didn’t you just catch a taxi?”

I was starting to get annoyed at this third degree.

“Because,” I said slowly and distinctly, “I enjoy the beautiful St. Petersburg Metro and I want to experience it every chance I get, that’s why!”

“Jade,” said Vera, and her voice sounded urgent. “This is very important! Tell me, what station are you at?”

“Why?”

“Just tell me, please!” said Vera pleadingly.

“All right,” I said. “I am currently heading down the escalator at the Sportivnaya Station. Anything else?”

“Yes,” said Vera in a very strange tone. “I want you to listen to me very carefully, Jade! When you get all the way down the escalator, take it straight back up, catch the first taxi and come straight to me! I beg you, do as I say!”

“Vera,” I said, starting to get worried. “Did something happen? Do you need my help?”

“Yes,” responded Vera quickly. “Something terrible happened and I need your help very, very urgently!”

“What happened?” I said, now really worried.

“Can’t tell you by phone, you must come as soon as possible! Oh please, I beg you, do as I say!”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” I said. “But I am already halfway down. It would probably be better if I took the train after all...”

“No!” screamed Vera. “Don’t! Trust me,” she added hastily, “it takes much longer by train. I know St. Petersburg and you don’t!”

That was true. “Fine,” I said. “I’ll do as you say. You just hang on! I’ll be there as soon as I can!”

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” Said Vera, clearly relieved. “Please, please hurry!”

In order to expedite my descent, I walked the rest of the way down the escalator, passing other passengers; then, thinking that this was ridiculous, I turned around and boarded it immediately on the way up. Having made the escalator round trip in record time in this accelerated fashion, I emerged back onto the street just a few minutes after entering the Sportivnaya Station. I headed to the curb in order to hail a taxi when Vera called again.

“Are you outside yet?” she asked impatiently.

“Yes,” I said. “I am on the curb now, trying to find a taxi.”

“Good!” she said, sounding much more upbeat. “Now, please catch one as quickly as possible and come here straightaway!”

“Vera,” I said, a little annoyed at her bossy manner. “What’s going on? Why are you acting so strange?”

“Just come!” said Vera. “I need you very badly!”

“All right,” I said. “I’ll be there very soon.”

I hung up and renewed my efforts to hail down a taxi. A couple of minutes passed and still there was no taxi in sight. I started thinking that perhaps I made a mistake listening to Vera; maybe I should’ve taken the train, after all. Throwing a look back at the Metro entrance, I decided that if a ride didn’t materialize within five minutes, I’d go back.

And at that very moment, I heard a powerful blast. The ground underneath shook violently, nearly making me lose my balance. Heavy black smoke came pouring out of the Metro station doors, as crowds of frightened people rushed out.

I ran towards the entrance to see if I could help. More and more people were spilling out from the doors, some covered in soot and blood, some coughing and crying.

I helped an elderly woman with a bloody forehead to a nearby bench. She seemed disoriented as she sat on the bench, smearing blood all over her face and whimpering. I realized that I was still holding my carnations, so I left them on the bench next to the woman and scanned the area, trying to figure out how to get her to a hospital. But the scene at the Sportivnaya Station resembled the Apocalypse. People were screaming, crying, trying to help each other, as more and more wounded staggered out of the station’s mouth and thick black soot covered the street.

It was clear, there was no way I could get a taxi here to take the old woman to a hospital. I dialed the free emergency number, hoping to get help that way. But the signal was busy. Apparently, many had the same idea. When I dug into my purse, trying to find something suitable to dress the old lady’s wound, I noticed a small boy, no more than five or six, standing alone in the middle of the street.

“Mama,” cried the little boy. “Mama, where are you?”

People were running around him like headless chickens and there was a real danger that someone might inadvertently knock him down. I dashed to the boy and carried him to the bench. I sat him next to the old lady who, despite her own wound, hugged him and whispered something soothing in his ear.

“Just give me a couple of minutes,” I said, addressing them both. “We’ll find your mama and we’ll get you to the hospital.”

Again, I dialed the emergency number. And still no luck.

But at that moment, I heard sirens signaling the arrival of OMON, the special police units. The area was quickly secured and an announcement came that the ambulances were on their way. With the help of OMON, more and more people were being carried up from the belly of the Metro. The air was filled with choking smoke and people's moans. I dashed to a young woman who was limping on her injured leg and helped her to my bench. She leaned on me, silent tears streaming down her face.

Then I finally saw the ambulance arrive. People in white robes dispersed in the midst of the bleeding and crying crowd and started doing their job. A young man with a doctor's satchel in his hand quickly examined the old woman's head wound and proceeded to examine the young lady's leg.

"Doctor," I said, "this little boy is looking for his mama."

The young man yelled, "Christina, here is a boy you need to see!"

A woman in a pantsuit who was holding a little girl in her left arm, took the boy by the hand.

"Don't worry," she said encouragingly, "we'll find her!"

"Is there anything else I can do?" I addressed everyone. Things now seemed under control, so I felt that I could leave. I did promise to help Duchess Vera, after all.

"*Spasibo* - thank you, we've got it," replied the doctor, who was busy bandaging the old woman's head.

"Thank you so much for your help," said the old woman. "I don't know what I would've done without you!"

"Yes," said the young woman. "Thank you from the bottom of my heart!"

"No problem," I said. "Take care. Hope you all recover soon, but I need to be going."

I made my way through the site of horror, as the bloody bodies were carried out of the station and women's wails pierced the morning air. I walked for a few blocks, breathing in the air that progressively became less and less smoky. Then, I hailed a taxi and gave the driver Vera's address.

I sat in the back seat, trying to calm down. For the first time since Vera's call, I was able to just sit and think. I looked at my hands and realized that I was still holding on to my carnations. I opened the packaging to see if they survived such long exposure to cold. The flowers nodded to me with their blood-red petals. They were still alive.

I stared at the carnations, when the Gypsy's warning drifted into my mind: "Stay away from underground places. But don't worry, you'll get help, so everything will turn out all right..."

And then, a horrible realization struck: *Vera knew about the attack on the Metro!*

A couple of minutes later, I was at the door.

Vera greeted me with a relieved smile. "At last," she said. "I was so worried!"

"Why were you worried?" I asked, keeping my voice deliberately even.

"Because," she pointed at the TV set, which was showing the site of horror at the Sportivnaya Station, "I've heard on TV about the... the blast." Her voice wavered and I gave her a closer look. Her eyes were red; her face bore traces of tears hastily wiped away with a silk handkerchief she was still holding in her hand.

"Vera," I said in the same even voice. "Why *did* you want me to leave the Metro?"

"Because I told you, I needed you here urgently."

All of a sudden, I felt awfully tired. "So," I said, already knowing the answer, "what happened to you? And how can I be of help?"

"Oh," said Vera, "you won't believe it, but the problem has already been fixed. A neighbor helped me."

I nodded. Just as I had expected. "So, what *was* the problem?" I asked.

"Oh, just a thing in the kitchen, nothing to worry your pretty little head about," she said vaguely. But to me everything was clear as day.

I marched to the kitchen, which appeared undisturbed. I opened the faucet, filled up a vase with fresh water and placed my carnations on the table in the living room.

"These are beautiful," said Vera. "Where did you get them?"

"Bought them," I said, "right before entering the Metro. And just like me, they survived the ordeal."

Vera didn't say anything, just stared at the flowers.

"Vera," I said, sitting down on a chair. The world felt very heavy and the huge load on my shoulders wasn't letting me breathe. I forced myself to look into her face. "There is no point in beating around the bush! You had no emergency in your kitchen or anywhere else. You knew about the attack. You knew exactly where and when it would take place. That's why you wanted me out of the Sportivnaya Station!"

Vera stared at me silently, her lip trembling.

"Why Vera? Why?"

She said nothing.

"I've seen an old woman," I went on softly, "her entire face covered in blood, and a little boy who'd lost his mother. I've seen people suffocating from smoke, and bodies carried out on stretchers. Innocent people have died! Why Vera? What for?"

Vera turned away, her shoulders shaking. "I told them," she said, sobbing, "I told them it was wrong! But they wouldn't listen. They are all busy playing their crazy games. And this hideous phrase they resurrected from the 1918 Civil War: *the White Terror*. What could have I done by myself against all these men?"

"Who executed the bombing?" I asked sharply.

"The Chechens."

As expected. "Who gave the orders?"

"Yury Gurevich."

"Right," I said. No surprise there.

"I was so worried about you," Vera said pleadingly, "when it turned out that you were inside the Sportivnaya Station. I just had to think of something - anything - to get you out of there."

"I am grateful you did, of course," I said sternly. "But you should've told me the truth. I could've saved a lot of people!"

"I am so sorry," she whispered. "I didn't want this to happen. I did try to talk them out of it. But I was all alone... They've already started looking at me suspiciously."

"You are not alone," I told her, as an inspired thought occurred to me. "You have me. Next time just tell me everything. Perhaps, I can help!"

She gave me a long look, as if trying to figure out whether my words had a hidden meaning. I smiled at her innocently, deciding that it was enough for today. I planted the idea in her head. Hopefully, this idea would bear fruit.

The TV was still full of horror scenes from today's bombing. The death toll kept climbing. It was now up to thirty six people. The following day was announced as a nationwide day of mourning. Next, the Chechen terrorists issued an Internet statement, claiming full responsibility.

I finished watching and dialed the phone number. As expected, no one answered that phone and as the message turned on, I said, "Sorry, wrong number."

This meant that I requested an emergency meeting.

I told Vera that I was going to the nearby supermarket to pick up some supplies. At the supermarket, I picked up a basket and wandered around the aisles, making sure there was no tail. I saw no one. The Monarchists with their clumsy technique, I would've noticed, and if there were any of

Alexei's people around, I was pretty sure I wouldn't know. Satisfied, I headed for the aisle with dried fruits and nuts, where I paused by a bin containing walnuts.

"You know, they have a great selection of nuts at the Doronin Café, just two blocks from here," said a passerby. "And today, they are running a special - three for one."

I bought a loaf of black Russian bread, some French pate and a bottle of red wine. Then I went for a leisurely walk in the direction of the Doronin Café. According to my contact, the meeting was to take place at one thirty p.m.

At one twenty, having thoroughly checked for the presence of a tail and having found none, I entered the Doronin Café and occupied the table in the furthest corner from the entrance. I ordered a cup of coffee and cream puff.

"Here we go," said the young waitress. "Coffee and cream puff." She laid down a pretty placemat, placed a steaming cup of coffee with an artistic oak leaf design on top, which was made of steam milk, and added the plate with the cream puff. Then she handed me a napkin with two words scribbled on it: *back door*.

I took the napkin and pretended to wipe my hands. Then, I handed the napkin back to her and said *spasibo* with a sunshine smile.

"You're welcome," she responded, removing the napkin. "Please let me know if I can be of further assistance."

I took a few sips of my coffee and bit into the cream puff, observing the café and the entrance to make sure no one followed me here. Everything seemed fine and I relaxed, awaiting the next signal. A minute later, the same young waitress passed by my table and gave me an almost imperceptible nod. That meant that the way was clear. I left a few bills on the table and slipped into the back door, which stood just a crack open. I proceeded through the dark corridor and knocked on the inconspicuous door at the end.

"Enter," said the voice that made my heart skip.

I opened the door and stepped in.



Chapter 19

“Is everything okay?” were Alexei’s first words. He got up from behind a desk in the corner and wrapped me in a protective bear hug.

For a moment, I allowed myself to linger in the heaven of his embrace. Then, I gently freed myself. I was here because I had important information. I couldn’t afford to get soft.

“Everything’s fine,” I said. “But I have some important intel.” And I told him about the Metro bombing and everything I learned from Vera.

He listened with deepening concern. “I suspected this much. So, they’ve announced *the White Terror*, but are hiding behind the Chechens’ backs. How very brave of them.”

“Listen,” I proposed. “What about arresting Yury Gurevich and Suleimanov. We have proof now that they are involved in subversive activities. Perhaps, if they were removed, the whole thing could be nipped in the bud?”

“Unfortunately,” he shook his head, “if we arrest these two now, the rest of them will go underground. And there are still some very big fish to fry. Some of their major leaders are stationed abroad - US, UK, Sweden. Besides, if we jump the gun, we can kiss the treasure goodbye. No, we’ve got to wait until the moment is right. The net has to come down on all of them at once. You and I, and so many others, we are just weaving this enormous web around them. But the time is not ripe yet.”

“It makes sense,” I agreed. “But listen, Vera seems to have her doubts. I clearly saw her remorseful today. I will try to cultivate that. My goal is to have her spill the beans regarding any future terrorist moves they might make. This way, we’ll be able to avert attacks.”

“Jade,” Alexei said in a husky voice, cradling my hand in his palm. “Be careful, I beg of you!”

He pressed my hand to his lips and then placed it against his heart. I inhaled, as my head began to spin dangerously. I was about to land in that alternate dimension where I always ended up when he was close.

But I had to be strong; I still had a big job to do! I so wanted to kiss him full on the mouth, but instead I just pecked him on the cheek. His scent was so desirable, so intoxicating... But I pushed him away.

“I will.” And I quickly left by the back exit, a bag of groceries in my hand.

A refreshing walk to Vera’s place did me good. It calmed me down after the encounter with Alexei, as my face began reacquiring its normal color. I touched my hot cheek, replaying in my mind his touch, his kiss, his strong heartbeat that still reverberated through my body. Somehow, I felt protected by that touch, that kiss, that heartbeat. With this kind of protection, I wasn’t afraid to do what I had to do.

The country was in shock from the vicious terrorist attack and the Sportivnaya Station was awash with flowers. People burned candles, held vigils and discussions, trying to come to terms with the tragedy.

Meanwhile, my job was to keep my eyes and ears open. Two days after the attack, Vera quietly slipped out of the apartment without telling me where she was going. I already knew what that meant. When she left that quietly and abruptly, it was because she had a meeting with the Monarchists. These

meetings were happening more and more frequently and after every one Vera would come home more and more upset. Something was up. I was determined to find out what.

I went to the supermarket and picked up a *Kievsky* cake and a nice bottle of sweet Spanish wine. Then I set up the table, made tea, laid out the cake and opened the wine. Vera was back at nine, in a very dark mood, just as I expected.

“Good evening,” I said, attempting to break the ice. “How are you, Vera?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said distractedly.

“How about a nice cup of tea?”

“Sounds good,” said Vera, sitting down at the table.

I poured some tea into her cup and cut a slice of cake.

Vera nibbled at the cake, silently sipping her tea.

No matter how I tried, I couldn’t get a word out of her.

“You know,” I said, “I bought some Spanish wine, your favorite. I took two gilded goblets out of Vera’s China cabinet and poured the wine. “Looks like you could use some.”

“Thank you,” said Vera and drank some from the goblet. “Nice bouquet,” she said approvingly. Then, as if deciding that it wasn’t the time to be bashful, she emptied her goblet and asked for more. I refilled it and took a small sip out of mine.

Vera emptied the second goblet and her pale cheeks slowly turned rosy. Her eyes now shone in a tipsy sort of way as she fixed them on me. “You know,” she said, “sometimes I think you are my only friend.”

“I appreciate that,” I said, refilling her goblet.

“Thank you,” she murmured, her tongue moving with difficulty. She drank up the wine.

“Let me know if I should add more,” I said.

“Yes, please,” she responded. I again refilled her goblet.

She downed it and announced, “Humans are so dumb. Look at us, fighting, robbing each other, lying, all because we think that it would give us an unfair advantage.” She shook her head and whispered in a confidential voice, “But I’ll tell you something - it never works. Nope! Never ever! The truth has a way of coming out no matter what! In this life you’ve got to earn everything through honest effort, or else!”

I eyed Vera with interest. This empty socialite, this vain, pampered duchess was suddenly turning philosophical on me. This was a first.

“Did something happen?” I asked to keep her on topic.

“Yes,” she muttered. “Something happened...”

I sat silently, letting her talk it out.

“See, they want another terrorist attack, this time, closer to Moscow. They feel they need to send a stronger message. And so... they will strike again.”

“Where?” I said. “When?”

She looked at me with a sly grin, wagging her polished finger adorned with a sparkling sapphire ring. “Ah, you want me to tell you everything, don’t you!”

“Not everything,” I said evenly. “Just the important things that may save many lives.”

“Of course... just,” nodded Vera with the same crooked grin.

“So...” I said and waited, looking her straight in the eye. If she thought I’d let her off the hook that easily, if she hoped she could hide her head in the sand again, she had another thing coming.

“Um...” she said hesitantly, and fell silent again. Then, she apparently made up her mind. “Are you sure you can do something about it?”

“Yes, I can,” I said firmly.

“But how?”

“That’s not important,” I said, eyeing her with a confident stare. Investigative reporting 101: when you want to coax the information out of someone who is hesitant to give it to you, it’s useful to hypnotize them with your stare, pull them into your field of influence, so to speak.

“Trust me,” I said, to reinforce my intention.

“All right,” she replied, then continued quickly as if afraid she might change her mind. “Tomorrow they are planning to bomb the seven a.m. *Sapsan* train to Moscow.” She exhaled and looked at me, expecting a reaction.

“Are you sure?” I said. “Are you absolutely positive?”

“As sure as one can be. We discussed the bombing during tonight’s meeting.”

“Where will the bomb be?”

“Multiple bombs – five to be exact, located at intervals along the tracks, to get as many carriages as possible. After the bullet train gets out of St. Petersburg and gains full speed, they’ll detonate.”

“Do you know the specific location?”

“No. The Chechens didn’t reveal that at the meeting.”

“All right.” I nodded, getting up.

“So... can you still do something?”

“I’ll try,” I said. “I have to think about it. I am going for a walk.”

I put on my coat and left without another word.

I wandered around the beautifully lit up historic St. Petersburg, past magnificent buildings, gorgeous bridges and exquisite statues, making sure no one followed me. Then, I made the call. When the message turned on, I said, “Excuse me, wrong number,” and hung up.

After that, I headed to the supermarket, which was open till midnight. In the deli section, I paused to pick up some delicious Russian salad called *Krasavchik*, when a man stopped next to me and said, “You should try this salad at the Doronin Café. Scrumptious, and only one half of the price.”

This meant that the meeting would be in twenty one minutes. I paid for the salad and headed to the Doronin Café. There, I sat down at the familiar table, ordered coffee and waited. The same waitress brought me my coffee and nodded almost imperceptibly.

I took a few sips of the brew, left a couple of bills on the table and quietly slipped through the back door into the familiar dark corridor. I opened the door and stepped in.

Alexei stood in the middle of the room, waiting. When he saw me, he breathed a sigh of relief and hugged me tight.

“I was so worried,” he whispered into my ear. “I thought something happened.”

“No,” I said, as my whole body melted from his touch. “Everything’s fine.”

He cupped my face in his hands and kissed me hungrily on the mouth. I wanted to free myself, I really did, but I couldn’t move a muscle, as if my entire body was under a spell.

We stood like this, having forgotten all about the treasure, terrorists and reality, until a small voice whispered to me from behind the veil of our very own surreal world, *but what about tomorrow’s bombing?*

I woke up, and with enormous effort managed to detach my lips from his. Alexei let out a tender moan. “I miss you so much,” he whispered.

I didn’t say anything, but that phrase almost made me forget again what I came here to do. I willed myself to focus.

“I have very important information,” I uttered urgently. “According to Vera, who has just come back from the Monarchist meeting, tomorrow there’s another bombing!”

Alexei immediately snapped out of his amorous state.

“When? Where?” he said in a businesslike tone.

“Tomorrow, seven a.m., *Sapsan* to Moscow. There will be five bombs along the tracks, positioned at intervals, in order to get the entire train. Vera didn’t know the exact location of the bombs but she said they would detonate once the train leaves the city and gains full speed.”

“I see,” said Alexei sharply, deep lines spreading across his high forehead. “First things first.” And he took out his cell phone. Turning his back to me, he spoke quietly to someone for several minutes. When he hung up, his face was focused and detached.

“This part is taken care of,” he said. Then he looked me in the eye. “Are you absolutely sure about all this?”

“As sure as can be. Vera swears they discussed it at the meeting.”

“But are you sure she isn’t lying?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. “She was pretty shaken up after the Metro bombing. She told me that she tried to dissuade them from going ahead with it, but hers was the lone voice of dissent and no one listened. Are you thinking this is disinformation?”

“It did occur to me,” he said with the same deep frown. “If for some reason they suspect you, they may decide to test you this way. It’s a very tricky situation. If they notice heightened security tomorrow around the *Sapsan*, they’ll know that you sold them out. It does seem awfully fast for a second bombing. With terrorists, after a bombing they’d usually lay low for a while before attempting something again.”

“I know what you’re saying, but I don’t think so,” I said. “My intuition is telling me Vera is genuinely against the bombings. I think there is a rift developing between her and the rest of them. And you know my intuition has gotten me out of some really, really tight spots in the past.”

“Perhaps you are right,” he agreed. “But there is still a risk that I might be right, so here’s what we are going to do. The train and the tracks will be examined thoroughly and we’ll have our people in position. We’ll try to stay as inconspicuous as humanly possible. There is nothing else that we can do. If this is a genuine attack and not a hoax, then we must prevent it.”

“Right.”

“But if it’s just a test to see if you are a double agent, then you can’t go back. I’ll put you up in one of our safe houses for tonight and tomorrow after the operation is complete, we’ll know better if it’s safe for you to go back.”

“No.” I shook my head. “Absolutely not!”

“Why not?”

“Because I have to go back tonight! Vera trusted me with this information. She was scared, I could tell, still she told me. What would she think if I just disappeared without a word? She’d think I betrayed her. And I am trying to cultivate trust here.”

“But what if she’s testing you?”

“I know she is telling the truth,” I said stubbornly. “I *have* to go back. I still need to find out where the treasure is and when they are planning their main strike, remember?”

He smiled bitterly. “I remember this every waking minute of my life, and even when I am fast asleep. But you are too important. I can’t allow you to go back under these circumstances.”

I listened to him as the Gypsy’s voice spoke in my head. *The world needs your help, HE needs your help!*

“Alexei,” I said, gazing into his magical eyes, “do you still need me to find out whereabouts of the Gold Train treasure and the date of the Monarchist strike?”

“Yes, but...”

“Tsshh...” I gently held my finger to his lips. “If you still need me there, I must go now. If I don’t, then the whole operation is ruined. Trust me,” and I placed my hand against his burning cheek, “I know what I’m doing!”

He took my hand and covered it with kisses, making me tremble from every touch.

I gave him a quick peck on the lips and left the room without looking back.



Chapter 20

When I entered the door, Vera still sat at her round dining table in almost the same pose as before. As soon as she saw me, she got up and looked at me inquiringly. I didn't say anything, just gave her a reassuring smile. We had a quiet late dinner at the same elegant dining table. Vera was incredibly subdued and called it an evening right after we ate. But long after she retired, I sat at my tiny desk, reading and listening to the smallest sounds from the outside. The St. Petersburg night was quiet...

After my nightly vigil, I woke up after nine. I quickly dressed and hurried to the TV room, hoping to catch the news. The TV was already on and Vera was sitting in her armchair, watching.

"They just said," she greeted me, "that a terrorist plot to blow up the *Sapsan* has been averted."

I nodded and sat down beside her, feeling a strong urge to start dancing.

"Tea? Muffin?" offered Vera. The coffee table next to her was already set for breakfast.

"Thank you," I said, suddenly feeling ravenously hungry. I devoured two muffins and a healthy chunk of *tvorog* with honey and fresh *smetana*, washing all that down with a couple of cups of strong chai.

Vera looked at me curiously, but said nothing.

Meanwhile, the newscaster was talking about the failed terrorist attempt.

"A massive terrorist plot has been uncovered today. Five bombs planted under the tracks have been neutralized as the seven a.m. *Sapsan* train to Moscow was preparing to leave St. Petersburg. Preliminary investigation suggests that the bombs, featuring a sophisticated remote detonation device reminiscent of the latest British designs, have been built by an expert in modern explosives. The bombs were found by the track maintenance crew, who immediately alerted authorities. The FSB operatives detained the train before it left the Moskovsky Railway Station. All passengers were taken to safety. Members of the track maintenance crew who uncovered the bombs, Ivan Sabruev and Evgeny Malishev, have both received personal commendations from the President of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Medvedev."

"See," I said, "the bombs were found by the maintenance crew."

Vera nodded with a relieved smile. "How lucky for them."

"Yes," I agreed, "incredibly lucky."

"Do you think they'll buy it?"

I didn't ask who *they* were, as it was clear that Vera was referring to my, and now her, worst friends.

"Of course they will!" I said with confidence. Vera relaxed a little, although some of her tension remained for the rest of the day.

As twilight fell on St. Petersburg and its exquisite buildings became illuminated with fairy tale lights, I decided to go for a nice evening stroll.

When I came back, I found Vera nervously pacing the living room.

"Is everything all right?" I asked.

"What have I done!" responded Vera in a terrified whisper. "I betrayed my cause and my friends!"

I stared at her, wondering what could've happened in the short time that I was gone. Her face was contorted with fear. It appeared for whatever reason, she was losing it and that was dangerous not only to Vera herself, but to me, as well as the entire operation.

I took her by the hand and sat her on the sofa. “Vera,” I said in the most soothing voice I could muster. “You didn’t betray anyone. On the contrary, you saved many innocent lives. You should be absolutely proud of what you’ve done!”

“Still,” she said in a shrill voice, “they are my friends and this is my cause!”

I said, “Vera, what happened between the time I left for a walk and now?”

“They called an emergency meeting for tomorrow. They didn’t say it, but I know, they’ll want to discuss a possible traitor in our ranks,” she replied in a panicked voice. “What if they suspect? What if they know it was me, who... who... you know...”

“Relax,” I said. “*How* would they know? It’s been announced everywhere that the maintenance crew found the bombs. They’ll be holding award ceremonies for those two guys, broadcast on national television. There is no way they’d think it was you!”

“True,” agreed Vera, relaxing a bit. “Still, I voiced my objections more than once. They know I am against terrorism.”

“So what?” I said lightly. “You are entitled to your opinion. Plus, you are a woman and women are supposed to be genteel; they’ll likely attribute your objections to that. Plus you are a duchess and co-chair of the Monarchist Committee. No, I think you are beyond reproach.”

“You think so?” said Vera, relaxing a bit more.

“I know so,” I said confidently, feeling as if I was trying to talk sense into a seventy-something-year-old child.

“But you have no idea what kind of people are now at the helm,” started Vera again. “Gurevich, Ponyatovsky, Vrangal (the last two were new names and I made a mental note to pass them along to Alexei), Suleimanov and the other Chechens. They are dangerous, they’ll stop at nothing!”

“Look, if you just act calmly and say as little as possible, you’ll be fine. And when the failed bombing is discussed, try to act exactly as others do, whatever their emotions might be: anger, indignation... Understand?”

She nodded as I met her terrified eyes. I wondered, was I taking too much risk here? Could I let her go to that meeting? What if she lost it and they realized it was indeed her doing? But at the same time, if she didn’t show it would arouse even more suspicion.

“All right,” said Vera, now visibly relaxed.

I gave her an encouraging smile, thinking that if she kept up with this panicky behavior, she was bound to give herself away sooner or later. If she ended up in their clutches, I was confident she’d spill the beans about me in no time. I had two, three days tops. All of a sudden, I felt a great sense of urgency. Somehow, I had to speed up the process of finding the Gold Train treasure. But how? That *was* the question!



Chapter 21

The following afternoon, as I was returning home from my daily exploration trip, I noticed Vera walking out the door, flanked by two Chechens. They all got into the black Mercedes SUV, which resembled a tank. I was used to Vera's frequent secret meetings, but being escorted to one of them by Chechens was a first.

I immediately recalled her fearful behavior and knew that I needed to follow them, just in case. In case of what? I had no idea, but for some reason I was sure I needed to do it. How would I help her if she got in trouble? I didn't know, but decided I'd worry about that if and when I had to.

Luckily, I was able to flag down a passing taxi.

"Follow that black Mercedes SUV," I said to the driver.

In the gathering twilight, the car in front of us did several sharp turns and roundabouts, making sure no one followed. I told the driver to keep his lights off, securing my request with a hundred dollar bill. He was pretty good and deftly navigated the streets. Soon, we left the posh center of St. Petersburg unnoticed. After going through some working districts, factories and docks, we finally emerged in the suburbs. The Mercedes turned from the highway onto a narrow dirt road, following it for another two miles. Then it drove towards a gated entrance. Behind the gate surrounded by a stone wall stood an old mansion set in the middle of an extensive dark park.

"This is as far as I go," said the driver, stopping some distance away, behind an outcropping of trees. "Pay up."

I got out and gave him the promised fee.

"I'll pay you double," I said, "if you wait for me."

"I don't know what you are up to, lady," said the driver, "but I wouldn't advise it. This place has a bad reputation."

"Triple?" I said.

The taxi driver shook his head and sped off without a word.

I was on a silent night road, alone, and in front of me loomed the house where Vera disappeared with the Chechens... the house with the 'bad reputation.'

The night fell as I quietly moved in the shadows. The imposing iron gate seemed deserted, but I had a distinct feeling that someone on the other side was watching. No, it was too risky to try and climb it here. I tiptoed away from the gate, moving along the tall stone wall that spanned the perimeter of the estate. In the moonlight, I noticed a spot where the vines grew right over the stone wall's top.

I pulled on the vines. They seemed sturdy enough. I climbed all the way up without any complications and stretched my body on top of the wall to take a breather and figure out what to do next. From this position I could clearly see the house and grounds. The front lit up for a moment and I saw the familiar Mercedes SUV parked in front of the main entrance. The car seemed empty. It appeared Vera was already inside the building.

One of the Chechens came out of the house and addressed the man guarding the front door.

"Did you let the dogs out?"

"Yes," responded the guard. "All five of them. And they are extra hungry tonight."

"Good," said the Chechen and went back inside.

Then it went dark again.

Unfortunately, the vines didn't reach all the way to the ground on the other side of the wall. But luckily, the wall itself was uneven and crumbling. I used the wall's crevices as insteps to help me climb down safely. I was nearly half way down, when one of the stones broke off in my hand and I fell the rest of the way.

Thankfully, there were some evergreen bushes that softened my landing. I scrambled out of the bushes on all fours, praying no one heard me. I was about to get up from my hands and knees when I suddenly found myself nose to nose with a huge wolf. When the momentary shock passed, I looked closer and realized that it wasn't a wolf, but a German Shepherd. The giant dog sniffed me silently, his eyes gleaming in the dark, his foul breath tickling my nostrils, his large teeth just inches from my throat.

I experienced a suspended moment, when the time simply stopped. In that split second, a lot went through my mind. Was this the end? Will I ever see Lara and Paul? Will I ever see Lily? And Alexei? Next, the Gypsy's words rang in my mind: *Trust your psychic powers!*

Speaking of Lily. I could communicate with her. Just like I communicated with James, the giant German Shepherd who saved me from drowning in my Stepford, USA adventure. I always operated under the belief that all animals were good and kind. That's why they talked to me. Why would this particular dog be any different?

"Poor thing," I transmitted to the dog telepathically. "They keep you hungry overnight, hoping you'd be more vicious, don't they?"

I carefully stretched out my hand and petted him. The German Shepherd gave a tiny, pitiful squeal. The huge dog closed his eyes and allowed me to pet him.

"I know, it's terrible," I said to him, getting back to my feet. "But it's no good attacking people either, I hope you realize that."

The dog looked at me with his intelligent eyes. "I know that," he responded.

"I want to help you. I don't know how yet, but I promise I'll get you out of here."

"There is nothing you can do," he transmitted. "The owners won't let me go. Besides, my whole family is here. I can't leave them."

"I understand," I communicated to him. "I have a family too, but they are very far away, in America. My name is Jade, by the way. And yours?"

"Buran."

I thought the name was appropriate. Buran meant "big storm" in Russian. As I thought this, I heard a rustle and two more dogs came into view, as large as the first one, but younger. I took an involuntary step back.

"Don't worry," said Buran and added proudly, "these are my sons, Ostriy and Bistriy."

Ostriy meant "sharp" in Russian and Bistriy, "fast," I noted.

"You have very handsome sons," I said to Buran. "Nice to meet you, Buran, Ostriy and Bistriy. I'd love to stay and chat, but right now I need to get inside. This is a matter of life and death."

"Dad, what's going on?" said Ostriy. "Why are you talking to this human?"

"Listen here," said Buran to his sons. "I always knew there were some good humans out there. This human, her name is Jade, is unlike any you've ever met. She can talk to us and she understands us. We must help her."

"I swear," I communicated back to them, "I'll find a way to get all of you out of here, even if I have to smuggle you out! You deserve to be loved and well cared for!"

"She does seem different, Dad," agreed Bistriy.

"All right," transmitted Ostriy. "What do we do?"

"We need to show Jade the back entrance, the one the caretaker uses. I overheard the guards yelling at him the other day for forgetting to lock it. He promised he'd lock it every night, but he's old and

forgetful. And I think he might be doing it out of spite, too. He hates his bosses, just like we do, and is staying here only because he's old and doesn't have anywhere else to go. If we are lucky, the door will be unlocked tonight."

As we moved stealthily through the dark grounds, Buran led the way with his two sons by my side, protecting me. Once again, I heard a rustling noise and two more dogs joined us. Buran explained the situation to his remaining children and we continued with our plan.

The low back door, half buried by the overgrown ivy, was indeed unlocked. It opened quite easily with just a slight screech.

"We'll guard this area while you are inside, Jade," said Buran. "Be back well before dawn. When it's light, we can't protect you."

"I'll be back as soon as I can," I said, and disappeared inside.

I moved like a shadow along the servants' corridor. The TV blared inside the caretaker's room; it looked like the old man couldn't sleep. Next, judging from the smell, I passed by the kitchen. There was still someone working in there, moving heavy pots, opening and closing cabinets. The smell was that of something being baked. I made a mental note to stop by the kitchen on the way out, to see if I could find some food for my new friends.

I kept moving through the long dark corridor until I reached a tightly shut door. When I heard voices coming from behind it, I knew I was at the right place.

"While the first attack was a success," said the same commanding voice I'd overheard at the Menshikov Mansion, "we have a big problem with the second! What the hell went wrong?"

"You know what," snapped Suleimanov's voice. "Some damn maintenance crew found the bombs! But that can't stop us! Adversity only makes us, Chechens, stronger! We are already planning a new attack. And I can promise you, every subsequent attack will be more deadly than the last!"

"What?" I heard Vera's voice. "Another attack... so quickly?"

"Duchess," piped in the commanding voice, "the more fear and confusion we can generate, the more advantageous for our cause."

"That's true," said Vera, sounding unsure. "But isn't it a little too much? It does seem a little too bloody, a little too..."

"I don't understand," Suleimanov objected sternly. "Are you against our methods? Or are you against our cause?"

"No, no, no. Of course not," said Vera, and I detected a whiff of fear in her voice. "It's just that..."

"Just what? Are you questioning our tactics or are you trying to sabotage the whole operation?" said Suleimanov, and I heard a thinly veiled threat in his voice.

"Now, now, Mr. Suleimanov," said, what sounded like an old man's voice. "Of course, Duchess Golitsina doesn't mean anything of the sort."

"Right," said Vera quickly. "It's just that... just that... I don't want any of your people getting hurt, that's all. When they commit so many strikes, it increases the risk."

"I'll worry about my people's safety," snapped Suleimanov. "If I say we can execute another attack, it means we can do it. Period!"

"Excellent," said Gurevich, "I like your way of thinki... pshhii!" He finished with a resounding sneeze. "Where is that damn doctor!" Then he yelled into the intercom, "Matvei! Matvei! Where is the doctor? I told you to send for him immediately!"

"Now, Mr. Gurevich," the old man's voice chimed in, "I really must protest. I don't think it's appropriate to invite outsiders when we are having a secret meeting."

“Relax, Count,” said Gurevich carelessly. “Dr. Stern is my oldest and most loyal personal physician. I made him wealthy. I own him. He wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize his standard of living. You can say anything, he won’t even hear it. I train my help well... pshhii!”

“Dr. Stern is on his way up,” announced a voice from the intercom, followed by footsteps from what seemed like multiple people.

As the heavy footsteps approached, I thought it be wise to retreat and quickly retraced my steps through the same corridor. On my way out, I remembered my new doggie friends. I peeked into the kitchen and making sure no one was there, slipped inside. The room was now empty and dim, with only a night light illuminating the counter.

I opened the oversized fridge and grabbed as much sausage and ham as I could carry, then quickly proceeded to the back door, emerging on the other side. Buran and his family occupied strategic positions around the back courtyard, awaiting my return. They all got up, their tails wagging.

“You all waited for me!” I said. “Thank you, guys, so much!”

“Don’t mention it,” said Bistriy importantly. “It is our job to guard and protect. We’d rather do this for you than for them.”

“I brought you food,” I said, laying on the ground the bounty from the fridge. “Just make sure you finish it all. Don’t leave a single trace, so they don’t suspect someone’s been sneaking food out for you...” I stopped, noticing how ravenously the poor dogs devoured the food. It seemed my remark was superfluous.

I left them to their dinner, climbed over the wall and emerged back on the road. I made the call and started jogging back toward the direction of the city. Twenty minutes later, I reached the highway and flagged a passing semi-trailer truck, which took me to the nearest Metro station. From there I caught a taxi, which dropped me off at the café. Forty minutes later I was in the familiar room, telling Alexei everything I’ve overheard.



Chapter 22

I went back to Vera's, feeling happy with myself for a job well done. It was already past midnight, but Vera still wasn't back. I changed into my pajamas and dove under the warm covers, thinking there would be time to talk to her in the morning.

In the middle of the night I awoke from a strange noise. The front door banged, then I heard footsteps. I turned on the light and looked at the clock. Two a.m. Was that Vera? But she knew not to disturb me at such late hour. Usually, when she returned that late she'd walk so softly that I'd never hear her. Could it be an intruder?

I picked up a heavy candlestick from the side table and quietly tiptoed to the door. There was a sound of a kettle being put on the stove, followed by what sounded like sobs. I rushed to the kitchen, momentarily blinded by the full light. Vera stood in the middle of the room, her chin trembling, eyes red. Her normally straight, regal posture was gone. Instead, in front of me was an old, lost, scared woman, almost unrecognizable.

"Vera," I said, putting down the candlestick and turning off the whistling kettle, "what happened? Is everything all right?"

"Oh, Jade. Oh..." and she started crying.

I took a teapot out of the cabinet and made tea. Next, I sat the sobbing Vera in a chair and handed her a cup of tea with honey.

"Vera, what happened?" I said.

"Oh, Jade," she whispered, her hand trembling. "If only I could..."

"You can tell me! What happened?"

"I... I am so sorry that I dragged you into this..."

"Dragged me into the Monarchist organization?" I prompted.

"Ye...es," she sobbed. "It's all my fault."

"What is your fault?" I probed. "Did something happen tonight, when you went to see your Monarchist friends?"

"How did you know I went to see them?"

"Umm... It's just that you always wear this kind of expression when you come from these meetings." I made a save.

"Really?" she said. "I've never noticed any special expression."

"We hardly notice our own expressions, do we?"

"That's true," agreed Vera, starting to sob again. "Oh, I should've never dragged you into this. And now look what's happening!"

Giving up on trying to get anything out of Vera, I just sat back and sipped my tea. When she's ready, she'll tell me.

I didn't have to wait long.

"It was horrible," she said in a pitiful voice, staring in front of her with empty eyes. "I never knew people could be like this."

I kept quiet, letting her talk it out freely.

"At first, everything was normal. The Chechens announced they were readying another terrorist attack soon. But then Gurevich insisted on seeing his doctor right there, during the meeting. He never

managed to get rid of his cold, the same cold that bothered him at the meeting when the *Sapsan* bombing was discussed. Then his personal physician, Dr. Stern, arrived and practically started giving him a physical in front of everyone. Naturally, we were all annoyed at his physician being present at a secret meeting, but Gurevich brushed aside the objections, saying that he owned him.

“And that’s when everything spun out of control. They were all yelling, blaming each other for the second attack’s failure. Then suddenly, one of them suggested that the physician was the traitor since he was also in the house during the previous meeting and could’ve overheard the *Sapsan* bombing discussion. Someone objected that Dr. Stern wasn’t in the room at the time of actual discussion, but no one listened. They were all yelling, accusing the poor man of treason.

“At that point, Suleimanov, with his hot Caucasus blood, really lost it. He jumped over the table and attacked the poor doctor, who tried to defend himself. But what could he do with just a doctor’s bag and stethoscope against a sharp knife? Suleimanov started stabbing him like mad, until the doctor fell. But even then, he just kept stabbing his body. The others tried to pull him away, but by the time they succeeded, the doctor was dead. After that, they all took the body out and buried it in the garden. Then they returned to the room and resumed planning yet another attack, as if nothing happened.”

Vera finished, still staring straight ahead and swaying slightly in her chair. Then she shifted her blank stare towards me and said melancholically, “But I shouldn’t be telling you all this. You shouldn’t be involved.”

“I’m already involved,” I reminded her. “You already got me involved, remember?”

“That’s true,” she murmured apathetically. “I don’t know what to do any more.”

“I know what to do,” I said. “Tell me, when and where?”

“I... I don’t know if I could...” she said uncertainly.

I looked at her in disbelief. This empty socialite, this spineless phony was really starting to annoy me. First, she dumps all this stuff on me and then she clams up! I decided to bluff.

“Fine,” I said. “Don’t tell me! Suit yourself! Take this information with you to the grave if you wish. But any innocent lives lost because of you will be on your conscience! Remember, God sees everything. Good night, I’m off to bed.” I started walking away.

The moment Vera thought I’ve lost interest, she started after me.

“Please wait! Don’t go! All right, I’ll tell you. It’s a simultaneous attack on the Moscow Sheremetievo Airport and the St. Petersburg Pulkovo Airport. They’ll have female suicide bombers in the international arrivals area during the busiest time of the day. They are saying they want to send a strong message to the international community.”

“Date?”

“Two days from now.”

“You did the right thing,” I said.

“What are you going to do?”

“Don’t worry about that and forget this conversation ever happened,” I said, deciding that my best bet was to appeal to her religious nature. “Let’s just pray that innocent lives are spared and hope God grant us our wish.”

Vera gave me a searching look. I smiled at her reassuringly and went back to my room. As soon as she fell asleep, I sneaked out of the apartment and went to see my contact.

With this new information, the noose around the conspirators’ necks got ever tighter. But it was too early to snap the mousetrap shut, as we still didn’t know where the treasure was.

So far, we’ve been lucky. But how long would this luck last? How much longer could I get away with spying on them without them realizing it? I felt it was the calm before the storm. The only thing I didn’t know was where the storm would come from.



Chapter 23

Two days later, we heard on the news that a major terrorist attack targeting Russia's two busiest airports, Moscow's Sheremetievo and St. Petersburg's Pulkovo, had been averted by the FSB, and that a number of Chechen militants had been arrested as a result.

Vera listened to the news indifferently. In the afternoon, she received a call and without a word got dressed and left.

The evening came, but she still wasn't back. I went to bed, but when I woke up the next morning, I noticed that her bed wasn't slept in.

I picked up her old fashioned, leather bound address book and called a few of her closest personal contacts to see if she'd forgotten to let me know that she'd been visiting with them. But none of them had seen her. Next, I dialed the luxury shops and restaurants she loved to frequent. No luck... Vera had a habit of staying at some ball or social event till the wee hours of the morning, but as far as I knew, there were none on her weekly social calendar, otherwise I'd be hearing about them endlessly. And she would've certainly said something if she was leaving town; most likely she would've attempted to drag me with her.

Vera had disappeared. No one knew where she was, and no one saw her. Something didn't seem right; I felt more and more convinced that it had to do with the Monarchists. What if they found her out? What if they were keeping her somewhere against her will? Vera was old and fragile, moreover, she was used to being pampered. If she indeed was held somewhere, it could be detrimental to her health. Now I was really concerned!

I hastily pulled on my jeans and a warm cashmere sweater over my white cotton blouse. Then I got into my trusty black puffer jacket and Columbia walking boots, grabbed my leather gloves, purse and locked the door. My legs carried me all by themselves to the Menshikov Mansion, the one place I still haven't checked.

As I walked, another chilling thought occurred. What if they tortured her? At her age and with her delicate constitution, she couldn't survive that! The next thought made me stop dead in my tracks. What if she spilled her guts about me? Then the Monarchists would be able to connect the dots and the entire operation would be completely ruined. They'd go deep underground, bury or move the gold, and we'd be left with nothing!

I had to find Vera, and fast. According to our agreement, in case of an emergency like this one, I needed to contact Alexei or one of his operatives. But I knew that would slow me down. While I was calling them and explaining the situation, precious time would be lost. Besides, there was a real risk that Alexei would not allow me to go to the Menshikov Mansion, citing excessive risk.

On the other hand, I could be barking up the wrong tree. What proof did I have that the Monarchists were holding Vera prisoner? It was just my hunch, nothing more. And how could Alexei and his people help me find out whether she was indeed in Gurevich's or the Chechens' clutches? Only I knew my way around the Menshikov Mansion. They couldn't be of any help in this reconnaissance trip. After I've gathered all the necessary information, I'd call Alexei so we could put our heads together to figure out the next step... if Vera indeed were in need of our help.

I thought it was a perfect plan, so I flagged down a taxi and said to the driver, "Menshikov Mansion." One block from the mansion I paid and walked to the building, hoping to find a way to get

inside inconspicuously. The front entrance was off limits; I knew that there were guards stationed just inside.

But I lucked out. There was a delivery truck parked by the service entrance, on the northern side of the giant mansion. Some kind of boxes were being carted from the truck into the house. I waited until the two deliverymen went back inside the truck to get the next batch of cargo. Then, I slipped quietly through the service door, finding myself in the basement storage area.

I quietly tiptoed through the service wing, then took the stairs up and emerged on the first floor. I knew this long corridor adorned with marble statues and golden sconces. If I continued to the right, I'd end up in the Grand Ballroom. To the left, I'd end up at the bottom of the stairwell that would take me to the upper levels and the Monarchists' secret meeting room.

I turned left, quickly moving towards the back and praying that no one would see me. So far, I've been extremely lucky, but I desperately needed my luck to last until I was safely out of this place. I tiptoed up the stairwell and reaching the familiar door, cupped my ear to listen.

Again, I was in luck. The Monarchists were inside.

"... non negotiable, period!" thundered Yury Gurevich's voice.

"I refuse to authorize this, Mr. Gurevich! She is one of us!" objected another voice, which I seemed to recognize as one of Vera's socialite friends, Count Vorontsov.

"Don't raise your voice at me," responded Yury Gurevich, in a tone that would send shivers down anyone's spine. Count Vorontsov fell silent.

"But Mr. Gurevich, I really must protest," attempted another voice. "You can't justify keeping the distinguished Duchess Vera Golitsina in a dungeon like that. She'll be missed. Authorities may come looking for her. And you'll be sorry."

"Are you threatening me?" hissed Yury Gurevich. "Perhaps, you are a traitor, too? Maybe you belong in that dungeon next to her? Perhaps, you'd like to be questioned by my people, as well?"

"No, no, no," responded the man in a slightly hysterical voice. "That won't be necessary. I was simply pointing out that you can't do that to a duchess, you, a mere commoner..."

"WHAT?!!! What did you just call me, *Baron*?!" Gurevich spat out these words, putting special emphasis on the last one.

"I...I... j...just," the man stumbled in sheer terror, and it occurred to me that the poor thing might have peed his pants.

"Gentlemen," interjected the commanding voice that I heard before. "Please, no arguments! It is important that we stick together. Baron, Mr. Gurevich, please shake hands."

There was a pause, as I imagined those two grudgingly shaking each other's hands.

"Good," continued the same commanding voice. "We are at a crucial juncture right now. We have a leak, which cost us two perfectly good operations and some of our best men. If Duchess Vera is the source of this leak, she must be questioned, noble blood or not. We must find out who the traitor is so that these failures won't happen again. Do we all agree on that?"

No one objected, so I assumed everyone did agree. It was clear, Duchess Vera was in a dungeon of some sort, but where was it located? Was it under this mansion, or perhaps... I held that thought because the commanding voice was speaking again.

"But we can't stop now. We must persevere! I propose a new operation," he said, as I pressed my ear as close to the door as possible and tried not to breathe. "This time, we won't target civilians, but a government installation. We have just the place in mind and we estimate that it'll take them a while to recover from this blow."

I listened so hard, attempting to catch every single word of what was said, that I completely forgot to watch for the stairwell. "We have some good intel..."

“What are you doing here?” said a rough voice. I spun around. A guard stood by the stairwell, pointing his gun at me.

The door to the meeting room opened and the Monarchists spilled out.

“Well, well, well,” said Yury Gurevich mockingly. “Look what we’ve got here! Her Highness, Countess Rosanova herself, Duchess Vera’s little friend, might I point out. Here is your proof, gentlemen, if you ever needed any! I didn’t. All the problems started after this so-called countess arrived and Vera introduced her to our Society.”

“Now just a minute Mr. Gurevich! She’s the real Countess Rosanova, I traced her genealogy myself,” again chimed in the Baron in an indignant voice.

“Shut up, Pierre,” said the owner of the commanding voice, who turned out to be a tall, imposing man with a straight posture and military crew cut. The Baron shut his mouth, as if suddenly swallowing the rest of his words.

“Please explain to us, young lady, what you are doing here,” the owner of the commanding voice addressed me calmly. A chill went straight through my body. This man was dangerous, I could feel it. Despite his calm tone and almost casual demeanor, he wasn’t the one to mince words and he’d do whatever it took to push his agenda through.

I stared back at him in silence, frantically trying to decide what to do next. But no bright ideas came.

“If I were you,” he went on evenly, “I’d rather talk to me, than to Gurevich’s butchers. It would be a pity, really. So young and so beautiful.”

I wanted to say something, but my tongue didn’t seem to obey me.

“Fine! If you prefer it this way... Yury, place *Her Royal Highness* in the dungeon,” he addressed Gurevich.

“I’ll be missed,” I said, deciding it was high time I spoke up. “I am a US citizen and people will come looking for me. If I don’t show up in two hours, they’ll know to look here.”

“I don’t think so,” said the man with a crew cut, throwing me a shrewd glance. “I think you are bluffing. Take her to the dungeon until we can have a proper chat with both traitors.”

The two guards searched the pockets of my puffer jacket and took away my purse. They led me through lavishly decorated first floor, then down the stairs, lower and lower, until we reached a space deep beneath the mansion, where the stone walls were slimy and dark, and steps hard and slippery. My nostrils tickled from that unmistakable dungeon smell, the smell of must and hopelessness.

The guards opened the cast iron door and pushed me inside. Behind me, the heavy door closed with a loud thud.



Chapter 24

I stood by the door, trying to adjust my vision to the darkness of the dungeon. At first I saw nothing, but my hearing was as sharp as ever.

“Peep, peep,” I heard under my feet and jumped away in revulsion. *Rats! Damn, where is Princess Lily when you need her!* I thought, swallowing hard. I was prepared for a lot of things, but rats?

Meanwhile, my eyes started adjusting to the environment. From the dim light streaming down from a solitary grated slit above, I could see that the room was pretty large; walls were stone and probably very thick. There seemed to be no other doors, except the one I was just pushed through.

From all indications, the situation didn’t look very good. Frankly, it looked just as dark and hopeless as this dungeon. I decided it was a good time to find a place to sit down and assess my chances of getting out of here. In the dim depths of the dungeon I noticed some kind of a ledge with a pile of rags on top, so I started slowly moving in that direction, trying not to step on any rodents along the way.

All of a sudden, the pile moved. I froze, the sound of my heartbeat reverberating in my ears. A figure rose from the pile, in fact, the pile *was* the figure. I could distinguish the vague contours of a female form.

Then, the pile spoke: “Jade?”

I jumped. My first impulse was to run, but realizing that I wouldn’t get too far, I responded, “Ye...es?”

“Jade,” continued the pile, “it’s me, Vera.”

“Vera?” I said incredulously. “Is that really you?”

“Yes, it’s me.”

It took me only a fraction of a second to cross the rest of that room. The next moment, I was hugging the trembling Duchess Vera. What I mistook for a pile of rags was actually several disgustingly filthy and smelly blankets Vera wrapped herself in to stay warm. But that was hardly enough as the poor woman was shivering from the cold and probably from fear, as well.

I held her close, trying to share some of my body heat, while relaying to her how I ended up in the dungeon. Finally, she seemed to have warmed up a little.

I let her go and made myself comfortable on the stone ledge, if it was at all possible to be comfortable on cold, hard stone at near freezing temperatures, surrounded by rats and awaiting possible execution. I felt like a bona fide *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*, well, minus the dead body.

“So,” I said, “who is that guy with the commanding voice, the one who speaks with a British accent and seems to be giving orders around here?”

“Ah, that’s Baron Vrangel,” said Vera. “He is the descendant of the famous Baron Vrangel, who was one of the leaders of the White Movement during the 1918 Civil War. After the war, his ancestors had emigrated to the Great Britain and he was born there. He’s been with MI6 for years and now he’s been appointed our new commander in chief.”

I made a mental note of all this information. If I ever got out of here alive, I’d need to pass it on to Alexei. *If I ever got out alive?* What kind of pessimistic thinking is this, Jade? I admonished myself mentally. Of course, I’ll get out of here! I *must* get out of here!

Meanwhile, Vera started crying. “I am so sorry,” she said, sniffing. “It’s all my fault. I shouldn’t have dragged you into the Monarchist Society. And now, look what they’ve done to you.”

“Don’t worry about it...” I started.

“No, it’s all my fault,” she interrupted me. “I knew all along that you didn’t want to be a part of it. But I was selfish, wanted to prove something to your Grandma Anastasia, may she rest in peace. Even after her death, even after...” Again, she began crying.

“Don’t worry about it...” I tried again, getting a bit frustrated. All I needed right now was for her to break down, instead of looking for a way out.

“No,” she shook her head. “Stop trying to be nice to me. I deserve what happens to me, and you don’t. You don’t know this, but we had a falling out, Anastasia and I, shortly before I moved back to Russia. That’s why you’ve never heard of me.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but she continued quickly.

“Yes, don’t deny. I saw the expression on your face when we first met. You’ve never heard my name before Boris asked you to pass me that package!”

“That’s true,” I admitted.

“Do you know why we had a falling out with Anastasia?”

“No. In truth, Grandma never spoke of her royal friends after she left the Society. Come think of it, she’d never even mentioned Uncle Boris, although when I was little, they were very close.”

“The reason she never spoke of us,” said Vera, “was because she disapproved of the turn the Royal Society had taken. It was then that the decision was made to overthrow the current government of Russia and reinstate the Monarchy. Anastasia argued against a new bloody revolution in this long-suffering land and when no one listened to her, she resigned from the post of secretary and left the Society. She even stopped taking calls from us.”

“I didn’t know any of this,” I said. “I am not even sure my parents did. I just know they were relieved when Grandma left the Royal Mess Society, as they called it. But I still can’t believe that *you* would want a bloody revolution in Russia. What made you join?”

“I joined because I wanted the beauty of the Monarchy and the glory of Russia restored. That’s how I was brought up by my parents. They dreamed about it all of their lives. When the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991 and all the lands that belonged to the once mighty Russian Empire were just given away for no reason whatsoever, I couldn’t stand it. The Russian government headed by Yeltsin, wasn’t communist any more, but it betrayed the very essence of the country’s legacy, the blood spilled by our ancestors to create the proud Russian Empire. So, when an opportunity came, I happily joined. I never thought there would be any bloodshed. I thought the people of Russia would gladly trade the current government for the legitimate monarch appointed by God.”

I gazed at Vera, wondering, was she really that naïve?

“It may come as a surprise to you, Vera,” I said, “but ever since the Russian Monarchy went away, the Russian people managed to create their own glory and legacy. And as it stands today, most of them wouldn’t want any Tsar telling them what to do. They lived long enough without any of God’s appointees, and they’ll be happy to continue doing just that. The only thing the Monarchists’ plan would create is another bloody civil war. And should the West get involved again, like it did back in 1918, with contemporary Russia’s nuclear capacity it could easily mean World War III.”

“I can see that now,” whispered Vera, and started weeping again.

“Don’t,” I said, cringing.

“Jade, I do need to ask for your forgiveness,” said Vera. “I dragged you into the Monarchist Society because I selfishly wanted to have one up on Anastasia, even after her death. She was always the smarter one, the more beautiful one. I am so sorry! Will you ever forgive me?”

She looked at me pleadingly.

“Of course I forgive you,” I said. “I did a while back. Fact is, I knew all along that you had an ulterior motive.”

“You did?” she said. “So why did you...”

“Play along?”

“Yes.”

I contemplated Vera for a moment. My instinct was telling me that this was the time for truth. Of course, there was some risk. If I did tell her who I worked for, nothing would prevent her from selling me out to our jailers. This way, she could conceivably trade my life for hers. But something was telling me she wouldn't do that. Something in her voice, in her look... Something, I thought I could trust.

I decided to take the risk. “Vera,” I said, “the reason I agreed to work with the Monarchists is because I am a double agent for the FSB. Initially, I didn't want to work with them any more than I wanted to work with you. But I had to make a choice. The Monarchists killed my friend. I saw where it was all going, and I saw what kind of people I was dealing with. So, when your offer came along, I agreed to spy for the FSB in order to prevent a potential civil war. I communicated the information about the attacks to them and they were able to prevent them.”

Vera was silent.

“I've done this in order to save lives,” I went on. “Grandma Anastasia told me the horror stories about the 1918 Civil War. Russia is my country, too. It is the country of my ancestors, a place that is dear to my heart. I don't care about the Monarchy, but I do care about the country. And I'd do everything in my power to keep it safe and peaceful. Don't you think it already suffered enough? My only question is, are you with me? Will you help me?”

She sat still for a moment, and then uttered a single word: “Yes.”

“Good! Now we just need to figure out how to get out of this dungeon.”

I got up and circled the room, examining and knocking on walls. I don't know what I was hoping for. A secret door? A hollow sound? Alas, everything felt solid... so very depressingly solid.

“What are you looking for, Jade?” asked Vera.

“Huh?” I said distractedly.

“What are you looking for?” she repeated.

“I don't know,” I murmured. “A secret door, a passage. Something... anything to get us out of here.”

“So you know about the secret passage?”

“What did you say?” I said, turning on my heel. “What secret passage?”

“The one over there.” She calmly pointed at the darkest corner of the dungeon, located just behind her improvised bed.

“Oh, my God!” I uttered, covering the distance to that corner in three giant leaps. “You mean, you knew about the secret passage all along and didn't escape? How come?”

“Where would I go?” she responded dejectedly. “I am too old to crawl through that rat hole; it's damp and narrow over there. No,” she shook her head. “I'll have to take my chances here.”

I frantically searched the dark wall for a hidden lever or a knob, or anything else that might help me open the way to freedom. But I found nothing of the sort. It occurred to me that the old lady was probably losing it. Maybe the dungeon was getting to her? Perhaps, she was delirious? Did she imagine the secret door? Otherwise, wouldn't our jailers know about it?

“Vera,” I said, continuing my search for the knob, “how do you know about this secret door?”

“Oh, it's all part of the White Guards' lore. Menshikov was Peter the Great's favorite lieutenant, originally a commoner. Peter gave him the title of Duke and Menshikov built this mansion to go with his newly found fortune. The tunnel was built together with the original house in the early eighteenth

century. During the Revolution and the Civil War, our ancestors used this tunnel to smuggle weapons and people to St. Petersburg to fight the Bolsheviks. My parents told me all about it. When I was young, we even played the Menshikov Secret Passage game, as we called it. I always knew where it was located.”

“How come Gurevich doesn’t know?”

“Phhh, Gurevich!” she said derisively. “Peasant, commoner, *nouveau riche*. What *does* he know? Nothing!”

“Riiiiiiight,” I said. “Do you mind showing me how to open it?”

“Here!” She got up and lightly touched a small circle, which blended so well with the wall that I had missed it. All of a sudden, the solid stone moved, slowly revealing a dark tunnel, which smelled even stronger (if at all possible) of rats and stale, musty air. I felt around inside the space. It wasn’t very big, but big enough for a person or two to fit in.

“Do you have a light by any chance?” I asked.

“Here,” she said, handing me an exquisite gold lighter, adorned with emeralds and sapphires, as well as Vera’s initials engraved on its side.

I lit it and stretched my arm as far as it would go. The flame of the lighter illuminated a narrow underground passage, which disappeared into the dark. Vera was right, it was a secret tunnel... our way to freedom!

“All right,” I said. “We must go now, before they come for us. You’ll have to leave your covers here because they won’t fit in the passage. I’ll go first, you follow me.”

She shook her head. “You’ll have to go by yourself, Jade. I am not coming.”

“What do you mean you are not coming?” I said. “Of course, you are! Don’t worry, I’ll help you.”

“I can’t go, Jade. I am too old for this and I’ll slow you down. It’s a very long tunnel and you have to crawl most of the way. It takes you out to a secluded portion of the Neva River. During the Civil War the exit was on the outskirts of the city. Now, it’s a bustling neighborhood, but the passage still takes you to the very bank of the river, inside the old docks’ area.”

“Are you sure the exit is still there?”

“Yes, I’m positive.” she said. “You can trust me on this, I’ve checked. Listen, you should go now. This is your only chance to save yourself. Tell your friends that the beginning of the Romanov Revolution is scheduled for exactly three weeks from now. The package you brought me from Boris Goncharov was a secret signal. Tell them that the Monarchists are about to start retrieving Tsar’s gold to pay for weapons and to buy people they need. It’s supposed to be a coordinated campaign which will start simultaneously in a number of cities.”

“Where is the gold hidden?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know that. Only three people know the exact location. This information had been passed from generation to generation. If one person dies, another custodian is selected. I only know that it’s located under a defunct church on the territory of an old monastery somewhere.”

Vera took my hand. “Jade... you should go now, before they come for us.”

I shook my head. “I can’t leave without you.”

“You must! You need to take this information to the right people.”

“I am not leaving without you,” I said firmly.

“Listen...” she started again.

“I am not going without you. That’s final!” I repeated.

She contemplated me for a moment. “All right,” she said. “I’ll come with you.” She shook off the filthy blankets she was wrapped in and slowly shuffled to the tunnel entrance. “You go first and I’ll

follow. Use the lighter to light the passage. I just recently refilled it. There should be enough to get you...us through the tunnel.”

I gave Vera a searching look. “All right, but no tricks,” I said and crawled into the narrow space. “It’s narrow in here, but we’ll manage,” I said, my voice bouncing off the walls of the tunnel and returning as an echo. “Let me first go a little further and check what’s happening there.”

I crawled about thirty feet forward, lighting up the walls with Vera’s lighter. The tunnel seemed in order. “You can follow me now, Vera,” I said, turning my head towards the dungeon entrance, “everything seems fine.”

“Sure,” replied Vera. “In a moment.”

As she said that, I felt the rumbling noise and saw the door of the tunnel closing. I turned and rushed back to the moving rock, trying to stop its relentless movement.

“Noooooo! The door is closing!” I yelled. “I can’t hold it, it’s too heavy! Vera, quick, maybe you can still make it!”

“No,” she shook her head and stepped away from the opening. “You go. I’ll stay here. Remember everything I told you. The lighter will help you find the way. This tunnel is narrow at first, but the closer you get to the exit, the wider it gets. Good luck and goodbye!”

I tried to pry the heavy rock open again, but in vain. It kept slowly, but surely closing, until it snapped in place and you could never tell where the opening had been.

“Vera, Vera,” I pounded on the cold stone. “Open up! Please!” But there was only silence. I was left absolutely alone in this dark and desolate space. What if Vera lied to me? What if she lured me in here on purpose? What if this passage doesn’t have an exit? Questions, one scarier than the next kept invading my mind. While I was about to start banging my fists on this indifferent stone again, I heard the sound of heavy metal bolts being opened. The dungeon door...

I held my breath, listening.

“What’s going on in here?” said a rough voice. “What’s all this noise...? And what happened to the second one?”

Then, apparently realizing the problem, the voice yelled, “Alarm, alarm! Urgent help in the dungeon needed!”

“Where is the other prisoner, you old witch,” said the guard dangerously. “Where did she go? Tell me or you’ll be sorry!”

Realization struck. They’ll torture poor Vera to find out where I’ve disappeared. They might even kill her. I turned on the lighter and frantically looked for a circle, similar to the one Vera used, but nothing on this side of the wall resembled the small knob Vera had pressed. Perhaps on this side it looked different? It never occurred to me to ask and Vera never volunteered this bit of information.

As I was searching for a way to open the door, it occurred to me that Vera had done it on purpose. She knew she couldn’t make it through the tunnel in her condition, so she deceived me in order to get me out of that dungeon... To save me!

Meanwhile, I heard more guards joining the first one.

“Where is she?” asked another voice, loud and confident, apparently belonging to the security chief. Then, there was the sound of a slap, followed by a pitiful squeal. “Where is she?” he repeated, and his words were followed by another, louder slap. After that, I heard a crash and Vera’s scream.

Oh my God, I thought, terrified. They are going to kill her! I lit up the lighter and renewed my efforts to find the way back into the dungeon. But I found nothing, absolutely nothing!

Think, Jade, think! What if I just screamed and pounded on the stone as hard as I could? If I could hear them, they were bound to hear me, too. I was about to start, when all of a sudden Vera cried out, as

if she'd heard my thoughts. "Run, Jade, run! Don't look back. Save yourself! Goodbye, and remember what I told you!"

"You stupid old cow!" yelled the security chief. There was a sound of a punch, followed by a crack and Vera's earsplitting cry. Then, there was silence.

I sat silently, listening. After a while, one of the guards asked, "Should I call the doctor?"

"I think it's a little late for that," replied the security chief.



Chapter 25

I sat on the cold, slimy rocks, hugging my knees, tears streaming down my face. The silly, vain, tricky Duchess Vera, the woman who took me in and who now protected me with her life... was gone. I was all alone in this narrow and scary tunnel, without any possibility of going back and without any certainty of finding the exit. There was only one way to go, forward, no matter what.

I put on my leather gloves and started crawling. As I did, I left marks on the tunnel walls with a rusty nail I found by the tunnel entrance.

Since I wasted a lot of fuel trying to find a way to open the door back into the dungeon, I didn't know how much light I had left from Vera's lighter. That meant I had to economize. The narrow passage was slippery and disgusting. I lit the lighter once in a while to orient myself in the tunnel, praying it wouldn't go out before I reached the light. I've been crawling like this for a long time, when I noticed the tunnel getting narrower. According to Vera, it was supposed to widen. What if I've taken the wrong turn? What if I was moving in the wrong direction? What if I was lost?

Granted, I've been diligently leaving marks with a nail. But if I had to go back to the dungeon, I'd soon run out of light and wouldn't be able to see those marks in the dark. Besides, even if I managed to somehow get back inside the dungeon, I'd be in the hands of Gurevich's goons. And look what they did to Vera!

No, I'd rather die here than go back! And that's when I remembered the Gypsy's warning: stay away from dark, underground spaces. I paused, wiping the cold sweat. Again it was happening exactly as she predicted. But I knew that staying paralyzed would be even worse. I had to keep moving, if only to stay warm. My only way and my only hope was the way forward.

And so I kept crawling, disregarding my scraped and bleeding knees. I kept crawling, trying to block out the squeaking of the rats and brushes of their tails against my hands and legs.

I almost stepped into something warm and squishy in the middle of the tunnel floor. In a panic, I lit up the lighter, as a bunch of rats scattered from the sudden brightness. Turned out, I narrowly avoided a dead rat with guts spilling out of its gray body. The other rats were consuming one of their own! Trying not to vomit, I carefully crawled over it and kept going, concentrating only on the passage before me and willing myself to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

I just finished congratulating myself on being able to stay focused, despite distractions, when I came to a fork. I hastily lit up the lighter. Left or right, right or left? There was absolutely no way of telling, as both tunnels looked identical. But the difference in direction could mean life or certain death. I didn't recall Vera mentioning a fork. Maybe she didn't know it existed? What else might she have not known or forgotten? And what if her information about the tunnel exit was also wrong?

I felt the chill of panic starting to settle in again. I kept the light on, spending what precious little fuel was left in it and desperately trying to discern any signs that might lead me in the right direction. But there were none. The two passages seemed mirror images of each other.

The lighter in my hand flickered one last time and died. I tried to rekindle it, but the sparks teased me for just a brief second, only to be gone forever. I was left in total darkness. The only remaining light was my inner light, the intuition that never let me down before.

My senses were incredibly alert. I listened, but heard nothing. The Gypsy's voice rang in my ears, "trust your psychic ability!" Somehow - I had no idea how - I knew, I had to go right. Was there a light

breeze coming from the right, so slight in fact that I didn't even notice it when I relied on my crutch, the cigarette lighter? Or was it really my inner vision? I didn't know and I didn't care. All I knew I had to turn right.

I resolutely took the right tunnel and kept crawling until the tunnel widened enough so that it became possible to straighten out. I stood up, stretching my numb legs and arms. And that's when I felt a movement of air. The breeze was light, but unmistakable.

I ran, stumbling towards the breeze, hungrily inhaling the real fresh air. Then I saw the light, very dim, but light nevertheless... The light at the end of the tunnel! And I could smell the freshness of the river!

Almost there. I ran to the light as fast as I could. A minute later, I was finally out of the hidden cave. I ended up on the bank of the Neva River, next to the old docks.

I was cold, filthy, scraped and bleeding, but alive.

Now if only I could get to the treasure in time, before the Monarchists realized that it was compromised and move it to another location!



Chapter 26

I stood on the deserted bank of the Neva River, its chilly water splashing quietly at my feet. Crouching down, I washed the dirt off my face, hands and jacket. Then I attempted to smooth out my matted hair. I walked past some old ships and warehouses, heading for the exit out of the old docks area. Ahead of me was the main gate with a security booth next to it. Inside the booth, I noticed a security guard.

The security guard was an older man in a warm coat made of some kind of shaggy fur, who was sitting inside, drinking tea out of a steaming mug and listening to a blaring radio. Someone could be stealing an elephant out of these warehouses and he wouldn't hear past the noise.

I paused just out of sight, in order to formulate a plan of action. First, I needed transportation. Second, I needed to get to Svetlana's notebook. And third, I needed to tell Alexei what happened. Gurevich's goons took away my purse, together with the cell phone and money. But I still had the money I'd hidden inside my jacket's stuffing.

I headed for the booth.

"Hey, where did *you* come from," said the guard, looking me over, "and where do you think you are going?"

"*Zdravstvuyte* - Hello," I said, attempting my most charming smile. "I wandered in by mistake, but I am happy to leave. I didn't mean to trespass."

"You are not authorized to be here," said the old guard grouchily. "I am going to have to call the police."

"Please," I said. "Don't! I am leaving. I am leaving now!"

"But how do I know you haven't stolen something?" said the old man suspiciously.

"Look at me," I raised my empty hands and turned around to show that I wasn't hiding anything behind my back. "Do I look like I have any stolen property on me?"

"No, but..."

"Look," I said. "All I want is a ride out of here. Do you know how I could get one? Please, this is very important!"

He pondered for a moment, and then apparently made a decision.

"All right, it doesn't look like you stole anything. I won't call the police. But you need to leave immediately, unless you want to get in trouble."

"I'd love to leave," I said. "But I need transportation."

"I don't have any transportation," said the old man dismissively. "And I'm here till morning. Leave, before I call the police."

"I'll pay you," I said. "I'll pay you as much as you want. Just help me get a ride from here."

The old man eyed me for a moment, then said, "How much?"

"One hundred dollars."

"Not interested."

"Two hundred?"

"Five," he said firmly.

"Four," I countered.

"Deal," he said. "But I want to see the money first."

“Do you have a pair of scissors?”

“What for?” he asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Don’t worry,” I said.

“No scissors here.” He shook his head.

“A small knife, perhaps?”

“Yes, I have a small knife. But what for?”

“You’ll see,” I said, taking off my jacket. It was very chilly without it. I quickly cut the thread I sewed my jacket’s lining with and reached inside the lining, retrieving a stack of dollars I hid in the stuffing.

The old man observed my manipulations with avid interest.

“Here.” I counted four hundred.

“All right.” He greedily eyed my fortune.

Then he reached for his cell phone and dialed a number. “Dima. I have some work for you. Get in the car and drive down here right away.” It seemed like Dima tried to object, but the old man added forcefully, “You just get your ass here right this moment if you want to make some good money tonight.”

That apparently settled the issue and he hung up the phone.

“He’ll be here soon,” he said to me. I nodded, hiding the dollars in my pocket. The old man’s eyes rested on the pocket where the money had just disappeared. I didn’t like his glance, it seemed way too greedy. I eyed him carefully, trying to figure out whether I could trust this guy at all. Maybe I shouldn’t have shown him the money? I hoped that he wouldn’t do anything stupid, like try to rob me.

I had to show him that I’d be missed if something happened to me.

“Can’t wait to get back to my friends,” I shared with him confidentially. “I called them ten minutes ago, told them that I got lost at the old docks area and that I was going to ask the guard for a ride. They said they’d be waiting for me. They offered to come and get me, but I said no. I’d ask this nice guard in the booth for a ride, I said. He looks like a nice old man and wouldn’t mind helping a stranger, I said. But my friends said that if I didn’t arrive in thirty minutes, they’d still drive up here to pick me up.”

The old man listened to all this and I could feel the cogs turning in his brain. Without a word, he turned away, pretending as if he was busy. He straightened out a pile of papers on his cluttered desk, refilled his mug, all the while muttering something under his breath. From all indications, he got the message.

A few minutes later, my transportation arrived. Dima turned out to be a pimply young man sitting at the wheel of an old clunker.

The old man said, “You pay me one half now and give the rest to Dima upon arrival.” I counted two hundred dollars and handed it to him.

The old man nodded and said, addressing Dima, “Take this lady where she needs to go.”

I got into the old car and gave the driver Natalia Vasilyevna’s address that I committed to memory back in Moscow. Less than thirty minutes later, I was knocking on her door.

“My God, Jade!” Natalia Vasilyevna looked me over top to bottom. “What happened to you?”

“It’s a long story,” I said.

“Do you need help?”

I sat in a chair, feeling the exhaustion settling in.

“Yes I do,” I said. “Let me just catch my breath for a moment.”

Natalia Vasilyevna exchanged a glance with her daughter Olga, who was busy setting the table. Olga took out a white linen tablecloth and retrieved some dishes from the China cabinet. Next, she brought in a steamy teapot with freshly brewed tea and some snacks.

“You must be hungry,” she offered. “How about some tea?”

“Thank you,” I said gratefully, drinking the dark liquid and feeling the blood returning to my veins.

“Would you like to take a shower?” asked Natalia Vasilyevna, eyeing critically my dirty attire.

“That would be wonderful,” I said.

A steamy shower later, I felt much better. Olga brought out a bottle of iodine for my scrapes and cuts and a fresh pair of jeans to replace my torn ones.

“Here,” she said. “These should fit you.” With Olga’s help, I treated my cuts, after which I pulled on her jeans. It felt incredibly good to get into some clean clothes.

“I came for my notebook,” I said.

“Here it is.” Natalia Vasilyevna nodded and brought in Svetlana’s leather bound volume from the adjacent room.

I flipped through pages filled with unknown symbols and abbreviations, until I reached the only page I partially understood.

Accts wrong t out c or bur Bkl ~ some bw M & SP

Which meant: “Accounts, that all of the treasure was taken out of the country or buried in Lake Baikal, are wrong. At least some of it is hidden between Moscow and St. Petersburg.” But the abbreviations at the bottom of that page still eluded me.

At that moment, the front door opened and Natalia Vasilyevna’s son-in-law came in.

“Kirill,” said Olga, pecking her husband on a cheek. “Look who has just dropped by!”

“Hello,” said Kirill, taking off his coat. “Good to see you again, Jade.”

Olga was now busy setting the table for dinner, as her mother attended to the children and her husband went to wash his hands.

They insisted that I stay for dinner. I allowed myself to let go for a moment, reasoning that I could use some food since it appeared that the night ahead could be a long and tedious one. I ate chicken cutlets with rice and vegetables, followed by a delicious apple strudel, feeling strength returning to my body. All the while, my eyes kept drifting to the black notebook sitting next to me on the table.

“What’s that?” asked Kirill.

I felt so comfortable with this family that I let my guard down in their presence. My fatigued, overwhelmed body and mind needed this moment of relaxation desperately after the dreadful experiences of the day. With someone else I wouldn’t have been this frank. But deep in my gut I trusted these people, who became as close to a family as was humanly possible on these foreign, and yet so intimately connected to me shores. My famous intuition was telling me that I was safe to confess a partial truth. “This is a notebook a friend of mine left for me to figure out. Problem is, I can’t seem to be able to. I look at these abbreviations and I draw a blank.”

“May I?” He extended his hand. I thought, what’s the harm? And I handed him the book.

“See this line over here?” I pointed at the mysterious letters at the bottom of the page.

Kirill read aloud, “St Dob 100 - 3 l r r st o mon ch 2 d l.”

He kept staring at the page, his lips moving silently, then he abruptly got up and reached for a volume on the bookshelf.

“See this book?” he asked.

I nodded. It was the same book Natalia Vasilyevna proudly showed me last time on the train, *The Old Treasures of the Russian Church Architecture*, written by her son-in-law.

He opened the page with a photo of an old Russian church. In the background, I could see the walls of what seemed like an old monastery.

“This is the place,” said Kirill, handing me the book.

I stared at the picture. Could it really be this simple?

“How do you know?” I said, afraid to believe and trying not to breathe for fear of chasing away this impossible stroke of good luck.

“I’ve done a lot of research on old Russian churches and monasteries while I was working on this book. This is the Church of Resurrection at the old Monastery of Saint Andrei, now defunct. See,” he pointed at Svetlana’s notebook, “*St Dob 100 - 3 l r r st o mon ch 2 d l*. Which means: Station Dobrynino, 100 kilometers from St. Petersburg in the direction of Moscow, 3 kilometers from the station. Make a left, then a right, followed by another right. Continue straight, till you reach the old monastery church. As to the rest - *2 d l* - I am not sure what it means, but I am confident that we are talking about that church!”

With these words, he handed Svetlana’s notebook back to me.

I remembered Vera’s words: “The treasure is hidden at a monastery somewhere. Only the three Custodians know its exact location.” Then I recalled the mysterious words I once overheard at the Menshikov Mansion, something about the Custodians needing to visit a monastery. Finally, it was all starting to make sense.

Was it a coincidence or fate that brought the old Russian teacher and me together on the train to St. Petersburg, was it a coincidence or synchronicity that her son-in-law happened to be the missing link in my search for Tsar’s gold, and was it a coincidence or my destiny’s guiding hand that made me pass the black book on to Natalia Vasilyevna without her knowing it? The Gypsy said it was destiny that brought me to Russia. I was ready to believe this after all the events I’d experienced. But at that very moment, I had no time to ponder on the philosophical significance of that. I’d meditate on these fantastic synchronicities and experiences after my Gold Train adventure was over. At that moment, I needed to act, and quickly!

I hastily gulped down the rest of my strudel and said to my gracious hosts, “Thank you very much for your warm hospitality. I’ll never forget it! But if you’ll excuse me, I still have something very important to take care of.”

I got up from the table and said to Kirill, “Can I speak with you in private?”

He nodded silently and got up from the table, leading me to his study.

“Kirill,” I said, after he closed the door. “This is a matter of Russian national security and I need your help. Will you help me?”

He nodded. “What can I do?”

I explained to him how to contact Alexei and what to say to him. Then we both donned our jackets and boots, raising intrigued glances from the rest of the family.

“I’ll be back soon,” Kirill announced to everyone.

“Incidentally,” I asked, “do you have a flashlight?”

He nodded and reached inside a cabinet, pulling out a thin, powerful flashlight. “This should last about six or seven hours.”

I tucked the flashlight into my jacket’s outer pocket. Next, I hid Svetlana’s notebook safely within the inner zipper pocket. Kirill lent me a small tote bag, which contained a set of detailed directions, *The Old Treasures of the Russian Church Architecture*, and a bottle of spring water. I said goodbye to my friends, after which Kirill drove me to the train station.

“I can come with you, if you need me,” he offered.

“No, I’ll be fine, I’ve got all the information I need.” I pointed at the bag with his book and directions. “Besides, you need to contact the number I gave you. *He* may need your help.”

I boarded the first train to make the stop in Dobrynino. One hour and twenty minutes later, I was standing on the empty platform. The lit up sign above me read: *Welcome to Dobrynino*. I took out the flashlight, along with the sheet containing Kirill's directions, and stepped off the platform into the darkness.

For a while, I jogged along the deserted night road. Then, following the directions at hand, I stepped off the asphalt onto an overgrown dirt road. I continued running, making turns according to the map, until I reached the old church. Behind the church's onion domes, loomed the walls of the defunct monastery.

Just in case, I turned off my flashlight, relying solely on the light of the moon. I tried the front door, but it was locked. Hmm...

I took out Svetlana's notebook and re-read:

St Dob 100 - 3 l r r s t o m o n c h 2 d l

All right, let's see... Station Dobrynino - check; 3 kilometers from the station, turn left, right, right, straight - check; old monastery - check, the church - check. What was left?

2 d l

Now, let's see what this might mean: 2 - two or second; d - hmm... I threw a glance at the church building. On the left of the main door, there was another, smaller door. And further to the left, in the corner - the second door, hardly visible in the dark.

2 d l - second door to the left!

I quietly crossed the churchyard and turned the old, rusty knob. To my surprise, it opened without a hitch and I walked into the church. The space inside wasn't very large, but quite tall. I shone my flashlight at the walls and gasped. All the walls, top to bottom were clad with beautiful icons. Stained glass windows with biblical scenes on them sparkled with mysterious, multi-colored lights. The church had a long-forgotten look to it. The dust was on everything, the icons, the pew, the wooden carvings and the floor.

Just a couple of steps to the left, I saw an ancient wooden door, obscured by a large column. I shone my light at it. There was no dust there. Moreover, it looked like it had been in use, as the massive corroded lock was hanging unlocked. I pushed the door and it opened with a screech.

I lowered my head and stepped through the threshold, into the dark, musty space. Lighting my flashlight and trying to hold my breath, I slowly made my way down the stairs, descending lower underground.

I got all the way down and found myself in a large cave. The cave extended deeper than my flashlight could reach, so I started moving in that direction. It appeared I was at the beginning of a long underground passage, but nothing like the tunnel I had to crawl through just recently. This one was wide and tall. Along with me, it could easily fit ten people standing side by side.

I marveled at the size of the whole thing, wondering who and for what reason had something like this constructed under a church belonging to an old monastery. And what other secrets could this defunct edifice be hiding?

As I kept moving, it seemed to me that I heard a sound. I turned off the flashlight and froze, listening. No more sounds came. So I turned the flashlight back on, thinking I've made a mistake, and kept moving deeper and deeper into the passage. All of a sudden, the passage made a sharp turn to the left.

I followed the turn and found myself in front of a wide stone arch. On the left side of the arch, I noticed a protrusion. Etched on it was a small circle with a crude carving of a Russian Imperial Crown inside. I examined the strange carving, wondering what it was doing there.

Then I stepped through the arch and emerged inside a spacious cave, blinking from the unexpected light. The cave's wall on the left of the entrance had a bracket, and set into it was a lit-up torch. Inertia carried me almost to the middle of the cave, as my fatigued mind slowly processed the information. Lit up torch in this abandoned space meant that someone was here... right now! Finally realizing the implications of that, I abruptly stopped and slowly turned around...



Chapter 27

Standing silently by the left side of the arched entrance was a man with a gun in his hand. The gun was pointed smack between my eyes. I turned my head to the right, then left. The cave didn't have any other exit. The only way out was through the arch. I was trapped.

The man with the gun made an ominous step inside the cave. I took a step to my left, attempting to get out of the line of fire. He made another step and readjusted his aim. I eyed him carefully, edging sideways towards the mouth of the cave. But my avoidance dance wasn't working, as every time I made a step the man resolutely made one as well, again fixing his aim, his finger on the trigger.

A solitary second that I still had left to live slowed down to a crawl, and every last millisecond of it was vivid and memorable like nothing I've experienced in my life.

As the gun formed a direct line with the spot between my eyes, I realized that my nemesis was already some distance inside the cave, while I managed to edge closer to its entrance. This meant that if I dashed to the arch now, maybe I still had a chance to escape through the opening.

I inhaled, mentally measuring the distance... and ran with my eyes fixed on the arch. The man calmly followed my move with his gun, but at that very moment a shadow appeared out of nowhere and flew past the entrance right towards me! The gun fired; I almost saw the bullet that was about to end my life cross the space between the shooter and me. But in that instant, the shadow materialized right in front of me. Inertia carried it a few steps into the murky depth of the cave, where the figure collapsed, as the bullet that was meant for me hit it in the chest.

"Evgeny, what the hell is going on here?" Another man with a gun in his hand ran into the cave, blocking my escape route.

"Damn, who was that?!" yelled the shooter, again pointing his gun at my head. But just before it went off, I rushed to the fallen man, who'd taken the bullet for me. The newly fired round whizzed by my left side and ricocheted off the wall.

With a grunt of pain, the wounded man braced himself slightly off the ground and fired the gun, which suddenly appeared in his left hand. My attacker cried out, dropping his gun and grasping his bleeding hand.

"He has a gun!" he yelled.

The other attacker raised his own gun to fire, while the man at my feet barked in a hoarse voice, "Run! Now!"

I took his advice without further ado and ran into the deepest and darkest corner of the cave, where I ducked, trying to blend with the wall. The wounded man kept shooting at the second attacker over and over again. The attacker groaned and grabbed at his leg.

Then he yelled to his companion, "Evgeny, lock them in! We need to call for reinforcements!" With these words, he quickly limped away.

The other one hurried out as well, but paused by the protrusion I noticed on the left of the arch, pressing on it with his uninjured hand.

Immediately, I heard the dreaded rumbling sound I knew all too well. It was the sound of a moving rock. I ran toward the entrance, but it was too late. By the time I reached the arch, the rock had already snapped in place, blocking the exit.

Again, I was trapped underground! Once more, I recalled the Gypsy's warning to stay away from dark, underground places, as the ominous sense of déjà vu made me shudder. I desperately banged my fists on the cold rock. But who would hear me? And even if they did, they wouldn't let me out anyway. I came back to my senses and stopped.

That's when I heard a moan. The wounded man, the one who took the bullet for me! He was still on the ground and he needed my help! I dashed to him. The man was motionless, the gun still in his left hand. I dropped to my knees in front him and stared at his face in disbelief... The man on the ground was Alexei!

I carefully pried the gun out of his fingers and placed it safely by the wall. His hands were cold and his face looked pale. I knew I needed to warm him up immediately. Hands trembling, I took off my puffer jacket and covered him with it as well as I could. Then I took off my cashmere sweater and placed it under his head, in lieu of a pillow.

Now that I was left only with my thin cotton blouse, I started shivering, but he needed the warmth much more than I did. I kissed his forehead, his lips, his hands. I held him tight to warm him up. I willed him to wake up, refusing to believe that after all we've been through together, this amazing man wouldn't survive. He had to survive! I couldn't live without him! As my hot tears streamed down on his face, he stirred and tasted them with his parched tongue.

"Don't cry, my love," he said softly.

"Thank God! You are back, my darling," I exclaimed.

Pulling me gently toward him, he kissed me hungrily on the lips.

"You have no idea how long I waited for you," he whispered hoarsely.

"Is this all you can think about?" I asked reproachfully.

"When you are around, yes!" he said, as his left hand reached for the buttons of my blouse.

"But you are wounded," I tried to object.

"All the more reason," he retorted. "What if this is our last..."

"Don't even say it!" I yelled at him. "Don't you dare!"

"Then help me," he whispered, his hand slowly unbuttoning my blouse. "Help me stay alive."

"I need to examine your wound," I said.

"Later. I need you now."

I couldn't even begin imagining on how many levels this was the absolutely wrong and impossible thing to do from the standpoint of traditional logic, morality, and Alexei's condition. But it occurred to me that this man, whom I loved more than life itself, completely accepted the fact that in the alternate universe of spies and ultimate danger there was no such thing as tomorrow. All we had was the present moment in the midst of an obscure expanse that humans normally referred to as eternity.

I agreed with him wholeheartedly. In my life, I've already experienced more than my share of loss. My parents and my beloved Grandma Anastasia were gone when I was still young; during my Stepford adventure I lost Adelaide, who became like a surrogate mother to me when I needed it most, and recently, I lived through the horrible murders of Svetlana and Vera Golitsina. Alexei was right – all we had was this precious singular moment in time to be happy and to feel alive, and it could not be wasted. If he...if we...would never make it out of this cave in one piece, I'd never forgive myself if we weren't together, one last time...

Before I knew what I was doing, my fingers deftly unbuttoned the rest of my blouse. Then I took off my bra and the rest of my clothes, and undid his pants. I got on top of him, trying not to disturb his wound. I slowly lowered my body, filling myself with his essence that made each and every inch of my body dance the dance of creation. With a moan of both ecstasy and pain, he caressed my bare breasts with his left hand as we merged, deeper and deeper.

How I longed for his touch, for his everything! I closed my eyes, savoring every sensation, dissolving into him and willing my own life force to keep him alive. I didn't feel the cold any more. The imprisoning walls of the cave that were our trap disappeared and the whole world became us, as we became the world. I pushed deeper and deeper, until I took all of him in. My singing, exquisitely sensitive depths held him in their embrace as the sensation rose to an unbearable height.

We lingered like that, on the plane of existence known only to those who dared to leave the body, who had seen the beauty of the spirit world. We merged and didn't want to let go. And then, we both exploded with all our untold passion and unspoken tenderness.

"I love you, Jade," he whispered.

"I love you, Alexei," I echoed.

I slowly got up, careful not to disturb his wound, and quickly dressed. Now that I've detached myself from him, the cold was settling in again.

I leaned close to Alexei and touched his forehead. It was now hot. His breath was labored and lips dry. I took the water bottle from my purse and gave him some to drink. I was thirsty too, but only a few sips were left and I had to ration it so it would last him as long as possible.

I needed to look at his wound, so I carefully opened his coat and jacket, holding my flashlight closely. There was a large bloodstain on the right side of his chest and I hoped with all my heart that the bullet missed his lung. The bleeding had stopped, as his shirt clung to the wound. There was no way I could take a look at that wound without disturbing it. If I tried to take off his shirt, it could start bleeding again. It seemed a better idea to leave it alone.

Alexei needed to get to the hospital immediately; that was the only solution. Unfortunately, under the circumstances it seemed impossible.

I kissed him on the forehead, which was getting hotter by the minute.

"Jade," he moaned.

"Yes, darling," I said, holding his hand. "I am here."

"Jade..."

"What do you want, my love?"

"You," he whispered and closed his eyes. He was unconscious.

I held his hand, my eyes dry. I couldn't afford to break down now. There was too much I needed to do. I made sure my jacket was wrapped around him as well as possible and went to examine the cave, praying for a miracle. I got lucky last time in the dungeon. Why couldn't I luck out again?

After several minutes, I came back to check up on Alexei. He was burning up and his breath was coming out in spasms. I moistened his dry lips with water. Ignoring the cold, I again went around the cave, knocking on every stone, pushing on every smallest protrusion, willing this harsh, indifferent space to reveal its hidden secret.

Alexei couldn't die in this cave! I had to save him! I had to find the way out!

Shining my flashlight at the wall in the darkest corner of the cave, I noticed a small protrusion that seemed different. My previous dungeon experience made me sensitive to any unusual irregularities in the stone that I came across, no matter how insignificant.

But at that point, it occurred to me that I had to save whatever light was still left in my flashlight. The wisest thing to do was to turn it off. Instead, I grabbed the torch from its wall bracket and shone the light straight at the protrusion.

The markings were very faint, but there was no mistake - they were the same as at the entrance into the cave: a crude drawing of a Russian crown enclosed in a circle. This could be our way to life and freedom! My heart pumping and afraid to breathe, I pressed on the protrusion...but nothing happened. I twisted it. Still nothing. I did it again and again, trying different angles. Nothing!

I stepped back, thinking. Surely, this protrusion had to be a lever opening a secret door. It had to be! But how did it work? I carefully examined the circle. It couldn't be that simple, could it? I stepped closer and pressed on the crown in the middle of the circle.

The heavy rock started moving ever so slowly, ever so reluctantly. It took the rock almost a minute to open completely. I stepped into the newly opened chamber, holding my torch high. This would be our way to salvation, our way home!

But...it wasn't the exit, far from it! Instead, I stood inside another cave, a really, really large one. And this cave was full of gold!

I blinked at the sudden glare of rows upon rows of gold bars and mountains of gold coins, all sparkling like a million stars from the light of my torch. It was hard to tell how much treasure there was. The chamber seemed endless.

Excited, I ran back to Alexei. "We found it! We found Tsar's gold!"

But Alexei didn't hear me. His breathing came out in labored spurts and he was burning up. I put the water bottle to his lips. Only a few drops were left.

I stared at all that gold. Here, in front of me was all the money in the world, but no way of getting out, no way of saving Alexei.



Chapter 28

For a moment, I stood frozen between Alexei and the gold. Then, shrugging off the fatigue, I went around the cave once more, stubbornly tapping on walls and systematically examining every stone with newly found determination. I was ready to crawl on my hands and knees in order to examine every square inch of this cave, for as long as it took!

And so I persevered, hoping to hear a hollow sound and diligently shining my torch at every little spot that appeared even slightly irregular. I forgot about the cold, as a singular thought bore into my tired mind: *I must save him!*

But despite all my efforts, I found absolutely nothing.

I decided that I'd rest a little and try again. Alexei was awfully quiet and I was getting more and more worried. What if he didn't survive till morning? I found myself sending a passionate plea to the Universe to please help me find the way out. I sat on the cold stone next to the treasure room, my eyes closed, attempting to tune into my fledgling psychic powers and willing myself to see the way out of this trap.

Yet, I heard nothing, I felt nothing. About to give up and return to my wall tapping routine, I suddenly heard a faint sound. It was very remote and at first, I almost dismissed it as my imagination. But then, I heard it more distinctly.

Shots... Definitely shots fired, followed by screams. They were coming from the direction of the tunnel. I ran to the secret door that trapped us here and put my ear to the stone. I heard the shots and the yelling more definitively. Some kind of a battle was raging out there. I hoped with all my heart that Alexei did manage to communicate to his FSB buddies where he was going and how to get here.

After a while, the shots stopped. I stood still, listening intently. Then I heard what I thought was the General's voice. He seemed to tell his people to look for us.

I started pounding on the rock and yelling, "We are here! We are trapped! Over here!" But no response came.

I could hear the people move around the tunnel, searching for us. The General kept yelling orders, while I was frantically trying to figure out how to let them know that we were right next to them.

When it seemed that our rescuers were about to leave, I had an epiphany.

I ran back to the treasure room and picked up two large, shiny gold bricks. They were very heavy, but I had no time to pay attention to such insignificant details. I quickly ran back, carrying the gold bricks in front of me and straining from the effort.

I flung both bricks at the wall as hard as I could. The metal produced a "twang, twang" sound as it made contact with the rock. Both bricks, made out of pure soft gold, were now dented. I picked them up and threw them again. "Twang, twang," sang the bricks. Immediately, I picked them up again and repeated. "Twang, twang."

I did it again and again, sweat now dripping from my forehead. Then, I paused to listen. There was silence on the other side. It appeared it was working - they stopped!

"Where did that sound come from?" I heard the General's voice.

"From behind this wall, Comrade General," came the response.

"Examine this wall, quick," commanded the General.

I took both gold bricks, now all dirty and deformed, and smashed them at the wall as hard as I could.

This time, they definitely heard me!

“Alexei, Jade, is that you?” yelled the General.

“Yes, it’s us!” I yelled back as loud as I could. “We’re trapped!”

“Are you all right? Where is Alexei?”

“I’m okay,” I yelled back. “But Alexei is seriously wounded.”

“Can you hold on just a little longer? We’ll get you out!”

“We’ll try. But Alexei is in very bad shape. He needs medical attention immediately!”

I thought I heard the suave, always in control, General swear.

“Nikolay, Victor, find the captain! NOW! He’s outside. Tell him to bring all the explosives,” he barked. Then he addressed me. “Jade, we’ll have to blast!”

“Wait, wait! You don’t need to!” I yelled back. “There’s a secret door!”

“Where is it?”

“Right here!” And again, I smashed my trusty gold bricks against the rock. “Did you feel it?”

“Yes!”

“On the left, approximately at my eye level, look for a small marking. It’s in the shape of a circle, with a Russian crown inside!”

“Did you hear,” yelled the General to his men. “Quick, everyone look for a circle with a crown inside!”

“Here is something, Comrade General!”

“Where?”

“Here it is!”

“Jade, we found it!” yelled the General.

“Now press it in the center. Make sure you press on the crown only. The rock should open!”

“Like Sesame,” joked one of the men, but stopped abruptly, apparently under the famous General’s gaze. There were no more jokes.

“I pressed on it! Now what?” yelled the General.

“Stand back a little! It should open!”

With huge relief, I saw the rock starting to move. Slowly, the door was opening up.

“You okay?” were the General’s first words the moment he stepped through the arch.

“Fine,” I said. “Please, help Alexei! I am really afraid...” I stopped as my lips started to quiver.

The General squeezed my hand briefly and dashed to Alexei. He was barking orders and within a minute, Alexei was nestled in several warm jackets and given water from someone’s flask. It was announced that the medical helicopter was on its way. I breathed a huge sigh of relief, confident that now he was saved.

I watched quietly as they fussed around him. Someone handed me back my puffer jacket and I put it back on, shivering from cold. All of a sudden, I felt deathly tired. The General took off his own toasty jacket and put it over my shoulders. I wrapped myself in it and got out of the way, sitting down on the rock by the treasure room entrance, as my glance fell upon the gold inside. The gold! I completely forgot about the treasure!

“By the way, Comrade General,” I said softly. “We found Tsar’s gold.”

“You did?? Where is it?”

“Right here.” And I pointed inside the treasure room.

“*Mama rodnaya!* - Mommy dearest!”

“*Bozhe moi!* - Oh, my God!”

“Vot eto da! - Wow!”

For a moment, everyone crowded the entrance into the treasure room, forgetting about Alexei, the Monarchists and everything else...staring wide-eyed, with mouths agape, at the treasure.

The General, first to get back to his senses, was already giving orders about security and transportation.

Then he came up to me and shook my hand. “Thank you on behalf of the Russian Federation, Comrade Snow,” he said. “Or do you prefer, Your Highness?”

“Comrade Snow is just fine,” I responded with a smile. “As a matter of fact, we have to thank Tsar’s gold for our rescue.”

“Oh? How so?”

“When you and your men couldn’t hear my screams, I started throwing these gold bricks at the rock to get your attention.” And I pointed at the two unrecognizably deformed chunks of gold, sitting forgotten in the dust.

“I always knew,” said the General, “that you were not only beautiful and brave, but also highly resourceful.” He bent at the waist and kissed my scraped and dirty hand.

Then he picked up the two disfigured gold bricks that suffered such a beating at my hand and gave them to one of his men. “Guard them with your life, Nikolay! These one-of-a-kind pieces deserve to be in a museum.”

Finally emerging out of the cave, I breathed in the fresh night air, which just ten minutes before I feared I’d never inhale again.

The medics carefully loaded Alexei into the helicopter, after which the General helped me to my seat. I held Alexei’s hand all the way to Moscow. We landed in the courtyard of the Kremlin Clinic, where he was immediately rushed into surgery. Seeing how competently the staff was treating him I felt a newly found confidence that he’d be alright.

A doctor examined me and declared that I was incredibly lucky to have no injuries, aside from a few minor bruises and scratches. They treated me and within an hour a car took me back to my hotel along with my new bodyguard, whom the General insisted on assigning, just in case.

At the hotel, I called the clinic and asked to see Alexei, but they wouldn’t let me, saying that although the operation was a success he was still unconscious. I took a very long, hot shower and collapsed on my bed, falling asleep almost immediately despite my worry about Alexei.

As soon as I woke up, I again called the clinic. I still couldn’t see him, they said. He was stable and incredibly lucky as the bullet just missed his lung. But he had yet to regain consciousness.

The rest of the day was a blur. I paced around my hotel room like a caged tiger, hoping, praying the phone would ring with good news.

My bodyguard knocked on the door and offered to take me downstairs for lunch. But I couldn’t eat, I couldn’t think. Later, the second-shift bodyguard brought me a tray from the restaurant. He set it on the table and left, throwing me a compassionate glance. I looked at the food and felt nauseated. Leaving it untouched, I resumed my restless pacing.

By four p.m. I was so exhausted that I just fell asleep on the couch.

“Jade, Jade...” I woke up from someone gently shaking me. The room was dark. I quickly looked at the clock. It turned out that I was asleep for over two hours. “Jade,” said my bodyguard, “Alexei is awake and he’s asking for you!”

I threw on my coat, grabbed my purse and ran out of the room, the bodyguard hardly able to keep up with me.



Chapter 29

I got into the car waiting downstairs. On the way to the clinic I couldn't sit still and my heart pounded so fast that I was afraid it would jump out of my chest. Once inside the clinic, I rushed to Alexei's room. I opened the door and saw him in bed, his eyes open.

"You're okay!" I exhaled.

Alexei looked just a pale copy of himself, but he was smiling.

"I asked them to send for you as soon as I was able to. Doctor says my vital signs were stronger than expected and my recovery is faster than usual, considering the circumstances. He seems to think it's my mighty constitution that has pulled me out so quickly, but I know it is you, Jade, it is our love that has saved me in that cave." He tried to sit up, but cringed and fell back on his pillows.

"Don't even think about it!" I told him sternly. "You have to stay in bed!"

"Yes, General," he responded cheerfully, but there was an unusual strain in his voice.

I took his hand. "Please don't speak, darling. It's too early. Besides, they'll boot me out if you misbehave and I so want to stay with you."

"Okay," he said, but started coughing.

I got alarmed. "Should I call a nurse or a doctor?"

"Absolutely not," he said. "They'll start fussing, besides, they may ask you to leave, and I so want you to stay..." He didn't finish, as another coughing spell overcame him.

"What can I do, darling?" I asked.

"Please, bring me some water," he responded through the cough.

"Wait here, I'll be right back," I said and went out into the corridor to look for water.

The nurse on duty wasn't at her station, so I told my bodyguard to watch Alexei through the open door and went to look for the nurse. I checked for her everywhere, but she was nowhere to be found. I walked through a double door and ended up in another wing of the clinic. At the end of the long corridor, I noticed a white-clothed table with bottled water and cups. I rushed to the table and grabbed one of the bottles and a cup. Then I hurried back to Alexei.

I was now feeling almost like my old, optimistic self. Even though Alexei still wasn't well, he was definitely getting better; we found Tsar's gold; the Monarchists and other criminals were being rounded up one after another; Svetlana's killer was picked out of a lineup by a witness and was now in jail, awaiting trial... And the man I loved with all my heart loved me back.

Of course, there was still an extremely difficult matter to deal with, that of my husband Paul. He was a good man, even if I got the short end of the stick after our marriage, when I had to deny my adventurous nature by prematurely becoming a stay-at-home mom. After the warped clandestine world of the Gold Train treasure, Chechen terrorism and the Monarchist conspiracy, my quiet and orderly New York life felt remote and almost surreal. It seemed as if this dangerous world was real, and that one wasn't. It took me some effort to snap back to the everyday reality after all Alexei and I had been through together. In this, regular world, I had family responsibilities and my darling little Lara, who needed me back home. As to my jet-setting husband... I still had feelings for him, and we had a daughter together. I had no idea how to resolve this confusing situation, but I decided to take my life one day at a time. Today, I needed to be there for Alexei. He could not be disturbed. He had to recover first. After I made sure he was well again, we could start thinking about the future.

When I approached Alexei's room, I had a smile on my face. As my hand reached towards the doorknob of the closed door, I noticed the bodyguard's strange look. I wasn't sure what that look meant, but being preoccupied with my thoughts about Alexei, I brushed it aside, turned the doorknob, pushed the door open and stepped into the room.

"Here's water..." I started - and froze.

Sitting on the chair next to Alexei's bed was a lovely young woman gazing at him with complete and total adoration. Two blue-eyed children, a little boy, who looked like a miniature copy of Alexei, and a pretty girl, who seemed to be around seven, stood by the bed next to the woman.

"When are you going to come back home, Papa?" said the little boy. "We miss you so much!"

The girl gently stroked Alexei's hand as the woman was bending to kiss him on the forehead.

Alexei's eyes fixed on me and I read everything in them. "I am so sorry," his eyes said. "I'm an asshole, I never told you. I wanted our fairy tale to last a little longer. You have every reason to be mad at me. But please, please, don't hurt them. They've been through enough."

I was stunned for only just a second, but made a superhuman effort to pull myself together.

"Ah, you must be Alexei's wife," I said to the woman, extending my hand. "It's very nice to meet you. You should be very proud of him. He is a good and brave man. If not for him, I wouldn't be alive today!" And I shook her hand with a big smile on my face.

"Excuse me, but who are you?" asked the woman, confused.

"My name is Jade Snow," I said.

"Jade has been working with us on the case. She uncovered most of the evidence that led to the arrests," said Alexei. "We wouldn't be able to complete this operation without her."

"It's very nice to meet you!" The woman returned my smile. "Any friend of Alexei's... You must come and visit us after my husband gets better and returns home."

"Thank you for your gracious invitation," I said with the same perky smile, while feeling as if someone had been poking my bleeding heart with a giant fork, "but I am afraid... I'll be leaving back to New York tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? So soon? But you must stay longer!" Alexei exclaimed.

In response to these words, his wife gave him a long, pensive look.

"Sorry, but unfortunately, I have to return. My work here is finished. No reason to stay."

We silently peered into each other's eyes, again communicating eye-to-eye, soul to soul. It was once more, as if reality dissolved and we were in another dimension, just the two of us, together.

"I don't want you to go," his soul said.

"I must," mine replied. "You have a family."

"I know," his said. "And you have yours."

"How long have you known?" mine asked.

"Since St. Petersburg. We'd checked up on you."

"And you never told me?"

"I didn't want it to end."

I gazed at this man who was ready to die for me, but who forgot to tell me he was married or that he knew that I was, for that matter... and felt my heart burning. Not with anger; I could never again be angry with him after what he'd done, but with love. I knew exactly why he didn't tell me. Given the circumstances, I would've done the same thing. In fact, I *have* done the same thing: I never told him about my family either.

In the alternate universe out of which he and I were lucky to escape alive, there was no room for error, nor any space for family. The family had to remain out of harm's way, in this, real, world. In *that* world where every day could be your last, all you had was a rare, fleeting moment of bliss in the midst

of violence and mayhem, and if you were fortunate enough to capture such moment, you wanted to hold on to it for dear life, for as long as you could before releasing it into the great unknown.

“Will I see you again?” his eyes implored.

I left this question without a response, as I noticed his wife’s eyes fixed on him with the same pensive, noticing stare. But she said nothing.

“Well, it was very nice meeting you,” I said to her. “I must go. Take care of Alexei. Oh, here is the water he asked for.” I handed her the bottle together with the cup.

“It’s been a privilege working with you, Comrade Moguchev,” I addressed him, smiling.

“I’ll always love you,” my soul echoed.

“It’s been a privilege working with you too, Comrade Snow,” he responded. “Thank you for everything.”

“I love you more than life itself,” his soul echoed.

“I know,” mine said.

“You’ll always be in my heart,” his said.

“You’ll always be in mine,” mine echoed.

As the car took me back to my hotel room, I could still hear his thoughts.

“I can’t live without you,” he said.

“We must live for our families,” I responded.

“Another time, somewhere, I’ll find you.”

“I’ll never forget you.”



Chapter 30

When I was all packed and ready to go, Comrade General stopped by my hotel room. I ordered some tea and pastry and we sat at the coffee table one last time.

“I came to thank you from all of us for everything you’ve done, Jade,” he said.

“It was my pleasure, Comrade General.”

“I know,” he said, putting his hand on top of mine, “how difficult this is for you. And I am very sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said with a perky smile. “It’s time to get back to reality. We all have to do what we have to do.”

“Jade,” he went on. “This may come as a surprise, but I have an offer for you. Come, work for us! You could live in Moscow; it really is a very nice city and I am sure you’d enjoy it very much. You could bring your family here. Your husband’s a journalist and there is plenty of work here for journalists with perfect command of English. I am sure we could find excellent employment for him. There are also many expats from the US and other countries living here, in Moscow. You’ll never feel isolated. Your daughter would grow up speaking Russian, the language of her ancestors, and you could truly reconnect with your roots. What do you say?”

“You are right,” I said. “It’s not just a surprising offer, I am actually stunned.”

“You shouldn’t be. What you were able to accomplish, without any special training... I simply wish some of my people could do half as well as you did, and they’ve been trained as professionals.”

“I’m flattered,” I said, thinking that it was quite an admission coming from an FSB General, especially since I’ve seen his people in action and knew how good they were. “I really am flattered. This is quite a compliment coming from you, Comrade General. And I’d be lying if I said that it wasn’t tempting to simply move my family to Moscow and live here happily ever after, but... it’s impossible.”

“But why not? I think you’d be happy here.”

“True, *I* probably would be happy here. And Lara would be happy here, too. But I don’t think Paul would be.”

The General gave me a penetrating look. “Sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Well, let me know if you ever reconsider. Remember, you have a standing job offer along with many, many good friends.”

“I’ll remember that,” I said.

“There is one more thing we need to take care of before you leave,” said the General, taking out of his jacket’s inner pocket a folded sheet of officially-looking paper. “A non-disclosure agreement.”

I nodded. I thought something like that was coming. I skimmed through the document, in which I promised never to reveal to anyone either verbally, in writing or in any other form anything to do with the Gold Train, the Monarchist conspiracy, the Chechen terrorists, or with any aspects, circumstances or incidents that concerned my communication and work with the FSB, either directly or indirectly.

Yes, I could definitely promise that! I reached for a pen and signed on the dotted line. The General collected the paper and got up.

“Just a moment, Comrade General,” I said. I reached into my bag and took out the black leather notebook.

“This belongs to Russia,” I said, handing it to him.

“So, the black notebook does exist...” murmured the General.

“Yes,” I said. “Svetlana’s notebook. This is how I knew where to look for the treasure. But it contains a lot more data, which I’ve been unable to figure out. I think there is more of Tsar’s gold hidden someplace else. Perhaps you’ll have more luck finding it. This treasure belongs to the Russian people.”

“You are full of surprises, as usual,” said the General, shaking his head. “And thank you.”

He took my hand and kissed it with great ceremony. “It’s been a rare privilege, Your Royal Highness.”

“Likewise, Comrade General.”

“Incidentally,” he said, getting ready to leave. “We’ve arrested the entire Monarchist Committee as soon as we got word from your contact. I don’t believe anyone who may still be at large knows about your involvement. But better safe than sorry.” And he again left one of his men as my bodyguard.

After the door closed behind him, I finished packing. My bodyguard helped me with my luggage and took me to the airport.

Two hours later, I was on a plane back to New York. I sat in my window seat, staring at the white clouds, as people in business class chatted with their neighbors, ate lunch, flirted with one another and read glossy magazines. Life went on, as if a major conspiracy hadn’t just been nipped in the bud and the missing Gold Reserve of the Russian Empire hadn’t been recovered. As if Alexei, the man who - well, with my help - was instrumental in making it all happen, the man who was the love of my life, wasn’t lying in the Kremlin Clinic seriously wounded.

The fluffy clouds floated past. I sipped my wine, his unspoken words ringing in my ears, “I love you more than life itself... Another time, somewhere, I’ll find you. Another time, somewhere, we will be together.”

There was absolutely nothing in the Universe I desired more... But in my world, it wasn’t meant to be. In my world, I had a family, the family I loved dearly, family waiting for me in New York. And he had a family, a very lovely family, in Moscow. End of story!

So despite his words ringing in my ears, despite every cell of my body aching to be with him, I shook off the spell and focused on how much I missed Lara and Paul, Lily and Rachel, and our life on the Upper West Side.

Paul met me at the airport with a bunch of white daisies in his hand and a big smile on his face. We drove back home as he was filling me in on all the news: how well Lara was growing; what new words she had learned; what was happening at *Time* magazine; and how we needed to address our co-op Board about the elevator situation in our building.

I listened, but said very little.

At home I petted Princess Lily, hugged and held close my little Lara and chatted with her nanny, Dolores. In the evening, Rachel dropped by and we had an improvised homecoming party. The next morning at seven, Paul kissed me goodbye and left for his office, his mind already on his next assignment. I took a walk with Lara in Central Park and after that, sat down at my desk to write the story about my Russian adventures... minus the Gold Train, the Monarchists, the FSB and Alexei.

Everything was getting back to normal. It seemed as if the past three weeks had never happened and I was ready to believe that myself. Almost... If not for the constant throbbing pain in my heart, the pain that went away only when I chose to listen to the voice from another dimension, ringing constantly in my mind, Alexei’s voice.

I willed myself to get back to reality and concentrate on my writing. But in every sentence I stumbled upon Alexei. Everything that happened in the past three weeks, everything we’ve been

through together... How could I omit all that, how could I change names and places without leaving enormous, impossible to fill gaps in my narrative?

I struggled with my story till the afternoon and finally, exhausted, closed my computer and decided to take a nap. At the dinner table, I talked very little, which Paul discounted as a consequence of my jet lag.

My husband was unusually generous and understanding. He washed the dishes, helped me put Lara to bed and then kissed me good night and tucked me in, saying that I needed to recover from my trip.

“You know, darling,” he suddenly confessed, “only after I’ve spent these past three weeks at home with Lara, I finally understood how much you sacrificed by becoming a stay-at-home mom. And you never complained, but just performed your family duties unfailingly. I want to tell you that I am sorry I’ve never taken into account your needs, and I promise it will be different going forward. I know how much you miss being in the thick of things, Jade. From now on, we’ll alternate staying with Lara so you could also have a career.”

I was lying in bed, eyes open, face burning. I was stunned by his turnaround and ashamed of myself. Paul was so great to me and I... I’ve been with another man!

The next morning, Paul left before I was up. A steaming pot of coffee, a warm muffin and the new issue of *Time* magazine was thoughtfully prepared for me on the table. I sipped coffee, feeling worse and worse. I didn’t know what to do. Should I come clean and tell him about Alexei? Then again, there was a school of thought that said that what he didn’t know couldn’t hurt him.

I spent the entire day vacillating between decisions and when evening came I felt as badly as before. We ate dinner in silence and once Paul was finished he immediately retired to his study to work on his article. He was so absorbed in his work that he didn’t even notice my condition. I thought it was just as well.

I put Lara to bed and went to bed too, deciding that tomorrow would be another day. After Paul left the next morning, I went through my usual routine of vacillating between pros and cons of telling him. In desperation, I almost picked up the phone to talk to Rachel, but was reluctant to tell the truth even to my best friend. Princess Lily was the only one who felt my condition. She made it a point of snuggling against my legs and sleeping in my lap as often as possible. Her wonderful purring was a calming influence that alone kept me sane.

By the evening, I was nowhere near deciding what to do. And then it hit me that even if I did tell Paul about Alexei, it would be very difficult to explain who he was and how I met him, without lying. And I couldn’t tell the truth. Which meant I couldn’t confide in Rachel either. NO ONE was supposed to know. That *was* the agreement between Comrade General and me.

It appeared I had to carry this burden alone. There was no way I could tell my husband! Perhaps, in time I would forget this whole story, I thought wistfully. Perhaps eventually – somehow – everything would get back to where it was before my Russian adventure.

That evening at dinner, Paul announced that his trip to Somalia has been approved and that he’ll be leaving in a couple of days. With a strange relief I thought that now, even if I wanted to tell him I definitely couldn’t. It would have been cruel and unfair to lay it on him before such dangerous assignment. I realized of course that I was just trying to appease my guilty conscience. Still, it felt as if I just received a stay of execution.

Paul was preoccupied with his trip and, as it usually happened to him in such cases, hardly noticed anything else around him. Soon, he was packed and ready to leave. I drove him to the airport and gave him a huge hug and a long kiss, just like in the old days. He waved goodbye as he passed through the security scanner and disappeared from my view.

And just like that, less than ten days after my return from Moscow, Paul was gone and I was again alone. Suddenly my heart throbbed, as my stomach did a strange flip-flop. I slowly made my way back to the car, inhaling deeply and hoping that the throbbing pain would go away. Perhaps I was still jet-lagged? Or possibly, it was my guilt talking? I drove back home, breathing deeply and sipping Evian. By the time I got back to the apartment, the strange pain dissipated.

Little by little, I eased into my old routine: Lara, Princess Lily, writing, pushing the stroller in Central Park, lunches and dinners with Rachel and other friends. I soon forgot the strange sensation I felt at the airport. My guilt began fading from my consciousness and a few days after my husband left for Africa, I started thinking that perhaps Paul and I still had the possibility of a happy future together.



Chapter 31

That day, I just finished giving Lara her breakfast. Dolores arrived to stay with my daughter so I could have the rest of the day off. She got busy in the nursery, while I was getting ready for a day on the town, when the intercom rang.

“Ms. Jade?” said the security guard’s voice.

“Yes, Carlos,” I said.

“Here is a gentleman by the name of Mr. Obolensky, who wants to see you.”

“Obolensky!?” My heart jumped all the way up to the ceiling, then dropped like a rock onto the tips of my toes. My voice acquired the note of excitement akin to a love-struck fifteen year old. “Carlos, please put him through!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“It’s me,” said the voice I thought I’d never hear again.

“Carlos, please let him in!” I said, barely containing myself.

Thirty seconds later, I heard the familiar footsteps. I opened the door and let Alexei in. He looked thin - the look of a man recovering from a long illness - and his right arm was in a sling. I carefully threw myself at him and hugged him tightly, trying to avoid touching his shoulder. He responded with his left arm, but winced in the process.

I delicately removed myself and led him to the living room. We sat on the sofa, holding hands and quietly drinking each other in.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” I whispered.

“Someone had to see you one last time, so they thought I’d be the best person, since you know me,” he responded, covering my hand with tender kisses. I inhaled and wasn’t able to let my breath out again. The whole world started to melt around me and just like before, I forgot everything but him.

“Besides,” he added, “they wanted to give me one more opportunity to see you.”

And at that very moment, Dolores walked into the room, Lara in her arms.

“Ms. Jade...” she started, but stopped as her eyes drifted to Alexei’s lips kissing my hand.

“Yes, Dolores?” I said calmly.

“I just wanted to know what you wanted me to give Lara for lunch and dinner,” she said. “But if you like, I can come back later.”

“No, that’s fine,” I said. “Please meet my associate, Mr. Obolensky, who helped me work on my stories in Russia.” I met her eyes. “He is a good friend, Dolores.”

“Of course, a good friend,” nodded Dolores. “I can see that.”

“Is that your little daughter?” said Alexei.

“Yes, meet my pride and joy, Lara.”

“Hi, little Lara,” said Alexei, poking her very gently in the tummy. Lara giggled and stretched her little arms towards him.

He took her in his healthy, left arm and started waltzing with her around the room, humming a merry tune.

“You probably shouldn’t...” I started.

“That’s all right,” he said, slightly out of breath. Lara giggled happily and wrapped her little arms around his neck.

I shook my head. I knew it hurt him, but he wouldn't admit it.

All of a sudden he stopped, his breathing heavy. I quickly took Lara out of his arms and gave her back to Dolores. Then I helped him to the sofa. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead.

"Told you!" I said, gently wiping his brow with a clean napkin.

"I'll come back later," said Dolores, throwing a glance of admiration in Alexei's direction and one of understanding in mine.

"Thank you, Dolores," I said, as she carried Lara out of the room. Lara was crying, not wanting to leave and extending her tiny hands towards Alexei.

I made him lie down on the sofa, while Dolores brought in some green tea and honey, as well as miniature salmon and cucumber sandwiches. Princess Lily appeared in the room and jumped nimbly on the sofa, sniffing at the treats. Alexei seemed to feel better, and color slowly returned to his cheeks. He sipped tea and munched on a salmon sandwich, sharing it with Lily who purred contentedly in his lap, as he scratched her chin.

"This is Princess Lily," I introduced her. Lily, in turn, greeted Alexei with a gentle meow. "She says hello."

"Hello, Princess. Enchanted to meet you!" He laughed happily. And then added, "I am in love with your family, my darling Jade."

Lily continued purring in his lap, begging for more caress. It was evident that no female, no matter what nationality, age, or species, could resist Alexei.

"By the way," he said, "I brought you a hello from your buddies, Buran, Ostriy and Bistriy."

"How are they?" I asked, recalling my loyal doggie friends.

"Ostriy and Bistriy have been accepted into the search and rescue program, along with their two siblings. Buran is getting on with age, so he'll be living with me and my family. They'll still be able to see each other on weekends and my children are ecstatic about having him around. Buran is really great with them."

"Yes, he is very paternal," I said. "I am so glad it all worked out so well!"

"Couldn't have been any other way," he said, and I thought I heard a hidden meaning in his words.

"How's your shoulder?" I asked.

"Much better. Doctors insisted I should stay at the hospital, but I escaped."

I nodded. How typical. "Are you here for long?"

"No, just to conclude business."

"What business?"

"You'll see," he said mysteriously. "I want to ask you out to lunch. We can discuss it there."

"Sure," I said. "Let me just leave instructions about Lara and re-arrange my schedule. Luckily, I have Dolores for today."

"Yes, it is very lucky," he said, smiling enigmatically.

Feeling that I was about to dissolve into the surreal world where our souls lived their parallel lives, I quickly said, "Let me just make arrangements, be right back," and slipped out of the room.

I left instructions for Dolores, called to re-schedule lunch with Rachel, and got dressed. We left discretely via the back exit to avoid being seen by security guards and neighbors. The fewer people knew about Alexei, the better – on that I wholeheartedly agreed with him.

"Where are we going?" I asked, as we got into the black car waiting for us around the corner.

The car driver took a very intricate route around Manhattan, making surprise turns and roundabouts. If I didn't know any better I would have said we were making sure we weren't being followed.

"Better safe than sorry," said Alexei, shrugging his shoulders. "There is a small, quiet place by the river. Someone I want you to meet will be there."

A small, non-descript restaurant by the Hudson River was practically empty. We were led into a private booth in the back, and as we passed through the place I noticed a couple holding hands at one of the tables. A man, who looked like a biker, sat at the bar, sipping beer. Another man in a suit, who looked like a banker or lawyer, was eating his lunch while talking to someone on his cell phone.

Everything looked very natural, but recalling our dinner at a small Sokolniki café one memorable day in Moscow, I gave Alexei a wink, “Our people?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” he said with a twinkle in his blue eyes.

We ordered sandwiches and sat next to each other, sipping coffee.

“So, where is the man I am supposed to meet?”

“He’ll be here any moment.”

As he said that, a middle-aged gentleman in a bow tie with an umbrella appeared from the back of the restaurant and quietly took a seat opposite us at the table.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Snow,” he said.

“Likewise,” I said.

“We are grateful for your help in resolving the Gold Train case,” he continued dryly.

Hmm... No preambles, straight to the point. I nodded briefly, wondering where he was going with this.

“The reason we requested a meeting is because we have some unfinished business.”

“Unfinished business?” I said sharply, not really liking the turn this conversation was taking. “What unfinished business? Look, I gave my word that I’d never talk about this with anyone, end of story! I don’t owe you anything else!”

I felt annoyed. I couldn’t believe Alexei lured me in here under false pretense again, and I, because of my feelings for him, just went along unquestioningly, like a complete sucker!

“And don’t tell me you are using Alexei to get to me again - that would be really low!” I blurted out, feeling more and more furious.

In truth, all of a sudden I felt alarmed. I was all alone in a remote restaurant with all these FSB operatives around. I haven’t told anyone where I was going. In fact, I had no idea when I was getting into the car with Alexei, where I was going! What if the FSB decided I was an unwanted witness? What if they thought I was a liability they couldn’t afford? Using Alexei would indeed be very smart. They knew that he was the one person with whom I’d go anywhere, on a moment’s notice, no questions asked. Sure, Alexei loved me more than life itself; he’d proven that back in that cave. But there was one thing he loved more than me... his Motherland.

“Jade, please let him finish,” Alexei said softly, placing his calming hand on top of mine. My hand involuntarily twitched at his touch as the excruciatingly sweet electric charge went through my body. I blushed and fell silent.

The man gave both of us a knowing look and continued smoothly.

“If you’ll allow me to finish, Ms. Snow. Our country is very grateful for your help. We have a law, according to which anyone who finds a treasure owned by the Russian State, is entitled to a percentage of said treasure. In this case you are entitled to this amount.” With these words, he handed me a non-descript piece of paper with an amount written on it.

I took a sip from my cup as my eyes drifted casually to the piece of paper in my hand. But when I saw the amount, I choked on my coffee.

“Oh My God! Are you serious???”

“Absolutely,” the man said.

“How many zeros???”

“It’s all right here, on the paper,” he said, smiling.

“A...are y...you sure it’s not a mistake?” I whispered.

“Absolutely sure,” he said patiently.

I turned to Alexei. “Is this some kind of a joke?”

“No joke,” he said with the broadest smile I’ve ever seen on his face. “Total and complete truth! I thought I’d play *Ded Moroz* for you.”

“You mean, Santa Claus,” I translated automatically.

“Yes, *Ded Moroz*, Santa Claus, after all, Christmas is around the corner.”

“Ms. Snow,” continued the man with a bow tie. “This amount is based on the current market value of the gold you’ve found.”

“Which is?”

“The full value of the gold is thirty five billion dollars, give or take a few billion. The founding fee will make you richer than you’ve ever dreamed of. We have set up a numbered Swiss account for you. If you wish, you could buy a private island and live there happily with your family for the rest of your life.”

“What’s wrong with living happily in Manhattan?” I murmured, still eyeing the piece of paper in front of me incredulously. In truth, I really had no objection to living on a private island, somewhere in the Pacific perhaps...

“Yes, about that... There is one condition. You cannot reveal to anyone in the USA that you have this money. And you cannot use it here. Remember, you are still under the agreement!”

“I remember,” I said, nodding.

The man jumped to his feet lightly. “I’ll be saying goodbye now,” he said, extending his hand. “I’ll be leaving you in the capable hands of our friend, Alexei.” He bowed, and a moment later vanished through the back, just as quickly as he’d appeared.

I sat there, as the full meaning of what just happened slowly penetrated my mind. I was rich - very, very, very rich. Paul, Lara, Lily and I could move to a gorgeous private island or do whatever else we pleased. Under two conditions: we couldn’t stay in the US and... this would all be happening without Alexei.

“So...” I said, “are you going back to work?”

“Yes, pretty soon,” he replied. “The treasure you’ve found constitutes anywhere between one third and one half of the lost gold reserve, so now we’ll be looking for the rest. Our specialists have been working on Svetlana’s notes and they appear to be making some progress.”

“Good luck,” I said, wishing deep down I could join him on this next adventure, but realizing full well that it was impossible.

“And of course, there is always plenty of other work,” he continued. “We are still tying up loose ends with this case. Incidentally, I thought I should tell you this: Boris Goncharov has been arrested in Moscow, after he and a number of other conspirators arrived from various countries in order to coordinate the main Monarchist strike.”

I knew something like this could happen, still, I felt my throat constricting. “Please,” I said, “pass along my personal request to Comrade General. Ask him on my behalf to be gentle with Uncle Boris. After all, he is an old man.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said, frowning. “The charges against him are grave: conspiracy to overthrow the legitimate government of the Russian Federation, aiding terrorism and inciting hatred and violence.”

“Please do what you can for him,” I whispered.

“I promise,” he said.

“Thank you, Lieutenant Colonel Moguchev,” I said.

“Colonel,” he corrected me. “I received a promotion.”

“Congratulations,” I said. “No one deserves it more.”

I gazed into his face, insatiably drinking it in to make sure it stayed with me forever. He was an unattainable dream of something more. He was my reminder that *I* could be so much more... But it wasn't meant to be.

He took my hand and held it in his. The warmth of his palm went straight to my heart as we sat silently, drowning in each other's eyes. Words were superfluous as our souls spoke directly.

“Will I ever see you again?” mine asked.

“I don't know. But I'll always talk to you like this,” his said.

“Me too,” mine echoed.

And that's when the Gypsy's prophecy rang in my head. “You'll find something very valuable, but lose something even more valuable instead.”

I found the treasure, but I lost Alexei.



Chapter 32

My life went on: Lara, Lily, writing, Rachel, friends. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to all, I was learning to live with a constant throbbing ache in my heart. Alexei's voice was hardly audible during the day, what with all the activity and noise. But at night, when I crawled into my lonely bed, I heard it loud and clear. As the pain became unbearable, I'd often lay with my eyes open till dawn.

Princess Lily, sensing that I needed her, started sleeping in my bed and her comforting purring soothed the pain like no medication would.

Meanwhile, Rachel made it a habit to check up on me daily. She was my best friend, but no, I didn't tell her anything - a promise is a promise. Still, she knew me all too well and she was a brilliant psychoanalyst not for nothing. She'd probably seen plenty of heartbroken people, so it wasn't hard for her to guess.

She'd drop by at lunch or after work, play with Lara and Lily, and quietly observe me. I noticed of course, but said nothing because her supportive presence calmed down my throbbing heart.

Five days after Alexei's departure, she decided to confront me. We sat at a café when she said, "Would you like to share anything with me?"

"What do you mean?" I said, feigning surprise. In fact, I knew this conversation was coming.

"Jade," she fixed me with her professional psychoanalyst's stare. "You know very well what I mean! You haven't been yourself ever since you came back from Russia. What happened? You can tell me! You know," she gave a small laugh, "anything you share with me is strictly confidential."

I am sure she meant this as a joke, to ease up tension and to make me feel comfortable, but she had no idea how close she was to the core of the issue.

"All right," I said, knowing that I couldn't get rid of her that easily. "To be sure it really is confidential," I threw a look around the crowded cafe, where people sat within a step from us in all four directions, "let's walk to your office and we'll talk there."

She nodded. "Good idea."

We walked out of the café and headed to her office, but then it occurred to me (blame it on my recent spying experience) that walls had ears. What if Rachel's office was bugged? I flagged a cab and gave the driver my address instead.

"Did you change your mind?" asked Rachel.

"Just had a better idea."

When the cab approached Central Park, I told the driver to let us out by the park entrance.

"I need some air," I explained. "Let's walk."

Rachel followed me without a word, but once on the park trail, she said, "If I didn't know any better, I'd say that you were acting like a textbook spy."

I thought it was telling that Rachel, being her usual perceptive self, should mention spies, but aloud I simply murmured, "It's nothing like that."

"Then what is it?"

"It's complicated, Rache."

"Try me," she retorted.

"I'd love to, but I can't," I said, and my voice cracked.

Rachel heard it. "Did you fall in love in Russia?"

“Yes,” I whispered.

“I knew this was bound to happen sooner or later,” noted my shrewd psychoanalyst friend, peering at me with her piercing stare, “what with your absentee husband and with you always suppressing your needs, but...oh, my God! You really are in love, deeply and forever!”

“Yes...”

She gave me a hug. “You poor thing. Your heart - I can feel it...” She held me tight.

“Thank you, Rache,” I said gratefully.

“So, what are we going to do about it?” she said.

“What *can* we do? He’s got a family, a very lovely family, in fact. And I have mine. Too many hearts to break... Can’t do anything.”

“Meanwhile, *your* heart is breaking.”

“It gets better,” I said with a sad smile.

“I can see that,” she responded sarcastically.

“Time heals all wounds,” I said.

“What’s his name?” she asked. “You know, anything you tell me is...”

“Yeah, I know - confidential. But,” I shook my head, “I can’t. I made a promise.”

Rachel fixed me with her penetrating stare. “There is something else you are not telling me.”

“Can’t tell you that either. Believe me, I wish I could! It would’ve been easier to bear.”

“Jade,” said Rachel, “I am really worried.”

“Don’t be,” I said. “Everything will be fine. Soon, Paul will come back from Somalia and life will get back to normal. I can’t wait to tell him the news...” I stopped myself just in time; one more moment and I inadvertently would’ve spilled the beans about my newly found wealth! But Rachel caught it.

“What news?” she asked immediately.

“News... eehhh... news... I mean, yes, the news - the surprise I am planning for Paul, so don’t you dare say anything to him!”

“You know I can’t say anything to him, since he’s all the way in Somalia,” she responded reasonably, but her voice clearly said that she wasn’t quite buying it. “So what’s the big surprise?”

“That we are taking a fabulous, long vacation to Europe as soon as he’s back! Isn’t it great?”

“Ye...es, it is great,” she said slowly. “But I know there is something else you are not telling me.”

“Rache,” I said, “I can’t lie to you - there is something else. And one day, I swear, I will tell you. But right now, please don’t ask, okay?”

“Okay.” She sighed. “As you wish. Just remember, you can always count on me.”

“I know,” I said and gave her hand a grateful squeeze.

The conversation with Rachel somehow made me feel better. Even though I didn’t tell her anything, I still knew that someone was there for me, ready to share the load. Meanwhile, the idea of booking a long European vacation to surprise Paul took root. I had it all worked out with the travel agency. I also called Paul’s boss, George Bollinger, and asked to give Paul a long-overdue vacation he’d promised, explaining to him about my surprise trip to Europe. He liked the idea and promised to keep it quiet until Paul’s return.

“Paul’s assignment is nearing end,” he said. “You’ll be happy to know, he only has a couple of interviews left. I spoke with him yesterday. Tomorrow he’s having an interview with a tribal leader, who may have connections with the Somali pirates, and then one more interview with the Somali government’s chief of security. After that, he’ll be back.”

“This is really good news,” I said. I was sad and relieved at the same time. Perhaps, I thought, with Paul’s return, my life would indeed get back to normal? I should really give it a chance. From now on, I’d be concentrating exclusively on Lara, Paul, and Princess Lily, and little by little the routine and

responsibilities of everyday life would relegate the memories of Alexei and Russia to the back of my mind.

I willed myself to focus on Paul's arrival. I'd sit on the sofa and imagine how we'd go to Europe and how some time during our romantic vacation I'd break the news of my newly found riches to him, how we'd plan out the rest of our life together somewhere on a beautiful, private island, away from the crazy world of geopolitics, bloodshed and spies.

The more I focused on these visions of a perfect future with Paul, the less my heart throbbed. With every passing day, it was easier to breathe and, surrounded by the love of Lara, Lily and Rachel, my broken heart began to mend.

Dolores still came in every day, which was a big help. Paul was due back in two days and I felt almost like my normal self again. The day before Paul's arrival, I cleaned up the house and displayed our European tour tickets in a prominent place, next to an enormous bouquet of my favorite flowers, daisies, fresh from the florist.

I already agreed with Dolores that she'd stay with Lara full time while we were gone, and Rachel promised to move in for a few weeks to help out. The day of Paul's arrival I ordered a delicious dinner from his favorite French restaurant to be delivered at seven, bought a new dress and got my hair done. I gave Lara and Lily a kiss and was already standing by the door, car keys in hand and ready to drive to the airport... when the intercom rang.

"Ms. Jade," said the security guard's voice.

"Yes, Carlos," I answered.

"I have a couple of people here to see you."

"Please ask them to come later. I am on my way to the airport, to pick up Paul."

"They say it's very urgent."

"Well, it would have to wait. I don't want to be late."

"It's a Mr. George Bollinger and another gentleman, and they are saying..."

"Jade," George Bollinger's voice interrupted, "I need to talk to you. Please tell the guard to let me in. It's very important."

"Is something wrong?" I said. "Did Paul get delayed?"

"Just let me in, please..."

I told Carlos to let them in and waited by the door, feeling inexplicably chilly, despite wearing a warm cashmere coat. I let both George and another man, whom I've never seen before, into the apartment and showed them to Paul's study.

"Jade, please meet Mr. Thomas. He is one of our... um... associates." Mr. Thomas was a tall man with an unmistakable military posture and a perma-tan of someone who spends a lot of his time outdoors and in hot climates. Africa, perhaps?

"Pleasure," I said, shaking the man's hand. His hand was rough and handshake strong.

"Likewise," he said in a husky voice.

I closed the door and we sat down.

"Would you like something to drink, Jade?" asked George.

"No." I shook my head.

"I wouldn't mind a Scotch on the rocks," he said, for some reason holding on to his heart.

I went to Paul's bar and made him and his friend a couple of drinks.

"Upffhh, better!" George downed his Scotch in one go.

I stood in front of them, throwing impatient glances at my watch.

"Look, George," I said. "With all due respect, I need to go meet Paul and unless you are telling me he's been delayed, I really should be going..."

“Jade,” said George and reached for my hand. Feeling all the blood drain from my heart, I tried to pry my hand out of his, but it felt soft and immobile as if it was made out of cotton. I heard a strange ringing in my ears and sat down in my chair, unable to move - because I already knew...

“Jade, dear, dear Jade,” he went on. “There is really no easy way of telling you this... Paul was killed on his way to the interview with the tribal chief two days ago. We only got the news today.”

“No...” my lips moved, but I heard no sound. I shook my head, hoping all this would go away. “No...it can’t be.”

“I am so sorry. If there is anything I can do...”

You’ll find something valuable, but lose something even more valuable instead...rang the Gypsy’s voice in my ears.



Chapter 33

The rest of that day was a daze through which I could vaguely see the faces of preoccupied Dolores, crying Lara, Princess Lily, who was trying to comfort me, and Rachel, who was giving me something to drink. Then I fell into a heavy sleep, in which some kind of slimy, filthy hands were pulling me into the abyss.

I couldn't resist, I was as good as dead, when a strong hand came out of nowhere and pulled me out. The voice I would've recognized anywhere, said, "Jade, follow me...over here, Jade...follow me...you are safe..." He brought me out of the abyss onto a beautiful meadow, and dissolved.

"Alexei," I cried out, hot tears streaming down my face. "Don't leave me, Alexei! Stay!"

I opened my eyes. I was in bed, a very grave looking Rachel by my side, checking my pulse.

"You gave me quite a scare," she said. "I was about to rush you to the hospital."

She checked my forehead. "Good, fever is down. Thank God for your strong heart. You pulled yourself out of it."

"*He* pulled me out," I whispered, licking my dry lips.

Rachel reached for a glass of water on the bed stand and put it to my lips, supporting my head with her hand.

"He?" she asked. "You mean, Alexei?"

I didn't respond; she didn't insist.

In a couple of days, I recovered enough to walk. When Paul's body arrived in a sealed casket we had a quiet funeral.

Days were hard, and nights even harder. I tried to avoid sleeping in the bed that I used to share with Paul, and usually found myself asleep in a chair by Lara's bed, or at my desk. Princess Lily often snuggled next to me and the healing sounds of her purr made me feel temporarily better. Alexei's voice still spoke to me, sometimes in my dreams, sometimes when I was awake, and I didn't know if I'd ever survive without these conversations.

With whatever strength I still had left, I made myself focus on my family. They needed me and I had to keep going, for them. Lara and Lily: going forward, that's all I was going to live for. I developed a routine that I went through every day like a robot, disregarding the low background of pain that accompanied me wherever I went, whatever I did.

Every day, I mechanically went through the motions: drag myself out of bed in the morning, force down some breakfast, take care of Lara, feed Lily, take my baby daughter for a walk, take care of the house, smile and talk to people who dropped by and wanted to drag me along to some activities I had no interest in, then force down some dinner, tuck Lara in bed, and make myself fall asleep in order to wake up again the next morning and start the same cycle over and over.

Christmas was approaching and New Yorkers were busy shopping, decorating and preparing for the holidays. I watched all the activity around me indifferently. I wasn't planning to celebrate.

One day, I decided to call George Bollinger.

"I won't be able to complete my story about Russia," I said. "Sorry."

"I understand," he replied. "Take as long as you need. When you are ready I'll print your story."

"No," I said. "You don't understand. I won't be writing this story, or any other story, at all. I don't think journalism is my thing."

“Jade, you are not thinking clearly right now. Of course journalism is your thing! You are great at it! Just give it time. I promise I’ll have a spot for you whenever you are ready.”

“I appreciate it,” I said. “But no, I don’t think so. I made up my mind. Going forward, I’ll be dedicating my life to Lara. I won’t be writing again.”

“Jade,” he said, “I beg you not to make this decision now. Give it some time.”

“George, I know, you mean well, but this is a done deal. Of course, I will pay you back all the money I spent in Russia. Just let me wrap my mind around my finances.”

“Please, Jade,” he replied. “You don’t need to talk about money now, and you don’t need to pay anything back. This is the least we can do.”

“No,” I said. “I will pay it back. That’s what I’ve decided.”

“When can I stop by?” he asked. “I’d really like to see you.”

“Thanks, George,” I said. “Not right now. I am kind of busy. But I appreciate your concern, anyway.”

I hung up, feeling that I’ve done the right thing. It appeared, as much success and luck I had with solving mysteries and spying, I had none with writing. Would I ever change my mind? I didn’t know. But for now, this was how I felt.

Rachel continued spending more time at my place than at her own and I was eternally grateful for that. Three weeks passed. Rachel and I sat in my living room, having tea with blueberry pie she picked up at the bakery. I nibbled on my slice, but quickly set it aside. I had no appetite.

Rachel followed my movements with a concerned eye.

“Relax Rache, I am okay,” I said, tired of her constant silent observation.

“Did I say anything?” she objected.

“You didn’t have to.”

We fell silent as Rachel worked on her pie and I half-heartedly sipped my tea.

“You know what,” she said suddenly. “I almost wish there was another case for you to solve. I watched you during your Stepford adventure, when you were solving that local conspiracy... You only come truly alive when you are working on a case. I bet *that* would cure you in a jiffy.”

“You think?” I said melancholically, thinking that there was no cure for my illness.

“Yes!” Rachel said, and I saw her eyes light up with this new idea.

“I recall Jason Paphos,” she went on, “the enigmatic and tragic hunk, the one who was framed for rape and murder. You really had a crush on him back then, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I remember,” I nodded.

The strangely innocent days of the Stepford mystery... They seemed so far away. I remembered the feeling of warmth I experienced in Jason’s presence, yet somehow I always wanted to protect him, as well. Back then I chose Paul...

“I wish it was as simple this time around,” I said.

Rachel gave me a probing look. “I really liked Jason,” she said. “He was a good man, sincere and dependable, despite all the accusations against him. I wonder where he is now?”

“We communicated by email for a while. Then, life happened and we stopped. Last I heard he was in Asia. Joined an agricultural co-op somewhere in Thailand or Indonesia, I think.”

“Very interesting,” Rachel said meaningfully.

Of course I realized that my friend was simply trying to distract me from all my troubles by mentioning Jason, but I was grateful nevertheless.

“You are too alive, my dear Jade,” she continued, “to bury yourself at this age. Don’t do it, it won’t work anyway.”

Another week passed uneventfully. I was learning to live with a massive void in my heart left by the two men in my life. Meanwhile, skillfully implanted by Rachel, the thought of Jason kept slowly percolating in my mind. How was he? Where was he?

If there was anyone else in the whole world I could ever share my pain with, it was Jason. Rachel was my very best friend, but she'd never experienced a loss in her life. She was single and unattached; not only her parents, aunts, uncles and cousins, but even her grandparents were alive and well.

Jason was another story: he had lost as much as I did. His father, just like my parents, died when he was a teenager, his mother was brutally murdered. He'd even lost his freedom... Besides, he was all Rachel said he was: a good man and a dependable friend. A crazy thought of dropping everything and moving to Asia somewhere closer to him, drifted into my mind. There was nothing left for me here, in America. But how do I find him?

I opened my computer and after a search, located Jason's old email address.

"Hello, Jason," I wrote. "How's your new Asian life? Would love to chat with you. How can I find you?"

I clicked on send. There was a strong chance he'd abandoned this email or didn't check it that often, but I hoped for the best. The reply arrived much faster than I expected, the very same day.

"Dear Jade, you have no idea how great it is to hear from you!" Jason wrote. "It's very easy to find me as I'm currently right here, in New York. If you have time, I'd like to drop by for a chat. Would tonight be alright?"

"Of course," I replied right away. "Can you come by at eight?"

At exactly eight, the intercom announced Jason's arrival. He stepped into the apartment and produced a huge bouquet of white daisies.

"I read the obituary in *Time* magazine," he said. "I am terribly sorry about your husband."

"You remembered my favorite flowers," I said, placing the daisies into a crystal vase and setting the arrangement on the coffee table.

"How could I ever forget," he responded with a big smile.

He took off his warm jacket and remained just in a light hemp shirt with short sleeves tucked into black jeans, as I sized up his strong, chiseled body. His tanned neck was adorned with a carved Buddha pendant hanging on a black leather cord, and just like in the old days, his dark hair was tied in a ponytail. He embraced me with his muscular arms and gave me a shy peck on the cheek. I set the table for two and poured some tea into his cup.

He said, "I've come to New York all the way from Asia, hoping to talk to you."

"Sure."

"Jade," he started. "I will never forget what you've done for me back in Stepford. You are the smartest and most intuitive person I know; you have an amazing gift for solving mysteries. Something happened that made me drop everything and rush here to see you. My people and I, we desperately need your help! Please help us solve the terrible problem that has been devastating our community. I know this is all out of the blue, but there is no one else I can trust!"

He reached for my hand with his callused and prematurely aged one. It was the hand used to manual labor, resilient and dark, like the Mother Earth herself.

"Will you help me, Jade? Will you come with me to Asia?"

I gazed into his sincere eyes framed with long, almost girlish eyelashes. He was my old friend, who I'd always felt comfortable with and who warmed my heart. Maybe, just maybe, I thought, there still was something left for me on this planet. Maybe, just maybe, I would still know happiness.

THE END



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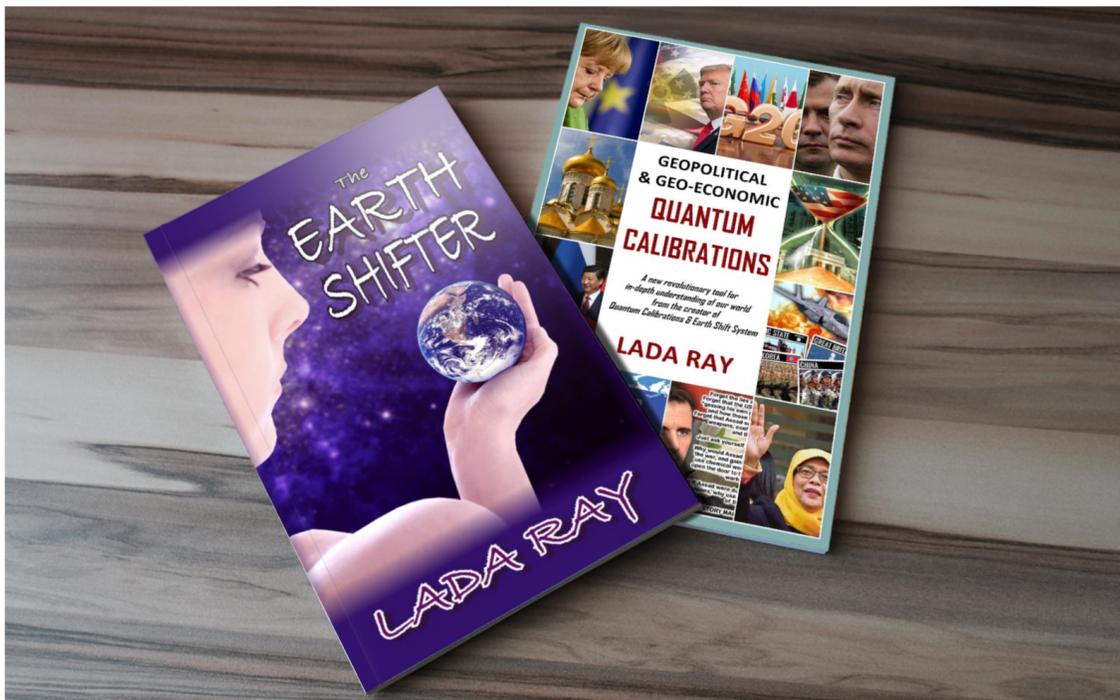
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