

The Shadow of Lillya

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Lillya shut her eyes and squeezed them tight. She imagined every muscle and limb of her father's favorite black stallion, and like she did as a young girl, took off like Pegasus flying. The faster the horse went, the clearer her past became, until it was as real as the struggles of her days. The planets parted, the stars scattered, and a trail of her memories were left in the shadow.

Chapter 1

St. Petersburg, Russia ~ 1916

The sparkle from the jewels sewn into the gowns, draped around necks, and held in place by bezels on the tiaras of the courtly ladies' heads was almost blinding. Giant crystal chandeliers swayed to the beat of the music, while six-foot-tall marble vases filled with leaves of palm the size of an African elephant's ear stood guard, eavesdropping on every conversation.

A drunken frenzy inspired the orchestra to play faster and faster. The loose limbs of the dancers on the ballroom floor looked like trees in a hurricane swaying up and down gyrating in circles then shaking like dogs just pulled out of a frozen pond, they wiggled until they collapsed from exhaustion.

Lillya caught a glimpse of a mysterious man with deep penetrating eyes. He was standing quietly in the corner of the room observing the crowd. Their eyes barely met but when they did for just a split second it was as if the fiery tip of an arrow entered and left her body. Lillya let out an unexpected "Aah" Loud enough to draw Anton's attention but soft enough to hide it from anyone else. She had heard stories of this man — a healer who had caught the attention of the Czar and Czarina.

A count poured a pitcher of drink down the front of a duchess' finely stitched dress and then without any inhibitions he started to lick it. Soon he was under her dress. The duchess unfolded her fan as though she were blushing, with mock embarrassment. The count popped his head out, quite content with himself, and addressed the crowd, not noticing the man in the corner. "Do you know what secret I found under there?"

The guests shouted back, "No!"

The count smiled, then winked and said, "The Empress doesn't go to the hospital to help the soldiers. She goes because the Czar no longer satisfies her. She's taken on a lover. I hear it's a healer, but who? Who could it be?" He said again as if to challenge the crowd. Then he grabbed the drunk duchess' hand and started dancing once again, knowing he had left one word on the lips of all in attendance, "Who?"

Lillya watched as the mysterious man in the corner left the room.

"We don't have to stay, my dear," Anton whispered in Lillya's ear. "We've shown ourselves. We can go now."

Curious as to the goings-on at court, Lillya later discovered that this man yielded more power than she had imagined. He would influence the future of her dear Russia and be at the heart of many rumors.

Lillya Xenia Englehardt Vronsky was not quite as anxious as her husband to depart. “Dance with me,” she said unexpectedly. “You know everyone loves to watch you. You are the best dancer in this ballroom. Besides, we need to stay informed, now more than ever,” she smiled through her teeth. She knew he knew she was right, but she was also aware he had no stomach for such affairs. It pained him to watch men and women he had once respected throw away their dignity as easily as if it were an old scrap of food and simple to replace. However, Lillya knew Anton would not refuse her.

Russia and St. Petersburg were fighting for their lives. “Millions of soldiers have died,” Lillya thought to herself. “And all the upper class can think about is overindulgence, intrigue and lies.”

As if he were able to read her thoughts, Anton whispered, “When they count their money and jewels tomorrow, I hope they tuck some of it away. One of these days the tables could turn and where will they all be then?” Anton did not say this to scare her. He simply wanted her to have a more realistic idea of how the people outside of their class felt. What was their level of aggravation and frustration and underneath that, anger? He had a unique perspective, that of a common man who had been brought into the folds of high society. With one eye he read the aristocrats and with his other the people who came to his circus and the vendors from whom he bought food and trinkets nearly every day on the street.

Anton was the heir of the most famous Russian family circus and came from a long line of high-wire walkers like his father, Dimitri, who had owned the circus that was situated near the Bolshoi. Every day of his life from boyhood to the day he turned the circus over to his own son, Vladimir, Anton mixed and worked with the people who filled his family's bleachers. His circus made the crowds laugh and scream. Yes, Anton felt certain he had a broader view of the temperature of the world and such matters. He had married into the upper class but could still see the world through the eyes of the people. With that in mind, years earlier, before the 1905 revolution and before he turned gray, Anton and Lillya passed on their legacy, the Vronsky Family Circus, to their son who now lived in America with his wife and four daughters. For this, Anton was glad, for he knew they were safe. Now Anton only had to focus on his wife, and that was enough.

The palace, Lillya noted, had recently adopted a frugal existence. Still, the message they were trying to send seemed to have little to no effect on the upper class, nor did it dictate their actions. The aristocrats, simply put, did not want to see, feel, or accept the rage and growing anger of the people just outside the palace doors, in the streets where they shopped, or in front of their homes. Even though they could see a dark cloud rising above them, they continued to spend enormous sums of money frivolously while the population was feeling the pangs of war and hunger, and this opulent ball was just one example.

As times got worse, Lillya and Anton moved onto her family's estate with Lillya's father, Yuri Engelhart. It seemed to be the right thing to do and was a natural fit. He loved good alcohol, fine fabrics, pastoral paintings, exotic food and most of all fine horses. He valued athleticism and people who did the best they could at whatever sparked their passion. He had enjoyed watching his grandson Vladimir when he was a child, learning all the feats he would need to know to lead and run the family's circus that would be his destiny, although Yuri wondered what they really thought about his estate and all that had come with it by birth. But Yuri enjoyed the world that his daughter had become a part of, and on afternoons when he had nothing else to do, he would visit the Vronsky Family Circus, sit in the bleachers, and watch the dancing bears and elephants and tigers all learn new tricks, and he was fascinated. "It takes so much more skill," he said to Lillya, "It would take me a lifetime of learning patience to do what they do. I so admire the talents your son is inheriting."

In later years, long after Lillya and Anton stitched a life together, to the extent that Yuri had enjoyed Anton's circus, equally, Anton surprised himself by the way he so easily adjusted to a life of leisure living with Yuri.

<Date or reference to the revolution needed to place this is historical time. This sounds like it follows the 1917 revolution.>

Still, sometimes of late, Lillya had to admit that it felt as if the world around her was crumbling, especially in regard to her homeland Russia; the country she loved with all her heart.

Russia was battling with itself both inside and out and it wasn't long before news began to trickle in about the arrests of friends; themselves wealthy aristocrats, some, who just like Lillya and Anton, had attended the ball not even three months past. The uncertainty of their future began to haunt her and she found herself staying up late into the night trying to wash the nightmares away. She remembered each one and could repeat them all at will with incredible detail and skill similar to the concentration it took her when creating her own fine needlework. Fear ran up and down her body just as it had the night before, and she witnessed herself tripping over a small log and landing in the middle of a big mud puddle. She couldn't get up by herself. The mud was like glue and she couldn't escape. She was vulnerable and unable to protect herself. "Which army would eventually come to get them?" she wondered. She found it almost impossible to come up for air and she thought she would die. Then a man with a familiar demeanor came down from heaven to visit her and he wrapped his arms around her and told her not to worry because he would save her. Day to day, night by night it seemed as if she tried out different dreams to see how they would fit just as someone else might try on an overcoat. She would feel it and smell it and use different voices to better

understand it. Would it be the Reds or Whites that would ultimately come and take them away? She tried to keep her immense fear to herself and would remind herself that fear only breeds more fear. News continued to find its way to their door, and none of it was good.

The protests and scuffles between the political factions became more violent. Every couple of days it seemed someone they knew vanished, and soon Lillya and Anton were forced to face the truth. “St. Petersburg has gotten too dangerous for people like us,” Anton finally told his wife. “We can’t hold off any longer.” Lillya was in agreement with her husband. She felt bad, for Anton was only guilty by association, and as her husband, love bound him to protect her. Many of Lillya and Anton’s friends were being forced to clean toilets, while some had simply disappeared. Had they been captured, or had they escaped?

Lillya’s family was not as high up the aristocratic ladder, but they were all well-liked and they each had a special talent that could not be replicated. Her father’s gift was to be good at nearly everything he tried, but most of all he was kind and he was charming. Still, Lillya realized that had she not been married to Anton she might have already fallen into one of those categories and none were very appealing. “You’re right,” she said to Anton and her father over dinner. “I understand, it’s time for us to go.”

The weeks before their departure, her father and Anton planned and plotted. “It’s good that you could see so far ahead, Yuri,” Anton said after Yuri reviewed his idea of sending Lillya and Anton off to their cousin Michael and the favors Michael owed him. “He’s a good man, but one needs a little more than goodness during these times to get someone to risk their life.” So, it was decided and Lillya had her own reasons to follow suit. Besides her father, Anton loved her more than anyone and both would give their own lives to save her, so she had no reason not to trust their plan.

Until that day, though, Lillya decided to appreciate every minute and every pleasure that she had been afforded during her life; besides, riding her favorite stallion to try to take her mind off of what was about to happen seemed like a smart thing to her.

“Am I grayer than I was last week?” she asked her husband. They had all seemed to grow older in that short period of time, more than she had imagined possible. As they came up with the details of their plan, it became clear her father would stay behind.

“I insist! Our old workhorse, Sophie, is exactly the kind of horse I will need, and she won’t attract attention. Sophie and Timur are my choices and Anton can choose a horse to pull our cart. That’s enough. Any more and we’ll have thieves outside

our campfire waiting for the fire to grow dim so they can jump in and take what is ours.”

The day of their parting came like any other. The sun rose, they ate their breakfast together, and joked as if they would be doing the same tomorrow. But as the hour of their departure neared, their emotions began to take over.

Lillya heard her father searching through his favorite room. “Not this one.” And he broke the bottle. She knew better than to join him at this moment. He had a right to release his feelings in private. Lillya reflected on the many hours her father had spent throughout the years categorizing, arranging and rearranging this room. She wondered if her old father would be walking as well as he did for a man his age if he had not had the determination each day to walk up and down the stairs to his cellar to dote on the many bottles that made him so happy.

Minutes later she heard her father express a very satisfied, “Yes.” She quickly moved away from the door. She didn’t want her father to think she had been listening.

“We’re going to have a little something before I send you off,” he said when he climbed back up the stairs. “Can’t let you go without warming you up a bit first. Tell that husband of yours to come inside.”

When Lillya and Anton entered her father’s study, he was opening an ungodly expensive bottle of Massandra Sherry that had once been a part of the Czar’s

private wine collection. Uncorking it like the expert he was, he poured three glasses. He refused to make a toast, for there would be no solemn goodbye, instead he lit his pipe and sat back in his old leather chair to better enjoy the smell of his tobacco. Lillya had enjoyed watching her father perform this ritual since she was a little girl. Next would come a soft, high, gurgly sound, the sound of her father imploring his tongue to fall into place and his lungs to pull in just the right amount of air to kidnap the scent of the wine's bouquet.

Without saying a word, they were all aware of the placement of the sun. They had decided they would depart before sunset, the time of least recognition.

Anton went back outside to check on the horses. He wanted Lillya to have a few moments alone with her father. They all knew that this was very likely the last time they would see one another in this physical lifetime.

Lillya had passed on the stallion and her favorite mare. She told her solid workhorses that they would soon be the ones leading the way. Lillya heard her father and Anton approaching from the front door. She knew it was the front door because of the peculiar sound it made. It reminded her of the racket of the cricket chorus in the field nearby.

Over the many years she had lived in this home she had come to recognize the creaks and squeaks of every wood plank in each room of the house and the distinctive way each door sang to her when it opened and closed. It was as if they

had created and learned anew their own language. “It makes the house friendlier,” she told her father when she was only a young woman. Some nights she joked with her father telling him that she had begun to understand what they said. About to say something, she held her breath. She felt a strange sense of foreboding. But why wouldn’t she? She was leaving the place that held so many memories from her childhood until now. They knew their reality, their entire way of life, was going to vanish. It seemed unfathomable. In a way, they felt detached even though they found themselves right in the center of all that was happening. In their minds they were simply players on the stage of life.

Lillya leaned in to give her father one last kiss but he touched her shoulder to stop her.

“I have something to give you, Lillya.” Her father said. “I should have done this years ago, but I didn’t have the courage. It’s wrapped in a small, ordinary maid’s towel so if a thief sees it they’ll think it holds no value. Inside are answers to the many questions I know still linger. Put it someplace safe and if you can, keep it to yourself.”

Lillya lifted one corner of the package to see what was inside. It was her father’s journal. “Some of the pages are soiled, but it’s all that you’ll need,” he told Lillya. “Now go. Finish getting yourself ready. You are not a young girl anymore, and don’t worry about your old papa. I’ve had a good life and more than any other

person, it was you who brought me joy, you and that son of yours. Oh, how I miss him.”

Anton walked back in the house and her father kissed Anton on the cheek and grasped both his hands.

“Take care of my daughter as you always have,” he said to Anton. “Remember, you are to head toward the Ural Mountain range then go to the town of Kungur. It is near Perm.”

“Perm. That’s where Natasha is from,” Lillya reflected silently.

Her father continued. “You will go to the lower part of the town. On Kittarskaya Street is the Uspenskaya Church. Your mother’s cousin Michael is friends with the priest,” he said. Then he glanced at Lillya the same way he had when she was a child to make certain she was listening. “He is expecting you. The priest and his church have received large donations for this service,” he went on to say. “The church has places where you both will be able to hide together, safely in plain sight.” Yuri slowed his speech, dragging out each word, not wanting this conversation to end. “has many trustworthy friends. Besides, in doing this he is paying back an old debt.”

“Thank you, Papa. I promise we won’t forget. I love you!”

Staying behind was surely a death sentence, but he had decided there was not a better nor more fitting place for him to die. He had never needed such a big house

nor so much property. It had been passed down to him as all property got passed down to the firstborn male. It was all he had ever known. And now he had a lifetime of memories and was too old and formed in his habits to start anew. He loved his estate, the wine and the horses and he had always taken good care of the families who lived with them. There would be no goodbyes. Instead two short French phrases rolled off his tongue. “À prochaine fois” and “Je t'embrasse très fort.” Then he did his best to smile. However, that was the day everything changed. Lillya could feel her father’s eyes on her back, but she did not dare turn around for fear that all the courage she had gathered up to have the strength to go would evaporate into dust and she would run back to him, wrap her arms around his neck and never let go.

How would all of this conflict end? Where would this revolution of the soul go and where would it take the people and the country she loved? How would they ever be able to fix all that they had blindly broken? Was there any goodness left floating in the sky tucked underneath a big fluffy cloud? Or a place on earth where peace and truth reigned? Had kindness disappeared? What would happen to her father and Anton and her son Vladimir? What would be left for the children and where would they go? The Russia she knew had been fading away, breaking up bit by bit, disappearing before their eyes, and in its place all that was left was confusion and

poverty, laced with violence and fear. Sadly, what she had hoped would only last weeks turned into months and years.

Childhood Days- Before the storm ~1860

Chapter 2

“It’s mine,” Natasha said, and she grabbed the necklace right out of Lillya’s hand. “You know that’s not true. It was a gift from the Duchess herself. That’s what my grandmother told me.” Lillya’s grandmother was really a great-aunt who thought her dead younger sister’s daughter would need a grandmother, and it was a role she had been training for and thought she could fulfill.

Lillya didn’t see her grandmother often; she lived in Moscow and traveled to other parts of Europe frequently with her husband, from whom she inherited her title and royalty. Nonetheless, Lillya was sentimental about the old woman, more so than most others in her life.

“It’s only because your mother died and me and the old one are your only true friends.” For a second Natasha felt bad for saying something so hurtful, but Lillya took Natasha’s guilt and used it against her and in this moment of weakness she tackled Natasha and pinned her down on the floor. After a few minutes they both got tired and Natasha gave up.

“Okay, here it is.” Laughing she handed Lillya the simple heart-shaped ruby necklace. Remembering her place, she lifted Lillya’s long golden wavy hair and

spun it into a bun on the top of her head, then added a deep red rose from the garden that was conveniently in a vase nearby to top off her masterpiece. Then she clasped the lock closed and let the necklace fall down Lillya's front where it rested just above her chest.

"Now turn around so I can see how it shines almost as brightly as your eyes. But it's not nearly as beautiful as you," said Natasha. Lillya just smiled. She was used to these sorts of easy compliments from Natasha.

Another maid walked through the door. "Will you please prepare a bath for Lillya?" Natasha asked. Then she watched and waited until the bathwater was poured, the maid knowing that Natasha had almost full authority to ask for whatever she liked when it came to Lillya. The maid delicately removed Lillya's clothes and helped her slip into the tub.

Lillya admired Natasha's composure and self-assuredness. She never brought up money or the fact that by social class she was far above Natasha's station, for she liked and respected her too much to do something so cruel. They had grown up together, and Natasha was more like a sister than anything else. Lillya couldn't remember a time when she didn't know Natasha. As far as she was concerned, they had shared most everything since birth. Still, as they grew older, their difference in stature and how society would judge them would become more apparent, for Natasha would remain forever the server and Lillya the receiver.

Sometimes as much as she loved Lillya, Natasha couldn't stop herself from getting fed up with her situation, and she would find herself becoming a bit manipulative. Natasha would search for a way to turn the tables and on more than one occasion, she almost had Lillya convinced that by being poor, Natasha was the wealthy one. Like the beautiful summer day when Lillya's father Yuri took Natasha shopping—even though Natasha knew most everything that they would buy would ultimately end up on Lillya, Natasha knew that Lillya would see it as Natashe getting to spend more time with her father, garnering his attention. Being the same size as Lillya worked for and against each of them depending upon their mood and generosity of spirit. Recognizing their similarities, when Yuri wanted to buy something special for Lillya and he wanted to pick it out himself, he would often arrange for Natasha to have the day off. This way he wouldn't have to interrupt Lillya's studies and Natasha got to spend an entire day by herself with Lillya's father. And if he bought Lillya a new blouse, he purchased a smart-looking scarf for Natasha along with a lovely belt so they each got to show off something special. But for Natasha, the best gift she received on her days spent with Yuri was the silent permission he gave her to converse freely, show off her intelligence, wit and humor, and every smile that Yuri gave her in return was more than enough reward for her. If she had been rich, she would have been stuck at home like Lillya

with the tutor, memorizing her lessons instead of spending the day with the best seamstress in all of St. Petersburg.

Natasha was beautiful like Lillya, and they shared a similar slant of the nose and a distinct dimple on their chins. Neither girl could believe their luck to be so similar in both spirit and looks. They were close in age and often pretended they were twins. Natasha was skilled like Lillya, but in different ways. She had a photographic memory and could remember everything Lillya had ever read to her, every classic, every poem. She could recite what she had heard almost word for word. She excelled in history and even learned to speak French just by sitting next to Lillya during her lessons. French, the language of the aristocracy, slipped off her tongue easier than it did her patron.

Natasha's mother was a housekeeper at a nearby estate and they moved to St. Petersburg from Perm when she was barely three. They never spoke of her father and Natasha had come to the conclusion that she was better off that way. It allowed her to design the father she wanted. Only she needed to believe it was true, and she could keep him to herself and continue living her life, and nobody bothered her or disagreed.

Natasha visited her mother every Sunday. A woman would come from the estate where her mother worked and would dress her in the clothes Yuri's personal maid had laid out for her, but when she arrived where her mother worked no matter how

beautifully or elegantly she had been dressed she would be sent to the back door where her mother and the other help entered and where her mother would greet her with a big smile. She had been instructed many years prior to never enter through the house from the main entrance.

Natasha loved her mother, but over time Sunday became her least favorite day of the week. But still it gave her the one thing she knew Lillya wanted and yearned for but did not have; a mother.

Natasha worshipped Lillya and taking care of Lillya and being her friend became her “raison d’être.” And her rewards came in the form of pretty clothes, good books and education, very unusual for anyone of her class. Most of the time she felt privileged to have been given such an important job. It made her feel a step above the other maids, and she was.

Lillya’s father Yuri was a tall handsome man who stood out from across a room. However, what made him special to Natasha was his ability to see what was special about her, and the way he quietly encouraged her by allowing Natasha to sit in on Lillya’s tutoring sessions and make certain she was not disturbed. Lillya could have objected, but she enjoyed the company and later she had someone to discuss that day’s lesson with who could remember it almost word for word.

Lillya stood up in the tub. The maid was waiting with a towel to dry Lillya off and prepare her for evening's supper. She undid her bun, took out the rose Natasha had put in her hair and shook her long mane. It was almost as thick as a horse's tail.

Drops of water splattered across the room, leaving pools of water on the floor.

Petra and Dimitri Vronsky from the famous Vronsky Family Circus were coming to their home to show her father a young mare they thought would be good for breeding. "They'll be staying for supper," her father had announced earlier.

Lillya had never been to the circus and she was curious. She had been brought up to believe that you only went to the circus if you had been invited to watch the performers at the palace of the Czar. It was below them, but recently her father had changed his mind. As he got to know Dimitri better, he found himself growing fonder of the man who was a master on the tightrope and a wizard when it came to horses. Dimitri was well educated and very clever, besides being strong and brave.

All qualities Yuri admired, and he enjoyed Dimitri's dry wit and sense of humor. "The man says what he thinks and doesn't stop himself from expressing what he really feels. Most men are afraid of what other men might think, and this makes him courageous in my eyes."

Lillya started talking excitedly while the maid was drying her off. "Papa says when Mr. Vronsky touches a horse something magical happens. He knows which ones to choose. It's as if they speak to him," she told Natasha.

Natasha was fumbling through Lillya's drawers.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"Got it!" and Natasha pulled out a simple gold necklace to complement Lillya's ruby, along with a matching bracelet.

"Now that's perfect," she said, feeling quite satisfied with herself. "They'll be here within the hour, we must hurry."

A blue-green gown with gold threads was waiting on Lillya's bed, but first they had to fix her hair. "If you move any slower, they'll find someone to replace me and then what would you do?" Natasha teasingly barked.

"Papa would never replace you. I couldn't live without your company," Lillya replied. "I'd have to go on a hunger strike."

Natasha smiled because she knew Lillya was telling the truth.

Looking out the window Lillya saw the Vronskys coming up to the house from the stables. "Papa's got a smile on his face. He must have liked what he saw. Looks like he decided she's the one."

Lillya quickly walked down the stairs into the parlor where the Vronskys and her father had just been poured drinks and were being served caviar by the help. Her father seemed to be quite taken by the couple. He rarely grinned and only showed his poker face to strangers, but on this occasion he could barely fit all the happiness he felt inside of himself.

Petra's petite figure was dressed in a bold royal blue and her dark shiny hair; blended with streaks of amber, yellow, and gold, was pulled back and wrapped into a perfect twist. Her smile was bright and warm and would disarm any soldier she came in contact with. Yes, any man determined to do battle with her would surely lose and fall to her feet.

Petra had a relaxed and natural way about her and she did not notice her effect on men. She would casually throw her head back to get her hair out of her eyes and laugh as if she were the only one in the room. She clearly loved her life and her husband most of all.

“My daughter Lillya is the horsewoman of our family and she is going to love your horse!

“Lillya, this is Mr. and Mrs. Vronsky from the famed Vronsky Family Circus,”
Yuri said.

“Your father has told us much about you,” Mr. Vronsky interjected.
Lillya for a moment became speechless as her father continued to brag about her with a great sense of pride.” He says you can already ride standing up. That’s a great accomplishment and says much about your character.”

“I find if one is balanced and is not afraid and speaks kindly to a horse she knows quite well, that most anything is possible,” Lillya shyly replied. “That is with practice, of course.”

“I must agree,” Petra Vronsky replied. “I have seen tricks on horses that would stump a magician.” Lillya instantly liked her. She found it easy to talk with Petra and imagined they had much in common and would have been friends in another lifetime.

A butler called them in for supper. Lillya caught a glimpse of Natasha at the top of the stairs and was happy she was listening in. She wished that she could call Natasha down to join them, but they both knew their place. She would have to share the evening with her later.

Biting into a Cornish hen, she admired their cook’s ability to add just the right amount of paprika on top of it and dole out to each person a perfect serving size of rosemary potatoes. Lillya soon forgot about Natasha, savoring each bite and morsel of food, as much as the conversation.

She let her father take the lead, remembering they had company, for it might have sounded rude for her to ask the questions she wanted to know the answers to immediately. Finally, they got around to the subject Lillya was most interested in hearing about—the circus. She was besotted by a story Dimitri told about their tigers Midnight and Satin. They were recently given to the Vronskys by a Prince

from India after he saw them perform for the Czar and his children on the lawn of the Winter Palace. Dimitri said, “I was rehearsing one afternoon when all of a sudden I heard a tremendous amount of commotion. I stopped to see what was going on. When I went out front there were five royal carriages. The one in the middle had the names Midnight and Satin painted on both sides in beautiful colorful calligraphy. I stood there dumbfounded. By now Petra was outside next to me.”

“Yes,” Petra agreed.

“Holding Petra’s hand,” Dimitri continued, “I inched in close to the carriage. A man in formal Indian dress handed me a letter and said, ‘This is a gift from the prince. You must have made quite an impression!’ Inside the gilded cage were two tiger kittens, playing with a big ball of yarn. The representative continued to say that they had been abandoned on the prince’s estate and that the prince himself had personally nursed them back to health. So, what was I to do,” Dimitri asked, “but to humbly accept them?”

“I used to go inside their cage and play with them until they got too big,” Petra said. Lillya’s ears perked up even more when Petra mentioned they had a son who walked the high wire and was also a notable horseman. She got chills just thinking of anyone walking across a wire fifty feet up in the air, for only Natasha knew that Lillya was afraid of heights unless there was something solid between her and the

ground. A horse was solid, so she had no problem standing up on the back of a galloping roisenback. “Anyone can do that, but to walk a wire, why that is magnificent.” Petra could tell Lillya was mesmerized by the glint she saw in her eyes; a glint similar to the one in her own eyes when she first saw Dimitri perform his act. Neither Lillya nor Yuri could hide their fascination.

Later that night, Lillya shared the events of the evening with Natasha, and did not fail to say, “Oh, and did I tell you, his mother mentioned they have a son who walks the high wire? I wonder why they made no offer of an introduction. They didn’t even tell me his name. They simply said he was talented and had a playful sort of personality. They should know that I’m old enough to meet their son.”

Lillya went on. “Thank goodness for Papa, though. By the end of the evening he decided to put his stallion with their mare. Then he promised the Vronskys that we would attend their circus sometime soon.”

“After all, our horses are going to bring our families together,” Lillya’s father said to the Vronskys as they were leaving.

Lillya’s father had no idea how true his words would become.

New Chapter <After the 1917 Revolution>

Keeping a secret is much harder to do when your audience is already mistrusting. No one seemed to tell the truth. The trick was to be able to sense true from the false and learn to interpret an ever-changing code. The White Army was made up mostly of Russia's armed forces, members of the upper classes, and soldiers from other nations. They didn't like one another, and they certainly weren't unified. At least that is what Anton told Lillya. Then the Reds had Trotsky, Lenin, and Stalin, who were in competition for ultimate rule and would trip one another up any chance they got, of course for the good of the cause. But then again, Lillya thought, "Even my father was not completely truthful until he handed me his journal. Or one could say he told the truth with great omissions." This leather-bound book would speak more intimately to Lillya in her father's voice than he had his whole life. The flames drew her into herself and got her thinking of the large townhouse

where she and Anton had lived when Vladimir was still young. She reminisced about its gigantic fireplace and she wondered if those striking flames from so many years prior were trying to tell her something and she hadn't been listening. Then a spark from the fire made a loud crackling sound and shook her back to the present. In the distance, she could hear horses galloping and she wondered if they were White or Red, or perhaps Czechs? They were fighting a world war on the Russian front, but soon their army found themselves intertwined in a civil war as well. Her ears followed the sound of the riders while her mind ran in circles until eventually, she landed where she began. "Maybe they are just like us; people on the run and hiding?" Still, she held her breath until they passed. The cruelty of both sides had become well known. Lillya knew that their lives could easily fall into the whims of a handful of soldiers and their fate would be decided by what kind of night or day these soldiers had had. On a good day, they might only take your food and horses. On a bad day, they would also shoot you and not think twice.

Lillya thought about the journal her father had given to her. She was anxious to read it. She was having a hard time falling asleep. The abandoned cabin they were in was cold and dark. Still, she and Anton were grateful for the cover from the wind. Lillya watched Anton's stomach rising up and down and every once in a while he would make a funny little squeaking sound through his nostrils. Trying

not to make any noise while making sure he was asleep, she put his handkerchief lightly over his nose to lessen the sound and quietly slipped her thumb and her index finger into the bag that carried her belongings, now including her father's journal, wanting to be able to read even just a little corner of truth before she said her nightly prayers, and said goodnight to her parents, husband, her loved ones in America. Then she would set her mind and point it to a happy place so that when she awoke the following day she could start it without any discoloration from the day before .

"Just a few words and I'll put you right back," she toyed with herself and the journal as if she were making a bargain with God. Anton's snoring became much louder and deeper even though he was a light sleeper. She didn't want to risk waking him, nor did she want him to catch her reading a journal he knew nothing about. Her father had asked her to keep it to herself and that's what she intended to do to the best of her ability. But Lillya soon came to realize that when one finds themselves in the middle of a revolution with no end in sight, they should avoid making promises, for they are not easy to keep.

Lillya could see Anton's legs becoming restless and knew that soon he would open his eyes. She got shivers up and down her spine. But she wasn't certain if this

chill was because she felt embarrassment and guilt that she would be discovered reading a book of secrets that for the time-being her father had asked remain between just the two of them, or had she simply gotten a chill from sleeping in a drafty old cottage. Either way for now she would hold her father's secrets to herself. She wrapped his journal quickly back into the maid's towel and threw it in her satchel.

Anton rubbed his hands over his eyes. Then he shook his right leg several times and next his left, making a sudden jerky motion as if he had not been sleeping at all and then sat up.

“What are you doing, my dear?” He said in a clear authoritative voice, “Tomorrow is a big day. You’re going to need your sleep.” Noticing Lillya was shivering, he came over with a blanket and gently laid it on top of her, making sure he had covered her feet then he bent down and gave her a kiss to remind her he was watching over her.

“Thank you, my sweet,” she replied and closed her eyes. “The journal will be there in the morning,” she whispered to herself. Then nodding to Anton, she said. “Perhaps if I keep my eyes closed and think sweet thoughts I will sleep.” But before she knew it, small rays of sunlight were finding their way into the cabin and they were planning their day.

The horses she had heard earlier were now off in the distance frightening someone else. Lillya took a deep breath and let out a sigh of relief. Her husband had done what he could the evening before to keep her warm and protect her from the unknown danger lurking in the woods.

Anton handed her a large cup of tea to help her greet the morning and when he was through, he covered the fire with a large pot to suffocate the flame.

“If we hurry, my dear, I believe we can reach Kungur before sunset.” But by the look on her face she let him know he was going to have to be more enticing and seductive than that to get her to give up her blanket for the cold and unknown.

“I can almost smell the faint taste of leather off in the distance.” Lillya could smell what her husband was talking about but decided it could only smell that delicious to someone who was making money from it. He added, as if he were describing a freshly frosted cake, “That is what has made Kungur so famous. It’s on the tip of my nose. Can you smell it?” he asked Lillya, trying to engage her senses. Anton repeated his words once more, hoping this time like a happy fisherman he would see his catch at the end of his rod when he lifted it out of the water. “Maybe Kungur will satisfy my craving.”

“Yes,” Lillya responded, “Kungur.” Then she paused for several seconds, put on a grin that almost matched his, “Isn’t that the last stop before nowhere?” Lillya and Anton both burst out in laughter.

“I guess it’s not so bad. At least we’ll be on the west side of the mountain range.

Think of our Czar and his family; they’re on the Eastern side in Siberia with five million square miles of nothing but isolation, ice, and snow,” Anton went on now that he knew he had her attention.

“We should be grateful. We’ll be near Perm where there is a decent Opera, and I hear they grow watermelon in the summer,” Lillya said in a voice that could almost pass as joyful, while under her breath she was pondering the thought, “Could Natasha be there?”

“Perm Provence is large,” Anton continued. “Remember we will be at the mercy of others. This is not a vacation, Lillya.”

Lillya had never been to Siberia, still all Russians had heard stories of the place and found ways to romanticize what it took to survive the rough life with its many unique qualities, but most shuddered with fear at the thought of being forced to live there. Some compared it to a batch of stew where a little of everything was thrown in until it became something new. European prisoners of war mixed with native Aboriginal tribesmen and they sometimes spiced the pot by throwing in a Russian Jew or political exile. Then there was the Trans-Siberian Railway; workers from around the world populated that path for over 15 years while they built it. For a few minutes Lillya had given herself permission to daydream. Every once in a while as Anton spoke, she caught a glimpse of her old self. The teenage girl who

galloped through the woods like a streak of lightning while standing upright on the back of her father's favorite stallion.

Lillya wondered where it would one day all lead. She found herself and Anton getting more and more entangled in this mess and she became that much more determined to find a way out. "I will see my son and his wife and children before I leave this earth behind. I will see the equestrian Ann Marie Heart and maybe her children, too. I will have grand conversations with our scholar Lucky, watch Spade carry on the family tradition and walk the high wire, and Diamond will sparkle, I'm sure, just as she does in the photographs Vladimir and Belle sent me. She must be a star in her own right by now. Yes, Lillya became determined that she would someday see her granddaughters and get to know Bella, Vladimir's wife. Each night Lillya would prop herself up after Anton fell asleep once she had discovered the spot that gave her the best light. Then she would read in secrecy until her eyes hurt and looked like small slits. Eventually the chill from being outside would override her curiosity. However, on one such occasion, just as she was about to close the journal, the name Michael popped out. Lillya could barely contain herself. What would she find, she wondered?

New chapter – Lillya’s childhood

Born the daughter of a maid, Natasha couldn’t help but feel that she had been misplaced. Her quick wit was apparent to anyone who met her, and it seemed impossible for her to keep it entirely to herself. She recognized how lucky she was to have been placed in Yuri’s household on this beautiful estate and to have become Lillya’s best friend.

Lillya’s father Yuri was very generous, and on some deep level, Lillya saw that he felt bad for Natasha and his compassion made her love him more. He left books under her pillow for her to read. Each time Natasha found a new book she would devour it, staying up late at night until her eyes got weary and she could no longer lift her head.

Thinking about her station in life only got her depressed so she focused on other things, like pleasing Lillya and Yuri.

Lillya and Natasha became inseparable and Natasha hoped it would never end. Lillya, not one to look too far down the road, did not see that life would eventually take them down different paths. Though Lillya’s father Yuri knew that day would come, in the meantime he believed he was doing something good. He gave Natasha a good home where she could be educated, challenged, and cared for, and he gave his daughter a best friend and confidant, whom she could love and trust.

Lillya's mother had been ill as long as Lillya could remember, though once in a while the doctors would let her come home. When they did, everyone would be on pins and needles waiting for the moment the symptoms of her anxiety would begin again. She would shake and sweat just a little bit and that would last for several days. The nurses would wipe her brow and try to keep her comfortable and calm her down with smelling salts and herbs. By the fourth night they would wrap her tightly in a blanket to keep her arms pinned so she couldn't hurt herself.

Lillya would toss and turn on those nights. She would sing herself to sleep while trying to focus on songs that made her happy, ones with happy lyrics and melodies that uplifted her. She prayed that her power of thought could be strong enough to override her mother's demons and bring about a happy ending.

Both girls knew what would happen next. Natasha would pull her covers down and quietly make her way to Lillya's bed, Lillya would open her blanket and let Natasha into her bed in the morning they would awake with their arms wrapped around each other.

Lillya's mother Angelina wouldn't shout or cry, even though sometimes they wrapped her so tightly she could barely breathe. Where she was going would be more comfortable for her and bring her one step closer to her life's purpose; to be God's messenger as was written in her name, but she kept on wondering, of what?

In the middle of the night, Natasha and Lillya would hear the carriage wheels approaching, the clop, clop of the horses' hoofs as they got nearer. It was impossible to interpret the commotion that was taking place, the low humming mumbles of her father and the doctors. A groggy reply in response from her mother, who earlier had been given something they called opium. All Natasha and Lillya knew was that it was strong and made her mother agreeable and sleepy. Angelina's doctor, speaking through his mustache and beard, was discussing something with the other doctors and Lillya's father while the rest of the crowd, that included secretly Lillya and Natasha, waited for the verdict as if each hair on his mustache represented an opera fan and everyone in the theater would be silent waiting to hear what the verdict would be, "Stay" or "Go," but her father already knew and so did Lillya and Natasha. They would be taking her to the spa in Odessa where she could rest and hopefully get better and one day return to the family for good.

The entire process usually only took five or six weeks. At first everything would be wonderful, and Lillya would get very excited and almost believe she might have a mother. But even by the age of five or six, the more it happened—and it did, again and again, Lillya began to recognize the signs. She could read her mother's body language.

The headaches would start, then she would join the family only for lunch, then she would lock herself in her room for the rest of the day. Soon she wouldn't venture out of her bedroom at all, nor receive any visitors, including Lillya. Then, almost like clockwork, the sweating and shaking would begin and the following day Natasha would hand Lillya a note when she opened her eyes for the day ahead, but the flowers next to her bed told Lillya all that the note would say. Natasha stood ready with Lillya's robe and slippers and together they would enter her mother's bedroom. The bed would be made as if no one had ever been there, and Lillya would defend her mother's actions by repeating to Natasha what she had heard all her life: her mother had a special job and she was off being a messenger for God, and then Lillya, like her mother, would think, for what? For whom?

Lillya would ask her Grandmama, when they were alone, where her mother had really gone. Grandmama would say, "She's with the doctors back at the hospital trying to get better for you." At least that was a partial truth. But then one morning her Grandmama came to their house dressed head to toe in black. Lillya did not have to ask. Her father, not grasping Lillya's comprehension of the situation, told her that her mother had decided to visit God during the night and she found it so peaceful and delightful that she missed the one train back home. Flowers came and filled the house and Lillya laid some on her mother's grave as Lillya stood bravely next to her father with Natasha holding her hand. Later her Grandmama handed her

a note, saying “I found this in your mother’s room.” It simply said, “Tell my daughter to have a good life. We will see each other again when the angels call for her many years from now.” Years later Lillya waited for her mother in the dark, but she never came.

New Chapter ~ 1918

“Perm Provence is large,” Anton recited. “Remember we will be at the mercy of others. This is not a vacation.”

Lillya had never been to Siberia, but all Russians had heard stories of the place and at times found ways to romanticize the rough life it took to survive with its unique qualities, but mostly they shuddered with fear at the thought of being forced to live there. Some had compared it to a batch of stew where a little of everything was thrown in until it became something new. European prisoners of war mixed with native Aboriginal tribesmen and they sometimes spiced the pot by throwing in a Russian Jew or political exile. Then there was the Trans-Siberian Railway; workers from around the world populated that path for over 15 years while they built it. For a few minutes Lillya had given herself permission to daydream. Every once in awhile, as Anton spoke, she caught a glimpse of her old self. The teenage girl who galloped through the woods like a streak of lightning while standing upright on the back of her father’s favorite stallion.

She and Anton had been on edge long before they had left Petrograd, a name she couldn’t get used to, the new name of her beloved St. Petersburg. She had forgotten what it was like to have no reason to hide. And, oh, how Anton hated being the one assigned to hold her kite string.

Anton had gathered a large stick at the beginning of their journey and he marked it each morning to keep track of the days. Without it, they would have gotten lost. “Just one more long, grueling day,” Anton thought as he marked the twig for what he hoped would be the last time. “If I’m right, by day’s end we will finally be able to give that wife of mine a rest.” Having no one to talk with he had become quite conversant with himself and the horses he tended to as well.

Lillya rarely complained. Still, she had to admit to herself that she was looking forward to sleeping in the same place, the same bed for more than one or two nights and she would be happy to let her guard down a bit wherever it was that they settled when they finally settled and to wherever it was the stars and destiny led them. Then she gave one giant yawn, said a quick prayer, and got down to the business of the day. Soon, she would be able to spend hours tucked away with her father’s journal, unraveling secrets she was positive she would find. Just thinking about it made her feel guilty.

Remembering seeing the name Michael, a chill ran up and down her spine. He was taking a big risk by hiding them. Maybe her father Yuri blackmailed him or perhaps Michael was indebted to return a big favor? All in due time, she thought, smiling at Anton. Enough of their life had been torn apart. She wasn’t so certain that her father had done her a favor by giving her his journal.

Anton recognized that smile in Lillya's eyes, however he knew it was safe not to ask her what it meant.

For a while she had forgotten how tired her feet and legs had become, not to mention her swollen ankles. She thought about her son Vladimir and his family. "Does he look like his father? Do any of his girls resemble me perhaps in spirit?"

Lillya missed her son horribly and she cursed her country and all of its stupid political factions for the reasons he lived so far away and for the pain that she felt from never having held any of her granddaughters, but Anton had been needed in the early years by his parents and of course Lillya had her father Yuri. She recited the names of Vladimir's children. "Let's see, Ann Marie Heart, Spade, Diamond Claire, and Lucia Akinsya Club. The last child was named after herself, as her full name was Lillya Akinsya Engelhardt. 'Akinsya' had come from Lillya's great-grandmother, and she liked thinking there was an old Russian name that she wore, too, floating around in that young country, the United States.

They had taken a short stop so Lillya could stretch. "If all goes well, tonight we'll be sleeping in Kungur." Anton repeated once more. Then with hopeful eyes he handed Lillya the reins of the sturdy workhorse she had ridden all of these months. She was a far cry from her father's stallion. She could see a small supply of hopefulness in Anton's eyes. Things were about to change. "If we are lucky, we will arrive around dusk."

Lillya smiled at Anton. She was thinking of her cousin Michael. She met him once as a child and he had left quite an impression on her like a map in her memory. She could only have been four or five because her mother was still alive. They had a simple lunch together and he did not stay long after the meal. She remembered that day clearly because Natasha had sat next to her and her father Yuri had put the guest of honor between Natasha and Lillya's mother.

Lillya remembered Michael was very distinguished looking with salt and pepper hair and he had a mustache that he waxed and wore turned up. He seemed serious, but then he'd tell a joke but no one laughed harder than him, and his smile would suddenly grow twice as big. Then he would cough as if he were choking on his own joke and laugh as if it was too big for even him. As a young girl she found him very mysterious. She caught her father sometimes whispering his name. He was her mother's favorite cousin and therefore there was an air of myth that surrounded him for no other reason.

"He's going to be very old," she said to Anton as he reset the bridle on her horse. It had somehow gotten twisted along with her thoughts. Then suddenly a horrified look covered her face. "Think of the shock he'll have when he sees me!" Up until that moment she had forgotten about how much older she had become, too. But then she remembered that all her cousin Michael would have to do would be to

look at her jaw and the small dimple in the middle of her chin and her painterly nose with the perfect slant. “Some things don’t change,” she smiled. She wore the family crest just like every other proud Englehardt. Yes, her cousin would believe she was who she claimed to be. He’d be able to see it in her face. She wore it as clearly as the statue of David rested his chin on his hand contemplating the woes of the world.

New Chapter - Childhood

Her arms stretched out wide, the wind on her face, she spoke softly to her horse, Pluto Gaetano, a gift from the Czar, her cheeks blushed bright red. She couldn't contain her excitement and covered her mouth with her hand to block the sound. She howled to the chipmunks, rabbits, squirrels and all the animals of the forest. Lillya had grown tired of being so secretive. She wanted the world to know what they had accomplished. Her horse prepared himself. He knew what was coming and he made an effort to keep an even, steady pace. He imitated her breath as if they were a part of one another. Then she stood upright on Nicholas, her horse's, back, and counted to eight, nine, ten. When she reached ten, she came back down again. Rocking steadily forward, she was grinning from ear to ear.

“Good boy,” she said to the horse as she released the pressure in her knees. They came to a slow steady trot, then she nestled her head into his neck, feeling all of his muscles. “I'm so proud of you Nikki! I have an apple in my pocket. I brought it especially for you.” Then she gave him a hug.

Lilly began humming to herself. She liked to hum. She liked the way it felt. The vibrations massaged her insides which got a little jumbled up between her equestrian tricks and her feelings.

Lillya excelled above all the other girls her age in her ability to ride horses, but she had one thing that she kept as a secret that was an embarrassment to her. She had a single large mole in the middle of her back that was shaped like a heart. Lillya felt as if she had been marked when it came to love, but she didn't know for what or why. When she was a child, she and Natasha would try to rub the mole away. But as she grew older, she had to come to terms with the fact it wasn't going away. "Yes, God has a plan for me," she would say to Natasha, the only person who knew. "This way he will know for certain how to find me when he is ready and be certain I was the one."

Lillya never met anyone besides Natasha who could replicate her own spirit. Natasha was proud and pleased, but it was hard for Natasha, being so smart, to be stuck in a lower station in life where nothing was expected of her. She could play the piano and speak French, but no one wanted to hear what she could do besides Lillya.

To allay her frustration with people not treating others well or wanting to understand their own God-given gifts, Lillya rode every day. It was the only way in which she filled her spirit after her mother passed away. She took out one of her father's horses and she rode him hard. Day by day she honed her talent. By age

twelve she had earned a reputation as a daring horsewoman. Her father had to close his eyes when his young daughter practiced gymnastics on her horse behind him. Natasha, too, had some questions left unanswered. Like, “Who is my father and why was my beautiful, wonderful mother born into the station of a servant?” Deep questions for young girls with the world in front of them.

Natasha tried not to think too much about the future. She believed she was living her best life now, and Lillya was unwilling to admit that eventually they would be forced by society to go their separate ways and develop separate lives.

New Chapter ~ 1918

Sleeping in abandoned shacks along the way to Kungur, Lillya dreamed of spending an afternoon in a comfortable chair next to a window. Basking in the indulgence of not having to travel, she imagined what it would be like to have her body clean again and not have to find a river to jump in. They all had known that they would travel during the summer, for the winter in Kungur would be the coldest weather she had ever known. She laughed at the thought of all the pretty dresses she had left behind, and wondered about Alexi, her dressmaker, who was now probably sewing buttons on officers' uniforms from whichever army had grabbed him first. There wasn't much in the way of choices these days. Life sort of happened to everyone and we all had to find some way to wade through the muck and sludge that slowed us down or took us to someplace we never would have chosen to go. But our feet made us stay, they were like quicksand in dirt, and they were forced to accept these unfamiliar boundaries. However, for Lillya, Kungur actually sounded exciting, for she was tired of living in fear and wanted to feel as if she had some control over her life and her destiny. She wished she could express all her thoughts to Anton, but he was already frightened for her and if she did, she was afraid they might scare him even more.

Being a noble man, Anton set very high expectations for himself and he would not budge or lower them to make them easier. Sometimes Lillya would tease him about his moral code, but deep down inside there was no one she would trust more with her life if she had to put it in someone else's hands. She knew he felt a huge commitment to protect her, even sometimes from herself. (**insert example**) Now, once too often, he would find himself pulling the kite string again and again.

"I understand that there is no time for pleasure today," Lillya said to Anton as she bent down to pick a poppy from a field close by. The rain and unusually warm weather had sent everything to distract her. A golden summer breeze was working its way in and would push her all the way to Kungur, she thought. "Let the wind blow me and all our baggage away," she said teasingly to Anton. "Blow me into the unknown," she continued. She could feel the string in Anton's hand yanking her back to the ground. "If only one of my father's stallions could magically appear, even for ten minutes, but I can't afford to think like that, still sometimes I can't help myself." Lillya quieted down. She couldn't blame Anton for their predicament, so she continued urging the workhorse forward, kicking the dirt and muck aside, learning to appreciate the poppies from afar. To pass the time she imagined a little house in Kungur that she would decorate and call home. The first thing she saw was a large stone fireplace that rivaled the one in their townhouse in St. Petersburg, but that was long ago and she knew her thought was too big. But

most of all, this little house in Kungur would be a place where she did not have to worry. “If times weren’t so bad we’d still be at my father’s estate. But for now, I need to reconcile that I can be happy with a little hint of sunlight caressing my face and not feel the need to run every time a horse approached.” Her nose picked up a foul scent, she realized it was herself. She was certain she was wretched by now and Anton was too kind. Lillya smiled as thoughts ran through her head, scattering like children on a playground. “Maybe our scents’ blended with each other’s until now we don’t know whose is whose.”

“Lillya, where have you been?” Anton asked, knowing quite well the answer. “We need to stay very alert today and not lose sight of one another even for a minute. I know it’s very hard and not in your nature, darling, but today you must listen to my commands. I promised your father I would get you to Kungur and in safe condition. And I’m not about to prove myself wrong. So, I’ll need your help.”

“Don’t worry, my dear,” Lillya said with a wink. “Don’t you know I always listen to you?”

Anton started to laugh with his deep belly laugh that put a smile on her face.

“Okay, my dear, what direction do we go from here?”

“We want to go northeast. Let me get my compass out.” He reached into his pocket and took out the trusty compass that had once been his father’s; the one he had

counted on since he was a young boy. Lillya believed in it, too, for it had gotten them this far.

“Why don’t you tell us, my dear,” Anton said.

Lillya tied her hair back in a bun, pretending it wasn’t even there, and then said to Anton, “Turn left. I, too, can smell the leather from the Kungur factories getting near.”

Lilly and Anton knew so much depended upon what would happen this day. Would Michael and his friends be there looking for them as her father had promised, Lillya wondered. Or would he have taken her father’s money and found he had better things to do than wait for a cousin he hadn’t seen in forty years who had nothing to offer him but trouble and stories from the past? Anton questioned whether Michael’s loyalty was strong enough and whether he was brave enough to show up at the church every night for weeks on end, waiting for his cousin and her husband to arrive, when he hadn’t seen her since she was a child. Anton prayed that he would recognize her. But with the dimple in her chin and her perfect slanted nose Lillya had no doubt that this Englehardt would recognize another.

Drenched in the last of what could be called summer sunlight, they continued toward Kungur. A sly smile appeared on Lillya’s face. Anton didn’t want to know the reason why. He could feel his wife’s heart pounding harder the closer she

thought they were to their destination. Wrapped up in his own thoughts, he was caught completely off guard when suddenly, a boulder came rolling down the hill aimed right where they were riding. Luckily, Anton had quick reflexes and was used to acting on instinct just as he had been taught to do since childhood. He urgently grabbed the horse's reins and pulled them hard and quickly got them out of the boulder's path. Lillya didn't know what was happening until she felt Anton give her shirt a swift tug, changing her direction and speed and she suddenly heard the sound of a giant boulder rolling past her. When it was over, she froze and stood there shaking. It took a minute or two for her to register just how close she had come to dying. Anton had just saved her life. Standing next to Lillya, he was shaking, too. The boulder had gotten very close to its target. It might have been just a fluke of nature, but Anton had to think of himself as a soldier leading the cavalry, and his job was to deliver his precious cargo safely, without a scratch if possible. Anton didn't really want to know who or think what was behind this close call, their near mishap. He wanted to make light of it and didn't want Lillya to become more frightened than she already was. Putting on his best face, he looked at Lillya with a grave expression and said to her, "Man can plan all he wants, but Nature is a force that has its own mind and it is always going to do what it pleases and will roar as loud as it wants and cause as much havoc and hardship as will fill its stomach."

Lillya replied, “But luckily, my dear, I have you. Nature doesn’t know the will and the force I have at my side!”

Anton had simply reacted. He hadn’t had time to think. Lillya slowed her breathing and began to normalize. Silently, her composure returned, and her green eyes began to sparkle and color returned to her cheeks and one could see the natural beauty of her youth. She wanted Anton to know she had relaxed. That they could go forward. Anton, wanting to break the hardened air that had entered the circle surrounding them, decided to tell a joke. Lillya loved that he was trying to make a joke during such a serious time. For only moments before, getting to Kungur could have been the least of their worries.

Anton knew how to focus more than anything else. Nothing could break his concentration when he had somewhere to go and something to do, and in this moment it was to see a smile on his wife’s face. So, he continued. The Austrian clown Leo told him a funny story. Amused, Anton smiled to himself when he realized the coat Lillya was wearing had once been Leo’s wife’s coat. He had talked to Anton about the art of illusion and how sometimes it could be more powerful than the truth. And he spoke about a clown who had tried to win the one and only position with a circus, but the circus had advertised that they were looking for a clown who could ride a unicycle and they were interested in no others.

The clown was so determined that even though he could not ride it, he bought a unicycle and made it very visible to the owners. And because they saw the bike, they did not question whether the owner knew how to ride one. He had only used it as a prop, an illusion, so he would appear more useful and the circus would hire him. But in reality, his finest skill was sticking a mop between his legs and running around in circles as if it were a donkey who had lost his mind and didn't know which way to go. Mimicking a costumed mop to look like a donkey got more laughs, anyway. With a unicycle one needed skill, a mop you just needed imagination, to be able to move your limbs and be funny and give the audience room to laugh. That's what jokes are about. Giving the other space and time to find something funny.

Lillya, not wanting to admit that she had been shaken, suggested that they stop for a short period of time. They could sip some Bergamot citrus tea just like the Czar would be doing at this hour had he not been summering on the other side of the mountain range where they would soon take refuge. Anton, fearing that the large stone could have come from a misplaced soldier out for revenge, or simply wanting to steal their horses, urged Lillya on by talking about the boar they might eat that night, the feast they might have.

“I need a safe place where I can read my father’s journal, without drawing attention to myself,” she thought. In her mind she was going over the directions her father had given them.

“Enter the back entrance of the church when the parishioners are leaving after the evening service is complete. In all that commotion it is less likely anyone will notice you. Still, you must be very careful.”

They had fared fairly well. Their supplies had lasted and soon they would be among friendly company and have the underground support of a nearby church and a few of their most trusted members who would help them to hide. Just thinking of it, Lillya started to feel the butterflies in her belly. She could barely wait to be around trusted company and sit at a proper table, drink wine and converse. Simply allowing these thoughts brought back memories of her father, and she wondered if he was still alive. Her father, she suspected, would be in his study waiting for the soldiers’ arrival, and whether they be the Red or the White he would let them know it was his patriotic duty to give up his estate to and for the people. Then if they were Red he planned on shouting “Comrade,” and if they were White, he would offer up his very best wine.

Her father knew nobles that kept 300,000 serfs. “What family needs such excess?” Behind closed doors Lillya recalled a conversation with her father earlier that year. “They got too greedy,” he continued. “And now if they leave, they most likely

leave with nothing. If they are lucky and smart they hid some of their family jewels. One necklace could buy them passage to America and keep them alive. I hope you didn't send every last emerald and ruby to the States and remembered to keep a few for yourself and Anton." She listened attentively but said not a word. Lillya found solace in knowing their affairs with the circus and their home had been settled before their world turned completely upside down. Thank goodness Anton and her father were forward-thinking men. Together they had made arrangements for her son Vladimir in the United States, more than enough to assure the legacy of his family and the circus.

Anton came from a long line of circus people and he had inherited his family's circus which was located near the Bolshoi in St. Petersburg, but that was many years ago. He had since given the circus to his son, who took the circus from Russia to Europe, then made a home in the southern United States traveling from one town to the next. But it was Lillya, it was her pedigree the armies would be most interested in. She was the reason they were running.

Anton and Lillya tried not to think about what had just happened. The boulder that fell had scared her, but Anton was sure-footed. Even so, he wondered, was it a random act of violence, was it some bored kid playing some sort of game or was it a displaced soldier from the Red or White army hoping that if he brought back several horses and two prisoners that he might once again return to their good

graces? Lillya could see the thoughts jumping around in Anton's head but she knew better than to ask him, for it would only stir things up and make them feel worse. They should just be grateful that nothing happened to them or their horses or even the displaced boy; after all she had a son and would hope that any mother would look at these almost children and think of their own progeny as well when making decisions. She quickly changed the subject and surprisingly found herself speaking of Donatalia, the daughter of her old friend Katya from whom she had learned this tea recipe. Katya was the first person who had ever made it for her many years ago. For just a few seconds she could see this young girl dressed in her New Year's best, trying not to have the son of their hostess notice she was counting her forks and spoons. Trying very hard to act grown up. She could see Donatalia unable to contain her excitement as Anton told one story after another. Anton was in rare form that night, Lillya remembered. Standing in the open so close to where the boulder could have so easily taken her life. Anton didn't know if his joke about the clown had worked, but he was certain that something he had done or said had triggered the smile that now appeared on her face. Lillya brought herself back to where they were standing and to that exact moment in time. Visions of ice castles and princesses and elephants carrying a cage disappeared when she heard her husband's voice break through the chatter that was going on in her head. "I think

it's time we get back on the horses," Anton said. "We've indulged in too much time already."

"You won't find any disagreement here," Lillya answered back. "I'm more than ready and my feet are, too."

New chapter Lillya and Natasha getting older

Yuri could hear giggling coming from Lillya's room. Lillya had convinced her father to put another bed in her room for the night so she and Natasha could live out their dream of being sisters. Lillya's father had begun to worry because he knew the truth of their situation; that their class difference would very soon become a problem. He could shelter them as children but soon it would not be so easy. Natasha would not be invited to any of the parties and events that Lillya would attend, and he assumed that after a while it was going to bother Natasha to dress up her best friend to go to parties while she had to stay home and clean up the mess they had made in the process of getting dressed. But the one thing Yuri didn't take into account was just how left out Lillya felt when all the girls would talk about their mothers. They would chatter about outings with their mothers, going for tea or to the seamstress. Lillya really missed Angelina and wished Angelina's special job had been to just take care of her. Did the angels really need her so badly?

Soon winter would be over and Lillya's father had arranged a grand vacation for the coming summer. He had decided that they would go to France. Besides the glamor of being in France, Lillya knew that not too many girls her age were given this opportunity and that it gave her something they did not have, even if they all had mothers. Sadly, Natasha would not be coming with them. Her father had

explained that she would have a young French girl helping her with the language, her clothing, the culture, her manners, and by the end of her time there, he told her she would know the difference of what was good or bad, for the French were the trendsetters of the world. What they said set the bar for everyone else.

Quietly, Yuri had thought it a good idea to begin to separate the girls without them understanding it was planned. He didn't really like the idea himself, but culture and class systems were going to dictate all of their lives and so he thought taking his daughter on an extended vacation might be a good start. He could think of no better or kinder exciting idea than this. Yuri went on to bait Lillya, knowing her love of horses, "There's a very famous cavalry school in the Loire Valley, in the town of Saumur, where we will be staying." Then he winked at her and finished, "If you mind your manners and are very good, perhaps I will find a way to arrange a tour for you?" He knew when he said this it would heighten his daughter's curiosity and then she would do almost anything he wanted.

"Boys and horses and a famous riding academy," Lillya silently thought. "Hmm." She had to be careful not to let the smile in her eyes take over her face. "Tell me about this journey you have planned for us," Lillya smiled mildly. Yuri had rented the east wing of a Chateau in the southwestern part of France from a man named Sergei who also had a great interest in horses and cultivated a small vineyard from which he made his own wines. "The Chateau was built by a famous architect.

Sergei will be able to tell you the story in more detail, but unlike many of the homes in that area, this one is full of light. Sergei loves to paint when he has the time, and light is important to him, as is being on the water,” Yuri went on. “There are very few characteristics one’s house needs to have in order to qualify as a true Chateau. Here is that one exception.” Yuri paused and held his breath until he was certain Lillya was sitting on the edge of her seat, her body all tense waiting to hear about something large dramatic, exotic and extraordinary. “This has to be wrong,” she thinks.

“The house must rest on the Loire River or one of its tributaries,” Yuri finally spit out with much certainty. Yuri always felt more disappointed in himself when he disappointed his daughter. “Its beauty has attracted many artists and many nobles have been drawn to the area like magnets. King George of France found its beauty so intoxicating he moved the entire capital of France from Paris to the Loire Valley. Besides, all the nobles were already traveling to the region during the summer and spending their vacations there. He just made it a little easier for them to do so.”

“I believe Sergei had his house fixed from top to bottom in the late 1860s, so it is up to date.” Yuri smiled, “You’ll like this; it still has a small moat and a drawbridge.” Yuri continued, “I’m told it has Belgian and Flemish tapestries covering many of the walls, and many other beautiful pieces of art, including some of his own paintings.” He sighed for a minute before continuing, “I think it sounds

like a picture from one of your favorite fairy tales,” Yuri told his daughter. “You’ll like it! But best of all, he has an unusually fine stable of horses. I believe the location will appeal to your imagination, heart and soul. There are a number of castles in this region. They were built as fortresses a long time ago, when they were needed to keep the gentry safe. But now they are used to house very wealthy families, and their horses are used for breeding, races, and contests; pleasure, not fighting. You’ll see.” Then he turned around as if he were planning to move on to something else but couldn’t stop himself from going on. “Some of my favorite grapes are grown there.” Yuri stopped for a moment, “I wish I could just count to ten and we’d be there.”

In late March, before their scheduled trip to France, her father finally got around to making a date for them to go see the Vronsky Family Circus. Lillya was beside herself.

“I can’t believe how excited I am,” Lillya said to Natasha. “I’m finally going to see that son of theirs that no one has introduced me to. They’re not going to get away with that tonight, I’m going to insist they introduce us and if I like him I’m going to make Papa promise to invite him to see our stables. I’m told his name is Anton. Can you imagine going out with a boy that walks a high wire!”

That night Lillya wore her favorite blue lace dress with a blue and yellow scarf to match. It was the color of the sea at sunset with embroidered golden threads running through it and burnt orange threads intertwined to accentuate the gold that looked like the sun setting on the sea. She hoped her father would like Anton as much as she thought she would. “Maybe he’ll invite him over to ride next Sunday?” She loudly mumbled to Natasha, trying to swallow a bite of her dinner at the same time. She could barely keep her food down. Butterflies were flying so rapidly in her stomach, fluttering at such a pace, she didn’t know if she could keep her composure. It was as if her stomach was their designated migrating ground, only the action was not between one tree and then another, but instead inside of her.

When Lillya got nervous Natasha liked to tease her, but this time she understood the importance of this event for Lillya.

The circus tent was teal blue and burnt orange with a big bright gold sign that lit up the sky and it read, *The Vronsky Family Circus*. Located near the Bolshoi, everyone in St. Petersburg knew where to find it. Dimitri and Petra Vronsky had arranged a special place where Yuri and Lillya might park their carriage. Petra and Dimitri seemed to be almost as excited as Lillya and Yuri. They knew that if Yuri and Lillya spoke highly of the circus, more aristocrats and members of the upper class

would follow their lead. It would also help to keep them in the good graces of the Czar and Czarina. They were escorted to the best seats in the house, front row and center, which had been draped with a beautiful purple fabric adorned with stars and hearts of gold and deep ruby reds. Lillya noticed all the eyes in the tent were staring at her and she couldn't help but admit to herself that she liked it and was glad she had taken the extra time getting dressed for the event. Caught in a web of her own thoughts, when the tigers entered the arena she smiled at the foolishness of thinking she could possibly outshine the natural beauty of their coats. They were wearing the most striking silky fur she had ever seen and the audience seemed to compete for their attention quickly and naturally turned from herself to them. Her eyes had become fixated on the circus and nothing else, and she had an instant uncontrollable pining to be a part of it. "What magnificent creatures!" Lillya said to her father, poking his elbow until he listened to her. She already had a special affinity for them, having heard Petra speak of them at dinner. "Their names are Midnight and Satin," she said to him as if she had been the only one who had heard the conversation. And just at that exact moment their trainer brought them within a breath of their proximity. Midnight opened his mouth as if to show off his prize-winning sharp teeth. Satin, attached to Midnight, came so close to them that Lillya felt as if she could almost touch her. And quicker than she could process what had just happened, in walked the elephants. Lillya had never seen such big

creatures. And at the top of one of the elephants, dressed in purple satin, was Petra, whose arms, though long, were unable to wrap around the big elephant's neck.

After several tricks and a roar of applause from the audience, Petra quickly changed clothes and entered the ring playing a flute while standing upright on her horse's saddle with a big red feathered plume popping out of the deeper red thick satin headband. Lillya smiled at her father. Petra's outfit was a bit risqué but she was so brilliant in her moves and the way she commanded her horse that no one could refer to her as cheap or inappropriate. They could only stare at her in amazement and awe.

Then the moment arrived. Twenty-five feet up in the air was the boy she had admired from conversation. She had never seen him. A little shorter and stockier than she had thought for such a position, but seemingly cooler than she imagined possible for someone about to embark on such a treacherous feat. Her heart started to rattle and shake so loud she was afraid her father might hear it. By the time he started juggling plates and had walked to the other side, she was already on her feet giving a standing ovation. Realizing how anxious she must look, she sat down. That night when the circus ended, Petra Vronsky arranged a little table to be put into one of the smaller tents and invited Yuri and Lillya to join them for some Schnapps, Vodka and pastry. The tent had a nice golden glow that comforted Lillya. Still, she was a bit nervous and her father knew it. "Only a sip," Yuri

reminded Lillya. “Just wet your lips.” Earlier, Yuri had teased Lillya, saying that he had told Petra they couldn’t come because it would be too late for his daughter. Lillya turned beet red and just about burst until she realized her father was joking. It turned out Lillya was the opposite of shy when it came to Anton Vronsky. Her tongue wiggled and wagged one sentence, paragraph, page after another. “He was so easy to talk to,” she told Natasha later that evening. “I’ve never talked to someone as smart as he that was close to our age. I think I might be in love.”

Natasha had a pot of chamomile tea waiting for their return, knowing she would have to calm Lillya down. “Why are we going to stupid France,” Lillya said later that night to Natasha. She knew she didn’t mean it. Any girl would give her eyeteeth to have a summer in France, walk the Champs-Élysées, visit the Cadre Noir in Saumer, live among the castles most others would visit, for the Loire Valley was known to have some of the largest and most beautiful Chateaux in the world. “The one summer I would want to stay home, father insists we go, and he’s not about to change his plans!” Natasha could not feel sorry for Lillya. Oh, how she wished she could go in her place. But that night when Lillya closed her eyes, the only one she could see was Anton. Hypnotized by his confidence and talent, he was throwing one plate and then another higher and higher.

Natasha could hear Lillya tossing and turning. She was made happy by Lillya’s excitement and joy but she couldn’t help think about where all of this might leave

her. Was this the beginning of what she knew one day would come? What she had been so fearful of coming? And Lillya would turn sixteen while in France, without Natasha by her side.

The next morning when Natasha went downstairs to get Lillya's breakfast, she noticed that flowers and a note had already been dropped off for Lillya. She could only guess who they were from. But just then, Yuri walked into the kitchen. An unusual thing for him to do. He had noticed the flowers, too, and could imagine what Natasha was thinking.

"You know these are not from Anton," Yuri told Natasha. Almost feeling he was betraying his daughter, he whispered, "These are from Petra." This made the two of them even more curious.

Yuri followed Natasha up the steps with Lillya's breakfast, the flowers and the note. When they walked into Lillya's room after first knocking and Lillya saw the flowers on her tray, before she had a second to open her mouth, Yuri blurted out, "Isn't this lovely? You got flowers and a note from Petra." You could see the disappointment immediately cross Lillya's face. However, all three in attendance, including Lillya, knew that if anything was to go any further it would have to start with the parents, and in her case it would have to begin with the boy's mother. "Why don't you open the note, my dear," Yuri said as Natasha handed her some fresh juice. "Dear Lillya," it read. "Dmitri and I and Anton were so pleased to have

had your company last evening. We know that when it comes to animals, you love horses most of all, so I hope the circus did not bore you.” Lillya interrupted and looked at her father and Natasha and said, “how could anyone be bored by the circus, it was the most fabulous show I have ever seen.” Lillya paused for a second and went on, “I could have given each of them two standing ovations! They were magnificent, weren’t they Papa?” Natasha coughed into her hand then picked up the note and said politely, looking at Lillya and Yuri, “May I continue? There’s more.” Petra invited Lillya to go riding with her. Lillya could pick out any horse she wanted from their stable to ride that day. And she wanted to know if Lillya could be available to ride two days from the current day. Lillya’s head was about to burst once more and before Yuri could express his thoughts, his daughter penned a short note saying yes, yes, yes!

Lillya couldn’t wait for the day to come. She played games with Natasha, letting her win just so Natasha would keep playing and she could keep her mind occupied. She picked flowers and arranged them in beautiful vases, then brought out her watercolors and painted in a little sunroom off of the kitchen until the light left the sky and she could barely see, and when it got too chilly, she relocated to the dining room window, close to the large stone fireplace. She was certain she would see Anton again. When she thought of him, chills rippled like a cool spring stream up and down her spine.

Natasha helped Lillya get dressed for Petra. She put on a beautiful pale yellow dress that had a scarf that went with it that was stamped with purple orchids. Lillya loved orchids. For Anton, she had Natasha gather flowers from the gardener in the greenhouse and put the flowers in her hair. When she was about to walk out the door to grab some air so she would look fresh when Petra's carriage arrived to take her to their stable, a rider unexpectedly approached the house asking for Lillya. He was carrying a note. It was from Anton. "Dear Lillya," it said "I am sorry, but I have been called away to answer business directed at my father. I'm sorry we will not have a chance to formally get together before I leave. Today is the day I have to go. I'm afraid it may be some time before we have another opportunity to exchange thoughts and ideas. My mother has explained to me that you will be leaving for France before my return. I find it sad that timing could get so in the way of discovering who you really are. This may be quite forward of me, but I'm wondering if you would meet for a few minutes right now? I know it won't be for very long." The expression on Lillya's face completely changed and she began to read silently, keeping the words from Anton between only the two of them. "Could you meet me in five or ten minutes behind your father's barn? I can't bear the thought of not speaking to you before I lose you to the horses and boys of France."

Lillya then looked at Natasha with pleading eyes, then showed her the note. “Will you help, Natasha?” Lillya asked. Natasha, knowing Lillya’s stubborn streak, and that Lillya would go with or without her, nodded her head yes.

Lillya’s father was back in his library working away, so Lillya had a short window of time to do as she pleased, but she knew she’d better move fast. Natasha ran to grab Lillya’s hand and together they quickly ran behind the barn paying no attention to the stable boys. Several minutes later, Lillya could hear footsteps coming up from behind. Trying to remain calm, she took a breath and then three others. Natasha took both her hands into her own and just that action alone helped her heart retain its normal beat. Not knowing what to say when Anton arrived, she simply remained silent. Lillya and Anton shyly embraced. Lillya knew his thoughts. She knew he would wait for her while she was in France. Quickly, he kissed her on the cheek, a typical French greeting, but his lack of words told her everything. Then he turned towards her with a big smile on his face, jumped on his horse and left.

Lillya tried to take a step forward but almost fell back. Then she looked at Natasha and said, “It’s a good thing I don’t walk the rope.” Natasha started laughing and gathered Lillya’s things and together they headed back toward the house. Lillya’s head was spinning. “He kissed me,” she whispered. “He kissed me!” When Petra’s carriage arrived she was much more silent than she would have normally been. Her

head was somewhere else as she played that last scene with Anton over and over as if they were rehearsing the final scene of a play in a theater. Petra, a smart female, sensed the feelings behind Lillya's demeanor and said to herself, "I have no doubt my son had something to do with this."

New Chapter

The scare with the boulder left both Lillya and Anton tense. They didn't have much farther to go, but anything could happen. Anton tried to remind himself of this each step that they took and tried to remind Lillya too, without being too pesty. He told her, "Probably only four or five hours more to go before we arrive at Kungur." Kungur was their final destination, for now at least. Still, he didn't want to get Lillya's hopes up too high. The closer they got, the harder their journey seemed to become. It felt almost impossible. Lillya didn't know time could move so slowly. But looking at the sun and the way it was positioned in the sky and the speed they were traveling, Anton felt fairly certain they would make it. Besides, he couldn't bear the thought of his wife sleeping outdoors for one more night.

Lillya had put on a good face. She didn't want to show Anton how frightened she had been by many of the obstacles they encountered along the way, especially the boulder. Yet she couldn't stop her mind from thinking what could happen if they were found out. She felt guilty for having gotten Anton into this upper-class cauldron of trouble. She thanked God for having made her a woman for the worst that would happen to her would be prison, but a man would most likely be sent to the front lines and certain death.

"Besides, what would they want with me?" Lillya had created numerous internal conversations with many imaginary people since they left. It made sense since

there was nothing to do but to walk and talk. Each step they took was bringing them closer to a new life, like it or not. However, Lillya had made up her mind to make the best of it. “What else can I do?” she said. Out of nowhere, a bolt of lightning lit the sky and thunder shook the earth. She tried to think of what horrible deed had been done to make God so angry. She was certain it was a man’s doing. “We don’t need this,” Anton said out loud, seeming to try to make up for the mishaps of his gender as rain the size of pennies fell from the sky.

Lillya was upset because the rain was ruining the game she had made up to keep her mind occupied. She liked to guess how many steps they had taken since the last time she added them up, but for now the rain was rinsing them away. The footsteps had been witnesses to their journey and the rain was erasing the evidence of all her hard work. So instead she found herself becoming transfixed by the sounds of the little bubbles that were popping underneath her feet as the rain made its way into the earth.

It felt childlike making up games like this, but she had had to find a different way of dealing with time and learning patience along the way. The stakes were too high to be playing make-believe. For the gameboard of life her father and the other men set up meant there was no time for frivolity, this was life and death!

Anton knew he had no choice but to trust the plan that Lillya’s father had set up for them with Michael. By now they were in too deep and no one else, friends or

relatives, seemed to owe her father a bigger favor, a favor of the magnitude of what they'd be asking Michael to do. Walking in the rain, the sound of the little bubbles continued popping under her feet. When Anton had estimated they were about an hour from Kungur and the church, Lillya reached into her bag and pulled out an old scarf to tie around her head. She'd be able to tuck her hair inside of it, covering up most of her gray and helping her to disguise her true identity. They started to see other travelers on the path going in the opposite direction. Lillya wondered why they were leaving but didn't dare try to venture into any sort of conversation or recognition more than a nod.

Testing his memory, Anton began to recite Yuri's instructions to the church. "You will go to the lower part of the town," her father continued. "On Kittarskaya Street is the Uspenskaya Church. Your mother's cousin is friends with the parish priest." He repeated them over and over until finally the church came into view. Both became more cautious as they inched in closer to their final destination. Lillya grabbed her husband's hand, unable to anticipate what would happen next. The congregation was chanting a familiar song from Lillya's childhood (find name of song). Lillya was about to whisper something to Anton when he put his finger to her mouth, signaling her to be quiet. "Shh," he said to his wife. "We must stay very quiet, my love. Michael will find us."

Lillya bit her tongue. Anton motioned for her to stay put. He left to check out their surroundings.

Lillya wasn't too pleased. Happily, Anton returned a few minutes later with news. "There's a big brush of blackberry bushes close by." And he pointed to the left where there was an old gardening shed. "I think that will provide some cover this time of day," he said after seeing a questioning look in Lillya's eyes.

"The hymn, the one they're singing, I sang it as a girl." She smiled, hoping to lighten the mood. "It was our closing hymn. No time to deliberate. I think we'd better get ready because the congregation will charge through that front door very soon."

<add material here>

Anton and Lillya found their way to the blackberry brush by the shed.

"Do you think Michael will be here tonight?" Lillya asked.

"I don't know, my love, but if not he will have sent someone in his place. Don't worry. He's going to take very good care of you. Of that I am sure!"

Anton had tried to keep his own questioning to himself, afraid that the power of doubt would prove him right.

"Anyway, there is no turning back." Anton said softly. He noticed an old beggar out of the corner of his eye. The beggar nodded in recognition. Anton just ignored him.

Anton gave Lillya a peck on her cheek to assure her. “Everything’s going to be fine,” he whispered and squeezed her hand. Wanting in some way to acknowledge how far they had come, Lillya lightly kissed him on the lips.

Lillya and Anton’s intimacy did not stop the beggar from coming closer. The old man motioned to Anton, wanting them to move closer to him. But Anton and Lillya stayed put. For a second, Lillya drifted to thoughts of her son Vladimir. She wondered how many obstacles he had had to cross to make his new home. And for a second; for a minute would be too painful, she imagined her granddaughters, whom she had never had a chance to meet.

“How horrible,” Lillya thought, “that men and politics break up so many families by starting wars.” But when thinking of Vladimir, she felt a sense of satisfaction, for she believed they had done what was necessary to ensure that he and his family were safe.

The people from the church scattered. A few went behind the church where Lillya and Anton were. Lillya heard coughing from behind them. She jumped and made a small jerky motion. Hoping no one noticed her, she turned only to see the beggar. Lillya decided to pay him no attention. Her sights were on someone else. The parishioners in front of the church said their final goodbyes and left for home as the pain of fright mixed with abandonment kicked her in the belly. The beggar, the only one vying for their attention, became annoying.

Anton whispered into Lillya's ear, "He might have had other things to do tonight. It's not as if he was given a specific date of our arrival. He's probably been outside this church the last three nights and decided to take a break, and didn't want to appear more religious than he is?" Anton tried to reassure his wife. "We'll wait a little longer, but if he doesn't show up tonight, don't lose faith, my dear. Your father would never put a plan in motion that involved your life without almost one hundred percent certainty that it would work out. If necessary, we will have to go back into the forest for one more night."

Anton could see the sadness on her face; the disappointment of no reward, when suddenly the parish priest approached them with the beggar at his side. Without wasting a breath, he introduced himself, then instructed the beggar to take over the reins of Anton and Lillya's horses and to follow him. All Lillya and Anton knew was that they needed to listen. The parish priest was the key to their future. They walked down a dark, small dirt lane and eventually stopped in the back of a carriage house that looked like all the others they had passed, only this one had a small cross embedded in the wooden door, allowing them to enter the premises. Lillya noticed a small lantern lit in the window and a strong green vine that was growing up the sides of the structure as if to frame the building like a painting. Lillya took a step back to take in the broader view. Upstairs looked to be a place where people could sleep and live and downstairs was clearly a place to rest their

horses and belongings. “We can talk inside,” the priest said softly. “And pardon me, by the way, my name is Nikolai.” Finally, Anton and Lillya knew the name of the parish priest.

“You will be quite comfortable here and out of the way,” the priest continued. “Still, always take the back road when you are coming and going. Your cousin Michael will come here in the morning with his wife Gretta and my wife Helena. His house is down the street, but you will be safer here, staying with me in our home,” he said directly to Anton. “No one would dare question or disturb the parish priest. Your husband will be known as my cousin,” he continued saying. Lillya had not realized before now, seeing the priest in the soft lantern light, how young he was. “How brave is he,” she thought, “for helping his friend Michael’s family.”

“There are some clean blankets on the bed,” he said when they had climbed the steps and entered the door to what would be Anton and Lillya’s new home. It was small and simple, but clean and cozy, and it had one small window with a table and chair in front of it that would gather the southern light. Lillya smiled when she saw it. Anton, seeing Lillya happy, smiled too. “There is fruit and bread and a hard piece of meat that you can cut. We weren’t quite certain when you’d arrive. Michael will be happy to receive this news. I will see you in the morning.” Anton

thanked the priest, gave the beggar some change and went back upstairs to help his wife settle in.

New chapter

“My dear, you’re quite a rider. I knew you were talented, but I didn’t realize you were better than me,” laughed Petra. Lillya and Petra were returning the horses to Petra’s groom. The groom spoke out, “You rode ‘em hard, Miss Petra. He’s going to need a good brushing today.” He winked at Lillya, “You didn’t have anything to do with this, did you?”

“No, I would never ride a horse so hard.”

“Oh no, not you,” the groom said with a smile.

Petra looked at Lillya and the groom and started to laugh.

“I think, Ivan, there might be a new member of the circus one day soon.” Ivan, besides being a groom by day and overseeing the stables, got to perform at night swallowing fire. Yes, he was the fire eater and loved learning new tricks, but he practiced those far away from the stables and simply talked to the horses about his accomplishments but never showed them what he could do.

Lillya was flying as high as a kite when she got back home. She barely said hello to him when she ran up the stairs about to burst, yelling for Natasha. “His mother’s amazing!”

“Calm down, Lillya, calm down. I’m certain she’s wonderful, but we have all night to discuss her.”

Lillya, with a sullen face, walked out. She was terribly disappointed that Natasha didn't seem to take her crush on Anton as seriously as she did.

Natasha was playing with the nightclothes in Lillya's closet and was deliberately making a lot of noise to cover up the sound of Lillya's happy voice. Lillya had been gone all day enjoying something while she had stayed home cleaning out the bathtub. She knew it was her duty, but when would that change?

In truth, Natasha had actually had quite a bit of fun while Lillya was out, but she didn't want Lillya to know it. For a few moments it was better, Natasha thought, for Lillya to think that she had stayed home lonesome and bored, but it was far from the truth. Lillya's father Yuri wanted to surprise his daughter and had hired one of the best French seamstresses in all of St. Petersburg to make some new dresses for her to take to France, and the seamstress had asked for one more fitting. Instead of sending Lillya, her father had sent Natasha.

The dressmaker, like anyone dealing with the upper crust of Russian society, spoke only in French to Yuri, assuming Natasha, a maid, would not know a word of the aristocratic language spoken amongst themselves, meant to help separate the working classes from the elite. Natasha smiled when Yuri winked at her, for with her photographic memory she had memorized all of Lillya's studies throughout the years, including her almost perfect French accent.

For several hours Natasha could almost believe this was her life, that of the mistress and heiress instead of a handmaid. The dressmaker and Yuri left the room to discuss fabric and prices. Natasha caught a glimpse of herself in a large silver plate and gave herself a big smile of approval. Yuri returned with fabric in one hand, but in his other hand he now carried a box filled with jewels.

You can pick one for yourself he told Natasha and one for Lillya. Out of loyalty and love, Yuri noticed she picked the nicest piece for his daughter. By the time dinner was through, both Lillya and Natasha had let go of their artificial disappointments in the other. Besides, Lillya would be leaving for France in one week's time.

Natasha knew that she would be missing her best friend and Lillya felt the same way. Natasha was like her sister and she couldn't imagine being without her for any length of time and she couldn't get Anton off her mind. "He was so bold," she thought. "He came to my father's home, asked me to meet him secretly and gave me a kiss."

Without a mother to help raise his daughter, Lillya understood that her father had become more open-minded than many fathers. He wasn't trying to hold himself up as the example of Russian society. After all the sadness he had seen his wife endure, he wanted nothing more than happiness for his daughter. Educated by some

of the best French teachers in all of St. Petersburg, she had been tutored and raised to fit into society, and therefore Natasha secretly believed, so had she.

He branded her with his lips, Lillya reflected on Anton. She couldn't get the feelings and what they meant off of her mind nor wash it away. She wanted some distraction. She wanted some laughter and fun.

Natasha felt a bit worried for Lillya because she could read Lillya's sparkling green eyes and they were saying trouble. Lillya had no inkling of the foreshadowing Natasha saw because she was at a point and an age in which nothing was taken too seriously, and little was more than a game until it wasn't.

The French had infiltrated Russia with their art, their dance, their drama and their food by now. Although the Russians were getting stronger in their dance it was hard for anyone to beat the French, but it didn't stop the world from trying.

Her father set up reservations on an ocean liner (what kind of ship would it be?)

Yuri's planned trip was suddenly in competition with young love and he found himself describing the beauty of where they would be traveling as if he were a famous French painter wanting to entice a museum or a buyer. "One of the most famous Chateaux in the Valley: Chateau de la Chance. It sits on the bank of the Layon River and was built in the 11th century and flowers and artichokes line the

river, as do beautiful grape vines that are later pressed into some of my favorite wines.”

“Mm” Lillya said with a big approving smile on her face. Yuri knew he would not have to work very hard for his daughter’s approval on where they would be going and with whom they would be staying.

The difficulty would be in separating his daughter from Natasha and this new blood and excitement she found jiggling inside her senses. She could see that her father was even more excited than she was to be taking this trip. It was the place he felt he belonged more than anyplace other than his own home. He saw the land, its rich beauty and perfect soil, as a part of himself. It was in his blood, the marrow of his bones, and this connection acted like a carrier pigeon, programmed to always bring him home. But when Lillya’s mother was still alive, she made him promise that he would never abandon their Russia and he would always do whatever was necessary to keep Lillya there, steeped in Russian culture and heritage.

Lillya was overwhelmed by the stories of the beauty and largeness of these French castles her father described and the many others that had been built in this region. She had seen wealth before, but the way her father described the natural passion and joy these people seemed to possess, they sounded magical.

The French had influence in Russia from art to architecture and became the standard bearers on what was considered good. So, any young Russian girl would

be more than thrilled to be able to experience the culture and to say that she walked the Champs-Élysées in Paris and that it was more beautiful than she could have imagined. Even though their destination would be Saumur, Yuri knew that he had to plan their transportation to include a short stay in Paris, too.

There were two ways of luxury travel between St. Petersburg and the Loire Valley, and Yuri decided he would indulge his daughter in both. They would take a luxury suite in a steamship to the Loire Valley, passing through the Baltic Sea and then going around Denmark, eventually landing in the French Port of Bordeaux. There he would have a caravan of stagecoaches waiting to take them to their final destination of Saumur, home of the famed equestrian academy, the Cadre Noir.

Lillya found that she preferred land over sea. Her stomach gurgled constantly and her father carried a bucket and walked beside her, but she enjoyed herself nonetheless and enjoyed daydreaming in her suite.

With each breath Lillya took, St. Petersburg seemed to be farther away and their house in St. Petersburg, which had always been considered large, would soon feel small.

Lillya and her father arrived at the Chateau d'le Chance just as the women were finishing airing out the rooms, each one more beautiful than the last. Exotic

lanterns adorned the home with their frescoes of engraved tulips that Lillya would discover let off a deep dripped oil of golden yellow that in its center almost looked orange. Tulips seemed to be in every room and on the grounds they were going to inhabit.

Lillya couldn't help but think about the story of the man who swallowed a tulip bulb, not realizing its worth. Lillya felt sorry for the man who had been made a fool of.

There was laughter echoing from the dining room when Lillya and her father arrived. Then two little boys who were playing tag and hide-and-seek using large marble statues and a giant marble vase to shield themselves came tromping in. They had no idea that their playground was at all unusual until their father walked in and reminded them to mind their manners. "Silence!" he barked. "I promised your mother I'd teach you to behave." Yuri and Lillya found the situation funny. Sergei, the children's father, had wanted to make a nice impression on the father and daughter who had come such a distance to rent the east wing of his Chateau for the following few months. Still, he knew his boys had charm enough to win over any crowd, let alone that of a tired teenaged girl who had been cooped up on a ship for days, no matter how luxurious their suite was. "What's that dirt you have on the bottom of your pants and on your shirt?" their father asked. "I'm certain Vanya

will be quite disappointed – she put a lot of care into dressing you this morning.”

But clearly the little boys carried no guilt or fear.

Sergei winked at Vanya as she entered the room.

Having heard Sergei, she chimed in, strengthening their father’s case. “Yes, your father’s right, you make me so sad that I could almost cry.” Vanya exaggerated her movements and the tone of her voice to pretend she was quite serious.

Taking Vanya seriously, Aleksi and his little brother Stassi apologized. And from this opening moment, Lillya knew that these two sweet boys would liven up her stay in France.

Lillya smiled and said hello, then followed her new handmaid Anika up the stairs where a bath had been drawn and was waiting for her. The water had been heated in big cauldrons over the fire and was mixed with ice cold creek water from behind the house to get just the right temperature. While she was bathing, Anika pulled out little sacks of lavender that she had made in anticipation of Lillya’s arrival. After putting them in Lillya’s drawers when she removed Lillya’s clothing from each of her suitcases, she smiled with a look of great satisfaction, for this was the first step towards helping Lillya not only speak French but smell French like all the other girls in her class.

Lillya figured Anika was probably only ten years older than herself, and even in her work clothes you could see she had a nice figure.

When speaking French, Anika's vocabulary and the way she put her words together was far superior to her own facility of the language. Someone had taken the time to educate her, for she spoke English and Russian too. Clearly Anika was more than a handmaid. "I could learn a few things from these French girls, especially this one," Lillya said to herself.

Lillya made it a part of her daily routine to ask Anika questions about herself, such as if she was married or had a boyfriend. And Anika made a point of teaching Lillya the finer points of escargot, duck cooked in plum sauce, but mostly how to carry the scent of lavender wherever she went. Every night, Anika put out a bowl of lavender and little bags to the side, for Lillya had become fond of making her own little bags, and if she didn't get around to it, Anika made certain there was one in each of Lillya's drawers when she woke up in the morning. "Now you'll smell like a real French girl," she would smile, and Lillya couldn't help but smile back. Anika slowly introduced her to all of the different rooms in the house. One sitting room with a big oak desk and stained glass cut windows was dedicated to the style of Peter Carl Fabergé, a Russian jeweler of French descent. The artist, unable to replicate the exact working of this famous artist, decided to make a wall clock and titled it "For Fabergé Time Will Tell It All." It reminded Lillya of St. Petersburg. "The east wing of the Chateau", thought Lillya, "Father and I will live quite well here."

Though many miles from home, Anton became the picture Lillya saw when she closed her eyes at night. “Anton had something special,” Lillya wrote Natasha, and she imagined the crowd cheering as he tossed plates into the air with each step he took. But Lillya had large ambitions of her own. She was a daring young woman and boys sought out the chance to catch a glance of this special girl.

Anton cursed his parents privately for sending him away just as he was meeting the one girl that he thought could make him happy.

There were many boys who had much more to offer than Anton Vronsky, as far as society was concerned, but Lillya’s fear of heights when she saw him at the top of a rope made her want him more, for he had conquered her greatest fear. Lillya and her father would be gone a long time, and she wondered if some other girl might capture his imagination in her absence. Natasha had reassured her that would be impossible. “There’s no one more interesting or talented than you!” and she believed it, so Lillya did, too.

And then there was the food. Escargot and pheasant and later the pear tartes. How would she describe all of this to Natasha? Oh, how she wished she could come, too. How would she explain the temperament of the people or why they serve so many courses in one meal? And breakfast, they call it petit déjeuner. Why, according to Papa, there is nothing small about it.

“Oh,” thought Lillya, “it’s so different!”

With all this beauty, luxuries, and delicious foods, it doesn't seem to calm the people from getting high-strung or having passionate arguments in all their conversations right in the middle of dinner. "Not because they are angry, but because they feel strongly about something," her father explained.

"They seem to have an uncanny internal clock to tell when the raspberries and crème brûlée is about to be served, because they are always smiling by the time dessert is in the air," her father continued. "They don't seem to fight, really, they just value good, hearty conversation."

Lillya began to imagine what the next months might bring and the more she thought of the present, the smaller the past became. It's not that she loved Natasha a lesser amount, it was just that there were so many new things around her to think about and the culture was so different that she couldn't help but get distracted.

Lillya had been given a prized horse to ride for the duration of their stay. She was told he was named Whisper because of the way he galloped down a path always quiet and smooth. And they liked the sound of this English word and its translation, too.

In the Loire Valley, you could actually smell the land as it flew off of his hoofs. Yuri and his friends sat in the library and drank and played cards at night. Lillya was certain he was having a good time. "I wonder what kind of life he leads when we're asleep at night in St. Petersburg," she wrote Natasha. "I think he's too

handsome and probably too full of life to have kept to himself all these years. I wonder why I never gave him credit for being more than a father. To me he's just Papa. But for the first time, I'm seeing that he's more than that to others. And I guess it's only in this land of romance and passion that I can even think about my father in this way. It just makes me question everyone, even myself.”

Kungur Chapter Arrival - continued

Anton was out taking care of the horses when two women approached the carriage house gently knocking on the door. "My name is Helena," one said. "Nikolai is my husband. I've brought you a few things for the house. This is Gretta, Michael's wife." Lillya smiled and opened the door. The women kissed Lillya on both cheeks as was the custom, and Lillya responded by introducing herself.

"Why, I would have recognized you anywhere," Gretta smiled. Michael is right - an Englehart wears their family crest on their face," and the three women laughed. "We came to help you get settled in. I know it is not what you are used to and last night had to be difficult and somewhat confusing, but we have all had to adjust to the times," Gretta sighed. "I also brought you some bergamot tea," Helena smiled. "It's our way of saying prayers for our county and the Czar and his family and it reminds us of better days. And it's our way of welcoming you."

Gretta was tall and very striking-looking with thin lips and a long dark brown mane of wavy hair. Lillya was surprised how little gray she had for a woman of her age. Helena was plainer, but pretty in her own way. The sky was beginning to change its mood from blue-gray to a crisp golden orange. Gretta pulled out some delicious-looking morning biscuits. Lillya caught the scent of fresh baked grains and the smell of cinnamon.

“You know, I met you as a child. I was younger than you are now. Michael, my Michael, had quite a crush on your mother. He thought the world of her. Yuri, your father, took it in stride. I think he was used to it. Oh, I’m sorry. I’m speaking to you, a single woman forgetting that the mother is always the mother. Your mother was quite confusing. No one felt they could compete with her in any way. My husband made a fool of himself sometimes.”

“This is going to be a happy reunion,” Gretta jumped in.

Lillya smiled, wondering, though, how Michael’s wife really felt about taking such risks with their lives and she began to think about all the secrets her father had obviously kept. What secrets would his journal reveal about them all? This woman who was Michael’s wife, a cousin by marriage, whose name was Margretta Villanova until she became an Englehardt. Could she be the key? What she did not know?

“Let me boil some water for us to steep the wonderful black tea you brought us.”

Gretta pronounced.

“My husband and Michael should be here soon.” Helena broke in.

“And Anton is anxious to meet you both.” Lillya added.

Margretta's nickname was Gretta. Older than Lillya, she still had maintained a good sense of humor and zest for life and love even though she, like Lillya, had lost much of what she'd thought would be hers. Lillya could see that these women might become new friends. Oh, how happy Lillya was to hear voices other than her own and Anton's. She loved her husband dearly, but she was in need of other companions and the sound of stories, laughter that only other people could bring with them and in return they could retell interesting stories and events their circus employees and entertainers had shared with them. Surely, they had enough interesting stories from the circus to last most people two lifetimes. Unfortunately, with strangers, that's what they would have to share, but who knew what the future would bring? She and Anton needed to hear other opinions; it gave them a source of conversation and debate and livened up their nights.

By the time Nikolai and Anton returned to the house, the women were chattering away about a celebration they wanted to have that evening. Anton handed Lillya a small bouquet of wildflowers he had picked along their way back. "I thought you might like these, my dear," he said as he handed them to her.

Anton and Nikolai began to store the goods they had collected and the women slowly began turning the carriage house into a home.

Michael walked through the door, the main attraction as far as Lillya was concerned. Lillya found him surprisingly jubilant, especially considering their

situation. Not an ounce of fear showed on his face. Not a clue that he could be involved in a scheme of hiding aristocrats.

“Lillya,” he smiled, as if it had only been months since they last saw each other “It’s been too long and how is that father of yours? He was always my favorite relative. But then again, he was the one who won the heart of Angelica. Quite a feat. She truly was an angel on earth! Born to do things we couldn’t even understand.” Lillya tried to take it all in without showing her feelings. She gave him a brief, sad, recent history of her father and tried not to tear up too much. “I like to think that he’s still at home, walking his horse, carrying a bottle of his favorite wine at his side, there with Stephano his houseman to keep him company and to listen to his stories at hand. But truthfully, I don’t know if he is alive or dead. And Lillya welled up as if she were a ten-year-old girl and it greatly embarrassed her. “I believe the creaky sound of the old wooden floors in our house must be helping to keep him company. And he’s very good at having conversations with himself.”

“But today is a joyous occasion. We must be grateful for these moments we have.” Michael said in deep reflection. “No one knows how many more we have left or what tomorrow will bring,” he said thinking of all the friends he had lost, while remembering the reasons he should remain in a grateful frame of mind.

“You are right cousin I promise not to be so solemn at dinner tonight.” And with that Lillya gave him her best Engelhardt smile.

“The parish priest, Nikolai, is a generous soul, and he has been paid well to maintain it. However, no one is truly safe. That said, I think you should be comfortable; certainly much safer than if you had stayed with your father.” I hope you’ll send my regards to him when the opportunity allows. He is a good man who has had to rise above much sadness—your mother—but you and I will have plenty of time to talk about that another time. It upsets Gretta, and right now you want her on your side.” Lillya didn’t quite understand what her cousin meant. She took a deep breath.

“Nikolai and I have established a very loyal congregation and he has told them that his uncle was coming to stay for a while, so people will welcome you with open arms and not apprehension, gossip, or mystery.”

Lillya opened the windows to get some air inside the house and to blow away some of the intrigue and mystery. A nice swift breeze came through and sprinkled the scent of Kungur leather that had slipped in through the cracks.

“It’s been a long hard journey” Lillya finally said. “I look forward to hearing stories about my mother. I was very young when she passed away. For now, though, I believe I need a nap.”

Michael kissed her on both cheeks, as did the priest's wife and Gretta. He and Anton hugged a deeper hug than normal for they knew within this gesture they had made a promise to take care of one another's family. A gesture from which there was no turning back. If one got caught aiding and abetting the enemy, the other one did, too.

Lillya wanted to feel worthy of the favor her father had asked. She felt quite sure that her father had already fulfilled his end of the request many years prior for, he was not one to ask others for help. Except his houseman Stephano to whom he had been paying a lofty monthly sum and more.

What is the secret they are both keeping? Lillya wondered about her father and Michael. He must have something on her cousin. But what? She closed her eyes and tossed and turned her way to sleep

New Chapter

Hervé Laurent Fleury was a plain sort of fellow that had worked all his life to make himself big. If he was given a lesson that would normally take two hours, he would take four to six hours of study to make certain when called upon that his answer would be perfect. His dress was always impeccable, and he studied the dictionary so in conversation he could throw out a word or two to display his intelligence and aptitude.

Laurent, as most people called him, also loved horses and he worked just as hard to become a master at that as he did with everything else. When he wasn't studying to perfect his person or appearance, he was at the chateau of a captain at the Cadre Noir who had discovered this overachiever of a boy in an orphanage nearby and decided he would be a very good worker.

There was never a son and fatherly relationship among the two, but a deep respect of each one's skill when it came to horses, so the man kept Laurent on and clothed him and fed him and one day suddenly surprised him with a scholarship to the famed academy.

Laurent took this opportunity like he took everything else; seriously, and thus he rose in the ranks until it was clear that someday he would equal his patron savior. However, one day while training the horses, his patron savior had a heart attack and died, leaving Laurent nothing but himself and his position at the academy, for

which he was grateful. Laurent showed a very bright future. The only thing missing was love and a wife. Then one day, while riding in the woods near the creek, he saw a streak of lightning ride past him. Not certain what it was, he returned to the exact same spot the following day in case the mystery decided to repeat itself. Being the kind of person who left little up to chance, he observed his surroundings like any good soldier would. He noted to his left stood a large tree that had been damaged in a recent storm and behind it a patch of beautiful wild roses that had found a home amongst the dandelions and brush. But the greatest impression of all was the scent of the flowers that lingered in the air and the sound of the water rushing behind him.

The next morning when he returned, a beautiful girl with shiny red-golden hair and emerald eyes, dressed in bright red silks was standing upright on her horse's back and she flew past him like a flaming arrow with a gigantic smile on her face carefree and happy. She blew him a kiss. Laurent almost fell off his horse!

"She's the most wondrous creature I've ever seen," he moaned over and over to himself. "I must meet her!" he exclaimed.

Having to work overtime, which for years had been no problem for him, that weekend Laurent sadly went to do his duty and fulfill his obligation at the academy. He had been given the job of showing yet another wealthy man around

the academy. “Don’t they see enough horses?” Laurent sighed to himself out of fear that if he didn’t return to that exact spot this morning the girl would think that he wasn’t interested, which could not have been further from the truth. Still, he took pride in his work and appearance for by now it was who he had become. But when the wealthy man arrived, a man from the academy approached Laurent to let him know that the man had brought his daughter. “He says she is very interested in riding, so you might need to slow your pace and cater it a bit toward her as I believe that is what would make this man happy.”

Just at that moment, a swirling girl dressed in yellow, gold, and red entered the stable with her father.

“This is Yuri and his daughter Lillya.” The squint in Laurent’s eye examining if what he was seeing was the truth could have told one hundred tales. Every fantasy he ever had seemed to come true when he saw this girl.

Laurent took several breaths, then escorted Yuri and Lillya into the manège where stood some of the most beautiful horses Lillya had ever seen. Although the cadet was very distinguished-looking, he seemed a bit tongue-tied at first until he began to display the very French upper crust form of horse ballet of which he was a master.

Lillya’s father whispered to her, telling her that very few horsemen around the world knew this special art as well as this cadet did.

Laurent knew that this was his time to shine. The girl certainly would be captivated and would have difficulty keeping her eyes on anyone or anything else other than him. “Thank you, father,” Lillya whispered back to Yuri. “Coming here has been worth it if only for this.”

Yuri, feeling quite pleased with himself, asked the cadet if he would like to come over to the Chateau where they were staying and go riding with him and his daughter sometime soon.

Laurent could not believe how lucky he was to have been the one chosen to give Yuri and Lillya the tour, and he quickly obliged. The rest of the day, Laurent could do nothing but brag, which was not his usual custom. “Did you see that girl?” he asked every cadet he could talk to. “She’s going to be my wife,” he repeated over and over.

Lillya, when she got back to the Chateau, immediately ran to the stables and took out Whisper.

“You are going to learn some special tricks this summer,” she smiled. For the rest of the afternoon until almost sunset Lillya schooled the horse until Yuri made her come back inside. “I’m going to see Laurent tomorrow, and you can’t say no, Papa.” And he knew she was right. “He’s going to teach me this secret art of horse ballet that very few men know. Just think what the aristocratic women will do

when I show them this!” Yuri didn’t want to think about it because his daughter was a force to be reckoned with when she made up her mind.

Lillya could barely contain her excitement. She had heard of the fine art of dressage and had actually seen one master once with her father when he took her with him to pick out a stallion. There was a French man with a beautiful chestnut stallion who had been taught this sacred art. Lillya knew how privileged she was to have been able to tag along with her father and she knew better than to pester him or his invitation would vanish as quickly as it had appeared. “You will look, listen, observe and be quiet,” her father said, “and nothing more. Are you able to do that?”

For days before, she practiced the art of silence, the most important and difficult one for her. So, when Laurent came along four years later and she was four years older, Lillya felt that she was more than ready to be schooled by him and by this time she had become a masterful rider herself.

“Don’t get too serious with this Laurent,” her father said after several days. And then he reminded her that she was in France to perfect her French and to get to know lots of French girls and boys, not just one. “Don’t worry, Papa. He doesn’t think of me that way. Besides he’s very polite and has never tried to force himself on me.” But Yuri knew men and he knew that they didn’t always say what they truly thought.

“You know that I’ve gone to all the dances I’ve been invited to, and when I get home, I’m going to set my intentions on Anton Vronsky. He’s the person I want to marry!” Lillya liked to get her father all riled up. But it was true for Lillya. Ever since meeting Anton, she could think of no future better or brighter than being in a circus, and she had never met a boy more exotic or kind. “No, father, no worries about me staying in France and marrying Laurent. That would put me a sea and an ocean away from you and the man I will one day love. I couldn’t bear being away from the two of you, let alone Natasha! I like him very well, but he’s not the one for me, you’ll see.” And she said goodnight, thinking about Anton while counting her horse’s steps, because if she could, she wanted to do this art as perfect as him.

Since coming to France, Lillya had gotten into the habit of borrowing Whisper every morning. She also got into the habit of seeing Laurent daily. She was surprised to discover in herself that there was something about the French that made her feel free and all warm inside and it wasn’t just because she was living in the middle of a vineyard or that her father let her sip wine at meals as she watched the others drink by the carafe. Lillya felt French passion seemed to be a happier passion than the daunting sadness described in most Russian stories, paintings, music, dance and poems. It made her want to be more free, and sometimes with

Laurent she found herself becoming someone else, a girl less shy and more expressive than the girl she had been all of her life. Yes, she still rode like lightning and could light up the nighttime sky, and there were many from the opposite sex both old and young taken by her, but she had held herself back. When she was with Laurent, she could see in his eyes that he was falling deeply in love with her without telling her or expressing any words. Lillya began to frighten herself, for in this foreign world she was beginning to feel this way too. Then one evening, as he helped her off her horse, his hands got tangled in the garlands in her hair and as he gently pulled them out, he found his hands lightly touching her face and surprising not only her, he leaned in and kissed her. Then he pulled back and looked into her eyes and could see that she liked it and, wanting her so badly, he did it again, only this time for twice as long. “Will you be mine?” he asked her. “We can spend our lives riding through the breeze and dancing on the shore. I promise you will be happy for it is all that I want in this world.” Lillya was shocked and excited at the same time. No man had ever spoken to her like a grown woman before. So enamored by the moment was she, she sighed, “Yes, my love, yes, yes!” But by the time the second “Yes,” slipped off her tongue, Lillya could already feel the gravity of her actions and yet she was conflicted by how tingly she felt inside. And Laurent, hearing her breathe and putting his hand on her chest to

make certain that the pounding heartbeat was hers, went from a knight to becoming a king, for the young woman he just kissed could be nothing less than a queen.

When they left to part their separate ways home he kissed her again; just long enough and hard enough to make her question herself and she left him dizzy and confused.

When she returned to the Chateau, her handmaid could tell something was wrong just in the way Lillya was avoiding her father. She immediately asked for a bath, almost demanded it, as if she wanted to wipe something off of her. The handmaid, trying to be nice to Lillya, instead made her cry. “Pourquoi pleurez-vous? Dites-moi,” she asked. And Lillya spilled her story of her infatuation with Anton and her embarrassment of getting carried away with Laurent. “How will I ever be able to explain this to the man I believe to be my true love? He pulled out this blue velvet box before I left, and he slipped it into my own pocket. I didn’t know what to do. It all happened so fast.” And Lillya began to cry even more. “I’m afraid to open it by myself. Will you stay here while I do?” and her handmaid nodded a simple ‘yes’ reply with her head.

Unbeknownst to them both, Yuri had followed Lillya in, and when he could hear that she was upset, he stayed outside her door and listened to her as she cried her heart out, wishing he could wrap his arms around her like he did when she was a little girl. Instead he did the only thing he felt a good father could do. He walked

next door, apologized for pulling Sergei from his dinner and they went into the library where they could have some privacy and talk father to father.

Yuri said not a word to Lillya, and better than that, he asked no questions. He did what he felt he should do to not throw dirt on either the young man or his young daughter. But as the morning sun began to peep its head through the panes in Lillya's bedroom, a groggy headed young woman was put into a carriage with big feather pillows where she was served breakfast dumplings as her father said his goodbyes to Sergei and they pulled away as suddenly as they had arrived. Soon they would be in Paris and on a train to St. Petersburg as if they had never gone. Lillya never saw Laurent again, but he saw her. However, she remembered the many mornings and teachings he had so freely given. She pictured herself on top of Sergei's horse Whisper and in her head went over the ballet step by step that Laurent had taught her until it became a part of her, because even in her present state of mind, she was not so far gone that she was unable to see its value to her in the world.

On the long trip home, when she was certain she was all alone, she opened the box that Laurent had so gently placed in her pocket. Inside was a short note that read, "To Lillya, the flame of my life. You sparkle brighter than any emerald or ruby. May this always be yours and you be mine."

Years later, Lillya passed the brooch to her good friend Katya, a beautiful ballet dancer, as she felt it was better to have it out of her hands. Katya, in turn, gave it to her daughter Donatalia, a very talented young ballerina who Lillya could still imagine when she shut her eyes the way Donatalia looked in her light lavender gown the night she danced with Lillya and Anton's son Vladimir on the lawn at the Winter Palace for the Czarina Alexandra. Donatalia's father was so proud and happy. The only true sadness was that Katya had passed away and was not able to join in the celebration. Lillya could understand how Donatalia felt, for on occasions like this she still missed her mother, too. Still, Lillya was certain they were there with them, giving Donatalia the ability to fly each time Vladimir lifted her in the air as if she were only a feather.