

There are people in the world who stumble, unlikely, into lives of adventure. Sergei, Aleksandra and Yenna were three very such individuals. Sergei was the oldest of the three; born at precisely 10 o'clock in the morning on Sunday, 9 April 1933. His parents were immigrants with no country at the time to call their own. His mother was — pardon the term — a gypsy. His father was Russian by birth, socialist by force and anarchist by choice. Neither Sergei's mother or father ever took the time or had the chance to relay the story of their meeting and subsequent love affair to him. All that he knew for certain was the time, date and place of his birth; along the northern coast of Africa in Algiers, Algeria.

Aleksandra was born nine months, two weeks, and four days later — one month pre-mature. The family had been slowly making their way down the coast line on small freighters and the occasional shipping boat. Her birthplace and the exact time were undocumented, but some weeks later they were able to ascertain that the nearest large city was Mogadishu in what was then the Italian Somaliland. Despite her earlier-than-anticipated arrival Aleksandra was the healthiest and most active of the three children on the day of her birth. The ship's captain asserted that she was born to be on the sea.

Little did the captain know how right he was.

Yenna came as a surprise some years later. The truth of the matter was that no one even knew that her mother was pregnant. Much later in life Sergei recalled, jokingly, that his father had chided his mother about her putting on weight for a few months before Yenna arrived, but no-one suspected the reason. Their mother had somehow maintained a regular cycle throughout the term of the pregnancy. She had a few minor aches and pains now and then, but nothing like she had experienced with her first two children. Yenna was born three-hundred miles inland of Bombay, India just outside of a large city called Nagpur. The birth was sudden and mostly painless for Yenna's mother. Yenna, on the other hand, was not happy to arrive — a fact she made known to everyone within earshot. One of her mother's more violent contractions had broken both of Yenna's legs and a second sudden contraction fractured one of her ankles. The three dhais who oversaw the birth were particularly concerned about the

injuries and took great care in setting the fragile bones and carefully wrapping them and swaddling the newborn for her own safety.

The dhais had another concern as well. While they examined the poor babe for additional injuries they stumbled upon a rare genetic anomaly. Both of Yenna's feet had syndactyly — webbing — from forefoot to the tip of the toe. The midwives had a difficult time trying to explain the situation to the concerned parents whose knowledge of the Urdu language was limited in comparison to their knowledge of Hindi. The best that was able to be conveyed was something along the lines of “old duck legs.” Finally one of the dai simply unwrapped Yenna and showed her feet to the parents directly, hoping not to shock them. The returned response, however, was laughter. Unamused, one of the dhais took out a small blade and gestured to the new parents that she would happily cut the webbing. The laughter turned into sudden shock as they emphatically waved the midwife away from that course of action. It was then that the new parents asked both Sergei and Aleksandra to take off their shoes and show their toes to the assemblage of dhais. Their mother painstakingly joined them as well and kicked off her slippers one by one. It was a familial trait it seemed, and one they were all happy to suffer together.

The family had made their way to British India by chance in the fall of 1938. By Yenna's birth in early May of 1941 their patriarch had made it his intention to stay and help the people however he could. While not directly a war-torn nation the nation had been torn apart by its status under British control. Millions of young men were sent to live and die as part of the war effort on behalf of the British Empire while the Indian National Congress was fighting and petitioning for their nation's freedom. The family ceased their running and their travels until India was finally granted its independence in 1947. The benefit for the children — which would prove out more and more as the years went on — was their aptitude for language. All three were fluent in Russian, Romanian, Hindi and English and could easily join in a conversation in any of the romance languages along with many of the other Indian languages. Picking up on the distinctness of different dialects and accents felt natural to them and, despite

their foreign appearance, it was easy for them to adapt and become accepted by new groups in new situations.

None of the three were particularly remarkable by first glance. All had mouse-brown hair with dark brown eyes. They were pale and thin with angular features that gave away their Eastern European ancestry right away. By the time this story takes place Sergei had just turned sixteen and was starting to fill out a bit more as a man and looking less the part of a boy. Aleksandra was no great beauty like the stories she read of Cleopatra made her wish that she was. She was tall for her age—a bit gangly as well. Of the most prominence to others and the most embarrassment to herself was a gap in between her two front teeth. It wasn't so significant that it could be seen at a distance, but on occasion she would whistle frightfully loud a sibilant *S*, *F*, *V*, or *Z*. Yenna was still young, eight and one month to the day, and while she had not had an easy childhood, by the calmness that shone from behind her eyes it was clear she had been well loved. Her first few years were the hardest. Prone to frequent injury she had scars all about her hands, elbows, knees and shins. By the time she was six she had broken both of her arms, two of her fingers, and one of her ribs. It wasn't until they had all left India for the southern cape of Africa that she stopped accidentally injuring herself at least once each week. Amongst her collection of scars was a thin white line running dead center from the bottom of her chin to her lower lip. At five she had fallen and struck the end of a table parting her skin to expose the bone. The doctor had patched her up almost immediately, but the scar was guaranteed to stay. It never bothered her though, not even into her teens or early adult-hood. It was her “favorite scar.”

The children's parents had died a little more than a year before the events I am about to detail for you took place. I mention this only so that you will not think them bad parents for letting their children go on a journey like the one they embarked upon. The fact-of-the-matter is that they had no choice. Sergei, Aleksandra, and Yenna needed to do whatever they could to survive. I know that it seems casual, perhaps even dismissive, the way that I bring up the tragic loss that these three suffered so young. I apologize if that is the case. If we come

around to it again one day I'll try to remember to tell *that* story in its entirety. In the mean time, I'll tell the story that feels most appropriate an introduction to the people who affected my life so dramatically.

The ship was sinking. They knew it was sinking not only because they had heard the cries of the crew declaring as much no less than thirty minutes prior, but the water had begun to swell the wood and seep into the ships galley at a steadily increasing pace. Aleksandra was pacing the room, inconsolable and crying out for help that would never come. Sergei was vainly trying to plug and patch every leak and entrance that he could with anything and everything available. Yenna, ever calm, sat up as high as her brother had been able to place her. She cradled her knees and clutched the blanket that she had treasured since childhood to her cheek. There was no denying that they were all terrified, but each was handling things very differently. The man of action, the lady in despair and the youngest one silently blaming herself for everyone's misfortune.

In a moment of reckless judgement the oldest of the three reached up to the youngest and plucked the blanket from her hands. "I need this little-love. It will stop the water, I promise."

Yenna gave no objection. She resolved to herself that she didn't deserve the blanket anyway. It was her fault the ship was sinking. It was her fault that her parents were gone. Her fault that they had to leave the others behind. Everything was her fault. Aleksandra, on the other hand, found her brothers decision utterly unacceptable.

"No!" she cried out, "No! No! No! Give it back to her! That is Yen's blanket! She needs it!"

"Aleksa," Sergei used the deepest and most assertive tone he could muster, "I need this to save us." He proudly presented the faded-red blanket as if it were a three-man submarine. He spoke with such conviction that Aleksandra almost believed him. "Trust me."

"We are sinking, Sergei. That... that won't help us at all. We need to find a way out."

“You don’t understand, Aleksa. I promise.” Sergei found it suddenly difficult to swallow. The reality of the situation crashing into his hopes and battering them down like a wave crashing into the shore. “We’ll be okay.”

The ship lurched and tossed Aleksandra and Sergei violently to one side of them room. Yenna, hidden in between two cupboards, was blessedly safe from the sudden rapid turn. The water was filling the room much faster now. There was no preventing the inevitable and there was nothing that anyone could do to stop it.

“Up!” Sergei demanded of his sister. “Climb up.”

She did as she was told, whimpering all the while. Sergei was close at her heels as they got as close as they could to their younger sibling.

“Yenna, are you okay?” Aleksandra was suddenly more scared for her sister than she was for herself. She felt embarrassed that she had been worrying more about her own life than about her brother and sister’s prior to that moment.

Yenna nodded yes with tears in her eyes. Aleksandra had seen her sister’s strength a hundred times before and knew that the little one was as tough as they came, so she could see through the lie as clear as glass. “I love you, Yen.”

The ship rocked again taking Sergei’s footing away. The young-man tumbled into an assortment of crates, pots and pans in the rising pool of water below.

“Are you okay?” Aleksandra called out from where she clung tightly to a beam.

“Unh.” He grunted in reply as he scrambled to his feet.

They had been on the ship for a month. Sergei had spoken to an old friend of his fathers who had spent his life at sea sailing port to port on different ships and working for businesses, governments, and individuals alike. “*You should sail to America,*” he said, “*It is land of opportunity. I know a ship that can take you —and your sisters —there. You will have to work, but it is a good ship. Good captain. Safe. Sturdy. Reliable.*”

He wouldn’t have considered leaving had things not gone sour. There was rumor that one of the older men they had come to know had taken a liking to Aleksandra and was going to steal her away and force her to marry him. Aleksa

had confided to Sergei one night that she was afraid. That was all he needed to hear to motivate action. In this moment, however, he was regretting that action gravely.

Slipping and sliding all the while, Sergei made his way back to his sisters. A moment later he was up as high as he could manage and a moment after that he was in shock. *Half-full*. He thought to himself, *Already half-full and nothing I can do*. Aleksandra began to cry softly to herself. Yenna placed a hand delicately on her older sisters cheek and that unleashed a torrent of tears.

“Don’t cry, Aleksa.” Sergei returned from his horror with a demon of humor, “The room will fill up faster.”

Aleksandra burped out a painful laugh before returning to the tears. Yenna joined her sister and Sergei found his eyes begging to moisten as well. Suddenly the ship let out a groan like it had awoken from a hundred-year slumber. The morning groan was followed by the familiar, if not considerably louder, popping of bones and sinew of the back, chest and shoulders of a long nights rest. This popping wasn’t due to a bad mattress, though. This was the ships spine, it’s hull, it’s heart bursting and breaking under the pressure.

There was a boom and a crash and the ship was torn in two. The galley split as though it were nothing more than a seam in an old pair of trousers. Then there was no sound, no light, nothing. Everything was suddenly nothing. There was no way to know how far down the ship had sunk before it fractured. It was summer, but that made no difference to the cold of the ocean. They were fortunate, surely, that they were in the Atlantic and not the Pacific, Indian, Southern or Arctic. It shouldn’t have mattered one way or another, though. They should have died then and there. Fate should have cut those three wonderful strings short and the story should be over, but it isn’t. I can’t explain it, no-one can, but those children made their way to the surface and were none-the-worse for it.

They told me later that it had felt like hours under the water slowly rising to meet the air and it had felt like weeks that they had floated precariously on the

surface. From records I have been able to piece together it was only three or four days. Regardless I know that none of us will ever be able to empathize with them. Aleksandra, with her lithe and lean body, was far-and-away the strongest swimmer. After taking in the largest breath of air she could manage and shaking as much salt-water from her eyes as possible she immediately looked for signs of help. There was nothing. No ships, no survivors, no chance. Dotted along the ebbing Atlantic water were signs of the accident. Part of a sail, broken boards and various other floating debris. As soon as Sergei surfaced with Yenna, and Aleksandra knew them to have survived, she made her way to the nearest planks. Each long stroke of her arms brought her slightly closer, but also farther away. Each splash sent ripples through the water cascading their savior farther and farther away from her.

Aleksandra, on the verge of tears and giving up for dead, was suddenly startled when one of the larger planks seemed to stop in its retreat. Strangely it reversed its motion and came speeding toward its pursuer. Don't be alarmed. It was no ghost, alien or magic spell. It was simply a wave that changed its course and not some preposterously mystical thing without logical explanation. Those stories come later. This was just a fortunate wave with an unfortunate side effect. It was no sooner than Aleksa had noticed the change of direction then the wood that would become their raft rammed directly into her forehead. Luckily Aleksa was no fool and was not about to let this once in a lifetime opportunity surf by. Despite the conk to her noggin she was able to wrap both arms around the board and hold on for dearest life.

It took Aleksandra a moment to remember why she was hugging a length of splintered wood so tightly. It came with the painful knocking in her head and the insight that she was under the water again — not above it. With a mighty twist Aleksandra flipped the board over and found herself no longer submerged.

“Yenna! Sergei!” Aleksandra cried out into the dark of night.

“Aleksa.” It was Sergei's deeper voice that boomed into her ears.

Aleksandra swiveled her head around and saw both her brother and sister mere feet away. “Here, take hold.”

“Yen first.” Sergei thrust his youngest sister forward in the water so that Aleksandra could take her arms. Quickly but carefully Aleksandra took her sister and pulled her up onto the plank which dipped ever so slightly deeper into the water. “Make some room.”

Sergei surged ahead to join his sisters on the makeshift raft. His weight, unfortunately, was too much to bear. His hands were fine, but as soon as he attempted to push up onto the board all three found themselves in the water again. It was good for them that Aleksandra was worried that such a thing might happen and had crossed her ankles below the water so that she still maintained a firm vice-like grip with her legs.

“Help, help!” Yenna cried out.

Aleksandra righted the plank again and scooped Yenna from the water as quickly as a gull might have a fish. Sergei had learned from his mistake and chose — this time — to hold onto the raft instead of going above. All three spent the next minutes looking for more wood that they might be able to claim for themselves. The moon was obscured intermittently by quickly moving clouds giving them only moments to see clearly.

All three were cold, tired, hungry and frightened, but they were alive and did not overlook that fact in their thoughts. As the first few hours ticked by the siblings were able to collect a few more items for their flotilla. Torn sail, additional planks, an old bucket with only a little bit of rust. There was no food to be salvaged and no fresh water to drink. Having spent many of their earliest years on ships both Aleksandra and Sergei knew not to drink the seawater though not well enough to explain to Yenna *why*.

When daylight came peaking up above the crest of the Eastern Sky at the end of the limitless ocean the children felt something akin to relief. Their bellies were still empty, their bodies still cold, and their throats still dry, but their hearts were once again filled with hope. Their parts that were exposed to the sun began to burn very quickly. They thought it wise, at first, to dip themselves into the cold ocean water when they would feel their skin redden and tighten. Within a few hours they reasoned out the folly of that choice and took, instead, to

covering themselves head to webbed-toes as best they could. By nightfall the piercing groans of their stomachs had become more like an endless murmur. None of them spoke much though Sergei and Aleksandra did share furtive glances whenever they heard poor Yenna whimper.

It went on like that for another day or two—not the way they used to tell the story, mind you—before the night that almost left the set of three a broken pair. It was very late or very early depending on how you choose to look at things. Sergei had fallen asleep sitting up—an unwise thing to sleep at all, but to attempt it sitting was worse still. Somehow in the daftness of slumber he slipped quietly into the water; the act of which did not stir him to awareness at all. Yenna awoke though, and was fearfully worried when she saw that her brother was missing. She claims she didn't hear him fall into the water, just that she knew he was gone.

“Aleksa... Aleksa, wake up!” Yenna cried out for her sister. “Sergei is gone.”

Aleksa stirred and then shook and then she shot up at the waist. “What?”

“He's gone. I don't see him.”

Aleksandra looked out into the quickly moving causeway that was conveying their makeshift raft to destinations unknown. There was no sign of her brother at all. Or, if there were, none that he was alive and fighting to stay that way.

“There!” Yenna's tiny voice packed a mighty punch.

Aleksandra looked to her sister who was pointing off in the distance. She followed the line of her little sister's pointer finger to a barely perceptible blue-gray blob bobbing like a buoy. *Sergei*, she thought to herself *how did he get so far away?*

“Wait here.” Aleksandra said calmly as she dipped into the water one last time. Having learned a little about trying to fight the ocean's current Aleksandra dipped her head below the water and opened her eyes as wide as she could. She couldn't see anything clearly, but knew that she had to swim as hard as she ever had if there was anything to be done for her brother. *He would do it for me, I must do it for him.*

Her resolve made her stronger and faster. It wasn't a choice to save her

brother it was everything. Her heart pounded in her chest and all the muscles she knew that she had strained on the verge of bursting. It didn't matter. She made it. She found his limp body laying face down in the water. He had been there for who knows how long. A few breaths was all it would take for him to have drowned and he had been like this for a few minutes. It made no difference, she had to try whatever she could. With a reserve of strength and energy she didn't know that she had hidden away Aleksandra grabbed her brother by his lapel and shoved him bodily out of the water. She pushed so hard that she pulled herself out as well allowing her to gobble the air into her lungs so full that it would be enough for two. They both smacked into the water with a force that would have emptied Sergei's lungs had they not already, presumably, been empty. As soon as she could catch her brothers face in between her hands Aleksandra placed her lips on his and blew with all her might.

Right away he coughed.

"Sergei!"

The coughing continued as Sergei opened his eyes to see his sister's face haloed by the start of the rising sun.

"Sergei, you're alive!"

"Aleksa, what?"

"We need to get back, we're so far away."

Sergei followed Aleksandra's gaze to the raft that was quickly moving away and seeming to gain pace rapidly. In the distance they could hear the shrill cry of Yenna, though they couldn't possibly have understood what she was saying. In a second they were under the waves and giving chase. The desire to survive was their fuel and their baby sister was the carrot that led them to have half a chance. They came up only for the occasional breath before diving down again and swimming like sea-lions on the hunt. Down, swim, up, breath, down, swim, up, breath. Over and over until all was surely lost. That was when the ocean decided it had, had enough of them I suppose. As the pair went up for breath another wave snuck in from below and lifted them up as high as it could. Again and again the waves picked them up and then sucked them back down just as

they tried to breathe in. Again and again they were unable to use their arms for little else than wild flailing. Again and again they thought themselves good and truly doomed.

Then they were on the sand.

As soft as it may feel underfoot, there is no comfort to be found falling into a mound of sand. Especially not sand littered with the remains of a tiny makeshift raft. Years later, in trying to corroborate their recollections of this tale, I found it hard to line up certain facts. I suppose everyone did for quite a while. I had found the ships manifest logged in a registry that detailed its intended course along with the cargo on-board. Had things gone smoothly Sergei, Aleksa, and Yenna would have docked in Port Hawkesbury, Nova Scotia on-or-about Thursday, 10 June 1949. Their ship, *The Tigress*, would have delivered eleven crates of semi-precious stones, forty-three bolts of rare silks and fabric, and eight-hundred pounds of unidentified cargo being sent from the University of Pretoria to Dalhousie University; taken on more supplies along with a second unidentified cargo from Dalhousie to Bard College; and then unloaded the three migrant youths off in the United States in New York City on Wednesday, 15 June 1949. By all logical reasoning their ship *must* have been blown dramatically off-course. Oddly there were no severe storms reported in any logs at the time and the three siblings never spoke of any storm as a reason for the ship's sinking. Likewise there is no accounting for how they managed to make it from wherever the ship *did* sink to where they set foot, finally, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland's Ocean City—five days earlier than it should have been possible—on Sunday, 5 June 1949. The logistics of it all perplexes me to this day, but I digress; it was 11 o'clock on an otherwise beautiful Sunday morning the day that things began to change forever.

The boardwalk, though not as busy then as it would be nowadays, was bustling with activity. Church had let out at 10:15 and all of the beach going families had either returned home to trade their Sunday finest for their bathing

suits or had gone directly to the ocean having worn their comfort clothes as a first layer. Sergei, Aleksandra and Yenna had washed up just south of the pier at the end of the boardwalk. A lifeguard, James Crawley, had been the first to spot something and was the first on the scene. It had been what appeared to be a small child riding one of the largest waves young James had ever seen that pulled his attention away from his normal duties. By the time he found Yenna sprawled out on the sand amidst the remnants of *The Tigress* Sergei and Aleksandra came crashing in behind him with a thud. James feared, at first, that they would be swept right back out to sea with the next wave, but the waves died down just as suddenly as they had started. In his panicked run to rescue Yenna the lifeguard had managed to attract quite a few peoples attention. A small crowd had formed along the line of the pier and some brave few had even ventured down towards the wave besieged beachfront.

A few members of the gathered crowd rushed to join James as soon as it seemed safe to do so. The small collection of bystanders and good samaritans grew minute by minute until it was nearly a village of helping hands there to claim they had saved the day. By 1 o'clock all three children had been fed, clothed, and their myriad wounds tended to by the good Dr. Townsend—the same man who would later bring me into this world. An hour later Mayor Trimper was on the scene declaring everything a great miracle and promising to honor James Crawley with the key to the city for his efforts. At quarter-past-five all three had been taken to a small bread and breakfast run by Auntie Mathilda. I don't believe that Auntie Mathilda was, in fact, anyones Aunt; it was just what she liked to be called. The police stopped in to question Sergei, Aleksandra, and Yenna so that they could put something on record for the official report. It was a mixed blessing in some ways. Questioned separately all of the stories that were conveyed by the three matched up (with only a few moments of gross exaggeration from Yenna and Sergei), but the impossible nature of the tale paired with their dubious origin story and Soviet ancestry was cause for alarm; the McCarthy era "red menace" threat still being of major concern to the average citizen in America at the time.

The next day they were moved from the B&B to the gymnasium of the Ocean City High School. Classes were out for the summer and Principle McIver was close friends of the mayor. Three cots, three large trunks, and three privacy screens had been set up so as to house the children for a length of time as would be necessary given the complex nature of the situation. The space was certainly large enough to house them, though a bit drafty at times and a cacophony of nightmarish echoes all through the night. Banners hung from the rafters with boasts of the schools fighting spirit, depictions of the school mascot, and purple banners with gilded fringes proclaiming them state basketball champions from the year before. Each morning a volunteer from the City Council would bring them breakfast, another would take them out for lunch, and in the evenings Principle McIver and his wife, Phyllis, would bring a picnic basket of goodies to share with them.

After a week of living in relative seclusion Sergei had, had enough. While everyone had been pleasant and kind to them he had resolved that how they were living was no life at all and distinctly the opposite of what he had envisioned coming to America would be like. That evening when Mr. McIvers—Stanley—came to bring them food Sergei demanded that they be allowed to go out about town and fend for themselves.

“I have been working many years already.” Sergei was trying out his newly adopted American accent. “I have taken care of Aleksa and Yenna since the day our parents passed on. We are no Soviet spies, we just want to make a life here.”

“I know... I know...” Stanley tutted, “we just want whats best for you kids.”

“I am no *kid*.” Sergei said with defiant pride.

“Of course,” Stanley realized the error of his misspeech a moment too late, “that isn’t what I meant.”

“So what will you do? Keep us prisoner here in this gymnastic hall?”

Principle McIver paused for a long moment so as to choose his words carefully. “No, Sergei. We won’t keep you here and we certainly don’t want you to think of this place as a prison. What do you propose that you would do? What is it that you *want* to do?”

“I want to provide. I want to work. I want to make good for my sisters and myself.” Sergei had chosen his words carefully as well.

The following Monday, at the break of dawn, Sergei jumped into a bright red Ford half-ton pickup truck and began a new job in construction. The first few days were grueling for a fact, but the work left Sergei invigorated and feeling full of purpose. Each afternoon when he would return to their temporary quarters all he could do was regale his sisters with stories of his day. Pedantic as those events might seem to you and I it was the passion with which Sergei told his tales that captivated the socially deprived sisters. Within a few days it was Aleksandra begging to work *somewhere—anywhere* within the bustling summer city. Phyllis McIvers was able to find the sweet gap-toothed girl work at a small cafe serving coffee and cleaning tables a few hours each day. The stories that she brought home—mundane as they were—still made Yenna crave for more. The next night when the McIvers brought them supper it was the littlest one begging to work.

“No, child. You are too young.”

“But... but... but...” Yenna stammered at a loss for something else to say.

“How about this,” Mrs. McIver suggested, “why don’t you come with me during the days. We can visit the boardwalk, and go shopping, and I can show you everything our beautiful city has to offer.”

The days moved quickly after that. June became July and July slipped into August in no-time. School was due to return in just a few weeks and plans were being made by staff and faculty at O.C.H.S. to clean, renovate, and repair in advance of the new year. Sergei had been making a fine living during the summer, Aleksandra had managed to save a few dollars as well, but Principle McIver informed them that at their ages they were in need of a formal education. At the beginning of the school year they would be required to take classes and begin to live more normal lives. Graciously the McIvers had offered to take the three children home with them for one week while the gym went under its summer repairs. Yenna was offered the spare bed in their guest room and Aleksandra and Sergei alternated arrangements on the floor or sofa each

night. At the end of the week, the renovations having been completed expeditiously, Phyllis offered to let Yenna stay with them in the guest room until better arrangements could be made for everyone.

Sergei and Aleksandra were not happy to be separated from their younger sister, but the McIver family had treated them all, Yenna especially, as though they were their own children. Sergei and Aleksandra saw their sister every day for dinner and would stay with the McIvers on Friday and Saturday night, joining them for church on Sunday before going back to their home in the gym. It was on the second Sunday of the arrangement that Yenna came to her siblings with a concern.

“They want to adopt me.” The little one said.

“What? Who?” Aleksandra asked incredulously.

“Mrs. and Mr. McIver.”

“Why do you think that?” Sergei asked.

“I heard them talking on the phone. They told someone that they couldn’t let me go. They wanted to adopt me.”

“Let you go where?” Aleksandra inquired.

“I don’t know. Somewhere. An *orf-nidge*. We’re supposed to go there.”

“An orphanage?” Sergei reeled in shock. “Did they say or-phan-age?”

“That sounds right.” Yenna said after a moment trying to recall the shape and the feel of the word in her mind.

“Are you sure, Yen?” Aleksandra asked, “They said they were going to put us all into an orphanage?”

“No.” The young one replied matter-of-factly. “Only you, Aleksa. They want to adopt me, and you would go to the orphanage, and Sergei would go somewhere else. I don’t know.”

Unacceptable. The whole situation was wholly unacceptable. Sergei had heard enough and was not about to let what remained of his little family to be torn apart by adoptions and orphanages and some other unknown. Being a man of action it was not about “what if” for Sergei, it was only about how. In an instant there were a hundred ideas formulating in his mind. Plots and plans

racing around from one neuron to the next trying to be the first to complete an entire idea. Aleksandra was heartbroken by the thought of being separated from the two people that she loved most in the world. While Sergei schemed Aleksandra flung her arms around her little sister and clung on with all the love she had within herself. As the thought of them all being away from one another forever pervaded the rest of her thoughts Aleksandra began to cry.

“We leave. Tonight.” Sergei blurted out.

The two sisters looked to him for more. Sergei stood, nodded his head in satisfaction, and stated again, “Tonight.”

That was the end of the beginning of their story. Everything prior to that had been trivial in comparison to what would happen next throughout the course of their lives. That night, after the McIvers returned him and Aleksandra to the gym for the last time, Sergei set out to gather supplies. He went first to one of his construction sites, then another, then another. He broke into house after house taking what he knew would help him for the plan at hand. Within hours he had two knapsacks filled to the brim with tools and implements he decided that they would need. His next stop was the cafe where Aleksandra had worked during the busy summer holiday season. For as much as he knew it was wrong to do so he stole again. Money, food, drinks; an old army duffle bag full of foodstuffs. The young man was burdened with purpose as much as he had become burdened by stolen goods.

Had he managed to get back to the gym for Aleksandra, then to the McIvers to steal away Yenna, then to the road and destinations unknown they might have lasted weeks on the run. That was not how things turned out. Leaving the cafe Sergei was apprehended by the police. He had been spotted going house to house and followed at a discreet distance by a conscientious citizen who later phoned in their concern when they spotted the B&E. The Mayor was called, Principle McIver as well, and the State Police got a call that night with reports of the young Soviet refugee who had been, apparently, planning some plot

against the people of the United States. That night Aleksandra was taken from the gym directly to the orphanage where it was deigned for her to live for the rest of her childhood. Yenna was sat down in the living room at the McIvers home where she was told that — since they couldn't have children of their own — they were going to adopt her and make her one of theirs. She would be Yenna McIver, or Jenna if she wanted to change her name to something “a little more American.” Yenna was also told about her sister and that her brother had been caught stealing and was going to be in a lot of trouble.

Before the night was through all three of them cried the tears of loss that they had shed the day they lost their parents. This time, however, they didn't have one another to lean on for support. The astounding thing, to me at least, was that despite the weight of their circumstances none of the three gave up on their hope. They knew that they would be together again and they would fight tooth-and-nail to make it so. They told me much later in life — once I was a grown man with a child of my own on the way — that it was that night that gave them the courage to do anything. The fear and sorrow that filled them then was worse than anything they encountered in their subsequent travels and adventures. They told me that nothing was more terrifying than losing the ones you loved and that nothing was better than knowing that they were there; even when you couldn't be with them.