

Completely alone in a strange new city, Alex Travolsky took the walk, each day, from his apartment on the South Side to his family practice a few blocks down the street. He had worked his way through school in Minsk and had come over to America to attend The University of Pittsburgh Medical School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He had gotten his high school sweetheart, Catherina, pregnant when they were both seniors in high school. They were soon married and she moved in with him and his parents, both devout Russian Orthodox Catholics. They shared a small three room attic flat. The room facing the courtyard in the back of the house was theirs and the small middle room was for little Damian. It contained little less than an old mahogany crib and some pictures of animals on the walls that Catherina had painted while pregnant. Indeed, the room was large enough only for that and perhaps one person to come in and soothe the baby to sleep. The front room was made into a little living room. There was a table and bookshelf in the corner, atop it a stolen Dell laptop that Alex had purchased from an acquaintance. A futon sat in the middle, looking straight at a small television perched atop a wooden TV stand. There was a closet near the window and from the vantage one could look right over the Slzangia Square, a small area of local business and daily market, in which Alex's father owned a butchers stand.

The baby was delivered in the downstairs bathtub by a midwife, actually the sister of Alex's mother. The delivery was not an easy one. More than once, the baby stopped moving because, the midwife divined, the umbilical cord was choking it. The screams were heard all over the square, and Catherina pushed herself to exhaustion during the twenty hours it took for the small, bruised baby boy to emerge into the world. He cried hard for only a moment while the midwife cleaned out his nostrils and tied the cord. Catherina never looked as beautiful as when he was first handed to her, naked and shivering. His hardly cry drooped to a low whimpering as she swaddled him in her arms. He took to the breast quickly, and his Daddy's hand for the first time.

The new arrival quickly lightened the dark mood that had hung over Alex's parents ever since the news. Business was good for his father and young Damian was so amicable and pleasant that he soon everyone in the house dotted upon him, smiling wide and often, and tickling and laughing in spite of themselves. Although young, Catherina proved to be quite capable, having Damian close in tow while doing laundry, cooking, cleaning, sewing, and doing everything else around the house. Alex helped as much as he could. He was attending University studying biology. The courses were demanding, as was the research that funded his studies. He spent the morning in lectures and the evenings in labs. He was responsible for the general upkeep of the biology laboratories. He had to keep them stocked with the appropriate equipment and chemicals, which was often not easy given the miniscule biology department budget. He was also working on studying a bacterium that removes uranium from water, which he enjoyed; he was very interested in using his knowledge to improve the lives of others. Most evening he would make it in by dinnertime, around six o'clock, and the whole family would eat together downstairs and talk about their day. Mostly everyone was happy.

When the time for graduation came, not many jobs were available for graduates, other than working for the government, developing weapons. On the internet, Alex researched American Medical Schools and Catherina said she thought that would be a good idea. She was very interested in American Culture and was very excited about the possibility of a new life there. It would be hard to be apart for so long, they agreed, but

for Alex the real loss would be missing Damian, who he already felt guilty for not seeing enough of. Eventually it was decided that giving him the best possible life would be in America, and that this would be the best thing for all of them. So, with heavy heart, Alex left his young family and flew to America. Medical School was difficult; he had been accepted to the M.D. /P.H.D. program, which meant tuition was free, but he had to pursue two degrees at once, one involving countless hours of research. He hardly had time to sleep, but when he did, his dreams were filled with thoughts of Damian and Catherina. He wrote them letters every couple of days and often talked to them online. Every Friday night they would talk on the phone, although Damian never had much to say to his father. He didn't even really know who he was. Catherina had gotten a job as secretary in a local law firm and Damian was in the daily care of his parents. A few scares happened. Catherina was becoming close with a young lawyer, whom she often talked about and had sometimes accompanied her places. As for Alex, there was a young girl named Dana, who had become a close study partner and fellow researcher, and often they would talk and eat together. Once, she had come to his room late at night crying and perhaps a little drunk. He embraced her and listened to how her boyfriend had left her for one of his coworkers. She didn't want to let go, and her face bent to his and for a moment, he almost kissed her. Somehow he demurred, and walked her to her car. Upon parting, she muttered something along the lines of, "Cat doesn't know what she's got". He went directly to his room and masturbated away his feeling of guilt and went to sleep.

During the last year, he wrote less and almost never called. He was studying for board exams and finishing up his dissertation. He was going to specialize in pathology and get a P.H.D. in toxicology. He had to hurry to fill in the gaps in his research and write everything up. He had done his on effects of certain toxins derived from poisonous *amitaba* mushrooms on biological systems, and possible treatment routes. He passed the board on pathology and successfully defended his dissertation. It was time to look for a job. He didn't know just exactly what he wanted to do- a post-doc fellow, residency, research, it all seemed open to him. Eventually, he signed on as a research director at a biotechnology lab.

All the letters of accreditation were passed on from Alex to Catherina. She would get his personal letters accompanied by all his various formal papers. Alex felt that, since he was totally absent from his martial and parental duties, he should at least give her *some* proof of his efforts. She got "report cards", letters of praise, and now, finally, his completed credentials. As soon as he started his job, plans were made for Catherina and Damian, now eight-going on nine, to join him in Pittsburgh. He rented an apartment on the Southside, across the bridge from the lab he worked at, and Catherina had been accepted to Duquesne University to study law. She had worked enough, they thought, and now it was her turn to pursue her career and personal goals. Damian, chilly at first to his new Dad and new home, warmed up quickly when school began. He made friends quickly and became involved in sports, ice-hockey especially. Work at the lab was going well, they were working on a vaccine for AIDS and they were beginning tests on monkeys to test its effectiveness. Everything seemed fine, everyone was mostly happy; mostly.

It was at the end of the day. After dinner and cleaning up, after homework and hockey games, that the distance between them became apparent. They felt awkward around on another, like strangers. Alex looked and acted differently, as did Catherina.

Damian could sense the tension between them and often went out with friends. They would lie together in bed at night staring in opposite directions. He wanted to reach out to her, and often they did. But their movements were uncoordinated and sex felt mechanical, as did conversation. It seemed like an invisible wall had been thrown up between them and neither of them could climb over it, or knock it down.

One night, about a year since they had been reunited, Alex came home to find Catherina crying in the bathroom. Damian was out at a friend's and he sat, for a moment, on their bed listening to her muffled sobs through the drywall. After thinking for a second, he backed quietly out of the room and reentered, this time shutting the door audibly saying, "I'm home, Trina." The crying stopped. "Be right out", he heard her say. Then the toilet flushed, followed by the sound of water running from the faucet. When she emerged he could tell that she had been trying to wash away the evidence of her tears. "Is something wrong?" he ventured nervously, expecting the worse. She looked up at him, her face contorting back to crying. She broke down and he caught her. They fell together onto the bed. "You were gone so long" she sobbed, "I was lonely." These were the words he had heard in nightmares for the last four years. "Sergi and I, we...I was young and you were so far away..." her voice got lost under heavy sobs. For some reason he wasn't angry. He felt compassion for her, and more than partly responsible. He tried to compose himself. Words raced through his head but none escaped his mouth.

"I'm...I'm so sorry...I don't think I love you anymore, Alex."

It hurt, but it was true. They were two very different people- now more than ever. Strangely calm, "Of course you don't", the words slipped out of his mouth, fell out, really, like a mouthful of food, half chewed. She looked up at him quizzically, her crying paused. "I never should have left, you had to basically bury me and now I'm back from the dead." She became cooler and pulled away to listen; he could tell she was surprised at his reaction. His courage failed him, however. "I'm sorry to; I need to go for a walk." She began to cry again and he turned around at the door. "Cat, I want to be a part of your lives and I'll help any way I can. I took your life from you once and now it's time to live. Be happy, sweetie, I love you, and I understand."

Those were the words he left her with, and they were the truth. It was as if a flood gate had been opened the barrier between them swept away. The look in her eyes as he said it showed the former understanding and gentle kindness that had been his last memory of Russia. They didn't talk anymore after that. They didn't have to.

He walked past all the bars on Carson Street. They were filled, he mused, perhaps with some others unfortunates with similar luck. But instead of misery searching for company, instead he walked only with his thoughts on this cold night in December. He had left his life sitting on the table and now it was cold. His wife and son grew up without him and, although he wanted to do what was best for them and to be a part of their lives, he ended up excluding himself. Now the loneliness, only half felt before, cut into him like the cold winter wind as he went over the bridge into Oakland. He past the Medical School and thought of all the things he missed while inside its walls- birthday parties, hair cuts, holidays; making love to Catherina. He thought about those quiet times, the nights that seemed to last forever, where he would lay in bed alone just looking at the emptiness beside him, trying to imagine her there, and Damian, perhaps, sleeping between them or in the next room. He wondered whether she might have been doing the

same thing, across an ocean in another country. *No wonder*, he thought to himself, *of course she needed someone*. He began to cry, feeling lost and hurt, angrier at himself than anything for putting the people he loves most in such a hopeless situation. He walked on in autopilot for hours, not seeing through his eyes at all but only the memories projected on them. Finally, he came upon a wooded cemetery, high upon a hill, surrounded by a rusting metal gate. He was tired and cold and the dry spot of ground under a large evergreen looked like an inviting place to take a rest. He lay there for awhile scanning the area around him and the houses below. The memories stopped playing for that time, and the cold feeling in his limbs became noticeable. He sunk his face into his coat and plunged his arms inside it as well, and laid down looking up at the branches and green needles. He didn't have the slightest idea of what he was doing or where he was, he only knew he was somewhere he had never been before.

The sun crept up and fell on his eyelids in between briefs periods of shade when it was hidden behind clouds. Birdsong mingled in his ears with the song of the occasional passing car on the road behind him some thirty feet. He slowly opened his eyes and squinted at how bright the morning was. He felt a fleeting moment of peace followed instantly with a numb feeling in his feet and the remembrance of the night before. He got up and realized that it had snowed. The tombstones were capped with a few inches and the ground was also, the snow crept around the bottoms of the stones, giving the place an eerie beauty, like something out of a Poe Poem. The tombstones looked old; he passed a few on his way back to the entrance, their names and dates almost completely faded off. *This is where we'll all be in a hundred years*, he thought to himself. Looking around, he realized that all these people were once just like him, and, perhaps, right now were leaning their sympathy, saying, "It's alright, young man, rest will come eventually." This made him smile, in spite of himself, as he popped out of the cemetery, feeling renewed, as if he had just stepped out of a coffin himself.

After walking down a winding road, he had managed to discover he had made it to Homestead, judging by the dirt covered *Homestead Tavern* sign hanging, overhead, on a shady looking establishment. He decided to wait and look for a phone elsewhere, and, after a few blocks, his search paid off in a small diner across the street from the only visible bus stop. He didn't notice a name on the window on door, but the menus at the counter told him he was in *Hanlon's Cafe*. A balding man in his forties, dressed casually in jeans and a tee shirt, approached him. "How ya doing?" he asked cheerfully.

"Pretty good", he responded just noticing that the man had only one arm, the other ended just below the elbow. He did his best not to let the man *notice* he had noticed.

"What can I get you? The special is an egg, bacon and toast."

"That would be perfect, thanx".

He was sitting on one of a row of red stools, the kind kids like to spin around on, and a few ones down were two elderly fellows, drinking coffee and talked about the President (not complimentary, as it sounded). They looked him over discreetly, and when on expressing their discontent. The food was wonderfully greasy and the coffee had him feeling warm again. He noticed a pay phone in the corner, and after paying the bill and tipping the amicable one-armed man, he used it to call home. Catherina was still there; she was worried about him and skipped class.

"Where were you, I waited all night. I was so worried about you, are you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, I just feel asleep on my walk, I guess I lost track of time. How's Damian?"

"He's fine; he slept over Ian's last night. He should be on his way home now. Are you...?"

"Yeah, I don't need a ride I'm on the bus line. Would you believe I made it all the way to Bloxnox?"

She didn't sound impressed, although a little worried. "Are you sure, I can come get you."

"No, its ok, I like taking the bus sometimes. It's been awhile. I should be home in an hour. I love..." he stopped himself, "See you soon, bye"

He hung up and waited fifteen minutes for the bus. He got on and looked out the window, as was his habit, and thought about how much more fun it was in a bus than driving. He had gotten used to taking a bus while he was in school, and he still preferred it, even over his new Mercedes Benz.

He had to transfer buses downtown and was home within the hour as promised. He walked into breakfast, Damian had made it home and they were sitting at the kitchen table eating waffles.

"Hi Dad"

"Hi Alex"

"Hi", he said, sitting down. Catherina put a plate in front of him and silverware and he began to eat. "So how was last night over Ian's?" he asked.

"Great, we played Playstation and watched *Halloween*."

"Cool, I love that movie. What game did you play?"

"Amped Two and Grand Theft Auto Three".

"Cool, I love those games, wanna play after we eat?"

"Yeah sure, if you like getting your ass kicked."

They all laughed and Catherina kept throwing Alex hopeful smiles. She didn't know what to make of him, she thought she knew how he would react and he was proving himself much more complex than she had thought. She hadn't counted on *him* growing as a person as well. For some reason, she thought he was always going to be the same Alex that she met in high school, the same Alex who got her pregnant and left for America. But he was different.

Chapter Two

Catherina Petrosvsky Zepurpivick was born into a black hole. Her mother died during this, her eight child birth. Demitri, her father, was an unfaithful drunkard who had lost his job as the government fell and was, for the most part, non existent. Young Catherina was raised primarily by her maternal grandparents, who educated and socialized her, and who fostered her love for all things artistic and beautiful, especially painting. Her grandfather, who worked as an art teacher at the University of Minsk, often brought back supplies for her to use, such as old paintbrushes and paints.