

1

A woman in her mid-thirties sat in a law firm in front of the largest desk she had ever seen. Across from her sat attorney William Ginsberg. She presented a California driver's license and a passport identifying her as Catherine Martin. The firm possessed a letter and a package to be delivered to Catherine four months after the death of Alice Martin, Catherine's grandmother.

Catherine didn't fully understand why she was there. An assistant to Mr. Ginsberg had called to set the appointment, saying nothing beyond, "We have been your grandmother's attorney for decades. She left certain items with us for delivery to you. Mr. Ginsberg will answer any other questions you care to ask."

The existence and contents of the letter and the package were a mystery to Catherine. She knew her grandmother had a modest sum of money, and that Grannie had always been a very private woman living a quiet life.

"What . . . Mr. Ginsberg? I'm sorry, my mind wandered for a moment. You asked?"

"Is this address on your driver's license still good? For our file, you understand."

Before speaking, Catherine let her eyes track a line of ornate carving on the modesty panel of Ginsberg's desk. "Six months before my grandmother's death I left Sacramento to move in with her here in Long Beach. Following her death, I remained in her home. Now, I'm considering moving to a hotel or renting a little place. I don't know how long I'll stay in Long Beach, perhaps a few months until her affairs are in order. I'm probably being silly, but after Grannie's death her home seemed a bit . . . creepy, I guess . . . somehow. As soon as I get settled, I'll let you know.

“If my grandmother left a letter and package for me, why didn’t she just give them to me? I was with her almost constantly during her last six months. What’s in this package?”

“Our firm does not know the contents of either the letter or package. I just buzzed my assistant to bring them in. I was surprised when I read the obituary you had published after your grandmother passed on. I only knew her as Alice Martin, but your announcement said she was born Alena Maltisi. I confess to having done little to prepare for our chat this morning. I did make a cursory review of our archived file where I found references to the name Maltisi.”

Attorney Ginsberg swiveled his chair slightly to one side to more directly face Catherine. “When your grandmother first became a client of the firm, over thirty years ago, we helped her change her name to Alice Martin. This was done with maximum secrecy. Only the judge saw the name Maltisi and the judge ordered the file sealed. All that is very unusual, I’ve never known of such an occurrence for a name change. In any event, your publishing of her obituary again brought the name Maltisi out into the open.”

“My grandmother was born in Russia. My mother and I were born on the island country of Malta where my great, great grandmother took for us the name Maltisi. When I was an infant my grandmother brought us to the United States. My grandmother always loved the name Maltisi. I often asked why we didn’t use that name in America. She would only say that one day I would understand. Beyond that, she insisted I refer to myself as Catherine Martin without reference to the name Maltisi or our life before coming to America. Long ago, I stopped asking further about the name Maltisi. When she died at age ninety, I felt it appropriate to include the name she loved in the announcements of her death. May I ask, when did Grannie . . . ah, my grandmother, give you this letter and package?”

“Thirty years ago, on your fifth birthday. I wasn’t with the firm then. The partner who originally set up the file has died. I took over your grandmother’s account ten years ago. There’s no current legal matter under contest, never has been. Our purpose today is simply to identify you and deliver the letter and package. Your grandmother and I met once each year to review and, if she wished, to amend her instructions. She paid all our fees and for all our time including carrying out her instructions today. You’ll owe us nothing unless you retain us to provide further services. With her death, our responsibility was limited to making this delivery.”

“Did I ever come here with my grandmother?”

“Perhaps as a child, I wouldn’t know. Over the ten years since I joined the firm, I don’t believe so. I can’t be certain beyond you were never here in my office where I met with your grandmother. Don’t you recall whether or not you came during any of those earlier years?”

“Not at the moment. My mother died when I was very young. I attended several boarding schools and spent summers with either my grandmother or my aunt, Natasha. If I came here it would have been during one of those summers. It’s possible, even likely, at the time I didn’t consider it important enough to remember. Forgive what that implies. It would be my immaturity that would cause that thought. If we did meet, please don’t think me rude for not recalling.”

“I understand these are not easy times.”

A light knock on the door preceded a woman’s entry. She moved gracefully across the thick carpeting, stopping at the side of Ginsberg’s desk. Her eyes were framed in mascara, her lids brushed with a faint blue. She leaned in far enough to set a small box in front of her employer. On top of the box she balanced a sealed, somewhat yellowed envelope. She stood erect, nodded slightly, said nothing, smiled at Catherine, and left. The door closed without a sound. Mr. Ginsberg pushed the box and envelope toward Catherine, just far enough to symbolize “these are for you.” He picked up the single sheet of paper Catherine had noticed at the center of his old-fashioned desk blotter when she entered.

“You’ll need to sign this.” He held the paper in his extended hand. “It’s a receipt for your grandmother’s letter and the box. I will then sign at the bottom confirming. You’ll be given a copy.”

“May I read her letter first?”

Ginsberg inclined his head and held it lowered for a moment, followed by a perfunctory smile. “Please, take the time and do it now. It may generate other questions you wish to ask. I say again, neither I nor anyone at this firm has read that letter.”

Catherine tore open the aged envelope, steadied her forearms against the chair, and began to read her grandmother’s handwritten letter. When she finished she found the envelope also

contained a timeline that joined many of the events of her family's history with that of Russia in general and the Imperial Romanov family in particular.

2

Later that afternoon a phone rang. The caller had dialed a number in Hong Kong. Gregory Kalma picked up his secure phone near Chicago, Illinois, the phone to which the call had been automatically routed. He put it to his ear and listened.

"This call is for 17ZR. What is your response?"

"There will be no more Czars," Kalma said. "The old ways are gone forever. Please reply."

"The meek are gradually inheriting the earth."

"This is 17ZR . . . and you are?"

"0023H4."

"Why are you calling?"

"One of the names you requested we track worldwide has been heard from."

"Which name and how did it come to light?" Kalma asked.

"Maltisi, with any or no first name."

"Where did it appear?"

"U.S. California. Long Beach."

"The reference being?"

“An obituary for a dead woman, Alena Maltisi, who immigrated to America from Malta. Her death notice also referred to her American name, Alice Martin.”

“Family?”

“Two daughters. One granddaughter.”

“Names?”

“It will all be in our report.”

“No. Do not send a written or electronic report. This is a secure line. Tell me now.”

“Daughters: Anna and Natasha. Granddaughter: born, Katerina Maltisi, U.S. name Catherine Martin.”