

The Bookseller's Daughter -- Episode 4

Gina

I had to do something.

The day after she showed me the investigator's report, Sylvia sat me down again – she even dragged out the term “tough love” to make her point. She listed the consequences of my doing something foolhardy, starting with emotional heartache and ending with lawsuits, criminal prosecution, and probable deportation. She made her point. I was vulnerable.

But as much as I loved Sylvia, I don't think she understood the emotional tug that this news had on me. Jelena – now Alexi – was the only link to my past. She might be my best hope for the future. The thought that she was alive and that she was somewhere where I might see her had a strong grip on me. I didn't want to try to get rid of the feeling. I just wanted to get a look at her – if only for one time.

“Alexi” – Thanks to Sylvia's investigation, I now had a name for the person she had become. I loved the sound of it. Her original Bosnian name, Jelena, conjured up images of the moon, and I hoped the strength of that name was still running through her. But it was a name she probably didn't even know, and I had no intention of telling her about her about it. I might never get to meet her to tell her anything – at least not in the foreseeable future. Still, I couldn't stop thinking about her. I found myself rolling her old name and her new name over my tongue to get the feel of them together.

The couple that adopted Alexi had moved to Indiana. The Reverend Allen Wilder's picture showed up in several places on the website of The Church of the Kindly Shepherd – blonde hair combed straight back, a square jaw, lots of teeth, and a smile that stared off somewhere to the left of the camera. I suppose he looked kindly enough, if you approached things in the right frame of mind. The church had lots of community-outreach programs to aid the shut-ins and elderly people in the congregation. The website said that the Reverend's wife, Susan, was the head volunteer for those

programs, but there was no picture of her. Most of the website was devoted to pages and pages of the Reverend's scriptural ideas, which were very heavy on fundamentalism. There were a couple of photos of the children in the congregation, including a group of teenage girls. Most of them were smiling, but one of them was more solemn-faced. It wasn't a clear photo, but it looked like it could be Alexi. I compared it with the grainy picture that had been included with Sylvia's report, and I realized that Alexi was unsmiling in that picture as well. That left me unsettled. I had hoped she was happy, but I wondered what would cause the sadness in her eyes. The more I looked at the photos, the more I realized I had to see her – even if it only at a distance.

I'd never been to Indianapolis, but the opportunity to go there was staring me in the face. There was a flyer on my desk from the American Booksellers Association, announcing a two-day meeting about internet book sales in Chicago near the O'Hare Airport. Indianapolis was only about a five-hour drive from there. So I signed up for the meeting and arranged to pick up a car at the airport that I could drive to Indiana on Saturday afternoon. I thought if I stayed there Saturday night, I could be at the church the next morning.

The drive from Chicago was long and flat. I was spoiled, I suppose, by living in San Francisco and Rome – and, before that, the Balkans. I was looking for a hill, a bay, a tower, a cathedral – any kind of landmark to tell me where I was. It started to sink in just how different Alexi's life was from mine. The trip droned on, interrupted only by a few freeway exit signs. Interstate 65 eventually merged with Interstate 465, which circled the Indianapolis. I got off at a shopping center called Keystone at the Crossing and checked into a Marriott Hotel just behind the main part of the mall. After throwing my suitcase in the room, I walked over to the shops and browsed awhile before heading back to the hotel. The restaurant looked pretty quiet, but that was okay with me. I wasn't in the mood for much of anything. I had Abraham Verghese's latest novel in my suitcase, and I knew that would carry me through the night.

I was planning to attend the morning service at the Church and then catch an afternoon flight out of Indianapolis International for San Francisco. What do you wear to a fundamentalist church in the Midwest? I stared into the full-length mirror in the hotel room and tried to assess the woman staring back at me. She looked presentable—maybe, just barely. She was thin in places where she might be a bit fuller, a little long where she could have been short. But I thought she would be okay, if I could get the clothes right. I put on a light touch of lip-gloss, some eyeliner, and then completed the look with low-heeled pumps. The result was nothing out of the ordinary by San Francisco standards, but would she blend into the congregation here? I hoped so. I wasn't looking to win any fashion awards. I just wanted to be passable.

The parking lot around the church was huge – larger than anything I was used to. But it was surprisingly full. Apparently the Reverend Wilder knew how to draw a crowd. The sign outside the church announced the sermon for the morning service: "Living in God's Family." I walked in and slipped through the foyer without talking to anyone. There was a display against the wall with a few announcements and handouts about the church. I thumbed my way through them, and I found a brochure about the church's club for teenagers, listing the names and emails of some of the leaders. Alexi's e-mail address was on the list. On an impulse, I grabbed the brochure and stuffed it in my purse.

There was a large crowd. I was probably younger and thinner than most of the people in the congregation, but that didn't stop a few of them from looking at me as if they knew me. I didn't really want to talk to anyone. I'd learned to tone down my Italian accent when I needed to, but there was no way that I was going pass as a Midwesterner. I thought I might remain invisible, until I was stopped by a pleasant-looking woman who seemed to have taken upon herself to greet visitors to the congregation. She grabbed my hand and gave it a friendly shake. She was in her late forties and had a full head of hair that was styled nicely. She was wearing a prim tailored suit that immediately made me feel dowdy.

There was a grin spread across her face, but it didn't convey as much happiness as she probably wanted it to. Her eyes looked a bit red, as if she may have been crying at some point.

She had an embossed gold name-tag with her name in black: "Mrs. Reverend Allen Wilder."

It was Alexi's adoptive mother – I wasn't ready for that.

Questions had been piling up inside my brain for more than a decade, and now they threatened to come tumbling out all at once. Where is Alexi? What's she like? Is she smart? Is she happy?

Fortunately, my mouth was frozen shut. I found myself just mumbling, but that was probably for the best.

"Welcome to the Church of the Kindly Shepherd."

I answered as politely as I could without really saying anything.

"My name's Susan. We're always getting new people at these services, and I like to talk to them and make them feel welcome. The Reverend – that's my husband – is usually too busy to do any of that."

I made some sort of response, and she picked up on it immediately. I got the feeling that Susan Wilder found any dead air space in a conversation to be a challenge. If no one else was going to talk, she'd step in and carry on by herself.

"Oh, I love your accent."

I told her it was Italian. She seemed to like that, but I wanted to drop the whole subject.

"Sometimes people get self-conscious about their accents. I know I do. When the Reverend and I moved here from South Carolina, everyone thought I talked funny."

While Susan and the others chatted, I looked out of the corner of my eye for Alexi, hoping not to be too obvious about it. I hadn't seen her anywhere in the crowd, and I was beginning to think that she might be missing from this Sunday service. But then a door opened on the other side of the anteroom

and, a young woman stood in the doorway for a second, scanning the room. She seemed to be looking for someone. But from the look on her face, she was none too happy about it. It was Alexi.

She apparently saw her mother, because she started walking quickly in our direction. She was wearing a pair of sneakers, some faded jeans, and a gray sweatshirt that hung loosely over her waist. I remembered a time when I dressed like that myself. Maybe I was reading too much into it, but she seemed to have dressed way down for the occasion. There was a lot of anger in her stride. As much as I had longed to see her over the years, it pained me to see her like that. She got close to where we were standing and stopped. If Susan Wilder had turned around at that moment, she would have seen her daughter's eyes glaring at her back.

I must have been staring at her, because Alexi looked up suddenly and caught my eye. I fantasized a glimmer of recognition, but quickly dismissed the idea. She dropped her gaze and looked back towards her mother. Susan Wilder saw her at that point. But before Alexi could say anything, her mother grabbed her by the arm, escorting her into the group and introducing her to the others. Alexi looked like she'd been through that sort of thing before – her mother talking hurriedly about something else, pushing aside any conversation that might have been unpleasant. She stood there with a barely subdued anger, her body almost rigid.

I must have said something – I don't remember what – to let Susan know that her daughter needed to talk to her. Whatever it was, it slowed Susan down for a moment and earned me a brief nod from Alexi. Susan's face turned more serious. It took only one angry sentence out of Alexi's mouth to convince her that she needed to usher her daughter away from the crowd, hoping to avoid a scene. She grabbed Alexi by the arm, making conciliatory gestures to her as they walked, promising to listen to her when they were somewhere alone. I caught only a couple of sentences from Alexi, as she and her mother headed towards the other side of the room.

"I'm not going to do it – I'm not! He's just trying to humiliate me."

The congregation started to make its way into the sanctuary. I headed off to the aisle on the left side, trying to find a seat as near to the back as I could. The organist caught everyone's attention with a few loud, trembling chords. That seemed to be the signal for everyone to reach for the hymnals. The couple in the pew next to me pulled a well-worn book from the rack in front of them and started to follow along. The man seemed to have internalized the music, singing with great intensity even though his eyes were closed. I picked up a copy of the hymnal and stared at the pages so I wouldn't look out of place.

The singing went on for several minutes without any sign of the Reverend. In the interlude, Susan Wilder walked in from a side door of the sanctuary and headed towards the front, stopping frequently at several of the rows of pews, reaching in to greet the people who were seated there. One couple stopped her a little longer, and she leaned in to them, seeming to listen as attentively as she could to what they had to say over the loud volume of singing. She finally nodded in sympathetic agreement. An older woman reached out to her, and Susan took the woman's outstretched hand in one of her own, patting it lightly on the top with her other hand as they talked. Everyone who wanted her attention seemed to get it. If there was any carry-over from her confrontation with Alexi, it wasn't apparent.

As Susan made her way to a seat near the pulpit, Alexi slipped through the door behind her, keeping close to the wall as she moved towards the front. She walked with her head down, not making eye-contact with anyone. As she got to the pulpit, she tried to take a chair off to the side. But Susan saw her sitting apart, and she motioned for her to move in closer. Alexi responded with what looked like a flash of anger that then seemed to settle into a smoldering sadness.

My own feelings were hitting me from all directions. I had to scold myself for a second for being almost happy that she seemed so miserable with the life she was in. It wasn't a life I would have chosen

for her, so maybe deep inside her soul she was really like me. But that thought brought with it a sense of shame. Did I really want her to be unhappy? This was the life she was in, and that wasn't likely to change. Wouldn't it be better if she could make the best of this world? As those thoughts raced around my brain, I knew that the next intruder would be a sense of guilt for my part in getting her into this predicament in the first place. But before I could wallow any further in that useless argument, the lights in the sanctuary suddenly went dim.

The people in the pews around me stopped talking, as the church settled into a dark, evening-like dusk. Within moments the lights over the center aisle got brighter, illuminating a pathway from the rear of the sanctuary to the pulpit. Suddenly there was a booming voice from the back of the congregation, as a figure began walking up the center aisle. The Reverend Wilder moved slowly with a Bible in one hand and his eyes in a gaze that seem to have no real point of focus. His free arm was stretched out in front of him like he was trying to seize something that only he could see, some invisible presence that was drawing him forward. He wore a lavalier microphone, but he probably didn't need it. As he approached the pulpit, his voice boomed out over the congregation.

I feel the presence of the Lord with us. He is right here in this room, calling upon us to do his bidding. Hear us, Oh Lord, as we raise our voices in song.

Accept us, Oh Lord, as we happily submit ourselves to your will.

The lights came up slowly, signaling the start of one last round of singing. As the voices echoed around the sanctuary, Reverend Wilder was now at the front of the church, walking slowly back and forth in front of the pulpit. He was well-tanned, and his smile was in full bloom. He'd loosened his suit coat, and the crucifix around his neck was swaying back and forth as he reached out towards the parishioners in the front rows, exhorting them to stand with the Lord. He began with a quotation from the psalms, and after a few moments of scriptural recitation he urged the rest of the congregation to

join with him. While the drone of the psalms was filling the room, I saw Alexi sitting in the front row, looking defeated.

Wilder paused for a second, as if reaching back in his thoughts. After he had his audience poised to listen, he launched into his sermon. *Just as we are all part of our own families, so we are part of God's family. It is he who draws us together and shows us how to live.* He did a recitation from scripture, drawing together quotes and thoughts that sounded strained to me, but the people around me were hanging on his every word. He moved back and forth in front of the congregation as he talked, exhorting, quoting, charming – using his considerable rhetorical gifts to get his audience to go where he wanted them to go.

I sensed he was finally nearing the end of the sermon. He suddenly stopped and walked over to where Susan and Alexi were sitting. He grabbed them both by the hand, urging them to stand and join him in front of the congregation. Susan looked embarrassed at first but then yielded to his urgings. She melded her body into his and cradled herself in his outstretched arm, smiling as she looked up to into his eyes. The Reverend had his other arm around Alexi, but unlike Susan she hadn't yielded to the idea. Her face had a look of resignation as she stared down at the ground. The more he drew her in, the more she seemed coiled and ready to escape if he ever loosened his grip.

"Let us pray," Wilder intoned. "Just as God the Father draws us together in his heavenly family, let us draw our families together. Let us ask God's help to do everything in his awesome power to keep our families intact."

The congregation murmured its approval.

"Let us ask Almighty God to defeat the enemies of his family. And let us pray that he smites down those who would destroy our families and would rip out the gift of life that he so lovingly places inside a woman's womb."

The approval grew louder, with several people shouting "Amen." I was starting to squirm.

“And let us pray that those who would pollute God’s family – those who would violate his ordained plan of one man and one woman – will be cast down and given the punishment that God has decreed.”

I couldn’t take it anymore.

I got up and headed for the door. A few people gave me dirty looks, but I didn’t care. I wasn’t going to see them again, and I didn’t care what they thought. My mind was frozen at that moment, unable to think through what I had just seen. I hurried through the anteroom and out the front door, moving quickly across the parking lot to my car. I got into the driver’s seat and took a few minutes to compose myself.

There was nothing I could do about Alexi’s situation. I simply had to swallow my bile and move on. Whatever I might attempt to do would make it worse. If I tried to do anything, I’d be putting both of us in jeopardy. Alexi had her own life to lead, and I hoped she would find herself.

I came close to doing nothing. But as I was getting ready to drive away, I looked up and saw the sign on the building next to the church. The large letters etched into the wall said “God’s Family Foundation.” That sign changed everything – I suddenly realized I had been deluding myself.

Ever since Sylvia told me what she’d discovered about Alexi, I had gotten used to the idea that a modern miracle had occurred. The good-hearted people of two countries, I told myself, had come together to rescue a child from the horrors of war and dislocation and had given her another chance. A little child from the Balkans named Jelena had somehow been transformed into a healthy American teenager named Alexi. In the back of my mind I visualized the God’s Family Foundation as an organization of staid but dedicated social workers and lawyers, probably affiliated with a large hospital or university. I assumed that the Foundation tried to unite families whenever they could. But if that proved impossible, they would look around to find the child a good, new home.

But I'd been assuming too much. As I sat there staring at the two buildings, looking at the people who were walking back and forth on the covered pathway between the Foundation and the Church, I knew that something else was going on. The Church and the Foundation were just one, incestuous organization. Someone had manipulated the adoption process right from the beginning. Alexi had probably been destined to end up right here from the minute the Foundation got its hands on her years ago. Her plight suddenly seemed a lot worse.

I had to leave if I was going to catch my plane, but my mind was so immersed in what I'd seen that I missed the turn-off for the Indianapolis Airport and had to double back at the next exit. I finally dropped off the car, putting my thoughts on hold for a few minutes as I worked my way through the ticket line and security. There's nothing like a modern airport to cut you down to size and make you feel insignificant. I was trying to grapple with what I had seen, but it wasn't getting any easier to solve. Although my sense of urgency about Alexi had grown dramatically, there was still nothing I could do about it. I could never convince anyone to investigate her situation. What could I tell them –that my instincts told me something was wrong? Sylvia would tell me to save my breath.

By the time my plane reached Dallas for the three-hour layover, I'd made a decision. It was risky, but I knew I had to do it. I found a Wi-Fi spot in the airport, and I pulled the laptop out of my flight bag and logged on. I stared for a moment at the church brochure that had Alexi's email address. Writing to her under my own name was too risky, because it might be intercepted. But I had an email account that I had opened under an assumed name several months earlier with the vague idea that I might someday want to use it. I needed it now.

I wasn't sure what kind of reaction I'd get. Maybe I was reading the situation all wrong. Maybe she would be offended – or even scared – to receive an email from someone she didn't know. I sat there for a second, trying to decide what to say. I couldn't tell her everything in just one message, so I had to tone things down a bit. I told her I was the woman she'd met briefly before the church services,

and I tried to give her some idea of why I was writing. I had to tiptoe around that gingerly, finally saying that I remembered her from years ago when she was a baby and had been thinking about her ever since. The message ended up being vaguer than I would have liked, but I couldn't figure out a better way to word it.

The ending, at least, was clear: "I'm here, if you ever need me."

Was that enough? I didn't know. But I could hear Sylvia's voice in my ear.

"Sure it's enough – enough to get you in a lot of trouble."

Two days later I got a response. I was apprehensive about opening it, and I couldn't understand what was making me so nervous. Maybe I had a premonition of what was about to happen. The email text was short and disturbing, and it ended with this phrase: "Please help me."

There was a video file attached. The first minutes were dark and indistinct, and then suddenly it became clear. I felt like someone had just kicked me in the stomach.

I called Sylvia on her cell phone and told her we had to talk immediately. She'd left her office early and was already at her house in North Oakland. I said I would be there within the hour. She was surprised by my vehemence, asking me if it could wait until the next morning when she could squeeze me in for an appointment at her office. I told her no – it had to be right now.

I raced down to Market Street and jumped on a BART train heading to the East Bay, squeezing myself in with the last wave of commuters heading home. At the Rockridge Station, I headed south down College Avenue a couple of blocks then up Lawton Avenue to the craftsman house that Sylvia and Margo were restoring. Normally, I'd spend a few moments chatting about the latest renovations they'd made, but I couldn't bring myself to talk about that at the moment. Margo met me at the door and was only slightly frosty about the fact that I was delaying their dinner. Sylvia ushered me into the small study

that she'd been fixing up for herself. Even before I sat down she wanted to know what this was all about.

"Look at this video," I said, "And then we can talk."

Sylvia was shocked by what she saw – I knew she would be. After she stopped the video, I could see the wheels clicking in her head, as she began thinking of ways we could act. She told me she'd contact the U.S. Attorney first thing in the morning and try to find the right agency to take action. She rattled off a list of alternatives, weighing them and comparing them, trying to settle on a course of action. I wanted her to take all of the legal steps she could, and I knew she would do everything possible. But that wasn't enough.

"I'll move as fast as I can on this," she said. "But it's going to take time."

I knew she'd say that.

"Please try to step back from this and let me handle it."

I knew she'd say that too.

But I already had my boarding pass printed, and it was sitting in my purse.