

A light snow had begun to fall as the line of visitors trailed out of the home and into their waiting cars. Sergei Ivchenko stood in the light of the doorway and watched as his houseguests drove away. He waited a moment, then closed the door and flicked off the porchlight.

A young man stood at the bottom of the stairs, his face fraught with indecision, and his mouth opening and closing as though he were thinking of the right words to say.

"It was nice to see you happy again, father," he finally said. Sergei looked up at him, seemingly noticing him for the first time.

"Grigoriy," he muttered. "I had forgotten you were still up."

Grigoriy smirked.

"Father, you seem to forget that I turned nineteen last month. I no longer have such an early bedtime. In fact, I haven't had an early bedtime in nearly four years." His smirk faltered as he saw his father's gaze wander away from him, but it returned after only a moment. Sergei smiled warmly at his son.

"And you, Grigoriy, seem to forget that I haven't been happy in nearly four years." His smile coupled strangely with his words. "Tonight was no exception. Goodnight."

Before Grigoriy could say another word, Sergei had left the foyer and closed the massive oak door to his study. Grigoriy sighed and climbed the stairs to his bedroom, leaving the door cracked just a bit.

"Do you know how long it took me to find this old piece of shit?" Sergei slurred. He ran a gloved finger down the steel barrel to the cylinder of the revolver and sighed.

He looked up and across the yard. The sun would be up in about an hour, or so he guessed. It was hard to know anything for certain with as much vodka as he'd drunk.

"It was my grandfather's," he whispered, his eyes still focused on some imagined thing far away across the field. "I never asked him if he'd killed anyone with it. I just, you know, assumed he had, and that was that."

He moved the revolver to his left hand and picked up the vodka bottle with his right. After a hearty swig, he held the bottle out to his right.

The bear sniffed at the bottle before gripping it awkwardly in both front paws and tilting it up to drink. When he offered it back to Sergei, the bottle was empty.

Sergei laughed and threw the bottle off of the roof, hearing the soft crunch as it landed in the still-accumulating snow. He shakily got to his feet and staggered the few steps to the open window, reached in, and pulled another bottle from the shelf.

"You will drink me dry, friend," he said as he sat back down beside the bear. He twisted the lid off and drained a quarter of the bottle before setting it down in the snow between them.

"Have I told you about Galina yet? My wife?"

The bear made no response.

"She was beautiful. Beautiful, smart, funny, and with just enough *oomph* in bed, if you know what I mean."

Sergei stared intently at the revolver, turning it over and over in his hands and running his fingers along the edges. His voice began to crack.

"But I was not. I suppose. I mean, I don't know." His eyes brimmed with tears. "How the hell am I supposed to know what she thought. I've never understood why people make the decisions they make. Does that mean I lack empathy?"

He turned to the bear, searching his face for some answer he thought he might find there. The bear picked up the bottle of vodka and tried to drink, but it slipped out of his grip and landed sideways in the snow.

"Well, at least the snow keeps it from rolling down off the roof, right?" Sergei laughed. He picked up the bottle, took a quick drink, and offered it to the bear again.

The bear took it in both paws and managed to gulp down what hadn't spilled when he dropped it. Sergei made no move to get a new bottle. He was toying with the revolver once more.

"She left, friend," he whispered. Tears dropped from his chin and froze on top of the snow near his feet. "She told me she couldn't love me anymore. She couldn't pretend to be happy anymore. And then - POOF! - she was gone the next day."

The bear tried to take another drink from the bottle and, finding it empty, let out a low growl before dropping it. Sergei stood and reached into the window again, but this time brought out a box of ammunition. The bear watched him warily.

Sergei removed a single bullet from the box and carelessly tossed the rest off of the roof.

"Have you played Russian Roulette?" he asked, turning the bullet over length-wise in his hand. "Well, if you have, I suppose you must be good at it, to still be here to talk to me."

The bear whined.

"I put the one bullet in, spin the cylinder, and pull the trigger," Sergei explained. "If the chamber is empty, I don't kill myself, and I hand the gun to you to pull the trigger. We go back and forth until one of us gets the bullet."

He popped the cylinder out and pushed the bullet into one of the chambers. The bear got to its feet and started to walk towards the window.

"No, friend, don't go!" Sergei pleaded. "It's no fun with only one player!"

The bear jumped at the sudden urgency in his voice, and sat back on his haunches once more. Sergei smiled and spun the cylinder before knocking it into place.

"Thank you," he said.

He held the barrel of the gun to his temple, closed his eyes, and pulled the trigger quickly. The sound of an empty *click* told him he was still alive. He opened his eyes and smiled as a fresh tear rolled down his cheek.

"Your turn."

He held the revolver out to the bear grip-first. The bear made no move for it. He shook the gun at the bear and was met with a whine.

"I suppose this thing would be difficult for you to hold." He pulled the hammer back and held up three fingers with his other hand. "Three, two, one." He pulled the trigger. Another empty *click*.

"This could go down to the wire," he said, turning the revolver back towards himself. He pressed the barrel against his temple once more, pulled back the hammer, and fired.

Again, nothing.

He turned it back to the bear and pulled the hammer back. The bear let out a low growl.

"Come now, be brave. You're not a coward are you?"

The bear ceased his growling as Sergei held up three fingers once more.

"Three, two, o -" He pulled the trigger just a hair early, interrupting himself with a loud bang.

He jumped in surprise as a spray of blood colored the snow around him red. The bear slumped forward.

Sergei stood and patted the bear on the head between its ears. He carefully stepped around the body and drunkenly climbed back in through the window.

Grigoriy threw open the door and ran inside, dressed only in his underwear.

"Father, what happened?" he breathed. "I heard a gunshot." Sergei wiped the blood from the barrel of the revolver and set it on the table beside his bed.

"We were playing a game of Roulette. He won, I lost." He shrugged, pulled off his gloves and boots, and crawled under the covers into his bed.