

Russian Roulette

By Sydney Lawrence

She had made it. Elizabeth drew a sigh of relief as she handed her ticket to the train conductor. She pulled a small case behind her in the crowded, noisy compartment searching for a seat. She groaned as she realized not only was every seat taken, but filled to its limit-except for one. A large, unfriendly looking man occupied the very back seat. It was easy to see why he sat alone. In her own language, Elizabeth would have had a difficult time asking the man to share, but in Russian--maybe he spoke English.

"Excuse me, sir?" she began, brightly fixing a hundred watt smile on her face.

The look he gave her said the smile had been wasted. She was nearly resigned to sitting on the floor when he motioned her to sit. Ready to launch into a speech of gratitude, she stopped abruptly when he pointedly brought a novel up to his face. At least she wouldn't have to worry about him talking her ear off like the older woman she had sat next to on the long flight from the States. Elizabeth lowered her head to fish a magazine out of her bag.

Suddenly, a pair of arms grabbed her waist. She rolled her magazine and drew her arm back; ready to give the leech seated next to her a thrashing. Only it wasn't the uncommunicative passenger with his arms around her pulling her upwards. Elizabeth straightened slowly, staring openly at the stranger that held her so close. He was tall, very tall. Elizabeth wasn't accustomed to the sensation of feeling small. At 5' 10" she towered over a lot of men in her stocking feet. She had long ago given up the hope of ever wearing a pair of boots or high-heeled pumps. Yet, in this man's embrace, she felt petite. His chest felt like stone and his arms, although holding her lightly, felt like bands of steel. His cropped black hair and dark brown eyes scanned her face quickly.

Under normal circumstances, Elizabeth would have stomped on his foot and demanded he let her go but for some reason, she couldn't seem to open her mouth. She forced her lips to open.

Elizabeth's eyebrows shot up to her hairline as his mouth descended on hers in a blindingly fast move. His tongue slipped between her gasping lips, skillfully maneuvering until she found herself kissing him back. Then, abruptly, it was over.

Elizabeth was certain she would have slid to the floor if he hadn't kept one arm around her back. She stood watching but not understanding as the stranger spoke heatedly to an official looking man that was glaring at him. Her ability to react seemed to have vanished. Like a mannequin, she didn't move throughout the exchange.

A sharp exclamation drew her out of her daze. "What?" she asked, uncertainly, slowly realizing the official had been asking her a question.

He barked the question at her again.

"I'm sorry, my Russian isn't very good." What was the word for slow? She had practiced for a month before her trip but now her mind was completely blank. She could barely think of a response in English. Reality slowly began to descend again, knocking her out of her state of shock. "I-

"Darling, show the man your ticket," the stranger interrupted.

Elizabeth opened her mouth only to have a quick kiss planted on her lips.

"Ah, there it is," the stranger said, his dark eyes glowing as he saw her ticket sticking out of the side of her purse. In a flash he had retrieved it and shown it to the official. "And here is mine," he said, pulling a duplicate of her ticket out of his pant pocket.

The official muttered under his breath and turned away.

"What do you think-" Elizabeth snapped, trying to pull free of the stranger's grip.

His lips were on hers again as he forced her to sit. Before there had barely been enough room for her and quickly realizing the lack of room, the stranger pulled her into his lap.

Enough was enough. Elizabeth ran the heel of her shoe down the front of his calf. She had fully expected him to drop her in a yelp of pain, but instead, he merely gritted his teeth and gave her a firm squeeze. "If you don't let me go," she started as she saw his head lower, "oh, no you don't." She turned her head as she spoke, "If you try to kiss me again, I'm going to bite you."

She felt his warm breath on her neck as he whispered into her ear, "A tempting offer, but if you will just be still, I'll explain everything."

His English was laced with a heavy Russian accent. A moment ago, when he had talked to the official he had sounded American-kind of cowboyish Midwestern. A tremor of fear ran up her spine for the first time. Even in her shocked state she had noticed the American accent and had somehow thought he was a tourist who had run into a scrape. What if he was in the mafia? Or a killer on the run? Her heart began to pound. His arms were still around her. She wasn't going anywhere.

She thought about screaming. Could they get him off her before he broke her neck? Her hands began to sweat.

"Don't scream," he murmured as if reading her thoughts. "You're in no danger."

Somehow Elizabeth was less than reassured. If she could just get to her purse...

"I'm in the army and I've left without permission," he said as he shifted her across his legs.

Elizabeth couldn't have said whether her lack of breath came from fear or his last movement. "Why," she licked her lips nervously, "why are you leaving?"

If he noticed her inability to breathe properly or speak without stumbling over her words, he made no sign of it. "My mother is dying," he said solemnly.

What little breath was left in Elizabeth was knocked out at his words.

"I'm sorry I forced myself on you but that colonel was suspicious and I couldn't get caught. I have to see her."

Elizabeth didn't know what to say. The poor man. His mother was dying and the army still wouldn't let him leave...oh, no. She was doing it again-being terribly naïve. How many hard luck stories had she believed in the past only to be duped? More than she could count. For all she knew, this guy was a smuggler or worse, preying on her because he knew she was a foreigner and a gullible one at that. Although she had tried in recent years to adopt a tougher looking image she feared she stood out in a crowd just as easily as if she had sucker written across her chest. If he asked her what she was doing in Russia, she decided she would lie. She felt a twinge as she made the decision. She hated lying. For one thing she always felt terribly guilty whenever she felt forced to do it and secondly, she was probably the world's worst liar.

She came to Russia as part of the Youth Outreach program. Her eyes had filled with tears as she had watched the videos at the organization's fall meeting. She decided she would use her vacation to help. Her friends had said they admired her generosity but she could tell by the looks on their faces that they secretly thought she was being silly to give up her hard-earned vacation to volunteer at an orphanage. She could imagine what they would think when she told them of this encounter-if she survived.

She tried to bend down to retrieve her itinerary from her bag only to realize if she bent any further she would likely fall on her head.

Sensing her dilemma, the stranger lifted her bag and placed it in her lap.

"Thank you," she mumbled and then wondered why she had said it. If he had left her alone she wouldn't have needed his help in the first place. She covered the charity's logo on the piece of paper as she scanned the arrival and departure times. Great. This leg of the trip was to last an hour. She hoped his legs would go numb.

After ten minutes of tense silence in his lap, she found it wasn't only his legs that were going to have a problem. She needed to stretch and move but the last thing she wanted to do was slide across him again. He might think she was trying to encourage him. She started to move one leg very slowly. There, that was better. Now, if she could just move a little that way.

"Could you please be still?" he whispered. She whirled around, ready to give him a piece of her mind when she saw his expression. Her face turned red and she said, "Look, I'll sit on the floor."

"There's no room there either. Here," he maneuvered her until he held her in a carrying position. "Now lie here," he said, bringing her head to rest against his chest.

Did he really think that was better? She tried to pretend he was her brother, a male friend, ...it didn't work. She was acutely aware of the very virile man holding her tightly against his formidable chest. She had an almost insane urge to rub her chest against his. She gritted her back teeth. It was only an hour trip. She would not throw herself at this stranger. Even if he was what he said, she was not going to make an utter fool of herself. He probably had a girlfriend or a wife anyway. That thought did the trick. She pictured him with a stunning woman and a passel of kids. Her heartbeat slid back down to normal as she watched the people seated across the aisle.

His deep voice caught her off guard, "What is your name?"

"Does it matter?" she mumbled.

"Kind of," he said vaguely.

Her head snapped up, "Why?"

"Shh! Stay calm," he said, pulling her back against his chest as he whispered, "I told them I was your husband."

His hand was against the side of her cheek. She turned and bit it.

"Ow!" he yelped, glaring at her.

"I don't know who you think you are-" she yelled.

"Quiet, please," he motioned with his hand.

"I will not be quiet," she said even louder, only to be picked up and carried off. She started to scream in earnest now but his hand quickly covered her mouth. She kicked and struggled, determined to get free of him.

"Please!" he snapped as he carried her out of the compartment into the open air. "I'm not going to hurt you." He set her down but kept those iron arms wrapped around her waist.

"You could have fooled me!" she said hotly, stamping his foot.

He released her and ran his fingers through his short, black hair. "I just want to go home. Will you please help me?"

The voice was devoid of the tone of command it held earlier. He sounded tired and desperate.

Elizabeth found herself nodding even as her common sense demanded to know what she was doing. He embraced her again but this time it felt completely different. His hand lightly caressed her back before releasing her with a softly spoken, "Thank you." Her blue eyes stared into his dark ones. It would be very easy to get lost in them, she thought dreamily before giving herself a hard shake.

"As I was trying to explain to you a minute ago, I told the colonel and the train conductor that I was your husband."

"Your accent was pretty good," she said.

"You think so?" he asked with a half-smile. "I thought I was going to be captured for sure."

"So, what do you want me to do?"

He grinned, "I knew I would like American girls. You're helping me and you don't even know me at all."

Her heart sank. "Yes, I'm acting like a naïve tourist but let me warn you," she started, trying to put on her sternest expression.

"I've told you, I won't hurt you. I meant it," he said sincerely.

She smiled back at him and then remembered his acting job with the conductor. "You ever done any acting?"

"Acting?" he laughed, "back there was my only performance."

Somehow she doubted it. With his devastating looks, she imagined he had a string of beauties he made up stories for. The thought made her grimace.

"What's wrong?" he asked at her expression.

"Nothing. So what do we do?" she asked, wiping a stray strand of hair out of her eyes.

"What's your name?"

Despite her growing trust in him, Elizabeth remained wary. "Do you have an I.D. card?"

He seemed puzzled by her question for a moment but then comprehension dawned. He reached into his pocket and extracted a wallet. He slipped a card from it and handed it to her.

As all the writing was in Russian, Elizabeth couldn't decipher much but it did look like a military I.D. The picture of one Dmitri Poshankov stared back at her.

He extended one hand, "Dmitri Poshankov. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss...?"

"Elizabeth," she placed her hand in his and felt a jolt as if she had touched a live wire. "Elizabeth Karing."

"A beautiful name—"

"For a beautiful girl?" Elizabeth interrupted, beginning to get annoyed. This guy was probably as phony as his I.D. card.

He laughed, "That wasn't what I was going to say."

Elizabeth turned pink, "I'm sorry, I don't know what made me say that." She felt gauche. Who was she kidding anyway? A guy like him would hardly feel the need to throw himself at women. He probably had to force himself to kiss her.

"You misunderstand. It's not that I don't think you are beautiful—"

She threw up her hand in a motion to stop. It was bad enough hearing the "I'm not your type, let's be friends speech" in her own country. "It's okay, really. So, what do we do from here?"

His eyes glittered as if he found her amusing and would liked to have said more on the subject but Elizabeth was too flustered to notice. "Just be nice to me and act like I'm your husband. I can pull that ticket trick again at the next stop."

"Ticket trick?" she asked in confusion.

He grinned at her and Elizabeth had to stop herself from staring. The formidable man vanished, leaving him looking much younger, almost boyish. He flashed his I.D. card between his index finger and thumb and then placed it back into his wallet. Then, reaching into his pant's pocket, he extracted a similarly sized card. He held the card out toward Elizabeth.

"It's the same card!" she exclaimed, realizing what he had done. At his skillful palming display, her suspicions were aroused anew. "Let me guess, you're an amateur magician," she said sarcastically.

"How did you know?" he said with a grin and the mischievous twinkle in his eyes that she was becoming accustomed to.

She wasn't amused. "I'm not helping you," she said firmly as she turned away from him.

His arm shot out and pulled her back to him. "Please, I'm not a criminal, I swear."

Her body was so close to his that her chest rose as he breathed. His eyes bore into hers with an intensity that should have frightened her. She turned her head quickly and said, "Alright, just let me go."

He did so but reluctantly, as if he were expecting her to run. "Come, let's go back inside. You must be freezing."

She looked down at her thin knit sweater. The icy wind was whipping through her hair but she hadn't even noticed. She nodded vaguely and

walked back into the compartment. She stood for a moment by her seat waiting for him to join her. She shrugged and sat down, thinking he would return shortly. Ten minutes later, he still hadn't come back.

She picked up her magazine and started to leaf through it. She finally gave it up. She was beginning to get worried, which was silly. The man was probably dangerous and she was well rid of him. She finally stopped fighting herself and walked to look out the back window. He was standing where she had left him, leaning against the railing. It was unbearably cold out there. How could he possibly stand it? She almost went out to invite him back inside but stopped herself. Did she really want to sit in his lap the rest of the journey? She blushed as she sternly told herself no. Another thought struck her. Was she so repulsive that he would rather freeze to death than endure her in his lap?

She forced herself to sit back down and read the magazine.

Elizabeth's head snapped up as they pulled into the station. It was time to switch trains. Her eyes darted back for a glimpse of him. Should she run now that she had the opportunity? She picked up her case and purse and began to shove forward in the line.

A hand on her waist stopped her from moving any farther. "Darling, what's the rush?"

Her heart skipped a beat at the husky voice. She turned around slowly. She started to move his hand but stopped as she noticed how cold it was. "It's a wonder you didn't freeze to death out there!"

He smiled, "It's nice to know you care." The words were delivered with a trace of sarcasm.

She said under her breath, "I might not want to get involved in your problems but I wouldn't wish you dead."

He laughed at that. "That's more than you owe me, I guess."

Her hands began to sweat despite the chilly weather as they got on board the second train. She bit her lip nervously, trying to appear casual. Her heart seemed to be beating so loudly she was sure the other passengers could hear it. She handed him her lone ticket and prayed they wouldn't be caught.

He played the trick as neatly as he had the first time. "You don't look so good," he said as he motioned her to sit.

"I don't feel so good either," she snapped back.

She felt his hand glide through the length of her hair. "I'm sorry I got you involved in this. If there had been any other way," he said, making an expansive gesture.

"It's okay," she said, her voice a little shaky.

"Why don't you go lie down?" he suggested.

Oh no! She had forgotten she had to take this train overnight. "Listen, there's no way--"

"I'll sleep on the floor. It will be fine," he said calmly.

"No, it's not fine!" she said, her color returning. "I don't know you from Adam."

"Adam? Who's that, your boyfriend?"

"No, it's just an expression," she bit out.

"Strange expression," he muttered. "I don't get it."

"Listen, there's nothing to get," she said, growing exasperated. "You are not sleeping in my compartment."

"Okay, okay. Settle down." He turned away from her and picked up the magazine she had been reading earlier. He began to thumb through it, ignoring her.

Fine. That was what she wanted. She was tired and decided she would try to take a quick nap. "Excuse me," she said pointedly as he made no effort to move as she tried to leave. She had to squeeze by him and she felt sure he had brushed against her heavily on purpose. She glared back at him before heading back to her compartment.

Elizabeth was in paradise. The sun was shining directly overhead making her feel warm and happy as she sat in a field of wildflowers. Their perfume tickled her nose and she breathed in deeply. Another scent permeated through the floral bouquet. It didn't smell like flowers at all. Elizabeth perked her head up and breathed in the musky scent.

Suddenly, she wasn't alone in the flower-filled field. A tall, dark figure momentarily blocked the sunshine falling on her. She recognized him at once. It was Dmitri. He sat down beside her. Moving closer, his hands came to rest on each side of her face. Her heartbeat quickened as his lips touched hers.

His tongue glided against hers slowly as if she were a delicate sweet he wanted to take his time tasting. Elizabeth grew impatient. Her hands slid up his powerful forearms to his chest. She pulled against the heavy fabric of his shirt, coaxing her hands underneath to feel his bare chest. She rubbed against him urging her body as close to his as possible. Her leg twined around his waist and she pressed closer still, urging him on.

Suddenly a cold blast drifted into the warm field. Elizabeth shivered as wind began to whip her hair.

Elizabeth shrieked as she awoke with a start. The window of her sleeping compartment had fallen down, letting the frigid Russian air inside. Her shirt was undone and she was sitting astride Dmitri atop the chamber's

bed. "Get off me!" she screamed, shoving him away. "How dare you! Get out! Get out this instant!"

"What's wrong with you?" he asked, bewildered at her transformation.

Elizabeth noticed his shirt was torn open, exactly as she had done in her dream. "I don't feel so well," she said, slipping to the floor.

The next time she awoke, she was more confused than before. She wasn't on a train. That much she knew. She propped her elbows behind her and lifted up on the small bed. Several heavy quilts weighed her down. She peeled them back and walked slowly to the window. She was on a farm-somewhere. She looked around the room. It was furnished quaintly with odds and ends, quite homey. Then she looked down. She wasn't wearing the shirt and pants she had fallen asleep in. A heavy cotton gown covered her from head to foot. She quickly patted herself down. She was missing her bra but thankfully she was still wearing her underwear.

Her mind raced. Where was she? Had Dmitri kidnapped her? She ran her hands over her body.

"I didn't harm you," a deep voice said directly behind her.

Her face turned an even brighter shade. "I didn't think you would have," she lied. "I just wondered what happened to my clothes."

He pointed to a chair next to the bed. Her shirt and pants were neatly folded on the seat.

"Oh," she said slowly. "Where am I and who took off my clothes?" she asked sternly.

"You're at my mother's house. My sister undressed you," he said shooting her a look. "I didn't want you to scream at me again."

She fidgeted uncomfortably, "I'm sorry but I was so confused..."

He looked at her warily, "You were burning up with fever."

"The people at the orphanage!" she exclaimed. "They'll be wondering what happened to me. They'll have called my mother. She'll be worried sick and..."

"Calm down, Elizabeth. I found your papers in your purse and I told Catherine where you were."

"Catherine?" Elizabeth asked confused, "How do you know the woman from the orphanage?"

"Since she is my sister, I know her well," he said as if he were explaining something to a small child.

"Why didn't you say so?" Elizabeth demanded. "Here I was thinking you were in the mafia..."

"Mafia?" he exclaimed. "Why would you think that? I told you I was in the army." His dark eyes glittered at her making her feel stupid.

“How was I to know?” she asked.

He smiled and conceded, “I suppose you’re right. I probably wouldn’t have believed me either.”

“Your mother!” Elizabeth jumped, bringing her hand to her mouth as she remembered his reason for sneaking onboard.

This time, the smile lit his entire face, “You are not the only patient that has made a full recovery.”

Elizabeth ran into his arms and hugged him. Then realizing what she had done, she started to back away.

“If you promise not to scream at me again, there is something I would like to do...” he murmured.

His head lowered, searching out her lips.

“No!” she pushed him back.

His face clouded as he moved away from her.

“No, I mean wait. I’ve been sick and my mouth tastes terrible and I...” she said, her hands fluttering.

Of course he ignored her, taking her back into his arms.