

THE FIXER:

THE LAST ROMANOV

By

Jill Amy Rosenblatt

SNEAK PEEK

Copyright© 2019 by Jill Amy Rosenblatt No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission of the author, excepting brief quotes used in reviews. *The Fixer: The Last Romanov* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

CHAPTER 1

Katerina Mills sat in the silver Honda Civic, peering through the lenses of the binoculars. The factory parking lot loomed larger as she watched the first shift employees filing out, heads bowing to brace against the frigid Vermont winds, and dashing to their cars.

Katerina knew every inch of the toy factory her father had managed. In high school, she had helped out after classes, typing, filing, and bookkeeping. Following graduation and while caring for William Mills' through his bout of cancer, Kat worked a few hours a day and carried paperwork back and forth to her father at home.

Can you keep an eye on things for your old man?

Bullshit, Kat thought. It was time to find out the truth.

Kat snapped out of her thoughts as Richie Calico emerged. She watched him turn up the collar of his jacket as he hustled toward a pristine, ruby red Dodge Durango. Kat knew Richie as a third-generation, blue-collar working stiff, always looking for an angle and an easy buck.

That looks new, Kat thought as she sharpened the binoculars on the Durango.

She watched Richie's head swivel back and forth, checking the lot as he hurried, a stark contrast to the slow, confident saunter she remembered every time he passed her desk, giving a slow, sing-song "Kat-a-ree-na," as if they shared a secret.

Richie slid into the Durango, revved the engine and took off, speeding out of the lot.

Time to spill your secrets, Richie.

Kat put the Civic in gear.

Katerina watched Richie pull into a strip mall, park in front of a run-down pub, and get out. She followed, parking in the back of the lot and cutting the engine.

Leaning forward, Kat wrapped her arms around the wheel. *I have to go in. I need him to fill in the blanks. How do I get in and out without being noticed? Steal in and out. Like a thief.*

She sighed. It had been a little more than two months since her first B and E. Alexander Winter, “Bob,” and “Professor,” to Kat, a good man and an expert thief, had walked her through it and brought her out. *He would know what to do.* She closed her eyes, the familiar ache of missing him threatening to overwhelm her.

Not now, Katerina thought, opening her eyes, forcing herself to return to the business at hand. *There's a reason Richie is looking over his shoulder.* Remember what Winter taught you, she thought. Once you go in, you give yourself five minutes. Every minute you linger, your risk of getting caught rises.

Scanning the lot one more time, she flipped the fur lined hood over her chestnut hair, opened the door, and got out.

Slipping in through the back door, Katerina stepped into the shrouded gloom of the deserted dive bar. She came up behind Richie slouching in a booth, drinking alone.

Suddenly, Richie's eyes shot up from his Coors and he jolted at seeing a person looming over him. Kat brushed her hood back, and his eyes grew wide. Gaping at her, he stared as she slid into the booth.

"Katerina," Richie said, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed hard. "Uh . . . Merry Christmas, Happy New Year . . . when did you get home?"

"Hi Richie," Kat said. "How's the heroin business?"

Chapter 2

Katerina did a quick inventory of the bundle of nerves opposite her; the twitchy, restless hands, the fidgeting arms and legs. Beads of sweat began to bloom on Richie's brow; he drained his bottle of Coors and licked his lips. A man dying of thirst, Kat thought. Or a man afraid of dying.

He shook his head. "I—I don't know what you're talkin' about," Richie said, his eyes darting around. "I don't—"

"Sure you do, Richie. The way I figure it, you were in on it from the beginning. When my dad got sick, you just put your hand all the way into the toy stuffing to sell a little junk on the side. And my father just didn't need to know, right?"

Richie shifted in his seat. "Hey, *he* asked me, okay? I just followed orders."

"Three months ago, my father stopped off in New York before he pulled his Houdini. He mentioned your name. 'Richie, my number two. He's his own man.' He sounded a little bitter. Try again."

Richie threw himself against the back of the booth, one leg bobbing up and down like a frenetic yo-yo. "I made one little change. I saved the operation a lot of money."

"More for you to buy your shiny, new little red wagon?"

Richie's ping pong match scanning continued between the bar in the front and the back door.

“Expecting company?” Kat said, feeling perspiration break out beneath her clothing.

“You . . . you haven’t seen anybody . . . like, you know . . . like . . . cops . . .”

“What kind of cops? Uniform cops or special cops, with a special name, like DEA?”

Like a corrupt DEA agent who showed up at my apartment demanding I find my drug-dealing father? Why yes, Richie, I have. I wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t.

This is what happens when you’re desperate.

“Hey, I told that guy—”

“What guy?” Kat asked, her heart giving a thump in her chest. “The guy who wants his ten million dollar drug money payoff? The guy with brown hair, brown shoes, and a gunshot scar on his side? Agent James Sheridan? That guy?”

Richie leaned in. “How do *you* know him?” he asked in a choked whisper.

Katerina wondered if her expression betrayed her thoughts as the memories attacked like a battering ram at a crumbling fortress. Her shock at finding Sheridan in her New York apartment, her useless mad dash for the door, being crushed against a wall, pinned . . .

You work for me now. Find your father. Or you and your mother are going to prison.

“We went for a mani-pedi,” Kat snapped, pushing the images down like an overstuffed suitcase she was desperate to close. “What about the shooting, Richie?”

“That was your dad,” Richie said. “*He* pulled the trigger.”

This is taking too long, Katerina thought as Richie grabbed a napkin and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“I don’t know where the money is, Kat. Honest, I swear on my mother’s grave.”

“Bullshit. Your mother is alive. She lives in Jersey.”

“So I bought a fuckin’ truck, so what? I got stiffed on the real money,” he whined.

Katerina did a quick mental estimate of the percentage of lies in Richie’s story. At least half. Probably more.

“How did it work?” Kat asked.

Richie shook his head. “I thought you knew, I really did. It was perfect. It was in the paperwork. You were typing up phony invoices for ghost shipments. You were paying phony bills for supplies we never got. Lost shipments weren’t lost, boxes of toys never got damaged or stolen. Everything you did helped layer in the drug money with the legitimate money, then wash it until it was clean.”

Great. That’s just what I needed. Another felony.

“So how did something so perfect blow up? What was that one little change?”

“After you left, you know your dad was better but not a hundred percent. Everything was going great, like always, so, he trusted me, and then I saw an opportunity so . . . I changed the trucking.”

And I wasn’t here to tell him.

“You just cut out the first company, just like that?”

“The new company was cheaper. I think one of the boxes opened, or a seam on one of the toys ripped open, one of the packets fell out. Somebody must’ve made a phone call. All of sudden Sheridan shows up and he wants money.”

Kat marveled at the depth and breadth of Richie’s stupidity even as she hung on his every word, desperate for an angle that could hold off a dirty DEA agent.

“What about the laptop my dad gave you. You were using it to move the money?”

Richie nodded. “He had a bunch of accounts. He took it back.”

Kat felt her blood pressure surge in frustration. Searching for her next move, she made a snap decision to play dumb.

“Who’s in charge at the plant now?” she asked, even as the hair prickled on the back of her neck, even though she had a feeling she knew the answer.

Richie sat poised like a runner ready to push off the block. “*They* are,” he said, “They took back the trucking. They control the product. They’ve got people on the inside. They got everything.”

They have a name and I need it. Before Christmas, Katerina had sent them a gift through an intermediary, a tip. Their operation was at risk from a DEA agent. She had provided just enough details, without a name, gambling *they* would remove corrupt DEA agent James Sheridan, alleviating her problem. She lost. They didn’t.

“Who was your contact? What’s their name?” she pressed.

Richie's eyes darted around in another sweep of the pub. "No names, I just dealt with some low-level guy."

A big man, with dark hair and bovine features, crossed the threshold from the bar into the back room, a glass of beer in his hand. He wore worn jeans and a plaid shirt under a down jacket; a working man. He set the beer down on a table out of earshot. He pulled out the chair and sat parallel to the table, facing the flat screen television.

Kat watched Richie's complexion blanch, his eyes fill with fear.

You didn't follow Winter's advice, Katerina thought. You stayed too long. Now you're out of time.

Richie grabbed his coat, keeping watch on the man staring at the television. He made a move to bolt.

Katerina took hold of Richie's arm, squeezing with everything she had. Faced with an exercise in failure, she tried one last time.

"What about Lulu?"

"Who?" Richie asked, snapping to attention.

Katerina rolled her eyes. "Don't give me the bullshit that you don't know about my father's cuddle bunny hooker."

Richie shook his head, his eyes still on the working man. “I don’t know why he took up with that skank,” he said, sweat gathering again at his temples and on his upper lip. “Kat, I gotta go.”

“Where does the skank live?”

“She rents a studio in a private house,” Richie mumbled. He rattled off the address, his eyes darting to the interloper still nursing his beer.

“Give me your cell number,” Kat said, wishing she had left five minutes earlier.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because I said so.”

Richie whispered the number. He looked over her, as if seeing her for the first time. “Your dad always bragged about your memory, how you never forgot anything.” He leaned in. “If you see him, put in a good word for me, okay? Tell him I didn’t try to hurt him. I was just tryin’ to make a little money, something just for me.”

Sure thing Fredo, Kat thought.

Richie hustled out of the booth, shoved his hands into the pockets of his coat and rushed out the back, like a man trying to outrun flames licking at his heels.

Katerina stayed in the booth, waiting to see which way the working man would head out before deciding her exit route.

He didn’t move.

Kat thought maybe Richie's paranoia had leeches into her, warping her judgment.

Her eyes took in the glass of beer sitting untouched, the man's eyes staring at the screen, his fingers drumming on the table.

Katerina could feel the flop sweat break out over her body.

He's been playing a waiting game.

And he's not here for Richie.

Kat bolted out the back door, running around the back of the building. As she came through the parking lot, she watched the tail lights of the Durango grow smaller as it tore down the road. She jumped into the Honda, her heart racing.

The man exited the bar and stood still, skimming the lot.

Katerina's breath came fast and shallow as she slid down in the seat, feeling like a duck in a shooting gallery, hoping he couldn't set his sights on her.

He stopped scanning. Katerina followed his gaze to an idling blue Altima parked across the street. The working man went to a dark sedan and climbed in. He gunned the engine and drove off. The Altima didn't follow.

Katerina started the car and pulled out of the lot, checking the rearview. Nothing. When she checked again her heart thudded in her chest at the sight of the Altima, following behind.

Who the hell are these guys?