

## Someone To Watch Over Me

by Emma Carlyle

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*Philadelphia*

*Six Years Ago*

“Dasha! More vodka!”

Dasha dropped the pot and scouring pad into the sink, grabbed another bottle of Stoli, and scurried across the kitchen. She stifled a yawn as she squinted through the tobacco-laden haze of the room at the clock over the stove. Another endless night of playing bar wench and scullery maid to her father and his vile cronies stretched out before her. What did they care that she had a calculus exam in less than nine hours?

Sergei Ivanichek slammed the deck of cards onto the table and yanked the bottle from her still sudsy grasp. “Guests first, stupid girl. Where’s your manners?” With a shaky hand he reached across the table to refill the three other glasses. The bottle clinked against Borka’s glass, spilling a small amount of the clear alcohol onto the plastic tablecloth.

Borka snorted. He stubbed out his cigarette and lit another. “I think Sergei’s had too much. Maybe now we can win back some of that money the thief’s stolen from us tonight.”

Grunting his agreement, Yuri took the bottle from Sergei and handed it back to Dasha. “Pour.”

She did as she was told, then wiped up the puddle. After a loud belch, Sergei resumed shuffling, dealing each player several cards. Yuri and Vanya studied their hands, but Borka left his cards on the table, reaching for Dasha instead.

“Lovely,” he said, wrapping his large, hairy arm around her waist. “You’ve grown into a real beauty, Dasha. I remember when you were no bigger than my knee. You’ll make a good wife.” He lowered his hand and stroked her backside.

Dasha jumped. Borka howled with amusement. Tightening his grasp, he pulled her down onto what little lap he had. The cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth, ashes dropping onto her. One fat hand stroked her cheek. The hair-coated knuckles of his other hand grazed across her breast.

Dasha stiffened and winced. As much as she wanted to grab the vodka bottle and smash it over his head, she knew better than to cross any of the men sitting around her father’s table. So she clenched her fists and bit her tongue.

Borka roared with laughter. “What are you now? Fifteen? Sixteen?”

Instead of answering, Dasha tried to squirm free. Borka’s expression grew lecherous. “I may be old, but I’m still strong as a bull.” He winked at the other men. “In every way that counts.”

Yuri elbowed Vanya in the ribs. "And that's no bull."

The four men yucked it up.

Dasha froze.

"Seventeen," said Sergei, answering for her. He gulped down another shot of vodka.

"Seventeen?" Borka's beady blue eyes grew wide with excitement.

"And the boy?" asked Vanya, motioning across the room to her brother Yusif.

Sergei glanced at his son. "Thirteen," he muttered around his cigarette, but his eyes gleamed.

Dasha knew that look. Her father was as easy to read as a street sign. It was the same look that came over him whenever he made a killing at the track or at the craps tables in Atlantic City. Sergei Ivanichek worshipped a green god with multiple zeros. She exchanged wary glances with her brother. He, too, had seen the glint in his father's eyes.

"I'll take them both," said Borka. His hand slid up Dasha's thigh. "My bed has been cold and empty for too long. Vanya can put the boy to work on the docks." He turned to his second-in-command. "Yes?"

Vanya nodded.

"How much?" asked Sergei.

Borka shrugged. "We'll work the details out tomorrow, my friend. Tonight we celebrate." He removed the cigarette from his mouth and raised his glass in a toast. The three other men followed suit. "To my new bride!" he said, settling his free hand between Dasha's legs.

All four men downed their vodka in one gulp. Then grabbing the back of Dasha's head, Borka forced his tongue deep into her mouth, muffling her frightened cry. "Ha! You have much to learn, Dasha," he said, breaking the kiss, "and I will enjoy teaching you." He pushed her from his lap. "Pour another round, girl!"

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Hours later Dasha lay awake in the double-bed she shared with her younger sister.

Thankfully, Anika had fallen asleep before Borka, Yuri, and Vanya arrived. Out of sight, out of mind. Dasha shuddered. God only knew what fate they might have assigned the frail nine-year-old had she been awake. Sergei resented every penny he shelled out for his children's upkeep. He'd jump at the chance to rid himself of Anika, as well -- especially if there were profit in it. The child stirred, snuggling her tiny body closer to her sister.

Every time Dasha closed her eyes, she saw a fat, hairy hand crushing her dreams. Felt a wet,

slimy tongue choking the life from her. She stifled a sob. She had plans for her future, and they didn't include being forced to marry a man old enough to be her grandfather. This was America, not Russia. The twenty-first century, not the nineteenth. To everyone except Sergei Ivanichuk and his throw-back cohorts.

Even though her father had emigrated to America years before she was born, Sergei still held fast to his distant aristocratic roots. Dasha had long ago given up trying to discern truth from prevarication in what spilled from her father's often less-than-sober lips. Was he the descendent of a bastard of the House of Romanoff?

Over the years she'd heard the same claim from half the Russian-American population of Northeast Philadelphia. She found it highly unlikely that Czar Nicholas and his randy relatives had sown their seed from St. Petersburg all the way to Sergei's native Volgograd.

In the next room she heard her father snoring the sleep of a man who had drunk himself into a stupor. After he agreed to sell his son and daughter, Sergei and his friends had partied well into the night. Dasha knew from experience he wouldn't wake until late afternoon.

Across the room she heard her brother rise. The squeaking floorboards echoed his progression from the bed to the closet. "Yusif! What are you doing?" she whispered.

"I'm going to kill that greedy son-of-a-bitch! He's not going to do this to us."

Dasha leaned over and flicked on the bedside lamp. Her brother stood barefoot in the middle of the room, clutching a baseball bat. "No," she said. "Put that down." The time had come to implement her plan.

"Dasha!"

"Get dressed, Yusif."