

Chapter Ten

Thursday, June 4, 2015.

Our Lady of Fatima Church (“Cova”), Detroit, Michigan.

By Thursday afternoon, in just one and a half days, Father Herald had managed to orchestrate the arrangements for Pope Nicholas’ trip to Detroit with everything confirmed exactly as he had proposed on the night the Pope received “The Russian Request”. Don Brown had been thrilled by such an opportunity to drop everything and be of personal service to His Holiness, and had deferred in every way to Father Herald’s specific requests. Father Frederick Ritter had been flown from Munich to Rome in the Brown Group’s private jet, just as planned, and had already been dressed in his twin brother’s papal garb and successfully installed at a quiet abbey as a decoy for the paparazzi. The Pope, Father Herald, and four Swiss guards had then flown non-stop from Rome to Michigan in the same private jet, arriving at Detroit City Airport on Friday morning. They had flown “under the radar” over Lake Huron, landing at a remote field in rural northeast Michigan. Then, as they approached Detroit from the north, it appeared as if they were arriving on a domestic flight from northern Michigan, so they were not required to pass through customs. At the airport three large SUV’s, each of a different color and model, were ready for the motorcade up Gratiot Avenue to the Cova. The Swiss guards, dressed as civilians, and the Pope, dressed as a European parish priest in a black cassock and disguised with a wig and false beard, rode in the middle vehicle with Father Herald. The twelve Brown Group security experts, dressed in plain street clothes typical for the inner city, occupied the SUV’s preceding and following the Pope.

Upon arrival, two priests in black cassocks could be seen entering the rectory, an entirely ordinary event at the Cova. Once inside, they were immediately ushered into Father Kiril’s office. In a few minutes, Father Kiril arrived from the morning Mass. As Father Kiril entered his own office, he trembled, knelt before the Holy Father, and kissed the Fisherman’s ring (which Nicholas brought out of his pocket for the occasion, and then concealed once again). The office door was closed, and conversation began. The Holy Father was on retreat, explained Father Herald, and would be spending much time in prayer. Once the church was locked for the night, guards would be posted, and Pope Nicholas would spend time in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. Next the Pope was introduced to Father Ivan Belarus, who had grown up in the Cova parish, and had said his first Mass there in the Extraordinary Rite. Father Belarus was short, stocky, and had a full beard, neatly trimmed, framing brown eyes and a face which was neither handsome nor homely. In public he always wore a black cassock. Father Herald was recommending him to Pope Nicholas, as a personal assistant for this retreat. In public, Father Belarus would

always accompany the Pope, and would do most of the talking, implying that “Father Jacob” had very limited English. In this way, others would not be likely to recognize the Holy Father by his speech. On Sunday morning, Father Belarus and “Father Jacob” would attend the orchestral Mass, but they would not be participating in the liturgy. The Pope would value the opportunity to thus pray quietly, without distraction, while the glorious music of Haydn would help to lift his soul toward Heaven.

So on Friday evening, the church was locked at nine o’clock as usual, and Pope Nicholas entered to begin his private prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. No one else was to be allowed in the church, except Father Belarus, who would stay in the back with a security radio and be ready if the Pope should require assistance in any way. Swiss guards and Brown Group security personnel guarded the church and parish grounds. A three-quarter moon shone through a cloudless sky, and the city was mostly quiet.

Inside the church, the lights were off except for spotlights illuminating the high altar. The red sanctuary lamp, announcing the presence of the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle on the altar, flickered quietly. Pope Nicholas prostrated himself before the high altar, and again sought the advice and consolation of Jesus in this hour of terrible trial. He begged forgiveness for himself, and for all his predecessors since 1929, who had delayed, out of human respect, from fulfilling the simple request made by His Blessed Mother. He foresaw the rage and ridicule that would come from the world if he announced a plan to perform the public consecration of Russia. Minutes passed, perhaps hours, and the Pope remained deep in prayer. After some time Nicholas moved from the main altar to kneel at a side altar where stood a traditional statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

“Nicholas,” said a deep, thrilling voice, musical in its beauty.

“Here I am, Lord.” He knew it was the voice of Jesus, speaking to his heart.

“In 1917 My Blessed Mother appeared to the children at Fatima, and told them She would come back to request the consecration of Russia, by the Pope in union with all the Catholic bishops in the world, to Her Immaculate Heart. In 1929 She came back as She had promised, to Sister Lucy in Tuy, and instructed Lucy to tell the Holy Father that it was now time to do the consecration. But it was not done. In 1931 I appeared to Sister Lucy in Rianjo, and expressed My dismay with the Pope’s delay in performing the consecration of Russia. I warned that, if the Popes delayed too long, they would fall into misfortune like the Kings of France, who delayed fulfilling another specific request for a hundred years, and then suffered destruction. This year is 2015. In two years it will be one hundred years since My Mother announced Her request. Now is the time, Nicholas. Heaven has now offered you the extraordinary grace of “The Russian Request”. This was obtained through My Mother’s intercession, in response to tens of millions of Rosaries offered by the faithful for the consecration of Russia. If you do the consecration, Russia will be converted, and a period of peace will be granted to the world. If you do

not do it, World War III will soon break out, and terrible destruction and the loss of many souls will be the result.”

“But Lord, do we not have until 2029, one hundred years after Your Mother came back to Sister Lucy in Tuy to make the actual request?”

“Strictly speaking, yes. But My Mother first announced Her request in 1917. I am asking you to do the consecration before 2017. Two years, Nicholas. Do not delay. If you do, the devil will find ways to make it ever more difficult, until your successor finds himself trapped, like King Louis XVI of France, who in prison was no longer able to precisely follow the mandate of Heaven.”

“Lord, I believe in You,” said Nicholas. “O Jesus, help my unbelief!⁵⁵ I am afraid of the world, that they will mock the Church and despise Your Vicar, if I do the consecration and then Russia does not convert.”

“In acting as My Mother has requested, you will come to believe completely that Russia will convert. Do not be afraid of men, who after they have killed your body have no more evil that they can do to you. Rather, fear Him Who is able to kill both body and soul, in hell.”⁵⁶

“Lord, You know that not all the bishops will obey me, if I publicly order them to participate in the public consecration of Russia.”

“The majority of them will obey, some begrudgingly. A minority will not obey. You must use the Keys of the Kingdom, which I first entrusted to Peter, and the power of binding and loosing. Those bishops who refuse to obey must forfeit their office as bishop. They must be told they are in mortal sin, reserved to the Holy Father alone to absolve should they later repent.”

“Lord, should I go back to Rome to announce the consecration?”

“No, Nicholas. There is danger if you return before the day of the consecration. You should have it announced in Rome, with all the conditions imposed upon the bishops, while you are still hidden away here at My Mother’s beloved Cova. You should only return to Rome, by private means and in disguise, on the day before the consecration. Otherwise, evil men will try to kill you.”

The voice stopped speaking, and Nicholas remained for a very long time in prayer.

After awhile, Father Belarus approached from the rear of the church where he had been keeping watch, saying that it was now two o’clock in the morning, and the Holy Father needed to think about his rest.

“Did you hear a voice?” asked Nicholas.

“No, Your Holiness. It has been very quiet here tonight. No one said anything.”

“I am going to bed now, Father Belarus. Tomorrow I will be in retreat. On Sunday morning, please meet me at the rectory in time for us to be seated in church before the prelude begins. And remember, in public you must call me ‘Father Jacob,’ and we will pretend that I speak very little

⁵⁵ Mark 9:24.

⁵⁶ Matthew 10:28.

English.”

“Yes, Your Holiness,” said Father Belarus.

“Oh – and Father Belarus, will you please inform Father Herald that we are going to do it. Jesus has told me I must do it now. Father Herald will understand precisely what I mean. Please ask him to pray for me.”

“Yes, Your Holiness,” repeated Father Belarus. But he had no idea at all what it was that the Pope was going to do.

On Saturday morning at seven o’clock, Doctor Mikhail Romanov made early morning rounds with Luke and Monica at Borgess Medical Center. Medical students did not sleep in on Saturdays – or on Sunday either, this weekend, as they would be looking after Doctor Mike’s patients, under the supervision of a colleague, while he went to Detroit. At half past eight o’clock Doctor Mike’s BMW pulled out of Nazareth and found its way onto the I-94 freeway eastbound. His fingers found the well-worn beads of his Rosary, and he sought the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary on behalf of himself and all those for whom he daily prayed. He had added three new people: Mariya, and her parents George and Katarina, whom he had yet to meet. He knew they were in the choir and he would be meeting them at the Cova this weekend. Three and a half hours later the BMW pulled through the “Fatima Cova” archway off Gratiot Avenue in Detroit, and parked behind the rectory. It was noon, and Father Kiril had invited Mike for a private lunch in the rectory office. After lunch had been delivered by the new housekeeper, and Father Kiril gave thanks, their visit began in earnest.

“I still feel a profound sadness each time my new housekeeper appears, even though she is absolutely wonderful. It makes me realize how very much I miss dear Mary Moretti,” said Kiril.

“She was in this parish since long before we first came here as teenagers,” said Mikhail. “When I think of quiet saints like Mary Moretti, I am reminded that most great saints remain unnoticed by the world. Worldly greatness counts for nothing in the end.”

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints,”⁵⁷ said Kiril, who could recite the Psalms by heart. Mikhail noted that his brother was struggling not to shed tears.

“Then maybe it’s a good thing I’m not a saint just yet,” said Mikhail. “The Romanov’s sent a punk to my office this week to threaten me, Kiril. That’s the real reason I needed to come see you.”

“What?”

“It seems they had their annual meeting in New York, and certain family members are not terribly pleased that I exist.”

“What changed, Mike? You’ve never had dealings with the Romanov clan before, have you?”

“Well, no. But sometimes I share my history with people I meet, who show some interest. Recently I told my two medical students about my

⁵⁷ Psalm 116:15.

family history, because one of them inquired. And then I took Mariya out for coffee after her recital, and she asked all about it too. She ended up saying she thought I should go to the Romanov Ball and be proud to be Catholic. I decided maybe she was right.”

“Love is blind, Mike.”

“Hey, I only met her once, Kiril.”

“You do have impeccable taste, Mike. Mariya is a striking young woman, very talented, and unusually pure in heart. Good parents. Only eighteen, probably quite romantic. She is attached to an outstanding young man of this parish. But he is my protégé, so I know him well, and I suspect he’s going to end up being a priest, if he ever manages to tame his wild side. So you might have a slight chance, even though you’re ancient.”

“Yes, she told me all about Mark.”

“Really? And that didn’t scare you off?”

“Well, at first, yes. But after she said I should go to the Romanov Ball, I started thinking I would need someone to take along as my date.”

“And so you got the brilliant idea of inviting Mariya to go along with you to New York?”

“Well, yes – and her parents, of course. It seemed perfect, since apparently all three of them are of royal descent. I wouldn’t dream of taking her to New York without proper chaperones.”

“And so you contacted the Romanov Nobility Organization and applied to go to the ball, and to also bring Mariya and her parents, I suppose.”

“Yeah. Stupid, huh?”

“Apparently.”

“So what do I do now?”

“What were the threats?”

“Well, this muscled-up guy, about forty, showed up in my clinic as a new patient. He said he was sent by ‘certain members’ of the Romanov family to warn me that, since I have a good argument about being the rightful heir to the throne, it is intolerable that I am Catholic and no longer Orthodox. They seem to feel that could hurt the family’s chances of restoring the Russian monarchy. So the family wants me to either become Orthodox again, or to voluntarily and publicly renounce any rights to the throne. And if I choose to abdicate, then I also have to agree that I can never go back to Russia. They don’t want to risk my becoming popular there.”

“And if you agree to neither of these options?”

“Then I am very likely to suffer an unfortunate fatal accident. I get up to thirty days after the ball to decide.”

“So they do want you to attend the ball?”

“Yes. I suppose most of the family hope to schmooze me while I am there, to see what nice people they really are.”

“And to try to charm you into compromising your religious principles.”

“That will never happen, Kiril. As Saint Ambrose so famously said, *Ubi Petrus, Ibi Ecclesia, Ibi Deus*. ‘Where Peter is, there is the Church, there is God.’”

“Have you already invited Mariya to the ball?”

“No, not yet. After the threat, I don’t want her to have anything to do with these nasty people.”

Father Kiril sipped his tea, and appeared to be pensive for a minute or two. Doctor Mike sat nervously, understanding his little brother needed some time to think. And pray.

“Mike, I think you need to go to the ball. The thing is, hardly anyone knows who you are, from a Romanov point of view. If you go to the ball, the press will take great interest in you, and in your young lady and her parents. Then, if something untoward happens to any of you in the near future, it will not look good for the Romanov’s. Getting your faces in the news is going to be your best protection.”

“But I don’t want young Mariya to become involved in all this.”

“She already is. They know you like her, and they could attack her or her parents as a way of attacking you. As long as all of you are not publicly connected with the Romanov dynasty, any of you could suffer apparent accidents without bringing suspicion on the Romanov Nobility Organization. But once the press figures out that you exist, and that you have a claim which supersedes the claim of the current pretender, then you have some protection.”

“The old *cui bono* method – the press and the police would ask ‘who benefits’ if something should happen to us?”

“Exactly.”

“So, then, my little brother, the good priest, is now advising me to take an innocent eighteen year old female parishioner of his with me on an overnight trip to New York City?”

“Sounds bad if you put it that way.”

“Just kidding, Kiril.”

“But of course you would take her parents with you, too.”

“That goes without saying, bro. So, when should I invite Mariya and her parents?”

“There will be a champagne reception in the gymnasium after the orchestral Mass tomorrow. A chance for people to meet the soloists. I’ll introduce you to George and Katarina. I’ll notify them today that you plan to take them out for dinner tomorrow afternoon. Then you can invite them all to the ball. I may be otherwise occupied tomorrow afternoon.”

“Why, what’s going on, Kiril?”

“Can you keep a secret? I mean, something you can’t tell anyone at all?”

“Yes, Kiril. I’m your brother.”

“Okay, well I have a secret visitor here this week, a priest from Rome who is a dear friend of Father Herald, and has come here to the Cova for a spiritual retreat.”

“So?”

“This priest is also a bishop.”

“Well then, as a courtesy, he would have to notify the Archbishop of Detroit that he was coming into his diocese. So how is that a secret?”

“He didn’t want to tell the Archbishop.”

“Why ever not?”

“Because he is the Bishop of Rome.”

“But ... wait, wouldn’t that be the Pope!?”

“Exactly.”

“Kiril, little bro, you know you never cease to amaze me?”

“It wasn’t my idea, Mike. It was all Father Herald’s doing.”

“Still, Kiril, I am continually astounded by the things you manage to pull off here, in the worst part of Detroit, in a parish that normally would have been closed down and sold off decades ago.”

“The Holy Father is here in disguise. And he is excited about attending the orchestral Mass tomorrow. He’s quite a musician himself, you know.”

“Oh, great, so now I get to sing for the Pope as a last-minute, substitute soloist. And I thought I would be nervous just having Mariya and her parents listening!”

“You’ll handle it fine, Mike. Now remember, you can’t tell anyone at all. Not even the Peterson’s. The Holy Father’s security depends upon the fact that no one knows he is here.”

On Sunday morning, the sky would be brilliant blue, and the Michigan weather would be mercifully cool for a June morning. Being an inner city parish with limited funds, the huge stone church had never been air conditioned, but the massive limestone walls could retain the cool temperature of the previous night until close to noon. The solemn high Mass would begin at nine-thirty in the morning, with a concerto for organ and orchestra beginning ten minutes before.

But at four o’clock, in the pre-dawn darkness, Father Kiril came rapping on Doctor Mike’s guest bedroom door at the rectory.

“Mike! Wake up! It’s already four o’clock, and you have to play this morning!”

“I can’t. I’m going to sing. Go away.”

“Mike! I mean it, bro.”

“Be quiet, Kiril. I’m going back to sleep. You should, too.”

“You have to get up, Mike. Now. Mark Szczypiorski, the Cova’s supremely talented young organist for the Rheinberger Organ Concerto Number Two, has just called in sick. He’s got a fever, chills, and vomiting, and he can’t possibly perform. I know you know that Rheinberger piece, Mike. You recorded it at Saint Luke’s when you were a resident.”

“That was years ago. Be sensible and go back to sleep, Kiril.”

“No, you have to substitute, Mike. I can’t get anyone else on such short notice, and the Pope is counting on hearing it.”

“Kiril, don’t be ridiculous. I haven’t performed it publicly in ... let’s see ... uh, three weeks. We did it at Saint Augustine Cathedral in Kalamazoo before our last orchestral Mass.”

“See? See how divine Providence works, bro? You’re on, dude. The orchestra has already been paid and rehearsed it. No one will notice a few wrong notes, except for me and the orchestra, and they’ll appreciate the difficult situation you are in. However, you know me – *I* may be

somewhat more critical. So you need to get up and practice.”

There was a moment of silence, then Mike resumed his yelling at his younger brother. It was like old times, back when they were teenagers at home.

“Great! Just great, Kiril! First you tell me I have to sing the bass solos for Mariya and her parents, because your bass soloist had some emergency. Then you add that, oh by the way, and there’s nothing you can do about it, but the Pope will be here listening too, in disguise, but we can’t tell anyone about that minor detail. And now you drag me out of bed in the middle of the night and tell me I have to go practice the Rheinberger concerto on the organ so I can perform it in ... oh my gosh! Five hours! Why did you let me sleep so late, little brother?”

Kiril heard him jump out of bed, and saw the light shine out from under the door.

“I just found out, Mike. I’m laying the organ score here outside your door, and keys for the church and the organ loft. Get some coffee on your way out. I brewed it just for you.”

“Thanks, bro.”

“Oh, and if you happen to meet any muscled-up young men snooping around outside in the night speaking French, they’re probably just a few Swiss guards from the Vatican, disguised in street clothes from the ‘hood.’”

“Great!”

“Now you get over to the church and practice, Mike. I’m going back to bed.”

In the dim light of pre-dawn, Mikhail found his way to the same familiar organ loft where he had begun organ study as a youth of sixteen. The Cova’s three-manual pipe organ had been upgraded gradually, over the years, by their youngest brother Vladimir Romanov, whose downtown Detroit pipe organ workshop was not far away. But Mikhail was basically familiar with it and with the peculiar acoustics of this vast stone room. Before long, his fingers and feet were feeling limbered up, the coffee helped his concentration, and Rheinberger’s magnificent concerto greeted the morning sun just now beginning to glow through the stained-glass windows. Mikhail had always imagined that this noble work, composed in the late Nineteenth Century, would have been suitable for a great state occasion such as a royal wedding or the coronation of a king. Today, however, unbeknownst to the faithful, it would be music to welcome a Pope.

By half past eight o’clock, the Men’s Schola had completed the final rehearsal of their Gregorian Chant, and the full Latin Mass choir was beginning their warm-up in the school. Mariya, their rehearsal accompanist, was leading the vocal exercises. Mikhail now learned that she would be the organist for the Haydn Mass, which was scored for organ and orchestra, but she had not been familiar enough with the Rheinberger concerto. So the two of them would both be featured organists in the same program. Well, maybe Mariya would be a bit nervous too, Mikhail mused.

Fair is fair.

But then he remembered that she had already played for the Pope, in Rome, for his birthday. And she would not realize the Pope was present today. *Not fair.*

Then suddenly Mikhail experienced an uncharacteristic pang of intense jealousy, as he realized that, had this reportedly handsome young prodigy named Mark not been ill today, *he* would have been alternating places with Mariya at the console in the organ loft, while Mikhail spent the entire Mass on the choir risers down below on the main floor. With Mark out sick, Mikhail would have to run back and forth between the choir risers and the organ loft, serving as bass soloist during the sung portions of the Haydn Mass, and as organist for the three movements of the Rheinberger concerto which would be performed during prelude, communion, and postlude. It might all seem a bit frantic, Mikhail thought. But today would be the perfect opportunity to show his new young friend Mariya that not only could he sing, he could still play the organ with virtuosity – even if he was ancient. Suddenly, his fear about singing and playing for the Pope was completely erased by his new urge to show off – just a bit – for Mariya.

At ten past nine o'clock, Father Belarus, well-known to everyone at the Cova, emerged from the rectory accompanied by the elderly visiting priest, "Father Jacob," who had a full head of curly gray hair and a full gray beard. As they crossed the rectory lawn and entered the church, Father Belarus greeted many parishioners and friends visiting for today's special Mass, but Father Jacob just nodded and smiled. Father Belarus explained to those who asked that Father Jacob, visiting from Europe, spoke little English.

"But that's the beauty of the Latin Mass," noted one parishioner. "No matter where one travels in all the world, it is always just the same. The vernacular really isolates people when they travel, but Latin, the universal language of the Church, unites all nations and tongues in one liturgy."

Nicholas realized, from the parishioner's enthusiasm, how much the Church had profited, in those places like the Cova, that had taken full advantage of his action nearly a decade ago. It was Nicholas who had freed the old Latin Mass, so that any priest who wanted to could say it without any special permission from anyone. Nicholas' erudite sense of humor had caused him to give the elegant old Tridentine Mass the clever designation "Extraordinary Form," thus relegating the new Mass to the properly descriptive category of "Ordinary."

Together, the two priests – one youthful and one elderly – made their way into a pew about halfway down the nave of the church, and took their seats. Others soon filled in their row, and when George and Katarina Peterson arrived, they could not get close to Father Jacob on their way to the choir risers in the back of the church. That was good, thought Father Belarus, for of all people here today, they would be the most likely to see through Father Jacob's disguise. The Pope was fascinated to note that several rows of pews had been permanently removed from the back of the

church, making room for the orchestra of twenty-five players in front of the fifty-voice choir on risers. The rear choir loft could not accommodate that many musicians. But the organist, seated at the console in the choir loft above, could view the conductor through a large mirror. An announcement was made concerning a correction in the program. Two scheduled soloists had taken ill, and Doctor Mikhail Romanov of Kalamazoo, older brother of Father Romanov, was substituting on very short notice, both on organ for the Rheinberger concerto, and as bass soloist for the Mass. The Pope, himself an accomplished musician, understood intuitively what a great feat this would be for Mikhail, if he proved able to perform such demanding works well under the circumstances.

Then the first chords of the Rheinberger concerto were struck, and the Pope began to feel his soul transported into realms of noble order and beautiful dignity. When the final notes of the first movement reverberated through the stone arches, the Pope thanked God for the privilege of being present. By then a dozen altar boys, the three associate priests of the parish in traditional vestments with birettas, and several Knights of Columbus in full honor dress and with ceremonial swords drawn, had formed the procession at the rear of the center aisle. Mariya Peterson now sat at the organ in the loft, and as the first grand chords of a brief Widor excerpt sounded, a solemn procession began. At the gates of the sanctuary, the Knights stood guard while the altar boys and priests entered the sanctuary to begin the opening prayers of the Mass. As the priests knelt before the high altar steps, the grand organ music ended, and all in the sanctuary knelt before the divine presence in the tabernacle on the altar. Next, the Latin *Asperges* was chanted by the choir, while the priest sprinkled the congregation with holy water. Then, kneeling at the foot of the altar, the priest and altar boys began the prayers of the Mass, in Latin:

“I will go unto the altar of the Lord.”

“To God, Who gives joy to my youth.”

As the ancient, ever-familiar prayers of the old Latin Mass proceeded, orchestra, organ, and chorus filled the church with Haydn’s dignified and glorious music, embellishing the beauty of the words with sweet harmonies hinting of higher beauties in the Heavenly realms.

Mariya was thrilled by the rich bass voice of her new friend, Misha. She had also been astounded at his virtuosity on the organ during the prelude, which was the first movement of the Rheinberger concerto. Alternating with him on the organ bench, as the program proceeded, seemed to cement a common bond, like two adventurers who were sharing a challenge together. She could easily imagine becoming friends with such a man, and maybe making music together on a regular basis.

At Communion, during the second movement of the Rheinberger organ concerto, the Pope filed up the aisle in his simple black cassock and presented himself on his knees at the altar rail to receive Holy Communion. He felt a renewed hope that liturgy of such dignity would again become commonplace, beginning in the Catholic Church in Russia, once Russia converted. The Russian Orthodox had never tolerated any modernization

of their rite nor any tinkering with the Old Slavonic in which their Mass was prayed. He began to foresee how Russia, source of the spreading of the errors of modernism, would soon become the source of liturgical restoration throughout the world. Please, Jesus, he prayed, keep me strong to do what You are asking.

When the Mass had ended, most of the congregation remained in their seats to hear the final, third movement of the Rheinberger organ concerto. Then, when the church was silent, many lingered, on their knees, to make their thanksgiving to God. Father Belarus wanted to spirit Father Jacob out the side door of the church and back to the rectory as quickly as possible. But Father Jacob had other ideas. He wanted to go to the reception and greet the musicians, and thank them for their fine work. He whispered to Father Belarus not to worry, that he would pretend he only spoke German well, with very broken English.

After another twenty minutes, most of the parishioners and guests had gathered in the gymnasium. As soon as a Knight of Columbus announced the official opening of the reception, there ensued an enthusiastic and prolonged applause, with not a few shouts of "Bravo!" for all the musicians who had worked so hard to bring today's Mass to fruition. Father Belarus cringed, hoping no one else would notice that as Father Jacob repeatedly shouted "Bravissimo!" he sounded a *lot* like Pope Nicholas VI. But not one of the musicians, except for Mikhail, realized that they had thrilled the heart of the Holy Father himself. Father Belarus was nearly in a panic as Father Jacob went down the receiving line of soloists, warmly greeting each one and speaking a few words of praise in broken English. Mariya had the uncanny sense that somehow she almost knew this old German priest. When Father Jacob greeted Mikhail, their eyes met, and momentarily locked in a bond that only two benevolent monarchs might share.

What was it about this Romanov man that he seemed to exude a royal dignity? mused Pope Nicholas. He seemed as if he were born to be a king.

But Mikhail knew exactly what it was about this old German priest, with broken English, that made him seem to carry himself with the air of a head of state. He was the Pope in disguise. Mikhail had never imagined that he would meet a Pope for the first time in his life under such circumstances, where he could not fall on his knees to kiss the Fisherman's ring. Perhaps, he hoped, there would be another time and place where proper decorum would be possible.

Father Belarus only allowed Father Jacob one glass of champagne. Then he whisked him out of the gymnasium and back to the rectory, where the Pope had much work to do. It was Sunday, and servile labor was not permitted on the Lord's Day. But intellectual work, which tended to ennoble the soul, was permitted. The Pope, former university professor and author of numerous scholarly books, would begin drafting the proclamation that would soon be issued from Rome, announcing the consecration of Russia. As Nicholas settled into his comfortable desk chair, at a window in his third-floor corner bedroom overlooking the park-like cemetery, he

switched on his laptop computer and asked Father Belarus to bring his breakfast, and a pot of coffee with cream, to his room.

After that he was not to be disturbed except in an emergency, and would probably be writing all afternoon long. If he were able to make sufficient progress on his urgent task, then at five o'clock he would like to relax by playing duets with Father Romanov on the two grand pianos in the parlor, before supper. Father Belarus was charged with making sure Father Romanov would be prepared with some appropriate music.

Meanwhile, back in the gymnasium, Mikhail had cornered George and Katarina Peterson, and was inviting them and Mariya out to dinner as his guests. All of them were on their second glass of champagne, which fortified Mikhail with more courage than he might otherwise have been able to muster. Defending himself in war zones or against punks in his clinic was easy. He was trained for that. But greeting the parents of a beautiful young woman, who had swept him off his feet, was quite another.

In this, he was in foreign territory, untrained, and, to be blunt, basically scared stiff. Mikhail nervously suggested the Coach Insignia, a revolving dining room on the seventieth floor of the Renaissance Center in downtown Detroit, just a fifteen minute drive from the Cova. Perched atop the General Motors World Headquarters, the Coach Insignia was named for the Fisher Body Carriage logo that for decades graced the metal floor panels inside the doors of General Motors vehicles. The Peterson's were of course delighted at the invitation, being anxious to become acquainted with this man about whom their daughter had been talking incessantly.

Less than an hour later the four were seated in a window-side table overlooking the Detroit River and Windsor, Ontario. During the next hour, their table would slowly move around the circle, giving them a gradually shifting view of the entire Detroit metropolitan area. But the Peterson's perspective on their future lives would also be changing during that hour.

Mikhail explained that he had been honored to meet young Mariya after her recital in Kalamazoo recently. Being taken with her musicianship, he had invited her for coffee afterwards. In the course of that visit, they had shared the stories of their respective lives and histories, and came to understand that both were Russian royalty. He had mentioned to Mariya that his high school name had been Petrov, but that his family had retaken the ancestral Romanov name around the time when he went off to college. He was in fact the only living direct descendant of a Russian emperor, through an unbroken male line free of morganatic marriages. That meant he was arguably the crown prince of Russia, should the monarchy one day be restored.

Since he had never considered restoration of the Russian monarchy to be an important possibility, he had not previously been active in the Romanov Nobility Organization, nor had he attended the annual Romanov Balls in New York City. But Mariya had encouraged him to go this year. He had therefore inquired, and the Romanov family had extended to him an invitation to attend, and to bring Mariya and her parents as his guests. This would be allowed only because all of them were of European royal

descent.

“We only learned about that recently,” said Katarina. “We were so surprised.”

“The thought of attending a ball for royalty was hardly on our minds,” affirmed George. “Visiting New York on short notice can be prohibitively expensive.”

“Surprisingly, my brother’s friend Father Herald became aware of this opportunity for us – I think Father Kiril must have told him – and he has arranged with Don Brown, the retired mayor, wealthy businessman, and philanthropist – to fly us out to New York in his private jet on Friday afternoon. He will let us stay free for two nights in the Brown Group’s three-bedroom condominium suite on top of the Waldorf=Astoria, the very hotel where the ball will take place on Saturday evening. All we need to do is rent elegant evening attire, and practice our ballroom dance steps. Especially the waltz.”

Suddenly, everyone at the table began to see this adventure as a fairy-tale royal ball being generously set before them for the taking. The fact that it might set in motion a series of events that would change their lives forever was not foremost on their minds. They were focused on more immediate concerns, like evening gowns and fairy tale ballroom dancing.

Mariya had no thought that this would in any way permanently impact her relationship with her beloved Mark. She assumed he would be thrilled at her opportunity to mingle among Russian royals. Her parents, however, being older and wiser, recognized the possible hand of divine providence in these events. This adventure would provide an important opportunity to carefully assess the character of this admittedly charming older man to whom their beloved young daughter was obviously so strongly attracted – even if she hardly admitted that attraction to herself.

For Mikhail, it would be another opportunity to get to know Mariya, and to observe how she interacted with many new people. As the dinner progressed, all of them experienced a growing sense of excitement and anticipation about the New York trip in just six days. Mariya felt she could hardly wait to tell Mark all about it – and yet she was beginning to realize that, to him, it might not seem very delightful at all.

After careful consideration, Mikhail and Kiril had decided it was best not to inform any of the Peterson family about the threat he had received, or of the fact that he and Kiril believed media publicity would be the best protection for all of them against any attack by rogue members of the Romanov family.

Meanwhile, back at the rectory, Pope Nicholas’ fingers had been flying over the keys of his laptop computer. A proclamation to the bishops and to the world had taken shape in his mind, and was now being recorded on the papal laptop hard drive. Pope Nicholas had the draft of his proclamation, including the consecration formula, ready for editing by Father Herald by five o’clock Sunday evening. While the editing proceeded, Pope Nicholas unwound by playing classical piano duets with Father Romanov in the

Cova rectory parlor until seven o'clock. Pope Nicholas then reviewed the final draft with Father Herald, and at eight o'clock called for his trusted Swiss guard Jacques, who was an expert in ultra-secure communication to and from the Vatican.

The text of the proclamation was to be transmitted securely during the night to the Vatican Press Secretary, who was charged with proclaiming it orally from the balcony of Saint Peter's Basilica on Monday evening at eight o'clock Rome time. While it was being read aloud in Latin from the balcony, it was to be simultaneously transmitted electronically to all Catholic diocesan headquarters in the world, and to all major world news outlets, with official Vatican translations into all major languages. The world media would be given just six hours advance notice that an important papal announcement was going to be read in Saint Peter's Square, so that they would have time to set up their cameras and get some correspondents in place for the initial reporting, but no time for excessive foolish speculation.

In just one day the world would begin to anticipate the formal consecration of Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, in a ceremony once and for all finally complying in every detail with the precise request of Our Lady of Fatima. The media firestorm would begin, and the forces of hell would unleash their full fury – knowing that their time was short to avert hell's definition of disaster, a beginning of the restoration of Christendom and all its blessings. And out of that tempest, Heaven had promised to inaugurate a new era of world peace. It would bring about a new period of the peace of Christ in the reign of Christ, beginning in Russia. At the suggestion of Father Herald, Nicholas included in his proclamation the words of the prophet Malachi: "Unto you that fear My Name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in His wings." (Malachi 4:2)

Nicholas asked Father John Herald to return to Rome as his personal deputy, to oversee all the preparations for the consecration ceremony. A special document was drafted, deputizing Father Herald to act on Nicholas' behalf in every way necessary to ensure that the consecration ceremony could take place as ordered.

Nicholas knew that there would be hundreds of details to be decided, and that he could trust Father Herald better than anyone else to ensure a dignified and impressive ceremony, worthy of the honor due to the Mother of God. At Nicholas' request the Brown Group jet was made immediately available, and by early Monday morning Father Herald was on his way back to Rome, arriving in time to be present on Monday evening when the proclamation would be read from the balcony overlooking Saint Peter's Square.