

Samantha and Uncle Boris

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Part I

Chapter 1

Samantha loved to enter contests. What kinds of contests? Mostly the kinds that gave prizes for writing clever things. And she was just learning English, so she especially looked for contests that would let her write clever things in this new language. It was just such a contest that launched her and her family into a grand adventure....

At first, she found contests in magazines. Then the school in her little Russian town got its computers connected to the Internet. Now she spent much of her spare time between lessons searching for the things she liked – stories, games, music, and of course, contests.

Samantha's class was studying what children ate in different parts of the world. She learned of a strange, dark, bumpy fruit called an avocado that was not sweet at all, and it had a huge seed inside called a pit. She wondered if children were made to eat them when they had been bad while the other kids got yummy fruits – like the berries that grew wild on bushes on her way to school.

Then she found a contest all about avocados! It was on an English-language Web site, and it was a little hard to understand. But Samantha understood that a whole lot of avocado growers in America got together and wanted someone to help them advertise their ugly fruits. *I bet they need a lot of help selling those things!* thought Samantha. She felt sorry for the farmers, almost as much as how sorry she felt for the children that had to eat them instead of sweet berries.

The contest rules seemed simple, which was good, because Samantha was not yet very good at translating complicated English instructions. It seemed that all she had to do was write a sentence or two describing what was best about avocados. But then, since she had never seen one up close, and had never tasted one, she realized that although the rules were simple, she would have to use a lot of imagination to follow them.

Why was it worth all the effort to follow the rules and win the contest? Because the first prize was a week-long trip to California in America! Wouldn't that be amazing – crossing the ocean and visiting people who spoke English and seeing big cities and shopping malls and amusement parks and movie-making and.... Well, it was just too wonderful!

On her next turn at the computer, Samantha went immediately to the contest site. She had not yet come up with a good sentence about avocados, but she was sure that she could create something magnificent. Minutes ticked by, and other children in her class kept asking her if she would give up her turn at the computer, since she didn't seem to be doing anything with it. No, she told them, she was THINKING with the computer, and she had a hard puzzle to solve, so she needed to be left alone. Then she looked up at the clock and saw that she had only a few minutes left, so she quickly put her fingers in the correct typing position and typed in her best English:

I love avocados because they make me feel all green and bumpy in my tummy.

She looked at what she had written and immediately felt embarrassed. That was a really silly sentence, and actually kind of stupid. But time was up, so she clicked on the button that said "Submit" and quickly took away that Web page so no one would see what she had done. She felt glum for the rest of the school day.

When Samantha got home, she found just the thing to take her mind off of her embarrassing contest episode. Her baby brother Dmitri was playing on the floor with kitchen items, and although he made a lot of

noise, he was just too cute and too funny to make him stop. Samantha sat down on the floor and played with him, naming the things he picked up: a lid, a spoon, a spatula, a pot, and so on. (She wished she had learned enough English to tell him the names of all those things in a second language. Just imagine how cute he would show himself to be – and how smart a big sister he had!)

Of course, after a while, it was time to get up and help her mother with chores and dinner preparations. Her father would be home from his factory job soon, and the best part of the day would come when the whole family would sit down to supper and chat about the day. Samantha just hoped they wouldn't ask her anything about using the computer at school today....

Chapter 2

You might be wondering if Samantha is a common name in Russia. It isn't. Samantha got her name long before she was born. When her parents were just a young couple dating each other, her future father took her future mother to a movie – a British movie. In the movie, there was a courageous young girl named Samantha. She spied on a terrible villain, risking her life, and saved her whole town from tragedy. Right then, future-Samantha's-mother decided that if she ever had a daughter, she would name her after this brave movie character. Was it a good choice? Did her actual daughter turn out to be as magnificent and as brave as the movie Samantha? You can decide for yourself as you read about her....

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Several weeks went by, and Samantha had entered five or six other contests – in her own Russian language, where she felt more confident. She even thought she had a good chance of winning a couple of them. One was a baby contest, and she wrote all about her baby brother and how clever he was and how much he would love the prize swing set. The other was a contest to describe her favorite singing star, and she could win a trip to a concert in the big city not far away.

Then one day a message showed up from the avocado contest people! What did it say? Samantha called her teacher over to the computer to help her translate the message. All the children in her class came crowding around as well, offering their help with the words. Finally they sounded out all of it:

*“Con-grat-u-la-ti-ons! Your en-try has been chos-en over 5,000 o-ther en-tries to
be our Av-o-ca-do Slo-gan Con-test win-ner!”*

She was so excited that she fell back in her chair. Fortunately, the crowd of children around her kept her from reaching the floor. Everyone cheered and some even started running around the room waving their arms, as if *they* had won the contest!

Samantha had seen that word “slogan” when she entered the contest, but she hadn't taken the time to find out exactly what that word meant. Now her teacher explained that a slogan was a short phrase that would help people remember a thing easily and pleasantly – like the words that showed up under the pictures in soft drink advertisements.

As the teacher walked around the room calming everyone and restoring order, the meaning of it all began to sink into Samantha's mind. Here she was, the contest winner, and she had never tasted their fruit, and her really stupid sentence was going to be the new avocado slogan, and she hadn't really understood what that even meant! Now she was more embarrassed than when she entered the contest! The thrill of victory was suddenly mixed with regret. What if the contest people found out what she had done – and what she had NOT done? Would they take away her prize? Would her friends at school laugh at her? Would her family be ashamed to show themselves in public? Would they have to move to another town? All the children – and the teacher – were shocked to turn and see Samantha standing by the computer, covering her face and crying.

Chapter 3

Over the next few days, Samantha tucked away all her regret and started looking at the bright side of winning the contest. She had come home with a print-out of the message from the contest people, with her teacher's translation written in the margins of the paper. Her mother – and later her father – read the message translation with a mixture of wonder and pride and worry.

“Samantha, dear,” she finally said, “it says you will be going to California in America for a whole week! How can I bear to be without you for so long?”

“But Mother, it says I can bring my family with me.”

“No, Samantha, it says you can bring one adult with you. Now look: Your father can't leave work just like that, and I have to take care of Dmitri and the house. You can't expect either of us to walk away from our responsibilities. So how will you go to America? On your own? I won't hear of such a thing!”

Samantha was on the verge of tears. Her mother was right, after all, but the disappointment was so enormous. And then a big booming voice came from outside the house.

“Hallo! Anyone home?”

It was Samantha's Uncle Boris – her mother's “little” brother – who was bigger than Samantha and her parents all put together. Uncle Boris lived outside a tiny village a few kilometers away. (Samantha had learned that in America, you would say a few “miles” away – and a mile was almost twice as long as a kilometer.)

Samantha ran to the door to let Uncle Boris in. She loved her uncle, because he was so funny and kind. And he really paid attention to whatever she wanted to talk about. She also loved the way he played with Dmitri so carefully, even though he was a giant of a man.

He walked the giant. He really did have to stoop a little to get through the door. But what most people noticed was not his height, but his thick black beard and the smile that was almost always behind it. And then they noticed his big belly. A giant indeed – but a gentle one.

But today was different. Samantha had heard Uncle Boris' deep voice, and it gave her courage – and an idea. When he was only two steps into the house, she barraged him with her plans and pleas.

“Uncle Boris, you are an adult and you are responsible because you were even in the army and I won a contest and I can go to California in America and I need a responsible adult with me and you are responsible and could you please come with me and could you please tell my mother and father that I will be safe with you and and and and...” Samantha was running out of words and breath – and Uncle Boris was confused.

“Whoa, child! What is all this? Who is going to America? Is this for fun? Is it punishment? Why don't you want to live with your parents anymore?” Uncle Boris was VERY confused.

Samantha's mother understood what was going on, and why Samantha suddenly bombarded her uncle with too much information. She spoke before Samantha had a chance to reload her lungs and start talking again.

“Boris, come over here and sit down and let me explain. Samantha has entered a contest – as usual. But this time she won, and the prize is very big: a trip to California in America – for a whole week. Now Boris, she thinks that since her parents can't leave their responsibilities, you could be the adult who goes with her on this trip. Boris, I know you love Samantha, and I know you would love to do anything she asks of you, but really, this is too much.”

Uncle Boris sat in silence for a while, looking down. Then he looked up at his sister, then at Samantha with her big, watery, pleading eyes. Then back at his sister.

“Sister dear, do you trust me to take care of Samantha when she visits my farm?”

“Yes, of course, Boris, but that is only a short distance from here.”

“But when she is with me at my farm, we could be hundreds or thousands of kilometers away, could we not? And you trust me, do you not?”

Samantha's mother could see that Boris was starting to side with Samantha. He might even agree with her daughter and be willing to cross the ocean with her!

"Boris, you have never been a parent. Can you imagine how frightened and worried we would be if Samantha was without us and far away?"

Uncle Boris looked down. No, he had never been a parent, and whenever that fact was brought up in a conversation, he usually felt defeated. Samantha saw what was happening and choked back her tears. Then Uncle Boris spoke again, never raising his head.

"Sister, I am sure I will find a wife someday, and I do want to be a parent – a good one. How can I convince my future wife that I am a suitable husband and father if she learns my sister cannot trust me with her daughter on a long journey?"

Samantha's mother looked shocked. She had never heard such an argument from her brother, and it made her feel pity for him. She knew that her little brother was a good man and would make a wonderful husband and father someday, if only a woman could see the prince inside the giant. Now it was her turn to feel defeated, and she spoke next:

"Boris, stay for dinner and let us all talk about this big decision."

Uncle Boris finally raised his head and smiled gratefully at his sister. Then he turned his head toward Samantha and gave her a wink.

Chapter 4

It was settled. Samantha would go on her winning journey with Uncle Boris. She beamed when she announced this at school, and everyone wanted to ask her questions about the trip. Of course, she had no answers, because the contest organizers had only just received her acceptance.

A few days later, a new message arrived from them. They were astonished that Samantha lived in Russia, not in the United States as they thought. There were new instructions for her and her adult chaperone. Samantha didn't pay much attention to them, because she figured that her parents would take care of all the details for her. But she did pay attention to one item in the message. It said to look for a photographer coming to her house soon.

A photographer! Wow! That meant that her picture was going to be put up somewhere – maybe in a magazine, or on the Internet! Maybe she would be recognized by people all over the world....

Later that week, a photographer did show up at the house. He was from the big city, hired by the contest organizers to take a picture of a young girl who had won their prize trip. The photographer didn't know any more than that. He was supposed to take some pictures and send them over the Internet to some people in America who would pay him. But he did have one other instruction that he had to follow. He had to take Samantha's picture while she held an avocado.

So on the day he arrived, Samantha and her family saw a man drive up in an old car. He got out and opened the trunk, pulling out a metal suitcase and a small grocery bag. The door was already open for him, and he stepped inside the house and was greeted by the whole family.

"Good day, sir," said Samantha's father. "Welcome to our home. Here is the prize winner you want to photograph."

And there was Samantha, wearing her brightest smile and her brightest clothes. She wasn't sure what to do, so she curtsied in front of the photographer, as if he were royalty. The photographer laughed.

"Child, I am just a picture-taker from the big city, not a prince from a faraway land!" Samantha turned a little red from embarrassment, but thought that anyone from the big city deserved a formal welcome. She had no idea how informal people were in the city.

The man took Samantha out to the backyard, where there were flowers he could use for a backdrop. The whole family followed, with Dmitri in his father's arms. Then the man opened his case and started setting up his equipment. Amazing! In a couple of minutes, he had assembled a camera on a tripod, then a small silver umbrella on another tripod. He placed all this near the flowers along the fence.

Samantha giggled. "Sir, I don't think it's going to rain today. And even if it did, that umbrella would not do a very good job."

The photographer smiled at her. "This is no ordinary umbrella, my girl. This is a reflector. I am going to turn it just so that light will bounce off of it and shine on the parts of you that are in the sun's shadow. Then the pictures will look perfect instead of just okay."

Samantha wasn't sure she understood, so she watched carefully as the photographer brought a chair from the kitchen table and placed it near the umbrella and in front of the flowers. Strangely, he pointed the chair not toward the camera, but at an angle away from the camera.

"Now sit down here. No, not like you sit when you eat dinner. Sit near the front of the chair, and sit up straight. No leaning back."

The photographer took a couple of pictures, and Samantha was glad it was over, although she thought it a shame that she had dressed up for such a brief session.

"Oh, no, don't get up. We've just barely started!" called the photographer. Then he walked over to Samantha and put one of her arms in a ridiculous and uncomfortable position and put something hard in her

hand. She looked down and realized it was an avocado! Then he turned her neck in an even more ridiculous and uncomfortable position. Then he told her to smile. Smile? She thought that there was nothing to smile about. This man was crazy and why didn't he take pictures of an acrobat or a gymnast if he wanted odd poses that made muscles sore on regular people?

But smile she did, as best she could. And the session went on, with the photographer walking over to her and rearranging her neck or shoulders or hair or torso. And reminding her not to lean back or slouch and to keep smiling. And making her hold the avocado on her lap, by her ear, and even over her head!

Samantha was starting to get discouraged and angry. She couldn't even look at the avocado in her hand, or put it up to her nose and smell it. But then the photographer said something about how she was cooperating much better than that singing star he had to photograph last week. Wait! This man took pictures of famous people? Then she remembered all the pictures she had seen in magazines and on the Web of her favorite stars, and she wondered if this man had taken any of those pictures. And come to think of it, some of those pictures showed famous people posing in some positions that were probably uncomfortable. And yet the pictures were interesting and fun to look at.... Samantha brightened and decided to be like the singing stars and other famous people. She would do all these uncomfortable things – because it was the price one had to pay for being famous!

After about a half hour, the man said he was finished. He looked at his watch and said he had to hurry to his next appointment far away. Samantha's parents kept asking him politely to stay and talk and drink tea with them, but he acted very professional and just packed up his equipment and loaded them into his car. Samantha stood there, still a bit sore and dazed, and when she looked down, she saw the avocado in her hand. The man saw it, too. He walked over to Samantha and reached out his hand to shake hers goodbye, and with his other hand he grabbed the avocado and said, "Almost forgot my lunch!" And then he was gone.

Samantha was stunned. She was famous, or going to be, but she still hadn't smelled or tasted an avocado! Her parents turned back to the house, and she shrugged and did the same.

Chapter 5

Two households, two packing scenes. At one house, a mother is trying to figure out what to put in her daughter's suitcase for a week in California, far off in America across the ocean. Her daughter didn't have that many clothes to choose from, and there was no time or money to go out shopping for anything new. But a few friends and neighbors had offered to help with some clothes their daughters had outgrown. So there is no lack of items to pack. The problem is deciding which things to put in the small suitcase that had belonged to her family for many years.

What complicates matters was a recent message from the people who were organizing the trip. When they discovered their winner was a girl from Russia, they had changed the travel plans. Instead of flying straight to Los Angeles in southern California (where the avocados grow), there would first be a flight to San Francisco in northern California. This was such a curious thing! What could they have in mind? What was so important about the northern part of California?

The daughter is a clever child. She first looked on a map to trace her upcoming journey. She saw the distance between the two big cities – San Francisco and Los Angeles – and wondered how they would get from one to the other. Then she used the Internet at school to find out the weather in the two cities. Los Angeles was practically the same weather all year long – very pleasant, with comfortable temperatures.

But when the girl looked up “weather in San Francisco,” she got all sorts of information that made no sense. Some days were cold and foggy and some days were warm and sunny. Then she found a quote from a famous American writer named Mark Twain, who said that the coldest winter he had ever spent was July in San Francisco! What could that mean? Cold winter in July? Was this man confused as well as famous? Was there a San Francisco in Australia, where the seasons were just the opposite of what she was used to? Such a puzzle! What was her mother to do with all this information?

But the daughter is more concerned with the destinations than with the packing. She wonders what was there to see and do up in the north? And what would she miss that another contest winner would have gotten to do? Of course, being away from where the avocados grew for a few days would give her a little extra time before it was discovered that she had never eaten one. So maybe the detour would not be all that bad....

Meanwhile, in another house, a man is packing. He is a big man with a big duffle bag. The bag is a bit worn, but if a person looked closely, an army insignia would still be barely visible on the green canvas. This man has very few clothes to choose from, so packing is a very simple matter for him. Into the bag go a couple of pairs of pants – pants big enough for two regular grown-ups to fit into. And then in go a few extra-large shirts and some underwear and an old navy-blue sweater made of wool. Are the clothes folded neatly before going in? No! Everything is stuffed in, as you would stuff a turkey with dressing, or stuff cabbage leaves with spiced meat, or stuff a potato with sour cream and onions, or stuff an avocado with...well, you get the idea. The packing is quick and efficient, even if it isn't very careful.

Lastly, there is the matter of choosing headwear. Which one? His cap from the local tractor dealer, or the fur-lined winter cap with ear flaps that could go up or down? Both are favorites, but decisions have to be made. He considers the two, even checking himself in the mirror with each one. Finally, the fur-lined cap goes on the head and the tractor cap goes in the duffle bag.

Done!

Chapter 6

It was a long plane flight – very long! It seemed that the plane kept going on forever, and the land below went on forever. But then it was ocean down below, and *that* seemed to go on forever! At one point, the plane landed, but Samantha was sleeping, so she missed it. It was all very boring, once the excitement of flying for the first time went away. So she looked at magazines and watched a few movies, and took a lot of naps. Finally, one nap was interrupted by an announcement telling all the passengers that they were about to land in San Francisco – in California in America!

Chapter 7

Uncle Boris put Samantha in front of himself as they left the plane. He did this for a few reasons. First, he figured that people would let a girl go by them, or even in front of them, but they might not want to meet up with a big man with a beard. For another reason, he thought it would be the safest way to keep track of Samantha, so she didn't get lost. And finally, he wanted Samantha in front in case there was something to read or say in English – which he didn't understand at all.

During the days preparing for the trip, and even on the plane flight, Samantha had tried to teach her uncle some English words that might help him. He got fairly good at “Hello” and “Thank you” and a few other common phrases, but he was shy about using them. He was just sure that he pronounced the words all wrong and people would not understand him. As for reading English words, Uncle Boris was hopeless. The alphabet seemed all wrong! If he learned to read one word today, then when he learned another word tomorrow, the first word flew out of his head!

So Samantha led the way off the plane and down a long indoor walkway, remembering to say “Excuse me” and “Thank you” in English to everyone near her – even fellow Russians who couldn't understand what she was saying!

At the end of the walkway, they came to an enormous room where people were standing around merry-go-rounds that had no horses on them. Instead, pieces of luggage spun slowly around and around, and every once in a while someone would grab a suitcase off the merry-go-round and either stand waiting for another one, or hurry off to some doors on the other side of the room. What a lot of confusion! Samantha could see what was going on, and she started to explain to Uncle Boris what they needed to do. But he stopped her and reminded her that in the army he had been on planes and knew all about picking up the luggage that had been stored in the belly of the plane.

Samantha looked at one, two, three merry-go-rounds and started to feel panic in her throat. Which one would spin their luggage around? Would someone grab hers before she found it? It was Uncle Boris who showed her what to do – look for faces of people who had been on their flight. That would tell them which merry-go-round to stand near.

Sure enough, they recognized some faces and walked over to them. And sure enough, after a few minutes, a green duffel bag appeared on the turning platform. Uncle Boris pointed and shouted, “See, Samantha, my duffel bag has arrived safe and sound, and I can just grab it when it gets close to us.”

Samantha felt relieved, and even decided that this was a fine game of find-and-grab. She loved to see how easily Uncle Boris scooped up his lumpy duffel bag as it slid by and made it land at his feet. She couldn't wait to see how he did that with her suitcase.

A few minutes went by, and her suitcase did not appear. Samantha began to feel the panic again. And then the big wheel stopped! Was that the end – no more luggage? Her eyes started to well up with tears. Uncle Boris noticed and tapped her on the shoulder. She looked up at him, and saw him pointing. She looked at where he pointed, and noticed several other people still standing around the merry-go-round. She also noticed that they were very calm, not at all upset like she was. Was this just part of the game? She didn't think she liked this part of the game.

Suddenly the room was filled with the sound of a buzzer, and a light went on above her merry-go-round. Then it started spinning again. Samantha was amazed. What a strange game! Did someone have to pay extra coins to make it start again, or was there a magician hiding somewhere who controlled the wheel? Before she could consider the possibilities, she saw her suitcase coming toward her. She jumped up and down and shouted at Uncle Boris, “Get it! Get it – before they stop the wheel or take it away!”

Uncle Boris just laughed and bent over a little. To him, Samantha's suitcase was such a little thing, and he grabbed it with one hand and plunked it down at her feet. She looked at the suitcase, then up at Uncle Boris, who stood silently smiling at the girl. She was so glad to have her suitcase, but she was even more glad to have her Uncle Boris to help her and not make her feel embarrassed by her childish behavior a few moments ago.

Samantha bent down to get her suitcase, but Uncle Boris beat her to it. He picked it up, then slung his duffel bag over his shoulder. Then they strolled to the big glass doors where people exited this noisy, confusing room. *Game over!* thought Samantha triumphantly to herself.

Chapter 8

Now they found themselves in another confusing room, but at least a quiet one. People stood in long lines, waiting for their turn at booths and tables. Above all this was sign with the word “Customs” on it. Samantha had learned that “customs” was an English word for all the traditional things people did and said and ate. She wondered if she was supposed to tell the people at the front of the line what kinds of customs she had back in Russia. She started listing some of her customs in her head, such as the foods she liked on holidays and poems she recited from memory and costumes and dances for special occasions. But she wasn’t sure which ones would be important to these people in America.

So Samantha asked what this room was all about, and Uncle Boris replied that he wasn’t sure, since he had never had to do this in the army. But then he remembered some things in his shirt pocket – two little books that he knew were very important. This must be the room where everyone from another country had to show a passport booklet! He patted his shirt pocket confidently, and he told Samantha that soon they would stand at one of those booths and explain why they had come to America. And he would show them their passport booklets.

Samantha began to recall this “passport” business. She didn’t understand it, but there had been a day she had to get her picture taken, and the photographer wasn’t like the one who came to her house. Instead, she had to go to a big ugly building, and there was a woman who made her stand straight, looking right at the camera. And she didn’t seem to care if Samantha smiled or had her hair brushed right. The woman took the picture and expressed satisfaction, and Samantha and her mother left the building after paying some money. Several days later her booklet arrived in the mail. And there was her picture, stapled onto the inside of the booklet. It looked awful – without a pretty background and with her face looking rather plain and expressionless. Yuck!

Her mother had put the booklet away, and later she gave it to Uncle Boris for safekeeping. So Samantha had forgotten all about it until now. Again, she felt so lucky to have Uncle Boris with her – a big man who understood the world and could explain things and protect her!

At that same moment, Uncle Boris was not feeling all that brave or capable of understanding the world. In fact, he was worried. He knew there would be someone at the booth who would speak Russian, but that person would be an American, and he knew he had to say just the right things to the person, or else they might have to go back to Russia immediately! He worried that he would not be able to explain about the contest and the prize and why he was here instead of Samantha’s parents.

So Samantha held her uncle’s big hand quietly and confidently, while up above, her uncle’s forehead was starting to glisten with sweat.

As it turned out, when it was their turn, they met a very kind American who spoke very good Russian. And when Uncle Boris fumbled his words, trying to explain the situation, Samantha spoke up and finished what he had begun. The man seemed impressed with her ability to make things clear, and even more impressed when she finished her little speech with the English words, “Excuse me, sir. Thank you.”

The man said he would need to look in their luggage, but not to worry. Samantha was shocked. A strange man was going to open her suitcase and look at her clothes and undergarments? She opened her mouth to protest, but Uncle Boris noticed and put a hand on her shoulder. She looked up and saw him shake his head very slightly with a serious look in his eyes, letting her know that this was not a time or place to make a scene or say harsh things.

So they put their luggage on a nearby table and let the man see inside. Uncle Boris acted very casual, so Samantha decided to do the same. Soon all that was over, without comment or embarrassment, and the two were ushered to another set of doors. On the other side, they saw people on the left and right, waiting for passengers coming out. Confusion and panic started to rise in Samantha’s throat all over again, but then she saw a man holding a sign that said very simply

Samantha
and Boris

Chapter 9

“Hello, my name is Francis Prine, your interpreter” said the man in very good Russian. “You must be Samantha, and you must be her Uncle Boris. Welcome to America, and welcome to San Francisco!”

Instantly, Samantha and Uncle Boris relaxed. Here was a man who would be able to understand them, and when he said he was *their* interpreter, they realized that he would stay with them all through their journey in America. How easy everything could be now! Samantha almost began to curtsy while Uncle Boris shook hands with the man, but then she thought perhaps that was overdoing things in America.

“The avocado growers hired me to escort you around to all the attractions that they planned for you. But first, let’s get you to your hotel so you can rest and recover from jet lag.”

Samantha didn’t know what that meant, but she did know that she felt strangely tired, and a rest would feel good. And anyway, it must surely be night in San Francisco, and nearly her bedtime. So what a shock when they walked through some glass doors and found themselves in bright sunshine! How could this be? Her body said bedtime, and the sun said middle of the day. And then she thought about the words “jet lag” and began to understand what they meant. All that travel across land and ocean must have mixed up her sense of time. The jet that brought them must have traveled faster than her brain – or something like that. Well, no matter what time it was, she was tired enough to sleep through any amount of sun.

The ride from the airport into the city was not that long, and Samantha was too drowsy to notice much out the car window, except that San Francisco seemed very bright. Was there a law that made everyone paint all the buildings white? Why would they do that? She thought that she might ask Mr. Prine about it, but the words never came out of her mouth. She was fast asleep.

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When she awoke, she found herself in a bed – a very comfortable bed, but not one she recognized. There was a window nearby, and she could see that it was light outside. *Oh*, she thought to herself. *It was daylight when we arrived, so I must have slept for a few hours. That was a good rest! And this must be a hotel room I am in.*

She jumped out of bed and saw that she was still wearing the clothes she had on in the plane. “This will never do,” she said to herself in a scolding tone. “I should get cleaned up and dressed with fresh clothes for supper. And I need to find Uncle Boris.”

By the bed, she saw a clock. It read 6:30, which meant that supper must be very soon. But before she could do anything to prepare herself, there was a knock on the door. She opened it, and there stood Uncle Boris.

“Good morning, sleepyhead!” he said with a grin.

“Uncle Boris, don’t say good morning when it’s nearly supper time. I’m really hungry, but I need to clean myself a bit before we eat. And where do we eat, anyway?”

Her uncle smiled at her mischievously. “I’ll say good morning if I feel like it, and you won’t get any supper anyway – because it IS morning, you sleepyhead!”

Samantha looked back at the clock by the bed. Was that really 6:30 in the *morning*, not evening? Did her brain need half a day *and* a whole night to catch up with the plane?

“Uncle Boris, tell me the truth, right now! Is it breakfast time or supper time?”

Just then, Mr. Prine stepped up behind Uncle Boris in the doorway. He was invisible standing behind the giant, but his voice was clear. “It most certainly is breakfast time, Samantha. You’ve been sleeping off your jet lag. Now we need to get downstairs to the restaurant by 7:00 so we can meet our schedule of what’s planned for the day.”

Samantha was all in a muddle. It really was morning. She really had slept – well, 12 hours, 14 hours, who knows? And now she had to tell her stomach to want breakfast, because it had missed the last suppertime when she slept right through it!

Quickly, she excused herself from the two men and went about the business of cleaning herself for the day. Then she picked out an outfit to wear, and hoped it was appropriate for California and for the weather, whatever it was going to be. Before running out the door, she grabbed a sweater, just in case that Mark Twain fellow was not so crazy about winter in July!

Chapter 10

Mr. Prine took them down in an elevator to the lobby on the main floor of the hotel. Now that would normally be enough to say about such a normal event, but it was Samantha's first time in an elevator – at least her first time awake in an elevator. What excitement! What a sensation as the elevator left her empty stomach up above to catch up a moment later! She thought about “jet lag” and figured there must be something called “elevator lag” to describe the funny feeling in her middle.

At the bottom, the door opened, but Samantha did not move to leave the elevator. “Mr. Prine, excuse me, but could I go up and down just once more? That was like a carnival ride!”

Mr. Prine looked at his watch and said, “Okay, just once.” But then he punched a button for the very top floor of the hotel, not the 4th floor where their rooms were. So the door closed and the elevator began to rise, and this time it felt like her stomach stayed with her but the elevator seemed to push up on her legs, or maybe her body was going slower than the elevator. This was wonderful!

At the top, Mr. Prine pressed the L button to go back down. What a ride! Samantha grinned and even let out a little whoop, and for the first time she looked up to see how much fun Uncle Boris was having. But Uncle Boris was not having fun. He looked a little green in the face, and his lips were tight, and he looked straight ahead with no expression on his face at all. *Oh dear*, thought Samantha. *That was rather selfish of me. I didn't think a little elevator ride would make Uncle Boris feel sick! Poor Uncle!*

At the bottom again, the door opened and Samantha squeezed her uncle's hand. “Thank you, Uncle Boris. You were very brave.” He smiled down at her, but he kept his lips closed as he wiped his forehead with his big handkerchief.

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Mr. Prine ordered breakfast for them after they told him what they wanted. Samantha listened to him talk to the waiter, and she was sure she recognized several of the words he spoke in English. She hoped that by the end of the trip, she might be able to order breakfast in English by herself. But then, what if they brought out raw fish instead of scrambled eggs, or radishes instead of toast, because she had said something wrong?

The food arrived – the exact foods they had asked Mr. Prine to order for them. And while they ate, Samantha asked, “Excuse me, Mr. Prine, can you tell us what we are going to do today? I hear that it is too cold in San Francisco for growing avocados.”

Mr. Prine replied, “Yes, it is too cold in this part of California to grow avocados well. Instead, we are going to see a bit of San Francisco, and then we are going on a little trip a little further north – to Sebastopol and a Russian fort.”

Uncle Boris jerked his whole body in his seat and spit out a bit of scrambled egg in shock. Sebastopol? Had they traveled thousands of miles just to visit a city only a few hours from their home? Why, he had even been to Sebastopol, to visit a distant relative who lived on the Black Sea. His experience there was not all that pleasant, and he didn't feel like going back.

Samantha also knew about Sebastopol, even though she had never been there. It was a famous city, where famous people did brave things in Russian history long ago. But that was back in old Russia, and not all that far from her home. Did this mean they were going back on a plane and getting jet lag again?

Mr. Prine saw their expressions and laughed. “No, not *that* Sebastopol. I mean one in America – in California. And from there, we'll visit a Russian fort nearby on the ocean.”

Uncle Boris finally swallowed the bite he had partially lost and leaned forward in his chair. “There is a Russian fort in California? Are there soldiers there? Do they need any help?”

“No, Boris,” explained Mr. Prine, “there are no Russian soldiers there. But you’ll see what *is* there and get a history lesson that just might surprise you. And I won’t say another word, because I don’t want to spoil the fun.”

Samantha and Uncle Boris started eating faster, knowing that there was some real excitement coming!

Chapter 11

Driving through the city, Samantha could see that not all the buildings were white after all. But most were light-colored, which made everything seem so bright. It was also noisy and crowded. But what amazed her was how hilly it was. It seemed that every street dipped down, then up, then down again. Mr. Prine took them to a street named Lombard that was not only hilly but twisty – like a snake had gone downhill and then humans had paved over its path for cars.

Samantha was told that San Francisco was also famous for its trolley cars that rode on train tracks through the city. But she had seen plenty of trolleys in the city near her town, so she was not very impressed – especially when she saw that people could just as easily take modern buses to get around.

At one point, Mr. Prine announced that they were coming to the famous Golden Gate Bridge. Samantha had seen pictures of it, and she was eager to travel on it. Sure enough, right around a bend in the road, there was the bridge: a huge reddish-orange structure towering up to the sky. As she got closer, she saw that there was actually more than one tower, with enormous steel cables draped between them. As they drove across, she was struck by several things in rapid succession:

First, the bridge was so tall that ships could pass underneath!

Second, when she looked on her left side (toward the ocean), she could see only a little way, because there was a fog bank hovering not far away!

Third, when she looked on her right (into the bay), she could see big ships and little sailboats all over!

Fourth, there was a strong wind that actually pushed against the car and made it sway a little!

It all happened so fast that she had no time to comment on any of these things. And when they had crossed to the other side, she started to speak, but something else came into her sight:

Up ahead was a tunnel – well, two tunnels, for traffic going each way. And rainbows were painted around the tunnel mouths!

The rainbow tunnel made her think of a book her teacher had read to her class, a book of folktales and fairytales from around the world. There were stories of forest elves and water sprites and leprechauns with pots of gold – at the end of a rainbow! And pookas, who could look human or like horses or like rabbits. And that made her think of Alice in Wonderland, chasing a white rabbit down a tunnel.

“Uncle Boris, Mr. Prine, please, are we going to Pooka Land?” Samantha asked excitedly in the dark of the tunnel.

Out of the tunnel (which was not very long), she could see Uncle Boris shrug his shoulders. He too had been mystified by all they had seen in the last few minutes, and as far as he was concerned, it would not be at all surprising if a pooka village came up next.

But Mr. Prine laughed. And as they sped along the lush green hills, he explained. “I haven’t heard the word ‘pooka’ in a long time – not since I watched an old movie called ‘Harvey’ that had a large white rabbit in it. No, we’re still in the regular world, although some people think this land just north of San Francisco is magical. In fact, the people who lived here before the white settlers came were sure it was magical. And they thought that mountain on your left was about the most magical place on earth.”

Samantha looked out her left window, and sure enough there was a huge mountain – green and proud in the sunlight. Where did that come from? How did a mountain grow up out of the ocean, around all these little hills? No wonder people thought this area was magical!

“That’s Mount Tamalpais, Samantha,” Mr. Prine continued. “If we had time, we could take a long winding road up to the top. Then you could see all around the Bay area.”

Samantha breathed a deep sigh of disappointment. Uncle Boris breathed a quiet sigh of relief. And on they traveled, northward to their next destination.

Chapter 12

“Yes, the town coming up is called Sebastopol, just like the city on the Black Sea,” explained Mr. Prine. “I heard a story that three or four towns in California wanted to be called Sebastopol, but that wouldn’t work, would it? So the story tells us that there was a fistfight one day, and the winner got to go home and keep his town Sebastopol, and the losers had to go home and give their towns new names. I don’t know if the story is completely true, but there you are. Anyway, it’s a nice little town with some shops and where we can get some lunch and visit an American school, Samantha. And it’s right where we need to turn west to go out to the ocean.”

When they got to the town, both Samantha and Uncle Boris craned their necks to see if there was any sign of Russian language or Russian folklore in the names of streets or stores. They were very disappointed to find none at all.

But it was a pleasant town, with colorful shops and friendly people. Lunch was fun, because they got to taste some new American foods: ice tea and tuna sandwiches and apple pie made with apples grown just down the street.

They drove a few blocks from the restaurant and came to a school. Mr. Prine told them, “I found out that this is the last week of school here in Sebastopol, so all the most important lessons are over. They will be glad to have visitors.”

Mr. Prine took them to the office, and the principal came over to greet them. “Hello! My name is Marjorie, and I’m the principal of this school. I’ll be glad to show you around, but I especially want to take you to a class of children about the same age as Samantha.”

Samantha was startled when Mr. Prine translated this to her. The principal had called herself by her first name! And was that what Samantha was supposed to call her if she wanted to ask the woman a question? Call a teacher or principal or anyone that important by a first name? Was this alright in California in America? Samantha decided to ask any questions directly to Mr. Prine, and let *him* decide what to call the woman.

They had been walking outside, surrounded by little buildings. The principal stopped at a door and said, “Samantha, the children in this classroom are all about your age. Let’s go in and meet them, shall we?”

Mr. Prine told Samantha what Marjorie had said, and Samantha was too confused to reply. This was the door to a classroom? The classrooms were all in separate little buildings, instead of all inside one big building with a long hallway connecting them? Who had ever heard of such a thing? Samantha just kept staring at the door, wondering how children in California in America could go to a school that had no hallway with doors and artwork displayed on the walls between all the doors.

Marjorie did not really wait for an answer anyway, but reached over and opened the door. Samantha peered inside, unsure what she might see in this American schoolroom. The principal gave her a little nudge to coax her into the room, and this is what she saw:

Children were all over the room, some standing, some sitting at tables, some sitting on the floor!

They were not all doing the same thing at the same time!

Some children were obviously older than others!

The walls were completely covered with artwork – crayon drawings, finger paintings, all types of art!

There were even things being displayed on strings hanging from the ceiling!

There was a little library of books in a corner, just for this classroom!

There was a large open cabinet filled with boxes and buckets of things for math and art and science and who knew what!

And there was noise! Children making noise! Not bad misbehaving noise, not wild playtime noise, but noise of reading out loud and explaining and discussing and asking questions.

And there was a teacher, but this teacher was dressed in purple and yellow and green – with red elf boots! – and she was walking around talking to groups of children and helping them and moving on to help others.

Samantha's eyes got very big, and her mouth opened and stayed opened with wonder and amazement. This was school in California in America? This was how children learned? How could they learn without desks in proper rows, and a proper teacher with practical clothing on?

Samantha looked over at the principal to see if maybe the elf-shoed teacher was going to get in trouble for all this, but Principal Marjorie had a pleasant, even proud look on her face. Then Samantha looked at Uncle Boris to see what he was thinking, and she saw a face that looked just like hers – stunned and confused.

Then it suddenly got very quiet as the children noticed visitors in the room. They looked at Samantha, then at Uncle Boris, and now *they* were stunned.

Marjorie did not seem to notice any of this, but instead just announced in a cheerful and somewhat high-pitched voice, "SarahJean! Children! We have some special visitors this afternoon. This is Samantha, who has come all the way from Russia on the other side of the earth to see you today. And this is her Uncle Boris, who is traveling with her, because her parents couldn't come on the trip. Would you like to clean up and come sit in a circle and ask questions to them?"

Instantly all the children began to put away whatever they were doing. For a few moments, the room was noisier than ever. But soon the children began to make their way to the front of the room to sit in a circle on a rug – as if they had done this many times before. Samantha wondered if American children had to sit on the floor a lot because no one had invented desks there yet.

When everyone was settled, the principal and the teacher (with only a first name!) sat on chairs on one side of the circle. Marjorie asked who wanted to ask a question, and please introduce yourself when you do. One boy raised his hand immediately and said, "Hi, my name is Xander, short for Alexander. Do you speak any English?"

Samantha understood his name and his question without help. "Yes, just a little," she said. The children giggled, and Samantha realized that her English might be correct, but it must sound very different from the way these children spoke. Her English had a Russian accent.

Another boy raised his hand. "My name is Nicholas. How did you get so big and how did you get such a big beard?" he asked, looking at Uncle Boris. The children giggled again.

When Uncle Boris had understood the question, he replied in Russian, "I am big because I work hard and eat good food from my own garden. And my beard is my pride and joy." Mr. Prine interpreted, and the children were impressed by this answer. No one giggled this time.

Samantha leaned over to Mr. Prine and whispered to him. Then he told the children, "Samantha wants you to know that in the old days in Russia, there were kings called czars, and two of them were named Czar Alexander and Czar Nicholas, just like these two boys."

Now the children oohed and aahed at this information, and the two boys turned and shook hands with each other.

Then a girl raised her hand. "My name is Everest. How did you get to come to America, and why did you come to our school?"

Samantha told Mr. Prine to tell the girl, "I won a prize for saying how much I liked avocados, and Mr. Prine wanted us to see a town named Sebastopol just like in old Russia, and see a Russian fort by the ocean later."

Everest spoke up. “Hey, I entered that contest, too! They told me my idea was good but not the winner. And they sent me a whole case of avocados!”

Samantha instantly liked this girl, and wished they could be friends – maybe by e-mail – when she got back home. She also wished the contest people had sent *her* some avocados!

Then Samantha whispered to Mr. Prine again, and he said to everyone, “Samantha wonders why you don’t sit in desks and wonders if you would like it if she tried to have some desks sent to you from Russia when she gets home.”

The children looked at each other in confusion and started whispering to each other, wondering what Samantha meant. Now Marjorie the principal spoke. “Please tell Samantha not to worry. We have desks in many American schools, but we prefer to use tables and rugs here at our school. But thank you for thinking of us so kindly, Samantha.”

Then SarahJean the teacher spoke. “Maybe Samantha and her uncle would like to stay a while and join us in our afternoon activities. Everest, could you show Samantha around?”

So the children got up from the circle and got out library books and puzzles and math workbooks, and SarahJean began to mill around, helping anyone who asked. Everest took Samantha’s hand and started walking around, with Mr. Prine close at hand to interpret back and forth for the girls.

Uncle Boris looked around and decided to help some boys working on a puzzle map of the world. He sat on the floor with them, and they looked up at him with amazement. They talked to him as if he could understand – which he didn’t – but he knew he could help with the puzzle, because he had always liked geography in school and remembered all the maps of continents and oceans. But he did not expect what happened next, as one, then two, then three more children walked over to the puzzle-solvers. Soon there were children leaning, then climbing on Uncle Boris, as if he was a big oak tree in the park. And he liked it! When SarahJean asked them to climb down, Uncle Boris felt strangely light!

But now it was time to leave. After many good-byes, it was off to the ocean, past the apple orchards and beyond.

As they drove, they found themselves following a river. “That’s the Russian River,” said Mr. Prine. “And soon it will empty into the Pacific Ocean and we will be nearly at our next destination.” Sure enough, they soon came to a fork in the road and turned right. And there was the Pacific Ocean glistening in the sunshine.

Samantha gasped at the endlessness of the water she saw out the window of the car. Not long ago, she had flown over an ocean, but being by it instead of above it impressed her immensely. Uncle Boris was nearly hypnotized with the sight of it. He had been to the Black Sea years ago, but here was a sight that was somehow the same and different. Then the two travelers turned toward each other and grinned. This was fun!

The next few miles of driving along the coast was an experience in dizziness, as the road twisted along the Pacific coast and up and down hills. Uncle Boris hoped it would end very soon – and it did. Mr. Prine pulled off the road and into a driveway. Fort Ross!

Chapter 13

The three got out of the car and entered the main building, the Visitors Center. Inside they saw displays that showed the history of the fort and the area around it. Mr. Prine began to explain to them that there were native people here originally, so some of the displays showed what their life was like. And then Russians came down from exploring Alaska and....

But Uncle Boris had stopped listening and had walked over to another display. Russians! Pictures of Russians, for sure, wearing clothes that Russian peasants wore for work and for holidays and parties. Mr. Prine smiled and took Samantha over to join Uncle Boris.

At the display, there was a video player, and Mr. Prine turned it on. It showed a Russian festival that had taken place a few years earlier at the fort, and now it wasn't just pictures of Russians, it was *moving* pictures! Uncle Boris shouted and clapped his hands like a child. And then he started singing along with the video, because he knew this old song, and he started dancing, because he had known this dance since he was a child.

Samantha was instantly embarrassed, seeing her uncle making such a scene, dancing and singing along with the video. She looked around nervously, wondering when someone would come over and ask them to leave. But instead, other visitors started coming closer, and clapped along with the music. And a man and a woman with official-looking name badges on came over, too. And they were clapping along with the music! So it was alright to do this sort of thing in America?

Suddenly Uncle Boris reached over and grabbed Samantha's hand and pulled her close, without losing a step of the dance. She knew what he wanted, because she had learned that dance at school by now. So she joined the dance, trying to do the steps correctly in front of all these people. But Uncle Boris didn't care if he got the steps exactly right or not. He was in Russia now, with his Russian friends, singing and dancing the night away without a care in the world – Boris, the life of the party, the man everyone wants to invite for a jolly good time!

When the video ended, our two dancers were given a loud round of applause by the other visitors. That's when Uncle Boris came out of his daydream and realized where he was. His face turned red. But when he saw the appreciation on everyone's face, he relaxed and started clapping with them.

The two people with name badges motioned for the two dancers to come over to them. They showed them pictures they had taken with their cameras, and told Mr. Prine to tell them that some of those pictures would be put in the display, and some of them would go on the Fort Ross website. When Mr. Prine explained that to them, they were amazed and embarrassed and grateful – all at once.

The woman with the name badge took charge of these special guests, and said she would give them a tour of the fort. So she walked along with Mr. Prine, and led them all out to see the fort behind this building.

What they saw was incredible in so many ways. The fort was made of wood – of timber – and 200 years old. There were old cannons and old farm and military equipment. There was a church and a cemetery and a barn, and a stockade to keep everyone safe inside. And there were signs near everything – in English and in Russian!

The woman explained (through Mr. Prine) that many of the objects they saw were not actually the original ones from 200 years ago, but were copies instead. That didn't matter to these guests. For Samantha, it was a moment of walking through history, of being a little girl long ago in a strange land that had dangers all around. It meant sleeping on a hard bed every night and doing hard chores every day – much harder than the ones she had to do at home in these modern days. And it meant owning few clothes and few other things – certainly no phone or computer or even an electric light to read by! But it was exciting because it was strange and because Mother Russia would be proud of her for being so brave to live in this wilderness.

For Uncle Boris, it was a moment of wonder and pride. He had been in the army, so he could imagine what it was like for soldiers to build these structures, and keep everyone safe, and explore the countryside all around – and wait for news from home far across the ocean. It would mean doing without many comforts and doing hard work for many hours a day. It would mean hunting and growing enough food for everyone. It would mean always being alert for danger coming from the land around or from the ocean nearby. But it also meant proudly doing a job for Mother Russia, and having fascinating stories to take back to tell friends and relatives for many years.

Now the woman took them outside the stockade where they could see the ocean in front of them. She led them down a path, and before long they were standing on a beach, with ocean waves lapping wildly to the shore. Samantha looked at the grownups and they all smiled and pointed to the water. So she hurriedly removed her shoes and socks and started chasing waves. She wasn't a girl in the wilderness of 200 years ago anymore. She was just Samantha, a child who was discovering the joy of romping in the ocean surf.

Now it was her turn to grab Uncle Boris' hand and lead him to a kind of dance. At first, he didn't seem to like the idea, but to please her, he also removed shoes and socks and ran up to the edge of the water.

Cold water! This was not the Black Sea, where tourists splashed and shouted. This was the northern Pacific Ocean, where goose bumps and numb feet came quickly to those who ventured into it. Uncle Boris had enough of it in a few seconds and retired to the moist sand out of reach of the waves, but Samantha remained, but only up to her ankles. So they walked and skipped along the beach, one in and one out of the water, chatting to each other and then stopping every once in a while to peer out to sea, as if expecting a tall wooden sailing ship to come over the horizon....

Chapter 14

The next day, Mr. Prine took them to the airport again. But this time, they boarded a smaller plane for a shorter trip. In a little while they were already landing, this time in southern California. They gathered their luggage and Mr. Prine took them outside. What a difference! Instead of cool air and occasional wisps of fog, the sun was bright and the air was warm. Uncle Boris stashed his fur-lined cap under his arm and marveled at the change in climate. Now this was more like the Black Sea resorts! All he needed was an ocean....

Samantha was equally struck by the change. She quickly unbuttoned her sweater, which she had worn all through her trip in the north.

“Mr. Prine, sir, I have learned that the famous amusement park is nearby. Will we be going to it today?”

“Not today, Samantha. Since we spent the last two days in the north, I’ll have to rearrange your other days to see if there is time for that. But we will be doing other interesting things that I’m sure you’ll enjoy. In fact, in just a little while, we are going to a movie studio!”

A movie studio! What an adventure! They could actually see a movie being made. And maybe they would see someone famous. She forgot all about amusement parks with rides....

They passed through a security gate with a guard and found a place to park the car. Mr. Prine took them to an office, where they met a woman who was in charge of visitors. She gave them badges to clip to their clothes, and she explained to Mr. Prine that they needed to stay with her at all times. Mr. Prine translated this to Samantha and Uncle Boris, who nodded their heads in agreement. Then the woman took them back outside and into a street with no cars – just pedestrians and little electric carts. Everyone looked busy, as if they were already late for some important meeting.

Their first stop was a building the woman called the cafeteria. When Samantha and Uncle Boris poked their heads in, they saw a cafeteria lunchroom. But instead of seeing couples and families as you would see in a regular cafeteria, the seats were occupied by the oddest assortment of people...

Some were in business suits, sitting back in their chairs, talking earnestly and looking important.

Some were in costumes, obviously on a lunch break from making movies – cowboys and space cadets and even a few fairy tale characters.

And some were in regular clothes, but they carried clipboards and cell phones and leaned forward in their seats and talked earnestly. At one table, two women and a man talked on their cell phones but constantly mouthed silent messages to each other.

The tour guide took them in to the room and to an empty table. She left to get snacks, and the whole time she was gone, Samantha and Uncle Boris twisted in their chairs, looking at the odd people and actions in the room, and hoping to see someone famous.

The guide returned with ice cream cones for everyone, then told them to eat while they walked around. So they licked ice cream as they walked (quickly) to another building. This woman was very friendly, but seemed to have other things on her mind – many other things – besides giving a tour to a couple of Russian guests.

Chapter 15

They passed through the doors of a building, but found themselves outside again! This was not an ordinary building, but instead an outdoor movie set, and most of the space was taken up by a large swimming pool! On two sides of the pool, there was movie-making equipment: cameras on wheels, lights and umbrellas, chairs and tables, and cables and wires all over. Samantha began to explain to her uncle that the umbrellas were not for rain, but for reflecting sunlight, but she was interrupted by a voice over a loudspeaker. Of course, Samantha did not understand what was being said, but she stopped talking and looked at Mr. Prine, who was listening intently.

Finally Mr. Prine looked over at the guests and whispered in Russian, “Okay, we have to be quiet now. The people here are about to start filming a movie scene in the pool!”

Samantha held her breath. This was the most unbelievable thing that could ever happen! She was going to see a movie being made, and then someday maybe even see the movie and afterwards tell her friends she was there!

Everything and everybody got very quiet. Then the tour guide’s cell phone rang, and the people around the pool frowned at her. She got very embarrassed and ran back through the door into the street to answer her phone, leaving the three visitors on their own.

It got quiet again, and a buzzer rang. Two men standing at one end of the pool pulled on a rope. A dolphin came gliding out from a hidden tunnel and into the pool. It swam around in circles, then crossed the pool and stuck its head out to greet a man who must have been its trainer. He gave the dolphin a treat, and the dolphin chuckled after it swallowed.

Samantha started to clap her hands with excitement, then remembered she had to be quiet.

Then a door opened at the other end of the pool, and out stepped a boy. He seemed to be just a little older than Samantha, or maybe the same age but just taller. He was surrounded by two adults, who seemed to be very attentive to him. One was talking to him in a whisper, and the other was looking around at all the people and equipment, as if he was making sure that this place was safe and secure. When the man saw the three visitors across the pool, he stared at them with no smile on his face, then put his finger up to his lips to remind them to be silent.

The boy stood by the pool, and the woman who had been whispering to him took off his white bathrobe for him. Under the robe, the boy was wearing blue swim trunks. He put his feet on the first step in the pool and sat down on the concrete above the water. The two adults backed away to leave him alone.

Wow! thought Samantha. *This boy must be really famous. He has people doing all sorts of things for him, and everyone has to be in place before he even comes out to the cameras!*

A man in a shaded chair yelled something, and all sorts of things started happening all at once.

The boy started kicking the water with one foot while staring across the pool.

The camera on wheels started rolling in an arc behind the boy, aiming down at him.

The trainer, standing far from the camera, waved his arms, and the dolphin started swimming toward the boy.

Another camera started moving along the edge of the pool, following the dolphin.

Samantha stared at the scene, fascinated by all the complicated things that were required just to make one little part of a movie. But her fascination was cut short by a shout from the man in the shaded chair and a buzzer noise. Everyone stopped and looked around. Samantha was puzzled. Did something go wrong? Did she make a noise that she didn’t even know about?

Whatever it was, it was clear that movie-making had ended suddenly, and Samantha looked up at Mr. Prine for an explanation. He was looking around and listening, too, and then he nodded his head and turned to his guests.

“Samantha, Uncle Boris, this happens all the time in movie-making. Some little detail goes wrong and they have to start over again. This was the first “take” for this scene in the movie, and they might end up doing two or five or even more takes until every little thing is right. In case you’re wondering, there was a cloud shadow that moved across the boy’s shoulder, and the director wanted nothing but bright sunshine in this scene.”

Hmmph! thought Samantha. *These people are so picky! What’s the big deal with a cloud shadow? If I was watching the movie, I probably would not have even noticed it.* She leaned over to tell Uncle Boris her thoughts about this delay, but noticed that he was not by her side anymore.

Uncle Boris was deep in his own thoughts, or daydream. When the movie-making stopped, he began to wander around the perimeter of the pool, but still in the shadows of the little bit of roof that surrounded the building. Samantha watched as he walked around, bending over to inspect loose pieces of equipment lying around or tapping them with the end of his boot, perhaps to see if they would come alive or spark with electricity.

He really wasn’t watching where he was going, being so absorbed in his inspections. Samantha was alarmed to see him getting outside the shade and closer and closer to the pool. She didn’t know if it would be alright to make a noise now, and soon it didn’t matter, because it was too late....

SPLASH!

Uncle Boris was in the water and waving his arms frantically and shouting – and everyone stopped standing around waiting and started staring and shouting with surprise and anger. Uncle Boris was ruining the scene for the next take!

Before anyone could do anything about it, the dolphin swam over to Uncle Boris. Maybe the dolphin thought Uncle Boris was in trouble, maybe drowning, and the dolphin shot under the water. Then it came up to the surface again, with Uncle Boris on its back!

Uncle Boris had been shouting and waving his arms, and he kept waving his arms, but his shouts turned to screams. Who knew that such a large man could have such a high voice? Samantha’s alarm was doubled, but instead of showing it, she started laughing. Laughing at Uncle Boris riding a dolphin with his arms waving in empty air and water streaming from his hair and beard and clothes!

The dolphin didn’t seem to mind the noise, and quietly swam to the edge of the pool and dipped down so Uncle Boris would slide down onto the steps where the boy had been. *What an incredibly talented and compassionate dolphin,* thought Samantha. *And what a scaredy-cat my uncle is! I wish I could ride a dolphin!*

Uncle Boris exited the pool with great speed. Who knew that such a large man could move so fast? In a flash, he was again in the shade at the edge of the building, sitting with his knees up to his face, shivering and gulping and gasping. Samantha ran over to him, hoping she could comfort him and hoping even more that people would forgive him and not kick them out of the movie studio forever.

While all this was going on, the director called several people over to talk privately. They stood in a circle around the director, speaking excitedly. Every once in a while one of them would look over toward Uncle Boris or point in his direction. Samantha was getting frightened, wondering if they were discussing whether to call the police – or the airport!

Then one of the director’s assistants walked over to Mr. Prine, and the two of them spoke for a few minutes. Samantha stroked Uncle Boris gently on the head and shoulder, but her attention was riveted on Mr.

Prine and the woman. Soon Mr. Prine ended his conversation and came over and bent down to speak to the two Russians.

“Well, this is most unusual! Uncle Boris, please calm down and listen. The director was angry at first when you fell in the pool, but when he saw Samantha laughing, he realized that it would be wonderful to have this happen in the movie! So he talked with the writers and the actors and the animal trainer, and they have all agreed that instead of filming the boy today, they want to film you falling into the pool again and getting rescued by the dolphin. But of course, you have to wave your arms around and scream like a little child, just as you did before.”

Uncle Boris had calmed down enough to listen, and what he heard from Mr. Prine horrified him as much as landing in water and being lifted up by a dolphin. His eyes got wide and because he still couldn't speak, he shook his head violently.

“But Boris, if you are afraid of the water, you'll see that you can stand up in the pool and it will only come up to your stomach. And the dolphin is very friendly and nothing to be afraid of.”

Now Uncle Boris was feeling one more emotion – shame – and this was just too much, especially in front of Samantha and all these strangers.

Still some notes higher and more quivery than his regular voice, all he could say was “Nyet, nyet, nyet, nyet!” Mr. Prine stood up, looked over at the movie crew, and shrugged his shoulders. The idea might be a good one, but no one was going to budge Uncle Boris to repeat something he was so embarrassed about.

Chapter 16

The next morning at breakfast in the hotel dining room, Mr. Prine announced, “Samantha, this is a big day for you. Today we will drive out to an avocado farm, and we’ll be met by some very important people. So be prepared to be a celebrity!”

Samantha knew what a celebrity was, because she had a favorite singing star who always had photographers around, and yesterday she had watched a movie star who always had grownup helpers and protectors. So would she have lots of shouting photographers around today, or serious-looking protectors? What kind of people would they protect her from? Somehow the word celebrity didn’t seem to fit her. After all, she won a contest and flew to America. That wasn’t at all the same as singing well or acting well in front of lots of people.

And then there was the matter of avocados. Going to an avocado farm would probably mean eating one. She was sure they tasted awful, and she wished she had had a chance to bite into one in private, so she could get over the shock of what this ugly fruit must taste like. Now she would have to do it in front of people, and pretend to like it!

These were her thoughts on the long drive away from the city and into farmland. But soon her thoughts were wandering. She thought of her mother and father. She thought of baby Dmitri and hoped he would remember her when she came back next week. She thought about what she might do if Dmitri didn’t recognize her and started crying when he saw her. And that made her think about games she played with her brother, and games she played with her friends, and picking berries with them on the way to school....

Suddenly her daydream was interrupted by a poke in the arm. Uncle Boris was nudging her with one hand and pointing out the window with the other. Samantha looked out just in time to see a big billboard with a picture of a girl sitting in a garden who

looked

just

like

Samantha!

Samantha swerved her neck as they passed the billboard, trying to see more of it. Was it really her? She looked at Uncle Boris, who was grinning a huge smile, his eyes twinkling with amazement and delight. She shouted at Mr. Prine in the front seat, “Mr. Prine, sir, I thought I saw myself in my backyard! Up on that sign by the road! Just like the photographer that day! And I wore my best dress and Mother and Father and Dmitri were there! Uncle Boris! Tell Mr. Prine you saw it, too!”

Mr. Prine laughed and said, “Samantha, I’m surprised you hadn’t seen one of those already. There are billboards all over America with that picture of you in the garden with the avocado!”

Samantha was shocked. All over America! Her picture! For everyone to see! A celebrity!

When all that had soaked into her brain, she asked, “Mr. Prine, sir, what do the words on the picture say?”

“Well, Samantha, what do you think it says? It says what you said to win the contest: ‘They make me feel green and bumpy in my tummy.’”

Samantha was stunned. They used her silly words – next to her picture! Now everyone would look at her and think she had said such a thing – which she had, of course, but that was beside the point. She was happy to be the celebrity with her picture with her best dress in her family garden. But a celebrity who said stupid things like that?

She gathered a bit of courage and asked, “Mr. Prine, sir, do you think those words are silly? Do you think the people we meet today will laugh at me for writing them?”

“No, Samantha, here in America, we call those kinds of words “catchy” – which means that even though people might not really talk that way, the words stick in people’s memory. So then they might think to buy avocados next time they shop.”

Samantha looked at Uncle Boris, who was just as puzzled as she. People had to remember hearing “catchy” words instead of just making a grocery list? Of course, she had heard and read some “catchy” words that made her think about asking her parents to buy certain things, but she was just a kid. Did grownups do that, too?

“Uncle Boris, do you know any catchy words that make you want to buy something?”

Uncle Boris looked sheepish. “Well, yes. Back home, I like to eat borscht, and I buy it in the store. There are lots of different kinds to choose from, but I buy a certain one every time because....” He hesitated, but finished when he knew she wanted an honest answer. “...because it has a picture of a pretty woman on the jar, saying ‘It’s the best borscht, Boris!’”

Samantha started laughing. Boris was such a common name in Russia, so of course the woman on the jar was not talking directly to her uncle. And Samantha knew that Uncle Boris knew that. But she realized that he felt flattered that a pretty woman would call him by name, so naturally he would buy that jar. She looked up quickly to see if her uncle disapproved of her laughing at him.

But instead of a frown, Uncle Boris started giggling, and the giggle turned into a laugh, and the laugh turned into a roar of hilarity. It really *was* silly, this business of “catchy” words to get you to buy things! Now they were both laughing, and tears started streaming down Uncle Boris’ cheek.

He wiped his face with his hand, and after a few more giggles, he said with as serious a face as he could muster, “Samantha, you should feel very proud to have your words by the picture on the sign. You made something ‘catchy’ and won a contest for it. Good for you!” And then he giggled again – and again. And then the car turned in to a long country driveway.

Chapter 17

Mr. McCracken looked like a farmer and walked like a farmer. He was tall and a little stooped over, wearing overalls and a blue work shirt and a straw hat. He had big rough hands that were used to working. And he walked with purpose, but never quickly.

Both Samantha and Uncle Boris recognized these things as Mr. McCracken strolled over to the car as the guests got out. Why? Because they knew farmers. And farmers are farmers, whether they farm in Russia or America. But there was something different about this farmer. He smiled. That seemed unusual, because farmers usually kept a straight face, unless there was something to frown and complain about. Did all farmers in America smile? Or just avocado farmers? Samantha wondered about these things, and also wondered what he had to smile about, growing a crop of ugly fruit that might be used to punish children.

Mr. McCracken shook hands with Uncle Boris first, and said some words that Mr. Prine translated as a welcome. Then the farmer crouched down and held out his rough hand to greet Samantha. As she shook hands, he said some other words, which Mr. Prine translated as “Welcome, and thank you for our new slogan.”

Samantha had all sorts of mixed feelings. She felt sorry for Mr. McCracken, growing something that needed a slogan to get people to buy it. She felt embarrassed for not knowing what an avocado tasted like. Yet she felt proud to help poor farmers like Mr. McCracken, who probably were nearly broke because people would rather buy sweet berries. But she put aside all those feelings and said simply in her best English, “Thank-you-and-let-ting-me-come-to-your-home.”

Mr. McCracken smiled even bigger at her English words. Then he stood up and said something to Mr. Prine, who explained to the guests, “Mr. McCracken was told that important people would be coming to greet you and get pictures of your visit. But since they aren’t here yet, he thought it would be alright to give you a tour of the farm now.”

So they began to walk, with Mr. McCracken leading the way. They walked past the house, two stories tall and painted white with green trim and borders. Samantha wished she could go inside and see an American farm family house, but before she could get disappointed, she heard some words spoken to Mr. Prine, who then said, “We’ll come back to the house later for a fancy luncheon. But first he wants us to see the groves before it gets too hot out here.”

Samantha was satisfied and decided to enjoy this tour. Before long, Mr. McCracken stopped by a large tree and pointed to some bright green ornaments hanging down. Mr. Prine explained that those were unripe avocados, which needed several more weeks to be ready to pick. Samantha walked up close to one of the baby avocados and whispered, “I know you would rather be a juicy berry, but life is not so bad as an avocado, is it?” She stared at it for a bit, as if she was waiting for an answer. Then she ran off to catch up with the others.

Mr. McCracken sauntered along and described his trees and his growing and harvesting methods. Uncle Boris was interested, being a gardener himself. But Samantha started daydreaming, sometimes staring at the ground as she walked, sometimes staring up through the avocado trees at the blue sky and clouds that made this such a beautiful day. On days like this back at home, she would be playing games with her friends outside, or playing catch with Dmitri in the backyard. Or lying down and watching clouds just like these....

And suddenly the sunny sky disappeared. Samantha looked up and realized they had walked into a shed. It took a few moments for her eyes to get used to the shadowy light. Then she noticed tables with planting pots, and small piles of little brown balls near them.

Mr. Prine was listening and translating to Uncle Boris. “...and then he takes a few avocados from each row of trees and plants the pits here in the shed. Later, they can be used to replace old or diseased trees.”

Oh! thought Samantha. Those little balls are the seeds of the avocados. But they are so big! So when a child gets an avocado for punishment, there must not be much to eat, because the seed takes up most of the room inside. That pleased her, because she was a child herself, and she didn't like long punishments.

As the group started out of the shed, Samantha noticed Uncle Boris hanging back a bit, not walking by the side of Mr. McCracken as he had been. Then she noticed Uncle Boris walking very slowly near a pile of avocado pits. He looked over at the farmer and Mr. Prine near the entrance of the shed, then quickly turned his attention back to the pits. A hand went out and grabbed two avocado pits, even as he walked, and stealthily put the hand in a pocket away from the view of the other men.

"Uncle Bor...." Samantha started to say, but he just kept walking casually to catch up with the others, and she realized that she better not say anything to anyone. Uncle Boris had taken avocado seeds without asking, and she had seen it! If she said something to him, it might attract attention, and if she said something to Mr. Prine, it would certainly attract attention! So she said nothing at all, but hurried out of the dark shed and into the light.

Chapter 18

As they approached the white farmhouse, they noticed more cars parked nearby – big cars, and a big van. Mr. McCracken opened the front screen door and let his guests into the living room. Samantha was getting to see an American house at last! Or she was until some extremely bright lights blinded her. Was this how Americans lit their homes? Couldn't they use little lamps instead, just like people in Russia?

She looked down to avoid the light, and when she looked up again, she saw several people standing around. Some wore business suits, and some wore very casual clothes but held cameras – big cameras supported on their shoulders. So this is why there were bright lights! The new guests who had come while they were on tour must have come in and set up for taking pictures. But who were these people, and why did they need such big cameras and bright lights?

After some introductions, Mr. Prine explained to Samantha and Uncle Boris, “Well, you really get to be celebrities today! The president of the California avocado growers is here, and so are reporters from a television station. He doesn't have much time, because he has to be somewhere else an hour ago, so he wants to greet you now in front of the cameras.”

Before Samantha could think about what she had heard, there was suddenly an arm on her shoulder – an arm belonging to a man in a business suit. She looked up and saw that the man had put his other arm around Uncle Boris' shoulder. (He was a tall man with long arms, but he was not nearly as thick as Uncle Boris.) Samantha was shocked. This man was acting as if he was an old friend of the family, when he was really a stranger! Mr. McCracken didn't act this way, and neither did Mr. Prine. But no one seemed to think this man's behavior was rude, because they all just acted normally. No, not normally. They actually seemed to give extra respect to this man. Was this how avocado presidents behaved?

Before she could finish her thoughts, the man turned himself and his two prisoners toward the lights and cameras. He started talking to Samantha and then to Uncle Boris. Of course, neither could understand a word he said, and he didn't seem to wait for them to answer anyway, but instead started walking them toward another room.

The next room was a dining room. There was a big table, spread with many dishes. Samantha realized she was hungry and wanted to sit down in one of the big chairs at the table, but the avocado president was still holding her shoulder. He looked down and said some more things to her, and she looked up at him, mostly out of habit. But he was already talking to Uncle Boris again, and he just looked confused. Then a voice behind the lights said an English word Samantha understood: “Perfect!” The bright lights went out, and the avocado president took his arms back. He quickly turned and walked back through the living room and out the screen door, along with a few other grownups.

Now maybe I can eat, thought Samantha, and she looked around to see if Mr. McCracken would offer her a chair. But no, something else happened instead. A woman holding a microphone grabbed Samantha's wrist and took her back outside. She looked back and saw Mr. Prine and Uncle Boris following. Once outside, the woman reached back and brought Uncle Boris forward so they were now side by side. She snapped her fingers at Mr. Prine and pointed to a spot near them. Mr. Prine obeyed quietly and stood off to the side.

The woman turned and started talking to a camera on someone's shoulder. Then she turned again, half to the camera and half to the Russians standing behind her. She said some things to Mr. Prine, who told them, “She says she is recording you for the television news. She wants to ask you questions and let me translate. She wants to start right now!”

The woman spoke, and Mr. Prine said, “She wants to know what you think of America so far?”

Samantha wanted to try using English again, just for practice. “It-is-very-nice-and-I-am...” But the lady waved her hand to stop her. Mr. Prine said, “She wants you to speak Russian, partly because you speak English so slowly and partly because she thinks the TV audience will find it more charming.”

So Samantha started again, in Russian, and said it was very nice and things were so modern and there were so many cars. Mr. Prine translated. Then it was Uncle Boris’ turn. He said he was impressed with how friendly people were and what fine weather there was for growing things.

Then the woman asked Samantha about the contest and how often she ate avocados at home and if it was her favorite food. Now Samantha felt a little wave of panic. How could she answer this? Then she realized that she could just answer part of the questions and maybe no one would notice.

“I was very surprised that I won the contest and even more surprised that the avocado people flew me all the way from Russia to America. And I got to take my Uncle Boris with me, who protects me and makes me laugh.”

Her answer made the woman smile and forget about the other questions about eating avocados. She talked some more at the camera, then said, “Perfect!” and the cameraman let the camera slide off his shoulder. She shook everyone’s hand, then turned toward the van to leave. Samantha’s head was in a whirl. So much going on and over so soon! Then her stomach growled, and she forgot all about her confusion.

Just then a white-haired lady came out of the house and ran up to the visitors. She spoke excitedly, waving her arms and gesturing in several directions. Mr. Prine told them that this was Mrs. McCracken, who said she had been hiding in the kitchen all this time waiting for the fancy people to finish their business. Now she wanted them to come inside and have lunch.

Samantha smiled at the lady, and the lady smiled back. Then she dropped down on her knees in front of Samantha and hugged her, just like a *babushka* – a grandmother. Samantha melted into the woman’s arms.

Mrs. McCracken and Samantha held hands as they walked back into the house. (Well, actually Samantha skipped while Mrs. McCracken walked.) The others followed. Soon they were all seated around the table. Mr. Prine explained, “The McCrackens thought the president and his staff would be eating here, too, so that’s why there’s so much food. And they also want you to know that almost every dish here is made with avocados. There’s avocado salad, avocado sandwiches, avocado soup, and of course, guacamole. But don’t worry, the dessert is not made with avocados!”

Samantha’s eyes got very wide. Never an avocado, and now everything avocado! What if she didn’t like it? And what was this “of-course-gua-ca-mo-le” sitting in a bowl like thick green goo? But Samantha’s parents had raised her to be polite, so she knew how to handle such a situation without hurting the cook’s feelings. She would nibble here and there and say she was still full from breakfast. Then she would hide her hunger until she could eat again later in the day.

Mrs. McCracken wasted no time with rules or formalities. She hovered over Samantha and filled her plate with some of everything. Then she sat down and waited for her guests to start eating. Samantha picked up a sandwich and bit off a little nibble from a corner. At the same moment, Uncle Boris scooped up some guacamole on a chip and stuck it in his mouth. Absolute shock went through both of them. This was *wonderful!* This was *magnificent!* This was out-of-this-world DELICIOUS! Samantha forgot her manners and gobbled the rest of her sandwich in a few gulps. Uncle Boris started scooping and eating and scooping and eating, like there was no tomorrow. Then he started on the sandwiches, and Samantha reached for the guacamole.

Mr. McCracken laughed, and Mrs. McCracken leaned over to him and whispered, “You’d think they hadn’t eaten all day – and they hadn’t eaten avocados ever in their lives!”

And Mr. McCracken whispered back, “Well, Mrs. Molly McCracken, they evidently have never eaten avocados the way YOU prepare them!”

Chapter 19

On the long drive back to the city, Samantha looked at scenery, hoping to see another billboard with her picture on it. But mostly she dozed, sleepy from eating all the goodies Mrs. McCracken had prepared. At one point, somewhere between sleeping and waking, she heard Uncle Boris singing softly to himself. The tune sounded like a lullaby, but the words were not familiar:

*I didn't know how lovely you were
when I held you in my hand.
Now I know what a treasure you are,
and you are mine forever....*

Samantha turned her head toward Uncle Boris, half-opening her eyes. His face had a dreamy look, and his hand was patting his pocket. She understood now what the song was about, and she slipped back into a sweet guacamole sleep.

Chapter 20

After the trip to the avocado farm, there wasn't much of a day left, so Mr. Prine excused himself and said he would be back in the morning. Samantha was wide awake now, having napped in the car, so she was eager to do something, even without Mr. Prine. Uncle Boris felt the same way. Plus, he had an idea: He wanted to go to an American store and see what he might like to buy.

"But Uncle Boris, we have no money, and especially we have no American money."

Uncle Boris made a sad face and agreed with her. "But we ought to find a big American store anyway, just so we can tell everyone back home what it was like."

Samantha liked the idea, so they took the elevator down and walked out into the busy afternoon sidewalk. Then she stopped and looked around. Where was a big American store? Which direction?

"Uncle Boris, perhaps we could stop someone and ask where to find a store. I think I can use enough English to find out."

So they stopped and watched the pedestrians on the sidewalk. Uncle Boris spotted a man who looked like he was intelligent and not much in a hurry. He got the man's attention by waving his arm toward him.

Immediately, Samantha began to speak.

"Please, sir, can you tell where big store is to buy?"

The man looked at Samantha with a puzzled look on his face, then looked at big Uncle Boris. Then he hurried off without speaking. Samantha was disappointed. She wasn't sure if the man left because she didn't speak correctly or if he was not interested or if he was afraid of Uncle Boris.

"Uncle Boris, let's try again, but this time, stand behind me and don't wave your arms too much."

Uncle Boris understood. Instead of waving his whole arm, he just raised his hand up near his face and waved like a little boy would, with an innocent grin on his face. A man in a flowered shirt stopped and took little earphones off his head.

"Please, sir, can you tell where big store to buy IS?" (Samantha thought that putting the "is" at the end of the sentence might help people understand, so she said it with great emphasis.)

"Wow! Foreigners with accents! Cool!" And then he proceeded to tell them about a store and how to get there and which streets to take and where to turn. "Got that?"

"Yes, sir, thank you," said Samantha politely as the man plugged his ears again and walked away.

Samantha started walking quickly in the direction the man had been looking when he gave directions, holding her uncle's hand. Then she stopped abruptly.

"Uncle Boris, I just realized: I didn't understand anything the man said!"

Uncle Boris laughed, and then Samantha laughed, too. "But he was looking in this direction, so let's keep walking. I'm sure there's a store nearby."

So they walked, and as they did, they heard music. Up ahead on the sidewalk, a young man with a guitar and a young woman with a violin were playing happily and vigorously, swaying with the music they were creating. When Samantha and Uncle Boris got close, they saw that the couple had laid their instrument cases open in front of them. Inside, there were coins and a few dollar bills from passers-by.

Samantha was enjoying the music, but she was suddenly yanked away by Uncle Boris. "What's the matter, Uncle Boris? Isn't the music lovely?"

Uncle Boris was walking quickly now, with great determination. "Yes, Samantha, it is lovely music. And it has given me an idea!"

When they were about three blocks away and could no longer hear the music, Uncle Boris stopped. He moved over to stand by a building, bringing Samantha with him. Then he took off the tractor cap he had been

wearing and placed it upside down on the sidewalk in front of him. Then he licked his lips, spread his arms, and started singing as loudly as he could!

Samantha's eyes got wide and she put her hands over her mouth. No, no, no, this was not happening! This couldn't be happening! What an embarrassment! What was he thinking?

But Samantha did have to admit that Uncle Boris had a beautiful deep voice, and he had chosen to sing one of her favorite Russian folk songs. Torn between the desire to listen and the desire to run away, she slid over a few steps and crouched by the building, looking up at her uncle pouring out his heart in song.

And then a passer-by put a few coins in the cap. And then another. And then another. And then someone put in a piece of paper money. Samantha was stunned, full of embarrassment and admiration for her uncle. She kept switching her gaze from him, filled with emotion, to his cap, filling with coins and bills.

Chapter 21

“Well, darling Samantha, we have money to shop in a big American store now!” Uncle Boris sounded triumphant as he stuffed the coins and bills in his pocket and put his cap back on his head.

“Yes, Uncle Boris, we must have a lot of money.” Samantha still felt a little hurt and embarrassed, yet her voice was softened by her love of folk songs and her uncle’s voice. “But please, if you are going to make a scene in public again, let me know so I can watch from across the street.”

Uncle Boris looked at her with a sad forgive-me face. Then he smiled and winked at her. “Whatever you say, boss!” And he saluted her, just like a soldier.

Now they walked along the sidewalk, and presently it was their noses, not their ears, that told them something interesting was up ahead. A small crowd of people was gathered around a cart, and when they got closer, they saw a man behind the cart, preparing and selling food.

Uncle Boris sped up his walking. “Little one, we have not had anything to eat in many hours, and that smells delicious!”

Samantha realized he was right. The avocado luncheon was a long time ago, the sun was getting low in the sky, and her stomach was empty. She hurried with him.

When they got to the cart, they watched the man serving something Samantha had not seen before. “Uncle Boris, what is that strange food? And why is the man scooping and squirting things on it?”

“Ah, Samantha, I think this is what the Americans call ‘hot dogs’ – one of their favorite foods.”

Samantha had heard of hot dogs, and how they were not made from dogs at all. She also knew they were a sausage inside bread, but this was the first time she had seen them – or smelled them. Her mouth was already watering. “Can we each get one? I would love to try it.”

Uncle Boris saw that it was his turn, and he stepped up confidently and held up two fingers to the man. The man nodded and put two sausages in their bread envelopes, then asked, “Whatcha want on ‘em?”

Of course, Uncle Boris didn’t understand. When he looked at Samantha, she just shrugged her shoulders, because the man spoke English so oddly that it made no sense to her. So Uncle Boris looked around and noticed the other people eating as they walked away, and he realized that the man wanted to know what to drop and squirt on their hot dogs. He leaned over the cart and stared down at the bowls and tubes of stuff, trying to see the choices. The man must have gotten impatient and said, “Tell ya what, I’ll just make you one with all the fixin’s and something simple for the kid. Okay?”

Uncle Boris gave up trying to figure out what was in the bowls and what the man was saying, so he just agreed with the man with his own hearty “Okay!”

The man deftly covered the hot dogs with green and red and yellow things and offered them to Uncle Boris, just a bit out of reach. Uncle Boris knew this was the moment to pay, and he reached a large hand down into his pocket and came up with some bills and coins. He grinned sheepishly at the man with a shrug, as if to say he didn’t know how much to give. The man looked at all the money in the outstretched hand and took a couple of bills and some change. “Good ‘nough, partner. Enjoy!” And he handed over the hot dogs.

Uncle Boris stepped away to make room for others, then gave Samantha her hot dog. They each gripped their food, and Uncle Boris bent down, looking into Samantha’s face with a grin. They both knew what to do, and they said in unison, “Ahdeen, dva,tri!” and on the count of three they both took a big bite.

Sweet! Sour! Meaty! Juicy! All at once! They kept staring at each other, smiling and chewing, but their eyes got bigger and bigger. When they swallowed that first bite, they burst into laughter. But then they got serious and finished their hot dogs, enjoying every flavor in every bite.

When they were done, Uncle Boris took the paper wrappers and headed back to the cart, his free hand already digging for more money. In a minute, he was back with two more, plus paper napkins, and they ate more slowly this time. Samantha could not finish hers, but Uncle Boris was glad to help her out.

Chapter 22

“Uncle Boris, do we still have money to shop in a big American store?” Samantha was a little worried that their eating might have ruined their shopping plans.

“I don’t know whether we still have a lot or a little. But I know how to get more!”

“No, please, don’t sing again, Uncle. Once is enough!”

“Oho! You said if I was going to do it again, I just had to tell you so you could cross the street – and I agreed with you. You didn’t say I *couldn’t* do it again. So go, child, run across the street and cover your ears,” he replied as he put his cap upside down on the pavement.

Samantha was in great confusion. She didn’t really want to go across the street, and she didn’t want to cover her ears. And she did want to go shopping now that her belly was full. But what if this was not really allowed and they got in trouble? What if...?

Before she could finish her back-and-forth thoughts, Uncle Boris started his first song. Ahh! A song about a boat ride down the Volga River – one of her favorites. Well, one or two songs couldn’t hurt. And anyway, look how his cap was already getting filled! And look at his face as he sang, full of love for Russia. Riding a dolphin might be embarrassing to this man, but music and singing never were. “That’s my Uncle Boris!” she wanted to say to people who passed by, but she stayed quiet and let the booming voice entertain everyone up and down the street.

Chapter 23

They found a big department store, not far away from the hot dog cart. Uncle Boris had been in a couple of big-city department stores in Russia during his army days. This one was just a little bit grander than those, so he was pleased that he had come. Samantha, on the other hand, had never been in a really big department store, so her mouth opened in amazement and would have stayed that way if Uncle Boris hadn't shown her her reflection in a cosmetics mirror.

At first they wandered around, just looking at all the colors and varieties of things. Then they rode the escalator – something new for Samantha. At first she didn't like this moving stairway with its metal teeth grinning up at her, just waiting to chew on her shoes. But once she figured out the rhythm of it, she asked to ride over and over, until Uncle Boris wandered off on their third trip up. Samantha ran to catch up, and she found him looking at camping gear, picking up objects, turning them over and over in his hands, then putting them back. She got bored watching him, so she wandered off on her own.

Presently she came to a shoe department, and immediately thought of her little brother Dmitri. Wouldn't it be great to bring him a pair of American shoes? She started browsing in earnest, trying to find shoes that were just the right color and size and sturdy enough for a little boy who liked to use his shoes for kicking, digging, scraping, hammering, and of course, walking and running.

After a lot of picking up shoes, turning them over and over in her hands, then putting them back, she settled on a pair that looked like miniature hiking boots. "Let's see him wear these out! I dare him!" she said to herself. Then she went looking for Uncle Boris, who had all the money.

He was not in the camping department anymore, but she found him in the men's clothing department. He had a scowl on his face, and she knew why. As usual, the clothes were too small for him. But she noticed he wasn't wearing his tractor cap. Instead, he was wearing an American cowboy hat, which was a little too small for him. He had pushed it back on his head, which made him look very... well, very... well, very American, sort of.

He looked up and saw her coming, and with a grin he pointed to his head, as if Samantha might miss the fact that he had on a too-small cowboy hat. She laughed and told him he looked great, like an American cowboy, except with a big bushy beard. Then he told her he needed to go back to the camping department before they paid for everything.

This place was so confusing! They wandered quite a while before they found the camping department again, and a while longer while Uncle Boris located the aisle that had the object he wanted. Ah, there it was: a fold-up chair made of metal with a canvas seat. He demonstrated how he could fit into it, and Samantha nodded with approval. She knew how much he liked to sit watching his garden grow.

They looked around and found a counter for paying for their purchases. Uncle Boris dug into his pocket and pulled out all the coins and bills and laid them on the counter. The woman shuffled the money around so she could count it, then shook her head with a frown. This was not enough money for the shoes, the chair, and the cowboy hat.

Uncle Boris slowly and sadly reached up and took off the hat and laid it on the counter, giving it back to the store for another cowboy to buy. The woman recalculated and frowned again. Then she reached under the counter and pulled out her own purse. She took out two bills and added them to their pile of money. Now she smiled at them, and they smiled back. Then Samantha looked across the counter at rolls of wrapping paper. This gave her an idea.

"Please, madam, can you make gift?" She thought it would be terrific to watch Dmitri tear open wrapping paper to find his shoes.

As the woman started to pick up the shoe box, it was Uncle Boris' turn to have an idea. He grabbed the box away from her and pulled it to himself. He turned away from the lady and pretended to inspect the shoes and the box, turning it this way and that. But his free hand was reaching down into his pocket and pulling out two round objects. Quietly, he stuffed one deep inside each shoe, then closed the box. He turned back to the woman and handed her the box, nodding his head as if to say that he finally approved of this purchase.

The woman took the box and walked over to the side of the counter, where she began to wrap the box with decorative paper. Samantha tugged on Uncle Boris' jacket, and he looked down at her seriously, with a wink and a finger over his lips.

Gift and chair in hand, it was time for the pair to find their way back to the hotel, walking enjoyably through the warm night air.

Chapter 24

The next morning, Samantha awoke feeling – feeling – feeling – not well. “Hmmm.... Avocados and hot dogs – all these things I’m not used to. I hate to disappoint Uncle Boris, but I don’t think I want a lot of excitement today.”

Then the phone rang, and she leaned over in bed and picked it up. She heard a man with a hoarse voice, speaking to her in Russian. Then she realized it was Mr. Prine – a not-sounding-very-well Mr. Prine. He told her that his throat was very sore, so he couldn’t take them to the amusement park today, and he couldn’t find anyone to replace him on such short notice.

Amusement park! thought Samantha. *We were going to such a fun and famous place today, and now we can’t. He’s ill, and I’m ill, and that’s that.* But she couldn’t let herself be too disappointed, because Mr. Prine was still talking. He was telling her about arranging for a taxicab to take her and her uncle to the beach for the day and that he would take them to a kind of “ball” park in the evening.

She looked at the clock and realized that she should wake Uncle Boris and get dressed and downstairs quickly, because the taxi would be arriving soon. As she did these things, she only had a moment to wonder what kinds of things Americans did at “ball” parks. Maybe they all met at a park and played catch with each other – but in the evening in the dark? That didn’t make any sense. But she had no time to give it any more thought.

They met the taxi driver in the lobby after their breakfast, and he spoke a bit of Russian to them! He said he had learned some Russian as a child, from his grandmother, but he had forgotten most of it. But that is why he got this job, since Mr. Prine had asked for someone who could speak at least a little Russian. Then he took them outside to his cab.

Away they went! This man drove like a maniac, swerving and speeding up and jamming on the brakes, always narrowly missing other cars and pedestrians. Samantha got very nervous, and held Uncle Boris’ hand so tightly that he had to take it back and shake it a few times to wake it up again. But he was nervous, too. Turning one corner, they leaned far over, and Uncle Boris almost crushed little Samantha.

The driver was not at all nervous. In fact, he talked the whole time, in broken and childish Russian. Samantha would start to laugh at the man’s speech, but then she would take a sharp breath as the car did something outrageous in the middle of traffic.

It seemed that the man was trying to tell them about the beach they were going to. He said that they should have fun, and they wouldn’t need him to help with words, because beaches were just for fun and swimming anyway, not for talking. And there were people at the beach who might look funny or do funny things, but that was okay and never mind. Samantha looked up at Uncle Boris, and he just shrugged his shoulders. All this baby talk didn’t make much sense to him, either.

As they got out of the cab, the driver turned around in his seat and told them he had already been paid, and here was an envelope with some American money for their lunch and their trip back to the hotel. Uncle Boris took the envelope from the man, then leaned over so that his nose nearly touched the driver’s nose. Then he spoke very slowly and quietly, just as he would to a small Russian child.

“Thank-you. You are a good man to give us the money from Mr. Prine. Sir, is your grandmother still alive?”

“Yes, she is, but I don’t see her very often.”

“Then go visit her and thank her for teaching you Russian as a child. And ask her to teach you how to talk like a grown-up. But don’t ever take her in your cab, because she will die of fright.”

Samantha started to giggle, but Uncle Boris pushed her and himself out of the cab before she could make any sound, and before the surprised cab driver could think of anything to say.

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The cab driver was right about one thing: the whole beach area was filled with people looking and acting very oddly. And dressing oddly. And moving oddly. For instance,

some of the men had long, braided hair down to their waist, and some of the women had short hair that looked like it had been chopped with an axe, and some people zipped around on roller skates and some on skateboards, and some people had a tattoo, and some were nearly covered with tattoos, and some men were lifting weights and looked like lobsters turning red in the sun, and some women were lifting weights and looked like lobsters turning red in the sun, and some people wore shorts, while some wore trousers that barely went over their knees, and some people wore bright flowered shirts, and others wore t-shirts with pictures, and some people only wore swim suits, and some were very, very small swim suits, and some people sat on benches and played guitars and sang and collected money, and some people sat on benches and hoped to collect money by doing nothing at all.

Samantha thought to herself: *This is like an amusement park, and it's like a zoo full of strange creatures. I don't think I'll ever be able to tell my friends at home that there is such a place as this.*

Uncle Boris was mesmerized by all this. He would walk along with Samantha, but his head kept jerking back to make sure he really had seen what he thought he saw, or turning left and right to be sure his eyes were not playing tricks on him.

Then he noticed how many of these strange creatures stared back at him! Why would they do that? He certainly was not wearing any bright shirts or tiny swimsuit. He was dressed sensibly, with his long trousers and his army jacket and his tractor cap.

Samantha started to notice the stares. She looked up at Uncle Boris to see if there was something about him that made people stare. No, he was just Uncle Boris – although he did seem a little overdressed for going to the beach. So she tugged on his sleeve.

“Uncle Boris, I think people wonder why you have on such heavy clothes at the beach. Maybe you could take off your jacket and tie it around your waist.”

Uncle Boris considered the suggestion, and nodded. He took off his jacket and tied it around himself – just barely. But people still stared. Then a young woman on roller skates came whisking right up to him. She stopped, reached up and tugged on his beard! While she was pulling, she turned her head and shouted at some other young women. Then they all laughed, and the young woman sped off with her friends.

Samantha and Uncle Boris stared at each other in shock. At least now they had a better idea about why people were staring, but that lady was a stranger, and she – she – she – she just grabbed his beard and pulled! California in America was such a strange place!

They decided to make their way down to the water, where they hoped people would just rest and swim, as the cab driver had said. After passing some un-resting people playing volleyball in the sand, and some other un-resting people playing catch with flat plastic disks, and some other un-resting people standing in a circle kicking a little round cloth sack around, they finally stood at the edge of the water – the great Pacific Ocean again.

Chapter 25

They soon discovered that this was not at all like the Pacific Ocean they had experienced in the north of California. This ocean was mild and fairly warm, and when they looked up and down the beach, they realized that this was also a more sandy and wide and friendly oceanfront. Samantha ran in and out of the water, venturing out all the way to her knees. Uncle Boris rolled up his trousers and waded up to his ankles. This was very pleasant and restful – and fun!

As they walked and skipped along, they came upon a girl who was a few years younger than Samantha. She had dark skin and very black hair, and she started talking to Samantha and offering her toys. It was obvious that the girl wanted Samantha to play with her in the sand. Uncle Boris leaned down and whispered to Samantha, “Go ahead, play! I’ll be over here lying in the sun.”

Samantha nodded, but before he walked away, she said to him, “Uncle Boris, this girl is not speaking English. It is something else!” But Uncle Boris just shrugged his shoulders, as if to say “What difference does it make?”

So the girls got to the business of play, using little pails and shovels to create castles and roadways and tunnels out of sand and water. When they got tired of that, Samantha watched as the little girl scooped up a pail of sand and walked over to Uncle Boris, who was now napping in the sun. She stood beside his big stomach, rising and falling with each breath, then poured sand right on it! Uncle Boris barely twitched in his dreams, and Samantha got the idea. She grabbed another pail of sand and ran over to dump it on her uncle’s stomach.

The game was on! The two girls ran back and forth, filling up pails and dumping them on Uncle Boris. In a few minutes, only his neck and head and legs were showing. And then only his head and toes were showing. And then he woke up.

His eyes opened and he twitched his nose, which had some grains of sand on it and in it. Then he tried to move his arm up to wipe his face, and it was very heavy! In fact, it was not moving! He turned his head and looked at where his arm should have been, and all he saw was a mound of wet sand. Then he looked for his other arm and found the same thing. And then he looked up behind his head and saw two little grinning faces looking back at him.

He started to say something to Samantha, but suddenly a woman’s voice called out, and the little girl ran off in that direction. And Samantha ran off with her! Now Uncle Boris was getting a bit annoyed. How could his niece do this to him – abandon him on a beach in California in America, surrounded by strange and rude people? And what if the tide was coming in? He would be swallowed up by the Pacific Ocean and never see Russia or his farm again! His eyes began to fill with tears, feeling so sorry for himself.

Then Samantha came running back to him, and excitedly told him that the little girl’s family was having a picnic lunch on the beach and they were invited, so hurry!

“Hurry? HURRY?” shouted Uncle Boris. “How am I supposed to hurry when I am trapped here and the ocean is about to sweep me away and you will never see your uncle again? Tell me that!”

Samantha laughed and got down on her knees and started scraping away sand with her bare hands – starting with his arms, so he could help her. Soon he was free, but his clothes were filled with wet sand and very uncomfortable. He started to complain about that, but Samantha cut him off.

“Silly uncle. The ocean is not about to swallow you up. In fact, it is getting further away. And there is food over there waiting for you. So you will be a little uncomfortable with sand in your clothes. You are a brave and disciplined soldier. How can a little sand stop you from conquering the picnic food?”

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The food was indeed delicious and worth conquering. The little girl's father and mother would point at something and pronounce it carefully for their guests. "Ta-co." "Ta-ma-le." "Sal-sa." They showed how to spoon some of the salsa on the other foods, and Uncle Boris imitated them with a big spoonful on his taco. Oh-oh-oh-hot-hot-HOT! His eyes got big and watery – not from feeling sorry for himself this time, but from the spicy salsa. Everyone laughed as he tried to drink away the heat in his mouth and throat. After that, he only used tiny spoonfuls, and he munched away happily.

When they were done, Uncle Boris reached in his pocket and took out some American money to offer to his hosts, but they would not take any. Then they taught Samantha and Uncle Boris how to say "Adios!" and the Russians taught the family to say "Doh svidahniya!"

As Uncle Boris led Samantha back up toward the road to catch a cab, he felt a tug on his sleeve.

"I am sorry that you have to feel all that sand in your clothes. Do you forgive me for covering you?"

"Don't worry, child. I did the same to your mother when we were young on a family holiday. Ask her if she forgives *me!*"

Chapter 26

After a good afternoon rest, they got a call from Mr. Prine, telling them that he would meet them in the lobby soon to take them to the “ball” park. Samantha had forgotten all about that. She should have asked the family about it at the beach picnic. No, she would not have been able to get that across to them. But she could have asked the crazy cab driver, only now it didn’t matter.

Mr. Prine had most of his voice back now, and when Samantha asked what people did at a “ball” park, he laughed. “Oh, right, in Russia, you don’t know anything about the American sport of baseball. Well, here, it’s a really big deal, and especially around southern California. Anyway, the game is played in stadiums with thousands of seats, which we call ballparks. I’ll try to explain how the game is played when we get there.”

Samantha had another question. “Mr. Prine, why would you take us to such a sport game? Is it really so important to see Americans do this?”

Mr. Prine answered mysteriously, “Samantha, a big part of the reason I’m taking you is because you are a bit of a celebrity, as I told you before. So going to the baseball game is a great way to show you off to other Americans.”

Samantha was puzzled. If there were thousands of people at the park, was Mr. Prine going to line them up and introduce her to each one? Wouldn’t he lose his voice again if he did that?

They arrived at the stadium and parked far away from it. But instead of walking what seemed like miles to get there, a little tram rolled up nearby for them to hop on and get a ride. Samantha liked that, and wished they could stay in the parking lot and ride the tram all around again and again. But she had to get out when they reached the front gate.

Mr. Prine walked up to the ticket counter and said something to the woman behind the glass. She nodded her head, then picked up a telephone and spoke into it while she gave Mr. Prine the tickets.

Now their guide led them along walkways and up ramps, then out into the seating area. Samantha looked out at a sea of seats – some empty, many filled with people. And down below, not too far below, was a grassy area marked off with white lines and red dirt. This was most interesting! What could sportsmen do on such a space filled with grass and dirt and white lines? Samantha looked up at her uncle, and she could see his confusion as well.

Mr. Prine got them seated, and then he got them drinks in paper cups. He started explaining the game of baseball to them, pointing to something called a “diamond” and holes on the side of the field called “dugouts” and white sacks he called “bases.” This made no sense to either of the guests, who tried hard to understand, but kept getting distracted by all the sights and sounds around them.

Soon an announcer gave a speech, and a girl about Samantha’s age walked out into the field, all by herself! Everyone cheered, as if they knew who this girl was. Then everyone jumped out of their seats and turned toward a flag flying over in a corner just outside the field, and the girl started singing, and some of the people started singing along. *So this is baseball!* thought Samantha. *I wonder why it’s called a sport, when it’s really about singing?*

When the song was over, everyone cheered, and the girl bowed and ran off the field. Samantha, already standing, started to walk away, thinking the game was over. Mr. Prine stopped her and said, “Samantha, the game is just about to start!”

Start? Samantha was really embarrassed. But she laughed at herself and went back to her seat. Evidently, baseball was *not* about singing.

The game got underway, and now there were grown men in uniforms standing and sometimes running in the field. It made no sense to Samantha or Uncle Boris, and it was rather boring, compared to the sports they

were used to watching and playing. But what fascinated them was the big sign near the flag – a huge sign that kept changing, with numbers and letters and sometimes cartoons. Now that was fun!

As the game went on, Samantha and Uncle Boris spent less and less time watching the men in the field and more and more time watching the big sign showing incredible things. So they barely heard the announcer's voice when he started talking again, until they heard the words "avocado" and then "Samantha" coming over the loudspeakers! And suddenly, there was Samantha, sitting next to Uncle Boris, on the big sign – which had turned into a giant television set! And the crowd started cheering!

Mr. Prine reached over and tapped Samantha on the arm. Samantha didn't feel his tap, but she *saw* it happening on the screen. She turned to Mr. Prine, who told her to stand up and wave to all the people in the stadium. She was shocked and nearly paralyzed, but she saw his friendly grin, so she stood up and waved to no one in particular, while her head was turned and she watched herself waving! Then she looked at Uncle Boris, who was also waving in little motions in his seat, and he was also watching himself wave.

Then a man and a woman walked up to them and presented them with caps just like the ones being worn by one of the teams on the field. Uncle Boris took off his tractor cap and put on his new one, but it was too small. The woman took it and adjusted it so it would fit better, but not perfectly. The man put a cap on Samantha's head, and it was too big, covering her eyes and half her ears. (Did she hear a thousand laughs when that happened?) The man made adjustments and put it back on her, and now it was only a little too big. And all of this was on the giant television for everyone to see. The crowd roared with approval.

The rest of the baseball game didn't matter a bit. Samantha was too dazzled to notice anything after this.

Chapter 27

“Remember the girl who sang at the beginning of the ball game last night?” asked Mr. Prine at lunch the next day. “That was Jacqueline, probably the most famous girl in the world. She’s made movies and television shows, and she sings and dances sometimes, too.”

Samantha wasn’t sure if she recognized the girl’s name or not, but she nodded her head anyway, waiting to learn what was coming next.

“Well, for your last night in America, you and your uncle will get to visit Jacqueline at her home. Since you’re about the same age, and since you are a celebrity, too, her agent thought this would be a good idea. So expect some photographers or maybe even television reporters when we get there.”

Samantha was puzzled about the word “agent.” She had heard of travel agents who sent people to faraway lands, and secret agents who spied on people. She wondered why a famous movie girl would need her own travel planner or her own spy. But she was pleased to know that she would get to spend time with an American girl in her own home – even if she was famous and there would be extra attention from reporters and cameras.

Sure enough, when they arrived at the hilltop house, there was a van from a television station and a few other cars in the driveway. But what Samantha noticed most was how plain the house looked. She was sure she would be going to a mansion, but instead here they were driving up to a house with not even an upstairs! Where would all the servants live to take care of this famous girl?

They got out of the car, and suddenly people appeared and exploded into action. A man with a big television camera was running toward the visitors, and a woman wearing high-heeled shoes was trying to keep up with him while she carried a microphone. At the same time, some people came out of the house and stood on the front porch.

Oh no, thought Samantha, *here we go again with people shoving me around and talking at me without waiting for Mr. Prine to interpret. Why can’t we just go in the house and be like normal people visiting other normal people?* But she smiled, knowing that was expected of her, and it was better to smile now rather than wait for someone to order her to do it!

Sure enough, the woman with the microphone came hobbling up, straightened her skirt and her hair, and talked into the camera. And sure enough, she turned and stuck the microphone in Samantha’s face and asked her a question. But at least she waited for Mr. Prine to translate her words.

“Samantha, this is the end of your American adventure – at the home of the most famous girl in the world. How do you feel about your stay, and how do you feel about meeting Jacqueline?”

“It very, very nice and I love people here and...”

The woman whisked the microphone away from Samantha and said something into it. Then she pointed it at Uncle Boris.

“I understand that you don’t speak any English. How does it feel to be taking care of your niece in a foreign land?”

Uncle Boris waited for the translation, then replied in Russian with a broad smile on his face. “I would take care of my niece even if we were on the moon. I would even protect her from rude reporters who stick microphones in people’s faces.”

Mr. Prine winced at these words, and then he said something in English to the woman. The woman smiled, and Uncle Boris and Samantha knew that Mr. Prine had not translated *exactly* what Uncle Boris had said.

The woman and the cameraman then escorted them up to the porch, where the two girls were filmed shaking hands and smiling. Then the man on the porch, who must have been Jacqueline’s father, said something

to the microphone woman and the cameraman in a firm but pleasant voice. The television people backed away and waved good-bye and headed toward their van.

Then the father looked at his wife and his daughter and said, “One, two, three...”

...and they all looked at their guests and said together, “Dobro pozhalovat!” At least that was what they were trying to say, which is “Welcome” in Russian. The way they said it was all wrong, but Samantha and Uncle Boris understood, and they smiled in appreciation that these people had tried so hard to make them feel good about their visit.

They all went inside, and again Samantha was disappointed to find such a plain house. At first, everyone sat in the living room while Mr. Prine translated everyone’s questions and answers. (For the first time, Samantha understood how difficult but interesting Mr. Prine’s job was. She wondered if she could ever do a job like that, and how fun it would be to meet all sorts of people and even travel to help them understand each other.)

Jacqueline then took Samantha to her room, and the grownups went out the back door and into the garden. Jacqueline’s room had all the things Samantha would expect to see in a room belonging to a girl her age: posters on the wall, a bookshelf with books and a music player, a bed with a flowered cover, and a desk with a computer on it. With Mr. Prine gone, she decided to try out her English with Jacqueline.

“Your room not fancy like rich girl. Why?”

Jacqueline smiled at Samantha’s attempt to use English – and her ability to notice the plainness of the house and room. “My parents say that singing and making movies is great, but they want me to be a regular girl and not spend money on crazy stuff that isn’t important.”

Samantha understood all that well enough, and she started to think of another question, when Jacqueline asked first. “What was it like to be famous all of a sudden? Were you surprised? Did your friends treat you differently? What did your mom and dad say about it?”

Samantha was shocked at these questions. First, she was surprised that Jacqueline wanted to know anything at all about her. And second, how could anyone think she was famous, just for winning a contest? She wasn’t really famous; Jacqueline was the famous one. It pleased her to think of this famous girl as a friend who would ask about her life.

“Famous? Not me! Friends say I still same Samantha. Mother and Father say I still do chores, do homework. Little brother Dmitri not even know what famous is; I am just big sister.”

Jacqueline laughed. “That’s how my family is, too! I wish the rest of the world treated me the same. Tell me something: Have you had any strange things happen on your trip? What kinds of people have you met? Have you been writing a diary about your adventure in America?” (Jacqueline had a habit of saying she wanted to ask a question, but ended up asking many.)

Samantha felt as if she was talking with a friend, not some famous person who sang in front of thousands of people last night. “Yes, I have seen strange things and met interesting people. But I did not write anything. When I go home to Russia I will write on computer at school.”

Jacqueline frowned a little. “So you don’t have a computer at home, do you? Well, that’s okay, we can write to each other anyway, whenever you’re in school. Just promise me you will write it all down and let me read it. Promise!”

Samantha was shocked again. This girl was really, really interested in her! “Okay, I write. But my English not very good yet. I get better and better and write in English. Okay? Good practice!”

Jacqueline smiled and agreed. Then they walked out to meet the grownups in the garden.

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Mr. Prine was very busy, trying to explain some of the garden plants to Uncle Boris, and trying to explain to Jacqueline's parents how a Russian gardener would do things differently. So while they were trying to show off their lovely flowers and shrubs and vines, Uncle Boris was trying to convince them that this would be an excellent location for growing turnips and cabbages and beets and other wonderful vegetables. Everyone was smiling, but the conversation was obviously going nowhere.

When the girls came out, the grownups turned to wave briefly, then continued their talk. Jacqueline showed Samantha around, proud of her parents' accomplishments with growing things. But what caught Samantha's attention was the view just beyond the row of shrubs at the back of the garden. She was looking down at the whole city of Los Angeles, glistening in the late afternoon sun. How magnificent, to live with a huge city at your feet!

The garden tour was followed by a grand dinner indoors – grand because it was full of lively conversation, not because the food was all that remarkable. Samantha finally realized that there would be no servants coming in and out from the kitchen. Instead, Jacqueline's mother served the food she had cooked herself. And that was just fine with Samantha. Being famous was not anywhere near as much fun as having a happy home and fun things to talk about at the dinner table!

As dinner was coming to an end, so was Mr. Prine's voice again. Everyone noticed, and Jacqueline's parents apologized for making the man work so hard all afternoon. Mr. Prine told them, in a croaky voice, that he was glad to do his job, but it would be better if they left now.

They all said goodbyes, and Jacqueline whispered to Samantha as they walked out the door, "Remember, you promised!"

Samantha looked back over her shoulder and nodded with a smile. Of course she was going to keep her promise! And of course she would have more reason than ever to get better at speaking and writing in English. What a perfect end to their American adventure!

Chapter 28

Samantha went right to bed as soon as they returned to the hotel. But Uncle Boris didn't feel sleepy yet. So he turned on the American television in his room and looked for programs that he might not ever see in Russia. Of course, that was easy, since he didn't own a television and rarely visited a house where one was turned on.

As he scanned the channels, he was amazed at all the variety of programs a person could watch. He could not watch them all in a hundred years! So many to choose from! So he slowed down his search, realizing he could never check out all the choices.

The first thing that caught his attention was a movie in black and white. It was an old movie, for sure, and the people were dressed much like his grandparents dressed in the old days, when they were going to the big city. But the people in this movie didn't act like his family at all. It was obvious there were gangsters who took people's money and did illegal things. And there was a man with a little moustache – such a tiny little moustache – who must have been the detective trying to catch the crooks. Without understanding the words, Uncle Boris soon got bored and moved on.

Then he saw a man sitting at a desk talking to people on a couch. They seemed to enjoy each other's company, but it looked quite boring to Uncle Boris. To his surprise, he found three other channels with people doing almost exactly the same thing. Why would people sit in front of a television and watch other people just sitting around and talking, and why would they do that night after night?

Uncle Boris clicked around some more, until something caught his eye. There were men wearing wrestling trunks and circling each other in a wrestling ring. Now this was interesting! You see, Uncle Boris had been a champion wrestler in the army, and he was known as Boris the Bear, who never lost a wrestling match. He could pin his opponent's shoulders down to the mat for a three-count better and faster than anyone else.

So this would be a great program to watch. He wouldn't need to understand any words, since he already knew all the rules of wrestling. He sat back in his chair prepared to enjoy watching some sport.

But suddenly he leaned forward in his chair, his eyes bulging with disbelief. One of the wrestlers pulled the other wrestler's hair! And the referee didn't stop the fight! Then the one who had his hair pulled ran over to the side of the ring, where someone handed him a metal folding chair. The wrestler lifted the chair over his head and started chasing the hair-puller around the ring!

Uncle Boris was so shocked that his jaw dropped and he drooled all over his shirt. This was *not* wrestling! This was a horrible mistake, a circus – a wrestling nightmare! They were breaking every rule that was ever made in wrestling, and no one was doing anything about it. Wait! The crowd is cheering this behavior! How can they? Didn't they come to watch men perform in one the world's most ancient sports? Why would they cheer this dangerous and stupid behavior? Have Americans gone crazy?

And then the hair-puller jumped out the ring and ran away! And the chair-lifter stopped running around and started shouting at the camera! And then he strutted around like a rooster and waving his arms! And the crowd was booing and cheering at the same time!

This was too much. Uncle Boris turned off the television and shook his head in disbelief. Then he looked down at his shirt and realized he should clean up and go to bed.

=====

So Uncle Boris had a dream on his last night in America. And this is his dream....

He is Boris the Bear, champion wrestler of the whole world. And he lives up on a hill, looking out over a giant city. His backyard garden is full of onions and cabbage and turnips, all the size of basketballs. He puts on

his black trunks with a strap over one shoulder, and he walks confidently down the hill and into the city to the wrestling arena for tonight's matches.

On his way, he hears a woman screaming that she has just been robbed! He takes three giant strides and catches up with the hooligan who had taken her purse and her money. He puts the man under his arm as if he was just a toy and makes him return the purse. Then he strides into the police station and drops the man in front of the police sergeant in charge. The policeman thanks Boris for his courage and strength.

Next he walks to a television studio. The man who runs the program sits behind a desk and asks Boris to come sit on the couch and tell a story. But Boris tells him that stories are boring, and he is a man of action. He picks up the whole couch with one hand, even though there are two other guests sitting on it. The television audience cheers for Boris. He puts the couch back down gently and waves to everyone as he leaves for the wrestling match.

At the arena, the crowd cheers when he enters the ring. They love Boris the Bear! And he loves them back, blowing kisses here and there as he walks around the ring.

He meets his first opponent, and he pins the man in thirty seconds. He meets his second opponent, and he pins him in twenty seconds. He meets his third opponent, and he pins him in ten seconds. The crowd has stopped cheering. The people are too amazed at the strength and skill of the Bear. They sit in awe, silently admiring their hero.

Then his fourth opponent climbs up into the ring – a very short opponent – a little girl. It's Samantha! She is so small, she can run between his legs when he tries to pin her. He tries again and again. Soon he is wobbly and dizzy from trying to catch her. And then his feet leave the ground! Samantha has picked him up and is carrying him around the ring, holding him over her head! And the crowd is cheering her! Down with the Bear! Up with Samantha!

Now Samantha walks to the center of the ring, with Boris still up in the air over her head. She starts twirling around and around and around and around, and the Bear sees the lights overhead spinning and spinning and spinning....

...and suddenly it's morning and it's all a dream.

Uncle Boris notices that he has been sweating in his bed. He goes to shower before meeting Samantha and Mr. Prine for breakfast. He is not going to tell anyone about his dream.

Chapter 29

Once again at the airport! Samantha is all excited, knowing that it won't be long before she is home with her family and friends. And what stories she can tell them! Will they ever believe her?

Uncle Boris is excited, too. He wants to get home to his garden and his quiet life. California in America has been a glorious adventure, but home is home!

Mr. Prine has said his goodbyes and good wishes for a safe flight home. They thank him over and over again for his hard work and patience and happy spirits, even when things didn't go very smoothly.

Now they walk to the room with the big sign that reads CUSTOMS. A Russian interpreter is brought to them, a woman who says, "You are about to leave the United States of America. Do you have anything to declare? Do you have any illegal items?"

Suddenly Samantha's excitement turns to dread. Her suitcase is opened on a table, and inside is the box of shoes for her baby brother, and inside that box...!

The woman picks up the box. She shakes it. There is a rattling sound. Samantha thinks to herself: Surely the shoes are legal. I paid for them with money Uncle Boris earned while singing on a sidewalk. I have the paper from the store that proves I was not a thief.

The woman says, "What is rattling inside this pretty gift box?"

Samantha thinks about the little trick Uncle Boris played in the store with the shoe box. She hands the receipt to the woman, but her voice quivers. "Sh-shoes for m-my little b-baby b-b-brother."

The woman shakes the box again. "That's funny. It sounds like more than two shoes inside."

Samantha starts to cry. She knows that Uncle Boris will go back to Russia without her, and she will be put in an American jail for criminals and hooligans who break the law and hide illegal things inside their baby brothers' shoe boxes. And her parents will cry, but then they will forget about their daughter in jail in California in America, the one who was a criminal and a hooligan.

Now Uncle Boris pushes Samantha aside and speaks to the woman firmly but kindly. "My dear lady, can't you see this child is tired and confused? So I put a little piece of candy in each shoe, so that her baby brother can try something sweet from America. Will you tear up the beautiful wrapping just to see two shoes and two pieces of candy? Shall we go to jail for that?"

The woman looks at Uncle Boris, who appears so stern and protective, yet so innocent. She looks at Samantha, blubbering and looking up at her uncle with a quivering chin. And the woman speaks again.

"No, we don't want to spoil the gift." And she hands the box and receipt back to Samantha, who quickly shoves it back in the suitcase and closes it up.

And now it is time to board their plane and return to their homeland.

Part II

Chapter 30

In the autumn, Russian weather gets quite chilly. So Uncle Boris had run a long electrical cord from his kitchen out to his garden shed. Two things are plugged in: a heater and a radio. The heater was for the night cold, and the radio was for company. Who needed the warmth and the company? Of course, it was his “gifts” from California in America – gifts that he had given himself!

Little shoots grew out of the soil in two flower pots, and Uncle Boris went out to his shed several times a day to look at them, talk to them, yes, even sing to them. He wanted them to be happy and grow and grow and grow and make luscious green balls. He remembered all the things that he had eaten at that farmhouse table in America – dishes made with those wonderful green balls from the trees in the orchard.

He crooned his words in a sing-song fashion, almost making a melody that would remind someone of an old Russian folksong.

*Pretty a-vo-ca-dos! Pretty, pretty little plants!
Won't you grow for your Uncle Boris?
Won't you be strong and survive the winter,
with my heater and my radio
to make you feel warm and happy,
even while the snows come down outside?*

Of course, no one would hear these songs, just as no one would see his plants. They were his secret!

Actually, he was a bit scared about the approaching winter. He knew he could bring the pots into his house if it got too severe outside, but then a neighbor might drop by and see the pots and ask questions. No, it was best to do everything possible to keep these special friends in the shed, with an electrical cord buried under the Russian snow!

When he wasn't looking in on his two plants, Uncle Boris was busy harvesting his garden plot and getting ready for the winter ahead. He had dug a root cellar many years before, and just like every other year, it was getting filled with the root crops he had nurtured all during the gardening season. (He had worried about leaving his garden for a week when he took his niece Samantha to America, but he knew that all would be well. Boris was known for growing strong crops, and sure enough, when he had returned from his trip, the garden was still in fine shape.

He wheeled some onions he had pulled and dried up to the root cellar and opened the door. Ahhh! The wonderful smell of vegetables in their winter beds! The odor blended onions and beets and cabbage and other foodstuffs into a symphony of fine eating. And when the cellar was full, and there were more vegetables to harvest, he would sell them to friends and neighbors who loved his produce and looked forward to seeing him wheel a cart past their houses and through the village nearby. And of course, he would always keep some aside for his niece and her family. He would always surprise them with an unannounced visit, wheeling his cart full of vegetables just for them.

Life was good! A little lonely, sometimes, living the life of a bachelor, but good and happy. And quiet and predictable, which was good. And now these two new friends out in the shed, promising so much for the future....

Chapter 31

Samantha was no longer so dreamy at school. She didn't even enter any more contests. She had a new determination, a new goal to work on. She would learn to speak and write in English so well that she could be proud to write to her new friend Jacqueline in America.

It was hard to imagine that she, Samantha, a plain Russian girl, would be friends with a famous singer and actor such as Jacqueline. When she had started to tell about meeting Jacqueline to her friends at school, she could tell that they believed her, but only up to a point. When she started to tell them that she had actually spent time at the famous girl's house and actually had a private conversation with her, she could see that her friends were starting to get suspicious, looking at each other with an odd look on their faces. So she decided not to even try to tell them that she would be writing Jacqueline regularly. When her English was good enough, they would see for themselves whom she was writing to and getting letters from!

In the meantime, she started writing about her adventure in California in America whenever she got time on a computer in her classroom. At first, she wrote an outline in Russian, just so she would remember what happened and the order that everything happened in. But then she started writing the actual chapters of her adventure in English, as best she could. Her teacher and her friends watched in amazement at Samantha's serious attitude as she checked words in a dictionary, erased sentences and started over, and read back paragraphs to herself, muttering approval or disapproval every so often. This was not the Samantha they knew!

Finally, she got up the nerve to send a message to Jacqueline, along with a couple of chapters about the first days she spent in America, up in northern California. When she pressed the "Send" button, she felt a knot in her stomach – partly from excitement and partly from worry about her writing ability – and partly from worry about whether Jacqueline was really serious about wanting to hear from her!

Winter was setting in, and that meant long, dark days and longer, darker nights – and cold, cold, cold. And snow – lots of snow. Samantha liked the feel of winter when she was home, because it meant a lot of family time when it was too cold and snowy to go anywhere else. And she liked to help at home and teach her little brother Dmitri all sorts of things she was learning at school – even though he couldn't even talk yet!

And this winter, it meant more time to write her chapters about her adventure in California in America. If only Jacqueline would write back....

Chapter 32

Dear Samantha,

I loved your letter and your chapters! Your English is much better, for sure! I didn't know you had gone to northern California and I didn't know there was a Russian fort there! Wow! I bet you and your uncle liked that a lot! And is the ocean really cold there? I don't get it – it's the same ocean as the one here, and it's pretty warm! I wonder why it's so different up there.

Keep sending me chapters! I hope you don't mind if I fix your English a little bit, do you? It's mostly okay, but there are a few places where words need to be rearranged!

I'm really busy these days, making a television show that won't come on until July! Can you imagine! I have to dress like it's really hot outside, and like it's about to be Fourth of July, which is our Independence Day, but it's not even close! In fact, when I leave the studio, I'm going shopping for Christmas and Hanukkah presents for my friends! So if I don't write back quickly next time, you'll know why! I can't wait to find out what you did when you came to southern California!

Your friend,
Jacqueline!

Chapter 33

Springtime! The air is still cool, and the root cellar is nearly empty. New crops have been planted, and the potted plants in the shed have survived the winter. Uncle Boris looks at his calendar while munching on his breakfast. May 7th, it says.

MAY THE SEVENTH?!?

This is a special day for Uncle Boris, one that he celebrates in his own special and private way every year. He gulps down the rest of his breakfast and hurries outside.

He turns off the heater in the shed, then picks up the radio and his folding chair from America and carries them to the edge of the garden.

Usually he would sit down to look over the garden in the morning sun, but today he places the radio on the chair. He is NOT going to sit right now! Instead, he bends over and turns up the volume on the radio – loud enough to be heard all the way across the garden, several meters away.

What is this day, this May 7th? It is the birthday of two great and famous music composers. One is Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, probably the most famous Russian composer of all time. He wrote great, booming symphonies, which were fun to listen to, but better still, he wrote music for ballets!

It is also the birthday of Johannes Brahms, the famous German composer. He wrote long, sweet symphonies, which were comforting to listen to, but better still, he wrote wild, emotional Hungarian dances!

Yes, two composers who wrote music for dancing. Not dancing like you would do at a party full of polite people, but dancing that used lots of energy and muscle and space! And Uncle Boris loved to use energy and muscle and space when he danced!

Today, he is not Boris the uncle or Boris the wrestler. He is not Boris the gardener or Boris the bachelor. He is Boris the *premier danseur*.

A man is talking on the radio, announcing the next musical number. An orchestra starts to play. It is the Brahms Hungarian Dance Number Five. Ah, such passion, such feeling! Instantly, Boris is transported to a circle of Gypsy wagons, with men and women and children waiting for him to perform. He begins.

He walks the circle with a tragic frown on his face as the music starts. The people nod with approval at his sadness. When the music speeds up, he suddenly bursts into a proud smile and lifts his arms to the sky. Yes, he has the heart of a Gypsy dancer today. He dips down, jumps up, twirls around, pointing at members of the audience. Everyone claps with the rhythm, sometimes shouting to Boris to encourage him to do even more risky and athletic jumps and turns.

When the music becomes gentle, he gets a twinkle in his eye. He runs to the crowd and grabs the hands of the oldest of the Gypsy women, with few teeth and white straggly hair. He twirls her like she was a young schoolgirl, and the crowd cheers. The woman plays her part well, acting shy, as if Boris was her new boyfriend.

Then the music turns sad and tragic again, and she skitters away into the crowd. Boris has lost his love. He is heartbroken, head down and shoulders sagging. Then at the end, the music turns once more noble, and he leaps and soars with joy and pride and Gypsy mischief. The crowd goes wild with applause and cheers as Boris ends on one knee, his fists on his hips, as if telling the world that no one will ever make him sad for long.

Boris is breathing hard, but he's happy, and no longer chilled in the morning air. He looks over his garden, and sees that he has managed to mostly dance around his newly-planted crops. He is proud of his athleticism. (Who knew such a big man could dance like with such feeling and power, he says to himself.)

The radio voice comes on again, and Boris, being a few meters away, strains to hear what is coming next. Music by Tchaikovsky!

Now Boris is transported to a stage in a huge auditorium. The Bolshoi dance company is performing tonight, with just one dancer for the entire Second Act of the Nutcracker! Boris will be a Russian dancer, a Spanish dancer, an Arabian dancer, and a Chinese dancer.

Standing in the spotlight, he can barely see the audience, numbering in the thousands. No matter, because his concentration is fixed on his performance. He leaps, he twirls, he soars! And he stays off the ground for an incredibly long time, as if he has discovered how to fly! At the end of each dance, the crowd cheers, throws flowers to the stage, and calls for encores. The people are delirious with joy at seeing the great Boris defy gravity with the grace of a swan and the power of a lion. At the end, Boris is glistening with sweat and pride.

And his garden is in shambles.

Chapter 34

Dear Samantha,

Thanks for the new chapters. I think you meant to put them in a different order, because one chapter is about the photographer who took your pictures in Russia and wouldn't let you taste his avocado, and the other chapter is about going to the avocado farm in southern California! Maybe writing about the farm reminded you to write about the picture-taking.

I know all about photographers who push and pull you around just to get a good picture! My parents sent me to modeling school so I could push and pull myself into weird positions. It's a lot better to do it yourself than have someone tugging you or shouting orders at you like you didn't know anything!

But I'm surprised you had never tasted an avocado and still won the contest! Aren't they great? My favorite avocado dish is guacamole. YUM! And guess what? I saw your picture on a billboard on the highway just yesterday! Were the flowers in the background really from your backyard, or did people add those flowers to the picture with computers?

Anyway, I really, really, really, really like reading about your adventure. Is it OK if I put your chapters in order? And would it be OK if I show them to some people I know? I bet they would like to read them as much as I do! Please?!?!?

Your friend,
Jacqueline

Chapter 35

Samantha had printed out Jacqueline's last e-mail letter and had brought it home with her. She showed it to her mother, and they wondered about the people Jacqueline might share the chapters with. They agreed that it would be alright if Jacqueline did it, but they thought they should check with Samantha's father when he came home from work, in case he could think of a good reason not to allow it. In the meantime, Samantha did her chores and tried to explain to Dmitri all about the latest letter from her friend.

When her father came home, he was greeted by a very enthusiastic daughter, who started to tell him all about the letter and if he thought it would be alright for Jacqueline to let others read her story.

"Whoa, little girl! Let me get in the door first! And when I do, start at the beginning so I can understand what you are asking me."

The little family sat around the kitchen table, while Samantha unfolded the letter once again so she could read and translate it for her father. Little Dmitri climbed up in her lap so he could read it, too.

After hearing the letter, her father paused, then spoke. "Well, Samantha, I don't see a problem with this, as long as..."

And suddenly his words were drowned out by a loud CHOPPETY-CHOPPETY roaring sound from outside their front gate. They all turned at once, wondering if an airplane or a truck was about to come crashing through the wall of their house!

The roaring increased, then stopped right in front of their house. The whole family scrambled out of their chairs and raced to the front door. Father swung the door open....

And there was Uncle Boris at the gate...

...sitting on a motorcycle!

Uncle Boris grinned at them, but they were all frozen like statues at the sight, and a bit deaf from the sound. Even though it had ended, it still rang in their ears.

Finally, Samantha's mother spoke. "Boris, what have you done? What is this? How...why...?" But she was too stunned to make any more sense. Then she woke up enough to remember her manners and invite him in.

Chapter 36

“Dear sister,” Uncle Boris was saying. “Calm down and listen to reason. This was indeed a VERY good idea. I’ve been saving up for a long time. And look: I can come visit more often, and I can get here quicker. And soon I will find a way to attach my cart so I can bring vegetables to you and all the people who buy from me. See? It’s a wonderful thing, this motorcycle!”

Samantha’s mother shook her head as she stared at him. “Boris, you are such a foolish little boy, but I see your point. Now see my point: You need a helmet! You cannot go riding this thing all around the countryside with a bare head. What if you fall? What if there is a truck in front of you and its tires spin and shoot gravel at you? If you do not promise to get a helmet immediately, I will wrestle you to the ground right here and take your keys!”

Samantha suddenly had an image in her head of her little mother wrestling her big uncle and winning! She started to giggle, but her mother shot her a stern look to let her know that this was not a time for laughter. But what neither of them knew was that at that same moment, Uncle Boris was remembering a certain dream he had had, where a little girl picked him up and spun him around and around. He had thought the girl in the dream was Samantha. But then, his sister did look a lot like Samantha when she was a young girl....

“Yes, sister, I promise I will get a helmet! So now will you stop worrying? And will you stop threatening to beat me up in front of your daughter?” He winked at Samantha.

“Yes, Boris, I will stop worrying a little. But I won’t stop completely until I see you wearing a helmet. Now come and eat supper with us, although there won’t be much to go around, since we didn’t expect you.”

Uncle Boris reached into his coat and pulled out the last cabbage from his root cellar. It was a bit wilted and pale, but it was a perfect gift for a hungry family.

“Will this do? Will this allow me to share at your table?”

“Yes, Boris, that is fine. Let me get this on the stove, while Samantha tells you about her newest letter from America.”

Chapter 37

Samantha was worried and puzzled. How could she write chapters about her trip to America that contained embarrassing situations? There were things that happened that Uncle Boris would not want people to know about his behavior, and there were things that even Samantha did not want others to know about her behavior. She decided to ask her teacher about this problem. But she would not say that the problem had anything to do with the chapters she was writing about her time in California in America. She would just say it was about a story she was writing.

Her teacher listened to the problem, then replied. “You know, Samantha, all the great writers have to write things about their story characters that were not always good. It made the characters more interesting and human to show their flaws, and it made the authors more honest and praiseworthy. So think about that when you write.”

Samantha did think about that. But she also thought about how her story characters were real people, not made-up ones. One of those real people was her uncle, and she never wanted to write anything that would hurt his feelings or get him in trouble. And another one of those real people was herself, and she never wanted to write anything about herself that would get her in trouble or make her parents distrust her. So what was she to do?

Her writing came to an abrupt stop. She could not write about the boy and the dolphin at the pool, or write about what really happened at the avocado farm. She wasn't even sure she could write about Uncle Boris getting sweaty hands while going up in an elevator, or about his singing on the sidewalk and getting money.

Finally, she decided to ask Uncle Boris. He was the only one who knew what she was worried about, and it was his reputation that was at stake as much as hers. There was only one problem: He hadn't come around since he promised her mother to get a helmet, and he didn't have a telephone. So she would just have to wait....

Chapter 38

Uncle Boris had made a promise to get a helmet, but doing it was turning out to be more difficult than he had expected. He asked the man who had sold him the motorcycle, but he had no extra helmet to sell. He drove (with a bare head!) all the way to a big town several kilometers away to a shop that sold motorcycles and accessories. But all their helmets were too small! The man behind the counter suggested that if Uncle Boris got a very, very close, short haircut, one of his helmets *might* fit. Uncle Boris did not feel like taking such drastic measures only to find out it would not work.

As he drove slowly out of town, putt-putt-putting, he spied a plumber's shop. Outside the shop were all sorts of plumbing left-overs from past jobs: hoses, pipes, sinks, bath tubs, shower heads, and a lot of unidentifiable objects.

Boris drove onto the shop's property and turned off his engine. He looked around all the of plumbing parts and equipment. There must have been at least three of everything, in different sizes and colors and shapes. An idea was coming into his head....

He wandered among the spare parts a while, then he sauntered over into the dim light of the plumber's shop. More parts and pieces! This plumber must have been in business for many years to have such a collection. But why didn't he re-use these parts? Or maybe he did, and he *STILL* had all these things left over!

"Hallo! Anyone home?" Uncle Boris was eager to meet this plumber, and he stepped through and over many objects in his quest.

"Back here! Come! I'm busy, so you'll have to come back here," came a voice from out of the dark of the workshop.

Finally the two met in a back room, where sunlight was streaming in from an open back door, revealing a skinny man with overalls and a dirty white shirt. They introduced themselves.

"I'm Sergei, the local plumber. I don't recognize your face. Either you don't live around here, or you have no running water in your house and you've never needed to call for me."

"My good sir, my name is Boris. I live several kilometers away, so you would not recognize me as a citizen of this town or as a customer. But I was driving by, shopping for other things besides plumbing, and I thought maybe you could help me."

Sergei put down some pipes and stood up, wiping his hands on his overalls. Then he stuck out his hand and the two men shook. As usual, Uncle Boris' hand swallowed the smaller man's hand, but he was careful not to squeeze too hard.

Now Uncle Boris explained his problem, and what brought him to the town. The plumber listened, then asked how he could help. Uncle Boris explained his plan.

Sergei the plumber had never had such a request in all his years of plumbing, but he was always up for a creative challenge. After all, in these old houses around town, people had asked him to fix things that could not be fixed, and install things that could not possibly fit, but he always got everything fixed and fitted. So this challenge was no more unusual than many others he had heard.

"Boris, this sounds like fun! Let's look around for what you need.

Chapter 39

Dear Samantha,

I haven't heard back from you in several days, so I thought I should see if you are OK. Are you OK? Is there a problem with the computer you use at school? Or did you get too busy to write chapters? I hope you can send me some again soon.

Your friend,
Jacqueline

Samantha clutched this letter in her hand. Her teacher always let her print her letters to take home, but this time she didn't come running into her house all excited about a new message from her friend. She was still worried, and she was still unable to write chapters about her time in America.

She trudged through the gate and through the front door. Her mother was working in the kitchen, and Dmitri was dancing in a wobbly fashion around the kitchen table, singing to himself and to the whole world, in a language all his own. Samantha sat down at the table and plunked the letter in front of her.

"Mother, if I had to choose between being friends with Jacqueline and being friends with Uncle Boris, I would choose Uncle Boris."

Her mother turned around to look at her with surprise and confusion on her face. "What on earth do you mean by that, Samantha? Why would you ever need to make such a choice?"

Samantha wanted to explain and didn't want to explain. At that moment, she just wanted to cry, even if that wouldn't help a bit. The first tear streamed down her cheek, and the second was about to fall, as her mother walked over to be close to her.

PUTT-PUTT-PUTT-ROAR!!!

Beep beep!

ROOOAARRR-PUTT-PUTT-PUTT-putt-putt-putt---putt!

Beep beep!

Tears and tenderness were instantly gone, and all three left the kitchen and headed for the front door. When they opened the door, there was Uncle Boris, on his motorcycle, grinning as he had before. But this time, he was beeping a homemade horn...

AND WEARING A SINK ON HIS HEAD!

Chapter 40

Well, not exactly a sink, at least not anymore. It *had* been a sink once, a little stainless steel sink, in fact. But now it was upside down, with one side partly cut out for Uncle Boris' face. And where the drain hole was (now at the top of the helmet), some bright blue and red wildflowers stuck out for decoration.

Chapter 41

“Well, sister, what do you think?” asked Uncle Boris. “Am I not protected in a most fashionable way?” And he knocked his fist on the side of the sink helmet to make his point. He winced a bit from the *bong* sound it made echoing into his ears, but he kept his grin.

“Boris, you look....” Samantha’s mother almost scolded him and almost told him he looked positively ridiculous, but she realized in an instant that if she did that, and if he gave up his helmet invention, he would not be safe on his motorcycle. “Boris, you look very, very protected.” She didn’t want to comment on the “fashionable” part of the description.

Samantha ran out to the gate to beep the horn, and Dmitri followed. When it was his turn to beep the horn, he did not seem to be able to stop. So after fifteen or twenty beeps, Uncle Boris picked up the little boy and walked with Samantha through the front door and into the house.

Chapter 42

“Uncle Boris, will you come out to the backyard so I can show you something?” asked Samantha. She glanced at her mother, who nodded her permission.

“Certainly, Samantha, and when you come to my house, I have something to show you in MY backyard!” he replied, thinking about his potted plants in his shed.

Once outside, Samantha took her Uncle as far from the kitchen window as possible. “Uncle Boris, I don’t really have something to show you. I have a question to ask you.”

“Alright, child, ask away.”

Samantha told him about writing chapters of her adventure in America and sending them to her friend the movie star.

“Ah, yes, the little girl we met. Too bad her parents are wasting all that good garden space. If they would only plant a few rows of onions, and some....”

“Uncle Boris, wait! I have to tell you something. Jacqueline said she wanted to show my story to some other people. And then I couldn’t write anymore, because some of the things that happened in America were....were embarrassing. Do you know what I mean?”

“Samantha, just because you tried to speak English and made some mistakes, that’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Uncle Boris, I’m thinking about things YOU did in America that YOU might be embarrassed about.”

And then Uncle Boris understood. He could think of something, well, a couple of, well, a *few* things that were a teensy bit embarrassing. He was quiet and thoughtful for a while. Then he chuckled.

“Samantha, dear, it was all long ago and far away. So she shows some friends a story you wrote. And they will read about a silly thing or two your Uncle Boris did. They don’t know me. Go ahead, tell your story to your friend. I am tucked away at my little farm by a little village in faraway Russia. How can any of those things in the past bother me, really? What’s the worst that could happen? It’s not as if she is going to tell the story to the whole world!”

Chapter 43

Samantha tore into her writing with new energy. She wrote chapter after chapter in English and sent them to her friend. And she gave Jacqueline permission to share the story.

But she did not share her story with classmates at school. After all, many of the teachers and students *did* know Uncle Boris. She didn't want him to be embarrassed locally. So each time she finished her latest chapter, she would quietly send it off to her friend in California in America. But neither her classmates nor even her teacher would get even a glance of her writing.

"Not yet," she would say, wondering when *yet* could ever be.

Then she had an idea. She would read chapters, in English, in her classroom, but only after she had taken them home and decided which parts to read and which parts to leave out. And which parts to make up to fill in any gaps! And she could do the same with her parents. What a great idea! Who would ever know the complete truth? What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter 44

Uncle Boris had a nosy neighbor. Not a bad man, no, not at all. But nosy. Sometimes this nosy neighbor walked across his field and through the little hedgerow into Uncle Boris' property, in a corner of his garden. He would say he just wanted to chat, but while he talked and listened, his eyes are roving all around.

Now that there were avocado trees growing so nicely in their pots, it just wouldn't do to have that neighbor just showing up unannounced. Building a fence would be too expensive, and besides, it would make the neighbor suspicious. The man would ask himself: Why build a fence after all these years?

So Uncle Boris came up with another plan. He dug a hole next to his shed. A big hole. A deep hole. How big and how deep? Wide enough and deep enough to let him sit on his folding camp chair and listen to the radio and watch his avocado plants sitting on a little table. In order for him to look out, he practically had to stand up. *That's* how big it was.

He kept the table down in the hole. The rest he kept up above, but close enough to grab as he scuttled down the hole to hide from his neighbor.

And of course he had rigged up a trap door to cover the hole, when he wasn't in it. It was an old barn door that he dragged home using ropes tied to his motorcycle. How clever! He wondered how he ever managed without that machine.

So here came his neighbor for the first time since digging the hole. Uncle Boris could see him far off, and he was sure the man could not see him. Grab the pots! Grab the chair! Forget the radio! Drop down in the hole! Drag the door over the hole! (Don't worry, it was an old door and there were plenty of spaces between its wood planks, so breathing was not a problem.)

The neighbor approached and called out. Hearing no answer, Uncle Boris wondered if the man would go away. No, he didn't! The man's footsteps were very clear as he walked into the garden. Uncle Boris could tell the man was inspecting the garden, because the footsteps stopped every once in a while. He wondered: How many times had this happened before? Think of all the visits to my niece and sister! Think of all the trips to the village to sell vegetables! And this man wandering all over my property the whole time!

The footsteps got closer to the hole. And now the man was standing *on* the door! He kicked at it, probably wondering why there was an old barn door on the ground when the rest of the garden area was so neat and cared-for. The kick stirred up the dust that covered the door, and the dust fell through the cracks and into the nose and mouth of the man below.

Perhaps you have heard someone cough and sneeze at the same time. But you have never heard Uncle Boris cough or sneeze. Each one alone is enough to shatter windows and break the glasses in your cupboard. But together, and at the same time? There is no possible way to describe that noise. Imagine hearing a lion, a bear, a goose, a falling barrel, and a rusty metal gate all at the same time. Then remember he's in a hole that makes sound reverberate and echo.

That's what the nosy neighbor heard under his feet.

First he jumped – straight up in the air. But somehow he twisted and landed away from the door and onto his feet. And the sound of footsteps was quick, as if someone was running from something terribly scary and unearthly.

Uncle Boris waited until the footsteps had gone away completely, then slid the door over to let air and sun in to the hole. But he didn't get out right away. He realized that not only was this hole good for hiding, it was good for much more. Down in the earth, the temperature was mild, even while outside the hole the weather was quite warm. And in winter it would probably be warmer than the outside air. And it was so private!

So he reached a great conclusion: I love my hiding hole. I think I'll decorate it and move in during the hot summer!

Yes, Uncle Boris had a nosy neighbor. But not anymore!

Chapter 45

Dear Samantha,

Have I got news for you! I showed your chapters to my agent, and she showed them to some important people at the studio, and guess what?!? They want to make a movie out of your book!!!!

Won't that be great?!? Of course, you'll get some money for writing the book, even though someone else will have to write the screenplay. (That's the word for the script that tells what happens and what all the actors have to say!) It won't be a lot of money, but I'm sure it will be enough to buy a computer for your home and let you go to college when you're older – and maybe buy a pony if you like ponies!

Of course, the whole movie idea is based around me playing the part of Samantha!!!! Won't that be great?!? I would try to look like you and talk like you do when you speak English. I can't do that right now, but there are speech coaches who can teach me how!

And I'm going to tell them that when the movie comes out, you should be here for the premiere! (That's the word for opening night in the movie business, in case you didn't know.)

I'll tell you more when I get more news. But isn't it GREAT?!?!?!!!!!

Your friend,
Jacqueline

Chapter 46

Dear Jacqueline,

I wonder if you are making a joke when you say you will be Samantha in a movie. Could it be true? Would anyone in America care about a Russian girl and her uncle going to California for one week? But if you are in the movie, everyone will want to see it, even if the story is only about a silly trip I made.

I am excited for you, if it is true. But if you are Samantha, who will be Jacqueline when they meet? Will you do both?

I am pleased that you want me to come to the premiere of the movie. That would be wonderful, but it seems such a bother for just one night.

Please tell me more. I think now you were not joking with me.

Your friend,
Samantha

Chapter 47

“What’s the worst that could happen? It’s not as if she is going to tell the story to the whole world!”

It was the booming voice of Uncle Boris, and it woke Samantha up from her dream. No, wait, it was Uncle Boris in the dream with that voice. And he was saying....

Then she really woke up and sat up! All this talk of making a movie and getting money for a computer and college and a pony and going to the premiere – in all this talk, she had forgotten about Uncle Boris. He had given her permission to write embarrassing things because he was so sure the world would never know, and now the whole world *would* know!

It was early morning, but still dark outside, and although she was alarmed at the thoughts she was having, those thoughts were not all that clear.

“Maybe if I give *him* the pony, he would forgive me. No, he doesn’t want a pony, he has a motorcycle. Well, maybe if I let *him* go to college.... No, he would never want that, and anyway, he already knows so much, why go to college? Maybe I should....”

And there she was stuck. She crashed back onto her pillow, trying to come up with a way to get her uncle to forgive her for letting Jacqueline tell the whole world.

“Think of it – the whole world! No matter where Uncle Boris went, people would notice him and talk about what he did in the movie. He could never go out in the world again. Even Eskimos! Even Spaniards and Argentinians and Japanese and all the other people in the geography book at school. But then, he never travels very far, anyway, so maybe he wouldn’t know about what the Eskimos and Argentinians knew....

“Maybe I won’t let them show the movie to Eskimos....”

And soon she was asleep again.

Chapter 48

Dear Samantha,

Thanks for the final chapters. Believe it or not, they are already starting to cast the movie! You already know that I'm going to be you. But the producers and writers decided that they could get everyone to like the movie better if I had a twin brother with me on the trip to America! Won't that be weird? Especially for you?

Anyway, my twin brother will be played by a famous actor named Ronald who comes from Australia. Remember the chapter you wrote about the movie with the dolphin and Uncle Boris falling in the pool and taking a ride? That was Ronald sitting by the pool! I guess you didn't get to talk to him, because the director was making everyone stay on schedule and not take any breaks or play around.

They found actors to play my mother and father and even my baby brother – YOUR baby brother! But they haven't found a good Uncle Boris yet. That should happen soon!

And they found a girl to play *me*! But in the movie, she will be younger than Samantha, and she will think Samantha is incredible just for being Russian and coming from far away and having an accent. (Well, you ARE incredible for being so brave to come from so far away, right?!?) So you'll be like her hero!

Gotta go! My online teacher wants to have a phone conference with me about last week's math homework. I think maybe I made some mistakes!

Your friend – and soon to be you!

Jacqueline

Chapter 49

Dear Jacqueline,

Thank you for telling me about the movie you are making. It sounds exciting. Do you know if the movie is going to be shown only in America, or will it also be shown in other parts of the world? Do you think people will laugh at my Uncle Boris if he travels? I worry a little about that. But maybe he will not travel anymore. But just in case he does.

I am not brave. I am just Samantha, and brave girls do not worry, do they? Maybe you know the answer to that, because you have met so many people of many ages. Do you think you are brave? I think so, because only a brave girl could make movies and sing in front of huge audiences in ballparks.

It will be very strange to have a twin brother in the movie. There are some boys in my class at school who feel like brothers to me sometimes, because we have been in school together for many years. But I do not know how it would feel to have one of them living in my house.

My parents say I should not buy a pony, even if I get a lot of money. They do think that we could have a computer, and I can teach my little brother Dmitri all about it. And they think that saving the money for college is a fine idea. Maybe I will be a writer someday and I will go to college to learn more about it.

I think about giving some money to Uncle Boris, because he went with me and protected me. And because he lives alone. I told my mother and father that he should have a telephone, and they agree with me. But you cannot just buy a telephone, they said. You have to pay for the service, they tell me. And he spent his extra money on a motorcycle! I hope there will be enough money to pay for telephone service for Uncle Boris and still go to college someday.

I do not understand what you mean about having a teacher online. I thought all children had to go to school, even famous ones. Do you not go to a school every day? But how could you, when you have to go make movies far away? How can you have a school on the computer? How can you have a teacher and classmates to talk to?

I write too much and too long. Please forgive me. I just have questions. And sometimes I worry. Do not pay any attention to so many questions and worries.

Your friend,
Samantha

Chapter 50

Dear Sam,

I just thought about calling you Sam instead of Samantha! Do you like that? If you don't like it, I won't do it anymore, but I think it's kind of neat. Sometimes my parents shorten my name, like when they call me for dinner. I like it, but I'm not sure how to spell it. It could be all sorts of ways, like

J-A-C-K-I-E
J-A-C-Q-U-I-E
J-A-Q-U-I

Oh gosh, I'm using the word "like" too much. My parents and my teacher get on me a lot for doing that, so I have to find other words to use instead.

Yes, my school is on the Internet. So I don't have a classroom with other kids in it. But there are other kids in my online classroom, and we chat all the time, kind of like you and I do, but without having to wait for the other person to answer. (Rats! I used "like" again!) At first it was very weird to have a teacher and classmates you didn't sit with in the same room, but after a while I got used to it. I can even go to school in my pajamas, because no one knows how you're dressed when you're online! But I still have lessons and homework and tests, just like regular school. What's great is that I can go to school and do my schoolwork anytime and anywhere! One time I wrote a book report on Africa and sent it from Africa!

Hey, don't worry so much! And don't worry about worrying! I worry too – like whether my homework is right or whether I'll remember the words to a song or the words I'm supposed to say in a movie scene. Just because I'm in show business doesn't mean I'm super smart and remember how to do everything right all the time! I even made myself some toast the other day and burned it! How smart is that?!?

And don't worry about Uncle Boris. He might do some funny things in the movie, but really he's the hero, isn't he? And so are you! I bet if he travels, people will say what a fine man he is and a great uncle, even if he did do some things that made them laugh in the movie.

I don't mind if you write long letters. I *like* to read them. Well, I *enjoy* reading them!

Oh, one more thing: The movie producers decided not to have you come to the premiere. Instead, they want to have a DOUBLE premiere – one here and one in the nearest city to your home! On the same day! (Well, maybe not at the same time exactly, since you are in a different time zone and there are so many hours difference between us.) So look for an invitation soon!

Your friend,
Jackie

PS: I almost forgot the biggest news of all: We've started filming!"

Chapter 51

It was morning, and Samantha was looking out a car window at the countryside going by. Her thoughts were busy and dreamy at the same time.

This is really happening. I'm riding in a big fancy limousine, on my way to see a movie about me! I'm just an ordinary girl, but look what's happening!

And to think that it was all because of words! I wrote some words and the words were put on road signs and people gave me a trip to America. I wrote some more words and people made a movie. Words are so powerful!

Even as a little girl, my parents would say things like 'A kind word is like a spring day.' So I grew up knowing that the words I speak could make people happy if I chose them well. But I didn't know that words I write could be just as...as...as influential – yes, that's the word! I can write words that influence how people feel and what people do – even in faraway countries. Isn't that incredible? And now, here I am, riding to see the movie that started with my words!

Samantha looked around her. Her parents were lost in their own thoughts, and her little brother was in his father's lap, trying to touch any button or gadget he could get his hands on in the car. It really was incredible, how all this happened and led to this moment!

But then a little dark cloud entered her thoughts. But where is Uncle Boris? Why wouldn't he come with us and feel how wonderful it is to ride in a limousine? Will he keep his promise and show up in time?

The car entered the city, and the countryside she had been watching gave way to apartment buildings and factories, and then office buildings and stores. And then the car slowed as it navigated city streets. Samantha's heart began to race. Almost there!

Then the car came to a stop, but not in front of the theater. No, it had stopped because there was a crowd of people blocking the way – a crowd that encircled something in the street. Was it an animal? Was there an accident?

And then Samantha heard something familiar.

PUTT-PUTT-PUTT-ROAR!!!

Beep beep!

ROOOAARRR-PUTT-PUTT-PUTT!

Samantha felt relief and embarrassment and irritation all at once. Uncle Boris *had* shown up, even sooner than she had, which was great, but he was making a spectacle of himself, and that was terrible.

The limousine driver honked his horn, and the crowd stepped back. And there was Uncle Boris, on his motorcycle, wearing his upside-down sink on his head, with a new bouquet of red and blue flowers coming out of the drain hole on top!

Beep beep!

Samantha had forgotten all about the "helmet" her uncle had had made, and now there he was, revving his machine and waving his arms high in the air as he bragged about being in the movie with his special and wonderful niece Samantha! And the bouquet of flowers bobbed and danced above his head.

Samantha wanted to hide under the seat and tell the driver to take her home again. But she couldn't do that. Instead, Uncle Boris waved at the driver and putt-putted out of the way, clearing a path for the limousine to drive up to the curb of the theater.

Chapter 52

As the limousine pulled up to the theater, Samantha looked out and saw that the sidewalk leading to the theater doors had a long red carpet on it. She had seen this sort of thing before, in magazines and on Web sites that showed celebrities arriving for big events. Was she a celebrity? Well, maybe just for today....

The car stopped and the driver hurried out and ran around to the door by the curb. He opened the door and nodded his head to let the family know it was time to get out. Then he stood at attention like a soldier, or like a movie star's driver, to give everyone the impression that someone important was about to exit the car.

Samantha's parents made her get out first, and when she did, she heard applause and her name being shouted – coming from the people on both sides of the carpet. Then a microphone was suddenly in her face, then a face was in her face. It was a television reporter, with a cameraman right behind her. She asked Samantha a question, but the crowd was too loud for her to be understood. So Samantha just smiled at the lady.

The lady shouted her question again. "How do you feel about watching a movie about yourself?"

Samantha replied, "It is like a dream come true!"

The woman started to take back the microphone, as if she was satisfied for the quick and precious answer from this child. But Samantha kept talking.

"Just think! I wrote some words, and the words became highways signs! And they flew me to California in America! And I had adventures! And I wrote more words, and the words became a movie, and..."

Now the reporter started to get a worried and peeved look on her face. This was more than she wanted or needed. So she interrupted this precious child with a simple "Thank you, Samantha, and we all wish you the best!"

Samantha felt a hand on her shoulder. It was the limousine driver, nudging her toward the front door of the theater, making sure there were no more attacks from the left or right. Samantha was grateful for this, and she turned her head toward the man and smiled. At the same time, she could see her parents and little brother coming up behind. Then she got nudged to move more quickly.

By the theater door, Samantha saw the oddest thing: a camera and a television, with no people operating either one. She looked at the television screen, which showed a red carpet and the front door of a theater. But it was not the theater she was standing in front of. In fact, the scene she was looking at was at night! She heard clapping and shouting coming from the television, and suddenly, she was looking at Jacqueline – Jacqueline dressed up for a movie premiere, waving to the audience. And then Jacqueline turned and she was facing Samantha! And then Jacqueline waved and shouted, "Hi, Samantha! It's nighttime here at our premiere! They tell me it's morning there – tomorrow morning! Isn't that unbelievable!?"

Samantha just stared at the television screen, trying to figure out what was going on, and how Jacqueline could see her and see it was morning – and wave to her! Then she put it all together – the camera, the television – there must also be a camera and television on Jacqueline's end in California! So they could see each other – and talk to each other!

Samantha's face lit up, realizing she could see and be seen, hear and be heard. She waved back and spoke in careful but excited English. "Hello, Jacqueline! It is so good to see you again and talk with you! Is it not wonderful that we can see the same movie at the same time? Are you excited? I am *extremely* excited!"

Jacqueline seemed to pause, as if she had to wait a little bit to hear what Samantha was saying. *Well*, thought Samantha, *I suppose it takes time to send a voice halfway around the world!*

"Yes, Samantha, I'm excited, too! Too bad Ronald couldn't be here! He was awfully fun to be with when we made the movie. One time he even told his manager and his bodyguard to *back off* and leave him *alone* for just once so we could have a private talk! Wow, was that a shock! He was like a different person when he didn't have them..."

Someone with a microphone tapped Jacqueline on the shoulder just then, and took her attention away. She politely answered the reporter's question, then turned her head back toward Samantha. "Sorry, Sam! Looks like I gotta go and act like a movie star here. Give your little brother a kiss for me! Bye!"

"Uh, bye," Samantha answered back, knowing that Jacqueline couldn't hear her anymore. Samantha sighed, but she understood that her friend had her own kind of "chores" to do to keep her fans happy. With that, the theater doors opened, and Samantha and her family were escorted in.

Chapter 53

The movie was like re-living her trip all over again, except that some of the things didn't happen exactly the way it was shown on the screen. It was in English, but there were Russian-language subtitles at the bottom of the screen whenever someone spoke. So it was easy for the audience to read along and understand – and easy for Samantha, too, because some characters spoke too fast or too accented for her to keep up.

She thought Jacqueline was great playing Samantha, with her hair dyed a lighter colored like her own. And she could tell her friend was speaking English not in her regular way, but in a way that sounded like the way Samantha spoke English. She was proud of her friend for making herself look and sound Russian for the movie.

She also liked Ronald being her “twin” in the movie, although she had mixed feelings about it. She could tell that the movie writers had added things that didn't really happen, just to give him lots of things to say and do.

And the Uncle Boris character? He was a bit goofy, that was a fact. But he was also shown to be tender-hearted and protective, just like the real Uncle Boris. When the character did something that made the audience laugh, Samantha would turn her head to see what expression was on her uncle's face. Did *he* think screaming on a dolphin ride in the movie was funny? Did *he* think riding in an elevator with sweat rolling down was funny?

Samantha was surprised to discover that when the audience laughed at these things, Uncle Boris would chuckle and look around the theater, as if he *wanted* people to laugh and wanted to make sure everyone *did* laugh! It was if he was the director of the whole movie, watching the audience to make sure that his production had the right effect on everyone! This made Samantha reassured, but the thought of Uncle Boris acting like he *owned* the movie and *planned* all the action also caused her to giggle – just at a place in the movie when nothing at all funny was going on. She stifled herself quickly with her hands.

When the movie ended and the lights came back on in the theater, the audience applauded enthusiastically. Uncle Boris jumped up from his seat near the front and turned around to face them. He grinned at them and waved victoriously. Samantha watched this, and just as she was about to tug on his shirt to get him to sit down, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her up and around to greet the audience. She raised one arm weakly, smiled weakly, and turned red. She looked down, hoping Uncle Boris would let go so she could sit back down – or better yet, slip unnoticed out of the theater.

If there were some people who knew what the real Samantha looked like before the movie, now there were *hundreds* of people who knew what she looked like, after Uncle Boris put her on display. Neither she nor he thought about that, but the limousine driver did, and he motioned for the family to come with him – not toward the regular exits at the back of the theater, but the other way. Sure enough, there was a door on the side of the screen, and the driver escorted them through it to a backstage area, then through another door that led into an alley. From there, he led them back toward the street where the limousine was parked.

This strategy to avoid people could have worked, but as the audience milled around outside the front of the theater, someone spotted Uncle Boris coming around from the side alley. (Who could miss this man or mistake him for anyone but the Uncle Boris in the movie?) One shout, and the whole crowd turned toward the family that was trying to escape to the limousine.

What a nightmare! Samantha and her family stood rigid, watching the crowd coming toward them. But Uncle Boris did not stand still. First he grabbed Samantha, picking her up and handing her to her father. Then he grabbed the limousine driver and his sister, who was holding Dmitri, and put them in front of the father. Then he whispered to them, “GO!” Turning back to face the crowd, he waved his arms and shouted to everyone, “Hey, folks, come see what the *real* Uncle Boris can do!” And he quickly moved toward his motorcycle, parked across the street from the limousine.

As if hypnotized, the crowd followed him and his waving arms and huge grin. When he reached his machine, he put his sink helmet on his head and put on a show. “Watch out! Here comes Uncle Boris!”

PUTT-PUTT-PUTT-ROAR!!!

Beep beep!

ROOOAARRR!!!!

The crowd gasped with surprise and delight, seeing this big movie character come to life off the movie screen. And what a show he gave them! He revved his engine, he squealed his tires, he rode in circles, he even did wheelies! (He had been practicing a lot at home lately.)

Meanwhile, the family and the driver scurried as silently as possible to the limousine, got in, and locked the doors. The driver started the engine and somehow managed to get that huge black car to drive slowly away without being noticed. But then, who would notice anything with Uncle Boris buzzing and roaring and zooming around the front of the theater?

As the limousine drove away, Samantha turned and looked out the rear window. Uncle Boris was astride his machine, talking to a policeman. Uh oh! But then, as the car turned a corner, Samantha’s last sight was Uncle Boris and the policeman shaking hands. What a clever and brave uncle I have, she said to herself, and then collapsed back into her seat with a tired but satisfied smile.

Chapter 54

Just as she suspected, Samantha's fame did not last long. New movies and movie stars would come along to take attention away from her. And she was completely comfortable with that – even happy. She just wanted to be a normal girl again and go to school and help raise her little brother. And write.

Sometimes she wrote in Russian, sometimes in English. Sometimes she wrote made-up stories, and sometimes she wrote about funny things her brother or uncle did. And yes, she kept sharing her writing with her friend Jacqueline.

And Uncle Boris? If you visited his little farm, you would see the same house, the same garden, and the same hole by the shed, but fancier now. You would also see two giant avocado plants growing in huge pots on wheels, which could be taken into his shed during the harsh winter months. Of course, he had to make the shed roof taller to fit them, but that's another story for another time.

And you would see and hear two other things on your visit to his farm: a telephone in his kitchen, which he used to chat with his favorite and only niece, and a pony named Sam, who was too small for Uncle Boris to ride on, but perfect for a girl who came to visit quite often.

THE END