

Acceptance

The evening was warm and Iossif took Mitzi for a short walk to burn some of the Napoleon slices that they have devoured with the tea. The young woman was fascinated with the story and was enthusiastic to help Riste. Her husband was thinking about his talk with Lambri and offered her a night cup before bed. They sat in his study and Iossif poured both of them a small measure of cognac, then sat in his armchair across from her and asked what Mitzi thought about adoption. Was she ready to be a mom?

Mitzi tensed, the loss was still raw, but she asked if that was what Iossif asked and where the baby would come from. She expected a tale about an orphan from one of the several orphanages that Nada took care of and was surprised that Nada had not asked her first. Iossif looked at her and said only one word:

'Dora...'

'What is with her? Is she all right, it is too early!' the terror in Mitzi's eyes made Iossif squirm, he should have been more open.

'No, she is not that much fine, but for now we cannot do anything. Nada does not know, but the things are not well there. I talked to Lambri today and he is also concerned about the baby after it will be born. There are enough people who knew about her pending engagement. If Dora shows in Sofia with a baby nine months after Todor's murder, and the baby probably will be a copy of his dad, they are both as good as dead. I suggest if you agree, we will adopt the baby and nobody will go after Spassov with the vengeance a Mihailov with Todorov's face will get. Dora will be a godmother and be part of the kid's life after I am gone. Everyone knows how close you two are plus Mihailovs are our best man and matron of honor. It is a great sacrifice for both of you, Dora for giving the baby even temporarily and you for accepting the idea that when the time comes right, the little fellow will get back his own name, his own life, his biological mother. It is hard, Mitzi, especially when we don't know how long the dark time will last. It may be a year, may be a decade, may be forever. But I am sure it will save a soul for the one we lost. You will be holding the memory of a great man in your arms and will look in his eyes and know that you and Dora did whatever possible for him not to die in vain, that his light will not extinguish like a candle in the wind. That will be your revenge over

Tashev and his world; you will make sure that if the father did not see the battle won, the son will. It will hamper your own life though, chances are that a future husband may not like the idea. There are many, many other reasons not to do it. I would like you to think it over and tell me when you are ready. It is not easy and it is not urgent, you have until the Easter break to decide.'

Mitzi looked at the brown depths of her glass, then upped it in one shot and looked at Iossif's solemn gray eyes. 'I am ready. When are we going to tell her that?'

Iossif gulped his own snifter's contents and smiled at her. 'That is my girl! During the March break, next week! I will be taking you for some fresh seaside air and we will go to that Brashlyan to see her and discuss it. You will not regret it, Mitzi!'

Boris dropped to bring a letter for Dora as well as few chocolates and medications, some wine for Konstantin and a roll of finest cotton for Elka's embroidery. His eyes were haunted. Nada who was all smiles collecting packages to be brought to Brashlyan, sat down with him in the sitting room. Lambri was at the university, and so was Vesselin, honing some quotes for his diploma thesis, even Maritsa was out shopping. He might as well spill the beans, she thought.

'Come on, what is on your mind, Bore?'

'Nothing that can be sorted, so why bother you with it? Thank you for asking anyway. I am sorry, I know I look like hell.'

'Is it Janetta?'

'No, the kid is wonderful; she is so good at languages, like her mother! Her German teacher is in awe with her.' Despite the bright tone, the haunted look did not dissipate a lot.

'The hospital?'

'No, the hospital is also going all right. We even have fewer patients from the services, they either come too late or they just do not bother with returning them anymore!' he slammed his fist into his palm.

'What is it then, a lady who does not pay you the required attention? I can't believe that, you are a nice lad and I know you are in the thoughts of many!' Nada was trying to lighten his mood. Boris was known as a confirmed widower, married to his profession.

'What is the point being in the thoughts of thousands if the only one who matters does not even notice you?'

the doctor looked horrified at what he had said.

Nada did not let the slip go away though. 'There is a woman who does not pay attention to your advances? I cannot believe it - is she married?'

'No, she is not anymore, and no, she does not even know how I feel about her. And I cannot tell her anyway, Nada, let us talk about something else. It is hopeless!'

Nada was feverishly passing through her mind all the divorced women around Boris, but there were not that many and none of them would reject his attention. Something was not as he was making her think, she knew it.

'You should not give up, Bore, there is always hope as long as we live...'

'Not even this is guaranteed. God, don't listen to me, please!'

'Is it one of your patients? A hopeless case?'

'Yes! No! Nada, it is not time to talk about me. It will pass, don't worry about it. All is going to be fine at the end.'

'Is she someone I know?'

Boris did not want to lie; he could not tell her the truth. But there was no need, Nada looked at him and in her eyes he read the understanding of a mother, the unerring instinct of a woman and the compassion of a fellow frightened soul.

'So it is Dora. But why did you not say a word when we were going through all this before? Lambri would not have gone with the betrothal if he knew how you felt.'

'It is not so simple. I have known her all her life, but to me she was a child, the daughter of friends I hold dear, I am so much older. I liked Eleonora enough to marry her and Janetta is the proof of that, I fought for Ely when she fell ill, but we were more friends than lovers. After she was gone the widowhood was convenient as a shield as I did not want to get married for the sake of marriage. Then Dora came from Istanbul after her first year and I knew I was smitten like I was seventeen. But she had always had eyes for Todor only. She was used to confide in me all her "foolish thoughts" as she called them as I was an old doctor and I would shut my mouth and not tell anyone. And I did not, did I? Dora thought it was hopeless; he was so much older, so sophisticated. She kept asking what she should do to attract his attention and how

you would react. Then she went to Switzerland and asked me to send her all the information about him. As I am a sucker, I did, every paper clip that I could find, every outrageous gossip I would hear. My only hope was that Todor had remained bachelor in much more favorable circumstances and that it would pass. Then she came back and Lambri suggested the betrothal. It was the only time Dora had ever kissed me; she came to the hospital skipping like a rubber ball to tell me that all her dreams had come true. She waltzed in my office, pulled me from behind my desk and kissed my cheek before telling me the news. That is why I fought that much for him, it was not for the bloody party, not for the bloody country, it was for her. I wanted her to have whoever she wanted and if it was not me, he was the lucky one and I tried to be happy for them. Then he refused to run and you know the rest, tell me, how would I have the heart to tell her what I really feel? I am still old enough to be her father, she is carrying his child and she still thinks that I am an old doctor at my blasted forty-three. May be I am, I don't know anymore. Dora will not trust anyone with the delivery but me, she made it clear. Until the baby is safe I cannot utter a word and I am worried sick about her and the little one.'

Nada was silent. Boris had been so close a friend, so staunch an ally, they have never looked at him as anything else but the great doctor and the exemplary father that he was. She had never suspected that the flowers and chocolates he sent to Dora were anything else but a courtesy for a small favor like an afternoon spent with Janetta at the zoo. None of them had seen the smoldering passion that had burnt him all those years. He had been Todor's friend for a long time and he would never stay between the woman who loved him and the man, no matter how much it had hurt. He was hurting again, for he was seeing the woman who he loved with all his heart being taken away by the baby of his dead friend. No matter what Boris and Lambri were feeding her, Nada knew that Dora's health was deteriorating rapidly, much faster than the baby was growing. Boris was facing the dreadful dilemma to be made to choose between the unborn child of a dead friend he treasured and the woman he loved. Dora had made the initial choice for him, refusing to get an operation that would have saved her but probably kill the baby. It remained to be seen whether the baby would not kill her. All was in God's hands. They could only pray.

After a lot of arguments for and against between the two of them Vassili Nikolayevich and Iossif agreed that they should at least share their theory with Riste himself and his mother before they embark onto the plan.

The old merchant came for dinner loaded with books and old albums, Vera carrying a Napoleon cake for Mitzi. They all sat for dinner but it was doubtful that Riste's mother could say what she was eating that day. The carefully selected words of the two wise men had turned her organized world upside down. Her boy being Nickolas II's grandson? It was not possible, it was not fair, it was so out of reach that two destinies would mix in the whirlpool of fates, she thought. The photos were a heavy argument to overturn, as well as the mythical value of the forget-me-nots and the note they had brought intact. Right behind that came the fear that while she had not been able to recognize the noble man behind Riste's features; that did not mean that someone else would not or had not already. Riste was a walking bomb - Sofia was full of White Army former officers each one of whom would be able to detect the uncanny resemblance which was growing stronger as the lad grew. If not them, there were enough people who remembered the pictures from the brief frenzy around the nightmarish death of the Romanovs. He should never wear a beard; the frantic thought was swirling again and again in her mind. Vassili Nikolayevich had mentioned that Naiden had been a bachelor and probably had no other children. She longed back for the anonymity of the puny village lost in nowhere, but understood that the way back had been cut the moment the old merchant had knelled before her son. How Riste would hold under the weight of his story - even if he knew only half of it - was another worry. It was like a fine wine, a little made the heart merry, a lot killed the human in man.

Mrs. Toneva should not have worried - Riste had philosophically accepted that Iossif and Vassili Nikolayevich were right, but apart from additional burden there would be nothing in his pedigree for him. The circumstances of his birth were maybe exciting for the adults, but did not feel more Riste or less Riste just because he had another man for a grandfather. He felt bad for his mother though, as she was evidently upset. He put a hand over her trembling one and smiled reassuringly in her blue eyes.

'Mom, everything will be fine, you will see. I will just have to learn some more stuff, that is all. And Mr. Spassov said I would have to shave, I don't see a problem!'

The table occupants laughed. "He does not know the other half and it is better that way!" laughed Mrs. Toneva. "He is good!" laughed Iossif, Vassili Nikolayevich and Mitzi. "I don't mind kissing you unshaven either!" laughed Vera and said aloud 'Anyone for another piece of cake?'

Riste looked at her and her father. In a split second saw the only advantage of his parental lineage he might ever exercise. Maybe it would impress his future father-in-law enough to trust him with the blond fairy who cooked heavenly?

Sofia-Bourgas night train was on time and so was the car that Iossif had arranged to meet them. One of the private hotels in Tsarevo had been more than happy to oblige towards a generous advance payment and the driver respectfully loaded the heavy suitcases that the couple had drugged with them for the few days they planned to stay. Sure a pretty lady needed a few changes of clothes, but it was not the season anyway. The town was practically empty, whoever was occupied with the tourists starting from the early days of spring, was using the time to visit relatives around the country. May be the guests were planning to go visit someone around as well, the snow had already melted and the roads were more or less passable. Or simply the older gentleman was indulging a caprice of his much younger wife to carry all her wardrobe with them. The driver gallantly opened the old car's door.

The little seaside town was a nice quiet place at the end of winter, but Mitzi and Iossif did not have much time to indulge in sightseeing. Few minutes after they moved in the villa, Konstantin knocked at their door. While Mitzi changed into her tourist outfit and sturdy shoes, he and Iossif reloaded the luggage from the suitcases in the solid cart pulled by two mighty horses and covered it with the tarp. Iossif helped Mitzi climb at the front while he himself occupied the back bench if one can call the plank loosely attached to the boards a bench. The cart rattled along the empty cobblestone streets and out of town.

They were lucky that the day was only a little foggy and the drizzle that the prognosis called for did not materialize. Soon the road turned into a dust one and Mitzi moved to the back seat to huddle in Iossif's arms. The occasional snorts of the horses and Konstantin's gentle encouragement to the beasts, the rattle of the wooden wheels and the song of the birds were creating an illusion that the time had stopped and the world had fallen behind them. Iossif was telling her a story about the ancient inhabitants of the places they had passed and the ones nearby. The professor was calling back to life the copper-red manes of the Thracians so like the manes of their beloved horses who had been following their masters in their tombs, the

silver-blond-haired veelas who could have very much danced on the lawn they had passed few minutes ago, the ancient aristocracy that had moved to the remote place after the old capital had fallen into the hands of Bayazid I, the fiery dance under the sound of the big drum on the day of Saint Elena and Konstantin. He was telling about the creatures that the lore told were lurking around, from the tiny talasams to the grand khalas, about the signs of the treasures that were hidden and how to dispel the curses that guard them. It was like a fairytale and kept her mind from the anxiety to meet Dora and ask for the greatest treasure ever to be entrusted to her for as long as it took.

Konstantin stopped the cart at the beginning of a path hardly visible in the dark forest closing on both sides. It was an exaggeration to call it a path, it was a somewhat wider clearing between the trees and the height of the grass covering it did not inspire confidence that it had been used frequently. Mitzi and Iossif started the journey on foot to help the horses pull the loaded cart along the holes and stones that covered the route. They walked hand in hand following the slow progress of the beasts that Konstantin led ahead. The forest was shadowy and Mitzi was grateful for the sturdy shoes and the thick tweed coat that Iossif had insisted upon. He was walking in his golf, short coat and the ever elegant cash-nez the color of his French cap. They went further and further into the forest closely following the cart for what felt an eternity before the path turned into a flatter and wider one. The ruts became less deep and then disappeared completely into a still bumpy but even road which Mitzi recognized as made by the ancient Romans. Konstantin stopped again and offered them to climb up as there was still some distance to the village. The pale sun was warming them now and the forest was opening around. The road changed again into a dirt one and after a sharp bend the secret village of Brashlyan unfolded before them.

The time did not matter to Brashlyan. The houses were built centuries ago over the bases that were built millenniums ago. The sea could be heard but not seen from where they were. The center was occupied by a tidy white church and the building that hosted the communal library and the school. The remaining thirty-something houses were built so that no one was troubling the view of the neighbor to the sea. These were not the miserable huts one could expect in such a remote locations - most of the houses were two to three stories high and built like fortresses, behind impressive walled gardens and heavy iron-clad gates. The

houses were invariably white except for the painted trims around the windows and under the eaves. The red baked clay of the roofs was untouched by smoke from the high chimneys that as far as Mitzi could see never repeated from house to house. Their host led them to one of the biggest houses, just out of the central square, a stone throw away from the church. The heavy gate opened and there stood Dora and an older woman who the guests recognized as Elka from Nada's description. Mitzi squeezed briefly Iossif's hand before vaulting to the ground to hug her friend.

Almost six months ahead, Dora was looking gaunt. She smiled bravely at Mitzi who was holding her as if she was made of spun glass and crying for both of them. Elka was hovering nearby. 'You have not had a breakfast yet, let us get inside, I have everything ready'. The good woman was hoping that the guests' presence will entice Dora to eat more.

'Great idea, I have heard from a reliable man that Konstantin's wine is second to none!' chimed Iossif with far more optimism than he had in him. His beloved goddaughter was a shadow of her former robust self, he understood Boris' concern. There was no way she would survive even the trip out of the village to the bigger road. It had taken them two and half hours to negotiate it in perfect health and Dora was hardly standing on her feet. In his backpack he had a mighty package of medication from Boris. The doctor had assured him that Elka was a qualified nurse. She had been Nada's schoolmate and was the village midwife as well after the last doctor had left Brashlyan right before the First World War to never return from the battle field.

They sat in the spacious kitchen and ate the hearty village breakfast laid down by the hosts. Dora was tempted with little but when Iossif produced a box of chocolates, her eyes lit up. Who cared that it was not a recommended food - she was half through the box under their smiling eyes. Soon however she felt tired again and Mitzi helped her to her room on the ground floor. After settling her with the remains of the box in her bed, she pulled a chair closer and started telling all the nonsense gossips that might entertain her. Dora had smiled and some of the color returned to her pale face. She did not know she had missed the people she loved so much, the young woman had so hard concentrated on the little one kicking feebly and the memory of his father. Dora kept asking questions and Mitzi obliged until she saw her friend getting drowsy.

'We are here for three days, we will have time to gossip, now take a nap and then we may go for a walk around. You should show me the grounds.' she tucked the blanket and waited until the regular breathing told her Dora was asleep.

The hostess looked at the serious faces of the old man and the young woman in front of her and confirmed their gravest fears. Dora was not doing well despite the medications and the herbal remedies that constituted most of what she ate. There was no question of transportation, they have seen the road. In case of something extreme they might try through the sea. Dora was having fainting spells on solid ground and a feeble boat would not make a fine transfer either, but was faster at least. Elka was grateful that Boris was going to come for the actual delivery albeit she was afraid that the baby may decide not to wait for him. Iossif told her about the proposed arrangement and the hosts agreed it was a solution that would spare the child and the mother.

'If it is boy, he is not going to live. If it is a girl, she will survive albeit with difficulty!' Elka said looking at Iossif. 'Do you want to adopt a boy?'

'No, no, no, a girl is as welcome as a boy, we talk about a boy only because Dora is so sure it is going to be a son!' Mitzi rushed to assure her. "But why you said that about a boy that he may not live?'

'There will be no more Todorov boys born, so I was told, the time had shifted to swallow them all.' Elka's eyes were sad and much older than her. Mitzi remembered Iossif's tale about the Pythias who would make their cryptic prophesies for only the future to reveal their real meaning. She bit her sob and said determinedly, 'Let us know what we can do!'

'How about sending more chocolate with Boris?' suggested the host, then got serious. 'If you can make her walk a little more, it will be great, and eat more. The rest is God's will. I believe you would like to have some rest also; your rooms are at the first floor. I am afraid the bathroom is downstairs. There is plenty of hot water.'

Iossif looked into the brown eyes of his hostess and tilted his head, 'The hot spring is hot in the winter also?' Elka shivered. 'Yes, just like in August,' she smoothed the tablecloth.

It was the chocolate, Mitzi claimed, she should use the energy to walk around and Dora obliged. Mitzi organized a mini-picnic for her at the end of the garden, producing a sandwich and a pickle and her friend obliged again. They sat and gossiped again, made another circle around the garden, ate another half a sandwich. Dora slept for another hour, after that Iossif took both young ladies to the local church. He could not shake the feeling that he had been in the small village, he knew that church. He seated the girls in front of the Virgin Mary's icon and asked the elder priest to see the wedding crowns. The cleric was somewhat surprised by the unusual request but took out the ancient jeweled rings. Iossif took them in his hands and thought that he knew them also, the red stone in the midst of green ones on the smaller crown was a little askew. It was like coming back home to a place that existed only in his memory. He had traveled extensively but rarely a place had met him with such a profound feeling of happiness, of security, of belonging. Nada had been right to send Dora to Brashlyan, it had magical atmosphere. Iossif started planning what to bring at his next visit at the end of May.

At the end of their second day in Brashlyan, they all sat around the big table in Elka's kitchen. The men were sampling the last year red wine and even Dora had half a glass with them. The visit had benefited her - her eyes sparkled and the pallor had retreated for a while. Iossif carefully led the talk to the baby and Dora's plans and then gruffly said, 'My dear, you had been my favorite goddaughter for ages so it breaks my heart to offer you that, but it is for the safety of the child you carry and for your own one. It is up to you to decide though - I am offering you to formally adopt the mite and when the time is right to reveal his true parentage. Let it be Spassov until then. I may not live long enough even to see him, if I am to trust Boris, but then Mitzi can adopt him without me and you will be his godmother. I know how much it is to ask, but think about the baby first and the danger you both will be in!'

The future mom gaped at him. She knew about the dreadful end of Mitzi's pregnancy and hurt for her, but she never expected that her friend would go for an adoption so soon after. And of her own son at that. She looked at the tightly shut eyes of the young woman she had known forever and remembered that five months earlier she had agreed to another seemingly outrageous proposal on the spot. It had not turned as they expected, but it had been right. Mitzi then had put the interest of the baby before her own and she was doing it again. If Todor's son would be safer, a temporary name did not matter. She was wary that her

father's position in Sofia was precarious to say the least and her showing with a child after all those death rumors might drag not only her own family into the abyss, but Boris as well. Even in Bourgas, several people had expressed their condolences regarding her betrothed. Who would believe that the baby was a result of a one night stand? The child's safety was the only thing that mattered, as Dora was intelligent enough to know that she might not survive the birth herself. Her parents were old, Vesselin had an entire life in front of him and it would be hard to start it with a baby in hands, not that he would not do it. Her godfather was again there for her, just like he had promised her parents when she had been baptized. Dora felt light and happy, like a stone had fallen from her heart. The baby would be safe no matter what happened with her. She looked at Iossif and chuckled, 'You will be a fabulous dad, Godfather, I am counting on you! Don't you even dare to die!'

Dora grabbed Mitzi and hugged her for dear life while both of them bawled the tension out until Iossif patted their shoulders, 'Enough! Kids, I have run out of handkerchiefs!'

The next morning Iossif hiked with Konstantin to the nearby monastery and talked with Mother Superior. The three elderly nuns were tending for few women who had been left behind by their families escaping the civil war nightmares in Greece, the ladies being too frail to continue. The village was sharing its food and minuscule supply of medication. Iossif had brought the bag Boris had assembled for them. Mother Superior was a regal middle-aged woman with disturbingly intelligent gray eyes and a small wooden cross on her stark black robe. Iossif asked what he could help her with and she smiled sadly.

'If it was not so impossible, I would say, send coffins, but it is a luxury for the comfort of the living and the dead could do without them. Thanks to God and the village's mercy we are fumbling well enough. The roof is leaking and needs new shingles after the smerch last autumn and someone to do it. It is not like the houses in the village, it is steep and dangerous, like the church, and it is expensive to bring the masters.'

Iossif nodded, pulled out his wallet and counted a stack of notes. Konstantin clasped his hands - it was more than the village had combined. It would save the monastery and the church and would be enough to buy few more animals for the nuns. He saw the gratitude in Mother Superior's eyes and how she lifted her hand to bless Iossif with the sign of the cross.

'You are a merciful man and God will be merciful to you in your last day, and I will come to witness it!' she said.

'I hope you will pray for me to be a father from the third try!' the old man looked into her solemn gray eyes.

'We all will!'

Dora waked up after her morning nap with the feeling of relief. Mitzi was reading in the rocker next to her bed. She reached for her hand and squeezed it. The black-haired beauty turned to her and Dora looked at her red-rimmed eyes.

'You will see, all will be fine. I am so grateful to you and Godfather, that will give us a chance at least. God only knows what will happen but I will know that we at least tried. And if something happens to me, I know you will take care of my son as your own. Mitzi, I would not have given it to anyone else, but I trust you and my godfather. It is such a relief! I was constantly worried about how I will protect the little one, it was eating me alive. I can't add to the troubles that are piling on Dad. I was thinking of hiding here forever, but it would eventually be dangerous to my hosts, it was a no-way-out situation. I feel so much better now!'

'You don't even think about bad things! Listen Dora, your son will need you, someone needs to feed the baby, you will be coming back with us and the komshuluk is always opened. More, lossif will take us away, you need to fight for him as well, don't you dare to die!' The periwinkle eyes were hypnotic, as if Mitzi was trying to transfer some of her determination and strength to her frail friend.

'I will do my best, you see, I caught your wedding bouquet, I have to marry again!' Dora tugged on her friend's hand. 'Come on, we will do a quick round before you go! You make me feel hungry!'

In Varna Tanas had started the long chain of events that would lead to the replacement of Mikhail Tashev as a chief of security. Several of his assistants were reasonably suitable although the Black Cardinal was planning to go personally for the last stage. Until then the three most promising candidates were on probation. Tanas was sure that Tashev would not go willingly but he did not want a bloody coup for the position. One of his own assistants fell ill with some strange fever, then another and he did not have much time to deal with Sofia, as there were other regions in dire need of attention. Tanas was traveling extensively and coming later and later to the woman he loved to bits and to their little son. Sometimes, when

he was looking at the small boy in his neat bed, he was thinking of Tashev killing that unborn child. He had to repress the urge to go and wash his hands, as if he had touched something dirty. May be he had, but there was nobody he could talk about it and he pushed the thought further and further on the shelves of his extensive memory.

Word of mouth was not exactly a diagnostic tool but that was all Boris had to relay upon - Konstantin had called to say that the patient was much better and Dora's last letter said that once the burden of responsibility had been lifted off her shoulders, she could breathe easier. And she asked for more chocolate, at least she was eating something. He was reading the pathologies in late pregnancies and refreshing what he knew of normal and pathological deliveries. Janetta was looking forward to coloring eggs at Easter with her maternal grandparents and he had planned a month leave from the hospital after that. The staff as well as his in-laws had unanimously agreed that he needed it - he had been working without a break since probably before the war, when he had gone for his honeymoon. Lambri was convinced that the hounds would not bite his pound of flesh before the end of semester and that was all he asked for, to give Vesselin the time to graduate. Mitzi was going through her "studies with Vassili Nikolayevich" with determination and was sitting at Riste's Russian lessons to be able to help him at home after that. Iossif was working on another book and the three of them spent the time in his study each deep in his or her own books until late night. The professor had made a point to link a lecture on the ancient symbols of fertility to his determination to be a father despite the grisly attempt on his wife's life and characterized it with his famous phrase "It is never too late until they put me six feet under!". He demonstratively bought a full set of baby's furniture in pristine white and paid several visits to different orphanages with Nada and Mitzi. The students spread the news around the town better than newspaper coverage and if anyone had been unaware of Mitzi's tragedy before, he was fully updated. When asked if she was serious about it, Mitzi had lifted her chin and told the speechless group that she would do her best to adopt an orphan born around the time her own child would have come into the world. The phrase made many old ladies cry and one security chief blister. Tane had been looking at his more and more frequent bursts of temper and increasing cruelty as a logical development of unstable psychic and tried to be as invisible as possible. Easter was on the second day of

May, just after the huge demonstration for the International Workers' Day, and the red dye was scarce due to both celebrations.

'Man plans and God decides,' thought Elka, looking at the restless Dora. It was the Good Friday early afternoon and according to the tradition, no housework was supposed to be done, no stitching or knitting. The house was already spotless clean for Easter, the red eggs were painted and put at the coolest place of the cellar. The younger woman had gained some weight and her daily walks were longer albeit she tired easily and kept mostly to the garden. She had finished the trousseau for the little one, its swaddling clothes embroidered with blue rabbits and blue birds and blue flowers, the blue hems secured with even neat stitches one next to the other. Konstantin had taken from the attic the wooden crib that had hosted all the babies of the house for the last two centuries. He had stripped the old wax from it and put a new, fresh fragrant one, then buffed it to a warm shine. Dora was three weeks away from the date the baby was to be born and the necessary precautions were taken. It was a waiting time. Boris was supposed to come on Monday and even Nada had hinted she may come closer to the due date for encouragement. When Dora winced twice within an hour, Elka braced herself and went to send Konstantin to the post office in Tsarevo to send a telegram if he could not reach Sofia by phone.

The matron took the call and promised to transfer the message exactly as soon as the director was out of the operation. Ivana knew that it was about Dora who was struggling with something terrible in a remote village. It was so sad that she may not survive, especially just before Easter. She sent a silent prayer to the good Lord to be merciful on the young woman and thought that once again Boris would run to save a soul or at least to make her last hours easier. He was going to stay on vacation around the region anyway; at least that was a blessing. She saw the flying doors open and rushed to meet the tired doctor. Boris paled even more if that was possible with his almost green face, peeled his scrubs on the go and run looking at the watch.

He called home to get his luggage prepared and brought to the train station, called Lambri to tell him he was going and stuffed his satchel with a lightning speed. He should have known that Mitzi and Iossif would react

immediately - the pair had arrived with his luggage and Janetta at the train station and had bought him a ticket for the sleep compartment to Bourgas. Mitzi was as white as milk but the hand that was holding the package with his supper was steady. He hardly had time to kiss his daughter before the train station man in red hat blew his whistle. The iron wheels started their monotonous song. Boris ate the supper that kind Mrs. Vassileva had hastily made for him, and tried to sleep, as he knew that would be his last chance before the vigil as long as it would take. His last pray before he dropped on his lumpy pillow was 'Wait for me, please, wait for me!'

'Doctor Danailov, Doctor Danailov,' a man was waving a big sheet with his name and looking at the face of every man trying to get out of the full train platform.

'How can I help you?' Boris was not expecting anyone to wait for him. The man was wearing a sort of uniform in blue and looked like he had been dragged out of bed not so long ago.

'Your car broke on the road, but we have another one for you. Mr. Spassov was adamant that you should be in Tsarevo before nine.' It was evident that the man was scared of what would happen if the faraway Mr. Spassov would learn that the car he had ordered was not on time. He picked up the suitcase and started towards the parking. Boris followed him blessing the old professor.

The doctor did reach Tsarevo before nine and he did reach Brashlyan before midday. Along the road Konstantin had tried to calm him that it had been a false alarm and Dora had slept normally. It was a first baby and there was still time, he said.

'Funny,' the doctor countered, 'it is normally my line!'

He thought that he behaved exactly like the expectant fathers who had brought their wives to him instead to Mother's House due to a last minute turn of events and were pacing his waiting room, jumping at every sound. The light carriage was rattling on the Roman path and soon he had to exercise his will not to jump and cover the last few hundred meters on a run.

Dora was totally happy to see him and kept repeating, 'But I thought that you would be coming after Easter!'

'I decided to surprise you! You look better and better! Elka, you have done a mighty good job, you will always have a place in my hospital, just say so!'

'And who will look after my chickens then?! Let us go and have some food, it is getting late! You go freshen after our road; we will all go to the divine service tonight!'

The future mom winced again and rubbed the small of her back but smiled at Boris. It was so good to have someone who was as much family as her own.

The church bell tolled to call the villagers to the grand divine service and they started gathering in their colorful costumes and it had been like that since time unknown. Boris felt somewhat out of place with his suit but at least he was matching Dora's city outfit. He smiled encouragingly and offered her a hand. The strength with which she gripped it told him that their Easter vigil would be held not in the church. He saw the violent contraction that rippled through her belly and did not hesitate longer. The doctor scooped her in his arms and went back into the house, Elka opening the doors for him.

'Not so fast, little one, not so fast!' Boris was drenched in sweat despite the breeze coming from the open window carefully covered with cheese cloth. According to the charts he knew by heart the birth was progressing well, but charts were one thing and Dora's pale face was another. Elka had sent her husband and son to the service but had remained at home, keeping a pot of boiling water constantly heated on the kitchen stove. She had brought him a pile of brand new sheets and few towels and had left them alone. The doctor was using the techniques he had learned to relieve pain and conserve energy, he rubbed Dora's back and feet, let her stand when she felt like standing, helped her turn to the side where baby's back was, breathed with her through the contractions. The baby's tones were clear and that was giving him hope. The night was growing old, he heard the bell joyously announcing that Jesus had resurrected and turned to Dora, 'Any chance you are dreaming of a red egg?'

Her nails dug in his palm, 'No, but I need to push! Now!'

And then again, and again, and again. He saw the baby crowning and saw Elka bursting in the room as a response to his yell or Dora's cry, then the next push propelled the infant into his waiting arms. The final stage had been so fast that the second he cleared the little mouth, the baby cried, a loud angry wail that

startled them. Dora closed her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief then held her hands to welcome the child. Boris remembered the advice of his OB teacher - the sooner the baby started suckling the faster the blood vessels would close. He put the wailing morsel in Dora's eager arms and pressed her belly to deliver the placenta. The wail was replaced by a soft whimpering sound while Elka was showing the new mom how to hold the baby to her breast. Boris cut the umbilical cord that had stopped pulsing. He wiped the sweat from his face and bended over the two close heads, 'Congratulations, Mommy, you have such a beautiful princess!'

'Thank you for helping me to bring her into the world!' Dora's eyes were full and so were his. He bended lower and kissed her bitten lips for the first time.

Elka helped Dora get to the bathroom and wash the sweat and blood while Boris bathed the young lady and changed the sheets. He sat in the rocker with the infant cradled in his arms and thought that Todor had cheated Death at his twelfth hour. The girl had his profile, but Dora's eyes. Although their color would probably change from the baby milky blue, they would be light, may be Todor's gray. The baby had a black hair but the shade of her real one might be quite a surprise and he hoped that she would inherit her mother's wheat ringlets. He knew the defiant chin and the high arcs of the eyebrows and pictured the little princess a grown-up woman speaking from a tribune like her father. Mitzi and Iossif would have one hell of a time if she had inherited the double dose of her parents' stubbornness, he chuckled. She was born on the day of Resurrection and her father had the chance to see the fruit of his struggle through her eyes. It was worth fighting the battle for her and for Janetta to see it.

Dora came into the room and looked at the two dark heads close to each other. The gentle smile made him look younger and she saw the man behind the doctor and friend she had known forever. A decent caring man with brave heart who had left behind his life to come and save her in a remote village without so much as a time to lace his shoes. He did not have to do that, but he had not even questioned her summons. He was not old enough to be the good old doctor, what she had called him in their extensive correspondence the previous year. Dora felt a stab of guilt - she had been imposing on his time, on his emotions, making him privy to all her heart's secrets she had burdened him with. Boris looked at her, put the sleepy girl in the crib

and lifted her mom to put her on the bed. He held her for a second longer than necessary and whispered in her damp hair, 'I was so afraid!'

Dora's heart melted in a chocolate puddle. It took a mighty power to scare Boris.