Summary

Sequel to "Darkness." Luka returns home from the Congo, accompanied by Gillian, to face a long recovery. He will experience new struggles, new joys, new pain and new love.

("Mature" rating due mostly to frequent references to/descriptions of events in the previous fic and generally mature subject matter and themes. There is no violence and just a little not-too-explicit sex.)

This fic is a full-length novel in 58 chapters and about 90,000 words. I hope you'll stick with it.

"I'm talking about a relationship, Luka. Two people ... relating to each other, being open with other, caring about each other, loving each other."

"But why now? Maybe because you're feeling sorry for me?"

"No. Maybe because I already love you. And I've been willing to wait for you to be able to love me back ... but I don't want to wait forever. When I walked into your room, and saw you lying there, and I thought you weren't breathing ... I thought you were dead ... I knew I didn't want to lose you before I'd at least tried ... we'd at least tried."

And our story ends. Did anyone enjoy it?

Notes

Originally written in 2004 and posted at that time to FF.net and a usenet group. (That dates me, don't it?) It immediately follows "Darkness", which you really should read first, if you haven't yet done so. (Though a summary of sorts in chapter one will help you to make sense of it if you haven't.)

As noted in my summary, this is very long -- by far the longest story I've ever written. I hope you'll find it worth the effort to stick with it and make it worth MY effort to post it.
"Luka? Luka. Doctor Kovač, it's time to wake up."

The voice penetrated Luka's awareness, and brought with it other awarenesses; of thirst, of a slightly sore throat when he tried to swallow, of vague nausea, of a distant pain in his leg. And the odors of disinfectant and latex and the thousand other faint odors that, all together, said 'hospital.'

He was at County. He was home. The Kisangani hospital hadn't smelled like this. Not only were the underlying 'hospital' smells a bit different, they were also always covered up by the much stronger smells of unwashed bodies, of sweat, of the dozens of different meals being cooked by patients families and, most strongly of all, by the smells of Kisangani itself - the smells of Africa.

"Open your eyes, Dr. Kovač." The voice came again. He didn't know the voice. He'd heard those words, or words much like them, a hundred times at Kisangani - when he'd wakened after surgery, or been fighting to waken from yet another nightmare, and when he had thought he had died, been so ready to die. The voices saying the words then had been familiar; Carter, and Gillian and Angelique. But this voice was strange.

Luka opened his eyes. A nurse, unfamiliar. She smiled at him. "That's right. Your surgery is over, and you're in recovery. Dr. Allenson will be by to talk to you about it when you're a little more awake."

Luka looked around. Recovery. He'd had surgery? Amputation. Angelique had said she was going to amputate - that the doctors in Chicago would have to amputate. But Allenson had said something to him ... was it yesterday? What had he said? Everything was still so fuzzy. Memories blurred together, of Chicago, of Kisangani. The anesthesia, the exhaustion from the long trip, from too many days and weeks of illness. From far too many days and weeks of horror. They all made it so hard to think.

"My leg?" he managed to ask, and realized that the sore throat must be from the tube they had put in his throat during surgery, the vague nausea from the anesthesia.

"Dr. Allenson will talk to you about it a little bit later. He has several surgeries this afternoon."

"Still ... there?"

"Yes, of course."

Luka let his eyes close again, and drifted back into sleep.

When he woke again he was in a different bed, in a different room. His own hospital room. Smooth white sheets, several soft pillows beneath his head, the quiet whirring of the air conditioning keeping the Chicago summer heat at bay. It was only the beginning of June, but he remembered thinking, when he'd arrived yesterday, that it was almost as hot as the Congo had been. Luka smiled to himself. County was far from being the most luxurious hospital in the Chicago area, but compared to Kisangani this was luxury indeed.

Compared to Kisangani ... compared to Matenda. Luka shuddered, his good mood lost in a flash of memory. Memories of brutal beatings, of feeling his bones breaking beneath a steady rain of fists and boots, and of his own voice crying out in pain, moaning. Memories of days, endless days of lying on the floor, alone, surrounded by the corpses of those who had been luckier than he, who had died quickly; waiting to die from thirst, from shock, from pain; praying hopelessly for death to
take him away from the agony. And still worse tortures, the ones that still haunted his dreams, but that he still couldn't bear to think about when awake, the memories that he fought to keep pushed down into the far reaches of his consciousness. Then, after he'd been found, rescued ... just hours away from death and brought back to Kisangani, there had been the long weeks of pain and humiliation and struggling to cope with the memories of his agony, and with the new agonies that each day brought him; until death had finally offered itself again as an escape, a release. But, despite his willingness to accept it, his body had, again, fought off death, and he had survived to come home.

Home, where he could begin again to try, somehow, to pick up the pieces of his life and start over again, leaving behind the memories, the horrors of Matenda.
Chapter 2

Gillian helped Luka from the wheelchair into bed. "Tired?"

"A little," Luka said, then smiled faintly. "Exhausted." He couldn't help remembering his words to Abby, just five days before. "I'm looking forward to it, I need to start getting my strength back." Physical therapy, the simplest of exercises, was proving exhausting beyond belief. But he knew too that he had been right. Exercise was the only way he was going to get his strength back, and it would get easier. Every day the therapist would expect a little more from him, and every day he would be able to do a little more, get a little bit stronger. And soon he would walk again, first with a walker, then with crutches, then with a single crutch or cane, and then, on his own.

Angelique had told him, back in Kisangani (God ... it felt like a lifetime ago ...) that he would probably have better function, and almost certainly less pain in the long term, with amputation and a prosthesis. Allenson had concurred, encouraged him to consider it. But he couldn't. He had faced everything - risked everything to keep it. Fought death and won. Did they really think he could give up his leg now?

So his right leg was still there, splinted and bandaged from ankle to hip. Still no cast, the open wounds, just days past life-threatening infection had to heal a bit more before they could be safely encased in plaster and fiberglass, cut off from the air. But there were plenty of pins in the bone, Allenson wouldn't tell him how many; just laughed and told him that he'd set off the metal detectors every time he came to work. Allenson had been optimistic after surgery. It had gone well, far better than he'd expected. There was no evidence of infection in the muscle any more, and very little left in the bone. With time it would heal, and with time and lots of physical therapy, he would eventually walk with comparatively little pain and loss of function. His leg would never be pretty again, but it would work.

The room was filled with flowers and small gifts. Luka had been amazed by the outpouring of warmth that had greeted his return. All the people he’d thought hadn't cared, hadn't thought about him at all - the people whom he, he had to admit, had hardly thought about. They had sent flowers and gifts, and had come to visit in droves. The flowers he appreciated. They brightened the room - the interior decor here, while better than the bare white room in Kisangani, left much to be desired. The visits were harder. Luka knew that everyone meant well, he knew he should be appreciative. But, along with the exhaustion of having to smile for the steady stream of visitors, it was, bluntly, awkward. Once they got past the requisite greetings and "glad to have you home's" ... there was, simply, nothing to say. Even the people with whom he'd usually been able to make easy small talk in the past; Susan and Jing Mei and Jerry ... and yes, even Abby, soon found their conversation exhausted once "You're looking great, Luka" and "Can't wait to see you back at work again, Dr. Kovač," had passed their lips. There was simply nothing else to say. He knew that they were wondering, wanting to ask about the scars, the still visible bruises, the bandages, the way his breath still caught with every intake of air. And about the look in his eyes, the look that still haunted him every time he looked in the mirror. Their cheerful words aside, he knew all too well that he was not 'looking great.' But of course they wouldn't ask, and he wasn't going to talk about it. Nobody ever had to know. He was home now ... he could leave that part of his life behind him. While he was grateful that nobody did ask, it did leave them with precious little to talk about.

It was 4 o'clock. No more PT until tomorrow. He could nap for a couple of hours. He needed a nap. Then it would be dinner time, and then the visitors would come, and a few hours of awkward conversation, until time for evening meds, and bed. And the nightmares would come again.
Tomorrow it would all start again; bringing him one more day closer to going home for real, one day closer to walking, one day closer to ... maybe ... being able to escape the nightmares, and really leave it all behind. Though he was, in truth, becoming used to the nightmares. Just as he had almost become used to the pain when it was really happening; the re-experiencing of the horrors, night after night, day after day, had become simply a part of his reality. He had no real expectation of being able to escape them. Memories of agony, of terror, of hopeless prayers ... of hands and bodies ... they were just part of his life now.

Gillian glanced at her watch. "I'm going to get a cup of coffee. I'll be back in a little while. Need anything?"

"No, I'm fine. I'll try to sleep or maybe look at the paper."

"Sounds good." Gillian kissed him ... still not seeing the way it made him tense, and went out.

Luka flipped through the paper. His concentration was improving, but he still couldn't read anything very heavy. The funny pages were the only part that interested him. Certainly not the depressing headlines. Maybe he should ask Gillian to bring him the Sun-Times tomorrow, rather than the Trib. Or maybe he'd just sleep.

A tap on the door. Dr. DeRaad.

"Hi, Luka."

"Carl."

"How are you doing?"

"Been better." Luka almost sighed. The standard routine anymore. Might as well be scripted. "But I'm getting there." And a long, awkward silence, as Carl pulled the chair up to the bed and sat down. "This isn't a social visit, right?"

"Right." Another long silence. Luka smoothed the blanket nervously. He'd known this was coming. "Luka, I'm not going to tell you that this is going to be easy. It's not. But it's part of getting well, along with surgery, and physical therapy. Those aren't easy either."

"I just ... can't see how talking about it is going to make a difference. It happened. It's over. Talking won't change that." Angelique had told him that talking would help, would make him feel better. It hadn't happened. There had only been the agony of saying the words, and then even more pain.

"I've been a psychiatrist for a lot of years. I still don't really know why talking helps, but I've seen it often enough to be able to say for certain that it does. Maybe not right away, but in time."

"So ... maybe it was just the time that did it."

Carl didn't answer for minute. "Luka, if you aren't comfortable talking to me, we can arrange for someone else. Any of the other psychiatrists on staff, or someone from the outside. There are some excellent specialists around, or if you'd rather talk to your priest, I'd be happy to call him, set up a meeting schedule for you. But it does have to be someone." A pause. "I don't have a lot of details about what you experienced, but I know enough to be able to tell you, bluntly, that without therapy, without some pretty intensive counseling, you are not going to get past it."

"Maybe I'm tougher than you think."

"Maybe ... though if you're that tough, you shouldn't be so afraid to talk about it." Luka wasn't
looking at Carl, but he could feel his eyes on him - feel him watching him. And Luka felt himself
tense, felt his own breathing quicken - then fought back the reaction. Carl was trying to get a
reaction from him. He was pushing him. No ... Luka told himself firmly. He wasn't going to play.
He concentrated on slowing his breathing; forced his muscles to relax, one at a time.

It felt like a very long time had passed. Carl hadn't said anything more. Luka took a deep, steadying
breath, biting back a wince at the pain it still sent through his chest. "I'm just not ready. Maybe
soon ... maybe in a few weeks ... I don't know. But not yet."

"All right." Carl sighed, and looked at his watch. "Well, you're on my schedule for the next 50
minutes yet, and for 55 minutes every day for the next couple of weeks, or as long as you're here.
And, unless my name is replaced on your schedule with someone else, I'm going to be here. So ... what would you like to talk about?"

Luka picked up the paper, made a show of flipping through it. "How're the Cubs doing this
season?"

"You follow baseball?"

"No, not really."

"Me neither, and definitely not the Cubs. I've never been one for hopeless causes."

'Then you may as well leave now,' Luka thought bitterly. 'I'm as hopeless a cause as you're going to
find.' But he managed a faint smile at Carl's feeble joke.

For the next 49 minutes Luka endured the excruciating small-talk. He knew what Carl was doing,
of course. Making him believe that anything, even talking about the hell-on-earth that had been
Matenda would be better than endless, numbing chitchat about sports and local politics. But Luka
wasn't going to let him win. So he kept up his side of the conversation until, at last Carl looked at
his watch again, for the 25th time and, thankfully, rose.

"Ok. I'll see you tomorrow, Luka. Think about what I said. If there is anyone else you'd rather talk
to, I'm happy to arrange it. I just want to see you better, and I know, and you know, that you won't
get better on your own."

"I'll think about it."
Luka put down his fork with a sigh. He was still famished; he couldn't get enough to eat. But County food was rapidly losing its charm.

"Not hungry?" asked Gillian, looking a little bit worried.

"Starving," said Luka with a grin. "But I'm sure I checked off 'pizza' on the menu card last night. I'm not sure what this is, but it is not pizza."

Gillian looked at the thing on the plate, poked it and tasted the red smear it left on her finger. "I'd say it's bread, with catsup on it ... and some of that cheese that comes out of a can. I'm not going to try to guess what the stuff that is pretending to be sausage really is."

"That's what I thought it tasted like too. I'm not that hungry."

"Want me to get you something else?"

"I hear that that new Jumbo Mart is supposed to have pretty good hamburgers."

"I'll get you one," Gillian said.

"Make it three."

"I'll be back soon." Gillian grabbed her purse and hurried out.

Luka poked at the food on the tray for another minute, trying to find something edible on it, then gave up and pushed it aside. He could wait for the hamburgers. And people would be coming to see him soon. Yesterday Jing Mei had brought him some chocolates.

Time dragged by. What was taking Gillian so long? And the clock said 7:15. Usually people came by to see him right around the shift change, either before heading to work for the night shift, or after getting off. Maybe there was a big trauma downstairs, he thought. Everyone was busy dealing with that. And maybe Gillian had stopped to help out. She was, after all, a nurse. He picked up the newspaper and begin to page through it again, looking for an article that might catch his interest.

Finally the door opened and Luka looked up hopefully. It was Gillian. "Sorry I was so long," she said. "Haleh cornered me just outside the Jumbo Mart. She wanted to talk about work conditions for nurses in Canada. I couldn't get away." She put a bag down on the tray. "Three hamburgers. You didn't say what you wanted on them. I told them 'everything.'"

"Everything sounds just about right." Luka opened the bag and slowly took out the paper wrapped burgers. He was suddenly not very hungry any more. He pushed one of them across the tray. "Here, you can have one. You haven't had dinner yet." He began to dutifully eat his own hamburger, but it tasted like dust in his mouth. It was past 7:30. It was pretty obvious that nobody was going to come to see him tonight.

He shouldn't be surprised, of course. None of these people were really his friends. They were simply professional colleagues; people he had worked with, with varying degrees of cordiality. They had initially come, no doubt, out of curiosity. They'd wanted to see what had happened to him, how he would look. And surely Abby had reported to them, after her first visit, how pale and sick he looked, and they had come by to see for themselves.
And, of course, there had been simple duty. Visiting the sick, sending flowers, was simply what one did, what was expected. Now that they had done their duty, satisfied the requirements of etiquette, and sated their own curiosity, they had no more reason to visit. He would not see any of them again until he returned to work. If he had died, he thought grimly, they would have done their duty by coming to his memorial service as well ... (And would probably have sent flowers to his funeral, in Croatia.)

He shouldn't mind. He should be glad. The visits had been horribly awkward, with nobody knowing what to say. He should be happy to be spared, tonight and every night, the necessity of smiling through his pain, making hours of meaningless small talk. He could watch a little tv, then go to sleep and get a good night's rest so he'd be ready to tomorrow's rounds of physical therapy. Not that he'd really get a good night's rest either. His first couple of nights home, utter exhaustion and then the strong pain meds of the early post-operative days had kept the nightmares to a minimum. But for the past few nights they had come back again, full-force. He would sleep, but he wouldn't rest.

Picking up the remote, Luka began to search for something to watch, eventually settling on a comedy. It didn't look very interesting, but it would occupy his thoughts until he was tired enough to sleep.

A knock on the door. It was Abby. "Sorry I'm so late. Lydia was late, I had to stay to cover until she got here."

"It's ok." Luka turned off the tv. An awkward silence.

"So ... how was PT today?"

"It went pretty well. I'm starting to get some strength back." He managed a smile. "I should be ready for the Athens Olympics."

Another silence, which Abby finally filled with "Had a funny patient today. Two actually. Identical twins. Both came in with sprained left ankles." Luka just smiled a little and nodded. Poured himself a cup of water.

The conversation continued, in fits and starts, for several more minutes, but Luka gradually became aware that Abby was staring, or rather, trying not to stare, at his hands. The bandages had finally come off his wrists that morning. The skin was a road-map of scar tissue from the base of his hands about six inches up each arm; red and knotted. Luka instinctively made an effort to cover his wrists with his hands - but with both wrists affected it was, of course, impossible. Abby looked away, looked down at her own hands.

Luka knew he needed to say something. For a fleeting instant he was tempted to tell her the truth - tell her exactly where the scars had come from - just to see the look of horror that would cross her face. 'Oh these? These are the result of having your hands tied with electrical cord behind your neck, tied so tightly that the weight of your arms pulls on them and makes the cords rub the skin raw. It isn't long, of course, before it is all so infected that it starts attracting insects, flies. It's like being dead, Abby, and having maggots eating your body, but you're alive while it's happening, so you can feel it.'

How would she react if he said that to her? But he didn't say it. He just said, "Plastics has been keeping an eye on the scars. If there are contractures it can compromise the function in my hands. But so far it just seems to be a cosmetic issue. I'll probably get some skin grafts eventually; should make them look better. Not that it really matters ... I usually wear long sleeves anyway, and my lab coat. They should cover most of it."
"If it makes you feel better you should have it done," Abby said. "Doesn't matter if anyone else sees it or not."

And another long silence. Why was conversation so awkward? Abby was the one person he'd usually been able to talk with easily before. Sure, they'd had their ups and downs, and had never really communicated on a deep level, but casual conversation had always been easy. Why was just having her in the room with him suddenly so difficult?

And, suddenly, he knew why. It was because she knew. It had been his determination, from the start, to leave Matenda behind him. He would come home to Chicago, and all of that would be forgotten. Nobody here would ever have to know any of it, beyond the minimum that his doctors would have to know, of course, to treat him. For everyone else, he had a broken leg which had needed surgical repair, and he was recovering. That was enough. But Abby had seen the meds that first night. She had seen the Triple Cocktail. She knew about the possible exposure to HIV. She didn't know why he was taking them, how he might have been exposed, but she could guess, or maybe Gillian would let something slip, enough for her to put two and two together.

Luka abruptly interrupted Abby's description of another 'interesting' ER case. "Abby, I'm really tired. I think I'd just like to go to bed, get some sleep." He looked over at Gillian, who had been sitting and reading. "Could you see about my evening meds?"

Gillian hurried out and Abby said, "Ok. I didn't mean to tire you. I'll come back tomorrow."

"No." Luka spoke quietly, steadily. "I'd rather you didn't."

"Did I do something wrong?" Abby looked and sounded genuinely hurt.

"No ... it isn't you. It isn't anything you did. I just need some time alone. This is hard for me, and I need some time to get my bearings again. I can't do that with people around. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be. I know ..." Abby trailed off. She was silent a moment then said, "You get a good night's sleep. I'll be around when you want to see me again."

Luka just nodded and picked up the remote again. Abby started for the door, hesitated in the doorway a moment, then left without saying anything more. Luka found his tv show again and stared at the screen while he waited for Gillian.

Of course, Gillian 'knew' too. He could never really be with her again either. Things were easier with her than they had been during those horrible weeks in Kisangani, but whatever hopes he knew Gillian still entertained for a future with him were hopes he was going to have to dash. He just hoped he could do it without hurting her. He really didn't want to hurt her.
Chapter 4

Gillian heard the screams from down the hall. She was sitting in the visitor's lounge, waiting to get tired enough for sleep. (Sitting in Luka's room all day didn't do much to bring on fatigue and, despite the late hour (or rather, the early hour) she was still wide awake.) Giving him the privacy he still insisted on for sleep; the privacy to dream his dreams, experience his nightmares undisturbed. When she would sometimes check on him in the night, or during his daytime sleep, she would occasionally find him sleeping quietly, but, more often he'd be twisting restlessly on the bed, muttering to himself, calling out in Croatian, or sometimes in English. The same dreams, the same terrors that never left him in peace. "Please ... no ... oh God ... help me ..."  

"But no screams. Not since he'd come to Chicago. Not, in fact, since before he'd nearly died, more than two weeks before, in Kisangani.

Gillian was on her feet and running, in his room in an instant. Luka was sitting up in bed, eyes wide open, but still, clearly, asleep. Sweat soaked his hospital gown and made his hair stick to his forehead. And he was fighting. Fighting the male nurse, who was trying, without success, to press him back down onto the bed. Gillian didn't recognize the nurse. He hadn't worked here before; perhaps he was a float from another floor, or a temp. He heard Gillian's footsteps (how, over Luka's panicked screams, she didn't know), and turned. He, obviously, didn't recognize her either.

"You a nurse? I rang for another nurse!" he said, taking in her street clothes, lack of a name tag.

Gillian was uncertain what to say. She had been helping with Luka's care, in an unofficial way, but she really couldn't practice here, not legally. She shook her head, then said "Stop it! You're panicking him! You're making things worse!"

"He's going to hurt himself. Find me another nurse, or a doctor!"

"Just take your hands off of him!" Gillian tried to position herself where Luka might be able to see her, if, in fact, he could see anything that all but the images that still filled his terrified memory. "Luka, it's ok. Nobody wants to hurt you."

The nurse (his tag said "Mitch"), gave her a disgusted look and, letting go of Luka's arms, ran from the room. Gillian sat down on the bed. Luka was still fighting, fighting things that were't there, striking at her, trying to get out of the bed. She had to somehow keep him from falling out of bed - God knows what he would do to his leg if he fell again - somehow calm him down, without touching him, which would only increase his panic further. "Luka, try to hear my voice. Everything is ok. There's nothing to be afraid of..."

And then Mitch was back, with leather restraints. Gillian was on her feet. "No! You can't restrain him!"

"I'm sorry, miss," he said coolly. "But I can't let him injure himself. I'm responsible for his well-being here, and until I can get some sedation orders from a doc, I need to keep him from hurting himself." Mitch got the bands over Luka's wrists (God ... didn't he see the scars ... couldn't he even guess what Luka might be going through?), and strapped him to the bed-frame. And ... amazingly, Luka's screams quieted, turning to sobs. He was still, clearly, terrified, he still had no idea where he was or what was happening to him - but he seemed to know now that he couldn't fight any more. They had won. They could do with him as they chose.

Gillian turned to Mitch, furious. "How could you do that? Do you have any idea? Didn't they tell
you *anything* about your patients before turning you loose on them?"

"Luka Kovač," he pronounced it Ko-vak, "compound tib-fib fracture, multiple rib fractures ..."

"Right ... all received when he was tied up! Tied up and beaten by men he didn't recognize. Haven't you ever seen a flashback before?"

"I couldn't let him injure himself. With all those broken bones, he could have done himself some serious harm." Just then another nurse came into the room.

"Rosen approved five of Haldol," she said, handing Mitch a syringe. He injected it into Luka's IV port.

"When we're sure he's calm again, we can take off the restraints," he said quietly to Gillian, and left the room.

Gillian sat down again beside Luka. He was still sobbing. "I'm sorry, Luka. I'm so, so sorry."

He looked at her, and finally seemed to see her. "Help me ..." he whispered.

"They'll take off the restraints soon, I promise. Just as soon as you're calm again."

"When is it going to stop? When is it all going to stop? I can't ... make it stop."

Gillian stroked his hair. She was crying too. "Just go to sleep. The Haldol will keep the dreams away, for a little while."

But Luka didn't sleep. Not for a long time. Not even the powerful sedative was stronger than his fear, his panic. He gradually grew quieter, outwardly calmer, but Gillian could still see the terror in his eyes as he stared blankly into space, pulling helplessly at the restraints, moaning softly. Finally, after several endless hours his eyes fell shut again and he fell into a restless sleep. And Gillian, aching with exhaustion herself, went to find Mitch (who had not returned to check on his patient), and demand that he remove the leathers.
Chapter 5

Susan stepped off the elevator. Fatigue still numbed her. Two straight shifts had left her too tired to drive safely. (With Luka ill and Carter still away - and Kerry stubbornly refusing to hire temporary replacements, the remaining attendings were being run ragged.) A nap in the on-call room had refreshed her enough to drive, but she thought she should see Luka first. She hadn't come up last night, hadn't had the time, and guilt nagged at her. She wouldn't stay long; it wasn't yet visiting hours, and she still needed to get some real sleep before coming back for another shift tonight, but she should at least say hello, at least apologize.

The door was open a crack. Susan tapped lightly and stepped inside - and froze. At first she thought he was asleep. He lay on his back, quite still, the covers nearly up to his chin. But his eyes were open.

"Luka?"

His head barely moved, his eyes moved slowly to look in her direction, but she was sure he didn't really see her. Her stomach turned over. He was a different person.

Her previous visits he had been sitting up in bed. He had looked tired, and Susan had enough experience to know that his smiles and good cheer had been, at least partially, an act; that he was still in quite a lot of pain - and not just physical pain. But the fact that he'd been able to maintain that act at all, and had cared enough to try had been a positive sign. Now though, the facade was gone. He was white, almost grey. The scars on his face, and some that she hadn't seen before on his wrists and arms stood out starkly. And his eyes spoke clearly of fear, pain and hopelessness - no, worse than that - terror, agony, despair. The wall he had worked so hard to keep in place had been stripped away, leaving his emotions open to view. He was shaking a little.

"Luka?" Susan said again. "It's Susan."

He took a deep breath, seemed to stir himself a little. "Please ... go away ..."

Gillian said quickly, "He had a hard night. I don't think he's up to having visitors right now."

"Ok." Susan touched his arm gently, and Luka flinched and gave a soft cry, as if her touch had caused him pain. "I'll come back when you're feeling better. I brought that book I promised you. I'll leave it on the table for you."

Luka didn't answer. Didn't seem to have heard her. He had slipped back into his own world, his own pain.

What had happened? What had changed? Susan looked at Gillian, saw traces of tears on her face. She met her eyes for a moment, then went out into the hall and waited there. A minute later, Gillian joined her.

"What happened? He was doing so well!"

"I told you, he had a rough night, he didn't get much sleep. I really can't tell you much more than that."

"Come on, Gillian. I'm not an idiot. I've already figured out that Luka must have experienced something pretty appalling out there. Those injuries, those scars - those are not the result of falling down a flight of stairs, or getting into a bar fight. What happened last night was, maybe, related to
whatever did happen? I'm not trying to pry, Gillian - but Luka's my friend. I want to be able to help him, or at least not make things worse by saying or doing something stupid."

Gillian sighed, bit her lip. "He has nightmares," she finally said. "about what did happen. Last night he had ... I guess it was a pretty bad flashback. I wasn't there when it happened, I just saw the results. Some idiot nurse did make things worse; Luka panicked. If the nurse had just waited, talked to him, talked him through it, he would have calmed down eventually. But he put Luka in restraints, sedated him. He was terrified. He spent most of the night unable to really sleep, but too spaced out on Haldol to know anything. I don't think he knew where he was, or what was happening, but he couldn't relax enough to sleep. I think he thought that if he slept..." Gillian trailed off and shook her head.

"What?"

"Nothing." Gillian looked at the door. "I need to get back to him. It will probably be a day or two before he'll be up to having any visitors again. You might want to check with the floor nurse before you come in."

Susan slid wearily behind the wheel of her car. She could still see Luka's eyes; haunted, terrified. What could have happened to him to have triggered such horrible memories, memories that still wouldn't let him sleep for fear of ... what? Susan had assumed until now that it had been, perhaps, an explosion. She knew there was a civil war; perhaps he'd been caught in a shelling. His injuries, at least the ones that Susan could see, were consistent with something like that - shrapnel, maybe some burns, his leg had been crushed under debris? Perhaps that was it. After all, he'd lost his family in a shelling, in a war. To have experienced it all again ... that could have been horribly traumatic for him. And if others had died? If he had been unable to save them?

Susan shook her head, made herself focus on her driving. It was really none of her business. She wouldn't pry. If he wanted to tell her about it, he would. Luka was just her friend. But then that thought surprised her. Was he her friend? They had been colleagues for a couple of years, had usually gotten along pretty well ... at least when he hadn't been behaving like a complete jerk. But she'd never thought of him as her friend before. Not in the same way that Abby or Jing Mei or Mark had been a friend. So why had the word come so naturally when she was talking to Gillian? And what had drawn her to his room nearly every day since his return?
Chapter 6

It had been a nightmare. An endless nightmare. And Luka struggled to waken from it. First had been the dream itself - the same dream he'd had a hundred times before, and before he had begun to dream it, of course, had been the reality. Then had come another reality that he had experienced before, of hands trying to press him into the dirt ... into the bed, of his own voice screaming in terror - panic - out of control, fighting desperately, until hands too strong for him to fight had tied him, bound him, and he couldn't fight any more. He could only scream. Then a fog, a heavy fog where there had only been terror, where voices sometimes spoke to him, where hands, gentle but still horrifying, still touched him, where he knew only fear and the awareness that it was all happening again; that he hadn't been able to leave any of it behind in Africa.

Finally the fog had thickened, and he had slept. A dreamless sleep.

He wakened again. His body ached with fatigue. The clock on the wall said 2:30. The light from the window told him it was the next day. Gillian was asleep in her chair. He remembered all of it. It had been better, he thought, when he hadn't remembered. When was it all going to stop? He remembered having asked Gillian that question. He remembered that she had given him no answer. He remembered sobbing helplessly, knowing that it would never stop.

No, there was an answer. DeRaad had been right. There was only one way he would ever be able to make it stop. He had to face his demons. However painful it might be, it could not possibly be worse than going through this, night after night, day after day.

But could he do it? Was he really strong enough? Could he talk about the things he couldn't even bear to think about? The things that sent nausea through him when he even tried? The only time he'd been able to talk about them, even a little bit, had been to Carter, that one time - when he had known that death would soon come to free him from the memories, that he'd never have to think about them again. Now there would be no such guarantee, no such promise. What if the talking just made things worse? Just caused him more pain? Could he bear it? He still felt himself so close to the edge of his sanity. He was barely holding on. Would this be enough to push him over the brink, into an even more horrible darkness?

A soft whimper of fear slipped out. And Gillian was awake in an instant. "Luka?"

"I'm ok," he said. "Did I miss PT this morning?"

"Yeah, you were sleeping. You needed sleep more than anything else. We're going to skip your afternoon session too. Allenson thinks you aren't quite up for it today."

"I ... I want to."

"You'll start fresh tomorrow. You won't get much done, and you can hurt yourself if you're too tired." She gave him an encouraging smile. "Are you hungry?"

Luka wasn't hungry; he recognized the familiar nausea from Kisangani, but he nodded. He had to start getting well. He couldn't go backwards again, into the darkness. "I missed lunch, didn't I?"

"And breakfast. I'll go see if I can find you something."

Luka was alone. He struggled to think of something cheerful, anything at all. He didn't want to watch tv. There was no newspaper. There was a book on the bed-side table. Where had it come from? It was the one Susan had mentioned the other day. Had she brought it? Had she been here?
When?

A knock on the door. DeRaad. A wave of nausea.

"You're early."

"I wasn't busy." Carl pulled the chair up and sat down. "You had a rough time last night. I've been by a few times already, but you weren't in any shape to talk." Luka nodded. "Has anything like that happened before?"

"Yeah ... once ..." Luka could feel his breathing quicken. He wasn't going to talk about this. Carl wouldn't make him remember that, talk about it? He couldn't start with that part ... he knew he had to talk about it, but there had to be an easier way to start, an easier way to do this. "Could I get some ... medication? Paxil maybe? I think that might help."

"I may put you on meds eventually Luka, but not yet. What you are experiencing is a very normal short-term response to the trauma you went through. It's something you need to deal with, work through, not cover up with drugs. In a few weeks, if you still need medication to help you cope, we can discuss it then."

"I just want it to stop. I just want all of it to stop."

"All of what?"

Luka didn't answer. Carl waited patiently. Finally Luka said, barely audible, "I couldn't make it stop ... any of it ..."

"Make what stop, Luka?"

"The pain. It hurt so much. I couldn't make it stop."

"When?" Carl's voice was almost as quiet as Luka's. Luka didn't answer. He couldn't. He was shaking too hard. He tried to make himself stop shaking, wrapped his arms around himself. "What was hurting?" Carl asked. "Who was hurting you?"

No... he couldn't go there. No yet. Carl couldn't make him talk about that part. Not yet.

Luka finally said, "It wasn't so much when ... they were ... hurting me. That part didn't last so long, and I knew I would die, and it would have to stop." Luka was aware that he was slowly rocking back and forth, but he couldn't stop himself, and Carl didn't try to stop him. He just listened calmly. "When they were done, they just left me there ... to die. But I didn't. I didn't die. There was just pain ... for so long. I couldn't get away from it no matter what I did, no matter how hard I tried. I couldn't make it stop.

"It was days ... Carter said it must have been 4 days, maybe 5 ... I'm not sure how long I was conscious ... it was at least a few days. I remember it being daylight, and then it was night. That happened a few times... going from day to night and back again. I couldn't see ... I thought I was blind ... but Angelique said my face was so swollen when they found me, I probably just couldn't open my eyes enough to see very much. I couldn't really see, but I could tell when it was day, and when it was night. The darkness looked different."

Luka fell silent. He was exhausted. This had to be enough for today. Carl couldn't expect more. He'd been talking for an hour, surely. But no, the clock showed, unbelievably, that less than 10 minutes had passed since Carl had come in. And the psychiatrist wasn't going to let this be enough.
"You were alone all that time? There were no other prisoners there?"

"Not ... alive. At first, the others were still alive. I remember Patrice calling me. But then they came in ... I heard shots; gunshots. They killed them. I think they all ... died quickly. I remember people crying, asking to be spared ... but after all the shots were done, it was quiet. There was just me."

"Why didn't they shoot you? Do you know?"

"Why bother? I was already dead." He had stopped rocking, stopped feeling. He was just talking now, saying words. It was easier when he didn't feel, didn't think.

"So the others weren't ... beaten?"

Luka shook his head. "I don't think so. At least ... not like I was."

"Do you know why?"

"Charles said it was probably because I'm ... western ... it's dangerous there for westerners. They wanted to make an example of me."

"And what do you think?"

Luka just shrugged, shook his head. After another long minute he whispered, "I don't know." The pain was coming back. He could only stay numb for so long. He looked at Carl for the first time. "I'm tired. And can you see what's keeping Gillian? She was supposed to be getting me something to eat."

Carl sighed. "Ok, Luka. You get something to eat, then get some sleep. We made a good start. I know this is hard, but it will get easier, and you'll begin to notice a difference soon. It's going to help. I promise."

"Yeah..." Luka shut his eyes and waited until he heard the door open and then shut again.
Chapter 7

Gillian stopped outside the door. She had to do it. It was the best thing for her, and the best thing for Luka.

He was doing better. It was sometimes hard to see, but he was. Physically, he was getting stronger. He'd been up with a walker for the first time the previous day, and had taken a few shaky steps. His emotional progress was less clear. (And, of course, due to privacy issues, she could only gauge it based on what she could see herself.) After a week of daily sessions with Dr. DeRaad, sessions that left him drained and exhausted, the nightmares did seem to be less overwhelming. (Though she couldn't be sure about that part either. She had been sleeping at Luka's apartment for the past few nights; the couch in the lounge just wasn't allowing her much sleep. Though she didn't miss the irony, of course, of sleeping alone in Luka's bed, night after night.) But Luka told her that the nightmares were better, and he did seem more rested in the mornings. He told her he was starting to feel better. And she had to trust him.

But, more sleep aside, he did not seem much better, emotionally. If anything, he appeared worse. He was more withdrawn, more depressed. He rarely spoke to her any more, except to answer her questions, as briefly as he could manage. He seemed to be devoting all of his energy, except for that he needed for his physical therapy, to bracing himself for his next counseling session, for the pain he would have to endure during that hour. She could see that he was struggling to make himself eat again, forcing each bite down against the nausea. He showed little emotion about anything. Even getting up to walk, something that she had expected to have brought elation, excitement, had only brought a distant smile and then focused determination as he threw his attention into walking: putting one foot slowly and painfully in front of the other.

He had few visitors now. Abby hadn't been back to see him. When Gillian had run into her in the hall a few days before, she'd asked her about it. "He doesn't want me there," Abby had told her. "He told me to go away."

"I'm sure he didn't mean it," Gillian had said, but she wasn't so sure. While he hadn't said it to her in so many words, his manner was making it quite clear to her that he would like her to go away as well. Whatever progress he was making seemed to be occurring in spite of her presence rather than because of it.

Susan still stopped by almost every day, but never stayed very long. Luka had little to say to her, and the visits seemed to be painful for him. Besides Susan, he had had one visit from a neighbor, and Jing Mei and Randi had stopped by once. No-one else had been by at all since those first few days.

But the visits he did have didn't seem to help. As in Kisangani, Luka seemed to prefer to be alone. It was too much work now to have to put on a 'good face' for company, even for her.

It was best for Luka. And it was best for her. It had only been a fantasy, of course, and Gillian wasn't even sure when the fantasy had started. Had she really expected, before all this had begun, that their time together would be permanent, or even long-term? When they had first met his first day in Kisangani all she was looking for, and all he was looking for, she well knew, was a little bit of comfort and pleasure, a little bit of human warmth in a setting that, even at its best, was sorely lacking in such things. Even now, after all these weeks, she knew almost nothing about him. Not much to build a relationship on, really.

Gillian opened the door and went into Luka's room. Luka was sitting up in a chair, staring at the tv
but, she knew, not really seeing it. It was just background noise. (Gillian knew that if she were to ask him what the people on the talk show were discussing, indeed, even what the name of the program was, he wouldn't be able to tell her.)

"Good morning," she said brightly. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah. Pretty well." The words came out automatically.

Best get on with it. "Can you turn that off for a minute? We need to talk."

Luka obediently switched off the set, put the remote down. "Something wrong with the apartment? Bathroom sink was dripping when I left. I asked the landlord to look at it."

"No ... nothing like that. Everything's fine there." Gillian took a deep breath. "I talked to Elise last night. Remember me telling you about her?"

"Your boss at the hospital in Montreal."

"Yeah. I need to go home, Luka. I'm going to lose my job if I don't."

"Ok," Luka said agreeably, and reached for the remote again.

Gillian was stunned. She hadn't expected - what had she expected? Not that he'd cling to her, beg her to stay, but surely something more than this. "I'd like to stay longer, I wish I could, but my savings are almost gone, I'll lose my apartment."

Luka sighed. "I never expected you to stay, Gillian. I assumed you would come home with me on the plane, see me settled here, and leave. It's been two weeks. You need to go home. You have a life. This hospital is well staffed, I'm ambulatory again ... or will be very soon ... I don't need a private nurse anymore."

He turned the tv back on, pretended to watch for a minute, then asked, quietly, "When will you be leaving?"

"I haven't made a reservation yet. I need to start back to work on Monday. I thought I'd try to get a Friday flight. That would give me a few days to get settled again."

"You can leave sooner if you want ... if you can get a flight. If you need money ..."

"No, I have enough for a ticket."

"It's the least I can do, Gillian," Luka said, and for the first time she saw some emotion, though she couldn't read what it was, in his eyes. "You have done a lot for me. And I do appreciate it."

"No, I can't take your money. You'll be off work for a while yet yourself. You need it."

Another sigh. "They'll be here to take me to PT soon. Why don't you go see about that ticket. Try my travel agent, Star Travel on North Michigan. Ask for Anna. She should be able to find you a good last-minute deal if you give her my name, tell her I sent you."

"Trying to get rid of me?" Gillian tried to make it sound like a joke, but her voice broke a little.

"You have a life, Gillian," Luka said again. "You need to get back to it." Then, very softly. "I don't know when I'm going to have one again."

"Soon, Luka. Very soon," said Gillian softly. She turned towards the door and thought to herself,
"But it won't be with me ..."
Chapter 8

Alone.

The nurse had been in earlier for his morning care. The aid had brought him his breakfast, which he forced down, one bite at a time, until his throat had literally closed in protest. None of his doctors had been by yet today. He was doing well, they saw no need to stop by so often anymore.

He didn't have a room-mate. They had put him in a private room from the start, believing that his emotional state made that the best choice for him. (Wouldn't want to be upsetting innocent sick people with nightmares at 2 a.m., now would we ...)

At 10:30 he would have half an hour of PT, and at noon someone would bring him lunch, which he would eat alone. PT again at 3:30, and at 4, counseling with DeRaad. Dinner at 6, Susan might stop by for a few minutes around 7, and then his evening care and meds.

The rest of the time he would be alone. Today and every day. Gillian had gone home.

It shouldn't matter. He shouldn't care. He didn't care. He didn't want her here. Having her here had been unbearable. He needed to move on, and he couldn't do that with a lot of people hanging around ... especially, people who knew. And he was used to being alone. He'd been alone for most of his adult life... at least since Danijela had died. Being alone wasn't really a problem for him anymore. It wasn't.

Luka took a magazine from the table, began to flip through it, but he couldn't concentrate. It was an issue of the Annals, one of several that Susan had brought for him. He'd asked her to bring them, he needed to catch up; keep up. "A little light reading?" she'd teased. "Better than watching soap operas all day," he had told her.

But today, it was too much for him. He didn't want to read. Closing the magazine, he let it slide from his lap to the floor, didn't bother to try and pick it up. He didn't want to read, not even something lighter. He didn't want to watch tv. He wanted to get up and walk out of here, go home, back to his apartment. He wanted to go to work. But he couldn't do any of those things. He wanted to cry, but he wouldn't do that.

It was only 9:30. An hour until physical therapy, until he could do something constructive towards going home again, going back to work. An hour of emptiness - one of many.

God ... why was he even bothering? Why was he trying at all? How long would it before he could walk? Before he could go home. Allenson was vague on both those questions. "At least a few weeks yet," was all he would say to the 'going home' question, and as for walking; the cast would be on for two months - after that, who could say? It would depend on how hard he worked and how well he healed. And the counseling. He hadn't even tried to ask Carl how long that would have to last. He was afraid to hear what the answer might be.

No. He was not going to cry.

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The day had dragged by with intolerable slowness. Two sessions of PT; he had walked a few more steps than he had yesterday. Lunch. This would be, Luka knew, the pattern for his days for a long time to come.
He didn't hear the knock. Suddenly DeRaad was there.

"How are you doing today, Luka?" he asked. Luka didn't answer. Carl really didn't want to hear his answer. Luka didn't want to hear himself say it.

Carl sat down and waited. After a few minutes of silence, he said, "What's on your mind today?"

"I don't want to talk today. I don't feel well."

"We don't have to talk about Africa. What would you prefer to talk about?"

"Nothing." Luka picked up his magazine again, pretended to look at it.

"You're paying for my time," Carl reminded him with a trace of a smile. "You may as well make good use of it."

"I have good insurance." Luka turned the page. A few more minutes went by. Carl waited patiently. He would sit there for an hour, Luka knew. God ... what did he want? To wallow in his pain, or to try and get better? He had to keep trying. It was all he could do. A deep breath. After 6 weeks, it no longer sent pain stabbing through his chest to do that. The ribs were nearly healed. "Gillian ... went home last night. It's good that she did. I'm glad. She needs to go back to her life, forget about me. She ... wanted things from me that I could never give her. We didn't talk about it very much, but I know she did."

"What kind of things?"

"A future. I don't have that."

"You don't have a future with Gillian, or one at all?"

A shrug. "I don't know." Another long silence as Luka struggled to gather his thoughts. He was so tired. So tired of everything. He'd tackle the easier one first. "I liked Gillian, but it was never supposed to be anything permanent. We both knew that when we finished our volunteer service I'd come home to Chicago and she'd go home to Montreal, and we'd go back to our lives. But then, once ... everything happened ... it was like she suddenly expected more. Maybe she fell in love with me? Or thought that I owed her something because she'd helped save my life. Or she felt sorry for me ... I don't know. We never talked about it."

"Why not?"

"There was nothing to talk about. It wouldn't have made a difference. There could never be anything for us. No matter what she wanted."

And again, "Why not?"

"Because there couldn't be. I don't love her."

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Luka was exhausted. As always, the session with Carl had left him feeling drained and sick. Carl had pushed, gently, patiently, firmly, for a little bit more than Luka was willing or able to give. (Rather, he thought, in the same way that his physical therapist did. The only difference was that, when he achieved more than he thought he could in PT, he felt a sense of accomplishment, knew that he was one step closer to his goal. In psych counseling, the extra effort just brought him more pain. He still couldn't see the light at the end of this tunnel.)
His dinner was sitting on the tray, untouched. When he'd filled out his menu card yesterday, he had selected items more or less at random. Nothing looked or sounded good to him any more; he'd known he probably wouldn't be able to choke them down anyway.

A knock on his door. It was Susan, bearing a smile and a large bag with something in it that almost smelled good. She looked at his dinner tray. "I didn't think you'd be eating that," she said. "Two weeks of hospital food should be just about anybody's limit. So I brought you something different." She moved the dinner tray aside and put her bag down.

"What is it?" Luka stirred himself to ask. He didn't really care, but thought he should be polite. Susan was going to so much trouble to be nice to him, make him believe that somebody cared about him. Not that he really believed it, of course.

"Chinese." Susan opened the bag. "I wasn't sure what you liked, so I had to guess. We have crab-sweet corn soup, and dumplings, and orange beef and Szechwan shrimp. And, of course, fortune cookies."

"That's a lot of food for one person," Luka had to smile a little at Susan's infectious good cheer. It wasn't something she was putting on to make him feel better, or to distract him from his problems. She really did seem happy.

"I need to eat too. I hate eating alone, and I assumed that you felt the same."

"It doesn't matter," Luka said softly.

Susan just smiled again and began serving out the food. "Fork or chopsticks?"

Luka hesitated. "Fork. I ..." In the past he had handled chopsticks with ease, but his hands were still a bit stiff and clumsy. There was still concern about nerve damage from the many days he'd spent with his hands tied. He felt he should explain but Susan didn't seem to want or need an explanation.

"Fork is fine. The food tastes just as good. Is Sprite ok to drink?"

"Yeah." Susan put his food in front of him and picked up her own. Luka still wasn't hungry, not even a little bit. But he wasn't nauseous. Maybe he could eat a little. "You seem in a good mood today," he said, before taking a bite of a dumpling.

"Didn't have to work, don't have a shift until tomorrow. I slept until noon, then went to the beach. You'll note my tan ..."

Susan continued to chatter away cheerfully, occasionally asking Luka a question. The things she said, the things she talked about weren't so dramatically different from the things Gillian had talked about, or Abby. It was mostly just inconsequential small talk. Nor was her manner really so different. So why was Luka finding himself, for the first time in longer than he could remember, relaxing ... smiling? Why did he suddenly look down at his plate and realize that he'd finished everything on it? Eaten a meal without having to force himself for the first time in days. It wasn't just that it was outside food and not hospital food. He wasn't alone, he told himself. He'd gotten himself all depressed about being alone, and now he had some pleasant company. That was all.
Chapter 9

Carl paged through the chart, rereading his notes. 'Patient was withdrawn ... Pt spoke freely about fears for the future ... Pt appeared more relaxed today.'

It had been nearly three weeks since his first session. Luka was definitely doing better. He was making good progress. He had a long way to go, but the improvement was clear. There were still good and bad days, but the good days, the productive sessions, were beginning to outnumber the bad ones.

Still, his physical progress was even more rapid. He would be going home soon, probably within a week to ten days at most. Once he was home, Carl knew he couldn't expect him to come back for daily counseling sessions. He might not even choose to come back at all.

While he had spoken of many horrible things, things that made Carl feel a little sick to hear them - and he thought he'd heard just about everything in his many years as a psychiatrist - he had not yet spoken about one part of his experience. It was in his medical records, Carl knew it had occurred. Sexual assault. He had been gently encouraging Luka to talk about it, but he wouldn't. And whenever the encouragement was anything more than gentle, Luka would shut down completely, refuse to speak for the remainder of the session. But he still talked about it at night. The nurse's notes reported almost nightly nightmares, in which he tossed restlessly in bed, calling out in his sleep, pleading for someone to stop ...

Carl sighed. It was 5 to 4. Gathering up his papers and pens, he headed for the elevator.

Luka was up in a chair. He usually was now. Being in bed, he said, made him feel like a patient, like he was sick. Being up in a chair made him feel like he was getting well.

Carl smiled a greeting, sat down in the other chair. "What's on your mind today?" he asked. His usual opening.

And, as usual, Luka just sat for a minute before answering, trying to gather his thoughts, gather his courage to reopen the box of memories, expose himself again to the pain.

"There's nothing else, Carl. I've told you everything, I think."

"No, you haven't." Luka just looked down at his hands, rubbed the scars. "And you've talked a lot about facts, about what happened. We need to start talking about feelings, about how all those things made you feel, and are making you feel now.

An amazed look, a short bitter laugh. "How do you think I feel?"

"I don't know, Luka. If I knew, I wouldn't be asking."

Luka shook his head. He stopped rubbing his wrists, began pulling pieces of paper off the magazine he held in his lap, shredding them into tiny pieces and dropping them onto the floor.

Carl waited for a few minutes, but Luka clearly wasn't going to say anything more. Was this going to be another session where he would sit for an hour while Luka said nothing? There had been a few of those along the way. No. It was time to push a little harder. "Luka," he said gently, and waited until Luka looked at him. "I want you to tell me ... you need to tell me about the assault."

"No." Luka's response was immediate. His voice sounded calm, but his hands started to shake, a
reaction he attempted to cover by shredding the paper faster.

"You're making good progress. You are ready to go there."

"No!"

Carl kept his words calm and measured, against Luka's rapidly increasing agitation. "Luka, I don't need, or expect a description of the act. I know what happened to you. But the effect it is having on you now is obvious - it's like a wall inside you, and behind that wall is the pain, and the memories. The longer that wall stays up, the more pain is going to build up behind it, and the worse things are going to get. Until you can get through it, you are not going to heal."

"Then I won't heal. I've survived this long." Carl saw Luka's eyes look towards the door, a flicker of fear.

"Anything you tell me is confidential. You know that, right?"

Another short laugh. "I work here, Carl. Doctors talk."

"Not about this. There is nothing about your case that I have felt the need to tell to Allenson or Heneley. I don't anticipate ever needing to tell them anything. If anything should come up that I think might benefit them to know ... might help in your medical care, I still won't tell them without first getting your permission."

Luka continued his destruction of the magazine. He seemed to be devoting all his attention to it. Finally he said slowly, "I can't ... I don't remember, Carl. I don't ... let myself remember. I think maybe I did ... once ... but it hurt too much. Now there are just the dreams when I sleep. When I wake up there's just the pain ... it still hurts, but not as much as when I had to remember it too. All I remember now is the pain."

"So tell me about the pain."

Luka's breathing quickened ... his eyes seemed to darken. He folded his hands, perhaps as a way of forcing them to be still. He seemed to be looking at something, seeing something that wasn't in the room. But he didn't say anything.

"It's ok, Luka," Carl said gently. "You're safe here."

Another few minutes of silence, then Luka began to speak slowly, his voice without emotion. "I ... I wanted to die ... I kept begging God to let me die ... it would stop ... I knew it would stop if I died ... I prayed and prayed... He didn't hear me ... never heard me. They were laughing ... I think He couldn't hear me over the laughing." His voice began to shake. "I was crying ... and they were laughing. I was trying to be somewhere else ... to not have to be there ... if I couldn't be dead ... I just didn't want to be there. Then I couldn't pray anymore ... they were pushing my face into the dirt. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't die, but I couldn't breathe. There was dirt in my mouth ... and blood ... and dirt ... so much dirt ..."

Luka's breathing had become ragged. The magazine, what was left of it, had slid unnoticed to the floor, and he was rocking again. His words had faded away to nothing and he just moaned now, sometimes there were what seemed to be words, but Carl couldn't understand them. Perhaps it was Croatian, or perhaps he was just mumbling now. Far from 'not remembering' Carl knew he was remembering all too clearly, he was there. Let him stay 'there', try and get this finished, or bring him back before the emotional pain got to be too much?

Luka made the decision for him. After a few more moments some pain, real and physical, made
him suddenly double over, and the movement startled him back into reality. A sudden cry, his eyes widened with shock, and as Carl instinctively reached out to catch him before he fell forward out of the chair, touched his shoulders, another scream of fear and confusion.

"Ok, Luka," Carl said. "Everything's ok now."

"Sick..." Luka choked out faintly, and vomited. He didn't resist as Carl gently supported his shoulders so he could lean forward, vomit onto the floor without falling from the chair.

When the spell appeared to be over, Carl helped Luka sit up again. He went into the bathroom without saying anything. Bringing back a towel, he tossed it over the mess on the floor, and then quietly handed Luka a wet washcloth.

"Thanks." Luka's voice was shaking. He wiped his mouth and his damp face. He was still shaking, and when he'd finished with the washcloth, he let it drop from his hand. "I'm tired," he said faintly.

Carl nodded. "I think that we're done for today."

"We're done, Carl. I can't..."

"Tomorrow we'll talk about something else. We'll come back to this..."

"No!" Luka interrupted. "I can't go back there."

"Ok, Luka. " Carl's voice was gentle. He wouldn't accomplish anything by upsetting his patient. "We'll discuss this all another time." To his relief, Luka nodded. "Can I help you back into bed? You look pretty tired."

"I don't need help." Luka transferred himself from the chair to the bed, just a few inches away.

"Luka," Carl said. "You talked a little bit about God earlier. And you've talked about that before, about praying. I think it might help you, might make you feel better, to talk to a priest. You are Catholic, right?"

"More or less. I don't belong to a church; don't have a priest."

"The hospital chaplain, maybe?"

"No... that's not necessary. And it won't help."

"Ok," Carl said. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow. I'll get someone in to clean this up."

Out in the hall, Carl leaned against the wall, took a deep breath. These sessions left him almost as exhausted as his patient. He was glad he had chosen to schedule them for late in the day. But he was sure he'd see Luka's terrified eyes in his dreams tonight. Maybe he should have chosen an easier specialty ... like trauma surgery.
"Time of death, 1317." Susan stripped off her gloves and headed out of the trauma room. Summer in Chicago, she thought in disgust. Didn't people have anything better to do with the long, sunny days than shoot each other just for the heck of it? Her shift was barely half over; already this was her third GSW, her second fatality.

"I'm going to get some lunch," she told Randi. "Page me if you absolutely need me; otherwise, allow me 30 minutes to myself. Please."

Susan walked outside into the summer heat. She'd planned to walk down to the street, eat lunch in a real restaurant, but now she reconsidered. Maybe a hamburger from the Jumbo Mart would do.

She was tired. What she wouldn't give to be able to go to the Congo (where-ever that was), and personally drag Carter back home. What had he been thinking when he'd decided to stay behind? He had to have known that Luka would be off work for quite some time yet, that the ER was impossibly short-staffed. Which meant, of course, that the remaining attendings were all working 60 and 80 hour weeks.

Or maybe she would drag Luka downstairs and put him back to work. Susan smiled at the thought. He probably wouldn't object in the least. He would see patients from a wheelchair, hooked up to an IV if they would allow him to. He was, she knew, looking forward to going back to work; it was what was keeping him going through his long, painful recovery. But of course, he was nowhere near ready. Wouldn't be for months. He could walk a little bit with a walker, was hoping to be ready for crutches soon, he'd told her yesterday. And emotionally, he seemed a great deal better.

The first couple of weeks he had seemed so depressed; struggling to get through each day. Even when he had smiled, it had seemed forced, an act for her benefit. But lately he seemed better. Susan knew he was getting counseling, perhaps it was starting to help. Perhaps he was finally beginning to work through whatever horrors he had faced out there. He still hadn't said a word to her about his time in Africa, and she wasn't going to pry. She was careful to keep the conversation light, non-threatening; or let him pick the topics. And he usually chose things like items from the newspaper, or the book he'd been reading. He never talked about himself, beyond letting her know how he was doing with his physical therapy. But then, that was nothing new. Luka had rarely talked much about himself even before this.

But he did seem to enjoy her visits. He seemed relaxed, almost happy when she was there, smiling comparatively often, and the smiles were natural now.

Still, why was she doing it? Susan knew full well that nobody else from the ER visited anymore. "I tried, Susan," Jing Mei had told her. "But he really didn't seem to care if I was there or not. He just seemed so unhappy. If I could help I would, but it's not helping him."

And Susan had said, "He's happier now, he's doing so much better. Try again. I'm sure he can use the company." But Jing Mei never seemed able to find the time anymore. And neither did anyone else.

Was she visiting just because she knew that he was lonely, then? Because she felt sorry for him? He would hate it, she knew, if he thought that was the reason. Susan knew that the one thing Luka did not want, perhaps the reason he was so closed-mouthed about his experiences, was for people to feel sorry for him.
But it wasn't as if they were friends. They hadn't been friends before. Acquaintances ... co-workers ... colleagues. But not friends.

They *hadn't* been friends, but certainly things could change. He was lonely, that was obvious. She was lonely. Her relationship with Chuck was nothing but a bad joke - he showed up occasionally for sex, (which she also enjoyed, she had to admit), but as for conversation ... no, whatever she was getting from Chuck wasn't friendship. Certainly wasn't love. Wasn't even a relationship, really. Why *couldn't* she and Luka be friends? They both seemed to need friends.

Susan finished her burger, headed back out into the heat. After her shift she'd go upstairs and see Luka. It would make her feel better. It was certainly better than going back to her empty apartment.
Why hadn't Carl listened to him? He had said, very clearly, he thought, that he had not wanted to talk to a priest. So, what had Carl done? Sent him a priest. At least it wasn't the hospital chaplain; someone he would have to face on a daily basis at work (when - someday - he returned to work), but an outside priest. Father Anthony had been here, he told him, to give Last Rites to a dying patient. Dr. DeRaad had thought, perhaps, Luka would like to speak with him for a while - he had some troubling spiritual concerns?

And Luka had been trapped. He felt unable to tell the priest to leave, so he had spoken to him. He'd talked a little bit about his pain; about his feeling that God had not been there for him when he had needed Him most. And in return he'd gotten, just what he expected, platitudes. "God was there, Luka. He heard your prayers, answered them the way He knew best. We sometimes cannot understand ..." and if he had been physically able, Luka knew it would have been a struggle for him to have not thrown the priest bodily from the room.

That had not been what he'd wanted to hear. That wasn't the answer he needed. Not now. When he had been dying in Kisangani, the empty comfort from Father Francois, the belief that he could trust God to help him, do what was best for him, had been helpful. It was what he had needed when facing death, preparing himself to die. But now he was facing life. A life full of memories, of fears. He needed more than empty comfort now. He needed to understand. He needed to find his own strength again, and this time it wasn't going to come from God, not if this was the best the priests could do.

The orderly was there with the wheelchair. "Time for PT, Dr. Kovac."

"Can't I walk? It isn't far."

"Sorry, not until the Doc okays it."

Luka levered himself into the wheelchair. It was ridiculous, he thought. He'd ride in a wheelchair down the hall, then he would spend half an hour exercising and walking on a treadmill - and then ride the chair back to his room.

But the PT was helping. He was definitely stronger now, physically. He could walk easily with the walker now, his arms were strong enough to support his weight. When he looked in the mirror he could see that he was regaining some muscle, putting on some weight. He was getting better. With or without God's help.

The physical therapist was waiting for him, smiling. "Ready for your next step, Dr. Kovač?" she asked. She was holding a pair of crutches. And Luka's memory flew back a few weeks. What had Allenson told him the very first day? "As soon as you can be up and getting around on crutches, you should be able to go home."

"I've been ready for weeks," he told her, meeting her smile.

"Ok. Let's give 'em a try."

Back in his room half an hour later, Luka sank wearily into his chair. Crutches were a whole different ball game from a walker. He'd known that, of course. He was a doctor. They were less stable, required different muscles, better balance. His leg, still casted from ankle to hip, seemed very heavy. But it would get easier. Everything was hard when you first began. He'd make rapid
progress, then he would go home.

Four o'clock. When Carl came in, Luka said quietly, "Thanks for nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"I told you I didn't want to talk to a priest!"

"Did you talk to him?"

"A little bit. It didn't help. I knew it wouldn't."

Carl sat down. "Do you believe in God, Luka?"

"Does it matter?" Luka didn't want to get into this. He wanted to go back to PT, work on what really mattered.

"I'm just wondering."

"I ... I don't know. Sometimes maybe I do."

"Back in Matenda, when you were praying, did you believe then?"

"I don't know." Again, the pain of stirring up too many memories. Why did this have to hurt so much all the time?

"Why did you pray?"

Luka shook his head. "I was dying, Carl. I was afraid. I was in pain. I was ... alone. I needed something. I was looking for something to help me get through it, help me bear the pain until I died. Praying helped ... or at least I wanted it to. Maybe it just made me feel like I was doing something ... I couldn't do anything except wait." He looked out the window. All he could see was the sky. Blue. "It didn't help. It just made me realize how alone I really was. I was going to die, and I'd be alone ... and maybe nobody would ever find me there. I wanted to die, I wanted that so badly; it hurt so much, and I knew that dying would be the only way it would ever stop hurting. But I didn't want to die alone. I wanted to know that ... at least ... God was with me. But He wasn't. I never felt ... anything when I prayed. Just pain.

A sigh. "I want there to be a God, Carl. When I think about Danijela, my kids ... I want to believe that they are with God, and that I'll see them again. I want to believe that He was there for them, when they were dying ... if they were afraid. But He wasn't there for me. Maybe I just didn't ..." Luka stopped talking, looked around for something to occupy his hands, but there was nothing in easy reach.

"Maybe what, Luka?" Carl prompted gently.

"Maybe I wasn't worth God's time ... attention ... maybe it was ... I was being punished. Danijela, Jasna, Marko - they'd never done anything to be punished for. God would have been there for them, would have helped them."

"What do you think you're being punished for?"

Luka just shook his head again. He couldn't talk to Carl about this. It was one thing to discuss the pain of Matenda; as horrible as it was, it was, at least, near the surface. But to start digging into the pain of his life ... the guilt ... the shame ... to expect the man to understand? No, he couldn't. Carl
would never understand.

"There must be some reason," he said finally.

"Luka," Carl said firmly. "I don't know what you think might have done, to 'deserve' this. But you
didn't do anything. You did nothing to cause this to happen to you, and you couldn't have prevented
it from happening. You went to Matenda to do good work, to help people. The men who harmed
you are evil, not you."

Luka just looked at his hands, rubbed the scars. There was nothing he could say. Nothing he could
bear to say. Nothing Carl could ever understand, ever help him with.
Chapter 12

How many times had he asked the question. "So, when can I go home?"

Allenson looked at his chart, shook his head. "I'm not sure yet. You are doing great, Luka, but you aren't ambulatory enough to go home."

"You said I could go when I could get around on crutches. I can do that."

"At that time," Allenson said quietly, "you had Gillian with you. I assumed that she'd still be with you. You live alone, Luka. You can't manage on your own yet."

"I can manage, if you give me the chance to try." Luka struggled to keep his voice calm.

"Would you consider hiring a nurse to stay with you, help you out?"

"If I'm going to have a live in nurse, I may as well still be here!"

"What about family ... friends? Anyone you can depend on to help you, to stay with you at least most of the time?"

Luka shook his head, the realization striking him like a blow. He had no one. No family. No friends. No one he could imagine asking for that kind of help; no one he could depend upon to provide it.

"Once you're home," Allenson went on, "you're going to have to come back here several times a week for therapy. You still need help with basic daily needs like showering and dressing, doing errands. You're either going to have to find, or hire, someone to help you, to be there all the time, or you'll have to stay here until you're a little bit more ambulatory, a little bit stronger. Compared to when you came in, you have made amazing progress, but you still have a long way to go."

"I'm going home," Luka said firmly. "Tomorrow. I'll figure the rest out."

A sigh from Allenson. "Unless what you 'figure out' is live-in help of some kind; a nurse, a home health aid, or a dependable schedule of friends and family, if you leave tomorrow, you'll be leaving AMA."

"That's fine."

"I know you're frustrated. I just don't want you to rush this. A little more time will make a lot of difference. In another week, ten days maybe, you'll be much better, much more able to manage at home."

"I'll think about it," Luka said softly. But his mind was made up.

When Carl came by later he got right to the point. "Saw Richard earlier. He tells me you're chomping at the bit to go home."

"I'm ready."

"What's the hurry?"

"Hurry?" Luka looked at him in disbelief. "I've been here over a month. Before this, I spent a month in the hospital in Kisangani. I think I've been hospitalized long enough. I'm sure my
insurance company will be glad to see me go." A smile. "This is a nice place to work, Carl. I've never wanted to live here."

But Carl didn't return his smile. "I agree with Richard. You are not ready to go home yet, physically or emotionally."

Luka bit his lip. "So .. what? You're going to commit me?"

"No, I just think you can still benefit from daily counseling. I don't want you to lose the progress you've made. Once you go home, will you be able to come back here every day? I know you don't live very far away, but it's still going to be a difficult trip with crutches and a cab."

"I think," Luka said slowly, "the best thing I can do, emotionally, is to go home. I need to feel like I'm a person again, not a patient, not a ... victim. To be in my own apartment again, do things for myself. To know that I have to do things for myself. I know I can do it, and I need the chance to be able to try."

"Will you come back for 3 sessions a week with me?"

"Yeah. I assume I'll be coming back for physical therapy too."

"Ok." Carl agreed finally. "I'll see if I can sway Allenson, convince him to discharge you."

"I'm leaving if he agrees or not."

"I know. But it's better if everyone's happy, right?"

"Happy? I don't think 'happy' is in the cards, Carl. Not anytime soon. Not for me." Luka rubbed the scars on his wrists. How long had it been since he had been happy?

"Are you nervous about going home?"

"A little," Luka admitted. "It will be different. And it will be hard at first. But I need to do it. I need to start getting my life back."

Carl nodded, sighed. He reached into his folder of papers, searched for a minute, then pulled out a flyer, which he handed to Luka.

"What's this?"

"It's information about a support group."

"Support group? For what?"

"For male sexual assault survivors. Along with your therapy with me, I'd like you to start going. They meet twice a week."

Luka stared, at the paper, then at Carl. "Support group?" he said again. "I can't ... Jesus, Carl, I can't even think about it ... talk about it to you. You think I'm going to go to a group where a bunch of men sit around and talk about how it happened to them too? And this is supposed to help?"

"It does help, Luka. You know that. No-one will make you talk before you are ready, but knowing that you aren't alone, that other men ..."

"I know that!" interrupted Luka. "I've seen it. I'm an ER physician, remember? Men have come into the ER ..." he shook his head. Even talking about this, in the most abstract sense, was getting
too painful. "Knowing ... doesn't make it easier ... when it's you."

"No, it doesn't," Carl agreed gently. "But talking with people who have been through it, who can
really understand what you're feeling, can help."

Luka let the paper lie on the bed. He didn't touch it. Carl sighed. "Just hold onto it. If you don't feel
ready to go now, maybe you will in a few weeks, a few months. Whenever you do go, it will help.
I promise."

Luka took the paper, folded it several times, put it in the bedside table drawer.

"How will you get home tomorrow?" Carl asked after a minute. "Do you have someone to drive
you?"

"I'll take a cab."

"Luka, have you thought this through?"

"If you'll just leave me alone, let me work out the details, I'll get it all figured out!"

Susan came by after supper, as she usually did. "How're you doing today?" she asked.

"Great. I'm going home tomorrow!"

"Wonderful! Allenson's finally discharging you?"

"He's agreeing, grudgingly, to let me go," Luka admitted.

"That doesn't sound quite so impressive."

"You aren't going to try and talk me out of it too, are you?"

"No. I just don't want you to rush into something you aren't ready to handle. If Allenson thinks you
need more time, maybe you should listen to him. He is the orthopod here, and you did do quite a
job on your leg."

"I'm going crazy here, Susan. I need to go home!"

"A few more days though ... why not? Get some more rest, let the pretty nurses take care of you ... maybe let plastics start working on your wrists."

"I've been resting. I'm bored senseless. And I can come back anytime to get the skin grafts. I don't
need to get them now. That will probably be outpatient surgery, or just a night or two."

"How will you get home?" Susan asked.

"Cab."

"No, I can take you home."

"Aren't you on tomorrow?"

"I'm always on," Susan said with smile. "But I can swap my shift, work tomorrow night instead."

"It's not necessary," Luka insisted.
"You can't take a cab. There are stairs to your apartment, aren't there? You'll need help."

"I can climb stairs. There aren't very many of them."

"Let me do you this favor, Luka? Why not?"

"Ok," Luka agreed. Susan could be very stubborn when she put her mind to it. "You can take me home, if you really want to."
Chapter Notes

Quick note about the layout of the apartment. When I first began watching ER, I missed the existence of a staircase in Luka's apartment. [Blame a very small tv and the fact that the stairs are never actually used [at least not in these first few seasons], but you just get a glimpse of the railing.] So, in all my fics that have scenes here, the apartment has the same basic layout – a few stairs leading down from the front door to an open-plan living space with a kitchen along one wall, a bedroom on the same level, and a bathroom with 2 doors, one opening from the bedroom, and one from the living room. And really, with his bad leg, we don't want Luka struggling up lots of stairs anyway, right?

Luka stood painfully resting on his crutches while Susan wrestled with the key.

"It sometimes sticks a little," he told her. "Especially when it's humid. Let me try."

"No, I got it." Susan gave the door a shove, and it flew open. She went through it. Luka just stood, looking into the room. "You ok?" she asked.

"Yeah." A deep breath, then slow steps through the doorway, and down the steps that led into the living room, one at a time.

"You might want to rig up a ramp," Susan suggested. "just until you can walk more easily."

"No. I need the practice." He started to make his way to the couch.

"It's a little bit torrid in here," Susan commented.

"You can turn the thermostat down. I asked Gillian to set it at 85 when she left. No sense in cooling an empty apartment for weeks." He sank down onto the couch. The walk from the car, the few steps, the stairs, had exhausted him. It must be the heat. He'd walked much further than this in PT.

Susan looked at him, concerned. "Are you sure you can do this? You don't have to prove anything; not to me, not to Allenson, not to anybody. If you need to be in the hospital a little longer, or need some help at home for a while ..." 

"I can do this!" Luka snapped. "I'm just a little tired. And thirsty."

Susan went to the fridge, opened it. "It will have to be water. You have no food in here at all."

"Obviously." Luka managed a tired smile. I wouldn't want to eat anything that had been there for 3 months, now would I?"

Susan brought him a glass of water. "Ok. You just rest. I'll run to the store, get you some groceries."

"There should be some canned stuff; soup, tuna, in the cupboard."
"Are you hungry? It's almost lunch time. I can fix you something before I go."

"No, I'm not hungry."

"Ok. I'll do that grocery run then. Need anything before I go? Help to the bathroom?"

Luka felt himself tense. "I can take myself to the bathroom if I need it! I don't need help!"

"Sorry, Luka. I didn't mean ..."

"I know. I'm just tired. Going home is tiring." He closed his eyes.

"I'll get the groceries, and maybe something take-out for lunch," Susan said. "I'll be back in an hour or so. You have my cell number, right? If you need anything?"

Luka nodded. Didn't open his eyes. "I'll be fine. Oh... wait." He leaned forward, reached into his pocket. He still didn't have a wallet, he'd have to buy one ... took out a roll of bills. "For the groceries." He peeled off three '20's.

"No, I got it."

"Susan ..."

Susan nodded apologetically and took the money.

"And take the key. You can let yourself in when you get back."

"Ok. Stay out of trouble." A smile, and Susan was gone.

For a long while, Luka just sat. His leg ached. He hadn't walked so far, really. Was it just the heat? Or the knowledge that he was home now, wouldn't have anyone to rely on to help him. Whatever he needed now, he would have to do it himself, would have to walk, no matter how tired he was, how sore.

Luka took hold of the crutches, used them to lever himself up off the couch. It was lower than his hospital bed, lower than the chair in his room. Standing up was much harder.

Slowly, he began to explore the apartment, seeing it as if for the first time - seeing it from the point-of-view of someone who was, temporarily, disabled. It was small, that was good. Not too much ground to cover. (But he couldn't have a live-in nurse, could he? Where would a nurse sleep?) Living room, the stairs down from the door weren't such a good thing. But he'd get used to them quickly enough. And it wasn't as if he'd be going in and out a dozen times a day. Kitchen area. Susan had been right, the cupboards were nearly bare. A few cans. The fridge held only a bottle of catsup, a half empty jar of mayo.

Into the bedroom. He smiled. Gillian had changed the sheets, made the bed neatly. Bathroom, it was small. Tight squeeze all the way around. And he'd have to figure out how to manage the shower. Maybe bring in a stool from the kitchen. He had to keep the cast dry, how could he do that? He couldn't wrap it himself. He'd figure out something. 'You're a doctor!'; he said to himself. 'Doctors are supposed to be smart, imaginative. Able to solve problems.'

Slowly back into the living room. Pick up the small overnight bag, containing the few things he'd brought back from Africa with him. Much less than he'd brought to Africa. Much of what he'd taken with him was now in the hands of the Mai Mai ... along with so much else ... Sling it over the shoulder, make his way back into the bedroom.
He set the bag down on the bed and opened it. A few changes of clothes, the right leg on the pants cut at the seam to fit over the cast. His passport. He put that away safely. A few books. Sticking out of one of them was a piece of paper. Luka sat on the bed, took the paper out. He heard Carl's voice. "A support group for male sexual assault survivors." He closed his eyes. How could even the slightest reminder still make him so weak ... so sick ... so shaky? And Carl could think that he could actually go? Voluntarily talk about it all again? Listen to other men relate their stories?

He sighed; he'd put it away. Maybe some time ... No. Struggling to his feet again, Luka hobbled into the bathroom. Tearing the paper into tiny pieces, he flushed the scraps down the toilet, and returned to the bedroom to finish unpacking.

Luka heard the front door open. "Luka!"

"I'm in the bedroom!" he called back, and made his way back out into the living room. Susan was putting two bags of groceries on the kitchen counter.

"I just got you some basics - stuff that will be easy for you fix so you don't have to stand at the stove; bread, peanut butter, canned soup, some frozen meals, pasta."

"I suspect I'll be ordering pizza a lot," Luka said with a smile.

"Probably. Which is why I picked us up some Thai for lunch today."

"Thai's always good."

"So..." Susan said, when they were settled with the food, "What now?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're home. Where do you go from here?"

"I ... keep getting better. I still have a lot more recovering to do before I can work again ... or even walk again. I'll still have PT and counseling three times a week back at County."

"How will you get there?"

"I can take a taxi. And when I can walk a little better, I can take the el."

"When I'm not working, I could ..."

"No, Susan." Luka said firmly. "I'm glad ... I appreciate everything you've done for me. You've been ... you were there for me when I really needed someone. But I'm fine now. I'm home. You don't have to keep doing this."

"I know I don't have to. Maybe I want to. I like spending time with you. And you DO need some help still."

Luka nodded, didn't look at her. "I've been thinking ... I don't want, or need, live-in help. But maybe I'll hire an aid ... someone to come by a few hours every day to help me, just until the cast comes off."

"That sounds like a good compromise," Susan agreed. "And I'm still happy to take you to your hospital appointments, if I'm not working."

"No," Luka said again. "That won't be necessary. I didn't come home so that people could keep doing things for me all the time. I need to learn to do things on my own again."
Susan nodded slowly. He could tell that her feelings were hurt, but better to hurt them now then to let this get out of hand. He didn't need her. He didn't need anyone.
Chapter 14

Susan pushed the elevator button again. What was taking it so long? She had to get back down the ER. They were swamped, but then, what else was new?

The click of a pair of crutches behind her, and she turned. "Luka!"

"Hi, Susan," he said quietly. He smiled, but the smile seemed forced. And Susan felt a wave of guilt wash over her. She hadn't seen him in almost two weeks. A short vacation, her first in far too long, then far too many shifts in the ER. She'd called him a few times, but she had only been to his apartment to see him twice in the three weeks since he'd gotten out of the hospital. She had promised herself she would help him, be there for him, and she hadn't been there at all. It had been so much easier when it had just been a matter of running upstairs before or after a shift.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"It's good." Luka pulled up his pant leg a few inches. "Cast came off Monday. Just a brace now."

"Good for you!"

"I feel about twenty pounds lighter." His words were cheerful, but his eyes looked dull. Maybe he'd had a rough session with DeRaad? She knew counseling was still a struggle for him. Or maybe he was lonely. She looked at her watch. "Look ... we're pretty swamped downstairs, but I can squeeze in time for lunch. Do you want to get something to eat?"

"I'm not really hungry."

"I'm not suggesting a 6 course dinner; just a burger or something."

"Ok," Luka agreed. He still didn't sound very enthusiastic. Perhaps he knew that Susan could see through his facade, and so he longer needed to maintain it?

"I'll meet you downstairs in about 20 minutes? I just have to dispo a couple of patients."

"No," Luka said quickly. "I can meet you at the restaurant."

"That's fine. Ike's?" Luka nodded. "I'll see you there in about half an hour."

Susan waited in the entryway. Would he show up? She had been a bit late herself, had gotten corralled into helping the med students. Perhaps he had come, seen she wasn't there, and left again? Thought she'd forgotten him again? Or perhaps he really didn't want to see her. Had agreed just to get rid of her?

The door opened; the slow click of crutches. "Sorry I'm late. I still don't move very fast."

"No problem."

Once seated, she said "I'm sorry Luka."

"For what?" Luka looked puzzled.

"I haven't been around much. I don't want you to think ..."

"You don't have to apologize. I told you ... you don't have to do anything for me."
"And I told you I wanted to. I thought we were friends. Friends help each other."

"Yeah ... each other." Luka didn't try to hide the bitterness in his tone. "What have I done for you lately?"

"You've done enough. You've been good company for me too. I wouldn't choose to spend time with you if I didn't enjoy it. I've just been so busy lately. With you and Carter still off work, and people taking vacations, I've been pulling 7 and 8 shifts a week. I haven't done anything but work and sleep these past few weeks. That, and my own vacation. I told you I was going, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you mentioned it. You still don't have to apologize for anything. I'm doing fine." The waitress came to take their order. When she left, Luka went on, "So, how was it? Your trip?"

"It was nice. Too short, but nice. And the Dells aren't anywhere near as exotic as Africa, but probably more relaxing."

Luka nodded, took a sip of his ice water. For a minute neither spoke. Susan was about to say something more, talk about work, anything to break the silence, change what was clearly still an uncomfortable subject. Then Luka said suddenly, "It wasn't all bad, Susan."

"What?"

"Africa. At first it was great. I loved every minute of it. I'd never worked so hard in my life - 14, 16 hour days, sometimes more, 7 days a week. But it was so ... satisfying. Like I've never gotten from working here. I remember, within a few days of starting, I was already trying to figure out when I'd be able to come back.

"And it was funny ... in so many ways there was so little I could do for my patients. We had almost no equipment, only a handful of drugs ... we had to ... I had to rely on my own skills so much to diagnose them. Couldn't just send them up to x-ray or CT, or order a dozen lab tests on the off chance that something might show up. And then, when I did diagnose the problem, as often as not there was nothing I could do to help ... many of them died anyway, or survived with horrible, disabling injuries." He rubbed his wrists. "But, no matter what I did, how little I could do, they were so grateful for whatever help I could give. Even if it was just holding their hand. And sometimes that seemed to make more of a difference - not just to them, but to me - than all the scrips I write here ... all the high tech stuff."

"It sounds fantastic," Susan said. "Maybe I should give it a try. I could stand a little job satisfaction about now."

The food had come. Luka started to eat his sandwich, didn't respond to Susan's comment. After a few minutes she went on, "Carter sure seems to like it. We got a postcard from him the other day in the ER. He's having a great time, I guess."

"I've gotten a couple of postcards from him too," Luka said. "One back when I was still in the hospital, one just a few days ago."

"Probably sent the same time as ours," Susan guessed.

"Probably. The mail service isn't that great. Mail only goes out a few times a week." Another bite of his sandwich, another sip of Coke. "I'm sure Carter is having a good time. Kisangani's great." A rather distant smile. "Unless of course you're a patient there."

"Unless you have Dr. Kovac to take care of you," Susan teased. Then, "You were there a long time? As a patient?" She had promised herself that she wouldn't pry, but this was the first time he'd
said anything about Africa in all these weeks. Maybe a few nontargeting questions would be ok.

"Long enough. Too long." Another distant smile. "About a month, I guess. So much of it was a fog. Fever, lots of drugs ... I didn't try to count the days. It was easier not to."

"I can see that. So you were ... pretty sick, I guess?"

"Yeah." The word had a firmness, a finality that told Susan that the subject was now closed. Another few moments of silence, then, "I'm going to be letting Maddy go at the end of the week. Now that the cast is off, I don't need her any more."

"Are you sure you can manage on your own? You said yourself that you still move pretty slowly."

"I can manage if I have to." The fierceness, the determination in his voice that she heard so often when he talked about walking.

"I'm sure you'll do great." Susan had finished her own sandwich. "I hate to eat and run, Luka, but I had to practically beg on my knees to get an actual lunch break, instead of just getting a bag of chips and a Coke from the machine and calling it lunch. I need to get back."

"Go," Luka said. "I'll get the check."

"You don't have to,"

"I've got it. I'm not quite done here yet."

"Ok," Susan said. "I'll call you."

"Sure..." Luka said softly. He didn't look at her.

Susan plunged back out into the August heat. She would call him. Though, of course, he could have called her too. Any time. True, she hadn't been home much, but there had been no messages on her machine. Did he want to see her? He did seem happy, or at least happier when they were together. The dullness in his eyes had lightened while they were eating. She knew what she wanted ... but what did he want? And if she asked him, would he tell her? He didn't need or want her help; he'd told her that often enough. But did he want her friendship? That he needed it was obvious. But would he let himself continue to accept it?
"Are you sure you don't need help with that?" Susan asked.

"No, I've got it." Luka poured the coffee, picked up one cup, then turned on his crutch and made his slow way - taking great care to not slosh the hot liquid on his hand - the few steps to the table. One cup down, then the return journey for the second.

Susan watched him, unsure whether to be impressed, amused, or saddened. He was still trying so hard. Trying to prove to her, to himself, that nothing had changed; that he could still do everything he could do before. That despite the crutch (he'd just made the dizzying advance from two down to one), and the brace, and the other injuries; despite the other traumas that were far less visible but were, she knew too well, perhaps even more disabling; he was still the same person he had been before.

Their relationship was still a mystery to her. He was still a mystery to her. She called him often now, saw him often now. He was always happy to talk to her, happy to see her. But he never called her. When she asked him about it one day he just said "You don't give me the chance, do you? Every time I think about doing it, the phone is ringing and it's you!"

They were easy together. Relaxed. Luka smiled more and more often when they were together, talked more.

He had even begun to talk about Africa, but only on his terms. Whenever Susan brought up the subject, he would promptly change it, but sometimes he would bring it up. He talked about his work there, about the hospital, about some of his patients and the other doctors. He told her about the street markets where you could buy anything from a mango to a tribal fetish. About the grinding poverty and the astonishing kindness of the people.

But he still hadn't said a word about his injuries, where they came from or what, besides the broken leg, they had included. And sometimes he would start to talk about something, seem to realize that he himself was venturing into forbidden territory, and change the subject, but not before Susan saw the clear look of pain in his eyes. Once, he had started to tell her about a patient who had "come to my clinic."

"Your clinic?" Susan had asked. And the look of pain and panic - and he'd quickly said, "The hospital ... he came to the hospital." What clinic? Had Luka worked somewhere other than the hospital? Had he had a clinic of his own? Why couldn't he talk about it? But Susan knew it would do no good to ask, this was an area where she could only tread carefully, and she would not risk hurting him, or driving him away.

They seemed to get along well, but there were still so many things Susan didn't understand. He would never let her touch him. "I don't need help!" was always his excuse when she reached out to steady him when he stumbled or wobbled on his crutch. But he could not hide the shudder, the look of pain that crossed his face when she touched him even accidentally, when taking something from his hand, or passing him in a doorway.

And a level of bodily modesty that Susan found surprising in a man, especially in a man who was a doctor, and who had been a patient for so long. (Both situations that tended to make one more at ease with one's own body, rather than less.) Despite the late summer heat, he always wore long sleeves, he never even walked around the apartment in a tee shirt. (Susan knew he wasn't hiding the wrist scars from her. She had seen them many times in the hospital. In fact, after several visits
to plastics, they looked much better.) If he needed to change, even just change his shirt, before they went out somewhere, he would go into the bedroom and shut the door. Several times he'd kept her waiting on the outside stoop because, he'd told her when he finally opened the door, "I wasn't dressed."

What was he hiding from her? What other scars didn't he want her to see? Or was it something else?

Luka had put the second cup of coffee down. He sank down onto the other stool. He looked tired, thought Susan. She stirred her coffee, couldn't think of anything to say.

"Oh, I forgot the sugar," Luka said. He started to stand again, but couldn't conceal a little sigh.

"I'll get it," Susan said. "You sit." She got the sugar and added a spoon to her coffee. "You know," she said, "You could hire yourself a maid or something to help out. All the best doctors in town do."

"A maid? For what? Because I'm so busy? It's not like I do anything all day."

"You just ... seem like you can still use a little help."

"The place not tidy enough?"

"It'll do. But all those empty pizza boxes in the trash are telling me you aren't doing much cooking yet."

"The cooking isn't the problem," Luka explained. "I can stand at the stove ok. It's the grocery shopping."

"I can do that for you ..."

"No!" Luka snapped. "I've told you a dozen times. "I don't need your help with things." He took a deep breath, steadied himself. Put on a smile. "Besides, isn't pizza supposed to be healthy? Balanced, all those antioxidants?" A sip of coffee. "I'm doing fine, Susan. As soon as I'm a little steadier on the single crutch, I'll be able to buy more food at the store. Right now, it's just easier to order out."

"Ok," Susan said. "I'm just ... trying to help."

An awkward silence, then Luka said, "You don't have to keep doing this, you know."

"Doing what?"

"Visiting me ... looking after me ... making sure I'm not lonely. I'm ok. I'm really doing well."

"Don't you like my company?" It was a struggle for Susan to hide the distress in her voice, make her words sound light. What had she done? It was no secret to her that Luka had managed to push away quite a number of his friends since he'd come home. Would she be next on the list?

Luka didn't answer for a minute. "I just don't understand why you are doing it, that's all."

"I'm doing it because I like you, and I thought you liked me. Because we are friends. I like spending time with you. I wasn't aware that there was a problem with that. I ... I don't have a lot of friends, Luka. And neither do you. I thought we were getting along, having a good time together."

"We are," Luka said after another long pause. "I just don't want you to think ... that I need you to
feel sorry for me. You're right that I don't have a lot of friends. I've never had a lot of friends. It's the way I've always liked it. I'm ... what's the word for it? An introvert?" Luka got up, poured himself more coffee, carried the cup back to the table. "But I want you to know ... you have to know ... that we can't ever be more than friends. I do like you Susan, and if you really want to be friends, we can be friends. But if you're hoping for more ... it isn't going to happen."

"I'm not hoping for anything," Susan said quickly. "Friends is good." Then, more slowly. "I don't know what's going to happen ... for you, or for me. If we both decide we want something more ..."

"We won't." Luka's voice was firm. "I won't." Then more softly. "At least not in the ... foreseeable future." And another pasted on smile. "Besides, wouldn't Chuck object?"

"Chuck? Who's Chuck?" Susan laughed. "I've just about given up on that relationship." More seriously. "Really, Luka ... if there's one thing I've learned in all my years, it's that relationships happen when they happen. Right now, friendship feels right for me, with you. If that changes, for either of us, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. But right now, I need friends a lot more than I need a lover. And I think you do too."

Luka nodded, sipped his coffee, then said abruptly, "You have an early shift tomorrow, don't you?"

"Yeah. I should probably go." Susan got up, got her purse. Was this the source of all the underlying discomfort then? Was Luka afraid that if they touched, that she might misunderstand ... might want something more? Or that he might? Or was it still something else entirely. Was some underlying pain the source of both these fears ... the fear of her touch and the fear of loving ... being loved again?

Luka walked her to the door, said good-bye at the base of the stairs. And Susan let herself out.
Chapter 16

Luka watched the door close behind Susan, then he turned and made his way to the couch. He was exhausted, but then, when wasn't he any more? How could doing nothing all day be so fatiguing?

He had lied to Susan. He wasn't doing well. Oh, he was doing better; but he could hardly be doing worse then when he'd arrived in Chicago almost 4 months before, now could he? But 'well'? 'Well' was still a long ways away.

He still went to counseling with DeRaad, only once a week now, for all the good it did. He just didn't have much to tell him anymore. He had discussed all he could ever bear to discuss about Matenda. There was more, there was much more, but he could not talk about it. He could never talk about it, even knowing that talking was still the surest path to recovery.

How could he tell DeRaad about the guilt, the shame ... the feelings that seemed to be worsening over time rather than getting better? The feelings that he knew had their roots in experiences that dated from long before he'd ever gone to Africa. The feelings that made him fight to control the shudders when anyone touched him. That made him know, with utter certainty, the truth of his words to Susan, "But if you're hoping for more ... it isn't going to happen."

He had tried to make excuses to himself for his lack of interest. He had a dozen excuses, all of them entirely reasonable. He was still not well physically ... too tired most of the time to even think about sex, let alone want it. And he was still taking the ARVs. Until he was sure he was safe (not that he wouldn't use protection anyway, of course), he wouldn't risk it. And if he was to have a relationship ... with anyone ... he would have to tell her about the possible exposure, let her make an educated decision - and that was something he just couldn't do. Once he'd had his 6 month test, and was in the clear, he'd think about it then.

And his leg. Susan had never seen his leg. It was not pretty. He wasn't yet comfortable with having people see it. He needed more time to get comfortable again himself with his new body image before he let other people see him again, not only the horribly scarred leg, but the lesser scars that peppered the rest of his body.

And it wasn't as if it had been so long ... not really. Only a few months, and he'd been sick for much of that time. He'd been celibate for far longer than that many times in his life.

And there was just too much he still felt he couldn't tell her ... tell anyone. Relationships didn't work when people had secrets. Until he could be open with her ... with himself ... he couldn't have a relationship.

Still, Luka knew that those were all excuses. None of them explained the feeling of shame .. of dirtiness, when he touched his own body in the shower, the queasiness when he even thought about being with someone again ... or the far more powerful nausea on the occasional mornings when he woke to find that his body had found its own release as he'd slept.

No ... he couldn't be with Susan. He couldn't be with anyone. Not now. Maybe not ever. And if he couldn't ... well, he had been celibate before. And it wasn't as if the idea bothered him now. It had been difficult at other times, but not now.

Danijela of course had been his first. He'd been young when they had married, but not as young as all that. Most of his friends had had 'experience,' and he'd had to endure their good natured teasing when he told him that he and Danijela were going to wait until they were married - until she was
old enough to marry him. They'd offered to fix him up with girls who would provide him with 'experience,' ("You don't want to go to Danijela on your wedding night all embarrassed and awkward, do you?") some for money, some just for the fun of it. But Luka had refused. He couldn't imagine doing such a thing to Danijela - if she was going to wait for him, he would wait for her. And to have sex with someone he didn't love ... he just couldn't picture such a thing. When the day had finally arrived, and the night, he hadn't been awkward or embarrassed at all, and neither had she. He and Danijela had learned together ... and it had been perfect.

For 5 beautiful years there had been only Danijela. Then there had been no-one. For the first few years after losing her, Luka again couldn't imagine being with anyone else. He couldn't imagine loving anyone else, and, after the perfect bond he had had with Danijela, the idea of sex without love seemed even more appalling than it had been before. He could wait. He would wait.

After a few years his friends again began to urge him to date again. "You can't grieve forever, Luka. Danijela wouldn't want that." So Luka had tried to date. There had been one woman he'd seen for a few months, Eva. That had been good, they had gotten along well, had even slept together a few times, but then her family had emigrated to Germany to escape their memories of the war. And there had been a few others. All of them had pushed Luka into bed too quickly, leaving him feeling vaguely dirty and ashamed ... the sex had not been good, and he had ended the relationships quickly.

Then he had come to America. Again, for the first few years he had been alone. He'd moved around too much, been too shy and uncomfortable with the language to get to know people, to develop any relationships. And while he could have picked up women in bars (it was no secret to him that women found him attractive, more than a few had tried to pick him up), that wasn't what he wanted. Being alone was better than meaningless sex with strangers.

And then, he'd come to Chicago, come to County and he had met Carol. He had known almost immediately, that, for the first time in 10 years, he'd found a woman he could love; a woman he wanted to be with. He had courted her patiently for months, never getting more, never wanting more than a kiss. Knowing that waiting would make the relationship right, would make it happen. But it hadn't happened. Suddenly she was gone, to find her true love, her soul mate.

And Abby. She too had pushed him into bed rather quickly, perhaps a bit more quickly than he was ready for. But, maybe because he was older now, more mature, or perhaps because he had begun to learn that you couldn't wait ... you didn't have to wait, the relationship had worked. Oh, it wasn't perfect (obviously not ... it too had ended ...), they hadn't always communicated well ... but they had been a good match sexually; and they had gotten along. No, he probably hadn't loved her, certainly not like he had loved Danijela, like he could have loved Carol had she allowed him to, but he had cared for her, and she for him. When it had fallen apart, it had been a shock. To this day, he still didn't quite know what had happened.

Then had been Nicole. Another woman he had cared for ... at least until he'd learned that she had just been using him to get what she wanted from him. The relationship had been brief, but good while it lasted.

And then ... suddenly everything had changed. He had suddenly changed. Caring ... feelings ... none of that seemed to matter to him anymore. How many had there been? A few dozen? Fifty? Maybe more. One night stands. A quick half hour in his car, or hers, or an empty room in the ER. Brief relationships. Married women. Prostitutes. He'd forgotten most of their names. Some, he'd never even known their names. Oh, none had been unwilling, but none had been people to him ... women. He hadn't cared about any of them. They had just been bodies. A source of pleasure ... of his own physical pleasure, or of power - the power of knowing that he could give them pleasure.
They had just been bodies to him. When the moment was done, they were all forgotten ... they all blended together in his memory now ... he couldn't even begin to think how many there had been, couldn't picture any of their faces, any of their bodies. Even Gillian. He could just about remember Gillian's face, but not her body. How had they felt when it was done? When he had left them for his next conquest? Had they felt ashamed? Dirty?

They had been just bodies. Not people. Just as he had been. To Them. In Matenda. A way to demonstrate their power. He could have been anyone. He knew that none of them remembered his face, his body.

He did deserve what had happened to him. He had earned it. Just a small payback for the pain he had caused to so many others ... in so many ways. Ashamed. Dirty. They would have felt that way, of course. How could they not? How could a woman not feel that way after having been used? How could he ever not feel that way, after having been used. After having used so many others. Having hurt so many others. In so many ways.
Chapter 17

It was slow today. Middle of the week, day shift, October. Not a busy time of year. Susan took a chart at random from the rack. 35 year old man, cough of 6 week duration. Smoker. Sounded like fun. She turned to head for curtain 3, and bumped into Abby.

"Hey, Susan. How's it going?"
"Good. Nice and slow for a change."

"A bunch of us are going out after work tonight - you know - Girl's Club. Want to join us?"
"I can't," Susan said.

"We never see you any more," Abby reminded her.

"Sorry, Abby, but I have a prior engagement."

"Let me guess," Abby said with a smile. "Tall guy, dark hair, Croatian accent?"

"Yes, I'm having dinner with Luka. Yes, again."

"Sounds like things are getting pretty serious between the two of you."

"No, they're not."

"Seems like every time I see you, you have plans to do something with Luka. If that doesn't meet the definition of 'serious', I don't know what does."

"It isn't 'serious', Abby, because we aren't going out. We're just friends." Abby looked dubious. "Really, Abby. He's lonely. He doesn't get out much, he can't drive yet, he's not working ... he doesn't seem to have very many friends. We just like spending time together. It cheers him up, and I like it too."

"Regular little angel of mercy, aren't we? I thought that was a nurse's job."

"Am I detecting a little jealousy here?" Susan didn't miss the hint of something - bitterness, maybe, in Abby's tone.

"I'm not jealous, Susan. I'm just finding the relationship a little puzzling, that's all. And I don't want you to get hurt."

"You're not the only one who's puzzled," Susan admitted with a smile.

"So ... let's see ..." Abby said. "You see him what, 3? 4? times a week? I know for a fact that you aren't seeing anyone else, not since you showed Chuck the door. You've been doing this for a couple of months now ... but you're not dating?"

"It's what he wants. He doesn't want a relationship right now. He said maybe he'd be interested some time ... but not right now. And that's ok."

Abby looked up, startled. "And he didn't tell you why?"

"No. I'm sure it has something to do with what happened to him in Africa, but I'm not going to pry.
He'll tell me when he's ready." Susan saw something in Abby's expression. "Did he tell you something?"

"No, not exactly." Abby sounded uncomfortable. "I found out something ... I'm not even sure if it has anything to do with this or not."

"Then I don't want to hear about it," Susan said firmly. "I'm not going to pry into his business."

Abby nodded. "Don't pry. And I won't tell you. I think the best way to keep him as a friend, or anything else, is to keep his trust, let him open up to you when he's ready." She sighed. "You're lucky, Susan. I've had Luka as a friend, and as a lover. I think we were better as friends - not that he wasn't pretty good the other way ..."

Susan laughed, then sobered again. "I don't know what happened between the two of you, but I'll see if I can talk to him. Maybe the three of us can get together sometime..."

"A menage?" Abby teased.

Susan smacked her with the chart. "Three friends, stupid!"

"No, I wouldn't want to intrude on your good times. It sounds like you have something nice going. I guess he'll be back at work soon?"

"He's hoping to be. A few more weeks maybe, certainly before the New Year."

"So, I'll see him at work then. We can figure out where we stand."

"I'm sure everything will work out," Susan assured her. She looked at her chart again. "Well, duty beckons."

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Susan handed the keys to the valet, got out of the car. She was meeting Luka at the restaurant tonight. She was tired, but she smiled. The thought of seeing Luka always made her smile. Even more so recently. He was doing so much better. Physically he was improving a lot. He got around easily now. He didn't even need the brace anymore. And, perhaps due to the physical improvement, he seemed much happier, more confident.

'We're just friends.' How many times had she said that? To herself, to other people. How many times had Luka said it to her? Made sure that she understood that friends were all they could ever be.

And she was happy being friends. If they were never anything more, that would be ok. But Susan couldn't deny it now. It wasn't really enough for her. Not anymore. She did want something more than friendship from him. There was no rush, not really. She wouldn't push him. But when he seemed more ready, maybe when he was working again, felt more secure and confident, and had begun to finally put behind him whatever traumas still imprisoned him so tightly - maybe then, if he didn't do it first, she would broach the subject. But there wasn't any rush. She was 38 years old. She'd been waiting this long for the right relationship. She could wait a little longer, even as she grew more certain, every day, that this was the right one.

Luka was waiting for her in the lobby. He saw her come in, rose from his seat and smiled. He touched her arm briefly in greeting. Susan could see that it was a still struggle for him to do it, that it was something he did primarily for the benefit of on-lookers, but she was pleased that he was making the effort, and pleased that it seemed to be easier for him every time he tried.
"Our table is ready," he told her.

"Sorry I'm so late. Traffic was awful."
Chapter 18

Luka sat on the leather sofa in the waiting area. Kerry had certainly come up in the world, he thought. But still, with County still struggling, he well knew, to maintain basic services, how could they justify this kind of expense for the Chief of Staff's office? (And this was just the waiting area! He couldn't imagine what her office would look like.)

It was still hard, Luka realized, for him to even picture Kerry as Chief of Staff. She had taken the position before he left for Africa, but he hadn't really absorbed the change before leaving. And he knew too (Susan had told him), that she still took frequent shifts in the ER. Because she didn't trust Robert to manage it well, because they were short-staffed, and because she wanted to keep her clinical skills up. Well, with any luck, the 'short-staffed' problem should soon be less acute.

"How much longer?" he finally asked the secretary.

"Dr. Weaver is on a conference call. It's running longer than she anticipated. She'll be with you as soon as she can, Dr. Kovač."

Luka rubbed his leg, it had become a nervous habit these days as much as a response to the constant discomfort, then put his head in his hands and took a deep breath. It wasn't like he was in any kind of a rush. He didn't exactly have a thousand places to go that day. His life, in the almost four months since he'd been discharged from the hospital could be most accurately described as "empty." These days he had counseling once a week with DeRaad. He'd finished physical therapy at the hospital, but went to a local gym sometimes. An occasional lunch or dinner with Susan. And endless hours sitting in his apartment, or walking in circles around the living room to keep his leg from stiffening up, as it tended to do whenever he sat too long.

He was ready. Now all he had to do was convince Kerry of that fact.

Finally the secretary answered a quiet beep on his desk phone and then said to Luka, "You can go in now, Dr. Kovač."

Luka rose, gave his leg a minute to adjust (he'd been sitting too long), took his crutch, and entered the office. Kerry was standing behind her desk; she smiled warmly as Luka entered.

"Luka, you're looking very well."

"Thanks. I'm feeling much better."

Kerry motioned to the chair. "Have a seat."

"No, I've been sitting in your waiting room for a while. Standing is better; really."

Kerry sat down again in her own chair. "So, what can I do for you, Luka?"

"I want to come back to work. I'm ready to come back."

Kerry shuffled some papers on her desk, suddenly wouldn't meet his eyes. "I'll need to talk to DeRaad first; see what he has to say."

"Kerry, however crazy Carl may tell you that I am, I'm getting crazier sitting at home. I need to be working again. I need something to occupy my mind ... my hands. I need to be able to think about someone other than myself. All I do is sit at home."
"I'm just not sure that you're ready. I know it feels like a long time to you Luka, but you suffered some very serious injuries. Emotional issues aside, I'm not sure you're up to it physically yet."

"I'm an emergency room physician, I'm not a construction worker or a mountain climber. I have full use of my hands. I can walk, I can stand. I am fully ambulatory, with a little help from my stick. And I should be rid of that in a few months time. But you should know better than anyone, Kerry, that a slight mobility impairment does not keep a doctor from doing his job." A deep breath. "I need to work, Kerry. I can't sit at home any longer."

Kerry seemed to be studying his face for a moment, then she nodded. "I'll need to clear it with DeRaad first, but if he clears you, you can start back next week. But we're going to start slow. Two eight hour shifts a week; if you do well with that, we'll increase you to 3 after the New Year.

"Two 12's," said Luka. "Increasing to 3 after a month."

"Deal. But no trauma for that first month either. Just general medical. You've been away for a long time. And I don't want you to push yourself too hard. Don't be afraid to say something if you're finding that it's too much. We can put you on half shifts ..."

"I'll be fine, Kerry," Luka interrupted.

"Ok. Go down to the ER. Get Robert to put you on the schedule. Two shifts a week for the next four weeks." A smile. "Welcome back, Dr. Kovač."

Luka smiled back, shook the hand she offered him, didn't even flinch. "It's good to be back, Dr. Weaver."

He made his way to the elevator, pushed the button. The elevator was empty, and when he stepped inside, hit "1", he was suddenly trembling. Was he ready? Could he do this? It had been six months ... But he knew that his words to Kerry had been true. If he sat at home much longer he would start to go backwards again. Getting busy again, working again, was the best therapy for him now.

The doors opened again and he stepped out into the ER. It was bustling, as busy as always. How long had it been since he'd been here? Well over six months, since he'd been working in Africa for several weeks before he'd stopped working completely. (A slight shudder still at that memory.) He'd always made it a point, unintentionally perhaps, to avoid coming here all these months. He would never meet Susan here, meeting her instead at one of their apartments or, if they had to meet at the hospital, in a neutral place like the front lobby or ambulance bay. He just hadn't been able to face being here, seeing all his colleagues, until he could see them as equals again.

"Hey! Dr. Kovač!" Lily had spotted him, rushed over to greet him with a smile. "You are looking great!"

"Thanks, Lily." He didn't want to deal with this now. Not yet. "Is Dr. Romano around?"

"Try curtain one." She smiled again. "Will you be back to work soon?"

"I hope so," a quick return smile, then off to curtain area one. He had some trouble finding it. They had remodeled a little bit.

Robert was there, supervising some med students casting a broken wrist. He had, Luka saw, a new prosthetic arm. It looked like a good one, but still, Luka couldn't help thinking 'There but for the grace of God ...'

"Robert," he said aloud. "Got a minute?"
"Hey, look who's back from the dead," Robert said, and they went out into the hall.

"You need to put me back on the schedule. Two shifts a week for the next month. I'll take whatever you need; weekends, nights, holidays."

"Not so fast," Robert said. "Who said you were ready to come back? You aren't looking very fit."

Luka bit back the temptation to say something about pots and kettles, saying instead "Check with Weaver. She said I could start back as soon as you can fit me in."

"Fine. You can start tomorrow night. I haven't had a Saturday night off in months. I'll have the rest of your schedule for you when you come in tomorrow."
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

As the story moves back within the walls of the County ER for much of its content, and solidly into the timeframe of Season 10, you will note that I have rather selectively chosen what I have opted to keep and ignore from the aired version of the season. You will encounter [mostly briefly] some of the new characters, including Sam, (though she is not, obviously, Luka's squeeze in this version), Coop, Morris and others. OTOH, there is no chopper crash. There is no Kem. Abby is not in med school. Jing Mei doesn't go to China. There was no mass layoff of nurses. Once again, you're bright, you'll figure it out.

He'd been sitting in the lounge for a long time. He had gotten here early, so he wouldn't have to deal right away with the crush of people coming and going at shift change.

He held his lab coat across his lap, ran his fingers slowly over the name embroidered above the breast pocket. 'L. Kovač, M.D.' How long had it been since he had been that person, since he had been Dr. Kovač? In the Congo he had been, by local convention, 'Dr. Luka.' And then he had been a patient for such a very long time. More than two months of hospitalization, first in Kisangani, then right here at County. Then more long months of recovery at home. Sure, people in Chicago had often called him Dr. Kovač, it was the polite thing to do. But he hadn't felt like a doctor. He hadn't really been a doctor. Doctors helped people, healed them. He had barely been able to help ... heal himself. What would it take before he would begin to feel like a doctor again?

When he had called Susan last night to tell her the good news, she had heard the uncertainty in his voice. "It's like riding a bike, Luka. Once you start doing it, it will be like you never left."

Luka stood up, slowly put the coat on, adjusted the collar. He slipped the crutch over his arm and walked to the mirror. Did he look like a doctor again? The coat certainly looked like a doctor's coat, but the face above it?

The scars had faded a great deal; there was a red line, still easily visible but faint, across his cheekbone. His hair covered the other main facial scar, the one on his forehead, and his clothes, of course, hid the rest. (Several skin grafts had reduced, but not eliminated the scars on his wrists and arms. Allenson had encouraged him to consider plastic surgery for his leg as well, but the extensive surgery necessary to make a real difference would leave him laid up again for weeks, and Luka wouldn't even consider that. Nobody but him would ever see his leg, so it didn't really matter.) His eyes? They looked frightened. Doctors were supposed to be confident. Could he be confident, or at least look it?

He still limped badly, even with the crutch. He probably always would. Despite his words to Weaver the day before, he didn't expect to ever be able to walk without it, not any distance. There had been too much damage to the knee joint, too much muscle lost in those early weeks to gangrene and infection.

The door opened and a bunch of med students came in. Luka didn't recognize them. They smiled at him politely and continued talking to each other. He knew he should speak to them, introduce himself. He was, after all, their attending. But he found himself tongue tied.
The door opened again. Jing Mei. A bright smile. "Hey, Luka! Welcome back! I heard a rumor that I might be working tonight with a tall, dark and mysterious stranger."

Luka smiled back, already more at ease with her easy warmth. "It's good to be back."

"Have you met the children?" Jing Mei nodded towards the med students.

"Not yet."

"Dr. Kovač; Lester, Charlotte, Ryan. They're all still pretty green, but we're whipping them into shape. Pratt's on tonight too, and a couple of new R2s I don't think you've met; Coop and Morris." She looked at her watch. "Late as always. Coop's good. You'll need to watch Morris like a hawk."

Luka just nodded, then said softly, "You know I can't do trauma, just general medical for the first few weeks."

"I know. I'm sure there will be plenty to keep you busy." Another smile. "You're going to do great, Luka."

Luka nodded again, took a firmer grip on his crutch and headed out into the chaos of the ER on a Saturday night. A bunch of nurses were there; Chuny, Lily, Yosh, a couple of new ones he didn't know. Hugs, kisses, greetings, which he endured stoically. Randi came rushing over to greet him.

Greetings and hugs from all the people who had not once been by to see him, not once picked up the phone to call him in the past 5 months. But they seemed genuinely happy to see him now. No, Luka reminded himself, this was just as it should be. They weren't his friends. They were people he worked with. There was no reason to think they would have visited him at home, but they could certainly be glad to see him back at work. And he could work well with them. He could work.

Luka took the charts that Jing Mei handed him. "Why don't you start with the ear ache in exam 1, the abdominal pain in curtain 2."

"I can handle more than two patients," Luka said. "Especially easy ones like these."

"Start with those," Jing Mei said gently. "It's pretty quiet so far. If things get busier, I'll give you as much as you can juggle. I promise."

Luka stood outside exam 1. Despite his confident words to Jing Mei, he was trembling. His first patient in half a year. What if he made some horrible mistake? What if he panicked? If she grabbed at him unexpectedly? A deep breath, then he opened the door and went in. A pretty blonde child of about 6, whimpering and holding her ear; her mother, a tired looking woman of about 30, and Chuny.

A smile. "Hello there, Katie. I'm Dr. Kovač. I'm told that your ear has been hurting you."

Katie just stared at him, wide eyed. Her mother said, "She's had an ear ache and fever for about three days."

"Ok. Can I take a look? It won't hurt." Luka took the otoscope and sat down on the stool that Chuny quietly moved into position for him.

Katie didn't take her hand from her ear. She was looking at Luka's arm, at the crutch that he now removed to rest against the side of the table.

"What's that?" she finally asked.
"Don't be rude," scolded the mother.

"It's ok," Luka said with a smile. (He was surprised at how easily the smile came.) "It's a crutch, Kat. Doctors can get sick and hurt too, just like little girls. I hurt my leg and I need to use a crutch to help me walk. Would you like to see it? I'd let you try it, but I'm afraid it would be much too long for you."

Katie shook her head. "Ok then, I'm going to take a look at your ears. I'm going to look first in the ear that doesn't hurt, ok?"

Luka couldn't remember when he had been so tired. (Well, actually he could, but it wasn't a time in his life he liked to think about any more.) Twenty minutes left in his shift. He just had to make it through the next 20 minutes. Then there would just be the el ride home, the walk from the station - and he could sleep; sleep for 3 days until his next shift.

Taking a chart from the rack he leaned against the desk and rubbed his aching leg. Jing Mei saw the gesture and frowned. "Why don't you go home, Luka. You look beat."

"No, I'm fine. I can take a few more patients, finish out the shift." He looked at the chart; 'weak and dizzy all over'. Sounded just about his speed, probably wouldn't take long, and if it turned out to be complicated, he could hand it off to whoever came on next. He reached up to initial the board and winced as pain shot through his leg. Dropping the pen, he grabbed the edge of the desk to keep from losing his balance. Jing Mei plucked the chart from his other hand.

"That's enough, Luka. Sit down and review charts until the end of the shift. It's your first day back. You did great."

Luka nodded wearily and sat down in the chair. It wouldn't exactly inspire confidence in the patients if the doctor fell down.

Fatigue blurred his vision, he could barely read the charts. Only the pain in his leg kept him from falling asleep where he sat. He made himself concentrate, and was startled by a voice at his elbow. "How'd it go?" Susan was smiling down at him.

"It's not over yet," Luka said.

"Sure it is. Shift's over." Luka looked at the clock, and was amazed to see the 20 minutes were gone. Maybe he had fallen asleep?

"You on?" he asked.

"Nope. Not until tonight."

"So, what are you doing here then?" Luka rose stiffly from the chair, managing to not groan as his leg protested, and started for the lounge.

"I came to help you celebrate your first day back."

"I'm exhausted, Susan," Luka admitted. "I need to just go home and go to bed."

"You need to eat breakfast first. Come on, I'll buy you a McMuffin. It'll be my treat."

Luka sighed, hanging up his lab coat. "Ok. You win."
It was a struggle to stay awake in the car. After a few minutes Luka stirred himself to say, "We've passed three McDonalds already."

"Oh, I think I can spring for something a bit more elaborate than a McMuffin. And you can stay awake a little longer. There will be coffee soon, I promise." She pulled into a parking garage. A hotel.

"You're taking me to a hotel to celebrate?" Luka asked with a tired grin.

"Just for breakfast. Don't get any ideas. They have a great Sunday brunch."

Twenty minutes later they were seated in the restaurant. Luka had already downed two cups of coffee and, while he was no more awake, the caffeine at least helped him hold his eyes open.

"So," Susan asked again, "How did it go?"

"I'm exhausted. Maybe I'm not ready."

"Who isn't exhausted after a 12 hour night shift?"

Luka pushed the food around on his plate. "I was never this tired before ... and in Africa I worked even longer hours ..."

"It's your first day. It will get easier."

He finally managed to smile. "I know. And, aside from the exhaustion, it did go really well. I didn't kill anyone ... not that I had the opportunity of course. Jing Mei made sure that I didn't get anything much more challenging than chicken pox. But you were right. I was terrified when I walked in there ... but as soon as I started, it was like I'd never left ... the patients ... the work ... it was great."

"And that's what matters, right?" asked Susan. "The patients and the work, not how tired you feel."
Chapter 20

Luka breezed into the ER. "Good evening, Jerry," he said.

"Evening, Dr. Kovač."

Another night shift; he'd be working with Jing Mei again. He'd been back at work for two weeks, and was getting back into the swing of things. Just like riding a bike. He was tired, but no longer collapsed with exhaustion at the end of each shift. And while he was still being kept strictly away from anything that could be remotely considered 'trauma', he was taking more challenging general medical cases. He was, he thought wryly, about up to speed with the 4th year med students ... But he was back at work, and he felt good.

The evening started out routinely enough; med students to monitor, and an assortment of lacerations, mysterious fevers, and 'weak and dizzy all overs.'

"Luka," said Jing Mei. "I'm getting buried here. "Can you take the patient in exam 2? Vag bleeding, no fever, I'm guessing a simple miscarriage."

"Sure," Luka took the chart from Jing Mei and headed into the room. Lydia was already there.

The patient was young. The chart said she was 18, but she looked younger, maybe 16. She was very pale. How much blood had she lost? There didn't seem to be a lot of blood on the bed.

"Amanda? I'm Dr. Kovač. How long have you been bleeding?"

Amanda bit her lip. "Not long ..."

"When was your last period?"

"I'm not sure ... I don't remember exactly ... I don't keep real close track ... but this isn't my period."

"Are you late? Do you keep track enough to know if you might be?"

"I don't think I am."

"Are you sexually active? Is there any possibility you could be pregnant?" All the standard questions, the triage notes seemed much more sketchy than usual, but Amanda seemed very nervous, frightened.

"Maybe ... I don't know."

"You know, Amanda, we won't tell your parents whatever you tell us. Even if you are pregnant, ok?" A tiny nod. "But I'm going to have to examine you, to determine why you are bleeding." Another tiny nod.

While Lydia helped Amanda get into the proper position for a pelvic exam, Luka got together what he needed, put on his gloves. He couldn't help noticing that Amanda was shaking, there were tears in her eyes.

"Have you ever had a pelvic exam, Amanda?" he asked her.

"No."
He'd save the canned speech, Luka thought, about how sexually active teens should see a gynecologist regularly until after they were done... "Well, it won't hurt. Just try to relax as much as you can. I'll be very gentle, and you be sure to tell me if I do anything that hurts you, ok?" No response from the patient. Luka looked at her to give her an encouraging smile, but her eyes were closed. He sat down, picked up the speculum, turned back the drape - and suddenly couldn't move.

Bruises on her thighs. A deep tear at the vaginal opening; it appeared to be the source of much of the blood. And, from Amanda, sudden sobs, and the sound of Lydia gently comforting her. Between sobs came the words "I didn't want to ... they made me ... they made me do it ... they said they would hurt me ... I'd never done it before ... they made me ...

Luka still couldn't seem to move, couldn't even breathe, but he found himself, somehow, looking into her eyes. And he might have been looking into a mirror. Pain, grief, fear, shame. His head was spinning. He had to get out. He had to say something, do something. Could she see what he was feeling? Was she also looking into a mirror?

His mouth was parched, like paper. He felt himself rise from the stool, strip off his gloves; heard himself say, as if from a long ways away, "I think you'll be more comfortable with a female doctor, Amanda. I'll get someone else to come in and examine you, ok?" And he fled. At the desk he said to Jerry, "Dr. Chen will have to take the woman in Exam 2. And get rape crisis down here for her."

He had to get away. He could feel the panic, the terror that he hadn't felt for so long; in another minute it would overwhelm him - then who could know what he might do? He could still see her eyes - they were Sakina's eyes, and his own.

Where could he go? Every room was full. There would be people in the lounge, in the men's room. The hospital was full of people. He could feel people looking at him. They knew. They had to know. Nobody could ever know, ever see...

Cold air. He had been walking, almost running. His feet had carried him outside. He was in the ambulance bay. Nobody was around. It was too cold for people to be hanging out outdoors. He could see someone having a smoke along one wall. He walked, almost ran, in the other direction. He couldn't breathe. It was cold, snowing a little. But Luka scarcely felt it. It was hot, sweltering. He was sweating, perspiration ran down his neck. The odor, in his nose, strong; of sweat. His own sweat, theirs ... the odors of ammonia, of blood ... of worse things.

He almost ran into the wall. He hadn't seen it. He couldn't see anything. Blackness swirled around him. He stopped running just before hitting the wall; some sense, not vision, warning him of its nearness. He dropped to his knees; scarcely felt the pain that tore through his right knee. He was going to vomit. He couldn't. He mustn't. Nobody must know ...

How long he knelt there, doubled over in agony, Luka never knew. He was gasping, sobbing. They made me ... I didn't want to ... they made me ... hurt me ...

Finally he came to himself again. He was sitting on the pavement. His knee had, apparently, refused to hold him any longer kneeling, and had dropped him into a seated position, though Luka couldn't remember when it had happened. Except for the pain in his knee, his body was numb. His pants were wet at the knees. Melted snow. He was cold, but it wasn't just from the air. He shook with chills. His hands were bleeding. Had he scraped them when he fell? No ... there was a sudden dim memory of pounding his fists on the pavement. But mostly he felt sick. And dirty.

It was happening again. How could he ever get his life back, how would he ever be able to work, if he never knew when it might happen again? When something would trigger the mindless panic?
They couldn't keep him away from trauma forever. Away from cases like this ... (Or, if they did, he would have to tell them why.)

The ambulance bay was empty. Nobody had, apparently, seen his panic. But inside the ER they must have seen. Jerry would have seen him flee the building. Jing Mei would be wondering where he was. Lydia couldn't have missed it.

God ... he had to get away. He couldn't go inside, face everyone, see more patients. How could he deal with other people's pain when his own pain was threatening to drown him again? But he couldn't leave. If he left in the middle of a shift, it would tell Kerry that he wasn't ready, that he couldn't work. Or he'd have to tell her why he had run, and he couldn't do that. He could never do that. They already pitied him enough, he knew. If he left now, he could never go back. And his life would be over.

No, he had to go back inside. What would he tell them? He'd think of something.

Luka struggled to his feet, his right leg protesting. Every step, even leaning heavily on the crutch, sent pain stabbing through it. Pain that he didn't need right now. In the doorway he paused, gathered himself, and went in.

Jing Mei was at the desk. "Luka, are you ok?"

"I'm fine. Just went out to get some air." The words came automatically.

"You're soaked, and you're bleeding."

"Oh... I slipped. It's wet out there, and icy. I'm not used to it, with the crutch."

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"Just twisted my knee a little, skinned my hands. I'm fine." A deep breath. "Did you get to ... the girl in 2?"

Jing Mei nodded, looked grim. "Horrible stuff. She's talking to the counselor now. I think she'll go to the police."

"Good."

"Luka, if I'd known it was going to be ..."

"I'm fine, Jing Mei. I'm fine."

"It's still trauma, and you shouldn't have done it. She presented at triage, told Sam it was ..."

"Don't worry about it. It's done. I could have handled it, but she was so upset. I thought she'd rather have a woman doctor." Luka shifted his weight more heavily onto his good leg and crutch. "I'm going to find some dry scrubs, clean up, then ice my knee for a few minutes."

"Want me to look at it?"

"No, it's ok. I just twisted it."

Luka knew that if she touched him, if anyone touched him, he would scream.
Chapter 21

The shift was finally over. It had been a struggle for Luka to get through it. His knee continued to throb, despite the ice and several doses of ibuprofen. But worse, he could feel Jing Mei and the others watching him. He knew they suspected something. How could they not?

Luka wearily put on his coat, started for the el. He looked forward to the day he'd be able to drive again. His right leg still lacked the strength and control to work the pedals safely. He could, of course, get a car with hand controls, or learn to drive with his left foot - but it was only a matter of time. He was still improving. And until he was well enough ... he lived in Chicago. The el would take him where he needed to go, along with the occasional cab.

He was exhausted. But could he sleep? What would happen if he slept? The nightmares hadn't been bad lately. Most nights he woke with the vague awareness that he had dreamed, but no actual memory of the dreams themselves. But today, he knew he would dream. More nightmares. More flashbacks.

He couldn't sleep, couldn't dream. That was something he couldn't bear, not after last night. Getting off the el at his stop, Luka started for home, then stopped suddenly and went into the small grocery store on the corner. A few minutes later he emerged, bag in hand, and walked the remaining two blocks to his apartment.

Inside, Luka went to the kitchen, put the bag down on the table. A bottle of vodka. It had been a long time since he'd been drunk - really drunk. An occasional glass of wine or beer with a meal, but when had he last been drunk? Kisangani? Before Matenda. With Gillian. The idea of getting drunk was very appealing. He'd drink half the bottle, maybe more. Enough to guarantee that he wouldn't dream today. Later he'd pay the price, but he'd think about that later. And that pain he could handle.

Opening the cupboard, Luka reached for a glass. Perhaps it was the fatigue, perhaps the nerves, or the bruises on his knuckles, or maybe his hands were a little stiff from the cold outdoors. The glass slipped from his grasp, shattered on the floor.

Luka caught his breath. 'They made me ... they hurt me ...' And he was suddenly angry. It wasn't fear, it wasn't panic, it was anger. And not a vague, general anger at the unfairness of it all - but anger at Them. At the people who had hurt that frightened young woman in exam 2 ... and at the soldiers who had hurt him. He suddenly wanted, needed desperately, to hurt them back ... to make them pay for all the pain they had caused him, for the agony that he knew now would follow him for the rest of his life.

He was gasping again, shaking. He couldn't do it. He couldn't hurt them. He couldn't do anything. He couldn't help her ... couldn't help himself ... couldn't help Sakina. He couldn't do anything. Couldn't change anything.

Still shaking, Luka took another glass. He didn't drop it. He looked at it for a moment, then hurled it across the room, and listened to it shatter against the wall. It made him feel better. A little bit. Suddenly Luka remembered Kisangani, remembered throwing a tray across the room, remembered being disappointed that nothing on it had broken. The hospital had used only melamine and metal dishes, so they wouldn't break. But the glass had broken, and he liked it. It was very ... satisfying. Luka reached for another glass.

Twenty minutes later, Luka sank down onto the stool, breathing hard. The cupboard was empty.
The floor was covered with broken glass and china. And he felt better. He felt much better.

But the bottle of vodka still beckoned. A few drinks, then he'd sleep. Luka opened the bottle, reached automatically for a glass - and found himself laughing, just a little bit hysterically. Every glass, every cup, every bowl, was now in shards on the floor.

Oh well, he could drink out of the bottle.

And he did.

A bell jangled in his head. Luka groaned ... tried to turn over ... rolled onto the floor. Why was he sleeping on the couch? It had been too far to the bedroom. He remembered having fallen twice trying to walk, remembered giving up, crawling to the couch. His head throbbed, his mouth was dry.

The telephone was ringing. He could let the machine pick it up. But no ... if he did that it would keep ringing until the machine did pick up. He reached for the phone and struggled back onto the couch. "Hello." His voice came out a hoarse croak.


"You just woke me. What time is it?" Oh God ... he was so hungover. His head hurt worse than his knee, and that was saying something. Through bleary vision he could see the bottle on the kitchen table. Had he finished it? He couldn't remember. He was going to have a couple of drinks ... but he knew he'd had more than that. Much more.

"It's a little after 4. Have a rough shift?"

"Ummm..." and Luka remembered. "Yeah ... sort of."

"I can come over; we can talk about it. I'm not on until tomorrow."

Luka rubbed his face, and suddenly saw the floor. It was still littered with broken dishes and glass. He groaned.

"Luka? You ok?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. But you can't come over today. I need to get some more sleep."

"I could come later, or we could meet somewhere? Maybe get dinner?"

"No ... ummm..." Luka rubbed his eyes, tried to focus his brain. "Not today. How about tomorrow?"

"I told you, I'm on tomorrow."

"After your shift. Come over. I'll make you dinner."

"Ok. I'll see you then. Around 8. Go back to sleep. You sound like you need it."

Luka hung up. He would go back to sleep. Then, later he would clean up the room.
"Smells good," said Susan.

"Nothing fancy. Just soup and steak."

"Sounds delicious." Susan saw the table. "New dishes?"

"Yeah. I ... decided I needed a change. A fresh start. Are you hungry?"

"Starved."

"Sit down then. Everything's ready but the steaks. I'll put them on now."

Luka served the soup, poured the wine, and sat down.

"Fresh start, hmm...?" Susan asked. "Feeling ready to start moving on?"

It could have meant anything, but Luka knew what she meant. She had been so patient, hadn't said anything, but he knew. Perhaps she had misunderstood the invitation. He'd better deal with it right now. "Susan ..." he stirred his soup. "We're friends. I like being friends, I like having a good friend. It's been a really long time since I've had one. But that's all we are. I know it can be hard for some people ... for some men and women to be 'just friends.' If you can't be that with me ... if you aren't comfortable with it, then we need to end this right now. I just can't promise you anything more."

"Are you just not attracted to me?" Susan asked.

"No ... it has nothing to do with you. I can't ... be with anyone right now. If I could, I would be ... and I'd be happy for it to be you, but I can't. Maybe some time, but not now. And I don't know when I will be ready. I don't want you to think that you have to wait for me. We can be friends, and you can see someone else. I won't be jealous. I don't expect anything from you. Never have. I just want you to be happy."

"I am happy. I like what we have. I just ..." Susan shook her head.

"What?"

"I worry about you sometimes. You still don't seem ... happy."

"You don't have to worry. I'm doing good. I'm working, I have friends. Right now, that's all I need. How's the soup."

"It's delicious. Please don't tell me it's from a can."

"Nope. I made it myself." Luka smiled, but just played with his soup. He wasn't really hungry.
Chapter 22

The alarm. Luka rolled over and hit the clock, knocking it to the floor.

He liked work. He really did. Going back had been the best thing he could have done. But why did shifts always have to start at such inhumane hours? It was still pitch dark outside ... but then it was December.

You've gotten spoiled, he told himself. All those months of sleeping in every day, sleeping late, having nothing to get up for, nothing to do. Even now, only two shifts a week, a mixture of days and nights, weren't giving his body an opportunity to reset any sort of biological rhythms. Well, next week he'd be back up to three shifts. And soon, with any luck, onto some sort of regular schedule again.

He'd slept badly too. Nightmares again? They'd been bad again, since last week's trauma. The sheets were damp, his shirt stuck to his back. He couldn't remember having dreamt, but he must have. He rarely remembered the dreams any more.

Luka groaned, got out of bed. Find the crutch, he'd need it until his leg loosened up after the night, though he didn't usually use it to walk around the apartment any more. Put on the coffee. Into the shower.

The hot water helped clear his head, his chest. He remembered coughing during the night. His throat was scratchy, sore. He'd been coughing for a couple of days. Must be coming down with something ... probably the flu. It was bad this year, he'd already seen half a dozen flu patients and it was just the beginning of December. Oh well, he'd get through the shift, then he'd have three days at home to recover before his next one. He usually shook off things like this pretty quickly, and it didn't seem bad. Two shifts a week; he could hardly justify calling in sick for something like this.

Luka got out of the shower, dressed quickly. Coffee. It didn't taste good. Nothing did. He was queasy. He remembered that he hadn't had dinner last night. He'd dozed off reading a book, and had then gone to bed early.

'Come on, Luka,' he told himself. 'Pull yourself together here! You're still just shaken up from last week. It happened. You know to expect it, and now you can keep it from happening again. You just can't let it get to you.' If he wanted to work, and he had to work, he had to keep working, he would have to be able to deal with things like that. He could come home after the shift - he could throw up, scream, cry and rage, in the privacy of his own apartment - but for those 12 hours, he had to hold it together. He had to stay in control through whatever they threw at him. And to do that, he had to take care of himself. He had to get enough to eat, get enough rest.

Luka choked down the coffee and the two slices of buttered toast. They felt like sandpaper in his mouth. His stomach still churned and he sat for a few minutes until he was sure the food would stay down. A few swigs of Pepto-Bismol to close the deal, then he got his coat and his crutch, and headed out into the chilly dawn.

The ER was warm and busy, as always. Luka always felt better when he was here. Despite everything, this was still the one place where he could almost forget his own problems, and pretend he was the person he had been before.

Kerry was waiting for him in the lounge. She got right to the point.
"How are things going for you so far, Luka?"

"Really well. I'm doing well with the work. I like being back."

"Good, good. Robert says that things seem to be going well too. Still..." Kerry hesitated, "We both think you should stick with the 24 hour a week schedule for a little while yet."

"I can handle more. And I need the money. This is barely paying me more than I was making on disability."

"You look very tired, Luka."

"I'm coming down with something," Luka admitted. "But I'll be fine. And once I'm over this, I can work a full schedule again."

"If you're coming down with something, that says you may be pushing yourself a little too hard."

"No, it says I've been exposed to the Influenza virus."

"Let's stick with two shifts until Christmas - either 2 12's or 3 8's, your choice. If you're doing better by then, we'll put you on a full schedule again."

"Two 12's," Luka said. He knew Kerry was right. He did need a little more time to get back into the routine. But 8 hour shifts wouldn't give his body a chance to get used to the 12 hour work schedule that was usual for attendings.

"Robert's been very happy with your work," Kerry said again. "You're doing great. Don't be surprised that you can't just jump back in with both feet. These things do take time."

"I know Kerry," Luka said. He turned to his locker, began to open the lock to get himself ready for the work day. He heard Kerry leave the room.

Walking out of the lounge a few minutes later, Luka almost collided with Abby. He hadn't had a shift with her since he'd been back, not terribly surprising given his limited work schedule. He hadn't even seen her, he realized, since that day in his hospital room 6 months before.

Abby looked startled, then smiled. Then, after an instant, the smile vanished under a look of nervous uncertainty.

"Abby," he said softly. "It's been a long time."

"Yeah."

"How are you doing?"

"I'm good. Keeping busy." Abby fidgeted nervously.

"Good. Busy is good."

"I'd heard you were back at work."

"Just been back for a couple of weeks, and just two shifts a week for a while."

An awkward pause, then, "You're looking good."

Luka knew that was a lie, that Abby didn't think he looked well at all. He could see that when
she'd first seen him, she'd be surprised at how bad he looked. "I'm coming down with something," he explained again. "I'm feeling pretty crappy today. But I am doing good. I'm walking again, I'm working again. I'm happy."

"I'm glad." But the uncertainty was still there. Something Abby couldn't, or wouldn't ask.

"Abby," Luka said. "I'm sorry. It wasn't your fault. It wasn't anything you did. I just needed time to get myself together again. I was going through a horrible time ... things were so hard."

"I know. You don't have to explain. You're better now?"

"Yeah, I'm doing much better. And we can be friends again, if you want."

"That'd be good."

Luka smiled at her, and was pleased to see her smile back. "Well, patients call."

"Maybe we could get lunch later?" Abby asked.

"Maybe. Try to find me later."

Fractures, burns, chest pains, fevers, boils, vertigo. The usual round of patients. Still no trauma. It was barely 2 and Luka was on his fifth cup of coffee. Just get through the shift, he told himself, then he could go home and sleep.

Randi poked her head into the room where Luka was evaluating an elderly patient with abdominal pain. "Dr. Kovač? Call for you on line 4. Dr. Heneley's office."

They were calling, Luka realized, to remind him of his appointment Monday morning. Just a regular check-up and follow-up. He almost groaned. He didn't want to go. If he was sick, he didn't want to be going in for a check up, it would just complicate matters. And if he had the flu, there really wasn't anything Heneley could do for him anyway. It would just waste everyone's time.

Luka picked up the phone. "Kovač here ... yeah ... I'm going to have to reschedule ... I umm ... have a shift Monday ... I'll call back next week when I know what my schedule will be for the next few weeks. Thanks." He hung up, returned to his patient. The shift was half over. He'd get some lunch; not that he was hungry, but all that coffee wasn't sitting well in his empty stomach, then there would be just a few more hours to go.
Chapter 23

Susan looked into the lounge. No Luka. Today, for the first time since Luka had come back to work a month before, the two of them were working the same shift. But she'd barely seen him all day. It almost seemed, she thought, that he was avoiding her. Every time she saw him in the hall, he would disappear in the other direction. And since he was still being kept on general medical cases, her time had been largely occupied with several traumas that had come in during the morning.

Still, why was he suddenly avoiding her? She'd hardly seen him for the past few weeks. He almost always claimed to be too busy to see her when she called; sounded tired and distracted when she spoke to him, but had refused to tell her what was wrong. On Saturday she had talked to him, and he'd told her, disappointed, that Kerry had said he couldn't go back on a full schedule yet, but when she'd offered to stop by and chat, he had made an excuse. Could he still be uncomfortable after their dinner a couple of weeks before, when she had hinted moving their relationship forward? Had that been enough to make him back off? Was he trying to tell her, in the only way he could, for her to back off?

Things had slowed down a lot. Nothing the med students and residents couldn't handle for half an hour. She hadn't had lunch yet. Maybe she could get Luka to have lunch with her, talk about this. But where was he?

"Frank, you seen Kovač around?"

"I think he's resting in the on-call room. He said he wasn't feeling well. Didn't look too great either."

Susan opened the door to the on-call room and stopped, startled. Luka was standing in the far corner, looking deathly pale. As she stood there, a wave of coughing - clearly not the first, hit him.

She was at his side in a moment, holding his shoulders, supporting him. She felt him flinch a little at her touch, but he didn't pull away, he didn't seem to have the energy to. She could feel the heat radiating through his shirt, through his lab coat. When the spasm had passed, she said, lightly, "That didn't sound so good, Luka."

"I'm ok... it's just the flu. I was thinking about going home ... it's pretty slow ...") then he choked as another wave of coughing hit - dry, hacking, painful.

"Let's check you out first," Susan said, when he could listen again.

Luka shook his head. "No ... I'm ok ... it's nothing." The coughing spell had left him gasping for air. He looked a little dusky now too.

"You look awful. And you're burning up."

"The flu will do that ... and I've been pushing myself pretty hard ... since I came back to work ... letting myself get run down." He was still breathing too fast.

"You've been working two shifts a week," Susan reminded him gently, trying to hide the fear in her voice. "That shouldn't be too much. Come on, Luka, humor me. I think Exam 3 is open. We don't have to make a big deal of it. Let me just check you out, listen to your lungs, make sure there's nothing seriously wrong."
Luka sighed, and grabbing his crutch, followed Susan into Exam 3. "Slip off your coat, and hop up there," she told him. "How long have you been coughing?"

"Like this, two ... three days maybe. A little bit of a cough for a week ... maybe a little more ... before that."

"Productive?"

"No."

"Any shortness of breath?" Luka nodded, not looking at her.

Susan checked his temperature with the ear thermometer. "102.7," she said. "How long have you been running a fever?"

"I'm not sure. I haven't taken my temperature ... probably just a couple of days."

"Ok... let's hear what your chest sounds like ... deep breath." Susan listened as Luka tried to take a deep breath, but had to cough again. But she had heard enough. "Sounds more like pneumonia than the flu, Luka." Luka just nodded, and Susan knew that she wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know. "Let's check your sats ..." Susan dragged the pulse ox over and put the clip onto the finger that Luka reluctantly offered her. She took a deep breath herself. "Ok... your resps are up around 40 and you're still only sitting at 90 on room air. I think a little oxygen would help here ... and you definitely need a chest x-ray, and we should consider admitting you."

"No... I'm ok. Just write me a scrip for Cipro and I'll go home and get some rest. I'll be fine."

Susan looked at him and shook her head. Why were men so damn stubborn when it came to their health? She reached for her prescription pad, then something in his eyes made her hesitate. He looked like a trapped animal. And some instinct made her ask, "Are you on any medications?"

Luka stiffened visibly; didn't answer. "I need to know before I can write you anything."

"Yeah ... " he finally answered, barely above a whisper. "AZT ... 3TC ... Indinovir..." Susan froze, felt her face go pale. Then Luka continued more firmly. "It's just for prophylaxis. I may have been exposed. The first test was negative; I'm due for the 6 month test ... soon."

"Ok..." Susan said quietly, dropping her prescription pad back into her pocket. "I think we may want to do the 6 month test now." Luka's only response was a very slow shake of his head. The bravado of a moment before was gone again. "Luka, this looks an awful lot like a severe case of PCP, and if that's what it is, you need to be in the ICU, on IV antibiotics."

"We can just test for the PCP then ... if that's what you think it is."

"You know better than that. An HIV test is faster and more accurate, and, if it's positive, with the clinical symptoms we can start treatment while we wait for the rest of the lab tests. A test for pneumocystis takes longer, and may not show anything." No response from Luka. "Luka ... I know all about denial, but finding out, one way or the other ... is best, isn't it? If the test is negative, you can stop worrying and we can try to figure out what else could be causing this. Whatever this is, I can tell you it isn't the flu."

"I can't," Luka whispered.

"Ok..." Susan took another deep breath. "Did you know for sure if the patient was positive?"

Luka looked up at her, puzzled. "Patient?"
"The needle stick. Was the patient an AIDS patient?"

Luka shut his eyes quickly. "It wasn't a needle stick."

Susan felt herself blush. "Ah... I'm sorry ... I shouldn't have assumed ... my mistake. " And there was an awkward silence, broken only by the rapid, faintly rasping sound of Luka's breathing. It had been no secret, of course, that Luka had been ... less than exclusive the previous year in Chicago, but surely he knew better than to have unprotected sex in Central Africa."Then what ...?" The question came out before Susan realized it.

"Does it matter?" The hunted animal look was back.

"No, of course it doesn't. You know that you can tell me anything, but you don't have to tell me anything either." A beat. "But Luka, we still need to test you, and we need to admit you. You are obviously really, really sick, and the sooner you start treatment the better. Your sats have dropped to 86 while we've been talking."

Luka looked up, and the pain in his eyes startled her. He was fighting tears, seemed to be falling apart before her eyes. "I can't do this, Susan ... I can't."

"I don't think you have much choice."

"I was just ... I had just gotten to where things were getting better ... I was having mostly good days ... I'm working again ... I ... I can actually walk around my apartment now without this damn stick. Hurts like the devil, but I can do it. I thought ... I thought I had a future again." His voice dropped to a whisper, barely audible. "Every time I thought it was over ... it would start again."

"Luka, you're going to get through this."

A bitter look wiped the pain from his eyes. "You must have been absent that day from your infectious diseases class. Hadn't you heard? AIDS is fatal."

Luka slid off the table and pulled the pulse ox probe from his finger. Picking up his lab coat and his crutch, he started for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going home. I have the flu. We aren't busy, you should be ok without me. My next shift is Saturday, I should be well by then."

"You're leaving AMA?"

Luka turned from the door. "I don't see a chart, Dr. Lewis. This conversation never happened."
Luka let himself into his apartment. He was exhausted. The walk from the el had drained him. He’d had to stop 5 times during the two block journey to cough. But it wasn't just the physical exhaustion - it was a fatigue that dragged at his limbs and awakened too many memories ... physical memories; memories he had thought he was finally beginning to leave behind.

Tea. A hot drink would help to loosen some of the crud in his lungs, let him cough it up. Then he would feel better. Luka put water on, searched in the refrigerator for something to eat, something that looked good. No, he was too tired to cook. Maybe he'd send out for something. No... it was only 3 o'clock, nowhere near time to eat dinner. He'd have the tea, and a snack ... he hadn't had lunch, then take a nap. The water was boiling. Find the teabags ... the cup. God ... why was everything so hard? Why was he so tired? 'Come on, Kovač... it's the flu. You're not up to par yet, even the flu is going to wipe you out. You haven't been sleeping well again ... '

Luka poured the tea, added a drizzle of honey to soothe his sore throat, found some crackers in the cupboard. They didn't look good, but nothing looked good, and they were easy, and he knew he should eat something. He could dip them in the tea so they wouldn't irritate his throat. Luka put his head down on the table for a minute, while he let the tea cool enough to drink it.

The doorbell. The buzzer startled him. The room was dark. Luka's head flew up, and his hand jerked and spilled something onto his arm. Cold water. The door buzzer again.

Luka got up, dizzy. He wasn't sure where his crutch was. He stumbled to the door, hitting the light switch, blinking at the sudden brightness. Where was the intercom switch? "Yeah?"

"Luka? It's Susan. Can I come up?"

"What do you want?" Luka still felt fuzzy, hot. The room seemed very stuffy. Why couldn't he get his breath?

"I just want to be sure that you're ok."

"Sure... come up." Arguing would have taken more energy than he seemed to possess. Luka unlocked the outer door, and opened his own front door. He couldn't stand here any longer or he would fall. He stumbled the few steps to the couch and collapsed there, eyes closed. The room was still too bright. A moment later he heard footsteps, heard his door close, and Susan's voice.

"Luka?"

"I'm ok, Susan. I probably look worse than I feel. I was just ... asleep. You woke me."

Susan knelt beside him, felt his forehead. "You're burning up. Where's the thermometer?"

"Bathroom ... where else?"

More footsteps ... it seemed too hard to open his eyes. Then, "Hold this under your tongue." Luka opened his mouth to obey, it was still easier than trying to argue. But a spasm of coughing hit, and Susan had to wait until he was done. While they waited for it to beep, Susan took out her stethoscope and again listened to his chest. She shook her head. "Your lungs sound really bad, Luka. You need to be in the hospital."

"It's not that bad..." Luka said, around the thermometer.
"Have you talked to your own doctor since you've been sick?" Luka shook his head. "Who is your doctor?"

"Heneley."

The thermometer beeped, and Luka took it out of his mouth. He couldn't seem to read the numbers on it. Susan took it from him. "103.8. And I'll bet you a pizza your PaO2 isn't over 60." She picked up the phone and handed it to him. "Call him."

"It's late. He's gone home." A faint smile. "The service would just tell me to go to the ER." And another wave of coughing. Pain stabbing into his chest with every breath - boots kicking him in the ribs - shattering them - blood, pouring into his lungs.

"And they'd be right. This is bad, Luka. I don't know for sure what it is, but it's bad. I'm asking you as a friend, to please let me call 911 for you."

"I can't ..."

"Why not? My God, Luka ... worst case scenario ... and it turns out to be ... what you're afraid of ... you go to the hospital, we treat the pneumonia, and you can still have a lot of time ahead of you. And if it isn't PCP, if it's something else, we still need to treat it. You can still die from garden-variety pneumococcus, if it gets out of hand, goes on too long."

"You don't understand, Susan. You can't."

"Try me. I thought we trusted each other."

"Not with this ... not yet." Exhaustion was washing over him again. "Please ... just let me sleep. I'll feel better in the morning."

Susan sighed, looked at him for moment, then reached into her jacket pocket, and pulled out two pill bottles. "Bactrim and Prednisone," she said. "You should be on IV antibiotics, oxygen, and God knows what else, but these may help ... at least until you come to your senses."

Luka looked dully at the bottles for a moment, then finally registered that they were the standard treatment for PCP. He nodded. "Thanks. Could you .. ummm.. get me some water?" When Susan had brought him a glass, he swallowed the pills. "And ... my crutch?"

"Let me help you, Luka. You're going to fall over, even with the crutch." She helped him hobble into the bedroom. He was so tired that the pain in his leg had retreated to a distant annoyance; so tired that he forgot to be bothered that she was touching him ... had her arm around him. She got his shoes off, helped him lie down ... God ... he shouldn't need this kind of help anymore ... "I can stay if you want; sleep on the couch."

"You don't have to."

"I don't mind. There's no-one waiting for me at home. And I've done it before."

She smiled as she said it, but Luka murmured drowsily, "Done what? Stayed with your dying friends?" and then slid into sleep.
Susan wandered back into the living room. It was all she could do to not pick up the phone; call 911. But if she went against Luka's wishes now, how could she expect him to trust her again? She knew, as much as she could know anything in the world right now, that Luka would need to be able to trust her; that he was facing something that she could never ask him to face alone. And she knew he didn't have anyone else. It had taken so long to get him to open up to her, even in the small ways he already had; to tentatively risk friendship after whatever horrors he had lived through.

She found a blanket and pillow in the linen cupboard, spread them on the sofa, but she knew she wouldn't sleep. She couldn't. She stood by Luka's bedroom door and listened to his breathing, his restless sleep, broken by frequent coughing fits that didn't seem to wake him. When she felt his forehead, he didn't seem to be any hotter, but PCP didn't necessarily cause really high fevers. The breathlessness; the dry cough that was so different from other types of pneumonia; those were what frightened her and, she knew, frightened him.

But how could she have missed it? Not just the cough, but the other symptoms that were so obvious in him now. True, she'd seen little of him the past few weeks. But still, she should have noticed something. He had lost weight. His face was visibly thinner, his shirt loose around the shoulders. And worse, the haunted expression that she remembered so clearly from those first weeks and months, that was back. The darkness, the fear behind the eyes.

"No ... no ... please ... stop ... oh God ..." then more in what she assumed was Croatian. Luka tossed restlessly on the bed, kicking off the covers. But it didn't look like delirium. What had Gillian had told her all those months ago? That Luka didn't like people watching him sleep? That he had nightmares?

Again, the urge to guard his trust; earn his trust. He was obviously breathing. She could safely leave the doorway, let him sleep for a while, dream his dreams in privacy.

She retreated to the couch, curled up in a ball under the afghan. Even from here she could hear his hoarse cries, though she couldn't make out the words. But that was good, as long as she could hear him, she would still know that he was breathing.

"Why are you doing this, Susan?" she asked aloud. How many times are you going to get close to someone, only to lose them? 'Staying on the sofa of a dying friend,' Luka had said. She'd done it with Mark, and had lost him. She'd gotten so close to Susie, and had lost her, in every real sense. And all the patients she had chosen to connect with over the years.

She was good with people; her supervisors both here and in Arizona had noted that on her reviews time and again. She knew how to listen, how to connect with her patients, make them trust her. Some had said that she might do better in private practice, where she could establish long term relationships; where 'treat 'em and 'street 'em' wasn't the rule of the day. But, because she'd chosen the ER, and because for whatever reason, true personal relationships seemed to have eluded her for so long, she chose, so often, to find her connection with patients in pain. And perhaps that was what had drawn her to Luka on his return. He had been in pain. Physical pain and emotional pain. He needed someone. A friend, not a lover. He would not even consider being more than a friend. Had it been the fear of the HIV that had stopped him? His fear of infecting her, or the knowledge that he would have had to tell her?

But ... God ... could she do this again? Get close to someone, and then have to watch him die?
Susan gave herself a shake. 'Don't get ahead of yourself,' she told herself firmly. 'We don't know anything yet. This could be something else. And if it is AIDS, people can live with AIDS for years ... decades.' ARV therapy had been a miracle in that regard. She just had to get him through the pneumonia.

And you can't be afraid ... afraid of getting hurt so you're afraid to love.

- 

Susan woke suddenly. Where was she? A leather sofa? The room was very quiet.

Luka! Susan threw off the afghan and ran to the bedroom door, straining her ears as she ran ... to hear something. The covers were still on the floor where he had kicked them hours ago. He lay sprawled across the bed, face down, much too still, his clothes soaked with sweat. Susan couldn't see his face, but the color in his hands had gone from the dusky shade of the evening to a frank blue. "Sonovabitch..." Fear made the familiar cuss-word catch in her throat. No ... She sat down, and the movement of the bed seemed to trigger something, because Luka breathed, faint, hoarse ... but he was breathing. Had been all along, surely ... just too weakly for her to have heard until she got this close.

She turned him gently. His face was damp, the same bluish shade as his hands. Eyes half open, glassy. Pulse in his throat was rapid and thready. "Luka!" He seemed to be breathing a little better; lying on his back gave him a better airway. "Luka! Wake up!" She shook him, rubbed her fist into his chest. And his eyes flickered.
Chapter 26

Sleep... Why wouldn't they let him sleep ... he was so tired ... they could drown him some more tomorrow.

Hands on him, shaking him, hurting him, making his chest hurt. No! But someone was calling his name. A female voice, familiar. "Luka! Luka!"

And the fog cleared a little. His own room. His own bed. But why was Susan here? Had they ... Maybe he was drunk ... he felt hungover. Had they done something stupid? But no ... he couldn't breathe. There was no air in the room. And she was still talking to him, worry on her face. "Luka! I need you to answer me. Can you hear me?"

It took a moment to think how to form words, and longer to get enough air into his lungs to speak. "Don't have ... to shout."

Susan seemed to wilt for a moment as relief washed over her, and a smile replaced, for an instant, the fear and worry on her face. "Luka, do you know where you are?"

"My bedroom ... and you're Susan." A brief smile. "I'm alert and oriented ... just tired. Why did you ... wake me up?" As he focused on his breathing, forced himself to draw air into his lungs, the fog was clearing faster. But God ... it was so hard. The effort was already exhausting him, fever seemed to be draining the strength from his body. It would be easy ... so much easier, to just sleep again.

"Because you weren't breathing! Luka, I'm going to call an ambulance. You are getting worse, and you need to be in the hospital."

Luka let his eyes shut, nodded weakly. The hospital ... he was suffocating, they could help him breathe. He couldn't do it by himself anymore. Susan got up, went to get the bedroom phone. And suddenly he remembered.

"No!"

"If you do not go to the hospital, you are going to die."

"Dying ... anyway..."

"No, you're not. Luka, we can talk about this more when you're well again. Let's just get you through this."

It was so hard to fight ... to fight her, to fight for air. "Hospital ... but not ... County."

"County's closest."

"They can't know ... please ..."

Susan sat down and took his hands. Hers felt ice cold. "Luka, this is nothing to be ashamed of. You are sick, and all that matters is getting you well. I don't care how you got it ..."

"Don't know how ... I got it ..."

"That's true, I don't. So how could I tell anyone, even if I wanted to?"

"Not County ... please ..." The fear, stronger than the fear of death, that someone would find out,
learn his secret... "Northwestern. Heneley... privileges there..."

"Ok." Susan finally agreed with a sigh. She picked up the phone again, but then another thought struck Luka, through the thickening mist. Catchment areas.

"Can't call ambulance. They'll have to... take me to County. Drive me..."

"I don't have my car today."

"Taxi, then."

"Luka, Northwestern is clear across town. By the time the cab arrives, we're looking at an hour before you get there. If we don't get you help soon, you will be dead in an hour."

Something in Susan's face penetrated the mist. Fear, grief. Guilt? And no... he wasn't ready to die. He'd fought too hard, too long to give up again yet.

"Ok.. ambulance..." He murmured faintly. And Susan was dialing 911 again before the words were out of his mouth. He dimly heard her giving instructions and the address to dispatch, heard her set down the phone.

"They'll be here in just a few minutes."

The grief was still clear in Susan's eyes. He should explain, Luka thought dimly. He knew that, even now, there might not be another chance, once he was at the hospital, and intubated. "I've known... suspected... for a while," he said. "Night sweats... losing weight... thrush... few weeks... scared."

"I know," Susan said gently. "Now don't talk. Just breathe, ok?"

"I knew... even with first test... could still have it. But can be... people can be positive... healthy... for years. Too fast... too soon..."

Luka heard the faint wail of the siren in the distance. Susan was holding his hands again. "You're going to get through this. And you'll still have a lot of years. You are so strong, Luka. You can fight this, if you just let yourself try." She wiped the tears from his face, and then from her own. "I need to go let the paramedics in, ok?"

Luka let himself sink back into the fog. There were voices, footsteps, hands on him. Something on his face... like cool water when he was dying of thirst, oxygen in his lungs, it seemed a little easier to breathe, and there was more air. Something cold on his hand... a stinging sensation. Someone lifted him... but he was mostly aware of someone holding his hand the whole time. He was so tired... he could sleep now. Then a voice, saying "Come on, Luka, try to stay with me... just a little longer." and the siren was wailing in his head... and then the familiar smells and sounds of the ER penetrating his consciousness. He heard Kerry's voice,

"Luka!" and then Susan's "I think it's pneumonia, probably PCP, he's been sick for almost two weeks." and Kerry again, softly, "He's HIV positive?" "I don't know. Maybe."

Kerry's voice. "Luka! Luka, open your eyes." Luka squinted painfully. The room was much too bright. Exam 3 again. Figured. "Luka, we need to know. Are you HIV positive? Or have you been diagnosed with AIDS?"

Luka pushed the oxygen mask from his mouth so he could talk - the sense of suffocation came back immediately. "Don't know..."
"Luka, it doesn't matter to me personally, or as your boss. But I need to know so we can treat you; give you the help you need."

"Don't know ... exposed ... Africa ... prophylaxis." Please ... he was suffocating. Kerry replaced the mask for him.

"Can we test you now?" Luka shut his eyes. "Luka, I need your consent to do it." He opened his eyes again, looked at Susan. She gave him an encouraging smile, squeezed his hand ... and he nodded. This was one fight he couldn't win. One of many.

Chuny's voice, quiet. "Sats are down to 78 on 100%"

"Ok," Kerry said. "8.5 ET tube, induction meds, portable chest; call respiratory for a vent . Very gently."Luka, we need to intubate, to help you breathe. You're going to go to sleep, and when you wake up, you'll have a tube in your throat, and you'll probably be up in the ICU."

Luka could only nod again, and a moment later, the world vanished into darkness.
It had been a long time. Luka knew that, but he wasn't sure just how long. Dim impressions of people talking to him, voices and faces he knew, and some he didn't, swimming in and out of a misty fog of fever and pain. Of hands that felt very cold, touching him, and holding his own hands. He tried to pull away, but didn't seem to have the strength. Of the beeping of monitors, and the humming of machines. Of the constant pressure of something forcing air into his lungs. And of thirst ... he tried to ask for water, but couldn't seem to do that either.

He finally woke up, fought his way out of the fog. Nothing had changed. The monitors and machines still beeped and hummed. Air still moved in and out of his lungs without any effort on his part. He was still terribly thirsty, and someone still held his hand. He tried again to ask for water, and still, nothing happened.

"Luka." Susan's voice. "Don't try to talk. Can you hear me?" Luka managed to move his head, focus on her, then he nodded. "You still have a tube in your throat; you're on a vent." A moment's hesitation. "Do you remember what happened?"

Luka nodded again. How could he forget? Drowning, suffocating, an ambulance ride, Kerry looking down at him ... He touched the tube, and Susan quickly moved his hand away.

"Don't touch it. It will come out soon. Just as soon as you're a little bit stronger and can breathe on your own."

He had to know, but could he bear to know? Luka mimed writing on his palm, and Susan handed him a notepad and pencil from the bedside table.

Luka hesitated. He'd denied it for so long, he couldn't any more. Not now. His hands were weak. He had to grip the pencil in his fist. He started to write an 'A' on the paper, the scribbled it out and wrote "PCP?" and showed the pad to Susan.

Susan looked at the pad, then at her lap. "Luka, Dr. Heneley will be by to see you soon. He can answer all your questions, tell you everything you want to know." Luka just underlined the 3 letters on the paper. Circled them. The pencil point broke.

And Susan nodded finally. "Yeah." Then more brightly. "You've had a rough couple of days. You had us all pretty scared for a while, but you're doing much better now. Another few days, if you continue to do well, they should be able to extubate you, then move you out of the ICU and into a regular room."

Luka could only nod, try to smile around the tube, for Susan's benefit. 'Had us all pretty scared?' Who, besides Susan, would really care, even now, if he lived or died?

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When he woke again, Dr. Heneley was there, looking at his chart. He smiled at Luka. "Good morning, Luka," he said, and sat down. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions. We'll talk more after you've been extubated, when we can have an actual conversation, but right now I'll try to let you know what's happening, and anticipate as many questions as I can, without wearing you out too much. Ok?"

Luka nodded. Did he really want to hear this? Maybe he could just go back to sleep. Pretend it wasn't happening.
Dr. Heneley only saw the nod, not the doubt, because he promptly went on, his voice crisp and professional. "You have pneumocystis pneumonia, a pretty serious case. Your condition is still critical, but you are improving. The HIV test was positive, and PCP is, as I'm sure you know, an AIDS-defining infection. I'm not sure exactly what's going on here yet. You were taking the prophylaxis. Even if it didn't keep you from seroconverting, it should have kept you asymptomatic for some time. But we do know that some of the African strains are resistant and particularly aggressive. That, with the delay in starting treatment, and your debilitated condition during those first few weeks, may have been enough to make the difference. I don't know. What we do know is that your CD4 count is under 100, and your viral load over 100,000. It's not at all surprising that you got sick."

Luka picked up the pad, and the pen that Heneley handed him, and wrote "I'm dead."

Heneley took the pad from his hand, and his tone changed, became gentler, more personal. "No, you are not dead. I'm going to refer you to Marty DeAngelo. He's the best infectious disease guy in town. There are other anti-retrovirals, and new ones being developed all the time. We just need to find a combination that works on this strain. Then we can get it back under control and you can stay healthy for a long time. But the other thing, Luka is that you are going to have to take better care of yourself. This should never have happened; you should not be lying in the ICU with a damn tube down your throat. Dr. Lewis told me that you'd been sick for weeks, my nurse said you canceled an appointment with me. We could have caught this early. You should never have allowed it to go on this long."

Luka nodded. His vision was suddenly blurred. Something wet slid down his temples. Heneley smiled at him, put a hand on his shoulder. "You're going to fight this, Luka." And Luka managed to nod again, wipe away the tears.

Recovery was painfully slow. Luka's fever slowly dropped, his oxygen levels improved, and after 2 more days, Heneley finally removed the tube from his throat. As the tube came out, and Luka coughed and gagged, he told himself that he'd never again be so cavalier about intubating patients.

Susan gave him a drink of water, holding the straw to his lips, and Luka sipped it gratefully. His throat was raw, both from the tube and from the thrush he was still battling, but the cold water felt good. He lay back wearily against the pillows. Another few days, Heneley had told him, and he'd be out of this fishbowl and into a regular room. And then he'd go home.

God ... he hated hospitals. They were fine to work in, he loved being a doctor, but being a patient was something else entirely. He'd been one for so long, and now it was all going to start again. How much time would he spend in hospital beds before it finally ended? One thing he was sure of ...

"Susan?" His voice was a faint rasp.

"Don't talk yet. Give your throat a chance to feel better."

Luka went on as if she hadn't spoken. "When the time comes ..."

"Luka, we're not going to talk about ... we don't have to talk about this now. You have lots of time. Years. If ... when ... it's important ... you can tell me then."

"I don't want to die in the hospital. I'm going to die at home."

Susan smiled, tears brightening her eyes. "Yeah," she said. "Of old age."
He was picking at his dinner of soup and jello - all he could swallow easily yet, even after 2 days, not that he had an appetite anyway - when Kerry came in.

"You're looking much better, Luka," she said brightly.

"Couldn't look much worse then when you saw me last," he said. He was still a little breathless. More than a little.

"That's true." Kerry smiled. Then, "We need to talk about your job."

Luka put down his spoon, said slowly, "I was pretty out of it when I came in, Kerry. But I do seem to remember somebody saying that it didn't matter, as my boss, if I was HIV positive or not." AIDS. He still couldn't say that.

"And it doesn't. I'm not firing you, Luka. I'm just concerned about you. The ER isn't the safest place to work for someone in good health, with an intact immune system. It's a very high stress environment, you're exposed to ..."

"I need to work, Kerry." Luka interrupted firmly. "I need to work. If I can't work, you and Susan should have just let me die downstairs in the ER ... or she should never have brought me in at all; let me die at home in my own bed. I don't have anything else. I don't have a family. I don't have very many friends. If I can't work, I will just be going home and waiting to die, because there won't be anything else for me."

"There's other work. You could teach."

"I'm not a teacher. That's not what I do, what I love. ER medicine is what I do ... it's all I've ever done. The six months I was off work, all that kept me going was knowing that I'd be coming back to work again as soon as I could walk. If you take that away from me, Kerry, I'm dead. Heneley and DeAngelo can give me all the drugs they want, but I am telling you now, I will be dead."

Kerry nodded, sighed. "You'll need to be fully recovered from this first, and your lab picture will need to look better."

"They've got me on a new combination already. It should start working soon. My CD4 counts should be coming up."

"Good." Kerry rose. "You get some rest. I hope you'll be ready to come back soon."

Her words rang with insincerity.

Left alone again (as alone as he could be in the fishbowl of the ICU), Luka lay back on the pillow. The long conversation had left him gasping and breathless. He remembered something Kerry had told him years ago, something Mark had told her before he died. Mark had stopped working to spend his last months with his family. "Don't let your work become your life," he'd told her. But Mark had a family. Luka's work was his life. That had been true ever since Danijela had died. (And true, in a sense, even before that - hadn't he sacrificed her and his children for his work?) He had nothing else. When he could no longer work, and that time would come, he knew, he would have nothing left to live for.
Carter parked his jeep, stepped out into the bitter cold. After almost 8 months in Africa, it was a shock to come back to Chicago in December. Cold, snow, dark.

Would he stay? When he'd left Kisangani, he hadn't been certain. He had things to do; settle Gamma's estate, spend Christmas with his father, see friends he hadn't seen in far too long. And yes, see Luka, make sure he was doing well. The man was not much of a correspondent. (But then, neither was he.) The first few days home, the comforts of civilization had been quite seductive indeed; hot showers, good food, people who spoke English everywhere he turned. (Even after 8 months, French was largely gibberish to him, but then, languages had never been one of his talents, and with the many multilingual staff members always happy to translate for him, he'd never been forced to sink or swim and learn!) But now, the cold snap was making him reconsider yet again. 95 degrees in the shade might not be so bad after all ...

Still, he didn't have to decide yet. He'd told Angelique he'd be gone for at least a couple of months, and then he'd decide one way or another.

Through the ambulance bay doors and into the ER. It looked strange. They had remodeled. "Dr. Carter!" Chuny came running and caught him in a big hug. "When did you get back?"

"A couple of days ago. I've been settling in, taking care of some business."

Chuny dragged him down the hall, screaming to everyone that "Carter's back!" and he was smothered by more hugs and kisses and found himself trying to answer a dozen questions all at once. And then he spotted Susan, standing off to one side, grinning at him, but her smile looked tired.

"Please tell me you're back for good and you're going to start taking shifts again," she said quietly. Carter disengaged himself from the pack of puppies and followed her into the lounge. "I'm not sure yet," he said. "It will depend on how things go. I'll be working for a couple of months anyway though." He poured himself some coffee. "Isn't Luka back to work yet? I tried to call him a couple of times since I've been home. I get the machine, but he hasn't returned my calls." He tried to keep his voice casual.

Susan looked uneasy. "He's back ... sort of."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"He was back to work for a while, but now he's upstairs in the ICU."

"With what? What happened?"

Another uneasy look, then Susan seemed to make up her mind. "PCP."

Carter closed his eyes. "Shit ..." he whispered. "AIDS?" Susan nodded. "When was he diagnosed?"

Susan again looked unwilling to answer, and Carter said, "I know that he was exposed in the Congo. It was something he was ... really scared about."

"He was diagnosed the same time they diagnosed the pneumonia. He hadn't had the 6 month test yet. I think he was putting it off ... was afraid to find out. He hadn't been well for a while."
"How did he take the news?"

Susan smiled. "Your guess is as good as mine, Carter. We've ... Luka and I have gotten pretty close ... I'm probably the best friend he has ... but he still doesn't really talk to me. It's hard to know what he's thinking, feeling. And he was just extubated a few days ago, so he hasn't had much time to talk about it yet. He had to have known though. He was so sick ... but he kept insisting it was the flu. I didn't even know he'd been exposed; was on prophylaxis. He'd never told me. Not until he was so sick. If we'd known before, we could have gotten him on a more effective combination."

Carter sipped his coffee. "Has he told you much about Africa? About what happened to him there?"

"No. Almost nothing. He doesn't let me ask, either. He's told me a little about his work there, but I don't know anything else."

"He experienced some pretty horrible things."

"I guessed that much," Susan said quietly.

"So it's not surprising that he's still using denial as a coping tool. It's not very healthy, emotionally or physically, but I guess it's worked for him up until now, and it seems the easiest way." Carter could still see Luka in his bed in Kisangani, hear him saying fiercely 'I don't remember anything, Carter!' ... while he knew well that he himself would never forget his own first sight of Luka in Matenda, covered with flies and blood. This just wasn't something you forgot. Ever.

Susan nodded. "It's just so hard for me. I care about him, Carter. It's hard seeing him in pain, and not knowing how to help. But if I push too hard, I'm afraid I'll push him away."

"I know that feeling," Carter assured her. He finished his coffee. "Can he have visitors upstairs?"

"Yeah. He's extubated, doing much better. They'll probably be moving him out of the ICU tomorrow. I'm sure he'll be thrilled to see you."

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Carter stood outside the glass. Luka appeared to be asleep. An oxygen mask covered the lower part of his face. The part Carter could see was rather pale. The monitors showed a rapid pulse and an oxygen level that still seemed a little low considering the mask. He looked, Carter thought, somewhat better than he had when he'd said good-bye in Kisangani, but this wasn't what he'd expected to find. Not what he'd expected at all.

The ICU nurse approached him. "Hello Dr. Carter," and he recognized her. She'd worked in the ER briefly a few years before. "You can go in if you like."

"I wouldn't want to wake him."

"I'm sure he won't mind. He doesn't get a lot of visitors."

So Carter opened the door and went in, and Luka stirred; opened his eyes.

"Hey, Luka," Carter said softly. "Didn't mean to wake you."

"Wasn't sleeping," Luka said. He looked confused for a moment, then a smile lit his face. He moved the mask from his mouth so he could talk more easily. "When did you get back?"
"A few days ago. When you get home you'll find a bunch of messages on your machine." Carter took the mask and started to replace it. "You should keep that on," but Luka shook his head.

"Don't really need it. Just wear it to make them happy." Clearly a lie. Every word was a little more breathless than the one before, and his sats dropped a few points on the monitor. He didn't object when Carter firmly replaced it. A few breaths from the mask, then, "Home for good?"

"Don't know yet. I'll have to see how it goes. Kisangani's wonderful, but civilization has its perks."

"When I get out of here, I'll have to walk for you. I do it pretty good now."

"I'll be looking forward to seeing it," Carter said with a smile.

"Two legs, both mine. One crutch."

Carter could only smile again. At least Luka had gotten the two things he'd wanted most, to keep his leg, and to walk again. But God ... why this? Hadn't he been through enough?

"So," he said after a minute. "I guess the leg works well enough for some nice slow dancing with Susan?"

"Did she tell you that?" Luka's eyes were suddenly troubled.

"No. She said you've been spending a lot of time together. I assumed..."

"We're not ... a couple. It's complicated."

"Women usually are, right?" Carter spoke lightly, and Luka smiled a little. "Ok," Carter went on. "You're tired. I'd better let you rest. I'll be around for at least a couple of months; we'll have lots of time to talk, catch up, when you're feeling better."

Luka nodded, closed his eyes. Carter clasped his hand briefly, and turned to go, but Luka said, "Carter."

"Yeah?"

"I never thanked you ... for saving my life."

"Yes, you did."

"No."

"Luka, you are alive. You are walking. That's all the thanks I need. Now you just keep fighting. You stay alive. Don't let it be for nothing."
Chapter 29

Luka leaned against the wall while Susan again wrestled with the key.

"You have got to talk to the landlord about this lock. It's 10 degree's out. It can't possibly be humid."

"It also sometimes sticks when it's cold," Luka said mildly, and Susan smiled at him, and he smiled back, a rather tired smile.

The door finally opened, and Susan put an arm around Luka's waist to help him inside. Luka didn't like it, but he couldn't yet walk well without help. The 2 weeks in bed had left him quite weak, though he didn't like to admit it.

"Do you want to go right to bed?" she asked, studying his pale face. "You look pretty wiped out."

"No, I've just spent two weeks in bed. I want to be up for a while." Luka sank down onto the couch, slipped the crutch from his arm, and put his face in his hands.

Susan watched him a moment, concerned. No, more than concerned. She hurt. She knew that he hurt, not just the physical pain of his illness, his chronic injuries but something worse than that. Now there were just even more things that he wasn't going to tell her, wasn't going to talk to her about. How long was he going to keep shutting her out? The two weeks since the diagnosis, he'd barely spoken to her about his feelings, his fears. Did he think she didn't want to hear? Had her too flippant response to his initial remarks made him think that? Or was he just not yet ready to talk about them. Was he going to keep using denial, as Carter suggested, as his coping tool?

"What's wrong, Luka?" she asked. He just shook his head, didn't even bother to raise it from his hands. "Damn it, Luka! Would you talk to me! We're friends, right? Friends talk to each other."

Luka looked up, looked at her. He looked exhausted - defeated. "Life ... just sucks sometimes," he said softly, and let his head drop back down again.

"That it does." She sat on the couch beside him. "But it's all we have, isn't it?" If he had been anyone else, she would have put an arm around him, but she couldn't do that. He wouldn't let her. God ... why wouldn't he let her do that?

And then she made her decision. Maybe it wasn't the right time. Maybe it was wrong to approach him when he was so vulnerable. Maybe it would be the worst mistake she ever made. But she had to know ... and her gut told her that it was the right time.

"Luka ... you don't have to go through this alone; face this alone. I'm here for you, and will always be here - as your friend if that's really what you want, but I'd like to be more than that."

A quick shake of the head. "We've talked about this, Susan. More than once."

"I know. And you said that you might be ready some time. I'm ready now. I've been ready for a while."

Luka raised his head; stared at her, baffled. "Let me see if I understand this," he said slowly. "You've been happy to be just friends for the past six months. And now that I've been diagnosed with a particularly virulent strain of a fatal sexually transmitted disease ... you want to start sleeping together? Do you have a death wish?"
"I'm not talking about sex, Luka ... though yes, I'd like that too. I'm talking about a relationship. Two people ... relating to each other, being open with other, caring about each other, loving each other."

"But why now? Maybe because you're feeling sorry for me?" The bitterness was clear.

"No. Maybe because I already love you. And I've been willing to wait for you to be able to love me back ... but I don't want to wait forever. When I walked into your room, and saw you lying there, and I thought you weren't breathing ... I thought you were dead ... I knew I didn't want to lose you before I'd at least tried ... we'd at least tried." Susan wiped at her eyes. "You said it wasn't me ..."

"It isn't. I do care about you. If I could be with anyone, I would want to be with you. But I can't. I just can't. And I still don't know when ... or if ... that will ever change."

"Why? Is it the virus?"

"No."

"Then what? There has to be a reason."

"There is." Very, very quiet. "But it isn't ... it just isn't something I can talk about. Not even to you. It hurts too much."

"Not talking about it hurts too, doesn't it?"

Luka didn't answer for a minute, just played with the fringe on the afghan, still on the couch from Susan's night there two weeks before. "What did Carter tell you?"

Susan was confused at the sudden change of subject. "About what?"

"About me? About Africa?"

"Nothing. Just that ... you'd had some terrible experiences. And I never asked for more details. But God ... Luka ... whatever this is, it is tearing you up, keeping you from living, more than the HIV is ever going to be able to do. Can you really think so little of me that you think that there is anything you could tell me that would make me think less of you? Love you less? And if it is something that might ... change the way I feel about you, don't I have the right to know? So I can make my own decision?"

Another long silence. Luka rubbed his leg nervously, looked around the room. What was he looking for? Escape? He picked at the fringe of the afghan, finally settled on a corner of the room to look at. Susan sensed that he wasn't really in the room with her any more. That he had gone somewhere else. Was this how he had gotten through his sessions with DeRaad? How he had managed to talk about the things that had caused him such pain? When he finally began to speak, his voice seemed hollow, distant.

"I ... umm ... I had a clinic for a while ... in Matenda. It was a village about 150 kilometers from Kisangani. A really remote area, there was no other medical care for thousands of square kilometers. I didn't have much to offer, a few antibiotics, anti-malarials, some vaccines when I could get them, some very basic surgery, but it made a big difference to these people who had nothing. But there was a lot of fighting in the area. Rebels. They came to the clinic. I'd come down with malaria. I didn't think I was really sick at first. Just chills and some fever. I took Fansidar. Thought I'd be fine. There was some warning before the soldiers came, most of my patients were able to escape, but I thought it was safe again, and came back ... the soldiers were still there. I was captured; me and a few others. Patrique, my assistant, a few of my patients, some other people
They held us there in the clinic. I was so sick. The malaria. I couldn't stand up to the treatment ... they made us kneel for hours in the heat, with no food, no water, our hands tied behind our heads. I kept fainting.

"So later, they took me to the tent, and they beat me. I thought at first they wanted information from me, but I didn't know anything. They beat me anyway. They broke my leg - most of my ribs - fractured my skull - broke a bunch of bones in my face. I thought they were going to beat me to death. I think that was their plan ... I don't know. I was crying. I was screaming. I just wanted it all to stop. And so ... they raped me. I was still tied up ..." (Luka's hands went automatically to the scars on his wrists). I couldn't fight them. I couldn't do anything. Five men." Luka's voice broke a little. He steadied himself and continued. "They took me back to the clinic, where the other prisoners were. They shot them all. I couldn't see what was happening, but I could hear the screams and the shots. I kept waiting for them to shoot me too, but they didn't. They left me. The soldiers went away, and left me to die. I lay there for days ... dying from the malaria ... and thirst ... and pain ... just waiting to die ... I was still tied up, and so badly injured I couldn't even move. There was so much pain ... so many flies ... I was so afraid. I eventually lost consciousness, but it took a long time. Finally Carter and Gillian and Charles found me and took me back to Kisangani. The doctors there took care of me until I was well enough to come home."

Luka fell silent, let his head drop back into his hands. Susan just sat on the floor; she had slid off the couch while Luka was telling his story. She was stunned, sick. Of all the things she had imagined - she'd never thought of this, nothing like this. "Oh God ... Luka ... I ..." She couldn't think of anything to say. Didn't trust herself to speak for fear that she would cry, and she knew he didn't want her tears now. Luka didn't speak either.

Finally she said slowly. "Were the injuries ... was there physical damage, so you can't ..."

"No. Everything works physically." Still no emotion in his voice. "I get ... ummm... nocturnal erections sometimes. A few wet dreams. I just can't bear to think about it. When I think about being with someone ... being touched that way ... I panic, I get sick." His breathing quickened a little.

"You've had counseling? About this?"

"It doesn't help."

"Then you need more. You need a different therapist."

"I can deal with it, Susan. It's just not important to me. Not anymore. I'm sorry if it is to you."

"Nobody should have to go through their life feeling like this, Luka, having this kind of pain. It isn't about sex ... it's about how you feel about yourself." A deep breath. "You know, Luka, that what happened to you ... what they did to you, has nothing to do with you ... and has nothing to do with sex. It was just their way of hurting you ... in a way that they knew would cause you the most pain."

"And they succeeded, didn't they?" The deadness was back in his voice.

"So you're just going to let them?" Susan sat back on her heels. "Damn it, Luka! If you just sit here, and let this thing ... consume you ... you are letting them win. That is what they want! You couldn't fight them then. There was nothing you could have done to stop them from ... doing what they did to you. But you don't have to let them keep doing it ... keep hurting you. You can fight them now! If you don't fight them, you are letting them win. Are you going to just sit there and let the bastards win?"
Luka looked up, his eyes defeated. "They killed me, Susan. I am dead. How much more completely can they win?"

"You aren't dead yet. You are alive, and can still be alive for a long time. You have a lot of time ahead of you, and you have *have* to keep living. It's all you can do. I know that it must seem ... scary to face this ... easier to keep coasting, say it doesn't matter. But I love you. I want so much for you to be happy. If you can't love me, ok ... but you can't just not love - because you're afraid of loving, because you think that you don't deserve to be loved. You still have life ahead of you Luka, and if it's one year, or five, or fifty, you deserve to be happy, and to be happy, you have to be able to love again - you can't be alone.
Luka rose from the couch, limped restlessly around the room for a minute, then sat back down again, exhausted. "I just don't know if I can. It's not that I don't want to; to be happy ... to make you happy ... to have a life again ... while I still have the chance. But it's so hard. I worked so hard and so long with Carl, it hurt so much to just scrape the surface. To do enough to make a difference, I don't know if I can do that." He looked at her, and his eyes were frightened now. "And what if I do try, and go through all the pain ... and it doesn't make a difference? Or I die before I get far enough? I don't need more pain now, Susan."

"Will it be more pain? Or just different pain?" Susan asked quietly.

Luka looked at her, then put his palm on her wet cheek, let it rest there a moment. He had never done that before. Seemed to be surprised at himself. "I can't promise you anything."

"Just try, Luka. That's the only thing I'm asking. And not for me, for you."

"I'll try. But my way first. Let me try to do this on my own. Maybe just knowing that I have a reason to try will be enough to make a difference. No more counseling ... trying to talk to strangers about this stuff."

"Whatever works," Susan assured him.

Luka gave her a tired smile, then said. "But not today. I'm tired, I think I need to go to bed now." His smile broadened a little. "Alone."

"You should eat something first," Susan said, and Luka nodded. "Why don't you get ready for bed; I'll fix you something and bring it to you."

Luka took his crutch and started slowly for the bedroom while Susan went to the kitchen. There were cans of soup in the cupboard. The bread had gone moldy in the two weeks, but there was an open box of crackers spilled across the counter. One of the tubes was still sealed and fresh.

Carrying the soup and crackers on a tray, Susan went to the bedroom and tapped on the half-shut door. "Decent?" she called.

"Yeah. Come in."

Luka was sitting on the bed in his shorts and a tee shirt. "Clam chowder and crackers. You need groceries again."

"I'm bad about that. Always have been. Comes from living alone."

"I know what you mean. Easier to just eat out, isn't it, or order in, than to cook for yourself all the time."

"Less depressing, certainly," Luka agreed.

Susan was looking at Luka's leg, she couldn't help it. She had seen it in the ER, when they had cut his clothes off, but in the heat and worry of the moment, she hadn't really noticed it.

"Attractive, isn't it." Luka said quietly.

"I've seen worse." But Susan, in all honesty, couldn't think when she had. A broad band of ridged
and pucker scar tissue ran from the ankle, disappearing under the hem of his shorts. There seemed to be little muscle left in the calf, and thick scars masked the form of the knee joint.

"It isn't pretty," Luka reiterrated. "But it's mine." He tasted the soup. "They were going to amputate. I wouldn't let them. I nearly died rather than let them amputate."

Susan could just nod. Luka quietly ate his dinner. When he was done Susan said, "I thought I might stay on the couch again tonight. You shouldn't be alone your first night home. You still aren't really well yet."

"That's fine."

Another awkward silence. They were supposed to be becoming more comfortable together, not less, thought Susan. Luka lay down, pulled the comforter over himself. Susan wanted so badly to lie down beside him ... hold him. Or at least kiss him good-night. But she couldn't rush him. Now, more than ever, she had to let him set the pace. She knew how hard even these little things must be for him now.

"Do you have something I could wear to sleep in?"

"Tee shirts are in the second drawer."

Susan found a tee shirt, and went into the bathroom to change. When she emerged, Luka looked at her and smiled. "Looks cute on you."

"Not quite my size." The shirt hung past her knees.

"Still looks cute on you." He lay down again. "Good night."

"Good-night. Sleep well." Susan started to leave the room, reached for the light switch at the door.

"Leave it on!" Luka said quickly. He sat up again, looked embarrassed. "I sleep with it on now," he said. "I ummm... at Matenda, all those days ... I couldn't see. There was something wrong with my eyes and all I could see were shadows and darkness. Then when I was in the hospital, in Kisangani, and then here, there was always a light on in my room, at least a small one, so the nurses could see to take care of me. And now, I can't sleep in the dark anymore. I guess I've gotten to be afraid of the dark." He looked down at his hands. "Stupid, isn't it? A grown man, and I'm afraid of the dark."

"It's not stupid at all," Susan assured him. "The dark can be a pretty scary place. Especially when you don't know what's happening ... what's in it."

"They ... came for me in the dark," Luka added softly. He sighed, and lay down once again.

It was still early. Susan wasn't tired. She found a magazine and tried to read, but she couldn't concentrate. Had Luka meant it? Was he really going to try? Or had he said it just to make her happy? Just to get her off his back? Would the next step be to push her away? Still, it seemed promising. He had opened up to her already, far more than he'd done in the past months. He'd told her about Africa. (As horrible as it had been to hear, Susan knew she needed to know it, and she knew that he had needed to tell her.) He had let her see his leg, indeed, seemed to have made it a point to have let her see it. (Perhaps he thought that once she saw it, she might rethink an intimate relationship? That the sight of it would turn her off?)

Suddenly from the bedroom came a sharp cry. Susan jumped to her feet, the magazine hit the floor. She ran to the door. Luka was twisting on the bed, alternately muttering incoherently in several
different languages, and crying out in pain.

A nightmare. The same nightmare he'd had two weeks before. The same nightmare he'd had six
months ago in the hospital. And how many hundred times in between? A nightmare that was now,
to Susan, even more agonizing to hear, because now she knew what it meant. Now she knew what
he was experiencing as he slept night after night.

"No ... please ... stop ... oh God ... molim ... molim ..." Tears wet his closed lashes, his back arched,
his fists were clenched.

Susan knew she should leave, go back to the other room. He was ok, he was just dreaming. But she
couldn't leave him in such pain. Not any more. Her feet were carrying her forward and she sat
down cautiously on the edge of the bed. She didn't touch him, she knew that a touch would only
panic him more, not comfort him.

"Let it go, Luka ..." she whispered. "You have got to let this go. You don't have to allow them to do
this you any more. You are safe now. They can't hurt you now. Let it go ... please ...." And then she
had to press her fists to her mouth to stop the sobs that were coming, loud enough to wake him if
they continued.

And suddenly his story came back to her. His words. 'I couldn't stand up to the treatment. I kept
fainting. So they beat me. I was crying. I was screaming ... and so they raped me.' 'Not 'then' they
beat me ... then they raped me.' But 'so' they beat me ... so they raped me.' Is that what he
believed? That they had done those things because of something he had done? Is that why he was
still tormenting himself over it? Did he truly believe he had earned what had happened to him?

Gradually Luka grew quieter. Susan didn't know if the nightmare had finally ended, or it had just
entered a different phase ... if something was happening to him now which just didn't make him
call out aloud. He continued to shift restlessly for a while, then that too finally stopped, and he
slept quietly, apparently exhausted by his ordeal. Did he go through this every night? How was he
surviving?

Susan sat on the bed and just watched him sleep. When, after a few hours, Luka began to dream
again, to move and talk in his sleep, she said softly, "Hush, sweetheart. It's ok. Just sleep ...." and he
grew quiet again.

- 

Sometime before dawn, Luka stirred. At first Susan thought it was another dream starting, but he
opened his eyes, blinked sleepily at her, confused at seeing her there. Then he seemed to
remember.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"About 5. Go back to sleep."

"You ... have a shift?"

"Not today."

"Why are you up?"

"Just watching you sleep." Susan smiled.

"Been sitting there all night?"
"Yup."

"Must be tired."


Luka patted the bed beside him. "Lie down. Get some sleep." A sleepy smile. "I won't take
advantage. I promise."

"You sure it's ok?"

"Umm hmm." Another smile. "And you can tell everyone we slept together."

"They'll be so jealous." Susan smiled back, then lay down under the comforter beside Luka. He
smiled at her once more, closed his eyes, and was asleep again.

She still wanted so badly to put her arms around him ... he looked so frail; the salt from his tears
was still dried on his lashes ... but she settled for touching the hand that rested on the pillow. He
didn't pull away. And as Susan drifted off to sleep herself, she thought that if she could never have
anything more than this; lying beside him, touching his hand while they slept, it would be enough.
Just so she could have it forever.
"Are you sure you're feeling ok?" asked Susan.

Luka nodded and quickly put a bite of potato into his mouth. He wasn't, but it was just nerves. Again. He was well enough, healthy enough. He was over the pneumonia. The new drug combination was bringing his CD4 count up and his viral load down. It still wasn't what they were hoping to see, but it was improving, and he was well enough to return to work. Or at least he had managed to bully Kerry into agreeing to allow him to come back.

He was glad about that, but he was also scared. What would it be like? Everyone knew now, of course. That he was HIV positive. That he had AIDS. The secret he had fought so hard to keep all those months. They didn't know how he had gotten it of course. That was something he hadn't told anyone else, and he trusted Susan to keep that confidence. They would assume that it was a needle stick, or a careless fling in Africa, or right here in Chicago.

But not knowing the details wouldn't keep them from pitying him. The disease itself would be reason enough for pity. Could he work amid the whispers and stares? Susan's voice startled him from his thoughts.

"You need to eat, Luka. You're going to be late for work." Luka sighed, took another bite.

"You staying here tonight?" he asked. Over the past several weeks, since Luka had come home from the hospital, Susan had gradually, but almost imperceptibly, begun staying at Luka's apartment, living with him. They hadn't really talked about it, but after the first night, she had slept almost every night since in his bed. Just slept. They lay side by side in bed, touching nothing but hands, sleeping. Luka was comfortable with that degree of intimacy. Indeed he seemed to benefit from it. With Susan there, the nightmares had retreated again. Perhaps it was a subconscious attempt to protect her from his pain, or perhaps he was really comforted by her presence, but he no longer woke drenched with sweat, no longer remembered dreaming.

And sometimes, before they fell asleep, Luka would talk about the things he'd never been able to talk about before to her. It was easiest that way, lying side by side, holding her hand, but not looking at her. He'd tell her about Africa, about Matenda, about Kisangani. About the horrors, about wanting to die, about trying to die. And she'd hold his hand a little more tightly, and he'd feel her trembling, and know that she was crying silently. He never talked for very long, and there were still too many things he couldn't tell her yet, but it was a start. A few times too he had wakened in the middle of the night to find her gone from the bed, and had heard her in the bathroom, crying. But for him, the talking didn't seem to hurt quite so much this time.

Susan had been staying with him, but tonight he wouldn't be here. He was working a night shift his first shift back. Susan still had her own apartment, would she want to sleep here alone?

"I thought I'd stay. You have a better mattress than I do. And I'll give you something nice to come home to."

"Ah, so you're going to make me breakfast then?" Luka teased. He rose. "I need to get going. Put that away for me. I'll eat it tomorrow." He got his coat and gloves and crutch, kissed Susan good-bye, a gentle kiss on the forehead, and headed out to work.

A kiss on the forehead. Susan wanted more than that, he knew. Expected more. Deserved more. No, they wouldn't have sex. He would never put her at that kind of risk. But she could have more
than a chaste kiss on the forehead ... holding hands. They were adults, not shy pre-teens. But he couldn't do more, not yet.

He was making progress. On his own, without going to a psychiatrist, without a support group. The idea of talking to other people about it ... the idea of talking even to Susan about some things still sickened him. But he was making progress. He could touch her. He could kiss her. He could sleep beside her; he liked sleeping beside her, waking in the morning to see her there. He could talk to her about so much. He just couldn't stand to be kissed. If he kissed her lips, she would kiss him back. If she touched him ... he shuddered. Not yet. She deserved happiness, she deserved so much more than him - a man who could promise her nothing except that he would, eventually, die and leave her alone again. But what did he deserve? Did he deserve the new light she had brought into his life?

Luka entered the ER. "Welcome back, Dr. Kovač" said Frank. No hint of pity. But then, this was Frank.

"Thanks." The lounge; off with coat and scarf, on with lab coat and badge, adjust the crutch. And L. Kovač M.D. was ready for work again.

Only warm smiles from the med students and nurses, and a 'looking good, Doc,' from Pratt. Robert was running the board. He assigned Luka his usual assortment of easy general medical cases; lacerations and sprains, fevers and vertigo. Things that he could do in his sleep, even now. Kerry had suggested that he wear a mask while treating patients who might be infectious. "You need to protect yourself, Luka. And really, it's something we should all be doing anyway."

"But we don't all do it, do we?" he'd said. "How will it look if I'm the only one?" He had though, agreed to restrictions similar to those Jeannie had worked under. No putting his hands into poorly visualized cavities; nothing that would put his patients at risk. Of course, as long as he wasn't doing trauma, there wasn't much chance of that anyway. There weren't too many body cavities, at least not bloody ones, with sprained ankles and belly aches.

The shift seemed very long. When were they going to give him something more challenging to do? It took an awful lot of sore throats and sutures to fill 12 hours. And Luka was tired. He should have asked for a day shift his first shift back. He probably could have gotten it. He'd worked enough nights in November; he'd done his penance. And with Carter back (it had been six weeks, but he'd made no more noises about returning to the Congo), there were enough attendings again.

Luka stopped in the lounge for coffee, warmed his hands around the cup. He felt chilly. The heat must be malfunctioning again. Just a few more hours to go. Sitting down at the table, Luka put his head in his arms. He heard the door open and close and quickly raised his head again, as Sam said,

"You ok, Dr. Kovač?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Barring the odd terminal disease. I'm just a little tired."

"Night shifts suck, don't they. Hospitals should be open 8 to 5, like offices. I think people could manage to get sick during business hours only, if they really tried, doncha think?"

Luka managed to nod and smile. His mouth was dry. He was sweating; he could feel his hair sticking wetly to his neck. And he could feel Sam looking at him.

"Are you running a fever?" she asked quietly. "You're looking a little flushed."

"Yeah. I think so," Luka looked at his coffee.
Sam came over, felt his face. "You're definitely warm. When did it start?"

"I'm not sure. I was fine when I got here."

"I'm sure it's nothing then. Nothing serious."

Luka just looked at her for a minute. "There is no such thing as 'nothing serious' for me anymore."

"You can still get colds and routine infections, just like anyone else." Sam's voice became businesslike. "Come on. Let's find you a room. I'll start a chart for you."

Luka shook his head quickly. "No, it's not that urgent. It can wait until morning. I'll go home, I'll call my own doctor as soon as his office opens in the morning. It's just a few more hours." He sighed. "You can tell Romano I'm leaving. He'll have to get someone to cover."

"Do you need a cab or anything?"

"No. I'll call Susan to come get me."

Sam returned to her work, and Luka reached into his pocket for his phone, then suddenly swept his coffee cup onto the floor, his hand balled into a fist. He was fighting tears. He couldn't even get through one shift. How would he be able to work? And how long would he survive if he couldn't go more than a few weeks between infections?

He steadied himself, then dialed his home number. After a few rings, Susan picked up, sleepy, concerned. "Hello?"

"Hi, love. I'm ... not feeling well. Can you come get me?"

"What's wrong?" Alarm in her voice.

"I'm not sure yet. I'm just running a fever."

"You're at the ER, Luka. Let them work you up. I'll meet you there."

"No! I'll call DeAngelo in the morning. I just want to go home now."

"Ok. I'll be there in about 20 minutes."

"Pick me up around front; the main lobby." Luka didn't want to wait for her in the ER. There would be too many questions, too much concern. If he was lucky, he might be able to slip out without anyone even seeing him. No-one but Sam and Romano would have to know.

As Luka put his phone back in his pocket and went to his locker to get his coat he thought that there was one good thing about his leaving early. Abby would be coming in for a day shift in a few hours. This way, he could avoid seeing Abby. He didn't want to see her yet. She had visited him once in the ICU and he had managed to feign sleep. Somehow, he just couldn't face Abby.
The el was packed. There were no seats. He had a crutch, Luka thought a little bitterly, but nobody offered him a seat. Holding onto the bar, he struggled to keep his balance as the train lurched into motion. Could his day get any worse?

The fever hadn't been anything serious. Just a routine virus, as Sam had guessed. But it was enough to keep him off of work again until his lab picture improved. And who knew when that would happen. The treatments weren't working again. "We can stick with what we're doing," DeAngelo had said, "and hope it's just a temporary fluctuation. Or we can try something different."

"What would you recommend?" Luka had asked. He knew he should be doing the research himself. He was a doctor, he should be looking into the latest treatments, being an active participant. But he was so tired. He just didn't want to think about it. He wanted to get on with his life, still pretend that this wasn't happening to him. He would do whatever DeAngelo thought best. So he was heading home again, with $1500 worth of new and experimental drugs in his pocket. And cheerful and encouraging words from DeAngelo echoing, too hollowly, in his ears.

And today was Marko's birthday. Marko. He would have been 14. A young man now. Luka looked at the teens around him on the el, listening to their music, talking and laughing amongst themselves. What would Marko have been like? Luka smiled a little to himself. Of one thing he was sure. Marko would never have kept his seat on the train while an older man with a crutch was forced to stand, struggling for balance.

He'd always assumed, he realized, that he would ... someday ... have more children. Not to replace Jasna and Marko of course, he could never do that. But because he loved children, had loved being a father. He had always wanted children. It had just been a matter of finding the right woman again, the right relationship, and then there would have been children again. But not now. Even if he could ever bring himself to be with Susan in that way, there could never be children. He knew that she probably wanted children too - she still spoke of Susie with much the same longing and loss that he still felt in his own heart. And she was running out of time. How could he hold her to him, to a relationship with him? Whatever it might eventually turn out to be, it would still have only one possible end; with him dead, and Susan alone again, having wasted however many years of her life with him.

Lost in thought, Luka almost missed his stop. He startled alert as the train stopped, and pushed through the doors just as they started to close again. A stop at the store for some groceries, then home to the empty apartment. Susan was working, she wouldn't be home until later.

He would tell her tonight. As much as he loved her (and he did love her), he wouldn't hold her any longer. It wasn't fair to her. They could go back to being friends, and he would face this alone.

Luka had supper ready when she came in.

"Something smells good," she said, with a tired smile.

"Hey, it's the least I can do."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't drive you wild in bed ... I can't support you in the style to which you are accustomed ... the least I can do is have supper ready for you when you come home from work. Sit down."
Luka served the food; ate his without really tasting it. Susan chatted about her day at work for a while, then asked quietly, "How was your appointment?"

"Bad."

"Can you be a little more specific?"

Luka sighed. "The ARVs aren't working again. He started me on something new. Again."

"And they will work this time. You have to believe that they will."

Luka traced designs in the tomato sauce on his plate with the tine of his fork. He took a deep breath. He couldn't put this off any longer.

"Were you ... did you want children, Susan?"

Susan looked startled. "What?"

"Children. You know, babies."

"I ... I don't know. Why?"

Luka kept his eyes on the plate, on the complex work of abstract art he was creating. Tata would be impressed. "Because I couldn't give them to you. You know that, right? Even if we ... even if I get to where we can make love, I could never give you children. And if you wanted them ... I might still live for years ... a few anyway ... I wouldn't want to waste your time."

"I'm not wasting my time," Susan interrupted. "I am here because I want to be here. How many times, how many ways do I have to tell you that? And I want for us to be together for as long as we can be. As for kids ... I don't know. When I was younger, I guess I assumed that I'd have them someday. Most women do, right? And I loved being a mother to Susie when I had her. But now, I don't know. It just doesn't seem quite so important any more. If we do decide, someday, that we want to raise kids together, I'm sure we'll figure out a way." She smiled. "I mean, if Kerry and Sandy can do it, it can't be all that difficult, right?" Her smile widened a little. "It is a pity that you can't father more kids though. I mean, they'd be gorgeous, wouldn't they? If Jasna's any example ..."

Luka shook his head, smiling a little in spite of himself. "No, she ... those were Danijela's genes. Jasna looked like Danijela. Marko ... everyone said Marko looked a lot like me."

"You'd probably be beating the girls off with sticks about now then ..." Susan said quietly, then grew serious again. "Still, we can talk about this another time. Lets get your health in order first, get everything under control. Then we can talk about kids, if you want them."

"Susan ..." Luka began again. This wasn't going at all as he'd planned.

"I said that's enough." For a moment they just sat, clasping hands. Luka looked at Susan's hand. So much smaller than his, smooth. Nails sensibly short. Hands that healed people every day. With such ease, such skill. So why couldn't they heal him? Why did her touch still cause him such pain? And his own hand. Still scarred. But he could touch his patients, handle their bodies with confidence and ease. He could heal them too. But to touch Susan, the woman he was growing to love more deeply each day. He couldn't do that. Why couldn't he do that?

Susan's fingers moved automatically, casually, to stroke his fingers, his palm, touch the deep scar at the base of his thumb. And, just as automatically, Luka pulled his hand away. He got up, began
to clear away the dishes. Susan clutched her own hand as if he'd hurt her physically.

"Luka, you need to get counseling again."

"I'm doing ok."

"You're doing better, but you're still so far from 'ok', emotionally, that I can't even begin to describe it. Do you even remember what you are supposed to be feeling like?"

Luka ignored the question. It would hurt too much to answer it. "I just need to be trying harder, that's all. I've been letting myself coast again ... I've been so busy dealing the physical stuff, the disease."

"We've been together for almost 2 months, Luka. You've been trying for almost 2 months. This isn't something you can do on your own. I knew you had to try ... I was happy to let you try ... but you need help from a professional."

"You knew what you were getting into, Susan. And you know where the door is."

"I don't want to leave," Susan said quietly. "I just want for you to stop believing that your body is ... something dirty ... something shameful. That the Mai Mai hurt you because of something you did; that it happened because you are a bad person, or that it somehow made you a bad person."

Luka was suddenly dizzy. The dishes almost slipped from hands - oddly numb. He set them carefully into the sink before he dropped them. All these weeks Susan had just listened quietly as he'd quietly told his stories. She had offered no advice. And he had never spoken of his feelings. Only the facts. What had happened ... not how it had made him feel, was still making him feel. That was still too hard, too painful.

So, how had Susan known? How had she read his thoughts? His heart?

"Luka?" Susan was speaking to him. Sitting close to him. She looked frightened. And Luka blinked, confused. He was sitting on the floor. How long had he been there?

"I'm tired," he said faintly.

"You blacked out for a minute. Are you ok?"

"I'm fine. I just got dizzy. I had a shitty day, Susan. I'm tired ... that's all."

Susan just looked at him. She wasn't stupid, Luka knew that. He knew that she knew that there was so much more he wasn't telling her. But he just couldn't tell her. Not now. Maybe someday, but not yet.

Luka struggled to his feet. He allowed Susan to help him, not that he really had any choice. "I'm going to bed."

"Don't run away from me," Susan pleaded.

"We'll talk about this another time. I promise. I just can't tonight." He took his crutch from the back of his chair and started for the bedroom. He could hear Susan starting to cry, but he didn't stop.
He had been lying awake for a long time. He was tired, he hadn't been lying to Susan about that. (He would never actually lie to her, even if he didn't tell her anywhere near the full truth about so many things ...) But he couldn't sleep. Too much pain today. Not physical pain. He was well enough.

When had it all gone wrong? Would anything ever be right again? And Susan ... she did deserve so much more. She wouldn't leave. She would stay with him no matter what. She loved him, and would willingly be hurt. Love was funny that way. But really, was it any more right to hurt someone just because they were willing? If he loved her, and he did, how could he go on hurting her? But the only way he would ever get her to leave would be to hurt her more ... and he couldn't do that either. Susan was the one person he could never drive away. He knew that much now.

Luka heard Susan's quiet footsteps come into the room. He closed his eyes, made his breathing quiet and even, pretended to be asleep. Under the fringe of his lashes he watched her ready herself for bed. She took a tee shirt from his drawer. She still slept in his tee shirts. "I don't OWN pajamas," she'd told him, when she'd begun moving her clothes over. But they both knew that she couldn't sleep naked in his bed with him. Not yet.

She was beautiful. Luka knew that. He loved her. Her body, as she undressed, was beautiful. Smooth, fair skin, glowing a little in the light. Not too thin, the round softness of her breasts appearing as she slipped off her shirt and bra, then disappearing again as she pulled the tee shirt over her head and smoothed it, unselfconsciously over her body. Of course she didn't know he was watching her, but even if she knew, she would be no more concerned. She went into the bathroom and shut the door, so the sound of the water running wouldn't disturb him.

Why couldn't he feel anything? He should feel something. She was beautiful. He loved her. He should feel desire ... feel something other than the vague, distant queasiness, or worse, the emotional deadness. He could try. Maybe if he tried ... he would feel something. He had promised her he would try. He just had to try a little harder.

Susan came out of the bathroom and turned on the small bedside lamp. (A compromise. She couldn't sleep with the overhead light on, he couldn't sleep in the dark.) She turned off the room light and got into bed beside him and very gently kissed his lips. "Good-night, sweetheart," she whispered, obviously still believing him to be asleep, and lay down and closed her eyes. And Luka opened his more fully to look at her. This close, even in the dim light, he could see that she had been crying. Soap and water hadn't removed the traces of tears from her cheeks, or the redness around her eyes. How long had she been crying? How many times was he going to have to make her cry ... couldn't he give her any happiness at all?

Luka raised up on one elbow, still looking at her thoughtfully, sadly, and the movement make Susan open her eyes. "Did I wake you?" she asked. "I tried to be quiet."

"No. I wasn't sleeping." He reached out slowly, traced the line of her jaw with his finger. She was
beautiful. And surprised. Her eyes widened a little in surprise. It was so rarely that he touched her.

"You've been crying," he said, touching her lashes.

"A little," she admitted.

"A lot," Luka corrected firmly. "I don't want you to cry. It ... doesn't help ... it doesn't change anything. I don't want you to hurt for me. You can't take my pain away, and it doesn't do any good for you to be hurting too."

"I wasn't crying for you," Susan said quietly. "I was crying for me."

"You don't have to do that anymore either," Luka said. And he leaned forward and kissed her lips. Very gently. Her lips were soft. He parted them with his own, found her tongue. And he still felt nothing. Susan made a soft sound in her throat, and he felt her hand on the back of his neck. And couldn't keep himself from gasping.

Susan pulled her mouth away from his. "Luka, you don't have to do this. I wasn't trying to push you. If you're not ready ..."

"I need to try. I think I've just been afraid to try. I'll be ok. I can do this." Luka spoke the words almost desperately, like an incantation.

"Ok," Susan said, and he kissed her again. His hands moved to caress her face, her neck. Her skin was so soft. Down to her breasts, even softer beneath the shirt. Luka reached down to move the shirt out of the way. His movements were automatic, all the things he remembered doing in another life, another reality. He still felt nothing. Only a distant gladness that Susan seemed to be enjoying what he was doing. He could make her happy, if only in a small way. These were the things that women liked. He knew that.

She was responding to his touch, beginning to return his caresses. He felt her hands on his shoulders, his chest, his back, on the back of his head.

Suddenly cold sweat on his brow, on his neck. He felt nothing, as nausea overwhelmed his senses.

He remembered pushing the blanket away, trying to get out of the bed. Then he was lying on the bathroom floor. The tiles were cold under his cheek, his teeth were chattering, there was the sharp smell of vomit in the air. But none on the floor; he had, apparently, made it in time.

He wasn't hot, the sweltering heat of the Congo wasn't here with him now. He was cold, an icy chill in the pit of his stomach. He couldn't stop shaking. Susan was there, sitting on the floor beside him, fighting tears, wrapping her arms around herself, perhaps to keep from touching him, holding him - knowing that it had been her touch that had done this.

"I'm cold," Luka whispered.

"Are you done throwing up?"

"I think so," Luka tried to sit up, then closed his eyes and lay down again quickly as the room swayed.

"You need to come back to bed. You'll be warmer there."

"Not yet." He couldn't stop shaking. Couldn't make his teeth stop chattering. It was like when he'd been so sick with malaria; chills, dizziness, nausea; but he was certain he didn't have a fever. He
wasn't sick. He was just ... sick.

Susan left for a moment, then came back with the spare afghan from the linen cupboard and a pillow. She seemed to sense what Luka himself was beginning to realize. He couldn't go back to bed - bring the horror that was still enveloping him back into their bed. If he did, it would never leave.

"I'm sorry, love," Susan said. "I went too fast. I was trying to let you set the pace,'"

She gently slipped the pillow under his head and spread the blanket over him, taking great care not to touch him.

"Not your fault. Would've happened anyway. Eventually."

The pillow, raising his head up off the cold floor helped make him a little warmer. The afghan did little to melt the icy knot in his stomach. But his teeth gradually stopped chattering. He began to count the floor tiles, as far as he could see without moving his head. When he reached the edges of his vision, he started over, counting them again back in the other direction. It was something to do. It was better than screaming. Better than breaking things.

"Are you warm enough?" Susan asked after a few minutes.

Luka didn't answer. 23 ... 24 ... 25 ... 26 ... 27. He kept counting. 99% of his attention was focused on that task. And with the other 1%, he somehow formed words.

"They were making jokes. Laughing at me. I was in so much pain. They'd been beating me for such a long time. My ribs were broken. I could hardly breathe anymore. My lungs were full of blood. I think I was in shock. Everything was so strange. I could hear them talking. Sometimes I couldn't understand them. They were speaking French, of course. Sometimes it was like I couldn't remember any French at all. It was just nonsense. Then it would be clear again. But it was echoing. Like in a big room. Like in a church. But we were in ... a tent. It shouldn't have echoed at all.

"It hurt so much. I was crying. I couldn't stop crying. They were laughing at me. They were saying I wasn't ... a man ... maybe I wasn't really a man. They ... I was lying face down. I had to be. With my arms tied behind me, I couldn't lie any other way. Sometimes they'd turn me, for a second, so they could kick me, but mostly I was on my stomach. I'd ... roll back onto my stomach when they let me go. So I really couldn't see what was happening. Just the ground ... and their feet and legs. And it was already getting hard to see anything. My eyes ... everything was getting dark. I thought maybe ... I was dying. I wanted so much to be dying ... to be dead.

"They said they should find out. They ... pulled my pants down. They touched me. They were laughing. Said I didn't ... feel like a man. Since I was just ... a whore anyway ... they should treat me like one.

"Then they were ... arguing ... laughing ... joking ... about who would go first. I was hearing all this. It was like a dream ... a nightmare. I wanted to get away from it. I kept praying to die, so they wouldn't do it. I knew if I was dead ... or even unconscious ... they wouldn't do it. They just wanted to hurt me ... if they couldn't hurt me, there would be no point. But I couldn't die. I couldn't faint. I couldn't even stop crying.

"There was so much pain ... I hurt so much everywhere else ... my leg, my chest ... in a way I didn't really feel it so much. It was just one more pain ... a little more agony. But it did hurt. It hurt so much. I wanted to scream, but I couldn't scream. And I didn't want to scream, because I knew they wanted me to ... they were trying to make me scream. I just wanted to die, to go away from there.
But I couldn't die. I just kept crying ... and praying ... and begging them to stop. And they would laugh at me. They would laugh even more, because I was crying. Because I couldn't stop crying.

"It seemed to last so long. Hours. It probably wasn't. I don't know how long it was. One of them would finish. I'd think it was over, they were done. Then another one of them would start. They were holding me down ... like I could have moved ... could have escaped. They were pushing my face into the dirt. Their hands were on me ... touching me ... I couldn't stand it. Every time one of them would ... finish ... it was like ... there was more dirt ... inside me ... not just where they were ... but all through me ... dirt that would never come clean. I'll never be clean again.

"When they were done ... I was lying there. There was blood ... and semen ... I could feel it. On my legs. My mouth was full of dirt. They'd been pushing my face into the dirt. When I'd try to breathe ... there would be dirt in my mouth. It was gritty in my teeth, and like mud, with all the blood. I was choking ... spitting out mud. I should have ... let myself choke on it ... but I couldn't. I thought they would kill me then. They had guns. They could have shot me. But they wouldn't do it. They wouldn't kill me. At least ... not that way ..."

14 ... 15 ... 16 ... 17 ...

Luka was still shaking. He gradually became aware that he had vomited again, a little bit, at least once, while talking. He couldn't remember having done it; wasn't sure when it had happened. He also knew that some of the things he'd remembered, some of the things he had told Susan, were things he had never remembered before, at least not while awake. If they had been in his dreams, he didn't know. He never really remembered his dreams.

Susan. He blinked, trying to clear his vision. She was still sitting close beside him on the floor, her face white. Her eyes were shut. She wasn't crying. She seemed to come aware, very slowly, that he had stopped talking. Her eyes opened slowly and - she might have been sleep walking - she got slowly to her feet, got a washcloth from the edge of the sink, and gently cleaned Luka's mouth and chin.

"Thank you." The two short words, very quiet, seemed loud in the eerily silent room. Luka knew he wouldn't have had the strength to have done it himself. He didn't know how he was going to get up, walk to the bed. He could sleep on the bathroom floor. He'd certainly slept in worse places. And he had to sleep. Now. The waves of exhaustion, so familiar from those horrible days, were starting to wash over him. He wasn't so cold anymore. He closed his eyes, let the blackness take him.

Susan's voice came through the darkness. "Let's get you back to bed now."

"Sleep here ..."

"You can't sleep on the floor. Let me help you walk. It isn't very far." A hesitation. "Is it ok if I touch you?"

Luka nodded. He didn't bother to even try to open his eyes. He let Susan help him to his feet, support him as he struggled the mercifully few steps back to their bed ... and he was asleep again before his body hit the mattress.
He woke to bright sunshine. His body ached. As if he'd been beaten. The analogy, popping into his head - too apt - made him shudder, sent a fresh wave of nausea through him. He squinted at the clock. 12:45. What time had he gone to sleep? He hadn't noticed the clock of course. But he remembered that Susan had come to bed at about 10:30. Surely he hadn't spent more than an hour in the bathroom. Had he really slept for over 12 hours?

Susan wasn't in bed with him. Of course she would have gotten up long ago. And she had a shift today. She was working a lot of shifts. As long as Luka was working only erratically, they needed the money. (Susan had been quietly contributing to the household expenses, though Luka had initially objected - his own scanty paychecks were barely covering his medical bills. He'd been better off, financially, not working at all, and collecting disability. But he needed to be working.)

Luka got up, slowly, shakily. He needed a shower badly. He stank of sweat. Into the bathroom, turn on the shower, strip off tee shirt and shorts.

There were footsteps behind him and Susan's voice. "Luka! You're up!" Luka turned, startled, and saw Susan looking equally startled, and a little embarrassed, and she looked quickly away. And Luka realized that he was naked, that she'd never seen him naked. "Sorry," she said.

"Not your fault. I should have closed the door." Luka was a bit surprised to realize that it didn't bother him to have her see him ... only to have her touch him. Still, he grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his waist. "I'm decent," he told her. "I thought you were working today."

"I called in sick."

"You don't look sick." Tired, he thought, but healthy enough.

"I didn't want to leave you alone," she explained gently. "Not until I was sure you were ok. You didn't sleep so well last night."

"Nightmares?" Luka was surprised. He didn't remember dreaming at all - thought he had slept like the dead.

"Oh yeah..." Susan managed a smile. "Thought the neighbors were going to wonder what we were up to! Why don't you take your shower. I'll make us some lunch."

"You can go to work if you want. Catch the second half of your shift. I'm fine here. Really."

"They got someone to cover for me." Susan stepped out of the bathroom and shut the door behind her. And Luka got into the shower. Of course Susan wasn't going to go to work. She would stay; insist that they talk about last night.

Last night. Luka shuddered again. Swallowed the bile that suddenly burned his throat. What had happened? It had been going so well. He had been doing so well - not feeling any particular pleasure himself, it was true, but giving Susan pleasure, and that was what mattered. And then ...

Luka turned up the shower, so the water pounded harder on his body, washing the sweat away. But it couldn't wash the rest of it away. Would he ever feel clean again?

Dressed, Luka went into the living room. Susan had lunch ready. He wasn't hungry. He was never hungry. DeAngelo kept giving him handouts, talking to him about the importance of eating
properly, keeping his weight up, staying well nourished, keeping his strength up. But it was so hard to eat at the best of times. And this was not the best of times. He was still queasy, from last night, and from the knowledge that he was going to have to talk about it again. But he sat down and picked up his sandwich. If he went through the motions of eating it, Susan might be fooled. And if he had to talk about last night, better for him to start the conversation, get it going in the easiest direction.

"I'm sorry, Susan," he said. "You must feel awful."

"About what?"

"Last night." Susan didn't answer. "I mean ... you put your arms around me ... and I go and throw up. That can't make you feel very loved."

"I know that it had nothing to do with me," Susan said quietly. "You weren't reacting to ... my hands. I know that you love me."

"If I loved you ... I should be willing to do whatever it takes ... to be able to show it. I shouldn't be so afraid."

Susan didn't answer for a minute, took a bite of her own sandwich. Finally she said, "You did a lot of talking last night Both before and after you went to sleep. Do you think you could talk to a counselor again now?"

"I don't know. It's easier ... talking to you."

"You need to talk to a professional. I'm not a psychiatrist, Luka, and I'm certainly not a specialist in this kind of thing."

"What kind of thing would that be?"

"Post traumatic stress ... sexual dysfunctions ..." Susan smiled a little. "I think you've got quite a long list going. I'm happy to listen to you, but I'm not enough, and I'm sensible enough to know that. You need more help than I can give you."

"I'm just ... scared."

"I know. But ... honestly Luka. Compared to what you've already been through, can this be anywhere near that bad? You survived that ... you can do this. You are so strong!"

"No. I'm not." Luka spoke the words so quietly that he wasn't sure Susan heard them. But he got up and went to the desk where the phone was, took the yellow pages from the drawer. If he was going to have to do this, best do it now, before he lost his nerve.

"Eat your lunch first," Susan said. He hadn't actually eaten a bite of his sandwich.

"I'm not hungry." Luka knew that if he ate anything before making the call, he would just bring it back up again before he finished.

P ... physicians. Subsection, psychiatrists. There were pages and pages of them. Luka flipped the pages back and forth, not really seeing them.

"Why not just call Carl," Susan suggested. "I'm sure he can recommend someone."

"No, I don't want to see someone he knows." Again, the old fear, irrational as ever, that people
would know ... find out. He had to see someone new, someone he had never seen before - someone he would then never have to see again.

A small display ad caught his eye. Dr. Brian McGrath. Specializing in PTSD. And he was in Wilmette. A long way from County. He'd surely never seen him before. Would never see him again. Luka took a deep breath, picked up the phone. He would call, then he would go throw up. Then maybe he would try to eat some lunch.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Susan turned out the light, got into bed. "Good night."

"Susan," Luka said, turning to face her. "Last night ..."

"We've talked enough about last night."

"No. It was fine, at first. When I was touching you, kissing you ... you liked it?"

"Yeah, of course I did. But not if it was too upsetting for you."

"That's what I'm saying. That wasn't a problem. It was ok. I can touch you ... I just can't stand to BE touched. This stuff is my problem, Susan, it shouldn't have to be yours." He drew his finger along her collar bone, but Susan shook her head.

"I don't think it's a good idea. Not until you've talked with Dr. McGrath. He'll probably have some ideas ... might want us to wait. It's just a few days."

"Please," Luka said. "You've been so patient. Don't think I don't know how hard this is for you." His fingers lightly stroked her neck, and her lips, and Susan's eyes closed, and he felt her tremble a little. She was, he thought, a normal, healthy woman, with normal desires. How hard must it be for her to lie beside him all these weeks, never touching more than his hand, never getting more than the most chaste of kisses. He knew it wouldn't take much to convince her.

He kissed her, let his hands tangle for a moment in her hair, like silk in his fingers. Then back down to her face, her throat, her breasts. Her body was so soft. And as Luka took her lips from hers so they could follow the path of his hands down her body, Susan made soft sounds of pleasure in her throat. He nuzzled at her breasts, feeling her nipples harden under his lips. His hands moved further downward to part her thighs, move the nightshirt aside so he could stroke her bare skin.

But for Luka, it was all still automatic. He was doing all the things he remembered having done in a different life, when he had been a different person; a person who might have found physical pleasure himself in touching a beautiful woman, in doing these things. But tonight ... he enjoyed watching Susan's growing excitement, hearing her sighs and soft cries grow more intense as he learned what kinds of touches seemed to please her most. Knowing that he could make her happy, give her pleasure, satisfy her ... bring something to the relationship ... did bring him some small sense of pleasure, of satisfaction. But even this seemed distant, detached. It might have been another man doing these things, giving the woman he loved pleasure. Even this was something he was not yet entitled to enjoy.

But Susan must not know that. While she would have to know that he felt no sexual pleasure, he couldn't exactly hide his lack of an erection, she couldn't know that he was anything but content ... pleased. And he was content, he told himself firmly. This was what he had set out to do, and he had accomplished it. What more did he want? Content was enough. Happiness ... satisfaction ... could come later.
When Susan was drowsy and relaxed from her climax, he kissed her and said, with what he hoped was a wicked smile, "Is that enough? I can give you another if you like. My hands have an unlimited supply."

Susan smiled back. "One's enough. It was lovely. We'll save the rest for another night."

Luka lay down again beside her. Usually after making love, he thought, remembering back into that other life, they would hold each other ... caress each other a while longer as they drifted off to sleep. When they hadn't - when he hadn't, it had been when the woman had been someone he hadn't cared about, a prostitute whose hour was up, or one of the quick fumbles in his car. No! He wouldn't think like that. This was something completely different. This had been completely unselfish, all about her pleasure. What could be better, more selfless than that? No, he couldn't hold her, wrap his body around hers. But this was a start. More would come later. And maybe, if he kept trying, he wouldn't even need Dr. McGrath to get there.

He was suddenly aware that Susan was looking at him, concerned. "You ok?"

He smiled. "Yeah, I'm great. I had fun. Now go to sleep."
Chapter 35

Susan looked at her watch. 3:45. He would be there now. The appointment would be almost over. She couldn't help picturing him in the psychiatrist's office. Would he be talking quietly, without much emotion, as he tended to do with her? Or crying, perhaps? What would Dr. McGrath be saying? Doing? It had to make a difference, it had to. Luka couldn't go on much longer the way he was, so unhappy. He'd been nervous this morning about the appointment, scared. But he had said that he was eager to go, anxious to get this started.

The past three nights in bed had been replays of the first. Luka would touch her, caress her, kiss her, bring her to orgasm. It was ... nice. But it was also, Susan had to admit, more than a little bit weird. It was hard for her to lie there and not touch him, not caress him back - not hold him. And, despite Luka's protests, his claims that it was 'ok' and 'fun,' it was obvious that he was doing it only for her. While it didn't seem to bother him particularly to touch her, he went at it like it was some sort of duty - the male equivalent, perhaps, of lying back and thinking of England? Or perhaps he told himself that he was just treating a patient, making her feel better. He seemed to need to do it; trying, maybe to prove something to himself, so she let him, but it wasn't really what she wanted. Hopefully the counseling would make a difference. Soon.

Susan sighed. She had work to do. A waiting room full of patients to see. She headed back into trauma 2, where Abby was tending her MVA from earlier in the afternoon, still waiting for a bed in the ICU.

"How's Luka doing?" Abby asked quietly.

"He's good. You could pick up the phone and call him, you know."

"I know. It's just ... awkward."

"Awkward why? Because of me, or because he's sick?"

"Neither one, Susan. It's just been so long. He didn't want to see me, and then just when he said he wanted to be friends again, he was diagnosed. He's hardly been at work ... there's nothing to talk about." She made a helpless gesture with her hands. "Ok. I'll call him. I promise."

"Don't knock yourself out on my account," Susan said, more than a little bit bitterly. "Nobody else has either, really." The truth. Carter stopped by from time to time, called occasionally. But besides him, they had little company. "I just thought you liked him."

"I do." Abby busied herself with their patient for a moment, then asked, "Any idea when he'll be back to work?"

"No. Soon we hope." Susan looked at the chart. "Call the ICU again. Find out when they can take her. We can't tie up trauma rooms boarding their patients indefinitely!"
Chapter 36

Luka had supper waiting for her again when she got home. He asked her questions about work, talked about the news. It was very obvious to Susan that he was carefully keeping the conversation on topics of his own choosing. Then,

"Saw my lawyer today."

"For what?" Susan was startled.

"Getting some of my affairs in order." Luka smiled a little. "I believe that's the usual expression." Susan couldn't hide the pained look on her face because Luka said gently, "I know there's no rush, but I was out anyway, he had time to see me. And I'd rather get this stuff taken care of and not need it ... then to need it and not have it, right?" Susan nodded, and Luka went on, in a quiet voice; he might have been talking about the weather. "I updated my will. You know, considering that doctors are supposed to be wealthy, I own surprisingly little of any value whatsoever."

"I'm not after you for your money."

"That's good, because you'd be very disappointed. I am leaving you ... some things ... but I mostly need to see that my father is taken care of. I've been helping him all along, you know. Which is part of the reason I'm not rich."

"Have you told him?" Susan asked suddenly.

"Told him what?"

"That you're sick?" Susan had overheard several phone calls between Luka and his father in recent months, but they were all in Croatian, so she hadn't understood a word. Still nothing she had heard had sounded like Luka telling his father that he'd just been diagnosed with a terminal disease.

Luka shook his head. "He doesn't have to know. When I die ... you can tell him ... something. Pneumonia, cancer ... whatever it ends up being will probably suit the purpose just fine."

"He's going to figure something out. I trust that the man isn't stupid, Luka. You could be ... really sick for a long time before it's over. You won't be able to hide that. Even over transatlantic telephone conversations."

"Then I'll figure something out if it comes to that. He doesn't have to know. And you will not tell him."

"Given that my Croatian is currently limited to about 4 words, I'm sure how I would tell him," Susan said quietly.

"Anyway," Luka said, firmly changing the subject, and pulling some papers from his shirt pocket, "I also took care of a few other things. He unfolded the papers and handed one to Susan. "A copy for you to keep. I have one in my wallet, and faxed a copy to County. There should be no questions. Susan looked at the paper, and her stomach turned over. An advance directive.

"You know..." she said after a minute, "This is really cheerful dinner time conversation." She couldn't help noticing that Luka, for once, had been calmly eating his dinner with apparent good appetite, while she had barely been able to choke down a bite for the last few minutes. Perhaps his counseling session had gone well?
"I know it isn't something we're going to need for a while. And I hope we won't need it at all. I don't want to be anywhere near a hospital when things get to this point. Remember what I told you before, Susan? I'm going to die at home." He hesitated. "If it's ok with you?"

Susan laughed a little, to keep from crying. "I think 'ok' may be too strong a word. I don't think I will ever be 'ok' with you dying at all. But if it has to happen, it should happen where-ever it will be easiest for you."

"I'm just thinking that it will be a lot of work for you ... to take care of me. You said yourself, I'll probably be pretty sick for a while."

"Luka, we don't have to talk about this now. It's not going to happen tomorrow, or next week, or without any time to figure out a plan. We'll have lots of time to work out the details, decide what's best for both of us." Susan didn't want to think about this now. It was strange, she realized. When this all first began, Luka had been rooted so firmly in denial, while she had been trying to make him face reality. Now, he seemed to be the one calmly planning for, and discussing, his own death, while it was all Susan could do to not cover her ears and run screaming from the room.

Luka nodded, smiled. "Just one more bit of business," he said, and handed her another piece of paper. "Durable power of attorney. Again, I hope we'll never need it, and the AD should cover any issues that might come up, but if there any any questions, and I can't ... speak for myself ... I don't want anyone else deciding for me, or trying to call Tata."

Susan didn't trust herself to speak. She still didn't want to think about this. They had lots of time. Years. A lifetime. Why did Luka have to be talking about it now? She got up and went to put the papers into her wallet. When she came back to the table, Luka was still quietly eating his meal.

"Your dinner's getting cold," he said. "You'd better eat."

Susan picked up her fork. "How did your other appointment go?"

"Other appointment?" She saw his grip tighten on his fork, and he was suddenly pale.

"With Dr. McGrath."

"I ... ummm ... didn't go," He set his fork down carefully, deliberately, and Susan knew he wasn't going to eat any more. "I was a little bit early, there wasn't much traffic. I walked around the block once ... to calm myself ... and then I couldn't stop walking. I just kept walking around and around the block. Finally it was too late to go inside. I called the office ... told them I was sick and had to cancel."

"Luka, you promised you would go."

"I tried!" Luka snapped. "Do think that it's easy? To open this stuff up again? To start all over? I want to do it, for you. I wish I could do it, Susan ... but I can't. I'm sorry. And we're doing ok ... aren't we? Things are better." He was almost pleading now. As if saying it would make it so.

"No, we're not doing ok. You're not doing ok. And you know that, you have to know that. If you were doing ok you would have been able to go to your therapy. The fact that it's so hard just proves how much you need it. You have to work through this stuff, Luka ... make some sort of peace with it ... with yourself."

"It's easy for you to say." Luka's voice was quiet. "You aren't the one who has to do it."

"Do you think it's easy for me to watch you, every day, hating yourself? You are a wonderful man,
"Luka, and there is nothing they could ever do to change that."

"Love is blind, Susan. That is the saying, isn't it?" Luka had automatically picked up his fork again to take another bite. She saw him look at the food on the fork, then put it down again. He put his face into his hands.

"Yeah, that's the saying. But I'm not blind. Or stupid. Are you talking about your past? I know you have a past. I know you made some mistakes, did some stupid things. That doesn't make you a bad person, it makes you a human person." Susan took a deep breath. "And there was nothing you could have ever done ... not ever ... to have made them do what they did ... and nothing you could have done to have stopped them."

"I could have made them kill me."

"How?"

Luka had gone pale, sweating. Somewhere in the back of her mind Susan thought it ironic that, after he'd eaten his first decent meal in some time, she had unwittingly started a conversation that would probably make him get sick again. But he was talking. Voluntarily. And she'd already gone too far to turn back now. "I could have fought them," Luka said after a minute.

"How? You were tied up."

"Not at first. They didn't tie us up right away. Before that, I could have fought them ..."

"Did you know what was going to happen?" Luka didn't answer, let his head sink lower into his arms. He was shaking. "Luka?" Susan prompted gently.

"I knew we were going to die," Luka finally said. "I didn't want to believe it, but I knew it. I didn't have anything to lose. But I just sat there and watched ... I just watched ... while they took Sakina away. I knew what they would do to her, but I couldn't even say anything. I was too afraid to try and say anything."

"Would it have made a difference?" Susan asked quietly. "Would they have stopped? Would they have let her go?"

"They would have killed me!"

"No, they wouldn't have. If they'd wanted to kill you, they had plenty of opportunity. And they wouldn't have had to kill you. If you'd spoken up, or tried to fight, they might have hurt you more ... hit you ... but why would they have killed you? If you were as sick with malaria as you've said, they wouldn't have had to kill you to keep you from fighting, to stop you from protecting her."

"I still could have tried ... should have tried ... been stronger ..."

"It wouldn't have made any difference. You are strong, sweetheart. The fact that you are sitting here, alive, after all that, proves that you are strong. You saved your strength for what mattered ... keeping you alive until help could come. Nothing else mattered, and nothing else would have made any difference."

"Maybe ..." Luka's voice broke. "If I could have protected her ... helped her ... even tried ... they wouldn't have ... done the same to me."

Susan's mouth was suddenly dry. She shouldn't be doing this. She couldn't bear to be hearing this stuff. Why had she started it? She should have just insisted again that he get into therapy ...
him there herself if she had to.

"Do you really believe that?"

"It makes sense, doesn't it?"

"No, it doesn't. There was nothing you could have done to have helped her, and nothing you did to make them hurt you. It was their choice."

Luka was quiet for a minute. He got up and wandered around the room for a minute, then sat down again. "When my family was killed ... I thought then that it was the worst thing that would ever happen to me. I couldn't imagine that anything could ever hurt more than that pain. Then, after a while, the pain got a little easier, and I began to realize that maybe I could go on ... pick up the pieces of my life ... start over. And sometimes I remember thinking that I was actually lucky in a way. I was only 25 years old and I'd already experienced the worst that would ever happen to me ... and I'd survived. I knew that if I could survive that, I was capable of facing anything that life might throw at me.

"And then ... in Matenda ... I learned that I was wrong. I learned that there are worse things. And I learned that I'm not ... strong at all. There are some things that I couldn't face. I fell apart ..."

"So what? Do you think anyone cares a tinker's dam that you cried? You were scared and in pain; of course you cried. But you faced it, because you did survive. They left you for dead and you spit in their eye and stayed alive. I think that says a lot."

"Just that God wanted to be sure that I didn't die until I'd suffered as much as I deserved. I didn't want to be alive, Susan. I didn't try to stay alive." He shook his head. "And now ... I don't want to die anymore ... I have a reason to be here ... a reason to live ... and I'm going to die. How fucked up is that?"

"Very fucked up," Susan agreed. "But you're still not dead yet. You have time ... we have time. If you can talk about this stuff to me, I know you can talk about it to someone who can really help you. I can't. I don't know how. But I know that you need help. You can't go on like this." Susan wiped at her eyes. "You know what scares me, Luka? The other night, I was watching you sleep, watching your nightmares. I wanted, so badly, to hold you, to be able to tell you that everything was all right. And I realized then that you were going to die ... and maybe the first time I would ever get to hold you ... to put my arms around you ... would be after you were dead. I don't want it to be that way. Not for either of us."

"I'll try again," Luka whispered. "It's just ... you can't know how hard it is."

"I know it will be hard. But it will be worth the effort. I know it will."

"When I came back here, I just wanted to leave it all behind. I was going to forget everything that happened. I was going to pick up my life again ... go on. I told you a while ago that I wouldn't let them amputate my leg. I didn't want that, because I knew that it would leave me with a permanent reminder, something I'd have to see every day of my life ... of what had happened to me there. So I nearly died from sepsis for the chance to keep my leg. And I won that fight. I survived, and I still have my leg. I came back home, I fought ... I learned to walk again, I struggled through all the therapy, I did everything I was supposed to do. And things were getting better. I think I could have finished getting through the emotional stuff ... eventually, without more counseling. I just needed to be able to put it all behind me, and I was starting to be able to do that.

"Then I got this damn disease. And I'm back to square one again. Every day I'm reminded, I have to
remember what happened to me. Every time I take a pill, or look in the mirror ... or look at you and realize how little time we have. It's never going to go away. As long as I'm alive, I'm going to remember, and when I die, it will be because of what they did to me. And counseling isn't going to change that. I can't forget it, Susan."

"Counseling isn't about making you forget. You won't ever forget. It's about helping you learn to live with the memories. It's about learning to not blame yourself anymore for things you couldn't control. It's about letting go of the pain so it doesn't keep eating you alive. You have got to learn to let all this go."

"I'll call again in the morning, make another appointment," Luka said, his voice dull.

"Making it doesn't do any good if you don't keep it."

"I'll keep it."
Chapter 37

McGrath checked his schedule. A new patient. He knew nothing about the man, he hadn't volunteered much information when making the appointment. All he knew was that he'd had an appointment earlier in the week and had broken it at the last minute - not uncommon of course. Would he show up for this one? A light tap on the door answered that question.

"Come in," he said, and rose to meet his new patient. "Mr. ...Kovač? Tell me if I pronounced that wrong."

"Kovač." He had pronounced it wrong. "And it's ... Dr. Kovač actually ... but Luka's fine."

"Hello, Luka. I'm Dr. McGrath, or you can call me Brian if you prefer." He offered his hand for a handshake, and Luka accepted it.

All this time, McGrath had been rapidly assessing his new patient. A fairly thick accent, probably recently arrived from Europe. Certainly within the decade. And Kovač was, unless he was much mistaken, a Balkan name. He remembered having treated a patient with that name some years ago, for problems related to the war there. Perhaps this would turn out to be something similar. His handshake had been reasonably firm, though his palms were damp.

Physically, the man was tall and strikingly attractive, though rather thinner than he should have been. And pale, even by late-winter-in-Chicago standards. He walked with a pronounced limp, barely using the crutch that dangled from his arm. There were scars on his face, and more at the base of his hands, disappearing up under his shirt sleeves. But his eyes were what struck Brian the most. Changeable grey-green-brown. They made Brian think of the sea. Or a mood ring. He knew immediately that whenever he needed to know what this new patient was feeling, he would only have to look at his eyes. And right now, those eyes looked terrified. Like he was heading for his own execution.

"Sit wherever you like, Luka," Brian said. He had several chairs of varying types and a sofa. Luka selected the hard wooden chair; perched on the edge of it. Perhaps so he could get up quickly? Brian sat on the couch, made himself comfortable.

"So, Luka. What brings you to see me?"

"My ... ummm ... my girlfriend wanted me to come. I'm getting by ok ... I think ... but she's worried about me; thought I needed to talk to someone." He was looking around the room, moistening his lips with the end of his tongue.

"You're having problems with your girlfriend?"

"No. Not really. She's wonderful. I love her. She loves me." The first hint of a smile. "I can't believe it took me this long to find her." Still looking around. Wanted to be anywhere but here.

"What's her name?"

"Susan."

"Where did you meet her?"

"We work together. Have for a few years now."
"You're an M.D?" Luka nodded. "Where do you work?"

"Does it matter?" Suddenly tense.

"No, not really. I'm just trying to get to know you a little bit. What's your specialty?"

"Emergency medicine. I love it." Luka rubbed his bad leg, another nervous gesture. He said nothing more.

"So, why did Susan want you to see me? What kind of problems are you having?" Luka didn't answer. "Luka, I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

Luka just shook his head, shut his eyes. "I can't do this. I'm sorry, Dr. McGrath. I shouldn't be wasting your time." He started to rise, adjusting his grip on the crutch to help lever him out of the chair, and McGrath quickly rose himself, went to stand near his patient. He couldn't, wouldn't physically stop him from leaving, but his presence might provide the psychological barrier he needed.

"I promise you, Luka, there is nothing you can ever tell me that I haven't heard before, or that is going to shock me." A bitter look from his patient. "I've been in this field for 20 years now, and I've heard just about everything." A breath. "Look, you took the first step, you made the appointment. You took the second step, you showed up. Now, let's just try and get through the session. Talk about what's bothering you. We'll make a start. At the end of the hour, you can decide then if you want to come back, keep going with it."

Luka was standing now, he began to pace the room, but didn't go near the door. "It's just not ... that simple." The click of his crutch was almost louder than his voice as he walked. "There is so much. It's going to take so long to get through it ... to get through enough to even make a difference. I just can't see how it's going to be worth it to me."

"However long it takes, we'll work through it. And at the end of it, you'll feel better, and it will have been worth it, for you and for Susan."

"But that's just it!" Fierce now. "I don't have 'however long it takes.'" He stopped walking, leaned his weight on Brian's desk. "I'm HIV positive - AIDS, actually. It's proving to be drug resistant, highly aggressive; I'm probably not going to live very long. A couple of more years ... if I'm lucky."

"All the more reason to start now, surely," Brian said quietly. "While you still have the time to take care of it before you go."

"That's just what Susan said."

"Smart girl." Brian kept his tone neutral.

Luka didn't respond, but, after another moment, sat down again in the chair, put his face in his hands. At first Brian thought he was crying, but he wasn't. He was just sitting there, clearly waiting for Brian to say something.

"Is Susan still well?"

"Yeah. We got together after I'd already been diagnosed. We haven't had intercourse."

"By mutual agreement?"
Brian was already getting the sense that this new patient of his was a man who was going to volunteer little, but who might respond well to direct, even blunt questioning from him. "You're impotent?"

"Not physically, no. I just ... don't feel anything anymore."

Any more. "So, this is a new problem?" A nod. "How new?"

"About a year. A little less." Luka rubbed his leg again, looked around the room. "I ... I'm told it's not uncommon ... not an uncommon response, psychologically, after being raped."

Ok. Now they were getting somewhere. "You were raped?"

"Yeah."

"Is that how you contracted the HIV?"

"Presumably so."

"Susan knows about this?"

"Of course. I told her. She still wants to have sex." Another faint smile. "I guess love makes you stupid."

"Well you're here, aren't you? Am I right in thinking that are also interested in trying to have intercourse?"

"I love her too. I guess the stupidity is mutual." Luka's smile deepened a little and, for the first time he met Brian's eyes, relaxed back into his chair slightly.

"You said the impotence isn't physical. You get erections?"

"Sometimes, at night, sometimes I'll wake up with one." The tension was back instantly. "It goes away."

"Do you masturbate?"

"No."

"Nocturnal emissions?"

"I've had ... a few." He was paler now. Sweating a little.

"How do those make you feel?"

"Sick. I go into the bathroom and throw up."

"It sounds like this is a bit more than just 'not feeling anything,' McGrath said quietly. No response from Luka, except to get up again, start pacing the room again. "So ... the rape happened last winter, is that right?"

"Spring."

"And you and Susan weren't together at the time?"
"I told you ... no. We've just been together a few months. I knew her then, but just as a co-worker, a friend."

"Were you in a sexual relationship at the time? With someone else?"

"Yeah." Again, Luka clearly wasn't in the mood to volunteer anything.

"What was her name?"

"Gillian. She's a nurse. It wasn't anything serious."

"She works at your hospital too?"

"No."

"How long were you together?"

Luka turned abruptly from the window, where he'd been staring out at the gray winter sky. "Listen ... I am here because Susan asked me to come see you. She wants for us to be able to make love ... have some kind of a sexual relationship. We can't do that because I can't even stand for her to touch me. When she touches me I get sick, I throw up. Can we just talk about that? If we can deal with this one problem, I'll be ok. The rest of it ... it doesn't really matter."

"The rest of it does matter, Luka. Your sexual problems are just a symptom. We need to treat the cause. And I think you know that. You're a doctor. Even if I had a magic pill to offer, that would let you go home and make love to Susan tonight, I wouldn't give it to you. I don't have such a pill anyway, and we both know that the only way to treat this 'one problem', is to get to the heart of it." Luka nodded, perched himself on the edge of the window sill. Brian took a deep breath. "When Susan touches you, and you get sick ... what's going through your head? What are you thinking?"

"I'm not really thinking anything. I kind of ... black out almost. Like I'm trying to get away from it. I know it's her, but I'm feeling ... Them ... touching me."

"Them? So it was a gang rape?"

"Of course it was! Do you think I couldn't have fought off one man?! Do you think I'm that weak?!" Luka caught his breath, steadied himself. "I'm sorry. Of course you didn't know that. I hadn't said ..."

The session was finally over. Luka looked almost gray, physically exhausted as he shook Brian's hand and walked out the door, leaning very heavily on his crutch. He had an appointment for next week - he'd agreed to try coming twice a week for a while. Would he keep the next appointment? Brian could only hope that he would. They had covered a lot of ground, enough that Brian knew the truth of Luka's words, there was 'so much,' and it was going to take them a long time to get to the root of his problems. He had treated many rape survivors over the years, both men and women; it was a common enough cause of PTSD. But in Luka he sensed, that there was something far beyond the rape itself, and the AIDS, and even the physical injuries (a subject they had barely had time to touch on today) that was causing him such deep pain, such intractable shame.
Chapter 38

Susan came awake suddenly. Luka was tossing and turning in the bed beside her. Another nightmare of course. Three weeks of counseling hadn't brought much improvement. None at all that Susan could see, to be honest. As they had back in the hospital, the sessions left him exhausted and sick. He would typically come home, go right to the bathroom and throw up for a while, then go to bed. He no longer spoke to her about Africa, and wouldn't tell her anything about the therapy. In fact, he no longer spoke much at all, except to answer her questions, usually in monosyllables. He spent long hours staring into space, or pretending to read or watch tv. And he no longer tried to touch her.

"Did McGrath say we shouldn't do this anymore?" Susan had ventured to ask, when several nights had gone by without any attempts at pleasuring her.

"No. I just ... haven't felt like it. If you want me to I can." He might have been offering to take out the trash, for all the enthusiasm in his voice.

"No. I'm fine. You just take care of yourself for now. Getting well, I mean."

And the nightmares were worse. Much worse. It was all part of the process, she supposed. He was uncovering a lot of painful memories ... they were going to invade his sleep too. During the day he seemed to be sleepwalking, and during the night he slept, and dreamed. McGrath had put him on anti-depressants, but Susan couldn't see that they were making any difference. Though .. of course ... as bad as things were, they might be even worse without the pills.

Still, Luka said that he thought the therapy was going well. "It's rough right now. We both knew it would be. But I think it will start to help soon."

Physically, he was doing a little better. Well enough, in fact, to return to work. Only half shifts, two or three a week, but it was something. Sitting at home feeling sorry for himself, they both knew all too well, wasn't helping matters. Susan would have thought that going back to work would improve his mood, but she didn't see any sign of that either, really. He would be in good spirits, or at least put on a good front while at work, then come home and revert to sleepwalking again. If she thought it would do any good, Susan would have been tempted to call McGrath herself, find out what was going on. But of course he wouldn't be able to tell her anything.

Luka was twisting on the bed, restless, muttering to himself. The pillowcase was dark with the sweat from his face. And his breathing was hoarse. He coughed, and Susan suddenly realized that this was what had wakened her. Luka had been coughing again. She felt his forehead briefly, and even before she touched his skin, she could feel the heat. God ... how long had he been sick? He'd been in bed already when she got home from work last night - he'd had a therapy session with McGrath yesterday afternoon and would have gone straight to bed afterwards, as he always did. He had looked pale and sick, but she'd attributed it to that. She hadn't touched him, of course - he could barely even tolerate her touching his hand these days. Had he been feverish then?

Susan got the thermometer from the bathroom. "Luka!" She called him first, so as to give him some warning, then gently shook him. "Luka, wake up, sweetheart." And a sharp cry from Luka as she touched him, and his eyes flew open in shock. He looked confused. "It's ok," she said. "I just needed to wake you up."

"Why?" Luka rubbed his hand over his eyes.
"You're running a fever, and you're coughing again. We need to take your temperature."

"Couldn't it wait until morning?"

"Nope." Susan tried to keep her voice cheerful. "Open up." Luka obediently opened his mouth for the thermometer, then closed both eyes and mouth again. "Were you sick yesterday?" Susan asked.

Luka shook his head. "Not sick now," he said around the thermometer. "Don't feel sick."

The thermometer beeped and Susan looked at it. "The magic oracle says otherwise. 103.9. Come on, get up. We're going to the hospital. Now."

Luka groaned a little, a groan that turned into a cough. "It can wait until morning, Susan. Whatever it is, it isn't going to kill me in the next ..." he squinted at the clock ... "three and a half hours. I don't feel that bad. Really."

"Right. And the whole idea here is to catch things early and treat them, before they get bad. And with a temp of 104, my money's on this thing getting a lot worse in the pretty near future. Come on, you know the way the game works, Luka. A temp over 103 wins you an immediate, free trip to the ER ... do not Pass Go, do not collect $200. Either you get up and get dressed and we drive to the ER, or I pick up the phone and call 911 and an ambulance brings you in. Your choice."

"You're a heartless bitch, you know that?" Luka said, but he was smiling a little when he said it. The first time he'd smiled in a long time, Susan realized. He was joking to cover his own worry. As, of course, was she. She started to sit up, then gasped and lay down again quickly. "Little bit dizzy..." he said faintly.

"Try it a little more slowly," Susan said. "I can help you."

"No ... I'm ok." He sat up again, very slowly this time, and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Could you get me my clothes?"

Susan had her own clothes on in a moment, and watched as Luka, much more slowly, dressed himself. He didn't look or sound all that sick, she told herself. It probably wouldn't turn out to be anything to worry about. But better to be safe than sorry.

As Luka struggled with the buttons on his shirt he said, rather fiercely, "I really ... really, really hate this disease. Have I mentioned lately how much I hate this disease?"

"Once or twice, yeah," Susan said, still cheerfully. "Almost ready?" The buttons were askew .. off by one, but Luka didn't seem to have noticed, and it hardly mattered. They'd be taking it off again when they got there.

"Just need my shoes and crutch, and my coat," Luka said, and coughed again. "This can't be PCP again. I've been taking the prophylaxis."

"Probably not," Susan agreed. "Cough sounds wetter anyway. Lots of crud in your lungs. Maybe it is the flu this time." She brought him his shoes. "Can I put these on you?" And Luka nodded, obviously realizing, or admitting, that he was sicker than he'd first thought. Or maybe, Susan thought, he was just tired and bleary. It was, after all, the middle of the night and she had just wakened him from a sound sleep. She got the shoes on his feet, tied them, handed him his crutch.

Luka tried to stand, got halfway up, and sat down again, breathing hard.

"Just take it slow, there's no hurry," Susan reminded him gently.
"If there's no hurry, I'll just go back to bed for a few hours," Luka said, with another brief smile. He tried again to stand, and still couldn't do it. Dropping his crutch, he let his head drop into his hands.

"I can help you walk, Luka. Let me help you. It isn't far."

Luka shook his head. "No ... maybe you'd ... better just get the ambulance ..." He looked at her, and she saw fear in his eyes. Not fear of this new infection, whatever it might be, or of his weakness - that was surely just a result of the high fever and fatigue. But fear that she might, actually put her arm around his waist, that he might have to lean on her.

"You hate ambulances," she said after a moment, when she could trust herself to speak. "And you just said you aren't that sick. I really don't think we need to bother the paramedics for this. Once you're up, I think you'll be able to walk ok, with just a little help."

"I hate hospitals," Luka reminded her. "But that doesn't seem to be stopping you." He sighed. "Ok. Let's go."

Susan felt him cringe as her arm went around his waist, but he endured the contact and she got him to his feet. As she'd guessed, once he was up, he needed only a little help and support from her to walk the few steps to the living room. The steps up to the door were a struggle, and then down to the street, and the car. He collapsed into the passenger seat and shut his eyes, shaking. Susan slid into the driver's seat and fastened the seat-belt for him.

"Cold?" she asked him. He didn't answer, just shook his head. "Ok. You just stay awake until we get there."

"Not ... falling asleep ..." he said faintly, but still didn't open his eyes. He didn't seem to be coughing all that much, Susan thought, but his lungs were obviously full of something. His breathing was hoarse, and too rapid, and the walk to the car had left him noticeably cyanotic. And he was still shaking. Susan turned the heater all the way up, though she knew it probably wouldn't kick in until long after they'd arrived at the hospital. She should have warmed the car up first. It was March, but it was still Chicago.

"Are you sure you're not cold?” she asked him, more to get a response than because she was interested in what it was. It didn't really make much difference either way. She couldn't make him any warmer, and they would be there in a few minutes.

"Having chills, I think."

Chills? How much higher could his fever go? "It's pretty cold out here, and the car hasn't had a chance to warm up. You're probably just cold. I'm cold."

"Yeah."

Susan pulled into the ambulance bay. Just because she'd skipped the ambulance didn't mean she had to bring him in through chairs and triage. Rank did have its privileges, after all. Parking at the curb she said, "Do you think you can walk inside?" A small shake of the head. "Ok. Sit tight. I'll get a wheel chair."

"I hate this, Susan. I absolutely hate this ..."

"It isn't making my day either, sweetheart. Be right back."
Chapter 39

Susan paused for a moment inside the ambulance bay doors to steady herself, wipe her eyes. This was bad. Even if it was, in fact, 'the flu', the flu could kill Luka with remarkable efficiency, as weak as he already was.

Taking a deep breath, Susan entered the ER and grabbed a wheelchair from against the wall. She spotted one of the nurses and said, "Sam! Find me a room, and a doc. I'm bringing in Luka in a second. He's really sick."

"Need help getting him inside?"

"No, I've got it. Just find me a room!"

She ran back outside with the wheelchair. Luka looked worse than he had two minutes before. His head lolled back against the seatback, and even in the dimly lit bay, she could see that his color was much worse. He had fallen asleep, or passed out. His breathing was labored.

"Luka! I told you to stay awake!"

His eyes fluttered a little but didn't open. "Not ... asleep ...

"Like hell you weren't! Come on ... into the chair." She reached around and unbuckled the seatbelt. He was too weak to really help himself now, and Susan debated going back inside to get more help, but she somehow got him into the chair. He slumped forward a little, and for a moment Susan feared he would slide out of it again, but he managed to straighten up, and she pushed the chair inside again.

Carter was waiting inside the doors. "Trauma 2," he said. She must have looked surprised; this wasn't a trauma, Luka was just sick, because he added, "It's what's open right now. We're pretty busy tonight." But what Susan was mostly noticing was the alarm on Carter's face as he looked down at Luka. She followed his gaze, and in the brightly lit ER, was shocked at how bad he looked - how much worse than he'd looked when they had left the apartment little more than 10 minutes before. He was still shaking despite the warmth of the lobby. His skin was ashy gray, and covered with a sheen of sweat. And every breath was a struggle. He needed oxygen - desperately.

"911, Susan," Carter muttered to her, under his breath. "Ever heard of it?"

In the trauma room, Susan gently helped Luka off with his coat, and said "We're just going to help you climb up on the table now, sweetheart, so Carter can examine you." But it wasn't a matter of 'helping.' Carter, Coop and Sam lifted Luka onto the table.

He was barely responsive any more, too weak to help.

"O2 by mask, 15 liters," said Carter briskly. "Start an IV and lets get a CBC, ABG and blood cultures, and we'll need a portable chest."

From Sam came "Resps are 20, pressure's 80 palp, he's a little tachy at 110."

"How long has he been like this?" asked Carter. "Susan?"

Susan had been unbuttoning his shirt. It would have been faster, of course, to have cut it, so they could get the monitors onto his chest, examine him properly, but somehow, she didn't want them to
do that. He'd worked so hard to get it buttoned.

"What?" She hadn't really heard the question.

"How long has he been sick?"

"I'm not sure. He wasn't this bad when we left. He was alert ... talking ... You'll have to ask him when it started."

The oxygen seemed to be helping. Luka's sats still showed a rather alarming 85% on the monitor, but they were coming up slowly. His eyes had opened and his color looked a little better.

"Luka?" Carter said gently. "You with us?"

"Yeah."

"When did all this start?"

Luka shook his head. "Was ok yesterday. Just tired. Then Susan woke me up ... said I had ... fever."

"You take your temp every day?" Luka nodded. "No fever yesterday?"

"Little bit. Under 100."

"It's 105.2 now," said Sam softly.

"It's gone up a whole degree in the last half hour," Susan said. Fevers didn't mean anything, she reminded herself. A person could be really sick with little fever at all, or run a very high fever with a mild illness. But this wasn't a mild illness. That was too clear.

"Any pain?" Coop asked.

"Just hard to breathe ... hurts a little. And I'm cold. Chills, I think."

Carter listened to his lungs. "You're not moving much air, Luka."

"Oxygen's helping ... a lot."

He was definitely more alert than he'd been a few minutes before, but he was still not sitting well, and the effort required to breathe at all was going to exhaust him quickly.

Finishing his brief but thorough exam, Carter said, "Ok, we'll have to wait for the x-ray, but it sounds like pneumonia."

"Again ..." Luka said wearily.

"But not PCP?" Susan said.

"No, probably not," Carter said. "He had pneumonia twice in the Congo," he explained. "His lungs probably aren't in the best of shape after three bouts with it in the past nine months. He's going to be more and more susceptible to pulmonary infections."

The chest x-ray confirmed the diagnosis. Consolidations in both lungs. "Pneumonia it is," Carter said cheerfully, though Susan recognized it as the same false cheer she had put on at home. "What the causative bug is, we don't know yet. Could be any of the many things you're susceptible to with the HIV, or it could be a standard variety of pneumonia that you picked up at work, or on the el.
We'll have to wait for the cultures to come back from the lab. In the meantime, we'll get you upstairs, and start you on IV antibiotics."

Luka shook his head. "Just write me prescriptions. Susan can take me home. I feel a lot better." He tried to sit up, but couldn't quite manage it.

"You feel better because of the oxygen," Susan told him. "You need to be admitted. It won't be for very long." She looked up at Carter. "Right?"

"Right," Carter said firmly. "Just for a few days. Once we know what's causing this, and you're sitting well on room air, you should be able to go home with oral antibiotics." A smile. "You're going to be fine, Luka."

Half an hour later Luka was settled into the ICU again. Susan pulled the chair close beside the bed, sat beside him. He looked a little better, but the numbers of the monitors were still worrisome, sats hovering around 90, even with oxygen, and a temperature staying stubbornly at 105, despite a dose of acetaminophen.

Luka looked at her for a moment. "This is it ... isn't it?" he said softly.

"You're going to be fine, Luka. We got you here quickly."

"Don't mean that ... mean ... this is my life now. In and out of hospitals ... well for a few days, few weeks, then sick again. Until my body can't take any more. Or I can't do it any more."

Susan blinked back tears. "It's winter. Everyone gets sick more in the winter. It's almost spring. You'll get through this, and then it will be spring, and you'll do so much better. Your t-cells are up ... this is just a fluke, right? A spell of bad luck. Anyone can get pneumonia."

"You look ... healthy enough."

"I never get sick, you know that."

Luka nodded, closed his eyes. He was exhausted by the brief conversation, and the oxygen mask made talking difficult anyway. "I love you." He reached his hand across the bed. Susan took his hand a little cautiously, would he realize what he was doing? Pull away? He squeezed her hand, held on. His hand was so hot.

"You get some sleep now," she said, when she knew she could speak without bursting into tears.

"That's what I was doing ... 'fore you woke me up, dragged me in here." He opened his eyes again, looked at her for a long moment, then smiled at her from under the oxygen mask. His eyes closed again and, a moment later, his hand relaxed and she knew he was asleep.

She must have fallen asleep herself after a while, because she suddenly heard a voice calling her name softly. Luka was still asleep. His breathing was hoarse and more than a little bit labored, but he seemed to be fairly comfortable. And Carter was there, squatting beside her chair.

"How's he doing?" he asked.

"About the same," Susan whispered. "Resting comfortably."

"Good." Carter looked at Luka for a moment, then at the monitors. Gently, "He'll probably need to be tubed soon."
Susan didn't let herself look at the monitors. She shook her head. "He's doing fine."

Carter's hand was on her arm. "And how are you doing?"

Susan could just shake her head again. She carefully set down Luka's hand and went to stand in the doorway, where they could talk more easily without disturbing his sleep. "It's so hard, John. I never thought it would be this hard - being with him, seeing him in so much pain. But I know that not being with him would be even harder, so I guess I'm kind of stuck, aren't I?"

"I think they call it love, Susan, not 'being stuck.'"

"That ... or co-dependence, but I'm pretty sure it's love," Susan smiled a little. "And I knew that as unhappy as he is, he's happier being with me ... so that helped." Then she had to blink back tears again. "But ... I'm not so sure now. He got back into therapy a few weeks ago ... counseling. He'd been so miserable, he's just ... not getting over what happened to him ... I insisted that he go. I thought it would help, he said it was helping, but to me he looked worse ... he was barely eating, having horrible nightmares, not getting any rest, getting so run-down. I'm sure that's what caused this. If I hadn't insisted that he go ..."

"He needed to go," Carter said firmly. "You said so yourself, and I've seen him. You're right, he isn't happy. He needs to deal with what happened to him; with what's happening to him now. He's been carrying this baggage around with him for far too long. And you didn't cause him to get pneumonia. He got pneumonia because he has an impaired immune system." Carter tilted Susan's chin up to make her look at him. "No unnecessary guilt, Susan. Luka's got more than enough for both of you."

And Susan had to smile a little. "I know. And he is going to be fine."

"Yeah. Look, I just got off. If you want to get some rest, I can sit with him."

"No, you've been on all night. And DeAngelo should be here soon to see him. I need to be here."

Just then Susan saw, through the glass, Sam waiting outside. "And don't you have someone waiting for you?"

Carter smiled, and Susan could have sworn he blushed a little. "We're just going to get some breakfast."

"And after breakfast?"

"Alex will have left for school by then. So who knows ..."

"Go. Have your fun! Someone should be having some."

Carter put his arms around her, held her tightly for a moment. "Everything's going to be fine, Susan. You're both strong. I'll be back later."

"Thanks."

Carter left, and Susan returned to her post beside Luka's bed. He was still sleeping, though more restlessly now. Susan forced herself to look at the monitors. His sats had dropped again. Only 83 now. They'd been drifting down, slowly but relentlessly for the past few hours. Susan gently adjusted the oxygen mask, making sure it was firmly against his damp face. It didn't help.

The door opened and DeAngelo was there. He greeted Susan briefly, then picked up Luka's chart and looked over it. A quick examination, which didn't wake Luka.
"Susan, we need to intubate him. He's not moving air any more."

Susan shook her head quickly. "I don't know ... if he wants that."

"He just needs a little help."

"I know that, but it's just not my decision. Or yours!"

Control. One thing Susan had begun to sense more and more, even though Luka hadn't said it in so many words, was his need to keep some sort of control. The painfully detailed advance directive, prepared long before it was likely to be needed; his fear of therapy, of opening up more memories; his frustrations with the disease that was steadily chipping away at his life. He would be furious, she knew, if he woke up to find a tube down his throat. He had lost control of his life, Susan knew too well. And he needed, desperately, to be able to control whatever things he could, however small. And even now, she knew ... perhaps especially now ... he would willingly die if it meant keeping control.

Susan shook Luka gently. "Luka, sweetheart. You need to wake up." Luka groaned faintly, choked, but didn't open his eyes.

"As low as his sats are, he may not be able to right now," DeAngelo said softly.

But just then Luka's eyes flickered and opened. They were dull and glassy. He choked again and started to cough. Thick, rattling, bringing up blood streaked sputum. When the spasm was over, he collapsed back onto the pillow, shaking a little. His eyes were closed again.

"Luka, we need you to open your eyes. Marty needs to talk to you."

His eyes opened again. Still dull, but he said, very faintly, "I'm here."

DeAngelo said, "Luka, we need to get you onto a vent, it will help you breathe."

"No."

"You aren't getting enough oxygen. You are barely moving air, and you are exhausting yourself."

"I can breathe ... just ... stay awake now ..." His sats had crept up a few points, whether due to the mucus he'd cleared from his lungs when he coughed, or to being awake, Susan didn't know.

"You have to rest. You can't do that if you are fighting for air. It will just be for a day or two, just until the antibiotics kick in."

"No ... vent ..."

DeAngelo sighed. "Luka, it will make you much more comfortable ... whatever happens."

Susan's heart fell into her stomach. And Luka's eyes moved to look at her, unspoken questions in them.

"Whatever you want to do, sweetheart," she said, her voice remarkably calm. "It's your decision." But her heart was screaming, 'Don't give up ... please ... not yet ...'

And Luka nodded slightly. "Just ... few days ..."

"Absolutely." DeAngelo took the syringe that the nurse had ready. "Ok, Luka, you know how this all works. You'll go to sleep, and when you wake up, there will be a tube in your throat. You won't
be able to speak, but you'll be much more comfortable."

"Whatever ... happens ..." Luka murmured.

"You are going to be fine!" Susan told him firmly, and felt his hand go slack as the induction meds took effect.

She had watched a thousand intubations over the years. Done at least that many herself. But she couldn't watch this one.
Chapter 40

Luka paid the cabbie and stepped out into the sunny street. The day was warm for late March. He walked slowly, very slowly, leaning heavily on his crutch, into the lobby of the small office building, rode the elevator up to the third floor.

He’d been out of the hospital less than a week, and was still weak and shaky, but he had told Susan he wanted to get back into therapy quickly. He’d missed three sessions, that was enough. He hadn't told her why he was in such a hurry to return. He was, he knew, running out of time.

Was the therapy helping? He wasn't sure. What was it they used to believe about medicine? That the worse it tasted, the more likely it was to work? Maybe it was the same with his therapy. As hard as it was, as badly as it hurt, it had to be doing him some good. There had to be a breakthrough soon. He knew he couldn't stand much more of it.

Brian welcomed him with a smile and a handshake. "Welcome back, Luka. I missed you."

"I was sick, in the hospital."

"I know; Susan called me. You're feeling better?"

"I don't bounce back as quickly as I used to, but I'm doing ok. Well enough to sit and talk for a while."

"Good." Brian sat down, opened his notebook. "Do you want to pick up where we left off last time?"

Luka shook his head. "I don't want to die," he began abruptly. "I was lying there in the hospital, in the ICU. I had a tube down my throat. I couldn't talk. I was looking at Susan. She was sitting in the chair by my bed, holding my hand; she'd been sitting there for three days, just getting up to go to the bathroom. And all I could think was that I was going to die. Not just then, I was doing better, getting better. But soon. And it would hurt her so much. I wouldn't hurt anymore myself, but she would still be hurting. I just don't know why she stays with me. What can I offer her but unhappiness ... more pain?"

"You were already sick, with the HIV, when you got together, right?"

"Yeah."

"So she knew what she was getting into. She could have chosen to not get involved."

"I think she felt sorry for me. Still does."

"Is that really what you see when she looks at you? Pity?"

"No." Luka had to be honest. "She loves me. Or at least she thinks she does."

"And what about you? What do you feel when you look at her?"

"I don't know. I think I love her. I know that I hate the idea of hurting her, I wish I could make her happy. But when I try to measure what I feel ... against Danijela, how I felt with her ... it's different ... and I'm not sure any more what it is."

"You're a different person than you were with Danijela. You're older, you've experienced a lot
more of life. Love will feel different.”

"Or maybe I'm just scared. Scared of being alone, of dying alone. So many people come into the ER, alone. Old ... sick ... or young and sick ... and they have no-one. They die alone, with just strangers around them. I don't want that to be me. But is it right to hurt her ... to use her ... so it won't be me?

"No matter what I do ... if I live a long time more ... or if I die soon, I'm going to hurt her. I hate that. All I do ... all I've ever done ... is hurt people. I know that this is all ... I can accept that it's all a punishment for me ... for all that ... but why does it have to go on hurting other people even now. Why does my punishment have to hurt the one person I care about?"

"Punishment? What do you mean?" Brian asked quietly.

Luka's mouth was suddenly dry. "Payback, you know. I've hurt people. Now I'm hurting. And I figure that when the balance sheet is equal, and I've had enough pain to make up for all that I've handed out ... it will end. And I'll have some peace."

"Who have you hurt?"

Luka shrugged. "People." Brian waited. "Too many, Brian. I can't even count them."

He stood up to pace, as he often did, then realized he didn't have the strength today, even with his crutch, and sat down again. "I don't know ... is it better to die soon, before I have the chance to hurt her even more ... or to try and live as long as I can, hope that I can make her happy, at least a little bit ... do a little bit of good with what's left of my life?"

"Tell me about the people you've hurt. Not Susan. The others."

God ... why had he brought this up? Why had he come in today? He could be home in bed, resting, getting his strength back. He could be peacefully dead and not having to go through this shit at all.

"I umm ... I killed my wife ...my kids ...

"You said they died in the war. Your apartment was shelled."

"We shouldn't have been there at all! We should have left Vukovar months before, but I didn't want to leave. I felt like I couldn't leave. My work ... I was doing my internship. Danijela ... she wouldn't leave without me, take the kids somewhere safer. She wouldn't even send them away, to her parent's house, or mine. And then, after the shelling, I could have saved them ... I didn't. I was a doctor, I'd been working in the hospital for months, dealing with this kind of thing every day. Patients would come in ... injured, dying .. and I'd help them, save them. But when I got back to the apartment, I just panicked. I didn't know what to do.

"Marko ... I saw him first ... under the rubble. All I could see was his hand. Maybe he was still alive, I didn't even check. He was my son, and I didn't even check to see if maybe he was still alive ... in pain, afraid. Even if I couldn't have saved him ... I could have been there, let him know his tata was there with him ... but I didn't. I just left him. And when I finally went back ... hours later ... pulled the wall off him ... he was already dead. But maybe if I'd gotten to him sooner ..." Luka again started to stand, to pace, then sat down again.

"Danijela and Jasna were both alive, both breathing. Danijela was bleeding badly, shrapnel in her spleen. Jasna had a head injury. She ... stopped breathing ... arrested ... almost as soon as I picked her up. Maybe if I hadn't moved her ... or if I'd gotten her down to the street, to the hospital, she could have lived. But all I could think was that I had to do CPR, keep her alive ... bring her back to
life. I did it ... for hours. I kept calling for help ... praying ... no-one came. When I finally stopped ... it had been hours ... she was cold. And Danijela was dead too. She had bled to death while I was trying to save our daughter. If I'd brought them to the hospital ... I'm a doctor, Brian .. I was trained to save lives, even then. I was young, just a student, an intern, but I'd been doing it for months. In wartime ... more is expected from students. I'd been saving lives every day. But I couldn't save the three people who mattered most to me ... more than anything. I didn't even try!"

"You couldn't save them, Luka. That doesn't mean you killed them. You are a doctor. And that means you know that we can't save all our patients. Some of them will die, whatever we do. You did the best you could, in impossible circumstances. Nobody could expect more."

"I expected more. I could have done more."

"If you could have, you would have. Do you remember what you were feeling when you walked into the ruins of your apartment, saw your wife and children?"

"Scared. I was so scared ..." Luka barely whispered it. "But I shouldn't have been!"

"Why not?"

"Because they needed me. They were dying. I wasn't hurt at all. A few cuts and scrapes. I should have been able to be stronger for them. I could have saved them ... if I'd been stronger."

"You couldn't. They died because a shell hit your apartment, not because of anything you did or didn't do."

"You weren't there! You don't know what happened." Luka rubbed his leg.

"And do you?" Brian asked quietly. "After all this time, are you remembering what happened, or what your own guilty feelings have turned it into? If you had gotten them to the hospital and they had died anyway, do you think you'd feel any different? Do you feel guilty because you couldn't save them, or because you're alive and they're not?"

"That won't be an issue much longer, will it?" Luka said softly. "One thing I won't have to feel guilty about any more."

Brian leaned back in his chair. "When you die, Luka, do you expect to see them again? Be with Danijela and your kids in heaven?"

"I ... I don't know. I hope I will. It helps me to bear it. It's made ... all this ... a little easier to bear."

"Do you think she will blame you, for letting her die? For letting your children die?"

"I don't know." Luka's voice broke. He felt like he was choking. "Can we talk about something else now?"

"Luka, why are you holding on to this?"

"I don't know what you mean." He rubbed his leg, couldn't look at Brian.

"No one else blames you for what happened, and it wasn't your fault. It's long past time you stop blaming yourself ... let go of the guilt. It doesn't do you any good and letting it go won't mean that you loved them any less. They are dead. You've spent 12 years of your life grieving for them, and carrying this burden of guilt. You don't have much more time left to waste on this, so why not let it go? You have another woman in your life who needs you, a lot more than Danijela needs you right
Luka heard Brian saying the words. Some small part of him knew they made sense. But they rolled off of him, couldn't penetrate. Had his guilt become so much a part of him now that he couldn't let it go, or was there still just too much else? Was this pain still buried so deeply under layers of newer pain, fresher pain, that he couldn't get rid of it until he had first excavated the rest? And how could he bear to do that?

He just sat, staring out the window. He couldn't think of anything to say. Finally Brian said, "I'm going to cut our session short today. You're obviously still tired and ill. Go home, get some rest, and think about what we talked about today. We'll talk some more about it next time."
The apartment was quiet and empty. Susan was at work, of course. Luka took off his coat, went automatically into the bathroom. But the nausea that usually plagued him after his therapy, the nausea he usually had to battle desperately to control during the cab ride home, wasn't there today. His heart ached ... his head hurt ... he was dizzy with fatigue, but there was only a distant queasiness in his stomach.

Could he finally be making progress? Could this be what he had been needing? No, he told himself. This is just familiar pain. So much of what he had told Brian were things he had told people, albeit usually in much less detail, dozens of times over the years. This pain was so familiar that, like the guilt that accompanied it, it was truly a part of him now. Talking about it didn't make him sick. Not anymore. Not like the other things did.

But God ... he'd been right, of course. He'd known it all along, this was why he hadn't told Carl about these things. Brian didn't understand. The pain, the guilt was part of him. He couldn't get rid of it, not really. Let it go? Removing the guilt, letting it go, would be like removing a part of his body. Like cutting off his leg. Or ripping out his heart. Or, at best, like removing scar tissue that had been there forever - exposing something even worse underneath. If he did let it go, would he even recognize the new person he would become?

He couldn't get rid of it, he just needed to learn how to live with it again. He needed to let go of the newer, fresher agonies. He needed to let go of Matenda. He should never have told Brian about Vukovar at all.

He would never be really happy; there wouldn't be time to get there. He just needed to learn how to make Susan happy. To be able to pay her back for the small measure of happiness that she was bringing to what remained of his life.

Luka struggled up from the bathroom floor. He was still queasy, but he wasn't going to throw up. He could leave the bathroom. Susan would be home in a couple of hours. He put together a quick casserole for supper; chicken, veggies, potatoes, cheese, and popped it into the oven. Today he could have supper waiting for her when she got home, though he was far too tired to eat any himself. Writing a note 'Supper's in the oven. I love you.', he put it where she would be sure to see it, took his meds, and went to bed.

He woke from a light sleep to Susan's footsteps and the slight rustle and jar of the bed as she slid under the covers beside him.

"Did you find your dinner?" he asked.

"Yes. It was delicious. A Croatian specialty?"

"Nope. A 'what we had in the fridge' specialty."

"I liked the note too. I love you as well, and I'm sorry I woke you."

"It's ok. This way I get to see you for a minute. I'll probably still be sleeping when you leave for your shift in the morning." He touched her face gently. "The one good thing ... the only good thing about being in the hospital was that when I woke up you were always there."

"I'd be here more if I could," Susan said. "I have to work. I wish I didn't have to work so much."
"I'll be back to work soon ... start pulling my share again." Luka knew well that Susan was working more shifts than usual because he wasn't working and had been so sick. The ER needed the coverage and they needed the money. Susan was supporting him right now. One more thing for him to be ashamed of.

"That's not what I meant, Luka. There's no rush."

"So, you don't want me to be well enough to work? To be able to work?"

"No ... I mean yes, of course I do. I'm just saying that you need to be well enough first. Going back before you're ready, when you're still not well, you'll just get sick again and have to start over. I'm just sorry that we can't spend more time together." She smiled. "When you do go back, I'll make sure we work a lot of shifts together; it would be pretty ironic if we ended up on opposite shifts all the time."

Luka rolled abruptly onto his back; looked up at the ceiling. "You deserve better than this. I hate hurting you, Susan. You know that, right?"

"You don't hurt me."

"Yes I do. I don't mean to ... I don't want to, but I do. All the time."

"It isn't you. The things that hurt me are just the same things that are hurting you. You just keep fighting them, all of them, and I'll be happy." A beat. "Did you see McGrath today?"

"Yeah. It went ok."

"You look better than you usually do after a session. Better than you have for a while."

"I didn't throw up. That's a definite improvement." He rolled over again to look at her. "I don't know how much longer I'll keep going back though. I don't know how much it's really helping."

"You just started. These things take time."

"It isn't cheap."

"Don't worry about that. It's worth every penny."

"Not if it isn't working." And not, he thought to himself, if someone else is having to pay for it because you are barely working enough hours to pay for your own health insurance.

"Stick with it a little longer. You do seem better today."

"I feel better, but I'm not sure how much of that is from the counseling, and how much is from being glad that I didn't die last week. That I have a little more time left with you." He was pleased to see her smile at that. He kissed her. Something else he could do to make her happy, at least a little bit. He began to caress her, as he had done before. It had been a long time, she must be missing this.

After a few moments Susan reached for him, to return his caresses, and he quickly moved her hands away. "No," he said. "Just ... let me ..." And Susan rolled away from him, sat up. "What's wrong?"

Susan shook her head. "I don't want to do this. Have you ... talked with McGrath at all about this stuff yet?"
"He knows about the problem. We haven't really started working on solving it yet. As you said ... these things take time."

"Then we're going to wait until you have started to work on it."

"I don't know how long that will take. Or if I'll ever get there. This is my problem. It's not fair to you to make you suffer for it."

"But this isn't what I want," Susan explained, sounding exasperated. "It certainly isn't what I need. Sex is about two people, Luka ... giving to each other, right? I can't just lie there and be ... serviced. And I certainly don't need for you to give me orgasms." She sighed. "I know you mean well, sweetheart ... but this isn't doing anything for me. I'd much rather just hold hands, or put my head on your shoulder ... when you feel ready for that ... and know that you're enjoying it; than have you doing all this for me out of some sort of sense of duty ... because you think it's what I'm wanting from you."

Luka was suddenly cold. Not sick. Just cold. Like there was a sudden emptiness inside of him. The one thing he had thought he was doing right, and it wasn't. "You said you liked it."

"I did. It's a first step. But we need to take the next one. And until you're ready to do that, I think it's better to just stop. Ok?" Luka nodded, got out of bed. "Where are you going?" asked Susan quickly, her voice suddenly concerned.

"I'm fine. I'm just getting something to eat. I didn't have supper."

"There's plenty of your casserole left in the fridge."

Luka warmed himself a plate, made some tea. He managed to choke down a few bites of it, then wandered aimlessly around the living room for a while, watching the clock. When an hour had gone by, and he was sure that Susan must be asleep, he went back into the bedroom.
Chapter 42

Luka adjusted his coat. It just didn't fit him right any more. Much too loose around the shoulders. But a 30 pound weight loss in 4 months would do that. Weight that he could ill afford to lose. He still hadn't fully gained back everything he'd lost in Africa. Pretty soon, he thought, he was going to look like a kid playing dress up in his dad's doctor-coat.

Triage was packed, as always. He still wasn't doing any trauma. And he'd stopped asking Kerry about it. He was working, he knew he should be happy with that. And after nearly a year, he wasn't sure he could do trauma anymore. Would he even remember how to run a code? What drugs and tests to order? No, he was happy with what he had; 24 hours a week, 3 8's, helping people who, with few exceptions, had nowhere else to go. Not an unsatisfying sort of life at all. He hadn't died from the pneumonia. He had some time left. Susan loved him. Life was good.

Luka took a chart from the rack, initialed the board, went into curtain area 2. "Mrs. Blake? I'm Dr. Kovač. What seems to be the trouble today?"

"I've had the most horrible indigestion, doctor ..."

Back to the rack for another chart. Then maybe he'd get lunch. Avoid losing another pound today. Carter was there. "Luka, would you grab the 16 year old in sutures?"

"That was the MVA, wasn't it? Sounds like trauma to me, Carter."

"He's fine. Just needs some sutures and a wrist splint. I think you can handle it. His mom's out in chairs, she's been nagging us to get him out of here, and we've got an MI rolling in any minute."

"Sure... I've got it."

The patient was sitting on the bed waiting for him. "Hi, Ronnie, I'm Dr. Kovač. I'll just get you stitched up and splinted, and you'll be on your way."

"Sure. Just do it." Ronnie had a laceration on his forehead and another on his left hand that needed sutures.

"I'm just going to numb you up a little bit, then a few stitches in each of these cuts, ok?"

"Whatever."

"Sixteen, hmmm? Been driving long?" asked Luka lightly.

"A few months. I'm almost 17."

"You're lucky. Could've been a lot worse. A few cuts, a sprained wrist."

"Yeah. Real lucky."

Luka began to suture the hand lac. He was puzzled. He was trying to make conversation, but Ronnie didn't seem to care. "Play sports, Ronnie?"

"Yeah, basketball. Season's over though."

"That works out well. Your wrist should be good as new by the time it starts up again in the fall. If you played baseball, this might slow you up a little."
"Damned airbag!" Ronnie suddenly said.

"Didn't deploy?"

"No ... it did. I thought I'd fixed things ... then I guess I hit the brake ... I wasn't going to, but I did."

"So, this wasn't an accident, maybe?" Luka kept his voice casual, kept suturing.

"She's been screwing around behind my back! Lying to me. We've been together for six months, and I find out yesterday that she's been fucking other guys!"

"So you run your car into a light pole?"

"I love her! She knew that, and she goes and does this shit anyway? What do you care? It was my car, and my life. I didn't hurt anyone else. And what could you know about it anyway?"

Luka had finished the last stitch. "I'm sure I don't know how you must be feeling, Ronnie. You just sit tight for a minute. I need to get some papers, and the nurse will bring you instructions on how to care for your sutures."

He threw his gloves in the trash and returned to the desk. "Jerry, get someone from psych down here to talk to the kid in sutures."

"Psych consult?" asked Carter, back there again. "Why?"

"Wasn't an accident. Suicide attempt, I think. What happened to your MI?"

"Looks like angina. 12 lead looks fine. I'm waiting on some labs."

They went into the lounge. Someone had brought in donuts earlier. Not very healthy, but they were calories. Luka took one, and poured himself some coffee. "God, Carter, are all teenagers that stupid?"

"I was pretty stupid at 16. Weren't you?"

"Probably. But not in that way. Running your car into a lamp post because your girlfriend's been messing around behind your back? I wouldn't have done that."

"Did you even own a car at 16?" Carter asked, pouring his own coffee.

"Well ... no ..." Luka admitted. "You must have owned one. Or several."

"Just one. And no, it wasn't a Bentley. Or a Rolls."

"Probably had a chauffeur though."

"Hell, no. You can't impress the girls with a chauffeur, Luka. It's much more impressive to be trying to cop a feel with one hand while driving with the other."

Luka smiled. It felt good to be smiling. "Is that what you do with Sam?"

"On occasion." Carter smiled back.

"So that's going well? The two of you?"

"It looks promising. But my record on relationships isn't very impressive, so I'm not holding my
breath. And I don't think Alex likes me very much."

"What's not to like? Several million dollars ... 50 room mansion ..."

"And I'd send him off to boarding school in Switzerland in a heartbeat."

"I take it this means that you don't like him either?"

"Let's just say that Sam's skills in raising children don't quite match her skills in ... umm ... how to put it delicately ... practicing making them."

"So that's what's keeping you from going back to Kisangani then? Sam's bedroom skills?"

"That's one of the reasons. There are others." Carter finished his coffee and started for the door.

"Like me, for example?" Luka said quietly.

"Don't flatter yourself." Carter grinned at him and disappeared through the door.

Luka finished his own snack. He knew he was right. Carter wouldn't leave now. Not until he was safely dead and buried. Which shouldn't delay Carter very long.

Back out in the hall he saw DeRaad opening the door into the suture room. What could a 16 year old possibly know about life, he thought. Or love. Or death. Or pain. There were things worth dying for, but not that.

He took another chart. Six month old with fever. A few more hours of work, a few more lives to save ... or at least make a little more comfortable. Then home to dinner with Susan and bed. Things were getting better there. Slowly but surely. He could tolerate her head on his shoulder, her arm around him. And she sometimes let him touch her, please her. She seemed to understand how much he needed to do it; that piling more new guilt on top of all the old ones wasn't making things any better for him. He needed to be able to give her pleasure.

Life was good. Life. Was good. For today, anyway.

"Mrs. Lee? I'm Dr. Kovač. How long has he had a fever?"
The late spring sun felt good on Luka's shoulders. How far had he walked? He had come downtown to do some shopping - just to get out of the apartment for a while, really, and had just started walking. He'd found himself, somehow, by the water. The warm May air, the smell of the water, the laughter of kids playing in the park, all made him forget the ache in his leg, the fatigue that was beginning to drag at him. How long had it been since he had walked so far? How far had he come? Three miles? Five? Luka knew he should head for the nearest el station, start home before rush hour. But he didn't want to go home yet. There was nothing for him at home. Susan was working, wouldn't be home until after seven. Of course, there was really nothing for him anywhere any more. Two or three eight hour shifts a week - when he was well enough to work them. Two more infections in the past month; two more hospitalizations, both thankfully brief. And things were no better with Susan. No worse, but no better. He'd made no more progress, hadn't gone back to counseling after the last hospitalization. He just couldn't bear to talk about these things any more. Too much pain for too little gain. Maybe he would try again later. When he felt a little stronger.

Luka was still walking. He'd left the lakefront and was walking aimlessly through an unfamiliar neighborhood. He was exhausted. Maybe, he thought, he should try to find a phone (he'd left his cell at home), and call a cab. No, he could sit down and rest for a while. When he'd gotten his breath back he'd find an el station, or maybe someplace to find a bite to eat. He hadn't had lunch. A set of broad stone steps. Luka sank down, stretching his aching leg out carefully in front of him. It took all his willpower to not stretch his body backwards on the steps and just fall asleep in the sunshine. Instead, he put his head in his hands and rested for a few moments, taking deep breaths. Of course he was tired. He'd walked for miles. Anyone would be tired. After a few minutes he summoned his strength, and managed to rise to his feet, groaning as his aching leg protested. The el station couldn't be very far. There were the tracks ... he'd follow them until he came to the nearest station. Then he suddenly noticed the sign in front of the building where he'd been resting. "St. Charles' Catholic Church." He shouldn't have been surprised, and he really wasn't, of course. How many Catholic churches were there in Chicago? Dozens? Hundreds maybe. Oh well, it didn't matter. The steps had provided him with a place to rest, and he was grateful for that.

He started for the sidewalk - but found, inexplicably, that his feet were carrying him up the steps, not down. The doors were unlocked. A moment later he was inside. The room was dim and quiet and cool. It was quite a small church, much smaller than the one where he had visited Bishop Stewart.

Luka let his feet carry him forward. There was nobody here. His footsteps, the metallic click of his crutch were the only sounds; they echoed in the silent room. He made his way to the front pew and sat down. Why was he here? He had tried looking for answers from God. He had tried so many times. At Matenda, and several times since he'd come home again. He'd never found any answers. Even the one time he thought he had found them, from Father Francois in Kisangani, it had turned out that those hadn't been answers at all. Only more questions. God hadn't saved him, hadn't ended his pain. He'd only kept him alive -- again -- for more pain, and a slightly more prolonged death.

Footsteps startled him. Luka realized that he'd been sitting there for quite some time, with his eyes shut. "Can I help you?" He opened his eyes. The priest, a very young priest, was standing close beside him. For a moment, Luka felt a sense of panic. Many priests passed through the halls of the County ER; visiting patients, comforting the dying. Would this man know him? Looking at him, Luka thought he looked dimly familiar. Perhaps he'd seen him once or twice, years before. But he
was too far out of County's neighborhood, and there was no hint of recognition in the young father's blue eyes, just concern.

"No," Luka said. "I just ..." he gestured helplessly, and was suddenly uncomfortable. He shouldn't be here. He reached for his crutch, prepared to rise.

The priest seemed to understand his unease. "Stay as long as you like. If you want to talk to someone, I'll be in my office. If not, God is always here, and He's listening."

"Thank you," Luka said, because he knew he should say something; give some answer.

He looked away from the priest, afraid that he would see the disbelief in his eyes. If God hadn't heard him before, when he was in agony, desperate ... how could he expect Him to hear his prayers, answer them now?

The priest left him alone again. Luka took a breath. Tried to think. He had come here for a reason. Why? What was he looking for? He could have headed for the el station, but instead he'd come, after so many years, back into a church, without anyone urging him. What might he find here that he hadn't found in months of counseling? In Susan's patient love?

What had helped him before, the one time he had found some comfort? When he'd been dying in Kisangani? Had it been the rituals? The confession? The taste of the wafer on his tongue? The gestures? The prayers? Had they brought him back to an earlier time ... a safer time?

Luka tried to pray. He couldn't kneel; his right leg no longer bent 90 degrees, no longer bore his weight, but he shut his eyes and tried to focus his thoughts ... to reach out. He tried to remember how he had felt in Kisangani, with Father Francois ... but as he spoke the words, he couldn't help but remember Matenda, saying those same words ... lying on the floor ... drowning in pain ... covered with flies. He tried to find God, but there was still only pain.

Finally, he rose stiffly and slipped the crutch over his arm. He looked from the main doors far behind him to the smaller door leading off to the side. A weary sigh, and he walked, his leg throbbing, his whole body aching, towards the side door. It surely led to the offices. He would ask the priest, if he was still there (it was quite late, surely he must have left without Luka noticing), to call a taxi for him.

The office door was open. The priest was reading at his desk. Luka got the sense that he had finished whatever work he had been doing long ago, but had stayed to see if Luka would come. The priest looked up, then stood up quickly, obviously registering the exhaustion and pain on Luka's face. He pushed the other chair slightly closer to the doorway, so Luka wouldn't have to walk so far.

"Come in. Sit down right here. I'm Father James."

Luka collapsed into the chair. "Luka."

"How can I help you today, Luka?"

For a moment, Luka couldn't answer. He was going to ask Father James to call a taxi. That was all. But what came out when he opened his mouth was. "You can't. Nobody can." And even he could hear the despair in his own voice.

"I don't think you believe that," Father James said gently. "You wouldn't be here if you believed that."
Luka shook his head slowly. "I'm lost," he whispered. "I don't where to turn anymore." He couldn't go on.

After a moment the priest asked, "You're Catholic, Luka?"

"I was ... raised Catholic. I haven't really ... haven't belonged to a church, gone to mass, for a very long time. My family, my wife and kids, they were killed in the war in Croatia. I stopped going then. Stopped ...believing then ... I tried a few times since ... but I just ... can't find ..."

Another long silence. Luka rubbed his wrists, his aching leg. Finally Father James asked, "So what brought you here today? What are you looking for?"

Luka looked at his hands. What to say? What could he tell this man? What could he hope to find help with? Comfort for? Nothing. Again, the realization that he shouldn't be here, but he was trapped now. He had to tell this earnest young man something. He so sincerely wanted to help, to prove that God could somehow help his pain, solve his problems.

And, suddenly, he was crying. Luka covered his face with his hands, trying in vain to hide the tears. Then his head sank down onto the desk, into his arms, and he gave in to the tears, for the first time in a very long time. In all his sessions with Brian, he had never allowed himself to cry.

Luka had no idea how long he cried. Somewhere during the time he heard Father James rise from his chair and move quietly around the room, heard small rustling noises and footsteps. When, finally, the tears stopped, when he had none left to cry, and he raised his head, Father James was sitting again in his chair, holding a cup of coffee. He pushed a second cup across the desk towards Luka.

"I can get you cream and sugar if you want."

"No. Black is fine. Thank you."

Hands shaking, Luka took the cup and sipped it, and the hot, bitter liquid steadied him a little. But he still couldn't talk, couldn't think of anything to say.

"Are you ill, Luka?" asked Father James after a minute. Luka was startled. How had he known? How had he read him so clearly? "You don't look well," the priest explained. Of course, it was obvious. The weight loss. His clothes hung on him.

"Yeah." Luka said finally. He took another sip of coffee. Would the priest still be as sympathetic when he heard? Or would he assume? Judge? "I'm dying. I probably won't live out the year. I have AIDS. I haven't been sick very long ... just diagnosed about 6 months ago. But it's been resisting the usual forms of treatment; there isn't much they can do for me."

"That must be very hard, Luka. I'm sorry." Only sympathy and concern. "Do you have any family or friends for support?"

"No family. My father and brother are still in Croatia ... and they don't know. I haven't told them. No close friends either, except my girlfriend. She's ... wonderful. The rest of my friends ... co-workers ..." a bitter smile. "I'm sure they'll show up at my funeral and say all the appropriate things."

"Your girlfriend is ... still well?"

Luka nodded. "I haven't ... given it to her, if that's what you mean. We haven't been together very long, and we haven't been ... intimate." He took a deep breath. There had still been only concern
and caring from the priest. "I got the disease ... last year. I was ummm..." he focused on his hands. "I was assaulted ... raped ..." The words came almost easily this time. Perhaps he was just getting used to talking about it, after having talked to Carl, and Susan and Brian. Or perhaps it was something else.

Luka climbed slowly out of the cab, every muscle screaming in protest. He handed the cabbie a wad of bills, and said "Keep it," dimly aware that he was probably giving him a very substantial tip.

"Need help upstairs?" asked the cabbie.

"No. I'm fine." He wasn't of course. He had actually fallen asleep in the cab. Father James had offered to drive him home after their talk, or call Susan to pick him up. But, after they'd talked for nearly two hours, Luka had finally done what he'd planned to do when he first went into the office, and just asked the priest to call a taxi.

The talking had brought him no answers, no miraculous healing. His pain, his trauma, was simply too far beyond the young priest's experience. The answers he had tried to offer had been mostly platitudes, the same ones that Luka had heard a dozen times before. But he had listened sympathetically, asked leading questions that encouraged Luka to talk. And, for hours, Luka had done just that, pouring out his pain, his anger at God, his grief and his fears. And he did feel a little bit better, as if he'd lanced an abscess, and some of the infection had drained away.

Father James had also urged Luka to come back to the church for mass, and had offered to visit him at home, had given him his card and told him he could call any time. Not that Luka would do it, of course. He couldn't go back to this church, anyway. While it had helped to have talked, he knew he wouldn't be able to face Father James again. He knew too much now. But maybe he'd try another. There were, after all, hundreds of Catholic churches in Chicago.

The light was on upstairs. Susan was there. Luka fumbled for his key, then gave up and hit the bell. A moment later the intercom came on. "Is that you, Luka?"

"Yeah ... can you let me in?" The door buzzed as it unlocked, and Luka opened it and practically fell through it. Susan was holding the apartment door open when he got to it, and got her arms around him to support him as he stumbled, exhausted, into the apartment.

"Where have you been?" she asked. "I've been worried sick!"

"I wasn't aware that I had to account for my every move." Luka said irritably. "I went out."

"You could have called ...

"I left my phone at home."

"There are no pay phones in all of Chicago?"

"Look... I'm fine. If I wasn't, the hospital would have called you, right? You are the emergency contact name in my wallet. Now, I'm exhausted. I'm going to bed."

"You should eat something first."

"I need to sleep." Luka stumbled into the bedroom and fell into bed and was asleep.
Chapter 44

Luka rolled over and looked at the clock. 6:30. Susan was still asleep. He got up quietly, but not quietly enough. Susan opened her eyes, squinted at the clock.

"You're up early," she said sleepily.

"You can stay in bed."

"Do you have a shift?"

"No; I'm just going to go out for a while."

"Out where? It's Sunday, Luka."

"I know."

Susan sat up, pulling the covers around her. "Is everything ok?"

"Yes, everything's fine." Luka smiled at her. "Just go back to sleep."

Luka showered quickly, shaved, and dressed. He had to search for a shirt that didn't look like a sack on him anymore. He had to get some new clothes, he thought. Stopping by the bed, he gave Susan a quick kiss on the top on her head. She'd been sleepily watching him dress. "I'll bring us back something for breakfast," he told her, then took his crutch and headed out.

Two blocks to the el station, up the long flight of stairs. The sign outside the church had said there was an 8 o'clock mass.

At ten minutes to eight he was standing at the foot of the broad stone steps again. People hurried past him, up the steps and through the open doors; mostly older people, alone, but some couples, and a few families with children, and a few younger single people. Luka watched them go. Some bumped into him as they passed him, and mumbled politely "Excuse me."

_Could_ he do this? Aside from the service he'd attended while caring for Bishop Stewart, and a few weddings and funerals, it had been over a decade since he'd actually been inside a church during a service. And if he did it, would it make a difference? Or would it just be a waste of time - of his increasingly precious time.

Luka took a deep breath and climbed the steps, and stood for a moment in the doorway.

The church looked very different than it had a few days earlier. It wasn't anywhere near full, this was obviously a small congregation, and there were several services that day. More people would probably come to later masses. But there were quite a few people there, talking to each other, greeting each other, smiling. There were candles, and he could see Father James up near the altar, talking to someone.

Luka entered the church, remembered to cross himself with the holy water, dipped his knee slightly; took a seat in an empty pew near the back. People walked past him, smiled at him politely, warmly. Then a woman about his age said "May I sit here?"

"Yes." Luka obligingly slid further along the pew to make room for her.

"I could have taken the inner seat," she said. "If you prefer the aisle."
"No, you would have had to climb over my leg. It doesn't bend very well. This is easier. Trust me."

"I'm Beverly. I don't think I've seen you here before."

"Luka."

"Are you visiting, Luka? From Europe, perhaps?"

"No, I live in Chicago. I just haven't been here before."

"I hope you'll like it well enough to come back. It's quite a nice little church."

And the mass began.

It was different than he remembered, Or perhaps it was that he was different. He was certainly a very different person than he had been the last time he had been to a mass. But it was also the same as he remembered. The language was different, of course; English rather than Croatian. And they seemed to stand more than he remembered, and kneel less. (Not that he was ungrateful for that part.) But the rhythm of the liturgy was the same, some of the melodies were what he remembered. And they took him back to an earlier time; a safer time. In church with his mother as a small child. With Danijela and his children as a young man.

And suddenly he was trembling, and wiping his eyes.

A gentle touch on his arm, and a questioning look from Beverly.

"I'm ok," he whispered.

When it was time to go for communion, Luka hesitated. Should he go? The last time had been in Kisangani, when he'd had Last Rites. He still remembered that so clearly - strange that he should - as sick and feverish as he had been, the memory should have been lost in a fog of illness and delirium. Would this bring back less pleasant memories than that? (As if the memory of preparing for death could be thought pleasant - but then, what was he doing here, if not trying to do that again? Was he preparing to face death again, or trying, again, to face what was left of his life?) And he hadn't been to confession. You were supposed to go to confession first - though his long talk with Father James could, perhaps, be considered a reasonable substitute. He had certainly confessed enough. What was he afraid of? That he would stand out? People would look at him? Stare? And Father James would definitely see him. Could he face him?

People were going up. It was now or never. Luka rose. He didn't need his crutch for the short walk. The service was over. People were getting up to leave. Luka just sat.

"Are you ok?" asked Beverly.

"Yeah. I'm just going to wait for the crowd to thin a little bit."

"Can I drop you somewhere? I have my car."

"No, it's only a few blocks to the el. I really do get around a lot better than you might think."

"It's no trouble, really."

Luka smiled. "Didn't your mother ever teach you that you shouldn't pick up strange men?"

Beverly smiled back. "Ah, but the ones you meet in church are usually safe enough."
"Really, no thank you. I'm fine. The exercise is good for me. My leg stiffens up if I don't use it."

"Well, will I see you back here next week?"

Luka hesitated. "I ... I'm not sure. Maybe."

"I hope I will," Beverly said, and left him with another smile.

The crowd was starting to thin. Luka got up wearily. Was it really only 9 a.m.? He made his way towards the door. Father James was there, speaking briefly to each parishioner as they left. His eyes were warm when he saw Luka, his handshake firm.

"I'm glad you could join us, Luka," he said. Luka just nodded and turned to face the long flight of stairs. He had passed an interesting looking bakery on the way from the el station. Maybe he would stop there and buy something for breakfast.

On the el, his bag of pastries safely on his lap, Luka shut his eyes. Had it made a difference? Had God been there for him today? Everyone had certainly been kind enough to him. He smiled to himself. If it hadn't been for the very conspicuous wedding band on her left hand, he might have mistaken Beverly's kindness for something rather less innocent. But yes, he did feel better. Like a layer of dirt had been peeled from his skin ... from his spirit. And he was tired, but it was a good kind of tired.

His stop. He stopped into his favorite coffee shop and bought two large coffees, then headed for home.

Susan was up and dressed. Luka put his purchases on the table. "Coffee, and an assortment of fascinating looking pastries. I have no idea what's inside of any of them, but they looked and smelled wonderful."

Susan ran to get plates. "You are in a good mood."

Luka smiled. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"Is it related to your mysterious crack-of-dawn errand? I know you didn't go out just to get me breakfast."

"I ... I don't know yet. Maybe."

They sat down to eat. For a few minutes the conversation focused on the breakfast. Then, abruptly, Luka said, "I went to church. To mass." Susan's only response was a surprised look. "The other night, when I was out so late - when you were so worried - I'd gone to the church. I talked to the priest for a while, hoped I could find some answers ... some peace. It helped a little, but he also encouraged me to come to mass. I decided to try; I didn't know if it would help, but I thought it couldn't hurt."

"I think it did help, Luka," said Susan.

"You think so?"

"I know that you've smiled more in the past 15 minutes than you have in the past week, and I don't think it's entirely due to the pastries, as wonderful as they might be."

"I just ..." Luka looked down, feeling his good mood starting to fade away. "I don't want to hope too much. I'm afraid to hope too much. I thought it had helped before, and it didn't. Not really."
"You have to hope," Susan said gently. "That's all you have right now. And I like seeing you smile. If hope will let you smile, I'm all in favor of it."
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

After 45 chapters ....

Susan came out of the bathroom. Luka was already in bed. "Can I turn out the light?" she asked.

"Yeah." Luka switched on the smaller beside lamp. He still couldn't sleep in the dark.

Susan got into bed, leaned over for a quick kiss. He could do that now, kiss her. She had an early shift tomorrow. But Luka's hand went behind her head, holding her there for a longer, more lingering kiss. His hand moved to her neck, and slowly down to the curve of her back.

Susan was about to say "Not tonight. I have to get up early," when she sensed that something was different. There was an urgency in his touch, and the distance that was usually there had vanished, the emotional distance that had been there for far too long; and the real, physical distance, the way he'd usually tried to keep space between their bodies, touching her only with his hands and lips. Now he was trying to pull her close, trembling a little as his hand slipped under her nightshirt to stroke the bare skin of her back, her breasts.

Even as she surrendered to his touch, Susan tried to guess what he was thinking, feeling. Something had clearly changed, but if she rushed him, went too fast, tried to make him go too fast, would he panic again? Would he stop himself from feeling what he might, finally, be ready to feel? When his mouth sought out her breasts, Susan caught her breath, then, mimicking his motions of a few moments before, let her hands go to the back of his head, tangling her fingers in his hair for an instant, then more slowly down to his neck - his back. And, for an instant, she felt him freeze.

"That feels so good," she murmured, encouraging him, and he relaxed again, letting his mouth and tongue continue their explorations, and Susan's hands were free to continue their own. The muscles of his shoulders - his back - the ridges of his ribs - he was so thin - then back up to his neck, his hair. 'Take it slow, Susan,' she told herself. But ... God ... she wanted him so badly, she'd been wanting him for such a long time. And he was lying close enough to her now, his body pressed against her, that it was obvious to her that he was responding too. Would he allow it to happen, or would he panic? 'Stop analyzing everything, Susan,' she told herself. 'You need to be relaxing too, and just letting it happen.'

She gently raised his head from her breasts so she could kiss his lips again, and she let her hands caress his chest, and then downward. And, for an instant, she felt his body tense again.

"It's good," she said encouragingly, and Luka smiled back at her, but she could see the uncertainty, and she could sense the fear. "Sweetheart, this is what's supposed to happen, remember?" And he relaxed again. He laughed a little, a laugh that Susan stopped by kissing him again.

She continued to caress him, feeling him grow harder under her touch, feeling his breathing quicken - and she knew that it was desire and excitement now, not fear or panic.

Then, abruptly, Luka took Susan's hand and moved it away from him, and rolled away from her a little. "I think ... that's enough," he said.
"What's wrong?"

"Nothing ... it's good ... everything is good ... it's just ..." he shook his head. He couldn't look at her.

Susan raised up on one elbow, looked at him. "I can ... take care of you if you like. My hands work pretty well that way too, you know. But I want for us to make love. I think you are ready." A teasing smile. "In every way."

"No," Luka was serious now. "We talked about this. It's too dangerous. I'm not going to put you at risk."

"If we're careful there is virtually no risk. I'm at more risk working in the ER every day. I'm willing to chance it, Luka. And I think it's something that you need to do. Even if it's just this once, if we never do it again, I think you need to know that you can. Besides, I bought that box of condoms ages ago. It would be a pity to waste it."

Luka finally met her eyes. "Are you sure you want to? I don't want it to just be for me ... like some sort of therapy or something."

"I'm sure. I've been wanting this for a very long time. And not just for you."

"All right." Luka smiled, still a little shakily she thought, and kissed her. They kissed, touched, explored for a few more minutes, then Luka opened the bedside table drawer.

"If it would be easier on your leg, I can be on top," Susan said.

"I think I can manage, unless you prefer it."

"No, whatever you want. I'm very flexible."

"Yes, I've noticed that," Luka teased, and rolled onto her. For a moment he just lay there - was he getting ready to make love, for the first time, to the woman he loved or bracing himself for some horrible ordeal? They needed to get on with it, Susan knew, or anxiety, if not outright panic, would make him lose his erection. She pulled his head down to hers and kissed him again, then reached down and guided him inside of her. Her own breath caught a little with the pleasure of the moment, her own sensations. But even better was seeing Luka's eyes widen a little, hearing his breath catch, as he felt the long forgotten pleasures - seemed to remember suddenly what this was all supposed to be about.

Their love making was not, perhaps, what Susan had always imagined in her fantasies. Once they began, Luka suddenly seemed to be somewhere else, but she could tell it was somewhere good; he was caught up in the feelings, the sensations, the emotions, the pleasures that he had not felt - had not allowed himself to be able to feel for such a long time. He didn't seem to know that she was even there anymore, seemed unable to give any thought to her pleasure. After the first moment, his eyes were tightly shut the whole time. But for Susan there was pleasure enough in watching his face, hearing the sharp little gasps as his excitement increased, his movements quickened until, rather too soon, he collapsed into her arms, and lay there trembling. After a few moments, his trembling grew more pronounced, his breathing had a catch to it again.

"Hey," Susan said gently. "You ok?"

"Yeah ..." Luka's voice was husky. "I'm great." He was crying a little. But as he raised himself up a little bit to look at her again, she saw that they were tears of happiness, of emotion, not of fear or panic.
"Well, if you're ok, you'd better get off me," Susan said lightly. "You're still pretty heavy, you know." Luka obligingly rolled off her, and wiped his eyes, and then her own. And Susan realized that she'd been crying too.

"Sorry," he said after a minute. "That probably wasn't quite what you were expecting. I'm usually not that ... quick."

"It's been a long time," Susan said.

"I can still take care of you."

"No. I'm perfectly satisfied. Besides," she added with a mischievous smile, "after the past few months, I figure I owe you at least a few orgasms before we even up the score." And she was pleased to see Luka smile again.

They lay together, easy, relaxed, not talking. Susan remembered that she had an early shift, that she should go to sleep. But she didn't want to sleep, didn't want to lose a minute of this, of what they had never had before - lying in bed together, naked, bodies touching easily, relaxed. She didn't want to lose this. How many nights like this would they have, before she lost him forever?

Suddenly she felt Luka's body start to shake again, he made a noise in his throat. She started to sit up in alarm, then she saw that he was smiling, fighting back laughter. He couldn't hold it back any longer. God ... how long had it been since she'd heard him laugh ... really laugh? It was a beautiful sound. She didn't want it to ever stop, but she finally had to ask, "What is so funny?"

Luka just shook his head, laughing too hard to talk.

"Come on, Luka, if you're going to keep me awake, you can at least let me in on the joke."

"I was just thinking," Luka finally said, wiping his eyes. "That when Father James asked me to go to mass, he probably didn't expect that the result would be that I would end up making love with a woman who is not my wife."

"I think he'd be thrilled to know that you are happy," Susan said. She hesitated. "And you know ... we could certainly take care of that one little problem, if you want."

"What problem?"

"The 'not your wife,' problem. We could get married."

"Married? Very romantic." The humor was gone.

"Why not? We love each other. We are happy together. I'm living here." Another teasing smile. "We know now that you are capable of consummating the marriage. Why not make it all legal?"

"Because ... you would then be a widow within six months, a year if we're lucky. I've been there. It's not a role I recommend."

"Luka ... when you die, when I have to give you up, it's going to hurt. And I don't think it's going to hurt any less just because I don't have a ring on my hand."

"No, Susan. It's very romantic, but it just isn't very practical."

"It is. I mean ... I want to marry you because I happen to love you, but there are practical benefits too. I could throw away that power of attorney that's been cluttering up my wallet. As your wife, I
wouldn't need it. And, insurance ... I mean ... you won't be able to work indefinitely ..."

"And when I can't work, I won't need insurance. When I can't work, I'll just be sitting at home waiting to die, and at that point, I don't think there will be much point in delaying it with a lot of expensive medical care. It will happen when it happens ... right here."

"You can't just give up. There are still things they can do for you ..." Susan blinked back tears. "I thought you were happier?"

"I am. And part of that happiness is from being ... at peace, I guess ... with what's happening. I'm going to die. It will happen soon. A year ... maybe less, maybe a little more. Right now, I still have things to live for, to keep fighting for. But when I don't anymore, I'm not going to just ... go on for the sake of being alive. I've done that before. It isn't worth it."

"I'll always be here," Susan said. "Aren't I worth living for?"

"You are part of the reason. You are the biggest reason. I love you too much to tie you to me when I know I won't have anything more to give you." He kissed her gently. "You've already given me so much; far more than I have ever given you, more than I ever could give you. But when the time comes, you're going to have to let me go. It will be time then for both of us to move on."
"You've lived in Chicago almost your entire life and you've really never been here before?" asked Luka.

"Nope." Susan lay on her stomach on the sand and squinted into the sunshine glittering off the water. Luka sat down beside her and watched the boats for a couple of minutes.

"I found it within a few weeks of moving here. Why didn't you know about it after 30 something years?"

"Could be that it's not in Chicago," Susan said. "Indiana's kind of a foreign country, you know. Or, could be that you have to drive through Gary to get here. Nobody goes to Gary or even through Gary if they have a choice. Never seemed worth the drive."

"So, was it worth the drive?" asked Luka, looking sideways at her.

"Yeah. Definitely worth the drive. It's pretty. Of course, the pleasant company helps too."

"Our tax dollars at work, or something like that." Luka threw a rock into the water, and watched the ripples for a minute. "I made it a point to find all the prettiest places on the lake as soon as I moved here." He smiled. " Took me a little longer to find the prettiest woman." He waited until Susan had blushed satisfactorily, then went on, "I've always liked spending time by the water. I grew up by the water, by the ocean."

"Why Chicago, then?" asked Susan. "If you like water, I figure that somewhere along the ocean would have been more your speed. The U.S. has plenty of ocean-front."

"I did live on the ocean for a while." Luka threw another rock. "When I first moved here I lived in Southern California."

"L.A.?

Luka gave her a withering look. "Over my dead body. No, Santa Barbara. Everyone told me that I'd like that part of the country, that it would remind me of home. The water, the climate, the fresh seafood. So I found a job in Santa Barbara, and moved out there. Lasted about 6 months. I couldn't stand it."

"What was wrong with it? I've been there too. A friend from college lives there. I visited her a few times when I was living in Arizona. I thought it was beautiful."

"It is beautiful. It reminded me of home," Luka said softly. "I didn't want to be reminded of home. I wanted to make a new start. I didn't want to look out my window every morning and see the ocean, and think I was still in Croatia."
"So you moved to Chicago? On the lake?"

"Not right away. I moved around for a while. Lived lots of different places. All away from large bodies of water. I tried a few more cities in California, inland from the coast, then worked my way east again. Colorado Springs, Kansas City, then finally Chicago when I needed water in my life again. Even then, for the first couple of years I spent my winters down south."

"Why?"

"I lived on a boat. On the lake. I really needed water in my life again. But I had no central heating. No heating at all. And the lake tends to freeze up in the winter close to the shore. Wouldn't have been healthy for either of us." He grinned and clarified, "Me or the boat."

"A boat? Like a houseboat?" Susan sounded fascinated.

Luka laughed. "That would be a generous description. No ... just a boat. It was cozy. No heat, no running water. It did have a kitchen of a sort. One of those propane camping stoves." He smiled, lay back on the sand. "I loved it. I think some of my happiest times in America were when I was living on the boat. I felt so ... free. I wasn't. Not really. I would have been freer with a car. But I always felt like ... anytime things got to be ... too much ... I could just get in my boat ... and go ..." He closed his eyes and just enjoyed the warmth of the sun on his face for a minute. "Leave it all behind."

"I guess boats are like that," Susan said softly.

"Yeah. Boats are like that."

"So what made you settle down? Get a real apartment?"

"A real job. I'd been moonlighting; working in hospitals all around the Chicago area ... sometimes even further up the lake. Kerry finally offered me an attending position at County. I couldn't move south for winter anymore, so I needed a more permanent place to live. I sold the boat and used the money to buy a car. I lived in a hotel for a couple of years, while I saved up for furniture and stuff, then I rented my ... our ... apartment."

For a few minutes neither spoke. They just watched the sun on the water, and Luka slowly stroked Susan's hair, warmed by the sun.

"Did she have a name?" Susan asked suddenly.

"Who?"

"Your boat?"

"No, not really. There was a name on the bow when I bought it ... Clarissa, Clarice ... something like that. I was going to change it, but never got around to it. Probably just as well. I would have changed it to something really sentimental like The Danijela, and then I would have never been able to sell it, right? I always thought that naming boats was kind of silly anyway. Just about as silly as calling them 'she'."

It was Susan's turn to give him a sideways look. "Are you saying that I'm silly?"

"Just a little. Or completely insane. But I'm very glad that you are." And Luka was also very glad that there were only a few other people walking on the beach as he lay down beside Susan and took her in his arms and kissed her.
Chapter 47

Susan couldn't remember ever having been so happy. Everything in her life seemed to her to be - simply perfect. Robert, in an apparent fit of temporary insanity, had graciously arranged their shifts so that most of Luka's shifts did match up with hers. So, while she did sometimes work while he did not, (she was, after all, working twice as many hours as he was, 48 hours to his 24,) he was almost never at work without her. So most of their time was spent together. At work they were of course usually busy, so didn't necessarily see much of each other. Susan was often busy with traumas while Luka stayed occupied with minor medical cases and supervising medical students, but when they would pass each other in the hall, their eyes would meet, and Susan's heart would warm at the new light that shone in Luka's eyes, and she would sometimes find herself grinning like a lovesick teenager. And she knew that he was happy too, which made her that much happier still.

Of course, Susan could not deny that much of her own happiness (and, no doubt, Luka's as well), was born of desperation - the constant awareness that they had to, somehow, pack a lifetime's worth of happiness into a few short months. Still, it was easy to forget that too, at least some of the time. Luka was doing quite well, physically. Though his lab reports were persistently grim; the third new drug combination was proving no more effective than the others in bringing his CD4 count up or his viral load down, he felt surprisingly well. No significant infections for several months, not since the pneumonia in March; and none at all since early May; his appetite was good, he had stopped losing weight, he was managing his reduced work schedule without difficulty.

On one especially good day Susan had remarked, only half-joking that maybe there really was something to this God business after all. Luka was, after all, still going to church almost every week. His response had been just a quiet "Maybe," and he'd changed the subject. Luka rarely spoke of his illness at all any more. He preferred to talk to her about other things, happier things.

He would talk to her for hours about his life; his childhood, his kids, medical school, his early years in America. Danijela. Even the war. Sometimes Susan got the sense that he was trying to give her ... himself ... all the memories, the good memories that would otherwise die with him. Some part of him for her to keep forever when he was gone. But he never told her so in so many words, and she never asked. She just listened, occasionally asking a question or two, as they cuddled together comfortably in bed, or on the couch, or on the beach - the Dunes having become their favorite destination on pleasant days when neither one was working. And then, when he was exhausted from talking, he would fall asleep in her arms, or with his head in her lap, and she would sit and watch him sleep, and be perfectly happy.

The one thing they never talked about, besides, of course, Africa - he never talked about that anymore - was the future. There could be no plans for the future. They never made any plans beyond tomorrow, and even tomorrow was uncertain, for no-one could know what might happen tomorrow.

They were living in the moment. Whatever they were doing; making love, or sharing a meal, or a joke, or a wordless glance and smile as they passed in the ER hallway, it was always with the knowledge that this might be the last time, so they had better enjoy it. And then, when the next time came, it was that much sweeter because there had been, in fact, a next time.

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Susan rolled over, half awake, and reached across the bed, and was instantly fully awake as she realized that the other side of the bed was empty. The clock said 3:15. She sat up, blinking the
sleep from her eyes. He was probably in the bathroom. No, the door was open, the bathroom was empty. Susan told herself firmly that she was being ridiculous. He’d probably gone to get a snack, or something to drink from the kitchen. But still, she’d check all the same. She slid out of bed and went to the bedroom doorway and opened the door. And froze there for a moment.

Luka was on the couch. Kneeling on his good leg, the bad leg extended out behind him. His head was bowed on his clasped hands, elbows resting on the back of the couch for support and balance. Even in the dark room she could see that his face was wet with tears slipping from under tightly closed eyelids, and his lips moved in whispered prayer. She caught only a few words ... enough to realize that he was praying in Croatian.

Susan knew that he still went to mass most Sundays. She had offered to go with him, but he'd firmly refused. This was the one thing he had to do by himself. Whatever new understanding he had worked out with God, it was private, between God and himself, and Susan could not intrude there.

She stood in the doorway for an instant longer, her heart aching at the pain on Luka's face, the pain he had not been allowing her to see for so many weeks - the pain he had clearly been choosing to share only with God now. How many times before had he left their bed, left her side, to go pray alone in the darkness? What agony was he still struggling with, alone? No, not alone, she reminded herself. He had found something that was working, helping him cope with his pain. He was truly happy most of the time, Susan was certain of that.

Susan was glad that his eyes were shut, that he hadn't seen her standing there. This was private. After another moment, she turned and went quietly back to bed. When Luka came back to bed himself about 15 minutes later, she pretended to be asleep, and could only hope that he wouldn't notice the tears that were wetting her pillow. He didn't seem to notice. He put his arm around her, rested his face against the back of her neck, and was quickly asleep; relaxed and breathing quietly. But Susan didn't fall asleep again for a long time. She knew that he would never mention this to her, and she could never mention it either.
Chapter 48

Susan had just walked in the door with her bag of groceries when the phone rang. She ran to pick it up. "Hello?"

There was a brief silence, then a thickly accented voice, sounding very much like Luka's said slowly, "Hello? Is Luka in ... house, please?"

Susan hesitated. Luka had been napping when she left. Should she wake him? The caller went on, "This is his fa'zer."

"Yes. Just a minute. I'll get him." Setting the phone down she went into the bedroom. Luka was still asleep. The ringing of the phone hadn't wakened him. "Luka?" She shook him gently and his eyes opened. "Sorry to wake you, sweetheart. Telephone. It's Tata." Luka sat up quickly, and Susan knew he was alarmed. He called his father every month or so to chat but, so far as Susan knew, Tata never called here. For him to call must mean that something was wrong. She handed Luka the bedroom extension.

"Bok, Tata ..." Luka said into the phone, and motioned for Susan to leave the room. She did so, but had to smile. It wasn't like she would understand a word anyway. She still knew almost no Croatian. She hung up the living room phone and returned to putting the groceries away. She could hear Luka talking in the other room and, after a few minutes his voice rose, anxious, then angry. It was hard to not go into the bedroom and see what was going on. Not that it would make any difference, of course. She still wouldn't understand a word.

And suddenly a thought struck her. She knew that Luka's father spoke almost no English ... her brief exchange with him a few minutes before confirmed that. So she was going to have to learn ... at some point ... how to say, in Croatian, 'Mr. Kovač, I'm sorry to tell you that your son died today.' Perhaps Luka could teach her the phrase.

After perhaps 10 minutes Luka's voice fell silent, and a moment later he came out of the bedroom. He went to the fridge, rummaged in it for something to drink.

"Is everything ok?" Susan asked, when it was clear that Luka wasn't going to volunteer anything.

"Yeah. Well ... no, not really," Luka admitted. He poured himself a glass of orange juice. "My uncle had an MI yesterday."

"Bad?"

"Hard to say. He's alive, but hasn't regained consciousness. Tata was pretty vague on the details ... he's upset of course. It sounds like he probably won't make it though."

"I'm sorry."

"And ... Tata wants me to come to Zagreb ... help him understand all the medical stuff ... say goodbye to Uncle Petar." Luka drained his glass, and from the look on his face, Susan knew he was wishing it contained something stronger than fruit juice.

Luka didn't say anything more. "I think that sounds like a good idea," Susan said carefully.

Luka stared at her. "Don't I have enough on my plate right now? I'm supposed to fly halfway around the world to baby-sit my father ... and help bury my uncle?"
"Were you ... are you close? You and your uncle?"

"We were, when I was a kid. I usually see him when I go home for visits, but we really haven't been close for a long time. Not since I left Croatia. I just don't feel any pressing need to do this. I'm sorry if it makes me a terrible person, Susan. My brother is there ... there's other family ... friends. He just thinks that because I'm a doctor, I can explain better what's happening ... maybe change what's going to happen."

He sat down on the couch, picked up the remote and began to look for something to watch.

"I still think you should go, Luka," Susan said. "It would be a good chance to see your father again, and your brother. You're feeling well right now. Why not take advantage of it?"

Luka turned off the tv. "I can't go," he said quietly. "You know that."

"No, I don't know that. We could both go, if you don't feel up to traveling alone."

"I can't see Tata. I can't let him see me. Not anymore." Luka drew his hands down his sides. While he hadn't lost any more weight recently, he hadn't gained any back either. He was still painfully thin. If Tata saw him, Susan knew, he would immediately know that something was badly wrong.

Susan shook her head. "So you still don't plan to ever tell him that you're sick?"

"I can't tell him. He wouldn't understand."

"You thought I wouldn't understand. I surprised you. Why not give him a chance?"

"This is different. Tata isn't young ... he isn't well educated. I love him ... he's my father, but I know that to him, AIDS is something you get from sex ... usually gay sex. I could never explain it to him. What am I supposed to tell him?"

"The truth might be a good place to start," Susan said quietly.

"And you think that would really help? Then he'd have to know that his favorite son ... and yeah ... I'm his favorite son ... had something ... unspeakable happen to him? Whatever I would tell him, it would just hurt him. I can't see any reason to do that."

"So what's the alternative? Never seeing him again? You think it won't hurt him to not have a chance to say good-bye to his favorite son?"

"It happens all the time, Susan. People die suddenly all the time, and there is no chance to say good-bye. When I came to America, and every time I leave after going home for a visit, we both know that it might be the last time we'll see each other. The assumption is usually that he'll be the one to die .. he's in his 70's now, not in the best of health ... but it looks like it will be the other way around." He sighed. "I should have died in Matenda ... medically I mean. I shouldn't have survived that. If I had died there, or in Kisangani, he wouldn't have been able to say good-bye."

"So ... what did you tell him? When he asked you to come?"

"I said I couldn't miss work. He got angry; said family should matter more than work."

"And he's right. He deserves to know, Luka. He deserves the chance to see you. And you need to see him. If you can't tell him the truth ... tell him something else. You said he doesn't know much about medicine. Tell him it's ... something else. Cancer ..."
"I can't lie to him."

"But you expect me to?" Susan asked quietly.

Luka looked startled. "No. I don't expect you to tell him anything."

"I'm going to have to. Eventually." She shook her head as Luka just looked at her, baffled. "At some point here, sweetheart, you are going to be ... off getting reacquainted with Danijela ... and I'm going to be sitting here making a lot of very unpleasant telephone calls. I'm going to have to tell your father that he's just lost his son. And ... as little as he knows about medicine ... I don't think he's going to be satisfied with that. He's going to want to know how ... and I'll need to tell him something."

"You can tell him the truth. Whatever the ... immediate cause of death is. It will probably be some sort of infection, right?" Luka sighed. "Susan, please let me do this my way. I love my father. But it's not like we get together every Sunday after church. I've been back to Croatia 5 times in the past 9 years, since I came to the States. We talk on the phone, I send him money. When I'm dead he will grieve, but for him to know the truth will just make the pain and grief worse." Luka shook his head. "It's hard on parents to see their kids in pain, or worse, to know that they're in pain, and to know that they can't help them. Tata has already seen me suffering. I just don't see how it will help him to know that I'm suffering more. Let him think it was something quick ... something easy. He can't help me, so how would it help either of us for him to know the truth?"

"Closure? For him, and you."

"He'll be able to bury me. That should be closure enough." He hesitated. "I've been thinking about it. I want to be buried at home ... in Vukovar. It's something I'd always thought I'd want, had always planned on. Then, in the past few months, I began to think that maybe I'd be buried here, but the more I think about it, the more I know that my ... original plan ... feels right. Would that hurt your feelings too much?"

"No." Susan smiled a little. "You should be with your kids. And Danijela. Given that we aren't married, I think that anything else would be really hard to explain to your family."

"Ok. I can ... see to making those arrangements ... something you won't have to worry about." He picked up the remote again, then put it down. "I don't know, Susan. I'll think about it. Maybe I'll write him a letter ... something you can see that he gets after I'm gone. I can try to explain some things. But he doesn't have to know. Not now."
The alarm. Luka rolled over and pulled the pillow over his head as Susan hit the 'off' button.

"Rise and shine, sleepy head," she said.

Luka sat up with a little groan. "I'm up. But I won't 'shine' until the sun does. Too damned early."

"You always shine," Susan said. "Even at 5:12 a.m."

He looked at her. "In exchange for that witty, but very sweet lie, I'll make you breakfast this morning. Let me just hop in the shower first."

'Hop' wasn't the quite the right word. 'Stumble,' would have been more accurate. Moving much more slowly than usual, Luka slid out from under the covers, took his crutch, and made his way into the bathroom.

Luka stripped off his shirt and shorts and stood before the mirror for a moment. It was still a shock to see himself, the person he'd become. The inner peace, the contentment; yes, the happiness he felt most of the time now didn't seem to match the man he saw in the mirror. And neither was this, he knew, the man who Susan saw. But the handsome man, the one who 'didn't even have to try,' was long gone; and in his place was a gaunt, scarred stranger.

Much too thin. Ribs, collar bones, hip bones all showed. His appetite was still fairly good, but he'd been losing weight again, even more rapidly than before. He still wasn't used to the scars either. The line across his cheekbone, his wrists and arms, his leg. More scars across his ribs and abdomen. Some new ones from the case of shingles he'd had in the spring. And his eyes. Far too large for his face now, but they looked back at him from the mirror calmly. Despite everything, this was a body he could live with, accept, be comfortable with. Until he had to leave it for something better.

Luka sighed and turned on the shower. He didn't want to keep Susan waiting for her breakfast. He was moving slowly lately. Must be the change of seasons, the shortening of the days. Summer was nearly over.

"Eggs ok for breakfast?" he asked her, doing the last button on his shirt.

"Sure. Two eggs, with cheese. Toast and jelly. Caviar."

"Don't press your luck."

"Thought it was worth a try. I already started the coffee for us." Susan grabbed her robe. "I hope you left me some hot water."

"I never do. Breakfast will be ready when you're ready for it."

Luka limped into the kitchen; he was using his crutch all the time now. Mixing bowl. Eggs and cheese. As he straightened up, the eggs had been on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator, the room suddenly swayed, went gray for a moment. Luka grabbed the edge of the counter and took a deep breath and, after a minute, felt steadier. He pulled a stool over and sat down. Never stand when you can sit, he told himself. And never straighten up so quickly like that. Of course you get dizzy when you do that.
Three eggs into the bowl. Luka reached for the fourth, and watched with oddly detached fascination as it slipped from his fingers and dropped to the counter and rolled slowly, very slowly, across the counter, and fell to the floor.

"Damn." Where was the salt? He found the box, poured some on the egg. He'd ask Susan to clean it up later. He was, after all, making her breakfast. And he wasn't going to bend over again this morning. Another two eggs into the bowl without incident.

Milk. He'd forgotten the milk.

He was so tired this morning. He'd slept badly. He remembered dreaming. Not nightmares, he didn't have those anymore, at least not very often. Just odd dreams. He couldn't remember what they were about though. The milk. He needed to get the milk.

"Luka?" Susan's voice startled him.

"What?" Luka blinked. "The milk ..." His voice sounded strange to his ears.

"Luka, what's wrong?" And Luka realized that Susan was out of the shower and dressed, brushing her hair. How long had he been sitting there? There were five eggs in the bowl. Nothing else. The milk. He was going to get the milk.

"I'm fine." His voice sounded more normal now. "Just a little tired this morning. I must have drifted off."

Susan felt his forehead. "You feel a little warm." She sounded worried, and her eyes were frightened.

"I just had a hot shower; of course I'll feel warm."

"I think we should take your temperature anyway."

"Fine. You get the thermometer, I'll finish the eggs. I checked. We have no caviar."

Luka briskly added milk, salt and pepper to the eggs, and put bread in the toaster before Susan returned with the thermometer. "Watch the floor," he told her. "I dropped an egg. Don't step in it." He opened his mouth for the thermometer, and continued cooking breakfast while waiting for it to register. Susan set the table and poured the coffee. "99.2" he said, when it finally beeped. "Perfectly normal after a hot shower. "And I like my showers hot. I told you, I'm fine."

"Still, if you're tired, maybe you should stay home today. You don't have to work."

"Yes, I do." Luka's voice was quiet but firm. "Can you serve the eggs?" He didn't trust himself to handle the hot frying pan this morning.

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The morning was dragging. Maybe he should have called in. A dull headache. Tomorrow he'd call Marty. Double check that nothing was amiss. No, tomorrow he had a regular appointment anyway.

"So, Mr. Garcia. How long has Angel had the rash?"

"Since yesterday. It's very itchy. He scratches all the time."

Luka reached into his pocket for his penlight. He'd check Angel's throat. Looked like simple contact dermatitis, but best to be thorough - and watched, with the familiar detachment as it slipped
from his fingers and fell to the floor. And the room was suddenly gray again. And he couldn't seem to move. Time stopped.

Dim, echoing, he heard Sam's voice. "Dr. Kovač? Are you ok?"

"I'm fine," he said. Or maybe he didn't. He couldn't seem to hear the words. There was only grayness, and the sound of his own breathing, and his pulse in his ears, both very loud. Then Sam again. "Luka, I think you should sit down for a minute," and a hand on his arm, and something against the back of his knees. But he couldn't sit down. He couldn't move. He knew that if he did anything, even tried to sit, he would fall. A faint sound in his throat, like a whimper. And Sam again, "Mr. Garcia, I'm going to have you take Angel back to chairs for a few minutes. Someone will see him very soon," and then louder, but further away, her hand was no longer on his arm, "Abby! Get Dr. Lewis! Now!"

"She's in a trauma!"

"Get her in here! And I need help."

And then he was falling. And there was only blackness.
Chapter 50

Luka! Luka!" An unbearable headache. A cool hand on his forehead. And a very familiar voice calling his name. Luka opened his eyes. He was still lying where he had fallen. Susan was there, and Sam, and Abby. And an overturned stool. He must have hit his head when he fell, he thought, maybe on the edge of the exam table. That's why it hurt so much.

"I'm ok. I just got dizzy."

"Maybe," Susan said, blinking back tears of relief. "But I think we should work you up."

"No, I'm fine."

He saw the three women look at each other, and Sam said gently, "You had a seizure, Dr. Kovač."

"No," he whispered, but looked at Susan, who nodded.

"It wasn't a bad one, didn't last very long. But we need to figure out what's wrong. Can we help you up onto the table?"

Luka nodded, and winced as nausea swept over him at the movement. He struggled to sit up ... and again the grayness, bright, this time, like an overexposed photograph, he thought, before it darkened into blackness again and he couldn't think at all.

When he opened his eyes again he was lying on the table, and the room seemed to be swarming with people. Susan was still there, and Sam and Abby. And Kerry and Pratt. And couple of med students. And an orderly. And his head ached.

"I'm not a damn teaching case," he growled.

"This is a teaching hospital, Kovać," Kerry said lightly. "Everyone is a teaching case. Even you."

"I'm cold." He was aware that they'd gotten his coat off, and his shirt, and Abby was putting monitor leads on his chest. Had she seen the scars before? He wasn't sure.

"We'll get you a blanket in a minute," Susan said.

"Temp 100.6," said Sam. "BP 110 over 70, pulse 90, resps 18, sats 99 on room air."

All pretty normal, Luka knew, except for a low grade fever. And a blinding headache.

"Do you know where you are?" asked Kerry.

Luka sighed. "Exam 2, County General Hospital, Chicago Illinois. It's Wednesday, September 15th, 2004. My name is Luka Kovač M.D. I'm alert and oriented times 3. I'm fine. I have a headache. And a terminal illness."

Kerry had to smile for a moment, before turning serious again. "You had a seizure, Luka. And you fainted when you tried to sit up. There is something wrong, we need to find out what. Any pain besides the headache?"

"A little nausea. Look... I had a dizzy spell and I fell. I probably hit my head; a slight concussion. That could have caused the seizure. I just need to rest. I can do that at home."
"Possibly. I'd still like to work you up, rule out anything else."

"You weren't feeling well this morning," Susan reminded him gently. And to Kerry, "He may have had an absence seizure this morning, while making breakfast."

Luka sighed again. He wasn't going to win this, and he was much too tired to try and fight them all. "Whatever you want to do. Just get it over with."

"Given your history and the fever, I think an infection is far more likely than a mass, so let's do an LP, see what shows up. If it's clear, we can do a CT." Kerry turned to one of the med students. "Marissa, have you..."

"No!" snapped Luka.

"No LP?" asked Kerry, puzzled.

"Not a student ... I know they have to learn, but not on me."

"Ok. I'll do it?" Kerry suggested. Luka didn't exactly relish the thought of Kerry sticking a needle in his spine either, but given the options ...

"Fine."

Everything was starting to get a little foggy again. The headache was making everything dull. But Luka knew well that, the remote possibility of a mass, a tumor, aside, there were two possibilities here. He could have meningitis. An infection. An infection was usually treatable, or, it would kill him relatively quickly. Either way, it would all be over within a few days, one way or the other. Or his symptoms, the slow thinking, the clumsiness, the seizures, could be symptoms of encephalopathy. Dementia. That would kill him too. But not quickly. Not quickly at all. It would only kill him after it had made his life a complete, living hell first.

"Ok, Luka, just a stick to numb the area first." He felt something cold on his back, and squeezed Susan's hand a little more tightly as the needle with the local anesthetic went in. God ... 10 minutes ago, 15 ... he had been a doctor. There was his coat over the chair. Now he was a patient again.

He managed to smile at Susan. "Honeymoon's over, I guess."

"You could still marry me," she said. "We could have a second one."

"And a little pressure now," said Kerry. "Hold real still now, Luka."

Luka just looked into Susan's eyes for a very long time, until the room began to turn gray again. He tried to speak, but nothing came out.

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He was dead. He was sure of it. He couldn't move, could barely feel his body. No pain, nothing at all. Just a heavy numbness.

But then gradually, the sensation, by now much too familiar, of air being forced into his lungs. God ... he was on a ventilator again. He tried to open his eyes. The lids moved, but seemed very heavy.

"Luka? Sweetheart? Can you hear me?" He managed to get his eyes open, and could feel now, distantly, someone holding his hand. Why couldn't he move? "Luka, can you hear me?" Susan, of
course. Looking exhausted. "Blink your eyes."

He blinked, and tears slipped out.

"It's ok," Susan said quickly. "It's drugs. It's just from the drugs. We've had to keep you heavily drugged, in a coma. It was the only way to stop the seizures." She wiped the tears from his face. "But the worst is over now. We're letting the drugs wear off now and you're getting better. You'll be able to move again soon. They'll take the tube out. Just don't try to fight the vent right now."

Luka closed his eyes. A ventilator. He had not wanted this. He thought he'd been very clear about that. But they hadn't listened to him, had they. Even Susan hadn't listened. He should be dead now. He had thought he could trust her.

It was still so hard to think. Everything was still foggy, dull. He was still so tired. He slept again.

When Luka woke again things seemed better. The tube was still in his throat, but he could move. Susan still sat by his bed. She still looked exhausted, obviously hadn't slept in days. But she managed to smile.

"Hey, look who's awake."

Luka didn't try to smile back. He motioned for a pen and paper. He was clumsy. Frighteningly so. The words on the paper were little more than a scrawl. Barely legible.

'Don't want this.'

"The tube will come out soon. I promise. Probably later today. You haven't had any more seizures, you're breathing on your own now."

Luka just underlined the words again. Why didn't she understand?

She shook her head. "I know. It was what we thought ... what I thought best. You had a good chance. With treatment, there was a good chance that you wouldn't die. I wanted to give you a chance. I wasn't ready to give you up. And I didn't think you were ready to give up yet. We were so happy. We can still be happy, right? We still have time. And it was worth it. You didn't die; you are going to be fine. You just needed help for a few days, like last time ... to get you through the rough spot. Like last time, when you agreed to the vent. If I'd thought it would be ... anything different, I wouldn't have let Kerry intubate you.

'Meningitis?' wrote Luka.

"Yeah. It's been a nasty few days. But you're getting better." She smiled. "You are very hard to kill. You'll probably live forever, y'know."

'Hope not,' he wrote, and closed his eyes, exhausted. No more hospitals. He would forgive her this time. She loved him, and had done what she thought best for him, for both of them. But this could never happen again, because he would never set foot in a hospital again, as a patient. As a doctor, yes, but not as a patient.
Luka shivered as he stepped out of the cab. The late October air was definitely nippy. It might even snow tonight. He didn't take the el anymore. If Susan couldn't drive him places, he took taxis. The fewer germs he could expose himself to, the better for everyone.

He stumbled a bit on the curb, regained his footing. The anti-convulsants, of course. A small souvenir of his last infection had been recurrent seizures. He took anti-convulsant drugs now, on top of everything else. They were effective, but made him a bit light headed and dizzy when he stood up too quickly. But, he was still alive. He was still working. He was still happy with Susan. Every day he could say those three things was a good day.

Luka swapped his outdoor coat for his lab coat, greeted his co-workers, and took a chart from the rack. It took him a moment to clear his vision enough to read it. Abdominal pain. He could handle that.

"Morning, Luka!"

"Good morning, Carter." Still not a word about going back to Africa. Not that Luka was surprised, of course.

"Got lunch plans?"

"It's ... 7:05, Carter. I never make plans more than an hour ahead any more. Seems the safest course of action these days." He reached up to initial the board.

"Come on, live dangerously. Optimism, you know. I hear it's supposed to enhance survival."

"Ok. But only if we eat at 11. Noon might be pushing it a little."

"Fair enough. I'll meet you at 11, patients permitting." Carter gave him a critical look. "Besides, I think you'd starve to death if you waited until noon."

Luka ignored that comment. "Will Sam be joining us?"

"She's not on today."

"Neither is Susan. Robert seems to have it in for us this month. For a while he had us sharing most of our shifts, but no more."


"The heart!" Luka yelled at him. "It's the heart! I do speak a little bit of English you know!" He chuckled and shook his head. What would he do without Carter these days? Susan made him happy, but Carter could always make him laugh.

Luka stirred his soup. It had sounded good on the menu, but didn't look appetizing at all. He knew he needed to eat it. Marty would have his head if he lost any more weight.
"Haven't seen much of you lately," Carter commented.

"Better get used to it." Luka tasted the soup and made a face, opened the packet of crackers.

"Are you this pessimistic with everyone, or am I just special?"

"It's called realism, Carter. I'm alive. I'm thrilled to still be here. But with a CD4 count holding steady at around 10, and a viral load higher than the national debt; realistically, I'm not going to be here much longer. The miracle is that I'm not dead yet. I'm trying to enjoy what time I have, what life I have; working, spending time with Susan. But when it's over, it will be over, and I hope I can go feeling like my life, and this remaining time, has been worth something."

Carter nodded thoughtfully. "So ... I don't suppose I can convince you to stick around until next summer?"

"Depends. What's in it for me?"

"Nice tux; all the good imported champagne you can drink; the chance to tell lots of embarrassing stories about me; the chance to dance with my wife."

Luka felt a grin cross his face. "She said yes?"

"She did."

"And Alex agreed to the Swiss boarding school?"

"Well ... we didn't get around to discussing that part yet. We may have to settle for something more local - like something in Joliet."

Luka smiled again, then sighed. "I'm very honored, Carter, but I'm going to have to decline. Aside from the fact that ... let's see ..." he ticked them off on his fingers, "I don't think they make tuxedos in my size anymore, I can't drink alcohol anymore, I don't know very many embarrassing stories about you, and I don't dance so well anymore - next summer is a very long time away. I can't possibly make any promises, and you know that. Now, if you and Sam want to run over to the court house tomorrow, or fly over to Vegas, I'll do my best to accompany you, stand up with you. Susan tells me that Vegas has some really great wedding chapels. But if not, all I can give you is my sincere congratulations, and wishes for a wonderful life together. You deserve it, Carter."

Back to work. More routine cases. Luka was tired. It was getting hard to make it through a shift, even 8 hours, with a long lunch break and a nap. Just two more hours to go. He'd call Susan and ask her to pick him up at the end of the shift. That way he wouldn't have to cope with a cab.

Suture room. Eight year old boy put his arm through a plate glass window. Elbow lac needing sutures. Yosh had already irrigated it and had the supplies ready for him. "This doesn't look bad at all, Joey. I'll just stitch it up, and it will be as good as new in a few weeks."

"Is that what happened to your arms?" asked Joey. You got cut too?" Luka looked at his own arms, where the scars showed under the edges of his shirt sleeves. Most of his patients were too polite to comment, but kids tended to be more honest.

"Nope. That was something a little nastier than just a cut, I'm afraid. And I didn't have such a good doctor as Dr. Kovač taking care of me. You'll have just the tiniest scar on your elbow. You won't even notice it after a while. I'm very good at this, I promise."

"How many stitches will I need?"
"How many would you like?" Luka injected the lidocaine.

"Can I have a whole bunch?"

"What would you say to four or five?"

"Ok." Joey sounded disappointed. "I thought I'd get maybe 50 or something."

"Fifty? Why would you want 50?"

"To show to all the kids at school. They'd think it was cool!"

Luka smiled and shook his head, took up the needle driver and needle. "This won't hurt a bit."

One suture. Two. He was tired, felt oddly clumsy. Concentrate, Kovač. He wanted to wipe his eyes, but couldn't take his hands from his work. Then his hand suddenly jerked. "Sorry, Joey," he said automatically.

"What?" asked Joey.

Luka started to take a third stitch. And suddenly froze. There was blood on his glove. And it wasn't from Joey's laceration. It was welling out of a tiny hole in the glove.

He felt no pain.

Ok. The needle hadn't yet gone back into Joey's skin. He hadn't touched him. Very deliberately, Luka moved his hands away from his patient's arm. As if from very far away he heard Yosh's voice. "You're fine, Dr. Kovač. You just stuck yourself." Yourself. Just yourself. Yosh cut the suturing material and Luka slowly rose and, very slowly walked to the sink, taking the bloodied needle and needle driver with him. He dropped them into the sink and pulled off his gloves. There was still no pain, though the needle had clearly gone quite deeply into his palm. He'd known his hands were numb. He'd known it for weeks, thought he could work around it, manage. But he couldn't. Not anymore. Luka put pressure on the tiny wound with a piece of gauze.

"Are you ok, Doctor?" asked Joey's mother.

"Sure. I'm fine." Luka managed to fake confidence, cheerfulness. "My hand slipped, that's all. It happens sometimes. I'll need to get someone else to finish Joey's sutures though."

Luka put a band-aid on his hand, threw the contaminated instruments into the sharps container, washed his hands, splashed cold water on his face. He couldn't do suturing any more. It wasn't safe for his patients. But there was still plenty of other work he could do. He knew his own limitations. He didn't look at Yosh as he left the room. "I'll get another doctor," he said again.
Chapter 52

Another shift.

Luka entered the busy ER and smiled a little. Yes, here he was still Dr. Kovač. Here he could still focus on what he could still do, for a few hours out of his week. The patients, most of them anyway, didn't know what he used to look like, used to be like. He was just the doctor they would see today, and then forget. And he could still take care of them. He couldn't save his own life, but he could save a few others. He could still do something to make his existence worthwhile.

"Good morning, Jerry," he said.

"Good morning Dr. Kovač. Dr. Weaver wants to see you first thing."

"Can I take my coat off first?"

"She didn't specify." Jerry picked up the memo. "I quote, 'Have Dr. Kovač come up and see me as soon as he arrives.' Whether that allows for coat removal, I couldn't say."

Luka smiled, shook his head, and went into the lounge. There were med students there, chatting, as usual. A few nurses. Opening his locker, he shed his coat, put on his lab coat, got coffee. At home he drank decaf now, or tea. The caffeine bothered his stomach. But at work he still drank real coffee. One more thing to make him feel like he was still a real doctor. Kerry could wait.

Once upstairs he didn't have to wait at all this time. Kerry's secretary spoke briefly to her on the phone and then said, "Go right in, Dr. Kovač."

The office looked just the same as it had almost exactly a year before, when Luka had come here to ask Kerry for his job back. And he suddenly shivered. He hadn't even thought about what Kerry might want to talk to him about. But the look on her face as she rose to greet him told him that it wasn't going to be anything pleasant.

"Have a seat, Luka," she said, and her voice had the same cool professionalism as her expression.

"Will this take long? Triage was looking pretty packed downstairs."

"It shouldn't take long. There have been some concerns about your work recently. It's becoming increasingly clear to everyone that you are struggling."

"I'm doing fine, Kerry. I haven't missed a shift in over a month. I haven't had an infection in even longer than that. The only thing I can't do any more is suturing - the neuropathy. As soon as I recognized I was having a problem with that, I stopped. Otherwise, my current schedule seems to be working well for me. I can do everything else."

Kerry shook her head. "You've been showing up, but your work, even in other areas, has been far below the standards we've come to expect. You've been making mistakes; a lot of them; putting your patients at risk."

Luka just stared at her for a moment. "No. I've been doing fine. I haven't made mistakes. I would know if I had."

"The other doctors and the nurses have been covering for you, correcting your mistakes." Kerry's voice was very gentle now. "We know how important this has been for you, to be able to work for
as long as possible. But it isn't something they can do any longer. It's risking patient's lives; you are risking patient's lives; and I know that isn't something you would ever want to do. I don't know if it's simple fatigue, or side effects of your medications, or a more direct symptom of the disease, but it's clear to everyone that the work is just too much for you now, Luka. I'm sorry."

Luka could only slump back in his chair, numb. He'd known this moment would have to come eventually. But not like this. He'd thought he was doing well. Why hadn't anyone said anything before? The words came automatically from his mouth, the words he'd said so often before, "I need to work, Kerry."

"We can find you other things to do. There is plenty of work to do around the ER. But nothing involving direct patient care any more."

Anger washed away the numbness like a wave. "Paperwork? Busywork? Something to make me feel useful while I wait to die? Don't bother." He stood up, so quickly that the room swayed for a moment. He had to grab the edge of her desk for a second to steady himself while he adjusted the grip on his crutch and turned to go. "And don't bother coming to my funeral either. I never could stand insincerity."

Luka was shaking, and he knew he was deathly white, but he fought to maintain some semblance of control as he made his way through the busy corridors of the hospital and back downstairs to the ER. He would have given anything to have avoided going back there at all. But he needed his coat and his wallet and keys. All were in his locker. Would he be able to leave without anyone seeing him? Asking questions? Surely they all knew already. Nobody actually expected him to show up for work this morning. He wasn't really needed anyway, of course - his schedule of erratic half-shifts and limited abilities just offered some extra coverage, he was never the only attending on duty.

He made it back to the lounge without anyone seeing him, or at least nobody spoke to him. He should clean out his locker, he thought, as he opened it. It took him three tries to get the combination to work. But he didn't feel like doing it right now, and he didn't have a bag to carry everything home in. He'd ask Susan to do it for him another day. He just took one photograph off the inside of the door. One of several copies he had made years ago. He put it carefully into his pocket.

Taking off his lab coat he started, automatically, to hang it on the hook. No, there was no sense in doing that. He would never need it again. For a moment, Luka held it in his two hands. It was like a second skin ... it was his identity, had been for as long as he could remember. Wadding it into a ball, Luka threw the coat into the trash can.

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The apartment was empty. Susan wasn't working today, she must have gone out somewhere. Luka was grateful for that. He didn't want to see anyone. Not yet.

Putting his purchase, picked up on his way from the el station (he hadn't wanted to wait for a cab) down on the counter, Luka got himself a glass. He wasn't supposed to drink any more. Alcohol was not good for him, lowered his resistance, increased the risk of a seizure, reduced the effectiveness of his medications - not that they were doing a damn bit of good anyway, of course. And he'd been good about that. He hadn't had a drink in months, hadn't gotten drunk in longer than he could remember. But today it wouldn't matter. What was the worst that would happen? It would kill him? He was dying anyway. And it wasn't like he had anything to live for any more anyway,
Vodka hadn't looked good today. Neither had scotch or tequila. He'd finally settled on a bottle of wine. It wouldn't get him quite so drunk, it was true, but it would taste better going down. And, given how long it had been since he'd imbibed, and how thin he was, maybe it wouldn't take as much alcohol as it used to to get him really drunk.

Luka filled the glass, drained it, then refilled it. He lifted it and said aloud, "Here's to you, Kerry - Fuck you." and drank down the second glass. For a really cheap wine - he hadn't bought it for taste or the cachet after all, but for the alcohol content, it was remarkably drinkable. A third went down just as easily, and he could feel the alcohol starting to affect him, not an unpleasant feeling at all.

Halfway through the fourth, suddenly, a far too familiar, and much less pleasant feeling - nausea. Luka bolted for the bathroom, and barely made it before the wine came up, along with the coffee and his breakfast.

Sitting on the bathroom floor, shaking, Luka no longer felt the least bit tipsy. Just weak and nauseated. Hell - what a caper to his morning. After everything else, he couldn't even get drunk any more. When he felt able to stand again, albeit shakily, he went back into the kitchen, poured the rest of the wine down the sink and put the bottle in the bottom of the trash. Susan would only ask too many questions if she knew. Then he went to bed.

He was just starting to drift off to sleep when he heard the front door open and close and then, a moment later, Susan's voice calling, "Luka? Are you home?"

"Yeah! I'm in the bedroom!" he called back, and Susan was there, concern etched on her face.

"What's wrong? Are you sick?"

"Besides the usual you mean? No, I'm fine."

"You had a shift today, didn't you?"

"That was the plan," Luka said quietly.

"What happened, Luka?" Susan sat down beside him.

"Kerry fired me."

Susan shook her head. "No. She can't do that, Luka. She cannot fire you, not for having AIDS."

A deep breath. "Ok. She didn't precisely fire me. I can keep working, if I'm willing to spend my days sitting at a desk shuffling papers, doing chart reviews and whatever other busy work they can come up with for me ... until I'm too weak to get out of bed any longer, or I drop dead from sheer boredom. But I can't see patients any more. I can't treat patients any more."

"Oh, Luka ... I'm sorry ..." Susan said softly. Then, "We knew it would have to happen though ... eventually."

And Luka suddenly caught his breath. "You knew! You've known for days - weeks - haven't you?"

Susan stared at him. "Known what?"

"About this! Kerry said that people have been covering for me ... I've been screwing up and the other docs have been covering for me .. protecting me ... fixing my mistakes. Which would include
you. We've worked the same shift more than once. How many mistakes have you corrected? How many scrips did you rewrite for me ... how many diagnoses did you second guess?"

"None, Luka. I swear I didn't know anything about it. If they were going to such trouble to protect you, they would have been protecting me too, right? They couldn't have risked me telling you."

"I just wish somebody had ... I would rather have known."

"I'm sure they thought they were doing what was best for you. This way you got to work a little longer than you might have otherwise."

"Or pretend to work. Was I really doing anything these past few weeks ... or just playing at it?"

"I'm sure you helped a lot of patients, saved a few lives along the way."

"It's just ... I hate this disease. It takes everything away. I can stand dying ... but why does it have to take everything away first?"

"It won't take everything," Susan reminded him gently. "It will never take me. I'll always be here."

Susan was fixing lunch when the door buzzer rang. Luka went to answer it. "Yeah?"

"Luka? It's Abby."

Luka turned to look at Susan in surprise. How long had it been since Abby had been by? She had visited a couple of times during the summer. Uncomfortable, awkward visits. Susan shrugged. "Sure, come on up, Abby," Luka said.

He opened the door for her. She looked a bit pale, and more than a bit awkward and uncomfortable. So, what else was new? "Hi, Luka. Hi, Susan."

"We're just getting ready to eat lunch," Luka said. "There's plenty if you want to stay and join us." Susan always made twice what he could manage to eat any more ... somehow thinking that if she cooked it, he would eat.

"No, I can't stay very long. I need to get back to work. I just ..." She opened the bag she was carrying. "I found this in the lounge," she said rapidly. "I would have put it in your locker, but I didn't know the combination. I didn't want it to get lost, or maybe someone else pick it up by mistake. I guess you just forgot to hang it up ... put it away. I didn't want you to wonder where it was when you came in next time."

His coat. Luka reached out and took it from her. There was nothing else he could do. There was a coffee stain on the sleeve from someone's discarded coffee cup. "Thanks." He could feel Susan watching him, watching them, puzzled. Quietly,"You didn't find it in the lounge, Abby. I left it ... where I left it, for a reason. And I know you know what that reason is. So don't pretend to be stupid. It doesn't become you." He limped over to the couch, sat down. Abby followed, continued talking softly.

"I just didn't want you to do something you'll regret later. I know you're angry. I would be too. But I think you'll want to hold on to that."

"For what? So I can be buried in it? I don't need it any more."

"Maybe someone will want to have it. Maybe your father? I know he's so proud of you, Luka."
He hadn't thought of that. Yeah ... maybe someone would want to have it. He'd have to think about it.

From the kitchen Susan said, "Lunch is ready. Are you sure you don't want to stay, Abby? We can put out another plate, it's no trouble."

"No, I need to get back to work. I'm just on a half hour lunch break and I'm going to be late getting back as it is." She got up. "I'll be seeing you, Luka. I can let myself out."

Luka just nodded. He wouldn't see her again. And his heart hurt at little at that. Something else he had ruined in his life. They could have been friends, stayed friends, if he hadn't been so afraid those first few months back home in Chicago. But then, time got away from them, and now it was too late. "Bye, Abby," he said softly, but she probably didn't hear him.

He heard the door open and close, and Susan said, "Are you coming to eat lunch?"

"In a minute." His voice broke. He held his coat in his hands, crushing it in his fists. Then he buried his face in the cotton fabric and cried.
Chapter 53

Susan turned off the stove. "Breakfast is ready. Are you coming?"

Luka didn't answer. He'd been standing at the window, leaning on his crutch, staring out at the snow flurries, for a good 20 minutes.

"Luka?"

"I'm not hungry."

"You need to eat a little."

"Why?" Short and bitter.

"You'll feel better if you eat. Susan poured the tea, put the food on the plates. "You like blueberry pancakes." She heard the pleading tone slip into her voice.

Luka just took his coat from the rack. "I'm going out. For a walk."

"Don't go far, ok?"

No response, just the slamming of the door behind him. And Susan sank down at her own place at the table, her head bowed over her plate. Her own appetite was gone. After a few minutes she got up and went to the window, looking up and down the street. She didn't see Luka. He couldn't have gone that far yet. He moved so slowly these days. Then she saw him sitting on the front stoop. Just sitting. Anything was better than being in the apartment with her.

The past two weeks had been hell. For both of them. No longer able to work, Luka was growing, daily, more depressed and withdrawn. Susan had immediately taken a leave of absence from work herself. She knew he didn't have a lot of time left, and wanted to spend whatever time he had left together. Luka though, had other ideas. He barely spoke to her anymore, growing more bitter and angry by the day. Preferred to use his waning strength walking around the neighborhood rather than talking with her. He hadn't had the energy for lovemaking for quite some time, but he kept far to his edge of the bed now, meeting any attempt at a touch from her with his most common words these days - "Leave me alone!" And often he'd then get up and leave the bed altogether, going to look out the window for a while, or leave the room without another word.

And he slept badly. His sleep was restless, filled with dreams again, or nightmares. But not the old ones anymore. He called out in his sleep; desperate, afraid. For Danijela. And he cried in his sleep. Too often she would wake to find him gone from their bed, but she wouldn't find him at prayer any more. Instead, she would find him just sitting, staring into space, or with his head in his arms, or looking at Danijela's picture.

He would never tell her what was wrong, what was troubling him so much. "You can't help." "Let me try," she would say. And then the usual, "Just leave me alone!" She offered to take him to church again, or to call Father James to come see him, suggested that he call the priest again. All these suggestions too brought curt refusals and "Just leave me alone!"

Luka barely ate any more. Worsening nausea and diarrhea were part of the problem, but he just had no appetite. Susan tried to fix things she knew he liked, things she hoped would stay down. But it grew increasingly clear to her, as the days passed, that the problem was a much more basic one than nausea. Luka had done what he had said he was going to do so many months before. When he
could no longer work, he would have nothing left to live for. He had given up.

He was going through a rough time, Susan knew. Things would get better, they had to. Stopping work had been a shock, had brought the reality of his illness, his impending death, home to him. He would regain his footing again, his sense of peace. He had to. But things didn't get better. Luka seemed determined to die, and die alone, without comfort.

Two people in a two room apartment, one living, one dying. Each alone.

- Susan was scraping the cold pancakes, hers and Luka's, into the disposal when the door buzzer rang. She ran to answer it. "I didn't bring my keys," Luka said, and she buzzed him in. Once through the door, he didn't speak to her. Just hung up his coat and went into the bedroom. After a moment she heard voices and, puzzled, went to the bedroom door. He was on the phone, speaking in Croatian. Impatiently, he motioned for her to leave the room, as he always did when calling home.

Susan retreated hastily, but felt a glimmer of hope. He was talking to someone, presumably Tata. This was an improvement. He hadn't allowed Susan to have company over, not even Carter, whose company he usually enjoyed. They had been alone together in their individual misery for weeks. If he was talking to Tata, perhaps he was starting to feel better.

After a bit, Luka came out of the bedroom, poured himself some tea from the pot.

"I can make some fresh," Susan said quickly. "That's cold."

"It's fine." Luka sipped the cup.

"Talking to Tata?" Susan asked after a moment.

"Yeah. I owed him a call."

"How is he?"

"He's fine. Arthritis in his knee has been bothering him." Another sip. "He wanted to know if I'm coming home for Christmas this year." The faintest hint of a smile. "I told him maybe. I might be, you know."

"I know."

"He said I didn't sound well ... wanted to know if everything was ok."

"What did you tell him?"

"That ... I'm tired. I'm having a rough week. Which is true." Luka poured the rest of his tea down the sink, set the cup down carefully. "I told him I loved him." A sigh. "I am tired. I'm going to take a nap."

Luka slept better in the daytime than at night now. The nightmares, or dreams, or whatever they were, didn't seem to bother him as much during the day. Or maybe, Susan thought, it was that she wasn't lying beside him during the day. He went into the bedroom again. Shut the door firmly behind him.

Susan sat wearily on the couch. She was tired too. She wasn't getting much sleep herself. She
stretched out, pulled the afghan over herself. But sleep didn't come. Why was he doing this? Was he pushing her away, thinking it would somehow make it easier for her? That if he said good-bye now, they wouldn't have to do it later? Or was he in so much pain that he didn't even realize how much he was hurting her? How long had it been since he'd told her that he loved her?

She must have finally drifted off to sleep, because when she opened her eyes again it was 11:30. She got up and peeked into the bedroom. Luka was still asleep, restlessly. He'd probably be getting up soon. She should make him lunch. Something light. He hadn't had breakfast, so he'd probably manage to eat a little something. Maybe the ginger tea he liked. It helped the nausea and usually stayed down when nothing else did. And toast and jam. If he managed that, she could make something else for him.

Going into the kitchen, Susan brushed against a small stack of papers on the counter, and they spilled over. She stopped to straighten them up, and one suddenly caught her eye. It was a notice from St. Charles. It was out of date, from early in the fall. Luka must have brought it home from church months ago and forgotten about it. But it had a phone number on it.

She had offered to call before, and he had refused. Maybe it was time to take matters into her own hands. Maybe, she thought ... this was a sign ... Susan took the paper over to the telephone.
He put down his pen and leaned back in his chair. This was the hardest part of the job, he thought. Coming up with something new and different to say every week. And he'd just been at this for a few years now. How did the priests who'd been doing this for decades manage it?

The phone rang and, grateful for the distraction, he picked it up. "Father McLachlan."

A woman's voice. Immediately he could tell that she was nervous, anxious. "Father James?"

"Yes."

"You don't know me. I'm Susan Lewis; I'm a friend of Luka Kovač."

Father James immediately sat up straighter in his chair. Luka. The troubled man who had come to see him months before, so distraught, so ill. He had seen Luka at mass quite regularly for a while, still thin and pale, the pallor still visible even beneath his summer tan. He'd seen him stand a little taller, a little straighter, a little more confident as the weeks had passed. Seen the pain fade from his eyes to be replaced by a new calm, a new peace; even as he had grown physically more frail. And then, quite suddenly, he had disappeared. Father James had been worried about him, terribly worried. He'd considered phoning or visiting him at home, but realized that he had no way of contacting him. Luka had never even given him his last name. He had finally assumed, in all honesty, that Luka had succumbed to his illness, and could only pray that he had made his peace with God before doing so.

And now this call. From Susan. Surely that was the name of the woman he had been seeing. His girlfriend. Perhaps THIS was the call then. She would ask him to perform a funeral service.

"Yes, Susan. Luka spoke of you. I ... I've been worried about him, haven't seen him here for quite some time."

"He's been too ill to get there. I offer to drive him, I have a car, but he won't let me. He says he doesn't want to go any more. He says ... it doesn't help any more." Susan's voice broke. "But I think it does. When he was going, when he was ... praying ... he seemed so much better. Now he's so depressed ... afraid ... he sleeps so badly." The words spilled out faster and faster, more and more anxious. "Physically, he's much worse, he doesn't have very much time left ... we're getting to the end ... but it's the emotional side that I'm worried about. It's like he's pushing me away. I just don't know what to say to him any more. I want to comfort him, help him ... but I don't know how ... he won't let me. Whatever I say, it seems to be the wrong thing."

"Would you like me to come and talk with him?"

"If you could."

"Yes, of course. I can come right away if you like."

"Thank you. But ... Father James. He might not be glad to see you. He doesn't know that I'm calling. I've offered to call, several times before, and he got angry, said no. Had some ... fairly choice words to say about priests. He's asleep right now ... doesn't know that I'm talking to you."

"I'll handle it."

The priest got the address from Susan, gathered some things together, and hurried out into the
chilly November day.

The door was opened by an attractive blonde woman; attractive, but pale and tired looking. "You must be Susan," he said.

"Come in, Father." she said. "Watch the steps."

He had expected that Luka would be in bed, and was surprised to see him sitting at the table in the kitchen area of the apartment's living space. And even more surprised when he rose from his seat and offered his hand in greeting.

"Father James." Luka's voice was a little more hoarse than he remembered it, but his handshake was still firm. His hand though was little more than bones now, and so was his face. The baggy sweater and sweat pants no doubt covered a body that was equally thin and gaunt. "Can I get you something? There's a fresh pot of tea. Decaf, ginger tea I'm afraid. Or I could make you some coffee."

"Ginger tea would be fine. And decaf is great. I get too much caffeine as it is." Father James watched as Luka took his crutch and walked slowly to the stove, poured the tea. It seemed to require a lot of concentration, but Luka was, clearly, determined to be the good host still, so he would let him do so.

When the cup was safely on the table Susan said, "I'm going to go out for a bit. We need groceries and I need to refill some prescriptions for you. I'll be back in an hour or two."

James saw Luka shoot her a look, half pleading, half anger; but she resolutely put on her coat, picked up her purse, and walked out the door. After it closed, there was a silence. He sipped his tea, watched Luka stare into his own cup, crumble the remains of his piece of toast into crumbs.

"How have you been, Luka? I've been concerned about you."

"I'm not dead yet." Another silence. A deep breath. "I couldn't come to mass anymore. I've been too sick. I was in the hospital for a while. It's a long drive. I didn't mean to worry you. I should have called, let you know I was ok. I'm sorry. And Susan shouldn't have ... put you to all this trouble."

"It's no trouble. She's been worried about you too."

"I'm dying, Father. This shouldn't be a great surprise to her by now."

"That's not what has been worrying her. I think she's concerned about your spiritual health, not your body. This is the time when you need to be getting closer to those who love you, Luka. To Susan, and to God. You don't want to be pushing them away now. You need to be comforting each other."

"I don't know how."

"How to what?"

"To comfort her. I'm going to die ... she'll be alone. What can I say that will make that better? I know what it's like to be ... left alone by those you love. There's nothing that makes it better."

"You can let her be with you now, while she still can. Share the time you have left. Let her know you aren't afraid of what's coming."

"But I am ..." Barely audible. "I wasn't before. But now I am." Luka got up, put his dishes in the sink, leaned his tall form against the counter. "I've been having ... dreams ... terrible dreams."
Father James remembered Luka telling him of the nightmares that had plagued him for so long. Had those returned again? "What do you dream about?"

"I dream ..." Luka licked his lips, shut his eyes. "I dream that I'm dead. I've just ... died. And I'm ... I open my eyes and I'm looking for Danijela."

"Your wife?" James clarified, and Luka nodded.

"I can't find her ... because it's dark. There's nothing there ... just dark. I can hear her voice, and she sounds ... happy, so I know that where she is ... it must be light ... beautiful ... I'm calling her, but she can't hear me. And I can't find her, I can't get to her ... and I'm so afraid ... in my dream ... that I'll never be able to find her. I can almost bear it, because I know that she is happy ... but I don't want it to be like that." Luka wiped the tears from his face. "I can't make the dreams stop ... they're always there when I sleep now. I don't want to sleep any more. And I don't want it to be like that."

"It won't be like that." James said firmly. "It's just a dream, Luka. We sometimes dream about things that have happened to us, or of things we are afraid of, but dreams don't predict the future. Death is frightening. No matter how ready we are, how certain in our faith, it's still something unknown to us. Seeing Danijela again, being with her again, that's what you are wanting the most?"

Luka nodded, sat down again finally. "For 13 years now."

"So it's natural that all your fears about dying; about the unknown, about leaving Susan, about the pain still to come; will all come together into one dream about your greatest fear - that you won't be with Danijela."

"I prayed ... for God to stop the dreams ... but He didn't."

"Have you told Susan about them?"

"No. How can I tell her?"

"She knows about Danijela, doesn't she?"

"Yes, of course. And she's ... wonderful about it, about her." He smiled a little. "Teases me sometimes that I'm leaving her for another woman." But I know it still hurts her I don't want to hurt her more."

"The worst thing you can do right now, for both of you, Luka, is to hide your pain from her. Share what you are feeling, what you are afraid of. Face it together. Let her help you. God brings people together so we don't have to face things alone. If you share your pain with her, and with God, it will lessen it for you. And that will make things easier for Susan, because she won't have to see you suffering so much."

Luka nodded slowly. "I suppose."

"Would you like me to pray with you, while I'm here?" Another nod, silent this time.

The sound of a key in the lock. Father James looked up from his book as the door opened and Susan came in. He jumped up quickly to help her with her bags of groceries.
"Where's Luka?" she asked.

"Asleep." Father James nodded towards the couch, where Luka lay stretched out, sleeping quietly.

"Does he feel any better?" Susan whispered.

"I think so. We talked for a while, prayed for a while. I think it was what he needed."

He watched as Susan walked over to the couch and looked down at Luka for a minute, tucked the afghan more snugly over him, kissed him. And her hand touched his forehead for a moment, where the smudge of oil was still visible under the fringe of his hair. She smiled, and returned to the kitchen. "Thank you."

"Feel free call me any time." He hesitated. "Have you discussed arrangements?"

"He'll be buried at home, in Croatia. That's where his family is. The funeral will be there. But I will call you, if he needs to talk to you again."

"You can talk to me too, Susan. Any time."

Susan shook her head with an embarrassed smile. "I'm not Catholic."

"Any time, Susan." Father James repeated.

"Thank you. I will."

"I'll be expecting to hear from you then." As Father James turned towards the door, he saw Susan return to Luka's side, sit on the floor beside him, lay her head against his chest. And Luka sighed a little in his sleep, put his hand on Susan's head to stroke her hair, but didn't waken.
Luka sat doubled over, retching into the basin Susan held for him. Finally he lay back onto the pillows, exhausted.

"Time for another shot of Compazine, I think," Susan said brightly. She set the basin down and gently wiped Luka's face before opening the drawer and taking out the syringe. "I have to call Carter, have him bring us some more. There's just one more shot."

"Don't bother," Luka murmured. "Doesn't really help. Just makes me sleep."

"It's better than nothing, isn't it?" Luka had been sick for over a week now; low grade fever and endless vomiting. At first the Compazine had helped, but it was growing less effective. Luka winced a little as Susan injected the dose. It was getting hard to find a spot with enough muscle mass left.

"Not really," he said. "I just get a shot and I throw up." He watched her drop the used syringe into the improvised 'sharps' box. "You should be wearing gloves."

"We're out of those too." A lie. Susan just hated wearing gloves while caring for him. Hated making him feel that he was ... contaminated. "I'm being careful."

She looked at his face for a moment. He looked horrible. There was no other word to describe it. After a week of being able to keep virtually nothing down, he was thinner than ever, the skin yellowish gray, and taut over the bones of his face. But the peace was back in his eyes. They'd had a couple of good weeks - happy weeks, after Father James' visit, and now this. But he would get over this, Susan told herself firmly, and they'd have a little more good time. He was still so strong. Even with this current infection, it had just been since the day before yesterday that he'd been too weak to get out of bed. They still loved each other so much. He wouldn't leave her yet.

Susan sighed. "Well, we have to do something. Without the Compazine, you can't keep anything down."

"If I don't try to eat, I don't throw up."

"You have to eat." The words came automatically. Then, Luka's hand, so thin, caught her arm. His eyes, so large, so calm, like the sea after a storm, looked into hers.

"No," he said quietly. Very quietly. "I don't."

"Luka ..."

"This isn't ... a bad way to die. I'm already dehydrated; it shouldn't be much longer. I'm not in much pain. I'm so tired. I'm ready to go. I want to go."

Susan swallowed the lump in her throat. She had thought she would be ready. Whenever the time came. "You're sure?" she finally asked.

"I've been sure for a while. A few days. There's just ... no point in this any more ... for either of us. Even if I got through this, somehow; it would be something else in a few days. I'm done. I want to stop. I just didn't know how to tell you."

"Well ... you told me."
"Are you angry?"

"No." Susan took a deep breath. "I told you a long time ago that this had to be the way you wanted it; however it would be easiest for you."

"It's just ... kind of sudden."

Susan just nodded, picked up the emesis basin. "Let me get rid of this." She fled into the bathroom, shut the door. She emptied and rinsed the basin, washed her hands, then splashed cold water onto her face. Sudden? It was what they had known was going to happen for over a year now. Since that day, almost exactly a year ago, she realized, when she'd sat in his living room and told him that she wanted to be with him ... be more than just a friend ... she had known that it would end this way. But all that mattered now was that it would be as easy as possible for Luka. She'd have plenty of time to deal with her own pain. Later. She steadied herself and returned to the bedroom, sat down on the bed.

"Do you umm ... want me to call Father James for you?" she asked.

Luka thought about that. "Not ... right now. Maybe later. I'm tired." A faint smile. "Damned Compazine. I need to sleep for a while."

"Ok." She smiled back. "I'll catch up on my soaps."

"Better not." His meaning was clear, though his smile told her that he knew full well she was teasing. The tv was in the living room. A sigh. "I'm cold."

Susan slid under the comforter beside him, nestled up against him. He was shivering, his skin was cold to the touch and a bit damp. "Better?" she asked, and kissed the back of his neck.

"Yeah. Much." He found her hand and held it. "I love you, y'know."

"I know." But he didn't hear it, because he was asleep.

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Luka slept, but Susan didn't. She knew she wouldn't sleep. Not until this was over. She couldn't risk being asleep when anything happened. And she wasn't going to miss a moment.

After a few hours, Luka stirred and wakened. Sitting up, Susan looked down at him and smiled. God .. he looked awful. It was ironic, she suddenly realized. In the ER, she dealt with death every day. But it wasn't that often that she saw people as ill as Luka. People in the final stages of terminal illnesses rarely came into the ER; being treated instead directly on the medical floors, or in hospices. Or at home. So many of those who died in the ER had been healthy until hours, sometimes moments before. And, of course, usually in the ER, death was an enemy to be battled, fought off at all costs. Not a welcome release. Yet, why was it the doctors, the ones who did the fighting on behalf of their patients, who so often refused such efforts for themselves?

She realized that she'd been looking at him for several minutes, that she needed to say something.

"How are you feeling?" she asked. Stupid thing to say.

"Thirsty."

"Could you try to take a little ..."
"No!

Susan shook her head helplessly. "We could start an IV for you, sweetheart. Just some fluids. It would make you more comfortable." She wasn't ready. She wasn't.

"No." He took her hand. "I'm sorry. I won't complain."

"You could try some ice chips. Or a few sips of ginger tea. You've been able to hold that down pretty well. Just enough to wet your mouth. It probably won't make you throw up, and you'd feel better."

Luka nodded, resigned. "I'll try."

"Which one?"

"Ice."

Susan ran to the kitchen, and brought back a cup of crushed ice from the refrigerator door and a spoon.

But she used her fingers to put a few chips between Luka's cracked lips. "Don't swallow it," she warned. Luka nodded, looking into her eyes. "Good?" Another nod.

"A little more?" Luka asked, after a minute, and Susan gave him a little more. A mistake. Whether he swallowed instinctively, or the melted ice in the back of his mouth was enough, he suddenly gagged, and was retching again before Susan had time to grab the basin. His stomach was empty, there was nothing to bring up, but he heaved for a long time while Susan supported his shoulders.

After several endless minutes the spasm ended. Susan said, "Are you done?"

Luka nodded. "Think so..." He was shaking, and Susan helped him lie down again. "Bad idea," he said, and managed to smile a little.

Susan didn't trust herself to speak; could just nod. She went again to empty the small amount of blood streaked bile from the basin, returning with a warm, wet washcloth, which she used to gently wipe Luka's face. It was clammy with sweat, and there was a little moisture around his eyes that might have been tears.

After a minute, Luka reached up and touched her cheek for an instant, then his arm fell weakly back to the bed. And Susan realized that she was crying.

"This isn't so bad," he said softly. "I've had ... hangovers that are worse."

Susan had to laugh a little through her tears. Comforting each other. That was all they could do now.

"You should get some lunch," he said after a bit. "Just 'cause I'm not eating, doesn't mean you can't."

"I'll eat later. Maybe when you're sleeping again. I'm not hungry right now."

"Yeah. I guess watching someone else throw up kills the appetite, doesn't it?"

A little more silence. It was hard to think of anything to say. Anything that didn't sound like dialogue from a bad 1930's romance movie, Susan thought.
"Is it snowing?" Luka asked after a while. Susan had to go to the window to look.

"No. It's sunny today."

"Open the blinds? So I can see?" Susan did as he asked. The sky was a brilliant blue.

"It's a nice day," she said.

"Yeah. We should go to the beach."

"Not that nice. A little too nippy, I think." She sat back down, smoothed the comforter over him.

"Think I'll catch cold?" Luka asked with a smile.

"No, but I might."

"No, you never get sick."

"Well, if it's still nice out tomorrow, we can go tomorrow," Susan said.

"I'll hold you to that." He looked out the window for a moment. Then, abruptly. "Do you think I might die today?"

Susan could just shrug. "I don't know. Maybe."

"You're a doctor. You're supposed to know stuff like that."

"I'm not a doctor today." She wasn't. She was just a woman about to lose the best thing that had ever happened to her. Making idle conversation about nothing, because that was what he seemed to want right now.

"What day is it?"

"Ummm... Tuesday."

"What date?"

Susan had to think about this one. She'd lost track of the date lately. It hadn't seemed important. "The 14th, I think."

"January?"

"No, December."

"Hmmm... I'll spend Christmas with my kids."

"Yeah. That'll be nice."

He looked at her for a moment. "I'm not scared." Very calm. She knew he was telling the truth.

"I know. Why should you be? There's nothing to be scared of."

"I am tired though."

"You sleep some more then. I'll be right here." It wasn't the Compazine, of course. They both knew that.
"No ... you get something to eat. Need to take care of yourself too."

"Ok. I'll do that. After you're asleep." She kissed him and sat beside him until he fell asleep again. And couldn't make herself leave his side to get anything to eat.

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The next couple of days were, for Susan, a bizarre mixture of heaven and hell. There was something strangely satisfying in caring for Luka, tending to his needs. She saw that he was as comfortable as it was possible to make him. She bathed him and changed his clothes, shaved him, moistened his parched lips. And could be glad that he was spending his last days as he had hoped he would, at home, with her, not in a hospital bed, hooked up to machines. Not dying as they had both seen so many people die over the years. He assured her, several times, that he was in little pain, nothing he couldn't cope with.

But the rest was hell.

At first he was relatively alert. They'd talk a little while he was awake, usually about inconsequential things still. But soon he slept more and more, and his waking moments were less and less lucid, more confused. He would ask questions that made little sense, or not seem to understand the answers. He would talk to her in Croatian, rambling, hoarse; call her Gordana, or Mama. (Susan had to smile a little at that one. She had seen a picture of Luka's mother. They didn't look even remotely alike.) But never Danijela. He always knew that she wasn't Danijela. He would try to get out of bed, though he no longer had the strength to even raise his head from the pillow. He no longer seemed to understand much of what she said to him, but would just watch her, wide eyed, and a little bit frightened, as she patiently cared for him, doing the little things that needed to be done. She just kept telling him that everything was ok, that there was nothing to be scared of ... and could only hope that he understood more than he appeared to. "Volim te, Luka. Volim te," she told him many times. One of the few Croatian phrases she knew. He had said it to her often enough. I love you. This he seemed to understand, even if he didn't always know who she was anymore. It would make him smile a little.

And then he would drift off to sleep again, and when he woke the next time, he would sometimes be lucid again. Ask her how she was feeling, tell her how tired she looked, but how beautiful, and how much he loved her. That he really wasn't afraid. Ask her what day it was, and then fall asleep again before she could tell him. And sometimes he would moan in his sleep, and seem to be in pain, though she couldn't figure out what was hurting him, and when he woke up, he would always insist that there was no pain ... assuming of course that he understood what she was asking him.

Sometimes she would lie beside him; hold him while he slept. And she thought that he might die in her arms. But the thought didn't strike her as romantic or beautiful. Because, at the end of it, he would be dead. And there could be nothing romantic or beautiful about that. Not for her, anyway. She never left his side, never even let go of his hand, for longer than it took to use the bathroom, or fill a fresh basin of water for his bath, or grab herself a quick snack, when she could go without food no longer.

And there were seizures. Just a few at first. He had stopped taking his anti-convulsants; he couldn't keep those down either. But they got worse as the days passed.
Frank picked up the phone "ER ... anyone in particular, Dr. Lewis? Hold on."

Carter had looked up from his charting as he heard Frank mention Susan's name. "Can you take this call from Dr. Lewis? She asked to speak to any of the doctors or nurses, but preferably Dr. Carter."

Carter had the phone out of Frank's hand before he'd finished speaking. "Susan? It's John."

"Hi, Carter." Even in those two brief words, Carter could hear the exhaustion in her voice; exhaustion, and something more. "Would you do me a favor?"

"Sure. If I can."

"I need some things for Luka. I can't leave him alone. Just a few things ..."

"How is he?" Carter asked gently.

"Dying." Susan's voice broke, and she steadied it. "He isn't ... I don't think he's suffering."

"What things do you need?" Carter asked, taking out his prescription pad and ripping off a blank form, turning it over.

"Some Ativan ... just a few vials I think ... and syringes ... ummm ... some ... artificial tears ... some valium if you can ... but don't worry about it if you can't."

"Do you need morphine?"

"I don't think he's in pain." Susan's voice sounded far away. "Not anymore."

"Ok. I'll bring those things right out to you." Carter hung up the phone, said to Frank, "I'm taking a break. I may be gone a while."

Susan opened the front door, and Carter's first thought was that she looked even worse than she'd sounded on the phone. She'd passed far beyond exhaustion, seemed to be sleepwalking - functioning on adrenaline. Or grief. She was pale, her hair stringy and unkept. She managed to smile at Carter and reached out to take the small bag from him.

"Thanks, Carter."

"Could I come in?"

Susan looked startled, then smiled again and nodded. "Yeah ... sorry. I'm not thinking." She turned back towards the bedroom, and Carter followed her. "He started having seizures a few hours ago. He'd been having them for a couple of days, but they got much worse. I couldn't get them to stop. They finally stopped a little while ago ... but he didn't wake up." More softly. "I don't think he's going to wake up."

"With multiple seizures, status, he could still just be postictal."

Susan shook her head. "His right pupil's blown. Left one isn't much better."

They'd reached the bedroom. Susan went in, but Carter just stood in the doorway a moment. It had
been about a week since he'd seen Luka, and the change was astonishing. A week ago he'd been ill, thin and weak. But they had visited for a while. Luka had laughed and joked as they'd talked about Carter's wedding plans, about the upcoming holidays. About the future that they had both known, even then, Luka would never see.

Today Luka was clearly, as Susan had said, dying. He lay utterly still, except for the very rapid rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. His eyes were open, but they gazed blankly at nothing. Susan had been taking excellent care of him though, far better care of him than she had of herself. He was freshly shaved, clean, his hair combed.

"The seizures seem to have stopped," Susan said again. "But I wanted the Ativan, in case they started again. I would have called sooner, but I couldn't leave him ... even to go to the phone." She sat down, opened the bag, fumbled inside of it.

"I brought you the Valium too."

Susan just nodded, spoke to Luka. "Ok, Luka. I'm going to make you a little more comfortable now." She put the drops into his eyes. "I'd been using water," she told Carter. "This is better."

Carter looked at Luka for moment, touched his hair, then said to Susan, "You know, Susan, he'll be more comfortable with his eyes shut. And you won't have to do that so often."

But Susan was shaking her head frantically. "No. He can ...I think maybe he can still see ... a little bit." She was suddenly crying, her words edged with hysteria. Carter knew that Luka couldn't possibly see any more. But if he had any awareness at all now, he might still be able to hear. He didn't need to hear Susan's pain. Carter took Susan's arm and gently but firmly led her away from the bed, and she allowed herself to be led. Back in the doorway she went on, still sobbing, "He wouldn't want it to be dark. He's afraid of the dark ... oh God ... he's afraid of the dark." And then she couldn't talk anymore, and slid down the door jamb, crumpling helplessly to the floor. Carter sat beside her, held her while she cried.

After a few minutes the tears slowed and Carter said "Have you been doing this all by yourself? Haven't you had anyone to help you care for him? You're exhausted." How long had she been struggling to hold herself together, for Luka's sake?

"It hasn't been hard. He wasn't that sick ... didn't need much nursing care. And he's not a demanding patient. It's just been the past few days. He stopped eating, drinking ... couldn't keep anything down, even with the Compazine. Said he'd rather not try to eat than be throwing up all the time. The seizures got worse, he couldn't even hold down his meds, and he was so dehydrated. He wouldn't go to the hospital, or let me set up an IV for him here." Susan wiped at her eyes. "He said he was ready to go, just wanted it to be over."

"Look," Carter said. "Why don't I stay for a while. You don't have to do this alone. I can sit with him, you can get some sleep. I'll wake you if there's any change."

"No." Susan shook her head. "He just wanted me here. And I'm ok, really. It shouldn't be much longer." She struggled to her feet, returned to the bed. Nothing had changed there. She put more drops in Luka's eyes and carefully wiped the excess that spilled out ... like tears. Then she said, very softly. "You're right, Carter. We should ... I should ... his eyes. He can't see."

"Maybe he can," Carter said gently. "There's no way to know."

Another shake of the head. "He couldn't see, even before. When he came out of the seizure ... the last one he came out of ... he couldn't see. He opened his eyes, and he said it was dark, that he
couldn't see. He was crying ... he said he didn't want it to be dark ... it was dark ... he was afraid." She wiped at her eyes again. "I told him to close his eyes ... go to sleep ... he wouldn't know it was dark if he was asleep ... and when he woke up, everything would be better. I thought it was just from the seizure, and he'd been so confused, so out of it ... I thought it would come back after he'd slept for a while. And then another seizure started, and he never woke up." Barely audible. "And he's never going to." She seemed to steady herself again. "Could you get the tape? There should be some in the medicine cabinet."

Carter brought the tape and Susan took the roll from him, but her hands were shaking too hard to do anything with it. Carter took the tape back, folded Susan's hands in his own. "Susan, you don't have to do this. It was just a suggestion. It doesn't matter to him either way. He doesn't know."

Susan's head dropped to her chest. She looked exhausted again. "I don't know what to do. He was so scared. I don't want him to suffer."

"He isn't suffering. All you can do now is be with him. That's all that will matter to him now. He doesn't know anything else." Susan's eyes moved to look at him, seemed to be searching his face for answers. And Carter spoke to her quietly, firmly; like he would when speaking to a distraught family member of a patient, not to a fellow physician who should already know all these things. "Luka is in a coma. It's like he's asleep. He isn't afraid of the dark, because he doesn't know it's dark, any more than you know it's dark when you are asleep and have your eyes closed. He's going to die soon, and I think it will be very peaceful. If there are any more seizures, or he seems to be in pain, you have the drugs for him ... but I don't think you'll need them. He isn't suffering. You just need to hold his hand and be with him. He'll know that you're here, and be comforted by that."

Susan managed to smile, a rather embarrassed smile, as if she was suddenly aware that she'd been falling apart. "It's all he wants," she said quietly. "To die in his own bed, easily, with me here with him."

"And it looks like he'll get three for three," Carter said. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay? I can be in the other room if you want privacy with him."

"No. I'll be ok, really. We'll be ok. Thanks for bringing the meds and things."

Carter embraced her, held her tightly for a long minute. "Call if you need anything else, ok?" he said, and Susan nodded into his shoulder. Releasing her, her turned his attention again to Luka, sat down on the bed beside him. All this time Luka had not, of course, moved. His breathing seemed a little slower, a bit more labored perhaps. Had he heard their conversation, or was he indeed beyond knowing anything ... asleep? There was no way to know.

Eighteen months before, he and Gillian had found him lying in his clinic in Matenda, near death. They could have let him die there. Carter remembered that he'd wanted to do that; to spare him what he was sure would only be more pain before an inevitable end. But they had given him a chance, and he'd survived, again and again, against impossible odds. But not this time. There would be no miracle this time. Had it been worth it? There had been, unquestionably, more pain; much more pain along the way. But also joy. He looked at Susan, who had sat down again on the other side of Luka, taken his hand, then smoothed his face, murmured something to him that Carter, sitting just inches away couldn't quite hear - but he was sure, somehow, that Luka could. Yes, unquestionably joy as well. Had Luka found it worth it in the balance?

He took Luka's other hand and clasped it for a moment, kissed his forehead. "Good-bye, Luka. You'll be seeing your kids soon." Then another smile to Susan. "I'll let myself out." He rose, then hesitated again. "Do you want me to tell people at work ... what's happening?"
Susan shrugged. "If you want. It doesn't matter. I'll call. Later."

Soon, Carter thought, going out of the quiet room. The call would probably come soon.
Chapter 57

Susan heard the front door open and shut. It was just her and Luka now. She still wasn't ready. Even now. He wasn't in pain, she knew. They could just stay like this. Forever.

But no, she had to let him go. He was ready. This was what he wanted. It couldn't be easier, he would die peacefully, he would leave her ... go somewhere else. Go where he really wanted to be.

Susan took the washcloth, wiped Luka's face. He was feverish again, his skin was hot. From the infection or the dehydration, she didn't know. It didn't really matter, of course.

"I'm right here, sweetheart. Everything's going to be ok." How many times had she said that in the past few days? She kissed him, still hoping for some response, still half expecting one. But, of course, there was none. He was very still, his breathing the only movement. And his breathing had grown slower, shallower, more erratic. His eyes looked at nothing, through her. He couldn't see, of course. Carter was right. He was long past seeing. Susan forced herself to do what she should have done long ago ... he would be more comfortable, then lay down once again beside him.

Time passed very slowly. Every time Susan glanced at the clock, certain it had been hours, she was surprised to find that only a few minutes had gone by. Beyond the slow passing of minutes, nothing else really changed. She continued to talk to him, the same quiet reassurances she had repeated a thousand times over the past few days. Every so often she moistened his dry lips, wiped his face and neck with a cool cloth, put drops in his eyes. She kissed him, searched his face for some indication that he knew she was there, could hear her words, even sense her presence. That he knew he wouldn't die alone.

Every so often Luka's shallow breathing deepened briefly, as he seemed to fight for air, draw a few gasping breaths, and then he would grow quieter again.

He was struggling. Susan could sense that he was fighting. It was a battle he couldn't win. More than that, it was a battle she knew he didn't want to be fighting. He had been so ready, so at peace with his decision. Even during those horrible hours when he'd been so confused, so altered, there had been no struggle, no physical fight. He had never asked her for water, never complained of pain.

Was it because of her? Did he sense, somehow, her doubts? Was he struggling because of her? Because he knew that she wasn't ready to let him go yet? And she wasn't ... God ... she wasn't. But it was time. For both of them to move on.

Susan took a deep breath, wiped her eyes. She was so tired. She hadn't noticed how tired she was. She swallowed hard and took Luka's other hand in hers, kissed each palm. "Luka, sweetheart, it's time to go. You don't have to fight any more. I love you so much, and I'm letting you go. You don't have to stay with me now. I'll be ok. Danijela's waiting for you. Your children ... Jasna and Marko ... they've been waiting such a long time for their daddy, they need their daddy to be with them now, to take care of them. You can go be with them all now ... kiss them ... hold them." She was surprised at how calm her own voice was now.

Luka seemed to relax slightly. His breathing slowed a bit, grew shallower. Susan lay down again beside him, rested her head on his shoulder. God ... she was so tired. She put her arm across his chest; she could feel the slow rise and fall as he breathed.

"That's it ... it's so easy, everything is going to be ok now ... you are going to be so happy. I
promise. Just look for the light. There will be a light, sweetheart ... go into the light. Danijela is there, and Jasna and Marko, and no more pain. It's ok. I love you so much, and it's time to go. Just let go now ... go into the light."

She continued to talk to him quietly, calmly. There were long pauses between his breaths now.

Then, for just an instant, a change seemed to go over Luka's face. Later, Susan could never say exactly what it was, because when the moment was gone, he looked just the same. A very quiet breath, almost a sigh. And Susan waited, but there wasn't another one.

She waited a little longer, then, trembling, put her palm flat against his thin chest, feeling for a heart beat. There was nothing. No pulse in his throat. She wrapped her arms around him again, held him a little tighter.

"You see ... I told you it would be easy, didn't I? So very easy." Easy for him. He was with his family now. And she was alone.

She must have fallen asleep. Her eyes suddenly opened. The room was growing dark. The clock said nearly 5. Luka's body, under her arms, wasn't so hot any more. She had slept for a couple of hours.

'It's dark. I don't want it to be dark.' She quickly sat up and switched on the light beside the bed. "It isn't dark now, sweetheart. Never again."

There were things she had to do. So many things to take care of now. She had to call Marty. Should have called him right away. He would need to come out, pronounce him, take care of the death certificate. Call the funeral home, make the arrangements to send him home. There was a Croatian church. She would contact the priest, ask him to come over and translate for her, so she could notify Tata.

Then a thought suddenly struck her. As if she'd never thought of it before. Once she started the whole process ... once they came and took him away, she would never see him again. It would be over. (Luka had been very firm about ensuring with the funeral home that the casket would be closed immediately, and remain that way once it arrived in Croatia.) She would never see him again.

Maybe she would wait a few minutes. A few more minutes wouldn't matter. But no. She was alone. Susan suddenly felt overwhelmingly alone. Luka wasn't here anymore. She was all alone now, and couldn't bear it.

She got up, every muscle aching, and picked up the phone. "Hi Frank ... Dr. Lewis. Is Carter still there ... Yes it's important." She rubbed her eyes, they burned with fatigue, but were dry. "John? Susan. Yeah ... he died a couple of hours ago. It was easy ... peaceful. I'm ok, but could you come over, be with me while I wait for DeAngelo? I know you're still on ... thanks ... I appreciate it."

Susan broke the connection, took a deep breath, then dialed again. She had a lot of calls to make.
Epilogue

Susan watched the plane gain altitude, grow smaller and smaller, until it was lost among the maze of contrails over the city. Then she turned wearily and started down the long corridors of O'Hare, back to her car.

She could have gone with him; accompanied his body home, and gone to the funeral. Part of her had wanted to do it. But she didn't know Luka's family. Except for a brief acquaintance with Gordana, she didn't know his Croatian friends. She didn't speak the language. They mostly spoke little or no English. She would have just been an outsider, among strangers. And there would be far too many questions; questions she would never be able to answer.

As far as they knew, as far as they would ever know, Luka's death had been sudden and tragic. A sudden illness. A stroke. No time to call them, let them know beforehand. No time to say good-bye.

There would have been questions about her too. How long had they been together? Since they were obviously so close (Susan knew she would never be able to hide the depths of her grief ...) why had Luka never mentioned her as anything more than a friend; why had there been no talk of marriage? Why had it still been Luka's wish, to the last, to be brought home to Croatia to be buried, to rest beside Danijela and his children in Vukovar?

He had left her some material things in his will, most of his real possessions, not that they amounted to much. Luka had never been one for material things; even after 9 years in America, his small apartment ... hers now ... was still quite bare - but Susan knew that his heart had always been Danijela's, and he belonged with her. Before Christmas, she thought, he would be lying beside Danijela and his children again. After 13 years apart. He was home again now.

Tomorrow would be the memorial service at work. She could mourn with her friends, with Luka's friends. Tomorrow too she would have to go to the post office, mail a small package to Tata. A letter that Luka had written him just a few weeks ago. She had no idea what was in the letter. Luka wouldn't tell her. She could look now of course, but she wouldn't ... even if she would have understood the Croatian words. And a few small items; specific remembrances, and some family heirlooms that Luka had wanted to send home to them.

Suddenly blinded by tears, Susan had to stop walking. She blinked furiously until she could see enough to find a bench, then made her way to it and sank down, fumbling in her bag for a tissue. She hadn't cried. All these last several days she hadn't cried. Luka wouldn't have wanted her to cry, she'd told herself a thousand times. The end had been as he had wanted it, peaceful and without pain, in his own bed. She had dealt with all the arrangements, (while Luka had tried to simplify things for her in advance, arranging to transport a body overseas for burial was not an easy or quick procedure, she had discovered); the multitude of phone calls, arranging for someone to translate for her so she could relate the news to Luka's family; and she had never cried.

She had told Tata herself. The priest was there to help out, and he'd translated the more complicated information concerning arrangements and such, but she had told Tata that Luka was dead. And he had understood. He hadn't cried either. At least not while on the phone with her. "... Luka died yesterday." she had said. None of the usual pointless stuff she usually gave to patients' families about how 'everything possible was done, but ...' He wouldn't have understood it anyway. She had just identified herself as Luka's friend, told him there was someone with her to translate if he didn't understand. And a worried, "Luka ... he is sick?" Why else, after all, would someone else be calling on Luka's behalf. "No. Luka ... he died yesterday. I am very sorry. There was ... no pain." And there had been a silence. "Do you understand?" Another beat or two of silence, then,
"Yes. I understand."

She hadn't cried before, but now the tears came. Tears for her own grief, for the empty days ahead of her, and for all of Luka's pain. Then, a voice at her elbow. "Are you all right, dear?" An older woman, speaking with a faint accent that Susan couldn't identify. She offered her a packet of tissues.

Susan nodded and took the offering. "Yes ... thank you..." but a fresh flood of tears belied her words. The stranger sat beside her, put an arm around her.

"Have you just said good-bye to a loved one?" she asked.

"Yes," Susan whispered, wiping ineffectually at her eyes.

"I know how hard that can be, especially at this time of year ... you just go ahead and cry." The woman pulled Susan's head down onto her shoulder and rocked her like a child - and Susan wept for a very long time.

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Susan walked slowly across the green grass. Far too many graves for such a small city, she thought. The attendant had told her, in his awkward and limited English, after consulting his map, where to find the ones she was looking for. When she'd booked her tickets and reservations in Chicago her travel agent had been surprised. Vukovar was hardly a usual destination for American travelers. Split, Dubrovnik. Even Zagreb. But not Vukovar. That was a forgotten name from the news over a decade ago. Why did she want to go there, and only there? It had been hard to wrangle much time off from Robert. She'd missed so much work last year, with Luka's illness, that she really had no vacation or personal time at all. But she needed to do this. And Robert, as he so often did when it really mattered, understood. So a quick trip. Fly to Zagreb, train and bus to Vukovar, spend two days, and fly home again.

There they were. Four graves. Two large, two small. Three of them very slightly weather worn, one very new. Susan couldn't keep from smiling.. Tata had shown good taste. Nothing ostentatious or gaudy. A simple cross. Luka would have approved, she was sure, though this was something they'd never talked about. The others were equally simple. The markers Luka himself had selected only a few years ago, he'd told her, to replace the very crude ones that had been placed after the hasty burials. Danijela. Jasna. Marko. Luka.

Susan lay the four bouquets of flowers down, one in front of each marker, and sat down in the grass, in the spring sunshine. She sat there for a very long time, enjoying the warmth and light on her face.

THE END

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