

Do You Carry Every Sadness with You?

By: Kathryn E. Miles

It was one of those sunrises that ruffle every nerve-ending in your stomach, sending ripples of tingly emotion to all corners of your personal nation. Those sunrises are supposed to touch something so deep, so profound, in a person's soul that they awaken some thought, idea or realization with the power to twist, change, spiral someone's course into any shape, any direction, so it no longer resembles anything it ever was before.

Hannah Westmore-Venedict leaned against the balcony railing, both hands braced on the cool iron as she listened to the sounds of early morning. She wasn't sure if that was true or not, about those sunrises. She shivered, her skin pimpling, whether in reaction to the beauty around her or the cool breeze blowing past off the ocean, she had no idea. The breeze curled past her lazily, twirling her long black hair into vines and creepers, and when it finally died, left them to root and climb in the lush landscape across her shoulders and chest. Childbearing had ripened a figure cursed with perpetual angularity. The childhood pet name her father had given her, "Gem," no longer applied. She was not a study in geometry any longer but one of elegant, swooping curves and softly rounded spheres. Three children had changed her body forever. And she was okay with that.

It was a different kind of bitterness that bloomed in her heart, with roots so pervasive as to overtake everything she was, everything she touched, saw, heard, said. She was surprised that it didn't linger like fingerprints, or perfume, in her wake. Her body ached with it, though her mother would say that was just ludicrous. Miriam Westmore would point out sensibly that her daughter's body hurt because she had given birth within the last forty-eight hours. Don't be so sentimental, Hannah, she'd scold. But

Hannah knew better, knew with a woman's wordless knowledge that it wasn't the birth. She sighed, letting the weight of her grief sink her body against the rail, fingers tightening, whitening, with the increased weight.

She had not seen her husband in nine months. She did not know if she'd see him again in another nine. He hadn't bothered to come to see Nathan when he was born four years ago. He'd only spent a few hours with Joseph after he was born, and he'd been their first child, and a son at that. The number of times he'd seen both boys could be counted on her hands. If that was not enough to plant the seed of sorrow in any woman's heart, she didn't know what else would be enough.

Her eyes, green as the verdant growth encircling her family's coastal estate, flickered out of focus, blindly searching the countryside for answers when it had none. This time, if he did come, no, *when* he came, it would be different. Twice, she had made the same mistake and both her boys would pay the dues for it until their father left this world, if not until the end of their own lives. With Elana, she swore he'd be different; he'd love her the way a father is supposed to love his daughter, supposed to love all his children. He would love her more than he loved Cristiani, more than a creation of wood, lacquer and strung wire.

Hannah remembered the first time she'd seen him. She'd been a law student at NYU, and on that early spring day her last class had been cancelled, the one and only time since she'd been there. She decided to walk through Central Park, enjoy the sunshine and the people. Alone, she wandered the paths, passing the Imagine mosaic, Strawberry Fields, and the Sheep Meadow. The latter was packed with kite-flyers and sport players of every variety. Laughing children chased each other madly among them

all, earning indulgent smiles and sighs of nostalgia. Usually, she stopped to watch, but that day she hadn't. She kept on walking with no real destination in mind yet something kept her in motion.

As she neared the Band Shell she heard the first strains, like angels whispering. Deep, resonant, the music spread through her like melted chocolate. She didn't even recognize the tune yet it gripped her tight. Time seemed to slow, pinpointing on the notes and bars filling up her empty spaces, all the cracks and potholes left by life so far. All the work she did and all the time she spent on attaining her goals had left her with gaps, inside. Being a lawyer is dry, lonely work, and studying to be one is not much better. There was not much time for friends, or music, or play time of any kind. She had begun to feel like pieces of her were being worn away, little by little. She was being whittled until she bore the shape that would be required of her. Inside and out, she was steadily losing who she was in favor of what she believed she wanted to be.

Hannah never could remember how she elbowed her way through the crowd surrounding the Shell, all she knew was that for the longest time she walked with her path, her sight, blocked by unknown shapes and colors, and all the while the music grew and grew and grew. Then, abruptly, she was free of all interference. She swayed, disoriented by the sudden change.

He sat on a wooden box on the edge of the marble stage, wearing torn blue jeans and a faded black button-down whose sleeves were rolled to his elbows. A thick plait of black hair dangled precariously over the edge of one wide shoulder, the ragged tip brushing rhythmically against his back and arm as he moved. He was young, and poor, from the looks of it. He had the face of a mad poet, and though she could not see his eyes,

she knew they would be wild and dark, like a forest creature's caught by a hiker's flashlight. He balanced *it* between his outspread knees, the source of the most heavenly music Hannah had ever heard. A cello, a lustrous red-brown and exquisitely made, it sang with a powerful depth, so that the lowest notes echoed in one's chest, but also possessed a delicate tremble in its highest ranges, disturbingly similar to a woman's soprano. His wiry body swayed as he played, seeming to become the music that his long slim fingers cajoled from the cello.

"Summertime" would never sound quite the same to Hannah again. He drew the bow across the strings, slowly, and she watched the muscles in his upper arm and shoulder flex beneath the fabric of his shirt as the long, low note rose above them. The long fingers on the struts shifted quickly and he flurried the bow, spattering notes in quick succession. The music was dark and sweet, his brow furrowed with concentration as the simple notes slid from his fingertips. They were smooth and languid, lazy like a summer's day in the South. They had the rhythm of a painter as he painted. Dip, slide, glide, swoooooosh, then a quick swirl of notes at the end of the measure. She felt as if she could practically reach out and touch the notes. She imagined them, slippery like bubbles, or thick and sweet like chocolate mousse.

She stood there, frozen, mesmerized by his movements and his music, fascinated by the oneness between player and instrument. The last chorus poured out of the two, and she swallowed hard. A knot sat in her belly, growing and tightening as the end neared. Then with an elegant flourish, he played the dying notes, letting them linger wistfully in the air afterward. There was a tiny, terrifying moment of pure silence, and then the crowd behind Hannah erupted. Whistling, cheers, clapping, cries for more rose fiercely, like a

giant wave of approval about to crash over onto the cellist sitting so nonchalantly on the edge of the stage.

Hannah hadn't clapped, or whistled, or cried for more. It was all just background noise to her now. In the second after the eruption, he'd looked up. Their eyes had met, clashing, black and green. Like a rabbit caught in the hypnotizing gaze of a snake, she'd lost all sense of time, of self, of purpose. She'd been right about one thing. His eyes were dark, so black that there was no difference between pupil and iris. But rather than wild, they were pools of unruffled water sitting silent and watchful in his mad poet's face with its slashing Slavic bones and full-lipped mouth. Disconcerting to say the least, they'd touched something hidden in her the Hannah had struggled to find all her life: Desire. It had long been quashed to make way for other things: Duty, Ambition, Responsibility. Want filled her in the absence of that music and in the presence of those eyes, the rising tide rolling in quickly to cover the mud bluffs its counterpart's departure had exposed.

So, She ran. Just turned tail and bulldozed her way through the crowd mindlessly. She'd opened the throttle once she was free and didn't stop until she'd thrown herself through her bedroom door and locked it behind her. Fear had replaced everything, the music, the desire, the awe. Fear of what it meant to want a man like that, to feel the way she did after only one look, one song. She was no fool. Only anguish lay down that road, anguish and regret followed men like that around like buzzards over a corpse. For hours she lay curled up on her side in her bed. But, gradually she'd relaxed and after while of thinking about it, she made a decision. She would forget him and his effect on her. She would block every second of that encounter from her mind, and move on as if nothing had changed.

But it had. Nearly five years later, he was introduced to her by her fiancée at a charity function hosted by the New York City symphony committee. The rest, as they say, is history. Bad history, Hannah thought bitterly, the very worst.

* * * * *

8 years ago

Since the charity ball, he'd been the only thing she could think about. She sat at her desk now in the venue office, her hands clasped so tightly in her lap that the skin was blanched, her nails leaving marks in the skin. The contracts arranged neatly on the desk's surface blurred, as she stared, into a jumble of looming dotted lines and frightening words like "collateral" and "defendant." The pen she'd been holding lay in a pool of its own black fluids, the ink spattered like blood across her, the desk, the papers, everything.

Seeing him again tonight had nearly killed her. When she'd met those storm-cloud eyes over Josh's shoulder, all those feelings, all those *desires*, came roaring back. After that day in the park, she'd spent months, years even, trying to push those needs into a deep, dark closet in the back of her mind. Good lawyers, her father claimed, looked at everything as objectively as possible, no matter the stakes. The only thing that mattered, at the end of the day, was coming out on top, and receiving the recognition and prestige required for someone of their intellectual caliber. Love, companionship, desire, happiness, all these things were non-essentials, not necessary for advancement and the completion of her personal goals.

Sex, she conceded grudgingly, was an unfortunate but obligatory component to her current lifestyle. As a lawyer whose body of work comprised mostly of clients working in the arts and entertainments industries, it would be most imprudent, as well as

impractical, to be without a sexual partner, of either gender. To be without would severely handicap her, both socially and professionally. That's why, in the end, she had agreed to marry Joshua Greenly. He was from a prominent family, well-connected, talented, and ambitious. He was also extremely attractive and, interestingly enough, sexually open-minded. His family owned and operated the oldest theatre in the city and was one of her most lucrative clients. Joshua was the stage manager which was how they'd met. If sleeping with one's lawyer is considered the best way to ensure exemplary service, then what did it mean to marry her? Fuck if she knew, Hannah thought, with uncharacteristic crudity. Three weeks since the ball and she was still as shaken as she'd been then. She shouldn't have come to the theater tonight, especially knowing he was practicing late. He was their West End venue's top grossing performer, known for being a perfectionist who kept late hours. She should've just stayed away.

But she hadn't. Instead, she had showed up as late as she could, when no one else was around to see her give in to her weakness. She needed to finish those contracts, she'd told herself, but even then she knew she was just making excuses to see him, to watch him play. She's slipped in the stage door, through the back alley. Even back by the dressing and storage rooms, she could hear the glorious strains of Metallica's "Nothing Else Matters," reverberating out into the empty seats. She bent and removed her heels, not wanting him to know she was there, listening. She crept up, eyes searching in the gloom, until she paused on the wings of stage right. She could see him now, but only the lean arch of his back, sweat dampening the valley of his spine. The thick plait of hair dangled, as always, over his shoulders as they rippled and flexed with the effort to control the bow and strings. At the sight she felt something settle low in her belly, coiling taut as

she watched, listening. She ignored it, refusing to recognize it for what it was. She watched him play, the music pounding through her. The instrument really had the loveliest tone she'd ever heard. It turned a power ballad into something rich and sensual. It was dark chocolate on the palate; bitter, sharp and rich with the slightest twinge of sweetness toward the end. He played it slower than it was originally, dragging out the notes and tweaking the tone, adding flourishes to the ends of measures.

She didn't like this view of him. She found herself creeping along back stage, carefully looking between him and where she was putting her feet. She came to the edge of the right wing. Her stocking-ed toes clung to the edge. Her eyes, on the other hand, clung to him. She had some of his profile now, along with the elegant line of his back and shoulders. The blade-thinness of his nose, the heavy brows furrowed over them, the glitter of the spotlight on the tips of his girlishly long eye lashes. Everything about him was long, she suddenly realized. His mouth, his nose, his legs, even his eyelashes were an impressive length. She wondered if...no, she shook her head. She wouldn't go there.

She continued moving; down the back stairs, along the back of the auditorium, as silently as her feet could carry her. He continued to play, dithering with the music as he went, until it was almost unrecognizable. His face came into view in pieces, angle by angle. Hannah slipped through the shadows, confident that with the light on his face he couldn't see her in walking along behind the last seats. There was his nose again, and there, the chiseled outline of his lips. The light played across the angled plane of his cheekbones and brow, and painted his dark hair with gold. His profile looked like an angel's, or a god's. She held her breath as he tilted his head, letting the light spill like sparkling wine down his throat and into the collar of his shirt. Sweat beaded along his

hairline and trickled down the taut tendons of his neck to pool in the hollow of his clavicle. Hannah was suddenly overwhelmed with the desire to dip her tongue in that hollow, to run her fingers and then her mouth across the plane of his cheekbone and down the ridge of the tendon. She could almost taste the salt of sweat and the musk of the man on her tongue, down her throat. She swallowed.

Shaking herself, she tried to control her thoughts. The heavy coil inside her was winding tighter with every breath, every new angle. She started toward the left side of the auditorium. He was mesmerizing. It was like something was being revealed, something new and wondrous, the closer she came to facing him. The music no longer mattered; it was him, there on the stage, that held her. She stood by the stairs to the left wing. She followed the movements of his hands, his shoulders as he played. Hannah's chest felt tight, her breathing ragged. Nostrils flaring, she inhaled, trying to steady both her heartbeat and her thoughts. Images of him using those hands on her, those fingers touching places that only Josh should touch filled her mind, leaving her mouth dry and other places far too damp for propriety's sake. The fierceness of his expression, the strength in the bones, their lack of forgiveness frightened her, but rather than leaving her cold, it pumped the bellows, pushing the flames into a conflagration.

It grew too much to handle. It was as if she had taken a drug for the first time, only to realize too late that she had taken too much. She had panicked. Fearing discovery in the state she was in, she slipped with shaking hands and rubbery knees through the left-wing back stage, and climbed the stairs to the office with both hands on the railing for support.

It was where she sat now, desperately searching for composure. She couldn't fight the images in her mind. Hannah had never thought of Josh like this, with this much passion, this much *need*. No man, ever, had inspired anything like this in her. She should've known better, she thought, considering what just one look into his eyes had done the first time she'd seen him. She had tried to work, but could barely hold the pen. She couldn't focus; everything was just a blur of words and fuzzy ideas.

"So I wasn't imagining it," murmured a deep, slightly accented voice from the doorway. She leaped from her seat, the pen flying across the room, freed from nerveless fingers. Hannah braced herself against the side of her desk, her legs threatening to drop her like a ton of bricks. Vasily leaned casually against the doorframe of the door she had left ajar in her preoccupation.

"You were watching me, weren't you, from the back row," he continued, eagle eyes unwavering. She watched the pulse throb in the hollow of his throat. It was going faster than someone who had leisurely come up the stairs, faster than someone who was not feeling some intense emotion. He must be angry, she thought wildly, angry that I spied on him.

"I—I'm so sorry, Mr. Venedikt, I didn't realize you were here," she stumbled over her words in a voice that quivered ever-so-slightly. "I apologize for interrupting your practice, I didn't mean....It wasn't my intention to....What are you doing?" she gasped. He had left his place at the door while she struggled. He was so close now that she could see the flecks of grey in the irises of his black, black eyes. If I wanted to, she thought, I could reach out and touch him, right now.

“Are you all right, Hannah,” he asked her, his voice a low rumble, “you seem...flushed.” One large, pale hand rose and its fingers ghosted across the pink skin of her cheek, lingering at the hairline. The scratch of the calluses on his fingers tips pulled at something low in her abdomen. A shiver ran down her spine and she dug the nails of her right hand into the desk to keep herself on her feet.

“I’m quite all right,” she responded, fighting to put a little icy distance in her voice. She was shocked when he came closer, chuckling darkly. She fought the desire to throw herself back and make the sign of the Cross, at the same time.

“Liar,” he laughed, “little liar, you’re getting ready to fall over.” He caught her elbow as she swayed. She resisted, trying to pull her arm from him. “I’m fine, really, just low blood sugar.” He laughed again, and slipped his hand from her elbow to her waist.

“Don’t pretend with me, Hannah, it’s no use,” he murmured, reaching up with his free hand to pull the clip from her hair. “You weren’t the only one affected by the music.”

Bewilderment filled Hannah and she narrowed her eyes. But the sensation of his fingers in her hair distracted her and all she could do was stare, in shock as his face came closer and closer. He claimed her mouth gently at first, hesitant. But at the sound of her moan, he deepened the kiss, using her hair to pull her head back. Her hands splayed across his chest, fingers fisting in the fabric of his shirt, using it pull him closer.

The encounter became very savage very quickly. His hands were not content to stay in innocent places. He ripped her clothes from her, bending her back over her desk. Lips, teeth, and tongue mapped her from jaw to pubic bone, leaving marks of possession along the way. She did not leave him long in power. She pulled his shirt from his

shoulders and finally indulged in her fantasy. With his hair as a curtain around her, she traced the slice of his cheek with her lips, followed the jut of his jaw down to that tendon. She ran her teeth along its ridge, nipping it, testing its strength, and finally found that place, a deep hollow above his clavicle where his neck met his shoulder. The noises he made encouraged her and she buried her face there, pulling the muscle into her mouth before biting down. Hard.

He reared back, hips rocking forward sharply. “Bitch,” he hissed, grabbing her wrists, using them to pull her away and anchor her against the desk. She mewed, impatiently, hips rising toward him as she lifted her legs to wrap them around his, trying to pull him in. It only took a moment of rearranging to meet her halfway. The sound they made as he sank in was one of infinite satisfaction.

“Vasily,” she gasped, trying to pull her wrists free as he thrust again. It was the first time she had ever called him by his first name. “Let me—,” she began, but his mouth silenced her, only allowing the gasp of pleasure as he thrust again to escape. The pace remained steady, and slow. Hannah fought to increase it, lifting her hips, or holding him in with her legs but he prevailed.

“Vasily, please,” she moaned, no longer fighting. She couldn’t keep her eyes open; orgasm was right there, right *there*, just push a little farther, a little faster, Oh, God, please, she thought, writhing with him in suspended motion. A shudder ran through him, hitching his rhythm. “Hannah,” he ground out, bowing his head, “fine.” It was as if a demon had been released. One, two, four hard, fast thrusts was all it took to send them both over the edge.

Hannah laid there, thighs still quivering, feeling the aftershocks of release shake Vasily as he lay over her.

What the hell was she going to tell Josh, she thought ruefully.

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It had been one thing after another with him. They would never have gotten married if they hadn't gotten into that argument New Year's Eve. Things had been going badly between them for months. For the first year of their relationship they had been unable to keep their hands off each other. Closets, alleys, under various tables, floors of all sorts became new and exciting locations to fuck. In June things began to change. He got a gig as a soloist for the city symphony. With each performance she saw less and less of him. He would come pounding on her door in the middle of the night, boink her out of her mind, then immediately leave. These times were few and far between, and growing farther yet. He would always do it the same way: no matter the position or the surface he would flip her so that she was facing away from him. She never was allowed to see his face during sex, not anymore. He refused to speak to her about it, when she saw him in public, and they never spoke anymore in private. New Year's Eve she'd gone out with friends, including Josh, and his newest lover, a male dancer named Jody. Being with them, she remembered what a real relationship was like. She'd just gotten home when the familiar pounding had come at the door. It had been at least 6 weeks since his last visit. Tipsy enough to be careless she had left him to pound. The damn fool kicked the door in. Shocked, she almost forgot to fight as he came bursting through it. She had to fight him off but it was no use; all he had to do was touch her in the right spot just once and she

was putty in his hands. It was after that the yelling started, back and forth, pacing up and down the apartment, until someone threatened to call the cops. He left in a huff. She didn't see him for nearly 3 months, and only then to tell him his idiocy had gotten her pregnant.

She'd been six months pregnant with Joseph on her wedding day. It had taken her and Zinaida, Vasily's diva mother, that long to convince him to follow through. God, she didn't want to think about that now. The hostility rolling off him that day had been unbearable. Any love he'd ever had for her had died the day she'd told him she was pregnant with Joseph. And, sweet Christ, it had only gotten worse with Nathan. After she told him about Nathan coming, he had locked himself in the study for nearly four days just to make sure he could control his temper. He refused to touch or hold either of his sons. He sent cards and gifts but made sure he was always on tour, too busy to come home to see any of them.

It was guilt driving him, guilt and shame. Oh, she'd figured it out soon enough. In making love to another woman, a human woman, he'd betrayed his real love. Cristiani. Hannah couldn't stop her lip from curling at the thought of Vasily's beloved cello. His children were physical proof of his infidelity. He couldn't even claim Hannah had foisted another man's get off on him. Both children had inherited the unmistakable Venedikt eyes and build. Nothing was enough in her husband's mind to exonerate him of guilt. The very fact that his body had responded to Hannah at all was betrayal enough. His Catholic roots are showing, Hannah thought snidely.

She inhaled deeply through her nose and straightened away from the railing. She looked out over the dunes to the ocean. It glittered now, reflecting the full power of the

morning sun. Her breasts ached and she knew Elana would be awake soon if she wasn't already. Hannah turned away from the railing, her long nightgown belling at the sudden movement. She paused though, by the French door, and looked back at the tree tops painted gold by the sun. She wished, in that short moment, that things had turned out differently.

“Hannah Elizabeth!” The indignant shriek echoed through Hannah's head. She frowned, but purposely ignored her mother's increasingly strident cries. The closet doors went open then closed, and drawers were sorted through then shut. Soon, Hannah was dressed in loose jeans and a linen smock. She was just buttoning the last button on her shirt when Miriam came huffing rudely through her daughter's closed bedroom door.

“I just can't believe, of all the nerve, to just come elbowing in like she owns the place. Hannah, I just don't know how you st—what are you doing out of bed?!”

Hannah stared at her mother for an interminable second. She walked over to her mirror, ran a brush through her hair. “Well, girl?” Miriam demanded, throwing out a hip in irritation. Hannah didn't look up but finished her hair, tying it loosely back with a silk ribbon. “Hannah, answer me,” her mother said sharply, starting toward her.

Hannah sighed, “I'm going to take care of my daughter, Mama,” she finally said, “I'll see you later.” She left, closing the bedroom door in Miriam's face quietly.

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The day passed quickly for Hannah. She'd gone to Elana's room and there found the source of her mother's consternation, Vasily's mother Zinaida. She knew why Miriam, usually pretty tolerant of most people, loathed her mother-in-law. Zinaida was a free-form kind of person. No structure, no rules, nothing hinder the unadulterated

expression of life. Miriam was too practical to stand that kind of behavior. Hannah made no secret that she preferred Zinaida to Miriam, at least since her marriage. Zinny understood Hannah's pain and her problems with her small, dysfunctional family. She had, after all, raised Hannah's husband. But having the two women in the same house was not fun, Hannah thought, she'd have to balance the scales soon or the household would explode into outright war.

The boys had been with Zinny all day and Hannah missed them terribly. She had seen Joseph briefly at lunch and Nathan, previously her baby, not at all. But, like both older women said, having a newborn was a great deal of work and other children were just a headache until the new one got older. Elana was a much better baby than either of her brothers; she, at least, slept through the night.

Hannah mulled these thoughts over on the veranda, Elana, full and sleepy, lolling in the crook of her shoulder. The crickets were starting to sing and Hannah realized it was time for supper. She rose carefully, though Elana snuffled a little in confusion at the movement. The way to the nursery was long and easy, Hannah completely absorbed in the noises her baby made as she carried her to bed. The hallways were darker now, with the sun setting, and none of the lamps had been turned on.

She first realized something wasn't right when she turned the corner at the top of the stairs and saw the nursery door was wide open. The orange glow of the sun arced across the floor from the window deep in the room and she could see the shadow of man bisecting it oddly.

She clutched Elana tighter, the baby squeaking a little like a kitten at the increased pressure. She found herself paused in the door, staring at the man leaning over her daughter's empty cradle.

Vasily was ruffled, as if he had been on a plane for hours and hours. His customary plait was mostly undone, long black strands clinging to his t-shirt. T-shirt? Hannah realized her husband was wearing clothes she hadn't seen him in since that day at the Band Shell. He had never worn a T-shirt, claimed he hated them because they were 'low-class.'

"Vasily?" she asked tremulously, taking a step inside the room. He didn't respond to her right away. He shifted his weight so that his body was half-turned to her, but he kept his gaze on the empty cradle. "You had a child, Hannah," he said quietly, "You weren't going to tell me?" He finally turned to look at her. His eyes were intense, red-rimmed and heavy-lidded from exhaustion.

Looking into his eyes, Hannah suddenly realized what he saw: His dark-haired wife holding a tiny bundle wrapped in a pink blanket. From the top of the bundle the baby's head showed. It was topped with red-gold curls. When the baby opened her eyes, they were blue and, from what the doctors said, would probably stay that way. Hannah blinked. She looked at him, looked at him and really saw him. Desperation came off him in waves and, though he'd tucked it down somewhere deep, conflicted hope was there behind those tired eyes. She thought back to the night Elana was conceived. He hadn't been sober for weeks. Blacklisting is something artists, any artist, can't live with. He'd been messy, sloppy in word and deed; so unlike himself. It was the longest he'd stayed

with her and the boys'; nearly 4 months. He hadn't touched Cristiani since that fateful concert.

One night, Nathan came to her in tears, saying the papa was in his closet with a rope. She had met Zinaida's eyes and a moment of understanding passed between them. She hugged Nathan then sent him to Zinny. She knew her mother-in-law would keep both boys' from seeing anything they shouldn't.

She'd expected Vasily to be purple and dead, dangling for the ceiling of his son's closet. What she'd found was a grown man, curled into the fetal position, weeping his heart out under all the clothes he'd knocked over when he fell off the chair and the rope came undone. She'd held him as he cried like a baby against into her neck. She had gotten him out the closet and up to his own bed. But when she tried to leave, he clung like a burr. She shouldn't have stayed. He was drunk. He was heartbroken, vulnerable. But she remembered how much she'd loved him, still loved him. More than that, she wanted her husband. It had been so long since she'd had a man in her bed. She had tried to have an affair but just couldn't bring herself to do it. So she stayed. And, for the one and only time in their marriage, she saw Vasily's face above hers. She opened her eyes and saw what she hadn't been able to see in years. The man above her was not the same man she had fallen in love with so long ago. She had left before dawn, while he slept off his drunk, and climbed into her own bed. Neither spoke of it, she believed, out of some sort of understanding. It wasn't until now that she realized that he doubted the validity of that memory. He believed, no, he hoped that it was just a fever dream and that Hannah had been as unfaithful as he saw himself. He needed someone to share the guilt with.

Hannah felt her heart clinch. Damn him. She wanted to hurt him. It would serve him right if Elana wasn't his. The only thing saving her from being some other man's was the fact she was too much of a coward to ever follow through with something so reckless.

"Do you really think she's yours?" Hannah murmured quietly, rocking the baby gently. "After everything that's happened, do you really think I would give you another child to ruin?"

Guilt skittered across his features but he stayed where he was. "I...I don't know," he responded. "If she isn't, Hannah, it doesn't matter, I swear," he whispered, "I don't think less of you for seeking what I can't give you in the arms of another man."

"Be that as it may," she answered, stepping closer, "How will you treat *her*?" His tortured eyes fell on the little pink bundle in his wife's arms. "She is your daughter," He began slowly, unsure, "I will treat her with all the love and kindness I could ever think give any child."

"And your sons?" Hannah frowned, stopping beside him next to the cradle. "How will you treat them?" She saw his eyes flinch when she said 'your sons.' He took a deep breath. "I will try to do better, Hannah, to love them the way I'm supposed to," he looked away, emotions flashing over his face too fast to identify, "but I can't promise anything."

She sighed, defeated. "I suppose, my love, that that will just have to do." He lifted his gaze to her face. She smiled, or tried to. Shifting closer to him, she held the baby out to him. "Now's as good a time as any, I suppose, to start acting on what you said," she sighed, "Would you like to hold her?" He nodded. She settled the baby into his arms, carefully.

She watched, tired as hell, as a new expression came over his face. She would've laughed if it had been anyone else. Vasily had the most stupefied expression, as if some ephiny had suddenly crashed into him. The bastard had just fallen madly in love with his daughter. "What's her name, Hannah," he asked without looking up.

"Elana, Elana Venedikt," she answered, tucking the blanket back from the baby's face. He nodded approvingly.

"That's as good and strong a name as I've ever heard," replied Vasily.