



SANDWICHES AND CUCKOO CLOCKS

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Excerpt of three chapters

CHAPTER ONE

"You can go, woman," the guttural Serb language penetrated Niana's mind as she woke, shivering under the thin blanket. Around her, one naked light bulb glowed from the rafters where the women and girls attempted to sleep. Snores, breathing and the occasional moan or scream filled the barren room. Oddly enough, this stinking overcrowded place was called The Haven, for no attacks took place here.

She staggered to her feet with vomit in her mouth and grabbed her jacket. God it was freezing. The cold eyes of the Serb officer glowered at her.

"Go," the man repeated. "We don't need you any more."

"Where?" the woman replied.

"Albania," he snarled. "Your kind aren't wanted in Kosovo."

"But how? And what of my friends who were in my car."

"They stay to service my men. You have thirty minutes to leave. My orders are to shoot all the pregnant sluts. If you're here after that time..." He grinned and ran a finger across his throat.

"Go, Niana," a shaking voice spoke in her own language. "Tell the world about us. It is stupid to stay and be massacred." It was Shemsie, who was another of those in her car when it had been stopped on the way to the border.

Niana nodded, squeezed her friend's hand and walked away. Outside, freezing air assaulted her face but at least the stink was gone. She was driven for forty minutes up a gravel road into the mountains and told to get out.

"See ya in hell," the Serb driver said, laughing as Niana shivered at the roadside and watched as the Russian Jeep reversed and headed away.

Silence reigned. Everywhere Niana looked there was nothing but virgin snow, with no footprints or tire marks beyond where the vehicle turned. A watery sun cast its light from a pale blue sky. The rest of the morning was but a numb memory as the hungry, freezing, pregnant woman staggered along the mountain road. Every bend led to another and every step crunched through icy snow. By noon the temperature was still barely above freezing. Niana was so cold she was certain her cheekbones had frozen. The woolen gloves barely

managed to keep her fingers from being completely numb, while walking helped to keep her feet from freezing.

After four hours, the exhausted refugee came to one more bend and another patch of nothingness. Thoughts turned to her family, husband, father, mother, elder brother and almost everyone else she knew. They were all dead. Her only other friends were those at the army camp. If for no other reason, she owed it to them and the unborn child within her to survive and to tell NATO of the atrocities that had befallen her people.

God, she was hungry. Her stomach rumbled while the unborn baby kicked. She staggered as the scene in front became blurred and the trees above began to spin. No, she was not about to give in. Somewhere ahead were her own kind, someone to help.

She took another shaky step, staggered and fell to her knees. "Oh, Zymer," she cried but by now not even the tears came. "I'm so, so sorry. Our baby."

Niana gritted her teeth and rose once more to her feet. Another bend was ahead, more snow, more trees, the weak sunlight and another bend. She stumbled forward and blinked. There was something else. A farm wagon covered in snow was parked on the roadside as if it had pulled over, perhaps to let an oncoming vehicle pass. Linked to the front of it, looking so bright in the white world, stood a tractor; a red tractor.

Hope surged through her. The depression and fatigue of a second before disappeared as she broke into a slithery run.

"Hello," she screamed. "Is anyone there? Hello."

But all was quiet. Not a sound returned.

She reached the wagon and grabbed a canvas cover tied to the wooden side. Shaking with anticipation, she lifted the corner of the flap and gazed into the dim interior.

Four enormous brown eyes ringed in terror gazed up at her and children's sobbing filled the air.

"Don't be afraid," Niana whispered in Albanian, her native tongue. "I will not hurt you."

There were two children huddled in the front corner of the wagon, a little girl who looked no more than four and a boy who was probably three years older.

"What are your names?" she asked quietly.

It was the girl who spoke. "I'm Adona," she said as she wiped away her tears. "Mummy's gone."

"Hi Adona," Niana said, and then switched her eyes to the boy. He gazed at her briefly and then glanced away without saying a word.

"Halia doesn't talk," the little girl said.

Niana smiled at the boy. "And you won't talk to me, Halia?" she asked.

Round eyes stared at her but the only response was a slight shrug.

"That's okay," Niana replied, glancing around.

For the first time she noticed several corpses lying almost covered by the snow beyond the tractor. Oh dear God, she thought, it must be the children's family.

"Mummy told us to hide when the soldiers came," the little girl explained while her brother continued to stare out with wide unblinking eyes. "There were big bangs and shouts then it went quiet. We waited for Mummy but she didn't come back."

"How long ago was that?" Niana asked.

"A long, long time. It got dark and snowed all day and it got dark again." For someone so young Adona's explanation was amazing. She knew the corpses were those of her father and grandparents and she also realized her mother wasn't among the dead. They had waited at least two days, possibly three and had eaten rations in the wagon. They used the canvas covering like a tent and it helped keep the freezing cold temperature within bearable levels.

"Okay," Niana said. "Your mummy must have been held up somewhere so what say, I stay and help you."

"She was crying," Adona whispered. "The soldiers made her cry."

"Oh Adona," Niana replied fighting her own tears. "It will be fine. We'll find your mummy and until we do, I'll stay with you. Okay?"

"Yes, please," the girl said while her brother gave a smile of approval but still said nothing.

"Right. So let's see if we can get the tractor going, shall we?"

The tractor seemed to be in good condition but, when Niana tried the starter motor, it grumbled but nothing fired.

"Did the soldiers touch the tractor?" she asked Adona.

"I don't know. We were hiding. When we came out, Daddy, Grandma and Grandpa were lying in the snow. The bad men and Mummy were gone."

Niana realized that if she continued to turn the starter she'd just run the battery down but what could be done? The tractor could be their salvation. Even with food she doubted if they could walk out. "Have you a stove or burner?" she asked.

"I think so," came Adona's vague reply, but it was her brother who nodded and ran to the front corner of the wagon. He returned with a small methylated spirits burner and box of matches.

"Oh Halia," Niana praised. "What a great help you are."

The boy smiled.

Half an hour later, the trio had their first hot meal, canned stew with potatoes and other vegetables added. This was followed by a hot chocolate drink and warm water to wash dirty faces. Afterwards, Niana boiled up another kettle of water and tipped it over the engine cowling of the tractor. She doubted if this somewhat amateurish effort would help but she had to try something. The starter motor whined and, on the second attempt, there was a chug and a puff of black smoke rose into the air.

"Almost," screamed Adona.

The next attempt worked. The engine fired, roared into life and the two children jumped up to a small wooden bench behind the driver's seat.

"We sat here with Daddy," Adona shouted above the rumble of the engine.

The young mother-to-be smiled warmly and said, "Let's go."

She selected a low gear and the tractor moved forward along the snow-covered road, past the corpses that were once the children's family and, Niana hoped, towards the Albanian border.

"...So what are you going to do?" The Serb border guard ran an eye down Niana's rotund figure, across to the two children clinging to her jeans and back to her. "Take your choice. You

can take the boy or the girl. The other one remains in Kosovo."

"You mean I have to choose between them?" the exhausted woman replied in a hushed voice.
"But why?"

The soldier, a junior officer no older than herself, held her gaze. His expression was devoid of any compassion. The eyes were blank, those of a robot or ruthless killing machine. Niana had seen eyes like those before. Back at the internment camp, the Serbs were like that, that look of utter disdain caused, probably, by years of indoctrination and generations of ethnic hatred. She shuddered and stifled a retort by swallowing. The stress of those terrible days, the physical deprivation, freezing conditions in the mountains and lack of food all combined to add to the turmoil passing through her mind. She gripped a wooden pole beside her and attempted to focus on the soldier.

"Why?" her voice came out as a sob.

"Hurry up, woman. You're holding up the line."

"What's wrong, Niana?" The little girl's voice was a terrified whisper. She stared, ashen faced, at the uncompromising guard.

The young woman staggered and glanced down. Halia was shivering in the cold room with his eyes showing the same helpless expression that Niana remembered when they had first met.

She could not abandon the children. She would not take one and leave the other. This was one last sadistic maneuver by the enemy to humiliate a defenseless Kosovar. Anger, burning and violent swelled in her throat. She wanted to scream and attack the vile creature behind the wooden counter. Her eyes turned. In front, beyond the opened end of the building, was the no man's land backed by a flagpole. The red with black flag fluttered in the dull light and falling snow. It was fifty meters to Albania and freedom but the distance might as well be fifty kilometers.

Could she run for it? Niana swallowed, gripped both the children's hands, glanced at each of them in turn and nodded.

"Children" she whispered, "remember what we practiced. Don't let go."

Both children squeezed her hand twice, a prearranged signal to show they knew what to do.

"Now," hissed the desperate woman.

She ran.

With the children's hands gripped, Niana crossed the bare boards of the floor in seconds,

dodged behind a guard and jumped to the snow covered ground.

She almost toppled but the momentum carried her forward. Shouts, some harsh and demanding, others high pitched as women refugees screamed encouragement, reached her ears but her only thoughts were to reach the red flag ahead.

The trio had covered half the distance when the first shot rang out and a spasm of agony cut through Niana's shoulder. The terrified woman screamed, staggered but remained on her feet.

"Only a few more meters, Niana," a child's petrified voice pierced her mind.

The two children were now in front. A second shot thundered and another blow hit her with such a velocity, her moving body spun around and she crashed into sludge. Blood gushed out from a fresh wound in her abdomen. More poured down her legs and onto the ground.

But someone was pulling her. The two children had not been hit. With tears streaming from their faces they dragged her forward.

Niana blinked back tears of pain and noticed two camouflaged soldiers holding shiny automatic weapons in their hands aimed across her shoulders.

Another shot rang out, an explosive bang rang in Niana's semi-conscious mind. A whine reached her ears and she saw a flash of orange. The soldier had fired across the frontier to protect her.

"Come on!" screamed Adona. "You can do it."

Now almost to her knees, she staggered forward and shrieked in agony. To people within earshot, her screams were incoherent but Adona and Halia understood. "Go, children. Leave me. Get to the border."

"No." sobbed the little girl. "We can't leave you."

Another rifle fired. The world spun and blackness enveloped the refugee woman as she crawled forward through the freezing slush in her last gallant effort to escape. The two children, though, pulled her relentlessly on.

In the whole desperate episode, neither of them would let Niana's hand go.

CHAPTER TWO

A rectangle of late afternoon sunlight shone through clouds of fine brown dust inside the small factory as a man, in shorts, black tee-shirt and work boots, worked with a sanding machine to smooth out an old wooden framed couch. He grinned, ran a tanned hand over the section just completed, released the trigger on the machine so the grinding roar dropped to a faint whirr. That was when he realized somebody was watching and glanced up.

A woman in her twenties stood by the door, attractive and slim with brown hair tied back into a ponytail. She wore a white blouse, denim skirt, white ankle socks and sneakers. A shy expression crossed her lips as if she didn't wish to interrupt the worker.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the man's muffled voice said. "I never realized I had a customer." He turned to show a face covered in safety glasses and a small cone shaped mask.

The woman jerked back almost in alarm before she hesitated, relaxed and broke into a smile. "No, it is I who should apologize," she replied in precise but accented English. "Please continue. I can come back."

"No, it's no trouble. I need to call it a day, anyhow." He removed his glasses and mask, switched the sander off and all became silent.

"I understand you're my landlord," the woman said. "I've just taken over the bakery."

"Of course. I should have guessed. There's been a hive of activity over there but, like you, I didn't want to interrupt."

"So you must be Mr. Coleman, the factory owner. I am Niana Bolsa." A slim hand was held out.

"Call me Matt." He gripped the hand and stretched to his full height, a full head and shoulders higher than his visitor. "Welcome to Dixon Street. I hope old Annie left everything in good shape for you."

Matt walked to the door and gazed at the century old building across the driveway. It had once been a general merchandise shop and included an apartment at the rear. He'd bought property three years back for his antique and furniture restoration business but had since moved into the building the pair were standing in.

A short time later Old Annie O'Neill rented the original building and set up a lunch bar to sell breakfast and lunches to workers in the area. Annie had placed the popular little business on

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the market two months back but, until now, had found no buyer.

He noticed a sign painter had changed the name Aunt Anne's Sandwich Bar to Niana's Sandwich Bar, and frilly lace curtains appeared on the old fashioned windows.

"I must say, I like the improvements," he continued. "Will you have everything ready for opening day?"

"Oh yes," Niana replied. "Mrs. O'Neill has been most helpful and showed me everything. It's just..." she gave a nervous laugh. "The apartment at the back is lovely but I want to convert the store room into a third bedroom. Anyhow, when I went to take down the old curtains the rod holding it pulled out. I wonder if you have a screwdriver I can borrow."

"I'll come and take a look," Matt offered. "It shouldn't be hard to fix. I like the new name you've given the lunch bar," he said. "Forgive me, but you certainly don't look like an old aunt to me."

The young woman stared at him with earnest brown eyes, noticed the warmth in his expression and flushed. "Thank you, I didn't want to change things too much but thought the original name wasn't really me." She nodded up at the sign above Matt's door. "I like your firm's name, too."

Matt glanced up at the ornate polished sign that read The Cuckoo's Nest - Antiques and Restored Furniture. He laughed. "Yes it's part of my hobby," he explained. "As well as furniture, I restore old cuckoo clocks. Cuckoos hoard things so the name just seemed appropriate. I originally started in the old shop but have been in the new building for three years, now." For a moment, the pair lapsed into silence as they walked across the driveway between the two buildings. "And the back flat? Do you think you'll like it? Annie told me you wanted to live there." He shrugged. "It's been empty for a while but is perfectly serviceable. I did it up when I moved in for four months."

"Oh yes. It is one of the reasons I'm attracted to the business. I look after two children and my present apartment is much smaller than this one. I'll move in next week and open the shop a week later."

She smiled and thanked Matt as he stood back at the rear door of the building and let her enter first. Though the apartment was old, Matt had repainted and carpeted it throughout. Simple, but good quality furniture went with the place.

"It's just what I need," Niana explained. "I'll put Adona, that's my little girl, in here and her brother in the other room." She smiled. "At the moment they're both squeezed in one bedroom."

Matt pushed a door open and a whiff of musty air hit their noses. "I'll get this painted for you," he said. "It's the only room I didn't upgrade."

"There's no need," she replied with an appreciative glance.

"No, I insist. I've a friend who'll probably be able to get it done before you move in." He glanced at the sagging curtain. "I see what's happened. The old brass fitting pulled away from the clip that holds it. I won't be a moment." He clambered up the stepladder Niana had been using, twisted the offending piece back in place and smiled down. "Now, if you hand me your new curtain I'll clip it on the runners."

Everything was completed in a few moments and, afterwards, the pair went through a connecting door to the shop itself where Matt noticed the improvements. He inspected the layout as the young woman explained what she'd done.

"I'm open from Wednesday to Sunday. Most of my sales are on the weekend," Matt said when he could find no excuse to linger. "All the best for your move in and opening. If you need any more help, just ask. "

Niana smiled and held her hand out again. "You're so kind. I'll get the first month's rent money over to you tomorrow."

"There's no hurry," Matt said with a shrug. "I'm just happy to have the place open again. I reckon my business has dropped ten per cent since Old Annie closed down."

He whistled a few bars of a popular tune as he strolled back, examined the couch he'd been working on and started the sander. On first impression, his new tenant seemed a very pleasant person. As he ran the machine up another section of the couch his mind reflected back. A great figure too, not to mention that cute accent. He wondered where she came from.

"Simmer down, boy," he muttered to himself as he grinned and continued his work.

It was late morning few a days later when Matt arrived at his shop with the old truck loaded with secondhand furniture he'd picked up for a song from various auction marts and secondhand dealers. There were a couple of old oak bedroom suites from estates that, when brought back to pristine condition, would be very popular.

He backed inside but the thought of unloading the heavy items didn't appeal. He grinned. This life was certainly better than having to fit in with a clock from dawn to dust.

A little orange Honda parked next door made his thoughts turn to the woman there. Perhaps she was having lunch too. Anyhow, that was a good excuse to go and visit her. He ran a comb

through his short hair and strolled across the alley.

"Come in," came the response to his knock. Niana was sitting at one of half a dozen wooden tables between the door and counter.

"I like these," he commented, nodding at the red and white checked tablecloths and comfortable looking chairs that completed the scene.

Niana glanced up from a thick document she'd been reading and sighed. "Hello Mr. ... I mean Matt," she said in a quiet voice. "They have to go out again, I'm afraid."

"Why?" Matt pulled out a chair and noticed she looked quite tired with dark circles under the eyes.

"Regulations," Niana said, holding up the document. "I wanted to use these tables for customers. However, this means I'd be classified as a restaurant rather than a food bar. I can't comply with all the extra regulations."

"I see. I had the same trouble when I decided to open my workshop as a retail store. The bureaucrats had a field day. I even had to put in male and female restrooms. One's never used and is full of old junk."

"That's one thing I need." Niana gave a slight grin. "Oh well, I'll just give up the idea."

"Wait a minute," Matt replied. "I'm your landlord. Perhaps I can help. What exactly do you need?"

"I've highlighted everything." Niana slid the document across the table. "I can't possibly comply. There's the extra restroom, an extra stainless steel work area and, would you believe it--off street parking for seven vehicles. I told them I was going to have six tables so that means seven parking spaces." She chuckled. "One family must be going to drive here in two cars."

Matt's eyes met hers and he burst out laughing.

The woman frowned. "What did I say?" she retorted.

"It's not you. I can solve two of your problems right away."

"How?"

"Unless they've changed the regulations since I had to follow them, it says the men's restroom can be off premises." He flipped to the back of the document and ran his fingers down the index. "Yes, here it is on page eighty six. It seems it's okay for the men to go outside somewhere but not the ladies."

"But how can that help?"

My unused restroom is directly across the alley. That side door you can see is the restroom. I'll put in a corridor door and leave the outside one open. Stick up a Gents sign and you have your restroom."

"You'd do that?" Niana glanced up at him but her face remained serious.

"Well I have to keep my tenant happy."

"Thank you but what about the other things?"

Matt grinned again. "I had parking problems, too so I created eight parking spaces down the back that are never used. I think I only needed four. I'll allocate half of them to you and stick up a new sign. Mine fell down last year sometime. You know, Parking at the Rear." He laughed again. "Mind you, I'll have to move junk out of the way."

Niana smiled for the first time. "You're a man of many resources, I see. You make it all seem so easy."

Matt was enjoying himself. "How'd you like to go stainless steel sink hunting?" he asked.

"And I suppose you have a couple of those lying around, too."

"Afraid not, but there must be one somewhere in the city. If you give me twenty minutes to unload my truck, we'll go and look."

Niana rose out of her chair and faced him. "If you're doing all this for me, the least I can do is help unload your truck. Come on."

"It's heavy stuff."

"So," she replied in a determined voice. "If you were about to do it by yourself, I must be able to help."

And help she did. For a petite woman, she was amazingly strong and never hesitated to take an end of several large dressing tables that were unloaded. Afterwards, she clambered up into the cab, smiled across at her host and watched for approaching traffic as they drove out.

An hour later, Matt found what they wanted at the site of a friend whose firm had just demolished a hotel. Niana purchased two large boxes of brand new dinner sets for almost nothing as they were embossed with the hotel's name.

"Who cares if they say Grand Hotel," she said as Matt lifted the boxes aboard the truck. "Perhaps I could call the sandwich bar that."

"Well, it's getting grander by the hour," Matt laughed and turned to the man beside them. "I want the sink top delivered tomorrow, Ted," he said.

"Sure, Matt." Ted Wilson grinned after Niana who had walked away to climb in the truck. "One sexy broad," he said. "Better than the old model, I'd say."

Matt knew it was a joke but frowned in annoyance. "It's nothing like that, Ted," he retorted. "She's renting the old shop, that's all."

"Oh yeah. How's Judith anyway?"

Matt's expression darkened when his wife's name was mentioned. "She decided not to come back after our trial separation, Ted."

Ted sighed. "Sorry Matt. I knew you were having a rough patch but didn't realize..."

"Oh, it's for the best, I guess," Matt said. "We've no family and she didn't appreciate it when I decided to give up my big corporate job and start out on my own." He laughed with a trace of sarcasm. "It is not so good on the golf and social circuit to have a used furniture husband instead of company director."

"Snob," Ted grunted, "and your house?"

"I'm living in it. Judith's moved in with some guy who has a place over in Western Heights."

"Well," Ted said, "you're a free agent, then." He nodded at the truck. "Take my advice and go for it, lad."

"Sure," Matt said, huffing a laugh. "A run down old hack like myself. You must be kidding."

Ted only chuckled, slapped his friend's back and walked away.

Matt watched him for a second before, deep in thought, he walked back to the truck. A faint fragrance of shampoo hit his nose as he climbed in and saw Niana smiling on him. My God, he thought, she's an attractive woman. Today she wore a dark blue sweater that enhanced her cleavage.

"A good friend?" she asked.

"I suppose." Matt flushed at his thoughts. "Ted helped me when I was getting established and we often refer customers to each other "

"It's good to have friends," came the hushed reply.

There was almost a sadness in the way she spoke. Matt glanced across the cab but Niana had already turned away. She was a beautiful woman but a bit of an enigma, too. He was curious.

A few moments later, Niana glanced at her watch and gasped. "Oh, my God," she whispered more to herself than to Matt. "I didn't realize it was so late."

Matt frowned and checked the time. It was twenty to three. "Why, have you an appointment?"

"The children. I have to pick them up." There was almost panic in her voice. "You've been so good but can I ask for one more thing? It's just that by the time we return to the shop and I get my car..." her voice trailed off.

"No problem. Where to?"

"Selwyn Avenue School. Know where it is?"

"More or less. You might need to direct me after I turn off the main road."

"Thank you. It's just that they depend on me." Niana glanced at Matt and continued, "They're orphans who came out with me. I'm all they have." Her cloudy eyes linked with Matt's. "You see, Matt, we're refugees from Kosovo. My family has gone. Halia and his little sister Adona were alone and I, what would you say, decided to look after them. I was given the chance to come to this country and brought them with me. Nobody had identification papers so I said we were related." She swallowed. "The truth is, I only met them when we were walking out."

"I see. That sounds like one hell of a decent thing to do."

"I guess, but I need them as much as they need me." She stared ahead as Matt moved the old truck forward. "I'm sorry. You don't want to hear all my complaints. I'm so thankful for the help I've had since my arrival here and now you've been so kind."

"No, I'm interested," Matt said. He saw that his companion was almost in tears. "Niana," he continued, "I can't even guess at what you went through, but I'd like to help."

"Why?" she replied in a sudden hard voice.

Matt flushed a bright red. "Hell, I don't know," he muttered. "Forget what I said."

Niana, smiled. "You're different from most men I've had contact with," she whispered. "Most are only interested in ..." She hesitated. "You know."

Matt thought back to Ted's comments and nodded.

"What about yourself, Matt. Have you a family?"

"No. My marriage is over and we had no kids."

"Kids?"

It was Matt's turn to smile. "Children," he explained. "Judith was a businesswoman and never wanted any."

"I see." The woman's eyes, still serious, bore into him. "Take the next left turn, then turn right at the third intersection. The school is two blocks further on. "

"Right," Matt replied and slowed down.

"No left," Niana corrected, caught his eye and they both laughed. "I took English up to university level but still can't understand it at times."

Vehicles filled every space outside the school so Matt double-parked while Niana searched through the throngs of children pouring out the gate. "There they are," she said. "I'll go and get them."

"Sure," Matt replied, watching as she scooted between two parked cars and made her way to where a boy about eight was clasping the hand of a little girl hardly big enough to be at school.

A minute later the passenger door opened and two hazel eyes gazed at him as the girl scrambled in, followed by a shy looking boy and finally Niana. "This is Matt, children," she said, and then repeated her words in another language. She glanced up at Matt and added more in her own language. Adona gave a chuckle and Halia a slight grin. "I told them you're the nice man who owns the shop and we'll visit McDonald's. Do you mind?"

"Not at all." Matt laughed.

Adona looked up at him. "I got a star at school today," she said in almost accent-less English.

"Did you now? What for?"

"My writing," Adona said in a proud voice.

"The children speak better English than I do," Niana commented. She glanced at the boy. "Don't you, Halia?"

"Yes," the boy replied, casting a quick glance at Matt before he lapsed back into silence.

"He doesn't trust men, I'm afraid," Niana explained.

"Well," Matt said. "We'll just have to show Halia that most men in this country are okay, won't we? "

Halia looked across at Matt. "Niana said you make furniture and wooden trucks."

"That's right. I've made several toy trucks," Matt said, glancing at his companion. They'd never mentioned the row of wooden toys he had on a top shelf in his shop. "If Niana doesn't mind, I'll show you how to make one when you visit."

Halia nodded and glanced away.

"Niana bought me a teddy bear," Adona interrupted. "I take him to bed every night."

"Did she?" Matt said. He felt a hand give his arm a brief squeeze and saw Niana gazing at him.

"Thank you," she mouthed and said some more to the children in her own language.

At The Cuckoo's Nest, the children ran across to the Honda and Niana turned to Matt.

"I must go," she said, "but I'll be back after I drop the children off at school tomorrow. It'll be easier once I've moved into the apartment here."

"What about next week?" Matt asked.

"You mean my early hours?"

Matt nodded.

"The mornings won't be too bad. The children will be with me and can walk to school later. I will be closing every day at two so will have time to clean up and meet them after school. That's one reason I thought the sandwich bar would be so good."

"And who financed you for it?" Matt asked. As he was about to apologize again for being forward, Niana flashed a smile before her face turned sad.

"My parents anticipated the trouble at home and had a little money deposited in an Italian bank. I inherited it and a local bank loaned me the rest. Your government has sponsored a program to help us get credit." She glanced across at her car. "But I must be off. Goodbye for now, Matt. Thank you for your help today." Her smile returned.

"My pleasure."

That evening as he drove into the driveway of his home, a modern house in one of the newer suburbs, he watched his cat crawl out from under a bush. He shrugged. Something was missing. He parked the truck in a space by the garage and climbed down before he realized what it was. For the first time in months, he never had that hollow feeling when he arrived back at the empty house.

"Well Misty," he said as he picked up the little grey cat to pet. "I hope you've been looking after everything for me."

Round yellow eyes stared at him as if the cat understood everything he said. Matt laughed, realizing that Misty was only hungry and knew he had cat food in his supermarket bag.

"Come on, Misty." He laughed. "I bought a piece of fresh fish for you."

Over the course of the next few weeks Matt found out a little about Niana. She was not, as he had first thought, a Muslim. A little research showed that about a quarter of Albanians were Orthodox Christians or Roman Catholics but Matt could find no facts on the ethnic Albanians from Kosovo.

"When I was a child, our communist government discouraged all religions," she commented one of the few times the subject was mentioned. "I guess it worked reasonably well, but my parents told me it was only after Marshall Tito died that the ethnic differences surfaced. The language we speak makes us the enemy in the eyes of Serb nationalists."

She spoke four languages with Italian added to her repertoire of two local languages and English; and originated from the capital of Kosovo, Pristina. There, she had been a postgraduate student. Her experiences during those fateful days in April 1999 were never mentioned but Matt could tell the memories were firmly embedded in her mind. Often small events would trigger a reaction from grim silence to soft tears before she'd swallow and continue whatever she was doing at the time.

Niana's Sandwich Bar opened without much fanfare, but it wasn't a whimper either. The original clients from Annie's establishment returned and the number of sit-down customers, especially for breakfast in the early morning, was so popular Niana moved her opening time back from seven to six-thirty and hired an employee part-time every morning until ten.

She proved to be an astute businesswoman who altered her menus to suit the clients' tastes. Unpopular choices were eliminated and she soon realized the majority of customers wanted ordinary food and tended to bypass the frilly stuff. As well as sandwiches, scones, muffins and small cakes sold well. Home-baked pies were also popular, with small individual ones preferred to the larger family-sized pies. Take-out coffee in paper mugs also sold well.

Matt noticed that the number of customers strolling through The Cuckoo's Nest increased and casual sales of smaller items such as the wooden toys and curiosities improved. He'd even sold two of the six cuckoo clocks that had been placed along the wall for months and had now begun to restore three more.

CHAPTER THREE

Bits of a cuckoo clock lay sprawled across the workbench like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle after Matt carefully tapped out the dozens of wooden pegs that held the ancient instrument together and used a special solvent to dissolve the old glue. This particular model had been tossed in a back shed or loft somewhere and had sustained water damage. The gears, chains and working parts were a solid mass of rust beyond redemption but the ornate wooden carvings, though blackened with age and neglect, were unbroken. Waiting along the bench was the mechanism of a second cuckoo clock, this one with a smashed exterior. Between the two, and after hours of careful reconstruction, Matt would end up with a fully working cuckoo clock every bit as perfect as when it was first manufactured a century before.

This was his hobby with little financial gain expected for his efforts. It was a fun way to pass a wet Saturday afternoon. Usually about four customers began to drift back so it was worth staying open.

As he grunted over a stubborn peg that wouldn't come out, a movement caught his eyes and he glanced around. Two children stood in the room with their eyes on him, the little boy behind his sister but with both arms firmly around her.

"Hello Halia and Adona," Matt said. "My, you both look smart. Are those new sweatshirts?"

"Niana bought them for us," Adona replied with a cheerful smile. She swung herself around. "I wanted to show you."

Halia glanced up at the row of wooden toys shelved above the bench. "You said we could see your toys," he said in a hesitant voice.

"Of course," Matt replied. "You know, they've been sitting there for ages, now. Would you

both like one to take home?"

"Can we?" Adona gasped.

"Why not? As well as toy vehicles, there were several wooden doll's cots and a small doll's house in the selection. "What would you like?"

"A tractor," Halia replied. "My daddy had a tractor."

"Me, too," Adona added.

"So you want a tractor, too," Matt said. "Not a doll's house?"

"No." The little girl shook her head. "I want a tractor, too, please." She stopped and big hazel eyes looked at him. "Girls can have tractors can't they, Matt?"

"Of course." Matt selected four wooden tractors and placed them on the bench. "There you are, pick one each."

Adona's eyes shone as she grabbed one toy while her brother had a more methodical approach. He examined the remaining three in turn before choosing the middle one.

"This has a latch to join a wagon on," he said in a solemn voice.

"So you'd like a wagon? I haven't any but we could make one sometime."

"Yes please," Halia replied. "One with four wheels."

"So what say we make two of them?" Matt said. "One each."

Adona, as usual, was the first to reply. "Yes please." She clasped her toy in little hands. "I'm going to show Niana mine."

She ran out of the room. Halia gave a small grin, clutched his own toy to follow but stopped at the door. "Matt?"

"Yes, Halia."

"That pile of sand by the car park. Can we play in it?"

"It will be a bit wet out there now but later you can."

"Thanks Matt," the little boy answered in his serious voice. "Bye."

Matt grinned and wondered if he could ever get the little fellow to smile. After all they'd gone through, it was probably his way of coping. He placed the remaining toys back on the shelf and returned to the cuckoo clock pieces.

A few moments later Niana appeared with a twenty-dollar note in her hand and looked serious, not unlike Halia's expression. "I told the children they shouldn't have taken the toys," she said in a quiet voice, "but they were so thrilled with them I never had the heart to return them. How much do I owe you?"

"They're a gift." Matt grinned. "Wooden toys don't sell well, anyway. Kids now-a-days want plastic ones with flashing lights and electric motors."

"But Matt ..." The young woman's eyes warmed. "Why are you so kind?"

Matt flushed. "As I said when we met, I just want to help."

"And no ulterior motives?"

Matt chuckled. "Of course there is, a beautiful young woman alone in the world ..." He coughed and glanced away. "That was a damn stupid thing to say. I'm sorry."

Niana fixed her eyes on him, seized his gaze back and reached out to grab his hands. "You hardly know me," she whispered and, without warning, tears began to roll down her cheeks. "You might not like the real me."

Matt blinked at her reaction, reached forward and tucked his arms around her, all the time expecting a firm rebuff but it never came. A soft body clutched into him. He could feel tight breasts pressed against his chest and warm arms around his neck, smell that rich clean hair and the aroma of toothpaste as her face moved a mere few centimeters away.

He reached down, placed a finger under a small chin and felt his lips tingle with emotion. Without really thinking about it he found himself kissing lips placed against his.

At first polite, the kiss soon turned into something more frantic as the woman responded. She held him, opened her mouth slightly so her tongue ran along his and continued.

However, a moment later she placed an opened hand on his chest, gave a gentle push and stepped back. "I'm ... I'm sorry, Matt," she whispered, wiped her hands down the sides of her jeans and stepped towards the door.

Matt interpreted her action as nervousness rather than annoyance so reached out and, in one deft movement, had her back in his arms. She was now shaking but remained there with more tears flowing and tucked her face into his neck as he, without really thinking of the consequences, ran fingers up her sweater and touched the smooth cleavage between her

breasts.

"Matt ..." She sighed but didn't object when he cupped a breast through the material. He kissed her again, long and with passion.

Niana hesitated, kissed him lightly on the cheek and lifted his hand off her breast. "Not now, Matt; please," she panted as if trying to contain her own emotions. "The children."

"Of course," he replied in embarrassment and relaxed his hold as their eyes met.

"I'm not an innocent virgin," she whispered and continued speaking when he smiled and hugged her closer. "No, Matt. Listen to me." The eyes were dry now but her lips quivered.

"Go on," he replied in a gentle voice and kissed her hair.

"I was eight months pregnant, Matt, when the soldiers came and shot my husband in front of me." She began sobbing again. "I was certain I'd be raped but they fondled me, stared at my rotund body, laughed, said they preferred slim women and told me to head for Albania." Her body shuddered and tears again rolled down her cheeks. "Thirty minutes later they returned, tossed a bottle of petrol over the house and torched it. My husband's body was still inside. I had the clothes I stood in. That was all."

"And your baby?" Matt asked, his voice grim.

"Stillborn" Niana shrugged. "After I reached the border an Italian doctor helped to save my life. It was hell, Matt." Her eyes, full of emotion stared into his. "I don't even know his name ..."

"Oh you poor dear," he responded after the story with all its horror unfolded.

He reached forward and passion again erupted between the pair, so intense, Matt didn't want to stop but fought his emotions as he held the young woman in his arms. After what seemed to be an eternity, the kisses stopped and Niana sniffed back stubborn tears.

"So that's me," she finally spluttered and stepped back. "I've made a fool of myself, haven't I?"

"No. You have a life ahead, Niana but never be afraid to remember the past."

"Oh Matt, I thought when you heard about me you wouldn't--"

"Perhaps you think too much," Matt interrupted.

"Sure." She blew her nose, grinned, and straightened the rest of her ruffled clothing. "Come on, the children will miss us."

"Okay," Matt said but noticed the twenty-dollar note placed under a block of wood on the bench. "I don't want anything for the toys, okay?" He reached forward and tucked the money in the pocket of her jeans.

"Okay," she replied and smiled. "But you shouldn't spoil them, you know."

"And you don't?"

"I just try to make their lives normal if there is such a thing."

Together, the two walked through to the shop. It was still raining outside and no customers were around. Matt locked up and they headed across the alley. Under the veranda of the smaller building, two mud splattered and wet children were pushing toy tractors along a muddy little road they'd made in the adjacent garden and chatting away in a blend of English and their own language. They hadn't even noticed the adults watching them.

"Oh goodness," Niana gasped. "They're filthy."

Adona glanced up with a grubby smile. "Hi Niana," she shouted above the noise of the rain on the tin roof, "My tractor got stuck and Halia had to come and push me out."

"Leave them," Matt suggested. "Let's have a cup of coffee. They can have a bath later."

"You can play for another ten minutes and use the hose in the alley to wash yourselves down before you come inside," Niana told the children as she led Matt inside. "I baked some scones at home. That was why I came to the shop on a Saturday, I thought you might be hungry." She coughed and continued in a hushed but warm voice. "I miss you on the weekends."

"And I thought it was only me," Matt replied.

"Oh, Matt, with all those sophisticated local women in their flashy cars that visit your shop, I thought you wouldn't be interested in a stressed out foreign refugee. As time slipped by and you continued to visit, I thought you were still only trying to be kind."

"Most of my customers are married, over fifty and have a two hundred thousand mortgage over their heads," Matt said. "Not one of them can compare to your sunny smile." He flushed. "I'm not very good at this sort of stuff."

"You were doing okay a few moments ago," Niana chuckled. "I just about had to fight you

off."

"Sorry about that ..."

"No you aren't." The young woman snapped, stood on tiptoes and placed a firm kiss on his lips. "What happened is what we both wanted," she whispered and kissed him again, "and what we both need. Next time we'll wait until the children are away and let things happen." She blushed. "That came out all wrong. I can't find the English words I want."

Matt cleared his throat. "You had some scones, I believe?" He changed the topic but his eyes showed his innermost feelings. Even in casual jeans and sweater Niana looked stunning; so feminine and self-assured. He could hardly believe what had happened those few minutes ago. It was like a dream and he'd wake up in his empty bed at home. He realized how lonely he'd been over the last long months but the emotion he felt now was more than a physical attraction of a lonely man towards a voluptuous woman ... much more.

"Of course." Niana's laughing voice interrupted his thoughts.

"With raspberry jam," Matt added. He plunked himself down on a stool beside the stainless steel bench they'd installed when Niana first arrived and watched as she slid a tray of scones into an oven to reheat.

She turned, smiled and took a container of orange juice out of the refrigerator. "Talking about children, I'd better bring my kids in," she whispered with an emphasis on the word kids. "They can use the shower here." She giggled. "Perhaps I guessed it was going to be a different sort of afternoon. I brought them an extra set of clothes."

Matt had just staggered out of bed on Sunday morning when the telephone rang. It was Niana but her voice sounded remote.

"We need to talk, Matt," she said. "Can I come and see you? I'll need to bring the children with me."

"Of course," Matt replied with a frown. He chatted for a moment without questioning Niana, gave her directions to his home and hung up.

"Oh, shit," he muttered, running his hand along the stubble on his chin, and dashing to give himself a quick shave before Niana arrived.

Half an hour later the Honda pulled up and the two children bounded out, Adona with a

cheery smile and Halia a slight grin. Both were well dressed in warm clothes and carrying their tractors and a bag of other odds and ends. Niana walked around her car with a tight expression fixed to her dark eyes.

"Your house," she said in a quiet neutral voice. "It's lovely."

Matt glanced back at the cream bricks and bay window behind him and shrugged. "It was built to my design. Well, I had a pad full of ideas and an architect put them all together," he added. "I started breakfast," he said, ushering the three into a contemporary kitchen where the smell of bacon filled the air.

"Oh Matt," the young woman sighed. "You are making it so difficult for me."

"Why, Niana? I can tell by your body language something is wrong. If I hurt you somehow, forgive me. That's the last thing I want to do." Matt nodded and noticed the two children gazing intently at him. "Go through to the other room, kids," he said. "I've got cartoons turned on. I'll bring you some breakfast when it's cooked. There's bacon, eggs, fried tomatoes and toast. How does that sound?"

Even Halia grinned before he followed his sister to the comfortable lounge.

"Now, what is it, Niana?" Matt asked when the children were out of earshot.

She'd taken off her jacket and wore a blue dress under a beige knit pullover. As usual, she looked quite beautiful. Her face, though, was serious with downcast eyes and teeth biting against her bottom lip.

"It's last night," she said. "Things happened too quickly. To be frank, I don't want to have an affair." Her eyes blinked.

Matt reached out for her but she stepped away. "No Matt," she said. "When you held me last night I was drawn to you. I needed your body but I am afraid."

"But why?" Matt's stomach churned as he wiped a hand across his brow.

"I don't want sex just for the lust. It's not enough. At the moment I am so lonely. I am trying to cope and I need you, Matt, but as you were--a generous kind friend, not a lover."

"I see," Matt said with disappointment ringing in his voice. "I guess I'm no great catch, am I?"

"

Niana looked at him and burst into tears, the same tears of emotion that wrenched Matt's heart the night before. "You don't understand," she whispered. "It's not that I'm not attracted to you. It's the opposite, in fact."

"You still have your husband on your mind and feel you're being disloyal to his memory; is that it?"

Niana wiped her eyes and stared across at him. "Why are you so bloody understanding," she sniffed. "I had it all worked out. I'd come here, say I wouldn't go to bed with you and even offer to sell my business if being so close became an embarrassment."

"And how did you expect me to react?"

"Oh I don't know. When friends become lovers, the passion passes and they go their own way, usually with one being hurt. I thought you'd be hurt, but very polite, talk for a while about something neutral, I'd go home and you'd avoid me in the future."

Matt walked across to the stove, turned the sizzling bacon over and tossed some tomato chunks in. He glanced out the window, frowned and turned to where the young woman's eyes had followed every movement he'd made.

Without a sound, he stepped forward grabbed her two hands and, before she could react, pulled her into his chest in a powerful embrace and kissed her fully on the lips.

"Matt. Stop it," she retorted, struggling to get out of his arms but he was too strong.

He held on, waiting until she stopped kicking and squirming, and watched while the inevitable tears continued to flow. Holding her face so she couldn't turn away, he kissed her again. Drawing her body against his, he willed himself not to touch the heaving breasts pressed against his chest. After several kisses, she responded with sobs conflicting with the passion.

Finally, Matt relaxed his hold so Niana was at an arm's length. "We're more than friends, Niana," he whispered, "and every day I want to hold you like I'm doing now." He let her hands go and stepped back. "But I promise I'll go no further unless it is what you want."

"Oh Matt," the sobbing young woman replied.

"Well?" Matt asked.

She smiled through her tears and held out a hand. "Mr. Coleman," she said, "I accept your conditions." She flushed. "I don't even mind if your hands drift a little."

"Good," Matt said with a wink. "Let's have breakfast. I'm starved."

He turned and broke four eggs into the frying pan. They hissed and splattered while a cloud of hot smoke rose towards the exhaust fan but he never noticed. The arm around his waist and the head tucked into his neck had distracted him.

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"I should be very annoyed with you," Niana retorted while kissing his cheek, "but let me finish cooking breakfast."

Matt kept his bargain and slowly the attraction he had for Niana turned into love that, he was sure, was reciprocated. Every day, when they were alone, he'd give a slight grin, grab her in his arms and kiss her. She'd respond and, if they were in a private spot, his hand would slip across her dress or sweater to softly massage the breasts beneath. He never went under the material until one afternoon, when Niana, almost in exasperation, undid four buttons of her blouse to show she was wearing no brassiere beneath. With a slight grin, she grabbed his hands and placed them firmly on her breasts, kissed him with a passion he was now becoming used to and rubbed a soft hand up his fly.

"Niana," he gasped as he bent to kiss her succulent body. "How can I keep my end of our bargain when you do this to me?"

"Patience, my love," she replied using that word the first time. She moaned as his lips touched a taut exposed nipple "Oh God, Matt," she moaned a moment later as his hand grabbed her other breast and squeezed. She lifted his head and kissed him before adding, "Perhaps I shouldn't have been so provocative."

"It's too late now," Matt said, lifting her up over his shoulder in a fireman's hold.

"Matt!" She screamed, kicked and thumped his back as he carried her over to an old couch in the corner of his workshop and plunked her down. He bent over and kissed her again, stood back and smiled.

"When one plays with fire," he said, chuckling.

"You just wait," she retorted as she redid her blouse buttons. Suddenly, she jumped up, tickled him under the arms and ran for the workshop door before he could grab her. "I have to go and pick up the kids," she said, laughing back at him. "See you later."

Matt went charging out after her and almost knocked an elderly lady over who, unnoticed, had entered The Cuckoo's Nest and had just been avoided in Niana's quick dash through.

"Oops, excuse me, Ma'am," he panted. "We didn't realize how late it was and Niana, there, has to go and pick up her children."

"You don't need to make excuses to me, young man," she answered in an indignant voice. Breaking into a crinkly smile, she added, "I was young once, you know."

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