

I WILL MAKE HER DEAD

MARTA SPROUT

A SMALL COMPACT MIRROR glided across the marble-tiled floor of the bathroom pushed by the hand of a child. It slid under Diane William's mouth. Her breath left a fog on the reflective surface just before she rolled over on her back and moaned.

A haze of confusion hung over her. The searing pain in Diane's forehead was almost steady. *Where in the hell am I?* Too many questions prodded her groggy brain. As she opened her eyes she found the wide-eyed stare of her seven-year-old daughter, Natty, only a few inches from her throbbing nose. A knot rolled in Diane's stomach. Natty was absorbing every raw twinge of pain as if she was taking in the glowing candles on a birthday cake. That and the nausea caused by the agony swirling in Diane's head made her want to vomit.

Even the smell of Natty's bubble gum increased the panic pounding in her chest. As her pulse surged she felt her consciousness begin to slip again. *I can't give in. I'll be damned if I am letting go now.* Diane blinked to clear her vision and saw the crimson ribbons of blood splattered on the vanity's cream-colored cabinets.

The fabric of Natty's dress with the twirly skirt absorbed similar streaks of red. Diane's eyes shifted to look at the porcelain-perfect face and rosy-cheeked child next to her.

"Mommy, get up," Natty said. Her matter-of-fact voice gave no indication of what she was holding in her hand.

As the girl moved closer Diane felt a sharp pain in her side. The words of her child sounded like distant chatter echoing down an impossibly long corridor. Unable to speak, Diane used what little reserves she had to cling to the conscious world like a life raft.

Natty's voice turned as chipper as if she were having a pretend tea party. "Mommy, I'm so sorry that you fell."

Diane heard sirens and footsteps coming up the stairwell, while Natty quietly sat beside her. She tried to crane her neck to see who was coming, but before she could move the upside down face of a ruddy-skinned police officer appeared hovering above her like a beacon of hope.

Her eyes pleaded with the figure standing over her. Her words were croaked from a mouth so dry her lips stuck to her teeth. "Please. Help. Me." Sweat poured off her forehead and mingled with blood gushing from a deep head wound. She heard the soft voice of a younger officer, a woman. "What is your name, sweetheart?"

“Natty.”

Diane helplessly watched the policewoman taking Natty by the hand. Diane wanted to warn her. The officer didn't see the danger. Despite her best effort the blur of stethoscopes, IV lines, and the agonizing jostling of being carried down the stairs on a gurney over took her.

In the foyer Natty's singsong voice was like an omen from a horror flick only Diane could see. She heard Natty talking to the police woman sweetly. “I need to find my sister. I'll be right back.”

Tears, overflowing Diane's eyes, trickled onto the crinkly pillow that smelled like alcohol swabs. *Not Lizzy. Please don't let her...* As Diane caught a glimpse of Natty's heels ascending the staircase a wave of darkness swept over Diane pushing her thoughts beyond reach. Speech was nearly impossible.

Moments later, the paramedics turned the gurney and rolled it down the sidewalk toward the waiting ambulance. Just five yards away from the blanket over Diane's feet, Natty stood next to the woman officer.

“Bye-bye, Mommy,” Natty said, smiling. With one hand she waved. With the other, she held her sister's hand so tightly her fingers were the color of alabaster. Lizzy's tiny four-year-old body and wide eyes were locked in horror. Tears trickled down her face, reflecting the flashing lights from the emergency-response vehicles.

“No, God please, no,” Diane pleaded with a cry muffled by the non-rebreather oxygen mask.



SIX YEARS EARLIER Dr. Stephen Williams and his wife Diane sat through all the paperwork and meetings to allow Russia's officials their chance to get a good look at this American couple who was about to adopt one of their orphans. Governor Sasha Bosnjak sat at a large worn table with his legs crossed, quietly stirring a spoonful of blackberry jam into his tea to sweeten it.

The eager couple exchanged smiles with the man while his secretary went through the stack of papers with an enormous stamp that tapped on the ink pad and then slammed down with the force of the Russian government's approval on each page of the adoption documents.

That the secretary and the Governor shared one battered desk in the corner of their conference room was noted by the couple. On the trip over they had been briefed that things in Russia were very different from the routine comforts they were accustomed to in the US.

“Zdraast-voeee-che,” Diane slowly offered a formal greeting of respect with one of the few words she knew in Russian.

The Governor, seeming pleased by her effort, nodded in reply and then to his secretary. When he shifted into barking orders to another staff member, the harsh consonant sounds of the language and the sheer volume of his voice made Diane jump. It sounded to her like he was yelling at them, but the traditional Easter pastry and the tea they were offered, along with his smile, told otherwise.

Through their translator, Diane told the official, “If I could take all the words in my language and yours, there would not be enough words to tell you how grateful we are. We will cherish this child, always.”

Moments later they were in the taxi with their translator dodging enormous pot holes and heading for a remote Siberian orphanage. Putting up with the strangeness of a language and a culture they didn’t understand was nothing compared to the heartbreak of the miscarriage she had suffered two years ago. She and Stephen had fought vehemently over the issue of parenthood. That wound was healing and he’d reluctantly agreed to the adoption. Now after seven years of marriage, they were finally going to become parents.

April in Siberia was the season when everything was coated in thick layers of putty-colored mud that splattered on everything. The razor wire and drab gray cement walls of the orphanage looked more like a prison than a children’s home. Somewhere within this behemoth wreck of a building was a baby girl waiting for the arms that would take her home.

Women in tall funny white hats greeted them like a gaggle of characters from a twisted version of Alice in Wonderland and then escorted the nervous couple through the bleak rundown corridors to the baby’s crib. It was separated from the others and set against one wall that had a painted cartoon like face that peered down at the crib with enormously wide eyes. Natasha looked like a fragile little doll that was blankly staring at a spot on the ceiling. Her bottle of runny yogurt lay next to her untouched.

Diane had dreamt of this moment for so long. She’d ached for the time when she could wrap her arms around a baby of her own. It felt as if love had enveloped her into a cocoon of wonder where the clatter of the outside world no longer mattered. The baby’s chocolate-brown eyes were breathtakingly beautiful.

With the nurse’s nod of encouragement, Diane picked up Natasha without hesitation. The child’s skin was creamy white with a tiny mouth like a rosebud. At nearly ten months old, the

infant was strong. As Diane tried to hold her, the baby arched her back and turned her head away. She locked her legs and strained until sweat beaded up across her tiny lip.

No matter how hard Diane tried, she could not get the baby to relax and look at her. Worry began to pour across Diane's face, when the head nurse, a matronly woman with a stiffly starched apron, took the child out of her arms and whisked her away. The translator explained that they were getting her ready to go, but they could hear two women vigorously debating something in Russian down the hallway.

While they waited, Diane and Stephen looked out of a dirty window to behold a sea of dreary flats. There were no private homes in Russia, at least not for common folks. Most people lived in giant rundown apartment buildings erected during the Soviet era. Due to a shortage of both money and apartments, it was normal for several generations to live in the same two-bedroom unit until a barren old couple died.

Diane hated the word "barren," having heard the clinical term more than once. It sounded so hopeless. Now things had changed and they were poised on the edge of a dream come true. Then the image of the baby twisting away from her threw a pall over her confidence. "Steve, are you okay with this?"

"Sure, what's wrong? Don't tell me, after all of this, you've changed your mind, for God's sake."

"No, that's not it. There is something about Natasha that... I don't know. Why won't she look at me?"

"You're a stranger to her. You know how sensitive babies are to unfamiliar faces and smells."

"So, you're telling me I smell funny? Thanks."

"No. Give her some time to get to know you."

"Isn't there something about her that seems off to you?"

"Hell yes. You'd be a mess too if you were stuck here. Look at this place. She just needs some time and a family to love her. Quit worrying so much. Jeez."

Natasha's anguished screaming from a back room somewhere down the hallway, did not allay Diane's fears, but considering Stephen had seen just about everything as an ER doc, Diane decided he was probably right. Surely his clinical training would alert them if something were really amiss.

Suddenly a racket was raised by a troupe of toddlers passing by that clattered over the floors yellowed with old wax. When the hefty women in charge of the small band realized that the Americans were watching, the caregivers became noticeably uncomfortable and abruptly redirected the children out of sight. A little girl with striking blonde pigtails that exploded off each side of her head turned to look back at the couple. One haunting blue eye stared at Diane, while the other was lost in a gnarled deformity that consumed half of the poor child's face.

“I wonder how many children are locked behind these walls?”

Before Stephen could answer, the couple was hustled out the door with the baby swaddled in thick blankets and a small basket of baby bottles and a roly-poly doll.

The head nurse pulled Diane aside and with her heavy accent she spoke her fractured English words thoughtfully, “Make good care for her. This girl, she is special.” Then the nurse instructed Diane to keep the baby swaddled for comfort and to feed her in about four hours. In the cab, Diane was captivated, as she studied the sweet face of her new baby girl.

On the way to the airport, Diane snuggled with her new daughter in a moment of bliss, until a sharp pain nipped at the bare skin just above her blouse. She pulled the baby away to find a tiny cut on her chest. Diane searched for a loose diaper pin or the jagged edge of a zipper on her jacket only to find nothing was out of place.

Puzzled, she spoke gently to the child, “Natty, did you bite me?” For the first time, the baby was staring directly back at her.

I WILL MAKE HER DEAD is a work of fiction. Names, characters, locales, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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