



Ksana
Gilgenberg

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«Издательские решения»

Gilgenberg K.

Butterflies / K. Gilgenberg — «Издательские решения»,

ISBN 978-5-44-853873-5

Life usually goes according to a scenario written for you beforehand. You go to school, graduate from college, get a job, get married, etc. Even if some of you have problems with these, you struggle to get what you are meant to have. But what if a 'system failure' occurs? What if someone wise and powerful decides to intervene in your life? Will such intervention turn out to be a happy blessing, or will it become the test beyond your strength?

ISBN 978-5-44-853873-5

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ISBN 978-5-4485-3873-5

Created with Ridero smart publishing system

Part I

Chapter 1 July 2012

Lika was in love with Vlad since primary school when he sat beside her at the desk and said, “Let’s swap the seats: you’ll take a seat next to that girl, so that Oleg could seat next to me.” He looked at her with such a plea that she could not help ceding the place to him. Thus, they were sitting at neighboring desks for eleven years. She was looking at his back, and he sometimes turned round to write something off her notebook or ask some questions. He was the one, except her best friend Rita, who had an access to her notebooks with homework in Math. Vlad and Rita were the most loved people for Lika after her parents had left her.

Lika was six when her parents divorced. Her mother and her younger sister went to the USA and got lost somewhere on its territory. According to a reached agreement, Lika was to live with her father. But half a year had barely passed when the father departed in an unknown direction whereupon Lika was almost taken to an orphanage. Luckily nothing happened: the widow of her father’s cousin sheltered her. Later her father let them know that he was alright, but Lika still went on living with her aunt. Father called her twice a month and occasionally sent her small amounts of money. There was only once when he disappeared for several years from her life, but, little by little, their brief conversations on the phone came back into her life. He lived somewhere in India for the last three or four years.

Despite not being a kinswoman, Aunt Ann (as Lika called her) treated her niece with great care. Aunt Ann treated her three cats, Mashka, Dashka, and Coco, with the same degree of concern. Coco was her favorite as it was the mother of Dashka and Mashka. All the three were ginger ones with blue eyes, and Aunt Ann was the only one who could distinguish them. Aunt’s favorites were allowed to do anything they wanted. She permitted them to stiff around the plates during breakfast, lunch, or dinner time, and they could even pull off some plums from her plate; she just playfully chid them.

To watch cats having fun was almost the only Lika’s entertainment because even a single mention of a TV-set that Aunt Ann called a “zombie-set” or a “brainwasher” made her aunt feel sick. As for the computer, she bought it for her niece on condition that “no computer games, no films, no useless surfing the Net! Only for study!” However, Lika was not one of the people who violated dear aunts’ bans.

And now, listening to Aunt Ann’s lecturing at Coco that had once again pushed a flowerpot of violets off the windowsill, Lika came up to another window and looked out at the courtyard. Outside the window, July had painted everything in bright colors. The midday Sun blinded her eyes, and sheep-like clouds added some depth to the view. Lika closed her eyes and moved her face to the sun rays. She was smiling; bliss flooded her. She imagined that she was sitting on a bank of a quiet river that gently rolled not only its waters, but tiny boats with white sails as well. Old willows rinsed their dark green locks in riverine light waves. Bustling swallows sped overhead hither and thither. Breeze playing with her hair brought some honeysuckle and sagebrush flavor.

Sudden shiver came down her shoulders, and her daydream melted away. Lika opened her eyes and saw Vlad. He was just entering the courtyard. Giving her a bit sad smile, he waved her “hello” and went on to his porch. Her eyes followed him as her heart beat unevenly in her chest.

“He’s no match for you!” Aunt Ann’s compassionate voice came over Lika’s ear, and she shuddered.

“Let me sweep?” the embarrassed girl offered and went to the pieces of soil near the window side; she was not going to discuss Vlad with Aunt Ann.

“Oh, Lika, Lika... Well, aren’t there enough good guys around you? Why to dwell on him? You’d better listen to an old wise woman – Vlad’s no match for you!”

Lika was silently sweeping the soil pieces onto the scoop trying to wave away the cats that certainly wanted to smell the wet nubbins. “I say it once again! Not your match!” Aunt Ann concluded and pointedly winked at Coco. “Don’t you want to ask me why?”

Lika shook her head. Somewhere deep inside she knew the answer to that question herself. “I guess we’ll need to buy a new flower-pot for the poor violets if that falls once again”, she said and then left the woman alone with cats.

“Coco, my girl, that’s silly! Just foolish! Agree with me?” Aunt Ann addressed one of the cats.

Coco loyally looked her owner in the eye. It seemed it agreed with anything she had said. Feeling approval from her pet, Aunt Ann went on with inspiration:

“At least *you* do understand me, dear Coco! He’s made of completely different dough! You can’t make good buns from the dough for gingerbread. I don’t mean gingerbread isn’t as good as buns but I won’t pretend I’ve ever cared for gingerbread. And you, Coco?”

Coco purred loudly in reply.

“I knew it! You don’t fancy it either. And the matter isn’t that he’s a spoiled boy who’s got used to get anything he wants, and our Lika is a poor orphan. No, Coco, it isn’t the case! There are so many examples of unequal marriage... Rich and poor, old and young... And what’s the reason then you ask me, Coco? Suppose it’s... it’s some kinda inner barrier, something inside themselves that doesn’t allow them to be together...”

At the moment Lika was standing at the door in her room listening to what Aunt Ann was saying. She agreed with every word she had heard especially with the last ones. They had always been just friends, but she knew it for sure Vlad was not indifferent to her. First she noticed that he started looking at her in a special way; it was different from the way he used to and from the way he looked at other girls. He eyed her as if he wanted to read what was inside her. And Lika learnt how to recognize those sights of his. They enraptured and hurt her at the same time. Probably, that was the pain of doubt. She felt he needed her but that was just the feeling that she was frightened to trust.

“Does he really look at me in a special way, or it’s just a fantasy of mine? It’s likely to be wishful thinking... Vlad is the most handsome, the bravest, the most... he’s the best! Surely, all the eighth-grade girls and older ones are mad about him. And me... What am I? What in me could possibly attract him? Is there anything special about me? No! Nil! I’m fairly beautiful, moderately clever and nothing more,” thought Lika.

“But if I were the most beautiful, if I were the life of the party, merry, sparkling like champagne bubbles, may be then I’d be a match for him. Oh, no!” Lika cheered up, “Then it wouldn’t be me, but Rita! By the way, where’s she gone? It’s been a week she would not answer the phone...”

Lika once again counted the days she had tried to get through to Rita. It appeared to be exactly seven of them. She saw the friend last on the day when she visited Lika to tell her about the last school ball which Lika had missed; her father had again forgotten to transfer money, and Aunt Ann’s pension was not big enough neither to buy a dress nor to pay for the restaurant. They only could spare some money for the class photo. Being between Vlad and Rita in it pleased Lika a lot. She was not really upset to have missed the ball. Besides, Rita told her about every detail leaving the feeling Lika herself had been there. But there was one thing Rita did not mention of.

The friends were sitting in the kitchen while Aunt Ann was out shopping. They were having tea with pancakes, and Rita was telling her about who of their classmates had had the loveliest dress, who had danced together, what entertainments had been there, the way Tanya, school’s best known news monger, had lost her mobile phone, etcetera. Lika was listening to her with an interest; she was

afraid to miss any particular detail concerning Vlad, but Rita never mentioned him issuing more and more details about the rest of their classmates.

Lika went on harking; the only question kept on pulsing in her head “And what about Vlad?” She was at the point of uttering it out when Aunt Ann came back from the shops, and the question had to keep on hammering in her temples.

Rita hurried home immediately.

“I’ve got to call Tanya to find out if she’d found her mobile.”

“Call me later, will you? And say ‘hello’ to her from me”

“Ok,” she snapped and left.

Yet Rita did not call either that day or later. Tanya phoned instead. Lika just wanted to ask her about the lost mobile and bring the chat to an end. She did not want to hear latest tattle that the classmate was ready to share with anyone any time of the day or night, but then she thought it would be a good opportunity to learn something about Vlad. At that very moment Tanya as if she had read her friend’s mind claimed,

“Lika! I’m telling you something! You just fall! So you’d better sit!”

“Already sitting.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“So?” Lika could not wait. It turned her stomach when the friend feignedly inflated the importance of the news. She had already imagined how many tedious gossips she would have to get through before the classmate could possibly say something she wanted to hear.

“It’s about Vlad!” Tanya blurted out.

Lika’s heart skipped a beat and went; she cheerfully smiled.

“OK, let it be about Vlad,” she said pretending to sound indifferent.

“Crikey, dear! You should’ve seen “im! He was...” as if been choked with delight, the mute came from the other side of the wire but then broke finally having found the right words, “Swanky! Irresistible! Orlando Bloom nervously smokes on the sidelines and tears his hair with envy! Marsha, my cousin, you remember her – knows his aunt – said his mum bought him – that – in Milan!”

“What did she buy? Who did she buy?” Lika did not understand anything.

“Oh, don’t you understand?! Mum bought him a tux.”

“Ah, now I see.”

“You’ve no idea how chic he was! And that tux...” Tanya said languidly.

“Why don’t I? I do have an idea,” and her imagination drew a picture of Vlad wearing a tux quite easily. And at that very moment Lika regretted she had not been there to see him.

“And this is just the beginning! I haven’t told you half a story yet,”

And again, there was a pause.

“Come on, out with it once you’ve started!”

“So – we were at the tables when he appeared. You know, he likes being in the centre of attention. He went across the hall and everybody stared at him! Even Timokhina (it was their tutor) said he looked stunningly.

“Argh, really said so?”

“Not exactly. She used some other words. And so, after her speech he was off, just evaporated. I asked the girls where he could possibly be, but nobody saw him leaving. Any ideas why he left so early?”

“May be, some troubles at home?” Lika started worrying.

“And that’s not there!”

“Yah! Why are asking if you’ve got the answer? Just say it.”

“Here,” Tanya exclaimed, “we come to the most interesting part! He said to Timokhina that he felt sick and that he had a terrible headache. In all, she let’m leave.”

Tanya was silent testing Lika’s patience. Lika sighed inwardly.

“And?”

“He didn’t have a headache. He just lied!”

“Was that him who told you that?”

“No. Malik told me. Malik and Oleg joined him later. They had their own party there! Emilie and Rita were sort of going there too.”

“Did they go?”

“Don’t know. I thought you knew. Weren’t you there?” wondered Tanya; her voice full of true disappointment.

“No. They didn’t invite me” Lika drew a sigh.

“And Rita hasn’t said a word about it,” suggested the curious classmate.

“She might never been there,” Lika immediately stood up for her friend.

“She did go there. Know it for sure,” Tanya declared.

Lika did not know what to answer. The thoughts of her friend who might have stopped trusting her began to spin round inside her head, but she threw them away.

“Odd, rather odd,” came from the other side of the wire, “Don’t you find it fishy?”

“No, I don’t. She hasn’t got time to tell me yet.”

“Crikey! What a fool you are! Your Rita took a fancy to Vlad that’s why she hasn’t told you anything!”

Lika was dumb struck.

“What a rave! What does it have to do with Vlad?” She managed to say in half a minute or so.

“Blimey, dear! You’re kidding! I guess, she’ll take Vlad from you! No difference for you?”

Lika was lost for words. Her head seemed to be swelling and getting so heavy that the neck did not seem to be strong enough to hold it and was about to break. She got hold of her head with her hand trying to push back her pulsing temples, but “Rita and Vlad together” was pattering harder.

“Are you still here?” Tanya hollered.

Lika made herself breathe in deeply. “Let it be so,” she ordered in her mind’s eye and immediately calmed down. It stopped rapping in the temples making it easier to breathe.

“Lika, are you listening there?”

“I am.”

“Crikey! Why not answering then?”

“I don’t know what to answer,” Lika avowed.

“It’s okay, don worry. It doesn’t matter, for all know there’s something between you two.

“All?” Lika did not cease to wonder. Somehow, the idea that she was being hoaxed crept into her brain.

“All? The whole school, Lika!”

“MMM... For how long?”

“Quite long. Malik told me in September. He saw a photo of you inside Vlad’s wallet.”

“What a rave!” Lika thought, “May it appear to be true? How come he’s got my photo?”

“So how long have you been dating? You can spill the beans; it’s not a secret anymore,” Tanya was about to plead.

“You know, Aunt Ann’s calling me – let’s have a talk later. See you.”

“See you,” Tanya mouthed with disappointment on hearing long beeps in the receiver.

And Lika perched herself on her bed; her fingers grabbed a mattress’s edge. She did not have a slightest idea of what had just happened.

“Just a hoax. A prank,” she concluded. “Rita must be up to this. That’s why she neither calls nor answers *my* calls.”

No matter how hard Lika had tried to hide her feelings toward Vlad, Rita might have guessed the point and made up her mind to support Lika in such an odd way. It was like her. She had always

been up to incredible things to raise one's spirits. And this time she succeeded as well. The very thought that Vlad had her photo warmed Lika's heart.

Lika instantly urged to have a talk with her friend to tell the truth about her feelings towards Vlad at last as though the chat with Tanya had torn the chains off her heart, and the feelings she had been suppressing came flooding her all over.

She dialed Rita's number but the number appeared to be disabled, and it was too late to try her home phone number. Having dropped the phone on her bed, she glanced at her own reflection in a mirror. She was smiling. It was a sincere smile coming out of her very heart which also made some tears come down from her eyes.

They say you cannot feel joy and pain simultaneously. In fact, you can only when you are in love.

Chapter 2

Butterflies

The next week Lika failed to get through to Rita – the number was either not available or engaged and sometimes Rita's mother replied that Rita was not at home but promised she would call Lika back. Still Rita never did.

Lika calmed herself down by supposing that her friend was preparing to enroll the university, getting her documents and certificates ready and passing a medical examination. After all, she was doing the same things.

Finally, Lika made up her mind to visit Rita as soon as the doing with the documents was over, and they were sure to have a farewell party. Rita was going to continue study in St. Petersburg. Actually, she did not like the idea; her parents insisted she would get decent education at a prestigious university. Lika was saddened by that fact; it deeply hurt her to part with the dear friend. But what hurt her more was the coming Vlad's departure – he had enrolled the American University in Bulgaria. That was the way she was going to lose the two people she loved most. The thoughts of future parting haunted her in the daytime and at night, clothed in robes of vague and sad images, they enlaced her with dreams. None of those thoughts left her a single drop of hope for future happiness. Nobody had ever taught her to stand for her rejoice. She had only been taught to take her fate as it was. And if the fate was bound to split her up with the loved one, she considered it to be the only possible way to go.

The chat with Tanya made her perceive the coming parting with a particularly poignant pain. The preposterous talk it had been. It embarrassed and confused her a lot. If only she could get to know the truth!

Lika decided to invite Vlad to a farewell party. "I'll ask him to come by all means!" that's what she said to a hairbrush in her hand having finished brushing her long beautiful hair. She put the hairbrush on the cabinet at the mirror and added "You'll see."

Lika turned off the light and got under the blanket. She took a deep breath, and permeated with oxygen an innocent phantasy came flowing into her brain. Holding hands with Vlad, glancing at each other, they were walking through the park. He gave her one of his sweet smiles and unspeakable tenderness filled her heart. Her soul awoke with the song by the thought they were together. It seemed the whole world went pouring with sunlight and some kind of bewitching and angelic music. "The same music must be heard up there in paradise," Lika had thought before the sunbeams began to decay into pieces which turned into huge white butterflies. Their superfine patterned wings fluttered to the music. They were persistently growing in number, and Lika was encircled by them pretty soon. The butterflies were so close to her that they were continually brushing her face with their wings. Lika stood frozen with either delight or fear of the possibility for the beautiful vision being breathed away. First she thought the butterflies were flying around her, but in a while she understood they were moving to the rhythm in a particular order. Their movements started to remind dancing which mesmerized and fascinated her. Having spread her arms, Lika saw the butterflies flying straight through her body as if she had not got one. Besides, her body got slightly transparent and so light that it seemed to start soaring just on a thought of flight. The flight without wings encouraged just by an urge was her precious dream that could fill her insides with real happiness. She tiptoed ready to start, but a wind blow appeared from nowhere; with a single swing it broke the beauty of the butterflies' dance and swept away the wish of flight. It had a dance of its own, powerful and furious. Its might did not raise any doubts. It caught the fragile butterflies into its wild whirl and took the lot into falling darkness. Then there came the second swing and then there was the third one and so on. The wind was growing stronger; it was getting colder, and impenetrable darkness fell from nowhere. Lika looked around in search of a shelter. She spotted a distant light and embarked to it with all speed.

The light appeared to be a flame of a burning candle standing alone on a table surrounded by the darkness. The flame was hypnotizing her. She felt drowsy and she was about to close her eyes hovering between a dream and reality when she heard a subtle whisper. "Help me," it was. "Who's here?" she asked, and at the same moment she noticed a big cube of ice on the table. It had started melting and a trickle of water was coming down from the table forming a puddle at her feet. Lika took a closer look and recognized one of those white dancing butterflies. The poor thing was trying to move its wings, but icy fetters were insuperable.

Lika looked over a dozen of variants of how to rescue the butterfly, but all of them were of no use. As soon as she thought of holding the cube over the candle's flame, the candle disappeared. As she grabbed the icy thing in order to split it off against the corner of the table, the table immediately vanished.

"What else can I do?" panic embraced her, and her heart gave a leap at the thought that she would not have time to rescue the beautiful white butterfly.

"Please, help me. Don't leave me here," she heard. There was so much of a plea in the voice that Lika began to cry. She felt she was short of time; the ice was melting too slowly even though she was clenching it tightly. Her hands got frozen quite soon; she almost seized feeling them. Therefore, she pressed the ice to her chest; struggling goose bumps, she still cheered to a trickle of melted water running down to the neckline. It was getting colder and in several minutes chills covered her. Lika was about to give up. She put down her hand, and at the moment she heard "Thanks!" The butterfly hardly touched her cheek; the sway of white wings, and it flew away.

Lika opened her eyes but did not understand at once that it had been a dream. One of the cats was sitting at her head. It may have been Coco. It awkwardly touched Lika's face.

"What?" Lika wondered and finally realized that her face was wet with tears. "Oh, dear! Are you sweeping away my tears? Oh, you, my heedful kitty!"

Lika petted the cat for a while and then remembered she had a lot of things to do. She jumped out of the bed and ran to the bathroom.

At breakfast Lika told Aunt Ann about her butterfly dream. After having listened to the niece carefully, Aunt Ann sank into a reverie for a while and then uttered:

"A sapid dream. I guess it's worthwhile thinking about. The only thing's left is to get what sense it makes. Butterflies... butterflies, they definitely stand for souls.

"Really?"

"I'm sure. And as they were white, the souls were pure."

"Whose souls were they? There were so many of them."

"I dunno but one thing is clear – you've saved someone's pure soul."

"Have I?"

"Yes, you have or probably, you will."

"Well, I doubt I could be a soul saver," Lika laughed.

"Don't laugh," Aunt Ann flared, "We cannot know for sure what we are deep inside. We aren't aware of the powers sleeping inside our hearts and what they are capable of if being awoken. We aren't always meant to know what our fate is, but we are destined to fulfil every inch of what is meant to be done when the time comes."

"Great! Then I'm off to save some souls," Lika smiled, "Anyway, I have so much to do today."

"Exactly! Do you remember you're going to the university? All the documents ready?"

"That's where I'm going first," Lika cheerfully replied and pecked Aunt Ann on the cheek. She hurried back to her room to put the documents into her bag. She was just to take them to the university that she had enrolled and then she would enjoy absolute freedom till the very September.

She finished with the documents and put on her favorite blue sleeveless dress. She spent some time looking at her reflection in the mirror and after making sure she looked enchanting, she left the room.

Aunt Ann gave her a bunch of instructions to deal in case of possible “hardships” she could face at the university reception. At last, she wished her good luck and locked the door behind her.

Lika fluttered out of the porch straight into thick July swelter. “If it only rained a bit...” she thought. The town was suffering from the heat. Singed by the sun, tired and dust-filled trees stood still under the bright-blue cloudless sky. Only lawns and flowerbeds, which were watered every day, were pleasing to the eye.

Chapter 3

Coco

On her way back home Lika came across Vlad. They had a talk about this and that, and then he sorrowfully said that it was his last day at home – the next morning he would be going to Bulgaria for studies.

“It’s a pity,” Lika could only mutter. She could hardly prevent herself from tears, and that’s why she looked away and frequently blinked. Still a tear came down her cheek. Vlad did not get a sight of it; he feasted his eyes on her fingers. So amazingly-beautiful, soft with almost transparent skin, they seemed to belong to an angel, not to a corporeal girl. To make sure she was real, he took her hand into his. She gave a start.

“Will you come round by eight tonight?”

“Why?” she asked quietly.

“There’ll be a party... a farewell party. Will you come?”

Lika gave him a smile and a nod. They parted till evening. Her heart went with both happiness and sadness when she came to the porch.

Her aunt was not at home. Lika poured a glass of juice and dropped into the chair at the table. Then she began to tell the cats about the conversation she had just had with Vlad. No, it was not usual for her to speak to cats, but the situation was unusual. Vlad asked her to come to his place, and she urged to tell anyone about it. Coco seemed to become all ears, as for Dashka and Mashka, they did not get interested in the story at all. As those two understood that Lika would not give them anything to eat, they left the kitchen.

And Coco, screwing up her eyes and pricking up her ears, stayed still on the stool opposite Lika. It moved its ears every time Lika went on with the story after pauses. By the moment Lika came to describe the invitation itself, emotions flooded her over, so she choked and started to cough. Coco jumped down from the stool, her back arched; it stretched.

“Hope you won’t go, will you?” Lika heard a strangely muted female voice.

Still coughing Lika sprang to her feet and looked around. There was nobody. She wiped off the tears that had filled her eyes because of the cough.

“Who’s here?” she shouted out. Her own voice distorted with fear made Goosebumps ran up and down her arms; her back got cold at once.

“It’s me, Coco,” there was an unflappable answer.

Lika stared at the cat, which had sat in front of her on the floor and was now unblinkingly looking into Lika’s eyes. It looked downright normal, anyway, as usual: pricked ears and a bit uppity look. By all means, nothing had changed about it. Lika did not know what to think. To tell the truth, she did not manage her thoughts, which like bubbles in a glass of champagne emerged and went phut when dealing with the reality. “Is this a hoax?”, “Talking cats do not exist,” “Just for laughs gags?”, “Did I go mad?”, “Have I fallen asleep and see a dream?” “Yes! This must be it! This must be a dream! I’m sleeping!” the girl cheered at that salvatory idea.

“No, you’re not, deary” the voice seemed to grin. “I’m talking to you in reality. By the way, it’s very difficult for me to provide sound chatter. Would you mind if I switched to a mental level?”

Lika kept on gazing at Coco. She had an itch to grab the cat and make it say something straight into her ear to make sure it was this fluffy creature that was talking. But she saw some kind of bellicose fire in the cat’s eyes, and it stopped her. “It’s a slumber,” she concluded. She had ignored Coco’s question and tried to remember the moment she might have fallen asleep. She attempted to trace back the events from the moment when she came home, got changed, went to the bathroom to wash her hands to the one when she proceeded to the kitchen and poured a glass of juice... No, she could not get the moment she had dropped off. That turned her incredibly upset.

“You don’t remember, do you?” Coco questioned from the far kitchen corner. It was now lying there on the floor with the same uppity smirk if you could say so about a cat and of what Lika had no doubts any more. It was eyeing her.

“Don’t remember what?” Lika was finally distracted from her thoughts.

“The moment you’ve caught off.”

“How come...? Are you reading my mind?”

The awareness of this fact decisively dumbfounded the girl. She sat down on the stool, clutched her head and leaned over the table. “I am sleeping,” she pronounced trying to sound as more convincing as possible.

“No, you are not. I am reality, deary” arouse in her head, and Lika understood at once that they had not been her own mental words. She reproachfully looked at Coco. “I’m sorry,” it went on in her head, “You haven’t allowed me... but it’s really difficult for me to speak audibly... Anyway, you don’t mind, do you, deary?”

Lika was being so tired of sorting out what was going on that she decided to accept the situation as it was. She hardly felt ready for the dialogue when “thank you” came in reply.

“Well-well, still planning to go to the party?” Coco asked Lika sending her thoughts to the girl mentally.

Unsettled by the event with the talking cat, Lika completely forgot about Vlad’s invitation. However, she almost recovered her poise, rooting herself to the thought that nothing was impossible, not excluding talking cats. The most important thing about it was to keep it secret.

“I’m going. It’s settled,” exclaimed Lika.

“Don’t you shout! I can perfectly hear you, even the things you don’t pronounce,” the current of alien thoughts flew into her brain.

“And that’s what I don’t like,” Lika answered in the same mute way. “Anyway, it’s none of your business. It’s up to me to decide! And you’re just a cat of mine,” she added loudly.

“Am I just a cat?” Coco interrupted the girl.

“You are just a cat even if you can talk.”

“So you’d prefer to join the party than to have a chat with the talking cat? After all, it’s not every day that you get a chance to talk to the cat that can answer you. You might be even the only human in the world that’s been given such an opportunity!”

“Do you mean it’ll all finish tomorrow, and you’ll become an ordinary cat again?” Lika asked cheerfully, and a sad sigh was the answer to her.

“Indeed, nothing concerns nowadays humans except their own primitive desires.”

“You, who is constantly sleeping and eating, dare tell me this...” Lika loudly resented.

“That’s being a very superficial judgment, deary. Outward inaction doesn’t always imply inner passiveness. Appearance can...”

“I guess that’s not your case,” Lika unhesitatingly broke the flood of the cat’s thoughts. “Generally speaking, I should be getting ready for the party,” she declared and proceeded to the bathroom having picked a bathrobe on her way. “I have no time to chat with you,” she added as she imagined herself wearing a short pink dress, beautiful high heeled shoes on her slender legs, the dark locks of her hair is blown on by the wind the same way as in a shampoo commercial while she would be walking across the yard to Vlad’s porch. And at the same moment he would come up to the window and would see her so incredibly beautiful that it would make him lose his head.

“Like in a cheap romance,” Coco sighed.

“Do not listen nor watch if you don’t like it!” Lika retorted and defiantly slammed the bathroom door shut.

She opened the tap and got under a cool flow of water. She still hoped she had been dreaming of the talking Coco. She even turned the water cooler; hardly holding back the holler because of the cold pouring down on her.

“Don’t catch a cold,” she heard the cat’s muted voice from behind the door.

Lika shuddered with cold or probably disappointment. The cold water did not work. Her own thoughts were still floundering. She was trying to think about Vlad, but the image of the talking cat extruded everything. “Might they exist? I must google it. There must be someone who’s already come across it... What if no one? What if...? Oh, no! What if I got cranky? What will they do? They’ll take me to the asylum! No, no, no! I can’t go there! I won’t tell anyone about Coco, no means! And what if anyone hears me replying her? Argh! Why is it so difficult? I’ll have to be on the look-out all the time. Oh, it’s so tiring...”

“I won’t speak with you in other human’s presence,” Coco interfered into the flood of Lika’s uneasy thoughts.

“It’s very kind of you,” Lika said loudly and spitefully.

“I will do you some good only if you don’t go to the party.”

“What?” Lika shouted indignantly. She put on the bathrobe and opened the door. The Coco was sitting in front of her as if nothing had ever happened. “My own cat intends to control me. It’s too much for me! Why can’t I go to the party I wonder?”

“I have nothing against parties.”

“Does this mean you’re against Vlad? What has he done wrong? Anyway, you don’t know him at all. You’ve never even seen him!”

“Nevertheless, I know he’s got a rare blood type,” hissed Coco.

“What...? What’s it all about?” filled with indignation, Lika could not find the words to say. She headed for her room. There, she strode from one corner to another pretending she was looking for her dress. She now looked into the closet then opened the door of the bedside table and then for some reason she turned on and turned off the light. She felt aggrieved at the cat’s words. But finally, Lika got tired of endless hubbub in her head and ordered herself to stop that. She opened the window wide and got the full lungs of fresh air, held the breath and then slowly breathed out. Then she had another deep breath. So that was the way she stood making herself breathe deeply and regularly avoiding any thoughts.

“Well,” she said to herself “I’m perfectly well now! I’m ready to get ready.”

Lika shut the window and opened the wardrobe. She took her favorite dress out of it and was about to put it on when she heard the sound of the opening front door. It was Aunt Ann.

“Lika, are you here?” she heard her aunt’s sonorous voice.

Lika went out in to the corridor with a bit of circumspection.

“Something wrong?” Aunt Ann got anxious at once.

“No!” almost shouted the girl and stared at the cats. All three of them were persistently rubbing against Aunt Ann’s legs purring loudly.

“Did they behave badly?”

“No. It’s Okay,” Lika made herself sound calm.

Aunt Ann brought some warm buns from the bakery. And when they sat at the table to have some tea, Lika told her about Vlad’s invitation not mentioning a word about Coco. Aunt Ann was not pleased by the fact of the invitation but she was not going to keep Lika out of it. She just asked Lika to come back home until eleven.

Lika was perfectly happy with the way she looked that evening. That hue of pink harmonized with her brown hair, which Aunt Ann had made into beautiful locks. Eyeing herself in the mirror, Lika smiled and tried to imagine Vlad’s face at the moment he saw her.

“What if he tries to make a pass at you?” it suddenly shot past in her head. She shuddered.

“Coco, are you here?” Lika turned round in search of an uppity cat muzzle, but it was not there.

“I’m not in the room, but it’s been me who asked you that,” it repeated “So what’s then?”

“It won’t happen,” the girl answered turning red at the thought that she could not be one hundred per cent sure of her own words; her heart banging against the ribs and her palms wet.

“Oh, you’d be a brilliant actress with such an ability of uttering something that you don’t really believe in,” Coco said. Lika got all the bitterness hidden behind the words at once and felt ashamed. She wanted to say some words in her own defense, but silence was the only answer to her.

Chapter 4

Secret

Trying to breathe deeply and slowly, Lika stretched out her hand towards the door-bell. The hand was trembling, and she put it down without pressing the button. Two minutes had gone before she made herself calm and was able to press her finger over the door-bell forthright.

“Hi!” she blurted out as soon as she saw his face in front of her after he had opened the door.

“Hi!” he answered falling into the depth of her eyes. Time came to a sudden standstill. Both of them seemed to fall out of the reality going on beyond the world and time. But the enchanting moment was ruined.

“Hi, Lika!” Emily shouted from the corridor, “Why have you stuck there?”

Vlad and Lika smiled at each other.

“Why are we standing here, indeed? Come in, please,” said Vlad and took Lika’s hand in his one, “Make yourself at home.”

Along a wide corridor they went into a large bright lighted room. There were seven people there – most of them were their classmates. Vlad’s best friends, Oleg and Malik, were talking with Ariana and Angelica, pretty girls from another eleventh grade. Anton, another classmate, was speaking on the phone aside. Vlad brought Lika closer to the armchair in which a lad looking a bit older than themselves was sitting. He might be nineteen or twenty. He had an attractive and very kind face, but his big eloquent eyes were hiding sadness. When Vlad introduced Lika to the guy, he smiled, but his smile was full of rue as well. Lika was about to recognize that smile when Vlad said that Sergei (that was the guy’s name) was his cousin. It made her recollect the fact that Vlad’s aunt who must have been Sergei’s mother died in winter. Lika smiled in return. She did not know why she felt some kind of solidarity with him. That was, probably, because she, having grown up without a mother, was able to feel the same pain as he did. And though her mother was alive, she sometimes forgot about it.

They had a little chat with Emily who had just come up to them. Emily was beautiful, tall, and slender. Her eyes were so black that you could not say whether they had pupils or not. The strange magnetism they disseminated embraced and hypnotized everyone who dared look into their depth. And at the moment, she was trying to catch Sergei’s eye to enchant him with her magic.

Somebody turned on the music. It made it difficult to keep on talking. Ariana and Angelica stepped into the centre of the room coiling in a dance. Somebody drew the curtains, and it got almost dark. The girls’ bodies turned into a weird game of light, shades, and crimson glitters, which was added by Angelica’s bright dress.

As Lika did not want to dance, Vlad offered to show her around the flat. She was happy to leave the room, which was trembling with the loud rhythms she had never been fond of.

Vlad’s room surprised her with its orderliness and minimalism. There was just a sofa, a wardrobe and a table with an armchair near it. On the window sill two flowers in pots seemed to look out into the yard as if they felt lonely in the almost empty room. A photo frame on the table looked lonely as well. Lika picked it up to view it more closely. It was definitely well-turned. A twelve-year-old Vlad and his parents, a happy smiling family, were looking at her from the picture. Love, bliss, warmth and something else, which seemed to be quite familiar but completely forgotten, emanated from the photo and made Lika’s heart ache. She remembered her mother. She often called her to mind but did not allow herself to think about her for too long. So this time she did the same sweeping those thoughts away and looked around at Vlad.

“Where’s that?”

“Crimea. Sevastopol. Look,” he started explaining pointing his finger at the back scene behind the image of his father, “This is the monument to scuttled ships. You can see a small part of it.”

“Oh, yes, I can. It’s a very beautiful photo. You’re so happy here...”

“Yeah, I like it too.” Vlad nodded, and his smile became much warmer as if the southern sun from the photo could really warm him. “Have you been to the sea?” he asked.

“Only in my dreams,” Lika smiled.

“The sea is magnificent!” he uttered with inspiration, “Nothing compares to it. You should see it by all means,” he added looking into her eyes and moving his face toward hers, “It’s like your eyes...”

Lika closed her eyes and felt the same lightness and desire for flight as she had in her dream at night. His breathing so close to her face reminded her of the touch of the white butterflies’ wings.

Lika was about to pull the bathroom door when she heard Emilie’s voice coming from there. The talk was about Rita. What Lika heard plunged her into shock. She stood there rooted to the spot; something cracked deep inside her. It was about her hopes and dreams that were collapsing. A minute ago she was the happiest girl in the world; her dream being so close to coming true befuddled her. Happiness had been so close that she had almost caught hold of it, and now it was spilling out just like sand through her fingers. Poor thing, she wanted to go down the drain, to vanish, to stop being not to hear what she had got to hear but could not make herself get under way. She could not even make herself release the door knob clasp so hard as if she wanted to force all her pain inside it. Tears went pouring from her eyes, and somehow it made it difficult to breathe.

“Does Lika know?” brought her to life. “Do you think we should tell her?” made her let the knob out and withdraw. She did not even remember to pick her bag from Vlad’s room. She ran away without saying goodbye to anyone.

In the yard she breathed in evening chill, and it turned her to breathing normally. What she could not do at the moment was to come back home with her eyes being red from crying. She had to be back with a happy expression on her face at any price otherwise she would never dodge Aunt’s persistent questions; and her aunt was quite skillful at getting answers to her questions.

Lika looked up at her own window. It was dark whilst the neighboring window had a clear cat’s silhouette pictured in the bottom of its illuminated frame. “Coco?” she asked herself recollecting the talking cat at once. “I might’ve died... Everything that happened today wasn’t real, it can’t have been real! I must have died,” she ingeminated looking at the window.

“You can say so,” it overblew inside her head.

“Coco?” she asked.

“Oh, you get used to recognizing me. Well done.”

“So I’m really dead?” Lika inquired and the placidity spilling all over her body surprised her.

“Every single day is a short life, and every single night when you fall asleep, you die. Today you differ from yesterday you, and it won’t be today you who’ll see the light of dawn tomorrow. It’ll be another person, another you, a new you. Surely, you’ll have the same face and the same body, but your look will never be the same again, your smile will change, your gestures will transform because today you’ve got some new experience, you’ve filled your heart with some new content, and at night you’ll die to meet a new you in the morning.”

“And pain? Will it go with the night?”

“Is pain that bad?”

“I don’t know... It’s sometimes unbearable,” Lika said and remembered once again how it felt when the world she lived in collapsed. The pain’s clingy grip on her was still tight. “Tomorrow, when I wake up, will it still hurt?”

“Only if you want it. It can be different. Lots of people want pain. They can’t live without it.”

“People don’t want pain,” Lika uttered wearily and shrugged.

“Why do they let it germinate then?”

“Probably, they don’t know how to live without it?”

“Well-well-well, let’s see... I’ll take the lid off and explain how to live without pain, and we’ll see whether it will work for you.”

"I think I'll be able to live without pain," Lika started warming up.

"Then stop antagonizing life. Take it as it is with all its perfection and malformation, sublimity and ignobility, genius and lack of talent, excessive loyalty and betrayal. Life... life is not what we think of it. It's much bigger, wider, and deeper. You just need to overcome the borders that cut you off the life infinity."

"What borders?"

"The borders that divide the world into black and white, good and evil, right and wrong, joy and pain..."

"Don't we have to know what's good and what's bad?" Lika did not allow Coco to finish.

"You already know the difference, you can't deny it, but you can learn how to perceive both of them just as an experience. Stop coloring your life in black and white. Let it be golden or violet, moreover, you'd better let it shine with all existing colors."

"Is this the secret?"

"Yes. You just stop weighing everything and everyone on your scales."

"It's something abstract. I thought you'd give me some precise instructions..." Lika sighed.

"Want instructions? Then try to enjoy the pain that is inside you now."

"What nonsense! How can you enjoy pain? Do you think I am completely mad?" Lika rebelled; she tried to see the cat's eyes in the lighted square of the window.

"Right you are, it's almost impossible to enjoy pain. Do you know why?"

"Pain is displeasing... unbearable... you want to get rid of it," Lika bitterly pronounced the words, and chills covered her. "Pain kills... it penetrates inside and gets stuck... it... It bites your soul, gnaws it and overcasts it with rooting wounds that keep on nagging. And then the pain will always be a part of you. It'll never leave you, and you'll never get used to it. You may forget about it for a while, you may look aside, but it'll summon you and then it'll devour you turning you into a wreck and then you'll die. The pain will kill you..." with her head and shoulders down, she seized talking and felt depressed because of all the words she had said.

"Great. Pathetic. And it's somehow true within the limits of your own world. Nothing more than stereotypes."

"And what is out there beyond the limits?" Lika asked automatically though she was not really interested. At the moment she was captured by her own pain. She was fighting it and pressing it out of her soul.

"What do you do when the traffic lights turn red?"

"Why?..." Lika asked but no answer made her give hers. "I stop, of course."

"And you don't want to kick the traffic lights off the road, do you?"

"No, I don't," she answered quietly having realized at once the point of the question. "Do you mean it's the pain conception that makes it feel wrong?"

"Not conception, but non-perception," Coco corrected Lika and fell silent as if giving the girl an opportunity to think over everything they had discussed. In a minute the cat went on. "Enjoy the pain... the same way you enjoy good feelings. Common, feel its depth... make it stronger... concentrate on it, but don't try to fight it... try to hear its calls, accept it and enjoy it. Common! You can do it!"

Lika stood still gazing inside her heart. She followed the cat's instructions just because she wanted to prove Coco that its advice was useless.

"I can't!" she shouted out with astonishment.

"You can't?"

"I can't enjoy the pain," Lika stated with embarrassment, "There's no pain.... It's gone..."

"No, it hasn't. Traffic lights can't move. You've accepted the pain and the red lights have turned green."

"That's incredible!" Lika was amazed, "Is it that easy?"

“Genius lies in simplicity as they say. Another thing is difficult, deary...”

“Which one?” the girl was eager to get the answer and to overcome any difficulty.

“To remember to use it in the moment of pain... you know, a habit is a second nature,” Coco concluded, and Lika understood at once that the conversation had come to an end.

The girl was walking around pondering over Coco’s words. The thing that amazed her most was that the pain had really gone. Previously, she would replay what had happened at Vlad’s a hundred times in her head recalling all the details of the conversation she had heard, assigning more and more tragical meaning to the words, and feeling pain mercilessly tearing her heart into pieces. But now she could not and did not want to remember certain words as if the whole situation had cringed and shrunk and had turned into a small glass ball, which you could hang on a Christmas tree.

“How funny... Pain isn’t that awful if you try and see another point of it,” Lika thought and looked up in the darkened sky performing its first stars. “Mom,” she called quietly. Somewhere deep inside her soul she believed that her mother’s heart could hear her calls coming from the far part of the world. “I love you, Mom,” she whispered fervently, and two teardrops slipped down her cheek. It had been ages since she said these four words last. Even thoughts about her mother had hurt her a lot because they had caused her inexpressible pain that could only be born in the heart of an abandoned child. As a child and later as a teenager, memories so often took her back to the moment when her mother was packing a suitcase picking her own and Katie’s clothes from the wardrobe while Lika was walking on air being sure they all were going on holidays. She was crooning the song that was coming on spot as she was thinking what clothes she wanted to take with her. Finally, she picked out a pink skirt with lace and put it into the suitcase commenting on where she would wear it. But mother was not happy about it at all. She knelt in front of the girl, and Lika could see tears in her eyes. Mom embraced her and began to tell her something about their family and their problems, but Lika could hardly understand anything except the thing that something bad had happened to their family. Even after Mom had told her that Lika would have to live with her father since then, the girl did not realize that Mom and Katie were leaving for ever. It took her several months of waiting in vain, bitter crying at nights and rare short chats on the phone during which Mom used to tell her one and the same thing – she loved her and missed her but could not tell when she would come back – to understand it. Little by little, those phone calls came to naught, tears of yearning raged themselves out, and only expectance of a meeting tightly rooted in her heart occasionally reaching her in her dreams at night. In those dreams she saw herself as a toddler sitting on her mother’s lap and feeling one mother’s hand brushing her hair while another one gripping her shoulder. There was some kind of special warmth coming from her hands, which filled her whole body and warmed her soul. It was that very warmth she felt now instead of the pain she had used to, and at that very moment the day that had tortured her for so many years turned into another “Christmas ball”.

“Thanks,” she whispered somewhere upwards, may be to the stars, and headed for the porch.

Chapter 5

Rita's tears

Woken up late Lika would not get up. Generally speaking, she did not have to be in a hurry; the holidays were in their midst. She was lying in her bed and thinking about whether it was a good idea to see Rita and find out the truth about what she had heard the day before in Vlad's flat. In a while she accepted the inner feeling that had told her that whatever the truth could be, Rita would still be a dear person to her. She decided she had to find a way to see Rita who had been avoiding her.

Lika thought Tanya could help her contact with Rita. So she invented a plausible explanation for the curious classmate; she decided to say that she had prepared a surprise for Rita and needed to meet her unexpectedly to bring it to life. Tanya's role would only be to call Rita and arrange a meeting in ten minutes. But it would be Lika who would come to the meeting, not Tanya. On the whole, the plan was simple and therefore, Lika thought it would work. The most difficult part of it was to get through to Tanya – her home phone number was engaged and her mobile was off. Lika dialed the number several times during an hour. "Hasn't she told all the gossip yet?" she thought about the classmate every time she heard short beeps in the receiver. Anyway, finally Lika managed to get through.

"Hi, Lika! So glad you've called. Wanted to talk to you. Look, d'you know what's up with Rita? I've been calling her for ages, but she hasn't been answering... Emily says that she's got ill. I can understand that, but why not to answer the phone...? She might be in the hospital..." Tanya was discoursing not letting Lika say a word. "D'you know anything about it?" she asked and finally stopped talking.

"In fact, I don't," Lika got upset the moment she realized that her hopes collapsed like a house of cards. "She hasn't been answering my calls either. I thought you might have known what happened."

"Something's wrong," Tanya drawled curiously, "It's okay for me, but you're her best friend! Have had an argument?" she supposed.

"No, we haven't. Everything was okay, but then she disappeared," explained Lika; now she knew the reason of Rita's behavior. "What exactly did Emily tell you?" she asked.

"She said there was a party at Vlad's yesterday, and Rita didn't come because she'd fallen ill. You went there, didn't you?"

"Yes, though I wasn't there long."

"You saw him, didn't you?"

"you mean Vlad"?

"No, his cousin, Sergei."

"Oh. Year, I saw him."

"What's he like?"

"Nice appearance..."

"Do you know he's dating Emily?" the classmate whispered into the receiver as if afraid of being overheard.

"This one is able to enchant anyone," Lika thought and then asked loudly:

"Do you think it's serious?"

"Blimey! God only knows!" Tanya exclaimed and then suddenly changed to sugary-sweet tone and almost sang the question she must have prepared beforehand.

"What about you and Vlad? How are you going to keep in touch?"

"Skype, I guess," Lika answered on spot taking into account the fact that the classmates thought them to be a couple. She had decided to play that game. "And he'll come on winter holidays... or I'll go to see him!"

"Crikey, dear, it's so romantic!" Tanya exclaimed being choked with emotion.

Taking advantage of a pause, Lika said goodbye to Tanya and made up her mind to visit Rita immediately. She was determined to see Rita even if she had to spend the whole day by her door. She wrote a note for her aunt running that she was going to have a meeting and was about to leave, but there was Coco lying just in front of the door.

“Dear Coco, would you let me go?” Lika asked aloud surprised that she had addressed the cat as if it were a respected person. It amused her and she smiled.

“Isn’t it a bother for you to go somewhere in this heat?” floated slowly in Lika’s head.

“It is. But I ought to go,” she answered.

“You could stay. There’re so many pleasant things you could do at home...”

“I’m going. Move out of the way, please.” She said strictly; she started losing her patience.

“Are you sure you’ll stand it? Will you be able to look at her and speak to her after all she’s done? Won’t it hurt?”

Lika became transfixed for a moment, but she could quickly regain control over her feelings. She started to get used to the fact that Coco knew everything about any event in her life.

“I think I’ll manage. Pain doesn’t scare me anymore. Thanks to you, by the way.”

“Okay-okay.” The cat stretched her body and then reluctantly got onto her paws and sat aside.

Lika smiled at the cat and closed the door. “This must be really funny!” she thought. “It’s funny I talk to the cat. It’s definitely abnormal! Can it be normal, I wonder? Who defines what is normal and what is not? Who says talking cats do not exist? After all, they might really exist, and they might even talk to their owners, but the owners just like me are afraid of looking crazy, so they don’t tell anyone about this. Even Aunt Ann might hear it... I should find it out. But how will I do this? I can’t come up to her and ask ‘Aunt Ann, can you hear Coco talking?’ Stuff and nonsense! That won’t do. It’ll be easier to ask Coco. But... if chatting Coco is working of my sick imagination, how will I believe her? O-Oh, I’ll have to ask Aunt Ann about it. And what if she does not hear Coco? No-no, this won’t do.” Lika was thinking on the way to Rita’s place, but as soon as she saw the top of the condo where Rita lived, her thoughts went over to the forthcoming meeting. Lika prepared herself to the fact that she would support and help her friend if it was necessary.

Lika stood at the door listening to a long vibrating ringing of an entry phone; nobody answered. Then she said to herself that she would be sitting at the door and waiting for as long as she needed. Fortunately, she did not have to wait for long; Rita came a surprisingly short while later. The moment Rita saw the friend, she got a bit confused, but in a while she attempted at smile. Lika felt the embarrassment of her friend which made her feel awkward too.

“Hi!” exclaimed Rita trying to look as more joyful as she could. “Have you been waiting long?”

“Hi,” said Lika. “No, really not, five minutes... not more...”

“Come in,” Rita said this more calmly as she opened the front door.

They both made themselves comfortable at the kitchen table when Lika noticed how pale and thin Rita’s face was. “Too much worries,” she thought.

“Where on earth have you been?” Lika asked curiously while Rita was pouring tea into a big pink cup.

“No matter... There was a lot to do,” the friend replied, and her fingers trembled when she took her cup.

“I see...” Lika uttered whereas “Rita, I know everything’ was spinning round and round in her brain. She did not dare pronounce those words aloud.

“Oh, tea with mint and lemon! Since when did you start loving this?” she added when she saw Rita putting a yellow slice and a couple of green leaves into her own cup; both of them hated mint.

“That’s melissa. It doesn’t taste like peppermint, and it’s quite tasty.” Rita tried to explain herself.

“Quite?” Lika interrupted the friend,” It sounds as if you are forced to put it into your tea...”

First Rita became paler and then blushed. Keeping silent, she went on sipping her tea. She avoided Lika's eye; her own eyes vacantly roaming over the wall behind the friend.

"I know the truth!" it started again in Lika's brain. "I know the truth!", "I know the truth!", "I know the truth!" it was going round and round. "Common! Tell her!" She broke the thought whirlwind. She opened the mouth but could not utter a single word; sighing loudly. Wordless, they kept on drinking tea. Thoughts in her head and the silence started suppressing Lika.

"Rita, don't you want to tell me something?" the silence was finally broken.

Instead of the answer Rita burst into tears. She looked away rubbing the tears off her face, but they kept on pouring down ever harder. Lika got on her feet and put her hands around Rita's shoulders, feeling her own tears coming down her cheeks. She really sympathized with Rita. So they were crying together – Rita sitting in her chair with her head in her hands and Lika above her clutching Rita's shoulder with one hand and stroking her head with the other.

"It's all right, Rita. It'll be all right... I'm here with you... we'll find the way out... calm down, please... it'll be all right... everything will be all right," she went on repeating softly.

Finally, Rita ceased crying but still gave little whimpers. Her eyes were red and swelling. And still she was beautiful. Her long golden curly hair were slightly waiving about her thin, angelic, beautiful face with gentle features. Lips, also red with crying, stood out as a bright spot. "How beautiful she is!" Lika once again thought looking at the friend who was still wiping her tears.

"You know it, don't you?" she ventured a guess, and a tear rolled down her cheek again.

Lika nodded; she could hardly fight her tears.

"Do they all know?" blushing Rita forced out the words.

"Tanya doesn't know. It means that not everyone's got wind of it," Lika tried to joke.

"Umm," Rita uttered hiding her head. "If I had known he ...If I had known, I would have never..."

"What's the use of talking about it now when it's happened? We'd better think about what to do next."

"I've no idea... no idea..." she started whimpering again.

"Did you tell him?"

"Yeah..."

"And?"

"He said he doesn't want any problems," Rita broke forth into tears.

In her sobbing she was saying something. Lika only could understand that he had given Rita money, so that she could get out of the situation and that if Rita's parents learnt about her pregnancy, they would throw her out of the house. At that moment Lika felt how terrible Rita's position was – she winced because of Goosebumps running up and down her shoulders when she imagined herself in her friend's shoes. What would she do in the same situation? She did not have the answer. Despair welled up in her. She swallowed and shook her head trying to get rid of the feeling. She still did not know how she could help Rita. "Should she support her morally? No. It's too little. She needs to do something significant. But what should it be? Should she talk to the father of the future baby?"

"I could talk to Vlad," Lika said with confidence.

"No, please! Don't! By no means! Hear me? Don't tell him!" Rita protested. "I don't want him to know. I've disappointed you, it's enough for me," she added sadly.

"Don't be silly! You haven't disappointed me. You're just goosey if you really think so. I still love you," Lika switched to tender tone once again, but in a second as if she understood something, she wondered, "You say you don't want him to know..."

"He doesn't need more worries. He isn't in charge of his cousin. I'm the only one to be blamed."

"So it was Sergei?"

Rita nodded; without looking up, she went on eyeing her own fingers. As for Lika, she felt absolutely delighted at the moment and smiled like a brewer's horse, "Thanks God it's not him! How

could she not understand it at once? How dared she doubt it? He was not able to leave either a girl or a friend in need! But if it was Sergei, why did Emily told her friends in the bathroom at Vlad's house that Vlad had got Rita pregnant? Did she just come up with something she really had not known? Apparently, it was so. And now she was dating Sergei. So what was going to happen next? What if he left her just like he had done with Rita? No way. Emily would never let anyone hurt her. She was so different from Rita! She was not the one who could be dumped – just the other way round. But would she have dated Sergei if she had known the truth? Lika thought that she might have not. "I need to tell her. Or shouldn't I? Can it make it more difficult?" thought the girl, looking at the completely upset friend, "Should I tell Rita that he's dating Emily? Probably, I'd better not... How long have they been going out? Who can be sure they'll go on? No, I shouldn't tell her now! She's so upset. But I must do something to help. Who could help us?"

"Rita, you must tell your mum about it," Lika said with decision. "She will understand everything."

Rita severely shook her head.

"No! No way! I can't!"

"You can. It will be all right. She will help you..." Lika went on persuading Rita.

"No-no-no! I can't tell her! Out of the question! Just imagine what she'll feel. I can't!"

"And how will you feel? Sooner or later she'll learn. You won't be able to hide it for too long..."

"Year, right you are... It'll become obvious quite soon. This cannot be allowed," she uttered wistfully. "But he's given me money and I'll use it."

"An abortion?" Lika asked almost in whisper.

"I have no choice," Rita replied in a small voice, and more tears leaked out down her cheeks.

"Rita, I don't think it's the right decision," she pronounced quietly in the tone that lacked confidence. Of course, Lika was sure Rita's decision was not right, though she hesitated unsure of her own decisions she would have made if something similar happened to her.

"And what is right then? Is it right to have a baby when you're seventeen?" Rita indignantly exclaimed. "What will I do with... him or her? My life will come to an end! I'll lose my friends and say goodbye to further education! No entertainment! Just nappies and walks with a baby carriage! Can you imagine the way my neighbors, my classmates will look at me! I'm feeling ashamed of going out. It seems to me they all know... they're whispering behind my back. I won't live like this! Can you see this?"

"What if he got married to you?"

"It would change everything, but he won't marry me. He doesn't need me. He clearly said I can't approach him anymore. Actually, he's even got a new mobile number," she uttered sadly.

"Why not to speak to his father?"

"And what? Will his father make him marry me? Besides, if he learns I've talked to his father about it, he'll come to hate me."

"It's very likely to happen so," Lika sighed.

"Anyway, you should wait a bit," Lika pleaded, "Don't act rashly, you should think it over first. There might be another way out..."

"I've made up my mind," Rita declared without any hesitation. "Mum and Dad are going to Turkey next week, and I'm going to the doctor's to have the problem solved."

Lika heaved a sigh. "So I have a week only," she thought.

Chapter 6

About Rita

Lika did not notice how she had got home. Deep in her thoughts about Rita's fate and the way she could help her, she automatically greeted her aunt and answered all the questions the relative asked her, but if asked to repeat their conversation, she would definitely fail to remember a single word from it. When she got into her room, she fell down onto her bed facing the wall and shut her eyes. It immediately brought the memories about Vlad into her mind; as bright flashes she could see the yesterday photo on which he was so happy, and then the touch of his lips. In a moment, pleasant warmth spread all over her body making her heart flutter in her chest. She could feel both joy and pain. "I love you," she whispered hotly, mentally addressing him. "How will I go on without you?" she was not going to cry, but tears ran down her cheeks.

"Are you all right?" suddenly there was a concerned Aunt's voice from behind the door, which slightly opened.

"Yes," she hurriedly began to wipe the tears away, but it was too late – Aunt Ann had entered the room.

"Well, I see you're crying," she flung up her hands, "Common, tell me what's happened."

"Nothing special," Lika answered quickly searching the way she could avoid questions.

"That won't do," Aunt Ann folded her arms and made it clear with her facial expression that she was not going to move until she knew the whole truth.

"Okay," Lika sighed sitting cross-legged on the bed "I've seen Rita. You remember she wouldn't answer my calls... Well, she's in trouble and it troubles me. I can't tell you the details, I have no right," she hastened to add foreseeing Aunt's next question.

Aunt Ann looked closely at Lika for a while as if she wanted to get any confirmation of her words in her look and then, apparently, not seeing anything contradictory inside them, she said:

"Well, the thing that it's not you who's got a problem makes me happy. I thought you might be suffering because of him. Thanks God he's left! I hope it'll make you calm, and you'll get a lungful of fresh air!"

"I guess, you're speaking about yourself now," smiled Lika.

"Right," Aunt Ann was not going to deny anything. "I've breathed a sigh of relief and now I want you to do the same."

Lika deeply breathed in and then breathed out. Aunt Ann laughed and kissed Lika on the forehead. In fact, the girl felt a bit better. "I'm so happy to have such a great aunt!" She thought staring after her aunt leaving the room.

Lika had another sigh, and slumping back onto her pillow, she again deepened into her thoughts. This time they were all about Rita. What had happened to her friend was awful and her heart ached from the inability to help with something essential in the current situation. Every time she thought about it, she imagined herself in Rita's shoes and every time it made her feel an attack of despair moving up her throat. "Poor Rita!" she whispered, "What's going to be with her now?"

"She'll have an abortion and will live on. Or... she might not..."

Lika shook her whole body at those words that had run through her head and turned her head in search of the cat. Coco was not in the room.

"Don't look for me. I'm in the kitchen," it flashed in her mind.

"Coco, why are you saying this?" The girl outraged loudly.

"Because it's true – I am in the kitchen!" the answer came.

"I'm asking about Rita,"

"That's true as well, by the way! I always tell the truth!" Coco declared with pride.

"Is it really going to be this way?" Lika pondered, "Will she do this?"

“Yes, she will,” Coco affirmed, “Wouldn’t you do the same if you were her?” the cat insinuatingly asked in a while.

Lika shuddered, and goose bumps ran down her spine. She made an effort to prevent a single thought at that moment. “Keeping silent? That’s very reasonable. People tend to think how they would act in a given situation. They always look as if they know the right way. They always know the way others should behave under such circumstances, and with all their might they convince themselves that they would certainly go the right way, that they wouldn’t backslide.

Lika felt the colour high in her cheeks; her heart beating against her ribs.

“There’s also another type of people. Those avoid such reasoning, because they understand that they themselves would act in such a situation no better than the object being condemned or discussed, but they are quite sure nothing of the kind would ever happen to them.”

Uneasiness filled Lika’s heart. She understood that she had both of these, and it was painful because it all seemed to be true.

“What is more interesting about it is that both types sincerely believe,” it went on inside her head, “that the events have nothing to do with them. It’s just a mere chatter over an evening cup of tea, something like “Guess what? She’s had an abortion! I wouldn’t have done that!”

Lika flinched again, because somehow Coco’s voice became very similar to the voice of Marie, a young woman living in a neighboring flat.

“You could change ‘she had an abortion’ to anything else. She resigned, broke up with somebody, bought or didn’t buy, did this or did that. That’s not the point!” It seems that Coco was captured by its own monologue. Its words swept faster and faster in Lika’s head, and it became more difficult for the girl to catch the meaning of all the lot.

“The point is that they separate themselves from reality, they don’t want to see that what is happening around belongs to them to the same extent as to the one they are talking about! They don’t want to feel integrity! But it’s obvious! We’re all one! We’re all interrelated!” the last two phrases sounded fervently with awe, “Do you feel this?” Coco asked in the same tone.

Lika had already calmed down and tried to listen to herself, to what was inside her.

“Dunno,” she answered feeling nothing special.

“Common, let’s try again,” the voice affectionately insisted, “you can do it.”

“No, I can’t,” the girl sighed. She was not up to it now. “Look, why are you so sure Rita will do it?”

“Oh, it’s rather simple. Arithmetic alone. It’s like two plus two. It doesn’t equal three or ten, at least, under ordinary conditions.

“Didn’t get it. What does arithmetic do with it?”

“Let us see what we’ve got. Rita. A beautiful gold haired young girl with a face of an angel,” Coco sang in a lilac voice, as if looking at Rita’s portrait, “She’s cheerful and open hearted. You could not help but fall in love with her!”

“That’s true!” Lika agreed at once, “Rita is wonderful! She’s very nice and kind!”

“Nobody in their right mind would ever say a word against it. But... with all her kindness and beauty, she hasn’t been taught to overcome difficulties of life.”

“She could learn how to fight difficulties,” Lika began to defend her friend.

“Of course, she could. If only she was able to find a reason why she would have to do this. Is there such a reason in her life?”

Lika did not reply. She was trying to demonstrate a straw Rita could possibly catch at to give birth to the child. “What could possibly motivate her? What does she love most of all? She likes going out and meeting her friends. She loves her parents and her friends. She’s mad about travelling. By the age of seventeen she’s visited lots of countries.” Lika recalled the photos of beautiful sceneries and souvenirs that Rita always brought to her from the trips. “She’s also fond of nice and expensive clothes she brings from Europe.” And in fact, Rita always presented much of the clothes to Lika

because she has never worn a thing for more than three times, except for those that she fancied a lot. “No, that’s not what I need!” Lika thought sadly. “She’s very kind... there must be something... Oh, how could I forget?! Rita is very fond of animals. She’s been a member of a society protecting the environment. Last year, she managed to set an abandoned kitten up. She was so happy! And at home she’s got a lot of different indoor flowers and plants, she takes care of them with great care and love. She talks to them while watering them and wiping their leaves. And they respond to it with rapid growth, the splendor of their greenery, and the brightness of their flowers. But this, too, does not seem to help,” sighed Lika.

“What about her ambitions?” Coco prompted.

“Ambitions? I don’t know... She wants to get higher education, get a good job, get married...”

“Have you got it now?”

“Not really.”

“So what we have is a nice and beautiful girl who loves animals and the world around her. She got used to living in comfort and welfare and takes admiration of her friends and people around her for granted. The only problem is that she isn’t able to overcome hardships of life because she hasn’t had any till now. Taking into consideration her life goals, which are only obstructed by an unexpected pregnancy, makes the final result obvious, for me, at least,” the cat concluded.

“No!” Lika declared, “I do not agree! I’ll persuade her! I believe she can change. There’s nothing fatal about it!”

“That’s your right, dearie!” Coco said in the end, and they did not recur to the subject that day.

Chapter 7

Aunt Ann disappeared

Lika understood that she had to be more persuasive in her argument to make Rita change her mind about the baby. In fact, she did not know much about having children, being pregnant, and all the sort of things. So she decided to study the topic thoroughly. She turned on the computer, waited until the antivirus loaded and opened the Google Chrome browser. In the address bar she typed the word “pregnancy” and clicked the first link in the list, but the site appeared to be difficult to navigate. It was much easier with the second. There she found an automatic pregnancy calendar, which gave out the expected date of delivery. It was then that she learnt that pregnancy term was counted in weeks. So Rita was supposedly in her sixth week. Then Lika read about baby’s week by week development, which was accompanied by pictures.

“He’s so tiny, just like a pea, but his brain is being already formed. He’s able to respond to external stimuli, and you can hear his heart beating,” Lika summarized after she had finished reading the article. “He certainly doesn’t look like a human yet... he’s something resembling a lizard,” she examined the pictured on the screen. “Yes, he is,” she concluded.

“Anyway, he’s got his soul, his conscious and his feelings. He can feel his mother’s emotions as well,” Lika heard Coco’s voice inside her head.

“There’s nothing about it here,” objected Lika.

“Take my word. I know it for sure.”

“I guess you’re right.”

Lika surfed the Internet until she came across a YouTube video which showed the detailed process of a fetus formation and its further development. She watched it in a burst of inspiration. “It’s incredible!” she admired in the beginning – “Amazing! Just wonderful how it all works! It looks like space... kinda birth of a new star”. “How cute and funny he is,” she melted at the end. “Rita must see this!” She finally said to herself and dialed Rita’s number. On hearing Rita’s “hello”, she began to tell the friend about the video, but Rita refused to listen because she was about to go to bed.

“Going to bed?” Lika got surprised. “So early?”

“Lika, have all the clocks in you flat got broken? Then let me tell you, it’s twenty seven past eleven.”

“You’re joking and it’s nice,” Lika replied and turned round to the window to check the sun. It was dark outside. And it was really twenty seven past eleven on the clock.

“Holy moly! I’ve lost the track of time. I’m sorry, dear. May I see you in the morning?”

“Year, okay,” Rita said wearily.

Then they wished good night to each other, and Lika sat on her bed thinking over the thing. “How could it come I’ve surfed the Internet for so long and haven’t noticed how much time went by? And where’s Aunt Ann? She hasn’t looked into my room not even once. She hasn’t called me to have dinner. Has something happened to her?”

The girl jumped to her feet and ran to her aunt’s room. The room was empty. There was no one in the bathroom and the kitchen but the cats sleeping each in its place – Coco in the basket, Dasha and Masha in their boxes. Lika was nonplussed; scary thoughts about her aunt’s disappearance burst into her head. “She might have gone to the shop, and on the way she might have fallen over and broken her leg, and at the moment she might be lying there unable to get help, or she might have been attacked by robbers...”

“Neither one thing, nor another,” appeared in her head, and the girl immediately recognized Coco. It had got out of the basket stretching itself. “She must’ve been kidnapped by aliens and might be experimented on at the moment.”

Lika did not understand whether the cat had said a joke or had told the truth. “Kidding?” she asked.

“No, I’m not. Just giving you another possible variant because your versions are... a bit dull and boring. She’s broken her leg...” Coco muttered. “Why? Why don’t you think that she’s fallen in love with a biker, and now they both are speeding through the night?”

Lika imagined her aunt on a bike holding the waist of a big bearded biker and smiled.

“Or she might have found a case full of dollars and may have taken it to the bank. And she might be late because the case is too big and won’t get into a bank box,” Coco went on.

“Banks close at five,” the girl objected with laughter.

“How sound of you!” the cat pretended to be indignant “You’ve got regulations everywhere. You’ve just ruined such a perfect version! I’ve already prepared myself for all the yummy sausages Aunt Ann could spend the money on!”

Coco was so funny at the moment because it opened its mouth and pretended to swallow a sausage, and then it began to lick itself. Lika got amused by the scene, she could not help laughing.

“You’re a fun,” she said to Coco through laughter.

“Me? In my eyes, it’s you who’s being funny – just a minute ago you were almost crying because you worried about Aunt Ann, and now you’re shouting with laughter and don’t care for your dear aunt who’s probably broken her leg and may be lying helpless somewhere under a bush, poor thing.”

“Oh, stop it, Coco! I won’t think in...” Lika hesitated trying to find proper words to finish her thought.

“In a tragic way?” the cat helped her.

“That’s it!” agreed the girl. “I’ll just call her and find it out.”

“Then she’ll think you’re crazy.”

“Why?” Lika wondered.

“Because she had told you before she left that she’d go to Olga Petrovna’s summer cottage to help her pick currents.”

“Really?” Lika could not stop wondering.

“Really. You asked her when she was going to be back and she told you not to expect her return till tomorrow evening.”

Only now she managed to recall vaguely the conversation. She remembered her aunt’s face when she was telling her something about Olga Petrovna, but at that moment Lika was probably thinking about how it turned out that Emily had learned about Rita’s pregnancy or about why Rita had begun to drink tea with mint. No, she was likely to be thinking about the tea with mint at the moment Aunt Ann told her something about patties.

“Mint patties?” Lika got surprised then.

“What mint?” Aunt Ann did not understand.

“Melissa,” Lika replied seriously.

“Lika!” Aunt Ann exclaimed, indignant at the niece’s inattention. “You’re always in the clouds, and you never listen to me! I was speaking about apple patties!”

Lika tried to explain herself giving the distraction for a joke, but Aunt Ann shook her head saying “Okay, I’m off. I’ll lock the door myself. Call me if you need me!”

“So does this mean there must be apple patties somewhere in the kitchen?” Lika asked Coco.

“Hey!” The cat cheered. “At least you remember this.”

“Let’s have a bite then,” the girl suggested after she had proceeded into the kitchen and took a bowl with patties from the cupboard.

“Do cats eat apples?”

“Are they tasty?” Coco asked.

“Yes, they are... mostly.”

“Give me a bit and we’ll see.”

Chapter 8

Lika would not give up

When the next morning Lika came to her friend, she was having breakfast. Pale and thin, she was sipping hot tea ignoring the sandwich.

“Rita, why aren’t you eating? Look at yourself; you’ve lost so much weight,” Lika detected.

“I can’t,” the girl answered glancing at a slice of bread and cheese with disgust, “I’m constantly sick. Everything I eat goes out. Tea with mint and lemon somehow helps.”

“Oh, poor thing!” Lika took pity on her, but when she saw that her friend was about to cry, she strictly added, “You must do something about it. There must be some kind of medicine for it. I think you should go to the doctor’s and ask.”

Rita remained silent.

“Doesn’t your mom take a notice of how different you’ve become... how thin and... unhappy?” Lika wondered.

“I try not to betray myself when she’s at home. Anyway, it didn’t escape her notice that something’s happened. But I didn’t even have to invent anything. She herself suggested that I’ve been sad because of the departure, that I’m going to miss my friends, you, and Vlad...”

“Has she noticed you’ve lost weight?”

“Yeah. She said after they return from Turkey, they will send me for a week to my grandmother. This will be good. I will need to be alone to think.”

“By the way, saying of thinking... I want to show you something... a video.” Lika began, not knowing how to describe it so that Rita agreed to watch it, “It’s just amazing! I think you should see it!”

“Is it a film?”

“You can say so. But it’s short. Documentary. Is your laptop on?” she asked heading for Rita’s room.

“No, I haven’t turned it on yet,” the answer flew from the kitchen.

“Finish your tea, I’ll turn it on.”

Lika hastily pressed the power button. She wanted to open the site she needed as quickly as possible, so that Rita immediately began to watch the film without having time to read its title. Lika was afraid that if the friend saw the name, she would refuse to watch it. But it did not work. Rita did not immediately understand what the film was about, but realizing it, she stood up with the words that she would not watch it.

“Rita, please! Do it for me, please!” pleaded Lika.

“I can’t!” she almost shouted in response. “It’s already been hard for me! And you press me instead of helping!”

“No, I didn’t mean to press,” Lika was embarrassed. She did not expect such a reaction. “It’s just... just...” she suddenly forgot all the reasons she wanted to give in favor of watching the film.

“Just what?” continued Rita, “just want me to leave him? Well, yes, it’s not you who’s sick all the time! It’s not you who’s been abandoned while being pregnant! It’s not you who’s going to grow a belly! It’s not you who’s going to have neighbours gossiping behind your back!”

“Rita, you only see the minuses of this situation, and I want to show you the pluses,” speech finally returned to her, “I don’t want you to make a...” she did not want to say the word “mistake”, “an ill-considered act. And in order to make a deliberate choice, you need to look at the situation from different points of view, don’t you?”

“I’m very well aware of both, but minuses prevail here,” Rita sighed.

“Well, what are the pluses then?” Lika was not going to give up. She felt that it was only necessary to adjust the friend to a positive wave, and that would make her be able to make the right decision.

“Don wanna talk about it,” the girl said wearily and sat on the sofa turning her back to Lika. She looked at the window, and tears streamed down her face, but Lika did not see them.

“Oh well. Then let’s continue about the minuses, for example, about the consequences. Do you know what abortions can lead to?”

“An abortion, not abortions,” Rita snarled.

Lika heaved a deep sigh. Though she really wanted to say something biting like “where there’s the first, there’s going to be the second” or “everyone starts with the first one, and then they perceive it as something normal” in response, she did not. Her goal was not to quarrel with her friend but to help her.

“Rita, it doesn’t matter. Can’t you see, I’m worried about you,” she said quietly, “because something can go wrong... What if it makes you sterile? Can you imagine that? You’ll finish school and get married. Your husband will really want a child, but you won’t manage to have them... and you’ll suffer greatly from this, much more than you’re suffering now because it will last for years. It will be much more painful when all these neighbors in the yard, all of your friends and relatives, when meeting you, will ask “Well, when are you planning kids?”, “Do you have children?” Or “Don’t hold plans on kids off, time flies.” And what anguish it’ll be to see pregnant women or mothers pushing their baby carriages along the streets. And then your beloved husband will leave for a woman who’ll be able to give him children, and you’ll stay alone. However, he might stay, but you’ll always read the pain and frustration in his eyes.

“No,” Rita shook her head, “it’ll never happen. There are lots of women who have some abortions, and they’re able to have children afterwards, and everything’s all right with them.”

“There’re lots of women who have only one, and they have loads of problems afterwards.”

“No,” persisted Rita. “It won’t happen to me. I’ll be fine.”

“Don’t you feel a bit of sorry for him?” Lika asked.

Rita bowed without a word.

“He is alive! He’s got the heart and it beats! He feels everything you feel. He feels your pain as well, and it hurts him not to be wanted. Probably, he can hear your thoughts about what you’re going to do with him. And if he loves you... and I’m sure he does... will you betray his love and murder him?” she finished in whisper.

“Do you mean I’m a murderer?” Rita could not help crying. She burst into tears with her head in her hands.

Lika got frightened of her friend’s reaction. “I shouldn’t have said all that,” she thought but was not going to change her mind about it. She wanted to give her a hug and comfort her but the friend pushed her away and said that murderers are not worth of embracing them. Lika sat opposite Rita and waited patiently till she would calm down. Rita was blubbing so hard that made Lika’s heart tear with empathy and inability to help; tears flowed from her eyes.

“Poor Rita! She seems to have a nervous breakdown. I shouldn’t have said that... Even without that, she’s at the verge of panic and exhaustion. Why did I say that? Why? I really made it worse instead of helping. Oh, Goodness, stupid me! What if she does something to herself?” Lika got really frightened and embarrassed because she did not know how to behave in such a situation.

“Rita, forgive me, please. I’m being such a fool! I should’ve thought before I said that. I shouldn’t have said anything except the words of support... But I really want to help... I don’t know how to do this... May be, you’d better talk to a professional? A psychologist?” suddenly suggested Lika, “You’d feel better, psychologically better.”

Rita kept weeping but her sobbing became quieter. Lika sat near for some time wrapped in doubts of whether she could leave Rita alone. It was the telephone call from Aunt Ann that solved

the problem. Aunt Ann phoned her to find out how the things were. She did not want her to feel lonely. At the end, she asked Lika to buy some bread for dinner. Lika said goodbye to her friend. Rita did not say anything in response but continued to sob and swallow her tears, so Lika left her alone.

“I hope she won’t do anything to herself! Oh, my Goodness, I hope she’ll be all right!” Lika prayed on her way back home, “I guess there’s not much I can do to help her. She’s most likely to do what she’s planned. Coco’s been right. Might it be the best thing to happen?”

Heavy thoughts did not leave Lika, and she even walked past the shop and only at the porch she remembered her aunt’s request. Sighing, she turned and walked back. Continuing to ponder over the situation, the girl got to the shop, bought a loaf of bread and went home again. Thoughts in her head were confused, they ran across one another, exhausted her, but there was no solution. She was on the verge of despair.

Chapter 9

Did Coco come from future?

At home Lika ate pies and, without even having cleaned the table, she went to her room and lay down on the bed. She was going to get some sleep, because the thoughts about Rita, how to help her, had completely exhausted her. “I must call her,” the girl thought and dialed Rita’s number. Rita did not answer. Lika listened to the beeps until the line got disconnected automatically. “Why isn’t she answering?” She began to worry, “She doesn’t want to? But what if she’s done something to herself? Oh, why did I leave her? I should’ve stayed until she didn’t calm down! What’s now? Should I go to her again?”

“I’m sure she’s all right,” opening the door with her paw and squeezing her fluffy head through the crack, said Coco.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that.”

“She merely doesn’t want to talk to you after all that you’ve told her. It’s easy to check – send her a message and she’ll answer.”

Lika hastily began to press the buttons of her cheap Nokia. A reply did not keep her waiting.

“She says she’s all right. She just wants to be left alone and asks not to disturb her.”

“That’s just what I told you!” Coco solemnly uttered aloud.

“Look, Coco,” Lika got inspired, “How come you know everything? How come you can talk? Why haven’t you talked to me before – you’ve been here for ages?”

“So many questions at once,” Coco sat opposite the bed, stretched forward its hinder paw and began to lick it.

“I sometimes wonder how one can be so smart and so ill-mannered at the same time,” Lika sighed. “I’m talking to you, and you’re washing your paw – it’s not polite.”

“Common,” replied the cat going on with her occupation. “We’ve known each other for ages! What are these conventionalities for? We’re almost blood. After all, it didn’t use to confuse you to walk naked in my presence.”

Lika blushed; it was true. She tried to comfort herself by the idea that she had not known that Coco could talk.

“Oh, right!” the cat drawled with simulated offence. “Why should you keep up appearances with dumb things?”

Lika blushed even more not knowing how else she could explain herself.

“Oh, come on, I’m just kidding,” the cat said cheerfully and even stopped licking its paw.

“I’m so sorry,” the girl still said.

As for Coco, it stretched forward the other hinder paw and began licking it.

“Will you tell me?” Lika asked gingerly.

“A tale? I don’t think I will. Not now at least. Let’s make it last thing at night. I know a large variety of wonderful tales. Which ones do you like, ancient or modern, Russian, oriental, European? I’ve got some Brazilian.” The cat pattered.

“Well, no, Coco,” Lika smiled. The more Coco tried to get off the subject, the more Lika wanted to get the answers to her questions.

“Well then... not Brazilian... may be Japanese?” Coco suggested.

“I don’t want a tale. I want your story. Where did you come from?”

“Lika, you’re old enough to know where cats come from. Should I tell you about the birds and the bees?”

Instead of the answer, Lika threw the small pillow, which she usually slept on, at Coco. The cat jumped aside and seemed to sneeze.

“It’s so ill-mannered to throw pillows at someone you’re talking to,” The cat said having copied Lika’s recent intonation and headed for the door.

“Coco, please!” the girl exclaimed. By the moment, she had jumped from the bed and having reached the door in two leaps shut it.

“You leave me no choice,” Coco sighed, “So make yourself comfortable and get ready to listen. A long time ago,” The cat began telling in a low voice, “In the year of three thousand eight hundred and five a pretty kitten was born...”

“Wait,” Lika cut across it; “In the year of three thousand eight hundred and five?” she thought the cat started telling her a tale. “Coco, you’ve promised to tell me a true story, not a tale!”

“But this is a true story!” Coco declared in its usual tone. I was truly born in the year of three thousand eight hundred and five!”

“I can admit you’re not an ordinary cat, but this fishy story’s too much!” Lika resented. “You can’t be born in the year that hasn’t come yet.” She looked over different variants of how it could possibly be done. “Do you live your life from the end? No, you can’t. It’s too far in the future... Oh, I get it!” she exclaimed cheerfully. “You mean your cat’s chronology! I should have guessed it at once!”

“Rubbish,” said the cat. The ideas apparently amused it. It watched Lika closely as the girl tried to find a rational explanation to its date of birth. “I can explain if you allow me, of course.”

“So,” the cat started again, “I was born in the year of three thousand eight hundred and five. I used thought-transference with my master as all the cats and dogs of my time did or... is it better to say ‘will do’?”

Lika was attentively listening but could not decide whether to believe the cat. She waited for any detail that could possibly prove the veracity of Coco’s story or refute it.

“So do you mean that in three thousand eight hundred and five all the cats and dogs will be able to communicate with people using telepathy? How can you explain this fact? How can you explain the emergence of this ability?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Evolution! Every living being evolves in this world, even a human.”

“Even a human?” Lika asked.

“Yes! People will acquire telepathy in the third millennium, but first they’ll be able to read only human thoughts. As for understanding animals and plants, they will come to it later.

“And cats? When will cats learn to read human minds?”

“There’s no need! Cats have always been able to do that!” Coco said with pride.

“They can’t do it now, can they?” Lika was not going to believe it so easily.

“Surely, they can! All the cats are telepathists. We can read your minds; we are sensitive to your mood and intents. We are sensitive to ghosts as well”.

“Why are some cats so stupid then? They won’t do what they’re told.”

“Don’t you ever call cats stupid! Cats aren’t stupid. We’re independent and freedom-loving! If we don’t wanna do something, nothing can make us.” Coco was full of determination to defend her “brothers and sisters”.

“Okay-okay, I won’t say a word,” Lika assured her. “All right, let it be so. You were born in three thousand five hundred and five....”

“Not five hundred but eight hundred!” The cat corrected the girl.

“Okay, let it be eight hundred... How come you’re here? Did you come by a time machine?” asked the girl. Mockery shadowed her voice.

“In my opinion, that’s the most appropriate version. I’m glad it’s been you who’s suggested it.” Lika’s tone did not offend her in the least. “Yes, believe I’ve come here in a time machine.”

“Oh, cats of future will evolve great enough to operate time-machines!” Lika taunted, “No, hang on! It must be a cat who will invent a time-machine! Am I right?”

“It seems to be my turn to hit you with a pillow,” Coco said calmly, “It’s much easier, deary. It wasn’t I but a human who operated the machine, of course. Precisely saying, it was a teenager, the

son of my master, who used it without his father's permission. I have no idea why he chose the end of the twentieth century for his first travelling, probably, it was just fortuity. As a result, I'm here and he's gone away without me.

Coco sighed with a bit of sadness. Lika was at a loss. She did not know whether to believe the story or not. She suggested that she had to believe Coco if she wanted to remain friends with the cat.

"Does that mean that I have an ability of thought-transfer?" Lika suddenly asked. "If I can talk to you, I can talk to other cats as well... Can I?"

Coco was silent. She might have not expected the question.

"Oh, I knew you were telling lies," the girl got upset.

"I'm telling the truth," Coco began to justify herself, "It's easy for you to talk to me because I first started speaking aloud, and you could make sure it was me who'd said the words you'd heard in an empty room. Other cats can't do it. They can't talk."

"And what about people?"

"Oh, it isn't that easy with people."

"Why not? People can talk."

"Yes, they can. They can also tell lies, they can hide their true intentions and feelings even from themselves. During the centuries they've made a go of it. What's the use of reading minds if there's no certainty? You'll never prove a thought, especially an indecent one, to be someone else's and not yours.

"Not all of them are indecent," Lika objected.

"Anyway, I'm sure you've come across such coincidences when they say 'great minds think alike', 'the same thought has just crossed my mind'.

"Year, it happens quite often..." the girl said thoughtfully. "So it means telepathy is real," she came to the conclusion. "Why haven't you spoken to me before?"

"May be, it's not me who hadn't spoken, but you who hadn't heard me..." the cat muttered.

It seemed that the answer was good enough for Lika because she asked the next question, and it was about what life would be like in three thousand eight hundred and five, but at the moment Coco was about to say something, the doorbell rang. It was Aunt Ann who returned from the summer cottage. She came earlier because the weather had got worse and she did not want to get into the storm.

Chapter 10

The virus of immorality

In the following three days Lika did not manage neither to see Rita nor to speak to her. Rita kept sending her a message a day saying that she was all right. As for Lika, she could not make herself stop thinking about the friend, Vlad, and Coco.

That day after lunch she decided to digress a little from those tedious thoughts and got back to the book she had started a while ago and had left it out because of the latest events. She made herself comfortable at the table trying to recollect the last passage she had read, but the sound of the income message in Skype distracted her. Imagine her surprise when she saw a message from Vlad. Immediately, the whole world was forced out of her mind. With an unevenly beating heart and fingers trembling with excitement, she answered to his “Hello, Lika!” Then Vlad called and told her about how he had settled in a new place. He also described the city, the river flowing nearby, the sunny weather and some guys he had made friends with. Apparently, he was very encouraged by the new life and the new place. Finally, he asked what was happening in her life. Lika shuddered. What could she tell him? About Rita’s pregnancy? No. Rita had asked her not to tell him about this, and, of course, she would not do it. About Coco? No way. “Undoubtedly, a talking cat could interest him but only if he could hear it himself,” she thought. Vlad would have thought that Lika had gone mad if she had told him about it. As a result, her account of the days spent in his absence turned out to be the most usual and even a bit boring. Anyway, Vlad seemed to be listening attentively to her. Then he inquired about Aunt Ann’s health and asked how Rita was. He wondered why she did not appear on Skype. Lika felt her face blushing, and her ears began to burn – she could not tell him the truth, and she did not know how to lie. Without knowing what to invent, she just dropped the call. She jumped up from her chair, and walked about the room, but to her distress, there was no time to think because the melody of the incoming call sounded almost immediately. The girl took a deep breath and clicked on “answer”. Vlad apologized for the quality of the connection; probably, he could not imagine that Lika herself interrupted the call, and then he apologized again, but this time for not being able to continue the conversation because he had to go. They said goodbye to each other promising to keep in touch. When his face had disappeared from the screen, Lika sighed with relief – this time it came to nothing.

Why does it all happen so in her life? Why can’t there be joy without pain? She was so happy to see the beloved person, but the happiness was shadowed by her inability to be fully sincere with him.

“Pain and joy always join hands;” Coco told her then, “that’s normal. You can’t only breathe in; you need to breathe out otherwise you’ll die. A heart is meant to shrink after it dilates – life is possible if only these processes go one after another in harmony.”

During those days, Lika and Coco really bonded. For two days the weather had been nasty, but as soon as the sun showed its face in the skies, Aunt Ann went to the summer cottage to visit her friend and Lika spent hours chatting with Coco. She did not notice how strongly she became attached to the cat, and their conversations started to influence her thinking, and, perhaps, her life in its right. Lika was impressed by Coco’s original thinking, her approach to life, in some ways the cat seemed to be wise, and the girl was curious to find out her opinion on any matter. Sometimes they argued long because Lika strongly disagreed with Coco’s opinions, but in somewhat magical way the cat always managed to bring convincing arguments and change the opinion of her mistress.

“The day after tomorrow Rita’s parents leaving for Turkey,” Lika told the cat after having read a message from the friend.

“Well,” answered the cat “it’s all coming to an end.”

“I haven’t managed to influence her decision,” Lika sighed, “If only you could talk to her...”

“Me? No! It’s out of the question! Do you want her to go mad? Just fancy! She’s in such a... poor mental condition and a cat’s talking to her!”

“Right,” Lika drawled, “I haven’t thought about it.”

Coco was silent and Lika got absorbed in thought. The night before she had googled about abortions. The thing that amazed her most was statistical data. According to WHO fifty six million of induced abortion occur each year in the world. “Fifty six million a year! Fifty six million of discontinued lives! Fifty six million of unrealized opportunities! Fifty six million of those who are not given a single chance! The worst thing is that it happens from year to year. Thereafter, the modern human race is considered to be sensible and humane. How is it possible that the mankind kill themselves, rob their own chances and opportunities but hopes to have comfortable future? Just imagine how many people like Einstein, Lomonosov, Pushkin, Charlie Chaplin, Mother Teresa, Salvador Dali, and Mahatma Gandhi and even like Jesus Christ could be born!”

“And what about those who could be like Judas, king Herod, Mao Zedong, Hitler or Stalin?” Coco interfered in Lika’s thoughts.

“But there were much more creators than destroyers,” Lika disagreed.

“Not as much as you tend to think. Just think: fifty-six million abortions a year. They are not done by creators. Creators don’t do abortions – they are meant to create not to destroy, they are here to support life, not to ruin it, otherwise, they wouldn’t be called creators.”

“You must be right and it is sad. Do you know which is the most difficult thing about it for my understanding?”

“I guess I know.”

“Twelve percent of all abortions are done due to medical reasons, twenty-three percent – for social, twenty-five percent are done to save a woman’s life and forty percent are performed due to personal desire of women. That is, forty women out of a hundred have an abortion just because they don’t want a child. But a desire is such a changeable thing that it may cause you want something today and don’t want it tomorrow, and then want it again the day after tomorrow. How can you be guided only by a desire? There must be something more you should take into account... responsibility, morality, love...”

“There must be,” Coco grinned, “What if there is nothing? How can you use something that you don’t merely have? So they have nothing to do but to be guided by what they have...”

“Why don’t they have these?”

“You know, lots of people will be asking this question in the future, and, probably, they will find the answer. In my day, the second half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries will be considered to be the most immoral period of all times.”

“Is it possible that the things are worse now than ever?” Lika asked sadly.

“Firstly, it’s all become too pervasive,” Coco began to explain, “the Earth’s tainted by the virus of immorality, and almost everyone is infected to some extent. Secondly, the level of consciousness has grown... or at least, it’s meant to have grown by now. And if ancient people who had primitive mind were pardoned for their blunders, will the same end well for the modern society?”

“I don’t think it will.”

“Right. The third millennium will go in search of the answers to the questions created by the present time. The most urgent will be the human reproduction.”

Lika raised her eyebrows.

“Don’t be surprised, deary, in future the problem of infertility will take the first prize. Anyway, this won’t happen immediately. The modern people are so self-confident that they won’t begin to raise the alarm, believing that they have an ace in the hole in the form of cloning. And only after several decades of unsuccessful experiments, after a great natural decline in the world’s population, serious search for answers will begin.”

“Will they find the answers?”

“They will.”

“So there won’t be any abortions in future?”

“Right.”

“So what’s the answer?” Lika exclaimed, “If we knew the answer, we could change the situation right now!”

“I doubt it,” Coco sighed. “I hope to change the fate route for a single person at least, but you want to change the fate of the whole society. That’s too much.”

“Can’t a change in the fate of one human affect the fate of the whole mankind?”

“If it were that simple, people today would be as advanced as people of my time.”

Lika still did not agree with Coco’s opinion and insisted that the cat told her all about it. Coco was adamant, arguing that the present level of human consciousness was not high enough for this information; that it would not be perceived, or it would be misunderstood.

“It’s like trying to explain to a three-year-old child why Anna Karenina rushed under the train,” the cat concluded her explanations.

“She did it because she didn’t want to live.”

“So try and explain what a life means and how one could not want to live it to a small child who has no idea of death.”

Lika sighed; she had no choice but to admit that Coco was right.

Next evening Rita called Lika to ask her to go to the hospital with her. Lika agreed. Besides, Aunt Ann was still staying at her friend’s, and Lika did not need to come up with any excuses for her.

In the hospital it all went not as easy as Rita had expected. She thought that she would be immediately aborted, and in a couple of hours she would be back home. Instead, first she was sent to one doctor, then to another one, and then she was asked to have various tests and ultrasound examination done. Rita was irritated that everything was so prolonged. Incredibly skinny, nervous, and jerky, she was only a pitiful shadow of that Rita that Lika knew and loved so much. Lika looked at her friend and did not recognize her. And yet, she continued to treat her with care and tenderness, ascribing Rita’s behaviour to the circumstances. She did her best to support the exhausted friend; she calmed her down and tried to smooth the edges when Rita suddenly became rude to the laboratory assistant, who took her blood for analysis.

The expectation of the analyses results seemed tiring, but the results themselves became a real challenge. When the friends came back to the hospital again, Yelena Mikhailovna, a doctor, aged fifty, with a pleasant and kind face, allowed Lika to enter into the study with Rita. She was very friendly and spoke in a sweet, melodious voice, very calmly and slowly, as though carefully choosing words. She wanted both girls to understand what she was about to convey to them. She said that the results of the tests did not allow Rita to have an abortion. First, it turned out that Rita had a negative Rh factor, and subsequently, she was more likely to remain sterile after an abortion, and she, Yelena Mikhailovna, could not allow such a beautiful and good girl to suffer all her life because of an error committed with the support of soulless doctors, to whom she did not relate. Secondly, Rita had salpingitis – inflammation of the fallopian tubes. And it had to be cured in the first place otherwise in future its consequences could lead to difficulties with childbearing. Then Yelena Mikhailovna prescribed various pills. She explained the purpose of each prescription in detail. At first she explained everything to Rita, but as soon as the girl realized that in the next few days she would not be aborted, she began to cry quietly, so the doctor switched to Lika who listened to her carefully not to miss anything Important. At the end, the doctor recommended consulting a psychologist. When Rita left the office, Yelena Mikhailovna made Lika stay and advised her to tell Rita’s parents about the problem, even if Rita herself was against it.

“But it’ll be a betrayal,” Lika pronounced quietly, looking the doctor in the eye.

“It may seem to be a betrayal now, but later she’ll thank you for it,” The doctor explained in the same low voice.

On their way back home Rita was silent just sighing from time to time. Lika did not manage to find more words of support for the friend, so she held her tongue. But when they were passing

by the chemist's, Lika offered to buy some medicine that the doctor had prescribed, whereat Rita declared she had not got any money for the pills.

"Sergei's given you money, hasn't he?" Lika wondered.

"He's given me money, but it's not for the medicines," Rita answered angrily. "If I spend it now, I won't have any for..." she did not want to say the word, "what he's given it to me."

"Rita, medicine is more important now!" Lika exclaimed. "Look at yourself. You're ill! You need treatment! You need to buy at least some pills for nausea, so that you could normally eat."

"I can't spend it," Rita said firmly.

Lika was so indignant at Rita's answer that she could not find any words of objection. It was difficult for her to understand Rita's behavior. Why can't she see the obvious thing? Her health is more important than that money. If it comes to the pinch, she could explain the situation to Sergei and ask more money. Besides, parents must have left her some money. In her own defense, Rita declared she would never speak to Sergei again and as for the parents, they had left money enough just for food, so she could not go to the night clubs while they were away.

"Okay, I've got a little money. I don't need it now," said Lika, "Besides, Dad promised to send me some by September.

"Oh, don't, Lika," Rita objected.

"That's flat. I can't see you turning into a skeleton."

Rita cried and hugged the friend.

"Thank you, Lika," she whispered.

Lika took the prescriptions from Rita and promised to bring her the medicines in the afternoon. Having taken all the money she had from the box in her room, without delay, she went to the chemist's. There were two of them nearby. She had to go to both, because the first one did not have one of the medicines. In fact, it was not even a medicine but vitamins. Lika was pleased to see them in the next pharmacy, but it appeared she did not have enough money to buy them. "I'll have to borrow money and return for them tomorrow," she decided for herself and headed for Rita.

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