

SAVING HOPE

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Hello!

This is a sample first chapter of

Saving Hope.

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Siberia, 2000

Alexandra Pavlova jolted upright, her maternal senses snapping to alert. The garlic she'd placed about the room tinged each breath and settled on her tongue. For two days, she'd spoon-fed the girl warm broth and tea with honey and arranged garlic cloves to nurse her daughter through a bad cold. From the overstuffed chair, she scanned the dark, finally focusing her attention on the small lump her daughter made under the *pododeyalnik* on the bed beside her. A shallow rasping sounded from below the linen coverlet.

She leaned forward from where she'd been keeping vigil and peeled back the blanket to caress Nadezhda's forehead. When she stroked her daughter's near-white curls from around her thin face, she yanked back her hand. The child's skin had seared her fingers.

The girl cracked her eyes and winced. "Hot, Mommy. I'm hot."

Her lids fluttered shut, and she drifted back into a too-deep sleep.

Alexandra bit her lip to stifle the cry. Her worst fear had been realized. *Pneumonia*. She knew the signs only too well after her mother's own battle with the disease just a year ago.

As quickly and quietly as possible, she sped across the parquet hallway to her bedroom. In the doorway, she stopped and listened to Yuri's steady breaths and compared them to their daughter's ragged ones. She chewed her lip again as she debated whether to wake him. His recent unemployment had made his moods so unpredictable. She never knew whether he would lash out or cry in despair when he received bad news. A glance back to the other room determined her choice.

At his side, she again paused before placing a hand on his shoulder. His thin frame, so like Nadezhda's, rose and dropped rhythmically beneath it. She jiggled his shoulder.

He shuddered and squinted at her. "Alexandra?"

"It's Nadezhda," she said, her voice low, but urgent. "She needs to go to the hospital. Now."

He frowned. "Are you sure it can't wait until morning?"

She twisted her hands behind her back, reading his thoughts in the lines on his forehead. Since Viru-Preparat dismissed him from his research position six months ago, they'd lived on their savings and the meager benefits the government gave them for Nadezhda's disability. Between her mother's and their daughter's illnesses, they knew all too well how the medical system worked under the new market economy — emergency room, doctors, medicine. Fees. Fees. Fees. Yuri had to be adding it all up in his head.

She checked over her shoulder to the other bedroom, recalling the rattle with each of her daughter's breaths, and shook her head. "Her lips are blue. I lost my mother last winter because we waited. We can't risk it."

His gaze fixed on hers. She clenched her fingers tighter, waiting his response. The area around his eyes softened.

"Go. Meet me at the door."

With a tight nod, she sprinted from the room, shaking her

hands to return the blood to them. In one movement, she scooped the child from the bed, blankets and all, and joined Yuri at their front door. As soon as he'd shrugged on his coat, he held out his arms for the bundle, and she put on her own wrap.

Their boots echoed through the building's narrow stairwell, then thudded on the courtyard's frozen mud as they crossed to the corrugated metal container holding their prize possession — a dull green Lada automobile.

Yuri grunted as he shoved back the top to reveal the car. Once they'd settled inside, he played with the choke and the gas pedal for several minutes before the car's engine finally whined to life. With a lurch, he steered the car out of the small garage and over the icy ruts into the Siberian night.

Only a few other cars' headlights, resembling insects' yellow eyes, flashed past them along the way. When their auto slid to a stop at the hospital's only entrance, a guard shuffled out of his shack and around the bar blocking their way.

Yuri opened the window, frigid air slicing through the crack. "This is urgent. Our daughter has pneumonia."

The guard's breath formed puffs of white in the car's headlights. "They're closed for an emergency disinfection. Go to the regional hospital."

"But that's a hundred kilometers from here."

The guard shrugged. "No one's here. All the doctors are on holiday."

The muscles in Yuri's face tightened, and she imagined him ticking off the additional costs: gasoline, wear on the tires, antifreeze, oil replacement, and on and on. How had they come to this point?

Before she could open her mouth to argue the need to make the trip, he shifted into reverse and headed back to the main road out of town. After the car turned onto the highway toward the regional capital, her attention swung between Nadezhda's breathing and the car's erratic course. Birch tree trunks flashed in the headlights as they sped past.

Yuri gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles white in the dashboard's glow. He caught her eye. "There's a lot of ice."

The child fidgeted in her arms, and she murmured quiet assurances to her before she did the same to her husband. "We'll get there."

As if to dispute her mother's assertions, Nadezhda fell into a coughing fit. Loud, wet hacks doubled her small frame. At first, Alexandra feared they would never quit. When they did, she held her breath until the child took a long, ragged inhale of her own.

The car's engine revved higher as they passed a sign noting the turnoff to the regional capital.

When they reached the hospital, Yuri yanked the wheel, and the car's tires jumped the curb in front of the main entrance's cracked steps. Without a word, he jerked open the car door and

carried their daughter inside, leaving Alexandra to follow. Just inside the second set of doors, a guard slept behind a desk. A small TV set cast a blue light over his face, and smoke curled from a cigarette smoldering in an ashtray. Yuri pulled to a halt at the desk and cleared his throat. The guard snored on. After a short wait, he handed the child to Alexandra and tapped the man on his shoulder.

The guard peered at the three of them through one cracked eyelid. "*Da?*"

"This is an emergency. My daughter can't breathe."

With a sigh, the man opened both eyes, pulled out a smudged telephone list, shook a cigarette from a package on the desk, stuck it in his mouth, lit it with the butt from the ashtray, and picked up the telephone receiver. He spun the rotary dial three times, muttered into the mouthpiece, and hung up.

"The emergency entrance is on the other side, but I've called them for you. Wait. They'll come here." A puff of blue smoke flowed out with his words. He settled back into his chair and shut his eyes again.

Alexandra searched the waiting area for some place to sit.

Spotting a wooden bench below a board listing doctors' names and work hours, she slumped onto it. With the bundle of blanket and child on her lap, she rocked back and forth in time to her husband's pacing on the curling linoleum.

The guard had long since fallen back to sleep by the time a large woman in a rumpled uniform entered from a back hallway. Her peroxidized hair stuck out at odd angles from a lopsided nurse's cap. Approaching Alexandra, she held out her arms. "Give me the child. You can fill out the forms at the emergency entrance."

Alexandra watched Yuri turn to leave, but she remained seated, her daughter clutched to her chest. "No. I'm going with her. My husband will fill out the forms for you if you wish."

She ignored Yuri's stare when he spun back around.

The nurse jammed her hands onto her hips and shook her head. "No one's allowed in. Go. Fill out the papers. Then go home. Call after nine o'clock, and we'll let you know her status."

She reached for the child, and Alexandra leaned backward, lifting her chin to the nurse. This woman would not intimidate her. "She has a heart condition. I must speak with the doctor. Lead the way. I'll follow."

"I told you, it's not allowed. I won't be fined for breaking the sanitation rules."

Alexandra knew this objection all too well. Ministry of Health regulations barred all outsiders, including family, from visiting patients — as if hospitals could arrest and control illness like a criminal. Fathers' first glimpses of their newborn children were from maternity-ward courtyards. New mothers would hold a bundle to a window while the men peered upward and waved flowers at their wives.

But Alexandra also knew her daughter's care depended as much on her personal efforts to secure what the child needed as any doctor's skill. Avoiding Yuri's gaze, she fished some bills from her coat pocket and flashed them at the woman. "This should cover any fines."

The woman checked the bills she held out, snatched them from her, and stuffed them down the front of her uniform. "All right. You can come, but take off your boots." She spun on her heel and marched to the hallway entrance.

From her station by the door, the woman tapped her plastic sandal and glared at Alexandra as she stepped over to her husband and kicked off her boots.

"Take these with you," she told him. "I'll see you at the emergency entrance after we're settled."

"Alex — "

She placed a finger on his lips. "Not now." She shot a quick glance at the nurse. "Please. We'll talk about the money later."

His gaze met hers, and she knew a protest lay on his tongue, but he simply peeled back the blanket and kissed the top of their daughter's head. "I'll see you at the other entrance."

She shifted the blanket onto her shoulder and followed the nurse through the door. Inside the hospital proper, her stockinged feet slipped on the floor as she struggled to keep pace with the nurse through the twisting corridors. The hallway's faded beige walls had soaked up years of disinfectant, and its smell burned her nose and the back of her throat.

Faded paintings of Pushkin's fairy tale characters marked the walls of the children's ward. Just past a rendition of Baba Yaga's bird-foot house, the nurse turned into a room. In the semidarkness,

Alexandra spied several metal-framed beds arranged like those in a

military barracks, each holding a rolled-up mattress. At the first one, the nurse untied the mattress and made the bed with the set of sheets and blankets bundled inside.

Laying her daughter in the bed, Alexandra pulled the covers up to her chin.

"Will she be receiving oxygen?"

"The doctor has to order that. She'll be here shortly to

examine her. Go join your husband. Come back after nine o'clock. The doctor will see you then."

She pulled off her coat and sat down next to her daughter. "I'm staying."

The nurse shrugged and left.

Now alone, she let her gaze rested on the child's face. Despite the fever, Nadezhda had a bluish tinge that gave her a peaceful, ethereal look. She wrapped a blond tendril around her finger and blinked back the tears stinging her eyelids.

A woman in a white coat and tall, white hat tiptoed to the other side of the bed and whispered, "I'm Dr. Volkova, the pediatrician on duty tonight. You say your daughter has pneumonia?"

Alexandra stood to address the doctor. "Her breathing became labored, so we drove her here. She has a congenital heart condition too."

She watched the doctor uncover the girl and open her night-shirt to listen to her chest. Her throat tightened when she saw the doctor's forehead crease.

"Her lungs are very congested. We'll begin the few antibiotics we have in stock right away. I'll have the nurse arrange a special room with oxygen for her."

"What about her heart?"

The doctor turned to stare out the window into the black night beyond. "I'm not a specialist. One can look at her in the morning. Right now, I want to focus on her breathing. I'll give you a list of antibiotics to buy. Bring them with you in the morning."

"Buy? Won't the government supply them?"

"Our budget has no funds for imported medicines." The doctor's lips pulled tight. "I've worked for two months now with no pay. Last week, they offered bathrobes instead of cash. What am I to do with twenty bathrobes? I'm a physician, not a street merchant. The staff turned down the offer and received nothing

instead. Patients are on their own as much as we are. Be prepared to pay even more if her condition worsens.”

Alexandra swallowed, Yuri’s rants echoing in her head. She couldn’t take another row with him. Not tonight. “Of course. I’ll take the list to my husband. He’s waiting in the emergency room. I’m staying with her.”

Dr. Volkova opened her mouth, but Alexandra preempted another argument about the sanitation rules, deciding to play her final card. “At hospital one twenty-two, they always allowed me to stay with her. My background in microbiology proved useful.”

Her connection to the Soviet biological weapons factory in the former secret city registered in the doctor’s face. She shut her mouth.

Alexandra continued. “I’m sure you can arrange for me to stay. There must be an extra bed somewhere.”

“*Da.*” Volkova drew out the vowel. “I can see about a bed in your daughter’s room, but don’t interfere with the staff.”

Before Alexandra could ask again about the specialist, Nadezhda gasped. With a jerk, her back arched and lifted her off the bed. The doctor ran to the door and called for help.

By the time the doctor returned to Nadezhda’s side, the nurse had arrived, pushing a cart filled with glass bottles in front of her. She and the doctor worked over the child, the nurse shoving shunts the size of knitting needles into her arms.

Alexandra felt the blood rush from her head and feared she might collapse.

“What is it? What’s happening?”

Glancing in her direction, the doctor barked at the nurse “Get her out of here. Now.”

The nurse sprinted toward her and dragged her from the room.

“Please. What’s the matter with her?”

Her begging received only a shake from the nurse’s head as

she continued forcing her toward the door. “No time to talk now. Join your husband. The doctor will see you there.”

Before she could protest again, the door closed in her face.

Even though the lock clicked into place, she grabbed the knob and twisted, shoving her body against the door. The doctor’s shouts carried into the hallway, but she could make no sense of them. Fear and frustration, held at bay through the long ride, flooded over her. She clung to the doorknob and allowed the tears to flow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Liese Sherwood-Fabre grew up in Dallas, Texas and knew she was destined to write when she got an A+ in the second grade for her story about Dick, Jane, and Sally's ruined picnic. After obtaining her PhD from Indiana University, she joined the federal government and had the opportunity to work and live internationally for more than fifteen years. After returning to the states, she seriously pursued her writing career and has had numerous pieces appear in both print and electronically.

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