

## Spring Picture

“Don’t expect too much,” said Anna. “Your grandmother’s settled into *The Grange*, but she’s been completely lost, since you left after Christmas. You know how depressed she gets every spring and summer’s end, but now, it’s winter too.”

“She’ll be fine, Mum,” Emily assured her. “I’ve got a surprise for her. Jan’s bringing it.”

“Jan?”

“The friend I flew over with. He was on assignment in London yesterday, but he’s staying with friends in Oxford today and collecting something I ordered especially for her.”

“Well don’t be disappointed, if your surprise falls flat. One minute, she’s perfectly lucid in English, then she returns to her childhood and then she’s talking to herself, in Czech. She hasn’t laughed, or smiled since you left.”

When they reached her room, Grandmother was slumped in her chair, staring into space.

“I’ve missed you so much, Gran,” said Emily hugging her. “What a lovely room and the gardens look wonderful, from up here.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Pavel?” Gran was alert. “Pavel?”

“No, Gran, this is my friend, Jan,” said Emily, gently stroking the old lady’s hand, as the door opened on a young man, struggling with a large bouquet.

“Dobry den, Babicka Kristyna,” said Jan, bowing. “My middle name’s Pavel, but my mother only called me that, when I’d been naughty. The lower her voice sank on the second syllable, the naughtier I’d been. These are for you, with our love.”

Kristyna smiled, as he put the bouquet into her arms and her face beamed, as she unwrapped the decorated willow sticks. “Pomlázka! Dekuji. Dekuji.”

She looked Jan, up and down. “Hezky clovek,” she declared, nudging Emily.

“Hezky, nebo hutny?” enquired Jan.

Jan, Emily and Kristyna laughed even more.

“What’s going on?” demanded Anna.

“It’s okay, Mum. I told you, Jan and I are here to cheer Gran up. I’ve learned quite a bit of the language, in the past three months. Teach English, learn Czech.

“Gran thanked us for the pomlázka; said Jan was handsome and Jan replied, ‘Handsome, or thick?’”

“I’ll speak English, Anna,” said Jan, picking up the ribboned sticks. “I didn’t realise, you didn’t understand any Czech. Now,” he said, looking at Emily, “you know what I’m going to do.”

Emily jumped up and ran round the room, while Jan pursued her, brandishing the willow sticks. He caught up with her and lightly tapped her on the legs, while she screamed with laughter.

“Now me,” laughed Kristyna, getting up out of her chair.

“Sit down, Mum,” said Anna.

Her mother ignored her and with Emily supporting her, Jan tapped Kristyna’s legs, while she screamed even louder than Emily.

“It’s a spring custom in Bohemia, Anna,” explained Jan. “No need to be alarmed.”

Kristyna pulled open a drawer in her bedside table and with Emily’s help, extracted a battered box.

“This is for you, Pavel,” she announced, handing Jan an intricately decorated, wooden egg.

“For Pavel,” she repeated.

“No Kristyna, I couldn’t take this.”

“Mum,” sighed Anna, “please sit down and stop giving away your treasures to total strangers.”

“It’s the custom for the girl who’s whipped, to give a kraslice egg to the boy,” explained Emily.

Jan gently returned the egg to Kristyna. “When did you leave Czechoslovakia?”

The old lady sat down. “Spring 1969,” she said slowly, pointing to a framed picture on top of the bureau. “And, there we all are, in the spring of ’67.”

“So, this is you, here?” Jan tapped the photo. “Your mother? Your brother?”

“My mother,” said Kristyna. “Pavel was a distant cousin...and my childhood love.”

“And this must be...Wait! This is Karel Svoboda...Your father?”

Kristyna nodded.

“Your father, my hero, was Karel Svoboda? Kristyna, I’m a photographer because of your father. He was a legend in his time. I can’t believe it. Wait until my grandparents and my old uni professor, find out I’ve met the family of Karl Svoboda.”

“The last time I saw him, was spring ’68,” said Kristyna. “We’d had an argument about my university semester placements. I was top in Russian and only tenth, in English. He said, I should look to the West, not the East and we should be free, in thought and not just, name.

“But it was the time of Prague Spring; of our reformer Dubcek and a new beginning for us. We thought the Russians were our friends.”

“My grandparents thought the same,” admitted Jan.

“My father left, the night after we’d argued and I never saw him again. There was a rumour that some of the photos of the Russian invasion that August, were taken by him, but we never knew if that was true.”

Kristyna looked tearful.

“So much for cheering her up,” snapped Anna. “Please take your friend and leave, Emily.”

“No,” said Kristyna, switching on the CD player, beside the family photo. “Music.”

*“Da-dumty-dumty-dumty-dum, Dum-ty-daa,”* she sang, tears streaming down her face, as Smetana’s *Vltava*, flowed on towards Prague. “Svoboda! Svoboda!”

Anna leaped up and turned off the music. “I loathe it. She’s always playing it.”

“Why shouldn’t she? said Jan. “It’s the music that defines our homeland...the river that flows through our countryside, to Praha. When the Russians invaded, everyone played that all day, as loudly as possible, until the power was cut.”

“Pavel and I were together in his parents’ village, outside Prague,” continued Kristyna. “We joined the group, painting Dubcek’s name on every sign into the village and then, we ran back indoors and played Smetana. Svoboda! Svoboda!”

Jan blew her a kiss. “Sbohem, Kristyna,” and left humming the music.

“That means ‘farewell,’ Mum,” shouted Emily grabbing her coat and following Jan, “and ‘svoboda’ means ‘freedom’.”

Emily arrived home at midnight, to find Anna, drinking gin in her dressing gown.

“Look, Mum...”

“Don’t say it, Emily. How couldn’t I know Christina Freeman was her translated name? Not know who her father was and what happened to him? Know nothing about her homeland, or her native language?”

“Because I wasn’t interested. It was old and in the past. And yes, I’m angry and ashamed that you and a complete stranger, wave your magic willow sticks and instantly transform her, when I couldn’t.”

“We must start again, Mum. Let’s all take her out – for her combined Easter and birthday lunch – on Sunday.”

“I won’t need a meal for the rest of the week,” declared Kristyna, easing herself into her chair.

“Thank you all so much for the lovely meal...and the chocolates...and the flowers. It’s so good to be with all the family again.”

She smiled at Jan. “And for those who might be joining it...?”

“Gran’s right,” said Emily. “Jan and I are getting engaged.”

“You’ve never hinted...”

“We were waiting for the right moment to tell you, Mum,” Emily broke in, “but...”

“...I messed that up,” admitted Anna.

“I’ve an engagement present for you,” said Kristyna. “Better than kraslice eggs,” she added, opening the bedside cabinet and handing Emily, a black velvet bag.

“This is exquisite,” exclaimed Emily, lifting out a tiny engraved glass egg. “There’s a whole set of them.”

“They were designed and made by Pavel. He was a craftsman, with the most prestigious Bohemian crystal company. After the invasion, he had to make parts for farm machinery.”

“What happened, Kristyna?” asked Jan.

“Remember Jan Palach?”

“He...died...in ’69,” said Jan.

“He self-immolated, in protest at the Soviet dictatorship,” added Emily.

“No, no,” shouted Kristyna. “He protested at the demoralisation of our people – they were beginning to give up. Others followed Jan’s example. Pavel was one of them.

“Only Pavel didn’t die...then...he lay half-alive for a week, cursing himself for not having done the job properly and because he failed, in a small village, he was forgotten.”

Kristyna's hands were shaking now. She clenched her fists. "He sacrificed our happiness, for our country.

"*'Do not be indifferent to the day when the light of the future, was carried forward by a burning body,'* was daubed in Wenceslas Square after Jan died. I still think of Pavel and those who died, every day."

"Why didn't you tell me?" pleaded Anna.

"How could I tell you, or your father, that I still loved someone else and that love had been sacrificed?"

Anna and Emily rushed to Kristyna and held her tightly.

Jan broke the silence.

"There's good news, Kristyna. I contacted my uni professor and he's investigating your father's disappearance. Half a century on, all sorts of photos, papers and diaries, are emerging from attics and he's now planning a photo exhibition, for the fifty-fifth anniversary of the invasion. I'm going to be working on it and we would like you to help us."

"I'd love to Jan-Pavel." Kristyna blew him a kiss. "Welcome to our family."

"One last present," said Emily, handing everyone a glass. "Slivovice."

"Plum brandy. I know that," laughed Anna, switching on the music.

Kristyna raised her glass. "Na zdrava a svoboda!" she shouted defiantly, as the *Vltava* flowed by.