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CATHY GLASS

A long way from home

How many heartbreaks can a little girl take?

Cathy Glass

A Long Way from Home

Аннотация

The true story of 2 year-old Anna, abandoned by her natural parents, left alone in a neglected orphanage. Elaine and Ian had travelled half way round the world to adopt little Anna. She couldn't have been more wanted, loved and cherished. So why was she now in foster care and living with me? It didn't make sense. Until I learned what had happened. ...Dressed only in nappies and ragged T-shirts the children were incarcerated in their cots. Their large eyes stared out blankly from emaciated faces. Some were obviously disabled, others not, but all were badly undernourished. Flies circled around the broken ceiling fans and buzzed against the grids covering the windows. The only toys were a few balls and a handful of building bricks, but no child played with them. The silence was deafening and unnatural. Not one of the thirty or so infants cried, let alone spoke.

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Certain details in this story, including names, places and dates, have been changed to protect the family's privacy.

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Anna's Story

Some stories have to wait to be told to gain the full picture and a better understanding of what happened. Anna's story is one of them.

PART I

THE PARENTS' STORY

Chapter One

Lana

Although the children weren't babies, they appeared as helpless as the day they were born. Dressed only in nappies and ragged T-shirts, they were sitting or lying on the hard floors, or incarcerated in their cots. Their large eyes stared out blankly from emaciated faces. Some children were obviously disabled, others not, but all were badly undernourished and clearly developmentally delayed. The four rooms in the orphanage were hot and airless in the middle of summer. Flies circled around the broken ceiling fans and buzzed against the grids covering the windows. The only toys in any of the rooms were a few balls and a handful of building bricks, but no child played with them. And the silence was deafening and unnatural. Not one of the thirty or so infants cried, let alone spoke.

'This nice one,' the care worker said in broken English, pausing at a cot containing a Down's syndrome boy. 'He no give you trouble.'

Elaine looked with renewed horror at the child rocking back and forth in the cot. A few wisps of fair hair covered his otherwise bald head, open sores bled on his lips and his face was so pale it was doubtful he had ever felt the sunlight. He stared blankly into the distance. Elaine went to speak to him but the care worker was already moving briskly to the next cot. 'Or this one,' she said, tapping the metal bars of the cot and ignoring the

fact that the child had been sick.

Elaine fought back tears and looked to her husband to say something.

Ian cleared his throat. The care worker – a large, brusque woman – seemed to be in charge. He didn't know what role she played and didn't want to upset her and risk their chance of a child. 'I'm sorry, we don't understand,' he said, almost apologetically. 'We were supposed to adopt a particular child. She's called Lana. We have a photograph of her here in our paperwork.' He went to unclip his briefcase.

The care worker tapped his arm. 'No. No. Lana, that baby dead. You choose another baby. We have plenty.'

Elaine's hand shot to her mouth. 'Dead? When?' she cried.

'We weren't told,' Ian said.

The care worker shrugged. 'You on plane.'

'She died yesterday?' Elaine asked, horrified.

'Maybe too late to tell you. You choose another baby. Plenty. Over here.' She led the way to another cot on the far side of the room.

'I want to go,' Elaine said, taking Ian's arm.

'We are leaving,' he said to the care worker, who was waiting for them by the cot.

'You come here and see baby. Talk to it.'

'No!' Elaine cried.

'You no want baby?' the care worker asked, a mixture of incredulity and impatience.

‘Not like this,’ Ian said. ‘We came here for Lana and you tell us she is dead. We are very upset.’

‘But you can choose another baby,’ she said, as though they were in the wrong.

‘No,’ Ian said firmly. ‘We can’t.’

‘Suit yourself,’ she said, clearly offended. Leaving the cot, she headed out of the room and towards the main door, a bunch of keys jangling at her hip. They followed. ‘Lots of other parents come here and take our babies,’ she snapped.

‘But not us,’ Ian said, annoyed.

They waited while she unlocked the door. Ian hung back as Elaine stepped outside. ‘Where’s the doctor we’ve been dealing with?’ he asked. ‘He was supposed to meet us here.’

The care worker shrugged, either not understanding or refusing to answer.

‘Dr Ciobanu,’ Ian tried again. ‘We spoke to him on the phone. Is he here?’

She shook her head. ‘You go now. I’m busy.’

‘You tell him we came?’ he said, but she pushed at his arm, signalling for him to leave.

Ian and Elaine stepped outside and the large metal door clanged shut behind them. A lone child screamed from inside.

Elaine burst into tears and Ian put his arm around her. ‘I don’t believe it,’ she sobbed. ‘All this time, working towards the adoption, and that heartless woman tells us our baby is dead.’ Although they’d never met little Lana, they’d felt a bond with her

ever since they'd first received her details and photograph, and considered her their daughter. This was supposed to have been the final stage in the adoption process that had begun nearly two years before and had included a detailed social worker's report, references, medicals, and endless form filling and expectation. Today they should have met Lana for the first time, given the doctor their paperwork and signed the forms for court. And while they waited for the court hearing they would have visited Lana each day, loving her more and more. But that had all come to an abrupt and distressing end. Their baby had died.

Ian gently guided his wife to the taxi they had waiting.

'No baby?' the taxi driver asked, seeing their faces as they got into the back.

'No. The baby died,' Ian replied, his voice shaking with emotion.

'Oh dear. It happens in this country,' the driver said matter-of-factly. 'Many babies die here.'

Ian nodded as Elaine wiped her eyes. They knew about the high infant mortality rate and the shocking conditions in some of the state-run orphanages that had contributed to their decision to adopt from this country.

The driver glanced at them in the rear-view mirror, started the car and pulled away. 'I find you a healthy baby,' he said. 'My cousin knows a lady who finds couples babies. You no worry. She find one for you, and she very cheap.'

'That's kind of you, but no thank you,' Ian said politely. They'd

been warned about these types of arrangements by other couples who had adopted from this country. There were many parents on the internet who were happy to share their experiences of international adoption to help others. While not always illegal, these private adoptions were fraught with problems, and money was demanded at each stage of the process. Yet ironically they'd followed the correct procedure and look where it had got them!

'You think about it,' the driver said. 'I give you my telephone number when we stop.'

'OK,' Ian said, without the strength to protest.

The air conditioning in the reception of their three-star hotel was a welcome relief after the heat outside. Ian and Elaine, desperate to be alone, caught the lift straight up to their room on the third floor. The maid had been in and everything was clean and tidy and the bed made. It was such a stark contrast to the poverty outside that Elaine felt a familiar stab of guilt.

'I don't think we're meant to have children,' she said, utterly defeated and sitting on the bed.

Ian sighed and poured himself a glass of water from the flask that was refreshed daily. 'I don't know,' he said, as dejected as his wife. 'I expected to face some hurdles, most of those we've been talking to who adopted from here did, but I never imagined this. To arrive and be told our child is dead, and then be shown other children, is heartless beyond belief.'

'Do you think what she's doing is legal?' Elaine asked.

'Who knows?'

‘Those poor children. She kept calling them babies but they weren’t. Some of them could have been six or seven, and most of them were disabled.’

‘I suppose they are the ones no one wants to adopt,’ Ian said sadly. ‘That care worker probably thought as Lana had died we’d be desperate and grateful for any child.’

‘I feel awful but I really can’t take on a disabled child. I told our social worker that right at the beginning.’ Her voice caught. ‘I’m just not cut out for it.’

‘I know, love, me neither. We’ve been honest, and it wasn’t fair to put us in that position.’ He sat beside her on the bed and rested his head back, exhausted.

They were having to deal with so many emotions: bereavement, shock, disappointment and anger. At forty-two and thirty-eight respectively, this had been Ian and Elaine’s last chance of a family. Elaine was infertile, IVF had failed, and they were considered too old to adopt a baby or very young child in their own country, the UK.

‘I think we should just go home and forget about it,’ Elaine said, leaning her head on Ian’s shoulder.

‘Yes, I agree. But I’m going to speak to that Dr Ciobanu first and tell him what I think. I don’t want other couples going through what we have.’

Half an hour later, when Ian felt up to it, he telephoned the orphanage but was told by a care worker that Dr Ciobanu wasn’t there, so he left a message (which he wasn’t sure the care worker

understood), saying he'd call back later. After two hours, having heard nothing, Ian tried again and was told bluntly, 'No doctor.' But later that evening, with plans to change their flights to the following day so they could return home as soon as possible, they received a phone call from Dr Ciobanu.

Ian steeled himself to say what he had to; he wasn't an aggressive man and avoided confrontation, but this needed to be said. Yet before he had a chance, Dr Ciobanu said, 'Mr Hudson, I'm sorry I wasn't there to meet you today but my wife was taken to hospital.'

Thrown, Ian said, 'Oh, I see. I hope it's nothing serious.'

'It wasn't, thank you. A funny turn. She is home now. If you come to the orphanage tomorrow morning you can meet your child.'

'I don't understand,' Ian said, shocked and confused. 'We were told our baby was dead.' Elaine moved closer to the handset so she, too, could hear.

'Yes, Lana died,' the doctor said evenly. 'She was a sickly baby so perhaps it was for the best that it happened here, rather than when you got home. I have another child. She is not sickly. You come here tomorrow and I will arrange it.' Ian glanced at Elaine, not knowing what to say. 'You come tomorrow and we go ahead,' he repeated. Taken completely unawares, Ian looked at Elaine for direction. 'You come here tomorrow at eleven and meet Anastasia. Now I have to go to my wife. Good night.' The line went dead.

Chapter Two

Another Chance?

Elaine and Ian were up most of that night discussing what had happened and what they should do. Prior to the doctor's phone call they'd decided to bring forward their flight and return home childless, yet now they were being offered the chance of another child, reigniting their hopes of having a family of their own. They were calmer now but still had big concerns. This new child, Anastasia, had appeared very quickly, and with no background information they were imagining all sorts of horrifying scenarios, including that she could have been abducted from her natural family or the parents might have been put under pressure or even paid to give her up. Yet while the care worker they'd seen the day before probably didn't have the authority to find them another child, Dr Ciobanu certainly did. He was a recognized professional in the adoption process in this country and had been recommended to them by other couples who had successfully adopted through him.

Ian and Elaine talked themselves round in circles. They knew nothing about Anastasia, yet other couples had told them not to place too much emphasis on any details given before they'd seen the child, especially the child's birthday. Record keeping was haphazard in this country, and if a woman gave birth in a remote village it could take her weeks to register the child or get to the orphanage. Also, children going for adoption were portrayed

in the best possible light, as developing countries such as this one relied on international adoption to take their orphaned and abandoned children. There was a lot to consider, but in the early hours they decided they would visit Dr Ciobanu as he'd asked and at least hear what he had to say about Anastasia, and take it from there.

'Perhaps it will be all right,' Elaine said hopefully as she finally drifted off to sleep.

'Whatever the outcome, I will always love you,' Ian replied.

They were awake again at 5 a.m., showered and dressed, and then went down for breakfast as soon as the restaurant opened at 6.30 a.m. On the way through the lobby Ian stopped off at reception and booked a cab to pick them up at 10.30. The hotel had been recommended by Dr Ciobanu and the cab firm it used had experience of ferrying couples who were adopting.

There were only four others in the restaurant having breakfast at that time, all businessmen in suits. The hotel had thirty rooms, and although it had been recommended by the doctor, as far as Elaine and Ian knew they were the only would-be adopters staying at present. Some of the staff knew why they were there, and when they'd checked in the receptionist had said she would arrange for a cot to be put in their room once the adoption had gone through.

Unsurprisingly, Elaine had little appetite that morning and only managed half a croissant and a cup of coffee. Ian, who showed his anxiety in different ways, had scrambled eggs on

toast, but kept checking his phone and nervously straightening the napkin on his lap. Neither of them spoke. Not only were they exhausted from the emotion of the day before and too little sleep, but there was also nothing left to say. Either they still had a chance of adopting or they'd return home as they'd arrived – a couple and not a family.

During breakfast an email came through to Ian's phone from one of the families they'd got to know online who were also going through the process of adopting. They were eager to know how the meeting with Lana had gone. 'I'll reply later,' Ian said. 'I can't face it now.'

After breakfast, they returned to their hotel room and tried to read the books they'd brought with them, but concentrating was near impossible. At 10.20 they were in the lobby waiting for the cab. They knew that little happened on time in this country – sometimes it happened earlier but more often late. The cab arrived at 10.40; not the same driver as the day before but he knew why they were there. Elaine and Ian would have liked to be left to their thoughts during the journey, but the driver was chatty and direct.

'You going to adopt?' he asked almost as soon as they got in.

'We're not sure,' Ian replied.

'Why not?' He glanced in the rear-view mirror, puzzled. Elaine moved out of his line of vision so she didn't have to talk.

'Our baby was very sick and died,' Ian said.

'Oh. I'm sorry. They find you another one?'

‘Possibly.’

‘Boy or girl?’

‘Girl,’ Ian said.

‘I have children, a boy and a girl,’ the driver continued amicably as he drove. ‘You meet your child today?’

‘Maybe, we don’t know yet,’ Ian replied. Elaine gazed out of her side window. Although international adoption was well known in this country, it was still a source of interest to the locals, possibly because adoption wasn’t part of their culture, hence all the state-run orphanages. They didn’t adopt or foster and didn’t really understand why anyone would.

‘Many couples adopt from here,’ the driver said as he drove.

‘Yes, I know,’ Ian agreed.

‘This is your first trip here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Some couples come back two, three times to adopt. They must like our children a lot.’ He grinned and Ian met his gaze in the mirror with a polite smile. ‘I take one couple three times to orphanages,’ he continued. ‘They from America. They adopt brothers and sisters. Six in all! Very good people with lots of money.’

Ian nodded. ‘But we don’t have lots of money. We saved up to make this trip.’

‘You good people too.’

Yet while it was a strain having to make conversation, hearing about successful adoptions was heartening and proof that the

system did work. Perhaps they had just been very unlucky and it would work out in the end. Perhaps.

It was 11.15 when the cab pulled up in the lane outside the orphanage. Ian opened the door to get out. 'You wait here?' he asked the driver.

'Yes. No rush. Very important you spend time with your child.'

There wasn't a meter running – cab journeys were quoted in advance and included any waiting time. Elaine joined Ian in front of the high metal gate as the driver wound down his window and lit up a cigarette. A wire-netting fence ran all around the perimeter of the orphanage, with a patch of land separating it from the building. This strip of land would have made a good outside children's play area had it not been so badly overgrown. Ian rattled the metal gate – the only way of attracting attention, as there wasn't a bell – and they waited. There'd been some rain in the night, and although the sun wasn't out the humidity had risen. Elaine knocked away a fly.

'They come soon,' the driver said, and sounded his car horn.

The door to the orphanage opened and the care worker who'd dealt with them the day before came out, keys on the short chain at her waist. Elaine took a deep breath. She really didn't like the woman. Without acknowledging them, the care worker nodded to the driver and unlocked the gate. 'Thank you,' Ian said, and they waited just inside while she locked the gate. They then followed her up the cracked cement path and in through the main door, which again she locked behind them.

‘You wait here,’ she said brusquely, and disappeared down the corridor, her shoes clipping heavily on the hard, tiled floor. A solitary child screamed in the distance and Ian threw Elaine a reassuring smile.

A few minutes later Dr Ciobanu appeared from the corridor. Although they’d never met him, they recognized him from his photograph online. In his mid-forties, of average height and build, he was wearing a dark suit with an open-neck shirt.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ he said pleasantly and, smiling, shook Elaine’s hand, then Ian’s. ‘So you decided to give me another chance?’ Ian nodded awkwardly. ‘No worries,’ he said, clapping Ian on the arm. ‘Come through to my office and we can talk.’

His office overlooked the front of the orphanage, and through the window they could see their cab waiting in the lane. Dr Ciobanu motioned for them to sit down. The room was small and cramped, with an old wooden table acting as a desk in the centre, and three chairs. Filing cabinets lined one wall and a fan stood on top of one beside an open bottle of water. ‘Would you like a drink?’ the doctor offered, going to the bottle.

‘No, thank you,’ they both said politely. The bottle would very likely have been refilled with tap water, and while this was safe for locals to drink – they’d built up a resistance to its bacteria – it upset foreigners’ stomachs.

Placing his tumbler of water on the table, Dr Ciobanu opened the top drawer of a filing cabinet and removed a folder. ‘Your paperwork,’ he said, returning to sit behind the table. He carefully

opened the file before him. Elaine and Ian saw the top page was their initial application sent a year ago, with passport-sized photographs of both of them.

‘I have the rest of the paperwork you need in my briefcase,’ Ian said.

Dr Ciobanu nodded and then, folding his arms, leaned forward in earnest. ‘I am sorry you were disappointed yesterday. It is not good practice to have a couple arrive and find the child is no longer with us. It is a pity I could not be here to tell you personally. We are very short-staffed and my two care workers have no time for breaking bad news gently.’ He threw them a knowing smile and Ian, at least, started to relax.

‘As I said last night on the phone,’ the doctor continued, ‘Lana was a very sick baby. We did our best to save her but it wasn’t enough. She died peacefully in her sleep.’

‘What was the matter with her?’ Elaine asked, her voice slight.

‘She wouldn’t feed, something wrong in her gut, but you needn’t worry about that. We have to look to your future.’ His gaze went from one to the other, gauging their reaction, and Ian nodded. ‘I do not have a photograph yet of Anastasia. She has only just been given up for adoption. But she is healthy and you can see her shortly. Her mother works abroad a lot, as many single women here have to. She has been leaving her with us since she was a baby. Now the mother has met a man who is going to marry her, so she will be leaving this country for good for a better life.’

‘And she can’t take her child with her?’ Elaine asked, horrified.

‘No. It happens,’ Dr Ciobanu said matter-of-factly. ‘The man may not even know she has a child. The mother believes her daughter will be better off here in the orphanage, as many parents in this country do.’ He sighed with exasperation, as though he didn’t agree with this. ‘I will explain to the mother that her daughter will have a better life being adopted by you, rather than being left here.’

‘So the child isn’t free for adoption yet?’ Ian asked.

‘No, but she soon will be. I will speak to the mother today and get her to sign the forms, which I will take to the court personally.’ Elaine and Ian knew that this wasn’t so unusual. Part of the doctor’s role was as an adoption facilitator – arranging and completing the formalities of adoption as well as advising the adopters on procedure. ‘The court will set a hearing date and once the adoption has gone through you will be issued with a new birth certificate, passport and visa for the child.’ This was standard and what would have happened with Lana’s adoption had she lived.

‘How long will all this take if we decide to go ahead?’ Ian asked. ‘With Lana we were already a long way through the process. It would have been completed in three to four weeks. I have to work; we can’t stay here indefinitely.’ He hoped this didn’t sound abrupt but they had to be practical.

The doctor gave a small shrug. ‘It shouldn’t take too long. The

legal system in this country can run slowly at times, but I will do everything in my power to speed things up.’ Which didn’t really tell them much.

‘How old is the child?’ Elaine finally thought to ask, overwhelmed.

‘Two and a quarter,’ the doctor said, glancing at a handwritten note tucked into their file. ‘Don’t worry, I will make sure you have all the correct paperwork for her, including a medical.’

‘She’s a lot older than Lana,’ Elaine said.

‘Yes, but she is strong and healthy. Why don’t you come and meet her? I am sure you will be happy.’ Dr Ciobanu immediately stood. He was used to having his word acted on, although he came across as caring. Ian and Elaine knew he only charged the minimum for his services, while some adoption facilitators were growing rich on the proceeds of international adoption, although no money reached the natural parents. It was illegal to give them anything – gifts or money.

Elaine’s heart missed a beat as she tucked her hand into Ian’s and they followed Dr Ciobanu out of his office. Could it possibly be? The moment they’d anticipated, worked towards and dreamed of for so long? Was it possible that after all the ups and downs and disappointments, they were going to meet a child who could be theirs? Ian’s hand tightened in hers and Elaine knew he was as nervous as she was.

Chapter Three

Anxious

‘Anastasia!’ Dr Ciobanu announced brightly, leading them to a cot in the second nursery room. Ian and Elaine met the child’s inquisitive gaze with a mixture of awe and apprehension. Clearly not a baby, but an apparently healthy, bouncing child with personality and gusto. She was pulling on the bars of the cot as though demanding to be let out, and was so different to the nine-month-old baby they’d come to adopt, it took them a minute to adjust.

‘Say hello to your new mummy and daddy,’ Dr Ciobanu told her.

Anastasia babbled something in her own language.

‘What did she say?’ Elaine asked.

‘It was just baby talk,’ the doctor replied. ‘Don’t worry, she will quickly learn English and forget her life here.’

‘Hello,’ Elaine said tentatively, taking a step closer to the cot. Ian joined her. Anastasia looked at them and they looked back. It was one of the most touching and surreal moments of their lives as they were presented with this little stranger who could shortly become their daughter. ‘Why is she in a cot?’ Elaine asked, without taking her gaze from Anastasia.

‘To keep her safe,’ Dr Ciobanu replied. ‘She is an active child and would be gone from here given the chance.’

‘I don’t blame her,’ Ian quipped, which helped ease the tension.

‘I’ll get her out and you can see how active she is,’ Dr Ciobanu said. Reaching over the cot side, he lifted out the child and set her on the floor. As soon as her bare feet touched the ground she made a dash for the exit. Dr Ciobanu called out something in her language and she stopped. ‘You mustn’t go out. It’s not safe,’ he repeated to her in English. She threw him an almost defiant look, but it was so quaint on the face of a cherubic two-year-old that they all laughed.

She was like a life-sized porcelain doll, Elaine thought, with her pale skin, clear blue eyes and fair hair, and wearing a little floral dress that was really far too small. But she did look healthy and robust, which was so important after what had happened to poor little Lana. Moving away from the door, Anastasia went to the closest cot and, peering through the bars, began talking to the child. He was very disabled and lay motionless on his back, staring up at the ceiling, his misshapen limbs jutting out at odd angles.

‘He’s blind and deaf,’ Dr Ciobanu said with a heartfelt sigh. ‘We do what we can, but ...’ He left the sentence unfinished.

It was as heartbreaking now for Elaine and Ian to see these children as it had been the day before. Although they hadn’t been in this room, it was similar to the others, and the majority of the children in the cots seemed to have a severe physical and/or mental disability. Elaine felt a pang of guilt for wanting a healthy child, but she knew her limitations – she couldn’t cope with a badly disabled child. That took a very special person. For some

moments they watched, spellbound, as Anastasia went from cot to cot, babbling to the infants in her own language and gently stroking their foreheads or holding their hands through the bars. Only a few responded by shifting their gaze to her; most lay unresponsive and continued to stare blankly into space as though they weren't aware she was even there.

‘Can we take Anastasia outside and play ball for a while?’ Elaine asked. The room was oppressive.

‘Possibly tomorrow,’ Dr Ciobanu said. ‘Today is just for you to meet her. I will speak to the mother and then you can come back tomorrow and play with Anastasia.’ Which they had to accept, and it seemed reasonable that the doctor would want to speak to the mother first to gain her consent to start the adoption process. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said, clapping Ian on the shoulder. ‘All will be well, I promise you.’

They continued to watch Anastasia for a while longer as she went from cot to cot. How Elaine would have loved to pick her up and carry her home there and then, for the bonding process had begun and she was already feeling protective towards her.

Dr Ciobanu made a move to go. ‘So you come back tomorrow,’ he said.

‘Yes, of course. What time?’ Ian asked.

‘I’ll phone you in the morning in your hotel room to let you know.’ He then called down the corridor for a care worker. ‘Anastasia can stay out of her cot for now,’ he said to them. ‘She can help. She likes to help.’

A different care worker appeared, but seemed no less harsh and abrasive in her manner than the other one. Dr Ciobanu said something to her in their own language and then called Anastasia, presumably to go with the care worker. Anastasia pretended not to hear and stayed by the cot. 'Now, please,' the doctor said firmly, then repeated it in her own language. Anastasia dutifully turned and went over to the care worker. Elaine's heart clenched.

'Goodbye, love,' she called after her. 'See you tomorrow.' But Anastasia didn't reply, because of course she hadn't understood.

'You can teach her English when you visit,' Dr Ciobanu said, beginning towards the door. 'She will learn quickly. She is bright.'

'Yes,' Ian agreed, much happier now.

Anastasia and the care worker were already out of sight as the doctor led the way to the main door. 'Do you want our paperwork now?' Ian asked, having brought it with them in his briefcase.

'Tomorrow will do. We have plenty of time.'

'But not too long, I hope,' Ian said.

The doctor smiled. 'Don't worry. You enjoy your stay here, see some of our beautiful country and let me take care of the rest.' He unlocked the door and they followed him down the path, where he let them out of the main gate, saying hello to their cab driver.

'So you'll phone us tomorrow morning to let us know what time we have to come?' Ian confirmed. He would have liked a firm time but had to accept that things ran differently in this country.

'Of course.' Dr Ciobanu shook their hands and then returned

inside as Elaine and Ian climbed into the back of the cab.

‘You look happier,’ the driver said.

‘We are,’ Ian replied, taking Elaine’s hand.

‘You met your daughter?’ the driver asked, starting the engine.

‘We did,’ they chimed. For although they hadn’t actually had that conversation, they both instinctively knew that to adopt Anastasia was the right decision. They were beside themselves with joy.

The driver dropped them off at their hotel and they went briefly to their room to freshen up, then had a light lunch in the hotel, including a glass of wine to celebrate. While they ate, Ian messaged those who knew they were there and were waiting for news, telling them only that they had met their daughter and everything was fine. They would fill in the details about Lana’s passing and Anastasia when they returned home. For now, this was the update their friends were waiting for, and his and Elaine’s phones buzzed with messages of congratulations and good luck.

They spent the afternoon walking around the local area, gazing into shop windows and down side alleys, and visiting the street market. They took lots of photographs. Although it was their first visit to the country, they’d read up about it and researched online and wanted pictures of the area to show Anastasia when she was older. The social worker who’d assessed them for their suitability to adopt and compiled their Home Study report had emphasized how important it was for adopted children to know their roots. She said they had to be completely honest with the

child from the start and recommended they compile a Life Story Book and Memory Box, which they'd already begun, having taken photographs of the departure board at the airport and saved their boarding cards. They'd take photographs of Anastasia tomorrow and, if they were allowed, of the orphanage too. They'd keep the clothes she wore here and anything else significant or of sentimental value that would help give her a better understanding of her past. Elaine had also begun a diary of their journey through the adoption process, confiding their hopes and feelings from when they'd made that first phone call enquiring about adoption. Anastasia would know as much about her past as possible, just like the social worker had said, although possibly not about Lana. She must never feel second best.

That evening, after dinner, they sat in their hotel room with a phrase book and tried to learn some of the language, but it was a very difficult language to learn and they laughed at their feeble attempts to pronounce the words. Thankfully Dr Ciobanu spoke very good English, and it was important that Anastasia learned English as soon as possible, so learning the local language for them was fun rather than necessary.

They were in bed early and slept well. Nevertheless, they were downstairs at 7 a.m. having breakfast, excited at the prospect of spending time with Anastasia, and not wanting to miss Dr Ciobanu's phone call. As soon as they'd finished eating they returned to their room. Although Dr Ciobanu had both their mobile numbers, the network service in this country was

notoriously haphazard and expensive, and they knew that most professions preferred to use landlines where possible.

The morning slowly ticked by. The maid knocked on their door to make up their room but they thanked her and told her not to bother today. The phone stayed perversely silent and by noon, when Dr Ciobanu still hadn't called, doubt and anxiety set in.

'He definitely said he'd phone in the morning,' Elaine said, 'and the morning has gone now.'

'Perhaps he got held up or called away,' Ian offered.

'Or perhaps Anastasia's mother has refused to give consent and is taking Anastasia with her,' Elaine said, voicing her worst fears. 'If so, I can't go through this again, Ian. I can't. We forget about it and go home.'

'We don't know that,' Ian said, trying to be rational. 'Let's assume for now that no news is good news.'

Elaine wasn't reassured. 'Dr Ciobanu said we could visit this afternoon but before long it's going to be too late. We can't just sit here waiting indefinitely.'

'But we know from other couples that there is a lot of waiting and hanging around,' Ian reminded her.

'But that was waiting for the court date,' she said, irritable from worry.

'All right, calm down. We'll give him another hour and then I'll phone at one o'clock.'

The hour passed, the phone didn't ring and their unease increased.

‘Shall I phone or will you?’ Elaine snapped at 1.05.

‘I will,’ Ian said, but went to use the bathroom first.

Elaine would have liked to give Dr Ciobanu a piece of her mind for causing them all this extra stress. International adoption was emotional and fraught even when it ran smoothly. But neither she nor Ian would criticize the doctor to his face, as they were relying on him to give them what they wanted more than anything in the world – a child of their own. He could keep them waiting for as long as he wanted and they had to put up with it.

Returning from the bathroom, Ian sat beside Elaine on the edge of the bed and pressed the speaker button on the phone so they could both hear the conversation. He keyed in the number to the orphanage and to their surprise it was answered straight away by Dr Ciobanu.

‘It’s Ian Hudson,’ he said, a slight tremor in his voice.

‘Hello. How are you?’ the doctor asked jovially, apparently oblivious to the worry he’d caused them. Elaine wrung her hands in her lap.

‘We’re OK,’ Ian said. ‘But we were expecting you to phone this morning about our visit this afternoon.’

‘Yes, come here tomorrow with your paperwork.’

‘Not today?’ Ian asked.

‘No. I have a visitor from the government coming this afternoon. Tomorrow is good.’ Which again they had to accept.

‘All right. So everything went well with the mother?’

‘Yes.’

‘She has consented to the adoption?’

‘Yes, of course. You and your wife will have to learn to trust me. I know what I am doing.’

‘Yes, I’m sure you do. I’m sorry,’ Ian said quickly. ‘We’re just very anxious, having lost Lana. We couldn’t bear another loss.’

‘And you won’t have to. Come here tomorrow at two and you can spend time with your daughter.’

‘Thank you so much.’

‘You’re welcome.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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