

Sophie's Heart

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Prologue

October 8, 1988
Prague, Czechoslovakia

The dark-haired woman walked from the tall stone building, her coat pulled close against an early frost. It felt good to be headed home, and even better to know that tomorrow was Sunday, a day off.

The woman was at the door of her apartment in just ten minutes. It was one of the better housing units in the city, provided because of her high position as a translator with the Federal Assembly. She let herself in quietly, but her grandmother, the only other occupant of the apartment, heard the door. She called from the small corner of the kitchen they had christened “the sitting room.”

“You’re a little late, but I’ve just made tea. Come and share with me, Sophie.”

Doing as she was bade, the younger woman divested herself of her outer garments and made her way toward Kasmira Kopecky—the only parent she’d known for the past 20 years. Kasmira was pouring from a chipped teapot into equally chipped cups. As she concentrated, her eyes sparkled with a youth that belied her age.

“You are looking very pleased with yourself this evening,” Sophie commented as she took the offered cup.

“It has come, Sophie.” The old voice was breathless with excitement. “In the mail today. Your name has come up on the list.”

The cup stopped halfway to Sophie’s mouth, and she stared in shock at her grandmother. This was not supposed to happen for years.

“I don’t believe it,” she finally managed.

Her grandmother drew forth a piece of paper and presented it with a triumphant flourish.

"It is right here. Your name, Sophia Velikonja, printed in neat black letters."

"But what of you?"

"Sophie," her grandmother's voice suddenly became very gentle, "I was never on the list."

"I know that, but you're not actually suggesting I leave you?"

"Of course I am." Her voice was still tender. "I outlived the cancer, but I'm an old woman, and my time here is still very short."

"I don't care how short it is. I don't want to miss any of it."

They fell silent then, each busy with her own thoughts. Years ago they had discussed their mutual dream of seeing America—not only see it, but live there for the rest of their years. When the dreaming and praying were over, they decided to put their names on the request list to leave Czechoslovakia. However, before the actual act could occur, Sophie's grandmother had learned she had cancer. It was a very hard time, but assuming she would be gone long before the time Sophie's turn would come, the older woman had insisted that Sophie submit her name. However, God had other plans.

"You must go, Sophie." The older woman now broke the silence. "It has been my dream for you for so very long."

Her grandmother's tone—the one with which her granddaughter could never argue—caused Sophie's eyes to close briefly in agony. When they opened, her eyes caught sight of her wonderful old beaten-down piano with its chipped keys and peeling woodwork. Would they ever sing around it again? She finally looked back at her grandmother.

"It's so far," she whispered. "I may never see you again."

"Our hearts will always be joined in Christ. You must never forget this."

The younger woman could only nod, her beautiful dark eyes never leaving her grandmother's. With love filling those eyes, her grandmother spoke again.

"Follow after God's heart, my dear child, for this is what He has planned for you."

With that, Sophie knew it would really happen. She would be leaving Czechoslovakia and her grandmother.

A moment later they were embracing, tears pouring down their faces as sobs



racked their bodies, each feeling as if giant hands had already invaded their world to tear them apart forever.



October 12, 1988
Middleton, Wisconsin

"I've got to find that dry cleaner's ticket. It takes so long without it."

There was no one in the car with Vanessa Riley, but that didn't hinder her soliloquy in the slightest. Her husband had long teased her concerning her habit of talking to herself, and she smiled at the thought of telling him she was at it again.

"Now what's this?" she said distractedly, her eyes momentarily leaving the road. "Oh, mercy, I wondered where that check was. No wonder I bounced that check to the plumber. Alec is going to wring my neck."

"Oh boy, oh boy, pay attention, Van," she said as she swerved a little. "You didn't even see that car."

Vanessa was in and out of the cleaner's in record time, but she still had two other stops to make. She pulled into traffic, fretting all the while.

"Oh, not rain—we're headed to the lake. Honestly," she said with growing frustration, "I haven't even started supper, and the kids will need help with their homework."

Vanessa's hand was in her purse once again, this time for her shopping list. She hated making them and felt quite proud that she'd bothered to fill one out at all. When she suddenly realized that she had left it on the kitchen table, her irritation knew no bounds.

It was probably this frustration and no other reason that she took the turn too fast. Houses lined one side of the street, but there were only fences and many trees on the other. Things had been very dry, and this fresh fall of rain was making the pavement treacherous. Vanessa prided herself on the fact that she'd never had an accident, so it came as quite a surprise to find her vehicle now spinning out of control.

For the first time in her life, she didn't know which pedal to push. Her foot groped around the floorboard even as her mind conjured up a brief image of her husband and three children. Vanessa Riley's last thought was that she simply had to get home to all of them; she hadn't even started supper.



Two hours later, Alec Riley let himself in the back door of the house, which put him directly in the kitchen. He was tired, but not overly so, and was looking forward to leaving for the lake the next afternoon. He stopped dead in his tracks when he found all three of his children in the kitchen working on supper. This was not the norm. He wondered briefly if they might all be growing up.

"Where's your mother?" he asked, knowing as he did so that the answer probably would be, "Lying down with a headache."

"We don't know." This came from the oldest, Rita, and it stopped Alec in his tracks. He took time then to notice the sober looks on their faces.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that she's not here." Rita shrugged.

"Well, is the car here?" Alec's voice was deep and calm, thinking that his children probably hadn't bothered to check. "Could she be at the neighbor's?"

"The car's not here," Craig put in, "and there's no note."

Alec glanced at Tory, his youngest, and found her watching him with huge, somber eyes.

"Well," hoping to cover his own growing dismay, he said swiftly, "I'm sure she'll be along any minute. I'll help with supper."

They had been working together for over 20 minutes when the doorbell rang. Alec sent Craig, knowing it would be one of his friends, telling him to inform whoever it was that they were about to eat. Craig was back in the doorway of the kitchen in less than a minute, his face rather pale.

"There are two men here to see you, Dad; one's a policeman."

For a moment Alec felt frozen to the floor. The circumstances—indeed, the very look on Craig's face—made his heart pound. He reached methodically toward the dish towel he'd slung over his shoulder, placed it on the kitchen counter, and moved toward the living room, somehow knowing that the men at the front door were going to tell him something that would change his life forever.



Chicago, Illinois

Janet Ring pulled into the church parking lot out of sheer instinct since her mind was miles away from home. She then made herself sit behind the wheel for a moment just to calm down. Bible study—a Bible study she was leading—was scheduled to start in less than 30 minutes, and she felt a complete mess.

"I know it's because of Alec, Lord," she whispered as she stared out the front windshield. "I know I'm anxious for him. Please help him, please comfort him and the kids. Nine months, Lord, and they're still so lost, so shocked and helpless. And now today. Today he must be in agony."

Tears filled Janet's eyes, and she couldn't go on. Today would have been Alec and Vanessa's eighteenth wedding anniversary, and Vanessa was not here to share it with him. Janet could hardly stand the thought. She wanted nothing better than to return home, climb back into bed, and sob her eyes out.

Movement outside the car at that moment finally drew her attention. A long-time friend stood in the July heat and looked at her with compassionate eyes. Unbeknownst to Janet, she herself hadn't been the same since Vanessa's death, either.

Janet opened the door and got out to stand beside Daisy, who gently said, "I won't ask how you're doing since I think I can tell. You're thinking of your brother, aren't you?"

Janet gave a watery smile. "Yes. It would have been Alec and Vanessa's anniversary today, and I'm really hurting."

Daisy hugged her before they walked toward the church.



“Will you call him?”

“I don’t know. Right now all I can think about is wanting to go home and cry.” Janet sniffed back more tears. “That’s a fine way for a Bible-study leader to feel.”

“Your pain is not a sin,” her friend told her.

“I know that, Daisy, but all my women are so young in the Lord. I don’t want to do anything to make them stumble.”

“You won’t. Your grief right now is normal, Janet—and healthy, I might add. As for your class, just ask God to get you through one thing at a time and to use you somehow today. Maybe just sharing how you’re hurting will touch someone; it will give all of them a chance to pray for you.”

Janet nodded. They were at the building now and needed to go their separate ways. With a final word of encouragement, Daisy left Janet for her own class. Janet then slipped into the women’s rest room. Finding it empty, she took a moment to pray.

“I do want to be used of You today, Father. Touch the hurt within me and turn it into glory for You. Help me to share with my ladies in a way that shows them that even though I hurt, I have not lost hope in You.”

Janet let her heart be silent then, simply standing still and thinking about what an awesome God she had. Committing her day to the Lord, she gave her brother back into His hands and went out to meet her class.



Forty-five minutes later, after the women had taken extra time to pray for and encourage Janet, they finally turned to their study. It was a topical study on the life of Christ, and the women—almost 30 of them—were very excited.

Nearly the entire class did the lesson every week, and many shared their thoughts or asked questions. They were deep into a discussion concerning Christ’s relationship with His disciples when another woman quietly slipped into the room and sat at the back. None of the class noticed her, but Janet, who was facing the rear, saw her immediately. New women were normally introduced and welcomed, but the timing on this day was all wrong. Several women were trying to speak at once, and Janet felt sure that the newcomer would only feel embarrassed to be singled out in such a manner.



"I think He was close to all of them," one woman commented, "but I think it's clear that there were a few who would be considered His most intimate friends."

"I agree," inserted another. "I was reading last night about the way He went into the garden to pray, and I noticed in Matthew 26 that He only took Peter, James, and John with Him. They couldn't even stay awake to help Him." Her voice became a bit chagrined. "That must have been a very vulnerable time for Christ, and I find it interesting that He asked just those few to share it with Him."

"So what's to be learned here?" Janet asked, knowing they were running out of time and wanting the ladies to go away with a special truth. Her eyes scanned the group, waiting for an answer. She noticed as she did so that the new woman in the back was studying her own Bible, but it was one of the regular attenders who spoke up.

"This is probably just the tip of the iceberg, but I think this might be evidence that it's normal to have many Christian friends, but we probably won't have dozens of intimate Christian friends."

"I was thinking the same thing," said yet another. "We will have friends—maybe many, maybe just a few—but we can't expect to be on extremely close terms with all of them."

"But what of the others?" Janet challenged them. "Surely every man *wanted* to be the close friend of Jesus. Do you suppose there was jealousy?"

Many heads nodded in affirmation.

"Were they right in being jealous?"

There was a soft chorus of nos.

"Then how about us? Is it easy for us to fall into this same trap? You bet it is. We want to befriend the most 'popular' women." Janet's hands went in the air to show her quotation marks. "We're tempted to be angry when we're not buddies with the Bible-study leader, the pastor's wife, or even the woman who sings solos with a voice like an angel."

Some of the women looked rather sober, so Janet went on more gently. "I can see that some of you are dismayed by this line of thought. I know that many of you are new believers and think that you left such attitudes in the coffee clutch at the office or on the playground with second-grade girls.

"I hate to be the one to tell you, but such attitudes can and often are found among Christian women, and we must fight against such division. You may or may not



be struggling in this area yourself, but either way ask God to help you gain a pure motive—not one of elevating yourself—and then ask Him where He wants you to minister or who He wants you to befriend. And with that, we are out of time,” Janet said abruptly, since the stranger in the back was rising to leave.

“I’m sure we will discuss this again, but for now, uh, Nancy, will you please close us with prayer?”

As the women’s heads bowed, Janet walked swiftly to the rear. She found the foyer empty and literally ran for the door to catch the woman. She was already crossing the parking lot when Janet called to her.

“It was nice to have you today,” Janet spoke and was thankful when the woman stopped, turned in surprise, and then smiled. Janet stopped in front of her and held out her hand.

“I’m Janet Ring, and I’m so glad you came today.”

They shook hands.

“I am Sophia Velikonja,” the taller woman said softly.

Janet blinked at her, her mind desperately searching to place the heavy accent.

“I beg your pardon,” Janet finally managed.

The other woman smiled again, a warm, wonderful smile.

“Please call me Sophie. I am sorry to leave, but I must work now.”

“You have to go to work?” Janet was starting to catch the sounds.

“Yes. I had pleasure today, but I must work.”

Janet smiled. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. I hope you’ll come again.”

“I will like that, but I do not know the time. Today I was late.”

“We start at 9:00 and usually end around 10:30.”

Sophie nodded. “I will try. Thank you, Jana.”

“Janet,” she corrected her gently.

“Janet.” Sophie drew the word out and gained Janet’s smile. “Good-bye, Jan-et.”

“Good-bye, Sophie.”

Sophie turned away then, and Janet made her way back inside. Had she stayed, she would have noticed that Sophie didn’t search out a vehicle but kept walking out of the large parking lot. It was no strain for Sophie; she’d been walking all of her life. Since she had to get to work she walked swiftly, her small purse and Bible held in the crook of one arm. She reached the bus stop in good time and was relieved to see the bus coming up the street.



Once in her seat, she stared out the window and reflected on the morning. She had been very complimented that Janet Ring had taken the time to come after her. It had bothered her to come in late and leave early. At first she'd told herself not to even bother going, but the weighty need to have Christian fellowship, however brief, had pushed her on.

It was not going to be easy to come to Bible study and be on time for work, but Sophie now felt it would be worth it. She prayed for Janet Ring and the other women she had seen. Before she knew it, the miles had passed and it was time to get off at her stop.



"Table three is a mess, Sophie, and Barb needs a table for eight in 15 minutes."

"Yes, Mr. Markham," Sophie answered and pushed her bus cart in the direction of the dining room. She'd been working at Tony's, a fine restaurant in Chicago, since her first week in America, and had finally worked her way up to "bus girl." Sophie realized that it was better than washing dishes or night cleanup, but it was still back-breaking work for very little pay. The hardest part about the job was that every so often she was treated by her boss and the waitresses like a slow-witted child.

Sophie told herself that if she was ever made a waitress she would never make anyone feel like a fool, but it was beginning to look as if she would never have the chance. She knew the waitresses made good money and hoped that she would someday move into that position, but Mr. Markham had made it clear on a number of occasions that her English was still lacking.

Sophie had come to the conclusion that if your skill with the language was not good enough in America, then *you* were not good enough. In Sophie's mind, this was the most difficult part of living in the United States. Even the separation from her grandmother was not as painful as feeling invisible most of the time. Because she struggled with the words, people thought she was dim-witted or that she couldn't understand some of the cruel remarks they would make right in front of her. Much to Sophie's pain, she understood them all.

"It's not eight, it's ten."

"What?"

Sophie, who had been working feverishly to have things ready, blinked at the



waitress. Barb, not one of the more understanding waitresses, rolled her eyes and addressed Sophie as if she were an idiot.

“They changed their number. I need ten place settings,” she said as she held her fingers in the air, “not eight.”

“All right,” Sophie told her and began to shift things around.

“Why can’t people stay in their own country?” Barb muttered loudly as she moved away, and for just a few seconds Sophie stood absolutely still, thinking that the pain in her heart was going to kill her.



“I met a woman today.”

David Ring, who had been reading the paper, laid it aside. The note in his wife’s voice drew his immediate attention. They were alone in the family room. All three of the kids were in bed asleep, and it was finally “their” time of the evening.

“Where was this?”

Janet answered with a thoughtful look. “She came to Bible study.”

“A believer?”

“Well, she had her Bible with her.”

“Do you think she’ll be back?”

“I think so. I didn’t get a chance to learn anything about her, but there was just something very special—” Her words trailed off.

“What’s her name?”

“Sophie. She gave me the rest, but she’s foreign and her accent made it difficult to understand her.”

“I hope you see her again.”

“Yes. I wish we’d had more time together, so I’m asking the Lord to send her back.”

“I’ll pray for her, too. Did you decide if you’re going to call Alec?”

Tears immediately filled Janet’s eyes, but she shook her head.

“I’ve decided to write to him just so he knows I care. I also thought I might ask them to come down before school starts.”

“Do that,” David said at once. “Tell them it’s hot, but we can live at the pool.”

They fell silent then, but Janet’s mind was already working on Alec. Should she write or call with the invitation? Janet just wasn’t sure and was still working on the problem when she and David turned in for the night.





All eyes were closed and heads bowed in prayer when Sophie slipped into Bible study the next week. As soon as the last woman had prayed, Janet spotted her and made a very brief introduction. The women all turned, smiled, and said hello. Sophie, feeling quite awkward, was glad when Janet began the lesson.

Sophie did not have a study book, but there were verses with every question, and it wasn't difficult to follow along. The minutes flew. The subject of Christ's life was one of Sophie's favorites. She was shocked to look down at her watch and see that she had to leave for work. There was more discussion going on, but she had no choice.

From the front, Janet watched her go and felt helpless to halt her exit. Knowing she couldn't abandon her class each week, the burden to have more contact with Sophie was great. With a prayer in her heart that God would eventually bring them together for quality time, her mind moved back to the class.



"Hi, Aunt Janet," Tory Riley said cheerfully from the other end of the telephone line.

"How are you, Tory?"

"I'm all right. We have to go back to school in just a few weeks." The ten-year-old sounded as disgruntled as she felt.

"You sound like Beth," Janet commented, referring to her own daughter's opinion of school starting. "Listen, sweetie, is your dad around?"

"Yeah, hold on a sec and I'll get him."

Far more than one second passed before Alec came on the phone, but Janet waited patiently.



“Did you get my letter?”

“Yes, I did.”

“So what do you think? Can you and the kids come down?”

“I don’t know, Jan.” Alec’s voice was deep and quiet. “I’ve got five houses going right now, and I don’t think I can get away.”

“Just for the weekend,” Janet tried to bargain. “You are taking weekends off, aren’t you?”

The silence at the other end of the line gave her the answer she dreaded.

“I appreciate the offer, Jan. I really do,” Alec said after a moment, “but it’s not going to work before school starts. Maybe this fall.”

“All right, Alec,” Janet said, telling herself not to push him. “How are you doing?”

“About the same.”

Again, it was not the answer she had hoped for, but she knew well that with the miles separating them, prayer was all she could offer. And in most ways, this was best.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Alec said, and Janet knew he was ready to get off the line.

“All right, Al. Give the kids my love.”

“Thanks, Jan. You do the same for me.”

“Good night, Alec.”

“Night, Janet.”

The phones were hung up, but the conversation, at least in Janet’s mind, went on for many minutes to follow.



“I can’t believe you’re taking me to Tony’s on a Friday night. We haven’t been there in ages.”

“Well, it isn’t every day that a Realtor closes on the largest home he’s ever sold.”

“Put like that,” Janet said to David as she snuggled close to his side in the front seat of the car, “I should be the one taking *you* out.”

“No way,” he said as they pulled into traffic. “In some ways, you deserve this more than I do.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you’re the one who often holds the fort while I’m out on evening calls. I couldn’t be selling houses if it weren’t for you. And this particular buyer needed more ‘courting’ than most.”

Janet leaned close and kissed his cheek. She knew it was going to be a wonderful evening.

And indeed, Janet's anticipation was rewarded. The food and atmosphere at Tony's were marvelous, and with a string quartet playing in one corner, it was also romantic. They were just finishing dessert when Janet spotted Sophie. She was cleaning a table across the way. Janet pointed her out to David and then waited until Sophie was on her way to the back of the restaurant before approaching.

"Hello, Sophie."

The younger woman turned in surprise and then smiled in pleasure.

"Hello, Janet. I saw you earlier, but I could not come. Are you have a good meal?"

"Yes, it was wonderful. This is where you work?"

"Yes. I must take my meal break in ten minutes, but I will be here until one o'clock."

"Ten minutes," Janet said with pleasure. "Can we talk?"

"Well," Sophie said, looking slightly ill at ease, "I would like that, but I cannot come to the front."

"Of course." Janet had not even thought of this. "Where do you go to eat? Could we meet you somewhere?"

"I go in the back." Again Sophie answered with a somewhat distressed look on her face. "Is not very fancy—not like out here."

"Oh, Sophie, we don't care, if you don't. It's so difficult to visit at Bible study, and I would really like to know how you're doing."

"All right." Sophie saw her sincerity and agreed, thinking it would be nice to have some company.

Five minutes later she saw that Janet and David were comfortable in the back dining room—the place where employees could eat if there was no banquet scheduled. However, it was some minutes more before Sophie joined them. One of the girls had spilled a platter of food, and Sophie had been ordered to see to the cleanup. The last time this happened her break was cut short, but she told herself that tonight she would get all the time coming to her.

"I am sorry to keep you waiting," Sophie spoke as she finally took a seat with the Rings. She placed a plateful of food on the table and a tall glass of ice water. "I feeling odd, eating when you are..." Sophie gestured rather helplessly with her hands, and David spoke up.

“Please don’t. We’re both so full we couldn’t eat another bite.”

“Sophie,” Janet said, “this is David, my husband. David, this is Sophie. She comes to my Bible study.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Sophie.”

They shook hands, and then Sophie excused herself and silently thanked God for her meal. Janet was telling herself not to leap on the woman, but she was so fascinated by what little she knew of this foreigner, as well as being excited to see her here, that she feared she would be overanxious and offensive.

“How do you like working here?”

This came from David. He’d seen his wife’s elation and gently taken her hand under the table. Janet was very relieved that he understood.

“I am very thankful for job,” Sophie told them. “So many do not have work.”

“Have you been in Chicago long?”

“Nine months. I am from Czechoslovakia.”

“You’re a long way from home,” David said kindly.

“Yes. Some days very long.”

“Did you work at a restaurant in Czechoslovakia?”

“No,” Sophie smiled slightly. “This has been new—” She hesitated.

“Experience?” David supplied, and Sophie nodded, her cheeks a little pink that she hadn’t been able to find such a simple word.

“I am not a late person,” she continued softly. “I like sunrise, so this is hardest—this staying up until late and missing the early day.”

“Do you ever have afternoons off, Sophie?” Janet asked. “I would love for you to come to lunch.”

Before Sophie could answer, her boss stuck his head in the door and told her that she was needed back on the floor and would have to cut it short. Sophie excused herself quietly and moved across the room. Mr. Markham was on his way out, but Sophie called to him. When he stopped, she said respectfully, “I need my break, Mr. Markham. I cannot come back early tonight.”

Mr. Markham frowned intimidatingly, but Sophie didn’t so much as flinch. Inside, she was feeling shaken, but her outside composure was admirable.

“I need you back on the floor.”

“I will come as soon as break is finished.”



"Come now, Sophie." His voice brooked no argument, but Sophie was not going to back down. She shook her dark head, still calm and completely in control.

"This is not first. From last time I know I cannot work well without full break. I cannot do this, Mr. Markham. Not now or later."

"Do you want your job here, Sophie?" the man asked, thinking this would end the whole conversation.

"Do you want law here, Mr. Markham?"

Sophie watched him blink and went on gently with consideration for both of their positions.

"Everyone here thinks I am stupid woman. I am not. I have read laws. You must give me full break. I need full break."

To Sophie's amazement, Mr. Markham's mouth stretched into a smile, his eyes alive with genuine amusement.

"Take your break," he said simply, and Sophie had to give herself a little shake in order to turn and go back to the table.

"Everything all right?" Janet asked.

"Everything is fine," Sophie told her sincerely.

"Can you come to lunch?"

"I would like that."

"Here," Janet said as she drew out some paper and a pen from her purse. "Give me your phone number."

Sophie beamed at them. She had had a phone for just one week and was feeling very pleased. The time together finished with an exchange of phone numbers and addresses.



"What did you think of her?" Janet asked David as they drove home.

"She's nice," he said, then hesitated. He, too, had seen something special in Sophie, but it wasn't easy to put into words.

"I can't wait to have her over. I don't think she has much fellowship."

"I think you're probably right," David replied, as he stifled a yawn.

"I've never met anyone who seemed so capable and yet vulnerable. Did that make sense?"

“Uh-huh. I get the impression that she stood up to her boss for the first time and felt pretty good about it.”

Janet answered him, but for the moment David was not attending. His mind was on Sophie and then Alec. He wasn’t matchmaking. Actually, he didn’t know what he was thinking, but the two kept coming to mind. David couldn’t shake the idea that Sophie might become very involved in their family before it was all over. He then told himself he was too tired to be giving it this much thought, and concentrated on getting them home safely.