

In the lovely Croatian countryside of the late 1800's, a baby near death is taken away. Miraculously the baby survives. Sixteen years later Katya's dangerous journey takes her where she really belongs.

DESTINY'S DOWRY

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***Destiny's Dowry***

**by  
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## **Part II, Chapter 1**

Late spring - 1907

She was out of breath and tired from running across the newly plowed fields. The overturned ground had the mingled odor of earth and manure.

Katya Balich stopped to rest, her chest aching as she took in great gasps of air. Perspiration glistened on her flawless cheeks and forehead. She was fifteen years old, slender and delicate, with long red hair wild with curls. Her green eyes were set off by finely arched brows and her full lips were a bit large for the proportions of her face, yet she was the most beautiful girl to ever be seen in Selna.

Exhausted, she dropped her hastily thrown together bundle of possessions and used it as a seat. The bundle was made up of a tablecloth tied corner to corner. In it was a blouse and skirt made of homespun flax, a small wooden crucifix, a hand crochet black shawl, some hard cheese and some equally hard bread and a wooden mortar and pestle.

With her hand shading her eyes, she surveyed the terrain searching for her pursuers. Her full skirt of heavy linen fabric was soiled and stained because of her escape. She wore a simple long-sleeved blouse embroidered with flowers at the neck and also down the length of the sleeves.

Katya was running away from her brother-in-law, Elia. This time she had to go where he wouldn't find her.

The hilltop provided her a panoramic view of the countryside and probably her last look at Selna.

This part of Croatia was a lush green. Katya could see patchworks of crops and a small church on a distant hill. A few long-horned milking cows were grazing about lazily. The bells around their necks sent musical sounds long distances. Some sheep were scattered on the side of a hill. The river Sava, with its clean fresh water, snaked its way through the landscape, and there to the East, she could see the small wooden cabins of her village.

Her eyes filled with tears. The village had been her home all of her life and now she must leave. Would she ever see those

sweet people again? If only her sister had not married that horrid man! The thought of Elia made her shiver.

Lost in her thoughts, she almost didn't hear the approaching horses. The sun shining directly into her eyes blinded her. She didn't have time to wait and see who was coming.

Cursing herself for stopping, she half-ran half-fell down the side of the hill and took cover in a clump of wild berry bushes. Dropping to her knees, she shoved her bundle under the leafy branches. With her heart pounding she flattened herself to the ground, praying that she had made herself invisible. "Mother of God, don't let him find me," she begged.

The sounds of the team and wagon grew louder as it rattled near. Then it stopped. *He saw me!* The thought was a silent scream in her head.

The pounding of her heart was echoing in her ears. She held her breath and felt herself trembling.

Katya could picture Elia Sokach with his thinning hair and tiny dark eyes. The eyes seemed perfectly suited to his rodent-like face and his pointed nose. His mouth was a thin line that seemed to be smirking even when he smiled. She thought everything about him was low and sneaky.

When Katya was a small child Elia had been cruel to her. He had slapped her, kicked her...ridiculed her.

"You're a freak," he had told her. "Where'd you get that red hair, from a witch?"

Her flaming hair totally set her apart from the inter-related villagers. Throughout the years comments were made about the color of her hair. Annoyed because of all the dubious comments and the fact that she had no control over what nature had given her, she refused the traditional braids. Instead, she wore her copper tresses wild and loose.

"Just like a Gypsy." The older women would say, shaking their heads in disapproval.

As she grew older, prettier, Elia tried to touch her or caress her. He would hide outside the window and watch her bathe in the wooden tub, which had to be brought into the house from the barn.

One day, when she was ten years old, while her sister, Anka, was nowhere near, Elia came into the house and watched her

bathe. He didn't touch her or attempt to. He just watched waiting for Katya's reaction.

"Get away from me you ugly man," she demanded. "Get out of this house!" Everything about Elia repelled her.

From the house across the road Old Julia heard the yelling, a common occurrence from the time Elia had married Anka. But this time it wasn't Elia screaming invectives. It was Katya's voice the old woman heard. "Get out! Get out! Stop looking at me!"

As fast as her old aching legs could carry her Julia hurried across the road and through the open door of the cabin. She saw Katya naked in the wooden tub with Elia standing above her.

"Holy Mary!" said the old woman. "Save us from the men in this family." Grabbing a straw broom leaning against the wall, Julia beat Elia over the head several times, sending him running from the house.

It was after that episode Katya moved across the road into the house with Old Julia.

Now, Katya didn't hear the dog sniffing around the bushes where she was hiding. When it started barking excitedly, she thought she would faint. She felt two arms lifting her from the ground. Instinctively she started kicking and hitting. The tears were rolling down her cheeks as she cried, "Leave me alone! I won't go with you...I won't!"

Her tracker was a large, strong man.

With blind hysteria, Katya fought him. He grabbed both her flailing arms with ease and pinned them to her side.

"Stop it!" he demanded, giving her a good shaking.

Startled, Katya opened her eyes and looked into the bearded face of her godfather, Milan Kosich. It was his wife who had wet-nursed her when Katya had been a baby and it was he who had gently placed her dead mother in the casket those many years ago.

She smiled, relief pouring over her like spring rain. She wrapped her arms around the six-foot Milan and clung to him, her legs going weak.

Milan held her. "You're safe," he whispered. The tall man bent his head of curly black hair to rest on Katya's flaming curls. His dark brown eyes were closed as he gently rocked her, soothing

her as he had done when she had been a child with a scraped knee, cut foot, or after a beating administered by Elia. Milan loved this girl as if she were one of his own daughters. After all, with her ample supply of breast milk, his wife Eva had kept the tiny baby Katya alive.

Milan was easily the tallest and strongest man in Selna. But, with children and those he loved, he could be very gentle.

“How did you know I was gone?” Katya asked holding on to him.

“Elia came to the house looking for you. He told Eva you ran away.”

He released her slowly. “Come, we must go. Elia and that man from Petrinja are looking for you,” he said.

“Do you know what he did?” demanded Katya, feeling brave as she stood next to Milan. “Do you know he sold me?” She was shaking with anger. “He sold me! He sold me as if I were a horse or cow.”

“I thought that it might be something like that,” he said, the anger building in him, wanting to kill Elia. “Hurry we can't stay here.”

“My things,” she said. “I need my things.” Katya reached under the bushes for her meager belongings, while Vuk the dog gave the tablecloth wrapping an approving sniff.

Vuk was a large gray animal with thick fur around his neck. He resembled a wolf, which was his name. Finished with his inspection of the bundle, Vuk nuzzled Katya's hand hoping to be petted, but her attention was elsewhere.

Milan took the bundle in one hand and holding Katya's arm with the other, helped her up the steep incline to the road where the horses and wagon waited.

The wooden wagon was made for hauling and didn't provide the comforts necessary for transporting passengers. There were no springs to ease the jolts felt from every rock and rut in the dirt roads.

The horses were a mismatched pair. Leena, the larger and older horse, was Milan's. The smaller black and gray belonged to his brother and was mainly used as a plow horse. So, when hitched together they made an odd-looking team.

Katya stood next to the wagon reluctant to get in. "I don't want to go back," she said sadly, avoiding Milan's eyes. "I won't marry anyone until I'm ready."

"I know. You won't have to marry anyone," he said, remembering the disappointment he had felt when she had refused his son, young Milan. He remembered how happy he had been at the prospect of having Katya as another daughter and to know that Elia couldn't come near her, once she was married and protected.

He easily lifted her into the wagon which had been prepared for her with a goose down comforter and some blankets. Then he placed her bundle next to her.

He swung himself up into the driver's seat. "Now get under the blankets and don't talk to me or get out from under them unless I say you can."

Milan watched her get comfortable on the goose down padding. Adjusting a blanket, he concealed her. A few sacks of grain were at the back of the wagon to make it look as if Milan was going to the open-air market.

Vuk jumped up and over the wagon seat, finding himself a place on the blanket next to the hidden Katya. He nuzzled the blanket just to let her know he was there.

Milan took one last glance at the wagon to make sure its contents didn't look suspicious. Then he made a clicking sound with his tongue and called out, "Aide!" The horses grudgingly moved, not quite in unison, as they weren't used to working together.

The day was warm with clear skies and the pleasant spring breeze felt good on Milan's face. He was grateful for the good weather. It would make their journey more pleasant.

It wasn't long before Milan could make out two riders on horseback coming towards him.

"Riders coming," warned Milan.

As they neared, Milan recognized Elia Sokach, Katya's brother-in-law and another rider, a stranger. Elia was a small man, about 5'6". He had on a pair of loose fitting black trousers and a linen shirt, which was worn loose over the trousers. He wore a cap of black felt with a small visor. The cap seemed to sharpen his already pointed features.



The other rider Milan presumed to be the man from Petrinja. The stranger was an older man with a round face and little round eyes that seemed almost hidden by his fleshy cheeks. He wore a black fez and Milan could see the man was bald. His form was short and bulky. Everything about him was soft looking, like a full pillow. His pants were black and not homespun. Over his white shirt he wore an elaborately embroidered vest and the heavy pouch hanging at his waist suggested wealth.

His fat, perspiring face was red, as if he were angry.

So...thought Milan, this is the man to whom Elia wanted to sell Katya.

No sign of recognition was exchanged between Milan and his longtime enemy as the riders and wagon passed each other. Any pretense of friendship between the two men had disappeared long ago.

The man from Petrinja courteously nodded his head, but was ignored by Milan.

Vuk sat up when he recognized Elia emitting a low, threatening growl. Even though Katya was hidden under the blanket and could not see the riders, she knew Elia was there. She had heard that familiar growl many times before, always when Elia was near.

Milan drove the horses slowly, as they had a long way to go and he didn't want to tire them.

He would miss Katya, but he knew this was the best that could be done for her. Milan and his wife, Eva, were sure their plan to get her away from Elia was a good one. He smiled to himself when he thought of Elia's anguish when he would have to return the money paid for Katya. Milan wondered how much the stranger had been willing to pay for the beautiful, strong-willed girl.

He looked over his shoulder at the wagon bed. Vuk was lying on top of the blanket, next to the hidden form of Katya.

"How are you doing?" He asked.

"Have they gone?" She asked, feeling warm under the cover.

"Yes, they're gone," he said. "You can come out. I don't think they can see us now."

“Milan, where are you taking me?” Her green eyes looked at him searchingly and her hair was a mass of loose curls. He wondered for the hundredth time how Mato and Mila (God rest their souls) could have produced this beautiful child.

“To a place where I hope you will be safe and happy,” he answered.

Milan didn't know it then, but soon she would be gone from their lives forever.

## **Part II, Chapter 6**

Long tables made of doors or planks, covered with brightly embroidered cloths, strained with the weight of the food offered on them. Jubilant people filled the seats enjoying the company of their friends and savoring the aroma of the roasting lambs and pigs. Standing in a wagon, above the wedding party, the Tamburashi played their stringed instruments for everyone's pleasure.

At the head table, nearest the house, sat the bride Luba with her handsome husband Nikola. He couldn't take his eyes from her pretty face. Her father and mother were at one end of the food-laden table, while Marko and Vera were seated at the other. Ivan, the groom's older brother, was seated next to his mother. Ivan raised his glass to toast the bride and groom.

"May Luba and Nikola have many happy years and many beautiful children."

"Nazdravlje, Good Health." The guests called out, raising their glasses.

After the toast when Ivan sat down, his mother smiled proudly patting his arm approvingly.

Marko smiled broadly at his handsome first-born son, who had inherited his mother's light brown hair and gold-flecked eyes.

"So, my other son, when will you marry?" His father asked, half joking. "You should have married before your brother."

"Find me a girl like Mama," he said, affectionately putting his arm around her shoulder, "and I'll marry tomorrow."

Marko looked at his wife admiringly, "Ah, my son, that will not be so easy."

Marko saw in Ivan's face the same fair skin and round face he loved so much in Vera. Hearing his other son's laugh, Marko turned toward Nikola, his other source of pride, taller than Ivan, darker hair, fuller face and body. Nikola strongly favored his father. His generous mouth was almost always in a smile, while Ivan was more serious. Nikola had a build like his father's, strong and muscular.

Marko started to raise his glass in another toast, when something caught his eye. Walking through the pasture past the

wagons, Marko saw a tall, black-haired man with a bearded face. Alongside him was a small slender girl with wind-blown red hair.

Following Marko's gaze Vera saw them, too. "Who are they?"

"I don't know." He said, rising. "They aren't dressed for a wedding."

"Come Ta," said Ivan, "I'll go with you. Maybe they are lost."

"Yes, we'll go together," said Marko, hoping these strangers didn't mean trouble.

Heads turned to look at the tall man and slender girl approaching, a large wolf-like dog at their side. The crowd looked on curiously, as no one recognized them.

Katya was embarrassed, for she could tell these were people of some means. She and Milan were still being cool to one another, so she didn't ask what this place was, or why they were stopping to visit.

She saw a compactly built older man come towards them. He was a strong man, with concern showing on his face. With him was a younger man, with a nice face and kind eyes, eyes that were locked on Katya. His well-shaped lips broke into a smile and shyly Katya smiled back enjoying his obvious admiration.

"Friend, are you lost?" asked Marko extending his hand to Milan.

"I am looking for Marko Balaban," said Milan. Seeing the fine garments on the men made Milan embarrassed with his own shabby clothes.

"You have found him," said Marko, "I am Marko Balaban."

Milan was momentarily speechless. This man was too well-off to be his cousin. "Perhaps, I have found the wrong Marko Balaban."

"I am the only Marko Balaban in these parts." He said. "Suppose you tell me what this is about. I want to get back to my party."

Ivan had not taken his eyes off Katya and it sounded as if his father wanted to dismiss them, so he quickly said, "You look as if you have been traveling." With an anxious glance at his father, he added, "Perhaps you would like to have something to eat, while we talk."

Katya was disappointed to hear Milan say, "No, No thank you. I must find my cousin Marko."

"Who are you?" asked Marko, "I don't believe I know you."

"My name is Milan Kosich and I am from Selna."

A huge smile broke out on the older man's face. "Mali Milan!" he shouted, wrapping his huge arms around his cousin. "Little Milan. I have not seen you since we were children." Together the men hugged and kissed one another on each cheek, laughing and crying with happiness, while Katya and Ivan looked on smiling.

Noticing Katya, Marko said, "And then, this must be a cousin, too."

"Not by blood," said Milan, "but, Eva and I have looked after Katya since the day she was born."

The curious wedding guests watched from the yard as Marko hugged Katya and said, "Welcome, my almost cousin. Welcome to my son's wedding party."

Seeing the lace and embroidered vest Ivan was wearing, Katya thought with some disappointment that he must be the groom. As if he were reading her mind, Ivan smiled and pointed a finger to himself while he shook his head "no". It made her blush.

"This is my oldest son, Ivan. Ivan, this is my favorite cousin from my childhood, Milan Kosich." Then laughing, he pointed to Katya, "And your almost cousin, Katya."

Milan and Ivan hugged, as was expected of relatives. When Ivan's lips brushed Katya on the cheek, she blushed again.

"The party is in the yard," said Vera, coming to see what was keeping Marko and Ivan. "All eyes are on you instead of on the bride and groom."

In his joy Marko scooped Vera in his arms, twirled her around and put her down in front of Milan and Katya. "My precious wife, Vera." He announced with pride. "Veritza, can you believe my cousin Milan from my childhood had appeared on this special day. It is an omen, a good omen."

"Mamitza," said Ivan, "this is Katya, not a cousin, but we'll hear all that later."

Vera saw the look on Ivan's face. A look she had never seen before.

“Come relatives,” she said, “we must let you freshen yourselves and join our celebration. You must be hungry.”

Milan hesitated. “Marko, I have come to ask something of you, but I see that I have not chosen a good day.”

Marko slapped Milan on the shoulder affectionately and headed him towards the festivities, “You have chosen a good day. Should I bring my son, the groom, bad luck by refusing a favor to you on his wedding day? No, Mali Milan, this is a good day!”

Milan motioned for Vuk to stay near the wagon. The dog lay on the ground making sounds of disappointment, as he watched the group walk toward the roasting meat he smelled.

Vera put her arm through Katya’s and took in the girl’s beauty. Noticing the smile on her usually serious son’s face she said, “Yes, this seems to be a *very* good day!”

With the sounds of the wedding celebration coming through the open windows, Katya was in Vera’s room and Milan in the kitchen, each washing off the travel dirt. Excited to join the party, they quickly dressed in clothes put out for them by Vera.

Both Katya and Milan were awed by the house, its possessions, and what seemed to them to be wealth.

When Katya came into the living room, both Vera and Ivan were there to greet her with approving nods. “You look wonderful,” said Vera. “I was hoping the dress suited you.”

Katya looked down at the blouse, embroidered in gold threads and heavily laced, tucked into a skirt with hundreds of small flowers of every color and shape sewn into each pleat. Over this was an apron of more embroidered flowers. Katya was pleased the long sleeves covered her bracelet. She didn’t want to explain about the Gypsy bracelet. If Milan had become upset seeing it, then his cousins might be upset also.

Ivan smiled approvingly. “It suits you very well.” He said approvingly, noticing she seemed even prettier than before.

“I have never seen anything so beautiful,” said Katya, running her hand over the design on the sleeve. “I’m afraid I may ruin it. Truly, I feel uncomfortable wearing it.”

“Don’t worry about such things,” admonished Vera. “Eat, dance, enjoy yourself and do not worry about the dress.”

Just then Milan came from the kitchen, dressed in a fresh white shirt and pants trimmed in lace, wearing a gold and black vest. Katya marveled at how handsome Milan looked.

Cousin Marko came into the room before anyone could comment on Milan's attire and said, "Come, meet my family and friends. We must eat. I make my own wine." To Milan, he said, "You must tell me if you like it." Marko took Milan's arm and guided him out into the yard where the kolo dancing had already begun.

Ivan was at Katya's side as he led her out into the bright sunlit yard. It was as if the angels had gifted the union with a glorious day. The day was not too hot. A gentle breeze wafted through the yard, not once stirring the dust. It was a perfect day for dancing. About ten men and women were in a circle arms linked, stepping in time to the music. The girls' heavy embroidered skirts flared out like fans as they twirled about.

"Sit here." Ivan made a place for Katya at the head table. Katya nodded and smiled at the shy bride. The young Luba was becoming increasingly embarrassed by her father's drunkenness.

Ivan ignored the bride's drunken father, Andra Ruzich, who was muttering something about 'how well his little Luba did by marrying Nikola.' Instead Ivan introduced Katya to Nikola and Luba. Nikola reached across the table, his dark eyes full of warmth, as he took Katya's hand. "I hear we are cousins. Welcome to our party." Turning with pride to his blushing Luba, he said, "This is my bride, Luba." Shyly Luba smiled and dropped her eyes. "Say something." Nikola urged Luba. "Welcome my cousin."

Before Luba could say anything, her father seated nearby, slammed his fist down on the table so hard that the dishes rattled. "I told you to do whatever Nikola says to do." He was drunk, bellowing, "He says talk, you talk!"

This was too much for the young Luba. It was bad enough all their friends knew what her father was like, but now in front of this beautiful stranger, Luba was humiliated. She got up and ran into the house.

Katya watched in silence as Nikola rose from his seat and went to stand before his father-in-law. There were only Ivan,

Katya, Nikola and the drunken Ruzich at the table. Nikola bent his face close to Ruzich's.

"Listen to me, Old Man," he said coldly, "I know you think you forced your daughter to marry me." He grabbed the man's collar. "Understand this. She is my wife now. She doesn't have to listen to you or be afraid of you anymore."

Heads within hearing distance turned to watch the encounter.

Ruzich blinked. What the hell was going on? How dare Nikola speak to an elder in this manner? Ruzich stood up wanting to say something, but the combination of plum brandy, hot sun and excitements made his head spin. The ground was coming up at him. Nikola caught Ruzich as he pitched forward. Nikola laughed good-naturedly and waived triumphantly to those who were watching, then he carried his father-in-law off to his wagon to sleep. Nikola dumped Ruzich in the back of the open wagon, with little care for the old man's comfort. Satisfied the drunken man would be asleep for a while, Nikola headed for the house to soothe his sweet little Luba. Friendly laughter followed him and the moment was soon forgotten.

Katya and Ivan were now at the table alone. She looked around for Milan and could see him smiling, glass in hand, being introduced to people by the happy Marko.

"Please eat a little," urged Ivan. "My mother will beat me if I let you go hungry." His voice was low and encouraging. It was a nice voice.

Katya smiled. "I can't imagine your mother beating anyone."

"She is nice," admitted Ivan. "But, she will give me the devil if she doesn't see you eat something." He took a clean plate and put some roast pork on it, then placed it in front of her.

"I felt sorry for your sister-in-law," said Katya, thinking about the shy bride. "I had a brother-in-law who was like her father. When I was little he always yelled at me or insulted me." She saw Ivan listening intently, so she went on, "There are parts of my childhood I don't remember. I think I hid most of the time. I seldom spoke, hoping he would forget I was around."

Ivan was overwhelmed by the sight and nearness of Katya. He had the strong urge to find this man who made her childhood unhappy and beat him. The sight of her hair was dazzling in the sunlight. He was pleased she had not confined the coppery mass to



braids, for it set her apart from all the unmarried girls with their hair in braids.

Among the guests were many unhappy girls who, along with their parents, watched their prospects of marrying into the Balaban family fade as they witnessed Ivan's attraction to Katya.

Katya was too excited to eat. She picked at the pork, taking only a small piece. She felt self-conscious knowing everyone was looking at her, especially Ivan. However, she found that she liked his attention.

Katya watched Marko with Milan in tow, traveling from table to table. Pleasure radiated from Marko's face as he introduced his cousin to all his friends. Milan enjoyed the limelight. Whoops of happy laughter could be heard from Marko and his friends,

Guests passing near the table smiled shyly at Katya, and nodded to Ivan, not stopping to intrude. There was plenty of time to get to know the pretty stranger.

Ivan's steady gaze into Katya's face made her a little uncomfortable and she looked away towards the dancers, who were now doing a dance with ribbons, criss-crossing them, weaving them in and out, forming overhead patterns of color with their graceful movements.

Watching the dancers was a handsome man dressed in tan colored riding pants, with a matching tan form-fitting jacket. The only decoration on this outfit was some delicate black stitching on the collar of the jacket. His black leather boots gleamed, even though they were covered with the dust stirred by the dancers. He was of medium build, with a well-proportioned body, no thick leg or arm muscles here. His perfectly cut brown hair, graying slightly at the temples along with his elegantly trimmed mustache, gave him the air of a professor or scholar.

Katya couldn't make out the color of his eyes as they crinkled at the corners when he smiled, which he was doing now in response to something that was said.

"Who is that man?" Katya asked, "The one next to the priest."

"He's here!" exclaimed Ivan excitedly, "He has been out of the country and wrote that he would try and be here for the

wedding. Come.” He took Katya’s hand, “I want you to meet my godfather, Anton Vladislav.”

Standing next to Anton Vladislav was Father Lahdra.

In the lovely Croatian countryside of the late 1800's, a baby near death is taken away. Miraculously the baby survives. Sixteen years later Katya's dangerous journey takes her where she really belongs.

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