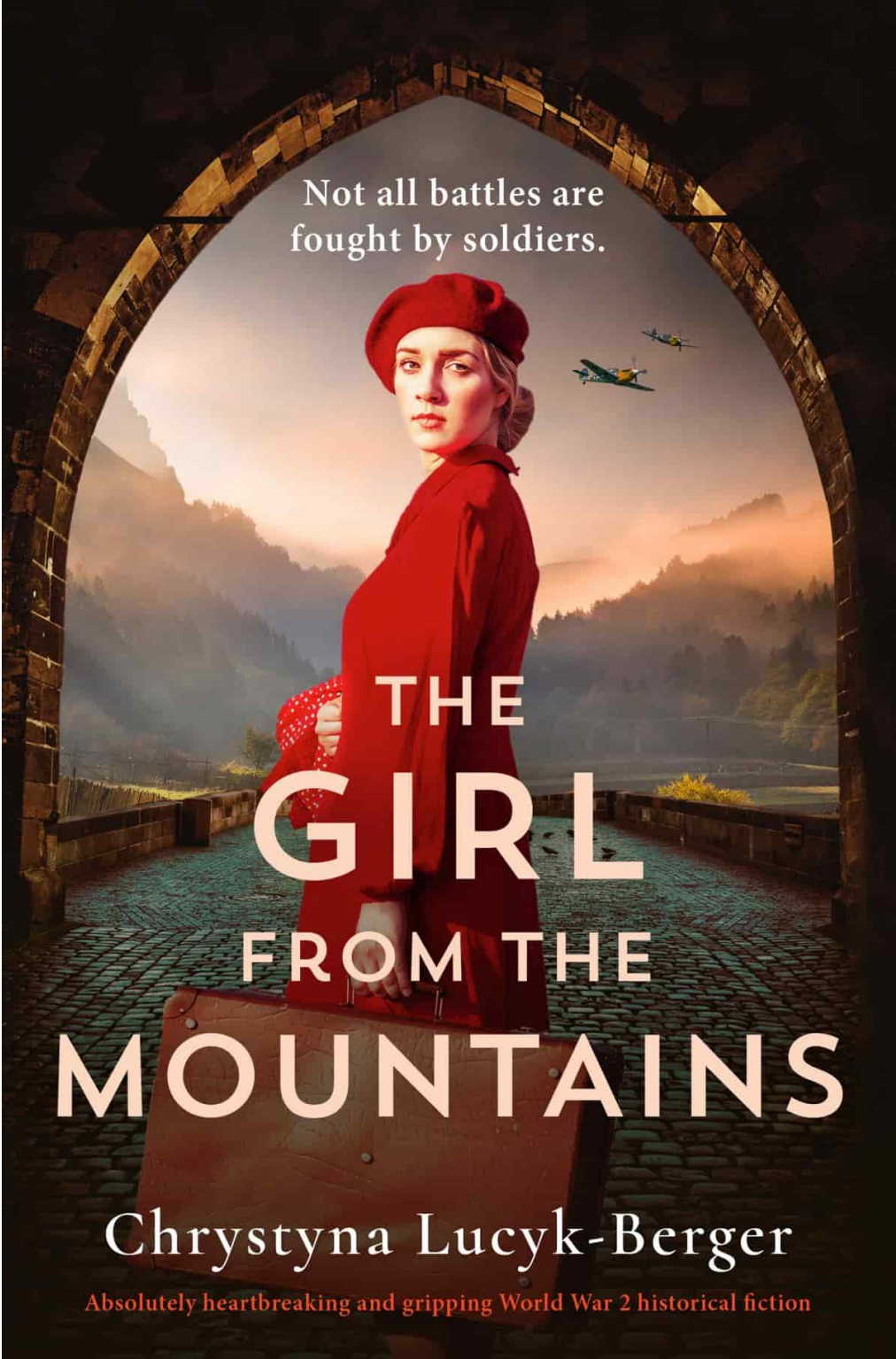


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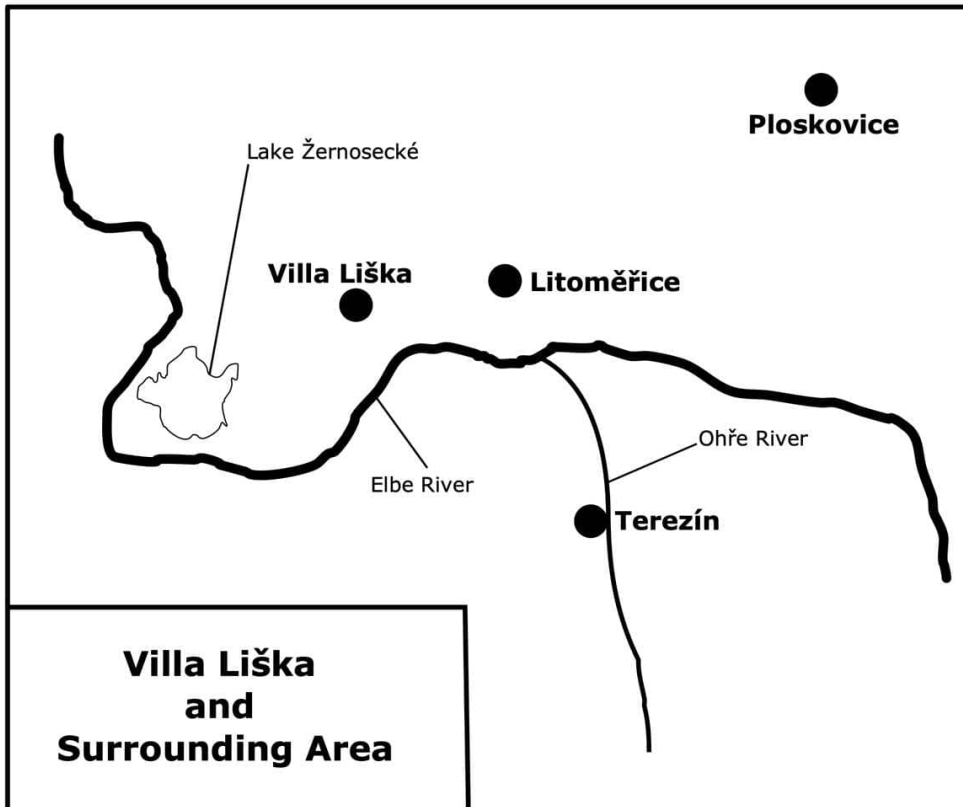
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To T – for letting me “take” your story and run with it.





PROLOGUE

APRIL 1942

Magda shoved open the service door and hurried across the snow-encrusted lawn. Out of habit, she glanced at the empty deer park across the road. A gust of wind bent the tops of the cedars lined up along the way. There, they urged, pointing down the mountain, is the way out. In that very stand of trees where she had once planted kisses on a traitor, she now hid secrets in retaliation.

At the iron gate, Magda looked back at Villa Liška. The high curved windows of the dining room and sitting room were dark. The house may as well be empty inside. The yellow limestone facade had lost its cheeriness a year ago. The house remained well maintained, but the spirit was so long gone that it was hard to believe she had once felt safe and loved in this mansion.

Magda lifted the latch, pushed the gate open, and crossed the street to the granary. She was less likely to be noticed if she passed the two mines. From there, she veered toward town. The clock tower rose against a gray flannel sky. Off the Ohře and Elbe rivers, the breeze carried the smell of damp laundry and stirred tiny, frozen pellets into whirlpools of ice. Not hail nor rain but snow. Again.

“*April, April,*” Walter had chanted to her, “*der weiß nicht was er will.*” April, April, it knows not what it wants. He had stroked the birthmark on her left cheek, the blemish to which she had always accredited her loneliness, and switched from German to Czech. “Do you know what you want, Magdalena?”

At the time, she had been certain the answer was Walter. She wanted Walter, with his attentions, his confidence, and his teasing. But she had been too shy to utter the words. Instead she’d fled behind the service door only to peer back at him through the lead-glass window. He stood there for quite some time before turning away.

Now, she wanted anything but Walter. Four years into the occupation—since the terror had taken seed and grown into a strangling weed—Magda yearned to wrap her arms around something entirely different.

It took her thirty minutes to reach the walls that marked Litoměřice’s old town. She passed through the castle gate, where Swastika-stamped flags snapped salutes to the wind. Years ago, when she had arrived in Litoměřice to look for work, she’d swum against a current of fleeing Czechs and Slovaks. Now, the dismal reminders of a displaced Bohemia lay beneath a red, black and white sheen. Those ruby-red flags were stationed throughout the main square too, draped along the sides of the town hall, sticking out beneath the clock tower, and stretched across the narrow streets. Triangular banners dangled over passages as if it were carnival. In the middle of these streamers, a portrait of the Führer reminded her that survival depended on loyalty and obedience to the regime. One misstep, and the Gestapo could pick her up.

Litoměřice's ornamentations were still beneath it all: the gas lanterns—electric for decades—lined the cobblestoned roads or hung from an oriel. The pastry shops now featured a slice of apple strudel alongside a few traditional cylinders of cinnamon *trdelníky* and poppy-seed rolls. But the flower-stitched aprons and bell-shaped *krojová* skirts in a dressmaker's shop looked faded and unwanted.

The familiar bus pattered to a stop near the baroque water fountain next to the oak tree. Military vehicles and trucks peppered the square. The signs on the buildings still had Czech names. The government offices had German.

Magda ducked into the bakery and stood in line behind a policeman, her heart hammering. She automatically pressed the edge of her headscarf over the ruby map on her left cheek. It was the oldest of her disfigurements, one of three that made her not only identifiable but immediately suspect. The two scars on her face were, after all, the marks of defiance.

As the policeman added his purchase to a jute bag, the woman behind the counter gave Magda a quick look. *The less you try to hide yourself, the less they'll notice you.*

Magda forced her hand to drop. The woman waited until the policeman had left before taking Magda's ration card and handed her the two extra loaves of rye bread in return.

"Will you be lighting a candle today?" she asked.

Magda nodded.

The woman added a roll into Magda's bag.

Magda stepped out of the bakery, the bag of bread clutched in her fist. When she reached St. Stephen's, she checked once more to make sure she had not been followed. She slipped her hand into her pocket and touched her talisman. Certain that

nobody paid any attention to her in the streets, she made the sign of the cross and entered the church through the side. An older woman rocked back and forth as she prayed, her prayer beads knocking softly. A man Magda did not recognize lit a candle. She stepped into a pew, kneeled, and made the sign of the cross, her mind far too distracted to form the simplest of prayers beyond, "Dear God, be merciful. Protect us."

It was a long time before the strangers left. Magda rose and went to the door that led to the crypts below. She rapped twice in quick succession, paused, and tapped three more times. On the other side, the iron bolt scraped across the heavy wooden door. As soon as it was opened wide enough, Magda slipped through.

SEPTEMBER 1938–MARCH 1942

CHAPTER ONE

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 1938

When the German motorcade rolled past Voštiny opposite the Elbe River, Magda and her mother were singing “Meadows Green” and threshing the wheat. Their song dissipated like smoke into the air. Magda’s mother straightened, one hand on her headscarf, like a gesture of disbelief. No tanks. No marching soldiers. Only those gray-green trucks and black automobiles on the horizon.

The procession moved on south, growing smaller in size but larger in meaning. When she looked toward the fields, Magda saw her father and her two brothers also pausing, one at a time, to witness the Germans chalking off the Sudetenland demarcation with their exhaust fumes. The Nováks’ farm lay within it.

Magda’s father faced the cottage and an entire exchange silently took place between her parents.

Then the rumors are true, her father said with just the simple lift of his head.

Her mother pursed her lips. *What now?*

Magda’s father sliced the sickle through the stalks. *We finish the wheat.*

And with that, Magda, her two brothers, and her parents went back to work.

Later, at midday, urgent knocking rattled their door. Everyone in the house froze except Magda. She turned slowly around in the room, as if this was to be the last scene she would remember. Her father held the edge of the table. Her mother rose from her chair. She was straight and proud and beautiful with an open face, the kindest light-brown eyes, and full lips. Magda's brothers, Bohdan and Matěj, sat rigid in their chairs. Each of their wives held a child. And Magda's grandparents sat so close to each other on the bench against the oven that they might as well have been in each other's laps.

The knocking came more insistently, and this time they stirred into action. Magda's father pushed himself from the table and left the room. The rest were in various stages of attempting to look normal. A moment later, her father returned with the village heads. With baffling lightness, he offered them *Becherbitter* as if it were Christmas, and shared a joke about a cow and a farmer—Magda was not paying attention to the story or the punchline that then made them laugh so.

The Sudetenland, the village wise men announced after the first schnapps, was now part of the Third Reich. Hitler was protecting his people. And that was why no other country called foul for breaching the treaty.

“But we will not go to war,” one village elder said, “as we may have feared.”

“Imagine that,” Magda's father said abruptly. It was the tone he used when angry.

Her brothers, however, visibly relaxed.

That night, before she went to bed, and while her brothers and father were making their rounds in the village, gathering information like hay, Magda asked her mother to play the guitar.

“I don’t much feel like it,” her mother said.

Magda hugged her tightly. Her mother clutched her as if Magda were floating away. Upstairs, the grandparents’ bed creaked, and the house settled around them.

“You remember,” her mother said, releasing her, “how you once asked me why you are the youngest?”

“Because you finally had a girl, you said.”

“Because there is bad luck in even numbers. I needed a third child so that nothing bad would ever happen to any of you.”

A small comfort, superstitions. Her grandmother believed in them as much as she believed in praying. And because it was Magda’s mother who was reaching for those superstitions, Magda hardly slept that night.

Shortly afterwards, in early October, Bohdan and Matěj ran back from the fields almost as soon as they had left the cottage. Motorbikes, a motorcade, the tanks, and the foot soldiers marched through Voštiny in the foggy dawn. A new protectorate was established, and the mayor was arrested for being a suspected Communist sympathizer, and his wife for being a registered one.

Two days later, Magda’s father received notice to report to the town hall. Bohdan and Matěj exchanged nervous glances. Magda only watched, already dreading what would unfold.

“They’ll want the rifles,” Bohdan said as he reached for one of the breakfast buns. His wife bounced their young son

on her knee and looked away.

Magda's father chewed on. Her grandfather groaned softly.

“We should have something for them to confiscate to make the Nazi swine feel accomplished,” Matěj said, always checking with Bohdan.

Their father leaned on his elbows. “You each have a rifle. Each registered.”

“And each a revolver,” Bohdan said. “Black market. But...”

Their father's eyes shifted to their mother, then to their grandfather. The slightest nod from both.

Father rose from his breakfast, still chewing, wiped his mouth with his hand and stalked to the dresser on the farthest wall. He returned to the table, lay one revolver at each son's elbow, and sat back down to his breakfast.

These were the weapons they had argued about quite some time ago. Bohdan had said that he was certain the troubles between the Czechs and Slovaks with Germany would not be settled peacefully. They had to protect themselves, Matěj had stressed. Their father had then ordered both of them to get rid of the revolvers. Now, here they were.

The boys moved in unison. They picked up the guns, and walked out of the cottage. Grandmother's chin wagged and she made anxious, smacking noises. Father suddenly rose and the rest of them—one by one—drifted to the doorway of the cottage and into the yard.

Bohdan and Matěj were at the apple tree out back, carefully cutting out a square of earth. Their father came out of the workshop with a metal box, bent down and put the two

revolvers in before lifting the grass and lowering the box into the earth.

Magda felt movement behind her and turned to see her mother go back inside. She returned with the guitar, sat on the bench beneath the eaves and hummed softly as she strummed. It was Magda's favorite lullaby.

Her sisters-in-law carried their children back into the house. Magda watched as her father and brothers hacked at the bottom of the square patch of earth and replaced it carefully. They then filled in the cracks with earth, ripped up some grass and scattered it over the wound in the ground.

Matěj and Bohdan nudged past her with affectionate bumps though their teasing was tainted by the grim set of their mouths.

Magda's father clapped her shoulder. "Southeast root. When it's time, you know where they are."

The guitar was silent.

Her father harnessed Princ and left the farm shortly afterwards, and returned that afternoon in the back of a truck and no sign of the horse. His head hung low over his folded hands as five Wehrmacht soldiers jumped down from the back and positioned themselves in the yard. Two young women in blond braids, white blouses, black cravats and black skirts climbed out of the second vehicle with clipboards in hand. A lieutenant stepped out after them.

One of the Wehrmacht eyed Magda's face, then turned away. Matěj and Bohdan bristled next to her.

Her mother called to her father—who was still in the truck—but he did not lift his head. Magda understood why.

Whatever they had done to him, he did not want his wife to see.

The lieutenant addressed the rest of the family and told them that they were there to confiscate weapons and that their possessions, their cottage and the farm were now Third Reich property. The documents were in German, stamped and signed with the names of officials none of the Nováks knew.

“Requisitioned for whom?” Bohdan snapped.

The lieutenant scowled at her brother as if he were an idiot. “For a German family.”

The officer’s glance landed somewhere inside, just beyond the door. He walked in and returned with Mother’s guitar. He examined it briefly, shook it by the neck, as if he were holding a chicken and checking to see whether it was dead. He walked it over to one of the young women with the clipboard. She made a note and he handed it to one of the Wehrmacht soldiers, who promptly put it into the lieutenant’s vehicle.

He turned back to the family. “You have two hours to pack your things and find new accommodations, but the farm will be vacated.”

“Where should we go?” Magda’s mother protested.

The lieutenant looked confused or annoyed and shook his head. “How should I know? You Slavs are the ones who have a thousand relatives to every family. Go to one of them.”

Bohdan and Matěj moved to their wives but the officer stopped them.

“Not you. You two are expected at headquarters. We need workers in Germany, and we need soldiers. We’ll figure out which it will be.”

When they brought Magda's father down from the truck, they refilled it with her brothers, the two registered rifles, Mother's china and her one crystal vase, the grandparents' books and Father's mandolin. The horse, like their house, had also been requisitioned, the cows were locked in the stable. Their father was to hand over the keys. Magda never had the chance to dig up the revolvers. That time never came.

Lidice was a "blip" on the Nazi's radar. That was how Magda's father put it. Nobody would bother to look for them there, a small village between Prague and Litoměřice. Shortly afterwards, the family—her grandparents, her parents, she, and her two sisters-in-law, and their children—were piled on top of one another in Magda's great-aunt's home. Rationing was put into effect not long after. Winter was coming. They had one sow for nine hungry mouths.

The house was damp and the winter wicked. Even before Christmas, it was clear that the family could not go on like this. Bohdan's wife spoke of family in Hungary. Matěj's wife left to a cousin's back north, taking their son with her.

"Magda could go to town," her great-aunt said one night. "Find work. Get her through the winter."

Mother made one little noise in the back of her throat. Like a sob. Or a hiccup.

Magda studied her fingernails. Her great-aunt meant "get her through the war." She had one good dress.

The night before she was to leave, her mother gave her a necklace with a cross. It was a thin gold chain with a simple gold cross, the chain only big enough to put around perhaps Magda's wrist.

“What is this?” she asked.

“Your godmother gave this to you for your baptism. I have all of your necklaces—Bohdan’s, Matěj’s, and yours. Take yours. Maybe it will be worth something, just in case. And otherwise, Magda, perhaps it will bring you comfort. Something of home.”

Her mother slipped it into a small pouch and pulled the strings together before laying it in her hand, then she scooped Magda to her. In the next bed, Grandmother coughed and muttered.

The next day, Magda veered off the main road to Litoměřice and followed the road to Voštiny. She slowly walked up the road to their farm, the fields dusted with snow, the Elbe sluggish in the cold. A crow cawed and grazed the winter sky. Something rustled in the dried stalks along the side of the road and Magda jumped as a young fox dashed out only a few meters before her. It stopped, its yellow eyes trained on Magda, before turning away and slinking off into the field across the road. A distant whirring sounded. Magda followed the road up to the ridge where the top flattened into a long plateau, with the blue-gray mountains in the background.

The sound grew louder and she had to cover her ears as a plane buzzed above her from the west. Leaflets rained down upon her. She hurried to the top of the road and halted at the sight of the people. People with carts, people on foot, on bicycles, were heading towards her—eastwards—with their belongings piled and tied precariously atop anything—the roof of a vehicle, onto the carts, on bicycle baskets. The planes continued to come. The mass soon enveloped her and they ignored her, nobody tried to turn her around, as she swam against the current of refugees.

“Where are you going?” she cried to random strangers.

But she knew. The rump of Czechoslovakia was not occupied. And Hungary remained free of Nazis. Magda picked up a leaflet.

“This is now the German Reich,” she read. Followed by a list of rules—all Jews and Communists were to report to the new protectorate, curfew was at seven o’clock, all weapons were to be turned in to the village headquarters, and so on. Things she already knew. Things she had already experienced.

She folded the piece of paper and put it in her pocket.

“Survive,” her mother had said. “That’s all—just survive. Do what they want, and at some point this will be over. But live, Daughter.”

Ahead of her was the Nováks’ farm. Hidden by the windbreak in the field behind the cottage, Magda watched three young children playing a game in the yard. A man was leading Princ into the stable. A dark-haired woman stood, hands on her hips, surveying the apple tree with an air of authority. Another two boys and a man were unloading a wagon filled with furniture.

“Stay where you are safe,” her father had said. “When this is all over, we’ll meet back at the farm.”

She tried to picture that, the Nováks confronting this transplanted family. All Magda wanted was to have her family back together. She would work where she could in Litoměřice, long enough to outlive the war and return home. All she had to do was keep her head down in the process.

CHAPTER TWO

DECEMBER 1938–MARCH 1939

Litoměřice was not far in the spring, in the summer, even in the fall, when Magda accompanied her father, and her brothers and her mother to market. It was not far when there were lambs to sell, and people to meet, and shops to look into the windows of. In winter, however, it was a world away. By the locked-up shops, the empty streets, and oppressive air, Magda began to doubt her great-aunt's prediction that—in the wake of the exodus—Magda should easily find work in service.

There was only one thing that might buoy her uncertainty. Magda followed the narrow road to the cathedral of St. Stephen. In the church, she lit a candle, went to confession, and prayed for her soul and for her family. Afterwards, she found the bench in the square, next to the baroque fountain, where her father and she used to set up their market stall, and unpacked an apple and a piece of buttered bread. She had to eat now. A few streets up the hill, she knew there were large villas and she would have to begin knocking on them. It might take her the rest of the day before she found a place, and even then, it would be uncertain when she might get a meal.

As she ate, she stared at the regime's flags hanging on each side of the town hall. A Christmas tree was set up in the center, as out of place as she felt. Nothing seemed remotely friendly or open to her here. A troop of teenaged boys and

girls, with brown or white blouses beneath their coats, suddenly poured out of a school building. These were the housekeepers of Hitler's *Lebensraum*, the Hitler Jugend and the Deutsche Mädel, like the two blond-braided girls who had come to the Nováks' farm, the list of the family's items clipped to their boards, and Magda's mother's guitar added to it.

Magda looked down at the last bite of bread and rose from the bench, an idea in her mind. There was a woman—a baker's widow—she remembered from the market, a woman many people seemed to respect and trust. She was Czech, but her husband was a Sudeten German. The bakery was not far from the edge of the square, towards the walls of Old Town. Magda found it, stepped in and paní Eva looked up from behind the glass counter.

"I'm all out," the woman called. "I've got only crumbs in the back."

Magda shrugged. "I'm not here to buy bread." She had only one set of ration cards. She would go hungry until she understood her situation better. "You might know my father? Slavko Novák? We're from Voštiny. We sold honey, and apricot marmalade among other things. You bought marmalade for your *Berliner* from us."

Paní Eva's face lit up. "Of course. My goodness, yes. I'm sorry. I see so many people day in and day out, I didn't recognize you at first. What are you doing here?"

Magda explained to her and the woman tut-tutted like a mother hen, stepped into the back, telling Magda to wait a moment, she would find something to eat for her first and write down an address. Magda's spirits rose.

The bell on the door clanged and a woman in a warm coat walked in, her face falling at the sight of the emptied display case.

“Is that you, Uršula?” paní Eva called from the back room.

“It is,” the woman said, her tone ending on a note of hope, or was it a warning? She had dark blond hair piled up on top of her head and a sharp nose. Her too-bright lipstick had run into the wrinkles around her mouth.

“I’ve got your loaf back here,” paní Eva announced. “Just a moment.”

She came back out and winked at Magda. She had a package wrapped in paper and handed it to the other woman, and for Magda, she had three slices of loaf ends and an address.

“The villa is located on the town’s outskirts,” she said.

The other woman cocked her head, peered over Magda’s shoulder, then jerked away as if she had not intended to see when Magda frowned at her.

“A respectable family,” the baker’s widow assured Magda.

Magda thanked her and headed for the door, when the other woman yanked on Magda’s coat sleeve.

“I wouldn’t bother if I were you,” she muttered. “The Taubers are—”

“Uršula!” Paní Eva’s voice was sharp and shrill. “They’re Sudeten Germans, just like you. You let the girl go now.” To Magda, the baker’s widow nodded. “Go to the villa I told you, and ask for Renata. Tell her I sent you.”

Uncertainty plagued Magda again as she climbed the steep road to Villa Liška. It lay a half hour outside of town near the

top of Radobýl Mountain. If they turned her away, she would have nowhere else to go before dark.

She passed the sign for the mines and then came to a crest on the hill. To her right was a granary and a stable followed by a wide, snowy plain stretching to the squat mountains on the horizon. The sun was setting before her, and the sky was a cold December pink.

To her left was a high iron gate that surrounded the grounds of an elegant Gothic mansion. The villa had two and a half stories and a red tile roof with two chimneys. The facade was a cheery yellow limestone with red-brick accents. Lights streamed from four high, arched windows in the center of the house and onto a raised terrace. They looked like church windows, and when Magda examined them closer, she swore the mansion had been built onto an old chapel. From the terrace, a lawn sloped down to the road.

Magda smiled and checked the latch on the gate. It lifted and she was inside. She followed the road just a little and realized she was at the back of the house, which meant this was the service road gate. Above her was the second gate with a gravel drive that had to lead to the front entrance.

She followed the service road a few steps further. The road wound away and to the east of the house past a carriage house, and onwards towards what might have been the roof of a stable or barn. The owners would certainly have a view of the Elbe and Ohře rivers from the ridge.

To her left was a large stand of cedar trees, and she gasped when she peered between them. Four deer blinked back at her from behind a mesh fence. When she clicked her tongue at them, they spun and leapt off into the darkening woods.

Magda turned her attention back to the house. She'd gone too far. She was almost directly below the high-arched windows and had a view into two rooms. Through the two right windows, she was obviously looking into the dining room with the table and chairs, the sideboards and mirror. Magda's stomach grumbled. There was a flickering light, as if from a fire. In the two windows to her left a woman sat at a piano. She had ginger-red hair, was slender and wore a scarf wrapped around her head, with the hair piled high above. A child—wispy curls of dark blond hair and wearing a blue pinafore—sat next to her. Just then, the little girl jumped off the bench and ran to the inside of the room. When she appeared at the window again, she pointed in Magda's direction.

Magda retreated to the end of the house and out of sight.

If the third chimney was any indication, she now stood at the door that led to the kitchen. The entrance was dimly lit, watery in the lead-pane windows. Magda was about to knock but lights illuminated the front of the house suddenly. She looked at the main gate. Nobody was coming. She crept to peek around the corner. At the front of the house, there was a circular drive with a fountain in the middle of it, the source of the light. Two small red maples guarded either side of the facade and were illuminated from lights beneath.

Magda balled her right hand and tucked her thumb inside. She really, really hoped the Taubers would take her. She would do anything to stay here. To make certain, she doubled her luck and balled the other fist, then returned to knock on the servants' entrance. When the door flew open, she nearly fell backward.

A giant of a woman—broad-shouldered, big-boned, and with a mop of dark curly hair—held a dust broom like a saber in her hand. She looked Magda up and down before saying in Slovakian, “There you are! Scared the daylights out of that poor child.” She paused as if seeing Magda for the first time. “At least you’re not one of *them*. Who are you? What do you want?”

Magda automatically tugged at the edge of her scarf to hide her left cheek. She looked down at her worn shoes, and pulled at the ill-fitting skirt that had bunched up beneath her coat. The warm smell of mutton and vegetables wafted out.

Another woman appeared—shorter, rounder and older with many lines etched into her brow. She brandished a spoon at Magda from behind the giant woman. “I saw you poking around here. Why do I have to keep chasing you people off? It’s a deer park, not a petting zoo.”

“Paní Eva sent me,” Magda rushed, not sure which one she ought to speak to. “From the bakery? I’m Magdalena Novák. I’m looking for work, and paní Eva said I should ask for Renata.”

The bigger woman sighed and leaned the broom behind the door. “I’m Renata.” She assessed Magda once more, then indicated the road. “And your people? Where have you left them?”

Magda told her. Renata and the older woman listened. The sky grew darker. When Magda was finished, Renata threw a look over her shoulder at the other woman before addressing Magda once more.

“I’m the housekeeper. This is Jana, the cook. Between the two of us, we’ve got everything under control.” She paused and peered outside. “We are the last house before an emptied-

out village up the road though. You may as well at least warm up.”

She held the door open, and Magda had to duck beneath the woman’s arm to get inside. She followed Jana into a warm kitchen, a stew ladled into a simple white-and-gold tureen sat in the middle of the table.

Magda paused to inhale. “Is that cinnamon?”

Jana was already at another door and turned sharply, eyebrows arched. “That’s very good. How did you know that?”

Magda dropped her chin. “It just smells like Christmas, that’s all. Like cloves and cinnamon.”

“Yes,” Jana said. “Paní doktorová likes the Mediterranean recipes.”

Renata stepped between them and turned to Magda. “The Taubers are Jews. Have you got a problem with that?”

Magda’s eyes widened. Now she understood this Uršula woman at the bakery. “No. I don’t mind at all.”

Renata looked down her nose at her.

Jana said, “Come along. Follow me. The family is to sit down and eat and will have to decide whether you’re to stay or go.”

Renata followed behind Magda. They were in the corridor of the villa. The floor was black-and-white marble. A limestone staircase with a wrought-iron banister and a broad landing was directly to Magda’s right. Beyond that, the front entrance with opaque windows in a wrought-iron frame. Against the wall, beneath a row of coat pegs, was a high-backed wooden pew. To her left was the dining room. Magda

was now looking at the cedar stand from the inside-out, through those high, curved windows.

She had to hurry to keep up, both Jana and Renata ahead of her now and leading her to the next room, that room with the piano. Magda hardly had a chance to register anything further as the two women both walked in, barely knocking, as if they were about to rat on Magda and were trying to beat each other to it.

Renata went first. “Dr. Tauber, Frau Tauber, we have a new stray.”

“Yes, the source of Eliška’s sighting,” Jana said.

“Paní Eva sent her,” Renata said as though that carried a lot of weight. “Her name is Magda Novák.”

Renata finally stepped aside so that Magda could see into the room.

On an armchair was a slender man with light-brown wavy hair, much longer than was the fashion, and wearing wire-rimmed spectacles. The woman Magda had seen playing at the piano was perched on the arm of his chair. She smiled a little. The child, meanwhile, was on the rug between them, looking rather preoccupied with the cardboard pieces of a *Loto* game until the Taubers rose in unison.

The little girl bounced off the floor and joined them, peering up at Magda as if assessing some kind of new creature. She had dark blond hair that would likely turn darker and be as wavy as her father’s, and she had the wide, blue eyes of her mother.

The man strode over, his hand at the ready. “I’m Dr. Johan Tauber. This is my wife, Ruth. And this is our highly imaginative daughter, Eliška.”

Magda hunched into herself, ashamed for having startled the child.

“Where are you from, Magda?” Frau Tauber asked in a manner as polite and proper as could be.

“Voštiny. We were forced to relocate to Lidice.” She paused. They seemed to be waiting for more information. Renata cleared her throat. Magda added, “Our farm, our home, was confiscated.”

“You poor thing,” the doctor’s wife exclaimed. “Jana, make sure you set another plate at table, please. And we’ll delay supper just a little while longer. Bring us a glass of sherry or *Becherbitter*.”

Renata and Jana shared a look before the latter bustled out.

“And Renata, would you be so kind,” Dr. Tauber added. “Make up the guest room after supper for Magda. Does everyone call you Magda, or do you go by Magdalena?”

Magda shrugged. “Magdalena.”

“Good, for Magdalena, please.”

“Of course.”

“Come warm yourself.” Frau Tauber took Magda by the shoulder and gently led her to the fire. She helped Magda to slip out of her worn coat.

Magda hesitated in taking off her headscarf. She had no choice. Slowly, she slipped it off her head and used her left hand to pat her hair into place to avoid letting anyone see her face just yet.

“Look at that,” Frau Tauber said gently. “What a beautiful color your hair is. If you could see how it shines in the light of

that fire. You're not as ginger as I am; you have a beautiful chestnut color."

She moved before Magda and gazed at her. Magda felt the heat rising up her neck and into her cheeks.

Eliška suddenly stood before her. "I wasn't scared of you. I thought I saw a wood sprite. I was hoping you would be a spirit but that's all right, because now you can be my friend."

Magda smiled and ducked her head, shied away from the child's intent gaze, the fascination of a child discovering a ladybug for the first time.

"What is that?" Eliška pointed to Magda's left cheek.

"The map of Siberia," Magda muttered.

Eliška reached up on tiptoe and gestured for Magda to bend down then took Magda's face in her hands and kissed that blemish.

"There," she said. "Papa always does that when something of mine hurts. You're all better now. Will you sit next to me at dinner?"

Magda did not know what to say to that. She nodded. Outside the windows, Magda saw it had begun to snow.

Christmas came and went with a letter from her mother. Bohdan and Matěj were working somewhere in Germany as *Ostarbeiter*. Magda's father spent his time ice-fishing and trying to make his aunt's house sturdier. They missed her and were happy for her new position as a governess to Eliška.

Between the lines, Magda read that she should stay where she was. Safe. Warm. Relatively well-fed. And with a family

that treated Magda so well, she felt as if she were living with distant relatives. But Magda minded her step. She made sure to maintain the distance she felt was necessary and expected of her position. She always addressed the Taubers appropriately, made sure to do her work conscientiously, and hardly ever let Eliška out of her sight.

The Taubers were a unique couple as well. Dr. Tauber was an oncologist, and quite renowned, Magda learned. His office was located across the hall from the sitting room with the piano. He had an examining room adjacent to it. He was at the hospital most days but took private patients once a month on Saturdays. Frau Tauber was a professional pianist and performed with opera singers and orchestras, sometimes going on long tours. She'd been to Asia, to North and South America, and even in the Middle East. Her practice room was next to Eliška's playroom at the end of the black-and-white marble corridor. It doubled as an entertainment room in the summers and opened out onto the pool on the southeast end of the villa.

Eliška, who was six, was spirited, but also sweet and she made Magda smile. Often. It was a happy household, with two devoted parents when they were home. It was Jana and Renata that Magda found harder to get to know. Jana shared a room with Magda in the attic floor, just above Eliška's. Renata had her own room, and a fourth one had been used by Gabor, the Hungarian groundskeeper, but he had fled back home.

With the villa located near the top of Radobýl Mountain, Magda felt almost insulated. The Taubers were renowned and appeared to be untouchable. But news from the outside could still seep through the limestone walls and into the house. Dr. Tauber returned some evenings and spoke in hushed tones to his wife, their expressions sullen and sad. Comments about

families, friends, about visas, and anti-Semitism became more frequent. And one evening, Eliška awoke screaming in her bed, the piercing cry coming right through the floorboards of Magda's and Jana's room. Magda sprang up like a soldier, was downstairs in a flash, but the parents were already with her.

The child was inconsolable in Frau Tauber's arms.

"I don't want to go away," Eliška cried. "Tell the bad men to leave me alone! I don't want to go!"

Dr. Tauber led Magda out of the room and to the linen closet. "Would you mind changing her bed? She's wet it. She'll sleep with us tonight."

"Is there anything else I can do?"

Dr. Tauber pinched his nose and squinted. "She's lost another friend. The Gersons have left. Their daughter Aila was Eliška's closest friend. The family were some of our closest friends."

The next morning, Magda overheard Dr. Tauber on the phone.

"Anything. Anything you can do, Max. You know all the points to argue. Tell them we qualify for one of those... I don't know. What are they called? Special concessions?"

And that was the last Magda heard anything about it. There were no further discussions, nothing that was happening outside was brought inside the walls of the Villa Liška. Almost feverishly, the Taubers created a world for their daughter that was safe, harmonious, and so real, even Magda had begun to feel as if perhaps all that had happened to her family in the autumn before had only been a bad dream.

In early March, the snow had hardly disappeared when the crocus popped out their long stems and the tiniest of buds

began emerging on the trees but spring was dampened by the news that seeped onto the grounds. Hitler convinced Slovakia to declare itself independent, then broke all his promises and invaded the Czech lands under the protectorates of Bohemia and Moravia.

Magda did not sleep through a single night that week, and Dr. Tauber asked her whether he ought to prescribe something for her.

She followed him to his office and he withdrew a small key from his desk. “I keep the supplies for the household separate from the rest of the clinic. Accounting and all that.”

He unlocked one of the cabinets on the wall. The top of it was lined up with anatomical models, including a heart that opened up to show the chambers and veins and arteries inside. Dr. Tauber withdrew a small wooden box, opened it and rifled through it. He tapped out four pills from a bottle into his hand.

“Try these. One a night and see whether you can get to sleep without them afterwards. All right?”

Magda nodded and examined the tablets.

“They’re not too strong. It will just help.”

He smiled kindly and she saw herself out. The first night it worked. And the second. After the fourth one, she tried to go without. It got better but it did not last. She went to Dr. Tauber once more when she’d tossed and turned an entire night.

On Palm Sunday, another “stray” sent by paní Eva appeared at the Tauber’s service gate, except he wasn’t any stray. Dr. Tauber knew him. They had served together in the military. A career soldier, stripped of his uniform and rank, Aleš Svoboda became the Taubers’ new groundskeeper and manager of the deer park. The first night he arrived, the staff

sat at the kitchen table to share a beet and potato stew, and Magda studied the stranger from afar. So much about him—from his compact figure, to his dry sense of humor and non-nonsense manner—reminded Magda of Bohdan and Matěj. After that, Magda slept without the help of any pills.

CHAPTER THREE

JUNE 1941

As she entered the Taubers' dining room, Magda was met with laughter—the type tinged by guilty pleasure or nervous dissent. She balanced the tray of soup bowls, then took a step back, hoping to blend into the jacquard wallpaper. She waited for instructions, but none of the six people took any notice of her.

Dr. Tauber had his back to Magda as he held his wire-rimmed spectacles in the air. His shoulders shook. Frau Tauber, opposite her husband, grinned widely at Mayor Brauer to her left. She gazed at him in anticipation as she absentmindedly stroked the diamond pendant around her neck. Frau Brauer, meanwhile, peered over at a small book the mayor held. Across from the Brauers, the Dvoráks, who had arrived from Prague earlier that day, glowed from their afternoon at the Taubers' pool. Their smiles had been plastered on since their arrival.

Magda had not seen the Taubers—or their friends—enjoying themselves like this in months, if not years. She found herself grinning as well.

“Just a moment.” Mayor Brauer lifted the book in his hand and raised a finger in the air. “I’m not finished yet. I’ve got at least ten more to go.”

The next wave of tittering did not deter the mayor.

“In Danish,” he read loudly, “it’s *lort*. In Swedish, it’s *Skit* —”

“And in Yiddish?” the mayor’s wife called.

“*Drek*.” Frau Tauber beamed.

“That is like the word for *dirt* in German,” the mayor said, looking over his glasses.

“Such prudes,” Mrs. Dvorákova said. “Do the Nazis even realize they speak Yiddish?”

“Gabriel,” Frau Tauber called to Mr. Dvorák, “can you imagine writing music together for a cabaret?”

“Straight to the piano with you.” He flung an arm toward the sitting room. “Excellent idea. Crappy music for crappy words.”

There was another round of delighted laughter.

The tray in Magda’s hands tipped dangerously.

“My goodness!” Frau Tauber clapped a hand over her mouth, but the next moment she uncovered it, still smiling. “Our soup is here. Look at us. This is what happens when your friends mix cocktails for you all afternoon. Magdalena, I’m so sorry for our behavior. Please do excuse us.”

She waved Magda in, and the people around the table settled down, whether sobered by the soup or Magda’s presence, Magda did not know.

She began with Frau Tauber and kept the left side of her face tilted down even if that made it look as if she had a crick in her neck. How else was she to hide the enormous birthmark on her cheek? As she reached the mayor’s bowl, she glanced

down at the small book he had set aside. It was a pamphlet really, innocent looking enough, until she read the title: *How to Say Shit in 20 Different Languages and Other Obscenities Likely Unfamiliar to the NSDAP*.

Magda choked back her surprise.

Frau Tauber's eyes were bright with mischief. "I'm sorry, Magdalena. It's truly inappropriate of us, and at the dinner table—"

"That may be," Dr. Tauber said, "but in comparison to other improprieties these days, utterly harmless."

Magda served him last. He jerked his chin upward and winked at her. She straightened her head. He was always doing that—always encouraging her to hold her head high. He knew how she felt about showing herself during dinner parties.

Back in the kitchen, she thought of the four guests in the dining room, sharing the day with the Taubers. The mayor of the town. The film producer. The singer. It was because of them that the family was still here, still safe. After all, it was not many Jewish families the Nazis issued a special exemption to.

After Magda served the main course, she set the empty fish platter into the sink. Jana and Renata were already eating, and Magda ladled a bowl of Jana's kielbasa soup.

Renata scooted over on the bench. "Eliška asleep?"

Magda took a bite before answering. The sausage was smoky and delicious. "Like a rock. I didn't even finish the first half of her favorite book." She noticed the clean bowl set across from her. "Where's Aleš?"

Jana rolled her eyes. “He and Walter are still in the vineyard.”

“Who’s Walter?” Magda asked.

Renata twisted her mouth the way she did when censoring herself. “The Fenkarts’ son. He used to come around and help Gabor with the deer until he entered the polytechnic in town. I think he’s just finished school... or something.” She made a sucking noise and glanced at Jana.

Magda knew of the Fenkarts, one of the Sudeten families. Frau Fenkart visited Dr. Tauber every week now that Dr. Tauber was seeing more patients at his office. Herr Fenkart was a quiet man and never appeared comfortable in the house, always waited for his wife on the hard, wooden bench in the foyer. But Renata seemed to have something else to add.

“What?” Magda asked.

Renata pursed her lips. “Nothing. Walter’s a charmer. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Magda scoffed. Who would ever be interested in her? After she finished her soup, she checked on the dinner party again. The Taubers and their guests had moved into the sitting room with their desserts. The tone was now serious, the atmosphere sedate compared to earlier. She cleared the dessert plates from the side tables.

“The Führer doesn’t want to drag out the conflict,” the mayor said. He rolled an unlit cigar in his hand. “He’s got France. He’s got Denmark.”

“He has Poland,” Dr. Tauber said. He gazed at Ruth Tauber and she shifted on the divan.

Mayor Brauer flicked the cigar up and reached for his coffee. “Anyway, with Germany’s assets frozen in the United

States, he'll have to stop.”

Anna Dvoráková clicked her tongue. “Max, I’m sorry, but if I had to cast you in a propaganda film, I wouldn’t. In Prague —”

“I’m telling you,” the mayor jabbed the cigar in her direction, “this will all blow over. Things will go back to the way they used to be. You’ll be making films again, Anna. Ruth and Gabriel here will be playing the concert halls again, and Johan won’t need...” He looked at Dr. Tauber but instead of finishing his sentence, he drank from his coffee cup. He shrugged. “It will all go back to normal.”

Magda had no reason to linger. Reluctantly, she stepped out of the drawing room and noticed that Dr. Tauber’s office was standing open with the desk lamp still on. She lay the tray onto a foyer table and went in to turn it off. She rarely had cause to go into his office, but she liked it, especially the layers of contradictory scents—of wood and antiseptic, of books and metal, of nature and technology—all in one space. The office faced the gravel drive and the fountain, now lit up in the dark. There were two plush chairs for guests before a desk with gold-plated handles. A bookshelf filled the space behind Dr. Tauber’s chair. Wooden filing cabinets were lined up on the wall opposite with his certificates and degrees, his medical license and the anatomical models.

She stopped at the brain and touched it. It was waxy. Renata claimed to have a strong stomach, but she found it unnatural to have one’s organs lying about a filing cabinet. She admitted that she closed her eyes when she had to dust the office.

Magda had laughed, secretly delighted to find that Renata had a weakness. “They’re not real. They’re made of wax and

stuff.”

She peered closer at them now, fascinated by the veins and the parts and the shapes. Renata told her that if Magda asked, Dr. Tauber would certainly explain some of this to her. He did to Eliška. Magda only had to ask.

She never did.

Dr. Tauber’s hospital hours had been reduced but he worked from home, seeing patients, holding consultations, and submitting his articles for medical journals. He could no longer travel and lecture at universities abroad so he had people coming to him. Patients ranged from the neighboring farmers to rather distinguished townsfolk, some coming as far as from Prague through word-of-mouth. Politicians mixed with the newspaper seller or the tailor in the foyer on Mondays, Wednesdays and every other Saturday. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Dr. Tauber was at the hospital in Litoměřice.

Magda turned off the lamp and returned to the corridor. She took the tray, and stopped at the bottom of the stairs. She should check on Eliška. With the girl’s room just above the dining room, the child had a habit of waking up at some point when there were noisy guests. Sometimes, all the way in her attic room above, Magda could hear Dr. Tauber coming home late, his footfalls tapping on the black-and-white marble floor. Now nine, Eliška was at an age where she felt old enough to sit in on adult conversation and she often asked the most precocious questions. Magda had caught her at least twice, standing outside the dining room, ear to the door.

As Magda had suspected, Eliška’s lamp was burning again and Eliška herself was sitting up beneath the sheets.

“What are you doing under there, Little Finch?” Magda lifted the covers off the girl.

Eliška giggled and threw herself back down on the pillows. Out popped her china doll from beneath her. “We were having a dinner party.”

“Did the guests and your parents wake you? They were laughing a lot.”

Eliška shook her head into the pillow. “You didn’t finish reading the story.”

“You fell asleep, silly.” Magda pulled the sheet up to the girl’s chin, making sure to tuck the doll in as well.

“I still know when you don’t finish the story. Will you do it now?”

Magda smiled. “No, it’s very late. Very, very late. Go back to sleep.”

“It’s loud outside.”

Crickets chirped down in the garden, and Magda rose to close the window. She returned to Eliška, stroked the dark blond curls away from her forehead, and kissed it. “Go to sleep now. Tomorrow we’ll see whether we can go to the lake.”

Eliška made a big O with her mouth before flashing a wide, toothy smile. She had two gaps where she’d lost her teeth. “And have ice cream?”

Magda chuckled. “We’ll see. Light on or off?” She reached to turn off the lamp.

“On.”

“What’s the word?”

“Please.”

“Only for a little while longer. I’ll come turn it off before I go to bed. Goodnight, my darling Finch.”

Eliška giggled. It was her nickname, but they had made a game of it, inspired by the bird encyclopedia in the library. The child was obsessed with it. Each night Eliška came up with a different species for Magda.

She looked up at the ceiling, then with that toothy grin she called, “Goodnight, my darling Barn Owl.”

Magda laughed, made big eyes in return, and hooted before putting a finger to her lips and shutting her eyes tight. When she opened them, Eliška squeezed hers shut.

Downstairs, Magda retrieved the tray of dessert plates and cups, her heart skipping when she bumped the glass flower vase. When it stopped wobbling, she breathed a sigh of relief. Made of handblown Venetian glass, it was one of Frau Tauber’s favorites.

Magda’s first real chance to examine the house was when Renata helped her move her things and bedding from the guest room to the attic room the night after her arrival. Renata then gave Magda a full tour of the villa and when she had explained the eclectic collection of vases and artifacts scattered on the foyer tables and their significance, Magda better understood the kind of people who lived here. The Taubers were open people, curious people, and well-traveled. Magda learned that Frau Tauber made it a habit to shop for something special wherever she performed. It was far from an even exchange, Magda thought. Ruth Tauber played piano beautifully, made people cry and smile, so the souvenirs she collected were worth only a fraction of the impressions she must have left behind. For Eliška, Frau Tauber always searched out either a figurine with a fox or something with a fox motif. Eliška loved

foxes, any kind of fox, and was absolutely convinced that the mansion was named Villa Fox in Czech because of her. Dr. Tauber often joked that it was a chicken-and-egg situation.

Magda returned to the kitchen, where Renata and Jana were drying the dishes. As she helped put them away, the back door opened and Aleš walked in with a young man.

“My goodness.” Jana stuck her hands on her hips. “Is that really you, Walter? You’ve lost all that baby fat.”

Renata chucked the stranger under the chin. “Walter Fenkart, aren’t you just handsome?”

Magda went back to furiously wiping a serving platter.

Aleš moved to his soup bowl on the table. “Walter’s here for a few weeks to help me. Jana, you got an extra bowl for him?”

The cook nodded. Aleš took his place at the table and served himself out of the tureen, but Walter said he would fetch his own bowl.

“I still know where they are.” And then he was standing next to Magda, reaching into the open cupboard.

“You’re new,” he said. “I’m Walter Fenkart.”

Magda stared at the bowl in his hand. There was a small chip on the underside of the rim. With a quick glance she took him in. A bit taller than Renata. Sandy-brown hair. Deep-set eyes. A thin, straight mouth. His ears were nice, perfectly shaped.

“Normally,” he said, “that’s when you tell me your name.”

Magda stood with the dish towel hanging limply at her side. “Yes...”

He had a wide smile. “All right, Yes. Nice to meet you, Yes.”

“Magda, are you flirting over there?” Renata teased. “I say, Aleš, I think our Magda’s flirting.”

“Get on over here, Walter, and eat,” Aleš called.

Magda backed away behind the open cupboard door, the glass pane between them.

Walter cocked his head. “All right then, I’ll call you by your proper name. Magda.”

“It’s Magdalena.”

His smile softened. “I like that even better.” He winked and turned away.

CHAPTER FOUR

JUNE 1941

In her room, Magda retrieved the small box of mementos she had packed with her and rifled through an envelope of photographs before withdrawing the one she was looking for. Radek Jelínek. The dark-haired, freckled boy grinned next to her. He was handsome. And kind. He had made her laugh. A bouquet of wildflowers was in her hands. She was not smiling. She was looking at him, though, through a veil of eyelashes. Behind them, the schoolhouse.

Magda's school in Voštiny had been a whitewashed one-story building. It had looked innocent enough from the outside, but it was Magda's hell inside. A geography lesson of Russia had shaped Magda's school years.

"Look, she's got the map of Siberia tattooed onto her cheek," one of the boys hollered.

The rest of the students jeered and the jokes grew, spreading like a virus. She'd been teased and taunted all her life but children were loud and direct. Children did not hide behind propriety. Some of the adults in the village had always dripped assertions about Magda's birthmark, comments about the devil or vampires, ginger hair and witchery. Even after her color had turned to the light chestnut Frau Tauber now so admired.

She removed more photos and spread them around. Bohdan and Matěj with boxing gloves, shorts and sport-shirts. Their mother stood between them, still young-looking, at least in the eyes. The brothers had kept busy, standing up for Magda any time they caught someone teasing their baby sister. Occasionally, it even came to fistfights. And Magda had often felt that the only people that could possibly love her—or defend her—were her family.

Except for Radek. He was the neighbors' youngest son, and was Magda's age. Radek accepted her disfigurement because—he'd once logically explained—he had seen it all his life so there was nothing novel about it. For Magda, Radek's friendship was a relief from her loneliness, until the summer they turned fourteen and everything about them had changed. Radek became uncertain, shy, silly, and sometimes downright flabbergasting.

Matěj had nudged Magda one night while she was complaining to her mother. "It's because he's smitten with you."

Magda was horrified. Matěj laughed.

"Our brother is right," Bohdan said. He was unsmiling, which meant to Magda that he was also not lying, not just saying it to join forces with their brother in teasing her.

She had fled to her bed but not before Bohdan hollered, "You let me know if I should take care of him."

That horrified her all the more. For the rest of the summer, she avoided Radek as best she could and, at some point, he stopped coming around at all. She missed him.

On the first day of school, Radek came by as usual. She came to the door and followed him at a distance, both of them

pretending nothing was different, except it was.

“Radek, I forgot something.”

He stopped ahead of her and turned. He looked curious but did not ask. “I can wait.”

“No, go on without me.”

Radek walked slowly away, and Magda ran back to the farm, stopped some distance from it and waited until she felt it was safe. When she showed up at the schoolhouse, Radek was waiting for her in the doorway. Empty-handed, she could not explain what she had gone to get and his confusion turned to anger.

“I’m sorry,” she said. And she was. She knew what rejection felt like.

“I had a crush on you. That’s all,” he said. “I don’t any longer.” He marched away from her.

During the break, she tried to talk to him. He found a group of boys to play football with. After school, he walked home with the older boys. Magda walked home alone. This went on the entire week, and finally she found the courage to meet him early enough on the road, to corner him, and try and explain.

“Radek,” she said. “You are like a brother to me. I’m sorry. I’ll never lie to you again. Please stop ignoring me.”

Radek’s eyes were serious, and she saw something bright and quick in them before he leaned in and kissed her on her left cheek. It left a tingling sensation, not at all unpleasant. He watched her for a moment with those dark, deep brown pools of his. “I’m not your brother.” And then he leaned in again to kiss her mouth.

Magda pulled back. So did he. She placed a hand on her cheek, where the lingering gesture of affection blossomed into something wholly foreign to her. “That’s enough for now.”

They walked to school together after that. Their families still met after Sunday Mass, and Magda and Radek would talk about school. But Radek played football with the older boys and found other things to do. And there were girls who followed him around and tittered when he walked by in the schoolyard. But he never tried to kiss her again.

A year later, when they were fifteen, Radek became persistent once more. He showed up at her house on her birthday, with a bouquet of wildflowers and an invitation to the village dance.

“I can’t,” Magda stammered.

Someone shoved her out the door and into the yard. Magda spun around.

Her mother stood there, arms folded. “Take the flowers, and the invitation, Magda. I’m going to sew you a dress.”

Magda stared at Radek and this time, unlike the last summer where they had floundered with one another, he looked determined. He crossed his arms, his stance wide in the yard before her, and his jaw, which was sharper now, was set.

Magda took the flowers and fled into the house and to her bed. When her mother sat down next to her, she was inconsolable. She begged her mother to allow her to renege.

“Why won’t you go?”

“Because they’ll all make fun of him.”

“Who all?”

“Everyone, simply everyone!”

“Your brothers will be there.”

Magda huffed. “They’re going to be defending me until I’m an old woman, is that right?”

Her mother stroked Magda’s arm.

“I don’t want to go out there,” Magda said. “Not so that he can be made fun of. There are plenty of girls who have their eyes on him! At some point, Radek will be sick of all the jokes and jeers, too. He’s only doing it because he feels sorry for me.”

Her mother sighed, took Magda’s hand, and held it. “Magdalena, your birthmark is not an excuse for avoiding risks. It should not be the thing that prevents you from performing acts of courage.”

“There is nothing courageous about letting Radek take me to the dance.”

Her mother smiled gently. “Everything about showing love requires an act of courage. Absolutely everything. But loving yourself is perhaps the most heroic act a person can perform.”

Magda had given in, and her instincts had been correct. It was a disaster. She and Radek avoided one another until the day he left for Germany to find work. His goodbye had been a late apology. Her well wishes, her forgiveness.

She picked up the photo of her mother and herself. Mother was playing the guitar and Magda was sitting at her feet, her elbow propped up on the bench. They had sung together that day, and her father had snapped the photo. Magda placed it on the pile and swept all the photos before her together. Her mother’s last letter lay on top of the mementos.

Her brothers had now received conscription notices calling them into the German military. Radek shared a similar fate,

her mother had written. The Jelíneks were broken-hearted.

That day Radek had asked her to the dance, Magda told her mother she did not want to be a hero. Ever. And she still did not.

CHAPTER FIVE

JUNE 1941

In summer, the deer roamed the surrounding forests and fields, so after removing the fencing, Aleš erected an outdoor play area for Eliška. She had a little house shaped like a Swiss chalet and an outdoor table made of a tree stump upon which Aleš painted a flowered tablecloth and trinkets. He painted four smaller stumps into toadstools and put them around the table to sit on. Delighted, the Taubers held a grand ceremony with a ribbon-cutting and everything. Eliška wore her finest outfit and invited everyone to tea.

Magda took Eliška outdoors as often as possible. They played games of *Pesek* or hide-and-peek. Sometimes she created a treasure hunt and hid messages in a hollowed-out knot in one of the cedars. Eliška would discover pictures or just shapes and colors with instructions to find things around the grounds that matched them best: flower petals, leaves, plants, sticks of wood, pine cones, or rocks. Magda planted the hints while Eliška took her piano lessons. It was also usually at that time that Aleš and Walter cooled off by the pool. Magda learned that Walter was a competitive swimmer and regional champion.

Soon after he'd shown up on the premises, Magda began dreaming of him only to feel flustered the next morning. She

squirreled away her growing attraction to him, reminding herself of the disaster that had been Radek.

Up to then, Magda had paid little attention to what went on in the deer park. The animals were a curiosity, but the wildlife management itself was a mystery to her. It was something the very wealthy did, and usually there were sportsmen in the family. Although the Taubers organized a hunting party for their friends once a year, they showed little interest in the sport themselves.

Sporadically, to hide her interest, Magda asked questions about the deer, taking care to spread her inquiries out amongst everyone in the house. But not much escaped the housekeeper. Renata had all the fodder she needed. As soon as Walter and Aleš stopped working and came in for a meal, Renata listed out Magda's questions: *Magda wants to know how you get the deer into the pen come winter. Magda wants to know why the Taubers keep them at all. Magda wants to know if she should help you prune the vines. Magda wants to know...*

Magda found a reason to flee the room every time Renata started.

"Why ask at all if you don't want to hear the boy talk?" Jana chided Magda later.

"I think he would much prefer talking to you than to me," Renata teased.

Magda's neck felt hot. She was not like Renata. Aleš and Renata were no secret affair, and if it was supposed to be a secret, they certainly were no good at hiding it. Once in a while, on the third floor where Magda shared a room with Jana, she heard Renata's deep chuckling through the bedroom wall and knew that the groundskeeper was with her.

Whereas the two were solidly proportionate to one another in character, Aleš and Renata were wholly mismatched in physical features. Renata was a tall, big-boned, twenty-six-year-old Slovakian with a head of dark curly hair. Aleš, half a foot shorter than Renata, had a receded hairline. He was a compact Czech, rooted to nature, and had fourteen years of experience over Renata. He was the kind of man, Renata once laughed, about whom fairy tales were never written and, therefore, a man she could depend on.

“Aleš”—she had winked—“gets things done.”

When Magda got the letter about her brothers in the Wehrmacht, Aleš sat down to dinner that night and had her in his sights.

“I heard you’re worried.”

Magda was surprised. Jana must have said something. She was the only one Magda had told about the letter.

Aleš then recalled how he had been a commander in the Czechoslovakian army. He’d been posted across the river at Theresienstadt when the Wehrmacht arrived to demobilize the local guard. His youngest brother, Gabriel, was in the seminary, which gave Renata another thing to tease him about. How could such a devilish man, she chided, be related to such a pious sibling?

Aleš had opened a door for her that day. Magda slowly gathered the stories about the others in the house. Jana, whose Prussian husband died in the Great War, left her home in Berlin to take care of her dying mother in a village some forty kilometers from Villa Liška. She never left Czechoslovakia again. Jana kept to herself, almost creating an invisible wall within their tiny shared room, and Magda respected it. From afar, she admired how incredibly resourceful the cook was.

And there were letters. Letters that Jana read and letters that she wrote, and never a word to anyone about them.

Renata was even more mysterious. Magda imagined the woman was running away from a dark secret she'd left behind back east. Sometimes she would catch Renata daydreaming, a sheen of sadness draped around her. But if Renata caught Magda watching her, she became brusque and used her feather duster to swat Magda's subtle queries away.

It seemed, Magda decided, the Taubers' help were all taking refuge in this house on the hill, a crew of lost souls that had drifted up Radobýl Mountain and to the iron gates outside. The Taubers had taken them all in, together with their stories and burdens.

One drizzling day, the temperatures dropped to an unseasonable low. Jana sent Magda to fetch wood, saying she would heat the main rooms before Dr. Tauber returned from his shift at the hospital.

The woodpile was outside the service door, and Magda caught sight of Aleš and Walter returning from the stable. She hurried back into the kitchen, quickly snatching up a plate of biscuits to make it look as if she at least had a reason to leave when they appeared.

Jana came out of the pantry. "What do you think you're doing with those? Those are for Frau Tauber's coffee guests this afternoon." She playfully smacked Magda's hand and almost made the biscuits slide off the plate.

Magda reddened. "I thought I'd bring some to Eliška."

“Bring some to Eliška,” Jana tutted. “Bring some to Eliška, I bet. Look at you. Since you came to work here, you’ve put on weight. Be careful, or you’ll be round and fat like an old farmer’s wife.”

Magda replaced the plate onto the table. She understood Jana was teasing, yet it still stung. When Walter and Aleš appeared, Magda quickly hid her face in the palm of her hand.

“Are you harassing the staff again?” Aleš said to Jana. “Look, Walter. Jana’s baked for us. How sweet.”

He swiped three from the plate and offered one each to Walter and to Magda before popping the third one into his mouth. “Very sweet,” he said through his mouthful.

He took the wood out of Jana’s arms, and Jana chased after him with a diatribe on how she’d have to bake all day to keep up with their pilfering.

Magda stood alone in the kitchen with Walter.

“Aren’t you going to eat that, Magdalena?”

She ducked her head and weighed the biscuit in her hand.

“You may as well. You’ve already touched it.” He took a bite of his. “These are good. Where did Jana get anis?”

Magda sniffed hers. Anis. That was what the scent was. “She has her connections.”

“Is that right?” Walter smiled conspiratorially. His eyes were a pale green like the first signs of spring. “Connections are good to have these days. Can’t have too many of those.”

She nibbled the biscuit.

“Renata says you’re interested in the deer management,” Walter said. “They’ve been kept for generations. Dr. Tauber

decided to keep doing it after his father passed away because it helps the deer through the winter, but also because Frau Tauber likes them.”

“Oh.” Magda shifted on her feet. She was finished with the biscuit. “And you?”

“I do it for fun. And to stay out from underfoot, I suppose.” His eyes flicked to the service door. “It’s not always easy at home.”

“How is your mother?”

Walter winced.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...” Magda’s face flushed.

“It’s all right. You can ask. She hasn’t gotten better. Dr. Tauber says a few months at most.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

He nodded. “Eliška calls you Magda all the time. Why is that?”

“She asked me what nickname I have. It’s what my friends call me, my family, I guess.”

He grinned. “Magdalena is nice. It makes you sound so, I don’t know, regal. But, you let me know when we’re friends, and I’ll call you Magda, too.”

Her insides were effervescent. She looked for an escape route, but Walter leaned against the table as if he were just getting started.

Just ask. Just find the courage to ask a question. “So if you’re not working here after the summer, what will you be doing next?”

Walter shrugged. “Swim. Find a job. Work.”

“What about working here?”

“I’m looking to do the kind of technical work I’ve been trained for. This agricultural stuff, it’s not really for me.”

“I suppose.” What was really for her then? Was this it? Back in Voštiny, her prospects had been fairly limited as well.

“Then there is...” He tilted his head toward the door. “I expect I’ll get the letter at some point. Get conscripted.”

She thought about that. She thought about her brothers. Her parents, piled into a house that was not theirs, onto land that did not belong to them. Her heartbroken grandparents, far away from their farm in Voštiny. The lines on her mother’s face the last time Magda had seen her. And how very wrong Mayor Brauer had been. Hitler appeared far from finished with his efforts to expand Germany’s territories.

Magda looked up at Walter. How could she tell him that she hoped he would not have to join the Wehrmacht? To tell Walter this without him thinking—without him realizing—she yearned for his affections, was impossible.

“Yeah,” Walter said, moving away from the table. “So, there is that too. The army.”

Magda opened her mouth but with forced brightness, he changed the subject.

“I’m in a swim meet in two weeks. You could come watch.”

Magda’s heart did a somersault.

He grabbed an apple off the table and tossed it into the air, then winked as he polished it against his shirt. “Renata and Aleš are coming. Would be nice to have a whole cheering section.”

It was only a friendly invitation then. He was not interested in her.

He stood in front of her. She only came up to his chest. She shifted to the left. He moved to his right. She smiled a little and turned sideways so he could get past her. He still stood before her, the apple in his hand.

“You doing a treasure hunt with Eliška this afternoon?” he asked.

He must have seen her setting up secrets on the grounds earlier. Magda looked out the kitchen window. The drizzle seemed to have let up, but the sky was still cloudy. She could have Eliška dress warmly. She would see him again, then. She nodded.

He headed for the door.

“Walter?” she squeaked. Like a mouse.

He waited.

“I don’t want you to... lose the meet. I’ll come and cheer you on.”

Walter grinned. “OK. See you around.”

The service door slammed shut, and Walter’s figure was fluid behind the lead-pane window.

Eliška bounced down the stairs in a light-blue raincoat and galoshes. Magda told her she had a whole surprise set up for her.

“Don’t forget your hat.” Magda buttoned up the girl’s coat.

Eliška skipped across the flagstone terrace and down the steps toward her play area.

“The first clue is near here,” Magda said. “You need to look for some sort of mark, something out of sorts with the natural environment.”

Eliška smiled slyly and tapped her temple. “The knot in the tree.”

“You would think so,” Magda said, “but today it’s different.”

But her charge was already scrutinizing the old hiding place. “No, it’s not. You’re trying to trick me.”

Eliška raised herself on tiptoe and reached her hand into the knot and withdrew a red satin ribbon.

“See, you’re trying to trick me.”

But Magda had not put it there. She glanced around.

Walter. *OK. See you around.*

Magda hid her delight. “You’re right. I tricked you. Let’s see if you can figure out the next clue.”

Eliška was already ahead of her. She twirled slowly around and then dashed to a nearby hedge and pulled off a second red ribbon. She turned to Magda with a look of exasperated disbelief. “This is too easy, Magda. Now I know what I have to look for.”

The third ribbon hung from a white rose bush. The fourth, on the rail by the swimming pool. The fifth—a large one—around one of the maple trees at the front of the house. The sixth, up high, in the bird feeder. Magda was enjoying the game, and she guessed even more so than Eliška. But to where was it all leading?

The stable. And to Walter.

He was leaning against the doorway, tossing the apple he'd taken from the kitchen. Magda felt her middle flutter again.

“Look, Magda!” Eliška pointed. “There's another ribbon.”

It was around Walter's neck, tied in a bow.

Eliška laughed and jumped at Walter, trying to reach the ribbon.

Walter grinned and straightened.

“I'm too short to reach it, Magda. You get it.”

“She's not that much taller than you are,” Walter said. He winked at Magda, then bent his knees. Eliška tried again, but he straightened once more.

“Magda, you take it,” Eliška called.

Magda stepped in front of Walter.

“Hey, you're smiling,” he said. He bent forward, the ribbon within grasp.

She reached to pull on it, but Walter snapped at her fingers, as if to bite her.

Magda pulled back. Eliška shrieked and laughed.

“Go on,” Walter said. “Try again.”

Carefully, like testing lake water, Magda reached for the ribbon again, and this time he caught two of her fingers in his teeth. She yelped in surprise.

Walter and Eliška laughed, an echo from those schoolyard days.

He bent forward once more. “Again.”

“You take it off.” Magda stepped away and went behind Eliška, her hands on the girl’s shoulders.

Walter’s expression wavered with disappointment but he turned to Eliška and covered his mouth as he bent to her level.

Eliška reached out and snatched the end of the ribbon, yanked it, and had it in her hand in a second. She dangled it before Magda. “I win, I win!”

Walter glanced at Magda as he spoke to the girl. “We’ve offered to keep one of the neighbors’ ponies while they’re away. I thought you’d like to meet it.”

Eliška’s eyes widened and she made that O with her mouth before dashing into the stable which was used only for the equipment they needed to harvest the grapes. In the last stall was a dark-brown pony.

“What’s his name?” Eliška was already climbing up the slats and stretching her hand over.

The pony took a step forward to nuzzle her hand.

“Coco,” Walter said.

Magda leaned against the wall. “I don’t know if her parents would allow her to be here.”

“It’s just an apple,” Walter said. He handed Eliška the apple, and she wrapped her hands around it.

“No,” Magda called. She went to Eliška.

Eliška pulled back with a little gasp.

“Look.” Magda took the apple and held it flat in her palm. “Like this. Coco can’t taste the difference between your fingers and your apple when he bites down.”

Eliška looked up, checking to see if she was holding it correctly. Magda guided her hand back over, standing behind her so she would not slip, and Coco raised his head to take the apple. It fell to the ground, and Eliška groaned.

“Look what I did.”

Walter said, “If you want, I can put a saddle on her.” He looked at Magda meaningfully. “Coco’s a she.”

Magda blinked. “Doesn’t matter. Either way, Eliška could have been hurt.”

“How?”

“Look,” Eliška said. “Coco’s letting me scratch his hair.”

Walter laughed and stepped forward. “Coco is a she, and that’s called a mane.”

Magda stepped aside again and Walter moved next to her.

“I’m sorry if I upset you,” he said. “I was just teasing.”

“It’s just...”

“Just what?”

Eliška climbed down and tried to pet the pony through the slats as it munched the last of the apple from the ground.

“I guess I have a temperament like the month of April,” Magda explained.

Walter turned and faced her, and one hand reached out to stroke her cheek. She pulled back. His hand hovered near her face for a moment before he dropped it.

“April, April, er weiß nicht was er will.”

Now it was she who was uncertain. “What do you mean by that?”

“April, April, it knows not what it wants,” he said in Czech. “Do you know what you want, Magda?”

Heat climbed into Magda’s face. Him. She wanted him.

“My brothers always say I should manage my temper better.”

“You have brothers? How many?”

“Two.”

“Older or younger?”

“Both older. Bohdan and Matěj.”

Walter’s eyebrows twitched. “I’d better watch out, then.”

Magda smiled sadly. “They’re in the Wehrmacht now. Nowhere nearby to protect me.”

Walter’s smile evaporated. He watched Eliška. “Yeah. That again.”

Magda ducked her head. “Walter?”

“Yes, Magdalena.”

She liked that. “I hope the war ends before you’re called up.”

His eyes softened. “Do you—”

“There you two are!” Renata stood in the stable door.

Magda whisked Eliška away from the pony and grasped her hand.

Renata’s look shifted over all of them. “The Taubers want everyone in the house.”

“What is it?” Magda asked.

Renata looked at Walter, her mouth twisting. “Germany’s invaded the Russian territories.”

Walter stepped forward and Magda stared at the back of his head, willing him to turn to her, to finish his question, to ask her what he was going to ask her, to begin something before it was all over.

Instead, Walter’s back straightened, his shoulders fell back and he lifted his head. His hands, however, were both clenched.

CHAPTER SIX

JULY 1941

It was hot the day of Walter's swimming meet. In the stands, Magda sat between Jana and Renata on the bleachers. Aleš sat on Renata's other side. The Taubers were just behind them, Frau Tauber in a hat and a pair of sunglasses. As the swimmers walked out in a line to their starting places, Magda attempted not to stare at Walter's triangular form. There was another teammate next to him, a boy with very light blond hair and wearing the same black one-piece swimsuit as Walter.

Six swimmers stepped onto the diving blocks when the judge blew the whistle. A second signal and the swimmers crouched into their positions. A pistol popped and six trim bodies launched into the pool. Magda's heart skipped a beat.

"Look at him go!" Renata pointed to Walter in the third lane.

The swimmers were pulling apart, a "V", like geese migrating in the fall, and Walter was leading them. They hit the wall with a somersault and Magda saw Walter's long, lean shape launch off like a missile beneath the water. He rose with powerful strokes, still in the lead. Now the differences between the swimmers was pronounced. Walter's teammate was the only one even close to keeping up with him.

Magda was cheering with the others. Below her, Eliška was standing with two other girls her age. She pointed to the pool and bounced on her toes as she applauded.

At the end of the pool, Walter's head and arm shot out of the water and he spun around, wiping his face, eyes trained on the clock. The line judge's whistle declared him the winner.

Renata clapped Magda's back. "I had no idea how thrilling this was! Did you see him go!"

Aleš was still clapping, a broad smile. "I'm just sorry his mother couldn't see it!"

Jana leaned forward. "She sees him. I'm sure she does. She'd be so proud."

Walter rose out of the pool, sleek and wet, grabbed the towel from his trainer and began drying himself off. The others came to shake his hand and congratulate him. Magda smiled broadly at his show of sportsmanship but frowned as two Nazi-uniformed officers extracted themselves from the other spectators. They strode over to where all the swimmers were still collecting themselves. Magda nudged Jana and Renata. They had also seen.

The officers shook hands with Walter, his teammate and coach. The boys listened attentively, their towels pressed up against their chests as they were still catching their breaths. Their looks changed from polite curiosity to smiles, encouraged by the officers' obvious enthusiasm. The two boys looked at one another, then eagerly at the officers. Magda imagined Walter saying thank you as he reached to shake each of their hands again.

The other swimmers threw longing and envious glances at the group.

Frau Tauber suddenly rose behind Magda. “What are those women doing?”

Renata also shot up. She was already pushing past Aleš before Magda could register the scene below.

The two girls Eliška had been playing with had been yanked away by what appeared to be their mothers. They gripped the girls by the hands and one of them was pointing at Eliška and then jabbing her finger toward the exit at the end of the pool.

Frau Tauber and Renata reached the scene at the same time. Frau Tauber bent down to Eliška, then rose as both women angrily pointed to the exit again.

Magda’s heart fell. Dr. Tauber was making his way down now. She glanced at the swimmers. The two officers had walked back to the bleachers, and those two mothers joined them. Walter was watching the scene and when he tipped his head in Magda’s direction, he made some sort of face she could not interpret before he followed the rest of the swimmers to where their teams were gathered.

Frau Tauber and Dr. Tauber each took Eliška by the hand, and without another glance at the rest of them, made their way to the exit.

Jana and Aleš also stood and Magda joined them. Quietly, for nobody had to explain what had happened, they left the meet.

Humiliation and shame. Magda knew these feelings well. She understood the smarting pain they left behind. She understood the despair that followed each attempt to rise above that pain

only to be felled again by the next set of taunts, the next set of judgments, by the next bitter disappointment that followed in the wake of knowing that the world had no place for the ugly. It had no place for those marked as different.

Eliška went to bed early after a quiet supper, and Magda had to go in and turn off her light. The lamp flickered before she reached for it and she pulled back, wondering if she had imagined it. It burned steadily. She tugged the small chain to turn off the lamp, and kissed the girl.

“Magda?”

“Are you still awake?” She kneeled at the side of the bed.

“Those girls’ mothers were really mean. We were just watching the swimmers together. I didn’t even touch them.”

“Is that what they said? That you touched them?”

Eliška’s lower lip trembled.

Dirty Jew. Rotten Jew. Magda’s blood simmered.

“Why do they hate me?”

“They don’t hate you.”

“That’s what Mother and Father said, too. But if they don’t hate me...” Eliška turned her head to the window. “What is it then?”

It was fear. Not hate. Magda rose and sat on the edge of the mattress, stroking the child’s hair from her forehead. “I know how it feels.”

“You do?” Eliška studied her. “How do you get them to stop?”

“You can’t. Instead, I think about all the people who do love me.” That’s what Magda’s mother had always said.

“Like you?” A hopeful smile.

“Like me.”

She kissed Eliška once more and the girl threw her arms around Magda’s neck. “You’re my greatest friend, Magda.”

“I love you, Little Finch.”

“Goodnight, Sweet Nightingale.”

Back upstairs in her room, Jana was already asleep and Magda thought back to that village dance with Radek. The boys that he played football with had wrangled him away from Magda almost immediately and Radek left her standing alone as his friends cast narrow-eyed glares her way, laughing, punching Radek in the arm, clapping his shoulder, turning him away so that his back was to her. And she watched as Radek, at first, remained mute, then chuckled nervously, and gradually deflated with each new joke.

She had fled, hid herself in the barn at the farm until some point where she thought it was appropriate for her to appear back home. When her parents questioned her, she said she’d had a wonderful time. But when her brothers arrived, Magda was found out. Bohdan and Matěj appeared at the dance and asked Radek what had happened. They then made certain Radek understood he was no longer welcome at the Novák farm.

Devastated, humiliated, shamed—the three emotions as familiar to her as any child’s imaginary friends—Magda had crawled into her bed and did not come out until Monday for school. Her parents did not even make her get up for church. She figured it was their way of apologizing for not trusting Magda’s instincts in the first place.

Radek did not come by to check on how she was, or ask what had happened to her.

Just like Walter had not come to look for her now after she'd left the meet early.

On the Monday after that village dance, Magda had walked back to school alone, and Radek was in the schoolyard with another girl, his eyes bright and pained—the glint of someone lovestruck. For Magda, he cast her only the dull, downward look of pity.

Today, she hid from Walter behind the walls of Villa Liška.

Jana was snoring lightly so that was not what awoke Magda.

Ping!

Ping!

Another stone hit the windowsill. He had to be throwing big stones to reach this high.

Magda rose and unlatched the window and leaned out. She could barely make him out on the lawn below.

“MAG-DA,” he shouted in a whisper. “Where have you been?”

“Here,” she shouted back hoarsely. “Always here!”

“Shush!” Jana rolled over onto her other side, muttering. “Go outside already.”

Magda hesitated and Walter whistled, then waved for her to come down.

She dressed quickly, slid into a pair of slippers, thought better and padded barefoot down the limestone stairwell. She

stopped before Eliška's door and cracked it open. Walter had not woken her.

The service door creaked open—she'd never noticed that during the day—and she was out on the lawn. Crickets strummed the air with their music and the lawn emanated the hot summer day into the soles of her feet.

Walter dashed across to her and skidded to a stop. She could make out his grin in the moonlight, and she could smell beer.

As if he'd read her mind, he produced two bottles out of a bag. "I thought you'd come to the lake with us and celebrate. You never showed."

"You never said."

"I didn't?"

She shook her head, unable to speak. He'd been thinking of her. He'd been expecting her. He'd wanted her to be with them. And he thought she had rejected him.

"Let's go to the pool," he said. "We can celebrate my win. Three gold medals, Magda. Three!"

Her spirits soared as they dashed up the lawn and across the terrace then to the other side of the house. He lifted the latch of the gate and he slipped out of his shoes. She pulled up her dress a little as they crouched down to put their legs in at the deep end. The lights along the pool had been turned off hours ago. A slight breeze rustled the leaves, and delivered the scent of roses and lavender. Beyond the ridge, where the valley and the river were far below, Magda could only see the lights from the brewery chimney and the granary.

Walter popped the swing top bottles open and handed her one. They clinked bottles and Magda tried the first beer she'd

had in a long, long time. She discreetly wiped the foam from her upper lip, trying to hold back the need to giggle once more.

“What did you think?” Walter asked. “Did you like the meet?”

She nodded. In the back of her mind, she thought, *Ask me why I left after the first heat?* But he didn't. He didn't ask because he knew. He knew. And yet, he was here now.

“Gustav is pretty upset. He lost every heat to me.” Gustav had to be the teammate Magda had observed. “Every single one except the relay that we swam together. He hates losing.”

“And so do you,” Magda said, before she could stop herself.

But Walter nodded and chuckled. “Yeah, I'm pretty competitive.” He took another pull from the bottle. “But we're both going to train for the nationals.”

“You are?” She wondered why she dreaded the news.

“Yeah.” He turned to her. “You saw those two officers, didn't you?”

She gently swung her feet in the water and said nothing.

“They're from a school. A polytechnic. I could study and compete, and...”

She turned her head to him.

“They said I could be the next Helmut Fischer. Fastest one-hundred-meter crawl. He set it in 1936. Nobody's beat his record yet.”

“And you want to be Helmut Fischer?”

He now moved his feet like she was, same tempo, the water swirling from him to her and back to him.

“I want to be better,” he said. He grinned. “Told you I was competitive.”

“You always want the best...”

He tipped his beer toward the other end of the pool before raising it to his lips. “Yeah.”

She was not the best.

She took out her feet and began pushing herself up, but his hand clapped around her wrist.

“Where are you going?”

“To bed.”

“You haven’t finished your beer. Why are you always running off, Magda?”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

He leaned towards her. She dropped her feet into the water without making a splash, gentle, like his kiss was. He pulled away and his eyes roved her face. She dared herself—willed herself—to not look away, to not drop her head. He wanted the best.

His second kiss was stronger, more probing. His hand was on the back of her head and this time her feet lifted out of the water on their own accord. He got onto his knees. She met him. He put his arms around her. She met him. He kissed her neck. She looked up to the stars.

In bed again, she thought about his kisses, his plea. His news.

“Magdalena?”

“Yes.”

They had stood beneath the cedar trees, and she did not want him to go. Not tonight. Not ever.

“I don’t want you to think I’m a coward.”

“Why would I do that? I wouldn’t.”

“I should never have said I don’t want to be conscripted. It’s embarrassing. My father—he’d be ashamed.”

“Any way you decide, Walter, I won’t think you’re a coward.”

He sighed with relief.

She planted a kiss on his cheek. It was not enough for him and she’d had to softly push him away.

“When do you go?” she asked. “To this summer training camp?”

“Tomorrow.”

She backed away. “Tomorrow?”

He would want to say goodbye the next day. She wouldn’t let him. Him leaving her so soon was worse than being teased from afar. Walter’s reasons to compete for the regime might be all right for him, but what if she no longer fit into his plans?

CHAPTER SEVEN

AUGUST 1941

The sun shimmered on the surface of Žernosecké Lake, and beyond the beach, sailboats sailed lazily by and around the two small islands. The hills wavered on the horizon in the heat. At the sound of a familiar voice among the seemingly hundreds, Magda propped herself up on her elbows and shaded her eyes.

“Is that Walter?” Renata asked next to her. She lowered her paperback novel and flipped her sunglasses down from her forehead. “From the look of that torso, it must be.”

Walter was sitting on the shoulders of a boy, wrestling another pair of boys. When Walter lost his balance and fell backward into the water, Magda laughed into her hand.

Renata snorted and poked the sleeping Aleš next to her. He was lying on his stomach, his head resting on crossed arms.

“Look,” she said. “Walter’s here.”

Aleš twisted around, but lay back down. “You’re better off looking the other way.”

“What on earth for?” Renata rolled her eyes and examined Magda over the rim of her glasses. “It’s summer. It’s hot. And I happen to know he was hanging around on his last day at the villa, hoping to see you, Magda. Go on. Go over and say hello.”

Magda shook her head. "I'll just stay here."

The four boys splashed out of the lake, laughing and jostling one another. Magda sat up and folded her legs beneath her. Renata smirked and lifted the book to her nose again. The boys fell onto their towels, lying in the sand just a dozen or so feet away.

Still laughing, Walter leapt up, grabbed his towel, and began drying himself off. He suddenly turned in Magda's direction and froze. She lifted her hand, but one of his companions sprang up and swiped Walter's towel away. It was the blond boy, Walter's teammate.

Walter tugged on the towel, and the companion faced Magda as well. She dropped her hand and pretended not to notice. The companion nudged Walter, and Walter shook his head. The other boy looked more intently at Magda. She knew these episodes. She'd been through enough of them in Voštiny.

Renata waved a Reichsmark in her face. "Why don't you go get us some ice cream? Aleš wants strawberry, and I'll have chocolate."

"I want no such thing," Aleš grunted.

"Fine. Get him a chocolate one too."

Magda sprang at the chance. She took the Reichsmark and started for the ice cream seller. Aleš rolled over onto his side and she heard him scolding Renata.

"Magda!" Walter called as he began racing his companion up the sandy slope. "That is you."

He was lying. He'd recognized her from the start. It was not as if it was difficult to identify her.

“How are you?” he asked. “This is Gustav. We’re swimmates.”

Gustav had blond eyelashes, and he was looking at Magda with an intent amusement. “I think,” he said, “your left cheek is... sunburned?”

Magda walked away. Walter called after her. The boys caught up, one on either side of her.

“Where are you going?” Walter asked.

She pointed to the ice cream seller.

“Gustav doesn’t come from the best of families.” He punched Gustav’s arm. They whispered behind her as Magda took her place in line for the ice cream.

“Let me buy you the ice cream,” Gustav said.

Walter stepped up close to her. “I’m glad to see you.”

“I heard,” she said, “that you’re going to continue your swim training and studies in Ploskovice.” She could not bring herself to ask whether it was true, whether he was going to the Napola, to the elite school for Nazis. He had conveniently left the most important detail out that night at the pool.

“You heard?” Walter asked. “Really?”

“Aleš said so.”

“Aleš. Yeah.” He glanced over his shoulder. “My trainer is talking about London in forty-four. The Olympics, Magda. I could set a new record.”

“Hey.” Gustav shoved in. “Why don’t you invite your girlfriend to the dance tonight?” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. Workers were transporting wooden planks across the bridge to the summerhouse on the island.

Before Walter could say anything, Magda shook her head. “I’ve got to get back to Eliška this afternoon.”

“But Eliška goes to bed early,” Walter said. “Come afterwards.”

Magda stepped up to the counter instead. It was her turn. She ordered three ice creams: two chocolates and one strawberry. She held the Reichsmark out to the seller.

Walter said, “Let me pay.” His bathing suit was damp, and he emanated a coolness from the lake water. He had no money on him.

“Sure, okay. Go ahead.” Magda folded Renata’s Reichsmark back into her fist.

The seller held out the first two ice creams.

Walter patted his hips and his sides. “Damn. Gustav, go get my money. Better yet, you’re the one who offered to pay, so go and get your money.”

Gustav groaned but jogged back to the beach.

Strawberry ice cream dripped onto Magda’s thumb. She shoved the money over the counter and took the last ice cream cone. “By the time he comes back, they’ll all have melted.”

“I’ll take the other cones,” Walter said. “We can bring them to Renata and Aleš.”

“So you did recognize me right away.” She thrust the cones at him and stalked across the grass.

“Come tonight,” he called. “You’re breaking my heart.”

She stopped. He looked genuinely contrite. She really had wanted to say goodbye. Nobody had had to tell her that he’d waited. She had watched him wait. But what would a future

Olympian want with her anyway, except for cruel entertainment, like now?

Gustav was already returning, and Magda indicated the other two cones.

“Give those to me before they melt. Keep that boy away from Aleš.” She forced a laugh. “The mood your friend is in, he’ll call Renata a Viking or something, and then there’ll be a fight.”

“Ha! You’re probably right.”

She took the two ice creams from him. “See you around.”

“I’ll be at this lake waiting,” he called behind her. “Even if it takes all summer. Come on, Magda. Magda!”

She walked backwards, holding the cones up. “Summer’s almost over. You won’t have to wait long.”

“*April, April! Er weiß nicht was er will.* Magda! What do you want?”

She was melting like the ice cream.

“What’s one dance?”

Magda shrugged, licked the strawberry off her knuckle and turned back to her friends. *What is one dance?* That was what her mother would say. And Renata.

Later, when she walked back to the villa, Renata and Aleš were so distant that Magda did not ask them to come to the summerhouse with her. The couple had argued, and Magda thought it was because of the stupid ice cream or maybe the money, but later she realized that hadn’t been it at all. As they followed behind her, they spoke in hushed tones, Renata

hissing more than speaking. Magda ignored them. Getting caught up in some sort of catfight with those two was like jumping off a bridge into a fast river—there was no way out.

Renata and Aleš were so involved in their discussions that they did not notice the black automobile parked by the side of the house. Aleš and Renata walked right past and argued their way through the service entrance but Magda walked to the corner of the house. As she had feared, two regime flags were stuck on either end of the front end, hanging limply in the sultry summer air. A driver leaned lazily against the front hood, gazing off in the direction of the fountain and the pool.

There was the familiar click of the front door. The driver straightened up and went to open the back of the sedan. Magda peeked from around the corner. A black-uniformed SS officer stepped out, followed by Dr. Tauber. They shook hands as they reached the car.

“Herr Obergruppenführer,” Dr. Tauber said. “Thank you very much for coming. I do hope I have been able to reassure you somewhat. Please give my regards to our Walter.”

The Obergruppenführer nodded noncommittally. “Thank you, Doctor. I will see you next month then.” He looked up and around the house. “You’re quite secluded up here on the mountain.”

Dr. Tauber opened his arms. “And still, you found me.”

The officer snapped the salute. Dr. Tauber raised his right hand. Magda ducked behind the house.

After putting Eliška to bed and after things had quieted down, Magda put on the one good dress she had. She stood in front of the mirror, checking her figure. Jana was right. She was at risk of becoming plump if she was not careful. She’d

inherited the lack of height from her father's side, but she had her mother's lush hair and full lips. If it were not for the mark on her face, she might not be so hideous to look at.

Piano music was coming from the drawing room. Magda knocked softly and peeked in. Dr. Tauber was reading a book on the chaise lounge. Frau Tauber was at the piano and still had her day dress on.

Magda cleared her throat.

Dr. Tauber lowered his book. "Magdalena. Going out?" He sounded distant.

Frau Tauber paused over the keys. "Are you going to the lake? There's a summer dance, Johan, at the lake."

"If I may," Magda said.

"Why shouldn't you? We used to..." Frau Tauber dropped her shoulders, turned back to the piano. The sheet music whispered as she turned the page. "You should take the bicycle."

Dr. Tauber smiled absently, his attention back on the book.

Magda hesitated. They had both been spending a lot more time at home than was customary. Dr. Tauber now only went to the hospital on Tuesdays, and saw his patients mainly at the house. The number of patients had dwindled, too. And Frau Tauber had canceled their summer holiday. When Magda had returned from the lake, Jana had told her that the Taubers had declined dinner. It was unusual, but Renata and Aleš were so unapproachable, Magda hadn't asked them whether they knew who the officer from that afternoon might have been.

"Is everything all right?" she asked and cleared her throat.

Dr. Tauber's expression was curious. "Why should it not be?"

It was his tone and the way he and Frau Tauber nodded in unison that left Magda uneasy.

"No reason." She excused herself and let herself out through the front door.

From the old carriage house, she wheeled the bicycle out and pushed it up the last bit of the mountain's slope. At the top was the wide, flat plateau and the mountains rising to the north. Ahead of her was the abandoned village of Michalovice. It always gave her the shivers. There was new graffiti sprayed onto the sides of the wall. *Juden raus!* The Star of David in blood-red paint was crossed out. Where had all the residents gone?

She got onto the bike and turned left to coast down the road to the lake. Ahead of her were the rivers, the chimney of the brewery and the rail yard with its lights already winking in the dusk. She saw a convoy of trucks leaving the old fort of Theresienstadt across the river. Wehrmacht. Where were they going at this time of night?

To her right a dark thing, low to the ground, dashed out of the underbrush. Magda screamed and snapped the pedals backwards to stop the bike. She landed hard on her feet, the bike sliding sideways beneath her so that she had no choice but to drop it. She teetered and panted, searching the waving cornstalks for a hint of what the creature had been but it was gone.

Shaking, she righted the bicycle and checked the chain. The front fender was a little bent and it whispered against the wheel as she continued to coast slowly downwards.

She heard the music long before she reached the little cabins that dotted the shore of Žernosecké Lake. It was going on nine o'clock, and it was just light enough that she could see the island was full of people. She left the bicycle leaning against a tree trunk near the beach and crossed the bridge. A group laughed loudly, and she heard glass bottles clinking together. At the sight of the dancers on the floor, Magda stopped.

We used to go. That was what Frau Tauber had said. And now Magda understood why they did not. It was not necessarily because they would be banned. Or seen. Or bring attention to themselves by being the only couple of “their kind” here. She understood everything she had observed in the sitting room that evening. The Taubers had shut themselves in as much as the world had shut them out.

And they were better for it. In the few times that Magda had gone into Litoměřice—something she avoided if she could—Magda had felt the effects, had recognized the impacts of Bohemia’s occupation. The flags, the uniformed soldiers, the rifles, the dwindling supplies in the shops and bakeries, the prisoners. These were, on the surface, easily attributable. What made the air hard to breathe was suspicion, fear, and pure terror. The villa was now their protected refuge. Here, on the island, the dance floor was packed with soldiers and uniformed police dancing with women in stockings and high heels, skirts and blouses, dresses of every color, and, Magda noted, some not quite for the season but it must have been the best ones the girls had. They were dancing beneath the summer sky and a forest of red, white, and black banners. Whereas on the beach everyone had looked the same—sunbathers, swimmers, people and families enjoying the summer weather—on the island at night, Magda could identify

who was who: who the Germans were, who the collaborators were, and who people like her were—people simply trying to get on with their lives. But everyone on this island was dressed in some form of either complacency or compliance, by just being here. Herself included.

“Hey.”

Walter. His green eyes. The wavering grin. The black jacket. The red armband. The swastika.

She bit her lip.

“Want to dance?” He held out his hand.

She had asked herself what one dance could mean. She had not expected this answer.

The band played a fast polka and the couples joined hands, moving to the dance floor. They locked arms, jugged elbows and danced drunkenly in circles. As Walter led her toward the crowd, Magda spotted Aleš with a group of men in civilian clothing near a drinks and sausage stand. She wanted to go over to Aleš, to ask him to take her back to the villa.

Magda was about to pull herself free from Walter’s grip, when Renata appeared from behind the stand. She went to Aleš, they kissed, and he put a drink in her hand.

Numb, Magda took her position before Walter. He started, and she stumbled a little. He excused himself, and she stared mutely at his left shoulder, the lapel, the shiny buttons of his jacket, the leather strap. In the spins, she caught sight of Renata and Aleš watching her, and she now knew what the argument had been about. Aleš had been trying to spare her this. This was what had upset him. Walter Fenkart was now one of Hitler’s obedient elite.

The polka came to an abrupt halt. She started to pull away, but Walter drew her closer to him as soon as the music began again, a slower song she did not recognize. She was aware of his every touch, his hand on her waist that pressed her closer to him, the pressure of his hand holding hers. She felt his hips brush lightly against hers. She tried to put some distance between them, but he bent down and whispered something into her ear. She could not make out what he said, but she felt shivers up and down her back. He pulled away then and twirled her around in a spin. Magda tried to smile, tried to look as if she were enjoying herself. She reminded herself he was what she wanted.

“Something wrong?” he murmured as he drew her back in. “Why don’t you laugh? You should laugh more, Magda.”

She swallowed. “There was a man at the house today. Someone who knows you?”

Walter pulled back. “A man?”

“An SS officer.”

His face brightened and he grinned. “That’s Doctor Obergruppenführer. He runs the Napola.”

“And what was he... looking for?”

“Looking for? No, I recommended him to Dr. Tauber. He has a”—he pulled in closer—“problem. I referred him to Dr. Tauber.”

“Oh.” Magda replayed the scene in her head. It made sense, but that feeling of dread did not dissipate.

Walter pulled away and looked as if he were confirming he’d answered her question to her satisfaction. “Can you smile now?”

“I didn’t know you were... that you were so good that...” She stopped, and he had to as well. She waved a hand in front of his uniform, from his shoulders to his shoes. “What does your father say about all this?”

He frowned. “About what? About us?”

But he was lying again. He knew exactly what she was referring to.

“My father wanted this for me. My coach wanted this for me.” He looked nonplussed. “I come from a family of farmers, Magdalena. None of us have ever had the chance at a higher education. I might have started working. I might have gone straight into the Wehrmacht. But I didn’t. I got accepted into a program where I can still learn something and make something of myself. I’m a good swimmer, Magda. You understand? Can you not just believe that this is what I have to do? Like you?”

“What do you mean, like me?” Her throat tightened.

“You’re hiding, too. In that villa.”

She stared at him.

Across the dance floor, someone called Walter’s name. Magda twisted around. It was Gustav, dancing with a girl.

Walter’s thin lips brushed along the right side of Magda’s neck, and his mouth came up, close to hers. Magda held her breath.

“Come with me,” he murmured. “Let’s get away from all this.”

“Where?”

He took her hand and began to pull her away from the dance floor. Get away? Yes, they should get away. Maybe then, the two of them might make sense together.

Magda stayed on Walter's heels as they hurried down to the far end of the island. They slowed when they reached the water, his hand still holding hers.

Walter stopped behind a fish-cleaning house and sighed. She leaned against the wall, arms crossed over her chest. It was a long way back to the bridge and to the bicycle.

Walter pulled a small flask out of his trousers pocket. He unscrewed it and offered it to her. She smelled the alcohol and made a face. He took a long sip.

"What's going on?" he asked. "I thought you liked me."

She did. But not like this.

Magda thought about her brothers, how quickly it had all turned. "Won't they send you to the front at some point, Walter? If not as a common soldier, then as SS or something? I mean, that's what the Napola's for, right? To shape you into Nazi officers?"

Walter screwed the top back on his flask and put it in his pocket.

"When the time comes, either way I'll have to go."

She could feel him gazing at her through the falling darkness. Crickets chirped in the tall grass around them. Something splashed in the lake.

"I really like you, Magda. You don't say much, but when you do, I know you mean it."

He moved closer, and she slid away along the wall. He tried again. This time she held her ground. His hand reached out to her face, and he lifted her chin to him.

"What will become of you, Walter?"

“What will become of any of us?” He kissed her tentatively. His lips were cool, soft. There was a whiff of the alcohol—the plum of *Becherbitter*.

“You give me courage, you know? By just being here.”

He kissed her again, and this time she kissed back. He placed her arms around his waist, and he moved against her, pressing her against the wall of the fish house. She froze.

“Magdalena,” he pleaded. “I love you.”

Her insides turned red hot and he ground her against the wall as if to put it out. Her back arched to relieve the pain. Everything ached.

He groaned. His lips moved down her neck.

“I can’t.”

“I’ll teach you how.”

“That’s not what I mean.” She pushed him away.

She could see his teeth in the sliver of moonlight and felt his hands inching their way up her skirt, his fingers pressing along her thighs. When he reached the hem of her underwear, one finger traced the fringe. She bit her bottom lip. He kissed her again, this time his hand easing beneath the fabric of her underthings, another hand on her breasts.

“I love you, Magdalena Novák. You give me courage.”

Then he was unbuttoning his coat, fumbling with the belt buckle. She stood, as if pinned to the wall, watching it all. She shook her head, but her body would not cooperate, would not take her away from here. When he was back at her, her body betrayed her again. His hand covered her mouth.

“It’ll be over soon,” he promised.

He was right. The belt buckle was clanging softly again, like a bell, as he buttoned himself back up.

Magda waded into the lake. Minutes had passed. Not hours. Simply minutes.

Two flashlights sliced through the darkness in their direction. Magda hurried with the washing, the fabric of the dress sticking to her wet legs.

Walter was composed again by the time the beams of light discovered him.

“There you are.” Gustav’s jeering voice. “Where’s your girlfriend?”

Another boy, whom Magda could not see, laughed. “Looks like we just missed it.”

She held her breath, outside the circle of light and hidden by the reeds.

“Come on,” Walter said. “Let’s get out of here. I need a drink.”

After they left, Magda came out of the water. She waited against the fish house, the iron smell of blood in the air. Her mother had been wrong. Magda wanted nothing more than to run back to Lidice and tell her that. There was nothing—absolutely nothing—courageous about love.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SEPTEMBER 1941

As Magda dressed Eliška for breakfast, the telephone rang several times downstairs. She stepped out of the room to see whether anyone would answer it. The ringing stopped. When Magda led the girl out of her bedroom, she found Ruth Tauber standing at the banister in her morning gown. She twisted a strand of pearls around one finger, the other hand resting on the wrought-iron banister. Her hair was done up in a green and turquoise blue scarf. A few strands of hair dangled over her forehead.

Magda was about to ask whether she needed anything, when she heard the muffled sound of a car crunching to a stop on the gravel drive. A moment later, the front door flew open. Magda and Frau Tauber leaned over the banister. In the foyer, Dr. Tauber stripped off his coat, flung it onto the coat hook, and tossed his hat on the wooden bench where his patients normally waited for him. He stalked down the corridor and disappeared. The office door slammed shut.

Frau Tauber headed for the stairs.

“Paní doktorová?” Magda followed with Eliška. “Has something happened?”

It was Tuesday. On Tuesdays Dr. Tauber worked at the hospital all day, conducting surgeries and checking on his

patients. Rarely was he home before supper, and more often than not, long after that.

“What’s wrong with Papa?” Eliška asked.

She bounded down the steps, two at a time but Frau Tauber stopped her. “Magda will take you to the piano room for your lesson. I must speak to your father first.”

At the office door, Ruth Tauber knocked softly before letting herself in. There were no voices, no sounds, nothing that revealed a hint as to what had happened. Dr. Tauber was normally a composed gentleman. Slamming doors could only mean that the cruel world had found its way into Villa Liška.

Magda led Eliška to the piano room at the end of the corridor and began tidying up as Eliška slid onto the end of the bench and watched her.

“Aren’t you going to play?” Magda asked.

“I don’t feel like it.”

“Try something. Anything.” Magda indicated the door. *To keep things normal.*

Eliška’s forehead creased but she turned to face the piano and lifted the cover. Magda paused with a pile of magazines in her hands. Eliška raised her fingers over the piano and then slammed both hands onto the black and white keys. The room vibrated with the discord.

Magda winced. They gazed at one another. As the ugly clamor evaporated in the room, muffled voices—urgent, devastated—took its place. Magda edged to the doorway and to the corridor.

Out of the dining room, Renata appeared with Aleš. He was holding the box of silver. At the bottom of the staircase,

they both stopped at the sight of Magda and exchanged a guilty look. Magda hurried over to them.

“Where are you going with that?” Magda frowned.

“Are they in there?” Renata pointed at Dr. Tauber’s office.

“Yes.”

Aleš went upstairs, and before Magda could protest again, Renata crossed her arms and barred her way.

“What’s going on?” Magda asked.

The front doorbell rang, and Renata broke away from her. Magda peered after Aleš. He was moving to the attic floor, still carrying the silverware.

“Good morning, Renata,” Magda heard Mayor Brauer say. “I’ll just go in and see him.”

Renata did not budge.

The corridor filled with Eliška’s playing. Magda recognized the piece by Liszt.

Mayor Brauer shuffled before Renata. “I know he’s here.”

It was obvious anyway, with the car parked out front.

“Please wait here,” Renata said. “I’ll let him know.”

“It’s a tragedy, really.” He pushed in and took off his hat, hanging it on one of the hooks. “I take it you’ve heard.”

Renata shook her head and shrugged. Mayor Brauer motioned for her to lead the way, though he seemed prepared to take charge himself.

He passed Magda as if she were invisible. “You’ll hear soon enough, I suppose.”

The Taubers came out of the office then.

“Max,” Dr. Tauber said stiffly.

“Hello, Johan. Ruth.” Mayor Brauer stuck out his hand to Frau Tauber first, but her greeting was lukewarm as she wrapped the morning gown tightly around her.

Dr. Tauber took the mayor’s hand brusquely in turn, then motioned him in.

The last thing Magda heard was the mayor making apologies and something about how unprofessionally the hospital handled the situation. Frau Tauber shut the door before turning to Renata and Magda.

“Well,” she said. “That’s it then.”

She drifted up the staircase and was on the first landing when she paused. As if she’d remembered something, she turned and leaned against the banister. “Magda.” She hesitated. “Were you planning to go out with Eliška today?”

“If that’s all right—”

“I’d prefer you stayed indoors.”

“Yes, Frau Tauber.”

She nodded. “I’ll get dressed then.”

Magda followed Renata into the sitting room. “Please tell me what’s happened.”

“I don’t know for sure,” Renata whispered back. “The doctor called from the police station though. The police chief put the call through and then handed him the telephone.” Renata’s voice dropped a decibel. “I think he’s been banned from the hospital.”

Magda covered her mouth. “Why?”

Renata nudged Magda to the coffee table and picked up that morning's newspaper from Prague and held out the front page. Magda gasped at the announcement.

ALL JEWS AGE SIX AND OLDER IN SLOVAKIA, BOHEMIA, AND MORAVIA ARE ORDERED TO WEAR YELLOW STARS, EFFECTIVE SEPTEMBER 19, AND TO SUSPEND ALL BUSINESS ACTIVITY. REPORT TO THE REICH'S CENTRAL OFFICE FOR JEWISH RESETTLEMENT TO PURCHASE YOUR STARS AND REGISTER YOUR PROPERTY.

“But the Taubers have special status,” Magda said. “Don't they? Dr. Tauber's the best oncologist outside of Prague. The hospital needs him.”

Renata took the newspaper from her. “Aleš has a friend named Davide at the railway station in Bohošovice. He's responsible for the coal and grain transports, sees to it that the breweries get their loads. He told Aleš that an unscheduled train arrived a week ago. Middle of the night. Davide was there, working on some paperwork. The SS came and made him stay inside the office, but there's a big window, and he caught a glimpse of people coming off the train. There must have been a lot of them, especially as it took a long time before the SS left. When they did, he went outside to have a look. Davide saw where they'd headed with all those people.”

“Where?”

“To Theresienstadt, the old fort, you know? It's where Aleš was once based before they disbanded our military. So Aleš went over there. He knows someone who still works there, maintaining the buildings. But his friend was really scared, said it was all hush-hush. Aleš finally got it out of him. He said that a lot of men arrived in the middle of the night. He

thought they were all prisoners of war, but”—she pointed to the newspaper—“there were plenty wearing these stars too.”

Across the corridor, voices suddenly rose, and then the door to Dr. Tauber’s office flew open. Mayor Brauer looked distraught.

“What more am I to do, Johan?” the mayor said angrily. “It’s a house arrest, not a deportation. I have to cooperate.”

“You have to do no such thing.” Dr. Tauber’s jaw was clenched.

Mayor Brauer jabbed a finger into Dr. Tauber’s chest. “I have to, and you do as well now.” He lowered his finger. “I never thought it would go this far, Johan, not like this.”

Dr. Tauber scoffed. “You can’t tell me you haven’t been aware of the anti-Semitism in this town. Anna was right. You’re a wholly unbelievable actor.”

“Why didn’t you leave when you could?” Mayor Brauer demanded. “I got you the—”

“Max! Every single one of us knows the difference between right and wrong. You choose to look away.”

Mayor Brauer’s neck turned bright red. He wagged his finger at Dr. Tauber. “Go on then. Show us how to do better. While your family and friends pleaded for reason, you were going to prove that you’ve got more clout than any other Jew. You and your celebrity wife. You’re Jews, Johan. They’ve marked you as the enemy because it is that easy. I did what I could for as long as I could. It’s out of my hands now.”

Magda’s stomach churned. If the Taubers had to leave, what would become of her?

Dr. Tauber pinched his nose beneath his glasses. “There is someone else I can talk to. Someone...” He looked up and tilted his head back, sighing. “Someone important.”

He suddenly turned his head in the direction of the sitting room, where Magda was rooted to the spot. Renata jumped, excused herself softly, and shut the door.

She turned and stared at Magda. “This is more serious than we thought.”

“We” was certainly her and Aleš. Magda was only beginning to comprehend they were in any real danger now.

“What’s going to happen?” she asked.

Renata leaned an ear against the door, then moved away to the ottoman as footfalls neared the drawing room. Dr. Tauber came in.

He looked down at his feet and took in a deep breath. “I’m sorry you had to hear all that.”

He went to the divan and sat, indicating they should sit as well. Magda moved to the chair closest to her and perched on the edge of it. Renata remained standing beside the ottoman.

“Mayor Brauer has assured me that he’ll find a way to let me practice.” He hung his head and waved a hand around in the air. “Even if it’s here at the house.”

“Is Frau Tauber well?” Renata interjected.

He looked up and scratched his neck. “She’s fine.”

“Because she’s been behaving rather, well, not herself,” Renata insisted.

She was right. The past few weeks, Frau Tauber had been getting up later and had been eating less. Which, if Renata was

right about the developments, would signal she was distressed.

Dr. Tauber smiled weakly. “That was something we wanted to tell the house a little later.”

“She’s expecting, isn’t she?” Renata said.

“Normally it would be happy news,” he said sadly.

Renata sat. “What did the mayor say?”

They were talking as if they were intimate friends. Magda wondered how it was that she fit into this setting, why she had the privilege to be here and take part.

Dr. Tauber glanced at Magda. “Mayor Brauer fears he will not remain in his position much longer. He’s done his best. I will grant him that. And as his friend, I cannot expect more of him.”

Renata huffed. “You’ve saved his hide more than a few times.”

“He’s in danger,” Dr. Tauber said.

Magda gripped the edge of her seat.

“Listen,” he added. “We’re going to go about our business until we know more. There is an important patient.”

Renata sat up. “The SS officer from the Napola?”

He nodded, reached into his breast pocket, and shook something carefully out of an envelope. They lay in the palm of his hand.

The yellow stars. Magda counted them. Four.

He extended them toward Renata. “In the meantime, we’ll need to apply these.”

Renata stared at him. Sweat broke out across Magda's brow.

"We must comply," Dr. Tauber said. "The authorities should have no reason to find fault with us. When this is all over—"

"No!" Renata leapt up and slapped his hand away.

The stars scattered across the floor, one landing before Magda's foot. Renata and Dr. Tauber glared at one another, neither moving to pick them up.

Magda stood. She could not draw air. She stared at the stars at her feet. *Jude*. Renata was one of them. Magda bolted to the French doors, threw them open, and fled to the deer park and into the woods beyond.

She was asleep. She knew that. In her bed and asleep. But she could not wake up. She felt the weight of Walter's hand on her thigh. He leaned in and whispered something into her ear. She could not understand him. He looked over Magda's shoulder and grinned. She whirled around and watched Dr. Tauber step out of the shadows, disapproval etched into his brow and around his mouth. He looked older and gaunt.

Walter turned Magda's face back to his, his gaze still over her shoulder. She thought he would kiss her, but he was whispering again.

Magda jerked away. "What did you say?"

Walter's mouth moved, and finally the words came, but it was not Walter's voice. It was Eliška's.

"Wake up! Wake up!"

Magda shot up in bed. In the dark, she put a hand over her thudding heart and strained to see something. Jana stirred in the bed across from her, and Magda took a deep, shaky breath, grateful she was not alone.

After Magda had returned from the woods, Jana had sent her upstairs to rest with a bowl of soup and, afterwards, she'd lingered in the staircase for a while, hoping to talk with the Taubers. But they were behind closed doors, talking with Aleš. Exhausted, Magda had gone upstairs to her room and crawled beneath the covers.

Shivering, she now pulled the blankets up around her and stared out the window. The night sky was moonless and pitch black. It was quiet save for Jana's soft snoring.

Why had she woken up? She moved the blankets off and searched for her slippers before rising and going to the window. Walter's image in her dream still lingered. She folded her arms over her chest and peered into the garden below her, three floors down. Still, she saw nothing that would have startled her from sleep.

Before turning away from the window to go back to bed, Magda caught sight of a faint orange light flickering on the lawn below. She leaned on the windowsill. The light was coming from Eliška's window, just below hers. She watched the light move, dance, grow stronger, illuminating the hedge now. Like candlelight.

Magda gasped. She shook Jana's shoulders. The woman spluttered awake.

"It's a fire!" Magda lurched out of the room and pounded on Renata's door. "Wake up! Get up! Fire!"

Magda nearly slipped on the stairs on her way down to the second floor. Thin, sinister wisps of smoke curled from beneath Eliška's bedroom door. At the opposite end of the landing, voices and the slamming of doors. Frau Tauber's stricken face appeared down the corridor. Magda could hear her flicking the light switch but no lights came on. Magda patted the door with her open palms, feeling for heat but the handle was cool. She took in a deep breath and threw it open.

Smoke, and flames hissing and crackling. The fire was crawling up the drapes, licking at the ceiling. Broken glass lay on the bedside table. Next to it, Eliška's china doll's face was blackened. Two glass fox figurines glowed. Scorch marks surrounded the lamp socket. She finally found Eliška, huddled on the floor, at the side of her bed.

Voices were calling hers and Magda's names, as if they were one. *Magdališka! Eliškamagda!*

Magda scooped the child into her arms, blankets and all, and nearly barreled past the Taubers. Aleš flew past her in a white undershirt. Renata, her mane like that of a dark lion, was behind him.

"It's electrical," Magda shouted at them. "By God, don't throw water on it. It's electrical!"

In the next moment, she was down the stairs and at the front entrance. Eliška was heavy in her arms. She propped the child up against her and opened the door with one twist, then stumbled out onto the gravel drive. Frau Tauber was right behind her. Magda lay the girl onto the grass, relieved to see Dr. Tauber coming out.

He dropped down next to Eliška and checked her pulse. "Come now, my darling Finch. Papa's here." He turned her onto her side and clapped her on the back.

Eliška jerked and coughed. Crying followed, and Magda backed away as Frau Tauber helped her daughter sit up. The parents murmured around her, encouraging her. She spluttered, then wailed again.

Aleš, Renata, and Jana came out at the same time. Aleš held a flashlight, and he was covered in soot.

“She’s going to be all right,” Dr. Tauber said. “She’s going to be all right.”

“We’ve put it out,” Aleš said. “I’ll ring the fire brigade.”

“No,” Dr. Tauber said.

“Why in God’s name not?” Frau Tauber cried.

But Aleš looked resigned. “I understand, Dr. Tauber.”

Magda did as well. They were not going to call attention to themselves. Not now. And hopefully, not ever.

“Aleš, can you manage?” Dr. Tauber asked. “Can you check the wiring in the house?”

Aleš nodded. “I have a friend, someone I trust. I’ll get him here first thing in the morning.”

“Good.” Dr. Tauber rose with Eliška in his arms. “Go get everyone some blankets. All of you, go fetch your valuables, and quickly. Just in case another fire breaks out. We’ll sleep in the old carriage house tonight.”

Frau Tauber draped one of the covers over Eliška. “We have to keep you warm, darling.”

Aleš volunteered to keep watch first. Renata said she would join him. Magda said she had no valuables and went to the carriage house with the Taubers. Jana returned with water,

refreshments, and blankets. Magda helped her set up places for them to sleep.

Frau Tauber called to her. “Eliška’s asking for you.”

Magda went and bent down to the child. “What is it, Little Finch?”

“I asked you to come.” Eliška’s voice was hoarse, sleepy. “And you did. I knew you would.”

Magda felt a hand on her shoulder, and she turned to find it was Frau Tauber.

“We owe you. You saved our daughter’s life. Thank you.” She pulled Magda into an embrace, and Magda shook her head.

“I just happened to—”

“You’re a hero.” Frau Tauber kissed Magda’s cheeks.

The next morning as Aleš and his friend Davide inspected the house, Magda wandered out to feed the chickens but stopped when she saw Walter coming around the corner of the villa. Her pulse quickened at the sight of him. He was in his Wehrmacht uniform, with his cap on a freshly shaven head, the rim of which rested just above those perfect ears of his.

She looked around and went to the end of the chicken coop, where she could see the front drive. The black car was back.

“I hear you’re a hero,” he said in greeting.

“No such thing,” she said. His presence in her dream came back to her, his hand on her thigh, the whispers in her ear. *Wake up.*

“Aleš was certainly singing your praises.”

Aleš would do no such thing. Walter was embellishing.

“She was in danger,” Magda said. “I wasn’t even thinking. Anybody could’ve done that.”

“That’s not what I heard,” he said. “Aleš said you had your wits about you. Even checked the door before throwing it open. Knew it was an electrical fire right away, all that.”

He was looking at the house, at the black streaks outside of Eliška’s window. She wanted him to look away from that.

She rubbed a hand along her skirt and pulled her scarf up higher over her brow. “My brothers. They were volunteer firemen. They talked about their training all the time. I remembered everything, including feeling the door first.”

He grinned drily and leaned against one of the posts. “You never came to say goodbye. I thought I’d see you at the lake again.”

“Did you expect I’d just be waiting where you left me?”

Walter frowned. “No. Well, I don’t know. Maybe. Are you angry because I left with the boys without you?” He straightened. “I didn’t want to embarrass you. I didn’t think it was any of their business, that’s all.”

He was lying.

“You knew where to find me.”

“Would you have been happy to see me?”

She scattered more feed.

“Wehrmacht,” he said, removing his cap. “I guess Germany needs soldiers and not swimmers. I’ve got a different type of training ahead of me now. In the meantime, I’m

driving the Obergruppenführer to his appointments.” He waved the cap toward the front of the house. “His results came in, so...”

Magda paused, one hand in the bowl. She gave him another chance to be honest with her. “Are you afraid?”

“For the Obergruppenführer?”

He knew exactly what she meant. God forbid he feel like a coward. She lowered the bowl to the ground. One more. One more chance.

“Walter, do you know about...” She couldn’t. She could not say the words. She wasn’t any better than him, then, was she? She looked meaningfully at the house. “Can you help them? Can you say something? Anything?”

Walter’s fingers flexed in the holes of the fence. “I don’t know how. It’s the law now.”

We all understand the difference between right and wrong. But what if wrong is the law?

“Did you see what they have to sign?” Her voice broke. Renata had shown her the documents Mayor Brauer brought with him. Stateless, all of them, in two months’ time. Their signatures would confirm the Taubers and Renata were the enemies of the Reich.

Walter turned away from her, his gaze fixed toward the deer park. “You know, I’ve got my own worries. Are you even listening to me, Magda?”

“My brothers,” she said, “were sent to the Eastern Front. I haven’t heard anything from them.”

“Yet. Just say you haven’t heard from them yet. It takes a long time for letters. Anyway, I’ll be done with the training in

about a month. And then, I don't know." He looked east. "We'll be taking Leningrad soon."

We'll? She was never with the "we". To which "we" would she ever belong?

"Will you write me?" He faced her again. "Can I write you?"

Magda watched two hens fighting over a piece of lettuce. She glanced at him and shrugged.

"Damn it, Magda." It was his voice that cracked now. "You're not like the month of April. You're more like the middle of January." He sighed and tapped the flimsy fencing with an open palm before shoving his hands into his pockets. "See you around, Magda."

She raised a hand in return. He clicked his tongue and backed away. She wondered. Was she wrong about him? Did he really care for her?

"And you are a hero." He waved his cap at the villa before replacing it on his head. "They owe you."

He was wrong about that. It was she who owed them and now they were even. Just about.

She left the chicken coop and found Aleš and Davide standing at the corner of the house, looking upwards. She stopped next to them, watching Walter stride back to the sedan.

Davide's finger ran upwards in the air along the limestone walls. "The whole wiring in the house," he said, "ought to be checked. First, it's completely outdated. Secondly, you've probably got mice chewing up the wires in there. You're going to need professionals for that."

Aleš scratched his balding head and grunted. “That’s going to be difficult to do.”

Davide glanced at Magda again and his gaze landed on the figure of Walter opening the door for the Obergruppenführer.

“Well, you’re going to have to find some way to keep the vermin out.”

CHAPTER NINE

MARCH 1942

The cuckoo clock, the one the Taubers had brought home from the Black Forest one summer, entertained Eliška for only the first hour of Ruth Tauber's labor. Thereafter, she begged Magda to play games with her, pausing only when the cuckoo popped out to mark yet another fifteen minutes of muffled agony in the bedroom above.

Dr. Tauber was pacing in the corridor. He would occasionally make his way up the stairs, where he hesitated on the top landing, before coming back down. Although he was a medical doctor, paní Eva—who Magda discovered was not only the baker's widow but a midwife—had requested Dr. Tauber to cite one Scripture from the Old Testament about a husband allowed at his wife's childbed. When he was not able to, she respectfully showed him the door.

Jana had gone through the house, opening all the cupboards, which supposedly promised to speed up the birth. Renata and Magda had been trying to distract themselves for hours. Renata, in Dr. Tauber's library, dusted the leather-bound books again and again while Magda played yet another round of Little Finch with Eliška.

Finally, they heard Dr. Tauber calling out, "It's a boy! It's a boy!" from the second floor.

Eliška flew upstairs to meet her father. He lifted her into the air as late-afternoon light pooled in from the front foyer. It was the first sunshine after a week of heavy spring rains.

When he reached them, Dr. Tauber grasped Renata's hand, laughed, and spun her around. Her cry of surprise turned into girlish giggles, the feather duster still clutched in her hand. Then it was Magda's turn, though with her, he was more reverent in his approach.

"Magdalena," he said after embracing her, "fetch champagne from the cellar, please. We will all celebrate together."

It was only as the doctor left that Magda felt the familiar gnawing fear. Since the episode with the yellow stars, dark shadows had taken up residence in every corner of the villa. They had grown as permanent as her birthmark. They were the type of fears that were only expressed behind closed doors and well out of Eliška's earshot. When Magda looked at Renata, she saw a glint of foreboding in her friend's eyes as well.

"Well," Renata said. They walked into the sitting room. "I suppose I should go tell Aleš. He's waiting to hear."

"He's waiting, all right," Magda teased shyly. "He's waiting to—" She bit back her joke. Aleš was a Gentile. Marrying Renata was illegal, and having a family together, hopeless.

"I had no idea you had such a raucous fantasy." Renata's sad grin did not match the playful smack of the duster against Magda's arm or the glassy sharpness in her eye. A feather floated up into the light. Still, she left Magda and hurried outside.

Magda shut the French doors behind her. On the sloping lawn, primroses and daisies had popped out. Renata joined Aleš at the stand of cedars, and the groundskeeper planted a kiss on Renata's hand. Magda sighed.

Later, Magda met paní Eva coming down the stairs. She gave Magda permission to see Frau Tauber. At the bedroom suite, Magda knocked softly before peeking in.

Ruth Tauber was stretched out on her side in the light-blue lounging suit Magda had lain out the night before. Strands of red hair were still plastered to her brow, but she looked otherwise unruffled. Upon Magda's entrance, she sat up, fluffed the pillows a little, and waved her in. The newborn, swaddled in a soft dove-gray blanket, was sleeping next to her.

Magda approached the bed. "Can I do anything for you, paní doktorová?" She looked down at the baby. He was beautiful.

Frau Tauber gave him a tender kiss and then held him out to Magda. "Meet Samuel. Go on—take him."

"I couldn't."

"I insist." Frau Tauber smiled. "Magdalena, do you not yet understand that I hold the highest esteem for you? For all of you? You're like family to Johan and me. Come," she beckoned, "sit down and take him."

Magda perched on the edge of the mattress and took the warm bundle. Since they had taken her in, the family had shown her nothing but kindness and respect, but ever since the fire, Frau Tauber had become another mother for Magda; indeed, the whole household was now her family.

"Eliška hasn't yet seen him." Magda held the baby close. "She should meet her brother before me."

“Nonsense,” Frau Tauber said. “Where is she?”

“Your husband has taken her with him to put together a party.”

Frau Tauber laughed, looking wistful. “It is big news. A son.”

The baby, eyes still shut tight, yawned crookedly. Magda touched the dark fuzz on his head and inhaled his new-infant smell and, for a brief moment, she felt unsteady. A swell of love and yearning lifted beneath her and rose to meet the apprehension that had dug its claws in over the past few months.

Frau Tauber bent toward the baby. “Look at his right hand, Magda. Do you see? He has a birthmark on his little wrist bone.”

Magda checked Samuel’s hand and smiled at the light-brown blemish. “It’s pretty tiny,” she said. “Nothing that will cause too many unpleasantries.”

Frau Tauber lay back against the pillows. “What about you, Magda? You’re a natural mother.”

“The only thing I wish for is that this war ends and I remain intact. That’s all. I want to go home. I want to return to my family, to the farm, to my brothers, and have everything be like it was.”

Frau Tauber made a soft noise and picked at something on the coverlet. When she looked at Magda again, Magda saw that she was holding something back, something like bad news, and then just like that it disappeared, and her eyes were bright again. “How are things with Walter? Have you heard anything from him?”

Heat clambered up Magda's neck. "He's finished with his technical training. He's been posted nearby as a radio operator, but Walter, he's..." She shrugged. *Changed*. It was simply an observation, too early to come to any real conclusion. His letters came frequently enough, but they were getting shorter and shorter. She never knew what to write to him, but her lack of responses did not stop his missives.

She turned the problem onto herself instead. "Walter's younger than I am. What should he want with me?"

"I have seen Walter's eyes on you more than a few times when he was working here. He's a very handsome fellow."

Magda automatically put a hand to her cheek. "That's the trouble, isn't it? He can be so charming, and I..." *He is so much more German now. And I, I am still very much Czech.* "Paní doktorová, you catch Walter staring at my blemished face, nothing else."

"He did not loiter on the grounds," Frau Tauber chided, "hoping to see your birthmark." She reached for Magda's lower arm to move the hand away from her face. "You are not the hideous creature you believe you are. You are a beautiful young woman. And you deserve love. You deserve happiness."

Magda placed Samuel back into his mother's arms and moved to leave.

"I'd like to ask something of you," Frau Tauber said.

Magda raised her head. Good. A task. She could do this bit gracefully.

"We may not practice the Jewish religion here very much." She looked embarrassed. "A little like some Christians only go to church at Christmas or Easter, but a baby boy is something

different. In eight days, we will have Samuel's *Bris Milah*—that is, his circumcision.”

Magda's eyes widened, but Frau Tauber plowed ahead, as solicitous as Eliška when the child had an idea for a new game just before it was time for bed. “We have discussed this, and Johan and I both agree that you should be Samuel's *sandek*.”

Magda blinked, confused.

“It's a great honor, and, oh, I know it's quite unusual, especially for us to be asking a Christian woman.” Frau Tauber laughed a little. “Yes, the Jewish community, if we had one left around here, would certainly have something to talk about other than the war and Hitler and... well, beware, Magdalena. If any of them find out, they will make a real scandal of it!” She pulled a face in mock anguish, but her eyes were filled with sadness.

Magda fidgeted with her hands.

Frau Tauber brushed a hair off her forehead and smiled wanly. “But they will accept our decision. When this is all over, we'll set a signal that Jews and Gentiles can live together.” She reached for Magda's hand. “I'm sorry. Our request is not at all political. You have no idea what I'm asking of you, do you?”

Magda shook her head.

“As *sandek*, you will hold Samuel in your lap during the circumcision. It's a great honor, Magdalena. You have such compassion, and I want it to be you holding our son during the mitzvah.”

“But I know nothing about—”

“You're a farmer's daughter, Magdalena. I know you will not flinch.” Her pout was playful, but there was a smidgen of

impatience in her tone. “I just had a child. I’m too tired to argue. Would you simply be your agreeable self, please?”

Magda looked down at her lap to hide her grin. “I’m sorry. Yes.”

“Good! Dr. Tauber is the official mohel in Litoměřice. Or was. He will do the circumcision himself. I really want Samuel to be in your arms, where I know he’ll be safe.”

This had to do with the fire. This was how they were repaying her.

Magda squeezed the woman’s hand, homesick for the intimacy of her own family, of the certainty she once felt. “Thank you, Frau Tauber. I will be Samuel’s... what was that again?”

“*Sandek.*” Frau Tauber gazed down at the newborn. “It’s as close to a godmother as you can be.”

Magda was fetching eggs for Jana when, like a ghost, Walter materialized out of the fog. He was standing between two cedars, his uniform as gray as the bark, watching the house. When his gaze met hers, she was not sure whether to go to him or to run away.

She placed the basket down and went to him just as the sun broke through the haze.

“What are you doing here?”

His arms twitched, as if he wanted to reach out to her. Instead, he turned to where the deer pen would be and gave a little laugh, as if embarrassed. “I missed the deer. They’re so...”

“Walter?”

“Where are they?”

He looked so lost that she took his hand. It was cold even beneath the gloves.

“Aleš did not put the pen up this winter,” she said. “The animals stayed nearby though, looking for food.”

Like they all had. They had been gripped by icy temperatures and there was simply less of everything now. The villa was one of the few in the district that contained a unique heating system built into the walls, but the boiler had broken, and the pipes responsible for carrying warm water froze and burst. There had been severe damage to the walls up in the attic, and she and Jana, and Renata and Aleš had moved into the guest rooms on the second floor. Then there were the requisitions. The farm’s grain, the wine—seized in return for some semblance of protection.

But they were coming out of that cruel winter leaner and tougher. Now, with the birds singing and the sun rising over the fields, Magda could forget the cold.

“You never write to tell me anything,” Walter said.

There was a tone of regret in his voice, and it gave Magda pause. He was right. She never wrote to him about anything of importance. She’d not told him about the excitement in the past week since Samuel’s birth, how the spirits in the house had lifted, brushing off the dingier layers of war. For the past seven days, she had not heard a single whisper about the rumors enveloping Theresienstadt; that the prisoners Davide had spotted were not the only ones to be sealed off in the fort. That Jews were being deported there and were building a large ghetto. A week before Samuel’s birth, Magda had caught Dr.

Tauber standing on the ridge above the rose garden. Below, where the Ohře and the Elbe met, came the vibrations and the din from the industry along the rivers. But Dr. Tauber seemed to have lain aside his shroud of guilt. There was no mention of the friends in Switzerland or of how another village had been emptied of all its Jews. Of collaborators who had hid entire families being executed by Nazis. Instead, in Samuel's wake, the darkness had begun to dissipate and Magda had hope again.

But she did not tell Walter this.

"Follow me," she said. "I know where we can find the deer."

He followed her across the road, his hand still in hers, gripping it now like a child afraid to lose her in a crowd. In the field behind the granary, the deer were grazing. There were three pregnant does. A murder of crows rose from the meadow, calling and complaining about whatever had disturbed them.

"The big stag," Walter said, "has to be somewhere nearby."

Magda had been anxious about the animals all winter. "I'm glad there won't be any hunting this year. We always fed them all winter only to release them in the spring. It seems too easy, giving them a feeling of security only to hunt them down."

Walter's voice was far away. "It's the way things are done, Magda. It's how we control the population. Some animals are castrated. Some we hunt for sport."

That word "we" again.

"Dr. Tauber usually waited a few weeks until after they'd dispersed," she said. "At least he did that."

Walter glanced sideways at her. "How are they?"

It was Dr. Tauber's significant patient list that had kept them relatively undisturbed. He'd been allowed to continue seeing the chief of police, even the new mayor, who had replaced Brauer shortly after the New Year. It seemed as if the authorities felt Villa Liška was far enough away that the comings and goings of Dr. Tauber's patients were kept discreet. And as long as the Obergruppenführer needed Dr. Tauber, after he had been diagnosed with cancer, the "Jew doctor" appeared to be tolerated.

Maybe, Magda thought, it was Walter's doing. Perhaps he had somehow contributed to the lax status the Taubers enjoyed. But if Walter had done something, he'd never mentioned it in his letters, just as she had not yet shared the news of Samuel's birth with him, or about the circumcision feast tomorrow and her role in it. He did not, if she guessed correctly, even know that Frau Tauber had been expecting. Such information was simply not written in a letter addressed to a radio operator with a Nazi address. And she was not so sure she wanted to tell him now.

She tested him, like dipping a toe into the lake. "Will you not come and say hello to the Taubers? Surely they would love to see you. It's been more than six months since you've been here."

Walter pressed his lips together. "I..." The shake of his head was almost imperceptible as he eyed the grounds beyond the gate. "I'd better not."

No, Walter had no hand in the Taubers' mild reprieve.

Magda could not keep the bitterness out of her tone. "They will be sorry when I tell them you were here and did not come to see them."

"Then don't tell them."

Her hand went limp in his. “I won’t.”

“I have to go back today.” Walter squeezed her hand lightly as if to revive her. “But I wanted to see you, Magda.”

There was something that had become fragile about him. He still looked strong. He still had his swimmer’s physique. But the smile was gone. And the green eyes were no longer like spring, but like moss shrouding something beneath.

“That’s nice,” she said anyway. “That you came.”

He took in a breath and stepped away from her. “It’s possible that I will be promoted. Just to second lieutenant, but it’s a step up. You know, officers have privileges.” He gazed up at the cedars across the road, their scent wet and heavy. “I’ll be going to the front soon. To the east. Have you heard from your brothers?”

She nodded. So far, they were both safe. “When do you go?”

“Within the week.”

A sense of certainty that they would never see one another again penetrated her thoughts. She took a step to him, forcing herself to be cheerful. “Then you must come and say goodbye to everyone. At least to Aleš. He still laments your absence to Renata and me. We could have breakfast together like we used to.”

She reached for his arms, clutched them both and swayed on the balls of her feet.

He pulled gently away under the pretense of walking her back across the road, back to the villa, but he stopped outside the gate. “I have to get back, Magda. You know”—he brushed a hand over her right cheek—“I really do care for you.”

His gaze was elsewhere now, and she followed it to the terrace, where Renata, Aleš, and she had built up the canopy yesterday. They had been enjoying the warm weather this past week, and Ruth Tauber had insisted on an outdoor gathering. Aleš and Renata were supposed to carry the canopy to the rose garden later, mainly to keep the party out of sight from the main road.

“What’s that?” Walter asked.

“Nothing. Just a party for—” *He doesn’t know, Magda.* “A birthday party.”

Walter’s eyes darkened. “You’ll be there, I suppose.”

On an impulse, she threw her arms around his waist, surprising herself. She had to say something. She had to at least try and pull him back in, remind him of what this place had meant to them all just a year ago. “Stay awhile. Come inside.”

He drew away. “I have to go.”

“Will you still write to me? I’ll tell you things, I promise.”

He gazed at her, searching for something. When he leaned down to kiss her, she yielded. Maybe she could reach him like this, but when she pictured them from afar—a tall and slim fellow in a Wehrmacht uniform, and a short, round girl with an uncharted map imprinted on her cheek—she could not find a way.

The next morning was again glorious, but with Frau Tauber’s excitement and Dr. Tauber’s solemnity, the house staff swung between the two nervous moods. There had been an argument last night. As she was putting Eliška to bed, Magda overheard

the Taubers raising their voices in the bedroom suite—something about how the mitzvah could be too great of a risk. Frau Tauber, however, insisted, and Dr. Tauber finally gave in. A small number of guests, the closest of their remaining friends, were invited. They were all Gentiles.

Magda dressed in her finest, a traditional embroidered Czech blouse and a navy-blue *krojová* skirt with colorful Bohemian flowers along the hem and up the middle. As she came down the stairs a half hour before the guests were to arrive, Dr. Tauber stepped outside his office and gazed approvingly at her.

“You look lovely, Magdalena. Will you step in, please?”

Magda noted his uncertain smile as he held the door open for her. Had the Taubers reconsidered? Or had they only reconsidered making her a part of the ceremony? Resolved to hide her disappointment, she walked in.

“Take a seat, Magdalena.” He was grave indeed as she sank onto the plush chair. He waited for her to get comfortable before perching on the edge of his desk before her. He wore a dark suit, finely tailored to his angular figure. His hair had always been a little longer than fashionable, and today it was slicked back.

“I wanted to tell you about the custom and what to expect, explain what it is that I will be doing.”

Magda relaxed, her worry replaced by curiosity.

“This might be a little embarrassing, Magdalena, and I want you to feel comfortable. I also want to assure you that although Samuel will feel some pain, it’s part of the mitzvah. The procedure is very safe.”

He reached for a box lying next to him on the desk. The leather hide that covered it was kept in place by silver implements and closed with a silver latch. Dr. Tauber set it on his lap and opened it so that she could examine the contents inside. She now saw that the box was made of wood. Inside were a small silver flask, two tiny silver trays, a strangely shaped instrument, a silver pointer, and another vial.

Dr. Tauber removed the strange instrument first and held it up. It was flat and shaped like a rounded *A* without the horizontal line in the middle. When he showed it to her up close, Magda realized it was a two-sided knife.

“There is almost no blood, Magdalena. When I uncover Samuel, I will pull his foreskin above the glans and then shave it off. It is almost like removing a skin protrusion.” He held her look. “Have you ever seen something like that done?”

Like a wart or a mole. “It’s fine, Herr Doktor. I understand.”

He smiled, plainly relieved. “There are several blessings, and the guests will have to respond. Frau Tauber has written them out for our guests. You won’t understand what we’re saying.”

She shifted in the chair, ready to ask permission to do something ceremonious herself. “Frau Tauber said that a *sandek* is something like a godmother.”

“Well, godfather, perhaps. It’s highly unusual for a woman to do this. Magda? What is it?”

Magda reached into the pocket of her skirt and withdrew the small pouch. “When Christians are baptized,” she said as she loosened the strings, “our godparents usually give us a necklace with a crucifix for protection.”

She shook the pouch over her palm and the necklace fell into it. She showed it to Dr. Tauber, pleased to see his face light up. “I asked Renata what I might give Samuel as a gift for his special day. And she told me about the Star of David, how it is a sign of blessing and protection. And then she gave me this charm that she had from her family. So, I’ve hung the two together on my necklace. It’s the necklace my godmother gave me for my baptism. I want Samuel to have it, if you approve.”

Dr. Tauber now hung the necklace up so that he could see the two pieces strung together: her golden cross, and Renata’s six-pointed star in silver.

“You want him to have both?” His eyes were alight.

She nodded. “If you approve. If not, I can just give him the Star of David. I would understand.”

“No, Magda. No. Frau Tauber and I want him to have both.”

She bit her lip to keep the tears at bay. This was what Walter would never understand about any of the people in this house.

Magda glanced at the waxy anatomical models. “Dr. Tauber?” She need only ask. She needed only the courage to ask. “You said I wouldn’t understand the rest of the ceremony. Would you mind explaining it to me?”

The Dvoráks were the first to appear, having driven up from Prague, complaining that getting a travel permit now meant almost giving away one’s firstborn. Anna Dvoráková treated Magda like a star in one of her films, explaining to each guest

who arrived thereafter that this was *the* Magdalena, the one who had rescued Eliška from the burning nursery, and how delightful it was that the Taubers bestowed Magda with the honor of Samuel's *sandek*.

An hour later, in the rose garden overlooking the valley, Frau Tauber presented Samuel to Magda and she led the two of them to sit on a chair beneath the canopy, where Dr. Tauber waited. He smiled at her serenely, and Magda's heart soared as she lowered Samuel onto her lap. All around her, the guests offered silent encouragement.

First, Dr. Tauber sanitized Magda's hands with alcohol, then he addressed the gathering, requesting permission from the community.

The people around Magda answered with a quiet but assured "*L'chaim*"—to life.

After the first blessing, Dr. Tauber began the procedure, and Magda watched, holding still, taking it all in, as if she would later be examined about it all. Samuel's little body spasmed at the incision, and then a cry of surprise exploded from him. There were soft chuckles, and someone clapped. Murmuring the next blessing, Dr. Tauber carefully placed the removed foreskin onto one of the trays.

He brushed a tear from Samuel's cheek and kissed the top of Magda's head. "We thank you. My children thank you."

As Dr. Tauber had suggested, Magda rose with Samuel and handed him to Dr. Tauber so that she could present Samuel with the necklace. She fastened the chain with the crucifix and the Star of David around his neck and everyone clapped.

Frau Tauber took him to feed him and swaddled him tightly before returning him to Magda. "He'll sleep for a while

now,” she said. “Take him. It’s your day together.”

The guests sang praises or cooed over the baby as Magda presented him. Someone began a song. Others joined in. Soon they were all clapping and even some danced as they migrated toward the pool. But above the singing, Magda heard a humming sound, a droning in the distance.

She extended the child to Frau Tauber and hurried to the back of the house and up to the terrace. The sound of engines was coming from the main road. Magda knew that sound. They’d been in her farmyard. They’d brought back her father and taken her brothers. Chills ran over her body at the sight of the first truck just a short distance down the hill. Other vehicles followed the first. One, two, three of them, and a black Mercedes Benz with those two flags. Maybe they would drive by. Maybe the Obergruppenführer had mistaken an appointment.

He never came with trucks.

She had every intention to bar the gate. She did not know how and she whirled around to see that the rest of the party had gathered on the lawn behind her.

“The children!” It was Dr. Tauber. It was a demand. He shoved the leather-covered box under Aleš’s arm, sealed with the instruments inside. “Hide them. Now.”

Magda understood he meant the children and the box. The box would give Samuel’s very existence away. But when Magda saw Frau Tauber’s eyes widen, Magda whirled to face the granary again. Where the border of the field met the woods across the road, the three pregnant does were bounding toward them. All three leapt before the first truck. There was nowhere to go except slam against the iron gate, and they scattered in

panic, springing between the vehicles as if the tarmac electrocuted them.

Aleš lifted Eliška into his arms, and pulled Magda, who was still holding Samuel, into the house. Behind her, the trucks braked to a halt at the iron gates. Terror gripping her, Magda spun around. An entire army had come to take them away.

JUNE-DECEMBER 1942

CHAPTER TEN

JUNE 1942

Magda stepped out of the bakery, clutching her bag. When she reached St. Stephen's, she checked once more to make sure she had not been followed. She slipped her hand into her pocket and touched her talisman. Certain that nobody paid any attention to her in the streets, she made the sign of the cross and entered the church through the side. Today, it was empty. At the door leading to the back of the crypts below, she rapped twice in quick succession, paused, and tapped three more times. On the other side, the iron bolt scraped across the heavy wooden door. As soon as it was opened wide enough, Magda slipped through.

"There you are," Renata said. She peered over Magda's shoulder and shut the door. "I've got everything downstairs."

Magda followed her to below the church, fighting off the feeling of being trapped like a hunted animal in a burrow and the dogs digging furiously above. As they passed beneath the stone arches, Renata's footfalls made two different sounds—*scuff-clack, scuff-clack*. The heel of her left shoe was worn, probably exposing a nail. On either side of them were rows of coffins—centuries of royals and bishops—stacked in threes behind wrought-iron gates. Beneath the scent of melted beeswax, the air was dank and musty. Renata stopped at one of the last gates and reached for the sconce. She retrieved a

medieval-looking key. She turned it in the padlock and swung the gates open.

Magda shuddered. It was sacrilege to be using the coffins, but Renata was already lifting the middle one open. Here was where they hid the Taubers' possessions, the pilfered provisions, and the other weapons of their resistance. Here in these catacombs, Aleš's youngest brother, Gabriel, now a deacon of the parish, had produced a death certificate for Renata. Then he had baptized her and married her to Aleš. Renata said that day was like experiencing a life in reverse. Her wedding gifts were the falsified documents and a new identity.

Renata was now named Vlasta. Aleš was named Zeus. Davide was Krok. Anyone working underground had a nom de guerre, and these were the names that Magda had to address them with.

“Have you got them?” Renata asked.

Magda reached into her coat pocket and withdrew the extra ration cards. They were all there. The ration cards were their new currency and it was the way Aleš and Renata and Davide paid people to shut up and look the other way. This was how they planted food in the fields for the laborers at the Jewish ghetto, or near the railroad tracks for the prisoners unloading coal. They did this with the hope that it was somehow helping the Taubers inside.

Renata riffled the coupons under her nose, as if inhaling the pages of a new book. She tapped them lightly against Magda's cheek. A kiss of gratitude. “Thank Frau Koenig and the SS Obersturmbannführer for us.”

Magda laughed abruptly at the absurdity.

Renata reached into the second coffin, a bishop's. "When is the witch due?"

"Any day now."

"Then this will be one of the last times you have to do this."

"She talks about how this is just the first of many children she will have. She wants one of those pins that the Führer gives to honor mothers."

"And in the Taubers' house." Renata turned around, holding a burlap sack. "It's blasphemous! Damned Nazis breeding little Fascists. If it's a girl, they'll groom her into an obedient baby machine. If it's a boy, he'll be another soldier for Hitler."

Magda thought about that.

"Your decoy." Renata pushed the sack at her. "I think there is a wedge of cheese they managed. Some oil, nuts, and preserves. And a sack of flour."

But not the things Magda had coupons for. She took the sack. "It's been hard to invent excuses."

"You'll learn."

"I came to tell you that there are six commanders coming to the house tonight."

"All right." Renata's mop of dark curls shook. "Aleš will come by then."

"Dinner's at eight o'clock." Magda looked at Renata's scanty sack, opened it, and began to transfer the items into her bread bag. "Jana's going to catch heat for this."

Renata scoffed. “I’m not worried about Jana. She always makes do. That woman is probably the most resourceful of any of us. Same place as always. You hear anything, anything at all, you leave us the message, all right?”

“Yes. Of course.” Magda’s job was not to interpret but to relay.

“And in an emergency?” Renata reminded. “If they suspect you in any way?”

“Proverbs seven twenty-two.”

“Proverbs seven twenty-two, and we’ll get you out.”

Magda handed her the bread roll. “This came in, too.”

“And so we break bread again.” Renata smiled wryly. She took the roll and slowly tore it in half, exposing a cream-colored slip of paper concealed inside. She handed Magda half of the roll. They each took a bite, their ritual of swallowing secrets.

Renata stuffed the rest of her roll into her mouth and unrolled the slip of paper. Her face fell.

Magda waited.

Renata handed her the slip. “Heydrich is dead.”

Magda stared at the message. Not a week earlier, a group of insurgents—supposedly better organized than Renata’s and Aleš’s—attempted to assassinate SS Commander Reinhard Heydrich, the Butcher of Prague. He’d been wounded. The Nazis chased the resistance fighters down, found them in a church—like this one—and killed them.

“There will be reprisals.” Renata snatched the message back, brushed a hand over her curly mane. “Koenig will go mad.”

Magda swallowed, but her throat was constricted. Right now she wanted to crawl into that coffin herself instead of going back outside and returning to the villa. Or run to Lidice, back to her parents, but their situation was even more dire according to their letters.

Renata steered Magda back to the stairwell. “You’re going to have a lot of information to transcribe.”

They reached the top of the stairs, and Renata pressed an ear to the door. Satisfied, she waved Magda through, but Magda spun around and hugged her tightly.

“I miss you, you know? All of you,” Magda said. “I wish it was you doing this, not me. You’re so much braver.”

“You are the bravest person I know, Magda. You’re the one amid that devil’s lot.” Renata pulled away and shook her a little. Her eyes grazed over Magda’s crooked nose, and she leaned in to kiss Magda’s cheek before releasing her. “Besides, Aleš is my husband now. I am with him wherever he is, even if it’s underground like mice in a cellar.” Her smile dissipated. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry about how it all turned out.”

“Don’t.” Magda would cry, and she did not have the luxury. Not here. She took a deep breath, steadied herself. “Kiss the boys for me, please. Hug them tight.”

On the way back up the hill and to the mansion, Magda stopped along the road, stepped blindly into the woods, and, when she was out of sight, finally allowed herself to cry.

Coming into the kitchen, Magda nearly jumped back at the sight of Frau Koenig.

“Where have you been?” the woman demanded. Her dark hair had been scraped back into a severe crown of braids. Her cheeks were flushed, and her hands were holding her enormous belly as if she were showcasing a trophy.

Jana was cutting up old bread as if nothing unusual was happening. A bowl of apples lay browning.

Magda raised the sack containing the meager list of items and dropped it onto the table. “Supplies.”

“I thought you went yesterday,” Frau Koenig said. “I sent you out for them yesterday.” She grabbed the sack, pulled it to her, and opened it. “Where are the tins of milk? Where is the sugar? Ration cards for pregnant wives—for officers’ wives—secure special provisions!”

Feigning repentance, Magda lowered her eyes beneath the woman’s glare. Lying, and pretending. Renata said it would become easier with regular use. “I’m sorry, Frau Koenig.”

“And the supply train?” The woman was easing her way toward hysteria. “You missed the first run to the supply train?”

Looking as remorseful as possible, Magda said, “Nearly emptied by the time I arrived. I had to trade just to get all this.”

“All this?” Frau Koenig mocked Magda’s Czech accent. Her face was a blend of despair and fury as she balled the scanty sack. “What should I do with this rubbish? What good are my ration coupons if we can’t get the things we need? We have six guests coming to dinner tonight.”

Jana cast Magda an irritated look, then shrugged at Frau Koenig. “I’ll make do, Frau Koenig. Always do. I’ve still got some things in the garden. Perhaps you would like to go up to

the library and we'll bring you a cup of tea. You really ought to have a rest."

Frau Koenig shifted on swollen feet and rubbed her hands along her sides. "I won't have this." But she had deflated. "This is what? The second, third time it's happened?"

Magda glanced at Frau Koenig's belly. Four times. Four times in three months.

Jana touched her temple, giving the woman a knowing look. "She had one of her spells again."

Frau Koenig huffed and cast another resentful look at the sack. "Spells or no spells, the lieutenant colonel will certainly hear about this. One of these days I will get the whole story about what happened to your face, *Magd*."

Magda tensed beneath Frau Koenig's rising anger and looked at the floor to save herself.

"And draw me a bath!"

As soon as the woman stormed out, Jana went to Magda and patted her shoulder. "It's over for now."

Magda shook her head. "*Magd*," she mocked.

The woman thought it was a joke. The day Waltraud Koenig arrived at Villa Liška, she had ordered Jana and Magda to line up with the new groundskeeper before her on roll call, just the three of them. She paced up and down before them like a drill sergeant, explaining that this household was now the property of the Third Reich and that Obersturmbannführer Koenig and she had the privilege of running it, and that everyone had to prove no fewer than four generations of German lineage to work here. Until Magda told Waltraud Koenig her name.

Frau Koenig—with a bark of a laugh—said she would keep Magda on, as *Magd* in German meant “servant” anyway. “With that birthmark and crooked nose, and that scar beneath your eye, *Magd*,” she had jeered, “you will certainly keep your head down and do as you are told.”

She took on two more staff, but from town. Nobody except Jana and Magda would live in the house, and she made it clear that she abhorred even that idea.

When Frau Koenig had dismissed the others, she blocked Magda’s way. “I have my eye on you. I know how you were involved with that criminal groundskeeper. I know about his questioning, what he tried to do. I know how he protected you. I’ll have none of that in my prestigious home.”

Her prestigious home!

Jana pulled Magda out of her reverie with another touch. “I’ll deliver the tray to the library. You go upstairs and prepare that woman’s bath.”

When the bath was ready, Magda returned downstairs and halted at the bottom. There were fresh roses in Frau Tauber’s Venetian glass vase. They did not deserve to look that beautiful. Worse yet there was a new photograph next to it. Obersturmbannführer Richard Koenig. The dark hair swept to the side over a broad forehead. That penetrating gaze from protruding eyes. His square jaw, and collar, the SS pin, the iron cross. The boxer’s physique. This was the man whose power and privilege overshadowed not only the government of Litoměřice but of Villa Liška.

“What are you staring at,” Frau Koenig snapped. She stood in the corridor, pressing on her sides. “Is that bath ready?”

“Yes. I was coming to get you.”

“And having an argument with the flowers on the way?” She approached, and Magda stepped aside. Frau Koenig glanced at the photo, then at Magda. “Go set the dining table. And tell Jana to bring my dinner upstairs tonight.”

“Won’t you be eating with the rest of the guests?”

Frau Koenig grimaced. “You truly are daft. Nobody wants to see a woman in my condition.”

The woman ascended with slow, heavy steps and disappeared into the bedroom suite.

When the Taubers’ cuckoo announced seven o’clock, Magda was just starting on the silverware, the set that Frau Koenig had brought with her from Austria. The Taubers’ silver lay in the bishop’s coffin.

She looked up, her chest pricking painfully. Obersturmbannführer Koenig would be home soon.

“He has to see you,” Renata had instructed from the beginning. “Koenig must be used to seeing you so that he will have little reason to find your presence suspicious. You have that household to run. Use that as your excuse for being underfoot should he complain.”

The trouble was, Magda’s first instinct was always—always—to flee.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MARCH 1942

SAMUEL'S BRIS MILAH

Aleš lifted Eliška into his arms, and pulled Magda, who was still holding Samuel, into the house. Behind her, she heard the first truck brake to a halt at the iron gates. Not the front gate used by visitors and patients, but the service road gate.

Magda pressed Samuel against her as she followed Aleš, just barely registering Renata bursting through the front door.

“Go,” Aleš shouted at Renata. “Now!”

Aleš continued to lead Magda up the stairs to the third floor. At the end of the hall, he threw open his bedroom door. The attic windows overlooked the gardens. Where the military trucks were now pulling into the drive.

Magda glanced down at Samuel. His eyes were wide, and he made little noises, his breaths coming quicker. She hugged him to her and bounced him. *Please don't cry. Please!*

Eliška whimpered, too, eyes wide with fright. Aleš flung open his wardrobe. Inside, his few items of clothing were neatly hung or folded. On the bottom of the wardrobe, two goose-down covers were stacked one over the other.

Eliška looked chastised, as if she were about to be unjustly punished.

Aleš grasped her shoulders. “We’re going to play a game, all right, Eliška?”

The girl tucked in her chin, and Magda saw that she did not believe him.

“Nobody except Magda or me is allowed to let you out.”

“But why?” Eliška asked.

“Because that’s the game.” Aleš’s voice sounded strained. “You like playing new games, right?”

The girl nodded again as a tear rolled down the side of her face. Magda tried an encouraging smile as Aleš coaxed her toward the hiding place.

Below, truck doors slammed and voices fired commands. Aleš grabbed the box from Magda and threw it open on the bed. “There should be opium.”

Magda handed him the vial Dr. Tauber had pointed out earlier. He had said it would never be used for the ceremony, but that they had it just in case.

Aleš popped it open, used his forefinger, and then told Eliška to open her mouth. She obeyed. He rubbed the girl’s gums with his finger. “This is a magic potion, Eliška, part of the game. You’re Sleeping Beauty, and I will be the prince who wakes you up.”

Magda covered her mouth and bit her palm, the sob stuck in her throat.

Aleš worked off the back panel of the wardrobe, revealing a hiding space, a fake wall. “Eliška, get in.”

Eliška stared at Magda.

“Go on, my Little Finch,” Magda said.

Obediently, whether from shock or trust, Eliška slipped into the hiding space but protested when Aleš began to replace the faux wall back. Her hand reached out for Aleš, for Magda. “It’s dark, Aleš. Don’t leave me here alone.”

Below them, dogs began barking.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JUNE 1942

When Koenig returned to the villa that night, Magda was laying out the last of the silverware. Her heart jumped at the sound of two men's voices. It was just after seven. Frau Koenig would not be pleased if the dinner guests arrived too early, but the footsteps did not come towards the dining room. Instead, they went straight to Dr. Tauber's office. Koenig might occupy it, but it was still Dr. Tauber's office to her. Magda flipped one of the knives so that its blade faced the plate, then stepped into the foyer to enquire whether she should bring refreshments.

She was too late. They were both inside. But the office door was cracked open. Before Magda positioned herself to the right of the door, she caught a glimpse of Koenig standing over the desk, opening a file. On the other side of the table, a pair of uniformed legs and black boots. The visitor sat in the chair she had been in that last day, the day Koenig had first appeared at the villa.

She heard the shuffle of papers and Dr. Tauber's leather chair giving way to its new occupant.

"You were right to come to me, Major," Koenig said. "This is very grave indeed."

“There are—I’m sorry to say—still many sympathizers and traitors to the Reich,” said a smooth, Czech-accented reply. Magda recognized the voice as one of Dr. Tauber’s former patients. The man continued, accusation dripping in his tone. “The locals are up in arms, the priests and nuns especially. They know that Theresienstadt is no longer for just enemies of the Reich but for Jewish—”

“Jews,” Koenig snarled, “are *the* enemy of the Third Reich. I hope that is absolutely clear. They and the people who are trying to hide them.”

There was a brief silence before the Czech man said, “We executed them on the street. To make that very message clear.”

Whom did they murder? Magda’s heart hung by a tendril, and she felt sick. Her body tensed, prepared to flee. She stared at the vase of roses. People depended on her. On this.

“That is unfortunate,” Koenig said.

“I’m sorry?” The major’s confusion was evident.

“I want information, Major. Your department is to squelch any organized resistance. And we need names. Do you understand me?”

“I do.” Something scuffed across the rug in the office.

Magda took a step toward the dining room, then she heard a bang as a fist came down on the desk. Her insides leapt, but her feet froze.

“Sit back down, Major. I’m not finished. This convent you found the child in...”

Magda clamped a hand over her mouth.

“We believe he was the only one,” was the weak reply.

Koenig's voice skewered the air, sharp as a blade. "The only... the only one?"

Heavy silence. Then pacing. It was Koenig.

"Where there is one rat," he growled, "there are many."

Magda fought to stay put. She had to know what his next move was going to be. If she had any hope of preventing any further tragedies, she had to know the details of Koenig's next move.

"I want every single house," he stormed, "every building and barn in this county overturned. No exceptions."

The other man protested. "But we—"

"Every single person questioned. Every man and child stripped. On the sidewalks if you have to. Every man and boy, do you hear me?"

"Yes, Herr Obersturmbannführer!"

"Not one single building or haystack in this entire county is exempt. Not even the churches!"

"I understand, Herr Obersturmbannführer."

"Not even my home, Major! And you treat my orders as if they are directly from Berlin!"

Magda fled to the dining room. She had just managed to get behind the door as the men, their voices lower now, emerged from the office.

She heard them speaking, heard each *Heil Hitler*, and then the front door shut. She retreated back into the butler's pantry, racking her brain as to how she could flee the house without being noticed.

"Magdalena!"

She froze. Koenig was in the dining room.

“Magdalena, where are you?”

She stepped out, knotting her shaking hands behind her back. His eyes bore into her, and Magda felt searing heat rising up her neck.

Koenig’s eyes rested on the table. “We’ll take our dinner immediately. I’ve canceled the other guests. I’m returning to town as soon as possible. I have business to attend to.”

Hunting down Jews. Hunting down children. “Of course, Herr Obersturmbannführer.”

His eyes raked over her face. “Then come back to my office. I want to speak to you. I received a call from Frau Koenig about an incident between you two today.”

“Yes, Obersturmbannführer. I understand.”

He scowled and stalked out, taking the stairs two at a time.

Magda stumbled to the table before her legs buckled beneath her. When her heart stopped galloping enough for her to stand again, she stared at her image in the mirror on the far wall. Koenig might see the birthmark as reason to treat her cruelly, but it was the crooked nose, the scar beneath her left eye, that were his constant reminder of how she’d once tried to defy him. *Keep your head down. Survive this war.* That was her mother’s advice.

She had to leave. Koenig suspected her and stealing ration coupons was a serious offense. But first she had to warn the very people she was here to protect, who were counting on her, about the raid Koenig had ordered.

Magda hurried into the kitchen.

“Jana—” But the kitchen was empty.

She wanted to scream, to throw the food that she had set out. But Jana suddenly came through the service door. Magda ran to her.

“The proverbs. I have to get out of here. He knows.”

Jana made the sign of the cross. Something thudded above them, and Magda clutched Jana’s hands. Then the footfalls of someone running down the stairs. Jana moved to the door that led into the corridor. Magda cried for her to stop.

“Magdalena!” He was commanding her to come out.

“Magda?” Jana called from the other side. “Come out here.”

Stiffly, Magda stepped out into the corridor but Koenig was anything but furious. He looked stricken.

He raised a shaking finger toward the stairwell. “My wife... I think it’s time.”

Jana pushed past him and urged Magda to follow her. Upstairs they found Frau Koenig doubled over by the bedpost, the hem of her robe soaked. Silently, Magda praised heaven above.

“Frau Koenig, take my hand,” Jana said. “Now.” The cook led the woman to the bed, but Frau Koenig resisted.

“I can’t. I can’t,” she breathed and doubled over again, wailing as another contraction gripped her.

Somewhere, the telephone rang.

Magda helped Jana get Frau Koenig into the bed.

Jana clutched Magda’s hand. “Go fetch Eva. Go fetch the midwife.” She looked meaningfully at her.

Get out. Get out of this house now.

Frau Koenig moaned again. She extended a hand to Magda. “Don’t leave me.”

That hand, that beckoning hand. That plea. Like Eliška.

Magda backed out of the room and hurried down the stairs. She had to get word directly to Renata or Father Gabriel. She could not wait for Aleš. She would do both.

In his office, Richard Koenig pulled the telephone away from his ear. “What is it? Is she having the baby?”

“Yes,” Magda said. *He’s not going to forget about those coupons.* “It’s coming. I’ll be back with the midwife.”

She burst into the kitchen, grabbed a sack and stuffed bread, and cheese and apples into it. She ripped a sheet from the calendar, found a pen and wrote 7:22 onto the tiny piece of paper. Next she wrote, *Nimrod is watching the stars.* Koenig was on a hunt and nobody—nowhere—was safe.

She rolled it up tight and ran out the door. It slammed shut behind her. Crickets chirped and the air was scented by sunbaked cedar bark as she stuck the message into the hollowed-out knot where she’d once hid Eliška’s treasure hunt clues. Then she purposefully left the service gate ajar.

If Aleš was watching, if he was hovering nearby, he would know it was an emergency. There would be no dinner party, no information about any reprisals for Heydrich’s death. No, this hunt Koenig had called was much more serious, and it was personal.

She mounted the bicycle and coasted downhill. It was still light out. She pedaled to the road leading to the cathedral’s square. Before her, the Elbe River and the bridge. The clock tower in the square rang eight o’clock. Less than three-quarters of an hour since Koenig gave the order for the hunt.

The Nazis were fast—they were well organized—but not that fast. She had just enough time. She steered left, crossed the quarters, and passed beneath the bridge that connected the north tower to the main cathedral. She leaned the bicycle against the wall and tested the door. Locked.

Panic seized her. The cemetery gate opened, and Father Gabriel stepped out, closing it behind him. She ran to him. He recognized her.

“I need to confess my sins,” she urged. “It’s been eight days since my last confession.”

She followed him to the church where he led her to the entry of the catacombs. She ran down the stone steps. He stayed to keep watch. The key was above the sconce. Her hands shook, but she finally managed to insert it into the padlock. The crypt was empty.

“Vlasta?” she whispered. “Where are you?”

There was no answer. Devastated, Magda lifted the bishop’s coffin and reached up on tiptoe to drop the bag of food into it. Amongst the Taubers’ possessions she found the bottle she needed and plucked it out. At that moment, Magda thought of what her brothers would say to this. She could imagine their looks of surprised admiration, and then their teasing. *Where has our Magda gotten so much courage?* Bohdan would ruffle her hair. Matěj would squeeze her reassuringly.

“What are you doing here?”

Magda yelped.

Renata stepped out of the shadows.

“Jesus,” Magda cried. “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.”

Renata put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m a Catholic now. Don’t use the Lord’s name in vain.”

Magda threw her arms around her, laughing and crying at the same time.

“Magda, breathe. What’s happened?”

“You have to get me out of the villa but first, you or someone... you have to cross the bridge tonight. You have to get to the convent.”

“We can’t cross without travel permits.”

“Vlasta—”

“Shhh!”

Magda’s heart thundered, their heads cocked toward the stairwell. Nothing.

Renata peered at her. “Who’s in danger?”

“Everyone. Everyone’s in danger. Koenig even ordered them to search Villa Liška!” Then because Magda didn’t know how else to explain why, she shook Renata’s shoulders. “Nimrod!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MARCH 1942

SAMUEL'S BRIS MILAH

Aleš gently pressed the wardrobe closed before giving Magda and Samuel a once-over. He dropped onto all fours near the bed and pried open three floorboards. From the bed, he grabbed a thin blanket and stuffed it between the slats.

“Do the same for Samuel,” he said, taking the box and shoving it deep beneath the floor. “Get some opium on your finger, rub it on his gums. Not too much, but the children must sleep through this.”

Magda grabbed the vial and followed Aleš's instructions, forcing his mouth open and putting a couple drops onto his gums. The baby's face scrunched up in protest and turned bright red at the foreign taste. Magda handed him over to Aleš, her empty arms leaden.

“What is that?” She pointed to what looked like a pillowcase near the blanket.

“It's jewelry, some valuables, things that they can sell if they—”

Escape this? “How? How did you know?” she interrupted.

Aleš, his forehead gleaming with exertion, looked gravely at her. “We managed to get them papers for Switzerland. Next week. Dr. Tauber had these ready.”

Aleš then lowered Samuel between the slats.

Magda helped place the floorboards back into position.

From the wardrobe, Eliška whimpered, and Magda had to hold herself back from opening it. Instead, she scrambled over to where she knew the girl would be able to hear her.

“What’s wrong, child?”

Thickly, Eliška said, “I feel funny. I want Mama. Where’s Papa?”

“I have to watch after your brother.” Magda’s voice betrayed her despair. “Wait for us. We’ll come get you when it’s... time.”

“Magda, no. Don’t leave me.”

Two floors below them, the barking dogs invaded the house, and heavy boots drummed on the marble foyer. Doors opened and slammed, and something that sounded like glass shattered.

Magda rushed to the window. An SS officer, his pistol aimed at the sky, stood in the midst of police and soldiers as the Taubers and the *Bris Milah* guests were herded onto the lawn before him. There was one familiar figure.

“That’s Walter,” Magda cried.

There were shouts coming from the stairwell. Aleš grabbed Magda and steered her out the door. On the second floor, they nearly collided with three Waffen-SS soldiers. They were nothing but young boys, newly graduated recruits.

Aleš and Magda did not resist when two of them seized them and marched them down to the foyer and to the veranda doors. Magda winced at the swarm of soldiers ransacking the house. Outside, a pair of soldiers allowed their German shepherds to snarl and bark around the terrified group.

It seems too easy, giving them a feeling of security only to hunt them down.

It's the way things are done, Magda. It's how we control the population.

Dr. Tauber had draped his suit jacket over Frau Tauber's shoulders, and she was pressed up against him, her face a grotesque mask of horror. The SS officer in charge, a man with a square jaw and a face as cold as a steel trap, spotted the soldiers with Aleš and Magda. He waved them over, but Magda did not recognize him.

"Who else is in the house?" the commander snapped. He turned to Walter behind him. "Lieutenant! Inventory!" His German had a Viennese accent.

Walter scanned the crowd, his eyes grazing over her as she was shoved at gunpoint into the terrified group on the lawn. She sought out Jana, who slipped her hand into Magda's and held on tightly. Where was Renata? Where had she gone? To her left, Magda felt Ruth Tauber's eyes drilling into her. Magda could not look at her. She would certainly give something away.

"The household staff is all here, Herr Obersturmbannführer," Walter reported. "Except one." He showed no reaction to Magda's shocked expression.

"Who?"

Walter's eyes skittered over to Aleš. "I'm not sure what her name—"

"Our housekeeper," Dr. Tauber spoke. "She has the day off today. She is visiting her relatives in Prague."

"Is that so?" the commander snapped. "If she's here, we'll find her. Documents. Check all their identities."

Calmly, Dr. Tauber reached into the breast pocket of his suit coat, still draped over Frau Tauber, and presented them to the first policeman.

"Obersturmbannführer," Dr. Tauber called to the commander, "you will find that everyone here is prepared to cooperate. I am the Napola director's personal physician."

The commander threw Dr. Tauber an indignant look. "The only authority here now is me. And you, your family, and your housekeeper were ordered to report to the resettlement office, with your belongings, for deportation." He strode over and snatched the Taubers' papers, opened them, then handed them to Walter. "What is the nature of your assembly here? Are you conspiring against the Reich?"

Dr. Tauber raised his hands. "Not at all. We were having a birthday celebration."

"A birthday celebration. Whose birthday is it?" His eyes landed on Frau Tauber, who'd shielded herself behind her husband. "Yours, Frau Tauber?"

Anna Dvoráková, dressed in a fur stole and a dark-green suit, stepped forward. "Mine, Herr Kommandant. It's my birthday."

"Herr Kommandant? My name is Koenig, and you will address me as Obersturmbannführer." He snapped his fingers at a policeman to check paní Dvoráková's papers.

The policeman examined them and nodded. "It's this woman's birthday today."

Magda slowly exhaled. The pieces were falling together. The Taubers had taken some precautions but not enough. They should not have had the celebration. What had Frau Tauber said? *We must continue living, Johan, but not in fear.*

Now it was Magda's turn. Angrily, she thrust her identity card and work permit to the policeman, but she could not stop staring at Walter. He watched calmly as the Taubers were marched past him.

"Where are they taking them?" Magda hissed to Jana, but the woman's look said it all. *Across the river. Where else?*

The policeman handed Magda her identity papers back and moved to Aleš.

"Lieutenant," Koenig barked.

Walter snapped to attention.

"Who else?"

Walter turned his back on the Taubers. "There is one more person missing, Herr Obersturmbannführer. Their daughter, Eliška Tauber."

As if Walter himself had rammed the butt of a rifle into her gut, Magda doubled over. Jana jerked her back upright, and Magda gasped. Walter's eyes narrowed and froze just before they met hers. The shake of his head was almost imperceptible, but she saw it.

Koenig turned to face Magda. He cocked his head slowly, as if setting sights on her. "You." He pointed at her. "Where is the daughter?"

One of the policemen whipped Magda around and shoved her toward the house.

“Not her! Please not her!” Ruth Tauber wailed.

The policeman jammed something hard and sharp into Magda’s back. His tight grip on her arm would surely leave bruises. He dragged her up the steps of the veranda, beneath the canopy, and toward the French doors.

“Where is she?” he barked.

When he yanked open the door to the parlor, Magda bucked and sobbed. She could not do this.

The soldiers, who were searching the room, stopped to watch the altercation. One had blond eyelashes. With a jolt, she recognized Gustav.

Magda braced herself in the door frame, and Gustav and his companion dropped what they were holding to grab her arms.

The policeman was now inches from her face. “Where is she?” he shouted. “Where is the daughter?”

“She came from upstairs,” Gustav volunteered. “With the other man.”

All Magda managed to scream as they dragged her into the hallway was a stream of “No... no... no...”

When the first punch landed, her head snapped back at the same time as something popped and crunched. Blood spurted onto her assailant. Magda howled, her throat raw and on fire. She twisted and flailed again. The second blow connected with the left side of her face. She groaned, trying to regain her balance between the two men who held her. She was certain her eye was lost.

Waves of pain, grief and fury ripped through her body. A kick to her shin. Her legs buckled beneath her. The next kick landed a blow to her ribs.

“Stop!”

Walter. It was Walter’s order. *Why now, Walter?*

“Release her.”

She slumped onto all fours. They had dragged her as far as the bottom of the staircase. Through her one good eye, the tips of men’s boots swam before her. When a pair of brown ones appeared, she tried to lift her head but could not. Someone crouched down next to her and took her chin, angled her face so that she had to look at him.

Walter, his lips pressed together, made a regretful noise in the back of his throat. She tried to focus on the man next to him and met Aleš’s gaze. His face crumpled.

“Let Aleš and me do this for you,” Walter said gently. “Magdalena...”

“Don’t,” she gasped. Iron filled her mouth. “Don’t call me that.”

Walter ran a hand over his cap, leaving it cocked back. He released her head and rose. “Take me to her,” he said. But he was speaking to Aleš. “My men will find her, one way or another. It’s best you take me to her.”

“Walter,” Magda pleaded. Her voice sounded far away and thick. “Take me. Take me!”

“The mother,” Walter said slowly, “wants her child. Aleš? Take me to her now.”

Magda burned, hot as fire. Stepping past her, Aleš ascended the first step. Magda scrambled on all fours to stop

him. She stretched out her hand, grasping and clawing until something brushed by her fingers. She snapped them shut on the piece of fabric, and she clutched it, pulling it to her with all her remaining strength. It was a trouser cuff. She lifted her head further, the dizziness threatening to close out all light.

Walter looked down at her over his shoulder.

From above, Aleš said mournfully, “I have to bring her to them. Magda, I have to get Eliška.”

Magda’s breathing hitched. Understanding what Aleš meant—remembering that nobody had ever told Walter about Samuel—Magda whimpered, trying to focus on Aleš’s blurred figure, trying to plead with him to save the baby.

Walter kicked his foot out, barely missing her head. The cuff slipped from Magda’s fingers, and she slid to the bottom step, sobbing and fighting off the hands that tried to pull her up.

All too soon, Aleš reappeared carrying Eliška across his arms. Fast asleep, Magda’s Little Finch lay limp, as if already dead.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JUNE 1942

Magda took the side roads around the old city walls to the castle gates, then through the park. She carried the bicycle down the stone steps to the road below and pounded on the door of the one-story cottage on Lidická Road. The sound of motors further up the street made her pull up against the door. One truck after another appeared on the throughway, heading for the main square.

She prayed Renata or someone would make it in time.

When paní Eva opened the door, she took one look at Magda, and her expression turned stony. “Right. I’ll get my things.”

Magda waited outside. The clock tolled half past eight. She imagined Aleš, or someone, finding the gate ajar, unrolling the paper, and decoding her messages. Proverbs 7:22—*Suddenly he went after her like an ox that goes to the slaughter, like a stag prancing into a trapper’s snare*—and Aleš would know they had to get Magda out that night. He would also understand her reference to Nimrod, that Koenig had ordered a thorough hunt for Jews; that the convents and monasteries were no longer safe. Renata was already—Magda prayed—ahead of him, finding a way across the river.

Paní Eva appeared in the doorway again, and they hurried to the town's gate. At the gate, Magda stopped and paní Eva passed through it alone.

“What are you doing? We should hurry.”

“I can't go back,” Magda said. She studied the fortification above her, the flags waving in the breeze. “Koenig knows about the ration cards.”

“He'll want to know why I didn't return with you.”

“Tell him I said I had an errand to run.”

The midwife walked back to her. “He won't punish you too much for the rations. Tell him you gave it to a family in need.”

“When he's looking for Jews in hiding?”

“You need to stay calm,” paní Eva said. “You have to wait for instructions. Where are we to find you?”

“I'll wait at the church.”

Paní Eva grabbed Magda's elbow. “You said yourself, they're searching all the churches. Come with me. You are safer at the house, right beneath his nose. If he's busy with this, he might even forget about you and the ration cards. Give your people the time they need to plan your departure.”

Magda shivered but willed herself to follow the woman past the mines and up the road to the villa. Every step back meant she was heading into danger. And then she reminded herself for whom she was doing this.

Koenig met them in the foyer, furious about the delay. Paní Eva muttered something about how she had just returned from another birth.

“Take her upstairs,” Koenig ordered Magda. He placed his cap on his head. “Ring headquarters when it’s over.”

Magda led paní Eva to the second floor. In the bedroom, Frau Koenig was screaming. The midwife placed a shaky hand on Magda’s and stopped her from turning the handle.

“I helped deliver two beautiful children in that room,” she said. “Two beautiful, innocent children, you know?”

The midwife’s eyes roamed over Magda’s face. The scar. The broken nose. That’s what she was looking at. Paní Eva slowly shook her head. Magda held the woman’s gaze and steeled her resolve.

Below them, the front door opened and slammed shut. No doubt, Captain Koenig was on his way to meet those trucks.

Magda’s fear turned into something cold and hard. “It’s all right.” She led the midwife into the room.

Jana had a compress to Frau Koenig’s forehead. When she saw Magda, her eyes widened, no doubt surprised that Magda had returned.

Frau Koenig sucked air between gritted teeth, then panted, her raised knees shook from the strain, her robe and nightgown were hiked up to her hips. Eva strode to the bed. In a soothing voice, she gave Frau Koenig instructions, followed by requests for the things she would need. When Jana and Magda brought her everything, she asked them both to leave the room.

Magda followed Jana downstairs and into the kitchen. They waited, drinking *Ersatzkaffee* and spoke in whispers although they were alone. Magda fought back sobs.

“You did the right thing,” Jana said. “Renata or Aleš will get there. They have to.”

Magda wiped her eyes and reached into her pocket, removing the two vials.

“For him? Or for her?” Jana asked.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t really thinking. But what if...” She looked meaningfully at the service entry. “If Aleš doesn’t get my message and I have to stay?”

“You have good instincts. Trust them,” Jana said. She seemed to mull something over. “If Koenig’s wife is doing poorly, he’ll be too focused on her to notice anything else.”

Magda hid the bottles back into her pocket.

“My sister is ill,” Jana continued. “I asked Koenig whether I could go visit her. He issued my travel documents.”

“Your sister? I didn’t know you had a sister.”

“She’s the one I write letters to all the time. Who did you think all those letters were from?”

Magda had never asked. She felt lonely already. “When do you have to go?”

“I was supposed to leave on Monday. But I could leave tomorrow, say she’s worsened. That will give everyone some time to adjust and get a plan together for you.” Jana’s eyes darted to Magda’s side of the table. “It’s perfect. You’ll make yourself indispensable. And you can still keep an eye on his every move.”

Magda glanced down at her pocket that held the vials. With certainty, she knew Aleš would not get her message tonight. With certainty, she knew they were all in jeopardy, and they may never get her out.

“Are you frightened?” Jana asked.

Magda looked at her. “Aren’t you?”

At midnight, Jana said she would go upstairs and rest. Magda could not imagine ever sleeping again. But deep in the middle of the night, she awoke, her head on the table. Something had changed. She climbed the stairs to the bedroom suite.

“Bring me the washcloths and water,” paní Eva said as the newborn cried in her arms.

Magda did as the woman instructed. Jana appeared in the doorway, went to the bed and began stripping the sheets.

Frau Koenig whimpered. “What is it? Is everything all right?” she asked.

“You’ve been in labor for a long time,” Jana said. “You need rest.”

“Everything is fine, Frau Koenig,” paní Eva replied. “You have a boy.”

“A boy?” The woman lay back. “A boy. Richard is going to be so pleased.”

A boy. Magda stood over the child, a feeling of absolute calm washing over her. She reached out and touched the dark, wet hair on his head and smiled at paní Eva, more serene than she had felt in years. Everything fell into place for her. She knew she had to go through with this, to feed Aleš and Renata information, to keep tabs on Koenig together with Jana. If she could do anything to prevent this little boy from having to fight for the Führer, she should at least try.

Magda reached into her pocket. The midwife looked curiously at her.

“You must be exhausted,” Magda said to Frau Koenig. She took a clean glass from the dresser, filled it with water from a pitcher, then uncapped the first vial. Two drops of opium swirled in like wisps of smoke. She threw paní Eva a look. The midwife looked up from the basin where she was washing the newborn and nodded.

Jana went to the other side of the bed and began to apply the compress.

“Bring me my son,” Frau Koenig said.

“We will,” Jana soothed. “The midwife must finish washing him first. Here, take this. It will help you sleep. You should rest. We’ll feed him, then bring him to you.”

Magda handed her the glass of water and Jana raised it to the exhausted woman’s lips.

“I’ll stay here with you, Frau Koenig,” Jana said. “I’ll stay here with you until you awake.”

When Frau Koenig lay her head back on the pillows and closed her eyes, Magda returned to paní Eva.

“What are you two up to?” paní Eva whispered. She swaddled the newborn in a clean blanket.

“Buying time,” Magda answered. She moved to the far corner of the room, making paní Eva follow her before she showed her the other vial. Sleeping pills, the ones Dr. Tauber had once prescribed her. “How much can I give her without it being dangerous but for her husband to be worried?”

Paní Eva read the label and looked alarmed. “The pills aren’t dangerous, but the plan is.”

“You said yourself that I need to stay aboveground.”

“But—”

“I need Koenig to rely on me,” Magda whispered. “Jana’s leaving the house. He’ll have no reason to get rid of me with nobody else to care for his wife and child. He’ll have to trust me.”

Jana joined them.

Paní Eva held out her hand for the baby’s bottle. It took a while before she could persuade the child to take the nipple. “I thought you wanted to go into hiding.”

Jana looked at Magda. “Tell her.”

“Tell me what?” paní Eva whispered.

Magda gently took the child from her arms, bottle and all. “If I did everything right, he’s alive. If I keep going, I can maybe help others.”

“He? Who’s he?”

“Samuel.” Magda gazed at her. “Samuel is alive.”

In the sitting room, Magda dialed Koenig’s number and handed the telephone to paní Eva. Outside the high-arched windows, the day was breaking. Darkness still surrounded the stand of cedars.

“Yes, Herr Obersturmbannführer. You have a son. No, Herr Obersturmbannführer, your wife—” She looked at Magda and Jana in turn, gripping the phone. “She lost a lot of blood, she has been weakened and will need much rest. No, Jana had to leave for her sister’s—”

There was shouting from the receiver. Magda winced.

Paní Eva’s voice shook. “Yes, Magdalena is still here. No, sir. I’ve no one else at the bakery. I’m afraid— Yes. I will tell

her.” Paní Eva nodded at Magda. “When will you be back? Right. I will ask her to do so. Yes, sir. I understand. I will tell Frau Koenig as well. A son. Yes. Congratulations.”

Paní Eva lay the telephone carefully back into its cradle and sighed. “He’ll be back in a few hours, he said.”

“Well,” Jana said. “It’s done. Now we need to make it real.”

“One pill, every twelve hours,” paní Eva instructed Magda. “But the child, he needs his mother. And make sure the formula is warm but not too hot.”

Magda hugged each of the women.

Jana picked up her suitcase and reminded Magda she would return as soon as she could.

When the front door closed behind them, Magda took a deep breath and went to the bassinet where the newborn slept. It was time to take the boy to his mother.

Frau Koenig was not pleased to see her. Magda had expected it. She handed the woman the child and left her to nurse him. In the kitchen, she warmed up soup and, as she waited, paced back and forth to the service window. They had to let her know. Didn’t Aleš and Renata know how excruciating it was to wait for this news? She prayed that they had reached Samuel in time. She prayed that they had reached Davide’s wife and child in time. Of course, she was the last person they were thinking of, even if they had been successful.

If they had been successful...

The soup began boiling over, and Magda quickly removed the pot from the stove and poured it into a bowl, cut some bread, and arranged a pickled beet salad on a plate. Beets for iron, for a woman who’d supposedly lost too much blood. She

dropped the pill into the soup and mixed it until it dissolved. The only person Frau Koenig trusted was Jana—a “pure-blood” Aryan—and to be safe, paní Eva had instructed Magda to dissolve the pill in anything but water. Frau Koenig would otherwise pick up on the bitter taste.

She carried the tray upstairs, her own stomach grumbling and she realized she had not eaten dinner the night before, and no breakfast. The baby’s cries resounded in the hallway and down the stairwell. When Magda managed to get into the bedroom with the food, she found Frau Koenig in bed looking fully distraught.

“He won’t take the bottle,” she said. “What’s wrong with him? Where is the midwife?”

Magda set the tray down. The child was screaming, his face red. “I watched her feed him. You can give him to me.”

“I don’t need you to feed my son,” the woman snapped.

Magda backed away. She brought the tray to the nightstand and placed it within Frau Koenig’s reach. The newborn twisted his head and screamed each time she tried to give him the formula. Frau Koenig’s face was also turning red.

“What’s wrong with him?” she cried.

“It might be colic,” Magda suggested. “The midwife—”

“Where is that woman?”

“You sent her away,” Magda said.

Frau Koenig looked at her in disbelief. “I did?”

Magda nodded. *Confuse her. Make her doubt herself.* “Yes, Frau Koenig. You told her that you did not want a Slav to help you. You sent her away.”

“I did no such thing.” But she sounded resigned. “I was tired. I was, I don’t know, half asleep.”

The child filled his lungs and released another plaintive wail, hiccupping on his own frustration.

“Go fetch Jana.”

“Let me try, Frau Koenig. Jana’s sister is very ill. She left early to—”

The child interrupted her at the same time as Frau Koenig shouted, “For heaven’s sake!”

Whatever the woman intended to do next, Magda was faster. She swooped in and whisked the baby out of her arms, and held him close. As if spent, the child began to quiet down.

She looked pointedly at Frau Koenig. “May I have the bottle?”

Frau Koenig looked dazed. She handed Magda the bottle of formula, and Magda tried to get the newborn to take it the way she had seen paní Eva do it. He finally took it. The women looked at one another.

“Frau Koenig, I am the only one here. Let me help you. You lost a lot of blood, you’re not feeling well.”

“I’m perfectly fine. I feel fine.” But she was not. The woman was far from fine. “It’s that opium you gave me. You put too much in.”

Magda tried to look neutral. “Jana made you some soup, and the midwife instructed that you should eat the beet salad. Eat now. I’ll make sure he finishes the bottle and I will bring him to you when he’s fallen asleep.”

The woman cast a look at the tray, then back at her son.

“Do you have a name for him?”

“Why would I tell you that? Where is my husband? Did you call my husband?”

“He will be here in a few hours.”

“A few hours?” Her despair was palpable. She looked completely beaten. And exhausted. She glanced at Magda and the child in her arms and sank beneath the sheets. “Robert. We want to name him Robert.”

“Good. I’m going to take Robert into the next room and make sure he eats,” Magda said with authority. “You eat and sleep. I will bring him to you when he wakes and then you can try again.”

Frau Koenig still looked conflicted but somehow the story seemed to be working, and the woman’s obvious disappointment that the father had not come running to her side was also wearing her down. She looked at the bowl of soup, lifted it from the tray and took the first spoonful. Magda’s heart skipped a beat and she had to stop herself from smiling.

Magda hurried out of the room and took Robert toward the nursery room but halted outside the door.

Eliška’s room. Samuel’s room.

She turned and went downstairs with the newborn and paced in the foyer, but he rejected the bottle now, mewling and protesting. She tried once more. He took the bottle and his eyes began closing. He sucked once or twice and then stopped. Sucked twice more and stopped again. Magda watched him and waited. She paced before Koenig’s photograph, looked at the newborn and back to him. She stepped into the sitting

room, studied the piano. She paused before Koenig's office, checked the clock.

The newborn fell asleep.

She went upstairs and cracked open the door. "Frau Koenig?" When she stepped in, the woman was asleep, the soup bowl empty. The plate of beet salad contained only the violet remnants of the pickling juice. Magda's heart pounded.

She lay the infant in the bassinet but he almost immediately began to whimper. Terrified that his mother would wake, she lifted Robert out and held him close. His tiny hands brushed against her chest, he yawned and quieted down.

Downstairs, she stood before Koenig's office and checked the clock again. A few hours. A few hours was relative. A few hours could be two, or even less, or maybe four. She had to do this now. Jana was safely gone. Paní Eva was safely gone. And if Aleš and Renata and Davide had survived the night, they would need more information. And Koenig. He was safely gone.

"Well, little man," she said to the newborn. "Let's go see what your father's got hiding in his office."

As she pushed open Dr. Tauber's door, Magda felt as if she were walking into a dream.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MARCH 1942

SAMUEL'S BRIS MILAH

Walter stopped beside Magda, who was still sprawled on the bottom steps. She sobbed and pleaded with him again to not take Eliška. He removed his cap and knelt down next to her.

“Magda, Magda. Magdalena.” He shook his head. “What might have happened if you had been just a little—just slightly—kinder to me? I ask myself that. I wonder whether I might have wanted to be a better man.”

The Wehrmacht soldiers lifted Eliška from Aleš's arms, then took him into a rough hold and shoved him through into the dining room. Two other men moved toward her, but Walter held up his hand.

“Not her.”

The men stepped away.

“Come with me.” He removed a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it to her eye. “Your nose is bleeding. Bend forward. Breathe slowly. It's probably broken.” He led her through the service door and into the kitchen. He pushed her down onto the bench at the table, then went into the pantry. He returned with something from the icebox.

“Here, put this on your nose.”

“Where’s Aleš?” Her voice sounded funny in her ears.

“He’ll be taken in for questioning. Don’t concern yourself with that now.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“Me?” Walter stepped back, hands behind his back. “I won’t do anything with you. I’ll leave you here. There will be someone else you’ll have to deal with now that I’m done.”

Magda pressed the cold mass to her nose. The pain throbbed all across her face. Her eye was swelling shut. She tried to focus on Walter with her one good eye.

“So,” he said. “Where’s Renata?”

Indeed. Where was she? Magda shook her head slowly. “I don’t know. Where are you taking the Taubers?”

“Magdalena—”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Fine. If you want to survive this, if you don’t want to end up in a ghetto with your beloved Taubers, I would begin answering my questions.”

The door opened, and Magda jerked her head in its direction. Gustav entered but Walter waved him away. They were alone again.

“Tell me where Renata is, or I’ll sic Gustav on you.”

“I don’t know where she is. She wasn’t here today. We told you that already.”

“Right.” Walter sighed. “You sure that’s your final answer?”

He dropped before her again and brushed some hair away from her shoulders. Magda squeezed her eyes shut.

“They made fun of me, you know? Taking a girl with such a face as yours. You know what I did?”

She kept her eyes closed, but if the tears could not squeeze by, the pain had to come out of her somewhere, she had to breathe somehow. She took great gulps of air. Saliva hung from her mouth and landed on the hand in her lap.

Walter scoffed. “Yeah. You’re quite the mess. I fought them, Magda. That’s what I did. I beat Gustav up. Badly. He kept his mouth shut. Didn’t turn me in. Question is...”

He pressed his palm against her forehead and stood above her before shoving her head back. She forced her good eye to focus on him. He raised a fist to her but she saw it—his fear.

“The question is, can you? Can you keep your goddamned mouth shut?”

Her heart pounded violently in her throat. Her words came out thick and slurred. “You are a coward.”

His eyes widened.

She gritted her teeth to keep her heart inside. “You are a coward.”

“Goddamn it, Magdalena.” She saw what he saw. The precipice. But he tried again. “Can you fucking keep your mouth shut?”

Magda blinked several times. For the first time, she recognized how deeply conflicted he was. They were both teetering, and he would take her down with him.

“Yes. Yes, I can.”

“Good.” He released her head with a sigh of relief, like someone who had hardly avoided a fatal accident. “As far as I’m concerned, you know nothing. I’m gone tomorrow anyway. I have my marching orders.”

He strode to the door and held it open. “Maybe I’ll see you. Maybe I won’t. Either way, Magda, all you need to do is survive. Stay smart and you’ve got a better chance than me. You’ve got one hour to get your *things* out of here. One hour and they’ll all be back. Koenig’s taking over the house.”

He started to go out the door, stopped, and turned again. “I’ll put in a good word for you. And Jana.”

When the last truck drove out of the gates, it was only her and Jana left. Magda made her way to the third floor, lifted the floorboards, and withdrew Samuel, who was still fast asleep. She checked his breathing. It was shallow, but his pulse was steady. Jana reached for him, and Magda passed him to her.

“I don’t know where to take him,” Magda said.

“I do,” Jana said.

“Give him to me.”

Magda whirled around to find Renata standing in the doorway.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JUNE 1942

Not once, in all the months since Koenig had taken over the villa had Magda stepped into the office. With Robert in her arms, she stood at the edge of the room. It was emptied of everything that had belonged to Dr. Tauber, except for the furniture. The desk, the chairs, the filing cabinets, the bookshelf—the middle taken up by Koenig's humidifier filled with cigars—had all been deemed worthy enough for the Obersturmbannführer. Now it was time for her to assess the contents, to find something that might be of value to the resistance efforts.

The desk was neat. Nothing that might be of any importance lay on top of it. She faced the door to the adjacent room where Dr. Tauber had examined his patients. It was closed. She tried the doorknob. It turned but did not yield. Locked.

The infant yawned, quiet now. Magda stepped towards the row of filing cabinets. Above them, the Führer's portrait hung exactly in the middle enshrined by framed medals, awards, certificates in German-calligraphy, stating whatever it was Koenig had achieved. All of these had replaced the medical license, the articles, the honors once bestowed on Dr. Tauber. Little swastika flags mounted upon brass or gold were positioned on either end of the filing cabinets. The anatomical

models and the tools that Dr. Tauber had used were now replaced by a showcase of photographs depicting the disease of Nazism.

Koenig with Himmler. Koenig with Heydrich. Koenig with Goebbels. Koenig with the Führer. Koenig marching up a row of soldiers straight as a forest of birch trees, chins jutting, hands stiff at their sides. She leaned in closer. Was Walter to be found here among these look-alike helmeted soldiers? Her eyes clouded. Her nostrils flared, her breathing was drawn-out and loud, as if she were just waking up to herself.

Behind her, the clock on the desk ticked loudly. The baby made little smacking noises as he yawned and shivered. She reached for the handle of the first drawer, gripping it as if she were outside of her own body, and pulled. It did not give. Of course it would be locked. What had she been thinking?

Facing the windows, Magda noticed a sparrow and a finch perched on the edge of the bubbling fountain. The gravel drive was empty. The branches of the maples swayed in the summer breeze and Magda felt a hollowing out of herself when she recalled Eliška finding that red ribbon Walter had hidden for her. Eliška, running to the stable to feed the pony.

Magda turned to the desk. Something. She had to find something. Something to make this borrowed time worthwhile. Something that would continue to help the cause to beat Koenig and the rest of them.

The minute hand moved to six past eight just as she stepped around to his side of the desk. She stood over it as Koenig had done the day before. There was nothing but the clock, the telephone, a photo of Waltraud Koenig, and another of their wedding day, before the altar of a church. Eyes narrowed, Magda yanked on each drawer. They could not all

be locked. Somewhere, he had to have a key that would unlock the others. She nearly fell into the bookshelf when the middle left-hand drawer opened and she immediately saw the compartment at the top.

She hurriedly placed Robert beneath the desk, then slid the compartment out. A file.

Shakily, Magda removed it, glancing sideways at the windows. The birds flitted off. The hydrangea beneath the window ruffled in the wind. She took out the file and opened it. Inside was a diagram, a map of some sort, or perhaps a plan. There were four sheets. She turned the sheets ninety degrees and pieced them together, one by one. She recognized the smaller map indicating Litoměřice, the Elbe, the Ohře, and the bridge, and Theresienstadt. The second diagram was only of Theresienstadt. There was the little fort, and then the rest of the military base. And a new part, marked in bold lines. New buildings were etched in, and a rail yard—a rail yard with tracks heading to and from every direction. There was no train station in Theresienstadt. There was no direct line into the military base. But here, there was apparently going to be a very large depot.

She heard crunching as someone walked across the gravel drive. Magda leapt like a stag and slammed the file shut. Blood thundered in her ears as she placed it back in the desk drawer and closed it quietly.

The baby cried out.

“Shush, Samuel! Shush.” She caught herself, shook her head. “Robert. Robert.” She had to keep her wits about her. She raised herself from beneath the desk, the infant in her arms but a figure moved outside the office window.

Magda dropped back beneath the desk. The crunching gravel. *Robert, Robert, Robert. His name is Robert.* The child cried on with protesting wails. The footsteps moved away.

Slowly, Magda crawled out from beneath the desk and made for the door. Just as she was about to shut it behind her, she saw the groundskeeper step up to the window, cup his hands and look inside.

He did not see her. He could not have.

Magda rushed upstairs to deposit the infant with Frau Koenig, but the woman was completely sedated. Even as Robert cried in Magda's arms, refusing the bottle again, she tried to calm herself. Her arms and legs were jittery. Waking up Frau Koenig—if she even could—would mean going through another round of insults and demands and Magda could not face that now. She had to keep her wits about her, to find a way to leave a message beneath the cedars, or to find a way to get to St Stephen's and find out what had happened.

At the window, she looked down into the front drive below. Certainly that man had not seen her. He might have seen movement, the door shutting, maybe, but she'd been too quick for him to know whether it was her or anything at all. The baby's cry must have alerted him. He couldn't have seen anything. He couldn't.

He appeared below her. Dieter, a Sudeten German, hired by Koenig as the new groundskeeper. He came and went three to four times a week, lived in Litoměřice, and rarely mingled with Jana or Magda. Now, he seemed to be simply going about his business, watering the hydrangea bushes.

She thought of what she had seen in the file. A railway line, a train station to the Jewish ghetto. Perhaps it would be meaningful to Aleš. She would write him another note. Just

not now. Not with this Dieter out there, and still no word or hint of what had happened the night before. Her nerves were raw. And the baby was beginning to weigh heavily on her as well.

She spotted the birthmark above his left elbow. Samuel's had been on the right wrist. What had Samuel looked like the day he was born? It seemed like years ago since Samuel's birth; not three months. She wrapped Robert up more tightly. Magda needed to rest, to sleep. Frau Koenig slept undisturbed, so Magda took him with her.

Robert continued to fuss as she carried him upstairs to her room. She would only lie down for a little while, maybe he would sleep. In her bedroom she placed him on the bed. She ached to get beneath the covers. The child's breathing changed and his eyes shifted in her direction. This was Koenig's son. This was the boy who would grow up with a tyrant, a man who was evil in every way. The child did not deserve it.

"Robert Koenig," she said and sat down next to him. "Your surname is German for king. Do you know what you would be named if you were Czech? Robert Král."

The baby gurgled a little.

"You like that, do you? Or is it my voice you like? Maybe I should tell you a story?" She lit up. "I could tell you about a very special day. About another young king who lived in this house."

Magda rose and went to the small dresser that contained her few possessions. She opened the top drawer and rifled beneath the socks to find her small stack of mementos. She withdrew her pouch, undid the strings, and dropped Samuel's necklace into her palm. Magda dangled it over the infant's face. It glinted in the light, and the child's eyes shifted to it

then back to her. He waved his hands, kicked his feet. Magda smiled though the grief was closing in on her.

“His name is Samuel. I am his *sandek*, his godmother. And he wore this star that represents another king.” She spun the necklace with the crucifix and the Star of David over him again. Robert’s eyes widened. She undid the clasp, put it around his neck and secured it.

Tears blinded her. “You have nothing to do with any of this. Nothing, Little King.”

She lay next to him, her head sinking into the pillow as she stroked the two pieces of jewelry around the boy’s neck.

“I don’t know where Samuel is right now, Robert. I’m afraid for him. I’m afraid for you.” It was the not knowing that was making it difficult for her to stop crying.

Magda wiped at her tears and reached for the bottle. She tried to give it to Robert, but he pushed it away. Even when she got him to take the nipple, he fussed. The formula was too cold. She would have to warm it up again. She forced herself out of bed once more, fluffed the blankets around him and kissed his forehead before going down to the kitchen.

Ravenous, she cut herself a piece of bread and some cheese, shivering as she paced in the kitchen. Magda was in over her head and she knew it. She needed to sleep, to sort things out. In her pocket, the pills rattled and Magda removed the bottle. She had just placed it on the table when the service door flew open. Before she could snatch them up again, Dieter strode in. He was a lanky man in his late fifties, with a grim-set face, pale eyes, and thinning hair. He pulled up at the sight of Magda. She eyed the bottle of pills and his eyes narrowed. She tried to smooth over the guilt that her face certainly revealed. She’d been too hasty. She’d been too obvious.

He crossed the room to the sink, turned on the tap and picked up a glass from the washboard. "I came for a drink. It's hot."

"Yes, of course." Magda casually put the pills back into her pocket.

His eyes darted to the baby bottle in the pot of hot water.

"Frau Koenig had a boy," she said brightly. "It was a long night. She's resting now. She lost a lot of blood, but everything is fine."

He grunted.

"The midwife left these." She patted her pocket. "To help Frau Koenig rest. She needs to rest."

He faced her and drank from his glass, his eyes on her hand.

Her insides jumped at the distant sound of the front gate opening. The hum of engines and the gravel grinding beneath wheels.

Dieter glanced at the door and left the glass standing in the sink before leaving. Not another word. It was worse than if he would have said, "I'm going to tell the commander I suspect you of something."

Now she had to face Koenig.

"Get yourself together," Magda hissed.

Shaking, she tested the formula and hurried to fetch Robert but she nearly ran straight into Koenig as he strode in through the door. He was not alone. A man was with him, older with dark eyes and a serious countenance and a leather bag in one hand.

Koenig greeted her brusquely. “This is Dr. Grossmann. He’ll examine the mother and child.”

He stopped before her as if he expected her to do something. Magda suddenly realized what he would see: his son in her bedroom. His son in her bed. His son with the—

“I’ll get him for you,” Magda said, as calmly as she could.

Koenig narrowed his eyes. “Get him? Isn’t he with my wife?”

Magda held up the bottle of formula. “He’s upstairs but Frau Koenig is sleeping and—” If she could get up to her room and bring the child down and pretend as if she were coming out of the nursery with him—“he’s been crying a lot and I’ve been feeding him.”

But Koenig was no longer listening to her. He pushed past her and up the stairs. Magda scurried after him, terrified of what he was about to encounter. He stalked into the nursery and came out before Magda reached the stairs leading to the third floor. He glared at her, then at the stairwell.

“Where’s my son?”

Dr. Grossman looked over his shoulder before knocking softly at the bedroom suite and letting himself in.

“Herr Obersturmbannführer,” Magda stammered. “I’ll fetch him for you.”

He shoved her aside and marched up to her room.

“Samuel is asleep,” she cried.

Koenig halted, one hand on the banister. He turned slowly to Magda as she gripped the wrought iron. His gaze seared her before he climbed the stairs, two at a time.

From the master bedroom, Magda heard Dr. Grossman repeating Frau Koenig's name.

Wake up, woman! Wake up! Magda willed.

Koenig strode out of Magda's room with the child and paused above her. He plucked the chain around his son's neck with two fingers. Magda backed away down the steps. Dr. Grossmann came out.

"Herr Obersturmbannführer, you should come here, please."

Koenig looked up from the chain. The crucifix. The Star of David. Then he was standing before Magda on the stairs, the infant between them. "What is this?"

Magda shook her head.

"I said, what is this and why is it around my son's neck?"

The doctor called Koenig to come down again.

Koenig clenched Magda's upper arm with his free hand and dragged her down to the bedroom suite. He shoved her through behind the doctor. Frau Koenig lay prostrate on the bed. The commander threw Magda a threatening look, strode to his wife and handed the baby to the doctor.

"Get that thing off my son." He bent over the mother, lifted her into a sitting position and lightly slapped her face. "Waltraud. Traudl, wake up. Wake up, now."

To Magda, he shouted, "What is wrong with her?"

Magda tried to speak but could not.

"Tell me!"

Magda gasped. "The midwife. She lost a lot of blood. I mean, your wife lost a lot of blood. It's pills. Just sleeping

pills. They're harmless. So that she could rest."

"Show me the pills!"

Her hand shook violently as she reached into her pocket. He rose and snatched the vial from her then passed them to the doctor.

"Tell me what that contains."

The doctor peered at the label. "Sleeping pills. The girl is right. They are harmless."

Koenig's grip did not loosen. The necklace was still around Robert's neck. "What is that?"

Magda whimpered. "It's a crucifix."

"And?"

"And the Star of David."

"Why is my son wearing it?" His voice was an octave higher.

"I wanted to... I wanted to..." She slumped beneath his grip, felt the bruises building beneath his fingertips. How could she possibly explain what she had wanted? She did not know what she had meant by it herself.

Koenig had apparently heard enough. "Examine my wife and child thoroughly," he barked at Dr. Grossman before shoving Magda back out into the corridor. He dragged her down to the foyer. He was taking her to his office. Oh, God! Did he know she'd been in there? Was that even possible? Panic scabbled from the pit of her stomach into every limb and she struggled to get out of his grip.

"You and I," he snarled, "are going to have a long talk, Magdalena."

He removed a key ring from his trouser pocket, inserted one into the examining room door and shoved her inside. The door slammed shut and she heard him lock it behind her.

Magda stood in the middle of the room. It was empty except for a table and a chair. She hugged herself, sobbing. How could she have been so careless? She squeezed her eyes shut and slid against the wall to the floor.

She heard footsteps outside the window and the front door open. Koenig was demanding something. Dieter's figure walked by the small window. She heard their voices but could not make out their words. They spoke for a long time. Koenig. Dieter. Koenig. Then Dieter, for longer this time. Koenig, questioning again. Dieter, the man of few words, speaking once more. Magda went back to the wall. She shivered, her teeth chattered.

Then she heard Koenig stride back into the office. She heard the clang of the receiver on the telephone. She heard the rotary dialing. His authoritative voice. Again, the words were too muffled to make out.

A dull knock on the office door. Voices again, soft, lowered on purpose but she recognized Dr. Grossman's cadence. When they were finished, she heard the men walking out into the corridor. She heard the start of an engine. The car pulling out. Koenig returning to the office. Then it was quiet. Absolutely still.

Magda did not move.

When his keys rattled outside the door, and the lock turned, Magda covered her mouth to stop herself from crying out. She scrambled to her feet and backed into the far corner. Koenig stepped in and softly closed the door behind him.

“Take a seat, Magdalena.” He placed a crystal ashtray in the middle of the table.

Magda moved, every nerve tingling in expectation that he would reach out and grab her again, strike her. She pulled the chair out, facing the wall and him as he stepped in front of her on the other side of the table.

He dropped the necklace onto the surface. “Now. Since this past night has been rather fortuitous, I find the symbolism here exceptionally... ironic.” He cracked his knuckles. “Tell me everything that happened, Magdalena.”

“Frau Koenig had a difficult birth,” she said, trying to keep her voice controlled.

“That’s not what Dr. Grossman says. He says my wife is the picture of perfect health.”

Magda swallowed. “That is what the midwife—” She stopped. She could not lay this on paní Eva.

“Go on. Tell me about the midwife.”

“I mean, the midwife and I saw that Frau Koenig was exhausted. And so the pills—”

“From the midwife.”

“No.” Magda stopped. She was doing horribly. She knew this. He was breaking her without having to try.

“Where are the pills from?”

“Dr. Tauber’s...”

Koenig scowled. “Dr. Tauber’s pills? Where did you get them?”

Magda’s head swirled. Her eyes felt as if they would not hold still. Her ears closed over the roar of her panic. “They

were my pills. He prescribed them to me. The midwife said Frau Koenig needed something to sleep.”

“Dr. Grossmann said she had opium.”

“Yes. We gave her—”

“We? Who is we, Magdalena? Why are you giving my wife opium?”

Magda scrambled. “Your wife had two drops of opium, also from the house. When she woke, the baby would not feed. And she was still very tired. I gave her one of my sleeping tablets.”

“My wife does not remember taking any pills from anyone.”

Magda’s mouth moved but no sound came.

Koenig leaned onto the table and was in her face. “Dr. Grossman says this crucifix looks like something one would give a child at baptism.”

Magda nodded, clutching to the slim truth she could admit to. “Yes. It’s mine. My godmother gave it to me.”

Koenig’s face smoothed over, and his lips jerked into a smile. “I see. That makes perfect sense, Magdalena. You holding on to your baptismal crucifix.”

He pushed himself away, reached into his uniform coat and withdrew a cigar and a clipper. He rolled the cigar before slicing the end and placing it carefully in the tray, cut-side down.

“Yes, a baptismal necklace,” he said. “With the Star of David.” He took a breath, raised an eyebrow and pointed the clipper at her. “Because Magdalena Novák is a Jewess.”

Magda froze.

“No, of course not.” He chuckled, placing the clipper next to the ashtray. He reached into his coat again, withdrew a lighter and lit the cigar. “My wife tells me she shared our son’s name with you. What did she tell you?”

Magda was dead in her seat. Her tongue felt thick. “I don’t recall.”

Koenig faced the door, his profile to her. “It is Robert. Not Samuel. You surprised me there. Samuel? We agreed a long time ago, that if we had a son, we would name him after my father. Robert Richard Koenig. Why would my wife give our son a stranger’s name instead?”

He turned his head, puffed on the cigar thoughtfully, and examined her. Magda clutched her hands in her lap below the table.

“So, who is Samuel?”

“My nephew. In Ústí nad Labem.”

“Ah. Matěj’s wife has a new son, then?”

Magda stopped breathing. How did he know anything about her family?

“Magdalena, who does the Star of David belong to?”

She shut her eyes. When she opened them, she was surprisingly ready for his question. She made herself contrite, as if she’d given up. “It was Eliška’s. I wanted to give it to her, for her birthday. As a reminder of me, and our friendship.” Magda swallowed. “I was her governess, and I loved her.”

“Eliška. The daughter. I see. How old was she?”

“Nine, Herr Obersturmbannführer.”

He sucked in a breath again as if he remembered something and held the cigar pointed at her once more. “Ah. But you were certainly planning on getting her a new chain. As that chain is meant for a small infant. It would never have fit around Eliška’s neck.”

“Yes,” Magda nodded. She dropped her eyes to the table, to the cigar end. It looked like the tip of a finger. “I just did not have the money for it. I was just going to...” Her voice weakened again.

He stepped around her. She heard him inhale. Exhale. The smoke was pungent and sour. Magda waved her hand discreetly before her face but the sneeze escaped her.

“You were saying?” He unlatched the window and fresh air rushed in.

What was she saying? She twisted in her seat. “About buying Eliška Tauber a new chain?”

He turned and leaned against the window. “Where is Renata Oravec?”

Magda shook her head. “I don’t... I don’t know. I told you then, I don’t know. She was at her sister’s the day you came.”

“At her sister’s. Like Jana? Who is now conveniently gone?”

Magda heard the gate scraping open again outside and a vehicle. Koenig turned to the window and closed it. As a car pulled up to the front, Koenig strode to her, reached over and crushed the cigar out, leaving a dark bruise in the ashtray. The cigar tip was knocked over.

“It’s been a long night, Magdalena. A long morning. And I have a new son and a wife to care for. It is time to leave.”

He had her by the arm again, dragging her up from the chair. It fell backward. He threw open the door and marched her out into the marble foyer, to the front door. Two figures appeared in the opaque window. Koenig yanked it open. Two plainclothes Gestapo looked surprised as Koenig shoved Magda out onto the stoop. They both had their identification ready for him. Koenig hardly glanced at them.

“Take her to headquarters. I’ll be by later for her. And keep her awake.”

He spun Magda to him and she cringed. “I know everything, Magda. And everyone. I know where every single one of your relatives are. Remember that.” He leaned in very close, so close she had to turn her face from his. “You can come clean and make it easy on yourself, or we can continue to play this game of lies. Up to you. Either way, I’ll find out what’s happening here and everyone who’s involved.”

The policemen escorted Magda to the waiting sedan. She fell into the back seat of the car and pushed herself up, stone cold from Koenig’s threats. The men climbed into the front and rolled out of the gate. The driver took a right, the slope to Litoměřice straight ahead of them. When they reached the bottom of the road, he took a sharp left and sped along a gravel road.

Magda’s eyes widened. They were not heading into town. When they were on the outskirts of Litoměřice, wide fields all around them, the vehicle came to an abrupt stop. The two men turned to her. One had brown eyes, they were cold, calculating. Of the other man, Magda only noted the mustache before he got out and flung her door open. She slid towards the opposite side and tugged at the handle.

“Sit still,” the man growled in Czech. He withdrew something from his pocket—she pictured a gun—and she frantically tried the door again—but he grabbed her, pulling her towards him. He put a hood over her head, shoved her aside and then sat down next to her.

“What are you doing?” she cried.

“Shut up. Sit still and shut up,” he barked, again in Czech.

Magda breathed heavily beneath the fabric. The vehicle pulled away, tires spinning on the dirt road, the engine revving. The man put his hand on her arm and she flinched. Her limbs, her skin, everything hurt. Everything was raw.

She felt the road beneath her rising, then going down again. They had to be outside Litoměřice now. But not far. It could not have been more than fifteen minutes. Shadows passed over her face and the road under them changed from dirt to paving and back again. Koenig had no intention of giving her a second chance. These men were taking her, to execute her and leave her body in a field, in a ditch somewhere.

The car stopped again. She was yanked out, and she tripped, falling to the ground. She was pulled up roughly onto her knees, those strong hands on either side of her neck.

She heard footsteps coming towards her. Steady strides. And then a man’s voice.

“Remove the hood. Christ, help her up.”

The hood was pulled off her head and Magda blinked in the sunlight. When she righted herself, she was face-to-face with Aleš.

“Looks to me like we didn’t get you out a moment too soon,” he said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JUNE 1942

They put the hood over her head again to move her on. This time she followed without a fight. This was for both her safety and theirs. Magda clutched Aleš's hand and did not speak. She could not formulate the words to say she was sorry. Could not formulate the questions to ask how they had managed to break her out from Villa Liška. She just followed.

Magda realized they must have come to a building when she was led through an open doorway and down a stairwell. She hugged the wall closely, although Aleš had a tight grip on her. She did not trust her legs. At the bottom, she shuffled along an earthen floor. There were the sounds of more locks and then the dull sound of a chair pulled out from somewhere. Aleš gently pushed down on her shoulders, removed the hood, and placed a glass of water into her hand.

Magda blinked. She looked around. There was a single lightbulb and a table. The two drivers of the sedan stood beside Aleš and from the shadows there was movement. Magda gasped.

“Paní Eva!”

Magda rose and she welcomed the woman's embrace.

“They picked me up first,” the midwife said. “Just as a precaution.”

Magda shook her head in disbelief, turned to Aleš. “He would have gone after her. Koenig would have—”

“What did you tell him?”

Aleš’s harsh tone surprised her. She stumbled back to the chair, sat down heavily.

“What were you thinking, Magda? Nobody is safe, not even Jana at this point. And we have no way of getting to her. Koenig is going to have her returned to Litoměřice. You can bet on that. Oh, she’ll convince them that her departure had nothing to do with you. I’m certain of that, but she’ll still be in danger.”

Magda swallowed. “I was thinking that if you got Samuel out, and came to get me, I could get information from Koenig’s office while he was away. Information that might be useful. Just one thing before you would come and get me.”

“And?” Aleš demanded. “Did you?”

Magda held his look. “Yes.”

He stood over her. “We’ll get to that. Right now, I want to know every single thing you said to Koenig. Every word.”

He let her rest after that. In the dark cellar of wherever they were, Magda curled up on the cot and lost all sense of time, drifting between sleep and wakefulness, between crying and screaming. Once in a while, she heard voices but she could not tell if they were real or voices in her dreams.

Paní Eva eventually brought her some soup and bread. Magda wrapped her hands around the bowl and drank straight out of it.

“We’ve got Samuel,” paní Eva said.

Magda’s hands shook and paní Eva took the bowl away from her. “How is he?”

The midwife nodded. “Aleš wanted to tell you but you were still so wrought. We’re going to their safe house as soon as you have your strength.”

Magda pushed herself off the cot onto unsteady legs. “I’m ready.”

“Take your time, Magda.”

Paní Eva held her fast by the arm and Magda winced. She rolled up Magda’s sleeve. Bruises up and down her arm. The women looked at one another.

“He knows where my family is,” Magda whispered. She turned away, the tears threatening again. Only after she had the chance to wash herself, to recover a little, did Aleš meet with her again. Magda wanted to know how it was that they had gotten her out of the villa, who the two men posing as Gestapo had been.

“We were on our way to get you out under the pretense that we were searching the house for Jews, because that was what Koenig had ordered,” Aleš began.

Magda stared at him. “He made a phone call when he locked me in the examination room.”

Aleš shook his head. “We didn’t know about any phone call. We had no idea that you were being interrogated.”

He'd stopped himself short from mentioning her stupidity, for slipping up, for giving so much away, and she was grateful.

Aleš continued. "You told Renata that Koenig had ordered a search on his own house. So we came up with a plan to go over and do exactly that. It was a bold move, but we wanted to have access to you. Then Koenig shoved you out the door and straight into our men's hands. They were surprised, to say the least."

She remembered their expressions.

"But they took the chance without question. Normally, I'd say we ought to celebrate but..." He looked at her meaningfully. Nobody had to tell her that this was a tremendously dangerous situation.

"He knew someone was picking me up," Magda said. "He called the Gestapo."

"Can you imagine how furious he was when they showed up?" Aleš leaned against the table, but the sly look in his eye was short-lived. "He now knows something was organized and Koenig is going to make someone pay for being duped."

The sound of a baby's cry brought tears of relief. Magda left Aleš and paní Eva behind as she ran the last few feet to the mountain hut. Renata waited outside with an infant in her arms. Magda scooped up the bundle from her, tears streaming down her face as she kissed Samuel's cheek. She remembered how much he had weighed in her arms the last time she'd held him, the day Koenig and Walter had come. Now he was bigger, with chubby cheeks and Frau Tauber's blue eyes.

Renata crossed her arms. “Are you pleased with yourself then?”

Magda took Samuel’s right hand in hers and shoved the cuff of his sleeve up with her thumb. There it was, the brown birthmark on his wrist. She looked up from the baby, and Samuel began to fuss. It had been too long. He no longer knew who she was.

“It was a terrible risk,” Renata continued. “Terrible, Magda.”

Magda could say nothing to this. She had never been so tired in her life.

When Aleš and Paní Eva caught up, Magda followed them inside. It was a simple woodsman’s hut, a single room with few furnishings: one bed, a table with two long benches on either side, a small cast-iron stove. They sat. Renata pushed a plate of bread and a glass of water towards Magda.

“How did you manage to get to Samuel in time?” Magda dipped a piece of bread into the water and held it to the child’s mouth. He tasted it and sucked it, his beautiful eyes straining to focus on her.

Renata said, “Davide drove. Father Gabriel did the talking. The Nazis were right behind us. I don’t think it was more than a minute after we drove away that we saw the first Wehrmacht headlights pulling into the convent behind us. We left through the service road with the lights off.”

She made it sound so easy, but Magda knew better. She kissed the top of Samuel’s head, fed him another piece of bread. “Then I got to you just in time.”

“When you said you needed the opium, Magda, I thought it was for getting yourself and Jana out. If you had told me

what you were planning...” Renata shook her head.

Magda shriveled beneath her glare. “I wasn’t even certain myself. I had no plan.”

“No plan? You’re incredible, you know that?”

“Yes,” Aleš interjected. “And now we need to decide what we’re going to do with Magda’s newfound courage.”

Renata and he took turns reprimanding her and Eva. The three of them—Magda, Eva, and Samuel—were in grave danger. Samuel because of Koenig’s orders to eradicate every Jew and the people who were hiding them, and Eva and Magda for their rash crime. But getting them out of the district altogether—especially Magda with her recognizable features—was not without great risks. They needed travel permits, and with Koenig’s manhunt, it would be extra challenging.

Magda listened with half an ear, distancing herself by keeping Samuel busy. Outside, birds sang in the surrounding woods, and the trickle of a nearby creek came through the door. Everything seemed lighter. The danger felt far away, and with Samuel in her arms, even more so.

“Can’t we simply stay here?” Magda interrupted.

“From now on,” Aleš said measuredly, “you will always be on the run.”

Magda pulled Samuel back into her lap. “I understand.”

“Do you? Do you really?” Renata challenged. She glared at paní Eva next. “And you! You were our best connection aboveground. Your family’s bakery will be destroyed.”

“Enough, Renata.” Aleš nodded at her. “Eva knew what she was doing.”

Paní Eva looked down. “I never liked the bakery anyway. I can still help. I can still do something underground.”

Magda laughed abruptly. *I never liked the bakery anyway.* Even when everyone looked at her with dismay, she laughed harder. It came from nowhere and she could not stop it. Samuel’s face screwed up at the sound of it.

Renata pointed to the midwife and Magda in turn. “The SS will put out an alert to all divisions of security—from the Wehrmacht to the SS. They will—”

“It’s a good thing Walter is on the Eastern Front then,” Magda said tersely and then laughed at her own joke.

Renata glared at her. “They will hunt for you until they have killed you both. Is that what you want, Magda?”

On the contrary, Magda wanted to say, she had never felt more alive.

Aleš slowly shook his head. “She’s in shock, Renata.” He patted the table. “My brother will have to find a new place for Samuel—”

“No!” Magda exclaimed. “He goes where I go.” She pressed Samuel to her. The baby began screaming, much louder, much more piercing than Robert’s newborn wailing. He turned his head, crying as if he was searching for one familiar person in the room, his little fists pushing against her chest.

Aleš pointed at the baby. “That is not something I can control. We have nowhere to take him now, not with Koenig leading the raids. Samuel has to be moved out of the country.”

“Where?” Magda demanded. “Everywhere we go, we’re surrounded by the enemy. He’s staying with me.” She leaned

him against her shoulder, patted his back. “I’m not letting go of him again.”

“I’ll take him.” Paní Eva twisted in her seat to look at Magda. “I’ll bring him to safety. I promise.”

“Where?” Magda demanded. “You tell me where, and I’ll think about it.”

Renata slapped her thigh, stood, and strode towards Magda. “Sit down. Just sit down. You will be given information only when it is absolutely necessary. But you have no idea what you are talking about, no idea what it’s going to be like for you, to be one of us. You’ve gone from delivering coupons and bread rolls to becoming a high-profile fugitive. You get no information. None. Or”—she waved a hand around the whole group—“we’re all dead.”

If Magda was ever caught. If they tortured her. That was what Renata was saying. They did not trust her to keep her mouth shut, to withstand the pain, the terror, the threat of death.

Renata reached for the child. Magda whimpered, felt Aleš’s hands on her shoulders. He pulled her into him and wrapped his arms around her as Renata took Samuel.

“There are quite a few of us now, Magda,” Aleš said into her ear. “We’re well organized. You know about the food, the stashes we have left. It’s not much—we can’t risk much. Once, a fight broke out between two of the prisoners in a field. They had both found the sack and had wrestled one another for those extra rations. Both were shot. We were compromised. The Nazis stepped up their security, and we had to lay low for a few weeks.”

He let that sink in. “There are more of us each day, and that too makes it dangerous. The Germans are finished with accepting foreign leagues. They’ve been sabotaged, attacked, and tricked one too many times. They suspect everyone.”

“And the good news?” Magda asked the room in despair. “Will this ever end?”

Aleš sighed. “Sometimes we cannot see the trees for all the wood.”

What wood? As a fugitive now, Magda had no way to return to her family. She had already lost Eliška. She had lost Frau Tauber and Dr. Tauber. She had nobody left of the family except Samuel, and if she lost sight of him again, if she was not able to make sure of his safety, she was certain she would die as well. She hated herself. She hated them. She hated everything. And that hate dried up her tears. That hate dripped like tar within her, cementing a new resolve she could not put into words.

Renata handed paní Eva the baby and gazed at Magda. “You ready for this?”

Samuel gurgled in Eva’s lap, one fist jammed into his mouth. What could Magda do with her newfound courage, Aleš had wanted to know. This. She could start with this.

Magda nodded.

She tried to rest, but sleep evaded her. She overheard Aleš and Renata discussing the Taubers, Samuel was to be taken far away. The Taubers might—he stressed the word *might*—still be in the ghetto. Renata and Davide argued about the purposes of the depot Magda had seen the plans for. More and more

trains were being sent east filled with detainees. Davide and his scouts had caught glimpses of the late-night or early-morning transports leaving the nearest train station in Bohošovice. Confirmations came in that the Germans had begun a work detail with the prisoners. They were building tracks that would lead directly to and from the old fort.

Davide was responsible for radioing in the coded messages and received information from both the Soviets and the British that news was seeping out of labor camps in the east, that they were the sites of horrible conditions and illness. What Davide relayed back to their group at the hut, Magda knew had already been censored. It did not help. She imagined the worst, but if what she had overheard from Aleš and Renata outside the hut one evening was true, she had not even begun to fathom the length the Nazis were going to in order to exterminate their enemies.

Later, Magda discovered that Davide's wife and child were hidden even from him. He had no way of getting to them. No way of knowing their whereabouts or whether they were safe. Magda felt awful for not having asked earlier how his family had fared under Koenig's manhunt.

Renata remained sore with Magda for most of the time they spent in the hut, but Aleš attempted to explain her behavior away. He conveyed the terror Renata had experienced while hiding from the SS.

"It changed her," he said. "It's left her edgy."

A double panel in the Taubers' bedroom wall, like the one in the wardrobe he'd installed to hide Eliška, was all that had lain between her and certain death. The Wehrmacht had ransacked the bedroom but had not found her. The hiding place, Aleš explained, had been meant for them all—the

Taubers, their children, and Renata. But Aleš had convinced them not to lay all their eggs in one basket and to hide the children separately.

“Frau Tauber knew,” Aleš said. “She knew that Renata would try to hide in the bedroom, that the dogs could find her, that she could have been the decoy for the children. If Walter had said nothing, Frau Tauber would not have had to choose between Renata and Eliška. He did, however. And she wanted her daughter with her.”

Magda lay her head in her arms.

“Renata is still wondering,” Aleš concluded, “whether we could have gotten everyone into the house on time. And the last thing she wants is for you to have to go through any of that. The Koenigs are going to pay for this. If the war doesn’t get them, I will. And that boy had better hope I never lay eyes on him again. He better hope he perishes in this war.”

He meant Walter.

“I hope he does, too.” But Magda was surprised at how she lacked conviction. “I hope he does,” she tried again.

“None of us,” paní Eva said to Magda later, “will be left unchanged by these years. This war will end and the only way we can beat the Nazis is to survive it.”

During the day, Magda played with Samuel, barely letting him out of her sight. One of the men who had driven Magda to the safe house appeared one evening. And then it was time. Not once had paní Eva given a hint of where she was taking Samuel, what risks were involved. But someone, paní Eva assured her, would know that if they did not find the Taubers when the war was over, that Samuel should be brought to her

in Voštiny. Aleš hugged Magda and told her that paní Eva was heading east. That was all he could and would say.

Tearfully, Magda said goodbye to baby Samuel. She kissed his cheeks, hugged him to her, and finally handed him back to paní Eva. “Please take care of him.”

The midwife squeezed her reassuringly. “You know I will. You did well, Magda. I will come back and find you.”

Magda grasped at that wisp of an idea. Doubt racked her mind and her soul. Something within her told her she would never see Samuel again.

With German patrols thick around the mountains, Magda was often shuffled between different hiding places. Weeks after she had fled Villa Liška with paní Eva, she was back in St. Stephen’s, in the crypt. Aleš and Renata were looking for a safe house further north for her, but for the time being she had to stay put with the coffins. Each day she suffered the pangs of fear that she would be discovered, and one day an anxiety attack left her unconscious when she could not breathe. The weight of what she had done, the situation she was in, was now very real. Renata had been right. She could not withstand this kind of life.

Magda ached to return to her parents. Just briefly. She thought of the small village where her family had been forced to migrate, a village so insignificant that it ought to remain anonymous. Surely, she could just sneak in and visit her family for a day—even half a day—and maybe get to Hungary, to Bohdan’s wife’s family if she had left as she said she would. Magda spoke to Renata and Aleš about it, pleaded with them. They finally agreed to arrange a way for her to get

there safely. The vision of seeing her family again buoyed Magda's spirits for the first time since Samuel's departure.

At the sound of the heavy wooden door opening above her, Magda scurried into the darkest corner. Footsteps made their way down the stone steps, then the *scuff-clack, scuff-clack* of Renata's shoes. Magda stepped up to the iron gate and waited for Renata.

"What time is it?" Magda asked. She was already smiling.

Renata stepped through and handed Magda an apple, a piece of bread, and a wedge of cheese that Magda ate hungrily.

"It's night."

At the brusque answer, Magda stopped chewing. Renata's breath hitched. She was crying.

Magda pictured paní Eva hanging from a tree. She pictured Samuel dead on the side of a road. They had captured them. Killed them. Slaughtered them.

"Lidice," Renata said.

"Lidice?" she asked. It was a blip on the Nazi's radar. That was what her great-aunt's neighbors had said. But Magda's hunger vanished at the look on Renata's face.

"They've burned it to the ground," Renata said hoarsely. She covered her mouth with her hand. "Magda, I'm so sorry."

Renata kept talking, but Magda's ears were ringing.

"There was a letter to someone in Prague. It was laced with hints about the resistance and Heydrich's assassination. At least, that's what someone said in an interrogation. The address was in Lidice."

Magda did not understand.

“The SS rounded up the entire village looking for the author of the letter. They imprisoned the men in a schoolhouse. They put the women and children in a separate location...” Renata jabbed the heel of her hands into her eyes. Her voice shook as she continued. “They massacred all the men. Ten at a time. We don’t know what they did to the women. But the children...”

Her nephew. Her niece. Matěj’s wife had left. But Bohdan’s? Magda could not be sure.

Renata uttered a muffled cry. She was not finished. “If the children carried Aryan features... Blond. Blue-eyed. The SS sifted them out for Germanification.”

Magda’s vision blurred. “And the rest?”

Renata wept anew next to her but she was angry. “They put them into a cattle car. Bullets spray too much blood on their uniforms, you know? Too much fucking blood. So they attached a hose from the exhaust into the back of the truck.”

Magda threw herself at Renata. They fell back against the stone wall and slid to the floor.

“I hope to God that I am wrong,” Renata said between breaths. “I pray it’s only propaganda.”

It was too late. Magda’s grief mixed up her family’s faces with those of Samuel’s and Eliška’s, all of them trapped inside a cattle truck, the engine running and running.

Magda bit into the heel of her hand, muffling the wails.

Renata pushed herself off the ground and gruffly brushed at her face, as if to scour the tears away. “Get up.”

“What?” Magda could barely focus on her.

“I said, get up.” She tugged at Magda’s shoulders, and Magda nearly fell forward as she came to her feet. “Listen to me. This war will end when each one of us fights against those German bastards. And not before.”

Magda shook her head. “I can’t. I have nothing—”

Renata slapped Magda’s face. “You will have to learn. This is no time for cowards.”

Her cheek stinging, Magda stared at her. Lidice. Koenig knew her parents were in Lidice.

Magda charged Renata again, pummeled her chest and shoulders. “It’s your fault. It’s all your fault! I should never have worked for you! Look what I’ve done!”

But Renata grabbed her, shoved her up against the wall and covered Magda’s mouth so hard Magda could not breathe. “I know it feels that way, Magdalena.” Renata’s voice broke. “But Aleš and I are the only people you have left. Blame us if it feels better. But don’t you dare blame yourself. Now come. It’s time to go.”

OCTOBER 1942-DECEMBER 1944

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

OCTOBER 1942

Danger left a funny metallic taste on Magda's tongue. It stuck to the roof of her mouth, thick and syrupy. Sometimes it made her feel sick. Miles east of Litoměřice, she was supposedly safe in the dilapidated house in the woods but her contact with the others was sporadic at best. She had to go out and scrounge for food and basic supplies, put herself at risk to keep herself fed and clothed. Stealing from the locals, Aleš tried to convince her, was a necessity, not a crime. He reminded her that those who collaborated with the Germans were warm inside their homes. With winter coming, Aleš had warned Magda that she did not have the luxury of principles.

The villages were the easiest. There was little traffic, and the farmers' routines were predictable. She thrilled at her successes. An item here. Another there. All the while she pushed her limits, a constant tug-of-war between her caution and her contempt.

And then there was the task of "doing her part," as Aleš called it. Renata, Aleš and the others were out there, risking their lives, doing really dangerous things to sabotage the German army and the German authorities. Magda had sworn to make herself useful and contribute but the memory of being in Koenig's grasp often prevented any action she thought she might take. Today, she entered the town of Zlatá Pole,

determined to do something a little more substantial than simply surviving. The low fog clung to the walls and muddy roads. A light mist fell. As she turned the corner of the locked-up butcher shop, Magda saw her opportunity.

A boy, maybe ten or eleven years old, rode past on a bicycle with a stash of newspapers strapped to it. He wore the brown garb of a Hitler youth. He stopped in front of the cigarette and news shop across the road from Magda, leaned the bicycle onto the wall and took the pile of newspapers inside. Anything Magda could do, Renata had said, anything at all, was a contribution to the effort. Then she would steal the boy's bicycle.

Her eyes on the boy through the window, she willed herself to cross the road but halted at the sight of two policemen on the other end of the street, both anonymous in their uniforms. She turned her head away, ducked beneath the eaves of the butcher shop and waited as if pretending to avoid the rain. The two men walked by the news shop and Magda, head bent, tugged the headscarf over her cheek. When the patrols disappeared, she dodged the puddles as she crossed the road to the bicycle, as skittish and jumpy as a newborn colt.

Blood pounding in her ears, Magda yanked the handlebars up and pushed the bicycle onto the road. She mounted it and pedaled away, her back prickling at the image of one of those patrols turning around, catching her and aiming his pistol at her.

Just west of the train tracks, Magda coasted down a gentle slope then stopped the bicycle and got off. She looked it over. Stealing it made the Hitler youth's life more difficult but in truth she had done nothing significant. Except put herself at great risk. If the police caught her with it, this old contraption

would cost Magda her life. Finally, the Gestapo would have Koenig's housemaid in custody. Disappointed, she rolled the bicycle down the bank of the Elbe and pushed it over and into the river.

Magda brushed off her hands and scrambled back up to the road. She would look for somewhere else to raid for provisions. North of the river, a hamlet was nestled at the bottom of a dale not unlike any of the hundreds of others in Bohemia, not unlike Voštiny or Lidice. The undulating hilly fields, the serene lake, and the enormous stork nests on the roofs and chimneys were all alike. This hamlet even had a little creek that ran beneath a willow tree just like on her great-aunt's property. Magda squeezed her eyes shut. The pain of not knowing whether her family had survived the massacre of Lidice had not eased. The loneliness, the isolation, and the constant danger added to her misery.

In the hamlet before her, smoke rose from the chimneys of only two of the four houses—the one nearest to her and the last one. Did only two families remain? Where were the others then? Magda edged her way to the house nearest to the forest, her teeth chattering as the mist continued to fall, soaking her headscarf. Droplets rolled from her loose collar down the back of her neck.

It was past milking time, and the families were having breakfast. She would have to wait until they led their cows and goats out to the pastures. She checked the grass. Yes, it was still long enough, still green enough, and maybe a week to go before the animals would be locked up in their stables for the winter. But today they would put the livestock out. Her stomach grumbled. Hunger was her one constant companion. Her calves and thighs were losing their shape. Her waist had diminished as well. The idea of being hurt by Jana's jokes

about growing too plump from eating biscuits in the kitchen at Villa Liška seemed utterly ridiculous these days.

The clothes she wore were not hers and the dress was too large, but it had been the easiest one to pluck from the clothesline in yet another nameless village. The coat she had taken from the foyer of a school gymnasium during a tournament must have belonged to someone large, too. She had grabbed it without thinking and draped it over herself as if it belonged to her, only to discover that the sleeves were far too long. She'd quickly rolled them up, hitched the middle into her waistband, and marched out of the building. That had been at the end of summer, and now both items were too light for the coming winter.

The wooden door of the first house scraped open, and a woman wearing a dark-red shawl over her head came out with a bucket and a small dish. She placed them both by the door. Two small children followed her, a little girl and an older boy. They went to the barn next to the house.

The smell of woodsmoke reached Magda as she crept nearer. Then the unmistakable scent of bread. The woman spoke to the children as they entered the barn, but Magda could not make out her words. Hay rustled inside, and a cow bellowed. Then the boy appeared again, picked up the pitchfork that leaned against the barn, and went back inside. The woman led a black-and-white cow out of the barn. It did not look healthy with its protruding ribs and limping gait. Its hindquarters were raw and scabbed beneath the matted hide. The woman pulled on the rope tied to the cow's horns, and the little girl followed her out into the field. The boy pitched hay out from the other side of the barn. With only one cow to clean up after, he would not be busy for long.

Making sure that nobody else was about, Magda darted out from her hiding place, through the picket fence, and to the open door of the cottage. She looked down at the bucket and the dish the woman had lain in front of the door. Magda snatched a small piece of soap from the dish and put it into her pocket before going inside.

The fire in the oven was down to only a few embers, but it was warm. Flies whirled over the empty breakfast plates on a roughly hewn table. One fly bumped and buzzed angrily against a windowpane above a bed. Magda grabbed a crust of bread off the table and tipped each of the three cups to her lips, getting the last drops of milk. A pot on top of the clay oven contained a layer of buttermilk skin along the sides, but her eyes landed on the shape of a loaf of bread beneath a clean cloth. She stuffed the pockets of her overcoat with that, tore off a piece, and cleaned the pot of buttermilk with it. She shoved the whole chunk into her mouth.

No extra clothes were lying about, but Magda would need a warmer cover for her bed. She yanked a blanket off a bed in the front room.

Then she heard a hollow step behind her.

Magda whirled around, her mouth stuffed with the stolen bread. The cover slipped from her hands and onto the floor. The boy stood in the doorway in his dingy gray tunic. They stared at one another. He was no older than seven and by the look of resignation on his face, she knew this had happened to him before.

After shoveling the cover back into her arms, Magda strode past him. He did not move. She sprinted back into the woods. If he had not been so young, if there had been a man in the house, she would not have been able to protect herself. If

only she had a pistol, or a revolver. It was not the first time she thought of the apple tree in Voštiny and the guns her brothers had buried beneath it. She hugged the bedding to her and with one hand, patted one of the pockets with the bread. She was getting good at this. Voštiny was half a day's walk away. And she would go under cover of darkness.

Hidden in the orchard outside the house she had grown up in, she waited until the German family went to bed. Someone played an accordion, smoke rose from the chimney, a lamp burned in the window, and a dog was tied up outside the door. Magda trod carefully around her own property. It occurred to her that her world had been more than simply turned upside down. She had been thrown outside of it. Her parents had likely been killed in Lidice, there was no way to get word to her brothers or hear from them. She was on the run from the Nazi officer who governed the district, and Koenig had made it clear that he knew everybody related to her.

Then there were these strangers—these Germans from somewhere—who now lived in her home. This was what it must have felt like to be dead and to return as a ghost, to be looking in on a life that had gone on without her.

Once the lights flickered out, Magda crept toward the farmyard. The washing line was still hung up, the apple tree just to the right of it. She dropped to the ground, soggy from all the rain, and as she tested the earth around the southeastern root of the apple tree, hoping for a clue, despair wrenched through her. Her brothers' guns could be anywhere within the radius. Her knees ached from the cold. Her first attempt turned up nothing. She moved away from the trunk, and using a rock she had found and her bare hands, she dug a second hole.

She was covered in mud. And then the dog barked from the front of the house. The barking gradually became furious.

Magda pushed herself up from the muddy hole when pain sliced through the heel of her palm. She bent closer to the ground and patted the spot where her hand had been. It was the corner of a metal box. A lamp flicked on in the house, spilling light into the side of the yard. A man yelled at the dog. Magda raked her hands around the corner of the box and eventually pried it out of the earth just as the dog's raspy barking came around. A chain rattled along the ground. It had been let loose. A voice called into the darkness, ordering the dog to protect, to get whatever there was to get.

Scooping the box against her, Magda fled into the orchard. The dog stopped at the edge of the property. The last thing she made out as she whirled around, wheeling backward, was the outline of someone holding a flashlight. She turned and disappeared down the hill and into the dale.

Aleš paced before her. "How dare you?" he snapped.

"How dare you put yourself in such unnecessary danger?" Renata translated.

As if Magda had not understood why Aleš was so angry. Truly, she did. She was asking herself who the hell she had thought she was, pulling a stunt like that.

Davide examined the weapons on the table. He was the only one visibly pleased with Magda's undertaking.

Renata reached into her satchel and tossed Magda an army tunic and a brown woolen pullover. Magda did not ask where they came from. She did not want to know. Every time the

three of them checked on her, they were dressed in an assortment of newly pilfered military gear. Over the last few months, Aleš had assembled a Red Army jacket with the insignia ripped off, a German infantry cap, and a pair of jackboots. Renata wore brown breeches and a military tactical strap draped over her like a debutante's sash. Magda wanted a pair of trousers as well. And new boots. The soles of her shoes were cracked and useless, her socks had holes in them, and her feet were always wet in this weather.

Wordlessly, Magda unbuttoned her dress, slipped it off her shoulders, and pulled the tunic over her head. It reeked of sweat. She pulled the dress back on over that, then tugged on the pullover while Aleš and Renata watched her. Magda stood before them, taking the two of them in as well. Did they see the kinds of changes in her as she saw in them? Aleš had gray hairs along the edges of his temples, although his hair had been shorn to the scalp, and his face was gaunt. When he spoke, his breath stank even from as far away as Magda now stood. Renata's frown lines were deeper, and she had new ones around her mouth. Her hair was matted and dirty. She also seemed to have lost half a foot in height and girth. Davide, in the meantime, had grown a grizzled beard, and bags had settled beneath his eyes, which had changed color—from hazel to dark green.

Magda reached for her coat and withdrew the remainder of the half loaf of bread and the knob of soap. "I got this too."

She placed them next to Davide, who pulled the trigger of the second revolver, then wiped at it again with his coat sleeve, casually glancing at the loot. The rain picked up outside, and water dripped in from the roof and into the tin pot Magda had placed on the floor near the door.

Renata considered the items and rolled her eyes. “Keep the bread and the soap. You need it.”

“And you’ll take the weapons,” Magda said.

Davide turned in his seat. “I think I can dig up some bullets...” He winked. “We’ll take one. You keep the other.”

Aleš yanked one of the revolvers out of Davide’s hand and thrust it at Magda. “You are going to learn how to use this.”

Magda backed away. He considered her. No, she would not keep a revolver. She had been a fool, taken another unnecessary risk. Better the guns go to those who knew how to use them, who deserved them, who were brave enough to require them in the first place.

“You can’t hide forever,” Renata said. “At some point, Magda, you’re going to have to face that world out there. It’s the only one we’ve got until we force it to be something different.”

Magda shook her head.

Renata strode over to Aleš and took the revolver from his hand before placing it on the table. She then led Magda to the single bed. They sat, the wood frame creaking. They weren’t many—Aleš and Renata, Davide and Father Gabriel were four of a handful of the local Czechs and Slovaks who did what they could both aboveground and underground. But the Nazis had managed to crush the opposition throughout the country. Their little group had very few resources, relying on the hard-to-access roads and the wooded mountains to keep them hidden. And still, Magda sensed Aleš and Renata were frustrated that they could not do more. Worst of all, the one and only bridge between the north and south—between Litoměřice and Theresienstadt—had been closed off. Only

those with travel permits were allowed to cross. There were only so many fake permits the group could manage.

Since Davide had become quite the talent with the radio, it was their way of making contact with the other side. Davide's close ties to the railway lines and his network in the various train stations had allowed him to create a flow of information. But a radio operator had to keep moving to avoid being detected by patrols set up to pick up radio frequencies, so Magda saw less and less of Davide these days.

"Have you heard anything from or about paní Eva?" Magda asked. She always asked.

Renata shook her head. "That's good news, Magda. Koenig would make an example of her. Even if she was captured elsewhere, he'd put her out on display—either as a poster or, you know, publicly. He's a bastard."

Magda swallowed the lump in her throat. "Please tell me where Eva has gone with Samuel. Please. If anything should happen to either you or Aleš..." She paused and took a deep breath. "I need to know where she might be, Renata."

Renata looked at Aleš. He looked up at the ceiling, brushed a hand over his head.

"All right, Magda," Renata said. "Eva took him into the Carpathian Mountains."

That was a long way to go.

"She told Aleš she knows someone living there. If she made it, she should be relatively safe."

Magda looked up at the leaking ceiling. Nowhere was safe. Ukraine certainly was not. Hungary was an Axis power. And they still did not know whether Eva had even reached her

intended destination. She dreaded asking the next question. “What about the Taubers?”

Everyone shifted before Renata answered. “Davide’s contact keeps track of how many trains are coming and going and from where. They’re going straight into Theresienstadt now but they come in full—beyond full, really—and the ones heading east have picked up in number over the last weeks especially.”

Magda frowned. “Where are they sending everyone?”

Renata said, “There are rumors... labor camps, concentration camps...”

“Death camps,” Aleš said. He leaned against the edge of the table. Davide and he shared a look.

“What do you mean by death camps?”

Mouth twisted, Renata said, “We can’t confirm anything. We’re not sure but... Remember the children of Lidice?”

Magda’s heart cracked.

“Apparently the Nazis have invented a rather efficient... method.”

“If the rumors are true,” Davide interjected.

Magda shut her eyes. “Do we even know whether the Taubers are still in Theresienstadt at all?”

“We do,” Aleš said. “For whatever reason, the Jews from the protectorate have been left alone in the meantime.”

Magda opened her eyes to check whether he was lying.

He gazed back at her steadily. “The SS is allowing letters out now, and then we discovered that food parcels have been arriving for some people.”

Magda allowed herself to brighten. “Well, that’s good, isn’t it? That’s something.”

Aleš cleared his throat. He rubbed a hand over his smooth head. “There are a lot of prominent people in the ghetto. We believe the camp administrators are using it to their advantage. To give the other Jewish families more reason to cooperate.”

Renata shifted on the sagging bed. “Some Christian groups and church leaders have been protesting about the treatment of the Jews—”

“Think about it,” Aleš said. “If a Jewish family receives word from a relative in Theresienstadt, or if news of someone famous—a lecturer, an artist, a celebrity, whoever—”

“Like Frau Tauber,” Magda said. “She’s well known. And Dr. Tauber, well, he’s known everywhere.”

“If it seeps out,” Aleš said, “and they claim that they are quite well, then the Nazis can lure the Jews to go with relatively less protest.”

“How do you know all this?” Magda asked.

Renata hesitated. “Someone escaped.”

“What?” Magda sat up a bit straighter.

“Two carpenters from Prague were on detail,” Renata said. “They were helping with a film set.”

“A film set?” Magda looked at each of them.

Davide scratched his head, as if he were considering what to say next. He dropped his hand. “It’s perverse.”

Between the three of them, Magda got the story. Aleš began by telling her the Ministry of Propaganda had ordered a screenwriting contest.

“We don’t know what the prize was,” he said. “The camp guards asked for volunteers for everything, from actors and costumers to carpenters and electricians.”

“Everything,” Renata confirmed when Magda looked at her.

Aleš continued. “The two men from Prague were put on a carpentry detail. The Nazis chose who would take part in the film, dressed up the selected actors, plopped them into lavish settings with a buffet, and made quite a spectacle of how wonderful it really is in Theresienstadt, because what else is it other than a cultural city meant to protect the Jews from the war?”

Magda frowned and looked to Davide, who was shaking his head. “This sounds unreal.”

Davide dropped his eyes. “I said so. Perverse.”

Aleš pulled out a chair and sat. “The carpenters managed to sabotage the inventory list of tools. They hid away some of the tools, thinking they could use them later to somehow escape or dig out hiding places within the ghetto. Or maybe even use them as weapons if they could organize a revolt. On the last day on the set, they each strapped one last tool to their calves.”

“They had no idea,” Davide interjected, “that they would need them very soon.”

“That’s right.” Aleš rubbed his head with a flat palm. “Right after filming, everyone who had been involved—except for the well-known celebrities—were marched to the train station two miles away, put into cattle cars, and sent east. The carpenters from Prague wasted no time. They were going to break out of the train.”

Magda's eyes widened as Aleš continued the story. Originally another man said he would join the two others if they could escape. The two from Prague and the third man managed to break through the floor of the cattle car but the other passengers in the carriage panicked. They were certain that the rest of them would be executed as soon as the doors were opened and the Nazis discovered the hole.

"The men from Prague," Aleš said measuredly, "chose to take care of themselves. They jumped."

"What about the third man?" Magda asked.

"They don't know whether he ever made it," Davide said. "They think the passengers tried to drag him back in. He might have broken free or he might have fallen to his death. Either way, they never saw him again."

The carpenters, however, managed to find a seminary, the same seminary where Father Gabriel had studied.

"He was the one who brought the men to join us," Aleš said.

"They're here? With you?" Magda asked. "Do they know anything about the Taubers?"

"They said there is a doctor trying to negotiate for medicines for the camp. Their description matches Dr. Tauber's." Renata bit her lip. "Magda, the conditions are worse than we can imagine. We suspect Frau Tauber was in this film too. Karol—he's one of the men who escaped—told us about a scene with a woman playing the piano. It sounds very much like it could be Ruth."

Magda could not fathom it. "And Eliška?"

Renata's eyelids fluttered. "The children are separated from the families. We have no information about her. But she's

blond and definitely blue-eyed. Maybe...?”

Magda swallowed and gazed at the revolver’s handle facing her. “These camps, these trains that take the people out of the ghetto and send them eastward, how do the Nazis choose who must go?”

Davide shook his head. “They don’t. There’s a Jewish council of elders in charge of the lists. Like we said, so far the more prominent figures have been left alone. They’re like some sort of currency.”

Renata rose. “The Taubers need to be indispensable. And they will need real currency when the time comes.”

Aleš scoffed and raised his hands. “If you know what we can do—”

“I do,” Magda said.

Aleš’s eyebrows shot up.

Magda held his gaze. “Medicine.”

“What?” Renata stepped between them.

But Aleš knew what Magda meant—she could see it in his expression, that slow recognition.

“If these men could get out,” Magda said, “then someone can get in, right?”

“Do you two mind telling me what’s going on here?” Renata said.

“Where’s the hiding place?” Magda asked Aleš. “In St. Stephen’s?”

“For who?” Renata asked. “The escapees?”

“Not who,” Magda said. “What.”

Aleš's expression darkened. "I only took what I thought might be of real value, what the Taubers might need to start a new life."

"So the medicine is still beneath the floorboards?" Magda's hopes rose. "Jana could deliver them."

Aleš sighed heavily. "Jana may be back working for the Koenigs, but she made it perfectly clear the last time we saw her at market we were not to approach. She's got Gestapo tailing her every time she steps out of the compound. She can't be compromised. She's the last one we've got that close to the Koenigs."

Renata groaned. "What are you two going on about?"

Magda turned to her. "Villa Liška. Aleš knows where the medicine is. We could go get them for Dr. Tauber. You said parcels are allowed now."

"No." Aleš picked up the revolver and strode over to her, the gun in his palm. "We're all at risk, Magda. You put yourself in this position when you decided to take the resistance into your own hands and avenge the Taubers—"

"It wasn't an act of vengeance."

"Enough!" Aleš offered her the gun again.

Magda took it, gingerly feeling its weight in her hand.

His gaze softened. "Magda, you've proven that you're not happy hiding out forever. You know you can do this. We'll wait until it's safe enough for you, but it's time. It's time to stick your neck out, too."

Renata stepped behind Magda and grasped her upper arms, squeezing. It was meant to reassure her. "It will be your first

mission, and we'll make sure there's as little risk as possible.
We're your family."

Behind her, Aleš said, "When it's time, be ready to go."

Magda's heart raced.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

NOVEMBER 1942

Word reached them that Koenig had left for a trip to Berlin and that his wife had gone along with him. Villa Liška was in Jana's hands. It was time for Magda to return.

Renata smuggled her out of the safe house and into the trunk of a car. Sometime after, they abandoned the vehicle on a road in the middle of the woods and covered it with branches and brush. Renata handed Magda a rucksack, and they hiked on foot out of the woods and across stubbled fields. The mountains were pressed up against the night sky like paper cutouts. Once, patrol vehicles drove along the fields, the rotating searchlights just missing them as they illuminated the grounds.

An owl screeched on the hill above them as they picked their way up the path by moonlight. All Magda knew was that they were on a mountain, but she could not tell where. Renata veered off into the forest, and Magda followed. Whereas Renata had the stealth of an Amazonian, Magda felt like a giant wading through a display of fine crystal. She thought of Eliška's glass fox figurines, remembered the foxes she'd seen in the woods. If she could move like that, be stealthy and cunning. She slowed down, focused and kept her breathing steady and low.

A shadow materialized before them.

“Password,” a man’s voice demanded.

“The mouse is in the talons,” Renata whispered. “How are you, Jakob?”

“Fucking cold.”

The man stepped forward, blew into his hands, and rubbed them. Magda could barely make out his features, but the voice was gruff, and she pictured a beard, or someone older, at any rate.

Renata clapped the partisan on the back. “Got long yet?”

“Half hour.”

“Good. I’ll see you inside. Cup of tea will be waiting for you.”

“If you mean your kind of cup of tea, it can’t go fast enough.”

Renata chuckled and turned to Magda. “Come on. We’re up here.”

Up here? Somewhere else in the woods a branch cracked. Renata pushed Magda forward into a steep muddy ravine. She saw nothing but more woods as she slipped on wet rocks and debris. Her feet were wet again. Magda cursed beneath her breath.

“Now you sound like a partisan.” Renata chuckled.

She pushed past Magda and scrambled over the edge to her left. Then she counted her steps up to twelve. They reached a patch of thick underbrush. Renata knelt down and moved most of it out of the way before lifting something up from the ground. A trapdoor.

“What?” Renata cocked her head in the dark. “This is why it’s called the Underground, no?” She lowered herself down the pitch-black hole.

“Ladder’s right here,” Renata called up.

Magda wiggled her foot until it landed on something solid. When she stepped off the last rung, she finally saw light at the end of a narrow tunnel. Renata moved toward it, and Magda hurried after her.

“Where are we?”

Renata tossed over her shoulder, “Tunnels, connected to the mines.”

They reached a well-lit subterranean bunker. Four men looked up. Aleš was in front of a typewriter. He nodded at Magda brusquely and continued hammering away at the keys. Davide, wearing headphones, tapped code into a radio transmitter. The other two men acknowledged Magda with suspicious looks.

“Hey, this is nice.” Renata moved to their side of the table. She picked up what looked like a flare gun. She waved it in Magda’s direction. “This is the Godmother.”

Magda turned around.

Renata laughed. “You’re the Godmother, you silly goose. That’s what we call you down here.”

Aleš yanked the paper out of the typewriter and handed it to Renata, who read it.

Wide-eyed, Renata lifted the paper in the air. “What’s this?”

Davide pulled off his headphones and grinned. “Stalingrad is surrounded. The Soviets have trapped the Germans in about

fifty square miles. Artillery, tanks, trucks, equipment included.”

Renata whooped and Aleš laughed. The others also cheered. Everyone, except Magda.

Renata danced over to her. “The Soviets are pushing back! This might be it!”

Magda smiled uncertainly. “Are we winning?”

Aleš hugged Magda briefly to him. “If *we* means anyone but the Germans, then yes, for now. It’s always only for now.” He looked at her and brushed something off her shoulder. “How are you doing? Glad you made it safely.”

She tried to smile bravely.

His attention was on the two men. The one with high arched brows and a long nose wore a turtleneck sweater. His hair was dark brown and messy, and his eyes were light hazel green and quick. The other one had a shorn head, like Aleš, but was not bald. He wore a priest’s cassock and a red bandana around his neck. He had freckles across the bridge of his nose and ears that stuck out. Both looked as if they carried the world on their shoulders.

“This is Karol Procházka,” Aleš said to the first. “And his friend Yanko.”

The carpenters who had escaped the train heading east.

Karol raised his eyebrows, and his mouth turned up a little. He had the kind of mouth where the ends were always turned up, always prepared to smile.

“It’s time for us to go do the watch,” Yanko said suddenly. “Come on.”

Magda stepped aside to let them through, but Karol stopped before her. “So you’re the one who stole Hitler’s bicycle,” he said.

Magda’s eyes widened. “What do you mean? I didn’t—”

Yanko smacked Karol’s arm and ducked into the tunnel.

Karol grinned widely. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you later.” And he disappeared after his friend.

Renata was at a small cooker, steam coming out of a tin pot. She poured hot water over tea leaves and unscrewed a bottle of *Becherbitter*.

“What did he mean about Hitler’s bicycle?” Magda asked her.

Renata snorted. “Nothing. It’s stupid. We told them about the day you dumped the Hitler youth’s bicycle into the river. Next day, Yanko says, looking really perplexed, ‘But what was Hitler doing in that little town?’ He’d missed the fact that we’d said *youth’s* bicycle. Well, Karol wouldn’t let it go. He kept making Yanko imagine Hitler riding around in a pair of lederhosen, visiting his protectorate on a bicycling tour. It went on for days, Karol making up an entire agenda for the Führer’s tourist spots of the day.”

Magda cupped a hand over her mouth. “That’s sort of funny.”

Renata raised her teacup to her lips. Then she tilted her head back and laughed aloud. “Imagine that! The Führer on a bicycling holiday! Pedaling across the Charles Bridge in tight little lederhosen!”

Before Magda could return to the villa, Aleš wanted her to learn the art of disguising herself better. Her hair chopped off, the stolen and tailored Wehrmacht uniform cinched around her waist, there was only one more thing to do. Karol Procházka was wrapping a bandage around Magda's head. Aleš was standing in what Magda thought of as his commanding officer stance, watching the progress of disguising Magda into an injured soldier on leave.

“You're to get the medicine, that's all,” Aleš said. “Do nothing else, you hear?”

“What's going to happen when I come back with the medicine?”

Aleš dropped his head. “The only thing we can do is try and get it to them as a food parcel. Renata is working on the details.”

Magda nodded.

Karol stepped back and examined her face. They had made it look as if her head wound was on the right side of her face so as not to arouse suspicion. But the bandage covered most of the birthmark on her left cheek. Karol held up a compact mirror, and Magda examined herself.

The crooked nose and the scar along her eye were still there. Wasn't that enough to give her away? She looked up at him to see what he thought.

“It's good,” Karol said. “It's enough to get you through the gate, at least. The Koenigs are not there. This will go off without a hitch. Just keep yourself together.”

Magda peered in the mirror again. She looked like the least put-together person on the planet. She willed her legs to steady her as she stood. “I'm ready,” she said.

Out through the tunnel they went and into the woods. She was still surprised they were not more than a half a kilometer from the villa. She had not recognized the terrain. How good of a partisan would she make if she could not even recognize that Renata had led her to the same place where Magda had spent almost three years?

The river was to her left, and even from here she could see that the bridge to Theresienstadt was fortified and well-guarded. Too soon she stood before the familiar gate. Beyond was the limestone facade, the towers, the pool covered for the season. There were no vehicles in the front drive, and the fountain was dry. She lifted the latch and stepped inside the ground, noticing as she did how the smoke rose from the kitchen chimney.

And then she heard a child's giggle on the far side of the house.

Magda halted.

"You get over here," a woman's voice called in German.

Magda turned towards the gate. It was too late to flee—she was too far inside.

Then she saw a toddler, a wide smile on his face, coming around the corner. At the sight of Magda, he stopped, his smile disappeared, and his face turned into a mask of fear.

"I told you to—"

Jana appeared. She snatched the boy into her arms and glared at Magda.

"It's me," Magda said. "It's me, Jana. Your son. From the front. I was... I was injured."

Jana and the boy both stared at her. The boy began kicking his feet. He had dark hair, had Koenig's dark eyes. A shoe flew off as he struggled to get down.

Jana lowered him to the ground and took his hand, approaching Magda with slow steps. "I don't have a—" She gasped.

"It's me," Magda stressed again. "How are you?"

Jana assessed Magda from head to toe. She put her hands on her hips and clicked her tongue. "Well, I! That's almost good."

The boy whimpered.

Magda pointed to the front door. "May I come in?" *Was it safe* was what she really meant.

Jana led the way into the foyer. It had not changed much. Magda peeked down the hall. The doors were all shut, but Jana bustled through the service door, and Magda hurried behind her, casting a glance at the photo of Koenig still on the foyer table. In the dining room, a new portrait of Hitler hung on the wall.

Jana sat the boy at the kitchen table, handed him a piece of sliced apple, then turned to Magda. "I was wondering what happened to you."

"Why is he here?" Magda pointed to the child. "I thought they were all gone."

"They are. Frau Koenig and the Obersturmbannführer are in Berlin, but..." Jana gazed at the child. "There is little room for a child like him."

"A child like him?"

"Robert is deaf." Jana stroked the boy's head.

Magda gaped at her. Koenig's son, with a disability. She did not understand much of the Nazi ideology but she did know this: no high-ranking commander would accept any weakness in his successors.

"Is there anyone else here?" she asked.

"I'm the only one. The Gestapo follows me around, but only when I leave the grounds."

"Good. Come with me."

Magda left the kitchen and took the stairs two at a time. The door that led to what was once Eliška's bedroom stood open.

There was a crib opposite to where Eliška's bed had once stood, and the room had been painted a soft duck-egg blue. There were toy airplanes and tanks on the floor, and on the dresser, a photo of Robert alone in the expanse of the rose garden. There was a wooden train set and a push toy with a little dog on four wheels. It looked like a normal boy's bedroom.

Jana came beside her, Robert in her arms again. Magda rubbed a finger along his cheek. He jerked back, burrowing into Jana's neck.

"He's a good boy." Jana's voice was shaky.

Magda dropped her hand. "I'm not here because of him."

"Then why?"

Magda peered at Jana. She looked older, thinner. Worn down to the bone. And she looked terrified.

"I need to get to Aleš's old room."

Without further explanation, Magda took the stairs to the top floor and strode to the last door. She pushed it open. The bed was neatly made, but the room was empty. She dropped to her knees and began prying the floorboards up. When Jana walked into the room, Magda looked up.

“Are you going to help me?”

Magda fetched a coat hanger to try and get deeper beneath and Jana retrieved a flashlight. Magda felt for the remaining pillowcase and pulled it out. When she opened it, she recognized the bottles of liquids and pills. It was not a lot, but it was what they had been able to salvage from Dr. Tauber’s destroyed office before Koenig had returned to take over the villa. They had brought it all upstairs to put with the rest of the personal items and valuables.

“I knew there would be a time when these would be useful,” Jana said.

Magda squeezed Jana’s hand and stood up. Robert was crawling beneath the bed. Jana lay on the floor and coaxed him out.

Magda finished stuffing the medicine into her military bag. Robert was looking at her with more curiosity. She lowered herself onto the bed. “What happened after I left?”

Jana put him down again. “When the real Gestapo showed up here, Koenig went on a rampage. He picked me up personally at my sister’s house. Paní Eva’s disappearance had him seeing only red and he put a high price on both of your heads. I had to lie. A lot.”

Magda grasped the woman’s hands.

“They’re all still looking for you,” Jana said. “For you, paní Eva. Renata. Everyone now.”

“Did he hurt you?” Magda asked, concerned.

Jana huffed. “I’ve had to work hard to win their trust again, to at least the point where they leave Robert with me all the time now. Koenig won’t allow his son on any party or official business.”

“What are they doing in Berlin?”

“What do I know?”

“Did you hear about Stalingrad?”

Jana nodded. “I imagine there’s an important emergency meeting, but he took Frau Koenig, so there might be something more ceremonial in all this than mere strategy meetings. You understand?”

“But he rejects his own son?”

“Koenig wanted to send them both away, him and her, but Frau Koenig threw a fit. She even threatened to expose her husband. Apparently, he is or was having an affair with a Slovakian woman. She held that over him and—” Jana shook her head. “She’s not stupid by any means. I actually feel sorry for Frau Koenig.”

Magda sighed. Up to a point, she had as well.

“Anyway, she threatened him. So the Obersturmbannführer punishes her in return by not allowing the boy to go anywhere. Except to that quack doctor.”

“What doctor?”

Jana looked stricken. “He administers strange treatments to recover Robert’s hearing. Trouble is, he may never have been able to hear so there’s nothing to recover. Koenig blames you, you know? Both of them do.”

The poor child! Magda shook her head. They didn't deserve Robert. They really did not. How could someone send children away to a ghetto, to a concentration camp, order their extermination and then have their own, only to reject them for the slightest imperfection?

"That's how it goes," Jana said, stroking the boy's head. "So he's with me."

"They never hired anyone new?"

"They didn't want to." She hesitated. "I suspect they think you'll come back if I'm here."

Magda considered this. "How are you managing?"

Jana shrugged, then looked down at the boy. "You know, if the war turns against the Nazis, I have a feeling Koenig will save his own skin before he tries to save this child."

They were all quiet, including Robert.

"Well." Magda stood up.

Jana sniffed. She pulled Magda to her. "It's good to see you, son."

Magda laughed a little.

"It's quite the elaborate costume to come to an empty house."

They both laughed.

"I'm being tested," Magda finally said. She was serious once more. "They want me to do more."

"And you should." Jana shook her head wearily. "Why are you still in the district? Why haven't Aleš and Renata gotten you out?"

"How? With this?" Magda put her hand on her left cheek.

“You could get rid of it. You can make it worse.” Jana reached out to touch the right side of Magda’s face. She smiled wryly. “What happened to you, son?”

“A wound.”

“Huh,” Jana breathed. She gazed at Magda’s other cheek. “As if you didn’t have enough wounds already. But a burn. A rather terrible face burn. That might set you free, don’t you think?”

The hand on Magda’s shoulder made her jump.

“It’s just me.” Karol smiled and pushed the hair out of his face.

“Sorry.” She waved a hand over the items on the ground before her. “I’m just looking at all this.”

“I like the idea.” Karol glanced over his shoulder.

Renata leaned against the wall, arms folded, whispering with Aleš. Magda looked away.

Karol pointed at the box that Jana had given her. “Can I have a look? It’s a fantastic resource to have.”

She indicated for him to sit. “I had no idea that Jana knew so much. But she was around long before me, and she had a lot more contact with Anna Dvorákova.”

Karol nodded and lifted a packet. “Gelatin. Interesting.”

Renata strode over and squatted next to Magda. She lifted the silk strips, the glue, and the rouge. “This could work. Aleš says it’s not important about getting it perfect but to just make it real enough if they take a quick look at your face.”

Magda imagined Jana at the party she'd told Magda about. The Dvoráks had brought along a makeup artist. That evening the Taubers made a bet with the Dvoráks about illusions and stage makeup, and they had asked Jana to come into the drawing room. Would she volunteer to have her face done? Jana said yes. Jana asked questions, as was her nature. The result was a grotesque face burn.

“Jana said something similar,” Magda said. “People will see what they want to see. And with something hideous, they look away. Anyway, Jana remembered the basics. Frau Koenig’s makeup is the only problem. If she discovers it’s missing, there will be questions.”

Renata nodded. “It’s interesting, either way.”

Interesting. That was all.

Aleš called Karol over. It was their turn to go on patrol.

Magda watched them depart, then leaned back on her hands. “First things first. How are we going to get the medicines into Theresienstadt?”

Renata sat down and crossed her legs, her expression grave. “There’s been a change of plan.”

“What?” Magda sprang up. “No. Why?”

Renata licked her lips. “Listen, we’re nobodies here. We can’t get ourselves organized enough to actually do anything. We’re in a hotspot, you know that. Aleš’s brother has been brought in for questioning.”

“Is Father Gabriel, all right?” she asked, concerned.

Renata shook her head. “He was released, but they were asking him about Eva.”

Magda’s eyes widened. “And me?”

Renata closed her eyes briefly. “Yes. Look, there’s something else. Aleš has received word through the network that the resistance has organized itself into something more official. It’s called the R3, and we’re trying to join forces with them.”

“What about the Taubers?”

Renata took in a breath. “There is nothing we can do for them except to fight the Germans and liberate them when the time comes. Right now, everything we try is going to be too great of a risk. Magda, listen, we need you. We need every person we can get.”

Magda began to throw the items back into the box. “I went there to get the medicines—”

“Medicines that we might very well need ourselves.”

Magda kicked the box aside. “Is that what you sent me in there for? To get these for you? Not for the Taubers?”

“No, Magda. We wanted to help, but orders are—”

“Orders? Whose orders? We’re alone here!”

Jakob and Yanko appeared in the bunker.

Ignoring them, Renata rose and grabbed Magda by the shoulders. “Listen to me. What good are you if you are dead? Huh, Magda? What good?”

Magda wrenched herself away. “You’re killing me already, Renata.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

DECEMBER 1942

As the winter got colder, Aleš cut the length of their patrols and they had more frequent rotations, which meant that Magda's sleep was more interrupted than ever. After a week, her body automatically woke her up after two hours.

One night, she could barely sleep. The air was thick in the bunker. Not even leaving the trapdoor ajar helped to circulate it. She often wondered whether—should they all fall asleep and not be awoken for a shift—they would just die down here for lack of oxygen.

Magda climbed up the ladder and welcomed the blast of cold air. It was so icy it felt as if her nostrils froze shut. She blew into her wrapped hands. Renata had finally managed to scrounge up a pair of boots for her. She wrapped the shawl tightly around her face to protect herself against the cold. She thought of the nun's habit that Father Gabriel had managed to get for her. The coif and wimple would serve to hide her birthmark. Father Gabriel spent several hours with her, reviewing a nun's behavior, how she would react to authority, and so on. Magda had felt utterly comfortable with the entire operation and the idea of the disguise. And if she really did have to go outside and into public, they could always create the burned face with the ingredients and materials she had.

It was a disguise for when they would really have to get Magda somewhere. They made up the entire story. She was a nun, entered the convent at nineteen. A kitchen fire started and she had been badly burned. She was on her way back to her convent after emergency treatment. But mostly, Father Gabriel said, he expected she would never have to go into that great of detail.

A stick snapped nearby.

“Karol?”

“Password.”

“The soup has boiled over.”

He appeared, and they stood a little way apart.

Her heart did a flip. It surprised her to realize that she looked forward to the way he could make her smile.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said.

“Are you still sore about the medicine?”

“I feel betrayed.”

“I can understand why you feel that way,” Karol said. “Aleš is right though. We don’t even know whether the medicines would make it to the Taubers, and the chances are relatively slim.”

“Everyone keeps telling me to be brave, to take risks, that I’m needed. And yet the one time where I know I can accomplish something to make a difference, they hold me back. I thought we were doing this to help people.”

“There is a cost to all of this,” Karol said, softly.

“Then why can I not just be one of the casualties?”

He flinched. “What is it about the Taubers that makes you so—I don’t know—willing to put your life on the line?”

Magda was taken aback. “Because they are kind? Because they are good people, really good people? They’ve never hurt anyone. On the contrary—”

“It’s more than that, isn’t it, though?”

She said carefully, “They may as well be my family. I was the boy’s *sandek*.”

Now it was Karol’s turn to look surprised. “That’s why you’re called the Godmother. I thought it was because of the necklace you put on the Koenigs’ son. That, by the way, required some true *chutzpah*.”

There it was. His smile.

“Stupidity, that’s what that was,” Magda lamented. “I was so tired. I wasn’t myself.”

“You want to avenge the Taubers, don’t you?”

She closed her eyes. “Why does everyone say that?”

“Because when we are really hurt, really angry, that’s the point where we do things we will regret. It’s natural, Magdalena.”

She peered at him through the darkness. “And what about forgiveness?”

Karol laughed softly. “That’s pretty sanctimonious these days. Few of us are capable of that. It’s something to aim for, but in this craziness... I don’t know, don’t you just feel angry all the time?”

“I do. And I hate myself for it. I’m afraid, all the time. And I am ashamed of that.”

She suddenly thought of Walter and barely heard Karol when he added, “And now you’re angry with Aleš and Renata.”

“I fear them a little. I don’t know what they have planned.”

To keep warm, she started to walk, and he followed her.

“What about you?” she asked. “The hate you must feel for what the Germans did to you, for putting you in the ghetto. It must be eating away at you. Do you think about killing Germans?”

Karol did not answer for a long time. “I’m glad the partisans are getting organized now. I’m in soldier mode now.”

“Have you ever killed a man?” She waited again.

Finally he said, “I haven’t. But I know I could if I had to.”

“What makes you think you could?”

“Because I value my life greatly. I’d do it to survive, to protect myself or my loved ones.”

“Did you have to protect loved ones before the Germans deported you?”

Karol took in a great breath. He stopped behind her.

“I don’t think I could ever kill someone,” Magda said quietly.

“You don’t know that.” He sounded angry.

“I’m sorry. Please. I don’t know what got into me.” *I thought I could talk to you.*

“Let’s talk about something lighter. What do you imagine your life will be like when this is all over?”

He passed by her and she followed him now.

“I can barely think past the next five minutes. My brain is freezing, and it’s not from the cold. Our days have become something of a minute-by-minute miracle, don’t you find?”

He nodded in front of her.

“What about you? What do you imagine?”

He turned, and she could sense his smile even in the dark, heard it in his voice. “Food. Lots of food.” He patted his middle. “Growing fat and happy, having a huge family, lots of children.”

Magda’s smile disappeared. “Really? You can imagine all that?”

Karol’s coat rustled. “I think I have to. Don’t you ever want to have children?”

“I have a child already. Samuel is my child. I am his godmother, and a godmother takes care of her godchild when the parents...” No. She was not going to finish the thought.

“Are you going to try and find him when this is all over?”

“There, that’s it. That’s what I imagine. I imagine finding Samuel.”

Karol took in a breath, blew an icy cloud out into the night. “What about having your own?”

“Then there would have to be a third.”

He laughed. “You can have four if you want.”

“No. Then I’d have to have five. And that’s a lot when I do not even have someone to love.”

Karol was silent for a while as they completed the first circuit. “Have you ever been? In love, I mean?”

Magda lingered behind him. She did not want to lie to him so up close. “No.” Her heart ached for something as simple as Radek and his first kiss.

“But why five? Or only three?”

“There is bad luck in even numbers.”

“Like in a bouquet of flowers?” he asked.

“Like in a bouquet of flowers,” she said.

“The best would be,” Karol whispered into the dark, “if Samuel was reunited with his family.”

“The best chance for that to happen,” Magda said brokenly, “is if the Taubers get the medicine they need. And the people I thought were my friends are preventing me from doing that.”

The resistance was getting more and more organized. Small bands of partisans had formed something more official and were calling themselves the R3. With the idea of negotiating a spot within the new organization, Aleš and Renata asked whether Magda would watch over the bunker, stating they would save her disguise for when they really had to move her. Magda agreed and as soon as they were gone, she took out the nun’s habit. She had made her decision.

Renata claimed that she and Aleš were sure the medicines would not get to the Taubers, but how could they know that if they had not even tried? Magda was not satisfied with simple assumptions—she wanted proof. She heated the gelatin, glued the silk strips onto her face and, with a depression stick, applied the warm gelatin to her face. After it cooled, she began applying the makeup. The rouge, the lipstick, and the black

kohl that she rubbed along the edges of her faux face wound to make it look like seared skin. She had to be careful that the whole thing did not peel off as she worked on it. Having only a small compact mirror was a challenge, but Magda held on to Jana's words that she only had to create the effect, not perfection. She then wrapped the bandage around her head, covering her masterwork, and donned the nun's habit and touched the sides of her head beneath the coif, the wimple, and the veil. It was the perfect guise. She was a Catholic nun, concerned about the rumors of disease and epidemics in Theresienstadt. Her convent was sending her to check on whether they might send food and medicine.

That half hour on the road to Litoměřice was a battle waged between Magda's conscience and her heart. She stopped several times, gripping the sack of medication, and asked herself whether she was really meant to obey orders.

Aleš and Renata were running the little group of partisans like a small army. And Aleš made it absolutely clear that he expected obedience and that his word was an order not to be disobeyed. But she was only going to check. Just check and have information ready to argue her point, to make her case for the Taubers. It had been her idea, and not theirs. Her risk. She'd gone to the villa to fetch the supplies and had fooled Jana well enough.

She did not involve Karol in her idea either. Like the others, he was also taking the organization much more seriously, reminding Magda that he served in the Czechoslovak army, and he did not feel Aleš was taking his job lightly. In the world out there, Karol had explained to her, Aleš was his superior officer, and what Aleš said, Karol had every intention of following. Karol had also added that he was

relieved that there was a concerted effort to organize themselves.

“Be careful,” Karol had warned when she shared her frustrations. “Partisans can be tougher—stricter. They won’t tolerate any *hovadina*.”

Everyone seemed to be all right with this, except Magda. There was a nagging voice in her head that said she had never signed up for this army. Besides, she was only going to the post office to see whether she could get a parcel sent to Theresienstadt at all. Then she would make up her mind. She would be in and out in a heartbeat. No one would ever need to know she had even gone.

The post office was in the town square, and the closer Magda neared Lidická Road, the more she hesitated. She could just duck into the corner pub outside the castle walls. Wait a little. Maybe get some information as to what was going on in town. Two police officers on motorcycles turned the corner, and Magda watched them drive by. In each of their sidecars was a trunk of some kind. They took the left fork into the town center. This was soon followed by a motorcade, and Magda stepped back. Gestapo. One, two, three vehicles. And a truck, the back flaps sealed tight.

She stopped to watch them pass. Something was happening. She turned to face the road where she had come. Maybe she should come some other time if the square was about to be swarming with Gestapo. She stared at the next car that followed. Two swastika flags were positioned on either side of the front hood. She stepped away from the curb and pressed herself up against the wall of a building. The car sped by on the cobblestoned street, Koenig’s profile in the back was, however, unmistakable.

Now more than ever was a good reason to run back, to return to the safety of the mining tunnels. But something was telling her to move forward. Now it was a contest between her will and her gut instincts—a whole different field upon which to do battle.

Magda slowly moved forward in the direction of the clock tower ahead of her. It was two in the afternoon. As she entered the square near the baroque fountain, she halted once more. Streamers stretched across the streets. Opposite the long rectangular square, and draped with large swastika flags on either side of the building, was the *Reichskanzlei*. In the center, where the buses and parades took up space depending on the day, was a high wooden platform—like a stage—with wooden crossbeams and one beam across the entire length of the stage. The two policemen—she spotted their motorcycles—threw open the boxes they had been transporting on the stage and withdrew ropes. They tossed them over the beam and secured them tightly. Magda shivered as she realized the Gestapo had built a gallows.

The motorcade inched its way past a growing crowd of pedestrians before parking between the *Reichskanzlei* and the gallows. Magda walked along the left arcade, trying to avoid the people stepping out of shops. Onlookers took their positions beneath the arches to look upon the grotesque display.

“Sister? Are you all right?” a young woman asked in German. She stopped in front of Magda. A small girl held the mother’s hand.

The mother’s eyes darted along the left side of Magda’s face. “You’re... You’re not looking... Do you need a hospital?”

Magda shook her head. “No. I’m just... I’ll be fine.” She touched the side of her face. Her heart lurched when the fingertips came back slick and damp. Magda turned her cheek away from the woman and pointed to the gallows. “What is happening here today?”

The woman pulled the child to her. “Criminals. They’re to be hung. Traitors to the Reich.” She hurried past Magda after casting her one last suspicious glance.

Along the square, the Germans had positioned several loudspeakers. They crackled and echoed across the square. “Citizens of the Third Reich! Our great nation has been threatened and sabotaged by partisans!”

Magda stopped again. A haggard man looked twice at her and she bowed her head. The next business along was a café. The customers inside were getting up from their tables to look through the windows and a few were starting to come out onto the streets. At the end of the café, one window looked only upon the coffee bar and a sideboard with a pile of newspapers stacked on it. Magda lay the bag of medicines on the windowsill and leaned in close to peer at her reflection. She clearly saw black and red spots seeping through the bandage and onto the wimple. The gelatin was melting.

“Dear God,” she whispered hoarsely.

Behind her own reflection, she saw the gallows reflected in the glass and then some movement. The crowd was growing thicker and moving toward the *Reichskanzlei*. Police were directing them all to the front. Magda followed the arcade, holding her hand alongside her face but afraid to actually touch it. She was closer to the gallows now, and she could see that the prisoners were being led up the stairs at the side.

Two men climbed onto the stage. A third, dressed in a black cassock, followed. Magda gasped. Father Gabriel. Her heart stopped beating when she saw the two women behind him. She knew them all.

A shop bell clanged violently before her. Magda glanced at the tobacco sign. Two figures stepped out and stopped just two meters from her. The black leather coat. The boxer's physique beneath. A cigar in his hand.

Magda was glued to the spot. She could not will herself to move.

Richard Koenig turned slightly to the spectacle in the square, announcing to his companion, "It's an early Christmas present for me. There are still twelve days left though. If someone turns that miserable girl in, someone will enjoy a very luxurious holiday."

He bent over the lighter the second man held for him. The Obersturmbannführer puffed at the cigar several times, then lifted his chin and exhaled. He glanced in Magda's direction.

She was dead. Her body drained of all its blood. She saw flashes of her life: the dawn sky in Voštiny, Radek's kiss, her mother's hug, her brother's dance when he discovered he had a son, the threshing of wheat, the German motorcade, the laughter at the Taubers' table, Renata whooping at the bottom of the stairs, Samuel in her arms, the birthmark on his right wrist, the crack of a fist against her face, Frau Koenig's sneer, Robert's cry as Magda held him, the deer, Walter—

Squinting, Koenig swung in her direction. "Sister?"

Magda blinked. She raised her arm before her face, bent at the elbow, and made the sign of the cross. The voice on the speakers crackled across the square.

Her gesture was not something that Father Gabriel had taught her. It was something she had seen him do. “Bless you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Koenig removed the cigar from his mouth and gave her a slow, steady sneer. “Save that for the women and men up there.” He jabbed the cigar in the direction of the gallows. “They’re the ones in need of salvation today.”

Magda allowed herself a quick glance up at him.

Koenig frowned at her, clicked his heels together, and lifted his hand. “*Heil Hitler!*”

With the cigar stuck back in his mouth, he crossed the road and strode toward the gallows. The crowd was eerily silent. His heels rang dully on the cobblestones. The speakers crackled again.

“Jana Neuhaus! Father Gabriel Svoboda! Jakob Navotný! Yanko Grünwald! And Eva Černý!”

Magda opened her mouth but no air came out. She fell back against the arcade’s column outside the tobacco shop, unable to go closer and yet unable to tear her eyes away from that platform.

There were only four nooses. They tied Yanko’s arms to one of the posts. The shot—like a single, stifled firecracker—sent Yanko’s head backward, then it dropped forward. There was a collective gasp from the onlookers. Jews earned bullets. The Gestapo slipped the nooses on the remaining four.

Magda balled her hands into fists as the noose was placed around Jana’s neck. All stood still, hands bound behind their backs, waiting as the last verdict was read. And then the earth

beneath them dropped. The ropes jerked upward, then down. They stretched taut. And stilled.

Magda turned away and then she saw it in the window of the shop she had just passed. A poster. With her face on it. The reward for her capture: six thousand Reichsmark.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DECEMBER 1942

Magda ran through the snow-encrusted fields, sliding and slipping over the uneven terrain. She twisted her ankle in the too-big jackboots. She ripped the nun's headpiece off her head and unraveled the bandage, the makeup and gelatin peeling away with it. She dropped to her knees, and howled at the bright blue sky until the sound of vehicles on the road above made her dive flat against the ground.

She turned her head. Trucks were moving up the road, heading for Radobýl Mountain. She saw the soldiers inside the cab and lined up on benches in the back. One was pointing a rifle around and making jerking motions. Magda turned her face away into the dirt.

The woods were a little way ahead of her still. The sun was sinking, casting long shadows that threw claw-like fingers across the earth. She shivered, the sobs building upward, her stomach heaving it all out into one long scream down into the frozen earth.

Jana! Gabriel! Jakob! Yanko! Eva! Eva! But then—she hiccupped—where was Samuel?

Her sobs came to an abrupt halt. She stared at the crystals of snow and ice before her and rolled onto her back. In great, gasping bellows, she laughed. She didn't care if the truck

came back. She did not care whether that soldier fired bullets into her body. She laughed with long, bitter cries, each release growing harder and more hysterical.

The bag of medicine was still at the café.

When she stopped laughing, she closed her eyes to that cold, blue sky and hugged her aching sides. She could just lie here and wait until the temperature dropped far below zero. But flashes of lights in the woods next to her, and the flares that lit up the snowy peaks and fields around her made her sit up and pull herself together. Her body finally began to feel something again. Cold. She felt cold. Her muscles spasmed. Her bones ached.

Die. Just die. What use was it trying to run again?

The Gestapo and the Wehrmacht were at the old mining tunnels—she could tell by where the flares were coming from. And if they went there, then the dogs would find the subterranean bunker. It would only be a matter of time. They had already found and executed Yanko and Jakob. She rocked back and forth, trying to forget the image of Yanko's slumped body, the hole through his head, the tugs and jerks of the ropes, Father Gabriel's feet dancing in the air. Jana's head angled so unnaturally.

Through the white noise, she heard two words. *The others. The others. The others.*

The countryside was crawling with patrols and dogs, like hunters seeking their prey. With hunters out to win a prize. Six thousand Reichsmark for her arrest.

It was growing dark. She was numb. On the horizon, there was an orange glow. That was the village behind Villa Liška. They were burning it to the ground, that abandoned village.

They must have found something or someone there. Or the Nazi bastards were just sending another warning.

She rose and stumbled across the field, trying to get her legs and heart pumping again. She was up. She was up and running. But she had the strangest thought in her head: she was not running *from* something, she was running *to* it.

She scrambled over an irrigation ditch, and hid in the brush. Now that she was moving, all she wanted was heat. Magda pushed further toward the mountains, heading north. What had Aleš said about the meeting? They were going to meet near Ústí nad Labem. That was it. That was north, over the mountains. The Nazi's vehicles would never make it up those mountains, and besides, she was ahead of them.

The dark night was hell, but it was also protection. Magda fell to the ground before a stream and cupped her shaking hands to drink the ice-cold water. Her stomach growled. She could have been moving for an hour or only fifteen minutes. Maybe it was two hours. She couldn't be sure. Through the dark woods, she did not even know whether she was heading north. The moon was waxing, and she was navigating in the pitch dark. What if she ran straight into the Wehrmacht or the patrols or whoever was on the hunt tonight? Maybe they were recruits from Ploskovice and the Napola, in a drill like Walter and Gustav had been on Samuel's special day. Either way, the Nazis were everywhere.

She rose and followed the stream. An owl called, another answered. More hunters. Something moved in the woods. Magda stood stock-still, one foot raised. Her blood turned to ice in her veins and her heart stopped before it started beating

wildly. She spun around. Again, another sound. Footsteps. Definitely not those of an animal, but a man. She'd spent enough time in the woods with Aleš and his group to know the difference. She covered her mouth and slid down a slope. She clung to a tree and kept her mouth covered to prevent her frosty breaths from giving her away.

A voice above her. "Who's there? I know you're there. Come out."

Magda unwrapped herself from a tree trunk. "Karol? Is that you?"

"Magda?" A shape scrambled down and landed beside her.

Magda threw her arms around Karol's neck. "What are you doing here? I thought they caught you all!"

"I could say the same of you." He held her at arm's-length. "I've been running since this afternoon. We returned to find the Nazis had surrounded the mines, and they're crawling through the hills. Something happened. Something set them off."

Magda could not control her shaking body. Karol pulled her into him. Through chattering teeth, she told him what had happened in the town square. About Yanko first. Then Father Gabriel and Jakob.

"Karol, they had Jana and Eva too." She shivered violently.

Karol took off his coat and wrapped it around her. "What were you doing in town?"

"I wanted... I was trying to..." Magda clenched her hands. "Karol, I took the medication to town."

His torso stiffened against her.

“I just wanted to know how to send a parcel, whether it would get to them. The nun’s outfit gave me a good excuse to ask, to find out.”

Karol rubbed her back and shoulders brusquely but he did not say a word.

Magda did not deserve to be leaning on him like this. Her legs were giving out on her, but she was far from being able to rest.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered hoarsely. “I’m so sorry.”

“I know you are.”

“Where are the others?”

“We split up. Davide was with me for a while. As soon as we saw what was happening, he said we’d be safer on our own. He told me to head back north but not right away, just in case. I’ve been zigzagging through the area.”

She had nothing on her except the nun’s habit and the coat she wore, surely not enough to keep her on the run for long.

“I’ve got a gun.” Karol reached into his waistband. “Aleš gave it to me.”

He placed it into her hand, and she weighed it in her palm.

“That’s one of the weapons I recovered, isn’t it? It was my brother’s.”

“Then you should have it.”

Magda pressed the revolver back into his hand. “I don’t know how to shoot. Besides, I don’t think I could. I’m the biggest idiot, the greatest coward this war has ever seen.”

“Don’t say that. It’s not true.”

“I watched them die. I just watched them die. I’m the reason they were hunting Eva at all. I’m the reason Samuel is dead. That Jana is dead!” She told him about the poster, about the six thousand Reichsmark.

Karol tightened his hold on her. “I don’t know all the history you have with these people,” he murmured, “but I imagine the Gestapo tortured the information out of someone. Or the reward was high enough for Eva, like for you, that someone betrayed her.”

Magda pulled away angrily. “He’s only a child! Samuel is only a child! How can they—”

“We don’t know whether Samuel has been captured as well, but Magda...” Karol was level with her, his face so close she could almost make out his features. “You have to believe that he’s still alive. Until proven otherwise. Promise me?”

A crack of a rifle sounded in the far distance. Magda jumped. “Good Christ. They’re still looking for us?”

A flare lit up the forest above them. Then something exploded far away.

“Are those the mines?” Magda asked.

“Or they’ve found the bunker.” Karol spun her in the opposite direction. “We can’t stop.”

Magda did not know where they were; she did not know the terrain at all. The world was as enormous and unknowable while at the same time not big enough to hide either of them.

Karol pushed Magda forward. “Aleš and Renata showed me a safe house on the way to the meeting today. I know how to get there, but we have to move fast. It’s on a mountain and we can rest there.”

Magda stumbled and had to right herself. She was so tired. “I’m never going to make it.”

“You are. Move!” Karol snatched her hand and sprinted ahead of her, dragging her so that she had to run to keep up. Eventually they burst out of the woods. Before them lay another field and then a steep wall of mountain.

She was breathless and soaked in sweat, but the exertion was freeing her mind. She thought about all that had happened to lead her to this very place, to this very moment.

The Germans rolling past her family’s farm. Her brothers absorbed into Hitler’s military. Her grandparents forced to move from the one home they had ever had. The Nováks’ farmhouse occupied by strangers. Her great-aunt’s small home in Lidice, where they’d had to sleep on the floor or on top of the tiled oven. The near squalor. The Germans marching through Litoměřice. Walter’s betrayal. The Taubers. Eliška. Samuel. Koenig. Karol’s descriptions of Theresienstadt. The cattle cars and the people in them.

And Koenig. The cigar. The creak of the black leather coat. The smoke in the air and his *Heil Hitler!*

By the time Karol led them up to yet another wooden hut hardly fit to shelter a cat, much less two people on the run, Magda had made her choice. If they survived the night, if they really managed to join a larger group of partisans, then she was going to be useful in some way, and obey orders, even if it cost her her life.

She stepped through the slanted door of the next safe house.

“Tomorrow we head northeast and see if we can regroup with the resistance,” Karol said as he rummaged in the dark

with his flashlight. He came back with an old lump of cloth. At the hearth, he brushed together a pile of splinters and shavings and built a nest, placing the piece of burlap on top. Then he slid open the magazine of the revolver and tapped out a bullet. It took some time before he managed to pull it apart and empty some of the gunpowder onto the tinder nest.

He looked up. “This will get things going.”

Next, he took the flashlight, undid the bottom, and tapped one of the batteries into his hand. Then he reached into his back pocket and withdrew something small. He held it between his forefinger and thumb. “Dinner.”

She peered at it and smelled cocoa. “How did you get your hands on chocolate?”

“The commanders at the meeting today had them. Let’s just say they used them to sweeten the deal... except they didn’t. I stole them out of a candy dish.” He blew softly in that way that was part of his smile. If she were blind, she would know when he was smiling.

“You were at a house today?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I was at a house today. Felt rather out of place after all this wilderness-survival stuff. Look, you get a bite and I get a bite.” She heard the rustle of foil as he unwrapped the praline and held it out to her. “Go on.”

She bit into it. It had a liquid center—rum—and she tried to not take it all, but it dripped on her chin, and it was so surprising that it made her laugh.

Karol popped the rest into his mouth and licked his fingers. He folded the tinfoil lengthwise and held the ends over the negative and positive charges of the battery. He hovered over the tinder nest. Nothing happened. At least Magda didn’t think

it did, until Karol whistled between his teeth and blew on the fingers holding the battery. “It’s hot.”

Whoosh! Pop! The gunpowder was alight. Magda sat back on her haunches with a little whoop.

Karol had gathered enough wood to feed the flames in the hearth. He sent Magda out to look for more. She found a stack of logs off to the side of the house, and she tapped them against the walls of the hut to get rid of the snow on the very ends before carrying an armload in to him.

As the flames danced on the walls, she took a look around. Like all the other huts she had stayed in, this one also had one bed, some musty covers, a couple of chairs, the fireplace, and a few odds and ends. She grabbed the covers and also the curtains that hung on the back window. She found an old towel, too, and brought those over to Karol’s ever-growing fire. She wrapped her hands in the smaller curtains, and draped the larger ones across his lap. They huddled together, Magda’s teeth chattering again.

Karol turned his head toward her. “You’re in shock, you know. Not just from the cold.” He put an arm around her.

“I have nowhere else to go. Look at you—you can make a fire with the simplest of things. You know how to shoot. You’ve trained with the military. And I am absolutely certain that you will find the rest of the group by the end of tomorrow.” She began to doubt her earlier resolve. “You should just leave me here. I’m utterly useless.”

“You’re not.” He squeezed her shoulder. “Besides, I didn’t know a lot of this before I went into the military. I had to learn it. And I can teach you.”

She stared into the flames, her body still shaking. “I want to find Samuel.”

“It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack, Magda.” Karol removed his arm. He turned to her, his legs crossed before him. “If we can turn this war around, then we can figure out how—and whether—we can find any of our loved ones. But this war...” He shook his head. “It’s dog eat dog.”

They were silent for a while, and he turned back to the fire.

Slowly her body relaxed, and the shivering and chattering grew less frequent. After a while, and not worrying what he might think, she said, “I just wanted to leave a mark, you know? On the child. To protect him, maybe? I think that’s why I put it on.”

Karol nodded beside her. “You were trying to make a point. Maybe you were hoping he’d be discovered like that.”

Magda sighed. She took in another deep breath and held it, one more shiver, and then her body let go of everything and she was exceptionally sleepy. She closed her eyes.

“All I ever wanted,” she whispered, “was to be able to go back and have things be as they were. I never wanted to change anything, not even with Robert, really.” She clenched her fists. “I’m a monster. Look at me. I am the reason our friends—my family—were murdered.”

Karol’s breath hitched, and Magda opened her eyes to him.

“Nothing will ever be the same again,” he said. “Nothing. And we are all going to be different.”

Magda searched his face. If they survived, she wondered whether they would even be able to recognize one another.

Karol fed the fire before he turned to her again. He took her hands in his. “I believe the soul can die a thousand times before the body does. That’s a good thing, because it means you have the chance to recover. So, today, right now, we must choose to live. All right?”

Magda hung her head, almost asleep already. She felt Karol shift and bend over her as he led her to rest in his lap. He shifted the covers so they were over them both.

“*L’chaim*, Magdalena.”

She nodded and closed her eyes. “To life.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

DECEMBER 1942

Eliška was pounding on the wardrobe panel, screaming for Magda.

Magda moved from the corridor to the doorway. “What is it, Little Finch? Be quiet. You have to be quiet. The bad men are coming.”

Again the pounding. Again the muffled screaming. Then scratching, like fingernails on chalk. Magda shivered. Her teeth chattered.

Over her shoulder, dogs barked downstairs, except that the stairs were falling apart, the house was falling down around her. Magda heard glass shattering on the marble floor. The floor was crumbling from the stairs to the corridor where she stood.

She ran to the wardrobe and yanked it open. She shoved the few items aside, frantically searching for the panel’s secret, to open it, to get the child out. The coverlets were heavy. The extra pillows, even heavier.

Eliška’s screams became more hysterical and then a crunching noise and her small fist punched through the panel. Her hand searched and reached for Magda’s but Magda was drifting further away. She could not grab hold of Eliška’s

hand. Someone or something was pulling Magda back, or she was falling through that crumbling floor.

“Magda,” the little girl shrieked. “Wake up!”

Magda groaned and summoned all the energy she had left to fall forward, toward Eliška and away from whatever was pulling her, making her sink.

She screamed and shot upwards.

“Magda!”

She fought the thing that pinned her down.

“Magda! Stop it. Stop it. It’s all right. I’m here.”

She wailed against the body that held her, punched at it until she awoke. Karol’s face loomed over hers.

He smelled of smoke and wood, and snow and cold. When he let go of her, he revealed the weak light slicing through the window. The sound of the wind came through the cracks of the old house. Something crackled and popped, and she turned her head to the fire. A pot steamed over it.

“Are you all right?” Karol asked.

She looked up into his worried face, felt weak and he moved to lay her back down on the mattress he’d placed on the floor, near the fire. He was wearing his coat again, his face ruddy with cold, the tip of his nose shiny and red.

“How long have I been asleep?” she muttered.

“We’ve been here three nights.”

She struggled to sit up, but Karol gently pushed her back down.

“You had a fever. Pretty high. We need to get some real food into you.”

He moved to the fire and she smelled meat. Her stomach grumbled and she put a hand beneath the covers and gasped. She was naked. Her skin was warm and dry.

Karol turned to her, the pot in hand and he met her look. “You were in a bad way, Magda. I had to get your body temperature down. I had you packed in snow for some time. I had to wash you, too.”

She realized what he was saying, and ducked her head beneath the cover’s edge.

Karol dropped to her side again and raised her carefully into a sitting position, covering her back with her own coat before handing her the pot. “Go ahead. All of it. It’s wild hare. Not as good as my mother’s but it will do with what I had available.”

She looked into the pot, then up at him, and around the room. There was a small pile of mixed nuts—walnuts, hazelnuts and acorns—and she recognized the puffy, cottony heads of cattails. Those he was using as tinder for the fire but there were small pieces of plant material floating in her soup that had to be the plant’s stalks, as well as wild watercress and red berries. Rosehips? Barberry? He’d also collected pine cones and strands of ivy leaf. He must have gone back down into the valley for these things. He’d been moving.

Magda tipped the pot to her lips and blew. She drank but snapped up the pieces of meat and plant matter. The soup was a mixture of tart and bitter, meaty and starchy. It was good.

Karol handed her a spoon, laughing. “All right, Warrior Queen, go ahead and dig in.”

When Magda had eaten her fill, she handed him the pot, pulled the coat further up her shoulders, lay back down, facing

the fire, and fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

It was dark when she awoke again. She threw the covers off. The wind whistled through the cracks of the house but the fire was still going strong and Karol was huddled next to her mattress, knees drawn up to his chest. He startled and turned to her. Magda pushed herself up on all fours.

“I have to go,” she said.

“Do you want help?”

“No.”

But he was already assisting her to her feet. Everything in her ached. She wrapped her coat around her, but her legs were still bare. Karol handed her the woolen socks and then her half-boots. All this just to relieve herself outside. When she stepped out, the world was blanketed beneath deep snow. Magda’s heart dropped and she considered how high up they were, how much further they had to go. And they had to go. The longer they delayed, the harder it would be to find and join up with other resistance members. They were all certainly on the run.

When Magda returned, she stopped in the doorway. Karol was waiting on the bench at the table. He rose.

“Magda, I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I had to—”

“Thank you. You likely saved my life. I’m grateful to you.”

He dropped his head but not before the corners of his mouth twitched even more. She took off the boots, padded back to the mattress. The nun’s costume lay on top. She lifted the underdress. Slipped her coat off her shoulders. Karol turned back to the table, picked something up. Put it back down. The fabric reached just above her ankles.

“Finished.”

He reached for the table again and picked up a pair of snowshoes made of cattails and branches. A second pair lay on the table.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “If you’re better. We have to.”

“I’m better.”

He rose, put another log on the fire. It was warm despite the draft through the cracks of the broken parts of the hut. He brought her a cup of something steaming. Tea. Rosehips. Or barberry.

“*L’chaim*,” he said as she raised the cup to her lips.

“To life,” she repeated.

She drank and handed him the cup back. He put it on the table then sat on the floor next to her mattress, knees drawn up again, but facing her this time, his left side to the fire.

“Where did you sleep all this time?” Magda asked.

“Next to you.”

“On the floor?”

He shook his head.

She scooted over on the mattress, patted it lightly, gave him an encouraging nod. He stretched himself out next to her, his back to her, and lay gently down on the makeshift pillow of curtains. He was still tense. Magda propped herself on her elbow.

“How will we find them? These partisans?”

“On the other side of the mountain,” he said softly. “There’s a farmhouse. It belongs to one of the men that was at the meeting.”

“I’m better. We can go tomorrow.”

“All right.”

“Thank you, Karol. I owe you my life.”

He turned to face her, adjusted the covers and she only saw his upper profile in the flickering light.

“You don’t owe me anything. You would have done the same.”

“I don’t know if I’d have managed to shoot a hare.”

“Trap it. We need the bullets.”

“Trap it. Even better. My brothers were good at that. Not me. I never did anything but the washing and cleaning, and fieldwork of course.”

He grunted. “Not any longer, Magda. When we find the partisans, you’re going to have to be able to do a lot more if you’re to make yourself useful.”

“I can’t even shoot.”

“They need to eat.”

She chuckled. “I can cook. I can do that at least.”

“And you have good instincts.”

“No such thing.”

“You do. You just haven’t learned to trust them yet. Start listening to your instincts, Magda. It’s going to save your life.”

She was quiet for a moment. Then, “Do you think we will survive this?”

“You have already chosen to fight. That’s all you can do right now.”

Something in her stirred. It began in the pit of her stomach and rose urgently into her chest, her heart beating steadier, stronger. And then an impulse shot through her limbs. She placed her hand on his face, stroked it, and cupped his chin in her hand. He tilted his head and kissed the heel of her palm. His kiss was soft. Tender, like the kiss one might give a child.

She put the rest of her hand over his lips, gently. He kissed her palm again. She pressed it to his lips once more, and she knew his eyes were on her. He kissed her hand again, differently now, and the tingling rose through her arm and into her neck and then everywhere.

Now he grasped her hand with his, and continued kissing it, turning to her fingers, then her wrist, up along the tender underside of her lower arm, rising as he reached for her elbow. He stopped, looked at her and despite the shadow of his face, she felt his penetrating gaze, knew he was not smiling. He was very earnest.

Magda lay back on the pile of curtains, and his face was above her. She traced his lips, the corners of his mouth, with her index finger. The heat dropped from her middle and through her extremities, and it made her shift achingly beneath him. She wanted to live.

He came down on her, met her, kissed her face, her brow, her nose, then her lips. Magda opened herself and invited him in.

“When did this become a disfigurement to you?” His finger traced the map of Siberia on her cheek.

Slowly, like puzzle pieces, the experiences came together in her head but she did not want to talk about them now.

Through the cracked pane next to the door, Magda could make out the shapes of the woods outside. They had slept on and off throughout the night as if to keep time at bay but it had not worked. Dawn was coming.

“Since someone told you that it’s hideous?” Karol asked. “Since someone teased you about it? Since someone pointed out that it’s different?” He shifted his head, trying to catch her gaze.

She gave it to him, almost sad that it was light enough to see one another eye to eye.

“You have a birthmark.” He traced the bridge of his nose. “I have the nose characteristic of the Jew.” He laughed a little and turned his face upwards, emphasizing his profile. “I mean, you could say I’m famous. This nose is on all the propaganda posters after all.”

She put a finger beneath his chin, steered it to her, like she had once seen Aleš do with Renata. *Look at me. Stay with me.*

“Don’t you just hate them?” she asked. “The Nazis? And not just the Nazis but all the anti-Semites who have made a point to degrade you, humiliate you... Kill you? Don’t you want to rage against them for all they have done to you, to your family, to your friends?”

“In Theresienstadt, I started to ask myself why people are the way they are. Why the Nazis are the way they are. Why our people—the Jews—complain so much, moan so much, are so willing to suffer.”

She frowned.

“That’s a joke. Probably a poor one. Only a Jew would say that.” He twisted to the dying fire. He needn’t feed it any longer. They would have to rise soon.

“We think the Nazis are the worst.” He sighed and faced her once more. His hair was tousled, his eyebrows just as messy. She brushed them with a fingertip.

“But I can tell you stories,” he continued, “about prisoners who have discovered the worst of themselves and allowed that to consume them and drive them. Or I can tell you about those who relied on being their best and clung to their dignity. Which story do you prefer? Magda, you wouldn’t believe it, the difference between that and the other—relying on your worst and on your best to get you through...”

She felt the tears prick her eyes. “I want to believe that the Taubers are at their best.”

He smiled gently. “I think you can be sure of that.”

They were quiet for a moment and he took in a breath, reached to put a hand on her arm. He stroked her skin. “I wanted to understand why. I spent a lot of time observing and thinking. What I have learned from that time is this: everyone is doing their best. Even when they behave badly, they are driven by some deep-rooted belief that this—what they are doing—is what is right, and their only choice.”

She dismissed his idea, running through the events of the last few years.

He sat up and took her hands.

No, don't go away. Not yet.

“I have come to the following conclusion.” He was determined. “We are shaped by our circumstances, and marked by our choices.”

“What choice,” she protested. “Did I have a choice about carrying this birthmark? Or you, born with your long nose?”

“Our disfigurements, as you call them,” Karol said, pulling her gently up to a sitting position, “are not choices, you’re correct. They are also not what define us. They are part of our circumstances. And you can either decide to be the monster you believe yourself to be because of what you consider to be disfigurements and scars, and I can choose to rage against the world because of my Jewish nose, or—you and I—we can choose to see the beauty in them, the things that make us unique. To each other. To us.”

The light broke through the window. The snow had stopped. The sun would soon appear. Magda kissed him and when he tried to coax her back down, she pushed away and rose. It was too late. This moment was over. The world had broken in. It was time to prepare for their departure.

Karol leaned against the cellar wall of the remote farmhouse. He stood opposite the barrel-chested man as Magda remained at the table with two other men. One was chewing on something and studying Magda. The other was cleaning out his ear with a finger before dropping his hand and wiping it beneath the table, presumably on his trousers.

“So,” said the man chewing, “are you really a nun?”

Magda looked away. She heard Karol say, “instincts” and “can find food. She has courage, and determination.”

“She’s a wanted woman,” the man in charge growled. “You can spot her a kilometer away.”

Karol’s chest rose. “And that is exactly why we must protect her. Aleš would not have it any other way, either.”

The man pursed his lips, tossed a disinterested look at Magda. “She’s your problem then. Keep her out of the way. But if she doesn’t prove to be useful, you can bet they’ll turn her in for the money. Got it?”

Karol returned to her and indicated she should follow him. Magda was happy to leave the other two men. At the doorway that led to another room in the cellar, Karol stopped her. “We have to be careful, Magda. We have to be extra, extra careful.” He jerked his head at the men inside. “Six thousand is a lot of money. And these men—”

“I don’t trust them. They’ll turn us in the second they can.”

“They know the commander of the R3, all right? They know how to get us to them.”

“What about Aleš? Renata?”

“Nobody knows anything about them. No word. That can be good or it can be bad.” Karol shifted on his feet, pulled her inside the other room. “Look, as soon as we meet up with the cell, we can decide what our next move is, all right?”

Magda shook her head. They were moving in a different world again, and this one was as foreign as could be, with a language in those men’s glances she did not understand. But she felt fear. Real, cold, raw fear. “All right.”

For the entire day, the three strange men avoided conversation with Karol and her. As curfew fell, the barrel-chested man went back upstairs to keep things business as usual but the two other men began playing cards at the table, a bottle of spirits between them, the air choked with their cigarette smoke. They neither offered Karol nor Magda something to drink or invited them to join them.

Karol was leaning up against the door jamb and Magda sitting on the floor in the second room. She sensed his discomfort, his nervous energy. They exchanged glances, and Karol quietly padded around the cellar room like a tiger trapped in a cage, looking for a way out.

The sound of the motorcar made them all pause whatever it was they were doing. There was a hammering above on the farm door that Magda recognized as the rapping of gun butts.

Karol straightened up. The men folded their cards and got up from their seats. Karol's mouth opened, but the cellar door above was thrown open and footsteps charged down the stairs. Magda flung herself into Karol's arms just before four men dropped down into the room. One aimed his rifle at the group at the table, the other at Karol and her.

Karol whipped out his revolver and aimed it at the rifleman but another man stepped forward. He wore a patched-up uniform and a cap. He raised his hands, a crooked grin playing on his lips.

“Easy there, *chlapče*.”

Karol lowered the gun, straightened and stepped forward. “Commander Orel.”

“I remember you.” The commander smiled wryly. “You’re Aleš’s *žid*.”

Karol nodded. The commander peered at Magda. He had gray eyes, gray-blond hair beneath the cap, and his head nearly scraped the ceiling.

He pointed at her. “She’s going to need a better disguise.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

JANUARY 1943–MARCH 1944

One revolver. That was all they had. No partisan could join if they did not have a weapon. That was the rule. Karol argued with Commander Orel about Magda, attesting to her good instincts, her work for the local resistance right beneath Koenig's nose, her potential if they trained her to be one of "them." Karol offered to take Magda under his wing, thus assuring that they would stay together. Once more, he managed to convince the partisan leaders that Magda was worth their while.

It was not until late January that Magda and Karol received word that Aleš and Renata were still alive and still active, that the number of resistance members had grown with members from the southwest, west and border towns. They were successfully pulling off minor operations in the area around Litoměřice's district. They also warned that Koenig had not given up his search for Magda. Both Renata and Aleš were on the Obersturmbannführer's list with bounties on their heads as well.

Delivered into the hands of the R3 cell, Magda and Karol began a new life on the run, in hiding, and in playing a small part in the acts of sabotage against the Nazis. Their goal was to sift out locals for new recruits and establish trusted assistants, locating and securing safe houses and the like for others that

would come after them. They eased their way southeast, towards Slovakia, in hopes of combining forces with other partisan cells and eventually with the Red Army.

If they were hiding in the wild in groups—in thick woods and high mountains inaccessible to German vehicles—Magda was responsible for “kitchen duty” without a kitchen. But Karol had taught her to trap and to forage, and Magda was growing more confident and resourceful. She recalled her grandmother’s tales of earlier conflicts, of hunger, of what they had done to survive leaner years. As the winter began to release its grip, Magda searched out wild onions, herbs and plants to add to the potatoes she stole out of half-frozen fields, and winter cabbages out of storage rooms in barns and stalls. Later, the cell identified entire areas willing to help the partisans and she also began stockpiling bandages and medication. It would, they said, become necessary, which meant the partisans were preparing to clash with the enemy.

Unsympathetic to the Nazis, farmers and miners were their salvation, offering a network of safety, connections, food, and clothing in return, sometimes, for protection. Magda’s and Karol’s main task was to hunt for information, and feeding that to the commanders, who then supplied it to the radio operators who forwarded information to other cells and Allied forces. Magda was surprised when Karol told her that Great Britain was sending in reinforcements, money, supplies and weapons. Commander Orel’s men, in turn, warned of advances, counted tanks and supply trucks, identified trains with munitions, and the locals also provided information about the patrols and checkpoints.

The tight grip of the Nazi and Gestapo forces made movement slow and exceptionally risky, especially for Magda. If she was recognized with her scars and her birthmark,

Koenig would make certain to unleash the hell hounds wherever she was.

She and Karol were in yet another safe house not far from Brno when a man and a woman appeared, providing the correct password and carrying a mysterious case. Their appearance made Magda and Karol nervous. The man was dressed in a suit and hat, and carried himself like a plainclothes policeman, but the brunette was sleek and beautiful and wholly misplaced in the rural surroundings with her high-heeled pumps, red lipstick, and fancy hairstyle.

“I’m Zoja.” The woman undid a floral scarf around her neck, establishing with one swift move that she was in charge.

She studied Magda, reached for her face and tipped it this way and that. Magda pulled back.

“Don’t be bashful. Commander Orel sent me. I’m here to recreate you, *holubička*.”

Zoja asked her companion to hand her the small case and she withdrew a handheld mirror then motioned for Magda to have a seat before it.

“Now, with your eye color, I would say we turn you into a blond, that would be most natural. Dark hair is undesirable, out of fashion, and it will bring your eyes out much too much. So, we will focus on making sure you blend right in and don’t attract any unwanted attention. After that, my dear, I will get rid of this.” She brushed a hand over her own left cheek. “And teach you how to make that nose look straight again. All right?”

Magda stared at Karol but he had an amused if not astonished look on his face. He folded his arms and settled back to watch the transformation.

Zoja roughly washed Magda's hair then cut it to shoulder length. She applied something that smelled strongly into Magda's hair, making the scalp tingle.

"It's a bleaching agent and I've prepared some extra packets for you to use on your journeys. All right?"

Magda, her scalp tingling, began to relax. She was also now deeply intrigued about what was coming next. Zoja produced a compact.

"Makeup," Magda marveled.

The woman flipped the compact open. "Everyone was looting the town. I took it out of a department store, along with this." She reached behind her and held up a box filled with rouge, lipstick, fake eyelashes, hair-coloring products, and skin products.

Magda burst out laughing.

The woman shrugged. "Hitler says it is a woman's duty to be beautiful. For morale. Obviously, someone would have snatched them up, so why not me? Now, I sell beauty products for bacon and bread, but Commander Orel"—she rubbed her thumb and forefinger together—"made me an offer I could not refuse. And *voila!* I'm here, *holubička*."

Magda grinned at her in the mirror and offered up her face. When Zoja was finished, Magda could not believe the transformation. Her mother's features were clear as day. Zoja and her companion left, and Karol stood before Magda with an expression of disbelief.

"I'm going to miss my Magda," he said wistfully.

Magda smiled and blew him a kiss.

Next day, Commander Orel returned to examine Zoja's work and provided Magda and Karol with new identity papers. From now on, nobody was to be addressed by their real names. The *četa* accepted her nom de guerre as the Godmother. Karol they named Rūbezahl, after the trickster spirit of the woods. Over the next few months, Magda lived through so many names, so many stories, that it became normal to study a new identity and internalize the new truths. She committed to it as she had before sitting her exams. She only used the makeup when they were to cross checkpoints and heavily patrolled areas and she used it sparingly but effectively as Zoja had shown her.

Karol taught her to protect herself, to watch, to observe, to watch the body language and expressions of the soldiers checking her identity, know when to distract them, how to stay one step ahead, and most of all, to trust her instincts. One night, Magda awoke from another nightmare about Eliška, stuffed all their supplies into the rucksacks and dragged Karol into the woods. Within half an hour, they watched from a safe distance atop a hill as the Gestapo crawled around the area. Their safe house was burned to the ground by dawn.

They crossed into Slovakia but not without near misses. They were now far from Koenig's district, but still within reach of his authority. Magda had become good at changing mannerisms, at adapting her ways of walking and at transforming herself like a chameleon.

In the summer, they had orders to meet up with a cell around the Tatra Mountains. For Magda, everything changed. The partisans were now well organized and she was absorbed into a group of women who were a mishmash of classes and backgrounds, and all there to assist with the various infrastructures the "real" soldiers required them for.

The Underground consisted of a plethora of mixed citizens, nationalities and interests. Some were determined to join the Red Army, others were only there to lend their power and support against the Nazis, others had the country's future in mind. Slowly, several sectors developed out of the one camp made up of Democrats, Social Democrats, Communists, nationalists, army officers, and even—to Magda's horror more than to Karol's—anti-Semites. For now, they worked cohesively together, but beneath it all, something else just as terrible as the war was simmering below the surface.

To keep them all alert and on their toes, everyone was expected to attend and take part in drills. The women were taught how to do hand-to-hand combat, but Magda refused to hold a gun. At the very beginning, Magda made friends with the women. One took Magda under her wing and schooled her in first aid, drinking and cigarettes.

Then came another major shift. Karol began volunteering himself for skirmishes. This surprised Magda and his longer absences left her floundering and dependent on herself. While she still felt like a misfit, on the fringe of the partisan division, Karol appeared to be thriving. He was exceptionally resourceful and whatever the division required as far as gadgets and structures, Karol managed to dig up pieces and parts out of rubbish or destroyed property and improvised useful contraptions, such as armor for trains.

Magda, herself, discovered she could do things that she would have found otherwise humiliating—like not bathing for weeks on end, going to the toilet in front of others, eating with her hands, eating insects, collecting dirt beneath her fingernails and smoking—to the point where she began to wonder whether she had lived any other way.

One night, late in summer, Karol sought her out in the women's camp, stood before her and announced that he was now Lieutenant Procházka.

“Me,” he grinned, “a Jew.”

“It matches your edginess,” Magda said. “You're harder, more angular.”

He laughed drily. “You should look at yourself. You take up more space. You stand more broadly, you stand strong, Magdalena. I wouldn't recognize you in a crowd.”

This hurt. His dry laugh, that hurt too. She wanted his old, easier laugh.

He broke his intense gaze and strode over. Hungrily, he grabbed her shoulders. “You really deserve the name now, Warrior Queen.” His kiss was hard, probing, testing.

She clawed at him and he clutched her harder. She could not have said who had dragged whom into the woods, into the gully beneath the birch trees. They made something like love, if lovemaking counted when it was desperate, wild and animalistic. Later, when their division was forced to break apart into smaller groups, Karol made a special request to have her in his unit. They sought one another out, sometimes while the others slept around them. Sometimes, Karol would lead her to an isolated spot and their painful lovemaking would leave them to weep in each other's arms afterwards. More rarely, they made love tenderly and that left Magda feeling numb. Some days, she was filled with a bitter resentment and avoided Karol, though she ached for him.

And then they entered the storm. Magda had lost count how many times they had moved and where they were exactly. She followed, she did as she was told, and rose and fell on the

reports of losses and wins, of advances and retreats. But the Nazis had assigned entire units to hunt down the resistance and, as if in utter defiance, the division picked up new recruits like a magnet did iron filings. New faces and names were added and struck off the list when they suffered casualties. Someone got caught. Others did not get through a checkpoint and were executed. The partisans lived in constant fear of being compromised. And when a single raid on a village eliminated twenty-four of their division, Magda stopped taking an interest in anyone new. She remained cool and distanced, and when fear threatened to strangle her, she chanted to herself, *Warrior Queen, Warrior Queen*, while throwing bitter glances at Karol. It was how it would have to be, she decided, if she was to be the hardened rebel he wanted her to be.

As winter closed in on them, new sounds and smells permeated the air. There was a rolling drum of artillery on the horizon and planes infiltrated the skies, thick as locust swarms. It took Magda a long time to figure out who was who. Sometimes, she awoke to the droning in a cold sweat, only to discover that it was only the broken record of noise in her head. She stopped sleeping again. When one of the nurses caught Magda dozing in the middle of a training session on how to remove bullets from certain types of wounds, she handed Magda a pill.

“What is this?”

“Pervitin,” the woman said.

It kept Magda awake. Wide awake and exceptionally tuned in to everything—the noises, the smells, the sounds, the tastes. The airplanes were louder, she felt the heat of the battles, smelled the smoke. She felt invincible and because of that she still could not sleep. After a while, she could no longer tell

whether they were heading into the storm—into that distant thunder—or whether it was charging straight at them.

Magda stopped counting the people she knew, and she stopped counting the hours she did not sleep, and she stopped counting the days she did not eat.

By late fall, the partisans' number one focus was sabotage. They blew up train tracks, intercepted codes and messages, sent more and more information to Allied troops—mostly the Soviets—of enemy positions.

Driven deep into the wilderness to burrow like badgers, the winter left them with holes in their ranks. They lost soldiers to wounds, capture, disease, or simply desertion. She woke up a few times in a dugout next to a stiff corpse, herself fighting through the numbing fog in her brain, the voice that called for her to sleep. But it was Karol who came by, tried to warm her, and she often marveled that he still managed to have enough strength to rescue both of them.

The situation became dire. The unit decided it was time to move. They hiked into another emptied-out village somewhere on the Polish-Slovakian border. Against the wall of a one-story building, they discovered a pile of corpses caked in snow and ice. Women. Children. Old men. And the dogs lurking on the edge of the village. Magda walked past them and stepped into the building—she now had a good sixth-sense about whether a building contained anyone alive in it and she knew this one did not. It was a school. It had been picked clean. She walked out the other door and moved forward.

On an empty road between hamlets, she spotted a bare foot in a ditch, leaned over and found the rest of the corpse. A

German. What was he doing here? Alone? Before anyone could stop her, she dropped down next to him. His overcoat was missing. Struggling to lift his body as others stopped to watch, she found what she was looking for—something to loot—and discovered a dagger. She peered closely at the blue face, looked at the dagger and held her breath. It was the kind of dagger the recruits at a Napola would receive. Walter had had one. *Walter*. She had not thought of him in what felt like a lifetime ago. This was not him, however. Just someone like him.

The ghosts of her past continued to follow her. They were in a valley of the Lower Tatra Mountains in a half-empty settlement, and it was there that Magda spotted a group of children, bundled up in vests and coats and rags, playing a game with a stick and a dud grenade. One of the soldiers asked them where they had found the grenade and the boys looked up with wide eyes.

“We just found it,” one said.

Then the mother stepped out of the cottage with a toddler in her arms and Magda rushed to her. The child had sandy-brown hair, a little curly, and bright blue eyes. She hovered over the frightened woman and lifted the child’s hand. No birthmark. And the child did not have blue eyes. They were green, and it was a girl not a boy. Without a word, Magda walked away from the woman, but that moment awoke something in her. She was on a new mission.

Magda kept a lookout for toddlers regardless of where they were. As the weeks rolled by and the landscapes and places blurred together, Magda marked Samuel’s second birthday by picking crocus, snowdrops and primroses from a field. There was a chapel on a foothill, and Magda knew even from that

distance that it had been hollowed out and scavenged but she found a half-broken candle holder and placed the flowers where the altar would have been.

Before the snow had completely given way to spring, Karol came looking for her. Something, he said, was brewing. The name Golian permeated their communications.

“I think the rebel armies have grown strong enough now,” Karol said.

“For what?”

His eyebrows arched meaningfully. “An uprising.”

AUGUST 1944–SEPTEMBER 1945

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

JULY–DECEMBER 1944

Magda finished wrapping the boy's cut finger. "There you are. As good as new."

He examined it and grinned. "That was fast. And hardly painful. At least it wasn't my trigger finger."

"I put in twelve stitches. Keep it clean as you can and then come check with me in a few days."

His eyes, a dark coffee color, flashed.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Franček."

"All right, Franček." She had the urge to tousle his hair.

He reached into his breast pocket on the dingy tunic and offered her a cigarette. "You want to smoke?"

He could not be older than sixteen. But she joined him outside the tent. They stood beneath the tarpaulin stretched across the front, rain pounding over them like nails into a bucket. The camp's grounds before them were a maze of muddy pools. The Low Tatra Mountains were wrapped in fog.

"So, how did you join up?" Magda leaned into his match. There was something about him that she warmed to. Maybe it was his eyes. Maybe it was the way he stood on the edge of

childlike innocence. He would change soon and she wanted to experience him before that happened.

“My parents were murdered,” he said, his cigarette moving irritably in his mouth.

“How did you get away?”

He exhaled, lifted his head. “I hid in the barn like a coward.” His eyes shifted to the rain outside. “I’m over it. This is my way of setting things right. What about you?”

Magda tapped her cigarette of the ash. “Long story.”

By the way Karol was striding over to the tent, mud-splattered boots, no cap on his head, she could tell he was incensed. He threw the boy a cursory look. Magda tossed the cigarette into a puddle and stepped back inside. Karol followed her in and dripped rainwater onto the dirt floor.

“They’re sending two heavily armed divisions of the Slovak army to Prešov to capture Dukla Pass but my company is to stay put.”

“Here?”

Karol nodded.

“And you wanted to be in Prešov?” Magda sighed. “What have you got, Karol? A death wish?”

Karol looked exasperated. “This is what we’ve been working for, Magdalena.”

“Yes, all right. And now they’re telling the Jew he can’t go? Is that it?”

Franček ducked his head between the flaps and raised a hand. “Bye.”

“See you in a few days,” she replied. She stalked over to the supply station and began repacking the bandages and cleaning up her space.

“And they’re reassigning me to a new captain,” Karol continued.

“Ah. That’s the problem then. You’re going to be separated from your friends.”

Karol shook his head. Even when he was angry or cynical the corners of his mouth still turned up. “I’m not like you,” he said. “I didn’t build a wall around myself. I care about the people—”

“Oh, shut up!” She slammed the bandages back into the supply box.

He hugged himself as if she had physically pummeled him. “What has gotten into you? Are you popping Pervitin again?”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s because I’m not, all right? Because I’m not taking them.”

He leaned against the makeshift table. “I came to ask you to stay with us.”

Her heart made a little leap deep inside her, so deep she barely felt it. He was still watching out for her. Still keeping an eye on her. When he remarked on her taking too much Pervitin, or smoking and drinking too much, she had begun rebuffing him and still he kept coming back for more.

“I’ll go wherever they assign me, I suppose,” she said.

“Damn it, Magdalena. What’s wrong with you? What are you playing at here?”

She glared at him. “I’m fine. I’m not playing.”

Karol scoffed. “You used to only say things you meant.”

Two nurses burst into the tent. Magda recognized them. One was Polish, one was Ukrainian. They waved at Magda to hurry.

“Wounded coming in,” the Polish woman called.

Magda left Karol standing there and met the rain-soaked entourage. The doctor was already calling on the worn-out medics to bring the most critical into the surgery tent. The others were brought into her tent.

“What’s your name?” Magda asked the Ukrainian nurse.

“Natalia.”

“Good. Natalia, take this one with the sling.” Magda checked on a man in a gurney and saw that he was bleeding from the right shoulder. “Send this one to me.”

They placed the groaning man onto a mat before her. She bent over his shoulder and checked both sides. The bullet had not gone through but he was bleeding out and his face was already losing color. She reached for her equipment only to find the forceps were missing. She retrieved her dagger and sterilized it. The man—grizzled beard, salt-and-pepper hair—widened his eyes. Magda ignored him and pushed down on his shoulder, just as the Polish nurse stepped up on the other side. She undid the man’s tunic, cleaned the wound quickly and dug in her knife to retrieve the bullet. He released a high-pitched scream but the bullet dropped onto her tray. She looked up at the other nurse, who grinned crookedly at her.

“You don’t mess around, do you?”

Magda sighed, patted the man’s shoulder. To the Pole, she said, “Can you clean him?”

“Sure. I’m Ula, by the way.”

Magda nodded and moved on to the next patient, only then realizing that Karol had gone.

There was so much blood, so much anguish and she closed her ears to it. She did not even want to know what happened in whatever skirmish this had been.

When it was over, both Ula and Natalia hovered around her. They had only recently arrived but Magda had watched the unlikely pair. Natalia was rosy-cheeked and moon-faced with light brown hair. Ula was older, with a short blond curly mop and gray eyes. She reminded Magda of a shorter, stouter Renata by her mannerisms and her presence. They all communicated in their own Slavic languages and understood one another well enough.

“You do good work,” Ula said when they had stepped back out into the fresh air. It was growing dark and the rain had stopped. The surgeon came out of his tent with four other nurses, his coat smeared with blood. He took out a cigarette and Natalia joined them but declined a smoke.

“I can’t understand how you do that,” she said. Instead, the Ukrainian girl withdrew a flask and poured all of them a shot of clear liquor into their tin cups, still stained with tea leaves.

They raised their cups and drank. Magda wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Natalia offered another one. Magda accepted.

The doctor began to tell them about the battle. “The fighting is intensifying but the swine collaborators refuse to acknowledge that there is no way the Nazis can win this war.”

“Can’t they?” Magda asked.

He shook his head. “Look at us. I have never known a more determined group. And such a mix. We’re going to beat them. One way or another.”

“How can you be so sure?” Ula asked.

The doctor pursed his lips, then smiled. “Because I’m a Jew and this isn’t the first time there’s been an attempt to eradicate us. As long as we’re together, as long as we live...” He drew on the cigarette. “What about you? What’s your story?” He was talking to all of them.

Natalia explained she was from a village on the Ukrainian-Polish border. “Or what used to be Ukraine but was then made Polish.”

Ula clicked her tongue in sympathy.

Natalia’s boyfriend had been killed. He had been with the First Ukrainian Front and was Ula’s brother’s best friend. They had all known one another, a wedding had brought them together, and when Natalia had nobody else to turn to, she sought Ula out. The two women had by then become acquainted with a *četa* in the area and offered their services as nurses.

“Somehow, we migrated over here,” Natalia said.

Ula stepped away and pointed at Magda. “Where did you come from?”

Whether it was the vodka or the fact that the doctor was so optimistic, Magda decided to share some of her story with them. As they smoked together and emptied Natalia’s flask, she told them about Dr. Tauber, about the models of the heart and the brain and the organs in Dr. Tauber’s office and how much she had enjoyed examining them. Magda stopped short

of talking about Samuel and Eliška. She knew she couldn't without choking up.

She drained the last drop of vodka and walked away without saying goodbye. She had vowed long before to never cry again. Tears were wasted in war.

Natalia and Ula met her at breakfast a few days later.

“We've been assigned to Lieutenant Procházka's platoon,” Natalia said.

Ula spooned up some beans. “We're staying put until further notice.”

Magda was about to question them further when she saw them focusing their attention on something over her shoulder. She turned around and coolly watched Karol as he approached where they were sitting. His beautiful, thick hair was shorn away, his body lean and hard beneath the half-opened tunic, and his cinched trousers accented his thinning waistline.

He swung the rifle off his shoulder and thrust it at Magda.

“We're looking for women who are willing to fight. We've received supplies. Rifles, munitions, grenades, things we can start training and working with, too.”

Magda stared at him. He couldn't really be serious.

Karol peered at the other two women. “The Americans are moving east, the Soviets are pushing in through Poland. We're going to bring this war to an end sooner rather than later. We're starting basic training right after breakfast for anyone who's not afraid.”

She stared at the rifle, wondering where she would go, where she would be at the end of the war. What she would do. There was no way back now.

Karol propped the rifle next to her.

Ula leaned back, her look darting between Karol and Magda. “This could be interesting.”

“Will you join us?” Karol asked them. “We’re going to need all the combatants we can get.”

Natalia rose, scraping up her plate. “Sorry. You need nurses, too.” She nudged Ula and, though Ula hesitated, she finally followed Natalia in the direction of the nurse’s tent.

Karol turned to Magda. “I think you’re going to feel better if you stay active, know how to protect yourself. At least train with us. It will keep your mind off of being afraid.”

“I’m not afraid,” Magda huffed.

Karol grinned. “You’re like that apostle who denied your Christ three times. Say something you don’t really mean once more, and I’m going to crow like a rooster.”

Magda threw him a piercing glare but rose and followed him onto the range. And she returned to it the next day. And the day after that. And then she was assigned to an entire squad.

Running, fighting, shooting, training. Karol had been correct. Her mind did feel free and she enjoyed the exercise again, enjoyed a sense of empowerment. Magda was in awe of the women who had volunteered to fight, and their enthusiasm was contagious. She returned to the nurse’s station feeling completely exhausted, and that night she slept soundly and sober.

Within a few weeks, Magda earned the right to be outfitted and sent on her first detail, and Karol praised her progress, saying she had truly earned her nickname now. But the moment he spoke the words, “Warrior Queen,” and made to kiss her, Magda turned away, lifting her kit between them and giving him a brisk salute.

At the end of August, they were called to muster at around half past eight in the evening. Their new captain marched up and down the lines.

All of Slovakia, he announced, was occupied by German troops, and he asserted that this was exactly what they had been waiting for. By assigning units to fight the insurgents, the Germans were weakening their own eastern and western fronts. That would allow the Allied forces to put the Wehrmacht into their pincers.

He paused not far from Magda and directed his gaze on the line of one hundred and twenty soldiers plus the administrators and medical team. “Lieutenant Colonel Ján Golian has sent his orders for all units to begin the uprising. All combatants are to move out in fifteen minutes. Dismissed!”

Magda raced past Ula and Natalia to her tent, gathered her kit and returned to her squad leader. They were assigned to scouting and reporting on enemy movements in one of the quadrants. In the flurry of activity, it took a moment for Magda to react to the nearby explosion and the rumble of the earth in the distant woods.

Whistles blew and the orders changed. They had been found, and if Magda had to guess, the Germans were going to blow their way through the woods, and more than likely had an army of panzers waiting for them. Magda whipped up her rifle and ran headlong to the camp’s parameter, helping to set

up barriers and sandbags. She was entrenched, and as the hellfire crept closer and dusk made it more difficult to make out the particulars, Magda no longer considered anything but the immediate present. Each rumble, each shake seemed to press her deeper into the ground, to still her shaky breath. Another woman was already next to her and moments later a soldier leapt in to Magda's left. She paid him no mind, her eyes trained on the edge of the woods.

“Good thing you fixed that finger,” he said.

“Franček?” Magda turned her head just long enough to confirm.

“Let's give them hell, huh?” Franček positioned his rifle.

They lay like that as the Germans blew a hole through the woods. Now she could hear the motor and percussion of the tanks, the *click-click-click* as the gunners aimed in broad circles around the forest. This could not be. They had been here for over a month. How had they been found out? It was agonizing, and Magda understood what it meant to have an itchy trigger finger. The closer the Germans got, the angrier she became, and the more she wanted to get this over with.

Suddenly, another explosion set off a fire close enough that Magda could see the flames through the woods. She heard the snapping and groaning of trees colliding and collapsing. A deer charged out of the bushes, heading straight for her. Someone shot, but the deer leapt right over Magda's barrier and suspended over their heads. Magda twisted onto her back. It landed so close, she felt the whisper of its hooves near her boots. She watched the animal zig-zag its way past further fox holes.

Magda heard someone yell, “Hold your fire!” and recognized Karol's voice somewhere ahead of her. She flipped

back over into position, terror seizing her. She dropped her head. *Karol. Karol. Karol.* She breathed in and out, in and out, squeezed her eyes shut so hard that she saw pinpricks of light and then at the sound of another crack and sizzle, she looked up. Dark shapes took form behind the flames.

They were here.

Something exploded to Magda's left. She covered her head but felt herself rise up, roll over and she landed atop the woman next to her. The wind knocked out of her, she rolled away and slid into a crater. Across from her, on the other side of the depression, she saw Franček lying at an obscure angle. It took her a moment to realize that his torso had been separated from the rest of him. His eyes were wide with fright. His mouth opened and closed like a fish stranded on a riverbank. His hand twitched upwards towards the rim of the crater as if he expected someone to pull him out.

Magda scrambled over to him just as the whistles blew and the battle began. She lay an arm across his chest, and held him long after he passed. Nothing else in the world mattered more than holding on to him. They could kill her, she knew. A German running by her could take aim at her head and simply kill her.

But when the Germans charged into the camp's parameters, Magda clambered over the rim of the crater, raised her rifle and felt a force so strong behind her, around her, and beneath her, that she knew she would not be another casualty in this war.

The crows and the piercing cry of a buzzard high above made her raise her hands, tip her head back in her neck and let the

rain come down over her. The air was thick with smoke and fog. Magda dropped her hands and assessed the destruction emerging in the light of dawn. Before her, a German panzer was draped with the bodies of Wehrmacht soldiers. The earth and the sky were both scorched. Ghosts drifted amongst the ruins of their camp. There were so many more of them than when the battle had erupted.

Magda stumbled forward, her ears ringing. She pressed a hand to the side of her face and it came away sticky and crusted with blood.

Voices were calling her name, and Magda spun towards them. Ula and Natalia were both running towards her.

She stammered before they reached her. “Where did those two companies come from?”

Ula was already checking her face.

Natalia took her hand. “Reinforcements. They were on their way and saw the Germans heading for us. They flanked both sides and it was—”

Magda tore away from her and watched Karol following a line of captured Germans on the other side of the parameter. He glanced up only long enough for her to recognize his relief at seeing her. She held back from running to him.

Ula gripped her arm. “You should get that wound dressed. Come with me.”

Magda obeyed, but in the field hospital she refused to take a pallet after they had dressed her wounds. Instead, her commander sent Magda and the squad back to the hospital to help with the wounded. By midmorning, as she was working on a severe gash in a man’s side, she heard fresh pops of

gunfire. She shared a look with the soldier she was tending. They would not be taking any prisoners.

Before anything else could happen, Magda and the nurses were ordered to pack up and be prepared to move out. The doctor put her and the other two nurses in charge of determining who was well enough to be mobile and who needed transportation. By the end of the morning, she marched out of the woods to a clearing below with the others and joined the crush on a truck filled with the wounded. Several units were still digging a mass grave to bury the dead.

As they pulled away, Magda searched for Karol in vain.

“The worst is this infighting,” a nurse next to her said. “We joined as various forces but everyone has their own agendas for when the war was over.”

Magda frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You didn’t hear what happened in Prešov?”

Prešov was where two of their divisions had been sent in July. It was where Karol had expected to go. Magda shook her head, bracing herself.

“The Air Force abandoned the Eastern Slovak army. Flew out to Poland to join the Red Army there, and left the army in chaos. The Germans disarmed our men without a shot.”

Not a week later, Magda learned of the losses and casualties of tens of thousands of partisans. She and Karol—all the others who’d remained here and survived the battle—could count themselves lucky.

Karol sought her out as they approached the northern Tatra Mountains. His stride was confident, his eyes were pained, and she was certain she was not the only cause of that pain. He reached out and embraced her, took her into his arms and she

felt his heart beat and yearned for that hut, just the two of them, alone.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Golian’s controlling things from Banská Bystrica. We’re going to regroup and try again.”

They were back in the wild, back on the run, and at one point the fighters ordered Karol in one direction as Magda and the nurses were moved to an entirely different and distant location, where they were to wait for further orders. She had not even had a chance to say goodbye.

By October, the Germans had regained much of the territory the insurgents had controlled but then word reached them that the Slovaks had officially joined forces with the Czechs again, as a symbol of the two countries’ intent to reunify after the war. Magda considered rejoining a cell and fighting as she had been trained to do, but Ula and Natalia convinced her to wait out the winter in hiding again. Once again, the women found themselves relying on families and locals who were willing to risk their lives to hide them, and they shifted from place to place, disappearing as necessary. When she slept, Magda’s dreams were infiltrated by the images of the people she loved and those she had lost, most of all, Karol.

It was not until December, when the Red Army was steadily winning territories in Poland and near eastern Slovakia, that Magda and the others regrouped and were soon absorbed into a Soviet division.

Life became more organized, more compartmentalized. Magda welcomed a regimen that was predictable. She even felt safer. Her rifle was requisitioned, and she was sent far behind the line to join the medical team once again. The first

days she assisted with administrative tasks, helped build a chicken coop, and set about listing the inventory of food and medical supplies. With her mind busy on other matters, Karol felt like a distant memory but when she put her mind to remembering him, the pain was so sharp it took her breath away.

Then one evening a Lieutenant Tadek Koncinsky appeared in the nursing station asking for Magda.

“You’re the Godmother?” Koncinsky asked her.

She nodded.

“I’ve been asked to pass this along to you.” The lieutenant handed her an envelope.

Magda held it delicately. It weighed nothing. Not Karol’s dog tags then.

“It’s not going to explode,” Koncinsky laughed. “Go on, open it.”

Magda turned away from him and slit the end of the envelope. A single sheet of dirty paper, creased as if it had been folded and unfolded a hundred times slid out. She opened it.

Warrior Queen, marry me.

She looked up at Koncinsky, hated that Karol had entrusted this to a stranger. “Where is he?”

“On his way. He’s been delayed. He’ll be joining us within the next week or two. Do you want to write something back to him?”

From Voštiny to the Tatra Mountains of Slovakia, Magda had lost so much, had grieved, had hung on, only to lose more

of the people she loved. She did not want the experience of losing Karol permanently.

Magda turned the paper over and Koncinsky offered her a pencil.

It would be best if we did not.

She slipped it back into the envelope. “Can you get this to him?”

“Is he going to be happy about it?”

She did not let go of the envelope immediately.

Koncinsky sighed. “I can get it to him.”

The next morning, Magda jerked awake at the sense of a shadow passing over her face. Dawn had not even broken and the others were still asleep. She lay back down only to hear a strange scratching sound outside the tent. She carefully folded back the flap and came face-to-face with a rooster. He strutted away, reached the corner of the tent and, as if he were laughing at her, crowed at the top of his lungs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

APRIL 1945

Command was looking for three women for a mission. Amongst several others, Magda—now officially with the Red Cross—traveled the few kilometers to town where she had been called before a group of officers. A Polish guesthouse owner had informed them that a secret meeting between German units and a Ukrainian partisan unit was to take place in a rural village in Poland, behind enemy lines. It was assumed that it was to plan a last-ditch effort. With the Americans nearly at the western border of Bohemia and the Germans now compressed as far west as Martin, Slovakia, Magda's commanders wanted three flies on the wall.

Uncertain whether the Germans were setting a trap, the commanders arranged to send kitchen staff under the pretense that the women were hired from the village to come and cook. They would serve the meal and drinks and extract as much information as possible. When the commanders approved Magda, she suggested that it be Ula and Natalia that go with her, as one was Polish and the latter was Ukrainian.

Karol was waiting outside the building for Magda when she came out. He followed her.

“You'll be recognized,” Karol pleaded. “I can't believe that Koenig has given up on you so easily.”

“It’s been almost three years,” Magda said. “And a few officers on the run are not going to be interested in arresting Koenig’s stupid housemaid.”

“You’re underestimating the situation,” Karol said.

“Am I really?”

“Yes.” He stroked her chin and lifted it, but she pulled back. His lips quivered. He had promised to respect her wishes, to simply be friends. “You’re not a stupid housemaid—that’s all I meant.”

She wanted to kiss him as badly as he must have wanted to kiss her. Instead, she walked away. It took everything she had to reject him like this, over and over. For years he had been the only person she had turned to. She had clung to him, learned all she knew, survived this far because of him. And she knew that if anything happened to Karol Procházka, she would die. Not because she was dependent on him but because her heart would break.

“Magda!” He was chasing after her. “Magda, stop!”

In his hand was her brother’s revolver.

“Where did you get that?” she cried.

That grin! “Listen, if you’re going to be in the same room with those bastards”—he rubbed a hand over his scruffy beard—“I just think it’s time you learn to shoot at close range. Take possession of this finally. It belongs to you. And, you might need it.”

Magda glared at the gun. She hated that twitching smile of his, trying to break through. Hated those elegantly arched eyebrows. Hated that look of victory on his face. Most of all, she hated the delicious shiver that came with the idea of spending time with him.

She snatched the revolver out of Karol's hand and strode in the direction of the shooting range. When she did not hear him following her, she called out, "Well, are you coming?"

Magda balanced the penny on top of the barrel as close to the muzzle as possible. She assumed a good stance, her feet spread apart approximately the same width as her shoulders. She aimed between the two ash trees at her target.

Karol narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest. His Adam's apple bobbed. "Are you sure the chamber is empty?"

Magda directed her sight on him. "I think so." She pulled the trigger. The penny fell. "Damn it!"

Karol gave her a gracious smile and walked over, picked up the penny, and took the gun out of her hand. "Dry firing is hard work. You were pushing into the gun. You're anticipating the recoil. Remember, we're building muscle memory here. No recoil to worry about, and it's not a rifle."

Magda wiped her brow. Karol had insisted they practice killing a man at close range, but using him as a target. It was over the line.

He must have sensed her hesitation. "I told you, if you can do this aiming the gun at me, and I'd like to believe you still hold some affection in your heart for me, you'll be able to do it to someone you're really angry with."

Magda rolled her eyes. "You seem so sure I'd never have any reason to shoot you."

He raised his eyebrows. "Cold and calculating. Did I create this? What did I do now?"

“I saw how your eyes bugged out when Svetlana joined the force.” Magda cupped her hands before her breasts and puckered her lips.

Karol laughed. “I had no idea you were a jealous vixen, but I should have guessed with that red hair of yours.”

“It’s not red,” Magda said. “And I’m not jealous.” She took the gun and the penny back from him.

Karol took up his position once more. “Again,” he said.

Magda aimed and squeezed the trigger a second time, working away at the pull until it broke. “Bang!” She broke her sight on target. The penny was still on the barrel.

“That’s it,” Karol said. “Steady hands. Perfect squeeze. Make sure to keep that finger in the optimal position. Again.”

Magda licked her lips. In her left periphery, Lieutenant Koncinsky appeared. She aimed and squeezed again. The penny remained where it was.

“You see that, Lieutenant?” Karol whooped.

“You sure she doesn’t have bullets for that?” Koncinsky asked.

“I taught her that.” Karol clapped the lieutenant on the shoulder.

“So, you’re going on a mission.” Koncinsky winked at Magda. “Sure would be a shame if we lose you as a nurse.”

Magda turned away.

“Shame she decided I’m not good for her,” Karol said plaintively.

The lieutenant laughed. “What she want with a Jew anyway? We should all stick to our own kind.”

Magda glanced at the idiot sideways. Karol's smile was forced and insincere. Always with the spurns, the digs, the jokes. She had adapted nothing more than their strategy. Jokes covered up the fear or the pain, and it could also disguise hate.

It hurt her that Karol was merely tolerated within the unit. They were a mixed group of Czechoslovaks, Russians, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, and Jews now. In fact, one group of Jews had abandoned them on principle. They had gone off on their own but had begged Karol to join them. Karol had chosen her even after she had insisted on rejecting him. He told her he was not giving up on her.

"I'm going back," Magda said to the men. She packed the gun into her holster. "I'll see you two later."

Koncinsky jerked his chin at her. "Be careful in that hornet's nest. Karol, we've got a briefing at 1900 hours. Don't be late."

Karol caught up to her, and Magda knew that he was annoyed by the lieutenant and his airs. She also knew he wanted to talk her out of her mission. Now that she had dragged Ula and Natalia into it, it wasn't an option. She whirled around and put a hand out to stop him.

"I'll be fine. I've got to get back to the hospital. I'm on duty tonight." She turned back to the camp and blew a kiss over her shoulder.

That evening, after serving all the meals, Magda stopped before her favorite patient, who was recovering from a gallbladder operation. "How are you feeling, Oskar?"

"Tired but good."

She needed a rest. “Mind if I just sit here awhile?”

He patted the side of the bed and she looked down the row. Things were quieter here this far back from the front. It was almost eerie. She said as much.

“You’ve had a rough road then,” Oskar guessed.

“What about you? You look like you’ve fought a few battles yourself.”

He looked wistful. “I suppose so.”

“When did you join the insurgents?”

Magda seemed to have touched on the right subject, for Oskar leaned back and began to tell her about his family, about his farm near Banská Bystrica. And then he began telling Magda a story that made her sit up and want to walk away.

“My daughter was very ill,” Oskar said, his eyes watering. “And we needed a specialist. It cost us so much. I sold livestock, my wife took on small jobs, we did everything we could. We took the boys out of school to save money. There was nothing left to do.”

He tucked his chin and looked ashamed. “We borrowed money, from lenders. From... you know.”

“Jewish money lenders?” Magda tipped her head. She braced herself for the comments, the slurs and derogatory remarks but Oskar rubbed his face and sighed, looking off into the corner.

“I was desperate. The interest rate, it was very high, but I felt I had no other choice. I had nowhere else to go. It was my decision to accept the terms, to take the money. I only regret... well. I regret that I was not able to save Paulina.”

Magda held his gaze. “I’m so sorry.”

“She was only eleven. Beautiful child. She was a beautiful child.”

Magda closed her eyes.

Oskar sighed. “These things, these years. So painful.”

“So, you were not able to pay them back, your money lenders?”

Oskar shook his head, surprised. “No. I wanted to. I had every intention to and I eventually earned the money. We had NSDAP members visit our farm. They told me that if I became a party member, became a supporter, I would automatically receive a free plow. Well, I saw my way out. I saw that, if I had a new plow, I could repay my debts. My younger sons signed on to the Hitler Jugend, my elder sons joined the Wehrmacht. So, one morning, they delivered the plow. Nice, brand-new piece of equipment. Oh, Magdalena, it was a beauty. Looked like something you would get in the Wehrmacht. It had the stamp of the Third Reich on it and everything.”

Magda frowned. “I don’t understand. Then why are you here?”

Oskar waved a hand as if to slow her down. “You are not as old as I am. My story is longer.”

She smiled but Oskar looked regretful again.

“Three of my sons fell. Harry, Jens, and Walter.”

As if electricity had shot through Magda, she jerked upwards and to her feet. “Walter?”

“Yes.” Oskar frowned. “Just last year. He was nineteen. Magda, why do you look at me like that.”

Her hand shook as she covered her mouth. It was not Walter Fenkart, of course, but Oskar's story was beginning to come together like pieces of a puzzle in her head. She went around to the other side of the bed and pulled the chair up. "Go on."

"My wife was devastated. She began railing against the Nazis. I could not stop her, and she blamed me. Well, I said... I said things I did not mean. I know that now. In either case, I had the money to pay the lenders and I returned to town to do so. And that is when I saw what had happened. They were gone, Magda. All gone. I stood there with my purse of money in my hand and all I found was a town emptied of Jews."

They were both quiet but the memories in Magda's head were loud, and insistent. Koenig, the Taubers, Samuel. Her family in Lidice. Magda's body shook violently before the sobs exploded out of her.

Oskar sat up and put a hand on hers. "I still have that money. I have it all for them when they return."

She wept. "And if they don't?"

Oskar squeezed her hand until she looked at him. "Then I will have at least done my part. I spoke with our village priest. He said, repent but do not try to recover what has been lost to you forever."

Magda rose and Oskar handed her a handkerchief. Magda thanked him and blew her nose and then Oskar said, "I think there is someone here to see you."

Magda dried her eyes, expecting to see one of the nurses or the doctors but it was Karol. He had shaved.

She looked at the clock. It was 2100 hours.

“I think I need to go talk to him.”

Oskar nodded. “Do that.”

“Are you all right?” Karol reached for her.

Magda shook her head and stepped into his arms.

“I wanted to see you one more time before you go. I can’t bear it,” he said into her hair. “I can’t bear the idea of losing you.”

The soul is able to die a thousand times before the body, because it is able to recover.

Magda led him to her dormitory room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

APRIL 1945

“Magda.”

Magda smiled in her sleep. It was such a sweet dream.

“Magda, it’s time.”

She opened her eyes to find Karol looking down at her. The sky was barely light. She remembered where she was. She remembered what she had to do.

“I love you.” Karol kissed her forehead.

Still in the glow of her dream, Magda reached for his face and kissed him back. There would be time for regret later. For now, she bathed in his light.

“Listen,” he said, “after this detail, I want you to join me. There’s a group of us who want to head west and join the Americans.”

Magda sat up. “Who else?” she asked.

Karol took in a deep breath. “The rest of us Jews, here. We should have left with that unit when they asked us to.”

No. Safety in numbers. That was why they had survived so long. It was one of the reasons anyway. “Why do you want to go?”

Karol looked over his shoulder. “The division needs us like the Germans need their prisoners for menial labor. But, Magda, these people here? They’re not fighting for Czechoslovakia.”

He was echoing her own concerns about hidden—and conflicting—agendas.

“Karol, just wait. Wait until I come back and then we can talk about it. All right?”

He agreed.

Magda rose and dressed in the civilian clothing she’d acquired for the mission, and applied the makeup, using the tricks of shadow and light to straighten her nose. But the powder was not of great quality and it only lightened her birthmark rather than covering it up. She tied a scarf beneath her chin and Karol looked concerned.

“It’s how I had to do it for years, before Zoja. I’ll manage. I’m in the kitchen anyway.”

Karol helped Magda strap the revolver to her calf. Then she pulled on the boots and checked that the length of the skirt hem covered the tops. He handed her the fake identification papers.

“Anna Gąsienica, huh?” He winked.

She squeezed his hand. “I have to go. Natalia and Ula must already be waiting.”

Karol kissed her one more time. “Be careful out there.”

“You too.”

“You’re a hero, you know? My warrior queen.”

She closed her eyes. “I’m not.”

When she left, she had completely forgotten to ask about his detail.

The three women were driven as close to the lines as possible, then escorted by two men to the checkpoint and across the border. The rumble from the front was nothing new to them, except that this time Magda was truly heading into the eye of the storm and behind enemy lines. Accompanied by Ula and Natalia, Magda's heart hammered in time with the artillery.

It was around eight when the three of them arrived at the guesthouse, located several miles outside of the nearest town. They were surrounded by nothing but wide-open spaces, easy for any guards to see oncoming danger. It was a two-story house with beveled glass windows all the way around. The weathered shingles were dark with age. To the south, the Tatra Mountains were a dark green. It was peaceful here. A cuckoo sang, the sun was out, the sky was thinly veiled with wisps of clouds. A picket fence surrounded the guesthouse yard. An apple tree, laced with white blossoms, shaded half the benches and tables set outside, still covered with dew. The other half were in the sun.

As Magda and the women approached, two field soldiers rose from the steps of the front porch.

"Papiere," one ordered.

Magda masked her surprise. He had such light blond eyelashes and eyebrows that it made his face look alien. There was a little mole just above his lip as if to make up for the lack of contrast.

Magda fished out her fake identification, and Natalia and Ula presented theirs. The guard told Natalia to raise her arms,

and he frisked her. Then, in Polish, he asked whether she spoke German. Natalia shook her head.

Blood rushed to Magda's head, and she felt dizzy. When the guesthouse owner burst outside, her insides jumped. His bushy mustache quivered. His beady eyes darted to the women and the soldiers.

"There you are, ladies!" He opened his arms, as if to herd the group of women in. "These are the girls I told you about," he said to the soldier with Natalia. "They're cooking the meal this evening for your officers."

The second soldier tilted his helmet back, dark-brown eyes having long alighted on Magda with interest. He beckoned for Magda's papers and examined them. Magda had to look away. His chiseled features made him exceptionally handsome, and there was something warm and lively about him. He seemed completely misplaced in this war, in his uniform. He should be playing football, or tennis, going out with girls, falling in love...

"Anna Gašienica." He looked up at her, still holding the identity papers. Smirking, he narrowed his eyes. "You speak German?"

She grinned stupidly.

"How did the other guy fare?"

She waited patiently, still pretending not to understand. "Your nose." He touched his eye. "And that."

Magda flushed and cleared her throat. She raised her arms and looked down at the ground.

The German soldier chuckled and took a step back.

“Come on,” Natalia said in Polish and pushed past them. “We’re late as it is.”

The soldier handed Magda her papers back.

She stuffed them into her pocket and followed the owner and her friends up the stoop, still holding her breath. They entered the guesthouse through a spacious dining hall with wood-paneled ceilings. The scent of lemon oil was layered atop the lingering stink of stale beer and boiled sauerkraut.

The kitchen was at the back. Despite the residue of smells, it was neat and clean, meaning nothing had been prepared. There was a relatively large serving hatch that left the women unprotected should they need to speak to one another but would also help them to overhear the discussions. Their commander had warned them of this but had also delighted at the layout. Natalia would filter the Ukrainian information from the representatives of the Ukrainian Legion and their guards. Magda spoke German and would focus on what the Germans had to say. Ula was the only authentic Pole to add to their cover. In either case, they were well-suited to the mission.

“How many are coming?” Ula asked the owner. She pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and surveyed the workspace.

“Eighteen, maybe twenty.” The man’s nervousness grated on Magda’s own.

“And who are they?” Natalia asked.

“All lower ranks. The higher command wouldn’t risk coming this close to enemy lines. The Germans are meeting with a few officers from the Ukrainian Legion. The Legion’s been helping the Nazis. They don’t want the Soviets to win, of course. Everyone’s pretty high strung. I wouldn’t be surprised

if my guesthouse goes up in flames tonight. Your commander assured me that with you girls, it would not.”

“Uh-huh.” Ula inhaled and blew out a puff of smoke just to the left of the proprietor’s face, then shot Magda a look. The man talked too much. “And you know all of this how?”

His cheeks reddened. “My, uh, my nephew joined the Legion. We’re originally from Ukraine, see, and he thought... well, it doesn’t matter. Either way, he referred his commander to me for the location and I—”

Natalia jammed her hands on her hips. “Our commander vetted you, but do tell us why you don’t support the Nazis yourself.”

His chin quivered. “The Germans have no...” He shrugged. “Scruples. I had a friend...” He looked pleadingly at the women, as if begging them to keep a secret. “He was Jewish.” He pointed to the countryside beyond the back of the house before turning back to them. “There was a village. A dozen or so families. They’re all gone now.”

Magda stepped forward, raised herself on tiptoe to be at his eye level. “And what did you do to help this Jew friend of yours?”

The man raised his palms and shook his head. “I couldn’t do anything before. You understand? Nothing. What could I do? But I’ve called you here now, haven’t I? To finally put an end to it?”

“We’ll see about that.” Magda moved her foot in her boot. Just to assure herself the revolver was still strapped to her calf.

There was nothing special about making *spaetzle*. Magda mixed the flour and eggs with water, let the dough stand a few minutes, and then pressed handfuls of mixture through the ricer and into a pot of boiling water. When they floated to the top, she fished them out with a rusted slotted spoon and piled them into a big bowl that sat on top of the oven.

Natalia worked on the cabbage rolls, filling them with barley and herbs. Ula pounded horse meat with a tenderizer that she would roast with the little lard they had. For soup, they had wild leek and potato.

The owner carried in a box of bottles. Beer and schnapps. The potions that would loosen tongues.

The three women were resolved to dislike the proprietor, but that resolve melted when he arrived from the cellar with a few sausages and potatoes for them to boil for their own meal.

“What about dessert?” Natalia asked, after they had eaten.

Magda leaned back. “Dessert? Really?” She frowned at the sensation rising in her.

Ula stood and went to one of the cupboards. She reached in and removed a tin, opening it up and inhaling deeply. “I found some poppy seeds.”

Natalia huffed. “I don’t have butter, remember? I can’t bake a poppy-seed strudel without butter, and you need the lard.”

Magda, still fighting the tightening in her chest, pointed to a crate beneath one of the worktables. It contained browned pears and a few bruised apples. “Compote?”

Natalia smiled. “Perfect.” She blew Magda a kiss. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

Magda wiped away the stray tear. She frowned and hurried back to the stove to busy herself. “Nothing.”

“That’s not true. You’re crying.”

“I’m not.” Magda turned away. It was ridiculous to be crying over dessert.

Ula came over and leaned against the stove. She blew a strand of hair out of her face and lit another cigarette. “It’s strange, isn’t it? This normalcy? To be cooking in a kitchen like this?”

Magda stared at her. That was it.

“We’ve accepted a lot of things as normal these days,” Ula said. “This”—she indicated the kitchen—“is not it anymore. But it will be. Trust me.”

What a thought! Now the tears spilled over, and she needed quite some time to collect herself.

The light in the kitchen shifted and changed as Magda and the women worked. It must have been past two in the afternoon when she spotted a convoy of vehicles heading up the road. She scurried to the window with Ula and Natalia close behind her.

Natalia pointed to the first four men who pulled up in a truck. “Those are the Ukrainians. See their armbands? The trident?” They also wore berets instead of the Wehrmacht caps.

Five Wehrmacht officers stepped out of a second black vehicle, with the top folded back. The men all shook hands. Other soldiers followed—guards, Magda guessed—followed by a motorcycle with a sidecar. The passenger in the sidecar jumped out, camera in hand, and snapped photos. He had a blond caterpillar mustache and wore dark-rimmed spectacles.

Some members from the delegations posed; others did not. Slowly the group moved around to the front of the house and out of sight. A few moments later, they heard voices in the dining hall doorway. The women positioned themselves in the kitchen, trying to look normal. Magda remained hidden, however. That was agreed upon. She would remain as close to the door as possible, and that was optimal, as the stove was on the far wall anyway. She grabbed the bowl of *spaetzle* and ladled a little bit of the hot water in to keep them warm and prevent them clumping together.

The officers walked into the dining room, and tables and chairs were pushed together, scraping against the wooden floor. Magda gasped a little when one of the German officers stuck his head through the hatch and, without smiling, took a look at each of them. Magda kept her left cheek facing the wall and nodded her acknowledgment of him.

“Smells good,” he said in German, as if testing them.

Magda pretended not to understand, giving him an apologetic weak smile. Natalia and Ula also smiled politely and nodded. Ula asked something in Polish, and he threw her such a disgusted look that Magda knew this man should be avoided at all costs.

The owner was busy helping the delegation set up, talking nonstop about how happy he was to have them all here and handing out bottles of beer. Almost all the German officers declined. Her view through the kitchen hatch was limited, but she could see one man rolling out maps. She glanced at Natalia and Ula, both of whom gave just the slightest nod. They had seen them too.

The soldier who had asked for Magda’s papers then peeked in through the hatch. With two hands on the counter he caught

her eye and smiled.

“I was thinking...” He waved an index finger at her. “You remind me of someone.”

Magda forced herself to keep a blank gaze on him. She frowned a little and gave a shake of her head.

He squinted and waved that warning with his finger again. “Don’t worry. I’ll remember by the end of the night.”

Moments later, one of the German commanders called the meeting to order. It was very official and even more serious. Magda found herself slowly drifting toward the hatch, trying to catch what they were saying. Ula looked over at her and jerked her head toward the stove. Magda stepped back. It was difficult to hear anything with Natalia slicing the apples, the knocking of the board on the counter interrupting what snippets of conversation Magda was able to catch. The men were purposefully keeping their voices low. If the women stopped working now, they would look suspicious. Magda widened her eyes at Ula and Natalia, and Natalia nodded over the next apple and pressed firmly on the cutting board.

The guesthouse owner pushed in through the door, the crate of beer empty. “The patrols will eat in shifts. Six will take soup now, and the others will go afterwards.”

Ula cocked her head toward the kitchen hatch. “And them?”

The owner shrugged. “Not yet.”

Magda moved to the pot of soup and ladled the first six bowls for Natalia and Ula. They worked steadily, hardly looking at one another. Her friends were going out there, would finally get a glimpse of what was available to them in

the dining room. Maps were good, but they needed more than that to figure out the Nazis' next moves.

The two other women left to serve the patrols outside, and Magda leaned against the wall behind the door. Ula suddenly moved in front of the kitchen hatch. She motioned to Magda and whispered, "They'll take soup in here now."

Magda hurried and ladled the bowls and served them at the hatch. Natalia appeared, winked at Magda, and took two bowls as well. When they returned to the kitchen, Natalia squeezed Magda's shoulder.

"You need to go out there next," she whispered into Magda's ear. "With the *spaetzle*. Just stay behind them all and be invisible."

Magda stared at the door. Be invisible. It was all she had ever wanted, all she had really practiced her entire life, and had never quite succeeded.

They were all quiet, Ula smoking her last cigarette. The dishes were piled up everywhere. Vehicle doors slammed, ignitions turned, and motors revved. Crickets chirped outside the open kitchen window. Natalia caught her bottom lip between her teeth and held Magda's gaze. They heard the front door of the guesthouse open and men marching back in. The women darted looks at one another and straightened themselves. The kitchen door flew open, and the soldier who had reviewed Magda's papers stood there with his blond companion.

"You remember now?" He pointed at Magda, very excited. "Didn't I tell you that was her?"

His companion blinked his alien eyes. “Yeah.” He tipped his head. “You were right. Why didn’t I see that before?”

Ula and Natalia shifted and positioned themselves slightly in front of Magda. Outside the window, Magda noted that the first convoy truck had driven away, lights slicing through the dark. Next to her on the counter was a glass of water. She inched the glass off the edge and then scrambled to try and catch it. Glass shattered. Water spilled everywhere. Natalia and Ula moved slightly away.

Magda grabbed a rag and bent down to wipe the water, pretending to pick up the splinters near her right foot. Her hand brushed the top rim of her boot. The sound of the motorcycle disappeared into the night, followed by another vehicle. There were only eight of them left now.

Footsteps moved in her direction, and Magda looked up. It was the blond man. He stood over her and cocked his head again, uninterested in the spilled water, or the broken glass, or the fact that she was squatting on the floor. Instead he reached down and shoved the scarf back off Magda’s head.

Magda froze, her glare meant to cut through him.

The soldier looked surprised. He looked at his companion. “No, she doesn’t. Bruno’s sister didn’t have this mark on her face.” He stepped back and returned to his companion, punching him in the shoulder as he pushed past him. “You lose. That’s a beer you owe me.”

Magda and the brown-eyed soldier stared at one another. She waited, her right hand still near her foot.

“Come on,” his companion called. “They’re waiting for us.”

The brown-eyed soldier continued staring at her. She would do this. She would do this if she had to. If for some reason he no longer thought of her as Bruno's sister but recognized her as a wanted woman—Obersturmbannführer Richard Koenig's housemaid—she would shoot him. There were only eight of them left. She had eight bullets, and she had important messages to return to the commanders of her division.

The soldier's eyes skittered from Magda to Ula then to Natalia.

Ula stepped in front of Magda again, fished out a cigarette, and cocked her head as she lit it.

Magda watched him turn away and listened carefully as his footfalls made their way out of the guesthouse. Only then did she release the breath she was holding. Ula and Natalia reached down and helped her up.

The owner walked in from outdoors. He opened his arms, wholly unaware of the state they were in. "And? What did you find out?"

The women looked at one another, stepped around him, and went out into the yard. The taillights of the vehicles grew smaller and smaller as they headed northwest. Magda turned around, cast one more look at the silhouette of the guesthouse owner in the doorway, the dining room, its lights still blazing, the glasses and dishes scattered on the tables outdoors and indoors.

"It's curfew," Magda called. "Better turn the lights out before the bombers set your guesthouse aflame."

She turned towards the southeast, Natalia and Ula behind her. They would spend the night in the empty barn they'd

found on the way, wait until dawn, and skirt around the front to get back to their contacts and return to safety.

Before they settled into sleep, they whispered to one another, putting the puzzle pieces together until they had the complete picture. Prisoners from the concentration camps in the east and west had been moved to Theresienstadt. The partisans had blown up rail lines and now many of the relocated inmates from the death camps had to march on foot to Theresienstadt.

The Nazis were not giving up on this war. Underground tunnels had been fortified in Poland, Germany, Bohemia, and Moravia to house factories, out of sight of the Allied planes. Magda told Natalia and Ula about the mining tunnels in Litoměřice. The Germans needed the Ukrainians, but Natalia had overheard two of the League's soldiers talking about how, as soon as they could, they would abandon the Nazis and try to find Tito and his men in Yugoslavia. The Ukrainians did not trust the Nazis. They knew the Axis powers were losing. Most sensational were the orders from Berlin to hold Litoměřice at all costs. The bridge at Litoměřice was the last gate to the west. Officers and soldiers hoping to land in the American or British lines needed to get across the bridge and move west. Avoid the Soviets at all costs at the risk of being immediately executed. Execute prisoners as necessary. Destroy all papers. Do what was necessary to cover everything up. That was the information the three women would deliver to their commanders the next day.

Magda lay down in the hay, her body sinking as heavy as a stone into a river. It took her a long time to release the tension, to neutralize the thrill of the mission. She surprised herself when she realized the first person she wanted to share her experience with was Karol.

Magda hurried out of the central command room with Ula and Natalia after the debriefing. She had to go find Karol. If her guess was right, the Red Cross would accept her request to transfer to Bohemia and perhaps she could be one of the first to identify and help capture Koenig. But would Karol be able to join her, change his plans about joining the Jewish group?

In the corridor, she saw the *četa* officers already heading to the commanders for their own debriefing. Magda spotted Koncinsky with a few others she recognized, but there was no sign of Karol. She told the girls she would catch up with them later and waited for the lieutenants to reach her.

“Good morning, Lieutenant.” She was thrilled with what she and the others had accomplished.

He stopped beside her, smiling uneasily. “Good morning.”

“Where’s Karol? I haven’t seen him.”

Koncinsky’s face went dark. “I’m sorry, Magda...”

“Sorry about what?”

He looked around and sighed. “He’s gone.”

“Gone?” Magda’s voice cracked. “What are you talking about?”

“He deserted.”

“He did not.”

“He did though. I took him with me on a detail, and he disappeared. Just like that. I haven’t seen him. I’m pretty angry with him. That slippery Jew got the best of me.” He narrowed his eyes, then placed his hands on her shoulders and rocked on his feet. “He wasn’t any good for you anyway.

Shame though. He was a damned good soldier, but you can never trust the J—”

Magda wrenched free of his grasp. “I don’t believe you. Was there violence where you were? A skirmish? Did he get injured? Did you leave him behind?”

“I wouldn’t do that,” the lieutenant said acidly. “How dare you question my honor?”

Magda clenched her jaw. This could not be true. Karol wouldn’t just disappear. He wouldn’t just desert. Not without telling her.

She tore away from him and ran to Karol’s quarters. Some of the soldiers from his squad were unpacking their things. She asked them to recount what had happened on their detail.

One scratched his head. “Strangest thing. We were heading for that settlement, you know?”

Magda didn’t. She had failed to ask.

“Yeah,” the other one said, his eyes shifting. “Then Karol and the lieutenant broke off to check out some farm on the way. They sent us on and said they would catch up with us.”

“We reach that settlement,” another said, “and it’s completely empty. Nobody there. It’s been picked through a few times as well. And the lieutenant shows up. He’s stark-raving mad. He said Karol gave him the slip. Just disappeared.”

“We offered to go look for him, but the lieutenant said if we found him, we’d be forced to execute him for desertion. He gave us the choice. We decided to come back. None of us wanted to shoot Procházka.”

Magda glared at them in disbelief. This sounded suspicious.

They looked at one another guiltily.

“Orders are orders,” one said quietly.

Magda would not cry in front of these men. She went looking for him. Asked everyone. Nobody knew. More seemed not to care. Not a word. Not a sign. It was as if Karol had never existed, as if he had been a figment of her imagination. The worst was the idea that he had simply abandoned her.

Magda returned to the hospital and burst into the supply room. Ula looked up from a sack of bandages, took one look at Magda, and threw her arms around her. A moment later, Natalia joined Ula. They walked with Magda out into a courtyard. Magda fell to all fours and pounded the flagstones with her fists, railing against the world and the war that had taken the last person she was never meant to let go of.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

APRIL–MAY 1945

Planes strafed the skies overhead. The horizon was on fire. Whistles, horns, and alarms interrupted all trains of thought until one simply stopped trying to process anything at all. Magda stopped asking questions. She no longer cared where they were going, how they would get there. She lined up and moved when and where the Red Cross moved. She changed bedpans and bandages, spoon-fed anonymous mouths, held the hands of the dying without really feeling them. She did not think. She did not react. She functioned. She was a machine.

The roads were littered with the debris of losses that come with someone else's victories. Blackened and mummified corpses were scattered outside of bombed vehicles. German prisoners of war, shot once in the head, reclined in their final resting places: in a ditch, in a field, against a tree, across Magda's way. Sometimes just one person, followed by a second some way down the road. Other times, a group on the ground, like children who'd held hands and spun around until they were so dizzy, they'd fallen backward onto the earth. One soldier—so small he had to be a teenager—was sprawled headfirst in a field, his right knee bent off to the side, his left arm outstretched toward the horizon he'd tried to flee toward. A family had died together in a burned-out vehicle, liquified into one horrific, molten sculpture.

Magda passed all this without comment, without much thought. This was the new normal. Her reality. A long, long time ago—as if she had read it in a book—there had been a figure, a figment of her imagination, who had brushed her teeth each morning, drank tea while reading a newspaper, washed dishes after supper, and hugged her mother and kissed her father goodnight before going to bed.

When the division arrived in Ústí nad Labem, thirteen miles north of Litoměřice, Magda was assigned to a nurses' station in the hospital housed in a Dominican monastery. As more and more injured showed up from the east, Magda felt something within her stir. Her eyes darted over the bodies of injured men, and she struggled to protect that wall she had built. Each time a dark-haired figure in uniform appeared, she missed a beat, missed a step. This enemy within her—this evil thing that called out to her to stop, to look, to listen—made her lift a bandage on a man's face to witness the wreckage beneath. But the chin was wrong. And the mouth. The corners turned downward. Not upward.

Magda was like a flickering candle flame placed before an open window. As the days went by and more men came to the hospital, any hint of Karol Procházka blocked the draft from the window for a millisecond. *Not his hands. Not his torso. Not his nose. Not his eyes.* Eventually, the candle was extinguished.

On the day the doctors announced that Hitler had shot himself in Berlin, that the Soviets had surrounded the capitol, that the war was officially over, Magda set her tray of supplies aside, walked out of the overflowing hall of wounded and injured souls, dropped onto a cot, and succumbed to the fever of grief.

For two days and two nights, Magda dreamed of a wrinkled face, kind blue eyes, a steady, calming voice. In the background, someone called a name, *Brother Bohdan*. Yes. Bohdan. *Brother*. And Magda's inner enemy led her into a darkened room featuring an old flickering reel of memories. Laughter. Throwing hay. A brother named Bohdan. The hot sun above a span of field. A whitewashed cottage. Lace curtains. The sweetness of cherries. Bohdan picking her up and spinning her like a butterfly in full flight—up and down, her arms outstretched. A beautiful face. Full lips. A laugh as pure as the apple blossoms in the backyard. A washing line with flowered dresses and crisp white coverlets softening in the breeze. The scent of herbed soap. *Magdalena, you're flying!* A guitar. A father. A table. Two boys playfully fighting over the first piece of hot fried dough. Bohdan grabbing it. His grin. Magda, the youngest of three, too small to compete. Bohdan tearing the sweet bread into three equal pieces, handing one to her first—the slippery warm oil on her fingers—then to their brother... *Matěj... Matěj...* as their mother dropped a second one onto the plate.

Natalia and Ula appeared one morning. Magda's temples still throbbed, and her clothing was crusted from sweat. A bowl of soup was steaming on the floor next to her. Natalia's concerned look made Magda turn her head away. Her neck felt wooden. She looked up at the sky above the open alcove. It rumbled, although it was bright blue. Planes crawled across the expanse like flies on a windowpane. She shut her eyes.

The two women moved to either side of her cot and squatted down, and one took in a deep breath.

“Magda.” It was Ula. “We spoke with the head nurse. Our old division is here.”

Magda opened her eyes, looked at one and then the other. Natalia dropped her gaze. *No Karol.*

“They’re sending a team of us to Prague,” Ula continued. “But we’ve asked for special permission to be dropped off in Litoměřice.” She paused.

Magda pictured Ula checking with Natalia, Natalia giving an encouraging nod.

“We could be at Theresienstadt when it’s liberated. We could be there first, to look for your Taubers.”

Magda squeezed her eyes shut. *Not his nose. Not his chin. Not his eyes.*

Natalia tried next. “There’s a team of doctors coming for Theresienstadt alone. Apparently it’s mayhem there. That concentration camp? The one they established for the factories in the tunnels? There’s been an outbreak of TB. The Thirty-Third Guards Rifles and the Fifth Guards army are heading there. There are concerns that the officers and commanders have already fled the city.”

Magda sat up. “No.”

The Koenigs. The Obersturmbannführer in civilian clothing probably stolen off the back of some poor soul on the road, walking into the hands of the Americans. Frau Koenig, with her sense of entitlement and the boy who could not hear, who had not been good enough for that man.

“No,” she repeated, and rose on unsteady legs.

She lifted her rucksack off the floor, rifled through it, and touched the revolver. She stuffed what few things she had

inside and eased it onto her shoulders. “When?”

Ula and Natalia glanced at one another.

“Now,” Ula said.

A monk hurried over to them, his wrinkled face creased with more concern, his blue eyes flashing with urgency. It was Brother Bohdan. “Magdalena, you must lay back down.”

He placed a hand on her forehead, almost like a blessing. Magda let him. Behind him, Natalia poured a glass of water, and Ula handed Magda a tablet. The effect was nearly instantaneous but then she felt awfully woozy. She steadied herself just as the monk took Magda’s hand.

“Where you are now going,” he said, “I want you to remember, God is angry, and to make it right, we must remember love.”

“Where we’re going now,” Ula said matter-of-factly, “we’re winning. And we’re off to save the wretched souls from themselves.”

The monk squeezed Magda’s hand. “Be an instrument of peace now. In your condition—”

“Eat the soup,” Natalia interrupted. “Sorry, Brother, but we have to go. Or we’ll miss the transport.”

Within minutes, Magda was sitting between the two women in the back of a truck. Brother Bohdan raised a hand in farewell. Magda lifted her hand in return just as another ambulance arrived with more of the injured and wounded. Something tugged at her heart, and she shut her eyes. When she opened them again, they were crossing the Elbe, and then all she saw was the landscape of rolling green hills and empty, neglected fields. Karol, she told herself, had not been in that ambulance truck either.

The drive lasted less than an hour, but Magda had fallen asleep, still woozy from the aftermath of the fever. When the truck shifted gears and slowed down, she recognized that they were already on the north end of town, on Lidická Road. Magda's limbs felt heavy, but she gathered her things. They would soon disembark in the square of the old town. Natalia and Ula watched her. They remained silent as the truck broke to a halt near the *Reichskanzlei*.

Ula jumped down first, her hair tied up beneath a headband to keep the mop out of her face. She reached a hand toward Magda and helped her down. For the first time in almost three years, Magda stood in the old square, near where the gallows had once been, but there was no time to think too much about that now.

A hodgepodge of vehicles filled the square, red stars on most of them. The front doors of the *Reichskanzlei* had been thrown open, and soldiers were going in and out like ants, carrying boxes. One of the German flags suddenly floated away from the building and buckled to the ground. A man whooped from the upper-story window. Glass broke somewhere to her left in the arcade, and Magda witnessed a scuffle between men dressed in civilian clothing and a group of soldiers in Czechoslovak army uniforms. One man clutched something to him and made a run for the other side of the square and darted up the alley. The people were looting. Cries of glee and of outrage echoed off the buildings. A woman with a child was harassed by a group of men, and she shouted something. Magda recognized the German cadence from the woman and the Czech language of those accosting her.

Ula and Natalia looked bewildered.

“The Fifth’s commanders are all in there.” The soldier who had driven them pointed to the *Reichskanzlei*. “I’d go there and find out where they want you to be.”

Natalia bent toward Magda. “Hey, are you okay?”

Magda was not. She wanted to vomit. “The Taubers are not in Theresienstadt. They can’t be.”

“Stay here.” Natalia patted her hand. “We don’t know that yet. We’ll find out where we need to go. All right? Just stay here.”

Magda nodded, still wobbly.

An old farmer’s truck, loaded with civilians, entered the far end of the square. It backfired, and Magda ducked instinctively. It drove crazily toward the *Reichskanzlei*, the people in the back whooping and cheering. Up the alleyway, Magda recognized the sound of a tank. How was it to get through the narrow streets? There was a thundering boom, and smoke rose behind the square. It was going to blow its way through.

Magda ran the opposite way and came to the arched gate. She took the steps to the old town wall and stopped. She was just above the Elbe, just above the bridge. A train was stopped in the middle of the rails facing Litoměřice. Smoke curled upward on the eastern and western horizons. They would all meet here—the Americans and the Soviets.

The Germans were supposed to have held on to the bridge, and the Soviet divisions should have captured them. She expected to see a barricade set up on either side of the bridge, with a group of German officers trapped in between. She indeed found a mass of people, but they were not dressed in uniforms. They were dressed in blue-and-gray striped rags

crossing toward Theresienstadt on the opposite bank. She saw bodies up against the guardrails of the bridge, knees pulled up, huddled men lying half sideways. The Elbe was too wide for them.

She thought of the tunnels that they had been told about. The underground factories in which the Germans used slave labor to build their machines, their weapons, their technology for warfare. These had to be the prisoners from the concentration camp in Litoměřice. How they had gotten herded over here, she could not even begin to guess.

Those who could were slowly stumbling along, leaning on each other as they headed to the old fort, to Theresienstadt. This could only end in disaster. Beyond, vehicles were driving in and out of the old brick fortress. Red Cross flags hung across trucks and flew on the flagpoles outside. Magda recognized the warning flags for TB and typhus. The red-black-white swastika flags were gone. Theresienstadt had been liberated, but Magda was certain the Taubers would not be there.

Magda stumbled to the edge of the wall. She took a sip of water from her canteen, then turned around and made her way back up the alley. Natalia and Ula were searching for her, their faces pulled tight in panic. The crowd had grown. The truck that had pulled up earlier into the square was pulling away from one of the buildings that had housed the armory. The doors of the armory were flung wide open, and soldiers were trying to prevent the civilians from going in.

“Christ.” Ula waved at Magda. “Natalia, there she is!”

The two women hurried to Magda.

That truck with the civilians in the back took another turn around the square, shouting down at the people on the streets,

sometimes stopping and picking up more civilians. Magda stared as it slowly passed by. One woman shoved her way past Magda, waving at the driver. When Magda grabbed her arm, the woman yanked away from her hold and scowled at her.

“Where are you all going?” Magda asked.

The woman snarled. “Koenig and the others might have fled, but he’s left that wife and child at the villa.”

Magda glanced at the men in the back handing out rifles. “I’m going with you.”

“Come on!” The woman bared her teeth. To the passengers in the back of the truck, she shouted, “She’s coming with us. Give us a hand!”

Magda was lifted inside. She vaguely heard Natalia and Ula shouting her name. She was crushed together with a dozen or so people, and as the truck shifted gears, bumped, and jarred, it sent Magda flying into the arms of some man. He stank of sweat and alcohol. She righted herself.

“I’ll find you,” Magda called back to Natalia and Ula. “I’ll come back to you later!”

The truck soon turned out of the square and onto Michalská Street, on the way to Radobýl Mountain and Villa Liška. The faces around her were gleeful, jeering. The hunted were now the hunters. For a moment, Magda tried to find a face she recognized, someone who would anchor her, help her find her footing in this swaying, bumping truck. But there was nobody. And she wondered whether anyone recognized her. How could they not? If they knew her, they would know the birthmark, the broken nose, the scar beneath her eye—the latter two marks that identified her as one of them. But she did not recognize a single person.

Magda faced the side of the road, trying to place herself back into the environment that had been—for at least a little while—familiar to her, almost home. How many times had she walked this road? How many times had she watched that clock tower grow nearer, heard the bells of St. Stephen toll its sad news? How many times had she spotted the deer in the fields, looked forward to seeing that stand of cedar trees?

She could not believe that Koenig had abandoned his wife. No, he must be hiding in the villa. He had discovered that second wall that Renata had hidden behind and was in there now. She was almost certain that was the case. How fast could the Germans run with the Soviets and the Czechoslovakian units so close on their heels? Koenig wouldn't risk that. He would stay hidden until it was safe to disguise himself and then try to reach the American zones.

She was going to find him herself. And then what?

And then what, Magda?

The woman from the square swayed next to Magda.

“Who's in charge here?” Magda asked.

The woman grinned. She was in her thirties, and she was missing a lower tooth. “The Revolutionary National Committee, that's who. To hell if we're going to allow the Red Army take control of what's our business.”

The truck slowed as it reached the bottom of the mountain and shifted gears to start the climb. Magda looked ahead. Two vehicles were haphazardly parked on the road.

“That's us,” the woman said, and some of the men nodded.

Magda recognized the mishmash of Czechoslovakian, Soviet, and German army uniforms. A man with a film camera stood off to the side and waved at Magda's truck to stop. The

revolutionaries were shoving a group of men and women—three of each—into a line on the road, their sacks and belongings scattered behind them. The couples had their hands above their heads as the rebel forces shoved them into a line along the side of the road. Together they turned away from the partisans and faced the northern fields and the mountains—the direction Magda and Karol had run off to so long ago. The driver revved the engine.

The people in the truck cheered and pumped their arms, some with rifles above their heads. “Collaborators! Collaborators!”

The man with the movie camera crossed in front of the truck, and the driver started to crawl past, maneuvering around the two abandoned vehicles.

Magda frowned as they inched by. She looked closer as they came level to the group. A woman stood out among the military personnel. A mop of dark curly hair beneath a beret. The stature of a Viking. Magda tried to find her voice, to call Renata’s name, but she came up short. Next to Renata, his weapon drawn and aimed at the back of a man’s head was Aleš in an officer’s uniform.

“Aleš,” Magda finally managed to shout. “Renata!”

Renata turned her head, and her shoulders fell back. Magda locked eyes with her. Aleš’s pistol popped. The man before him fell. Renata said something, and Aleš twisted toward the truck, and she saw the recognition in his face. And resignation. As if he had expected to see her. But when the man to his left sprinted into the field, Renata shouted and raised her weapon. The shot sliced the air. The man convulsed and sprawled forward. Aleš swung back and stepped behind

the next woman. Magda saw his pistol kick back. She clasped a hand over her mouth.

God was angry. But they were angrier.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

MAY 1945

They were not the first to arrive at Villa Liška. The iron gate to the service road stood open. A couple of men in slanted berets were smoking cigarettes in the stand of cedars, near Eliška's play area. The red-and-white toadstool pattern on the stumps and the table that Aleš had painted was faded, cracked, and peeling. Furniture from the house lay out on the sloping lawn. A handful of men loaded a dresser onto a truck. Frau Tauber's dresser. The portrait of Hitler from the dining room lay ripped and torn beneath a shattered window. Other pieces, a foyer table included, lay broken and splintered on the stones of the terrace. Doors slammed inside the house somewhere. A woman screamed. A child shrieked.

It was happening all over again. The day Walter had led the Nazis here—it was happening again but in reverse now.

Magda clutched her rucksack and staggered from the truck. She hurried up the lawn to the French doors of the sitting room. Inside, people were looting in a frenzy. Two women stuffed books from the library shelves into bags. One wore a linen tablecloth around her shoulders and carried a silver candelabra. A man barged through the dining room door and walked past Magda as if she were not there. In his arms, a box of china.

“Put that down!” Magda blocked the man’s way.

He veered away with a look of disbelief. “There’s plenty more where that came from.”

Magda was about to tell him who all this really belonged to when she heard a woman screaming. Magda dashed into the foyer and stopped at the bottom of the stairs. The rebels had Frau Koenig. She was trying to wrest herself from the hold that three men had on her. They dragged her from Frau Tauber’s bedroom, along the landing and to the top of the stairs. Frau Koenig’s hair had been shorn off. Robert clung to her neck, howling, his legs swinging wildly.

“Let them go,” Magda cried.

She gripped the banister to steady herself as she charged up the stairs, but the men shoved her out of the way.

They nearly lifted Frau Koenig and the boy into the air as they rushed down the stairs. Magda followed. They pushed Frau Koenig into the dining room and then out the French doors.

Frau Koenig stumbled forward but regained her balance and fell onto her knees on the terrace. Robert was shocked into silence, his eyes wide with fright. He stared at Magda for a second and then, with an ear-piercing shriek, thrashed himself against his mother.

“What do you want with her?” Magda cried. “It’s Koenig you should be looking for.” But she had the sensation that the Obersturmbannführer had truly abandoned his family. Robert was deaf. Robert was a cripple. According to him, Robert was dispensable.

The three men swung their rifles off their shoulders. Frau Koenig covered her head and bent over her boy. Her scalp was

splotched red. Blood ran from a cut down her forehead.

“It’s too late,” one growled. He wore a Dutch cap. “He left her here for us. Put the bitch out of her misery.”

“She might know how to get to Koenig,” another one said.

“Yeah,” the third agreed. “We should take her in for questioning.”

Frau Koenig looked pleadingly at all three, but when her look landed on Magda, her face changed. She lifted a shaking finger and pointed at her. “You! You!”

Dutch Cap nudged Frau Koenig’s shoulder with the muzzle of his rifle.

The second man lifted his aim in Magda’s direction. “You know her? You two related?”

Magda shook her head. “I used to work here.”

The realization on the second man’s face spread. “This is the housemaid Koenig was looking for.”

“Is that right?” the third man asked. “Well, I doubt you’ll get those ten thousand Reichsmark now!”

The others gathered on the lawn and jeered but looked hungrily at Magda.

One woman stepped forward and spit on Frau Koenig then peered at Magda. “You must have done something really bad. Must be a hero.”

“I’m not a hero,” Magda said shakily.

“She’s the one who saved the Taubers’ little girl,” another woman cried. “There was a fire, and this woman here, she saved the doctor’s little girl.”

Magda stared at the dark blond woman. The only people here that night had been the family and the staff. “How do you know about that?”

The woman shrugged. “I just heard.”

Dutch Cap sneered at Magda. “A real hero.” He bent over Frau Koenig and yanked her head up by a remaining tuft of dark hair. “What did you do to our girl here?”

“I’m not a hero,” Magda repeated.

But then it was the air about the blond woman, a queen stripped of her crown, that made Magda turn to her again. The woman held a box. No. It was a drawer. A drawer from one of the dressers.

“Uršula,” Magda muttered.

The woman looked at her.

“Uršula,” Magda said again. “You knew paní Eva.”

“Who?”

Magda stepped close to her. “Paní Eva. The one who always put aside a loaf of bread for you. You tried to stop me from coming to the Taubers, because they’re Jewish.”

The woman’s eyes widened and Magda flipped the box out of her hands. The contents spilled onto the lawn. Glass figurines. Some foxes. The Venetian vase. Other trinkets and things, and deep in the grass, something fragile and gold.

Magda bent down and lifted the chain. The crucifix. The Star of David.

“They’re all dead anyway,” the woman said. “They’re all dead.”

Magda drew her arm back and made contact with the woman's jaw. Uršula screamed and stumbled backwards. The men around Frau Koenig cheered and laughed.

The third rifleman approached Magda as she stuffed the chain into her pocket. He held his weapon out to her. "Here. By the looks of your face, she and her husband must have done quite a job on you. You've got the hunger. You do it. Kill the bitch. Don't you want to kill the bitch?"

Magda stared at his rifle. She looked back at Uršula, who was complaining and cursing but nobody was listening to her. Everyone wanted to know whether Magda would take the rifle.

Frau Koenig turned her head to Magda, and the fright in the woman's eyes sent a pleasurable thrill through Magda. The sensation chilled in her blood at the sight of the child. Robert was fighting to get out of his mother's arms.

Magda reached for her rucksack on her shoulders and slowly removed it so that everyone could see what she was doing. She held the gaze of the three men standing over the bounty that was Frau Koenig. She opened it and reached in. Magda withdrew her revolver.

The men sniggered, each taking a step back.

"That's right, girl," Dutch Cap said.

The second nudged the third. "She's got as many balls as us all here together. Go ahead, girlie. She's all yours."

He shoved Frau Koenig forward onto all fours. Robert fell from his mother's arms and his head thudded dully against the flagstones. He lay face upward and stared at the sky for a moment before his face contorted with his cries once more.

Frau Koenig tried to scoop her son into her arms again, but Dutch Cap kicked her in the ribs, and she sprawled sideways.

Magda moved to stand over the woman. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Her lips were hot and dry. She felt nauseated. In German, she said, “Woman, if you want to save yourself, you had better tell us what we want to know. Where is your husband?”

Frau Koenig gasped for air, clutching her side. Magda dropped down next to her. Robert was trying to get up, and someone moved to Magda’s left. She swung the revolver at the person. It was the second rifleman.

“Leave the boy be,” Magda ordered.

Robert rolled over onto his side and crawled on all fours towards his mother.

Magda turned back to the woman. “I said, where is your husband?”

Frau Koenig panted. “I don’t know.”

The crowd pressed in like hyenas. Magda smelled the adrenaline, the sweat. She glanced at their faces. This was who they had become.

“There’s a wall,” Magda called, her gaze steady on Frau Koenig’s. “In the master suite, there’s a double wall. You’ll find it if you look carefully. Koenig might still be here.”

The three riflemen exchanged looks of admiration, then jerked their heads at a group of men in the crowd. Those men dashed back into the house. Others followed in their wake.

“He’s gone,” Frau Koenig said matter-of-factly. Saliva dribbled from her mouth. “He’s left me and Robert here. He’s gone.”

Magda pursed her lips. Robert reached them, and rocked backward, snot running from his nose. He made noises, like an animal in pain. His mother did not appear to hear him.

Magda clicked the revolver's safety back into place. She turned to the child and gestured as his mother might. "Come here. Come to Magda."

He shook his head.

The boy had no idea what he wanted. Magda rose and lifted him into her arms, pressing him against her. She was something solid. Something he could cling to. He kicked his little legs, and she felt the muscles in his torso tense. He was a strong boy. Much stronger than any of the children she had encountered along the way here. Perhaps even too strong for her.

Frau Koenig released a keening wail. "Leave my child! Leave him alone! You witch! You dirty, stinking Jew!"

"Are you Jewish?" Dutch Cap said with surprise.

Magda stared at him, rubbing her hand over Robert's back, the revolver still in it. She tried to lift him higher, tried to get him in her arms so he would stop weighing her down. "I'm the child's godmother."

There were angry grumbles from the crowd. Magda pressed Robert closer to her. He finally wrapped his legs around her waist. He smelled of lemon and rosemary. She pictured the bars of soap in Frau Tauber's bathroom.

The second rifleman jerked his head at Magda. "Is this true?"

"Arrest Frau Koenig if you must," Magda said. "But you will not be murderers like the Nazis. She certainly has valuable information."

Robert twisted around and looked down at his mother, then whimpered and threw his arms around Magda's neck. He was hanging on for dear life. *Don't put me down with her.* That was what he was saying.

Those who had gone to search the bedroom walked out with disappointed expressions. They found the second wall, they reported, but they did not find Koenig or anyone else hiding there.

Dutch Cap jabbed his muzzle into Frau Koenig's cheek. "You're no use, are you?" He spoke in German.

With her left hand, Magda supported Robert. With her right, she cocked the pistol at the rifleman.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" he demanded.

"I'm Magda. Magdalena Novák from Voštiny."

"And what are you going to do, Magdalena Novák from Voštiny? Invite this woman back to your village? Make her your aunt? You have no idea what's really going on here."

"I've been underestimated all my life," Magda said slowly. "And yet here I am." In German, she said, "I'm taking the child with me."

Frau Koenig looked up in anguish. "He's my son! Don't you dare hurt him."

Magda dropped her hand. "You still don't understand," she said. "I've wanted nothing but to protect him from that husband of yours. And you were too weak to!"

Frau Koenig lowered her head. "Kill me," she sobbed. "You may as well kill me."

"What is she saying?" The second rifleman asked.

“She wants us to kill her,” Dutch Cap said.

The crowd surged forward.

Magda raised her pistol into the air and shot, then swung it at the crowd, turning with Robert. Her arms were beginning to shake, and her legs were unsteady. Two vehicles pulled up alongside the service road gate. Renata’s and Aleš’s group. Magda could not do both. She could not protect the boy and the woman. Magda tossed the pistol to the side. It bounced across the lawn and landed under a bush.

Robert buried his face into Magda’s neck. She lifted the child higher into her arms, turned, and walked down the sloping lawn. The tops of the cedars waved in the spring breeze.

Aleš jumped out of the first vehicle and threw open the back door. Inside, Renata was leaning towards her.

“Magda, let us take you to where you need to go,” he said.

Magda walked past him and stepped onto the road. To her right, the white clock tower of Litoměřice. To her left, the road that would take her back to Voštiny. She gently brushed tears from Robert’s face with her hand. She kissed his cheeks and spoke soothingly in Czech.

She faced Aleš and Renata.

“Do something about this,” Magda ordered. “Nobody wins like this.”

She turned left, away from Litoměřice. At the top of the road, Magda lowered Robert to the ground. At the look of fright on Robert’s face, she clutched the poor boy’s hand. She pointed down to where the Ohře and Elbe rivers met and entwined with one another. Žernosecké Lake glimmered in the afternoon sun. Bursts of gunfire and shelling from the final

battles reverberated off the hillsides. A cuckoo sang in the field behind them. The red-tiled roof and the highest yellow limestone tower of the villa peeked above the tree line. She waited with Robert's hand in hers.

Not a minute later, a shot rang from the yard below. Magda turned her back on Litoměřice and Villa Liška.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

SEPTEMBER 1945

At the sight of the truck kicking up dust clouds on her side of the Elbe, Magda dropped the damp white coverlet back into the laundry basket and walked to the front of the cottage. She looked towards the horizon. The truck was heading north toward the border. Or so she thought. It slowed at the crossing, then turned east, heading for Voštiny.

Robert squealed behind Magda, chasing after the geese. The dog ran on its chain, barking playfully. Against the glare of the morning sun, Magda raised her hand and waited as the truck neared the farm. She cursed beneath her breath.

It was probably another deportation truck filled with Germans who had been turned away at the border. It was madness. Utter chaos. There was no system in place, but the deportations had begun immediately. German families were rounded up, or—irony of all ironies—sent a letter to pack a maximum of fifty kilograms of their belongings, to report to immigration headquarters, and to hand over a list of their personal items and the keys to the properties once requisitioned from Czech families. But Germany did not want the families, either, and all the border towns got in return were fleeing, stateless refugees pilfering, stealing, and even murdering along the way for food and shelter.

The families that had returned to Voštiny had been sometimes forced to take the law into their own hands. It was not pretty. It was the reason Magda had requisitioned the German family's dog before they were thrown off her property. Still, she wished she had not tossed that revolver back at Villa Liška.

The dog's bark changed as soon as the truck veered into their long drive. Robert ran over to her, sober now, and reached for her hand.

The policing units were rubbing the wounds of this country raw. The scars were already deep. As black and deep as the branding of the *Hackenkreuz* on their souls. Magda braced herself for an altercation. The prisoners could pick some apples from her tree, but that was it.

The truck pulled into the yard and stopped a few feet from Magda and Robert. Magda dropped Robert's hand. She knew those silhouettes. She knew those figures, that odd pair.

"Go into the house," Magda signaled Robert. He did not budge. Neither did she.

The truck doors opened. Magda stepped back. She wanted her revolver. She should release the dog from his leash. Anything to prevent these unwanted intruders.

Aleš got out first. He was dressed in a police uniform. Magda waited until Renata came to the front of the truck. Magda wanted to see her face, just one more time. Face her just one more time.

"You can both get back into your vehicle and return to where you came from."

Aleš and Renata exchanged a look.

“Did you hear me?” Magda demanded. “Get back in the truck and go.”

“Magda,” Aleš started. “We’re not here to cause any trouble.”

“Then you should not have come.”

Renata, at least, had the sense to stay put. She leaned against the hood and crossed her arms. Her mouth twisted.

The dog barked anew near the back of the truck.

Aleš looked over his shoulder. He fished something out of his shirt pocket. A packet of cigarettes. “You want one?”

Magda looked at him as if he were crazy.

“Because I hear you were quite the smoker during the war.”

Magda glared at him. Renata smirked.

“And a drinker.” He pointed over his shoulder. “I’ve got a bottle of *Becherbitter* in the back. We could celebrate.”

“What the hell have we got to celebrate?” How would he know she had smoked? She’d only done that out east and mostly with Natalia and Ula.

Somebody jumped out of the back of the truck and at first she could only see the boots but then a man with a child in his arms appeared. The man wore a black shirt and khaki trousers. The ends of his mouth curved up but his lips quivered with uncertainty.

Magda’s eyes darted to the boy. Wavy brown hair and ruddy cheeks. Ruth Tauber’s eyes. Eliška’s eyes.

Magda clutched at her throat. Her chest constricted. She willed her legs to move, but they would not. She had to wait

until they came to her. She did not know on whose face she should focus on first.

When he stood before her, Magda could finally say his name. “Karol... Karol...” And then she could not stop saying his name, the tears springing and spilling over her cheeks.

Karol smiled. “Magda, this is—”

“Samuel.” Magda reached for him. The little boy went to her but leaned back, as if to keep her in his sights.

“Samuel,” Karol said. “This is Magda, the one I was telling you about. Another person who saved you.”

Samuel seemed to study her. He then took his tiny hands and placed them on either side of her face. He turned her head left, then turned her head right. He kissed her on the left cheek. “Karol,” he said softly, “says you’re my godmother. Hello, Godmother.”

Through her tears, Magda burst out laughing. She hugged the boy to her, squeezed him, her heart breaking. She gazed at Karol, trying to ask him with her eyes the things that she could not utter.

He nodded. Samuel was the only one to survive.

“I would say,” Renata called and before Magda could sink back into mourning, “it’s time for a drink.”

Magda handed Samuel back to Karol. She strode over to Renata. They gazed at one another. The marks of this war—their scars—were deep. But it was also what made them who they were now.

Magda took in a deep breath and opened her arms and welcomed the strong embraces, first from Renata, then from

Aleš. She wiped away her tears and only then noticed Robert standing off to the side.

“Robert, come here,” she gestured.

He came slowly. She reached for his hand.

Karol lowered Samuel to the ground, and she led Robert to them. Robert assessed Samuel, his bottom lip jutting out.

“Samuel,” she said, “go and pick some apples with Robert, and I’ll make some fried apple rings for the two of you.”

Samuel looked up, uncertain, but Robert tentatively reached across and offered his hand. Magda spotted the birthmark on Samuel’s right wrist bone.

“Robert can’t hear, understand? But you can try talking to him. We all do. He understands more than you think.”

The boys were shy at first but gradually, with Karol’s and Magda’s prompting, they trotted off to the apple tree at the back of the house.

Magda and Karol followed them. They watched a while as the children examined the apples on the ground, then Magda turned to him, the question on her face.

“Tadek Koncinsky betrayed me,” Karol said. “He pistol-whipped me when we were searching a barn, and locked me in. When I awoke, I heard vehicles approaching. He’d turned me in, that...” Karol shook his head. “He handed me over to the AK for money.”

Magda felt that bitter anger rising. She’d known something about the lieutenant’s story had not added up.

Karol rubbed a hand over his head. He took in a deep breath. “I was terrified. I was sure I was done. They’d have taken me straight to the Gestapo for reward money and the

Gestapo would not have even bothered with deportation. I watched through the slats of the barn. Two vehicles. Four men. All for me. And then shots were fired at them.”

Magda frowned. “From where.”

Karol’s eyes shone with tears. “That group of Jewish rebels I wanted to desert with. They’d had a feeling that Koncinsky was no good.”

Magda grasped for his hands, stood before him. “They saved you?”

“Yes.” Karol nodded and gently released himself to wipe the tears away. “After the war, I decided I wasn’t coming back to find you until I’d found Samuel. I headed to the Carpathians. I knew I would never catch up to all of you. I went on a different mission.”

“How did you know where to look?”

Karol tossed a look back at the truck. “I was the only one who knew where. Aleš figured since I was Jewish...” He chuckled sadly. “Anyway, we Jews stick together, you understand?”

He took Magda’s hands into his again. “How is my warrior queen?”

She was no warrior queen. She was no hero. But she had survived. One of the few. Those who had returned were shells of themselves. Robert had prevented that for her. Robert was the reason that she was still managing, why she accepted who she was and the life she held within her.

“I found almost everyone I was looking for except, well, the Taubers. I’ve found Samuel. And now you.” She leaned against him.

“And now you have us, again. I’m sorry about the rest of Samuel’s family.”

Magda turned to watch the boys picking apples. “I’m going to be all right.” She squeezed Karol’s hand. “Especially now.”

Aleš and Renata appeared with four glasses they had found in her kitchen and a bottle of *Becherbitter*.

“Davide sends his greetings,” Aleš said. “He and his family are now in Prague.”

Magda crossed her hands to her heart. “Thank God.”

Renata jutted her chin at Robert and Samuel. “Now you have two.”

Magda glanced sideways at Karol. “There is bad luck in even numbers.”

Karol laughed a little. “Yes. I remember you telling me that.”

“We can’t risk that, can we?” She led his hand to beneath the apron she wore. Magda made sure he felt the life she carried.

Karol’s eyes widened. Magda closed hers, heard him smile. When she looked again, he threw his head back and laughed before swinging her up and crushing her to him.

“*L’chaim*,” she whispered in his ear. To life.

If you were absolutely gripped by Magda’s epic tale of wartime bravery, then make sure you stay up to date with the latest releases from Chrystyna Lucyk-Berger.

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A LETTER FROM CHRYSTYNA

Dear Reader,

I want to say a huge thank you for choosing to read *The Girl from the Mountains*. If you did enjoy it, and want to keep up to date with all my latest releases, just sign up at the following link. Your email address will never be shared and you can unsubscribe at any time.

[Sign up here!](#)

The Girl from the Mountains was inspired by a friend's anecdote. Her husband was born in the Sudetenland, what is today part of the Czech Republic. His father was the commanding officer of one of the districts and married to quite an imperious woman. When she gave birth to a son, someone in the community decided to take their revenge by leaving a permanent mark on their newborn: the infant was returned to his parents circumcised.

When my friend shared this story with me, I was flabbergasted. The first thing I wanted to know was what kind of person and what sorts of events would lead someone to take that great of a risk?

It could very well be that the parents did it on purpose to perhaps save their own hides toward the end of the war. However, I had not even considered that aspect until much later when I was already in the process of writing Magda's story.

This began as a short story focusing on that act of circumcision as the ending. It was a perfect story of revenge and a search for justice. I was then invited to take part in *The Road to Liberation* project which consisted of six authors submitting six short novels to a collection that celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Second World War's end. It was then that I expanded Magda's story from 10,000 words to some 60,000 words. And because I had to—for the sake of the project—cover up to at least VE Day, Magda and I ended up on quite an adventure. Litoměřice was no longer “just a town I'd found on Google,” I now had quite some serious research to do. I traveled to the Czech Republic and met with the historians and archivists. It was fantastic. I got so much inspiration, including building in the story of Terezín's (Theresienstadt's) Jewish ghetto and eventual concentration camp. I also had to flesh out the other characters more and by this time I was truly enchanted with the whole cast.

On a whim, I submitted the manuscript to Bookouture and received an email from Cara Chimirri, who expressed sincere enthusiasm for the story. There was

only one hitch: how much did the circumcision of Koenig’s son mean to me? Well, at first I thought everything. Magda’s character was created for that. But when I was honest with myself and Ms. Chimirri, I knew that Magda’s arc needed a slower progression. The original idea had served its purpose in the short story and the shorter novel, but all along I knew that the theme I really wanted to tackle was “how far can one go before they lose their soul?” I agreed to adjust the storyline, to create a more gradual buildup to Magda’s “Warrior Queen” persona, and to explore the boundaries Magda would reach before “recovering” herself. Writing this version of the story has been one of the most challenging and enriching experiences I’ve had as an author. I am only sad that in the COVID-19 era, I was unable to travel back to the Czech Republic and—due to the extensions I added including the Slovak Uprising—to Slovakia. I pride myself on visiting the worlds my stories take place in. I hope one day to make good on that.

I hope you loved *The Girl from the Mountains* and if you did I would be very grateful if you could write a review. I’d love to hear what you think, and it makes such a difference helping new readers to discover one of my books for the first time.

I love hearing from my readers—you can get in touch on my Facebook page, through Twitter, BookBub, Goodreads, Instagram or my website.

Thanks so much,

Chrystyna Lucyk-Berger

www.inktreks.com



HISTORICAL NOTE

This story is completely fictional and I had to make serious decisions regarding what to keep as authentic and historically accurate and where I had to take some license. These decisions included:

THE ASSIGNMENT AND USAGE OF NOM DE GUERRE AMONG THE PARTISAN CHARACTERS AND THE TITLE OF *PANÍ*.

Any resistance fighter or partisan could attest to how important identities, name changes, and disguises were for their survival and in accomplishing their missions. In this novel, I refer to these name changes and the nom de guerre of Magda and Karol, but refrained from using them throughout these scenes to avoid confusing readers, and for the sake of length.

As I was working through the story, I did have a list of second names for each character. That list began growing longer and longer. To avoid using the *nom de guerre* or refraining for identifying each new name Magda might have had during her time underground was a difficult decision to make as it does shave off quite a bit of the historical accuracy.

This was, however, one of the areas where I felt my fictional license had to be applied to avoid disrupting the narrative.

Paní is the Czech title used to address women whom Magda would feel are her elders and above her class, and here there are also some distinctions: *Paní* with a last name is simply like saying Ms. or Mrs.; *paní doktorová*, is the title attributed to a doctor's wife, and *paní* with a first name is simply a polite way of acknowledging one's elders and higher-ups, such as *paní Eva* was to Magda, but closer to Madga in social class.

THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS AND THE GHETTO: LITOMĚŘICE AND THERESIENSTADT (TEREZÍN)

It is first important to understand this: Theresienstadt was a centuries-old military base that housed a regiment of Czechoslovakian military personnel in 1938. After the Germans annexed Moravia and Bohemia (the German Sudetenland) in the fall of that year, the Czechoslovakian guards were dissolved and the Wehrmacht took over.

The Gestapo set up its prison and headquarters in the Small Fort (*Malá Pevnost*). Political prisoners and criminals were held there. The Wehrmacht was housed in the various barracks in the town outside of the Small Fort.

In the fall of 1941, that Wehrmacht was replaced by male prisoners from German camps, who were then given the task to fortify the barracks and to reconstruct the spaces and the town to accommodate what would later become the Theresienstadt Jewish ghetto. In the spring of 1942, women and children were included in the deportations and sent to Theresienstadt. The crackdown and the initial subjugation of

the Jews in the ghetto was harsh and unmerciful. However, when word got out about the treatment of the Jews there, Christians and Jews alike protested across the Third Reich. By the end of summer 1942, the Nazis allowed letters and parcels and eased up on the inmates. They quickly learned to use that to their advantage as a propaganda tool.

In 1942 and in 1944, two films were produced in Theresienstadt for the purposes of propaganda. In 1942 the Nazi administration held a contest for best screenplay. In 1944 the famous film director, and Jew, Kurt Gerron was also interned in the ghetto. He was commanded to produce a film. The Nazis built a swimming pool, renovated the facades, provided food and clothing, a park, and entertainment to make it all look so very... appealing. As one friend said, "It sounds worse than a Stephen King story." It was.

At first the ghetto was used as a transit depot for sending Jews and prisoners from the west on to other camps established in the newly won territories of the Reich, mostly Poland. At the end of the war, as the Nazis became trapped between the Soviet and American fronts, the inmates from camps in both the east and west were transferred to Theresienstadt in a final effort to "save" labor resources. However, many of the railroads were sabotaged by resistance fighters, and many of those prisoners were forced on long death marches before—and if—reaching Theresienstadt.

Litoměřice—across the river from Theresienstadt—is a real town in the former Sudetenland, with two mining tunnels nearby. These tunnels were fortified in 1944 by some five hundred prisoners brought in from Dachau. The inmates were ordered to prepare the tunnels to house two factories: a tank motor manufactory and an electrical components factory (today Audi and Osram—although Audi did send their tank

motors to the Richard I tunnel, Osram never made the relocation to the Bohemian district). More prisoners were brought to the camp to work.

These prisoners were placed in a concentration camp not far away. TB and typhus killed thousands between 1944 and 1945. In the chaos, the Litoměřice concentration camp commander released the prisoners by bringing them to the bridge and letting them go. The majority had only one destination available to them: Theresienstadt. Doctors from Prague rushed to the camp to help and faced one of the worst horrors many had witnessed in the war. Widespread disease and epidemics were killing hundreds of people daily. Crime rates in the district escalated, the squalor contributed to the diseases, and there was utter chaos in a multitude of languages for quite some time.

Berlin insisted that the Germans hold Litoměřice. It was the last bridge to the west. As the Germans fled from the Red Tide, they hoped to land in American zones, where they knew they would be treated better, especially the officers. Litoměřice presented their last chance, and it is one theory that some merciful soul—perhaps the concentration camp commander—released the inmates on the bridge before fleeing themselves.

THE JEWISH SITUATION

There are a few things that I want to point out regarding the research conducted on the Jewish aspects in this book. I knew from the offset that I would not be focusing on the family or the Holocaust when I began creating Magda's character. She would be separated from the Jewish family, and all that she could possibly know about them was what might have been

filtered in from the Underground. It was one reason I brought Karol into the story. However, there were other aspects I needed to make sure I had correct before this story could come together.

THE TAUBERS NOT BEING DEPORTED UNTIL SPRING OF 1942

When I read a study about how quite a number of Jews were able to avoid deportation based on their influential status or good connections to Gentiles, the Taubers' story finally had some credence. Also, Theresienstadt was not set up for the ghetto until spring 1942. With the Taubers' influence illustrated in this novel, it was absolutely plausible to deter their internment.

MAGDA AS A *SANDEK*

I am grateful to the several Jewish people who read through the first story I'd written about Magda, especially Penina Scullion. It was quickly clear that not only was the situation illustrated plausible, but the ceremony was accurately depicted. I'm grateful for the feedback and the kind, encouraging words.

KAROL'S ESCAPE FROM THE CATTLE TRAIN

This escape is based on a hodgepodge of different accounts by Jewish eyewitnesses and escapees that I'd collected in my research. Most fascinating were the various oral history platforms. I'm exceptionally grateful to everyone who curates

these stories and makes them available to the public. It's a real treasure and testament to human history.

THE LOCATIONS

Villa Liška is based on Villa Pfaffenhof, located near the Richard I and Richard II tunnels on the mountain of Radobýl. It was the home of the commander of the Litoměřice concentration camp and not the district's Obersturmbannführer.

The abandoned village behind the villa is wholly fictional. There is a village there called Michalovice. I have no idea whether it existed in the Second World War, whether it was abandoned or occupied by Germans, but in this book I needed it to be abandoned.

St. Stephen's cathedral in Litoměřice has catacombs, but the layout and the church's role in this story was wholly fictionalized, as were all the characters. Also, it was nearly impossible to hide in Litoměřice. Most of the Czechs and Slovaks fled the city after it was annexed in 1938. Very few local residents remained, and those that did? They have their own stories.

Though I placed Magda's family in a completely invented rural village of Voštiny, Lidice did exist. The story of that Nazi reprisal is devastating, and the memorial—an entire area of beautiful fields and hills, and a lake and a willow and a running stream—is one of the most heartbreaking I have ever experienced. I felt moved to at least mention this tragic story, and thus placed Magda's family at a distant relative's after their farm was requisitioned by the German regime. This decision was solely based on wanting the reader to be aware of

this event and means no disrespect to those families who were murdered at the hands of Nazis.

The Napola (the elite Nazi school) in Ploskovice also existed. Zlatá Pole, where Magda stole “Hitler’s bicycle,” was completely fictional but the joke came about when my mother was reading one of the drafts and said, “One thing confused me. How did Magda end up stealing Hitler’s bicycle?”

THE SLOVAKIAN UPRISING AND PARTISAN SCENES

In this version of the novel, I expanded great sections of Magda’s and Karol’s time with the resistance and insurgent armies. Although I conducted much research about it, I found it was necessary to take great liberties in illustrating the uprising and the partisan life, which was not an easy decision. I prefer to accurately depict military campaigns and study maps and documentation in great detail, making sure that everything I write is as accurate as possible. I have also unfortunately never been to the Tatra Mountains and used the Carpathian and Alps as my inspiration and I hope—when time permits and travel restrictions ease, that I can spend some time in the areas I had in mind as I wrote. Hence, I apologize in advance for any grave inaccuracies historical experts or locals may find in this story. This is, once again, an area in which I applied the fiction part to my historical fiction license and am exceptionally grateful to have had the opportunity to study at least the very superficial facts about a part of history I previously knew very little about.

THE END OF THE WAR IN LITOMĚŘICE

The meeting in the unspecified Polish guesthouse is loosely based on the Ukrainian research I have done with members of my family. It was of great advantage to have that perspective and to be able to build it into Magda's story.

On May 10, 1945, the Thirty-Third Rifle Guards and the Fifty Guards Army occupied Litoměřice. The locals raided the armories and took some "matters" into their own hands. The National Revolutionary Committee was quickly formed. Whether collaborators were shot on any roads on the Litoměřice outskirts, I cannot say. The scene with Aleš and Renata on the road on this day was, however, based on recently discovered films of reprisals conducted on collaborators. The Czech Republic's media released these to the public in a concerted effort for the country to come to terms with its role in the war's aftermath.

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Special thanks to Ursula Hechenberger-Schwärzler for accompanying me on one of the most enriching road trips of my life. Thanks to my writing colleagues on Facebook and my friends and my family who have volunteered to read so many of the earlier versions and parts of this book, and most-most especially to my husband, who during the intensive time it took me to complete this novel, really did everything to assure I had no distractions and released me from as many household/pet/family burdens as possible.

I am especially indebted to Theresa, who shared her anecdote with me and inspired me to create Magdalena Novák,

as well as the whole cast of characters that sprouted up from that one little discussion. I will miss them. I am further grateful to the Bookouture team and my editor, Cara Chimirri, for giving Magda's story the opportunity for a third makeover and a whole flotilla to reach readers around the world.

To all my friends who felt forsaken during all these rewrites: I shall make it up to you. Promise.

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