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A Gold-colored Background (English with Czech Accent)

Mandy Alyse Kalish
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

A GOLD-COLORED BACKGROUND

(ENGLISH WITH CZECH ACCENT)

by

Mandy Alýse Kalish

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ABSTRACT

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By

Mandy Alýse Kalish

Richard Wiley, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of Creative Writing
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

As part of the degree requirement for an MFA in Creative Writing I am submitting an unpublished, original novel as my thesis. The novel is a first-person narrative of a woman from the Czech Republic. As the story develops, Zlata, the main character, comes to Las Vegas with her husband. The two eventually win a large jackpot, at which point the husband dies of heart failure and Zlata inherits all of the winnings. She stays in Las Vegas and eventually teams up with a tiny busboy to design and open her own hotel/casino on the strip. This novel is meant to encompass the Czech spirit while also telling a story that portrays the American dream. I hope to explore both foreign and domestic perspectives while telling a compelling, exciting and resonant fictional story.

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CHAPTER 1

BRNO

In Brno, the second-largest city in the Czech Republic and the city where I lived as a girl, there is a church called the Church of St. James. At the top of one of the high gothic arches is a little stone man bending over, aiming his bare butt at a rival church on Petrov Hill. This bare butt, built by the stonemason as an act of revenge against his competitor, has lasted hundreds of years. There are other examples like this in Brno. At the Old Town Hall, an ornate stone building, the master builder felt betrayed by the townspeople before he finished the project, so at the peak of the main portal, he told his workers to twist the center stone so it would be forever crooked, and no one has since made it straight. Even the bells of Petrov Church always ring noon when it is only eleven because long ago this simple trick made the invading Swedes retreat and saved Brno from being conquered and burned to the ground. All of this is to say that a Czech person from Brno does not easily let go of the wrongs or rights of the past, that we set our most meaningful moments into stone or ritual, whether bare bottoms or bells: we will laugh, we will cry, we may even move away, but we will never, ever forget. I moved way from Brno a long time ago, and after many years in Las Vegas, after opening the Bohemian Hotel and Casino and making it a success, it's time to set my story into stone before I kick the big chicken, or the big bucket, or whatever it is Americans claim to kick when they die.

Like everyone of my generation, I must use my imagination to remember, unlike the children of today whose every moment is captured by tiny implanted cameras. For them, remembering shall consist of watching their lives as if they are, and always were, just observers. I feel privileged to remember and relate my past experiences in the way I wish; it's only fair for the past to be like the future: a matter of the imagination. Of course, there are certain modern technologies I do enjoy. My little speech-to-text recorder allows me to write my story while walking in the woods, which is one of my favorite activities. As I've gotten older I've become more reflective, and was intrigued when my lover gave me this brilliant device and pointed me towards the woods. I feel at home here among the birds and the smell of cedar, oak, birch, pine, though I don't think I've ever felt more at home than when I was a girl walking in the woods of Southern Moravia.

As a meek little girl, I spent my childhood hiding behind my mother's meaty leg. When she took me along to town to buy produce for the restaurant, I would cling to her; when people stared and my mother smacked at my hands to try and shake me loose, I wouldn't let go. She had to drag me along while she shopped and walked home. I only let go once we were inside the restaurant, where she would take my chin in her hand and say: *I'm too old to walk around with a monkey stuck to my leg.* On Saturday mornings my father took the wheelbarrow to town to buy the meat for the week. He would call for me to come with him but I never went because his legs were too skinny to hide behind. I stayed with my mother and helped roll out the dough for her famous poppy seed kolacky, which is one of our best-selling breads at the Bohemian Cafe.

My parents' restaurant was busy on weekends. I liked to hide behind the bar and

watch my mother serve beer to the regulars, big men who worked at the textile factory up the road and who talked about the years when the communist cowards had control. Our restaurant, even though it was small, had lots of tables and always smelled like hot goulash. On Saturday nights, a beautiful gypsy woman performed traditional dances on a small stage my father built in the corner of the dining room. She wore tiny cymbals on her fingertips and had the prettiest long hair I'd ever seen: black and shiny as mice eyes. She danced like a hypnotized snake, swaying back and forth to the slow rhythms. After dancing, she stood at the end of the bar and had her dinner, sometimes glancing at me and smiling, which made my heart rate race and my cheeks burn. I only remember her speaking to me once, just before she left Brno. After sopping up the last of her stew with a piece of bread, she looked at me with her warm brown eyes and said: *you can only learn what it is you want when you leave the place you call home.* Of course this is the standard gypsy motto, but to me it seemed like a prophecy from an exotic beauty. At the time, I couldn't imagine leaving home. I wanted only to be with my mother, and thought I would grow up to be just like her, serving beers in the same restaurant to the same group of people and that was the extent of my ambition.

At school I was an average student because I never spoke; I sat by myself, playing with the ends of my pigtails, which my mother made every morning by parting my hair down the middle and pulling the halves into ultra-tight braids; part of the reason I didn't speak was because I could barely move my face. After school I walked home to my only friend, Oskar, our big sheepdog. When Oskar saw me coming he would gallop towards me like a pony. I'd yell for him to stop but he came full speed and knocked me down, licking my face until I laughed so hard I couldn't breathe. My parents would be at the

restaurant and my older brother, Tomas, would be at soccer practice or with a girl. As we got older, Tomas sometimes brought his girlfriends to the barn behind our house, and I would sneak up to the dirty window to watch them kiss or take off their clothes and roll around, which I thought looked rather silly. When Tomas graduated, he moved to an apartment in town and we saw him only on weekends when he came to the restaurant for meals.

After Tomas left, instead of watching his soccer practice or spying on him in the barn, I spent a lot of time walking with Oskar in the woods. We both favored a particular tree, bigger around and taller than the rest, with more space around it than any other tree in those woods. Our walks always led to that tree: to Oskar marking it with never-ending streams of urine, and to me, looking up and feeling impossibly small. I loved each season for its variety of birds. In winter, white and brown geese flew overhead in great arrow-shaped flocks, along with Heron, and the ever-present quacking of ducks transfixed us. Spring and summer brought out all ten varieties of European Woodpecker, with their incessant tapping and multi-colored heads. In autumn we caught rare glimpses of raptors, eagles and falcons circling overhead, and year-round we heard little starlings and warblers filling the woods with more sound than seemed possible.

As I look back now, I think that surely I must have been lonely, but it's not a feeling I remember. The time I spent alone was occupied by observing everything around me. And even though I didn't excel in school, I did pay attention, especially in history class. As the other girls stood together in giggling groups, I sat alone under my favorite tree, eating my lunch and reading books about ancient history. Even when I watched Tomas practice soccer with his team, I brought along my books. My favorite ancient heroine

was Libuse, a female ruler of Czechoslovakia in a time when magic was not only a belief, but a way of life. As a gifted prophet, Libuse saw visions of the future and won over her father and the Czech people with her fairness and beauty. She married Premysl, who became king and started a dynasty that lasted hundreds of years. I spent many hours closing my eyes and trying to summon visions of the future. I suppose if I'd seen myself as I am now, a crispy old raisin with hair as white as a baby's new teeth, I'd have had a good laugh. Or a cry.

When I was done with high school I didn't want to leave home; I didn't know what I wanted, really, but my mother said I had to find work even if I still lived at home. By that time I'd grown tired of the restaurant and it had been many years since I'd clung to my mother's leg. Though both my parents asked me to work in the restaurant, I felt bored by the idea and decided to look for a job on my own. Since my only strong interest had always been history books, I went to ask for work at the Brno library. Old Lady Barbora was the head librarian and even though she seemed to despise me, she gave me a job. When I asked for work, she said: "Well, it's a library, not a beauty show, so I suppose you'll do," and she put me in charge of re-shelving. If there weren't any books to re-shelve, I had to start at the A's and make sure the books were in order. Barbora sat at the checkout desk glaring at people as if she were a statue of scrutiny. I think she was always drunk because her breath smelled of brandy and even her *sshh* sounded slurred.

The library, like most places in Brno, looked historic. I used to admire the gothic spires of the church across the street and up the road was the Town Hall, with the famous Brno Dragon that always made me laugh because it wasn't a dragon at all, but a large, stuffed alligator that hung from three iron chains over the entranceway. I liked the library

because of its high archways and long, rectangular windows where visible light rays came in dusty yellow beams. The building was old, but in the generation before mine, when the communists had control, it was boarded up and all the books were sealed in boxes. The regime didn't allow people to read or to use their minds, only to work and work harder: even worthless books were banned, so that in the second decade after the revolution, people still came and crowded the library just because they could. I wonder if I had been born earlier, if I would have become loyal to the party out of fear, or if I would have married a Russian and spied on my neighbors. It is not only my parents' generation I am glad to have escaped, but also my grandparents' generation, when the Germans invaded and controlled Czechoslovakia. It is a part of my mother's dark past, when she was a girl and the Gestapo came for the Jews who were her neighbors.

My mother lived with her parents and younger brother in the hills east of Brno. Her father raised hogs, cows, chickens and rabbits. He was friendly with the Jews who had a farm on the other side of the hill. My mother played in the woods with one of the young Jewish girls. They climbed trees together like boys and threw stones into the lake. Then the Gestapo came and ordered each Jewish family to pack one small suitcase, even if there were ten people in the family. *One shirt, one pant, and one pair of socks per person* they said: *you'll be lucky to live long enough to need more.* My grandfather heard about this and became possessed with rage. My mother said he took his axe and destroyed five wooden porch chairs, the porch steps and half of the porch when he finally just broke down and sobbed. The next day he went to the neighbor's farm to try and save them from the Gestapo. *They are Czech before they are Jewish* my grandfather said to the SS soldiers, but one of them pointed a gun at my grandfather and said he would shoot

and then hunt down my grandfather's family unless he left them alone. My grandfather had no choice but to turn away and let them take the Jews, who were put on a train and, as far as my mother knows, were all dead within a year. After that my grandfather was not the same. It was as if his eyes couldn't focus. When the Germans were defeated in 1945 and marched out of Sudentenland and 800,000 of them were slaughtered, my grandfather stopped speaking altogether.

Not long after that, on a Sunday when my mother was still quite young, my grandmother, Babiĉka, took my mother's younger brother, Peter, to church, leaving my mother at home because of a stomachache. My grandfather Karel hadn't gone to church since the Germans invaded. When my mother went into the kitchen that morning for a glass of water, she found her father with his head facedown on the table, dead. Maybe he didn't know my mother was still home or maybe he wanted her to find him. He'd taken rodent poison and poured it in a fifth of whiskey, then drank the entire bottle. My mother told me this story sometimes when we rolled out the kolacky on Saturdays. Even when she talked of finding her father dead from suicide, my mother, with her long, flowered dresses and flabby arms, still managed to seem cheerful. *I didn't cry*, she'd say as if still surprised by her reaction. *I cleaned him up and I walked to the church and whispered in my mama's ear. I felt I should be strong for my mother and my brother, who cried like babies when they came home and saw his body.* Then she would sprinkle poppy seeds on the dough and smile as if she'd just told me her favorite fairy tale.

Maybe it was my mother's disposition that kept me from really feeling the tragedy of her stories; it wasn't until many years later that I actually felt sadness for my grandfather and his loss. In fact, I don't remember feeling much of anything as a child. I see myself

as a creature made up mostly of eyes and of ears, a creature whose voice and whose heart were slow to develop. At the time, it was enough to listen and to try and imagine my mother as a girl.

After my grandfather died, Babička sold all the animals except the rabbits and began making dresses to earn money. She hired a giantess from Slovakia to help with the children. My mother laughed when she talked about Tana, the giantess, who walked my mother and her little brother, Peter, to school every morning, their tiny hands barely fitting around Tana's huge pinkies. No one ever teased my mother because all the kids knew the giantess would come find them and squash them like peas. Looking back, I think my mother spoke more about her nanny than her own mother. After Karel's suicide, Babička became a bitter widow. She lost sight in her left eye, which clouded over with a thick, opaque paste, and she became mean-spirited. Perhaps my mother's strong, cheerful nature arose out of childhood necessity. Ask anyone from Eastern Europe to talk about family history and you will uncover one strange, tragic story after another, especially in the Czech Republic, where we have been conquered and abandoned again and again. As an innocent young woman working in the library, even during a time of peace, I too had lessons to learn about loss.

CHAPTER 2

FRANZ

When I started working at the library, I began to notice a change in myself. At school, I'd seen so many girls who cared only about chasing boys. They talked all the time about love and I thought they were dumb, with their ridiculous blood-colored lipsticks and their loud-smacking gum. Once out of high school, however, since I no longer had to think about school or about finding work, I needed something new to think about, and what better than boys? Of course, not many boys my age spent time in the library, so I dreamt up imaginary boys: smart, clean-shaven boys with perfect straight teeth who were always telling me how pretty my pigtails looked and how good I was at reciting the alphabet. Nowadays, it means something entirely different to have a virtual boyfriend, but back then it was all very innocent.

In my second summer at the library, one of my brother's classmates, Franz, began coming to study in the afternoons. I remembered watching Franz play soccer when we were in high school. He never lost his temper or tried to show off like my brother or the other boys. After practice, instead of going and sitting with the girls who chewed gum on the sidelines, Franz was the only one who stayed on the field and kept shooting at the goal until it got dark. I liked him because he seemed shy and humble, he wore circular glasses that magnified his kind brown eyes, he was clean-shaven and he had perfect straight teeth. Sometimes I stared at him without even realizing, until he'd look up and

smile and I'd feel my damn face turn the color of a hot beet. I was a fool for his tan shorts and soccer legs, for the way he sat reading books all day without talking to anyone. Finally, one afternoon while I pretended to straighten up the table across from his, he spoke.

"Excuse me," he said. "Don't I know you?"

"I'm Tomas's sister, Zlata."

"Oh right," he said. "What's Tomas doing these days?"

"He moved into town."

"Still with a new girl every week?"

"Of course," I said.

I remember it was raining that day. Drops of water raced in erratic streaks down the two-story windows.

"Want to sit?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, and then sat.

He smiled and I noticed for the first that he had small dimples in his cheeks. Well that was it: I was in love. Franz asked how my parents' restaurant was doing and told me he was studying to be a professor of international relations. I think I blushed the whole time, and after a few minutes Barbora came with her sour brandy breath and told me to get back to work. The rest of that afternoon I thought of my brother and his girlfriends rolling around in the barn and my heart beat faster. I tried to think of Franz and me in the barn but I couldn't quite imagine him nude, or how it would feel or what exactly we would do with each other's bodies. The next day, Franz walked up to where I sat sorting books and asked if I wanted to take a walk in the park after work. I said yes and dropped

a book on my foot.

It was about this time when my mother started getting phone calls from a man with a raspy voice. The first time he called my parents were still at the restaurant. When he asked for my mother, I said she wasn't at home, then went back to watching the television and soon forgot about the call. Later that night, when we were all sleeping, the phone rang again. By the time I ran into the hall and picked up, my mother had already answered. I stayed quiet and listened to the conversation.

"I've been talking to Karel," the man said. The only Karel I knew of was my mother's father.

"You're drunk," she said.

"He wants you to know something. Your husband is a liar."

"Shut up," my mother snapped.

"And your son--"

"You shut up!" she said and slammed down the phone.

The next morning my mother seemed disturbed. She dropped an egg on the white tile floor while making breakfast and stood there staring at the broken yellow yolk like it was an omen. Maybe it was. Maybe I should have seen the runny mess as my heart and the floor that broke it as Franz, but no one thinks like that, especially a young, stupid girl in love.

"You're so easy to talk to," Franz said on our first date in the park.

Of course I was easy to talk to: I hardly spoke. He talked about his studies, about his father's constant drinking and his mother's affairs, about his dream of becoming a professor and making a living with his mind instead of his hands, about how shy he

usually was with girls and how I made him feel like he could just be himself. He held my tight pigtails in his hands and said he wanted to set them free. He told me I was beautiful like a train at half speed, which made my heart beat faster even though I had no idea what it meant. Soon we went to the park every night, and Franz would talk and talk and I would admire his strong legs and small hands.

"Why won't you let your hair loose?" he asked one night.

I looked down and thought for a moment.

"It would look too wild."

"That's why you're my little half-speed train," he said, taking off his glasses and kissing me. It was the first of many kisses, and one night, between kisses, I told Franz I loved him. He blushed and said he just might love me too. That night I ran home and tackled Oskar for a change, and when my mother and father came home, I told them all about Franz. They were tired, but they took out a bottle of Slivovice and we drank a toast. While my father re-filled our glasses, the phone rang and we all froze. After the third ring, my father slammed his fist on the table and stomped over to the phone.

"No, she will not come to the phone," he said. "Karel is dead! It was none of your business then and it's none of your business now. Is that some kind of threat? Call here again and I'll break both your arms!" When my father hung up, our celebration was clearly over.

A week later, my brother Tomas came to the house while our parents were out and told me his life was over.

"Three different girls say they're having my baby," he said with his face in his hands.

"Is it true?" I asked.

"It's possible."

Sunlight came in through the blinds, adding stripes to the round kitchen table. Tomas had never spoken to me about his life before and I wondered if it was my new relationship with Franz that made me seem like more of an equal. Then he asked if I even knew how babies were made.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "They're made from you sticking your prick in every girl in Brno." Again he put his face in his hands and said his life was over.

"Really, Tomas, you're twenty-five. Having kids is not the end of the world."

"Three kids at once, and no wife?" He stood and paced, running his hands through his greasy black hair. After a minute he went to the refrigerator and took out a roll of salami.

"Can't you marry one of the girls?"

"Which one?" he asked, ripping off a bite of salami.

"Isn't there one you like best?"

"No," he said, still chewing. "I like them all but I could never pick only one. Women are like--" and he looked at the meat in his hand, shrugged, and bit off another piece.

"Then that's what you get," I snapped. "Women are like flowers, Tomas, not meat. If you cut one at the stem to use it only for show, then you will have its beauty but only for a short time until it dries up and dies in your hands. But if you take the whole plant to admire its beauty but also its roots, its thorns, then it will give to you every day, not just one, and you will never own it but it will always be yours."

"That's the problem with women," he said. "Lectures. The only thing you know

about sex is what you learned from spying on me in the barn."

I almost gagged on my tongue. He took another bite of salami, put it back in the refrigerator and drank from a full bottle of milk. When he sat back down he looked like a boy again, with white milk drying on his upper lip.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I don't care," he said with a wave of his hand. "What should I do?"

"You're going to be a daddy," I said. "Three at once."

It turned out only one of the girls was telling the truth, a stocky blonde named Dominika whose father owned a small bank. By the time Dominika's belly grew big, Tomas had taken a job as a teller at her father's bank and she moved into his apartment. While things for my brother seemed to be going well, Franz grew more and more distant. Our walks were filled with less talk and more silence. Then, just before my nephew was born, Franz brought me to the park and told me he'd been accepted at Oxford and was leaving the following week. He said he was sorry and that he'd known for months but didn't want to ruin our fun by telling me sooner. I spat in his face and ran all the way home. It wasn't until I was safe in my room and lying on my bed that I realized I'd spat on him. At first I laughed, and then, of course, I cried.

I only cried once over Franz, before my sadness changed to disgust. He was a weak, pathetic boy and I'd been weak my whole life. Franz had never loved me. He hadn't offered to stay or to take me with him; he only wanted me around before his real desires could be met. And what were my desires? I couldn't stay content with my life in Brno, working at the library, chasing after storybook love only to find a faint-hearted fool and settle down to raise his fat babies for the rest of my life. Looking in the mirror, I saw for

the first time a spark of defiance in my eyes and I liked it. I loosened my pigtails and shook my hair wild. *Nice to meet you*, I said, and went downstairs to the kitchen where my mother and father sat at the table sipping their tea. I grabbed a roll of salami from the fridge and took a giant bite.

"What's this?" my mother asked. "Where's my cute little girl with the tails?"

"I don't know," I said, ripping off another bite. "We lost touch."

Just then the phone rang. I walked quickly to the receiver. It was the raspy-voiced man again.

"Zlata," he said, "you must come to Prague."

I said nothing and hung up the phone.

"Was it him?" my father asked.

"No," I lied. "Nobody there."

A week later, at the same kitchen table, I told my parents I was moving to Prague. My mother gave my father a worried look.

"Baby birds grow up and fly away," he said, putting his hand on my mother's back.

"Do you remember the gypsy woman who used to dance at the restaurant?" my mother asked me.

"Of course."

"She told me one night that she saw your future. If you left here by your twenty-second birthday, you would be rich and powerful, but also you would live far away."

"Prague isn't far," I said.

"No, it's not," my father said, his hand making slow circles on my mother's back.

"I'm twenty years old," I said. "I'll go where I please."

Two days before I left, Tomas called to say Dominika had given birth to a baby boy, Milan, and asked us to come to the hospital. My parents closed the restaurant early and we drove in our old brown station wagon. At the hospital, my parents smiled while Dominika nursed her writhing, red-faced little boy. My newfound defiance prevented me from feeling joy. I stood in the corner with my arms crossed, thinking how ugly and alien newborns were, like needy worms brought into a selfish world by selfish people for selfish reasons. When the baby fell asleep, Tomas got on one knee and asked Dominika to be his wife. My mother squealed and everybody clapped but me. Before Dominika could answer I walked out into the lobby and waited for my parents to drive us home. The next night I boarded a bus for Prague and was not sad to say goodbye to anyone but Oskar. He knew I was leaving because he hid under my bed while I packed and wouldn't come out. When I got on my knees to say goodbye, he whimpered like a puppy and barely lifted his head. Three weeks later, my parents told me, he ran away.

CHAPTER 3

PRAGUE

A bald man sat in front of me on the bus from Brno to Prague. Instead of looking out the window into the passing night, I stared the whole time at his head. By the end of the ride I knew every dent, every detail of his imperfect scalp and was disappointed to see him go. When I got off the bus, I realized I knew nobody in Prague and that I needed to find a place to stay for the night. My first impression outside the station was that the streets were dirtier than the streets in Brno. I wandered around Na Prikope, which was crowded with tourists, and felt like a foreigner. My suitcase's wheels went *clack clack clack* on the stone streets. At one point, I took a wrong turn and ended up in a dark, dead-end alley. When I turned around to leave, a bald man stood before me, blocking my way. I wondered if he was the bald man from the bus, but there was no light in the alley to get a close enough look. He told me to give him my money. I laughed. He took out a knife. I opened my mouth to scream and he came towards me, looking irritated, and that is all I remember.

Many years later, it's easy to say that even the worst things that happen eventually lead to something good, but I am probably just lucky: so many people suffer and never get a single good thing in return. Regardless, don't ever go into a dark alley alone at night, especially around Na Prikope.

The next thing I felt was my body floating in darkness and an abstract sense of

discomfort, but no acute pain. In this long drifting, this weightless space, a voice began speaking: it was the raspy-voiced man who'd been calling my mother. *He met the tortured children and held them in his arms. They were afraid but he told them they were forever safe and the men who did evil, who hurt their families, would be punished. He helped them understand they were dead but their souls lived on and they would see their families again, if their families had also been killed, but first they must rest and take comfort in his love. He watched you and he saw your defiance and he knew it would not lead to good. He watched you from the day you were born and your brother as well and he saw your father betraying your mother. He knew she did not cry when she found his body, not because she was not sad but because she was strong.* The voice filled me with comfort, until one day I opened my eyes and saw a man with a beard sitting next to my bed. He said he was my Uncle Peter, and because the light in the room glowed so brightly yellow, I thought perhaps I was dead. Of course I wasn't dead, but I might have been if someone hadn't found me bleeding to death in the alley, a long cut on my left cheek and a deep gash down my side. All that for a suitcase full of crappy clothes. The bald man didn't look in my boot, where my money stayed hidden. What a stupid man; no wonder he carried such a sharp knife.

When they released me from the hospital, Uncle Peter brought me to his apartment on top of a hill in the Vysehrad.

"The Vysehrad was the first neighborhood of Prague," he said as he helped me up the stairs. "King Premisyl built his castle here, long before Prague castle was built: you're young, but you know about the Premisyl princes?"

"Of course," I said. "I used to love Lubise and thinking about those magical days."

When we got inside his apartment, the first thing I noticed was the amazing view.

"What is that place?" I said, looking out at an eerily dark field across the street with hundreds of statues.

"The National Cemetary," he said, turning on the lights and motioning for me to sit on the couch.

"I'll make some tea," he said, "and you should call your parents."

I called and my father answered the phone. I told him I was feeling better and that Uncle Peter had brought me to his home until I recovered.

"You can't stay there," my father said.

"Why not?"

"It's for your own good."

"But he came to the hospital every day, for my own good."

"I won't talk to you while you stay there."

"Give me a reason."

"Just do as I say!" he yelled.

"No!" I yelled and hung up.

I heard Uncle Peter fill the teakettle in the kitchen. Out the window, dark clouds expanded in the sky like spilled ink. Weather changes fast in Prague. Across the street, beyond the cemetery, a steeple spire stood tall, with a cross on top where a group of small birds circled as if it were their duty to create a constant ring. I felt so empty that day, unsure whether it was the traces of pain medication or the knowledge that I had no plan for my new life in Prague. Uncle Peter came in with a tray of tea.

"My father doesn't want me to stay here," I said.

"What do you want?"

"Why do they hate you?"

Uncle Peter stroked his beard and watched the weather change.

"I won't tell you now," he said. "When you're better, then you will know the truth. But now," he said, slapping his palms against his thighs, "now you are in Prague. This is a magical city full of history and adventure. In Prague, we know how to have fun! I'll take you to the castle, to the catacombs; when you're better we'll go out dancing. Next month my group plays at an outdoor festival. Three of us big guys; we play accordions and sing old folk songs hip-hop style. You'll love it."

"I have to find work," I said.

"When the scab on your cheek becomes a scar, then you can look for work."

I reached up and touched the scab.

"Scar?" I said.

"Come now," Uncle Peter said, getting up and walking to the stereo. "Scars add mystery, and beauty is mystery!" He put a tape in the player. "This is my group. We wear overalls with no shirts underneath, so our hairy boobs can bounce around for the ladies." The music started playing and Uncle Peter jumped around the room, singing along with the words. I tapped my feet to the beat and watched Uncle Peter. He was a big man and as he stomped to the music, I couldn't help but laugh.

"Good," he yelled, "we must laugh, we must laugh, we must laugh!"

For the first few days, I was still weak and went to bed just after dinner. In the mornings, when I woke, Uncle Peter would be gone, though I wasn't sure if he left late at night or early in the morning. I had so little energy that most of the time I just sat by the

window, watching the weather change. Uncle Peter's apartment was on the fourth floor of an old building, high enough so I could see a part of the Vltava river from the window; I liked watching the reflection of buildings and bridges warp on the slow-moving water. Looking at the changing sky, I tried to find clues in the shapes of the clouds as to what my purpose might be. It spooked me that I'd awoken from near death without any sense of what I wanted to do with my life. The spark of defiance I'd felt after Franz left me, which had motivated me to move to Prague, seemed long gone.

Uncle Peter came home between two and three each afternoon with cheese, bread and salami. If I asked where he'd been, he'd say *even the lazy must work.* At five o'clock, his favorite show came on: a local news program with a special segment called "Hana's Hollywood Lip-Talk," which sounds more melodious in Czech and basically means gossip. Prague had become a popular place to shoot movies, so there was never a shortage of celebrity "news" for Hana's reports. I didn't understand why anyone cared about Hollywood gossip; I disliked western culture and how it invaded even our small country, but Uncle Peter loved the show and even forbade me from speaking while it was on. Hana had perfect, plump lips, smooth skin, big brown eyes and a high-pitched voice I found extremely annoying. She talked about star sightings like it was the most important news in the world. The way she flipped her short hair, with a quick whip of the neck as if trying to get it out of her face even though it always stayed in perfect position, seemed completely vain. I felt great relief at five-thirty when the program ended.

When I started feeling stronger and less content to sit and stare out the window, I took short walks in the neighborhood. Once in awhile I was tempted to go through Uncle Peter's desk drawers or to sneak in his bedroom and look for clues as to why my parents

disliked him. But I resisted the temptation. I tried satisfying myself by studying the old pictures on the living room wall: black and white snapshots of Uncle Peter and my mother as children on the rabbit farm, a photo of Tana the giantess standing next to what appeared to be a tiny tree, a photo of my grandmother and grandfather on their wedding day, my grandmother looking young and vacant, my grandfather staring with eyes as intense as an owl's. Looking at the same old pictures can only last for so many hours. It's true: one afternoon I broke down and searched through the drawers of Uncle Peter's desk.

At first, I found nothing of interest: receipts, roadmaps, train schedules. Then, in a bottom drawer, I found an envelope marked *Private.* Inside were pictures of various gravestones, one of them my grandfather's and the others with names I didn't know. Uncle Peter also had an expired security i.d. from a cemetery, with a picture of him without the beard and looking much thinner and more serious, almost crazed. Obviously, my Uncle Peter had a morbid fascination, which made me wonder even more where he went late at night. I decided to take a nap after lunch so that in the evening, when Uncle Peter left, I could sneak out and follow him. I replaced everything in his desk. When he came home that afternoon, I smiled and ate my lunch as usual, listening to his stories and nodding, and then excused myself for a nap.

"You feel weak?" he asked.

"Just tired."

"But you've been looking stronger. I thought we'd go out."

"Not today," I said, "but soon."

When I woke up later it was almost dark. Uncle Peter had just watched Hana's show

and was in the kitchen cooking supper. I went in and asked if he needed help.

"No," he said. "Sit, relax. You probably helped out a lot at your mother's restaurant."

"You should have come to visit."

He was concentrating on slicing the pink meat of a chicken breast.

"If they invited me, I would go."

"Why don't they?"

"That, my dear, is for another day."

Not long after dinner, I pretended to go to bed. At ten-thirty I heard Uncle Peter leave and I followed. I was sure he was going to a graveyard. After walking down the hill, he turned onto a narrow road. He took so many turns and small alleys that I was afraid I would never find my way home on my own, but soon we were behind the big museum and walking towards Wenceslaus Square. The square was crowded and well lit by neon marquis. Uncle Peter walked into a door under a marquee that read: All Nite Girls. Two men stood outside in bright orange vests and handed out flyers. I stood there for some time, watching people pass by, and then went across the street to buy a headscarf before going inside the All Nite Girls. Inside was a big, square room with a bar along one wall and women standing against the other three walls. Men stood, drinking at the bar or browsing the women. Once in awhile couples went up one of the many dark stairways. I didn't see Uncle Peter, so I ordered vodka and stood at the bar, my head still hidden beneath the scarf.

The place smelled like cigar smoke and damp socks. Most of the customers were middle-aged men, though there were several small groups of young men drinking shots at

the bar, being loud and obnoxious. The women along the walls, for the most part, had long legs and short skirts; their faces looked more Russian than Czech, with dominant eyebrows and high, narrow cheekbones. I imagined myself standing on display against the wall, my breasts spilling out of a low-cut top, my legs slightly spread, pale thighs exposed, and rather than feeling uncomfortable, I was surprised to feel a surge of excitement. I ordered another vodka. About ten minutes later, I saw Uncle Peter; he came down one of the stairways with a very drunk man slung over his shoulder. He carried the man out the front door and dropped him on sidewalk. Some of the girls. clapped when Uncle Peter came back inside.

"You girls have any problems," he said with his usual smile and a playful bow, "call Peter!"

"And what if the man won't pay?" asked a tall girl.

"Call Peter!"

"What if the man gets violent?" asked a thick girl.

"Peter!"

"If he throws up in our lap?" asked a short girl.

"Then you're on your own!" he said with a laugh.

Still chuckling, Uncle Peter came over to the bar. He asked for a beer and made a toast to freedom with two other men.

"My son asks me about the communist days," the first man said. "I tell him it's not worth remembering."

"Not bad times now, ay Peter?" the second man said.

"Not bad at all," Uncle Peter agreed.

"Guarding pretty girls is a little different from guarding old Russian pigs?"

"Why bring it up?" Uncle Peter said.

"How could you work for those pigs?" the first man said, slamming his pint on the bar. "Swine! I almost starved to death rather than spy on my neighbors!"

"You're too fat to starve to death," said the second man.

"Our past is our past," Uncle Peter said as a curvy young girl walked by.

"And an ass is an ass," said the first man, finishing his beer and chasing after the girl.

"Well, back to work," Uncle Peter said to his remaining friend. "And don't cause any trouble tonight, Milos, or you'll be banned for another month," and with that, Uncle Peter left the room and I was free to go home.

The next day, Uncle Peter came home early and empty-handed.

"Something tells me you're feeling better," he said. "Put on your walking shoes."

We walked that day to the Mala Strana, below the castle, and crossed a bridge to the Rudolfinum and Karlovy University. Uncle Peter took me to the Jewish Quarter, which was cramped and depressing, as if the holocaust still hung in the air; we went to the Staremesto, Old Town Square, which was packed with tourists since it was a beautiful summer afternoon. While the tourists stood in a herd waiting for the old clock's toy skeleton to ring in the hour, Uncle Peter and I admired a stone church across the way, with its golden oval on top catching the sun and reflecting a bright yellow that seemed to say "God is in."

"You are like that," Uncle Peter said to me, because in Czech, Zlata means golden. We saw Kafka's old home and the surreal museum, the Black Madonna building and the Dancing Building, swaying as if two figures joined together in moving harmony, both

buildings examples of how cubist architecture had thrived in Prague. It seemed for every old building or alleyway we passed, Uncle Peter had a story: "This is where the real puppet theatre began, in a tiny pub that used to be where that cafe is now; if you wanted the best homemade dumplings and roast pork in Prague, you knocked three times on that door and they invited you in for dinner at six every night. On Saturdays, that place was closed, but if you waited until a red light flashed in the window, they let in five people at a time and had underground meetings."

When the sun started setting and the streetlamps came on, we boarded a trolley and crossed the Vltava again, heading up to the castle. I thought we would get off to watch the lights turn on for the night, but we kept riding down the hill behind the castle, through some woods and into another, more industrial part of Prague that seemed a bit like Brno. We got off and walked several blocks until we were standing in front of a large concrete building. We sat on a bench and watched young people come and go in groups.

"What is this place?" I asked. By then it was well after nightfall and the building seemed shrouded in sinister shadow.

"A dormitory," he said.

"You know someone who lives here?"

"During the communist occupation," he said, looking at the ground, "this was an interrogation center. They made the rooms into cells and brought people in to question their allegiance to the party and to get them to report on their co-workers, their neighbors, their families. They tortured people, peeled off their fingernails. They blackmailed you to make you work for the party. To me, they said they would take away your parents' restaurant if I didn't help them, so I agreed and became a security guard for this building.

I stood at the door, making sure no one left or came in without permission. I am sure many people have never forgotten my face. We remember but we pretend to forget; that is what it means to be Czech. And your father dislikes me because he knows I worked for the regime, though he doesn't know why."

"You should tell him."

"Family shouldn't have to explain."

"Then why are you telling me?"

"Because you're here and because your mind is still open. And because I know you are curious about me," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"How do you know that?"

"You cannot work security for thirty years and not know when a clumsy girl follows you on the street!"

I stared hard at my shoes.

"Beautiful scarf, by the way," he said. "Your mother used to play dress up with our mother's scarves when we were kids. She thought it made her look grown up, but put a fancy scarf on a goose and you still have a goose."

"I looked in your desk," I blurted. "When did you work at the graveyard?"

"I only volunteer information," he said, standing to leave. "I am never coerced."

CHAPTER 4

CHATEAU

Yesterday, I went to the doctor for a routine physical, and instead of peering into my ears, throat and nose with a pen-light, as they did decades ago, he injected me with hundreds of tiny nanobiobots to circulate in my blood and take thousands of internal imprints. I don't know if this is just another way to charge rich people too much money, or if medicine has truly advanced, but I do know I'm in excellent health for my age. When nanomedicine got popular years ago and people started freezing their genetic age, I thought it was a ridiculous thing to do: why prolong our natural lives? For a few more years of joy and pain, slightly postponing our inevitable decay? The minute I start falling apart, I'm going the way of my grandfather, Karel: downing a cocktail of whiskey and poison. No one wants to end up a drooling, wrinkled, decrepit heap. I'd rather die with dignity tomorrow than in ten years with some stranger wiping my saggy bottom. I never used to care about dignity; all I used to want was direction. When you get to be my age, though, there's only one direction left to go, dignity notwithstanding.

The night of Uncle Peter's tour, after he went off to work, I felt restless and decided to go up to the castle. Even though it was a warm, clear night, I was the only person walking up the long stairway. Once at the top, I had the magical view to myself, but it did nothing to help my mood. Something felt wrong. It wasn't that I wanted to leave Prague or that I wanted something different: I didn't know what I wanted. I had left Brno

as an act of defiance, but after the attack, as I mentioned, the sense of defiance disappeared. I searched for it that night, but I only felt lost. Hours passed while I sat at the edge of the hill, looking for answers in the twinkling lights. Lights are so simple, I thought. They are either on, or they are off. Going back to being a good, dim girl wouldn't do. I decided it was time to take risks, to have fun: to live for the simple, electric charge like a light in the night.

It was close to dawn when I got home. I slept until noon and went shopping. Replacing my stolen clothes became my first adventure. On my list of things to buy was a switchblade so I'd never be defenseless again. With my savings, I bought sexy clothes that would have made my mother blush. Then, as if I'd done it a million times before, I went into a makeup shop and bought eye shadow, rouge and the reddest lipstick I could find. For my last stop, I picked out a switchblade with a golden handle and a blade sharp enough to skin a bald man. Walking home with my arms full of packages, I was so excited I didn't pay attention to the upcoming curb and tripped, falling and scattering my bags, but even that couldn't ruin my mood.

After a nap, I put on one of my new outfits and got ready for the night. My plan was to walk around the old town and find a crowded bar or club where I could ask for work. I wanted to be in the middle of the action and I would insist on a job, I would not leave without work; I would get a job that very night. When I finished getting ready, I heard something break and went to the kitchen to see what had happened. Uncle Peter was sweeping up shards from a broken dish.

"Where are you going dressed like that?" he asked without looking up.

"It's time to find work."

He looked up with an expression devoid of the usual joy.

"You went shopping?"

"Someone stole my suitcase, remember?"

"Of course I remember. I came to the hospital, remember?"

"How did you know I was in the hospital? I came to Prague, someone attacked me, I woke up and you were at my bedside. How did you know I was there?"

Uncle Peter sat down at the table.

"What do you know about your grandfather?" he asked.

"He liked animals."

"Did you know about his obsession with death?"

"No."

"He used to take me to the cemetery and make me lie on the graves and shut my eyes. He said if we were quiet we could hear the dead's thoughts." Uncle Peter looked at me as if scrutinizing my reaction. "Believe me, don't believe me, but I still hear him. The dead are in the dimension next to ours. I never heard them until he died; I went to his grave at the full moon and stayed there all night. Then I heard, clearer than if he was standing right here. That is how I knew. He told me."

"My dead grandfather told you I was in the hospital?"

"Yes."

"I'll go to the graveyard with you next time."

"I don't go anymore."

"Too many voices?"

"Don't toy with me," he growled.

"Calm down," I said, getting up to leave. "Do whatever you want."

It had just stopped raining when I left the apartment. The sound of my heels on the stone sidewalks bounced across the narrow streets as I walked north along the river towards the castle. I crossed a bridge and headed to Old Town Square. Many of the tourist restaurants were crowded, but I didn't want to serve food, I wanted to have fun, so I kept walking. On the outskirts of Old Town Square, I heard loud music and noticed people standing outside a bar. As I got closer, I smelled marijuana and saw people passing a joint. Inside, it was crowded. I went up to the bar and ordered a beer; the bartender was a girl about my age in an outfit similar to mine. She seemed like the wrong person to ask for a job, so I just drank my beer and observed.

The bar had a lot of space. I stood in a large room with a high ceiling, dark blue walls, wood beams and a long, wooden bar. Through an archway next to the bar was another, slightly smaller room with high ceilings, light blue walls and a wooden bar. I drank and listened. Not everyone spoke Czech. Many spoke English or German. After I finished my beer, I pushed my way through the crowd and into the smaller room where it was quieter and less crowded; I found a bar stool and ordered another beer. The bartender was a lean guy with a goofy smile and thin leather bracelets. He winked at me when I ordered my beer. I watched him to see if he winked at anyone else: he didn't. He was the one I would ask for a job, but I wanted to be subtle. The last thing you should do when you want something is act like you want it. The number one rule is to act cool—not cool as in *hip*, but cool as in *I don't care and I never laugh or cry*. I was looking around the room, being cool, when a guy with big curly hair waved me over to his table. I went over and he asked if I wanted to sit and finish my beer and then join him outside

for a joint. I said sure, even though I'd never smoked weed before; when we finished our beers we went outside and he lit the joint. I asked him if the police might come by and he said the police knew this place and they never bothered anyone because they got a cut of the sales. He passed me the joint. At first I thought it tasted like moss, but the next few puffs tasted better.

When we went back in and ordered more beers, I felt my spirit lift as the colors and sounds grew more vivid. Uncle Peter's words kept repeating in my head: *Did you know about his obsession with death?* The boy with the big, curly hair told me a story about how his cat once choked on a penny and I laughed so hard I snorted, which made me laugh harder, and when I stopped laughing, I couldn't help bobbing my head to the beat of the music. I knew curly-head was talking but I couldn't focus on his words, and then he left and I was dancing in the corner by myself for a long time before I realized I must look like a fool. I went back to the bar and ordered another beer. The bartender winked at me again and I told him if he didn't stop winking I'd come behind the bar and spank him a lesson. He raised an eyebrow and left to take someone's order. I watched his butt and couldn't stop staring even though I knew I was not being cool.

After my fourth beer, I felt invincible and so full of love I was ready to burst. I was also so full of pee. I went into the hallway behind the bar and saw somebody selling weed by the cigarette machine; I squeezed past him and went into the women's toilet. When I finished and opened the door, the hallway was empty except for the goofy-faced bartender.

"I'm ready for my spanking," he said with a wink. He took out a set of keys and unlocked the door next to the men's room. The next thing I knew we were in a tiny, dark

room, standing between stacked crates of glasses, kissing and grinding. He had me backed up against the crates, his hand up my skirt, rubbing against my crotch; all around us glasses were rattling. I felt his penis trying to push through my panties. Everything shook and I wanted him inside me, but a tiny drop of sense broke through.

"Wait," I whispered. "Wait."

"What?" he said with his tongue in my ear.

"I need a job," I said, "I want to work here."

"You do?"

"Yes. I want to work here, I have to."

"Okay," he said. "No problem;" he squeezed my ass.

"When do I start?"

He put his fingers inside my panties.

"Tomorrow at four."

And then we did it, right there, standing up, with the crates pressing into my back and the glasses knocking around until I was sure they would shatter, cutting us both open and drenching us in blood. It was my first time, though it hurt only for a second before pleasure took over, so intense I saw lights flashing even though I don't know if my eyes were open or closed. Afterwards, when I was in the bathroom cleaning up, I noticed the scar on my cheek looked bright pink. It didn't bother me that when I left, the bartender barely looked in my direction. Most girls will say they lost their virginity, but I gave mine away and felt glad to have it gone. I'd made up my mind the night before to live for excitement, and on my walk back to Uncle Peter's that night, I felt proud for accomplishing so much in one night.

When I went to the bar the next afternoon to start my new job, I found the door locked. After knocking for ten minutes, a tall man in dirty jeans came to the door and yelled through the glass that they were closed.

"I'm supposed to start work," I yelled.

He shrugged his shoulders as if he couldn't hear me.

"I'm supposed to start work," I yelled again.

Looking annoyed, he unlocked the door and opened it a crack, telling me to come back in an hour when they opened.

"But I'm supposed to start work. Your bartender hired me."

"What bartender?"

I realized I didn't know his name.

"He was working yesterday, in the smaller room. Goofy smile. Leather bracelets."

The man looked me up and down.

"Janek?"

I nodded.

"Janek doesn't hire people, I hire people, and I didn't hire you." He started to close the door.

I stuck out my foot.

"Wait—I work hard; I never get tired. I can pour the perfect pint."

"Do you speak English?" he asked.

"No, but I'm taking lessons and I'll learn within a month." This was a lie, of course, but everybody taught English at that time and I'd heard it was easy compared to Czech.

"We don't need anymore bartenders," he said, pushing the door hard against my

foot.

"Then let me clear the glasses. I was here yesterday and it got so busy the glasses piled up everywhere."

"I'll only pay a hundred crown a night and the rest you'll have to make in tips."

"Great," I said, and so began my early days as a grunt at the Château Blue.

Pavel, the manager, let me in and brought me down to the basement where big machines steam-dried the glasses. Through the door, he had looked to be in his twenties, though once inside I saw that he was probably closer to forty.

"I only let you in because our drying machine broke last night. Otherwise, I don't hire people off the streets, especially if Janek said he'd give you a job, which probably means he fucked you in the store room."

"Bitter old man," I said under my breath.

"Dry these and carry them upstairs when you're done," he said, leaving me alone in the basement.

I was almost done drying the glasses when the music came on upstairs and Pavel came down in a rush.

"Are you done yet? We need glasses."

He helped me carry up ten crates total and put them in the storage room where Janek and I had been the night before. I couldn't believe we had both fit. With the crates, there was hardly enough room for one person to stand, and there were piles of trash and puddles of dirty water, not at all what I had imagined with my eyes closed and his hands in my panties, but I suppose any place is a palace when you're having passionate sex. Janek looked at me like I had shit for eye shadow when I carried the crates up from the

basement. I guess he thought telling me I could work there was a sure way of getting rid of me, but too bad for him that it wasn't that easy. He tried to act like he was busy wiping down the bar when I walked over to say hello.

"Don't worry," I said with a wink. "We both got what we wanted."

Collecting glasses was an easy job. Like I'd promised Pavel, I studied English every afternoon before work, and soon I understood most of what the tourists said. My biggest problem at the bar was the female bartender, Didi. If I stopped to talk to a customer, she would glare at me. When I cleared glasses from her bar, she turned her skinny face away and wouldn't look at me. Some girls just hate other girls, so what could I do? I ignored her and kept having fun, which was the point. Those are the best times: when you're satisfied with the way things are going. *Satisfaction.* Now there's a word to wear on your forehead when you're ready for a smack in the face.

CHAPTER 5

ILLUSIONS

Around the time when Janek quit and Pavel let me bartend in the back room, I started hearing my dead grandfather's voice in my sleep. I knew it was his voice because he told me: *this is your dead grandfather, Karel. Confront your lying father. He hides. Your mother was my favorite: so lovely. I know she was strong. My beautiful wife has changed. Treat my son like a hero. I could have been a hero, too. One day they were gone, and then, slaughtered like cows. There, everything suffers.* The voice went on and on, always somewhere in the middle of my sleep, because when I woke in the afternoons, the words already felt distant.

Aside from the dreams, I started feeling less comfortable in Uncle Peter's apartment. Some days he would be jolly, putting on his tapes after lunch and jumping around, while other days he barely lifted his head to say hello, just sitting, sipping tea and staring out the window. We only saw each other for a few hours in the afternoons when he came home from work and I got ready to go. If he came home with food, we ate together by the window—this was in the beginning of winter when the clouds moved in slowly and stayed longer, their somber, heavy presence replacing the swifter clouds of summer. Even when Uncle Peter was in a good mood, I felt something odd in his demeanor. He might ask me to speak English, and when I'd say *please pass the butter*, he'd laugh and laugh, but then, when I looked down to spread the butter, his laughter would stop and I

could feel him studying me, but the moment I looked up, he would laugh again as if he'd never stopped. I thought it was lucky that Janek left so I could make more money and move out on my own.

On the day I started bartending, Didi walked in and froze when she saw me behind the bar instead of Janek.

"Shouldn't you be carrying crates?"

I ignored her.

"Where's Janek?"

"He quit," I said, smiling.

She stormed over to the other bar and noisily stacked the glasses.

I soon found out why Janek quit at the beginning of winter: the tourists disappeared and we were left with a handful of locals and the occasional Swede. Some of the regulars who always sat at Didi's bar switched and started sitting at mine. One regular, a handsome, dark-skinned man with kinky, overgrown hair, called himself Mad Sirk. At first, I thought Mad Sirk was sweet—a little crazy, but sweet—in the same way that at first, I thought another regular, Paul, was a creep. Paul was a small, middle-aged guy who always wore shorts and dark sunglasses. He sat by himself at the end of the bar, rarely speaking to anyone. Once in awhile, if a stranger came in, he'd make small talk for a few minutes or he and Mad Sirk would occasionally argue about sports, but other than that, Paul sat and watched the world from behind his dark glasses. Soon, though, I found out that Mad Sirk was the creep and Paul was the sweet one. Sirk was horrible at Czech, so he spoke to me in English with an unusual accent: a mixture of British, French

and Czech all at once, rolled into a speedy slur. When there was no one around to pester, he sat and told me too much about himself.

"I'm, like, one of the most popular spinners in London. I done mad parties. Things are happening here, too, in the music scene. I did some crazy parties this year, and next summer it's gonna be wild. Seriously, I got a reputation. Go to London and ask around for Mad Sirk; they've all heard of me. Paris too."

"Then why are you in Prague?"

"I fell in love, that's why. With a beautiful Czech woman. You Czech bitches are trouble. Too beautiful and you know it, too. That's what makes you trouble. She had my baby, so I'm here, like, trying to be a daddy and all. Trying to keep it real. She's got this other daughter, too, like, fourteen years old. What a sweetie. I love young girls like that, you know, just before they get their spots, when they're skinny and awkward as all get. I wouldn't touch her though, cuz she's my girl's girl and all, but I do love 'em young; nothing wrong with that."

When he told me about *liking 'em young*, I must have looked like I'd seen the ghost of my last vomit.

"What's wrong with you, then?" he said.

"I think Paul needs another beer." Paul was the only other person at the bar at the time, so I poured him another beer and brought it over.

"On the house," I whispered, turning to see if Mad Sirk was waiting for me. Thankfully, he'd gone in the other room to look for someone else to trap.

"Don't mind him," Paul said. "He's harmless."

"How do you know?"

"Everyone in the ex-pat community knows him. He's been couch-surfing for years."

"I thought he lived with his girlfriend. They just had a baby."

"She kicked him out two years ago."

"What a liar."

"Nobody takes him seriously."

There was a long pause. Paul sipped his beer and I thought about walking away.

"You're an ex-pat?" I finally asked. "From where?"

"L.A. I came here ten years ago to do a shoot and never went back."

"You speak good Czech," I said.

"Thanks. So do you." Paul took out a cigarette and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger.

"Why do you always come here alone?"

Paul laughed and lit his cigarette.

"I'm just curious," I said.

"Work slows down in the winter, so I take a few months off. I come here in the afternoon, have a few beers, maybe meet a friend for dinner or go home and watch TV. That okay with you?"

"What's with the glasses?"

"What's with the questions?"

"Just curious."

"My eyes are sensitive to light, and my eyes are my job. No eyes, no work."

"I like the look."

"Thanks. Want to go smoke a joint?"

As Paul and I went outside, I saw Mad Sirk talking to Didi. She looked like she was enjoying the conversation.

"What's with you and Didi?" Paul asked, passing the lit joint to me.

"She thinks I'm a slut."

"Are you?"

"If I am it's none of her business, or yours either."

Paul smiled.

"So what do you do?" I asked.

"Director of photography," he said while holding his breath.

After we smoked, we went back inside and talked for a few more hours. He asked me about Brno and told me about life in Los Angeles, with so many people desperate for fame. I thought I never would want that life in all of my years and I never imagined how many years were still to come or how many changes. It would be great to see Paul sitting at one of the bars in the Bohemian, with his tinted glasses and smug half-smile, though I don't even know if he's still alive. I do know he saved my butt, and for that, I'm still grateful.

Some days I'd be pouring a beer or wiping the bar when suddenly I'd remember something my grandfather had said in my dreams. *We had chickens and cows and donkeys, but now she only has rabbits: rabbits, what good are rabbits*? Suddenly, a phrase would pop into my head: rabbits, what good are rabbits? Dreams can be like hazy memories or moods that nag from just below the surface, enough to irritate or haunt you, but never enough to understand why. And because I'm such a heavy sleeper, it's unusual for me to remember my dreams. I will tell you this: if you're a heavy sleeper, sleep with

someone you trust and always lock the bedroom door. I woke up one morning, only a few hours after falling asleep, and there was my Uncle Peter, kneeling next to my bed, his face up close to my ear, talking like he was my dead grandfather, Karel.

"*But before the war, everything—*"

He froze. I blinked. A neighbor flushed the toilet.

"What are you doing?" I said.

He stood up and brushed off his pants.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Sometimes I talk to you in your sleep. People are more open when they're sleeping."

"Talk to me in my sleep?" I pulled the covers up to my chin. "Why would you do that? You like to look at young girls in their sleep? Working with prostitutes isn't enough for you, you have to take a peak at your niece in her nightdress?"

"No," he said, "don't be disgusting."

"*Me* disgusting? For all these weeks, I'm thinking Papa Karel is talking to me from the grave, and it's you, sneaking and whispering in my ear like a pervert? I trusted you. I came here to live with you and listened to your crazy stories and I even believed you!"

"Ask your father about his German love-baby."

"Get out."

"Ask him about Greta and your half-sister."

"Get out!" I yelled, and he turned and walked out.

Ten minutes later, I left with all my things wrapped in a bed sheet since the bald man had stolen my suitcase.

"Where will you go?" Uncle Peter asked as I went out the front door.

I didn't answer him, but if I had, I would have said I had no idea. Somehow I ended up on a bus back to Brno, watching out the window as we passed so many dreary fields. The worst part about feeling betrayed is that trust is a choice. I'd betrayed myself. I was so angry that day, for sleeping night after night in Uncle Peter's apartment and going against my parents' judgment. Even though I'd decided to live for excitement, just under the surface I was ready to run home and hide behind my mother's leg. I had a sense, even if I couldn't articulate it at the time, that I'd forced myself into wanting something, anything, in order to escape feeling aimless, and I'd compromised my own best judgments in following those forced desires. I'd trusted myself and everybody else too quickly. I'd mistaken living without thinking for freedom and adventure, and in turn, once again I felt lost.

An old woman across the aisle interrupted my thoughts to ask if I was on a holiday from school. I told her to mind her own business. When the bus arrived that afternoon, I walked directly to my parents' restaurant, about twenty minutes from the station. By the time I got there my fingers were frozen and cramped from holding the awkward sheet. Lunchtime was over and my mother stood alone in the dining room, sweeping. She looked up when I walked in and squinted to see me better. When I dropped my sheet on the nearest table and said *hello mama*, she squealed and let the broom fall.

"Zlatushka, what a surprise!" she said and spread her arms wide, walking towards me.

"Come here, my baby," she said.

I laughed and she gave me a hug, and then squeezed my face in her hands.

"Look at you. Karlov!" she yelled. "Karlov, come see who's here! You poor little thing. Look at that scar."

"Stop, mama," I said, and waved her hands away. "Let's sit."

"What happened? Why didn't you call? Something happened, I can tell."

"Sit with me and have a drink."

"Karlov, Karlov, come out here!"

My father pushed open the swinging door to the kitchen and came in the room. He was looking down, towel-drying his thick, hairy forearms; sweat dripped down his big forehead. When he looked up and saw me, he seemed disappointed.

"Oh," he said. "You."

"Come on, papa, sit down and talk with us."

"And why should I? Why don't you go talk to your Uncle Peter instead?"

"I'm sorry, papa. You were right. I should have listened."

"Karlov, come here," my mother said. "And bring us some wine."

My father obeyed and brought over a bottle and three glasses. He sat down and looked away. Even in his greasy, oversized cooking shirt, he had the presence of a heavyweight fighter who could do real damage if he wanted. I poured the wine.

"So what happened?" my mother asked, looking worried.

I told them first about my new job, showed them the scar on my side from the attack, and by the time we'd finished our first glass of wine, my father was looking at me again. Then I told them about Uncle Peter, about where he worked, about the communist interrogation place he'd shown me and how he said he was blackmailed by the secret police who used my parents' restaurant as a threat, and then about how he'd knelt by my

bed when I slept and pretended to be grandfather Karel. My father's cheeks were already red from the wine, but when I finished speaking, they looked purple.

"Did he touch you?" my father asked.

"Of course not," I said.

"He wouldn't touch her, Karlov. He's not like that."

"Again you defend him."

"He's my brother."

"And a lot of good that's done. Is that why he begged you not to marry me, because he loves you like a brother?"

"You know why he did that," my mother said, her voice sounding sterner than I'd ever heard before. She glared at my father, who stared back for a moment, then looked down, defeated, and I saw that my mother had all the power. They were silent.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Both of them shrugged.

"Somebody please tell me the truth?"

My mother played with the tablecloth and my father inspected his wrists.

"Do I have a half-sister?" They both looked up. "A half-sister named Greta?"

"No!" my father yelled.

"Greta was the woman's name, not the daughter," my mother said.

"What woman?" I asked.

My father looked down at the table while my mother told the story without her usual smile.

"Before we were married, your father went to Germany with his parents to visit their cousins in Munich. His parents knew we were in love and that your father wanted to marry me when they returned, but they didn't like me—they thought I was below them: I lived on a farm with only rabbits, my nanny was a Slovakian giantess, my father committed suicide. When your father brought me have dinner with his parents, they were always very rude, serving me the fat of the duck for dinner or grilled rabbit. Well, they took your father to Munich not to visit cousins, but to get him away from me and try and find him another girl. They found a pretty girl named Greta and had her come over every night and drink beer with them, and then they would go to bed and leave your father and Greta alone. He resisted week after week, but, my shy little girl, men will be men, and one night he was drunk and he screwed her."

"Tanya!" My father interrupted.

"Yes?"

"Such language, in front of our daughter?"

"Be quiet," she said. "The next day he felt so rotten that he ran away, took the train back to our village, knocked on my door in the middle of the night and proposed to me, right there on our front porch at three in the morning." My mother looked at my father and smiled. He looked at me and shrugged.

"So it was before you got married? Big deal. I don't have a half-sister?"

"Well, after he proposed, your father moved into our house and stayed with us until we were married. His parents were so mad at him for running away that they left us alone. But when they heard the wedding would be soon, they came to our farm, wearing black as if someone had died. My brother Peter answered the door and invited them in.

Peter sat with us in the living room while your father's parents told us that Greta was pregnant and would be having his child the following month. They expected him to leave me and go be with Greta, but he refused. Even Peter turned on us and said that only a coward would leave a 'bastard' child behind to marry a different girl. 'But I love your sister,' your father said. Peter and your father's parents didn't care, so none of them came to our wedding, and that's why we never told you about Uncle Peter or your other grandparents, because they objected to our marriage."

"What about Greta's baby?"

"Who knows if it was the truth or a trick," my mother said, finishing off her wine and carrying the empty glasses to the bar.

My father sat with his head hung low.

"Don't worry," I said to him. "I think it's romantic."

"Bah," he said with a wave and a sheepish grin.

"Look at the time," my mother said from the bar. "Karlov, you'd better get cooking or we'll have no food to serve for dinner."

When my father went back into the kitchen, my mother came over and sat down at the table with me.

"It's my fault about this mess with Peter," she said, taking my hands in hers.

"What do you mean?"

"When they called us from the hospital in Prague, I was so worried. The only person I knew in Prague was Peter, so I called and begged him to go to the hospital and stay by your side."

"It's not your fault."

"Please don't tell your father. He'd be furious if he knew it was me who brought you two together. And that bull about the communists blackmailing him is a lie. He worked in the graveyard where my father is buried outside Brno until a year after the revolution. He didn't even move to Prague until the Russians were gone."

Just then my father came out of the kitchen.

"I thought we were going back to work. What are you two huddling about?"

My mother put her hands in her lap.

"Nothing," she said.

"Good," my father said, puffing himself up to his full height. "Now finish sweeping; this floor is a mess."

I stayed at the restaurant that evening and helped my parents serve dinner. It was my only night off from work and I knew I'd have to go back to Prague the next day. After dinner, my brother and Dominika brought in little Milan for a piece of my mother's moist honey cake. Milan was a fat baby with Tomas's black hair, Dominika's light blue eyes and a constant string of drool hanging from his open mouth. My brother also looked fatter and his hair was thinning; when Dominika asked him to get her a drink, he obeyed with a surly expression, which made me think he regretted getting married, though I didn't get the chance to ask. The time went by so fast that the next thing I knew I was on a bus back to Prague with the small tan suitcase my mother had given me. When the bus arrived, I would have to go straight to work, and though I didn't know where I would go after that, I knew it wouldn't be to Uncle Peter's.

CHAPTER 6

HANA

I've noticed, especially here in America, that everybody thinks life is all about the choices. People like having control and contemplating their options: in love, in the grocery store, in business. In my life, the best things that happened came about not by choice, but by chance. Do I believe in God? I'm close enough to finding out that I don't want to piss off anyone up there by saying no. Maybe God is a big man with a long beard and a beer in his hand; maybe God is a woman who will take me into her loving arms and rock me into eternal sleep. For all I know God is a sadistic jellyfish. The point is, I went to work one day with a suitcase and nowhere to go, and by the next day and through no choice of my own, everything changed.

"What's with the suitcase?" Paul asked when I got to work, straight off the bus from Brno.

"I had to move out of my Uncle's place."

Paul didn't ask any more questions. If he had, I might not have trusted him and told him I had nowhere to go, but since he didn't, I chose to tell him.

"Really?" he said. "No friends, no relatives, no boyfriends?"

"No, no and no."

He tapped his fingertips on the bar.

More people came in. While I served them, I saw Paul go outside and make a call

on his cell phone. When he came back in he asked for another beer.

"My friend has an extra room," he said. "She said you can stay for a few days, and if she likes you, you can stay as long as you want."

"I don't know," I said, unsure of how much I should let myself trust him.

"Okay," he said. "You can stay here, I'm sure. Sleep on the bar, shower under the tap."

"Very funny."

"She's coming here later to give me the keys."

Near closing time, Paul's friend still hadn't come. He said he wasn't surprised and called her again.

"She's at Radost with some people. She wants us to meet her there."

At a quarter past two, we took a cab to I.P. Pavlova, then got out and walked half a block. It felt strange to venture outside Chateau Blue with Paul. The weather was still cold enough to turn our breath into steam. From the outside, Radost looked closed. The façade was dark, but I followed Paul inside, into a large sunken lounge lit by candelabras. People ate and drank in oversized black velvet booths while electronic music pulsed through huge speakers. Paul walked to the back of the room and turned left into another room, this one sunken a few steps below the first. The booths in the second room were upholstered in leopard-print and the space-age bar was in front of a giant mirror lined with rows of colored bottles. Paul walked towards a group making a lot of noise in a corner booth. A woman with brown hair sat with her back to us, telling a story to the group. She laughed and flipped her short hair with a quick whip of the neck as if trying to get it out of her face even though it stayed in perfect position. Paul tapped her on the

shoulder and she turned around. It was Uncle Peter's favorite annoying television host: Hana the Hollywood Lip-Gossip.

Paul introduced me to Hana. Her smile seemed more natural and relaxed in person and her voice was an octave less annoying. She made one whole side of the booth scoot down so Paul and I could sit next to her. I noticed that the other women at the table were all thin and tall. They had on long dresses and short necklaces. The men looked carefully disheveled and wore sophisticated watches. Paul and I ordered martinis. People were talking about a party where one of the girls had gotten so drunk she'd ripped off her shirt and sung the Czech anthem with such an awful singing voice that even though she had beautiful breasts, everyone ran from the room. When Paul finished his martini, he got up to leave.

"Have fun," he said to me, then thanked Hana for the favor and left.

Hana had long fingers and shiny red nail polish. She sat with her back straight and her shoulders bare in a sleeveless orange dress; I wondered how her arms stayed so dark in the winter. I realized people had stopped talking and Hana was looking at me.

"Are you always so quiet?" she asked with a taunting smile.

"Are you always so tan?" I said.

"I just got back from Spain. Have you been? The Spaniards are crazy—even the grandparents go out dancing all night."

"I love Spain," one of the other women said, and thankfully Hana's focus shifted and I could revert to observing. When everybody stood to leave, Hana told me to follow her; we went outside and hailed a cab. Hana lived in the Vinohrady, a former vineyard transformed into an upscale neighborhood with tree-lined streets and big houses. Soon

we were in her spacious apartment, with its flowing white curtains and collection of mirrors on the walls. Hana sat on the sofa and took off her shoes while I stood by the door with my suitcase at my feet.

"Here we are," she said.

"Thanks for taking me in."

"I owe Paul a few favors," she said, walking over to an oval mirror and inspecting her face from several angles.

"Well, thanks again." Hana didn't respond. She pulled down the skin beneath her eyes and studied the bottoms of her eyeballs.

"I'm going to bed," she said abruptly, before going into her room and closing the door.

I stood with my suitcase at my feet for at least ten minutes before I figured she wasn't coming back out, and then I went looking for the guest room. It was through the kitchen and down a hall, a big room with a round bed, like an oversized powder puff. Before going to sleep, I locked the door. That first night at Hana's, I felt alone and unsure of my decision to come back to Prague. As my mind drifted, I thought about going away to college, studying to become a teacher or a doctor, but the thoughts filled me with a sense of dread. When sleep came, I dreamt I'd taken Didi's job, bartending in the big room at Chateau Blue on a crowded night; every single customer was a bald-headed man. In the early afternoon, I woke to the sound of knocking and rattling. I realized Hana was trying to get in.

"My god," she said when I opened the door. "Did you think I'd sneak in and murder you?" She looked fresh and ready for work.

"It's a long story," I said, rubbing my eyes.

"Tell me later, I'm late. Help yourself to anything but my jewelry. I don't know what I'm doing later—you have a cell?"

"No."

She touched her stiff hair and took a step backwards. "How do I look? Presentable?"

"You look great."

"I like you. Stay as long as you want."

And I did stay, for just over two years: two years of drinking, partying and consoling Hana after her thousand-and-one breakups. The details of those years are foggy, thanks to the alcohol: we drank, we had lovers, we drank more. Even during summer, when I made good money, Hana would never take money for rent, so I lived the glamorous life: I bought designer clothes and make-up, I treated people to expensive meals, I bought round after round of drinks, and when you're looking your best and buying things for people, it's easy to feel like there's nothing more to life than popularity. Once again, I'd fallen into living for the thrill of the moment, but after two years of hedonism, I felt empty and bored.

"I'm tired of parties," I said to Hana one night. "Can't we see a movie or stay home?"

"I spend all day talking about movies and I hate them. We'll just go for a few drinks. Come on," she said, "*it'll be fun.*"

When she could tell I wasn't changing my mind, she lost interest.

"You can stay home and suck your thumbs if you want, but I'm going out."

And she did go out, as on many subsequent nights, without me. The time alone felt exotic. I took baths, I cooked soups, I started reading again. Saying no can be very exciting. Nowadays, I say no all the time because I'm rich and I run a business, but back then, since it felt strange it also felt good. Of course, Hana wasn't too fond of *hearing* me say no. She'd grown accustomed to having me around to tell her she looked great or to chase away her least desirable admirers. Usually, after I stopped going out, she tried to ignore me when she came home, but one night she came home especially drunk and in a fiery mood.

"It smells like my grandmother's diaper in here. It's disgusting." I had cooked garlic soup. "What's the matter, you got tired of living in my shadow, or some boy fucked you too hard?"

"You're drunk."

"*You're drunk.* Thanks, babiĉka. Why don't you leave? You think I want to come home to your depressing soups after I'm out having fun? I'm sick of your ugly hair!" Then she lied down on the couch and laughed herself sick.

I went to my room. I knew Hana didn't mean what she'd said, but still I tried to think of where I could go if she wanted me gone. The next morning she knocked on my door and came in. It was one of the only times I saw her without makeup or hairspray. She looked younger; her hair seemed so shiny and soft, and the brown of her eyes became striking against the natural paleness of her face.

"I'm sorry," she said, sitting down next to me on the bed. "I didn't mean what I said."

"You remember?"

"I always remember." The vulnerability in her eyes was unusual. "I miss you," she said.

"We can do other things. We don't have to go out all the time."

"I like going out. What else would I do? I hate soup."

I laughed.

"If I have a party in the apartment," she said, "will you come?"

"Of course."

I traded shifts at the bar and that Saturday night we had our party. Even though I tried to have fun for Hana's sake, it was all the same vacuous people with their stupid conversations. Most of Hana's friends didn't have brains fit for spaniels. I hid by a window and wondered how I'd ever survive the night. That's when I noticed a man with black hair, standing by himself in a dark corner and smoking a cigarette. Even from a distance I could tell he was different. First of all, he didn't have a drink. Secondly, the way he smoked wasn't casual or stylish: he took long, intense drags as if someone had told him tobacco was rare. He loved that cigarette like it loved him back. I watched him for a long time and decided to introduce myself. Walking slowly across the room, I felt sure that he saw me, that he willed me towards him with an unspoken wish; and then I was close, and then I was tripping over a bump in the rug, then flying into him, pinning him against the wall until all he could say was *unhhh*.

I regained my balance. He stepped away from the wall, tilting his head until his neck cracked.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"At least now I'm awake."

"I'm sorry, I was just..."

"Don't worry," he said, rolling his shoulders. "I needed that. This party put me to sleep."

"Me too," I said, rolling my shoulders as well.

"I've got an hour before I can leave, so you might have to do it again," he said.

"Why an hour?"

"I promised my sister I'd stay until one."

"Who's your sister?"

"Hana," he said.

"Hana, the one who lives here?"

"That's the one."

"She never told me about you."

"Why would she?"

"I'm her roommate."

"Zlata?" he asked.

I nodded. We were standing close to each other, and I could feel the warmth of his body. I was surprised at how calm it made me feel.

"I'm Bohumil," he said.

"I like the way you smoke."

"Pardon?"

"I watched you, before. You smoke like you like it."

"Why would I smoke if I didn't like it?" He had a devilish spark in his pale green eyes. I couldn't look away. It had been a long time since I'd felt such a strong attraction,

since Franz in Brno, and even then, the feeling wasn't as strong.

"How'd you get this?" he asked, running his finger along the scar on my cheek.

"I was mugged, my first night in Prague."

Bohumil pulled up his right sleeve and showed me a thick, rope-like scar that ran the inner length of his forearm.

"Wow," I said. "How'd you get that?"

"I'll tell you," he said, leaning in close, "if I can take you for a ride on my motorcycle tomorrow."

I said yes. After Bohumil left, Hana came over to me, shaking her head.

"You should stay away from my brother," she said.

"Why?"

"He's a loner. He never has a girlfriend for more than a week. And he's obsessed with paper."

"I'm not looking for a boyfriend," I said. "We were only talking."

"Fine," she said, putting her hand on my shoulder. "But if you hurt him, I'll kill you."

CHAPTER 7

BOHUMIL

The expectation that two people can fall in love and live happily ever after is idiotic. Love only begins to thrive in an atmosphere of disappointment and opposition. That's why Prince Charming needed to be a frog, because if he'd been Mr. Perfect all along, he would have died a virgin. When Bohumil didn't show up the next day, I was crushed, but of course it made me want him even more. Hana and I had lunch and then she went shopping while I sat around waiting. When Hana came home late in the evening, I was too embarrassed to tell her I'd been stood up or to ask for Bohumil's number, so I just took a bath and went to bed. The following Friday night, he showed up at Chateau Blue with a dozen red, paper roses.

"Sorry about last Sunday," he said. "Something came up."

I poured him a pint without looking at him, then walked to the other end of the bar and tried to ignore him. He sat there, smoking cigarettes and staring at the wall.

"Why weren't you at our party last week?" I asked Paul.

"Hana's friends bore me," he said.

I could see Bohumil in my peripheral vision. He was watching me.

"Yeah, they're awful," I said to Paul. "I don't know how Hana stands it."

"She's nice, but she cares too much about appearances."

"Right," I said, trying to seem interested in our conversation.

When Bohumil finished his beer, I went and asked if he wanted another.

"That depends," he said. "Do you want me to stay?"

"That depends," I said. "Where were you last Sunday?"

"Something came up."

"You already said that."

We stared at each other like stubborn opponents.

"My bike broke down," he finally said. "I thought it would be quick to fix, but it took a few hours. When I took it out for a test ride, it broke down again. I had to wait hours for a truck to come by and give me a lift back to town."

I didn't say anything, but I poured him another beer.

Bohumil stayed until closing that night and gave me a ride home on his motorcycle. I loved the feel of the wind, and even better, I loved holding onto him and pressing against him as we turned the sharp corners. I remember that ride so clearly, as if I can still feel the hard, narrow seat underneath me, and the excitement of holding him close for the first time. I felt at ease, like I didn't have to search for anything—not for words, not for a forced sense of purpose.

"Thanks for the ride," I said when he parked in front of Hana's apartment.

He took off his helmet, making a mess of his wavy black hair.

"Sure. I owed you one," he said.

Mesmerized by his bright green eyes, I took a small step towards him and he kissed me, softly at first, then with force.

"What are you doing the rest of the night?" he asked after our kiss.

I felt weak.

"Probably going to sleep," I said.

"Want to go to Budapest?"

"Tonight?"

"Why not?"

"Give me five minutes."

I went upstairs and packed an overnight bag; ten minutes later we were on the deserted road headed towards Budapest. We rode for the rest of the night. When the sun came up while we were in Slovakia, I was amazed to see how the dark fields came alive with vivid greens as soon as the smallest trace of light leaked up from the horizon. We stopped for coffee and I told Bohumil about my mother's giant Slovakian nanny.

"Sure," he said. "Giants live all over these hills."

"I'm serious."

"It's quite a coincidence," he said with a serious expression. "My father was raised by Viennese dwarves."

"Very funny."

We got back on the road and arrived in Budapest by noon. I never realized that Budapest was divided in half by the Danube: a grand, wide river that put the Vltava to shame. The city seemed huge compared to Prague, with its own giant castle on a hill and stone lion heads at either end of the big bridge that connected Buda to Pest. Bohumil took us into the heart of Pest and parked in front of a domed Turkish bathhouse, decorated with a mosaic of beige and blue tiles. Inside, we changed into bathing suits and went out to the sunny, crowded courtyard with its various pools. We soaked in the warm pool, then laid down on deck chairs and napped. I woke up before Bohumil and

admired his lean, chiseled body. All I wanted was to inhabit that sense of peace forever, with the sunlight warm but not hot, reflecting off the skin of the beautiful, carefree man lying beside me. When he woke up, we went back in the pool.

"Tell me more about yourself," Bohumil said as we sat on the steps, watching people of all shapes and ages float by or swim.

I told him everything.

"And what's next?" he asked when I finished.

"I don't know," I said. "What about you?"

"What do you want to know?"

"For starters, how'd you get that scar?" I asked, pointing to his arm.

He turned away.

"I'll tell you some other time," he said.

"Tell me something else, then."

"Like what?"

"How about your obsession with paper?"

He laughed. "I like paper, but obsession? I don't think so."

"Well what's so great about paper?"

"When I was a kid, my dad showed me his books from the *Samizdat*, when writers had to make their books by hand and distribute them in secret. I loved the way those books felt, the way the ink raised up on the paper, how I could run my fingers over the pages and feel the words. Something about the texture of the paper fascinated me, so I started learning about it: different types, how it's made, how paper gets used to make glass, spray paint, lipstick, liquid soap, so many things. I love the feel of it: of pages, of

money. So I eventually left Karlovy Vary and came to Prague to work in a mill. I started off on the machines a few years ago and now I manage the mill. Does that sound obsessive?"

"Absolutely."

He splashed me. I splashed him back. We were asked to leave the pool. After getting dressed, we took a walk and ended up having dinner at an awful Italian restaurant where the spaghetti stuck together and the bread fell apart.

"At least it's not moving," Bohumil said, stabbing at his hunk of spaghetti.

"At least it's not moldy," I said, playing with the breadcrumbs in my palm.

After dinner we rode up Castle Hill to the Budapest Castle and sat and admired the view of each other. Instead of sweet talk, we gave each other cute little insults. *I like how your chin is too small for your face; did you borrow those ears from an elephant; your teeth are like pointy yellow buttons; oh how your breath reeks of garbage.* It's impossible to describe the magic of strong chemistry between two people, but we both felt it. We found a cheap hotel room and undressed each other like eager virgins. Bohumil traced my body with his fingertips and told me I was his perfect piece of paper. When we made love, I felt his pleasure combine with mine until I didn't know the difference, until we both surged into a climax at once, overwhelmed.

And it lasted much more than a week. We spent nights at Bohumil's small apartment in the Zizkov, a working-class neighborhood bordering the chic Vinohrady, where Hana lived. Bohumil loved taking trips on his bike; we went to Vienna and Germany, to Poland and the Swiss Alps. I loved that Bohumil lived in the present. After our first trip to Budapest, we rarely spoke about our pasts. I also liked that he was a man

of very few habits, other than smoking. He never bit his nails or cracked his knuckles or stroked his chin. Some days, he might run his fingers through his hair every ten minutes, but then I wouldn't see him touch his hair even once for the next two weeks. When we traveled, we could go hours without speaking a word; our silences were full of ease. After six wonderful months, I brought Bohumil home to Brno to meet my parents.

"He's so sweet," my mother said when Bohumil was in the kitchen with my father. "Can he cook?"

"No, he doesn't cook," I said.

"He's like your brother used to be, so handsome."

"How is Tomas?"

"Fat and miserable, like any married man. Dominika wants another baby, but Tomas is always out with his friends. Who knows when they have time for sex?"

"Don't ask me."

"How about you? How's the sex? I bet it's good, just look at his eyes!"

"Stop!"

"My shy little baby." My mother was trying to tickle me when Bohumil came in from the kitchen.

"I just drank pig's blood," he said with a smile.

"That's good," my mother said, nudging me with her elbow. "It makes men virile."

I thought it was fun, having dinner at the restaurant with my parents, but it stirred up bad memories for Bohumil, who barely touched his food. I knew from Hana that their parents had died almost ten years ago, but she only mentioned it briefly and didn't give any details. It was the same with Bohumil: he'd mentioned it, though only in passing.

After dinner that night, on the long walk home, Bohumil finally told me about his parents and their deaths. It was a windy autumn night. Dead leaves scraped by on the pavement, crunching under our feet as we walked down the dark streets. Bohumil chain-smoked and looked ahead into the distance while he told his story. I didn't fill his pauses with questions or words; I just looked at him and listened.

"My parents grew up in different neighborhoods in Prague during the war. When the Russians invaded, both my parents had just graduated high school and though they didn't know each other at the time, they both decided to go to Karlovy Vary to live. Neither of them liked the big city, and they'd heard about the mineral springs in Karlovy Vary, and the beautiful mountains, so they boarded the same bus on the night after the invasion and ended up sharing a seat. They talked the whole time and fell in love during the two and a half hour ride from Prague. By the time the bus arrived, they were inseparable. Even during the occupation, they found ways to live a happy life. My father, Francin, was a mechanic and my mother, Maryška, a nurse. They married and bought a little house in the hills, not far from a hot mineral pool. They had two children, of course, and we were happy; it was a happy childhood. The hills of Karlovy Vary are so beautiful, even though I haven't been back since the accident.

Every few months, my father went to Prague to buy parts for his shop, and when he returned, even during the occupation when goods were rare, he brought presents. For Hana, he brought mirrors; for me, it was books or rare paper; and for my mother, it was rings, wristwatches, fashionable hats or necklaces. After the revolution, of course, the presents got better. On his last trip, when I was sixteen, he brought my mother a set of cold-cathode neon tube healing lights. It had different size tubes, which, once plugged in,

let off strong, colored lights that were said to have healing powers. The lights could be used for different parts of the body by holding them close and moving them slowly over the area you wanted to treat. My father turned off the lights in the room and made us all close our eyes. When we opened them, he held a short tube that shone with a strong purple light: it lit up his hands, his face and his clothes, it turned the whole dark room bright, neon purple. He brought it close to our faces and I could hear the sizzle of the electrodes—it even had a smell. The smell of a spring thunderstorm. We were all so excited, but he said it was only for our mother, and that they would use it late at night when Hana and I were asleep. My mother threw her arms around his neck and kissed him right there in front of us, which wasn't something we were used to seeing even though we always knew they were in love.

Later that night, Hana and I went to bed. I remember risking punishment by turning on my desk lamp to admire the colored construction paper my father had brought me that afternoon from Prague. Suddenly, I heard a loud zapping noise downstairs, and an explosion of glass. My light and my digital clock went out. I ran down the stairs and saw, by the light of a streetlamp, my father, lying on his back by the outlet, with the transformer clutched in his hand. I remember staring in shock at his hand, at how it was locked around the transformer like a claw. I looked over and saw my mother, stuck sliding halfway out of her favorite chair, covered in bits of glass, her hair shooting out in all directions, her hands wrapped around the cathode wire from the exploded tube, connected by a long cord to the transformer in my father's hand. I ran over to her and tried to pick her up, tried to shake her to see if she was still alive. That's how I got this," he said, pointing to the scar on his arm.

Bohumil lit another cigarette.

"It was supposed to help their health," he said with a bitter laugh.

We walked the rest of the way in silence. You cannot truly comfort someone whose loss you haven't shared. At my parents' house, we drank Slivovice in the dark kitchen. I took his hand and showed him the way to my old room. In bed, I thought of the awful tableau of his dead parents' bodies, distorted by high voltage shock, and began to cry. Bohumil held me and told me life was too short not to know what we wanted. I told him I was sorry, over and over I repeated it: *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

The following weekend, Bohumil picked me up from work and asked if I was interested in going for a ride. Two and a half hours later, we parked in the hills of Karlovy Vary. Even by night I could tell it was a beautiful town. I saw the lights of the main streets snake through the valley and smelled the dense mix of trees. Bohumil had a flashlight, and shone it along the short path to a hot mineral pool. We took off our clothes and eased into the steaming water.

"Hana and I used to come here and soak when it snowed," he said, looking up at the moon like a young, wide-eyed boy. "Our old house is just over the ridge."

"Does it feel strange, being here?" I asked, moving closer to him in the water until I was next to him. I wanted him to look at me so I could see how he was feeling.

"Only because I'm nervous," he said, still looking away.

"Why?" I asked.

He looked down at the water and leaned into me. The minerals made our naked bodies slippery.

"Because I want to ask you something," he whispered. "Will you marry me?"

I didn't expect the question, or the way it made me feel: like all the anxiety and uncertainty that had been accumulating in my body my entire life suddenly became warm liquid that flowed out of me and into the water forever. Bohumil looked at me, waiting for an answer, but the intensity of his eyes, open wide with expectation, glittering stark green in the soft darkness, left me speechless. I remember the moon that night, shining like a harmless yellow bulb. I took its beauty as a sign that our marriage would be blessed. I didn't realize how fast some blessings burn and turn to dust.

CHAPTER 8

WEDDING

I've often looked at old married couples and wondered how they've stayed together all those years; I don't know if Bohumil and I could have done it. Of course I'd like to think, had circumstances been different, we'd have done as well after fifty years as we did after one, but my brain isn't made of butter. People change, and I'm sure we would have had our problems. I think what probably helps my relationship now is that, although we often disagree, we're too old to try and change each other. I don't think I ever wanted to change Bohumil, but I do think I wanted him to change me. Thinking about it now, it seems like a different life, like a different girl looking forward to a wedding she thought would change her life, and it did change my life, though not in any predictable way. The wedding was unpredictable for me even in the planning stage. I'd assumed, since Bohumil had lost both his parents and behaved so strangely when we'd gone to visit mine, that he would want a small, civil ceremony in Prague, but he surprised me by saying he wanted a traditional wedding in Brno.

"I'm sure your parents would like that," he said late one night while we sat on his old couch. Bohumil smoked cigarettes as I stared at a blank notepad, trying to make a list of possible careers.

"I'm sure they would," I said.

My list wasn't going very well, since I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. Bohumil wore his favorite dark blue boxer shorts and blew perfect smoke rings over my head as I stared at the notepad.

"Who am I?" I said. "What do I want to do?"

"You worked at a library," Bohumil said, lighting another cigarette, "which was quiet and solitary, and it got dull. Now you work at a bar, which is social and loud, and it's gotten dull. Try something between the extremes."

I tried thinking about what could be in-between, but nothing came.

"Did your parents have a big wedding?" I asked.

"No," he said. "They didn't want to go back to Prague and deal with the soldiers, so they got married in a small neighborhood chapel in Karlovy Vary, with the organist as a witness."

"I could go back to school," I said, even though the idea depressed me.

"You could," Bohumil said, "but I can tell you don't want to."

"It's not fair," I whined. "You and Hana are so lucky: you both always knew what you wanted. You loved paper and Hana wanted to be on TV."

"You're putting too much pressure on yourself. If you know what you want to do, do it; otherwise, just enjoy your life. Some people want to be president, others just want a cold beer."

"That's my point," I said. "At least they know what they want."

Bohumil put out his cigarette and lifted my legs onto his lap.

"We can open up a specialty paper shop," he said, rubbing my feet.

"We'll make paper babies and live happily ever after."

"That's right," Bohumil said, manipulating my toes with his palm. "And you're wrong. Hana didn't always want to be on TV. She always wanted to be an ophthalmologist, but she's learning disabled and never scored well enough on the entrance exams."

"Really?"

"That's why she collected mirrors as a girl. She spent hours at night examining her eyes. I bet she knows more about eyes than most ophthalmologists. The TV thing happened through a friend of our grandfather's in Prague," Bohumil said, losing interest in my feet and reaching for another cigarette. "And I'm not even sure she likes it."

He lit his cigarette.

"My mother believed in astrology," he said halfway through his smoke. "She believed the answers to any person's spiritual questions could be discovered by studying the position of the planets when that person was born in combination with current planetary movements. She also thought it was important to be astrologically compatible with friends and lovers."

"I never thought about it," I said.

"I went to an astrologer after our first trip to Budapest," he said. "I think I needed to know what my mother would have thought of you and me, as a match. She looked at our birth charts and said that our signs, you're an Aries and I'm a Scorpio, are ruled by Mars, which means we both live our lives by following the path of desire. She said we're a great match because you're always looking for your identity, but you actually care much more about relationship, and I'm a shrewd detective and a relationship magnet, so I can

find out what you need, draw you in and hold you while I transform your metaphorical lead of selfish desire into pure gold desire."

"Wow," I said. "Metaphorical lead of selfish desire?"

Bohumil laughed.

"Take it any way you want," he said. "I took it as approval."

"I'm asking selfish questions about what to do with my life, when I can only be satisfied by other people?"

"Not necessarily," Bohumil said, pulling me towards him. "But close."

Our wedding was to be in the early summer, and during the spring of that year Hana took me shopping for a dress. Because I'd been spending all my free time at Bohumil's, it had been a long time since I'd seen her. We met at a café in the Nove Mesto on a sunny but cold afternoon. Hana was already there when I arrived, and she seemed to be bursting with excitement, which I think was a combination of my engagement to her brother and the three espressos she drank before I arrived.

"It's so good to see you," she said, jumping up and hugging me when I got to the table. Everything about her looked the same: stiff hair, tan skin, perfect makeup.

The waitress came by and asked if we wanted anything. I ordered water and Hana thought for a moment before ordering water as well.

"I almost ordered another espresso," she said, smoothing her hair and then rapidly tapping her fingers on the table. "It's my newest obsession, but I think three's my limit. I don't know how I lived without it. It might even be better than alcohol! So what do you have in mind for a dress? Something white, of course, and not too frilly; with your fabulous figure, it should be low-cut, but classy of course; maybe some lace trim on top,

though lace is out of style, but why not bring it back? I'm sure Bohumil will love you in whatever you wear. He's very loyal. I never thought he'd settle down, but life is full of surprises!"

Hana paused to run her tongue along her front teeth.

"I'm so glad I took the day off," she went on. "You can't imagine how dull it is in that stuffy studio all day. If they let me go out on location, that'd be one thing, but all day in that awful room with those stiff-as-tables news people. And for what? Nobody watches my stupid segment, anyway."

"I know one person who loves your show: the Uncle I lived with before I moved in with you."

"The creep? Ugh. That's my point: only losers watch the show. What a loser. You should have kicked him in his tiny balls. Good for me you needed a place to stay, though. I knew I liked you right away. You've got loyal eyes."

"Thank you so much for letting me stay, Hana. I don't think I've ever had a better friend."

"Don't get sentimental," Hana said, looking down as her cheeks flushed. She took her three empty cups and arranged them in a triangle.

"I miss you," she said in a low voice without looking up. "I even miss the smell of your awful soups."

"I find that hard to believe," I said.

She looked up at me, the corners of her mouth barely turning up in a wry half-smile that reminded me of Bohumil.

"Shall we go?" she said, standing up and dropping a handful of coins on the table. "I can't believe we'll be sisters. How will you do your hair? We can get you a stylist, and I have the perfect necklace for you to borrow. Diamonds are the new pearls, my dear, but not just any diamonds. Size matters: don't let anyone tell you it doesn't." I followed her out the door and spent the rest of the day keeping up.

Other than choosing our outfits, Bohumil and I didn't have much else to do in preparation for the wedding. My mother insisted on doing all the planning, which was fine with us. Bohumil's one request was that two seats in the front row remained empty in honor of his parents. Both of us had always been loners, so we only invited a few guys from the mill, and the rest of the guests were family and friends of my parents. My mother picked an ornate gothic church for the ceremony, and planned the dinner and after party at their restaurant.

Bohumil and I went to Brno two days before the wedding. My mother had made and hand-delivered her delicious kolaches, the small, stuffed buns that serve as wedding invitations, and everyone I spoke to said they were the best-tasting kolaches ever made. The day before the wedding, Bohumil had the groom's test, where he stood in my parents' front yard and was asked to choose between an axe and a bottle of wine. His choice was supposed to determine whether he'd be a useful husband or a drunk. First, he picked up the bottle of wine, but then he put the bottle down and walked over to the axe. After a brief hesitation, he turned towards the small crowd in the yard and said he'd pick neither. Everyone called out insults and booed, but then, quick as a striking mongoose, Bohumil picked up the axe and swung it through the bottle of wine, exploding the glass and spraying purple liquid all over the grass. Everyone cheered.

Next came the bride's test, where they sent me into the house and I was supposed to pick up a broom. If I swept the whole place clean, it would have meant I'd make a very good wife. Instead, I brought the broom outside and swept up the mess from Bohumil's broken bottle. Everyone said we were a perfect match. That night, my brother took Bohumil out drinking and Hana brought me a crown wreath made of rosemary to symbolize wisdom, love and loyalty. My mother put her arm around Hana and gave a good squeeze.

"You're part of our family now, too," my mother said without sounding sentimental.

"Thank you," Hana said, touching my mother's hand.

Soon we were all drunk, dancing to famous old songs, and it seemed just as soon that Bohumil and I were standing at the altar saying our vows. When we left the church, our family and friends formed an aisle, and as we walked through they made it as hard as possible, tripping and pushing us, so we could learn the lesson that marriage is a struggle and we must make it through together. Before we got in the car, everyone threw dried peas and yelled out their best wishes. At the reception, we drank champagne and my father took me into a broom closet for the ceremonial kidnapping. It took Bohumil all of five minutes to find us, so he never had to pay the symbolic ransom and everyone said it was a sign our marriage was blessed.

CHAPTER 9

LAS VEGAS

When I was very young, my family took a trip for a week to visit my Babička on her farm in the hills. The only life on that farm was one old lady, one thousand white rabbits, and an overgrown field of potatoes. Babička's house smelled of wood fire and stale pickled cabbage. My father and Tomas spent the entire week repairing the roof and my mother spent it in the kitchen, peeling potatoes. In the afternoons, Babička would take me to see her rabbits.

"Don't feed them carrots. They'll bite your finger to the bone," she said.

Under the thick film of her blind eye, I could see the dark circle of her retina as it roamed around in its socket. I remember one afternoon at the rabbits, Babička bent down towards me, her face full of warts and connecting wrinkles. She said: *You, too, will be a young widow.* Then she licked her long, crooked finger and smoothed my wild eyebrows. *You will be a young widow,* she repeated, *but you will also be rich and powerful.*

When I married Bohumil, I thought Babička must have been wrong, since he was only a paper mill manager. He earned a decent salary but wasn't at all rich or fuelled by greed for money. When the workers at Bohumil's mill chipped in and presented him with two plane tickets to Las Vegas for our honeymoon, we didn't know how to respond.

We'd been talking about Paris or Amsterdam, and we resented having our honeymoon picked out by other people, but we decided to look at it as more of a paid vacation than a honeymoon, and to make the best out of it. Neither of us would ever have chosen to go to America on our own. Americans, I thought, were fat and much too cheerful. They came into the Chateau and drank Slivovice in shots, like it was cheap whiskey, and they smiled all the time. Rather than turning down a well-meaning gift, however, the day after our wedding we boarded a plane to Las Vegas.

We landed in Las Vegas at noon. On our descent, we saw the desolate, brown desert stretching in all directions, and it seemed as if we were landing on another planet. As we approached the airport, I saw the long strip of casinos up close and couldn't believe such elaborate buildings were built in the middle of a vast, dry, dead seabed. Inside the airport, we knew without a doubt that we'd arrived in a strange world. Ringing, blinking slot machines separated the carousels in baggage claim and large screens showed loud, glitzy ads for an endless array of shows and casinos. Once we had our bags, we went outside to find the hotel shuttle, and the bright heat hit us like a solid wall; we had to put our bags down and catch our breath several times before making it the short distance to the shuttle. I'd never seen such barrenness before, never been to a place that seemed so inhospitable to life. We got in the shuttle and began driving towards the Orleans Hotel and Casino.

"Look at that," Bohumil said as we passed a large, black Pyramid.

I started to admire the large head of a sphinx when we stopped and a taxi pulled up next to my window with an ad for a strip club on its roof, blocking my view of anything else. We sat at the light for what seemed like ten minutes while I stared at a picture of

the backsides of ten women, each wearing nothing but a thread for underwear, their multi-colored butts all facing me in a row as they bent forward. Bohumil saw what I was looking at and laughed. When the light turned green, we crossed the main strip and into a more normal-looking area. The buildings seemed so far apart and the flatness stretched on and on, without even a patch of green grass. The few trees I saw looked more like skinny brown poles with frayed wigs on top. The roads were too wide and most of the cars were bigger than our kitchen in Prague. I didn't see anybody walking on the sidewalks. Las Vegas looked to me like an uninhabitable place where people only existed indoors.

When the shuttle stopped outside the Orleans and we stepped out into the bright and heavy heat once again, I too was eager to get indoors. Once inside the casino, I couldn't tell it was midday in the desert; the air was cold and the lighting made it seem like perpetual dusk. While Bohumil waited in line to check us in, I wandered around a bit among groups of people hypnotized by the games and the giant TV screens. I saw Chinese people, black people, Indians, Germans (who are also fat like Americans but more red in the face and always in old sandals and tight shorts). Bohumil spoke only broken English, so I went back to the lobby to see if he needed help, but he already had our room keys and was waiting for me by the elevators.

Our room, with its faded purple carpet and stale smell, was on the ninth floor. Thick drapes blocked out most of the sunlight, and when I opened them, I saw flatness, cars, strip malls, and, far off in the distance, a mountain peak covered with snow.

"Look at that," I said to Bohumil, pointing to the distant peak.

"We should go there," he said. "We can rent a motorcycle and explore."

I noticed a layer of light brown haze that hung high in the air between our hotel and the horizon and I closed the drapes in disgust.

"I don't like it here," I said, taking off my shoes and sitting on the bed.

"It's only a week," Bohumil said, sitting next to me and rubbing my shoulders.

We were both tired from the long trip, but we made love and showered before taking a nap. It didn't matter where we were, we agreed before falling asleep: we knew we would enjoy our honeymoon. We woke up just as dusk was dissolving into the darkness of night. We felt refreshed and ready to venture outside and explore the strip. It was still hot outside, but not as stifling as it had been during the day. A shuttle bus dropped us at an intersection in the middle of all the action. Whether we looked to our right or left, we saw crowds of people walking along the sidewalks amid endless neon lights, headlights, flashing marquee lights, stoplights, spinning spotlights, street lights, so many lights I felt a steady surge of energy just standing in the midst of all that glitz. The air felt heavy and still. I looked at Bohumil. He wore all black that night, and he seemed unphased by the dazzling lights, as if he were the type of man impossible to impress. Something did impress him, however, when we turned around and saw we were standing in front of a gigantic slot machine.

"The Centennial Slot," said the red neon sign. "One Hundred Million Jackpot."

Bohumil read the sign and his eyes got bigger. I asked if he wanted to try it, but he said the line was too long and we would come back later. We did an around-the-world-tour, with a pilsner in each casino: Paris, New York, Monaco, Egypt, Venice, Rome, Italy, Morocco, each with their themed architecture and décor, but all with the same dirty, old, busy, awful carpets. And where was Eastern Europe, we wondered? Where was

Budapest or Prague or Krakow? Las Vegas seemed to me like the epitome of the shallow west: putting up a fancy façade, highlighting its greatest hits and pretending the rest of the world didn't exist.

It was very late and much less crowded when we walked back to the Eiffel Tower for our pull at the Centennial Slot. Bohumil hadn't gambled at all that night: perhaps he was saving his luck for the big one. We held hands as we waited in line. A sign asked us to please limit ourselves to three pulls whenever there was a line. We looked behind us when it was finally our turn. There was a line. Bohumil pulled three times and we didn't win. *Here*, he said, handing me three more dollars for a maximum bet. *You pull the last one.* It was our fourth pull.

I believe that when extraordinary things happen, time changes speed. When the bald man took out his knife, the sound of the blade against its sheath seemed delayed and distorted; when a rabbit bit my finger to the bone as I snuck it a carrot at Babička's, its big front teeth came down so slowly, I felt I could have pulled my finger away if only I wasn't so curious as to how the bite would feel; when Bohumil entered me for the first time, in our cheap hotel room in Budapest, time almost stopped with the pain and the pleasure of it (for such a skinny man, Bohumil was surprisingly large in the penis); and when, on our fourth pull at the Centennial Slot, the number 100 appeared three times in a row, all sound and movement slurred. I heard distant car horns, shouts, sirens and whistles. I looked up in a daze and saw fireworks oozing into the sky: red blots, purple blots, blue blots slowly exploding into flower shapes and falling downward like lazy shooting stars. Bohumil and I stared at each other, wide-eyed, two dumbfounded deer frozen amidst a swirling crowd. Next thing we knew, news cameras were in our face;

Bohumil started laughing hysterically, so they stuck the microphones in my face and I don't know what I said. Two serious men in dark suits took us by the elbows and asked us to follow them. We all got into a limo and the men poured us champagne.

"Congratulations," they said.

Bohumil asked who they were.

"We're from the city. You get to go meet the mayor."

On the way, they explained how long it would take to process our prize, how much would be withheld for taxes, and in our case, how we'd have to extend our visas and stay in Las Vegas until the paperwork was finished. They gave us a briefcase with twenty thousand dollars in cash and said the rest would come by check in about six weeks. Bohumil took my hand and squeezed as we drank our champagne. When we got to City Hall, we were taken in to shake hands with the smiling, chubby mayor while about twenty photographers took endless pictures that blinded us with flash. Much later, when Bohumil and I finally got back to our hotel room, he opened the briefcase full of hundred dollar bills and dumped it over his head.

"Unbelievable," he said, staring at the scattered pieces of green paper.

I didn't know what to say or feel, so I got under the covers and pulled the sheet over my head. Bohumil jumped up on the bed.

"Zlata," he said, bouncing me up and down. "We're rich. Rich, rich, rich!"

I'm still not sure why I wasn't happy. Maybe I'd inherited a trace of Babiĉka's prophetic streak and I subconsciously sensed our great luck would soon be balanced out by great tragedy, but it's too easy to feel insightful in retrospect. All I knew at the time was I felt more dread than joy.

I woke up in the morning to Bohumil nuzzling my neck.

"What do you want to do today?" he asked. "We'll do whatever you want."

"I don't know," I said, still groggy from sleep.

"Take a shower," he said, "and I'll order some breakfast."

On my way to the bathroom I noticed that while I was sleeping Bohumil had put all the money back in the briefcase. When I got out of the shower, breakfast had arrived and Bohumil arranged a romantic spread on the table by the window, complete with red roses. He'd opened the drapes and the room was flooded in light.

"So, wife," he said, sipping his coffee and not touching any of the food. "What shall we do today?"

"We can rent a motorcycle and check out that mountain," I said.

"We could buy a motorcycle!" he said, smiling like I'd never seen.

"Don't get carried away," I said. "We have a lot to think about."

"Think?" he said. "We're too rich to think. We don't ever have to think again, as long as we live."

"That's not true."

"You're right," he said, trying to stop smiling. "We should be very serious and discuss this very seriously."

"Stop it," I said, throwing a triangle of dry toast at him.

He came over and kissed me and soon we were back in bed.

Later that morning we rented a classic low-rider motorcycle and headed towards the west side of town. At first, the wind felt so hot I wanted to tell Bohumil to pull over and rent us a car, but after a period of adjustment, the heat soaked in and began to feel good.

We passed a smaller chain of mountains on our way to the snow-covered peak, and I was surprised to see the browns from far away turn into deep, earthy reds as we got closer. After about forty minutes, we followed a sign to Toiyabe National Forest and took a left onto a straight, flat road that eventually began to curve and climb into a wooded area that seemed absurdly out of place in the middle of the desert. Soon we were on top of Mt. Charleston, standing on a thin layer of snow and breathing in the cool, pine-scented air. Beyond the mountain we had a clear view of Las Vegas as it sprawled into the immense, blank desert.

"I love it up here," Bohumil said, standing close to the edge of the lookout. "We should build a house right here."

"What about Prague?" I said.

"We'll live there too. A house here, a house there, why not?"

Bohumil turned to me and lit a cigarette.

"We can have whatever we want," he said in a low, sexy tone.

The rest of the afternoon we rode around Mt. Charleston and the Red Rocks, until it started getting late and we returned to the Orleans, both ready for a rest.

"Maybe we'll see a show tonight, after dinner," Bohumil said, putting out a cigarette before getting into bed next to me.

When I woke up at dusk, Bohumil was still asleep. I nuzzled his neck and whispered in his ear, but he didn't move. I thought he must have been over-tired, so I took a long, hot bath and let him keep sleeping. When I got out of the bath, it was totally dark outside and I was hungry, so I turned on the lights, thinking it would wake Bohumil. He still didn't move.

"Bohumil," I said. "Wake up!"

When he didn't move, I thought he was playing a joke on me since he was usually a light sleeper, so I snuck up to the bed and then jumped on him and started tickling. His body was stiff and cold. I knew right away he was dead, but at the same time I felt so confused.

"Bohumil!" I shouted, taking him by the shoulders and shaking him.

It took me a moment to realize I should call for help. Frantic, I dialed the front desk and within seconds the lock on the door clicked and two in-house paramedics rushed in. They led me away from the bed before attempting to resuscitate Bohumil. I saw them put a paddle to his chest to try and jumpstart him back to life, but somehow I knew in my heart there was no hope. They kept trying and trying as I stood there, shocked and horrified, watching as they put the electric paddle repeatedly over his heart, jolting his rigid body with a crackling surge of power so strong he seemed to rise up from the bed, only to fall back down, stiff as a tree and dead as a tree turned to paper.

CHAPTER 10

GRIEF

Grieving is similar to being stuck indefinitely in an airport: a surreal, dizzying, tedious, thought-sucking daze, like being a ghost among ghosts in an endless cycle of waiting. According to the coroner, Bohumil died from a massive stroke caused by heavy smoking. It is not unusual for such complications to arise, the coroner said, but it was unusual in someone so young. I authorized cremation, though the decision wasn't easy. I didn't think Bohumil would want to be buried in America, but I also couldn't fly him home until I was cleared to leave by the city government. Everything had happened so fast. After failing to revive him, the paramedics had taken Bohumil away on a stretcher and told me to follow. We rode in an ambulance to a hospital, where Bohumil was brought into the morgue and pronounced dead. I had to fill out and sign many papers before I was left alone to say goodbye to my new husband. It was awful. I don't even like to remember it: the gray room, his colorless, distorted face. Standing next to Bohumil's body, I was too stunned to cry. One minute he was on top of a mountain planning our future and the next he was dead. At the hospital, all I felt was disbelief. Later that night, alone in our hotel room, came the suffocating grief.

I don't know how to express the way I felt after Bohumil's death. Only people who've suffered devastating loss will understand, without any words at all, how all encompassing and debilitating the grief becomes. I got in the bed where we'd last been

together and didn't get out for weeks, except for the few times I had to go to the toilet; I would force myself to stand, with whatever strength I had left, and in the bathroom I would see my reflection and barely recognize the wild-haired, swollen-eyed stranger. I alternated between visions of him, of our experiences together, and dizzying states of darkness when it felt as if I were being pinned to the bed by heavy weights. Sometimes the phone rang; sometimes there were knocks at the door, but for a long time I couldn't reach out of the darkness and respond. What saved me, or at least what began to save me, was the simple smell of hot food.

One dark night I heard the lock click and saw light come in from the open door. I hid under the sheet, half-expecting to be attacked and half-expecting Bohumil to strut in and hop on the bed. The door closed, the light disappeared, and soon I smelled food. I didn't feel hungry, but my mouth watered and I knew I should eat. I switched on the bedside lamp and closed my eyes, letting them adjust to the weak light. Someone had wheeled in a cart with steak, rolls, a steaming baked potato and a Stella Artois. I could only eat a few bites of the steak and half a roll, but the cold beer tasted good and went down fast. Sitting there, with a bit of food and beer in my belly, I began to feel human again. The next morning, I opened the drapes a few inches, ate the rest of the steak and spent several hours sitting in front of Bohumil's closed suitcase. When I finally opened it, I saw his blue boxer shorts resting on top; I held them and wept until all my new strength disappeared and I was once again a dizzy wreck. The cycle went on for several more weeks. I would order a steak, take a few bites, go back to his suitcase, hold each piece of his clothing as if would help me hold on to him longer.

There were lucid moments when I knew I should call Hana, but still I couldn't do it.

I couldn't call anyone and say the words out loud in Czech: *Bohumil's dead.* I felt so far away from everyone else in the world; I felt weak and incapable of resuming my real life. When I lost Bohumil, I lost myself as well, at least for a long time. Even when I emerged from the room and began walking in the world again, some large part of me was gone. I did things in those first months after his death and made decisions perhaps no one can relate to, but I was lost: a roaming, wounded soul, desperate to follow even the slightest spark of what might make me feel alive again.

After almost a month, I grew restless in that room and tired of solitude. Late one night I went downstairs, almost as a ghost floats, and wandered the busy casino. Everything felt surreal: the giant, hanging masked heads with blinking, colored eyes, the iridescent Mardi Gras beads, the old people smoking and playing the slots, hypnotized, pull after pull. Why did they get to smoke and grow old? I ended up at the bar, drinking pilsner. No one seemed to see me. After my second beer, I noticed two large alligators on top of the bar's awning. I suddenly remembered standing in front of the Brno Dragon as a girl, and for an instant, I smiled. Two men in shiny shirts sat down and ordered drinks. One man asked the other if he'd ever been to the Bunny Ranch. I thought of Babička and her prophesy, of the days we spent at her farm, before Tomas and I grew older, before I met Franz or Bohumil, and I felt a trace of my old self. I thought if I followed that trace, if I found the Bunny Ranch and could awaken more memories of my innocent self, then perhaps I could grow strong again and get over the grief. I went to the concierge desk and asked if he knew how to get to the Bunny Ranch.

"That's up in Carson City, by Reno. It's about a one-hour flight. If you drive, it'd take about nine or ten hours."

It was much farther than I thought, but I had so much empty time, I decided a long car trip might not be bad. I needed to find someone to drive me.

"Can you send a bellhop to my room tomorrow morning at ten?" I asked. "Have him, or her, bring a pot of coffee and two mugs."

"Sure thing, ma'm," the concierge said.

I walked around the casino a little more that night, relieved to be observing others and to have my mind wander away from thoughts of Bohumil. I wondered what kind of rabbits could survive on a desert ranch in the middle of summer. I felt renewed strength, so I went upstairs and called my parents. My mother answered after the first ring.

"Hello, mama," I said.

"Thank god," she yelled. "Where are you? Why haven't you called? Hana came looking for you: we're all so worried. Bohumil lost his job because you never came back. Where are you?"

I was right. Just hearing the Czech language made me start to break down.

"Hello? Hello?"

"Mama..."

"What happened? Tell me, what happened?"

"We won, money."

"Why are you crying?"

"A lot of money."

"Yes?"

"And Bohumil...Bohumil got sick."

"Tell me what happened!"

"He's dead," I said, and the room started spinning. I couldn't control my sobbing or hear what my mother was saying. "I'll call you back," I said, and sunk into bed.

That night I dreamt of my first love, Franz. He came into the Brno library and brought me red, paper roses. *I've won a lot of money*, he said, *and now I can take you to England.* We went out front and he showed me his motorcycle. Uncle Peter appeared next to me and whispered that I was making a big mistake. *Hold out for something better*, he whispered in my ear. The next thing I knew, I was lying naked in Babička's muddy rabbit pen, with hundreds of white rabbits hopping all over me, tickling and scratching me with their sharp, thick claws. The mud got softer, until I sunk down deep into the earth. It was dark; I felt a man's body next to mine. I reached out to touch him, and he turned into ash. A quiet, persistent knocking dragged me out of my dream and woke me in the morning. It was a very short, black bellhop. He had a pot of coffee and two mugs.

"Come in," I said, my voice still deep from sleeping.

He came in and closed the door.

"You can put the coffee on the table," I said.

He put the coffee down while I opened the curtains. The strength of the sunlight shocked me. I backed away, covering my eyes with my arm.

"You all right?" he asked. "You don't need to open those for me. Keep 'em closed," he said, and I heard him close the curtains. "I'll turn on the bathroom light."

I uncovered my eyes and watched him come back from the bathroom. The dim light was just enough so we could see each other.

"Will you join me?" I said.

"Sure," he said, hopping up on one of the chairs.

His feet dangled inches above the floor. It felt strange, sitting across from another person.

"Can I pour you some?" he said.

"Please."

"I came up here last week, right? Brought you some steak," he said, pouring the coffee.

"It's possible," I said.

"How was it?"

"It was fine."

"Yeah, they got good steak here."

We sipped our coffee in silence.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Ditty," he said, pointing to the nametag on his chest.

I laughed before I could stop myself, and he raised both his eyebrows.

"In Czech, Dítě means child," I said.

"You making fun of my size?" he said, sitting up taller.

"No. Ask any Czech person."

"Okay," he said, contemplating for a moment. "Child—that's funny. I like that."

"Wait," I said. "I think I do remember you. When you brought me steak the other day, you didn't smile or try and chat. The other bellboys were all so damn cheerful, but I think I liked you. You left me alone."

"They probably just trying to get big tips. Everyone knows you won the

Centennial."

"They do?"

"This is Vegas. What happens here spreads fast."

"And you like Vegas?"

"You bet," he said. "This a real special place. I once served the President of the United States, up in the Penthouse. Brought him some cream of asparagus soup and a bottle of white wine; got searched by the Secret Service, the real deal."

"Have you ever heard of the Bunny Ranch?"

"Who wants to know?" he snapped.

"I'll pay you a thousand dollars to drive me there."

"I'll take you there, sure. When you wanna go? Thursday's my next day off."

"You know where it is?"

He said he had a rough idea.

"Thursday's fine," I said. "We'll leave early. I'll see the rabbits for a few hours, then we can drive back."

"My car isn't fancy, just a beat up old Nissan."

I told him I didn't care.

"See the rabbits," he said, turning his head and looking at me sideways. "You for real?"

After Ditty left, I took a long, hot shower. My dream from the night before came back to me, as did my conversation with my mother. When I got out of the shower and combed my wet hair, the woman in the mirror still looked like a stranger. It would be good to take a drive, I thought, to get away from the hotel and to re-connect, even in a

small way, with my childhood. I knew I had to call Hana—I even wanted to call her—but when I walked over to the phone, I felt too weak and exhausted to lift the receiver. After Thursday, I thought, climbing back into bed: after Thursday I'd have enough strength to call.

CHAPTER 11

BUNNY RANCH

Ditty picked me up at seven in the morning on Thursday, which was too early for either of us to carry on a conversation. He sat on two telephone books and strapped a wooden block to the bottom of his shoe in order to drive. Soon, the signs of Las Vegas city life, the housing developments, strip malls and casinos, disappeared. I had never been in a real desert, and couldn't believe how dry and dead it seemed. Mile after mile, hour after hour, I got lost in the desolate, alien flatness. It seemed like the perfect place to be for someone who felt so alone. Once in awhile I saw a trailer with a car or two parked next to it in the distance.

"I can't imagine a more depressing place to live," I said to Ditty as we passed a lone trailer.

"You ever been to the projects?" he said. "Least out here, you got some space to breathe."

"What are the projects?"

"Buildings in bad neighborhoods where the government sticks poor black folks, where the rent is real low and so is the life expectancy."

"Is that where you're from?"

"The Bronx projects: it don't get more depressing than that."

He started to tell me about gangbanging and government cheese.

"I used to be a banger," he said. "They called me Lil' Blood, and I thought I was pretty tough, shootin' at other young black thugs I didn't even know, until I got busted for assault with a deadly when I was sixteen and spent two years in jail. It's no game up in there; I learned real fast how to keep my ears open without hearing anything and my eyes open without seeing. Am I boring you?"

"No," I said. "Tell me more."

"About jail?"

"What happened when you got out?"

"I went back to the projects, to the one bedroom I shared with my Mama and my baby sister, LaTrelle. My old posse kept tryin' to get me back into bangin' and my Mama kept beggin' me to get a legitimate job. I didn't know what the hell I wanted to do."

"I definitely know how that feels," I said.

"Oh yeah?" Ditty said, giving me an approving glance before looking back at the road.

"So what did you do?" I asked.

"Well, I got on a city bus one day, just to take a ride and get out the neighborhood. When the bus went down Madison Avenue, I got off and wandered into one of those expensive boutiques where a toothpick costs two thousand dollars. I heard all these people, shopping in pairs and talking about buying things without even mentioning the price! That just blew me away, you know? In the projects, we were totally removed from hope and prosperity; our lives didn't seem free; our options felt limited, like we were all still trapped in the slave quarters, workin' our asses off to get by. That day I

realized that if I worked hard, I could be something big: I could get out and help my Mama and my sister get out too. The next day I got a job bussing tables at a restaurant in Harlem. Basically, I got out of the moment-to-moment trip and into the big trip. Eventually, I came out here to live with my Uncle and go to hospitality school, which I finished last year. Now, I'm taking some business classes at the community college, still livin' with my Uncle, but I got enough saved up so when I need to get out on my own, it won't be any problem. That's my story, glory. And what about you? You thought about what you gonna do with all your money?"

"Not really," I said, staring out the passenger window. "All I can think about is Bohumil."

Ditty reached over and put his hand on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry about your husband," he said. "But you young, and you rich! You should think about what you're gonna do with your money."

I didn't want to think about the money; I didn't care about it at all.

"I'm in business school, like I said, so if you need any advice or anything, just let me know."

We stopped for coffee, gas and snacks in the afternoon and got to the Bunny Ranch around five. I knew right away that I'd made a terrible mistake. The outline of a naked woman's body flashed on and off in bright pink neon, next to a sign that read: Moonlite BunnyRanch, America's Hottest Cathouse, Best Little Whorehouse in the World. Ditty parked in the dirt lot and turned off the car.

"Well," he said, turning to me with a gigantic grin, "here we are." He undid the strap on his shoe and let the block fall to the floor.

"What's wrong?" he said. "You look like you about to cry."

"There aren't any rabbits here," I said, dejected.

"Of course not."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think you really wanted to drive all this way to see *rabbits*."

"What *did* you think I wanted?" I said, raising my voice.

"I don't know. I was tryin' to mind my own business."

I squeezed both of my fists until my nails dug into my palms.

"What you want to do, drive back?" he asked.

I kept squeezing and staring at the sign.

"Come on, let's just go in for a drink," he said. "We been in the car almost ten hours. My legs is short, but they still need to stretch. Damn."

"One drink," I said.

"Fine with me," he said, opening his door.

Ditty walked in front of me and waited outside the entrance while I kicked rocks and took my time, feeling more like a fool with every step. Even if there had been rabbits, how would seeing a bunch of rabbits have helped me? I could have gone to a store and bought a picture book about Brno if it was nostalgia I wanted. Once again came the same plaguing question: what did I want? When I followed Ditty inside, it took my eyes a minute to adjust from the intense daylight to the dark parlor. I expected something similar to the brothel where Uncle Peter worked in Prague, but the front parlor of the Bunny Ranch seemed more intimate and comfortable, with red velvet sofas and soft pink lights. I heard women talking and laughing in a nearby room.

"Maybe they didn't see us come in," Ditty said, throwing back his shoulders and trying to stand as tall as he could. "Hello!" he shouted.

Suddenly eight or nine women filed into the parlor and lined up in front of the far wall. I looked at the women, most of them tall blondes in bikinis or what looked like shirts made of shoelaces, and I felt so embarrassed I just stared at the floor.

"What's happenin', lil' Ditty?" one of the women said. "We ain't seen you here in awhile."

Ditty looked at me and shrugged his shoulders.

"Sorry Brown Sugar," he said to a black hooker towards the end of the line. "I think we just here for a drink today."

"Oh," Brown Sugar said, looking disappointed. "Come on in."

I followed Ditty who followed the women into the bar.

"You want to sit at the bar, or a table, or a booth?" Brown Sugar asked.

Ditty looked at me.

"Bar," I said.

I sat at a stool and ordered a beer and a double whiskey. Brown Sugar helped Ditty up onto the stool next to mine. From far away she was pretty, with smooth skin and well-proportioned curves, but up close she had a bad case of acne and wore much too much makeup.

"So, how you been?" she was saying to Ditty. He ordered a gin and tonic and sat with his back to me, absorbed in Brown Sugar.

"I been good, you know. Got some irons in the fire. You lookin' real sexy today, baby. I like that top. That leather?"

"Yeah, leather. I was hopin' you'd come in again. Been keepin' my eye out for you, lil' daddy."

"Oh yeah?"

I made accidental eye contact with one of the blondes with huge boobs. She headed straight for me.

"And how are you today, sweetheart?" she said.

"Not good," I said, sipping the last of my whiskey.

"You're real cute," she said, leaning in close enough so I could smell the hot dog she must have had for lunch.

"Please, leave me alone," I said, turning back to the bar and ordering another drink.

"No problem," she said, walking away.

I drank my beer and tried to look around without making eye contact with anyone. The hookers seemed to be having fun talking amongst themselves. I didn't think any of them were particularly attractive. They looked like hookers, which was different from Uncle Peter's brothel in Prague, where the girls looked like regular girls in short skirts. At the Bunny Ranch, they looked like balloon-boobed sluts. I was almost finished with my beer and ready to go when I noticed a woman across the room; she looked so familiar, my heart fluttered. *It couldn't be her*, I thought, but she looked exactly like the gypsy woman who used to dance at my parents' restaurant on Saturday nights. I couldn't stop staring at the woman, and soon she looked at me and stared back. I felt myself blushing but I couldn't look away: she had the same big brown eyes, the same olive complexion and full lips. The woman got up and walked towards me, her shiny black hair reflecting the pink neon lights.

"May I join you?" she asked, with an accent different from the Romanian gypsy's. Up close she looked less like the gypsy, but still beautiful in a similar way.

"Of course," I said. She sat next to me and ordered tequila on the rocks.

I ordered another double whiskey.

"I'm sorry for staring," I said. "You look like someone I used to know."

"It's your first time here?"

She sat so close to me, I could smell her skin, like the flowers I used to find in the woods when I was a girl.

"You were so shy in the parlor," she said. "Like you don't want to be here."

"It's a long story," I said. The bartender served us our drinks.

"Please, tell me," she said, sticking her middle finger in the glass of tequila and stirring the ice.

"Straight tequila?" I asked.

"You like it?"

"I never tried," I said.

"Oh, you must try it," she said, taking her finger out of the glass and bringing it slowly over to my mouth, as it dripped on the bar, as my mouth opened before I knew it and she put her finger all the way inside. She smiled and brought her hand back to her drink.

"What do you think?" she said.

"I'd have to taste it again."

"Whatever you want," she said, smiling and handing me her glass.

I took a sip. It didn't agree with my whiskey, but the flavor still excited me.

"So, will you tell me the story?" she said after I gave her back the tequila.

I told her about Bohumil's sudden death, and how I had come to the Bunny Ranch looking to re-connect with the memories of my grandmother's rabbit farm to help me get over my grief.

"Your husband died?" she said when I finished my story.

"Yes."

"And you are sad?"

I nodded.

"I come from Mexico," she said. "When our people die, we celebrate. We don't take anything lying down, and death is no exception. Your husband is free now; if you feel sad, it is for yourself, because you miss him. But you're a young, beautiful woman, and you should be happy: happy you knew him and loved him, and happy you're still healthy. If he loved you, he'd want you to be happy and to live, not to mourn and be sad."

I thought what she said made sense.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Violeta."

"Vee-o-letta. I like that."

A doorbell rang twice and everyone left the bar area except for Ditty, Brown Sugar, Violeta and myself. After a moment, the other hookers came back in the room, followed by several loud, middle-aged men. Violeta and I had finished our drinks. I asked her if she wanted another.

"Can we go to my room?" she said. "One of those men always requests me, but I'd

rather keep talking to you."

"Sure," I said. I tapped Ditty on the shoulder and told him we could stay for a few more hours.

"Yes!" he yelled, pumping his fist in the air.

Violeta took my hand and led me from the bar into a hallway. She walked like the gypsy woman, with slow steps and a graceful sway of the hips. The black top she wore was backless, with a spaghetti strap that tied into a small bow behind her neck, showing off her smooth, muscular back. Halfway down the hallway, she stopped and turned around.

"Here's how it works," she said. "Before we go into my room, we're supposed to negotiate a price based on what you want to do with me. Usually, I charge $1,000 for an hour, but since I like you, I'll drop my price to $500. Is that okay?"

I felt a little flustered, being caught up in this unexpected transaction, but talking to her had begun to make me feel better, so I decided to buy us some time.

"I'll pay the full thousand," I said, "but I just want to talk."

"Whatever you want," she said, brushing my cheek with the back of her hand.

Violeta led me around the corner to a small office. She told the Madame about our arrangement, got a clean set of sheets, and we went a few doors down to her room. Inside, everything was varying shades of purple: the curtains, the bedspread, the lighting. She went to a small bar by the window and poured me a whiskey.

"Will you have one too?" I said.

"I don't like whiskey, but maybe a little tequila." She poured herself a drink. "I'll put these sheets on the bed so we can sit and talk," she said, putting her tequila down

after taking a sip. Her room had no chairs.

I watched her put the sheets on the mattress.

"Let's listen to some music," she said, pointing to the stereo. "That way we won't hear the other girls." She got on the bed and started fluffing her pillows.

I didn't recognize any of her CD's.

"Do you have any gypsy music?" I asked.

"Gypsy?" she said, jumping off the bed and running over to a wooden trunk in the corner. "This is my personal collection. I've got Gypsy Kings and some Flamenco guitar."

I picked the Flamenco and she put it on.

"It's so strange," she said, as we stood by the stereo sipping our drinks. "No one ever asked for Gypsy before."

"When I was a girl, there was a Gypsy woman who used to dance at my parents' restaurant on Saturday nights. She was so beautiful. I loved watching her. The way she danced, so slow and so fluid."

"Come here," Violeta said, taking me by the hand and leading me to the bed. She propped two pillows against the wall and sat me down. I watched while she went to the stereo, turned up the music, and looked at me to make sure I was watching. Without looking away, she took two long drinks, her hips swaying to the music, and finished her tequila, putting the glass on a shelf. She danced for me, slow and fluid, keeping her eyes locked on mine, running her fingertips down the sides of her body, up through her hair, moving her hips in slow circles, lifting her shirt over her head and letting it drop to the floor, baring her breasts and her soft, flat belly. I finished my whiskey and wished I had

more. Something made me feel dizzy: the loud Gypsy music, the undeniable desire rising inside. My dizziness grew more intense as she came closer, as she climbed onto the foot of the bed and crawled towards me, her breasts brushing up against the length of my legs, as I laid down, the weight of her body on top of me, the unbelievably smooth feel of her back, of her slick, gentle mouth on mine. I felt almost sick with excitement. She took off my shirt and found the scar on my side, feeling it first with her fingertips and then with her tongue. We both became naked; the tempo of the music increased. Her mouth was everywhere, our fingers and our hands all over each other, into each other; I couldn't get enough, but I thought it might kill me, that constant verge of explosion. Oh, Violeta. What a beautiful, beautiful name.

I'd gone to the Bunny Ranch that day an empty shell, expecting to reconnect with myself and go backwards in time in order to begin getting over my grief. Although I did find something that reminded me of Brno, it wasn't anything I expected. I followed a familiar stranger along until she somehow lit a spark in me and helped me release some of the weight of my grief. It wasn't as if I needed a new love, because love had nothing to do with what happened in Violeta's room. Letting go is the hardest, most mystical task I've ever faced, and its process defies explanation. All I know is I left the Bunny Ranch feeling stronger and less sad than when I'd arrived, and though I never felt sexual attraction towards another woman again, whenever I remember Violeta, I always feel a brief rush of delight.

CHAPTER 12

MT. CHARLESTON

Ditty and I got back from the Bunny Ranch just before sunrise and I slept until the late afternoon. When I woke up, I noticed a blinking red light on the phone, so I checked for a message. The city lawyer had called to say my check would be ready at the beginning of the following week. Once I had the money, I could leave: I could go anywhere I wanted. But still, all I wanted was Bohumil. I went to the window and looked at Mt. Charleston; I felt I needed to go back there, to where Bohumil and I had last ventured together, where he'd said he'd wanted to build a house.

The phone rang and I answered it. It was Hana.

"You never called me!" she yelled. "My brother died and you never called me!"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I couldn't say it out loud."

"You told your mother!"

"And afterwards I didn't speak for weeks."

"You're speaking now!"

"I was afraid—he's your only family."

"How dare you," she hissed. "Where's his body? You had him buried there, in Las Vegas?"

"He was cremated, so I can bring the ashes to Karlovy Vary."

"No," she said very softly.

It felt so good to hear her voice.

"What?" I said. "What is it?"

"We made a pact," she said, "to be buried next to our parents."

"But they wouldn't let me leave the country."

"You could have sent his body," she said, raising her voice. "You could have called me and asked what he would have wanted!"

"You're right," I said. I felt sick to my stomach. "I'm so sorry. It's been so hard, and I've thought about you every day."

"How do you think I've felt?" she said. "How do you think I felt when your mother called to tell me what you'd told her, and still you never called me?"

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"*Go to hell you little bitch*!" Hana yelled before hanging up. Actually, she said a dirty phrase in Czech, which roughly translates to: suck a bird (cock), you cunt.

I went into the bathroom and stared at myself in the mirror. There was no good reason I could think of as to why I hadn't called to tell her about Bohumil. I stared hard at my reflection, disgusted; I started pinching my cheeks, then smacking them again and again. Thinking of Bohumil's ashes in a vase in the next room, I smacked myself until I couldn't think. The physical pain, of course, went away, but to this day I still wish I could have smacked myself earlier and gotten up the courage to call Hana immediately after Bohumil's death. I felt awful that night, even without an idea of how soon Hana, too, would be gone.

The next morning I got into a rented car and drove to Mt. Charleston, even though I still felt awful: I was tired, my cheeks hurt, and I kept replaying Hana's words in my

head. The day was already very hot. When I turned left off the highway towards Mt. Charleston and the road started to curve and climb, I rolled down my window and felt the cool air, smelled the pine, and began to feel a little better. I drove to the highest lookout point and hiked up a short trail until I was sitting alone in the woods, looking at a view of the Las Vegas valley. I thought of Bohumil, of course, and of where his soul might have gone; somehow, my thoughts that day led me to the myth of Libuse.

When the Czech King, Krok, had to choose a new ruler from his three daughters, the youngest and most magically gifted was chosen: Libuse. She was a successful and respected Queen, until one day when the loser of a dispute accused her of weakness and bias. Because no one spoke up to defend Libuse, she decided to give the people a strong male ruler if that was their wish, and so she chose a husband, Premisyl, to be King. He too was fair and always consulted his Queen, Libuse. Eventually, however, a war of the sexes developed, and so came about the Maiden Wars, when the men fought to overthrow the powerful women. The women almost won, but in the end they lost and all the female leaders were slaughtered. I thought of young Libuse and of how she would have held on to her power and changed history if she'd never been married. I knew I could never replace Bohumil, and that I wanted to be alone for a very long time; if I went back to Prague, I would only be reminded of Bohumil and our time there. I thought about building a house on Mt. Charleston, as Bohumil had suggested: it would be something we'd shared, something he wanted, and also something I could make my own.

That afternoon I decided to stay.

After I got my check the following week, I went back to Mt. Charleston and bought a large piece of land. I hired an architect and contractor to build my new house on the

hill. During the two years it took the house to be built, I stayed in the Orleans, though I switched to a suite so I could start letting go of the past. Every few days, Ditty would come by with a six-pack of beer or a bottle of wine. He kept after me to let him manage my money so that down the line we could do *something big*. Maybe I did it because I liked and trusted him, or maybe it was because I didn't care about the money beyond what I needed to help my family and build my house, but eventually I did agree to let him manage twenty million dollars. He came up with a detailed investment plan, we had a lawyer draw up contracts, and as soon as we signed the papers, Ditty walked over to the phone and called down to the concierge.

"Mr. Henry, this is Ditty. I quit! And send up your coldest bottle of champagne to suite 919, pronto, Tonto."

In the evenings, while I waited for the house to be built, I started going to magic shows on the strip. Since there were only about twenty working magicians in those days, I saw each show almost thirty times. At the height of my obsession with magic, I booked the Amazing Pierre for a private party, which wasn't a party at all, but a private showing in my hotel suite. From the moment he arrived and saw only one person, he seemed very disappointed and gave a lackluster show, barely gathering up the energy to pull a rabbit out from his mouth.

"My goodness," I said when his show was over. "That was rather awkward."

"My majeek," he said with a ridiculous fake French accent, sticking out his chest and lifting his chin, "eez art for ze masses, not for one over-privileged perzon."

"Your magic," I said, "is boring."

He huffed indignantly while stuffing his props into a black duffel bag.

"You," he said, "are a beautiful woman, but you know nossing about majeek."

"You are also a beautiful woman who knows nothing about magic," I said, trying to tease him in a lighthearted way.

"I am not a woman," he gasped. "Oo told you I am a woman?"

"Can you turn yourself into a woman?" I asked.

"Of course not."

"Now *that* would be a good magic trick."

Pierre arched his high eyebrows until they almost left his forehead completely.

"I will show you majeek," he said. "Give me a dollair."

"I gave you thousands of dollairs."

"Fine," he said, taking a dollar out of his own pocket. He straightened the note on his palm until it lied flat, then waved his other hand over the dollar bill. The bill folded itself in half and then in quarters.

"Impressive," I said. "Must be a trick dollar."

"But I asked you for a dollair!" he whined.

"Calm down," I said. "Here's a dollar."

He took my dollar and repeated the trick, then, once the bill was folded into quarters, he waved his hand again and the bill disappeared.

"Very impressive," I said.

"I am a professional magician," he said, lifting his nose high into the air.

"Can you read people's minds?"

"I am not a con-arteest," he said, dismissing me with a wave of his hand. He finished packing his props and walked towards the door. "Zat is ze end, zo, adieu."

"Bless you."

"Pardon?"

"I said: so that's it? No balloon animals, no flotation?"

"Should you want *balloon animals*, I sujest you hire a shildren's clown," he sneered before walking through the door, opening it first like any normal person would.

A few weeks later, my house on Mt. Charleston was ready. Though the woods in Toiyabe don't have the variety of Southern Moravia in terms of trees or birds, I fell in love with the Blue jays. I love their strong call, how they mimic the sounds of hawks to scare other birds from the birdfeeders. The jays are gregarious, royal blue birds with stylish black collars and a fearless nature that entertained me on countless daily walks. I'll never know for sure if I made the right decision by staying in Nevada, but even Libuse, with her gift of magic and prophesy, didn't have the power to change the past. I still regret not calling Hana, and I sometimes wonder if there's anything I could have done to save her life. I retreated to my house in the woods, leaving her virtually alone in Prague: alone and helpless on the night it mattered most.

CHAPTER 13

TRAGEDY

Perhaps it's no coincidence that this chapter is number thirteen, a number associated with awful luck. I think our luck is probably determined before we're born—not the predestination of specific events, but luck in general. Family, a matter of luck, determines so much of our lives. My own family has been a blessing and a curse: a majority of good, though flawed, people, and a minor few who've tainted us with suicide and murder. Hana's and Bohumil's family had a strange and tragic luck, made stranger and even more tragic by their association with me.

If I stood looking out the living room window of Hana's old apartment at night, I would see a city street with people coming and going, walking by or driving in cars, their headlights flashing fast into dark doorways before moving on. I'm sure I did look out that window many times, but I never thought to search the shadows, just as I never thought he would follow me to find out where I lived, and in doing so, discover where Hana lived as well. I should have been more careful. I should have known that when you say goodbye to a disturbed liar, he does not necessarily say goodbye to you. He must have stood out there many times during the years I lived with Hana, and during the years after I left. It could have gone on, just with him watching, or maybe he could have made up a reason to have approached Hana and lied his way into her life. So why did he choose violence, and what exactly happened on that night?

Six months after I moved into the house on Mt. Charleston, I got a call from my mother. She was hysterical and it took her some time to calm down and speak.

"The police just arrested your Uncle Peter," she said.

"What for?"

"Have you heard about Hana?"

"One at a time," I said. "What about Uncle Peter?"

"Hana's body was found last week, Zlata, on the stairs of her apartment building. She was strangled to death. They found your Uncle Peter's fingerprints all over the door and stair rail—they found pieces of his skin under her nails."

It was dark when I got the call; I went outside into the warm night and threw up by the stump of a tree. The stars spun above the trees as I knelt, reeling and retching until there was nothing left inside. At some point I crawled back to my house and spent the rest of the night curled up on the foyer floor. The devastating news left me feeling stunned, angry, and paralyzed by regret. For the first time, I was actually happy that Bohumil had died young, so that he didn't have to suffer the pain of his sister's death. When the sun came up in the morning, its light felt like a violent invasion.

That afternoon I flew back to the Czech Republic. Hana was buried next to her parents in Karlovy Vary on a cold, rainy day. When they finished lowering her casket into the ground, I poured Bohumil's ashes into the deep hole so they would be buried together, as they'd planned, forever next to their parents. I asked for her forgiveness, for forgiveness from all of them. Perhaps they were luckier than most, ending up together so soon. Long after the priest and the other mourners left, I stayed by the gravesides, letting the cold rain cry for me, trying not to remember how Uncle Peter once said he'd lie on

top of graves to listen to the voices of the dead.

Uncle Peter admitted to killing Hana, though he never gave an account of why or how it happened. He got very ill two years into his life sentence and died soon thereafter of kidney failure. Several weeks after his death, I got a letter from him: a letter it took me over twenty years to open. For the longest time, I just couldn't bring myself to read it. If he's written me a letter, he wanted me to read it, and for years I preferred my own unanswered questions to fulfilling any of his wishes.

After Hana's funeral, I went to visit my parents in Brno. I hadn't been back since my wedding, and was shocked to see that my father had lost almost all his hair and my mother's hair had gone silver. They still ran the restaurant and worked six days and nights a week, even though I'd sent them a large sum of money.

"What did you do with the money I sent?" I asked my parents on a Sunday night when the restaurant was closed and we were eating at home.

"We put it in the bank," my father said. He sat hunched over his plate, as if his broad shoulders were too heavy to hold up in his old age.

"You could retire," I said. "You could hire more people to help at the restaurant so you don't have to work so many hours."

My mother didn't look up from her plate.

"We like working at the restaurant," my father said. "We're old," he said. "We want what we've always wanted."

"What about you?" I asked my mother. "Don't you want to rest? Aren't there things you want besides serving food and beer to the same people every day?"

My mother rolled a piece of potato around with her fork and stared at her plate. She

looked at my father as he concentrated on cutting his meat; hers was a serious, worried look, one I rarely remember seeing.

"I want you to come back," she said, looking at me. "Why stay there, Zlata? Why can't you find another husband in this country? What is there for you in America?"

"Sell the restaurant and come live with me," I said. "I have a big house on a beautiful mountain; you can have your own car, come and go as you please."

"We're too old and we don't speak a word of English," my father said. "There are plenty of mountains here with big houses, and these are your people. You want us to die here alone?"

"That's ridiculous," I said. "You have each other, and you have Tomas close by. It's too painful for me to come back here. Every day, all I still think about is Bohumil; if I came back it would only be worse. I like America. The people there leave you alone. You don't have to talk to your neighbors—why come back here where everybody will talk about what you have for breakfast and who you kissed in high school and people go on and on about the war and the communists?"

After dinner, while my mother washed dishes, my father and I went in the living room. He sat in his favorite green armchair and asked me to sit on his knee.

"But I'm a grown woman," I said.

"I have strong knees. Come sit, like when you were a girl."

I perched uncomfortably on his knee, trying not to put my weight on him.

"We're happy to see you," he said.

"Mama doesn't seem happy; she seems more unhappy than I've ever seen her."

"This has been hard on her," he said. "Think about if your own brother commits

such unspeakable acts, acts that hurt your own child. It is very hard for her now."

"Has he been in touch with her, since the arrest?"

"No, but every time the phone rings she jumps. She'll feel better, but for now, it's very hard."

That night, after my parents went to sleep, my brother Tomas came over. I was standing in the living room next to my father's armchair, sipping a glass of Slivovice, looking at a framed picture of myself as a pig-tailed young girl. Tomas came through the front door, and I turned away from pictures of him as a handsome young boy to see him standing there, a middle-aged man with gray circles under his eyes and loose flesh hanging beneath his chin.

"I'm sorry about your sister-in-law," he said. "And your husband."

I poured him some Slivovice and we sat in our parents' armchairs.

"I'm sure it must be hard, but I really envy you," he said.

"Money isn't everything, Tomas. I can give you more."

"No," he said, pulling on the extra flesh below his chin. "I envy your freedom. You have no commitments. No spouse, no children: you're free."

"You're just in a miserable marriage," I said. "Bohumil and I were different. He made me feel free...more free than when I'm alone."

"You were only married a week," Tomas said bitterly. "Soon it turns to routine, into boredom, and the next thing you know your life is wasted and your son looks exactly like his mother."

"How is Dominika?" I asked.

"Fat and miserable," he said. "Only Milan makes her smile, and he's a lazy brat.

All he does is sit at his mother's feet and beg for sweets, like a trained pig."

"You should take him outside, make him work in the yard."

"I got him a train set for Christmas last year, and he spent ten minutes outside with it, and then started whining that he hates trains and could he please go back inside and have a snack? I said no, you'll play with your train until I say stop. I started to tell him about the history of how the trains were used in the war, but he just spit at the dirt and said he hated history. I got so mad I kicked his new train across the yard, and he looked up with a big smile and said 'now that you've broken my train set, daddy, can I go back inside?'"

Tomas stared at the floor with a look of indignation. I watched as faint shadows of thin branches stretched and swayed on the walls. We finished our drinks as we had spent most of our childhood: without speaking.

"Well," Tomas said when his glass was empty, "I should get home."

We walked to the front door, but before he stepped out into the night, he turned around and looked at me with desperation in his eyes.

"I have a girlfriend," he said. "No one else knows."

"I'm sorry," I said, unsure of how to respond. "I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything," he said, and for the last time, I watched him walk away from our parents' house.

I spent two days in Prague before returning to Nevada. On the first afternoon, I went into the Chateau Blue hoping to see Paul, but the bar was filled with young strangers. None of the staff looked familiar, so I left without having a drink and walked to the Old Town Square. Tourists flocked around the church clock for its hourly bell ringing, but I

still preferred the gray stone church across the square with its golden oval on top, reflecting the sunset with a bronze-yellow glow. The snack stand's hot sausages filled the square with a warm, meaty smell and hundreds of cooing pigeons strutted around pecking at stray crumbs between the crooked, dirty cobblestones.

On the night before leaving, I walked to Hana's old apartment and stood across the street, looking up at the darkened windows. An occasional car drove by, flashing me with its lights. I wished I had gone back after Bohumil died and told Hana in person. We could have cried together and used my new money to buy a house with an alarm, far from the crowded center of Prague. How easy it must have been for Uncle Peter to stand there, unnoticed, staring up at her window, waiting for her to stumble home from one or another inevitable party. Or maybe she did notice him. Maybe she told him to get lost or asked him inside for a drink. I stood on the sidewalk outside Hana's old apartment until just before dawn, and sometimes I feel like I'm still standing there, waiting for Hana to part the white curtains and wave, for a sign of forgiveness.

CHAPTER 14

THE BOHEMIAN

I got back to my house on Mt. Charleston and there was a message from Ditty asking me to call him as soon as possible. When I called he said he had some exciting news and asked me to meet him at his new office the following morning. His office was on West Flamingo in a non-descript strip mall, flanked by other non-descript strip malls. From the outside, his office looked abandoned. There was no name on the door and dark tinting and long curtains kept anyone from seeing in his windows, so I double-checked the address before opening the door. Inside, the small reception area was barren except for institutional gray carpet and long, dark curtains.

"Hello?" I called out.

"Come on back," Ditty yelled.

I opened the only interior door and was surprised to see Ditty, looking regal in a red tie and black suit, sitting behind a grandiose mahogany desk in a large, imperially decorated room. I was about to sit in one of the two high-backed, hand-carved wooden chairs in front of Ditty's desk, but he stood up and motioned for me to join him on the L-shaped black leather couch.

"How was your trip?" he asked, sitting down at the other end of the couch.

"I went back for a funeral," I said.

"You wanna talk about it?"

"Not really," I said.

I liked Ditty, and he was the closest person I had to a friend, but I didn't have the energy to tell him about Uncle Peter and Hana. Looking back, I think I should have opened up to more people along the way, starting with Ditty. He and I could have been good friends, but I'd become too isolated to try and relate.

"That's cool," Ditty said. "Just let me know if you change your mind."

"Thanks," I said. "So what's the exciting news?"

"As was our agreement when you hired me to manage your money," he said with complete self-assurance, "I broke the investments into two groups: fifteen million into steady, interest-bearing accounts, and five million to play with at my discretion. Now, of that five million, I also broke it into two groups, one of four million and one of one. I ended up investing the four million in a cutting edge company that was developing, among other things, something called 'The Random Remix Robot.' The music industry is always changing, and the newest thing will be to cut out the dj and sell a do-it-yourself re-mixer. The software analyzes the tempos and melodies of a particular song, so the customer downloads his or her favorite songs into the player, and it creates original, hit re-mixes every time. From the look on your face I can see you you're less than amazed, but I'm tellin' you, it's the hottest new thing, and I'm not the only one who thought so. Last week, the company got bought by Oogle-Jams, and you won't believe how much they paid."

Ditty took out a notepad and silver pen from the inside pocket of his jacket and jotted down a number. When he showed me, I indeed did not believe it.

"In two years, we made ten times our money, and that's only part one! With the

other million, I went a little more traditional," he said, sitting back and smoothing out the non-existent wrinkles in his pants. "You've been here a good while, so maybe you've seen those 'Big-n-Tall' stores for men? Well, what about the little man? A man like me tries to find a good suit and he has to pay a fortune to get it custom made or tailored. Not every little man can afford to do that, and he shouldn't have to. So, I looked into starting a specialty store called 'Short-n-Small,' selling decent-priced suits for the little men. We designed some prototypes, set up a website, and pretty soon a buzz spread and we sold out. Now we know there's demand, so we just have to worry about supply. And why stop at men's suits? *Why stop at men?* Plenty of women are short and small too, and why should they have to shop in the kid's section? Give a little shorty some dignity. So, to make a long story short, we're opening flagship stores in five major cities in the next year. You're looking at a gifted entrepreneur, my friend."

"Great," I said.

"Aren't you excited?" he asked with a raised voice.

"It's just money."

"It's hardly *just money*, it's a challenge and it's a art. Try it yourself. We should work on something together—shoot, you've got the money and the time. This is Vegas; we could open a casino on the strip, something new and exciting, not like what's down there already. Why not think up some ideas? You put your passion into that for awhile, I bet you'd get addicted."

I waved the idea away like it was an annoying fly.

"Don't say yes or no," Ditty said, glancing at his sparkling watch. "Just think about it. We could work together and pull off something sweet. I'll be in charge of gaming and

service—I served the President of the United States, once—and you could be in charge of entertainment, design, whatever you want."

His enthusiasm started winning me over and I began to humor his idea.

"When Bohumil and I first came here," I said, "we noticed there was no hotel with an Eastern European theme."

"You see, that right there is a great idea. A Russian palace—it's a great idea."

"Not Russia, you fool. Eastern Europe."

"I was just playing. But we could do whatever we want. Think about it."

"We'll have magicians," I said, "and real beer. And nice carpets."

"That's the spirit," Ditty said, smoothing the lapels of his blazer. "Write down your ideas and we'll put some plans together. That's all it takes: good plans and Ditty's golden touch!"

I started writing down ideas and realized it would be impossible to represent all of Eastern Europe in one hotel, so I settled on Bohemia, and specifically Prague as a theme. With no artistic skill, I managed to sketch a crude design that had the highest part of the hotel in the back, built to look like the Prague Castle, and other parts of the building like the many hills and neighborhoods, including Old Town Square with the old church clock and my favorite stone church with the golden oval on top. Ditty was right: the more I started planning, the more passionate I became about the project. There would be a restaurant called BRNO, modeled after my parents' restaurant, from the menu to the décor. We could have gypsy dancers every night and a special theater for headlining magicians. The carpet could be designed to look like cobblestones, and the ceiling could be a giant screen that had constantly changing weather.

"I like it," Ditty said when he came over the following month. He wore a black silk suit with an olive-green tie. "But look, we're not the only themed hotel on the block. How will we compete with luxury casinos that already have a reputation?"

"There's no other Eastern Europe," I said. "Ours will be unique."

"Nothing wrong with unique, but the word I want is innovation. If you want to be great, you gots to inno-vate!" Ditty paced around my living room with his hands clasped behind his back.

"These ideas are good," he said. "Let me think about it for awhile, let it marinate in the juices. I'll be on the road the next few months opening our clothing stores, so keep thinking and we'll get together when I'm back. Sound fine?"

"Sounds fine," I said.

Ditty was actually on the road opening stores for several years. During that time, we communicated often about our casino plans, sending sketches, lists of restaurant options, ideas for themed clubs, details of the specialty paper shop I insisted on including. I went to the strip often to analyze the competition, scout magicians, and, I'll admit, to play a few hands of poker. At home, I'd started collecting and hanging mirrors, and through my new habit of studying every angle of my reflection, I'd perfected the art of the blank face. I also had a new friend: a sheepdog named Skar. We spent hours every day walking in the woods around my house. By the time Ditty settled back into town, he'd created an empire of clothing stores for short people, and we were both ready to move on and start creating our dream: The Bohemian.

Ditty had consulted floor managers and hotel staff all around Vegas, and knew how hard it was for already established casinos to protect themselves from high-tech cheaters.

Technology had become so advanced that one person could speak to another from across the room, without wires or buttons, and pinpoint the recipient of the sound so that no one else could hear it, which made for easy spying on cards. Cameras were also a problem, since screens could be implanted in fingertips, rings, or anywhere else on a player. Ditty had the gaming tables designed with surrounding soundproof curtains, which also made it impossible for others to see inside and take pictures or videos of a player's cards. Cash free gaming was the norm, so Ditty wanted to have a retro game room where players could use cash and old style chips. He also loved videogames, and designed an entire section of the casino floor as a virtual videogame area, where individuals or teams paid to battle each other in tournaments for cash jackpots.

Ditty's gaming ideas seemed interesting, but I was more interested in the thematic hospitality angle of the hotel. I'd wanted to name the hotel/casino The Bohemian because it was a familiar name in the west and because Bohemia was the historic region covering two-thirds of the Czech Republic, although the district of ancient Bohemia did not include Brno. Brno was part of Moravia, which was similar to Bohemia in terms of landscape and culture, but also quite different. I tried explaining all this to Ditty, and his eyes glazed over. It took some convincing, but I finally won Ditty over to the idea that using history and culture as a theme for the hotel portion of The Bohemian could be our most important innovation.

"Remember when historical fiction was all the rage?" I asked Ditty while we shared a bottle of red wine on my porch late one afternoon.

"No," he said. He'd gained a bit of weight since he'd been on the road, and it widened his face and made it seem more prominent and mature.

"Well it used to be very popular. People still go to Renaissance Faires and war reenactments. Wasn't there a hotel on the strip that held jousts and medieval feasts as an attraction?"

"They went bankrupt."

"Maybe they didn't take the idea far enough."

"Meaning what?" Ditty said. He seemed distracted, more interested in a yellow butterfly that hovered above him than in our conversation.

"Historical tourism," I said. "Why do people still come to Las Vegas when cyber gambling and reservation casinos are so popular and prostitution is legal in twenty other states? They come for the experience: to feel like they've traveled not only to sin city, but to New York, to Paris, to Venice, all in one week. But why stop at cities or regions? Why not give people a trip to another era as well?"

Ditty stopped looking at the view and gave me his full attention.

"Picture this," I said. "Guests go from our high-tech, modern casino on the ground floor, and instead of getting in an elevator to go to their rooms, they get in what appears to be a horse-drawn carriage, which takes them through a dark time-tunnel and comes out on the other side in ancient Bohemia. The interior is designed like a giant old castle; flaming torches light the gray stone halls, the rooms are palatial suites with canopy beds and red velvet curtains. Of course, they have modern amenities like bathtubs and running water, and guests can pull a lever to access secret compartments with entertainment consoles for those not interested in immersing in the full historical experience. But everything else seems authentic, down to the views from the windows, which look out at a sea of endless, vibrant green hills. At night, wolves howl in the distance under the

eerie blue moon."

Ditty got up and walked to the porch railing, looking out at the view for a long time before turning around with a grave expression.

"I think you went too far with the howling wolves," he said, "but the rest is brilliant; so brilliant, in fact, I can't believe you thought of it first."

"Maybe you're not the only entrepreneurial genius," I said.

"It's innovative, it's fresh," he said, pacing the porch. "It'll be a technical challenge, but I already know who to talk to and how to make it happen."

The whole process of building The Bohemian was long, difficult and wonderful; despite the discouraging setbacks, politics and cost inflation along the way, it surprised me how good it felt to work towards something. And even though I spent much of my time alone those days, walking in the woods with Skar or reading, my life never felt empty. The anxiety of searching for someone or some purpose, like I felt in Prague or after Bohumil died, disappeared. I entered my forties feeling a sense of fulfillment I'd never known, even though I can't say I had a social life. Ditty sometimes called to invite me to parties, but I always turned him down. I'd had my fill of parties when I was younger, and found I much preferred solitude. I turned fifty before The Bohemian had its grand opening, and though it took us more than fifteen years to buy the land and build the thing, at least we did it right. Word spread fast that we'd started a trend, and Ditty jokes that we're booked through the year three thousand. But I didn't get to enjoy our success for very long. Soon after The Bohemian opened, my brother Tomas called to tell me our father was dead.

"Where's Mama?" I asked, surprised she hadn't been the one to call.

"She's not doing well," he said. "You better come fast."

CHAPTER 15

THE END

In 1972, two decades before I was born, a Yugoslav Airlines flight from Copenhagen to Zagreb and Belgrade exploded over Srbska-Kamenice in Czechoslovakia, killing every person on board except for one: Vesna Vulovic. A flight attendant for Yugoslav Airlines, Vulovic survived a fall of over 33,000 feet; and, after one month in a coma and physical therapy for seventeen months, she fully recovered. Although a Serb, Vulovic became a Czech hero. Ustashe, the Croatian National Movement, exploded the flight, a flight that had scheduled a different woman with the first name Vesna to fly that day, but instead Vesna Vulovic took the shift. In an interview many years later, Vulovic admitted she still loved to fly, and said she had no fear of death, that to die was pure destiny. In this age, when people debate nanobiology and fusing living matter with non-living matter in that constant, hopeless struggle against entropy, we have fooled ourselves into believing we can control destiny because we're all so damned afraid of death. Where's the courage? Let's send a billion biobots into the afterlife: *that* would be life-changing science. No matter how you tell your story, if you tell it long enough we all know how it ends.

When I first arrived back in Brno for my father's funeral, I asked the driver to take me to the neighborhood in the east outskirts where my parents' restaurant had been before they sold it, five years prior. Over the years I'd spent so many days in my quiet,

beautiful house, imagining my parents sitting there with me, imagining how they might have liked Mt. Charleston and the Spring Mountains or might have felt about the flat, wide-open sprawl of the red and brown desert, or the wide roads and the strip malls, or the loveable, bullying Blue jays that protect my porch birdfeeders; there were many lonely days when I'd wanted to share it with them, or with somebody. We drove by my parent's restaurant and I saw it had become an Indian restaurant; I liked their marquee, shaped like a Persian castle. After driving by twice, I asked the driver to take me to my brother's, where my mother had been bedridden with fever in the two days since my father's death.

My brother and Dominika lived in a small, three-bedroom house not far from my parents' old restaurant. From conversations I'd had with Tomas on the phone, I knew Milan was living in Switzerland, coaching a soccer team and running a small bike repair shop. When Milan had hit puberty, he suddenly changed from taking after Dominika to taking after Tomas. Gone was the chubby, lazy son, and in his place was a handsome young teenager who started playing soccer and dating a different girl every week. Even though it was Milan who had changed, Tomas began sounding like a different man on the phone; he was proud of his son and probably grilled Milan for details of sexual conquests so he could relive his glory days one by one. When I arrived at their house, Tomas answered the door. He looked almost the same as the last time I'd seen him, still slightly overweight, still balding, but his cheeks had more color and his eyes twinkled in the way they used to when he was young.

"Come in," he said, smiling and stepping aside so I could walk past him. He seemed genuinely glad to see me, but also sad for the occasion.

He brought me into the kitchen, where Dominika was washing dishes from their dinner. She barely looked up from the sink to greet me.

"Won't you make some tea?" Tomas suggested to her. "I've got to make a call." He excused himself and left me alone with Dominika.

"So my mother is staying here?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

I sat at the table and waited patiently for the tea. When the kettle boiled, Dominika filled two teacups and sat across from me, sipping in silence. After I'd finished my tea, I asked Dominika to take me to my mother.

Dominika led me down a short hallway and opened a door, leaving me alone with my mother. I turned on a dim lamp and my mother stirred; she was thin and sick with fever. It was hard to believe this was the same strong, happy woman who used to roll out the poppy seed kolache on weekends and tell vivid stories of her childhood.

"Zlata," she said, half-opening her eyes and trying to smile.

"I'm sorry, Mama." I sat on the bed and took her hand. "He's at peace now."

Her hand burned with heat in mine; I felt her hot forehead. She reminded me of how easily our electric bodies can overheat and combust.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Let me tell you something," she said. "Your father loved you."

"I know."

"Yes," she said, her eyes still half-closed. "I want to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"It's my fault. Peter, it's my own fault."

"You should rest."

She spoke louder, though without fully opening her eyes.

"When a woman's husband kills himself, it destroys her. I could be strong, I was still a child, but Babiĉka hated him. Peter looked just like Karel, so she hated Peter. She spoiled me and I never stood up for poor little Peter. He tried to love me; he followed me everywhere, and I just wanted to be on my own. I wanted to be strong."

"It's not your fault," I said. "It's over. You are strong, and you have to be strong for daddy, and for us."

My mother died two weeks after my father. I felt sadness and a sense of relief, knowing she'd grown weak and wanted to join my father; after my mother's death, I agreed to stay at a nearby hotel until Tomas and I settled our parents' affairs. Shortly after my mother's funeral, I took a walk to see the library where I used to work. The building looked exactly the same, and though I had intended to go inside, when I stood outside the front entrance, I had the irrational fear that Barbora would be sitting behind the main desk, staring me down, so instead I crossed the street and went to the little park where Franz and I used to go in the evenings. I sat on an empty bench opposite the rosebushes; not a minute later, an older version of Franz sat next to me.

"Hello," he said casually, as if we'd made a date and he expected me to be there.

It took me a moment to see, beneath the large, square glasses, that it was Franz. He still wore tan shorts and had the same perfect, straight teeth and strong, though wrinkled, legs.

"Franz?" I said. "I don't believe it."

"You haven't changed at all," he said.

"Of course I have."

"Well, your hair is free from the braids, and see: it's not too wild. You always were my half-speed train."

"What does that mean, anyway?"

"Full-speed trains travel fast from one point to another; half-speed trains slow down and enjoy the ride."

"How do you know I don't travel fast?"

"Because I know," he said.

It was a clear, mild day. Very few people passed by as we sat on the bench.

"Well isn't this a damn surprise," I said, and slapped him on the back.

We both laughed, and then a silence descended that was all the distance between us and the memory of the last time we'd met. On the phone, years ago, Tomas told me he'd heard Franz had married an Englishwoman and started a family in London. I looked at Franz; he sat a bit stooped, gazing ahead with his hands in his lap. The thick, square glasses made him look older than his age, though his voice and body seemed unchanged since youth.

"I heard you married an Englishwoman," I said.

"Yes, Vicki," he said. "We were married almost thirty years. She died seven years ago."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Thirty years is a long time."

"Yes it is. I have two daughters, Elizabeth and Katherine."

"Pretty names. Do they speak Czech?"

"No," he said. "I didn't come back as much as I should have, but they've visited me

twice since I moved to Brno."

"I didn't come back often enough either," I said.

"You're famous," he said. "With your big hotel and your jackpot money."

"You heard?"

"Of course," he said, looking at me with a pleading in his eyes that was magnified by the glasses. "Sometimes I asked."

I looked at the sidewalk, where a fat, ragged pigeon walked in bullying circles around a young one. I was surprised to feel so excited, sitting there next to Franz, both of us nearing sixty. Of course I'd thought about him over the years, thoughts that usually ended in the shameful memory of me spitting in his face and running away like an immature coward. I still felt a fondness for Franz, for him seeing something in me when I was such a shy girl, and for the kisses that woke in me the first sparks of desire.

"I'm sorry I spat in your face!" I blurted.

"No, it's me who should be sorry. I was horrible, waiting to tell you until just before I left, and not explaining first how much you meant to me, that I wanted to stay in touch and for you to come visit me. But you spat in my face and ran off so fast, I couldn't tell you, and I was too shocked and too much of a coward to come after you; and then I told myself there would be many women in London, and there were, of course. I met Vicki and we fell in love, but I still thought of you, Zlata. I regretted letting you go and I missed you; I missed our talks."

"We didn't have talks," I said. "You talked and I listened."

"I realize that," he said. "I hope it wasn't boring for you. Maybe I was selfish, but I needed someone to talk to and I liked how you listened, how you seemed to live inside

yourself and not care about other people."

"Of course I cared," I said. "My god, that was a long time ago. We're old; we're old, Franz!"

"I know," he said. "I heard you are a widow, too."

"Yes," I said. "I've been a widow for as long as you were married."

"I'm sorry," he said, brushing a stray hair from my forehead. "You're still so beautiful."

For the first time since my cheeks went wrinkly, I blushed.

"Don't be stupid," I said.

"I heard you were in town for your father's funeral," Franz said. "I've been coming here every day, waiting for you."

"We're too old for this," I said.

"Are we dead?"

"No."

"Then we're not too old," he said.

That afternoon we went out for a beer, and we've been inseparable ever since. Instead of doing all the talking, Franz liked asking questions. He'd developed a deductive, critical mind and he paid unbelievable attention to details. I was surprised to learn that he'd remembered the shade of pink ribbons my mother used to tie at the bottom of my braids in high school; he remembered the drab gray dress I wore the first time he asked me to the park; he remembered it was raining the day we first talked in the library. We got along well, though we both knew we were different. Through circumstance or necessity, I'd lived my life without conforming to a career or a social structure, whereas

Franz had settled into a hierarchical academic life and admitted he enjoyed being part of a system he didn't have to create.

"You make yourself sound like a boring conformist," I said to him that first afternoon, after he'd told me more about his life.

"You're right," he said. "But I can still change. I want to have fun; I want to travel and ski the Alps on my seventieth birthday. I'm young!"

We did ski the Alps on his seventieth birthday; we've traveled to New Zealand and the Amazon, we've shared many bottles of wine and are both grateful and.delighted to have found a lover and companion so late in life. I'll never love him as I loved Bohumil, whom I still miss every day, but Franz is a good friend and a gentle man, and I'm lucky to have him as a companion. The only time we spend apart is when he goes to visit his daughters. We tried going to visit them together, but it didn't work out. The first time we traveled to my house in Las Vegas, we stopped for a few days in London to meet Elizabeth and Katherine. Neither young woman was pleased to meet me nor to face the fact that their father had a new girlfriend; his daughters were cold and rude the entire time, and while Franz and I were disappointed, we both agreed it was more their problem than ours, so their disapproval did little to dampen our spirits.

Franz also helped me face my own troubled family. It was on our first trip to my house on Mt. Charleston that he convinced me to open the letter from my Uncle Peter.

"Maybe there's something you need to know," Franz said as we stood in the kitchen, sharing a bottle of wine.

I went into the other room and came back with the letter.

"Here," I said, putting it on the counter in front of Franz. "You read it."

He opened the letter.

"Dear Zlata,

I never meant to kill Hana or to hurt you. I am a cold man. I am not healthy. The doctor said my kidneys will fail and I needed to look to my family for a donor. You were the one I wanted to ask, so I looked for you: before that, I never tried to find you.

I went looking for you, and there was the woman I watched every day; the smiling face of Hana and she wouldn't tell me where you were. She was drunk and she smelled like the whores I fight for every night. I told her I needed to talk to you and she insulted me: she yelled in the street about my tiny balls and awful things I won't repeat, and so I got hot inside and felt rage, towards every woman in my life who held back from me like I'm pig shit.

I only wanted good. I wish you the best life with all the happiness I never knew and maybe never deserved, since I am a murderer and deserve nothing more than hate.

Your Uncle Peter."

Sometimes I lie awake at night, haunted by memories of Uncle Peter, Hana and Bohumil, and other times I lie awake, excited to see Franz's calm, warm body resting next to mine. There is much to be grateful for in life and much to mourn. Vesna Vulovic said she thinks the reason she survived the fall from 33,000 feet was because she had low blood pressure. She said she never should have gotten the job at the airline, but on the day of her interview she drank twenty cups of coffee to get her blood pressure up. When everyone else's hearts exploded in mid-air, hers stayed intact because it beat at such a different speed. I sometimes think my own heart, like Vesna's, found longevity through its slow, abnormal pace. Of course, we both had an absurd amount of luck as well. It's not as clever as a statue of a naked butt, but there's my story: set in stone.

VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Mandy Alýse Kalish

Home Address:
175 N. Grove Ave. #G2
Oak Park, IL 60301

Degrees:
Bachelor of Arts, English, 1996
Bucknell University

Special Honors and Awards:
Magna Cum Laude, Bucknell University, 1996
GREAT Scholarship, Graduate College, UNLV 2004

Publications:
Book Review, *Red Rock Review*, Spring 2005
"Dug-Up Dog," *The Banana King*, Summer 2006
"On the Fourth Pull," *Cricket Online Review*, Spring 2006

Thesis Title: A Gold-Colored Background (English With Czech Accent)

Thesis Examination Committee:
Chairperson, Richard Wiley, MFA
Committee Member, Douglas Unger, MFA
Committee Member, Dave Hickey, MA
Graduate Faculty Representative, KC Davis, MFA