

ONE

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS—JANUARY 1956

Our house is creaking, settling in for the night. David is in the den typing up a paper he's been working on for at least six months. I sit in the armchair in my study, feet propped up on the windowsill, needing to pee, too tired to get up, too busy caressing my belly, bidding the life growing inside me goodnight. Twelve weeks old. The size of my palm, Dr. Page says.

With the baby, Mama has come back into my head. I need her, want her here to guide me. David is loving, attentive. He is willing to shop, cook, wash the dishes, sweep the floors. He'll do anything to keep me happy and rested and I love him all the more for it, but I ache to say, "Mama. I'm expecting a baby," and pour my happiness over her, to keep her warm, to make her face shine with pride. My baby, her grandchild.

I am filled with questions. Did she dream that her baby would be born with a hole in its heart for lack of love? That the weight of her body, tossing in sleep, would suffocate it? When does the fear go away? With its first kick? When it meets the world and screams?

I picture scenarios in which I ask her to place her hand on my belly and tell me the sex of the baby. She was always good at guessing. A girl, she says, and we start spouting possible names. I paint her laughing with joy, hugging me, telling me not to fear, all will be well.

The old Mama dream has come back.

We're rolling down the mountain surrounded by snow and rock. A black bed of pine trees waits below. Above us the barbed wire of the Italian-Swiss frontier plays its thousand bells, announcing Christmas, warning the German guards. I hold my baby sister against my chest and feel Mama's hips embracing mine, her arms locked round my waist, her chin hooking my shoulder. A human avalanche, we roll to what we perceive as safety.

Romantic. False. Wishful thinking.

Since that night on Mount Bisbino, twelve years ago, Mama has drifted in and out of my landscape. Sometimes I've felt her presence like the phantom limb of an amputee, and in my dreams I've asked her countless questions, both serious and silly. Should I cut my hair? Is it okay for my boyfriend to touch my breasts? If I get married, will my love, his love last? For how long? Why aren't you here to help me? What happened to you?

Other times I've reduced her to a pinpoint in my heart, pretending that not having a mother was just fine, nothing to go on about. I had Papa to take care of me. I wasn't an orphan like so many other kids after the war.

Papa always maintained Mama was killed the night of Christmas Eve, 1943, trying to escape Nazi-infested Italy with two of her children. Me and Claire. I believed the story in my teenage years when I was too absorbed in the now of my life to question it. But even then, when someone would ask about my mother, I could hear doubt unfurling as I answered, "She was killed in the war." As an adult, I cannot help but think her death is the easy, neat explanation, the one that leaves everyone guiltless. Everyone except me, that is.

Maybe Papa knew the alternate ending to Mama's story. Before he died, I plied him with questions, but his answer never changed. "Alice is dead. Please, Susie, let your mother rest in peace." I'm left swaying on uncertain ground.

Is her death a lie? Did she die, or did she decide her life would be better without us and walk away? What will I tell my baby about the grandmother she will never have? I want my child to grow up without doubts. I need to search for the different truth that I believe is there. I need to free myself of the guilt I feel. Let go of the past. I have only six months before the baby leaves the cradle of my belly. She will need all of me then. I promise her that. I was a bad daughter. I will be a good mother. I promise.

I have no proof Mama is still alive, but I was there that night on Mount Bisbino. If the Germans had killed Mama, I would have heard the shots. No one fired a single shot.

**PRAGUE, THE GERMAN PROTECTORATE OF
BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA—OCTOBER 21, 1941**

I'm horribly late, but here I am applying another layer of lipstick. Fuchsia. My mouth looks like a wound. "Obergruppenführer," I mouth at my reflection in the gilt-framed mirror Marco bought me as a welcome-to-Prague gift. "Obergruppenführer." This time out loud. It sounds funny, silly even. It means superior group leader. The new governor of Bohemia and Moravia, Reinhard Heydrich, is an Obergruppenführer, and there isn't anything funny or silly about him. Giorgio Scarditti, the Italian consul, is honoring him tonight with a reception downstairs. As the wife of the vice consul, I'm expected to show up and be gracious. What I feel is anything but gracious.

I smile at Susie's reflection in the mirror. Looking at her makes me feel better. She has her father's looks. Sharp cheekbones on a narrow face, thick, long black hair I braid every morning, and wide dark eyes that never seem to get enough of the world. "Germans do that, string a bunch of words together," I say. Susie is sitting on the bed, playing with the buttons of the gown I should already be wearing. Her hands are probably dirty with the chocolate Marco gave her before going downstairs. Tonight I don't care. "They're doing it with countries too. Stringing them into one."

Susie giggles. "*Donaudampfschiffahrtsgesellschaft*. That means Danube Steamship Company." She's only eleven and learned to speak fluent German after only a few months. Andy too. It's easy for the children. Seventeen months have gone by and I still barely understand it. I refused German lessons. At thirty-two I'm too old, the language is too difficult. After years of living in Rome I manage in Italian, although I can't get rid of what Marco teasingly calls my "chewing gum" accent.

A Handel adagio drifts in from Andy's bedroom. Handel is my favorite, and with eyes closed, I tilt my head forward and wait for the soothing notes to wash over me, but the clock on the bedside table clicks the passing seconds too loudly. It's no use. I have to move, get dressed, face the evening.

"Help me with the buttons, please, Susie." She slips off the bed and holds up the gown. I step into it and suck in my stomach as Susie reaches my waist. I've gained weight since the last time I wore

this gown, a smoky blue satin I bought at Bonwit's in New York before sailing to Europe.

"The eyelets are tight," Susie complains.

"Why can't we see Heydrich too?" Andy, my sweet talented boy, is standing in the doorway, a shock of hair covering one eye as always. He too has his father's lean dark looks except for his eyes, hazel and deep set like mine.

"He's just a man like any other," I say. Why does power excite? Marco came home early from the office today, his face flushed and taut, his eyes brimming with anticipation. It turned my stomach. "There's nothing to see, Andy."

"He's the snake and the devil," Susie says and flops back on the bed. "You're done, Mama."

"Thank you, sweetie." I slip one of my evening gloves on, tug it up my arm. The snake and the devil is what Jitka, our Czech housekeeper, calls Heydrich.

"I think it's unfair." Andy's voice cracks. "I told everyone at school I was going to meet him. What am I going to say now?"

Susie starts jumping up and down on the bed. "Lie."

"No lies. Susie, please stop jumping." I offer Susie my gloved arm and the sapphire bracelet Marco gave me as a wedding present. "Help again." As Susie bends over to close the catch on the bracelet, I kiss the top of her head. Her hair smells of the lemon juice I rinse her hair with to make it shine. I must remember to ask Jitka not to say anything more about Heydrich in front of the children. Jitka, who told me that horrible story. I had heard rumors about Heydrich. That he had been behind the burning of the Reichstag, that Hitler had picked him to govern the German protectorate for his ability to destroy any resistance. That in the few months since he'd come to Prague, he had ordered the torture and killing of many men. They were only rumors until last week when I found Jitka sobbing in the kitchen. She kept repeating the same Czech words, getting louder and louder, trying to make me understand. I poured her a glass of brandy and ran downstairs to get one of the consulate secretaries to translate.

The day before, an old man, a widower who lived on the floor above Jitka, sang the Czech anthem from his window as Heydrich's open car passed in front of their building. That morning she found his broken body propped against the doorway.

My heart froze. I had to pour myself some brandy too. Thank God the children were in school. I told Marco when he came home for lunch, told him that I wouldn't, couldn't, go to the reception. I asked him to stay home with me, to find some excuse not to participate in honoring a murderer. He said that was impossible. There were going to be many other receptions; he couldn't always come up with an excuse. Doing his job did not mean he was endorsing Heydrich's methods. Ugliness was part of war and there was nothing we, as individuals, could do to put an end to it. Resigning from his job wouldn't save a single person. In fact, his job was keeping the family safe. We had children to think about. The war would be over soon.

I can hear him now.

"We're stuck in a bad situation, and all we can do is make the best of it. I need you to be on my side. We both agreed a diplomatic career was a good idea."

That's true. With the Depression reaching Europe, his career as a civil engineer had petered to nothing. Marco is good-looking, charming, persuasive, with a knack for listening intently to the most boring guest, and an ability to quickly assess a situation. The perfect diplomat, I thought naively, when a life lived in different countries seemed exciting, when I still judged Mussolini just a pompous windbag, when I still believed diplomacy had some relevance in world affairs. That the Italian state wasn't likely to go bankrupt was an added incentive.

Andy is still leaning in the doorway, looking forlorn. "The adagio was beautifully played," I tell him. "You've made enormous progress." If I stay, I could read a bedtime story with Susie, listen to more Handel.

Marco expects me to meet this Nazi murderer, shake hands with him, smile even. If I don't go downstairs, I'll get a week's worth of simmering anger from him, another stifling round of lectures on the duties of a diplomat's wife from Giorgio's wife, Lilli, and probably a scolding behind closed doors from the consul general himself. Staying upstairs will not change the course of the war or save anyone's life.

I push myself to the door. "I'm proud of you, Andy. You'll have to play it for Papa." Andy moves aside to let me pass—at thirteen he's at the do-not-touch stage—but I manage to sneak in a quick kiss on his chin. Both my children are tall, something that fills me with a pride I'm slightly ashamed of. I blame it on my own height, five foot

two. "Tell your friends the truth," I tell Andy. "Your father wouldn't let you." The one thing we had agreed on—keep the children away from Heydrich and his cronies.

"I made tons of mistakes in the adagio," Andy says.

I smile. My son was never any good at accepting compliments. I blow both my children a kiss. "Good night, sweeties. Don't let the bed bugs bite."

Heydrich and his party are in the front hall when I walk in, only a few feet away, saying goodbye to Giorgio and Lilli. The huge Bohemian glass chandelier Lilli is so proud of dribbles light on his head. May it fall on him, I think, and then the snake and the devil looks at me. I stop, one arm half sheathed, the glove hanging limply from my hand. I find myself unable to take a step in any direction. Waiters hold up open overcoats. He is tall, thin, with a never-ending forehead, jutting ears, a prominent nose. Small eyes that suck me in. I could scream at them and there would be no echo. The sound would simply be snatched from me, swallowed.

Heydrich plunges his arms in the armholes of his coat.

For a moment the man is defenseless, but I do nothing. Can do nothing.

Then Marco is at my elbow, pushing me forward. "This is my wife, Alinka." Alinka, the name everyone has adopted for me here, making me sound Slavic. Alice is so American. I don't mind. I somehow feel safer, less like a woman straight out of a Henry James story.

Heydrich nods and I curtsy like a silly school girl.

When Heydrich leaves, I sense an audible release of tension. Louder voices, laughter, the clinking of glasses. Marco kisses my forehead. "Good for you. The curtsy was a charming touch." I feel only shame.

My head fills with all the foolish actions, the insidious compromises I've made to please, to be deserving, to keep love. I tell myself I'm being a good mother, keeping my children happy, safe. That gives me a warm little glow for about ten seconds. What choices do I have? When Mussolini entered Hitler's war last year, I begged Marco to take us back to the States. He refused, convinced no American company would hire an Italian. If the children and I went back without him for the duration of the war—no one knew, knows, how long that might

be—I was afraid it would end our marriage. Marco kept repeating that he needed my trust, my support, my presence to give him ballast. For better or for worse, I had vowed.

I love him, the children love him. We are a happy family. We are safe. All I have to do is pretend the war doesn't concern me. Keep my opinions to myself. Be Alinka, not Alice. Fold my conscience and tuck it out of sight like the lace handkerchief I keep in my purse in case of a sudden gust of tears. Be like Lilli, wrapped in the importance of her husband's career, facing each day with a smile permanently etched on her powdered face.

I'll try. For Andy and Susie. For Marco, who still makes my heart dance. I take a glass of champagne from the tray a waiter offers, walk over to Lilli and say, "The flower arrangements are gorgeous." At least that's true.

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS—JANUARY 1956

It's a cold night and the squirrels have gotten into the attic again. They're having a grand old time—playing soccer with pebbles from the sound of it. David is oblivious, his steady breath adding a comforting warmth to my neck.

Half an hour goes by. An hour. I'm still wide awake. The squirrels have quit their game. The only sound is David's breathing and an intermittent gurgle in my stomach, another call for food, or hormones doing battle.

It's always been hard for me to go to sleep. Dropping into a void where I have no control. As a child I made a pact with Mama. On the nights she went out, I promised I'd go to bed without a fuss, but when she came back, she had to stop in my room and, if I was awake, tell me everything.

The night of Heydrich's reception I was waiting for her. I remember her looking more beautiful than ever. The gray blue of her long dress had turned her eyes the same color. She had pinned back her red, curly hair, but strands now straggled down, framing her soft round face. Pearls dangled from her ears. Her neck was bare.

"Don't you sometimes wish you were back home?" Mama asked me.

Home where? Newport Beach, where we lived for three years while Papa commuted back and forth to the Italian consulate in Los Angeles? Rome, where I was born and lived the first seven years of my life? Rome was ages ago. Newport Beach I missed vaguely. My letters to my best

friend Judy never got a reply. I stopped writing. My American friends were becoming goodbye poems in my friendship book. The maple syrup and peanut butter my mother kept sending for never arrived either. Europe was at war. We couldn't go back.

"Home is here," I said. Where the family was together again, all of us in a fat circle in which I could roll to my heart's content. Papa had come to Prague before us, while Andy and I finished the year in the red schoolhouse on the beach. For those six months I thought I'd lost him forever.

I asked her, "What did you do to the snake and the devil?"

"I put pepper in his champagne and a toad in his sock."

When she bent over to kiss me goodnight, I saw that her eyes, those eyes that seemed to look at you from somewhere deep inside her, shimmered. She'd been crying, but I said nothing, afraid that it was Papa who had made her cry.

Why would I think Papa had made her cry? Had he made her cry before? Papa had a temper; he used to yell if he couldn't find the shirt he wanted to wear, or Mama wasn't ready on time, or Andy didn't study. His outbursts were part of the background noise of our lives. We didn't mind them very much, which probably made him angrier, but his anger petered out quickly, a flare quickly doused by Mama's calm response. I don't think he ever made her cry. Not then.

PRAGUE, THE GERMAN PROTECTORATE OF BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA—OCTOBER 21, 1941

I wait in Marco's bed to hear his footsteps down the hallway. He's on duty downstairs until the last guest leaves. Since we've moved into this Prague apartment with too many rooms, we each have our own bedroom. His idea. Marco likes to read well into the night, which keeps me up, and he's started snoring. I do sleep better, but I miss the inconsequential chitchat before turning out the light, the weight of his body next to mine, closing my eyes to the sight of his profile as he reads, reaching out with my foot and finding him in the dark.

I'm hungry, wet with wanting him.

I wanted Marco from that first night in Baltimore, when he appeared at Eliza's eighteenth birthday party, on his way to South America to build a bridge on the Magdalena River. He was bent over Eliza's mother. She was showing him how to crack a crab. He'd

never eaten one before, he was saying in heavily accented English. His foreign looks—jutting cheekbones, a long straight nose pointing to his smile, intense dark eyes, black hair smoothed back from a high forehead—made me instantly greedy for him. His gaze was direct, different from the bungling glances I'd sometimes caught from the Johns Hopkins boys. I stared back, my usual shyness gone, thrilled by the thought of him as an exotic stranger, telling stories, opening vistas.

Marco was passed around from girl to girl, mother to mother, like an hors d'oeuvre they hadn't tasted before. He kept up his end—kissing hands, never losing his smile, telling jokes that made everyone laugh too loud. He finally noticed me, a freckled awkward eighteen-year-old in a hideous little-girl dress my mother had forced me to wear. He held me in his gaze, and the smile left him. I felt chosen by his sudden seriousness, beautiful enough for my mother to unpurse her lips later that night and my father to hold his gaze on me for more than two seconds. When Marco walked over to me, I was so wet I had to run to the bathroom. Later, behind a tree, spiking my lemonade with his gin, Marco accused me of running away from him.

What if I had? So many twists and turns possible, with no map, no outcome specified. It's the fabled three doors. Behind which one waits the tiger?

I turn off the lamp by the bedside and wrap my arms around the pillow. I would never have found anyone to love as much as I love him. Anyone to love me back the way he does. I wouldn't have my beautiful children. I opened the right door.

The snap of the lamp wakes me up. Marco leans over me. "How nice of you to visit." He is usually the one to come to me.

I clasp his neck and draw him to me, kiss him. With my free hand I pull at his shirt, reach my hand underneath to his skin. I breathe in his smell—tobacco, cologne, alcohol and something else, something I can't place. A sweet smell that I like.

Marco slips the straps of my nightgown down to my waist, nuzzles his head between my breasts. "Thank you for tonight," he mumbles. "Come inside me. Wipe tonight away."

I should get up, go back to my bedroom, wash myself, but Marco's fallen asleep on my shoulder. My arm is all pins and needles, but the

weight of his head grounds me. Like the burn in my nipples, the rawness between my legs.

Two weeks after Eliza's party Marco leaned out of the bus window belting *Voglio bene a Alice* all the way to Fort McHenry. Excessive emotion is what I called it then, loving every second of it. Excessive emotion that I still need to cover myself with nightly, using it like a cream to keep me young.

From the beginning we couldn't keep away from each other. We eloped a month after Eliza's party and went to live in Colombia while Marco finished building his bridge. Andy was born a year later in Bogotá. After keeping us and the doctor waiting for ten days, he came in the dank basement of our rented house. Marco still insists it was the goat that brought Andy out. A flayed, gutted goat peering at me from a butcher's hook supposedly frightened me into letting him go. He makes me laugh with his operatic stories.

Marco turns. My shoulder is suddenly free and I kiss the back of his neck, the dip between his shoulder blades. I love you, Marco Alessandrini, but sometimes you are wrong. It was the heat and the flies that kept Andy in the darkness of my belly. I was resting with my feet up in the cool basement when my water broke. The goat I saw weeks later, covered with blue green flies, so shiny they would have made a pretty necklace.

I reach down under the covers and retrieve my nightgown.

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS—FEBRUARY 1956

I learned to adore my father by watching Mama. His presence brought a softening of her posture, a thickening voice. Her chin lifted to reveal the whiteness of her neck, her fingers stretched open. Her nose quivered as she inhaled his scent. If he touched her, her lips parted like the lips of the women at Sunday Mass who lean against the altar railing, waiting for the body of Christ to rest on their tongues. At first I wanted that love from Mama. I would imitate him and run my fingers down her face, follow the curve of her hip with my hands, kiss her in the dent behind her ear, smell her. She would laugh and push me gently away, offering me a doll instead.

After losing Papa for six months, I turned to him. In Prague I made sure to be the first to reach the front door when I heard the jangle of his keys. I interrupted whenever my parents spoke to each other. His lap was my

chair. If they touched, my hand would slip between theirs. I would listen for his slippers footsteps outside my room long after the sounds of the apartment had shut down. Her door opening and taking him in. Closing me out.

I made a pest of myself, Andy kept reminding me. Papa seemed to enjoy the attention. Mama said she was happy there was so much love in our home.

The night of Heydrich's reception I slipped out of the apartment and waited in the stairwell for Papa to come home. I wanted to show him a drawing I had done in school that day. On the floor below, the consul general's door finally opened.

"Danke schön und gute Nacht." A large man came out on the landing in a thick overcoat, a hat in his hand. A reedy woman walked out backward, a silver fur jacket flung over her shoulders. Her hair was slipping out of a low bun. Hair with so much henna it looked purple.

The marble stairs were cold. There was no heat in the stairwell, and I had to go to the bathroom.

Papa came out, in his black uniform, a cigarette burning in his hand. I crouched not to be seen and watched the woman move into the chandelier's light, next to him. The silver fur fell from her shoulder. Papa's hand caught it at hip height.

They walked down, out of sight, and their mingled footsteps stopped. I heard the rustling sound of silk; the same sound Mama made with her nightgown when she got in and out of bed. I bumped down a few steps, holding my thighs tight to keep from peeing. The woman's fur jacket lying on a stair, like a dog sleeping. I couldn't hold it anymore and ran home. In the rush, I forgot my drawing.

I woke up with a sore throat the next day. Mama insisted I stay home. Jitka probably fed me her capon broth and Mama read to me. That's what they always did when we got sick. When Papa came home for lunch, he shooed Mama from my bedroom and dropped my drawing in my lap.

"It's good. You caught Mama's unruly hair. And my long nose." He laughed. "But you're prettier than that."

"No, I'm not." I had drawn a circle with our four faces.

"What were you doing on the stairs last night?"

"I wanted to say good night."

"I bet you weren't wearing your slippers. That's why you caught a cold." Papa sat down on the bed, his palm on my forehead to test for fever. He was warmer than I was. I waited for the scolding that was sure to come.

“Do you know what I used to do to stay home from school?” he said instead. “I’d hold the thermometer against the radiator until the mercury boiled like pasta water. I’ll show you my armpits. They’re so burned up they’re hairless.”

I laughed.

PRAGUE—DECEMBER 6, 1941, THE FEAST OF SAINT NICHOLAS

We’re having a dinner party for Marco’s new friend, Karl Müller, and Jitka’s mayonnaise has curdled twice, which prompted Marco to storm off to his bedroom with whatever is necessary to start a new batch. He’s convinced that the mayonnaise curdled because Jitka is having her period. I look in and laugh. He’s sitting on the bed, dish towel tucked in his undershirt, whisking frenetically as Susie pours a thin stream of oil into the bowl on the night table. “You really are ridiculous, Marco, straight out of the Dark Ages. Please, Susie, don’t believe your father’s superstitions.” Seeing her standing resolute, proud of her role in saving tonight’s dinner, fills me with tenderness, and I kiss the top of her head. “You’re doing a great job, sweetie.” I feel light tonight, blessed, despite the guest, a German munitions expert I haven’t met. I’ve promised myself not to think of how many people his expertise has killed. Not tonight. I’m brimming with good feeling and Kay and Rudolf Vlasek are coming. Kay is American and Rudi is Czech. They’re the only people I consider friends here.

I check in with Jitka in the kitchen. She’s leaning her formidable body against the stove, arms folded across the balcony of her chest. She looks exceedingly grumpy. I ask if I can help, English words she understands. She shakes her head, knowing how useless I am in the kitchen.

“Tereza!” Jitka points to the kitchen clock. Tereza, her niece, whom she recruited to help her serve dinner, hasn’t shown up yet. “Pstruh!” Her finger pans to the huge steamed trout, our main course, lying on a Meissen platter on the table. It’s missing an eye and it’s much too large and fragile to turn it on its other side. “Susie will fix it,” I say and go back to Marco’s bedroom to tell Susie she’s also needed in the kitchen. She’s the food decorator, the flower arranger, the aesthete in our household.

The bowl now holds a glistening pale yellow mound. “It’s coming,” Marco says.

“Alleluia,” I shout and leave them to lay out Susie’s dress on her bed. It’s her favorite, burgundy velvet with a cream lace collar and cuffs. Andy struts in to show off his new lederhosen. He’s slicked back his hair with his father’s hair cream, but his cowlick sticks up anyway. I pin it down with a bobby pin. “Very handsome,” I tell him, “but your knees need a good scrubbing. Go on. It won’t kill you.”

In my bedroom, I choose an apricot silk gown with a low neckline. I want to look my best tonight. Not for the guest. For my husband. For me.

“*Zlaty Da’zd* it is called—golden rain,” Rudi says, handing me a small gold branch tied with many red ribbons. “It is a traditional gift on Saint Nicholas.” I kiss his cheek, still cold from outside. The smell of alcohol prompts me to squeeze his arm. He’s a quiet man with exquisite manners and not a drinker. “Thank you,” I whisper. His and Kay’s presence is a great act of friendship. Together we form a secret alliance against the Axis powers at the table.

Giorgio, looking his pompous consul general best, arrives with his wife, Lilli, glittering with jewelry. The guest of honor comes late. His date is Milena, a regular at diplomatic parties. Usually alone. She’s a skinny, sinuous woman with small teeth, gray with lack of calcium. Not beautiful in any way, but what Marco would call “a type.” I barely know her, but I’m fascinated by her deliberate movements, the smooth whiteness of her skin, the dark almost purple hair. Most of all by the sadness in her face. She seems to have that special strength that grief can give women. I’ve noticed them in the streets of Prague, their heads covered in black kerchiefs, each feature of their faces emphasized, underlined by the loss they’re bearing. A son or a husband lost in Russia, maybe. The faces seem drawn in charcoal, the kerchief worn as a mourning edge, like the black frame of a death announcement. Milena has some of the same emphasis on her face. All anyone seems to know about her is that she’s a Polish refugee lucky enough to have found work as a translator for the German command. Refugee. The word alone explains sadness.

“Welcome, Milena.” I kiss both her cheeks, and am left with the sweet smell of her perfume and two bags of chocolates for the children.

Marco takes over the introductions and offers spumante. Susie, glowing in her dress, tosses her braids and passes hors d'oeuvres. After everyone is settled on sofa and armchairs, Andy plays the Handel adagio he's been practicing for weeks. He's removed the bobby pin and his cowlick trembles in rhythm with the movement of his bow. "It's been raining for a week," he says afterward to excuse his mistakes. "The damp affects the soundboard." He's always good at shifting responsibility, not unlike Marco. "Did you know Schumann went *wahnsinnig*?" Andy asks all of us. He likes to show off the bits of information about composers that his Czech maestro feeds him. Last week it was Smetana's political problems with the Hapsburgs. He's also good at deflecting.

Karl Müller laughs. I have no idea what *wahnsinnig* means, but I'm not about to admit it in front of Lilli and Giorgio or this tall, large German with a square face and wheat-colored hair, who could easily pass as a farmer from the Midwest.

"And did you know, young man," Müller asks in English, "that Obergruppenführer Heydrich is an excellent violinist?" The conversation has been proceeding in a jumble of English, German, and French. "Perhaps you would like to play for the Obergruppenführer? When it stops raining, of course."

I sit up. "Never!" Marco sends me a warning glance meant to shrivel my tongue. I beam him a reassuring smile. I will not let this evening be spoiled.

Karl Müller's eyes dart to my cleavage, stay there. I feel myself blush. "I respect your wishes, Frau Alessandrini. Children must stay innocent."

Milena is watching us. Her hair is loose on her shoulders. Her sleeveless sheath is the color of oysters, with the same wet sheen. Her skin is so white I will call her the swan. Turning people into animals is a game I play with the children. Müller is the bear.

Tereza announces dinner and I tell the children it's time to say good night. Andy bows, Susie curtsies and passing by me, whispers, "Schumann went cuckoo." I smile my thanks. My clever girl, she knows her Mama's shortcomings too well.

We move to the dining room. The table is covered with my favorite tablecloth—a white Florentine linen we bought on my only trip to Florence. The gray embroidered forget-me-nots are so delicate

they look drawn in pencil. Susie's carefully written place cards sit next to the three glasses for each guest. In the center, I've placed Rudi's gold branch with the red ribbons on it. Lilli launches a begrudging smile at me. The table setting has passed muster.

Müller pulls out my chair. I thank him and sit as Marco pulls out Milena's chair. Kay sits down on her own. I watch Milena sink down in one floating motion, see Marco's hand brush the length of her arm. I unfold my napkin, place it on my lap, take a sip of water. Her skin is inviting. It's only a gesture.

Müller, to my right, is spooning his soup when he tells me I look like golden Prague. *Zlata Praha*. He's flirting with me, which doesn't flatter me. "I have just discovered that *Praha* means threshold in Czech," he says. "The beginning, the possibility of change. I like that idea."

"The possibility of an end to the war?" Milena asks.

Kay leans over her plate, spoon high in front of her. "If so, who's going to be the victor?"

Marco quickly proposes a toast to his guests. Müller counters with one to his hosts. Kay's question gets buried under long drafts of wine.

"When my train pulled into the Prague station this morning," Müller says, after Tereza has cleared the soup plates, "I had to make my way through a large, silent crowd of men, women and children."

Lilli tilts her impeccably coiffed head. "Why would any person wish to leave Prague? After Rome, it's the safest place in Europe."

"These people were not leaving or coming. They were waiting. I had a strange feeling, almost of fear. The uncanny silence of so many people."

"What were they waiting for?" I ask him. My eyes are transfixed by Milena's arms poised on the tablecloth, comparing them against my own, muddied with freckles.

"They were waiting for the trains from the eastern front that bring in the wounded. It has become a favorite pastime to watch dying German soldiers."

I shudder. For the soldiers. For Marco's hand skating Milena's bare arm.

"Cruelty is to be expected," Müller says. "What I find frightening is the passivity of their hatred."

“It’s dread they’re feeling,” Kay announces in a shrill voice. “Dread that not enough Germans have died.”

Before anyone can comment, Tereza breaks into the dining room holding up the trout on a silver platter. The fish’s head is intact, body skin replaced by a smooth coating of yolk-bright mayonnaise dotted with slivers of black olives and lemon slices. Susie has meticulously substituted for scales and fins. She’s restored the missing eye with a caper. The *pstruh* is now perfect.

The guests applaud and I announce, “I also have a Saint Nicholas present to give. A lovely one. On Saint Nicholas we should have only good news.” I make sure everyone is looking at me. The inauspicious start will have a happy ending.

“Marco and I are expecting a baby.”

I sit on Marco’s bed, still in my evening gown, waiting for him to come out of the bathroom across the corridor.

“That was quite a surprise,” Marco says, walking in.

My thumb traces different shadings against the velvet of the duvet. “You’re not angry I told them before you knew?” My hands feel cold and heavy.

“I would have preferred to be the first one to find out.”

“I’m sorry. I hadn’t planned on it, but I had to stop things.”

Marco drops his bathrobe on the armchair and sits down next to me. The bed shifts with his weight. “Stop what?”

I’m not sure. More ugly stories from Karl Müller? Kay saying something irreparable? My doubts? I’m too tired to know. “I wanted to talk about happy things, that’s all. Are you happy?”

“Not the best of times to bring a baby into the world.” Marco clasps my hand. I’ve been rubbing the velvet thin. “And three will be a handful for you, but I think it’s great.” He kisses my forehead and I lean into him. He smells of toothpaste and soap, and the banality of those smells acts like a balm.

“It was a good evening,” Marco says, getting into bed. I feel his long legs slide behind me under the duvet. “Everyone got tight with too many toasts to us and the baby.”

“Except Milena.”

“Can you blame her for claiming she wasn’t feeling well? Karl didn’t take his eyes off of you the whole time. I think he’s *ein Bisschen*

in love with my wife.” The thought seems to please him. I’d rather he were jealous.

“Milena is very attractive.”

“She’s too skinny.” He reaches for my shoulders, runs his hands down the length of my arms. “Flesh is what I like.” Goose bumps appear on my skin, and I laugh.

I wake up to a glorious morning, with the sun pouring into the room and the sky wearing only a few ragged clouds. Marco has already gone. His bedroom window faces a garden covered in gravel and ivy, and dotted with billowing stone statues of half-clad beauties, a garden that could just as easily be in Rome, especially with today’s golden light. Wisps of Roman memories scud across my mind: Marco’s coffee-stained kisses in the morning, our afternoon lovemaking while baby Andy napped. Pinching pennies. All we could afford were beans and pasta. We got fat. On Sundays, Marco plunged us into Roman history—museums, ruins, the cool, musty interiors of countless churches, the surprise of a new piazza or a half-open doorway to a Renaissance courtyard, the city awash in apricot light. I was enchanted.

Romans made me feel that being an American was something special, prized. Everyone welcomed me, filled me with anecdotes about saints, popes, politicians. Shopkeepers cheered my terrible Italian with extravagant hand gestures. On the street men and women alike looked me over as though I were worthy of appraisal. The attention embarrassed, then thrilled me. I began to feel sensual, even beautiful. I miss that.

I slip on Marco’s bathrobe. I have to get back to my bedroom before the children wake up, but I look at my reflection in the window glass first and tell it, “I’m still happy.”

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS—FEBRUARY 1956

The morning after the Saint Nicholas dinner was a Sunday, a day when Papa usually cooked us an American breakfast: eggs, pancakes, French toast with caramelized sugar instead of molasses. By the time Andy and I came back starving from Mass with Jitka, Papa had gone to Kolín for the day on business, which meant we got stuck with the usual—*caffè latte*,

bread, and jam. After breakfast Mama asked me if I wanted to go out with her, just the two of us. I was thrilled. A special girl-to-girl privilege.

We were paying a sick call, she said as we crossed the Charles Bridge with its statues black with coal soot. It wasn't far, a twenty-minute walk along the Vlatva to the Josefov quarter, the old Jews' Town.

"Last night Milena wasn't feeling well." Her words came out in puffs of smoky air. I kept warm by jumping puddles. Mama looked cheerful, at ease under her fawn hat, one arm clutching the fern that she'd taken from the bathroom at the last minute.

"Ah, so you are here." Milena opened the door a few inches so that we could see only a narrow slice of her.

"I hope you're feeling better," Mama said.

"What is it you came to see? How I live?" She let go of the door and walked around the large square room. "Not like you. One room, barely a kitchen, a closet of a bathroom." The one window had no curtains. Clusters of flower prints covered the wall behind the unmade bed. Some were shiny and looked as if they had been cut out of magazines.

"This is not a fancy quarter. Cheap. Even cheaper now." Her strong accent made her words stick to the roof of her mouth like toffee. She was wearing a paisley bathrobe belted tightly around a waist which didn't look much bigger than mine.

Mama stopped just inside the threshold, but I went to the one empty chair and sat down. The place smelled of tobacco, wet coal dust, and sandalwood. The white ceramic stove in one corner gave off too much heat.

"I should have brought flowers." Mama took a step inside the room and held up the fern.

"For me?" Milena clasped the plant to her chest and laughed. "Take off your coats." She pointed to an armchair piled with pillows and slipped behind a flowered curtain. "I will make tea."

I asked to use the bathroom. It had lavender walls and a cracked bath tub. I had a need to search, but didn't know what I was looking for. I turned on the faucet, sniffed Milena's perfume bottle—the smell was icky sweet—opened her powder box. When enough time had elapsed, I pulled the chain. Back in the room, I stepped behind the flowered curtain into Milena's kitchen.

"What is it?" Milena squinted at me. Behind her, cups and sausages hung from a rod above the sink. Stacks of jars filled with food sat on the floor.

“I want to help.” There was barely room for the two of us. She sent me back out with the sugar bowl.

Mama, now sitting in the armchair, whispered, “You should thank her again for last night’s chocolates.”

“Andy ate them all.”

“I should be making tea for you,” Mama called out.

“It’s a simple grippe. I am fine.” Milena appeared with a tea service on a tray. “The water will boil in a moment.” She placed the metal tray on a chair and bent over to drag a long bundle wrapped in brown packing paper out from under the bed. “This is why I laughed when I saw the plant you have brought me. This is a gift which I received also today. I have a little cold and in one morning I receive two gifts.” She unknotted the string.

“I must show you.” Milena unrolled a deep blue Persian prayer rug covered with stylized flowers and leaves. “It is a gift from a good friend. Very valuable.”

Mama rubbed her fingers on the rug. “It’s lovely.”

I heard the tea kettle rattling and started to get up, but Milena’s hand on my arm stopped me. “Today you are in my home.”

She poured the tea sloppily, spilling it on the tray. With her slipper, she flipped back the tip of the rug. “It’s pretty, but cheap these days. Prague is a treasure chest of bargains. Giving a carpet is not a sign of love. A baby is different. That is love, is it not?” She offered both of us a dripping cup. “Of course, to make one is only a few minutes and then he turns away, lights a cigarette, and leaves. Maybe a baby is not love.”

Mama gave me a quick look and put her cup down. I think she was sorry she had brought me along.

“Do you not know”—Milena let her hair slither to one side with a tilt of her head—“that the Germans have warehouses full of furniture, paintings, silverware? Ask your husband, if you do not believe me. From where do you imagine all my belongings arrive?” She waved her arm. “Examine this tea service. It is lovely and fine, you agree?” She held her cup against the lamp. “It is as transparent as skin. Do you see? Do you see?” Her fingers showed through the porcelain, looking like shadows. “Can you believe it was buried in a garden? An entire service. For twenty-four people.”

I didn’t learn until after the war the significance of those buried objects. Whole families, mostly Jews, leaving family history—the physical measure

of who they were, how hard they had worked—to what they thought was the safety of a soil to which they would return.

As Mama gulped down her tea that Sunday morning with the church bells ringing six times across the old Jewish quarter to sound the noon *Angelus*, I didn't think about the beautiful objects my father brought home, how he must have known, or at least guessed, their provenance.

After the Allies won, the Czechs shaved off Milena's hair. She was jeered at and spit on in St. Wenceslas Square, along with hundreds of others who had collaborated with the Germans. Then she was shot.

"Don't say anything to Papa about our visit," Mama said when we got home. "He'll worry you'll get sick, too."

Part of the family's Sunday ritual was to eat dinner together in the dining room, a long yellow room with black and white prints of Prague on the walls. I used to run into that room to watch an enamel nightingale pop out of the gilt clock on the sideboard to sing the hour. I made countless drawings of that clock, a clock that stayed in Prague along with the prints.

That Sunday Mama told us she was expecting a baby while we ate a tart Jitka made with the pears Papa had brought back from Kolín. I immediately decided I didn't want a sister or brother. We were fine just the way we were, but at least Andy and I got to drink half a glass of spumante and polish off the tart. Papa must have told at least one of his silly jokes:

"Does anyone know what hell is?"

A chorus of nos.

"Hell is eating a meal cooked by an Englishman, matching wits with a Frenchman, waiting for an Italian, and disobeying orders from a German."

I'm sure we laughed.

Because of the time difference, my parents couldn't have known about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

PRAGUE—DECEMBER 8, 1941

Jitka is trying to teach me how to roll out strudel dough when Marco appears at the kitchen door with a stunned look on his face. My heart dips. "The children?"

"No. Oahu." I don't know what that is. He explains. "No one knows the exact death toll yet, but it's bound to be immense." I go on rolling. The dough is almost transparent. Just a few more rolls. Steady,