KELLY RIMMER

The WARSAW ORPHAN

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1

Roman

28 March, 1942

THE HUMAN SPIRIT IS A MIRACULOUS THING. IT IS THE STRONGEST part of us—crushed under pressure, but rarely broken. Trapped within our weak and fallible bodies, but never contained. I pondered this as my brother and I walked to a street vendor on Zamenhofa Street in the Warsaw Ghetto, late in the afternoon on a blessedly warm spring day.

"There was one right there," he said, pointing to a rare gap in the crowd on the sidewalk. I nodded but did not reply. Dawidek sometimes needed to talk me through his workday, but he did not need me to comment, which was fortunate, because even after months of this ritual, I still had no idea what to say.

"Down that alleyway, there was one on the steps of a building. Not even on the sidewalk, just right there on the steps."

I fumbled in my pocket, making sure I still had the sliver of soap my stepfather had given me. Soap was in desperate demand in the ghetto, a place where overcrowding and lack of running water had created a perfect storm for illness. My stepfather ran

a tiny dentistry practice in the front room of our apartment and needed the soap as much as anyone—maybe even more so. But as desperate as Samuel's need for soap was, my mother's need for food eclipsed it, and so there Dawidek and I were. It was generally considered a woman's job to go to the market, but Mother needed to conserve every bit of strength she could, and the street vendor Samuel wanted me to speak to was blocks away from our home.

"…and, Roman, one was behind a big dumpster." He hesitated, then grimaced. "Except I think we missed that one yesterday."

I didn't ask how he'd come to that conclusion. I knew that the answer was liable to make my heart race and my vision darken. Sometimes, it felt as if my anger was simmering just below the surface—at my nine-year-old brother and the rest of my family. Although, none of this was their fault. At Sala, my boss at the factory on Nowolipki Street, even though he was a good man and he'd gone out of his way to help me and my family more than once. At every damned German I laid eyes on. Always them. Especially them. A sharp, uncompromising anger tinged every interaction those days, and although that anger started and ended with the Germans who had changed our world, it cycled through everyone else I knew before it made its way back where it belonged.

"There was one here yesterday. In the middle of the road at the entrance to the market."

Dawidek had already told me all about that one, but I let him talk anyway. I hoped this running commentary would spare him from the noxious interior that I was currently grappling with. I envied the ease with which he could talk about his day, even if hearing the details filled me with guilt. Guilt I could handle; I probably deserved it. It was the anger that scared me. I felt like my grip on control was caught between my sweaty hands,

and at any given moment, all it would take was for someone to startle me, and I'd lose control.

The street stall came into view through the crowd. There was always a crush of people on the street until the last second before seven o'clock curfew. This was especially the case in summer, when the oppressive heat inside the ghetto apartments could bring people to faint, besides which, the overcrowding inside was no better than the overcrowding outside. I had no idea how many people were inside those ghetto walls—Samuel guessed a million, Mrs. Kukliński in the bedroom beside ours said it was much more, Mother was quite confident that it was maybe only a hundred thousand. All I knew was that ours was not the only apartment in the ghetto designed for one family that was currently housing four—in fact, there were many living in even worse conditions. While the population was a hot topic of conversation on a regular basis, it didn't actually matter all that much to me. I could see with my own eyes and smell with my own nose that however many people were trapped within the ghetto walls, it was far, far too many.

When the vendor's table came into view, my heart sank: she was already packing up for the day, and there was no produce left. I was disappointed but not surprised: there had been little chance of us finding food so late in the day, let alone food that someone would barter for a simple slip of soap. Dawidek and I had passed a store that was selling eggs, but they'd want *zloty* for the eggs, not a tiny scrap of soap.

"Wait here a minute," I murmured to my brother, who shrugged as he sank to sit on an apartment stoop. I might have let him follow me, but even after the depths our family had sunk to over the years of occupation, I still hated for him to see me beg. I glanced at him, recording his location to memory, and then pushed through the last few feet of people mingling on the sidewalk until I reached the street vendor. She shook her head before I'd spoken a word.

"I am sorry, young man. I have nothing to offer you."

"I am Samuel Gorka's son," I told her. It was an oversimplification of a complicated truth, but it was the best way I could help her place me. "He fixed your tooth for you, remember? A few months ago? His practice is on Miła Street."

Recognition dawned in her gaze, but she still regarded me warily.

"I remember Samuel, and I'm grateful to him, but that doesn't change anything. I have no food left today."

"My brother and I…we work during the day. And Samuel, too. You know how busy he is, helping people like yourself. But the thing is, we have a sick family member who hasn't—"

"Kid, I respect your father. He's a good man and a good dentist. I wish I could help, but I have nothing to give you." She waved to the table, to the empty wooden box she had packed up behind her, and then opened her palms toward me as if to prove the truth of her words.

"There is nowhere else for me to go. I can't take no for an answer. I'm going to bed hungry tonight, but I can't let…" I trailed off, the hopelessness hitting me right in the chest. I would be going home without food for my mother that night, and the implications made me want to curl up in a ball, right there in the gutter. But hopelessness was dangerous, at least in part because it was always followed by an evil cousin. Hopelessness was a passive emotion, but its natural successor drove action, and that action rarely resulted in anything positive. I clenched my fists, and my fingers curled around the soap. I pulled it from my pocket and extended it toward the vendor. She looked from my palm to my face, then sighed impatiently and leaned close to hiss at me.

"I told you. I have nothing left to trade today. If you want food, you need to come earlier in the day."

"That's impossible for us. Don't you understand?"

To get to the market early in the day one of us would have to

miss work. Samuel couldn't miss work; he could barely keep up as it was—he performed extractions from sunup to curfew most days. Rarely was this work paid, now that money was in such short supply among ordinary families like his patients, but the work was important—not just because it afforded some small measure of comfort to a group of people who were, in every other way, suffering immensely. Every now and again, Samuel did a favor for one of the Jewish police officers or even a passing German soldier. He had a theory that, one day soon, those favors were going to come in handy. I was less optimistic, but I understood that he couldn't just close his practice. The moment Samuel stopped working would be the moment he had to perform an honest reckoning with our situation, and if he did that, he would come closer to the despair I felt every waking moment of every day.

"Do you have anything else? Or is it just the soap?" the woman asked me suddenly.

"That's all."

"Tomorrow. Come back this time tomorrow. I'll keep something for you, but for that much soap?" She shook her head, then pursed her lips. "It's not going to be much. See if you can find something else to barter."

"There *is* nothing else," I said, my throat tight. But the woman's gaze was at least sympathetic, and so I nodded at her. "I'll do my best. I'll see you tomorrow."

As I turned away, I wondered if it was worth calling into that store to ask about the eggs, even though I knew that the soap wasn't nearly enough for a whole egg. It wasn't enough for even half an egg here on the market, and the stores were always more expensive than the street vendors. Maybe they would give me a shell? We could grind it up, and Mother could drink it in a little water. We'd done that for her once before. It wasn't as good as real food, but it might help a little overnight. It surely couldn't hurt.

As I spun back toward our apartment, a burst of adrenaline nearly knocked me sideways. Dawidek hadn't moved, but two Jewish police officers were now standing in front of him. Like me, my brother was tall for his age—an inheritance from our maternal grandfather that made us look bizarre when we stood with Samuel and Mother, who were both more diminutive. Even so, he looked far too small to be crowded into the doorway of an apartment by two officers. That situation could turn to bloodshed in a heartbeat. The Kapo operated on a spectrum from well-meaning and kindly to murderously violent, and I had no way of knowing what kind of Kapo were currently accosting Dawidek. My heart thundered against the wall of my chest as I pushed my way back to them, knowing even as I approached that intervening could well get me shot.

For everything I had been through and for everything I had seen, the only thing that kept me going was my family, especially Dawidek. He was my favorite person in the world, a burst of purity in an environment of pure evil. Some days, the only time I felt *still* inside was when he and I were playing or talking in the evenings—and that stillness was the only rest I got. I could not live without him; in fact, I had already decided that if it came to that, I wouldn't even try.

"Dawidek?" I called as I neared. Both Kapo turned toward me. The one on the left, the taller one, sized me up as if an emaciated, unarmed sixteen-year-old was any kind of threat. The smart thing to do would have been to let Dawidek try to talk his own way out of this. He was nine years old but used to defending himself in the bizarrely toxic environment of the ghetto. All day long, he was at his job alone, and I was at mine. He needed his wits about him to survive even an hour of that, and I needed to trust that he could handle himself.

But I couldn't convince myself to be smart, even when I knew that what I was about to do was likely to earn me, at best, a severe beating. I couldn't even stop myself when the Kapo gave

me a second chance to walk away. They ignored me, returning their attention on my brother. "Hey!" I shouted, loud enough that my voice echoed up and down the street, and dozens of people turned to stare. "He's just a kid. He hasn't done anything wrong!"

I was mentally planning my next move. I'd make a scene, maybe push one of the Kapo, and when they turned to beat me, Dawidek could run. Pain was never pleasant, but physical pain could also be an effective distraction from mental anguish, which was the worst kind. Maybe I could even land a punch, and that might feel good. But my brother stepped forward, held his hands up to me and said fiercely, "These are my supervisors, Roman. Just supervisors on the crew. We were just talking."

My stomach dropped. My heartbeat pounded in my ears and my hands were hot. I knew my face was flushed raspberry, both with embarrassment and from the adrenaline. After a terse pause that seemed to stretch forever, the Kapo exchanged an amused glance, one patted Dawidek on the back, and they continued down the street, both laughing at me. Dawidek shook his head in frustration.

"Why did you do that? What would you do, even if I was in trouble?"

"I'm sorry," I admitted, scraping my hand through my hair. "I lost my head."

"You're always losing your head," Dawidek muttered, falling into step beside me, as we began to follow the Kapo back toward our own apartment. "You need to listen to Father. Keep your head down, work hard and hope for the best. You are too smart to keep making such dumb decisions."

Hearing my little brother echoing his father's wisdom in the same tone and with the same impatience was always jarring, but in this case, I was dizzy with relief, and so I messed up his hair and let out a weak laugh.

"For a nine-year-old, you are awfully wise."

"Wise enough to know that you didn't get any food for Mother."

"We were too late," I said, and then I swallowed the lump in my throat. "But she said that we should come back tomorrow. She will set something aside for us."

"Let's walk the long way home. The trash cans on Smocza Street are sometimes good."

We were far from the only family in the ghetto who had run out of resources. We were all starving, and any morsel of food was quickly found, even if it was from a trash can. Still, I was not at all keen to return to our crowded apartment, to face the disappointment in my stepfather's gaze or to see the starvation in my mother's. I let Dawidek lead the way, and we walked in silence, broken by his periodic bursts of commentary.

"We picked one up here… Another over there… Mordechai helped me with one there."

As we turned down a quiet street, I realized that Dawidek's Kapo supervisors were right in front of us, walking a few dozen feet ahead.

"We should turn around. I don't want any trouble with those guys," I muttered. Dawidek shook his head.

"They like me. I work hard and don't give them any trouble. Now that you have stopped trying to get yourself killed, they won't bother us, even if they do notice us."

Just then, the shorter policeman glanced toward the sidewalk on his right, and then he paused. He waved his companion ahead, then withdrew something from his pocket as he crouched low to the ground. I was much too far away to hear the words he spoke, but I saw the sadness in his gaze. The Kapo then rose and jogged ahead to catch up with his partner. Dawidek and I continued along the street, but only when we drew near where he had stopped did I realize why.

We had been in the ghetto for almost two years. Conditions were bad to begin with, and every new day seemed to bring new

trials. I learned to wear blinders—to block out the public pain and suffering of my fellow prisoners. I had walked every block of the ghetto, both the Little Ghetto with its nicer apartments where the elite and artists appeared to live in relative comfort, and through the Big Ghetto, where poor families like my own were crammed in, trying to survive at a much higher density. The footbridge on Chłodna Street connected the two and elevated the ghetto residents above the so-called Aryan Poles, and even the Germans, who passed beneath it. The irony of this never failed to amuse me when I crossed. Sometimes, I crossed it just to cheer myself up.

I knew the ghetto inside and out, and I noticed every detail, even if I had taught myself to ignore what I saw as much as I could. I learned not to react when an elderly man or woman caught my hand as I passed, clawing in the hopes that I could spare them a morsel of food. I learned not to so much as startle if someone was shot in front of my eyes. And most of all, I learned to never look at any unfortunate soul who was prone on the sidewalk. The only way to survive was to remain alert so I had to see it all, but I also had to learn to look right through it. The only way to manage my own broiling fury was to bury it.

But the policeman had drawn my attention to a scene of utter carnage outside what used to be a clothing store. The store had long ago run out of stock and had been repurposed as accommodation for several families. The wide front window was now taped over with hessian sacks for privacy; outside that window, on the sidewalk, a child was lying on her stomach. Alive, but barely.

The ghetto was teeming with street children. The orphanages were full to bursting, which meant that those who weren't under the care of relatives or kindly strangers were left to their own devices. I saw abandoned children, but I didn't *see* them. I'd have passed right by this child on any other day. I couldn't even manage to keep my own family safe and well, so it was

better to keep walking and spare myself the pain of further powerlessness. But I was curious about what the policeman had given the child, and so even as we approached her, I was scanning, looking to see what had caught his attention and to try to figure out what he'd put down on the ground.

Starvation confused the normal growth and development of children, but even so, I guessed she was two or three. She wore the same vacant expression I saw in most children by that stage. Patches of her hair had fallen out, and her naked stomach and legs were swollen. Someone had taken her clothing except for a tattered pair of underwear, and I understood why.

This child would not be alive by morning. Once they became too weak to beg for help, it didn't take long, and this child was long past that point. Her dull brown eyes were liquid pools of defeat and agony.

My eyes drifted to her hands, her palms facing upward, as if opening her hands to God. One was lying open and empty on the sidewalk beside her. The other was also open but this palm was not empty. *Bread.* The policeman had pressed a chunk of bread onto the child's hand. I stared at the food, and even though it was never going to find its way to my lips, my mouth began to water. I was torturing myself, but it was much easier to look at the bread than at the girl's dull eyes.

Dawidek stood silently beside me. I thought of my mother and then crouched beside the little girl.

"Hello," I said, stiff and awkward. The child did not react. I cast my gaze all over her face, taking it in. The sharp cheekbones. The way her eyes seemed too big for her face. The matted hair. Someone had once brushed this little girl's hair and had probably pulled it into pretty braids. Someone had once bathed this child and tucked her into bed at night, bending down to whisper in her ear that she was loved and special and wanted.

Now, her lips were dry and cracked, and blood dried into a dirty black scab in the corner of her mouth. My eyes burned,

and it took me a moment to realize that I was struggling to hold back tears.

"You should eat the bread," I urged softly. Her eyes moved, and then she blinked, but then her eyelids fluttered and fell closed. She drew in a breath, but her whole chest rattled, the sound I knew people made just before they died—when they were far too ill to even cough. A tear rolled down my cheek. I closed my eyes, but now, instead of blackness, I saw the little girl's face.

This was why I learned to wear blinders, because if you got too close to the suffering, it would burn itself into your soul. This little girl was now a part of me, and her pain was part of mine.

Even so, I knew that she could not eat the bread. The policeman's gesture had been well-meaning, but it had come far too late. If I didn't take the bread, the next person who passed would. If my time in the ghetto had taught me anything, it was that life might deliver blessings, but each one would have a sting in its tail. God might deliver us fortune, but never without a cost. I would take the bread, and the child would die overnight. But that wouldn't be the end of the tragedy. In some ways, it was only the beginning.

I wiped my cheeks roughly with the back of my hand, and then before I could allow my conscience to stop me, I reached down and plucked the bread from the child's hand to swiftly hide in my pocket. Then I stood and forced myself to not look at her again. Dawidek and I began to walk.

"The little ones should be easier. I don't have to ask the big kids for help lifting them, and they don't weigh anything at all. They should be easier, shouldn't they?" Dawidek said, almost philosophically. He sighed heavily and then added in a voice thick with confusion and pain, "I'll be able to lift her by myself tomorrow morning, but that won't make it easier."

Fortune gave me a job with one of the few factories in the

ghetto that was owned by a kindly Jew, rather than some German businessman only wanting to take advantage of slave labor. But this meant that when the Kapo had come looking for me to help collect the bodies from the streets before sunrise each day, the only other viable person in our household was my brother.

When Dawidek was first recruited to this hideous role, I wanted to quit my job so that I could relieve him of it. But corpse collection was unpaid work, and my factory job paid me in food—every single day, I sat down to a hot lunch, which meant other members of my family could share my portion of rations. This girl would die overnight, and by dawn, my little brother would have lifted her into the back of a wagon. He and a team of children and teenagers, under the supervision of the Kapo, would drag the wagon to the cemetery, where they would tip the corpses into a pit with dozens of others.

Rage, black and red and violent in its intensity, clouded the edges of my vision, and I felt the thunder of the injustice in my blood. But then Dawidek drew a deep breath, and he leaned forward to catch my gaze. He gave me a smile, a brave smile, one that tilted the axis of my world until I felt it chase the rage away.

I had to maintain control. I couldn't allow my fury to destroy me because my family was relying on me. *Dawidek* was relying on me.

"Mother is going to be so excited to have bread," he said, his big brown eyes lighting up at the thought of pleasing her. "And that means Eleonora will get better milk tomorrow, won't she?"

"Yes," I said, my tone as empty as the words themselves. "This bread is a real blessing."

2

Roman

"CLEVER BOYS. YOU ARE SO CLEVER," MY MOTHER SAID, CRADLING the bread in her spare hand, the other busy supporting my newborn sister, who was suckling desperately at my mother's breast. "How did you do this? Was it the street vendor?"

"She was very sympathetic," I said, carefully avoiding both the truth and a lie. Dawidek and I hadn't discussed the need to hide the origins of the bread. We didn't need to.

My mother beamed at us, and from his place beside her on the mattress on the floor of our room, my stepfather smiled proudly, too. I would have to tell him later that I still had the soap, because I knew that as soon as my mother finished the bread, he would immediately turn to worrying about how we would provide for her tomorrow, unless I told him that I had a plan in place. But for now, I just enjoyed the happiness in his eyes.

"A miracle," my mother declared. "Today, we are blessed."

Before the war, my family had been the sole occupants of a spacious, three-bedroom apartment on bustling Miła Street,

right in the center of the Jewish Quarter of Warsaw. My stepfather was the principal dentist at his very own clinic a few blocks away, and his parents owned the apartment above ours. We weren't wealthy by any means, but we did enjoy a comfortable existence. I had skipped several grades in elementary school and was traveling to and fro across Warsaw by tram to attend high school, and Dawidek was in the early years of his education at a Jewish school just a few blocks away from home. My mother kept the house and volunteered at a soup kitchen in her spare time.

Today, that same three-bedroom apartment on Miła Street was now home to our family, Samuel's parents, their elderly friends Mr. and Mrs. Kukliński, and the Frankel and Grobelny families. The Grobelnys once lived in a small apartment on the same floor as Samuel's parents, right above us. When the first big influx of people came, they made the mistake of coming down to visit us and left their door open. By the time they went back, two other families had invaded their space, and they never got it back. They were a family of five then, but Mr. Grobelny was shot on the street just a few weeks later, and then their two older children died of influenza the following winter. Mrs. Grobelny was so forlorn she barely functioned anymore, and her toddler, Estera, relied heavily on the other adults for care. Mrs. Grobelny and Estera shared the dining room in our apartment, sleeping together on a sofa each night.

The Frankels were a Hungarian Roma family, consisting of Laszlo and Judit, and their seven-year-old twins, Imri and Anna. It had been crowded before Grandfather came home with the Frankels the previous autumn. He apologized profusely even as he laid down the law as the unofficial head of our crowded household. He'd seen Laszlo begging in the street while Judit sat with the children, sheltering behind a trash can to get out of a bitter wind.

"It is not right that those children should sleep on the street

over winter while we could find room for them in our household."

We had done our best to fairly apportion the apartment—the Grobelnys in the dining room, my entire family in what was once Samuel and Mother's room, the Frankels in my bedroom, and the grandparents and the Kuklińskis were in Dawidek's former room. What was once the front room now served as Samuel's clinic. Every apartment in every building in the ghetto was now crowded with multiple families, as the Germans brought people from all over Europe to cram them in behind the walls with us.

When the ghetto wall had gone up, the water was shut off, and now we could only get water from the station faucet. Given Mother was busy with Eleonora, my grandparents and the Kuklińskis were old and frail, and everyone else was working during the day, it had fallen to Judit to fetch the household's water. Morning and night, she would make the trip with a bucket in each hand. It wasn't nearly enough. Like everything else, water had to stretch, and not a single drop could be wasted. Judit was a master of reuse. Sometimes she'd boil scraps of food to soften them, then use the same water to launder clothes, then use it again to flush our toilet.

How had it come to this? Once upon a time, I'd had hot showers every day and enough food that I didn't even realize a person could feel a hunger so intense it became a throbbing pain in their stomach. Even after two and a half years of occupation, including almost two years walled within the ghetto, I sometimes managed to convince myself that the complete collapse of our lives was some kind of dream. The nightmarish existence of life within the ghetto sometimes did take on a surreal, dreamlike quality. How could it possibly be real? How could we have slipped from the life we knew to this one in such a short period of time? How could I have taken a chunk of bread from the hands of a dying child to give it as a gift to my mother? And

how could it be that my mother would be so hungry that that small, crusty piece of bread could inspire tears of joy?

I tried not to think about the little girl's vacant eyes and the cracked, bloodied skin at the corner of her lips, but every time I looked at the bread, her face appeared. To help distract myself, I hovered near my mother and then motioned toward the baby that rested in her arms. Mother smiled at me, and Samuel took the bread from my mother's hand so she could pass me my baby sister.

Eleonora. The miracle child who made our already complicated lives all that much more complex. The streets were rife with stories about women who were forced to end their pregnancies, women who were shot on sight simply for being pregnant, even newborns murdered by the SS, right in front of their families.

Grandmother had assumed the role of family rations collector when Mother's belly became too big to hide. The rations were a form of torture, too—generally, what was called a *family serving* of an oatmeal-like sludge, ladled into our kettle by the Kapo under close German guard. We were enduring a slow-motion extermination by starvation. The collective rations of our entire household would barely meet the nutritional needs of a single adult.

Samuel said with Mother's malnutrition, a successful pregnancy was an actual miracle, a verification that God had wanted to bless us with the child. I loved Eleonora, but I felt so conflicted about her presence. Breastfeeding was draining the life from my mother, besides which it was increasingly evident that she was not producing enough milk to sustain Eleonora anyway. My sister had been unsettled constantly since her birth six weeks ago, but I was noticing that the periods where she was quiet and still were becoming eerily prolonged.

I told myself that this was because Eleonora was getting older and that as babies got older, they just learned how to be quiet.

Deep down inside, I knew that I was fooling myself. The so-called miracle bread had probably bought us a little more time, but tragedy was hovering at our doorstep. The thought of Dawidek having to lift Eleonora's tiny body onto that wagon made me want to tear the world apart.

There was nothing I could do to change our situation, nothing beyond the daily struggle to get just a little food, to buy just a little more time.

"I removed a bad tooth from a woman today," Samuel told us, as Mother began to nibble on tiny bites of the bread. "She said she'd heard a rumor that we're all going to be moved to the East, and soon."

"To the East?" Mother replied, frowning. "What's in the East?"

"A work camp. At Treblinka, near the forest. She heard that the Germans have built large factories where we will *all* work to produce goods for the Germans, not just the small number of us with work permits."

I waited, knowing what was coming next. There were always rumors, and Samuel always heard them first because, like Dawidek, he was friendly and often cheerful, and the nature of his work meant that his patients quickly came to trust him. We had a conversation like this every few weeks, and while the rumors changed, the progression of the conversation did not. Samuel never disappointed. He drew in a deep breath, then his face stretched into a broad smile, and he gave my mother a reassuring hug.

"You see! It's like I told you, Maja. The Germans have realized their mistake, putting so many of us in these conditions. Soon, they will relocate us to the forest where there will be enough space and food and water for us all, and we can earn our keep for them properly. They want us for labor, right? So it makes sense that they would move us somewhere where we can be strong to work for them." Samuel looked across to Dawidek,

who was pushing pebbles around on the floor as if they were toy cars. Then he looked to me, and he smiled again. "You'll see, Roman. Things will get better soon. It's only a matter of time."

My mother silently broke off another piece of the bread, catching the crumbs that rained down onto her skirt. When she had finished her mouthful, she licked her finger and collected the crumbs from her skirt. Finally, she looked at me, and her gaze spoke volumes. She was tired of this—tired of our situation and tired of Samuel's stubborn refusal to acknowledge the simple, obvious fact that we were, effectively, doomed. She rarely said as much aloud anymore. I noticed that over the course of her pregnancy, and in the weeks since Eleonora's birth, my mother had become less and less vocal about her thoughts on what the German end goal might be. When we were first walled in, she was full of fight and carefully looking for a way out. But time had worn down her spirit in the same way that it had worn down her physical reserves, and now my mother was a shadow of who she once had been. I knew that Samuel saw it, too, and I often wondered if he wasn't compensating for the hopelessness of our situation when he went off on these ridiculously optimistic tangents.

"And if what awaits us in the forest is not better than this, but worse?" my mother said carefully.

"Worse?" I repeated incredulously. I couldn't imagine anything worse. It was, to me, as close to hell on earth as a person could imagine.

"Dawidek, darling, could you please go out to the bucket to fetch me a cup of water to have with this delicious bread?" Mother asked, her tone all at once sweet and gentle. Dawidek carefully set his pebbles down on the floorboards and left the room. My mother looked right into my eyes, and she whispered, "There are many rumors. You know this—they come and they go. I don't want you to panic, but Judit told me today that there are those at the market who say that a man escaped

from a camp at Chełmno. She says that he saw proof that the Germans intend to be rid of us."

"Rid of us? How many of us?" I said, frowning.

Mother looked away before she murmured, "Maybe all of us."

"That's absurd," Samuel said dismissively. He shook his head, then exclaimed, "They need us for labor, Maja! Why would they kill us all when they need us for labor? They are trying to expand the Reich throughout all of Europe, and in this ghetto alone the factories are producing enough clothing for their entire army, not to mention the munitions we are producing. Besides which, why would they have allowed us to live until now, only to kill us all later? And how *could* they kill us all? It is impossible. It is a ridiculous notion."

"Is it really so impossible?" Mother asked him impatiently. "After everything they have done to us, how can you believe they wouldn't be capable of that?"

"Because they are still *human*, Maja!"

It was Samuel's turn to raise his voice, and he did so just as Dawidek returned to the room, wide-eyed, holding a cup of water in front of him like a shield. None of us moved, even as I felt a shiver of fear run down my spine. In all of the years that Samuel had been in my life, I had only ever heard him raise his voice twice. The first time was a shout of joy when my mother announced that she was pregnant with Dawidek. The second time was when they argued just before the Germans walled in the ghetto. Mother wanted to flee the city. Samuel was convinced he would still be allowed to operate his dentistry practice back in his old clinic, and that in doing so he could sustain the family.

"They *aren't* human, Samuel," I said, throat tight. "How can you even think they are, after what we've seen?"

Samuel closed his eyes, but his breathing was ragged. In the dim light, I saw that his hands were clenched into fists. After a moment, he exhaled unevenly, and then he whispered, "I need

to believe that there is some hidden depth of grace within these men who torture us, because if there isn't, then all hope is lost. And it's not just lost for us, Roman, but for humanity, because even once all of this is over, this evil could emerge from the souls of men again and again and again."

Dawidek finally moved to offer Mother her water. She gave him a sad, apologetic smile as she took it, then murmured her thanks. My brother walked back to his pebbles and resumed his game. The conversation seemed over, so I startled when Samuel suddenly added, "Have you heard anything?"

I looked up to find the question was, bewilderingly, directed at me.

"How would I have heard anything?"

He shrugged.

"Don't the boys at the workshop talk?"

I suppressed a wince. The boys at the workshop did talk; I just didn't engage unless there was no way to avoid it. It was different in the beginning. Sala had taken a dozen of us into his employ on the same day. I made three friends in that cohort: Leonard, Gustaw and Kazimierz. We all learned to operate the machines together, and soon I found myself looking forward to my work. Leonard had a wicked sense of humor and was forever making me laugh, and Gustaw wanted to be a lawyer just as I did—if we were ever able to return to our education. He and I found plenty of intellectual topics to keep our minds active. Kazimierz was well connected and knew all kinds of ways to access black-market food and other resources.

Leonard was the first to go—he contracted typhus and died within days of falling ill. Gustaw simply disappeared. I went to his house when he stopped coming to work, and his parents had no idea what had happened to him. Losing Kazimierz was the hardest: our merry gang of four had been just two for months, when one day the Gestapo came into the factory and dragged him away, kicking and screaming. Having seen Gustaw's par-

ents' agony at his unexplained absence, I took it upon myself to go to Kazimierz's mother to explain what had happened. After that, I made a determined effort to avoid friendship. I'd learned the hard way that loneliness was difficult to survive, but grief was infinitely worse.

I sat at a table working a sewing machine opposite another boy about my own age. Although we had worked together for over a year and he had made many attempts to talk to me, I still didn't know his real name. The other boys called him Pigeon. I had no idea if this was an insult or a compliment or even where the nickname originated. I avoided a friendship with him purely because I'd heard the rumors—he, like many of the young men in the factory, was flirting with the underground. I had already watched one friend dragged away by the Gestapo, and should that happen again, I would make sure it happened to a stranger.

I did empathize with those who worked with the Resistance. I'd thought of it myself, but these were childish fantasies, and I knew I'd never act upon them. No resistance activity could save my family from what they were going through; in fact, connecting with the Resistance could only bring my family pain. Besides which, every time the subject came up, Samuel made me promise I would never get involved. I knew his determination to avoid the underground came not from a philosophical objection to resistance, but from a philosophical objection to facing our reality.

After all, if Samuel was right and sooner or later the Germans would correct the hellish existence they had forced us into, there was little point in risking our lives to fight them.

"I keep to myself at work," I said abruptly. Baby Eleonora was beginning to wriggle, so I shifted her in my arms, lifting her higher and rocking gently, the way I had seen my mother do.

"Perhaps you could ask around," my mother said. She gave me a slightly pleading look. "Something is coming, Roman. You know Mrs. Grobelny's second cousin is on the Council, and