

Sopron, Hungary Summer 1943

As the Budapest streets with their clatter of trams and hurried pedestrians began to thin out, Eva César reclined against the cool leather of her father's town car and let out a long breath. Two hours from now, she would be on her family's country estate in Sopron with nothing to do but soak in some much-needed sun, bask in Dora's glorious cooking, and tackle (at last!) the three biology books she'd tucked inside her valise under layers of clothing like boxes of stolen chocolates. It had been a maddening spring, filled with endless parties and dinner outings, and a steady stream of thank-you notes to write for the gifts arriving in elaborate packages for her upcoming wedding. She'd unwrapped each one nonetheless, feigning delight, filled with an undercurrent of annoyance that with Europe at war, she should be receiving such lavish gifts. Endless bibelots, crystal napkin rings, stained glass vases large enough to fit all the flower bouquets in Budapest combined. All, she imagined, would be stored in a pantry somewhere, collecting dust after the wedding. She wouldn't have much use for them in her new life with Eduard. The planning of the wedding itself had felt more like the negotiation of a peace treaty, obliterating any time at all she might have had for reading. Even the dress fittings (all six of them) she'd come to regard as a weekly trip to the dentist. At the last appointment, she did her best not to slouch, or tap her foot, or swat the tiny flies that seemed enthralled with the bursts of tulle and lace on her shoulders. She'd had the overwhelming urge to push past the seamstress hovering at her feet and flee. Didn't this woman with a mouthful of pins and the concentration of a mathematician understand what was taking place outside the rosewood-paneled walls of her shop? Didn't she know that while she insisted that every pearl on her five-foot train should be fastened at exact intervals, men were trudging through trenches without proper boots, dying in the Russian snow? Then she'd spotted a recent newspaper folded in three on the low table near the sofa strewn with patterns and rolls of silk, and she realized, of course this woman knew. Everyone in her family's circle knew, yet they all seemed intent on looking the other way. Everyone other than her dear Eduard seemed far more consumed with the fact that chocolate éclairs had vanished from Budapest entirely, or that the Széchenyi Baths had become overcrowded. No one was concerned that tens of thousands of Hungarian soldiers had been killed at Stalingrad, with the new year still in celebration. Poor Eduard. As her car moved through the streets, Eva pictured him at that very moment, his head bent in concentration, pushing his round wire glasses back on the bridge of his nose as he extracted a piece of shrapnel from a soldier's shoulder. He'd planned to join her in Sopron until late in the spring, when what remained of the Hungarian Second Army had retreated from the Eastern Front and wounded soldiers began pouring into Budapest hospitals by the thousands. Of course, she had agreed that he should stay for as long as he was needed. Besides, here, under her father's nose, their every movement and conversation would be observed, their every word measured. There would be no Sunday strolls on Andrásy út, their arms intertwined, exchanging views on what might come to Hungary if its alliance with Germany was to continue. No coffee and Gauloise cigarettes at the brasserie across from Heroes' Square, where he would give her a detailed account of the latest tourniquet he'd applied, and how, just as he was preparing grimly for an amputation, it had managed to stop the blood flow and save the doomed limb. Or how a bullet could enter the body in a way that endangered no organs then splay under the skin like a trick flower pulled from a hat. As the car turned into the main highway and began closing the two hundred kilometers that stretched between Budapest and Sopron, she sparked a cigarette, and thought with some amusement of the day when her fascination with anatomy began. She was eight years old, and on that Christmas Eve, among other gifts, she'd been

presented with a brand-new set of pencils and a coloring book. She sat at the kitchen table later that night with her book and a cup of hot chocolate provided by one of the servants. There, among the clattering of pots and pans and plates being scrubbed, she opened it for the first time and wondered in that first instant if her uncle had picked it up from the bookshop by mistake. It was a drawing book, but there were no flowers to fill in, no clouds or castles. There, in all its glorious form, Eva glimpsed the naked human body for the first time. Not just the body, however, but all it contained in its secret corridors, intricate maps of systems she never knew about. As Eva stared at the illustrations opposite the blank pages she was to fill in, she marveled that her own body contained such complexities. That underneath the quiet smoothness of skin, blood pumped through mazes of veins; that everything from the muscles in her neck to the tendons in her toes was all connected in one perfect constellation. All night she'd spent copying the illustrations—the tendons, the arteries, the organs, shaped like some strange exotic fruit. She hadn't noticed when the sun had come up nor that her breakfast tray lay untouched on the armoire. It was only when she met Eduard years later that she was able to confess this obsession to anyone. She went to a friend's birthday dinner out of obligation as much as boredom. She expected the usual meaningless chatter as she stood around alone smoking a cigarette, then she overheard the conversation taking place just on the other side of the fireplace. She didn't mean to eavesdrop, but then she saw that the woman in the duo had grown quiet and was looking at her in perplexity. The man, too, noticing the distraction, had glanced over his shoulder. There was a sort of gentility in the premature silvery strands at his temples, an earnestness in his clear blue eyes as he turned to her fully. "I'm sorry," Eva found herself explaining. "I'm just waiting for someone. Please don't mind me. I didn't mean to interrupt." "You're not interrupting in the least," said the man. He held out his hand, and a tiny, amused smile that seemed at odds with his formal gesture appeared at the corners of his lips. "I'm Eduard." "Eva," she replied as she shook his hand, hoping that taking a drag of her cigarette in tandem would convey some mild disinterest. But she was interested, not necessarily in the way he looked, which was not exactly unpleasing, but in what she'd heard him say only moments earlier. "You're a doctor with the Red Cross. I'm sorry." She found herself apologizing again and wished that she hadn't. "I couldn't help overhearing. That, and . . . well, mostly everything else. So it's true, then. Our regent means to disentangle Hungary from the war. And he's already promised the Americans and the Brits to hold back fire on their aircraft." She took another drag of her cigarette, which shivered slightly between her fingers. "Incredible, isn't it, but is it sustainable? I imagine Herr Hitler will not take this kindly." "True," said Eduard after a long pause. He looked at her as if suddenly observing her from a different angle. "But tell me . . . Eva. Why would someone as lovely as you be interested in tracking political maneuvers?" "Why not?" she said, tipping her chin in defiance and tossing back the rest of her champagne. "Even someone like me"—this, she said in clear irony—"does not wish to see the Nazi flag flutter on Castle Hill." They ended up leaving the party together, grabbing a latenight drink. In the dim lights of the tavern he insisted on, Eva noticed how alive he was talking about his work, which had begun in earnest even before he finished medical school. It occurred to her that perhaps he couldn't afford to take her to a place better—he'd earlier mentioned with surprising openness the school debts he'd been struggling to pay for years—and she felt warmed from within with something like enchantment, or perhaps admiration. To her own astonishment, she'd placed her hand on his. Later, he walked her home in a drizzle of rain, passing the darkened storefronts on Váci utca. The quietness of the night, with its faint sound of streetcars, seemed to embrace them in an intimate way. In front of her home, just a stone's throw from the Operaház, he paused on the sidewalk to take in the tall windows and ornate baroque facade, and she squeezed his arm, as if to indicate that this, like anything else, was

ordained by something that had nothing to do with them. He'd kissed her cheek and departed in a hurry, his shoulders scrunched against the October wind, shaking the mist from his hair as if to dispel the evening, which might have been no more than a dream. Four months later, they were engaged. She knew it was rushed, yet ever since his proposal, when he declared that her presence in his life had spurred in him a desire to rise to the highest planes, a similar feeling had awakened in her as well. She was twenty, after all. Twenty, and he, perfect in every way. She couldn't have hoped for a better match. Besides, in the short time they'd spent together, she never became more certain of one thing: with this man at her side, she could shape her own future. She could make of it what she wished—and that, above all, had filled her with great exhilaration. - The car, Eva realized with a start, had turned from the main highway, and began its upward climb on the smaller road leading up to the villa. She hadn't noticed the time pass, yet here she was, on a land that belonged to a different world, with its lush trees and the calmness of a simple life, and all the colors of a Cézanne painting. At the end of the long driveway, after they'd gone through the main gates and the villa revealed itself from the shade of oaks, she opened the car door and, before stepping out, she inhaled deeply. The Sopron air always smelled of fresh-cut grass and rain even at the onset of summer, that nostalgic, comforting air of her youth. Despite the chauffer's protests she pulled her own valise from the trunk, and as she slammed it shut, a familiar voice greeted her from the top of the stairs. Dora, her summer governess, was hovering under the arched door, breathing heavily as though she'd run a mile from the kitchen. "Oh, my dearest, you're here!" she sang in her quivery voice, fanning her plump, ruddy cheek with one hand while balancing a platter of her legendary baked strudel on the other. "Oh, but look at you! Soon to be a madame! Oh, come here, love. Let me see you, my beauty." "My dearest Dora, hello!" Eva shouted, laughing, running up the steps. "You're back! You don't know how happy this makes me." Dora lived in town, but every summer while Eva visited, Dora reinstalled herself at the villa even though Eva had long stopped needing a nanny. If anything, they'd become close friends over the past years, and Eva couldn't wait to see her year-round. "You know, I think this will be a summer of great adventure for us," Eva said now, kissing Dora's flour-dusted cheek even though she couldn't think of anything at all adventurous between now and early September. Taking a hearty bite of the strudel, she walked into the house with it, letting the powdered sugar scatter into the air like dust dancing in a slant of light. In the vast windows, the sun had already dipped beyond the hills, bathing the vineyards in shades of amber and gold, and she paused in the living room doorway to take it all in. This peacefulness, this splendor. Would it last? For how long? Sopron, she thought, after this summer, may never quite belong to her in the same way again. She turned and went up the staircase, thankful that at least for now, for two more weeks, while her father was detained in Vienna, the Sopron of her childhood belonged just to her. It was only hers and Dora's, and she intended to enjoy every languid, unadventurous moment.