

*A novel inspired by
the 'Japanese Schindler',
written by a woman who
owes him her life*



The
STAR
on the
GRAVE

'An extraordinary tale, elegantly told.'

TOM KENEALLY

LINDA MARGOLIN ROYAL

*For my late parents and all those who weren't saved from the horror.
And especially to my grandmother Felka, my rock.*

People say 'live for the future, don't live in the past.'

But I don't live in the past, the past lives in me.

Olga Horak, Holocaust survivor

KAUNAS TRAIN STATION, LITHUANIA SEPTEMBER 1940

Chiune Sugihara gazes through the train window at the stone-grey platform, crowded with groups of people and only just visible through the haze of train smoke and rain. Hardly anyone is sitting on the platform's benches of chipped wood with rusting wrought-iron legs; this is not a place to relax. He watches people bid farewell to their loved ones with swift, tight embraces that wrinkle jackets and dislodge hats – quickly readjusted by fastidious mothers. Everywhere, tears are lost among the drizzling raindrops.

As people board the train, Chiune thinks the scene could be an impressionist painting. The soupy mist and water smear the expressions of the people gathering at the train windows, continuing the farewell ritual with their loved ones and friends on the platform. Armed Soviet guards peer at faces as they patrol the station, eager to flex their authority after the USSR took over Lithuania some weeks back. The travellers are yearning for this town of Kaunas, even though they haven't left yet, remnants of fresh soil tended the day before still wedged under their fingernails. He closes his eyes, overwhelmed by the emotions on display, feeling out of place. Though he knows he stands out with his neat, crisp attire and his obvious

Japanese heritage, what makes him feel other is the way he cannot imagine displaying such brazen, genuine, moving feelings.

'They're so grateful,' he says to his wife, Yukiko, as he looks back out the window. He sits down, bows his head, tries to breathe. To anyone else in the carriage, he would simply look to be deep in thought, but his wife correctly reads it as distress. She reaches out, laying her gloved hand over his. He allows himself to reach up and touch her face before composing himself.

Across from him, their three young sons chat excitedly, full of adventure and curiosity about their destination. He smiles at them and glances back through the window to see a boy staring at him from the platform. He is a teenager, perhaps fourteen, filled with innocence, beaming with hope: not yet a man, but on the verge. The boy pushes his thick, dark hair away from his eyes as the wind plays havoc with it, and suddenly Chiune recognises him. Michael Margolin. Michael accompanied his father to the Japanese embassy only days earlier. The father – Chiune doesn't remember the elder Margolin's name – scolded Michael several times for flicking his hair away from his eyes, just like that. The reprimand had no real heat, Chiune remembers; it was simply the exasperated affection of a parent, to which he could relate.

Chiune locks eyes with Michael, gives him a small smile through the window, willing Michael to understand: Yes, I remember you. Michael's face breaks into a smile of his own. He gestures at the window. Chiune opens it as the train begins to lumber away from the station.

'Thank you, Mr Sugihara!' Michael shouts, jogging alongside the carriage. A group of boys and girls begins to form, trotting behind. One teenage girl breaks from the others and catches Michael's hand as they run, her dark hair caught by the wind. They're all calling to Chiune. 'Goodbye!'

Unable to stop himself, Chiune leans out of the train window to wave, and sees the large emotional crowd of Jewish refugees back on the platform, waving and calling out their heartfelt, final farewells. Their words mingle

through the rain and smoke, but he hears a young woman shouting, 'We will never forget you! We will never forget you!' Another is crying the words of a verse Chiune recognises from the Old Testament, and several call in a language he doesn't understand – Yiddish, he guesses.

As the train pulls away from the station entirely, Michael lets go of the girl's hand and jumps off the platform to run alongside the tracks. There's shouting in the crowd as two figures break away in pursuit: Soviet guards. Another man follows them – Michael's father – yelling something Chiune can't make out.

'Go back,' Chiune calls out to Michael, who can't hear him or his father over the train, and begins falling away as it picks up speed. Chiune anxiously leans out the window, trying to see through the fog, but the mist swallows them and makes them disappear.

Chiune braces himself on the window, sheets of rain sleeting into his face as he strains his ears. He can only hear the rhythmic chugging of the train; the shouts are muffled, steadily receding into the distance.

And then Chiune hears the gunshot, and the weather clears momentarily. His heart catches in his throat at what the evaporating mist has revealed.

Chapter 1

Sydney, Australia, July 1968

Rachel Margol pauses at the entrance to Hannah's hospital room. The old Polish woman is sitting in her bed, face turned towards the sun pouring through the window. She looks peaceful, and Rachel is sorry to disturb her as she knocks on the open door. Hannah beckons her in before turning back towards the light.

Rachel approaches her. Bathed in the golden glow, almost angelic, Hannah's face looks like porcelain. Her skin is fine and translucent, her veins duck-egg blue. Rachel thinks it's paper-thin, thinks she could see the blood surging through Hannah's veins if she leant in. The perfect light for painting her portrait – but even as Rachel wishes she had her paints at hand, her medical training kicks in. She commits the scene to memory. Hannah is only wearing a thin hospital gown over a light, long-sleeved blouse. Or rather, the gown is wearing her: it envelops her withered form. The old and frail are perpetually cold, Rachel knows.

'You shouldn't sit up without help, Mrs Radomsky,' she says gently.

‘Blame my father,’ replies Hannah, in a heavy accent. ‘The stubbornness belongs to him. What is your name again, my dear?’

Rachel’s told her many times, but she doesn’t say so. ‘Rachel.’

The old lady is delighted. ‘Ruchalah! It’s been so long.’

Rachel doesn’t recognise this foreign pronunciation of her name. It’s not Polish – her grandmother is Polish, and she’s never referred to Rachel in that way. It’s a puzzle she soon forgets, though, as she sets to preparing Hannah for her daily wash.

After she helps Hannah into the aqua-tiled bathroom, Rachel fills a plastic container with hot water from the porcelain sink’s huge brass fittings and sets it in the shower recess. As she helps Hannah remove her gown, the old woman is confused. ‘Where is the girl, the other girl?’

‘I know it’s normally another nurse’s job, Hannah, but today it’s been assigned to me,’ she explains calmly. Even though Hannah has withered and shrunk in her old age, she still towers over Rachel’s five-foot frame; Rachel is relieved when Hannah relaxes into the plastic seat. As she peels away Hannah’s blouse, Rachel pauses. Numbers are etched into the old woman’s left forearm, scarred into flesh with fading black ink.

‘We were not names. Only numbers,’ Hannah says, briefly catching Rachel’s eye.

‘What do you mean?’ Rachel asks – she’s sure she’s heard or read about tattoos like this before, something to do with the war – but Hannah has already drifted off again, humming something, staring ahead with a tranquil smile.

Short attention spans aren’t out of the ordinary in Rachel’s work, so she continues on and removes the blouse entirely. She’s turning on the taps in the shower, adjusting the temperature of the water, when Hannah suddenly begins trembling and moaning. Rachel glances up to see her staring stone-faced at the water pouring out of the shower nozzle.

‘Hannah?’ Rachel asks. ‘What’s the matter? Are you cold?’

Hannah clutches at Rachel's arm, fingernails digging hard into her skin. Her trembling turns to shaking, and she doesn't seem to hear Rachel trying to soothe her. The moaning has become a wail. Frightened, Rachel tries to free herself from Hannah's grip so she can fetch help when an orderly comes in. The orderly, a woman Rachel has seen around the hospital, immediately turns off the shower and wraps Hannah in a towel, ignoring Rachel entirely as she guides Hannah out of the bathroom and back to her bed.

Rachel is left in the bathroom, forearm already beginning to bruise. Her heart races in her chest – what did she do wrong? Moments later, the orderly returns and hisses, 'You can't ever put this patient in the shower.'

'I ... I was told to bathe her,' Rachel stammers. 'I don't usually wash the residents, they were short-staffed this morning – nobody said—'

The orderly sighs. 'You need to sit her in the chair and just attend to her with a cloth. Okay?'

'Okay.' Rachel swallows.

The orderly nods then storms out. Rachel takes a breath in, blinking back tears, and returns to coax Hannah back into the bathroom.

She carefully washes Hannah's back with a soapy washcloth, watching how the woman's wrinkled, soft skin moves with the pressure of the fabric, how her white hair, the consistency of fairy floss, almost melts into her neck as Rachel moves it away from the soap. Rachel rarely feels awkward when she helps the resident patients like this; they deserve compassion, care, respect. These are things Rachel can give them, and she often likes chatting with them about their lives as she does. But as she glances again at Hannah's tattoo, she finds she's too shaken to talk, let alone try asking more questions.

~

Rachel eyes the rows of cleaning supplies on the storeroom shelves, bottles lined up like soldiers awaiting inspection. An army waiting to attack and wipe out every germ in its path. She's preparing to wash bedpans. Not the greatest duty in her day-to-day responsibilities, but not the worst, either – though she knows her nursing friends, Kate and Susan, would disagree. She hefts a large container of bleach from the shelf and adds a glug to the sink she's filled with hot water, then gets to scrubbing the stack of bedpans she's wheeled over on a trolley. She doesn't mind cleaning them, really; it's meditative, and the storeroom is quiet and secluded. On days like today, she especially doesn't mind it. She's still shaken by the incident with Hannah. She berates herself; she should have asked about any special requirements. She should have done her due diligence.

After she finishes the last of the bedpans, she stacks them on a clean trolley and washes her hands, wincing at how dry they are. Her grandmother, Felka, tells her that if she doesn't take care of them, her hands will look like an octogenarian's by the time she hits thirty. Rachel smooths them with rich lotion from a small tube of hand cream she carries in her uniform pocket. Vanity. *You got that from me*, Felka said once, with more than a touch of pride and not a hint of judgement. Proud, loud and happy to be so. Rachel is nothing like her grandmother.

The storeroom door opens, and Rachel glances up. It's Thomas, one of the junior doctors. Rachel puts the hand cream away quickly.

'Hello, Rachel,' he says.

'Hello, doctor.'

He heads to the shelves, putting a row between himself and Rachel. 'You can call me Thomas when we're alone.'

If it were anyone else, Rachel might think this friendly and conversational, perhaps even flirtatious. She knows otherwise. Thomas, with his perfectly coiffed blond hair and irritatingly clipped private-school accent, has no interest in being friendly. As he lingers by one of

the shelves, she wishes he would hurry up and leave. There simply isn't room here for Rachel, Thomas and Thomas's larger-than-life ego.

'Do you need something?' she says reluctantly, approaching the aisle he's in.

'Just these,' he replies, taking something off the shelf: an entire packet of latex gloves.

'Thomas, we bring them around if you need them.'

He edges back down the aisle to Rachel. 'Well, I need more than just a couple of pairs for once.'

'You don't need a whole box.'

'Don't be such a Jew.' He grins. 'Throwing piss bombs at the interns is a tradition.'

No, you're just trying pathetically hard to make it one, she'd love to say. Instead, she repeats herself. 'You don't need a whole box.'

Her contempt must come through, because he comes close to her then, towering over her. Rachel's short, but even then, he's tall – and he knows it, owns it.

'You're just a nurse,' he sneers. 'If you were studying medicine, you would understand. But that's never going to happen. So why don't you get back to scrubbing the bedpans, sweetheart?'

Rachel has so many responses jostling for space in her mind: that with her grades she could have studied medicine but *chose* to nurse. That nursing is a challenging and rewarding job deserving of respect. That he has no right to speak down to her. But rather than say any of this, she looks away, and he walks out.

~

Rachel is relieved later when Kate pulls her mid-walk from the hospital hallway into one of the hospital's ancient washrooms for a break.

Susan's already inside, sitting on one of the benches. She watches as Kate compares her forearm to Rachel's to see who fared better over the weekend with tanning at Bondi Beach.

'You win again,' Kate says enviously to Rachel; her creamy arm contrasts starkly against Rachel's tanned one.

Susan snorts. 'That's a competition I won't be entering unless we're vying for who can burn and blister the fastest.'

As Susan and Kate swap tales of the day's painful patients, Rachel considers bringing up what happened with Hannah, and then with Thomas, but remains quiet. Next to towering Kate, with her bright dyed-auburn hair, and Susan, with her mass of bouncy curls, she feels inconsequential. When they're together, Rachel's voice is the quietest. Always.

She watches as Susan eases her way to the end of the room and attempts to crack a window open. The old wooden frame relents after a moment, unsticking and coming away, leaving a residue of chipping, bubbled paint on the ledge. Pleased, Susan lights a joint. Rachel hastily locks the door.

'Stop being such a scaredy-cat.' Susan grins.

Kate's peeling off her sensible stockings and swapping them for flimsy, alluring nylons. She pauses to say to Rachel, 'You're such a goody-two-shoes!'

'Blame a decade of Catholic school,' Rachel says, a little grumpily.

The bewildering, restrictive uniform; the strict, oblivious priests; the suspicious, sadistic nuns; the impenetrable verses. That school was more than enough to put her off getting in trouble; the last thing she wanted was another reason for her father to hate her.

Relenting, Susan comes over and gives her a squeeze. 'Oh, we love you anyhow.'

Kate pulls off her uniform. Her figure is slender, athletic, and Rachel looks away, fiddling with her crisply starched white apron. Susan catches

her gaze, offering the joint. When Rachel shakes her head, Susan reaches out and jams it between her lips.

‘Live a little,’ Susan scolds. Rachel forces her mouth closed, raising her brows at Susan. She has no desire to reek of weed at work.

Susan sighs – ‘Fine, fine!’ – and plucks the joint from Rachel’s mouth before returning to the window and taking a deep suck.

‘Can one of you cover me for an hour?’ Kate says after a moment. Rachel glances back at her; she’s wearing a plaid mini skirt and a short-sleeved cashmere jumper with a plunging neckline. Slipping into black patent leather flats, she adds, ‘I’m getting lunch with Owen.’

Lungs full, eyeballs popping, Susan shakes her head as she expels the smoky air in a bark of a laugh. ‘Looks like he’ll get dessert too,’ she manages in between coughing her lungs out. Rachel grins, despite herself.

Kate rolls her eyes as she pulls an anti-war badge from her pocket and waves it at Rachel and Susan. ‘You two coming tomorrow? Owen’s making signs for Save Our Sons.’

‘Sure,’ Susan says, moving from the window to offer the joint to Kate. She takes it, passing both of them a badge.

Rachel turns it in the light. Cheap plastic wraps around the bold, colourful text – *NO JAIL FOR ANTI-NAZIS*. It’s difficult to miss, and she’s not sure that she could pull off wearing it. Kate, though, could make it look stylish.

‘Owen’s cousin ran away,’ says Kate, gesturing with the joint. ‘A deserter. I would have too. Why do we need to fight everyone else’s bloody wars? What business do our lads have, risking their lives in Vietnam?’

Rachel puts the badge in her pocket and watches as Kate takes a drag. It smells earthy, and even as it makes her nose wrinkle, she finds herself taking a deep breath. Kate makes it look glamorous, somehow. Brash, alluring. She’s taken her lush hair from the snug-fitting nurse’s cap they all have to wear, and it falls just-so on her pale shoulders.

‘Got a spare one of those, Suse?’ Rachel asks before she can stop herself. Kate coughs.

Susan raises her brows. ‘We’ll corrupt you yet!’

Rachel smirks. ‘Oh no, you won’t. I pledged allegiance to Vinnies. Remember ...’ She becomes very serious as she repeats the mission statement drummed into them on entry into nursing school. ‘We bring God’s love to those in need through the healing ministry of Jesus. Compassion, justice, integrity and excellence!’

Susan prompts her, ‘Integrity being ... come on, Rachel ...’

Kate puts on a saintly expression as she jumps in: ‘Ensuring our actions and decisions are grounded in our values, reflecting both honesty and authenticity.’

‘Amen!’ they all chant and cross their chests, then Kate shouts to the sky, ‘Forgive us, heavenly Father.’

They crack up in unison. Rachel quickly pockets the fresh joint Susan passes her along with Kate’s badge. She unlocks the door. ‘Thanks, Suse. And I’ll cover you, Kate – but I’m off. *Some* of us have to work.’

‘Glad it’s not me.’ Kate grins, and Susan is laughing as Rachel closes the door behind her. Rachel has her own appointment to get to.

As Rachel walks down one of the long hospital hallways, she passes by one of the open common areas where patients can move about freely. Today they’re gathered around a small television with a chipped wooden frame. Some of the patients are in light hospital gowns, attached to drips they wheel around on rickety metal stands; others are in their own night-clothes, covered up by floral or plaid dressing-gowns. They all gaze at the television with the same rapt attention as it blares with an ABC newsreader talking about the Tet Offensive and the student demonstrations against the Vietnam War in Melbourne.

Rachel isn’t listening, though. As she walks past the nurse’s station and smiles at the ladies behind the desk, busily inspecting files and

discussing medication to be dispensed, she passes a window – and sees horrified young interns cowering in a courtyard as piss-filled gloves are pelted from the floors above.

~

Rachel enjoys her and Dr Yanni Poulos's covert meetings, but today she really needs it, needs that sense of someone steadying her, wrapping around her. They meet in a hidden-away laundry room. The door is securely bolted shut, just in case anyone hears the noise of sex – rough, passionate – against the shelves.

Yanni finishes and falls away. He always does it so elegantly; it never feels seedy or cheap to Rachel. After a breath, he pulls up his trousers and Rachel dismounts the towel-filled washing cart. While he uses a clean handtowel to wipe himself, she pulls up her stockings and pats her hair back into place. She sneaks a glance at him, at his handsome, chiselled jawline, his smooth, dark, freshly shaven skin. She can smell his cologne and sweat on her, and it makes her chest ache with joy.

Yanni tosses the towel into the washing cart, and then grins at her. She grins back, and loops his stethoscope around his neck.

'Back to rounds,' she says affectionately.

'Right,' he says, adjusting his coat, and nods. 'Rounds.'

He watches her, eyes crinkling as she smooths his white shirt, then kisses her once more.

'See you at Maria's house tonight, then?' she asks.

He nods, already turning away to return to work. She wanted to ask him about Hannah, maybe even seek reassurance about Thomas, but she decides to bask in the afterglow; as she tidies the mess they've made, she's smiling to herself, heart full to bursting.

~

Felka Margol is enjoying a perfect morning cup of tea. Her tabletop is laid out just as she likes it: a lace doily to both decorate and shield the red-and-white Laminex surface from her favourite floral teapot, which is sitting there as it does every morning, as it has done for decades. She's already cleared away any remnants of her ritual breakfast, consisting of toast lavishly smeared with butter and cherry jam. Not a crumb in sight.

A pile of newly delivered mail also sits before her. She regards it as she lifts her teacup – pretty bone china, floral, matching the teapot. She sips carefully, but still leaves a smudge of her lipstick on the rim. Dark burgundy, it matches the various splashes of red throughout her home, from her perfectly manicured ruby nails to her crimson velvet bathrobe. Even Felka's mess, what little there is, is coordinated.

She sets the tea down, feeling quite relaxed, and begins sorting through the letters. The first envelope is a bill, which she sets aside; the second is a clothing catalogue, which she decides she will peruse during a bath that evening.

But the third envelope makes her pause. A telegram. Telegrams always mean news. Her heart thrums in her chest as she tears open the seal.

The sender's address is enough to make her diaphragm clench.

Joshua Nishri, Attaché to the Consul-General, Embassy of Israel, 3 Nibancho, Chiyoda City, Tokyo, Japan.

Felka stops. She glances at the black porcelain vase she keeps on the deco cabinet, shot through with gold.

She turns back to the telegram and reads the contents. She puts it down. She sits at the kitchen table, motionless, staring into yesterday. Lost in the past, she's a young woman again, strolling with another, laughing, along a street dotted with rickshaws and Japanese street signs.

By the time she remembers to breathe, she has to gasp for air. She begins coughing. Reaching out blindly for her tea, she knocks the cup over. It cracks, brown liquid spilling out and soaking the mail. The telegram's words blur. Stained, it looks antique.

Felka catches her breath, and is confronted with the mess before her. She sets the cup upright with shaking hands, cutting herself on the crack. The blood drips onto the telegram, mingling with the water. She cries out in frustration, sadness and fear, letting her guard down only because nobody is there to witness her doing so. She frantically mops at the telegram with a red napkin.

It's unacceptable: the broken teacup, the stained mail, the blood, the tears. Among everything in her home, so wonderfully ordered and pristine, she feels grotesque and out of place. And so, she spends an hour wiping down the table, detailing every groove and screw, until the shaking subsides.

~

The key clicks loudly and the front door to Rachel's house creaks open to a dark void. No matter how many times she has performed this lonely, silent ritual, it never becomes any easier. As she enters the empty house, her grandmother's voice echoes in her mind, as it always does. *Check every room. Under the beds, behind the curtains and doors. You never know where someone may be hiding. Promise me, darling.* Felka has always been paranoid.

She removes her shoes and treads softly from the entry hallway into the nearest room – her father's. Michael won't be home for hours. As she kneels to peer under the double bed with the plain bottle-green bedcover, she hears a loud *clang*. Her heart races as she jerks up. A whine sounds. It's just the cat next door.

She lets go of her breath and edges past the dressing table, left as her mother arranged it twelve years before. On it are a few silver picture frames, now dulled. One contains a wedding photo: Rachel's beaming mother, Shirley, next to an uncharacteristically cheerful Michael. Another is of Rachel as a baby being suffocated in a cuddle from her grandmother. A perfume bottle is still in its place. A bone-inlaid hairbrush. A small glass saucer where Shirley used to place her jewellery.

She tries the other two bedrooms. Nobody behind the doors, or in the closets, or under the beds. In the bathroom, Rachel swiftly pulls the shower curtain across. Ever since watching *Psycho* a few years earlier, she sighs with relief every time she finds it empty. The rest of the house is easy. Everything is in plain view, and all clear.

She enters the neat kitchen and peers in the fridge. As usual, there's a pre-cooked meal of meatloaf and limp vegetables with a note from Felka, but Yanni has warned her there will be a mountain of food at the engagement party. She decides instead on a banana.

It's 5.30pm and she's not due at the party until 7pm, so she wanders back to her bedroom. Opening the door is like detonating an explosion of colour in the dark, dim house. The room is large, but the bed and wardrobe have been crowded into a corner by a large desk sitting under the window and dozens of canvases featuring rich blues, reds, yellows and greens. A bookshelf beside the desk is full of sketchbooks, novels and art history titles, and the desk itself is littered with loose sketches, pencils and an old pickle jar filled with worn paintbrushes. The smells of linseed oil and turps mingle in the air.

Rachel picks her way between the stacks of canvases and sits at her desk. She retrieves one of the works from a pile beside her chair and sighs. Not her best. When she first sketched the scene she was excited to try something new – a view through Felka's window into the kitchen,

Felka leaning into the frame from the left as though demanding to be seen. But the perspective has come out all wrong, which often seems to happen when she's trying to translate a three-dimensional scene into the simplified, flattened style she prefers. The reds have turned out more muddied than pure, too. It can't be salvaged.

She will reuse it. She ruthlessly brushes white paint over the whole thing then grabs her hairdryer and waves it gently over the canvas until it's just dry, the old painting barely showing through. When it's ready, she selects the least shabby of her well-used brushes from the old pickle jar and squeezes the remnants from a near-empty paint tube onto her palette. She curses when it is barely enough. She is in dire need of new equipment, but art supplies are so expensive, and she's trying to save as much as possible of her nursing wage. Michael could help, but he has never seen the point of spending so much money on a hobby. Instead, he fills her wardrobe with expensive clothes she never asks for: his attempt to express affection, she supposes.

She tries to recall the scene from the morning, of Hannah bathed in sunlight. The initial sketch comes easily: Hannah's limbs drawn round and loose as she leans in her chair, face to the sun, the figure evoking the work of Matisse, Rachel's idol. She begins to fill in the base colours: large, flat patches of blue for the hospital gown against a yellow wall. When she finally pauses to check the time, relaxed and a little weary, it's past seven. *Oh God*. She jumps from her chair and races out to call for a taxi, then quickly gets dressed.

As the taxi driver beeps his horn outside, she dashes back to her desk and collects a wrapped vase and a small hand-painted card – a bunch of bright cherry blossoms in a vase. Perfect.

Just before she leaves, she pauses one more time to look at the half-finished portrait of Hannah. It's good, she thinks. She'll finish it on the weekend.