

chapter 1



Autumn wind howled around the corner of our house and seeped through the cracks of the window frame. On the nightstand, the flame of the kerosene lamp flickered in response. From the street out front I heard the ice wagon go past, the clopping rhythm of a horse's hooves against the pavement, and the lonely whistle of a steam ship as it labored up the Danube. I paid them no attention and instead sat in the corner on a straight-backed chair, my eyes glued on Grandma as she lay in bed, struggling to breathe. Four years after the Great War, with all the changes it brought to our lives, and still no doctor in Linz could save her. I was only twelve years old but even now, when I close my eyes and think of it, I can feel the hard slats of the chair pressed against my thighs, the tingle in my legs as my feet dangled just above the floor, and I can hear the gurgling rattle that came from Grandma's chest with every breath.

Papa was huddled over Grandma, his ear close to her lips, his eyes focused on nothing as he once again strained to hear what she was saying. She'd been trying to speak all morning and each time her lips moved, Papa rose from his seat at her bedside and did his best to understand what she was saying. I felt sorry for him, hovering near her, his eyes squinted almost closed and his forehead wrinkled in a look of frustration, but he

the Locket

seemed to take comfort from his role as her interpreter. I suppose it took his mind off the inevitability of her demise.

Across the room my brother, David, leaned against the doorframe. Older and wiser, he seemed to take it all in stride. As if he'd seen it before and knew what to expect. But I knew the truth. I'd heard him two nights before when Grandma took a turn for the worse and Mama told us there was nothing anyone could do for her now. After she told us that, and we were all in bed and the house was dark and quiet, David cried himself to sleep.

Grandma was dressed in her favorite white gown made of plain cotton fabric with lace at the collar. Her hair was neatly combed in place and around her neck was a thin gold chain with a round locket resting on her chest just below the neckline of the gown. She wore the necklace every day but she never opened the locket. Once, when I asked her what was inside, I saw her eyes tear up and she had a faraway look, like she could see a day in the past as well as I can see this one now. For a moment I thought she was going to tell me about it, but then she cleared her throat and just smiled at me. I knew that what she remembered must have been more than I could ever imagine. I loved that locket. Not as much as I loved Grandma, but I loved it just the same.

My grandmother was born Hanna Assido and grew up in Hollabrunn, a town north of Vienna, in one of Austria's richest farming regions. The year she turned fourteen, she met Yoel Batsheva, the son of a local farmer and the man who would one day become my grandfather. Their courtship was something of a scandal—hers was a family of lawyers and merchants with a long history in the region; his ancestors had been wanderers, Ashkenazi Jews roaming over Eastern Europe in search of a place to call their own. She was fluent in at least four languages—Hebrew, German, French, and Spanish, along with the Yiddish phrases that would pepper her conversation throughout her life. He knew only Hebrew and the guttural German necessary to survive in a working-class

environment. When Hanna was seventeen, she and Yoel married. From that day until the day he died, Yoel divided his time between the family farm and Temple Beth El, where he served as rabbi. They had three children. Moshe, my father, was the oldest.

From my place on the chair I watched and waited with a sense of sadness, knowing that this would be the end, yet confident that when the moment came, death would safely pass me by. Then Grandma drew a labored breath and tilted her head in my direction. Her eyes, clear and sharp, focused on me. A sinking feeling pressed against my chest and the sense of confidence and security I'd felt just moments before suddenly vanished.

Grandma's lips moved and Papa turned toward me. "Sarah, she wants to tell you something." Reluctantly, I slid from the chair, moved to the bed, and leaned over Grandma.

"Put your ear close to her lips," Papa directed. I did as he said and placed my left ear between her nose and chin. In the faintest whisper, she said, "The locket belongs to you."

A smile spread across my face. I tried to hold it in for fear Papa would be upset, but I couldn't and I'm sure Grandma didn't mind. I saw the corners of her mouth turn up ever so slightly. I looked up at Papa. "She said—"

Before I could finish, Grandma drew another heavy breath. Her chest heaved twice, then all the muscles in her body relaxed and she lay still. Papa leaned past me, nudging me aside, and once more leaned over her body. He listened for a moment with his ear near her nose, then he reached behind her head, removed the necklace and dropped it into the palm of his hand. "She is gone," he whispered. He looked over at Mama. "She is gone."

"Yes," Mama nodded. "She is gone."

Papa turned to me. "What did she say to you?"

"She said, 'The locket is yours.'"

the Locket

“I thought so,” he nodded.

David pushed away from the doorframe and stood up straight. “We must make arrangements.”

Mama shot him a cold, hard glare. “The breath is barely from her body and already you are talking about arrangements?”

Papa gestured for quiet. “It is okay, Orna. David is right. We must think of the arrangements.”

“What?” Mama gestured to the body lying on the bed. “Why do you talk like this in front of her?”

Papa did not reply but instead turned toward the door. “I will go see Rabbi Gavriel. He will know what to do.”

“It is still the Sabbath,” Mama protested.

“Death does not work by the calendar.”

“You should see Alois,” she offered once more. “He can help with these things.”

“Orna, I have told you many times. Alois is a lawyer. We do not need the courts to help us. This is a matter for the rabbi.”

Papa crossed the room to the dresser, put the locket and necklace in Grandma’s jewelry box, and started toward the door. David followed him, and I listened to the sound of their footsteps as they walked through the house. Then I heard the front door bang closed.

When they were gone, I looked over at Mama. “Why is Papa so worried?”

“The authorities,” she sighed.

“What about them?”

“We must bury your grandmother within twenty-four hours.”

“So, we bury her,” I shrugged. “The Sabbath will be over tomorrow.”

“Already you are twelve, but you do not understand?” Mama shook her head. “Tomorrow is Sunday. They do not like to have Jewish funerals on Sunday.”

“Who doesn’t like it?”

“The priests and the bishops.”

“The Christians?”

“Yes. The Christians. That is what I have been trying to tell you. The Christians do not like for us to have funerals on Sunday.”

“But we are not Christian.”

“But the chancellor is and so are all the important government officials. They do whatever the church tells them to do.”

“Then why doesn’t Papa want to see Uncle Alois? He could help with the authorities.”

“Your father does not want to involve the authorities.”

“But Uncle Alois has many friends. They can help. That’s what he does.”

“How do you know such things?”

“I have seen them when they come to his house.”

“Uncle Alois has many friends, but your father wants to handle this himself. Come.” Mama gestured with a nod toward Grandma’s body. “We must cover her now.”

“We can do that?”

“You see any men around her to do it?”

Mama turned toward the doorway to leave the room and I started after her, but she stopped and turned to me. “No, no, no,” she shook her head. “You must stay.” I didn’t want to sit alone in the room with a dead body, even if it *was* Grandma’s, but Mama wouldn’t let me. “We cannot leave her alone,” she said sharply. “I have a clean sheet in the closet. I will be just a minute. Then we will cover her and light some candles.” She shooed me back toward the bedroom. “You stay with the body.”

With halting steps, I backed my way into the room and took a seat on the chair in the corner. Mama was in the closet upstairs—I could hear her footsteps above me. I sat on the chair and stared again at Grandma, this time not watching her breathe but how still and motionless she’d become. As I watched her, my mind wandered to what Mama had said

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about Uncle Alois and I knew that if I were an adult and needed help, he would be the first person I contacted. Grandma never seemed to like him, but of all the people on Mama's side of the family, he was my favorite.

Just then, Mama returned to the room. "See? That didn't take long."

I came from the chair and moved near the bed, still thinking of Uncle Alois. "Mama," I began, "why didn't Grandma like Uncle Alois?"

"Who told you such a thing?"

"I could tell by the way she acted."

"It is nothing."

"It must be something."

"Where did you learn to talk to me like that?"

"Does Papa like Alois?"

"Yes," she replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "Alois is my brother. Your father is my husband. Of course he likes Alois."

"Then why didn't he want Alois to help just now?"

"Never mind all that." She spoke to me in the dismissive tone she used when I'd asked one too many questions.

"I like Uncle Alois," I offered, trying to turn the conversation in a new direction.

"I like him, too," she agreed quickly. "Now, hush. We have things to do besides talking about our relatives."