

Skeletons at the Feast

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Excerpted from the Prologue

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THE GIRL—A YOUNG WOMAN, REALLY, EIGHTEEN, HAIR the color of corn silk—had been hearing the murmur of artillery fire for two days now. Everyone had. A rare and peculiar winter thunderstorm in the far distance. Little more. The sconces in the living room hadn't twitched, the chandelier in the ballroom (a modest ballroom, but a ballroom nonetheless) barely had trembled. The horses, while she was harnessing them and helping to load the wagons—short trips with bags full of oats (because, after all, so much would depend on the horses) and longer ones with some of the clothes and the silver and the jewelry they were going to take with them—had looked up. But the animals hadn't expressed particular interest. If, Anna surmised, they had thought of anything they had thought of the cold: It was one of those frigid weeks when the days would alternate between whiteout-like snowstorms and periods so still that the smoke from the chimneys would rise up into a slate gray sky in lines that were perfectly straight.

These shells, however, the ones that were falling this afternoon, were great concussive blasts that had the people and the horses—a seemingly endless caravan of strangers that clogged the road and crushed the snow and ice along the sides, and had come almost to a complete stall now before the river—fretting and fidgeting in place. At each explosion the animals whinnied and the babies, hungry and chilled despite the blankets and furs in which they were swaddled, cried out. If they managed to free one of their little hands, the blue fist would lash out, a small, spring-loaded paddle. Clearly, however, the artillery had leapfrogged over them. Passed them. Hours earlier it had been many kilometers to the east. Now it was ahead of them to the west. Some of the shells were falling so nearby that they heard the screech—a strange foreign animal, something that might exist in a tree in Africa or South America, the girl thought—before the reverberant burst left them crouching, anxious, in their places in line. At first she presumed the Russians were trying to hit them, this long line of families trying desperately to flee to the west, to take out the carts and the wagons and the walkers piecemeal, but then she understood their real intent: It was the river itself. They were trying to smash the buttress-thick ice that coated this stretch of the Vistula from shore to shore like a skating rink and was serving as a bridge, because the nearest stone and cement overpass was twenty-five kilometers to the north. Along the shore she saw soldiers and Volkssturm teenagers—boys who were easily two and three years younger than her twin brother and her—funneling the refugees across what they believed was the safest part of the ice, but she had the sense that any moment now people were going to start leaving the queue and fanning out into the woods, where they would cross the river wherever they could.

Or, at least, believed that they could. The girl had heard stories of wagons and families disappearing yesterday and the day before through the ice to the north and the south. She wasn't sure if they were true, but so much of the last month had been a study in how things she had once thought were inconceivable were actually happening. They'd all heard what had occurred three months earlier in Nemmersdorf. The Russians had captured the East Prussian village in October and held it for five days. When their own soldiers recaptured the small town, almost all of the civilians were dead. She had heard tales of girls her age (and younger) nailed naked to the sides of barns and farm carts, their arms spread wide as if they were being crucified but their legs splayed open so that even in death the men could violate them. There were the stories of small children flattened into the main roads of the village by the treads of tanks. Of live babies held by their ankles and swung like scythes into stone walls while their mothers were forced to watch, their children's own blood and brains splattered like so much butcher's waste onto their overcoats. Of the French prisoners of war—some people claimed as many as forty of them—who had been executed by the Russians for reasons that no one could fathom.

And then there were the stories of what her own people had done. BBC propaganda, maybe. But probably not. She knew people who knew people. Her older brother, whom she hadn't seen now since October, told her of an SS officer he had met who—supposedly—had served inside Treblinka in 1943. When her twin, Helmut, was on a hike with his Jungvolk friends last summer, the last they would take before the drills grew serious, he told her there were rumors (implausible and offensive, in his opinion) that some of the less committed boys would share when they thought no one was listening. Rumors of what really went on in some of the camps. And, of course, there was what their English POWs had claimed was occurring, stories that Helmut would dispute as half-truths and cant spread by the Allies to further demonize the Germans. It got to the point where he threatened to tell his father on them if they uttered so much as one more syllable.

She tensed when she heard the high-pitched whistle of another shell, and saw her mother once again pull little Theo, the youngest of her children, against her. Then there was the blast. Ahead of her there was shouting, screaming. She couldn't tell whether the explosive had landed on the road or the river, whether people were wounded or merely panicked. More panicked, actually. Because certainly numbness had not completely subsumed the animal panic that coursed just below the skin and behind the bloodshot eyes of this long and plodding throng of parents and children and very old people. Only as Anna watched the nearest soldiers and Volkssturm recruits trying to prevent the line from spreading north and south into the woods—here is that panic, she thought, we are like desperate beetles scurrying from a giant's boots—did she understand. The bomb had created a great spider's web of cracks in the ice.

For a moment her father and Helmut conferred, the two of them murmuring softly into each other's ears. Their army uniforms were still crisp. Then each of them walked to the front of a wagon—they were traveling with two—and her brother ordered her to come help him with the horses. After all, he muttered, they were more her horses than his. She thought he was being needlessly bossy, but she also knew that she didn't dare question him now. It seemed that their family, too, was going to leave the caravan and trek into the woods, and he was going to run ahead and find a spot along the river that looked suitable for a crossing. Beside her, beneath the blanket in the wagon filled with oats, their sole remaining POW cleared his throat.



THE PRISONER, a twenty-year-old Scotsman named Callum Finella—a name that initially had made both Anna and her younger brother giggle, but struck her now as infinitely more lyric than the suddenly wolfish-sounding names of most of the males in her family—had been with them since September. He was one of seven British POWs who had been sent to the Emmerich family estate from the prison camp just outside of Thorn to help with the harvest. When the other six men—older by four and five and six years than Callum, but still he had called them his mates—had been returned to the stalag in mid-October, the family had used their party clout and simply kept Finella since their Polish servants had fled or been put to work in the coal mines in Silesia, the oldest of their three boys was fighting somewhere far to the south on the outskirts of Budapest, the middle one had been pressed into service in the Volkssturm, and Theo, at ten, was barely beyond short pants.

Now Anna removed her glove and snaked her hand between two of the burlap sacks, searching for Callum's fingers. She found one of his thumbs and the fleshy pad of his palm just beside it and thought, much to her surprise, of his penis. The sudden way it would grow in her hand, a dangerous but irresistible animal wholly independent of him. Then he whispered her name. At least it sounded to Anna like a whisper. But, perhaps, it was actually more like a stage whisper. Beckoned by her hand, his head emerged from beneath the bags of feed like a chick from a shell, his sunset red hair only partly smothered by one of Helmut's knit caps. From atop the driver's box her mother glared at them both. Anna didn't believe that her mother could possibly think that anyone other than their own family could either hear or see the young soldier—not with the clamor all around them from this distraught and pathetic parade of refugees; rather, she guessed, Mutti simply didn't want to be reminded of the reality that they had the (his term for himself, not theirs) *lad* with them. When the war had been far to

the east and the west in the autumn, Callum had been a harmless, albeit brawny and tall, exotic animal: He knew how to play the accordion that her father's brother, Uncle Felix, had left behind when he'd been transferred—to everyone's relief to the western front. And he hadn't even fired a shot before he'd been captured. He and Helmut were never going to be friends, but Anna was confident that her mother appreciated the time the Scot spent entertaining her and her little brother (though, of course, Mutti hadn't an inkling of either the details or the depth of the way he had entertained her one and only daughter). Quickly Callum retreated back beneath the grain and Anna withdrew her hand, moving forward to help her father steer the horses into the copse of pine to their right. As she was grasping the reins, she heard once more the shriek of a Russian shell. She looked deep into the creature's eyes, hoping to keep the animal calm when it exploded.



THIS TIME THE shell landed beside them. One moment she was gazing into the face of a velvety bay stallion she had named after a castle—Balga, a fortress that was nearly seven hundred years old—and the next she was on the ground, awash in snow and pine boughs and small frozen clods of dirt. She looked up and saw Helmut was talking to her, saying something—perhaps even yelling—but she couldn't hear a thing. It was as if he were mouthing the words. He was standing over her, then squatting beside her, staring at her with those hazel eyes and girlishly long eyelashes that sometimes she couldn't believe he had gotten instead of her. Her father and Callum were kneeling, too. They were sitting her up, each holding an arm and appraising her, dusting the debris off her cape. Slowly her hearing returned, and the first sound she was aware of was the wailing of women not more than fifteen or twenty meters behind them, their cries for help. Someone swearing at the Soviets. Apparently, a shell had exploded just behind them, too.

She opened her mouth to tell Helmut and Callum and her father that she was fine, she wasn't hurt—at least she didn't believe that she was—but suddenly the simple act of speaking seemed like too much work. Something was pinching her stomach, and she realized it was the earrings and the necklace she had bandaged against her flesh when she had been unable to fit another piece of jewelry into the secret pouch she had sewn into her skirt. She saw there was a trail of blood now on one of the sleeves and shoulders of her father's usually immaculate uniform coat—the stain was shaped, she thought, like monkshood—and she reached out her arm to him. He seemed to notice the wet blotch for the first time and remarked casually, "It's not mine." His head jerked reflexively toward the line behind them and so she turned. Men were pushing an overturned cart into the snowbank beside the road, trying either to move it out of the way or to reach whoever was underneath it, or both.

Finally she uttered a word, a two-syllable question: "Mutti?"

"Mother is fine. Theo is fine. We're all fine," Helmut told her.

"Callum? Are you—"

"I said we're all fine," Helmut hissed. Then to the Scotsman he ordered, "You. Back beneath the feed."

She glanced at the wagon that had been upended by the explosion and understood now why someone was howling: There in the snow were a man's unattached legs, the limbs still in their wool trousers, and a steaming, Medusa-like nest of tendon and muscle emerging from the pants where there should have been an abdomen or a waist.

Her father chastened her brother for being short with her and for snarling at Callum. She looked around now for Mutti and Theo and saw that her mother had pulled Theo ever deeper against her chest, shielding his face from the debacle just behind them. Then, with the awkward jerks of a marionette—Mutti was shaking, this woman who in 1939 had single-handedly buried the Luftwaffe pilot whose plane had been shot down by the Poles and would crash in their hunting park, was actually trembling—she turned her eyes to the sky. There was another plane. A Russian plane now, because that was about all

that filled the skies these days. It was approaching from the south, perhaps paralleling the path the Vistula had carved through this section of the country. Some of the trekkers stood frozen in their spots in the queue, but others scurried, despite the knee-deep snow, like frightened mice into the comparative safety of the forest. But the plane, for whatever the reason, didn't bother to strafe them. Neither did it drop a single bomb on the ice. It simply continued on its course toward the north.

An elegant old woman beside a sled with four large suitcases balanced upon it pulled her hands from a fur muff and shook her fist at the sky. She said something dismissive about Göring. Wanted to know where the German planes were.

Slowly Anna climbed to her feet and smiled for her mother and young Theo.

"I'm okay, Mutti," she said. "Really. Just a little shaken."

And then, no longer hushed by the burlap bags of oats beneath which he had been hiding for hours, came the voice that spoke a German that was lighthearted, enthusiastic, and still, on occasion, inept. "It takes more than a little bomb to slow Anna Emmerich," Callum said. Despite the characteristic irreverence in his tone, however, his smile was forced and his eyes were wide ovals of dread.



WHERE TWO YEARS before there had been a yellow Star of David, there was now a small Nuremberg eagle made of bronze. The star, by law, had been sewn onto his overcoat with the stitches so tight that a pencil point couldn't be pressed between them. The police or some Brownshirt bully would check. This eagle, dangling from his uniform beside an Iron Cross, was merely attached with a pin. He stood now on the east bank of the Vistula with his hand on the grip of his pistol, though the gun was still holstered and the safety was on, wondering if it all wouldn't be easier if he were just decapitated by a fragment from one of the Soviet shells that clearly were inching closer. Just get it over with. Unfortunately, by even the most liberal definition this wasn't a bombardment: He had endured Red Army bombardments, and this was nothing like them. But these civilian Prussians in the lines before him now? These once proud Aryans and anti-Semites who had literally leapt for joy when Hitler's tanks had rolled into Poland in 1939 and made them Germans once more? They seemed to think it was the end of the world. Oh, please. It was as if they had never seen a limb—a leg, an arm, a fist—fly through the air like a falcon.

The irony of the exodus approaching the river wasn't lost on him. On his own, he had read, he had studied. The difference between this flight and the others? These souls were fleeing a retribution they had asked for. They had brought these shells down upon themselves.

Now, of course, he was on this nightmarish sinking ship with them, though if he had to wager he would bet he would figure a way off. Find yet one more lifeboat. He was, apparently, unkillable. But how much would it really help him to become a Jew again now? It wasn't as if the Russians had such great love for his people either. The Lithuanians were stringing the Jews up back in '41 while the Nazis were still en route; the Ukrainians and the Latvians had been all too happy to handle the heavy lifting when it came to machine-gunning the Jews in the early days. They had practically volunteered for the opportunity!

No, he should have started to work his way west months ago, as soon as it was clear that the western Allies had no intention of being pushed back into the English Channel.

"Manfred?"

In the midst of the turmoil and the noise, for a moment Uri had forgotten that he had renamed himself Manfred. It was the most Teutonic alias he had been able to come up with when he'd realized what was expected of him as reservist Henrik Schreiner with Police Battalion 101, and so in the chaos of the

retreat from Luków he had commandeered this uniform from a Wehrmacht soldier who had been shot cleanly in the back of the head. Before that, since jumping off the train almost two years ago now, he had been Hartmut, Adler, Jurgen, and Franz. Sometimes he had found the dead soldier's name in the papers in the uniform pocket. Other times, there hadn't been any papers at all and he'd come up with a moniker such as Manfred (which, he'd realized in hindsight, was both Teutonic *and* the name of the doctrinaire Nazi pedant who'd lived in the town house beside his family back in Schweinfurt, before they had been forced to move).

He turned now to the one-armed captain beside him, a fellow roughly three or four years older than he was. Twenty-nine or thirty, Uri guessed. The officer had served in Poland and France and North Africa and Italy and Russia, a virtual travelogue of Nazi victories and defeats, with little more than the scratches and bruises that are inevitable with a life in the field. But no serious wounds. Then in October, while home on leave in Dortmund, his left arm was crushed when he was helping his grandmother down the stairs of her home during an air raid, and the house had sustained a direct hit. His grandmother had died pretty near instantly, he'd told Uri, but he'd thought his arm might have a chance. It hadn't. The good news to losing the wing? It meant that he had been relegated, for the moment anyway, to this sort of police action many kilometers behind the front.

Though, the captain had rued, those kilometers had collapsed exponentially since the Russians had begun this most recent offensive.

Uri wondered if years from now, if somehow they both survived, he and this captain might actually be friends. The fellow was unflappable, a trait Uri respected, and he seemed to see the misery that was marking the end of their world as more Chaplinesque than Wagnerian—which, most days, Uri did, too. But then he decided a postwar friendship was unlikely. Not because this Captain Hanke was anti-Semitic, though Uri supposed on some level he was. Rather, he had the sense that the two of them had been too lucky for too long, and it was absolutely inconceivable that they would both be alive when this steamroller was done lumbering over them. And if he, Uri, was indestructible, then the odds could not be especially good for this poor fellow beside him.

"The engineers are coming to destroy the ice now," the captain was saying. Then he motioned toward the teenage boys in their Jungvolk uniforms who were helping to keep order. "Send the children across the Vistula."

Uri nodded and approached the oldest of the group, one of the few who actually wasn't dwarfed by the rifle in his arms. "Son," he said, "take your squad to safety on the other side of the river. They're going to blow up the ice."

The boy saluted, and Uri had to restrain the reflexive urge to shake his head in bemusement.

"And then, sir?" the boy asked. He had almost periwinkle blue eyes and a movie star's aquiline nose. Perfect skin. Fifteen or sixteen years old now, Uri surmised. He could have modeled for those idiotic propaganda posters that so disturbed his mother and father when they were alive—he didn't know for a fact they were dead, but he had to presume that they were—and as early as the Olympics in '36 had made them scared for their son and their daughter.

"Wait for orders."

The boy seemed to want to say something more, and so Uri told him, "Go, go. The captain and I will handle the people here." *We'll probably be run over*, he thought, crushed in the last-ditch stampede that would occur the moment the engineers appeared with their satchels.

But still the boy stood there, his lips slightly parted. Little puffs of smoke with each exhalation.

"Yes?"

"My family, sir. They're in the line. Back there."

He nodded. He was fairly confident that he knew what the boy was driving at, but he wanted to be sure. "You want to join them?" he asked. A lesser boy, he knew, or most of the middle-aged Nazis he had dealt with lately, would have been hinting about some scheme to get his family across the Vistula before it became nothing more than a river of ice shavings and splinters. But not this one.

"May I, sir?"

"Yes. But do yourself—and them—a favor. Find another place to cross. Under no circumstances stop moving west."

Above them they heard the shriek of another approaching Soviet shell, and—as was frequently the case—it reminded Uri of the sound of a train whistle.



AND URI SINGER knew the sound of train whistles well. He had heard them often as a boy, when he and his parents and his little sister would travel from Schweinfurt to Dresden to visit his aunt and uncle, or to the Alps to go hiking. But it was only in March of 1943, when he was finally deported and spent nearly three days in a cattle car, that he began to appreciate (and loathe) the subtle differences in ululation. He'd been at work at the ball-bearing factory, wondering in a vague sort of way how he and his family would be degraded next, when the SA came for him. He was twenty-four years old, and his life could not have been more different from the one he had anticipated a decade earlier. At fourteen, even in the first months after Hitler had come to power, he had still assumed he would start and finish at the university, and he would be a journalist by now. Perhaps he might even be writing a book. He ended up getting to spend a single year at the college before it was closed to the Jews.

It was midmorning when the SA had arrived at the factory. The two thugs in their greatcoats told him he would meet his parents and his sister at the train station. He didn't. He never saw them again, though God knew he had tried to find his sister. Nor had he ever been back to Schweinfurt. He had heard that first the RAF and then the Americans had started pummeling the city four months after he was taken away, and most of the place now was rubble.

Except, of course, for the factory where he had worked. It was damaged, people said, but still operating. That, he guessed, was pretty typical. The apartments and town houses and butcher shops that had been laid waste were rarely rebuilt, but the Nazis would try to find the resources to repair the factories. And so the war effort went on. Even the killing in the concentration camps. And the evacuations from the concentration camps. The Russians, last he'd heard, were approaching Auschwitz. And while there were rumors that most of the prisoners were being walked to the west, he understood that some were being wedged back into the boxcars. Imagine: While the enemies of the (and he heard these two words mordantly in his mind) *Greater Reich* were at the Rhine and the Vistula, someone somehow was still finding the rolling stock to expend upon the plan to exterminate the Jews. Rather than move troops or tanks or boxcars full of *panzerfausts*, they were moving the Jews. Just so they could kill them in Germany instead of Poland.

Maybe, he concluded, it was because they didn't have any troops or tanks or *panzerfausts* left to move. They only had Jews.

He watched this frightened but enthusiastic boy run back to his family and considered for a moment if the teen would be naive enough to try to stop a Soviet tank with that rifle of his. Probably. He shook his head: They didn't have a *panzerfaust* to give him.

Uri wondered, as he did often, whether he would be alive now if he hadn't jumped from that train

nearly two years ago. Initially he'd presumed he would have died at Auschwitz, because even his youth and his strength would have bought him only so much time. But as he'd survived one normally fatal indignity after another in and out of the Wehrmacht, he'd begun to question this. It was as if he were being spared, his negligible soul cradled time after time by providence. For all he knew, if he'd stayed on that train going east two years ago, he'd be on another one right now going west.

No. Not likely. He'd have died. No one lived nearly two years at Auschwitz. It was why he'd hurled himself along with the slop bucket out the cattle car door that unusually balmy night when the opportunity had presented itself. He had, inevitably, just heard another of those stultifying train whistle blasts.

By 1943, the vast majority of the Schweinfurt Jews were gone, and Uri and his parents and their few remaining friends had a pretty good idea about what was going on at the concentration camps.

At least the ones in the east. In his opinion, anyone with eyes in Schweinfurt, Jew or Catholic or Lutheran, had to have figured it out. How could they not have had serious suspicions about the deportations? One afternoon he'd passed the train station and seen the Jews who were being transported that month. They had been rounded up from a different part of the city and so he hadn't known anyone who had been taken that particular day. He'd only wound up near the station because a friend from the factory lived in the neighborhood, and this buddy had an antenna he could attach to their pathetic Volksempfänger radio ("All Nazi, All the Time," his father would joke cryptically) that would allow them, when the weather was right, to receive the BBC. Still, he was wearing his star and so he didn't dare get too close: He could just imagine himself being accidentally herded onto the train by some Nazi moron, even though he clearly hadn't packed a suitcase and had brought none of his clothing or his valuables with him.

But even from the distance he saw something that caused him to stand perfectly still for a long moment, watching, as the cacophonous sounds of the city around him seemed to vanish. He could hear himself breathing, but nothing more. The Jews were being herded into the first three cars—far too many for each one, it was clear; dozens and dozens were going to be forced to stand—and their luggage was being loaded onto the fourth car. A freight car. And then, as Uri watched, that fourth car was uncoupled, and the first three pulled away. The luggage, he saw, wasn't going with them. Luggage, he realized, never went with them.

When his hearing returned he ran as fast as he could back to the ball-bearing factory. It would be three days before he would have the courage to venture once more to his friend's neighborhood for the special antenna.

Over the following months, more and more of the city's Jews were deported, including Uri's acquaintance who had helped him with the radio, and every evening he and his sister and his parents would crowd around the Volksempfänger in their cramped and dingy apartment—a single room in a shabby hotel that had been converted to Jewish housing—and wait for the four tones that signaled the start of a BBC broadcast. When the broadcast was in German, everyone listened; when it was in English, either Uri or his father would translate it, invariably missing some of the subtleties but usually understanding its gist.

Before the war, the family had lived in an elegant, three-bedroom town house with a yard that looked out upon the gazebo in the city's small park. Now? A dark room in a ramshackle hotel with a squalid bathroom at the end of the corridor that they shared with at least two dozen other evicted Jews crammed onto their floor. And they only had that because his father was a decorated veteran of the earlier world war, and now both he and his father were, more or less, slave labor in a factory the Nazis deemed critical to the war effort. Prior to that, his father had owned a not-insubstantial trucking company. Seven vehicles and twelve employees. The fascists had just drooled when they had forced him to sell it to them for next to nothing. No longer did anyone try to face this stoically or philosophically, to murmur how one didn't blame the ocean for tidal waves. Because, in fact, it wasn't

a random act of nature behind this nightmare; it was their neighbors.

Slowly his parents' health began to fail. Somehow his father soldiered on at the factory, but both of his parents were weakened by their steadily diminished rations and the cold and the daily struggle to make do in their squalor. Their Shabbat dinner at sunset on Friday night—already shrunken because of curfews and the reality that as Jews they had almost no food to eat—grew even more intimate, because Uri's aunt and his uncle and his cousins were taken away. And then his grandmother. And, soon, another aunt who never had married. When this last woman—a nurse until the fact she was Jewish had cost her her job, a woman who even as a teenager had been an angel of mercy to wounded soldiers in the previous world war—was deported to the east, his own mother took him and his sister aside and with completely uncharacteristic melodrama told them that they had to live through this nightmare. No matter what, they had to survive. Someone had to let the world know what was going on. What the Nazis were doing.

When they came for him at the factory, he actually asked if he had time to run home to pack a suitcase, even though he knew it would never go with him to the camp. His escort, those two heavyset men from the SA with eyebrows that reminded him of caterpillars and oddly similar wattles of flesh dangling under their chins, told him that his mother had packed one for him. Two, as a matter of fact. Uri had considered informing them that he only owned a single valise, but knew there wasn't a point. He tried to find his family at the station but they didn't seem to be there. Someone told him one train already had left for the east, and in all likelihood they were on it. Still, he searched for them in the mob, moving as best as he could among the throng and twice being struck in the back by different guards when inadvertently he had strayed too near to one of the exits.

Most of the time, the Nazis weren't even bothering with passenger cars by then, and so he was herded into an unheated cattle car that still had giant twinlike balls of straw in the corners and along one of the long walls. Though he recognized a half-dozen people in the car with him, it was mostly a surreal and kaleidoscopic pastiche of shapes and faces he might see on any given day on the street or in the park: surreal because the people were crowded—though not, as he would hear often occurred, packed so tightly that the victims could neither sit nor move, and some would actually asphyxiate—and were constantly fidgeting and shuffling as they struggled to get comfortable, and so one moment he would spy a pretty young woman named Rivka in a spot across the car, and in the next he would see standing there a very old woman named Sarah; kaleidoscopic because in the variegated light from the slats high on the walls, light that changed as the day wore on and the train chugged its way (dear God, no) east, their eyes and lips and kerchiefs seemed constantly to be changing color. They were, he guessed, the very last Jews left in Schweinfurt: the labor, the technical help—Jews with some rare expertise—and their elderly parents and children.

He asked virtually everyone in the car whether his parents or his sister might be somewhere on the train and he might be reunited with them at their destination, but no one could say. Everyone agreed that there had been plenty of couples roughly his parents' age and a great many girls who looked fourteen at the station—even some who, roughly, matched his description of Rebekah. Still, he hadn't seen any of them there and it didn't appear that anyone else had, either. At least not for sure. And Rebekah was a hard girl to miss. She was tall for her age, womanly, and—partly because they were practically being starved to death and partly because the Singers were naturally slender—thin. She had gorgeous, creosote black hair that reflected the sun like glass. If she were anywhere on this train, the men, at least, would have noticed.

It was evident to Uri after the first day that they were not going to be released from the cars until they arrived at the camp. Periodically the train stopped and a pair of soldiers would slide open the doors to see if anyone inside had died (no one did, at least that first day, not even any of the older people), and to allow one of the passengers to empty the buckets of excrement over the side. The soldiers certainly had no plans to do it. There wasn't room to lie down in the car, but Uri could sit if he curled his knees against his chest—though this, too, posed a certain hazard: It meant that his nose was close to the level of the arses and the pant legs of the people around him, and his own face and hair would

brush up against the pee that had sopped into their wool trousers and the crap that had turned their underwear into unsalvageable diapers. Some of the people who had been brought to the train directly from their homes had a little food with them, and some were kind enough to share their crusts of pumpnickel or rye. But that was gone within hours. From then on, everyone grew more hungry and thirsty and frightened. And the smell from the buckets and, yes, from the people around him—the oldest people around him, he realized, were unable to squat to use the containers; others were simply too modest—grew unbearable. It wasn't merely the stench of sweat and fear, the acrid smell of the urine, or the feces that filled the pails, the pants, and the corners of the cattle car. It was the vomit. Increasingly, the stink alone was making people sick, and that was creating a vicious, malodorous circle.

During the second day, when the threshold of his own gag reflex had become downright heroic and he had grown inured to the touch of someone else's shit-soddened fabric, he would encourage the old people and the children to lean against him. Or sit against him. Or use his shoulders as a pillow or his knees as a hassock. And they did. No one, not even the children, had the energy to sing, but he would tell anyone who was interested stories about . . . anything. He would make up anecdotes about the ball-bearing factory, he would recall whatever he could about his aunt's service on the western front a quarter of a century earlier. Or his father's. There was an older fellow in the car who, it would turn out, had served in the same stretch of trenches as Uri's father, though the two men had never met. Sometimes people listened to Uri and he thought it might have helped a little bit. But he also knew he was merely throwing a glass of water on a house fire.

By the third day, he and some of the others were sure they were going to Auschwitz. Much to Uri's astonishment, there were actually grown-ups in the car who hadn't heard of the place. Oh, they knew of the concentration camps and the deportations. But they honestly believed—had, almost inconceivably, managed to reassure themselves—that this was all about resettlement. Not extermination.

It was this, he decided later, the fact that there were Jews—Jews, for God's sake!—who didn't believe what was happening that finally propelled him with his bucket of shit through the opened cattle car doors. It wasn't the reality that a wonderful old man who had consoled his wife with the sighs and murmurs of an angel had expired beside him, it wasn't the death of one of the car's two babies—he honestly missed the infant's howls because it meant the little one had died—and it wasn't even his own fear about what awaited him at the train's eventual destination. It was, in essence, what his mother had said: Someone had to survive this inferno and, indeed, it might as well be him.

And so when the train was starting to move once more (and, yes, there was that whistle), as a soldier was jogging beside the car and sliding the door shut—just as this middle-aged corporal of the Reich was using his own gimpy legs to jump back onto the train—Uri acted as if he were merely tossing one more pail of waste into the woods and weeds that lined the tracks. But this time he allowed his body to follow his arms. He landed on his side, drenching his shirt and his face in diarrhetic muck, and rolled into the brush. He heard the guard screaming at him, the train accelerating. Almost simultaneously he was aware of the crackle of gunfire and felt something stinging his arm. But he knew they weren't about to stop the train for one shit-covered Jew, and the guard wasn't about to remain behind and miss the trip east. And so he kept pinwheeling, spinning like a rolling pin amid shrubs and high grass and spring weeds and then, much to his relief, among actual trees. There he stood and he started to run, and he didn't stop until the sound of the train (and its infernal whistle) had receded far into the distance.

He had no idea where he was, but he was nowhere near a railway station or a town and that was probably a pretty good sign. He leaned against what he thought, in the dusk, was an oak tree, and looked at his arm. His shirt sleeve was sliced open and his upper arm was bleeding, but the bullet had just grazed him. It was actually his right hip that hurt like hell. And his knees. Clearly he had banged up his hip and his knees when he'd fallen. Well, he thought, that's what you get when you dive from a rolling, accelerating train.

But, initially, he was still very glad that he had.

It was only after he had caught his breath and begun to concentrate on the sounds of the odd and unfamiliar animals he heard all around him—owls and bats and somewhere not terribly far away, a wolf—that he began to fear that he just might have deserted his family. Rebekah. Yes, she was tall and pretty, but she was only fourteen. And perhaps because there had been a child, another girl, born between him and his sister who had died within days of her birth, he and his parents had always doted on Rebekah to the point that she was really rather helpless. And what if she was on that train, in one of the other cars? His parents, too? The thought left him a little sickened, and he wasn't sure now what he would do next. He was, he realized, worse than a stranger in a strange land. He was a Jew in the east. And so the very first thing he did was to rip his star from his shirt. He'd figure out the rest—clothes, a name, a ration card for food—after he'd gotten some sleep.