TIED with TWINE

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a novel

PAM RECORDS

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Chapter 1

Hegewisch, Illinois 1920

Halina shoved the dirty sheet in the tin washtub as quickly as she could. Water splashed over the side, puddling at her feet, then snaking to the drain in the middle of the basement floor. She started to scoot out of the way, but realized it was a little late for that. She was already as soggy as a dead bird in a gutter, all mud and suds, from her bloomers to her work boots. In her rush, she had been sloppy and would likely catch hell for it. Too bad. She wanted to be done. At this rate, she'd never be through with the laundry—not to mention the rest of the chores—in time for tonight's poker game at the shanty. She'd better step on it.

She kneaded at the sheet as if it were bread dough. Shove down, fold over. Again. She closed her eyes and hummed a polka. That usually kept the heebie-jeebies from crawling up her arms, but not today. She hated doing the sheets. The dribbles, smears, and stains told stories too intimate for a stranger to hear. She knew what happened in bed in the dark when no one could see—except maybe the mice in the walls or God, hovering near the ceiling as if he had nothing better to do. Sometimes she heard the giggles and the moans, then the threats and slaps, flesh on tender flesh. The sounds seemed to bubble up from the sheets. Either she was crazy—just like Ma—or she had an imagination with one or two colors too many. Didn't

matter which it was; she still had sheets to scrub. There were also lamps to fill with kerosene and rugs to take out back and beat.

And where was Patcja? Halina always got stuck with the hard scrubbing. Patcja washed the dainties—the kind the women with bobbed hair and pleated skirts dropped off in their laundry baskets. Not once since Ma had started taking in laundry had Patcja done her share of the helping. Halina paused to listen for footsteps on the floor above, the joists creaking under her sister's generous curves.

Maybe she'd have to tell her sister—once again—that she wasn't too fragile, or too perfect, to help. But then again, Patcja's damned breathing spells did seem to be getting worse—just as Baba had warned them. *Patcja will gasp for air, and there will only be smoke.* Baba's creepy predictions were always hanging in the air over them, dripping dread, like birds crapping as they flew by. Too bad the predictions were as close to right as mumbo jumbo could be. That old woman's Gypsy ways were as powerful as ever—even if the rest of her earthly frame was straddling the fence between the living and St. Florian's cemetery.

Halina sighed and reached for the bar of borax and the scrub brush. Her pruney fingers, numb from the cold water, dropped the hunk of harsh-smelling soap. She fished for it, mumbling a string of blasphemies, including some new ones she was breaking in so they would just roll off her tongue, natural-like, when she needed them. Maybe at poker tonight. If—

Suddenly, she saw a hand. It was under the suds, just below the surface of the water. Not a *real* hand, just a handprint on the sheet. It was smeared, formed by something dark and reddish-brown. *Blood? Disgusting*. What trouble had Ma brought home now? Again?

She looked closer. Small blue letters ran along the frayed hem of the sheet. "HAWTHORNE HOTEL." Wasn't that the seedy place north of town, on the way to East Chicago—the one where bootleggers and their women stayed? Sure. She could see the newspaper stories in her head. Stach was always saying to stay away from there.

Everyone with any sense in their heads stayed far away.

She scooted backward, but she could still see the handprint—small, with fingers outstretched. Maybe too small to be a man's hand. It might even be too small to belong to a woman, she thought. But her ma had little hands like that. Short, stubby fingers—just like that.

Really, this sheet could belong to any of the snooty ladies—or their hired help—who dropped off their baskets of soiled clothes, she told herself as she tried to remember which of the laundry regulars might have dropped off a basket yesterday. Queenie, Ditzy, or Darling? Mama Bella or Floozy-Flora? Floozy's clothes were so pretty, with lots of lace, fringe, and fancy tassels in just the right places. Oh, how she hoped something hadn't happened to Floozy.

She'd seemed fine when she came to the house on her usual day to drop off a basket. Halina remembered Ma meeting her at the front door before the doorbell even buzzed. Ma had stood in front of the open door, as though she was blocking the view. Of course, she didn't want her favorite customer to see inside this pitiful house.

"Hello, Missy Flora. Good day! A very good day to you. A full basket, I see. Good, good," Ma had said in that sugary-sweet voice she used for customers. She probably thought it hid the nervous tremor that sometimes crawled out of her throat, but it didn't.

After Flora had left, Halina had tried to take the basket. "I'll start on these," she had said.

"No—I'll do them," Ma had snapped, pulling the basket away, trying to hide it behind her back as if it held something wicked—or horribly contagious.

Halina wondered if Ma knew about some nastiness that Flora was involved in or *with*—someone who had left a bloody handprint. This didn't look like ordinary time-of-the-month bleeding, either. Maybe there had been an accident or someone had been hurt. Perhaps some man liked to play rough with his woman—whether it was a wifely kind of woman or the kind that was bought. Maybe he got carried away or he had a temper. *Or worse*, she thought. More

possibilities appeared in her imagination, each more hideous than the last. Maybe it was some sickness, a gut-eating disease eating away at a poor soul.

She looked again at the sheet but kept the handprint under the surface of the water, as if the water could keep the trapped evil from escaping. The water seemed to magnify the handprint, but it was still oddly small. Maybe a child's hand. *Holy Mother Mary*, thought Halina, *please not a child.*

Halina fumbled with the matchbox hanging from a ribbon on her neck. The worn textures were comforting. The sounds of rattling seeds and dried petals, bug wings and pebbles were muffled and sweet. She imagined an invisible protective net snaking out from the matchbox and cloaking her. The amulet, a gift from Baba, was full of prayers and conjured curses, Old Country nonsense. *How silly. What am I worried about?*

She scrubbed harder and faster, in a hurry to be done with this dadblasted sheet. She didn't want a mystery wallowing around in her head. She sure as hell didn't need to get all riled up and nervous, tugging on a spirit doctor's handiwork for protection. There was likely some innocent explanation behind this filthy sheet, but it was none of her business, anyway.

Sounds bounced around the cinder block walls. The coal furnace took up most of the basement and made so much noise that it was impossible to think. Kneeling on the cement floor was putting a crick in her back, too.

Get on with it, she thought. *Poker tonight. I need to play and win. Win big.* She wondered just how much a train ticket east would cost. She had no idea. Did she have enough yet? Maybe after tonight. Maybe this was the last sheet she would ever need to wash.

In circles, then up and down in long strokes, she scrubbed. More water splashed. This time, the trickles across the floor seemed pink, like something from a fairy story, like the kind Ma used to tell them when they were little and the world was safe, a floating island

attached by a long ribbon of memories to Poland, where the souls were left. She shook her head, as if that could clear her mind of the nonsense.

"You've always got your head in the clouds or some made-up world where you can be something you're not," Ma was always lecturing. It never made much sense to Halina. She knew she could never be anything here in this God-forsaken swamp on the edge of Chicago. And that's why she was saving for a train ticket, her escape from the Polish stink that clung to her skin and clothes, her hair, and the fringe of eyelashes that hid her coal-black eyes.

She wiped her mouth on her apron hem, trying to wipe away a bitter taste, warm, salty, and metallic. She realized it was blood. She must have bitten her tongue clenching her jaw as she scrubbed.

She cringed at the thought of more blood. *Disgusting. Stupid girl.* She wanted to slap her own face. How could she even think of being a nurse when she cringed at the thought of blood? Childish. She had better get over it if she was going to be a healer, like Baba. She wasn't ready to give up on the one plan she'd had ever since she was a little girl. Those Red Cross ladies during the Great War hadn't known a thing when they'd sent her on her way, telling her that only American girls could be nurses in America. She didn't know enough English, they'd told her. They didn't want her, they'd said.

Well, neither did anyone else.

And they'd all be singing a different tune when she learned all there was to know about doctoring and medicine and fixing up the busted and bleeding. Lord knew there were enough trampled feet and severed fingers and festering sores in Hegewisch. And crazy-minded souls who—

"Halina, stop your lollygagging around! I want to be done with these last sheets before the air turns damp and they won't dry," Ma hollered as she clomped down the stairs. Her short legs wobbled under her weight. Her bib apron barely covered her generous belly and matching bosom. But her babushka was too big. It came down

past her forehead, nearly hiding her face.

"This one is going to take more scrubbing," said Halina as she reached for the bleach.

"Well, get on with it. Stop your daydreaming. Your mind wanders off, gallivanting here and there like you have all the time in the world," Ma said, shaking her head. "You don't know how to put in a good day's work." Then Ma launched into the usual stories about how hard she had worked on her family's farm in the Old Country.

Halina interrupted, not wanting to hear the speech once again. "Who dropped off these sheets, the ones I have in the washtub now?"

"Those? Ah, those are, umm, mine," Ma said absently, concentrating on the bushel basket at her feet. She was sorting out the apples that were rotten from the ones almost rotten. "Why?"

Halina pulled the edge of the sheet up out of the washtub, just enough so her mother could see the faint imprint of outstretched fingers, what was left of the handprint. A pink rivulet of water ran down Halina's arm.

Ma's face fell. Her chin dropped, and her empty mouth gaped open, as though she was looking for some explanation or story to tell, something perfectly simple, innocent. She twisted her apron in a knot, and her cheeks flushed.

"Is there something you want to tell me, Ma? Did something happen? Is Pa at it again?"

Her mother took a step closer. The woman glared and snorted, her nostrils flaring. Hot air hit Halina's face, and she knew she had made a mistake. She had clumsily trodden on her mother's private pains—ones that were too perverse to be seen or mentioned out loud and certainly not meant to be witnessed by her daughter, who was old enough to understand pain but didn't know a thing about marriage. Not a dadblasted thing, Halina realized an instant too late.

Ma slapped Halina's cheek.

Halina winced, turning her face away as she grabbed her mother's wrist, firmly. She wouldn't let go.

They stared at each other, eye to eye.

"Just get the washing done—*today*," Ma said tightly. Some other emotion smoldered under her breath. Was it fury or shame? The way her eyes flicked back and forth, it seemed more like fear. Halina couldn't tell. Maybe all of those. Maybe they were all mixed up, crazy-like. She wanted to say she was sorry. She was sorry for asking about the sheet, sorry for being callous about it, sorry for the blood—and whatever had happened that had caused it. And whatever made her mother think it was something to be kept a secret, endured in silence.

But Ma was already plodding back up the stairs, carrying the bushel basket while trying to hang on to the railing at the same time. She stumbled. Maybe a knee had buckled, or maybe she had just lost her balance.

"Here, I'll help you." Halina dropped the sheet back in the water and dried her hands on her apron. She took the basket from her mother and followed her up the stairs, carrying the rotten fruit for her. She could see dozens of green worms writhing in the bottom, trying to crawl out. One landed on her hand. It was sticky with apple gore.

Halina's stomach turned. She dropped the basket and ran out the kitchen door. She needed air—*now*.

The spring day was damp and chilly, but it also felt good to her, refreshing. Wind smacked her cheeks, a brisk wake-up slap. She took a few deep breaths and tried to wipe the invisible creepy-crawlies and goosebumps off her arms. Those green wiggly—

Halina's thoughts were interrupted. She smelled smoke. A fire? She looked around, worried, hoping it wasn't close by, something

burning out of control. The shacks of flimsy old wood went up quickly once they caught a spark, and the burnt-out Patchiecki place down the street was testament to that. The whole family had gone up with the house, too. *May they rest in peace.*

No, it was just a trash fire in a steel drum, she saw. At the back of the yard, by the alley, there he was, the man himself. Her father was burning a week's worth of trash in a steel drum. Flames shot out of the top, sending sparks floating off into the air. He had his shovel over his shoulder and used it to tap the trash down into the flames. Why was he standing so close to the fire? Was he proud that he could take the heat or just stupid? *Maybe he's just drunk. Or he had been chewing those toothache pills with their magic ingredients.*

His back was to Halina. He was a big man, with broad shoulders and a barrel chest. He took his shirt off and hung it over the fence gate. The sleeves of his long johns didn't reach to his wrists. Halina wasn't close, but she could see the scars on his arms from the time he got caught in a thrasher when he was a boy. She knew the story well. Another Old Country yarn that got bigger and more important with each telling. All made-up horse shit, probably.

But remembering the thrasher story kindled a pang of sympathy for her father. He'd been a young boy in a small village when it had supposedly happened. There had been a traveling doctor who had patched him up. The old coot had ridden around in a carriage, with a carpetbag of simple instruments, homemade bandages, and medicines. That was how they got their doctoring in the Old Country. Amazing anyone lived to be thirty.

She was sorry for the little boy—but not the man he grew up to be. He was a bully, mean, gruff, and cold. She could see through his forlorn act. She should tell him that, too. Or maybe she should ask him, *Why is there a bloody handprint on the sheet in the basement, the one Ma says is hers? Did you hurt her?*

But she could never ask that. What could he say? And there would always be that question hanging from her mouth, like a

cobweb she couldn't brush away, no matter how hard she tried. No, she decided, she'd better stay quiet.

Halina couldn't see his face, but she knew what his expression would be: a grimace, the same scowl that was frozen in place, day and night. When she was young, a few other expressions had popped up now and then: surprise, sadness, longing—his mouth hanging open as if he were starving and could almost taste a dollop of honey about to drop on his tongue. But it had been a long time since she had seen any expression other than the familiar scowl.

Halina crept closer, the ground squishing under her boots. The grass was littered with old twigs and mud puddles she tried to step around, trying to be quiet; she wasn't sure why. Maybe she wanted to sneak up on him and scare him, or hit him. Or maybe tap him on the shoulder so that, when he turned around, she could slap his face hard enough to make his store-bought teeth go flying out of his mouth. *That's for Ma. For treating her like trash,* she would say. *Could* say—or not.

She didn't know what she wanted to do. She glanced toward the house and saw some old tools that had been left out on a bench: a hammer, a screwdriver, a big wrench that had been there a while, maybe all winter, judging by the rust. She went over and picked up the wrench. It was heavy in her hand, much heavier than she'd thought it would be. What was she expecting? A child's toy? Something made of cardboard and paste?

The flames in the old drum crackled, the trash popping and sizzling as it burned. Pa stirred and poked at it with the shovel. It was a coal shovel, the kind used on a steam engine to heap coal into the hopper. He'd likely stolen it from somewhere or someone while God made notes and said, "Tssk, tssk."

Halina took another step, careful to avoid the deeper mud bogs. Already, she could feel water seeping through the holes in her boots, making her feet wet. She was still yards away, but smoke burned her eyes. She cut though the garden, where the spongy ground was

quieter. Her footsteps were muffled. The remains of last year's garden were brown and brittle. Stalks were empty of life, used up. Old tomato plants drooped in awkward tangles, like scattered skeletons.

In the center of the garden, a scarecrow still hung on stakes, one up his backside and one horizontal stake that ran through the sleeves of one of Pa's old shirts. It used to be red plaid, but after the winter, it had mostly faded into varying shades of gray. The burlap face was weathered away, its red yarn mouth pecked away by crows. The button eyes had fallen long ago, lost somewhere in the muck at her feet. *Or something ate them and squirted them out in the next county.*

Halina hid behind the straw-stuffed shell of a man wearing her father's clothes. She was close enough to hug this creature, smell its mold and decay. He wasn't going to scare away much in this condition—half man, half straw-monster that seemed close to returning to the earth, where he belonged. Dust to dust.

She went somewhere else. Her mind played one of its tricks—a distraction or a promise or prediction. She wasn't sure. But she saw herself dancing with the straw man, even though he had no face. She held his hand, even though his hands were empty work gloves on the end of the stake. She knew it was absurd, but a pretend dance was better than no dance. *A straw man is better than none*, she told herself. But she wasn't sure.

She ducked behind the scarecrow's shoulder, flirting, a silly smile on her face that some man would surely find charming. But then she was back in the garden, her feet wet, her wet dress plastered against her skinny legs. A warm blush crept up her face and over her scalp, tingling. She was embarrassed to catch herself in her own foolishness. *Grow up!* she wanted to yell at the idiot girl who still hid in pretend moments and drifted to nowhere.

She still clutched her wrench. It was real. And cold and made of metal that wouldn't fall apart or wither. Loosening her grasp, she hefted it back and forth from hand to hand. It wasn't so heavy anymore, or else she was stronger.

Pa threw more of the broken twigs and branches he had gathered from the ground into the fire. He leaned on his shovel, looking like a smug master of fire. But then she saw his hands shake, and it wasn't from the chill. The man had the shakes again. He was dangerous like that.

She ducked lower, behind some withered rhubarb. She should go in the house, but she was afraid to move. Anything could set him off when he had the shakes.

"I know you're there," her father said without turning to face her, not even glancing over his shoulder.

She said nothing but squatted lower, wishing she could dissolve into the ground. Rotten leaves and stems, tomatoes that had gone unpicked and then rotted on the ground and weathered all winter closed in around her. A robin hopped and pecked at the dirt, digging worms out of the mush. She startled a chipmunk, and he scampered along the fencerow, his cheeks full of seeds from the hollyhocks that had grown along the edge of the garden. He was taking them somewhere, to some nest near the alley. He chattered, running past the trash drum in circles as if he weren't sure how to get home. The funny thing was cute with his cheeks ballooned out like that, she thought.

Pa jumped at the sound of the chipmunk's chatter and growled suddenly, coming to life, finding some energy and swinging the shovel in bursts of reflexes and fight.

"Damned rat! Git, you rat!" Pa shouted.

NO.

"Hate rats. Damn dirty things," he mumbled as he chased the chipmunk, shovel swinging in wide, random arcs that were far from hitting the target.

Halina hunched over, ducking and hiding her face. "It's not a rat," she mouthed, soundless. She should stop him, she knew. She should jump out and make her father quit, but she couldn't make her legs move.

The chipmunk darted left. Pa swung to the left. The chipmunk darted to the right. Pa swung the shovel again, like swinging a bat at a baseball. He missed. The chipmunk ran up the fence, then down.

This time the shovel hit. The chipmunk fell. Maybe he was just stunned. Maybe he would get up. Maybe he would be fine. *Sure, he could be fine*, she told herself.

Pa scooped him up with his shovel and dropped the chipmunk into the smoldering fire.

"No!" This time sound came from her mouth, high-pitched and frantic. But too late.

Pa leaned the shovel against the fence and turned around. He looked straight at Halina as she cowered behind the scarecrow. She was so ashamed of her herself and her cowardice.

"I knew you didn't have the nerve. Weak. I knew you were nothing," he spat as he grabbed his shirt from the fence and walked past the garden. So nonchalant, so calm, so heartless.

Why hadn't she hit him over the head with the wrench when she had the chance?

She still had the wrench in her hand. She clutched it tighter, her muscles tensing. She raised it, then began running toward her father, her legs pumping hard and fast.

Mary had returned to the basement and the tin washtub. The sheet was still in the cold water, just where Halina had left it. She knelt, her knees making grinding sounds as she lowered herself to the cement floor. *I'm too old for this*, she thought. *Far too old*. But she didn't waste time moaning. She didn't even bother to see if the stain was gone. It was good enough, she told herself. That lousy fancy-talking hoodlum with his stinking cigar wouldn't know a clean sheet from a filthy one.

And he deserved nothing better than this blood-stained rag of a sheet to lay his bare ass on. Let him wallow in the shame, roll in it, the way Flora had rolled helpless on the floor. Such a mess . . . Just thinking of it . . .

Mary swallowed hard, forcing the sourness in her mouth back down.

She twisted the sheet into a ball, squeezing the water out. She twisted it again, like twisting the stiff dough for *kreteche* as she had done thousands of times. She draped the heavy sheet over her arm. With it slowing her down, she climbed the stairs sideways, her good leg always first. She heard a commotion, a voice—Halina's shrill scream—from somewhere outside the door.

"No, you can't just walk away from me!" Halina shouted. "You can't!"

But there he was. Fryderyk strolled away from the angry girl. The man simply waltzed through the door and shut it before Halina could come in—before Mary could get out with the wet sheet still over her arm.

Outside, Halina pounded on the door with a wrench, again and again. Mary could see her and hear the door cracking and splintering. Fryderyk was unmoving, his face frozen in his usual old-man expression.

Then Mary heard a thud—the girl had dropped the wrench on the sidewalk—and there was no more banging, no more yelling. But the sudden silence was just as jarring.

Fryderyk shook his head. Was he confused or disappointed? Mary wondered as she watched him walk past her to the kitchen, saying nothing, not even acknowledging her, just his stink filling her nose.

"What now, you oaf? Teaching her lessons again?" Mary shifted the wet sheet that was dripping water down her leg. "Eh? Preparing her for *Ameryka's* injustices again? You think you can make her fierce so no man can take her and ruin her?" Mary demanded, her voice

hoarse, throat muscles taut. "Why?"

She didn't really expect an answer—or want one. She knew the truth. He did too. And they both knew the soldiers had given her no choice. In the end, it didn't matter, did it? Used was used.

"So she won't be like her mama, that's why," Mary mumbled to no one.

She watched him pour a cup of coffee and add whiskey from the bottle on the table. It had no label, must have been home-brewed moonshine he got from some alley-man selling hooch to the stupid—or the desperate. Fryderyk wasn't stupid. He wasn't all bad, either. There had been some good days.

Mary went out the door, letting it slam behind her, the splintered trim rattling. She looked around, but Halina was nowhere in sight. It was just as well, she thought.

Mary hung the sheet on the clothesline. The weight of the water made it droop, a heavy burden, unmoving despite the wind. As the sun hit it, a faint handprint was visible, just a shadow. But still, the outline of her hand was there, in Flora's blood.

I need to be more careful.

Chapter 2

Halina patted the lumpy bundle in her skirt pocket, making sure it was still there, still safe, even if it was damp, like everything she wore. She swished her skirt around as she walked, letting the wind get to it, hoping it would dry faster that way. Baba lived only three houses down the street, so the walk wasn't far—barely time for the skirt to catch a good breeze.

Halina walked around to the back, as usual. The house was dark, all closed up, as if no one lived there. She knew better, of course. Baba just didn't like nosy neighbors or visitors, unless they came on business, the doctoring kind. Everyone else could go to hell, the old woman liked to say. She didn't mean it most of the time.

Halina could see smoke curling from the chimney. She could smell it, too. Willow. She wondered what Baba was brewing with willow, a soft wood that held water so it burned at low temperatures—not good for brewing most medicines. She tried to remember what else she had learned about willow, but her mind didn't want to focus on lessons about flames and wood. She was thinking about wood creatures—chipmunks, to be exact—and fire.

She had to knock several times before Baba came to the door. The old woman didn't look happy, mumbling complaints and warnings, recipe ingredients and bits of scripture, mixed up in a ramble

that seemed like dialogue from a dream—or a nightmare. Halina was used to it and just let the woman carry on, like a kettle that had to release its steam before it could be quiet.

Baba returned to the kitchen. Halina followed cautiously, not wanting to interrupt whatever Baba had been focused upon. Halina could see several pots, bowls, and baskets scattered about. Herbs and roots, powders and bottles of deep-colored liquids were strewn across every surface. Something was boiling in a pot over the fire.

Maybe it was just dinner, she thought, a good Old Country stew. Baba had a stove and an oven but seldom used them. Halina knew the woman liked to make her special concoctions directly over flame, so she used the small fireplace in the corner. That was how Baba had learned to make the recipes, taught by an old Romani woman over campfires in the evening as the brightly painted wagons made camp on the edge of some town. And so that was how Halina had learned to make the recipes, as well—in this kitchen, over flames in the brick fireplace.

Baba frowned, concentrating on the recipe in progress as if the world depended on it. Maybe it did—at least *their* world, which seemed so topsy-turvy these days. Halina could smell the sharp, acidic liquid that was bubbling in a big copper pot, and nearly gagged. Then she remembered to breathe through her mouth, as she had been taught.

She'd come without a plan, and now she regretted the impulse, feeling nervous in this kitchen that was hardly a kitchen at all. She really had no idea what she could do for this creature, but decided to go through the motions and at least try. She found a clear corner of the table and carefully pulled the rolled bundle out of her pocket. She had wrapped him in her apron when she'd rescued the fella from the trash drum. It seemed he wasn't burned at all. He had been in an old coffee can that was wet with coffee grounds and potato peels. They must have protected him a bit. He was still breathing, his furry white belly moving ever so slightly. That he'd

survived being hit by the shovel was a miracle. Maybe he hadn't been hit so hard, after all, just stunned.

Baba was busy, not noticing. *Good.*

Halina spread her apron out and set the chipmunk on top, taking a moment to appreciate his intricacy of form, fur, limbs, tail, texture, and colors. And that sweet face with whiskers and bulging cheeks still full of seeds. With her pinky finger, Halina cleared his mouth, then massaged his chest, mimicking the rhythm of his shallow breaths but pushing slightly more, encouraging more air to flow in and out. At the same time, she put her mouth close to his nose and blew gentle puffs.

Puff. Push. Puff. Push.

With her eyes closed, she focused only on this rhythm and lost track of time. When she finally opened her eyes, she was startled to find Baba beside her. The old woman was watching. How long had she been there? Halina hung her head, embarrassed that Baba had witnessed her silly fumbling.

"Oh, I give up. It's no use. It's not working," Halina said.

"Nonsense, silly girl," Baba said and pushed Halina out of the way. She picked up the small animal, cupping it in her chubby fingers. She held the animal to her face, rubbing his fur against her own weathered cheek, lined with deep wrinkles, and whispered into his face, breathing words and hot air into his mouth and eyes and ears. She started to sing some old Polish song—or was it a hymn? Halina didn't recognize the tune, but it was sweet and heavenly. When it ended, Baba flipped the animal, laying him down on his belly, and made the sign of the cross over the animal and then across her own chest.

"The rest is up to him. Does he want to live?" she asked, shrugging her shoulders. "Who are we to say?"

And then she flicked his rump, hard, with her thumb and forefinger, as though she were flicking lint off her shoulder.

Halina held her breath. The chipmunk shook his head, then his

legs, finally finding his footing—and was off. He scrambled down from the table and across the room, straight to the door, as if he had known the way all along and had simply been napping.

Halina gasped and ran to open the door for him, partially in disbelief. She was happy for him, yet sorry to see him go.

"He forgot to say thank you," she said to Baba as the animal ran out and disappeared.

"They never say thank you," Baba said. "Never. And why should they?"

They both stood in the open doorway looking, watching, as if they could possibly see where the creature had gone.

Halina wasn't sure how long they stood like that. Time had a way of becoming muddled when Baba was near.

Stach, making a ruckus as he came down the alley, broke the spell.

He pushed his homemade wheelbarrow over the gravel, struggling with a heavy load that seemed to repeatedly become stuck in the ruts and mud holes of the alley that ran behind the houses on Avenue O. Halina could hear him cursing and grumbling and groaning, as if he were trying to announce his arrival and get the attention of Baba or God—one or the other.

"What's he up to?" Halina asked. But Baba shook her head.

"Phfft. Stach is his own man. How should I know? I am not his keeper."

"But you're his aunt, and he lives in your shanty. Doesn't he ever tell you what he's up to?"

"No. And I don't ask."

"I just hope it doesn't interfere with poker night," Halina said as she walked through Baba's backyard, past the chicken coop,

scattering a dozen noisy black-and-white chickens. She wanted to see what dadblasted big, heavy bundle was in the wheelbarrow. She hoped it was something good and that he would be willing to share.

But as she got closer, she wished she hadn't stepped off the stoop of the house.

She could make out the shape of a man, folded up in thirds, like an accordion, his arms and legs tucked in under him to fit into the wheelbarrow. His head rested against his chest at an odd angle. Halina wondered if his neck was broken, if that was his ailment. But then she saw the bloody red holes on his chest and realized he had been shot—at least three times.

Halina couldn't stop herself. She had to see more. Who was it?

"Ahh, missy, you don't need to get closer and look at this," said Stach when he saw her coming toward the alley fence. "There's nothing for you to see. Stay where you are."

She didn't listen, and walked around the wheelbarrow so she could see the man's face.

She gasped. It was Milosz, a young man her age. They had been in the same fourth-grade class at St. Florian's. His open eyes stared at her. Flies hovered at his nose, swarmed the bloody holes.

She choked and gagged and spat on the ground. "Milosz, you bum! What did you go and do?"

Baba was beside her, pulling her arm, turning Halina's face away from the wheelbarrow as if she were some child—as if turning away could erase the image now burned in her mind.

"Stach, why did you bring him here?" Baba demanded, spittle flying from her mouth as she shouted. Halina could see her eyes were wide open and sparked with fury.

"Well, he wasn't dead when I started this way," Stach answered. "When I found him, I thought there was some hope of you fixing him up." He shrugged his shoulders, possibly realizing now that his logic had been flawed.

"Are those bootlegger bullet holes?" Baba asked.

"I don't see someone's name on them, but since Milosz was acting as doorman at The Corner, deciding who got in and who didn't, seems he might have made an enemy—or two or three—out of a customer who had a thirst and didn't like being turned away," Stach said, looking at the man—not much more than a boy, really. "But who can say about whiskey men? They are a crazy lot, you know."

Halina's horror subsided, replaced by worry. "Where'd you find him? Did you see who did it?" Halina asked, looking around for any signs of the mysterious trucks that had recently started driving around Hegewisch. She thought of the white truck she saw frequently, the milk truck Nicky drove. And a rusty black one, too. "Did they follow you?"

"No, I found him behind The Corner, in the alley, bleeding like a stuck pig and asking for a priest—like a priest could fix the holes in his gut." Stach shook his head.

"So you put him in that stupid wheelbarrow and wheeled him through the streets for everyone to see?" Baba looked as if she might burst into a fireball. She was all horror and gasps of hot spit. "Do you know the Russians did that in my town? Killed the men at the roadblocks and put them in wagons and paraded the pile of corpses through the streets! No dignity!"

Stach stepped back and started to wipe his face with his hands, but saw blood on his palms. "I was more worried about getting him here fast, while there was some breath left in him, than maintaining his dignity," Stach said. "Maybe I should have left him there."

Stach looked miserable, Halina thought. He was a good man, her friend, someone who had taught her so much—including how to play poker. As she watched him squirm under Baba's glare, she couldn't help but think of the many kindnesses he had shown her. She wished she knew what to say to help. Her heart ached for Milosz. And Stach. And Baba, who seemed to have lost every ounce of compassion she once held. What was her problem? Halina wondered. *Why is she so crazy-mad at Stach?*

"Maybe you can fix him up, Baba. Maybe *we* can," said Halina, suddenly hopeful. "You fixed the half-dead chipmunk. Maybe you can fix a man with only three bullet holes. That's not many. Come on, bring him in the house, Stach." And she started to run back through the yard to the kitchen where miracles happened.

No one followed her. She froze mid-step, realizing how childish she must sound. Stach wouldn't even look her in the eye; neither would Baba.

"Wheel him to the church," Baba commanded, her voice sounding cold. "Take him to the priest, like he asked. Let Father say last rites, and let the church bury him." Baba turned away. "And hurry with it. I don't want bootlegger blood in my alley," she said.

"Are you sure he's gone, Stach?" Halina asked, still not wanting to give up. "Are you sure there's not a breath left, nothing we can do?"

"Nope, missy. Not a thing. See his eyes open like that? He isn't blinking. Means he's seeing nothing but God's parlor full of harps and angels. He's probably taking a singing lesson 'bout now."

He might have meant it to be comforting, but his tone was too close to sarcasm. Everyone knew Stach didn't think much of the church. He scorned it every chance he got. And this was one time when it wasn't funny.

Halina hit Stach's arm with her elbow. "Show respect. He was a friend of mine," she said.

"I am. I'm gonna wheel him back to the church." Stach took off his coat and laid it over Milosz, tucking a limp arm that was hanging down back into the wheelbarrow.

"Stach," Halina said, "what in God's holy name were you doing at a boarded-up saloon, closed for Prohibition, with an empty wheelbarrow?"

"I never said it was empty," he said.

And that was that. Halina was left wondering if Stach was buying from or selling crates of moonshine to Augustino, the man who ran The Corner—once a tavern, now one of those speakeasies

everyone was talking about. The whole dang world had gone crazy all of a sudden—all over this stupid Prohibition nonsense. People who used to be normal were now completely nuts, stockpiling and hiding crates in garages. And some idiots were trying to brew their own concoctions—just swamp water and turpentine—and pass it off as whiskey. Then there were the fights and threats and the snooty-snotty do-good ladies calling drink sinful and acting all aghast and horrified at the sight of a beer. So strange. St. Florian's couldn't even do communion with wine anymore. Imagine that. Jesus drank wine, didn't he? He made some at that wedding, for crying out loud. This loony law, or whatever it was, couldn't possibly last long. It better not, anyway.

Stach turned the wheelbarrow around and started back the way he'd come. Baba was already hobbling toward her back door, favoring her bad leg.

Halina watched them both, Stach going one way, Baba the opposite. She stood in the middle, unsure, once again, where she belonged.

And she wondered if there would still be a poker game tonight. *I sure hope so*, she thought as she walked home to finish the laundry.

Chapter 3

Halina didn't get far from Baba's house. The white milk truck was behind her, she noticed, following her at a distance, nice and slow, as though it was carrying something fragile or dangerous—maybe explosives that could blow up at any minute. She closed her eyes as a picture of an exploding fireball came to her, then was gone in an instant. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

Wish I could be done with this imagination.

With a quick glance over her shoulder, she could see the truck was still there, still slow-poking along. And she saw the driver. It was Pock-Face, just as she'd guessed. She knew him, in a way, one of those mixed-up ways that made her toes curl and her fists clench. She might hate him or love him. She wasn't sure which.

Instead of walking by the burned-out Patchiecki house as usual, she turned up the sidewalk that once led to the front door of the house. Now, there was nothing but rubble—bricks, some charred wood, a chimney and fireplace, half of a cinder block wall that used to be the foundation or a basement wall. Halina didn't remember much of the place before it burned, but she had known the children who had lived there, had played with them—a boy and girl with blond curls, like hers. They must have been around five or six when the house burned, Halina remembered. She still saw it in her nightmares.

Tossing a rock to make sure no rats or snakes were hiding in the tall grass, Halina walked through the yard and climbed on top of the waist-high block wall. It was her thinking-wall, where she went to ponder. She hummed and swung her feet, just as she had when she was a child. But this time, she wasn't thinking of silly, made-up games—or even mulling over whatever injustice Sister Beatrice had doled out during the day at school—as she had so many times in the past.

"What took you so long?" she asked, tossing the question over her shoulder as she caught a glimpse of him trying to sneak up behind her through the long grass.

"I was trying to surprise you," he said, pulling his fedora farther down on his face, as if it were a mask he was trying to hide behind. In the slanted afternoon sun dappled with specks of shade, his face didn't look so bad—just rough, like a sandy beach, pebbled.

"You can't surprise me. I see the future."

"Like hell you do."

"No, I do. Really," she said. "I'm not bragging. It's more a curse than a gift."

"Hmm." He hopped up on the wall in one show-off move that was meant to be impressive. But she didn't impress easily, and those muscles weren't enough to make her gush and swoon with adoration like some silly American girls would do. Or her sister would do, if she had the chance. Halina wanted a man who could think. So far, Pock-Face—Nicky—wasn't passing the test.

"I try to focus on here and now," he said as he looked her over, eyeing her dress, still damp from doing laundry, the thin cotton still clinging to her legs, making her cold—making her *sutki* stand upright, like soldiers. He was evaluating her Here and her Now.

"So, *that's* the way it is with you? Only have *one thing* on your mind, like most Italian men?"

He chuckled. "Sicilian. And weren't you listening? *Two* things: *Here* and *Now*."

She jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow, just as she had jabbed

Stach a few minutes ago. The image of Milosz was fresh in her mind again.

"Do you know what happened?" she asked him. It came out sounding more like an accusation than a question.

The smiles were gone from both of their faces now. Halina felt tears well up, but she wiped them away.

"Yeah, I know."

"Couldn't you stop it?"

"No. I got enough problems watching out for my own hide. It ain't easy being a driver."

"So why do you do it?"

He shrugged. His wide shoulders, busting out of the seams of his old white shirt, looked so funny as he made a little-boy kind of shrug, as if he were five and his mama had asked him why he'd broken the last china cup. And Halina wondered if his mama was still in Sicily or if she lived in Back of the 'Yards, too.

She realized she really knew very little about this young man, except that he was one of Sal's gang, a driver. And they had been friends—or something—for years, since before the Great War. He seemed so confident, even then, and she was envious, wishing she could be so sure of her footing in this world.

He must have been darling as a little boy, she thought. *All those dark curl*s . . . And she couldn't resist poking a few stragglers that hung over his eyes back under his fancy felt hat. Her hand lingered just a second too long.

He grabbed it and held it, right where it was, pressed against the side of his face. Maybe just a little too hard, too tight. His face was warm. His hand was hot, sweaty, smudged with dirt and red steel dust.

"Well, for one thing, I can drive around, see what's happening, watch out for you—and your sister, too—"

"My sister, too?" Halina interrupted. "You watch out for my sister, too? How *dare* you sit next to me and tell me—"

She jumped down from the wall, angry that he, too, could be

wooed by the perfect auburn—

The grass moved. She had startled a snake that twisted in the tall grass. Halina yelped, jumped, danced, trying to avoid it.

Nicky picked her up, took her back to the wall. "It was just a garden snake. He's gone."

"Don't you go thinking I'm afraid of no snake," she hissed.

"I know. You're fearless," he said.

Was that tone sarcasm or awe? She didn't know.

"And you're just another big rat," she said as she pounded on his shoulder with a fist. Just once. No, twice. And then once more, but not so hard.

"A big one, I know. With big rat teeth." And he made goofy gnashing noises that made her laugh.

"Don't watch out for my sister," she said, a petulant lip sticking out, which she instantly hated. She wasn't that kind of girl. She wasn't silly or jealous.

"But she needs more watching than you. *You* are the smart one. She's going to get you both in trouble. That's why I worry. For you. *You* only."

"Oh, you see the future now, too?" she scoffed. "I thought I explained that was *my* special calling."

"Well, anyone with half a brain could see what's ahead for Patcja, I think," he said, suddenly turning serious. This somber expression was so . . . so . . . responsible, wise, scholarly. Handsome, too.

She thought about her sister. Maybe he was right. Maybe she was trouble waiting to happen.

"Be careful, Halina, and don't ask more questions about Milosz. He was stupid."

"I know. I helped him with fractions in fourth grade—"

And then Pock-Face Nicky was gone, jumping down from the wall and off through the tall grass toward the stand of trees behind the Patchiecki house—where the cellar used to be. The Patchiecki vegetable cellar. She hadn't thought of that in years. She remembered

being in it for some reason as a kid. Oh yes, it came back to her. They had been playing hide-and-seek.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are . . ." She could still hear herself calling for her friends. She couldn't find them, not anywhere. Then she'd stumbled on the door in the ground, which had been left open, she remembered. She'd walked down the steep stairs into the cellar, a big room with shelves lined with Mason jars of canned vegetables . . . and Irena, her friend, had jumped out at her! *"Boo!"* the little girl with curls had shouted.

All that space, and shelves, she thought. *It would be one hell of a place to store illegal whiskey, wouldn't it?*