



Chapter One

Budapest, Hungary

Late April 1944

I'll see you next week, Miss Bognár." Ten-year-old Ferenc flashed Éva a dimpled smile as he turned to leave the bright music studio.

"Don't forget to practice your scales. They're very important to playing the clarinet well."

Ferenc gripped his small, square case embossed with the Bognár clarinet-maker seal and grimaced.

"Now, now. We talked about this during the lesson. No one likes them much. Just do them at the beginning of your session and get them over with."

"Fine." The boy harrumphed and made a hasty exit before Éva could instruct him further.

He had so much talent. If only he would be more disciplined, he would have a bright future as a musician.

As she stared out the window after Ferenc, a black-booted Nazi soldier strode by like he owned the world. Right now, he and his countrymen did own this part of it and had since they'd invaded almost a month ago, after President Horthy attempted to make peace with the Allies.

She put the kettle on the coal stove to boil. What would remain once the Germans left? If they ever left.

She shook away the thought as if she were shaking a cramp from her hand from too much practicing.

Her clarinet. Other than her fiancé, Patrik, the only distraction these days from the Nazis. She retrieved her case from the back room and assembled the instrument, the greased corks sliding together as she tongued the callus on the inside of her bottom lip. Not taking much time to warm up, she launched into Brahms's Hungarian Dance no. 5. The vibrant Cossak, Eastern tone of the piece took her from the bottom to the top of the register, her fingers flying over the keys.

As she played, her body swayed, almost as if she danced to the tune. The music transported her from this storefront to a celebration on the Hungarian plains, conjuring women in dark blue dresses with crimson embroidery swirling around the floor while men in tall black boots slapped their knees.

Some notes she drew out, while for others, she allowed her fingers to skip over the instrument. With her tongue relaxed, she tapped out the staccato on the reed. By the time she reached the end of the short piece, she was breathless.

Then she flicked her gaze to the window. A German in his olive-green uniform stared at her through the glass, his blue eyes narrowed, his arms crossed over his chest. She swung around, swabbed out the ebony clarinet, and shoved it into its case. By the time she glanced up again, the Nazi was gone.

She breathed a sigh of relief and spun from the window to straighten the disheveled sheet music for sale on metal racks in the front of the shop. A page slipped from her fingers and fluttered to the ground.

The bell above the door tinkled, and a blast of chilly air rushed through the room. Good, her next student was here. She picked up the fallen sheet of music and turned to greet her student. But instead of another pupil, her sister-in-law Zofia dashed in and locked the door.

“What are you doing?” Éva clutched the paper to her chest.

Zofia's breath came in short spurts. “Someone is following me.”

“Following you? Why?”

With a flourish, Zofia pointed to the yellow star sewn onto her blue coat.

“Oh.” Zofia had been such a fixture of Éva’s life for the past several years, she often forgot her best friend was a Messianic Jew. “Come on back and sit down. You’re pale and shaking. I’ll make you some tea. I already have the kettle on.”

“Don’t waste the precious leaves on me. We have so few left.”

Éva guided Zofia to the break room behind the glass case displaying instruments and accessories for sale. She pulled out a chair and motioned for Zofia to sit at the table. “Tomorrow we can drink ersatz coffee. Today, you need the tea.”

The kettle whistled as the water boiled, and Éva poured a cup before sitting across from Zofia. “Tell me what happened.”

Zofia drummed her fingers on the tabletop as if playing the piano she so loved, her dark red hair falling across her cheek. “I was on my way back from Hansi’s audition with the Youth Philharmonic. She performed very well, by the way. Your Patrik, the great conductor, was impressed.” For a moment, her eyes brightened.

Éva giggled at the way Zofia referenced her fiancé.

Dimness overtook Zofia’s eyes once more. “On the way back, I had this, this feeling. I can’t describe it. Like pinpricks on my skin. When I turned around, I didn’t see anyone. Not out of the ordinary. People going about their usual day. So I kept on.

“The feeling ate at me all the way here. That’s why I locked the door. Whoever was following me might be on the street waiting.” She lowered her voice. “Waiting to arrest me.”

Éva’s mouth dried out. “You don’t think this is because of Károly, do you?” Could the man she had once loved still be causing her friend problems?

Zofia straightened. “He’s dead, no longer a danger to me or anyone. What I’m more afraid of, though, is that despite the fact the Nazis aren’t rounding up Jews en masse in Budapest like in the country, they will arrest anyone who steps out of line.”

“There you go, then.” Éva returned to the table with the steaming mug. “Nothing to worry about, because you don’t step out of line.” Besides, they had Zofia’s husband and Éva’s fiancé to keep them safe. “I’m sure the incident was nothing more than your imagination”

“What incident?” The deep voice behind them sent Éva rocketing out of her chair. She hadn’t heard the bell above the door. Her fiancé, Kedves Patrik, leaned against the door jamb, his hands in his pockets, cool as you please.

“Patrik, you scared me half to death.” Éva steadied her trembling legs. “If you keep doing that, I’m going to have to take away your key.” She crossed her arms and tried to pout but couldn’t stop a smile from breaking out.

He dangled his key chain. “Come and get it.”

She leapt for it, but he jerked the key behind his back. When she reached to snatch it, he pulled her close and kissed her soundly.

“That isn’t a fair fight.” But she kissed him back. “Alright, you win. This time.”

“You wouldn’t want the key. Then you’d have to keep lending it to me for the evening deliveries.”

She brushed away a lock of his dark, wavy hair from his forehead. “No, we wouldn’t want that. We might end up seeing each other even more than we already do.”

With a gleam in his dark brown eyes, he held out the key to her. “You may not win with brute force, but you do make a persuasive argument.”

“Ha, ha.” She stepped from his embrace. “Just make some more noise next time.”

“I will. I’ll clomp in like a bear. Or an elephant.” He grinned, lumbering around the room and stomping loudly enough to alert everyone in Budapest of his presence. “How’s that?”

She laughed, heart fluttering, and kissed him on his clean-shaven cheek. “Much better, thank you.”

Oh, he was a good man. As true and honest as he was handsome, and someone who had helped her forget the past.

He dropped the key into his pocket. “Why is the door locked in the middle of the day anyway?”

“It’s my fault.” Zofia traced the rim of her teacup, her piano-playing fingers long and delicate. “I’m pretty sure someone followed me here after I left the concert hall.”

“Pft.” Éva waved away Zofia’s concern, more to reassure herself than anything. An idea shaped in her mind and settled her stomach. “This answers the question. Patrik was behind you.”

He shook his head. “Not that close. She must have left at least fifteen minutes before me. One of the flutists stopped me to ask a question, and then I straightened the chairs.”

Maybe they were making too much of a single incident. True, there were those Hungarians, her own countrymen, who hated and persecuted the Jews. She shuddered when a picture of Károly, sandy brown hair, laughing blue eyes, a cleft in his chin, flashed through her brain. As she always did, she dismissed it. Sent it to the furthest reaches of her mind, unwilling to relive that part of her life. Unwilling to suffer that pain again.

But his haunting presence hung over her, a specter whose shadow hounded her. Visible in each and every German who now walked the streets of Budapest.

“Did you see anyone suspicious behind you?” Patrik sat at the table, his gaze intent on Zofia.

“Not that I noticed.” Zofia played with the cup’s delicate curved handle. “Just this feeling I had. I still can’t shake it.”

The same one Éva had now. She returned to her seat. “Why don’t we talk about more pleasant subjects? Like our wedding. Not too many more weeks—”

“Think harder, Zofia. Try to remember who was behind you. Did you see the same person more than once?”

“*Nem*, not that I can remember. Like I said, it was nothing more than my gut speaking to me.”

The room darkened, the light from the front window dimming as the sun slid behind Buda's buildings. "If you remember anything at all, let me know right away. But do be careful. Both of you."

Though he included Éva in his warning, he directed his narrow-eyed stare at Zofia.



The whir of the printing press as Patrik cranked the machine inspired a song in his head. He paused in his publishing of the anti-German pamphlets, grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil, and before he forgot, scribbled out the tune's melody.

The back-alley office of this branch of the Zionist Youth was peaceful tonight. No meetings. No planning sessions. No one here forging documents. With the solitude and quiet, he got a good deal of the composition written.

He whistled quietly to himself to hear the refrain, to avoid drawing the attention of the authorities.

Not quite right. Something in the rhythm of the notes was wrong. He put aside his music and ran off another stack of pamphlets. The steady *whish* as he fed the paper through the machine took on a life of its own. He tapped his toe to the pulse of it.

A smile spread across his face. Ah yes, that was better. The correct rhythm. Giving his tired, aching arm another rest, he reworked the problem spot and completed the rough sketch of the tune. He would present the music to his symphony in a couple of weeks, but he already knew what it sounded like. Typically Hungarian with its Asian influence and haunting, minor melodies. Inspiring. Rousing.

Something the Germans were sure to hate.

He grinned wider.

He picked up one of the pamphlets and checked it. The words outlined the severity and gravity of the situation for Hungarian Jews. Many of them in the countryside had already been rounded up and herded into ghettos, like sheep ready for the slaughter.

People like his younger sister. His older sister and her husband. All living in Nagyvárad, on the Romanian border. He'd urged them to cross. Get out while there was time. Go to Palestine, where his mother had always dreamed of going. She would never get there, but they could start over in the promised land.

Time might have run out, though.

Only Budapest remained relatively safe. Even that wouldn't last forever. Already it was changing. The incident earlier today with Zofia troubled Patrik. Her writings for the Zionists, one of which he printed now, must have drawn the attention of the authorities. They were hunting her. Of that, there was no doubt.

Her affiliation with Éva had him pacing the floor. The two women owned the music studio. But technically, only Éva owned it now. Jews could no longer possess businesses. Not much longer and she wouldn't be able to employ Zofia either.

Not only did they work side by side, but Zofia was married to Éva's brother, illegal in itself, and the couple lived with Éva and her parents. The ties were close. And dangerous.

If only the Soviets would hurry up and arrive.

Patrik patted his false identity booklet tucked in his suit coat, which hung over the room's lone chair. He was safe, safer than his people, safer than his kin. He'd tried to create new identities for them. His sisters, though, took after their father, the stubborn old goat, and would hear nothing about it.

Patrik hadn't been able to protect them. He couldn't allow anything to happen to his precious Éva. His muse. His life.

God, when will this all end? He rubbed his gritty eyes. These late nights, working the printing press into the wee hours of the morning and then going to his job as conductor for the Budapest Youth Philharmonic, were brutal. He needed some sleep.

Before he made a crucial error.

If only he could turn off his racing thoughts.

A soft knock sounded at the door, the syncopated rhythm just right. Someone from their organization who knew the code.

He opened the lock and ushered in Varga Bram. “What a surprise. I thought you headed home hours ago.”

“I did, but I couldn’t sleep.” Bram bounced on his toes, his curly blond hair keeping time.

“What’s on your mind?” Patrik yawned.

“Just excited for Zofia’s latest treatise. We’re fortunate to have her, you know. No one can match her writing style. Fantastic. Good enough to awaken the people from their pathos. I want to grab a handful and pass them out to everyone I meet.”

“Hold on. That isn’t the best idea, you know. The Gestapo wouldn’t appreciate your gesture. Especially since she was followed today.”

“We’ve all been shadowed. She’ll have to watch her step, but she’s a smart woman.”

Being smart hadn’t been enough for many people Patrik knew.

Bram rambled, circuiting the stuffy room as he did. “There are too many people in this city, in this country, who have closed their eyes to anti-Semitism for too long. President Horthy awakened the sleeping giant by trying to make peace with the Allies, and now reality is here. Time for us to shake off our slumber and push back. To fight what is happening.”

“I agree with you. But is it too little too late? And at too great a cost?”

“Never too little. Never too late. Always worth whatever price we have to pay.”

Thoughts of what the Nazis might do to Éva in retaliation sucked out what little air there was left in the room. Everyone knew how ruthless and brutal the Nazis were, though no one spoke about it. If he was caught, if Zofia was caught, everyone associated with them would pay the price. Patrik leaned on the table to steady himself.

“Why don’t you go home and get some rest?” Bram slapped Patrik on the shoulder. “You look like you could use it. Since God gave me a motor that runs all the time, and I’m already awake,

you might as well take advantage of my offer. It will probably be the best one you get all day.”

Patrik’s eyes were heavy, and the page’s print swam in front of him. Bram was right. Nothing sounded better to Patrik at this moment than a mattress and a feather pillow. Perhaps tonight he would manage to fall asleep. Perhaps tonight his dreams wouldn’t haunt him. His flat was a few blocks from here, down a couple of alleys and across a single street. He’d snuck around past curfew plenty of times.

After a last farewell to Bram, he exited the room. Bram clicked the lock shut behind him.

Tonight, the moon scuttled behind clouds that dropped a light mist. At least it wasn’t the snow they’d had earlier in the month. April in Budapest. Would spring ever arrive? Maybe not. Maybe with the Germans, winter was perpetual.

He scurried down the alley and took a left at another back street. In the dim light, he made out his building up ahead, the many tall windows dark. All he had to do was cross this street and he would be home.

He set out.

His foot slid on a small remaining patch of ice.

In horrible slow motion, he flew into the air and landed hard on the ground.

His hands throbbed. White-hot pain raced from his tail bone up his spine.

For several seconds, he sat without moving. He couldn’t stay here forever, but every breath, every flinch of his muscles was excruciating. He mustn’t cry out. He bit his tongue until he tasted blood.

“Hey, you there. It’s after curfew. What are you doing out?”

A German soldier dressed in a long, dark coat and tall, dark boots marched toward him.

And Patrik was in no shape to run.