

PROLOGUE

SECRET-BEARER

1942

Auschwitz, Poland

JANA IVANOVA WAS CHOSEN: one of fifty Jewish women in the Politische Abteilung, where she worked as a typist. Each night, she typed death certificates. She processed a card with the hour of death. She was free to choose from a list of thirty-four prescribed diseases for the cause of death, to choose the time. *At 6:42 A.M. the Polish Jewish Prisoner X died of pneumonia.* The documents were sealed with the signature of an SS physician. Her cards were filled out with false accuracy—the cause of death was always the same.

One day, when the call came, Jana followed the SS man to an alcove. On his breath, she smelled chocolate and the rich odor collided with the memory of Ivanova's, her family's sweetshop, in Prague.

The colors, the smells, the plenty—prunes and sunflower seeds dipped in extra-dark chocolate, halvah studded with nuts, not to

mention butter mints, caramels, fireballs, licorice, and toffee. Her father, Vilem, held her in one arm, fed her butter mints with the other, teardrops of pink, pale yellow, mint green. They melted smoothly against her tongue, stuck to the roof of her mouth, as she crunched the sweet white sprinkles. The wave of memory makes her eyes burn. Days after school, Jana watched over her younger sister and three little brothers, and helped her mother in the candy shop. Nights, her father sculpted his beautiful, ferocious heads in their building's basement. Jana liked to be in the candy store, but even more, she lived for her time down below with her father. When he came into a room, he took up all the space, he was all Jana could see. The way he looked at her, the light she brought into his face made Jana feel more alive than anything.

As a secretary of death, Jana wrote the name and numbers of the people who were "selected." One day, her father's name was on the list. She begged the *Rottenführer* to spare him. "What does it matter?" he asked. "Today, tomorrow, next week?"

Jana Ivanova made a card for her father—*Herzschwäche*, heart failure. Each night, she talked to her father in her head, heard his voice, conjured the features of his face. She wasn't sure how long she could hold these beloved sounds and shapes intact, before they blurred.

The SS men called Jana and the other typists, *Geheimnisträgerinnen*, secret-bearers, the troop on its way to heaven. For their secrets could only be safeguarded by their deaths. When would it come? That morning? At nightfall? The day after tomorrow? Next week?

In that way, Jana knew she was the same as the other Jewish

prisoners, her father, mother, sister and baby brothers, her grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins . . . but in another way, she was special, different. Jana was allowed to bathe, she got a little more food, she could wear a kerchief over her shaved skull. She lived inside daydreams, dreams more vivid than the terrors of her nights, dreams that put a sparkle in her dark brown eyes and a half-smile on her full lips. She dreamt she would give birth to a child someday, a beautiful, healthy baby who would take after her father. A girl! Why did she see this girl? The dream of a daughter sustained her. She could make it through another day.



1947

Bremerhaven, Germany

JANA IVANOVA CLIMBED QUICKLY to the highest deck of the ship. She was surprised by the strength in her legs, the spring to her step. She was alone on deck, he rested down below, as they sailed from Bremerhaven, Germany to Halifax, Canada. It was cold on deck, bracing, wind whipping off the sea. The sky above shone pale, the sea dark blue. The wind made her face flush, the sea-spray prickling her cheeks, salting her chapped lips. Her hair, choppy and chin-length, flurried about her face, into her eyes. It had grown in dark and straight, lank planes instead of curls, nearly black. Jana gazed through binoculars and watched the turbulent darkness all around, the flapping white gulls. They keened with a desperate, mournful sound that pierced her heart. She was free now, alive. Jana glanced at her arm with the tattoo number and could barely believe she was here. She willed that

her suffering would fade with this new life; and she willed this, willed that she would give birth to the child she had imagined for so long, a beautiful, healthy girl.

Jana spotted the man who had saved her life—brought her back to life—climbing up on deck to join her, the camera slung around his neck. He lifted the camera and took aim. Jana stretched her chapped lips into a smile, her eyes tearing in the wind, streaming down her face. The horror was behind her. She would not turn around.



PART I
HIDING

Memory Book
Winter 1968

PART I
HIDING

Mama, where is you?

Willow, for me say, where are you?

Where are you, Mama?

Not here.

I see you!

Don't touch. You'll smudge the picture.

You is . . .

For me say, you are.

You are, Mama?

Just yes.

Why I am Willow, Mama?

Oh, lovey, the willow is the most beautiful tree, grows so strong.

Look out in the yard, blue it looks tonight. Like a silver

Memory Book
Winter 1968

Mama, where is you?

Willow, for me say, where are you?

Where are you, Mama?

Not here.

I see you!

Don't touch. You'll smudge the picture.

You is . . .

For me say, you are.

You are, Mama?

Jane Ives.

Why I am Willow, Mama?

*Oh, lovey, the willow is the most beautiful tree, graceful, but strong,
tough. Look out in the yard, blue it looks tonight. Blue willow, silvery*

*blue, so strong, stronger than what, I don't know. The willow bends,
lovey, but won't ever break.*

Where is you, Mama. In this picture?

Hiding.

Behind your Daddy. He's so big. How old is you Mama?

Are you. About your age.

I'm four soon.

Another year, you have yet.

Why you hide, Mama?

To make people find me, maybe not find me.

Mama, close your eyes.

*Willow! Come out right now! Time for bed. Willow, where are
you?*

ONE

January 2005

Kingston, New Jersey

A LETTER. The creamy envelope looks fresh, as if it has not even gone through the postal service, and it is addressed to “Miss Jane Ives, 7 Madison Street, Kingston, N.J., U.S.A.” No zip code. Jane holds the letter, feeling its weight in her hand, the rich texture of the stationery, fancy paper with a grain like wood.

She stopped hoping for a certain letter years ago when Willow turned five. She got her answer a few weeks before Willow’s birthday, not the answer she yearned for, but an answer nonetheless. For years she had waited, hoped, yearned. She harassed the poor postman—he saw her coming and cringed. She ran out into the street when he was still several houses away, nearly tackling him, tearing into his canvas sack if he was too slow for her, grabbing other people’s neat stacks of mail and rifling through to make sure there was no mistake . . . But the letter never came.

Through the years, Jane kept busy, teaching kindergarten at Cedarpark School in Kingston, taking long walks each afternoon with her best friend, Sunny, attending Willow's puppet plays. Her days were full, and the yearning for this one letter receded to the background like static. She rarely received a letter. There was always mail, of course, she made sure of that—stacks of catalogs from around the globe, subscriptions to six magazines and three newspapers, but a letter, that was rare. A letter would mean trouble, no? Who would write?

Willow, now up in Montréal, called. Until her daughter's move up north to Canada a month ago, Jane had talked to Willow once, twice, even three times a day. Twenty-four hours without some contact with her daughter was hard for Jane to bear.

She had, after all, just the one child, always her child, even though Willow is now nearly forty. But with her move to Montréal, Willow had insisted on a new routine. A time, a schedule for calls. *So I'll be sure you'll get me, Mama.* Spoiled, I am, Jane thought, glancing at the fridge where she kept Willow's schedule tacked to the door with a bright apple magnet, so she could contact her any time of the day. Or night. Moved up to Montréal to take a job as artist in residence at the old jam factory, *Usine de Confiture*. *Usine C*, they called it now, a theater, where Willow would do her puppet plays and a little teaching. It was an honor.

Yet Jane suspects Willow headed up to Montréal for more than a job. Her heart flutters in her chest, a trapped butterfly. There are things Jane needs to talk to her daughter about.

She thumps the stack of mail on the kitchen table and sinks into a chair, her fingers trembling. She flips the envelope over: it

is not from Willow, not from a person, no one she knows. It looks official. From an organization called WITNESS: THE HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE FOUNDATION.

Jane considers throwing it into the garbage, hiding it, tearing the paper to tiny shreds, burning them, chewing, even swallowing the bits. Making the letter not be.

Records, they have always: files, names, information.

Dear Miss Ives:

We are in the process of collecting and documenting testimony of survivors of the Holocaust like yourself. We are honored to invite you back to Montréal to tell your story, in your own words.

Enclosed here, you will find detailed information about our Foundation, our history, and our vision for the future. So we will never forget to remember . . .

There is more, a thick clump of literature, the catalog of the foundation with its yellow Mogen David set aflame, other images, children, parents, grandparents, old sepia photos with tattered borders, but what catches Jane's attention is a large, pink sticky note slapped onto the catalog. She adjusts her bifocals to read the handwritten scrawl.

Dear Jane,

I'm working at the Witness Foundation now. It's intense, but I'm learning a lot. Hope it's okay that I gave them your name and address. My father said it would be fine, good even. The directors are always trying to track down new survivors—sorry, that didn't come out right, but you

know what I mean—while they're still—you know. Sorry I'm babbling, what else is new? Can you babble in print? Whatever.

It would be so cool if you could come up here and work with us. I don't do the interviews myself, but maybe in time, who knows? Now I'm just an assistant, girl-Friday-type person, but it's interesting. Anyway, it would be great to see you! And I'm sure Willow misses you. The theater she's at is this out-of-the-way hub of the arts, if that makes sense, and it's a draw for some top artists doing new work. Personally, I plan to see every one of her shows, maybe even take a class in marionette making. Your daughter is one talented woman, but you already know that, right?

XOXO, Shoshy

Jane sets the letter on the counter and measures grounds and water for coffee. The girl's father, Leonard Rappaport, is her neighbor in Kingston. Jane taught him at Cedarpark School and now he is a big *makher*, head of Jewish Studies at Princeton University.

Jane imagines telling her best friend Sunny all about this letter to make it feel less strange. Witness? What kind of word is that? Everyone is putting on a show these days, Jane thinks, showing off what should be private.

My name, it looks like someone else's. Not mine. My story, no one wanted to hear. Mine and not mine. Blame those who would not listen.

In the little bathroom off the kitchen, Jane splashes cold water on her face, then stares into the mirror above the sink. There she is. Round, rosy face with a cap of straight, silver hair and girlish

bangs. She is just five feet tall and built like a fireplug, a perfect size fourteen petite, with a determined waddling gait, her stout arms propelling her forward. She feels solid and healthy and has no desire to slim down.

Five years ago, she survived breast cancer, and when her weight dropped with the therapy, it caused her a panic she had not felt since the war. She was disappearing. Jane has an ache in her right shoulder, even after her operation, and on damp days the pain is bad. Sometimes, she doesn't hear because of a buzzing in her left ear, but that passes too, along with the dizziness. She managed to keep both breasts and, knock on wood, has been in the clear ever since. Some days when she is anxious, alone, Jane feels her heart race, an odd sensation, clawing, an animal caught in her chest. But it always goes away. Why worry?

The aunt and uncle, all the cousins in Montréal—relatives of the man who saved her life—greeted them at the train station. Jana remembers the crowd, feels again the heat and crush of their bodies, the smell of their eager breath. Relatives and friends.

Me, no one recognized, because no one knew me.

All around her, Jana heard English and French, foreign languages. Growing up in Prague, she spoke Czech and Yiddish, as well as German, which saved her. A smattering of Hungarian in the DP camp at Belsen. Words, phrases, sentences to survive.

She remembers the tiny apartment on Jeanne Mance in Montréal, its outside staircase zigzagging upward. Weathered brick, flaking yellow trim the color of lemon pie filling. Seven they were, crowded into that flat, family and yet not.

When Jana tried to speak, they shushed her. Sha, Sha. Don't let's talk about those things. Forget the past, be glad you lived, don't make others uncomfortable.

Good news, good times! That's what everyone wanted. Isn't that what most people want? All the time?

Don't know, don't tell. Hiding again. Dress nice, speak like a Canadian, don't say words you can't pronounce well. And in America, the same. What could be more American than Jane Ives? A new life, fresh start for her beautiful baby girl. Willow. A willow bends, never breaks.

Outside her kitchen window, the January morning is sunny, still and windless, all glittering pines and deep-shadowed snow. Jane will keep to her routine, which gives shape to her day. Sipping her coffee, she leafs through one of her memory books. As Willow grew up, each night they lay, side-by-side, on Willow's bed, the heavy books spread across their laps, heads propped on pillows, leafing through them, their bedtime ritual. Now Jane does it out of habit, nearly every morning and evening. It puts her life out in front of her where she can see and touch it, where all of her losses are links in a story, where everything flows and makes sense, even looks pretty.

She is thankful for her girlhood friend in Prague, Michaela, whose family saved valuables and cherished photos and mementoes for Jane, hiding and preserving these treasures, sending them to her after the war. Dear friends are a *brukhe*, a blessing.

Jane is still transfixed by her own image, the image of her daughter, of the people and places she loves and once loved. She

cherishes these bits and pieces, miniatures of reality, and can't help wondering if people expelled from their own pasts become the most fervent picture-takers and collectors. Jane is grateful to make memories; soon there will be no more new memories to make.

She picks up the phone, dials Willow's number, her hand trembling as a familiar voice rings out through the kitchen window.

"Yoo-hoo, Janey!"

She jumps, clutches her chest, the receiver still in her hand. "A heart attack, you'll give me!" She lumbers up from her chair and slides open the glass door to the windowed sunroom, putting a plump arm around her dear friend, guiding her in. Sunny brings in the fresh, bracing scent of the day—pines, wood smoke, cold air.

"Like winter, you smell. Nice." Jane strokes Sunny's hair, a glistening platinum, which complements her fair skin and teal eyes. She is a tall, strong-boned woman, with long, lithe limbs and wide, womanly hips, which come as a surprise. She's nineteen years younger than Jane, though most put her at little more than fifty-five. They became fast friends at Cedarpark School, sharing coffee and anecdotes about their students, Janey's little ones and Sunny's big fifth-graders.

"I'm antsy today," Sunny says. "I need a walk."

"It's not time yet," protests Jane. "I didn't go through all the mail."

"The mail can wait, dear. It's lovely out, I can hardly believe it's January."

"I got a letter."

“From Willow?”

Jane shakes her head.

“Nothing bad, I hope.”

“Well, bad or good, I don’t know.”

“Go put on your coat, Janey. Let’s talk as we walk.”

The friends head out toward the canal, and Sunny takes Jane’s arm as the light turns pearly for a moment. This morning, the woody path is nearly deserted, shards of sun and sky splintering through trees. The ground is hard and crunches under their feet, as they watch glints off the canal. Jane loves it in here; enveloped by the trees and sound of the water, she feels safe. They stroll alongside the canal, where a grove of white birch leans toward the slow-moving river.

Now and then, Jane picks up treasures: a pinecone, the skeleton of a small animal, a pod, or pretty stone. These she saves too, artifacts to complement the photographs in her memory books.

“So how is Willow?” Sunny asks.

“Lately, she is always with one question or another,” says Jane, glancing into her friend’s eyes, straining to see them through her sunglasses. “In the night, she has strange dreams, she tells me.”

“It’s a new life for her.”

Jane clucks her tongue. “I got a letter.”

“You said. How nice—from *whom*?”

“Not a whom, a place.”

“Stop being mysterious Janey, what place? What about?”

“One of those organizations. Like poison mushrooms, they crop up!”

“*What* organization? A hate organization?”

“*Oy gevald!* Hate, I can handle. This is worse, curiosity, *farshteyst?*”

“Spell it out for me, Janey.”

“Tell your story, my story, I’m okay, you’re okay, I’m not okay, you’re not okay. Like pornography, this documenting.”

The wintry sun slips behind a cloud and the towpath is engulfed in a greenish dark. Sunny flips her sunglasses on top of her head. It is so still, all they hear is the crunch of their boots on the hard frozen path, the scurry of a squirrel up a dry trunk.

“Witness, they call themselves. They want me to come up to Montréal to tell . . .”

“About your life during the war? And after?”

“*Vos iz der takhles? Vos iz der khilek?* What’s the difference? Now? Useless!”

“Well, I’m inclined to disagree with you.”

“Why?” Jane stops suddenly and stares down her friend.

“If you don’t tell your story, who will? It’s something you can leave behind, for Willow, for . . .”

“I’m not going anywhere so fast.”

“It’s a nice excuse to go back to Montréal to see Willow. Do it while you are hale and hearty. You love that city! Like nowhere else on earth you tell me.”

“Willow, she has her whole life out before her,” Jane says, speaking too fast. “All the men look at her when she’s passing.” Jane ruffles her bangs with a mittened hand. “Not one can she stick with, Sunny, nothing sticks with her.”

“Her puppets stick. She’s an artist.”

“Don’t let’s talk about it.”

"You miss Willow, dear."

A winter hawk perches on a branch, chocolate-brown with a light-banded tail and black-tipped feathers. It hovers a moment with deep, vigorous wing beats.

"What I remember, I don't know. There is no beginning, no end. It will make no sense."

Sunny touches Jane's wrist, a fleshy space between mitten and coat sleeve, and Jane feels the warmth of her friend's hand, which is bare.

"Your gloves, put them on," Jane commands.

"I don't feel the cold today."

"Sunny," Jane says suddenly, "at dusk let's come out again. I want to see a snowy owl."

"Wouldn't it be lovely?"

Jane hooks her hand through her friend's arm and they continue down the wooded path, the canal glistening beside them, risen with rainwater and melting snow, the winter-warped trees lacy silhouettes against the sky. When Jane needs to rest, they stop at a bench, or a sturdy stump and sit awhile. Warm now, Jane pulls off her mittens and hat, which makes her scalp itch. She looks into the water, keeps on looking. Pearly clouds shroud the sun and a wind with the underside of winter lifts her hair from the back of her neck, where she is sweating. Without warning, she gets up and leans down to the river and thrusts her hand into the current. The water is glacial, it makes her bones ache. Jane stares down into the river, the reflection of trees shivering into a shadow world. As they walk back the way they came, they pass under a weeping willow.

“Your favorite,” Sunny declares with an impish smile.

“The roots, you can’t garden around. So many pests, every minute dropping leaves.”

“So graceful,” puts in Sunny.

“They grow quickly,” adds Jane, “*anything* they adjust to, rain is all they need.”

Their litany calms her, as Jane watches the shadow of the willow, black across the path, green in the water. Like two different trees, showing different colors.

That night, Jane is submerged in the dream again. Hands clawing at damp earth, nails ragged, fingers bloody. Digging, digging. Digging up or burying, she never knows for sure.

Jane cannot mention this dream to anyone—she never talks of it—not even to Sunny, whom she tells nearly everything, and certainly not to Willow. This dream is hers alone.

In her sleep, she furiously buries or digs up the menorah, the one her father sculpted for her of brass, with a candleholder modeled after each member of their family, a gift for her thirteenth birthday. Such a full house they had: mother and father, two daughters, three sons, even a puppy, Samo.

Frantic, on her knees in the moist, cool earth of the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague. A burying to keep alive, to hide, to make safe. Or is it a digging up to salvage, find, bring back to life?

The dream changes, but at its heart, remains the same. Digging up or burying, as if her life—all their lives—depend upon it. *Will the menorah still be there, intact? Broken or stolen? Vanished?*

Digging up or burying, over and over, no end or beginning.

Jane awakens in the midst of her task. She lies very still until the icy sweat dries, her trembling stops, the afterimage fades. She has no idea what time it is, but soon, soon she must begin another day.

