

The
Refrain
Within

MUSIC OF HOPE SERIES

Book Three

A WWII Women's Fiction Novel

LIZ TOLSMA

 GILEAD
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MUSIC OF HOPE SERIES

The Melody of the Soul

When the Heart Sings

The Refrain Within

The Refrain Within, book #3 in the Music of Hope series

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*One needs something to believe in,
something for which one can have wholehearted enthusiasm.*

—Hannah Senesh, 1921–1944, Hungarian-Jewish
soldier and WWII rescue mission volunteer

*Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been
honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men
for thee, and people for thy life. Fear not: for I am with thee:
I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the
west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep
not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the
ends of the earth.*

—Isaiah 43:4–6



Glossary of Foreign Words

Hungarian Words

A múzsám (ah MEW-zham) – my muse

Anya (AHN-ya) – mother

Apu (AH-poo) – father

Asszony (AH-soyn) – Mrs. (as in some Asian languages such as Korean and Japanese, it comes after the surname)

Buda (BOO-duh) – the more residential side of the city

Csillagom (CHEE-la-gome) – dear

Édesem (EE-deh-shem) – sweetheart

Gundel palacsinta (GOO-dell paula-CHEEN-tuh) – crepes with ground walnuts, raisins, and rum and topped with dark chocolate sauce

Halászlé (HAW-lass-lee) – soup loaded with carp and paprika

Igen (EE-gen) – yes (the number of times it is said in a row indicates a level of excitement)

Jó napot kívánok (Yo nuh-POTE kee-VAN-oke) – good day, formally

Köszönöm (KOO-sih-num) – thank you

Langosi (LAHN-go-she) – fried dough topped with cheese

Lecsó (LEH-cho) – vegetable stew

Nem (NEM) – no

Nyuszikám (NEW-see-cam) – my bunny

Pálinka (PAH-lean-kuh) – Hungarian fruit brandy

Pengő (PEN-gyou) – Hungarian currency from 1927 until 1945; in June 1944, 1 USD = 33.51 pengő

Pest (PESHT) – the more commercial side of the city

Szent Istvan Bazilika (ZENT ISHT-von BOZ-eel-ih-kah) – Saint Ivan’s Basilica, a famous Budapest church

Szerelmem (Suh-RELL-mem) – my dear

Tiyul (tee-YOOL) – an exodus or journey

Ulti (OOHL-tee) – a trick-taking card game for three players

Úr (OOR) – mister

As with most Asian languages, in Hungarian the family name comes first and then the Christian name. For example, I would be Tolsma Liz. The heroine in the story is Bognár Éva. Titles also come after the family name. *Úr* means “mister,” so when referring to Éva’s father, he will be called Bognár *Úr*, or Mr. Bognár.



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.



Chapter Two

Patrik lay on the ground, incredible pain shooting up his back and down his legs.

The German soldier advanced.

Patrik's pulse pounded in his ears, drowning out the man's shouts. It didn't matter. He understood the rifle that the thin but muscular soldier shrugged from his shoulder. Germans had shot people for far less provocation than being out after curfew.

And they didn't bother to ask questions.

Biting the inside of his cheek to stifle his scream, Patrik jumped to his feet. Half limping, half running, he tore down the street.

The Nazi's boots sounded on the pavement behind him, pounding a tympanic beat, driving, relentless, drawing closer.

The pain drove Patrik's breath from his lungs. He would never outrun the soldier, not in this condition. A plan, that's what he needed. He gasped for air, his mind racing faster than his legs.

The blackout darkness might be his best defense. That and his knowledge of Budapest's side alleys might give Patrik a fighting chance.

There—a narrow, dark crevice between the Baroque-style buildings. Patrik darted into it and down an alley that reeked of rotting cabbage and spoiled eggs.

His skin tingled, a sure sign the soldier tailed him. What Zofia must have felt earlier today.

Near the end of the alley, Patrik stubbed his toe on something, perhaps a piece of wood. He clenched his fists, digging

his fingernails into his palms. Now his foot throbbed too. But there could be no pausing. Onward he hobbled, his chest heaving, dodging left down another of the city's back streets as rats scurried in front of him. Behind him, the German puffed. Good. Perhaps he was tiring. Patrik's own legs burned. He wouldn't be able to keep going much longer.

A thin shaft of light from the upper story of a building shone into the alley, illuminating an oversized construction garbage bin. Perfect.

Avoiding the light, Patrik slipped behind the metal container, breathing through his mouth, making as little noise as possible.

Footsteps. Patrik closed his eyes. The steps halted in front of him.

Tick, tock, tick, tock. Patrik covered his Swiss watch to dampen the sound. How long before the soldier searched behind the bin? Patrik scooted farther into the shadows, his tail bone screaming in agony as his backside hit the rough brick of the building.

In a deep voice, the Nazi swore. The footsteps moved on. Not toward Patrik but away from him.

When he opened his eyes, Patrik couldn't make out a thing. The light from above had been extinguished. God's providence.

Still he stayed planted in place. The German might be trying to lure him into a false sense of security, ready to pounce on him the minute he moved from his spot. So even though he needed an ice pack on his backside and another on his toe, he didn't twitch a muscle.

The adrenaline drained from his body, and sleepiness overtook him.

Patrik nodded off.



When Patrik awoke, still squatting behind the stinking refuse bin, light brightened his surroundings. Above, in the narrow

opening between the buildings, was blue sky. Patrik drew his coat around himself, his fingers stiff with the cold.

Perhaps it was time for the monkey to jump in the water. The soldier wouldn't have waited for hours to catch a lone man breaking curfew. Still, Patrik hesitated. He peered around the corner of the bin. The only creature stirring here at this time of day was a scrawny rat.

His back in agony, Patrik crawled from hiding. No movement at either end of the lane. Fire raced through his aching body as he stood up.

Though he wasn't sure of his exact location, he was familiar with the area in general. He'd never make it home in this condition. Where could he go to rest and maybe procure a few aspirin? Someone he could trust.

Ah. Éva and Zofia's music studio wasn't far. If he couldn't depend on his fiancée and his future sister-in-law, whom could he trust? Perhaps they had aspirin. At least they had a waiting room with a comfortable chair.

The odor of spoiled milk and ripe fish clung to him as he crept down the main street. The few early morning commuters steered a wide path around him.

Up ahead was Éva's ground-floor studio. A large plate-glass window, decorated with flowers constructed from sheet music, occupied the storefront next to the door.

He shuffled up and tried the knob. Locked. Of course. It was far too early in the morning for anyone to be here. He fished his key from his pocket.

"Excuse me, sir. Can I help you?"

He startled at the sound, then relaxed. It was his beautiful Éva, the loveliest woman he'd ever seen. Tall and slender, she gazed at him with her warm brown eyes, her wavy, golden hair brushing her shoulders. The deep purple of her long wool coat complemented her fair skin. "Good morning, *a múzsám*." His muse.

He kissed her lips, lingering, desiring to stay here and forget the war, the Nazis, his night in the alleyway.

When she broke away with a sniff, his lips tingled.

She drew back and covered her wrinkled nose. "While this is a wonderful surprise, you stink, and it's barely after sunrise. What happened?"

"Well, I was in the neighborhood . . ."

She raised her fair eyebrows. "Really?"

"Really."

Éva fumbled with the key before opening the door. "I'm not a fool. How about the truth, Patrik?"

The truth. One of the few things she demanded of him. One of the few things he was unable to fully give her. "It was late last night. I got caught up in my work at the concert hall and was hurrying home when I fell. I slept in an alley."

"An alley? My poor dear. You have to watch the time better."

"I do. You're right." She believed his story. He was getting a little too good at lying. But he couldn't tell her. She didn't know what he did during the hours he wasn't with her or at work. For both their sakes, he aimed to keep it that way.

He stepped into the studio, Éva forging ahead of him. To his left, racks of music. In front of him, a long counter over a glass display case filled with instruments from flutes to trumpets. On his right, a grouping of chairs and a table holding a couple of magazines. Behind that, a hall with a row of doors. The lesson rooms.

"How about some tea and an aspirin?"

"That would be perfect."

He trailed her into the kitchen behind the counter. In short order, she brought him a warm cup of tea and the pill and settled him on a chair, rolling up her own coat to provide a bit of cushioning.

"What would I do without you?" He pecked her on the cheek.

"Let's hope you never have to find out."

That was his constant prayer these days.

He sipped the spiced liquid. The warmth spread through him, driving away the last vestiges of the chill that had permeated him.

A small bell chimed, and a minute later, Zofia joined them. Her mouth opened into an O. "Patrik, what are you doing here?"

"Dracula was chasing me, and I fell." A code she would understand and something that made Éva laugh as intended. "I came here because I knew I'd get proper care."

"Of that I have no doubt." She patted a strand of red hair back into its roll and nodded to Éva. "We received that new shipment of music books yesterday. Would you mind sorting through them? I'll be along in a moment to help you."

After a glance between Patrik and Zofia, Éva left the room. Zofia leaned on the table near him and spoke in a low voice. "What really happened?"

He gave her the details. "Do you think they're on to us?"



Early May 1944

Zofia shrugged into her blue coat, cringing at the sight of the yellow star sewn onto the lapel. The symbol that marked her as one to be feared. Hated. Killed.

Her husband, Ernő, stood in front of the apartment door, his arms crossed in front of him. "Why do you have to go out tonight? You weren't feeling well not that long ago."

She pecked him on the lips. "I'm fine now. Something I ate for lunch must have upset my stomach. You know this is for a private lesson. This student is frail and can't leave her home, but she loves to play the piano. Her one joy in life. And I'm thankful they continue to employ me, even at great risk to themselves. Not many people do anymore. Business at the shop has dropped off a great deal."

“Just stay home this evening. You can phone and cancel. Under the circumstances, I’m sure they won’t mind. I don’t like the idea of you being out alone. Not after you were tailed the other day.”

“I’m sure that was nothing more than my imagination.” She should never have told Éva, who in turn had told Ernő. She had caused him worry and had made it more difficult on herself to slip out to meetings.

“I could see it shook you up.”

“I’ll be fine. Quit fretting.” He didn’t understand the importance of where she was going.

“Let me walk you there.”

That was the last thing he could do. “No need. I wouldn’t be good company. You stay home where it’s warm.”

“I’d rather be cold than have you in danger. You aren’t involved in the same sorts of activities as in Poland, are you?”

Another thing she should have never told him. His suspicion wasn’t good, not good at all. She touched both his cheeks. “Of course not. You are my life now. My previous activities cost me everything. I wouldn’t put you or your family at risk.”

But wasn’t that exactly what she was doing?

Even after what had happened, though, she had to help her people any way she could. The cost of action was high. The cost of inaction was higher.

All she could do was trust herself and those she loved to God. That’s what Mama would tell her.

“I hope not. You’ve done your part.”

“You’re overprotective, and I love you for it, but now it’s time for you to let go.” She kissed him again, stroked his blond hair and his square jaw, and slid outside, shutting the door before he had a chance to protest further.

Once down the steps and on the street, she released a breath she hadn’t realized she’d held. In truth, there was no student and no in-home lesson. Instead, she headed toward Bram’s flat and a meeting of their branch of the Zionist Youth.

Her illness and Ernő's reluctance to let her go put her behind schedule. She scurried as fast as she could down the damp street and slipped by the sentry at the door and into the apartment just as the meeting got underway. So many Jewish young people crowded the room, it was almost impossible to pick out the black lacquer Chinese-style furniture covered in bright designs.

Patrik stood beside Bram, a head taller than the man who was always in motion, Bram's green eyes always twinkling. No chairs were set up. Instead, most of the guests held glasses of fruit brandy, *pálinka*, so that in case of a raid, the meeting would appear to be nothing more than a cocktail party.

Before she even shed her coat, Bram motioned her forward. "Here is the lady of the hour. That pamphlet you wrote calling the citizens of Hungary to throw off their apathy and come to their senses about the senseless, just brilliant. A masterpiece."

At the round of polite applause, she shuffled her feet and studied the floor. "All I did was share my thoughts."

"And so eloquently. Please tell me you have more inside you dying to be written."

She nodded. Indeed, several ideas swam in her head. If she had more privacy at the studio or at home, she would be able to produce many more pamphlets for their organization.

"Good, good, so glad to hear that. With Jews being rounded up all over the country and shipped to Poland, it's more important than ever that we give a rallying cry to the rest of the nation. The time for sloth and indifference is over. The time for action is now."

"Hear, hear." Several members raised their glasses.

The teenage boy posted at the cracked-open door closed it and shushed them. "German voices. Coming up the stairs."

The party-like atmosphere fizzled. A tickle settled into the bottom of Zofia's stomach. Were these the men who had been following her earlier? Must be. She'd brought them here. Ernő had been right in warning her not to go out. She should have listened to him.

Zofia slipped to the piano and opened the lid. “It’s a party, remember, everyone.” Without any other fanfare, she touched the keys and brought forth Lizst’s Hungarian Rhapsody. Her fellow Zionists gathered around the piano.

Before she finished the song’s introduction, before she came to the rolling, rocking melody, without so much as a knock, the door flew open and three armed Germans strode inside. “All of you, into the corner.”

All twenty or so of them?

“Move it. Now.”

As one, they scuffled toward the far corner. Bram moved a painted silk screen, so everyone would fit.

Zofia huddled close to Patrik and whispered to him, “This must be who was following me.”

He shrugged.

“Turn the place upside down.” A lanky Gestapo officer, as tall as Patrik and as fair as Patrik was dark, marched over and stood toe to toe with him. “Do you have something to say, Jew boy?” He slapped Patrik.

Patrik didn’t flinch.

“Answer me.”

“I’m not Jewish. Check my papers.”

“Then a Jew lover, at the very best.” He slapped Patrik once more.

Zofia’s throat swelled. What was going to happen to them? Would they all be arrested?

What had she done?

Some of them, like Patrik, had false identity papers. Others, like her, didn’t. A careful search would turn up that fact and jeopardize their entire operation.

Bram left the corner, ambled to his ebony drink cart, and poured three glasses of *pálinka*. He turned to the agent in charge and clapped him on the back. “Have a drink and join the party.”

The officer eyed Bram.

“Come on. There’s no harm in a single glass. Your superiors don’t even need to know. There’s nothing for you to find, so you might as well enjoy yourselves while you’re here. Warm your insides before you head out. Chilly spring we’re having.”

The German grabbed the proffered glass, downed the liquid in a single gulp, and handed the tumbler back to Bram.

“See, I only keep the finest. I’ll get you another one.”

A tall, fair-haired man, almost Aryan in appearance, grabbed the glass from the German. “Let me do it, Bram. Keep the others calm.”

“Thank you, Simon. I’m grateful to you.”

Simon slid past Zofia, and she shivered. The man had been to several of their meetings, and Bram acted as if he trusted him, but something about his lazy smile was as oily as a Danube eel.

After the tall Nazi drank two more glasses, the two soldiers under his command returned from their search. “Nothing out of place here, sir. Do you want us to bring some of them in for questioning?”

The officer waved them away. “That’s enough.” He slurred his words. “There’s nothing here. A few Jews we’ll deal with sooner or later. And a man with the best bottle of *pálinka* I’ve had in a long time.”

The Nazi’s two comrades steadied him as they exited the flat.

A din filled the room, and a wave of nausea overtook Zofia. She swayed, and Patrik steadied her. “That was too close.”

“Bram has a way of falling into a manure pile and coming out smelling like a rose. Though if they had searched me, they would have found this.” From the inside of her coat pocket, she pulled a sheet of paper.

Her latest writing.

Titled “In Defense of Those Who Assist Jews.”



Chapter Three

Mid-May 1944

Patrik held tight to Éva's hand as they strolled down the Danube Promenade along the sparkling blue-green river that separated the residential area, Buda, from the commercial and retail area known as Pest. The dying light illuminated the Chain suspension bridge, and beyond it, the green-domed Buda castle. The early evening air was cool but not as cold as it had been.

With the ever-present threat of Allied bombing attacks, any quiet evening such as this needed to be enjoyed.

Patrik squeezed Éva's hand. "I'm sorry I've been busy these past few weeks. I've missed you."

She gazed at him. "What's been keeping you so preoccupied?"

He kissed the back of her soft hand. "You, *a múzsám*." Adding to the list of lies. In fact, his work with the Zionists took up much of his time.

"Me?" She widened her deep brown eyes.

"*Igen*, you. As I look forward to our wedding, my heart is filled with music, consuming me. All these melodies play in my head, light, bright, happy songs. Ones you could dance to. My fingers can't form the notes on paper fast enough."

"I'm sorry to have caused you such trouble."

"You are the best kind of trouble I could ever have."

He ushered her into a small, quiet café and drank in the odors of paprika and fried potatoes and onions. They evoked memories of his mother's cooking. No one rivaled her in the kitchen.

What he wouldn't give for one more of her home-cooked meals. A black-suited waiter met them at the door. "Good evening. Since you're early, you have your pick of tables. One near the window, perhaps?"

Patrik nodded, and the waiter led them to their seats. With the blackout shades yet to be drawn, they had a magnificent view of the Danube, the sunset's brush painting it red and gold.

After they settled in and placed their orders, Éva leaned forward. "Speaking of trouble—"

"That's never what you want to hear at the beginning of a conversation."

"*Nem*, but Patrik, she's in trouble."

"Who? Zofia?" Just like Éva to run ahead and finish a story before giving all the details.

She furrowed her brow. "Why would you think Zofia?"

"Because she was followed. If it isn't her, I need more information, *a múzsám*."

She fiddled with the pristine white napkin in her lap. "Székely Ersebet."

"Ah, your prized pupil and the star of my youth orchestra."

"She never, ever misses a lesson. I haven't seen her since the invasion two months ago. Has she been at practice?"

"*Nem*, I haven't seen her. But that doesn't mean you should go searching for her. She's Jewish. And she lives in Kistarcsa."

"What does that mean?"

"You haven't heard?" He leaned forward.

"*Nem*."

An example of what they had been talking about at the meeting the other night. Ignorance. Apathy. "She won't be coming anymore."

Her brown eyes clouded. "I don't understand."

"You've heard about the roundup of Jews outside of the city? Trains leave there every day, full of human cargo bound for a place much worse than the camp at Kistarcsa."

“That’s what they say.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Have you seen those camps?”

“*Nem.*” He couldn’t. Prayed to God that he never would.

“Then you don’t know for sure. I’m going to find her. If I need to bring her to the city, I will.”

He banged on the table. The few other patrons in the café stared at them. “You won’t. Do you hear me? Don’t go anywhere near there.” His mouth dried at the possibility of losing her too. He would lock her up somewhere safe if he had to.

She pushed her chair back, her shimmering eyes wide. “You’re frightening me.”

He forced himself to relax and keep his voice calm. “Good. You should be afraid. This isn’t a game. This is life. I don’t want anything to happen to you. We’re about to get married and, Lord willing, have children. What would I do without you?”

“You could come with me to find her.”

He couldn’t. The images in his mind of what his family was suffering haunted him as it was. Taking Éva to one of these camps would only intensify his nightmares.

To protect the identity he’d constructed with such care, he couldn’t let her discover his secret. “Neither of us will go. I understand you and your heart, and that’s why I love you. But I’m too busy right now. You should be as well, with the last-minute arrangements for our wedding.”

“But—”

“For now, stay out of trouble. Please. I can’t lose you so close to when I can make you my wife.” He kissed her hand, so soft and smooth.

Éva made no reply, but he read her silence. She was bent on tracking down her student. “Promise me—”

“Éva, my dear, what a surprise to see you here.” A chunky, fair-haired woman clad in a black coat with a rose pin on the lapel stood at their table. “And who is this handsome fellow with you?”

Éva smiled, her grin tight and stiff. “This is my fiancé, Kedves Patrik. Patrik, this is an old schoolmate of mine, Lakatos Reka.”

Reka grimaced. “It’s nice to meet you, Patrik. But we aren’t old.”

“I only meant that we’ve known each other for a long time.”

A dimple appeared in Reka’s full cheek. “Of course we have, but it’s been a while since I’ve seen you. Not since I moved to Nagyvárád. Now I’m back in the city on business. I travel here every Monday and then back to the border on Thursdays. How are you doing? And that handsome brother of yours?”

“He and his wife are wonderful. Very happy together.”

Reka bent over and whispered, “Too bad she’s Polish. And Jewish. He could have done so much better for himself.”

Éva stiffened. Patrik squeezed his hands together. Reka was so typical of many Hungarians.

The two women chatted for a couple minutes more about people he’d never met, so he tuned them out. At long last, Reka waved and headed to her own table.

“You’re friends with her?”

Éva shook her head. “She always did have a crush on him.”

“On who?”

“Sorry. Guess I jumped ahead again. She always had her eye on Ernő. I never have been friends with her. We attended school together, but that was the extent of it. Ever since Ernő became involved with Zofia, she’s popped back into our lives, despite the fact she lives in Nagyvárád.”

Nagyvárád. The city where he’d been born, where his sisters still lived. A haunting melody arose in his mind, accompanied by images of his siblings’ faces, of their lives in the ghetto.

Nem. He would not think of these things. Not now. He shut off the memories and concentrated on the woman in front of him.

An air raid siren blasted the evening’s stillness.

Éva hunched over. “I hate those things.”

Though their food hadn’t yet arrived, Patrik laid a few *pengő*

on the table, then assisted Éva out of her chair. Her face was as white as the Carpathian snows, and she bit her lower lip.

“Don’t worry.” He grasped her by the elbow. “We’ll be fine.”

“Do you even know where a shelter is?”

The waiter picked that moment to scurry to the front. “Get down! Get down!” He shoved Patrik and Éva to the ground. The roar of bomber engines crescendoed above the whine of the sirens.

Patrik blanketed Éva with his own body, then covered his head.

Whistling noises filled the air.

Explosions shook the café.

The window above them shattered.

Splinters of glass rained down like hail.

Beneath him, Éva shuddered.

“Hush now, I’m here. Everything will be fine. God will take care of us.” *Please, Lord, do just that.*

The whistles and rumbles surrounded them for half a lifetime. The building shook a few more times but remained intact.

Then, as suddenly as the raid came, the bombers turned and headed home. Not until the all-clear sounded did Patrik move. He stood, shaking the glass from his back and his hair. He helped Éva to her feet and checked her for injuries. None visible.

She turned around so he could brush her back. “Oh God, *nem! Nem!*”

He followed her gaze.

There on the ground lay the black-suited waiter, his white shirt steeped with blood, an enormous, icicle-shaped shard of glass piercing his heart.



Patrik stepped between Éva and the waiter’s lifeless body and wrapped her in the cocoon of his embrace. She trembled as she leaned against him. Bombs ripping apart homes and lives. Hunger. Fear. Pain. When would it all end?

“Hush now, it’s over. You’re fine.” Patrik spoke the words into her blond hair as he rubbed her back. The action eased her thumping heart. After a while, her breathing returned to normal.

“Let’s get you out of here.”

“Shouldn’t we alert the authorities?”

He bent and kissed her cheek. “The police will find him when they search the buildings. Right now they’re busy giving aid to those who will benefit.”

Reka rushed to them, her blue eyes standing out in her pale face, the red of her rose pin the same shade as the waiter’s blood. “Oh my, oh my. That bomb almost killed us. Did you feel that? I’ve never been so scared in my life.” She glued herself to Patrik’s side and batted her eyelashes.

Éva swallowed the hard lump rising in her throat. “Are you injured?”

“My ears are ringing, and I think I twisted my ankle when I rushed over here. Could you take a peek at it, Patrik?”

“If you could run, then there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“But it’s throbbing.”

“I’m not a doctor.”

“Please.” Reka’s nasal whine was worse than the screech of the air raid sirens.

Patrik crouched and palpated Reka’s bare ankle. “No broken bones. I don’t even see any bruising.” He stood up again. “My prognosis is that you’ll live.”

Éva couldn’t stop the smile that spread across her face. Good for Patrik.

“I don’t know how I’m going to make it home.” Reka pursed her full lips into an inelegant pout.

Éva sighed. “Her parents live around the corner.”

“We’ll walk you home.” Patrik acted the gentleman while Éva longed to wave a magic wand and make Reka disappear.

“How gallant of you, Patrik. If you weren’t engaged to a friend of mine, I’d snatch you for myself.”

Éva fought to tamp down the heat rising in her chest. Not that she didn't trust Patrik. Still, when they were alone again, he would get an earful from her about his gallantry.

The three of them crunched their way through the café and out the door, Reka's limp almost convincing. Their walk wasn't far, five minutes at most, but the destruction along the way was unbelievable. Buildings that had weathered centuries of war and turmoil lay in heaps of rubble. One explosion had knocked a streetcar from its tracks. Éva averted her gaze from the bodies of passengers strewn about.

Patrik rubbed her shoulder. He could read her thoughts.

"Why didn't the alarm sound in time?" Eva shuddered. "No one had a chance to take cover."

"Who knows?" Patrik shook his head.

"Do the Germans want to see us all killed?"

Reka gave a hyena-like laugh. "Of course not. We have been loyal to them from the beginning. If not for that coward, President Horthy, our country would still be at peace. The Allies wouldn't be bombing us."

Patrik sighed. "I doubt that. The Soviets are land-hungry and eager to spread their ideology to the world. Hungary would be one tiny bite for their voracious appetite."

"Oooh." Reka sidled closer to Patrik. "Handsome and intelligent. I agree with every word you say about those fascist dogs. The Russians won't be satisfied until they've gobbled up every country in their way. That's why we need Germany."

Éva fisted her hands but held her tongue. Only by divine strength. Thank goodness, they arrived at Reka's parents' building in short order.

"How can I ever thank you, Patrik? You saved me."

"Hardly. No thanks are necessary."

Reka planted a big, noisy kiss on his cheek and hobbled into the building.

As soon as the door shut behind her, Patrik burst into laughter.

Éva huffed. “What do you find so amusing?”

“She is quite something.”

“I’m happy you recognize it. To top it off, she’s smitten with you. I’m glad you’re all mine.”

“Good thing, because she’s just my type.”

“You know how to lighten my mood.” What had she done to deserve such a man in her life?

They set off for the main road toward the bridge. More destruction. Homes. Businesses. Places of worship. Lives lost. Other lives that would never be the same. Jew or Gentile, it didn’t matter.

“Do you see my point now about how dangerous times have become?” He gestured at the devastation.

“It’s just as dangerous sitting on the davenport in the living room.”

He clamped his lips shut. What she said was true. Nowhere was safe now.

And the Allies had bombed Budapest, not Kistarcsa. She might even be safer in Kistarcsa.

Igen, she would search for Ersebet.