

PROLOGUE

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A black Edsel roared down a country lane, made a sharp turn into the gravel driveway, and disappeared into a vine-covered garage. The door lowered, coming to rest on the cracked cement floor.

A smartly dressed woman watched from the dining-room window of the clapboard farmhouse, smoothing back her cropped hair as the sky darkened to gunmetal gray and hail began to ping sharply against the window. She kept her eyes riveted on the side door of the garage, expecting to see him appear, clutching one of the old Burberry umbrellas that hung by his hunting boots, just inside.

Several minutes later there was still no sign of him. A violent shudder swept through the woman's body as she replayed the discussion they'd had the week before. While the rumbling thunder grew louder, she threw on her yellow rain slicker and strode out past the guesthouse to the garage.

Opening the passenger door of the car, she looked over to where he sat in the driver's seat. His head was tilted back; his eyes stared straight ahead. Blood seeped from behind his neck, and a clot of dark blood had pooled in the well of his right ear. She tried to rouse him, shaking him vigorously. She raced around to the driver's side, yanked open the door, and leaned in, looking straight into his face with fearful, knowing eyes.

Sickened, she backed out of the vehicle, and then, drawing on her diminishing resources of courage, lunged back in. Her eyes locked onto an envelope lying on the passenger seat, addressed to her in his distinctive scrawl. She looked down at his hands; they were empty, curled against his chest. Then she saw the gun resting on the floorboard.

Her mind floated free, dissociating itself from her body. She watched herself racing out the door, following the circular path toward the road and back to the garage again, emitting a primitive sound like an animal with its leg caught in a trap.

She forced herself to regain control. The grief and anger and raw pain could come later, but right now there was one thing to do before anything else—she had to open the other letter, the one in her bedroom safe. Her family's carefully constructed life was about to disintegrate.

October 23, 1956 – Budapest, Hungary

Orange, red, and yellow leaves swirled through the autumn air as Árpád Stern mounted the cracked stone steps of the spa behind the Gellert Hotel and approached the collection booth. He paid for his mud bath and massage, and took the stairs down to the basement.

His masseur, a sheet wrapped around his enormous body, nodded toward Árpád's usual room—number eight—with its chipped yellow walls and gray mosaic floor. Árpád removed the wire-rimmed glasses from his elongated ears and stripped off his clothes, laying them carefully on a bench by the exposed, rusted pipes. Then he pulled a towel down from a pitted metal shelf, wrapped it around his waist, and climbed onto the gurney-type bed.

As Árpád closed his eyes, he wondered why he bothered to come here, as the peaceful stillness was always invaded by the haunting memory of that bitter-cold December day twelve years earlier when Hungarian soldiers seized his pregnant wife, Irén, right outside the tiny apartment in the ghetto they shared with another family. He had been upstairs with his sons, János and Alfréd, cutting up limp vegetables for the evening's stew when he heard her frantic screams from the street below. He recalled dropping his kitchen knife on the faded linoleum floor and rushing to the open window.

He watched helplessly as the soldiers shoved his wife, along with other Jews chosen at random, into the back of a truck. The doors closed and the truck pulled away before he could move his suddenly paralyzed legs an inch. He later learned that the truck had taken the prisoners to the banks of the Danube where the soldiers lined them up and shot them in the back, laughing as they watched the bullet-riddled bodies sink into the cold, dirty water below.

A month later, Árpád and his children were herded onto a train that took them to Terezín, near the fork of the Elbe and Ohre rivers, sixty kilometers from Prague. They endured two harsh winters and a typhoid epidemic that almost cost Alfréd his life before the Ukrainian Red Army liberated the camp.

After the war, Árpád brought his sons back to Budapest and settled in the Jewish ghetto, where he opened a small butcher shop on Rumbach Street. When the Hungarian communist government nationalized the agricultural sector, he bought black-market goods from underpaid government employees who hid meat and other goods in false bottoms of their trucks and smuggled the merchandise to shopkeepers like Árpád, who risked jail for the

extra money that might one day buy freedom for their families.

Árpád's masseur burst into the room. "The students are demonstrating in front of the radio station," he said, his face more animated than Árpád had ever seen. "They said there's thousands of them over there." Árpád knew the students supported the Polish dissidents. He also knew it would mean trouble.

"Throw me my clothes," he ordered, flinging his ragged towel onto the tile floor. Árpád dressed, stuffed his feet into his shoes, and rushed out the door. He climbed the marble stairs and turned down the hill toward the Danube.

When he finally reached the square, he witnessed soldiers' bullets raining down onto the mob from the roof of the radio station. Several students dropped to the ground. Árpád backed away from the edge of the crowd, stumbling against something on the pavement. He looked down and saw the body of a young girl, part of her face torn away. He recoiled into an awkward run and didn't slow down until he reached his store on Rumbach. Once inside, he locked the door and collapsed against the wall, sliding down to the cold cement floor.

Some time passed before a loud knock shattered the silence. Árpád looked up to see János staring down at him through the cracked glass pane. He had his father's hawk-like nose and square jaw, and his mother's thick black hair and mud-brown eyes, and her defiant temperament. Árpád raised himself from the floor and turned the rusted lock.

"Papa, why were you sitting in the dark?" János asked.

"They were shooting at students in front of the radio station," Árpád responded, his breathing still uneven. "I don't know what to do. This may be our only chance to leave."

"Papa, you've always talked of the day we would go to a new country where we would be free and have our own place to live," János said in a resolved tone that belied his fourteen years.

"I know, but it may be dangerous if we try to leave now," Árpád said. He paused and drew in a lungful of air. "But if we wait, there may never be another opportunity."

"Papa, it was you who introduced me to Petófi's *Nemzeti dal*. Remember the line—*Most, vagy soha?*—Now or never?"

"You're right, János," Árpád smiled. "*Most, vagy soha*. We'll make arrangements to leave as soon as possible."

"I'll go fetch Alfréd at the synagogue," János said.

"What's he doing there so late?"

"Rehearsing for a Hanukkah play."

“Get him, and I’ll meet you at home. But not a word to anyone.”

“Of course not, Papa. No one must know,” János said, slipping his father’s old wool jacket over his muscular frame. He was already an inch taller than the five-foot-ten Árpád.

A half-hour later, János returned to the apartment with his fifteen-year-old brother, Alfréd, in tow. “Is it true what János told me. Papa?”

“Yes. We’re thinking of leaving,” Árpád said.

“Thinking?” János said, now staring at his father. “I thought you’d decided.”

Árpád turned the dial of his shortwave radio to Radio Free Europe. The Americans were encouraging the Hungarians to revolt, and urging them to stay and fight for their country. “If we leave now, maybe they won’t be so eager to let us into America.”

“You promised us we would go to America,” János reminded his father. “I’ve spent the last three years learning English. That’s where I want to go—the only place I want to go.”

“János, there are many other such countries,” Alfréd said, pushing his glasses back on his fleshy nose. “I’ve studied about them with Mr. Goldschmidt. He said if we ever left, Canada would take us, or even England. And if they wouldn’t, Germany or Austria would be fine with me. I could use my German there.”

“We are going to America!” János said, looking straight into his father’s eyes.

“All right,” Árpád conceded, knowing János was right. “I’ll call Zsilinszky and see if he’ll take us to the Austrian border.”

“No, Papa,” János said. “I think he’s the one who informed the authorities about the last shipment. My teacher told me today that he saw Zsilinszky drunk down at a bar on Akácta Street, bragging about his new-found money and the crooked Jew bastards.”

“But he’s one of us,” Árpád said.

“In name only, Papa.”

“You mean Zsilinszky turned us in?” Alfréd asked, his mouth full of chocolate.

“It doesn’t matter now,” János said. “What about Pucser? He’s always been fair with us and I’m sure with four young children he could use some extra money.”

“I’ll ask him in the morning when he comes with the lard shipment,” Árpád said.

“In the meantime, should we pack some clothes?” Alfréd asked.

“No. We can’t have anything that will slow us down,” Árpád insisted, as

he shoved an arm into the sleeve of his coat.

“Where are you going?” Alfréd asked.

“I have to collect some money owed me. Remember—not a word to the Herzbergers or anyone else,” he said, referring to Aranka and David Herzberger and their widowed daughter, Valéria, who shared the cramped apartment with them.

At one in the morning, Árpád labored up the three flights of stairs, slipped his key in the door, and went into the dining room. Stepping onto a wobbly chair, he pushed up the second plank on the slatted ceiling and reached in for a small metal box.

“What are you doing up there, Stern?” the white-haired David Herzberger asked, startling Árpád. Aranka and Valéria stood at the doorway, their bathrobes draped over their flannel pajamas.

“I’m getting my stamp collection down,” Árpád responded.

Seeing that Árpád was unsteady as he reached for the box, Valéria moved to help him. Her stout frame pushed against the chair, causing Árpád to lose his balance. He tumbled to the floor, gold pieces cascading onto his body and rolling onto the wood floor. He looked up at the Herzbergers, reached over to grab the table, and hoisted himself up from the floor.

“So you’re leaving, Stern,” the elderly man said.

“Please don’t say anything to anyone,” Árpád begged, as his two sons entered the room.

“Papa, what was all that noise?” Alfréd asked, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

“Your father’s stamp collection suddenly became more valuable, Alfréd,” the old man said, a hint of a smile on his blistered lips. “So, when do you go, Stern?”

“Hopefully tomorrow,” Árpád replied.

“Hopefully?” János asked, his eyes fixed on his father.

“Tomorrow,” Árpád said. “We leave tomorrow.”

October 24, 1956—Budapest, Hungary

János lay sleepless in the narrow bed he shared with his brother. It wasn't Alfréd's snoring that was keeping him awake—he was used to that. It was the idea of finally seeing America, the country he had only read about in books and magazines. János counted the hours until dawn by the bells of the clock on top of the Lutheran church on Deák Tér, three blocks away. The sounds of gunfire and the roar of tank engines were getting louder.

The tinny bells had just pealed seven times when he heard a rumbling noise under the window. He yanked back the soiled sheet that barely covered the grimy window. A government truck pulled up in front of his father's shop, a few doors down Rumbach Street. Ben Pucser squeezed his belly past the steering wheel and got out. He peered around before opening the back door and removing a floorboard.

Árpád was waiting and motioned him to replace the panel. Then he leaned close and whispered into Pucser's ear as they entered the shop. Moments later, Árpád emerged alone, leaving Pucser to finalize his bill for prior deliveries, and returned to the apartment block. János and Alfréd were waiting inside the front door.

"Pucser says the Soviets are everywhere," Árpád said. "They've declared martial law."

"Will he take us, Papa?" Alfréd asked.

"I offered him three pieces of gold, but he's too scared."

"I will speak to him," János said.

Árpád threw up his hands. "It won't do any good."

János slipped into the bedroom and then left the apartment. He returned ten minutes later. "He'll take us to the border. But we must leave now, before the fighting gets worse."

"He'll take us?" Árpád said.

"We must leave now, Papa," János insisted. He knew that doubling the price with the gold pieces he had taken from his father's box would be more than Pucser could pass up. "We'll have to lie in the back, under the lard and chickens, so they won't find us at the checkpoints," he continued. "Alfréd, bring a few towels and take some of Valéria's perfume. We'll douse them in the stuff."

"But her perfume is worse than the animals," Alfréd protested.

"Get the towels," János ordered. "You won't think so once you open the door to Pucser's truck."

The fighting on the Pest side of the river was escalating. “We’ll have to take the Széchenyi Lánchíd bridge over to Buda. The others are closed,” Pucser shouted over the loud blasts of mortar fire.

They waited at the foot of the bridge for more than an hour as the line of vehicles crawled toward the checkpoint. The blood drained from Ben Pucser’s face as he watched a young Soviet officer drag a woman out of the car in front of them. She thrust her arms into the air as two soldiers prodded her in the back with their sharpened bayonets and marched her over to a drab-green military truck. The officer summoned Pucser to move his van up to the inspection post.

“Where are you going?” he asked in heavily accented Hungarian.

“To a farm outside of Tatabánya, to pick up some vegetables,” Pucser replied.

“Open the back doors,” he ordered.

Pucser fumbled with the keys. The officer noted the truck’s government insignia and then turned back toward the long line of vehicles waiting to cross. He paused for a moment and then said, “Never mind. Just get out of here. You’re holding everything up.”

Pucser threw himself behind the wheel of the truck.

“Wait!” the officer shouted.

Pucser’s stomach twisted. “Yes?”

“You forgot these,” he said, throwing the keys at him. “God, you Hungarians are thick,” he said, spitting on the ground. “Get out of here—now!”

Pucser jammed the keys into the ignition and pushed down hard on the accelerator. “I never should have done this,” he said as he drove away. “I’ll drop you off on the outskirts.”

János heaved the carcasses off his chest and grabbed Pucser’s neck from behind with his powerful hands. “If you don’t keep your part of the bargain, I’ll strangle you,” he exploded.

“János, stop it!” Árpád barked. “You’ll get us all killed.”

“Papa, he made a deal with me and he must honor it,” he said, his steely voice showing more than a hint of frustration with both Pucser and his father.

“I will keep my word, János,” Pucser said, rubbing his neck. “We’ll drive toward Kópháza. But I want you out before the border.”

The trip was uneventful except for a group of T-3 tanks thirty kilometers outside the city. Pucser spotted them and turned off onto a bumpy dirt road for the rest of the journey.

“We’re about two kilometers from the border,” he said as he pulled the

truck onto the grass. “That’s as far as I go.”

“How do you expect us to find our way?” Árpád asked, as his sons tramped over to a ditch to relieve themselves.

“Follow the side road from the gully below,” Pucser said, as he stepped down from the truck. “When you get to the other side of the hill you’ll be in Austria. They may have already planted landmines, so look for signs of fresh digging. I wish you luck.”

“Ben, you are an honorable man,” Árpád said. He hugged the startled driver. “Shalom. And may God be with you.”

Suddenly, a burst of machine-gun fire scythed into the two men as they embraced. In life, fleeting acquaintances—in death, locked together as they slumped to the ground as one.

Alfréd grabbed János, sheltering him, as he forced him back to the truck. Then he rammed his large frame against János, shoving him onto the front seat, as bullets punctured the van. János grabbed the wheel and started the engine. The truck’s threadbare tires spun on the gravel, spewing pebbles. Alfréd crouched down as János propelled the truck toward the border.

“They killed Papa!” Alfréd sobbed. “They killed Papa!”

“Everything will be all right,” János said, trying to reassure himself.

“All right? How can you say that? Papa’s dead!”

“You saved my life just now. I’ll never forget that. As for Papa, there’s nothing we can do,” János said. “You’ll have your whole life ahead of you in a new country.”

“I don’t want to go to a new country. I want to go home.”

János yanked a hand off the steering wheel and gripped his brother’s shoulder. “We have no home. If we tried to go back they’d kill us,” he shouted, his eyes racing back and forth between his brother and the dusty road. “You’re coming to America with me.”

An Austrian flag hung limply over a barricade blocking the road. Austrian officials questioned the brothers briefly and then escorted them a few kilometers down the road to a monastery that was being set up as a refugee camp. János and Alfréd were ushered into a small room off the main courtyard. Inside, there were two old wooden desks—both with faded ocher-colored benches in front of them. A man sat behind the closest one. He was stocky, about twenty-five, with a full head of chestnut hair, and dressed in a white shirt and gray flannels. He began speaking to them in halting Hungarian. Alfréd quickly informed him that he and János spoke English.

“I’m Paul Dawson,” the American said. “I’m a refugee worker with the United States government. Would you mind answering a few questions?”

During the next two hours, János and Alfréd gave an account of what

they had witnessed back in the city as the revolt was ruthlessly suppressed. They told him they were both good students and worked in their father's shop. Dawson was worried that this kind of situation provided an opportunity for the Soviets to insert sleepers using refugee cover, but he quickly came to the conclusion that the two young men were not Soviet agents.

"Would you consider going back to Hungary to help your country?" Dawson asked, clearly impressed with both of them. "We would provide you safe transportation and a generous stipend to live on. You could help your people against the Soviets," Dawson said.

"We will never return to Hungary," János said, not looking over at his brother. "We want to go to the United States—to Washington."

"Washington? Why there? Most Hungarians are in Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago."

"Exactly. We are no longer Hungarians. We have no desire to be with them," János said.

"But why Washington?" Dawson asked.

"It's your capital city. I've seen pictures of it in magazines. Pictures of your President Eisenhower—the general. That is where we want to go," János said.

A faint smile flashed across Dawson's face as he pulled a picture of one of his Austrian girlfriends out of his worn leather wallet and ripped it in two. "Here, young man, take this, and don't lose it," he said, handing part of the photograph to János.

"What is this for?" János asked with a puzzled look. Dawson returned the other half to his wallet. "If ever in the future someone gives you the side I'm keeping, so that the pieces fit together—it means I want to talk to you, and it's safe to follow their instructions."