

### The Prince and the Nun

It is war time and Sister Therese is torn between her vows and the people she loves. She is trying to keep the handsome Prince Mefist at arm's length and at the same time protecting her friends.

Villagers, partisans, refugees, and Jews all come to her for help and she cannot refuse. Only by cooperating with the Prince can she and the sisters survive. And if that means running a bordello for the Army officers, then that is what she will do.

But it is not easy to resist Mefist, and as the two of them struggle to hold back a violent world, he becomes a friend and more.

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## THE PRINCE AND THE NUN

# **Jacqueline George**

HISTORICAL ROMANCE



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## **DEDICATION**

For the friends who made my time in Central Europe so memorable.

## THE PRINCE AND THE NUN

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#### Chapter 1

The castle of Montebello basked in the August sun like a cat on a garden wall. In the still, heavy air, Therese could hear the murmur of life from the village below and the chatter of haymakers in the summer meadows up against the forest edge. The hay was nearly cut now, and the weather remained kind. Following the men with their scythes, the women in colourful headscarves raked up the coarse grass and pitched it up onto the drying stands. The shaggy hummocks dotted the sloping ground. Soon the horses and wagons would begin hauling it down to the village barns. The season's wheel was turning as it had done for hundreds of years.

The sun fell slowly in the afternoon sky and Therese turned her chair to keep it out of her eyes. The tower gallery in which she sat was new. The Egerhazys valued tradition and their ownership of the castle.

When the tower roof had begun to look seriously decayed, they had stretched their budget to replace the tiled cone and had included the gallery tucked under the eaves. The work had taken more than five years. First cutting and hauling the massive oak logs in the hardness of winter, sawing and stacking them to season and then carefully cutting them to size in the wagon yard below the castle hill. Then, over the space of a summer, estate workers had stripped off the old bonnet of the tower and carefully saved the tiles.

With the summit of the tower bare, the carpenters had opened the door to the gallery for the first time in many years and started to remove the old supports one by one and replace them with new oak. Therese had visited at that time. Standing in the doorway, she could not pass it onto the loose planks beyond, her heart had died as she looked down between her toes at the red roofs of the family apartments below. The intricate timber web that would support the new gallery was taking shape and the carpenters stepped without fear from beam to beam, with nothing to hold them if they missed their footing. She nearly vomited, and the men had laughed kindly at her white face. She hurried below, and the Convent prayed for the men's safety at every mass until the job was completed.

Now she was safe. The solid walls and floor of the gallery, the heavy beams of the roof above, all closed her in. In summer, when the wind was not too strong, the servants pulled up the shutters. Then she could sit with her forearms resting flat on the rail, her chin on her knuckles, and watch the world below.

It was not a large world. No matter where on the circular deck she sat, she looked out over Krasna Dolina, the Beautiful Valley, tucked into its forested walls that were not quite mountains but were too large for mere hills. Far to the southwest, maybe thirty kilometres as the crow flies, she could see the Trnava Gates. The Gates were a sharp gorge through which the sluggish Trnava River left the valley, and the highway and the railway came in. The railway soon crossed the river and wound along the southern wall of the valley, where great stone quarries gouged the hills away.

As a concession to the Egerhazys, who had allowed the steel monster into their valley, the line had been continued to end in the village below the castle. From the little station it was possible to ride out into the world beyond, out onto the Danube plains, to Bucharest, to Pressburg, to Budapest, Vienna and beyond.

Apart from the railway or foot trails through the forests, the only way out of the valley was to use the highway. Either through the Trnava Gates beside the river and the railway, or to the east over the Tergov Saddle. Looking east, Therese could see where the white road wound up from the village and disappeared into the forest shadow. Higher up the slope, it could be glimpsed in pools of light where it doubled back on itself, to and fro, tighter and tighter until it flattened out and headed for the notch in the hills called Tergov Saddle.

The tower gallery had become a favourite summer place for Therese. Whenever the pressures of her office allowed, she would tell Maria that she was not to be disturbed, and she would climb the tower to meditate. Sometimes she would bring some work, some papers or reading, as a sop to her conscience. Mostly the papers stayed unsigned and the reading unread. She just needed to draw strength to get the Convent through these difficult times.

For the moment, the valley was peaceful but she did not expect it to remain so for much longer. The Egerhazys had cut short their summer a month ago and moved on to America. Whatever was coming to the valley, they did not want to be swept up in it.

For with the harvest gathered all over Europe, it was the time for armies to march. The radio brought confusing news. Statesmen rushed between capitals by night train and even flew by aeroplane in the worst of weather. While the owners and controllers of society were out in the country attending to their estates, the chancelleries hummed with activity. Day by day, war moved from a possibility to solid reality.

Over the centuries, war had done little damage to the valley. It was isolated and possible to bypass, and armies were reluctant to enter for fear of being trapped. The same stood for raiding parties; only overwhelming strength could guarantee a safe exit with their booty.

The history of Montebello Castle was a history of allegiances changed. A new king, a new social order, and the current owner had only to decide whether to cooperate or go into exile. The Egerhazys proved particularly adept at this and no doubt they would return again in a year or two, after the current unpleasantness, and again life would go on.

The chapel bell rang out a mellow angelus, and the haymakers started to gather their tools and make for the shrine on the boundary between the meadow and the wagon yard. Therese sighed and picked up her chair. No doubt matters would take their course with or without her worrying.

### **Chapter 2**

They came late in the morning. There was no resistance from the village. The people lived lives so far removed from the government that they had no personal interest in the movements of any army, even their own. Therese heard the rumble of the convoys on the highway through the village and waited for the first troops to arrive at the castle. Eventually they came.

Through the window came confused noises, but she assumed that some vehicles had come up to the wagon park. It was a much sharper, brassy roar that climbed up the final hill and became muffled in the gateway. It would have stopped there, inside the open castle gates, and its occupants would now have to walk up through the stony wards just like all the castle residents.

Sister Maria tapped at the door and rushed in, flustered and nervous. "Mother Therese, a motor bike has come, with three soldiers on it."

"Thank you, Maria. Show them in when they get here." She was surprised that it took no effort to control herself. "Stop worrying and arrange for some coffee for our guests. If they are all soldiers, they will take coffee and sandwiches in the refectory. If there is an officer, you had better bring his coffee here and take care of the soldiers in your office. Go now!"

Ten minutes later, she was back. "Mother Therese, Sergeant Grossner wishes to see you. He has left one soldier with the motorbike."

The sergeant strode into the room and stood at attention. He was a large man with short hair and a black moustache. He wore a thick and bulky uniform. A pistol hung on his belt in a closed brown holster. Therese sat back in her chair but did not rise to greet him. For a moment, she let him suffer in silence.

"Sergeant Grossner, you are welcome. As this is a convent, I think you may remove your hat."

The social antennae that are part of every old soldier heard her accent, understood her rank and adjusted his demeanour. He whipped off his hat, clicked his heels and bowed his head.

"Sergeant Grossner, Your Honour, reporting as ordered!"

"Very good, Sergeant. You bring orders for me?"

"Er, no, Your Honour. Er, Captain Prince Mefist just sent us, sent me to take charge of the castle and, er, report back."

"Very good, Sergeant. Excellent. The castle is yours. Now if you report to Sister Maria outside, I think she has ordered some coffee and a small snack for you and your men. I shall write a quick note for Prince Mefist, and if you would be kind enough to come back in ten minutes, it will be ready for you."

Grossner clicked his heels again and left. Campaigning soldiers soon learn to take meals whenever they are offered.

How should she write to Mefist? She recognized the name. The Mefists were not part of her family's circle but had a respectable reputation. She thought they came from somewhere to the north, a tiny principality that existed in spirit only. The Mefists had not been sovereign for many years now and had never sought to establish a grand name in the Empire. Wellbred, rich enough, they represented the class from which Therese had come herself.

What was Mefist now? Clearly not the leader of any considerable force, or he would be more than a mere captain. She decided to write to him as the Prince and not the captain.

#### Dear Prince.

I am taking advantage of your sergeant to send a quick invitation. We dine at the unfashionable hour of six o'clock. Perhaps you could join me for dinner and we could discuss how best we at Montebello can serve you and the Imperial Army,

Your servant,
Mother Therese von Falberg
Mother Superior of the Sisters of Magdalene
at Montebello & Castle Chatelaine

She sealed the note in an envelope and gave it to Maria. "I will be praying," she said and shut her office door. She heard the sergeant come and go before she called for a sandwich and took it up the tower, together with a book of prayers newly translated from Italian.

She could not escape the Imperial Army even at the top of Montebello Tower. Trucks were passing through the village and grinding up the long climb to Tergov Saddle. They must have been unloading there, because an equal stream of trucks was sliding back down the road and heading out of the valley.

In the wagon yard below, the castle soldiers lounged around two trucks, smoking and chattering quietly. Their rifles stood resting against each other in stacks of three. They were cooking over two fires on the grass verge. She watched them and tried to decide what, if anything, made these men different from the farmers she normally saw from her tower.

Far below, a motorbike and sidecar disengaged itself from the village traffic and tore up the narrow ramp towards the castle. She recognized Sergeant Grossner getting out of the sidecar and giving orders. Immediately, the men were busy. The trucks reversed to the other side of the yard to unload tents and equipment. Within half an hour, three large tents had been erected and a smaller one set off to one side. Over towards the forest, four men were digging a latrine. She hoped they would erect a shield around it.

Therese sat thinking for a long time. Before the angelus could call her to her duty, a small staff car started on the climb up from the village. It pulled into the wagon yard, and an officer got out. Would this be Mefist? His insignia were covered by a black leather coat thrown over his shoulders. He looked young and relaxed; he wore his cap fashionably tilted towards one ear, and he was smoking a cigarette.

The officer inspected the tents, with Grossner following a metre behind him. Grossner called the men together and barked them to attention. Roll call, and the men's shouted names carried across the meadow. Mefist was already walking away.

He started on the sharp climb up to the castle gate but suddenly stopped and looked up at Therese. She threw herself back into the shadows too late; their eyes had met. Embarrassed, she collected her things and returned to her office to wait for him. She waited a long time, and her tray of papers was nearly empty before Maria knocked. "Mother Superior, Captain Prince Mefist is here to see you."

He was a handsome man with dark curly hair and fine features. He came straight to her desk and held out his hand. "Mother Therese, how good to meet you! I have come to impose on your hospitality."

Therese was shocked at herself. How thoughtless! She should have realized he would need a room. She looked at Maria standing at the door. "A visitor's room has been prepared, Mother Superior." Bless her heart, thought Therese. I wonder if it has been, or whether it will be just now?

"Prince, you are early for dinner. Can I offer you coffee?"

"Please, call me Mefist. If it is no trouble to you, perhaps we could delay the coffee? I need to see a little more of your empire. Sister Brigitta has shown me around the Convent and the chapel, but I really need to see more of the castle and the family apartments before we can sit and talk sensibly. If you would send someone with me..."

"Of course. I shall come with you myself, and then we can carry on to dinner."

They strolled through the dark family rooms. They had been closed since the Egerhazys had left and had a musty smell. The furniture sat covered with dustsheets, and the smaller paintings removed to the basement. Mefist paused in the dining room and lifted the dustsheet from the polished oak table. "Old Egerhazy lives well. I wish I had come in happier times."

"Do you know the Count?"

"An acquaintance only. Everyone knows the Count. And I believe I also know your brother? Otto von Falberg?"

"You know Otto? Do you have any news of him?"

"He joined the Artillery, but I should imagine you know that. No, I can't say I've seen him recently. We were at the Academy together. Have you heard from him?"

"He wrote from Vienna, but that must have been two months ago. Perhaps now you are occupying us..."

"Yes, that should make it easier. The first thing I need to do is to get the telephones working. Some fool in the village has locked up the switchboard and gone home. We should be able to get at least a partial service running soon.

"If these are the living rooms, where are the bedrooms?"

Therese took him through the empty portrait gallery and on to the bedrooms. He showed more interest in the number of toilets and bathrooms.

"Prince, what are your plans for us? Will you be staying long?"

He laughed. "I am sure we will be staying here for as long as it is possible. Once the General gets his feet under the table here, you won't pry him out easily. It's a fine house, most desirable. Comfortable, spacious, beautiful views, and then there is the hunting." He turned to look at her. "Of course, there is also the company."

"But I must keep the Convent totally separate. I am afraid we will be no company at all."

"Mother Therese, you cannot imagine how refreshing it is for soldiers to have civilized ladies around. Even if they are nuns. Although I will have trouble calling such a beautiful young lady 'Mother.' Could I call you Sister?" He smiled, but she cut him off.

"That would be incorrect. While I am in charge of the Sisters, I must be called 'Mother Superior,' whether I approve of it or not."

"Very well, Mother," he said with a grin. "What is upstairs from here?"

"The servants' quarters. Shall we go up?" The stairs emerged in the servants' hall, a large loft with sloping ceilings divided by heavy roof beams. A long dining board took up much of the space, and the rest was filled with comfortable benches and settles around the fire space. The Egerhazys believed in basic comforts for their servants.

"This could be ideal," said Mefist. "Perfect. Where are the bedrooms?"

Therese had never seen the servants' quarters before. A corridor led off the hall with rooms on either side. Each contained one or two small beds, a skylight, a cupboard and a washbasin and mirror. The servants lived in more comfort than the nuns, for they had washbasins. She saw that each room had a radiator, a remarkable luxury for a servant's bedroom. She remembered being told that the Count had hired an American engineer to modernize the plumbing and heating of Montebello. She wished he had come to the nuns' cells as well.

Mefist seemed happy. He counted the rooms as they walked down the corridor, and inspected each one on the way back. The room nearest to the hall had a door in the far corner.

"Where does this go?" He unbolted it and pulled. It had not been used recently. As it creaked open, dusty newspaper draught-proofing fell from the jamb. Inside they found the head of a spiral staircase and another door.

"That must go out onto the roof; but where do the stairs go? Please be careful," he said, not doubting that she would follow him. "I expect it is very dusty."

The stone steps were worn, and it was dark. On their way down, they twice passed small windows that must light the steps during the day. They had dropped some way before they reached a door, outlined by light in the room beyond. Mefist opened it.

"The library! Now I know where I am," exclaimed Therese. "The main rooms are just there. The stairs go on down to the buttery and the wine cellar, and towards the boiler room, or you can take a door out into the courtyard."

"Mmmh. A private way up and down. Better and better. Is it time for dinner?"

They are together at the high table in the refectory. The cooks had done their best to please him, and it pleased Therese to see him enjoy himself. He shared a small jug of the local muscatel.

"Prince, why are you here? What do you want from the castle? Or from the Convent?"

"Ah, now to business. I am, I suppose, a herald. A proper harbinger of changes and bad times. We're going to set up our head quarters here. They're sending old General Falk here. Should be arriving next week. Do you know him? Falk-Sokol from Breslau?"

"No, I've only met the old man. I didn't know there was a son."

"But that's him! He must be nearly seventy. They have to put him somewhere, and there won't be much to do here. We'll secure Tergov for the moment, and then we'll probably move on. After that, Montebello will just be the policeman of the valley. Keeping things quiet and denying it to anyone else. Old Falk should be able to manage that.

"So I have to arrange everything, accommodation for officers and men, communications, kitchens. We'll be busy.

"Then I need a bigger sickbay. Yours is far too small, so we'll keep that for the nuns. The sisters can nurse us, I hope? That'll save bringing our own nurses, who are always a fearful headache. We spend our time pretending to guard their virginities; we might as well be hunting unicorns. They're just as mythical.

"I'll ask you to clear out the coach house — my men will do the work, if you like. We'll turn all that into bunk space for the soldiers, and the loft above.

"What else? A guardroom and sentry box at the outer gate. Regular patrols around the hill at night. Castles are easy; they're designed to be secure.

"Finally, we need an officers' club. We'll put a bar in the servants' hall and set it up as a lounge, and the girls can live in the bedrooms."

"Girls?" Therese thought she had misheard.

"Yes, girls. Of course girls. Can't have an officers' club without them, and I think we're going to find them in your Convent." He studied her face and seemed ready to laugh at her.

Therese was stunned and insulted. "I assume you are joking," she said stiffly. The quizzical expression on Mefist's face showed he was not.

"But, but we're nuns." She must have misunderstood. "You can't use us. Aren't you a Christian?"

"My dear Therese! Don't be upset. We're not going to carry you off and rape you. Or your Sisters. If you don't want to volunteer, well, we'll just find some girls elsewhere. Don't worry about it." He started to fold his napkin. "Now, we shall be busy tomorrow. I have a hundred things to attend to, and I will need your fullest cooperation. I'll breakfast at eight. Then we'll start with a roll call of all castle staff at eight-thirty, and the nuns at nine. I'll want full names, dates of birth, all the details.

"I'll get my men in as soon as I can, and we'll start getting ready for the staff. We have to move furniture in and out, so if you have someone to tell them where to store things...

"We'll make a start on the officers' club too. I have to have something ready to welcome the General. He's fond of that sort of thing."

"But he's so old!"

"Old Falk? He's famous for it. He fills his estates with love children. He's been doing it for years, and he'll probably die doing it. The Army is proud of him."

Therese felt shocked. People did not talk about such things to nuns, and having Mefist discuss them openly over dinner confused her. "I don't know

about the General, but I will not have the Sisters or the Convent associated with any such thing. And I will not have you filling the servants' quarters with prostitutes either."

He smiled at her. "Mother Therese, I don't believe you are aware of what is happening here. You've been occupied, like it or not. In fact, you could say we have raped you already! This castle is Army property now, and it is going to be run the way I want it run.

"Naturally, I don't want to disturb the Sisters more than necessary, or drive you out of your home, but the Army's needs come first. Believe me, I won't hesitate to push all of you ladies out of the front gate tomorrow before breakfast if I have to. But that will not be good for you or the castle. The village people still need you, and who will take care of the sick and injured soldiers? Who will mend the damaged souls?"

He paused to let his words sink in. He studied her face, and when she dropped her eyes, he went on.

"Therese, my dear, you have responsibilities you can't avoid. The sisters can stay inviolate in the Convent, and someone must lead them. More than that, you are still chatelaine for the Egerhazys. You can't leave, and I don't want you to."

"But those girls..."

"Unimportant! What difference does it make to you if the Army keeps its girls upstairs, or in the cellar, or down in the village? You don't have to mix with them. The important thing is to keep the castle running. Keep food on the tables and fire in the boilers. Keep the hospital working and the General happy. All of those things are important, and I would welcome your assistance. What's so wrong with that?"

"But the girls, you said you wanted to use us. That's sacrilege!"

"Well, it would make life easier, of course. I need a dozen girls, and here on my doorstep is an unlimited supply of single, obedient ladies. I sure we could sort out a dozen pretty ones and the problem would be solved. With a minimum of inconvenience for everyone.

"Never mind; I wouldn't want to upset you or your family. Otto would probably come and shoot me at dawn if I laid a finger on you uninvited. We'll just bring some girls from the village tomorrow."

"From the village? You can't bring women from the village! We know them all. We don't have any women like that! They'd never come. I mean, I suppose they might if we didn't know about it and you paid them enough, but they would never come and do things like that with the nuns watching over them."

Mefist leant back and laughed. "What a delightful thought! Having the girls do their duty under the supervision of some of those kind old ladies you have in the Convent. I wonder what they would make of the whole process.

"No, you have the wrong idea. They won't be coming up by invitation. This is the Imperial Army. If we want something, we just take it. I'll send the sergeant to round a few up. I do wish you'd reconsider. I would much rather have volunteers because then I won't have to guard them. On top of that, volunteers are more likely to work with a will, and that way everyone is happier. Are you sure you can't lend me some girls?"

Therese rose to her feet. "Prince, you go far beyond the bounds of politeness, and of your religion. I will not have my Sisters thought of as *girls* for the use of any man who might fancy some diversion. Our vows are sacred!

"Now, I'm going to bed. You can sort out your unpleasant problems by yourself."

As she turned to leave, Mefist called out, "Sleep well, Mother! I'll see you for breakfast."

### **Chapter 3**

Therese breakfasted alone in her office. Her night had been restless. She kept thinking of the changes that had happened so quickly, and worrying about the changes the new day would bring. The thought of the officers' club still horrified her.

She did not have much time for thought. Maria called for her. "Mother Superior, Prince Mefist requests your company in the refectory. Shall I tell him you can't come?"

"No, thank you, Sister Maria. I had better attend." She rose sadly. "Don't forget we meet at nine o'clock."

The castle workers were already standing in line when she got to the refectory. A small soldier with untidy hair was taking down their details. He jumped to attention as Therese came up.

"Good morning, Mother Superior." Mefist relaxed against a table. His uniform fitted him so perfectly, he might have been born in it. "This is Timko. I should imagine you'll be seeing more of him. Back to work, Timko!"

Timko grunted, "Your Honour!" and sat down again.

"I had no idea how many foresters Egerhazy maintained. What does he do with them all?"

"Oh, fire-wood, fences—I had never really thought about it. The forests are very large, and the sawmill has to be run, of course. Whenever we want something built in the gardens, it always seems to be the same men."

"Good, I shall borrow some, if you don't mind, to help my men with the coach house. As soon as Timko has finished here, he is going to ask the carpenter for a sentry box—and don't forget to requisition the paint, Timko. The sentry box will be the first thing the General sees, so it had better be properly made and painted correctly.

"If it is all the same to you, Mother, I'll have our cooking detail report to your cook. They're sensible men, and they won't mind being told what to do. They might even learn something, although I doubt it. We'll need extra hands in the kitchen when everybody is here.

"What else do we need to talk about? Office space. Do you mind if Timko shares some of Sister Maria's space? That way he'll be close to the telephone in case we get everything connected in the near future. I'm sure the General will want a proper signals room and antennae on the roof, all that sort of thing. He can worry about that when he gets here."

Mefist took her by the elbow and led her aside. "Mother Therese, could you please show me who should help us with the family apartments and the coach house? If I don't have someone who knows their way around, there's no telling the damage my men could do."

"Certainly, Prince. Mikhail is the outside foreman. We can speak to him about the coach house, and Fodor is the best person for the family rooms. He is assistant to the butler whenever the family is in residence. Let's do it now."

They walked down the slow-moving line of servants. Mikhail was an old man, a carpenter, and he smelt of tobacco and pine shavings. He stood with his cap in his hand.

"Yes, Mother, I shall get there directly. Just as soon as His Honour's man has my name and number. Clear the coach house and make up bunks. They'll have to sleep on straw for a while. We've got the timber, but it all takes time. I'll get the men to it straightaway."

"Mikhail, the Prince wants a sentry box. You'd better start on that today. We must have it ready for when the General comes."

Mikhail thought about that. "I've never made a sentry box, Mother. I've been in them many times in the Great War, but I don't know they'd be what His Honour wants."

Mefist smiled. "You don't know the Imperial Army yet, Mikhail. We have instructions for everything. Timko will show you what we need."

Mikhail bobbed his head. "Thank you, Your Honour. I shall get right on with it myself."

They moved down the line to Fodor, a painfully thin young man in a white over-shirt and dark trousers. "Fodor, please help the Captain's men

prepare the family rooms for the General. I want all the good furniture in the cellar. What about the carpets, Prince? Do we put them back?"

"Not unless you want them destroyed! All that marching and stamping to attention. I try to put a stop to it inside, but it seems to be part of our nature. Shout at a soldier, and off he goes without troubling his brain at all. Put canvas covers down, Fodor, if you have them. If not, see the sergeant and get some tarpaulins from the trucks. I don't want to destroy those beautiful floors too. I have to be able to look the Count in the eye after the war."

"I beg your pardon, Your Honour, but do you want the books to stay in the library?"

Mefist thought for a moment. "Yes, why not? Soldiers spend most of their time lounging around doing nothing, and the books will help. I'll have the General issue an instruction about it. Better take anything valuable away, though. I don't suppose anyone would steal, but you never know. They might borrow a stack of books just to lift their beds higher off the floor."

Mefist led her on. "So we're expecting the nuns shortly. I don't think we have much for them to do at the moment. Tell me, who is your deputy? Sister Brigitta?"

Yes, she supposed that Sister Brigitta was her deputy. Therese admitted to herself that Sister Brigitta should really be given a role or a title. It was just that she found the woman so repellent. Hard-faced, bitter, grasping. Therese could not imagine leaving juniors in her charge. Brigitta stood behind her whenever the Bishop visited, and at her side for every service in the chapel. For all that, she knew less of the day-to-day running of the Convent than Sister Maria.

"I suppose you could call her my deputy. Why are you asking?"

Mefist shrugged. "Oh, just in case. So I know who to turn to if you are not available. Now, I'm expecting Sergeant Grossner with the girls soon. I'll send them straight up to the servants' hall when they come. Perhaps you could bring Maria to register them?"

"Prince, I thought about this all night. I do not want my Sisters to have anything to do with those women. They can take care of themselves! We will not be involved."

"Mother Therese! I'm surprised at you. Of course they can't take care of themselves. I expect they'll be very upset, and I don't think Sergeant Grossner is the man to take care of them. He'd probably line them up and shout at them. You've got to help them. They will have no one else to turn to. If we are not kind to them, we might find them jumping out of the windows, God forbid!"

His objections surprised her. She had not imagined that he would care. She knew very well that the women had souls the same as anybody else, so she compromised. "Very well. We will come and register them. But that's all. Nothing else. Once they are registered, we shall leave and never go up to that floor again."

He seemed pleased with her. "Of course. As you like. Just help with comforting them. After all, they will be leaving their families behind, and I am sure they will be very lost. Leaving fathers, husbands, babies. It will be a big blow, I'm sure. If you don't mind, I'll send some other Sisters up as well, just to help them through the first hours."

"Prince, you can't do this! You'll kill them! Get your women from somewhere else, but please, not from the village. You'll destroy everything. When you leave, what's going to happen to them? Do you think they'll just be able to go back home? You may as well line them up in the courtyard and shoot them now!"

Mefist stiffened under her attack. "Mother Therese, this is war. There's nothing you or I can do about it. The Army needs women, and it will have women. Like it or not, I have to take them where I can find them. Where there's fighting, people suffer. Soldiers and civilians. Some suffer more, some less. You have never seen a village that has been fought over. Or a battlefield. Or a starving refugee column. Be thankful that we are only talking about taking the girls in and giving them good food and a comfortable bed in return for two or three hours of work every day. At least they and their families are still alive!"

#### **Chapter 4**

Sick at heart, Therese led Maria up to the servants' hall. They sat in silence and waited. Therese reflected that authority could be a very lonely thing.

A noise on the stair, and Therese waited in despair. Then black headscarves rising out of the stairwell let her relax again. It was the Sisters that Mefist had said he would send. They sat quietly at the table. Therese realized with a start that none of the older Sisters had come. Timko, or maybe Mefist, must have selected only the younger, prettier ones.

Therese thought about what she must do. She rose and moved to the head of the table. All eyes turned to her. "Dear Sisters, we are living in very bad times. The Imperial Army is here and is controlling Montebello Castle. I no longer have a say in what is happening.

"I am sorry, but there is nothing I can do. Soon they will bring a group of women up from the village. They are taking them from their families and will make them live here."

Therese was at a loss. She had intended to spell out the full awfulness of what Mefist intended, but now, looking from face to face, she just could not do it. "It is a great sin taking women from their families, and God knows I would stop it if I could, but I can't. You have been sent up here because the women will be very upset. It is our job to help them bear the pains that life brings and help them in their hour of need.

"Be kind to them..." Her voice broke. "Sister Helena, please sing for us."

Sister Helena lowered her blue eyes. "Mother Superior, what shall I sing?

"Start with Ave Maria, and then you may choose a favourite hymn and we will help you." God help us! she thought. Please, get me through this trial. Jesus and all the Saints, help us all. Sister Helena was still singing when heavy feet sounded on the stairs. Sergeant Grossner came first. His cap tucked under his arm, he tried to walk on his toes, a difficult thing in his heavy boots. He led the women to the far corner of the room, and they all waited respectfully for Sister Helena to finish. They crossed themselves as she ended.

Therese had watched them come in. She recognized most of them. The peasant women all wore the traditional clothes of the valley; a short, layered black skirt and heavy, embroidered waistcoat. The married ones had coloured headscarves, but the maids all wore their hair down. There were two black-haired Jewish girls, and they wore white headscarves and long skirts. Another had the features and dark skin of a gypsy; she stood apart from the others.

Lastly, Mefist came up the stairs. He did not sound breathless but complained nonetheless. "It's a long way up from the courtyard. I must have a word with the Count next time I see him. He should buy a lift. Is everyone here?" He counted the women as they stood respectfully with their hands together and their eyes lowered. Therese looked anxiously at her nuns. They still did not understand.

"Very good. A fine bunch of beautiful ladies. I expect you are wondering why you are here. I shall explain. This place"—he waved his hand around the room—"does not look very much at the moment, but with a little time and some assistance from you, it will change. By the end of the week, this will be a bordello for officers, and you are going to live and work here." He clasped his hands in front of him and watched their reaction.

For a moment, the news passed through the group of women like a breeze through willow leaves; then one of the young married women opened her mouth and screamed.

The nuns were frozen at their table. Sister Helena was still standing after her singing, but with her hand at her mouth. The others stared at Therese in disbelief. Now all the women were sobbing and trying to ask each other what was going to happen and why to them.

"Help them!" croaked Therese. The nuns, with tears starting in their eyes, rushed into the crowd to help the women. To hold their hands and put arms around their shoulders. The two Jewesses were crying into each other's hair. The gypsy girl stood apart, dry-eyed and uncertain. Perhaps she did not understand what was happening.

Maria came to Therese and knelt at her feet. She lifted her face, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Mother Therese, please stop him." Therese put her hand on Maria's shoulder. She could do nothing to help.

Mefist stood like a black shadow. At that moment, he looked the very incarnation of evil.

A stocky woman burst from the crowd and threw herself at his feet. "Your Honour! Your Honour!" She scrabbled at his boots, bending to kiss them. "Your Honour, my baby. I must go back. I must feed her." She knelt up and opened her waistcoat. Her large breasts swung wildly under a grey cotton blouse, wet and stained. "Look, my milk is ready for her. I must go back. As God protects me, I must go to my baby!"

"Stop!" commanded Mefist to the room. Everyone looked at him, and the noise fell to quiet sobbing. For a moment, he looked at Therese as she sat at the head of the table. "Mother Therese, are you sure you can do this?"

Therese swallowed. She looked at the kneeling Maria. She looked at the woman at Mefist's feet. At the women clinging to each other and to her nuns. Did she really have a choice?

She turned back to Mefist. "I—" Her voice cracked. "I must talk with my nuns."

"No," he said sharply. "You are in charge. They will do what you tell them. You must decide." Then he relaxed and moved towards her. "Apart from that, if there is any question about what you are doing, it is far better that only you should commit the sin. Give them no choice and their souls are safe, I believe."

She looked at him coldly. This man had the devil in him. "I have decided. Now give me a moment to talk to my Sisters."

The nuns came back to the table and sat with their eyes lowered. The village women watched, sobbing quietly. Therese swallowed and spoke carefully. "Sisters, I cannot allow this to happen. I have done my best to divert the Captain from this course, but he will not listen. For the moment he is our Caesar, and we must bow our necks to his rule.

"In a moment, I will give you a command that will suspend your vows and put you outside our order. It is a great evil, and I take it on myself only. By doing this, we can prevent a greater evil, and these women can return to their homes. Only Sisters Simone and Maria will be exempt. Sister Simone because she cannot bear this burden in honesty, and Sister Maria because she is a little older than the rest of us. Sister Simone, come here, child."

Sister Simone came to her. She had a simple, clear face with sky-blue eyes. "Mother, why are you sending me away? I am a good nun."

"Of course you are, child. You are an example to us all. I am not sending you away. It is the others that must go away. I want you to go to Sister Brigitta and ask her to come to my office. Can you do that? Then you can stay with your Sisters in the Convent. Go now."

She reached up to pat the girl's head and send her on her way. "Go to Sister Brigitta," she repeated to herself as she left the table.

Maria came to her without being called and again knelt beside her chair. "Please, Mother Superior, let me stay. Don't send me away from you. Let me take Sister Simone's place."

Therese was surprised. "Why do you want to stay?"

"I don't want to leave you, Mother Superior. It's a good thing. I want to help you and my Sisters."

"Are you sure you want this, Maria? You won't be able to change your mind once you have started." Therese's heart was touched as Maria nodded her upturned face. It felt good to know she had at least one unconditional friend. "Very well, if you wish it." Maria returned to her seat.

"Mother Superior?" Sister Agata asked for her attention. "Mother Superior, will you stay with us?"

"Of course, child. Do you think I would let you suffer alone? We will all do this together. We will pray together, we will help each other, we will show the Army how true Christians act, and maybe at the end of this war, better times will relieve us of most of our burden.

"Now kneel, and we will say the rosary together. Then you can show these unfortunate women back to their homes."

The Sisters pushed back their chairs and knelt. The village women all knelt with them. Even the two Jewesses knelt and bowed their heads. Their prayers might be different, but their relief was shared. Mefist remained standing through the familiar prayers.

Therese dismissed them. "Off you go, Sisters. Take the ladies down past the wagon park; I don't want the soldiers shouting at them. Take them all the way down to the halfway shrine before you come back."

"Yes, Mother Superior," they chorused.

The village women started to move off. One tall girl with long black hair and a pale complexion came and stopped by Therese. "Thank you, Mother Superior. It wouldn't have mattered too much to me—not that I want to lie with any of these pigs—but thank you for the other women and their families. We'll tell the village what you've done. They'll be angry for sure. The men won't want to think of what these soldiers are doing to our nuns. We'll tell them what you did for us."

"What's your name, child?"

"I'm Jana, the butcher's daughter. Don't you remember me?"

She vaguely remembered the butcher's little girl. "Of course, but you are a woman so soon. Go with God, my child."

"Oh, ladies," called Mefist after the departing nuns. "I shall expect you back here immediately after dinner. There's work to be done and no time to lose."

Therese was left alone with him.

"Why did you send Sister Simone away?" he asked. "She looked the prettiest of them all."

"Yes, but she's simple, almost an idiot. Her family sent her here so we could protect her from the world. It wouldn't be right to let men use her.

"You knew what would happen, didn't you? You knew I couldn't sit by."

Mefist grinned like a boy. "I had faith in you, Therese. I know you are kind and generous. You're a good woman."

"A fine way you picked for me to show it! God alone knows what the Bishop will say when he hears about all this."

"I know perfectly well what he will say. There's not much difference between the Church and the Army, you know. You'll explain to him, and he'll say, 'I'll have to leave that to your own conscience.' Then afterwards he'll do his best to disown you, mark my words."

#### **Chapter 5**

After dinner, Mefist came to lead her back up to the servants' hall. Now the decision had been made, she felt better. Nervous and excited for the future, but happy at the thought of the village women back in their homes.

Mefist looked happy too. "You know, I'm very pleased I've got your girls to work with. Grossner says he picked the best he could find in the village, but it would have been a struggle to do anything with them. Just like most of the men we get as soldiers; the most you can hope for is dumb obedience.

"At least most of your girls are ladies, and intelligent. You can't enjoy love-making without some education and intelligence, and if you are not enjoying it, your lover won't either."

"I'm sure you know much more about such things than I, Prince," she said sourly.

"Therese, my dear, let's be friends. If we work together, we can make this a happy place for the girls. The best bordellos are like a home. The men are pleased to come and relax in them, and the girls are pleased to see them. If we get it wrong, the men will just hurry through, and the girls will suffer. They'll feel as if they were in prison."

"Prince, you're not going to win me over to your way of thinking. I can't imagine how I came to be involved in such a foul thing. Prostitution is wrong, and that's all that should be said about it."

Mefist smiled. "What about your patron saint? Mary Magdalene? She was no better than a lot of girls, as I understand it. No, I've put that in the wrong way. She was a good woman, but she might have been at home here, yes?"

All Magdalene sisters knew how to counter that myth. "Nothing in the bible says The Magdalene was a prostitute. Anyway, do you think the Church would pray to someone like that? So it can't be true, or she wouldn't be a saint."

"Therese, Therese, that argument is chasing its tail. We'll make her a saint because Jesus loved her, and because she's a saint she can't have been a prostitute. No, it's precisely because the Church spends so long telling everyone that she wasn't a prostitute that I think she probably was.

"Look at the society she lived in! Any single woman who goes around washing men's feet with her hair in a society like that is no pillar of virginity. You should pay more attention to Jesus and forget the old men at the top of the Church with their obsessions about women and sex. Jesus didn't mind—he loved Mary no matter how she earned her living, and so should you!

"What are you going to call the girls, by the way? They're not going to be nuns for a while; are they still Sisters?"

"Ah, I hadn't thought about that. I suppose they're still my sisters, no matter what, but I can't let them dress as nuns anymore." A thought struck her. "I can't dress as a nun any more. I can't let them call me 'Mother Superior' either, and we can't go to chapel with the other Sisters; we'll have to use the visitors' gallery. That's terrible. Oh dear, I don't know how we'll feel."

She felt privately grim at the thought of what Sister Brigitta must be feeling. She had said nothing when she heard of her appointment as acting Mother Superior, no sympathy, no gratitude; she had just closed the elation up inside her. She must have believed she would never get the promotion she craved, because she came from a poor background and had only the most basic education. Now she would already be thinking about how she could use Therese's difficulties to usurp the position permanently.

At least Sister Brigitta would not receive the role of castle steward. That stayed with Therese, and she would be dealing with the Army and Mefist. Sister Brigitta would not be cock of the farmyard yet, just acting Mother Superior. She shook her head and put Sister Brigitta out of her mind. She had more important things to worry about.

Mefist and Therese emerged into the servants' hall to find the girls already waiting for them around the table. They got to their feet and stood, eyes down and hands clasped in front of them. Mefist looked at them for a moment, then clapped his hands sharply and said "Boo!" Therese jumped with the others.

Mefist was smiling and happy. "Sit down, sit down, my friends, and cheer up! What's done is done, and now we must make the best of it! Let's talk of what we've got to do. Make room for me, I'll sit in the middle."

Mefist squeezed himself onto one of the long benches. "First things first. What shall we drink? Therese, can we order some wine? Four bottles perhaps? We can always ask for more if we need it."

Sister Anna jumped up. "I can fetch it, Mother Superior."

Mefist looked at Therese curiously. She swallowed. "Anna, my dear, I don't think you can call me Mother Superior anymore."

"So?" asked Mefist. "What can she call you now? What will you call her, Anna?"

Anna dropped her eyes and blushed. "I don't know, Your Honour."

"Dear oh dear!" exclaimed Mefist. "What are we going to do with you all? I can't have you calling me or any of the other officers 'Your Honour.' We get that from the soldiers all day, and I don't think I could stomach jumping into bed with someone who calls me 'Your Honour.' You can call me 'Captain' or 'Prince' when you have to, but my real friends call me Mefist.

"What are you going to call Therese? I don't suppose 'Sergeant' would be appropriate; can you imagine it?" The girls giggled at that idea. "The traditional name for someone in her position is 'Madam,' but I don't think her dupka is fat enough for 'Madam.' What do you think?"

The girls were looking at the table. They did not want to think of Therese's bottom.

"Oh cheer up, you miserable bunch! I think you should call her 'Mistress.' Would that suit you, Therese?"

She realized what Mefist wanted to do, and decided to help him. "I don't know, Mefist. Isn't a mistress what gentlemen like you keep in a city apartment to give you some amusement when you are up from the country?"

"Ah, my little secret is out! Never mind. Still, mistress is also the female of master. So try again, Little Anna!"

Anna squeezed out, "Please, Mistress, shall I fetch the wine?"

"Thank you, my child. Agata shall go with you to help with the glasses."

"Now look," said Mefist to the remaining girls, "We're in a hurry. By the time the General gets here, we must have everything clean and comfortable. We'll have our own little bar right here, with coffee and wine and beer and cocktails. This table will have to go; we need small tables, and comfortable chairs, and a gramophone, and a piano. Can anyone play the piano?'

"Sister Helena can play."

"And she can sing. She's got a wonderful voice."

"Oh yes?" said Mefist with interest. "Which one of you is Sister Helena? Oh yes, I remember you from this afternoon. You sang very beautifully. Do you know any modern songs?"

Helena blushed and looked away. "I could try to learn, Your- Prince."

Mefist clapped his hand and looked displeased. "Ladies, ladies! This really will not do! You must speak to me properly, man to man. Or should I say, woman to man. Now look at me, Helena!"

Reluctantly she lifted her eyes to his. He held them for a moment and then smiled. She started to smile and to blush. "Please—" she managed and looked down again.

"Helena!" admonished Therese, but Mefist held up his hand.

"Don't be so hard on her, Therese. She'll soon get used to it. Now Helena, just look at me, smile, and say, 'I could learn, Mefist.' Go on, you try."

The idea was painful for Helena. Her face flushed, her eyes went wet, and her smile looked more like a grimace. "I could try to learn, please, Mefist."

Mefist applauded, and Therese and the others joined him. "There, I'm not so horrible, am I?" No one answered, so he looked around. "Maria, I'm not so horrible, am I?"

Maria was made of stronger stuff. "I believe we're all frightened of you, Captain Mefist."

"Nearly, but you can't possibly call me Captain when we're *en famille* like this. Try again."

"I believe we're all frightened of you, Mefist."

"So you should be!" He held both arms up over his head, waggled his dangling fingers like the claws of a movie monster, and said in a creaking voice, "I am the wicked Imperial Army come to ravage all the poor Sisters

of Magdalene." They all laughed at him. "But I'm also Mefist, and when the General's not here, my friends will call me Mefist.

"Listen, you may not believe that I am here to take care of you, but you can certainly trust Therese. She really cares for you, or she would still be Mother Superior, and I would be up here trying to persuade Sister Brigitta to smile sweetly. Thank God for that mercy!" The thought of Sister Brigitta smiling brought another laugh.

"Please, Mefist," asked Maria, "What will you make us do?"

"Girls, I want you to understand this. I have a duty to carry out, and you will help me do it. The Army has ordered it. Therese has ordered it, and now it's a fact. Of course you don't like the idea; who would? Still, accepting the inevitable is the difficult part. After you've done that, life will be easy.

"Most of the officers are pleasant young men, not hard-hearted ogres like me. They're full of high spirits, and they may be dead or shot to pieces tomorrow, or next week, or next month. They are a little frightened and lonely, and what they want most of all is a place to be happy. A place with the things that young men love; wine, singing, and, of course, friendly girls. So that's your job, to make them happy.

"It's not such a bad gift to give them, and don't forget that we won't be here forever. The front will move eventually. We will push on, or get pushed back. We will go and you will stay. I see no reason why life should not continue as it has been in the past.

"To start with, before you can be accomplished hostesses, you have to learn. Of course, that means you have to suffer a little—under my orders. I order you to suffer. Take your headscarves off."

Instantly the tension came back around the table. The girls were quiet and frozen. Mefist looked at Therese to give the lead. Trying to stop her fingers trembling, she reached up to unpin her headscarf. Her dark chestnut hair fell free. She shook her head, guided her hair back over her ears, and looked straight back at Mefist.

"Therese! What beautiful hair you have!" He scrambled off the bench and came to stand behind her. He ran his fingers through her hair.

"Who has a comb? What? A room full of girls and not a comb between them! We'll have to use mine. What's your name? Right, Suzanna. Jump up and comb your Mistress's hair. Let's make it even more beautiful." Therese willed herself to sit still while Suzanna combed. The feeling reminded her of the days before she had been sent to the Convent, when friends and sisters would often comb each other's hair. No one had touched her since then, unless by accident. The thought made her sad.

"Come on, the rest of you. Headscarves off! You can wear them to chapel, but then they come off." The girls took them off and sat looking at each other, shocked at the difference such a simple thing as hair made to familiar faces. Without asking, they started to pass Mefist's comb around the table.

Helena and Agata came hurrying up the stairs with bottles and a tray of glasses. Their headscarves came off before the glasses could be passed around and filled.

"Therese, give us a toast!" called Mefist.

What could she drink to? She thought for a moment. "To a happy home!"

Mefist looked around and then banged on the table. "Mistress Therese, young Sister Suzanna here is not drinking her wine!"

All eyes looked at Suzanna, who blushed.

It must be part of Mefist's games, she thought; I suppose I had better play along. "Well, Sister Suzanna?"

"Please, Mistress, I don't like wine."

"Not good enough! Mistress Therese, if all our sisters and I have to suffer drinking this wretched wine, Sister Suzanna should be enough of a lady to join in our suffering. Punish her!"

Therese put a severe face on. "Sister Suzanna, do you have anything to say for yourself before you are sentenced?" The girls around the table looked worried and tense again. The constant shifting of familiar ground confused them.

Suzanna could not speak up for herself. Therese tried again. "Do any of her Sisters have anything to say for this bad girl? Maria, is there any reason why she should not be punished severely?"

"Please, Mistress, she's only young..."

"No reason at all, Mistress Therese," shouted Mefist. "Youth is no excuse! Make her finish her glass right now!"

Therese could see that the idea of the game had begun to dawn on the girls. They were smiling at Suzanna. "Sister Suzanna, not joining our toast

to a happy home is a very bad thing to do. However, you are young, as Sister Maria has reminded us, so I sentence you to drink our toast right now, by yourself, with-Mefist, your advice please. How much wine? A full glass?"

"Mistress Therese, the sentence is entirely at your discretion, but might I suggest half a glass? We don't want to find our sister under the table at our first meeting." The girls were openly laughing at Suzanna now, and she looked hot and embarrassed.

"Half a glass? Mmh." Therese pretended to ponder the question and then raised her glass. "Very well, against my own inclinations, half a glass. So, Suzanna, to a happy home."

"Hurray!" shouted Mefist and started to clap rhythmically. "Drink, drink, drink, drink..." The others caught the beat and started to clap and call, "Drink, drink, drink..." Now they understood the game, all nervousness had gone.

Holding her glass with both hands, Suzanna drank as quickly as she could. She reached for her headscarf to wipe her lips. "It's horrible," she whispered.

Mefist laughed. "Ah, Suzanna. To be a lady, it's necessary to suffer sometimes! It's good for your character. Now who will give us another toast?"

"You, Mefist," called Therese. "You are the one with all the words. Give us a toast!"

"Certainly, Mistress Therese. So, I give you a toast. I raise my glass and propose a toast to the twelve—no, I forgot Mistress Therese—the thirteen prettiest ladies in the valley!"

The girls all drank the toast; no one wanted punishment. Or perhaps they liked to be called pretty.

"Another toast!" called Mefist. "Suzanna should give us another toast!"

"Oh no!" she said, so quietly that only her neighbours could hear. "Why me?"

Therese held up her hand for silence. "Sister Suzanna will propose a toast for us!"

Suzanna started to lift her glass, but her supply of ideas had dried up. Mefist reached behind his neighbour to pull her shoulder towards him and whisper in her ear. Again she lifted her glass. "I propose a toast to Mistress Therese!"

"The beautiful Mistress Therese!" shouted Mefist. "God bless her!"

Therese looked down the table at the raised glasses, the smiles and shining eyes. The wine had made a difference. With such inexperienced girls, a little wine could go a long way. She looked at Mefist to end the fun.

"Ladies, ladies! I had no idea you were all so thirsty, or Anna would have brought up more wine. Never mind. It's getting late, and we have a lot to do tomorrow. Firstly, with Therese's permission, after breakfast I want you to bring all your things up here and move into the bedrooms along the corridor. They'll be your home from tomorrow on. Bring some cleaning things. You'll start by getting our new home spotless. I'll sort this furniture out, but you'll find your rooms are ready for you. Wear your oldest clothes for the dirty work.

"What else? Some time in the morning, as soon as I have a moment, I'll come up and measure you all for some pretty clothes. I must do that as soon as possible. My cousin's in Vienna at the moment. I'll see if she can buy you some interesting things. She always seems to buy clothes by the armful. So she can come and pass on a little worldly knowledge. I know she's studied bedroom ceilings all over Europe, so she's a bit of an amateur expert at that sort of thing.

"What about hairdressing? Is there someone in the village?"

"We cut our own hair," said Therese.

"Forgive me, but...perhaps the results are mixed. You need an expert. There must be someone who can help."

"I suppose we could ask Mrs. Orlova. I believe she does her friends' hair for special occasions."

"Mrs. Orlova it is, then. Please send for her, but I want to speak with her before she touches any of you. I'm not sure I'd trust any lady's hairdresser who is not a homosexual male.

"Now girls, headscarves on and off to bed. Straight to bed, and don't talk to anyone about our meeting here tonight. I'll see you all tomorrow."

The girls picked up their headscarves and, with practiced gestures, pinned them into place. Mefist had put his hand on Therese's arm to keep her in her seat while the girls left. "Good night, Mistress!" they called happily.

"They'll be a good bunch," reflected Mefist. "I shall enjoy being with them. Such a change from the soldiers. I have to say you're doing well, Therese. The Army could use a few more officers like you. Let me know if you ever decide on a military career."

"I'm not happy about all this, Mefist. The fun and games are all very well, but they are not thinking about what is going to happen to them."

"Don't worry! Firstly, nothing unnatural or unpleasant is going to happen to them, so it won't be too bad. You've done the difficult bit for them.

"The other thing is that they will have their friends living with them. If they're all together, being kind to the officers won't matter. That's why our little meeting tonight was so important; it lets them know they're not alone. Also, they know they can count on you to take care of them."

"What about me, Mefist? Am I going to have to let the men use me too?"

"Mmh, difficult question. In your position, you don't have to take on any customers unless you want to. Although I suppose if the General or some other ranking bigwig insists, you'll have to say yes."

"But the General's old!" she cried without thinking.

"Yes, I'm afraid age goes with seniority. I guess the girls will get all the fine young men, and you'll be stuck with the distinguished ones. Never mind—there's many a fine tune played on an old fiddle, so I'm told. Of course, if you fancy someone a bit younger, you'll be free to take your pick.

"But I don't know what the girls will think of you if you stay out of it completely. Let me know what you want to do, and I'll try and make it as easy as possible for you."

### **Chapter 6**

The girls rushed to climb up to their new home and choose their rooms. Therese followed them up slowly. The bedroom corridor buzzed as they skipped from room to room and admired their friends' choices. Maria stood at the door of the first room. "I've kept this one for you, Mo-Mistress."

It was the room with the door to the disused stairway. "Thank you, Sister Maria. I'm sorry, thank you Maria. All these changes will take some getting used to, but I suppose we must try. I suppose 'Sister Maria' is only for formal occasions. I don't think I shall be sleeping here, you know. You wouldn't want me around all the time anyway. You wouldn't feel free to gossip. So we'll keep this as the office. We'll have to lock the door to those stairs, and I'll keep the key. Have you found a room for yourself? Can I see?"

"Yes, Mistress, it's just next door..."

Maria had chosen a room with a bright skylight. It looked bare, and only Maria's suitcase on the bed hinted at occupation. "Please, Mistress," Maria asked, "Can I hang up my crucifix? Would it be right?"

"Of course you must! Just because you're going to be, er, working here doesn't mean you can shut the Good Lord out. I must find one for the hall as well." She went out into the corridor. "Girls! It's time to get changed. Take off your habits and headscarves and put them away. You heard what Mefist said; they're only for chapel. For now we need old clothes for hard work. Let's get cleaning. I have some work to do with Sister Brigitta, and then I will join you."

Mefist found her with Sister Brigitta, trying to explain the filing system. "Good morning, Mother Superior, good morning, Therese. How is your business going? I'm afraid you will have to move your office into the Convent, Mother Superior. I'm going to use this one as my bedroom. Timko

will set up his office outside, and I'm sure you won't want to share with him.

"Is the telephone working yet? I suppose it's a forlorn hope. I do hope it won't take too long. They promised me sometime today.

"Therese, the men will finish the coach house today, so I want them eating in the refectory from, say, tomorrow lunchtime. Is that possible? I'm really too busy today. I could be in six places at once and still be late.

"Mother Superior, I am going to take Therese away right now. Do your best with what you have, I'd suggest. It will all sort itself out eventually. I'm sure that Therese will lend you Maria for a few hours to help sort things out, but not today. Or tomorrow. We're all going to be very busy upstairs.

"By the way, is there a piano anywhere? I could trade you the long table from the servants' hall for a piano."

"There's the old one that Sister Helena used to practice on," suggested Therese.

Sister Brigitta started to protest, but Mefist cut her off. "That's agreed, then. I'll send the men down with the table this afternoon, and we can amuse ourselves watching them trying to get the piano up that staircase. Grossner will manage; he always does.

"Come, Therese, we must run..."

As they hurried along, Mefist said, "That Sister Brigitta is no shining light. I'm glad we won't have to spend too long with her. Make sure that you're in charge of the refectory. I don't want her trying to tell the girls what to do. Or upsetting my men.

"Now, Therese, I've got to measure our girls so I can buy them some decent clothes. They're not going to be happy, but there it is. I'll need your help today, so do your best. It'll be the first step in their training."

"Mefist, you're asking me to teach them something I don't know anything about myself."

"That's life in the Imperial Army, Therese. We're always being asked to do things we know nothing about, but don't worry. As soon as the telephone is working, I'll call my cousin Wanda. She'll teach us a lot, I'm sure. I need you this morning to help keep them calm and comfortable. We have strong taboos to break."

Therese started up the stairs, but Mefist stayed to shut and bolt the door behind him. The girls had been busy. They had pushed the dining table up against the wall and Agata and Dorota, the tallest girls, were standing on it and cleaning the skylights.

Mefist called them. "Girls, stop what you're doing. You need to be measured for your new clothes." They all appeared in the hall, looking disheveled and dirty but happy.

"You're doing well. We'll soon have the place in shape. Now, I have to recruit you into the Army—well, approximately anyway—and the first thing recruits have to do is take off all their clothes and be measured. So get started. Everything off and stand over here."

Therese stood, as shocked as the girls. Then she reached for her headscarf. The girls just stood and stared. Once she had taken her headscarf off, Mefist held her arm and stopped her. "Come on, girls. It's all part of joining the Army, and I'm not going to bite you—yet. Maria, show them how it's done."

Maria looked even more horrified. She stared at him, and then at Therese. When Therese nodded, her hand crept to her apron. "Go on, all of you!" Therese ordered. "It's got to be done, so we may as well get it over with quickly. Just do as you're told! Now!"

Frightened, the girls hurried to strip off their dresses. "Everything, Maria!" ordered Mefist. She had stopped after reaching her chemise and loose cotton drawers.

"Oh, Mistress!" wailed Maria.

"Yes, everything, Maria." Reluctantly Maria started to pull off her underwear and lay it on the table. While the others followed her, Therese whispered to Mefist, "What about me?"

Mefist had a twinkle in his eye. "Don't worry! I'll get to you later. I'll make sure you get your new clothes too."

"That's not what I meant!"

"I know that, but you're the mistress. You must be treated differently, up to a point. I'll deal with you privately. Let's get on."

The girls were standing in a tight group—like sheep, Therese thought. They struggled to cover themselves with their hands and arms.

Mefist stood in front of them, legs apart and hands on hips. None of the girls could look at him. "Dear me! What a sorry lot of recruits we have here! Come on! Stand up for yourselves. Here, form a line! That's it." The girls shuffled into an untidy line. "Now, attention! That's it; heads up, hands by

your sides. Stand up straight. Good, now you're beginning to look like the girls I know.

"Therese, come with me. I want to be introduced to all of them, one by one."

Therese put her hand on the first trembling shoulder. "This is Maria. She comes from Brno. She's been with us a long time. How long, Maria?"

"Please, Mistress, I've been a nun for seventeen years," she answered in a small voice.

Mefist looked her up and down. Therese thought she looked round and soft. Her breasts were heavy and had large dark nipples. "You're very beautiful, Maria," said Mefist politely. "Could you please turn around?"

Maria had two dimples above a generous bottom. "Charming!" said Mefist. "Turn back now. I think we can predict fame and maybe fortune for you. You'll be very popular. Perhaps we can find a nice officer to take you home with him."

Maria blushed and said, "Thank you, your Hon-Mefist."

They moved on to the next girl, Meike, a slim, brown-haired girl with tight little breasts and tiny pink nipples that peeped out across the room. "Tell me about this lady," ordered Mefist.

As they continued down the line, Therese reflected on the variety of figures in front of her. Short, tall, big breasts, small breasts, soft bellies, boyish waists, a variety of bottoms. Mefist complimented them all, but Therese saw no beauty at all in the embarrassed line of naked bodies.

After he had finished the line, Mefist came back to the centre. "Well done, girls. I'm proud of you. Now; the Imperial Army has spent the first hours of the day scouring the village, and here are the results of our search." He produced a packet from his tunic and opened it. It was full of combs. "Here, share them out and comb your sister's hair. I'm going to start measuring you. Maria, you're first. Jump up on this chair."

Mefist passed a small leather-covered notebook to Therese and pulled a tape measure from his pocket. Maria stood in front of them. Her breasts stared Mefist in the face. She flinched at his touch as he reached around her waist. "Seventy-four centimetres." he passed on to Therese while he slipped the tape down to her hips. Maria trembled as his hands brushed her hips and belly. "Ninety-four centimetres. Now hold still, Maria," he warned as he tried to position the tape exactly over her dark nipples. Ninety-one—no,

make that ninety-two, we don't want to squeeze such delightful breasts, do we? Do you know about cup sizes, Maria?

"They are C, Mefist," said Maria.

"Good. Write down C, please, Therese. What's your shoe size, Maria? Now turn round, I want to measure how tall you are."

"Please, Mefist," asked Maria, "Will I be good enough?"

"Good enough?" He patted her bottom. "The men will be queuing up for you! I'd take you home myself, but Therese is very jealous. Go on with you, and let's have the next one."

Therese watched and noted as he measured each of them, chatting and calming them as he did so. He had just the right touch. Therese expected he would be good with animals too. When he had finished, he called them together. They had forgotten their nudity and stood together as if they were fully dressed. Therese was surprised it had happened so quickly. "Good work, girls. I have all your most intimate details in my little book. I'm going to send a telegram to Wanda, and I hope we will see her in a few days. You'll like her.

"Now I have to compliment you. I have never seen so many pretty girls all at once. Wonderful, but I simply must get you some proper clothes." He walked over to the table and pulled a pair of gray drawers from one of the heaps. "Look at these!" He held them up. "They are terrible! No one under the age of 103 should be permitted to wear them. Gather them all up, Therese. I shall take them down to the boiler house myself."

The girls started to protest. "No, no. I won't hear of it! I will not allow all these beautiful bottoms to be put in such uninspiring garments. You'll have to manage with nothing at all. Think how nice that will feel on a day like this. Now get dressed, and in a few minutes we'll all go down for lunch."

Mefist led Therese to the new office and shut the door behind them. "Now it's your turn, Therese." She had resolved not to fight him, and anyway, all the girls had had to go through the same humiliation—and in public, too. She threw her headscarf onto the desk, turned her back, and started to undress.

"I think that went rather well, don't you?" he asked behind her.

"I've seen grooms like you. A pocket full of sugar lumps, and they can make horses do anything they want. Except that you used combs and not sugar lumps. Tell me, do you really think they're pretty?"

"Well, all ladies are pretty when they want to be, didn't you know? Did you see them at the beginning? Cowering and trying to hide behind their hands? Then look at them just now, when I took their knickers away? Which picture looked prettier? It's all in their minds, you know. Once they know a bit more about men, they'll be strutting around like peacocks—you'll see.

"They need attention, of course. They're just so clumsy, and so *hairy*! Never mind. Wanda will fix that sort of thing. She'll give them a bit of confidence too, I expect. Here, give those to me."

Therese had just stepped out of her drawers when Mefist snatched them from her and went out. "Here, Dorota, add these to the heap!" She heard a giggle, and Mefist returned.

"Right, Therese, let's have a look at you." He took her hands and held them apart. "Very nice. Turn around." He dropped one hand and, lifting the other, turned her as if they were dancing. "Beautiful, truly beautiful. Therese, I have to say you are the pick of them all!"

"I heard what you said to all the other girls, Mefist."

"That was all true too, up to a point, but you are wonderful. If I had to elope, I know who I'd take with me."

"Save your hot blood for someone else, Mefist. When this is all over I shall be back in the Convent, even if I have to be a lay-sister and take care of the chickens."

"Let me kneel at your feet!" he said dramatically and brought out his measuring tape. She winced inwardly as he knelt in front of her. He was staring straight at her sex. My God, help me! I don't think I can do this for much longer, she cried silently. Hurry up, Mefist! But Mefist took his time. Slowly he reached around her waist with the tape and tightened it up. Her skin tingled. He reached around her again to smooth the tape around her back. His face was near her, and she could feel his breath on her belly.

He dropped the tape and reached for the notebook. Then he reached for the tape again. As he bent forward, his hair touched her with an electric shock. She trembled as he smoothed the tape around her bottom and held the join tight in her hair. He did not seem to notice. He stood up to measure her breasts. "These are truly magnificent, Therese," he said, brushing the outsides of her breasts with his fingertips. "Look at them!"

Therese looked down. Her nipples seemed darker than normal and they were standing tight and erect, as if she were cold. A shiver ran through her as he adjusted the tape over her sensitive points, and she felt his brushing fingers in the depths of her stomach. "Holy Mary, Mefist! Stop playing with me!"

He smiled and leaned forward to give her a kiss on the forehead. "You're a real Aphrodite. You'll make some lucky man very happy. Now come for lunch."

When he had gone, she fumbled for her clothes and got dressed. Her skin felt strange and alive as she walked down to lunch with the girls. The movement of her habit across her bare bottom made it worse. When they got to the refectory, Therese called the chief server over. Together they organised a separate table for the girls at the foot of the hall. From now on they would eat here, and Therese decided to sit with them.

"It's the best place to be, Ma'am," said the server. "You're right next to the kitchen door, and your food will always be hot."

### **Chapter 7**

Therese and Maria sat in the last cleared meadow at the edge of the forest, high above Montebello. The floor of the narrow sloping valley was kept clear, partly as summer grazing, but even more so the huntsmen could shoot boar and deer from the hides at the forest edge.

The two women looked down the open strip between the dark forested slopes, towards the castle sleeping like a friendly beast on its ridge in the sun. Its red roofs and round white tower stood out against the smoky haze of the valley floor beyond.

Autumn was already taking the tree leaves up here, and the long grass bent brown and lifeless. The wild raspberries had finished, but there were still blackberries to find if you searched long enough. Therese poked at the small fire and added some more dry wood.

"It's beautiful up here, isn't it, Mistress? It reminds me of when I was a little girl." Maria was sorting and trimming the mushrooms, mostly steinpilz and kurki, they had picked under the trees. She was an expert and would keep them all from harm. "My mother used to take me to the woods and we'd pick mushrooms day after day. She'd dry them for winter, or take them into town for sale. We were very poor then. She died poor, but that's the way it is. God doesn't look in your purse when you go to Him. Did you pick mushrooms, Mistress?"

"No, Maria, I was always too frightened. I'd pick the field mushrooms sometimes, but there's so many in the forest that I never learnt the good ones. I used to have a pony, and I was too busy rushing around the estate or taking her to visit my friends. Then my family sent me to school in Interlaken, and the teachers there certainly didn't think that young ladies should pick mushrooms. In some ways I was more restricted in school than in the Convent. Why did you become a nun, Maria?"

"I didn't have a choice, really. My mother died when I was only twelve. I didn't have family—well, I'd got an auntie, but she had no money either and already had more than enough children. My mother had left the few crowns she had to the priest with a letter begging him to take me in, so he found a place for me here. It was that or the streets, so here I am."

"Do you regret it?"

"No, not really. I mean, children and a family would have been nice, but it's God's work we do, isn't it? I'm warm and comfortable, and I have my Sisters. I can't complain."

"But it's not too late for you! You're only thirty-four, aren't you?"

"Thirty-three, Mistress. I'm not thirty-four until Christmas. God forgive me, but I'd love to have a little baby, husband or no, and now that might even come true! Do you think the Convent would throw me out if it happened?"

"Maria, if Mefist or the Convent didn't take care of you, I'd send you to my father. You would have earned your peace by then."

"Mistress, I always said you were the best Mother Superior a nun could wish for."

Therese felt embarrassed at her gratitude. "Call the girls over, Maria. This fire must be big enough by now."

The girls ran up, chattering and shouting to each other. They looked healthy; the exercise had put colour into their cheeks, and their eyes shone. Meike had a garland of autumn leaves around her head. "Get those sausages," ordered Therese, "and you'd better all get a stick to cook them on. No stick, no sausage."

Maria had already sharpened sticks, and she passed one to Therese. "Beer, Mistress? Mefist told me to make sure the girls all had some. He says it's good for the complexion." She started to open the half litre bottles and pass them around. "Come on, girls, share and share alike."

Maria grabbed the pointed end of Therese's stick and deftly threaded a sausage and half an onion onto it. "Here you are, Mistress, and some bread, and your beer. Mefist particularly said you had to have some."

Therese sat grilling her sausage, deaf to the chatter around her, and drank from the bottle of dark beer, just as Mefist had ordered. It was strange to think that less than a week ago, she had only the slightest idea that Mefist

existed. Now he had taken over the castle, and the lives of the girls, and her life too.

The funny thing was, it felt so natural now. All she believed in had been stood on its head, and she hardly noticed. She could see the same in the others; they did not seem upset at all. She passed the beer bottle to Maria.

"I do like Mefist," said Maria, echoing her thoughts, "He's a real gentleman. You know, not one of those that are full of their own importance and walk around with their bellies stuck out. He just *is* important. I think we'd do anything for him. Even have dancing lessons with no clothes on, like we did this morning. You should have joined in, Mistress, it was such fun."

She half-wished she had, but she had only got back in time to see the last waltz before Mefist had packed up the gramophone and sent them all out with a picnic lunch to pick mushrooms. The girls had been enjoying themselves, whirling around like ice skaters, oblivious to their lack of clothes. Mefist was right about that too; even naked, they had begun to look beautiful. But he had also been right about the hair.

She had spent a frustrating two hours trying to telephone the Bishop. The Army had sorted out the telephone lines, and she got through to faraway Vojnicky Kapitula without too much difficulty. She had tried several times, but the Bishop had not been able to speak to her. She wondered if he knew of her troubles already, and if so, who had told him.

In the end, she poured out her heart to a deacon who had told her to wait by the telephone. Within a few minutes he had called her back. "The Bishop is sorry that his schedule means he cannot speak to you himself, but he asks me to tell you that he is confident your good conscience will carry you through these difficult times, and that you will be in his prayers." She had felt a very unchristian urge to scream at him, but had hung the telephone up quietly. Mefist had understood. No one wished to share her burden.

Mefist had said they must go for a picnic because he wanted them out of the club. The carpenters wanted to install a bar, and the piano was coming. Therese suspected he really wanted to give her the chance to take her mind off the telephone and the Bishop. She had enjoyed the long walk up from the Castle with the girls. Searching for mushrooms in the forest had absorbed her completely. Now, sitting with her friends and enjoying the badly cooked sausages, she had set the phone call aside. The Bishop, fortunately for him, lived far away. She did not need him or his approval to do what was right. In fact, if the man himself walked out from the trees right now, she would not be interested enough to attack him.

They returned to the castle as the sun fell. The tents by the wagon park had gone, and the soldiers had moved up into the castle. The new sentry box stood by the outer gate, and military ideas of cleanliness had begun to impose themselves. The main gates, held permanently open, had a new coat of paint, and the curbstones had been painted white. The old guard room, long used for the porter and garden tools, had been brought back into use, and a neatly lettered sign stated that you were entering the Head Quarters of The Princess Royal's 3<sup>rd</sup> Carpathian Brigade. The sentry smiled to the girls but saluted Therese as she passed.

She went to her room only to find that she had been moved. She found her things in the governess's apartment on the first floor of the tower. A move up in the world that made Therese happy. She would have easy access to the tower gallery, and rare privacy because her room was not on the way to anywhere else. There were no other apartments in the tower, just a storeroom above her. Visitors to the tower could either carry on up the spiral staircase to the top or go back down again. The only other exit was a small door onto the roof of the main buildings, but that was only used for maintenance.

She had a large room, fresh and clean, with a writing desk under the small window and two comfortable chairs at the fireplace. A narrow door led to her own bathroom, a luxury indeed. And for some reason, she had a large double bed. Therese had never slept in a double bed before. She was writing at the desk when a knock came at the door. She opened it to Mefist.

"Well? Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"But you can't! It's my bedroom."

"Of course I can, and anyway, who's to know? You could get up to all sorts of mischief up here and nobody any the wiser." He walked in and took one of the soft chairs. "This is nice. It must be one of the coziest bedrooms in the castle. Do you like it?"

"It's very nice; and I suppose I have to thank Mefist, who seems to be able to do anything."

"Your humble servant, Mistress. Just say the word and I'll walk through fire for you."

"Well, thank you, but why are you here?"

"Oh, mostly to watch you enjoying your new room, of course, but also because I'm going to miss you at dinner. I have to run up to the front and I don't know when I'll get back. Probably late tomorrow, so you'll have to meet Wanda at the train. I'll arrange with Grossner to give you my car and a driver. I'm sure Wanda will have a mountain of luggage. She never travels light, and she'll have all the things for the girls. If you wouldn't mind taking care of her until I get back.

"Oh, and the hairdresser is coming tomorrow afternoon. No doubt it will take her a couple more visits to attend to everyone. I visited her in the village, and she knows that if I come back and find the girls looking like a bunch of frizzed up old grandmothers, she'll be joining one of our mule trains. With a packsaddle on. I want long hair wherever possible. A few curls or waves if the girl wants, but I'm not interested in what ladies like. I want what all men want, and that's long hair that spreads out on the pillow.

"What else? Yes, Corporal Horvath will bring in a consignment of drinks and glasses for you tomorrow morning. Horvath used to be a barman at the Metropole in Budapest, so he's just the person to teach the girls how to serve wine and carry drinks to the tables. Then let him give a special session to the people who will work behind the bar. That should be you, of course, and I would suggest Maria—she's sensible enough—and one other. A steady girl with some brains. Not Helena if she's going to be playing the piano much, but someone reliable.

"Now I must be off. I'm late already."

"It's not dangerous, is it? I mean, at the front. Are they fighting up there?"

"No, there's no fighting yet or we'd be hearing the guns. I don't think there will be any fighting. It would be a stupid place to attack us, but you never know. So, I'm off." He jumped to his feet.

"Do be careful, Mefist."

"Don't worry, little sister. I'll be back tomorrow." He brushed her cheek with his lips and left.

## **Chapter 8**

Standing on the railway platform in normal clothes felt humiliating to Therese. Many of the village people would recognise her, and she had no wish to advertise her new status as bordello madam for the Imperial Army. She had come to the station as a nun several times before, and she had always waited in the stationmaster's office with coffee and biscuits. Now she felt exposed and disgraced, and the large figure of Grossner standing respectfully behind her did not help.

The train appeared as a black dot in a cloud of white smoke. Therese flinched as the noise and steam of the engine enveloped her and the train squealed to a halt.

Wanda was unmistakable as the only woman in fashionable city clothes. Her skirt was shorter than normal, her stockings fitted perfectly, and her hat and coat were sharp and in a matching light fawn.

She held her hand out. "You must be Therese. It's nice to see you. You are just as pretty as Franz said. Could your sergeant organize the porters? I'm afraid I have rather a lot of things. Ask the guard, Sergeant. He has the list."

"Did you have a good journey?"

"My dear, it was terrible. These country trains can be so slow in normal times, but now they are positively crawling, and the main lines are so busy with army trains. Still, Franz says the valley here is going to be an island of tranquility. I hope so. I don't like to think of him in danger. How is it all affecting you?"

"Well, not at all really. It's all very peaceful." Therese stopped in surprise. "Well, it has actually affected *us* very much. I mean, a week ago, we were still nuns! Now we're just..."

She could not bring the word out, and Wanda smiled at her. "I don't think you're *just* anything. You have a job to do, and Franz said if you

hadn't volunteered, they would have had to take women from the village. Franz was lucky to find you. The village people should be grateful, although I don't think you'll find any women to say nice things about you. Just forget about them and call yourself a hostess. That's what I'd do. If anyone criticizes, ask her if she'd like to take your place.

"How are the other women taking to the idea?"

"I don't know if they've really understood what's going to happen to them. Mostly they're very young."

"That's good. You learn faster when you're young. Once they've got over the first few times, they'll start to enjoy themselves. Your big challenge will be to stop them getting fat and lazy."

They walked out into the Bahnhofplatz, and Wanda could see the castle for the first time, perched high above them and shining white in the sun.

"Is that it? It's beautiful! And it's all yours!"

"Oh, don't believe that. I'm just the steward. Count Egerhazy owns it, but he's in America. Up there we've got the Convent, and the Army. Mefist has more influence than I."

"Franz makes you call him Mefist? How terribly correct!"

"We all have enough trouble with just Mefist. We kept wanting to call him Prince. Especially the girls. It will be a long time before I could call him anything except Mefist."

Grossner came out of the station. "Your Honour, I think I had better run you both up to the castle and come back for the luggage. There's a great deal of it."

Wanda giggled. "Well, the Prince did insist. Just let me have the small brown suitcase, the leather one, and the rest can come up later."

Grossner whisked them up the hill and right up to the guardroom. "Your Honour, I'll have a man bring the suitcase up. Where do you want it?"

"Bring it to my room, please, Sergeant. Miss Wanda can use that while she's here. The rest of the luggage can go into the library. I'll have the girls carry it upstairs."

Arm in arm they walked up from the outer gate. Wanda stood about the same height as Therese, and she smelled expensive. She dressed very well; her outfit had a feeling of quality about it, and Therese supposed that she would have gone to a fashionable couturier. Her dark hair sparkled in the

sunlight and looked well-groomed but natural. She had an elegant figure. Therese enjoyed having her on her arm.

Wanda wanted to see the club and meet the girls straight away. The place already looked more homely. Someone had found some Mucha prints, and the carpenters had hung them to cheer up the bare white walls. The simple metal lampshade had been replaced with a small chandelier, and new lights shone behind the bar. Easy chairs sat around the fireplace and round café tables lined a small patch of floor, sanded and polished, ready for dancing. Beyond the dance floor a corridor led to the girls' rooms.

Wanda approved of the girls, and they liked her immediately. Maria and Dorota worked behind the new bar to prepare the coffees, and the girls served them. Wanda ordered three of the little tables pushed together, and soon everyone had squeezed together to listen to her. They wanted to hear what was happening in Vienna, how the war affected everyone, and whether Wanda thought it would soon end. They were open in their admiration of her clothes, and they wanted to know about the newest fashions. They clucked over the price of her stockings and envied her hair. But most of all, they wanted to know about Mefist.

Therese let them take her to lunch while she ran down to see Timko. Mefist had promised that Timko would take care of the castle administration so there would not be too much for her to do. Perhaps, with a little luck, the Army would pick up most of the bills. She found Timko waiting with a full tray of papers for her attention and a long list of questions. She sent for sandwiches, and they worked together through the lunch hour. Timko seemed an intelligent man and she saw that, once he had found his way around the files, the castle would be in good hands.

The arrival of the hairdresser disturbed them. Mrs. Orlova was a small woman with tightly curled, dyed hair. Mefist's threat to send her up the mountains wearing a packsaddle if she made a mistake had frightened her.

"Do you know what the Prince wants, Mother Superior?" she asked in a whisper.

The old name sounded sad and strange. "You don't call me Mother Superior now. Just Madam von Falberg will do. I'm not sure what Mefist likes, but his cousin is here. She'll help us."

They found Wanda and the girls carrying luggage up to the club and storing it on the dance floor. Wanda took Mrs. Orlova in hand immediately.

"Franz is very particular about a girl's hair. I cut mine short once, and it was all he could do to talk to me for months. He sounded fine on the telephone, but each time he saw me face to face, he was so upset I thought he'd be sick! So you can trim it, but don't make it any shorter."

They looked around them at the girls. None of them had cut their hair really short, but then again, none of them had let it grow more than collar-length. Longer than that would be a vanity and inconvenient under a headscarf. "They're all young, so make them up as if they were going to their first communion. That should do it. Men love the innocent look. You've got a dozen girls to do, and Therese, so you'd better keep it simple or you'll be here for days. Franz hates too many curls anyway."

Mrs. Orlova sat her first client under a skylight and unpacked her bag. Wanda was unpacking too. Once she had found what she wanted, she called the other girls over. She had twelve boxes neatly wrapped in brown paper.

"I got Meissners on Annagasse to make me up some collections for you. They're all different so you'll just have to take potluck. Pick one and open it. We'll see what he's got for you."

The packages contained cosmetics. The girls looked at them with trepidation. Wanda quickly scanned the lipsticks and nail varnishes, and started to swap them around. "Now, that's much too strong for you. Where's a pale one—here, take this instead. With your hair color, this will be better. Yes, that will do, I think. Or maybe this one? No, stick with that color because Maria can't possibly use yours. Now, let's try them on. Do you have a mirror?"

The girls looked to Therese. "I think I saw a cheval glass in the Countess's dressing room."

"That's what we need because we have to dress them later. Can we bring it up?" Soon they were all absorbed. Therese crept back to Timko.

Dusk had already come when Mrs. Orlova left. Therese walked with her to the castle gate. "They're a nice lot of girls, Ma'am, and pretty too. The officers will think they're in heaven, I'm sure."

"What is the village saying, Mrs. Orlova?"

"Oh well, there's a lot of talk. Some saying this and some saying that. There's no help for it, that's what I say. I mean, if it weren't the nuns it would be some of us. Let the old women gossip, that's what I say to them, but Jana Krausova has been going around trying to put things straight. She's

a strong one, that one. I heard her myself saying to one of the women, I won't tell her name to you, Jana said 'If you're so set on keeping the nuns safe, why don't you go and offer your dupka up there? I'm sure your husband can spare you.' That shut her up, I can tell you! The men are quiet, mostly anyway. The ones that have young wives or daughters are just glad. The young men talk, of course, saying stupid things. I expect the Army will have them soon, mark my words. They'll take them off to Serbia or somewhere and make them into soldiers. Keep quiet and go and hide in the forest, that's what I tell them. The Army won't be here forever, and it's better to be cold in the forest than dead in Serbia.

"No, the village won't say so—at least not when the priest's listening—but I think they're mighty relieved that you and your girls are keeping the officers away. We'll still have to deal with the men, of course, but we can handle them."

Therese watched as the woman's dumpy figure trotted down the ramp to the wagon park. She supposed that she would see a lot more of Mrs. Orlova.

#### Chapter 9

Mefist returned as they ate dinner. He wore battledress and looked young and adventurous. He hugged Wanda cheerfully before squeezing onto the bench beside her. The girls were pleased to see him safe and sound. As soon as he sat down, the servers were at his side, bringing wine and food. They must have been waiting for him.

Polite as ever, he noted the girls who had been under Mrs. Orlova's care and complimented them. Soon he was eating and telling of his trip to the front, amusing them with his pictures of the people he had met and of the ways they had made themselves at home in the forest around Tergov. Therese watched the animated faces around the table. It felt good to have Mefist back again.

After dinner, he rushed them back up to the club. "I want Wanda to see you dance," he proclaimed.

The girls hurried to their rooms and came back naked. Mefist wound the gramophone and sat at one of the small tables to watch them waltz. He demanded Tokay, and Therese got up to serve him. When she returned to the table with three glasses of the noble wine, he had gone, dancing with Wanda and then with the girls. Wanda came for her and she danced, for the first time since she had come to Montebello as a novice.

It was a happy feeling to dance with Wanda, but when she was passed on to Mefist, she felt frightened. His woollen battledress felt rough, and he smelled of smoke and oil. Her feet remembered their lessons at Interlaken, and Mefist's strong arm about her waist whirled her around the floor. When the gramophone ran down, she found they were the only couple on the floor. The girls were smiling and proud of her.

"Tokay for everyone!" called Mefist. "Even Suzanna must like Tokay. Now, I have definite news at last. The General will be here in three days. We can expect the first officers to be here the day before. Are you all ready?"

"Oh, Lord," muttered Wanda. "I haven't even given them their clothes yet, and as for what they have to do..."

"Don't worry! These are Therese's girls. They can do anything."

"Maybe, but they'll do it a lot better if they know what they're supposed to do."

"Of course nuns don't know what to do. That's the whole point. No one will be surprised."

"Franz, that's unfair. You have to give them an idea, or they'll be frightened."

"Well, you tell them. I can't say much because I look at these things from the wrong end."

Wanda frowned at him. "Wrong end! I'll give you wrong end. Get up, little brother. You've been cock of the farmyard too long. It's time you gave these poor girls a little help."

Uncertainly he stood up, and Wanda pushed him back until he rested against the table. "Come around, girls. Watch what I'm doing and remember!"

They crowded around while Wanda moved her chair next to Mefist and reached for the fly of his trousers. Therese watched in horror as Wanda's elegant fingers unpicked the buttons, one by one. She looked up at Mefist, but he had eyes only for Wanda's hand. He had a half-smile on his face. Wanda's hand reached inside his clothes, fumbled for a moment, and then drew out his sex.

It lay on the front of his trousers like a soft white limb, rapidly growing and stretching. A gasp went through the girls. The pink eye began to peep from inside its hood as the pole grew to its full size. "Jaki durze hujek!" muttered Agata.

Wanda laughed. "Oh, it's not so big, is it, Franz?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I only know one of them; you've met many more."

"Maybe I have," she said. "I'd say this is a handsome one, but no larger than normal."

"It's much bigger than my little brother's," said Dorota, "but he's only young."

"I can assure you this one is fully grown and ready to make you fly! Touch it." When no one volunteered, she grabbed the nearest hand—Maria's—and guided it towards Mefist.

As her fingers touched, the rigid sex pulsed, and Maria whipped her hand away as if she had been burned. "It moved!" she cried.

Wanda laughed. "Of course. It was just saying hello. Now someone else."

Using the same caution that they would have employed for a snake, the girls reached out to touch the beast with their fingertips. "What do you think?" asked Wanda.

It's soft, they said. It feels silky. It's alive!

"It's very big," said Agata, "I mean..." She is right, thought Therese. It is huge. How will it fit inside?

Wanda laughed at their reaction and reached up to pat Agata's cheek. "Don't you worry. One like this will make you very happy and, who knows, by the time I visit again you may be dreaming of much bigger ones. Now I'd better show you how it works. First of all, you can pull the skin back like this." She slid her hand back confidently, and the sleek purple head emerged. Mefist sighed.

"Do you like that, Franz?"

"Your touch is unmistakable," he said softly.

Wanda pushed her chair aside and knelt in front of him. The skin had returned, and the swollen head was half-hidden again. "Now watch me. If I do this..." She started to move the skin back and forth rhythmically, "...I can make him come. Is that right, Franz?"

"Mmh," was the only reply she got.

"This feels very good for any man, but what really drives them mad is this." She bent forward and, still moving her hand backwards and forwards, took the plum of his sex into her mouth.

"Aah!" said Mefist. Therese watched his face. He had shut his eyes, and he seemed to be suffering. Wanda let go of him and sat back on her heels. Mefist opened his eyes and smiled.

"Now, everyone do what I just did," ordered Wanda.

"All of them?" asked Mefist. "I don't think..."

"Don't think," she said. "I'll make sure you don't surprise us. Now who's first?"

The nearest hand belonged to Helena. Wanda pulled her over and forced her to her knees. Helena stared at the rampant sex in front of her. Her cheeks were flushed and her pale blue eyes open wide. "Move the skin back like I showed you. That's it. Nice and gentle. Now suck it." Curtains of straight blonde hair swung to hide her face as she reached forward. Mefist disappeared into her mouth, and she started to suckle like a calf. "Stop, stop!" cried Wanda. "That's enough, girl. You have to leave something for the others. I can see you're going to be very popular," she said, helping Helena to her feet. "The men are going to love you." Helena blushed and stared at the floor.

"Very good. Now who's next?" As Therese watched the girls come one after the other to kneel at Mefist's feet, two thoughts skipped into her head. Firstly that the nude girls looked very pretty as they concentrated on Mefist's pleasure, and the second irreverent thought that the procession of girls coming, kneeling and leaving seemed a parody of the communion. Saints forgive me, she said inwardly, I'm thinking like Mefist.

"Is that everyone? There, Franz, you didn't disgrace yourself. I told you I'd take care of you. I suppose it's time for the finale." Wanda knelt again and reached for his sex. "Now, I'm going to make him come. Normally when you do it this way, there's nothing to show. You just keep sucking until he stops coming. So I'll try and make him come where you can see it happen. Watch carefully, because it happens very quickly." The girls pressed closer.

Therese watched as Wanda's fingers with nails varnished crimson wrapped around Mefist's sex and slowly pumped. The head had disappeared out of sight in her mouth, and her red lips ringed the shaft tightly. Her beautifully made-up face shone against the rough cloth of his uniform. Her dark hair fell forward, and she reached up with her free hand to hook it behind her ears. Everyone stood silent, not wanting to breathe.

The stroking of Wanda's hand became faster and more insistent. Therese could hear Mefist's breathing. His eyes had closed again, and stiff little movements shook him. Wanda suddenly took him out of her mouth. "He's coming..." and she plunged back onto him.

"Aah!" gasped Mefist. His body stiffened and his centre arched forward towards Wanda as far as he could reach. Wanda jerked back, and they could

see his sex spurting as it left her mouth. In great animal pulses he spurted over her cheeks, neck and hands.

For the moment, the room was silent and tense, and then Mefist's rigid frame slowly relaxed. "Oh Jesu, Wanda. That was...fantastic."

Wanda jumped to her feet, swallowed, and held out her hands to the girls. "Here, taste it!" They did not hesitate. They came to her and touched their tongues to the white cream. Wanda lent over to where Therese had been sitting for the whole show. "You too," she said, offering her cheek. Therese kissed her. It felt creamy, and tasted dry. Smooth and dry. Wanda was smiling at them all.

"Maria, bring a cloth for her," Therese ordered. "So that's how it happens."

"Yes, that's it. Are you surprised?"

"I didn't know you could do it that way. Is it normal?"

Wanda laughed. "Sometimes I think men prefer it that way, especially the married ones. What do you say, Franz? I think you must have been very hungry, from the mess you made of my makeup."

"When you make love, Wanda, it's wonderful whatever you do," he said gallantly, "and you're right; it's been a long time."

Wanda wiped her face with Maria's cloth. "Well, Therese and all of you, doing it that way has got its advantages. It gives the lady complete control of the man, which puts him in his place. It doesn't take long, and it's easy to clean up. A quick wipe, a sip of wine, and you're ready for the next one! It doesn't hurt, as long as you don't get the stuff in your eyes because it burns, and you can't get pregnant. It's even nicer the other way round, when they do it to you. I expect you'll find that out for yourselves when you get the right man. Try to get Franz here into bed. He's an expert. He'll have you climbing the walls!

"Now, ladies. Do you think you can all do that? Good. Call that lesson one in lovemaking."

Mefist objected. "I don't think the Imperial Army would get very far with its soldiers if we asked the sergeant to pass around a rifle and then told the recruits to watch carefully while the sergeant fired just one shot."

"Maybe, but the rifles your soldiers carry can be reloaded much more quickly than the sort we girls have to work with. Or are you ready to prove me wrong?"

"No, no. I surrender. What are we doing tomorrow, Therese?"

"Well, Mrs. Orlova is coming after breakfast to finish off, and to teach about manicures."

"I still have lots of things to do," said Wanda. "We have to learn about waxing hairy legs. We have to practice making up again, and I want at least a serious hour to teach about not getting pregnant. That's really important. Then we have to give out all the clothes. Can we have a dance and a dress rehearsal tomorrow evening? Just for us girls? And you, of course."

## Chapter 10

Wanda refused to take Therese's room from her. "It's a big enough bed," she said. "We'll share it. You don't snore, do you? We'll be nice and warm, and we can talk."

Wanda was sitting at the desk writing when Therese came out of the bathroom.

"My God!" she shrieked when she saw Therese. "Does Franz know you sleep like that? Even my Grandmother doesn't have a nightie like that."

Therese was taken aback. She looked down at her flannel nightdress. Simple enough; long sleeves, buttoned at the neck. It covered her from top to toe, and it kept her warm.

"I don't know if I'm safe sleeping with you dressed like that. You could be a man underneath, and I'd never know." Then, seeing Therese felt embarrassed, she kissed her cheek and said, "Make the bed warm for me. I won't be long. Can I use your dressing gown?"

Therese lay in the centre of the bed, feeling uncomfortable. Wanda was like a whirlwind with her energy and new ideas—impossible to contain. Now she had even disturbed Therese in her own bed. She listened to the splashing in the bathroom and waited.

She came with a rush. "It's cold! Castles! They're always cold!" She threw the dressing gown off and rushed naked for the bed. Therese caught a flash of her golden figure as she dashed around the bed and jumped under the covers. "Warm me up!" she demanded and, turning her back to Therese, she wriggled and pushed up against her. She drew Therese's arm around her and shivered.

Her body felt hard and vibrant and inexplicably smaller than Therese had expected. She cuddled up closer and pulled Wanda into her lap. Wanda's hair lay under her cheek, and her perfume filled Therese's breathing.

Wanda shivered again. "That's better. You're nice and warm. It must be the nightie." She wriggled again. "Mmh, this is nice. What did you think of this evening?"

"I'm not sure. It all seemed so easy. Is it, I mean, did it...do you like to do that?"

"Oh yes! It's fun! I like pushing men around and making them do what I command."

Therese thought about that idea for a moment. "It didn't look that way. I mean, you were kneeling at his feet and he was taking his pleasure. You looked like, I don't know, like a servant."

"You wait until you've tried it. It's not like that at all. To start with, no girl *has* to do it. Not even in a bordello. You only do it if you want to, and that means men only get it if they treat me correctly. When I'm doing it to them, I'm the one in charge. I can go faster, slower, harder, however I choose. There's nothing much he can do to change things. I can make it an experience he'll never forget, or I can stop halfway and leave him begging. No, you'll see. You'll be the engine driver, with your hand on the lever. And your lips, of course," she added with a chuckle.

"Don't you mind doing it with Mefist? I mean, he's your cousin."

Wanda laughed. "I'd forgotten that! What must you be thinking of us? We're not really cousins, second cousins, actually. My parents died at the end of the Great War, and Mummy and Daddy took me in – that's Franz's parents. He doesn't have any real brothers and sisters, and they brought us up together. I call him 'little brother' sometimes, and he likes it.

"Franz and I have been making love for ages. We've been doing naughty things together since we were little. He's like my brother and I love him, so it seems natural to do something now and again. God knows what will happen when I marry. I don't think it will be easy to find an understanding husband. Maybe I'll get a wife instead."

"Tell me about Mefist. What's he like at home? Where do you live?"

"Where do we live? All over the place at the moment. Home is Lingau, up north on the Prussian border. Near Allerstein. We have a castle up there, smaller than this one of course, and my father spends most of his time there. Mother prefers the house in Gneisnau, so she is always moving backwards and forwards. I live mostly in Vienna just now. I have an interest in the Kunsthistorisches Museum there. Franz I don't know about. At the moment

he's wrapped up in his army work, but I don't think he feels too seriously about it. I can't imagine he'll ever grow into a general or anything like that. He's too independent, and he can't stand stupidity. I expect he'll end up like my father. Living at Lingau. He loves the country life."

"What's he like at home? What does he wear?"

"What does he wear? He has a tailor in London who makes his riding clothes, and that's what he wears mostly. Makes him look very severe and stylish. He spends half the day on horseback when he's in Lingau. It's a big estate, and there's always a lot to be done. I'm sure he doesn't need to personally look at everything that goes on, but that's what he does. We hardly see him in daylight at all."

"Does he hunt?"

"Sometimes. When we have a shooting party, he'll usually join in. He takes a lot of care of the animals, but he's not one of the men who sit up a tree all night just to shoot a pig. He lets the foresters do that. He says they enjoy it more.

"He took photographs for a while. He used to get up in the dark and he and one of the young foresters would carry a great big camera out to the edge of the forest. You should have seen them coming back for breakfast, all cold and hungry, with bags and boxes and the wooden tripod. He developed the plates himself and made some wonderful photographs. We kept telling him to put them in a book. I'm sure people would buy it, but he hasn't done any photography since he went to the Academy. Maybe he'll start again when all this fighting is over. He'd be able to take some wonderful pictures here."

She wriggled around to face Therese. She pushed her onto her back and arranged her head on Therese's shoulder. Her head felt hard, and Therese could sense her breathing. The hand resting on her stomach filled her consciousness.

"What about you, Therese? You seem to be quite taken with Franz. Has he made a conquest?"

Therese was shocked. "Oh no! Nothing like that. He's just, I don't know, interesting, I suppose. I suppose I ought to hate him, but he's nice. I mean he came in here—when?—a week ago?—and just turned everything upside down. I was a Mother Superior then, and look at me now!"

"You mean, in bed with a loose woman?"

"What? No, you're not..." She didn't know how to continue.

"Not what?"

"Wanda! You know what I mean. You're not a loose woman."

Wanda laughed at her embarrassment and kissed her cheek. "You're sweet, but I am a loose woman when I choose to be. Look at you, you're the madam of a high-class bordello now. It's fun, isn't it?"

"I don't know what my mother would think."

"She wouldn't mind. I've met her, don't forget, and I'm sure she would think it's just a necessity of war. I wouldn't tell her, if you're worried. No one else will. Gentlemen are notorious for not talking about such things to women."

"I'm frightened, Wanda. The officers will be here the day after tomorrow, and none of us know what we're doing! Me especially. I don't know anything about sex. I came here straight from school. I've never even had a boyfriend."

"Don't worry so much. You're doing very well. The girls are wonderful; they're pretty, intelligent, and they'll do what you tell them. Just make sure you write down who has all the drinks at the bar, and how many times they take the girls to bed. And that's all. Franz and Timko will take care of all the paperwork and the requisitions you'll need."

"I'm still worried about the girls. They don't know what to do."

"As Franz says, nuns are not meant to know, so it won't be a problem. Believe me, if you take care of them as you're doing now, they'll be loving sex in no time at all. That's nature. We're born to it. It's being a nun that's difficult.

"What about you personally? Will you be taking part in the first night?" Therese thought for a moment. "I don't know. Do you think I should?"

"I wouldn't. Not in the club, anyway. I mean, if the General wants you or someone like that, bring him up here but make sure you write it down in the book. That way the girls will know you're doing your bit. Of course, you don't have to say yes to any more junior officers. That's what the girls are for. I'm sure you'll have a couple of the younger ones up here when you feel like it. I know I would. I think you're going to enjoy the next few months."

The hand on Therese's stomach slid up to her breast. Without thinking, she grabbed for it, but then stopped. She loosened her grip but left her hand

on top of Wanda's. It was only Wanda, after all, and she did not want to seem unfriendly.

Once she had permission, Wanda started to caress her and run a fingernail around her nipple. A rush of electricity shot through her body and down to her stomach. The nipple stiffened, and Wanda started to pinch and twist the hard button.

"Mmh, you have beautiful breasts. Beautiful. I can't wait to see them. Franz said you were very beautiful when he measured you."

"He didn't!"

"Of course he did. He told me all about it. How you got all excited and trembling, and these were standing up hard." She reached over to pinch the other nipple. "You definitely got his attention. Tell me, do nuns ever do this to each other?"

"Oh no! It wouldn't be right. Although, I wonder if I'd ever know? You'd have to ask a priest. If they did it, I'm sure they'd confess."

"I'm not so sure. If it were me, I certainly wouldn't share the experience with a dirty-minded priest. It would only upset him anyway. Here, take this nightie off. I'm nude, so you should be as well. Stroking you through this flannel is awful. Think of it as practice."

"I couldn't—" she said, but did not stop Wanda pulling the nightdress up.

"Come on, take this dreadful thing off!"

Therese sat up and pulled the nightdress over her head. The cold air washed around her, and she hurried back under the covers. "That's better," said Wanda, her hand returning to torment Therese's nipple. "Doesn't it feel good?"

It felt very good. The unaccustomed touch of the sheet on her bare skin and the warmth of Wanda at her side. The hand on her breasts grew more insistent, and she started to tremble. Wanda's hand slid down across her stomach and into her hair.

"I—" protested Therese, but she tipped her hips upwards to meet the hand. A finger slipped down towards her centre. Then it happened to her. She had crushed Wanda to her with the arm around her shoulders, and she was pressing the questing hand down into her and squeezing it between her thighs. Waves of ecstasy swept through her rigid body, and she heard herself saying, "Stop, stop, stop!"

"My God, Therese!" said Wanda when the crisis had passed. "What happened? I hardly touched you!"

"I don't know. I've never... Oh, Wanda, that was wonderful!"

Wanda reached for her and kissed her urgently, full, open-mouthed kisses that took Therese by storm. She reached around Wanda and pulled her closer. It felt exciting to be this close to her. She opened her legs when Wanda's knee pressed between them. Then Wanda's smooth, wet sex gently kissed her thigh. She lifted her knee to push back, and Wanda's hips started to rock against her. Again Wanda's fingers came to her centre, rubbing hard and insistently at her sensitive spot. For a moment she was conscious of Wanda's wetness sliding up and down her thigh, and then she slipped into ecstasy again.

She returned to find Wanda lying half on top of her, crushing her leg between her thighs and trembling periodically. Her face was buried in Therese's hair, and her breathing sounded harsh.

Wanda relaxed and rolled onto her back. "Ooh! I was as fast as you, I think."

"Was it—was it enough?"

Wanda laughed weakly. "You want more? So quickly?"

"No, but you? Was it right?"

"Therese, you are a very promising student. It was very right, and quite enough for the moment. What about you? Did you enjoy it? You came faster than I could have imagined."

"It was good, very good. I had no idea it was going to be like that."

"My dear, you have only just started. It will be ten times better than that when you've done it a bit more. When you are with a man that you love...well, just wait and see.

"Oh, you've finished me. Here, hold me and we'll sleep. It's been a long, long day."

#### **Chapter 11**

Therese woke with a rush, aware of someone sleeping beside her. Wanda had turned her back, and her hair spread over her pillow. Her breathing came quietly. Therese reached out to touch her.

"Go away," she mumbled. "I'll see you later."

Feeling naked and uncomfortable, Therese grabbed some clothes and hurried into the bathroom to dress. Wanda remained curled up in the bedclothes as she left for breakfast.

The club was in turmoil when she got there. Mrs. Orlova was busy, and Maria had got everyone else hard at work cleaning. She put up her mop when she saw Therese and smiled. "Good morning, Mistress. Come and have a look at your office. We've been getting it ready for you."

They had worked hard indeed. She now had a proper writing desk and her filing cabinet from the old office. A hunting print graced the wall. As a concession to her new position, Maria had given her the cheval mirror and an elegant chaise longue. "Where did you find that?"

Maria blushed. "I took it from the Countess's dressing room. I'm sure she won't mind. You'll take more care of it than some soldier, I'm sure. The mirror's from there as well. I know Miss Wanda has bought you some nice clothes, so you'll need it. I tried to get our old typewriter, but Sister Brigitta has taken it. Timko says that if you have any typing, he'll do it for us.

"It's strange, not being a nun any more. I don't think I liked the way Timko looked at me. I could see just what was going through his mind."

"I hope you don't think I'll be using the chaise longue, Maria?"

"You never know, Mistress. You never know."

"Go on with you! Miss Wanda has missed breakfast. Do you think you could find something for her?"

When she came, Wanda looked impeccable. Maria brought her coffee and a croissant to Therese's office. Wanda spoke between bites. "I'm going to get them to wax their legs first. I cannot stand women who have hairy legs under their stockings. Or hair under their arms. Mrs. Orlova should be finished by then, so we'll have a lesson on contraception. You'd better attend, because you're the one who will have to make sure they're careful. We don't want the club to turn into a baby factory. Then before lunch it's your turn. Mrs. Orlova first, then I'll wax your legs, and perhaps a little bit more. Let me start on the girls first. Why don't you come back at about eleven-thirty?" Therese fled.

Mrs. Orlova was in a talkative mood. As she worked on Therese's hair, she described the excitements that the Imperial Army had brought to the village. The tavern was busier than it had ever been; they could have sold far more spirits than could be found from the wholesalers. Already the worst wine in the farmers' cellars had sold out, and soon the meaner ones would have to choose between crowns in their hands now and a proper celebration of Christmas. The more enterprising households were brewing beer as fast as they could and hoped to make their fortunes.

The village now had three police stations. Sergeant Marian and his two constables of the State Police now had to wear blue armbands and report daily to the District Administration Office that had taken the place of the mayor. The Army had its own Military Police who kept the roads clear and pushed truck convoys through without stopping at the tavern. Much more sinister were the black-uniformed contingent of SekPol security police that had taken two classrooms in the school, and they gave the most fertile field for the gossips to plough. SekPol worried the village most, and already some of the young men were talking of disappearing into the forests to avoid an invitation to become Imperial soldiers.

Apart from that, life went on normally, and women were preserving and pickling food for the winter. The men had not finished harvesting the maize and still had the last of the winter wheat to sow. All in all, people trusted to their own irrelevance to protect them from the storms now sweeping Europe. Instinctively they knew that appearing simpler and slower than reality was the only way to survive. SekPol would find no loose talk in the village because they kept their own counsel.

Mrs. Orlova did not appear to do much to her hair, but Therese liked the result. She did not dare, she said, to do more than put a discrete curl in her bangs because Prince Mefist would not like it, and she was not half brave

enough to risk his displeasure. Anyway, Therese liked it and did not feel guilty about admiring herself.

Maria and the girls liked it too, and Therese realized with a start that Mefist and Mrs. Orlova had created a "house style" for the Sisters of Montebello. How arrogant he is, she thought. A normal man might force his wife to dress her hair the way he liked, but Mefist had managed to impose his wishes on a whole harem. Fortunately he had good taste.

Wanda took her straight from Mrs. Orlova's care to the office. "Now, my dear. Let's start turning you into a modern lady. Makeup first."

Wanda sat her in front of the mirror and opened a brown cardboard box. "Look what Meissner has sent for you. I chose the ones I buy myself because you may as well copy me. We're much the same colour, and now we'll look like sisters! Watch what I'm doing and then you can have a try yourself. Sit still and don't talk while I'm working." Her firm and confident fingers started to rub her cheeks.

"I've been teaching the girls. You've got a real gem of a girl in Helena. She's got good hands and an eye for what works for the different girls. I'll send her some magazines to keep her up to date. You'll have to get her to do your eyebrows; I don't have time today. She's going to be a busy girl for the first week or so. Tip your head back."

Finally Therese looked in the mirror. She now looked glamorous. The mirror image made her smile and look even prettier. She chuckled happily.

"Enough of that," said Wanda. "You can admire yourself later. I've got to show you how to wax your legs. Get your skirt off and sit on the chaise longue while I get the wax ready."

When she returned, she almost dropped the pot. "What are you wearing? Mefist will kill you if he sees those. None of the other girls have dared to put anything on at all. Get them off and hide them quickly. We have to take them off anyway."

Therese reached for the tie of her illegal drawers in embarrassment. Mefist again, she thought, and now Wanda had turned out just as bad. She hesitated, but they had to go. She did not feel she could be offended now, especially after what had happened last night. She stood and slipped them off.

"Oh dear," said Wanda without thinking. "I'd better trim some of that first. Put this towel under you."

Wanda pulled Therese down on the bed and firmly parted her knees. At first she could not sit still under Wanda's comb and scissors. The comb felt sharp on her skin, and the scissors pulled at her hair. The unfamiliar sensations disturbed her, and she tried to put them out of her mind.

Wanda looked up from her work and smiled. "I think you're going to look very pretty down here once we find our way through the forest. Are you enjoying it?"

"Ah yes, I think. It's very-exciting."

"Good, good. I'm glad it hasn't gone to sleep just because you were a nun. Open your legs some more, I can't see what I'm doing. You wait until I've finished; it's going to look very sweet."

The steel of the scissors felt cold as it slid between her legs and snipped repeatedly as it shortened her hair. Therese lay back and tried to think of something else. At last Wanda stopped.

"That was the easy bit. Now the wax. Stretch out your legs."

Therese winced as Wanda pulled the hair from her legs. "Stop jumping! Don't you know it's necessary to suffer if you're going to be beautiful?"

"I had no idea. How would I know? I thought you were just naturally beautiful."

Wanda laughed and patted her thigh. "Well, thank you for the compliment, but I have to do this the same as any other girl. It's worth the pain, believe me. Don't worry. You'll soon get used to it." Again she pushed Therese's legs open and started to wax the sides of her sex.

Again the excitement of Wanda touching her down there, until "Ow! That hurt!"

"Sorry, my love, but it's got to be done. You wouldn't want anyone to see you like this, would you?" Wanda was without mercy and carried on tormenting her.

After the initial shock, the pain of plucked hair was not so sharp, and again Therese's excitement rose. Her sex felt swollen and wet.

"There! What do you think of that?"

Therese lifted herself onto her elbows and looked down between her open legs. Her hair had been trimmed to a narrow patch covering her mound and below. Further down, her lips were covered by a light dusting of fur that did nothing to hide their fullness or the pink frills that protruded obscenely between them. She was shocked at the sight.

"It looks so naked."

"It looks very pretty, and it's getting juicy. Look!" Therese watched in horror as Wanda's elegant finger reached and slipped between her lips. Her sex spasmed around the intruding fingertip, and a rill of pleasure washed over her as Wanda drew her finger slowly up and out of her furrow. She moaned and bit her lip.

Wanda lifted her finger up to her lips and licked it delicately. "Mmh, tasty!" she said with a smile. "You're a very excitable lady. Now kneel on the bed with your dupka in the air and I'll finish you off."

"What?"

"Come on, Therese, do as you're told! Dupka in the air. I've just got the smallest bit to finish."

Therese wanted to protest, but she had already accepted humiliation, and complaining now would be meaningless. She knelt and lowered her head to the cushion. Her blouse slid forwards and uncovered more of her.

"What a dupka! The men are going to go crazy over you, and the women will be jealous enough to commit murder. Now hold still; this might just bring tears to your eyes!" Wanda started to dab wax at the last of her hair. Just as she pulled it away, Therese heard the door open behind her.

In a flash, Wanda had her hand on the back of Therese's neck, pinning her to the bed. "Stay!' she ordered as if she were controlling a dog. Therese started to resist but surrendered to her keeper. She could not see who had come in, but a faint perfume of hair cream and tobacco told her that Mefist was standing behind her, staring at her upraised bottom. She swallowed her pride and tried not to think of Mefist.

"There, little brother! You're just in time. Have you ever seen anything quite so beautiful?"

"My word, Therese. You'd make the Pope forget his vows. I wish I had brought my camera." Therese felt his eyes on her, and her stomach twisted. Her sex pulsed, and she sobbed silently. Her whole body was taut and trembling.

"Well, Franz? Are you just going to stand there?" taunted Wanda.

Therese heard him moving nearer. "She's not ready," he said softy. She felt his breath on her bottom and the brush of his moustache as he kissed her. "Enchanting!" and his breath moved lower. His tongue slid into her, and

suddenly she was coming. She moaned and threw herself forward onto the bed.

"Oh God, oh God!" She moaned and rolled from side to side with both hands clamped between her legs, pressed against her sex. "Oh God, help me!" Wanda sat beside her and rested a hand on her shoulder. Her shaking slowed to nothing.

"My God, Therese! I've never seen anyone come like that. I think you have a talent you've been hiding from the world. Or do you just have a magic tongue, Franz?"

"Well, you should know. You are the one who taught it what to do."

Wanda tried to turn her over, but Therese buried her face deeper in the bed. She stroked Therese's hair and said, "Go away, Franz. We're busy. You can talk to her later."

# **Chapter 12**

Mefist found her in the tower gallery, sitting and looking out over the autumn fields of the valley. The sun was sinking, and the dark of the nearby forest grew mysterious. The air hung still, and the village and places beyond were hazy with wood smoke. The hay had gone from the castle meadows, and it would not be many days now before nightly frosts started to creep out of the forests to the flat lands below.

Therese had always loved this tail end of the year. Summer had ended, and the fruits of field and garden were safely stored for the lean times of winter. The clothes and habits of long sunny days would be put away, and everyone would settle down to the cozy indoor life of winter.

"Your favorite place?" asked Mefist tentatively.

"Yes. I spend hours up here in summer, but I suppose it will be too cold to sit here soon."

Mefist leant on the rail beside her and took in the view. "Are you upset with me?" he asked.

"Upset? Why should I be upset?"

"This afternoon. Being taken by surprise. Or not being taken in the way you wanted. I don't know..."

Therese looked up at him in surprise. For the first time since she had met him, Mefist looked unsure of himself. "Of course not. I've made up my mind to accept what I have to accept, and nothing that you or the Army can do will touch me. I have a job to do, and that's the end of it."

"You're a tough one. I would like you to know you can count on me to take care of you. Wanda too. She'd like to stay to help you get started, but she has to be back in Vienna. But we'll manage. Don't you think so?"

Therese thought for a while. "Of course, I don't really know how we're meant to behave, but I suppose the officers are mostly gentlemen, so it

shouldn't be too hard. I hope they're gentle with the girls. They're so young..."

"You can put your mind at rest about that. They'll be doing what comes naturally. We just have to make sure that the girls live a good life. You know, plenty of exercise, lots of new things to occupy their minds, a comfortable home. You should be able to manage that."

For a while they enjoyed the view together and thought.

Therese broke the silence. "Mefist, did you ever think of joining the Church?"

"What? Me as a priest?" Mefist chuckled. "No, not for a moment. I could never abide those fat bishops and cardinals. The church is even worse than the Army. At least we manage to thin out our officer corps through manoeuvres or a war every now and then. The colonels and generals of the church stay until they die of overeating. What gave you such an idea?"

"I'm just thinking about what I'm doing. I know it's got to be done, and I'm quite happy to give up my future if it keeps those village women out of trouble. The girls are fine; they're just following orders, and no one can blame them. But what about me? How will I know that I'm always doing the right thing? The Bishop won't even talk to me by telephone."

"Mmh. I don't know if I can offer any advice about that. What about your priest?"

Therese snorted. "Father Mendel? God forgive me, but I can't take that man seriously. I'm sure this whole thing would be far beyond him."

"I think I understand," said Mefist with a grin. "I can't imagine him wrestling with theological abstractions either, but what's your difficulty exactly? You really didn't have a choice, and you're not harming anyone."

"No, it's not that. I didn't want to do it, but I had to. Even if the Bishop finally throws me out, at least I'll go knowing I did the right thing for the village. As long as you look at it like that, I'm safe. It's a terrible job, but it has to be done. If anyone's to blame, it's you and the Army. The question is, will it change the girls and me? Will we become the thing we despise?"

"Despise? No, you're wrong there, Therese. You don't have the right to despise anyone or any profession. Prostitutes are people like everyone else and you are obliged to love them, but I'm not even sure you'll be prostitutes. After all, they do it for money, and you're doing it for something much more important."

Therese thought for a moment; she still could not rid herself of a hatred for the women they might become. "I know I shouldn't despise them, but everyone else does. Maybe I'll be more sympathetic in a week or two, but that's not it. What I want to know is, will it change me? Will I start out doing something horrible because I have to, and end up liking it? How will I know whether I'm managing the club because I have to, or because I'm enjoying it?" Therese pleaded for an answer.

"You're serious about this, aren't you? Don't worry about it. You have to do a good job, so switch your mind off and don't think about whether you're enjoying making people happy or enjoying being happy with them. You're splitting hairs anyway."

"No I'm not," Therese stated emphatically. "I will have to have sex with people I don't know, and I hate it! But what happens to me if I stop hating it?"

"Ah-ha! Now I understand what's troubling you. That's easy; just remember you're a nun and don't enjoy it."

"But..." Therese rested her chin on her hands and tried to order her thoughts. "But I think I liked it. I think you made me like it. You made me—do it." She looked at him with tears in her eyes. "God forgive me, I wanted you to do it. I wanted your thing in me. Oh God!" and she started to cry.

Mefist put his hand on her shoulder. "Don't cry, silly! Of course you liked it. That's the way people are made. Everyone likes it when it's done properly." He reached around her and pulled her to rest against his side as he stood there. "It's natural. If you weren't meant to like it, I'm sure God would have made you some other way."

"But the Church..."

"Don't! If there's one thing that makes me see red, it's those sexobsessed old men at the top of the Church. The things they make women believe are completely evil. Who can think of any doctrine more poisonous than original sin? Just ignore what they say about sex. Treat it like their opinions of Chinese or Mongolian; they don't have any experience of them, so they can't hold a useful opinion.

"Look at it this way; you're walking down the corridor and someone is sweeping up. The dust makes you sneeze. Is that a moral statement? Of course not. It's something your body does on its own, and it even feels nice. Sex is the same. Someone does something to your body, and you come. Infrequently and with difficulty if you're talking about most women, or like a volcano if you're talking about Therese. Either way, there's nothing more to be said about it. It's as natural as a sneeze."

"Nuns aren't meant to enjoy things like that," she sobbed.

"Nuns do what they have to do. Their souls belong to God and their bodies could be doing anything. Teaching, nursing, gardening, anything. Even managing a bordello. Just lie back and think higher thoughts." He passed her a handkerchief. "Here, wipe your eyes. Honestly, I've heard girls cry because they can't have orgasms no matter how hard they try, but I've never heard of a girl crying because she comes too easily. The world must be crazy."

"It's not like that," she sniffled into the handkerchief. "It's just that when it happens *I* go crazy. I lose all my self-control."

He patted her shoulder. "Good, good. That's how it should be. I'd hate to think you're made of wood. I'll let you into a little secret; the more you do it, the better it gets! Can you imagine how fantastic it'll be in a month or two?

"Now, the party this evening. It's very important that we give the girls confidence, so I don't want any long faces or tears. I want you to shine like a star. We'll start at six o'clock sharp, so Wanda wants you in your room at least an hour before hand. She's got some surprises for you. Just now she's giving the girls their clothes, and it's as noisy as a monkey house down there. You'll be impressed. I had to leave before I disgraced myself."

"I can't imagine you disgracing yourself, Mefist."

"Ah-ha! You had your face buried in the bed this afternoon, or you might have guessed how close you came to starting your career early. You were enough to make a blind man disgrace himself."

"Well, at least now I know how to get your attention."

"You certainly did that, and I can't promise to walk away another time. In fact, I can promise that if you ever do that to me again, I'll take what's offered no matter who's watching. So be careful!"

#### Chapter 13

Wanda had brought her an evening dress that belonged in Hollywood, made by her own couturier. It was black and shiny and cascaded from Wanda's arms in heavy, slinky folds. She twinkled a smile at Therese and ordered her out of her dress.

Therese dropped her grey workaday clothes onto the bed and reached for the dress. Wanda held onto it and looked pointedly at Therese as she stood there in a shift, brassiere and long socks. "Off!" she said. Therese pulled her shift over her head and sat down to slide off her socks.

"Off!" said Wanda again.

"But—"

"Off!" Therese sighed inwardly, removed her brassiere, and reached again for the dress. Being naked in front of Wanda was beginning to feel natural.

"No. Stockings first. Start with this." She produced a suspender belt, black lace and elastic straps. "The hooks go at the back."

Therese fumbled behind her back to hook up the belt.

"Now the stockings. These are American, so be careful with them. You won't be able to replace them in the village."

The stockings were not silk but sheer nylon. Therese had never touched anything like them before and carefully opened them, ready to roll up her legs. She had worn silk stockings, but they felt nothing like these wonderfully light and stretchy creations. Her fingers slowly remembered the actions of hooking the stockings to the straps, and she stood to straighten her seams in the mirror.

"You should go dressed just like that. You'll make all the girls jealous."

Therese looked again in the mirror. The stockings made her legs seem very long. The black of the stockings and lace stood out against the white of her skin, and the neat patch of dark hair that Wanda had left was framed by

the straps of the suspender belt. Her hair did nothing to hide the furrow below and the pink frills peeping from it. She found the picture interesting. Did all ladies look like this under their dresses? Nuns certainly did not look like this under their habits.

"Stop admiring yourself and put this on."

Therese reddened and reached for the dress. As she pulled it over her head, it seemed no more than un-sewn scraps of silky material. She pulled the straps up onto her shoulders, and the dress hung loosely from her.

"Wait a minute." Wanda was behind her and fumbling low on her hips. She found the zip and started to pull it up. The dress tightened; first around her hips, and then upwards. It squeezed her and tightened about her chest as Wanda clicked the zip home. The bodice of the dress trapped her breasts uncomfortably, and she reached into the décolletage to pull them into place. The effect shocked her. The dress was cut so low that her breasts were almost completely exposed. Worse still, they were lifted up and offered like two ripe fruits on a tray. She stared in horror at the mirror.

Wanda stood back and looked at her critically. "That's a very good fit. Especially at the front. Turn around!"

As she moved, she found her legs restricted by the tightness of the dress around her thighs. In the mirror she could see the shiny blackness moulding her hips and thighs. A lacy flare reached down from her knees to her ankles. Her bottom looked big and obvious.

Wanda clapped her hands and laughed. "Dear Serge! He loves a good dupka, though not usually female ones. He just can't help himself. I must get a photograph of you. He'll be so happy."

"But it's not like me...."

"Of course not. You used to be a nun, but now...now it's perfect. If I looked like that I could be Queen of Vienna. Stop complaining and see if you can do your hair and makeup the way I showed you."

The room was dark when they entered, lit only by the lights behind the bar and a single bulb of the many in the chandelier. Mefist sat at a table at the edge of the dance floor, and he stood to receive them. The table had glasses, a candle and a bottle of champagne. Wanda led her to him and twirled her around.

"Doesn't she look beautiful? Serge deserves a medal, and he's never even seen her."

"My dear, you look wonderful," said Mefist, bowing to kiss her hand, "and you too, Wanda. If you were in Vienna together, your beauty would set the world on fire. Sit down and we'll toast the future."

While Mefist filled their glasses, Wanda put a record on the gramophone. American music, Cole Porter. The curtain over the entrance to the girls' rooms rattled aside, and they danced into the room.

Therese was stunned. After seeing the girls dance naked for so long, seeing them in their new clothes came as a shock. Not that any of them had dresses. They all wore stockings and heeled shoes, but none of them wore knickers. Above their stockings they wore a colourful mix of underwear. Short slips, lacy brassieres, bustiers or transparent night dresses, all different. As they danced in the semi-darkness, they hinted at sex and wickedness. Therese had seen none of this worldliness in them before.

"Dance with them," whispered Mefist. "They're your girls...."

Moving carefully in her high shoes, Therese was passed from arm to arm as she danced. Suddenly she no longer knew these girls, these beautiful women with their erotic clothes and their naked, siren sexes. They were elegant and smooth in her arms. Their hair swayed as they moved, and their red lips smiled at her. They frightened her.

After a second playing, Wanda lifted the needle from the record. Mefist was applauding at his table. "Wonderful, wonderful! I can't remember that I have ever seen so many beautiful girls at one time. Pull up more chairs and tables, and come and sit where I can get a good look at you."

"And bring the kanapki," called Wanda, "and more champagne. Three bottles. Put it on Franz's bill."

The girls pushed round tables together and brought glasses, bottles and large trays of small open sandwiches from behind the bar. Mefist steered Therese to the head of the table but squeezed himself between the girls on one side. Wanda settled on the other. She looked excited.

Mefist raised his glass. "To the most beautiful girls in the world! Drink up, or I will challenge you to a duel at dawn!"

"That's hardly fair, Franz," said Wanda. "I don't suppose any of them know how to use a sabre."

"No matter! They would only have to appear dressed like that, and they would win before anyone could draw a sword." He looked around at the girls drinking cautiously. "Are you enjoying your champagne? They say it's

like drinking bottled stars, but it can make young girls forget themselves very quickly. Be careful! You never know what might happen to you.

"Oh, I love these!" He had settled on the caviar and smoked trout canapés. "Champagne and caviar, the second and third best things in the world."

"What is the first best, Mefist?" asked Helena. Her eyes were shining, and she must have felt safe sitting two chairs away from him.

Mefist reached across his neighbours and pulled her close enough to whisper in her ear. Her hand covered her mouth, and she blushed. Her friends were clapping and laughing as the red flush spread down to her chest, under the thin black gauze that shadowed her breasts.

She looked beautiful in her confusion, and Therese raised her glass. "Let's drink to Helena—she deserves it!"

Then Mefist took control again. "I think Therese should make a speech, don't you?"

Forced by the clapping and calls, Therese rose reluctantly to her feet, but Mefist would not let her speak. "She's not properly dressed. Maria, off you go!"

They all turned to watch Maria trot off on her high heels, her heavy bottom wobbling as she went. If Timko could see her now, thought Therese. Maria returned with a black jewel case.

Mefist opened it and took out two gold and diamond earrings. He gave them to two of the girls. Therese sat still while the girls held her hair back and clipped the heavy rings to her ears. Then Mefist drew a matching necklace from the case and handed it to Maria.

"You look lovely, Mistress!" said Maria, standing behind her to clip the necklace. "Just like a real lady."

"A mirror!" called Mefist. "Who's got a mirror?"

Her face looked pale in the mirror, her sharp features framed by the darkness of her hair. The earrings twinkled in the shadows, and the necklace gleamed richly as it dipped towards her half-naked breasts. A different, sophisticated and beautiful woman looked back at her. She stood to give her speech.

"My friends—" she started weakly, and then took hold of herself. "My friends, how beautiful you all look! When we started out last week, I knew you would do your very best, but I had no inkling of the success you would

make of it. I became a nun without knowing a thing about feminine life, and I suppose we are all learning together, but look at you now! I'm sure Mefist has never sat at a table with twelve such beautiful ladies. Isn't that right, Mefist? You tell them."

"Fourteen! Fourteen beautiful ladies, and you're right, I have never sat down with so many at once. What about you, Wanda?"

"Well, I don't know about me, but certainly the twelve of you and Therese, you are fit for a sultan. I don't know what the General is going to say. He's an old man, and just looking at you all will probably give him a seizure. Go on, Therese, tell us some more."

"What can I say? Just that I'm proud of you all. We'll start work in a day or two, and you will be famous! So, before we start dancing again and before the champagne does too much damage, I'm going to propose a toast. To the beautiful Sisters of Montebello!"

The room filled with music and chatter as they danced in the shadows. Therese danced with them, holding the girls close and letting their hands range across her back and bottom. Their slim bodies rubbed up against her, and they rested their heads on her shoulder. She felt their breasts against her own, felt the smooth curves of their hips and bottoms, felt their hard mounds rubbing insistently against her thigh.

Their universe contracted to the dark bowl of the dance floor and its swaying, erotic female bodies with their high heels and long white legs. Therese was conscious of Wanda and Mefist leaving the room, but the dancing and champagne continued without them.

Wanda came to her bed some time in the small hours of the morning. Therese half awoke and welcomed her shivering back into the warmth. She returned to sleep with Wanda's hair about her face, smelling of perfume, of Wanda and of Mefist.

## **Chapter 14**

She felt tired and spent as she traveled with Wanda down to the train station. It was a still, grey day and the village lay quiet. The sentry at the town hall door was the only sign of the Army's occupation. Sergeant Grossner held a signal saying that three staff officers were arriving so Therese would say goodbye to Wanda and welcome her first three customers at the same time.

They looked young and boisterous as they forced their way out of their compartment, all coats and cases. They looked around them, and Grossner stamped to attention and snapped a salute. They returned the salute automatically and stood looking at Therese and Wanda in confusion, and at Grossner, who stood mute behind them.

"Gentlemen, welcome to Krasna Dolina! I am Therese von Falberg and this is Wanda Barczewski, Prince Mefist's cousin. Did you have a good journey?"

They saluted again and took her hand to kiss. "Mueller, Jadrovski and Nielsen, Mademoiselle," said the tallest. "All lieutenants, I'm afraid. We're not important enough to come in the road convoy, so we had to get up early and travel by train. Is Prince Mefist here? We have to report to him on arrival."

"No," said Wanda. "He's too busy up at the castle, and I'm going back to Vienna on this train. You'll just have to make do with Therese, and Sergeant Grossner, of course. Are these all your cases? The car is just outside."

"No, we have more boxes in the guard's van. Nielsen, would you mind showing the sergeant and we'll put the cases in the car?"

"What about Drazevich?"

"Damn, I'd forgotten about him. Lieutenant Drazevich is from SekPol, and he chose not to travel with us. He should be here somewhere. Where is he?"

Further down the platform stood a slight, round-shouldered man with a black SekPol uniform and leather coat. The others called him over.

He returned Grossner's salute and said, "There is no officer to meet us?" He spoke with a flat and uneducated Rhineland accent.

"Oh, Drazevich. Don't be so sour. Two beautiful ladies waiting for you, and you want an Army officer! Where are your manners! Here is—excuse me, are you a princess, Fraulein?"

Wanda giggled and offered her hand to Drazevich. "No, only when I am being precious, as Franz calls it. Lieutenant, I am Wanda Barczewski, and this is Therese von Falberg. She is chatelaine of the castle and is in charge of making your stay in Montebello comfortable."

"I will not be staying in the castle. I will stay with my men who are in the village. I want to be shown their quarters."

Therese was prepared to dislike Drazevich on sight, and every time he spoke, he confirmed her opinion. Still, duty called her and she said, "I can show you. Perhaps you would like to leave your luggage here while I say goodbye to Wanda, and we can go together. It's not far."

"This is my luggage." He lifted his small cardboard suitcase with a belt around it. "I want to go now." The man's rudeness was staggering, but Wanda would not permit any of it.

"Lieutenant, you will wait here!" she said sharply. "When she is ready, Fraulein von Falberg will escort you, and I suggest you use a different tone when you are speaking to a lady!"

She led Therese to one side. "What an unpleasant worm, and so rude! I should be very, very careful with that one. SekPol has some very nasty political connections at the top, and he could make a lot of trouble. I'm going to give Franz a call right now and make sure he stays up at the castle. Someone needs to keep an eye on him." She gave Therese a hug. "I wish I could stay longer, to help you get started, but don't worry. Those girls already know what to do, and their blood is beginning to show. They'll take to it like ducks to water, you'll see. You'd better go and take care of your secret policeman. I'll telephone, and I'll come back in a month or so. Enjoy yourself!"

Therese felt lost as she turned away. Wanda had only visited them for a short time, but she had been a foundation for them all. After all, she was the only one of them who had actually made love with a man. Now they would have to learn by themselves.

Then Wanda came to her elbow again and whispered into her ear. "Get Franz into bed with you as soon as possible. He needs a good woman like you, and he'd be just the man for you. And he's such a delightful lover." She left to use the stationmaster's telephone.

Therese led Drazevich to the school. Looking very inappropriate in the playground, an immaculate sentry stood to attention at the school's front door. The surprise arrival of their officer obviously came as no surprise to the men of SekPol. Therese left Drazevich at the gate and walked on into the village.

The long, low village houses with cracked plaster and unpainted wooden doors were squeezed to one side of narrow garden strips running back from the road. Vegetable patches and orchards ran down the open side of each house and behind to the flat village fields beyond. The verandas on the sides of the houses held neat stacks of split firewood for the winter, and heavy crops of maize heads hung drying under the eaves. Wood smoke and animal smells filled the air.

As she walked toward the three churches in the village centre, an old woman in traditional padded waistcoat and black petticoats came towards her. Therese prepared to smile and was shocked when the woman walked past as if Therese did not exist.

The houses became bigger as she approached the square. In the centre stood the squat town office, bright and cheerful with apricot stucco and white ornamentation. The arched walkways on each side were quiet and empty of their market stalls. The houses and shops facing into the square looked pretty, proudly painted in pastel colours and ornamented with false textures and religious figures. This was where most of the Jewish citizens had their shops. The butcher made an exception. Selling pork was naturally a Christian calling, and Krausov had one of the larger shops. Usually his windows were full of sausage and ham, but he had little on display today.

As she looked at the empty trays, two women came out. When they saw her, their faces hardened and they pointedly looked away. Again Therese cringed, and she was still feeling embarrassed when the door opened again and Jana Krausova came running down the stairs. "Sister, Sister! Come inside. Come and drink coffee with us."

Therese allowed herself to be led inside, through the shop and into the best room. Jana sat her down and fussed over her. Krausov came in, heavy and red-faced. He looked as if he had just thrown off his apron and combed his hair. "Servus, Ma'am, servus. You honour us. Coffee, Jana, coffee, and biscuits."

"Oh, Pappi! Don't fuss. I'm putting the coffee on and Tanya's buying some biscuits now. Sit down and tell Sister Therese the news."

Krausov sat but seemed at a loss for conversation.

"News, Mr. Krausov? What news is Jana talking about?"

"Oh, nothing, Sister. Just the news. What the soldiers are doing and so on."

"I don't think you should call me 'Sister' any more, Mr. Krausov. I'm sure you know what's happening at the castle, and it seems as if other people do. They were being rude to me."

Krausov turned redder. "Stupid women! Jana told me. Yes, she did. And I'm grateful to you. I wouldn't want my girl being used by those officers. Thank God for the nuns, I say. Her mother's gone, you know, passed on; but it would have killed her I'm sure. If I could get my hands on that Prince...I'd butcher him, so I would! Butcher him!"

Therese found herself leaping to Mefist's defense. "It's not his fault, Mr. Krausov. You mustn't think like that. It's just the Army. That is what happens whenever armies settle down. I'm glad in a way that we were there to help. I'd hate to think of what would have happened in the village if we hadn't been there. You know, if it hadn't been Mefist, it would have been someone else. He's not too bad. He's very kind to us, apart from making us, well, take care of the officers. At least I can help the girls and make sure they can all go back to being nuns when this is all over."

"I'd still go for him, if I met him."

"Please don't do anything foolish, Mr. Krausov. A new chief for SekPol arrived today, and he's not a good man. He's staying in the village, and I think he's going to be very dangerous. I'll be asking Prince Mefist to help control him, so the best thing the village can do is to keep quiet and not give SekPol an excuse to make trouble. The General and his staff are coming

today, so the last thing we want is for some crazy village man to make trouble."

"A general's coming? How long will he be here?"

"Didn't you know? General Falk-Sokol. He's going to make Montebello his headquarters, so he'll be here for a while. He's a nice old man. I used to know him when I was a little girl. Apparently he likes hunting and good food. I expect you'll be able to sell him as much good meat as you like."

"As much as I'd like? Now, there's the problem. It'll be more a matter of how much I can get my hands on. People here are killing most of their animals and putting the meat by. They think that if they don't hide it, the Army will have it. What do you think, Sister?"

"Call me ma'am, Mr. Krausov. I don't know what to think. The Army seems very efficient. They can drive supplies in or send them by train. I don't think they'll be stealing the people's food. Mefist says the troops won't stay at Tergov for long, so there shouldn't be too many people here anyway."

Jana came in with the coffee and biscuits. "Sister..." she started before Therese cut her off.

"No, Jana. Don't call me 'Sister.' We're friends; why don't you call me Mistress, as my girls do?"

"Er, Mistress. Old Isaacs is in the shop. He saw you come in, and he wants to say thank you."

"Thank you? What for?"

"For his daughter and her cousin. They were taken up to the castle with me. You remember them?"

"Oh, I don't think he should worry, but I suppose I'd better see him. Would you mind, Mr. Krausov?"

Krausov opened his mouth to speak, but Jana got in first. "Pappi, you know he's always been kind..."

"No, let him come in. We can't afford not to have friends in these times. I'll bring him in."

Isaacs was a thin old man. His grey hair hung long and straggly, and he held his hat in front of him. He looked uncomfortable in Krausov's best room. Krausov waved him down. "Sit down, sit down, Friend Isaacs. Have some coffee with us, and you can talk to Madam Therese."

Isaacs discomfort was painful to see. He did not know how to start talking.

"Which girl was your daughter, Mr. Isaacs? I wasn't able to talk to them at all."

"Rebecca, Your Honour, she's my youngest. God's last gift to me and her mother. Thank God you saved her! The gentlemen can be very hard on our people sometimes. She's a good girl, and very clever with books and writing. She's sharp, and she'll make someone a good wife when these times are over, if I can find someone who will catch her fancy. But she's a worry to me with all these soldiers in the village. She has to stay inside all the time. If the soldiers catch her outside, they'll have their way with her, God help her. We have friends in Switzerland—perhaps they could take her until this is all over. She'd be safe in Switzerland."

Jana had to put his coffee cup into his hands. "Here you are, Mr. Isaacs. It's coffee from your own shop." He sipped but said nothing.

Therese tried again. "How are these times for you, Mr. Isaacs? Is the Army bringing business to you as well as trouble?"

"The poor soldiers don't have any money, Your Honour. They all want to buy tobacco and vodka, but, no money. Still, I can't complain. I sell a little, buy a little, and the world goes round. I wish they were gone and we could live in peace again."

"At least you can find tobacco and vodka to sell them," complained Krausov. "I can't get meat for love or money, and I can't sell what I don't have. It was a bad day when the Army came, and that's for sure."

"Ah, my friend Krausov is right. Soon we shall have a black market, like the bad days after the Great War. You'd remember, Friend Krausov. The rich, fat people stayed fat, and the rest of us starved. Bad times are coming again, God protect us."

Therese made a note to speak to Timko. If the Army could spend some cash in the village, everyone would benefit. She would try Sister Brigitta too. The Convent took enough money from the peoples' pockets; now they could use some of it to help.

"Send Rebecca to me, Mr. Isaacs, if you are worried about her. If she's as sharp as you say, and honest, I'll find her a job in the office. She can stay in the Convent with the nuns, they'll protect her, and you can visit her when she's not working. How does that sound?"

"Thank you, Your Honour, thank you!" Old Isaacs was in danger of dropping his coffee cup and kneeling at her feet.

She jumped up to avoid him. "Mr. Krausov, thank you so much for the coffee. It's so nice to visit a home again. It's been so long I had almost forgotten. Now I want to have a word with Jana, and I'll go. Good morning, Mr. Isaacs, and give my regards to Rebecca."

With Jana leading, she went to the kitchen. It was warm and bright, and a housekeeper stood cooking at the large brick stove. "Jana, can you walk with me a little way? I can't bear the way those women looked at me just now. It made me feel-dirty, I suppose."

"I'm going to do better than that. Rado, my brother, has gone to borrow a trap, and we'll drive you all the way to the castle. He's probably harnessing it up now. Isn't it nice to see old Isaacs here? I've known him all my life, and he's never been inside here. It's not that Pappi's a bad man or anything, it's just that.... You know how it used to be, Jews in one place, Christians in another. They're still like that in the village, though not one of them could tell you why. I think it's stupid. It's the twentieth century already, and you'd think people would be smarter by now. Listen to them talking in there. They've been looking at each other across the square for fifty years and never sat for a cup of coffee together. Stupid!"

Rado was a solid young man. His ginger hair and freckles gave no hint of his sister's dark-haired beauty, but the smile was the same, and he had the same ready tongue. "Are you ready for a drive, Sister?"

"Watch your manners, Rado, and you don't call her Sister anymore. Mistress will do. I'm coming with you. I want those old crows to see that the Mistress has friends in the village."

Jana made Rado take them through the square. The more people who saw them, the better. Therese felt disapproving eyes on her back, and she would have been happy to creep home by the back lanes.

They met Drazevich. He was leading a SekPol patrol, and his men were checking the papers of everyone they met. Therese waved as Rado drove by. Drazevich watched her but gave no greeting.

"Who was that?" asked Rado.

"Lieutenant Drazevich, the new SekPol officer. You'd better be careful of him; he seems to be a real rat."

Rado snorted contempt and urged the pony to a trot.

Therese made them stop at the edge of the village where the long climb up to the castle started. She always felt uncomfortable watching horses labour up the hill and would have got out and walked beside the trap anyway. Rado and Jana trotted away, waving. Therese crossed herself at the shrine marking the foot of the hill and started to climb.

## Chapter 15

Therese was summoned to the General's office late in the afternoon. "Come," he barked in answer to her knock, but he jumped up and hurried around the desk to meet her.

He grabbed her hand and kissed it enthusiastically. The bristles of his white cavalry moustache brushed the back of her hand. "Therese, my dear! It has been so long that I almost cannot recognize you. What a beautiful woman you have turned out to be! Can you remember when we last met? Cross country, and you flying across the fields trying to keep up with the young bloods? I'm not surprised your mother wouldn't let you have a full horse. You were quite reckless enough on your pony. Those were the days, eh?"

"General, I am so glad you have come to us. We are completely helpless here, and we need someone to protect us."

"That's not what I hear. Every time I ask a question, I'm told that Madam von Falberg likes it this way, or Madam von Falberg wouldn't like it that way. I believe your father would be proud of the way you run your castle. You've certainly got Mefist eating from your hand."

Therese's face reddened. "That's not true! Mefist has taken over everything. He's even turned some of my girls into a harem and made me their mistress."

"Yes, I'd heard about that. Do you mind? I mean, can I look your father in the eye?"

Therese could not help smiling at the thought. "Of course. I can't approve, but if the officers have to have a club, then I'd rather it was done this way. At least this way I can keep an eye on things, and we won't be troubling the village girls."

"Well, if you can tolerate it there's no more to be said. I'd rather have someone reliable taking care of things. Some of these young officers will go putting their private parts in places that I wouldn't put my walking stick.... Young fools!"

"General, I'm sure you were as bad as the worst of them when you were that age. That's what the rumours say, anyway."

The General stroked his moustache in satisfaction. "Is that what you've heard? Not a word of truth in it. When I was a young officer, I drank nothing but milk and went to bed by eight o'clock every night. Now I'm older, are you going to invite me to your club tonight?"

"Certainly, General—we are all at your service, and that of your officers, of course."

"Very good. I'll issue a general order. All officers to report to the club at 20:00 hours, suitably attired and sparkling clean. I'll look forward to meeting you in your own domain."

As she moved to the door, he called her back. "Therese, did you happen to meet an officer called Drazevich from the Security Police?"

"Yes, I showed him where his detachment is in the village school. He's planning to live down there."

"What did you think of him?"

"I think he would make a good corporal. He's small-minded and rude to women."

"Rude to women, eh? Well, we'll see what we can do about that. I've never met him, and SekPol HQ wished him on me. His file says nothing at all. I think he'd better live up here where I can keep an eye on him. Would you mind sending in an orderly as you leave? I think I'll include him in my general order."

Now Therese hesitated. "General, my girls.... None of them have ever—you know. They're only girls, and I'm worried about them." And about me, she added in her thoughts.

"Don't worry, my dear—we're all gentlemen here, and your girls shall live like princesses. You as well. You can always count on me if you have a problem. In fact, I shall give you an honourary rank, say colonel, and everyone will treat you like royalty. I must gazette that before I forget."

"You can't do that, General, I'd be more important than Mefist. Don't forget he's the one who tells me what to do."

"Maybe, my dear, but no one else knows that. He's a prince, of course, and that must count for something even today. Consider yourself entitled to

the privileges of a colonel. Unpaid, of course, but that's another reality of Army life."

The girls huddled together in the club. They wore the same finery as they had the night before, but now they looked more like frightened schoolgirls. The erotic nymphs of last night had disappeared. On the point of eight o'clock they heard the General step onto the stairs at the head of his men.

The General and his staff wore their dinner uniforms. He met Therese on the dance floor. She expected him to kiss her hand but he drew her to him and kissed her cheeks. "Therese, my dear. What a beautiful salon! Together with such beautiful ladies. Come, introduce me!"

She kept hold of his hand. "General, you're not going to inspect them! They're not soldiers, and you're not on your parade ground. Come and sit down, and they'll take care of you."

The General nodded to his men, and in a moment the tables were full. The men took out their cigarettes, and the gramophone started. "Come on, girls. Drinks for our guests." She took Agata's hand and brought her to the General. "General, Agata will take care of you. Ask him what he would like to drink."

Agata wore stockings with a green satin suspender belt. A gossamerthin slip with green ribbons reached almost to her hips, and her blonde hair hung to her shoulders. To Therese she looked unconscious of her nudity, but petrified with fright at the thought of serving the General.

"Your Honour..." Agata stammered.

"Speak up, my dear," said the General. "This old man would like some champagne. Can you manage that?" He reached around her and patted her bottom. An electric jolt shot through her. An expression of horror on her face, she reached behind her and arched her hips violently forwards to keep her bottom safe. She dropped her eyes to the General and found he was staring at her unprotected sex, thrust helplessly at him in her attempt to save herself. She froze for a long instant and then whipped herself out of the encircling arm and ran to the bar.

Therese was there to catch her and whisper, "Well done, Agata! Now don't cry; he's a nice old man, and he likes you. Maria, champagne, quickly! With two glasses. Smile, Agata, smile, you're doing very well. Can you open the champagne for him? Remember how Horvath showed you? Good,

now I want you to open the champagne and pour two glasses, right? Then just sit down and let him talk to you. Don't drink more than half a glass, or you'll disgrace us all. Off you go now."

Agata had a plea in her eyes, but Therese hardened herself against it. "Go on, Agata, remember what Wanda taught you. Make us proud of you." She thrust the tray at her and steered her towards the General. As she left, Therese patted her bottom. "And stop worrying about your dupka!"

Therese stood at the bar and watched with everyone else as Agata stiffly and uncertainly peeled the wire from the bottle. She tilted it, held the cork, and carefully twisted the bottle. The cork popped free with a sigh, and she poured the sparkling golden liquid. She sat down and smiled as the General raised his glass to her.

It was as if he had given a signal, and all the men started ordering. Girls demanding drinks flooded in, and Therese moved behind the bar to help Maria. When she had a moment to look up, the club had been transformed into a lively bistro. The girls sat scattered around the tables, and the men were admiring them. All of them had light in their eyes and were chattering with animation. Obviously the evening would be a success.

Drazevich had come. He sat at a corner table with a young man whose ears stuck out dramatically from his cropped head. Drazevich wore his normal policeman's uniform; perhaps he could not afford a dinner uniform. The pair had no drinks in front of them, and Therese hurried over. The boy leapt to his feet, and Drazevich reluctantly joined him.

"Lieutenant Drazevich, how are you? Are you going to introduce me to your friend?"

The boy thrust out his hand and said, "Stoibel, Franz, Ma'am." He shook hands stiffly, bowing his head and clicking his heels.

"Well, Franz Stoibel, what can I get you to drink? And you, Lieutenant Drazevich?"

"Do you have any beer?" asked Drazevich.

"Certainly-and you, Franz? Beer as well?"

He reddened and stuttered, "Ma'am, could I have some wine please?"

Therese wondered how much wine the boy had drunk in his short life. "Some of our own wine, then, made here in Montebello from local grapes. Please wait a minute."

Maria was in trouble at the bar. "I don't know their names, Mistress. Who can I charge for the drinks?" Therese looked at the book behind the bar. Maria had listed the drinks to men called "fat Major," "blond lieutenant," and so on.

"Never mind. We'll learn their names soon enough. I'll get the girls to ask. Now a bottle of beer for Drazevich, and I'll get a glass of Muscat for his friend. He's called Franz Stoibel and looks as if he has just left school. You'd better go and sit with them. Be careful of Drazevich. He's an uneducated pig, but he's from SekPol, so watch out."

She watched as Maria tapped on her high heels towards the corner table, and she noticed that the men at the other tables watched her too. She had not thought of Maria as particularly attractive, but she certainly turned heads tonight. It must be the way her bottom wobbles, she thought, the way it sticks out between her corset and stockings and wobbles as she walks. It must be what men call voluptuous, and they like it. Even the General, and he has Agata beside him.

Agata had begun to enjoy herself. Perhaps the champagne had loosened her tongue. The General was telling her something and gesturing widely with one arm. The other arm was wrapped comfortably around her and drawing her closer. As Therese watched, the General whispered something into her ear, and they both stood up.

They made an odd couple. The General was a distinguished man. His full head of white hair and his bristling moustache gave him a senatorial air, and the authority of his uniform and position hung about him. Beside him Agata stood slim, blonde and beautiful, her long legs made even longer by high heels and stockings. Her young breasts held the transparent slip away from her body. Her pointed, swollen nipples peeped forwards and outwards. She held her head high, conscious of the room watching them as they strolled to the entrance of the girls' corridor.

As they passed the bar, the General turned to Therese and winked. She could not help smiling as she wrote the General's name as the first in the book for the girls' services.

They stayed away for a long time. None of the other men left their tables; Therese supposed it was a matter of respect. When the General returned, Agata clung to his arm. He was smiling, but Agata could not look at the rest of the room. The General brought her to the bar.

"Here is your young lady again, Therese. She was magnificent! A credit to you and her sisters." He guided her to a barstool. "I'll see you again soon, my dear." He pinched her cheek and started for the door. "Oh, Therese, kick these young fellows out by eleven, would you? We've got work to do tomorrow."

As soon as his footsteps died away, the girls were all on their feet and being led back to their rooms. Agata watched as Therese listed the names. Maria had taken Stoibel rather than Drazevich.

The tables were still occupied by unlucky men sitting quietly. Oh dear, thought Therese, do we have to deal with them all? Agata must have read her thoughts. "The General says that we only have to take one customer tonight. I don't think I'd want another."

Therese pushed a coffee over to her. "How was it? Did it hurt?"

"No, not really," said Agata, looking down at the bar. "He kissed me, I mean, down there. He kissed my thing!" Therese was shocked. She found it hard to imagine the General doing such a thing.

"How did that feel?" she asked.

"His moustache tickles. I almost laughed at the beginning, it tickled my legs so much. Then he started to lick me, and that felt nice." She looked straight at Therese. "It was really nice. He made me come, lots of times. I forgot everything, it was so wonderful. Then he got on top of me. He's big and strong, like a horse. His thing is big too, I could hardly get my hand around it and when he pushed it in...well, I can still feel it in there. It felt so good. I was very wet, it just pushed its way in and it made me come again. Then he came and I could feel it pumping inside me. Honestly, it was good. He's a nice man."

"He didn't hurt you? Are you alright?"

From the height of the barstool, she reached one foot down to the floor and opened her thighs to look at her sex. Beneath its dusting of blonde fur, Therese thought it looked pink and swollen. It still seemed tight and closed, and showed no sign of how the General could have slipped inside. Agata's long fingers with pink varnished nails spread the lips apart. Inside she was pink, moist and pretty. "It seems to be fine, but it still feels sort of stretched and tingly."

Then she realized the whole room had been watching them, and she closed her legs and turned to the bar. "Poor men," she giggled. "They'll have to wait for another day. They won't sleep well tonight."

# **Chapter 16**

They met again in the morning. Around the small tables pushed together, the girls sat relaxed and happy. The night had gone well. The bar had been busy, and the girls had found that doing what comes naturally could feel very pleasant.

"Look at my book. I'm going to have too much work sorting out the names," complained Maria. "I don't know who drank what or who was paying for it. Who was drinking whisky? He's just written down as 'officer.' It could have been anyone!"

"It's your handwriting, Maria," said Therese.

"I think that was my table. The little man with the pencil moustache. Like a small Valentino without the magic," said Dorota.

"That's all very well, but what's his name? Whisky is expensive. Did anyone take him to bed?"

"I didn't. I took Mikhail. He was nice." Dorota looked happy.

"Mikhail's not enough. What was his rank and his family name?"

"I know he's a lieutenant. He's got a Czech name, but I think he's from Hungary. What was his name now...?"

"Jadrovski," said Therese. "I remember him."

"Mmh-me too," said Dorota, and the girls laughed.

"How much do they pay to sleep with us, Mistress?" asked Maria. "Drazevich asked me, and I didn't know. So I took the boy instead."

"I don't know," said Therese, "and I don't care. Mefist will sort out all that sort of thing. Apparently Timko just adds everything up at the end of the month and deducts it from their pay. Trust Drazevich to worry about that."

"I don't think he has much money," said Maria. "He says his father is a draper in Düsseldorf. He doesn't like to mix with gentlemen, but now he doesn't have a choice. I suppose we'd better take care of him or he'll never be able to afford a drink, much less one of us."

"I'll think about it. What about the rest of you? Did you have any problems? Anyone sore?" They blushed and giggled.

Maria had a question. "Mistress, what do we do if they want it more than once? I mean, at the same time."

"Maria! What have you been doing with Franz Stoibel? The boy's young enough to be your son!"

Maria had the grace to blush. "It wasn't my fault! He was soenthusiastic. We must have done it, I don't know, six times? One after the other. He'd no sooner stopped than it stood up and he was off again. He was on top, I was on top, he did it from the front, from behind, and even standing up against the door as we tried to leave."

"But did you enjoy it?"

"Well, it wasn't bad," she admitted amid the laughter, "but how many times do I write him down in the book?"

"Don't be greedy, Maria. It sounds to me as if you should be paying him!"

"Mistress, how could you say that? I only wanted to help."

"Calm down, Maria. You did very well. You all did very well. Our friends certainly had a night to remember. Now Maria and I are going to sort out the paperwork, and I'd like all of you to clean up your rooms and the club here. Nice and clean, mind. Let's open the skylights and get a bit of fresh air in here. After lunch we're going for a walk. I want to see some colour in your cheeks, because we're back to work again tonight."

Mefist came to her office. "Congratulations, Therese. You and your girls are the talk of the officers' mess. No one can believe their good fortune at being here, and the ones who got left out last night will be queuing on the steps at eight o'clock. How did you find it?"

"It was all very easy, actually. As if everyone knew just what to do. We provided the club and the drinks, and everyone enjoyed themselves. Even the girls. Now I'm trying to sort out who drank what. Maria's with Timko arranging to bring up more drinks for the bar and the girls are cleaning, as you see.

"Where were you? I'm disappointed that you didn't come to our opening night."

"Oh, I thought I'd leave it all up to you, and besides, I had to do something for the General down in the village. What did you do? Did you enjoy yourself? Did you pick yourself a strapping young lieutenant?"

"Mefist! How could you? No, you won't find my name in the book yet. Will you come tonight?"

"Mmh, maybe. Or I might leave it for a day or two, when you've quietened down a little. I might have to go down to the village again. Drazevich is stirring things up already. He's only been here twenty-four hours, and he's got his men going around the village shops looking for black marketeers.

"He's brought a conscription order with him. The General has to find 150 recruits and 200 draught horses from Krasna Dolina by the end of the month, and no doubt there'll be more later on. Drazevich wanted to do a dawn raid and grab young men from their beds. Idiot! The General had to order him to behave himself. The villagers don't care about us at the moment, one way or the other, but rub them up the wrong way and we'll be in a hornet's nest. Imagine all the forest full of partisans! We wouldn't be able to move in the open for fear of being shot down, and we certainly don't have the men to control forests like these.

"We'll ask for volunteers first, and the magistrate's promised to empty his cells. So don't go poaching or stealing your neighbour's chicken, or you might find yourself joining the Army. We'll get the men without too much trouble I guess, but I don't know where we'll get the horses. At least we can pay for those—and a sad bunch of old nags we'll get for our money, no doubt."

"Mefist, we need to spend some money in the village. Buy vegetables, meat or something from the people. That's the way to help them and help the Army."

"Ah-ha! You've been talking to Krausov, haven't you?"

"What? How did you know?"

"Calm down. Drazevich reported you, that's why. I don't know what he found so interesting about you meeting the local butcher, but something in his twisted little mind made him report your movements to the General. Not that he'll try such a thing again after the old man shared his feelings with him."

"The little rat! You know we were sitting in the club this morning thinking that we'd have to do something to help him because he doesn't have enough money to live like a gentleman. Apparently his father's a draper in Düsseldorf."

"Not enough money? My dear, his father is a draper of a sort. He owns Landers in Breite Strasse! He's as rich as Croesus."

"That man is going to be trouble, Mefist. Can't you get rid of him?"

"I'm sorry, but no. The secret policeman is always with us, and if it wasn't a fool like Drazevich, it could be someone far worse. Don't worry; we'll keep him under control. Let him come to the club and make him welcome. If you can arrange a little friend for him, so much the better. Make sure you let me know if you hear of any mischief he's up to. If he won't pay, put his time on my bill. It'll be worth it."

"He asked Maria how she charges. She was really upset and took Lieutenant Stoibel to bed instead. How much would he have to pay?"

"Never you mind! I set the charges according to rank and what they can afford. They're paying far less than they would for girls like ours anywhere else. I wonder how much I should charge for you?"

"Mefist, if you ever dare to charge anyone for me, I'll kill you! And I'll tell Wanda. Now, getting back to Drazevich. I don't think he's going to have a little friend, because he's the sort of person who hangs on to his money."

"That's easy. Just explain to him that as a policeman, it's on the house. I gather that's quite a normal arrangement in most places. The police protect the bordello, and in return some chosen officers get free service. He'll go for a deal like that, you'll see. I'll make sure he comes to the club tonight, and you can have a chat with him."

When Mefist had gone, Therese went down to Timko's office and called Mrs. Orlova for an appointment at five. She had to pass on the news about the recruits to Jana, and Mrs. Orlova would make a useful channel of communication.

That evening Mefist appeared with Drazevich. The club was busy again. Without the General, the young men could enjoy themselves. Lieutenant Nielsen turned out to be an accomplished pianist with a fund of the latest music, and he shared the piano stool with Helena, his latest student. He was teaching her jazz, or so he claimed. In fact his lesson looked more of an

excuse to squeeze up to his half-naked companion. It did not take long for his muse to give way, and he led her off to her room.

Maria was helping at the bar, but Therese took her off to sit with Mefist and Drazevich. Drazevich appeared less surly than he had been the day before, but it took all Mefist's skill to get him into conversation. Therese returned to serving drinks.

Mefist soon followed and sat at the bar to smoke a cigarette. Maria was having some success with Drazevich and as he drank, he began to talk freely. She came to the bar to fetch him another brandy and left again, whispering, "God, he's boring!" It was not long before she took him to her room. Mefist looked amused, but Therese shook her head and thought, "Poor Maria."

They came back quickly, not more than ten minutes later. Drazevich gave them a minimal nod and disappeared down the stairs. Maria said nothing.

"Poor Maria!" said Therese. "I hope he wasn't too bad."

"He's not very good at it. He just took off his trousers, pushed it in and finish! I hadn't started and he was already getting off me. Franz Stoibel did it much better."

"Did he say anything?"

"Before, while we were here. How he wanted to have a checkpoint at each end of the village, but the General wouldn't let him have the men. Also, he doesn't like Mefist here. I think he doesn't like princes."

"Listen to him carefully, Maria," said Mefist. "When he comes back, get him talking again, and try to remember everything. Then tell Therese and she'll pass it on to me. I don't want him to think you're too friendly with me, or he won't talk to you openly. Therese will make sure that no-one else takes him when he comes here."

"I don't know if he'll want me, Mefist."

"Don't be silly! Everyone wants you, and they'd want you even more if they thought you came free of charge. You certainly made an impression on young Stoibel. What did you do to him?"

"Do to him? He did it to me. All over the room and every way you could imagine. I was all of a tremble when he had finished, but it was much nicer than Drazevich."

"Never mind. Stoibel's duty officer tonight, but I'm sure he'll be back. Now, give me a bottle of champagne. I'm going to take Therese off to her room to drink it."

Therese was stunned. Of course she knew it might happen to her eventually, but she hadn't expected it so soon—or that it would be Mefist who would betray her. She tried to hide her feelings, but Maria smiled as she gave her the champagne and glasses. "Oh, you're so lucky, Mistress," she whispered. "Enjoy yourself!" and she reached for the book to put their names down as evidence.

Mefist locked the office door behind them. "Now stop looking at me as if I were something you've found stuck to your shoe. I've asked you here to drink champagne, nothing more." He reached for the bottle and started to open it.

"But you've made them think..."

"Let them think! You don't mind, do you?" He passed her a glass. "Just think of the advantages. The girls will all believe that you're working just as they have to, and if they think you have an interest in me, they'll leave me alone and I won't have to be involved in any squabbles or disappointments. Here's to you and the girls!"

Therese sipped her champagne. "What will I say to them?"

"Just smile and say it's a secret. That's not even a small lie. Unless you'd like to have something to talk about, of course. I'd be very honoured, you know."

Her mind and pulse were racing. "No, no, I couldn't...I mean, if I had to-but-not like this." She did not want him like this. She wanted him to say he wanted her, and to take her without giving her the choice.

"Oh well, please come to me if you change your mind. Why don't you stretch out on the chaise longue, and I'll take your chair. We'll have to stay here for at least half an hour. I've got my reputation to think of!"

Therese sat on the chaise longue and lifted up her feet. The champagne caressed her palate. She stretched herself and relaxed. She looked at the ceiling and said, "You know, this is not as bad as I thought it would be. It's all so—I don't know—civilized, I suppose, and the girls like it, which surprises me. I thought they would be doing it out of duty, but they actually seem to enjoy it."

"Well, it is very enjoyable, you know. Especially for someone as sensitive as you. I think you're a natural lover, and Wanda thinks so too."

Therese ignored the compliment. "Remember what we spoke about the other afternoon up on the tower. I'm here to do a duty, not to enjoy myself. It's good that the girls are not suffering because they don't have a choice in what they're doing. Only I did have a choice, and it's a valid choice only if it's no more than a duty. Like feeding the poor or nursing the sick. If I start doing this because I enjoy it, well, I'd be as bad as you or the rest of the officers."

"Oh we're not so bad, really. There are many worse people in the world than the men outside. If you want to feed the poor and nurse the sick, why don't you take your dress off? I'm sure the sight of you lying there would be very comforting to me in my hour of need."

"Mefist! You're impossible."

"Won't you take it off for me? I promise not to touch...."

Therese raised her glass to him. "Not tonight, Mefist, not tonight. Perhaps another night, if you're kind to me."

"Ah, Therese. You're turning into a real lady and learning how to make a man suffer. I shall kneel at your feet nightly until you take pity on me."

#### Chapter 17

As Therese climbed up along the forest edge, the cold air made her eyes smart and her nose run. The dry brown grass crunched beneath her feet with the remains of last night's frost, and the dark mud of the path was still frozen hard and difficult to walk on. Any day now, she thought, the snow would come and the forest would take on a new life.

It felt good to put the castle behind her for a while. If she looked back, it lay below with its white stone pale in the winter light. A short distance away, but a different world. The General had settled in now and become as much a part of her daily life as Mefist or the girls. He ran his headquarters strictly but comfortably, and everyone knew where they stood.

Even the village tolerated his rule. The 150 recruits had been found, mostly by persuasion rather than coercion, and had been shipped off to training camp. The horses too had left by train, undoubtedly the sweepings of the valley stables. Therese hoped that both groups would not have too hard a life.

Drazevich had been kept in check, more or less. Mefist had taken him up to the front at Tergov to discuss the possibility of setting up a SekPol base to guard the morals and thoughts of the frontline troops. Drazevich seemed to have taken the hint and become a little less abrasive. He visited the club two or three times a week, and Maria dutifully listened to his stories before being taken to her room for a brief and unsatisfactory session. Mrs. Orlova carried his thoughts and plans down to the village, and Jana worked quietly to upset them.

After the first rush of hungry men, the girls now had more time to enjoy life. They were free to roam the castle and grounds all day. Apart from the few days a month when they could not work, and Sundays when the bedrooms were closed, they worked every evening from seven o'clock to eleven. They rarely had to accept more than one customer a night. The

officers came to the club to drink, chat and read the newspaper in female company as much as to take them to bed.

There were exceptions, of course. Drazevich never appeared except to take Maria. Franz Stoibel had established a fearsome reputation, and Mefist said that it was as well that he came from a wealthy family. His appetite for love would have bankrupted a normal man. He had made love to all the girls already but still preferred Maria, his first sweetheart.

The General did not come to the club for the girls any more. He had arranged for the girls to take turns sharing his bed every day after lunch. They liked the old man and looked forward to it.

Maria had become the surprise of the club. Right from the beginning she had been popular with the customers, and now she had become so busy that she politely diverted young men to the other girls every night.

She had also caught the eye of Major Lamoreaux, a short, blustery supply officer from Alsace. Therese had hardly noticed him until the afternoon he had come to her office, freshly scrubbed and embarrassed, and asked for permission to take Maria riding in the castle grounds. Maria went, and now he had won a special place in her affection. Not that she granted him a special place in her bed; he still had to pay for her favours and share them with her other admirers.

Mefist had taken Therese off to her office for a private chat several times. He seemed to enjoy her company, but in spite of his pleading, she had not taken off her dress for him. Not yet, anyway, but she knew that her determination was weakening and she might grant his wish soon. Just for the kindness of it.

As she walked, she scanned the forest shadows for wild pigs. They were always around and quite capable of chasing you up a tree if you disturbed them. Bears lived here too, but they mostly kept to themselves deep in the forest, and would soon settle in for their winter sleep anyway. Deer and elk, now they were another matter. The foresters put out hay for them, and salt licks. Plenty of deer meant venison for the castle tables.

Voices and noise were coming towards her. Around a bend in the path appeared two soldiers with rifles at the ready. Behind them came Sergeant Grossner and the rest of the patrol. Grossner called a halt and stood the men to attention as she approached.

"Good afternoon, Your Honor!" he said, saluting her.

Therese always felt uncomfortable being saluted. She smiled in return. "Good afternoon, Sergeant. Have you come far today?"

"Twenty kilometres, Your Honour. Uphill and downhill. The General wants to get some of the fat off us."

Therese looked at the men standing rigidly behind him. They were redfaced and steaming in the cold, damp air. "Well, they look a fine group of men to me," she said, loudly enough for the men to hear. "Do carry on. I expect they're keen to get back to the castle and rest." Equipment clanking and creaking, the column moved briskly off down the hill and soon disappeared from sight.

She had not gone much further before the smell of wood smoke caught her attention. She heard a murmur of voices in the trees. Curiosity led her into the shadows, and she found a group of men sitting beside a small fire, cooking sausages. They had been working on the tree trunks stacked behind them. A draught horse with a nosebag on stood under a tree. It had a blanket and chains draped across its back. She coughed to warn them and the men turned to stare at her in surprise.

"Why, Madam!" said old Mikhail, jumping to his feet and pulling his cap off. "What are you doing up here? Are you lost?"

"Not at all, Mikhail. I was taking a walk." She looked at the men in their bulky clothes sitting on the ground by the fire. "And you are taking lunch. Will you invite me to your table?"

"Leszek, get her ladyship something to sit on. Here—move that log up and stick a coat on it or something."

"Will I bring the horse blanket, Mikhail?"

"Don't be stupid! Her ladyship don't want to stink of horse sweat. Besides, the old boy might take a cold if you take his blanket after he's been working so hard. Sit yourself down here, Ma'am, and warm yourself. I'm surprised to see you up here all by yourself. Ain't you frightened?"

"Frightened of what, Mikhail?"

"Them soldiers, Ma'am. Did you see them just now?"

"Certainly, but they're no problem, are they?"

"If you say so, Ma'am. I'm sure I don't know. Here, Your Honour. I'm afraid it's nothing suitable, but it'll warm you up." He handed her a hot, fat sausage wrapped in a slice of dark bread. Her stomach leapt at the rich smell, and she suddenly realized that she was hungry.

"Why, thank you Mikhail, but I'd be taking your lunch."

"Not at all, Ma'am, not at all. It's share and share alike when we work up here. Besides, Leszek's mum always packs enough sausage for a real man even if he ain't anything like. We'll not go short, never you mind."

The men already held bread and sausage, so Therese bit into hers with a clear conscience. It tasted rich and spicy. The villagers of Krasna Dolina believed they made the best sausage in the world, and it tasted all the better for being cooked over a wood fire and eaten in the forest on a cold day. Mikhail rooted in his bag and drew out a bottle and small heavy glass tumblers. He carefully filled them to the brim and started passing them around. Finally he offered one to Therese.

"White Lady, Ma'am. Warm you up. Na zdravie!" and he offered his glass and drank it in one swallow.

"Na zdravie!" echoed the others draining their glasses.

Therese sipped at the sweet, fiery liquor and coughed in surprise. "Mikhail!" she exclaimed, "This is very strong!"

"It's good for you, Ma'am. Helps the sausage go down."

"I think this would make me drunk very quickly," she said, sipping again. "Tell me, do you come up here a lot?"

"We do in winter, Ma'am. We're dropping this timber, and we'll set up a sawpit here shortly. Break down the trunks and when the snow comes, we'll drag 'em out to season down at the castle. We're running low on timber, Ma'am. The soldiers are taking it all to make tables and things. We shall be out of good, seasoned timber soon if they don't let up."

"Do you see many people up here?"

"Not many, Ma'am. A few hunters, but not so many of them nowadays. Still, I believe we'll be seeing more folk in the forest soon if the Army keeps on taking the young men. They say young Rado Krausov has run off to the forest."

"Rado Krausov! What happened to him?"

"He crossed them black policemen, that's what happened. Then when they came for him, he had gone. The police just smashed up old Krausov's house and couldn't do no more."

"What did he do? What did they want him for?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Ma'am," he said, avoiding her eye.

"Poor Rado. I wouldn't like to live in the forest in November. It'll be snowing soon."

"You're right, Ma'am. St Martin always comes on a white horse, and it's his day Thursday."

"How will Rado survive? He'll freeze."

"I don't know, Ma'am. I suppose he'll shoot some meat, and I expect he'll be busy building a little shelter somewhere. I know he's young and strong, but it's nothing I'd like to do. These old bones like a warm bed at night."

Therese drew her coat tighter around her. The thought of Rado struggling to survive made the forest look blacker and unforgiving. She shivered. Now she had stopped walking, the cold had begun to seep in.

She left the men and decided to hurry back to the castle. She needed to know what had happened to Rado and why Drazevich was chasing him.

She went looking for Mefist as soon as she arrived, but Timko said he had gone with the General down to the village. Timko did have other news for her; Mrs. Orlova was waiting in her office.

Mrs. Orlova looked worried. "I'm so glad you've come, Ma'am. That policeman has taken old Krausov away, and Jana's terribly worried. They've got him in the school and no one can see him, and on top of everything, Rado's run away. There's a notice in the square saying he's to be shot if anyone sees him. Everyone's upset. The schoolmaster tried to talk to old Krausov, but the police wouldn't let him in. It's terrible! The Army's meant to be protecting us people, not treating us like an enemy. Jana says you've got to help her."

Therese's mind raced. The first important thing to do was protect Jana and Mrs. Orlova. If Drazevich got an inkling of the link between them and Therese, there was no telling what sort of conspiracy he would dream up. At best he could take the village women for questioning; at worst, they and Therese could be imprisoned on suspicion.

"Now, calm down! Are you well enough to do my hair? I don't want anyone to think you came up here for any other reason." Therese pushed back the office door so that anyone could see them, and arranged her chair in the centre of the room. "What are you going to do for me?"

"Well, I don't know, Ma'am. It looks beautiful as it is. Just like a young maid. Prince Mefist would kill me if I did too much to it."

"You'll have to do something. I want to show off my earrings; can you push it back at the sides a little? If Mefist doesn't like it, well, you've got an excuse to come back again." Mrs. Orlova opened her bag and started to comb her hair.

"Now; start at the beginning. Tell me what happened to Rado."

"Well, it was all that police Lieutenant..."

"You mean Lieutenant Drazevich, don't you?"

"Yes, Drazevich. That's him. You see, he has a sort of lady friend in the village."

"What! I thought-I mean-Never mind, go on."

"Well, it's Darina. Do you know her? Well, she's always been a bit that way. When we were young girls she was always letting the boys put their hands up her knickers. She was a real slut. She still is, come to that. She had a baby by her brother, did you know? The sisters took it away from her and took care of it somewhere out of the valley. Anyway, she's got a son who's a bit simple. He's not a bad lad considering, but not good for much. Anyway, Drazevich got hold of her and said he was taking her son away for the Army unless she let him-you know. Stupid, really. She'd have done it for a crown anyway. Or less. She'd take on all the policemen for a bottle of vodka. So, she has a house down by the gypsy colony. It's all muddy down there, being so near the river, and she doesn't take care of it. It's a real hovel. So most days Lieutenant Drazevich goes down there in his fine uniform and has his way with her. I don't know what he sees in her. She's no lady and not clean. Anyway, there's one thing she's really fussy about, and that's not wearing boots inside. Quite sensible if you ask me, with all that mud outside. So last week Rado was going past and he sees the Lieutenant going inside, and when he looks he sees the Lieutenant's big shiny boots standing outside the door. So he goes off to Darina's stable and comes back with a bucket of cow muck, and he fills the boots right up to the top.

"Well, the Lieutenant was crazy when he came out. He made Darina clean them spotless before he'd put them back on. I don't think anyone would have told what had happened if it had been in the village proper, but they were right next to the gypsy houses there, and the gypsies don't care for the Krausovs. They told him who had done it, and he went off to get his men. Somehow Rado heard they were coming, and he had gone by the time

they got to Krausov's place. The police went all through the house looking for him and they broke things. Smashed mirrors, tore photographs out of their frames, tipped all the food in the pantry out on the floor. Then they took old Krausov to the school and said they wouldn't let him out until Rado comes back.

"Now Jana doesn't know what to do. She can't get her father back, and she says she's told Rado to stay away because she's afraid of what Drazevich will do to him if he comes home. I think he's gone to the forest. Anyway, she sent me up here to beg you to help."

Therese sat thinking. Her first instinct was to rush down to Jana and comfort her, but that would not help. She could talk to the General, but somehow she knew that he would not look kindly on anyone who filled an Imperial Army officer's boots with cow dung, even an officer like Drazevich. He was naturally careful of the Army's honour. She supposed that she had better concentrate on getting freedom for old Krausov. Rado had only himself to blame, and at least he would still be alive in the forest. She would have to wait for Mefist to return.

It was already late when Mefist came up to the club looking for her. She could see he had news and reached for the champagne. Maria entered their names in the book and grinned as Therese rushed him into the office and locked the door.

"Mefist, I've been waiting for you for ages. What took you so long?"

"Now, now, my dear. Don't start nagging me so soon, or I'll think twice about marrying you. Open the champagne. It's been a grey day, hasn't it? I wouldn't be surprised if it didn't snow soon."

"Mefist—" she threatened.

"Sergeant Grossner said he saw you out walking today, far away up the hill. How was it?"

"Mefist, if you don't tell me what is happening right now, I'll scream!"

"Really, Therese, I've never seen you like this! Why don't you relax and drink your champagne, and we can have a sensible discussion." He handed her a glass and steered her to the chaise longue. "Why don't you take your dress off for me?"

"Mefist—" she pleaded.

He crossed his arms and struck a pose. "No, I'm implacable. At last I have a lever to move you with. Take your dress off, and I'll tell you everything."

"Mefist, you're not being gentlemanly!"

"No, today I'm a slippery politician, and I'm waiting. I've been swooning at your feet for a long time now, and you have not been gentle with me."

Perhaps it was good to have an excuse. She knew she would have to do something for him eventually. After all, he presumably paid for a lot more than he received each time he came here. She reached behind her to unclip her dress. "But no touching, Mefist, and I shall expect every last detail."

She turned her back to him and allowed the dress to slip down over her hips and legs. Still with her back turned, she carefully draped the dress over the back of the chaise longue and sat down. Slowly she lifted her legs onto the day bed and rolled her hips to face him.

He was smiling like a cat with cream, and he lifted his glass. "Therese, you are more beautiful than ever! I swear I'll never look at another woman without feeling dissatisfied. I think I'll send for my camera so I can record you like this and send it to Hollywood."

She blushed as his eyes brushed over her naked breasts and down to the secrets hidden between her closed thighs. "Stop it! Start telling me what you've been doing."

"Really, Therese, you're in such a hurry. Well, I had to go down to the village with the General to deal with the affair of the butcher Krausov. A friend of yours, I believe." He waited for her to nod agreement. "Well, Krausov's son has apparently attacked Drazevich's boots."

"Filled them with cow dung!"

"Is that what he did? Drazevich seemed reluctant to discuss the details, but how did he come to fill the boots with cow dung when Drazevich was inside them?"

"He wasn't in them. Drazevich was having some old slut in her house at the end of the village, and his boots were on the step outside the house."

"Really? I had no idea. Drazevich has a secret lady love. Well, well, well...."

"She doesn't sound much like a lady love. She's middle-aged and dirty. She's got an idiot son and she'd be happy to go with anyone for a few kopeks. Only Drazevich doesn't pay her; he threatened to take her son for the Army, so she does it for nothing."

"Really, Therese, I feel I've made you take your dress off under false pretenses. You're telling me what has happened."

"I don't know about Krausov. I know that Drazevich's men ransacked his house and did a lot of damage, and that they were holding him in the school until the son comes back. That's all I know."

"Well, I got a message through Timko that something had happened and told the General. He was furious that someone had been disrespectful to Drazevich, and we went down to see what was what. We found they'd got old Krausov handcuffed and tied to a window catch with a rope under his

arms so that he had to stand on tiptoe. The old man was suffering. Well, that upset the General, so we had him cut down. Then we found out that Drazevich really wanted the son, not the old man. So we questioned Krausov a little, and the General released him on a bond of five hundred crowns. I think he would have just let him go, but he didn't want to disagree with Drazevich in public.

"Old Krausov has a nice daughter, did you know that?" He was trying to make Therese jealous. "She's quite beautiful, you know. Long dark hair and such deep, dark eyes. She got hold of me outside the school and begged me to help her father. Maybe I should invite her up here to discuss it..."

She could not help rising to the bait. "Mefist, if you do any such thing, I'll-I'll never take my dress off for you again. Anyway, Jana's a nice girl and she's a friend of mine."

Mefist pretended to consider it. "Oh, well. If that means you're going to continue taking off your dress for me, I suppose I'd better help her from a distance. Do you know what has happened to the son?"

"Rado's apparently run off to the forest. I don't suppose Drazevich will bother looking for him there."

"Probably not, but all the same, I think I'll make sure the General knows what's behind it all, and about Drazevich's old tart. He won't be happy about it. Now, enough of that. Tell me about your walk."

"Well, I went up the hill, that way, along the edge of the forest." She waved her arm vaguely in the direction of her walk.

"I love the way your breasts move, my dear. They are enchanting, truly enchanting."

She was blushing again. "Mefist, pay attention. Do you want to hear about my walk or not?"

Drazevich caught Rado one night as he tried to reach his father's house. It had been snowing that evening, and the SekPol patrol came across fresh footprints. The curfew had been in force since eight o'clock, so they knew someone was up to something illegal. They found Rado trying to hide in a doorway.

They woke Therese as they struggled to get him up the stairs outside her room. When she opened her door in her nightdress, she found herself looking straight at Drazevich. Two policemen were dragging Rado up the spiral stairs above.

"What's happening?"

Drazevich looked pointedly at her in her nightdress. "I have taken a prisoner. He will stay in the storeroom. You may return to your room." She wanted to shout at him but thought better of it and shut the door. She heard them upstairs, dragging furniture out of the way, she supposed. Then the questioning started. It was horrible. She could hear Drazevich shouting questions and what sounded like blows and struggling. Then everything quietened down and the voices did no more than murmur, until Drazevich was shouting again and more blows came. She got up, put on her dressing gown, and went looking for Mefist.

She woke him and begged him to come. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he came to her room still in pyjamas and dressing gown. The ugly sounds continued until, as they debated what to do, they heard the door being closed and feet on the staircase.

Therese pushed Mefist to the door. "Go on! Find out what's happening." "You don't mind? Very well." He flung the door open and called to Drazevich.

"It's police business. I'm interrogating a prisoner, and he'll stay up there until I'm done with him. So get back to your fancy woman and let me get back to my job."

Therese saw him stiffen and pulled him back before he could say anything.

"That poisonous little sneak!" he exploded when the door closed. "Now what do we do?"

"Can't you stop him?"

"It's SekPol. Even the General can't go directly against them. Still, I guess we can hobble Drazevich. The General will certainly welcome the chance to interfere with him after the Krausov affair. He feels that Drazevich's tart has made the Army look silly. We can't release the prisoner, but we can certainly make his captivity more civilized. I'd suggest you complain to the General in the morning about the noise and ask if you can make a medical visit to the prisoner. I expect he'll need cleaning up after Drazevich and his men have been beating him, so then you can complain to the General and make sure he gets a daily visit. Even SekPol won't want to rough him up if anyone is watching."

He seized Therese by the shoulders and pressed her to him. In a dramatic voice, he said, "My dear, I would love to stay here and make wild and exotic love to you until you are climbing the walls in ecstasy, but my duty to the Army calls me. Adieu, my love, I will return!"

Therese closed the door behind him with a smile. Wild and exotic lovemaking with Mefist was sounding more attractive every day.

In the morning, Therese found a guard posted at the foot of the spiral staircase of the tower. The storeroom under the stairs had been emptied and a card table placed in its doorway. An open log book lay on the green baize top. The sentry leapt to his feet and saluted as she passed. Oh dear, she thought, this is beginning to look very serious.

She went to the General's office before breakfast. He was dictating to an orderly with his door open, but he stopped when he saw her and called for coffee. "Dear Therese! I'm so sorry about last night. Drazevich has very little common sense, and very little idea of what is polite. I apologise for him. He would apologise himself, but I'm afraid he has had to attend an incident at Tergov. Some ammunition has been reported missing. We don't know if it was stolen or used for practice. Not important, really, but it's

enough to send Drazevich off to the front line for a couple of days. I've told him not to return before Friday at least. Come; sit down and have coffee with me. Show me that I am forgiven."

What an old charmer, she thought. No wonder the girls enjoy their afternoon visits. "General, I understand completely, so there's nothing to forgive. Are you sure I'm not disturbing you?"

The orderly came in with coffee and cake. "General, do you think I should make a medical visit to the prisoner? I'm afraid he was badly beaten last night."

"Of course, my dear. I'd be most grateful. It's far better that you do it. I don't want to be accused of interfering in SekPol's dirty business. Go ahead and do what's necessary. You might check on the feeding and sanitary arrangements as well. Drazevich is convinced the man is a partisan; what do you think? Is that possible? We haven't had any of that sort of trouble so far."

"I think he's trying to mislead you, General. I'm pretty sure it's the man who filled his boots with cow dung, and he just wants his revenge."

"Hmm. Dirty business. Very dirty. Tell me, my dear, do you think we could have trouble with partisans hereabouts? You know more about the village than we do."

"I'm positive you could have very severe trouble if you make the partisans yourself. Let an officer like Drazevich loose down there in the village and he'll start an incident, shoot someone, and then it will start. Of course, the more he tries to suppress it, the worse it will get. These people seem very placid, but they're as stubborn as mules once they get an idea in their heads. All the same, I believe it won't happen unless you make it so."

"Would you be able to tell me if something was about to happen?"

"But of course, General. I've no desire to see young men dying, and all the sadness and bitterness that would bring with it. I can tell you, but I can't do much to influence the village people. Apart from singing your praises, and I've been doing that already to anyone who will listen."

"Good, good. I'm sure this will be my last posting, and I would be delighted if it turns out to be very quiet and boring. Nothing wrong with that—what? So far it has been a foretaste of heaven. Enough work to keep me busy, and your young ladies every afternoon. I hope the war goes on forever!"

Therese approached the soldier guarding the stairs. She carried a bowl of warm water with antiseptic, a towel and a bag of lint. She smiled in answer to his salute and said, "General's orders, soldier. I have to visit the prisoner. Can you let me in?"

"Beg pardon, Your Honour, but Lieutenant Drazevich said that no one was allowed to go in."

"Really, soldier? Perhaps I should bring the General so you can explain to him?"

The soldier whitened. "I'm sorry, Your Honour," he whispered hoarsely. "I'm just a soldier. I don't know what to do. He just said no one was to go in, and especially Prince Mefist."

"Just let me in, soldier, and if Lieutenant Drazevich has any complaints, just tell him that the General ordered it." The soldier picked up the large key ring that lay openly on the table. Beside the old-fashioned door key were two small, bright keys that Therese did not recognize. Handcuffs, she guessed.

The storeroom was a jumble, lit by a single glazed arrow slit deep in the tower wall. A hooded figure lay in the dim light below the arrow slit. His hands and ankles were tightly handcuffed, and the two sets of cuffs had been crossed so that hands and ankles were close together behind his back. He smelt of stale urine.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" The exclamation burst from her. "Give me those keys right now!" She was shaking in fury.

The soldier did not object and handed over the key ring, muttering, "Sorry, Your Honour, it's SekPol, not us."

Therese bent to unlock the cuffs. The chains were stretched taut and the rings bit into Rado's flesh. The first one sprang open, and Rado groaned. She quickly unlocked the rest and returned the key ring to the soldier.

"Get out and lock the door behind you. I want a proper breakfast for him right now. Tell the kitchen the order's from me and have one of the women bring it. See Fodor and tell him to send me up water and a basin. And a chamber pot. Tell him to bring a razor as well; this man has to be shaved. Get moving!"

She started to untie the hood and nearly vomited. Rado's face was swollen and bruised. His eyes had closed, and dried blood surrounded his nose and mouth. She carefully peeled the hood away where it had stuck with blood. There was no question of shaving his battered, wounded face today.

"My God, Rado. Are you alright?" Immediately she wished she could take the stupid words back. Rado groaned and rolled onto his face.

"My hands," he croaked through swollen lips. "The blood's coming back. Oh God!" He tried to move his fingers, but the pain made it agonizing. Therese put her hand on his shoulder and waited as he slowly revived.

By the time the food arrived, he had managed to sit up against the wall and was carefully moving his legs to get some life back into them. The girl set the tray down beside him, horror on her face. "What have they done to him, Ma'am?" He shook his head at the coffee and asked for water.

"Run downstairs to my room, please. Bring a glass of water from the bathroom." The girl hurried off.

"Do you think you can eat?"

"I can try, but I don't think I can chew the sausage. Is there porridge? Or soup?"

As Rado sat sipping his water, Therese sent the girl off to the cook again. She knew that the girl's story would be all over the castle in the next half hour. She started to mop Rado's face with warm water to remove the dried blood.

"Where am I, Ma'am? In the castle?"

"Yes. You're in the tower. My room is just below."

"Where's the policeman?"

"Don't worry. He's been called away for a couple of days, and the General and Prince Mefist are trying to sort something out for you. They can't set you free, but at least they can stop this ugliness. It's criminal!"

"That's SekPol, Ma'am. They're not normal people."

"At least we have no SekPol people up here at the castle. Not until Drazevich gets back. Are you ready for some coffee? Look, I can't let you go free. I'll have to put your handcuffs back, but not like they were. We'll link them together and fasten one wrist to the radiator here. That means you can move around a bit at least. I'll get you a bed, or a mattress for tonight. You won't be very comfortable, I'm afraid."

"It'll be heaven compared to last night. Thank you very much, but can you help me to escape?"

Therese touched her lips and frowned at him. "Where are your boots?"

"I think they threw them over there somewhere. They started to beat the soles of my feet at one stage. I think I'll be walking slowly for a while."

"At least we have your boots. You'll need them eventually. I want you to promise me that you'll still be here tomorrow. If you escape now, God knows what will happen to me." She added in a whisper, "Give me a day. I'll work out something."

She sent Fodor off for some replacement clothes and offered to help him strip and wash. Rado was too shy, so she joined the two sets of cuffs into one and clipped one end to the radiator. She explained to the soldier how to secure his prisoner once Fodor had got clean clothes on him and left, promising to return in the evening.

Therese decided she would have to solve two problems. How to get Rado out of the storeroom, preferably before Drazevich returned, and then how to get him out of the castle. Of course, it would all have to be done without pointing the finger of suspicion at herself or anyone else in the castle. She thought about asking Mefist for help but rejected the idea. Drazevich already disliked him and if he could implicate him in a plot to free a prisoner, the consequences could be very serious indeed. She sat in her office and started to compile a mental list of things that she must do. It became very long and complex.

Still, she thought, as Mikhail might say, it's the job never started that takes the longest to finish. She called for Maria and got down to work.

She met Mikhail in Timko's office when he returned from the forest that afternoon. The old man stood before her, hat in hand, but she said nothing until Timko took the hint and excused himself. "Mikhail, I want you to help me, if you don't mind. I need a couple of things done confidentially."

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Need a haversack or some kind of bag, with useful things in it. A knife, string, matches, I don't know."

"Useful things, Ma'am. Like useful for what?"

"Say, useful if you were going to spend a little time living in the forest."

"Ah, I see, Ma'am. I see." He lowered his voice. "How is he, Ma'am? They do say that they beat him something terrible."

"He's not well, but he'll live. If I can get him out of here. But not a word to anyone, Mikhail. Not even your wife. If anything gets to Drazevich, I'll be shot. Or worse."

"Don't you worry, Ma'am. I'd never let that happen to you. You did right calling me. No one thinks anything of an old fool like Mikhail."

A wave of thankfulness caught at her throat. "Why thank you, Mikhail. Can you get that bag? Perhaps with a blanket as well?"

"Certainly. And no one will know nothing. What do you want me to do with them?"

"Nothing yet. Just keep them handy. Oh, and a long piece of rope. I think he's going to have to climb down the outside wall at night. There's something else you can help me with. He's got to be able to open the door from the inside, so he'll need some kind of lever."

"He's in the tower storeroom, Ma'am? Well, there's no problem with that. There's a box of tools there already. I saw them when we were moving the Count's things last month. I'll be bound the police didn't find them, not without moving all the furniture. They're right over in the back corner, through the door and on your right. I don't know their story, but they're fine tools for a carpenter, right enough, but foreign made. Sheffield steel! They seemed hardly used. Looks to me like the whole box was sent from England for someone of the family, and put aside when they lost interest. I'd have been happy to take them, but... Still, it's probably just as well. Now they might be the saving of young Rado. It's not much of a lock, that one. He'll have no trouble getting it off if you can get him out of his chains."

"You leave the chains to me, Mikhail. I'm sure he's going to be very grateful—if I can get him out of the castle safely. Let's go up to my office. I think you'd better make me a shelf to explain why you're here."

Getting the chains off him. That was going to be a headache. Therese decided to visit her room. The sentry jumped to attention and saluted.

"Good morning, soldier. You're still here! How long do they keep you on duty?"

"Until seven o'clock, Your Honour. The sergeant says it's easy duty, so we stay seven to seven and eat our lunch here."

"That's terrible. It must be very boring. Shall I bring you a magazine?"

"Thank you, Your Honour. I can't read very much."

"Never mind. At least you can look at the pictures." She went up to her room, wasted a few minutes, and returned to leave two women's magazines with the soldier.

Securing the sentry was going to be a necessity. She sat with Maria at lunch, and they put their heads together.

At quarter to seven that evening, Therese and Maria returned to the tower. Therese wore a provocative evening dress and carried a bottle of beer and a glass. Maria had a tray of sandwiches. She had dressed in her nun's

raincoat that reached down to her calves and did not hide her stockinged ankles and patent leather shoes tapping along the flagstones. Even more interestingly, the coat was buttoned only to the level of her hips. As she walked it swayed open and closed, giving shadowy glimpses of her plump thighs.

"Good evening, soldier. Let's go and feed the prisoner."

Maria led the way, and Therese let the sentry follow her. She could see he appreciated the sight of Maria's bottom swaying up the stairs. The soldier unlocked the door and stood back to let them pass. Rado was sitting up on his mattress, blinking in the light.

"Maria, take that chamber pot downstairs please. Keys, soldier, and we'll unlock him while he eats. I'll sit with him; you take Maria out and lock the door behind you. He'll be safe enough." She knelt and undid the handcuffs. Rado stretched and rubbed his wrist.

Maria took the covered pot and the two of them left. In spite of her burden, Maria had already started to flirt with the soldier.

"Quick!" Therese whispered. "Don't worry about the food. Apparently there's a toolbox over there in the corner. Check that it's there and what's in it, but don't move it or any of the furniture. I'm going to look for your boots."

Rado tiptoed quickly to the stored furniture and started to squeeze through. "I've got it, I think. This is a nice box. Walnut, I think."

"Never mind the box. What's in it?"

"Carpenter's tools. Plane, mallet, chisels. Nice chisels, too. Gauge and square, screwdriver...."

"Anything you could use to get the door lock off quietly?"

"Oh, yes. That'll be no problem at all."

"Good. Put the box back and make sure it's hidden. Now come and sit down and eat your supper before Maria gets back."

She found the boots quickly and moved them out of sight. Rado sat back on his mattress, eating his sandwiches hungrily. He ignored the glass and carefully drank his beer straight from the bottle. Therese looked at him closely. The swelling around his eyes was going down a little, and yellow and blue staining had crept across his face. His lips were still swollen and ugly. He chewed very gently.

"You can eat that?" she asked.

"More or less, Ma'am. If I do it slowly."

"Good. In a few days you'll be able to eat anything. What about the rest of you? Can you walk?"

"They hurt my knee, Ma'am, so I wouldn't like to go too far just now. If you could give me a couple of days I should be right."

"I'll try and get you out of here tomorrow night, before Drazevich gets back. We'll try and make out that you've left the castle, but we'll hide you away for a day or two until the fuss dies down. It won't be comfortable, but we'll do what we can."

They could hear Maria laughing outside. She seemed to be flirting with more than one man. They tapped at the door and unlocked it. The sentry brought his relief in. "Your Honour, here's the night guard."

"Very good. Maria, put the pot over here where he can reach it, and run down to my wardrobe and get a blanket. It'll be cold up here tonight. Give me your hand, Rado, it's time to be locked up again." He offered his calloused hand, and Therese clumsily closed the cuff about his wrist. She clicked it tighter and checked to see it could not be slipped over Rado's hand. The soldiers watched, and the night guard took the keys from her. They all left, turning off the light and locking the door behind them.

Mefist was sitting at the club bar when she got back, but she did not allow him to take her off for a chat this time. Better to keep him in the dark for a day or two.

Next morning Dorota came with her to bring Rado his breakfast. The same soldier had day duty again, and Therese purposely left him alone with Dorota as much as she could. It would brighten his day. Rado looked and felt a lot better, but as he stretched and walked a little around the room, she could see he was still in pain. She clipped him back into his handcuff and told him with a wink that she would see him in the evening.

Waiting for the evening visit made for a long day. Therese passed the afternoon in the library, trying to read but spending most of her time watching the snow whirling outside the tall windows. Outside, wild weather lashed the castle and the wind moaned in the chimney. The forest would be no place for humans tonight.

She timed their visit to coincide with the change of guard. She brought both Maria and Dorota with her, both wearing half-opened coats over their working lingerie. They stood talking with both sentries until the day guard left, Maria fluttering her eyelashes at him quite shamelessly.

Rado ate nervously and without speaking. Dorota stayed with Therese and left Maria to chatter with the guard by the door until Therese called. "Right, my friend. Time to be locked up again. Give me your hand." The cuff started to close about his wrist just as Maria found her shoe buckle was coming loose. Without a thought, she went down on one knee and put the other foot out in front of her to play with the small buckle behind her ankle. The coat slipped from her thigh, and the guard could see more female flesh than he had seen since he became a soldier. His eyes were glued to the sight, and his mouth hung half open.

The handcuff clicked home around both Rado's wrist and Therese's fingers, and she made a show of testing its fit. "There we are. You're not going anywhere unless you take the radiator with you. Maria! What are you doing? Cover yourself—that's not ladylike. Here, soldier, your keys. We'll leave the prisoner to his dreams."

The guard was still in a daze as he locked the door and led them downstairs. As they came to her door, Therese stopped. "I don't think I'll go up to the club tonight, Maria. It's been a tiring day; I think I'll go to bed early. You can take care of things without me. Good night."

"Good night, Mistress," the girls chorused. Therese pulled the door almost closed behind her and waited. She could hear the girls chattering with the guard, and also surreptitious noises above her. After what seemed a long time, she slipped off her shoes and tiptoed out of the door and down the stairs.

She stopped at the edge of the light, where she could hear Maria speaking. "Dorota my love, go and stand at the corner for me, won't you? I'm going to show this big soldier just what a little girl can do to him. Cough or something if you hear anyone coming."

"But what about Mistress Therese?"

"What about her? You heard her, she's going to bed. Besides, I'm sure we'll hear if she opens her door up there. Go on with you."

Therese heard Dorota tap away, and then Maria started again. "Now, my man, sit down and look at this." She heard a tip-tap of shoes and a swish. Therese could imagine Maria pirouetting and throwing her coat aside.

"Do you like what you see? Say something or I'll put it back on."

"Come here," rasped the soldier.

"Very well, but no touching. Hands by your sides, soldier. That's it. Do you like them? Oh yes, that's very good, oh yes. That's right. Kiss them. Suck them. Oh yes. Look, they're going hard. Mmh. No! No hands! Just keep kissing them."

"God, you're beautiful! You're making my prick as hard as a cart pole."

"I'm glad about that. I was beginning to think you hadn't noticed me. Oh, that's good.... Now do it to the other one. Mmh. So tell me what you're going to do with that cart pole of yours."

"I'm going to stick it into you so hard it'll come out of your ear. Here, let me get my hands on you."

"No! Hands by your side! And don't stop kissing my tits. Is it strong, this cart pole of yours? I'm not going to stick it into me and then find it's as soft as bag of tripe, am I? Take it out and let me see. If I like it enough.... Mmh, that's not so bad. It's a nice handful. I wonder if it's hard enough."

"Come here, you slut, and I'll show you what it's good for!" The chair scraped as the soldier stood up.

"Not here, you idiot! Let's get in there behind you. Lie down, quickly, and let me get at that cart pole!"

Therese crept forward. The two of them were out of sight in the storeroom. Maria was silent, but she could hear the soldier breathing heavily. Maria's coat lay on the floor with her high-heeled shoes tipped up beside it. The keys lay on the card table beside the logbook. She heard a sucking pop from the storeroom and Maria's voice again.

"Did you like that, soldier? Is your cart pole going soft yet?"

"Aah, stick it in, you bitch! Stop making me wait for it. Sweet Jesus, give me your cunt!"

Therese silently picked up the keys and fled.

The door was already open and the lock hanging half off. Rado waited just inside, the open toolbox on the floor beside him. She rushed to take the handcuffs from the radiator. Rado put them into his pocket.

"Boots?" she whispered. Rado pointed to them behind the door, but Therese put them in the open doorway. "Come on!"

Soundlessly they crept down the staircase. She pushed Rado into her room and carried on down the stairs alone. A regular thumping was coming from the storeroom, and she could hear Maria moaning. "Aah, aah, aah, yes, that's good. Yes, yes, do it to me. God, I'm coming, yes, do it—"

Therese returned the keys carefully to their place and stepped into the doorway. Maria was crouched over the guard's thighs with her back to him. His heavy legs and giant boots made her look smaller. She was violently hammering her bottom into his stomach and between her open thighs, Therese could see the dark shaft disappearing into her with each stroke. She had an expression of pained concentration on her face, and her brow wrinkled as she laboured towards her climax.

"Maria! What are you doing! Get up immediately!"

Maria looked up with an expression of intense frustration and disappointment on her face, and then she smiled impishly and jumped up. "Not you, soldier! You stay right where you are!" He lay to attention on the floor, his incongruous white sex lying collapsed on his trouser front and rapidly diminishing. A large drop of clear liquid oozed from it and stretched down to puddle on the rough cloth of his uniform.

Therese turned to Maria. "You hussy! How many times have I told you not to mix with the soldiers? Get back to your room this minute! I'll deal with you later." Maria squeezed past her to pick up her coat and shoes and padded off in stockinged feet.

"Now you! What do you think you were doing raping one of my girls? Eh? Answer me!"

"Your Honour—" he stammered but was at a loss to say any more.

"Don't you know that she's Major Lamoreaux's woman? Oh yes, he's definitely going to want to talk to you. You're in very deep trouble."

"Please, Your Honour, I didn't know."

Therese let him suffer for a while. "Damn you for an idiot, soldier! If I could think of some way of skinning you without upsetting the Major, I'd do it myself. I'm going back up to my room for a minute, and then I'm going to deal with Maria. She'll be eating her breakfast standing up when I've finished with her. Get up and dress yourself!"

Rado was standing in her room and waiting. She silently showed him the bathroom and then how he could press the back of one of the armchairs against the open wardrobe and climb into its upper compartment. The compartment was spacious and taller than its door, and gave access to the narrow ceiling space above the room. Squeezed in up there, he would not be seen unless a searcher had a torch.

He struggled up into the darkness. Therese pulled him down again and made him practice. After two attempts he could get in quickly and silently. She moved the chair back a little and left him up there. She locked the bedroom door as she left.

Downstairs the sentry stood rigidly at attention, and she ignored him. Then she turned back as if she had forgotten something. "What have you put in your book, soldier?"

The laboured writing showed Maria, Dorota and herself arriving with food, and Maria leaving with Dorota. "Good. Now put my name down. I warn you, don't breathe a word of what you've done. Not to anyone, understand? The slightest rumour reaches the Major, and you'll be dealing with the police for rape on top of whatever the Major has for you. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Your Honour."

"Good. Not a word!" and she stomped off like an avenging fury.

She sat in her office with the door closed. Her pulse was still racing, and she felt sick with worry. She willed herself to relax and she waited.

A long time later, a light tap came at the stairway door at the back of her office, and she jumped up to open it. Maria stood there smiling. She looked

wet and disheveled, and her hands and face were black with coal dust. She was wearing thick socks and carrying Rado's boots. She looked a mess.

"I did it, Mistress!" she said triumphantly. "Just like you said."

Therese pulled her into the room and took off her coat. Her stockings were torn and her knees were as black as her hands.

"Stand still, or you'll get dirt everywhere." Therese took the boots from her and knelt at her feet. She peeled the socks off and unhooked the stockings. They were finished. She would throw them onto the fire when the club closed. She went out to the bar and came back with a bowl of warm water and a damp cloth.

She knelt again and started to wipe Maria's legs. "Now, tell me what happened. Start at the beginning. You were giving a fine acting performance with the soldier. I could almost think you were really doing it because you wanted to."

Maria hung her head. "It wasn't easy, Mistress. Oh, it was easy enough to get him excited and into the storeroom..."

"I know. I was listening. You certainly convinced me."

"Anyway, once I'd got him there and played with him a bit..."

"As Wanda showed us..."

"Yes, just like that, but he got all excited and he came all over my hands as I was trying to put it in. Then he wanted to get up but I knew we needed more time. I pushed him back down and sat on his chest to keep him there. I was pulling and sucking at his thing and trying to get it to stand up again. I didn't think I'd ever succeed, but I found that when I was sucking at it and wiggling my dupka in his face, he started getting excited again, and eventually it was hard enough for me to sit on. His thing was nice. And then you came," she ended lamely.

"A moment or two too early, I think."

Maria blushed. "Yes, I was nearly there," she said wistfully. "Still, at least he stayed hard longer than Lieutenant Drazevich. Oh well. I hope I get Lieutenant Stoibel next time to make up for it.

"Anyway, I went upstairs like you said and picked up the boots. I found the little door onto the roof and sat on the step to put on my socks and the boots. That made my dupka cold, but when I got the door open and went outside, well, then I got really cold. There's so much snow up there! I pushed through along the edge of the battlements but I was exhausted by the

time I got to the top of our steps. Anyway, it's only snowing a little now so they should be able to see where I went. Then I went down the steps. It was very difficult in the boots because they've got nails in them and make a lot of noise. You should have given me more socks, Mistress. The boots are very big, and now I've got blisters all over.

Anyway, I got down to the boiler room, and at least it's warm there. I took off my coat to keep it clean. I climbed over the coal to the chute and thank God the cellar is full. If the coal had been any lower I don't know if I could have got out of the hatch. Anyway, I opened the hatch very quietly and looked out. There was no one around, so I crawled out and made some boot prints. I didn't leave any handprints or anything, and then I carefully got back inside and climbed back down the coal. I took the boots off and put my coat on, and here I am."

"You're very, very brave, Maria. One day, when all this is over, I'm going to write this story down-parts of it, anyway-and everyone will know what a heroine you are. Give me your hands, they're filthy."

Clean hands, clean face, a new pair of stockings from Therese's desk, and Maria was fit to face the world again. "Go to bed, Maria. Brush your coat off just in case and hang it in your cupboard. If anyone asks, it got damp when you were out walking this afternoon. I'll get rid of this dirty water when the club closes."

Maria pulled her shoes from her coat pockets and put them on, wincing as she touched her blisters. As she reached for the door, Therese called her back. "Oh, Maria. I'll get Franz Stoibel for you as soon as I can, and you can have him all evening if you can keep up with him."

She locked and bolted her bedroom door before whispering for Rado to come down. "If you promise to behave yourself, you can sleep down here tonight. Get washed; I'll wait for you."

He came back dressed only in his shirt and smelling of her soap. He looked embarrassed. "I can sleep in a chair, Ma'am."

"Don't be silly. I think we're both adult enough to use the bed. Go ahead and use that side. I need a bath." He took his clothes and climbed up to stow them in his hiding place. His stocky legs were covered in curly ginger hair that did nothing to disguise the black bruising. She bit her lip in sympathy but said nothing. She turned and went into the bathroom.

When she returned, the light from the bathroom door fell across the darkened room. Rado lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. With a start, she realized that a tear trail led down from the corner of his eye down towards the pillow, and his eyes were shiny. He had been crying. Her heart leapt out to this lonely boy. She switched off the bathroom light and hurried to join him.

He was the second person she had welcomed to her bed, and he was harder and heavier than Wanda. She turned to him and reached up to wipe the tears away with her fingertip. "Don't worry. You have friends, and we'll take care of you here and in the forest."

"It's not that. It's just that I always sleep in my bed, and now... I feel like when I was sick as a boy, and my mother used to put me in her bed. She died..."

She felt sorry for him and useless. She reached across his chest and pulled her body close to his. "Go to sleep. You'll feel better in the morning."

His elbow poked uncomfortably into her ribs. "Excuse me," he said and pulled the arm out from between them to put it under her head and around her shoulders. She lay half on his hard body, and the sensation was strange

and exciting. His scent came through the smell of soap and played tricks with her brain.

He gave her a gentle squeeze and she whispered, "Don't touch me, Rado. Just go to sleep."

"I can't," he said and pulled her closer. She felt comfortable, her thigh resting on top of him and her hand feeling the hardness of his chest. It was a good, secure feeling to be a woman in a man's arms. She sighed and snuggled closer.

She became conscious of something trapped under her thigh, something firm and growing. For an instant her mind reeled. How should she feel? Horrified? Frightened? Not really—now it felt, well, natural, she supposed. She did not blame Rado, but... "Rado, I can't."

"That's alright, Ma'am. I understand. Don't move. We'll try to sleep."

It continued to grow under her thigh. Therese felt at a loss. After all, she should know what to do in situations like this. None of the girls would be confused, and the thought made her feel inadequate. Still, she knew enough to realize that sleep would not come and solve the problem, and anyway, a strange light-headedness was creeping over her. She would have to do something.

"Promise not to move, Rado, and I'll help you." She moved her hand down across his stomach. His shirt confused her, and she pulled it up to reach his sex. It was big and heavy, and the skin felt dry and silky to her touch. Feeling it stiff in her hand excited her. She slid her fingertips down its length to its hairy roots, and then slowly back up to its tip. It felt very long.

She was conscious of her ignorance and thought of the demonstration that Wanda had given them so long ago. She gripped the shaft and pulled the skin gently back.

"Aah!" grunted Rado. It was satisfying to hear him, and she repeated the movement. "Oh, that's so good," he sighed.

It felt good to give pleasure like this, and she concentrated on drawing out the experience. Rado would go back to the forest soon, maybe tomorrow. At best he faced a hard, lonely winter. At worse he might be hunted to death, or die of cold. She would give him something to remember. She continued to move her hand very slowly up and down. Rado sighed and muttered unintelligibly.

She was becoming very excited herself. Her breasts felt swollen and tight, and her nipples grew sensitive and demanded attention. Her sex was swollen and crying moisture. She concentrated on the pleasure she was giving.

Suddenly, she knew she was not doing enough. She threw back the bedclothes and jumped to her knees. Snow bright from the window gave enough light to see Rado's form. The shaft she held sprang from his dark hairy centre. She gripped it in both hands, and Wanda's lesson came to her again. She pushed down and saw the shining plum uncovered at the summit of his sex. She bent forward and licked experimentally. Rado stiffened instantly. He was wet and slippery, and that made her more excited.

His arm now free, Rado reached for her thighs and the hungry sex between them. He was clumsy and did not seem to know what to do. "No–stop–don't touch," she pleaded, but he did not stop. She grabbed his wrist with both hands, pinning it to the mattress. Reaching for his fingers, she clenched them into a fist, and then pulled on his calloused thumb until it stood up in a crazy signal of agreement.

Still pinning his wrist, she pulled her nightdress up, shuffled forwards, and eased herself onto it. She slid easily downwards and pressed the sensitive surfaces of her sex against his wrist. It felt satisfying and good.

"Don't move," she said and pressed down harder. She reached for his sex and bent forward to take it into her mouth. Leaning forward on his fist felt good, and she pressed down again. Sucking the head of his sex and pumping with her hands, she tried to concentrate on giving pleasure. Very quickly, almost immediately, she knew that he was coming. All his muscles were tightening, and his sex reached up higher and higher towards her. She felt his fist heaving strongly up and down below her. She wanted more, more of his shaft, more of his thumb inside her. She wanted his shaft inside her; she wanted to stop and jump from his fist to his shaft. She wanted everything.

Crazy and out of control, she ground her sex down on his invading fist and bobbed her head up and down to take him all. Too late, and he was coming. His sex buried deep in her mouth, she welcomed it pulsing and spurting into her. Her thighs had closed on his forearm, but he continued to muscle her up and down, lifting her from the bed. "Stop – oh, stop," she sobbed, pulling herself from his thumb. She collapsed onto his chest and

curled up, trembling and burying her face in his shirt. Her sex was singing and sending uncontrollable spasms through her.

Slowly she relaxed. Rado had his arm around her and was stroking her hair. She moved off him and fell back onto her pillow. Her heart had slowed again, and a feeling of warm contentment flowed through to her toes and fingertips. She felt very good.

"Are you alright, Ma'am?" asked Rado.

"What? Oh yes. Yes, I'm fine." There was cold air on her thighs, and she sat up to pull her nightdress around her legs again. She pulled the bedclothes over them both. "And you? Did you like it?"

"It was wonderful, Ma'am. I'd never imagined—I mean—I suppose you ladies and gentlemen know more. I never thought it could be like that!"

She grinned to herself in the dark. If only you knew, Rado, if only you knew.

In the morning Rado returned to his hideaway before she unlocked the door. She felt guilty as she smiled to the guard and went off to breakfast.

She decided to bring a girl who knew nothing of what had happened the night before; her naturalness would be the best means of smothering any suspicions. She came back with Meike carrying the breakfast tray, and they climbed the stairs. The soldier filled in his log and was just starting to follow them when they came running down to give him the news. Therese had to repeat it twice before he turned white and ran upstairs.

He ran back down again, completely unmanned. "What'll I do, Your Honour? The Sergeant will kill me. I didn't do nothing, Your Honour. God's my witness that I didn't even go up there! What'll I do?"

"Meike, run and get Timko. He'll know what to do. Stand up, soldier. It's not your fault."

"But the Sergeant..."

"Shut up, soldier. Attention, and wait until Timko gets here."

Timko came running with Meike in his wake. He went to look at the empty room himself, unable to believe what he had heard. "Your Honour, I'll run for the Sergeant and Captain Mefist. If you would be kind enough to wait here and make sure no one goes up?"

Sergeant Grossner was not panicked by unpleasant events. He came heavily down the stairs and said, "Well, here's a fine thing, Your Honour. Captain Mefist's not going to like this. Nor the General, not to mention Drazevich. Never mind. Timko, you run along and turn Lukas out of bed. If he's been sleeping on duty.... I want him up here at the double. Tell him the General'll be here like as not, so he'd better look like a soldier when he gets here."

He stood calmly beside her for a while and then turned his attention to the soldier. "Semenov, did you relieve Lukas on time? What did you do?" "Sergeant, I came up just before seven. Lukas was here, ready to go, so I just sat down and he went."

"Did he say anything about last night?"

"No, Sergeant. I asked what's the news, and he just said it had been very quiet. The Mistress here had gone up around eleven thirty, and that was it."

"And he didn't hear anything?"

"He didn't say nothing, Sergeant."

Grossner turned to Therese. "When do you think it happened, your Honour? Did you hear anything yourself?"

She pretended to consider. "No, Sergeant. Not that I'd expect to. That's a solid oak door to my room. Unless someone clumps past in heavy boots, I wouldn't hear them.

"I don't know when it could have happened. I can hear if someone is walking around up in the storeroom, but the prisoner would have been trying to be as quiet as possible. I suppose he could have gone while I was in the club last night, but how did he get past the sentry? The sentry might have been asleep in the middle of the night, but I'm sure he was awake when I came back to bed."

"Oh, well. We'll let the officers sort it out. That's what they're for."

Mefist was frustrated by the whole thing. "Damn! Now we're going to be sending reports and answering queries forever. Sergeant, keep an eye on the guard. Have you sent for the night guard? Good. When he gets here, just keep the pair of them until we get a chance to question them. This is going to be a big waste of time. No one will admit to knowing anything, and I'm sure the man is long gone. Meike, my dear, would you please run up to the General's office and say Captain Mefist sends his respect and could he please come because the prisoner has escaped. Don't forget to say I'm sending my respect."

He started wearily up the stairs and then called her. "You'd better come along, Therese. Show me what's what."

The door swung half-open, as they'd left it minutes ago. The breakfast tray with its sausage, bread and coffee was still on the step. They pushed the door open. The room looked small and dusty. Rado's mattress lay below the arrow slit. Behind the door, the toolbox lay open on the floor with tools around it.

Mefist tried to understand what had happened. "Where did he get the tools? There's a whole box of them. Don't tell me that Drazevich left the prisoner a whole box of sharp tools to amuse himself with. I can't believe anyone brought them up here, so they must have been stored." A thought struck him, and he went back to the door. "Sergeant, come up here and bring Semenov with you."

"Sergeant, he didn't get out through the window, and for the sake of Lukas's hide, we'd better assume he didn't just walk down the stairs, so it's just possible he's still hiding here. I'll stand by the door and the two of you start searching the furniture. Just be careful; he might have a knife or something sharp."

Mefist retreated to the doorway with Therese. "Suppose he didn't go down the stairs; could he have gone upstairs? There's only the way to the gallery up there, isn't there?"

"There's nothing up there, unless he can fly. But Mefist, he was chained to the radiator."

"What?"

"That's right. He was chained by one wrist to the radiator with handcuffs. How did he get them off? When I first got here Drazevich had his wrists and ankles pulled tight and chained behind his back. That man is worse than an animal."

"Semenov, was the prisoner properly handcuffed?"

"Last time I saw him, Your Honour. We opened the cuffs to let him eat and did 'em up again afterwards. That was yesterday morning, but Lukas'll know about last night, Your Honour."

"Are you finding anything, Sergeant?"

"No, Your Honour, we're about done and there's nowhere big enough for a man."

"Mmh. Let's carry on up, Therese."

She followed him up the spiral stairs until they reached the small door onto the roof. It was ajar, and snow had blown in onto the steps. "Oh, I'd forgotten about this," she said, "It goes onto the roof. He must have gone out there..."

The angry voice of the General came up the stairs, and Mefist turned and ran. Therese stayed where she was for the moment; she wanted to give the General time to blow off steam.

He came up the stairs a few minutes later. Therese could see his anger. "Morning, Therese. Fine mess this is. Drazevich trying to start a private prison up here instead of using the perfectly good lock-up in the village. Serves him damn well right. So what we got here?"

"The door was ajar, General. I haven't touched anything."

"Well, open it then. Let's have a look."

The snow had piled deep outside. Across the open roofs it lay thickly, and up against the battlements it was waist deep. A narrow furrow showed where someone had pushed through, walking along the gutter between the slope of the roof and the castellation of the battlement.

"That's where he's gone, I suppose. Mefist, take that guard and find out where he went. Have the Sergeant bring the night guard to my office. I'll get some patrols out, but I'll be surprised if they catch the fellow now. The snow's coming on again, so there'll be no tracks. Therese, my dear, can you tell me anything? Anything you saw or heard?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid, General. I know he was properly handcuffed when I left last night. I did it myself."

"Oh well. There's no telling how clever a man can become when his life's at stake. I'd better get back. Come and have tea with me this afternoon. I'll need to see a sensible face by then, I'm sure. Oh, and bring Meike too, and whoever was with you last night. I'll get someone to type out statements while we have tea, and you can sign them before you leave."

He turned and left. Suddenly Therese became conscious of Mefist looking at her very thoughtfully.

Therese sat in her office, sick with worry. She wanted to get Rado out of the castle as soon as possible and take advantage of the snow now falling. He could only leave when it was snowing, or his tracks would invite pursuit.

There was a tap on the door, and Mikhail came in. "I've brought your shelf, Ma'am. Can I fit it now?"

Mikhail was dusty and smelt of freshly sawn pine. As he measured and marked the wall, he spoke under his breath. "When do you want the things, Ma'am?"

"I think it had better be tonight."

"Dear, oh dear. That's not much time. How does he want to go out? Through the coal-hole like the trail you laid?"

"I thought he'd go down the wall. Is that alright?"

"That's best. Tell him that if he looks in the bottom of the shrine by the wagon park, he'll find a blanket and a bag of things. Now, how am I going to get the rope to you? Is this room safe?"

"It hasn't been searched, but God knows what they'll do when Lieutenant Drazevich comes back. After all, the trail goes down the steps on the other side of that door."

"When will you be in your bedroom? I can bring it there."

"I suppose I could go there at dinner time."

"That's right, Ma'am. You go down to the refectory when you're ready and ask them to bring your dinner to your room. Will you be able to carry it to him tonight?"

"Don't worry about that, Mikhail. Just get me the rope."

She went to the refectory after they had finished with the General. It had embarrassed her to sit and maintain the lie for so long, although it did not seem to trouble Maria and Dorota. Meike was still ignorant of what had happened.

She waited alone in her room until a girl came to the door. "Your dinner, Ma'am," she called out.

A plump serving girl pushed in with a tray and laid it on the bed. Therese recognized her face; her name was—yes, that was it, her name was Tanya. "Help me please, Ma'am," and she started to undo her apron and pull off her dress. A long rope wound tightly around her body like a severe corset.

Therese undid the end of the rope and started to pull it from her. Tanya spun like a top as they hurried to get it off. The rope piled up on the floor until she was free to collapse onto the bed. "Beg pardon, Ma'am. My head's going round; I got dizzy enough putting it on, and that was a lot slower."

"Take your time, Tanya. You're a very brave girl."

"Oh no, Ma'am! It's just that Mikhail asked. He's my grandfather, you know. He said I wasn't to tell no one. Not even my mother."

"That's right. Not a word because if the police take you off, they'll get the truth out of you one way or another, believe me, and then we'll all be in deep trouble."

"I won't say nothing, Ma'am, you can trust me."

"I'm sure I can, Tanya. Now, let's get you dressed again."

She passed the rope up to Rado along with the sandwiches and sat down to wait until the club opened.

They did not move until midnight. With Rado carrying his boots, they crept silently up the stairs and opened the door to the roof. He still limped, but he could move much more freely than the night before. The snow outside lay soft and deep, and it was still falling. The marks of this morning's activity had gone.

Thankful that she did not have to push through it as Maria had done the night before, she stood holding the rope while Rado put his boots on. He tucked in his scarf and fastened his jacket. Securing the rope around the battlement took moments, and then he was ready to go.

He took her by the shoulders. "Thank you from my heart, Ma'am. You and the girls have saved my life. Now you've given me a chance, I'll survive." He pulled her roughly to him and kissed her firmly on her lips. "And thank you for last night. It was heavenly. If I thought it would happen again, I think I'd stay."

"Get on with you, Rado, and if you ever breathe a word of what happened last night... If Jana ever found out, I don't think she'd ever talk to me again."

"Oh, she and father will love you. If you ever need anything, just ask them. If it's possible, they'll do it without question."

He pushed the snow off the battlement and swung out into the darkness. The rope moved rhythmically as he worked his way down and slackened when he reached the bottom. Therese leant out and looked down. She could make out the white of his face looking up. Quickly she lifted the rope off the battlement and dropped it after him. He coiled the rope and, keeping to shadows at the foot of the wall, he left. She waved but thought he did not see her.

Her bed welcomed her. At last she felt safe again. A big laugh was welling up inside her, and she felt happy. She had really helped someone, and it felt very good. She had even made love to him—well, sort of made love to him. That had felt good too, although she would not have done it if she had not been sorry for him. Still, she had to admit to herself, it had felt very good anyway.

The snow was still falling next morning, and the village was out of reach at the foot of the hill. Therese wondered how Rado would fare in weather like this, and whether he had managed to get the supplies Mikhail had prepared. The Tergov road would be deep in snow, and Lieutenant Drazevich would not return today. She shrugged her shoulders at the thought.

Mefist came to her office in the morning. The isolation brought by the snow was a pleasant feeling, and he had less work to do. Over a coffee, they chatted until he looked her in the eye and asked, "So tell me. Is he still hiding in your room?"

She opened her mouth to deny it but could not. "He's gone; how did you know?" she asked sheepishly.

"You can't keep secrets from me, my dear. I just watched you lying to the General and realized you'd been up to something. It took a little while, but I worked it out in the end."

"Who else knows?"

"Why no one, of course. Who else is there to tell? But explain to me; why didn't you send him out straight away?"

"He couldn't go. Drazevich had kicked him so much and beaten his feet so that he couldn't walk properly. Even last night was difficult. And anyway, it took time to get supplies together for him, and I wanted him out of that storeroom before Drazevich came back."

"You've been a very naughty girl. Playing with things like that could get you and your friends into very serious trouble, and neither the General nor I would be able to help you." Therese felt herself turning red and said nothing.

"Very well-this time. Now, the General is hosting an evening of cards in the club tonight. Bridge and canasta. I think it's probably better if the girls don't play, but they'd better all be there to serve drinks, and console us if we lose. Can I invite you?"

"Invite me to my own club? Of course. I know the Count has some card tables somewhere. I'll see if I can get them. Anything else you need?"

"No. Just your lovely self. I'll see you tonight."

The General's evening started early. He commanded that all drinks should be put on his bill, and play commenced. The players drawn to bridge concentrated fiercely on their play and rarely looked at the girls. Elsewhere things were more relaxed, and as the noise and frivolity increased, the girls became busier running to and fro to the bar. They also started to disappear off to their rooms.

Therese rested her chin on her hand and was watching the fun from the other side of the bar when a shout of female rage echoed down the corridor. The noise in the club stopped instantly, and they heard the sound of a door being flung open. Footsteps ran down the corridor. Lieutenant Nielsen burst into the room. He was completely naked, and his erect pole lashed from side to side as he ran. Behind him came his nemesis. Maria, equally naked, was running behind him and beating him with the heel of her shoe. Her breasts swung wildly as she struck him about the shoulders, and her face was contorted in fury.

Nielsen looked quickly around him and disappeared down the stairs. Maria stood in confusion in the middle of the room.

"Maria!" shouted Therese. "Go to your room this instant!"

She looked at Therese, and then turned to run away. The silence in the club carried on for a beat, and then disappeared in a wave of laughter. Therese could not comprehend what she had seen or the mayhem she saw

now. People were rocking in laughter and holding their stomachs in pain. Even the General was roaring.

Mefist staggered up to her. "Therese, you have to tell us what happened. Please..."

Therese knocked on Maria's door and went in. She was sitting on the bed crying. Lieutenant Nielsen's clothes were draped over the chair, and his boots stood neatly below them. Therese sat beside Maria and put her arm around her.

"Tell me what happened."

"He tried to put it in the wrong place," she sobbed. "He was a bit drunk. We were just doing it normally, and he took it out and tried to put it in the wrong hole. He hurt me!"

"What? Oh, poor Maria. Why did he do that? Was it an accident?"

"No," she said, still crying. "I tried to stop him, but he just kept pushing. I feel so ashamed..." and she dissolved in more sobbing.

Therese's temper rose. Maria was one of her girls; how dare Nielsen do such a thing to her? What was wrong with him anyway, wanting to do such a filthy thing? She patted Maria on the shoulder and went back to the club. Everyone waited expectantly, but Therese spoke only to Mefist, and in a low voice.

To her surprise, her story only broadened his smile. "That Nielsen!" he said. "His father was a diplomat and sent him to one of those terrible English schools. That's where he got a taste for bottoms. I'm glad to say he's discovered women now and given up boys, but it looks as if he still likes a bit of variety. How's Maria?"

"Alright, I think. More surprised than hurt, but she feels terribly ashamed."

"I should imagine she is surprised if she's never done it before. Never mind; come and tell the General."

The General laughed at the story, confusing Therese even more, and then he asked for Maria to be brought to him. Therese went to lead her out.

Maria did not want to come. She was frightened and embarrassed, and insisted on washing her face and repairing her make-up. Therese led her by the hand but pushed her through into the club in front of her. The room erupted in cheers and clapping. Maria's face went bright red. The General gestured her over.

"Well, my dear. Am I safe? I suppose so, because you have your shoes on your feet again. Oh, don't look so embarrassed. I haven't laughed so much in years. Come and sit on my knee and tell me how to play my cards. Therese, could we have a drink for Maria? What would you like?"

By the time Therese had returned with Maria's Tokay, she looked happy again. Her ample bottom was parked on the General's lap, and the two of them were attempting to play cards.

"Well, what do you think, Therese? Did you know you had such a little wildcat in your nest? If she weren't so useful here, I'd sign her up as a sergeant. She'd soon frighten the men. Now, what are you going to do about her? I can't have her savaging my officers. She'll have to be punished."

"But, General, the man tried to...."

"Therese! I'm surprised at you! Arguing with a General officer. I don't know what the Imperial Army is coming to. No, leave her to me." Without letting Maria off his knee, he tapped the table. "Gentlemen, a moment please. After dinner on Sunday. All officers to be present in the mess to witness punishment. You too, Therese, and all the girls. That's all; carry on."

He gave Maria a squeeze. "So, my dear. Do you think you could visit me tomorrow afternoon?"

"Well, I could, General, but Major Lamoreaux did ask me to go for a walk tomorrow."

"And you'd rather be with him than an old man like me, I suppose."

"Of course not, General. I'm sure he won't mind."

"No, no, my dear," he said, patting her bottom. "I wouldn't want to deprive the Major, but do put yourself on the list to visit me again as soon as possible. Try not to damage any more of my officers. Now step down and let me try and play my cards. I shall see you on Sunday evening. I think I shall enjoy it—but I don't know if you will."

Therese felt worried enough to go looking for Mefist on Sunday. She caught up with him in the refectory.

"Mefist, you've got to help me. What's going to happen tonight?"

"Don't worry, my dear. It's easy. All the officers meet for dinner and when we've eaten the best that Montebello can provide, and drunk the cream of your cellar, we'll send up for you. You come down with Maria and all the rest of the girls, and the General will ask a few questions and decide how Maria should be punished. That's all. It's really very simple."

"I don't know what we are meant to wear."

"Oh, something a little formal I suppose. We'll all be in our dinner uniforms. Even Drazevich, because the General ordered him to get one."

"And that's all?"

"Yes, that's all. What else can I do for you?"

"You haven't been to visit me for a long time," she pouted.

"You've been so busy recently, and I thought you had a visitor, anyway."

She glowered at him. "Mefist, you promised to take care of me. You're the only one I can talk to about important things. Come and visit."

"Would it be worth my while?"

She bit her lip. "Alright, I'll take my dress off again. Will you come?"

"In that case, I'll definitely consider the idea. Not tonight, of course."

"Really, Mefist! I thought you came for my company, not just to leer at my body."

"Oh, I come for both! I come to see you, and the more I see, the happier I become."

That evening found Therese waiting with the girls in the quiet of the club. They had all dressed in their Sunday clothes and had done their best with hair and makeup to make themselves presentable in the officers' mess.

They were nervous, and none of them had felt much like eating. Eight o'clock had already past and no one had come for them. Time crept by until at last they heard Mefist's voice calling.

He looked cheerful and well-fed. "Come on, girls. Don't keep the General waiting!" He whispered to Therese as they hurried past, "What have you done with them? They could go to church dressed like that. Oh, well. It's too late now; we'll wait and see what the General says. Now, give me a moment to sit down, and then file in. You and Maria stand at the front, facing the General. The others can fan out on either side."

He pushed through the door. Therese waited a moment and then steered Maria to the door and stepped inside.

The room looked crowded and smoky. The long tables had been arranged on three sides of the room and were covered with bottles and glasses. The General sat in the centre of the top table. The girls arranged themselves in a line facing the General, looking across the empty court in the middle. Therese looked left and right. They stood demurely with their hands held together in front of them. She raised her eyes and looked nervously at the General. He raised a knife to tap on an empty glass.

"Silence, gentlemen. We are gathered here to witness punishment arising from the disgraceful incident that occurred in the club on Friday night. The two people concerned are present, so we'll start immediately. Lieutenant Nielsen! Front and centre!"

Nielsen squeezed himself behind the chairs of his colleagues and came to stand at attention in the centre. Therese was pleased to see that he looked nervous, but she still had a little sympathy for him.

The General had some papers in his hand. He set his glasses down and addressed Nielsen.

"Lieutenant Nielsen, I have your charge sheets in front of me. They are confusing, but that's life in the Army for you. Can't make head or tail of them." His manner surprised Therese. The old man behaved as if the matter was not serious, but he had gone to the trouble of setting up this court... He started to speak again. "The charges seem to come down to two major military offences. Firstly, navigation. You are charged with losing your way. What do you have to say for yourself?"

What was the old man talking about? Was he referring to some other incident? Had Nielsen got lost on patrol?

"Beg pardon, Your Honour. The charge is incorrect. I was just a little undecided on the direction I wanted to take."

"Undecided, eh? Oh dear. That makes my task very difficult. Let me demonstrate this point of military law. Suppose an officer has been commanded to charge the enemy to the left and, without wishing to disobey orders, he charges to the right. A case like this is simple. He has taken the wrong direction; he is lost and an idiot. Quite possibly a dead idiot. However, if the officer has no orders and, indeed, is not certain himself about the direction he should choose to go in, then he cannot fairly be said to be lost. Merely undecided. So we can imagine Lieutenant Nielsen standing at a fork in the way, trying to make up his mind what to do. Lieutenant Nielsen might choose to go up or perhaps to go down, so what shall we say?"

The officers were muttering to each other and laughing.

"Very well. Lieutenant Nielsen, can I take it that, faced with a choice of directions in which to proceed, you had not finally made up your mind which to choose? Very well. Charge dismissed!" He slipped one of the papers over to Mefist.

"Now, I'll move on to the second, more serious charge. Gentlemen, getting lost is a very serious thing. You might fail to find Brigade HQ and inadvertently miss your evening meal. You could wander into the front lines and be taken prisoner by the enemy or worse. However, it is the nature of our work as field officers to be lost on occasion. It has happened to us all, even to me when I was younger.

"However, a thing that has never happened to me or, I trust, to any of you, has now been charged against Lieutenant Nielsen. Nielsen, what branch of the service are you commissioned into?"

"The Artillery, Your Honour."

"And at the Academy you have been taught all there is to know about the care and maintenance of our big guns?"

"Yes, Your Honour."

"Then why are you brought before me on a charge of having kept your weapon inadequately greased? Eh? Answer me!"

A wave of laughter swept around the table. Even from behind, Nielsen radiated embarrassment. "Er, I have no defence for my, er, neglect, Your Honour, but I regret it deeply."

"Very well. I shall not expect to hear a second complaint. Now what punishment shall I impose? Captain Mefist?"

"I believe some perfume would be appropriate, Your Honour."

"Very well, Nielsen, you will present the lady concerned with a large bottle of perfume."

"And chocolates!" shouted someone.

"And a large box of chocolates—"

"And stockings!"

"And six pairs of the finest stockings you can acquire from Vienna! There, that should make you think next time. Dismissed!" Lieutenant Nielsen wheeled and marched off.

"Now the most serious charge of the evening. Assaulting an officer of the Imperial Army and attempting to inflict grievous bodily harm using an evening shoe. Will the accused and her superior officer please step forward?"

Therese touched Maria's elbow, and they both stepped forward.

"Madam Therese!" the General said severely. "What do you mean appearing before me improperly dressed? Eh? This is not a church or a mothers' meeting. I do not expect girls to appear in the officers' mess wrapped in enough clothes to brave the Arctic. Go and get changed immediately, and take your girls with you." Therese bit her lip and ran.

They all rushed up stairs in confusion. "What does he want, Mistress? How shall we dress?" they asked.

"Quick, get into your working clothes. And-and I don't know. Get changed anyway." Therese threw off her dress and re-arranged her hair. She was wearing nothing more than stockings and suspender belt and her jewelry. What else could she put on? She looked in the cupboard and pulled out her nun's cape. It was a formal garment, little used. Black, with a hood, and held together by a hook at the neck. She threw it over her shoulders and looked into the mirror. Her body disappeared into the shadows, but when she moved, the cape opened provocatively. She tried folding the sides back over her shoulders. It pulled a little at her neck, but the pose displayed everything she had. She rushed out to tell the girls.

They knocked at the mess door and waited. The door opened and they passed in. The men gave a light smattering of applause and murmurs of approval as they arranged themselves in front of the court. Then, taking their

timing from Therese, they folded the sides of their capes back. This time the applause was overwhelming, and the General smiled.

"Will the accused and her superior officer please step forward? Maria, you are charged with attacking Lieutenant Nielsen with an evening shoe. What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Please, Your Honour, he hurt me."

"That's no excuse! He has told us himself that he was just a little bit lost and had neglected to grease his weapon. Nothing more than that."

"But, Your Honour—"

"Madam Therese, tell the accused to hold her tongue."

"Maria, hold your tongue!"

"Yes, Mistress," she said in a hopeless voice.

"Very well. The charge is admitted. Now—how shall you be punished? What would you say, Mefist? A hundred? Would that be enough?"

"Your Honour, she's a very small girl, and her dupka is not very large either."

"Mmh. I see. Perhaps fifty, then. What do you say?"

Therese spoke up for her, "Your Honour, she has a delicate constitution, and if her dupka is too severely punished, she might not be able to perform her duties. I believe she has an appointment with you tomorrow afternoon." The tables erupted with laughter.

"Very well. That is something I shall have to bear in mind, but all the same, I shall insist on a good dozen. Lamoreaux, have you brought your whip?" Lamoreaux passed his riding crop along the table to the General. He slapped it into his palm. It made a sharp crack, and Maria cringed. "Very good, Lamoreaux, but I don't know how you'll get her to forgive you." More mocking laughter from Lamoreaux's colleagues.

He passed the riding crop to Therese. "Very well, Therese. Get on with it."

"Me?"

"Of course you. Who else? Or do you think Maria would prefer me to do it?"

"Please, Mistress, you do it. I'd be frightened of anyone else."

"Give me your cape, Maria," she whispered. "I'll try to be gentle." She took the cape and handed it to the nearest girl. Maria's eyes shone wet and

Therese felt for her, but she turned her around until her back faced towards the General and prepared to strike.

"Stop!" called the General. "That's not good enough. Get a chair or a stool for her."

They brought a dining chair for Maria. She grasped the back of it and bent forward, pushing her bottom towards the General, but still he was not happy. "Not good enough. Get her something to bend over."

"Excuse me, Your Honour, I know just the thing," said Mefist. "Give me a hand, Jadrovski."

They came back with a large and heavy coffee table, solid oak, from the General's office. They removed the chair and placed the table in the centre of the room. Therese did not understand what they intended until Mefist said, "Kneel on it, Maria."

Maria clambered onto the table and stopped on all fours. Her bottom was on display. To Therese she looked attractive in her helplessness. The men admired her rounded figure and her plump breasts hanging down below. Therese remembered how Wanda had forced her to display her bottom to Mefist and knew what to do. "Put your head down, Maria. Rest it on the table."

Maria pushed her elbows outwards and lowered her face to rest on the backs of her hands. She disappeared behind the curtains of her dark hair. Her back dipped and climbed up to the summit of her bottom, tight and round, with the pink of her sex protruding below its dark furrow. Therese was surprised to see the pink frills were wet and shiny. She looked at the General. "Perfect," he said with a smile.

"Your Honour," called Mefist. "Madam Therese is not properly dressed."

Oh God help me, she thought, what does he want this time? She reached for the fastening of her cape and passed it back. Being ordered around by these men was beginning to make her cross.

"That's better," said the General. "Now off you go. A dozen of the best!"

She looked at Maria's bottom and suddenly started to blame her. If Maria had not lost her temper, if she had just behaved like a lady, they would not all be here, taking part in this farce. She raised her arm and swung it gently against the white mound below her. "Oh!" squeaked Maria in surprise.

"One!" shouted the men.

"Stop!" shouted the General. "What are you doing, Therese? If you don't whip her properly, you're next, and I shall claim the privilege! Try again."

Therese lashed out quickly. "Oh!" cried Maria, and she immediately felt guilty. She had not intended to hit Maria quite so hard.

"Two!" shouted the men. She struck again.

There were three pink stripes on Maria's bottom. Therese looked at them in horror. She tried to lay the fourth one a bit lower. She felt a little more confident now and continued. Maria had stopped squeaking, but Therese could hear her crying, and she hurried through the rest of the strokes.

As the count reached twelve, the General shouted for them to stop. Therese stood, crop in hand, uncertain of what she should do next. The General worked his way out from behind the table and came to stand next to Maria. He made a show of inspecting her bottom and then walked around the table to inspect the other side. He reached out and smoothed it with his hand. "White and pink and very pretty. Well done, Madam Therese. What does the accused have to say for herself?"

"Maria?"

"Please, Mistress, I'm very sorry," she said without raising her head.

"She says she's very sorry, Your Honour."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it. Now up you get." He took her by the arm and helped her up onto her knees. "Oh dear, your eyes are wet. Here..." He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and, reaching his arm around Maria's shoulders, he gently cleaned her eyes. "There you are! Now come and sit on my knee. You too, Therese. Mefist is waiting for you. Gentlemen, you may take care of the rest of them." As Therese followed Maria and the General behind the tables, the girls were laying their capes on the floor and choosing a lap to sit on.

Therese came uncertainly to Mefist. She wished she had not come by order, or that they were in the privacy of her office, but there was no help for it. She settled into his lap with his arm comfortably around her hips. It

felt good, and she enjoyed the smooth cloth of his dinner uniform against her bare skin. Mefist felt strong and smelled excitingly male.

Maria was already happy on the General's knee, chattering and sharing his glass. Thank God the punishment seemed to have done her no harm. Therese put her arm around Mefist's shoulders to steady herself and reached for his glass.

"Do you mind, Mefist? What are you drinking?"

Mefist did not answer. She looked down at him and realized that he was staring at her breasts, only centimetres away. Her stomach jumped. "Stop it, Mefist! You're meant to be talking to me, not staring like that."

"I can't help it, my dear. They're so beautiful, and they're standing up! Look! Therese, my dear, I think our little bit of theatre has left you feeling excited. In fact, I bet you are leaving a wet patch on my trousers right now."

"No!" she cried. "It's not true!"

"I'm sure it is, my dear. Can you see?"

She rocked back and opened her legs. Between her thighs the petals of her sex shone brightly against the dark uniform on which she sat. She pressed her fingertips onto her mound and pulled up so she could look further around the corner. The pink folds opened and stuck out further. She was wet and shiny, but that came from sitting naked on Mefist's lap. She looked lower for a wet patch on his trousers. Mefist was looking too, his head close to hers.

"Captain Mefist!" called the General. "What are you two looking at? Is it something you should share with the rest of us?"

Therese jerked up in surprise and slapped her legs together. Her ears burned, and she knew she was blushing fiercely.

Mefist rose to the question. "Excuse me, Your Honor, we were just carrying out a routine equipment inspection." A roar of laughter came from the tables, this time including the girls' voices.

"I trust everything is in good order? Polished? Well-oiled?" More laughter.

"Your Honour, I'm pleased to say that the equipment is of the very best quality and in excellent condition." This brought cheers as well as laughter, and Therese grew even more embarrassed.

The General raised his glass, and above the noise he shouted a toast. "Gentlemen, I propose a toast to Madam Therese's equipment. May it

continue to delight her and her friends for many years into the future." The toasts were drunk to happy shouts of "Madam Therese's equipment!"

The General stood up. "Now, gentlemen, it's time to draw a close. Major Lamoreaux, take this young lady away and tend her wounds. I suggest you rub cold cream gently into the affected area. Captain Mefist, if you can tear yourself away from the admiration of Therese's equipment, I have a couple of things in my office we should attend to before we turn in. Goodnight to you all."

### Chapter 26

Therese walked with Mrs. Orlova down to the wagon park. Old snow was piled high on either side where the road had been cleared. Having large numbers of soldiers available for snow clearing was a welcome luxury in winter. Therese enjoyed being outside again now the snow had stopped and felt happy to escort Mrs. Orlova. Of course, it also gave them a chance to talk freely.

"So tell me, how is Jana?"

"Oh, she's well, and old Krausov too. They're both worried about Rado, of course." She waved at the forest. "It must be terrible in the forest at the moment. What does he eat?"

"Don't worry about it. No explanations. Just don't worry and tell the Krausovs not to worry either. He's fine and he's going to stay fine."

"But how do you know, Ma'am?"

"I told you, no explanations. I'm completely sure there's nothing to worry about. After you get that list down to the village, he may have company soon. That'll make for a better Christmas, won't it?" Tucked into her underwear, Mrs. Orlova had a carbon copy of a list that Timko had typed out, obtained by Maria in circumstances Therese did not want to think about. The Office of Army Recruitment had finally got themselves organized and sent the names of young men to be called into the Army. Drazevich would receive the list tomorrow, so time would be limited.

"What about the rest of the village? What's the news?"

"Well, I can't say things have changed much, really. Now the soldiers have settled in, everyone seems to be getting along. Oh, I forgot to tell you. Jana sends her love and asks if she could visit, along with her friend Rebecca. Shall I tell her it's not suitable?"

Not suitable? she thought, not suitable? "I suppose you're right, but then again, I don't suppose you feel uncomfortable, coming in the afternoons as you do."

"Well, perhaps that's right, Ma'am. No one's come chasing after me, worse luck!" She gave a shriek of laughter at the thought. "I suppose she could tell old Krausov she was meeting you in the library or somewhere. That'd set his mind at rest, especially now that Rado's sent word that everyone was to look out for you. When should I tell her?"

Leaving her at the wagon park, Therese walked on towards the cart track along the top of the meadow. The snow lay thick here, and her only way forward was to follow the ski tracks made by the daily patrols. It was hard going, as even on the ski trail she sank to her calves. She struggled on to the shrine that marked the corner of the meadowlands. The statue of Our Lady stood mantled in snow and ice, but her painted face peeped out and solemnly watched Therese. A sudden spurt of guilt filled her. What would Mary make of her now?

Everything had seemed so clear when she had started out down her current path. None of them had had the slightest inclination to accommodate the Army. If some way had been found of importing women from Vienna or Budapest, the girls would still be nuns, and Therese would still be their Mother Superior. And probably not feeling a great deal differently about themselves. None of the girls behaved like sinners; you could see that they had nothing on their consciences from the way they worked and the way they enjoyed themselves doing normal things all day. Therese felt differently. She bore some of the responsibility for the situation, and she had a nagging feeling that she should feel more guilty.

She supposed the truth was that she did not seem to be doing any harm. The girls were happier than they had ever been as nuns. She had never seen Maria more alive and full of spirit. Everyone acknowledged her as the club's most skillful lover, and she never wanted for a client. The younger girls liked her too, and would always take their problems to Maria before coming to Therese. How could giving anyone that sort of happiness be so very sinful?

Her personal conscience had also proved remarkably elastic. She knew that making love with Wanda or Rado was wrong, but if that was true, why did it feel so nice at the time? It still felt good afterwards. Surely evil should make her feel bad and dirty. A few nights ago she had attended a dinner party dressed only in stockings and jewelry, but she did not feel sullied by the experience. She had enjoyed it, and enjoyed sitting on Mefist's lap afterwards.

She looked again at the gentle statue. Why, she asked herself, was the Church so interested in how she amused herself? It had no such strictures about eating and drinking. Senior churchmen were famous for knowing their way around the pleasures of the table. It had no strictures against sport or riding. Why on earth should they be so interested in sex? What difference could it possibly make whether Therese wore her knickers or not? She blamed the old men who ruled the Church, but it really worried her that by rejecting their foolish ideas about sex, she might be chipping away at the foundations of her belief in the hierarchy itself.

The old men were less important than the statue in front of her, she decided. Forget them, and concentrate on the good, kind and gentle message of her religion. She bowed her head and prayed for a moment.

Before she could start down the hill, whoops and shouting came from above. Two soldiers slid into view, crouched over their skis and racing each other despite the rifles and equipment slung around them. They swung uphill and skidded to a halt, laughing and mocking each other's performance.

It was the daily patrol coming home. Behind them, scattered disgracefully but coming as fast as they could, the rest of the patrol filled the slope. In the middle of the bunch came Sergeant Grossner, a little stiff and upright but in perfect control of his skis.

Therese caught up with him as he took off his skis. His face shone red, and his breath steamed. "Good afternoon, Your Honour. You're taking your walk?"

"Yes, Sergeant, but I must say you seem to be having much more fun on your skis."

"I love it, Your Honour. My family comes from Tartry, and we're born on skis, so they say."

"I'm jealous. Could you teach me how to do it?"

"Why certainly, Your Honour, but you should try the Prince. He's a devil on skis. He skied for the Army and won some cups, I believe. There

was some talk of him going on to the Olympics, but he said he preferred wine and women, so I'm told."

"I'd rather surprise him," she said.

"Very well, Your Honour; if you can find yourself some skis, we'll see what we can do. Beg pardon, Your Honour, I'd better attend to my young idiots." The soldiers were whistling at the last of their companions sliding carefully in, and Sergeant Grossner strode amongst them, shouting and getting them into line.

Therese went straight to Timko's office and placed a call to Wanda.

Mefist came to visit her that night. She was glad to see him and reached for a bottle of champagne, but he reached out to stop her.

"Wait a minute, my dear. Something's come up." He looked a little drawn and worried. "Look at this." He passed over a telex message.

Below the identifying codes and direction, the message said,

Your command area to forward to OIC Railway Detachment Szeged 100 conscripted labourers. Duties will be track maintenance. Men to bring boots and warm clothing as these not available Szeged. Food and accommodation will be provided. Draft to report Szeged before 15 December.

"What does this mean? Where's Szeged?"

"It's a railway junction in southern Hungary, I think. Or is it in Slovenia? Probably Hungary; that doesn't look like a Slovenian name. Anyway, we'll have to round up a hundred men and ship them south. That's on top of the conscripts that have just been called up. I hate it when the government does things like this. If only they'd conscript the men properly, send them a telegram or an official letter. Then people might hate the government. This way, they just hate the Army—and we're within rifle shot."

Therese's mind raced. "Mefist, when are you going to do this?"

"Well, I don't know yet. This has just come from the signals room. The General hasn't seen it yet."

"If you could give me a day or so, I could take some of the sting out of it, I think. Tell me, would the men be safe down there?"

"I should imagine so. There's no fighting within hundreds of kilometres and anyway, railway labourers don't get involved in any shooting."

"What would happen if any of the Army conscripts got accidentally sent to Szeged instead?"

"Therese, you are a genius. Take me to your office and we'll talk about the details."

Excitedly, she drew off her dress and hung it in the wardrobe. She patted her hair back into place and hurried to the chaise longue. Mefist was pouring the champagne. He waved her over to the desk. "No, not there. Come and sit on my lap again. We have to talk business."

She went to him as he sat on her office chair and stopped just out of reach. "No touching, Mefist. You've got to promise me. Looking's bad enough, but definitely no touching."

"Yes, Your Honour, no touching it is. Now come around here and sit down."

She settled herself comfortably on his lap with her arm around his shoulders. He raised his glass to her. "Here's to the beautiful Therese and her beautiful equipment!"

"Stop it! And it's not beautiful anyway. It's just—it's my thing, that's all. Don't talk about it; it's not polite. Now, where are these railway men going to be conscripted?"

"I haven't thought about it yet. I suppose I could borrow an office at the railway station. Would that do?"

"Yes. That would be very convenient. Now, when does Drazevich get the list of Army conscripts?"

"Why am I beginning to suspect you know more about this than you should, my clever little girl? We were planning to give it to him tomorrow. I see what you're aiming at. Perhaps if I can promise the General a peaceful life on the one hand, with all the young firebrands working safely on the railways far away, or forests full of discontented partisans on the other, he might be inclined to sit on the list of conscripts. I know what we can do. We can get Timko to print up an official letter form. That should take a couple of days, and then he'd have to fill in all the names—another day. Then it's the weekend—another two days—and the General will have to sign them—yet another day. Is that enough for you?"

"That's plenty. I'll go down to the village tomorrow to buy some ribbon and spread the word. When will you set up the office in the railway station?"

"I'll get Timko down there tomorrow afternoon, say between three o'clock and five o'clock, and the same the next day. Get your men to come in and tell some of them to sign with a slightly different name. Change their

Christian name or use their middle one. Then if anyone in Vienna's trying to follow the paperwork, they won't know who's who. They'll just get confused and give up. If we can get the men signed up, I'll send a partial draft on Monday. Then when Drazevich goes around next week, everyone can just shake their heads and say perfectly honestly that their sons have gone off to work on the railways. They'll even have an official receipt to prove it."

"The village doesn't realize how lucky they are to have you here, Mefist."

"They don't realize how lucky they are to have *you* here, but I do. God, your breasts are beautiful. Do they drink champagne?"

"I don't know. Try and offer them some."

Mefist pressed the rim of his glass to the base of her left nipple and tipped it gently until the champagne splashed her. It tickled and made Therese laugh. "Perhaps it's not thirsty."

"I'll try the other one."

Therese watched as the pale golden liquid rose to lap her nipple. It looked and felt delightfully naughty, and the little button tightened and stood out in anticipation.

"No, not thirsty," said Mefist. "Never mind, there'll be more for us. Oh look, they're wet. May I lick them dry?"

"Certainly not! No touching, remember? Still, since you've been kind to them..." She carefully wiped her nipple dry with her finger and gave it to him to lick. "Nice?"

"Magic-but what about your 'equipment'? Does it drink champagne?"

"Certainly not!" She leant forward so her equipment was tucked further underneath her. "I felt a complete idiot the other night. I don't know what came over me, letting you look at me like that when everyone else was there."

"It was very, very pretty," he said wistfully. "Can I look now, when there's no one else here?"

"No!" she said sharply, and then relented a little. "Do you really think it's pretty?"

"Of course. It's very pretty. Gorgeous, in fact, and tasty. I can vouch for that. Don't you think it's pretty?"

"Of course not! It's just me; it's just my thing. How could I think it's pretty?"

"Why not? You know your face is pretty, and your breasts, and your figure. Your legs are elegant and your dupka is very desirable. Why shouldn't your little flower be pretty?"

"I don't know. I suppose I've never really looked at it, and I've never seen anyone else's. Except the girls', of course, and I suppose they might be quite pretty. I was a bit surprised that they're all different, but I suppose that's natural when you think about it. Come to think of it, Agata showed me hers just after the General had her for the first time, and it was pretty in its own way. Prettier than mine, anyway."

"Can't say I've studied Agata's with the same devotion as yours, but I seem to remember that yours is much nicer."

"Mefist, you're crazy," she said, but something inside her appreciated his compliment. "I'm sure you've forgotten what it looks like anyway."

"You could refresh my memory. Please? I promise not to touch."

She thought about it. She liked Mefist; in fact she was growing more and more fond of him every day. Something inside her *wanted* to show him because it felt nice to be admired, especially by Mefist, and besides, what harm could it do?

"You have to promise me you won't touch. I think I might go crazy if you did, and then anything could happen."

"What a delightful thought! Anyway, I'll promise. Look but don't touch."

Therese shuffled forwards a little and leant back, supported by his encircling arm. "Show me," he whispered. They looked down between her closed thighs. The vee of her dark hair pointed down to her closed, fleshy lips. The tight furrow between them disappeared out of sight. "Show me," he whispered again.

She tried to open her legs, but the desk stopped her. Slowly she lifted her foot and rested it on the desktop. Mefist dipped his hand under her other thigh, lifting it up to rest across his chest. She was lying back, cradled by his arms.

At her centre they could see her pink inner lips twisted tightly together and reaching provocatively out beyond the tight cushions on either side. "It's beautiful! Show me more." Obediently she pressed two fingertips to the top of her furrow and pulled up. The movement opened her sex, and the petals of her inner lips fell apart. "Oh, so sweet!" he whispered. "How is your button?"

"My button?"

"Yes, your button. Your clitoris. How is it?"

"I don't understand."

"It's there, under that cover. Touch it. It should feel good."

She studied herself and moved her fingertip to the long cover that ran down from near the top of her furrow to the springing of her inner lips. She pressed it gently and felt a hard rib underneath. It felt good. "That's it. Is that good? Now rub it up and down a little."

"Ooh!" she moaned gently. "That is good."

"Try and pull the hood back, and your little button will pop out. Try it!"

Uncertainly she reached a little lower, pressed and pulled back. A pink pearl was uncovered at the top of her inner lips. "That's it," he whispered. "Touch it."

She moved her thumb to hold the cover back and brushed the pearl with her fingertip. "It tickles," she said.

"That's right," he said. "To start with it tickles, and then it wants more and more. Rub it up and down again."

She returned two fingertips to the cover and rubbed up and down. "Oh Mefist! That's exciting!" She continued to rub gently up and down. Her sex began to wake up and take interest in what was happening. She settled into a rhythm, and the two of them watched expectantly.

"Don't stop," he said, kissing her brow lightly. Her fingers built up excitement inside her. Mefist's head rested against hers as they watched together, and the feel and the scent of him filled her mind. Her red varnished fingernails moved firmly and inevitably in the groove of her sex. She knew she would carry on to the end.

She let her head fall back onto his arm but she did not stop. She rubbed faster now. Faster and harder. The pressure was building, building inside her, and she wanted to open her legs wider. She wanted to open herself completely to him, and she pressed outwards between the confines of his chest and the office desk. She was panting from her efforts and making little noises of frustration as she struggled to reach her goal.

He whispered to her, "You're so beautiful, darling. So sexy. Don't stop. Do it for me. You're wonderful, my love. Do it now. I love you, Therese. You're fantastic. Don't stop. Yes, you're coming, my love, you're coming. Don't stop. You're coming...."

"Aah!" she groaned and lifted her head to look at herself. Her hand flashed up and down between her open thighs. "Ooooh!" and she sought his lips. She crushed her mouth against his as her thighs slammed shut and her trapped fingers pressed deep into the folds of her sex. Her hips butted up and down as the spasms of her orgasm shook her. Mefist held her safely in his arms while she thrashed through her climax.

She came slowly back to consciousness. He was cradling her on his lap, one arm behind her and the other under her knees. She had slipped down, and her forehead nestled against his neck. "Oh Mefist. What did you do...?"

"Nothing, my love. You did it all, and you were wonderful."

"I went crazy."

"That's right. You lost yourself completely, and so quickly that I can hardly believe it. Did you enjoy yourself?"

"I want to do it to you!" she declared and tried to sit up.

"Oh no. No touching. Stop wriggling or I won't let you go. Stop it! That's better." He lifted her up and set her bottom on the desk. He pulled her feet towards him and set them on the chair, on either side of his hips. He was sitting between her stockinged knees, and he rested his arms on her thighs. He looked up at her. "Good?" he asked.

"Wonderful, but I want to do it to you now."

He smiled and reached up to brush hair from her cheek. "No. Not now—you're still crazy. It was enough for me to watch it happen to you. Do you still think your little flower isn't beautiful?"

"Well, it certainly knows how to do beautiful things. If you like it, I suppose that's enough." She looked down at him between her knees, smiling and happy. She reached out to stroke the side of his face and his neck.

"And how's it feeling, your little flower? Is it sore? Is it cheerful?"

She laughed at the idea. "It's very cheerful. Look!" No longer shy, she spread her thighs wide and rocked her hips back to bring her sex up into view. He had his hands on the insides of her thighs, and they stared together at the puffy pink lips unashamedly gaping at her centre. As they watched, a spasm ran through her sex, and she felt it lift up inside and relax again

happily. She could feel she was open to him, and she was sure that, down below where she could not see, he could look right up inside her. She reached back and lent on her hands. Her head was hanging back, her hair brushing her shoulders. "Please, Mefist..."

He was holding her knees apart and gently kissing the insides of her thighs. The pressure was building again and she was begging him to take her, to fill her and love her. "Aah!" she groaned as a wave rushed through her and she realised the begging sounded only in her head. "Please, Mefist..." she pleaded. His kisses nibbled up her thighs, coming nearer and nearer to her swollen, hungry, protruding sex. Another wave came. "Oh God, Mefist! Please!" At last he reached her; his breath was on her sex, his breath was driving her over the edge...

She was sitting over him. She had curled into a hard ball around him. She had taken her sex away from him, and with scissored legs, she held his head crushed between her knees. She had doubled over and pressed her face into his hair. Waves of ecstatic pleasure raced again and again through her sex as she squeezed and squeezed it beneath her.

She slowly realized that Mefist was stroking her back, moving his fingertips gently up and down her spine. She relaxed, collapsing softly as Mefist disentangled himself. He lifted her, bringing her feet up and laying her on the desk. She could feel papers sticking to her back. He put his hand behind her head and bent to kiss her lips. "Therese, my love, you are fantastic! I've never met anyone so talented at sex."

She felt weak and lost. Between her legs her swollen sex clenched languidly on itself. Her skin was glowing, and her arms and legs felt completely relaxed. She had no desire to lift herself from the desk.

"My God, Mefist, what did you do?"

"Not guilty, Ma'am, I might have breathed on it, but you snatched my dinner away before I could settle down to a good meal."

"It was wonderful. I've never felt anything like it. I must be crazy. I can't move."

He lifted her again and carried her to the chaise longue. Half-sitting, half-lying, sipping champagne, she slowly recovered. "I can't believe the girls do this every night."

Mefist laughed. "They don't, and just as well or they'd be worn out in a week. They have fun, but their customers are only customers, after all. The girls are not doing it to please themselves."

"Well, you certainly pleased me. Did you like it?"

Mefist laughed. "Oh yes. Definitely. I could watch that all night. More than you could possibly stand."

"But don't you want... You know what I mean."

"Of course, but not now. Maybe sometime in the future, when you're feeling better about the whole idea."

## Chapter 27

She took Jana with her to buy ribbons and threads for the girls. As they walked around the square, she explained about Mefist's requirement for railway workers.

Jana understood quickly. "That's excellent! I'll have to get the word around quickly. I know a lot of them were talking about going to the forest but, well, I don't think Rado would be happy to see some of them. We grow some real simpletons down here in the village. I must go and tell everyone."

"No, wait! Don't leave me. I haven't done my shopping yet. Come with me. The recruiting office won't be open until this afternoon anyway."

"Alright, but let's go to Mrs. Pankova first. Do you know her? Mrs. Orlova's sister? She's the most fearful gossip so if we let her know, I won't have to tell anyone else. Besides, she's a dressmaker. She might have ribbons and things she could sell. You should try her, Mistress, she's very good. I don't know if she could make the sort of dresses you must wear up at the castle, but she makes lovely petticoats and underthings. Last time I was there she was making a wonderful pair of French knickers from burgundy silk. Just like ladies wear, but she wouldn't tell me who they were for, which is unusual for her." A thought struck her. "They weren't for you, were they, Mistress?"

"No, definitely not mine." No, Jana, she thought, Mefist doesn't let me wear knickers, French or otherwise. You'd be surprised what this lady's wearing under her skirt. Just a tuft of hair and a big smile. A big *satisfied* smile, she corrected herself, mentally caressing the memory of Mefist last night.

They casually left their news with Mrs. Pankova, but she did not have ribbons to sell them. They went on to Isaacs's shop, an emporium of everything where ribbons could definitely be found. Rebecca hurried from behind the counter to meet them. At home she still wore an ankle-length belted dress, but her raven-black hair was uncovered and hung richly behind her in a loose tail tied with ribbons. "Servus, Ma'am, servus indeed!" She seized Therese's hands and started to kiss them.

"No – no, Rebecca! Stop!" She could not help laughing at the girl's enthusiasm. "It's not right-tell me, how are you? How's your father?" She took back one hand but left the other for the girl to hold.

"My father's in Switzerland, Ma'am."

"Call her Mistress, Becky—she's not old enough for Ma'am," chipped in Jana.

"He's in Switzerland, Mistress. With my mother, and he's left me with the shop."

"Very good, manageress. Can you show us some ribbons and pretty threads? My girls need them."

"Of course, Mistress, but first you must come inside and sit with me. Please come!"

She led them not to the comfortable sitting room that Therese had expected, but to a room almost completely filled by a long, heavy dining table. As Rebecca opened the curtains, the daylight fell on rich dark mahogany furniture. A brass menorah stood on the polished sideboard at the end of the room. An oil painting in the manner of the old Dutch masters hung opposite the window. The room had an air of loving care, and every surface was highly polished. Rebecca left for a moment.

"You don't mind coming here, Mistress?" asked Jana. "I mean, with Becky being Jewish and you a nun?"

"Mind? Why ever should I? Goodness me, Jana, think of where I work! Rebecca should be the one objecting, not me. Anyway, Jesus was Jewish, wasn't he?"

Jana opened her mouth in surprise, but nothing came out. Rebecca came in to sit with them, and Jana said, "Mistress just said that Jesus was Jewish!"

"Of course," answered Rebecca calmly. "Didn't you know?"

"No-yes-well, I suppose I did, but I'd never really thought about it. I'll bet that most of the village wouldn't believe it if you told them."

"Oh yes," Rebecca said casually. "Jesus is one of the great Jewish success stories..."

Jana swung a pretend slap at her. "Go on with you! Tell Mistress what your father's doing."

Therese interrupted, "I wish you two would call me Therese. All my girls have to call me Mistress. I love them, but I suppose they have to because I'm in charge. It would be nice to have some friends who call me by my own name."

"Therese," said Rebecca experimentally. "Well, if you don't mind, but my father would be very upset if he heard me."

"Mine too. He'd kill me."

"Well, just tell them I ordered it or something. Or just keep it for when we're together, if it's so terrible. Tell me about Switzerland."

"He's in Zurich, and he's written to tell me how everything is very modern and clean. You don't see any horses at all in the city centre, except for some that bring the beer to the restaurants, and even they are clean and have ornaments all over their harness."

"What's he doing over there?"

"I don't know exactly. He tells me all about the shop here and the money and licences and so on, but I don't know about the Swiss business. That's with my uncle, and I think it's all about money and banking. Apparently it's safer for Jews to keep money in Swiss banks. You never know what might happen to it here, and there's no one to take care of you if something goes wrong. Where do you come from, Therese?"

"Me? Oh, my family's mostly from Saxony, not so far from Dresden, but we have some really nice estates near Breslau and I was mostly brought up there."

"So why did you become a nun? I mean, didn't you want to get married and have a family?"

"Mmh. That's a difficult question. I know that when I got back from finishing school, my mother wanted to push me on to a judge. A judge! He seemed so *old*. I think he was about forty or so, but that seemed terribly old to me then. On top of all that, I was on the edge of disgracing myself with a very attractive young schoolteacher who had just arrived at the local gymnasium. I'm afraid my family thought he was most unsuitable. They were right, of course, but he had such beautiful, blue eyes.

"We had an awful row, Mother and I, and Father sent me here for two years, to grow up a bit more. So down I came, crying all the way of course, to be a temporary novice. One thing grew into another, and when the time came for me to leave, I decided to stay. Looking back, I'm sure behind it all

there was some wicked pride, and that's not a good reason to give up the world. Still, look at us now. The world's come chasing after me with a vengeance. I think Mother and Father were upset when I took my vows, but I can't imagine what they'll say when they hear what I'm doing now. I hope they'll try to understand."

"Will you be a nun again afterwards?" asked Jana. "I mean, when the Army goes. Will you be Mother Superior again?"

"I don't know. They ought to let me back again, but I'm afraid they won't be so forgiving. Actually, I'm finding that I don't really care very much. It was good being a nun, but there are many other people in the world who are good and useful. Being a nun is only one way to serve God."

"What about the girls? Will they be nuns again?"

"Really, I don't know. You know, I don't believe they'll stay. They've changed so much since they started working. They're happy, irresponsible, singing all the time. I think they'll all just go home and live a normal life. The oldest girl, she's a bit older than me, has already told me that she wants to have a baby of her own. She would like a husband, of course, but if she can't find one, she'll be happy just with a baby. So she definitely won't be a nun!"

Rebecca wrinkled her brow. "I just wonder what I'd be feeling now if you hadn't sent us away, Therese. All those men..."

It suddenly struck Therese that the girls wanted to talk about sex. Not about love or husbands, but about sex. About what it was like to be penetrated and filled by a hungry man, to be used for pleasure again and again to the point of satisfaction and maybe beyond. They thought Therese could reveal the secrets.

An old woman pushed open the door and came in carrying a tray with decanter and glasses, and a plate of delicate white wafers. "Here's the Tokay, Miss Becky, but I don't know what your mother would say..."

Rebecca took it in her stride. "Thank you, Miriam. Put it down here, and I'm sure she'd say that special occasions deserve Tokay!" The woman set the tray down with a bang and left, muttering to herself.

Jana looked at Therese with in impish grin on her face and started her giggling. "That girl!" said Rebecca, but she joined in the giggling.

They raised their glasses to each other. Therese knew the girls were feeling adult and sophisticated. They would not understand that the gift they were giving her was to make her feel herself again, like a free, young girl.

Mefist came bouncing into the club that night, happy and boisterous. "How are you, Therese? You look wonderful. Doesn't she look good, Maria?"

"You're right, Mefist. I don't know what you've been doing to her, although I can imagine, but her colour's up and her eyes are shining. You're not pregnant, are you, Mistress?"

"Maria! No! Don't wish that on me so soon."

"You're right, Mistress. I've been a nun a long time, and I'd like to do a bit of catching up before I settle down. This is certainly a good place to do that."

"You really surprise me, Maria," said Therese. "When we were nuns together, I never would have imagined you would be such a-such a-" Therese searched for a word that would not be rude.

"Such a star!" said Mefist. "You're a real star. Everyone wants you, all the time. If you were in business on your own account, you could retire by Christmas. I'm sure all the other girls are jealous. You must have a special talent."

"Flatterer! If I'm so wonderful, why haven't you taken me yet, Mefist?" "Yes Mefist! Why not?" demanded Therese.

"Maria, my dear, I'll tell you a secret. I'm afraid I'm not a very brave sort of man, and Therese here has threatened to claw the skin off my back if I even think about another woman. The other day I just mentioned that I'd seen a pretty girl down in the village, and you should have seen her! Dragons weren't in the race, believe me. She was breathing fire, and you could have cooked your toast from the other side of the room. I dream about you and your luxurious figure every night, but I'm not brave enough to try. Besides, she does take a lot of my energy. She's a very demanding lady."

"I believe you, Mefist. We couldn't help but listen last night...."

"Maria! How could you! Look, here's Major Lamoreaux. Run off and take care of him before I ask him for his riding crop and give your fat little dupka a real whipping."

"Certainly, Mistress. You know, Mefist, we could always do it one afternoon when she's out for a walk, you know. I can always fit you in."

"Cheeky little baggage! She was the nicest nun, you know. Quiet, pious and really compassionate. Now look at her, wiggling her dupka at everyone and having the time of her life. You can try her if you like, you know. I wouldn't mind."

"If I thought you really meant that, Therese, I'd jump off the battlements right now."

"Mefist, I never know when you're being serious or not. Did you mean what you said last night?"

"Of course! Every word. I'm hurt that you could doubt me, but did you mean what you said?"

"Me? What did I say?"

"Ah-ha! I suspected as much. All forgotten. You'd better ask Maria. She can probably jog your memory."

"Mefist, you drive me mad. Come to my office."

"No, not tonight, lover. The General is still working. I just came by to tell you that Timko signed up a lot of men this afternoon, and if it carries on like this, I'll probably have the draft made up by the end of tomorrow. Won't Drazevich be disappointed! Has he come in for Maria recently, by the way?"

"Oh, he still comes in. I don't think any of you men could resist the chance of Maria without charge, but he's not saying much to her. Perhaps he's not visiting his other lover anymore and he's just too hungry to sit down and chat. I hope he doesn't suspect anything, or Maria would be putting up with him for no reason. We'll try a bit harder to get him sitting and drinking next time. I'd like to know what he thinks of his little recruiting drive too."

# **Chapter 28**

Mefist caught her in the refectory. "Therese, why has Wanda sent me fifteen pairs of skis complete with sticks and boots? In very small sizes?"

"Oh damn! She was meant to send them to me. I wanted it to be a surprise."

"It was certainly that. Almost as much of a surprise as hearing Therese von Falberg using a bad word just now. So, what are you going to do with them?"

"I was going to ask Sergeant Grossner to show us how to use them. When he's off duty, of course. Then we can go for walks on them, when the weather's nice."

"Has she sent the right skis for that?"

"I don't know. The Sergeant said to ask for touring skis, so they should be right."

"You're always surprising me, Therese. You've been planning this, haven't you? Still, I don't know about the walks. There are probably deserters and partisans in the forest. It might be dangerous."

"I don't see why. If they don't shoot at your patrols, I can't imagine they'd shoot at us."

"I didn't think they'd be stupid enough to *shoot* you. I suppose I could always come along to make sure you didn't get into trouble. Let me speak to Grossner first; the weather's nice this afternoon." He turned to go, and Therese called after him.

"Mefist, did she send the jackets and trousers too?"

They came back from their first lesson tired and exhilarated. The girls rushed up the stairs, still wearing their boots. They were laughing and chattering like schoolgirls on a day trip. Their cheeks glowed red, their eyes shone, and they were a delight to be with. Mefist was waiting for her as she followed them up to the club.

"My dear, you look delightful. How was it?"

"Well, I think most of us found out that it's not as easy as it looks. My legs are tired, and my back and shoulders, but it was good fun anyway. I have to admire Grossner. He's very calm and completely immune to the girls' charms. They were fluttering their eyelids at him, but he just kept sending them round again and again and shouting at them to do it properly. He's a good teacher."

"Yes. Much better than me. I don't have the patience. Come down to the library with me."

"The library? Why the library?"

"Therese! Why do you always need to know everything in advance? Just come with me to the library and we'll sit and chat in front of the fire."

"But I have to get dressed..."

"You are dressed. Just take off your jacket. That's it. Now pull your shirttails out, that's fine. No shoes, those socks are good enough. Oh, alright, you can comb your hair, but nothing else. Let's go!"

"The General won't mind, Mefist?" she asked as he hurried her along.

"Mind? Why should he? It's your castle, after all."

"But I'm not dressed..."

"Oh, stop behaving like an old lady. Or I'll tell everyone what you're really like."

"Mefist..." she threatened, but they had reached the library. Sitting in front of the fire was the General, drinking tea and chattering to Jana and Rebecca.

"Therese, my dear. You've got visitors. We couldn't find you, so I've been keeping them company. Charming young ladies. Come and sit here." He patted the arm of his chair, but something made her push between his legs and sit on his knee.

"Rebecca, Jana. What a shame you didn't come earlier. We were having a skiing lesson. You could've joined in. How has the General been treating you?"

"Oh, he's very kind, Mistress. He's been taking care of us for ages."

"Kind? That's good; I don't think I'd trust him alone with young ladies like you normally. Isn't that right, General?"

"You always think the worst of me, Therese, my dear," he said, pretending sadness.

"Because you have a silver tongue. This old charmer has had a reputation for chasing ladies for the last fifty years." And he's still doing it, she might have added. "But we love him anyway. He's like a father to the girls and me."

The girls were relaxed and happy. They had imagined that generals were fire-breathing dragons, not kindly old men who could find time to drink tea with chance visitors.

"Therese, I had better get back to work. How are you going to send these young ladies home? I'd take them myself, but I don't think it would help their reputations to be seen getting out of an officer's car. Do you think you could go with them?"

"Believe me, being seen with me would be even worse for their reputations."

"Really? I am surprised. Aren't people strange? So, what are we going to do?"

"Get Mefist to borrow a nun. That'll solve the problem. Tell him to ask for Sister Alice or Sister Brenda. They won't mind helping out."

"That's the answer! There's no one more respectable than a sister from Montebello. They have a remarkable reputation."

"General—" threatened Therese.

"Now, my dear, move your charming dupka and let me go." He took the girls' hands. "Jana, Rebecca, I'm truly happy to have met you both. Come here whenever you can. Any time you visit Therese, I shall expect you to come to my office."

"Isn't he nice?" said Rebecca, after he'd left. "He's not at all what I expected."

"Yes, we're very lucky, but you be careful! He's a charming old devil and loves young girls. So how do you like our home?"

They looked around the library. "It looks very grand," said Jana. "I can't imagine normal people living like this."

"Well, we don't, really. No one lives like this anymore, not even the Count and his family. Times change, but it's nice to see, isn't it?"

"Where did they take us when we came here before? I can't recognize anything. I was too confused."

"Oh, you came to the club. That's upstairs. It's different now."

"Can we see?" asked Jana, and Rebecca wanted to return to the place as well.

Therese was doubtful. "But your fathers—what would they say if we went upstairs?"

"We won't tell them," said Jana.

When they first emerged from the stairwell, they did not realize they had arrived. The place looked so different, so homely. This was the comfortable time before the evening meal when the girls were free to sing or relax or sew, as the fancy took them. Dorota had taken over one of the tables for her scrapbook. Hollywood fascinated her, and she was cutting and sticking treasures from magazines into her collection. Beside the fire, Maria carefully stitched black lace onto something light and frilly; opposite her, Meike had her nose in a novel. Helena quietly practised on the piano.

"It's lovely!" whispered Jana. "It's so nice."

Their reaction surprised Therese. "I'd never thought of it that way. It's just where we live, I suppose. Come and meet the girls. What would you like to drink? The girls will be having coffee or soda because they're on duty soon. How about Tokay? I know you like that."

They liked each other. Therese left them chattering by the fire as if they had known each other for years.

"It was very different from anything I had imagined," said Rebecca as they went looking for Sister Alice. "It was homey and the girls were very, I don't know, I suppose educated is the word I'm looking for."

"Yes, I thought they'd be just, you know, sluts," added Jana. "Though I know that's stupid because they were nuns not so long ago."

"Yes, and if you think it's hard to believe," said Therese, "what about me? Mother Superior to bordello madam in one little jump. I still wake up wondering which one I am."

"Can we come again?"

"Of course. Come earlier and we can go skiing. Only bring trousers if you want to do that."

### Chapter 29

Therese woke early to knocking at her door. It was Timko with an urgent telephone call from Jana. Therese threw her dressing gown on and went to hear what Jana needed.

She was crying on the telephone. "Julius is dead. SekPol shot him near the cemetery. He was going to the forest with some others. They didn't want to work on the railway or go for a soldier."

"Who's Julius?" she asked.

"He was our friend. We went to school together. The policemen left him dead in the square with a notice around his neck." She cried some more.

The General called for Therese immediately after breakfast. "Sit down, my dear. Coffee's coming. Now, you've heard the news, I'm sure."

"Yes. It's awful."

"You once guaranteed that we would have partisans if we manufactured our own. After you said that to me, I've often thought about it, and worked against it. Only now, if we're unlucky, that damn fool Drazevich has managed to do it all alone. He left the body lying in the square, you know. With a notice around his neck saying 'Rubbish for collection.' How could he be so stupid?"

"General, I'm not sure he is stupid. I believe he knows exactly what he's doing. I think he's trying to take over. After all, if the valley stays quiet and honest, what need would we have of SekPol? He's cocking a snook at you."

"Do you think so? Really?" The coffee arrived, and he stirred his cup absently. "You could be right. Thank you, my dear. Your pretty head does more than hold up your hair. What can we do about him?"

"I don't know what you can do about Drazevich. Can he just shoot people like that? Is it legal?"

"Yes, my dear. There's a curfew. It's a military order, and the man was breaking it."

"I suppose you can't go against SekPol without some very powerful friends, but you could have an enquiry or something, couldn't you? Perhaps punish him for treating the body like that? It might slow him down a bit."

"We could do something, I suppose, but I don't think it would have much of a result."

"Perhaps that's less important than showing that you don't just accept what happened. It'd give me something to tell the village, no matter what came out of it. Better still if you send for a couple of villagers to give statements. They'd go back and tell their friends that we're not all like Drazevich up here."

"You're right, of course. The Army wouldn't lose anything by doing things correctly. I'm going to have to do some aggressive patrolling. Drazevich's report says there was a group of men, probably avoiding conscription. I can't just sit here while conscripts walk away past my front door. I've got my masters to answer to as well."

"What's Drazevich doing now?"

"I don't know, but I know what he's doing for the rest of the day. He'll be leading his band of valiant but overweight policemen in the forest. If he's going to make a lot of trouble for all of us, he can at least participate in sorting it out. Now, what can we do to calm down the village?"

"It will be very difficult, unless you're prepared to string Drazevich up in the square. Could you send Mefist to the parents and ask for permission to send a wreath? Even if they say no, at least it's a gesture."

"Yes, I can do that. I couldn't attend the funeral, not as General. The family would never accept it anyway; I know I wouldn't. You'd better go now, my dear. I've got to tear a strip off Drazevich, and then we'll start patrolling. Keep away from the forest until this is over."

The patrols came back in after dusk. The forest terrain was too dangerous for any more than standing patrols at night, and they would not help. Therese was eating soup and bread in the refectory when Mefist came in.

"It's been a wretched day. Drazevich must be the most unpopular person on earth tonight. I went down to see the boy's parents, those poor people. They were so lost but still trying to be polite. I don't know if they understood what I was saying to them. Then I had to spend the rest of the day standing over Drazevich. SekPol don't have skis, you know. They're

more used to creeping around city cesspits, but they had to go out and guard the forest edge. The Army was meant to be flushing the partisans out, and the police were meant to shoot them when they broke into the open fields. Absolute rubbish, of course. Anyone in the forest would only have to retreat uphill and we'd never know they were there, but we have to look as if we're doing something.

"And I lost a man. Shot, right in front of me. I couldn't believe it! The first casualty by enemy action we've taken since we got here. Tell me, would those men be hunters, do you think? What sort of rifles would they be carrying?"

"I'm sure anyone living in the forest is a hunter. A lot of the local men go hunting, mostly legally, but there's quite a few that can't afford the licence. I don't know what sort of rifles they carry, but they look very big and expensive. With telescopes on top."

"Well, that's what they used. It was good shooting. The sniper must have been holed up in the edge of the forest. We don't know how far away exactly, there is too much scrub around there, but it was a long shot. Just as the light was going. He must have waited until then so he could get away in the dark. Drazevich was shouting at his men, as usual for him, and he'd just turned on his heel to leave when the man he'd been shouting at was bowled over backwards. We all dived for cover. I got the men to put down some covering fire and we pulled the man in, but he was dead. No way to follow the sniper, not with good troops, let alone that bunch of fat incompetents."

"Do you think the sniper was trying to get Drazevich?"

"You know, it wouldn't surprise me at all. Do you think they'd know who he is?"

"Oh, the village knows Drazevich very well."

"Mmh. I think I'll warn him. It doesn't matter if it's true or not. At least the little sneak will be sweating cold tomorrow."

"You're going out again tomorrow?"

"Oh, yes. We'll be out tomorrow and probably the day after."

"Do be careful, Mefist. I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Don't worry. I'll probably be with the police again and we'll be very careful, and I certainly won't stand anywhere near Drazevich."

Mikhail sent a girl up to her office next morning to ask permission to come up. He closed the door and brought out a note from his pocket. It was on a piece of paper torn from a schoolbook, written in round pencil letters. It was dirty with mud and charcoal.

General Falk-Sokol, Imperial Army, OIC Montebello

Your Honour,

We would like to apologise to the family of the policeman killed yesterday. We were trying to hit the man responsible for Julius Ilkov's death. However, we are prepared to let one death pay for the other. Your patrols are free to use the southern slopes of the forest, keeping at all times to the forest tracks. We guarantee the tracks will not be ambushed or mined. However, away from the tracks there is no guarantee of safety, and we will fight to defend our home.

Yours respectfully, OIC Partisans, Krasna Dolina

The note had come from the forest. Therese could imagine Rado or one of the others writing in the dark of a brush shelter, keeping close to the fire for light. The fact that the note had reached the castle so quickly and openly horrified her. Mikhail waited for a reply.

"Don't ever do this again, Mikhail!" she said in a low voice. "It's too dangerous. Tell them everything has to be by word of mouth from now on. If you'd been caught with this, you'd be shot, but only after SekPol had got the names of all your friends out of you. Me, Maria, your granddaughter Tanya. It would be terrible!

"Listen carefully; here's the answer. Firstly, no more letters. Secondly, give me two peaceful days to talk to the General. Thirdly, don't provoke the General. He's a proud man and if he thinks it's his duty to hunt partisans, he'll do it until he drops dead. If Rado keeps quiet and behaves like a civilian who just wants to live and let live, then I think I can keep the General quiet. Have you got that?"

"Think so, Ma'am. No letters, two peaceful days, and don't provoke the General, live and let live like civilians."

"That's it. Now, why did you come here?"

"Why, to bring you the letter, Ma'am."

"No, Mikhail, you've always got to have a good reason to come and see me. In case anyone asks. Now I think you were going to ask me if you could take two days off duty because your wife's sick."

"But she's-I see, Ma'am. Yes, Ma'am, two days off would be very handy."

"Very good, and they won't come out of your pay. Now get along with you."

The General's office was unnaturally quiet, as most of the men had joined the search. He waved her into the soft chairs and came to sit with her. "It's a bad business, Therese. One man dead already, and it could be a lot more before this is all over. I wouldn't mind proper fighting—at least you know where you stand and who your enemy is—but this guerilla business, it's very bad for morale. You can be shot at any time, but there's never anyone there to shoot back at."

"General, can I talk to you in confidence?"

"You mean like the confessional? Of course, my dear. I think I might enjoy listening to your sins."

"No, General, this is serious. I had a message this morning, from the forest."

"What! How did they get in?" The General was shocked by her news.

"Never mind that," she said firmly. "Let me give you the message."

"Very well. I'm listening, but I don't know if I approve."

"General, they've sent apologies to the family of the man killed yesterday. They were trying to get Drazevich."

The General looked at her and started to turn red. He was about to explode at her but jumped to his feet and left the room. Therese sat in silence and waited.

He still looked agitated when he returned. "Pardon me, my dear. That was inexcusable."

"Not at all, General, I understand perfectly."

"Look, Therese, I am part of the Imperial Army and proud of it. Have been all my life; I was born in a garrison hospital, you know. I will not tolerate anyone shooting at my men or my officers, even officers like Drazevich. If I get my hands on the man responsible, he'll be brought before a tribunal and then taken out and shot. That's final! You can tell them that!

"Did they say anything else?"

"Yes, they passed on that any patrols on this side of the mountains that stay on the forest tracks will not be ambushed or mined. I don't think they want to fight, General. They wanted Drazevich because of the trouble he's been making down in the village and they know he was responsible for getting the young man shot. Apart from that, I understand they just want to keep out of your way."

"Keep out of my way, eh? That might be possible. Just between you and me, understand? No agreements, no writing or anything, and I'm not going to give up the search for that sniper. Well, not before the week-end, anyway."

Therese went to Timko's office. She wanted to call Mrs. Orlova to come up, and perhaps bring Jana with her.

She did not get an answer to the message Mikhail carried, but on Friday afternoon Major Lamoreaux's patrol returned without their officer.

#### Chapter 30

"But how did it happen, Mefist?"

They were in the refectory, having a late breakfast. "Well, it's stupid and that's why no one has told you yet. He'd eaten something that had upset his stomach and he was having to stop every now and then to take to the bushes. Well, they were about as far away as they had planned to go when he went off to the bushes again, but this time he didn't come back. The patrol waited and waited—they didn't want to disturb him at his business of course—but eventually they went to look and found he'd been taken, skis and all. The next man in the patrol was a corporal with the heart of a pussycat. He decided it was coming on to snow and getting dark, and he couldn't justify splitting up the patrol and sending some back, or risk having the whole lot of them blundering around in the forest at night. I suppose he was right; they were a very long way out, but it was downhill all the way back, so they could get back to the castle before nightfall. They apparently talked for a bit and then came home without the Major. What do you think they'll do with him?"

"I'm sure the first thing they'll do is put him on a diet. I should imagine food is rationed out there, but I don't think they'll hurt him. Just keep him prisoner, I suppose. I expect we'll hear something soon."

Mefist looked depressed. "I don't know what's happening. We're doing everything we can do to keep the peace, and every day brings something else destructive. I know just what the General's going to do now. Reconnaissance in force; whole area sweeps, and we'll just keep on until we find Lamoreaux or someone to kill. It's so stupid! The Coalition seems to be pushing us back in the south. We've got serious problems; the war's not going well for the Grand Alliance, and in Krasna Dolina we're going to be running around the forests wearing ourselves out chasing a few boy scouts. Damn it all! I'd better go. The General's holding a briefing, and then we'll

be on our way. It's going to be a hard day—snow shoes through the forests because we won't be able to use skis in the trees."

An air of impending misfortune hung over the castle all day. The club was very quiet in the evening with the girls in their rooms, or reading and chattering by the fire. For the first time there were no customers. Mefist dropped by to say good evening. He looked tired and, pleading an early start in the morning, he went off to bed after only a few minutes.

Again Therese was woken early by knocking at her door. Expecting more bad news, she wrapped her dressing gown around her and opened the door. Agata and Dorota were there. "Maria's gone, Mistress! She hasn't slept in her bed!"

The girls had all dressed and were waiting for her. She hurried to Maria's room. It was clean and neat. The bedclothes were tucked in with almost military smartness and gave no sign of anyone having used the room recently. She opened the cupboard. Again, very tidy. The drawers held Maria's lingerie and stockings. The bottom drawer had some neatly folded new linen and the chocolate, perfume and stockings she had received from Lieutenant Nielsen, all unopened.

"Who saw her last?" Therese asked, remembering that Maria had not been behind the bar in the evening. After a while, they decided she must have gone missing sometime in the afternoon.

Therese dressed and went to Timko. It did not take long before he found that Maria had been seen leaving the castle with her skis. She had said she was going for some private practice in the meadow by the wagon park. Therese hurried to the General.

"General, I'm sorry to trouble you at a time like this, but Maria's gone missing. She went out yesterday to practice with her skis by the wagon park, and she didn't come back. I'd like to take the girls and some foresters out to search for her around the castle grounds. With your permission of course."

"Maria? Oh, what terrible luck. You'd better hurry. She may be lying out there with a broken leg. God knows if she'd survive the night. I can't give you any men. They're all out looking for Lamoreaux. Therese, do not allow anyone to go into the forest. Do you hear me? No one into the forest, or we may have an unpleasant accident and find my men shooting at your people. Off you go, and keep me informed."

They met in the inner courtyard, the girls fully dressed and carrying their skis, the foresters and castle servants in thick clothes with the earflaps of their winter caps flapping loosely. She set the men to search the gardens and the slopes that ran down from the castle towards the village. She and the girls would cover the meadowland around and above the castle.

They carried their skis down to the edge of the wagon park and looked out over the meadows. The snow lay thick and heavy, unmarked since fresh falls had blanketed their practicing a few days earlier. Their best course was to search for Maria's trail. Leaving their skis standing in a snow bank, they circled the wagon park, looking for a single ski trail that might show that a small lady had come there to practice her shaky skiing. They found nothing. The only ski marks leaving the wagon park ran up to the edge of the forest to join the trail along the top of the meadows. The search patrols had gone out this way, and the snow was compacted and heavily marked.

They put their skis on. Therese insisted on searching once again around the wagon park, then spaced the girls out in a long line up and down the slope. They moved slowly off across the meadow, searching for ski trails. They reached the forest edge, moved uphill, and swept back. Nothing. Therese looked back at the ground they had covered. Something was wrong. The meadowland had yielded nothing, but this was the only area Maria would have gone to practice; nowhere else made any sense at all.

The girls had gathered around her, waiting for guidance. "This is stupid," she said aloud. "Maria would have come here to practice. Unless she decided not to practice but just go for a trip. Do you think she was confident enough to go for a walk by herself?"

The girls did not think so. Maria was far from being a good student and although Grossner had declared his satisfaction at her performance, they all knew that was more for encouragement than anything else.

"Look, if she didn't ski on the meadow here—and I'm sure we would have seen something if she had—then she must have gone on up the ski trail. Right; we're going on up." They looked up the long cleared ride that ran up into the heart of the forested hills above. "I'm going to take the trail with two girls. The morning patrols will have destroyed any marks she made, but we'll be trying to spot any trails leaving the main path. The rest of you form up in a line and sweep up there to the top of the ride. Remember,

don't go into the forest or our men might shoot you. We'll see you up there."

Slowly Therese worked up the trail with Meike and Suzanna beside her. They climbed easily and were delayed only by checking every deviation off the main track, hoping each time that it was not just a soldier relieving himself but a trace of their lost friend. On the rough ground to their left, the girls were struggling with snow hummocks that continually collapsed and dropped them into brambles or grass tussocks. At the top of the clearing the trail continued into the forest, disappearing under dark, arching trees. They stopped to gather thoughts.

"She wasn't here," said Therese with a sigh. "Unless she stayed on the trail the whole time, and why would she want to do that? We've already come much further than you'd want to do at the end of the afternoon."

"I think she really loved Lamoreaux," said Helena.

That was the answer. It had been obvious all along. Maria had taken her skis, and she probably had a bag or just filled her pockets, and set off to find Lamoreaux. She had gone in the afternoon because with luck she would be able to hide from the returning patrols and keep skiing into the night. The silly, brave girl. Therese's heart wrung as she thought of the little figure fighting her lonely way along the forest trails in the cold winter night, searching and hoping. Now Therese knew that the men searching around the castle would find nothing. They slid rapidly back down to the castle.

Even the General was shocked at her news. "Therese, there's nothing we can do. If we're lucky, we'll pick her up in one of the sweeps. If not, maybe she's with the men in the forest. Along with Lamoreaux, I hope. The men are already doing all they can. If she's still alone, I really don't have much hope for her. I'm sorry."

It was a black night for them all, and Therese came to breakfast wasted with worry and short of sleep. She sat alone out of choice and picked at her food. Mikhail came and stood at her table with his cap off. "Servus, Ma'am, I've got news."

"Why are you here, Mikhail?"

"I'm just saying thank you for my days off, Ma'am, and telling you my wife's feeling better, and I've got a message from the Major."

"So quickly? What does he say?"

"Ma'am, he says he and Maria are safe—"

"What! Maria's safe?"

"Yes, Ma'am, didn't you know she was going to see the Major?"

"What else did he say, Mikhail?"

"He says they're both safe, that's one thing. She brought him some medicine and his stomach's much better, that's the second thing. The third thing is that Maria's very tired and can't travel today, so he'd like to ask the General for two days leave before they come home. That was all, Ma'am."

"Mikhail, you're a saint! Thank you so much. I've been crying all night. And now everything's fine again. Thank Christ and all His Saints. I'm going to the General."

A wave of relief crossed the General's face, and he immediately blustered off to get coffee. Therese smiled at the way the old man tried to conceal his emotion. "Leave!" he snorted when he returned. "I'll give him leave, alright. He's going to have a hot welcome when he's standing in front of my desk. If he hadn't gone and got himself taken, we wouldn't have had all this fuss." Then the coffee came and he could relax.

"Therese, my dear, I've decided I need a secretary. Someone with some brains to keep my orderlies working hard. Can you call that girl Rebecca for me? Ask her to come for a chat?"

"General," she teased him. "Are you sure you're not just looking for someone to sit on your lap to take dictation?"

"Certainly not! I'm surprised at you, Therese. When I want someone to sit on my lap, I'll ask one of your girls. They'd be much better at that sort of thing. Of course, Rebecca's much pleasanter to look at than the orderlies, but that's not the point. I need my paperwork to be organized. I want my letters typed correctly the first time. If I have an intelligent young lady working away there, the orderlies will have to fall into line, because they can always be returned to active duties if they upset me."

As Therese left, the General called after her. "As soon as that girl sets foot in the castle again, I want her in here, understand? No changing clothes, no excuses. Straight to my office!"

Rebecca appeared in the club that afternoon, happy and talkative. The General had sent a car for her, shown her around the office and explained her new job. She would continue to live at home, and starting next week a car would pick her up every morning, and take her back at night. She did not stay; the car was waiting for her.

The club was busier that night than it had been for some time. Everyone felt the good times had returned again, and they wanted to make up for lost time. Tomorrow only normal patrols would go out, keeping to the forest paths. It was an evening to drink, to sing and to enjoy the ladies.

Mefist came. He helped her behind the bar, offering smiles and quick retorts for all the girls as they fetched drinks. He was enjoying himself, winking at the girls and writing his brother officers' names in the book with a flourish.

He did not take Therese to her office. During a quiet moment, she asked him, "Mefist, why didn't you make love to me the other night? I wouldn't have minded."

"I know, my love, but I don't make love to crazy women. Only to ladies who make it quite clear in advance that they want to be loved—and I certainly don't make love to ladies who 'wouldn't have minded.' Goodness me, what sort of an invitation is that?"

"That's not what I meant! I mean I might have enjoyed it."

"I'm quite certain you would have enjoyed it. You are demonstrating a lot of talent in that direction, but I don't think you're quite ready to sell your soul to the Devil, are you?"

"But it wouldn't be like that—"

"Of course it would, and I'm not going to make up your mind for you. Remember why you're here and then say straight out, 'Mefist, take off my clothes and push it into me.' Then I might listen to you, but I'm not going to take advantage of you when you've just come so many times that your brain's scrambled and you can't remember what you've been saying."

Therese was silent. She knew she wanted Mefist. She dreamed of sleeping beside him and waking up together, but she just could not invite him. Not in cold blood. She knew that when she got excited enough, she would do anything—anything he asked. The trouble was, he refused to take that step for her, and her conscience would not let her take it alone.

## Chapter 31

Grossner had them all sliding down the meadow and struggling back up again. It was hard work keeping up with his demands, and Therese began to understand why sergeants are usually unloved. He stood in the centre of the field shouting directions—lean forward, drop your shoulder, reach out, stand up—and all the time the girls did the work while he just watched.

Until he suddenly said, "Oh-ho! We've got company. Look!" Following his pointed ski stick they looked into the distance, up the trail to the edge of the forest. Two tiny black figures were on the trail far above, sliding down towards them.

"Come on," said Grossner. "Let's go up and meet them. Try and catch me!" He swung into long, loping strides diagonally up across the meadow to join the trail. The girls hurried to join him, falling into his tracks to make the going easier. But they were still left far behind.

He waited for them five minutes up the track, smiling as they struggled up to him. "Dear me, dear me, and you're such young things. You should leave an old man like me a long way behind you. Here they come now."

The stocky figure of the Major came around the corner, followed by Maria, a little black barrel in her warm clothes. She still looked uncomfortable on her skis. The girls had taken their mittens off and clapped and cheered as Maria drew up. The Sergeant stood at attention and saluted.

The Major returned the salute. "Afternoon, Therese, ladies, Sergeant. It's good to see you again."

"Nice to have you back, Your Honour." The girls crowded as close to Maria as their skis would allow, to try and get her news.

"Interesting visit, Major?" asked Therese.

"Er, yes. Very interesting. We must have a chat after I've reported to the General."

"Did you meet Rado?"

"Do you know him? Yes, he's quite an interesting young man. Certainly keeps his men in hand. He'd have made a good soldier."

"That sounds like Rado. I think the General wants to see you as soon as you get in, and Maria as well." She poled herself clumsily over to Maria.

"Well, my girl, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"I'm sorry, Mistress," she said in a small voice.

"And so you should be, you little baggage! You had me crying all night, thinking you were lost in the forest. I bet you were lying with your lover next to the fire."

Maria said nothing, so she carried on. "You're in deep trouble, of course. The General wants to see you straight away. He says that you're not to change or go to your room. You're to go straight to his office. If he's not there, you'd better wait. We'll see you for dinner and you can tell us all about it."

The Major and Maria slid gently off and the girls prepared to follow, but Grossner would not think of it. "Where are you going? I haven't finished with you yet. We're carrying on up so we can have a good long slide back down again. Come on, show me you've got some muscles under all that fat!"

They crowded around Maria in the refectory to hear her story. "It was terrible, Mistress. Much worse than I thought it was going to be. I went up and up and up. It was a long way but I just kept going slowly. I heard the patrols coming and I hid in the bushes until they'd passed and then just kept going on and on. Then it started to get dark. I was frightened, Mistress, I kept thinking about wolves and bears, and then telling myself not to be stupid. I know there's no wolves around here and all the bears are asleep, but I was still frightened."

"But how did you see in the dark?"

"Oh, it wasn't too bad. The snow catches the moonlight and I could see quite well, but it started to get very cold. I just kept moving so I wouldn't freeze. I felt so lost and stupid. I didn't know where I was going or what to look for, so I starting shouting for Rado every now and then. It's difficult shouting and going uphill at the same time. So I'd stop and shout for a bit, and then I'd ski for a while until my legs were tired, and I'd stop and shout again. I wanted to sit down but I didn't dare because I was afraid I'd never get up again. I don't know how long I went on for. Hours and hours. I was

ready to stop and sit down and there'd be an end to it when I heard a voice behind me. They'd followed me for a bit to see who I was and if anyone was following me. Two young men with rifles; I was so glad to see them, I could have kissed them both. I was really, really tired. I could hardly stand up so they towed me. They tied two straps together to make them long enough, I held on and one of them pulled me up the hills. When he got tired, the other one would do it for a while. Then we stopped and took off our skis. They carried me. Really, they put me on their backs and carried me up through the trees. One carried all the skis and the rifles, and the other carried me. They were really strong. Then we got to the camp and Rado was there, and everything was all right."

"Rado was surprised to see you?"

"Of course. They were all surprised to see me, and especially the Major. They sat me by the fire and gave me some hearth bread and venison stew, and things started to look a bit better. The Major took me to bed and I slept like a log for the rest of the night and half the morning too. I couldn't move when I woke up. My legs wouldn't work and I ached so much across my back and shoulders. I had to get up for a pee—that was difficult in the cold with so many clothes on—but then I went back to bed for the rest of the day. The second day was better. I could move, but my back and shoulders were aching! We had a party in the evening. It was really nice. They've got everything they need up there. Food, cognac, a warm fire, and a nice warm cave to go to sleep in. Rado's a big man now, Mistress. He's in charge of everything and all the others do what he tells them.

"In the morning we started off walking back. That was difficult in all that snow, and then we skied for a bit. We hid in the trees for a while until one of the men came to say the patrol had passed and we were free to go, and the Major and I started out. It wasn't too bad coming back. Most of it's downhill, so we just slid gently down the trail and I tried not to fall off too much. And then we found you."

"Well, I think you're very brave, you little idiot. I hope the Major appreciated his medicine."

"I think he was getting better already, to tell the truth, but he appreciated my coming to find him."

"So he should. I don't think I'd be brave enough to go skiing in the forest at night by myself. What did the General say when you got back?"

"He was very nice. I thought he was going to shout at me and maybe even whip me again, but he said I am a credit to my sex. He said that if I'd been a bit taller he'd make me a sergeant in the Prussian Guard. Then he told me to be sure and visit him tomorrow after lunch. So it looks as if I'm back again! Although, if he thinks I'm going to be on top, he'll have to think again. My legs are still too stiff for that sort of exercise. If he's so keen, he can do all the work."

Mefist came and took Therese to her office that evening. It had been so long that she was instantly excited and hurried to hang her dress in the cupboard. When she turned she found Mefist already reclining on the chaise longue with his feet up. He watched her expectantly. For once he did not want to control her.

She was at a loss. "What shall I do, Mefist?" she asked.

"I don't know. What would you like to do?"

"Mefist—" she pleaded.

"Come on, my dear, show some imagination. I expect something exciting in return for the extravagant fee I pay for your services. No, that doesn't mean I'm going to steal your virginity. I'm glued into my trousers, so you're safe as far as that goes. I just want to know what the Mistress of Montebello can do when she's trying to please me."

For a moment she felt cross with him, but then she took the challenge. "I'll dance for you," she said, "but I'm not ready yet." She went to her desk and drew out her comb and her makeup. She pulled her chair over to the chaise longue and set her things on it. Then she dragged the mirror to the foot of the day bed and turned to Mefist.

"Open your legs. I want to sit down." She sat on the end of the chaise longue between his legs and adjusted the mirror until she could see herself comfortably. Now she had become used to seeing herself in nothing more than jewelry and stockings, she knew she looked good. She took in the picture; dark hair flowing to her shoulders, fine features and slightly flushed cheeks, smallish, well-rounded breasts with pink buttons semi-erect and staring back at her. Her black suspender belt cinched her waist and complemented the dark triangle of hair that disappeared into the shadows beneath her.

She shook her hair and passed her comb back to Mefist. "Comb my hair," she asked.

He had done this before, she was sure. He deftly worked from the tips to the roots, banishing any hint of tangles and gently combing until the teeth ran freely through her mane and her scalp tingled. She tipped her head far back until she could feel her hair reaching down to her shoulders. The teeth of the comb scratched down her back, and she shivered. Her nipples tightened into hard buttons, and between her legs her sex began to wake.

"Thank you," she said, reaching back for the comb. Ignoring him, she reached for her makeup and started to go through the motions of dressing her face. She could not see him in the mirror, but she felt him watching every move. She took her time and made him suffer. Her lipstick came last. She stretched her mouth open and worked carefully to paint the perfect line. Finally, she pressed her lips together and relaxed to examine the result. What now, she asked herself?

She stopped in the middle of closing the lipstick tube and set the top down on the chair. Stretching one nipple nearly flat, she started to rub the lipstick onto it. It felt exciting, and the nipple stood proud when she finished. In the mirror the red colour looked strong and shocking. She smiled and moved on to the other one.

She stood, keeping her back to him. She reached behind her and slipped both thumbs down inside her suspender belt. Running them between the front and back, she settled the belt comfortably on her hips. She stretched and twisted to look at the seams of her stockings. Then, turning to him at last, she lifted one foot onto the chaise longue. Using both hands, she smoothed the stocking on her leg and concentrated on making a slight adjustment to the tension of one of her straps. She did not look at him but she knew he was looking at her, staring between her legs at her sex and willing her to show him more of it. The thought excited her further, and she started on the other leg.

Standing at the foot of the chaise longue, she smiled at him. He was lying back with a grin on his handsome face. She thought she could see the swelling of his sex in his trousers. That felt good too. He sat up, passed her a champagne glass and made the motions of a toast to her, but said nothing. She drank and set her glass back on the desk. It was time to dance.

The gramophone was playing outside, and the music came softly into her office. She stood with her legs a little apart, her hands on her hips, and started to sway in time to the music. His eyes followed her hips from side to side, but the music was too soft and she started to dance to the music in her head. She swung her hips further and faster, tipping them back and forth to provoke him. Her breasts were swinging with her movements. That felt good; she knew he loved watching her breasts move. She pirouetted on one foot and turned her back to him. Again she swayed her hips, and she knew he was staring at her bottom. She widened her stance a little and stuck it out towards him as she swayed. From where he lay, she knew he could see underneath her. As she stuck her bottom out, he could watch her sex in the shadows. She wondered if he could see her excitement.

Keeping her hands on her hips, she started a languid two-step around the chaise longue, stopping now and then to go through the motions without lifting her feet from the floor. He smiled happily at her, and the swelling in his trousers had become unmistakable. She started on a second circuit of the daybed.

As she reached the foot of the daybed again, he moved. Putting both arms behind his back, he made it clear that, despite his excitement, she would get no help from him. She bent and lifted his legs onto the chaise longue. She danced on the spot at his feet. Her hands had left her hips and she danced with her arms. As she lifted and stretched, she knew the shape of her breasts would be changing. He would like that.

Opening her legs so that she could stand astride the chaise longue, she started to sway up towards him. As she swayed she ran her hands up and down her sides and caressed her breasts, twisting her nipples and running her hands back down to her hips to start again. She could see he was enjoying her and her mounting excitement. She knew her sex was swollen and wet, and she knew he found it beautiful. She tried to show him more as she moved closer.

She ran her hands across her breasts and reached down between her legs to fleetingly tease her hungry sex. As her fingertips brushed against her inner lips they were gaping and swollen, rubbery and resistant to her touch. She shuddered as she reached deeper and brought her moisture up to rub into her sensitive button. Her fingers lingered to caress it. It felt good and she started to rub, slowly and firmly.

In front of her, the bulge in his trousers held her eyes. She wanted to reach out and unbutton him. To pull out the white baton that Wanda and all the girls had played with. Her rubbing continued. She wanted to pull back

the skin of his sex and expose the swollen purple plum that they had kissed and sucked. She wanted to take that head and rub it up and down between her wet and open lips. She wanted to point it at her innermost spot, to hold it to her entrance, and to sit on it, to slide down onto his spike until he had taken her completely.

She stood rigid and shaking as she came. Before she fell, Mefist quickly drew his arms out from behind his back and held her firmly by the hips. Insistently he pushed her to one side until she had to abandon her stance above him and, drawing her leg back from across the daybed, stand beside him. He spun her around and pulled her back to sit between his open legs. Lifting her hips and pushing her shoulders, he dragged her into place until she was lying back on top of him, as he was lying on the daybed. Her legs dropped open and fell from him and the bed. Her toes barely brushed the carpet. She raised her head to look in the mirror and saw herself draped wantonly over him. She formed an open invitation. Her sex, pink and open, stared back at her. The shadow of her entrance opened at the base of her petals. She moaned and let her head fall back onto his shoulder.

His hands held her waist. They were hard and strong. She trembled as he moved them up, up across her ribs to the undersides of her breasts. His fingertips caressed her as he drew them across her breasts, teasing the sensitive sides and running almost up to her shoulders before returning to repeat. His touch felt wonderful, and she knew that he could make her come. His stroking grew firmer and began to circle her nipples. She was on fire, and she caught her breath as his fingertips strayed onto the rough surfaces around her buttons. He dragged loose fingers backwards and forwards across her nipples, the rubber stubs being pulled sideways by each finger, springing free just in time to be caught by the next. It was too much, and her orgasm rolled over her again.

He was whispering to her, "Oh, that was beautiful! So good, I could feel everything. I love your breasts. So round and soft and beautiful. And your nipples...." He squeezed her buttons between finger and thumb, rolling and twisting them to the edge of pain. Again she was coming. "No, no!" she heard herself saying, but it was too late; she trembled and twisted in his arms as it hit her again.

She had reached up to pull his head against her, leaving her body even more open to his hands. Again he was whispering in her ear. "So good.

You're wonderful, my love. So sexy. I love to feel you coming. No one comes like you. I'm going to touch your flower. Would you like that?" His hands roamed across her stomach and moved slowly downwards. "Do you want me to touch you? Would you like that? Tell me you want it."

His fingers reached her mound, trailing from side to side and around the bush that graced it. Each time they brushed past the top of her furrow, she tipped her hips up to capture them—but they passed on. "Please, Mefist, please...." she begged.

"That's right," he whispered. "That's right. You want me to touch you. You want me to open your little flower." His fingers reached deeper between her legs, but still he did not touch her as she was aching to be touched. He brushed up and down the outside of her sex, pressing and pulling her there and drawing her sex open and more open. She thought she would cry in frustration, but finally his finger reached down and dipped into her entrance.

"Oh, you're so wet and so excited. You're a sexy woman, my love. So hot and sexy." His fingertip was dipping and circling, dipping and circling. She begged for more, begged him to reach into her and fill her but he held back, circling her empty entrance. Then the fingers of his other hand touched her clitoris and played up and down. She lifted her head, and in the mirror she could see the invading hands covering her sex and moving in her furrow, and she was coming, coming....

Her head fell back, and in her mind she said, "No, no, stop, please stop!" but her orgasms did not stop and she was lost in confusion.

She returned to herself curled up in a tight ball on top of Mefist. She held one trapped hand pressed hard against her to keep it still, and his hand and hers were crushed between her thighs. She lay still and panting, breathing in the scent of him.

"That was fantastic." Her body was purring. Her sex gave a contented spasm, and Mefist wiggled the fingertip that lay trapped inside her. "Ah! No! Take it out!" The sensation was unbearable, and she opened her thighs to let him out. "Ah!" she said as he slipped out of her. "I'm so sensitive I can't bear to be touched."

Beneath her, Mefist struggled to move up the daybed. He eased her down until she was circled by his legs and lying back against his chest. "There! Now go to sleep, my love. You need a rest."

She let the feeling of relaxed warmth envelop her and her eyelids began falling, but she could not sleep. Maria was knocking at the door. "Mistress! Mistress! Come quickly! Drazevich has taken Rebecca."

# **Chapter 32**

"Timko told me, Mistress. He's trying to find the General now. You must help her, Mistress. God alone knows what he'll do to her. If he hasn't done it already."

"Did Timko say where she is?" demanded Mefist.

"He's taken her to the school house."

"Therese, get dressed and come down to the gate house. I'll grab a radio and get ready to move. Maria, go and find the General. Tell him where I'm going and ask if he would be kind enough to call on the radio."

The frost was hard and ice crackled under their wheels as they swung out of the castle and down the ramp. Moonlight brightened the snow blanket and made the bare trees black and sinister. The village stood dark and silent. They pulled into the schoolyard, and Mefist went to hammer on the door. Therese entered with him.

The police had partitioned off the far end of the entrance hall and taken the two front classrooms as their own. "Lieutenant Drazevich, please," asked Mefist, tight-lipped.

"In here, Your Honour." The policeman looked terrified.

They found Drazevich buttoning his uniform jacket. The school room was big and bare. No sign remained of the children who had studied there. The high walls had been severely whitewashed and there was a desk, filing cabinet and a coat stand. Therese's eyes went to the far side of the room. Rebecca was there, standing naked against the wall. Her hands, cuffed together, were high above her, tied to a heating pipe. Red welts criss-crossed her white skin from shoulder to knee. She was sobbing and hiding her face against her upraised arm. Therese rushed to free her; standing on a chair, she tried to untie the handcuffs from the pipe.

"Therese—" called Mefist. He held up an open clasp knife for her. She sawed at the tight knots.

"Lieutenant, I need an explanation."

"For capturing one of your spies?" Drazevich sneered. "The prisoner is being interrogated about her admitted partisan links. Get lost, Prince, and take your fancy woman with you." Drazevich was furious, spitting the words at them.

There came a tap at the open door, and Mefist's driver was waiting. "Beg pardon, Your Honour, the General's on the radio."

At last Rebecca's handcuffs came free from the pipe, and she collapsed onto the floor. Therese sat with her and tried to comfort her. "Where are her clothes, Lieutenant?"

"What are you worried about that slut for? She's just another Jew."

Therese was about to shout at him, but Mefist came back. "Lieutenant Drazevich, the General orders you to give up your sidearm to me and report to his office immediately in my company."

For a moment, Drazevich's face showed the anger and hatred that consumed him. Clumsily twisting his pistol from its holster, he passed it to Mefist. "You'll pay for this, you little nancy boy. You'll be getting your ticket to SekPol HQ before the end of tomorrow."

Mefist checked the pistol chamber and looked at him coolly. "I don't suppose you'd like to have an accident cleaning your pistol, would you? It's customary for gentlemen at times like this. No? I can't say I'm surprised. Let's go. You can travel beside my driver, and I shall be behind you with my pistol out. Can she move, Therese? She's got to come too. Where are the keys for her cuffs, Drazevich?"

"Damn you, Mefist!" He stepped to the window and threw it open. "Go and fetch them yourself!" Before he could be stopped, he had drawn something small from his pocket and flung it far into the night.

Mefist stood stone-faced. "Therese, the cuffs will have to stay on. I'm sure Lieutenant Drazevich will find a convincing explanation for the General. She'll have to travel as she is. It won't be for much longer."

"She's naked, Mefist. I'll give her my coat, but—she's got no shoes, for a start."

Mefist called into the corridor. "Corporal! Where are the girl's clothes?"

The policeman appeared. No doubt he had been listening, and he now looked at Mefist and Drazevich impassively. "Beg pardon, Your Honour, but she didn't bring none with her when she came."

Mefist steeled himself against shouting at the man. "Corporal, it is quite possible that Lieutenant Drazevich will not return tonight. If he is not here tomorrow morning, ask your sergeant to report to my office at 07:30 hours. Now, please call in my driver."

The driver came at a run. He looked shocked to find Mefist watching over Drazevich with a gun in his hand. "Andrei, I have my hands full with Lieutenant Drazevich here. Do you think you could possibly carry Miss Rebecca and put her in the back of the car? Our friends from SekPol seem to have forgotten to let her bring clothes and shoes when they arrested her."

Rebecca had been helped into Therese's coat, but her nakedness was still on display. "Oh Sir, I'm fine now; I can walk."

"Never you mind me, Miss. I won't look," said Andrei, "and you're only a little thing-no trouble at all. Now lean against me-that's it, and up we go."

The cold bit through Therese's evening dress as she stepped into the night and helped Andrei manoeuvre Rebecca into the back seat of the car. They sandwiched her between Therese and Mefist and started for the castle.

Andrei carried her all the way into the castle, but once there, she insisted on being put down. She managed a wan smile to thank him. "Never you mind, Miss, and I'm sorry for it. Those SekPol people..."

The General's office was lit up, and although it was very late, the orderlies were still at their desks. They jumped up as Mefist brought Drazevich in. The General stood like a statue behind his desk. Drazevich and Mefist stood to attention in front of him. Therese drew Rebecca to one side, and they stood watching. Therese had never seen the General like this. She shivered with cold; Rebecca trembled with both cold and fright.

"Mefist," he thundered. "Why isn't this girl properly dressed? What do you mean bringing her into my office like this?"

"I beg your pardon, Your Honour. I believe you need to see what has been done to her."

The General grunted in distress. He came to stand in front of Rebecca. She could not meet his eyes. "Excuse me, my dear, may I look?"

She said nothing, but after a moment released the front of the coat that she had been holding together with her cuffed hands. It fell open.

"Excuse me," he said again, holding the coat open. "And your back as well? May I see?" He took the coat from her shoulders. Therese could see

that the damage to her back was much worse. In places the welts of repeated blows had broken the skin and she was bleeding.

The General wrapped the coat around her again. "Thank you, my dear. Did he-er-did he do anything else?"

"He raped me, Your Honour." She was sobbing again. "In my house and again in the school. It's still running down my leg."

"Oh, my poor girl! Therese, take her away and take care of her. Anything she needs. We can have a chat in the morning if she's up to it."

"General, the handcuffs..."

"Of course. I was forgetting. Drazevich, the keys?"

"I-Your Honour..." He could not manage more.

"Lieutenant Drazevich, where are the keys?" he roared.

"Beg pardon, Your Honour, I threw them away."

The General stared at him in disbelief for a moment and then shouted for an orderly. "Sergeant Armourer to the library at the double. We have to cut these cuffs off. Go! You there, poke up the fire in the library and get them tea and rum quickly! Go on, you two. You don't need to hear the rest." He ushered them out of the office and shut the door behind them. Therese stopped to scribble a note to Rebecca's household and ordered immediate delivery.

They sat in the dark of the library, warming themselves in front of the fire and sipping tea laced with rum. Therese stretched her hands and feet into the warmth. She could see Rebecca was feeling the heat reach her front and warm her under the coat around her shoulders. She looked secure now. Maria had brought a petticoat so at least she was covered from the waist down. The blouse would have to wait until her hands were free.

There was a tap at the door. The Sergeant Armourer had come. He was a stocky man carrying a bag of tools. He looked shocked to see Rebecca and embarrassed by her nude breasts. His large, positive fingers manipulated the cuffs.

"There's no help for it, Your Honour. We shall have to cut them off. I could try drilling out the lock, but there's no guarantee that would free them. Perhaps we should cut the chain first and then the young lady can put a shirt on. I'm sure we'll all be more comfortable that way." He knelt Rebecca by the hearth and stretched the chain over a log of firewood. Pinning it with a

cold chisel, he cut it with a single violent hammer blow. Rebecca hurried to put the blouse on. The sergeant saw her back and winced.

"We used to flog the men in the old days, Your Honour, so I've seen worse, but never anything like that on a young girl." He shook his head. "Those SekPol people should be put away themselves." It took Therese and a large screwdriver to hold the cuffs still enough for the sergeant to cut safely. The three of them knelt over the hearth for a long time before both cuffs were released. The sergeant left, apologizing to Rebecca as if he had had some part of the responsibility for her hurts.

Mefist came to her room straight from the General's office. She was sitting on the bed, listening to the sounds of Rebecca in the bathroom.

Mefist slumped into a chair. "What a perfectly bloody night! And it started off so well."

"Yes. Yes, it did, but that seems a lifetime ago. You know, we nuns talk a lot about evil and wickedness, but I wonder if we know what we're talking about. I've never seen real, live evil as we saw it tonight. I suppose you've seen worse."

"Yes, I have, but it was always in places where men were behaving badly anyway, so I suppose it was no surprise. Lost battles, destroyed villages, that sort of thing. I can't say I've ever seen someone who should have been an Army officer and a gentleman behave like that. How is she taking it?"

"Not badly, considering. She doesn't seem to mind the beating so much. He must have been using a heavy belt or something—thank God—so there's more bruising than cutting. Most of all, she minds that she was raped on the family dining table. That hurts. The thought that she and her family will be sitting around the same table every Sabbath. I think I'm going to set Mikhail to making a new table for her; perhaps that would help.

"What did the General do after we left?"

"That old man has had some experience in life. You should have seen him. First of all, he brought in an orderly who could take shorthand. Then he got Drazevich to talk, to explain everything. He said he had reason to believe that Rebecca was a partisan spy, so he'd raided her house and taken her for interrogation. On questioning, she had given him the names of all the men in the forest, and then I'd come along and interfered.

"Then the General made him describe the house and how the raid was conducted. He asked where he'd first questioned Rebecca and Drazevich described a room with a big table in it—it must be the one you were talking about. The General said, 'And you bent her over that table and raped her. When did you strip her, before or after?' I don't know how the General knew the details. Drazevich tried to deny stripping her, and the General just looked at him and said, 'I presume you're telling me that Miss Isaacs answered the door wearing not a stitch of clothing?' And then Drazevich just had to shut up.

"He had to admit that he had whipped her with a leather belt. He didn't seem embarrassed by that; I suppose beatings like that are normal for SekPol. He said Rebecca was only a Jew, and that didn't go well with the General. Drazevich kept saying, 'But I got the information. All the names.'

"The General pushed a piece of paper across to him and asked if he recognized the names. He said yes, those were the names. The General stood up and came around the table to him and asked if he thought he—the General, he meant—was stupid. 'No, Your Honour,' he said, 'not at all.' The General said he was perfectly well aware that every person in the village above the age of seven could give him the same list, and would do it for nothing because it was open knowledge. Only he hadn't got his list from the village but from Major Lamoreaux, who had managed to sign up every one of them for the Militia, including Acting Lieutenant Rado Krausov. He said they were brave men, real soldiers, who were living hard in the forest guarding the castle's northern marches while brothel creepers like Drazevich were running round the village raping his secretary.

"Drazevich had been shaken when he heard Rado and his men have been signed up for the militia, but when he understood that Rebecca was the General's secretary, he knew he was done for. SekPol might be politically able to do what they like with a young Jew-worse luck, I'd say-but he knew there would be no help for him now he'd been caught kidnapping and raping a general's secretary. The Army would never stand for that, no matter what. He's sitting in the General's toilet now, handcuffed to a pipe. He'll be on the train out to Vienna tomorrow."

### Chapter 33

Therese traveled with Rebecca to the village next morning, leaving immediately after breakfast to avoid any chance of seeing Drazevich on his way to the railway station. Rebecca said goodbye on the pavement; she did not want Therese to come inside with her. Leaving the car to wait for her, she walked over to see Jana.

Jana had a surprise for her. She brought a document, new and still with its envelope, grandly headed *Field Commission*. Therese read the legal language and finally found that Rado Krausov had been commissioned as an officer in the Imperial Militia with the rank of acting lieutenant. Jana was full of both pride and relief. She had never imagined that filling Drazevich's boots with cow dung could end like this.

Back at the castle, Therese found it difficult to face work, and leaving her in-tray, she went looking for Mefist. She found him in Timko's office, jacket off and hiding behind a mountain of paperwork. Timko went to fetch coffee without being asked.

"How's Rebecca?"

"Not bad, I suppose. Sore, of course. She left blood on my nightie, poor girl. I just don't know what makes men behave like that. I'm glad he's gone now."

"More or less," said Mefist.

"What do you mean? He has gone, hasn't he? He was going to be on the train this morning."

"He escaped. When the car was going slowly, turning out of the wagon park, he jumped out and ran for the forest."

Therese was shocked. "My God! What happens now?"

"Well, it does have a positive side. SekPol HQ will have to agree he's guilty now. All the evidence is against him, and he won't be there to ask his friends for help to suppress it. On the other hand, it means we've got a

desperate man hiding in the forest. Things could be dangerous outside for the next few days. We've already warned Rado, and I'm issuing an order that no one is to wander out of the castle without an armed escort. So if you want to take the girls skiing, let me know and I'll send some guards with you. I doubt he'd attack a group anyway. He's not armed, after all, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

"I wonder if he'll survive."

"I should imagine so. I would. My guess is he'll be trying to get to the village tonight for food, and then he'll leave the valley to the south. That's what I'd do. I expect we'll send some small groups of men out this afternoon to lie up and try and catch him coming out of the forest tonight, and we'll send patrols along the forest edge tomorrow morning to see if we can find tracks. Unless it snows, of course. Then we'll just give up."

"What about the woman he has in town?"

"Good point. We might drop by and visit her this evening. I wonder if SekPol could be trusted to catch him?

"Guess what we found after he'd run away? He had nearly twelve thousand crowns in cash in his bag! Can you believe that?"

"Twelve thousand! But-that's a fortune! Where could he have found money like that in the village?"

"I don't know, but you can be sure he didn't come by it honestly. The General has given it to Sister Brigitta to put in the Convent bank account for the moment, but he's sent a signal to HQ asking what to do with it. They're going to love asking SekPol about it, I'm sure. Even if we end up sending it to his family, it will still have been worth it to make SekPol squirm."

"Twelve thousand crowns. It seems so unjust when you think whom he must have forced it from. No wonder the villagers knew just who he was and wanted to kill him. How I wish we could have stopped him before he got hold of Rebecca. It must have been terrible being helpless in the hands of a man like that, quite apart from the rapes."

"And don't think that SekPol doesn't know just what goes on. I hate these political militias. Pure fascism. They're taking the country by the throat and forcing their way to the top by sheer terror. There are still decent people at the top—politicians and Army mostly—who think it's possible to compromise with them. That's stupid; you only have to look around Europe to see there can be no compromise. You either control them by legal means,

or they'll control everyone by terror. The quality of some of the people they're getting into city governments, it's hard to believe. No decent party would let them in. They're no more than petty criminals!"

"How's the war going, Mefist? Is it going to come here? We keep hearing stories."

"It's not good, my love. I think we can probably hold the Carpathian line—after all, Galicia is hard to take but easier to defend. It's much more difficult to the south and east. I don't know what will happen there. I expect it'll come down to politics in the end. I can't imagine Vienna fighting to the last brick. It's not their way. There'll be some sort of conference and a settlement. Where it'll leave Montebello, I can't imagine."

"Is it true about the refugees?"

"Pretty much, I believe. There's quite a lot of them moving across Pannonia. It must be terrible in this weather because the villagers are not being kind. They have little enough anyway. The government's trying to help, even dropping bread from planes, but it's difficult. There was one column mistaken for troops the other day and the Coalition planes bombed and strafed them. Apparently it was terrible. Thank God refugees are not coming over Tergov into the valley."

"Where are they going?"

"I don't think they know. They want to get away from the fighting, and they try to go anywhere they've got relatives. If they haven't, they just head in the general direction of Vienna. What else can they do?"

"Poor people." Therese's heart went out to them. "I'd hate to be sleeping on the road in winter."

"Well, if any come into the valley, we'll try and do something for them. The supply trains mostly go back empty, so we can send them on to Vienna. At least they won't have to walk."

"Perhaps we can find some money for them. What about Drazevich's money? At least that would be putting it to a Christian use."

"You're full of good ideas, my love. I'll suggest it to the General. Now, talking of money, you've got a problem that puts Drazevich in the ranks of the poor. What are you going to do with the money you and the girls have been earning in the club?"

"Money we've been earning?"

"Of course. The drinks have been selling very well, and we've set the prices to make a modest profit that we can plough back into things for the club. That's fine, but the money we've been playing for the girls is something separate. What do you want to do with it?"

"That's nice. I suppose we can buy them Christmas presents. Is there enough for a pendant for everyone?"

"Of course. If you want to give them diamonds like pigeons' eggs."

"What! Diamonds? How much money is it, Mefist?"

"Oh, I should imagine it might be fifty thousand crowns by the end of the year."

"What! Fifty thousand! I don't believe it. Where did it all come from?"

"Out of our pockets, my dear, and if you don't believe it, ask Timko about it."

"This is a bit of a shock. I suppose we could divide it between the girls, but what would they do with it? Nuns don't need money."

"Maybe not, but any that decide not to go back to being nuns, they might appreciate their share to help them settle into normal life. Anyway, you still have to persuade the Bishop to let them go back to being nuns."

"Yes," she said thoughtfully. "I wish he would just come out and say yes or no. I'm really disappointed in the way he's avoiding the whole thing."

"Would you like to know what I'd do? I think I'd give him a call and let him know there's going to be about fifty thousand crowns available. Tell him you don't know what to do with it because nuns don't need money—just as you told me. Then when he asks you to send it to him, ask him for a letter you can show the girls. Tell him you don't think they'd be happy to send the money unless they were sure they'd be welcomed back.

"Once you've got a letter from him, you're safe. He won't disown you because you'll show the letter around and the whole business of how the money was earned will come out. That could make him very unpopular. It gets him involved in the whole thing, and he'll have to accept some responsibility for you all."

"I'm sure some of the girls won't want to go back. In fact, I'd guess that most of them won't. I'm certain that Maria will leave."

"That's not a problem. You don't send the money immediately. Once you've got the letter, you know you can go back to the Convent if you want

to. And those who don't want to be nuns anymore can take their share of the money and leave with us when we go."

"I don't like to think of you leaving, Mefist."

"Then come with me."

"I–I can't. I have to stay..." A sudden wave of anguish swept over her. She had not thought about what the future would hold for her.

The Bishop was well-defended at Vojnicky Kapitula. She could not get past his personal office and had to mention the amount of money involved before he would come to the telephone. She had anticipated an argument, but he understood what was required immediately and promised the letter would reach her as soon as the trains allowed. She felt disappointed as she put the telephone down. The Bishop clearly thought that welcoming prostitutes back into the Convent was a small price to pay in return for fifty thousand crowns.

#### **Chapter 34**

Mefist had joined her for a walk. The day was ideal for it; high cloud kept the sun away, and the east wind they had suffered from for the past few days meant the snow was cold and free-running. Therese followed behind him, using his tracks and sliding easily. She had become used to skis now, and traveling uphill came more easily than it had done.

They stopped at the top of the cleared ride above the castle. Therese had not been further than this before, and she was glad of the opportunity to rest for a while.

"We're very lucky here," said Mefist, "Having the forest so conveniently near. With this clearing too. The view is wonderful on clear days, all the way down to the castle. I should think an artist could spend years just wandering up and down this ride, painting pictures of the different seasons. Here, try this." He pulled a silver hip flask from inside his jacket and passed it over.

The fiery liquor trickled warmly down to her stomach. Then, just as she leant over her skis to give the flask back, he whispered, "Still!" A hundred metres away, she saw a movement at the edge of the forest. Something was coming. An elk shouldered its way through the bushes and stepped onto the open ride. Therese froze, still with her arm out-stretched. They watched as the big animal walked without fear across the ride and disappeared into the trees and they could breathe again.

"What good luck!" said Mefist. "The gods are being kind to us. Shall we go on up?"

Therese felt doubtful, but with Mefist she was prepared to try anything. They swung into the trees and kept climbing. The trees closed around them, and they skied over ice fragments that had dropped from their branches. Therese realized that Maria must have come this way on her epic trip. "How far did Maria go, Mefist?"

"Oh, a long way past here. Ten or twelve kilometres. She did well for someone who wasn't used to skiing. Has she ever come back?"

"I don't think she likes skiing very much. She goes for short walks with Lamoreaux, but I don't think she'd go out by herself. Unless she had to."

"I love skiing in the forest. It's good walking in summer as well, but nothing compares to swishing down the tracks in winter." He stopped at a fork in the track. "Here we are. Rado's post box." An old beech hung over the track. Reaching into a hole in the trunk, he pulled out a sealed envelope. "Mmh, delivery to the village. And here's the return, Army paper work." He folded a bulky envelope and forced it into the hole.

"It's a real postal service!" said Therese.

"Yes. The patrols check it every day. It's usually just letters to and from the village, but, as Rado is beginning to find, being an officer in the Imperial Army means bureaucracy is never far away. That's the way Maria went, by the way. Rado's camp is along there and up the hill. It's quite cosy. Shall we plan to spend a weekend together there?"

"You're not inviting me away for a dirty weekend, are you, Mefist? I'm a single girl, so I shall have to refuse."

"Oh well, it was worth making the suggestion. We'll go up this way; there's a nice view not so far away. Hey, stop! Listen!" Therese strained her ears to hear above the noises of the trees. An insistent drone was intruding into the peace. "Coalition planes," said Mefist. "Coming this way."

"Are we safe?"

"Of course. They'll never see us in the trees, and even if they did, they will have gone before they could do anything about it. Here they come, look, to the left of Tergov. Oh, the men are shooting at them. That'll be a surprise." As Therese scanned the horizon near Tergov, she could see flashes and smoke. Shells burst in the sky in distant puffs of cloud, and now she could see the black spots of the planes weaving and scattering as they passed through the barrage. Then they collected themselves together and continued their progress. Therese watched in awe as the camouflaged planes ground past between her and the village. They were not flying very high, and she could see figures through the cockpit canopies.

"Light bombers," said Mefist. "They'll probably be looking for railway targets. Bridges, tunnels. Let's hope they miss."

They skied on across the forested slopes until the track swung out to pass around a rocky nose. Mefist unbuckled his skis and stamped his feet. "There! Look at that." They looked out over a sea of dark treetops, beech and oak, swept clean by the wind. Through the nearer trees, the snow blanket could be seen beneath them. White snow shone far away in the distance, where the forest ended and the fields began. The castle was small and distant, with the white finger of the ride probing up towards them.

"I had no idea we'd come so far," said Therese. "I hope we can get back before it gets dark."

"Don't worry. We'll be back in the castle in half an hour, you'll see." The long, near-continuous slide back felt deeply satisfying, and Mefist was right; half an hour after standing on the rocky outcrop, they walked up from the wagon park with their skis on their shoulders.

The Bishop's letter waited for her in her office. She tore open the envelope and two sheets fell out. The first letter was addressed to her as chatelaine of Montebello. It gave the Bishop's sympathy and exhorted her and her sisters to strength in this hour of trial. It ended by eagerly looking forward to their return to their vows as soon as the current difficult situation would allow. Good, she thought, we're safe!

The other letter was hand-written, apparently by the Bishop himself. It addressed her as "My Dear Sister Therese" and told how nice it had been to hear from her the other day. She swallowed a biting retort and read on. In view of the current uncertain times, it is probably best to send the money to Switzerland. This is not a matter that should be discussed with others; in fact, I would ask you to keep the matter between us, as the political implications of sending church money abroad might be misunderstood. At the end of the letter were an account number and the address of the Credit Suisse bank in Hauptbahnhofstrasse, Zurich.

She was surprised and then, as she thought about the second letter, her surprise developed into suspicion. She hurried down to Mefist to beg a car and went to see Rebecca.

She was returning to the car outside Isaac's shop. Andrei was holding the car door open for her to enter when two children hurried up. They were calling, "Food, Your Honour, can you give us food?" Andrei rushed to intercept them, but Therese ordered him back and looked at the children. A boy and a girl, dark and dirty, with black eyes peering out of pinched faces.

They both wore rough coats tied at the waist with rope and had woollen caps pulled down over their ears.

"Where are your parents?"

"Dead, Your Honour," they chorused glibly.

"Where are the rest of your people?"

"There ain't no one, Your Honour," said the boy. "We're by ourselves but we don't have no food, and we're hungry."

Therese tried to identify their accent. It had much in common with the way the gypsy people spoke, but the whole sound was different. "Where do you come from?"

"We've come from Bacau."

"By yourselves?" They nodded, and Therese looked at their feet. They had boots they must have stolen on the way, cracked and dirty. The girl's boots seemed far too big for her thin legs. Bacau was far away in Rumania; it was hard to credit that they had walked so far.

"There are no more of you around the village? Down at the gypsy colony, perhaps?"

"They don't like us down there, Your Honour. They say we talk funny and sent us out."

She thought for a moment and waved them into the car. She ignored Andrei's look of hurt disapproval and sat beside him. As he drove up the hill she could hear the children whispering behind her in another language. She thought she could recognize Roma, but she did not know that language and she could not be sure. They were silent and over-awed when the car pulled up at the guardhouse.

"Please, Your Honour, where are you taking us?"

"For a bath and dinner, and somewhere to stay for the night. Does that sound good?"

"Ooh, thank you, Your Honour. What is this place?"

"It's a castle. Just now the Army is staying with us, and on the other side the nuns have a Convent. You can stay with them."

The girl stopped dead. She looked trapped. "What's the matter, child?" asked Therese.

"She don't like nuns, Your Honour," the boy answered for her. "They locked her up in Bistrita. We won't go near no nuns again. No, not even if we have to stay hungry."

Therese thought for a moment and looked at her watch. "Very well, I'll take you to meet some friends of mine, but we're going to go through the places where the Army officers work, so you must be very quiet. Come along."

As she ushered them inside, she realized they were older than her first impression. They were both taller than her shoulder. She also realized that they smelt; a sort of smoky, farmyard smell hung about them. She hurried them up to the club.

The girls came to them out of curiosity. "What are your names, children?" asked Therese.

"I'm Othello, Your Honour, and she's Portia."

That was a surprise. Where could their parents have unearthed names like that? "Well, Othello and Portia, meet my friends. Girls, I think we need a good bath, and then we'll all go for dinner. How does that sound?" The children were looking around them in amazement.

"Your friends are pretty ladies, Your Honour," said Othello, and the girls giggled.

"The prettiest in the Empire! Now, if I give you both new clothes, will you give me your old ones?"

"What do you want these old things for? Don't have much time left in them."

"I was planning to burn them," said Therese cautiously.

Portia looked at the girls and said, "If we can have clothes like that, it's a deal," and she started to untie her coat.

"Could you take care of them, and I'll go and find something for Othello? I think I've got a dress or two we could use for Portia."

"Don't worry about Portia, Mistress. There's twelve of us here, I'm sure we can find something that'll fit. If you ask Timko, I'm sure he'll find something for the boy."

When she returned, Maria was sitting with Othello in front of the fire. He was wearing nothing more than a towel around his waist, and his narrow body looked half-starved. He was clean, and his dark wavy hair shone with firelight. She handed him a bundle of clothes. "Try some of those. The trousers are long, but we can take those up easily enough." Othello went to the far side of the room to change; that seemed to be enough to soothe any embarrassment.

"They're actors' children, Mistress. I don't know what happened to their parents—I didn't like to ask—but I think they did come from Rumania."

"Actors' children? That would explain the names, I suppose. How old are they?"

"The girl's seventeen, and the boy's eighteen. You wouldn't think it to look at them, but you should have seen me trying to bathe the boy. I almost started work early today. He's going to be a real devil for the girls when he's a bit older. He says he can play the fiddle, and Portia dances. That's how they've managed to get this far, dancing for money. Where are they going to sleep, Mistress?"

"I'd thought about the visitors' rooms at the Convent, but Portia has had a bad time with some nuns on the way, and she won't hear of it. I don't know. I know we have to get them out of here after dinner; I don't think the officers would approve. I'll see what I can do."

The girls had enjoyed themselves with Portia. She appeared in a flowing black skirt and someone's Sunday blouse. Her waves of black hair had been tied back and disciplined with red ribbons. Makeup, earrings, and she looked like the gypsy princess of legend. Therese clapped her hands in surprise and delight. "Wonderful! Now we can all go for dinner!"

Mefist came to see her that evening, and she was frustrated that she could not spend some time with him. Othello was curled up on the daybed asleep and Portia was reading magazines with her, struggling with the words and relying on Therese for help.

#### Chapter 35

The girls took Othello and Portia skiing in the morning and left Therese free to write Christmas letters. As she wrote, the feeling grew at the back of her mind that this would be her last Christmas in Montebello. Before, the Convent had been her family; now the family had changed a little to be the girls, Mefist and the Army. In her heart, she knew that things could not stay the same or ever truly go back to the past. The Army would move on, and whom would she belong to next Christmas? Her mother and father no longer seemed remote and shut away forever; she might find herself at home again. She recognized with a start that she was not even considering returning to the Convent, even though that was clearly where her duty lay.

Mikhail disturbed her. "Your Honour, we're just bringing the Christmas trees in. Will you be wanting one up here?"

Mikhail stood and watched as the men wrestled the tree up the stairs and nailed supports to the trunk. "We delivered that table to old Isaacs house yesterday, Ma'am. Beautiful job it was, though I say it myself. We used some oak that old Tomaszek had put aside soon after we got back from the Great War. Lovely timber it was, but hard as nails. The lads worked hard on it too, for Miss Rebecca's sake. Finished it so you can see your face in it. Proper job it was.

"The Prince gave us a truck to carry it down to the village, and old Isaacs was beside himself when he saw it. Devil of a job to get it into the room, and we had to get the old one out as well. He wouldn't keep the old one, you know. I tried to buy the timber off him, but he wouldn't have it. We don't see mahogany like that in Krasna Dolina, and I'd have liked to use it. Could have made a pair of cabinets from it, it was so thick, but no. He made us saw it up and burn it in the garden. A wicked waste but, I don't know, I'd probably feel the same if it had happened to any of my girls. I

hope that black policeman froze in the forest, but let's not think of such things at Christmas."

"You're right. Drazevich has gone, and Rebecca seems to have got over it all. Now, call the men over and we'll have some Christmas spirit." Therese lined spirit glasses up on the bar and poured them brimful with schnapps. The schnapps disappeared instantly, and the men stood expectantly at the bar. It would have been churlish not to refill them, but she took her time over it. The castle workers were renowned for their ability to absorb spirits. "So here's to you all at the end of a very strange year."

"Yes, Your Honour," they answered.

"Very strange year," echoed Mikhail thoughtfully, "and I expect we've got worse coming. We're lucky to have you to stand up for us, Your Honour. So a Merry Christmas for Mistress Therese is what I'll be drinking this year."

"Yes, yes, Merry Christmas, Your Honour!" the men chorused as they tramped down the stairs.

She was clearing the glasses when Timko appeared with the post. Mostly Christmas cards, pretty things she loved to get and that she would hang with the girls' cards over the fire. There was also a perfumed letter that she tore open eagerly.

My Dear,

The war is becoming such a bore. They had the bad taste to drop bombs on us yesterday. Fortunately they were not interested in the old city but seemed to be trying to hit the railway station. I can't say our hearts were full of martial vigour as we cowered in the cellar waiting for the planes to go away. The whole business is pointless and dirty. The prospect of the train journey home is just too awful to consider, so I am begging a place for Christmas with you and Franz at Montebello. I am planning to arrive on Friday, so please don't turn me away.

I must rush because there is a darling lieutenant who has promised to provide me with tickets, passes, escort, all the things a traveling girl needs. He comes from a poor local family and is quite unsuitable, but he is such an enthusiastic lover it's all I can do to hold myself back and look demure. After an afternoon with him I am exhausted; my knees are shaking, and minette is stretched and tingles as I walk. So I'm sure you'll understand why I must hurry off!

Please warn Franz and give my love to all the girls. I can't wait to see them all again, and especially the valiant Maria who skied all the way from Montebello to the North Pole for the sake of love.

See you soon, Wanda

The letter swept away Therese's sombre mood, and she ran to give Mefist the news.

The girls returned from skiing rosy cheeked and hungry. While they were changing for lunch, Portia came to her office. She wanted to ask for something but seemed embarrassed, so Therese took her for an early lunch. They sat together across the long table, and Portia settled into her bread and gulas soup. The kitchen had taken pity on the children, and as soon as her plate was empty, another appeared. She continued eating as if the first helping had never existed. She was already looking healthier, and she had colour in her cheeks.

"I like your girls, Mistress. They're not like any others I've met. They're real ladies. Can we stay here? I'm happy to work just like they do."

"But Portia, you're only seventeen!"

"Makes no difference, Mistress. I've been earning money with my dupka for a lot longer than any of them have. How do you think we got here? You don't earn much money from ordinary folks by dancing, Mistress, no matter how you try. I'm good at it, too. The men always want to come back to me."

Therese was shocked. She had never met a prostitute before. Then she caught herself; she'd never met a *professional* prostitute before. Portia treated the whole business in such a matter-of-fact manner.

Therese thought about what she had said. "Portia, my dear, if you and your brother behave yourselves, you can stay as long as you need. If the girls like you, you can be part of our little family, but, listen to me: I don't

want you involved in any part of the girls' business. You and Othello can help out; perhaps play us music and dance, but no men. Is that clear?"

"But why not, Mistress?"

Why not? thought Therese—how can I explain? "It's because they're nuns." Portia looked at her with questions all over her face. "I know it sounds stupid. Nuns shouldn't be doing that sort of thing, but the army forced us into it. I ordered them to do it. If you come and join them freely...well, I don't know. It's not the same and it wouldn't be right. Can you understand?"

"I don't mind, Mistress. It's nothing to me, no matter how many men there are, so long as they don't beat me and do crazy things."

Therese reached out and touched her cheek. "Listen to me—no! That's it. Stay here; eat and get your strength back. Help me and dance for us. That's enough. And if you want, I can ask the girls to give you proper reading lessons. Othello too, if he wants it. Now eat up your gulas. There's pork and bigos coming."

Therese begged a fiddle from the Convent and brought it to the club that afternoon. Othello's eyes widened as he reached for it and plucked the strings. "Oh, Mistress! Now we'll have some music!"

Portia came running from the back as he struck up a gypsy tune. Therese stood in the doorway of her office and watched as Portia strutted out in front of him with hands on hips, stamped her foot and started to dance. A wild and primitive dance, her hair and skirt flying as she whirled and pirouetted. The rhythm of her feet was infectious and the girls began to clap with the music. Portia whirled to a halt with a final stamp and a dramatic pose, and the girls cheered her and reached out to pat her back. Therese thought hard for a moment, and called the girls around her.

When Rebecca had finished her work, Therese traveled down to the village with her. She had an appointment with Mrs. Pankova.

Wanda looked a picture as she stepped off the train. Her fur coat was tailored to a nicety and her winter boots heeled and stylish, quite unlike the thick and heavy boots that kept Therese's feet warm. She was smiling widely, and her eyes sparkled. Her hair fell about her face and blended with the dark brown fur. Therese ran to hug her and whisk her away to the castle.

The girls would not let her rest but hung onto her arms and competed for her attention until Therese chased them away and took her to the refectory for lunch.

"So? Franz has been writing to me, but I still can't work out if you've managed to get into his bed yet. I've asked him directly, but he just doesn't answer that bit of my letters. So I'll ask you; what have you been doing with Franz?"

Therese blushed and avoided Wanda's eyes. She did not know what she could say.

"Therese, what have you been doing? You're turning red, so I know you've been trying something naughty."

"Nothing really. He comes to the club sometimes and takes me to my office to sit for a while."

"To sit and do what? Answer me, you bad girl!"

"It's nothing. Honestly. We haven't done it..."

"And why not? What did I tell you on the railway station when I was leaving? Really, I'm disappointed in you. I was so hoping to have you as a sister-in-law."

"I can't, Wanda. No, it's the truth. I can't. I'm still a nun inside, I swear it. I've got a duty to see the girls through this without thinking about anything else. I've got a letter from the Bishop that says we can go back to being proper nuns when it's all finished. I'm still pure—no, not pure. No normal person is completely pure, but I'm not very sinful. I haven't given myself to Mefist or anyone else."

Wanda just looked at her with a half-smile on her face.

"It's true! As long as we don't choose to do this, don't do it from free will, we're safe. We can go back to being nuns again." She did not want to talk about what the guarantee had cost, or the Bishop's private letter, or the enquiries that Rebecca's father was making. Suddenly, under Wanda's amused gaze, she was no longer sure of what she was doing or why she was doing it.

"Oh well," said Wanda, "we'd better eat, drink, and be merry today. Tomorrow Therese and all my friends might turn back into nuns again. What a terrible idea!"

## Chapter 36

Therese had expected Wanda to spend some time alone with Mefist, but after a happy, talkative evening in the club, she came with Therese to bed. She rushed from the bathroom without a dressing gown, dived into bed, and wrapped Therese's arms around her to warm up.

"Ooooh!" she shivered. "Castles in winter! However did people live before there were radiators? Squeeze me; I'm still freezing."

Cuddling Wanda felt nice. She felt rounded and soft, and her fragrance made Therese's head spin. She pulled Wanda's hips harder into her lap and then reached up to pull her back into the warmth. A shiver ran through the vibrant body, and Wanda sighed. "Oh, that's better. You're absolutely the best pillow, and I was so cold!"

Therese felt the soft roundness of Wanda's breast under her arm. The hard button of her nipple was trapped beneath Therese's wrist. It grew in her mind, and she loosened her grip to touch it and run a fingernail around the edges. "Mmh," said Wanda, "that's nice. Do it some more." Therese cupped the breast in her hand and started to pull and twist at the nipple with her finger and thumb.

"Mmh, so good," she murmured. "You could make me come just doing that. Oh, yes. That's right. Don't stop." She held her hand over Therese's and wriggled onto her back. She reached around Therese with her free hand and pulled her head to rest on her shoulder. She released the hand that she had held trapped at her breast. "Go on; don't stop. I'm enjoying it."

It felt good to rest her head on Wanda's shoulder and feel her warmth and vivacity under her cheek. Teasing Wanda's nipple felt good too; she enjoyed the giving of pleasure and the small noises Wanda was making in her throat. She moved across to the other nipple, to tease it into an equally hard peak.

"Oh, Therese, I love it when you do nice things to me. You must drive Franz wild."

"He won't let me do anything to him. He plays with me and makes me come again and again, but he won't let me touch him."

"Why ever not? Have you tried?"

"Well, yes, but he says I can't because I might lose control and make love to him."

"That doesn't sound such a bad thing."

"I suppose you're right, but he says he won't listen to me when I'm crazy with sex. That's all very polite, but I can't imagine asking him outright when I'm not crazy. He should be asking me, anyway."

"Oh, the pair of you are made for each other! You won't make love unless he pushes you into it, and he won't push you because you think you want to be a nun again. You're both crazy. Aah, don't stop doing that. Franz doesn't know what he's missing. So what does he do to you, alone in your office?"

"Well, he puts our names in the book, and then he takes me to my office and he looks at me."

"Looks at you? That doesn't seem like much."

"You don't understand; he looks at me with no clothes on! It gets me all confused. He looks right at my—my thing, and says nice things about it. He sat me on my desk and looked right up inside me once, and just the thought of it made me come!"

"Really? That's excellent. There's hope for you yet. I know it does funny things to me too when the right man looks at me so closely. Then when they lick you, mmh, heavenly! That's the best! Has he done that to you yet?"

"No. He breathed on me once, but it started me coming so much I didn't know what I was doing."

"Oh, Therese! He breathed on you! How could he stop himself? He should have pushed it into you right then. I know I would have done."

"No. When I relaxed again, he just laid me on the desk and kissed memy mouth, I mean—and that was nice. If I'm honest, he could to anything to me and I'd let him. I'd enjoy it, I'm sure, but he won't do it because he knows I can't. I really like Mefist."

Wanda reached for her and placed a kiss on her lips. "Mmh, sweet," she said and reached for another. This time she held Therese to her to suck and nibble at her lips. It felt delicious, and at the touch of Wanda's tongue, Therese opened her mouth to let it in.

Wanda's hand behind her head slackened, but still Therese kissed on. Wanda took the hand from her breast and moved it down across her stomach. Therese made no resistance and when Wanda stopped guiding her, she moved on across the plains of her stomach to the small brush that graced her mound. "Oh, yes," sighed Wanda as she felt the fingertips brush her lips. "Do you let Franz do this to you too?"

"Sometimes. It's very exciting when he does it."

It was good to have Wanda trembling to her touch, and Therese dipped her fingers down between her open thighs. Wanda's sex felt soft and full, and she tried to clasp it in her hand. Wanda groaned as she squeezed and lifted her hips up. "Aah, yes!" she muttered, "Do it to me, please. Love me, Therese."

Therese could feel moisture in the palm of her hand—it was Wanda's excitement. She reached deeply between Wanda's thighs with her middle finger to touch her behind her sex. She slowly trailed her finger up and immediately fell into Wanda's wet softness. It was warm and very slippery. She touched Wanda's entrance and she could feel it kissing and sucking her fingertip, inviting it to dive deep inside.

Therese left the invitation and moved very slowly upwards, her finger wrapped in Wanda's soft, wet folds. She reached the magic button and, pressing firmly, drew the length of her finger along it as she pulled out of Wanda's furrow. The effect was electric. Wanda was hanging on to her and kissing her, rigid as she pushed her hips up and opened her legs as widely as she could. She was shuddering with orgasm, and Therese felt alarmed at what she had done.

Her alarm turned to pleasure as Wanda collapsed with a sigh. "Oh Therese! That was wonderful, and so quick! Now I'm going to do it to you." But she looked so completely relaxed that Therese would not allow it.

"No. Not tonight. Tonight it's my turn, so you just lie there and let me do what I want." She bent to kiss her again. Wanda was soft and yielding as Therese leaned over her. She lay open for Therese to take, waiting to surrender everything. Therese lowered her kisses to reach her nipples.

Wanda slowly rocked from side to side as Therese plundered her breasts. Wanda seemed lost in a dream, and Therese wondered what she was feeling. Therese lowered herself again to trail kisses across Wanda's stomach to the tuft of wiry hair. She kissed and rested her cheek on it. Wanda was hot and exciting. Her perfume filled Therese's mind as her lithe body heaved up and down beneath her cheek.

Wanda's thighs were spread wide, and Therese moved to lie on her stomach between them. Wanda's sex lay open in front of her but despite the bedclothes being thrown back, she could see nothing. "Light," she said, "Turn on the light!"

"Don't stop," pleaded Wanda, lifting her hips, "Don't-oh, light. Yes, but don't stop."

In the glow of the bedside light, Therese stared at Wanda's sex. It was wide open for her. The full outer lips had opened and flattened as Wanda spread herself wide. In the furrow between them, Wanda's clitoris hid like a covered finger. Below it her inner lips gaped open and Therese looked into Wanda's wet, sugar-pink heart. As she watched, the closed entrance of her tunnel tightened on itself and relaxed again. It was wet with slippery excitement. Therese reached out a fingertip, and the pink mouth immediately swallowed it. "Aah! More!" said Wanda.

Ignoring her need, Therese removed her finger and reached up for her clitoris. The cover moved freely over the hard shaft beneath. She pushed up, and the hard pink pearl peeped out at her. Experimentally, she slid the cover up and down. Wanda moaned. Using both thumbs, Therese forced the hood back as far as it would go. The button stood proud, and she reached for it with her tongue.

Wanda's hips tipped backwards and forwards as Therese licked her clitoris rhythmically. She was panting and moaning and Therese could not guess what she felt. Still licking the exposed button, she moved to stir Wanda's entrance again. Two fingers slipped easily inside, and Therese reached in as far as she could.

Wanda was open for her, and welcomed her as she pumped her fingers in and out. Wanda was crying, "No, no, stop!" but she was pulling Therese's head into her, not pushing it away. Therese had all four fingers inside her now and pumped and licked as fast as she could. It was difficult to follow Wanda's gyrating hips.

Wanda's cries reached a crescendo, and Therese pushed into her for the last time. She sucked Wanda's clitoris into her mouth and bit down hard on it with covered teeth. Wanda's thighs were crushing her, and her mouth was being pulled hard into Wanda's sex by her hands behind her head. They had welded into one rigid, unmoving statue as Wanda rode wave after wave of pleasure.

Slowly Wanda started to relax. "Don't move, don't move," she begged. "Aah! Oh Jesu!" She shuddered uncontrollably as Therese released her tormented button. "Aah! No! Don't move! It's too much." Therese left her fingers inside, feeling the spasms running through Wanda's sex. As they became less frequent, she slowly pulled her fingers out, feeling the tunnel close behind her. Cruelly, she trailed the departing fingers up over Wanda's button. "Aah!" she cried, grabbing for them, "Please, no more."

Therese lay on her back in the dark with her arm around Wanda. Her hand cupped Therese's breast but had no sexual intent. Wanda was exhausted, and Therese felt proud. It was good to make love to the girl now resting on her shoulder, good to give so much pleasure to someone you loved.

The next morning Therese rose alone, leaving Wanda curled up and sleeping deeply.

The girls were cleaning when she got to the club. Today would be busy, but she wanted them to get some fresh air. When they had finished cleaning, she chased them out with their skis and told them not to come back before lunch.

Wanda turned up about ten o'clock, still looking sleepy. Maria had left her croissants on one of the tables, and Therese went to the bar to make coffee. Wanda brought the croissants and sat on the other side of the bar to watch. Standing on the rail of her barstool, she reached to grab Therese by the ears and pull her across for a kiss. "You were wonderful last night. I haven't felt anything like that for—I don't know how long. Thank you, and next time it will be my turn."

"You're feeling well this morning? I didn't hurt you?"

"Hurt me? Oh, you mean inside! No, of course not. When I'm so excited you can put your whole hand in."

"A whole hand?" Therese winced at the thought. "That must hurt!"

"Oh no. Not if you're all excited and wet. You just feel very full, and it's unbelievably exciting to have your lover's hand moving around inside you. You should try it!"

Therese thought of her sex stretching around Wanda's hand or Mefist's, and rejected the idea. Wanda might be elastic enough to manage, but Therese was quite sure she was not. "What are you doing today? You could join the girls out skiing if you like."

"I thought I was going to stay with you. Sit and chat, you know."

"Sorry, my love, but after lunch the club is closed. We're preparing a little surprise for the men, and you, of course. Would you be very upset if I asked you to meet a couple of my protégés? They'll take care of you all afternoon, and I know they'll jump at the chance to meet a fine city lady. Just don't tell them what you get up to at night; I've got my reputation to think of."

As it was Saturday, the General's office was preparing to finish work at twelve o'clock. Therese took Wanda to visit the General and then introduced her to Rebecca, who was happy to take Wanda down to the village to meet Jana. Before she left, Rebecca reached into her handbag and gave Therese a sealed envelope.

Therese carried the envelope back to her office before opening it. It contained a telegram from Mr. Isaacs to Rebecca. It was short and economical. It simply stated, *The name on the account you have queried is Herbert Adler love Papi*.

Therese thoughtfully put the envelope in her desk. Bishop Adler was not being honest with her or the Church.

# **Chapter 37**

Therese stood in darkness outside the door to the officers' mess. Around her the girls clustered, silent but nervously rustling in their costumes. They had been waiting for a long time, certainly more than ten minutes, and the tension was making her sick. Then, at last, the door latch clicked and it opened a little.

"Therese?" asked Mefist. "Oh, there you are. All ready? Good, the stage is yours..."

Her stomach twisting inside her, Therese stepped into the light. The room was quiet and expectant. The dining tables were arranged along the walls, as they had been that long-ago evening when Maria had come to be punished. The men clutched their wine glasses and looked already merry. In the centre of the table, in the seat of honour, sat Wanda with the General relegated to her right hand. Therese pushed herself to the centre of the room, and Wanda started to applaud.

Everyone was clapping and denying her the opportunity to start. Then someone called, "She's wearing a dress!," and laughter and catcalls followed.

She held up her hands to quieten them. "My Lady, gentlemen, please! Let me have some quiet."

"She's still wearing a dress," came the complaint, this time in a hoarse whisper.

"And so I am," she said defiantly. "I shall keep wearing it until someone makes it worth my while to take it off!"

The room filled with more applause, and the men shouted, "Mefist! Tell her to take it off! Mefist! She's not listening to us!"

Mefist stood wearily to address the table. "Gentlemen, we all know Madam Therese, and I can assure you that underneath that beautiful exterior is a will of purest steel. If the lady insists on wearing a dress, not even I could charm it off her. So you may as well keep quiet and let's see what she's got for us. Go on, Therese!"

"My Lady, gentlemen," she started again, "Christmas is nearly here and it's time to think happy thoughts and enjoy ourselves. So the Sisters of Montebello have prepared a small musical revue which they will present for your amusement."

"In dresses?"

"Of course, gentlemen, in dresses. We don't want you to disgrace yourself in front of your distinguished guest, do we? Of course not. And now, to start our evening, we have two professional performers, fresh from Bucharest, singing a song about a poor shepherd and a gypsy princess...Othello and Portia!"

Therese left, and in came the youngsters, Othello darkly handsome in a loose blouse and tight black trousers; Portia with a long flowing skirt and white blouse decorated with ribbons. She had large golden hoops in her ears and silk flowers in her hair. As Therese watched through the crack of the door, Othello gave his fiddle a final tune and played a pregnant arpeggio. Portia started into a Roma song full of the sadness of young love and the wildness of the gypsy people. Othello's playing was infectious, and Therese could see the men at their tables nodding and tapping their fingers to the rhythm.

When the song ran down, there was applause and cheerfulness but no real enthusiasm. Therese did not worry. That would come later. Portia rushed offstage as Helena and Therese entered.

"There you are, gentlemen. Isn't it nice to have some culture sometimes? However, now we've exhausted your capacity for romance, we'd better offer you something else. First, meet Helena, most of you know her very well." She paused for the cheers of appreciation. "I could even say that most of you know her *intimately* well." There were more cheers and laughter. Helena was always popular, if only because she could always be relied upon to blush, as she was doing now. "Anyway, Helena has been playing with Othello..."

"Lucky Othello!" and laughter drowned everything.

"Helena has been playing *music* with Othello, and I think you'll like it. Play them something!"

Helena looked at Othello nodding his head to catch the beat and thumped into the familiar rhythm of Offenbach's can-can. The door swung open and a line of all the girls and Portia danced in, shoulder-to-shoulder and kicking high. They all wore the simple colourful skirts that Mrs. Pankova had run up, and their kicking showed off their petticoats and frilly knickers. The men cheered and shouted as the line danced into the room, paused and reversed out again. The door slammed shut and the music stopped abruptly. The men banged the table and shouted for more, but Therese was adamant.

"No, no, no! If you are well-behaved, and if you make us welcome, then perhaps I shall ask them to come back, but for the moment we are going to call on our real actors to give us a small piece of culture, the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet. Here are Portia and Othello!"

They were welcomed in with applause, and their audience sat spellbound as players who lived rather than acted their parts brought the familiar words to life. Therese and the girls listened with pride as they were applauded off the stage.

"Very well, gentlemen, you seem to have a spark of romance buried somewhere inside those uniforms. Shall I ask the can-can dancers to return? No, it's too early in the evening, and we have another drama for you.

"As you all know, we have a very brave young lady among us. A lady who was brought to this very place not so long ago to have her bottom admired by you all." Catcalls and demands for Nielsen to re-enact the event that caused the problem. "Hush, gentlemen. Now, without this lady's knowledge or approval, we have prepared a dramatization of her journey into the forest. As she has not seen it herself, I shall call her out to watch. Come on in, Maria!"

Maria appeared at the door. She stumbled as she was thrown into the room by her colleagues, and the door slammed shut behind her. She was still wearing her can-can costume. The room clapped and laughed as Therese gave her centre stage, and she bowed, grinning with embarrassment.

Therese came and put her arm around her shoulders. "Of course, there is another player from the drama here tonight—Major Lamoreaux." More cheers and claps, and demands for a speech. "Major, you mustn't be upset with our little play, because we all love you, but remember! Warriors who forget themselves far enough to be rescued by fair maids should expect a

little mockery, even from their friends. So, take care of Maria while we play, and don't be too cross with us. Let the play begin, in the forest somewhere high above Montebello..."

The lights were cut and when they came on again, the Major was leading a troop of soldiers through the snow. They climbed hard as they skied uphill without skis or sticks. The major was played by Portia, their smallest girl. She acted the part with no more aid than a painted moustache. She shouted at her complaining men, heaping insult after insult on their heads, and they replied with complaints and scurrilous comments about the Army and the officers who had sent them there. Following real life, the time came for Portia to disappear into the bushes. She left the soldiers waiting and slipped away through the door. The offstage noises that followed were very loud and very disgusting. The audience was nearly falling from its chairs at the grotesque, amplified farting and dramatic groans, followed by the reluctance of the soldiers to go and look for their officer afterwards. Watching Wanda and the General supporting each other with tears in their eyes, Therese found it hard not to collapse herself.

The next scene showed Maria (played by the tall, slim Agata with her drawers packed with a false bottom) mourning over her lost lover, and finally deciding to go and rescue him. She packed an insane range of useful items into her bag and set off into the forest. As Maria skied into the forest, Therese narrated and the girls offstage provided the sound effects. Maria suffered through storms, winds, wolves and wild pigs until at last she threw herself onto the ground to die. At this point the partisans found her and dragged her out of the room by her feet.

The bandit king and the Major were found sitting by the fire and sharing a large venison bone when Maria was dragged in, still pulled by her feet. The Major rushed to her and helped her up. They embraced, something made more difficult because Portia only came up to Agata's chest. She was tired and cold so the Major took her to the cave, behind a blanket held up by two girls. As soon as they were out of sight, the blanket started to shake wildly. There were shouts of delight, and pieces of female underwear started to appear over the top of the blanket.

Eventually the Major reappeared and started to negotiate for the return of Maria. The Major found it necessary to make several visits to the cave as they negotiated, with the accompanying noise and fuss of course, until the bandit king finally settled on the rank of lieutenant in the Militia as a suitable price for releasing his hostage.

Therese loved the applause and laughter and saw with relief that the Major and Maria were enjoying the show as much as anyone.

Therese quietened them down. "Well, gentlemen, you have been present at the first performance of a work that will undoubtedly be talked about for many years into the future. Now it's definitely time for the can-can girls again. If you can put that one down, Major...."

The line danced vigorously into the room again, presenting wild female legs and frilly knickers to the audience. They left, the audience shouting for more, but the next act was Portia dancing a sort of flamenco to the music of Othello on the guitar. That was impressive and unlike anything Therese had seen before.

Othello set aside his guitar and the pair of them danced a tango to Helena's playing, a dramatic, sliding, sensuous dance that held everyone's attention. The applause was loud, but Portia cut it short as she ran for her costume change.

The can-can line started to thunder into the room again, and this time the men were whooping and cheering. From where she stood, Therese could not see what had caused the excitement. She worked her way up behind the tables toward Mefist. When she looked back, she realized with a start that the frilly knickers were missing. She knew that can-can dancing without knickers was a gentleman's dream from the last epoch; clearly the idea had lost none of its attraction. Portia, at the end of the line, was knickerless too, but Therese did not have the heart to disapprove.

# **Chapter 38**

All the world loves Christmas, and everyone carries in their hearts memories of songs and traditions that make the dream come true. In Therese's heart there lived the carols of her childhood and remembrance of family meals that had not changed for all her youth. The big break had come when she joined the Convent. Now Montebello was part of her spirit of Christmas, but it had yet to overlay the memory of the child. At least she no longer suffered the bitter sense of loss she had experienced at her first Christmas as a nun.

As always, the castle staff gathered outside the castle gate. Those who lived with their wives and children in the village had walked up, and they stood red-faced, breathing steam into the icy air. Below them the black village with its three church towers stood in shining white fields. Despite the lateness of the hour, lights shone in the windows and people hurried in the streets.

Normally, Therese and the girls would have been with the nuns, but this year they stood with the expectant crowd at the gate. She represented the Count and the family. Wanda waited beside her in her warm fur coat. Therese looked around and smiled at familiar faces in unfamiliar clothes. Rebecca was there, standing with her father. It must have been a battle for her to persuade him to come, but they had come, and Therese went to shake his hand and welcome him.

The chapel bell started to strike nine o'clock, and the villagers hushed expectantly. Straining their ears, they listened for the nuns, and at last the distant voices could be heard singing *Adeste Fideles*. Slowly the singing grew louder until the nuns appeared, bearing lanterns and following a cross. The procession turned without stopping and led them into the castle and on to the refectory.

The refectory had been decorated with ribbons and pine branches. The tables were all laid, and wine and candles waited. Sister Brigitta stood grandly at the centre of her table with the nuns at her sides and waited for the families to find places and receive her blessing. Therese was pleased to see that Wanda and the girls had been separated in the rush and were spread around the tables. She sat next to Mr. Isaacs to make sure he felt welcome, but Rebecca had chosen to sit with Helena and the kitchen staff, freed from their duties for one evening of the year.

After the blessing the nuns went to bring the first of the long procession of meatless dishes that made up the traditional Christmas Eve feast. The men had opened the wine bottles, and everyone had a full glass in front of them. When the nuns started to ladle out the spicy fish soup, people reached for the bread and settled down to enjoy themselves.

Therese too was enjoying herself. Sitting with the staff and not with the nuns was more fun. It felt pleasant to drink wine with her neighbours and admire their children. It was stimulating to have a Jew by her side at this most Christian of times and to make him welcome. The war was invisible for a while, and the big family of the castle could celebrate in peace.

The Isaacs surprised her by coming on to the midnight Mass that followed the feast. On normal Sundays, Therese and the girls always stood in the gallery at the back of the church where they could be part of the service without intruding on the nuns' devotions. Tonight they went again to the gallery as a matter of habit and took Rebecca and Mr. Isaacs with them. The two of them watched solemnly as the timeless service slowly progressed.

Therese went to the castle gate to wave goodbye to the people facing the long walk back down to the village. At least the road ran downhill and they had the company of friends. Then the girls hurried her and Wanda up to the club to open their presents.

Therese went to bed replete. Her friends were her family. Wanda was snuggled up drowsily beside her. Tomorrow the officers' mess would treat them all to dinner and they would be caressed and feted like princesses. She went quietly to sleep.

Reality did not intrude into Montebello for several days; then Mefist came to her office in the morning to interrupt her letter writing.

"Things are not looking very favourable, my love. There's going to be a peace congress in Budapest on the second of January. It looks as if the war is ending."

"Ending? Oh, that's wonderful! Peace at last!"

"Well-maybe. The Coalition is insisting on the conference, but from the Alliance only the Imperial Government is going. I think it will break the Alliance. France, Germany, Italy...what they'll do is anyone's guess. I don't even know if they'll do it together. And then there's England and America. They may want to get involved if Russia is too successful."

"But what will happen to us?"

"To the Army, you mean? Well, I don't know of course, but I should imagine that we'll be leaving the Grand Alliance and joining the Coalition Forces. I don't think they will demobilise us, not with the fighting still going on in the north. They'll be suspicious of us, of course. They won't trust people who've recently been fighting against them, so I expect they'll use us for administrative and security purposes in occupied areas, second-class things like that."

"I don't care. If it means that you and the others can stop fighting, it's a good thing."

"Perhaps you're right. So I suppose that soon I'll have to pack my bags and give you back the keys to the castle."

"But Mefist, you can't go so quickly! We still need you here!"

"Sorry, my love, but I expect the Army will have other ideas."

She was still sitting alone, absorbing Mefist's news, when more trouble appeared at her doorstep. Maria came in and shut the door behind her, a clear warning of problems.

As she sat, Therese could see she had been crying. "What is it, Maria? What's happened?"

"Nothing, Mistress," she said in a small voice. "That's the problem. My period. I think I'm pregnant."

Therese was shocked. "But, Maria! How could that have happened? Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I can feel it." She started to cry again. "I know I said I wanted a baby, but like this? What will I do, Mistress?"

"How did it happen? Didn't you always use protection?"

"Not always, Mistress. I forgot to take condoms with me when I went to Lamoreaux in the forest, and we did it lots of times there. There was nothing else to do, it was so cold outside," she ended lamely.

Therese thought for a while and then said, "Go to your room now. I want you to wash your face and cheer up. Put some makeup on and dress properly. You always wanted a baby, and now you've got one coming. That's good! Don't worry about things. I'll make sure that this will be something you'll enjoy now and into the future. Off you go."

Pleased to be doing something after Mefist's news, she scribbled a note and went looking for a girl to deliver it.

Only a quarter of an hour later, Lamoreaux tapped at her door. He was smartly dressed and wearing his cap. A written order from Colonel von Falberg had surprised him, but then he had realised that a formal summons from Therese could only mean trouble.

"Come in, Major." She looked at him standing to attention in front of her desk and did not invite him to sit. "Major, I want to know your intentions towards Maria. You are quite likely to be leaving Montebello soon, and I want to know what you intend to do."

The Major was taken by surprised. Therese acting like a mother hen was the last thing he had expected. "Er, Your Honour, it's very difficult."

"Difficult? You're not married already, are you? So what's difficult?"

"No, Your Honour, I'm not married. The trouble is Maria—she says she's too busy to marry at the moment."

"Very well. Suppose I managed to change her mind. What would you propose to do with her?"

"Oh, we'd go back to Alsace to live."

"What do you have in Alsace? Can you afford to support her?"

"That's not a problem. I have a small estate there and that brings a good income. More than enough to live on, and I have some investments too. I don't need to stay in the Army."

"How much do your investments bring in?"

"Oh, Your Honour..." He was reluctant to discuss his finances with a lady, but when Therese frowned at him, he continued, "They brought about seventy thousand francs last year. It'll be less this year, because of the war of course, but still over fifty thousand. Probably nearer sixty thousand, and

the estate brings in another forty or fifty thousand including rents. So I can take care of her."

"Very well. Just supposing I persuaded her to change her mind, what sort of settlement would you give her?"

"Settlement? I hadn't thought, Your Honour."

"Of course she needs a settlement! She has no family, no money of her own, she needs a settlement. So how much will you be giving her?"

"Er, Your Honour, I have no idea of what is proper."

"I see. Then give her forty thousand. Of her own, in her own bank account, understand?"

"Forty thousand! But-yes, Your Honour. Forty thousand."

"Don't be so mean, man! It's not as if you're losing it; you're marrying her after all, so you may as well marry someone with money. Now get along to her room and ask her to marry you."

Lamoreaux saluted and turned for the door. As he left, Therese called him back. "Major, on your knees. It has to be done on your knees!"

Therese listened as he walked up the corridor and tapped on Maria's door. She heard Maria invite him in. Seconds later the door was thrown back with a crash and Maria came running to her office. Ignoring politeness, she threw herself at Therese to hug and kiss her. She was crying again, but now for happiness.

"Enough, enough! You should be kissing Lamoreaux, not me. Now the pair of you run along to Father Mendel. Tell him I want a marriage on, let's see, the second of January. We'll start the New Year with a wedding!"

## **Chapter 39**

After lunch Therese was passing the end of the corridor of officers' bedrooms, and by chance she looked up the corridor. She caught a glimpse of Wanda stepping into the General's room and the door swinging closed behind her. Therese could not resist teasing her when she lay in bed that night with her head on Wanda's shoulder.

"Well why not?" asked Wanda. "I was just giving him a little Christmas present."

"Just Christian charity?"

"Well, something like it. He's a nice old man and he does love ladies."

"Did he like his Christmas present?"

"Of course, but he's not my favourite old man anymore."

"Why ever not? Didn't you enjoy it?"

"Oh yes, he's quite good at it, but he said I was just as good as your girls. How dare he! I should be much better."

Therese laughed. "Perhaps he thinks of them as professional, and didn't want to insult you."

"Maybe that's the reason, but I'm sure none of them can do it as well as I can. I've had years of practice and they're nuns, for goodness sake."

"Ah, but they had such a good teacher! You must have given them confidence. You should be proud of them."

Wanda would not be mollified. "I'm still not forgiving him until he admits that this afternoon was the best he's had since he got here. I got him so excited he did it twice. I bet he doesn't do that very often."

Therese was amused at Wanda's hurt pride. She also felt insatiably curious about Wanda's sex-life. "What's it like, Wanda? I mean, what does it feel like?"

"You mean, with the General?"

"No, I mean normally, with anyone. I've never done it, don't forget."

"Oh, I never forget! Franz doesn't let me. But when he complains, I tell him to stop complaining and just do it with you, but you know what he's like. You're turning him into a walking time bomb, but I'm not letting him use me to let off steam. That's your job."

Therese did not like to discuss Mefist even with Wanda, so she persisted with her original question. "So, what does it feel like?"

"Mmh, it's difficult to explain, really. A bit like describing colours to a blind man. You know what it feels like when we do it? Well, it's sort of like that but different. It's not just having something inside you shuttling backwards and forwards as fast as it can, although that feels good too. It's the fact that it's a man on top of you. They're so big and hard and strong, and greedy too. Once they get inside you, there's nothing that's going to hold them back. They just keep hammering away at you, fast or slow, until they come. If he's good and has got you really going first, you can come too, but he doesn't worry about you. I don't think they care, they just keep going and if you're lucky, you can keep coming and coming. And then he comes and feeling it pumping inside you is fantastic. It usually makes me come again, feeling it jumping and twitching inside me. Believe me, if the man is right, there's nothing like it."

"You make it sound very good."

"Oh, it is! When everything's right, it's the best feeling in the world. You've got to try it. Even if you go back to being a nun, you've got to try it first. Mmh, you're getting me all excited just thinking about. Touch me, please." She took Therese's hand and drew it to her mound. "Oh yes! That's good. Stroke me, Therese." She held Therese's wrist and tried to force her hand lower.

She spread her knees and sighed as Therese's fingers started to tantalize her sex. There was a quiet knock at the door. Therese tried to pull her hand away, but Wanda held her in place.

"Who's there?" Therese asked.

"It's me, Mefist, Can I come in?"

"Come in, Franz," called Wanda. "It's not locked."

As Franz opened the door, Wanda moved her hand on top of Therese's and secretly clenched her fingers into her sex. "Can't sleep, Franz?"

He was wearing dressing gown and pyjamas. "No, I'm not sleepy. So I've come for a chat. You two look very beautiful in bed together." He settled into an armchair near the dying fire.

"Wouldn't you like to be where I am?" mocked Wanda. "What would you be doing then?" She was slowly moving Therese's hand up and down, keeping a gentle pressure on her clitoris.

"You'll have to ask Therese about that," he said calmly.

"Oh, come on, get into bed. You don't mind, do you, Therese? I'll make sure his dangerous bits don't get near you."

"No, I don't mind," she said and allowed herself to be shuffled sideways to make room on the other side of Wanda. Again she tried to rescue her hand, but Wanda did not set her free.

Mefist threw off his dressing gown and quickly stripped off his pyjamas. This was the first time Therese had seen his body. He looked white and lithe, and she had a quick glimpse of his rising sex springing from a nest of black hair as he slipped into bed beside Wanda. His weight moved the mattress as he settled in. Wanda sighed and released Therese's hand.

Therese dipped her fingers into Wanda's excited sex and caressed her with long strokes.

"Oh that's good," she purred. "That's just what I need."

Mefist must have realized something was happening, and Therese felt his fingers join hers. He reached deeper to probe inside Wanda but she was content to stay where she was, rubbing the clitoris that had grown hard and insistent under her fingers. In moments Wanda was twisting under them, shaking her head from side to side and panting. "Oh God! Oh God!" she moaned. "Ah! Stop–please stop."

Wanda lay panting between them. "That was very quick," said Mefist. "I think you must have started without me."

"It was nice. I really needed that. Do it to Therese. I want to watch." She pulled Therese over and rolled her into the space next to Mefist.

Therese lay on her back with their heads weighing heavy on her shoulders. Soft and hard, they pressed against her sides. Adding to Mefist's solidity, she could feel his rigid sex against her flank. Its tip was wet and slippery. Their hands were on her stomach and reaching up to capture her breasts. They pulled and teased her nipples and her excitement mounted rapidly. Wanda's soft lips were suckling at her breast, but Mefist reached up

for her mouth. He kissed her firmly, ravishing her mouth and using his tongue inside her.

Their hands were on her stomach and their knees were forcing her legs apart. She was trapped, thighs spread wide and unable to struggle. They were stroking her, teasing her, running their fingers over her sensitive skin but avoiding her sex. Closer and closer they came until their fingertips were brushing against her, tantalizing her and making her groan in frustration. At last they touched her, pulling on her delicate lips and spreading her wetness into every fold. Fingers penetrated her, stretching her open and reaching far inside. Fingers rubbed insistently on her clitoris—and she was coming. They held her pinned as she moaned and struggled in her orgasm.

As she started to relax, Wanda's fingers were still inside her. Her sex clenched on them, and Wanda wiggled her fingers in response. A trill of pleasure ran through her. "Stop, let me rest."

"Of course. It's Franz's turn now."

Mefist pulled her across him and settled into the centre of the mattress. It felt good to rest on his shoulder and feel his hard, muscular chest under her hand. Wanda threw back the top of the covers. "Look!" she commanded.

Mefist's sex lay on his belly, staring up at them with its one blind eye. It looked big and threatening. Therese reached out to touch it and it jumped up to meet her hand. She gripped it and it filled her hand. Slowly she pulled the skin back and let the purple head shine. "Aaah!" said Mefist.

Wanda's hand joined her and together they moved up and down. Mefist moved restlessly beneath them, heaving and stretching as the pressure mounted.

"Stop," whispered Wanda, "Not too soon. Here-sit on it."

She offered his sex to Therese. Therese pushed herself up and looked at the pillar in Wanda's hand, its swollen head slowly appearing and disappearing as its sheath slid back and forth. It was big and strong, powerfully rooted in its mass of wild black hair. Her sex squeezed; she was ready for him. "No–no. I can't..."

"Go on. Look, it's crying for you."

She was staring at it, a rabbit frozen before a snake. "No. I can't. Please don't make me."

"Don't force her, Wanda. You do it," ordered Mefist.

Wanda looked at his swollen sex and then up at Therese. "You don't mind?"

"No, I don't mind. Do it to him. He needs you."

She moved aside as Wanda threw back the blankets and came to him. Kneeling on one knee over him, she guided his point into her and slowly sank down onto it. "Oh Jesu! Oh, that's it."

Mefist threw the pillows onto the floor so he could lie back flat. His hands went to Therese's hips and he was pulling her, drawing her over him until she knelt above his face. In front of her, holding her own breasts and with her eyes half-closed, Wanda was slowly lifting herself and dropping back onto Mefist. Under her Therese could see his sex, wet and shiny as it was drawn out of her and then swallowed up again as she fell back on to him.

Mefist pulled on her hips, forcing her to spread her knees and lower herself until she was kissing his face with her sex. She shuddered as his tongue snaked through her folds and dived inside her. He still pulled down on her hips and she let herself sink further until she was pressing him into the mattress. In front of her, Wanda watched. Therese could see Mefist moving rapidly underneath her now, thrusting into Wanda as his tongue reached into her. She fell forward into Wanda's arms and started to rotate her sex on his face. Almost immediately she was coming again, an orgasmic wave rolling over her. Wanda was holding her up, supporting her while Mefist worked beneath them both.

She was vaguely aware that Wanda had stopped moving and was letting Mefist thrust harder and faster into her. All the time his tongue worked, driving Therese from climax to climax as he rolled his face in her. The waves were coming faster and faster, scrambling her senses until in a final despairing effort she threw herself sideways and collapsed trembling onto the bed. Beside her Mefist had arched his body and was lifting Wanda high into the air. She had her head thrown back and gyrated on his hungry pivot as she drew the last of her orgasm from him.

Some time later, Therese woke. They were moving beside her. Wanda was on her back, and between her upraised thighs, Mefist moved slowly in and out of her. Therese turned to them and Wanda pulled her into their warmth. Therese held her breasts and pulled and twisted her nipples. Then, as Mefist's movements became more deliberate, she slipped her hand down

to Wanda's centre, to where the slippery shaft was thrusting relentlessly in and out. It was thick and hard, and was stretching Wanda wide. Therese found her clitoris and started to rub in time with Mefist's movements. Wanda began to moan. Her excitement stirred Mefist, and he moved faster and more urgently.

Wanda began to pant and lifted her legs to cross them behind his back and draw him further into her. She was breathing in rough gasps. Therese's fingers were driving her frantic. Mefist accelerated until with a final thrust he slammed deep into her, trapping Therese's fingers between them. She could feel the throbbing of Wanda's sex as Mefist, taut and rigid, pumped his pleasure into her.

Therese fell asleep again in Wanda's arms, and when she woke in the morning, they were alone.

## Chapter 40

The Congress of Budapest went about its work quickly. The formal Armistice terms had been agreed and promulgated by the end of the first day. Now the people of the village and the castle waited by their radios to see what the changes would mean for them and their friends.

The General did not want Lamoreaux and his bride to get caught up in conflicting orders and on the day after their wedding, they boarded the train with papers routing them through Switzerland and France on their way to the Major's home. The whole castle stood in the courtyard to bid them farewell, and there was not a dry eye in the club.

Portia moved into Maria's old room. She wanted to live with the other girls even if she was not allowed to work with them.

The orders they had been dreading arrived two days later. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Carpathian Brigade was to report to barracks in Gyor for training and redeployment. They were to move immediately and report once Krasna Dolina had been cleared of Alliance Forces. The valley would come under the control of the Coalition's Military Administrative Area of Pannonia, and details would follow.

It appeared that in the valley of Krasna Dolina very little would change. The Imperial Army would be absorbed into the Coalition forces, but Montebello was still a strong point that would have to be occupied. One army unit would move out, another army unit would move in, and hopefully life would continue more or less as before. Perhaps the Coalition would assign Imperial troops to Montebello, rather than their trusted frontline forces that were needed in the north. It would be safer now as the fighting in the south had stopped. Only the northern front still had active fighting, and that was over the Carpathians and hundreds of kilometres away.

Movements started immediately. All available transport shuttled between Tergov and the train station as the few remaining troops were shipped out. The wagon park became a hive of activity as files and materials were loaded onto trucks and the Headquarters staff prepared to move. Moving home was the Army's natural business, and it shocked Therese to see how rapidly the rooms were emptied and how people had already left in spirit.

The club was full that evening, but subdued as the girls realised that they were being discarded and left behind. Therese went constantly from table to table, cheering them up and promising a meeting for tomorrow.

At last, Mefist came and took her to her office. Neither of them was in the mood for play and they sat quietly, chatting and thinking about the future. He had brought the money the girls had earned, sixty-three thousand crowns. She locked it in her drawer, and with a kiss and a hug they separated.

The soldiers had gone early the next morning, and the girls and castle staff waited at the gate as the General and last of the officers boarded their cars. Mefist came to her again and held her.

"Come back, Mefist. Promise me, come back and see me. As soon as you can." She was crying openly, not caring who saw her.

She could see he was affected, and his voice sounded hoarse when he said, "I'll be back. As soon as I can get leave, I'll be back." Then the General came to his shoulder, competing for her attention.

"Therese, my dear, it's time to go. I can't tell you what a delight you've made our stay here. It was something an old man could only dream of. I hope we meet again soon." He kissed her cheeks. "I don't know who'll be taking our place in Montebello, but I'll certainly keep an eye on you. I'll try to make sure you get someone sensible."

"Send him back, General. Please, send him back. I don't know what I'll do without him."

"Don't worry, my dear. If there's a way to send him here, he'll be back. Even if I have to send him back for my wristwatch!"

The small procession of staff cars eased down to the wagon park and swung down the hill towards the village. Suddenly the day grew very cold and very grey.

Before lunch, Therese went to sit in Timko's office. She did not open the door to her old room, the one that Mefist had used as a bedroom. It was only then she realised that she no longer had Maria to help her. She went looking for Rebecca and found her cleaning and tidying in the General's office. For the moment, at least, Rebecca could work for her and, between the two of them, they would have to get the castle running again.

The first thing she would have to do was to see Sister Brigitta and show her the Bishop's letter. She passed a message for her and sat reading the castle files while she waited. Timko had been tidier and more conscientious than his appearance suggested. The files were probably more up to date than when he had received them, and she quickly found the records of stocks and deliveries. It pleased her to see that they would be eating army food and burning army coal for some time into the future.

It was only when Sister Brigitta tapped at the door and walked straight in that she realized how long she had been waiting. Sister Brigitta must have been trying to make a point, and it was reinforced when she sat down without invitation. Oh dear, thought Therese, God give me patience.

"Mother Superior, it's good to see you again." She must be correct if she wanted to avoid a tantrum from Sister Brigitta. "I just wanted to discuss with you how we'll manage things over the next few days."

Sister Brigitta moved to the attack immediately. "Well, Miss Falberg, I don't think we'll have any difficulty. You have your duties as housekeeper for the Count, and we in the Convent have God's work to do."

It was never going to be easy to negotiate with Sister Brigitta, so Therese just pushed the Bishop's letter over to her. She read and her face turned white. "If you think you and your whores are going to return to the Convent, you're stupid as well as vile. I'm going to telephone the Bishop. He obviously doesn't know what you've been doing. You'll come into the Convent again over my corpse!"

Therese sighed and took the letter back. "Mother Superior, the decision is not in our hands. We will just have to do what the Bishop says, as always. However, for the moment there will be no change. My girls will stay where they are for a few days until the military situation is clear. Then those who wish to leave can do so safely. As for the rest, as I said, the Bishop will decide. I suggest you just carry on as if the Army were still here."

She brooded for a while after Sister Brigitta had left and then went looking for Rebecca. The sooner they started work, the better.

She was sitting at lunch with the girls when a figure in uniform appeared beside her. "Rado! You're back at last, and in uniform. Make room for him, girls. How's Jana and your father?"

Rado squeezed in and a plate appeared in front of him. "They're fine, Your Honour. I came up to ask if you needed anything now the Army's gone, and to deliver a telegram."

The envelope was addressed to 'Officer in Charge, Montebello Castle.' She opened it. It read:

In accordance with the terms of the executive order issued by the Peace Congress on 4<sup>th</sup> January instant transferring responsibility for the Krasna Dolina area to the Military Administrative Area of Pannonia, this is to inform you that the castle of Montebello is to be handed over intact and with all munitions and supplies to the relevant military forces.

Elements of the Strength through Toil Mechanised Infantry Regiment under the command of Brigadier General Strelnikov will relocate to Montebello Castle and take control.

All remaining Alliance forces should parade at the castle with arms stacked. Officers may retain their side arms. The entrances to the castle should be clearly marked with visible white flags to signify receipt of this order. Failure to follow these orders will be taken as a hostile action.

Col. Lipkin

Chief of Staff, Military Administrative Area of Pannonia, Szolnok

She passed the telegram to Rado. "I suppose this means you'd better move your men up here. Then you can surrender the castle and everyone will be happy. Do you think your men will mind? It shouldn't be for long. I'll get the foresters to put up some white flags immediately."

She decided to send Rebecca home early, and she left with the girls' money. It would be safer with Mr. Isaacs than loose in the castle.

Rado and his small band of men moved into the coach house that afternoon, and the sentry box was occupied again. A big white flag hung over the gate and smaller ones were tied to the trees at the entrance to the wagon park, and then they waited.

That evening Therese spent with the girls in the club. She showed them the Bishop's letter and asked who wanted to go back to the Convent. None of them did. They wanted, most of all, to return to their families for a holiday. Then they would spread their wings and take on the world. Go to Vienna to be near Wanda. Get married and have babies like Maria. Go to study music or medicine. None of them wanted to return to the Convent. Nor did they seem to care for Therese's future. They were young birds, and they were ready to fly from their nest.

# **Chapter 41**

The telephone gave them warning of the approaching troops and all the castle inhabitants, even Sister Brigitta and the nuns, gathered in the corners of the courtyard to watch their arrival. Therese had arranged for Mikhail to wait in the wagon park to reassure them. Rado stood to attention in the centre of the courtyard, in front of all eight of his men. They were all in uniform, but they did not look as if Sergeant Grossner had been taking care of them. Their carbines were stacked in two stands on either side of Rado. The spectators pressed themselves against the walls and left as much space as possible.

The tramp of marching feet sounded, coming to the gate below and on up to the courtyard. The Coalition troops looked battle-worn and professional. Their grey uniforms appeared baggy and strange after the well-tailored uniforms of the Imperial troops. They carried full packs, and items of equipment dangled around them. The rifles on their shoulders looked well-used. They were led by a tall, thin captain with a large pistol belted outside his greatcoat. Rado saluted as he approached and held the salute as the Coalition troops halted and wheeled to face him.

The Captain walked up to Rado and gave a casual salute. "Captain Stumpfl, Second Political Officer, Strength through Toil Regiment. And you are?"

"Lieutenant Krausov, Imperial Militia, Your Honour."

Rado had come on well, thought Therese, since the day he had first met her and driven her and Jana out of the village in a borrowed trap. Now he looks and behaves just like a soldier.

Captain Stumpfl scanned the men with an expression of distaste. "Do you trust your men, Lieutenant?" He clearly did not care if he was overheard.

"But of course, Your Honour."

"Perhaps that was the wrong question. Can I trust them?"

Rado was put out by his questions. "You can trust them with your life, Your Honour."

"I doubt it. Never mind. Dismiss them and order them back to normal duties."

"Beg pardon, Your Honour, are they to take their carbines?"

"Certainly not. I may return their arms after I have spoken to them individually. Get them moving. You go too. I'll send for you when I'm ready."

As Rado and his men left, the captain started to walk around the square with his hands clasped behind his back. He stared at the people, looking them up and down, with no hint of human contact in his face. He stopped in front of the nuns.

"Mother Superior Therese von Falberg?" he asked.

Sister Brigitta stepped forward. "Your Honour, I'm Mother Superior Brigitta. Falberg's over there."

"Very good. My information must be incorrect. Please take me inside and show me the facilities." He turned back to the courtyard. "The rest of you stay here until I return." Therese and the others stood uncomfortably in the cold, watching the soldiers watching them.

They returned in twenty minutes, too short a time to have covered the castle but obviously enough time for Captain Stumpfl to decide on his next move. He cleared a corner of the courtyard and started to call out names from the list he was now carrying. "Now, over here immediately, Therese Falberg, Agata Grunwald, Dorota Krawczyk, Meike Strechler—" Therese was shocked. He was calling out all the girls, even Portia. Sister Brigitta must have given him their names.

The girls crowded together behind Therese. "Captain, may I speak with you?"

Stumpfl came to her and without warning slapped her face. "Silence!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "All prisoners will be silent!"

"I am Colonel von Falberg to—" but another stinging slap ended her protest.

"Silence! Enemy prisoners have no rights! Sergeant, tie this noisy bitch up."

There was nothing she could do. Her eyes were weeping, her head was spinning and she could taste blood in her mouth. The girls had pulled her back into the crowd for protection. The sergeant came for her, and she eased the girls away and forced herself to stand upright.

"Beg pardon, Your Honour," said the sergeant quietly, "If you could turn around and give me your hands. That's it. Tight but not too tight. Sorry about this, Your Honour, but he gets like this sometimes. Best to go along with him."

Therese turned back to face Stumpfl, who was fumbling inside his coat for another list. "I have more names. Franz Mefist, Maria Breig, Rado Krausov and Rebecca Isaacs."

No one came forward in answer to his call. He turned to the castle staff and started to shout again. They were looking shocked and cowed and did not answer. Therese spoke again with all the firmness she could manage. "I can help you, Captain Stumpfl."

Stumpfl came back to her. "Very well, where are they? And no lies or it will go badly with you."

"I am not in the habit of lying, Captain. Captain Prince Franz Mefist is a member of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Carpathian Brigade and is currently with his unit in Gyor. Maria Breig recently married Major Lamoreaux of the same brigade and traveled with her husband to Alsace on honeymoon. The other two are not here and I don't where they are at the moment. And my title is Colonel, Captain, and—"

He slapped her again, but she fought on, "you will address me properly!"

"Oh yes, Colonel, Your Honour! I'll address you as you deserve. I can just imagine the battlefield you won your promotion on. You and the rest of the whores are arrested for consorting with partisans and for common prostitution. You will be dealt with as soon as General Strelnikov arrives. He knows how to deal with traitors. Until then, the coal cellar is behind you. Get down there, all of you."

They filed into the narrow doorway. If only they could turn up the spiral stairs, they would pass the library and come up to her office and home. As it was, they went down to the boiler room. Oh well, Therese thought, it might be dark and dirty, but at least it is not cold. They were herded in and the

door slammed behind them. Someone found the light switch, and the girls untied her hands.

She looked around their prison. More than half of the space was taken up by the two boilers that heated the castle, and the coal that had been poured down the chute from outside. At one time the walls had been whitewashed, but a patina of coal dust lay wherever it could and dirtied their hands whenever they touched the walls. It would only be a matter of time before they were all as black as coalminers. Therese looked at the chute door, where Maria had laid false trails to cover Rado's escape. It was now padlocked.

She stood and thought for a moment. The girls were standing in a bunch in the centre of the room, waiting for her. She took a quick inventory of the room. Scrapers and stiff brushes for the boilers; two shovels; buckets; a yard broom; a large pile of hessian potato sacks, brought here to dry, and slept on regularly from the look of them.

Therese clapped her hands and tried to look confident. "So, don't just stand there. Take your coats off and we'll start cleaning. We might be calling this home for a while, so we may as well be comfortable."

They worked through the afternoon, cleaning and turning their dungeon into a home of sorts. They had water—a tap in the corner—and buckets to carry it in. They used the water to keep the dust down and to wash the floor and walls. Eventually the area around the door was clean enough to live in. They arranged the potato sacks to give seats against the walls. The slop bucket stood in the far corner of the room, behind the second boiler.

Work done for the day, they sat and chatted. The shock of being imprisoned was wearing off, and the girls seemed happy to sit and talk to her. As long as Therese was there beside them, they obviously felt that things could not be too bad.

"I wonder what Maria's doing, Mistress? Do you think she'd be in one of those grand hotels in Switzerland?"

"Let me see—when did she leave? Four days ago? I suppose she might be, but Lamoreaux promised her a visit to Paris, and she was really looking forward to that. I expect they're dining in an elegant restaurant, and she'll be wearing some of the finest clothes he could buy her. I wish she was here now." "Oh, yes, Mistress. She was a good one for times like these. She always had the right word to cheer you up. Or at least to set you thinking straight. She'd have given that Captain the sharp side of her tongue."

"That's right! She wasn't afraid of anybody. Do you remember her chasing Lieutenant Nielsen that night, Mistress? It still makes me laugh when I think of it."

"Me too. Him with his hands on his head trying to protect himself and his thing waving around in front of him. And Maria having to jump up to hit him properly with her shoe. I was surprised that she was so upset. Lieutenant Nielsen used to do that to me all the time."

That surprised Therese. "Really, Agata? In your bottom? You poor child. It must have hurt terribly."

"Oh no, Mistress. You just have to put it in very carefully to start with, and use lots of cold cream. After that, it's fun. I thought so anyway, and so did Lieutenant Nielsen. Didn't you ever try it, Mistress?"

"No—" she bit off the rest of what she was going to say. "No, I never tried it. It looks as if you are all so much more experienced than me."

"Never mind, Mistress. Practice makes perfect, and you've got plenty of time."

"I didn't like making love very much to start with at first, but after I'd had a bit of practice, it just got better and better. And now, if I'm in the mood and the man's right, well, fly me to the moon! Do you think the same, Mistress? The more you do it the better it gets?"

Therese thought about it. She was sadly ignorant compared to the girls, but she had to admit that each time Mefist or Wanda took her flying, she did seem to get closer and closer to the moon.

They heard voices outside, and everyone sat up. "Stand away from the door," shouted the sentry. "Stand away—I'm ready to shoot if anyone moves."

They crowded together away from the door. It swung inwards to reveal the sentry standing with his rifle ready. Then in came Mikhail, not the normal boiler man.

"Good evening, Your Honour, ladies. My word, you've made this right homely. I've just come to tend the boilers, that's all." He went to open the first boiler. As he levered the riddle back and forth, he watched the doorway. He stopped making a noise and, sure enough, the sentry stepped forward to look and see what was happening. Mikhail started riddling again, and the sentry watched for a moment and stepped back into the stairwell where he could watch his prisoners from safety. As soon as he had gone, Mikhail waved at them and slid a small folded note under the boiler. He dropped coal from the boiler's hopper into the grate and after a few adjustments moved onto the second one.

Therese called to him as he started to leave. "Mikhail, can we have some food?"

"I tried, Your Honour, but the Captain says he won't think about it until tomorrow. I saw him take a good dinner, though."

"Could you take out our slop bucket then?" Mikhail looked at the sentry, who nodded. He carried out the bucket.

"Do you have another, Your Honour? I shall get this one cleaned up and bring it back tomorrow morning when I fill the hoppers. Sleep well, Your Honour, ladies."

Once he had gone and they could not hear the sentry moving, Therese gestured to the girls to keep talking and went for the note. *Have telephoned the General and the Prince for help. The key to the coal chute is on top of the doorframe. Burn this.* Of course, she thought, they'd lock the coal chute door but then keep the key handy to save the trouble of keeping it safe. Changing old habits was never easy. She quietly opened the boiler spy hole and poked the note in. It flared up instantly.

She passed on the message about the telephone to cheer the girls up, but she kept the key a secret. Trying to escape with no one waiting outside, they would risk getting shot. If they got clear of the castle, where could they go? Perhaps Rado could plan something if they were still being held after a few days.

They had turned off the single light and were ready to sleep when Portia started to call quietly through the door. "Soldier, soldier! What's your name? Soldier, come on, answer me. I'm not going to bite."

"Ivan. What's yours?" came the whispered answer.

"Natasha," said Portia with a grin. "What are they going to do with us, Ivan?"

"I don't know. Nobody tells us anything. That captain can be a crazy bastard sometimes, but I expect he thinks he's keeping you for his bed. I'm

surprised he hasn't sent for one of you already. Perhaps he's tired after all that shouting and slapping your lady. Is she really a colonel?"

"She certainly is, Ivan, and when word gets out about what he's doing, your Captain's going to be up to his ears in shit."

"He's not my captain! He's a Political. No one can touch him."

"What about your general? What's he like?"

"Oh, he's a right hard bastard. Been wounded more times than I've had lunch. One hand gone, and one eye. Wears an eye patch and walks with a stick, but he's still as hard as Swedish steel. I'm glad I don't have nothing to do with him. What do you look like, Natasha? Which one are you?"

"Wouldn't you like to know! No, you're good enough. I'm blonde with blue eyes, and big tits and dupka. I'll wink at you tomorrow if I get the chance, but don't say anything. We don't want any trouble."

"Go to sleep, little Natasha. Things'll look better in the morning."

### **Chapter 42**

It was difficult to sleep on the stone floor. The potato sacks made no sort of mattress, and they had only their coats to cover themselves with. They paired off for warmth and Therese wrapped herself around Portia, who slept curled up in a tight ball like a cat. She was used to sleeping in rough places and dropped off quickly. Therese lay awake for much longer, always uncomfortable and always afraid to move for fear of waking Portia.

In the end she must have dozed off because she woke with a start. She was lying on her back and Portia was fast asleep under her arm. The stone floor was poking holes in her, but that was not why she had woken. She could hear voices outside. She sat up, and now everyone else began moving.

"What have you got down there, soldier?" asked an educated voice.

"Girls, Your Honour. Captain Stumpfl arrested some girls. One of them says she's a colonel."

"One of them is a colonel, if I'm to believe what I'm told. Give me the key and go and get Stumpfl. Tell him that Colonel von Falberg wants to see him immediately. If he objects, tell him I sent you. Go on, I'm sure my driver and I can fight off these female storm troopers."

"Switch on the light!" ordered Therese. Light flooded the room and they were blinking and rubbing their eyes. They looked terrible, red eyes, faces swollen with sleep and hair like haystacks. They started to pass combs and try to look presentable.

The key turned in the lock and the door swung open. Framed in the doorway stood a slight officer with an eye patch, his black leather coat draped over his shoulders, leaning on a walking stick. They all straightened up and stood as much to attention as they could. He came straight to Therese.

"Colonel von Falberg, I believe," he said, reaching for her hand to kiss. "Prince Mefist asked me to take good care of you and your girls, but I don't seem to have got off to a very good start, do I?"

"General Strelnikov, how pleased we are to see you! I'm afraid we have not been able to prepare much of a welcome. And please call me Therese, Your Honour. My rank is only honourary."

"Honourary or not, a colonel is a colonel, as Captain Stumpfl is about to discover. We don't want to start our partnership with our new allies by abusing senior officers. While we are waiting for him, introduce me to your young ladies. Mefist has told me all about them."

As they stood together, exchanging pleasantries in a dirty boiler room, lately their dungeon, Therese realized that this was a very different General to old Falk-Sokol. Strelnikov was elegant and polite. He would be at home in any of the courts of Europe, but he was a man who had been shaped, literally, by hard fighting. She guessed his age at about fifty, but fifty difficult years. His politeness was a mask for—for whatever lay underneath. His confidence and authority were almost strong enough to touch, but they too concealed the man inside. He would be a bad enemy, Therese decided. Polite but ruthless, and terribly, terribly effective.

Stumpfl came in and stood to attention by the door, but the General ignored him.

"Therese, my dear, do you think it would be possible to find some food so early in the morning? My driver and I have been driving since yesterday morning. We had planned to stop en route, until I started getting radio calls about your predicament."

"Of course, General, if you don't mind eating with a bunch of dirty girls. We're going to knock up the kitchen staff because we seem to have missed lunch as well. Perhaps in the refectory in fifteen minutes? Come on, girls, let's go!"

They filed up the steps, passing the guard at the top. As she passed, Portia patted the front of his trousers. "Nice, Ivan! Thanks for the company." Poor man, thought Therese, he'll be dreaming about that for weeks.

The girls refused to meet the new General in dirty clothes so while Therese was looking for a cook, they dashed upstairs to change and wash the bits that showed. Therese was helping by carrying plates and bread out to the table when the General came into the room followed by Rado. He had a slim cigar wedged between the fingers of his gloved false hand. She could see now that he had trouble walking and that he needed the stick he leant on. Poor man, she thought, only one hand and he has to use that for his walking stick.

"Welcome, General. I've ordered coffee, sausage and eggs as the fastest things we can prepare. Will that suit you?"

"Soldiers eat what they can, my dear. Isn't that right, Lieutenant? I'm sure you had trouble with rations in the forest."

"Yes, Your Honour. It was bread and wild pig most days up there."

"Well, well, it could have been worse. Let's sit down and see if Krasna Dolina can make decent sausage." Reaching for an ashtray, he carefully stubbed out his cigar and returned it to his cigar case. It must have been difficult to buy cigars in the Coalition Army areas. He left his coat and stick on the table behind and climbed over the bench to sit down.

Therese sat opposite. She wanted to ask for news of Mefist, but the General had other things on his mind.

"Therese, explain to me. You are steward of the castle for the owner—is that right?—and Krausov here is the senior military officer in the whole valley as far as I can understand. Does he work for you, or do you work for him?"

Therese looked at Rado; neither of them had ever considered the matter. "I'm afraid I just run the castle, General. Keep the staff busy and the wheels turning. The Army gave us the rations they needed and we cooked them here. They supplied coal, but I believe we are paying for the electricity. Apart from that, I ran the officers' club. What about you, Rado?"

"Your Honour, until just recently, my men were in the forest. We were just a tripwire force really. The General wanted to know as early as possible if anyone was moving into the forest. We weren't meant to fight them; there aren't enough of us."

"Well, some things are going to change here," stated Strelnikov. "For a start, we don't need to maintain a significant force on this side of the Carpathians any more. Now the Imperial Army is protecting our flank, we can get on with the real fighting. I think we can promise a large part of the Imperial Army a spring campaign in the Pripet Marshes, which is the worst

place for modern warfare that I can think of. We shall want every man we can find up there, not sitting in Montebello getting fat and lazy.

"Lieutenant, can we expand your force to say thirty men?"

"Your Honour, if I could tell them it's for local duties only, I don't think I'll have any trouble at all. There are plenty of men who wouldn't mind serving in Krasna Dolina but would run away if the Army wanted them as proper soldiers."

"Good. Start on that tomorrow—this morning, I mean. Tell them their duties will be to guard the castle and patrol the forests. I don't think we'll be getting any real trouble from that direction, but there's always the chance of stragglers and deserters turning to banditry or worse. I'll see if I can't find you a couple of young sergeants, damaged goods like me, to get your men in line and properly trained. They might be hunters and think they can shoot, but believe me, they don't know what it's like. If the deer and pigs had guns and could shoot back, then they might learn something."

The girls arrived at last, and the General and Rado stood to greet them. They might have been frightened of Strelnikov when he had just rescued them from their dungeon, but now they were their normal confident selves again. They crowded around him to hear what he had to say. Therese sent some of them to the kitchen to help with bringing the coffee and food. She was pleased to see the General's sausage arrived neatly chopped into pieces he could manage with one hand.

"Therese, Falk-Sokol and Mefist spent most of their time with me talking about these young ladies. I was trying to understand their troop dispositions and the resources available, and all they wanted to do was talk about you and your girls. You must be famous."

"Not too famous, I hope. We have normal lives to lead after the war!"

"The way I understood it, our biggest danger here is the possibility of an Imperial Army raid so that the young officers can carry you all off."

"What are your plans for us, General? I'd like to start sending the girls home as soon as the trains are safe again."

"Oh, I don't think you should hurry to do that, Therese," said the General calmly. "We're going to need you here for at least another couple of months. I'm afraid I shall have to make you the same offer that Mefist did. It's either you or some village women, and we'd much prefer it if you would stay."

Therese looked around the table. The girls did not seem concerned; perhaps they had never really believed they would be going soon. Therese swallowed and nodded her agreement.

"Good! I'm very pleased. My men will be coming tomorrow, so shall we have an introductory party the following night? Will that suit you? Now, I'm going to turn in. It's been a long day. Lieutenant, come and see me a four o'clock this afternoon with a list of the men you're going to recruit. Pick the ones you want and I'll make sure you get them. Don't be too nice about it; soldiering is a duty in wartime.

"Therese, perhaps you could send someone to show me my room? We'll meet at eight thirty and you can show me around."

"This morning?" she said in surprise.

"Of course. You'd better get to bed quickly if you're to have any sleep at all. Oh, I almost forgot." He reached into his tunic and produced an envelope. "Prince Mefist sends this."

# Chapter 43

Therese did not feel well as she waited at Strelnikov's door a little before eight thirty. She had not had enough sleep and she was lightheaded. Stumpfl's blows had bruised her, and she knew from the mirror that below one eye her cheek had swollen and turned dark grey.

"Come!" he called, and she found him sitting behind Falk-Sokol's old desk. He looked as fresh as a flower and was already reading through a tower of files.

"Therese, come and sit down. What do I have to do to get coffee here?"

"You do have a secretary, Your Honour, if you want her. She's a capable girl and I'm sure she'd be helpful. I told her to wait for a call, so if you'd like to meet her, I could show your driver where she lives."

"Yes. Let's do that to start with. Could you pass the word for my driver? Could you please beg some coffee from somewhere? I didn't feel like breakfasting again."

Mikhail went with the driver. She gave him a note asking Rebecca to bring cigars for Strelnikov; it could not hurt to spoil him a little. She returned with coffee and two cups but just before she knocked on his door, she left her cup outside. He sent her back to get it.

He had come from behind his desk and sat with her at the famous oak coffee table. "Therese, old Falk-Sokol said that you know most of what goes on in the valley. Tell me what I need to do to keep everything quiet and happy for the next two months."

"Nothing, Your Honor—" But he interrupted her.

"Please, call me Benedikt when we're alone, and I shall call you Therese. Outside you'd better call me General. So—what has to be done?"

"Nothing, er – Benedikt. I don't believe the villagers are interested in your army, any more than they were interested in their own. Provided you

pay for anything you take from them, I should think you won't even need to bring in any extra policemen."

"And partisans? We won't find ourselves being shot at from behind each tree?"

"Why should you? They're peaceable people, as long as they're allowed to keep tending their animals and gardens. Falk-Sokol didn't have any trouble, even though there was a crazy SekPol officer who tried to upset everyone."

"The name of this officer?"

"Drazevich. Lieutenant Drazevich. He was a vicious little worm. He finally went too far and raped the General's secretary. He was being sent to Army HQ under guard when he escaped to the forest."

"We know Lieutenant Drazevich. Stumpfl's been interrogating him, but he didn't tell us he'd been arrested for rape. He said it was for political reasons."

"No-not at all. Your secretary's Jewish, so he thought he could do what he liked with her. He raided her house and had her there, and later again back at his office. The old General wouldn't have stood for that sort of thing anyway, but Drazevich didn't realize the girl had just been taken on as the General's secretary. That made everything much easier and we got rid of him next day. I hope you don't have too many officers like him or Stumpfl."

"Yes-Stumpfl. What are we going to do about him? You have priests and we have Political Officers. Not all bad, but you can't get rid of them easily. What do you want me to do with him?"

"Nothing really, but I suppose it will be a bit awkward for both of us for a while. Are you going to have any troops at Tergov? Perhaps he could go there."

The General thought for a moment. "That might well be possible. The Imperial Army was told to leave all supplies and heavy equipment behind and retire with personal weapons only. Our main task, the reason I'm here, is to clear Tergov and transport everything north. That's what I'll do; I'll tell him he's in charge of ensuring our new allies don't rob us. He likes being suspicious of everyone. Just try and be polite to him for a day or two, and he'll be out of your hair."

"Benedikt, would I be rude if I asked what has happened to Drazevich?"

"We still have him. We caught him trying to cross into our lines in Vojvodina and thought he might be a spy. After what you've just told me, I think I might hand him back to the Imperial Army as a gesture of solidarity. We'll see.

"Now, what do you think of young Krausov?"

"He's a good man. He lived in the forest for a while by himself before the General recruited him into the Militia. I heard he did a good job of patrolling the forest. He's very resourceful."

"So I heard. I hope he enjoyed his stay with you?"

Therese was embarrassed and did not answer him. Mefist, she was thinking, just wait until I see you again...

"Never mind, but don't play games like that with me. If you want something, see me first. I expect we can come to some sort of arrangement. Now tell me, what do you do all day?"

"Running the castle keeps me pretty busy. Mefist had an orderly who helped me, and between us the Army didn't have to worry about accommodation or such things. It was as if they were staying in a big hotel. I suppose I'll have to get someone else to help with the paperwork, but I still think we'll manage. My people are used to soldiers by now. Of course, I run the club as well. It's quite a job keeping the girls healthy and happy, but it's enjoyable. Wait until you meet them in their own setting. I think you'll like them."

"Tell them to concentrate on amusing my officers. If they can do that, I'll be delighted. Now, if you've finished your coffee, can you show me around the castle?"

The girls were on their best behaviour the following evening. Mrs. Orlova had visited, and the girls would have looked like young brides if they had not been so nearly naked. Therese waited behind the bar with Othello and Portia, living with the other girls now but still banned from taking men to her room. They were waiting for noises on the stairs.

The officers came in a group. The gramophone was wound up and in moments the club became as it had always been, cheerful men at the tables calling for drinks and the girls running back and forth keeping them happy. There was little that differed in the Coalition forces, only their baggy uniforms and the pungent black tobacco they all smoked. The General did

not take a table but instead sat at the bar chatting with Therese. She was pleased to see that Stumpfl had not come.

"I can't imagine these girls were nuns, Therese. There's no connection at all. Mind you, they're fine women. I don't think I've ever been in a place like this that was full of real ladies. Mostly the girls are pretty coarse and simple, and the occasional exiled lady you do find is drinking herself to an early grave. Do they like the work?"

"I think they don't mind. They've been ordered to do it, and perhaps that gave them the excuse to try something new and exciting. I don't think they would do it without the orders. As soon as they're free, they'll all run off to their families. None of them want to be nuns anymore."

"What about you, Therese? What happens to you when all us soldiers leave?"

"I don't know. I ought to go back to being a nun. The Bishop has said we can, but I don't know. It doesn't seem very attractive anymore, but if I'm not a nun, what will I do with myself? I don't want to spend the rest of my life as the Count's housekeeper here in Montebello. Going back home won't help. I'm sure my mother will demand that I get married and give her as many grandchildren as possible. I'm definitely not going to follow in her footsteps. I don't know what she does with herself all day; it certainly doesn't seem to be anything useful."

"Travel. See the world."

"Yes, that's a possibility. I wouldn't mind a holiday, perhaps a trip to America, but I don't want to just travel for no reason. I'll still need something to do."

"Mmh, you're a difficult lady, Therese. If you were a man you could find all sorts of directorships to fill. Or get involved in organizations like the Red Cross. You'll have to fight hard to get people to take a woman seriously. It's unfair, but men rule the world for the moment. Perhaps I'll take you along as my Quartermaster General."

"Well, thank you, General, I might just come and take you up on your promise."

"Therese, I'm going to leave the men to ravish the maidens. They'll be happier when I'm not watching. Don't forget to book all their drinks, and please don't let any of them get too drunk."

"I'm writing their drinks down already, and also for the girls of course. You'll need to decide how much I should charge. Mefist had a sliding scale so the officers paid what they could afford. Poor lieutenants had their fun for less."

"Really? That's all very democratic. Never mind, I'll think about it. Oh Therese, would you mind coming to my bedroom tomorrow afternoon? Say one thirty? Good, I'll look forward to it. Good night!"

## Chapter 44

She had been furious and despairing the night before. Strelnikov did not understand. She was not meant to be like the girls, available for anyone to use. She was meant to be different, and most importantly, she had an arrangement with Mefist. Why did Strelnikov not understand? Or perhaps he did understand and just wanted to put her in her place. Conscience kept telling her that the girls were taken every day, like it or not, and it was surely time that she showed them she could do her duty when necessary. The thought did not comfort her.

In the end she had swallowed her pride and she stood at Strelnikov's door, waiting for his pleasure. He opened the door in dressing gown and slippers. He waved her in with a smile.

His room looked tidy but male. The only concessions to homeliness were two campaign book chests stacked against the wall displaying Strelnikov's personal library. The books were severe reference works. Half-buried in the wardrobe, Othello was folding and storing the General's shirts.

"That will do for now, Othello. Come back after dinner and you can finish up."

Othello smiled shyly at Therese and left. Strelnikov patted his shoulder as he squeezed past, a surprising gesture from such an austere man.

"Well, Therese, welcome! Take a seat—on the bed will do. What would you like to drink? Cointreau? I'm living in luxury here. I even have ice, can you believe that? I've seen plenty of ice recently, but none of it was for drinking. That's life in the army for you. Months of soldiering and putting up with discomfort, danger and bad cooking, and suddenly I'm king of the castle, I eat well, and the most beautiful woman in Krasna Dolina is visiting me after lunch. It's hard to believe."

Strelnikov sounded almost jovial as he busied himself with the drinks. Therese sat on the end of the high old-fashioned bed with her feet dangling, clutching her glass with both hands and trying to relax. At some point, some point very soon, she would have to get up and make the first move. She supposed that when men paid for their pleasure they did not expect to court the woman. He would probably just lie back and let her minister to him. Strelnikov reclined comfortably in the single armchair. She prepared herself to go to him and took a big gulp of her drink.

"Slow down, slow down! Relax, Therese, no one's going to hurt you. Would you like to take your dress off?"

Dumbly she stood and pulled her dress off. Underneath she had dressed as Mefist required, with no underwear except for her suspender belt and stockings. She knew she was beautiful; Mefist had said so many times, and she believed him. Still, it was a hard thing to stand naked under Strelnikov's impassive gaze. "Turn around, please," he asked.

She pirouetted slowly but when she looked into his eyes again, she could see he was still studying her. He seemed to be considering her, comparing her to some unknown paragon of female beauty. He was in no hurry to throw her onto the bed and take her.

"Very, very beautiful, my dear. Mefist had nothing but superlatives when he was describing you, and I can see he did not exaggerate. You are very lucky and so is he, but sit down. Sit down and enjoy your drink." He was resting his own drink on his stomach and not looking at her anymore.

"Therese, I have a confession to make. Or should I say a secret to share. I'm not interested in women. I'm sorry, but that's how I am. Oh, I enjoy female friends. I enjoy beautiful women, and like spending time with them. Women like you, who have both beauty and brains, I could spend all my time in their company. Only not in bed. That just doesn't interest me.

"It's always been a problem for me. I think the Imperial Army might show a little more tolerance, but in our society the prohibition is absolute. It is just not possible to be a General who enjoys young men in bed. Totally impossible, except that's what I am. I hope I haven't disappointed you too much, my dear?"

"No, not at all. I mean, I'd have been happy, but... Do you want me to put my dress back on?"

"Not unless you insist, my dear. It's not every day I am allowed to share such a picture, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't snatch it away too quickly. You understand why I've invited you here, I suppose? Not that I want to

poach in Mefist's woods, but I need a little camouflage to keep people like Stumpfl at bay. I hope you don't mind."

Waves of relief ran down to her toes. "Actually, I'm very happy. I've only been with Mefist before, so I really wasn't looking forward to it. But now-I'll be happy to come and sit with you as often as you like."

"Good. In fact, excellent! I'll protect you-the men are already wondering if you're on offer or not-and you can protect me. And you don't mind if I take Othello as my personal servant? He's inclined the same way, you know, although I get the impression he would take anything that's offered."

"No, I don't mind. If he's truly willing."

"Oh, he's a very willing young man, and good company too. Just what I need. Speaking of which, Rebecca's a very sharp young lady. She's just what I need as well, but it's my office for her. Did you know she turned up with a box of Dutch cigars yesterday? How did she know? Oh, you told her of course. Stupid of me, but thank you anyway. It was kind of you both."

"It always pays to know what your lord and master likes, Benedikt."

"Lord and master! I hope Mefist doesn't imagine he's *your* lord and master. Or he's going to wake up one morning a very disappointed man. Now what are we going to do while you're here? We can't just sit and drink at this time of day. We'd be finished before nightfall."

"We could talk. Tell me about yourself, where you come from, what you have in your book chests."

"Me? I came from nowhere, a little town call Mezö-Laborcz in the Carpathians. I'm half-Ruthenian and half-Ukrainian and my family was stranded in the Ukraine by the Great War. We've been there ever since, but my parents still speak Ruthenian at home. If I'm lucky I may get a chance to visit Mezö-Laborcz on the way north; the railway line runs through it on the way to Sanok and Przemysl. I shall plan a day or two to look around again. Look at the icons, they're unique up there.

"To answer your other question—that's what my books are about. Icons. I've always found them fascinating, and I look for them wherever I go. Do you have many here, in Krasna Dolina? I can't find anything in my books. I suspect the old German professors passed you by. Perhaps they were suspicious of the name—it sounded too pleasant for them."

Therese was surprised at this latest confession. A love for icons was the last thing she expected to find in him. "We don't have much in Montebello. Roman Catholics were never so fond of them. There are some interesting churches around, wooden ones in the smallest places, and they can be very pretty. I don't know about the icons, though; I'm sure you'll find them very primitive."

"Ah-ha! Primitive is not necessarily bad when it comes to icons. Some of the most impressive artists have worked all their lives in small villages. Let me show you..."

They spent the rest of the afternoon sitting on the bed with Strelnikov's books open between them. Therese listened with increasing fascination as his enthusiasm for the beautiful pictures dissolved his hard shell.

"Try and keep your afternoons free, my dear," he said as she left. "When we're not hiding in here, we can look at all the churches in the valley. To assess their possible use by enemy forces, of course!"

# Chapter 45

Strelnikov's car slid to a halt, blocking the only lane of Maly Zverkov, and Therese stepped out onto the packed ice surface. It was a still, grey afternoon, and wood smoke from the closely packed houses filled the air. Strelnikov negotiated the ice carefully. She did not dare offer him an arm for support; he probably did not need it and would certainly resent it.

The car reversed away and they looked around. Curtains moved in the small windows of the cottages as Therese tried to guess which was the priest's house. When they found him, she was surprised by his youth. He was a tall handsome man, a little forbidding in his long Orthodox robe, and his beard was not yet touched by priestly grey. He looked frightened at first by the uninvited and sinister ambassador of the satanic Coalition now standing at his garden gate, but soon gathered himself and agreed to show them his church.

The path wove up across the face of the rocky knoll on which the church stood. It was dark, shaded by the pine trees that covered the slope and cut the church off from the village below. The snow piled in long mounds showed that this part of Maly Zverkov had been kept clear of ice and snow all winter. Therese watched Strelnikov as he limped up in front of her. The mishap that had taken his left hand had presumably been responsible for the rest of the damage to that side of his body. His right leg seemed intact, and it was a shame he had to hold his stick with his good hand, on the wrong side of his body. She found herself wondering if it would be possible to provide him with some kind of stick he could use with his left arm instead. She would see Mikhail about it. He had the sort of engineer's eye that could get to the root of practical problems.

When they reached the rounded summit on which the church stood, Therese turned back to look over the village. The long narrow cottages butted up against the lane, living accommodation at the front and their back parts exclusively barns and stables. Behind them the villagers' strips of private gardens and orchards stretched back to the edge of the communal fields. In summer the gardens would be green and busy, with people working and living in them. Now they were white and quiet, and the vegetable patches were dotted with small heaps of manure brought from the barns day by day throughout the winter. Further away lurked the forest, dark and ominous, climbing up to Tergov Saddle.

The church was traditional, built entirely of timber and clad in narrow pine shingles. Its three ornate spires were topped with onion domes also crafted from timber and shingles. Strelnikov stood at the gate of its low enclosure and stared up at the building. "This is very like home," he said. "I was brought up with a church just like this."

"Your Honour is from this area?" asked the priest diffidently.

"Mezö-Laborcz. The same but different. Will you show us inside, Father?"

The priest pushed back the double doors to allow as much light as he could inside. The interior was of dark, heavy timber, and the low ceiling given by the gallery above the entrance made it cave-like. A few steps inside, the nave opened up and Therese could see the roof beams dim above her. They stood for a moment in the bare room the villagers used every day, looking at the thick, carved screen that cut off the other half of the church. The figures of saints, old and unrecognizable to Therese, peered down at them from the walls and the screen. Through the ornate carving in front of them, they could catch glimpses of gilding and the shuttered icons surrounding the altar.

The priest swung the inner gates open and gestured them in. Therese eased Strelnikov's cap out from under his arm and let him go on with the priest. She stood in the entrance and watched as the priest deftly opened the icons for display. Strelnikov stood in front of them one by one and studied them, as if trying to commit each one to memory in all its shining beneficent glory.

Therese knew as she watched him that this man was no mere cataloguer, no dry professor comparing and contrasting. He loved icons.

At the doorway, Strelnikov replaced his cap and shook the priest's hand. "Thank you, Father. You've been most generous."

"You are welcome, General. It's always a pleasure to show our church to a believer. Come back whenever you wish."

The priest and Therese watched as he started back down the steep path. "There goes a very lonely man, I believe," he said.

"You're right, Father. Perhaps when this war is over he can let himself be a little more human. I wish we could give him something to help."

"We have a painter in the village. He paints icons in the winter; I have one in my own house, and I've sent others to my Bishop. I could ask him."

"That's it! Yes, please ask him. A small icon, perhaps St Martin or a soldier saint, one that he can take with him. When it's ready, call me, please. Therese von Falberg at the castle."

"Oh, we all know you, Madam. You are not what I'd expected. I won't come down with you. My people will be here soon for the evening service."

As Therese walked back down, she was thinking of the priest's words. What had he expected her to be? She passed old ladies climbing up to the church and returned their quiet greetings.

As their car returned to the main road, Strelnikov said, "If you don't mind, my dear, we'll carry on up to Tergov. I might as well see what's happening now we're so close."

The road became increasingly steep and wound tightly around the ridges and gullies that led up to the pass. The trees closed in and hung darkly over them as the road started to flatten out. The marks of military occupation were around them, crudely painted signs on the trees and footpaths leading away from the road. Through the trees she saw an antiaircraft gun, its barrel reaching up blackly into the empty sky. As they slowed at the summit, Therese could see soldiers in the trees and a truck parked beside the road.

Suddenly a violent explosion ahead of them thumped against the car, and the windscreen shattered and bulged inwards towards them.

Therese opened her eyes again and stopped flinching. "My God! What was that?"

"A mine, I'd say. I hope it's not an accident, but... It's probably better if you stay in the car."

"I'm a nurse," she said, climbing out and following him. He walked down the road, to the group of soldiers ahead of them standing on the road and looking into the trees. "Attention!" ordered someone, and the soldiers stood rigid as they came up. They had been looking under the trees where the snow lay quiet and thick. The whiteness had been destroyed by the bloom of an explosion radiating dark destruction from its centre. Beside the pit lay a soldier, his legs blown off. Therese could not see if he still lived. No one was following him off the road.

Therese was filled with remorse and with loathing for the men who did not help him. Without thinking of herself, she looked for the path he had taken to his destruction and followed it. "Stop, Miss, stop!"

"Shut up!" roared Strelnikov. "Don't miss the footsteps, Therese. Get some rope, soldier. At the double!"

She took big steps, following his marks in the snow until she could stand at the centre of the explosion. Blood melted into the snow around the stumps of the soldier's legs, and now she could see that his body had been ripped open. His face was white but unmarked. Therese knelt beside him and put a hand beneath his head. Automatically she started to say the last words over him. She thought she saw his eyelids flutter as she touched his forehead, and perhaps he heard some of her words before he slipped away. She stood beside him in the snow. She did not know what to do next.

"Therese, we're throwing you a rope. Tie it onto his belt."

The rope stretched out and fell across the body. She found the end and tied it to the soldier's belt. Shivering now, she picked her way step by step back to the road. The soldiers helped her back over the bank of snow beside the road and steered her back to Strelnikov.

"Follow the Sergeant, Therese. He'll get you something warm to drink. Wait for me; I've got to have a word with Captain Stumpfl when he gets here."

The sergeant led her along one of the paths into the trees. He was taking the death of his comrade calmly. He had probably seen many more on his journey to Tergov. After a few minutes, he turned abruptly aside and stepped quickly down into a hole in the ground. When he pulled aside the curtain at the bottom, candlelight fell out from the bunker beyond. She bent to enter and stepped down into a low room roofed with pine trunks.

To one side a crude table was squeezed between benches built against the walls, and the sergeant laid a greatcoat for her to sit on. A small pot stove kept the cold away, and on top of it a saucepan steamed. In the darkness beyond, Therese could make out bunks against the walls and clothes hanging to dry. The atmosphere was close and smelly.

"You're in luck, Your Honour. We got some beetroot sent up today. No pierogi to go with it and make it proper-like, but it'll warm you up anyway."

He ladled the blood-red borscht into a large enameled mug and gave it to her with a hunk of bread. It was hot and rich, and flattened drops of fat floated on its surface. She sipped at it eagerly. The sergeant sat opposite her in silence. She presumed he would be eating later, after the General had left.

"Where are you from, Sergeant?"

"Me? A long way from here, Your Honour. I come from a small place near Yegorlykskaya, on the other side of Rostov. It's a different world, Your Honour. None of these mountains there."

She sat and pondered his answer. It seemed strange to her that a young man from so far away should find himself sitting in a bunker in the forests of Krasna Dolina. Strange that another young man should have just died in the snow for no sensible reason. Strange that she should be here, her world turned upside down. There was a noise outside and Strelnikov pushed his way in. The sergeant writhed out from his bench and let Strelnikov sit down.

"Are they taking care of you?"

"Oh, yes. This borscht is good-try it." She pushed the mug across to him.

The sergeant started to fetch another mug, but Strelnikov stopped him. "No, Sergeant. Save it for the men. I know they love it, and there's never enough on a cold night. We'll share this one." They finished the soup turn and turn about, sitting in a bunker on a frontline that had never been fought over but was still lethal for the unwary.

As she followed Strelnikov out of the bunker, the sergeant stopped her. "The boys would like to say thank you, Your Honour. For what you did for poor Piotr. There's none of us would have done it, not when you could see there was no hope for him. At least he died shriven, poor bastard, begging your pardon. We can tell his mum, and it'll be some comfort."

It was a bitterly cold trip back to Montebello. The driver had punched a hole in the shattered windscreen. Big enough to see through, and big enough to let the wind in and drop the temperature far below freezing.

The General said nothing for most of the trip, but as they reached the village, he said, "I hate losing men like that. It's so stupid and a waste. That

idiot Stumpfl should have taped the minefields off by now, but I doubt we'll ever make a real soldier of him. I'm going to demand we get some of the troops that laid those mines back again. At least they should know where to look when the snow melts.

"It was very impressive, what you did up there. Very impressive. If you'd been stupid about it, we might have lost you as well. The men were pleased with you, but don't do it again!"

"I never want to be where I might have to," she said with a shiver.

## Chapter 46

Therese missed Mefist. Life in Montebello was sterile and pointless without him. The accident with the young soldier had shaken her, and she realized that Montebello had lost its hold on her. She wanted to move on, to roll up her sleeves and rejoin the world. Before she could change her mind, she sat at her desk and wrote to Bishop Adler. She wanted to explain herself, but the words would not come, and she contented herself with a simple statement of resignation.

One thing bothered her. She could not leave the nuns in the hands of Sister Brigitta. She begged the Bishop to take her into his household, and send instead a Mother Superior who was used to responsibility and whom the sisters could respect. As an afterthought, she slipped into the envelope the telegram about his Swiss bank account. It would reinforce her recommendations.

Mikhail made Strelnikov a new stick, and Therese persuaded him to use it. It clipped around his injured arm just below the elbow and had a handle that he could force into his false hand. He could walk more easily now, with an upright stance and above all a free hand to hold or carry with. The change seemed to make him happier.

The priest from Maly Zverkov had telephoned her, and the new icon was waiting only for the paint and glue to cure before it would be ready for delivery. Therese continued to enjoy her study sessions with Strelnikov and, even more, the outings to look for icons. She was learning things about Krasna Dolina that she had not seen before. Her only regret was that she no longer had time to join the girls on their skis; that was something Strelnikov could not hope to enjoy now, or probably ever again.

Life went on quietly. The officers had little to do apart from training their men, and their stay at Montebello became something of a rest cure. In the evenings, the club was their only amusement and they played cards, drank, chatted, sang, and of course kept the girls busy. Therese noted with pleasure that the money owed to the girls continued to mount rapidly. They would all leave Montebello with some money in their purses and every prospect of a good start in their new lives.

Little was heard from Stumpfl. Therese understood that he was in disgrace, and that most work had stopped at Tergov until help arrived. Only the equipment that could be reached on obvious paths was towed out and brought down to the station yard for cleaning and maintenance. Equipment and material deeper in the snow-covered forest would have to wait for Imperial Army guides.

Strelnikov came up to her office one morning with keys in his hand. "News, Therese! Good news, I think, for you at least. Firstly, I'm traveling this afternoon. They're sending a plane for me and I'll be in Kiev for a couple of days. A planning conference for the spring offensive. It means I'll have my marching orders soon—back to the front. I'm not looking forward to it. The Pripet Marshes have broken many generals before me.

"Even better still for you, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Carpathians are coming back, some of them anyway. A small detachment led by a colonel you know."

"Colonel? I don't think we had any colonels here before. Just majors and the rest, and the General of course. We weren't really big enough for a proper general staff. Falk-Sokol had only been sent here as a last posting before retirement."

"You know this colonel. I'm told he insisted on promotion before he would come, so now he's Colonel Prince Franz Mefist-two steps at once. Apparently he didn't want to be junior to the castle chatelaine."

"Mefist!" she cried, and jumped from her desk to hug Strelnikov. "Oh thank you, General, thank you so much!"

"Enough, my dear, enough! I did what I could, but that was nothing compared to the influence that Mefist apparently has. They would have forced him on me if I hadn't asked for him.

"Now look, my dear, I won't stay here long once I get back from Kiev. The regiment's already on the move, and I shall follow once the Divisional HQ in Lwow is ready. I'm promoted too. I want to take Othello with me, I'm sure you won't mind. Only he won't come without Portia. I'll take care of them both, don't worry about that, and there are opportunities in Lwow

for artists that they'll never get here. I'll find an apartment for them, and Othello can keep working for me. You must come and visit us, if you can.

"Now, take my keys. Tell Mefist he's free to use my office until I get back. All the files he'll need are in there. Rebecca knows where they are."

She was standing in the tower gallery for the first time since autumn, wrapped in her fur coat with the hood drawn closely around her head. Below her in the meadows, the girls were playing on their skis, earnestly practicing on a makeshift slalom course. Their cries came up to her through the still air.

It felt bitterly cold up in the gallery, but she told herself she was waiting for the excitement of the small plane coming to take Strelnikov to Kiev. She could see his car parked outside the village where the road crossed the flat fields beside the river. They had lit a fire, probably a car tyre and oil, and a small plume of black smoke drifted lazily down the valley.

The plane came to them suddenly, a small camouflaged plane with a high wing and a single engine. It had skis in place of its normal wheels. It swooped over the village and turned up over the castle. Therese could see the pilot looking down at her, and she waved. The plane dipped down to the field and slid from one end nearly to the other. It taxied back towards Strelnikov, and she could make out the black figures walking towards it. Moments later, the plane had slid back to the edge of the field and was running up its engine. It gathered speed and carefully left the ground. Another turn over the castle with Therese waving frantically, and Strelnikov had gone.

Still she waited in the gallery. There was always a chance that Mefist would come today, that his car was right now driving into the valley and hurrying towards Montebello. She forced the thought to the back of her mind and stood for a while watching the girls skiing. They were timing each other through the course, and even from a distance, Therese could see that the best skiers had become very proficient.

Suddenly, there he was. His car had pulled into the wagon park and stopped. Mefist got out and stood watching the girls. His new insignia were covered by his black leather coat thrown over his shoulders. He looked young and relaxed; he was smoking, and his cap was fashionably tilted towards one ear. He shouted to the girls and waved and, once they had recognized him, the whole gaggle came skiing down to him, throwing off

their skis and running to embrace him. Therese could hear their shrieks and see them pointing up to the tower. Mefist looked up and waved. She waved back, and then turned and ran.

Rebecca was working alone outside the General's office. Therese used the keys to unlock the office and then held them out to Rebecca. "Mefist's back! He's just arriving now. Be a darling and run down and find him. Tell him he's to report to the General's office immediately and give him the keys."

She let herself into the office and locked the door behind her. She would have little time to get ready. She threw off her coat and sat down to pull off her warm boots. She unbuttoned her dress, and it joined her coat on the General's chair. She tried to catch her reflection in the window and check her hair, but there was no time. She straightened her seams and started to move the soft chairs away from the coffee table.

She turned the coffee table slightly so that it pointed towards the door and knelt on it, her back towards the door. Just as Maria had knelt on this table so long ago, she bent forward and, placing her forearms on the tabletop and her elbows out, settled her face on the backs of her hands. She knew her bottom was sticking up in the air, her highest point. Mefist loved it; he had told her so. He had promised her that the next time he saw her as she was now, he would accept the invitation and take her.

She was thinking of him, of how he had looked when he first came into her office. She thought of dancing with him in those uncertain days before the club had first opened its doors. She remembered him sitting at crowded tables, raising his glass in preposterous toasts, laughing with her and the girls. She saw him in the snow, marching upwards on his skis; saw him watching a stately elk wade past and disappear into the forest. She felt his touch as he had touched her for the first time, slipping a measuring tape over her naked body.

She had let him look at her, taking her modesty and throwing it away. She had let him look deep inside her, let him breathe on her naked sex. She had danced nude for him and caressed herself, she had given him her orgasms. She had let him touch her, let his fingers reach deep inside her. She thought of his rigid, hungry sex, with her fingers and Wanda's clasped around it. She had offered him her sex, and he had licked her and probed and kissed her until she could no longer stay on her knees above him.

Soon he would open the door and see her. See her offering everything she had for him to take without reservation. She reached between her legs and touched her lips. They were heavy and wet, hanging open for him. She opened her knees further, and the cold air caressed her pouting entrance. She was ready for him now.

There were brisk footsteps outside and the sound of the key in the lock. The door eased open and he stepped inside. She could smell him, the male smells of leather and tobacco that made her mind shudder. He said nothing, but she heard him lock the door again. He understood; he knew what she was thinking. She was starting to tremble and her sex was pulsing, sucking and releasing, sucking and releasing, sucking and relaxing again. Why was he making her wait?

His coat was being laid on the desk. The sound of buttons calmly opened and his pistol belt being unhooked. Oh hurry, she was thinking, put it in me! Take me—now! The belt and its heavy pistol were laid on the desk. More buttons, and at last he was coming to her. His trouser legs brushed against her stockinged feet at the edge of the coffee table and then his hands were on her, hot and rough, cupping the mountains of her bottom. His hands slid down her back towards her shoulders, stroking and kneading the muscles of her back. Eyes closed, she was reaching back with her hips, trying to catch the baton she knew was pointing at her sex. She was shaking; she was already out of control. The hot plum pressed for an instant against the back of her thigh, and she moaned in frustration as it left her.

Then it was touching her. It was touching her centre, nosing between her lips. Her shaking was more violent and her orgasm was coming, coming, it was already too late. His hands clasped her hair and suddenly he pulled her head back. He pulled her back onto him, impaled her deep on his cock, pulled her back against his rough clothes. The last thing she could remember was that she had finally taken him, that he was hers at last, and then everything else was lost in the earthquake.

#### THE PRINCE AND THE NUN

# THE END

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# **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jacqueline lives in the far north of Queensland, Australia, on the shores of the Coral Sea. She has a house built for the tropical climate on tall stilts and with walls that open to let the breeze blow through.

She settled in Australia after living with her husband in many countries and cultures, and her travels have given her a fund of stories and locations she uses.

Jacqueline writes romantic stories because she is an unrepentant romantic at heart. In a world that is drowning in poverty and violence, she tries to hold up a cheerful light and make everyone's life a little happier. That is a big job, but it is fun to make the attempt and, who knows, it might just work.

When she is not writing, she is kept busy by her garden, which is still maturing. Right now her coconut trees look young and scrappy, but come back in five years and they will be towering over the house. What could be more romantic than a coconut palm?

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