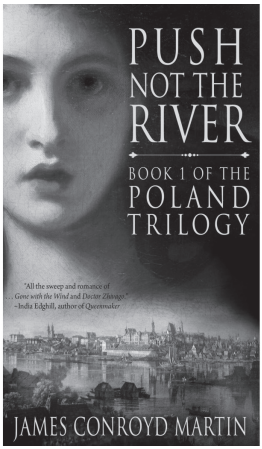
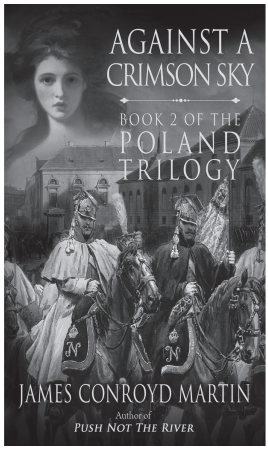
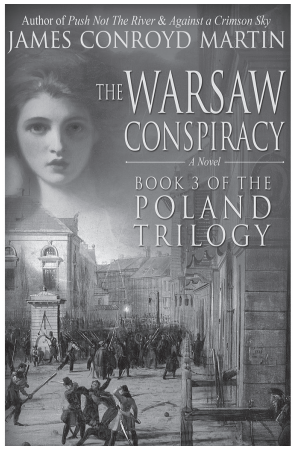
THE POLAND TRILOGY BY JAMES CONROYD MARTIN





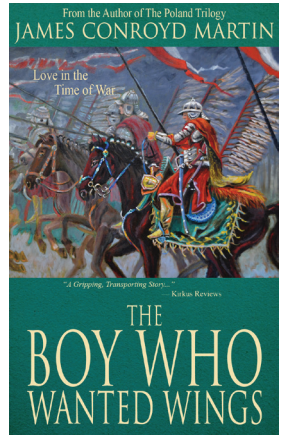


Check out The Poland Trilogy: https://goo.gl/93rzag

Based on the diary of a Polish countess who lived through the rise and fall of the Third of May Constitution years, 1791-94, ***Push Not the River*** paints a vivid picture of a tumultuous and unforgettable metamorphosis of a nation—and of Anna, a proud and resilient woman. ***Against a Crimson Sky*** continues Anna's saga as Napoléon comes calling, implying independence would follow if only Polish lancers would accompany him on his fateful 1812 march into Russia. Anna's family fights valiantly to hold on-to a tenuous happiness, their country, and their very lives. Set against the November Rising (1830-31), ***The Warsaw Conspiracy*** depicts partitioned Poland's daring challenge to the Russian Empire. Brilliantly illustrating the psyche of a people determined to reclaim independence in the face of monumental odds, the story features Anna's sons and their fates in love and war.

THE BOY WHO WANTED WINGS

A Novel of the First 9/11



Aleksy, a Tatar raised by a Polish peasant family, holds in his heart the wish to become a Polish hussar, a lancer who carries a device attached to his back that holds eagle feathers. As a Tatar and as a peasant, this is an unlikely quest. When he meets Krystyna, the daughter of a noble landowner, he falls hopelessly in love. Even though she returns his love, race and class differences make this quest as impossible as that of becoming a hussar. Under the most harrowing and unlikely circumstances, one day Aleksy must choose between his dreams.

"A gripping, transporting story of self-determination set against fate."

~Kirkus Reviews

On the eve of September 11, 1683, a massive Muslim Ottoman horde was besieging the gates of the imperial city of Vienna and had been doing so since the previous July. Now, however, they were just hours from capturing this capital of the Holy Roman Empire. The Turks' intent was to bring Islam to all

of Europe, and this city was seen by East and West alike as the gateway. With the window of time closing for Vienna, the walls were about to be breached on September 12 when the vastly outnumbered Christian coalition, led by Polish King Jan III Sobieski and his legendary winged hussars, descended Kahlenberg Mountain to engage the Turks in an attempt to lift the siege. As crucial and consequential as the 1066 Battle of Hastings, the ensuing battle changed the course of European history.

In hardcover, paperback or e-book

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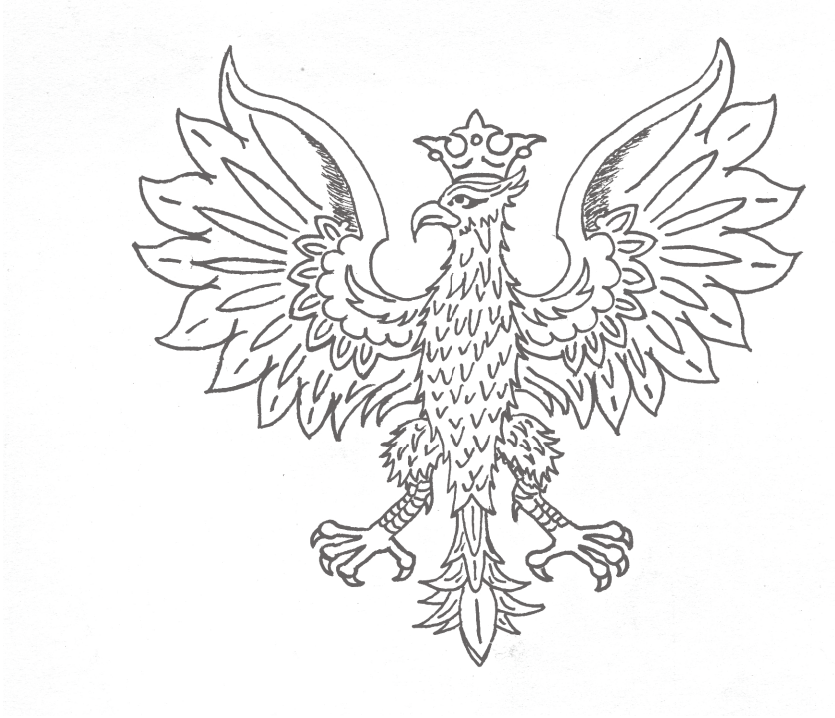
AGAINST A CRIMSON SKY



JAMES CONROYD MARTIN

HUSSAR
QUILL PRESS
CHICAGO

Against a Crimson Sky

First Print Edition: 2006
Second Print Edition: 2016

Chief editor Mary Rita Perkins Mitchell
Cover and interior design by Streetlightgraphics.com

ISBN: 978-0-9978945-6-1

Cover art:
Lady Hamilton as Circe
By George Romney c. 1782
Tate Galleries UK

Garde Imperiale ~ Chevau-légers Polonais 1807-1814
Mounted Officers of Napoleon's Polish Imperial Guard
Watercolor
By Lucien *Rousselot*
Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library

Title page:
Polish Eagle, drawing
By Kenneth Mitchell

Map design:
Paul J. Pugliese

Interior art:
Wycinanki (vih-chee-nahn-kee), Polish folk papercuts
By Frances Drwal

For Scott, Barbara, John, Rick, Faye, Bob, and Jeanie

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This novel and its predecessor would not have been possible without the help and encouragement of my friend, John A. Stelnicki, whose ancestor's diary provided the basis for *Push Not the River*. I offer sincere thanks to Sally Kim, Thomas Dunne, and Sally Richardson of St. Martin's Press for their enthusiasm for the two projects. Guiding me through the novels with his justly celebrated expertise has been my agent Al Zuckerman.

For exceptional editing skills, I thank longtime friend Mary Rita Mitchell, as well as Pam Sourelis and Carolyn Chu. The late Frances Dwral's folk papercuts (*wycinanki*) add visual charm to the words. For help on things Polish and otherwise, Donald Kaminski and Edward Kaminski's support and suggestions have been invaluable. A host of people have aided me in my quest in ways too numerous to mention. Some of these are Piers Anthony, Francie Arenson, Marilyn Bricks, Ken and Penny Brown, Judi Free, Scott Hagensee, Gary Holtey, Patrick Keefe, Kevin Kelly, Jan Lorys, Sr. Mary Paul McCaughey O.P., Mike McCaughey, Ken Mitchell, Kitty Mitchell, Tom Rusnak, John Rdzak, Angela Turley, and members of the Green Door Studio, Chicago, 2003-04.

GLOSSARY

dog's blood—damn; damn it

kołacz (kaw-watch)—bread made for the wedding celebration

Marzanna—the Polish Goddess Death, depicted in white and carrying a scythe

"Napoleoni Magni Caesari et Victori"—"To Napoléon, the Great Caesar and Victor!"

opłatek—an unconsecrated bread wafer usually shared among those participating in wigilia meal; while sharing the wafer, each participant forgives past transgressions and wishes everyone health, luck, wealth, and after death, a crown in heaven.

owczarek nizinny—the lowland sheepdog

Shepherds' Watch—Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve

starosta—the local magistrate

szlachta (shlach-ta)—the gentry; officially of equal status, in actuality their wealth and holdings often varied greatly

Szkoła Rycerska—The school of knighthood, a military school founded by King Stanisław

Third of May Constitution—Ratified in 1791, the first written constitution in Europe initiating democratic reform; overthrown in 1794 when certain disgruntled Polish magnates invited Catherine of Russia in to protect their interests; Poland's final partition occurred in 1795 with Russia, Prussia, and Austria dividing the spoils

wigilia—the Christmas Eve meal and celebration; it is valued more highly than Christmas Day.

NAME PRONUNCIATION KEY

Halicz = Hah-leech
Jan = Yahn
Jósef = Yú-zef
Kościuszko = Kawsh-chew-shkaw
Kraków = Krah-koof
Michał = Mee-how
Paweł = Pah-vel
Sochaczew = Saw-hah-cheff
Stanisław = Stan-neess-wahf
Wilanów = Vee-lahn-ooff


Europe 1812
French Empire
French Dependent States
French Allies
NORWAY
North Sea
DENMARK
Dublin
UNITED KINGDOM
OLDENBURG
London
CONFEDERATION OF THE RHINE
Atlantic Ocean
Paris
0 100 200 miles
0 200 kilometers
FRENCH EMPIRE
KINGDOM OF ITALY
Corsica
Rome
Madrid
SPAIN
Lisbon
PORTUGAL
Sardinia
Mediterranean Sea
MOROCCO
ALGIERS
TUNIS


SWEDEN
Stockholm
St. Petersburg
Riga
Baltic Sea
Copenhagen
Moscow
Borodino
Tilsit
Bobr
Wilno
Smogoni
Smolensk
Niemen
Orsza
Gdansk
PRUSSIA
Voronovo
Minsk
Beresina
Grodno
Borisov
RUSSIAN
EMPIRE
Vistula
Sochaczen
Warsaw
Pozan
GRAND DUCHY
OF WARSAW
Kiev
Dnieper
Kraków
Prague
Halicz
Dniester
Vienna
AUSTRIAN
EMPIRE
MOLDAVIA
Odessa
Bucharest
Danube
Black Sea
MONTENEGRO
Adriatic Sea
OTTOMAN
KINGDOM
OF NAPLES
Naples
Constantinople
EMPIRE
Sicily
KINGDOM
OF SICILY
N
W
E
S

PROLOGUE

Whom the Gods Love
Die Young

—Polish Proverb

POLAND 1794

2 NOVEMBER ALL SOULS DAY

Swollen with recent rains, the river heaved and churned, flowing rapidly away from Warsaw, its burden of bodies propelled carelessly along, like so much flotsam.

A partially clad woman clung to something as the current took her. A log? A piece of planking from the broken bridge? Delirious from the fall, she was certain she was dying—or had died. Her faith—or the hazy filaments of a childhood belief that she conjured now—suggested she might expect to ascend into heaven as if on wings. Or plummet to a hell she had thought little about.

But she was being carried now in an undulating line—like a weightless twig—through the drumming rush of water. The sparkling interplay of the afternoon sunshine on the water was deceiving, for the river was brutally cold.

The woman's mind inexplicably fastened onto the mythical river that was thought to usher one to the Greek Underworld. Her cousin had told her about it—the river Acheron, was it? She dared not open her eyes.

What was she to expect in the Underworld? There would be the fee for the ferry boat operator. Did she have any coins? She thought not, and without a coin he would not bring her across. Everyone knew that. Might she use her charms on him? Were charms of her kind taken as legal tender in the Underworld? She had her doubts.

Her heart felt the icy fingers of the river upon it. How was she to account for her life? The things she had done?

The frigid, pulsating water seemed to run faster now—like her fear—rushing her to her fate.

The ancient Poles had believed that those who died by drowning were

doomed to become water spirits, forever residing in the waters where they had met death. She imagined Marzanna, Goddess Death, waiting for her at the river's end, dressed in white and carrying her scythe.

The woman pushed the Polish deity from her mind. At the age of twenty, she had run out of time. So?—what of it? She had often proclaimed that the years of her youth were ducats to be spent. Wishing she had lived a better life was useless. Just as well, she thought—she had never been one for apologies. Or regrets.

She was cold, cold to the bone. She took in a mouthful of water and coughed. Despite the urge, she knew not to move a hand to her face. To do so would cause her to lose her grip, and the river would draw her to its bottom. Her arms and hands were frozen in position, locked onto the object they were holding… holding.

And if God was the Christian God of her parents' beliefs, she wondered, would he forgive her?

With the numbing cold, she felt darkness descending—and the angry resignation that death was imminent. It was as certain as the fall of night's curtain.… *Dog's Blood!* How had she come to such an ignominious end?

The villagers who had hurried down to the river's edge stared in horror at the cargo the River Vistula was carrying past them. Those transfixed with wide eyes were mostly women, their men having gone off to fight with Kościuszko against the invading forces. An old man gawked much like the others—in silence—as the flotilla of human bodies moved steadily along. Sometimes a corpse became enmeshed in the weeds and foliage at the bank of the river, but the force of other bodies following a similar fateful journey goaded it once again on its way—or the water's strong current drew it down.

In disbelief, the old man turned toward Warsaw; the city was a great distance away, twenty miles upriver, but he could see an eerie, orange glow and above that, thick, black smoke rising high into the air. Had the capital fallen to the Russians? *God help us all*, he prayed. Then aloud: "God and the Black Madonna!"

The man's grandson had braved the sight, going close to the shore.

The old man called him back. This was no sight for a sixteen-year-old, even one already wounded in the patriots' cause. The boy seemed not to hear.

"Jerzy, come back!" he called again.

His grandson turned, a queer look on his face, and waved him forward.

Without questioning, the old man obeyed.

When he came to the shore, his eyes widened at the sight that held Jerzy spellbound. A raven-haired woman clung to what looked like planking that had become caught in the thick reeds and tubers at the river's side. Her skirt

was red as blood, and she was naked above the waist. She was both young and beautiful… something about her told him she must certainly be noble.

The old man saw now what Jerzy had seen. Little bubbles at her mouth. *Damn!* The woman was gasping for breath. She was alive!

The peasant understood what his grandson meant to do and moved closer to assist.

Jerzy immediately stepped into the water, reaching for the woman with one arm while the other linked him to his grandfather and to the river's bank.

Jerzy tugged at one of the woman's arms, trying to force her to let go of what had held her afloat. Her skin was a grayish blue. "Let go! Let go!" he cried.

She remained insensible to his directions. The mouth seemed to twist and tighten. Her talon-like hands held fast.

The current spun her body now, pulling her, whipping her legs and lower body out toward the river's middle, as if the river had mighty hands that would not allow her to be rescued.

Jerzy held on, persisting in loosening her grip, pulling back one finger, then another. At last her hand came free and came to clasp his as he pulled her to him. Her other hand willingly released that which had held her afloat the long distance from Warsaw, and as the old man aided his grandson in pulling the woman to safety, he saw that she had set free the red uniformed body of a Russian soldier, its mustachioed face blue and bloated beneath the waters.

PART ONE

The Doorstep of the Palace
Is Slippery.

—Polish Proverb

1

WARSAW 1794

The West Gate
13 December

Her heart contracting in fear, Anna returned the ice blue gaze of the Russian soldier who stared up through the open doorway of the covered carriage—and she thought she could do murder.

Here was a man with power, the power to keep her from the home she had not seen in three years, from the child who had been sent to safety there two months before, and from the man who should have been her husband in '91 had it not been for fate and the interference of others….

The soldier's beadlike, wolfish eyes moved over her, and Anna instantly felt a shiver travel up from the base of her spine—until she had to fend off a trembling at her shoulders. She would not be cowed. Her back stiffened as she steeled her nerves.

"What is your destination?" he demanded in broken Polish for the second time.

"Sochaczew." She kept her voice steady. "To my family home." Her reply came in Polish. She would not let him know she could speak his tongue.

"Papers!"

His brusqueness did not surprise Anna. Nothing since the fall of Warsaw into Russian hands surprised her anymore. "Here," she said, handing him the parchment Paweł had given her.

She tried not to watch as he officiously perused the documents. Her upper teeth tore at her lower lip as she silently cursed him—and a fate that had brought thousands of such interlopers into Poland, catapulting them into positions of power.

The open door allowed for the coach interior to go cold as a vault. But

Anna had more serious concerns and a chill that ran deeper. What if she was denied egress from the city? What if he saw fit to take her into custody? What if –?

"Your purpose in Sochaczew?" he barked, failing to address her properly. The man was impudent. She knew that if he could read, he had to be aware of her title.

"My mother is near death."

His eyes narrowed as if to assess her veracity. "Too bad."

It was a lie, of course, but Anna felt confident that he could have no way of knowing both of her parents had died in '91. She neither flinched nor turned away her gaze. The ruddiness of his face—that not hidden by a great black moustache—was enlivened by the red of his uniform.

"And when will you return to Warsaw?"

"I am not certain. Such things are hard to predict."

"Of course," he said, without a trace of empathy. "And this?" He nodded toward the passenger opposite Anna, as if she were a parcel.

"Lutisha, my servant."

He looked from one to the other. "Any weapons to declare?"

"No."

"Certain?"

Were they to be searched? Her pulse quickened at the possibility. "I am quite certain, Captain." Anna smiled nicely. She knew well the soldier's uniform was that of a lieutenant. It couldn't hurt to inflate his stature a bit.

He did not correct her. "Very well." Without further questions, he handed the document back to Anna and slammed the door. "Move on!" he called to Anna's driver.

The carriage lurched and rumbled forward, passing through the city's western gate. The fingers of her right hand moved over the folds of her dress, lightly tracing the object stowed in a hidden pocket—her pistol.

Anna smiled at the wide-eyed Lutisha—so faithful a servant—hoping to reassure her, but her own heart continued to race. *The swine! The filthy swine!* She had won the little battle with the Russian soldier but cursed him nonetheless. He, with the assumed power he held over her, *had* put fear into her heart, and she was tired to death of being fearful.

As the carriage moved away from the city, Anna took herself to task, for it was fear that had made her draw closed the leather window curtains at the outset of their journey. In leaving Paweł's town house on Piwna Street, they had passed through the Outer Courtyard of the Royal Castle, and Anna could not bear to look at the palace, knowing as she did, that Poland's monarchy was most likely at an end. Even less did she want to see across the River Vistula to the once vibrant suburb of Praga, now in charred ruins, her aunt's pristine white town house on the bluff burnt to cinders. She smiled tightly at Lutisha's puzzlement and gave no explanation for shutting out the light.

The cobblestones now gave way to the hard earth of winter, and the carriage started to bounce and roll through the countryside at a moderate clip.

Anna's fear ebbed. The journey—barring the unforeseen—would take less than a day. They should arrive at her estate in time for supper. She would be home. She felt lucky, indeed, for her family estate remained intact, but she felt a foreign sort of guilt, too, because Jan had lost his estate at Uście Zielone and Zofia had lost both the family estate at Halicz and the town house in Praga, all to the invading Russians.

Anna and Lutisha sat in silence and semi-darkness for half an hour.

"May I open my curtain, madame?" Lutisha asked at last.

"What? Oh, yes, of course." The briefest of knowing looks on Lutisha's face told Anna she had misjudged her, that the servant knew exactly why Anna had closed it.

Anna opened her own curtain now, too. The sun was shining brightly for a cold December day. She sat at the small window, her eyes on the passing flat expanses of whitened fields, patches of birch and evergreen forests, an occasional manor house—and myriad cottages and huts where people tended to their animals, living their lives as their ancestors had done. Each blink of the eye produced a new living portrait. She wondered at the sights, for they gave no clue to what Poland had endured, no clue to what had befallen her country. The sights touched a place in her heart, a sad place, because she knew that this was merely the appearance of things, for the peasants' losses were as heart-rending as those of any other patriot. A close examination of the passing scenes revealed many more women than men at their tasks. A multitude of their men had willingly taken up scythes at the call of Tadeusz Kościuszko. Many of them had been slain by the allied powers of Austria, Prussia, and Russia. They would not be returning to their modest homes.

Lutisha sat across from Anna, her large, round face a stoic mask, her fingers moving over the beads of a well-worn rosary. Still, the gray eyes of the old and corpulent servant could not veil their sadness, blinking at long intervals like those of a falcon. *How loyal she is,* Anna thought, *loyal and brave and strong!* With the Russians descending on Warsaw, she had chosen to stay with Anna and Zofia in the city, rather than leave with her daughter's family for the safety of the country.

"You'll see Marta and her family in time for supper, Lutisha."

The woman's toothless smile lighted Anna's heart. It struck Anna how alike was this peasant to Aunt Stella, the countess Lutisha had served all her life. One noble at birth, one peasant—and yet both born with Polish hearts and souls. Aunt Stella… Anna's own heart caught. Countess Stella Grońska had been fortunate in that she had not lived to see the destruction of her Praga town house, the fall of Warsaw, and the impending dissolution of her beloved homeland. Anna turned her gaze again to the passing landscape. She could not help but wonder whether her own son would grow up to call this land *Poland*.

The thought cut to the quick, and Anna tried to think of other things. It was good fortune that they had left a Russian-held Warsaw with so little fuss. How had Paweł made it possible for her to leave? In early November, after the Russians retook the capital, they threw about it a fine net of security, tightening it as if the city were the Golden Fleece. How had he produced the documents? Had he bribed someone? "Anna," he had cautioned her earlier that morning as he helped her into the coach and provided her with the traveling papers, "this document refers to you only as Countess Berezowska-Grawlińska. No mention is made of your having been recently named *princess*. I suggest that remain a secret."

What was this concern over her title? She guessed that being a member of the *szlachta*, the minor nobility of which there were many, made her less suspect than being of the higher nobility—or even the magnate class. But there had been no time to question Paweł in the matter.

King Stanisław August had meant the title as a reward for her patriotism, but because he ignored the warning she had dared to bring him about the untimely uprising against the Russians, it mattered little to her. And what gave an even hollower ring to the appellation of "princess" was that for decades now, titles came to Polish citizens only through foreign powers; Stanisław had bestowed her title under the auspices of Catherine of Russia. Catherine—Poland's inveterate enemy! Her body tensed at the thought.

Anna stared out at the blur of scenery. Thoughts and time fell away.

At last, her eyes found focus and she realized the landscape was becoming more and more familiar. She was returning home to Sochaczew. She thought how much her life had changed since she had left her family manor house more than three years before. Both she and her country had changed. There was much to regret, things best forgotten.

The carriage moved now through a forest, the daylight dimming as if dusk had fallen. With a start, Anna recognized an almost indiscernible path that led into a thick patch of evergreens. She took in a deep breath, then expelled it slowly. When she closed her eyes, the old memory washed over her, uninvited, like the cold, dark, and turbid waters of the pond she knew lay a few miles into the blackest heart of the forest. Her usual powers of repression failed.

For the moment, she was alone again in the dense and eerie woods on the shore of that pond. Night had fallen, a moonless, starless, night. Everything about her was still and black, and she could not help but recall the superstition that the forest was home to the devil. With her sprained ankle, she had lain in the pungent fall leaves for hours, like a wounded bird, awaiting the rescue party while holding off the bone-chilling cold and fighting the ignition of real panic.

She could not imagine what was keeping Zofia, who had gone for help. And then came the sense—alarm—of someone, something, lurking nearby.

Something dangerous. Watching her. A long moment passed with only the drumming sound of her own beating heart.

Suddenly a figure stumbled out of the shrubbery and moved toward her in a deliberate and menacing way. Despite the injury she began running—running—insensible to pain—fear propelling her on, her feet padding along the water-parched bank of the pond.

A tree trunk provided only a momentary hiding place, and when the beast found her, she managed to push him into the pond. But he held fast, pulling her with him into the cold, murky depths. Struggling to free herself, she worked her way to shore—knowing he was close behind.

Then came the claw-like hand upon her back—the stink of liquor on his breath—the earth rising up—and a white-hot explosion as her head hit the stony ground. His body on hers—crushing her—rending her—terror giving way to torn flesh and raw pain.

Then, oblivion.

Anna pushed the memory into the dark and empty place inside her where she held it prisoner. She did have to admit to herself that from that violent and terrible night in the forest had come Jan Michał, her beloved child. Who could explain that? He was at Sochaczew, where he had been taken for safety's sake before the Russian onslaught.

And Count Jan Stelnicki was there at Sochaczew, too, waiting for her. Anna felt hot tears beading in her eyes at the mere thought. Her fears seemed to vanish. In the letter she carried near to her heart Jan had pledged his love and proposed marriage. He would adopt Jan Michał. Anna wondered whether he would be allowed to keep his title, for he had fought with Kościuszko against the allied forces. Perhaps even she would be denied her royalty. But what did it matter? They would be together. She would have him at last. Happiness was within reach. She suppressed the thought that years before it had seemed within reach, too.

Anna recalled, as she often did, that warm afternoon in September of '91, before *it* had happened, that night in the forest. They had met in a meadow at midday. Jan, with his blond hair, cobalt blue eyes, and dimpled chin was the most handsome man she had ever seen. In but a few weeks she discovered that beneath his iconoclastic leanings, bold gaze, and glib forwardness, lay a sturdy foundation of patriotism, passion, gentleness. Her love for him took root and endured—increased—in the intervening months and years, years in which they saw almost nothing of each other. It frightened her now to think she might at last live her life with this man, find contentment with him. Did she deserve happiness? Was it truly a possibility? she wondered, for caution had set up a barrier about her heart.

She called to mind now the saying that the most important things in life happen only once. Such was the meeting with Jan Stelnicki.

And yet, somehow she had lived to see this day. A day of reunion. There was a God. There was! A mere six weeks earlier, she had miraculously survived

the flight from the Russians across the burning Praga bridge—just before it collapsed into the River Vistula. Her cousin Zofia had not been so fortunate. Anna made the sign of the cross now. Her heart went out, guiltily, to her cousin, but she tried not to linger upon the loss, as she had all this while.… Today she would be reunited with her son and with Jan. It was not a time to dwell on the past and the dead… not today! The carriage trundled on.

In no time they came into Sochaczew. The Market Square seemed oddly deserted. Soon they would pass the cemetery. So much death—and yet Anna felt her heart beat rapidly. "We're not far now!—A few more miles out of town." Her family home, Topolostan—Poplar Estate—was named for the twin columns of trees that lined the long, curving drive from the road to the house.

She remembered that Lutisha had never been to Sochaczew. "Oh, don't put your expectations too high, Lutisha. It's not as large as Aunt Stella's estate at Halicz, mind you, nor as elegant as her Praga town house."

A flicker of hurt in Lutisha's eyes halted Anna's train of thought. She immediately regretted the mention of the two homes where Lutisha had spent the bulk of her years. Lutisha had taken lessons in the French ways of tending a home and had passed on the methods, as well as the etiquette, to her daughter and granddaughters. Barring outright ownership, she could have been no prouder of those residences. The town house was destroyed, as was nearly all of Praga, and the Groński manor house—"the great house," the servants called it—had been burned in the summer of '93 soon after the Russians invaded in support of the Confederacy of Targowica, the gathering of Polish magnates that had so foolishly invited Catherine into Poland to depose the Third of May Constitution.

While Anna was grasping for some comment that would assure Lutisha that her new home would be safe and welcoming, someone outside the coach shouted, and the vehicle ground to a an abrupt halt. Her excitement at being in Sochaczew was immediately snuffed by a dark presentiment.

"What is it?" Anna called to the driver. She could hear his raised voice amidst several others. She called out again.

"It's the Russians, milady," the driver called back, urgency in his tone. "The town's been garrisoned. They want you to step out for interrogation."

Interrogation. Looking to Lutisha, whose eyes had waxed like twin moons, Anna attempted a smile that she hoped would calm the aging servant and belie the cold terror that had seized her own heart.

Haunted by memories of the frigid river, the woman lay in the dark, unable to fasten her mind to any sustained thought. Despite a heavy counterpane

and a fur covering over that, she shook continuously against the cold. Her eyes remained closed. When she shifted, even slightly, pain ran through her like a hundred piercing knives. Beneath her was the consolatory scent of fresh hay. She knew that she had come close to the surface of consciousness many times before this, hovering only briefly in the presence of strange, whispering voices. Somewhere, too, were the sounds of animals. Her mind did not attempt to distinguish what kind. Then she would again descend into a welcoming darkness that benumbed every sense.

It was the silence, the terrible and empty silence, that now worked at her, keeping her from her descent. Her eyelids lifted slowly, grudgingly, like tiny, weighted curtains. What she saw, she saw with stark objectivity, for her mind was unable to think. Gray light was beginning to filter in through the square, four-paned window on the wall to the foot of her bed. The play of the morning rays passed through the *wycinanki* that served as curtains, the delicate papercuts casting a striking design of flowers on the beaten earth that formed the floor. Her eyes moved to the opposite wall where a little table held a shrine consisting of icons and candles. Framed religious pictures hung on the wall above it. To the right of the table was a doorway through which a bread stove glowed white in the dimness.

To the right of the door hung a voluminous red skirt she vaguely recognized. On the floor rested once-elegant black boots. These, too, seemed familiar. Her eyes took in all of this, but it was not until she heard a door open and close that her mind formed real thought. *Who is entering?* She could hear footfalls. And for the first time, an alarm went off somewhere within her, breathing life into her dormant nerves. *Where am I?*

These cramped and rustic surroundings were unknown to her—and less than pleasing, although she wasn't sure why. She closed her eyes. She could hear bits of conversation between a man and a woman in the other room. They spoke in a low Polish dialect, their tones hushed. Who were these people?

The whispering lessened as the sounds of preparation for a meal began. The little room she was in—more an alcove, really—took on warmth as the stove was fed. She pulled the cover up to her neck, lulled into drowsiness by the smells of chicory and baking bread. She slept.

Some time later, she came suddenly awake. Some instinct told her she was being observed, and she immediately opened her eyes. An hour or two had passed. Daylight brightened the room. Two figures stood just a pace away, looking down at her.

"I told you she moved, I did," the peasant woman said.

"You did," said the weathered old man at her side. He smiled now. "It is good to see life within you, milady." He had few teeth.

The woman wished they had not disturbed her, longed to fade back into the comfortable straw of her bed. But it wasn't her bed. Hers was made of—what? Something softer? Goose down? She struggled to remember. How had she gotten *here*? And even though she knew these people were in no way

connected to her, she could not recall faces or names of people who *were* important to her. Like sudden storm waters, panic rose.

She stared at the two. Fragments of memory began to eddy, flash, and stir. She remembered their faces poring over her, talking to her, forcing her to drink and eat. How long had she been here?

The blond woman smiled at her as her large hand clenched the folds of her colorless sack-like dress, allowing her to drop into a clumsy curtsy. "Is milady hungry?"

"No." The word was scarcely a breath. When she lifted herself up onto her elbow, the pain cut through her, and she felt herself growing weak. She coughed, her chest contracting in pain.

"You're pale—you must rest, milady," the man said, moving away. "You will eat later, when it's ready. Rabbit, a good fat one, too!—I'll leave you to my daughter for now."

His daughter nodded. "You'll want to use the chamber pot, I expect."

The woman could not deny it. And she realized that the experience of having people there to see to her needs was a familiar one. These were peasants—and *she* was not one of them.

She was helped then—at considerable pain—to sit up and slide off the bed onto the cold chamber pot.

When the peasant woman came back to collect the crude and coverless container, she introduced herself as Danuta.

"Thank you, Danuta," the woman whispered, shivering. She sat on the side of the narrow bed, exhausted by her effort.

"And you… what are we to call you, milady?"

Strangely, it was only now that the woman's own identity came to her. She stared blankly at Danuta as the horror of what she had been through came back to her in galvanizing waves—Praga being put to the torch—the Russians on horseback descending—sabers raised, falling, and flashing red in the sun—the cries of women and children unheeded on the smoke-filled, acrid air. She felt faint again.

Danuta stood before her, grasping the pot as if it was a tureen, waiting.

"How did I get here?"

"You were in the river. My son fished you out, he did."

"Your son?"

"Yes, milady, Jerzy." She nodded toward the other room. "My father helped, too."

"I see." She fought off the faintness. "How long?"

Danuta shrugged. "Three weeks, maybe four."

Weeks! Was it possible?

"Thank you," she heard herself say. She had not always treated her own servants with respect, but these people had saved her from certain death, and she knew that her life was still dependent on them. She would have to behave accordingly, and she attempted a smile now. "I'm cold, Danuta."

"I'll fix you a bowl of *kasza*. It'll warm your bones, Lady…" Danuta persisted in her need of a name.

"Grońska," the woman said, coughing and falling back into the straw mattress. "Lady Zofia Grońska."

Count Jan Stelnicki smoothed over the plaster and stepped back to look at his work. The fissure in the wall was the last of several that had been in need of repair in the large reception room of Anna's manor house. With the owner of the premises absent for three years, the estate had gone without the diligent care necessary to keep it up. He sighed, less than satisfied with the result of his labors. He was better at soldiering, it seemed, but he was glad to be doing something physical. It gave him less time to think, less time to worry. Paweł had sent the message about Anna's arrival only the day before, prompting Jan's concern about the dangers of such a trip in Russian-occupied territory. And he would deny it if someone were to ask him, but he was nervous about seeing Anna again.

The woman he had loved from afar for so long was just hours away. Never mind that his own family estate at Uście Zielone and town house at Kraków had been sequestered—booty to the allied powers. Never mind that it was at Anna's estate that he waited. He would put aside tradition and pride. In very little time, he would see Anna.

"Much improved, Lord Stelnicki," Jacob Szraber said, coming in from the rear of the house by way of the music room. He approached the mended wall.

"Think so?" If only there were more time before Anna arrived. So much still had to be done around the estate.

"Indeed. I've finished with the roof."

"I told you to leave that for a younger man."

Jacob shrugged. "None younger around. Walek is just as old, unless you count his young son Tomasz."

"Then *I* would— "

"Oh, no," Jacob interrupted, "that wouldn't be proper. A few new evergreen shingles and it was done."

"Well, you made it leak-proof, I trust?"

"We'll know come spring, I guess." His laugh coaxed one from Jan. "And don't worry, I took care not to disturb the storks' nest. They'll find it this spring just as they left it."

"You've been a tremendous help, Jacob, but… " Jan's words trailed off.

"The estate's not the same place the Countess Anna left, you mean."

Jan nodded. "Nor is anything else in Poland."

"Well, in such times as these it is enough that the countess is coming home to her son and to… " Jacob paused, his eyes averted in embarrassment that he may have overstepped himself.

Jan smiled, taking his meaning. *To you, Jan*, he had meant. Jan thought of Anna's little boy. She was coming home to him, too. "Where is Jan Michał?" he asked.

"He's with the wife. Good for her to have someone to fuss over, after… ." Jacob's voice caught with emotion and he was unable to continue.

Jan nodded in understanding and compassion. He silently thanked God for Jacob and Emma Szraber. Without them the estate would be in even greater disrepair. At the start of the conflict, Jacob had fought as a Polish patriot, joining the contingent of Colonel Berek Joselewicz, the first Jewish regiment since Biblical times. He had seen serious action, survived, and come home to resume his duties as estate manager, but Jan's heart went out to the middle-aged couple, for they had lost their daughter Judith and her newborn son. It had been confirmed only three days before: The two had been among the twelve thousand caught up in the chaos when the Russians took Praga.

The Warsaw uprising had so incensed Catherine that she sent a general notorious for his ferocity—Aleksandr Suvorov—to level Warsaw. His forces descended from the east like red locusts, destroying the suburb of Praga and putting thousands of its citizens—men, women, and children—to the sword. Only a burnt bridge and the River Vistula held the enemy at bay from the capital walls long enough for the blood lust to cool, allowing for the city to capitulate peacefully.

So many of the large Jewish population had died violently that day, cut down at the bridge, on the streets, in their homes. Jan's blood iced over to think it might just as easily have been Anna who had not made it across the burning bridge to safety behind the Warsaw city walls. The Szrabers' daughter and grandson were not their only losses. Their well-loved son-in-law had died at the ramparts that same day, defending the city's suburb from the Russians. There would be no regeneration for this good and proud Jewish family.

Jan had been there, too, and had suffered two wounds and the indignity of capture. The signing of the peace treaty, however, had allowed for his release.

Marta entered to announce the afternoon meal, a worried smile flickering on her earnest face. Jan knew that she was concerned over her mother, Lutisha, who had stayed in Warsaw to take care of Anna's needs. They would both be in Sochaczew in a matter of hours now, he thought, and the whole household would breathe easier.

Jan and Jacob moved to the dining room where Emma and little Jan Michał were already seated. Jan watched as Marta's daughters Marcelina and Katarzyna began to serve the mushroom soup. Just before the Russian invasion, Walek, Marta's husband—a patriot himself—had managed to spirit his little family away from the doomed suburb of Praga. He had taken Jan Michał also, disguised as his own child. How Jan wished that he had taken Anna, too, but anyone of nobility would have been detained, placing everyone in jeopardy. As it was, no one much cared about a little retinue of peasants.

"Lady Anna," Emma said, "will be home for the evening meal, I should think."

Jan paused for a few moments, a spoonful halfway to his mouth. Had she been reading his mind, just as Jacob had done? The mere mention of Anna's name—the thought that he would see those amber-flecked green eyes before the day was through—made his heart pump faster and his mind wander.

He found himself staring at his spoon and suddenly felt a bit ridiculous. A man who had seen the kind of bloodletting that had come his way, a man who had had to kill, should not be so emotional, he thought. Holding off tears, he put the spoon to rest in the bowl. He looked to the sandy-haired, dark-eyed child he had offered to adopt. "How is that bread, Jan Michał?"

Chewing with relish on the fresh rye, the boy looked up with adoring eyes to Jan. "Good." He pronounced the single word with such enthusiasm that crumbs went flying.

Everyone laughed.

A few minutes of silence passed. It was Jacob who broke it. "It is all very well, Lord Stelnicki, your having us take our meal here to give you company, but when Lady Anna comes home, we will eat in our cottage."

"What? Nonsense, Jacob!"

"Oh, that's the way it must be, Lord Stelnicki," Emma said. "It's hardly proper for an estate manager and a governess to be taking meals in the Berezowski dining room. And you and Lady Anna will have such a lot to catch up on when she arrives. So many preparations… " The woman stopped mid-sentence, her face reddening.

Jan smiled at her and started again on his soup. He tried to fend off the blood he felt rising into his face. That he and Anna would marry seemed to be common knowledge.

Soon Katarzyna cleared away the bowls while Marcelina brought in a huge tureen of *bigos*. Little Jan Michał's eyes bulged, sparkling brown at the sight and fragrant scent of the stew. Jan studied Anna's child. In truth, he felt uncomfortable that the boy had taken to him so quickly. Why was that? It was, after all, in his nature to be protective. He could not explain his own feelings to himself. Was it a fear of taking on such a responsibility? Was it the memory of the child's father? He would not wish away the existence of the little innocent. But he could—and did—hold himself responsible for the circumstances that had led to the boy's entrance into the world. That day at the pond was a day Jan would regret the rest of his life. Even now, years later, no day went by without his thinking *if only*…

A long moment passed.

"Lord Stelnicki," Emma said, "you've hardly eaten a thing."

"I'm just taking my time, Emma," he said. "It's delicious." Jan was impressed by the little meal. War had left the country poor, the storehouses of even the manor houses and castles nearly empty, but Marta and her girls

had somehow conjured up the most savory *bigos* he had tasted in years, and when Marta came out from the kitchen on some errand, he told her so.

By custom, compliments to the cook were seldom made in the dining room, and the attention caused a rise in the servant's color. In her embarrassment, Marta changed the subject. "Oh, Lord Stelnicki, it will be so good to have Lady Anna here, safe and sound."

"That it will, Marta," Emma concurred. "Not to mention having Lutisha, your mother, back!"

The thought put Jan's mind on a happier path. He could not bring himself to say anything for fear of tears. How he longed for Anna, had since they had met in'91, and now they were to make a life together.

As Marta retreated to the kitchen, Jan sopped up the gravy of the stew with his dark bread and began to chew, savoring the familiar afresh.

"Lord Stelnicki," Emma ventured, as she helped Jan Michał with his meal, "Lady Anna—has she had no word about her cousin?"

"No, Emma." Jan kept his eyes upon his plate. "I'm afraid that Zofia was among the many lost in the waters of the River Vistula."

"May God rest her soul," Emma said.

Zofia, Jan thought. He certainly wished no one dead, but just the mention of her name brought on a tide of grim emotions.

Zofia came suddenly awake, flushed and perspiring. The Praga massacre—with all its horror—had unfolded in a hellish nightmare. She could taste in her throat the acrid smoke of the burning homes, hear the screams of women and children being mowed down in the streets like shafts of wheat, see the glint of scarlet-stained cutlass and saber blades rising and falling, falling and rising. Even after the bridge collapsed into the Vistula, the Russian legions—lancers in the lead—continued to bear down on the populace, propelling them off the bridge and to a watery grave.

The Russian soldier that had pulled her atop his Arabian had stolen from her what jewelry she had worn—all but one ring. So it was that—on horseback and in the midst of the killing—they struggled over the diamond ring Zofia was intent upon keeping. It had been her mother's. She had only just managed to place it in a hidden pocket in her skirts when the cries of the people around them rose to fever pitch.

It was then that both she and the Russian realized that they were inextricably caught up with the masses that were being forced toward the jagged precipice of the broken bridge that jutted out over the roiling waters. The Russian soldier's face went as pale as a ship's canvas as he sought—futilely—to direct his horse to safety. Zofia held to him with a vice-like grip as fear—so unfamiliar to her—coursed through her. The press of the crowd tightened then, and the horse rose up in a panic.

They teetered at the edge of the broken bridge for what seemed a long moment, the sight of the swiftly moving Vistula below. In the water, their heads bobbing and limbs flailing, a thousand souls that had escaped the blade and bullet would not escape the current.

Then came the crush of the crowd and suddenly the horse was pushed from the precipice and they were falling—falling—falling.

Zofia shook her head now in an attempt to cleanse it of the memory. She pulled herself into a sitting position at the side of the bed, dizzy at her own emotions. It was night, and the cottage was quiet as a crypt. A low fire off in the main room of the cottage tossed a dim, flickering light into her little alcove. Her eyes went to the ruined skirt hanging near the doorway. Summoning a hidden strength, she was suddenly off the bed and moving toward it, her bare feet cold on the earthen floor.

She took down the skirt and fumbled for the hidden pocket. Her fingers came upon the ring then, and a wave of relief washed over her. She might very well need something of value to pay for her restoration to Warsaw. She withdrew the diamond ring and held it up to the weak, flickering hearth light. The facets of the perfect stone twinkled coldly, like a distant star.

2

Anna had been kept waiting in the cold room for more than two hours. Outside, twilight had darkened into the pitch of night. When she had been shown into the office, a Russian soldier had asked her questions in his language, and she had responded in kind. She had come to be with her dying mother, she told him, showing him her papers. Had she signed with the Confederacy of Targowica? he asked. The question startled her, and she felt her face flushing hot. Yes, she told him, hurting anew to think of it.

"It is good that you have signed, Countess." He seemed satisfied.

Anna thought the little interview over. She stood to leave.

"Sit down, please, Countess Berezowska-Grawlińska," he said. "You are to wait here."

And so she waited. Another hour.

The details of the office in which she was confined—labels on a file, a flag, a man's sash hanging on a hook—indicated that its owner was a Pole. He collected clocks and sundials, it seemed, for they were present in abundance—gathering dust on the desk in front of her, on tables, and on the walls. The steady ticking and signaling of the clocks began to work on her fragile nerves. This was time being stolen from her, minute by minute.

How had she come to find herself caught up in such a lie? Violating her dead mother's memory in order to provide a likely excuse for a return to Sochaczew—it made her feel small. Oh, it was true that her name had been affixed to the Confederacy of Targowica, but it was her cousin Zofia who—without consultation—had added their names to those of greedy and misled nobles, men who should have known better than to ask Russia's Catherine to intercede and overthrow the democratic Third of May Constitution. Aunt Stella had been astute in predicting that Catherine would want more than to help crush the seeds of democracy in Poland, that she would want Poland, as well.

But Anna had to admit to herself that lies might have their place in a truthful world, for the lie about her mother would admit her to her home and a new life with Jan Stelnicki—just as the traitorous placement of her name with the Confederacy had already served her well. Zofia had once told her that lies were more useful than truth. Had she been right? And were such means justified?

The door opened now and the Russian soldier entered, followed by a man in the old-fashioned Polish garb of Eastern influence—a long coat over tight trousers, a colorful sash at a thickening waist and a ruff at a fleshy neck. He seemed to have been taken away from a meal, for he was still chewing and wiping at his grizzled moustache. Anna thought him to be in his mid-fifties. He appeared vaguely familiar.

"This is Countess Berezowska-Grawlińska" the Russian pronounced, failing to introduce the Pole to her. "I am finished with her. You are to question the good countess and make a report. If she does not cooperate, she is to be detained."

"I understand," the Pole said.

"Good!" The Russian made his exit, his boot heels hitting hard upon the wooden floor. He left open the door that led to other offices.

"Now, Lady Berezowska-Grawlińska, we will have a nice little chat in our own tongue, yes?" The Pole went to the chair behind the desk and inked a pen.

He avoided calling her *countess*. Like most of the *szlachta*, the minor nobility, he did not use titles in direct address, for they thought it too imperious to do so. Anna was buoyed by the thought that they were Poles of the same class and dared to hope she would find an understanding ear and quickly be put on her way home. But there was something about his eyes and deep, gravel-like voice that gave her pause. What was it? And it was odd that a Pole should carry such weight in a town garrisoned by Russians.

"You have been away some time," he said.

"Yes, I have… and I am hoping to return to my estate as soon as possible."

"Topolostan—ah, yes. Of course, I understand. This should not take long."

"That's very good to hear." Anna's reply was all bluster. In reality, his familiarity with her estate's name unnerved her.

"When did you leave Sochaczew?"

"In July of 1791."

"A long time."

"I've lived with my aunt in Halicz and more recently in Praga."

With each of her answers, the man scratched away at a bit of paper. "And what has prompted your return?" The end of the man's pen tapped one of his upper teeth.

Anna felt a pressure on her heart. This time the lie came with a great uneasiness—still, she could not change her story now. "I've… I've come to be with my mother.… She's in ill health."

One of his bushy eyebrows lifted now and he withdrew the pen from his mouth. "Dying, isn't that what you told the lieutenant?"

Anna swallowed hard. "Yes.… It is reason enough, I should think."

"Ah, yes. But these Russians are suspicious souls, are they not?"

Anna felt awkward. She would not allow him to place potentially dangerous words into her mouth. She affected a non-smile, the type her mother had used as a mask for displeasure. What she longed for was the protection of her father, long dead.

The official grew tired of waiting for a verbal reply. "And we Poles are a resourceful lot."

"I don't wish to be held up any longer. My servant must be freezing in our carriage. She's elderly, and I'd like to get her home."

"It is hard to lose a parent. Myself, I have lost both."

"I'm sorry. Then you understand—"

"What I don't understand, Lady Berezowska-Grawlińska," he said, his small, milky blue eyes boring into hers, "is the reason for your deceit."

"Deceit?" Anna's heart tripled in time.

"Come, come, my lady," he said, his voice taking on gruffness, "you know as well as I that when you left here three years ago, you left your parents stone cold in the ground!"

Anna couldn't think; she could only stare dumbly at this smug creature who suddenly seemed quite capable of anything.

He was smiling, as if he had just brought down a deer.

"How do you know—"

"How do I know? I am the *starosta* here in Sochaczew, have been for nearly twenty years."

"The *starosta*?"

"Ah, our Russian hosts do not always show good manners. The lieutenant didn't introduce me. I am Lord Grzegorz Doliński."

Anna's back went rigid, but she attempted to maintain her composure. While she had seen him only once, years before, the name now brought home to her his identity. He was indeed the croaky-voiced magistrate of Sochaczew.

It was he who had investigated the murder of her father and taken into custody the peasant who had killed him. And it was he who had somehow allowed the murderer to escape. An old wound opened, loosing a bitter poison into Anna's bloodstream as she recalled how, on her deathbed, her mother had cursed the name of Doliński.

Anna could scarcely believe that she stood before him—and at his mercy.

Doliński laughed. "You're wondering what I'm doing here, Lady Anna! Here at my old desk with my sundials and clocks—and amidst a contingent of the red devils!"

When Anna merely stared, he smiled. "Captured your thoughts, have I?"

Anna suppressed the bile that rose up within her and nodded.

"We Poles are resourceful, always able to survive, yes? Well, the Russians are clever ones, too, they are. When they take over a town or a country, they don't replace the old bureaucracy with their own. Oh no, they're smart enough to keep things and people in place whenever and wherever they can, so that life goes on—or *seems* to go on—much like it had before their frontier violation. Their invasion appears less invasive, if you take my meaning. People adapt and are less likely to rebel. And so here I am at the desk I came to years ago." He pushed his eyebrows upward. "Of course, I must answer to them."

Words failed Anna. She had been caught in a stupid and useless lie. What had prompted her to risk all? It was a foolish gamble. And she had lost to a longtime family enemy. Her arrest was all but certain. Perhaps the best she could look forward to would be a return trip to the capital. And the worst… well, she knew of nobles who had been deported to Siberia. And now, as if to ring out her sentence, the six o'clock bells and chimes on the many clocks began to peal.

"Come here, Lady Anna," Doliński said, pushing back his chair and moving across the room. "Come quickly and look at this one."

Reluctantly Anna obeyed.

"It's a beauty, isn't it?" Doliński was referring to a cuckoo clock of linden wood hanging upon the wall. The yellow painted bird was just now delivering its final call. "It's Austrian."

"It's 'cuckoo' in any language, Lord Doliński."

He looked at Anna, paused for a moment, and laughed. "Marvelous, Lady Anna! I shall remember that one."

Anna did not laugh.

"Oh, you needn't be afraid. You may miss the evening meal at your manor house, but there's no reason why you shouldn't be home tonight."

"Then you won't—"

"Tell our new Russian landlords of your little lie?" He moved toward a window as he spoke. Was he looking out at her carriage? Anna wanted to curse the man but knew to say nothing. He returned to where she stood. "I must write my report, Lady Berezowska-Grawlińska. It may be dangerous for me to write something other than the truth."

Anna remained silent, already suspicious of his intent.

"We Poles survive, do we not, Anna? May I call you that?—Oh, not all of us, of course, but the smart ones do. Come… come back to the desk." He took hold of Anna's arm to lead her.

Anna smiled and disengaged herself. Walking back to the desk, she felt the bile rising again and imagined herself running from the room. But where would that lead? Certain arrest? Confinement? She thought she would be ill. When they seated themselves again, she welcomed having the desk between them.

"Should I choose to clear you to leave, my dear, you would be in my debt."

Anna concluded that the man was suggesting a bribe. "I have but little money on my person, but I can request some from Warsaw."

He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "I hear the mint's been shut down, despite Stanisław's pleas to his old lover Catherine.—Oh, I have more money than things to spend it on, my dear." Elbows on his desk, he placed the tips of his fingers of one hand against those of the other. "I appreciate your concern, but I'm not hinting for money, Anna Berezowska-Grawlińska."

Anna looked into his fleshy face. His eyes—like blue stones—confirmed her suspicion. Her heart swung out over an abyss. What was she to do?

He smiled. "Nonetheless, I am a man who likes to be appreciated."

Anna stiffened in her chair. "Your favor to me would be much appreciated, Lord Doliński. But if you are a true Pole and a man of conscience, such a favor might redeem you of a past failing."

Surprise spread over Doliński's face. "Failing, you say?"

Anna stood. "You were in charge of confining the man who killed my father. Feliks Paduch managed to get away under *your* watch. I should think you would be glad to have the opportunity of doing Samuel Berezowski's daughter a good turn."

"Oh my, you *are* your father's daughter!"

"I take that as a compliment!"

"Ah! I like a woman with a bit of spirit." Then, in a harder voice: "Please sit down, Lady Berezowska-Grawlińska."

Anna pushed down the rage she feared would spill out in invective. She sat.

He leaned forward over the desk now. "Your eyes are magnificent, Anna.… You see, I can be appreciative, as well."

"Tell me, Lord Doliński, do you collect women as you do clocks?"

Doliński turned crimson and drew back, as if stung. Was he angry? Or did he still have enough of a sense of decorum to be shamed? Before he could do or say anything to reveal himself, the Russian came clumsily into the room.

"Well?" the lieutenant asked. Doliński coughed and looked down at the paper on which he had scribbled, the nib on his pen long dried up.

Anna felt faint. This man with the stones for eyes had her life in his keeping. What would he say?

The Russian glared at Anna, then at Doliński. "Come, come," he prodded. "I don't have all day."

"I… I have yet to finish the interview, lieutenant."

"Very well. She'll have to keep, then. I've another for you to question. This one looks more promising… but not nearly so pretty." The Russian winked at Anna.

When the door closed behind them, Anna heard the lock fall into place.

Zofia was unaware of how many days or weeks had passed in the pitifully tiny cottage. The fever held on tenaciously. She slept constantly, dreamt deeply, allowing herself to come to the surface of awareness when Danuta sponged her body, helped her to eat broth and bread, or aided in the use of the chamber pot. Occasionally Danuta's father forced foul-tasting herbal potions upon her. Her son—the boy who had rescued Zofia—was not in evidence.

For a long while, Zofia thought she would not live—and often prayed that the end would be quick and painless. Her days of parties, balls, and castle intrigue seemed a lifetime ago. But in time, the fever broke, strength seeped back into her bones and flesh, just as spring carries life to a cold and dead land. Although spring was still months away, it was with a start that Zofia realized she would survive.

As her physical condition improved, so did her spirit. She began to wonder about Anna. Had she made it safely across the bridge? Had she survived?—And Jan? Had he survived the Russian deluge? Most of the time, however, she worried how she would be able to return to Warsaw… and what she would find there.

Wearing a cotton shift, she was sitting in a crude and cushionless chair one day when she heard someone enter the dwelling. Danuta and her father had left for the village not long before, so she was immediately put on guard.

"Mother?" came a gentle voice.

Zofia saw a face appear around the corner, then disappear. "Come in, come in," she called.

Slowly a figure came into the doorway.

"Your mother's gone out. You must be Jerzy."

He nodded uncertainly.

"You fetched me from the river," Zofia said, marveling at his resemblance to another.

He nodded again.

"Come in. A few days ago I would have scolded you for not letting the river do its work. But today I am able to thank you."

The boy dared to take two paces. He seemed confused.

"How old are you, Jerzy?"

He cleared his throat. "Sixteen, milady."

"I see. I think your mother has sent you out of the house, no?" Zofia nodded toward the bed. "Is this yours?" When he colored slightly, she asked where he had been sleeping and eating.

"In the barn, milady." The boy shifted from one foot to the other. "It's not so bad."

"With the chickens and that damn rooster I hear?"

"Yes, milady."

"And with the goats that go on braying the livelong day?"

"Bleating. It is donkeys that bray."

Zofia laughed. "You have those, too?"

"No, milady."

"Sheep?"

"A few." Jerzy shrugged. "They stay outside except in blizzards or hard rains."

"And then?"

The boy lifted his blue eyes to the ceiling. "There's an attic above."

"Above?—Above *me*, you mean?"

He nodded. "We have a ramp to the rear of the house."

"You do?" Zofia asked, imagining a little Noah's ark overhead. "Hardly a *petit palais*, to be certain," Zofia said with a smile, confident he would not understand. She offered her hand. "Thank you, Jerzy."

The boy stepped forward, unsure what was expected of him. He looked at his own hands, filthy from the morning's work, then dropped them. It was an awkward moment, and Zofia tried to stifle the giggle that tickled upwards in her throat—to no avail. Of course, he had never kissed a lady's hand. What was she thinking? He was blushing now.

She dropped her hand and attempted small talk while she studied Jerzy more closely. His clothes were those of a peasant farmer, scarcely more than filthy rags, the boots well-worn and caked with mud. But he was already tall and nicely built. The dusty blonde hair framed a face more aristocratic than peasant. He was a striking boy, with his deep blue eyes, and he would be a handsome man. Here amidst stark poverty and ugliness was this golden child favored by the gods.

Zofia knew she was making him uneasy—as much with her talk as with her eyes. Oddly, the sight of him squirming in discomfort gave her pleasure.

"I must go now," Jerzy said at last, turning for the door.

"If you must, Jerzy… but come visit again, will you?"

The boy's blush deepened and he disappeared.

Zofia laughed aloud when she was alone. It felt good to laugh. As if she had only just started to live again. It felt good, too, to enjoy handsome male company. Even one as young as Jerzy.

She returned to her bed with its straw mattress, scarcely believing how

the short interchange had sapped her strength. She lay back against the lumpy pillow. The little burst of energy had come and gone. The weakness made her worry that it would still be some time before she could hope to leave this place. *How long?*

Zofia allowed herself now to reflect on the realization that had come upon her the moment the young boy walked in. A sweet nostalgia filled her as her mind allowed a decade to fall away. She remembered the many trips from her parents' house at Halicz to the neighboring Stelnicki estate at Uście Zielone where an aristocratic replica of Jerzy had welcomed her. *Dog's Blood!*—Jerzy was the very image of Jan Stelnicki!

Count Jan Stelnicki. The nostalgia drained away almost at once, memories quickly turning bitter. She had counted on—plotted—an alliance with Jan to avoid a marriage betrothal to another made by her parents when she was a mere baby. But that was before the arrival of Anna at Halicz. Little Anna Maria with her reddish-brown braids and wide green eyes! How had her cousin won his affection? How had *she* lost it? The mystery still irked her. Well, she had had the satisfaction of foisting off on Anna the man to whom she had been engaged, Antoni Grawliński. She could not help but smile to herself. What a crafty piece of work that had been!

The smile disappeared. How could she have known the tragic end that marriage would come to?… *Well, better her than me*, Zofia thought. And yet a little truth that she had always held below the surface rose up now—before Anna came on the scene, Zofia had been interested in Jan mainly as a way of avoiding an arranged marriage, but after Anna seemed to win his affection, her own interest in Jan increased to a white heat. She *had* been jealous of Anna.

Still, she loved her cousin. A little mystery, that.—Had Anna survived the Russians? Zofia had done what she could to get her safely across the bridge. She hoped—and somehow instinctively felt—that Anna had indeed survived. Zofia had told her to go to Paweł's Warsaw town house. Is that where she was? The Russians would not harm her, for Zofia had affixed their names to the Confederacy of Targowica.

And Jan. Had he survived? This seemed less likely. He was the foolishly courageous type, willing to go at professional killers with a handsaw. But if both Anna and he survived, how long would it be before they found each other? The thought took hold of her, provoking a kind of panic. She wrestled with the counterpane and turned to the wall. When would she be well enough to return to Warsaw? How was she to get there? How far down river had the current taken her?

And what would she find in the capital? Her thoughts and the helplessness of lying in a sick bed day after day were more than she could bear.

Why must life be so complicated? Her mind came back to Jerzy. How simple life would be if only she were sixteen and a pretty village maid being courted by him. She allowed the pleasurable daydream to play out in her head. She would tend a cottage garden, cultivating rue and rosemary for

her bridal wreath and lavender to freshen the linens in her dowry chest. On her wedding night he would remove her wedding cap and take her into his strong, sun-burnished arms… .

But a peasant? Zofia thought again. She looked about the bleak little room, pictured Danuta and her father in their pitiful clothes going about their tedious and grueling tasks. She thought of herself as part of their household, kneading dough, keeping the *bigos* pot at low heat for hours on end, feeding and killing chickens. And producing children like Lutisha turned out strings of sausages. She laughed aloud. *Not in this life*, she thought. The old attraction she had for the city, fine clothes, jewels, money, men—and power—sprouted up again, like a plant with intractable roots.

Still, at Jerzy's image she felt a tickling sort of warmth spreading through her. She stopped laughing. Surely there was some way she could repay the boy.

Jan paced the length of the reception room, fraught with worry. Each time he passed the window he looked out into the bluish night, down the long, curving avenue, high with snow and bordered by parallel rows of poplars and twin ponds.

Midnight had come and gone without a carriage from Warsaw. Had the departure date changed in the time that had passed since the letter came from Paweł? Had Anna been delayed? Turned back by the Russians? Or worse?

By the time most of the candles in the reception room had guttered, he sat in semi-darkness, his body tense with worry. With the homecoming celebration suspended, he had sent the Szrabers home to their cottage for the night. From the rear of the house came the worried whispers of Marta and her daughters. Of course, they loved Anna, but Marta's mother, Lutisha, was the beloved matriarch of the little family, and their concern for her was great.

Jan Michał had refused to go to bed at midnight when hopes for his mother's arrival faded. It had been a mistake to tell the boy his mother was expected home, but who could have known? "No bed!" he told a frustrated Emma when she tried to coax him upstairs, "No bed!"

Jan had had to intercede. "Aren't you a little soldier?" he asked, lifting the brown-eyed youngster into the air.

"Oh, yes!" Jan Michał cried, thrilled by the motion.

"Well, soldiers must go to bed!" Jan said, setting him down. "They need their rest so they can do the king's work. You don't want to disappoint the king, do you?"

The boy's face clouded. "No."

"Then you'll let Emma bring you up to bed?"

The boy thought. "You bring me, Jan!"

The bargain was struck. Jan carried the boy upstairs. "Will *Matka* be here when I wake up?" Jan Michał asked before Jan could snuff the candle.

Jan kissed him on the forehead. "We will hope so… goodnight."

But his mother had yet to arrive. Jan sat now, despondent and frustrated. What should he do? What *could* he possibly do? He could not just ride off in the direction of Warsaw. He had no papers to travel, and his service under Kościuszko made him no friend of the interlopers. He looked at the bottle of good Gdańsk vodka that was to have supplied many a toast that night. He vowed not to touch it until Anna was safely home.

Jan struggled to stay awake, but the preparations for Anna's homecoming had exhausted him so that by two in the morning sleep had overtaken him in the chair where he sat.

The clock was striking three when Jan came awake with a start.

Someone's hand was on his shoulder. He opened his eyes to find Walek's face staring down at him. The fire in the grate had gone out, and the room was dark and cold. "What?" Jan asked, asked. "What is it, Walek? News?"

"Yes, milord."

Jan reared up in his chair, fear taking hold. "For God's sake, man, tell me!"

"Lady Anna's carriage has arrived."

Jan was on his feet in an instant. "Arrived? She's *here*?" Pulling on his frock coat, he broke for the front door.

"Wait, milord!"

"What? What is it?"

"The carriage has already been unloaded, milord. Passengers and baggage."

"Unloaded! Then where… ?"

Walek allowed himself a smile now. "Lady Anna and Lutisha are in the kitchen with my wife and children."

Jan felt suddenly lightheaded. And shamed that he had fallen asleep, that he was not the first to greet Anna. "What kept them?"

Walek shrugged. "That, Lady Anna can tell you herself."

Jan started for the kitchen, his heart beating erratically. He could hear the animated talk now.

He saw the back of her head first, the reddish tint of the brown tresses highlighted by the huge kitchen hearth at full heat. Lutisha, sitting across from her, saw him enter. She looked up and grinned. Her daughter and grandchildren fell silent. Anna turned in her chair to see him approaching and stood immediately to greet him. Her dress was gray and creased from traveling. The strain Jan saw in Anna's face lasted only seconds. She smiled widely. "Jan!" she cried, forgetting any formality.

Speechless, Jan moved forward and swept her into his arms. He was kissing her even before her face could fall into focus. It had been more than two years since he had seen her, two years that fell away in a single embrace. The formality of kisses on either cheek was jettisoned aside as he held her, his

mouth hard upon hers. She held tight to him, giving herself over. Forgetting present company, he drew back only to give her space for breath—and then kissed her again.

Pulling back at last, he saw her emerald eyes filling with tears. His heart waxed full. It was only then that they realized how forward their behavior was in the company of servants—and that they held the rapt attention of everyone in the room. Anna's face flushed red.

"You must forgive us," Jan said, noticing that Lutisha and Marta were blushing, as well. Marta and Walek's two girls and young son were trying to suppress their giggles.

It was Lutisha's turn to surprise the group now. "God be blessed," she said, "that is the way every Pole should greet his love!"

Everyone laughed and gave assent, diffusing Jan and Anna's embarrassment.

"I told them not to wake you," Anna said, looking pointedly at Walek.

"Beggin' your pardon, milady, we figured he wouldn't have it that way."

"Indeed!" Jan cried. "Indeed!" It was all he could manage for fear his own tears would start. He suspected she had wanted their reunion more private.

"I'm sorry, Lord Stelnicki," Marta offered, "I should have awakened you as soon as Walek went out to direct the carriage into the stable, but I—I was too excited to see my mother, and I forgot. We all rushed outside."

"I understand, Marta," Jan said, dividing his smile between her and Lutisha. "Don't give it a second thought!"

Chairs were brought in, and everyone sat as if they were all of one family, one clan. The occasion seemed to call for it, and no one appeared to mind. Anna told them of the journey home. "The delay at the *starosta*'s office was tedious and uncomfortable, but Lutisha had the worst of it, having to stay in the cold carriage. Thank God for her strength and patience!"

Lutisha's large face reddened and her grandchildren chided her for it. She blushed all the more.

Jan sent Walek to the reception room for the bottle of vodka, and toasts were made all around for the health of everyone there, for Poland, for the king.

Later, just before sunrise, Anna and Jan sat facing each other in the reception room, alone for the first time. Jan had lighted the hearth and found fresh candles. He studied Anna in the flickering light. "Why on earth did you tell them not to wake me, Anna?"

"I don't know. I was afraid, I think. Two years is so long… and your wound—you wrote so little about it—I didn't know what to expect."

"A shoulder wound—it's nothing." He shrugged. "A lancer nearly knocked me off my horse."

"Is it painful?"

"No, it's well healed. I have a bit of a scar, though. He paid for his

inaccuracy, I can tell you." He gave a nervous laugh. "I do hope a little damage doesn't affect our bargain."

"Bargain?"

He moved from his chair and sank to his knees near Anna. He took her hand in his. "You *will* marry me, Anna?"

She nodded. Color was rising in her cheeks. "It's been so very long… are you certain?"

"Of course, I'm certain!" Jan said, then paused, peering into the green eyes. "Are *you*?"

Her long-lashed eyelids sank slowly and retracted twice before she could summon speech. "Yes.… Jan, two years ago… at Halicz… you joined Kościuszko's army before I could tell you… that I love you."

Jan's very core—one hardened by soldiering—seemed to melt away. "Oh, Anna, know that I love you."

"But I wished a thousand times that I had not allowed you to go off to war without having told you.… Had something happened—"

"Anna," Jan said, pressing her hand, "I knew. I knew! How could you think that I didn't know? Words weren't necessary then, and they aren't now."

Anna's eyes assessed him. It seemed that, rather than give herself over to tears, she laughed. "Then my worry was all for nothing."

He kissed her now, taking her by surprise and feeling her lips yield to his, her mouth to his tongue. He had not given her such a kiss since that day in the forest nearly four years before. Jan opened his eyes slightly to see that Anna's green eyes were open wide. He pulled back. "You were kissing with your eyes open!"

Anna smiled. "I had to assure myself it was really you, Jan, and no dream."

Jan returned her smile. "And your verdict?"

It was Anna who kissed him now, without reservation. His arms went around her. Her mouth was warm and sweet.

"We'll be married as soon as possible," Jan whispered, drawing back at last. "Next week—"

"Oh, Jan, there are conventions. The banns need to be read at church…" Anna stopped speaking, and her face went as white as a Sunday napkin.

Jan laughed. "I know what you're thinking. That I'm of the Arian faith. Well, I have a bit of a surprise. I've become a Catholic."

Anna's deep-set eyes grew large.

"That *was* your concern, yes?"

"But when… why?"

"Last year, but I made up my mind to do it long before that—just after you asked me to be godfather to your son and I was unable to do so because I was not Catholic. I converted so that it would never be a concern again. But as far as other conventions, Poland has been reduced to nothing, so conventions be damned!"

"Jan, you meant what you wrote, about Jan Michał."

"About adopting him as my own? Of course. Although two Jans in the house may be confusing. Maybe you should call me *Janek*."

"No, I think not." Anna said. The reply came immediately and with a kind of abruptness.

"You don't like the diminutive?"

"No," she responded with a certainty meant to close the matter.

Her peremptory reaction to the diminutive was odd, but the lips that he longed to kiss turned up in a half-smile now, and he put the thought aside and kissed her yet again.

"As for the name," Anna said after the kiss, "we shall come to some resolution for what is the most happy of problems for me."

"Well, it's one you should sleep on. I must go and let you rest." Jan stood now. He did not want to leave. He wanted desperately to kiss her again—but he was afraid that another kiss would not be enough—

"Go?"

"Yes, I'm staying at the Szraber cottage."

"But there are two guest-chambers here." Anna rose from her chair. "Haven't you been staying here?"

"Yes, but now it's hardly proper." Jan felt himself blushing. "Not until we're married, Anna." He attempted a laugh. "What would Lutisha say?"

Anna thought a moment. "Sometimes I do think it *is* the peasant class that sets the moral tone for the *szlachta*!"

"They do say," Jan added, "that the lining is sometimes better than the coat!"

They both laughed.

"Anna?"

"Yes?"

"The *starosta*—he treated you well, did he?"

Anna's eyes moved away. "Come to the window, Jan." She spoke as she walked, her hand in his. "Oh, he kept us waiting some time, but all's well now.… Look, Jan, the sun is just about to break!"

Later, as Jan walked to the Szraber cottage, his eyes fixed on the sky that was becoming tinged with red, but failing to bring it into focus. His thoughts inexplicably came back to Jan Michał and his elation was tempered just a little. He had vowed to adopt Jan Michał as his own, and he had meant it. Why, then, did the promise carry with it a weight that tugged at his heart?

Anna looked in on her son before going to her own room. The blond hair of his babyhood was browner now, but the face was just as angelic. She dared not awaken him. Before retiring, she sat in her old window seat, watching the blue-black of night recede. Below a rabbit skittered across the snow, making for the bare acacia trees near one of the ponds.

Alone now, the memory of Grzegorz Doliński's face, voice, and touch returned. She had been kept waiting, listening to the ticking and pealing of those clocks for hours on end for no good reason. All on his whim. Then she was allowed to go. "I hope you enjoy your visit, Lady Berezowska-Grawlińska," he had said as she left. Anna turned around. "It is not a visit," she said dryly. "I have come home." Doliński smiled. "All the better." Those words, delivered in his gravel-like voice chilled her then, chilled her now, but Anna became determined not to permit this man—the man who had allowed the escape of her father's murderer—to haunt her.

Anna sat a while longer. It was from that window seat in June of 1791 that Anna had watched in horror as peasants brought home the body of her father. Memories of the father she worshipped and that terrible time flooded her. The serfs on her father's land loved and respected him, all but one: the scoundrel who took his life, Feliks Paduch. The irony was that her father treated the families on his estate well and believed that the Third of May Constitution would bring the country closer to a full democracy.

Her father's death had seemed to initiate other tragedies.… Anna shook her head, hoping to clear her mind… .As tentacles of light pushed their way into the dark nave of the sky, Anna watched the snowy landscape glow pink, as if lighted from beneath. She forced herself back into the present. She was to be married. She was to have the marriage she should have had four years before. With Jan's conversion to Catholicism, the last obstacle was set aside. She remembered how Jan had told her years before that he did not *disbelieve* the gods of the religions, that his was a personal god, one found in essence of the flowers, trees, and sky. He had puzzled her then, but in time she had come to understand. Oh, his conversion did not mean he had not abandoned his iconoclastic beliefs, either, she knew. He had converted for her sake alone.

She smiled, warmed by the thought. He could not have known that his stand on religion would not have kept her from him. Nothing would have kept her from him. Not after all that had happened. And she would never call him *Janek*. That was a diminutive Zofia had used on occasion as a way of pretending some intimacy existed between her and Jan. Anna knew that Zofia had purposely set out to undermine her relationship with Jan. Oh, she had done her damage. But she would do no more, Anna thought. No more.

Anna willed away her fear of happiness. She *would* be happy.

A motion outside the window took her attention. She looked out now into the winter dawn to see a white eagle winging its way against a crimson sky.

3

FRIDAY, 2 JANUARY 1795

"Zofia! Zofia!" Count Paweł Potecki's own broken cry brought him into consciousness. He lifted his head from the pillow, his face wet with perspiration. He had dreamt of her again. She had been so close, had seemed so real that he thought he could reach out and take her hand that reached out to him. But a step toward her did not bring him closer. Nor did any number of steps as her figure receded into a thickening fog.

It had been that way in their relationship, too, he thought. There was closeness and yet a great distance between them, a distance that she controlled. A power that she possessed. How had he fallen so completely under her spell?

He threw back the covers now and pulled himself into a sitting position at the side of the bed. He remained there, trying to shake himself of the dream. A few minutes passed.

Finally, he rose and walked to his bedchamber window, as was his morning custom of late, to see what activity was afoot in the capital. Viewed from the second floor of the town house, Piwna Street was quiet enough. A peddler pushed a cart toward the Market Square. Here and there passersby with serious faces braved the cold, their shoulders leaning into the wind that rose up off the River Vistula.

The bells at nearby St. Martin's tolled eight. To look out at Warsaw, Paweł mused, one could not guess the city had fallen. Not a single building had suffered damage. Only Praga had been destroyed, and the Russians had made a good job of that. Only Praga, he thought bitterly—and the heart of the Polish people.

The physical well-being of Warsaw belied the political actuality. News had gotten out that King Stanisław proposed to the victor that he keep his monarchy while allowing himself to be tied to Russia by treaty. Paweł could well imagine Catherine's laughter upon hearing it. She would have jettisoned the French language of her court for colorful oaths in her native Prussian idiom. The proposal was a wingless bird—too close to what Poland's status had been for years. And, by God—she had rewarded her General Suvorov with a golden baton for the Praga massacre! No, Poland was to be treated like what it was: the conquered enemy.

Those Poles who had taken part in the insurrection had been arrested and packed off to Russia. Somehow Stanisław had convinced—or bribed—Suvorov to be lenient in his dealings with Polish officers. Both Paweł and Jan Stelnicki had benefitted from that. He prayed their good fortune would hold. Paweł knew only too well fortune had not held—nor Suvorov's word—for the city's president, who had been assured by Suvorov that he would be safe if he returned to the capital where his leadership skills were needed. He did return, but Catherine had different ideas, and he, too, had been provided with a ticket to a colder climate.

Paweł dressed—no uniform any longer—buckled shoes, breeches, a short waistcoat, cravat, and a frock coat. Then he went downstairs to scare up a servant and a cup of coffee. Both were scarce these days. And the house was quiet since he had sent Anna off to meet Jan. Anna and Jan—at least one good thing had come out of the tumult.

He looked into the coffee that his longtime servant Fryderyk had brought him, wishing to read the future of his country as a gypsy might tell his fortune. He saw nothing, only the liquid, dark as ink. What might be done? Poland was being pushed from the world map into obscurity, and there was nothing, nothing to prevent it. No one to help. Why was it that he somehow felt personally responsible for Poland's fate?

Oh, he had given good fight in the final hours. He had risen to the occasion. But he had come late to the party. He should have joined Kościuszko earlier, much earlier, just as Jan Stelnicki had done. It wasn't cowardice, he gave himself that. Or at least what one usually thought of as cowardice.

It was ignorance. Ignorance of the plight of the common man, the peasant, in Poland and elsewhere on the continent. Joining Kościuszko's band of patriots had opened his eyes. He had witnessed firsthand the thousands of brave and simple souls who had left home and family to come fight for their Poland. Yes, the Third of May Constitution promised democracy and a better life, but Paweł doubted that was the true reason they turned out with scythes and other crude farm implements that had never been meant to harvest souls. He lived among them, fought with them, ate with them, slept on the hard ground with them, celebrated with them, cried with them. There was Franciszek, a grandfather of thirteen; Ignacy, with his faith as large as his girth; young Kazimierz, an idealist and newlywed. None of them lived to return to their loved ones. These and thousands like them cared more for their Poland and the threat from outsiders than for anything else. Centuries of invasions from Swedes, Turks, Tatars, Cossacks and a half dozen other nations had steeled their marrow with patriotism.

And it was Zofia, too, he had to admit, who had kept him home and safe. For the longest time he had been unable to bring himself to leave her. How she had mocked him when he spoke of Kościuszko with respect.

Much earlier, against his judgment, against his principles, she had managed to beat him down until he signed the Confederacy of Targowica.

In doing so he had become an accomplice with the magnates who invited Catherine into Poland so that their own powers would not be corrupted by the Constitution. It made him sick to think of it now.

In time he tried to make things right, to redeem himself by joining Kościuszko and his patriots. He thought back to Zofia's reaction, and the moment came back with cold clarity. Zofia had exploded into a rage that lasted nearly half an hour. He remembered little of what was said on either side, only her beautiful face made ugly by her anger, only her last words flung at him as he left. "You will die, Paweł Potecki, stupid man! You will die, and for what? For a map and its boundaries that shift year by year anyway, no matter what little people like you might attempt!"

But it was Zofia who had died. Paweł's despair, once nonexistent and now most often hidden deep within, bared itself. He drank down his coffee.

Anna had supplied the details. She told him how at the siege of Praga one of the brawniest of the Russians had swooped down on her, but Zofia had diverted his attention so that Anna could escape across the bridge to safety behind the Warsaw walls. Paweł knew that Zofia was too cunning not to know that doing so was placing herself in the very jaws of the enemy. So shaken with emotion, Anna had hardly been able to speak as she told Paweł of Zofia's falling from the broken bridge and being carried away by the River Vistula's cold and swift current. Zofia paid the ultimate price for her sacrifice.

At least everyone believed her dead. Yet there was some part of Paweł that would not accept it. Was it a presentiment? Or a fool's notion? He could only wonder how someone so vibrant, so alive, could be gone in the blink of an eye?

Oh, he had gone to search immediately, riding along either bank days at a time, stopping to inquire at villages or lone huts. Few victims had survived the cold current. Once he came across a team of peasants working at a mass burial site. Time was of the essence, for the winter would soon harden the ground. He'd come away wondering if Zofia lay somewhere beneath the bodies he had seen thrown like drowned kittens into the makeshift hole.

He had heard of a few survivors, men and women given succor by the peasants and sent back to their homes in Warsaw and elsewhere, so that when he gave up his search of three weeks and returned to the capital, he did not give up on Zofia. She may yet appear, he thought, against all odds, against all reason.

He had proposed marriage a dozen times, and she had refused as many. His friends could not understand his fixation for Zofia. He maintained that they didn't know her, not really. They knew the gossip, some of which was based on fact. Paweł himself had witnessed her changeable nature, her selfishness, her unchecked sensuality. But there was a hidden side, too, one that told him she could be reclaimed. That side *had* come forward at last, propelling her to save her cousin's life. Now, however, Zofia was as inaccessible as the figure in his dream.

Paweł took his china cup and crashed it to the floor where it shattered into a hundred pieces. Not even the optimistic Fryderyk would be able to put the pieces together. Paweł put his head in his hands and wept, unreservedly.

He left the house an hour later, as the St. Martin's bells tolled ten. It was but a short walk to the Royal Castle.

The royal sentries were Russians. He had tried four days running to gain an audience with the king, and four times he had been turned away. The king was not receiving, he had been told. He had no reason to expect the reaction today would be any different.

What good could come of seeing the king? he wondered. Why did he persist? What was there that could be done to make things right? He had no answer, but he was driven to go, nonetheless. Some faith, some spirit, had come of his experience with Kościuszko and his mighty band of nobles and peasants and it was that mysterious force driving him now. He would not just sit back and watch Poland's dissolution.

On the previous occasions he had gotten past the downstairs sentry at the Senators' Gate. Today the man gave a slight smile of recognition and waved him on. From the ground floor Paweł climbed the curved white marble staircase to the first floor, his destination the Throne Room by way of the Great Assembly Hall.

"Potecki!" someone whispered sharply as he passed through the National Hall.

Paweł turned to the right to see one of the tall, ornate doors partially open, the king's face, pale as plaster against the gold. "This way!" King Stanisław said, motioning Paweł into the Marble Room. "Hurry!"

"Your Highness!" Paweł bowed and quickly deferred.

"Come sit," the king said, pulling the door closed. "It is good to see you, Paweł. My man-servant told me you've been here every day this week. Today I've been on the lookout for you. Imagine, me, a spy among spies in my own household!"

"You aren't able to see anyone?"

"Oh, they let a few bumbling fools in so as to let people think things are running normally. But even if they had allowed a proper audience with you, someone would have sat nearby taking notes. You can be certain of that."

The king must be seventy by now, Paweł guessed. He wore no powdered wig—few seldom did anymore—and his thinning gray hair was drawn and tied in the back. He had a simple face and birdlike eyes that betrayed the sadness beneath the smiles he affected. The two talked at some length of the December weather, the prospects of a long winter, and other mundane subjects. All was formality. Neither, it seemed, could bring himself to speak of the desperate situation of the country. At last, an awkward lull ensued, and with a great sigh, the king asked, "How goes it with the people?"

Paweł's lips tightened. "Well, there's been some improvement. The grain

stores have been released, and that should shore up the cries of starvation. And soldiers are no longer being evicted from hospitals."

"Ah, is it possible there's a trace of humanity left in Suvorov? Has the golden baton softened him, I wonder?"

"It's just a phase, Sire. A fox may change his skin but never his character. There will be other fields for his men to mow."

"Of course, you're right. People are slow to change, if they ever do. And what about the people, *my* people? What do they think of their king?"

"The people shall always stand with their king." It was the sort of thing a royal sycophant would say, but in this case Paweł knew it to be true. Oh, the king had his enemies at home, and most knew his weaknesses, yet the country as a whole supported him.

"But he is not a Tadeusz Kościuszko?"

"No. Nor do they expect you to be." Now, Paweł thought, perhaps he *was* playing the sycophant.

"I have disappointed them. I continue to do so. The people appear on the castle steps daily hoping to see me, to ask me for help. I receive letters, hundreds of letters, Paweł! They just want the chance to live humbly. Some want no more than a plot for their war dead and a marker. It's heart-rending. And it humbles me, I can tell you. I should have done more!"

"But what could you have done?"

"I could have listened to that girl who came to me in October to tell me of the insurgents' plans. I might have tried to make them wait for Kościuszko. Then the revolution would not have been so bloody that Catherine would unleash her meanest dog. Suvorov will pay in hell one day!"

"Why didn't you, Highness? Listen, I mean."

"Oh, I was certain that Kiliński and the other rebel leaders would not heed me, but I should have tried, just the same. I should have! What was the girl's name? Berezowska?"

"Yes, Sire, Anna Berezowska-Grawlińska."

"A brave girl, that one."

"Yes, Sire."

"Took some nerve for a young thing like that to come before a king and suggest he do something."

It did indeed, Paweł thought. He knew Anna's feelings toward the king had been tempered by that meeting. They were strong—and ambivalent. She had found him the quintessence of sophistication and culture, a true and ardent benefactor of science and arts and letters. But as a leader of men she deemed him weak and ineffectual.

"I might have done something then," the king was saying, as if in response to Paweł's train of thought, "but now I can do nothing for my people. Why, even when the city's president was carted off to the coldest part of Russia, what could I do for him? Nothing but give him a fur coat—and that's what I did. A fur coat! It is all so sad, Paweł, so sad."

"What is to happen, Highness?"

"Oh, I'm certain even peasants far removed from the city know that the country will be fully carved up now, like some prize cow. Word has it Prussia is hungry for Warsaw. And they want to see me removed. I would be an obstacle, they say. Of course, I would be, even if only a token one."

"Have you heard anything from—"

"Catherine? Yes, just yesterday, as a matter of fact." The king sneered. "She wants me to go to Grodno. Lithuania! Can you imagine? To spend my last years in some guarded country castle—like I'm some cast-off English queen!"

Where Catherine was concerned, Paweł could well imagine. "And… "

"Will I go? I have conjured a number of excuses to keep me in Warsaw—bad health, poor carriages, the weather, an unfit castle at Grodno. I've made a list. My hope is that while I delay, Catherine and Prussia will somehow get into a squabble and change their plans."

Paweł could not fathom how a squabble between Catherine and Prussia might be advantageous for Poland, and so he had not the heart to press the issue with the king.

The two heard movements in the adjacent Yellow Room. "They're probably looking for me, Paweł. I've been off the leash too long. Will you come back on Monday? I have something to discuss with you." His eyes narrowed. "Something important."

A servant led Anna into a small room in the church rectory. This was the one formality of the marriage arrangements that she had dreaded.

The balding priest entered, smiling. "Lady Berezowska-Grawlińska, it is indeed good to have you back in Sochaczew."

"Thank you, Father Lukasz."

"Don't be nervous, child. This is a mere formality. Please, sit."

Anna nodded and obeyed. Once they were both seated, the priest spoke in what must have been his tone in the confessional. "It is quite all right, however, for the bride to be nervous when speaking of her wedding." He chuckled.

Anna knew he was trying to make her feel at ease and so attempted a smile.

"Now then, my lady," he said in normal tones, "let's move to the matter at hand. Do you have a record of your husband's death?"

Anna had thought of lying, saying she hadn't, but somehow couldn't bring it off. She couldn't start a new life with a lie. She turned the document over to the aging priest, then watched his face cloud over.

"Antoni Grawliński died in a duel? Good God!—Oh, pardon me, my lady, this is just such a shock. I'm so sorry."

"That's all right, Father. Antoni was not a good husband."

"Oh?"

Anna knew the priest was waiting for her to offer more information, but she could not bring herself to do so.

"And the child that you and Antoni had?"

"He is well, Father… but he is not Antoni's child." Anna regretted the admission before it was out of her mouth. She had meant to keep things simple.

"Then… who— "

Anna saw no way out, other than to go on with the story. "Father, the child is the result of an attack that occurred shortly after I arrived in Halicz… before the marriage."

The priest suppressed a gasp. "Oh, my dear, I see.—Did you keep that from Grawliński?"

"No, he knew. He was marrying me for what I could bring to his family. For money, Father. And land. You see, he wanted to build a distillery here in Sochaczew on my family property."

The priest's mouth fell slack. "A distillery!—And the—person who attacked you?"

"My cousin Walter."

"Your cousin! Holy Mary, Mother of God!"

"He is not my cousin by blood."

"Well, you were spared that, at least. But, still!" The priest took a moment to collect himself. "And Jan Stelnicki? Will he be a good father to little Jan Michał?"

"Oh, yes, Father, they've taken to each other as if they *are* father and son."

"Excellent, my child. I fear that in similar situations, the man might resent a child not his, and especially in this situation… " The priest's face was reddening.

Anna tried to spare the priest embarrassment. "Jan is… a decent man." Anna found herself at a loss in describing Jan's worth.

"I'm certain he is, and I will find out for myself tomorrow when he comes to see me. If all goes well, the first engagement announcement will be read in church on Sunday. The banns will need to be read three succeeding Sundays."

"Of course, Father."

Anna left, thankful that Father Lukasz was a simple soul and that the twists of her story had deterred him from coming to the question hardest to explain, the question that would surely have given him pause in bestowing his blessing on the pair. He had not asked the identity of Antoni's dueling partner. To explain that it had been Jan who had challenged Antoni would not have been an easy thing. And impossible to explain that it was Walter—still obsessed with Anna—who had actually assassinated Antoni.

Were such omissions a form of lying? The better part of herself thought so, but for once she took stock in the maxim that only fools and children speak the truth.

She would warn Jan that on his visit to the priest he should tread softly.

The banns were read on the appointed Sundays. The Christmas holidays fell within this time period, and the *wigilia* celebration was the happiest Anna could recall. Tradition held that Christmas Eve was better observed and celebrated than Christmas Day. Jan, Walek, and Walek's son Tomasz went out into the forest to collect boughs of spruce and fir with which to decorate the manor house. Jan Michał had talked himself into being included, and when they returned, he sat in the sleigh high atop a little mountain of greenery, his smile showing every baby tooth. It was little Jan Michał, too, who had the privilege of searching out the first star of the evening, for it was only after its sighting that the *wigilia* supper could begin.

Although Jewish, Emma and Jacob Szraber joined Anna, Jan, and Jan Michał at table. They even shared in the unconsecrated *oplatek* that was offered after a short prayer by Jan. It was the first *wigilia* at table for Jan Michał, and he seemed mystified as the wafer was passed from person to person and individual wishes were made. Everyone called for a restoration of a true Poland and for prosperity in the fields, barns, and homes. Jan Michał was not to be overlooked. "I wish," he cried in a high voice, "for a horse of my own."

When everyone laughed, Jan Michał looked about him and quickly amended his wish. "Or a dog!" The laughter escalated.

After dinner, Lutisha and her family were asked to join the others in the music room. The happy group sang the old carols while Anna accompanied them on piano. Emma, her former governess and music teacher, claimed she had not lost her touch, but Anna thought differently. She would have to practice more.

As midnight neared, Anna, Jan, Jan Michał, and the servants climbed into sleighs and headed for Shepherds' Mass, waving farewell to the Szrabers. The night was clear, allowing the nearly full moon to brighten the snow and light their way. Along the route Anna found herself counting the roadside shrines with their carved icons sheltered beneath two boards forming an inverted V. This had been a favorite pastime as a child.

"Look, Mother," Jan Michał cried from beneath his scarf. His eyes were lifted to the sky. "So many stars now!"

Anna looked up. The stars, said to be the shepherds' fires of the first Christmas, were numberless. "Yes," she said. "So many!"

"Jan Michał," Jan said, "those stars foretell next year's harvest, and it looks to be a good one, indeed."

A good harvest and a bright future, Anna prayed.

Anna and Jan were to celebrate their wedding day on 4 January 1795, the Sunday after the third reading of their banns.

On the wedding's eve, Anna sat at her dressing table while Marta combed her hair. Downstairs, Lutisha was directing Marcelina and Katarzyna in making the wreaths of rue that Anna and Jan would wear and exchange at the church ceremony. In the morning, Lutisha would rise before dawn to bake the *kolacz.* No wedding bread she had ever made, Lutisha claimed, had crust that cracked in the cooking.

In case there was any truth to the notion that cracks in the bread presaged a bad marriage, Anna prayed that the good servant's skill would hold up. Anna's aunt had seen to the baking of the kolacz for her first wedding, and the crust had cracked.

"You have such beautiful hair, madame. Not brown, not red, but the best of both."

"Thank you, Marta. You know, as a girl I often wished for blond hair, like yours!"

Marta giggled. "It's getting gray, little by little, what with a husband and three children.… Madame will wear the amber combs tomorrow, yes? They work well with the bits of amber in your green eyes."

"Do you think I should wear them?—Then I shall!"

Marta was pleased. "And you will cry tomorrow, at the church?"

"Cry?" Anna thought for a protracted moment. "I don't know."

"Oh, but you must, madame! You *must*!"

"Must I? Why?" Anna asked, teasingly. She knew very well the superstition.

"Oh, Lady Anna, if a bride doesn't cry at her wedding, she will cry all of her wedded life."

Anna laughed. She had not cried at her marriage to Grawliński, but she knew that no amount of tears could have salvaged that union.

"Did *you* cry when you married Walek?" Anna asked.

"Oh my, yes."

"Then you believe the saying?"

Brush in mid-air, Marta paused and thought for a moment, locking eyes with Anna's in the mirror. She shrugged. "A few tears?" she asked in great sincerity. "It hardly seems worth the risk *not* to cry, does it, madame?"

Anna let loose a peal of laughter, and a few seconds later, Marta joined in.

Some sixty guests, all *szlachta* from Sochaczew and the neighboring towns attended the wedding Mass, witnessing the exchange of Jan and Anna's wreaths of rue. The occasion afforded the minor nobility a show of extravagance.

Proclaiming "Foreign influence be damned," Jan had dared to wear his dress uniform of blue, crimson, and gold trim. Anna had lost her best dresses when Praga burned, but Emma had saved the day by creating for her a French

patterned dress in soft yellow. She stood in low-heeled yellow slippers facing Jan, bathed in the blue light of his gaze, and she thought she could never be happier than at that moment. She would no longer fear happiness—she would embrace it.

Anna was too elated to cry, yet she knew it was expected.—Still, by the end of the ceremony, her eyes remained dry. For too many years she had shunned crying in public. Oh, she held herself no braver than anyone else, but her tears had always been shed in private. She tried to think of something now that would induce the crying. She thought of the attack upon her in the forest. She thought of her first marriage and what a trial that had been, what a scurrilous character Antoni Grawliński had proven. She thought of Zofia and her deception.… And still no tears came.

So be it. With Jan as her husband, she turned away from the altar and started for the far entrance, resigned to leaving the church dry-eyed. It was then that her eyes fell on little brown-eyed, brown-haired Jan Michał, sitting like a little man with Emma and Jacob. It struck her at that moment that if her life had not taken the sometimes tragic turns it had, she would not have this wonderful child. It was that simple thought that unsealed a chamber of her heart, allowing a rush of tears—and bringing smiles of relief to many in the church. The news would please Marta, who was home preparing for the guests that were to eat, drink, and dance the entire night.

The supper and reception were splendid affairs. While Jan was landless, he still possessed considerable assets, the interest of which he contributed to the running of the estate, but Anna requested of Lord Lubicki, her family's longtime investment banker, a significant sum so that the celebration would be truly memorable. Her father had wisely invested in foreign markets, so that most of the family wealth survived the Russian interlopers.

Polish hospitality dictated that even Lord Doliński, the despicable *starosta*, be invited. Anna had seen him at the church, too—or thought she had—in one of the pews farthest from the altar. The sight sent a chill playing along her spine. Still, she was not about to let his presence ruin her day, so she put him from her mind—until the recessional commenced and she and Jan moved toward the door. Her eyes surreptitiously sought out his pew—but she found it empty. At home, as Anna welcomed several families that had been friends of her parents, as well as a few women she had known in girlhood, he crossed her mind again, but—thankfully—he did not darken their threshold.

Redolent Christmas greenery and pine cones accented the white tablecloths. Candles gaily danced everywhere.

A small commotion arose then. Under the supervision of Jacob two youths hauled a wine barrel into the dining hall. "What is this dirty old thing?" Anna asked.

Jacob's smile stretched wide as the sky. "It is your wine, Lady Stelnicka—it is 'Lady Anna's wine'—purchased in Hungary in the year of your birth for the occasion of your marriage—as is the custom!"

Anna could only stare and mumble, "As is the custom." She watched dumbly as the keg was tapped and purplish wine began to fill up glasses. Her mind spun with thoughts. Her first marriage had taken place in Halicz, so far to the south and performed in such a hurried fashion that no thought had been given to this cask, so long buried in the cellar. How fitting it was that it survived to slake the thirsts at *this* wedding instead.

Jan handed her a glass. Her heart caught as she raised it to the guests. If only her parents had lived to see this day…

Her reverie fell away as toasts were made for Poland, for the king, for her and Jan. Anna and Jan then shared the prescribed bowl of *kasza*; the porridge had been cooked in milk so as to make it sweet, just as their married life was to be. Baked chicken was served to all, along with sauerkraut, beet soup, and peas—symbolic of fertility. Then came the *kolacz*. Anna's heart swelled to see that the crust of the wedding bread was perfect. Not a single little crack. *God bless Lutisha!*

Toasts began again, more boisterous than before the meal and accompanied by the crash of glass upon the hearth. Then came the dancing that continued until well after midnight. It was at the height of the celebration that five young married women took Anna to her parents' room, the room—and bed—that was to be hers and Jan's. Had this been her first marriage, much show would have been made in public about the removal of the wedding wreath, the unplaiting and ceremonial cutting of her hair, and the placing of the *czepek*, the cap of a married woman. None of this had been observed in the marriage to Grawliński, however, because of the shame associated with the rape.

Now, at least, Anna was to have a *czepek* for what was politely called the bedding-down. One of the women, Halina, presented Anna with the embroidered wedding cap. "Emma made this for you, Anna."

Anna gasped. It was the most beautiful cap she had ever seen, all done in pastels and laced with semi-precious stones. Once the wedding wreath was taken from her head, and the cap put in its place, the women cried out their sincere compliments as Anna assessed herself in the mirror. She saw herself as more than a beautiful bride—she saw herself as *happy*. This cap would be used only for the special occasions of her life—and at her death.

"A toast now!" one of the women—Sylwia—announced. She had brought up to the bedchamber a bottle and six glasses. She poured out the vodka and the glasses were passed around. A naughty sparkle came into her eyes, and she cried, "A girl no more!" so used was she to the saying at weddings.

Embarrassed, the other women quieted, and when the stout woman realized her blunder, her eyes went large and the sparkle disappeared. She put her hand to her mouth in horror.

"I've been married before, Sylwia. I've not been a girl for a long time!" Anna laughed. "But come now, I'm not offended! You must laugh, too!"

The tension was immediately relieved and the chamber rang with girlish

laughter. Sylwia, however, still had a mouthful of vodka and as she released her laugh, the liquor was released as well, spraying out and down her dress. The sound of their collective laughter now became shrill enough to break windows. Halina thought this called for a dance and led the other five in a spontaneous mazurka. They sang

> Everyone take a good look
> She was in a wreath and comes in a cap.

The dance ended with the other women climbing up onto the great feathered bed. Anna could only stare and hold her breath as the five jumped up and down, laughing and calling out rude things about the future of the marriage as they tested the strength of the bed. One by one, they collapsed onto it. By some miracle, the bed held.

Halina proposed another toast, but by the time she was ready to pour, a strong rapping came at the door. Anna watched the five turn their attention to her, their eyes sparkling with vodka and humor. Anna could read their silly faces like pictures in a child's book. Sylwia giggled. "They've come for you, Anna."

"Open up!" someone called. The door had been bolted.

"It's my husband!" Halina laughed. "Go away!" As was customary, the women refused admittance, playing at protecting Anna until the men threatened to take down the door. "Go away!" they cried. "Go drink yourselves silly!"

The revelers persisted. "Much is to be done before the night is over," someone shouted.

Anna watched and listened to all this as in a dream. She cringed to think that her union at last with Jan was to be so public, such a cause for hilarity. And yet she trembled with elation to think that she no longer had to love him at a distance.

Halina opened the door at last, and the wedding guests crowded into the room, many carrying drinks to toast the couple's wedding night. Two of the groomsmen pushed their way to the bed and fell upon it. One of them announced in a slurred voice: "We must warm it up for Lord Stelnicki and Lady Stelnicka!" His eyes rolled back into his head then, and he passed out. "Make way! Make way!" someone was calling, and soon another groomsman was pushing through the throng, pulling the husband into the bedchamber. Jan had his part to play, too: that of a reluctant groom. "Make way for Jan Stelnicki!" the groomsman announced. "Where is the Lady Anna? Ah, there she is!—My lady, we have come to deliver the goods!"

That comment set everyone off on a bawdy tavern song that continued through a toast and many good wishes. The guests were still singing as they filed out and crowded into the ante-room. Many were having trouble with the lyrics, but the irreverent refrain—though raucously off-key—was delivered

with great enthusiasm. The unconscious groomsman was slapped awake and set to, so that all three groomsmen could wish the couple the best and finish clearing the room.

When all of the guests were assembled in the ante-room, Jan walked over and closed the door, bolting it securely.

He turned to face his bride. He smiled.

Anna's heart beat as if a sparrow were held captive in her chest. She walked to him now, her eyes on his—those cobalt blue eyes she had discovered that day in the meadow years before. She had wished for this day a thousand times, never fully believing it would come. But it had come. They were husband and wife. Whatever the future, they were as one.

When she reached Jan, he bent to kiss her. And the kiss held… oh, she had had her share of vodka, but it was some other unearthly elixir that lifted her now… transporting her. His mouth went to her ear. "Anna," he said—in the same soft murmur he had said her name that fall day so long ago in a forest near Halicz. Eyes tightly shut, she could hear the rustle of leaves that day, smell the very scent of earth, feel his body near hers… .

Outside the revelry and singing continued, as if at a distance. "Now, don't be lazy!" someone was calling. Anna laughed.

"May God grant you descendants as plentiful as the stars," said another.

"At last!" It was a woman's voice this time that came through the door. Anna thought it Halina's. "The bedding down is complete!"

"Oh, it is hardly that!" Jan called back, laughing, and the crowd beyond the door responded in kind. He bent now to lift Anna, scooping her up as if she weighed no more than a hummingbird.

"You've brought some of your carvings!" Zofia exclaimed, moving from the bed to her chair. "Come, sit!"

Jerzy nodded. He had come to visit her several times, each time managing to do so while his mother and grandfather were on some business in the village. He carried to the chair next to Zofia's an armful of his wooden carvings, painted and unpainted.

Jerzy sat and started to hand them, one by one, to Zofia for her inspection. "Oh, my, these are excellent, Jerzy," she said, noticing that he was well-groomed and his hands scrubbed clean. "How long have you been carving?"

"Since I was five, I think. My grandfather taught me. His fingers are too bent these days for carving."

Zofia smiled. "So he carves now through you?" She turned over in her own slender hands the figures of a bird, a cow, a dog, a windmill, passing them then to the bed.

"What kind of wood is this?"

"Linden. It's best to use."

Zofia inspected now the wooden replicas of peasants, crudely hewn, but surprisingly evocative in emotions. She felt something for each likeness, something in their stance and in their faces that went to the heart. The people depicted were impoverished, but they were rich in spirit and character.

"Who is this one?" Zofia asked, for the bearded figure did not look like a peasant.

"John the Baptist, milady."

"Ah, I see the halo now.… And this one? Another saint?"

"St. Barbara."

"Ah, some say that when one dies, the soul must spend a night with St. Barbara. Do you suppose that's true, Jerzy?"

The boy reddened.

"Well, it is true. That some people believe it, I mean. But then, some people believe anything.… Oh, these are all wonderful! You've got one more. Let me see it."

Jerzy seemed uncertain and held back. Zofia reached for it, but the boy moved it out of reach, as if he were afraid for her to see it.

"What's so special about that one? You wouldn't have brought it if you didn't mean for me to see it!" Zofia rose now, laughing, but quickly managing to pull it from his grasp.

"It's not finished," Jerzy said.

As if in slow motion, she took her seat again, turning over the figure in her hand, her eyes wide in amazement. It was the unpainted figure of a woman, not in village costume but in a modern western dress with a wide skirt. It wanted only a little splash of red paint. The almond-shaped eyes of the face stared out, eerily transfixed, as in death. "Why, it's me!" Zofia exclaimed. "Dog's blood!—Did I look like that when you found me?"

Jerzy eyed Zofia cautiously. He was blushing to the roots of his hair. "Yes, milady."

Zofia stared at the carving. "Dog's blood," she murmured. He had captured a sense of emptiness, the emptiness of death. But it was the emptiness she had also felt in life.

Jerzy pulled himself to his feet, as if to begin collecting the sculptures.

Zofia was at a loss. What was she to say to him? What did she mean to him—that he could create such a thing?—Or he to her?

When he reached for the figure, Zofia held it away from him, teasingly. It was a childish reaction, she knew, but it was the only one that came to her. Jerzy leaned across her for the extended arm that held her likeness. Zofia reached up with her free hand, lightly touched his face, and arched her back so that her face moved near to his.

His blue eyes flashed surprise at her touch, then as she held her hand on his smooth cheek, fear suffused his blue eyes.

"Jerzy?"

"Yes?" His voice, cracking slightly, betrayed another reaction—arousal.

Zofia gave him her most generous smile. "Would you teach me how to carve?"

4

Anna was alone when she awakened. She pushed her arms out from under the counterpane, stretching. How long she had slept, and how deeply! The soft winter light in the room caressed her, whispering that it was already mid-morning. She looked over to Jan's place, ran her hand over his pillow. He had roused her a few hours before, already dressed, saying he was going to tend to some things on the estate and that she should sleep. She thought she remembered murmuring something in reply, but she was quite certain of the kiss he had given her. She smiled now to think of it. *Now* the bedding down was complete.

Things to do on the estate, she thought. Oh, he had much in common with her father! Although Jacob had always been an excellent estate manager, in the old days her father himself had done much of the overseeing of his modest estate and several serf families. Anna's mother had never approved of her husband's taking such an interest and let her opinion be known. No, she had never understood her husband. But the count had taught his daughter to love the land and how to grow things, beginning with a small garden that yielded an array of tulips and other flowers, as well as vegetables. Much to her mother's vexation, Anna wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty or tear a nail.

I will not make the same mistake as my mother, Anna thought. I *will* understand my husband. Her father would have been quite satisfied with the match she had made. She pulled Jan's pillow to her, held it, suffused with contentment.

A light knock came at the door. Then a whispered voice: "Madame?"

"Come in, Lutisha! I'm quite awake."

Lutisha entered, taking a tray directly to a little table near the bed. She seemed careful not to glance at Anna, who smiled to herself at the maid's modesty. "I've brought coffee, madame, with extra cream, the way you like it."

"Thank you, Lutisha. Good country cream—not like we get in the city, I can tell you!" Anna sat up in bed and tucked Jan's pillow behind her. She watched as the servant started placing upon the tray the glasses from the night before. Anna interlocked her hands behind her head. "Well?"

Lutisha paused a moment but did not look up. "Well, madame?"

"Lutisha! Every day you come in and you say, 'How is Madame this fine morning?' And today you are silent."

The woman began to color and could say nothing.

"Lutisha! Look at me! Yes, that's it. I can tell you I am *very* fine this fine morning." Anna laughed.

Lutisha turned crimson now. "I am… pleased, madame.… Will you be coming down to breakfast?"

"Yes, Lutisha, I will be coming down to breakfast." Anna put on a serious face. She enjoyed teasing the old servant, but thought it best to bring it to an end.

When another knock sounded, Anna, thinking it Jan, called, "*Entré!*"

Two blond heads topped with ruffled white caps appeared in the doorway. "Oh, pardon, madame," Katarzyna said. "Marcelina and I thought Grandma would need some help, but we didn't know you were still in bed."

"Didn't you?"

"Oh, no," Marcelina said, giving her sister a gentle push into the room. "We're sorry to bother you, madame."

"It is no bother. You may help your grandma by taking those bottles there and picking up Lord Stelnicki's sash from the floor. Katarzyna, would you bring my morning robe? The blue one—it's in the wardrobe."

The girl obeyed, managing to steal a look at Anna as she approached her. Setting the robe on the bed, she stood for a long moment staring at Anna's embroidered wedding cap that lay on the bedside table.

Anna smiled. "It's beautiful, yes?"

"Oh, madame," Katarzyna gasped, "I've never seen a *czepek* like it!"

"How old are you, Katarzyna?"

"Eighteen, milady.… I mean madame."

"You're seventeen," Marcelina contradicted.

"Nearly eighteen!"

"But that's months away!" her sister said.

Anna turned to Marcelina. "That must make *you* sixteen this year, Marcelina."

She gave a little wince. "Not 'til October, madame."

"Well, it won't be long before you are *both* married off, I'm certain. Tell me now, have you prospects?"

"Oh, no, madame!" Katarzyna cried. Marcelina shrank back, shaking her head.

"Very well," Anna said, "but I'm not sure I believe you. Two pretty girls like you! Katarzyna, you may try it on. Go ahead… look in the mirror now. Come, Marcelina, you may have a turn, too."

The sisters radiated their pleasure as one posed, then the other, before the mirror at the vanity table that had belonged to Anna's mother. Lutisha's expression, however, darkened by the minute. "Madame, they should not be in your chamber today."

"Shush, Lutisha. They only wanted to see if I am a changed woman, didn't you girls?"

The girls' heads turned toward Anna, their eyes widening. They looked at each other now in guilty wonder to be found out.

"Perhaps you would like to try it yourself, Lutisha?"

"Oh, madame! What nonsense you talk." Lutisha looked as if she didn't know whether to give herself over to indignation or laughter. The servant tried to cover her toothless smile as laughter won out. Everyone joined in.

"Whatever you say, Katarzyna and Marcelina," Anna said, "it will not be long before the two of you will require caps." The sisters giggled, squirming in embarrassment. "I will see," Anna continued, "if I can't prevail upon Emma to make your caps for you when the time comes."

Again the eyes widened. "You would do that?" Marcelina whispered.

"Yes, I would!" Anna laughed. "Now, time to leave me alone or I shall be certain to come upon you on *your* marriage morning! Out!"

"You heard madame, out!" Lutisha cried, shooing her granddaughters from the room. She turned toward Anna at the doorway, gave a little embarrassed smile, and made her own exit, closing the door behind her.

Before coming to serve at the Berezowski estate in Sochaczew, Lutisha and her family had been servants at Anna's aunt and uncle's larger estate in Halicz. Anna smiled to herself, remembering how these two girls had regarded her when she came to stay at the Groński home. Anna had questioned them about the garden that they kept, even commenting on the variety of an onion. They answered nervously, giving each other side glances, clearly aghast that a countess should concern herself with such things.

But Jan had understood her inherited love of the land. And he loved her for it.

As for being a changed woman, she was that, indeed!

The hard snow crunched under the highly-muscled stallion's hooves. Jan was exploring field and forest, his head held high as he inhaled the frosty January air. He had tried to be of help to Walek earlier that morning, but everyone had his assigned Monday chores, and there seemed to be nothing in need of doing. For his offer he had gotten some odd, knowing glances—some, too, that perhaps questioned his absence from the wedding bedchamber. So he had gone riding instead. Concerned with getting Anna's manor house ready for her arrival, he had not ridden in days. How good it felt to have a horse beneath him again.

As he rode, he fell into his old habit of reliving the campaigns he had made with Kościuszko, reveling in what was done right, guessing how the mishaps and defeats might have been avoided. A true Pole sought glory, or so the saying went. He wondered if it were so. He had fought for democracy,

fought against the allied forces. He did not bask in his victories, nor did he show off the shoulder scar rendered by a Russian lancer, the scar Anna had so delicately traced with her fingertips last night.

He found himself singing aloud a ditty about swordsmanship popular among the cavalry:

> Hungarians cut directly,
> Muscovites cleave from above,
> Turks whip round-about,
> And Poles slash criss-cross!

Jan's sword—nicknamed Jadwiga after Poland's Jagiellonian queen, for it was her saintly sacrifice that made for the union of Lithuania and Poland in one Commonwealth—hung now on the wall in the reception room, and Jan had to own up to a sadness that he carried it no longer.

Oh, there was excitement in war, he could not deny that. For most soldiers who had seen action, there was—in the moment—an incomparable thrill to it. Even in the killing—or was it *especially* in the killing? How many lives had he ended? He didn't know. He had seen death in the most nightmarish forms. Only the devil could have engineered so many excruciating ways to bring an end to life. Soldiers on both sides fell like so many papier-mâché dolls—to the lance, saber, carbine, and cannon. Allies and enemies, peasants and nobles, all bled equally. Battle was the ultimate gamble. A riptide of energy and emotion flowed through him on the field, a tide that excited his senses, and it was this experience that brought him low after the battles, brought him low now. How could he feel such blood lust? Yet he knew instinctively that it was blood lust that allowed him to survive. The thought chilled him.

Jan found himself in a pine forest now, its floor white as milk, the incredibly tall trees rising to the heavens. The lower forty or fifty feet of the trees were devoid of branches, sturdy as columns, so that he felt he was in a pristine and soundless cathedral. The forest *is* God's church, his father had told him. The memory soothed him. He tried to conjure up his father's face and voice, recalling with pride how he had helped give birth to the Third of May Constitution.

Jan dismounted and, leading his horse, slowly laid down his own path. Before joining Kościuszko, he had been content to live a good and full life, a noble on his family estate near Halicz. Now he had put off his uniform, taken marriage vows, and resigned himself to live the placid life of the *szlachta* on the Berezowski estate, his wife's estate. It seemed that life was asking him to forget that his own estate had been confiscated by enemy forces, forget his father's dying wish that he fight for democracy, forget that brave men died at his side fighting for a Poland that people claimed no longer existed. A roiling tide of convoluted and unsettling emotions filled his heart.

In all of this, there was Anna. He had loved her from that first day so

long ago. They had waited an eternity, it seemed, but they were together now. Their wedding night had not been a disappointment. Her hunger had equaled his and he loved her for her passion. No man could have asked for more.

The marriage would be a good one—and yet Jan felt himself still some distance from any sense of peace or complacency. With the marriage ceremony he had become a father, as well as a husband. Would he be a good father to Jan Michał, a child not his own? The boy was delightful and worshipped by Anna. And yet, to think that this was her cousin Walter's child somehow unsettled him. He could never allow Anna or Jan Michał to know this. He prayed he could bridge the distance he felt and do right by the boy.

Jan suddenly realized he had gone far into the forest, one unfamiliar to him. He turned around and began to retrace his steps.

An hour later, coming to where field and forest met, he mounted his horse again and gave good spur, hoping that the sharp blast of winter wind against his face would help to clear his mind. In no time the great thatched roof of the barn loomed ahead. As he neared it, Walek saw him and waved. The door was open, and Walek stood prepared to take the horse. Jan knew that the loyal servant had served in Kościuszko's peasant army, taking up a simple but sharp and effective scythe against the allied forces.

Walek had come back, fitting once again into family and service, doing the tasks he had always done, albeit on a different estate. Jan wondered what Walek's thoughts about it were. Did he have dark thoughts, too? He would ask him one day, he decided. For now, Jan worried whether he himself would adapt once again to the traditional life of the *szlachta*.—Or had he been a soldier too long?

Walek took hold of the horse and Jan dismounted.

"Walek, those big old sheep dogs they keep in the South, near Zakopane, do you know anyone in these parts who keeps them?"

"No, milord."

"Ah, well, ask around in town, will you? See what you can find out. I'll pay a good price for one. It's for little Jan Michał."

Realizing that the morning was nearly gone, Jan ran toward the house, hurried through the kitchen—aware of surprised faces in his wake—and raced up the servants' staircase. He found Anna dressed and ready to leave the bedchamber. She gave him a disparaging smile. Was there a trace of real hurt in it?

"Fine husband you are," she said, "running off on our first morning!"

Jan bowed in exaggerated fashion. "I beg your pardon, Lady Stelnicka," he said. Her married name did not go without the effect in her expression that he desired. Any hurt she might have felt dissipated at once. "Or is it to be Lady Berezowska-Grawlińska-Stelnicka?"

Anna laughed. "Stelnicka. Only Stelnicka!"

Jan took her into his arms. Anna spoke before he could kiss her. "Speaking of names, I have a solution for having two Jans in one house."

"And what is that, Lady Stelnicka?"

"I will start calling my son by his second name, Michał."

Jan smiled. "*Our* son," he said. "So the problem is solved!" He kissed her now, felt her yielding. Then, drawing back, he said, "I have another apology."

"What?—Are we to begin married life with apologies?"

His mouth went to her ear. "I am sorry for one thing only," he whispered, "and that is that you went to the fruitless task of dressing.—I told Lutisha we would not be down before the afternoon meal. Why, the old girl's face turned as red as her apron!"

"You've heard?" King Stanisław asked. Paweł's second visit to the king came on Monday, 5 January 1795, just two days after Austria signed a treaty joining Russia and Prussia in the dismemberment of Poland. They met in the Monarchs' Portrait Room, a small chamber off the Throne Room, and all precautions were taken for secrecy.

"That Austria is to share in the spoils with Russia and Prussia?—yes, Your Majesty."

The king sighed. "They say that 'Where one owl comes out, two others soon follow'." He chuckled but his face was pinched in bitterness. "Here, it's the other way around."

"Poland is no mouse, Sire."

"Ah, but we are in their talons, just the same."

The irony that they conferred in a chamber with portraits of all the European monarchs looking down on them was not lost on Paweł. "Have they worked out boundaries?"

"No. They'll take good time in that, you can be certain.—As for me, my final day has been set, Paweł. No excuse to stay has worked."

"When, Sire?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"I'm sorry," Paweł murmured, his heart going out to the king, who seemed at once sad and resigned to his leaving. Perhaps he was relieved to be fully free of the yoke of leadership.

Paweł had come today, wondering what the king had wanted to speak to him about. What in matters of the state could *he* possibly do? Especially now, with this news.

"Don't fret about me," the king told Paweł. "Don't pity me, either. I've had my time. I might have done better with it, God knows, but regrets will do no good now.—Ah, I've been a ship's captain on a tempest-tossed sea." The king then told Paweł that while he held no hopes that he would ever be restored to the throne, he did believe that Poland itself could be restored under a new, elected king. His reason for inviting Paweł back was to conscript him into a

movement that would have as its goal the reestablishment of a Polish state with a democratic system working in conjunction with a monarch.

Paweł had waited patiently for a name to come up. Who was to be the rallying point for such a movement? While the king had not married, he had a number of children by several women… and there were other possible candidates, too—the king's nephew, Prince Józef Poniatowski, among them.

Paweł knew that the king had always worn a belt that bore symbols of the Masonic Brotherhood—the square and compass—but he thought it little more than a decoration, an ornament like any other given a king. Now, as King Stanisław spoke of a group capable of establishing a new order, a new line of succession, his forefinger lightly tapped the insignia. Paweł realized that the king, afraid of spies' ears, was silently relaying information to him. The Masonic Brotherhood was the group the king was entrusting to restore the monarchy.

It suddenly rang clear: King Stanisław was himself a member of the Brotherhood. Who could have imagined? But to think that the secret organization, powerful as the Brotherhood was, could somehow put back together what three powers had dissolved… Paweł thought perhaps the king had gone a little daft in the head.

"You're wondering how you might be of help," the king said.

Paweł nodded. *Daft but Argus-eyed just the same.*

"They," he whispered, "will find their uses for you. You came to me on your own to see what you might do, remember?"

"Yes."

The king pulled from his robes a folded sheet of paper. "Here is the name of a person you are to contact, so that work can begin. Odd, isn't it, that his surname is so close to yours?"

Paweł nodded, recognizing the name. He had gotten much more than he bargained for. While he was not committing himself to anything—especially anything hare-brained—he would not leave without asking about the succession. "Your Highness, just who – "

"Might follow me? Do you know, I would not wish this on one of my children. The throne carries a weight beyond your imagination. *They*," he said, "will know whom to nominate. I suspect it will be someone with a clean slate, someone with no connections to the great political families of the day. Someone not related to the Czartoryskis, the Radziwiłłs, the Lubormirskis—or the Poniatowskis, my own clan."

"I see," Paweł said. In fact, he didn't see at all.

"My time has dwindled away, Paweł," the king said as Paweł was taking his leave. He placed a slender hand on Paweł's arm. "And I don't want to be known as the last king of Poland." He attempted a smile. "Help me, will you?" he whispered. "As for the future, trust in the Brotherhood."

Two days later, at nine o'clock in the morning, Paweł Potecki left his city mansion and fell into the flow of the crowd moving toward the Castle Square. The final date—7 January 1795—for the removal of King Stanisław from his beloved Warsaw and Poland had come. The streets were lined with Russian soldiers meant to preserve order. Paweł marveled at the sheer number of citizens, noble and peasant, come out into the bitter cold—with unmasked grief and sadness on their faces—to bid goodbye to their king.

Staying in the city had meant foregoing the wedding of his friends Jan and Anna. Paweł had sent a wedding gift and his deep regrets for missing the ceremony. What a lucky man, that Jan! When Paweł had joined Kościuszko's forces, he made it a point to search him out and to tell him of the great concern Anna held for him. He had wished only that Anna's cousin Zofia held such concern for himself.

Paweł and Jan had become fast friends on the battlefield and off, but events within the capital were unfolding too quickly to get away, even for a day or two.

Paweł was making his way now to the arched opening that led into the Great Courtyard. People stood shoulder to shoulder. This was as far as he would get. He was glad for his height as he watched the door that held everyone's eyes transfixed.

Within a quarter of an hour, the king came into the courtyard. His breeches and cloak were brown, the cloak lined in crimson velvet that matched his cap. Crimson!—even at such a time, how proudly he wore Poland's color.

The servants of the Royal Castle were lined up to bid him farewell, some of their faces streaming tears as he passed by and allowed them to kiss his ring. Now and again he gave a consolatory pat on their bowed heads.

This done, Stanisław's eyes fastened on someone across the courtyard. Paweł stretched his neck and for the first time saw that it was General Suvorov himself. Paweł's blood grew hot. A flame of anger licked at the back of his throat. Here was the red devil that had overseen the Praga massacre. Twelve thousand innocent civilians—women and children—had died. Here was the man responsible for Zofia's death.

Suvorov was presenting before King Stanisław the Russian Guard of Honor. Paweł cursed to himself. Suvorov knew the military, knew maneuvers, knew novel ways of killing, but he did not know honor. The man was the lowest of shape shifters.

The king, holding his head up with quiet dignity, turned then and reviewed his own Royal Guards for the last time. He managed a small smile of gratitude.

Here was honor, Paweł thought.

Without final words, the king climbed up into his carriage. One adjutant general, General Gorzeński, had been allowed to accompany him, along with the king's valet and doctor. Other members of his entourage, as well as wagons filled with favorite belongings, would follow later in the week. The carriage

immediately began to move toward the gate, mounted Russians at the front and back. The king waved sadly to the swarms of people as he passed. The carriage came very near to where Paweł stood, and he was certain the king caught sight of him, for there was a flash of recognition in the eyes of faded blue, the lifting of the veiled lids, and the slightest nod.

Paweł would remember that moment all of his days. It was as if in that split second some transference of power or responsibility had been made. He was immediately reminded of his standing over his father's deathbed. Count Potecki had been rendered speechless by a devastating stroke, and just before he died, his eyes went to his fifteen-year-old son, wordlessly imploring him to take good care of the wife he was leaving behind. No words were necessary.

Here, too, something of an ethereal nature occurred, something of great import, linking Paweł to the king and the fate of Poland. His hand unconsciously moved to the pocket holding the little sheet of paper the king had given him. He had yet to act on it.

What might be done? *What?* Was there a way to save Poland, save the throne? Or was he bearing witness to the leave-taking of the last king of Poland?

Suddenly his thoughts were dislodged by the spontaneous cry of the people. "The People with the King!" they called. "The King with the People!" It was the old anthem used in fighting off the allied powers. Well, they had lost, Paweł thought, but their spirits had yet to be defeated.

"The People with the King! The King with the People!" The chanting went on as the little retinue wended its way down, moving like a church processional toward the city gates and river. Suddenly, the carriage was stopped by the masses, whereupon people attempted to unharness the horses and retain their king. Stanisław was leaning out from his window attempting—his motions implied—to discourage such actions.

Paweł's hand went to his mouth in a motion of pity and despair, for the Russians were already upon the insurgents—pistol shots ringing out—and in moments the carriage was moving down the incline toward the river at a healthy trot, a scattering of bodies in its wake, the people's chant silenced.

The area was clearing a bit as Paweł came out into the Castle Square. He stared up at Zygmunt's Column. At its top the bronze figure of the long-dead king held a cross in one hand, a sword in the other, like a warrior saint. Beneath it now, moving toward the river was another king—one of flesh and blood—this one being forced from his throne and homeland. Stanisław was neither warrior nor saint, but he was undeserving of this fate.

Paweł made his way through the throngs of angry, grieving citizens to the city walls fronting the River Vistula. He watched as the king's carriage was ferried to the Praga side—it would be spring before work on rebuilding the bridge could begin. The carriage stopped and remained on the embankment of the ruined Praga. Paweł could see the king—the crimson cap unmistakable—alighting from his coach and coming to sit on a little folding stool provided

by his valet. He sat facing the panorama of Warsaw—it was a sight Paweł had often marveled at from a window of Zofia's now destroyed town house.

The king was holding something up to his face. Paweł stared in wonder, then realized what it was. King Stanisław was surveying his beloved city for the last time through a field-telescope.

Time passed and the pantomime of the Russian general now in charge of the king's journey to Grodno, Lithuania, indicated his great frustration and anger. The king remained impervious to his urgings. He would have his last look.

It began to snow. The citizens in the square and at the walls shivered in the cold and began to return home. Paweł left, too, after an hour, taking one last look at the lonely, sad man in the red cap. He could take no more—and he had been charged with things to do. What things, he had no idea.

Later, Paweł would learn that the king had sat there peering through the field-telescope at his capital for a full two hours.

King Stanisław II Augustus leaned forward on the little wooden stool, his shoulders sagging, his lips so thinned as to be invisible. He studied the Royal Castle that sat perched on the escarpment on the opposite side of the River Vistula.

Thirty years before, he had come to the throne through the machinations of his one-time lover, Catherine of Russia. His rule had initiated a new period in Polish history. As his eyes moved over his beloved capital—a city of 30,000 that had burgeoned to 150,000 in the span of his reign—regrets he had held all morning for the sake of his subjects pummeled him now, like the stinging pellets of snow and ice that blew up at him from the river. Oh, he had overseen significant change for the good, a period of enlightenment in the law, education, and the arts. His dream to re-create the Polish world had had its successes, most notably the Third of May Constitution, the first written democratic document of its kind in Europe. Its aegis allowed for Poland to keep her elected monarch and at the same time respect the rights of the individual. The reforms were admired all over the world. But the peasants' rebellion in France had sent shockwaves to Austria, Prussia, and Russia where they shook and rattled the very thrones of the monarchs. Any seeds of democracy were to be stamped out like weeds. Ultimately the three powers brought about the final partition of Poland, all three partitions incurred under the king's watch.

The short-lived Constitution was but a memory now, yet the king prayed with the whole of his heart that its memory would endure. He prayed, too, that he would not be known as the last King of Poland.

A motion caught the king's eye. He looked up. It was the Russian general once again approaching, his face screwed up against the cold wind off the river.

King Stanisław gave him the same gentle smile he would give to any suppliant. He had kept the man waiting long enough.

The monarch stood, tucking away his field-telescope and adjusting his crimson cap. Then he took his final look at Warsaw, sighed, and moved toward his carriage.

So slipped the scepter.

5

LATE MARCH, 1795

Anna was awakened one morning by sounds on the roof above her. For a moment she thought someone was up there repairing the evergreen tiles. Then came the cries: "Kle-kle-kle!"

She sat up in bed, smiling to herself, then laughing aloud. "You are a bit tardy this year, Józef and Alijca!" she called out, laughing. "I might have done without you. Oh, but you are welcome just the same!" For years the same pair of storks had been returning from wintering in a warmer climate—Africa, it was said. Like clockwork, the storks sought out their fair weather home. They would nestle into the huge awkward nest adjacent to the chimney and stay until September. They were thought to bring luck—and sometimes a child—to the owners of the house.

Anna became lost for the moment in the reverie of childhood. She remembered standing with her father and looking up at the pair, awed by the flurry of black wing feathers against the white plumage of the body and the red of the legs and bills. "Oh, they're fighting, Papa!" she had cried. "Do make them stop." Her father spoke gently, telling her they were merely playing. She must have been five or six and could not have known they were engaging in a rhythmic and nearly violent rite of courtship.

A few minutes later, Lutisha knocked and entered. "Will you be coming down to breakfast, madame?"

"Yes, Lutisha. Why shouldn't I?"

Lutisha brought a ewer of warm water for the wash stand and had her back to Anna. "It's just that you haven't always come down, of late."

"Ah, that's true, isn't it?" Anna felt she could keep the secret no longer. "Lutisha, I think the storks have returned."

"Oh, just the one, madame," Lutisha said, turning around. "The male, I suspect. That's the way of it. He repairs the nest and gets it ready for the female."

"Why is that, I wonder?" Anna asked. "Do you imagine they spend the fall and winter months apart?"

"Some think so, madame, and the way they carry on when the female arrives, well, I do believe it!"

Anna laughed. "Well, I think I've beat them at their game, Lutisha!"

The servant understood, her smile lighting her large face. But it was not a smile of surprise. "Then it's luck to the whole house they're bringing."

"You *knew*, didn't you?" When the woman pursed her lips, Anna laughed. "I thought so!"

Lutisha shrugged. "There's just something about a woman in the family way I've come to see."

"What is it?"

"Just a look, madame. A secret sparkle in the eye."

Anna laughed again. "I've always said servants know more of what goes on in a house than does the master."

Lutisha blushed. "Tis' the case, sometimes, madame. Truly." She turned to go.

"I'll be down momentarily."

Lutisha rounded about at the door. "Are you looking for another boy?"

"Perhaps."

"It would be good for Jan Michał to have a little brother. And I expect Lord Stelnicki will be wishing for a boy." The door closed on Lutisha's happy smile.

Anna's euphoria was immediately snuffed out. Her moods were volatile these days, and mention of Jan and the child brought her low.

Jan had gone out early again, hadn't been around long enough in the mornings these past weeks to realize she had the sickness. What was it he was always finding to do? The estate ran well enough under the watchful eye of Jacob; what could he possibly find to busy himself with? And why? Didn't he know she needed him? Oh, he was there in the evening, and at night their lovemaking was everything she could hope for… but in the morning… to find him gone…

Anna began to dress. Suddenly, a thought ran through her like an ill wind. She seemed to be thinking and behaving like her mother, who had so resented her father's desire to get out and about on the estate, directing and doing. It was as if Fate had somehow given Anna's mother's life to her. Here she was in

her parents' house, in their bedchamber, and in a relationship that—for the moment, at least—possessed eerie parallels. The spectral thought chilled her.

Anna had understood her father and his love of the land, understood him more than her mother had. But now—as if she were in her mother's place—she seemed to understand *her* better.

Her mood still did not lift. Lutisha had cut to the heart of another worry. *Would* he be wishing—expecting—a boy? Would he be happy with a girl? Anna was praying for a girl, but it was only now that she came to grips with the reason for her prayer. The truth was, she was afraid that delivering a boy now, just as the bonding between Jan and Michał was taking form, could somehow reduce the strength of that father-stepson relationship. As loving and open as Jan seemed to be with little Michał, Anna said a prayer that she bring a girl into the household.

Anna would tell him the happy news tonight. She had no choice, for the whole house would know in no time. Or perhaps everyone did already.

Paweł rode alone, the morning mist rising up around him. For the sake of secrecy, he had been told to avoid the road, and so he directed his horse through the dense forest, taking care to avoid fallen trees and low-hanging branches. Tired as he had ever been, he scarcely noticed the buds on the oak trees or the light green shoots on the pines. These trees that rose around him—like pillars in a Greek stadium, he had often thought—failed for once to incite within him his awe of nature. In time he passed through a mile-long clearing, then drew up his horse at a bank of birch trees that stood like sentries at the clearing's edge. Before him lay a wide expanse that encircled a hill, upon the crest of which sat a large, wooden hunting lodge, its windows like square, unblinking eyes.

He had slept little in the past week. With spring at hand, he had returned to the countryside, talking among the peasants, inquiring, combing the little hamlets along the riverbanks for some trace of Zofia. Hope died hard. But he had yet to upturn a single clue. Zofia had vanished. Lately he had seen only pity in the eyes of his friends, who had given her up for dead long ago. Anyone would have. And yet he could not give himself over to the thought that she lay among the many bodies that had been dropped by peasants and soldiers into pits like so much human refuse. Not Zofia…

He dismounted now, fighting off fatigue. He tied his horse to a shrub and took the brown robe from his saddlebag. With the robe in place over his clothes, he began to trudge across the clearing, his eyes on the lodge. Before he reached the halfway point, something flashed from one of the upper story windows, a glint that quickly disappeared. Was it just the reflection of the quickly rising sun? The spectacles of someone at the window? A spyglass?

Paweł allowed his thoughts of Zofia to fall away. The sun was tempering

the chill of the forest. He felt relief in thinking of other things. He stopped and drew the hood of the robe up over his head. Through the eye holes, he took his bearings and moved toward the lodge. This was his fourth meeting, and he felt as silly in this costume as he had at the first, in Warsaw. How had he allowed the king to draw him into this little masquerade? He felt a fool. At the word of the king, he had taken up with a group concerned with power and shrouded in secrecy and ceremony. It was not a group to make him feel a true member or even welcome. And there seemed always an undercurrent of danger. But he continued his membership, thinking—at times—that King Stanisław had entrusted to him a quest, one that somehow held the fate of the nation in the balance.

This lodge, hidden away in the country, seemed no different than other hunting lodges owned by magnates. A morning's ride from Warsaw, the site acted as an artery of its main lodge in the capital, "Charles to the Three Helmets," where Paweł had been inducted, and where he had sworn to live according to the Rite of the Strict Observance. It was with more than a little hesitancy that he had vowed allegiance to the superiors in the order. But for the moment his promise to the king—who had belonged to this very lodge—stifled his second thoughts.

At the door he was met now with the familiar somber greeting of a short, stout member in a rumpled robe cinched beneath his overhanging belly. He was shown to the large, vaulted hall where some twenty members of the Brotherhood, grouped in threes and fours, were speaking in serious tones. Was it his imagination or had his arrival caused a subtle stir in the movements of the hoods, a lowering of voices? A few Brethren nearby nodded and mumbled hello's, addressing him as Piotr, the fictitious name he had been given.

Paweł was beginning to tell one from the other by their size, the drape of their robes, and, most especially, their voices. These were nobles for the most part. They, too, had fictitious names, but the voices of some were familiar to him. Some were acquaintances; a few, friends. However, he had been sternly warned never to show a hint of recognition, and he obeyed.

The Grand Master approached him now. "Brother Piotr, you are a trifle late. But we had faith you would come."

"I was delayed. I'm sorry, Brother." He could not imagine why *his* attendance should carry such importance.

"It is good that you are here."

The Grand Master's voice was deep and authoritative. Paweł knew his own identity was no secret to him. He wondered if everyone knew his identity. He felt at his core that they did. Or did he imagine as much? The man to whom the king had sent Paweł had sworn that was not the case, and yet…

He had heard of the power of the Freemasons. Sometimes he felt it among them. Yet what did they think they could do to restore Poland as a nation? The king was gone. Not dead, but in the clutches of Catherine he had passed into history as surely as if he were stone-cold in the ground. The Brethren

knew—as did he—that there would be no resurrection, nor did they long for one.

Over the course of the meetings, he had learned of their plan, or parts of it. The Brotherhood was determined to see a new king seated, a new Polish banner of white and crimson waving once again. Poland would not be swallowed up. It would be reconstituted. The Brotherhood was prepared to wait… and to plot. Paweł himself could think of several likely prospects that might rally the nation. Yet names at these meetings—unless whispered in small groups—were avoided.

Members spoke of schooling, languages that would have to be learned, leadership traits inculcated in a newly-chosen king. It was as if Poland's hope lay in a boy-dauphin or infant Messiah—Paweł found it very strange. And when he pressed them for specifics—what man or child would suit their needs—they seemed to lead him down circuitous paths.

Later, Paweł dared to question the Grand Master: "Why is it that this smaller group meets away from the city, Brother?"

The Grand Master paused before he spoke, and Paweł wished he could see through the hood to his expression.

"The Capital has too many ears and eyes, Brother Piotr, for what we have to say and do."

"Too many *Russian* eyes and ears?"

The Grand Master paused, nodded. "Or Prussian.—Oh, we may owe the existence of our order to the Prussian influence, but with our nation fully partitioned today—and no little part of western Poland gone to Prussia—the interests of true Poles like you and I, Brother Piotr, will do battle with Prussian interests."

"I see." Paweł had hoped to draw more out of the Grand Master through his questioning, but hadn't learned anything he hadn't already figured out for himself. His efforts went unrewarded.

"Come, let us all be seated," the Grand Master announced, "so that we can discuss as one body. There is business to be done!"

It was fully dark when Paweł returned to Warsaw. He walked from the carriage house to the rear door of his town house. Any real business that had transpired at the lodge escaped Paweł's notice. Thankfully, the return trip by road had made for a shorter one than the morning's trek through the forest. Still, he felt as drained as he had after battle. The thought of sleep quickened his pace up the stairs.

"My lord," his servant said, greeting him at the door, "you have a visitor in the reception room."

"Yes? Who is it, Fryderyk?"

The servant took Paweł's coat. He seemed afraid to speak. The pallor

of the man put Paweł on notice. Rather than repeat the question, Paweł strode quickly to the reception room. The chamber was dimly lit, and had the servant not told him of a caller, Paweł would not have noticed the motionless figure at the far end of the room.

"Hello," he said, starting across the room. The low fire in the hearth sent flickering shadows playing on the visitant's form. It was a woman, he saw now, in peasant attire, a mass of dark hair crushed under a kerchief. What business could she possibly have with him? How was it that his servant had admitted her?

To his surprise, she started to move toward him with assurance and familiarity. He immediately recognized—despite her costume—that her posture and gait were those of a woman of high birth. The hearth light fell across her face at that moment, shimmering on the arresting features. He recognized her.

His heart swung out in an arc over a void—and slowly, slowly—returned.

If God had given him the breath, he would say later, he would have gasped. As it was, he was struck dumb, and his legs threatened to fail. "Zofia," Paweł said at last. It was nothing more than a whisper, and he could say no more.

"Paweł," she replied, the old uninhibited smile playing under the dark, almond eyes and aristocratic nose. She was in front of him one moment, embracing him the next. He could not tell which of them was trembling—he thought perhaps they both were.

After a long, long moment, Zofia drew back, apprising him, the smile teasing now. Her eyes were wet. He had never seen her cry. The moments seemed to draw into minutes. Paweł was afraid to speak, afraid that this was a vision or a spell or a dream and that the slightest noise would crack the illusion. That she would dissolve into dust.

"Paweł," Zofia said, "you look as if you've seen a ghost!" She threw her head back in that old familiar way.

It was her laugh—like the tinkling of coins—that made him believe her real and alive.

"By the white eagle and all things holy, Zofia, I believe I have."