

THE POLAND TRILOGY BY JAMES CONROYD MARTIN

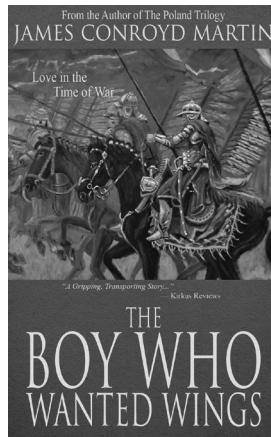


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Based on the diary of a Polish countess who lived through the rise and fall of the Third of May Constitution years, 1791-94, *Push Not the River* paints a vivid picture of a tumultuous and unforgettable metamorphosis of a nation—and of Anna, a proud 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.

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PUSH NOT THE RIVER



JAMES CONROYD MARTIN

HUSSAR
QUILL PRESS



Push Not the River

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By Frances Drwal

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While this story is considered historical fiction, many of the characters and events depicted are based on real people and events as described in the diary that inspired *Push Not the River*.

*For my parents,
John and Bette Martin*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The cornerstone of this novel is the unpublished diary of Countess Anna Maria Berezowska, translated into English from the Polish by her descendant, John A. Stelnicki. Countess Berezowska began keeping a diary when her personal world began to disintegrate and her writing became for her, I suspect, a great therapy. She sometimes read and copied into her own diary the colorful entries from her cousin Zofia's diary. It was Zofia's often risqué content that most likely accounted for subsequent generations' withholding the document from the public. For some decades, it was even sealed in wax and hidden away. Amazingly, the years of the countess' personal crises coincided with some of the most important years in all of Polish history: the Third of May Constitution years. It is fortunate that such a remarkable private view—and a woman's view—of those perilous years has survived.

James Conroyd Martin
August 2003

PRONUNCIATION KEY

Częstochowa = Chehn-staw-haw-vah

Dniestr = Dnyehstr

Jan = Yahn

Józef = Yu-zef

Halicz = Hah-leech

kasza = kasha

kołacz = kaw-watch

Kołtataj = Kaw-wohn-tie

Kościuszko = Kawsh-chew-shkaw

Kraków = Krah-kooff

Michał = Mee-how

Paweł = Pah-vel

Sochaczew = Saw-hah-cheff

Stanisław = Stah-neess-wahf

szlachta = shlack-ta

Wilanów = Vee-lahn-ooff

żur = zhoor

THE PARTITIONING OF POLAND

The dotted outline indicates the partitioning extremes assumed by Prussia, Austria, and Russia in 1772, 1793, and 1795.





Second Partition 1793



Third Partition 1795

PROLOGUE



Wherever you go,
you can never leave yourself behind.

—POLISH PROVERB

SOCHACZEW 1779

ANNA'S EYELIDS FLUTTERED BRIEFLY IN the morning light, then flew back. The girl felt the pace of her heart increase. This was the day she had awaited, the twenty-sixth of July. Her name's day. She sat up immediately and looked to the table near the window. On it sat the package wrapped in red paper. She gave out a little sigh of relief.

She sprang spritelike from her bed, pulling at her nightdress. She washed and dressed quickly, donning the blue dress trimmed in lace and the glossy white leather shoes. These were worn only for special occasions. She worked overly hard at brushing her brown curls. She was too impatient, she knew, and when she drew the brush through a tangle, she saw herself wince in the mirror. It was a very grownup expression, one she had seen her mother use.

She brushed and brushed. A bad job would bring a light scolding from Luisa when it came time for braiding. Still, her mind was not on the task at hand. Time and again, her amber-flecked green eyes would shift in the mirror to where the red package sat in her sight line. Tired as she had been the night before, she fought off sleep for as long as possible, fearing that the present might disappear somehow. But it had not. It was here and it was hers. She had only to look at it, red as a ripe apple and many times more inviting, to make certain.

Her morning rites finished in record time, Anna gingerly slid the package from the table into a tight, two-armed grasp. Taking special care with the opening and closing of her bedchamber door, she moved out into the hall and to the stairway. The aroma of coffee and breakfast sausages was a usual one, but this was no usual day. She reached high for the banister, and descended with the hesitating care of an old woman, stopping on each stair with a little jolt, until at last she came to the main floor of the country manor house.

Her mother was breakfasting in the dining room while the maid stood at her side pouring coffee into a china cup. Several pans steamed on the sideboard.

The dark-haired Countess Teresa Berezowska glanced up, smiled. "Good morning, Anna Maria. Happy name's day."

"Happy feast day, Anna," Luisa said in a happy tone. "St. Anne is looking down on you. How old is my little lady?"

Anna smiled, delighted at the attention. "Five!" she said. Her first instinct was to hold up the fingers of her right hand to underscore the fact, but she

realized in the nick of time that doing so would cause her to drop the package. Her heart beat faster at the thought.

"A bowl of *kasza* with milk and a poached egg this morning," Luisa was saying, "and if you finish that off there will be some fluffy *babka* for this happy day."

Taking small, measured steps, she moved, as was her morning routine, to give her mother a kiss on the cheek. The countess leaned over to accommodate her daughter. Anna thought her mother the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. Her father's chair was empty, so she went directly to her own place. Carefully, she positioned the package next to her plate. Freed of her treasure, she clambered up onto her chair.

Luisa placed Anna's breakfast before her, humming very prettily. Anna was determined to eat every bite, for she could smell the delicious iced *babka*. Where is it? she wondered. The light, sugary cake with its hidden raisins was her favorite.

Lifting the first spoonful of egg to her mouth, the girl noticed that her mother's violet-gray eyes were locked upon the red package. And that her smile had died away.

A little bell of alarm sounded in Anna's head. She put down her spoon. Her immediate thought was for support. "Where's Papa?"

"He's gone off on business," the countess replied. "Always some farm business."

Her mother's tone frightened the child. The countess' eyes moved from the package to her.

"Now what have we here, Anna Maria Berezowska? Is this your new doll?"

"No, Mama."

"I see. I thought not. The package seems neither the correct shape nor size. Where is it, then?"

Anna's lips were dry. "I... I didn't choose a doll."

The countess' mouth tightened. "But your father took you all the way to the capital yesterday for the express purpose of buying you a doll, one with a painted face, glass eyes, and real hair. Were there none to be found in all of Warsaw?"

"Oh, yes, there were many dolls, Mama, only—"

"Only what?"

"Only I chose this."

"You did, did you? You were quite deliberate, then, in going against my wishes. You were to have chosen a doll."

Anna didn't know what to say. Her mother did not raise her voice to her, never had. But Anna recognized the seriousness in her tone and steady gaze. Her little limbs trembled; she would not cry.

"Would you leave us now, Luisa?" the countess asked, smiling.

Anna's heart dropped. She had seen that smile before. She had learned that it wasn't a real smile. She longed to have old Luisa stay but knew to say nothing.

The maid curtsied, then crossed the room toward the kitchen door. She smiled at Anna, a smile that was a smile. The girl knew Luisa meant to give her courage, but it didn't help much.

"Open it up," the countess said, once the maid had vanished behind the swinging door. "Let's see what can be more amusing to a little girl than a new doll."

"Shouldn't we wait for Papa?"

"Open it, Anna Maria." The countess was not to be put off by the cleverness of a five-year-old.

Anna had been so caught up in the wonder of the gift that she had not thought about her mother's reaction. She started to tear clumsily at the well-wrapped package. Her hands were sweating.

It had been her first trip to the capital. Wide-eyed, she had sat on her father's lap as the carriage rattled along for what seemed hours and hours. They entered the suburb of Praga, then across the River Vistula, the wheels vibrating on the wooden bridge, then clacking along the cobbled streets of Warsaw. It was the most amazing thing, this city, like something from one of her books. "Oh, Father!" she cried. There passing before her was the Royal Castle. "Does the king live there? Truly?" Her father was smiling. "He does, indeed." They passed the Cathedral of Saint Jan, and the city mansions of the nobles—the *very* rich ones.

Magnates, her father called them. "Why aren't you a magnate?" she asked. "I have all the wealth I need," he laughed, hugging her to him. In the castle's outer courtyard the two craned their necks up at Zygmunt's Column. The bronze figure of the long-dead king held a cross in one hand, a sword in the other—like some warrior saint. He had been the one, her father told her, that had moved the capital from Kraków to Warsaw. Years later she would remember the Royal Castle as merely massive and daunting, but the memory of her father's embrace—his strength, his warmth, and the faint scent of a shaving soap—these she would carry with her always.

They continued then to the Market Square, a glittering honeycomb of shops and stalls. And Anna did see dolls that she liked, too, dolls of every description and recent style. Beautiful dolls. But once her eyes settled on that sparkling object she was now unwrapping, nothing else would do. "Is this what you truly wish, little Ania?" her father asked, using her diminutive. She looked up at him, realizing at once that her wish was his wish. "Oh, yes!" she cried. It was then—in the enchanting city of kings—that the notions of feast days and wishes and magic were sealed together in her mind, it seemed, forever.

The red paper was tearing away at one corner, then another. Something under it flashed and gleamed.

When the paper would not pull wholly free, the countess became impatient, moving swiftly to the girl's aid.

In moments it stood stripped of its wrappings. The translucent object seemed now to draw in the sun from every direction. It stood before the

countess as if pulsing and glowing with warm life. The molding and cutting of the crystal were exquisite. Secured in a crystal base, the delicately carved legs seemed to thrust the body forward. The wings were extended as if for flight, the beak lifted in anticipation.

"What is *this*?" the countess cried.

Anna could not tell whether her mother was happily surprised, puzzled, or angry. Still, her fears momentarily disappeared at the sight of the marvel. "Oh, it's a bird, Mother. A crystal dove! Isn't it beautiful?"

"I can see for myself it's a bird, Anna Maria. But why should you or any little girl want such a thing?... And in place of the doll of your choice!"

"Because it's so pretty, Mama. You know I love birds. I've always wished for one, but Papa says they are meant to be free. This is a bird I can keep. See how it sparkles. And... it has magic!"

"Magic?"

"Oh, yes."

"What magic?"

"See how the light goes through it? It makes colors just like a rainbow."

"Much like a prism," the countess conceded.

"A what?"

"Never mind. Go on."

"Well, the merchant said that's a sign of magic. He said this bird will carry me anywhere I want to go. Even to the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow!"

"What a lot of bombast! The magic was not in the bird but on that wily merchant's tongue. I'll wager he wheedled a pretty price out of your father for this bit of nonsense!"

Anna felt her heart fluttering against her chest. She looked up into her mother's face, which seemed to have reddened slightly. "Oh, but Father..." Anna's words died away when the countess lifted a forefinger in a shushing motion.

"Anna Maria, darling, it was your *mother* who suggested the doll for your feast day, was it not? Don't you think your mother knows a bit more than you?"

Anna held back the tears. If only she could explain her love for the bird. She *had* tried, but her mother did not understand.

"You do get the strangest notions, dearest," her mother was saying, "and you just don't let go. Yes, you can look at the bird, but you can *play* with the doll."

Was there a softening to her tone? Anna dared to hope so.

Seizing the crystal bird, the countess carried it across the room and placed it on the uppermost shelf of the china cabinet, well out of Anna's reach. "It'll stay here until I decide what's to be done with it. If you don't want a doll—"

"But I have Buttons!"

The countess turned around. "An old rag doll!"

"I don't need another—"

"And so you won't have another, either. Perhaps you will just do without a present this year. Do you have any idea how you've upset your mother?"

Anna stared. Her mother's lips seemed to thin, then disappear.

"Do you?"

Anna couldn't speak.

"I see you do not. I'm going upstairs to lie down. Finish your breakfast." The countess left the dining room.

The girl did slowly finish her porridge and egg, cold as they were. As she ate, her wide, dry eyes never strayed from the cabinet that held the bird captive.

"Ah, Anna," Luisa chimed as she came in from the kitchen and bustled toward the sideboard, "I can see you're ready for your fluffy *babka*, my little feast day girl!"

Anna, however, slipped quietly from the room before the maid turned around with the cake. She was halfway up the stairs when she heard Luisa calling her.

She did not turn back.



"What is it, little green eyes?" her father asked. He dismounted and stood tall before her. "Have you been crying? Why?"

Anna had been in the stable for over an hour awaiting his return. Bravely, she had crept out of her room, down the servants' stairway, and through the kitchen to the back door. She crossed the yard and entered the stable. She waited nervously. When she was in such a state as this, she would thrust the extended fingers of both hands back through her long brown hair in a brushing movement, rudely simulating the soothing strokes the maid employed in brushing her hair. But today this oddly nervous motion of the hands agitated more than soothed. Even the presence there of the wonderfully majestic horses failed to divert her attention.

"Ania," her father pressed, lifting her up onto his empty saddle. "You've been pulling at your hair again.... Tell me what the matter is."

She found herself looking down into her father's face. It was the first time she had sat on a horse and she felt her heart racing. The great animal stirred slightly beneath her, like some mountain come alive. It was a thrilling moment, but she was not about to lose thought of the bird. She let the story spill from her, holding back tears. She had done all of her crying earlier in her room; she would not cry in front of anyone, not even in front of her father.

"This is serious," Count Berezowski announced at the end of the account.

"Must I give it up, Father? The crystal bird, must I?"

"Did your mother say you must?"

"No, she didn't *say* so."

"But you think she means as much?"

Anna nodded. She bit her lower lip. One hand moved unconsciously toward her hair.

"Well then, Anna," her father said, gently catching and restraining her hand, "we must not lose hope. I'll see what I can do."

"You'll talk to her?"

"Oh, I suspect she'll talk to me first," he laughed. "But, yes, I'll talk to her."

"Oh, thank you, Papa!"

"Come along, now." He lifted her down from the horse, so that his mouth was close to her ear when he said, "Sometimes you must put yourself in the way of destiny."

Anna's arms tightened around her father's neck. He smelled of the fields, another scent to lock away in her memory.

"There, there, no promises. And if we are successful, Ania, it might mean you may have to do something to please your mother. Or give up something."

"Oh, anything, I'll do anything."

"I'll see what I can do."

Somehow her father met with success, for when Anna awoke the next morning, it was to the sight of the crystal dove gleaming on the table beside her bed. She picked it up gently, as if it were alive, mesmerized at the rainbow she thought she saw within. It would be years before she would find out what had been yielded for the sake of the glass bird; years also before her father's brief and enigmatic philosophy would find resonance in Anna's mind: "*Sometimes you must put yourself in the way of destiny.*"

PART ONE



There are three things that are
difficult to keep hidden:
a fire, a cold, and love.

—POLISH PROVERB

HALICZ 1791

SHE STOOD MOTIONLESS NOW, IN a painter's tableau of flowers and grasses, a long distance from home, alone. It was only recent events—not the intervening years—that made Anna question her childhood attachment to the mythical. Today, in fact, the young girl who stood poised on the threshold of womanhood questioned the very world around her.

The afternoon was idyllic, the meadow at mid-day a canvas of color and warmth. A breeze stirred the wheat and barley fields nearby, coercing the spikes into graceful, rippling waves. Next year the meadow in which she stood would be made to produce also, but for now it was thickly green with overgrown grasses and rampant with late summer wildflowers, birds, and butterflies.

To all of this Anna was coolly indifferent. She stood there, her black dress billowing in the breeze, vaguely aware of a bee that buzzed nearby. In time, though, her eyes found focus as she observed a few fallen leaves hurl themselves at the trunk of the solitary oak, whirl away, and come back again. In them—their detachment and their restless movement—she somehow felt a comradeship. She was as mindlessly driven as they. And from somewhere deep at her core, a keening rose up, piercing her, like that of a mournful siren from some unseen island.

How had it come to this? Only months before, upon the passing of the Constitution in May, Anna's universe had been complete and happy. The reform seemed to place her father in a good disposition. The Third of May Constitution did not threaten him, as it did some of the nobility. Count Samuel Berezowski was of the minor nobility, the *szlachta*, his great-great grandfather having been conferred the title of count when in 1683 he aided the legendary King Jan Sobieski and much of Christian Europe in keeping Vienna—and therefore Eastern Europe—from the Turks. The count managed his single estate himself and he already allowed his village of twelve peasant families liberal

freedoms of thought and action. As was the custom, the peasants addressed him as Lord Berezowski.

It was a happy time for Anna's mother, too, because she was eight months with child. As a young girl, Countess Teresa Berezowska had gone against her parents' wishes, foregoing marriage into a magnate family for the dictates of the heart. This did not preclude, however, her own ambition to bring into the world children who would go on to make matches that would distinguish the family. Though her heart had been set on a first-born boy, she rejoiced with Samuel in the birth of their healthy, green-eyed girl, Anna Maria. She was confident that many childbearing years were left to her and that there would be a troop of boys to fill up the house. Instead, a succession of miscarriages ensued and her health grew frail, her beauty fragile. Still, the countess persisted against doctors' advice, until at last—seventeen years after the birth of Anna—it seemed certain that she was to bring another child full term.

Anna's relationship with her mother improved after the incident with the crystal dove, but a certain distance between mother and daughter remained. Anna came to realize that while she was loved by both parents, her mother was much concerned with bringing boys into the world. While Anna's father gave his love freely, her mother inculcated in her—through the spoken and the unspoken—a sense of inadequacy that sent her into herself, into her own realm of imagination.

Alone in her books of fable and fairy tales and the myriad places they took her, Anna longed for a brother or sister to anchor her to the real world.

But it was not to be.

Feliks Paduch, one of Count Berezowski's peasants, had always been trouble. Since adolescence he had been involved in numerous thefts and brawls. At thirty, he was lazy, alcoholic, and spiteful, a man who questioned and resented his lot in life. Some peasants whispered, too, that he had been involved in the murder of a traveling Frenchman, but no one dared accuse him.

Countess Berezowska had encouraged her husband to evict Paduch, and he had nearly done so twice, but each time relented. A few days after the passing of the Third of May Constitution, Count Berezowski set out for the Paduch cottage in response to a local noble's complaint that Feliks had stolen several bags of grain. The *starosta* should settle the matter, the countess insisted, but the count, claiming he was ultimately responsible for his peasants, would not leave the matter to a magistrate.

It was on that day that life changed forever for the happy family. Anna was sitting in the window seat of her second-floor bedroom reading a French translation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when she heard the commotion below. She looked down to see eight or ten peasants accompanying a tumbril in which her father's body lay on a matting of straw.

Because of the sincere mutual respect between the count and his peasants, this time they seemed unafraid to name Feliks Paduch the murderer. It was Anna who had to tell her mother, and who—in her own bereavement—had to

listen to the countess mourn her husband while in the same breath rail against him for playing estate manager and attending to most ignoble business well beneath his station, business like Feliks Paduch.

Countess Berezowska was devastated. Anna believed that it was the traumatic effects of her father's murder that precipitated the premature birth of the baby. The boy lived only two days. The countess never recovered from her husband's murder and the difficult birth—thirteen hours it had taken. After the baby's death, the countess stopped taking nourishment. A week later, in a delirium of grief, anger, and despair she died.

And so it was that within a matter of days, Anna had lost everyone. The fabric of her peaceful life at Sochaczew had come undone, never to be made whole. She stood alone in her garden that day, the day of her mother's death, somehow unable to cry. How her mother had loved the flowers grown there. In fact, Anna had taken to gardening, initially, to please the countess, who so loved to have flowers in the house. Her father had helped her start the garden that year, the year the five-year-old precocious child had brought home the crystal dove. She had been allowed to keep it and wanted so to please her mother by producing bushels and bushels of flowers.

The garden venture took no time at all to instill in Anna a passion for growing things. Her father gave her an array of bulbs, imports from Holland. She dutifully planted them in the fall, wondering to herself how such funny looking things could ever produce something delicate and pretty. But in the spring the green feelers peeked out of the brown earth, and amidst fine rains, reached brave, thickening arms upward. Anna had arranged them in neat rows, like soldiers, so that when the heads burst open with hues of reds, purples, oranges, and yellows she could scarcely contain her delight. It seemed a miracle. That first bouquet to her astonished mother was her proudest moment. In time she came to see in the flowers an almost symbolic difference between her parents: while her father loved the living, growing flowers still rooted to the earth and warmed by the sun, her mother preferred them cut, placed in cool water, and set out in shaded rooms to be admired.

Anna's lesson with the crystal dove so many years before had provided a defining moment for her relationship with her mother. Anna persisted in her love for her mother, but its foundation seemed to be one of fractures and fissures which, while they never fully broke away, seemed always to hold the threat of doing so. The difficult truth was that she questioned her mother's love for her. The countess' love was a cool kind of love, taking the form of a nod or a light pat on the head, a love given out sparingly, like formal candies in tiny wrappings, and on occasions few enough for Anna to store away in a half-filled memory box. Anna, in turn, grew up confident only in her father's unconditional love, a love that radiated like sunshine. She came to fully place herself in his guardianship, so much so that at his death she found that her reservoir of trust had been emptied. Even he, in dying, had failed her. If what he had done was place himself in the way of destiny, no good had come of it.

The Countess Berezowska's older sister, Countess Stella Gronska, arrived with her husband and daughter Zofia for one funeral and stayed for three. When they left Sochaczew to return home to Halicz in southern Poland, they insisted on taking Anna with them. The count and countess would provide guardianship for her until she reached eighteen.

At first, Anna was grateful. Her world shattered, she was happy to have someone deciding and doing for her. And her aunt and uncle were warm and loving people. Zofia, too, was welcoming. Anna found her cousin very different from herself, so outgoing and worldly-wise.

The Gronsks tried their best to be a family to her. But as the days at Halicz wore on, Anna came to miss her home and its familiar surroundings more and more. Sleep brought with it dark dreams of abandonment, of isolation. At night she sometimes awoke to her own voice calling out for her father. Her aunt and uncle responded to her melancholy with genuine concern, but she would only pretend to be comforted. What she longed for was the cocoon of her father's library, where she had spent countless hours of her childhood transported to other times and places by the stories on the darkly varnished shelves. And, most of all, she missed the opportunity to mourn at her family's graves, to touch the earth that held them, when she could not.

Anna often wondered why it was that *she* survived. Had she *done* something to lose her whole world? Sometimes she found herself wishing she could join her family in the earth on that little hill where they and three other generations rested amidst daisies, cornflowers, and poppies. What did living have to offer now?

Her life had taken on a tragic dimension, one that reminded her of the many tales and legends she knew. So often they, too, ended tragically. Why? In growing up, she would often read a tale only to the point when things went wrong. Then she would stop in order to provide her own, happier, ending. Her favorite story was of Jurata, Queen of the Baltic. If Anna could not quite identify with the mythical beauty of Jurata, she did acknowledge that they had in common their green eyes. What she admired most about the goddess was her passion. Oh, Anna wished for such passion in her own life.

Jurata lived in a palace of amber under the sea. One day a young fisherman broke one of her laws, but the kind Jurata forgave him. Falling in love with the fisherman, the goddess courageously defied custom and law, swimming to shore to meet him every evening. Anna thought the myth very romantic. It was at this point that she chose to amend the story. She had no taste for the unhappy ending that went on to depict the god of lightning and thunder, Percun—who loved Jurata—flying into a rage because Jurata, too, broke a law: that magical beings marry only among themselves. Percun destroyed the palace with his thunderbolts and Jurata was never seen again. The pieces of the broken palace, then, accounted for the bits of amber found in the Baltic area.

In Anna's ending, Jurata chipped away at her amber palace, breaking it down bit by bit, a mythical feat in itself. She then cleverly created among the

gods and goddesses a great desire for the yellow stones. At last, she was able to assuage Percun's anger by presenting him with the largest cache of amber in the world, thus making him more respected and powerful. Jurata's passion was so great that she assumed a human form, giving up her immortality for the love of her fisherman.

Now, transfixed in the meadow, Anna was aware of the sights and sounds about her only in a peculiar and distant way, as though she stood—an intruder—in some French bucolic painting. She wondered if this panorama were even real. Perhaps her very life was no more than a dream. Might she be *dreaming* her life? Strange as it was, the notion caught hold in her imagination. Was such a thing possible? Somehow, at that moment, it made sense. *If only recent events were illusions*, she thought.... *If only—*

Suddenly a voice shattered the trance: "You must be the Countess Anna!"

The deep voice jarred her into consciousness, and an instinctive, fearful cry escaped her lips before her mind could work. She wheeled about, shielding her face against the western sun, her eyes raised to take in the mounted rider.

Her skin felt the full heat of the afternoon sun. His visage was at first little more than a silhouette cut against the sunlight, like a black-on-yellow paper cutting. Still, she knew he was not from the Gronski estate.

"It is a fine day, is it not?" He was smiling at her. A smile she could not interpret.

"Who are you?" She hardly recognized the voice as her own. It sounded distant and tiny. Her heart beat rapidly against her chest, and for a moment she thought of running.

"I'm sorry if I startled you." The smile was fading. "I assumed you would have heard my horse."

"You did—and I had not." Anna swallowed hard. She fought for composure. She would not run. "You might have called out from a distance."

"Truly, I am sorry. Really, Countess Anna—it *is* Countess Anna?"

She mustered decorum now. "*Lady* Anna Maria. My parents didn't use their titles."

"Forgive me." He was maneuvering his horse around her now. "Around here you'll find that many of the *szlachta* do."

"Do you often go about sneaking up on people?" She lifted her head to him, feigning boldness. She found herself turning, too, in a half circle until it was no longer necessary for her to shade her eyes against the sun. She was certain that he had initiated that little dance for just that end.

He was laughing. "It's a habit I thought I had broken, Lady Anna Maria."

His cavalier attitude was disconcerting. Anna chose not to answer.

"And what," he pressed, "is it that brings you out here, milady?"

Anna conjured up one of her mother's smiles that wasn't a smile. "I might ask you the same question."

"Fair enough." It was he who was shading his eyes now, but he took his

hand away long enough to point. "Your uncle's land ends there to the west with that wheat field. This meadow is mine."

"Oh." Anna felt her confidence go cold and drop within her, draining away like a mountain stream. How neatly he had put her in her place. "I am nothing more than an interloper then, is that it? I'll go back immediately."

He smiled. "You need do nothing of the kind, Lady Anna. There's no key to the woods and fields."

It was a saying she had heard her father use, one she had thought was his alone. Her gaze was held by the stranger. She answered: "It's just that I found the meadow so very peaceful, so conducive to thinking."

"Ah, so pretty—and thoughtful into the bargain!"

"Are they qualities so incompatible with each other?" The man was impossible, she decided, her spine stiffening.

"No, of course not. It was a stupid comment." The cobalt eyes flashed as he stared down at her.

She smiled now, her head lifting to meet his gaze. "At last we agree on something."

He laughed.

Anna sensed her little victory a hollow one. Was he laughing *at* her? She turned away. "It's well past time for me to return to the house, so if you'll excuse me—"

In one quick movement the stranger swung down from the black stallion.

Anna felt fear rise again. She took a cautious step backward.

"Oh, but we haven't met yet," he was saying. "Allow me to detain you but a moment longer. I am Jan Stelnicki." He bowed, stood erect, gazed down at Anna. The dark gray trousers tucked into high black boots, white silk shirt, and red sash around the waist made for an impeccable appearance. His costume was a mix of western and Polish influence, but that he wore no hat was neither western nor Polish.

Anna nodded, lifting her eyes to take in his considerable height. "Well, since you seem to already know my identity, there's little else to say." She persisted in her petulant tone even while her mind was seeking its own course. Despite the missing hat and familiar manner, his nobility was evident in his speech and bearing. Once he stood in the shade of the great oak, she took in the aristocratic and masculine features chiseled under a mane of wavy yellow-gold, the laughing smile above a dimpled chin, and those dark blue eyes. Some current at her core stirred: something profound and alien. *No man should be so beautiful.*

"Lady Anna," he was saying in a voice almost intimate, "may I offer my sincerest condolences? I was saddened to hear of your parents' deaths."

"Thank you, Lord Stelnicki."

The mourning which for months had consumed her life took on a strangely distant quality now. Her impatience with the stranger was giving way involuntarily to a dichotomous mix of caution and attraction. She watched the

motion of his mouth, the porcelain flash of teeth. He wore no moustache. This, too, ran against the Polish mode of the day. There was a mesmerizing presence about him and a strength, not merely physical strength—though he possessed that, too—but a force that came from deep within and resonated in his gaze, in his voice.

“Will you be staying with the Gronski family long?” he asked.

Her immediate response was to tell him that it was of no concern to him, but she took just a moment too long to formulate the reply and her annoyance dissipated. She heard herself telling him that she would be staying with the Gronskis for some time and that, yes, they were treating her very well. While he turned to tether his horse to a wiry branch jutting from the thick tree trunk, he continued his questioning, asking why they had not previously met. Studying him at his task, Anna replied that she had been to visit her aunt and uncle twice several years before. He took studies at the University then, it seemed. When he turned to face her, Anna averted her eyes, politely asking where. In Kraków, he responded, then two years in Paris.

Anna feigned nonchalance. She had never been to Kraków, but she had been to Warsaw—not often, even though her home was so near Poland’s capital. Paris, however, seemed worlds away. Paris was the City of Light: the quintessence of European culture. She longed to see it. Now, of course, the unrest there made it quite unsafe.... How old is he? she wondered. Twenty-two? Twenty-three?

“I am glad that you will be staying,” he was saying. “I trust that I will be allowed to show you the sights here at Halicz. Our Harvest Home will be concluding with much celebration...”

Her mind a blur, Anna watched as the young man went on speaking of the local autumn customs. What emboldened him to speak to her as though he had known her all his life? She absently fingered the dark lace at her throat. The voice was so warm, so musical, the eyes inviting as a lake in August. Still, she wondered at his sincerity. Did sincerity and boldness coexist? “Lord Stelnicki,” she managed when he took a breath, “I am afraid that such festivities are out of the question for me for some little while yet.”

“Of course. Forgive me.” He bowed from the waist. “But once you are out of mourning there will be many winter gatherings to which we shall look forward—parties, sleigh rides, and—”

Anna interrupted, smiling indulgently. “Oh, I’m afraid that in a few weeks my aunt and uncle will shut up the house. We are to winter in Warsaw.”

“Of course. For the moment I forgot the Gronski custom. Why, were you staying, I would personally organize a *kulig*. Our joyrides are well-known around here and no Halicz manor home turns away a sleigh party!”

“At least,” Anna laughed, “until the master’s vodka reserve has been drained!”

“I expect so.” Lord Stelnicki laughed, too. Then he let out a great sigh and his face fell with an exaggerated disappointment. “Ah, winter will not be such a happy prospect for me.”

He was so glibly forward that Anna could only stare. *This* comment, certainly, was insincere.

But the mocking attitude vanished suddenly and he brightened. The blue eyes held Anna's. "Time is the world's landlord and he may be friend or foe. May he be our *friend*, Lady Anna Maria."

Anna had never heard this saying before, but she knew his meaning and she felt her face burn. His forwardness unnerved her. No man, and certainly no stranger, had ever behaved toward her with such familiarity. Her throat, already dry, tightened as she sought a diversionary tactic. "Do you not winter in the city, Lord Stelnicki?"

"You must call me Jan. Please."

She longed to extinguish that expectant smile. Did this man ever meet with resistance? Even as she thought this, she found herself nodding in acquiescence. Silently, she promised herself to ignore the request.

He was satisfied, nonetheless, and told her that in years past he had spent December and January in Kraków—where his father lived now—but that he enjoyed the country far more. Yes, he assured her, even in winter, admitting himself to be an odd sort. His mother, it seemed, had died some years before and he assured Anna from experience that Time would help to heal the hurt.

Despite his forwardness and her own awkwardness, Anna was surprised by some interior part of her which sought to prolong the conversation, but having been reminded of her mourning, Duty, not Time, prompted her to insist that she return to the house.

"Very well, then," he said, "I'll lead my horse to the Gronski home, if you would care to ride?"

"Oh, no!"

"You do ride?"

"Of course, but I did come out for the walk, you see. Otherwise, I would have ridden out myself. I look forward to walking back." The words had spilled out in a rush, but he seemed satisfied with her excuse.

"Well, Lady Anna Maria," he said, bowing, "I welcome you to Halicz and look forward to our next meeting. I hope that one day soon we will ride together. The countryside is breathtaking. When do you put off your mourning?"

"In three weeks' time." His deep voice was no longer alien and startling. It was somehow a lyrical voice she had not known but had held always within her, like some ancestral song, primal yet soothing. Is his interest as keen as it seems, she wondered, or am I too vulnerable in my grief? Or merely too easily snared by my own imagination? What stupid and easily-caught bird was it that Polonius had compared Ophelia to? A woodcock, that was it. Is that what I am? Her heart was quickening nonetheless. He wanted to see her again. The thought was at once exciting and unnerving.

"Forgive me for disturbing you today," Lord Stelnicki was saying. "It was just that from the distance I took you for Zofia and so I rode over. I will make a

point of calling on the Gronski family in exactly three weeks. What is it? Why, Lady Anna, I do believe that you're blushing!"

Anna inwardly cursed him for pointing out her embarrassment. She forced out a little laugh. "It is funny, I should think. I have never been mistaken for my beautiful cousin, I can assure you. I could only wish for such beauty."

"Why, Anna—it's only fair now that I address you so—you have little reason for such wishing." He mounted his black steed. The leather creaked as he settled into the saddle with the grace and ease of one who has ridden all of his life.

Once again Anna found herself staring up at him.

"Look!" he said, gesturing in a sweeping motion. "See the two meadow flowers, the yellow and the violet? One is as different from the other as day from night. Yet who will say that one is more beautiful? Oh, a fool might. But only a fool." The saddle groaned again as he leaned over, motioning her nearer, as if to impart some great secret. "But do you know what may determine the desirability of one over the other?" He spoke with a great earnestness.

The intense eyes held Anna's, and she could only shake her head in mute response.

"The fragrance!"

The playful, widening smile, set against a complexion colored by the sun, revealed the even white teeth. Suddenly, he drew up on the reins, and as the animal reared, he waved and turned the horse into the wind. Anna stood close enough that she felt the earth tremble when the horse's forelegs came down. She took a stumbling step backward, feeling a quick breeze made by the swish of the animal's tail.

As the horse thundered off, Jan Stelnicki called out his goodbye.

Her lips apart as if to speak, she stood and stared until the figure crested the hill and fell from sight.

Anna's legs quaked. She felt as one abandoned by the enemy on a battlefield. The man was incorrigible: insufferably confident, proud, strutting. He caused defenses within her to rise like drawbridges. And he was toying with her to the last. *Yellow and violet flowers, indeed. You are a scoundrel and a rogue, Jan Stelnicki!*

And yet she was drawn to him. For a short while, her life had been filled with something other than death and darkness and mourning. Anna sank now to the ground, the stiff satin skirt billowing up around her like a great black cushion.

The world went on as it had before he arrived. The leaves were continuing their circuitous movement. A butterfly fluttered among the meadow flowers. A tiny sparrow sat appraisingly upon a nearby branch.

The meeting with Jan Stelnicki played out again in her mind. She tried to make sense of her feelings. Of course, he is strikingly handsome, she conceded.

There was something else about him, too, a special manly grace or energy that accounted for an immediate and deep attraction. A simple meeting, and yet Anna felt that somehow her life had changed. Was this to be the kind of mythical romance of which she read, dreamt, invented?

Doubt ran close behind and she scoffed at the notion: I will not be some easily-snared woodcock. I am too old for such a wishful and girlish infatuation.

But her mind grasped and held to one thought, one memory. Anna's mother often had told her that she herself had known she would marry Anna's father from the very first meeting. And she *had*, despite the concerns of her parents and offers from other wealthier and higher-placed nobles.

She had known! It is possible. Anna's heart surged at the thought. *Might it be so with me?*

Her mind was not through playing devil's advocate, however, conjuring up myriad reservations and fears. Maybe Jan Stelnicki is less than sincere, she thought. Maybe he is merely taking advantage of his looks and charm. To what end? Perhaps he has long been skilled in the arts of seduction. Perhaps it is only his ego....

But there was something deeper—some mysterious link—which attracted Anna and gave profound meaning to what seemed a happenstance encounter, a link that the blacksmith of the gods, Hephaestos himself, might have forged.

Anna sat, her eyes alert now, suddenly aware that the meadow about her teemed with color and movement and warmth and life. This experience of intense attraction she savored for the first time in her life. She drank it in like a fine French wine and it lifted both her body and mind to a strangely ethereal plane.

Rainless clouds came and went. The sun slowly moved over her. Anna stood at last, and the movement stirred the little sparrow from its perch. With purposeful steps she set out in the direction of the Gronski home.

Perhaps she was to have a future, after all. If the endings of myths might be changed, why not the ending to *her* story?

A gusty wind began to blow, catching the folds of her black skirt as it might a sail, pushing her along.

Anna laughed to herself as she broke into a run. She was thinking about his expression that Time was the world's landlord. She would conscript Time as friend rather than foe. "After all," she said aloud, "it will take time to learn how to ride a horse!"

2

HERE, AT HAWTHORN HOUSE, THE Gronski manor home, no one would forbid her to ride. Not like at home. Anna went directly to her bedchamber on the second floor. After washing and changing for supper, she walked to the massive old dresser and tugged at the bottom drawer. She lifted from it a carved wooden box with delicate inlay, a work of art fashioned by the artisans of the Tatra Mountains. Carefully, she placed it on the dresser top and lifted the lid.

Even away from the window, the translucent object shone brightly against the red velvet lining. Anna removed it from the box and placed it on the black marble. She turned it first this way, then that way, somehow dissatisfied. It was only just before her mother died that she had learned its secret. How strange that this beautiful but lifeless object kept her from riding horses. The sight of the dove had never failed to please her, yet the familiar serenity was absent today.

She had told Jan Stelnicki that she could ride. She had never lied before and found it unsettling. No good could come of it.

No matter, she resolved after some moments, Zofia will teach me how. And one day I *shall* go riding with Jan.

It was the first time she had thought of the stranger on a first-name basis. She looked up into the mirror to find her expression an odd combination of surprise and pleasure, as if in his absence some intimacy had been established between them.

She left the crystal dove on the dresser, certain that the maid would not dare touch it, and went downstairs to seek out Zofia.

Anna found her cousin sitting with her mother in the small parlor that led to the Count and Countess' antechamber and bedroom. Her buoyancy would not allow her to sit. Thoughtlessly and with a childlike abandon, she poured out the news of the meeting with Lord Jan Stelnicki. Zofia expressed the keenest interest, and Anna forgot for the moment that Countess Stella Gronska was even present. When the story was told, however, Anna saw that her aunt's face had bled to white and the expressive brown eyes widened now in horror. "Do you mean, Anna, that you met Jan Stelnicki in some *field*? You were *alone*?"

"No," Zofia joked before Anna could reply, "Anna told you: Jan was there. Well, cousin, what do you think? Is he not handsome?"

"Oh, yes," Anna replied softly, "and charming."

"And one day," Zofia said, "he will be Count Jan Stelnicki,"

"Count or not, his behavior is unheard of," the countess protested. "The boldness! There was no introduction and no chaperone. And he had not the decency to wear a hat."

"Oh, Mother," Zofia said, "don't excite yourself so. You'll bring on your heart palpitations. This is a new day."

"That I should live to see it!"

A maid appeared now to announce supper.

Anna had no appetite; she was suddenly as spiritless as a willow tree jilted by the breeze. At her heart's core, she herself had thought the meeting improper. Why had she not, then, anticipated her aunt's response? How stupidly impulsive to blurt out everything as she had! What a little fool I am, she thought. I must learn to think before I speak.

Walking to the countess' chair, Anna knelt and reached out to touch her hand. "Oh, please don't hold his forwardness against him, Aunt. He approached me only because from the distance he thought me to be Zofia."

"And where was I?" Zofia intoned. "If only I had known the fields were ripe with men!"

"Zofia!"

Zofia pulled a face. "You are too serious, Mother!"

"Not as serious as your father should he hear such scandalous talk." The countess took Anna's hand in hers and softened her tone. "Perhaps you do not realize the impropriety of such an occurrence, my child. In any event, your parents would not have approved, Anna. Jan Stelnicki, though a good friend and neighbor, is not a Catholic but an adherent to the Arian heresy."

"His *father* is an Arian, Mother," Zofia said. "Jan has little interest in religion."

The Countess Gronska's lips tightened like a purse drawn closed. "The difference between a heretic and a heathen is thin, Zofia, and one I will not argue." She stood abruptly, drawing Anna also to her feet. "We will go into supper now." Although she had to look up into Anna's face, there was no questioning the older woman's resolve. "Anna Maria, I must forbid you to venture beyond the outer buildings on your own. Be certain that not a word of this—this *meeting*—reaches your uncle's ears. He's called men out to duel over less. And understand me well, Anna: under no circumstances are you to see Jan Stelnicki again."

For all appearances, supper was cordial. Anna conversed with her aunt, uncle, and cousin, answering questions, smiling and even laughing a little. But her mind and emotions were working on a different level. She remembered a baby bird with a broken wing she had once found. Her father made for it a little splint, and Anna lovingly nursed it, anticipating the day it would experience its first flight. But one morning she discovered that despite their efforts and its own tiny will to live, it had died during the night.

By the time supper was finished, Anna was, as she had been so many years before, inconsolable.

3

ZOFIA SAT AT HER WHITE French vanity table with its painted design, absently running the hairbrush through her dark, lustrous hair. She had removed a mask of makeup, so that her expression was stark in its seriousness. She sighed deeply at her reflection. There was nothing to do but confront Anna and put an end to her childish infatuation.

But how to handle it? She continued to brush, staring, as if entranced by her own reflection. Her mind struck two options. She might douse Anna's interest by merely supporting her mother's opinion regarding Jan's religion, or lack of it. Anna was too simple and timid a soul to go against the whole family.

Or she could tell Anna the truth: that she had her own designs on Jan Stelnicki. Doing so, however, meant problems. She wondered if she should chance Anna's violating the confidence. If Zofia's parents found out, they would be furious with her. And her intentions would be put to a certain end.

The almond-shaped black eyes stared into the mirror, searching. She could not escape the question. Did *she* love Jan? She cocked her head, considering. He was certainly breathtakingly handsome and every sinew held charm. Their mutual attraction was undeniable. In the few months that he had been back from Paris, they had met secretly several times. But two weeks ago—at their last meeting before Zofia accompanied her parents to collect Anna at Sochaczew—she had made a serious miscalculation that put their romance in jeopardy. However, if she had nothing else, she had faith in herself and was certain that her beauty and finesse could—would!—win him back.

Her eyes peered into the mirror, as if into her soul. *Do I love him?* She asked herself this question now because, whether or not she did love him, she might very well have to tell Anna that she did. And if it were to be a lie... well, she would have to be prepared. She continued to stare, and, ultimately, she was honest with herself: no, she did not think she loved him. The truth was, he fit into her plans. He was going to be of invaluable service to her. His looks and charms were merely dividends.

She was not about to sign him over to Anna. It was too bad, but she would have to lie and scuttle from the start her cousin's hopes for romance with Jan. Zofia put her mind to work. She knew from experience that for lies to work effectively, every option, every possibility, must be considered in advance. She would be careful. There must be no blunder.

Still, she felt the pressure of the clock. At Christmas, she was expected to marry a man she had never met, someone to whom her parents had promised her when she was only an infant.

Zofia's blood rose at the thought.

The world was changing—but too late for her parents. They, especially her father, would not relent unless circumstances somehow forced them to do so.

But she could be stubborn, too. And clever. She was not about to sacrifice her youth and vitality to a life of formality with some crushing bore.

I will not.

Jan was her ticket out of a life of narrow convention. Her plan was to tell her parents of their relationship once the affair was consummated. If they chose not to cancel the long-standing engagement, she would tell her betrothed herself. But what if he were some spineless creature who didn't care that she hadn't saved herself for the bridal chamber? It would be just her luck. What then? If necessary, she would go so far as to claim to be in a family way. As for marriage with Jan, perhaps she would agree to it in a few years. She doubted she could find a better match. Yes, she might love him one day. For now, she longed for freedom, not marriage. She took seriously the jest that one should live wildly for three years before marrying. She didn't want to play the age-old roles of wife, mother, grandmother—not before she had lived and enjoyed her life. These years were golden ducats to be spent on pleasure.

Her own parents were conspiring to rob her of her youth. She felt a fierce shiver course through her at the thought of having to live out the obligation. *I might as well be dead.*

Zofia's thoughts came back to her cousin. She sincerely regretted Anna's peculiar part in this. She liked Anna. It was just that her cousin had unwittingly stepped between two powers greater than herself. No doubt Jan was being his polite and ingratiating self, but he could harbor no real interest in the girl. It was ridiculous. In her innocence, Anna had misinterpreted his attention, pure and simple.

Oh, the braided, wide-eyed Anna was pretty in her own childlike way, but Zofia had long been aware of her own dark beauty and was unused to any serious competition. At gatherings in the country as well as in the city, she was always the sole focus of attention, attracting men like insects to a flame. Others much more beautiful than Anna had been unable to steal the light from Zofia. No, she decided, the girl posed no real threat.

Zofia was certain that for Anna's part, it was just a silly infatuation, no doubt her first. She would let her country cousin down as easily as possible. She will get over it, she mused, for there would be no choice in the matter.

A timid tapping came at the door. Zofia opened it to find the maid's daughter standing there, her face pale, her words garbled.

"What is it?" Zofia demanded. "Did he write? Did he give you a message? Speak up!"

The frightened thirteen-year-old Marcelina was but a mouse trapped by an owl.

Zofia grasped her by the wrist and pulled her into her room, shutting the door behind her. "Now tell me what happened!"

The girl's eyes were gray discs of fear. "He—he returned your letter, my lady." Her hand reached into her apron pocket.

"He didn't read it?"

She shook her head.

Zofia struck the girl hard across her mouth. "Answer me!"

"No, he would not read it, my lady," Marcelina wailed as she handed the sealed envelope to Zofia. The tears were coming now and blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. "He asked... he asked that you please... you please—"

"Yes?" Zofia demanded. She wanted to strike the girl again but held back. "What did he ask?"

The girl steeled herself. "That you not write to him again."

Zofia snatched the letter and stared dumbly at it while the shock passed over her in galvanizing waves.

Marcelina, expecting to be struck again, began to shake and sob.

It took Zofia a moment to recoup her presence of mind. "All right, all right, stop it, Marcelina. Stop it, I say! Take this kerchief and wipe your mouth and eyes. You can go now."

The girl turned to leave.

Zofia again locked onto the girl's wrist. "You know not to say anything about this, don't you? I swear, Marcelina, if you do I'll see that my father puts your whole family out. Without a day's notice. Do you understand?"

The girl stared in mute despair.

Zofia took her by the shoulders and shook her. "Do you understand?" she demanded. Her long nails cut into the girl's flesh.

Marcelina managed a nod and a whisper. "Oui, Mademoiselle."

"Good." Zofia composed herself now, even managing a smile. "Your accent is improving. Wait now, let me get you one of my ribbons for your hair. I know how you like them."

Zofia fumbled through her vanity drawer, but by the time she turned around with the red ribbon, the girl had fled.

Zofia sank into her chair. Was it possible that he had sent back her letter without even reading it? Jan Stelnicki had rejected her.

Rejection. The sensation was a new one for Zofia and one she didn't like. How can this be? she wondered. Her plans were collapsing before they could be implemented.

What was she to do? Her mind reeled as she searched for an answer.

Some minutes passed. At last, her hand closed into a fist and crumpled the letter, the long, polished nails coming together. Zofia was not one to send up the white flag on the first volley. She would *do* something. But what? She just needed a little more time to think out her next move. Things had been going well enough. She and Jan had been getting more and more intimate through their meetings in the forest. Although he played the gentleman, holding his passion in check, she was certain that he loved her.

She thought back to that last meeting. It had proven a disaster. She had lost

patience with his reserve in making love. She was, she realized now, too anxious in securing this physical commitment. Her preoccupation with the timetable for marriage that her parents had set made her so.... And his code of behavior was scarcely more modern than that of courtly love in the old French legends. He worried over her honor, he said.

If only he knew.

It was on this occasion that Zofia took the initiative in their too-innocent lovemaking, her mouth returning his kiss with undiluted intensity, her hands working at his sash. Jan was shocked by her aggressiveness, shocked and inexplicably angry. They argued. It was a major blunder on her part, of course. Her forwardness had served only to smother the desire she knew burned within him. Their parting—just before the Gronskis traveled to Sochaczew—was unresolved and unhappy. But she was certain that his reaction was an eruption of male pride, a pride of the moment that would settle in the ensuing weeks.

Evidently, it had not lessened. Zofia had sorely misjudged him. Her mind came back to the present, her eyes focusing on the sealed envelope. Why had he not even read her letter? Angrily, she tore it into little pieces.

She sat quietly seething for several minutes. Might there be something more to his behavior? she wondered. Was it her planned marriage that put him off? He had known of her long-standing engagement although she had told him of her intention to refuse it at the proper time. Was he afraid of her father? Her fiancé?—Or was it possible that he did not care enough for her?

She dismissed the last thought immediately. He *did* love her: she well knew when she made a conquest.

So what was this ploy of his? How would she manage to see him? She had learned that she could not be too assertive. But how could she *do* something while at the same time appear not to be taking the initiative?

Further, this now complicated what she would tell Anna.

Anna! Zofia suddenly sat forward in her chair. Of course! Her eyes widened at their own reflection. Why hadn't she seen it immediately? It was exactly what she would do were she in his place. It was so transparent!

Jan is using Anna to make me jealous!

What interest could he possibly have in a rustic *girl*? Anna with her green eyes, braided hair, enthusiasm, and naiveté! It was a silly ruse, nothing more.

She smiled at her reflection. Well, let him proceed with his plan—she had underrated him, after all. It will serve him right when it backfires, she thought.

Zofia determined her course of action: she would send no more letters, admit no interest. Her lack of initiative would now bring him back to her. Her confidence, a longtime companion, was restored to her. Jan would come begging.

And she would let him beg. She would relish every moment of it.

No, she would not tell Anna of her own involvement with Stelnicki. On the contrary, she would *encourage* her, just for fun. The girl's simplicity would be her undoing; why, once her mourning was over, she would probably revert

to wearing her village costume. Jan's boredom with Anna would speed his steps back to Zofia. She laughed aloud, studying her reflection as it seemed to join her in her mirth.

She still had until December before her time would run out. At Christmas her parents were to execute their plan to marry her off. If the wedding were to take place, it would truly be, she darkly mused, my execution. No, I will beat them at their game and Stelnicki at his, and if Anna steps in the way, well, God help her!



Zofia knocked and entered Anna's room without waiting for permission. "Hello, dearest."

"Hello." Anna sat at a small French writing desk.

"Writing poetry?"

"No," Anna laughed. "I keep a journal sometimes."

"A diary? What a wonderful idea! *I* should keep one." Zofia smiled wickedly. "My guess is that you're writing of Jan Stelnicki?"

Anna blushed.

"I thought so!" Zofia put her hands on her hips.

"What?"

"Oh, don't be coy! Or is it shyness that I detect? Well, that will get you nowhere. Were you taken by him, or not? Just try to deny it, I dare you."

"You can be cruel, Zofia," Anna said, clearly feigning disinterest. "What difference can it make anyway? I'm not likely to see him again."

"You mean Mother's interdict?" Zofia walked mincingly into the room. "I wouldn't let that worry you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that a resourceful girl like yourself can certainly manage a little flirtation on the quiet."

"I should not like to go against your mother."

"She needn't know. Anna, dearest, a year from now you will be of age and managing your own estate. What will it matter then? You are only young once."

"How old is Jan?"

"Too old for you!"

"Really? Do you think so?"

"Really?" Zofia mimicked, turning to her cousin with an exaggerated expression. "Do you think so?"

"Zofia, please!"

"He's twenty-five." Her mouth curled upward as she studied Anna, then broke into a broad, knowing smile. "Why, you *are* smitten! Aren't you? He must've been in a very charming mood, indeed. He can be most irresistible when he chooses. But be careful, my darling. His moods are as changeable as the weather. But today I can see that he was a Don Juan!"

Color and excitement pulsed in Anna's cheeks. "I suppose that every girl must be entranced by him. Aren't you, Zofia?"

"Me? No!"

"Is it his age?"

"Hardly. I was joking about the age difference, you goose. Why, I've already had admirers older than Jan. He and I are but friends. Oh, I admit him to be the handsomest of men, but my taste runs, shall we say, wider." Zofia's laugh was sharp and naughty. She was enjoying shocking her cousin. "Why settle for a rose when all the flowers in the garden are yours for the picking?"

"You're so beautiful, Zofia. I imagine that you must have many suitors."

"Too few here in the country, let me tell you. Ah! but in Warsaw! Well, you would be surprised, I expect. As would my parents. Oh, they are a problem!"

Zofia began to pace. "Secrecy is impossible in the country, but in the city... well, there are ways. Sooner or later, though, I must confront them. Oh, Anna, they expect me to marry some baron's son whom I've never met. It is a union promised by the families years ago, when I was a child. Can you imagine? And he doesn't even receive his title and property until the old baron is cold in his grave." Zofia turned back to Anna and let out a great sigh. "The old ways are dead but do my parents know it?"

"Perhaps you'll find that you can love him. He may be handsome and noble."

"Like your Don Juan?" she scoffed. "You're a hopeless optimist, Anna. I don't know how we shall ever get along." Zofia's eyes focused now on the glass bird and she moved immediately to it. "Why, Anna, what is this figurine? It's a dove! Is it crystal?"

"Yes. I received it for my fifth name day." Anna stood now, clearly afraid for the safety of the glass treasure. "Papa took me to Warsaw to pick out a doll with glass eyes and real hair, but I fell in love with the crystal bird. Mama had a fit when she saw it."

In a flash Zofia scooped it off the dresser and held it to the candlelight, turning it this way and that. "Why it's lovely, the way the light plays through it." She sensed Anna hovering behind her. "Don't worry, dearest, I sha'n't drop it."

"I found out only recently that in return for my keeping the dove Mama made Papa promise never to teach me how to ride."

Zofia turned to face her cousin. "Why would she do that?"

"Because I was the only child, she was forever worried about my health. If any of the other expectancies had gone to term, I don't think she would have been quite so protective."

"I dare say you'll come out of your shell soon enough. And you can start with Jan Stelnicki!"

"Zofia!" Anna gasped.

"Oh, don't play the tepid heroine of one of your books."

"You don't mean to say I should go against your parents?"

"Of course! As long as you do it secretly." She carefully returned the dove to the dresser top. "I'm off to bed, darling."

“Zofia?”

She turned again to Anna. “Yes?”

Anna advanced a few steps. “Will you teach me to ride?”

Zofia’s eyes narrowed in laughing appraisal. “Why, Ania, you are as transparent as your glass bird! You want to go riding with Jan, of course. Oh, don’t fret, I shall teach you.” She hugged her cousin. “I love it! This may be your first romance.”

“I... I don’t know how I shall manage it.”

Zofia suddenly held Anna at arms’ length. “Do you mean to tell me that you never once tried to outwit your parents? You *never* rode a horse?”

“Oh, I thought about it. When words wouldn’t work on them... well, on Mother mostly... I planned a hundred schemes. I even bribed a villager to teach me.”

“And?”

Anna dropped her eyes. “I couldn’t go through with it.”

“Oh, Anna! Out of fear—or integrity?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps it was a mix of the two.”

Zofia released her cousin. “You may have grown up sheltered, Anna Maria Berezowska, but it is I who would wish to be in your shoes today. You have your title already, and in less than a year you will be in sole control of your life. And I? I’m likely to be an old married woman with the best part of my life behind me.”

“Oh, Zofia, you exaggerate. Somehow I can’t help but feel that however it turns out, you’ll have your way in the matter.”

Zofia was caught for a moment by the sincerity in Anna’s green eyes. Then she threw her head back and laughed. “Why, my dear cousin, I shouldn’t be a bit surprised.”

4

JAN REMAINED IN ANNA’S THOUGHTS. His laughing smile and piercing blue eyes haunted her like an angelic specter. Zofia’s words of encouragement dallied in her ears, too, prompting in Anna a boldness that made her dare to think she *should* see him again. Didn’t the goddess Jurata defy custom and law to meet with her fisherman?

Anna realized, however, that Aunt Stella was no minor problem. She had been adamant. And she was for the time being, after all, her guardian.

But for now Anna was secretly elated by Zofia’s assurance that *she* herself had no interest in Jan Stelnicki. Anna would find some way to deal with her aunt,

but if Zofia had expressed an interest in Jan, Anna would have been crushed. She would have stepped aside silently, not only out of a sense of honor, but also out of the belief that Zofia could not help but win any man she chooses.

Only weeks before when the Gronski family had come for her at her parents' estate in Sochaczew, Anna had been astounded by her cousin's metamorphosis. She remembered Zofia as a boyish, gangling girl whose constant complaint was that her older brother would not include her in his outdoor activities. She was spoiled even then and, invariably, Walter was made to look after and entertain his sister. Zofia had a certain inexplicable talent for dealing with her parents which Anna held in awe. Clever enough to realize that tantrums would not move the stalwart Gronskis, Zofia had honed to a fine perfection a kind of diplomacy which seldom failed.

Just five years later, Anna found her cousin a raven-haired, black-eyed woman of sophisticated beauty and bearing. No more did she allow anyone to call her by her diminutive, Zosia. As the carriage lurched and trundled on in the direction of Halicz, Anna's gaze was kept involuntarily glued to Zofia. Anna marvelled at—and envied, too—her cousin's great blossoming. Was it possible that Zofia was but eighteen, one year older than she?

Anna had never considered herself beautiful and certainly not the stunning creature that Zofia had become, but she thought that at times she could appear attractive. Her mother had told her that beauty is a beacon that emanates from within. And Anna would try to believe it, though sometimes failing to see past the irony that her mother was a great natural beauty.

Anna had grown to be as tall as most men, and her frame was at once sturdy and slender. "Your curves are still in evolution," her mother told her when Anna came to her with concern over her slenderness. "Be patient. You are now half-woman, half-child, Anna Maria. In a very short time you will attract your share of men."

Anna thought her hair her best feature. It had darkened slightly to a chestnut brown which in certain lights came alive with a reddish fire. At home she had worn it in the village fashion: in two thick braids that extended almost to her waist, but during this period of mourning she had taken to winding a single braid about her head. It was her emerald eyes, however, that most people commented upon, deeply set as they were and strikingly flecked with amber.

Anna now recognized in her cousin Zofia the same great dark beauty of her own mother. Zofia was perhaps even more striking. She sighed with relief: If Zofia *had been* attracted to Jan Stelnicki, she feared, all would have been lost.

For several days Anna stayed within the boundaries that her aunt had set, becoming acquainted with what the servants called *the great house*, which rested majestically on a bluff above the River Dniestr. Like her own home at Sochaczew and countless manor homes of the minor nobility that were the very soul of Poland, it was fronted by a covered porch with two sturdy columns of white-washed stone, a porch that promised Polish hospitality. The many rooms and niceties of the limestone home impressed Anna, but it was that it had a

third floor replete with hooded windows jutting from the evergreen-shingled roof that made her think it as elegant as any city mansion. Outside, she took winding paths as she investigated flower gardens, orchards, a pond, the farm manager's cottage, and countless outer buildings.

The majority of Count Leo Gronski's multiple tracts of land were let to peasant families Anna never met, but she did come to know the extended family that ran the Gronski farm and household. One day she came upon Katarzyna and Marcelina, daughters of the farm manager, hard at work in the vegetable garden. She gave greeting and they curtsied nicely, but eyed her strangely as she made her way through rows of beetroot, peppers, cabbage, and onions.

At home Anna had enjoyed cultivating her own patch and so took an interest in one so large and varied. When she paused to comment on the variety of an onion, the girls stared, wide-eyed. It was unthinkable that a lady, a countess, should know about or concern herself with such things.

She could read it in their faces: Lady Zofia would never be found in a vegetable garden.

Anna was amused at their reaction but unashamed of her more rustic background. Her father had taught her to touch, to smell, to love and work the land. "If a Pole holds nothing more than his own patch of land," he would say, "he is a wealthy man." Still, Anna realized that there would be talk, and not wishing to irritate the Countess Stella, she declined to associate with the girls in the following days, hoping that the whisperings did not reach her aunt's ears.

By the end of the week, Anna had fully explored the interior and exterior of the house. While she hoped that such activity would assuage the sadness of her parents' loss, she knew at her core that she was trying to counter the strange and powerful force that ran through her like a river. Her thoughts were drawn, almost unwillingly, toward the vague yet mighty notions of a girl's heart—and toward Jan Stelnicki.

Defying her aunt, she found herself in the meadow where she had met him. Aimlessly, she moved among the wildflowers and tall grasses, lost deep within herself.

He wasn't there, of course. Not that she truly thought he would be. Yet, just as the compass needle points north, she was drawn to that spot.

She lost track of time. She hadn't been listening to the birds, or she would have noticed when they suddenly ceased their chatter. A storm was on the rise.

A clap of thunder shook her from her trance. The sky already loomed black with rain clouds. As Anna picked up her dark skirts to flee the meadow, large drops—cold and stinging—awoke in her a sense of foolishness for her girlish hopes.

She ran now against the wet wind. The loss of my parents and my unsteady mind have done this, she thought. I am behaving like a fool, sneaking behind my aunt's back, allowing a single meeting with a man to control me so. Tonight at supper I will ask Aunt Stella if I may return home.

Anna was soaked to her undershift when she noiselessly entered the house through a side door, breathless that she might be discovered.

A sharp voice startled her immediately: "And where have you been?"

It was Zofia.

Anna was struck dumb.

"You are quite a sight, Anna!"

"I... I was walking." She sniffled. "I got caught in the storm."

"Obviously. Mother was looking for you."

"She didn't go out to look, did she?" Anna tried to disguise the panic she felt welling up in her.

"No, she sent me—and I must say that I searched every inch of the *grounds*."

"Oh." Anna chose now to face her humiliation. "Well, I might as well tell you that I was—"

"I told her, dearest cousin," Zofia interrupted, "that you were resting in your room, that you had a bit of a headache." She stared past her fine straight nose with knowing, laughing eyes. "Now, do go get yourself dried off, for if your headache leads to a death of pneumonia I shall be hard pressed to explain it."

Returning to her room, Anna collapsed onto her bed in a state of exhaustion. She felt as if her execution had been stayed, and in relief silently vowed to keep away from the meadow.

It was at supper, however, that the Countess Stella herself gave Anna's thoughts a second shaking. "You are so quiet tonight, my dear," her aunt said, peering solicitously at her over dessert. "Is it the headache?"

Anna felt her throat tighten. What was she to say? She was caught up in a lie and could only regret her disobedience.

"Anna's tired, Mother," Zofia said, coming to her rescue in a heartbeat. "And still so sad." She lifted a spoonful of her plum dumpling to full lips which smiled secretly at Anna.

Anna stared for the moment at her cousin's honeyed innocence, taking in the mischief that danced in the dark eyes, then she nervously turned her gaze to her own dessert, which sat untouched before her.

"You have taken the deaths so very hard, child," the countess said. "It is a shame that death must so affect the young. Well, mourning will soon be over. But you need to begin, even now, to focus your thoughts on other things. You are young and you must get back to the business of being young. My sister was especially fond of some stoical saying about the past. Do you remember it, Anna Maria?"

"Yes, Aunt Stella."

The musical voice of Anna's mother played vividly in her memory. "She would say that what is past, one cannot change, so each backward glance is a bit of the present slipping away."

"Yes," the countess exclaimed. "That is it precisely!"

Anna could only think how in the last days of her mother's life that saying

was merely a saying. In the end, her mother had not been able to prevent herself from letting the past undo her.

For Anna, though, her mother's advice dovetailed now with her father's: "*Sometimes you must put yourself in the way of destiny.*"

5

THE WALK IN THE MEADOW became for Anna a daily event. For several days, it was a solitary experience.

When she had begun to think that she would never meet him there again, that his very existence was a trick of her imagination, he appeared. This time she had seen him in the distance, and as he hastened his horse in her direction, she found her heart involuntarily quickening.

"Good afternoon, Lady Anna," he said, bringing his horse to a halt.

"Good afternoon, Lord Stelnicki," she replied, unable to attempt a smile as forward as his.

"Jan—remember?"

"Yes."

"Still deep in thought?"

"Not so very."

"Good!" He swung down gracefully from his horse.

To counter the increase of some foreign excitement that ran beneath her surface, Anna attempted conversation. "I thought that your harvesting would still be underway."

"Oh, it is."

"And yet you can go riding?"

"My men are hardworking and trustworthy." He tied his horse to a low-hanging branch.

"Is it your wheat?"

"Yes."

"What other crops do you cultivate... Jan?"

He smiled. "Barley and oats."

"The rotational grains."

His eyes widened beneath the raised brows, so blond as to be almost invisible.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You surprise me."

"That I should know about such things?" Anna laughed, tilting her head to the side. "Well, I expect you'd be quite astonished if I told you I had a

knowledge of the planting, maintenance, and yield of numerous fruits and vegetables—as well as tobacco.”

“Indeed!” His interest was piqued. “Traditionally our peasants have been left to farm the fruits and vegetables—their mainstays are beetroot and potatoes—so my knowledge is limited. And as for tobacco, I’m at a complete loss! How have you come by this?”

“I’ve learned about the land from my father. I have my own little garden, too.” The memories called up were sudden and painful and Anna fought to keep the tears away. “In time I will return to see to the management of my estate.”

Jan’s soft tone bespoke his compassion. “It’s near Warsaw, isn’t it?”

“Just a morning’s ride to the west.”

“Anna, would you care to sit for a while in the shade of the oak? Even with your bonnet, you’re likely to burn in this sun.”

“I shouldn’t be staying away from the house for very long.”

“Not for long. But you could squander a few minutes on a rogue such as I.” The blue pools that were his eyes seemed to plead.

Anna laughed. “A few, then.” That he called himself a rogue, an appellation she had privately given him at their last meeting, gave depth to her laugh.

On the dry, overgrown grass, Jan spread out his coat and helped Anna to sit. She watched him as he moved effortlessly into a cross-legged position before her. Again, defying convention, he had worn no hat. His shirt was fine-woven cotton, loose-sleeved, with a ruff at the neck. His trousers were brown, a lighter shade than the coat. The calf-high, reddish-brown boots were of an excellent leather, supple and shining.

“What is your family name, Anna? You must have thought me insolent in the manner I addressed you last week, but you see, I didn’t know it. It’s not Gronski, is it?”

“No. My mother and Aunt Stella were sisters, though my mother was the younger by many years. My father’s name was Berezowski—Samuel Berezowski.”

Jan alluded to the meaning of her surname’s root—birch—telling her how beautiful the tree is, so tall and white, so graceful, strong, and healthy. It was, he said, a fitting name for her.

Anna blushed. “My father would say fitting because I was always deserving of a thrashing with a birch rod.”

Jan’s laughter was explosive. “He never did!”

“No,” she laughed. “Not that he didn’t want to thrash me on occasion.”

“Lady Anna Maria Berezowska—it is a fine name.”

“Thank you.” Anna smiled, leaned forward, and nodded her head, giving from her seat a mock curtsy.

Jan’s brow furrowed slightly now and Anna saw him serious for the first time. But she was unprepared for his next question.

“How is it that your parents died, Anna, one so close upon the other?”

Anna stared mutely for a moment, then averted her eyes.

“Forgive me,” he said, “it was stupid of me to have brought up the subject.”

Anna gave a slight wave. "There is no need to apologize."

"Oh, but there is. I am a colossal idiot."

"No, I'm silly, I suppose, but it's as if there were some part of me that would block it out... as if their deaths had never happened." Anna could not bring herself to face him. She continued: "Sometimes I find myself thinking that I am merely on holiday here at Halicz and that at the end of September I'll return to Sochaczew, to my home and parents. Then my heart remembers and I wonder: Is this the sign of a girl's stupidity... or a disordered mind?"

"It is neither. The attempt to put pain outside of the heart is only human, Anna." He leaned very close to her then, lifted his forefinger to her chin and slowly turned her head so that her eyes could not escape his. His voice was as light as his touch, yet somehow firm and steady. "But you must be careful not to delude yourself. To speak of their deaths is to accept. Only when there is this acceptance can the healing begin."

Other than her father, Anna had never heard a man speak with such gentleness. Somewhere deep within her she felt a dam crumbling and giving way. A current of affection for this man, not merely attraction, rushed through her.

"Jan," she said, calling on all of her reserve, "my father was murdered."

He blinked in surprise. "Murdered?"

Anna nodded. "He had only just turned forty." Tears started to bead in her eyes.

"There, Anna, you don't have to talk about it."

She managed to hold her tears in check. "I'm fine. You're right. Perhaps I *should* talk about it."

"You loved him very much."

"One couldn't help but love him. He was more at ease roaming the fields on his white stallion than in making idle conversation in the castles of the magnates. I think it was because he was so close to the land that he treated his peasants so well. He saw them as belonging more to the land than to himself. He often said it was merely fate and a little courage that prompted his great-grandfather to ride with King Jan Sobieski against the Turks a hundred years ago. That was when the family was declared noble and granted our estate on the River Vistula."

Anna paused, summoning the strength to continue. "Papa's peasants loved him.... Except for Feliks Paduch, a drunk and ne'er-do-well who stole anything left unattended for two ticks of the clock." She felt the taste of bitterness rising from her heart's center. "Had Papa evicted him years before as he so often threatened, he would still be alive."

"Paduch killed him?"

Anna nodded. "He was caught, too, but managed to escape the fool magistrate before he was sentenced. He has sworn to see my father's lineage end with me."

Jan's mouth dropped open slightly. "Is that why Count Gronski insisted you live with them for a year?"

"Partially, I suppose."

"And your mother?"

"As much as she loved my father, he remained an enigma to her to the last." Anna told him then of the circumstances preceding the deaths of her mother and infant brother.

"Oh, I am so sorry, Anna. My God, you've lost your entire family."

"Yes."

An awkward silence ensued. Neither wanted to protract the conversation. Anna watched as two birds flew from the branches overhead and circled out over the meadow.

It was Jan who broke the quiet. "More and more, men like this Feliks Paduch are taking such action, rising above their station. Such discontent can be traced, I suspect, to the peasants' revolt in France."

"Really?" Anna took the moment to surreptitiously push a tear from her eye. "You don't think such a thing could happen here, do you?"

"I would hope not. Our peasants are much better off than the wretched poor in France. They have some just grievances, to be certain, but our new Constitution is a decided advancement for them, as well as for the middle classes." The blond brows came together as one now in an expression of deep concern. "However, should Poland fall to anarchy, the blame must fall squarely on the nobility."

"On the nobility?"

Jan nodded. "Yes, there are a good many nobles, including some of the magnates, who are opposed to relinquishing any rights to the peasants and middle classes, and they swear that they will see the Third of May Constitution rescinded."

Anna's widening eyes reflected her bewilderment. "But it was passed only this year."

"Yes, and should we overthrow it, we would be asking for the same desserts that are even now being delivered up to the French nobility on the *guillotine*."

Anna sat quietly, stunned as much by what he was saying as by the intensity of his political thoughts. There were, she realized, several sides to the incorrigible cavalier of the first meeting. Now she ventured to ask of *his* family: "Where does your father stand?"

"Squarely behind the Constitution." A pride came into the musical voice. "He worked hard behind the scenes for it. But he is not a well man. I worry about him." He paused for a moment. "Anyway, this is to be a new life for you, Anna. It will be a fine one!"

"I hope so."

"You... you don't worry about the curse that Paduch fellow made?"

"No... no, I don't. I put that down to drunken swagger."

"I'm certain that that's all it was. Well, then, we must go riding soon—once your mourning is put off, of course. I would so enjoy showing you the countryside."

Though his enthusiasm held her, she felt her face flush hot with embarrassment. All her life she wished she could control the telltale reaction.

"What is it?" he asked, suddenly concerned.

Resigned, she inhaled, then blurted out the admission: "Lord Stelnicki, I cannot ride!"

It took a moment for realization to overcome puzzlement, but then he began to laugh, with great relish.

Anna's uncertain reaction now was to half-heartedly join in his mirth while trying to explain. "Papa had agreed to teach me, but Mama strictly forbade it. She worried over my safety. But Zofia has started to tutor me at riding! We go out mornings. It's an incredible feeling—like that of a bird soaring! I'm afraid I'm not very good at it, though. And I'm more than a little sore, too."

"I'll wager that you are!" Jan was trying, unsuccessfully, to control his laughter. "I'm sorry to laugh. Forgive me. Actually you gave me quite a fright when you became so serious. I thought for a moment that you were going to tell me you are already... engaged."

"What? Oh no, no."

"Good. And don't worry. You'll win your horse over, I'm sure, as you must have done your cousin... I mean to get Zofia out and about in the *morning*."

He knew Zofia well enough, Anna thought. "Oh, it is *late morning*!"

The two fell to laughing again. Anna's amusement was genuine this time. Somehow she felt no guilt that it was at her cousin's expense.

"You'll be an expert before you know it." Jan placed his hand over Anna's. "And we shall take long, long rides." The texture of his voice thickened and he inclined his head toward hers.

Anna suddenly sobered, withdrawing her hand from his.

"What is it? What's wrong, Anna?"

"It's just that..." she paused, heart thumping. "Jan," she began again, "I am afraid that my aunt and uncle will not allow you to call."

He smiled as if in relief. "Of course, they will. We are the very best of neighbors."

"But... you see... you are not Catholic."

"Is that all?" He laughed.

His reaction stunned Anna. "You don't seem to understand what... what a great difference it *does* make... that you are not Catholic."

"Oh, it is true, I admit. My parents were of the Arian sect, though my father is more political now than religious. But I, myself, follow no religion."

"Lord Stelnicki," Anna said with an even preciseness, "that fact only serves to widen the chasm between us."

"Now, don't misunderstand me. I do believe in God. Look about us, Anna Maria. How could anyone with sight look and not believe? It's just that my God is with me here, in my heart, and all about us—in the meadow grass, in the fields of grain, in the flowers, in this old oak tree, and in the blue of the sky.

Mine is a personal God. I haven't followed any of the religions of the churches, though I do not *disbelieve* their doctrines. Do you understand?"

"I... I think so." In truth, it was a puzzle to her—and disconcerting.

"I'll speak to your uncle," he was saying. "If we cannot agree, I shall become a Catholic."

Anna's mouth fell slack. "Jan! Please do not make light of this."

"Oh, I'll joke as often as the next fellow, but believe me when I say that I am quite in earnest."

"You can't be! A religion is not to be put on like a cloak or a hat."

"Just because I don't wear a hat doesn't mean that I *can't* wear one!"

Anna stared at him as if he had suddenly started speaking Serbian.

"Now let me finish, Lady Anna. I would not be simply bowing to the custom of your religion. I'm certain that my God can be found in your church. You see, I believe that He can be found in *all* of the churches."

Jan was becoming more and more enigmatic. Was he serious? Did he truly mean to become a Catholic for her sake? And why was it that she seemed always to be questioning his sincerity?

"If your aunt and uncle will permit," he was saying, "will you allow me to call on you?"

"Oh, yes." The words fell from her lips before the thought was processed. Discretion then reclaimed her. "I... I should return to the house now, Jan."

"Will you be walking tomorrow afternoon, Anna?"

Anna smiled. "I may."

"Good! Do you know you have dimples when you smile slyly like that?" Jan helped her to her feet, then mounted his horse. "I'll see you here, then... unless you would care to practice your horsemanship now?"

"Thank you, no. I'll walk. Oh, and Jan," she joked, "do be sure not to mistake me this time for Zofia."

His lips curled in a devilish smile. "Now it is I who have a confession to make, Anna. I have never seen Zofia dressed in black—why if she were in mourning, I have no doubt that she would sidestep custom and appear in a delicious pink dress. So, you see, I knew full well who you were the other day—she had told me about your impending arrival."

He gave spur to his horse now and rode off.

Anna stood staring at the retreating figure, wondering what it was about this man that set her pulse running with the wind. But any doubts that this was the man whom she would love and wed dissipated like vapor at noon.



From her vantage point on the little hill above the meadow, Zofia had seen enough. Though she could not hear Jan and Anna, she was able to see the physical interactions and emotions play out on their faces as clearly as if they wore Greek masks.

She stood transfixed, her own emotions stirring a strange heat within her. Seeing was believing, but she could scarcely comprehend the tender scene she had just witnessed.

What was Jan up to? Anna had been correct: he *was* expressing his interest. And in no subtle way, either. Why? *Was* he interested in Anna? How deeply? Or was he trying, as Zofia suspected, to arouse her jealousy?

In frustration, Zofia struck her riding crop against the skirt of her dress. She knew her only course of action now was to let the little flirtation play out. It would come to nothing, she was certain. Still, she felt helpless, as if she were drowning. She didn't like it.

Zofia realized—with a jolt—that it was jealousy she felt. And she liked that less. *Did* she love Jan Stelnicki? Perhaps. Or perhaps she was reacting to the possibility of being the loser in this drama. A loser to a country innocent. She silently damned her cousin.

Zofia mounted her horse. Just for fun she had encouraged Anna in her attraction to Jan. Well, the game had turned dangerous, inciting the unforeseen, but Zofia became determined that any reversal of fortune not be hers. “Anna Maria Berezowska,” she whispered, her teeth scarcely parting, “You will come to rue the day you came to Halicz.”

6

ANNA ADAPTED TO LIFE AT Halicz. She had not known what to expect, for according to the terms of the Partition of 1772, some twenty years earlier, the city and Province of Halicz had fallen under the rule of Austria. However, she found Halicz essentially no different from her own town of Sochaczew, its citizens and their way of life no less Polish. The old culture survived and flourished under Austria's Leopold II.

But life's routine was very different for her now. At home she had assisted her mother and their servant Luisa in the management of the household, but here at Hawthorn House, the women sewed, read, and entertained, contributing relatively little to the real welfare of the home. For this, four servant women were designated to do all of the cooking and housework so that there was not the lightest of tasks for Countess Stella, Lady Zofia, or Anna.

Anna spent her mornings reading, and when Zofia arose—not much before noon—riding. Afternoons were spent with Jan. Countess Stella never questioned her whereabouts, and Anna suspected that Zofia made excuses on her behalf. She worried that she would be found out and that the rendezvous'

would be banned. How long could they be kept secret? Each day, too, Jan urged her to agree to a full day of riding.

The time spent with Jan was the highlight of her day. Whether walking in the meadow or sitting under the oak, the two seldom lacked a topic of conversation. As Anna spoke of her former life at Sochaczew, she realized she was coming to terms with her past. And as she listened to Jan talk of his thoughts and experiences, she was awed by his worldliness, intelligence, and humor.

At night, when Anna lay alone in her bed, her mind and heart were filled with thoughts of Jan Stelnicki. She came to hope that he loved her, a hope undermined at times with self-doubt. She was certain that his winning ways could bring him the woman of his choice: the richest, the most sophisticated, the most beautiful. Was it conceivable that he would one day propose to *her*?

On occasion, a certain intangible fear invaded her; later, she would put this dark foreboding down to the loss of everyone she had loved, but for now she fought it. Wasn't she deserving of some happiness? When a heart is in the full bloom of first love, destructive thought finds no welcome. And Anna was very much in love.



Anna saw Zofia waiting for her on the pillared porch.

"Walter is coming home, Anna!"

"How wonderful! It's been so many years that I wonder whether I'll recognize him. How old is he now?"

"Just twenty-two."

"And a soldier of fortune! You and your parents must be very proud and happy."

"I swear, you do have romantic notions, dearest. He's a mercenary in Catherine's military machine—an officer, true—but a mercenary just the same. He's as brash and incorrigible as ever, no doubt. We never did get along. Oh, don't look so puzzled."

Zofia hugged Anna to her. "If only I had had a sister like you, Ania. But his coming does at least mean some life in this dreary house, some entertaining, a party or two to while away these last dull days in the country. Oh! And then this fall I shall be able to show you Warsaw!"

"Zofia, I've been to the capital. Have you forgotten that Sochaczew is but a short distance away?"

"Ah! But have you been to the theatre? To concerts? To the opera? Royal receptions?"

Anna could only shake her head.

"Well," Zofia scoffed, "then you have not been to Warsaw!"

"It all sounds so sophisticated and exciting."

"And, my dear, absolutely everything is done in the French fashion. It's that way on the entire continent."

"Is it? Well, in the meantime, I shall be glad to see my cousin. And you will be, too, though you may not admit to it. When does Walter arrive?"

"Wednesday. And now for the real surprise!"

"What? What is it?"

Zofia's dark eyes twinkled as she held Anna in suspense.

"Oh, Zofia, tell me!"

Zofia spoke slowly to heighten the effect. "Mother has agreed that you put off your mourning on that day."

"Really?" Anna gasped. "But that is so very soon."

"I know and you can be certain it took some clever speeches on my part."

"But... do you think it proper?"

"It's every bit as proper as the way you spend your afternoons."

Anna was struck silent. Her face burnt with embarrassment.

"There, there. I only mean that it's wonderful, you little fool—nothing less. Walter was the perfect excuse. Oh, don't look like that! Now—I shall personally see to your apparel and toilette for the occasion. Come upstairs this minute and we shall select the dress!"

Anna hesitated. "Zofia?"

"Now you are not to feel guilty."

"No, it isn't that."

"What is it, then?"

"Today Jan made me promise to go riding on the very day after my mourning is finished. How can I keep that from your parents? I am not ready for a confrontation with them about Jan... not yet."

"Riding with Jan? The day after?" Zofia paused, her almond eyes narrowing into mere slits for a moment, then opening wide. "I know! What if I tell them I've arranged for a riding party, one that includes Walter and me?"

"Oh, that would be wonderful, really! In fact, I would prefer having the two of you along."

"It does sound like fun. Lutisha will pack a lunch basket. Let's set it for Thursday morning then."

"But do you think you can smooth it over with your parents... about Jan, I mean?"

Zofia shrugged. "What harm can there be in having him join our little riding party? It'll be perfectly innocent, darling."

"I hope so. I feel terrible about having disobeyed your mother."

"There is one thing, Anna."

"What?"

"I don't think you should tell Jan that Walter and I are to join you. At least not until Thursday morning."

"But why—"

"Just trust me, Ania. Now, come along. And don't fret so. I said that I would arrange it, didn't I?"



Countess Stella Gronska inspected the kitchen fireplace where a roast sizzled on the spit. "Is this being turned often enough?"

Old Lutisha rolled her eyes but answered in the French fashion in which all of the housemaids had been tutored. "Yes, Madame Gronska."

"And is it being basted enough?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Good. Everything must be perfection tonight." She walked quickly to the table near the great white ceramic stove used only for bread. "Marta, is this bread fresh? Not this morning's bread, that would never do."

Lutisha's daughter smiled indulgently. "It is still hot to the touch, Madame Gronska."

"So it is." The countess pulled a crust from a loaf of rye and tasted it. "Excellent! Without bread even meat has no flavor."

"Tis so," Lutisha laughed.

The countess finished her rounds of the kitchen. "Ah, I can see everything is in order, as I might have expected. I suppose I have only slowed the pace here, but it is over a year since my son has been home."

"A very long time," Lutisha said. "We are all glad to see Lord Walter again."

The countess checked the preparations in the dining room for the third time, then moved toward the west wing.

Walter had arrived in good spirits. He seemed happy. Proud of the work he was doing in Russia. The countess had her own thoughts about that, but what worried her now was how he would react to what she and Leo had to say concerning his future. He was hotheaded, as hotheaded as Leo. She would have to play peacemaker, no doubt, as in the old days.

The countess found her husband dressing for supper, buttoning his best shirt.

"How handsome you look, Leo!"

"For an old man, you mean?"

"I do not!"

"Damn, I'm all thumbs with these pearl buttons. Why must they make them so damn small?"

Moving to her husband, the countess assumed the task, as she had done a hundred times before. "You must take your complaint directly to the oysters," she laughed. "Tell them to make bigger pearls. Our children may be grown, Leo, but that doesn't make us old."

He grunted. "Nor does their growth mean that they are adults, Stella."

"You won't bring up at the table the subject of Walter's returning home, will you? Not at supper, not in front of Anna."

"No, I won't."

"And you won't drink too much?"

"No."

"And you won't encourage Walter to drink?"

"Walter doesn't need encouragement," the count laughed. "And you're nagging, my dear."

"I'm sorry.—Leo, what will you do if Walter does not come back to Halicz?"

"We've spoken of that, Stella."

"You don't truly mean to say that you could disown him?"

"I sincerely hope it does not come to that."

"But if it even comes to making the threat, must you reveal... you know... that which we have kept from him?"

"I'm not so sure it was a wise thing not to have told him years ago. He will have to know someday."

"Be that as it may, I fear telling him now. I fear his reaction." The countess thought for a moment. "And there is Zofia, too—There, finished!"

The count turned to look in the mirror. "Thank you, my dear."

"You could do it, too, had you the patience." From behind, the countess stared at her husband's reflection. "Leo, sometimes I feel as if she knows our secret."

"Zofia? Nonsense, how could she know? As long I have you here, will you help me with my sash?"

"She can be very sly at times," the countess said, taking in hand the brown and purple silk of Turkish design. "She's my own daughter, but she has a touch of the devil in her." The countess pulled the sash tightly about her husband's waist and secured it. "You know, I never know what she's thinking. Not like a mother should."

"Is there any way she *could* know about Walter?"

"Perhaps. A few months ago I found my secretary unlocked. I never leave it unlocked, Leo. And I found some old papers and letters askew. I didn't want to make an issue of it. I didn't want to believe it."

"Well, let it be," the count said, turning to his wife, "unless she should say something about it. She's a wild one, Stella. Always has been. I dare say marriage will calm her down in a hurry."

"Don't you think we should tell her about the arrival of the Grawlinski family?"

"No! That's one secret I plan to *keep* from her. I don't want to put up with her arguments should she find out. They will arrive *unexpectedly*, the marriage will take place, and that will be that. Are we ready?"

Leaving their bedchamber, they passed through their anteroom. "Tell me, Stella, how have we managed to raise two children who so thoroughly reject our values? A man should leave behind more than land and money."

"They are just young, Leo. Young beer is frothy. You've said so yourself."

The answer seemed to quiet her husband, but as they came to the dining

room, arm in arm, the countess could not empty herself of trepidation. Leo had patience in short supply. Walter, too, was unpredictable.



Anna drew in her breath as Zofia helped her with the hooking of her dress.

"Black is for dead things, darling," Zofia hissed into her ear. "When a flower dies, it turns black with decay, as do animals and men. Who, then, ever decreed that the living be made to wear such a non-color? Good riddance to your mourning! There. Now, turn around. Why, Anna, you look magnificent! Yellow isn't my color, but on you it looks divine."

"Really, Zofia?"

"Really, Zofia?" she mimicked, chuckling. "Believe me, it's a good thing that there is no suitor of mine downstairs for you to poach. Although there's to be a party on Saturday, and for that I think that I shall have to lock you in your room."

Anna gazed into the long mirror. Zofia's gown did, indeed, seem to transform her.

"Have you seen Walter?" Anna asked.

"Yes." Zofia's voice was flat. "Now, let's see, you scarcely need any rouge on your cheeks." She smiled wickedly. "Those walks in the meadow have given you a lovely bloom."

Anna fell speechless with embarrassment. She felt blood rising to her head.

"Just a little touch of red to your lips and some powder—"

"Oh, I've never worn anything on my face."

Zofia cut short her cousin's concern with a flick of her hand. "There's a season for everything and everyone, Anna. Doesn't the Bible say something to that effect? This is *our* season, cousin."

Anna acquiesced and found herself impressed by the results.

When the two were ready to descend the stairs, Anna put her hand on her cousin's arm, detaining her. "Zofia, have you mentioned the riding party to your parents?"

Zofia stared opaquely. "No, dear," she said simply, starting down the stairs.

Anna raced after her. "But I've told Jan. He'll be here at seven tomorrow morning."

"Oh, I'll bring it up tonight. It will sound quite spontaneous. Leave it to me."

Anna had no time to worry further. Walter was waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

"Ah, the years can work wonders! Is it really you, Anna?" Walter kissed her on either cheek, in the French vogue.

"It is I."

"The same little urchin who fell out of the willow tree?"

"Oh, how memory can be manipulated," Anna said, laughing. "I seem to remember being pushed."

"You were," Zofia drolly intoned. "Chivalry was not one of Walter's strong suits as a boy. If indeed you had any, Walter. Or should I say *have* any?"

Walter bowed dramatically. "We all change, Zosia. I would hope that our dear cousin does not bear a grudge."

"You can be certain *I* will bear a grudge if you continue to call me Zosia. My name is Zofia."

"The stories!" Anna cried, hoping to avert an argument. "Do you remember, Zofia, how at night Walter would frighten us out of our wits with his stories of blood and gore?"

"I do."

"Good news, then," Walter said. "My experiences in the army have added significantly to my bank of bloody tales. And these new additions, ladies, are grounded in realism."

"I'm certain of it," Anna laughed.

Walter and Anna chatted for a few minutes and were laughing as the three went in to supper. Zofia's usual effervescence was in short supply.

Anna and Zofia sat across from Walter. The Count and Countess, seated at either end of the great table, seemed delighted to have their little family reunited.

Anna thought Walter quite handsome in the gold-embellished red uniform of a lieutenant. It took little coaxing on her part to set him expounding on his adventures in the service of Empress Catherine. He claimed that because of his Polish background he was being groomed to do diplomatic work between the Empress and King Stanislaw. Anna was impressed. His parents listened, too, but Zofia sat quietly sipping her wine, uninterested in the conversation.

Lutisha began to serve an ambrosial meal of roast duck, dressing, and mushrooms. Anna glanced now across the table; her gaze was caught, and held, by Walter. She thought his hard, angular face somehow appropriate to that of a soldier. What was in those reddish-brown eyes, deep-set under hair black as a starless night, that sent a cold tingling along her spine? It was a soldier's attitude, she decided, one that reflected a soldier's cumulative dark experiences.

As the supper continued and the wine flowed, she became aware of how his striking, yet brutish, face would turn in her direction when no one else was watching. However, by the time Anna's glass of wine was but half drained, she was immersed in private thoughts—of the riding party, and of Jan Stelnicki....

Later, a change in the conversation's tone at the table reclaimed Anna's full attention. Walter's brusque words were directed at his father: "I can scarcely believe that you support the Third of May Constitution."

The Count Gronski's short, stout form shifted in his chair. "It is a great reform."

"For whom?"

"For everyone."

The wine had affected both father and son, and their volume rose as the debate escalated.

"Oh, it surely seems to contain something for everyone." Walter's tone was bitterly sarcastic. "Peasants are guaranteed human rights; indentured servants may purchase their own freedom; the middle classes are given political recognition; and full religious freedom is preserved for all. Now, tell me, how do *we* gain by it?"

"What do you mean?" the count asked.

"It would seem that everyone gains by it, Father, except the nobility."

"I can tell you what we've gained by it," Zofia said.

All eyes turned to her. Sitting smugly in her cinnamon-colored gown, she had suddenly come alive. Anna noticed that her second glass of wine stood empty.

"Walter," Zofia asked, "haven't you heard the Mazurka that was specially written for the Constitution? Why, it's a splendid little tune complete with its own dance! I'll teach it to you, brother."

Count Gronski's fist came down on the table, rattling the plates, silver, and crystal and causing the candle flames on the candelabrum to flare and dance. "Your levity in this matter is not appreciated, young lady!"

Zofia had amused herself, though, and winked now at Anna.

"The Polish nobility," the count asserted, "will earn itself a high place in history for its declaration of rights to all people. If a fledgling country like the United States of America can succeed in a similar undertaking, by God, surely Poland, with its illustrious past, can attempt no less."

Walter shook his head. "To grant these concessions is to invite trouble. The rabble will only demand more and more from what they will construe as a weakened aristocracy, and with good reason."

Countess Gronska sat forward in her chair, her huge eyes reflecting concern that the harmony of her carefully orchestrated meal was threatened. "Leo, can't this discussion be postponed until after supper?"

The count seemed not to hear. "Can't you see, Walter," he persisted, "that if the middle classes and peasants are not allowed certain rights and privileges, we could take the same path that France is set upon?"

"Not if the aristocracy maintains a position of strength! I think that the *Sejm* who drew up this so-called constitution must have been made up of fools. As for King Stanisław's signing of it—it only confirms my image of him as a bumpkin and a weakling."

Count Gronski looked as if his rage would get the better of him. "You dare speak that way of your King? Of your homeland? Where are your loyalties, Walter? Where?"

Walter shrugged.

"Please, please. Don't excite yourself so, dear," Countess Gronska begged. "There will be no more such political talk until after dinner when you two may discuss this matter privately. Whatever will Anna think?"

An awkward silence ensued. The count deferred to his wife's wishes.

Walter's eyes caught Anna's now. She thought something cold and calculating lurked in their brownish fire. Was this the way of soldiers?

Clearing her throat self-consciously, Anna asked, "How long will you be at home, Walter?"

"Less than a week, I'm afraid. The campaign against the Turks is being accelerated. I'm to go directly to the front."

"Oh, Walter!" his mother exclaimed, her hands raised to her face.

"Don't worry, Mother. We anticipate victory within a few months."

"You do promise to take care of yourself?"

"I do, Mother. Father, you must agree with me on this at least: that the whole of the continent will be a safer place once the Turks are duly trounced."

"More political talk," Zofia sighed. "I shall scream."

"I will admit," the count said, "that the barbarians deserve it. But the prowess of Catherine's generals will neither increase my liking for her, nor decrease my distrust. She may very well protect us by aborting some future invasion of the Turks, but who, for the love of the Almighty, is to protect us from *her*?"

"Did you know," Zofia whispered to Anna, "that Catherine was once mistress to our King Stanisław? They say she has been mistress to no fewer than—"

"Zofia!" the countess snapped. "I am not as deaf to your vulgar asides as you sometimes seem to think. The topic is not a fit one for the table—or a young lady. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Mother. I'm sorry." She could not suppress a little laugh, however, and a softer comment murmured to Anna: "But it's far more amusing than anything else we've heard."

"Walter," the count was saying, "when the Turkish campaign is finished, I want you to resign your commission and come home."

Walter was momentarily startled, then piqued. "Father, I've written to you about that."

"Walter, dear," the countess pleaded, "we are getting no younger—your father and I. It is our wish... and it is time... that you take up your rightful duties here."

Walter seemed to have no wish to draw out the tears that swelled in his mother's eyes. "Ah, look!" he exclaimed. "Lutisha has brought us dessert."

"Ouch!" the corpulent servant cried.

Walter had pinched her and one of the honey cakes fell from her platter. The strain was lifted for the moment and everyone laughed, even the befuddled, toothless servant, who retreated to the kitchen, her red apron held to her face.



Anna stared over the pages of the book she held, vacantly watching the small blaze in the reception room fireplace. The Countess Gronska had ordered it

lighted to cut the chill of that mid-September evening. The countess absently took up her crewelwork. Zofia held a book but made no attempt to read it. All three were listening intently to the Count Gronski and Walter, who were raging at one another in the library.

The countess sighed sadly. "They agree on nothing, Anna. But they are cut from the same cloth. Each is willful; each has a terrible temper."

Zofia threw her book to the floor and jumped from her chair. "Listen!" she gasped, as if thrilled. "Father is taking Walter down to the cellar!"

Anna stared, noticing for the first time some dark facet of her cousin.

"Oh, don't look so puzzled, Anna darling," Zofia said. "Father would often punish Walter and me by taking us down to the wine cellar, sometimes leaving us there for the entire night. Until one time when we drank ourselves senseless." Zofia laughed at the memory. "I was clever enough, however, to escape the thrashing for that. Walter wasn't so lucky. Of course, we should be beyond that stage now. He must have said something terribly wicked for Father to become so enraged."

The countess was annoyed by her daughter's exultant attitude. "I expect your father merely wishes to spare Anna a scene. Zofia, perhaps you are not so old as to be beyond correction. Now keep to your own affairs."

"If only I had one to keep to," Zofia said in an aside to Anna.

"What?" the countess demanded.

"I said," Zofia lied, "that I'm now eighteen. Anna, don't you agree that family and society place too many restraints on young people, especially on our sex? Why, a woman must be forty before she can enjoy her freedom—and by that time, what does it matter?" She chuckled at her own comedy.

Anna was not about to be coaxed into a family quarrel. She felt intrusive and uncomfortable. "Goodnight, Aunt," she said, rising. She kissed the countess. "It's late and I'm tired."

She looked pointedly at Zofia. "I should like to go riding early tomorrow."

The hint seemed to elude her cousin.

Anna pressed the issue. "We should both be rested, Zofia."

"To bed! To bed! Oh, how I despise the dreary country. There are no weddings, no banquets, no opera, no balls—only the deathly fresh air. And the music—Oh! How I do miss the music!" Zofia flung her hands in the air now and began dancing the lively steps of the Mazurka in front of the hearth, gaily humming its melody.

Anna started to leave the room, brooding that her cousin seemed bound to forget to mention the riding party to her parents.

Zofia halted her self-amusement. "Wait! Listen," she whispered sharply, "is it possible Father would use the whip on Walter?"

"Don't be absurd," Countess Stella said. Yet Anna could see that she was concerned.

Anna chose not to stay and listen. She gave her cousin a perfunctory kiss and went directly upstairs to her room.

For a long time Anna lay unable to sleep, unable to exorcise dark and vague premonitions. The evening had upset her. She felt uncomfortable, too, caught up as she was in a family squabble. Walter had not favorably impressed her; secretly she was glad that his stay would be short. Zofia, too, in her attitude toward her brother revealed a sinister side that had only been hinted at before. There must be real love there between brother and sister, but other issues seemed to keep it buried.

And why hadn't Zofia mentioned the riding party? Anna could not believe that she hadn't picked up on her hint. Her cousin was not so obtuse. She had deliberately put her off. Why?

Perhaps it was just as well, considering the humor the count and countess were in.

What was to happen now? She would almost surely have to send Jan away in the morning. Would he understand?

What was Zofia thinking of? Anna lay listening for the sound of her cousin passing her door so that she might speak to her. But the rich food and the wine lulled her into a deep drowsiness. With the strains of the Mazurka still dallying in her head, sleep rose up to claim her.

7

ANNA AWOKE AT SEVEN, FILLED with tense anticipation. Shivering in the chilled room, she washed, quickly dressed, and hurried to her cousin's room.

"Wake up, Zofia," she whispered, gently shaking her. "Jan Stelnicki will be at the stable in only minutes. Perhaps he's already there. What are we to do?"

Zofia moaned and turned her face into the pillow.

"Zofia, please!"

She stirred. "Oh, is it truly morning?"

"It truly is. Now, what are we going to do about the outing?"

"Surely we must cancel—"

"But why should we?"

"Your parents will—"

"I shall fix it," Zofia said, sitting up in bed.

"Oh, do you think you can? Did you speak to Walter about joining us?"

"Yes. Once everyone went to bed, I went down to the cellar to ask him. All I got for my effort is this headache."

"Zofia, you were drinking!"

"Oh, a little wine," she crooned as she wiped the sleep from her eyes. "We

laughed over our childhood days. You know, you may be right, that I do hold some fondness for Walter."

"Of course you do. But he didn't wish to come with us?"

Zofia shook her head. "He seemed wholly uninterested. I suppose he's had enough riding of late. The three of us shall go."

"If you are certain..."

"I am. Why should your day be spoiled?"

"Do hurry out of bed, then."

"I must have time to get ready, Anna. You know how I am about my appearance."

"We'll wait for you at the stable. You must promise to hurry."

"What is this you've got on?"

"My silk blouse and green skirt."

"The skirt will never do, darling. It's so... rustic. Now that you're out of that horrid black, we must do something with you. In the wardrobe you'll find a russet riding skirt and matching jacket."

Anna suspected that it would be more expedient to comply with her cousin's wishes. She quickly found the outfit. "Why, it's stunning, Zofia!"

"You may keep it. Your blouse is fine; the creamy color will set off the russet nicely. Hurry and change!"

Zofia sat motionless, watching Anna slip into the outfit. "There! Now that's much better."

Anna moved to the bed. "Zofia, won't you please get up?"

"I've come up with an idea, darling," she announced. "Ride to that secret pond of ours in the forest. The stable master and I will take a shorter route I know of and perhaps be there even before you and Jan. That will give me time to get ready and Lutisha time to pack a lunch. I'm afraid I failed to mention the outing to her."

"Oh, no! I'll wait for you and the lunch. I'll send one of the servants out to tell Jan we've been detained."

"No, Anna, it's decided. You and Jan go ahead, I *insist*."

"But Aunt Stella," Anna breathed, "and your father, when they find out—"

"You are a worrywart, I swear. I'll take care of them, dearest."

Zofia took hold of Anna's hands and pulled her close, the dark eyes assessing her. "Janek is harmless, Ania, a tamed bear. I know. Moody sometimes, perhaps, but nothing to worry about. Now run along. Oh, and let my appearance at the pond be a surprise, all right?"

"Oh, Zofia," Anna whispered, realizing now that she was trembling. "I could not possibly—"

"Oh, yes, you can. And you will! Don't be a ninny, Anna. How can you ever hope to be cosmopolitan if you won't forget your country naiveté? Do you think a French girl would shy away from a handsome man? Never!"



Her heart racing, Anna hurried down the servants' stairs and through the house, praying that no one would catch sight of her. She was pondering something, too. Zofia had used Jan's diminutive, *Janek*. Why? Was she on such familiar terms with Jan? Then she realized that Zofia and Jan must have been friends since childhood, and so such familiarity was only natural.

Outside, she pinned her riding hat to her head, and hastened through the damp morning air to the stable.

Her mind was a whirlwind. She knew that their going into the forest unchaperoned would be judged scandalous by most, but her pulse quickened at the thought of being alone with Jan for the first time since her mourning was put off. She was at once happy and fearful.

Zofia had been right: before meeting Jan, Anna had had no experience with men. And during the meetings with him in the meadow, her mourning had served as a kind of shield; without that, she was apprehensive about what she should say, how she should act. She wished that she had had the worldly-wise Zofia coach her in such things. There was never a lull in a conversation when her ebullient cousin was present. How will Jan act now? she wondered. What will he say? Might he say that he *loves* me?

Jan stood just inside the stable, smiling. His riding outfit was of deep blue, one that intensified the blue of his eyes. His shirt, open at the neck to reveal a matting of reddish-blond chest hair, was very white against his tanned skin. He held the reins of his own black steed, as well as those of another horse, slightly smaller.

He nodded toward the snow-white mare. "This one is yours, Anna," he said, "if you want her."

"You don't mean..."

"I surely do." The smile widened.

Anna stood there fighting back a fountainhead of tears. Everything in her background suggested that she must refuse such a magnificent gift, but she could not bring herself to do it. Perhaps later, after she had a chance to consult her cousin. She had no wish to start off the day by hurting or even insulting Jan by refusing the gift.

The old stable master entered now.

"Look, Stanisław! Lord Stelnicki has given me my own horse. Isn't it a lovely creature?"

"Tis a beauty, milady."

"Do you think you can board another, Stanisław?" Jan asked.

"One more will be no bother, milord."

"Thank you, Jan," Anna said, "though it's too great a gift."

"Nonsense." The piercing eyes held Anna's for a moment.

Outside, Jan helped Anna to mount her horse. He then joked with the stable master, slipping some coins into his gnarled hand.

Anna yielded now to an impulse, thinking that she would show off her

newly acquired riding skills. Without waiting for Jan to mount his horse, she slapped the riding crop against the milky flank.

Like a bolt of lightning, the highly-muscled mare took off.

Only the day before and on days previous, Anna had thoroughly relished her horseback outings with Zofia. As they made the progression from a tame canter to a lively gallop, new feelings of power and exhilaration surged within her. Her blood pulsed with a joy of life.

How very different were Anna's feelings today! Her animal ran so fast that Anna gasped for air and held on for dear life. She was too frightened to call out.

Somewhere behind her, she thought—prayed!—were the sounds of Jan's horse's hooves. She thought, too, that she could hear him calling to her.

The neatly tilled furrows of the farmland flew beneath her in a blinding fury as the wind cut into her face. The landscape about her was nothing more than a flashing blur of color.

Anna had learned to ride on a much smaller and more docile horse so that her efforts to slow the galloping mare were futile. She feared now that the horse would stumble and send her tumbling headlong to the hard ground, and she could not catch enough of a breath even to call out.

At last, Jan caught up to Anna, the powerful shoulder of the stallion pressing into that of the mare. Reaching over, Jan took Anna's reins, and very near to where the furrowed acreage ended and the forest began, managed to bring her horse to a halt.

Anna panted for breath. She felt faint.

"Are you all right, Anna?" There was concern in Jan's voice, but Anna suspected an amusement, too.

"I think so. Only winded. And a bit humiliated. I dare say Angel is a more tranquil creature."

"I should have warned you that this one has spirit. Horses are like people, Anna, each with a different temperament. And as with people, you should get to know them before putting them to the test."

"Thank you for the advice, belated as it is." Anna managed a laugh, even if it were at her own expense. "Tell me, does this horse have a name?"

"We call her *Pegasus*."

"How appropriate! I think she does have wings, indeed!"

Jan laughed.

Anna spied then what she thought was a sparkle of impetuosity in his eyes.

Before them spread the great forest of giant oaks, cloaked now in hues that could only hint at the multi-colored splendor to come. "Isn't it beautiful here?" Anna said, trying to appear composed.

"Let me help you down." His voice itself seemed a caress. "We'll rest here awhile."

"No," Anna replied. "I'm fine, really. Let's continue."

"You must keep tighter reins," he warned, handing them over to Anna.

"She must be shown who is the master—or mistress." His hand lingered over Anna's for a few moments.

As their horses moved now, slowly, and the shadows of the high trees engulfed them, Anna's mind raced with as many thoughts as there were leaves. Why did I listen to Zofia? Why did I put my reputation at risk? And might there be an even greater risk? She had little experience in the ways of courtship. How good of a judge of character can I be when I could not even anticipate a horse's temperament?

They were soon deep into the forest and had to pick their way delicately, as the old trail was largely covered by a thick undergrowth of sweet briar and bracken. Here and there, angling shafts of light squeezed through the treetops and fell in brilliant beams to the forest floor. The morning air was made visible by the rising mist. Saplings of oak leaned and stretched away from their own rooted earth in a life struggle for their share of a limited sunlight. Few would survive. The forest was cool and pleasant, the ride relaxing, and the anxiety within Anna began to lessen.

"Did you bring any coins, Anna?"

"Coins?" Her puzzlement lasted only a moment; then she, too, heard the eerie sound. Somewhere, far into the interior of the forest a cuckoo intoned its strange lament. "No, I have not."

"Nor I. Ah, well, what harm can befall us on such a magnificent day?"

Anna's love and respect for legends—more than superstition—made her regret that Jan had given his coins to Stanisław.

Anna's grandmother had told her the old folk tale: A lovely maiden had made fun of St. Anna, who was berry-picking in the woods; the offended saint transformed the girl into a cuckoo bird, destined forever to haunt the countryside bemoaning its fate. If, according to the tale, one jingles a few coins when the sound of the cuckoo is heard, all would be well.

Anna had always thought it a morbid story of revenge, one unworthy of a saint. She wondered at the precaution, too: could following superstition buy protection? And yet, her first reaction at not having coins was regret. Of course, Jan was right. What harm could befall them on such a day? She tried to shake her fears.

Jan halted and dismounted. Anna stopped, too, watching as he stooped down near a fallen tree. Laughing, he sprang up with an immense mushroom. "Would you look at this, Anna!" As large as his fist, it looked like a speckled beige flower.

"It may be poisonous," Anna said.

"No, it isn't, but you're right to be cautious. The forest does have its dangers, but it has its gifts, too." Jan took a knife and cut into the stalk. "See, Anna, it's pink as a baby's bottom. If it were white and oozing, then we'd worry. It's not especially good for eating, but fine for soups or stews. Lutisha will think it a fine gift."

Quartering it, he placed it in his saddlebag.

He stooped again.

"If they are all that size," Anna called, "we will not need many."

He stood now and approached Anna, his hand hidden behind his back, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

"I do not presently have a taste for a mushroom," she joked.

"Hold out your hand."

Anna slowly put out her hand, and Jan placed in it a tiny red flower.

"Thank you, Jan."

He bent forward in a mock bow.

"Tell me," Anna asked, "does anyone ever call you *Janek*?"

"No, never. But you may do so if you wish."

Anna felt the heat rising to her face. She didn't know how to respond.

Jan was staring at her, his eyes narrowing, the smile deepening. At that moment, Anna felt that his mere glance could pierce through to her soul. Somehow, she was certain, he sensed what her feelings were and she dared to think she might know his. *Today, he will ask me to marry him.*

Anna made no effort to dismount, though she was certain that he wanted her to do so. In the cooling shadows, she watched appraisingly as he prepared to mount his horse. How manly he seemed; how handsome. Yet sensitive to others and to the fragile beauty of nature. The sweet wild vapors of the forest enraptured her, intoxicating her with what she knew was love for this man.

They rode leisurely through the lush woodland for nearly two hours. Anna's fears—intuitive and unnamable—blew over her from time to time like whiffs of stale air, but passed quickly.

They came to a tiny stream and paused to allow their horses to drink. Jan drew his horse very close to hers. "Anna," he said, leaning toward her. His arm moved to her waist and he brought her but a hair's breadth away from him.

Jan kissed Anna now for the first time, lightly. Anna did not return the pressure, but she did not pull away, either. She found his lips strangely supple and wonderful. The soft, yielding sigh that she heard now was her own. His grip at her waist tightened and her breasts pressed against his open coat while he kissed her mouth, then her neck. There was a kind of pain in his holding her so, but she was somehow numb to it. The horses moved restlessly beneath them, perhaps nervous at their own proximity. Jan was whispering something so low that she could not decipher it. When his mouth moved to her ear, she realized it was merely her name he was chanting, over and over.

"Let me help you down," he murmured now.

Anna pretended not to hear. His nearness, his kiss, had set off an alarm that sounded through her like the clang of an abbey's bell. She would not—could not—let this get out of hand. When he repeated himself in a voice too distinct for her to ignore, she withdrew from him.

"Jan, we have a long way to ride before we reach the pond I told you of." Anna sent Pegasus splashing into the narrow stream. She had lied: she knew that the pond was reasonably close.

Her fears returned in number. She should never have ventured into the forest alone with Jan. What had possessed her? Her mother had taught her to avoid temptation and risk. She was afraid, too, of certain intangible feelings that stirred and moved within her when Jan kissed her, when he touched her. Had she made the mistake Icarus had? Was she even now flying too near the sun? She could only pray that Zofia would be waiting at the pond for them.

The two followed the stream's course for some distance without speaking. Anna led the way and Jan followed, playing sweet music on his Jew's harp. Occasionally, he would stop his music and mimic the song of a nearby bird. Anna would laugh and turn her head to watch him, but his face seemed inscrutable. Had she angered him?

As they moved along, Anna became fascinated by thousands of shimmering stones that lay in the shallow stream's bed. The small stones resembled shining rough garnets, emeralds, and amber. Or was it merely the sparkling interplay of water and light that made them appear so? Anna suppressed the desire to ask if some of them might actually be precious stones. She wished not to appear naive.

The stream sloped sharply now as it led them into a denser part of the forest.

Suddenly, Anna saw something odd beneath the waters. It was white and the curved shape tapered to a jagged point at one end. She halted her horse. "Look, Jan!" she called. "There near to the shore!"

"What is it, Anna?"

"It looks like a tooth. Yes, it looks like a monstrous tooth!"

They approached the object. Jan dismounted at the very edge of the stream and stooped to pick it up with both hands.

"What do you suppose it is?" Anna asked.

"This *is* a kind of tooth, Anna, as big and heavy as it is!" He stared at the awesome object for a few moments, turning it over in his hands. "I would imagine that this is the tusk of a mastodon, an animal as tall and as long as that tree is high."

Anna felt a flicker of fear ignite in her stomach, but she chose to laugh. "Imagine, indeed. Do you mean a dragon?"

Jan indulged her with a smile. "Mastodons were animals that once roamed these lands. People believe the ancients killed all of them."

"Lucky for us," Anna said, with a laugh. "If only we could take it with us. I should like Zofia to see the tooth of a real dragon."

Agitation drew down the corners of Jan's mouth. "I'm serious, Anna. This is from no dragon but from a great beast that once roamed the countryside. Why, my peasants have found the bones of a whole such gigantic creature in my farm soil." When Anna's eyes challenged him further, he became distracted. "It's true!" he cried.

"I've heard of such beasts only in storybooks," Anna said. "You're teasing me."

As if in anger, Jan hurled the object out into the deepest part of the stream. Silently, he mounted his horse.

Anna was stunned. Now he *was* angry with her. But why? Zofia was right: his moods *are* changeable.

They left the water now, picking their way through briar and brush, moving into the forest's dense heart.

"You're leading me through a maze of thicket!" he called from behind. "I trust you know the location of this hidden pond?"

"Oh, yes," Anna sang out, but a doubt did invade her private thoughts. Zofia had taken Anna to the secret place several times since her arrival. Anna believed that they were the only ones who knew of its existence. One could bathe and swim there in complete safety and privacy, but the insects, fish, and water plants inhibited Anna. Zofia was less restrained and splashed happily in the cool waters while Anna sat on the bank, envying her cousin's audacious spirit.

Now, as the horses led Anna and Jan through thick, overhanging willow branches, the pond came into view.

"Look there!" Anna said. She pointed to the small body of water that lay nestled in a circular corps of oaks and willows. Like a mighty sentry, one dead oak stood towering at the water's edge, its great twisted roots exposed at the sloping bank.

Anna's heart quickened. Her eyes scanned ahead, near to the water's edge, then all about. With the leisurely pace she had set and the stops they had made, she was certain that Zofia had had enough time to catch up. There was, however, no sign of her. Ah, Zofia, she thought, it would be a clever trick of you to leave me alone here with Jan Stelnicki.

Anna's knuckles whitened as her hands clenched and drew up reins. The horse came to a halt and Anna leaned forward.

"What are you looking for?" Jan asked, dismounting.

"Nothing." If he *were* angry with her, the storm had passed.

"Come, Anna, let me help you down." His voice was soft but insistent.

Jan's grip was tender as he effortlessly lifted her from the horse. He is so terribly strong, she thought. When her feet touched the ground, his arms went around her. He kissed her, harder than before, with firm lips that slid over and between hers.

The warmth of his mouth and the strength of his body made her feel as though she were being supported solely by him, and should he unfold his arms from her, she would fall to the ground.

Suddenly, she felt and tasted Jan's tongue and was stunned into an unwitting acknowledgment that this foreign kiss was the sweetest of sensations.

Though Anna tried to pull away, she was powerless in Jan's arms, and after a time her body sank with his into the dry, soft leaves beneath them.

Anna could only think that this must not happen. She struggled against Jan and against some interior part of her that wanted not to struggle. On the horse, she had felt an element of protection, an avenue of escape. On the ground, however, she felt suddenly vulnerable.

"Stop... please..."

The air near the earth smelled warm and heavy with the late summer dust of the leaves and flowers. The weight of the world pulled at her eyelids while Jan kissed her, again and again.

She forced open her eyes when she felt his silken blond hair beneath her chin, his warm mouth on her throat. She had left the top button of her blouse undone, and his lips moved down now, laying light, caressing kisses. Anna's feelings were new to her and undeniably blissful. But she knew their danger, too.

"Jan," she whispered, "please stop."

When he looked up, Anna saw only the fire of desire in his eyes, and she became afraid. He continued to watch her, to study her. Slowly, the blue discs that were his eyes filled with a placid tenderness. Anna realized at once that where she thought there was danger, there was only safety, only strength.

"Marry me, Anna. I swear by the white eagle that I will love you always."

Some silent gasp escaped within Anna, but she was unable to speak. What she had dared to dream had come true, and her life would never be the same. Her loneliness would belong to the past. Once again she would be part of a family. And, like her parents, she would experience love and marriage.

She found breath, but words came with difficulty. "Jan, I... it is so soon after—"

"It is not! We were meant to find each other when we did. You've felt it all along, just as I have."

"It's just that—"

"I'll make you happy, I will! If we must wait a bit, so be it. We shall. Unhappily, perhaps, but willingly. Only say that you will marry me, Anna. I love you."

"Oh, Jan, I—"

"Anna! Jan!" Zofia's shrilly cheerful voice came from nearby.

Jan jumped to his feet, then aided Anna to hers.

"What is *she* doing here?" he whispered sharply. He had recognized the voice at once.

"She's brought a lunch. It was to be a surprise."

"Oh, it is that."

"Over here," Anna called weakly. She felt her face burning crimson. *What had she seen?*

"There you are!" Zofia cried, appearing from behind a tree. "Good afternoon, Anna... Jan." Her voice bubbled with life and innocence. She wore a rose riding outfit and a white lacy blouse. Her black hair fell in a free-flowing wavy mass.

"Good afternoon, Zofia," Jan said. He pretended to be busy tethering the already secured horses to a shrub.

"I began to think that you might not come." Anna was aware that her own voice and visage could not disguise her embarrassment. She could not say the truth: that she had begun to *wish* that her cousin would not appear at all.

"Oh, I *am* sorry to be late." Zofia hugged Anna.

Anna had come to realize that her cousin's apologies were but endstops to a topic and required no reply.

Zofia helped Anna spread out a blanket on the ground, her perfume competing with the forest fragrances. Bending over, she whispered: "But I did it for you, dearest!" Then, in a louder voice: "I've brought the most delightful luncheon. Ah, what could be lovelier than an outing in the woods with my cousin and... my friend Janek?"

Anna looked to Jan, who was brushing down the horses. His annoyance at Zofia's presence was visible. Was he also annoyed she had used his diminutive? Or had he noticed?

"We might even bathe later, Anna," Zofia was saying. "That is, if Jan would be so good as to leave us alone for a while."

"I'd rather not, Zofia," Anna said. "You know how I am about the water."

Zofia sighed dramatically. "You do give the impression of being dainty and helpless, Anna. And I suppose there are men who find those characteristics attractive." Her dark eyes darted fleetingly to Jan, who seemed preoccupied with his task. "For me, though," she continued, "such a guise would require too much patience, a quality I readily admit I lack."

Anna thought for a moment that this last barb was directed at Jan, but she could not understand it. She was miffed by her cousin's teasing and chose to ignore it. "I have an idea," she said. "Let's pick some raspberries to eat with our meal. I had no breakfast, so I'm hungry as a bear. And I adore raspberries!"

"Well, it's not my idea of fun," Zofia said, "but I'll defer." She turned now, cupped her hands to her mouth, peasant-like, and shouted: "Stanisław!"

In a few moments the servant appeared, leading two horses. The three left him to unpack the small bundles that comprised their lunch and began walking through the dense greenery in search of a raspberry patch.

"Jan," Zofia asked, "will you walk ahead of us to make sure that the way is clear?"

Jan stepped a few paces ahead and began clearing the few obstructions. Anna thought he did so grudgingly.

Zofia pattered on casually, holding Anna back until Jan was out of earshot. "Well," she impatiently whispered, "what happened, darling?"

"What do you mean?" As they passed through a narrow clearing, Anna pretended to be concerned with her skirt and would not lift her eyes.

"Don't be coy!" Zofia hissed. "Tell me. Did he dare to kiss you?"

Anna looked up at Zofia and nodded.

"Honestly, Anna! Must I pry everything out of you?"

Anna drew in breath to blurt out her news. "He asked me to marry him."

"What?" Zofia's mouth dropped open. She appeared to be genuinely stunned. "Are you joking?"

"No."

Zofia let out a little gasp. "What... what did you tell him?"

"I put him off."

Zofia's blank look changed now as her tone and expression took on direction. "Oh, Anna, I'm so sorry to have done this to you. You don't hate me for it, do you? I thought that after your mourning you would enjoy a little dalliance with Jan. That's why I plotted for you to have this time alone with him. Who would have imagined that he would propose? He was serious?"

"Oh, yes."

"Now, don't worry, dearest. I'll fix things for you."

"Don't be silly, Zofia. I—" Anna stopped, realizing that Jan had waited for them to catch up.

"This way," Jan said. "I've found a decent patch."

While the three picked raspberries, Zofia babbled incessantly. Anna could not read her cousin's behavior. Did she think that her interest in Jan was only casual? If so, she could only bide her time until she could tell her differently.

Bored and perhaps irritated by Zofia's banter, Jan kept stealing impatient glances at Anna.

Finally, Anna became unnerved. "I'll let you two finish," she announced. "I'll go get the luncheon ready." She quickly moved off in the direction they had come.

"You were the one who wanted raspberries!" Zofia called.

Anna didn't know what she wanted. Her mind was as tangled as the briar and brambles she found herself encountering. Her feelings concerning Jan were strong and positive but tainted by some nameless sense of danger or inappropriateness. And her cousin's attitude was a mystery to her.

By the time Anna came to the clearing at the pond, she had made the decision to put an end to the outing. She ordered Stanisław to repack the bundles of food.

She walked down near to the water and paced, waiting for Jan and Zofia to return so that the day might end. Time and a clear head were needed. She was uncertain of marriage, though she knew she loved him—despite his changeable ways.

His advances and proposal *had* been impetuous. It was behavior very different from the custom of her parish. Tradition held that the suitor would arrive at his beloved's home with a flower-covered bottle of wine. The young lady would fetch the prescribed tiny wineglass, fill it, offer it to her suitor, then to her parents. When they had all sipped of the glass, she, too, would lift it to her lips, and the young man would know that his offer had met with a favorable response.

Anna felt guilt, too. Having had to hide her romance with Jan from her guardians, she could look forward only to objections.

She watched idly as Stanisław put the last of the bundles into the saddlebags. The servant then mounted his horse and spoke to it in a playful tone while he patiently waited.

A shadow passed overhead.

Looking up to the sky, Anna saw a huge eagle soaring majestically. She recalled how Jan had sworn by the white eagle that he would love her forever.

The bird circled now and fell into a sudden swoop, disappearing beyond the treetops.

"I reckon he's sighted his dinner," Stanisław called.

"I suppose he has," Anna heard herself say. Her mind, however, was recalling her father and remarks he had made numberless times. She could picture him at the supper table, knife and fork in hand but forgetting to eat so caught up was he in expounding on how strange it was that Poland should have as its symbol the eagle, a bird of prey; how Poland held no standing army and chose not to barter and threaten in the great throne rooms of Europe; how peaceful are the Polish citizens; how, in the past, it has been the countries bordering Poland—Prussia, Austria, and Russia—that have been the predators on Polish lands and peoples; how, only twenty years ago, these three partitioned Poland, taking spoils amounting to one-third of the land and one-half of the population.

It was peculiar, how her father's words carried so little weight at the time. It seemed a lifetime ago. How young she had been then... before things began to fall apart. How caught up she had been in frivolities of youth. Now, her father's words about his homeland echoed through the tunnel of her memory, ringing into the present with truth and portent.

Suddenly, Anna's attention was jarred from this tangent by the sound of Zofia's screaming. "Go back to the house, Stanisław!" she was crying. "Go back now!"

Anna turned around. "What is it, Zofia?" She could see only her cousin's back. "What is the matter?"

At Zofia's repeated command, the confused stable master gave spur to his horse and disappeared into the woods.

Zofia turned toward Anna now and dashed down the slope. "Jan did this to me!" she cried.

Anna stared in disbelief. The lace material covering Zofia's ample bosom was disheveled and torn.

Jan was in quick pursuit.

He ran to where the cousins stood and roughly turned Zofia to him. Beneath his blond hair his face was red with rage. "What did you say to Anna?" He held tightly to Zofia's arm. "Tell me!"

Zofia did not answer but only snarled at the brusque manner in which Jan treated her.

Jan cocked his head in Anna's direction. "What did this lying creature say to you, Anna?"

The scene unfolding before Anna seemed unreal to her. She became confused and terrorized as Jan continued to press for an answer and as Zofia cried, her free hand struggling for release, her high voice full of reproofs. Anna felt removed, as if this were happening to someone else.

Jan shoved the hysterical Zofia aside and moved toward Anna. "You need to know the truth about your cousin..." he was saying.

But panic surged within Anna, and she turned and ran.

In a flash Jan followed, barking out words of explanation that Anna's mind could no longer process.

Anna's feet padded along the dry and crusty shore of the pond. Her mind was in a ferment.

Where was she to go? Her breath came hard. Still, she increased the speed of her steps.

She could hear Jan's labored breathing close behind.

Anna raced up the incline of a little hill. She saw—too late—that it ended abruptly in a bluff of several feet.

She went tumbling headlong into a water-parched pocket below, coming to rest in an awkward sitting position. Her hat had fallen off and her braids, which had been wound about her head, had come loose.

Anna looked up to see Jan staring down at her from the little bluff.

"Are you hurt, Anna?"

"Let me be!" she heard herself cry. Her foot burned with pain, but she said nothing of it.

Jan descended the bluff and came to where Anna sat. Kneeling in the dry earth, he clumsily held out his hand.

Anna averted her eyes, then covered her face. "Jan, please leave me. Please!"

After what seemed an eternity, she looked again. He was gone. She sat motionless and numb.

Should she call him back? Anna suddenly realized that she did not want him to leave.

But the sound now of a horse's hooves told her that it was too late. Hot, stinging tears brimmed in her eyes. What had she done?

She tried to stand but couldn't.

"Oh, Anna, you're hurt!" Zofia stood on the bluff now, gaping down at her.

Anna held the tears at bay. "My ankle feels like fire," she conceded, "but I don't think it's broken."

"Oh, it's your left ankle! We'll need Jan's help if you're to mount your horse. Don't try to move, darling. I'll catch up to him."

"Do be careful, Zofia," Anna called. Her cousin had already disappeared from view.

Using her elbows for support, she raised herself up onto a small mound from which she could see Zofia mounting her horse. As Zofia's horse galloped away, Pegasus, still tethered to a shrub, shied, unsuccessfully straining against her reins.

Anna knew that they would need a man's assistance. She prayed that her cousin would be able to overtake Jan and bring him back. And, perhaps more importantly, she wanted to give Jan a chance to explain himself. Only now did

she process the genuine concern she had seen in his eyes. How could he have done what Zofia accused him of if Anna had won his heart?

She picked herself up on her hands and knees and struggled to a flat, shaded area at the edge of the pond. She lay down, and cupping her hands, brought cool water to her dry lips.

She fell back now, exhausted, eyes to a cloudless sky. Jan Stelnicki's appearance in her life had been the most exciting thing ever to happen to her. Perhaps, however, their meeting had occurred too soon. She was just seventeen. Anna dreamt of marriage, a home, children—yet life since she had come to live with the Gronski family seemed so grand and promising, especially by comparison with her more reserved and rustic background. She longed to shed her childlike innocence and acquire sophistication. She wanted to experience the splendid social and cultural life of Warsaw, of which Zofia spoke incessantly. In a year or two, she might grow tired of leisure and independence, but she hesitated to forfeit it now.

And there was, too, that vague fear of Jan's temperament. He appeared so impatient and impetuous. *Had* he attacked Zofia? It seemed inconceivable.

Would Zofia lie about such a serious thing? Why?

Anna worried over Zofia. Though she was a good horsewoman, the forest was rife with clawing undergrowth, fallen trees, low-hanging limbs. Anna looked about her, trying to concentrate only on the seemingly endless flow of drifting, autumnal leaves.

She felt alone and powerless. As time passed she struggled to stay alert.



It was a voice calling her name, Anna thought, that awakened her. She was instantly aware of a new pain. Hours had passed, it seemed, and the sun had shifted, burning her face. She felt as if the dry, pulsating skin had been drawn across her face like a mask.

"Oh, Anna," Zofia was calling, "Jan was furious!" She picked her way down the embankment and moved toward Anna. "Oh, darling, you're scorched. Your face is as red as a ripened strawberry!"

"He isn't coming back?"

"No, dearest."

Anna's heart dropped.

"I caught up to him a long ways from here. He hardly let me speak, though, he was so enraged. Oh, he's an impossible man!"

"What about Stanisław?"

"I tried to track him, that's what took me so long. But he had too great a head start."

"What are we to do, then?"

"Do you think that if we combined our efforts we could get you mounted?"

"Perhaps. We can try."

The cousins did make an effort of it; however, after half of an hour their attempt ended ingloriously when they found themselves both sitting upon the ground. "There's only one thing left to do," Zofia said. "I'll go back to the house for help."

"Must you? Can't we just wait? Surely the stable master—"

"No. I led Stanisław here." Zofia got to her feet. "I expect the old fool can find his way home, but I doubt that he could find the pond again on his own, and it will be dark before anyone will think to look for us. And they might *never* find us here. Walter and I discovered this place when we were but children and kept it secret from everyone."

Anna had to admit that Zofia's going back was the only logical plan.

"Don't fret," Zofia said. "I will hurry. Did Stanisław leave any of the food?"

"No, I had ordered him to repack it."

Zofia regarded Anna strangely at this but did not question her. She stood now. "I'll not be long in bringing help."

"Zofia?"

"Yes, dearest?"

"Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"What you said.... Did Jan attack you?"

"I said that he did, didn't I? Do you question my word, Anna?"

"But I don't understand. Only a short time before he said that he loved me. He proposed *marriage* to me."

"And you believed him? Oh, Anna, you have so much to learn about life and about men! In the heat of romance a man will promise anything to gain satisfaction. He merely wanted his way with you, darling. Nothing else."

"I don't believe it! Jan is not like that!"

"It comes as a surprise to me, too, I must admit. Had I the slightest suspicion, I would never have allowed you to go with him. It's a good thing I came along when I did."

"Zofia, look at me. Is this the truth?" Anna's eyes searched her cousin's face for some sign of deceit. She prayed that it was a lie. She could not have so misjudged Jan. Anna pressed the issue: "You were not play-acting?"

Zofia's anger flared without warning. "You little fool!" she hissed. "You dare to call me liar? What makes you think that a man like Jan Stelnicki would want to marry a backwoods bog-trotter like you when he could have his pick of Warsaw's finest? He took you for an easy mark, that's all!"

Zofia turned now and left.

Stunned, Anna watched her leave with eyes that would not focus, parted lips that could not speak. A few minutes later, she realized that Zofia had not only taken her own horse, but she had taken Pegasus as well.

Anna removed her boots, first from the injured and swelling foot, then from the other.

Much later, sleep provided an escape.



Upon emerging from the woods on foot, the two horses in tow, Zofia paused and stared vacantly across a clearing.

She still seethed with anger. It had all gone so far wrong. Once again she had miscalculated. She had hoped that the outing would provide for Jan an opportunity to assess her and Anna side by side. Anna, with her rustic ways, would pale by contrast.

Her master plan had been thought out so carefully. In the months since Jan returned from school, Zofia had methodically, secretly, charmingly courted him. She was convinced that a relationship with Jan would help her escape the arranged marriage with Antoni Grawlinski.

Now, if she were forced to marry Grawlinski, it would be her witless cousin's fault. Anna had ruined her plans. Anna had ruined her life. *Damn her!*

Zofia blamed herself, too. She cursed the day she told Anna she had no interest in Stelnicki. How could she have known the outcome? And today in the raspberry patch, when she had set aside her pride and confronted Jan with her feelings, he dared to look into her eyes and say that he cared only for Anna.

To think that she had lost Jan Stelnicki to little Anna Maria from Sochaczew! What did he see in her? Was it possible her innocence was a pretense—that she was a little minx on the sly? Anna could not have arrived at Halicz at a worse time. For Zofia—or for herself. Zofia would never forgive her cousin for her interference.

She considered her options now. She knew that she could not reignite Jan's interest in her, at least not now. Oh, she was confident the day would come when she would pick up that challenge again. For now, though, she would have to find another way of escaping a marriage that was for her an execution.

Somehow, some way, she would engineer a reversal of fortune. Her first priority was clear: she must ruin Anna and Jan's romance. Anna must *never* have Jan. She would rather see them both dead.

Zofia did not mount her horse, as she had planned. What hurry was there? She would walk the remaining distance, walk and think. She would use her head. She would find a way out of her troubles. After all, she would not set sight on Grawlinski until Christmas.

And not even then if she played her hand correctly.

Leading her horse, Zofia started walking now, slowly but with direction. *The wheel of fortune will turn again, and with the next turn, or the turn after that, I will have my way.*

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