

A DARING ESCAPE

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— PROLOGUE —

*Ústín, Czech Republic
September 20, 1993*

Condensation dripped from stone-hewn walls as Charles lowered himself down into the dry well, seeking the treasure his grandfather had tucked away just days before the Allies sacrificed the Sudetenland to Hitler's death squad like a lamb to the slaughter. The rock walls and the earthy, wet smell reminded him of medieval dungeons and secret tunnels he had read about as a child, and of tales of adventurers hunting treasure.

The harness Charles wore was connected to a rope and attached to a pulley—his father's idea. Knowing that fifty-five years prior his grandfather had had no such contraption, he wondered how the man had managed to get down here and hide the treasure. *If there is family treasure.*

Even though he'd heard the story all his life, Charles wasn't sure whether what his grandfather had told Charles's father was true or just a distraction from the mounting war right outside their home. He would soon find out.

At his father's insistence, they had come to search out the

treasure. His great-grandmother's land and country house had been returned to their family as restitution a few months prior. It had taken his father, a retired Christian minister born a Jewish son of a storekeeper, only a few weeks to book flights to the place that had never left his mind or his heart.

Yesterday, as they'd descended the airplane's stairway after arriving at the Prague airport, Charles had a feeling his father had come not only to seek the treasure but also to lay to rest his past and find some direction for his future.

This is my story too, Charles whispered within his heart. No one from their family would be alive if it hadn't been for others risking their lives, especially a special woman his father swore never to forget.

"Do you see initials in the stone?" The older man's words echoed down the well. Even though this was the first time he'd been back in his home country since he'd ridden away on the kindertransport in 1939, his Czech accent was still strong. Most people knew that Ondřej Šimon, or Andrew Simon as he was known in the United States, was of European descent, but few understood what he'd faced during the war. It had been hard for Charles to understand as well until he'd come here. His father seemed to come alive when they arrived, as if landing on his home soil had been the key to unlocking the emotions hidden deep inside.

Standing before the astrological clock yesterday in Prague's Old Town Square, his father—who'd given a hundred talks about his experience in the war without shedding a tear—had wept, leaning heavy on his son for support. Then, as if remembering the Nazis' rigid march pounding down the cobblestone streets, he'd clutched Charles's hand and urged that they return to the quiet of their hotel room. Side by side, they'd walked with quick steps, memories trailing his father like hunting hounds.

It had been a miracle that his father had escaped Czechoslovakia in the first place. The majority of Jewish boys his age had become ashes in the crematoriums of Terezín, Sobibór, and Auschwitz.

“I’m looking for them,” Charles called back up, pushing his tangle of thoughts down to the well’s depths, forcing his attention back to the task at hand.

Charles placed his hands on the moist rock wall and turned himself slowly as he dangled just below the opening. He supposed his grandfather had tied a rope to a nearby tree to lower himself into this place. Had he expected his young son to do the same?

His headlight illuminated the gray stone. Halfway around his slow circle, he spotted something. He sucked in a breath, cool air filling his lungs. A carved stone with the letters “A.S.” sat eye-level, undisturbed for the last fifty-five years.

“I see it!” he called up to his father.

Charles reached into his back pocket and pulled out the long iron file his father had brought from his workshop in Michigan. He inserted the end of the file under the stone and was amazed by how easily the rock slid out and how light it was in his hand. It was rectangular, no more than four inches thick—the size of a small box of cereal. Charles discovered next that it was a mere cover for a secret compartment behind it, and his respect for the grandfather he never knew grew. Had Abram Šimon also been fascinated by medieval tales and hidden treasure as a child?

Charles was amazed that his grandfather had come up with such a clever secret compartment and that the man had recognized the threat the Germans posed just outside their country’s gates. Not only had he known, but he had the forethought to hide something of value and then tell his young son its location. And

now through the stories—and whatever was held within this hidden chamber—Abram Šimon’s legacy would live on.

“I have the cover off. What do you think, Dad? Should I reach inside and see what I find?”

“Is that a real question?” Nervous laughter flowed down the well, echoing around Charles. “Why have you not done it yet? Are you waiting for me to have a heart attack right on this spot?”

Charles reached into the opening, his fingers brushing against something soft and wet. Was something alive in there? He quickly pulled back his hand and then focused his headlamp to illuminate the space. A dark form filled the opening. A black velvet bag. And reflecting off his headlamp was an intricately stitched Star of David, sewn upon the velvet, and Hebrew lettering he couldn’t decipher.

Charles reached in his hand and pulled. The bag was bulky—larger and heavier than he thought. He had to wiggle it to and fro to get it out of the spot. Finally, he was able to release it, though it almost slipped out of his hand and into the depths of the well.

“I have it!” he called up to his father, trying to balance the heavy bag in one hand and the stone in the other.

“Ready to be pulled up?”

“Wait a minute. Let me put the stone back.”

“*Ne!*” his father called, slipping back into the Czech language as he often did when thoughts of his home country filled his mind. “Bring that up too. I need to see it.”

Need to see it. Need to feel the connection with his father. Need to be reminded how he was cared for and loved.

“Okay then, pull me up!”

Charles allowed himself to be lifted to the surface by his father’s slow pulls, much the same way he’d allowed himself to be pulled into his father’s stories throughout the years. Many

survivors refused to speak about what they'd experienced, but his father had been the opposite. For as long as Charles could remember, his father visited schools and organizations, telling about his daring escape and how his life had been spared.

The gold star of David embroidered on the velvet bag spoke of times past and a family Charles had never known. It spoke of his grandfather, who'd found a way to offer a gift to those left behind, even after his death. But mostly it was a tangible reminder of who his father was and the miracle that had saved his life in a war-torn world, where heroes had emerged from the most unlikely places.

— ONE —

London, England

Monday, December 12, 1938

Amity Mitchell shivered slightly despite the warmth of the small coal-burning stove inside the conservatory. Across from her sat her student, poring over her books—or at least pretending to for her tutor’s sake.

Even though Christmas was just a few weeks away and white flakes of snow fell, fifteen-year-old Celia, her pupil and friend, insisted on doing her studies within the glass-walled greenhouse attached to the large London family home. It was bad enough to Celia that she and her father came to their London home for the winter, leaving their Somerset estate for the season, but the young woman couldn’t bear to be within the stuffy walls of the brick manor while doing her studies. The chilly conservatory was a compromise.

Celia craved the wide-open countryside. She longed for fresh air, for freedom. This glass cage was as close as Amity could offer. Little did Celia realize that all of England had become a glass cage to Amity. A place to view the cold world beyond the United Kingdom’s rocky shores. A fragile protection that Amity guessed

would shatter the moment Adolf Hitler, chancellor of Germany, raised his fist in force against her adopted country. The world had already witnessed Germany's hate and violence against the Jews. The *Kristallnacht* pogrom on November 9, when Jewish homes, shops, businesses, and synagogues were destroyed, showed what would happen to anyone Hitler wished to destroy. It was said hundreds of Jews had been murdered and thousands arrested. Did the English believe they were beyond such fate?

Don't have such dreadful thoughts, Amity scolded herself, but it didn't work. With the recent signing of the Munich Agreement, permitting Nazi Germany's annexation of portions of Czechoslovakia, she was starting to see a threat on every corner, a German spy behind every smile—just as in one of Celia's father's novels.

Amity needed to focus her mind on educating one young woman instead of allowing her thoughts to cross borders and fret about foreign issues over which she had no control. *At least for today*. But what about the holiday to come? She was considering actually crossing borders and traveling deep into the heart of Europe. Would leaving for a time, at her brother's request, jeopardize her position here? Worries crowded in again.

Do your job and do it well, and perhaps Clark will choose to extend your contract, she reminded herself. It wasn't every American who was offered a chance to enjoy London society the way she had been. But was there something more for her?

Like Celia, Amity enjoyed her employer's country house—a Georgian manor near the village of Templecombe named Cartwright Manor. But the city house was nothing to sneeze at either. It was grander than any home she'd been in back in the states and was situated on The Drive, one of the most beautiful parts of London in the South Woodford district. Amity had her own

large bedroom with an en suite bath, and most of the time she felt more a part of the family than an employee.

And yet the year was almost over, and Clark had not brought up her terms for the upcoming year. Did they still want her around? Celia was a bright girl. Did her father feel it unnecessary to hire a tutor to continue preparing Celia for university but was afraid to tell her so? Amity could understand if that was the case.

Amity enjoyed the flexibility and freedom that came with being a private tutor. If only she'd been allowed to explore and to dream when she was Celia's age instead of being the one to care for her mother and stepfather while her half-brother, Andrew, moved abroad.

Andrew's father was a British sea captain, and he had met and married their mother after meeting on holiday. After his death from a shipwreck, their mother had returned to America and married a second time, and that's when Amity had been born. Five years her senior, Andrew had been a doting brother, and her heart had been broken the day he decided to leave. Adored by his British grandparents, Andrew had moved to London as a teen and had done well for himself.

After her parents' death in an automobile accident, Andrew had sent for her, and a few years after her arrival he had introduced her to the bestselling author Clark Cartwright, a widower who was in need of a young, interesting tutor who could maintain control of Celia, yet also not be too uptight about her fanciful ways.

"School the child without shattering her imagination in the process," Clark had urged. Amity attempted to do her best with both.

Amity rubbed her hands together now, fighting off the chill, and Celia lifted her gaze from the history book in front of her.

Her eyes widened as she looked out the window beyond Amity's shoulder.

"Oh, look, Ami!" Celia jumped to her feet and pointed to a bird that hopped around the base of the shrubbery. "It's a thrush. And look, he's carrying a red berry. What a cheeky little thing, isn't it?"

Amity blew out a sigh. How would she ever be able to keep this young woman focused on her studies when her soul ached to be out in the winter gardens exploring?

"Very cheeky indeed." Amity forced a smile. "Tell you what, let's finish our history, and then we'll bundle up and take a stroll. Maybe you can use the camera you received for your birthday."

"I'd rather watch the birds than photograph them, but it *was* a thoughtful gift from Father. But really, do we have to finish this chapter? There's always tomorrow." Celia winked.

Amity slid Celia's book closer to herself, scanning the pages they'd already covered. "Well, how about you answer two questions, and if you get them both right we'll finish the rest of the chapter tomorrow?"

Celia straightened in her chair and tucked a strand of silky black hair behind her ear. Her hair was opposite of Amity's own auburn locks, which were neither straight nor silky.

Celia clapped her hands together. "Two questions. I'm keen on that." She wore a dark blue dress and white sweater, and the young woman looked more like a lady with each passing day—except for moments like these, when the little girl inside wanted to explore and play.

Amity tilted up the book so her pupil couldn't see the answers and flipped back a few pages. She cleared her throat. "First question: What fierce invader was labeled 'the scourge of God'?"

"Are you talking about the fourth century or today?" Celia

smirked. “Because after the annexation of the Sudetenland, Daddy thinks Hitler is just getting started, and Grandfather has called the Germans the Huns since the Great War. So, if that’s who you mean...” She let her voice trail off, humor in her gaze.

Amity lifted an eyebrow, wondering how much longer she’d be able to keep up with her pupil’s intellect. “I agree with your father about Hitler—and yes, the Germans were often referred to as the Huns during the war—but I was discussing the *fifth* century, thank you very much.”

“Then that would be Attila the Hun, of course.” Celia studied her nail cuticles as if bored by the question. Then she perked up, shifting in her seat with excitement. “But speaking of the invader, did you hear there is a new novel called *The White Stag* about the Huns and Attila’s sweep through Europe? I can’t imagine the drama. I assume it’s downright brilliant, and Daddy promised to get me a copy the next time we’re at the bookshop. He’s heard good reviews despite the fact it’s from an American author.”

Amity placed a hand on her hip. “*Despite* the fact?” She narrowed her gaze, pretending to be offended.

“Second question,” Amity started before Celia could launch into reviews of other new books she hoped to read. “What was the name of the pope who stopped Attila just outside of Rome and obtained from him the promise that he would withdraw from Italy and negotiate peace with the emperor?”

Celia rose and smoothed her hands down her skirt. “Pope Leo I. Can we go out now?”

Amity closed the history book. “Yes. You’ve done well. Bravo.” Then she pointed to the scattering of papers and books on the worktable. “But first put away your things. I’ll never hear the end of it from Mrs. McGovern if you leave your papers askew.”

“Oh, I have no doubt about that.” Celia gathered up her books

in a pile. She grinned. “Sometimes I wonder who really is the head of this household, my father or our stodgy head housekeeper.”

“Shh.” Amity covered her lips with her finger. “The walls seem to have ears here.” Then she helped by gathering up the loose papers and pens.

As they cleaned up, Amity couldn’t get the young woman’s comment about Hitler off her mind. She hadn’t heard anyone compare the German dictator with the Hun destroyer before, but something deep inside told her it was a fair comparison. After listening to Hitler’s speeches on the BBC, she’d be surprised if he stopped at the Sudetenland. Even though both France and Britain were intent on avoiding war, Amity suspected it would come to that.

Once the cleanup was complete, Celia wasted no time and took hurried steps toward the cloakroom.

“One more question,” Amity called out as she rose from her spot at the table.

Celia swung around, placing her hands on her hips and swishing her skirt from side to side as she pouted. “But you said two questions only.”

Amity nodded. “This isn’t so much a question as something to ponder. Would you have done it? Would you have dared to approach someone as vicious as Attila the Hun?”

Celia lifted her face to the conservatory’s glass ceiling and focused on the falling snow. She stood quietly, and for a moment Amity was certain she’d forgotten the question and had again become lost in her thoughts. Amity was about to ask again when Celia met Amity’s gaze.

“I suppose if I knew God was on my side I would dare to stand up to a Hun invader. Surely Pope Leo I felt that He was.”

“But he could have died,” Amity commented, following Celia to the cloakroom to grab their wraps.

“We’re all going to die, aren’t we?” Celia’s voiced softened, and she suddenly seemed older than her fifteen years. Her face fell, and the joy of the earlier moment was gone. Amity had no doubt the young woman was thinking of her mother, who’d died little more than three years ago. “It’s a good question though,” Celia continued. “What if Leo hadn’t gone? What if he’d been too scared?”

Amity slipped her arms into her wool coat, and a strange sensation settled in her chest. “Rome would have been conquered, and the world as we know it would have been different.”

It still might be different yet, a nagging fear inside Amity’s gut suggested. Despite the festivities of this season—the Christmas lights of Oxford Street and the Trafalgar Square tree—this century’s own Attila seemed to be on the move, first annexing Austria and now the Sudetenland.

“Peace for our time,” Chamberlain had declared after signing a nonaggression treaty with the German leader, but who really believed Hitler would hold up his side of the bargain?

Hush now, it’s none of your concern, she scolded herself. Even though Andrew now worked for the British Home Office, which oversaw immigration in the United Kingdom, they were both American citizens and could leave the UK at any time. Attila wasn’t storming at her own country’s gates. At least not yet.

Amity considered the telegram she’d received from her brother at lunchtime. It was a cryptic note, one she didn’t fully understand.

Please visit me in Prague for the holiday. Need assistance with Jewish welfare work. Send date of your arrival. Room will be waiting for you at Hotel Evropa. STOP.

It was just like her brother to demand so much and send so little information. Did he expect her to drop everything and come? To buy a ticket and travel to a part of the world in crisis? What

would Clark think about that? What about Celia? Amity couldn't just leave the young woman behind, could she?

Then again, what was this Jewish welfare work? Surely it had to be important for her brother to send for her. Even without more information in the telegram, Amity understood the context behind her brother's message. With the recent occupation of the Sudetenland, the Jews who'd lived in that part of Czechoslovakia had been pushed out of the newly annexed area, either by Nazi terror or Nazi threats. Were the streets of Prague now filled with refugee families? It would make sense if they were. But if that was the case, why had Andrew requested her? She was no Pope Leo I. What could she offer in the face of Hun invaders?