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A Case of Twelve

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in English at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 2009

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Your file *Votre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-63214-7
Our file *Notre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-63214-7

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Canada

A Case of Twelve by Julia Gedeon-Matusky is a fictional coming-of-age story that explores the challenges facing a teenaged boy and his Slovak-Canadian family during the politically and socially tumultuous period in Quebec from 1964 to 1967. The family struggles financially and personally as it witnesses its Slovak immigrant community dissipate into the anonymity of the larger society. The members of the Danco family resist adapting to an increasingly French milieu within Montreal because they consider themselves part of English Canada rather than Quebec. They become pitted against the frustration, anger and occasionally violent actions of some Québécois who feel their French language, culture and business opportunities continue to be thwarted by the predominantly English business elite. The novel also relates how various ethnic cultures intersect daily within an increasingly cosmopolitan Montreal as the city prepares to welcome the world at Expo '67. At the same time, it conveys some of the prejudices that were alive and well against women, divorced parents, people with disabilities, homosexuals, and the hippie culture then coming into vogue. Marek Danco filters all these experiences as a 13-to-15-year-old boy who is striving to attain his personal space and freedom as well as sexual experience, all while trying to figure who might have abused a little girl who he helps to rescue from a manhole.

The author gratefully acknowledges the information about Slavic mythology contained in

Tales from Slavic Myths by Ivan Hudec,

Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc., Wauconda, Illinois.

Chapter One

Marek Danco cringed when he saw the staircase at 4081 Henri Julien. The first ten steps coiled like a snake before a dozen others soared with a ladder's steepness. They led to the second storey of the street's tallest triplex. Marek wanted to punch whoever had the dumb idea of building outdoor stairs in a city as wintery as Montreal. He kicked forward the leggy stand on his bike. The heavy frame lurched to one side. Inside the front metal basket, a cardboard box slid across like skates. Marek had to run to stop two beer quarts from tumbling out. A roll of toilet paper bounced over his arm and plopped into a snow bank. He flung it back into the box with its soaked side buried. It wasn't fair that he had to deliver groceries when all his friends were playing street hockey or having fun at the pinball machines and soccer tables in *Rizzo's Pool & Patates*.

Shoving the bike into thick snow, he wondered about how to contact the government. There had to be a law against putting thirteen-year-olds to work. If he could find a way to report his parents without them knowing, he would do it in a second. But they probably would find out and make his life even more miserable. One way or another, though, he was getting out of this stupid job, even if it meant running away. Mamo and Apo would call the police, but the cops might not look too hard for someone almost fourteen.

He booted away the fresh layer of snow from the first grey step. Just as he feared, it was caked in ice. He swallowed hard to keep his lunch down. The gold watch that Apo took from a customer as payment said it was after four. It would be dark in no time. Marek grabbed the grocery box, slipped his fingers inside its tuck-away handles and

edged upwards, grinding a heel into each wooden step and gliding his back along the wrought-iron banister. Where the stairs corkscrewed tightest, he adjusted his footing to the widest side of each pie-sized plank without looking down. He knew one glance through the gaps between the stairs and his head would spin like a top.

Marek had begged his parents to get someone else to deliver groceries for them. He nearly convinced Mamo by warning that his grades would get worse, but Apo insisted Marek had all evening after supper to do homework. How could Marek reason with a man who forced his seven-year-old daughter to stay at the kitchen table until she finished all her breakfast? Danika warned Apo that eggs made her puke. Marek felt a little guilty about telling her the wiggly white stuff attached to an egg was sperm, but it wasn't his fault Apo was so obsessed about them eating all the food on their plate. If Marek heard one more time about how Apo had nothing but potatoes and beets to eat in Slovakia, he would scream. It would have served Apo right if Danika had vomited all over him, just as it would if Marek fell backwards now and split open his skull.

Pushing the box onto a step a few rungs ahead, Marek crouched and crawled up the highest stairs as he gripped the banister. He prayed none of his friends saw him climbing up like a monkey. The street was deserted. The whole city grew quiet after a snowstorm. If he fell and yelled, his voice might carry from this height to the top of the block, but whether anyone would come outside to help was another thing.

He wished Apo had a real job like other fathers, working for the railroad or in construction. Marek's grandmother was always talking about how in the Old Country her family had been something. Baba went on and on about how everyone admired her father because he was such a knowledgeable teacher. Obviously those kinds of smarts weren't

automatically passed down from generation to generation. Otherwise, Baba would be able to speak English after thirty years in Canada and Apo would have a better job. Although Marek realized it must have been awful for Apo to be put back into the first grade when he came to Canada in 1934. At nine years old, he was twice the height of the other pupils. The kids in the higher grades constantly made fun of him and the other immigrants for being so far behind, especially after Apo and his best friend, Radovan Sokol, kept skipping classes. No wonder they quit after Grade Four. Yet Apo could have gone to night school when he got older. Instead he wasted his time in Baba and Dzedo's store. *Danco's Grocery* was a gold mine when all the Slovaks lived nearby, but most of them had moved to better neighbourhoods over the last few years. Mamo let Apo know it every time someone they knew bought a bungalow with a front yard and room for a vegetable garden in the back.

A voice as shrill as a seagull's yelled out Marek's name. One of Marek's boots slipped and his right shin slammed against several stairs. Grabbing onto a stair, he pulled himself up onto the landing. "What the fuck are you trying to do?" he shouted at his sister's best friend. "Kill me?"

Catina d'Alves Estrella waved a fuzzy mitt at him. She had the roundness of a babka doll all bundled up in her red snowsuit with a white hat and scarf covering everything but her chocolate eyes and pudgy nose. "I just wanted to—"

"Are you following me?" Marek suspected the little pain-in-the-ass had a crush on him. It pissed him off that Catina's mother didn't have someone look after Catina until she got home from work. Instead Catina was always hanging out with Danika at home or

in the store. They drove Marek nuts: Catina staring at him, and Danika asking stupid questions and then giggling like a fool.

Catina pointed up the street. “I live–”

“Vapra casa,” Marek yelled, remembering the Portuguese from his school buddies.

“I just wanted...”

“Que é a matéria? Is your brain frozen? Vapra casa! Go home!”

Catina scrunched her mitts up to her eyes and ran off. Marek felt a little bad about making a small kid cry, but he didn’t need a shadow.

Pain surged through his shin. Clenching the banister, he stood as close to the building as possible as he caught his breath. There had to be a way to get Benoît Bourke to deliver the groceries again. Marek felt terrible about Apo firing him. Benoît had worked for *Danco’s Grocery* for as long as Marek could remember. Apo had felt sorry for Benoît when his Papa took off, leaving his Mama with four kids. Benoît was a little young at ten to be a delivery boy, but his Mama wouldn’t take charity. She said she knew what all the Europeans already thought of the poor French people. The store had always been busy then, so Apo hired Benoît and often gave him extra food or money.

Marek pulled out a cigarette from his vinyl bomber jacket. He remembered when Benoît had taught him how to inhale properly about three years earlier. They had gone into the lane so Marek’s parents wouldn’t see him. He always liked hanging out with Benoît. They pitched baseball cards and talked hockey. Marek also liked Benoît explaining how girls enjoyed being kissed and touched, although he doubted a guy as

scrawny as Benoît was always speaking from personal experience. Marek couldn't remember a time when he didn't know Benoît. When Marek was little, Benoît often invited him to ride on the delivery bike's handlebars. Although a bit scared up there, Marek knew Benoît would never do anything to hurt him. One time Benoît even stopped a gang of older kids from taking candy from Marek's pockets. So what did Marek go and do as thanks? He felt like such a shit for getting Benoît fired.

It was his fault, even if he didn't do it on purpose. How was he supposed to know his parents would notice a bit of change missing from the register now and then? He couldn't believe it when Apo had accused Benoît of stealing. Of course Benoît denied it. He wasn't the kind of guy to do such a thing. Benoît made a point of being loyal, not like his Papa. Marek hadn't known where to look when Benoît turned to him for support. Benoît looked so hurt that Marek couldn't bring himself to admit that he was the one who had skimmed the cash.

Three weeks later, Marek was still mad at himself for being so greedy. He should have kept track of the money he was taking. He never pinched quarters, but the nickels and dimes must have added up. It served him right to get saddled with the delivery job, and he would do it without complaining if outside heights didn't make him so dizzy all the time. He thought about telling Mamo and Apo about his fear of heights, but Apo would tell his best friend Raddy, or Mamo would mention it to one of her friends, and Montreal's whole Slovak community would know. He had to find another way to make things right with Benoît.

He could still fess up about taking the money. He could handle the strapping across his palms from Apo's belt. It would be harder to stomach the disappointment in

Mamo's face. But if it fixed things, he would do it. The problem was there was no guarantee it would. Benoît and Apo had called each other awful names. There was no way Benoît would come back without an apology from Apo, and Apo wasn't big on admitting mistakes. He also seemed happier with Benoît gone. Why pay a stranger when you can get your own kid to do the work for a measly two-dollar allowance a week plus tips?

Marek took a deep drag and blew several circles. The cold air kept the rings intact longer than usual. If only Vincent Jelen could see how perfectly round they were. Marek had learned by watching Vince work his mouth like a camel. They had known each other all their lives. Marek still remembered Vince bouncing him on his lap and taking him for horsey rides at *The Slovak Hall*. When Marek got older, Vince liked to grab a hold of him for a wrestling match or tickle fights. They always had fun. Over the last few years, though, Marek almost had to stand on his head to get Vince's attention. If only Vince realized how badly Marek wanted to work at *Jelen's Auto Repair*. There was fat chance of that happening as long as he was slave labour for Apo. Marek had to do everything he could to get Apo to rehire Benoît.

If Apo refused, Marek would run away. He planned to leave home in another two years anyway, as soon as he turned sixteen and could legally quit school. First he wanted to work at Expo '67 so he could meet people from all over the world. Then he would learn a trade: car mechanics or body work from Vince, if he could. He wasn't going to waste his life stuck behind a counter.

The cross on Mont-Royal lit up. The bitter cold blurred the yellow lights into a halo. He could see nearly all the snow-coated summit from the balcony and he felt fine as

long as he didn't look downwards. He spun the watch on his wrist and saw it was almost half past four. Apo wanted everyone at the table with their hands washed by no later than 5:30 so he could eat supper before the six o'clock news. With his boot, Marek pushed the grocery box towards the left side of the double doors. Then balancing the box on a knee, he twirled the doorbell. He counted three steamboats and spun it again. He started to peel a curled green paint chip when a small man with mousy brown hair peeked out from behind the door's curtained window. Marek rolled his eyes. He had overheard Apo say Gaston Sauvageau owed everybody money. No wonder Gaston checked who was at the door before opening it. No one else did. Most people kept their doors unlocked till bedtime.

Dressed in work pants and a sleeveless white undershirt, Gaston cracked open the heavy door and reached for the groceries.

Marek twisted his waist to keep the box away. "You have to pay cash."

"Voyons, mets tous ça sur mon tab," Gaston mumbled without his dentures.

"We can't put any more stuff on your tab until you pay some of it off."

"Ton papa me connaît."

Marek tightened his grip. "My dad knows you alright. He says cash only – *argent seulement* – until you pay us something."

Gaston stomped his bare feet. "Ostie. Tabernac."

Marek was forcing back a grin when Gaston grabbed the two quarts of beer and slammed the door shut. Marek stood there stunned for a second. Then he spun the

doorbell again and again. Finally he put down the box and banged his fist against the wooden door until his hand ached.

He leaned forward and yelled through the letter slot. "Open this fucking door, you son of a bitch, or I swear I'll kick it down."

A window above swished open and a woman leaned out. "What are you doing?" she asked with a Slavic accent.

Marek kept smashing his boot against the door.

"What the hell are you doing?" she yelled, loud enough this time to make him stop and look up. When she folded her arms on the window casing, her boobs stood out like rocket missiles. Usually boobs that plump and pointy would make Marek hornier than a dog in heat, but Gaston had pissed him off so badly that he could hardly think. "Mind your own business," he said.

"Stop or I'll call the police." Her raspy voice sounded like she meant it.

"What's this to you?"

"I own the building," she said.

Marek figured she must have meant with her husband, but it still made him pause. The raised arch of her pencilled eyebrows told him she wasn't kidding. She had eyes the colour of asparagus. Her skin had leathered from too much sun but it made her look warm in the middle of winter. She wore shiny peach lipstick applied really thick. Marek tried to keep his gaze on her face, but it kept slipping to her boobs. When she noticed him staring, she clasped her silk kimono.

"What did Gaston do?" she asked.

She had straight white teeth with a single gold cap on the right side.

“Nothing.”

“If I know Gaston, he did something. He fucks everybody.”

Marek had never heard *that* word come out of woman’s mouth.

She leaned farther out. Marek couldn’t believe the size of her boobs.

“Who are you?” she asked.

Her squinting made him nervous. “Why?”

“Tell me, and I’ll pay for whatever Gaston stole from you.”

“How do you know he took anything?”

“I know Gaston,” she said as she kept staring. “Are you Hank’s kid?”

Hardly anyone called Apo by the English version of his name. Marek thought he knew all of his parents’ friends, but he had never met this woman. He would have remembered those boobs. Her accent also sounded a little different – Polish or Hungarian. There were still a few other Slavic families in the neighbourhood.

“Come upstairs,” she said. “I’ll give you money.”

Marek hesitated. He couldn’t think of why this lady wanted to pay for Gaston. Deciding it didn’t matter, he pushed open the door as soon as she released the lock with the inside cord. He shut the door, placed the grocery box at the bottom of the landing and ran up the stairs two at a time.

“I’m Klaudia Toth.” As she extended a hand, her kimono fell open exposing a sheer nightgown over a nipple as dark and round as a ripe plum.

“Your father, did he ever mention me?”

Marek shook his head as he kept staring at her. He only ever saw this much woman in the girly magazines that Apo kept hidden behind the furnace in an old suitcase. *Touch her*, the horny voice in his head kept saying. *Dressed like that, she's asking for you to touch her. Grab her nipple. The worst she can do is slap you.* Marek silenced the voice by staring at the floor.

When he looked back up, she had refastened her kimono belt. As she reached for his arm to invite him inside, he caught a whiff of her scent: apple blossoms, and cabbage. The place reeked of cabbage rolls. His stomach growled embarrassingly with hunger. “Sorry,” he said, feeling himself blush.

She motioned for him to follow her down a long hallway. His dick twitched as he watched her butt jiggle. Her heeled slippers lifted her backside up and out. Yet it was still quite flat. She was built like a Barbie doll – all boobs, very little ass.

At the kitchen table, she took his wrists. Her fingers were soft and warm but the sharpness of her enamelled nails hurt a little as they pressed into his skin.

“Let me look at you,” she said with a smile that reminded him of when his aunts pinched his cheeks.

“You’re Hank’s son, alright.”

“How do you know him?”

“I guess he never told you.” She motioned for him to wait and disappeared into a bedroom off the kitchen.

He assumed she would return with some old photos of Apo and her, but she came back with a small change purse.

“Will this cover it?” she asked, handing Marek a two-dollar bill.

“Yes, but I don’t know if I have enough money to give you back.”

She snapped the purse’s gold clasp. “Keep the change.”

Marek crumpled the money in his palm and nodded his thanks. With nothing else to say, he edged towards the door, hoping she would stop him. At the bottom of the stairs, he struggled to get the lock to stay open. Rather than pulling the cord, she clicked down the stairs in her fluffy slippers. Her warm hands brushed against his as she turned the lock. He picked up the grocery box to conceal his hard-on as he backed out of the doorway. After she closed the door, he pressed the box against his crotch. The bulge in his jeans felt uncomfortable as hell but also filled him with pride.

It occurred to him that she might be watching. If she was, then she would know what he wanted if she ever invited him inside again. In the meantime, the fierce cold quickly took care of his discomfort, and the steep descent reminded him that he needed to set things right with Benoît.

Chapter Two

The steps outside *Danco's Grocery* spilled onto Colonial and Napoleon, confusing even the mailman about the address. The wind whipped around this narrow corner, often rattling the large windows overlooking each street. On this late November day it sent Marek's tuque flying as he planted the delivery bike into the snow. He could hardly breathe with his nose stuffed from the cold. It wasn't fair that he was freezing his ass off while every other kid was sleeping or watching Saturday cartoons. He stomped the snow off his boots and ran up the couple of cement steps into the store he had known all his life. The cowbell screwed over the door frame announced his arrival.

"Where've you been?" Apo straightened up from leaning his thick forearms on *The Montreal Star* pages spread open across the candy counter. A full white apron covering his belly made him look more like a butcher than a grocer. Marek shuddered at Apo's bare arms. No matter how much cold air blasted into the store every time the door opened, Marek had never seen Apo shiver in the short-sleeved cotton shirts he wore year-round. Either his blubber kept him warm like a seal or he had the cold blood of a lizard. His biceps were impressive from lifting so many crates and cases, but the rest of him was plain fat.

"Ti mñe čuješ?"

"Yes, I hear you." Marek shook out his jacket and tossed it onto a coat stand. "Where do you think I've been? It's hard to pedal through all that snow, you know."

Marek blew his nose as long and loud as he could. His cheeks tingled from the cold. His fingers throbbed as he rubbed the numbness from them.

Apo hunched over his paper again, his bald head gleaming like a bowling ball. Marek hoped it was true about men getting their hairline from their mother's side. Mamo had nice thick hair that was blond when she was young. Marek noticed his was getting darker as he got older, too. He did look more like her: tall and lean with high cheekbones. She told everybody how both his eyes and hers changed from blue to green depending on the colour of clothes they wore. Apo's eyes were grey, like his mood most of the time. His eyes, body, fingers – everything about him was too big and round.

Still cold but thirsty, Marek fished a Kik Cola out of the big red cooler. The moisture from the steel lid caused his hand to slip and the cover landed with a thud.

“What the fu–” Apo grabbed his chest in a mock heart attack.

“Sorry.” Marek turned away, hiding a smile. Maybe if he got on Apo's nerves enough, he could get fired. He stuck the cola's neck into the cooler's opener and caught the cap with the same hand before it could clank down the shaft. He peeled the cork liner from the cap and slipped it into his pocket. Kik wanted a thousand liners for a three-speed bike. He eased himself onto the cooler. The cola tasted good and for the first time all morning he relaxed as he watched Apo refold the paper and return it to its stand.

“What are you staring at?”

“Nič. Nothing.” Oh boy. Apo was in one of his moods. Marek considered retreating upstairs, but it was Saturday. Mamo would force him to vacuum or do other women's chores. No, thank you. The quiet between Marek and Apo made the hum from the store's fridges and neon lights seem as loud as a car idling. Marek took another sip of his Kik and burped loudly. Gassy bubbles erupted from his nose. Apo looked up, shook his head but then laughed so hard that his belly shook. Marek laughed, too. This wasn't

exactly part of his plan to get on Apo's nerves, but a good chuckle might put Apo in the mood to tell him about Klaudia. Ever since Marek had seen that plum nipple a week earlier, he couldn't stop thinking about what it would be like to touch it, squeeze it, kiss it... He shifted on the cooler. On any other day, he would have sneaked up to his room to wank off, but on a Saturday, Mamo wouldn't leave him alone, even for the minute it would take.

He reached for a Mae West and ripped open the wrapper. His best friend Patrick Richard was impressed when Marek told him Mae Wests were named after the army's puffy life vests and not the steamy Hollywood star. Apo had found that out when he met the Quebec City baker who had invented the small cakes. At least Apo had done one cool thing in his life. Nothing went better together than a Pepsi and Mae West. Of course, *Danco's Grocery* sold only Kik and Coke because the salesmen were Slovak. Marek warned his parents they were missing out on the Pepsi Generation, but he might as well have been talking to plywood.

He showed the Mae West to Apo, who nodded. Apo was supposed to write down everything the family ate or drank. Marek couldn't understand why Apo couldn't be bothered to do this when he saw how Mamo pulled at her permed curls doing inventory at the end of each month. It wasn't as if he was busy.

As Marek gulped the soft drink, he felt someone watching him. The cold had fogged up the Colonial window. He considered rubbing a spot clear with his elbow, but Apo would have a fit. Marek wanted to annoy him but not enough to risk getting his hands strapped. No one was allowed to put so much as a finger on Apo's limited view of the outside world. It was almost impossible to see out the Napoleon window with the

huge cooler and wooden soft drink crates in front of it. The Colonial window had only a single wire strung across its base where Mamo attached penny bags of Maple Leaf chips with tiny clothespins.

Marek slid to the far side of the cooler to see out the Colonial window better. Sure enough, Tatiana Dusek was peeking out from behind the lace curtains across the street. It wasn't enough that Marek had Catina staring at him. There was also this weirdo. Marek knew Tatiana wasn't so much looking at him as for any distraction, but her gaze still gave him the creeps. Even through the fogged window he could see her face shrouded in a *babushka*. The woollen shawl had brightly coloured flowers and a dark green border and fringe. Marek had also seen her wearing the same kind of *chustkas* with maroon or navy borders. They concealed most of her head and the pigtails she wore into her early twenties. Her face was as pale as milk. No wonder. Her parents never let her outside except to shake out a rug or shovel the stairs. The instant she finished, one of them cracked open the door and curled a finger at her to return inside. She would be pretty with a bit of sun. Even with her kerchief, Marek could tell she had a slender neck, but she wore the same bulky sweaters and long skirts all year long.

As soon as Tatiana noticed him, she disappeared. A few seconds later, she looked out again. Marek thought about sticking his tongue out to see her reaction, but decided her life was miserable enough. Since her graduation, she hadn't been allowed to go anywhere except shopping with her parents on St. Lawrence Boulevard. It was odd that the Duseks didn't let her get some kind of job. She didn't seem funny in the head, like one of Marek's cousins. Tatiana looked smart the way her blueberry eyes drank up the world outside her window. If her parents were so worried for her safety, one of them

could walk her to and from work the way they did when she went to high school. Marek remembered how mortified Tatiana always looked as she tried to keep half a block ahead so it would seem as if she were on her own.

“Apo, why don’t the Duseks ever let Tatiana go out?”

“Mind your own business.”

Ha, ha. That was good one, coming from Apo who discussed the Duseks and every other Slovak whenever Raddy came to the store. Apo and Raddy gossiped more than women at a church bazaar.

When Marek looked back out, he saw only Pan Kysly struggling to open the door.

“Pomož jomu,” Apo said impatiently. “Help him.”

“Take it easy. I am.” Marek rolled his eyes as opened the door and extended a hand. The old man waved him off, preferring to press his gnarled knuckles onto the handle of his black cane.

It was so tempting to release the door early and have it squish Pan Kysly like a fly. That would teach him for ratting to Apo about seeing Marek at Mount Royal Park during school hours. Marek never liked Pan Kysly. No one else demanded to be called *Pan* – Mr. – all the time except this old geezer who thought he deserved special treatment because he managed to live into his seventies. Big frigging deal. Marek hopped back onto the cooler and watched Pan Kysly shuffle like an upright turtle down the store’s middle aisle.

Apo pushed his belly onto the counter to locate Pan Kysly’s whereabouts. If the Plexiglas ever did shatter under his weight, a gazillion jawbreakers, gummy bears and cinnamon hearts would scatter and Marek would grab as many as he could.

“It’s cheaper if you buy two,” Apo said when he saw Pan Kysly pick up a soup mix.

Pan Kysly put a wobbly hand to his ear.

“To tunši kec kupice dva,” Apo repeated louder.

“Ja ňe hluchy,” Pan Kysly yelled back.

No, of course, Pan Kysly wasn’t deaf. He just couldn’t hear anything.

“And why do I need two?”

Marek supposed the English was for his benefit, although he could easily understand whatever Pan had to say in his fancier Slovak.

“For 27 years, I’m alone... since my wife died... You know she had cancer. Why are you bothering me with two?”

Apo retreated under the counter and straightened the liquorice laces.

Pan Kysly returned the soup mix, almost knocking down the other boxes with his unsteady hand. His name suited him perfectly: he was as sour as bottled cabbage. Nearly every day he came to the store and nearly every day he bought almost nothing. Marek wished Apo had the balls to tell him to go shop elsewhere.

It took what seemed forever, but Marek waited until the old man reached the end of the aisle before he cleared his throat. “Apo, how do you know Klaudia Toth?”

Before Apo could answer, Pan Kysly poked out his head. “Tota kourva jedna,” he shouted, pretending to spit.

Apo’s face went beet red. “She’s not a whore,” he yelled back. “Don’t ever call her that in my store again.”

Marek sat up. He had never heard Apo raise his voice at a Slovak customer. A French or English customer, yes. Slovak? Never.

“Vona je kourva,” Pan repeated, squaring his shoulders.

Apo pursed his thin lips. “Take the empties to the yard,” he told Marek.

“Later.”

“Teraz,” Apo said.

Marek knew that low voice meant *right now*, no discussion. Marek picked up a couple of crates. The crystallized sugar in some of the empty soft drink bottles had created fruit flies. Marek rushed out the back into the yard so the cold would kill them before they flew out of the bottles.

The yard had boxes and crates stacked nearly a storey high under a tin roof. A wall of cement blocks topped with barbed wire kept out thieves and city inspectors. Marek pushed aside empty boxes and dumped the crates.

Rushing back into the store, Marek had to squeeze past Pan Kysly, who had planted himself in front of the windowed fridge packed with cold cuts. Pan Kysly stretched his neck so he could see Apo behind the meat case. Even on a wooden platform, Apo was hidden from the nose down.

Marek slid back onto the cooler.

“The usual?” Apo said, holding up a roll of beef salami.

“Just a quarter of a pound,” Pan Kysly said, as if he ever took more.

Apo switched on the slicer. Simply idling, it rattled tins on the shelves. When Apo glided its blade across the salami roll, it whined like a small buzz saw. Garlic perfumed the store. Apo noticed Marek licking his lips and threw him a slice.

“Don’t tell your mother,” Apo said.

Marek wondered if he meant about the salami or Klaudia. He jumped off the cooler to catch another slice, which made Apo laugh.

Once again in a better mood, Apo offered Pan Kysly a slice, but the old man refused to be distracted from the meat scale. What nerve thinking Apo might try to cheat him out of a couple of slices! Apo always gave people the full weight and sometimes, if he liked someone, a slice or two extra. Nevertheless, they both stared at the scale until the indicator stopped, and then repeated the process for a quarter pound of mock chicken.

“Something else?” Apo asked.

“A small piece of *slanina*,” Pan Kysly said, indicating the size with his thumb and crooked forefinger.

“Sorry, I’m out.” Apo grabbed the two small piles of meat sitting on waxed paper squares and within seconds had each wrapped in brown paper and tied with string.

Pan Kysly stomped the floor with his cane. “What do you mean you’re out?”

“I mean I don’t have no flat bacon.”

Marek always cringed when he heard Apo use bad grammar, but he didn’t dare correct him. He left that to Mamo.

Pan Kysly looked furious. “How could you run out of *slanina*?”

Without looking down, Apo stepped off the wooden platform and over to the cash register. “I don’t sell much anymore. Even Slovak people think it’s too fat, bad for the heart. So I order less so it won’t sit here and go bad.”

“Too fat?” Pan Kysly huffed. “That’s crazy. People need some fat in the winter.”

“Don’t tell me. Tell the people who don’t buy it no more.” Apo punched the register’s keys and waited for the plastic tally cards to pop up with the prices in the glass casing. The wooden drawer flew open with a loud ka-ching.

Pan Kysly kept muttering as he gave Apo the exact amount. “What kind of Slovak store is this without *slanina*?”

Apo put away the money and slammed the drawer. “Hey, you know what?”

“Co?”

A smile erupted on Apo’s broad face. “Tam, there... Česko-Slovensko at Expo ’67... Czechoslovakia’s going to ... coškal buduju... something big.”

Marek sat up. “Czechoslovakia is going to build a pavilion?”

Apo nodded, too excited to say more right away.

Marek smiled, too, as he imagined how easy it would be to get a job there. He was pretty sure his Slovak was good enough. He understood it better than he spoke it lately, but could improve that in no time. All he had to do was talk with Mamo or Baba, who never failed to correct him. What he needed to find out was how different Slovak was from Czech. He had never even met anyone who was Czech. None of the Slovaks he knew associated with them. Baba hated them. She would never forgive them for taking all the best jobs in the Old Country while the Slovaks were kept peasants. Greedy bosses, she called them. It seemed to Marek that Baba packed more bitterness than anything else in the one suitcase that she brought on the boat to Canada.

Marek wanted to ask about the differences between Slovak and Czech but knew better than to interrupt Apo while he was telling Pan Kysly in a mishmash of Slovak and

English what he had read about the pavilion in *The Montreal Star*. Apo was proud he could read English. Not all the Slovak men could.

“Dojsc – enough,” Pan Kysly yelled. “Speak proper Slovak – *vavrac* – not that backward *hotorak*.”

Marek’s jaw dropped. Everyone knew what a snob Pan Kysly was about his fancier dialect, but no one had ever been so outright insulting about the Slovak that Apo and Mamo spoke. For a second, Marek thought Apo might punch the geezer. A part of Marek wanted him to, but Apo was so big that a single blow could kill the old fart.

Slipping off the cooler, Marek approached the counter.

Apo’s eyes darted in his direction.

Behind Pan Kysly’s back, Marek circled his index finger to show how crazy the old man was. There were other Slovaks who thought the western dialects were more cultured than *the farmers’ talk* from the east, but they just made faces when they heard it spoken. It only became an open discussion when a *vavrac* wanted to marry a *hotorak* or vice versa. Then all the babas and dzedos gossiped about how bad a match it would be – the *vavrac* lowered in status, and the *hotorak* always made to feel less worthy. As if any of this should make the least bit of difference in Canada...

Apo opened a small paper bag with a thwack. He dumped the cold cuts into it and handed it over. “Dobrý deň,” he bid the old man in perfect *vavrac*.

“So do you think it will rain today?” Pan Kysly asked.

Apo wiped the counter. “Prosím, please, I have no more time to talk today.”

Yes! Marek cheered in silence.

“What do you have to do that is so important?” Pan Kysly demanded. “Order more *slanina* maybe?”

Apo walked out the back as if he didn't hear a word.

Pan Kysly huffed as he shuffled towards the door. Marek held it open so Pan Kysly could leave faster. Again he was tempted to let go and hurl Pan Kysly like a rock in a slingshot across the street and into Tatiana's window, but he waited till Pan Kysly edged down the first step just out of the door's reach.

“He's gone,” Marek said, but Apo didn't respond.

Marek went behind the counter to find Apo. When he realized Apo had either gone upstairs or into the yard, he crouched down to the shelves under the cash register and pocketed a few of the loose cigarettes that Apo sold three for a nickel. In the old days, he would have opened the cash register and helped himself to a few nickels, too. Now he could hardly look at the big silver register without feeling guilty about getting Benoît fired. He had to find out how much cash was missing and some way to replace it.

As Marek reached for a gumball, the damn cowbell over the door startled him. He bounced up and saw Radovan Sokol smiling like he had already had a few drinks. Raddy and Apo were *krajany* – from the same village back home – which apparently obligated them to be the best of friends for life.

Raddy wore a new fedora that looked pricey enough to be from *Henri Henri* on St. Catherine Street. Couldn't be. Raddy didn't have that kind of money. It had been months since he worked construction. He told everyone he needed a union card and the union wouldn't give cards to guys who couldn't speak French. No one believed him. With the Métro being dug and Expo's construction underway, the city needed every

worker it could find. Mamo told Apo that Raddy must have been caught drinking, but Apo refused to hear this gossip. He always rallied to his *krajan*'s defence.

Marek had to give his godfather credit for trying to look his best. Raddy never went out without shaving. His suits, though shiny in spots, were neatly pressed along with his shirts from a Chinese laundry. Such a waste of money, Mamo said, but Raddy didn't have a wife to do his wash.

Raddy patted Marek's head with his tobacco-stained fingers as he walked into the store. His nose reminded Marek of a tulip bulb covered in tiny blue and red capillaries. Mamo said it was blue from Raddy being so liquored up all the time.

Apo peeked out from the back of the store to make sure Pan Kysly had left.

"What's with you?" Raddy posed the question at the same time as he motioned whether it would be okay to grab a beer.

Apo looked at the *Dow* Beer and Ale wall clock. "A little early, no?"

Raddy shrugged. "Ah, give me a break. This damn liquor strike is making the bars run out of booze, and the taverns are so packed that it takes forever to get a stupid beer."

Apo nodded his okay and handed Raddy a paper bag so it would look like Raddy bought the bottle if Mamo showed up.

Raddy lifted the bottle cap off with his bare thumb. "I hate these stubbies," he said, taking a sip. "They make me feel like I'm drinking from a baby bottle."

"Well, you practically nurse yourself on beer," Apo said.

"Very funny," Raddy said as he sat on a stack of small beer cases.

Apo shook his head. "You're going to break the cardboard."

"I'm not that heavy."

“Wait,” Apo said, motioning for Raddy to stand. He reached behind Raddy and pulled forward the few larger cases of twenty-four beers.

Raddy plopped down onto his skinny ass.

Apo sniffed the air. “You smell like a swimming pool.”

Raddy took a whiff of his clothes. “It’s the chlorine or something from *Colonial Bath*.”

Apo gave him a weird look. “What are you doing there? You’re not one of those faggots – God forbid – are you?”

Raddy looked taken aback. “Why? Because it’s cheaper for me to wash over there than pay my greedy landlady what she wants for hot water?”

Apo gave Raddy a playful shove before returning behind the counter.

“I bumped into Pan Kysly on the way here,” Raddy said. “Was he ever pissed off about something?”

Apo picked up a rag and wiped the register. “Don’t talk to me about him.”

Raddy looked from Apo to Marek to Apo again. “Why? What happened?”

“He’s got some nerve telling me what kind of Slovak to speak,” Apo fumed. “Who gives an ef about Slovak dialects anyway? We’re in Canada now. We should be speaking English.”

Raddy downed his beer and asked for another.

“I can’t keep giving you free beer,” Apo said.

“Lem išče jeden?”

“One more and that’s it,” Apo said.

Of course, it wouldn't be. Apo could never say no to Raddy. When Mamo complained, he insisted they had to make allowances for Raddy not having a father since he was ten. Everyone saw Raddy for the drunk he was, except Apo. Yes, they were *krajany* and friends since grade school, but Apo treated Raddy like he could do no wrong.

“Czechoslovakia is going to build a pavilion at Expo '67,” Marek told Raddy.

Apo's face brightened. “Tak! Yes. To budze coškal veľke – really big.”

“Why are you getting so excited?” Raddy said, looking annoyed. “It's probably going to have only Czech stuff in it.”

Apo flattened his plump hands on the counter and straightened his elbows. “It is *Czecho-slovakia*.”

“So what? You really think the Czechs will let Slovaks take up their space?”

Apo grabbed *The Montreal Star* off its stand and jabbed at it with his finger. “It's going to be a big pavilion.”

“What are Slovaks going to show anyway? Hay stacks?”

Apo hesitated. “We have lots of things.”

Marek wanted to hear what they were. All he ever saw were the costumed dolls with the crinoline skirts collecting dust in the living room curio. And the *valaska* – a varnished walking stick with flower motifs carved in its handle. Baba had told him countless times about Juraj Jánošík using a forest axe that looked like a *valaska* to take money from the rich to give to the poor. *Like Robin Hood?* Marek asked. Baba shrugged. *Co ja znam o Row-been Huud?* She always said *what do I know* of this or that whenever someone questioned her. She never appreciated Marek interrupting one of her stories. If *Row-been Huud* was another man, she decided, he must have taken the idea from Jánošík.

Marek was more intrigued about how thieves could be heroes. Didn't all robbers take from people better off than them? *You ask too many questions*, Baba told him. Marek hadn't thought about the *valaska* since he stopped taking it off the wall to use as a tomahawk to play cowboys and Indians.

"Who knows if the Russians are even going to let Czechoslovakia build anything," Raddy said.

Marek shifted towards the edge of the cooler. "How can they stop it?"

Raddy's hairy brown eyebrows went up. "Their army, you silly goose. Don't you remember Hungary? I guess you were too young."

"I remember the tanks on the television," Marek said, hating it when Raddy talked about him being too young.

Raddy polished off his second breakfast ale. "Besides, the whole thing is going to be a flop."

Marek jumped off the cooler and shook a finger at Raddy. "No, it's not. It's going to be the best world's fair ever."

"Who says?"

"Everybody, the radio, television..."

Raddy chuckled. "If they get it built in time..."

"They've already made the islands," Marek said, annoyed as hell at Raddy for suggesting that the one exciting thing on the horizon might never happen.

"Don't be surprised if downtown Montreal floods next spring, the way they plugged up the river making those islands bigger," Raddy said.

Apo rocked on his heels. "We must make sure that Slovaks are represented," he said more to himself than anyone. "We are one country but two nations."

Raddy laughed. "I thought you were Canadian?"

"On paper," Apo said. "Not in my heart."

Marek could hardly believe he was hearing this from the man who so often thanked Canada for giving him and his family a better life.

Apo seemed to read his mind. "How can I feel Canadian when the people here can't even agree on a flag?" he said. "They don't know who they are, but I do."

"Who's that?" Raddy asked.

"It's hard to explain," Apo said.

Raddy laughed so hard that he had to hold his side.

"What is so—" Apo fell silent when he saw Benoît Bourque push open the door and step inside wearing some kind of army fatigues with black fleur-de-lys arm flashes.

Marek felt his guilt wash over him like rain. He wasn't sure what to do, where to look. It didn't matter. Benoît brushed past him as if he didn't exist.

The fatigues made Benoît look skinnier and his freckled complexion almost greenish. His piercing blue eyes seemed as cold as ice rinks. He stopped in front of the counter, hands on hips. "Je veux mon argent."

Apo stuck out his chest like a rooster. "What money?"

Benoît slammed his fist on the counter. "You owe me two weeks pay."

"I owe you money?" Apo roared. "What a joke. You owe us money, sonny boy."

"Quoi?"

“You heard me. You stole from us. After all the years we let you work for us, you had the goddamn nerve to take money from our cash.”

Benoît squared his bony shoulders. “J’ai volé rien.”

“Yes, you did steal from us,” Apo said. “How could you?”

Marek knew from the fury in Benoît’s eyes that he was telling the truth. He felt like such a shit for getting Benoît into trouble. He never imagined his parents noticing a little change gone now and then.

Apo and Benoît looked ready to fistfight.

Benoît leaned into the counter. “Show me proof,” he said with his thick French accent. “La prevue,” he repeated, “ou l’argent.”

When Apo made no move, Benoît lunged forward to grab Apo’s collar. Apo cocked his neck back and picked up the telephone receiver behind him. He held it up like a hammer. Marek could hear the operator asking if there was an emergency.

Pink blotches covered Benoît’s neck. “I did not take your fuckin’ money.”

Apo held the receiver higher. “Get out, or I’m calling the police.”

The strangest of smiles crossed Benoît’s face. Marek heard Raddy’s paper bag crinkle as he tightened his grip on his empty bottle.

The operator kept asking in French and English if something was wrong.

Benoît rocked back on his combat boots. Marek didn’t understand Benoît’s whole army get-up. Maybe he joined the cadets, but the uniform looked different.

“English pigs,” Benoît said. “Maudits anglais.”

Marek had never heard Benoît speak to Apo so disrespectfully. All this was going way too far. Marek stepped towards Benoît to try to calm him down. Benoît shoved him aside. Raddy stood up, holding the stubby like a small club.

Benoît swung around and flipped open a switchblade.

Raddy backed away. “Take it easy, kid. No one has to get hurt over this.”

Marek couldn’t believe that Benoît was acting so crazy, no matter what Apo had accused him of doing. “Qu’est-ce qu’il y a avec toi?” he asked. “What’s with you? There’s obviously been some kind of mistake, but you don’t have to go nuts.”

“Don’t pretend that you are my friend,” Benoît said, holding the knife expertly close to his body so it couldn’t be snatched away. “You’re all the same.”

“What?” Marek had never heard Benoît make jokes about hunkies or fun of the Dancos being *Slow-vaks*. And he couldn’t mean that stuff the Québécois said about the English. The Dancos weren’t English. They just spoke English.

“Odstup ša,” said Apo, warning Marek to move back.

“Don’t talk that funny language in front of me.” Benoît lifted the knife higher. “You should be speaking French – only French.”

“Envoyez la police,” Apo said into the phone, along with the store’s address.

“You called the cops?” Benoît lowered the knife for a few seconds. “Tabarnac. You should have just given me the money.”

Apo looked furious. “I owe you nothing.”

Marek backed away from Benoît and opened the door. “If you leave now, my dad will cancel the police call. Right, Apo?”

Benoît looked from Marek to Raddy to Apo. “English pigs,” he told Apo as he left. “On aura vos argent. Tout va changer.”

Apo’s hand shook as he told the operator to forget about the police.

Raddy lowered his stubby. “That was something, eh?”

Apo paced. “What does he mean they’re going to have the money and everything’s going to change?”

“They’re all talking like that now, the young ones,” Raddy said. “Talking about taking over Quebec. It’s so ridiculous.”

Apo kept pacing. “That prick stole from us and expects me to pay him? I wish I could have caught him red-handed. I would have slammed his fingers in the register.”

Suddenly the idea of confessing held less appeal for Marek. He doubted Apo would get that violent, but Marek had never seen Apo so angry either.

“We should have never stayed in Quebec,” Apo said, still pacing.

Raddy took a new beer without asking. “Benoît is just a punk. Forget about him.”

“My family wanted to go to the States but the Americans didn’t want us. It was fine when Slovaks did all the dirtiest jobs in Pennsylvania’s coal mines, but as soon as our families started to buy houses, they didn’t want us anymore.”

“Stop sounding like such a martyr,” Raddy said. “We’re lucky to be here, off those miserable farms, out of those shacks.”

“Goddamn Frenchmen. They welcomed us when factories paid a dollar a week, but as soon as we open a business and have something, we’re not one of them.”

“Benoît is just mouthing off,” Raddy said. “Don’t let him get to you.”

“He’s got some nerve telling me that I should be speaking only French. It’s a free country, no? They don’t know what the fuck they want. We took Danika to a French school when it was time for her to start kindergarten and the nuns told us she didn’t belong there... that we should take her to an English school.”

“Ne nervuj še – don’t get yourself all nervous,” Raddy said. “He’s just a punk.”

“Easy for you to say,” Apo snapped. “You don’t own nothing. You don’t have property here.”

Raddy’s green eyes looked down at the bowed floor planks.

Marek felt his heart drop into his gut. There had to be a way to fix things. He ruled out telling the truth at least for now. He wasn’t so much afraid of the strapping he’d get from Apo but the possibility that he would lose Benoît’s friendship forever. There had to be some other way. “Apo, how much do you think Benoît took?”

Apo stopped pacing. “Čom?”

“Just curious.”

“I don’t know right now,” Apo grumbled. “Mamo knows. Don’t bother my head.”

Asking Mamo wouldn’t be easy. She would likely tell him it was none of his business. Nothing was ever easy, but Marek had to find a way to put things right again.

Chapter Three

Before Marek could put down his school bag, Apo handed him a box. Marek fumed when he saw the address. Gaston had some nerve ordering more groceries.

“Did he pay off some of his tab?” Marek asked.

“No. Vun muži placic perši.”

Oh, sure. Gaston had to pay first for any more groceries. And Marek was supposed to get him to hand over the cash. Easier said than done, Apo.

Marek considered telling Apo how Gaston has stolen two quarts of beer from him, but all he needed was for Apo to tell Raddy and then every other Slovak in Montreal would know. It was bad enough Klaudia had figured it out. No. This had to be handled one on one. Marek would keep everything downstairs until Gaston gave him cash for the new order *and* the beer he stole. Marek dumped his school bag behind the counter and walked out with a determination that made the box as light as egg whites.

He pedalled faster when he saw Vince outside his garage on Duluth Street. Coatless in his grey coveralls, Vince leaned one foot up against the corner building, a cigarette dangling from his lips as he tried to wipe the grease from his fingers.

“If I were you, I’d want everyone to see that I worked with my hands,” said Marek, coming to a stop and keeping his balance by stretching his toes to the ground.

Vince pulled the smoke from his mouth. “Just because you’re a working man doesn’t mean you have to look like a bohunk.” Vince took another haul and blew several perfect rings.

“Nice,” Marek said.

“I see your old man has you working.” Vince ran his hand through his hair. Marek envied its length. Apo insisted on Marek getting a crewcut every few weeks, especially after he saw the Beatles with their mop heads on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Apo told Mamo that no son of his would ever look like that. Marek felt like a shaved porcupine for the first couple of weeks after every cut. It was longer now, a good quarter of an inch and there was no way he was going to let the barber shave it again no matter what Apo threatened.

Vince’s hair looked more like creamed coffee since he stopped slicking it back with Brylcreem. Marek wished he could have bangs that flopped in his face like Vince’s.

“Hello! Anybody home up there?” Vince snapped his fingers in Marek’s face.

“I wish I could get out of this job.”

Vince laughed. “You should work for me. You’d make a lot more money.”

Marek almost lost his balance. Learning to use the air compressors, car jacks and battery chargers would be a dream come true. How amazing it would be if he could pop open a hood to check the wiring or listen to an engine rev and know how to fix it.

“Can I?” Marek’s voice cracked as embarrassingly as when it was still changing. “I could work every day after school—”

Vince raised a hand, rubbing more grease off a cuticle as soon as he noticed it. “Whoa. You have to ask your parents. I’m not running interference with your father.”

“Maybe you can talk to him.” Marek did his best to keep his voice even. “He respects the business you have. Maybe he’ll listen to you.”

Vince shook his head. “Personally, I don’t think your father likes me at all, but if you convince him, fine. Just don’t get me involved. In fact, tell him it was all your idea.”

Marek's shoulders slumped. He already knew Vince didn't like getting involved, but Marek needed help with Apo. "He's never going to let me quit. I'm like his slave."

Vince laughed, grabbing a hold of his cigarette so it wouldn't fall out of his mouth. "Aren't you feeling sorry for yourself? It can't be that bad."

Marek knew better than to reveal his fear of heights to a guy who didn't seem to be afraid of anything.

"If I can get my parents to say yes, then you'll hire me, at least part-time?" He really hated that his voice rose up like his sister's, but working in the garage would be so neat. He might even be able to buy an old beater and fix it up. It seemed too good to be true, which is what worried him. Vince often made suggestions, but seemed to forget about them just as fast, not that Marek could blame Vince with all the work he had to do.

"Have you seen Catina?" Vince stubbed out his cigarette under his work boot.

The mention of her name reminded Marek of the huge bruise along his right shin. "What do you want with that little brat?"

Vince lit another cigarette. "What the fuck did she ever do to you?"

Marek froze. He didn't mean to say or do anything that might lower Vince's opinion of him. "The last time I saw her was outside Klaudia's."

"Klaudia Toth?" Vince stood up straight. "What's Catina doing there?"

"Not her. Me."

"What were you doing there?"

"Delivering groceries."

"Careful," Vince said. "That Klaudia is one shady lady."

"What do you mean?"

“Never mind. What time did you see Catina?”

“It wasn’t today. I saw her Friday when—”

Vince removed his smoke. “What the fuck are you doing wasting my time with what happened days ago?” He threw his cigarette on the sidewalk and smashed it with his boot.

“She almost made me—”

Vince waved Marek off with one hand and walked away towards Henri Julien.

“I’ll let you know if I see her again,” he called after Vince, but Vince kept walking as if he never heard Marek.

Marek felt his face get hot. The last thing he needed was to have Vince change his mind about Marek working in the garage because he thought Marek was mean to little kids or stupid about time. He decided to find Catina for Vince.

He rode along Laval from Rachel to Roy, and then did the same along City Hall, de Bullion, Colonial and St. Dominique. He doubted Catina would go farther. All the kids knew where the invisible chalk lines were around their neighbourhood, and the risks of getting beaten up by kids they didn’t know if they crossed those lines.

Marek’s calves tightened from pedalling through all the slush on the side of the streets. His fingers were freezing even with gloves by the time he rode home to see if Catina was hanging out with Danika. There was no sign of either of them.

Apo walked out of the small room curtained off at the side of the store and looked out the window. “What are you still doing with the groceries?”

“Gaston wasn’t there,” Marek lied. “I’ll go again now to see if he is.”

As he rode past the garage again, he saw no sign of Vince. Just as well until he found Catina. Looking farther east along Duluth, he spotted Danika making snowballs outside The Shoemaker's and pedalled towards her.

"Where's Catina?" If anyone knew, it would be Danika.

"You made her cry." Danika's red mitts had dyed the misshapen snowball into an uneven pink. "She told me you made her cry."

"Tell me where she is or I'll make you swallow that snowball."

Danika aimed the snowball at him. "I'm telling Mamo."

With her front teeth still not fully grown, Danika looked like a young *Baba Yaga* – a real little witch. He took a hold of her arm and forced her to drop the snowball. Then he grabbed one of her blond pigtails and gave it a light tug. "Did Catina go home?"

Danika wailed as if Marek had pulled her thin braid out of her skull. The door to the *Service de Cordonnerie* opened with a squawk as it pushed against its warped frame. Out came Mamo, her eyes wide with annoyance. "Co vy robice?"

"Nič. Nothing," Marek said as he gave Danika a stern look. Danika squealed right away. Ever since her seventh birthday, she constantly went crying to Mamo about what Marek said or did to her. Marek envied kids without sisters or brothers to bother them.

Mamo had bluish half-moons under her eyes. The black clothes she wore to mourn her father made her look a lot older than forty-five.

"Dnuka," she said, pointing for Danika to go inside. The door moaned as Mamo reopened it. Marek stood his bike up and followed. Tanned leather filled his nostrils as Mamo held open the door for Danika and him. After they walked up to the counter, The Shoemaker peeked out from the back room where a television blared. Odd. The

Shoemaker was completely deaf. He wore shoes with soft soles so he could feel the floor vibrate whenever someone walked in. He motioned with a finger for Mamo to wait a minute and disappeared again.

“Ja neman času na toto,” said Mamo as she shuffled impatiently in her boots.

Marek never knew his mother to have time for anything.

The Shoemaker kept his shop dark except for a banker’s lamp on the front counter and a bright gooseneck light over his workbench. A toolbox attached to the workbench had each of its four drawers opened at varying depths so he could grab the hammers, awls and chisels neatly arranged inside. Piles of leather, laces, insoles and zippers covered a table in front of a wall of cubby holes stuffed with shoes and slumped boots.

“Who’s that?” Danika pointed to a statue on a shelf.

Mamo tapped her heel till Danika repeated the question in Slovak.

“Svati Crispin,” Mamo then said, explaining he was the cobblers’ patron saint. It bugged Marek how she could remember everything about every single saint but forget when he told her about parents’ night at school or where he was going with friends. Maybe her head was too cluttered with useless knowledge.

The Shoemaker walked up to the front counter with a meek smile as he tied the strings of his leather apron. The apron, the shop, and The Shoemaker’s thick white hair always reminded Marek of Geppetto even though he doubted The Shoemaker was Italian. Maybe French. He had *Service de Cordonnerie* sign outside, but more people were changing their signs to French lately. He could be English or Dutch. It was hard to know.

As soon as The Shoemaker noticed Danika, his smile broadened. He motioned for her to take a lollipop from the large bowl that he kept brimming with candies on the

counter. To Marek's surprise, Mamo didn't tell Danika to wait till after supper to unwrap it. All of her attention was focused on the black pumps she had pulled out of a cloth bag.

Marek wondered if he should somehow say something about the television still blaring from the back. The Shoemaker must have turned up the volume by accident. Everyone knew he couldn't hear a train if it rolled through his shop. He couldn't speak either. Deaf *and dumb*. That's what everybody called him: deaf *and dumb*. Marek didn't consider him *dumb* at all. Anyone who could craft the kind of boots in the shop window had to be pretty smart. Too bad no one wanted handmade boots anymore, judging from the dust on them. It was much cheaper to buy a pair at Sample's. "So what if they last forever," Marek had overheard Mamo tell Apo after unsuccessfully trying to haggle down the price for a pair. "Styles change every year now." Marek would have liked to ask The Shoemaker why he even bothered making them. He guessed The Shoemaker wanted to keep his skills in case handmade footwear became popular again.

"I want these to match," said Mamo, holding the pumps against a swatch of shimmering turquoise fabric. The Shoemaker took one look at both and shook his head. Mamo let out a sigh and repeated herself louder.

Marek hated to see Mamo so frustrated all the time. "I think he's trying to tell you he can't dye the shoes the colour you want," he said.

The Shoemaker nodded, his second chin widening and narrowing as he did.

"Čom ňe?"

The Shoemaker looked from her to Marek.

"She's asking why not," Marek said, making sure he formed each word distinctly.

The Shoemaker pretended to shut off his lamp.

“Oh, the shoes are too dark,” Marek guessed.

His mother’s failure to scold him for speaking English made him realize how important these shoes were. She had announced on Sunday that she wasn’t going to wear black to the New Year’s Eve dance. Baba *oy-yoy-yoyed* about what people would think. If there was a heaven Marek doubted his Dzedo was sitting up there fretting about Mamo wearing black for only fifty weeks rather than a full year. Yet Baba acted like it would be the world’s biggest scandal. Oh, the *haňba*/shame. What a fuss for nothing, Marek thought. Yet he couldn’t understand why Mamo was being so stubborn either. As Apo had pointed out, she usually wore black to the New Year’s Dance.

“So what colour can you make them?” Mamo asked.

The Shoemaker pointed to the last row on a wire stand filled with small dye bottles. Judging from their darkness, Marek didn’t expect Mamo to like any of them.

Marek walked over to where Danika sat. “So do you know where Catina is?”

Danika pulled the lollipop from her mouth and stuck out her tongue at him.

“I don’t see turquoise,” Mamo said. “Do you even have turquoise?”

The Shoemaker shrugged to show he didn’t understand.

Mamo jabbed at the fabric swatch. “This colour.”

When The Shoemaker shook his head, she turned away from him and sighed. “No wonder he can’t dye my shoes turquoise,” she grumbled in Slovak. “He doesn’t even have that colour. I should go somewhere else.”

“There’s another shoemaker on Pine Avenue,” Marek said.

“Ja neman času,” she said. Again, no time. Never time.

Marek felt really awkward. The Shoemaker had to know Mamo was talking behind his back, and right in front of him.

She reached for the navy blue. “Can you do this one?”

The Shoemaker lifted his palms but then sort of nodded. On the Black Cat poster for rubber heels, he formed an X with his fingers over the word *guaranteed*.

“I’m not paying if the colour is wrong.”

He nodded okay.

“You will dye them over if they’re not right?”

The Shoemaker’s head bobbed. He pulled out a calendar with large squares for each day and pointed to a date. Mamo shook her head. “I need them earlier in case you don’t dye them right,” she said, pointing to another square.

Nodding, The Shoemaker scribbled a price on a slip of paper. Mamo put her hand to her cheek. “Oh no, I can’t afford that much.”

Marek hated it how Mamo always haggled over prices, but it nearly always worked. The Shoemaker crossed out the figure and wrote a lower one.

As Mamo wrote down their address, the store fell quiet and Catina ran out of the back room. She hugged Danika and grabbed a cherry lollipop. Her snowsuit hung unzipped from her waist, exposing a white cardigan buttoned up to the neck. Under the lamplight, her bangs had the shine of black olives. She wore two bright pink barrettes in the shape of little elephants to keep the rest of her short fine hair away from the sides of her round face. One of the little elephants dangled upside down. The Shoemaker reached over and fixed it.

“Where the hell have you been?” Marek asked her.

Catina made a cry-baby face.

“Leave her alone,” said Danika, shielding Catina behind her own bulky snowsuit.

“I’m just asking where she’s been, for cryin’ out loud.” Marek gritted his teeth as he tried to keep his cool in front of Mamo. “Catina’s mother is looking for her.”

“No she’s not,” Danika said as sassily as possible. “She’s not even home from work yet.”

“Well maybe she got home early today.”

Catina’s chocolate eyes widened. She zipped up her snowsuit and ran out.

“Ic za ňu,” Mamo told Marek. “Go after her.”

Marek looked at Mamo to see if she was serious. “Why? She knows her way.”

“Ic. Už cma.”

It wasn’t *that* dark, not with the street lamps everywhere. Marek let out a sigh as he shuffled towards the door. “Watch my bike,” he told Danika.

He expected Catina to be halfway home, the way she raced out the door, but he saw her kicking a chunk of ice as she walked ahead. Marek followed at a distance.

She twirled the bell to an upper duplex on Henri Julien. When no one answered, she used the key hanging from a cord around her neck to open the door.

After she disappeared inside, Marek jogged the short distance back to Duluth Street. He figured he could still earn a few brownie points by telling Vince that he had walked Catina home, but the *Closed* sign was up in the garage window.

When he got back to The Shoemaker’s, Mamo and Danika were waiting outside. Mamo pointed to the undelivered groceries.

“Gaston refused to pay cash,” Marek lied, being pretty sure the slime-ball wouldn’t have the nerve to phone the store to complain.

Mamo shut her eyes, the way she always did for a few seconds when she heard something she didn’t like. “Podzme domu,” she said. “I need to talk with your father.”

Oh no. That was never a good sign. Her announcing this in English meant something really serious was up.

Chapter Four

The constant buzzing from the fridges and bald neon lights rattled Marek's nerves for the last hour before closing. Minding the store on a Friday night was such a drag. Mamo had promised she would send Apo back down as soon as they finished talking. What they had to say to each other for over an hour was beyond Marek. He still hadn't found out why Mamo rushed him and Danika home from The Shoemaker's four days earlier. Whatever it was, it couldn't be good. Mamo only held "discussions" with Apo when she had made up her mind about something.

Marek reached under the counter and grabbed a handful of flying saucers. He popped one into his mouth and let the shell melt on his tongue like a Communion wafer before crunching the tiny candies. He felt safe taking whatever he wanted from under the counter. There was no way Mamo or Apo counted the thousands of candies neatly displayed in the case, even if Apo did have the time. What Marek still needed to find out was how much they believed was missing from the register. If it wasn't too much, he would crack open his piggybank and then hide the amount within the store where Mamo or Apo would easily find it. They were always stashing money in the store until one of them had time to go to the bank. So it would be easy to make them believe that one of them had lost track of some money, if Marek could find out the amount that was missing.

Raddy probably knew. It drove Mamo crazy how Apo told Raddy almost everything. Yet Marek hesitated to ask Raddy because he also seemed to tell Apo every single thing.

Marek punched the register's zero key and watched the drawer spring open. His parents kept fewer bills in the register at night, but the smaller compartments were filled with change. Marek ran his fingers over the pile of shiny nickels. They felt cold.

The walls groaned the way they do when someone is left alone. At first Marek thought it might be Apo's heavy footsteps. He slammed the drawer shut. The store was quiet again except for the mechanical humming everywhere. Marek hated that sound. It felt as spooky as the hissing on a television station after it went off the air.

He could really use a cigarette. Shuffling aside some paper bags, he pulled out the opened pack that Apo kept stashed in case the cops showed up. Apo could get in real trouble for selling cigarettes separately, but there so many customers who couldn't afford to buy them any other way. They were a bit stale but the tobacco smell calmed Marek as he waved the pack under his nose. He slipped two cigarettes into his shirt pocket, then put one back. As much as he wanted to smoke it right away, he wouldn't dare light up in the store. Apo had quit years earlier because Mamo hated the odour, something Marek could never understand. She couldn't stop customers from walking in with a lit cigarette, but forbad Raddy from smoking the store. Apo said he didn't mind the smoke, but Mamo insisted that it ruined the smell of the fresh bread that was delivered every day and people bought less. She would probably smell the smoke all the way from upstairs if Marek lit up. Better to wait till he closed the store in twenty minutes and go out to have a cigarette.

Until then, he needed something to keep his mouth busy. He stuck his head inside the candy case and reached for the waxed lips. They were fat like Klaudia's. Closing his eyes, he pressed them against his mouth and pretended to kiss her: softly at first, brushing both lips, then caressing the lower one, drawing it between his, running his tongue over it

like he would around a juicy grape, except he would never bite her lips. Instead, he would use his tongue to gently push them apart...

Marek opened his eyes. The waxed lips weren't melting fast enough for his tongue to work its way through. He grabbed the pencil by the register and poked a hole through the middle like a doll's mouth. Closing his eyes again, he leaned against the counter behind the cash and worked his tongue back and forth to make the hole larger.

Ding-a-ling-a-ling.....

Fuck. The damn bell nearly clanged the piss out of him. He dropped the disintegrating lips to the floor and thanked God he was standing behind the register where no one could see his boner.

Gaston smiled with a blaze of false teeth. "Ça va?"

Marek stood motionless, finding it incredible that Gaston would show his face.

"Donnes-moi un paquet d'Export A, s'il te plaît."

"Not until you pay for the beer you stole," Marek said.

"Câllice. Tabarnak." Gaston stomped his feet. "Put the beers on my tab, ostie."

"No. You have to pay first," Marek said, shaking his head. "Il faut payer avant."

"Franchement." Gaston made a fist in the air. Then he started to laugh.

Marek grabbed the phone to call Apo, but the woman who shared their party line was talking on it. "Get off the phone now," he told her. "C'est urgent."

The woman cursed and kept talking in French. She complained to her friend about Marek's family always hogging the line with some kind of gypsy language.

"C'est urgent," Marek yelled again. "Please hang up."

Gaston grabbed Marek's shirt. "Donnes-moi les cigarettes, ostie."

Marek tried to break free without success. He attempted to hit Gaston with the receiver but Gaston was shaking him too hard. His head started to pound but he wasn't going to give this asshole what he wanted for free again. No fuckin' way. Gaston would have to knock him out and then Marek would get the police to arrest him, if Gaston didn't accidentally kill him first with his shaking or his stale beer breath. Marek heard the woman yelling "Qu'est qui ce passe?" on the line as the receiver haphazardly banged against the cash register, but she wouldn't hang up. Marek kept hold of the receiver, waiting for his first chance to swing it at Gaston's head.

Suddenly he saw Apo tower behind Gaston. He peeled Gaston off Marek in an instant and dangled him off the floor. "What the fuck are you doing to my kid?"

Gaston gasped and gurgled as he tried to free himself from Apo's grasp. His upper dentures popped out and thumped onto the floor.

Marek wanted to laugh but felt more angry than relieved. He was sure he could have fought off Gaston with more time. He wanted the chance to hurt him.

Apo lifted Gaston up so they were face to face. "If I ever see you in here again, I swear to God, you'll be sorry."

Gaston fell against the cooler in a heap. "Maudits polacks," he yelled as he grabbed his teeth and ran out the door.

Part of Marek wanted to laugh, but he felt too humiliated. He imagined Apo telling Raddy about how he had to defend his son and then all the Slovaks in Montreal would know.

Apo now filled the middle of the store. "Are you okay?"

Marek nodded. His neck hurt from the shaking, but he didn't want Mamo fussing over it. "Don't tell Mamo," he said. "Please don't tell anybody."

"Don't worry," Apo said. "I won't tell nobody."

Marek wondered if the vow of silence was because Apo was ashamed he had to defend his son. Well, if he was, he was a hypocrite. He didn't look so brave when Benoit lunged at him. Marek had tried to defend himself in the same way on his own. Apo had Raddy and Marek to back him up.

Marek did admire how Apo grabbed a hold of Gaston the same way Marek's favourite wrestler, Killer Kowalski, would have, dangling him up in the air before dropping him. He knew he should thank Apo, but he would have never been in that situation in the first place if Apo and Mamo hadn't forced him to mind the store. "I shouldn't be here alone," he said. "I shouldn't even be delivering groceries. It's not safe."

"You said you were okay, no?"

Marek gulped hard. "I don't want to work for the store anymore."

"Okay, we won't leave you alone here anymore."

"I don't want to deliver groceries either."

Apo patted Marek's head. Then he noticed the cigarette in Marek's pocket. "Are you smoking?"

Marek wanted to say, Yes, I am. I'm old enough. All the kids my age smoke. If I'm old enough to work, I should be old enough to smoke.

"No," he said instead. "Gaston wanted one but wouldn't pay for it."

Apo smiled his approval. "Drunken fool," he said. "I'm one of the few people who still let him run a tab, and this is what he does as thanks."

“You should hire someone bigger to work here. Maybe get Benoît to come back.”

Apo gritted his teeth. “That son of a bitch stole money from us.”

“He says he didn’t do it.”

“I don’t believe him,” Apo said.

“Do you have proof he took money?”

“Who else could it be?”

Marek realized he needed to change the subject before Apo started really thinking about who else it might have been. First, though, he needed that one piece of information that might make things right again. “How much is missing?” he asked. “Maybe Benoît could pay it back.” Of course Marek knew the only way that would happen is if he gave Benoît the money, and even then, it was a long shot. Yet if he found out how much was missing, his other plan to stash the money where his parents would find it might work.

“I am not hiring nobody I cannot trust,” Apo said.

Anybody. Not *nobody*. Anybody. Marek bit his tongue before he spoke. “Then I’m sure you could find somebody else,” he said. “Vince says I could work for him at the garage. It would be safer there, working with Vince.”

Apo rubbed the dimple in his chin, which meant he was considering this.

“It would be good for me,” Marek continued at racetrack speed. “I would learn a trade. Mechanics earn good money. People always need cars fixed.”

Apo cocked his large head to one side. Definitely considering it...

“I could give you half my pay if you want,” Marek said.

Apo turned beet red.

“Co? What?” Marek asked. “What did I say?”

Apo grabbed a hold of his arm. “You think I need the few measly bucks you would make at Vince’s, that I would take money from my own kid?”

Whoa. Marek had no idea he was touching such a sensitive nerve. It only made sense for him to think his parents were forcing him to deliver groceries so they could save money. Business was slow with so many Slovaks moving to better neighbourhoods. Some of them still dropped by on Saturdays, but many had stopped coming altogether.

Apo eased his grip. “I wanted you to feel good about helping your family and earning a little money.”

“I do. I did,” Marek lied. “But now I want to do something else.”

“Put the cigarette back, lock up the store and come upstairs.”

“Why?”

“We have to talk to you.”

Oh no. Here it was: the outcome of Mamo’s “discussions.” Marek still couldn’t think of what he had done wrong. Maybe Danika squealed on him about something, but what? Whatever it was, it couldn’t be good.

Marek took his time closing the store. The longer he took, the more likely Mamo and Apo might forget about whatever it was they wanted to discuss with him. He pulled the bills from the register, stacked them in a small paper bag and stuffed the bag under a loose floor board as fast as he could in case a mouse or rat lurked inside the space. Then he took all the change from the register and poured it into empty milk bottles that he then hid at the back of a fridge. He left the cash drawer wide open so anyone tempted to break into the store would see it was empty. After checking the back door was locked, he switched off the neons and listened to the fridges hum louder. The *Dow* wall clock threw

a pink hue over the store. Marek flipped over the *Closed* sign on the door and stepped outside to lock it. His parents usually locked the store from the inside and went up the back stairs, but Marek hated those coiling steps.

Javelle water filled Marek's nostrils as soon as he entered the stairway leading up to the flat above the store. Mamo scrubbed everything with it until the skin on her hands cracked and bled. Then she would stop for a few days until they healed. Usually the smell of bleach made him feel good about how clean Mamo kept the house, but tonight it reminded him of how perfect she wanted everything to seem.

The soft light seeping from under the door at the top of the stairs meant Apo and Mamo were probably waiting for him in the living room. He removed his boots and dragged his feet up the stairs. As soon as he pushed open the door, Danika charged at him, waving a Barbie in his face. "Marek likes girls," she chanted. Danika was always more obnoxious when she had Catina as her audience. Catina sat on the couch with a dopey smile on her face, her favourite barrettes lopsided as usual.

"Buzz off," Marek warned Danika through gritted teeth. When she wouldn't stop, he knocked the doll out of her hand. It went flying across the living room and landed near Catina who gasped as she hurriedly moved her legs.

"You almost scratched her new shoes," Danika yapped.

"We're not supposed to wear shoes in the house," Marek snapped back.

Catina bent forward to unbuckle them. Still dressed in her school tunic, her bare thighs made a farting noise as her skin broke away from the chesterfield's plastic cover. Danika laughed hysterically while Catina blushed.

Marek headed for his room at the back of the flat, but Mamo appeared in the hallway. She marched past him when she heard Danika jumping on the chesterfield.

“Prestañ.”

Danika stopped immediately. Marek imagined Mamo having a nervous breakdown if that plastic tore.

“Behave,” Mamo warned the girls in English. “Or Nosa might come.”

“No, not Nosa,” Danika said with real fear in her voice.

“Who’s Nosa?” Catina asked.

Marek couldn’t believe Danika was still naive enough to think a guy with a big nose went around dressed in black to take away bad children in a gunny sack. Then again, Danika still believed in Santa Claus, too. He thought about telling her that it was all bullshit, but he liked seeing her terrified once in a while, and the fact that Mamo was the source of this terror made her less of a saint, no matter how much she acted like one. It made whatever he did to Danika seem less severe. Danika actually trembled when Mamo became furious enough to pretend to dial Nosa’s phone number. She cried hysterically, pleading with Mamo to hang up. Marek even told Mamo once to stop. Mamo liked to rule through fear. It frustrated the hell out of her when Marek stopped listening to her threats to send him away to a boarding school. Danika would figure things out soon enough. Until then, he found it amusing how she had somehow associated Nosa with Raymond Burr and every time Apo watched *The Perry Mason Show*, she hid under the sewing machine as far away from the television as possible.

“Who’s Nosa?” Catina asked again.

“Nobody,” Danika said as she crossed her forearms and sat on the chesterfield.

Marek started towards his room, but Mamo told him to go to the kitchen.

Apo sat at the Arborite and chrome table that had been pushed against the wall to have enough room to walk by it. "Sit," he said, pointing to the chair across from him.

Marek felt like yanking the clicking tail off the Kit Kat clock as they waited for Mamo. The only modern thing in the entire house couldn't be more stupid as far as he was concerned. Sitting there, waiting, he figured Mamo must have found out about the notes he had forged at school. He prepared himself to be grounded for a week.

Mamo started off in Slovak, of course, telling him that Baba was too old and weak to live alone in the flat above them. "She has to move in with us."

"Where?" Marek asked. "There's no space for her in here."

"That's why we need to talk to you," Mamo said. "We thought she could move into your room."

"Where am I supposed to sleep?"

Apo moved up his chair. "The dining room," he said.

"But there's no wall separating it from the living room."

"We'll put up drapes," Mamo said.

Marek's mind raced as Mamo blathered about how they would arrange things. Did they honestly expect him to live in a room without four walls? Where was he supposed to relax? Be alone? Have some privacy?

"You'll see," Mamo continued. "We'll make it nice."

Anyone could walk through drapes. Anyone could hear through them. Marek had enough trouble keeping Danika out of his real room. He had to shove his desk-chair

under the doorknob. Even then he kept quiet while he wanked off in case the little brat was listening outside the door.

“Why can’t Baba move into the dining room?”

“She needs some privacy,” Mamo said.

“And I don’t? No. I’m not giving up my room. No goddamn way.”

“Watch your language,” Apo warned in Slovak.

Mamo stood. “You’ll see. We’ll make it nice.”

“It’s not a real room if it’s missing walls,” Marek snapped back. “And, if you think it’s so great, why don’t you move into the dining room.”

Apo leaned forward. “You’re lucky to have any kind of room of your own.”

“Here we go,” Marek said lifting and dropping his arms. “Now you’re going to tell me how you slept eight to a bed in the Old Country.”

Apo started to stand up with a raised hand, but Mamo stopped him. “You’ll see,” she told Marek again. “I’ll buy really heavy fabric.”

It occurred to Marek that Mamo and Apo didn’t want Baba at the front of the house because their bedroom was right across the skinny hallway. When Marek stayed out till eleven on Fridays and Saturdays, they could screw after Danika went to sleep. But with Baba in the dining room, they wouldn’t be able to do the dirty anymore. They couldn’t stick her in Danika’s room because the former storage area only had enough space for a child’s bed and small dresser.

Mamo sighed. “My nespokojny...”

“You’re not happy?” Marek yelled. “You’re not losing the one thing that made it worth living in this shit hole.”

“Stop shouting,” Apo ordered.

“Ñe, no!” Marek shouted. “What else can you do to me? Take away my clothes?”

Apo stood abruptly, causing the table legs to thunder across the vinyl floor.

“Leave him,” Mamo said, blocking Apo’s way. “Give him some time.”

Marek stormed out. In the hallway, he shoved Danika aside and went downstairs.

As soon as he reopened the store, he went for a cigarette. He no longer gave a damn if Mamo or Apo caught him. What were they going to do? Take away his room? Even the nicotine failed to calm him down.

Nobody. That’s who he was to them. *Nikto*. Nobody. Nothing.

Oh sure, they knew who to get to deliver groceries, but he was nobody when it came to having a room.

Enough of this shit. He needed to find a way to move out sooner rather than later. Somehow he needed to convince Vince to hire him at the garage. Maybe there was room there – at the back – where he could live, too. No, that wouldn’t work. Apo would find him and drag him back home by his ear. Maybe he could secretly work at the garage and find a room at a boarding house somewhere. Even the guys who pissed away their money at taverns had a goddamn room. He grabbed another few cigarettes before locking up and going over to his favourite park to cool off.

Chapter Five

Marek sat on the steps outside the store. He had stopped talking to Mamo and Apo after they had told him three days earlier about their plans to take away his room. He still had to deliver their stupid groceries. Apo would give him a good whack if he didn't. But he refused to say anything other than *yes* or *no* when either of them ordered him to do something or asked a question. When Mamo insisted on a longer answer, he responded in English. Of course, this infuriated her. She wanted the family to speak only Slovak at home. Good, Marek thought. She should know what it feels like to have something she values taken away.

The wind lashed around the corner and gusted up Colonial like it had been propelled through a giant peashooter. Marek zipped his jacket and pulled up the collar. He wasn't going home until his ass was frozen solid. Baba's furniture was already crowding the flat, waiting for him to move his stuff out of his room.

He felt as empty as the smoke rings he blew. Across the street, the curtains moved. Soon there would be nowhere he could go to be alone. He stuck out his tongue as far as it would stretch even though he couldn't see Tatiana Dusek staring out her window. Sure enough, the curtains hopped back into place. If only he could get everyone to leave him alone so easily.

Blinding headlights turned up Colonial. Guerino pulled over to the curb in his navy Chevelle. Rumour had it his father bought him the muscle car after he passed Grade 10 on a second try. Everyone knew Guerino Adami, leader of Los Lobos. The Italian and Portuguese tough guys at D'Arcy McGee called a truce and formed one gang after

separate run-ins with some guys from the French high school. The leaders took it as a sign that they should join ranks when one of them pointed out that *lobo* meant wolf in both languages.

Guerino rolled down his window and flicked his cigarette ashes onto the sidewalk. He always wore a shirt and a tie with his maroon Los Lobos jacket, as if being a gang leader was some kind of important office job. Marek was surprised at how puny The Big G looked up close. Thin as a rake with chalky skin, Guerino had the five o'clock shadow of someone years older.

"Hey, kid, go inside and get me a pack of smokes," Guerino said, waving a fiver. He sounded like he just got off a boat from Italy. How did that happen, Marek wondered, that someone born in Canada could sound like such a foreigner? Marek thanked God he didn't have an accent. At least he didn't think he did. He would have to ask Patrick the next time he saw him. It might be another good reason not to speak Slovak anymore.

"Come on, eh," Guerino said, flapping the money. "I don't have all night."

Marek kept still. "The store is closed."

Guerino looked through the window. "The light is still on."

"Sorry, we're closed."

"But you could still do me a favour and get me a pack."

Yes, he could, but then he would have to do it every time Guerino was too fucking lazy to get out of his car. "Go to St. Catherine Street," Marek said. "The corner stores there are open all night."

"Madonn', come on, eh? Be a good little boy and get me a pack of Export A."

Good little boy? Marek felt the blood rush into his cheeks.

“Bahfungoul,” he said as he ran the back of his hand up his neck and outwards from his chin. “Go fuck yourself.”

Guerino forced a laugh. “You’re not too smart, eh? No one even goes to your father’s stupid store anymore. You should thank me for wanting to buy something here.”

Marek stepped onto the sidewalk. He glanced into the car and grinned when he saw the Big G had to sit on the Yellow Pages to be high enough to look out the windshield. “Did your Mama strap you into your high chair?” he said.

Guerino turned white and started to open the car door, but he forgot to pull up the lock. “Come here, you little *budiùlo*,” he yelled. “I’ll show you who’s a baby.”

Marek had enough, from G, from everybody. “I’d tell you to go fuck yourself,” he said, “but your prick is probably too short.”

Guerino opened the heavy car door and started after Marek.

Marek ran inside the store but couldn’t get the key into the deadbolt in time to lock it. He pressed his body against the door as Guerino slammed the other side with his shoulders. Marek kept his eyes closed in case Guerino’s fists came through the break-resistant glass. Again and again Guerino kept hammering the door. Marek worried he wouldn’t be able to maintain the strength to keep him out. Yet there was nothing else he could do. It must have been five minutes before Guerino finally left.

After sticking the store key into the lock and turning it, he slid down to the floor. He banged the side of his head with his palm. What was he thinking? He must have suffered some kind of temporary insanity. It was his parents’ fault. They drove him crazy, taking away his bedroom, forcing him to deliver groceries, making him work in the store. What now, though? If he didn’t apologize to Guerino, he could pretty much count on

getting the crap beaten out of him. If he did apologize, it would be all over school. Guerino would tell everybody. He might also pick on Marek forever.

“Marek?” Mamo’s voice startled the hell out of him.

“Co stobu?” she asked when she saw him jump.

“Nič. Nothing’s with me.”

Mamo had entered by the back holding Catina’s hand. “Take Catina home.”

“Why can’t she go home on her own?” Marek said in Slovak to prevent Catina from understanding.

“No. It’s too late, too dark.”

“Then why didn’t she go home earlier?”

“I can walk home by myself,” Catina said.

“See,” Marek told Mamo in English. “She says it’s fine.”

“Absolutely not,” Mamo said in Slovak.

The minute they stepped outside, Catina got on Marek’s nerves by hopping, skipping and leaping over sidewalk cracks.

“Stop that,” he said.

“The devil can snatch you if you step on the lines,” she said looking up at him.

“Yeah, right.” Marek nervously looked up and down the street for any sign of Guerino. He felt edgiest crossing the first dark laneway. Guerino could easily have parked his car there, shut off the headlights and be waiting for Marek. No, that was silly. Guerino had no reason to think Marek would go out right away. If Marek ran into Guerino, it would be because the Big G was cruising. Marek knew he had to be more worried during the day when the Big G and Los Lobos could get him at school. Fuck,

fuck, fuck. Maybe if Marek stayed out of sight for a few days, told his parents he was too sick to go to school, Guerino would forget about what happened. Yeah, right. The only thing that might save Marek was the Big G not wanting anyone to know that he had to sit on a big fat telephone book to drive.

“Who’s Nosa?”

Marek had nearly forgotten about Catina walking beside him.

“Nobody,” he said.

Marek could see Klaudia’s place as soon as they turned onto Henri Julien from Duluth. It had been two weeks since he saw her last, but he could still picture her amazing boobs. There was no sign of her now, or her slimy tenant. Marek swore that if he saw Gaston, he would climb those blasted stairs and pummel him.

“Why is Danika so scared of him?”

Marek decided Catina might keep a better pace with him if he answered. “Nosa is a man with a big nose and a black coat who stuffs bad kids in sacks and takes them away forever.”

“Puxa vida! Come on!” she said. “It’s not true.”

The way Catina said *it’s not* sounded like *snot*, and for the first time in days, Marek laughed. Catina had more smarts than Danika. She was several months older, almost seven-and-a-half, but still, Danika was such a baby in comparison. Marek blamed Mamo for overprotecting her, while Catina had to manage a lot on her own.

“How do you know it’s not true?” he asked.

Catina rolled her dark eyes. “There’s no man taking away kids.”

“Then why is Danika so afraid?”

Catina stopped to think about this, the last thing Marek needed. As he checked the length of Henri Julien for signs of Guerino, he thought he saw Vince walking towards them from Rachel Street. Great! Vince would see Marek accompanying Catina home.

“Danika is a scaredy-cat,” Catina said.

“Come on. Hurry up.” Marek had seen Vince step onto a duplex stoop. While it looked like Catina’s place, Marek wasn’t sure.

“I’m not afraid.” Catina’s pranced sideways.

“Oh no?” Marek pulled up his collar and raised his hands like a giant iguana. “Maybe you should be,” he growled as he stomped towards her to get her moving faster.

Catina squealed with laughter as she ran up the street. Marek had half an eye on her and half on where Vince was disappearing. Damn. Marek was going to miss him. He slowed down, but Catina kept running, looking back to see what was keeping him. A few yards from her house, she tripped on a chunk of ice and landed right on her face.

Fuck. What if she blamed him? He ran towards her and lifted her by her snowsuit hood. “You okay?”

Catina rubbed her forehead and nodded. Thank God there was no scrape or bruise. “You should be more careful,” he said, wanting to make sure that she didn’t blame him.

She used her key to open the door, but Marek gave the bell a spin anyway. Her mother pulled the cord to unlock the door and peered down from the top of the stairs. Severina d’Alves. *The divorcée*. The one and only *divorcée* in the neighbourhood. Everyone talked about her after she moved back. There was all kind of speculation about why her marriage broke up. Did he cheat on her? Beat her? Whatever it was, it had to be horrible for her to justify Catina growing up without a father.

“Vindo aqui,” she said.

Catina ran up the stairs and hugged her mãe’s lean hips. They had the same chocolate eyes, but Severina’s hair was longer and dyed a pomegranate red.

Marek cleared his throat. “I’m Marek Danco. Danika’s brother.”

“Yes.”

“Can I speak to Vince?”

“Who?”

“Marek Danco.”

“Not you. I know you’re Emilia’s kid.”

“Vince. Could you just let me speak to Vince for a second?”

She hesitated. “I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“The garage mechanic. I’m sure I just saw him come in here.”

“No, no. That’s my nephew, Hector.”

“But I was sure...” Marek knew Hector Soares from school, and that wasn’t him.

“Obrigada. Thank you,” she said, shutting the door at the top of the stairs.

Shit! Of course, she would lie to him. She already had a bad enough reputation.

Marek had overheard Mamo joke to her friends that they better watch their husbands around *the divorcée*. So, of course, Severina d’Alves wouldn’t want anybody to know that she was entertaining a man in her flat. The rumour mill would crank up big time. Marek went home eager to ask Vince the next time he saw him about *the divorcée*.

Chapter Six

At the garage, sparks flew as Vince blasted the paint off a blue Tempest. The car's hefty grill and low trunk reminded Marek of Klaudia. Over the past week he had peddled up and down Henri Julien at least a hundred times hoping to see her leaning out her window.

He had lots of time to ride around after lying to his parents about school being closed for a week so the teachers could plan new lessons. Marek figured a week would give Guerino enough time to cool off. His forged note to the principal said he needed time off because his grandmother had died. Marek had to stop himself from wishing this were true. Baba was driving him nuts since moving into the flat. She was constantly nattering away in Slovak about why he wasn't studying or helping with the dishes. He already had warned Mamo that if she didn't tell Baba to stop acting like his second mother, he would. Mamo gave him one of her looks. So much for that.

Vince lifted his welding helmet and motioned for Marek to come closer. "Nice, eh?" He ran his fingertips over the bare metal. "Soft as a baby's bottom."

Marek nodded. "You're a smooth operator, alright."

Vince looked up. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know. The other night. At Severina's."

Vince turned to pick up the blaster. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"When you went to get cozy with Catina's mǎe ... I saw you go to her place."

Vince squatted to inspect the side panel again. "It wasn't me."

Marek could swear it was. Yet he couldn't think of a reason for Vince to lie. Maybe Vince was worried about his girlfriend Kammy finding out. Yet Vince had to know that his secret would be safe with Marek. As much as Marek liked Kammy, it wasn't his job to tell her what her boyfriend was doing. It wasn't like they were married. They weren't even engaged.

Maybe Vince didn't want Marek knowing that he would have sex with an older broad. Severina had to be a good ten or fifteen years older. Maybe that was it, although Marek couldn't understand why Vince wouldn't want to get sex wherever he could, especially since the divorcée was a beautiful woman for her age.

"Sorry," Marek said when Vince finished blasting the side panel. "My mistake."

"No problem." Vince wiped his hands. "Just be careful before mouthing off."

Marek turned away to look at some of the wrenches hanging on the wall.

"So did you ask your old man about working here?" Vince said.

Marek's heart skipped a beat. "Maybe you could talk to him?"

"I'm not getting involved. I've got my own problems."

Marek felt his heart drop.

"Speaking of trouble..." Vince motioned towards the customer's door. Kamilia Pokorny struggled against the wind to pull it open. She could have walked through the open garage, but not Kammy. She had to do things properly. With her long blond hair, sky-blue eyes and high cheekbones, she was definitely one of Montreal's prettiest Slovak girls. She had officially been Vince's girlfriend since her thirteenth birthday, maybe earlier without her parents knowing.

Marek didn't understand why Vince bothered to go out with her for so long. Yes, she was pretty. Yet if she didn't put out – and Vince had talked more than once about her still being a virgin – why bother with her for so many years? Especially with her parents giving Vince all kinds of hassles. They never let her go out alone with him. He either had to visit with her in their parlour where the Pokornys checked on them every few minutes, or he could take her to a Slovak dance or picnic where they had at least a hundred chaperones. It seemed way too much trouble for one girl, no matter who she was or how good she looked.

“It smells like paint in here,” she complained.

“What do you expect a body shop to smell like?” Vince said.

Kammy smiled at Marek. “How's your family?” she asked in Slovak.

“Good, thanks,” Marek said, wishing she hadn't shown up.

Turning back towards Vince, she put a hand on his shoulder, being ever so careful not to touch any of the grease on his coveralls. “My Mamo is making all twelve traditional dishes for Christmas Eve.”

“So?” Vince asked.

“You're invited, silly.”

“But I already made plans to ski up north.”

Kammy's eyes widened and Marek could swear they turned a shade lighter as she drew her mouth into a pout. “To je tradicia.”

“What tradition?” Vince said. “Your parents never invite me to Christmas.”

Giving an exasperated look, Kammy stomped her heeled boots. “That's why this is such a big deal. They *are* inviting you this year.”

Vince furled his eyebrows. “Why all of a sudden?”

A sly smile covered Kammy’s face. “I warned them that if they didn’t start treating you nicer I might elope with you when I turn eighteen in a few weeks.”

Laughing, Vince flicked a paint chip off the back of his hand. “Okay, I’ll come.”

Kammy locked her fingers around Vince’s neck.

“Careful,” Vince said. “Or you’ll get smudged.”

Marek had never seen a speck of dirt on Kammy’s white coat. She must have sprayed it with Scotchgard. When she pinned up her hair for special occasions, she put enough hairspray to stop a cannonball. She probably did the same with her coat.

“I ti pujdzes do kojscela?” she asked.

Vince groaned. “Not Midnight Mass. It’s always so long.”

Kammy pouted again. “Kazdy pujdze. To je rodinna tradicia.”

Again with the *family tradition*. Did Kammy forget that Vince didn’t have any family? Vince hadn’t seen his father since he was eight. His Mamo had died four years ago, when Vince was nineteen. Cancer.

Kammy did have a point about everybody going to Midnight Mass. Slovaks that Marek didn’t see the rest of the year showed up on Christmas Eve. The church was so packed that people had to stand along the walls and in the foyer. Mamo always made sure the family arrived one hour earlier so they could get their usual pew half-way up the rows: far enough in front to look interested yet far enough back to seem humble in the eyes of God.

Vince excused himself to deal with a customer. As soon as he did, Kammy gave Marek an unexpected peck on the cheek and bounced around like a pompom girl.

“Can you keep a secret?” she asked.

Not according to Vince, he wanted to say but kept quiet.

“I really think Vince is going to propose to me this Christmas,” she said, grabbing a hold of Marek’s arms and swinging them.

Marek gave her a smile, but had no idea what to say.

“I’ve noticed him looking at my hands. Probably trying to figure out my ring size, don’t you think? He must know it’s time for us to get engaged.”

Marek kept smiling. If Vince was planning to propose to Kammy, what the hell was he doing at Severina d’Alves’s? Maybe Vince just wanted to have some fun before settling down. Or maybe this marriage stuff was all in Kammy’s head.

Kammy took a tighter hold of his hands. “Did he mention anything to you?”

Marek shook his head. Kammy’s hands were hot. He wished she would let go.

“You can tell me. I won’t squeal.”

There was nothing to tell. Yet Marek had a feeling that would be the worst thing he could say. So he looked around, hoping Vince would come back right away.

Kammy released his hands and spun around in her A-line coat. “I hope he’s looking for a ring. We don’t have to get married right away. I don’t mind waiting two years until I’m twenty, even twenty-one, but I don’t want to end up an old maid.”

She looked up at the heavens blocked by a cement ceiling. “I keep hinting, you know. Sighing when I see a nice ring on a television commercial. Slowing down when we pass a jewellery store. He has to know that’s what I want, no?”

Marek regretted getting off his bike.

“That’s my dream, to marry a good Slovak man. I know my parents were hoping for someone better, a doctor or lawyer, but Vince has a good job. We’ll be able to buy a house in a few years. A nice one, in the suburbs, not in this ugly old neighbourhood.”

Marek was about to lie that he had deliveries to make when Vince returned.

“So you’d better give me some ideas of what to buy for your parents,” Vince said.

Kammy rattled off ryes and whiskies that her father liked and suggested fancy chocolates and embroidery threads and lots of other things for her mom.

“Whoa, slow down. I’m never going to remember all this,” Vince said with a smile. “Marek, get a pencil and paper off my desk, next to the phone.”

Marek headed towards the back of the building. Halfway down a lean corridor, he stopped at the toilet to have a pee. The pantry-sized room had a pull-chain toilet and no sink. The murky brown water in the bowl smelled awful. Marek couldn’t imagine Vince letting Kammy near this filth. His friend would have to change his ways if and when he got married. Marek had a hard time imagining Vince becoming domesticated. He would probably be like a cat, only going along with things when they suited him.

An oversized metal desk filled most of Vince’s office. Nude calendar girls with tits as big as watermelons covered the grey walls. Marek brushed his hand across the body of a girl wearing only a sailor’s hat and a smile as she sat back on her heels. The page felt cold and waxy. Vince had piles of invoices, crank bolts, bearings and wrenches littering his desk, but no pencil or plain paper that Marek could see anywhere. He sat in the office chair and began to search inside the desk. Each drawer shrieked as it rubbed against its metal frame. They were filled with bills, combs, business cards, eight-track cartridges and restaurant towelettes. Marek fished out a pen, but it had a plastic woman

floating inside who became naked as soon as the pen was turned upside down. Quite sure that Vince didn't want to be handed this pen with Kammy around, Marek reversed it a few more times and then put it back.

The bottom left drawer seemed jammed until Marek released it with a fairly good kick on the inside of the desk. At first he saw only a small telephone book. Vince's black book, no doubt, filled with the names and numbers of women. Marek was dying to know whether Vince had some kind of system for rating them in bed. When he flipped open the book, he was disappointed to see it filled with the names of older Slovak people. The book probably belonged to Vince's mother.

As Marek returned the phone book, the drawer's inner shelving came loose. He lifted it to find the lower compartment filled with stockings, garter belts, tubes of K-Y Jelly, and locks of hair stuck together with tape. There were also several pairs of small panties. Marek picked up a black pair. He had never felt the cool silkiness of satin and just thinking about it against a woman's warm skin excited him. He knew he should close the drawer right away, but not before he examined a pink pair that looked as thin as paper. The panties smelled like strawberry Kool-Aid crystals. They seemed to be made of the same stuff as Communion wafers, only much thinner. Marek was sure they would melt with saliva. He was so tempted to lick a bit. Instead, he put them back exactly the way he had found them. He made sure everything else was in place and shut the drawer. Then he sat back and closed his eyes for a second to remember all of it.

"What the hell is taking you so long?"

Marek nearly fell off the chair as he spun around to face Vince. "I'm still looking for a pen and paper," he said.

“Did you look in the desk?”

“No,” Marek lied, figuring it was the thing to say after their strange conversation about Severina d’Alves. “You told me it was on top somewhere.”

Vince lifted the phone and waved a pen and pad in Marek’s face. “Right here,” he said, sounding really mad.

“You didn’t tell me—”

Vince walked out.

Marek followed, wondering if he could manage to do anything without pissing Vince off.

“See you later,” Vince told Marek as soon as they re-entered the garage.

Marek wasn’t sure if he was being dismissed because Vince was so angry at him or he just wanted to be alone with Kammy. Either way, Marek could take a hint. He grabbed his bike and stood on the pedals. As soon as he rode out of the garage, his mind wandered back to the treasures inside Vince’s trophy drawer.

Chapter Seven

Marek was about to have sex with a mermaid when Baba's thin voice streamed into his consciousness. Damn it. The mermaid had just had a shower to get rid of that fishy smell. If only he could drown out his grandmother's yakking.

Baba was telling Danika about how the most powerful Slavic god Svarog became exhausted after creating the Universe and put his one and only son, Svarozhich, in charge of this era.

Marek had heard the same story years earlier.

"Co je éra?" Danika asked.

Marek doubted his sister would know the word in English either.

"A very long time," Baba explained in Slovak. "And Svarozhich had a huge spinning head with many eyes, ears and mouths that let him see, hear and speak the truth about everything. One of these eyes saw right through the stardust where the Universe began with a big explosion. A magical horse lived among these milky stars and was protected by a rooster that slept with one eye open."

Marek glanced at his alarm clock. Just after seven on a Saturday, the only morning he could sleep in later. He pulled his pillow over his head to tune out Baba, but her voice seeped through the drapes that Mamo had sewn for his so-called room.

"Svarozhich tricked the rooster and snatched the stallion with the golden mane," Baba continued. "He trained the magical horse to pull the Sun across the sky."

What a crock. Not that Marek cared what Baba told Danika. He just wished she would do it somewhere else.

“Before Svarog went to sleep inside the Sun, he told Svarozhich to collect the horse’s manure to mould the Earth and the clay figures that would later become people.”

“And that’s why everyone is so full of shit,” Marek yelled in Slovak, stomping through the maroon drapes in his striped pyjamas. “Could you please go somewhere else to tell your stories?”

“It’s our living room, too,” Danika said in her sing-song way.

Baba sat on the chesterfield with her arm around Danika. She wore nothing but black even before Dzedo passed away. Her bosom sagged to her belly under her cardigan. She had rolled down her dark stockings to her ankles and the skin on her shins was as colourless as ice. On her swollen feet, she wore men’s *papuče* with brown vinyl uppers and a woolly trim. Marek dreaded the idea of his friends seeing the way she looked. Not that he would invite anyone over anymore with nowhere to play music or talk in private.

Mamo showed up wiping her hands and wanting to know what the fuss was.

Baba stood up. “Slovaks are a people of stories,” she said, waving a finger at Marek. “We once had the most stories in the world, but we have forgotten so many of them. If we lose our stories, we lose who we are.”

She spoke so fast that Marek barely understood her. It all sounded like nonsense anyway. If people didn’t care enough to remember a story, it couldn’t be that important.

Baba kept babbling about how many stories had already been lost.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” he said. “Speak white.”

Mamo’s slap across his cheek felt like the sting of a B.B. gun. She had given him the occasional smack on the arm, but nothing like this. Never like this. “Don’t you ever talk to your grandmother like that again,” she said.

“Sure, take her side.”

Mamo gave him that look of hers and left for the kitchen.

“It’s not fair that I don’t have a room,” he yelled as he trotted after her.

Mamo turned and stared him down when she reached the kitchen. “Life is not fair,” she said. “Do you think it’s fair that I have to share my home with my mother-in-law? What about my privacy? What about my space?” She kept her voice to a loud whisper. “Do you think I want her watching my every move? Constantly making comments about what I buy, how I cook, what I bake, when I wash the dishes?”

“So why did you invite her to live with us?”

Mamo said nothing, but Marek could tell by the troubled look on her face that it was for one reason: *peniaze*. Always, *peniaze*. It seemed every decision his parents ever made had to do primarily with money, no matter what Apo had told him earlier about not needing a handout from him or Vince. It dawned on Marek that Mamo and Apo wanted a bigger rent from the top flat than Baba could pay since Dzedo had died and she received only half of his pension. Mamo wouldn’t admit this, of course, preferring that everyone thought she was helping Baba out. Business was obviously slower than even he realized. He was surprised during his week of skipping school to find out how dead it was in the store all day.

Mamo pulled a tissue from her apron pocket and blew her nose. Marek hated it when she cried. He went to put his arm on her shoulder, but she shooed him away.

The doorbell buzzed. Marek sheepishly followed Mamo to the front of the flat.

Danika had already pulled the release cord for the downstairs lock. A slender woman in her mid-twenties walked up. Her chestnut brown hair was swept up in a

chignon without a strand out of place. She had olive eyes and full lips with a touch of lipstick in the same soft pink as cotton candy. Her face had the tanned glow of maple butter and the longest cocoa-coloured eyelashes Marek had ever seen. A mohair coat with a navy blue hat made her as classy as a stewardess.

“I’d like to see the flat for rent.” She had a French accent but spoke English well.

“Come in,” Mamo said.

The woman unzipped her knee-high boots and placed them at the top of the stairs. Her nylon-covered toes looked like a perfect family of delicious mushrooms.

As she removed her coat, Marek noticed her dark navy skirt fell below her knees. Her blouse was buttoned high. Very classy, very chic.

She extended her arm to shake Mamo’s. “I am Séraphine Moreau.”

Mamo invited her to sit on the chesterfield where Baba and Danika sat huddled. As Mamo followed Séraphine into the living room, Marek realized he was still in pyjamas with his prick able to pop out of the slit in his trunks. He ran into his room.

Séraphine made an embarrassing noise as she sat on the chesterfield’s plastic, sending Danika into a fit of giggles.

“Go play in your room,” Mamo ordered her, which she did with some moaning.

Mamo offered coffee, tea, cola, water, but Séraphine politely refused them all.

“How many people are you?” Mamo asked.

“Just my husband and me.” Séraphine pronounced *husband* without the “h.” It was not a word Marek wanted to hear uttered by her candy pink lips. He took a quick look in the mirror above his dresser, licked his palm and patted down a few spikes from his outgrown crew cut. Then he used his pinkies to remove the sleep from his eyes.

He re-entered the living room through the drapes. The heavy fabric wrapped around one of his legs and he stumbled forward. Séraphine smiled but, thank goodness, didn't laugh.

There was nowhere to sit. Baba stuck to her half of the chesterfield like bubblegum on a sidewalk. Marek pretended to look for a textbook as he tried to get a closer look at Séraphine. Her legs were crossed ladylike below the knees and towards one side. Her knees were as smooth as a honeydew melon. No knobbly bits or bluish veins, just two perfectly round caps blushed by the blood running through them. Unfortunately, he also caught sight of a plain wedding band.

“Why do you need a six-and-a-half for two people?” Mamo asked.

Séraphine moved her legs to the other side. “My husband works from home, so we would use one room as an office.”

That ugly word again.

“What kind of work does he do?” Mamo asked.

Marek retrieved his Math book from the floor next to the chesterfield. Séraphine pulled her skirt down around her knees without looking at him.

“Co ty robiš?” Mamo asked him.

“I need my book,” he said.

He caught Baba giving him one of her I-know-what-you're-doing smiles and he thanked God that she didn't speak English.

Séraphine looked up and smiled, too. She had great teeth: white, straight and none of those gold caps that so many immigrants had.

“Is that Polish or Ukrainian that you're talking?” she asked.

“Slovak,” Mamo said in her best English.

Baba nodded like a bubblehead.

“Slo-?” Séraphine narrowed her eyes.

“Czechoslovakian,” Marek said, knowing full well that most Quebeckers had never heard of Slovaks. Czechoslovakians... the hockey players, yes. Slovaks, no.

“What does your husband do?” Mamo repeated.

Séraphine moved a bit, the chesterfield’s plastic sticking to her legs again. The plastic embarrassed Marek to no end. It was so working class... so you-finally-can-afford-something-new-so-you-have-to-make-it-last-the-rest-of-your-life. He was tempted to make a natural-looking tear in it so Mamo would remove it and people could finally sit in comfort. Knowing Mamo, though, she would scotch-tape the rip.

“He sells encyclopaedias,” Séraphine said.

Mamo looked concerned. “Door to door?”

“No, to schools and libraries. He’s like a branch manager.”

“Does that mean people would come here?”

“No, no. He makes appointments to visit the schools and libraries.”

Marek hoped all this would reassure Mamo about the rent being paid on time by a quiet couple, but she had more questions. “And you?”

“I work at Dupuis Frères.”

Ding, ding, ding. A winning answer. Mamo loved that store because she could buy dresses that Slovak women couldn’t find at Eaton’s or Morgan’s. Séraphine might be able to get her some kind of employee discount or at least tell her about sales.

“Let me show you the flat,” Mamo said, making her way to the keys hooked by the door. Séraphine nodded at Baba and Marek as she made her way out.

Marek wished Baba would get lost somewhere so he could have the living room to himself, but she stayed glued to the chesterfield. Overhead they heard the clapping of Mamo’s slippers. With only one set of footsteps, Marek guessed Séraphine had removed her boots again. A smart move that would impress Mamo.

It was a good half-hour before Mamo returned without Séraphine and slumped into a chair.

“Ta co?” Baba asked, not giving Mamo a chance to breath.

“I don’t know,” Mamo said in Slovak.

Marek cleared his throat. “She seems like a nice lady.”

“Vona je šumne oblečena,” Baba said.

“Yes, she was dressed nice,” Marek repeated.

“I don’t know,” Mamo said again. “Why didn’t she come with her husband? I’m worried he’s going to make noise over my head all day, his phone ringing constantly.” Sitting up, Mamo sighed. “But she’s the only person who has come to see the place. No one rents in the middle of winter. I should have asked her why they need to move now instead of May like everyone else. Maybe they’re being thrown out from their last place.”

“This lady doesn’t seem like someone who would be kicked out,” Marek said.

Mamo reluctantly nodded. “I wish we could find some of *naso ludze* – our people – to rent the flat, but the Slovaks who still live around here are too old to climb up two flights of stairs.”

“Did you decide?” Marek asked when Mamo stood.

“No, no. Of course not. I have to talk to Apo first.”

She always had to talk to Apo first, even though she decided everything.

Mamo twisted the bottom of her apron as she headed back towards the kitchen.

“You should go downstairs to see if your father needs help,” Baba said.

“Leave me alone.” Marek retreated to his so-called room. Apo would phone if there was a delivery to make and Danika would run to fetch him. Damn. If he still had his old room, he could lie back on his bed, think of Séraphine and release some of the excitement he felt about her. He would let his mind linger on her legs as he jerked off. Then he could finally relax for a while. With his luck, though, Danika would barrel through the drapes and scream blue murder if she saw him with his prick in his hand. Or Baba would peek through and say what a sin he had and then nag him to go to confession or risk going blind. His imaginary time with Séraphine Moreau would have to wait.

Chapter Eight

As Marek entered the store, he saw Mamo sitting in the side room. One step inside that tiny room and his chest tightened. It reminded him too much of when his family had lived as crammed as tinned sardines in it. Every night Mamo unfolded Marek's cot as far away from Danika's crib as possible but he still woke up gagging from her diaper smell. To change the baby, Mamo had to climb over his cot from the three-quarter bed that she managed somehow to share with Apo. If the wheels on Marek's cot shifted the least bit, he felt the rumble of Apo's snoring. Late some nights, Marek sensed Mamo hovering over him. He always twitched to make her uncertain about whether he was sleeping. Then she told Apo *este ňe* – not yet – and Apo would sigh. If Marek didn't give enough hints about being awake, they rocked their bed until Apo moaned like a dying bull. Marek pretended to have nightmares sometimes to make them stop.

Mamo sat at the kitchen table that her father had nailed together from scrap wood. The rose duster she wore over her black mourning clothes gave her face some colour. She flicked a pencil between her fingers as she craned her neck over the store's ledger.

“Cólera!” she said when her pencil snapped in half. The word sounded so much worse in Slovak. Mamo said *cholera* whenever she became frustrated. It was a way to sort of swear without having a sin. Marek had lost count of the number of times Baba warned Mamo that she could – God forbid – summon the plague by calling it too often. Baba's own grandmother had died from the outbreak in eastern Slovakia in 1831, and Baba still believed that nobles had poisoned the peasants' wells.

She was always talking about words being more powerful than people realized. How they could soil a person's reputation and even bury a life. Marek wanted to dismiss Baba's cautions as malarkey, but the fear on her wrinkled face was enough to make him avoid saying the word and cringing when Mamo did.

Marek thought about slipping upstairs, but Mamo would have a fit if an order came. Her jaw looked tight enough to crack walnuts as she walked to the counter and plopped the ledger on it. "We're short again," she told Apo.

Apo's face looked sadder than a dog's.

She pulled out what was left of the pencil and stabbed at a column of names. "Oni muša placic."

Apo hunched over the list. "Yes, I know they have to pay, but if I push too hard, they will buy what they need somewhere else."

Mamo rolled her eyes. "Jezis-Maria! What is the point of having customers if they don't pay us?"

Apo lifted his hands in surrender. "Fine, I will talk to them."

"Kedy?"

He squirmed. "This week."

Mamo pointed the pencil's jagged end at him. "Ti šlubuyes?"

"I promise, I promise." Apo grabbed *The Montreal Star* and retreated to the far side of the counter.

"You'd better," Mamo said, still waving the broken pencil. It was one of the few expressions she always used in English. And she had to be furious to speak English. She

had also broken her rule never to argue in front of the children. It was harder for everyone to have privacy since Baba had moved to the lower flat.

When Apo glanced up from his newspaper to scout Mamo's location, Marek gave him a supportive grin. Apo looked away. Marek could only imagine how embarrassed Apo felt about being so hen-pecked. He wished Apo had the guts to tell Mamo to back off. Yet watching Mamo chew her lip as she poured over the ledger again, he wished Apo would realize he needed to do something before she had a nervous breakdown.

Apo refolded *The Montreal Star*. "Things will get better soon," he said.

Marek shook his head even though Apo might see him. Apo always had to try to have the last word, even when there wasn't a chance in hell of that happening.

Shutting the ledger, Mamo walked up to him. "Kedy?" she demanded.

"Expo is coming," he said, like he was announcing Queen Elizabeth's arrival.

Mamo let out a huge sigh. "Expo is two years away. And do you really think people will come here from Expo to buy Coca-Colas and souvenir *čečka*?"

Apo straightened. "You'll be surprised how many people will come through our neighbourhood. Thousands will come to Montreal from all over the world."

Mamo huffed. "Oh yes. Expo will be our salvation." Her sarcasm oozed like new toothpaste. "People will line up to buy kielbasa to take back to the United States and England."

The bell over the door clanged. Raddy stood at the entrance with his usual broad smile. He removed his fedora as soon as he saw Mamo.

"Dobre rano, Emilia," he said, tipping his hat. "Jak še maš?"

Mamo nodded the briefest of hellos. Then she grabbed the ledger and stormed off into the back room, zinging the drapes closed behind her. Marek had overheard her more than once complain to Apo about how much time Raddy spent at the store. She resented his presence all the more since Baba had moved in with them. That closet of a room was the only place Mamo could spend time alone now and she liked it quiet when she did.

If Mamo had gone upstairs, Raddy would have praised the Lord for being a bachelor and vow yet again never to get hitched. It was the one promise he seemed able to keep.

Raddy motioned for a beer. Apo looked up at the *Dow* clock. It wasn't yet ten, but he nodded. He never could say no to his *krajan*. It was a good thing Apo didn't feel the same way about every Slovak he knew or the family would be in the poorhouse.

Apo pointed to the stack of crates where Raddy could keep the bottle hidden.

Raddy grabbed a stubby from the beer fridge and lifted the cap with his thumb. Marek wanted to ask Raddy to show him how to do that but not when Mamo was in hearing range.

Sitting on a stack of twelve-packs, Raddy guzzled his beer and then wiped the foam off his mouth. "Škoda, eh? Just awful."

Apo looked at Raddy. "Co? What?"

"You mean you don't know?" Raddy put aside the bottle.

Apo lifted his palms to show he wasn't in the mood for games. "What are you talking about?"

The lines across Raddy's forehead deepened.

"Know what, Kresne?" Marek asked.

“About the graffini... I mean, graffili... You know: the paint.”

The drapes swished open. “Jaký farba?” Mamo asked. “What paint?”

Raddy stood and pointed at the door. “You should go see for yourselves.”

Mamo and Apo rushed past Marek.

When he caught up with them outside, they were standing on Napoleon Street and staring upwards with their mouths open.

MAUDITS POLACKS!

Someone had scrawled the insult in a screeching yellow paint diagonally across the entire store window.

Whoever had put those words there might as well have thrown paint in Marek’s face. He felt sick to his stomach.

Mamo covered her mouth with a hand. Marek put his arm around her. She buckled slightly. He tried to take her hand but she brushed him off without taking her eyes off the words.

“It’s only paint,” he said in Slovak. “It’ll come off.”

Mamo looked at him as if he spoke a foreign language.

Apo tried to wipe away the paint speckled onto the wall, but it had already encrusted the porous bricks like yellowed bloodstains.

Raddy took Mamo’s arm. “I’m sorry,” he said in Slovak. “I thought you knew.”

Mamo pulled away. “How were we supposed to see from inside?” she yelled as if the graffiti were his fault. “We can’t stay up all night guarding the store.” She covered her face as she broke down into tears.

Apo’s chest heaved. “Who would do this to us?”

“Breathe,” Marek told him. “Or you’ll have a stroke.”

Apo paced in front of the window, gulping for air.

Marek tapped Mamo’s shoulder to get her to look up. “Tell him to calm down,” he told her. “He listens to you.”

Mamo kept her face hidden as she shook her head.

“Who would do this to us?” Apo kept asking when he caught his breath.

“I bet you it was Benoît Bourque,” Raddy said. “He was as mad as a hornet when you wouldn’t give him his paycheque.”

“That son of a bitch,” Apo yelled.

Marek walked over to Apo. “No, it’s not him. It can’t be him.”

“Why not?”

Marek looked up at the graffiti. “Benoît never called us polacks.”

Raddy lit a smoke. “He did use some name.”

“Yes, he called us pigs – English pigs – not polacks.”

Pulling a tissue from her pocket, Mamo dried her eyes. “So who did this?”

“It’s that frog, Gaston,” Marek blurted. “I bet it was him. Goddamn frog.”

Apo grabbed Marek by his sweater. “Maybe it was, but that’s for the police to find out. You don’t do nothing. Ti mňe čhješ?”

“Yes, I hear you.”

“Dost – enough,” Mamo said as she folded away her tissue. “Ja chcem predac.”

Whoa. Marek knew Mamo was upset, but *sell the store?*

“It’s only paint,” Apo told her again. “We’ll scrape it off.”

“Don’t you get it?” she yelled. “They don’t want us here. They actually think we’re making money, and want us out.” Mamo never said who *they* were. *They* could be the French, English, Ukrainians, Jews, Portuguese, Italians, Greeks, Protestants, even Greek Catholic Slovaks. In this case, the French graffiti made it clear whom she meant.

The colour drained from Apo’s face. “Emilia, I don’t want to sell,” he said almost in a whisper.

Acting like Apo had chosen another woman, Mamo started crying again as she went back inside the store. Apo followed, saying he needed to phone the police.

Raddy and Marek stood in silence.

“It’s that fuckin’ pepper, Gaston,” Marek finally said.

“You really think he did this?”

Marek nodded. “Oh, it’s him, alright.”

“I’m not so sure.” Raddy took out a smoke and lit it.

“Why not?”

“Gaston Sauvageau is a lazy son of a bitch,” Raddy said. “I don’t think he would go through all this trouble, especially if he had to buy paint. He’s in debt over his ears.”

“You didn’t see the way...”

“See what?”

“Nothing,” Marek said, moving towards the store entrance. “I’m going inside.”

As soon as Marek hopped up the steps, Mamo gave him his jacket and a thin piece of wood with a razor blade pushed into it.

Marek groaned when he realized it was a homemade scraper. “Why me? I didn’t put the paint up there.”

“You’re not embarrassed by what they wrote about us?”

Marek lowered his head as he put on the jacket.

“I have to ...” Raddy said, pointing at nothing down the street.

“Yes, of course you do,” Marek said with Raddy already gone.

As Marek chipped at the paint, he called Gaston every bad name he knew in French. Apo stepped outside to take a photograph of the window in case Marek removed all of the graffiti before the police arrived. Fat chance. Marek’s wrist already throbbed after scratching off a small portion. He needed a ladder to reach most of the lettering. It would take days to remove everything.

“I will come to help soon,” Apo said.

Marek would believe this when he saw it happen.

The winter sun could only penetrate Napoleon Street’s narrowness around noon. By two o’clock, the street was almost dark. It struck Marek as odd that such a short and skinny street would be named after such a famous person. He found himself thinking about all kinds of silly things after scraping the damn window for so long. His fingers were frozen and he needed a smoke desperately.

Placing the scraper on the window’s ledge, he scurried around the corner into the laneway. After making sure no one was lurking around, he lit up a cigarette. He sucked in the smoke for as long as he could before releasing it in a series of rings. A wind out of nowhere blew them into nothing.

He thought about how to get even with Gaston Sauvageau. He could put dog shit on Gaston’s doorstep and ring the doorbell, but he remembered that Gaston never opened the door before checking who was there first. If he just left the crap there, Gaston might

slip on it on his way out and fall down those insane stairs. As much as Marek wanted revenge, he didn't want to risk going to jail for killing Gaston.

A thin smile crept across Marek's face as he thought about scrambling raw eggs and pouring the glop through Gaston's letter slot. He would have to sneak out to do it late at night, which wouldn't be easy with his so-called room now right across from Mamo and Apo's bedroom. There had to be a simpler way.

Marek nearly danced on the spot when it struck him. Stink bombs! He could find out from Patrick where to buy some and slip them inside Gaston's door. It would make Gaston's place smell like rotten eggs for hours. Marek chuckled as he imagined Gaston pinching his nose and running from room to room to open windows.

By wearing gloves, Marek would make sure no fingerprints could be traced back to him. His main worry was getting safely down those stairs before the stink bombs started to reek....

A rough tap on his shoulder frightened the hell out of him. He tossed his cigarette and spun around ready to punch in case the Guerino had sneaked up on him.

Patrick Richard widened his grey eyes when he saw Marek's fist an inch from his nose. "Take it easy," he said. He looked a little like Alfred E. Neuman on the covers of *Mad*. A bit less dorky, but not much. As he stepped away, he forced Catina, whose hand he was holding, backwards, too.

Marek picked up his cigarette. The snow had turned it to mush and he whipped it down the lane. He kicked snow in Patrick's direction. "Are you fucking crazy?"

"Why?"

"You scared the shit out of me. And you ruined my smoke."

“Sorry.”

Marek had to take several breaths to calm down.

“What are you doing with her?” he asked, pointing at Catina.

Patrick looked down at her and smiled. “We’re just walking home together.”

Marek tugged on Catina’s scarf. “Don’t you dare say a word about me smoking to Danika.”

Catina shrugged. “Okay, but she already knows.”

Marek released the scarf. “Fuck me. How?”

“I’m not saying.”

Marek wanted to shake her but this wasn’t his sister. He couldn’t pull her hair or twist her arm. Besides, he already suspected Danika of fishing through all his stuff. It was so easy for her to slip through those stupid drapes.

Patrick warmed one of Catina’s hands by rubbing it between his palms. His own skin was so thin and pale that it looked almost blue.

Catina withdrew her fingers and put on her mitts.

Patrick blew on his own hands and rubbed them together. “What’s up with you?”

“I’m not talking in front of her.” Marek pointed his chin at Catina.

Patrick ran a hand through his curly red hair. “Okay, I’ll take her home and come back. I have about an hour before supper. You’ll still be here?”

Marek shrugged.

“I can walk home by myself,” Catina said louder than necessary.

“You sure?” Patrick tried to grab her hand again but she ran down the laneway.

“Wait up,” Patrick called after her.

“Let her go.” Marek booted a snow pile. “Good riddance.”

Patrick watched Catina run over mounds of dirty snow. “Why? She wasn’t bothering us.”

“I don’t want little kids hanging around me.”

“Oh.”

“And what were you doing holding her hand?”

“Just being nice.” Patrick shoved his fists into his jacket. “She’s a sweet kid.”

“Gross.” Marek stuck out his tongue as far as it would go. “Don’t bring her around me anymore. I have enough of her when she’s playing with Danika.”

Patrick shrugged. “What’s got you so miffed anyway?”

“I don’t like people sneaking up on me.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Yell: one, two, three, I’m coming?”

With an Irish mother and Québécois father, Patrick could speak French and English almost perfectly, but he couldn’t say *three* properly if his life depended on it. His “threes” always came out as *trees*. Usually Marek bugged him about this but he wasn’t in the mood today. Nor was he in the mood to tease Patrick by pronouncing his first name in French and his family name in English instead of the other way around as they should be said.

“Can I have a smoke?” Patrick asked, putting out a hand.

Marek pointed to the soaked cigarette down the lane. “There’s your smoke.”

“Very funny. Come on, eh?”

“No, I can’t.” Marek had at least five in his pack but he was fed up with Patrick mooching one every time they saw each other.

“What do you mean? You always have cigarettes.”

“Not anymore. My folks have noticed stuff missing from the store. I can’t keep taking whatever I want. If you want smokes, you have to buy them.”

“Come on, eh? Where am I supposed to get money?”

Marek smiled. “Want to deliver groceries?”

Patrick rounded his bony shoulders. “You know I can’t work. I have to stay with my kid brother and sister when my Ma’s not well.”

“Sorry.” As much as Marek wanted another smoke, he was fed up with giving freebies to Patrick and other friends. All of them acted as if he owed them free stuff because his parents had a store. No more.

Yet Patrick looked as if he could really use a smoke. It wasn’t easy for him to look after and cook for Isabel and Luc after school three or four times a week.

Marek took out another smoke. “I’ll share half, but that’s it.”

As soon Marek lit a match, Patrick cupped his hands around it to block out the wind.

Marek took several drags before handing the smoke over. “What’s happening at school?”

“Yeah, where’ve you been? You don’t look sick.”

Marek looked away. “I’m better now. So is Guerino around?” Marek could only hope that the Big G had dropped out again.

Patrick handed back the smoke. “Why are you asking about him?”

“My God, you’re curious.”

“Hey, you’re the one asking....”

“Tell you what,” Marek said, blowing a huge smoke ring towards Patrick’s face.
“I’ll give you what’s left *after* you tell me what I want to know without any questions.”

“Okay. What?”

“Is he around?”

“Yeah.”

Marek glanced downward. “Has he been asking for me?”

Patrick laughed a bit. “What would Guerino want with you?”

“I told you *no questions*.”

Patrick made a face. “It wasn’t really a question.” He fidgeted again. “Come on, eh, half the smoke *is* gone.”

Marek took it out of his mouth and looked at its length before handing it over. Patrick dragged on it like he was drinking a milkshake through a blocked straw. When he tried to blow rings, they came out as wiggly as Casper the Ghost. Marek laughed.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said. “Help me scrape off some paint and I’ll give you two whole packs of smokes.”

“Great!”

“But I’ll keep the smokes for you.” Marek didn’t want to have to put money into the register for a couple of packs when he could sneak out the loose ones a few at a time.

Patrick scrunched his nose. “I can keep my own cigarettes.”

“If I keep them, they’ll last longer.”

Patrick made another face.

“Okay,” Marek said. “I’ll give you four now, and the others a few at a time.”

They shook on the deal.

“So what paint are you talking about?”

“Finish your smoke and I’ll show you,” Marek said. “But if you see my parents, don’t talk about it. Don’t mention that I’m missing school either. Okay?”

Patrick squeezed the dog-end of the cigarette between his index finger and thumb and sucked hard before releasing a stream of smoke. “So you’ll be back on Monday?”

Marek nodded, knowing Patrick would keep a seat for him in the cafeteria. Sometimes Marek wished he could hang out with someone who acted cooler, dressed better and had more money, but there was a comfort in them being friends since Grade One. Marek could always count on Patrick to chat their way out of a fight with a French gang or scrape paint off a window. He gave Patrick a jawbreaker from his pocket before plopping another one in his own mouth.

“What’s going on with you and Guerino?” Patrick asked as he hurried to keep up.

“Nothing.”

As they rounded the corner, Patrick’s mouth fell open at the paint on the window. Marek tapped it shut and handed him the scraper.

“Where are you going?” Patrick said.

“For another razorblade.”

The store bell startled Apo. “You’re finished?”

“Are you kidding?” Marek said. “Patrick is going to help me.”

Pressing the zero key, Apo opened the register and pulled out a two-dollar bill.

“Give him this later,” he said.

Mark folded the deuce and put it in his pocket. A few good bets on pinball at *Rizzo's* and he could quadruple that money. He just had to remember to tell Apo thanks on Patrick's behalf later.

It was almost three when the police arrived. Marek hated the way Apo sucked up to both officers. After they wrote their report, he slipped them each a fiver and invited them into the store for a sandwich on the house. As if that would make them put aside their other cases and focus only on the property damage at *Danco's Grocery*.

At four-thirty, Patrick left. Only then did Marek realize that they had scraped the graffiti down to ITS POLACKS. "Cripes," he said to no one. He would have scraped a bit off both words if Apo had taken out the ladder. It was too cold and dark and Marek's wrist ached too much to do anymore now. He just hoped Mamo wouldn't come outside to inspect the progress. She was probably too hurt and embarrassed.

Picking up the homemade scrapers, Marek felt someone watching him. He popped his head around the corner. The lace curtains were slightly pulled back at the Duseks' house. Marek puckered his lips and blew a huge kiss across the street. The curtains instantly became a perfect veil on the world again. As least Tatiana Dusek was one problem that Marek could dismiss in a flash. If only the others were as simple.

Marek slapped the side of his head when he realized he had forgotten to ask Patrick where to buy stink bombs.

Chapter Nine

The graffiti had been gone for several days, but Mamo couldn't get those words off her mind. She was still in bed with a terrible headache.

Marek's stomach was still in knots thinking about the kids at school calling him a MAUDIT POLACK. He already felt like an oddball there. Most of the kids were English – of Irish or French background – but English. He always tried to act English – the plain Canadian kind. Although when some kids mistook his family name as Italian, he didn't correct them. No one messed with Italians. Only he had been stupid enough to do that, which reminded him to look out for Guerino on his way to The Shoemaker's.

It annoyed Marek that Mamo and Apo said the family's name with a soft c like in the Old Country. They still wrote Dančo on Christmas cards and cheques. Marek had to plead with them to leave the accent off the new COKE sign for the store. "Don't you want to look Canadian?" he yelled. Mamo finally agreed, but only after Apo said they might get more customers if their name didn't look so foreign.

Now Marek would never be able to pretend he was Italian or plain Canadian again. Word spread fast when bad things happened. Marek had warned Patrick that he would beat the crap out of him if he mentioned the graffiti to anyone, but some kids from school must have seen it. Or their parents did. Marek cursed Apo for not replacing the window with a new pane right away. Instead Marek and Patrick spent three more afternoons scraping it. Marek couldn't move his wrist for two days afterwards.

As pissed off as he was at Apo, he was more furious with Gaston. It was one thing to call people names to their faces, but only a coward painted them on a window in the middle of the night.

Marek looked forward to seeing how fast The Shoemaker would pick up the vibration of Marek's footsteps when he entered the shop, but a television program was blaring again in the back. Unsure of how to get The Shoemaker's attention, he grabbed a seat and waited. He noticed the handmade boots in the window had more dust covering them. So did St. Crispin.

The Shoemaker knocked on the wall to get Marek's attention and indicated he would be out in a minute.

Marek wished he would hurry up. Once Marek picked up Mamo's pumps, he could go with Patrick to *Rizzo's*.

The television fell quiet a couple of minutes later, but The Shoemaker was still in the back somewhere.

Marek fought the urge to tap his foot. It wasn't The Shoemaker's fault that the last few days had been hell. Everyone had to be as quiet as corpses at home because of Mamo's headaches. Baba was acting like the boss of the house, constantly asking where Marek was going and when he was coming back. Even Apo was behaving strangely. He stared at every French guy who entered the store to see if he looked suspicious. Marek warned Apo that he was creeping out some customers, but Apo kept doing it. If Marek knew how, he would reassure The Shoemaker that he wasn't the only one going through life without being heard.

All of a sudden Catina ran out from the back as springy as the kernels in a popcorn machine. Then Danika poked her head out, licking a cherry lollipop. As soon as she saw Marek, she hid behind Catina.

Marek felt a shiver ride up his spine. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Danika's eyes got big. "Please don't tell Mamo."

Marek tried to remember whether he was supposed to be watching Danika. No, definitely not. He was out delivering groceries until Mamo pulled herself out of bed long enough to give him the stub for her shoes.

"Does Mamo know where you are?"

She lowered and shook her head. Out of its braids, her wispy blonde hair was a mess. She would have never been able to sneak off if Mamo felt well. Normally Mamo was a hawk when it came to watching Danika. So was Baba. Danika must have slipped out while Apo was supposed to be looking after her.

"You're not allowed to step off our block," Marek yelled.

"We just came for a minute." Danika glanced at Catina, who stood motionless.

Danika ran under the open counter space and grabbed Marek's hand. "You should come and see. The Shoemaker has a coloured television set."

Marek had only ever seen a coloured television at Morgan's. And here the girls had been watching *The Flintstones* on one. Just like at the movie theatre. It surprised Marek that a shoemaker could afford a coloured set. Marek could only dream of his parents ever buying one.

Danika tugged on Marek's arm. "Come and see it."

Marek shook off her hand. As much as he wanted to see the set, he wasn't going to get all excited about it the way a little kid would. "You'd better get your ass home."

Danika zipped her snowsuit. "Please don't tell Mamo."

"I'm not taking any shit for you."

Danika started to cry.

Marek turned so his back faced The Shoemaker. "Knock it off," he said.

Catina gave Danika a hug and then did her best to make a bow with Danika's woolly hat strings.

The Shoemaker tapped Marek's shoulder and then lifted his palms quizzically. Various dyes had permanently etched the lines on his hands like mud.

"Nothing's wrong," Marek said. He turned back towards Danika. "If you go straight home and Mamo doesn't know you were gone, I won't tell on you... as long as you stay out of my room."

Danika nodded and ran out.

Catina slipped back under the counter and began straightening the stacks of leather on the long table. She rushed around re-arranging things like it was her family who owned the store. The Shoemaker patted her head when she pranced within reach.

Marek wondered if he should talk to Señora d'Alves or get Mamo to say something to her about Catina running around everywhere after school. His thoughts were interrupted by a tall man bursting into the shop.

"Les bottes sont prêts?" the man asked in an unnecessarily loud voice and too quickly for The Shoemaker to understand.

Catina tugged on The Shoemaker's sleeve and used her fingers to talk to him. Marek had never seen anyone signing. He immediately thought about how neat it would be to learn a few signs to share with Patrick as a secret code at school.

The Shoemaker made a little square with his hands to ask for the customer's stub. Swearing the whole time, the man searched his pockets.

The Shoemaker gave an understanding shrug before his fingers spoke to Catina.

"Quelles sortes de bottes?" she asked the man.

As he described the boots, Catina's hands moved like shadow puppets.

The Shoemaker nodded and patted Catina's head again. He raised an index finger to ask for a minute and then searched the cubby holes along the back wall.

Marek walked closer to Catina. "Where did you learn to do that?"

"What?"

"Talking with your hands."

"Oh that." Catina shrugged. "Monsieur Cousineau taught me."

"Your French teacher taught you?"

Catina gave Marek a strange look. "No."

"Ostie," the guy said, clacking a key on the counter. "Il est plus lent que mélasse."

Marek had always thought *slower than molasses* was a Slovak expression. It made more sense that it would be Québécois with the maple trees everywhere.

Catina walked over to the man. Her head barely reached his waist. "Ce n'est pas gentil," she said. "Vous êtes celui qui a oublié votre billet."

The man lifted the back of his hand.

Marek stepped forward and yanked Catina back by her shoulders. “Leave the man alone,” he said under his breath.

“But it’s not nice what he said about Monsieur Cousineau.”

Oh. The Shoemaker’s name came as a surprise. For some reason, Marek thought he was English or at least English-speaking because of how well he read Mamo’s lips.

The Shoemaker – Monsieur Cousineau – returned to the counter with a pair of lady’s boots. He showed the man the new heels, but the man ignored them as he flung a few dollars on the counter, grabbed the boots and rushed out.

After he left, Monsieur Cousineau shrugged his shoulders.

Catina signed and he nodded.

“What did you say?” Marek asked.

“That man is like a speeding mackerel,” Catina said.

“Eh?”

“It comes out better in Portuguese. The mackerel – no matter how much it swims faster than the other fish – is still a mackerel.”

“I’ve heard of holy mackerel, but not speeding ones. The Shoemaker knows Portuguese?”

“No, of course not,” Catina rolled her eyes. “He’s French.”

Marek handed Monsieur Cousineau the stub for Mamo’s pumps.

“That’s what you said with a couple of moves of your fingers?” he asked Catina.

“Just part of it,” Catina said. “He knows that saying. I’ve told it to him before. My mãe says it all the time.” Catina went back to straightening the piles of leather. “It smells like beef,” she said, holding a strip up to her nose.

Marek was still fascinated by the puppet language Catina shared with The Shoemaker. “Could you teach me to sign?”

“To what?”

“Sign.”

Catina looked puzzled.

“You know. Talk with your hands.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t know that’s how you say it in English. I guess so. Monsieur Cousineau taught me.”

“Taught you.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said. Maybe you want him to teach you, too.”

Monsieur Cousineau emerged from the back, holding up Mamo’s pumps as if they were glass slippers. The navy blue was darker than Mamo wanted. Marek would give her the shoes in the kitchen where the light was the brightest.

“Tell him thank you for me,” he told Catina.

Catina signed Marek’s thanks and Monsieur Cousineau nodded happily.

Using Monsieur Cousineau’s arm, Catina leaned half of her small body onto the counter. “I told him in French, okay? I only know how to talk to him in French.”

“Thanks,” Marek said, meaning it.

As he started towards the door, Catina asked him to wait for her. She fetched her snowsuit from the back room.

“You should see the coloured television,” she said as she plonked herself on the floor and wiggled the snowsuit over her patent leather shoes. “We don’t even have a black-and-white one at home.”

Marek no longer wondered why Catina spent so much time at The Shoe– ...
Monsieur Cousineau's.

Monsieur Cousineau disappeared into the back and returned with Catina's hat and scarf. When she stood up, he wrapped the scarf around her neck and gently tugged her hat over her ears and tied it.

Catina laughed. "It tickles."

Monsieur Cousineau grinned and planted a kiss on her forehead.

"Come on," Marek said. "I haven't got all day."

After grabbing a lollipop, Catina followed Marek out.

On the street, she hopped, jumped and skipped to avoid the sidewalk lines.

"Can't you walk like a human being?"

"Boring," she said with her lollipop stick protruding from her mouth.

Marek gave her a little nudge. "How long did it take you to learn to sign?" He had already started to think about using a few signs to share test answers with Patrick.

Catina's neck disappeared into her snowsuit as she shrugged. "Monsieur Cousineau teaches me something new when I ask him."

"But how long? Weeks? Months?"

"I don't know." Catina's attention went back to the devil's cracks.

"How long have you been hanging out at Monsieur Cousineau's?"

"Since I started school, I guess."

"Why do you sign in French?"

"Monsieur Cousineau is French, and it's easier for me. My father speaks French when I see him. French is more like Portuguese than English, you know."

“Yes, I know,” Marek said, getting a bit annoyed. “Teach me something.”

“In Portuguese?”

“No, silly. In sign language. Start with the ABCs.”

Catina stopped all of sudden where the sidewalk had buckled into a sprawl of cracks. Staring ahead, she took Marek’s hand. She hadn’t put on her mitts and her fingers were as cold as popsicles.

Marek looked up and saw Vince strolling towards them.

Vince took out a smoke. “Your new girlfriend?” he asked, pointing at Catina.

Marek forced a laugh. “I’m walking Catina home.”

Vince looked at the shoe-bag in Marek’s other hand. “Where’ve you been?”

“The Shoemaker’s,” Marek said.

Vince pulled away his cigarette and crouched down to be face to face with Catina.

“Hi, sweetie,” he said as he touched her chin. “Is your mother home yet?”

Catina shrugged.

Marek gave Vince a playful shove. “I thought you weren’t—”

Vince shot up and gave him a not-in-front-of-the-kid look. Oh fuck. Of course Vince wouldn’t want Catina to know if there was something romantic going on between him and her mǎe. They probably waited until Catina fell asleep.

Tossing his cigarette, Vince extended a hand towards Catina. “Want to go see if your mother’s home?”

Catina’s fingers wrapped tighter around Marek’s. “I’m going to Danika’s.”

Marek looked down at her. “What? I thought you were going home.”

“No. I forgot to give Danika something.” Catina milled around in her pocket with her other hand and pulled out a folded paper. “Something for school.”

Vince lit another cigarette. His nostrils flared to let out the smoke. “See you,” he said as he brushed past them.

“Hey, can I drop by the garage later?” Marek asked, but Vince didn’t answer.

“Come on,” Marek said, giving Catina’s hand a pull. It had turned dark a lot earlier than Marek had expected and he felt uneasy about having sent Danika home on her own.

Chapter Ten

Mamo flittered around the store like a trapped moth while Marek cleaned the shelves.

“He probably went with that drunk Raddy to the tavern,” she said when Apo didn’t return from the bank on time. “Like I don’t have enough to do without being stuck in the store.”

Marek thought about telling Mamo that he had lots of homework but he didn’t want to raise any suspicions about the week he skipped classes. He already had to bribe Danika to keep her mouth shut, giving her ten Bazooka comics he was saving for sea monkeys. She had found out about him missing classes from Catina, who heard this from Patrick during their walk home.

“Rub the top of each tin,” Mamo said. “You should be able to see yourself in it.”

He wished she would take a look at herself. Mamo was never in a good mood when she had to mind the store, but her patience was next to nil since the graffiti. She had become obsessed about what other Slovaks were saying about it. After one friend mentioned it at church, she accused Raddy of telling everyone. He swore to God that he didn’t, but she refused to believe him.

“Maybe Pan Kysly told someone about the graffiti,” Marek said.

“You know he doesn’t go to Slovak church anymore,” Mamo snapped back.

“He’s too old to go all that way by bus.”

Marek thought about reminding Mamo about something called the telephone, but he kept his mouth shut.

“Put them straighter,” Mamo said as she reached over his shoulder to re-align several biscuit tins. “Make sure they shine.” She was determined to spruce up the store and find a buyer for it no matter how many times Apo said he didn’t want to sell. They got so riled up about it after supper one night that Mamo threatened to divorce Apo if he refused to consider purchase offers. Marek doubted Mamo, who worked so hard at being a good Catholic was serious, but her ultimatum made Danika cry. Baba yelled at Mamo and Apo to lower their voices or go argue in the store, which put Mamo in a worse mood.

“Rinse the rag in the pail more often,” she barked. “And squeeze it out good.”

Marek thanked God when the phone rang with an order. He couldn’t blame Apo for taking his time. Marek planned to get his own break from Mamo by stopping off at the little park on City Hall Street after the next delivery. Hardly anyone went to the park that city workers made after a row-house caught fire and had to be torn down. He grinned as he thought about having a couple of smokes and doing chin-ups on the monkey bars.

His smile disappeared when he saw Mamo dump a huge package of Kotex pads into a shallow delivery box. The sky-blue package was almost as tall as Danika’s walking doll. Everybody would see it from a block away. He cringed at the jokes if he bumped into guys from school: “Helping the ladies with their time of the month? So who’s on the rag now? Do you show them how to pin the napkins?”

It would be just as bad if he ran into any of the girls. They went everywhere in flocks like pigeons and giggled hysterically at the stupidest things.

He couldn’t even look at Mamo as she handed him the grocery box containing all that women’s stuff. If he were alone in the store, he would wrap the embarrassing thing in brown paper, but Mamo would yell at him for being wasteful.

Near the door, he pulled off his sweater without Mamo seeing and covered the box with it. Then he quickly zipped on his jacket over his T-shirt.

“Zbohom,” Mamo said.

Marek nodded, but he wished she would just say *bye* instead of telling him to go with God all the time. He didn’t need God constantly following him around and watching what he said and did.

It took seconds for the wind to tunnel under his jacket cuffs. To try to get warm, he pedalled faster than he normally did on icy streets. The only good news was the delivery address: 4107 Laval. Marek dropped off groceries there at least once a week. The woman lived on the ground floor. No stairs. Only a stoop.

The long block up Laval towards Rachel wasn’t very steep but the bike’s old tires had no traction on the ice. Marek pedalled backwards to brake but the bike kept sliding. As he leaned forward, the back wheel popped up and sent him tumbling over the pipe basket onto the street. His right knee smacked onto the cement even though he used both hands to break his fall. His palms smarted and his knee felt on fire. Despite the pain, he picked himself up as fast as possible and wiped his muddied hands into his jeans. He looked around. No one saw him, thank God. He righted his bike and tossed the cardboard box back into the basket. Luckily, the milk bottle remained intact. Neither were any of the soup cans damaged. But a corner of the Kotex box was badly dented. Marek wanted to put a fist right through the damn box. The only thing that stopped him was having the contents go flying all over the street. He shoved the box upside down into the basket.

He picked up his sopping wet sweater and threw it into the grocery box. Then he brushed the slush from his jeans. His pant legs were too narrow to roll up but he could tell by the way his knee burnt that a good layer of skin had been scraped off.

Marek had told Apo the bicycle tires had to be changed, but Apo said they were *good enough for now*. To Apo *for now* meant forever.

After rolling the bike the short distance remaining to 4107 Laval, Marek twirled the bell. The woman who opened the door always looked a bit crazed. She rarely blinked her brown eyes as she yanked him inside by his arm and shut the door behind him.

“Je n’aime pas la froid,” she told him as if he didn’t know by now how much she dreaded the cold. She kept a rolled bath towel along the base of the door and thick cardboard taped over the letter slot. All winter long she wore two bulky sweaters and fleece-lined boots.

As she went for her wallet, Marek put his sweater on the radiator to dry.

“J’ai une surprise pour toi aujourd’hui,” she said after paying for the groceries.

Marek grinned nervously as he wondered what kind of surprise the woman that some called *the crazy lady* might have in store for him. She took hold of his hand and pressed a coin into his palm.

“Merci, madame,” he said as he grabbed his sweater and backed out the door.

A few houses away, he looked at the coin. He caught his breath when he realized it was a brand new fifty-cent piece. It gleamed so bright that it was almost white. There wasn’t even a scratch on it. Marek had never seen a fifty-cent piece, let alone a brand new one. He pedalled the short block along Rachel to Henri Julien, hoping to show it to Patrick or Klaudia if she was leaning out her window.

With the snow banks ploughed away, Marek easily coasted down the sidewalk on Henri Julien. A good thing with his scrapped knee starting to stiffen. The bicycle lurched over each sidewalk crack with the rhythmic thud of a snare drum. Outside Patrick's house, Marek stood the bike along the wall of the rundown duplex and tiptoed onto the porch. The brass doorbell shined like a gold chalice on the green door. The one time Marek had spun it, Patrick's father had yelled his head off about waking him up in the middle of the afternoon. Patrick apologized later, saying his Papa got extra grumpy when he couldn't sleep during the day. Monsieur Richard worked nights at the oil refineries in Pointe aux Trembles. It could be dangerous working around those huge flames if he wasn't rested. The whole family had to stay quiet until he left for his shift.

A few days after Patrick's explanation, Marek overheard Monsieur Richard tell Apo in the store how it didn't matter that he spoke English in addition to French and had seventeen years of refinery experience. The bosses weren't going to promote a Frenchman into management. Not now. Not ever. "Qu'est-ce qu'ils pensent?" he asked Apo, slurring after a few beers. "That I'm going to convince the guys to start another French Revolution? Fuckin' WASPs!" Apo nodded and then complained about how bank managers treated anyone who didn't have an English name like a DP – displaced person.

Marek could see into the Richards' kitchen. Patrick's Ma sat slumped in a chair, ignoring her two youngest running around her. Marek retreated before one of them saw him and called out his name. He didn't want to risk waking up Monsieur Richard again.

As he turned to go, he saw a man as big and awkward as a circus bear descending the nasty stairs across the street one at a time. Staring harder, Marek realized it was Apo in his Sunday hat and coat. Marek rushed to get his bicycle, but the long front legs on its

stand jammed into the snow left by the building. There was no way to call out to Apo without waking Monsieur Richard. Neither could Marek run with his sore knee, no matter how much he wanted to know whether Apo had settled the score with Gaston.

“Eh, toi-là.”

The hair on Marek’s arms stood up as soon as he heard the gravelly voice. Monsieur Richard stood in the doorway in his long-johns, his face unshaved and hair uncombed. Marek got on his bike so he would be ready to skedaddle if necessary.

Monsieur Richard leaned over the porch railing. “Patrick n’est pas avec toi?”

“No, I haven’t seen him.”

Monsieur Richard spit on the sidewalk. “If you see the little fucker, tell him to come home right away or I’m going to whip his ass good.”

Marek nodded but Monsieur Richard had already slammed the door.

The snow had started to ice up around the bicycle’s tires. Marek kicked it away and yanked the bike free. When he looked back up, Apo was gone.

As Marek started down the street, he heard Klaudia’s window swish open. She looked all dolled up with bright strawberry lipstick and rouge and her caramel hair piled high with a few loose curls. Gold sparkled on her ears like the wrapping on Easter chocolates. Her lime blouse showed off enough of her boobs to make him lick his lips in spite of the cold.

“Come upstairs,” she said.

It wasn’t a good time but there was no way he could say no to those boobs. He parked the bike under the stairs where Gaston was less likely to see it. Most of the snow

on the stairs had melted but there were clumps of ice stuck to some of them. He forced himself to climb up one at a time despite his fear.

Klaudia had left her front door open for him. She waited at the top of the inside stairs with her boobs a good foot ahead of her. Whatever bra she wore to lift and separate them had industrial-strength elastic. Marek tapped his sore knee to stop from being aroused.

“Come in,” she said as she walked towards the living room. A girdle under her pencil skirt kept her butt wrapped tight. Marek would give anything to flick open her garter belts and slip off her creamy hose. She walked to the living room window and looked across the street. Marek felt his breath quicken as he imagined stroking her back side. To calm down, he gazed around the room. She had costumed dolls everywhere, like the ones Mamo kept, except the skirts were longer and the colours darker. They didn’t look quite Slovak.

Klaudia sat on the plush red couch. It was the first time Marek had seen one without a plastic cover. She patted the cushion next to her.

Marek sat down and rubbed his palm over the velour. He had never felt anything so luxurious.

“Your hair looks really nice that way,” he said.

“Thanks.” Klaudia fingered a curl. “It’s thick because I only wash it in beer.”

“Wouldn’t you rather drink the beer?”

Klaudia laughed wholeheartedly. “You want a Coca-Cola or a Seven-Up?”

Marek shook his head. “Do you know why they call it Seven-Up?”

She shook her head distractedly.

“Because a Coke or Pepsi only has six-and-a-half ounces in a bottle.”

“I didn’t know that,” she said with a smile.

“The 7-Up guy told me that.”

Klaudia smiled. She had nice eyes – brown with gold specks – like the hazelnuts in gift chocolates. Her tanned skin looked as smooth as peanut butter.

“I noticed you looking into Patrick’s house,” she said.

Marek straightened his back. “I wasn’t snooping. I was just looking for Patrick.”

“Did you see her?” Klaudia asked.

“Who?”

“Patrick’s mother.”

Marek nodded.

“Did she look okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did she look hurt? Did she have any bruises on her?”

“I don’t think so. She was just sitting there like usual.”

Klaudia clasped her hands. “I’m worried sick since that bastard lost his job.”

Marek was surprised that Patrick hadn’t told him about his Papa getting laid off or, worse, fired. It explained immediately why Patrick was spending less time at home.

Klaudia looked towards the window as if she could see the Richards’ place from the couch. She dropped both hands to her sides. One of them brushed against Marek’s thigh. A tingle surged through him. He looked to see if she meant for him to feel like that, but she seemed lost in thought.

“I keep telling her to leave with the kids,” she said. “I would take her to a safe place. I would help her to get a divorce. But she won’t go, says it would be too much of a sin, and embarrassment. She would rather be dead than embarrassed, stupid woman.”

After a big sigh, Klaudia smiled a little. “I’m sorry I’m bothering you with this.” She patted his hand. “It’s just so hard to check on her with him at home all the time now.”

Marek leaned forward to kiss her.

“You’re a good listener,” she said unaware of his advance. “Like your father.”

Marek retreated as he suddenly realized why Apo might have worn his Sunday best. “Was he here? What was he doing here?”

“Who?”

“My father.”

Klaudia sat back.

“You saw him? I didn’t think you saw him.”

“What was he doing here?”

Klaudia looked away. “You have to ask him.”

Marek’s chest heaved. “Did you have sex with him?”

Klaudia raised her penciled brows.

Marek couldn’t believe what he had just blurted out. What on earth was he thinking? Yet he needed to know. He couldn’t imagine being with a woman who had just been with Apo. It made him want to puke. Klaudia looked cheap and ugly to him now. The wrinkles shooting out the sides of her eyes reminded him of the crushed leather in Monsieur Cousineau’s shop.

Klaudia stood up so fast that she almost lost her balance. “Get out,” she said.

“So it’s true what they say about you being a *courva*.” Marek couldn’t understand why he was being so vulgar. It was as if all of his anger inside had broken down a gate that usually guarded his words.

“Get out,” she said much louder as she moved towards the hallway. “Or I’m calling the police.”

Marek wanted to grab her and shake the truth out of her. He longed to press her boobs against his chest and stick his tongue in her mouth. More than anything, he wanted her to tell him that he was out of his mind thinking she would do anything with Apo when all she cared about was him – Marek – no one else.

The doorbell clanged. Klaudia went to the entrance and pulled the release cord.

If it was Apo coming back, Marek wasn’t sure what he was going to do. It infuriated him to have things end with Klaudia this way. He wanted to apologize, to say that he made a mistake, and to hear her say that he got that right. He wanted her to forgive him and then make love to him.

“Go,” she said, pointing down the stairs.

He resented being dismissed. She was the one who had called him up. She was the one who brushed her fingers against his thigh and then patted the back of his hand.

“One thing’s for sure: you dress like a cock teaser,” he said, brushing past her.

A man with a camera strapped around his neck had started up the stairs. He wore a mohair coat and lamb-wool hat – all very expensive. He nodded politely at Marek.

Marek looked back up at Klaudia. “Is he your next trick?”

The man grabbed a hold of Marek’s jacket. “Do you want me to sock him?”

“Just ignore him,” Klaudia said with a flat voice. “We’re already late.”

She couldn’t have said anything more hurtful if she had tried. The last thing Marek wanted was for her to ignore him. He wanted her to tell him that she wasn’t a whore. That she had never slept with Apo. That this guy in the fancy clothes was her cousin. When Marek looked back up, she had disappeared with the guy inside the flat. If she was a whore, Marek was going to find out. Maybe Apo had some girly photos of her, too. If he did, Marek would find them. It infuriated him to think about Apo cheating on Mamo and messing up Marek’s chances for a sex life, but those photos might be a way out of delivering groceries.

Chapter Eleven

The Slamka Brothers provided the music at every Slovak function. Only two of the four young men were brothers, but having started the band, they got to name it. All four resembled straw men. They stood on stage as expressionless as sticks as they played the same old *chardash* song probably for the thousandth time. Marek heard the music drag, thanks to Johnny Slamka's lackadaisical accordion playing, but none of the couples shuffling and spinning on the dance floor seemed to notice.

Marek and his parents had arrived late at the New Year's dance because Apo refused to close the store early. As soon as they entered the largest of three dance halls at *The Slovak Hall*, several of Mamo's friends cloistered around her to exchange hugs and kisses. Their husbands gathered around Apo to shake hands and pat each other on the back. Marek kept his distance to avoid having his cheeks pinched or head patted. It took all of a minute for the men to get Apo to the bar while Mamo took a seat with the women.

The large portrait of Josef Tiso caught Marek's eye as it always did. The same black-and-white photo of the gloomy Slovak president also hung in the Slovak church basement. Marek could never figure out what the story was with him. Raddy gave Father Tiso credit for making Slovakia independent from the Czechs between the wars. Apo called him a German puppet. Mamo said it wasn't right the way the Czechs murdered him for following Nazi orders. Baba praised him as a martyr.

Vince plopped his arm on Marek's shoulder. "He looks as if he already knows they're going to put a noose around his neck, eh?"

Marek's throat felt tighter whenever he thought about Tiso being hanged.

Vince held up a plastic glass filled with scotch. “There are rumours about him diddling thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds when he was the principal at a girls’ school.”

Marek looked at Vince to see if he was kidding. “But he was a priest.”

“So what?” Vince laughed. “At least the fat ass stopped the Nazis from taking any more Jews when he found out they were being shipped to Auschwitz instead of factories. Too bad most of them had already been sent to camps.”

Marek lowered his head. Although he didn’t understand why, he felt guilty for what happened to so many Jews in Europe. He tried to be nice to the ones running the stores on St. Lawrence, especially when Mamo started to haggle with them over prices.

“Hey, they don’t say it out loud, but a lot of the Slovaks from the Old Country hated the Jews, you know.”

“Why?”

“Because they owned all the shops.”

“How did they get to own everything?”

“It had something to do with it being a sin way back for Catholics to make any interest when they lent money. So the Jews made loans to each other and the Catholics didn’t. That’s what my Mamo told me anyway.” Vince lifted his drink. “Na zdravie,” he said as he walked away.

Staring at Tiso’s grim expression, Marek wondered if everyone’s life was predetermined and all there was left to do was live it. He hoped not.

Hearing Apo laugh, Marek walked over to the bar in the hopes that Apo would buy him something stronger than a Coke. Marek hadn’t wanted to come to the dance, but staying home with Baba and Danika had appealed to him even less. He knew Mamo

wanted him to meet some nice Slovak girls. Marek was more interested in getting a bit hammered.

Raddy had already downed a few drinks. His cheeks were rosy and his nose a darker purple than usual. He looked way too showy in a powder blue suit and white hat.

Apo poked Raddy's shoulder. "You finally getting married?" he asked in Slovak.

Raddy hugged Apo like they hadn't seen each other in years. "Not me. Never."

"Then why are you dressed up like a fuckin' groom?"

Raddy dusted off his wide lapels. "You're just jealous 'cause I look so good."

Apo let out a boisterous laugh. A friend handed out whiskey doubles.

Raddy thanked the guy like he had given him a hundred bucks.

"Na zdravie," Apo said as the circle of men lifted their plastic glasses.

Apo let out a gasp after the liquid gold went down his throat.

Marek shifted closer.

"Want a Coke?" Apo asked.

Marek raised an eyebrow.

"Come on, Hank," Raddy said. "It's New Year's. Give the boy a real drink."

Apo glanced over at Mamo. Their eyes met briefly and Apo gave her an uneasy smile before he turned again towards the bar. "One rum and Coke," he told Marek.

Marek nodded as Apo handed over a ten-dollar bill to buy drink tickets.

As he waited in line, Marek noticed Vince returning Kammy to their seats after a dance. Vince looked good in his plain black suit and open shirt. Marek couldn't wait to take off his tie but knew Mamo would give him an earful if he so much as loosened it before the balloons were released at midnight. Marek couldn't help but notice that both

his and Apo's shirts and ties complimented Mamo's turquoise dress. To his surprise, she liked the navy blue shoes and bought a purse to go with them. Marek hoped none of her friends said anything bad about her outfit. Baba had pleaded with her up to the last minute to change into a black dress. No way.

"Dobrý večar," Marek said when it came his turn to buy tickets. He added a fiver to Apo's money and tucked the extra tickets into a pocket before returning to the bar.

"So you couldn't find a date for New Year's?" Apo was asking Raddy.

Raddy looked at the dance floor. "I didn't want to bring anyone here."

Apo laughed as he took the tickets from Marek. "Why? Are you ashamed of us?"

"No, of course not."

Apo ordered rum and Coke and a round of shots for a half-dozen friends.

The band started to play the Beer Barrel Polka. Apo tapped Marek's shoulder.

"That's ours, you know," he shouted over the music.

"What is?"

Apo pointed to the band. "Everyone thinks it's German, but we wrote it."

Raddy gave Apo a playful slap. "No we didn't. A Czech wrote the music and, several years later, another Czech came up with the words. *Skoda Lasky*. Wasted Love."

Apo made a face. "We're from Czechoslovakia, no?"

Raddy lost his smile. "What kind of Slovak are you? The Czechs treated our parents like white niggers and you act like we were one big happy country over there."

Apo looked flustered as the other men stopped talking. "Well, like it or not, we're one country now: Czechoslovakia," he said.

“Didn’t your parents tell you what the Czechs did to him?” Raddy said, pointing at Tiso’s portrait. “How they hanged him for no reason?”

Apo’s back straightened. “He supported the Nazis, for God’s sake. You sound like those Quebeckers who want to separate because of what happened to that guy Riel years ago.”

Raddy looked ready to explode. “They hid Father Tiso’s body so we would never have a gravesite where we could pay our respects to him. How can you forget that?”

Apo called over the bartender to refill everyone’s glass and prepare one vodka with orange juice. “It was wartime, the past. Let it go,” he said in English. “We’re Canadians now.” Then Apo downed his whiskey, grabbed the screwdriver and walked over to Mamo’s table.

“You’ll never really belong here,” Raddy shouted after him.

Apo ignored him as he whispered in Mamo’s ear. Mamo smiled and they stood up to dance. Marek hated Apo in that moment. He was such a hypocrite dancing with Mamo like she was the love of his life after screwing around with Klaudia who knew how many times. Just as Apo was a hypocrite calling himself a Slovak one minute, Czechoslovakian the next, and then Canadian when that suited him. He tried to be everybody to cover up the fact that he was nothing.

Marek noticed Kammy sitting alone. He looked around the crowded hall for Vince and found him talking to Irene Horny at the bar. *Horny*. What an embarrassing name. In Slovak, it meant the top or upper part of a mountain, but it had to be the source of endless chuckles in Canada. Even a French guy who knew the least bit of English would laugh at the name. Marek couldn’t understand why the family didn’t change it to

Horn or Horner. Marek also had no idea why Vince would pay attention to Irene. At thirteen, she was flat as an ironing board. Yet Vince hovered over her like she was a babe while Kammy, looking gorgeous in a peach gown, sat alone. Marek walked over and gave Kammy a peck on the cheek. She patted the seat next to her.

“Look at him,” she said. “Flirting with that young floozy right in front of me.”

Marek shrugged. “She’s a kid. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Kammy faced Marek. “How could you say that when it hurts me so much?”

Marek now wished he had steered clear of her. “You want another drink?”

Kammy polished off her screwdriver and handed him the plastic glass. “Here,” she said, giving him a couple of tickets. “Get yourself one, too.”

Marek elbowed his way through the hoard of men by the bar to where Vince kept talking to Irene. When Vince saw Marek, he called him over. “Marek, you know Irene.”

“I think Kammy wants to dance,” Marek whispered in Vince’s ear.

Vince waved him off. “Let her wait a bit. Irene here is telling me about how she’s going to Slovakia next summer to live with her aunt for a couple of months.” Vince rubbed his hand along Irene’s arm. “Where does your aunt live again?”

Marek flagged a bartender and ordered a screwdriver and another rum and Coke.

“For you?” the bartender asked.

“No. For the pretty lady over there and her boyfriend,” Marek said pointing first at Kammy and then Vince.

As the bartender poured the drinks, Marek looked away, relieved. The last thing Marek needed was the bartender telling Apo about Marek ordering drinks for himself.

Marek gave Kammy her drink. “Na zdravie,” he said.

Kammy downed half of hers in one gulp as she stared at the parquet dance floor. “Come on,” she said, pulling him by the arm.

The band was playing a polka and Marek did his best to hop from foot to foot. He now wished he had stayed at *Slovak Dancing School* long enough to learn the basics. It had been so embarrassing to be pulled this way and that by a crabby teacher who kept yelling *one, two, three, one, two, three* at him in front of a bunch of giggling girls. He wished the Slamka Brothers would learn some rock and roll songs.

Kammy gripped his shoulder to pull him from side to side as she kept smiling widely so no one would notice she had to lead. He felt the whole room staring at him. The band – thank God – next played a slow. A good slow: *Spanish Eyes*. Marek felt his heart stir as Kammy moved closer and put her head on his shoulder. Her blonde hair smelled of strawberries. Her body was as soft and warm as lightly toasted marshmallows. He had to remind himself that she was Vince’s girl.

Then he felt the dreaded tap on his shoulder. He expected it to be Vince cutting in but it was Eddy Medved. Marek would have liked to tell him to buzz off, but Eddy was big on brawn and short on brains. Marek wasn’t about to mess with him, but he didn’t want Kammy to feel that she had to dance with him either. If she were smart, she would tell Eddy that she needed a break and sit down again. Instead, she gave Eddy a big smile and slipped one hand into his paw and placed the other up on his shoulder. Marek had a bad feeling, but there was nothing he could do. Eddy had cut in on him fair and square.

Marek returned to his seat. Taking a big gulp of his rum and Coke, he watched Kammy sway her hips as she danced with Eddy. Marek glanced over at the bar and was relieved to see Vince still deep in conversation with Irene. Then he saw Raddy walk over

to Vince and point at the dance floor. Marek's heart skipped as he watched Vince elbow his way through to the dance floor and yank Kammy away from Eddy.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing with my girlfriend?” he yelled.

Eddy shrugged. “Hey, if you're not paying attention...”

Marek ran onto the dance floor. He tried to pull Kammy safely out of the way, but she wouldn't budge.

She did move back when Vince pulled off his jacket and flung it aside.

Eddy, who stood a good foot taller than Vince, just laughed. “You want to duke it out, grease monkey?”

Vince went wild with his punches. Eddy did his best to defend himself but Vince's fists came at him too fast. Eddy fell like a shot bear and Vince pounced on top of him, still punching away. Blood oozed from Eddy's mouth.

As Marek tried to pull Vince off, Vince backed his elbow and struck him in the nose. Marek covered it with his hands to see how much it might be bleeding.

The band stopped on a squeaky accordion note. Mamo screamed out Marek's name. “Are you okay?” she kept asking as she ran towards him. Marek wished she would shut up and disappear instead of embarrassing him in front of everyone.

Vince kept hammering Eddy while a thicker crowd gathered.

Apo pushed his way through. After checking that Mamo and Marek were alright, he grabbed a hold of Vince's belt and lifted him away from Eddy.

Vince kept punching the air, aiming this time at Kammy. “I'll fuckin' kill you, you tramp,” he yelled.

The big Medved lay there with his face bruised and bleeding. Several of his friends knelt beside him to see whether he could stand up.

Apo kept his grip on Vince's belt while two other men held back his shoulders.

"What the fuck are you doing dancing with another guy?" Vince shouted.

Several young women encircled Kammy, who had started to cry.

Eddy stood shakily and lunged at Vince again. Mamo stepped between Eddy and the men holding Vince. "Dost. Enough," she shouted. "Why is it at every dance, every wedding, you have to behave like barbarians? You get a few drinks into you and you act like savages. *Hañba*. Shame on both of you. Go home, Vince, and take a cold shower. You made enough trouble. Eddy, let your mother look at your face."

Lowering his head, Eddy apologized to Mamo and walked towards the bar.

Kammy's parents had already fetched her coat and were escorting her out.

"I want to talk to you," Vince yelled at Kammy, but she kept walking.

At the bar, one of Eddy's buddies held a dish towel full of ice on his face.

Marek's nose throbbed. He knew Vince hit him by accident but it still hurt. He went over to where Vince stood alone, the men all bordering the dance floor now in case he decided to take another run at Eddy or go after Kammy. Marek felt embarrassed for Vince but couldn't blame him for losing his cool after Eddy called him a grease monkey.

"It's your fault, you little twerp," Vince told Marek. "What the fuck do you think you were doing asking Kammy to dance?" Vince stormed out the back door before Marek could explain that Kammy had dragged him onto the dance floor.

The band played the Mexican hat dance. Irene Horny asked Marek to dance but he said no. He bought a rum and Coke and took it out of the hall to drink. Then he went

to the men's room to look at his nose. The bridge had swelled but nothing looked or felt broken. When he returned to the hall, everyone seemed to have forgotten the whole episode. People crowded the dance floor, hopping in circles, bumping into each other and laughing hysterically.

Marek bought two more rum and Cokes. He slumped into a chair and sipped his drinks while he rubbed an ice cube along the side of his nose. After a while, he felt tired and put his head down on a table.

He was startled awake when everyone began counting down the seconds to the New Year. Dozens of balloons were released from an overhead net and bounced everywhere. The band played *Auld Lang Syne* so loud that it hurt Marek's ears. People were blowing toy horns and yelling *Sčešlivy Novy Rok* over the music as they kissed or shook hands. Raddy was so plastered that he was kissing a few men on the cheek.

Apo and Mamo walked over to the table.

Marek tried to focus on them but they looked blurry.

"Vun pijany," Mamo complained to Apo, very upset.

"I'm not drunk," Marek slurred.

Apo took Marek's face in his large hand and looked hard at him.

Marek saw one, two, three Apos and started to laugh.

"Leave him," Apo said. "We'll deal with him tomorrow."

Apo withdrew his hand and Marek's head slumped back onto the table.

Cólera! Nineteen sixty-five wasn't getting off to a good start.

Chapter Twelve

A rare winter rainfall had left the city in slush. The air was as damp as a dishcloth. Pan Kysly complained about the humidity eating at his bones. Marek was stuck listening to him nearly every day after school after Mamo and Apo grounded him for getting drunk at New Year's. Mamo had also ordered him to clean all the fridges, one by one. Marek wished Apo had just given him a good whack like in the old days, instead of going along with Mamo's new approach to parenting. His only salvation came when he could go out to deliver an order and then he still had to deal with all kinds of stairs.

In no hurry to get back to the store, he took a chance of walking up Klaudia's wet stairs with the intention of apologizing to her. Being grounded for two weeks with no television had given him a lot of time to think. He realized there was no reason for him to have been so rude to her. It wasn't her fault if Apo couldn't keep his prick in his pants.

Wet for so long, the wooden steps had turned almost slimy. Marek's breath shortened as he went up one at a time. He might have drawn the wrong conclusions about Klaudia and Apo. His search through the store, the flat, the basement and both sheds hadn't turned up any revealing photographs of Klaudia or Apo and Klaudia together.

Marek clenched the banister as he stepped higher. The wrought iron felt as cold as ice cubes. If Marek found out for sure that Apo had sex with Klaudia, he would let Apo know in a round-about way. He knew if he just came out and said, "I know you're bopping Klaudia and I'm telling Mamo unless you stop making me deliver groceries," Apo would give him a good slap. Instead, he would casually mention having seen Apo leave Klaudia's place. Then he would say again how much he didn't want to deliver

orders. If that didn't work, he would bring up Mamo and Klaudia in the same sentences. First, though, he needed proof. If he apologized to Klaudia, she might tell him the truth.

Standing in front of Klaudia's door, Marek didn't have the nerve to twirl the bell. He needed more time to work out what he was going to say, and how to react if Klaudia slammed the door in his face. If she didn't, she would probably notice that he looked and smelled good. He had shaved the fuzz off his upper lip and splashed on some Old Spice that he borrowed from a bottle in the store. His parents had been too preoccupied to nag him about getting another crew cut and his dark blonde hair had become just long enough to part. He chewed a jawbreaker to freshen his breath although the gum was getting stale. He stuck the wad along the inside rim of Gaston's mail slot. He still planned to get even with Gaston, but needed to make things right with Klaudia first. Her brass doorbell stared at him like a golden Buddha.

Way below on the sidewalk, a man sounded panicky as he ran up Henri Julien. Gripping the balcony railing, Marek forced himself to look at the man and a woman rushing towards a small crowd. The group stood under a streetlamp but the light was too dim for Marek to recognize anyone. By the time Marek edged his way back downstairs, the crowd had formed a thick wall.

Leaving his bicycle under the stairwell, he ran up the street. As he joined the crowd, he jumped up and down to see over people's heads. When he caught sight of Danika standing alone, he pushed aside several people to get to her.

"Are you alright?"

She nodded but didn't say anything.

Everyone stared at an uncovered manhole. The cast-iron grate had been pushed to the sidewalk's edge.

“Marek, is that you?”

The voice seemed like Vince's but it had a strange hollowness to it. When Marek realized it came from inside the manhole, he dropped to his knees and forced himself to look below. Several feet lower, he saw the top of a man's head.

“Is that you, Vince?” he asked. “What are you doing down there?”

Vince looked up, his face streaked with dirt. “I need to lift her up to you.”

“Lift who?”

A wave of whispers went through the crowd. *Catina. The little Estrela girl. D'Alves's daughter? Yes, the divorcée's kid.*

The stench of warm rot filled Marek's nostrils. He sat back on his heels to stop from gagging.

“I can't fit up the manhole with her,” Vince said. “I need your help.”

Marek forced himself to look down again despite the odour.

Vince had climbed lower. “Come down a bit so I can pass her up to you.”

The hole was darker and smellier with Vince lower in it. Panic swept over Marek like a thousand prickly needles. “I'll get help,” he said, standing up.

“Where are you going?” Vince yelled. “I need help now.”

Marek pushed through several people and ran to the hydro-electric pole at the corner. The glass tube on the emergency box was missing. If someone had just broken it, there should have been a deafening clang from the bell higher on the pole. He rushed back. “Did someone pull the alarm?” he asked. “Est-ce-que quelqu'un a tiré l'alarme?”

An old man stepped forward. “Oui – yes – but it has been a few minutes ... et personne viens ... no one has come.”

Marek looked at the crowd. “Somebody, please, call for an ambulance.”

A woman nodded and left.

Marek turned back to the manhole. The man whose voice had caught Marek’s attention a few moments earlier kneeled and peered down the hole. “Je suis trop grand,” he said, motioning with his hand for Marek to step closer. “Il faut que tu descendes...”

Turning around, Marek looked for someone in the crowd about his size to lift Catina out, but they were all adults or little girls like Danika.

“Get your ass here,” Vince yelled.

Marek held his breath as he knelt by the manhole again.

Vince had descended lower. He held Catina under one arm in a wider, darker space at the bottom of the sewer. Catina’s neck slumped like a rag-doll’s.

“Get down here,” Vince said.

“I’m not sure I can.”

“Don’t be a fuckin’ wimp.”

Marek felt the embarrassment flow into his cheeks as he removed his jacket. He sat on his rump and lowered his legs.

With his free hand, Vince pointed at the rusty rods that had been secured on both sides of the cement tubing a few feet below the sidewalk. “I only need you to stand here,” he said. “Then I’ll lift her to you and you can pass her up higher.”

Marek looked up at the man hovering over his shoulder. The man nodded to show he understood. Marek held onto the sidewalk as he found his footing. The smell got

worse with every step downwards. It made him woozy and he worried he might faint on top of Vince and Catina. He tried holding his breath but had to let it go as Vince lifted Catina towards him. Her limp body felt as heavy as a sack of potatoes.

“Got her?” Vince asked.

As Marek tried to grab a better hold of Catina, the slime on her snowsuit caused her to slip from his grip. He latched onto her collar but she still dropped a couple of feet.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Vince yelled.

“Sorry.” Marek again secured his grip under both her arms. Catina’s weight eased as Vince lifted her up again as high as he could. Marek’s arms shook like Jell-O as Vince released his hold and Marek again tried to lift her overhead within the narrow space. He dug his heels into the steel rods and prayed for his footing to hold.

“Un peu plus haut,” the man above said.

Hooking his hands under her arms, Marek braced his back against the sewer as he anchored his feet on the rusty rungs on the other side. He prayed they wouldn’t break as he pushed against them. Mustering all his strength, he managed to raise her a few inches higher. When he thought his arms were going to collapse, he felt her weight lifted from him and thanked God. “I got her out, Vince,” he yelled down. “I got her out.”

Marek climbed out of the manhole and ran to where Catina had been placed on the sidewalk. He gently wiped some of the muck off her face with his pocket handkerchief. She had a nasty bump on her forehead and her chin was scraped, but the scariest part was that all her skin had turned blue. Marek tapped her cheeks, hoping to bring the rosiness back into them.

“Catina, it’s Marek,” he kept saying. Her sweater and snow pants were covered in grime. Both of her patent leather shoes had been scraped. One of her pink hair barrettes hung upside down. He fixed it, knowing how upset she would be if she lost it. Her head remained slumped to one side. He grabbed his jacket and rolled it as a pillow under her neck. He knew he should breathe into her but wasn’t sure how. He looked up at the crowd. “Can someone help her?”

No one moved.

“Where’s the ambulance? Did someone call?”

Marek couldn’t see the lady who had promised to phone for an ambulance. Through a sea of legs, he caught a glimpse of Severina d’Alves running up the street. He also felt Vince’s shadow over him.

“Go make sure an ambulance is coming,” Vince said. “I’ll look after Catina.”

Marek nodded and ran to meet Señora d’Alves. He had to catch her in his arms to keep her from running past him.

“Is she alright?” her voice quivered.

“She will be,” Marek said uncertainly, “but we need to call an ambulance.”

“Meu Deus.” Severina tried to break free. “What happened to her?”

“We need to make sure that there’s an ambulance coming first.”

Señora d’Alves took a key from her purse but saw her door was open. They ran upstairs and she went straight to the telephone table. Her hands shook like jelly as she grabbed a small telephone book. She cranked around the eight on the phone so fast that her finger got caught under the steel part holding the dial. As soon as she yanked it free, it started to bleed like crazy.

Marek grabbed the phone and finished the call.

Señora d'Alves had already gone downstairs. As Marek caught up with her, he saw blood dripping onto her coat. He took out his hankie and knotted it loosely around her finger as they kept running.

“We need to wrap it tighter,” he said.

She pushed him away and kept going.

As soon as she saw Catina in Vince's arms, she tried to grab her.

Vince blocked her with his shoulder. “I'm trying to get her to breathe,” he said before puffing himself up and lowering his lips over Catina's to blow into her. Catina's small chest lifted and dropped again. The horrible blue had drained from her face but it deepened in her pudgy hands like the start of a bruise. Her body remained motionless except for the air that Vince pumped into it.

Marek saw Apo with his arms protectively around Danika's neck. Only then did it occur to Marek that Danika wasn't even supposed to be on this street, but he couldn't think about that now with the ambulance pulling up.

One of the drivers checked for a heartbeat. “C'est faible, mais c'est là,” he said. His confirmation of Catina's faint heartbeat caused tears to swell up in Marek's eyes.

The other driver quickly put an oxygen mask on Catina's face and a brace around her neck, leaving Marek's jacket on the sidewalk. As they lifted Catina onto a stretcher, Señora d'Alves rose to hold her hand, dropping the stained hankie. Vince noticed her cut finger. “How did that happen?”

Marek stepped closer. “She was turning the di- ”

Ignoring him, Vince grabbed her hand and told an ambulance worker to wrap it.

Her brothers and cousins showed up out of breath and asked her all kinds of questions in Portuguese. She waved them off with her cleaned and bandaged hand and stepped into the back of the ambulance to go to the hospital with Catina.

The ambulance had been gone less than a minute when Vince used his work boot to push Marek's bloodied hankie down the manhole.

Marek was about to ask him why, when the stranger who helped Marek with Catina took a hold of Vince's dirty hand and shook it. "Un héros," he said again and again. Other men stepped forward to congratulate him, too. Some of the women clapped.

"How did you know she was down there?" Marek asked.

Vince didn't seem to hear. Marek tried to get his attention but Monsieur Richard stepped in front of him to add his congratulations. Patrick stood beside him.

Marek tugged on Patrick's arm. "Where've you been?"

Patrick shrugged. "Around. Why?"

"I could have used your help."

With one arm still around Danika, Apo picked up Marek's jacket and handed it to him. "Let's go," he said in Slovak.

"Don't you want to congratulate Vince?" Marek asked.

Apo shook his head. "Mamo is probably worried sick about where you two are."

Marek crouched to face Danika. "What were you doing off our block?"

Danika started to cry so hard that it was impossible for her to say anything.

Apo swept her up in one arm and started to carry her home.

She kept crying as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Marek, podzme domo," Apo said. "Let's go home."

“I’m coming.” Zipping his jacket, Marek noticed all the mud on his clothes and some blood. He smelled like rotting garbage. Looking back over his shoulder at the thinning crowd, he saw two police officers asking Vince questions. He wanted to stay and find out what Vince was telling them, but Apo’s voice had made it clear he wanted everyone home right away. He would have to find out more from Vince later. As Marek retrieved his bike and rolled it alongside Apo and Danika, he couldn’t help but feel a bit jealous that Vince was getting all the credit for saving Catina.

Chapter Thirteen

Marek retreated to his bed after Sunday lunch. It had been almost two weeks since he had slept through a night. The memory of Catina's pale blue skin kept him awake. When he finally managed to drift off, Danika often startled everyone in the house with her night terrors. She woke up screaming that Nosa was coming to get her, too. When Mamo and two officers repeatedly asked her if she had seen anyone with Catina near the manhole, she kept shaking her head and crying.

Catina was still in hospital. Marek had no idea about her condition. When he tried to find out from Señora d'Alves, he was greeted at her door by elderly relatives who spoke only Portuguese. He found out Catina was at THE MONTREAL CHILDREN'S, but nothing else. Marek thought a few times about dragging Patrick with him to visit her, but something always got in the way. He considered going later that night if he was able to nap in the afternoon. Chances were slim, though, with Baba yapping to Danika in the living room.

"Pripelaga – Mother Earth – burned with an emptiness inside because some of the Sun's rays had been trapped within her layers," she told Danika before going on to explain that Rod told Pripelaga she would ache until she let him inside her to release creatures in the likeness of the gods.

Marek laughed. "Baba, tell Danika how Pripelaga got pregnant," he said from his side of the drapes. "Rod must have had one big ... as they say in English ... *rod*."

Danika stuck her head through the drapes. "Let Baba talk," she said in a babyish voice. He would have pinched her nose if Baba wasn't right there on the other side, too.

Baba pulled Danika back into the living room. “All you need to know for now is that Rod and Pripelaga became one for a while,” she said. “Later Pripelaga suffered a great deal of pain as she pushed out a large number of clay giants.”

“Clay?” Danika asked.

“Yes, they had stone for bones and seawater for blood, and some of Pripelaga’s trapped sunrays beamed from their eye sockets.” Baba ignored Marek’s laughter. “Tall as hills, they could move but remained hollow because they were born from her emptiness.”

“They were like Play-Doh?” Danika asked. “How could they be alive from clay?”

Marek listened to Baba sigh. She had told him this story, but he never paid much attention. Now he had little choice. No one was allowed out on Sundays. Mamo insisted on the family being together, except for Apo who stayed in the store from one to five. Then everyone sat down to dinner, after which the family watched *The Ed Sullivan Show* and *Bonanza*. Marek would have to ask for special permission to visit Catina.

Baba’s voice cracked with irritation. “Bože moj! Did they not teach you at school that God made Adam from dirt?”

Danika stayed quiet.

“And remember I told you Svarozhich had wrestled control of Mother Earth from the god Chaos?” Baba paused. “Later taking pity on the hollow giants, he blew a magical breeze into them so they would have a bit of what the gods knew as eternity.”

Danika bounced in her seat. “Is that how they got their souls?”

“To pravda. Tak!” Baba said, clapping her thin hands in praise. “The giants became real people, but Svarozhich didn’t have enough breath to make them live forever.

Pripelaga became very sad when she found out her children and her children's children would all eventually die unless one of the gods blessed them with immortality."

Marek covered his ears with his pillow. He vowed to find a job and move out the second he turned sixteen. It was the only way he could imagine being alone with his thoughts again.

"How could they be people when they were so big?" Danika asked.

"Each generation became smaller until flesh covered their softer bones and blood ran through their veins," Baba said. "That is why even today when someone acts without feeling, we call that person stone-faced."

Marek wished Baba could be like other grandmothers who read stories about Cinderella or Snow White. He turned on his side and buried himself deeper under his pillow and blankets to muffle her voice.

Falling asleep, he met Snow White. Standing next to her was Catina. Danika flittered above them, singing *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*. Catina smiled up at Snow White as she took her hand. They looked almost identical with their shiny black hair and round faces, except for their age difference and Catina's sick blue skin.

Marek awoke to a series of thuds.

Danika was singing in Slovak about *lipa* trees. Marek always had a hard time remembering the English word – linden – since he never used it in English. Whenever Marek had a cold, Baba nagged him to drink linden tea from the leaves she picked at Mont-Royal Park and dried for days in a wooden box. No way.

"What was that sound?" he asked Danika in English.

"What sound?" Danika poked her head between the drapes.

“Like thunder.”

“You’re dreaming,” Danika said. “There’s no thunder in winter.”

“Po slovensky,” Baba ordered. Everything always had to be said in Slovak.

Marek stared at the ceiling, tracing a crack with his eyes. He wished he could sleep for once without Catina’s scary blue face giving him nightmares. Maybe when he saw her or at least found out how she was that awful memory of her would fade.

Danika sang *Frère Jacques*. When she finished, Baba clapped even though she probably didn’t understand a word. Danika bowed, pushing her bum into the drapes.

“Sit,” Baba told her. “I want to tell you about the special noise that Svarozhich made when he blew into the clay beings. This sound became his divine word – his *slovo*. And the people blessed with his *slovo* became Slovaks.”

“Are Slovaks and *Slavs* the same?” Danika asked.

“Slovans?”

Marek had never heard the Slovak word for Slavs.

“Yes and no,” Baba said, explaining that Slovaks were the people of *slovo* – the word of God. And Slovans – Slavs – were all the glorious people of Eastern Europe named after *slava*.

“Slava?” Danika asked.

“Glory,” Marek said in English.

“Oh.”

“I thought Slavs meant slaves,” Marek said in English.

“Ñe, ñe, ñe,” Baba said, sounding irritated as she explained that *slave* in Slovak was *otrok* and if someone had changed the word Slavs to mean *otrok* they had a *hañba*/shame.

“Čom?” Marek asked.

“The serfs in Eastern Europe might not have owned their land, but they were left on their own to work it and then pay taxes with the food they harvested. They were not bought, owned and sold like Africans were by the *Europske* and *Amerikani*.”

Marek doubted Slovaks were any god’s chosen people, unless maybe they were Jewish, too. Yet he liked that Slavs were named for glory and not slaves as so many kids used to tease him when he was younger. Getting out of bed, he peered over the back of his desk where he had secured three stink bombs with masking tape so Danika couldn’t find them.

Again something thudded overhead. Now fully awake, he realized it sounded like someone dragging a table or chair across the wooden floor in the top flat. He stepped through the drapes into the living room. “Are the people moving in upstairs?”

Danika shrugged. “How should I know?”

Then Marek remembered it was the first of February, when the new tenants were supposed to show up. He scooted past the coffee table to look out the window. Securing his arm on the wall to avoid getting dizzy, he looked straight down and saw a young woman removing boxes from a rusty white convertible. As she turned, he realized it was Séraphine Moreau, although he scarcely recognized her. Her chestnut brown hair was hanging straight and long with a part in the middle under a beaded headband. Beneath her unbuttoned winter coat, she wore a white peasant blouse and a flowery skirt that flowed

halfway down her calves. She looked as beautiful as the first time he saw her, and yet so different. The word *gypsy* came to mind but wasn't quite right.

Baba nudged Marek to move over so that she could look out, too. As soon as she recognized Séraphine, she let out a gasp. "Bože moj, ona je *beatnik!*"

Of all the words in the English language Marek never expected *beatnik* would be the first one to fall out of Baba's mouth. She must have picked it up watching the news.

Mamo appeared in the living room wiping flour off her hands. Baba again told her about the new tenant being a *beatnik* like it was some kind of infectious disease. Mamo peeked out the window. Séraphine must have spotted her because Mamo waved.

Baba warned that the new tenants would be filthy people who would let the top flat become infested with *chrobaci*. She had seen these people on television and they walked barefoot on the street, their soles black as coal.

"Don't worry," Mamo said. "It's too cold to go without shoes in Montreal."

"Ty budzeš banovac," Baba said. *You will be sorry.*

"What was I supposed to do?" Mamo asked, rubbing the last of the flour off her fingers. "It's not easy getting new tenants in the middle of winter."

"You should have let me live upstairs at least until Moving Day in May, instead of being so greedy for more rent."

Mamo's face turned as pink as Danika's hair ribbons. "Don't you have something else to do?" she asked Marek and Danika.

"Can I go out?" Marek asked.

"Dze?"

“Just to help the new tenants move a few boxes.” Marek knew Mamo had to be really upset if she was letting him speak in English.

Baba grabbed his arm. “See what they have. See how clean they are.”

Rolling her eyes, Mamo said Marek could go, as long as he promised to come right back if the new tenants didn’t need help.

“Can I go, too?” Danika asked.

“Ñe,” Mamo and Baba said at once. Danika had become their prisoner since Catina’s fall.

Marek ran to his room to comb his hair and then out the door.

The back half of Séraphine’s convertible reminded Marek of a supersonic jet with its twin fins and chromed tail lights. “Quelle belle auto,” he told her.

Her nose scrunched. “Want to buy it?”

“Je souhaite... I wish.”

Séraphine looked down the street. “It will not be easy to park it around here.”

Her French accent couldn’t be more charming. She enunciated every syllable in English like her tongue was caressing ice cream.

“Peux-je t’aider?” he asked. “Can I help you carry up stuff?”

Séraphine gave him a smile, the same sweet smile that she had when she looked as sophisticated as a stewardess. She had replaced her candy cotton pink lipstick with a reddish brown gloss that reminded Marek of cinnamon on French toast.

“Tu parles français assez bien,” she said. “Did you learn in school?”

“And playing on the street... when I was much younger....”

“Es-tu certain que tu veux m’aider?”

Marek nodded and took a large suitcase from her. It felt heavy enough to have a body inside. He carried it as high as he could to avoid scraping the bottom, but failed to clear the stoop. The clasps sprang open and the contents spilled onto the sidewalk. Instead of clothes, there were books thrown everywhere, along with stacks of articles wrapped with string from *La Presse* and *The New York Times*. There were also lots of coloured photographs of tourists lined up around the Statue of Liberty or wandering around a huge bell with a crack in it. Marek couldn't help but stare at the photos as he rushed to collect them. His parents only ever took black-and-white shots. Apo was given a brand-new Kodak Instamatic from a customer desperate to lower his tab, but Mamo refused to buy the more expensive film the camera needed. So Marek had rarely seen coloured pictures except for the yearly school photos. The people in Séraphine's pictures weren't smiling. They were going about their business like they didn't even know the camera was there. Some of the shots were strange: people riding up escalators or leaving through revolving doors, security guards standing by entrances....

Before Marek could bunch them all together, Séraphine whipped them out of his hand and scooped up the rest. She threw them face down into the suitcase and gathered up the newspaper piles and books just as fast. Her face had turned as pale as egg whites.

“Je m'excuse,” Marek said. “I'm really sorry.”

Séraphine ran her hand through her hair. Several bangles on her wrist jangled. She forced a smile. “Ce n'est pas grand chose. It's all this moving. Très stressant.” She handed him the cardboard box she had been carrying.

The box was big and Marek could hardly see as he edged up the stairs. At least they were indoor stairs. One of the few things Apo had done right was to buy a building

with all interior front stairs, although Mamo hated it how their corner property stood right along the sidewalk. She complained that prisoners had more yard space.

At the top of the stairs, a tall lean guy with a thick beard and sandy brown hair down to his shoulders waited for them. Marek took an immediate dislike to him, knowing he was probably Séraphine's husband. Although remembering she was married, Marek had hoped that her spouse had disappeared somewhere and Séraphine was moving into the flat with her sister or best girlfriend. No such luck. This guy acted like he already owned the place instead of merely renting it. Baba wouldn't like his beard or long hair. She would give Mamo an earful about not meeting him before renting out the flat.

The guy took the box from Marek and leaned forward to kiss Séraphine's cheek. "Are there are lot more?" he asked. "I'll get my coat and help you."

Marek had expected him to speak French, but he talked English with a drawl.

"We can manage," Séraphine said. "Con, this is ... I'm sorry I don't remember...."

"Marek. Marek Danco."

Séraphine pointed in the hairy guy's direction. "Marek, ça c'est Conner Quarles."

Marek noticed she didn't say this is *mon mari* -- my husband - the way most women introduced their spouses. So maybe they weren't married.

"Call me Con," the guy said extending a hand while he gripped the box under his other arm. He squeezed Marek's fingers hard. "What kind of name is Marek?"

"I don't know." Marek had never thought about it. "What kind of name is Con?"

Con laughed. "So you're the kid living downstairs?"

I'm not a kid, you jerk, Marek wanted to say, but kept quiet.

"Put these things in our room," Séraphine told Con, heading downstairs again.

Back at the car, Marek started to lift another suitcase.

“Laisse ça. Leave that,” Séraphine almost shouted. “Here.” She loaded up his arms with shopping bags and then looked up and down the street. “My cousin was supposed to bring my furniture in a truck we borrowed.”

Marek noticed she said *my* furniture, not *our* furniture.

“Where did you live?” he asked.

“Terrebonne.”

Marek hesitated.

“C’est près de Saint-Jérôme,” she said.

“Oh. Up north. Close to New Glasgow? Slovaks have picnic grounds there.”

“Les Bas-Laurentides, yes.”

Every time they carried up stuff, Con greeted them at the door and took it away – except for the suitcases that Séraphine insisted on storing on her own. With Con’s arms full, she asked Marek to carry several hat boxes into the small room at the front of the flat. Marek hoped Séraphine had some nice sophisticated hats inside the boxes. Not that he disliked her peasant look, but he knew Mamo and Baba wouldn’t be pleased if she dressed like that all the time. A few nice hats might impress them.

The small room at the front of the flat didn’t exist in the Dancos’ home. There was space for it in the emptiness over the lower stairwell. As small as it was – like a nursery – Marek would have loved to have one like it with all that sunshine that never made its way to the lower floors. He could see the cross on the mountain and even St. Joseph’s Oratory by looking straight out. He imagined how small the people and cars seemed on the street below but decided not to look in case it made him dizzy.

On his way out, he noticed Con sitting in the middle of a smoky living room. Next to him was a young woman with naturally bronzed skin that made her look Portuguese, or maybe Spanish. Across from her there was a Negro man sitting with his legs crossed. Con introduced them as Luczia and Ismael. Luczia wore silver horn-rimmed glasses and loose brown curls that bounced as she nodded. Ismael had skin almost as dark as the bitter chocolate Mamo used for baking. He wore a T-shirt that looked as if all of its rainbow colours had been dissolved in bleach. Its snug fit showed off his broad chest and large biceps. Marek started to make his way across the oversized floor pillows to shake hands but Ismael made a V-sign with his fingers instead. Marek had no idea what it meant.

S raphine touched Marek's shoulder, sending a tingle down to his toes.

"Can you stay for pizza?" she asked.

Marek nodded and plonked himself on a floor pillow.

The group sat in silence as the turntable played some tone-deaf guy singing about the answers to different things blowing in the wind. It seemed a ridiculous song to Marek but Luczia swayed to it with her eyes closed like it was a love song by the Beatles.

With no one talking, Marek wasn't sure what he was supposed to be doing. He wished someone would offer him a cigarette. He glanced over at Ismael who caught his eye and gave him a fierce look. Marek quickly turned his gaze to the walls of the combined living and dining room. It had been constructed exactly like the double room a floor lower but it looked so much larger and brighter without furniture and dividing drapes. A wooden frame that Marek assumed was some kind of bed without a headboard sat against the dining area's back wall. An upside down crate served as a night table with

a strange lamp on top. The lamp had a bright orange liquid inside its glass casing which kept forming large bubbles that floated upwards and disappeared somewhere.

“It’s an Astro lamp,” Séraphine said, when she noticed Marek looking at it.

The album ended and Luczia jumped up to pick out another one from the stack leaning against the wall. After flipping through several jackets, she played a forty-five instead. As soon as the group of male singers began wailing about some guy named Louie, she danced around, waving her arms over her head and then rolling them like they were stuck inside a winter muff. Marek had never witnessed such bizarre dancing. He liked its abandon and wished Séraphine would dance, too.

He looked at the posters everywhere. Mamo wasn’t going to like all that scotch-tape on the walls. Some of the pictures were neat, like the one of the Empire State Building. Marek recognized it right away because the Aldred Building in Old Montreal looked very much like it, only smaller, of course. Some of the other posters seemed plain silly, like the one of about a hundred cans of *Campbell’s* soup, and another of a pocket watch that had somehow melted and was slipping down the side of a desk.

Séraphine grabbed a package of something called incense. She pulled out a foot-long stick and lit it. The burning stick gave off a smoke that smelled like flowers on fire.

As soon as the forty-five ended, Luczia ran up to the turntable to play it a second time. “God, I love this,” she said, dancing again.

Séraphine lowered the volume. “You want us to be kicked out on the first day?”

“What’s the point of having a stereo if you can’t play it?” Luczia snapped back, throwing herself back onto the bed.

Ismael lit a cigarette. “The governor of Indiana has asked all the radio stations to boycott that song.”

Luczia sat up. “Why?”

“Says it’s pornographic.”

“Idiot,” Con said. “Doesn’t he realize that’s the best way to make it a hit? Ban a song and everyone buys it to keep or trash.”

“Je n’ai pas compris tous les mots,” Séraphine said. “What do the Kingsmen sing that the guy finds so offensive?”

“Sais pas,” Ismael said. “The song’s publisher is willing to give a thousand greenbacks to anyone who points out any suggestive lyrics.”

Con slapped his knee and laughed. “Oh, fuck, yeah, I heard about that governor. He said the song made his ears tingle. If you ask me, it made his prick twitch.”

Séraphine threw him a look. “Con, ne parles pas comme ça ...”

“What did you say, darling? You know I don’t understand French.”

“You should learn. You’ve been here for months.”

“And I hope it won’t be for much longer.”

Séraphine looked hurt.

Con stroked her hair. “Come on. You know I won’t go anywhere without you.”

Everyone stayed quiet for about a minute. Then Con lit a cigarette.

“Can I have one?” Marek asked.

“Are you allowed?” Séraphine asked.

“Sure.”

“How old are you?” Luczia asked.

“Sixteen... I look young for my age.”

Con handed him the lit smoke and asked Ismael for another. Marek again silently marvelled at how dark all of Ismael’s skin was except for the burnt orange rim outlining his palms and fingers before the insides of his hands turned a yellowish white.

Ismael caught Marek staring. “What the fuck are you looking at? You’ve never seen a coloured man?”

Actually, no, Marek hadn’t. If there were Negroes in Montreal, they weren’t living in his neighbourhood or going to his school. Marek had seen lots of Negro boys on the news fighting in Viet Nam, but on the family’s television set, they all looked ash grey. Ismael’s skin was such a deep brown in comparison. It showed every line of his knuckles and yet it was smooth – tight as a fitted sheet – on his arms and face. Marek had never seen hair like Ismael’s either. Some of the Portuguese kids had coarse hair, but not like this. It looked as bristly as a scouring pad and stood up like it would on a porcupine’s back. The Negro soldiers that Marek saw on the news all had their hair shaved off. The few Negro actors he saw looked as if their hair had been slicked back with Vaseline.

“Stop fuckin’ staring at me, you white-assed motherfucker.” Ismael jumped up and grabbed Marek by his jacket. Con hopped up nearly as fast and wedged himself between them. Marek was too startled to say or do anything. He knew he shouldn’t keep staring but he was afraid if he so much as flinched, Ismael would sock him in the mouth.

Ismael pulled on Marek’s jacket again, reaching around Con to grab a hold of it. Séraphine took Ismael’s arm and stroked it. “What’s with you? He’s just a kid.”

Not what Marek wanted to hear from her, but if it saved his ass...

“Tell him to stop looking at me.”

Fairly certain Ismael wouldn't chance hurting Séraphine, Marek looked away.

"Relax, man," Con said. "What's got you so uptight?"

Séraphine wiggled her way in front of Con and gave Ismael a hug. Ismael released his grip from Marek and slumped back onto his seat. "We were supposed to be discussing things, not wasting time babysitting this punk."

Con patted Ismael's back. "We're all uptight. This isn't easy for any of us."

Marek stood. "I should go."

Séraphine touched his arm. "I don't want you to leave on bad terms," she said. "Stay for the pizza."

He sat back down and made a point of not so much as glancing in Ismael's direction. Instead, he stared at a poster with a mishmash of blue and red streaks behind Séraphine, taking a glimpse at her whenever he was fairly sure that she wasn't looking.

Con jumped up. "I have something to help us hang loose."

As he left the room, Séraphine kneeled behind Ismael and rubbed his neck.

"Oh, yeah, baby," Ismael said. "That's good."

Jealousy gripped Marek's stomach.

Luczia disliked Séraphine touching Ismael, too, judging from how fast she sprung up from the bed and sat down beside him. "You shouldn't say *coloured*," she said.

Ismael looked at her annoyed. "What?"

"You should say Afro-American."

"Don't you think I should be allowed to call myself whatever I want?"

Luczia shrugged. "Well it's hard to know what to call you anymore if you tell us not to use a word and then you use it yourself."

Out of the corner of his eye, Marek could see Ismael edge forward on his pillow.

“Woman, you got some fuckin’—”

Con leaped into the room with his arms spread wide like some kind of caped crusader. “Ta da!” he said, showing the others a clear plastic bag with what looked like dried herbs. “Do you have papers, Ismael?”

Ismael fished a pack from his jeans and threw it towards Con. Marek had been thinking of getting paper to roll his own cigarettes since Mamo and Apo had started noticing things missing from the store. This would be his chance to see how it was done and whether he liked those smokes. It surprised Marek when Con used only his fingers instead of a rolling machine. He also found it odd how Con twisted the ends.

The odd-looking smoke caught flame as soon as Con put a match to it. Con took several puffs and passed it to Ismael. It seemed silly to Marek that Con didn’t either roll up another one right away or pass the stuff to the others to roll some. Instead he sat back and held the smoke in his lungs as he closed his eyes for a few seconds. Then he took Séraphine’s face in one hand and pressed his lips against hers to release the smoke right into her mouth. Marek was intrigued and disgusted and jealous all at once.

“Oh, man, that’s good shit,” Con said.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Marek dared to look in Ismael’s direction again. Ismael had the bizarre smoke pressed between his thumb and index finger as he dragged on it longer than on a regular cigarette. He tried to breathe into Luczia, but she nudged him away as she grabbed the smoke from him.

The strange cigarette was causing Marek’s eyes to water and his throat to dry. It smelled like old rope on fire. Marek guessed the tobacco was a stronger American kind.

“Where did you get this pot?” Ismael asked as he passed the smoke to Con.

Con pointed at Séraphine. “Her cousin grew it last summer in...”

Séraphine waved at him to shut up.

Con looked over at Marek. “Want some?”

Marek shrugged.

“Ever try weed?”

Again Marek shrugged as nonchalantly as possible.

Séraphine rose onto her knees. “Con, maybe we shouldn’t...”

Con handed over the odd smoke. “One or two tokes won’t kill him.”

Marek inhaled deeply and immediately started to choke. Ismael and Con laughed.

Marek wished he could tell them to fuck off. He took another puff and realized this was like no tobacco he had ever tried. The smoke filled his lungs with a blanket’s thickness and almost immediately made him feel lightheaded.

Marek sat quietly listening as Luczia played a record with some Caribbean sounding guy singing about what he would do with a hammer. Marek had never heard any of Luczia’s music and wasn’t sure whether he liked it. He took back the smoke from Con and inhaled slower.

Feeling dizzy a minute later, he stared at the poster of the soup cans to stop his head from spinning, but the writing on the labels kept going out of focus.

The doorbell startled him and made Ismael laugh again.

“It’s probably the pizza guy,” said Séraphine, who rose to answer the door. Con hid the plastic bag and Luczia opened a window.

From the hallway, Marek could hear Danika's voice. Mamo had sent her to fetch Marek for supper. He got up fast, thanked everyone and rushed towards the door before Danika could run upstairs.

Con followed Marek into the hallway. "Hey, kid."

Marek turned, not sure what to expect.

"What do you think about 'Nam?"

Marek wasn't sure what Con meant. His head now felt like someone had stuffed it with cotton. He liked the numbness except when people were asking him questions.

"The war," Con said. "How do you feel about the war?"

Marek almost expected a game show buzzer to sound. "It looks pretty awful from what I've seen on television," he finally said.

Con's smile told Marek that he had given a correct answer.

"Don't be a stranger, kid," Con said as he closed the door at the top of the stairs.

As Marek looked down, the stairs appeared to be melting like the pocket watch on the poster. He grabbed the banister and descended into the dark passage a step at a time.

"Come on," Danika said in a tone exactly like Mamo's, except an octave higher. "You're late for supper."

He shooed her off and took his time entering their flat.

Mamo was waiting at the top of the stairs with Baba right behind her. "Where have you been so long?"

"I was helping the new tenants move."

Baba started her own interrogation. "What kind of clothes do they wear? What kind of furniture do they have? Do they look clean? Are they walking around barefoot?"

Mamo grabbed Marek closer and smelled his shirt. “Have you been smoking?”

“No, no.” Marek shook his head without looking at her. “It’s incense.”

“Co?”

“Incense. It’s to make a room smell nicer.”

“Well it stinks. Go change your shirt and wash up for supper.”

In the breakfast nook before the kitchen, the dining room table had been pulled out for Sunday dinner. Marek stared at his soup. Bits of rehydrated mushrooms were floating around like nose snot.

Apo tapped Marek’s arm. “Co stobu?”

“He looks sick,” Baba said. “White as a ghost.”

Marek stared at the tablecloth’s roses to stop his head from spinning.

“Eat your soup,” Mamo told him. “It will make you feel better.”

Marek looked again at the swimming mushrooms. “Can I be excused please?”

Baba grabbed his forehead to check for a fever. “Ñe. Nič,” she reassured Mamo.

“Go to bed anyway,” Mamo told Marek.

As Marek left, he could hear Baba say that he probably caught something from the *beatniks*. He threw himself on his bed and listened to the soft drone of the music playing above. He felt wonderfully numb and hungry for something sweet like ice cream or Séraphine. The strange cigarette had relaxed him more than any booze he ever had. One thing was for sure: Marek planned to make his way back upstairs as soon as possible.

Chapter Fourteen

Pinball machines pinged everywhere as Marek opened the heavy door into *Rizzo's Pool & Patates*. A few Grade Nine boys rushed ahead of him to get to the soccer tables. Nearly all the chairs were filled with men nursing beers cloaked in paper bags or sipping whiskey from porcelain coffee cups.

With his location by the Pine-Park Interchange across from D'Arcy McGee High School, Rizzo Paducci made more money selling steamies and soft drinks than he would from a corner tavern – especially since he sold booze on the sly anyway. Bald as a cue ball, Rizzo's head glistened under the dim lights behind the long Arborite counter. The skin on the back of his neck fell into folds. He constantly made twitchy faces like he was chewing tobacco and never spitting it out, and his square body looked strong enough to stop an Austin Mini Cooper.

The clack of pool balls drew Marek's attention to the far end of the large double room. Several guys who looked older than Marek occupied the four pool tables. Marek had to wave away thick cigarette smoke to get a better look at them. He didn't want to run into Guerino. It hadn't been easy but Marek had managed to avoid the Big G by rushing through the school halls between classes and spending lunch and recess at the very back of the cafeteria near the fire exit. Now *Rizzo's* glazed windows made it too dark to recognize most faces, but Marek felt safe with no one around wearing Los Lobos jackets.

He grabbed the one chrome stool that emptied along the bar and swivelled on it. Whoever had phoned a bomb threat at school had made his day. The principal and

teachers had rushed all the students out of the building and across the street. Everyone waited outside for nearly an hour before the police said it would take more time to search the whole building and the principal finally dismissed classes. Marek couldn't have been happier to be able to go to *Rizzo's* for a while instead of home to deliver groceries.

"It's the terrorists," quite a few kids had said while they were waiting outside. Marek doubted l'Armée de libération du Québec had the school on its radar. Then again, it was possible. A shiver ran up Marek's spine as he thought about the night-watchman who had been killed by a bomb at an army recruiting centre on Sherbrooke Street. There was also that policeman, Walter Leja, getting both his hands blown off as he tried to remove another bomb from a Westmount mailbox. Mamo said Leja was probably left like a vegetable. After his mishap, she paid the postman twenty dollars to take her bills and letters back to the post office to mail. She ordered Marek and Danika to stay as far away from every mailbox as possible.

Marek still had trouble believing that his school would be a target. Sure, McGee supported Confederation but that was nearly a century ago. And lots of French kids went to D'Arcy. No one – French, English, Portuguese – was the rich WASP that l'Armée seemed to be targeting, although not always successfully. The dead guard had an English name but had been raised as Québécois. Leja was French Canadian, too.

Everyone at D'Arcy was pretty much working class or downright poor. Marek was willing to bet that a kid from the nearby French high school had made a prank call. If so, Marek hoped whoever it was did it more often.

He tapped a quarter on the counter until Rizzo gave him a look.

Rizzo walked over and wiped the counter like he were doing Marek a big favour by serving him. “What’ll it be?”

Marek licked his lips as he noticed the chocolate cake sitting under a glass dome. It looked so much sweeter than the dry cakes Mamo baked with nuts or jam. “How much for a slice?”

“Twenty-five cents.”

“Huh? That’s a lot.”

“You want it or not? I don’t got all day.”

Marek handed over his quarter. Rizzo lifted the heavy dome and dumped a thick piece of pre-sliced cake onto a plate. He slid it down the counter so it made its way around a customer’s elbows and stopped directly in front of Marek. His precision told Marek that only a fool would play pool with Rizzo for money.

The cake was as rich and moist as Marek had imagined but as he took his second mouthful he bit into something so hard that it nearly cracked his tooth. He spit a coin onto the counter.

Rizzo gave a rare smile. “Amico, congratulazioni! You found the lucky coin.”

“Lucky? I could have choked on this fuckin’ quarter.” As Marek rubbed his throat, Catina’s blue face popped into his head.

“Michia!” Rizzo joined his thumb and forefingers and shook them at Marek.

“You win a prize and you’re still not happy?”

“Do you know how dangerous this is? Whose stupid idea was it?”

Rizzo walked over and grabbed Marek’s jacket. “Are you calling my wife stupid?”

Marek quickly shook his head. “No, absolutely not.”

Rizzo eased his grip. “She was just trying to do something nice.”

“But I could have choked to death.”

“Ah, fungule. It’s twenty-five cents, too big to swallow.”

Marek rubbed his neck again. “It’s not too big to get stuck in a throat.”

“Stop complaining or get out,” Rizzo said, pointing to the door.

Marek couldn’t imagine life without spending time at *Rizzo’s*. “I’m sorry.”

Rizzo accepted the apology with a grunt. He was about to say more but one of the regulars squeezed his way to the counter asking for another “coffee.”

First checking again that Guerino wasn’t around, Marek returned his attention to mashing up the rest of the cake. Glancing at the door every time he heard it open, he immediately saw Patrick when he strutted inside like a peacock.

Marek waved him over. “You get laid or something?”

With no empty stools in sight, Patrick leaned his arm on Marek’s back. “Enjoying your afternoon off school?”

Marek ran his fingers along the bottom of his teeth. “Are any of these chipped?”

“No. Why?”

“Just be careful if you buy this ‘lucky’ cake.”

“So you’re enjoying your afternoon off, eh?”

Marek let out a deliberate sigh. “Yes, of course. Why do you keep asking?”

Patrick leaned forward. “Well, you can thank me for it.”

Marek turned to face Patrick directly. “What the hell do you mean?”

Patrick’s big smile exposed the gap between his front teeth.

“You didn’t!”

Patrick raised his reddish eyebrows as he grinned.

“Are you crazy? What if you got caught?”

Patrick shrugged off the suggestion. “How? I called from a pay phone.”

“From a booth?”

“No, here.” Patrick pointed to a row of phones near the washrooms.

Marek lowered Patrick’s finger. “Are you crazy? What if someone saw you?”

“Nobody saw me. Even if people did, they don’t know where I was phoning.”

“But somebody might have noticed that you made a call just before the school was evacuated.”

Patrick looked around. “The police are not going to bother with a crank call.”

Marek pushed his plate aside. “Hey, dummy, there’ve been real bombs. The cops are probably taking all threats really seriously.”

“Good. Those people should go to jail.”

“Do you want to be one of them? The fuzz won’t be in the mood to hear about how this was just a prank.”

“You worry too much for nothing.” Patrick waved to get Rizzo’s attention.

“I hope you’re right,” said Marek. “Cause if the cops find out it was you I wouldn’t be surprised if they put you in jail for a couple of nights. And you’d be suspended for sure. How would your Papa react to that? I bet he’d whip your ass.”

An uneasy look washed over Patrick. “Fermes ta bouche. Dits rien.”

“Fine, I’ll shut up, but smarten up, okay?”

Rizzo rolled his eyes when Patrick ordered a vanilla shake. Marek looked around the room again. The place was now packed with school kids, even a few girls. Marek's gaze settled on Hortense de Silva, who toyed with the zipper on her sweater as she pretended to watch a fussball match. When her cocoa eyes caught Marek's, he could feel himself blush. He was about to smile when a guy in army fatigues blocked his view.

"Hey, back off," Marek said as he shoved away the guy's arm.

"As-tu un problème?"

The guy who turned around ready to fight was Benoît. He lowered his fist when he saw Marek.

"God, you're uptight," Marek said.

"Laissez-moi. Leave me alone."

"I know you didn't steal any money from the store."

Benoît's shoulders went back. "Dits ça à tes parents."

"Yes, I have told my parents."

"I never took a fuckin' penny from your father," Benoît said, uncomfortably loud for Marek. "Until he accused me of stealing, I thought of him almost like a father."

"Yes, I know. He made a mistake. A big one." Marek couldn't believe how angry Benoît was months after his firing. "You didn't write that stuff, eh?"

"Quoi?"

"The paint across our store window."

Benoît laughed. "Je souhaite, mais j'ai de plus grands poissons à faire frire."

"What's that mean: you wish, but you have bigger fish to fry?"

Again Benoît laughed. "Tu verras," he said. "You'll see."

“Fine,” Marek said, tapping his “lucky” quarter till Rizzo gave him another look.

“So what’s with the uniform?” he asked Benoît. “Did you join the air cadets?”

Benoît stood up straight. “Le futur.”

“What future?”

Grabbing the Pepsi bottle that Rizzo gave him, Benoît walked away smiling.

Marek glanced up at the PLAYER’S MILD clock on the wall behind the counter.

He knew he should head out or he would have to run all the way home to get there at the usual time. He didn’t want to leave, especially not with Hortense glancing his way again. It surprised him that she even noticed him. She could have her pick of any guy at school. There had been fistfights over her. The question was whether she was worth it. Marek had learned the hard way that some of the girls who looked eager to have sex became all prim and proper when he occasionally managed to get the least bit close to one of them at a party or dance. It made him wonder about the quiet girls, the shy ones, the girls who went straight home from school and weren’t allowed out after supper. Maybe they were the ones desperate enough to put out.

“Marek, look out!”

Patrick’s warning came too late. Guerino already had his small but powerful hands around the back of Marek’s neck. Marek gulped hard. He tried to wave to get Rizzo’s attention. Usually Rizzo stopped any trouble before it started but he either didn’t notice or pretended not to see after Marek had insulted his wife.

“So we finally meet,” Guerino said with his thick Italian accent.

Marek pulled on G's arm to loosen his grip. The students at the adjacent stools cleared away. So did Patrick. Some friend, Marek thought, although he realized he might have done the same. The least Patrick could do, though, was get Rizzo to break things up.

"What the fuck do you want from me, Guerino?"

"I didn't like the way you spoke to me the last time I saw you."

"Well, if you don't let go of my neck, I'll tell everyone what I saw in your car."

Guerino's hands tightened. "You do, and I swear I'll snap off your neck."

"Okay, I'll keep quiet, but only if you let go."

"What's he talking about?"

Marek didn't recognize the voice. He cocked back his head as far as he could and saw the mess of brown curls that belonged to Hector Soares. In charge of the Portuguese members of Los Lobos, Hector was second in command and a lot cooler headed than G. His negotiations with G led to the truce between the Portuguese and Italians at school.

Guerino waved off Hector. "None of your business," he said. "It's between this punk and me. So, Marek, you want to step outside or should I punch you out here?"

A semi-circle had formed around Marek with some guys sitting on the counter, but no one stepped forward to stop what was about to happen, not even Rizzo. Marek realized it must have been true what people said about G's dad being "connected."

"I have a better idea," Marek said, raising a finger to get Guerino to wait a second. "I bet there's something I can get for you that you would enjoy a lot more."

"What is it?" Guerino asked.

"Not in front of everyone," Marek said as his mind rehearsed what to say next.

Guerino let go so hard that Marek almost fell off his stool. Patrick caught him in time, but Marek pushed him away. He straightened his shirt and jacket and walked as slowly as he could to where Guerino and Hector had already cleared a table.

“Show’s over,” Rizzo kept saying as he swatted the air near the counter.

Marek tried to look tough as he turned a wooden chair around to straddle it. He figured this would give him a better chance of running out if G didn’t like his offer.

“So what am I going to enjoy more than beating you to a pulp?” Guerino asked.

Marek leaned forward. “Ever heard of pot?”

“You mean marijuana? Of course.”

“Ever try it?”

Marek knew as soon as Guerino looked at Hector that he hadn’t.

“Well, I’m not sure but I think I can get you some.”

“You don’t have it on you?”

“No, of course not. I could get arrested carrying it around with me all the time.”

Marek leaned forward. “Give me a couple of days, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Okay, you have two days,” Guerino said.

“Make it till Monday. I might need the weekend.”

Guerino looked at Hector again. It was almost as if he couldn’t make a decision without his Portuguese sidekick. Hector nodded ever so slightly.

“Okay, till Monday at lunchtime,” G said.

Marek stood to leave.

“Hey, you,” Hector called out after him.

Marek turned, afraid to know what Hector wanted now.

“Where have I seen you before?”

Marek shrugged. “At school, I guess.”

Hector shook his head. “Somewhere else.” He wasn’t much taller than Guerino but his stocky frame made him seem like a body builder in comparison.

“I don’t know,” Marek said.

Hector dismissed him with a backward wave. “I’ll have to think about it.”

Of course Guerino had to have the last word. “Now get out of here,” he ordered.

Marek stormed out, wishing Patrick had never made the prank call. What should have been a fun afternoon turned out to be a nightmare. And now he had to suck up to Con – maybe even plead with him – to sell him a small bag of pot. As soon as Marek hit the street, he tossed the “lucky” quarter. He changed his mind, figuring money was money, but it rolled off the sidewalk and into a sewer.

Chapter Fifteen

School let out early again, the fourth time in less than a month. Patrick swore he didn't make the new bomb threats. Someone else was playing copycat. Marek wouldn't put it past Guerino or one of his gang to make the crank calls to get out of March exams. As Marek followed the other students out of the school, he felt uneasy watching the cops entering the building. Having to look for a bomb that might blow up in their faces did not put them in a good mood. Marek still doubted there was a bomb, yet there was no way to be sure. No one opened a mailbox anymore without some worry.

Marek refused to discuss any of this with Patrick where someone might overhear. The last thing he needed was to be questioned by the police. Apo would swat him good. Mamo would never forgive him for putting such *hañba*/shame on the family.

"Come to *Rizzo's*," Patrick said. "I'll wager you a dime a pinball game."

"You don't have that kind of money."

Patrick took a handful of coins out of a pocket.

"Where did you get all that change?" For a second Marek wondered if Patrick had stolen money from the register. No, not possible. Patrick never waited inside the store for Marek. Apo's questions about his Ma and Papa made him nervous.

"From my Ma," said Patrick, which meant he had ransacked her purse again. He stuck his tongue behind the gap between his teeth. "Are you coming or not?"

His willingness to part with the money showed how much he wanted Marek's company at *Rizzo's*. With his Papa at home all the time now, Patrick stayed out as much as possible.

Patrick never said anything, but the way he carried his arms and occasionally limped made it pretty clear that Monsieur Richard was awake enough these days to pin down Patrick and punch the crap out of him every so often. At least he never touched the little ones, as far as Marek could tell. The bastard only started hitting Patrick when he turned twelve or thirteen. He beat Patrick's Ma for as long as anyone could remember. Mamo once said that people couldn't really blame him for losing his temper with her once in a while because she was in such a daze all the time and no real wife at all.

"Let's go," Patrick said. "Before all the pinball machines are taken."

"Not this time." Marek waved and started to walk away. *Rizzo's* wasn't as much fun lately. Guerino had been acting like Marek's new best friend ever since Marek gave him some pot. Now he wanted more and was even willing to pay for it. Marek was surprised at how easy it was to get Con to sell him a *dime* – ten ounces for ten bucks – as long as Marek said nothing to Séraphine. But Marek wasn't sure how willing Con would be to repeat the favour.

Marek decided to avoid the Pine-Park Interchange. The short but dark tunnels were an easy place to get roughed up. Instead he walked along the stone walls lining the St. Sulpice Seminary. He could smell the apple blossoms seeping over the barbed wire trim. In another few months, he would jump up and grab as many apples as he wanted from branches drooping with fruit. Today he planned to take his sweet time going home so he wouldn't have to make deliveries earlier than usual.

The couple of nickels jingling in his pocket would be well spent on two chocolate-coated donuts from *Richstone Bakery*. He still had some pot left that he had pinched from the dime bag and he looked forward to smoking it at the back of the Rachel

market across from the bakery. He was fairly sure he wouldn't bump into anyone there. Apo walked over before sunrise every day so he could get the business discounts and first choice of fruit and vegetables for the store. With most Slovaks having moved away, Marek was unlikely to see anyone else he knew there on a weekday. The only kids from school might be a girl running an errand for her mother. No big deal. Mamo rarely talked with other women unless, of course, they were Slovak. Then she could spend an hour on the phone, no matter how much the party line woman complained.

He planned to sit on the park bench where he could watch the ducks huddled in their cages muttering to each other. Testing the wind, he didn't think any smoke from his joint would blow towards the stalls. A vendor had yelled at him the last time for getting his chickens stoned. He threatened to call the police when Marek joked about stoned chickens tasting better.

When he reached Duluth, he walked through Fletcher's Field. The duplexes lining Esplanade Street all had fancy doors and stained glass windows. As nice as these houses were, he thanked God his parents didn't have any customers here. The stairs on these duplexes rose higher and steeper than the steps to most triplexes.

He stopped as he always did to look at the house where he was born. The small private clinic had closed years earlier. Mamo teased him about being the last baby delivered there. After him, the doctor said no more. He couldn't take Marek crying almost constantly for three days. Baba said it wasn't Marek's fault that he was born scared. Anyone with an umbilical cord wrapped around his neck three times would be. Mama said it was probably the reason Marek hated turtlenecks and scarves.

A muscle car pulled up. At first Marek thought it was Guerino after him for more pot, but the motor purred too quietly.

“Where’re you headed?” Vince asked, resting one hand on the back of the vinyl seats while the other held the steering wheel and a lit cigarette.

“Nowhere.”

Vince tapped the seat impatiently. “You can’t be going nowhere.”

“Just home,” Marek said.

Vince leaned over and opened the passenger door. “Hop in. I’ll give you a lift.”

Marek didn’t want to go home but neither did he want to miss a ride in a De Soto.

Vince hit the gas pedal. He burned rubber along Esplanade like it was a drag strip. Marek knew this was supposed to thrill him, and it did, although the possibility of some kid stepping out between the parked cars also scared him. Fortunately, Vince slowed down as they drove past Danika’s grade school on Rachel Street.

“Nice wheels,” Marek said. “What year?”

“Fifty-nine,” Vince said. “A gem.”

At the red light, Vince turned a bit to face Marek. “So what’s up?” His eagerness to talk surprised Marek given how distant he’d been since Catina’s fall.

“Nothing,” Marek said. “What could be new with me?”

“Did you see Catina yet?”

“No. You?”

Vince shook his head as he veered past a car before the light turned green. “I hear she’s still in a coma. The doctors can’t say whether she’ll come out of it and, if she does, whether she’ll be, you know, normal.”

Marek felt the mucus at the back of his throat clump up. “Poor Señora d’Alves,” he said when he was sure he wouldn’t cry. “She must be going crazy.”

Vince nodded. “She’s at Catina’s bedside until the nurses kick her out. Then she goes to the Santa Cruz Mission and prays until the priest sends her home so that she can sleep a little before she goes back to work and later the hospital again.”

“Did you see her?”

“No, but that’s what her nephew told me. This is his car that I just fixed. He says the circles under her eyes are as dark as tea bags.”

“Are you going to visit Catina?”

Vince shrugged. “I don’t want to complicate things for Severina. Besides, if Kammy found out I went there, she would be asking all kinds of questions.”

“You could say you’re just friends.”

Vince laughed. “Men and women are never just friends. You’ll find that out soon enough.” He slowed down on Colonial. “People are saying The Shoemaker did it.”

“Did what?”

“Hid Catina in that sewer.”

“What? Who’s saying that?”

“Different people,” Vince said, looking straight ahead. “It makes sense. She was hanging out at his shop all the time, and a deaf dummy like that isn’t going to get anywhere with a real woman.”

“Who’s saying all this?”

Vince took a sharp left onto Napoleon and stopped at an angle by the store.

Marek stayed in his seat. “I don’t think any of it is true.”

“Who knows?” Vince shrugged. “Anyway, I got to go.”

Marek slipped out of the car. Vince peeled away before Marek had a chance to shut his door properly. Marek stood on the street dumbfounded. It had never occurred to him that someone might have put Catina into that manhole. He had always thought she had accidentally fallen. The idea of someone taking her down there made him shudder. He didn't think Monsieur Cousineau was capable of doing such a thing. Monsieur Cousineau didn't have that horny expression on his face when he looked at girls. He had never stared at Catina or Danika the way Marek's buddies gawked at the girls at school, or how Vince eyed all women, no matter what their age.

Marek decided to tell Danika to stay away from Monsieur Cousineau, just in case, although he doubted she would go to his shop anyway. She wasn't even allowed to play on the sidewalk these days unless Baba was there to watch her.

He pushed open the door to the grocery store.

Raddy stood behind the opened register with a couple of fives crumpled in his left hand. “Oh, hi,” he said. “You scared me.” His cheeks turned as red as penny firecrackers.

“What are you doing?” Marek asked.

“Just putting in money that a customer gave me.” Raddy flattened the fives in his palm and slipped them into their slot. “Your father put me in charge for a few minutes.”

Liar! Apo might have asked Raddy to mind the store, but only Apo, Mamo and Marek were supposed to operate the register.

“Where is my father?” he asked, feeling his own cheeks turn hot.

“In the back.” Raddy shifted his legs.

Marek would never have suspected Raddy – his father’s *krajan*, best friend and Marek’s godfather – of stealing money from the store. Especially since Apo gave the son of a bitch money and beer all the time. Marek wanted to spit in Raddy’s spidery face. He held back, knowing that Apo would be even more upset than he was. And Mamo would be furious...

Raddy walked casually away from the cash and plopped his butt on a stack of small beer cases.

Marek no longer wanted to be in the same room with this pathetic lying stealing drunk but knew if he left, those five dollar bills would be gone in an instant.

Apo returned with a plastic crate filled with milk in slim boxes.

“What are those?” Raddy asked.

“The milkman says the company is not putting milk in bottles no more.”

“Why not?”

“He says the cardboard seal is not clean enough.” Apo shook his head. “And drinking from this waxed cardboard is better?”

“I bet the milk tastes funny,” Raddy said.

“Well, I hope not,” Apo said. “Milk is one of the few things we still sell quite a lot. The milkman says the company is working on plastic jugs and bags, too.”

Raddy laughed uneasily. “That’s stupid. How’s a plastic bag going to stand up?”

Apo shrugged.

“Progress, eh?” Raddy gave another nervous laugh as he looked over at Marek.

Marek pretended not to see him.

“So, listen,” Raddy said. “A guy came by for smokes, and I sold him a pack and put the money in the register.”

Liar!

Apo nodded, although he looked surprised. “You knew how much to charge?”

“How many times have I bought a pack here?”

Apo smiled. “Usually, my friend, I give them to you for nothing.”

Raddy made a sassy face. “I got to go,” he said, easing himself off the beer cases. “Can you lend me five dollars till Friday?”

Apo shook his head. “No, Raddy, I can’t.”

“I’ll pay you back when I get my government cheque.”

“That’s what you always say.”

“Just two bucks then. I have a good tip on a colt named Secret Passion.”

“No.”

“But it’s almost a sure winner.” Raddy walked over to the counter. “Come on, Hank. I’ll pay you this afternoon. I’ll borrow from my mother if the horse doesn’t win.”

Apo stepped away. “Ti mñe nerozumiš? Don’t you understand me? I can’t afford to pay for your gambling and drinking anymore. I don’t have the money.”

“It’s a couple of bucks, for God’s sake.”

Apo’s face reddened. “Two bucks today. Five bucks last week. I can’t do it anymore. Look around. Do you see customers? It takes me forever to earn a few dollars.”

Raddy grabbed his fedora off the coat stand and marched towards the door. “I would have shared half the winnings with you,” he said as he walked out.

Apo waited for the door to close behind him. “That’s what he always says, but either he never wins or he never shares when he does.”

Marek approached the counter. Out of habit, Apo reached for the liquorice laces that Marek liked chewing. Marek touched Apo’s arm to stop him.

Apo planted his palms on the counter. “Co teraz? What now?”

“Raddy is taking money from the cash.”

Apo made a fist as he grimaced. He walked back and forth several times before flattening his palms on the counter, deep in his own thoughts. “I thought I got him to stop,” he mumbled.

“You knew?”

“I should know better than to leave him in the store even for two minutes.”

Marek’s mouth dropped open. “You knew and you fired Benoît anyway?”

“At first I thought it was Benoît, but then... Don’t tell Mamo, or she’ll have a fit. She would never forgive Raddy. He’s got a good heart, you know, but a weak spirit. He needs someone like me to look out for him.”

“Some friend. Because of him, I’ve been stuck delivering groceries.”

Apo’s eyebrows scrunched. “I thought you would like to help out the family and earn a little money.”

“Ñe.”

The hurt in Apo’s face showed immediately. “I was hoping to give you this business one day, to keep it in the family. You could be your own boss.”

“No, thank you.”

Apo frowned as he picked up a cloth and wiped the counter for no reason.

The lights and fridges droned in the uncomfortable silence that followed.

Apo threw his rag into an empty pail. “Don’t tell Mamo about Raddy, okay?”

“What are you going to do?”

“I will handle it, but don’t tell Mamo nothing.”

Marek wasn’t surprised that Apo would hide this from Mamo, given whatever else he was probably hiding from her about Klaudia. As he thought about this, his anger mounted again. “What about Benoît?” he asked. “It’s not fair accusing him of stealing.”

Apo rubbed his hands like he was trying to get dirt off. “Aachh,” he said. “I got fed up of him telling me I should learn more French. It’s my store. If I want to say *good morning* instead of *bonjour*, that’s my business. It’s a free country. I switch to French when someone can’t talk English.”

MAUDITS POLACKS! The words popped into Marek’s head like a downtown billboard. Although Benoît had denied painting those words, Marek was no longer sure whether he was telling the truth. MAUDITS POLACKS would be something Benoît might write if he was hung up on everybody speaking French, especially after Apo fired him. Marek needed to find out before he slipped those stink bombs through Gaston’s mail slot. He didn’t want to waste them on the wrong person.

Pulling out his Math book, Marek settled into a makeshift desk of beer cases. He tried to concentrate on his Algebra problems, but his mind kept going back to whether Benoît could have been angry enough to write those words on the store window.

It was about a half hour later that Raddy burst into the store out of breath. “Hank, come right away,” he said. “They’re heading over there with baseball bats.”

Apo rushed around the counter and grabbed his jacket and cap. "Call the police and tell them to go to The Shoemaker's," he told Marek before running out.

Marek grabbed the phone. That damned woman occupied the party line again. He quickly explained the situation and she freed the line after he promised to give it back within a minute. Marek dialled the emergency number taped on the wall and repeated what Apo had told him to say. He realized that Vince must have told Apo and Raddy the same rumour. At first the cop on the line thought Marek was playing a prank. Marek had to convince him that he wasn't. As soon as Marek hung up, he grabbed the store key, flipped the door sign to *Closed* and locked the store.

Peddalling as fast as possible, he got to Monsieur Cousineau's in two minutes. A mob stood outside the shop. Marek recognized several of the Portuguese men as Catina's relatives. He also saw Hector and Guerino, each with a baseball bat resting on their shoulders. Apo and a few other men stood in front of the shop as a human barricade. Monsieur Cousineau stared out the dusty window. He looked more confused than frightened, leading Marek again to believe in his innocence. Marek wished Monsieur Cousineau would run out the back and hide somewhere, but there was no way to tell him this, or rather show him, without others catching on.

Marek leaned his bike against the building and pushed his way through the crowd to stand next to Apo. Standing on the lower step to the shop, he could see both Patrick and Vince at the edge of the crowd. He already knew Patrick was a coward, but he couldn't understand why Vince wasn't helping Apo and the other men to fend off this mob.

“Hey, bolo,” yelled one of the Portuguese men at Apo. “Move your fat ass or we’ll move it for you.”

“Por favor,” Apo said. “Go home or the police will arrest you.”

“You called police, bolo?” the same man yelled. “We should beat you up, too.”

“It’s not police business,” another man shouted. “We will handle this.”

The mob thickened as it pushed toward Marek, Apo and the few other men.

“Vamos ir perla pate trasiera,” another Portuguese man shouted.

Realizing some were heading towards the back, Marek pushed his way up a step and lifted a hand. “Expera, por favour,” he said as loud as he could without shouting.

“The Shoemaker didn’t hurt Catina. It’s only a rumour, and it’s not true.”

“How do you know?” yelled Guerino.

“I saw him with her and with my own sister and he would never do anything to hurt a little kid. If he could talk, he would tell you.”

Hector pushed his way forward and waved his bat like a greeting rather than a threat. “Now I remember you. You helped rescue my cousin.”

Marek nodded.

“And it’s true what you say about The Shoemaker not hurting Catina?”

Marek had to keep his knees from shaking as he looked at all the angry faces glaring at him, waiting for an answer. “I would bet my life on it,” he said unevenly. “My little sister’s life... She’s been here with Catina and Monsieur Cousineau.” Marek realized this might get Danika in trouble but he couldn’t worry about that now. “He lets them watch his coloured television set. I know because I’ve been here with them, too.”

“So Catina wasn’t alone with him?” Hector asked.

“No,” Marek lied. His chest felt like a balloon that wouldn’t fill no matter how many times he tried to breathe into it. He wasn’t a hundred per cent sure Monsieur Cousineau hadn’t done anything wrong, but he wanted the poor man to live until the police or someone found out.

“So who started this rumour about The Shoemaker?” Hector said.

Marek panned the crowd hoping to get Vince to tell everybody where he first heard it, but he couldn’t see Vince anywhere.

A space cleared around Hector as he pretended to swing his bat. “Whoever hurt my cousin better watch out, because when I find the guy, I’m going to break his face.”

Two paddy wagons drove up, sirens blaring. As soon as the vehicles parked, most of the men ran off. The flashing cherry lights caused Monsieur Cousineau to blink hard as he kept standing at his window. Or maybe he was trying not to cry. Marek couldn’t tell.

The police relaxed after Apo explained that everyone set on making trouble had gone home. When asked who they were, he said he didn’t know any of them. Apologizing for the false alarm, he slipped one of the cops a ten to buy a round of beer for his coworkers after their shift. The police left without filing a report.

Guerino had slipped back near the store without his baseball bat. He casually grabbed Marek’s elbow. “Did you get more stuff?”

“I’m working on it,” Marek said as he shook off the grip.

“Work faster.”

Monsieur Cousineau kept staring out the window. He jumped when Marek rapped on the door and motioned for him to unlock it.

“Ça va?”

Monsieur Cousineau shrugged.

“Je suis désolé pour tous ça,” Marek said. “I’ll try to find out who caused all this.”

A heavy knock at the door startled them both. Monsieur Cousineau peeked out and held the door open for Apo.

“Come on, Marek,” Apo said. “It’s suppertime.”

Chapter 16

“Where do you think you’re going?” Mamo stood, hands on hips, in the middle of the hallway.

Marek clutched his school bag. “The library.”

“Čom?”

“For my Geography project.”

“I want you back in an hour.”

“No, I need to work there.”

“Čom? Bring home the books you need.”

“They’re reference books. I can only use them there.”

“Pre Pana Boha!” Mamo said *for God’s sake* whenever she was stumped. “What kind of library won’t let you borrow its books?”

“It does, but not these. They are big *atlases*.”

“Co je to: *atlases*?” It was rare Mamo didn’t know a word in English. She had completed Grade Five at St. Patrick’s Elementary before going to work in a shoe factory.

“Map books,” Marek said in English. “Big ones. Too big to take home.”

Although she looked unconvinced, Mamo stepped aside. “Go, but I want to see the work from these precious books.”

“Tak. Dobre,” Marek said. He zoomed downstairs before she changed her mind.

As soon as he turned the corner onto Napoleon Street, he ran into the laneway.

“Pssst. Marek, here.”

Marek spun around. “You idiot,” he told Patrick. “Don’t scare me like that.”

“How am I supposed to tell you I’m here?”

“Not by scaring me.” Marek gave him a light shove. “What are you doing here?”

“Your line was busy, so I came over to see if you wanted to go to *Rizzo’s*.”

“And your Papa let you out?”

“He’s sleeping,” Patrick said, looking away.

Marek knew *sleeping* meant plastered to the point of being passed out.

Patrick shuffled his boots. “So you want to go?”

“I can’t. I have something to do.”

“What?”

Marek didn’t want to tell him where he bought his dope. Neither did he want Patrick so much as looking at Séraphine. Yet at the same time he wanted him to see how beautiful she was. It would also make it easier to go upstairs more often if Patrick dropped by the house on the pretence of them going elsewhere.

Having unlocked the yard’s steel door earlier, Marek pushed it slightly to make sure Baba wasn’t sitting there reciting her rosary. With no sign of her, Marek signalled to Patrick to keep quiet and follow his exact footsteps. Apo kept empty food tins strung across the yard to trip up thieves. Marek pointed them out to Patrick as they slowly made their way through a maze of crates and boxes.

Marek smiled after they negotiated the yard successfully but gulped when he looked at the rear staircase. It corkscrewed upwards through a big opening in the second floor balcony and then continued upwards through another round gap in the top gallery. Marek cursed himself for arranging to meet Con in the back. Yet he agreed that

S raphine might wonder what Con was doing so often with Marek if he always rang the bell. By using the back way, Con could say he saw Marek in the yard and invited him up.

Clutching the banister, Marek started up the metal steps one at a time. He could feel Patrick shadowing him.

“Give me some room,” he whispered. “You’re like a dog sniffing my butt.”

“You’re taking forever.”

Marek gave Patrick the finger.

He stopped halfway up to slow his breathing.

“What’s with you and stairs?” Patrick whispered.

“Can’t you shut up for a minute?”

When Marek reached the top balcony, he crawled along the brick wall till he stood behind the shed. Without a downward view, he felt safe here. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to slow his pounding heart.

Patrick joined him a second later. “Are you afraid of heights?”

“No, of course not,” Marek lied. “I’m probably coming down with a cold.”

“Maybe you have asthma.”

“Could be.” Marek opened his eyes and saw his leather school bag in Patrick’s hand. “Why did you drag that up here?”

“I thought you wanted it.”

“Well, I don’t.” Marek had told Mamo he needed a new school bag, one that looked more grown up, like a briefcase, but she never got rid of anything that was still good enough. “Leave it on the balcony,” he said. “We’ll get it later.”

Patrick stayed quiet for a minute while Marek caught his breath. “Do you know why Montreal has so many stairs?” he then asked.

Marek shook his head.

“My Papa told me the city used to evaluate a house by how wide it was in front. So people made their homes narrow and long so they would pay less tax.”

“You’re kidding me,” Marek said.

“Non, c’est vrai.”

“Well it was really stupid to build so many outdoor stairs in a city with our kind of winters,” Marek said as peered through the window.

In the kitchen, Con sat on a stool and smoked impatiently. Marek was running late because of Mamo’s interrogation. As soon as Marek rapped on the window, Con sprang from his chair and opened the door. “Wait. I’ll get the stuff,” he said before disappearing into another room. He returned with a sandwich bag filled halfway with dope. Marek gave him a ten and reached for the dime bag, but Con held onto it.

“I’ll give you some more for nothing if you run a few errands for me,” he said.

“What kind of errands?”

Con looked over at Patrick.

“He’s okay,” Marek said. “He’s my best friend.”

Con motioned for Marek to step into the kitchen. It looked empty compared to when Baba and Dzedo lived in it. A chrome kettle sat on the stove, a couple of stools bordered the counter, and several empty pizza boxes leaned on a plastic trash bin next to a broom.

“I need you to take a package to a guy tomorrow whenever you have lunch at school,” Con said.

“This stuff?” Marek pointed to the dime bag. He had no problem selling pot to a few trusted friends (and G), but he didn’t want to get nabbed in some kind of police sting.

“No, not pot,” Con assured him. “Just some papers he needs.”

“Why can’t you do it?”

Con stood closer. “Can I trust you?”

“Sure.” Marek reached for the dime bag and tucked it inside his jacket.

“I’m helping guys who don’t want to fight in ’Nam. They need papers to work in Canada until the damn war ends. I have to be here in case one of them phones for help.”

Marek remembered how scared the new soldiers looked on television. Apo said it was a *škoda* – real pity – so many were being killed. He thanked God that his family had immigrated to Canada, or Marek could have ended up in that hell on Earth.

“And you’d give me some pot for free?” Marek asked.

Con laughed. “Not a lot, but some, yes.”

“It’s not dangerous?”

Con looked over at Patrick again. “Not as long as you don’t advertise it.”

Marek paused and then put out his hand. “You got yourself a deal.”

Con did some kind of weird handshake that involved clutching the top of Marek’s fingers. Then he gave Marek a brown envelope. “Whatever you do, don’t lose this stuff.”

“I promise I won’t,” Marek said, already thinking about how to open the sealed envelope to look inside before delivering it. He was sure it contained false identification.

“Are you sure your friend can be trusted?” Con asked.

“If you want, I’ll tell him to go home,” Marek said, curious about what else Con might tell him if Patrick left.

“No, it’s okay. Maybe he can help us out, too.” Con pointed to the envelope. “Put that away and come in the front.”

Marek shoved the envelope into his other inside pocket and slipped off his jacket and boots. He motioned to Patrick to do the same. “Don’t say or do anything stupid,” he said as they walked down the hallway to the living room.

He smiled as soon as he saw Séraphine, but his grin disappeared when he noticed Ismael sitting next to her on the floor, whispering something.

Ismael’s back shot up. “What are they doing here?”

“It’s okay,” Con said as he lit a joint. “They’re going to help us out.”

“No, I don’t like this,” Ismael said.

Luczia lifted herself off the bed and joined the haphazard circle. “Me neither.”

Séraphine patted Ismael’s shoulder. “We could use the help.” She reached for a box of envelopes and started to stuff typing paper folded like pamphlets into them.

Ismael shook a finger. “If either of these candy asses tells anyone what we’re doing, I’ll kill them.”

Patrick gave Marek a wide-eyed stare that Marek did his best to ignore. Marek concentrated instead on inhaling the joint going around so it wouldn’t make him cough.

When the doorbell rang, Con stood up like he was expecting someone. He let in another bearded and thin guy and introduced him as Marc from Montreal.

Marc kissed Séraphine on both cheeks before he sat down.

Con reclaimed his seat and talked in a low voice. “How did it go in Plattsburg?”

Marc nodded. “Bon, je pense. I mailed the stuff from there like you told me.”

“You made sure all the envelopes were sealed?” Con asked.

“Mais oui. Of course.”

“Good. The brass isn’t allowed to open a private’s mail. Now we wait. I bet we start getting calls tomorrow. I’m so glad we have a couple of phones set up.”

“How do we know it’s not cops on the phone?” Luczia asked.

“Whatever you do, don’t ever give them this address or your own,” Con said, leaning forward towards Luczia. “Tell them to meet us at the Mr. Donut on St. Catherine Street near the Forum. The cops don’t hang around those places since *The Star* did a piece on how they were getting fat there. Arrange for whoever it is to sit by the window. You can pretty much tell by looking at someone whether he’s a pig or a scared guy on the run.”

S raphine raised a hand like she was back in school. “Don’t forget the note.”

Con smiled and patted her arm. “Yes, the note is crucial. Remind every soldier to leave a note in his foot locker saying he’s confused and needs some time to think. So if he gets stopped on his way here, the brass can’t accuse him of desertion.”

“What about transportation?” Ismael asked.

“Oh yeah,” Con said. “Remind them whether they’re coming by train or bus to buy a round-trip fare.”

“D  Deus nozes a quem n o tem dentes...” Luczia said.

Marek laughed. “God gives nuts to those who don’t have teeth?”

“Yes,” Luczia said, laughing, too. “And why should these guys waste money on round-trip tickets? We don’t have a lot of cash to help them out when they get here.”

Con wasn't laughing. "It's important, Luczia. If the military police catch a guy with a one-way ticket, the only place that poor fuck's going is the slammer. If he has a round-trip fare, he can get a lawyer to argue that he was never planning to desert."

"They can't hitch-hike?" Luczia asked.

"Some are, but I'd rather they didn't risk being picked up by the highway patrol."

Again Séraphine raised a hand. "Their dog tags. Make sure you tell them to keep wearing their tags so if they get caught, they can say they were not going over the wall."

Con laughed and patted her knee. "It's AWOL, dear, but you have the right idea."

Séraphine let out sigh. "It's still better English than you speak French."

Con ignored her. "Some of these guys are too nervous to call from the base or anywhere for that matter. They're afraid that all the phones are bugged. So we've included how to get in touch with us by mail. As soon as we know where to contact them, we can mail them more information about when and how to go through the border or, if they're nervous, send one of our Canadian buddies to escort them across."

"Québécois friends," Marc corrected him.

"Yes, yes. Our Quebec buddies... like you say, chums."

Séraphine laughed. "Chum in French means *boyfriend*."

"Fine," Con said, turning his back on her a bit.

Ismael again pointed at Marek and Patrick. "And they're here because..."

Con sat up. "I'm always worried that someone will call needing help while I'm out checking the rented mail boxes or taking documents to someone. So Marek, and maybe Patrick, are going to check the boxes and run some other errands for us, right?"

Marek nodded while Patrick looked surprised.

Con lit up another joint and passed it to Marek. “You can also meet guys at the bus or train station if some of our friends from small-town America are worried about getting lost in a big city,” he said. “The cops won’t be looking for ...”

“Kids?” Ismael asked sarcastically.

Marek was getting ready to say something, but Con patted his shoulder.

“I was going to say teenagers,” Con said.

“What are they getting for these services?”

“I’ve arranged something.”

“Good,” Ismael said. “Unless people are committed to a cause, I prefer that they’re paid, so if they fuck up I can get word to the cops about their involvement.”

Patrick’s face grew long. Marek also didn’t like what he was hearing. “I thought you said it wasn’t dangerous,” he said to Con.

Con shook his head. “Don’t listen to this motherfucker. He’s just scaring you.”

Ismael leaned forward. “You give the cops my name, or any of our names, and you’ll have a new understanding of what it means to be scared.”

Marek looked at Con, who again patted his shoulder.

“It’s important to keep all this under wraps, but don’t worry about Ismael,” Con said, giving Ismael an irritated look.

Marek jumped a little when Con started clapping.

“Great!” Con said. “Now that we have more things set up, we can really start making a difference like they’re doing in Vancouver and Toronto.”

Luczia reached for the joint but just held it. “What about the guys whose numbers haven’t been called yet?”

S raphine took the joint from her. "We already put advertisements in campus newspapers, explaining how to contact us."

"That's not going to help my brothers," said Ismael, his anger igniting like a gas stove. "None of them are in college. We need to do something for them and fast."

S raphine gave Luczia back the joint and put her arms on Ismael's shoulders. "Calm yourself. We'll do something for them, too."

"When?" Ismael gently pushed off her arms.

Con leaned back on his elbows. "As soon as we can get it going."

Ismael shook his head. "No. Not good enough. Either we start getting the word out in some coloured neighbourhoods right away, or I'm out of here."

"Okay," Con said. "We'll arrange for our Quebec friends to go to New York."

"When?" S raphine asked.

"A week, two tops."

Ismael relaxed a little.

"They're not coming here, are they?" Marek asked.

"Oh the little twerp speaks again," Ismael said. "What's the matter, white boy? You don't want any niggers here?"

"No, it's not that," Marek said, although he knew his parents would go berserk if a lot of Negroes showed up at the flat. Baba was always saying Canada was more peaceful because there were fewer coloureds, and the government should keep them out. "My family doesn't like it when tenants have lots of overnight guests because we pay for all the hot water."

“Oh, I see,” Séraphine said. “Well you don’t have to worry because we have a safe house for them. Right, Con?”

Con nodded. “I don’t want them here. It’s too much of a risk to me.”

Ismael laughed. “And our number one priority is to protect Con’s lily-white ass.”

“Very funny,” Con said without looking at Ismael. “So we’re all clear about what we have to do? Marc, could you finish stuffing those flyers so that Séraphine can start typing address labels? Luczia, give them the list of recruits we got from my contact at Fort Hamilton. Ismael, why don’t you start writing the message you think should go to your black-assed brothers in Harlem.”

As the others got busy, Con turned his attention to Marek and Patrick. “Marek, you deliver that package I gave you, okay? And, Patrick, do you want to check the mailbox on St. Lawrence near Prince Arthur?”

Patrick looked bewildered. “What do I get...”

“I’ll explain later,” Marek told him, hoping to persuade Con to give him all the pot and so he could decide how to share it with Patrick.

Luczia played a record from a group that Marek had actually heard once previously singing about a magic dragon. Ismael took out a folded piece of ordinary blotter paper and dotted a corner of it with a few drops of liquid from a tiny bottle. Then he bit off a piece and swallowed it. When Ismael offered the blotter to others, Marek reached for it but Séraphine put out her arm to stop him.

“Later, man,” Con said. “It’s better if we do it one at a time, just in case....”

Ismael put down the blotter. “We have to help as many of these poor cats as fast as possible. That bastard Johnson is talking about escalating things.”

S raphine nodded. “Did you hear about the Buddhist girl over there? Eighteen or nineteen years old... She poured gasoline on herself in a public square and lit a match.”

Luczia covered her ears. “I can’t listen to this.” She ran over to the bed.

S raphine followed her. “You have to listen.”

“La, la, la, la, la, la,” Luczia sang as she kept her ears blocked.

“You need to know so you’ll be ready to do whatever it takes to make things better.” When no one said anything, S raphine walked out of the living room.

Con nodded at Marek. “See if she’s okay. She likes you.”

Awkwardly, Marek stood up. His brain had just the right amount of spin from the grass. As he walked towards the kitchen, he bumped his head into a hanging lampshade made of wool tied hundreds of times around a metal frame. S raphine was sitting at the kitchen counter, her forehead cradled on her arms.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Je suis perdue. I’m so lost.”

“What do you mean?”

“I want to do something that’s going to make a real difference, but I’m not sure...”

Marek sat on the stool next to her and ever so awkwardly started to rub her back with one hand. The pure wool of her sweater made his palm itch. He would give anything to feel her bare skin.

She buried her face in his shoulder. “I am so confused.”

Con showed up, grinning. “So are you two getting it on?”

S raphine looked up angrily at him. “Don’t be stupid.”

“Hey, free love and all that. I’m sure Marek here would be forever indebted to you if you showed him how it’s done, if he hasn’t done it already.”

S raphine tried to swat him but missed. “Fermes ta bouche, cochon.”

“I’m not sure what you said, but I don’t think it’s very nice.”

“Well, if you want to know, I said–”

Con grabbed three Dr. Peppers from the fridge. “If you really wanted me to know, you would have told me in English. Have fun, kids.” He walked out.

“You see how he humiliates me?” she said. “He doesn’t own me... Fucking right... ostie... I’m the one who works and pays for everything.”

“Why do you put up with him?” Marek returned his hand to her back but she nudged it away.

“He says the police might find him if he goes out to work somewhere, even if he has new papers. I don’t want to be responsible for him being shipped to Viet Nam.”

“Can’t he do some kind of work from home?”

S raphine looked close to tears. “Of course, especially if he learned a little bit of French. But he always has an excuse. The cops will get him, or he’s too busy setting things up to rescue other Americans, or the best one is that it’s against his philosophy as a hippie because computers and machines could do nearly all the work if people refused to do it. Quel blague! Merde! Why am I even telling you all of this?”

Marek shrugged. “What’s a hippie?”

S raphine laughed and stood up to fill the kettle.

Marek noticed a stack of painted canvasses leaning against a wall in the breakfast nook. He picked up one with a horse pulling a female calèche driver through a blinding snowstorm. "This is pretty good," he said. "Did you paint it?"

Séraphine smiled as she wiped her eyes. "I wanted to try to show them at le pavilion du Québec at Expo."

"You should," Marek said, nodding enthusiastically. "If you want, I'll take them to the Expo offices for you. I want to fill out a job application there anyway."

She shook her head. "You have to send photographs. Et je ne peux pas. I can't."

"Why not? I can get my father's Kodak Instamatic for you if you want."

"No, I can't draw that kind of attention to myself now because ..." Séraphine paused. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"No. You could never understand unless you were Afro-American like Ismael or Québécoise like me."

"I'm a Quebecker."

"A Quebecker, maybe, but not Québécois...."

"What do you mean? I was born here."

Séraphine cupped Marek's chin. Her fingertips were soft and warm but the cuff of her wool sweater felt scratchy. "You don't know what it means to be oppressed."

"How are you oppressed?"

The kettle whistled and Séraphine poured herself a cup of Earl Grey tea. She carried the teacup on a saucer into the living room.

Ismael was on the bed with Luczia. At first Marek thought Ismael was going to rip off her clothes and have sex with her in front of everybody. Ismael had taken off his shirt and was dry-humping her like he was riding a bronco.

“Cool it,” Con said. “Or the bed might break.”

Flopping onto his back, Ismael started mumbling and then laughing hysterically. He sat up, looked right at Marek and fell back laughing again. Marek knew Ismael wasn't making fun of him, but was amused by something that had been put in his head by the magic blotter. Marek had never seen Ismael so much as smile until now. He disliked Ismael but his laughter was infectious.

“Do you see them?” Ismael asked, staring into nowhere now. “The purple dogs on Jupiter? Oh no, the marmalade is running... running away.... We have to go fish for it!” All of a sudden, he bolted upright, his smile disappearing. “Oh fuck, that bastard is as white as chalk...”

Marek prepared to run in case Ismael went after him again, but Ismael just sat there, swaying a bit. “Oh, they're so beautiful, the black angels with their white gowns and leather wings. Look at how their purple halos glow in the dark....”

Ismael fell back on the bed and laughed hysterically.

Luczia removed herself from under his arm. “Is he going to be okay?”

S raphine walked over and tried to lift one of Ismael's eyelids. As soon as she touched him, he reached up and pretended to dance with her.

As everyone watched and laughed, Marek leaned over and tore a tiny piece of the moistened blotter that Ismael had left on the floor.

S raphine pulled away from Ismael. “I wish he didn't do that stuff.”

“Who can blame him?” Luczia said. “It’s all going to hell. Look at all the protests, and how the pigs are shooting down his people like animals.”

S raphine took the joint Patrick was holding and inhaled deeply. “The real war is here,” she said when she finally exhaled. “We need to destroy the colonialists.”

Con gave her a puzzled look. “Isn’t everybody who came to America a colonist, except for maybe the Indians?”

“Voyons, donc, you know what I mean.” Whenever S raphine got really annoyed, she formed a thin line between her eyebrows like the dented curve on a perfect peach.

“No, I don’t,” Con said. “Who exactly do you mean?”

“All of the rich ones with power that have exploited us for centuries.”

Marek looked over at Patrick to see if he understood the conversation any better. Not judging from the blank stare on his face. Marek noticed the time on Patrick’s watch and jumped up. The library had closed nearly a half hour ago. “I got to go,” he said, making sure the piece of blotter was deep in his pocket before he grabbed his jacket.

S raphine gave him a big smile.

“Did you see that?” Patrick started to whisper while they were still in hearing range. “Whatever that drug is, I want some.”

“Shhhhh,” Marek said. “They’ll hear you.”

“So what?”

Marek again told Patrick to be quiet as they got their boots and went down the front stairs.

The second Marek stepped outside, someone grabbed him from behind. He couldn’t see who it was at first, but the grip was too large to be Guerino’s.

“What are you doing up there?” Apo demanded in Slovak.

“Nič. Nothing.” Marek tried to break free but couldn’t.

“Don’t tell me *nothing*.”

Patrick stepped forward. “We found a letter on the stoop that must have slipped out of the mail slot,” he said. “So we rang and took it upstairs.”

Apo stared at Marek. “Why do your eyes look so funny?”

Marek shrugged.

“They do look weird, eh?” Patrick said. “I told Marek when we were studying that I think he’s coming down with a cold.”

Apo let go. “Mamo wants you upstairs now,” he said and left.

Marek rubbed the back of his neck. “Thanks for the save,” he told Patrick.

“You don’t live with my Papa without learning how to think on your feet.”

“Do you think my father is watching the flat... everyone who comes and goes?”

Patrick shrugged. “I don’t think he can see that much from inside the store.”

“I should warn Séraphine.” Marek turned to go.

“Wait.”

Marek faced Patrick again, expecting him to ask for some of the magic blotter.

“So what’s the deal?” Patrick asked.

“Eh?”

“The pot that Con’s giving us for running errands. How do I get my share?”

“Shhhhhh. You want my parents to hear?”

“Half and half?”

“I should get more because I’m the one who knows them. They live in my house.”

“So what? I still have to do half the work. I want half.”

“We’ll see.” Marek felt like the inside of his head was coming loose.

“No. If you don’t give me half, I’ll ask Con to give me my share.”

“I’ll tell Con that I changed my mind and don’t think you can be trusted.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Marek slammed the door on Patrick and made his way upstairs. Then he remembered leaving his school bag on the top gallery. After checking that Patrick was gone, he walked over to the back yard.

“It’s not good what you’re doing,” Baba said from somewhere in the dark.

“What am I doing?”

“Those people can get you into a lot of trouble.”

“You don’t even know them.”

Baba stepped into the light from the laneway. “I know in a way you still refuse to know things. I know in my heart.”

All dressed in black as usual, she reminded Marek of a Halloween witch. A real Baba Yaga. At least she kept her stockings rolled up when she went outside. Marek wondered if Baba had spotted him going upstairs and told Mamo and Apo.

“Leave me alone. I’m old enough to look after myself.”

Baba sighed. “If only I could protect you. All I can do is warn you and pray.” She returned inside.

Marek started up the stairs, but he stopped when he heard the door on the top gallery open.

“Ici,” said Séraphine.

“Sera-t-il sûr dedans là?” Marek recognized the voice as Marc’s asking Séraphine if something would be safe inside the shed.

Séraphine said yes in French and that Con never went inside there. She told Marc to give her the box and she would hide it just in case Con did nose around.

“Et Ismael?” Marc asked. “Pouvons-nous lui faire confiance?”

“Oui,” Séraphine replied. Yes, Ismael could be trusted. She had every confidence that he was on their side. After all, this was his idea.

Marek waited until he was certain they had returned inside before he retrieved his dumb school bag. On his way down, he wondered what Séraphine was hiding from Con.

Chapter Seventeen

Marek pretended to have aching knees when his family was invited for supper by Raddy's mother. It was a chance to be home alone because Pani Sokol was one of the few people Baba made the effort to visit. Growing bones were about the only thing Mamo didn't know how to remedy.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us?" she yelled a last time.

"No, I'll stay in bed or watch some television."

When the doors shut, Marek hopped out of bed. He fished out the piece of blotter from his desk and popped it into his mouth. It tasted like paper maché.

For the longest time, nothing happened. He stared into his dresser mirror and thought about lighting a joint. Looking closer, he saw the hair growing over his lip was getting more like a regular moustache instead of peach fuzz. A few prickly whiskers had also started to poke out of his chin. He couldn't wait to grow a full beard. Not that he would ever have one like Con's. He wanted a five o'clock shadow that showed up early like Vince's. Unbuttoning his pyjamas he examined his chest for any new hair. So far only two strands.

He stared at his reflection again, then remembered Baba's warning that if you looked too long into a mirror your gaze could be caught by one of the souls trapped between worlds. He rubbed his eyes, and looked back again. His face had become long and distorted like in a funhouse. His eyes had turned black and looked the size of bowling balls, which made him yell a bit at first. Then his nose disappeared. He touched

his face to try to find it but felt nothing, not even his fingers. He looked closer, locating his nose when he bumped it into the mirror.

Feeling the floor shudder, he grabbed his desk-chair to steady himself. He looked back into the mirror. His eyes had turned white and looked like two softballs. When he looked again, they were as small as green peas. Marek shut his eyes tight but the brightness of the light blue stars bursting everywhere make him reopen them.

When he looked back at the mirror, Svarozhich gawked at him with his dozen blue-green eyes rotating back and forth like a telephone dial. Marek yelled but couldn't tell whether he was making any sound. As Svarozhich roared with laughter his mouth widened in the middle of his many eyes and turned into a manhole. The emptiness pulled at Marek so hard that it felt as if his skin would rip off. He flung himself onto the bed and then ran to hide behind the other side of it.

When he peeked out, his bed had turned into the manhole and dozens of hands were reaching up to grab him. He jumped away, but the arms lengthened until the hands were inches away.

The walls and drapes were all lined with gods like spectators in a sports arena. Perun threw a lightning bolt that flashed with pain inside Marek's head. Chernobog pointed a finger and ignited a line of fire along the ceiling. Marek tried to stand on his chair to blow some of it out. He lost his balance and fell. Chernobog and the other dark gods laughed while Svarozhich watched with his revolving eyes.

All the hands disappeared but children's voices echoed with cries for help. The hole opened wider and Marek saw Catina slumped at the bottom of it. As Marek went to

reach inside, the adult hands reappeared and tried grabbing him. Marek yelled at them to stop. When they wouldn't, he asked God – the One he knew – to please make it all stop.

Every corner of the room now had Baba Yagas all dressed in black suspended from the ceiling and cackling as Marek cowered from Perun's new lightning bolts.

Marek ran for the door but Chernobog had turned it so black that Marek feared that nothing could emerge from it. Inching away from it, he saw Byelobog – the white god – face his arch enemy. Keeping perfectly still, they fought with their minds. As Chernobog's dark thoughts wrestled with Byelobog's white ones, huge grey blobs filled the middle of the room. The blobs changed shape and grew darker or lighter, depending on which god had more power from one second to the next.

When Marek looked up at the other cheering gods, he realized absolutely everything had turned grey like on a black-and-white television set. He rubbed his eyes, but everything was still grey when he reopened them.

Chernobog's darkness seemed to be turning lighter until he jerked back his head and all his blackness disappeared back inside of him. When Byelobog summoned his thoughts, the colours in everything flooded back so powerfully that Marek's head felt like it was going to explode. He curled into a ball on the floor and stayed there for what seemed like an hour, maybe longer.

Hearing a doorbell ring, he looked up. Several of the gods were holding a crimson gateway open for him. He crawled to the hallway door. When he opened it and looked down, he saw the stairs dance around and up and down like they were doing a chardash. He thought he was going to be sick right there when Svarozhich asked him in a voice and language that wasn't human what right Marek thought he had to try to be like gods.

Then Marek heard a roar so loud that it pierced his ears. “Svorag – my Father – is waking up,” Svarozhich whispered. All the gods began running away in every direction while Chaos – who had no real shape – laughed and laughed.

Marek closed the door and pulled himself up. He tried to run but within a few steps became cloaked in darkness. He tried again and again to unravel himself but he was caught in an eternity until finally he surrendered. Then calm swept over him and he felt heavenly as he watched a single bluish star glitter in the middle of nowhere.

When he regained consciousness, he found himself wrapped in the maroon drapes. They were partly torn off their ceiling hooks. He tried to stand, but his legs wobbled like rubber. When he tried to steady himself against a wall it kept moving. His arms were as heavy as lead. When he saw on his alarm clock that it was already past ten o’clock, his heart started to race. The family would be home within the hour.

Marek had no idea how to reinstall the drapes. He would have to say that he accidentally tripped on them and they came crashing down. He started to fix his bed. As he leaned over, a blinding light struck the back of his eyes like Perun was piercing them with lightning again. Then he had a flashback of the stairs dancing around. He thanked God for not letting him fall down them head-first. Then he wondered who had been at the door. It could have been Séraphine. Maybe she heard him fall or yell.

He looked into the mirror. His face had reclaimed its correct proportions but his skin was as pale as boiled chicken bones. He slapped his cheeks to try to regain some colour. As he finished putting his room in order, he vowed never to do that magic blotter stuff again. Yet he knew this would be a difficult promise to keep because it would mean never again experiencing that bluish starlight he had a feeling was God.

Chapter Eighteen

April had brought its showers when Marek bumped into Señora d'Alves during one of his deliveries. The bags under her eyes reminded Marek of the dark parts of the moon. Her beige trench coat hung from her shoulders like a sheet.

“Bom dia,” Marek said. “Como é você?”

Señora d'Alves lifted her lean hands skywards and shrugged. Her cut finger looked double its normal thickness. A yellow stain had penetrated layers of gauze.

“E como é Catina?” Marek asked.

“Better, agradeça o Deus,” she said. “Slowly getting better, thanks to God. She’s been out of her coma for two weeks, and she’s beginning to talk more.”

“Does she remember what happened to her?”

Señora d'Alves shook her head. “That is what is so troubling me. She remembers nothing except who she is, who I am, and who her father is...”

“What do the doctors say?”

Señora d'Alves cradled her bandaged hand in her good one. “They say to be patient. She had a bad concussion. It’s going to take time.”

“I’m sure they’re right. Even if she can’t remember... as long as she knows you.”

Señora d'Alves made a fist with her good hand. “I want to know the *bastardo* who hurt my daughter,” she said. “I swear if I find him, I will kill him.”

“How’s your finger?”

She shrugged.

“Did you get someone to look at it?”

“Sim, sim. When I went to Emergency with Catina.”

“Maybe you should get a doctor to look at it again. It seems really swollen.”

“When I have time.” Señora d’Alves shoved her hands into her trench coat.

“Bom,” Marek said, although he doubted she would. “I’m sorry I haven’t gone to visit Catina yet. I didn’t expect her to be in the hospital so long. I’ll go see her soon.”

“That would be nice,” she said, walking past him. “Adeus.”

Marek biked the short distance to Vince’s garage. Kammy hovered over Vince as he worked on an engine. Marek stood on his pedals to get out of there as fast as he could. As much as he liked Kammy, he couldn’t stomach any more of her girly antics. Ever since the fight at New Year’s, she acted like a six-year-old, constantly bopping around Vince and talking in a cutesy voice. Marek had enough of that with Danika at home. Kammy also dressed younger with satiny ribbons in her hair and bows on her blouses. Her skirts were halfway up her thighs and she often wore knee-highs rather than nylon stockings.

A block away from the garage, Marek looked at the time and realized he needed to pedal over to St. Louis Square. His arrangements with Con had been working out well. Con gave Marek (and Patrick) a gram of grass for every mailbox check or errand.

Today Marek was meeting a deserter at the park to give him fake ID. Marek initially felt a little uneasy, even guilty, about being involved in something illegal, until Con and Séraphine read him some of the letters from the guys they were helping. Most

were terrified about not getting away before their draft number was called. They wrote how torn up they felt inside about leaving the people and country they loved, but realized they were no good dead to anyone. A few wrote about how awful boot camp was and how they didn't want to die for nothing. They asked about the best times and places to cross the border and whether they would be able to work or even understand anyone without speaking French in Montreal.

Con and Séraphine spent hours typing out instructions and reassurances every night until Baba hit the ceiling with a broom handle for them to shut off their electric typewriters. Before school every morning, Marek sneaked upstairs and picked up the letters to mail when he checked the mailbox on St. Denis Street after school.

Marek sat at his usual bench by the fountain so that he could see if a police cruiser drove up. A guy in a lumberjack shirt and jeans sat an inch away from him. His eyes looked wild and his clothes smelled of old sweat.

“Do you have something for me?” The guy's arms shook like Jell-O.

Marek nodded as he edged farther away.

“Give it to me.”

Marek stood up, but the guy snatched a hold of his sleeve.

“What's the code?” Marek asked. “I can't give you papers without the code.”

The guy yanked Marek back down onto the bench and pulled out a switchblade.

“I'm not interested in papers right now. I need a fix. Do you have anything?”

As Marek reached for his inside pocket, the guy stuck the knife into Marek's jacket so that it almost pierced the vinyl.

“Relax, man,” Marek said, never more scared in his life except for that one time on acid. He pulled out his pack of smokes and gave the guy the one joint he had left.

“All you have is weed?”

Marek tried to leave, but the guy leaped up and grabbed a hold of him, sticking the knife harder into the jacket. “Get me something else.”

“Okay, okay. Just don’t hurt me, alright? I’ll take you where you should be able to get something.” Marek took his bike and started walking with it. The guy walked next to him, keeping the knife under Marek’s jacket and suckling the toke like a baby pig.

Marek gripped the metal handlebars so hard that his fingers throbbed. He prayed for God to be with him as he walked along Prince Arthur and then up Colonial. The guy held the knife so unsteadily that Marek could feel his skin being scraped under his shirt. He was pretty sure the trickle down his back was blood. He was also quite certain he had wet his pants a little. He swallowed hard as the guy prodded him to walk faster.

When Con didn’t answer the doorbell after a couple of rings, Marek really started to panic. At last, the door sprung open. As Con looked down in surprise, the guy pushed Marek into the dark foyer and then brushed past him and up the stairs in his army boots.

“I need something fast,” he said, quivering like a kite tail.

“Why did you bring him here?” Con yelled down.

“He had a knife to my back,” Marek shouted.

As Marek turned to leave, Con yelled at him again. “I might need help.”

Even though Marek wanted nothing else to do with the crazy guy, he didn’t want his family or Séraphine to find Con stabbed to death. He slowly mounted the steps.

After checking the slight cut on his lower back, Marek followed Con into the living room. The guy had thrown himself onto the bed. “Sorry if I scared you, kid. It’s just that I’m going to crawl out of my skin if I don’t get a hit of some kind soon.”

Bending over the crate beside the bed, Con fished out the bottle with the magic liquid and a new blotter. He dabbed a corner several times and tore it off.

“Can I have some for later?” Marek asked.

“No,” Con said with a firmness that surprised Marek. “Have one of these instead.” He flipped open a cigar box containing several rolled joints.

Marek grabbed two, lighting one immediately and shoving the other in his pocket. He was finding it harder to cope without grass. The way the guy had rattled his cage made him wonder if marijuana would be enough to calm his nerves.

The guy practically tore the blotter out of Con’s hands and swallowed it almost without chewing. “God, I need this,” he said as he lay back and unbuttoned his jacket.

“It’s Wendell, right?” Con asked.

“Wendell Slater.”

“So how did a nice white college boy like you end up in ’Nam?”

“Military family: father and grandfather. I thought I was doing the right thing, but we’re killing babies over there, blowing them into bloody pieces, and for what?”

“I guess to keep the commies from taking over everything,” said Con as he lit up a joint for both of them. “You can’t stay,” he added. “My old lady will have a fit if you’re here when she comes home from work.”

Marek looked at his watch. “I have to go for supper.”

Wendell Slater jumped up and pinned Con's arm behind his back. "Where am I supposed to go?" he yelled. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Take it easy, man," Con said. "I'll get my friends to help you."

Releasing his grip, Wendell fell back onto the bed. He curled into a ball and rocked himself like a baby in a cradle.

"Are you going to be okay alone with this guy?" Marek asked Con, handing back the envelope with the forged IDs.

Con nodded. "I'll phone Ismael. We'll take him to a hotel room to wean him off the heroin," he said, looking concerned. "I might be gone two or three days helping Wendell out. Then he's on his own. I doubt he'll remember how to get back here."

Wendell started yelling, "Betsy, where are you? I love you so much."

"You have to keep him quiet," Marek said. "Or my parents will start wondering."

"I'll get him out of here as soon as I can."

"And I don't think I want to run any more errands. I could have got killed today."

Con patted Marek's shoulder. "The guy's just scared. You see he's hurting. I don't think he would have really harmed you."

"I'm not so sure," Marek said as he left.

After a few deep breaths, Marek walked into the store as inconspicuously as possible. Fortunately, Apo was involved in an intense discussion with a long-time customer while Raddy and Pan Kysly watched like ring-side spectators.

"Mais c'est un vrai Timex," said the customer, holding an ordinary watch up.

"Peut-être, maybe, but I have enough watches," Apo said. "J'en assez."

The customer looked so frustrated. “Henri, be a friend,” he said. “Just put these few things on my tab until I get my cheque next week.”

“No. You owe too much.”

Then the guy started to cry. “My baby needs food,” he said. “My wife is going to leave me if I don’t bring home something to eat.”

Apo grimaced as he grabbed the watch from the man and buckled it onto his wrist. Then he bagged several baby food jars, a carton of milk, a loaf of sliced bread and two sardine cans. He shoved the groceries towards the man. “I’m keeping the watch so you don’t blow your cheque when you get it,” he said, pointing to his wrist. “And if you go back to the track before you pay me, I’m going to ring your doorbell and tell your wife how you lost all your money.”

The man nodded on his way out. “Merci beaucoup. I promise I’ll pay you back.”

Apo shook his head and wrote down the amount for the groceries in the ledger.

“He’s probably never going to pay you,” Marek said.

“So what am I supposed to do? Let a baby go hungry?” Apo slammed the ledger closed and onto a shelf. “Just don’t tell Mamo.”

Pan Kysly started waving his cane. “You should have never let these people have credit,” he said in Slovak. “That is what put them in trouble in the first place.”

Apo tossed the watch into a drawer. He clacked open a paper bag for the quarter pound of sliced ham and can of pea soup that Pan Kysly had finally decided to buy.

“Thank you so kindly for the advice,” he said in Slovak as he re-opened the ledger. “By the way, you still owe me \$12.43 from the time your old age security cheque got lost.”

Marek laughed just as he took a sip of Kik. The cola sprayed like an April drizzle.

Apo pretended not to notice as he wiped the counter.

“Children today, all so rude,” Pan Kysly grumbled as he banged his cane on the floor on his way out. As usual, Marek held open the door, and, as usual, he thought about letting it go early.

Hopping onto the cooler, Marek saw Apo smile as he arranged a bunch of plastic Canadian flags in a pencil cup next to the cash. He also stuck one of the new flags onto the right side of the cash register and a slightly larger Slovak flag made of fabric on the left side.

“The new flags look like a bouquet,” said Marek. “Did you just get them?”

Apo nodded proudly. “I ordered them a month ago so they would be here the same day as the flag will officially be unveiled in Ottawa.”

Raddy picked one up and gave it a twirl. “It’s kind of plain. I would have put some blue or another colour into it instead of only red and white.”

“At least it has no symbols from England or France,” Apo said. “I can’t believe how long it’s taken this country to come up with its own flag.”

Raddy plopped the flag back into the cup. “You think they’ll sell?”

“All the stores should have some, just in case people want to buy one, no?”

Raddy shrugged. “Hear about that poor kid who got killed working on the Métro at Berri de Montigny? Only nineteen years old. He fell thirty feet from a platform.”

“Pan Boho,” Apo said, adding a few tsks. “That’s how many guys killed digging the Métro?”

“Seven. Don’t forget there were also fourteen hurt at Peel a few weeks ago,” Raddy said. “And my Mamo wonders why I refuse to work on the Métro sites.”

Apo shuddered. "You wouldn't catch me dead down there."

Marek rolled his eyes. "I'm sure it'll be safe once it opens. I can't wait to ride it."

"We'll see," Apo said. "They're crazy digging a tunnel under the St. Lawrence River to St. Helen's Island. What if the tunnel cracks?"

"And did you hear about how they're making St. Helen's bigger?" Raddy said. "They're going to make the river flood."

Marek sighed. "I'm sure they have experts who know how much land to add."

"They're destroying the nesting place of thousands of birds," Raddy said.

Apo laughed. "I'm sure the birds will find somewhere else to lay their eggs. Canada is a big country."

"The whole thing is going to be a big flop," Raddy said.

Marek jumped off the cooler. "How could you say that when they already have sixty buildings up and every day more countries say they want to be a part of it?"

"Oh, yeah? What countries?"

"Trinidad and Tobago, for instance."

Apo let out a breath like whale. "They're making a big mistake letting those people come."

"Why?" Marek asked.

"You think they'll want to go home after they see how good we have it here?"

"Well, Imrich, you came here from somewhere else," Raddy said.

"That's different," Apo said.

"Why?" Marek asked.

Apo hesitated. "They're not like us."

“How do you know?” Raddy asked. “Just because people look different or think different it doesn’t mean they’re not good people.”

“Aaach,” said Apo as he waved them off. “You know what I mean.”

Marek knew exactly. That was the strange thing about his family: he understood more about what his parents made a point of never saying than what they actually did.

“It’s this damn liquor strike,” Raddy said, changing the subject. “It’s got everyone uptight. Last night I went to a downtown bar that ran out of rum. Can you believe it?”

Apo nodded and then motioned for Raddy to take a beer if he wanted.

“It’s been what? Two months already that–” Raddy fell silent when he saw Benoît and his friend Loïc enter the store. They were both wearing army fatigues with the black fleur-de-lys arm flashes.

Marek looked over at Apo who stood motionless.

Raddy eased himself off the beer cases, his bottle gripped in his hand.

“Detendes-toi,” Benoît told Apo. “I just want a package of Export A.”

Apo reached behind him to get the cigarettes without taking his eyes off Benoît.

“So how is it here since you fucked me?” Benoît asked. “Business is good?”

Apo slid the package on the counter towards Benoît. “On the house,” he said.

Benoît laughed while Loïc stood like a soldier. “You think that’s all I was worth?” Benoît said, taking the pack. The flags caught his attention and he started to ruffle them. “C’est quoi tous ça?”

Loïc cleared his throat. “C’est le nouveau drapeau canadien.”

“Je sais,” Benoît snapped at him. “Henri, where are your Quebec flags?”

Apo put both hands on the register.

Benoît picked up one of the flags and held it under his lighter so that the plastic started to shrivel. “Henri, what kind of Québécois are you?”

An uneasy silence descended on the store.

Fearful of what might happen next if the tension became any greater, Marek took a step towards Benoît. “What’s got into you? Yes, Apo fired you and probably shouldn’t have, but he was good to you. He gave you lots of stuff for free.”

Benoît threw the flag back into the pencil cup. “Why do you people come to Quebec if you don’t want to be one of us?” He picked up the Slovak flag and twiddled it between his thumbs. “And what’s this?”

No one said anything.

“You put up a Polish flag, or whatever nationality it is that you are, but not a fleur de lys.” Benoît threw the flag on the floor. “Vas-y, Loïc.”

They marched out.

Apo picked up the flag and paced behind the counter. “This is a free country. That’s why I came here. I can put up any flags I want.” He stuck it back into the side of the cash register.

Marek slipped outside while Apo wailed to Raddy.

“Whoa. Attends, Benoît,” Marek said as he ran down the street to catch up with him and Loïc. He took out a folded ten he was keeping to buy more pot from Con.

“C’est quoi ça?” Benoît asked.

“I feel bad about how things ended up between my Papa and you.” Marek wanted to tell Benoît it was all Raddy’s fault, but he was afraid of what Benoît would do to him.

“Je ne veux pas ton argent,” Benoît said. “I did nothing to deserve to be fired.”

“I believe you. Je te crois.” Marek felt a lump in his throat. “But did you do it?”

“Mon Dieu, I told you I didn’t steal any money.”

“Not that. The graffiti.”

“I already told you no. I’m mad as hell at your Papa, but I’m not going to risk going to jail for something like that. I have bigger fish to fry.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“None of your beeswax,” Loïc said as he and Benoît walked off.

Marek was about to go back inside when he noticed Séraphine walking home. He waited to say hello but she stopped and greeted Benoît and Loïc with a kiss on both cheeks. Marek wondered how she knew them. He did his best to look like he was just hanging out as they kept talking, but as soon as Raddy came outside, Apo told Marek to go upstairs.

After supper Marek took advantage of one of the rare times Baba went out shopping with Mamo and Danika to watch some television on his own in the living room. When he heard the upstairs door slam, he peeked out and saw Benoît leaving with Loïc. He ran downstairs in his socks, slipping on a step and nearly going head first into the front door. “Fucking stairs,” he mumbled, rubbing his big toe.

He caught up with Benoît and Loïc on the next block.

“Qu’est-ce que tu veux?” Benoît asked.

“I just wanted to know how you know Séraphine.”

Benoît smiled. “She’s my cousin.”

“Ta cousine?” Marek noted the slight resemblance for the first time. “You’re the cousin who helped her move here? Where did *you* get a truck?”

“From my uncle, as if that’s any of your business.”

“Why here?”

“Quoi?”

“Why did you tell her that my parents’ flat was for rent when you’re so mad at them? Why give them the rent money?”

Benoît gave a loaded smile. “I knew she would like all the storage space.”

“Voyons-donc,” Loïc said. “Fermes ta bouche.”

“Why is he telling you to shut up?” Marek asked.

Benoît just smiled as Loïc pulled him away.

Chapter Nineteen

Marek sat in the kitchen waiting for Baba to finish making his kielbasa sandwich when the doorbell rang. He ran to the front of the flat but Mamo was already closing the upstairs door.

“Who was that?” he asked.

Mamo went into the living room without answering. She picked up a cloth and started dusting the costumed dolls her cousins from Europe used to send at Christmas. The porcelain dolls stopped coming after Mamo stopped mailing packages with clothes and American money twice a year. Marek couldn't remember the last time Mamo had received a letter from Slovakia. When she used to get one, she'd give him the stamps.

Going over to the window, Marek saw Hortense walking towards Duluth Street.

“Why did you send her away?”

“What do you want with that floozy?”

Marek was surprised to hear Mamo speak English to him.

“You don't know anything about her,” he said.

Mamo licked her thumb and rubbed a doll's face. “You just have to look at how she dresses to know what kind of girl she is.”

“What's wrong with her?”

“For one thing, her breasts are nearly spilling out of her blouse.”

“It's not right, Mamo, you sending away my friends.”

Mamo dismissed him with her dusting rag. “You should find yourself a nice Slovak girl, when you’re a little older. What about that Horny girl?”

“I’d rather be a monk than go out with a stick figure with a last name like that.”

“She’ll fill out. And she could be the next Pani Danco rather than Slečna Horny.”

Marek pretended to barf. “I can’t believe I’m having this conversation with you.”

He stomped to the back of the house and onto the rear gallery. Slumping into the chair behind the shed, he sulked. He wished he could phone Hortense to find out what she wanted, but he had no idea where she lived or her father’s first name. There were dozens of de Silvas in the neighbourhood. He would have to wait till he saw her at school, although that might be a while the way the nuns and brothers kept the boys and girls apart. Maybe he would see her at *Rizzo*’s, although it wouldn’t be easy to talk to her there. If she was still Guerino’s girlfriend, Marek didn’t want a Los Lobos member reporting their conversation back to the Big G. Marek wanted to keep the peace that he and G had established.

Just thinking of Hortense’s perky boobs excited him. His hand moved down towards his zipper, but he stopped himself. He stood to go to his room when he heard a chicken clucking.

With a deep breath and holding the railing tightly, he looked down into the yard but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

The clucking became louder as he neared the shed. He clicked open the door and found Danika stroking a hen on Baba’s lap.

“Look,” Baba said, lifting the bird. “It has three legs.”

Between the chicken's two scrawny reddish legs was a third darker and shorter limb.

“What on Earth...”

“Baba got it at the Rachel market,” Danika said, all excited. “It’s a lucky chicken because it has three legs, like Svarog.”

“Does Mamo know that you have this bird in here?”

Baba cleared her throat. “When I was a little girl back in Europe, my father had a chicken with three legs,” she said. “He knew it was lucky because many things that are special come in threes, such as the Holy Trinity.”

Marek wasn't in the mood for another of Baba's stories but he wanted to hold the chicken so that he could tell the guys at school. Baba made him sit down before she handed the bird over to him.

“All the villagers were jealous or spooked when they saw it,” she continued.

“Čom?” Danika asked.

“It was not normal. So they pressured my Apo to kill the bird and throw it away or cut off its middle leg so it would be like other chickens. Apo just wanted to keep it as a pet but the villagers, including his family, wouldn't leave him be.”

“What happened?” Danika asked.

Baba held her bosom like it hurt. “Being a teacher rather than a farmer, he let himself become attached to the bird. He could not bring himself to kill it for such a stupid reason. So he took a knife...”

“Oh no,” Danika covered her ears and ran out.

Marek watched her go into the house.

“So he took a knife,” Baba continued, “and cut off only the part of the leg that showed, hoping it would heal if he kept enough pressure on it until the bleeding stopped.”

“Did it live?” Marek asked.

“For a few days... Then the cut became infected and the bird died.”

Marek cringed as he thought about the hen’s leg oozing with the same kind of yellowish pus that he saw had penetrated Severina’s bandaged finger. “That was pretty stupid,” he said. “Why didn’t they just leave the dumb bird alone?”

“People do stupid things. I believe the village was punished with a drought. Most of the crops failed the next summer. Our neighbours didn’t have enough to feed themselves, let alone pay my father to teach any of their children. We had to move away. When my family went back a year later, the Magyars had already forbidden everyone from learning Slovak. We all had to speak Hungarian.”

“So your father taught school in Hungarian?”

“Bože, ne!” Baba shook her head. “He left to make a new life for us in America.”

“You mean Canada?”

“No, America. He said he would rather work in Pennsylvania’s coal mines than help to destroy the Slovak people. I grew up without him. When he came back, I was almost a woman. Then later, thank God, we came to Canada, before the Second War.”

“You must have been happy when the Nazis lost.”

“Oh yes, but also sad at how the Americans pushed the Czechs and Slovaks onto each other so that Amerikani would not have to go to war again for either of us.”

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t go to the States before the War.”

“We were no longer welcome in America,” Baba said, sounding angry. “The Amerikani were afraid there was too many of us and we would take over everything.”

“Oh, yes, Apo said something about that. Now you think this chicken is lucky?”

Baba shrugged. “I don’t know why this chicken has come into my life. Maybe to remind me that I was once necessary like Svarog’s extra leg to give life to our family, but now I’m just a strange old hen whose time has passed... a third wheel.”

Marek shook his head. “Don’t talk like that,” he said. “Mamo needs you. You’re always helping to look after Danika. Who else would tell her all those stories?”

“I keep telling you them, too, because I hope you’ll remember to tell to your children and grandchildren. We are a people of stories. If we lose our stories, we lose ourselves. How sad it would be for the people of the *slovo* to lose their words.”

Marek sort of laughed. “I guess we would be like all the other plain chickens out there. Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad.”

He gave her back the hen and prepared to leave, but Mamo pushed open the shed door as mad as a hornet. “What did you do to your sister?”

“Nič. Nothing.”

Baba put the chicken into a small cage. “It’s my fault,” she said. “I upset her.”

“I wish you would stop telling her all those myths,” Mamo said. “They’re probably giving her nightmares.”

Marek stepped forward. “Danika is just upset because of what happened to a chicken with three legs in Slovakia.”

Opening the door, Mamo shook her head. “Oh yes, that is the one thing we were missing around here: a three-legged chicken.”

“I will take care of it,” Baba said. “You won’t even know it’s here.”

Mamo rolled her eyes so far back that only the whites showed. She looked like one of the goddesses that Baba once talked about. Marek couldn’t remember her name. There were so many gods and goddesses. He would have to ask her again.

“Come downstairs,” Mamo told Marek. “There are orders waiting for you.”

“Okay, I’ll get my jacket.”

In his room he reached for the cigarette pack taped to the inner lid of one of his desk drawers. The pack came out but the drawer jammed on a ballpoint pen. Marek shoved the drawer open and closed several times but the tip of the pen had lodged into the wood. Frustrated, he pushed the entire desk against the wall.

There was a small puff of smoke and then an overwhelming stench like rotten eggs. One of the stink bombs taped to the back of the desk had burst open. His eyes watered and his nose stuffed up as he bent over the desk to try to stuff the stink bomb into his lunch bag. The bomb leaked through the paper and he threw it onto the floor because of how badly it stung his eyes.

Danika flung open the drapes, pinching her nose. “What’s that smell?”

Baba stood behind her with a kitchen towel covering her face.

“Nič. Nothing,” Marek said. “Get out of here.”

He rushed over to the living room windows and opened them all the way. “Do the same in Mamo’s bedroom,” he told Danika, but she just stood there, green as a Martian.

Baba nudged her. “Open the kitchen door and then sit outside on the balcony.”

Marek raced down the steps to get the outside door open. When he ran back up, he found Baba trying to clear out the air with her towel as she held her breath.

They retreated to the kitchen when Baba looked ready to pass out.

“What is that smell?” she asked.

Marek told her about buying the stink bombs to get even with Gaston.

“Revenge always costs,” she said as she kept fanning the air with her towel.

“Mamo is going to kill me,” Marek said.

The phone rang and Danika rushed inside to answer it. “Mamo, you’ll never –”

Baba wrestled the receiver from Danika. “Yes, he’s coming,” she said. “He just had to help me with something first.” She hung up and told Marek to go downstairs.

“What am I going to do about the smell?” he asked.

Baba told Danika to go onto the balcony again. Then she took Marek to the front of the flat. “If you promise not to do something like this again, I will try to help you.”

Marek coughed to get some of the stench out of his lungs. “How?”

“If my chicken brings us any luck, your mother will stay downstairs for quite some time doing all the counting she does. I will try to keep Danika occupied with the hen while the house airs out. And then we will see what I have to say. Now take those other smelly things out of here and get rid of them somehow.”

Marek hugged Baba. Her body felt bony like a boiled chicken’s, but warm, too.

Baba shooed him off. “Don’t say anything about what made it stink.”

Marek nodded, retrieved all the stink bombs and ran downstairs. He planted them in the dirt around a tree and cleaned his hands on his jeans.

When he entered the store, Apo and Mamo were arguing. They usually stopped when Marek showed up, but not this time.

“We can’t go on like this,” Mamo said as she waved a short pencil in the air.

Apo kept his head lowered. "Things will get better."

"Kedy? When? Next week? Next month? Oh, yes, a year and a half from now when Expo opens. *Tak*. Right. And what if we go bankrupt before then?"

"We will not go bankrupt," Apo said looking anywhere but at Mamo.

"Have you even looked at these books?" Mamo picked up the ledger from the counter and slammed it back down. "We are bleeding money every month."

Apo looked over at Marek. "Enough. Not in front of the children."

"He is not a child anymore," Mamo said. "Give him the order to deliver."

Apo handed Marek a box and a piece of paper with Patrick's address. Marek was surprised to see Barnum's Animal Crackers and other goodies in the box. The bottle of chocolate milk had the new foil cap. Only chocolate milk and whipping cream were delivered in bottles now.

Mamo walked up and down the middle aisle. "If you don't make some kind of effort to sell this store, I swear to God I'm going to leave you," she yelled at Apo.

"How are you going to pay for things?" he asked.

"I'll get a job. There are store and offices looking to hire women like me."

"What would you do in an office?"

"Answer a telephone."

"They have switchboards."

"I'll learn how to work one."

Apo huffed. "You think it's that easy."

"I'll go work as a store clerk. I have experience."

"Where?"

“Here, in this God forsaken place.”

Apo turned red. “I won’t let you. And you wouldn’t dare go against me like that.”

“You want to bet? Women have rights now, you know. I don’t have to get you to co-sign a loan or a lease for me anymore. If I want, I’ll get myself an apartment.”

“An apartment would be better than here?”

“Yes, for a while,” Mamo said.

“Until when? You find another sucker to support you?”

Mamo threw her pencil at him and went into the small room. “If you don’t sell, I swear to God I’m going to divorce you,” she yelled.

“You need grounds for a divorce,” Apo said. “What grounds do you have?”

“I will make a list for you.”

Apo sort of laughed. “It has to be a reason that a judge will accept.”

Mamo clenched the drapes. “Don’t worry. If I want, I’ll show reason,” she said as she drew the drapes shut.

“Fine, then. You can start practising being on your own right away.” Apo grabbed his coat and cap and stormed out.

Behind the drapes, Mamo was crying and saying, “I swear to God I’m going to divorce him” over and over again.

Marek wanted to comfort her, but had no idea how. He took the box of groceries out to his bike.

At Patrick’s flat, he twirled the doorbell a teeny bit.

Mrs. Richard answered the door with a smile almost as big as her wide face.

“Long time no see,” she said as she directed him down the hall and into the kitchen.

“How are you, Madame Richard?”

“Marek, you know how much I hate being called *madame*. It makes me sound like a lady of the evening.”

“Yes, but your last name is French, so I thought...”

“So say my last name in French, but put a Mrs. in front of it, please.”

“Okay,” he said, looking around. “Where are the little ones?”

“Luc is staying overnight with my mother. And Patrick took Isabel with him so that... Never mind.” She giggled like a young girl.

The front door opened and Monsieur Richard walked inside wearing a three-piece suit and a shirt that looked pressed by the Spanish laundryman on Laval Street. “Bonjour, Marek,” he said, shaking Marek’s hand. “Comment ça va?”

“Très bien. Merci, Monsieur Richard.”

Marek felt like he didn’t know either of these people. “Okay, I got to go.”

“Just a minute,” Mrs. Richard said. She picked up her change purse.

“You don’t want to put it on your tab?” Marek asked.

“No, we have money now,” she said, smiling at her husband. “Big boy here has a really good job.”

Monsieur Richard grinned. “Je travaille comme un gérant à une compagnie de construction maintenant.”

“A manager? At a construction company? Félicitations. Congratulations.”

Monsieur Richard nodded his thanks. “I have Monsieur le Maire to thank.”

“Why?”

“Jean Drapeau will only let French companies to do Montréal’s projects at Expo.”

“What about other companies?” Marek asked.

Monsieur Richard stomped his foot. “And it was fair that I was never a manager at the oil refineries even though I worked there for seventeen years? Ça c’était juste?”

“Non, mais non,” Marek said. “Of course not.”

The front door opened and Isabel ran down the corridor and wrapped her arms around Mrs. Richard. Patrick followed, his eyes looking glazed.

“What are you doing here?” Mrs. Richard asked him.

“Don’t worry. I just need something from my room and we’re going out again.”

“Où?” Monsieur Richard asked.

“Je ne sais pas encore. Somewhere.”

Marek started to leave but Mrs. Richard grabbed his arm and handed him a dollar.

“That’s too much,” he said.

She closed his fingers on the bill. “Take it. Times might not always be so good.”

He thanked her and walked out with Patrick and Isabel. He rolled his bicycle alongside them a short distance and then grabbed Patrick’s sleeve. “What are you on?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar,” Marek whispered so Isabel wouldn’t hear. “You’re stoned.”

“So what? It helps me to be mommy’s little helper.” Patrick took Isabel’s hand to cross the street. She pulled away and skipped ahead as soon as they reached the other sidewalk.

“What’s with your Ma?” Marek asked. “I’ve never seen her so cheery.”

“Every once in a while she gets full of pep, but it never lasts.”

“Maybe it will now that your Papa has a good job.”

“I doubt it. The peppier she gets the more down in the dumps she becomes later – almost like a zombie.”

“Did she get checked out?”

Patrick nodded. “Her doctor took her off Miltown and gave her Valium. I tried a couple and they just make you feel like you’re seeing everything from inside a big glass.”

“Are you crazy? What are you doing taking someone else’s pills?”

“Relax. It’s not like they give you a high. They just take off the edge.”

“You’re doing too many drugs,” Marek said. “I never see you straight anymore.”

“Ce n’est pas tes affaires.”

“It is my business if you do something dumb.” Marek stepped closer to Patrick to look into his droopy eyes. “What are you on now? Tell me!”

“Just some hash. The tab of acid has worn off already.”

“LSD? Are you out of your fucking mind?” Marek still had bad flashbacks from his one and only acid trip. He had suspected for a while that Patrick was taking harder and harder drugs but he wasn’t sure what to do about it. “Who sold you the acid?”

“Huh?”

“The acid cap, you idiot.”

“Don’t call me names. Je n’aime pas ça.”

“I call it as I see it. Who gave you the cap?”

“You should try it,” Patrick said. “It lets you feel things you didn’t know existed.”

“Who sold it to you?”

“Why?”

“I want to know that it’s safe.”

“X.”

“What?”

“You know. Mr. X.... Ismael. He wants people to call him X or Mr. X now like they used to call that guy who got shot... Malcolm X. Ismael – I mean X – says he doesn’t want to use a white man’s name anymore.”

“What the fuck are you doing buying drugs from him?” Marek yelled.

“Quiet. Or my sister will hear you.”

“It’s okay for you to be looking after her while you’re wrecked but I can’t say anything about it?” Marek blocked Patrick’s way. “Where are you getting the money?”

Patrick looked away. “There’s more floating around my house these days.”

“If your Papa finds out, he’ll whop your ass.”

“It’s Ma’s and she owes me for looking after her kids, practically raising them. Besides, she’ll never notice if I take the cash bit by bit.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Marek warned. “Anyway, you need to stay away from acid. It’s too dangerous.”

“I’ll be fine. I don’t do it unless X is around.”

“Oh, good. So he’ll phone for an ambulance when you trip out.”

“How do you know so much about this anyway?”

“Never mind.”

Patrick grabbed Isabel’s hand roughly and started to walk away with her.

“Where are you going?” Marek asked.

“How the fuck should I know? I have to keep her out till at least eleven o’clock so my parents can fuck.”

“Shhhh.” Marek looked at Isabel, who kept walking.

“Isabel knows it’s nookie night. If I don’t take her out, then we have to stay in our beds and pretend to sleep. Ever since Papa became a manager and my Ma has been riding high on something, they’re going at it every few nights. It’s better if we go out, right Isabel?” Patrick stroked her head. “At least I don’t have Luc with me today.”

“So where are you going with her?” Marek asked.

“Maybe to see *The Sound of Music*.”

Isabel tugged on Marek’s leg. “Come with us?”

“I can’t,” said Marek. “Hey, Patrick, why don’t you come over to my place after supper? Danika can play with Isabel.”

“We’ll see,” Patrick said. “I think it’s a long movie.”

Marek looked down at Isabel. “I hear it’s supposed to be really good.”

Isabel stared back up with her wide blue eyes, saying nothing.

As Patrick walked off unsteadily with Isabel, she pulled away and skipped ahead. Marek found it odd how little she talked for a four-year-old. Danika never shut up after her third birthday. As he watched Patrick and Isabel turn the corner, he vowed to find some way to get Patrick to ease off drugs a bit.

With some time to kill, he pedalled over to *Jelen’s Auto Repair*.

“How’s it going?” Vince asked as he wiped some grease off his thumb.

“Okay, I guess.” Marek got off his bike and pointed to a large black automobile up on blocks. “What model is that?”

“A ’55 Nomad.”

“It’s like a hearse for the mob.” Marek laughed but stopped when Vince didn’t.

“They don’t make cars with that much character anymore.”

Marek saw another car in the back. “So you’re busy these days,” he said, still hoping to work at the garage at least on Saturdays.

“The usual.” Vince used one dirty fingernail to remove the grease from another. “Let’s go outside so I can have a smoke.”

Vince paced the short distance to and from the corner as he smoked.

Marek leaned his bike against the wall.

“Hey, look,” Vince said pointing up Henri Julien. “Isn’t that your daddy going up to Klaudia’s?”

Marek turned and saw Apo lumbering up the stairs to 4081 one step at a time.

“What’s with you?” Vince asked. “Your face is all red.”

“Nothing.” Marek lowered his head.

“You think there’s something going on between your dad and the shady lady?”

Marek squished a mound of ants with his sneaker.

Vince blew a large and perfectly round circle in his direction. “Maybe, there is something going on. Your pop and Klaudia have a history.”

Marek looked up. “What do you mean?”

Vince had a smug look. “You don’t know?”

“No one ever tells me anything.”

“My mother told me once that your father used to go out with Klaudia. I think they might have even been engaged.”

“What?” Marek always thought Mamo was the first and only woman that Apo seriously dated. “When was this?”

“Back when they were sixteen or seventeen.”

“And what happened?”

“I don’t know.” Vince blew smoke rings. “So you think your old man is bonking her?”

Marek grabbed his bike. “I should go.”

“It’s possible that the two of them are getting it on, but somehow I doubt it.

Klaudia is not the kind of gal to break up a marriage unless she’s getting paid to do it.”

Marek kicked out his bike stand again. “What?”

“Well, you know about her, don’t you?”

“No. What?”

Vince smiled. “I told you she’s a shady lady, but I guess you don’t know what that is. She helps women get a divorce.”

“How?”

“She gets their husbands in a compromising position at a bar or in a hotel room just long enough for her photographer to take a few snaps and – voilà – the woman has the grounds for divorce that she needs.”

“But that’s not fair.”

“So what? It’s still proof that he’s ready and willing to cheat on her.”

A chill went through Marek. It all made sense now. Klaudia’s sexy outfits. The man with all the camera equipment. Klaudia telling Marek that she was willing to help Mrs. Richard to get out of her situation.... Marek felt sick thinking about Mamo hiring Klaudia to double-cross Apo. He could hardly believe it, but she did say that she would find a reason to get a divorce if Apo refused to sell the store.

“Are you okay?” Vince asked.

Marek nodded, even though his stomach ached. “Does she go all the way?”

“What?”

“Does Klaudia fuck the guys?”

Vince laughed. “Just their lives. She’s not a *courva* no matter what Pan Kysly and others say about her. She just gets them all kissy with her or undressed enough for the photos and then she leaves.”

“And they let her go?”

“I think she tells them she forgot something in her car that would make their time together more exciting,” Vince said.

“She has a car?”

“It’s a jalopy that I fixed up,” Vince said. “Anyway, that’s how she excuses herself. If she runs into trouble, she has the guy who takes the shots to help out.”

“How does he get the pictures from inside the room?”

Vince shrugged. “I guess they have a hole set up in a hotel wall or maybe she tells the guy that it’s more exciting if they keep the curtains open. I don’t know for sure, but I imagine it’s pretty easy when all a guy wants to do by that point is get it on.”

Marek got on his bike.

“That’s the odd thing,” Vince said.

“What?”

“Klaudia doesn’t take her business home. There’s too much danger that a guy would go back there and beat her up. It’s also why she wears different black or blonde wigs as the shady lady.”

Marek didn't want to hear anymore, but he also didn't want to leave until he got Vince thinking about someone other than Klaudia and Apo. "I saw Señora d'Alves a few days ago."

"Severina?"

"Yes. Have you seen her lately?"

Vince shook his head. "How is she?"

"She looks tired. And her finger is still not healed."

"She should get a doctor to look at it," Vince said.

"I told her that."

"What about Catina?"

"She's getting better."

Vince looked up Henri Julien. "Does she remember what happened?"

"No. The doctors say her memory might come back with time."

Grabbing the rag from his back pocket, Vince cleaned the grease from behind a fingernail. "Is it possible that she won't remember?"

"I guess."

Marek watched Vince rub a finger so hard that the skin was turning bluish. "Does that stuff ever all come off?"

"Not unless I really work at it." Vince stomped out his cigarette. "I got to get back to work."

Chapter Twenty

Two weeks later, Marek walked into the store to find Apo furious with Mamo. She had stuck a *For Sale* sign in the Napoleon Street window. Apo found out about it a few hours later when he went upstairs for a minute and overheard Mamo talking price with someone on the phone.

“I am not selling,” Apo shouted.

“At least talk to the man,” Mamo said. “See what he wants to offer.”

“I am not selling.”

“Look at me.” Mamo lifted her skirt above her knees. Her legs were a tangle of blue varicose veins. “Yours are no better,” she said pointing at Apo’s legs. “You complain every night about how much they hurt. If we have a chance to get out of here, why not take it?”

“And how are we supposed to feed ourselves?”

“Find a job. There are lots of jobs out there now.”

“Doing what? I have no trade. I’m too old for construction. I have no education to work in an office. I can’t read or write French.”

“Maybe you could get some kind of packaging job.”

Apo sneered. “You would rather have me working like a robot on an assembly line than be my own boss?”

Mamo threw her pencil in the air. “You would rather put us into more debt?”

“I would probably have to start at the lowest salary. We can’t live on that.”

Mamo touched Apo’s hand. “I’ll find a job, too.”

Apo stepped away. "I don't want my wife out working," he said. "People will think that I can't support my family."

"O Pan Boho! What's the difference if I work in our store or somebody else's?"

"At least when you work here it's for our family business."

"Some business, losing money every month..." Mamo shoved her hands into her duster pockets and headed towards the back. "I'm telling you, Imrich, one way or another, I am getting out of this quicksand."

Marek fished out a Kik and sat on the cooler. Halfway through his drink, he walked over to the counter.

"Co?" Apo asked when he noticed Marek hovering.

"Mamo is serious, you know. She means it about leaving one way or another."

Apo wiped the counter. "What are you talking about?"

"I think Mamo might have hired Klaudia to help her to get a divorce from you," Marek blurted out.

Laughing, Apo threw his cloth on the floor.

"You think it's funny?"

"Mamo would never have anything to do with Klaudia," Apo said, still chuckling. "She would never even speak to her."

"Why not?"

"Klaudia and I went out a long time ago, and your Mamo is the jealous kind."

Marek edged away from the counter. "So why are you doing her?"

"Co?"

"Why are you screwing around with Klaudia behind Mamo's back?"

Apo's face grew serious. "I would never cheat on Mamo."

"Then why are you always at Klaudia's?"

Apo's blush ran so deeply red from the base of his neck to top of his forehead that Marek wasn't sure whether it was from embarrassment or anger. Marek edged slightly away from the counter in case Apo tried to grab a hold of him.

Instead, Apo checked behind him and down the aisles to make sure the store was empty. "I had to borrow money from her," he said, almost in a whisper. "Raddy took a lot when I wasn't paying attention. If your Mamo found out, she would kill both of us."

"Why don't you get Raddy to pay back the money he took?"

Apo spewed air. "I would if he had any. The idiot blows everything."

"Why do you stay friends with him?"

"You wouldn't understand," Apo said as he walked over to pick up the rag.

"Raddy and I have been friends since we were six years old. He's like the brother I never had. I can talk to him about living in Slovakia as a little kid and he knows what I mean."

Apo pushed aside the cooler and removed the FOR SALE sign. He hid it on a shelf under a stack of paper bags.

"What happened?" Marek asked after a while.

"Co?"

"Between Klaudia and you?"

Apo looked towards the back to make sure Mamo wasn't lurking. "I loved Klaudia, but it wasn't going to work between us."

"Is it true you were engaged?"

Apo grimaced. "Who told you that?"

“I don’t remember where I heard it.”

Leaning his forearms on the counter, Apo let out a big sigh. “Yes, we were engaged, but your Baba forced me to break it off. She said that Dzedo and her would never speak to me if I married Klaudia.”

“Why?”

“Because Klaudia is Hungarian. Baba will never forgive the Magyars for what they did to the Slovaks. They rode into our village and tricked people into talking Slovak. Anyone who did get a kick from their riding boots or a lashing with their horsewhips.”

Marek shuddered as he thought about getting a lashing across his back. “Shit. I didn’t realize it was so bad.”

“They asked children if their teachers were giving them lessons in Slovak and if they said yes, those teachers were jailed and beaten. They beat the hell out of anyone who tried to keep the Slovak language alive.”

Marek thought for a bit, while Apo needlessly wiped the candy counter.

“But Klaudia didn’t have anything to do with all that stuff in Europe, did she?”

Apo laughed. “No, it was a long time ago, and she was born here in Canada.”

“So why blame her?”

“It takes generations for people to forgive and trust again. Sometimes they never do.”

“Weren’t you mad at Baba for splitting you up?”

Apo cocked his head to one side. “At first. Then I met your Mamo and the rest you know.... It was better I married my own kind. We have the same church, same

friends, same dance hall... That's something you should think about when you get serious about girls."

"Yeah, yeah," Marek said, taking a Jos. Louis cake and biting into it.

"Don't tell Mamo about the money I borrowed," Apo said.

Marek nodded. Sliding onto the cooler, he watched Apo polish the register.

"What happened to all the flags?"

Apo stopped and frowned. "Take a look at the front page," he said pointing to *The Montreal Star* on the newsstand.

Marek hopped off the cooler and took a copy over to the counter. The headline story featured a large picture of several people stomping on the new Canadian flag. Other smaller Canadian flags had been set on fire. Looking closer at the crowd, Marek recognized Séraphine.

"There is no respect left in the world," said Apo, looking close to tears.

Marek stared at the photo. It was definitely Séraphine yelling at some cops. He started to read the article. "They're upset the new flag doesn't have the fleur de lys."

"So what?" Apo barked. "It's on the Quebec flag."

"And that they're against the flag representing something called colo-ni-a-lism."

"Co to? What's that?"

Marek vaguely remembered Séraphine complaining about colonialists. "I'm not sure," he said. "Something about who got here first?"

"They're full of shit," Apo said. "But they're crazy, too. Look at the people they killed with those mailbox bombs. Look at the way Benoît and the other little frog acted when they were in here. I don't need more trouble so I put the flags away in a box."

Apo picked up a broom. The winter salt and sand created a dust cloud as he swept. "That's what's hurting business, all this separatist nonsense," he mumbled. "Good people, people with money, are starting to move to Ontario."

Marek grabbed a pack of Beeman's gum and held it up for Apo to notice.

Apo nodded but didn't note it down. "These people don't know what it's like when you break up a country," he continued. "Families and friends are split up."

"What are you talking about, Apo?"

"The Hungarians took a big chunk of eastern Slovakia for themselves after the Germans let Tiso divide us from the Czechs after the First World War. Baba ended up having some of her own family living in Hungary."

"Nothing like that can happen in Canada."

"Oh yeah? If Canada breaks up, the Amerkani will be here in no time."

"Canada would be a pretty big state," Marek said, laughing.

"It's no joke," Apo said. "Look at how the Soviets took over half of Europe. If Canada breaks up, the Amerikani might have to take over to keep the Communists out. Even Patrick's father says this, and he's French."

"It wouldn't be so bad. We both speak English, watch the same television..."

Apo walked over and shook Marek's shoulder a little. "Don't ever say that. I don't ever want to be one of them."

"Why? What's the big deal?"

"Baba didn't tell you?" Apo put down the broom and leaned against the dairy fridge. "They closed the borders on us. Baba and I were stuck on a ship for days sick as dogs, afraid we would be sent back to Slovakia. I thank God to this day that Canada

opened her arms to us.” Apo pretended to kiss the ground without bending down. “But your Baba has always been sad about her family being split up. Her older brothers didn’t want to start over here after building their houses in Pennsylvania and we couldn’t go there. She lost family to Hungary. She lost family to the States.”

“But that was so long ago...”

“Everyone there has to become American. Look at Uncle Steve when he visited. He could hardly talk Slovak. What a *haňba*/shame. In Canada, we can be Slovaks.”

Danika poked her head into the back of the store. “Supper’s ready.”

Apo grabbed a ring of keys from a concealed hook and walked over to the door where he put up the *Back in 10 Minutes* sign and then locked the door with a key.

“But, Apo, that’s why the U.S. is so great,” Marek said. “Everyone is American there. People come together, like the Czechs and Slovaks did in Europe.”

Apo shook his head. “A shotgun wedding,” he said. “It was supposed to keep the Germans and Hungarians from picking us apart, but once the Amerikani made it clear they wouldn’t come back to fight for us, the Communists took over everything, just like they will do here, if we’re not careful. Now go upstairs.”

“I’m not hungry,” Marek said, taking the keys and unlocking the door. “You go. I’ll mind the store.”

Before Apo could answer, Raddy stormed into the store.

“Lock the door!” he yelled, grabbing the keys from Marek and fumbling with the lock until it turned.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Apo said.

Raddy looked through one window and then another before he crouched down.

“What did you do now?” Apo asked.

Raddy took off his hat and started pacing up and down the store’s middle aisle. His hands shook. “I need a drink.”

Marek passed him a beer.

“Imrich, don’t you have anything stronger?”

Apo reached under the register and pulled out a bottle of rye from a hidden compartment. He took a whiskey glass that he kept on another shelf, but Raddy grabbed the bottle and chug-a-lugged.

“They’re after me now,” Raddy said after he lowered the bottle.

“Who?” Apo asked.

“That girl’s family.”

“Catina’s?” Marek asked.

“Yes, her. That Portuguese girl. Someone told her cousin that I was the one who stuffed her in that hole. My God, how could they think such a thing?” He grabbed the bottle and took another guzzle.

Apo pulled the bottle away. “Where did you hear this?”

“They’re going after all the single guys,” Raddy said with real panic in his voice.

“Who said that?” Marek asked.

Raddy looked away.

Marek’s voice cracked. “Was it Vince?”

Turning his head farther in the other direction, Raddy whimpered like a kid left at camp. “I would never hurt a little girl. My God, I would never hurt a woman. I’m not even inte–” He grabbed the bottle again.

“Enough,” Apo said, wrestling the rye away.

“Those men are going to beat the shit out of me for nothing,” Raddy said crying. Marek had never seen grown men cry other than drunks at weddings.

Apo tried to calm Raddy to calm. “Don’t worry. We’re not going to let anything happen to you.”

“Bože moj, God help me,” Raddy said as he slumped onto a stack of beer cases. “They had baseball bats when they went after The Shoemaker. They’re going to have bats when they go after me. Someone has to tell them. They’re going to kill me. Someone has to tell them it wasn’t me... that it couldn’t have been me... They have to know...”

The colour drained from Apo’s face. “Know what?”

“Nič. Nothing.”

Apo looked over at Marek. “Go upstairs,” he said in a tone that made it clear there would be no discussion.

Marek went to the back of the store but stayed in the narrow corridor.

“What did you say earlier about not being *into or interested in* something?” Apo asked.

The few seconds of silence that followed seemed to stretch forever.

“Don’t tell me that you’re one of those goddamn faggots,” Apo yelled.

Marek could hear Raddy crying like a girl who had fallen off her bike.

“I should have known by the way you dress,” Apo said. “O Pan Boho, I hope to God none of the other men think I’m like you. Shame on you! You have a real *haňba*.”

“Please try to understand,” Raddy said. “I can’t help...”

Apo slammed his fist on the counter so hard that its metal frame screeched. “You should have got married like the rest of us. You have such a sin.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Damn right, I don’t,” Apo yelled. “How could you let yourself become a queer?”

“It’s not something you choose,” Raddy said with a shaky voice. “Please, Hank, you don’t understand.”

“And I don’t want to. What you’re doing is so wrong that it’s against the law. I could phone the police right now to put you in jail.”

“It’s not right what the law...”

“Get out. I don’t care if those Portuguese men beat the shit out of you. I never want to see you again.”

The floor moaned under Apo’s stomping as he went to unlock the door. The bell over it must have made a loop, the way it clanged. It was almost a minute before it sounded again, and then everything was dead quiet except for the fridges and lights humming.

Chapter Twenty-One

Raddy showed up drunk at the store again a few weeks later. Apo rammed the door shut in his face and locked it. "I'm not going to be a friend with a *faggot*," he said.

Marek wondered if Apo even knew the Slovak word for men who liked men, but he wasn't about to ask. Apo turned beet red whenever Mamo so much as mentioned Raddy's name.

Swearing under his breath, Apo put the *Closed* sign on the door and went out the back.

Raddy pressed his face to the glass door. Marek thought about going outside to give him a pat on the back and say it would be okay, but it wasn't okay. The last thing Marek needed was for someone to see him talking with Raddy and start calling him a queer. And Raddy would probably bug him to try to talk to Apo. Marek didn't want to promise something that he knew he couldn't do. He slid off the cooler and hid in the store's middle aisle until Raddy left.

Later Marek reopened the store in case anyone wanted an icy Kik or fudge popsicles. Summer had descended on Montreal like a steaming facecloth. The store offered a reprieve from the stifling heat with its fridges humming louder than usual to keep cool. A few kids showed up with their dads for ice cream, but that was it.

After he locked the store, he went upstairs and watched television for a while but there was nothing but re-runs. The heat made it an effort to keep getting up to change the channel. He missed when Danika was younger and willing to switch the dial whenever he wanted. Even with the drapes opened, his windowless room was too stuffy for sleeping. He dragged a comforter out of his closet and made himself a sleeping bag near the living

room window. A cooler night breeze prompted the curtains to float over him like a ballerina. He imagined what it would be like to dance with Séraphine: one of her soft hands resting in his palm; the other placed on his shoulder with a light pressure to let him know she was truly in the moment with him and the music.

Pain shot up his shins. Another growth spurt. His legs felt like they were being pulled in opposite directions at the same time. The humidity didn't help. It filled the marrow in his bones with a numbing ache. It scared Marek that he might one day get the kind of arthritis on Apo's side of the family. On a muggy day like this, Apo could hardly bend his knees or back. Marek remembered how Dzedo couldn't grab a fork without first pushing it to the edge of a table and letting it drop into his deformed hands.

Marek hoped Baba wouldn't stink up the flat again by getting Apo to rub his joints with the hot peppers she kept in a jar. If she did, though, Marek wouldn't complain. He still appreciated her for keeping him out of trouble after that stink bomb went off. She had told Mamo it was a sulphur build-up in the plumbing. At first Mamo refused to believe her. A few days later, one of the other two stink bombs planted under the tree went off and everyone on the block walked around pinching their noses. Then Mamo agreed the odour had come from the sewers. Marek couldn't believe his bumbling good luck, and thought maybe it had to do with Baba's three-legged chicken.

He was just getting comfortable when Danika jumped onto the chesterfield.

"What do you want?" Marek asked.

"It's too hot in my room," she said in the whiny way she had of making everything sound like part of a bad song.

Marek lifted his top lip to make a horse's face, teasing her about how oversized her new front teeth looked compared to the remaining baby ones. She threw a crocheted pillow at him. Marek was about to whip it back when Baba appeared in the doorway.

"What is going on in here?"

"Nič. Nothing." Marek said as he slipped the pillow under his aching legs.

"It's too hot to sleep," Danika said.

"Yes, it is."

Although the lights were off, Marek could see Baba clearly in the glare from the streetlamp. She pulled one of Dzedo's handkerchiefs from her pocket and dabbed her pasty forehead. The hankie flashed like a dove against her black cardigan and long skirt. No wonder she was sweating. Marek hated it how all the older Slovak women dressed entirely in black like witches at Halloween. It made them all look a hundred years old. Mamo tried to dress younger, more modern. She even wore pants in the store when it felt chilly a few weeks earlier, but Apo took such a fit about her looking and acting like a man that she hadn't put them on since. At least she wore a nice hat instead of a kerchief when she went out.

Danika bounced on the chesterfield. "Tell me a story, Baba. A new one."

Baba looked at Marek.

"Jeden," he said, holding up one finger. "Then I need to sleep."

Baba told Danika to scoot over. Danika waited for Baba to settle onto the chesterfield and then leaned into the nook of her arm. Marek couldn't understand how they could sit so close in such heat. There was rarely any space between them whenever they were together. It was as if they became attached by invisible stitching.

“The Age of Dreams was a paradise,” Baba said.

Danika sprang up. “Like the Garden of Eden?”

“Yes,” Baba said, pulling Danika closer. “Until the gods became annoyed at people for acting like gods, because everything was so perfect.”

Danika sat up a bit. “What did they do?”

“Chernobog – the black god – convinced the others they were wasting their time keeping everything perfect for the mortals, arguing over the ones they liked best.”

“And then?”

“Svarozhich ended the Age of Dreams by creating new gods: some good and some evil.”

Danika sat up. “Why would he do that?”

“It was only when bad things happened that people realized they weren’t gods.”

Marek propped up on his elbows. “Then Adam bit into an apple and ...”

“Ticho,” Danika said with a silencing finger to her lips.

Baba cleared her throat. “There was a boy who wanted to win a girl’s heart by helping to end the hunger in his village. So he went to find a tall plant with magical seeds.”

Marek laughed. “*Jack and the Beanstalk* was Slovak?”

“Kto?” Baba asked.

“Never mind, Baba,” Danika said before sticking her tongue out at Marek. “Did he find the magic beans?”

“Seeds,” Baba corrected. “And, yes, after a very long trip. But this made Veles, the god of crops, angry.”

Danika sat in Baba's lap. "Then what?"

"Veles complained to the other gods."

Marek laughed. "Then a giant said, 'Fe, fi, fo, fum...'"

Danika threw another crocheted pillow at him.

Mamo tapped on the doorway. "What's everybody doing in here?"

"It's too hot in our rooms," Danika said.

Mamo turned towards Baba. "Your chicken won't be too hot in the shed?"

Baba shrugged. "If I leave the door open or put the cage in the yard, a cat might kill it."

"I'll see if Imrich can get the screened window opened wider. It smells like a barn in there..."

Baba lowered her head. "I will clean the cage again tomorrow. I promise."

Mamo left the room with her eyes rolled.

Danika bounced on the chesterfield. "So what happened when the boy took the seeds? Something bad always happens."

"The King of Time put the boy to sleep and made him an old man," Baba said.

"Like Rumpelstiltskin." Danika kept bouncing.

Baba's face went blank.

"Titulky," Marek said, recalling Rumpelstiltskin's Slovak name.

"Maybe Titulky, maybe not," Baba said hesitantly. "What matters is that he went back home broken-hearted about being too old to marry his sweetheart."

"A potom?" The blue in Danika's eyes was as deep as marbles in the dim light.

"The goddess of Good Luck took pity on him and made him a boy again."

Danika clapped.

“The villagers – especially the girl – were thrilled to see the boy. The seeds he found let them grow grain they could bake as bread. They named the grain *zbozhi* since it came from the gods. And they named the boy Slav in honour of all the Slavic people that his bravery helped to feed.”

“He must have been so happy,” Danika said.

“So happy that he shed the first human tear.”

Marek sat up. “Okay, now I want to go to sleep.”

“Tak. Dobre,” Baba said as she tried to usher Danika out.

“No,” Danika said. “I want to sleep here on the couch.”

Marek turned on his side and listened to Baba shuffle out in her *papuče*.

Sometime during the night, Marek woke to familiar voices outside his window.

“Do you have your passport?” Ismael/X asked.

“Oui, c’est ici.” Séraphine patted her shoulder bag.

“And you have all the other stuff you need?”

“Yes. I will pack everything into the car the night before I leave.”

“It’s all hidden somewhere safe?” X asked. “And you kept the sticks apart from the other thing?”

“Oui. Je ne suis pas stupide, tu sais.”

“I never think of you as stupid, darling,” X said, reaching forward to take a hold of Séraphine. “Con doesn’t suspect anything?”

Marek felt his face get warmer. He didn’t think Séraphine was the kind of woman to cheat on her husband or boyfriend or whatever Con was.

After making sure Danika was still asleep, Marek knelt so he could peek out. Séraphine was standing too close to the building for him to see her. X was about a foot onto the sidewalk.

“Okay, we’ll touch base in the morning,” X said, leaning forward – no doubt to kiss Séraphine. As X stepped back, Marek ducked so X wouldn’t see him.

“Leave around midnight tomorrow, so there won’t be any border guards,” X said.

“And everything is ready on the other side?” Séraphine asked.

“Oui, chérie, everyone is in place.”

Marek remembered the trip to New York to help the young men in X’s neighbourhood to dodge the draft, but it surprised him that Séraphine rather than X would be going. He guessed X, like Con, wasn’t able to go back to the States without getting arrested. He listened as Séraphine took her time creaking up the stairs.

It took a long time for Marek to fall asleep again, and it was nearly light when Apo shook him awake. Fortunately Marek had wrapped some of the comforter around himself like he was hugging Séraphine because he woke up with a boner. Danika would probably scream if she saw it. She was holding Apo’s hand and looking scared as it was. The house smelled like a campfire.

“Get up.” Apo shook Marek again with his free hand. “We have to get out.”

Marek felt his prick shrivel but ran into his room to grab his bathrobe just in case.

As soon as Marek stepped back into the living room, Apo put Danika into his arms. “Take her downstairs now. Go, fast.”

Moving towards the front door, Marek saw Baba shuffling out with a black sweater and skirt over a flowery cotton nightgown. Her purse was draped on one arm as

she held a framed photograph of Dzedo to her drooping breasts. In her other hand she carried the hen in its cage. Mamo nudged her forward. She had a shopping bag with the family's large box of photos and a couple of store ledgers. She also had the steel case that contained all the family's passports, birth certificates and other important papers.

"I want to get my doll," Danika said, trying to break free of Marek's grip.

"No," Apo said. "Get out now."

Carrying Danika, Marek followed Mamo and Baba downstairs.

Fire trucks arrived with deafening sirens. Apo directed the chief to the rear of the building. Marek handed Danika to Mamo and followed Apo into the laneway.

Neighbours already crowded the laneway. They pushed each other aside while the trucks edged forward with their blinding lights and then filled up every last space again. Others soon arrived on the other side of the trucks, everyone staring up.

Flames greedily licked at the Dancos' top shed. Thousands of bits of paper flew upwards and then floated down as embers and ashes like a fire god's confetti. A thick grey smoke swirled out. Then sparks flared in every direction and a white flash blew out the shed's two small windows. Shards of glass flew everywhere. Chunks of metal and wood rained down on the lower shed and caused the tin roof over the yard to collapse.

The police arrived and forced everyone farther away. Several people gasped as the shed's roof blew up and the corrugated metal toppled into the yard. A ladder went up and firefighters scampered to the top to try to douse the blaze from a safe distance, but there was little left to save. Another blinding white explosion had the fire chief yelling at his men to move away. Marek had seen a few shed fires but never fireworks like this.

Several more gold flashes erupted from what remained of the shed. The intense heat forced everyone back.

Marek noticed Séraphine standing next to Con. When their eyes met, Séraphine looked away. Con stared up at the shed with his mouth open.

As Marek started to walk over, Tatiana Dusek blocked his way. She put a hand to Marek's ear. Her fingers were cold.

"It was that small Italian guy with the wolf jacket," she whispered in Slovak.

Marek looked at her in disbelief. "Guerino Adami started the shed fire?"

Tatiana shook her head and then nervously looked around. "No. Or at least not that I know. But he did put that paint on your window."

Marek felt like someone had stung him with a B.B. gun. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. He has that jacket and that big car."

"Why didn't you tell us earlier?"

"I was afraid."

Loud cracking sounds filled the air again. Marek looked up but had to shield his eyes from another blinding white flash. When it dimmed, he looked again and saw the shed walls had been blown apart. Whole sheets of metal crashed onto the wooden crates in the yard.

When he turned around to speak with Tatiana again, she was gone.

The fire chief asked Apo what had been stored in the shed. Apo shouted at Con, who came over with his arm latched around Séraphine's waist.

"What the hell did you have up there?" Apo yelled.

"Nothing," Con said. "Our bikes and some old magazines."

Apo looked furious. “Why would you keep paper in a shed?”

“You probably knew that shed was a fire hazard,” Con snapped back. “We could have died up there.”

“C’est assez. Enough,” said Séraphine, pulling Con away with her.

The fire chief said he was pretty sure the sun beating down all day on the metal roof had sparked the fire, but he couldn’t understand why there were so many explosions.

Carrying Danika on her hip, Mamo pushed her way towards the front of the crowd. She had left the shopping bag and fireproof case at Baba’s feet near the end of the lane. As soon as she reached Apo, she handed Danika to him. She gasped when the remaining structure crumpled onto the shed below in a mess of flames. The roof on the lower shed dented inward but kept the fire out. A few pieces of ignited wood landed on the rear balcony. The firefighters worked quickly to douse them and the lower shed.

Marek saw Mamo crying and put a hand on her shoulder. She latched onto his arm and pulled him towards her. He let her hold him for a minute. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Séraphine again looking as if she was about to cry. He eased out of Mamo’s hug, and walked over to her. “Are you okay? Ça va?”

Séraphine nodded. “I am sorry for all the damage.”

Marek paused. “It’s not your fault. And thank God no one got hurt.”

“Oui,” she said, looking away.

“You didn’t have anything really important in the shed, did you?” Marek asked.

Séraphine looked puzzled. “Ça va dire quoi? What do you mean?”

“Like your paintings.”

“Non, rien comme ça... nothing like that,” she said, looking a bit relieved as she walked away.

The fire chief was again talking to Mamo and Apo. Marek joined them and found out the firefighters definitely suspected arson because of the many explosions.

“Arson?” Mamo grabbed Apo’s arm. “Who would do this to us?”

In French, the fire chief said there were all kinds of crazy people and the arson department would have to investigate.

“How?” Apo put Danika’s hand into Mamo’s. “The whole shed is gone.”

“There might be clues in the debris,” the chief said.

“But we can go back inside the house?” Mamo asked.

“It might be too smoky tonight,” the chief said.

Mamo pulled back her shoulders. “I need to make sure everything is okay.”

Danika wiggled to get out of Mamo’s grip. “You’re holding me too tight.”

The chief patted her head. “Stay in your store until we check everything,” he told Mamo. “It shouldn’t take too long.”

As soon as the chief walked away, Mamo began looking around for Baba and panicked when she didn’t see her because of all the neighbours crammed into the lane.

“She’s there at the back, where you left her,” Marek said, pointing Baba out.

Baba stood like a statue with the shopping bag and steel case between her ankles and the hen’s cage in her arms. The chicken was clucking madly.

“It is ridiculous you having that bird,” Mamo said. “You have to get rid of it.”

Baba kept staring past Mamo at the building.

Mamo threw up her arms. She retrieved the shopping bag and case and walked off, pulling Danika along.

Apo took the cage from Baba. "Come on, Mamo. Let's go."

"Walk slowly," she told him. "I don't feel so good."

Marek looked back into the crowd and noticed Vince and Patrick and some of his other friends. Everyone from blocks away had shown up to watch the fire. Marek told his friends about how the fire might have been started on purpose.

As the police shooed people home, Marek heard Tatiana's parents calling for her. Pan Dusek ran over to a police officer. "My daughter is missing."

"Was she in one of the sheds?"

"No."

"How old is she?"

"Twenty-two."

"Months?" The officer raised an eyebrow.

"No, twenty-two years."

"She's not exactly a child," the officer said. "I'm sure you'll find her."

Panic washed over Pan Dusek's face. "But she might have run away."

"At twenty-two she should be free to go if she wants, no?"

Pan Dusek hesitated and then said, "Maybe someone kidnapped her."

The cop looked sceptical. "Tell you what," he said. "I'll give you my number. If she's not back in twenty-four hours, call me." He scribbled a note and handed it over.

Pan Dusek threw the paper onto the sidewalk. "By then she could be anywhere."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The police banged on the door the very next night startling everyone out of their sleep. One cop pulled Marek from his bed, while the others rounded up the rest of the family into the living room. The officers tore through the flat, pulling Marek's cigarette packs out of their hiding places. Thank God he had shared his last joint with Patrick after the fire. Mamo looked at the cigarette packs but said nothing. She was too shocked by the raid, especially when an officer removed the heads from some of her costumed dolls to see if anything was hidden inside.

Baba's chest started to heave.

"She needs some water," Mamo said to the officer in charge.

He grabbed a bag off Marek's desk and told Baba to breathe into it.

Another cop told Apo to follow him to the shed.

"What are you looking for?" Apo asked.

"Moja kurča," said Baba in fear of what the police would do to her chicken.

As Mamo stood up, a cop pushed her back onto the chesterfield. "My mother-in-law has a chicken on the back porch," she said. "She's worried you're going to hurt it."

The cop laughed. "What are you? Farmers? You're not supposed to have animals like that in the city."

Mamo nodded. "I know, but it's a pet."

The cop laughed again.

"We bought it as an Easter chick for my daughter," Mamo lied.

He smiled at Danika. “J’ai une fille de cet age. I have a girl her age, too.” Again, but more politely, he told Apo to accompany him to the shed. As soon as Apo started walking towards the back, Mamo tried to run after him. Another cop blocked her way.

“You’re not taking him alone,” she shouted. “Either you let me go with him, or I will keep yelling my head off.”

The officer in charge said to let her go and Mamo disappeared with Apo.

“Can I go to the window for some air?” Marek asked.

A cop shrugged his okay.

Police cars filled Colonial Street with their flashing cherry tops. Neighbours emerged from their homes in ratty housecoats and stared at the Danco building. Two police officers were taking Con away in handcuffs. Marek looked for Séraphine but saw no signs of her.

The police looked more relaxed when they escorted Mamo and Apo back into the living room. Mamo told Danika to go to her room. She also told Marek to help Baba to hers, but Baba refused to move.

Ignoring Baba, the cops drilled Mamo and Apo about how they knew Séraphine Moreau, where she usually parked her car, when the last time was they saw her, what she was wearing, and who her friends were.

“We don’t know,” Mamo said again and again.

“Please tell us what she did,” Apo said after several minutes.

The officers refused to say. The one in charge apologized in French for busting in on the family, saying it was necessary for security reasons.

“Whose security?” Apo asked. “Are we in some kind of danger?”

“Je ne pense pas,” the officer replied. “I don’t think so. Not anymore...”

Mamo placed a hand on his arm. “Please tell us what’s going on.”

“Allez en bas,” the officer told the other policemen, who immediately followed his orders and went downstairs. After they left, he told Mamo to sit down.

“Your tenant, Séraphine Moreau, is part of a small Quebec separatist group called l’Armée de l’Indépendance,” he said.

“Oh, my God,” Mamo said, while Apo steadied himself against a wall.

“Some of them were plotting with a small group of extremist Negroes to try to blow up the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building and the Liberty Bell,” the officer continued.

“You’re kidding,” Apo blurted.

“Non, c’est vrai. They stole dynamite sticks from a farmer who had the explosives to clear boulders from his fields. We think Séraphine Moreau had some of that dynamite upstairs in your shed.”

Mamo gasped. “They blew up our shed?”

The officer shook his head. “The dynamite sticks were for blowing up the Statue of Liberty. The sticks went off after the heat from the roof started a fire.”

“Why in God’s name would they want to blow up American places?” Apo asked.

“C’est bizarre,” the officer admitted. “Something to do with feeling oppressed in Canada the way Negroes are oppressed in the U.S.A.”

Apo forced a laugh. “What bullshit. It’s not the same at all.”

The officer gave Apo a disapproving look. “I guess they believe what they believe,” he said. “Not all of us have it easy here.”

Mamo had no colour in her face. "Is Conner Quarles, her husband, one of them?"

The officer shrugged. "We're not sure yet. He says no. We think her cousin, Benoît Bourke, and his friend, Loïc Conan, are involved. Have you seen them?"

"Emilia, move over," Apo said to Mamo. "I have to sit down. I can't believe this."

Mamo put a hand on Apo's shoulder. "Benoît used to deliver groceries for us," she said. "A few months ago, someone wrote something terrible on our store window. We made a police report. Do think it was him?"

The officer shrugged again.

"I don't think so, Mamo," said Marek, recalling what Tatiana had told him about Guerino painting the graffiti.

Mamo and Apo looked at him like he suddenly had appeared out of nowhere.

"We were small fry to them," Marek said. "A hiding place for their bigger plans."

"Is it safe now?" Mamo asked the officer. "Did you find anything else?"

"We've looked through everything," he said. "I'm sorry for some of the mess in your store and in the back."

Apo looked close to tears.

Baba held a hand to her chest as she walked to her room in silence.

The officers left soon after and Marek joined his parents in the kitchen. No one could sleep. The flat still smelled like a smokehouse. Mamo prepared a pot of coffee. Apo slumped into his chair at the head of the table. Baba sat on the rear balcony, stroking the chicken. Marek went to see how much the sheds were damaged.

"Go inside," Baba said.

"Why? I— "

“Can’t I have a minute alone?” she yelled.

“Alright,” Marek said. As he reopened the kitchen door, he turned around to give her a peeved look. He saw her grab the hen’s throat and with one twist break its neck.

“Jesus Christ! What are you doing?” he yelled in English at her.

Baba sat motionless, a blank stare on her face as the chicken’s body fluttered in her lap for a few more seconds.

“Are you fucking crazy?” he yelled again.

Mamo and Apo ran onto the balcony. Danika tried to follow, but as soon as Mamo saw the chicken, she blocked Danika’s view and ordered her back to her room. Apo lifted the lifeless chicken and put it in the wooden box that Baba kept on the gallery for drying linden leaves.

“Are you alright?” Apo asked her in Slovak.

“They must be unlucky,” Baba muttered. “I should have never bought it.”

“Don’t talk crazy. It’s not your fault,” Apo said.

Marek puked over the side of the balcony.

“What’s wrong with you?” Baba asked him.

“With me?”

“Yes. With you. You eat meat. Where do you think it comes from?”

Marek wiped his mouth in the tea towel Mamo handed him.

“How could you do that?” he shouted at Baba. “I thought it was your pet.”

Baba shrugged. “I am too old to take care of it. Besides, it’s not good to become too attached to anything. At least now we will have good soup from it.”

“Is she crazy? I’m not eating anything made from that bird.”

“Calm down,” Apo said. “Go inside.”

Marek looked over at the dead chicken. “Well you’d better get rid of it. Danika already has nightmares. Now I probably will, too.”

He went to his room and closed the drapes in spite of the suffocating heat. He wished he could smoke up and forget everything, but he didn’t have any pot.

After Mamo and Apo went to sleep, he sneaked into the back of the kitchen pantry where Apo kept some booze. He took quite a few swigs of rye. The alcohol burnt his throat, but quickly made him feel better, smoother, calmer....

Soon after, his head started to spin. He sat up in bed and stared at his desk lamp to keep from being sick.

The next day, he showed up at school with a hangover. As he walked towards his locker, Hortense de Silva waved at him from the Girls’ side. He walked to the threshold where the boys weren’t supposed to cross.

“You look awful,” she said.

Marek straightened out his school jacket and flattened his hair. “How are you?”

Hortense smiled as she played with a button on her crisp white blouse. “Good.”

“My Mom told me that you dropped by my place,” Marek said.

“Yes.” Hortense pulled Marek closer. “I’m having a surprise birthday party for Guerino, and since you two are friends now, I thought you might want to come. You can bring your girlfriend if you want.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend.”

Hortense reached through the doorway and patted his hand. “Maybe I can help you find a date.”

“What about you?”

Hortense laughed. “Don’t let G hear you talking like that. He’ll kill you.”

“What do you see in that guy anyway?”

Hortense stepped back. “He’s someone that everybody respects.”

Marek lifted an eyebrow. “You mean fears, don’t you?”

Hortense gave a wry smile that made him realize she was proud of being the girlfriend of someone others feared.

“So can you make it?” she asked.

Marek was about to say no when he saw Hortense’s smile vanish. Before he could ask why, she ran down the Girls’ corridor. A second later Marek felt someone grabbing his jacket. He started to swing around with a fist when he caught sight of Brother Murphy’s brown robe.

“What are you doing near the Girls’ side?” Brother Murphy demanded.

“Nothing,” Marek said, leaving before he could be asked more questions.

In Math class, Marek’s head pounded. Knowing he looked as bad as he felt, he asked to go to the washroom. After splashing water on his face, he knelt and rested his forehead on the sink for a couple of minutes. The cold porcelain felt good. He returned to class to tell Brother Flavelle that he was going home.

He grabbed his books and went back to his locker for his school bag. On his way out, he stopped at the cafeteria to buy a Pepsi from the vending machine, hoping it would settle his stomach. Guerino sat at a table alone. Marek walked over, bumping chairs along the way, and unclasping his schoolbag. “Here,” he said, throwing a banana.

Guerino looked up. “What’s this supposed to mean?”

Marek put his foot up on the chair next to Guerino's. "Yellow is your favourite colour, isn't it? After all, yellow is for cowards."

Guerino stood. "You're out of your fuckin' mind bothering me like this."

"Oh, am I?" Marek pulled out a cigarette and lit it. "So if I call the police and tell them you painted the graffiti on our store window, you have nothing to worry about?"

"You have no proof."

Marek forced a laugh. "But I do. I have a witness."

"Who?" Guerino grabbed Marek's arm.

"Let go or I'll accuse you of assaulting me, too."

"If you so much as say a word..."

As Guerino waved a finger in Marek's face, Hector showed up with a couple of other Los Lobos. As soon as G saw he had backup, if necessary, he grabbed Marek's nose.

"Fight clean, you bastard," Marek yelled as he tried to pull G's fingers away.

"You're always such a goddamn coward, the way you fight, the way you paint--"

"Shut the fuck up," G shouted back.

Hector stepped forward and peeled G's hand off Marek's face. "What the hell are you doing?"

Marek rubbed his nose, thankful it wasn't broken. "Why don't you tell Hector? Tell him what you did like a coward in the middle of the night. Or maybe I should..."

"No you won't." Guerino lunged at Marek.

Hector blocked his way. "Enough, or you'll get us all suspended again."

Guerino waved a finger at Marek. "You keep your mouth shut."

“Why don’t you learn how to speak nice about people, call them Poles rather than polacks?” Marek could feel his face and neck burning up with all his anger. “Or if you’re going to insult them, at least find out what nationality they really are.”

Guerino took out a smoke and lit it. “You’re all the same.”

“Oh but you’re not, are you?” Marek knew he could get beaten to a pulp, but his rage at G messing with him and his family made him feel he could punch back just as hard, and fuck up G’s life just as badly. “You’re special…” he said, hesitating. “You even need a special car…”

Guerino went berserk. He swung madly at Marek but the others restrained him.

“Anyway, I’m done with you,” Marek said. “You’re not getting any more dope from me or anyone I know.”

“So what? I can get pot anywhere.” Guerino struggled to get free. “Let go of me, you morons,” he told Hector and the others. “Let me at him.”

“No,” Hector said. “It’s enough.”

When they saw the principal coming, Hector told Guerino and the rest of the gang to take the fire exit.

“What’s going on here?” the principal asked.

Hector and Marek remained silent.

“Who was just here with you?”

Hector looked at Marek before he spoke again. “Kids from the French school, sir, here to make trouble. It’s a good thing you showed up.”

The principal looked at Marek for confirmation.

“None of them are from here, sir,” Marek said.

After some hesitation, the principal confiscated their smokes and ordered them back to class.

Marek rubbed his nose as he walked out of the cafeteria with Hector. “Thanks, man. I owe you.”

“No, you don’t,” Hector said, taking out a fresh pack of smokes from a back pocket and offering Marek one. “You helped to rescue my cousin. I’ll never forget that.”

“How is she doing?”

“Better, thanks.”

“Does she remember what happened?”

“No, but she is starting to remember things from earlier.”

Marek felt bad that he still hadn’t visited her. “Is she still in the hospital?”

“Yes, but not for much longer, we hope.”

“When is she coming home?”

“She’s not going home. She’s coming to live with my family for a while.”

“Why?”

“Her mãe – my aunt – is in the hospital.”

“What happened?”

“You remember she cut her finger?”

Marek nodded.

“Well it got infected and the infection or whatever it is started to eat her skin.”

“Is she okay?”

“No. The doctors might have to cut off her finger.”

Marek shuddered. “Sorry, eh?”

Hector glanced sideways. "We have to get out of here," he said, pointing out the principal coming towards them again.

Marek followed Hector out into the school yard. Hector rejoined G and the rest of his gang. Marek headed out the gate.

When he got home, he found Mamo crying on the chesterfield. "What's wrong?"

"Baba is in the hospital," she said. "She passed out this morning while she was making soup from that stupid chicken."

Marek swallowed hard. "Is she okay?"

With one shoulder, Mamo shrugged uncertainly. "I left Apo at the hospital with her so I could be here when you and Danika came home. Go open the store and keep Danika there with you when she gets here, okay? I am going back to the hospital now."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Marek almost fell off his bicycle when Luczia stepped out from around the corner on Napoleon Street and tried to grab his arm. “Que é a matéria? I could have tipped over and really hurt myself.”

Luczia apologized while looking over her shoulders. “Have you seen Séraphine or Ismael?” she asked, seeming very nervous.

“No. They’re probably in jail or hiding somewhere.”

“They arrested Con, too, but then let him go. I can’t believe what those idiots did. Not Con, though. He was just trying to help guys escape the war. Me, too. You’ve got to tell the cops that if they ask.”

Marek nodded and started to leave.

“No, wait. Don’t say we’re helping Americans. That could get us in trouble, too. Say nothing. Meu Deus, I hope they’re not looking to arrest me, too.”

A car backfired. Luczia jumped. “I have to get out of here. Con wants you to meet him at the Post Office around four this afternoon.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure. You won’t say anything to the police, will you?”

Marek shook his head convincingly. He’d been hoping to hook up with Con to get some more dope. His friends at school were bugging him to sell them more. Patrick nagged him constantly since X’s disappearance after the shed fire three days earlier.

After Luczia took off, Marek pedalled a case of beer to a triplex on City Hall Street. It was easy to carry up a case of twelve under one arm, even on these serpentine

steps. A case of twenty-four was another story. He needed both hands in the tuck-away handles to get one of those motherfuckers up a flight of stairs. If he let go of one side, he could expect the whole case to wrench out of his grip and tumble down, the bottles smashing and spilling everywhere.

It used to be people only bought twenty-fours around holidays, but the seventy-day strike by liquor board workers gave many people – including women – in Quebec a bigger taste for beer. Many of them bought less hard liquor after the Régie des alcools du Québec re-opened its stores in mid-February and soon after bumped up its prices. Now *Danco's Grocery* had cases of Dow, Molson, Labatt and other beer brands stacked to the ceiling in a large corner of the store. Beer sold more than anything else.

Marek couldn't remember when he last delivered quarts of beer. Maybe it was to that prick, Gaston. Marek hadn't seen him in months. Gaston didn't dare show his face in the store. He was probably racking up tabs at other corner groceries. It was a real problem for Mamo and Apo to collect money from some customers. Mamo had a list of them who gave false addresses and phone numbers, or moved away without paying what they owed.

Sliding the beer case onto the balcony, Marek pushed the new electric bell. The door buzzed open and a man at the top of the stairs threw down a crumpled five and told Marek to leave the change with the beer inside the door. No tip. Cheap bastard!

Marek slammed the door. He had given up hopes of working at *Jelen's Auto Repair* after Vince hired a French mechanic. Vince said he had no choice with more customers wanting things explained to them in French.

As Marek descended the ridiculously shallow steps, he tried to calm himself by thinking about Expo. He would have to get a fake ID to work there because his sixteenth

birthday wasn't until three weeks after Expo's opening. Hector would probably get him a fake bus pass in exchange for some pot.

His watch indicated four o'clock, but it always ran slow. Marek kept forgetting to ask Apo for the Timex a customer had left as collateral and never reclaimed.

Marek biked over to St. Denis Street as fast as he could. Con stood looking impatiently around the corner from the Post Office. His usually wavy hair was flat and greasy and his beard longer than usual. He smelled like someone had pissed on him.

"Did they put you in jail?" Marek asked.

"I was released this morning," Con said. "Thank God I always carry only fake ID on me or I would have been deported already."

Con took out his pack of Camels. Marek accepted one even though he didn't like American cigarettes.

"Come on," Con said, leading Marek across the street. He opened the heavy wooden door to a corner tavern. "Get in."

Marek leaned the bike against the wall and walked inside, holding the second door open for Con. His eyes needed a couple of seconds to adjust to the darkness. He couldn't believe how dingy the place looked. It reeked of stale beer and cigarette smoke. The smoke reminded Marek of ghosts the way it cloaked the few overhead lamps. He laughed thinking about the women fighting for the right to be allowed into taverns. They would change their minds if they saw one.

As soon as the owner noticed Con, he pointed to a back table by the fire exit.

"Why are you letting him tell you where to sit?" Marek asked.

"Because you're under age. If cops show up, get out that door as fast as you can."

The wooden chairs felt greasy. The table was sticky with dried beer. Con walked over to the bar and brought back a glass of Coke, a pint of beer, and an empty glass. He filled the glass with some beer and pushed it towards Marek.

“So did your Mom and Dad go ape over what happened?” Con lit a joint and kept it hidden when he wasn’t smoking it.

“The police raided our place, too, you know,” Marek said. “It really upset my grandmother. And, fuck, I could have been caught with pot on me.”

“Sorry, man, but I had nothing to do with it.” Con poured more beer.

“What you’re doing, helping those other American guys, is against the law, no?”

“The pigs aren’t interested in that,” Con said, shifting his seat closer and passing the joint to Marek under the table. “It’s what that double-crossing whore was plotting with that motherfucker Ismael, X, or whatever the fuck his name is now.”

“You didn’t know what they were planning?”

“Of course not. I’d never do anything to destroy those places. I love my country.”

Marek hesitated and then said, “Then why aren’t you fighting for it?”

“You don’t get it, do you? This isn’t about protecting the States. It’s about sending a message to the Chinese and Russians about what’ll happen if they invade any more countries. It’s about some rich Americans making loads of money selling guns and tanks. And about Lyndon Johnson letting thousands die rather than admit a mistake.”

“So you had nothing to do with the dynamite?”

“Fuck, no.”

“Where’s Séraphine?”

“I don’t know and I don’t give a shit,” Con said as he scratched his beard like there were bugs in it. “I really didn’t mind it if she wanted to screw Ismael. I told her I didn’t own her. But the way she betrayed me – the way they both sabotaged what we were trying to do – I’ll never forgive that. They could have got me deported.”

They sat quiet for a few minutes after Con went up to the bar to get more beer.

“So I need to know if your parents are going to flip out if I see them,” Con said.

Marek shrugged. “I don’t know. They didn’t like beatniks in the first place.”

“Beatniks? I’m not a beatnik. I’m a hippie.”

“What’s the difference?”

Con laughed. “We’re not just hanging out in coffee shops, listening to folk music. We’re trying to make the world better.”

“How?”

“Getting as many young men out of ‘Nam as possible. And one day we’ll get companies to start using computers so that people don’t have to work like dogs.”

“But won’t they get paid less?”

Con finished his beer. “We could live better with less. People fill their houses with furniture and other stuff because companies are constantly advertising that crap.”

Marek licked the foam off his glass. “Anyway, my parents are not happy about the fire and the raid.”

“I need to get my stuff back. Can you help me?”

“The cops didn’t find your stash?”

Con smiled. “There are a lot of great hiding places in that flat.”

Marek looked up at the Dow Brewery clock. "I got to go." He wobbled as he stood. "Do you want the mailbox key back?"

"Keep it for now. We'll see how things go with your folks. What's happening with Patrick? I checked the other mail box and it was packed."

"Ismael has been selling him bad shit," Marek said.

"Well if he's not in jail yet, he will be soon. Séraphine, too."

Marek pushed in his chair.

"Wait." From his jeans, Con dug out something about the size of two sugar cubes wrapped in foil.

"What's this?"

"Hashish. It's all I have on me. That's why I need to get back to the flat, but I don't want your mother or father calling the cops when I do."

"What's this do?" Marek asked, thinking back to his bad acid trip.

"It's weed – same as the other stuff – only pressed so it's a little stronger."

"You swallow it?"

"God, no!"

For the first time ever, Marek heard Con laugh. He sounded like a kid.

"You break off a tiny piece," Con said as he showed approximately what size by curling his finger into his thumb. "Stick it on a straight pin, light it and then wait for it to start really smoking up before you inhale. It's better if you have a hash pipe or a bong to funnel the smoke, but you'll get enough of a buzz just like that."

"What do I owe you?"

"Nothing," Con said. "I'll drop by and speak with your dad soon."

Marek nodded and made his way out through the dark maze of tables and chairs into a blinding sunlight. When his eyes readjusted, he saw his bicycle was missing. He ran up and down the block to see if anyone had moved it as a joke, but it was gone.

He walked home in dread even though it wasn't his fault. The city had changed. People used to leave their doors unlocked all day. Now they had double locks. Apo had started keeping a hammer under the counter in case someone tried to rob him. He refused to let Mamo be alone in the store at night. Ever since Catina's mishap, mothers were calling their children inside when it was still light outside. Some weren't letting their kids out at all. Instead they were enrolling them in after-school crafts or floor hockey at youth centres. Mamo constantly grilled Marek about where he was going. She didn't let Danika out of her sight. With Baba in hospital, Danika hadn't been outdoors in days.

Marek unwrapped the hash. He was tempted to try some but knew he would need it more after his parents chewed him out about the bike. Marek couldn't imagine who would take such a big and ugly bicycle except maybe the owners of another grocery store. He would check out a few to see if any suddenly had two bicycles or one that looked different. All he would have to do is look for the nicks where he kicked up the stand to know whether the bicycle was his.

When Marek walked into the store, Apo ordered him straight upstairs.

As soon as Mamo saw him, she demanded to know where he had been so long.

"It takes time to—"

"Eat," Mamo said. "We'll wait for you."

"Ouch, you're hurting me," Danika said as Mamo rubbed her face with a thumb.

"Next time wash it better on your own," Mamo said impatiently.

Marek peeked into the pot on the stove and ladled some goulash into a bowl.

“Wait for me for what?” he asked with a mouthful.

“To go to the hospital to see Baba,” Mamo said as Danika sulked beside her.

“I can’t,” he lied.

“Čom?”

“I have too much homework.”

Mamo hesitated and then said in English, “I’ll write you a note.”

“I have to study for a math test,” he said. “I’ll go next time, maybe even tomorrow if I have less homework.”

Mamo left reluctantly with Danika.

Alone for a change, Marek went to his room. He unwrapped the hash and broke off a tiny chunk. He looked around for something that would act like a pipe. After some thought, he pulled out a large peashooter from his desk that he hadn’t used in years. He found a straight pin from Mamo’s sewing basket and pierced the hash chunk with it. Then he lit it and waited for it to smoke up. As soon as it did, he stuck as much of it as he could inside the large peashooter and inhaled through it until he started to choke. The smell was stronger than weed, especially mixed with the little bit of plastic that had burnt at the end of the peashooter. Marek opened the living room window in case Apo came upstairs.

Marek felt calmer within a couple of minutes. Having the bike stolen no longer seemed like the end of the world. Mamo and Apo would just have to understand that it wasn’t his fault.

He went over to his record player and put on the *Help* album that he bought after seeing the Beatles on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. He could relate to *Hard Days Night* and

working like a dog, especially given the likelihood that Mamo would force Marek to use some of his savings to buy another bike. Oh well, not the end of the world...

The music sounded so clear, almost like his old gramophone was magically playing the music in stereo. He needed to save up for a stereo like the one that Con and Séraphine had, except with an eight-track player. It was so neat how Vince could play eight tracks over and over in his Galaxie without the music ever skipping a beat.

When *You've Got to Hide Your Love Away* played, it was like John Lennon knew exactly how Marek felt about everyone, especially Séraphine. When he closed his eyes, he could see her cinnamon lips and the few tiny freckles on her nose after she spent the least bit of time in the sun. He wondered if her nipples were the same colour or a little darker. They couldn't be large. Not like Klaudia's.

Marek wished he would have said something – anything – to Séraphine about how much he loved her. Maybe if he had, she would have talked to him about what she was planning to do and he could have talked her out of it. He blamed X/Ismael or whatever his name was for being a bad influence on her.

With the hash, none of this upset Marek the way it usually would. He felt so calm, so clear. It was as if someone had cleaned out his brain socket and screwed in a brighter light bulb. Marek laughed at the idea of walking around with a light shining out of his eye sockets and people saying what a genius he was like Edison or Einstein.

All of a sudden he felt so hungry. He searched through the kitchen cupboards until he found a Mae West. He remembered it being named after a life vest and started to laugh, especially when he pictured the stacked Hollywood blonde in nothing but a life vest, and him swimming across a lake to her rescue. The crinkling paper sounded almost

musical when Marek ripped it open. He tried to reproduce the sound but couldn't. The fluffy white cake was a little bit of heaven on earth with its buttery filling and chocolate coating. Marek giggled when he thought about how much his thoughts sounded like a commercial. He didn't know whether the company had improved the cake or it was the hash, but the Mae West had never tasted better.

He poured himself a glass of Kik. The fizz sounded like tiny creatures yelling for help from a dark syrupy pit before they disappeared the way the empty bubbles in Séraphine's Astro lamp did. Marek had loved watching how the orange liquid rose up under a glow and created a space for itself within itself. Wow. That was kind of like what Marek had to do within his overcrowded household.

He almost bought his own Astro lamp. He had seen them in some of the hippie stores on St. Lawrence Street below Sherbrooke, except now they were being called lava lamps. He changed his mind when he realized how much it would remind him of Séraphine. He thought of her often enough without reminders. Even now, he felt turned on but he didn't wank off. Too much effort. He flipped over the album and ate the rest of the Mae West.

Side B had played several times when the front door opened. Apo stuck his head in and told Marek to follow him into the kitchen. Marek dragged himself down the hallway preparing to explain how the bicycle's theft wasn't his fault. When he entered the kitchen, he saw Danika crying in Mamo's lap. Mamo looked teary, too. Apo held his head in his hands. When he looked up, his eyes were as red as a rabbit's.

"Marek, sit down," he said. "We need to talk to you."

"Jeżes Maria," Marek said as he sat out of Apo's reach. "It's only a bike."

“Co?” Mamo said. “What’s wrong with you anyway? Your eyes look funny.”

“I’m probably coming down with a—”

Apo pulled up a chair next to Marek’s. “Your Baba had another heart attack.”

“Co? What? Is she okay?”

“No, she died, Marek.”

Marek felt like his ears had been plugged with cotton.

Pushing Danika away from her lap, Mamo stood up to make coffee. “I told you to come with us,” she said. “Now it’s too late. You’ll never see your Baba alive again.”

Marek felt like throwing up. “How could she die of a heart attack when she was right there in a hospital?”

With a huff, Mamo turned on the water tap and filled the stainless steel coffee pot. “You can ask how and why all you want but it won’t change anything now.”

Apo shifted his chair to face Mamo. “Are you mad at him or me? You don’t think I wanted to be there when my own mother died? I had to keep the store open.”

Mamo waved him off. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

“Well, maybe you should be.”

Marek stood up. “Since things are such crap, you might as well know that the bicycle was stolen, too,” he said in English.

Setting down the coffee pot, Mamo took a seat. “Your bicycle?”

“It’s not my bicycle.”

Apo sighed. “What happened? Where?”

“While I was delivering the beer on City Hall Street,” Marek lied.

“I should have got a lock for you,” Apo said. “We’ll get a new bike.”

Mamo went to the stove and slammed the coffee pot down on a burner. “No we won’t. We’re selling the store and the rest of this God-forsaken building.”

Apo banged his fist on the table. “A corner grocery store has to have a delivery bicycle whether we keep the place or not,” he said before walking out.

Marek watched as Mamo rolled up her eyes. He felt terrible when he realized that he never did ask Baba the name of that goddess who only ever showed humans the whites of her eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Mamo was in a sour mood after she found out Slovak church stopped holding funeral masses on Saturdays. She agreed it was awful – even bad luck – for a bride to watch a coffin being carted out just before her wedding, but she worried about the delay in putting Baba into the ground. “Everybody holds two days of visitation so we won’t be able to bury her until next Wednesday or Thursday,” she announced during supper. “That’s almost a week after her death. I’m afraid she won’t look so good by then, no matter how many chemicals the funeral workers pump into her.”

Marek toyed with the potatoes and onions on his plate. “Why does someone who’s dead have to look good?”

“You want her to start rotting and smell?”

Apo put down his fork. “Do we have to talk about this now?”

“Well, if not now, when? We have to make arrangements.”

Danika pushed away her plate. “I don’t want to see Baba if she’s going to smell.”

“She is not going to smell,” Mamo said as took her plate to the counter.

“But you said that she would.”

Mamo sighed. “No, I said that I didn’t want that to happen.”

“I don’t want to see her anyway,” Danika said in English. “It’s too creepy.”

“Po Slovensky,” Mamo said, but Danika refused to repeat herself in Slovak.

Instead she bolted for her room.

“Why did you do that?” Apo said.

“Do what?” Mamo’s jaw cracked like snapped twigs. “The only time I can talk to you is the few minutes you spend eating supper. Am I supposed to talk about this in the store where Pan Kysly or Raddy or someone else is going to walk in any second?”

Apo hunched over his meal, while Mamo cleared more plates.

“I’m not finished,” Marek mumbled, his mouth full.

She didn’t seem to hear. “Take Danika to the park or somewhere.”

“Do I have to?”

“Your father has to reopen the store, and I need to make phone calls for the funeral.”

When Marek knocked on Danika’s door, she was curled up on the bed with her arms wrapped around one of Baba’s sweaters. “This smells like Baba’s lilac soap,” she said.

Marek only remembered Baba’s foul odours: the red pepper rubs for her arthritis, the garlic breath after she chewed raw cloves to fight off colds, her sweaty feet when she took off her *papuče* and the stained glass of water by her bed for her dentures. He also remembered the smell of javelle water on her hands often, but never lilac soap.

“I’m taking you to *Molly’s*,” he said.

“I don’t want to go anywhere.”

“Mamo wants us out for a while.”

Danika buried her nose in Baba’s sweater for another few seconds. Then she hid it under her bedspread. She grabbed her pink sweater and slipped her hand into Marek’s.

They walked the couple of blocks to *Molly’s* on Duluth near St. Dominique in silence. As many different candies as Apo displayed under his counter, *Molly’s* had at

least a hundred more varieties. A sweet grey-haired little lady, Molly and her grumpy husband, Ben, sold bonbons, trinkets and comics that no other store had. They also stocked kits for model airplanes, cars, tanks, helicopters, and real kites. Marek could spend hours going through the car models and comics. It made Ben so nervous that he actually trembled whenever kids were *just looking* because so many shoplifted. Molly always reminded Ben to relax when Marek browsed. Marek had earned Molly's trust years earlier when he told her that his parents owned a store and how upset they were whenever anyone tried to steal anything.

After Marek bought three comics for Danika and a new peashooter for himself, he took her on the bus to *The Montreal Children's Hospital*. His eyes watered and his throat got tight when he thought about not visiting Baba before she died. He wasn't going to make the same mistake with Catina.

He expected Danika to be thrilled when he told her where they were going, but she didn't show much of a reaction at all. If anything, she grew quieter.

Catina was asleep when they walked into her room. She still had a nasty bump on her forehead, but her cheeks were strawberry pink. Marek felt so relieved when he saw her looking healthy again that he didn't notice Patrick sitting in a corner chair, looking stoned as usual. When Patrick sat up, Marek jumped back a little.

"Shit, you scared me," he whispered. "What are you doing here?"

"Visiting, like you," Patrick stood unsteadily. "I try to drop by for at least a few minutes every day since her mom got sicker."

"The family doesn't mind?"

“I leave when relatives show up. There’s usually someone here all day, but the family goes home for dinner.”

Catina stirred. Marek gave Danika a nudge. “Go say hello.”

Danika stumbled towards Catina and smiled awkwardly.

Marek turned his attention back to Patrick. “Do you know how Catina’s doing?”

“Better, I think. I don’t really ask.”

“Does she remember anything more?”

“No. Maybe it’s better if she doesn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe it’s better for her if she stays blank about what happened to her.” Patrick said as he started flipping through a Portuguese magazine from the nightstand.

“What are you on now?” Marek asked. “How could you say that?”

Patrick shrugged. “Why do we always have to relive everything? Why can’t we leave the past alone? Maybe if she doesn’t remember it’s because she doesn’t want to.”

“You’re weird,” Marek said as he walked up to Catina. “How are you?”

Catina smiled. “Hi. Okay.”

“Do you remember me?”

Catina squinted like she was looking towards someone standing in the sun. She nodded hesitantly after a few long seconds.

“I brought Danika to see you.” He pulled Danika closer. The girls stared at one another. It had been months since they had played together.

“Show her your comics,” he said. “Actually, why don’t you give her one and I’ll buy another copy for you.”

Danika fished into her bag and pulled out her comics. She fanned them out on the bed. Catina stared at them.

He walked over to Patrick. “What about her mǎe? How’s she doing?”

“Not good. The infection has spread.”

“Yes. Hector told me the doctors probably have to cut off her finger.”

“They already did,” Patrick whispered. “It’s gone part way up her arm.”

“What?”

“It’s eating her skin and no one is sure how to stop it. She might lose her arm.”

Marek felt the contents of his stomach start to rise up into his throat and had to swallow several times to keep it down.

“Come on,” he told Danika when he was sure he could speak without being sick.

“We have to go home.”

Danika picked out two of the three comics to put back in her bag.

Marek held Catina’s hand as he said goodbye. “Get well, eh?”

She nodded without a smile.

Patrick followed Marek and Danika out.

On the St. Catherine Street bus, Danika sat in a single seat. Marek and Patrick kept an eye on her from the back where they lit up a joint.

“I’d love to find the bastard who put Catina in that manhole,” Marek said.

“How do you know that she didn’t fall?” Patrick said.

“She would have killed herself if she had fallen.”

Patrick stared out the window. The bus grew crowded. At St. Lawrence Street, he decided to walk rather than wait for the No. 55.

“Danika can’t walk all that way,” Marek said.

“I can’t take the fish and other weird odours on that bus. Too many immigrants with smelly food.”

Marek nodded and waved goodbye.

When he and Danika arrived home, Apo gave him an order for Drolet Street.

“But we don’t have a bike.”

“Walk there,” Apo said, dumping the box into Marek’s arms. “I already ordered another bicycle, but it’s going to take at least a week to get here.”

After dropping off the order, Marek noticed the lights at Vince’s garage. He walked over and found Vince spray-painting a 1962 Fury.

“You’re working late,” Marek shouted.

Vince shut off the machine. “I’m waiting for Kammy, who’s late as usual.”

“Nice paint job.” Marek still wanted to learn how to do auto body work.

“So what’s up with you?”

“We saw Catina tonight. Danika, Patrick and I went.”

“What’s Patrick doing around her?”

Marek shrugged. “They’ve always lived on the same street.”

“Doesn’t he have any friends his own age?” Vince put away the spray-painter.

“So how is Catina?”

“Better.”

“Is she remembering more?”

“We didn’t talk much. She looks healthier, thank God. But Mrs. d’Alves might lose her arm.”

Vince stopped coiling an extension cord. “What? Can’t they do something?”

“The doctors can’t seem to stop her infection from spreading.”

Vince threw the extension cord on shelf. He looked exhausted.

“You know, if you have too much work, I could still help you on Saturdays before I start making deliveries,” Marek said. “You don’t even have to pay me.”

“We’ll see,” Vince said as he rubbed specks of paint off the back of one hand.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Vince said as he took Marek’s hand to shake it. “My sympathies about your Baba.”

“Thanks. How did you find out?”

“Hey, telegram, telephone, tell-a-Slovak, eh?”

Marek pretended to laugh.

Vince patted Marek on his jacket shoulder before he crouched down to inspect his paint job again.

“By the way, everything is okay,” Marek said.

“What?”

“Between my folks. My dad just had some business with Klaudia.”

Vince laughed. “Are you sure it wasn’t monkey business?”

“No, he’s just—”

Kammy breezed through the customer’s door. “Hello, boys.”

Vince stood up. “Come here and give me a kiss.”

Kammy stayed at the counter. “No, I don’t want to get all greasy.” As usual, she wore white except for the brilliant threads embroidered into flowers along the neckline and cuffs of her peasant blouse. It must have taken her mother hours to stitch the

elaborate design. Mamo said it was Pani Pokorny's way of showing that she was a lady of leisure because her husband had a good job as a railway engineer.

"Did he tell you?" Kammy asked Marek.

"Tell me what?"

Kammy stuck out her left hand and wiggled her fingers like a baby octopus. Her ring finger had a thin gold band with a tiny diamond.

"Wow," Marek said. "Congratulations, to both of you."

"You really didn't know?" Kammy said.

Marek shook his head.

"Your mother didn't tell you about the engagement party next Sunday?"

"She probably forgot."

Kammy suddenly covered her mouth with her newly jewelled hand. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said. "My deepest sympathies about your Baba." She kissed him on both cheeks.

"Thanks."

"I hope you can still come to the party," she said. "It's going to be at *The Slovak Hall* after the meeting about Expo."

Marek's ears perked up. "What meeting about Expo?"

"We have to decide what to show in the space we're going to have," she said.

"It's a lot smaller than we expected."

"We're going to show things from here?" Vince asked.

Kammy shrugged. "I guess it's too expensive to ship everything from there. And what's wrong with our stuff? We have costumes, dolls, crystal--"

“Crystal is Czech,” Vince said.

“Not all of it. A lot of it is made in Slovakia, but obviously people don’t know that.” She made a playfully scolding face.

Vince threw his rag aside. “If I’m going to pay to go to Expo, I want to see the stuff that people over there have now, not the junk they shipped here years ago.”

Trying to regain Kammy’s attention, Marek touched her arm. She jumped back when she saw a tiny grease spot on her sleeve.

“I’m really sorry,” Marek said. “I must have picked up the grease when I shook Vince’s hand, but it’s my fault – not his – for not seeing it.”

Kammy reached into her purse and pulled out a tiny bottle. “It’s okay,” she said as she dabbed the spot with mineral spirits. “I’ll have to get used to it being married to a mechanic.” She gave Vince a kiss on the cheek, being careful to keep the rest of herself a good distance from him.

Marek cleared his throat. “Do you know if there’s going to be anyone at the meeting talking about the jobs at Expo?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Why?” Vince asked. “You want to work there?”

Marek shrugged.

“Oh my God,” Kammy said, looking at her watch. “I still have to go to your store to order the cold cuts for the party, and then shop for decorations...” She playfully slapped Vince’s shoulder with the back of her hand. “I told you we should have given ourselves more time to plan the engagement party.”

Marek stepped forward. “I can give your order to my father if you want.”

“That’s so nice of you, but I don’t have it written down.” Kammy paused, looking at her watch again. “But it would save me so much time....”

Vince looked around the customer counter. “Damn it. The new guy is always taking my pens. Marek, go to my office and grab one off my desk and some paper, too.”

Marek nodded and started down the narrow corridor behind the counter.

“Hey,” Vince called him.

Marek stopped and turned.

“Where’s your bicycle?”

“Long story,” Marek said and headed back towards the office. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Kammy and Vince kissing, only their mouths touching.

Down the narrow corridor, he peeked into the washroom. It was as filthy as ever.

The office still had its walls covered with pinup girls but a lot of them looked younger and more of their bodies were exposed. No wonder Vince wanted to keep Kammy out. Marek ran his fingers over a nude nurse. The paper felt clammy.

Everything was as cluttered as the last time Marek saw it. He walked over to the desk and found pens and pads next to the phone. Mission accomplished, he sat on the chair and imagined owning a garage one day.

Then he glanced down at the drawer... The drawer with all the lady things in it... The trophy drawer... He knew it wasn’t right, but his arm reached down to open the drawer. It wouldn’t budge. He searched around the desk and found a key taped to the back of it. As soon as he stuck it into the desk’s keyhole, he heard the lock release.

He paused, knowing what he was about to do was an invasion of privacy, but his curiosity was overwhelming. Pulling open the drawer, he removed the false bottom. It

had the same lady things, but also a pure white bra and panties that looked as if they might fit Kammy. The bra smelled of baby powder. So did Kammy.

As he put back the bra, he saw two hair barrettes tucked in a corner. They were the same bright pink barrettes in the shape of elephants that Catina always wore. Marek picked them up and turned them in his palm a few times.

“What the heck is taking you so long?” Vince asked. “You can’t be that slow if you’re ever going to work...”

In his panic to close the drawer, Marek slammed it shut with an undeniable bang.

Vince rushed towards the desk. “What the fuck are you doing with my stuff?”

Marek formed a fist to hide the barrettes. “The drawer was open and...”

“No, it wasn’t,” Vince said, his face as white as paper. “I always keep it locked.”

Inside, Marek felt as shaky as Jell-O, but he tried to look as casual as possible as he slowly rose from the chair and rolled it between Vince and himself. If he needed to run, he could push the chair towards Vince to give himself a head start.

The metal clasps from the barrettes dug into his skin as he kept his fist as tight as possible. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do with the barrettes. Maybe ask Catina how she lost them. But what if she didn’t remember? He couldn’t trust Vince not to lie the way he always did about promising to give him a job. Yet it didn’t seem right to go straight to the police without asking Vince why the barrettes were in his trophy drawer. Maybe there was a perfectly innocent explanation.

“What did you steal from me?” Vince said, almost shouting.

“Nothing.”

“I know you took something,” Vince said. “I can see it in your hand.”

Marek felt he had no choice but to open his palm and give Vince a chance to explain. As soon as he released his grip on the barrettes, Vince snatched them. Marek tried to get them back, but Vince kept him away with the chair.

“It’s not what you think,” Vince said, dropping into the chair after shoving the barrettes deep into a pocket in his overalls.

Marek leaned against the doorframe to steady himself. “Did you put her in that manhole?” he asked with his voice as shaky as when it was changing.

“Are you fuckin’ crazy?” Vince banged the desk. “Why would I fish her out if I put her down there?”

“Maybe you changed your mind.” Marek held the door frame to keep his bearings in case he needed to run out. “Maybe that’s how you knew where she was.”

“You’re out of your fucking head.” Vince stood up, shoving the barrettes in a pocket. “Your sister came to get me. She’s the one who told me Catina was down there.”

“My sister?”

“Yes.” Vince paced. “So why don’t you ask her if she put Catina down there?”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Not any more ridiculous than you thinking I would do it.”

“Then what are you doing with her bar— ”

“None of your goddamn business. And whatever Catina says, you can’t believe her. Her brain is kaput. It’ll never be right.”

“Her memory is fucked up because of what someone did to her.” Marek said as he edged backwards into the corridor. “If it wasn’t you who put her down there, why are you so afraid of her remembering?”

Vince stared at a wall. "I never did anything that hurt Catina."

"What did you do to her?"

"Get out," Vince yelled, lunging at Marek.

Marek ran down the corridor. He stopped and caught his breath before reaching Kammy.

"I called my father and he would really prefer if you and your mother came in person so you can decide how thick you want the meat sliced," he lied as he walked past her. "Sorry about that. I have to go."

Running home, Marek hoped to God that he was wrong about everything. He wished Vince would phone him to explain himself better.

No phone call. Vince was probably too upset at Marek for drawing the wrong conclusions. He needed time to cool off before straightening things out.

Back in his room, Marek couldn't get the barrettes out of his head. Why would Vince take them? Maybe he saw they were falling out of her hair when she got hurt at that manhole and decided to keep them for her. But why put them in that drawer? And why say Catina was a liar when she hadn't even said anything?

Marek went over every possibility. Maybe Vince was only having a fantasy about her. No harm in that, although Marek's stomach tightened when he thought about someone fantasizing about Danika. The whole situation with the barrettes felt wrong. Yet the last thing Marek wanted to do was get Vince in some kind of trouble if he didn't hurt Catina. It wouldn't matter if Vince was innocent once the police got involved. People would never look at him or treat him the same way again.

Even if Vince did touch Catina on purpose, maybe there was no harm done if she couldn't remember. Marek shook his head, surprised that he would think such a thing. If Vince had done something ugly to Catina, Marek needed proof. Without the barrettes, there wasn't any, unless Catina regained her memory. Then Marek could back her up by saying that he saw her barrettes in Vince's trophy drawer.

As he went to hang up his jacket, he noticed grease on the shoulder. He easily wiped off the surface grim, but the grease had worked its way into the vinyl creases. It would never come out.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The funeral parlour reeked of fresh carnations, the *fleur du jour* for every Slovak occasion because they filled out floral arrangements at minimum cost. In the windowless Salon A they reminded Marek of when Mamo had stuck too many cloves in a baked ham.

Wreaths and baskets had been placed on stools and stands all around Baba's coffin. Marek knew Mamo would be pleased by the large number. She counted them at other people's funerals like they were part of a popularity contest.

Marek walked up to the coffin along with his family and bowed his head. Instead of praying, he thanked Baba for the times she helped him to avoid getting heck from Mamo and Apo and for all her good cooking. He also told her to say hi to Dzedo. Marek wanted to feel sadder about Baba's death but something inside him had shut down. He figured it had to do with him no longer wanting to feel bad about not visiting her in the hospital. It was better to feel nothing. As awful as he knew it might make him seem, he was also happy that he would be getting his old room back. Although Baba had always been in his life, she really got on his nerves after she moved in with the family. Maybe if their home was larger, it would have been easier.

He made the sign of the cross and started to step back when Mamo grabbed his arm. "Touch her," she said. "If you touch her, you won't have bad dreams about her."

Mamo pulled him forward with such determination that he was afraid his sleeve would rip off his suit jacket. Baba's fingers had been laced together in perpetual prayer along with her rosary. They felt as cold as a fridge and hard as a baseball. He removed his hand as quickly as possible and stuffed it into a pocket to warm up.

Danika whined as she tried to wiggle her small hand away from Mamo's. "I don't want to touch her," she said. "Don't make me touch her."

Apo grabbed Danika's hand and placed it on the side of Baba's white satin pillow. "This should be good enough," he said, giving Mamo a peeved look.

Mamo scowled at him. She valued rituals like they were cultured pearls.

Fidgeting, Marek tried to lower the crotch of his pants through his pockets. The pants had become way too small. He worried his balls would turn carnation blue from the lack of space. The jacket also felt like it would split down the back if he moved suddenly.

As they waited for visiting hours to start, Mamo cried a little.

"Co?" Apo asked.

"I should have never told her that she had to get rid of that hen," she said.

Apo put a hand on her shoulder. "Words never killed anybody."

"No, but they can lead to actions that do."

"It is not your fault," Apo reassured her. "If it's anybody's fault, it's those goddamn amateur terrorists for scaring her with that shed fire."

Danika tugged at Mamo's arm. "Can I go play in the other room?"

"No. You have to wait for people to tell you they're sorry that Baba's dead."

"What if they're not sorry?"

"They're going to say it whether they're sorry or not, and you have to say thank you."

As with all Slovak funerals, the same few individuals arrived exactly at one o'clock. Marek had seen them at other visitations standing outside the funeral home and staring at their watches. It was almost like some kind of race to see who could enter first,

although Marek couldn't figure out what the prize was. These same people always said they came early because they had to leave early but they often stayed for hours talking. Funerals were one of the best venues for catching up with everyone's news.

Within a half hour, Salon A was crowded with people who Marek saw at nearly every Slovak occasion. They acted mournful for a few minutes and then stepped away from the coffin and socialized. A young death would have generated lengthier sorrow, but Baba had lived to a good age.

Pan Kysly joined a circle of older men to talk about how much time each of them might have left and express their hopes for it to be longer. The old women sat hunched in chairs lining the far wall and compared aches and pains until one of them had a soothing piece of gossip to whisper. Apo's pals shared work stories, while Mamo's friends talked about how their children were driving them crazy. No one talked very much about Baba, maybe because there was not much left to say.

Marek was startled by a small tap on his shoulder. He turned around to see Hector and Catina. Hector lifted Catina's hand with his own. "She wants to say goodbye to the lady who always told such good stories."

Catina unclasped Hector's fingers with her other hand and ran up to the coffin. She stepped onto the padded bench meant for kneeling to the dismay of several older women. Mamo walked over and showed her where to stand instead.

"Thanks for coming," Marek told Hector, who nodded.

Catina talked out loud to Baba as if she were still alive. The same older women started to whisper to each other.

"Is she remembering more?" Marek asked.

Hector shrugged. “A little, like about your grandmother, but the doctors say that she might never remember what happened that day. It could be she’s blocking it out, along with some other things.”

“What other things?”

“That’s the problem,” Hector said. “We don’t know.”

On tip toes, Catina reached into Baba’s coffin to pat her clasped hands. Again Mamo ran over to make sure that Catina didn’t do anything to mess up Baba. All eyes were on Catina, watching and waiting for something to talk about.

“How’s your aunt?” he asked Hector.

“Not good.” Hector lowered his head and shuffled a foot on the maroon carpet. “She’s going to lose a part of her arm.”

“Oh my God. I told her to get her finger looked at.”

“I know. We all did, but the doctors say it might not have made a difference. She might have been infected with this germ or virus or whatever it is almost right away.”

Marek thought about the handkerchief that he gave her smudged with sewer dirt. No, he couldn’t think about it. He wouldn’t let himself about it. The ambulance guy had cleaned and disinfected her finger right away. The infection had to have happened later.

“Who’s looking after Catina?” he asked.

“She’s staying with my family during the week and with her father on the weekends.”

Catina ran back to Hector and wrapped her arms around his legs. “Aprovação. Eu estou pronto para ir agora.”

Marek raised his eyebrows. “You want to go already?”

Catina looked up and nodded.

“Don’t you want to spend a bit of time with Danika first?”

Catina shook her head. “Por favor, vamos ir,” she told Hector. “Let’s go.”

Hector shrugged. “I guess they had a spat.”

As Hector started to leave, Marek leaned over to whisper. “I’ll have some extra hash for you next week, as a special thank you from me.”

Hector, who had become not only a good friend but one of Marek’s best customers, nodded his appreciation. Marek watched Hector go over to his parents to say he was leaving with Catina. Hector didn’t look tough at all when he spoke to them.

Marek’s stomach knotted when he saw Tatiana enter the room. She walked over to him while her parents went to pay their respects to Apo.

“My sympathies,” she said, taking his hand.

“Same to you,” he whispered back. “How did they find you?”

“I trusted the wrong person,” she said, lips trembling. “I’ll be smarter next time.”

“When?” Marek doubted the Duseks would ever let her out of their sight again.

“Soon, or I swear to God I’m going to kill myself.”

“Don’t talk like that. You’ll find a way.” He excused himself, feeling uneasy about how intense Tatiana seemed.

He walked closer to where Apo was greeting Hector’s parents and introducing Señor Soares as his new landlord. Two days after Baba’s death, Apo called Señor Soares to discuss selling the store. It seemed Apo had less trouble letting go of the family business with his parents dead and Marek having made it clear he wasn’t interested in it.

The men had struck a deal that would let Apo lease the store and the middle flat for another eighteen months. At first Mamo was upset at having to wait so long to move, but she calmed down when Apo said he would use the time to try to do some kind of job training. She also perked up when he said that she needed time to go house hunting. While Marek was happy for Mamo, he didn't like the idea of having to move away from all his friends in a year and a half.

Marek looked around in case Vince had showed up, but saw Patrick and his whole family instead. Apo often invited Monsieur Richard over for a beer at the store since he stopped being friends with Raddy. They both liked to talk about how it was better for Quebec to stay in Canada with the Communists threatening to take over the world. Monsieur Richard was also helping Apo to improve his French. At least that was what Apo was telling Mamo to justify the free beer he gave Monsieur Richard. More often than not when Marek heard them, they were chatting in English. Apo threw in the occasional *oui* or *bien sûr*. Or he mispronounced English words as French.

Mrs. Richard stood around like a statue holding her purse on her arm. She looked at Marek blankly until Monsieur Richard whispered to her to express her sympathies. Then he led her towards Mamo and Danika. Marek noticed she was limping a little, and he wondered if she had fallen or Monsieur Richard had roughed her up again. Having seen her spaced out in the past, he was more concerned by Patrick's appearance. He must have dropped ten pounds. His eyes were bloodshot and his nostrils looked raw.

"Was that Catina I saw?" Patrick asked.

"Yeah."

"Is she still here?"

“No, I don’t think so. Why?”

Patrick shrugged and went to stop Isabel and Luc from playing tag around people’s legs.

Throughout the afternoon, Mamo and Apo’s friends kept streaming into the funeral parlour. Kammy’s parents had arrived shortly before two. Although Marek was tempted to ask when Kammy and Vince were coming, he knew that wouldn’t be polite.

Marek tried to wiggle some room in his crotch without anyone noticing. He wasn’t sure how he was going to survive in his tight suit until nine o’clock at night. He went to the smoking room and bought a Pepsi from the dispenser. He was dying for a smoke. Actually, he was dying even more for a joint. Faking a faint smile each time someone offered condolences was getting to him. He downed his Pepsi and went over to Apo in the main parlour.

“I need some air,” he whispered. “All these carnations are suffocating me.”

“Be back in 10 minutes. The priest is coming at three o’.”

Marek looked around for Patrick but the Richards had left. He walked out of the funeral parlour and over to the next block to light up a joint. He was finding it harder to go more than a few hours without having either a joint or a hit of hash. Thank goodness Con was getting him a regular supply. Marek also found it was taking more weed or hash to get the same sweet buzz, although he realized this might be his imagination. Yet maybe it was time to try something a bit stronger once in a while. Not often. Just once in a while.

He thought about trying the coke that Patrick got from somewhere, but it scared him. Patrick seemed desperate for it these days. He was robbing his mother blind to get the money he needed for the coke and it was never enough.

Con was only giving them each a gram of weed and very occasionally hash when they helped to stuff the letters that Con and Luczia still wrote to new recruits at the military bases in the States, or when they went downtown to meet a draft dodger or deserter who had made it over the border.

Patrick often smoked the hash right away to settle his nerves. He refused to tell Marek who was supplying him with the harder drugs. It had to be a friend of X's. Marek would ask Luczia the next time he saw her. She had invited Con to live at her flat, although it didn't seem to be helping her in terms of getting it on with him. Con's one love had become fighting the war. He was less uptight about demonstrating in public after the Canadian government had made it pretty clear that it wouldn't ship back dodgers merely for protesting. Con had become more worried about being unable to return to the States without being thrown in jail for who knew how long.

The newspapers all had a front-page story about how the police had arrested Séraphine, X, Benoît and several others for their involvement in the bomb plot. The cops had found them hiding in a barn up north. Marek felt badly for Séraphine, but he couldn't bring himself to visit her in jail. First of all, his visit could put his family under suspicion again. Secondly, and maybe even more importantly, he couldn't bear seeing her through bars or a Plexiglas wall.

Marek finished his joint and popped some Chiclets gum in his mouth. He figured the priest's incense would cloak the marijuana smell.

Back at the funeral parlour, everyone stood in preparation for the prayers. Marek took his place alongside his family. Following tradition, the priest began each prayer of the rosary with others reciting the second half.

They were halfway through the first set of Hail Marys when Raddy walked into the parlour wearing a dark blue pinstripe suit and holding a fedora in his hand. As soon as Apo saw Raddy, his face reddened. Mamo locked her arm through Apo's. The priest kept praying but others fell silent as they looked from Apo to Raddy and back again.

After the prayers ended, Raddy approached Apo and Mamo. Apo broke away from Mamo's hold and walked off. Raddy offered his sympathies to Mamo. She thanked him and then he went over to the coffin and kneeled. Marek overheard someone whisper that Raddy had a sin to think he could worship as a Catholic.

When Raddy moved towards a group of men he knew, they closed circle to exclude him. He walked over to a row of empty chairs and sat down. Everyone pretended not to look at him while desperate to see his every move. The room grew quieter than an empty church. Mamo walked over and sat next to him.

"How are you?" she asked quite loudly in Slovak as she took his hand in hers.

Raddy forced a smile. "Tak. Dobre."

They started to chat in voices too low to overhear. Within a few minutes, the others grew bored of trying to eavesdrop and resumed their own conversations.

Marek wanted to go over and say hello but stayed glued to his spot. Danika had no such problem. As soon as she returned from the washroom, she ran into Raddy's arms. "Where have you been?" she asked. "I've missed you."

Apo looked upset when he saw Raddy with Mamo and Danika, but he calmed down after he noticed people chatting about other things. Nevertheless, he went out of his way to avoid coming face to face with Raddy. Marek wondered if Apo would ever speak to his *krajan* again. Things were so much easier when a guy was a confirmed bachelor and no one questioned why. Marek was still having a hard time figuring out what Mamo was doing talking with Raddy. It could be Mamo simply wanted to avoid a scene. Or maybe she actually felt sorry for him. Marek suspected it was easier for Mamo to be kind to Raddy knowing that Apo would never let Raddy be the third leg in their lives again.

Fortunately, Raddy knew better than to show up at the funeral and wake. The family was exhausted by two and a half days of mourning for Baba.

“At least she didn’t smell,” Danika told Mamo during supper that night. Apo had already gone downstairs to reopen the store. He was afraid he had lost some regulars even though he left a note on the door in English and French explaining that the store was closed for a family funeral. Monsieur Richard had helped Apo to write the French part.

Marek joined Apo downstairs to get out of drying the dishes. He jumped off the cooler when he saw Con and opened the door for him.

“What do you want?” Apo said.

“My stuff. I want my stuff.”

“Get everything now and then give me your key,” Apo said.

“I might need a couple of days.”

Apo turned red. “After what you did you have the nerve to still bother me?”

Con looked over at Marek.

“My grandmother died,” Marek said. “She had a heat attack because of the fire.”

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t start that.”

Apo straightened. “I don’t care. You’re trouble – all of you. I want you out.”

Con raised his hands. “Okay.”

After Con left, Marek went to the flat with Mamo and Apo. Con had taken his stuff but left Séraphine’s things.

Mamo fumed. “What are we supposed to do with all of this?”

“Throw everything out,” Apo said.

“What if she comes back for it?”

“I don’t care.”

Mamo scratched her head for a while. “What if the police want some of it?”

This gave Apo pause. “We’ll keep it all in the basement for a while.”

Mamo bit her lip as she collected the empty pizza boxes from the living room and shoved them into a garbage bag.

“Can I keep this in my room until Séraphine comes back for it?” Marek asked, holding the Astro lamp. He wanted it to remember the fun times with Séraphine.

At first Mamo hesitated, but then nodded okay. Marek had counted on her liking the bright orange. Baba’s death would force her to wear all black for another year.

Dances and parties were also out of the question, but Mamo insisted on delivering the heating pad and blender that she bought for Kammy and Vince’s engagement to *The Slovak Hall* since the family was going to the meeting about Expo ’67.

On the following Sunday, the family splurged on a rare taxi ride to get all of Mamo’s dolls and the *valaska* to *The Slovak Hall*. When they arrived at the meeting,

there was a heated debate over how much room Slovaks deserved within the Czechoslovakian pavilion.

“It should be half and half,” shouted one man, whose name Marek had forgotten. “It’s not right that the Czechs should have most of the building.”

“But the Czech government is paying for it,” said another.

“With whose money?” Raddy’s mother said. “The Czechs got rich on our backs.”

“We should build our own pavilion,” the first man said.

“And where would we get the money?” an elderly woman asked.

“We’ll raise it, like we did for our churches and this place.”

“It took years to raise that money,” another woman said. “Not in a few months.”

When Apo cleared his throat, Mamo tapped his arm to stay quiet but he couldn’t. “We should be glad the Czechs are building the pavilion and letting us show what Slovaks have. We are one nation. We should work together against the Communists.”

The first old woman blew air out of her mouth so hard that her lips vibrated. “The Czechs are the Communists.”

“How do you know that?” Apo said. “Maybe they’re not.”

“Every one in power over there is Communist now. Slovaks, too.”

Mamo tugged at Apo’s arm to follow her. The family walked over to the table where two women were taking inventory of items for display at Expo. Mamo beamed as she began showing her dolls.

“We have enough dolls already,” Pani Hadvab said. “Valaski, too.”

Mamo’s smile disappeared. “Then what the hell do you want?”

“Some modern things, sent over more recently. Some crystal or Modra pottery.”

“Well the bulletin you mailed should have said so.” Mamo stuffed the dolls back into the box and walked out with the rest of the family hurrying to catch up.

“Crystal and Modra pottery,” she mumbled. “You have to go back to Slovakia to bring those kinds of breakable things here.”

They went over to the smaller room next door where the engagement party was supposed to start in a couple of hours. The room was filled with white tablecloths, pink carnations in white vases and pale blue balloons. In the far corner, Kammy sat hunched over a table. Her parents were patting her back as she cried.

“What happened?” Apo asked.

“The bastard is gone,” Pan Pokorny said. “Kammy was phoning him for a couple of days and never getting an answer. She didn’t think anything of it because it’s so loud at his garage. But she went there after church today and saw everything was gone. The bastard packed or sold all his equipment and took off somewhere.”

“What?” Mamo looked shocked. “Why would he do that?”

Marek had a few ideas, but wasn’t sure which ones to share, if any. Maybe Vince realized he didn’t want to settle down with Kammy. Maybe he fell in love at first sight with someone else. And maybe.... Marek’s chest tightened as he thought about the other possibility, yet he said nothing. What was he going to say? There was no trophy drawer to show. No barrettes. No proof of any kind. Marek wasn’t even sure that anything happened. It didn’t make sense that Vince would harm Catina, stuff her down a manhole and then make every possible effort to save her, unless his conscience got to him?

Marek slumped into a seat. The more he tried to deny it, the more convinced he became that Vince had started the rumours about other men hurting Catina. He couldn’t

believe it when he went by Monsieur Cousineau's shop a week earlier and saw it had been sold to a stained glass maker. The new owner had no idea where Monsieur Cousineau had moved.

Raddy still lived in the same boarding house, but he didn't spend time with anyone from the Slovak community anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Six

A week later, the Dancos were visiting another funeral parlour. The doctors had tried to stop the flesh-eating disease by amputating Severina d'Alves's arm, but when it invaded the rest of her body, she died within hours.

"They said they had never seen anything spread so fast," Hector told Marek while Catina went to the washroom. "I thank God that Catina didn't catch it from her."

"And how is she doing?" Marek asked.

Hector shrugged. "Her memory is not improving. They don't know whether it's because she's in shock about her mother dying or a permanent memory loss."

Marek wished there were some way to make her remember. Rumour had it Vince had gone off to Windsor, Ontario, where he was making good money working in a car factory. Maybe he did get cold feet about marrying Kammy, as some were saying. Yet Vince didn't strike Marek as the kind of guy who would pick up and leave because he was done with a girl. Marek could hardly believe it when he saw for himself the FOR LEASE sign at the garage. Then again, Vince had practically left Kammy at the altar. It would have been hard to face other Slovaks after what he did to her. Interestingly, Kammy had recovered quickly and was already dating Eddy Medved.

When Catina returned from the washroom, her skin was as pale as snow.

"I'm really sorry about what happened to your m̃e," he said.

She nodded.

Marek pointed through the maze of people to where his parents were standing.

"Danika is somewhere over there if you want to talk to her."

Catina shrugged as she linked her arms around Hector's thigh.

"She's like that with a lot of people right now," Hector said. "It's all too much."

As Marek stood around talking to a few guys from school, Guerino arrived with Hortense. G ignored Marek, but Hortense gave him a smile. The rumour around school was that she planned to dump him now that Hector was in charge of Los Lobos. The gang had voted Guerino out. Hector and the others were fed up with him picking fights. It was one thing to defend Portuguese and Italian honour or a sister's reputation, but Guerino had started beating up French kids for no reason.

Marek smiled back at Hortense but didn't risk a confrontation with G by speaking with her. Instead he watched as Hector moved Catina from group to group like one of Danika's walking dolls. Hector had invited Marek to join Los Lobos, but Marek didn't see the need to belong to a gang. Standing up to Guerino had given him enough of a tough reputation. Wearing gang colours would just attract the principal and teachers' attention and make it harder to sell dope at school.

Later that night at home, Marek asked Danika why she didn't make more of an effort to talk with Catina. She burst into tears.

When Mamo rushed into the living room, Danika ran into her arms.

"I'm so sorry," she kept saying in Slovak. "I didn't mean it." She cried so hard for a while that Marek thought she was going to pass out.

"Calm down," Mamo repeated. "Catch your breath."

It was at least ten minutes before Danika exhausted her tears.

"Now tell me what's wrong," Mamo said.

"I didn't mean for her to go down there," Danika said, almost crying again.

Marek sat up. "Into the manhole?"

Danika nodded and wrapped her arms tightly around Mamo's waist, but Mamo distanced herself slightly to look at Danika. "You told Catina to go down there?"

"We didn't mean it." Danika started to cry really hard again.

Mamo patted her head. "It's okay. Just tell us what happened."

Danika kept sniffing as she talked. "She asked me and two of our friends, Lise and Maggie, where she should hide if she's outside and Nosa shows up. We told her to go home, but she asked us what to do if she couldn't go home. I thought she was kidding, making believe, so I told her she could hide in a sewer. I was joking. I didn't think she would do it. I was joking." Danika started to sob hard again, especially when Mamo pressed her close.

Marek sat numb as he thought about how terrified Catina had to be to lower herself into such a filthy place. He wondered how she found the strength to push aside the manhole cover enough to squeeze by it. "Did she say who Nosa was?"

"I don't know," Danika said, drying her eyes. "I don't think so."

"Think," Marek said, tugging her arm. "Try to remember."

"I don't know," Danika yelled back. "If I did, I would tell you."

Mamo pushed away Marek's hand. "Leave her be. She's had enough." Mamo took Danika's face into her hands and wiped away the remaining tears with her thumbs. "It's good that you told us. Now go wash up."

As soon as Danika left, Mamo turned to Marek. "You can't say anything. We can't change what happened and I don't want Danika to get in trouble with the police."

Marek was still thinking about who might have frightened Catina so badly.

“Ti mne čuješ? Do you hear me?” Mamo squeezed Marek’s hand. “You can’t say anything about this to anyone, or Danika could get into a lot of trouble.”

Marek nodded. “I understand.”

“No, I don’t think you do,” Mamo said, taking Marek by his shoulders. “If the police find out what Danika told Catina to do, she could be taken away from us.”

Marek eyes widened. “But she didn’t mean any harm.”

“It won’t matter if enough people get angry over what she did. People are always desperate to have someone pay when something awful happens. You have to keep your mouth shut forever about this. Not a word to anyone. Do you understand?”

Nodding, he dropped the idea of asking Catina who had frightened her so much.

He walked over to the living room window and saw Tatiana across the street. She now opened the curtains all the way and stared out from the middle of her window.

Marek looked at the metal grates on the Duseks’ bottom windows. Pan Dusek told Apo he installed them after a robber tried to break into the house, but Marek knew they were to stop Tatiana from sneaking out from the basement again.

Both Mamo and Apo were furious after Marek had phoned the police and said Tatiana was being held against her will. He thought his call would be anonymous, but the cops traced his number and showed up at the store to follow up. They told Apo they didn’t see any signs of Tatiana being restrained or locked up. They even offered to take her with them but she refused. Marek suspected it was a cop she had mistakenly trusted the first time she had run away.

Pan Dusek had marched over and given Apo an earful about Marek phoning the police. Apo promised that Marek would never interfere again. He told Marek to mind his

own business. Tatiana was a big girl and if she really wanted to leave, she would. Marek doubted it was that simple. Yet he didn't see what more he could do unless she asked for help.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Tatiana never did ask for help. Instead everyone was surprised a year and a half later when she filled an old suitcase and walked out.

“Look, Dad,” Marek said, having finally convinced Mamo and Apo to let him call them Mom and Dad the way other kids called their parents.

Dad put down one of the last boxes he was packing before handing over the store to Señor Soares. They watched as Tatiana struggled to get the suitcase away from Pan Dusek’s grip. Tatiana yanked it free, and Pan Dusek fell backwards. Tatiana helped him up but then walked away.

Pani Dusek tried to stop her, too. She pulled on Tatiana’s sweater, pleading with her to stay, but Tatiana shook off her mother’s grasp and kept walking.

Marek grabbed his jacket but Dad blocked the door.

“I just want to say goodbye,” Marek said, trying to squeeze past him.

“You’re not running off somewhere with her?”

When Marek laughed, Dad stepped out of the way.

Outside, Marek unlocked the bike from the lamp post. He caught up with Tatiana on the next block. She smiled and put her luggage in the delivery basket. He walked the bike alongside her to the provincial bus station at Berri de Montigny. “I hope they’ll be okay,” she kept saying.

“Here,” he said, giving her ten bucks. “Get a fare for as far away as possible.”

“I think I’ll –”

Marek shook his head. “Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know in case I’m asked.”

She leaned forward taking his chin into her hand and placed her lips on his.

“Thank you,” she said. “Maybe I can send you a postcard.”

“No. You can’t take any chances of them knowing where you are.”

She nodded and sighed.

Marek handed over her suitcase. “You can do this,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.”

He started to pedal away. From the corner of his eye, he watched Tatiana hesitate and then head for the Métro station. He really hoped Montreal had become large enough to let her disappear.

Seeing the time, Marek pedalled hard up the steep streets back to the store. He was supposed to be at Patrick’s in thirty minutes. They spent less time together since Patrick’s folks separated nearly a year earlier. Everyone thought Mrs. Richard would crack up when Monsieur Richard took up with a teenager at his office. Instead she never looked happier. She loved being an office temp and was taking steno courses at night.

Mr. Richard took Isabel and Luc to his new flat on weekends, but Patrick was stuck with them after school. Isabel and Luc basically took care of themselves, cooking *Kraft Diner* or *Campbell’s* soup while Patrick was strung out on the couch. Patrick did his best to look more alert when his parents were around, but anybody could see that he had a problem, unless they were totally absorbed by their own lives. Marek thought about saying something to the Richards because he was so worried, but he was afraid Patrick would be shipped off to the home for troubled boys in the Laurentians and he would never see Patrick again.

“Where did Tatiana go?” Dad asked when Marek entered the store.

“I honestly don’t know.”

Marek looked up at the Molson clock. He still had a few minutes before he met Patrick. "Can't we at least keep the clock as a souvenir?" he asked.

Dad shrugged. He had tossed out the Dow clock and everything else from the brewery months earlier. For several weeks, people had stopped drinking beer almost entirely because doctors suspected one of the brands had been responsible for more than a dozen men dying in Quebec City. The drop in beer sales almost wiped out the Dancos financially. For a while, it looked as if Señor Soares would back out of buying the store. A medical investigator said it was a chemical that Dow added to its beer to give it a foamy head that had destroyed the heart muscles of at least twenty-five heavy drinkers. The company removed the cobalt but no one wanted the beer anymore. It went from being as popular as Pepsi in Quebec to something only drunks bought on account of it being so cheap.

Marek pulled out his new schoolbag from behind the counter and took out a folder. His sixteenth birthday wasn't for another three weeks, but Mom and Dad had bought him the schoolbag and a season's passport to Expo '67. He tucked the passport into the inside pocket of his jacket and zipped up.

"Be home by eleven," Dad said.

Marek nodded. He had wanted to wait outside a Métro station overnight so he could be among the first visitors when Expo '67 opened that day, but Mom insisted it was too dangerous. He did appreciate her letting him take the day off school.

Walking over to Henri Julien, he saw Klaudia leaning out of her window with her arms folded as usual. Her unbridled boobs sagged over the window casing. The no-fault divorce coming into effect was putting her out of business. Dad said she had no money

worries with all the rent she collected from several duplexes and triplexes on Henri Julien. A lot of people eager to move had sold their homes to her dirt cheap. Dad still thought it was a mistake to sell their building, saying its value would pick up in a few years, but Mom just wanted out.

Marek gave Klaudia an appreciative nod. Klaudia smiled back. He never did apologize to her, but she seemed to have forgiven him anyway. Dad must have said something to her. Marek was grateful to her. Looking for the booze in Dad's secret compartment, Marek had found a bank letter threatening to seize the building if Dad failed to make an immediate payment. Klaudia had obviously lent Dad a lot more money than whatever Raddy had taken.

Across the street, Patrick was waiting outside with Hortense. After she got nowhere with Hector, she asked Marek to go out. They had been seeing each other for six months. Marek walked around the now co-ed school with her on his arm like a trophy. And while she didn't let him go all the way, they came pretty close to it. He would miss her when they broke up, but couldn't see taking the long bus trip from Rosemount to spend time with her after his family moved. Maybe if there was a Métro station near the Dancos' new home, but there wasn't. So he didn't see it lasting, especially with Mamo refusing to let Marek invite Hortense over.

Marek was thinking of making a clean break from everyone in the neighbourhood. He still wanted to smoke pot and hash and maybe sell some after he moved, but he was fed up with Con pressuring him to go to anti-war protests. Marek refused to go after he overheard Luczia saying the police might be photographing everyone at the demonstrations.

He was also fed up with all the kids at school bugging him to sell them weed. Some of them almost got him suspended with how openly they asked for some.

Marek kissed Hortense and she hooked her arm into his. He gave Patrick a playful punch and they started walking towards rue St-Denis to catch the bus to the Métro.

“Thanks again, Marek, for buying me a day pass,” Patrick said.

Marek nodded. He didn’t know how close they would stay once he moved but he wanted to keep the friendship they had since Grade One.

The number of people at the Bonaventure station was unbelievable. Thick ropes had been set up to keep the hordes moving down long bricked corridors. For a second, Marek thought he saw Tatiana, but it couldn’t be. The girl he spotted had black hair.

When a subway train arrived to take another slew of people to the Île-Sainte-Hélène station, everyone pushed and shoved to fit into a car. Marek held onto Hortense’s hand and the back of Patrick’s jacket so they wouldn’t be separated. They were squeezed like sardines when the automatic doors closed. The subway train sped through a long tunnel under the St. Lawrence River. Marek wished Dad and Raddy could see him, but then he felt a little anxious thinking about all the water overhead.

“Are you okay?” Hortense asked.

He nodded as he saw the first glimmer of the Île-Sainte-Hélène station. When the doors opened, he was pushed so hard by the crowd that he couldn’t stop to wait for Hortense and Patrick. They had to fight their way through people to catch up with him.

The three of them were corralled down another corridor and then out several Métro station doors before joining a sea of people in an outdoor covered area. Marek had never seen so many human beings in all of his life. They were all pressing forward

towards a dozen entrance booths with turnstiles. Speakers boomed welcoming messages in various languages. Most of the people were white but there were also countless Asians, blacks and people of other races.

As the crowd pressed Hortense and Marek towards the turnstiles, he envied the shorter and more civilized VIP line. He couldn't believe it at first, but he peered harder and saw Séraphine Moreau standing behind the Plexiglas with some Quebec politicians he recognized from TV. Dad had read in *The Montreal Star* about her being released early from prison because she used her time to study law. Monsieur Richard, who visited Dad less often, joked about how they should send their kids to jail to become lawyers. Dad said no one with a record should be allowed to practise law. Both of them would be furious to see her and other *independentistes* getting VIP treatment at Canada's birthday celebrations.

But Marek's heart quickened. It was so wonderful to see her. At the same time, he was furious at her for having been involved in something that could have injured so many people, including his family. He could almost comprehend her wanting Quebec to be its own country, just as some people wanted Slovakia to be independent from the Czechs again. Yet he couldn't understand trying to break up Canada at a time when it was so incredibly great with Expo '67 taking place in Montreal, Quebec. Neither could he accept that she had been willing to let innocent people get hurt, and even die.

She looked so different. Her previous style – the one that people now called *bohemian* to Mom's dismay – was gone. She had replaced it with a very mod look – a hot pink suit with shiny black boots up to her knees. Her hair was cut shoulder-length with a thick fringe of bangs.

Marek struggled to get an arm free from the people pressed around him. He waved once at her, and then again, thinking she hadn't noticed him, and then realized she was probably ignoring him. The rejection coursed through his body like a small electrical shock. He grabbed a tighter hold of Hortense as the mob kept thrusting them forward a few inches at a time. When they finally reached the turnstiles, it was such a crush that some children were crying out in a panic. Each turnstile clicked through a person every second. Marek did his best to stop when a little girl ahead of him was accidentally hit in the forehead with the metal bar. She reminded Marek of Catina. It had been months since he had last seen her. She had moved away with her father and his new wife.

The little girl's mother scooped her up and carried her over the turnstile. Then Marek let Hortense go ahead. A woman in another line yelped when her purse got caught in the turning bars. Marek disliked the mayhem, yet found it so exciting. His heart raced.

When he showed his season's passport and went through the turnstiles, he looked for Patrick. When he couldn't see him anywhere, he became anxious. The two of them had been talking about Expo '67's Opening Day for so many months that Marek didn't want them to end up spending it apart.

As people spewed out of the turnstiles, they grabbed onto each other to prevent from getting lost. Within seconds, others lost sight of family and friends and searched the ocean of faces to find them. Those who did find one another looked visibly relieved as they locked hands or arms. Marek finally noticed Patrick and made his way over to him. When he turned around again, Hortense had disappeared.

"I think I see her," Patrick said rushing ahead.

Marek tried to follow but was cut off by a group of senior citizens. When he finally made his way around the group, Patrick and Hortense were nowhere in sight. He stayed put with the expectation they would return for him, but once the seniors moved out of the way, the crowd resumed its pushing in earnest. He decided he would have a better chance of finding Patrick and Hortense inside the fair, away from the entering crowds. And after waiting for more than two years to see Expo '67, he couldn't wait any longer.

A smaller crowd nudged him down one of several broad walkways. He stopped in his tracks when the awesome sphere of the American pavilion loomed before him. It had to be five or six times larger than the Orange Julep on boulevard Décarie. The escalators looked as if they were operating in mid-air inside the transparent dome. He joined the line of people waiting to go inside, standing on its outside edge so he could keep an eye out for Hortense and Patrick. The line crawled forward and then stopped for the longest time before advancing ever so slightly. At this rate it would take him all summer to visit all of the pavilions. Even if it did, he was determined to see every single one of them and have its stamp inked on the pages of his season's passport. At that moment, looking around at all the pavilions and people, life couldn't be more fantastic. He took out a cigarette, being careful not to let anyone see the hash and joints he was saving to share with Patrick.

It took almost two hours to reach the doors. Marek entered the sphere mesmerized by the sun and the clouds he could see through its thin grey skin. He forgot himself and clapped when a mini-rail glided through it. The steep escalators took people up and down four storeys. Marek decided he would ride up without looking down at all.

His back hurt from standing by the time he approached the booth to have his passport stamped. He was surprised to see security guards using metal detectors to check some people.

The line crawled ahead just as slowly inside the pavilion. A short distance ahead Marek saw Con standing with a large group of people. He called out to him, hoping Con would invite him to join his group farther ahead in the line.

“Good to see you here,” Con said giving Marek a hug. “Glad you’re joining us.” Marek already knew some of the people who helped Con arrange things for draft dodgers and deserters. Con introduced the others who all welcomed him with peace signs.

Marek tried to explain that he wanted to see the pavilion and then go look for Patrick and Hortense. Con wasn’t able to hear with the sudden ruckus. A group ahead of them had knocked down the barrier ropes and ran to sit down in the middle of the pavilion. Others joined them.

“Oh no,” a woman said, looking fearful. “Lyndon Johnson is supposed to open the pavilion and raise the American flag today.”

Marek looked around. There were no signs of the U.S. president anywhere. Instead a man dressed in a scout leader uniform and bullet-proof vest stood by the flagpole. He looked scared enough to pee into his brown shorts.

Con pulled Marek along with him as he and his friends also ran out of line and into the open area. They all sat cross-legged on the floor and then pulled off their sweatshirts and jackets to show T-shirts that read: PEACE, NOT WAR; STOP THE BOMBS; JOHNSON IS A BABY KILLER. Well over a hundred protestors were cramped elbow to elbow and chanting NO MORE WAR. Guards and police officers

flooded into the building and surrounded the demonstrators, their hands planted on their gun holsters. Marek stood up to leave, but Con pulled him back down.

“What’s with you?” he asked. “Don’t you want to stop the war?”

Marek sat all the more nervously as he thought about getting arrested with some weed and hash on him. Mom and Dad would take away his season’s pass for sure. He noticed a large clay pot with a plain green plant nearby and inched his way towards it without standing up. He leaned against the pot for quite some time. Then when he was sure a nearby guard was distracted, he tossed his cigarette pack into the dirt. He shuffled on his hindquarters back to where Con sat.

The guards looked really uptight at first. Then a couple of their commanders showed up and they seemed more relaxed. Even the scout leader looked more at ease as he sat off to one side.

All of the protestors grew quiet and watched as a guard approached a very pregnant young woman sitting on the floor. He bent over and whispered something. She got up and walked over to where another guard had unfolded a chair for her to sit on. Other guards pulled out chair after chair for the protestors, who accepted them. Several other guards showed up with cases of Coke and started handing them out. A few people laughed and sang *Things go better with Coca-Cola*.

“What the fuck is this?” Con grumbled. “They’re trying to kill us with kindness.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” Marek asked. “It’s a peace demonstration, no?”

“Peaceful demos don’t make the six o’clock news or the front pages,” Con said.

“Yet if we’re the ones who start trouble, it kills our message. Damn. I was really hoping they would rough us up and kick us out.”

Thank God this is Canada, Marek thought. He kept looking for Hortense and Patrick but didn't see either of them. After what must have been a half hour, his legs started to cramp. He stood up.

"I'm just going to the washroom," he told Con and then a guard. Walking back along the same large pot, he saw his pack of smokes and dope was gone. Fuck.

Outside he quickly became caught up in another crowd. He realized he might never find Hortense and Patrick. As he searched numerous faces, he came across Raddy in a straw bowler hat smiling at him. Dressed in a white suit with black pinstripes and a purple shirt and tie, he looked more flamboyant than ever. He stood with his arm around the waist of a guy dressed in a T-shirt and jeans who looked twenty years younger. Marek felt uncomfortable standing so near to them. The last thing he needed was to be mistakenly arrested for being a homosexual.

"Hey, Marek, how are you?" Raddy pulled him close and gave him a hug.

"Good."

"I want you to meet my friend Philip."

Marek nodded but grabbed his belt loops so he wouldn't have to shake hands.

"So what's new? How's your father? As bigoted as ever?"

Marek didn't answer.

"Forget that," Raddy said with a wave of his hand. "We're going over to the Koliba so Philip can taste stuffed cabbage. Join us. I'll buy you lunch."

Marek had overheard Mamo talking about Raddy inheriting some money from his mother. It would have been nice if Raddy had used some of it to pay Dad back.

“I need to catch up with my friends,” Marek said, pointing to the Labyrinth pavilion ahead.

“Okay,” Raddy said with obvious disappointment. “Well, I hope to see you again soon. I’m also hoping that you’ll talk some sense into that father of yours.”

Marek shrugged. He wasn’t sure what to think about Raddy being so open with his new boyfriend. Raddy never looked happier. Yet Marek found it sad – downright embarrassing – how everyone stared at them. He could swear he almost heard people thinking *homos, tapettes, fruits, queers* as they gawked.

He waved goodbye and lined up at the Labyrinth, again hoping to spot Patrick and Hortense while he waited.

No such luck. His feet ached by the time he walked past the people who stamped his passport. Nevertheless, he was thrilled to have two stamps, although he needed to go back to the U.S. pavilion to see it properly. There was lots of time – five months – to see everything. He was so glad he hadn’t saddled himself with a job at Expo or elsewhere. This was so much better, seeing the world all summer long in Montreal.

The sound inside the Labyrinth was deafening. In the dark corridors, people kept nudging him forward. Being constantly squished on all sides was getting to him. He wished he had smoked one of his joints.

Pushed farther along by the crowd’s uneven tempo, he shuffled forward into a huge room with several balconies like in an opera house, except the balconies stretched around the entire building. It made him nervous to be shoved towards the railing. Logic told him the concrete balcony was too thick and high for him to fall over, but his breath shortened. Yet there was no space to move back.

Marek held tighter onto the banister and forced himself to look down where everyone was peering at a movie screen as big as a swimming pool. The image of a quiet pond with a few lily pads was being projected on it. Marek sensed lights above him and looked up to see an oblong movie screen with a girl throwing pieces of bread. It was dizzying to be trapped in a space that was so immense and yet felt like it didn't exist. He looked across the huge room at the other balconies to stop his head from spinning. Speakers blared with the sound of the bread plopping into the pond. When he looked down, he saw the band of circles each piece of bread created as it hit the dark water.

He was just getting used to this when the image changed to a man's feet in ballet slippers atop a high wire. The net below him looked deathly narrow and flimsy. Marek's breakfast rose to his throat. Looking above him at the rest of the high-wire artist nauseated him even more. He shoved his way backwards through several rows of people.

After catching his breath in an empty corridor, he found his way to an exit and ran outside. The sun was blinding compared to the darkness inside the pavilion. Seeing a bench, he sat down and tried hard not to puke in front of thousands of people.

He decided to walk around until his head stopped feeling like it had been through a washer. Again he searched for Hortense and Patrick. Many people looked uptight, overwhelmed by so many others around them.

He stopped to buy a Coke and wished he had taken one from the guards earlier when he saw how overpriced they were. If his Dad and Mom could have charged that amount at their store, the family would have been rich.

Finding a large fountain, he sat on its cement edge and sipped his drink. He could hardly believe it when he saw Patrick and Hortense rushing along. He waved them over.

“Where have you been?” he asked, giving them each a hug.

Hortense looked close to tears. “Looking for you,” she said. “I don’t like it here. There are too many people. Let’s come back when it’s less crowded.”

Marek raised his eyebrows. “Are you kidding me? We haven’t seen anything yet.”

“I want to go home.”

As much as he liked Hortense, Marek wasn’t going to let her ruin his dream day. “I’ll walk you back to the entrance so you can take the Métro.”

Hortense looked at him with disbelief. “You’re going to let me go home alone?”

“I don’t want you to go, but I’m not leaving. We just got here.”

As the three of them made their way towards the exit gates, Marek knew his decision to stay meant it was over with Hortense. He felt bad, but also relieved. She would now have a reason to end it with him instead of him having to break it off with her.

Her cold kiss confirmed it was all over except for the words. They would have to wait for another day when Marek didn’t have a world’s fair to explore.

“Want a tab of acid?” Patrick asked as they walked back into the fair.

Marek hesitated. While he had tried it a few more times at Patrick’s house, he didn’t really feel comfortable with it. He would have preferred to stick with his weed or hash, but some goddamn supposed peace lover had nabbed his stash out of the potted plant. Or maybe it was a guard? Anyway, he wasn’t going to chance buying some from a stranger at Expo in case there were undercover cops. Neither was he going to waste his time looking for Con to sell him some.

“Okay,” he finally said, deciding it would be cool to experience this flood of people in another realm. There was plenty of time to visit the pavilions later when he came off the high.

“Let’s go over there,” Patrick said, pointing to some trees by the river away from the busy walkways.

Marek settled on only half a tab, while Patrick swallowed a whole one. Patrick had been taking it too often to get high from less.

They watched the river as they waited for the acid to take effect.

“Maybe it’s not real acid,” Marek said, feeling nothing after an hour.

Patrick grinned. “Wait. It’s coming.”

And it did. They started to find everyone and everything hilariously funny, especially when people gawked at them to see why they were laughing so much. When the laughter finally wore off, Marek saw people’s faces distorted like in a funhouse mirror. Trying to weave his way through all the distorted people was more incredible than the Labyrinth and didn’t nauseate him. What a trip until the eyes of those people began multiplying and spinning like Svarozhich’s.

“Go away,” Marek yelled. People stepped back, but their eyes stayed fixed on him. He started running. While he could hear Patrick yelling at him to wait, he kept going until he was out of breath. When he stopped, he felt a painful bright flash go through his head like one of Perun’s lightning bolts. Despite feeling weak, he was too hyper to sit.

They came across Place des Nations where nearly two hundred flags flapped noisily in the brisk April wind. An opening ceremony of some kind was taking place on a large stage. They sat in the nearest bleachers. Marek squinted in the sun at the VIP stand.

S raphine was sitting there among the politicians, looking very important. He didn't bother waving again. He could see that she was looking right through him, almost like that goddess whose name Marek could never remember. No, she wasn't a goddess... And her eyes weren't white. They were hollow. She was one of those clay people who radiated warmth and light but also a deep emptiness. It pained Marek to see S raphine's blank stare and yet he couldn't avert her eyes. After the speeches ended, he watched her file out with the others.

"Let's get out of here," he said. The acid now made him feel as shaky as if he had downed a dozen coffees. He wanted to walk off the effects, and his feelings for S raphine. When he looked over at Patrick, he realized he wouldn't be able to go anywhere for a while. Patrick was staring into nowhere with fear on his face.

"She's after me," he said with a tremble in his voice. "She's after us."

Marek tried to calm him down. "It's okay. I'm here. No one is after you."

Patrick yelled. "Oh, my God, she's floating towards me. She's coming to get us."

"Who?"

"Help me. You've got to help me," Patrick yelled as he shook Marek.

Marek took a firm hold of Patrick's shoulders. "Take it easy."

"Don't you see her?"

Patrick stared so hard past Marek that Marek glanced behind his shoulder. The second he did, Patrick broke away from Marek's hold and scampered higher into the emptying bleachers. "I'm so sorry," he said again and again.

"For what? Come down here and tell me. It'll be okay if we talk about it."

Patrick looked right at Marek. "No it won't. It'll never be okay."

“What are you talking about?”

Patrick ran farther up. Marek followed as best he could but felt unsteady as soon as he walked up a few rows. “What are you doing?” he said. “Come down here.”

Patrick teetered on the top bleacher. “Tell them I’m sorry.”

Climbing one rung higher despite his fear, Marek saw Patrick was bleeding from his nose. “Come down here. I’ll protect you.”

Other people had gathered a short distance behind Marek. He heard someone say he was going to get the security guards.

“We have to go, Patrick,” Marek said. “We need to stop your nosebleed.”

Patrick felt his nose and looked at the blood. “It’s her,” he screamed. “She’s killing us from the inside the way she died.”

Marek’s head pounded. He was more and more conscious of the increasing number of people gathering around. “Please,” he said to a small group with several men. “I’m scared of heights. Please go up there and get him down.”

The men stood like plants in frozen earth.

Marek turned to the rest of the crowd. “Please, someone, help me get him down.”

Then Marek saw Raddy and Philip make their way through the crowd and start up the rungs. Marek went to the side of the bleachers to try to talk some sense into Patrick. When Patrick saw Philip and Raddy coming nearer, he turned to run. He screamed as he fell. Marek rushed towards him to try to break his fall. He managed to grab onto Patrick’s arm but the force of the fall was too great to slow. Patrick landed with a thud. His neck was twisted oddly, but he wasn’t twitching like Baba’s hen.

Marek pulled off his jacket to make a pillow for Patrick's head but Raddy stopped him. "It's better if you don't move him," he said, keeping his hand on Marek's shoulder.

Taking an old tissue from his pocket, he wiped Patrick's nose but he was bleeding from his mouth now, too. He shifted his eyes towards Marek.

"Marek, I'm really sorry."

"That doesn't matter now. Hold on. We're getting help."

Patrick smiled. Then his eyes stopped blinking.

Marek tried to revive him by shaking him. Patrick's head bobbed like rag doll's. Security guards peeled Marek away.

"What's wrong with you?" he yelled at Patrick. "Why did you have to go and die on me?"

It took forever for an ambulance to show up and take Patrick's body away. The cops asked Marek to go with them to a mobile police station around the corner from Place des Nations. Raddy and Philip went, too, and stayed with Marek as the cops asked endless questions.

Marek had little to say. Patrick had obviously done cocaine along with the acid, but there was no point in mentioning this with Patrick dead ... just as there wasn't any point in saying what Patrick had probably done to Catina. Marek still wondered if Vince had something to do with Catina, too. Again, there was no proof. Patrick had said that someone – Marek guessed Severina d'Alves – was coming to get *them*. Who did he mean by *them*? Patrick and Vince? Patrick and Monsieur Richard? Marek always had a strange feeling about Monsieur Richard but, again, there was no proof.

He might only learn the whole truth if Catina eventually remembered everything and talked about what happened. Then again, if she did, it might get Danika in trouble. Marek thought about asking Mrs. Richard whether Isabel or Luc knew what Patrick might have been talking about, but it would be hard enough for her to deal with Patrick's death. Marek didn't want to make matters worse. Not without proof.

It was at least two hours later when Marek saw Dad and Monsieur Richard approaching the front door of the cop station.

"We're going to go," Raddy said, tugging on Philip's sleeve. "You have enough to handle without Hank getting upset about me being here with you."

"Thanks, Kresne," Marek said, unable to remember the last time he addressed Raddy as his godfather.

Raddy nodded and told Philip to follow him out the back.

Raddy and Philip quickly said goodbye and went out the back. Marek didn't know what to say to Monsieur Richard. No words could explain the sorrow he felt for having failed to save Patrick.

Monsieur Richard was so numb with grief that it probably didn't matter that Marek couldn't bring himself to speak.

Dad put a hand on Marek's shoulder. "Let's go home."

Marek nodded and followed him out of the police station.

As they walked towards the exit, the many pavilions and people no longer held the same magic. Expo '67 would never be as wonderful as Marek had imagined.