

## ABSTRACT

Title of thesis:                   THE ORACLE OF STAMBOUL  
Michael Lukas, Master of Fine Arts, 2006

Thesis directed by:           Professor Maud Casey  
Department of English

*The Oracle of Stamboul* is a novel-in-progress about a preternaturally intelligent little girl who changes the course of history. Born on the outskirts of the Ottoman empire at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Eleonora Cohen follows her father to Stamboul, overcomes adversity, learns about herself, and eventually becomes an advisor to the Ottoman sultan, Abdulhamid II.

THE ORACLE OF STAMBOUL

by

Michael Lukas

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
2006

Advisory Committee:

Professor Maud Casey, Chair

Professor Tita Chico

Professor Howard Norman

©Copyright by  
Michael Lukas  
2006

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One.....	1
Chapter Two.....	16
Chapter Three.....	27
Chapter Four.....	41
Chapter Five.....	52
Chapter Six.....	60
Chapter Seven.....	67
Chapter Eight.....	86
Chapter Nine.....	101
Chapter Ten.....	110
Chapter Eleven.....	121
Chapter Twelve.....	132
Chapter Thirteen.....	144
Chapter Fourteen.....	156
Chapter Fifteen.....	162
Chapter Seven (Revised).....	170
Chapter Eight (Revised).....	182
Chapter Nine (Revised).....	194

## Chapter One

Miss Eleonora Cohen came into this world August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1878, ushered in by her father, two gypsy midwives, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division of Tsar Alexander II's Royal Cavalry. To the historically-minded reader, Eleonora's birth date may seem more than a little prescient, coinciding as it does with the Russian occupation of her birthplace, a sleepy Black Sea port called Constanta. Not to mention the date's coincidence, more than a hundred years previous, with the birth of Louis XVI, whose guillotine-bound wife, Marie Antoinette, Eleonora was said uncannily to resemble. Nor its correspondence with the death of Abu Bakr II-Sadiq, the Prophet's most trusted advisor and the first of the rightly-guided caliphs, from whom Eleonora's future ruler, Abulhamid II, was said to have descended. Those more sympathetic to the push and pull of the planets might recognize Eleonora's birth date as the cusp of Virgo and Leo, with Venus ascendant and Mars in its second moon, a highly auspicious confluence occurring only once every 252 years. Indeed, even the location of her birth, a squat grassy hill on the outskirts of town, is not without significance, it being the exact place upon which an aging, exiled Ovid was sitting, looking out over the port, when he was moved to compose his final masterpiece.

But in spite of all these signs no one, except perhaps the gypsies, had any idea that this little girl would one day change the course of history. Just as no one, except the Ottoman governor and his advisors, who, having been informed of the Russian troop movements, had left late the night before with a trunk full of gold and tax receipts, knew

Constanta was on the verge of being attacked. To everyone else August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1878 looked like just another windless late summer day.

As the pale morning sun pulled itself up over the hills behind the Muhamediyya Mosque, a flock of rose-colored starlings swept down from the top of the lighthouse and a mid-sized British steamer drifted out of the harbor. Having already called the faithful to prayer, the town muezzin squatted against the base of the minaret, sipping quietly from a hot glass of mint tea. A few sleepy-eyed shopkeepers were sweeping the fronts of their stores and some of the more pious Muslims were beginning to trickle into the mosque. But at that hour, most Constantans, regardless of religious persuasion, were still rustling about in their houses, preparing breakfast, throwing stale corn to the chickens, or in bed, blinking at the first light of what seemed to be a perfectly normal morning.

Then, from the vicinity of South Hill, a cannon fired twice in swift succession, scattering the starlings and tingeing the air with spent gunpowder. Close behind these warning shots, both of which splashed harmlessly in the middle of the harbor, a trumpet sounded and twelve hundred grey-coated servants of the Tsar galloped down the hill, shouting Slavic curses and kicking up an enormous cloud of dust. Although they were ostensibly liberating the Orthodox subjects of Constanta from their despotic Ottoman overlords, no cavalry can conquer a town of any size without a bit of pillaging. And pillage they did. With the governor and his bodyguards half way to Stamboul, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division rode rampant through the streets, breaking shop windows, terrorizing stray dogs, and pulling down whatever statues they could find.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. Before any of the cannons or the pillaging, in the early morning quiet when this doubly-historic day seemed like any other,

Eleonora's mother-to-be was sleeping soundly in her sturdy wooden bed, nine months pregnant and dreaming of small bright red and yellow birds. Snoring quietly, she lay stretched out on her back, her loosely-curved light brown hair, which Eleonora would later inherit, scattered across the pillow. A peaceful scene, but not long to last. At the sound of the first cannon shot, fired just a few hundred meters away from the Cohen's small grey stone house, Eleonora's mother-to-be sat straight up in bed and screamed so loud her bedroom window shattered. Then came the second shot, the trumpet, and twelve hundred Russian soldiers galloping past her house. There's no telling what it was exactly—the dust, the noise, or the trembling of the earth—but by the time the last, lagging horseman rode past her bedroom window, Eleonora's mother-to-be was fully in labor.

In that same prefatory moment, before the cannons, the horses, and the broken window, Eleonora's curly black-haired father-to-be was sitting with his friends in the town square, drinking hibiscus tea under the soon-to-be pulled down statue of Ovid. He spent every morning like this, sipping his tea and leisurely watching the square come to life, the men on their way to work, the women to market, and pigeons pecking the ground for food. Again, a peaceful scene, but not long to last. At the sound of the first shot, Eleonora's father-to-be fell backwards in his chair, knocking an almost entirely full glass of bright red hibiscus tea into his friend's lap. Under normal circumstances, he would have apologized more profusely, knowing how difficult it can be to remove a hibiscus stain, but at the moment he had more immediate concerns. Before the sounding of the trumpet, he had righted his glass, handed a ten rial note to the waiter, and was running up the hill to his wife.

But there was no need to worry. By the time Eleonora's father-to-be was halfway up the hill, his wife was in the calloused, capable hands of two purple-kerchief gypsy midwives who, within minutes of the cannon shots, had mysteriously shown up at the Cohen's front door. By the time he arrived at the small grey stone house, sweating and covered with dust, everything was ready for the birth, the water boiled, the sheets torn, and the mother-to-be relaxed.

Do not worry, the older of the two midwives said, shoos Eleonora's father-to-be out of the bedroom. But what else can an expectant father do? And so, playing his part, he paced a wide oval around the living room, wringing his large, knuckly hands and wondering, in the back of his mind, where those strange midwives had come from.

Meanwhile, the Russians were looting his store, an oriental carpet shop that had been in the Cohen family for three generations. They punched holes in the wall with their bayonets and tracked muddy boot prints through the display room, but as much damage as they did to the building, most of the carpets survived. A silk Heriz and a small, matching pair of Tabrizis were taken by one of the more sophisticated officers, but for the most part the pillagers were looking for more easily transferable commodities, and even if they had been in search of carpets, most of them would not have known which to take. Considering the circumstances, Eleonora's father-to-be was lucky.

Apart from the Orthodox church, which, at the end of the day, stood as pristine as if God himself had protected it, the library was the only building in Constanta that wasn't pillaged. Still standing to this day, the small, pillared building owes its survival to Constanta's librarian, an owlish old man who, when everyone else was hiding under their beds, stood boldly in front of the library, holding a battered copy of *Eugene Onegin*

above his head like a talisman. Although the soldiers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division were primarily illiterate Ukrainian peasants, they could recognize the shape of their native Cyrillic, which was apparently enough for them to spare the building.

The rest of Constanta, however, was not so lucky. All over town, the Tsar's men were beating down doors, rummaging through safes, and making off with whatever they could carry. There was no logic to the pillage, Muslim, Christian, and Jew were looted alike. The mosque, the courthouse, and the residence of the governor all were torched. And as the day wore on, the pillaging only increased. The beat of hooves, the cannons, and the screams growing louder and louder until, at the moment of Eleonora's birth, they had completely eclipsed her mother's cries.

Then, suddenly, there was silence. Like an orchestra after its crescendo, the entire town stood still as our newborn heroine blinked and, with pistachio green eyes, looked out onto the world for the first time. Possessed with an almost unearthly calm, Eleonora looked slowly around the room, from the gypsy midwives to her father and finally to her mother, lying half-propped up against a pillow, her skin pale yellow and eyes receded into veiny, dark purple sockets. Something was clearly very wrong. Eleonora's father did not need to ask the gypsies if she was okay. They would have spoken if she was. Crossing the room, he knelt beside his wife and, pushing back a curly damp strand of hair, kissed a bead of sweat from her upper lip.

She has your mouth, he said. Eleonora's mother shuddered, as she sometimes did upon waking from an especially convincing dream, and for a moment she seemed partially to regain herself. Lips parted slightly and eyes shut tight with concentration, she tried to speak, once, twice, and finally, the third time succeeded.

It's not too late, she whispered, coughing. She's not too late.

In spite of these dramatic beginnings, Eleonora and her father lived a relatively normal existence. They ate fish on Thursdays, went to synagogue on Saturdays, and on Sundays took picnics in the woods behind their house. Of course, there were certain sacrifices that had to be made. It would have been ideal, for instance, if Eleonora had had a grandmother or aunt in Constanta to take care of her, but her grandmother was dead and her aunts were all married off in Tulcea and Bucharest. And so, as much as Eleonora's father disliked the idea of leaving his daughter at home with a stranger, for the first two and a half years of her life, she was dressed, nursed, bathed, and swaddled by a series of unremarkable nurses. There was Mrs. Kochek, a stringy black-haired Bulgarian widow, Mrs. Bandsdt, a corpulent mother of five who tied her hair back with a dirty white handkerchief, Miss Gehorg, a sweet but forgetful Thracian farm girl, and a host of others whose names are unimportant.

What *is* important, to our story at least, is that none of these nurses stayed more than three months in the Cohen household, most of them leaving within a few weeks of their arrival. It wasn't that Eleonora was difficult, the nurses were quick to reassure her father. Quite the contrary. She never cried and, although a bit of mischief is to be expected from any child, she rarely got herself into trouble. Indeed, Eleonora very nearly took care of herself. She could eat unattended at six months, took her first steps at eight, and was talking in complete sentences by her first birthday. She always sat still when her hair was being combed and never objected to eating her peas.

But, as Mrs. Bandsdt said, There's something else about her, something a bit queer.

Doting parent that he was, Eleonora's father had a hard time accepting that his daughter was the source of the situation, blaming instead the nurses' indolence and capriciousness. It wasn't until one sharp autumn Wednesday, just a few weeks after Eleonora's second birthday, that he finally got a sense of what was driving the nurses away. Arriving home, as he usually did, a few minutes before six, dust in his curly black hair and a worn tweed suit jacket draped over his arm, Eleonora's father found the house empty, the windows wide open and a pot of vegetable soup boiling over in the kitchen. Thinking that Eleonora and her nurse, Mrs. Porsikt, had gone outside and lost track of time, he took the soup off the fire and stuck his head out the back door to call them in. From this partially obscured vantage point he saw what at first seemed to be a perfectly normal scene, his daughter sitting cross-legged in the middle of the vegetable garden, surrounded by a circle of what must have been more than half a dozen whitetail bucks. He watched silently for a moment before stepping out from behind the door, the suddenness of which scared the deer off into the woods, leaving Eleonora alone in a tangle of pumpkin vines.

Tata, she said, almost admonishingly, looking up at him with deep, glossy green eyes. You scared them away.

That night after tucking her into bed, a bit earlier than usual, Eleonora's father sat down at the kitchen table with a glass of palinca and tried to replay what he had seen. He had not registered it at the time, but in retrospect he could swear he had heard Eleonora speaking to the animals. No, not speaking exactly, but communicating somehow, with a low, plaintive humming sound not unlike a dog's whimper. What that meant, he didn't know. He wasn't even sure he wanted to know what that meant. What he did know was

that his daughter was different from other children and, after turning the matter over in his head for a number of hours, he decided that it would be in everyone's best interest to dispense with the nurses and take care of Eleonora himself.

And so, that next morning, and every morning after, until she entered St. Basil's Academy at the age of four, Eleonora and her father ate breakfast together and walked down the hill to the town square, where they sat and drank hibiscus tea with her father's friends under the newly-reconstructed statue of Ovid. While the men discussed politics and gossiped, Eleonora sat quietly with her hands in her lap, watching the grey and white pigeons gobbling up the crumbs around their table. It was, from Eleonora's perspective, an improvement on the previous situation, but being mortally shy around pretty much anyone but her father, it took some getting used to. Occasionally, a friend or customer would stop by for a few words with her father, after which they would inevitably tousle Eleonora's hair and ask her all the questions adults typically ask children.

How old are you? When is your birthday? Are you a good girl? To which Eleonora would smile and, without a word in response, look back down at the pigeons. She didn't mean to be rude, she just didn't want to speak with any one. After a while, people learned to leave her alone. In any case, Eleonora and her father never stayed in the square very long. As the town clock rang nine they would stand, say goodbye to his friends, and cross the square to their store, which, following the Russian conquest, was housed in the Ottoman governor's former carriage house, the only part of the former despot's residence that survived.

There were any number of ways for a child to amuse herself in the unused rooms of the old carriage house, but for the most part, Eleonora spent her days in the storeroom,

a large, airy, and triangular attic where her father kept the most valuable carpets.

Although she was a bit scared of the ladder one had to climb in order to get up into the storeroom, Eleonora could sit there for hours, counting the ants along the back wall or tracing the history of a carpet with her little finger. Humming tunelessly to herself, she would follow the knots back through the centuries, to the workshops of Isphahan and the textile markets of Bukhara, reading lost love in a jasmine bud and the passing of empires in a particularly deep hue of purple.

At five o'clock Eleonora and her father would lock up the store and walk back across the square to the Constanta Inn, where a table for two would be waiting for them in the back corner near the bar. A dim and somewhat greasy establishment, the Constanta Inn catered mainly to sailors and single men with no one else to cook for them, but in spite of this, the Innkeeper's wife tried her best to make Eleonora and her father feel at home there, giving them the best pieces of meat and always reminding Eleonora to eat her vegetables. Sometimes, when business was slow, she would sit with them while they ate and complain about the other customers—Mr. Hasdeu, who never paid his tab, Mr. Karimov, who was a drunk, Mr. Lisv, who always smelled like fish, and Mr. Jirk with his wandering hands—but for the most part Eleonora and her father ate by themselves, which was just fine by them.

After dinner, Eleonora and her father would walk slowly back up the hill together to their small grey stone house. By the time they arrived it was usually already past Eleonora's bedtime, but if she was quick about getting herself ready and her father didn't have too much work, he would sit on the side of her bed and tell her stories about all the marvelous, magical far-away cities that he had visited as a young man—Lanzhou,

Andihzhan, Persopolis, Samarkand—cities with floating gardens, tall pointed crystal palaces, and people of all varieties. And sometimes, if she was particularly lucky, he would tell her stories about what, in his opinion, was the most marvelous magical city of all, that Bosphoran Beauty, formerly Constantinople and Byzantium, currently the capital of the Turks. Stamboul.

Someday, he would say, kissing her forehead. Someday when you're older, I'll take you there.

It was a few months before her fourth birthday that Eleonora first discovered her mother's small collection of books in the corner of the living room. Of course, she had noticed the books before, but it wasn't until that afternoon, left alone at home with a minor stomach complaint, that she thought to pull one out and have a look inside. Standing in front of the bookshelf, she ran her finger along the spines and stopped, randomly it would seem, on a worn, red-leather bound volume in the middle of the top shelf. I wonder what's inside, she thought. Reaching up onto the tips of her toes, she maneuvered the book down from the shelf and dragged it across the room to her father's armchair where, struggling somewhat, she hoisted it up onto her lap and opened it to the first page.

Whereas any other child would be content to leaf through a few pages and move on to some other distraction, Eleonora sat with the book, the second volume of Laurentiu Raicu's epic five part novel *The Hourglass*, for almost than three hours, sunk deep into her father's armchair with the book propped open in her lap. In that whole time she didn't turn a page, she didn't really even move. She just sat and stared at the title page,

confident that if she concentrated hard enough she would be able to decipher the strange symbols in front of her. She was right, eventually, but these things take time.

The next day, having induced her father to carry the book down the hill with them and up into the storeroom, Eleonora sat down cross-legged on a small green and white Malmuk prayer rug in the middle of the room, determined not to move until she could read. With a lightly-furrowed brow, her chin in her hands and her elbows on her knees, Eleonora sat, and for hours stared at the page in front of her. She was in this same position when, a bit after noon, her father stuck his head up through the hole in the floor to tell her it was time for lunch.

No thank you, Tata, she said, not looking up from the page.

Are you sure you're not hungry? he asked, but already she was too immersed to hear him.

For two weeks, eight hours a day, every day except Saturday, Eleonora sat in that exact same position, legs crossed and chin in her hands, staring at the first page of the second volume of *The Hourglass*. Until slowly, like a photograph coming into focus, she was able to discern the sound contained within the shape of each letter. Soon after this she began to be able to piece together words and a few simple sentences. But it wasn't until the end of the third week, after some practice with Hans Christian Anderson and The Brothers Grimm, that Eleonora truly felt she could read, at which point she climbed down the ladder, hugged her surprised father around his knees, and, looking up at his bushy black eyebrows, said, Tata, I can read.

The next day Eleonora began straight in on the first volume of *The Hourglass*, and by her fourth birthday she had finished all 2039 pages of this sprawling, operatic

history of a notable Bucharest family in decline. As anyone who has read the book can attest, one steps away from *The Hourglass* a changed person. Being that she was as young as she was when she read it, the book made a particularly profound impression on our heroine. For the rest of her life, the word Love was wrapped up with Miss Ionescu's passionate, unrequited pining for her Jirik, Dignity was Count Olaf's quiet pride in the face of his family's ruin, and Despair, the dirty, doomed lives of the Orphans. In five worn, red-leather bound volumes, *The Hourglass* defined, if not the world, than at least her vision of what the world should be. Of course, she didn't understand everything in the book. A four year old girl cannot have enough experience in the world to know much about sexual relations, financial markets, or horse riding. But she understood enough.

It was her father who truly didn't understand. Although he could, if called upon, make his way through most any book you put in front of him, Eleonora's father had never really seen the point in reading. Why spend your time behind a book, he thought. When there's so much to do in the real world? But, loving and supportive father that he was, he kept his thoughts to himself and was always happy to carry Eleonora's books down the hill for her. He even let her use an old Turkoman camel bag to lug them up into the storeroom and back down again. Being unfamiliar with literature, however, he did not fully understand how extraordinary it was that his young daughter had read *The Hourglass*, not to mention *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, *The Metamorphoses*, *The Black Sea Letters*, and *The Aeneid*, but he knew enough to seek a more informed opinion.

A few weeks after her fourth birthday, Eleonora's father took the day off of work and walked her down the hill to St. Basil's Academy, a grey old brick building on top of which stood a statue of the school's thin, bearded namesake extending his arms towards

the town square in blessing. There were four other primary schools in Constanta—Heder Maimonides, Kuttab Saladin, The Publius Ovidius Naso School for Boys, and St. Helga's School for Girls—but St. Basil's, a French school founded at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by wandering Jesuit priests, was the oldest and had by far the best reputation. Built in the Ottoman style, the classrooms were arranged in a large square around a courtyard, dusty and bare except for an enormous loquat tree in the middle. Standing next to each other under the arched stone entrance to the school, Eleonora felt her father's hand close a bit more tightly around hers.

Come on, Tata, she said, and tugged him across the courtyard to a half-open door with the words *Headmaster's Office* written above it.

A dour, puffy faced man, the headmaster was sitting at his desk, bent over a pile of official looking documents, when Eleonora's father knocked on the open doorway. Glancing up at them, the headmaster coughed, and turned back to his work with the manner of someone who knows he is being watched, looking off into the middle distance occasionally and carefully licking the nib of his pen. He went on like this for what seemed to Eleonora an especially long time, during which she stood slightly behind her father, her hair freshly washed and hands folded carefully in front of her new yellow sundress. When the document was completely finished, double-checked, and stamped, the headmaster took off his glasses and, rubbing both eyes with both hands, regarded Eleonora and her father anew.

How may I help you? he asked.

Please, we have come sir, in order for us to discuss about my daughter who I think she in my humble opinion, will perhaps be ready to begin at St. Basil's Academy this fall.

Eleonora had never seen her father so nervous, his legs quivering and hands thrust into the pockets of his old tweed jacket. She is quite a good reader, he continued, glancing back at her for reassurance. She reads better than I do.

Eleonora smiled down at her feet. It was a strange to think she could do something better than her father could, but it was true. When her father finally finished, the headmaster leaned back in his chair and stroked his greasy grayish-brown moustache, examining Eleonora like an unfamiliar document that had somehow ended up on his desk.

Quite extraordinary, he said. If what you say is true, Mr. Cohen, we have here quite an extraordinary child. Looking down at the fringes of his carpet, Eleonora listened as the headmaster went on to expound his theory of education, in the grand sense of the word, and the pedagogical philosophy of St. Basil's. Of course, Eleonora knew that most children her age could not read, let alone decipher carpets and talk to animals, but still she had never really thought of herself as anything out of the ordinary. And yet, that's what the headmaster had called her. Extraordinary. Apparently, that's what she was.

Come here my dear, the headmaster said when he had finished his disquisition. Looking first to her father for permission, Eleonora walked across the room and stopped, hands still clasped at her stomach, in front of the headmaster's desk. As she walked, the headmaster twisted in his chair and removed a wide calf-leather volume from the bookshelves behind him. Opening it to about the middle, he set the book on his desk, facing Eleonora.

If you would, he said, giving her an institutional smile that showed many years of experience with children. Read aloud from here.

Eleonora peered down at the page and, squinting slightly, tensed her lower lip. She had, she realized, never read anything aloud, but she figured she could do it if she tried. And so, flattening down the front of her dress, she took a long, shallow breath, and began to read:

*Cide Hamete Benengeli tells us in the second part of this history, which recounts the third sally of Don Quixote, that the priest and the barber did not see the knight for almost a month in order not to restore and bring back to his mind events of the past, but this did not stop them from visiting his niece and housekeeper, charging them to be sure to pamper him and give him food to eat that would strengthen and fortify his heart and brain, the source, as they had good reason to think, of all his misfortunes.*

In the middle of this passage, in fact, before the conclusion of the second clause, the headmaster was flung into a jowl-quivering fit of coughing, Eleonora continued reading until the end of the sentence. By that time the headmaster had himself sputtered to a stop and was ostentatiously clearing his throat.

She reads very well, he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Then, reaching over to pat her on the head, the headmaster went on to say that, at her level, Eleonora should be in the fourth form. But considering her age, he thought the second would more appropriate. And so, that's how it was.

## Chapter Two

That next Monday, the first day of the new school year, Eleonora and her father walked back down the hill to St. Basil's. By the time they arrived the sun had already made its way more than halfway up the sky, glittering off house windows and whatever moisture was left on the grass from the night before. A flock of starlings, which had followed Eleonora and her father tree to tree from their house, were resting around the statue of St. Basil, and the grey old building was draped with yellow and red bunting to celebrate the first day of school. Eleonora was dressed for the occasion in a navy blue and white uniform that she and her father had bought the day before from his friend the tailor, her loose light brown curls bobbing about rosy cheeks and pistachio green eyes.

The night before, over dinner at the Constanta Inn, Eleonora's father had explained that he would drop her off at the main entrance and, after school, pick her back up in the same place. That's how it would be for the first week. Once she learned the path from school to the store she could, if she wanted, walk it by herself. But neither Eleonora nor her father were thinking about any of these things as they stood under the statute of her new school's namesake, that great Cappadocian epistolaire who, although he probably would have disapproved of the indulgence, was draped in a gown of yellow bunting. Eleonora tugged down the hem of her dress and glanced at the other children, with their parents and their uniforms. Gripping her new greenish-black slate in both hands, Eleonora felt her father's fingers gently raise her chin so that they were looking into each other's eyes.

Don't let anyone push you around, he said, attempting a smile, then quickly kissed her on the forehead and left.

Eleonora watched her father down the path to the town square until the top of his head disappeared below the arched green horizon of the hillside. And then, there she was, alone, standing on top of the hill with her slate and her navy blue and white uniform. This is what Lonely feels like, she thought. Imagining Miss Ionescu counting the stars from the deck of the H.M.S. Tillman, Eleonora rubbed her nose on the cuff of her shirt and looked up at the statue of St. Basil. He looked silly like that, with yellow fabric draped over one shoulder and around his waist, like a Roman jester. It wasn't a very funny joke, it wasn't even really a joke at all, but Eleonora smiled to herself, as people sometimes do when they are alone. Then, as she was about to turn away, St. Basil smiled back. It was almost imperceptible, so subtle that someone looking straight at him might have missed the faint curve of his lips and crinkle of his eyes. But there it was.

If St. Basil had smiled at her, Eleonora thought, transferring her slate to the other arm as she walked into school, then everything must be okay. It was the same dusty, bare courtyard she and her father had stood in front of the week before, but this time it was filled with children, shooting marbles, skipping rope, and chasing each other in circles. She had imagined the courtyard would be empty, or, if it were full, that the children would be lined up neatly in rows according to form. Standing in the entranceway, she watched a small leather ball sail from one end of the courtyard to the other and then back across in the same manner. Having spent most of her young life in the company of adults, she had never actually played with another child. She had read about playing, she knew it

was something children did for fun, but she had always pictured it as a quiet, controlled pastime like Chess, Backgammon, or Jacks.

Transferring her slate back to the original arm, Eleonora rubbed a piece of dust out of her eye and began to make her way through the courtyard, carefully picking her path around assorted clumps of children and, at one point just barely avoiding a collision with an exuberant, freckled boy not much larger than herself. Once safely on the other side, Eleonora found that she was standing directly in front of the Second Form classroom, or at least that's what the sign above the door said. Taking a final, bewildered look back at the courtyard, she stepped into the nearly empty classroom, which was, in contrast to the courtyard, exactly how she had imagined, thirty desks, arranged in rows of five, all facing the blackboard and a large oak teacher's desk at the front of the class.

The room was entirely empty except for a somewhat dull-looking boy sitting in the front row. One either side of blue eyes, he was possessed of a large, flat nose and a mop of dirty blonde hair that almost, but not entirely covered his forehead. Noticing him before he noticed her, Eleonora coughed into her fist, thinking that if she were able to catch his attention, she might be able to ask him a few questions she had about classroom protocol. The boy, however, was fully engrossed in the task of chewing his thumb and, after a few moments, it became clear that he had not heard her cough, or, if he had, he was ignoring her. Transferring her slate again, Eleonora shrugged and took a seat in the third row, on the other side of the room. Even if he had been able to answer her questions, his answers probably wouldn't have been very illuminating.

Once comfortably established, her slate on the desk and four new chalks lined up alongside it, Eleonora selected a piece and began very slowly to write her name across

the top of her slate. Although she was an excellent reader, she had only just begun to practice writing and was, therefore, slower than one might expect. E-l-e-o-n-. As she was finishing the second “o,” Eleonora heard an angry sort of grunting sound from the front of the classroom and glancing up from her desk, saw that the boy with the large forehead was staring at her malevolently.

First form is next door, he said, and as a crude sort of punctuation, spit a piece of thumbnail onto the floor.

Eleonora knew she was in the right classroom. She clearly remembered the headmaster telling her she would be in the Second Form, and the sign above the door clearly read Second Form but, not wanting to cause trouble, especially not on the first day, she quietly ignored the boy and went back to writing her name. E-l-e-o-n-o-r-. She was almost finished with the final “a” when a piece of chalk sailed over her head and skittered to a stop in the corner of the room. There was no doubt that that piece of chalk had been intended to get her attention. She looked up again and another piece flew past, within a few centimeters of her head.

First form is next door, the boy repeated, suspending a large globule of spittle, and who knows what else, inches from the ground.

Before Eleonora could consider how best to respond, indeed, before the spittle touched the ground, an iron bell rang and the rest of the class began to pour in from the courtyard. They were a noisy collection of ruddy, navy blue and white uniformed children, jostling each other for the best seats, comparing scabs, and clattering their slates on their desks. From what she could tell, most of them were either Moldovan or Bessarabian with a few Turks and one or two she recognized from synagogue. They all

seemed to know each other from before and, more importantly, they all seemed to know what they were doing, or at least they seemed comfortable in their lack of knowledge. The last one in, a slight, pale boy who looked as if he had recently recovered from a grave illness, was followed directly by the teacher.

She was a tall, gangly woman with stringy black hair and an enormous mole just below her right nostril, the kind of woman who, under the right circumstances, might be considered a witch. Exhaling sharply through her nose, she strode up behind her desk and pulled a wooden ruler out of the top drawer, pausing for a moment before she rapped the back edge of her desk. Instantly, the class fell silent.

Before we begin, she said, scanning the room, I want to introduce the newest member of our class.

Although she was looking down at her slate, Eleonora could feel the teacher's gaze pass over the back of her neck like a shard of ice.

Miss Eleonora Cohen. At the sound of her name, Eleonora's shoulders hunched up involuntarily. Miss Cohen would you please come up to the front of the class and introduce yourself?

Gripping a piece of chalk so tightly it snapped, Eleonora slid out of her seat and made her way through a gauntlet of unmoved knees, elbows akimbo, and the tattered, outstretched shoe of the sick-looking boy, who hissed what Eleonora thought was the word Jew under his breath as she passed. At the direction of the teacher, Eleonora stood on the right side of the large oak desk, knees trembling and eyes fixed on the space between her new black shoes.

My name is Eleonora Cohen, she said. I live with my father on South Hill. And I love him very much. There was some giggling from the back of the class, which the teacher silenced with a snap of her ruler. Unsure what more was expected of her, Eleonora paused and looked up at the teacher.

I am told you are quite the little reader, she said, placing a hand on Eleonora's shoulder and squeezing in a way that was both comforting and threatening at the same time. The teacher's mole, Eleonora noticed as she stared up at her sallow, pockmarked face, was surrounded by a sprouting of whiskers and crowned with a pink corpuscle. It was like nothing Eleonora had ever seen before. Her father had a mole, in the same place in fact, right below his right nostril, but her father's was nowhere near as revolting as this.

Miss Cohen, the teacher said, tightening her grip. You were asked a question. Please tell the class what your favorite book is. Or do you not have one?

Eleonora looked out at her classmates, an assortment of bare knees, tall white socks, and scattered nose picking.

Oh yes, I do certainly have a favorite book, she said. It's a book by a man named Laurentiu Raicu, and it's called *The Hourglass*.

*The Hourglass*, the teacher repeated, raising her eyebrows. Is that something your father read you? There was a whispering from the back of the class, but the teacher ignored it.

No, Eleonora said timidly. My father doesn't read very well.

Well you can't have read *The Hourglass* by yourself. It's much too long and difficult for someone your age.

Eleonora didn't want to contradict the teacher, especially not on the first day and especially not when she was squeezing her shoulder so hard, but if there was one thing she had learned from her father it was the importance of always telling the truth, no matter what the circumstance. And so, Eleonora told the truth. But I did read it myself.

Without another word, the teacher released Eleonora's shoulder and meticulously walked around to the back of her desk. Well, Miss Cohen, she said, opening one of the drawers with frightful violence. If you read *The Hourglass* then you will have no trouble reading this.

Gripping a tattered blue and green book by the spine, the teacher came back around to the front of her desk and pushed it into Eleonora's hands. Why don't you read a few pages aloud to the class, she said, her voice filled with venom. I'm sure they would like to hear how well you read. Wouldn't you class?

The class was silent and unmoving except for a bit of nervous fidgeting. Not sure what else to do, and not wanting to upset the teacher any more than she already was, Eleonora opened the book and, coughing hesitantly into her fist, began to read. She read at first in a small voice, uncertain and restrained, but as the words stretched out and gained poise, her head rose and she began to project out into the class.

*Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.*

*In consideration of the day and hour of my birth, it was declared by the nurse,*

*and by some sage women in the neighbourhood who had taken a lively interest in me several months before there was any possibility of our becoming personally acquainted, first, that I was destined to be unlucky in life; and secondly, that I was privileged to see ghosts and spirits; both these gifts inevitably attaching, as they believed, to all unlucky infants of either gender, born towards the small hours on a Friday night.*

As Eleonora read, increasingly louder and with more confidence, the rest of the class watched their teacher's face pucker up and quivering uncontrollably with anger. Partially out of fear and partially from amazement, they sat stock still in their seats and watched as their teacher, who was standing behind and to the left of Eleonora, raised her wooden ruler and, with alarming force, struck her dead on the thin line of skin between sock and skirt.

Shocked, Eleonora dropped the book and raised her hands to her mouth. Never in her life had anyone hit, or even threatened to hit, her. And she hadn't even done anything wrong. All she had done was answer honestly and read. Her fists clenched and trembling at her sides, Eleonora bit her bottom lip to keep the rising pool of tears from spilling out onto her hot red cheeks. She was right, she knew it, she had done the right thing and she was right, she knew she was right. As she was thinking this, Eleonora felt another swack, in the same place, this time even harder.

Now sit down, the teacher said. And let that be a lesson to all of you. Lying will get you nowhere in this classroom.

Understandably, Eleonora was quite upset by this episode. That evening at dinner she told her father what happened and, with a look of glassy determination, said she never wanted to go back to St. Basil's again. He nodded and folded his lips between his

teeth. As much as he wanted to give her what she wanted, Eleonora's father had just that afternoon paid his daughter's very expensive tuition in full, a fact which probably played a role in his attempt to convince her to go back to school.

Why don't you try just a few more days? he said, working the remains of a particularly stringy brisket out from between his teeth.

Eleonora looked down at her beet soup and brisket, the sight of which made feel her queasy. Maybe things would get better. Maybe everyone's first day was difficult. She had a hard time believing any of this, but for her father's sake she decided to try.

Okay, she said. A few more days.

Smiling, Eleonora's father raised his bushy black eyebrows and reached across the table to tussle her hair. Who knows Ellie, you might end up liking it.

Eleonora never did end up liking school, but she knew it made her father happy, so she kept going. Six days a week, every week for almost a year, she walked down the hill with her father, waved goodbye, and watched him down the path to the town square. Of course, if he had known how much she despised St. Basil's, Eleonora's father would never have tried to convince her to keep going, but apart from that first night, she kept her feelings to herself, masking her sorrow like Miss Petrvoich after her greedy, beautiful sister married Gehorg. The only thing that gave Eleonora any hope at all was the statue of St. Basil, smiling faintly at her every day as she walked into the courtyard. There must be some reason for me to continue, she thought. Otherwise he wouldn't smile. But as much as she believed in the significance of St. Basil's smile, Eleonora had a hard time imagining any reason for her to continue at his Academy. She hated her teacher, she had no friends, and she never learned anything. If there were a window in the classroom she

would at least have been able to daydream, but there wasn't, so instead she just sat there and stared at the blackboard. Sometimes she would practice her writing, transcribing passages from books she had memorized, but there's only so much one can write on a slate before having to erase it and start over again.

At the end of the day, when the other children ran off to play in the woods behind the school, Eleonora walked in the other direction, down the hill to her father's store. She didn't care that no one ever invited her to play. Even if they had, she thought, walking down the middle of that wide, hard dirt road. She wouldn't have accepted. She didn't like any of the other children much and she didn't really want to play any of their games. She would rather just sit up in the storeroom and read, which was probably for the better. If she had accepted their hypothetical invitations, Eleonora never would have discovered the Old Roman Wall, a ten meter remnant of the meandering granite barricade that, thousands of years before, defined the boundaries of the city.

The wall ran unbreached for five centuries along the crest of Middle Hill, about halfway between St. Basil's and the town square, until the middle of the 6th century when it was inexplicably torn down by a Byzantine military governor. Equally inexplicably—who really understands anything those Byzantines did?—the governor left that one ten meter span of wall intact. By the time the Ottomans arrived, nine centuries later, it was a sad, pock-marked assemblage of stone, grass growing in between cracks and garbage scattered around the base.

In spite of its bad state of disrepair, the Old Roman Wall was one of Eleonora's favorite places in Constanta. Almost every day, laying her slate and chinks neatly on one of the foundation stones, she would scramble up onto the ruins and look out over the city.

The ubiquitous grey stone and yellow-thatched houses, the town square, its surrounding store windows and the new bronze statue of Ovid glinting in the sun, the residence of the Russian military governor, the harbor, the Genoese lighthouse, and alongside it, the foundation of the new casino. Listening to the gulls chattering as they held still against the wind, Eleonora would stand up there for what seemed like forever, smelling the sea wind and watching the activity below.

### Chapter Three

Eleonora was standing on that same wall a few months later, looking out over the snow-covered houses and wondering where all the gulls had gone for the winter, when, out of nowhere, an icy wet snowball hit her smack in the back of the neck. Turning, she saw two more snowballs arc over her head and, close behind them, a gang of fourth formers running down the hill at full speed. They're after me, she thought, frozen in place as a third shot almost clipped her shoulder. Whereas most children would instinctively understand that the worst thing these boys might do is rub her face in the snow, Eleonora, having never really played with other children, let alone older boys, truly thought she was in mortal danger, which is why, instead of standing her ground, and perhaps stooping down to make her own snowball, she took off running like a rabbit from a hungry pack of wolves.

The wind twisting wet hair behind her ears, Eleonora ran as fast as her little legs could carry her, caterwauling down the snow-packed dirt road, past The Publius Ovidius Naso School for Boys, the old courthouse, and the Muhamediyya Mosque, unaware that her pursuers had given up on her after a few dozen meters and gone back up the hill to work on their fort. When she finally stopped, panting, her hands on her knees and her grey rabbit fur hat lost somewhere in the snow behind the old courthouse, Eleonora looked up at the dirty wet brick walls on either side of her and realized she was lost. She had no idea how she had gotten to this narrow, slushy alleyway, walled in on either side by brick and criss-crossed at the top with dripping clotheslines, but she wanted very

much to find her way out of it. Still breathing hard, Eleonora walked to the edge of the alley. A busy, cobbled promenade, lit every twenty meters or so by a snow-covered vapor light, the street looked vaguely familiar and she could make out a blue and white sign that said Karatzli Street. But what can faint memories and unfamiliar street signs really tell you other than confirm that you're lost?

Eleonora stood for what seemed to her a very long time at the edge of Karatzli Street and watched the people bustle past, their heads wrapped in fur and hands buried deep into coat pockets. She had hoped she might see someone she knew, but everyone was so bundled up that, even if she had, she would not have recognized them. Her cheeks reddish-white with cold, Eleonora stood watching at the edge of the snow-packed street until a gust of wind forced her back into the alley. Now what? she thought, huddling next to a warm grate. And then, as if in answer to her question, she noticed a small wrought iron door bolted to the opposite wall. Not much taller than herself and only about twice as wide, the little door was rusted around the bolts and its top edge draped with a wet layer of snow, yet somehow it seemed inviting.

That's curious, Eleonora thought. What could be the purpose of such a small door? As she pondered this, a second, stronger gust came howling through the alley. Whatever the door's purpose, it was probably best to find shelter behind it, she thought. After a bit of a struggle, she succeeded in cracking open the heavy iron door with her shoulder and, squeezing through, she found herself in a damp hallway lined with kerosene lamps, at the far end of which she could just make out a soft light. Eleonora didn't at all want to disturb the owners of the house, or whatever it was she had wandered into, but she figured it would be better to present herself than to stay hidden in the

shadows, and so, running her hand along the wall for balance, she walked towards the light.

At the end of the hallway was a cavernous black and white tiled room, two stories tall and lined floor to ceiling with books. Still shivering slightly, Eleonora stepped out into the room, took a few steps cautiously towards the middle, and stopped. She had never seen so many books. It was, she thought, as if she had eaten only beet soup and potatoes her whole life, then suddenly stumbled upon a feast of onion soup, roast chicken, cheese, and baklava.

Hello. At the sound of this strange, quivering voice, Eleonora jumped back and quickly turned towards the desk it seemed to have come from.

Hello? she asked, unsure to whom, if anyone, she was speaking. There was a bit of rustling on top of the desk, which was the same size and color as her teacher's, but completely covered with books, and a short owlsh man in a dark brown suit stepped out from behind it.

Please, Eleonora said, holding her hands at her chest. I didn't mean to bother you. I was running away from a snowball and got lost and I was very cold. I don't want to be any trouble. If you could please point me in the direction of the town square, I'll be on my way.

During her appeal, the old man slowly tottered over to the middle of the room, so that he was standing directly above her when he replied.

Now let's see here, he said, scratching between his eyebrows with the back of a pen. The town square. For the town square you want to walk down this street, Karatzli, half a kilometer and then you're there.

Thanking him for his help, Eleonora curtsied as best as she could, but instead of leaving, she just stood there, looking up at the stacks, a muted rainbow of brown, red, grey, green, and blue, punctuated every ten or so meters by a sliding ladder as tall as the room itself.

Are all these books yours? she asked, after a long moment.

Oh no, the old man said, laughing in a kindly way that made his eyes crinkle up and water at the corners. This is a library.

He wiped his eyes off with the back of his hand then, stooping down next to her as if he were about to tell her an important secret, whispered. If you want, you can take one of them home with you today. That's what a library is for.

Eleonora looked up around her at the crowded bookshelves. She did, very much want to take a book home with her. By that point she had read every book in her house twice and was about to start *The Hourglass* for a third time. But ever since what happened on the first day of school, she was reluctant to talk about her reading habits with anyone except her father. Plus, with so many books to pick from, she had no idea which to choose.

Which is your favorite? Eleonora asked, trying to work up her confidence. The librarian paused and rubbed his forehead with his thumb.

Of course, I am a great admirer of the classics: Ovid, Homer, Virgil, and the like, but among more contemporary writers, I would say I am most partial to Tolstoy, Goethe, Balzac, Dickens. He smoothed down the tuft of whitish-grey hair just above his forehead and looked back at his desk, as if he might see an author he had forgotten.

If you please, Eleonora said, holding her hands behind her back. I would like to borrow one of those you mentioned.

Oh no, the librarian said, looking down at her. I don't think you would like any of those. They are all quite long and difficult to read.

Exhaling, Eleonora stared down at her sheepskin boots, which were almost completely soaked through with melted snow. She didn't want this nice old man to think she was lying or to make him angry, but something about him made her think he might believe her.

Well, she ventured, still staring at her boots. If any of those books are like *The Hourglass* I think I might like them. It's my favorite book.

Blinking twice over clear blue eyes, the librarian furrowed his brow. You read *The Hourglass*? he asked, less to her than to himself.

Before she could answer, he shrugged his shoulders and tottered back to his desk. Mumbling as he searched, the librarian moved some papers aside and picked up a number of different books before he found the one he was looking for, a blue and green volume with silver lettering on the spine. Walking back across the room he read aloud from the title page. David Copperfield, by Charles Dickens, translated into Romanian by Georges Hasdeu. I think you might like this one, he said and handed the book to Eleonora.

That same night, after her father tucked her in and kissed her on the forehead one last time, Eleonora sat up in bed and pulled her newly borrowed copy of *David Copperfield* off the nightstand. With some effort, she propped the large blue and green book up on her crossed shins and opened it to the frontispiece, a vellum-protected steel

engraving of the author wearing a stark white collar and a stern expression. His hair, round and flat at the top with a waved puff on either side, reminded Eleonora somewhat of St. Basil, and although Mr. Dickens' beard was much smaller than the Saint's, it too had a similar shape. Perhaps if she had noticed this picture the first time she opened the book, at the cruel behest of her teacher, Mr. Dickens could have warned her of what was going to happen. But this time, with nothing to warn her of, he just winked.

*Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.*

*In consideration of the day and hour of my birth, it was declared by the nurse, and by some sage women in the neighbourhood who had taken a lively interest in me several months before there was any possibility of our becoming personally acquainted, first, that I was destined to be unlucky in life; and secondly, that I was privileged to see ghosts and spirits; both these gifts inevitably attaching, as they believed, to all unlucky infants of either gender, born towards the small hours on a Friday night.*

It was not without difficulty that Eleonora read the book's opening passage again, stuttering on words she already knew and wincing as she came to the end of the second paragraph, but once past the first page Mr. Dickens took over and she all but forgot the painful memories associated with his book. That next week, Eleonora read *David Copperfield* whenever she had the chance, after dinner, before school, in her father's store, and sometimes even in class. Although the book was heavy and quite ungainly, the

size of a small dictionary or a Bible, she took it with her wherever she went, lugging it down the hill in her old Turkoman camel bag. In this manner, Eleonora finished *David Copperfield* in less than three days, and although she found David himself to be a bit naïve, she quite liked Mr. Dickens' style, not the least because it reminded her in certain ways of *The Hourglass*. It was not surprising then that, the moment she finished, sitting alone up in the storeroom after school, Eleonora climbed down the ladder and asked her father for permission to go back to the library, which he reluctantly granted only after she promised to return straight back to the store when she was done.

Entering this time through the main entrance, Eleonora found the librarian sitting hunched over a large brown ledger, his unkempt grayish-white eyebrows scrunched down around his nose and the back end of a pen in his mouth. Concentrated as he was, the owlish old man didn't notice Eleonora until she was directly in front of his desk, standing in her school uniform and winter jacket, the red wool camel bag hung around her shoulder.

Well, hello there, he said. Noticing the top of *David Copperfield* peeking out of her bag, he clicked his tongue. Why don't we try something a bit easier this time? In fact, just yesterday, I was thinking of a book you might enjoy. It's a collection of German stories called *Children's Tales and Household Stories*. I think that's what it's called.

Actually, Eleonora said, taking the book out of her bag and with two hands placing it on the edge of his desk. I quite liked Mr. Dickens. I thought David was a bit naïve at times, but I liked it overall.

The librarian stopped searching and looked up at her, his eyebrows rising to a peak. You really did read it.

Yes, sir, she smiled, pulling at the hem of her dress. I did. You don't happen to have any more books by Mr. Dickens, do you? Or is this the only one?

The only one? the librarian repeated, standing up from his desk. No, not at all.

He turned and looked up at the stacks, tracing them in the air with his index finger until he found the section he was searching for. Once found, he wheeled one of the ladders a few meters to the right and began to climb, cautious, but with surprising agility. A little more than half way up, at about the height of Eleonora and her father's roof, he stopped and ran his fingers along a row of blue and green books, all in the same style as the one Eleonora had just finished.

Mr. Dickens wrote a number of very good books, he shouted down to her. And most of them are translated. Let's see here. He looked down the row, tapped a few of the spines, and after careful consideration of the options, pulled one out. If you liked *David Copperfield*, he said, beginning to climb down. You might enjoy this.

Actually, Eleonora called up to him. If it's possible, I would like to borrow all of them. I'd rather not bother you every few days with a new request.

The librarian paused in mid-step as if to consider fully what she had said. Then, nodding, he selected four more of the thick blue and green volumes and perched them in the crook of his arm. Well, it's certainly no bother, he said, nearing the bottom. But our policy says you can only check out five books at a time.

The librarian placed the stack of books on his desk and recorded their titles one by one in his ledger. When he was finished, he looked up at Eleonora, standing quietly in front of him, her jacket still on and the red wool camel bag clutched to her chest. She was not much taller than his desk, her hands and nose both still red from the cold.

How do you suppose you're going to carry all these books home? the librarian asked, stacking them neatly on the corner of his desk. That was not something Eleonora had considered. There was no way all those books could fit in her bag and, even if they could, they would be too heavy for her to carry by herself.

I don't know, she said. The librarian thought for a moment, scratching the space between his eyebrows with the back of his pen, then stood up and tottered over to a small door behind his desk. There was a bit of rummaging, a scrape, a crash, and finally the old man emerged with a small wooden wagon, dusty and covered with cobwebs of spiders long past. Blowing it off, he placed the wagon on the ground in front of Eleonora and put the books inside it.

This used to be my son's, he said, handing the handle to her. But you can use it.

That next Wednesday and every Wednesday after for almost a full year, Eleonora could be seen tottering down Karatzli Street, pulling the creaky but functional wagon behind her, piled high with books to return. After a few weeks the librarian, who had obviously taken a strong liking to Eleonora, waived the five book limit, but there was a limit, of course, to how many books she could read. Depending on their length and difficulty, Eleonora read between five and eight books a week, first only in Romanian, but also later in French, Latin, Greek, German, and English. Sometimes the librarian would suggest a certain book or author he thought she might enjoy, but for the most part he left her to her own devices. After a while, he even let her retrieve the books on her own, propelling herself on ladders around the room, and picking out whatever titles struck her fancy. Dickens led her to Shakespeare, Balzac to Tolstoy, Goethe to Flaubert,

and by the time spring came along, Eleonora had given herself as good an education as you can have.

Most afternoons, while Eleonora was reading cross-legged up in the storeroom or pulling her wagon back and forth from the library, her father could be found sitting hunched over his desk, one hand worrying a curl and the other doing figures in his ledger. Their expenses were by no means extravagant, but the rent of the carriage house, combined with nightly meals at the Constanta Inn and tuition at St. Basil's, was getting to be too much for their little business to bear, especially now that the handmade oriental carpets they sold were competing with cheap, mass-produced products from Britain and the United States. Eleonora's father had tried a number of different calculations, but in the end, they were spending more money than they were taking in, a state of affairs that can never last for very long. What could they do differently? They couldn't move out of the carriage house, there was no other storefront in Constanta big enough to hold all of their stock. They couldn't stop eating at the Constanta Inn, Eleonora was still too young to cook and her father didn't have the time. And, although it would have solved their financial problems, Eleonora's father did not, under any circumstance, want to take his daughter's education away from her. Of course, Eleonora would gladly have agreed to stop going to St. Basil's, indeed, the only reason she continued was that she thought her father wanted her to. But, keeping her feelings to herself, Eleonora's father continued to believe that his daughter had grown to like school.

After much deliberation, he decided that the best solution was for him to travel to Stamboul and, with the assistance of his longtime business partner, Moncef Barcouc Bey,

attempt to sell some of the stock there, for while handmade oriental carpets may have lost fashion in Constanta, they were still very much admired in the Ottoman capitol. As he saw it, the only problem with the plan was that he would be forced to leave his precious daughter at home for at least a month, but these were extenuating circumstances, he told himself, and it was for her benefit that he was going. For a long time, Eleonora's father kept his plan to himself, hoping that perhaps he would have a run of sales and be able to cancel the trip, but as the date of departure grew closer, he came to accept the idea and, finally, less than two weeks before he was set to leave, decided it was time to inform Eleonora.

Ellie, he said, that night after dinner, sitting lightly on the edge of her bed.

Eleonora lowered her book, *L'Education sentimentale*, and looked up at him with her big pistachio green eyes.

Yes, Tata?

He took a deep breath and ran his hands through his hair. Ellie, he said, his moustache trembling, Things at the store aren't going well, they haven't been going well for a long time. I've thought a lot about what to do and I think the best solution is to sell some of the stock in Stamboul.

Eleonora laid her book face down in her lap and blinked. Stamboul. In the brief moment that her eyes were shut, she imagined herself riding high atop an elephant through the Grand Bazaar, snake charmers and spice merchants on either side of her.

When are we leaving? she asked, sitting up.

Not we, her father said, flattening the creases out of her blanket. I'm going by myself. Stamboul is no place for little girls. But don't worry, I'm not going to leave you

here alone. I've already arranged with your Aunt Sheidel to come stay with you. That way you can still go to school while I'm gone.

School and Aunt Sheidel. Eleonora could not think of a worse combination. To spend her days with her wicked teacher in a windowless classroom and her nights at home with Aunt Sheidel, that corpulent, childless old hen who visited them every year at Passover and forced sour gefilte fish on her. There were few things in the world that Eleonora hated, but her Aunt Sheidel's cooking and school were both, for good reason, near the top of her list. And to bear both these burdens alone, without her father, whose company she had never in her life left for more than a few hours, that was just too much. Tears pooling up around her bottom lashes, Eleonora looked up at her father, hoping she might convince him to reconsider either the trip or the decision not to bring her, but she could tell from his face that he was not going to change his mind.

This, she thought, must be how young Gehorg felt when his older brothers told him they were running off to join Vladimirescu's militia. Then, glancing over at her mother's old bookcase, which her father had moved into her room a few months before, Eleonora remembered what young Gehorg had done. In that moment she decided that if he wouldn't bring her to Stamboul, she would find a way to go with him.

You're right, she said, picking up her book to cover the beginnings of a smile. It's probably best if I stay here with Aunt Sheidel.

The next two weeks, while her father was packing, putting his affairs in order, and deciding which carpets to take with him, Eleonora was making preparations of her own. To the casual observer, she would have appeared completely normal, but inside Eleonora was positively whirring. She continued, as usual, to carry a book around with her in her

camel bag, and still tried to read whenever she had the chance, but she could hardly get through a page without her mind jumping to some new, heretofore unconsidered eventuality. What if her father found her before they reached Stamboul? What if Aunt Sheidel arrived in Constanta before her father left? What if there wasn't enough room in any of the trunks? But more than anything, Eleonora was excited. After almost two years of constant reading, she was finally doing something that might be interesting to read about, and she could hardly wait.

After dinner, on the night before he was supposed to leave, Eleonora kissed her father on the forehead and, wishing him a safe journey, retired to her room. She had been uncharacteristically quiet at dinner, a specially-prepared meal of roast chicken and onion soup, and it was not like her to go to sleep so early without a book, but Eleonora's father was too preoccupied with last minute preparations to pay much attention to his daughter's behavior, a state of affairs that worked in her favor. While he was double checking his checklist, Eleonora was making last minute preparations of her own, laying out clothes for the next day, composing an explanatory note to Aunt Sheidel, and transferring the piece of roast chicken she had smuggled out of the Constanta Inn to her camel bag.

Early the next morning, when she heard the carriage stop outside their house, Eleonora put on her favorite red cotton dress, draped the bag around her shoulder, and slipped out her bedroom window into the vegetable garden. Breathing heavily through her nose, Eleonora crept around to the side of the house and watched her father talking to the carriage driver. In that moment, just before the decisive act, Eleonora began to doubt somewhat the wisdom of her plan. Maybe this isn't such a good idea, she thought. She had never even left Constanta and *The Hourglass* was, after all, just a book. Maybe it

would be best to stay at home with her Aunt Sheidel. As she was thinking this, a small bright red and yellow bird landed on the windowsill next to her and, with a short twitter, put her doubts to rest.

Thank you little bird, Eleonora whispered. And when her father and the carriage driver went in for the last of the trunks, she slipped around the corner of the house, ran across the street, unlatched the luggage compartment, and quickly scrunched herself into a battered old steamer trunk almost, but not entirely, filled with expensive Viennese velvet brocade her father planned to sell when they arrived.

## Chapter Four

Bumping along the rocky road to Stamboul, her neck bent forward and knees scrunched up to her chest, Eleonora pondered her situation. As much as she had thought ahead, checked, and double-checked her checklist, she had never really considered what it would feel like to be shut inside a trunk for nine hours on end. Frankly, it didn't feel very good. But considering the possible alternatives, she thought, trying to stay optimistic, her situation wasn't really so bad. She had enough room to maneuver herself around and the fabric she was lying on really was quite comfortable. Indeed, it was some of the most expensive fabric in the world. Still, no matter how optimistic you are, being shut up inside a trunk is never very nice. On top of this, the inside of the trunk was practically pitch black, the only light coming from a crack along the lid. She could make out the outline of her fingers if she held a hand up in front of her face, but beyond that, Eleonora was in the dark.

In spite of the discomfort and the darkness, Eleonora was confident, perhaps foolishly so, that eventually everything would work out. Didn't Miss Ionescu eventually marry her Jirik? Didn't Ulysses eventually make it home? If things worked out for them, she thought, the carriage jolting violently over a rock. Why shouldn't they work out for me? Whether or not things were going to work out for her in the end, Eleonora knew that nothing at all was going to happen until the carriage stopped for the night and so, brushing down the velvet with her palm, she closed her eyes, which was really not much different than leaving them open, and tried to picture the countryside they were passing

through. Stone cottages spaced out every few hundred meters along the side of the road, a cow watching them with little to no interest, a small boy on a donkey with a stick, cypress trees and, beyond that, vast tracts of yellowish green farm land, separated according to crop. As she drifted softly in and out of sleep, the cottages turned into villages, the villages to cities, and the cities grew taller, with wide boulevards, crystal spires, and magnificent floating gardens.

To the passing carriage, Kuchuk, with its well-swept streets and tidy red brick houses, would most likely appear entirely normal. But stand in the middle of the town square in the middle of the day and, chances are, you won't see a soul. Other than a few brave men, scurrying hurriedly along the edges of the sidewalk, their heads bent and briefcases clutched to their sides, the streets of Kuchuk are entirely empty. A few short years ago, Kuchuk was just like any other town. Perhaps its inhabitants had a bit less sense than the inhabitants of other towns, but essentially it was the same.

Then one day, a mischievous little boy came home late from school because he had been playing by the river. Mischievous boy that he was, he told his mother that he was late because he had been attacked by a monster, a walking fish monster, he said, with fangs. Whereas any sensible woman would have scolded her child doubly, once for coming home late and once for lying, the mother of this mischievous little boy, like all the residents of Kuchuk, was a bit short on sense. Hearing his story, she gasped and forbid him from returning to school until this fish monster was caught.

The next day, in the interest of public safety, the boy's mother told her neighbors about the monster. Then they told their neighbors, adding a few details for effect. Then their neighbors told their neighbors and so on, until everyone in Kuchuk knew about the

fish monster. Within a few days, the town was completely paralyzed by fear. People only left their houses when they absolutely needed to, to buy food or go to work. And after a while, most stopped doing that. Except for those few brave men scurrying along the edges of the sidewalk, the streets were completely empty. The only sound in the town square was the twittering of birds and the rumble of a passing carriage.

Just a few kilometers down the road was another town of about the same size, a town so utterly overwhelmed with vegetation that it looked like a lost Incan village in the jungles of South America. The inhabitants of Kainardji, though much more sensible than the inhabitants of Kuchuk, were known throughout the region for their laziness. Like Kuchuk, Kainardji was a relatively normal town until just a few years previous. The transformation began, as most do, with a few small, unnoticed changes, a tree branch downed by the wind, tufts of grass poking up between the cobbles of the town square, ivy slowly creeping up the trellises.

For a long while, the inhabitants of Kainardji ignored the encroaching vegetation and went on with their lives. When it was no longer possible to ignore, they told each other that cutting the vegetation back would be too much trouble, that things actually looked better that way. And they went back to playing cards, laying in the grass, or whatever else they were doing. For a full year, no one mowed their lawn, trimmed their trees, or cut their ivy. Eventually, the town square became a meadow, the streets were littered with downed branches, and the ivy began creeping into people's houses.

At that point the inhabitants of Kainardji gave up. They stopped going to work, stopped cooking, stopped cleaning, and most stopped going to school. Who needs all that, the inhabitants of Kainardji said. Instead of working, cooking, cleaning, and going to

school, they spent their days playing cards and lying in the overgrown grass. When they needed to eat, they hunted birds with sharp rocks and gathered wild mushrooms, which had begun sprouting everywhere. When a carriage passed through the town square, the inhabitants of Kainardji all hid behind trees and threw rocks.

The next town over was a small but very prosperous trading post called Shumla. Besides having a number of quite prideful inhabitants, Shumla was notable for being constructed entirely out of glass. All the houses, all the stores, and all the town buildings were all made out of glass, sparkling in the sun like an endless crystal sea. The library was glass, the town hall was glass. And on top of the highest hill was the biggest building of all, bigger than the library and the town hall combined, a twenty two room glass mansion with a glass stable house, and a shimmering glass greenhouse.

The owner of this mansion was the richest man in Shumla, a glass merchant and the first person in town to build his home out of glass. Glass, he told everyone he spoke to, is not only the most expensive building material, it also allows anyone who passes to see all the beautiful things you have in your house. And, of course, people noticed. Even before he had finished building it, everyone was talking about his magnificent glass house. Soon the second and third richest men in the city got it into their heads that they too should build glass houses. Then the fourth and fifth and sixth richest men wanted glass houses as well. Such is the way with the prideful. This continued until everything in the town was made completely out of glass and the glass merchant was ten times as rich as he had been to begin with.

As the horses slowed to a stop, whinnying and stamping their feet, Eleonora stirred softly in her cramped velvet bed, fish monsters, ivy, and glass mansions melting away. Where am I? she thought. Trying to sit up, she hit her head on the top of the trunk and quickly remembered. She was in a trunk, on a carriage, bound for Stamboul. She was also quite stiff, she realized, as she tried to maneuver herself into a more comfortable position, and hungry too.

Who would have thought that running away would be so difficult? It's a shame there weren't any books about running away in trunks, Eleonora thought, her stomach mumbling loudly. If she had known how uncomfortable it would be, she might never have gotten it into her head to begin with. Of course, in the grand scheme of things, her situation was not particularly horrible, but at the moment Eleonora was not concerned with the grand scheme of things, she was concerned with getting out of the trunk and getting herself some food. Not one accustomed to physical hardships, Eleonora was on the verge of revealing herself to her father, thinking that would be the easiest way to get a hot meal, but, she reminded herself, if she revealed herself now, after less than a day on the road, her father would undoubtedly send her back to Constanta. Then where would she be? She would be back in Constanta, alone, with her Aunt Sheideland her teacher. Also, her father would be very upset with her, for running away and for making him lose two days of travel time. No, she did not want any of that. And so, turning awkwardly onto her other side, she waited, scrunched in the trunk that was to be her home for the next two weeks.

Once the horses were detached, led to their stalls, brushed down and fed, Eleonora lay silently and listened to the sounds of the horses until she was positive that there was

nobody left in the stables or, if there was somebody there, they were asleep. Pushing up the top of the trunk, she stood up, as straight as she could in the cramped space of the luggage compartment, cracked her neck from side to side, and leaned over to touch her toes.

Ouch, she said. She finally understood why Mrs. Livno was always complaining about her joints. She also had a new understanding of the phrase hunger pangs. But there was time for this some other time, Eleonora thought as she stepped out of the trunk, unlatched the luggage compartment and, grabbing her camel bag, slipped out onto the ground.

Peeking her head around the back corner of a building that, from her vantage point, looked surprisingly similar to the Constanta Inn, Eleonora snuck along the wall and into a small, moonlit square anchored in the middle by a statue of a large, bearded man named Lajos Kossuth. Probably a friend of Ovid's, she thought, scratching an itch on the top of her head. Now how can I find some food. Smelling roast lamb and fried potatoes coming from entrance to the inn, Eleonora considered trying to scrounge some food from around back, as she had often seen gypsy children doing at home. But as hungry as she was she didn't want to risk the chance of her father seeing her. And so, clutching her bag to her side, she took off into the night.

Once she was a sufficient distance away from the inn, Eleonora slowed to a walk and looked closely for the first time at the row of nearly identical red brick houses that were laid out on either side of her. Now where can I find some food, she thought, inadvertently chewing the strap of her camel bag. It seemed to her that whenever people were forced to scrounge for food, they usually stole loaves of bread from windowsills or

begged for scraps from the back doors of inns. She looked around again to see if there were loaves of bread on the windowsills. There weren't. Who would leave a loaf of bread on a windowsill overnight? And the back door of the inn was not an option. Then, just as she was beginning to feel desperate, Eleonora spotted a small brown rabbit bounding across the street with a large bright orange carrot in its mouth. That's it, she thought. Creeping around the back of the house the rabbit had come from behind, Eleonora found a glorious vegetable garden, blooming with carrots, turnips, and cucumbers, all ripe for the picking. What more could she ask for? Well, she thought, I really would like a hot piece of brisket to go with these carrots. But one can't expect to find a piece of brisket in a vegetable garden.

Eleonora tramped hungrily through the plants, pulling up tubers, eating them, and tossing the stems over her shoulder, until, sated and seated in the dirt next to a blackberry patch, she heard a voice.

Who's there? She froze and lay down flat on the ground. Who's there?

No one, she replied. After a moment of confused silence, Eleonora heard a rustling, a muffled yelp, some more rustling, and finally, a little boy in light blue pajamas emerged from the bushes, rubbing a scratch on his forehead. Seeing the dark, breathing lump by the blackberry patch, he tottered over and cautiously poked at it with a stick.

Ouch, Eleonora said, grabbing the stick and tossing it into the bushes. Why did you do that?

Satisfied that the lump was indeed someone, and not, as it had said, no one, the little boy sat down next to it. What's your name? he asked.

Iliyana, Eleonora replied, sitting up and pulling her dress down over her knees.

Are you running away from home? he asked, picking his nose and wiping it on his pajama bottoms. Eleonora thought about that.

No, she said. I'm looking for food.

I'm Cosimo, the boy said, watching himself bore a hole in the dirt with the same finger he had just picked his nose with. And I'm running away from home. I'm going to live with the gypsies.

He paused, looking up to see what Eleonora's reaction would be. She was unimpressed. If you want though, the boy continued. I could make you a salami sandwich before I go. Then maybe we can run away together.

Eleonora had no intention of running away with this dirty mop-haired little boy, but she wasn't going to turn down a salami sandwich. She was much too hungry to turn down a salami sandwich. And so, listening to Cosimo describe how mean his parents were, how they wouldn't buy him a bicycle, and how they always made him eat his spinach, she followed him into his house.

Why did *you* run away? Cosimo asked, raising himself up onto his tip-toes in order to reach the bread basket. She really had never thought of herself as running away. It was always more of a running to or a running with. But, watching him saw off the thick fatty red circles of salami, Eleonora thought that sometimes it's best to tell people what they want to hear.

I'm a gypsy, she said, lowering her gaze. Cosimo stopped in mid-cut and looked at her with his wide glassy blue eyes.

A real gypsy?

A gypsy orphan, Eleonora said. My parents were gypsies but they were killed by a bear when I was three years old.

Wow, the boy said, handing her the sandwich. A real gypsy.

Settling down into a wooden rocking chair, Eleonora told Cosimo stories of how, for the past three years, she had wandered the countryside by herself, pinching vegetables from vegetable gardens, sleeping in carriage houses, and relying on the kindness of the strangers. Stopping every once and a while to take a bite of a sandwich, an apple, or a piece of cake, Eleonora told him a story, which she was quite proud of having made up, about a wolf she had befriended. By the end of the story, in which the wolf tragically dies defending her from bandits, Eleonora had eaten three salami sandwiches, two apples, and three pieces of cozonac. For his part, Cosimo was sound asleep, curled up on the couch like a little puppy.

Goodbye, Eleonora whispered and, on the way out, stuffed the rest of the salami, a loaf of bread, and two apples into her bag. She knew stealing was wrong, she really did, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

Over the next five days Eleonora went out from her trunk twice more in search of food, raiding vegetable gardens, begging from the back doors of inns, and even stealing a loaf of bread from the windowsill of a forgetful housewife. The fourth time she went out, Eleonora found herself in a much larger, much different looking town, a city really, that unbeknownst to her was the site of the famous fourth century Battle of Adrianople. But even if she had known about the battle, it would have been far from her mind as she wandered the winding, uncobbled streets, lined on either side with shuttered storefronts

and narrow, two-story houses, looking for food and trying to decipher the strange, curling Arabic script that adorned all the signs.

With no real sense of where she was going, or even where she should be going, Eleonora continued along the empty, narrow dirt streets, winding her way farther and farther from the center of town, until finally she arrived at the western gate. The gate itself was a heavy stone arch, ostensibly watched over by a Turkish soldier, whom she could hear snoring from twenty paces away, a saber laying loosely across his lap and a worm-eaten dark red fez slipping down his forehead. Resting for a moment in an empty chair across from the watchman, Eleonora looked out past the swath of wheat fields and olive orchards at the edge of town. What am I doing here? she thought and sighed, the question sinking into her stomach like stale bread in soup.

Then, as if things weren't already bleak enough, a mangy grey and white dog bounded out of the wheat field in front of her and started barking at her knees, licking her shoes, and running circles around her chair.

Be quiet, Eleonora whispered, pointing to the watchman. You're going to wake him up.

But the dog kept barking, as dogs are wont to do, and the watchman kept snoring, as watchmen are wont to do, until finally Eleonora stood up and readjusted her bag, intending to leave the gate and find her way somehow back to the inn.

Get along now, she said, pushing the dog's mangy flank. Go back home. She watched the dog bound off into the wheat field, seemingly on its way back home, but a moment later it was again at her feet, barking, licking her shoes, and running circles around her.

What do you want? she said, exasperated. Again the dog bounded off toward the light brown forest of wheat spears, but this time he stopped at the edge of the field and looked back, panting expectantly, as if imploring her to follow.

Okay, Eleonora said, figuring that she was already quite lost and she could always find her way back to the city if she needed. But not too far.

Eleonora followed her canine guide through wheat fields, olive groves, and past a few scattered cottages to the edge of a dark, looming forest. I'm not going in there, she said, the dog looking back at her from the edge. We've already gone much too far.

When the dog saw Eleonora had stopped following him, he barked, ran over to her and started trying to jump up on her chest.

Stop it, you stupid dog, she shouted, swatting at his nose. I never should have followed you here in the first place. You obviously don't know where you're going because now we're even more lost than I was before and I still haven't eaten anything.

Eleonora squatted down next to a small boulder, and dropped her forehead into her hands, just barely holding back the tears. She very well might have broken down entirely, abandoned the dog, and tried to find her way back to her father's carriage alone, if she hadn't at that very moment heard the haunting, breathy music of a pan flute wavering through the forest. Wiping her nose off on the sleeve of her dress, she stood up and listened more closely.

Is that where you're trying to bring me? Eleonora asked, at which the dog barked and began trying to jump up on her chest again. Figuring she had a better chance of finding her way back with the dog than alone, Eleonora followed him into the forest.

## Chapter Five

A few minutes later, Eleonora found herself on the outskirts of a temporary gypsy encampment, the hem of her dress snagged on the thicket she had emerged through. Her mangy grey and white guide was nowhere to be seen and the sound of the pan flute, though closer than before, seemed to be coming from somewhere much deeper in the forest. The encampment, a circle of makeshift canvas tents thrown up haphazardly around a fire pit, looked like the kind of place Robin Hood and his men might spend a few nights before moving on to Ellsinore. Whoever these people were, Eleonora thought, sniffing at the smell of roast meat wafting over from the fire, they probably had some food left over from dinner. But even the prospect of a hot meal was not enough to induce our still very shy heroine to approach a stranger, let alone a whole group of strangers who, for all she knew, were villainous bandits and thieves. As Eleonora pondered how best to go about the situation, a rounded, ursine old woman appeared from in between two of the tents.

Eleonora! she exclaimed, approaching her with outstretched arms. Eleonora, my dear. We've been expecting you.

Eleonora had no idea who this purple-kerchiefed woman was, how she knew her name, or why she had been expecting her. And so it is understandable, indeed quite reasonable, that Eleonora regarded this woman, who was, indeed, her midwife, the very person who brought her into the world, with no small measure of suspicion. And yet, somewhere, beneath that suspicion, Eleonora felt in this mysterious woman a deep and inexplicable sense of trust. Perhaps a recollection of her birth was still lodged somewhere

in her memory. Perhaps the midwife herself inspired confidence. Perhaps Eleonora's reason was overcome by her hunger. At any event, it was not long before Eleonora reached out and took the midwife's hand, staring up in at her thick, hazelnut colored arms as they walked through a ring of tents to an enormous fire at the center of the encampment.

About twenty people were gathered loosely in a circle around the fire, weary, dark-haired people in threadbare clothing and tattered boots, seated haphazardly on stones, logs, and blankets. The midwife, who in fire light looked almost celestial, led Eleonora to an unoccupied stump and, laying a calloused hand on the ridge of her back, said she would return shortly. Eleonora sat down on the edge of the stump and watched the sturdy old woman walk back across the circle. Truthfully, she felt a bit ill at ease in the company of all these drifters, but more than anything else, Eleonora was tired, her legs ached, and she was hungry. Closing her eyes against the smoke, she took a deep breath, wondering if this was where the dog had intended to bring her. Alongside the pan flute, still playing its ghostly tune somewhere deep in the forest, Eleonora could also hear murmured conversation in a language she was not sure she understood, the occasional crackle of the fire and, behind that, if she listened carefully, the creaking canopy of branches and the low, even hum of a slightly less than three quarters moon, waning through a cloud bank.

Quite a long while later, or so it seemed, the midwife returned, carrying a rough wooden plate piled high with fatty pink pieces of pork and a steaming yellow mound of cornmeal mush. There were no forks, so Eleonora ate with her hands, as she had seen some of the younger children do, using clumps of the yellow mush to scoop pieces of

meat into her mouth. It is said that hunger is the best sauce and, indeed, Eleonora had never enjoyed a meal quite so much as this one. Even the feast of the Faerie Quenne, she thought, which was composed of the most lavish food imaginable and lasted twelve days straight, she would not have enjoyed half as much as this pork and cornmeal mush. When Eleonora was finished eating, the midwife again laid a hand on the ridge of her back and at that moment, as if by some previously agreed upon sign, the forest fell silent. The pan flute stopped its music, conversation died off, even the fire restrained its crackle. All the eyes turned towards her and the midwife. Reknitting the purple kerchief under her chin, the midwife stood up and, looking at Eleonora with a mother's pride, moved deliberately towards the center of the circle. Arriving at the center, she took a long deep breath and began to speak.

A long, long time ago, before anyone now living was alive, a girl named Jenica was born to two loving parents in a land of peace and prosperity. But the tides of History, as they will, soon turned towards war. One empire invaded another and there was much fighting in Jenica's town, which was on the border between the two empires. In the fighting, Jenica's mother was killed. This was very sad for both Jenica and her father. But life goes on.

After an appropriate time of mourning, her father, who was a blacksmith and made a comfortable living, married another woman, a war widow with two daughters of her own. Jenica's father thought his new wife was a good woman because she was kind to him and always cooked his favorite meals. But to Jenica she was mean and jealous. While her father was at work, this new mother made Jenica sweep the ashes out of the

hearth and scour the pots. All the while, her own daughters were trying on new dresses and gossiping. The work was very difficult, but Jenica didn't say anything, because she was scared of her stepmother and because she was generally a good girl who did what other people told her.

At the same time, far away in the capitol city, the king of the empire was sitting on his throne, worried about the prospects of another war. In the past month, the king of a neighboring empire had sent many armies to the border. He consulted his advisors, who told him the nonsense advisors always tell kings. Then the king sent for an old wizard. Without even hearing what the situation was, the wizard gave the king a magical quill, made of a peafowl feather, and said that the person who could make this quill write would save the kingdom from ruin.

The king was a man who believed in magic. So, instead of listening to what his advisors had said, he invited all the nobles in the empire to his court to try the quill. And all of them came—the dukes and princes and barons and counts—dressed in their finest regalia. And they lined up in an enormous line, a line that led through the halls of the castle, out the entrance gate and almost past the walls of the city, each of them thinking that he would be the one to make the magic quill write. But as hard as they scratched, the quill would not write.

Once all the nobles in the empire had tried the quill, some of them more than once, the king put the quill on a purple velvet pillow, gave it to his most trusted advisor and told him that it was his job to go to every city, town, and village in the empire and make sure that every man and boy in every city, town, and village, no matter how small, tried the quill.

And so, with the quill resting on its purple velvet pillow, the advisor went to every house in the empire. There was much excitement where ever the quill went, for, by that time, everyone in the kingdom had heard of the magic quill. In every house he visited, the advisor found the men all dressed in their best clothes. And every one of them thought in the back of his mind that he would be the one to make the quill write, that he would be the one to save the empire.

But, after visiting every house in the empire, no one had been able to make the quill write. And, to make matters worse, the troops of the neighboring empire were, according to reliable reports, conducting patrols into sovereign territory. Confused, the king asked his wife, the queen, what she thought. Was the wizard wrong? Had his advisor perhaps missed someone?

Your advisor, the queen told her husband, missed half of the people in the empire. Apparently, the person who will save the empire is a woman.

Of course, the king exclaimed. Why didn't I think of that?

The next day, the king ordered all the female nobles in the empire—the duchesses and princesses and baronesses and countesses—to his court to try the quill. Like their husbands before them, they all came dressed up in their finest clothes and lined up in a line that trailed out the gates of the city. But, also like their husbands, none of them could make the quill write.

Determined now to find the person of whom the wizard had spoken, the king sent his advisor out again, again to every city, town, and village in the empire. This time it was his job to make sure every person in the empire tried the quill, man or woman, boy or girl, even new born babies. For although he trusted his wife, the king thought that perhaps

the advisor had missed someone the first time around. And so the advisor set out again, knocking on doors in every city, town and village in the empire, the quill still resting patiently on its purple velvet pillow.

During this whole time, Jenica continued to sweep the ashes out of the hearth and scour the pots while her sisters tried on dresses and gossiped. She never told her father how poorly her stepmother treated her, because she was a good girl and also because she was scared of her. Indeed, she worked so hard that she hadn't even been able to see the quill when it came around the first time.

When the advisor's carriage pulled into Jenica's town, which was one of the last in the entire empire, it was the middle of the day. The advisor was beginning to worry that the magic quill was not really magic. He was thinking to himself that perhaps the king should have spent his time training the army instead of waiting for a magic quill. But still he had a small bit of faith left.

When he pulled up to Jenica's house, which was the last house he was planning on visiting that day, Jenica's stepmother and stepsisters were all very excited. They all got dressed up in their finest clothes and they all tried the quill. But like everyone else in the empire, none of them could make a mark. As he was readying to leave, the advisor asked, as he always did, if anyone else lived in the house.

No, Jenica's stepmother said, for she was an evil woman. Not knowing any better, the advisor believed her. He was on his way out the front door when Jenica walked up from the basement, where she had been scouring pots. Her apron was filthy and her hands were covered in grease.

Who is this? the advisor asked.

No one, Jenica's sisters laughed. She just sweeps the ashes and scours the pots.

But the advisor insisted that everyone, no matter what their job, must try the quill. It was the king's orders, he said. And so the advisor called Jenica over to the table and presented her with the quill, resting on the purple velvet pillow. Embarrassed by her appearance, Jenica took the quill with downcast eyes. Timidly, she pressed it to the badly scratched royal paper, and to everyone's surprise, it wrote, as if by its own volition, the letters of her name. Jenica.

The midwife stopped there, just before the story ended and without another word, quietly walked back across the circle and sat down next to Eleonora. Meanwhile, the rest of the people around the circle began sleepily stretching and collecting their blankets. It seemed strange to Eleonora that the midwife had ended her story where she did, and even stranger that no one else appeared to mind. Didn't they care? Weren't they anxious to know how Jenica saved the kingdom? The only explanation Eleonora could think of was that the midwife was going to continue her story the following night. Running her hand along the top of the stump, Eleonora suddenly felt a strong and somewhat unexpected desire to stay, to stay with this woman and travel around with her, listening to her stories and eating cornmeal mush. It was odd, she thought, how close she felt to this woman she hardly even knew.

As Eleonora thought this, the midwife turned to her and gently rustled her hair. It's about time for you to be getting back to your father, she said. You have work to do.

Eleonora looked around the camp, at the kitchen tent and all gypsy families settling down for the night, then back into the middle of the fire. She really would enjoy

living like this, traveling from place to place, eating pork and cornmeal mush, listening to the distant sound of the pan flute. But there are some things in life you can't decide. No matter how much we fight against it, we are like fish hooked to the line of Providence, taut and slowly pulling us towards our futures.

Before you go, the midwife said, reaching into the folds of her dress, I have something for you. Reverently, she removed from her dress a magnificent inlaid cedar comb and held it out in the palm of her hand. Eleonora took the comb and held it out in front of her, the dying fire light dancing along the mother of pearl and dark, burnished cedar prongs.

Keep this with you, the old woman said, kissing her gently on the top of her head. Keep this with you wherever you go. And remember, you're not too late.

## Chapter Six

That next day, bumping over a not particularly well-maintained mountain pass, her knees scrunched up to her chest and the soft touch of velvet on her cheek, Eleonora dreamt of peafowl feathers and gypsies, and a mangy grey and white dog leading her through narrow, wet streets as dawn clung perpetually to the horizon. Eleonora could still taste the roast pork and cornmeal on the corners of her lips as she blinked herself awake. Did that really happen? she thought. At just that moment, as if in response to her question, Eleonora realized that she was clenching in her little fingers the comb that strange gypsy woman had given her. She brought the cedar and mother of pearl comb, which seemed to glow of its own dull light, up to her face and inspected it as best she could. I guess it did happen, she thought. But even with the comb in her hand and the sweet, grainy taste of pork and cornmeal on her lips, Eleonora, who had always been somewhat of a skeptic, still had a difficult time believing what had happened to her the night before.

One thing she did know for sure was that she was hungry. Indeed, even in her sleep, Eleonora had begun to feel the sad, familiar waves of hunger beating against the walls of her stomach, a dull persistent gnaw, in light of which her dreams, the comb, and the truth all seemed entirely unimportant. I have to go out again tonight, she thought, and quieted her breath to hear if there was anyone there in the stables. As usual, she could hear little more than horse sounds, neighing and whinnying, with a bit of hoof stomping, mane shaking, and oat chomping. But behind the horses, Eleonora could also faintly hear

the twizzling of an unfamiliar mouth instrument, snaking through the feline half tones of an Oriental scale. It sounded like a dulcian, she thought, only slightly less melodic. Whatever it was, and whoever was playing it, Eleonora knew it wasn't safe to leave the carriage until it stopped.

It would be nice to stretch my legs, she thought to herself, at the very least. And so, as she had done more than a half dozen times by now, Eleonora carefully lifted the top of the trunk and, stepping out onto the floor of the carriage, stretched her legs out as well as she could manage in the space. On either side of her, bleeding apart from the darkness, Eleonora could make out the outline of the other trunks, stacked up on top of each other, a few errant rugs too large to fit inside any of them, and an enormous wicker basket, which she couldn't, for the life of her, determine the purpose of. As she was contemplating the basket, Eleonora heard a rattling of keys and the carriage driver muttering.

Where did I put that damn bridle?

Spooked, she quickly ducked back into her trunk and closed the lid just moments before the driver opened the luggage compartment.

What? he yelled over his shoulder. What on earth is it doing in there? And cursing under his breath, he slammed the luggage compartment shut.

She knew that she would, at some point, have to reveal herself to her father, but being, as she had for the past weeks, primarily concerned with finding her next meal, Eleonora had not thought much about how or when she wanted to do this. And more importantly, she really had no idea how her father would react. It had been so long that, when Eleonora tried to imagine possible reactions, she had a difficult time remembering

even what he looked like. Of course, she knew he had curly dark brown hair, light brown eyes, a Roman nose, and a thick moustache. But she had forgotten the other, indescribable features that made him different than any other man with curly dark brown hair, light brown eyes, a Roman nose, and a thick moustache. This thought, of forgetting what her father looked like, bothered Eleonora so much that she nearly forgot how hungry she was.

By coincidence, if such a thing exists, it so happened that the night Eleonora decided finally to reveal herself to her father they were less than a day's journey outside of Stamboul. She had not been keeping track of the days, having had more pressing tasks to attend to, but based on her recollections, Eleonora assumed they were getting close. We must have been traveling for at least twelve days, she thought, going back in her head, and Stamboul, according to what her father had told her before he left, was almost exactly two week's carriage ride from Constanta. Although she was normally very good with numbers, neither of these figures were even close to accurate. Not only did she miscalculate the number of days they had been traveling, it was in fact closer to twenty, Eleonora also neglected to factor in the condition of the roads, which, owing to a particularly harsh winter, were in quite bad disrepair. But her miscalculations were equivalent, and so the point remains that, by coincidence, or some other force, the night Eleonora decided finally to reveal herself, which was the night after the carriage driver had almost discovered her, they were less than a day's journey outside of Stamboul, in a small seaside resort town called Selymbria.

After a number false starts and abandoned attempts, Eleonora carefully pushed open the top of the trunk. Rubbing her eyes with the heels of her palms, she stepped out onto the wooden floor of the luggage compartment and, silently listening, although there was really no purpose to her stealth, heard the same strange dulcimer, much louder than it had been the night before, twizzling circles around half tones and quarter steps. It was the kind of music one might use to charm a snake, she thought and, stretching out her arms, cracked her neck from side to side. Then, finally, inhaling decisively, Eleonora stepped forward, unlatched the door to the luggage compartment and pushed. As luck would have it, the door was stuck. Undeterred, Eleonora positioned her shoulders against the door, braced her feet on the bottom of her trunk and, counting to three, pushed back with all her strength, the sheer force of which sent her tumbling backwards out of the luggage compartment and into a conveniently placed pile of hay.

That was lucky, Eleonora thought. Picking herself up off the ground, she dusted off the back of her dress and regarded the row of horses stabled up around her. They were sleeping for the most part, but every once and a while one of them would shake its mane or whinny plaintively and roll its horse lips, as if confronted in its dreams by some inexorable equine dilemma. Once Eleonora had determined that there were no stable boys around, though really that hardly mattered anymore, she crept out of the stable and around the side of the inn, which, apart from the Arabic script on the sign hanging next to the front door, looked quite similar to all the other inns she had crept around the side of. It had the same dark red brick, the same gas lamp in the window and the same yellow thatched roof. But this time, instead of lighting off into the night, Eleonora walked up to

the front of the inn and, without so much as a moment's hesitation, pushed open the heavy wooden door and walked inside.

A thick cloud of smoke hung about a meter above the tops of the circular tin tables, pushed back to the walls and facing the center of the room, where a lanky young man with the beginning, pubescent wisps of a mustache was playing the mouth instrument Eleonora had heard for the past few nights. There were two or three and sometime four fat, bald, or wrinkled men at every table, all of them drinking tea, sucking the long serpentine hose of a water pipe, and either playing backgammon or watching backgammon being played. Along the back wall of the room was a short bar lined with empty water pipes and there were waiters circling with tea pots and grayish red hot coals.

As she stood in the doorway, scanning the room for her father, more and more eyes were turning on her, this dirty, skinny little girl who looked like she had just walked in from the forest. The slap of backgammon pieces stopped, the conversation died down and, although she did not speak the language, it was clear that many of the tables were discussing her. At that moment Eleonora was struck by the horrible, irrepressible thought that her father was not in the room, that he was gone, dead, or somehow otherwise absent, and that for the rest of her life she would be alone, a lonely orphan scrounging for food in a strange land. Thinking this, Eleonora had the urge to run, to run out of the room and escape into the forest where maybe, if she were lucky, she would be able to find another encampment of gypsies.

Ellie! Shocked at the sight of his daughter, Eleonora's father stood up in his chair, shattering his glass of tea, and bounded towards her. What on earth are you doing here?

The mood of the room quickly shifted from concern to interest, as the inn's patrons watched Eleonora's father lift her up into his arms.

I, Eleonora said, looking at his bright light brown eyes, his grey stubbly cheeks, and the crescent moon creases under his nose. I wanted to come to Stamboul, Tata. I wanted to come with you.

She tried to continue, to tell him about the trunk, Cosimo, and the gypsies, but she couldn't. Overcome with emotion, Eleonora buried her face in her father's smoky wool shirt and began to sob, stuttering. I don't want to go back home, Tata. I hate school and I hate Aunt Sheidel. Please don't send me home, Tata. I missed you so much.

The next morning, after dispatching a telegram to her Aunt Sheidel in Tulcea, Eleonora and her father set out together on the last leg of their journey to Stamboul. It was a soggy, bright spring day and Eleonora sat on top of the carriage, squeezed in between her father and the grimy carriage driver. For the first time in almost three weeks, Eleonora felt the sun beating down on her, the warm wind blowing on her cheeks and the brightness of a breathtakingly blue sky. The hills rose up from the road on either side of them, scattered with spiky purple wildflowers, yellow-lichen covered rocks and, every so often, a lonesome clump of cypress. As they rode, kicking up dust behind them, Eleonora could hear bullfrogs along the side of the road and, every once and a while, a spray of yellow-bellied wood warblers sputtering overhead.

But as exhilarating as this all was, Eleonora had not slept much the night before, kept awake by the excitement of seeing her father for the first time in almost three weeks, not to mention her primarily nocturnal schedule. And it wasn't before long that, resting

her head on her father's warm, wool lap, Eleonora drifted off to sleep, dreaming of towns as they passed through them, Corlu, Muratbey, Ahmediye. As she fell deeper and deeper into sleep, she rushed out in front of the carriage, soaring over the landscape to the shores of the Bosphorus.

From the balcony of her minaret, Eleonora looked out over the imperial city, the slow, majestic straits of the Bosphorus shimmering purple in the late afternoon, the markets, the slums, the trio of gargantuan testudine mosques and, presiding over all this, Topkapai palace, a citadel of marble walls and crystal towers, seated regally at the confluence of the straits. In the middle distance, a flock of cormorants swept across the river, curving gently against the boat traffic. Here was her mythical ox-crossing, formerly Byzantium and Constantinople, currently the capitol of the Turks, the Gates of the Orient, the Pearl of the Bosphorus, as beautiful as Io herself and adorned with the most magnificent jewels. Stamboul. Into the city.

## Chapter Seven

Long, long ago in the early days of the world a beautiful young cow-eyed Argive princess named Io sat, as many beautiful young princesses have, on the grassy banks of a glassy slow-moving river, watching it pass by on its way out to sea. So beautiful was this young princess, sitting on the riverbank with her pale white skin and long dark brown hair, that Zeus, or Jupiter as the case may be, noticed her from atop Mount Olympus and, seeing her, decided that he would have her. Descending from on high on a puffy white cloud, Zeus hopped off onto the riverbank, flexed his muscles and introduced himself. Although he was a lecherous old man, the king of gods could also be quite charming when he put some effort into it—he was, after all, the king of gods—and after a few minutes of dallying about inconsequential matters, Io relented to the inevitable. But before taking the proverbial tumble, Zeus, who was experienced in such affairs, and knew better than anyone how jealous his wife could get, pulled a cover of clouds over him and his young Argive mistress.

Although he was certainly correct about his wife's jealousy, Zeus had seriously underestimated her intelligence. Or, maybe it was that he had been so caught up in the moment that he couldn't think of a better ruse. In any case, Hera was not fooled. Noticing the somewhat too abrupt cover of cloud blowing over the Peleponese, Hera put down the pomegranate she had been eating and, bending down towards the earth, parted the celestial blanket. What she saw, down there on earth, was her husband sitting alone on a

river bank next to a beautiful and very confused white heifer, which was in fact Io, transformed moments before by Zeus.

What are you doing down there? Hera asked, pushing the clouds further apart to see if she could spot any young maidens fleeing into the woods.

Nothing, he said, sheepishly, petting the tuft of long dark brown hair between the heifer's horns. I was just sitting here on the river bank, all by myself, enjoying the day, when this beautiful white heifer wandered up to me.

That is a very beautiful heifer, Hera said. She knew better than to believe her husband, but also knew it took a certain cunning to ensnare him. I have always wanted a beautiful white heifer like that.

Well, said Zeus slowly, considering his options as he ran his hand along Io's broad white bovine back. Why don't I give you this one as a present?

Would you? Hera exclaimed, clasping her hands together in joy. That's a marvelous idea.

Hera was exceedingly happy to have come out on top, again, but once she had Io in her hands, she wasn't quite sure what to do with her. She could have put her to work or tortured her somehow, but Hera had more important things to do than fool around with some young heifer. And so, wiping her hands of the matter, she tied Io to a post and told her loyal watchman Argus, who had a hundred eyes and slept by closing them two at a time, to watch over her. For a long time Io remained like that, a cow tied to a post by a riverbank, mooing plaintively and wishing she had listened when her father admonished her never to talk to strange men. But, really, who could resist the king of the gods? He was the king of the gods. And, as it turns out, a lover not without a bit of compassion.

Although Zeus had long since turned his attentions to other princesses sitting on other river banks, he couldn't help but feel guilty about Io's fate. Not guilty enough to do anything about it himself, but enough to ask his son, Hermes, or Mercury if you like, to try to set her free.

And so Hermes, who didn't have much else to do, winged down to see if he could rectify the situation. Being the god of, among other things, shepherds and music, he disguised himself as a goat herder and, playing his pan pipes, guided his herd to the grassy river bank along which Io was being held captive. Spotting the white heifer and her watchman, Hermes took a seat under a willow tree a few hundred meters up river from them and continued with his sonorous melody, playing just loud enough that Argus could hear.

Now Argus was, for the most part, a very assiduous watchman, and loyal too, but watching a white heifer tied to a post can get boring after a while, especially if you don't have anyone to talk to. Which is why, upon hearing the sonorous melody of Hermes's pan pipes, he left his post and wandered over to investigate. Seeing that the music was coming from a simple goat herder, or so he thought, Argus smiled to himself, sat down next to him and, after exchanging the requisite greetings, let himself get caught up in Hermes's story of how pan pipes were created. The story itself, in which Pan chases Syrinx through the forest and, just as he grabs her, she is turned by her nymph sisters into a bundle of reeds, isn't particularly boring, but the manner in which Hermes related it, repeating himself repeatedly and delving into musical interludes every so often, was really quite tedious. So tedious that Argus soon fell into a deep sleep, slowly closing each of his eyes, one by one until all hundred were shut. As soon as the final pair of eyes

closed, fluttering shut against its owner's best interest, Hermes leapt up and, pulling a sword from his cloak, chopped off Argus's hundred-eyed head.

When news of Io's escape made its way up to Mount Olympus, Hera was furious.

Do you know anything about this? she asked Zeus, pointing down at the unmistakable white heifer grazing happily near Sparta.

No, he said, smiling in a way that he knew would make Hera even more furious. I haven't thought about that heifer for a long time.

Alright then, Hera said, storming down to the underworld. If that's how it is.

Hera pushed past her brother-in-law Hades, grabbed the ghost of Argus, and turning him into a gadfly, ordered him to torment Io for the rest of her life. And so, Argus the gadfly pursued Io the heifer all over the map, up through Macedonia and Thrace, across the straits that connect Europe to Asia, and back down the eastern coast of the Aegean. It is in memory of these tormented wanderings that the eastern Aegean coast is named Ionia and the straits between Europe and Asia are known as the Bosphorus, or the Ford of the Cow.

Beyond this, the story becomes a bit hazy. As one legend would have it, Io gave birth to a daughter on the banks of the Bosphorus and this daughter, Keroessa, who was brought up by a nymph named Semestra, gave birth to a son, Byzas, who founded a city on the European side of the strait. Another legend purports that Byzas was Semestra's son and that he founded the city, on the Asian side, after marrying the daughter of a nearby king. Still other legends contend that Byzas was the king of a small Aegan tribe and founded the city after consulting the Oracle of Delphi, which told him to settle across

from the city of the blind. In any case, a city was founded on the Bosphorus and its name was Byzantium.

For the next four or five centuries, Byzantium prospered, taxing ships that passed through the strait, building a network of supposedly impenetrable walls, and reaping a bountiful harvest from the dark, fertile soil around the city. There were a few minor scuffles with surrounding empires. Thracians would pillage the outlying villages from time to time, Rome always wanted to be paid homage, and the Persian army looted the city's treasury on its way to Greece. But for the most part, the citizens of Byzantium tried their best to keep to themselves and not give anyone any reason to invade.

Then, late one rainy night towards the end of the second century, Byzantium was given an offer it couldn't refuse. Cloaked in the cover of darkness, a muscular, cleft-chinned Roman general named Pescennius Niger stole into the city and requested its support in the current Roman battle of succession. Now, the leaders of Byzantium knew full well how often the Romans were battling for succession, they also knew how little was to be gained by supporting even the winning faction of such skirmishes, but Niger's request was difficult to turn down, seeing as his troops had already taken control of both ends of the Bosphorus. Pragmatists that they were, the leaders of Byzantium assented.

Five months later, these same leaders received a messenger carrying Niger's bloody severed head, the messenger and head both sent courtesy of Septimius Severus, the notoriously vengeful general who had ended up winning the battle of succession. Not long after this ominous delivery, the aptly named Severus laid siege to Byzantium and, two years later, when the city's defenses were finally breached, killed its leaders, sold its soldiers into slavery, and tore down its supposedly impenetrable walls. But even this

most ruthless of generals could not resist the charms of Byzas's city. Two decades later, the aging emperor Severius took his eldest son, Aurelius Antoninus Caracalla, to the site of his most merciless victory. But whatever lesson he had intended to impart to the young Antoninus was lost on him. Struck by the city's natural beauty and ideal military location, the baby-faced general convinced his father to build a new city in the ruins of Byzantium, which he did, and renamed the city Anatonina.

A little more than hundred years later, during another Roman battle of succession, the details of which are not particularly important to our story, a young general named Constantine, later the Great, the namesake of Eleonora's home town and, at the time, the general in charge of defending Anatonina, become convinced that the capitol of the Roman empire should be moved to this perfectly located little city. And so, twenty years later, upon his happily uncontested ascension, Constantine's first order of business, against the advice of his advisors, who didn't want to leave Rome, and his mother, who advocated strongly for Troy, was to move the capitol of the empire to Anatonina, known henceforth as New Rome, or Constantinople. And so it was. Over the next five years Constantine transformed the city into a first-class capitol. He built solid Roman roads, a cistern, a coliseum, and, as a good omen, took the eight meter tall snake statue from the Oracle of Delphi and installed it in front of his new palace. Thus, Byzantium was reborn.

There is some contention as to whether the Byzantine Empire began in 330, with the completion of Constantinople, in 395, with the death of Theodosius, or in 476, with the abdication of Romulus Augustus. But there is no doubt in anyone's mind that, by the middle of the sixth century, when Justinian rode his chariot triumphantly through the gates of the newly reconstructed Hagia Sophia, Constantinople was the most marvelous

city in the world, with the biggest dome in Christendom, the best university west of the Nile, and seven kilometers of supposedly impenetrable walls. A few years later, the new dome of the Hagia Sofia collapsed, as often happened in those days before steel and calculus, but its replacement, which better accounted for the stress of the dome on its pendentives, remained intact, with periodical repairs, for the next four centuries.

Towards the end of the tenth century, around the same time that the replacement dome collapsed, a semi-nomadic tribe of Oghuz Turks rode a cloud of dust into and conquered most of Anatolia. But the Seljuks, as these Turkic horsemen were called, were not particularly concerned with that particular swath of territory, being as far as it was from the center of their empire in Persia. It wasn't until Osman I, the visionary Seljuk governor of Bursa, established his own, Ottoman empire in Anatolia, just a few days ride from Constantinople, that the Byzantine rulers started getting nervous. Having been overrun twice by crusaders, twice by Arabs, and for centuries economically strangled by Genoese merchants, they had good reason to be suspicious. But the Ottomans were a patient empire, at least at the beginning, biding their time as Byzantium collapsed in on itself, inching all the while closer and closer to their ultimate objective. Until finally, in the middle of the fifteenth century, Mehmet, later the conqueror, the Ottoman's brash, young sultan, rolled his large caliber field artillery up the hills outside Constantinople and, guns blazing, earned his sobriquet.

Riding into the city alongside Mehmet was his best friend and aide-de-camp, Captain Orhan Barcous, the son of a Persian tailor who had risen up through the ranks of the army and, after saving the sultan's horse in battle, had earned his undying favor, the sultan's that is. Once in Stamboul, as the newly conquered Ottoman capitol was named,

Captain Barcouc established himself in the house of a former Genoese merchant in Beyoglu, just across the river from the sultan's new palace. Marrying into money, Captain Barcouc left the army and went into the textile business, using his contacts to secure the sole contract for supplying uniforms to the Ottoman army. His fortune thus tied to Ottoman military success, Captain Barcouc's business grew as quickly as the empire, and he died one of the richest men in Stamboul, his wealth and considerable rural holdings split among seven sons.

Thus began the history of the Barcoucs, one of Stamboul's most important notable families and an element of no small importance to our story. Over the next four hundred years, as the empire expanded, contracted, and expanded again, the descendents of Captain Orhan Barcouc occupied some of the most prominent roles in Ottoman history. General Osman Barcouc guarded Suleiman the Magnificent's right flank while he took Belgrade in 1521 and, that same year, protected the Ottoman supply lines during the siege of Vienna. Ibrahim Barcouc was the chief engineer to Sinan, the architect of Stamboul's Suleiman Mosque and the Selimiye Mosque in Edrine, among many others. Agha Bacous, a high-ranking bureaucrat in the Ministry of War, was, in one of the empire's temporary periods of decline, charged by Mahmoud II with creating a college to train the Ottoman military in new, Western methods of warfare. Indeed, to cite all the notable Barcoucs would be to recount four hundred years of Ottoman history.

Not all Barcoucs, however, opted for a life of war and courtly intrigue. A large part of the family actively shunned public life, occupying themselves instead with the textile business and the family's massive rural holdings. It is to this branch of the Barcouc

family that Eleonora's father's business partner, Moncef Barcou Bey, known also as the Bey, proudly counted himself.

As the last light of the day trickled out behind the Bosphorus, pooling in a cypress forest on the Asian side of the straits, Eleonora and her father's carriage slowed to a clomping stop and the horses, sensing the end of the long journey, shook their manes and whinnied with relief. Eleonora, who had been sleeping most of the day, stirred quietly and lifted her head from her father's lap, the creases of his pant leg embedded in her cheek. Blinking, she stretched up and out like a house cat, yawning as she absorbed the twenty-six room Ottoman beaux-art mansion in front of her. This must be the sultan's palace, she thought, rubbing the sleep out of her wide, pistachio green eyes. But what are we doing at the sultan's palace?

Although nowhere as large or opulent as the sultan's palace, as Eleonora would one day learn, the Bey's house was, for a private residence, quite impressive. Located between the Jangahir mosque and the residence of the Viceroy, just a few hundred meters below Robert's College and less than a kilometer from Captain Orhan Barcou's original residence, the Bey's house sat on the very edge of the Bosphorus, its wide white façade watching the boats pass by like a regal old man seated on a park bench. Known formally as Yaseman, in honor of Barcou's Persian heritage, the mansion had been in the family for more than three generations, most of which time it was filled with multiple, overlapping strains and presided over by a series of small, sharp matrons. For the past twelve years, however, following a series of untimely deaths, the Bey had lived alone in

the house, retaining only a skeletal staff of eight servants, the minimum required to keep it in proper working order.

Welcome! a strong, but not overly loud voice called out from across the circular cobbled drive. Moments later, a tall, mustached man wearing a dark suit and a bright red fez emerged from inside the house and with long, purposeful strides crossed it to Eleonora and her father's carriage. The Bey, which, Eleonora assumed correctly, was who this man was, had what one might call an imperial face, black hair, and, hidden behind a pair of gold-rimmed pince nez, sparkling green eyes that had the effect of making his hair appear even blacker. As he approached, Eleonora watched this regal, strangely enchanting man with no small amount of interest. He seemed to her the kind of person who inhabited the books she had read, the kind of person who would associate with Count Olaf or the Von Hertzog twins.

May I? the Bey asked, extending his long and surprisingly broad right arm up towards Eleonora and her father's seat. Eleonora glanced behind her for permission, but her father was busy discussing the details of payment with the coachman. What other way could she get down? Looking back at the Bey's arm, which had, in the interim, not moved at all, Eleonora timidly took hold of it and let him help her, his large hands guiding her down the ladder that ran along the side of the carriage. Eleonora watched with interest as the Bey helped her father down and heartily embraced him. She had never seen her father hug anyone before.

My dear Yakub, the Bey exclaimed, holding him out by his shoulders, as large men often do. Welcome! It's so good to see you and, he paused. Your daughter? At the

mention of his daughter, Eleonora's father and the Bey both looked down at Eleonora. I assumed you would be traveling alone.

As did I, her father said, laughing. I hope it won't be any inconvenience.

Oh no, the Bey said, flicking his wrist as if to brush away any concern. Then he said a few words in Turkish to his groom, turned and strode back across the drive to the house.

Passing through the enormous carved oak door, held open by a gaunt, serious butler in light grey livery, Eleonora could not help but gasp. Never in her life had she seen such a large, opulently appointed room. In fact, the only building in Constanta of comparable size and style was the main hall of the new casino, which was, at the time she ran away to Stamboul, still under construction, and not, in any case, an appropriate place for a young girl. The Bey's antechamber was presided over by an enormous yellowish crystal chandelier, straining imperceptibly against its chain and lit with thousands of miniature gas lights. Directly below the chandelier, a wide marble staircase curved softly to the second floor, and on either side of her ran two grand halls hung with a seemingly endless row of portraits, each portraying a different male member of the Barcouc family, each of whom was adorned with the Bey's same large black moustache and fez. There were suits of armor, a cavalry of antique swords, and moldings of intricately carved plaster, but the most amazing object, in Eleonora's estimation at least, was the enormous purple, blue, white, and green silk Hereke, by far the largest carpet Eleonora had ever seen, stretching more than ten meters square from the front door to the foot of the staircase. Instinctively, Eleonora bent down and ran her fingertips along the surface of the carpet.

I see you've been teaching Miss Cohen the family business, the Bey said. Looking up, Eleonora blushed and quickly stood up, worried that she had done something inappropriate.

I fear the business bores her, Eleonora's father said, proudly resting his hand on top of her curly light brown hair. The truth is, she's more of an intellectual than a merchant.

An intellectual, the Bey repeated, as he led them upstairs to the second floor. Perhaps than we can visit the library after dinner.

Eleonora had not, she realized at that moment, even thought about books for a long time, having been more concerned for the past few weeks with survival than reading, but the mention of a library stirred a great desire in her.

I would like that very much, Eleonora said, a bit loud and a bit late.

But first, the Bey said, stopping in front of a tall white door. We must eat. And before that we must ready ourselves for dinner.

As he said this, the Bey pulled open the door he had stopped in front of, revealing an enormous fairy tale bedroom with ceilings as high as a small church, two sixteen-pane bay windows, one of which faced the Viceroy's house and the other the Bosphorus, and a gigantic multipartite poster-bed draped with white lace.

I hope you don't mind sleeping in this room, the Bey said, removing his pince nez and wiping them clean on his coat jacket. The women's wing has been shuttered for some time now. Perhaps, he continued, giving Eleonora an avuncular wink, if we had been given a bit more notice, we might have been able to prepare a room for you there.

Eleonora was speechless. This was her room? This whole huge room, which could easily have contained her and her father's entire house inside it, was, for the time being at least, hers. Standing there, a bit behind the Bey and to the right, her hands on her mouth, she felt, she thought, like Miss Holvert arriving at her uncle's mansion after her father died, shocked and overwhelmed by luxury.

Dinner will be served at seven, the Bey said, stepping out backwards as he closed the door behind him and her father. Monsieur Karom will show you down.

Eleonora stood in that same place and position until she heard the door click shut behind her, at which point she slowly lowered her hands and stepped carefully across to the other side of the room. Pushing herself up onto the bed, she took a deep breath and, exhaling, let herself examine the contents of the room more thoroughly: the bureau and dressing table, the plush red armchair in the corner, the wide oak writing desk, the bay windows, and back around to the bed. My bed, she thought, bouncing a bit. After sitting and looking for a long time, Eleonora pushed herself off the bed and padded back across the room to the dressing table, a massive Victorian affair with more drawers than she could think of what to put inside. As she reached down to run her hand along the top of the dresser, Eleonora saw something move.

Frozen, she turned her head slowly back over her right shoulder and then her left. There was nothing there. It must have been my imagination, she thought. In fact, the movement Eleonora had seen was her own reflection, a possibility she didn't realize until a moment later when she raised her gaze to the mirror. Seeing herself, Eleonora stepped back in shock. In addition to not being very well accustomed to seeing reflections of herself, Eleonora was also quite unkempt. Although she had bathed the night before, her

dress was stained in a number of places and her hair was matted to one side. She was also, she noticed, quite a good deal skinnier than she had been the last time she had seen her reflection. Is this really how I look? Eleonora wondered, blushing at the thought that the Bey had seen her in such a state. As she was thinking this, the door swung wide open.

Hello? Eleonora said, cautiously. There was no response. Hello? she said again, louder and not without a small quiver of fear.

A few moments later, a short, old, leather-skinned woman with a thin line of white hair peeking out from under her dirty dark blue kerchief walked backwards into the room carrying a pile of towels up to her chin. Resting them on a chair next to the door, the handmaid turned towards Eleonora and, with a complete lack of surprise, regarded this small, dirty little girl standing in front of her.

Do you know where I might be able to find a dress? Eleonora asked, after a long silence. This dress is much too dirty for a house like this and I don't have any luggage with me but I thought that maybe there might be some dresses somewhere in the house somewhere.

As Eleonora spoke, quickly and stumbling over the French, the handmaid took her by the wrist and led her gingerly across the room to a small white door which, although she had spent a good deal of time examining the room, Eleonora had not previously noticed.

Letting go of her wrist, the handmaid said something in another language which, although Eleonora didn't understand it, felt vaguely reassuring, and left the room. And so, she was left standing alone in this relatively small blue and white tile bathroom, one corner of which was taken up by a deep white porcelain bath tub. It was much warmer in

the bathroom, Eleonora thought, than it was in the rest of the house, and steamy, as if someone had just recently taken a bath. After what seemed like a long while later, the handmaid returned carrying a heavy copper cauldron by the handle. Exhaling heavily, she set it down next to the tub and repeated the words she had said earlier, this time in a slightly more exasperated tone. When she saw that Eleonora truly didn't understand, the handmaid sighed, pushed back her kerchief and, bending at her knees, tried to lift off Eleonora's dirty red dress.

Except for the first few years of her life, which she, truthfully, didn't really remember very well, Eleonora had always bathed herself. And so one could understand why she would be, at least initially, a bit shocked to have this strange woman attempting to remove her dress. Seeing Eleonora's reticence, the handmaid stepped back and, putting her hands on her hips, repeated the same words she had said twice already before, this time with even more exasperation. Realizing that there was really no way out of the situation, Eleonora slowly pulled the dirty red dress off over her head, and stepped into the tub. Standing there, stark naked and shivering slightly while the handmaid scrubbed her clean, Eleonora felt a bit ill at ease. But when the bath was over, and she was wrapped up in her towel, her hair washed, and the places behind her ears clean for the first time in years, Eleonora felt much, much better. And when she stepped back into her room the second time, feeling much more comfortable there, there was a beautiful blue velvet dress hanging on the dresser, an evening dress with a high lace-collar which, although it was too itchy and a bit formal for her tastes, fit her surprisingly well.

Although he could, if he had so desired and without any loss of propriety, eaten in a less grandiose room, the library, for example, or the drawing room, the Bey preferred to have his meals served in the dining room, at the far end of a long oak table that had many times comfortably seated more than sixty dinner guests. It wasn't because of formality or tradition, although the Bey was, for all his liberal ideas, quite stalwart in his traditionalism. Nor was it because of frequent large dinner parties. Indeed, in the years following his notoriously libertine youth, the Bey had become somewhat of a recluse, refusing invitations and seeing only his closest friends regularly. No, none of these factors had any bearing on the Bey's proclivity for eating in the dining room. If one were to ask him, he would probably respond simply that he enjoyed it and might have added some vaguely wise aphorism, as he was wont to do.

The Bey was sitting there at the head of the enormously long oak table when Eleonora walked into the dining room, a few feet behind the butler and dressed in the high lace collared blue velvet dress that the Bey's old handmaid had dug up from the depths of the women's quarters.

Good evening, Miss Cohen, the Bey said and motioned for her to sit down in the chair to his left. Mumbling a reply as she seated herself, Eleonora looked down in awe at the army of silverware lined up on either side of her plate. She had never in her life seen so many different forks, spoons, and knives. At the Constanta Inn she and her father had eaten with only one fork and one knife, or a spoon if it was soup, and all of these were bent. She couldn't imagine a meal that would require so many utensils.

Your father told me a bit about the conditions of your journey, the Bey said, unfolding his napkin and spreading it out in his lap. Eleonora looked up and nodded, not

sure if he expected a response. Although she had changed significantly during her journey, Eleonora was still not the most talkative of children, especially not around strangers.

It was in the midst of this slightly awkward silence that Eleonora's father walked into the room, a few steps behind the butler. He too had bathed, shaved, and was dressed in his best suit, which Eleonora had seen him wear only on holidays and various other special occasions.

Good evening Moncef, he said as he sat in the chair to the Bey's right. Then, looking across to Eleonora, I see you found something to wear.

Yes, the Bey answered for her, touching his mouth with the corner of his napkin. My handmaid found it in the women's quarter and brought it up. I'm afraid it is a bit old-fashioned. We will have to buy another one tomorrow.

Eleonora's father coughed into his handkerchief and put it back into his pocket. Oh, no Moncef, please, don't trouble yourself. We will make do.

The Bey, who made, Eleonora noticed, a small motion to the butler, waved off her father's protests. It's no trouble at all, he said. Really, it's my pleasure. We haven't had any children in the house for so long, it's beginning to feel a bit dreary. Don't you agree Miss Cohen?

Before she could answer, the butler and two other servants appeared with three silver-domed platters and, at the same moment, all placed them on the table in front of Eleonora, her father, and the Bey. Then, also at the same moment, they pulled off the tops of the platters to reveal three roast Cornish game hens, perched daintily on three jeweled beds of rice. In the excitement of the past few hours, Eleonora had forgotten how hungry

she was. But when the silver dome of her platter was removed, forcing the hot, fragrant air up into her nostrils, she was knocked with an intense hunger. As her father and the Bey discussed business matters and politics, Eleonora dug herself fully into the task of eating, first the game hens, then the rice, then a clear beet soup, tomato salad, and finally, practically the entire plate of fruit and cheese.

After dinner, the Bey led Eleonora and her father to the library, a lushly-appointed dark wood-paneled room filled with old books, globes, and landscape paintings. There, sitting in leather armchairs much like the one Eleonora's father owned, the butler served the three of them hot red tea and pistachio baklava on finely-engraved silver trays. For the Bey and Eleonora's father, the butler also brought cigars and a set up of fine bois cognac. Seated with her legs hanging off the ground and her hands crossed demurely in her lap, Eleonora watched her father carefully pour two glasses of the cognac as the Bey set up a game of backgammon. When he was finished, the Bey looked up at Eleonora, who was watching him intently.

Feel free to browse around the books, he said as he passed the dice to her father.

Thank you, Eleonora responded, glancing at the bookshelves on either side of her. But I think I might watch you play, if that's okay.

At the sound of his daughter's voice, Eleonora's father looked up and smiled. Are you sure Ellie? he asked, raising his closed hand to roll.

Eleonora nodded. She wanted very much to look through the Bey's books, but she was strangely entranced by the game. Scooting closer to her father and the Bey, so close, indeed, that her knees brushed up against the side of the table, Eleonora leaned forward and watched the two men play. They moved and rolled with a certain forcefulness and

speed common to backgammon, slapping the pieces on the board and throwing the dice hard against it, pausing only to take a sip of the cognac or draw from a cigar. They played seven games, of which her father won four and the Bey three. After the seventh, which he lost, the Bey remarked somewhat enigmatically and apropos to little, The Lord hates a coward, and shut the board.

Would you play a game with me, Tata, Eleonora asked, looking up at her father, who had risen already from his chair. It was the first thing Eleonora had said in two hours.

I'm very tired, Ellie, her father began to say, when the Bey interjected.

I'll play with you, he said to Eleonora, and then turning to her father. That is, if you don't mind.

No, of course not, Eleonora's father said, relaxing back into his chair and pouring himself a third cognac. Nothing wrong with a little backgammon.

The Bey turned the board diagonally so that it was facing Eleonora and began setting up the pieces. Are you quite certain you understand the rules?

Yes, she said. I think so.

Eleonora proceeded to beat the Bey handily, without profiting much in the way of rolls. Indeed, the Bey's two double sixes and double fours should have sealed his win, except for Eleonora's almost innate ability. Although she was not quite as fast or forceful as the Bey and her father, pausing thoughtfully for a moment before each move, Eleonora made the best move every time and won.

Well, I'll say, the Bey said, leaning back in his chair after the end of the first game. You certainly do understand the rules.

## Chapter Eight

The next morning, following a more humble meal of yoghurt, figs, honey, and Turkish flat bread, the Bey, Eleonora, and her father walked outside, in that order, to the Bey's waiting carriage. Eleonora had been excited to ride even in the old brougham her father had employed, but here was a proper carriage, a rubber-wheeled, oak-paneled Viennese-built contraption with two light grey Arabian horses, brass fixtures, and red velvet seats. Courteous as always, the Bey held the door for Eleonora, who was dressed in the same itchy, blue velvet and white lace-collared dress she had been wearing the night before. This was the kind of carriage, Eleonora thought, marveling at the luxury around her, that Miss Ionescu would ride to a grand ball. The only difference, at least the only difference she noticed, was that instead of windows, one could see to the outside only through a small wooden latticework screen, which played the dual purpose of shading the carriage's interior and, more importantly, preventing the rabble from seeing the house's ladies as they went about town.

Her face pressed up against the latticework, Eleonora stared out at the Bosphorus, which, by this point in the day, was already teeming with skiffs, steamers, and small wooden fishing boats. How could I not have noticed this before? Eleonora thought and, with a little laugh, realized that this was only her first day in Stamboul. It felt as if she had always lived there. As she was thinking this, the carriage jolted to a start and Eleonora, who had been concentrated mainly on her thoughts and the scene outside, was sent tumbling back into her father's lap.

Now Ellie, he said, admonishing her as he chuckled, you must not lose sight of the path ahead of you, and placed her back in front of the wooden screen.

There, across the strait, was Stamboul in all its glory. Three gigantic testudine mosques loomed over a fortuitous mass of dirty grey stone, dark green cypresses, and every type of person imaginable, all crowded together in a curving, overlapping mess of streets. As the Bey's carriage followed the edge of the water towards Galatia, tilting slightly as it turned, Eleonora's attentions were caught up by the most magnificent sight she had ever seen. There, emerging slowly into view, was Topkapai Palace, the crown jewel of Stamboul, perched regally on the tip of the Golden Horn, its white marble walls glinting in the sun, its various edifices surrounded by a regiment of glass towers, all reaching up towards a perfect turquoise sky.

The Bey's carriage slowed to a stop at the Galata crossing and it was swarmed by a somewhat insalubrious jumble of boatmen offering to ferry them across the straits. A bit taken a back by the crowd around the carriage, Eleonora sat back properly in her seat, and glanced worriedly across the compartment to her father, who reached over and touched her blue velvet knee. After a bit of haggling, the Bey's groom arranged for them to cross with a ruddy, blue eyed Circassian with whom he had done business before. There was a bit of jolting as the horses, who, for good reason, never much liked to cross the straits, were persuaded onto the ferry, and then they pushed off. In her current orientation, Eleonora could see the Beyoglu district they had left behind, a row of seemingly impervious stone houses, including the one where Captain Barcous first established himself three centuries before and, rising up behind them, the grey, squat,

cone-capped Galata Tower, built five hundred years previous by a syndicate of suspicious Genoese traders.

I see the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, Eleonora heard the Bey say. When her father didn't answer, she turned back around and saw that he was peering out at the imperial palace she had just been looking at. Feeling as if she was called upon to say or do something, Eleonora smiled and straightened her dress. Although the smaller apple, the Bey continued, stretching the metaphor perhaps a bit too far, is considerably better at backgammon.

Eleonora nodded. It's not a particularly hard game.

No, the Bey responded thoughtfully, rubbing the face of his watch with his thumb. It isn't particularly difficult.

Again, Eleonora smiled and looked down at her hands, which were folded in her lap. Aside from a few distant nephews and nieces, whom he saw on holidays and the like, the Bey had almost no experience with children. But this young girl was quite different than any of the other children he had had contact with and, although she was exceedingly shy, he felt as if he was making some headway.

If you look carefully, he said, reaching over her to point out her wooden screen. You can make out the old walls of the city.

With another jolt, followed by a good deal of jostling, the boatman docked at Eminounu, a busy pier overwhelmed by fishermen, hawkers, and aggressive grayish white gulls. From a distance, Eminounu had seemed to Eleonora a docile, picturesque scene, framed on either side by the New Mosque and the Egyptian Bazaar, and filled in by a colorful assortment of humanity. Up close, however, the picture was pervaded

primarily by the smell of rotting fish, cherries, and a spice that Eleonora thought might be nutmeg but wasn't quite sure. After compensating the boatman, the Bey's groom took them through the wide square between the mosque and the bazaar, scaring up a flock of pigeons as they rode. Behind the mosque, the carriage turned into a steep dirt street that, if it had been empty, would hardly have been wide enough for the carriage. The street, however, was crammed with men in turbans, barefoot children begging, and men carrying loads as large as donkeys, not to mention the donkeys themselves, the pigeons, an army of stray cats and, she couldn't be sure, but she thought she glimpsed the backside of an African elephant as it disappeared around a corner.

Unlike most other Beys, Viceroy, Rectors, and Imams, who considered the realm of commerce well below their station, Moncef Barcou Bey participated fully in and truly rather enjoyed the interactions involved with buying and selling goods. It would be incorrect to assume that the Bey saw the craftsmen and merchants of Stamboul as his equals—he was, after all, a Bey—but regardless of how he regarded them, the Bey treated everyone well, whatever their social station. We are all equal before God, he would respond to anyone who chastised him for mixing with the rabble, and there really isn't much one can say to argue with that. Of course, the Bey's social group, if he had a social group, was comprised almost entirely of the titled persons who, in other contexts, might be called the nobility. But what else should we expect? Even the most liberal of thinkers are most comfortable with people of a similar background and we cannot fault the Bey for continuing this trend. The important thing is that the Bey, unlike most of his coterie, was happy on occasion to mix with those below his station. Indeed, Eleonora and

her father were hardly nobility and, like scores of other merchants before them, he had welcomed them into his home with hospitality and grace befitting a vizier.

Among these was Stamboul's most successful textile merchant, an enormously obese and bad-tempered man by the name of Hajj Ali Ibrahim Osman Bekir, also known as the Hajj. Although the honorific Hajj was usually reserved for older, more venerated men, a sign of deference that goes far beyond its literal meaning, Ali had bragged so much about his trip to Mecca, both beforehand and afterwards, that his friends took to calling him the Hajj in jest. He had, in short, only grudging respect. But in spite of his odious personality and unsightly physical aspect, the Hajj was the most knowledgeable and influential textile merchant in the city. No one knew this better than the Bey.

After passing through the textile market, the Bey's carriage turned left and stopped at the end of a dim cul-de-sac in the nebulous region between the textile and gold markets. On either side of the approach to the Hajj's carpet shop was a row of small gold dealers, all but two or three of them standing in front of their narrow little stalls, jangly gold bracelets and necklaces hanging above them and children with small tools bent over anvils in the back. At the base of this dreary, gilded cul-de-sac was a ramshackle storefront hung with the geometric, wide-woven rugs that Bedouins lay at the backs of their tents. The entrance itself was not much wider than the gold dealers' stalls, but once inside, the space opened up into a storeroom as large, if not larger than the Bey's antechamber, though not quite as high. Lit with gas lamps and whatever light could make its way through the dirty skylight overhead, the floor of the Hajj's showroom was covered haphazardly with carpets of almost every variety, and the walls lined with carpet piles taller than Eleonora's father.

As the Bey walked in, leading Eleonora and her father behind him, a small, barefoot boy, who had been sitting on the ground in a far corner of the room, stood up and scurried back into the recesses of the store. The three visitors stood quietly in the doorway of the enormous storeroom, admiring the carpets from a distance. After a number of various, violent crashes, which seemed to be coming from a back room somewhere, the Hajj emerged from the door the boy had disappeared into, an obese, pockmarked and sweaty man wearing a white robe and red checkered headdress typical of Gulf Arabs. Grumbling with each lumbering step, he made his way slowly across the room and, upon his eventual arrival, clasped the Bey hard on his shoulder and said something in Turkish.

Mr. Cohen, said the Bey, I would like for you to meet my dear friend and business partner, Hajj Ali Ibrahim Osman Bekir. Nodding, although clearly not understanding what the Bey had said, the Hajj reached out and violently shook Eleonora's father's hand, simultaneously placing his own hand in the region of his heart. Then, glancing down at Eleonora, he laughed heartily and said something to the Bey, nudging him in the side with his elbow. The Bey, who was obviously offended by the Hajj's comment, coughed into his hand disapproving and looked away. When the Hajj saw that the Bey wasn't going to respond, he turned and shouted something into the back room and, sitting on a small wood and leather stool that miraculously held his weight, motioned for his guests to be seated on the carpet-covered bench that ran along the storeroom's back wall. Greedily eyeing the trunks that the Bey's groom had earlier brought into the store, the Hajj clasped his hands together and said a few words to the Bey.

If you don't mind, the Bey translated, Hajj Bekir would like to examine the carpets you have brought. Eleonora father nodded.

Yes, of course, he said quietly. Before the Bey could translate, the Hajj had lifted himself up off the stool and, unlatching the trunks himself, began removing their contents. Sitting between him and the Bey, Eleonora watched her father nervously twirling the ends of his moustache while the Hajj hastily laid his carpets out on the floor of his store. She did not have a very good feeling about the way this man comported himself. Running her hands along the rough dark red kilim she was sitting on, Eleonora thought about how strange it was that she had lived inside a trunk, a trunk exactly like the one the Hajj was unpacking, for the better part of three weeks. And now she was here, in Stamboul, with her father and the Bey, watching the Hajj unpack her father's carpets. When she thought about it like that, the whole thing seemed a bit strange. But in the moment it had made perfect sense, and it continued to. In spite of what her thoughts might be telling her, she knew she was doing the right thing, or at least was on the path towards doing the right thing, if there can be said to be a distinction.

Would you like some tea Miss Cohen? Eleonora felt the Bey's hand lightly on her shoulder. When she looked up she saw a small boy standing in front of her with a tray of teas. It was, she assumed correctly, the same boy who had been sitting in the corner of the room when they arrived, a dirty, caramel-colored child with no shoes and dark, dark brown eyes that reminded her of Cosimo and, at the same time, of Oliver Twist.

Yes please, Eleonora said, blushing, and took one of the glasses by the top rim, as she had seen the Bey do the night before.

By the time Eleonora was half finished with her tea, the Hajj had removed all of her father's carpets and laid them out into two piles, one just a bit higher than the bottom of his robe and one that reached almost to the top of his large belly. Sucking his teeth as he pulled down on the bottom of his face, the Hajj pursed his lips and looked at Eleonora's father for a long while. Then, glancing at the piles of carpets that lined the walls of his storeroom, he cleared his throat loudly and, pointing to the smaller pile, said a few words to the Bey. Pausing, the Bey turned his fez, which was resting in his lap, and asked the Hajj a question, as if trying to reason with him. Before he could even finish, the Hajj shook his head decisively and blew out sharply towards his forehead, as if trying to get a mosquito off his face.

Hajj Bekir says that your carpets are very beautiful, the Bey translated, turning to face Eleonora and her father. But at this time he can only offer a price for the pieces on his left. Pausing again, the Bey turned back towards the Hajj, whose arms were crossed on top of his enormous belly, and asked him another question. The Hajj quickly shook his head no.

He says he can offer you five hundred pounds for all of them.

Although she was well versed in the history and typology of carpets, Eleonora knew very little about the business side of her father's trade and so had no idea whether or not five hundred pounds was a fair price for the carpets piled up next to the Hajj's left ankle. But from her father's reaction, a lowering of eyebrows and silence, she could tell that he was not happy with the initial offer. Unhappy, but not unwilling to bargain.

Rising slowly from the carpet-covered bench he had been sitting on, Eleonora's father walked towards the center of the room and, without so much as looking at the Hajj,

squatted down next to the carpets in question. One by one, he lifted them off the pile, lovingly inspected them, then laid them out in the space between where the Hajj was standing and the bench where Eleonora and the Bey were sitting. Whereas the Hajj had given each piece no more than ten or fifteen seconds' attention, Eleonora's father took his time, touching them, turning them over and, even smelling a few of what, one could tell, were pieces of art he truly knew and loved. When he was finished, more than a third of the Hajj's showroom was covered with Eleonora's father's carpets, each of them given the space it deserved. It was only then, after he had inspected and laid out all of these carpets, that Eleonora's father looked at the Hajj, who had, for his part, been standing silently the whole time with his arms crossed over his belly. The two men looked at each other for a very long time, hardly taking a breath, until the Hajj, who seemed quite ill at ease in the silence, finally relented. Scratching the top of his head vigorously, he looked at the carpets laid out in front of him and said two words to the Bey.

On further consideration, the Bey translated, Hajj Bekir would be happy to pay 600 pounds for the lot.

Without much thought, indeed, as if the Hajj's second offer was of no consequence, Eleonora's father looked at him and said, I will sell them for no less than a thousand.

The Bey began to translate what Eleonora's father had said but, in the middle of his disquisition, the Hajj cut him off with a snort. Looking at Eleonora's father in disbelief, and not a small bit of insult, he said the same two words he had said before and stamped his foot, as if inscribing a period in the middle of the floor.

And so, the haggling went on, back and forth like that, the Bey translating and mollifying as best he could. In the end, the two men agreed, with not a small bit of intervention on the Bey's part, to a price of 900 pounds sterling, paid in full on the spot. Eleonora had never seen her father bargain so hard. In fact, she thought, thinking back, she had never really seen her father bargain at all. At home he would always cut the price by a few lira, but there was an understanding that this was just to make the buyer feel special. In Stamboul, she thought, things were very different.

While it would be difficult to argue that fin-de-siecle Stamboul, with its dirty, narrow overcrowded streets, Byzantine sewage system, and gangs of diseased cats, was a thoroughly modern city, there were certainly certain elements, whole neighborhoods in fact, that could hold their own alongside Paris, London, or Vienna. The metro, for example, Robert's College, or almost any part of that cosmopolitan enclave called Beyoglu. A tightly huddled mass of stone houses and glass storefronts rising sharply up from the Bosphorus. Beyoglu was comprised, demographically speaking, almost entirely of European consular staff and businessmen, with a few Jews and liberal, well-to-do Turks scattered throughout. Separated by stone walls and a hill too steep for carriages, the neighborhood had evolved separately from the rest of the city, like some lonely school of fish in a isolated mountain lake.

In the middle of the fifteenth century, when Captain Orhan Barcos first laid eyes on Beyoglu, it was a fiercely-guarded enclave of Genoese merchants, granted a certain degree of autonomy by the Byzantines and administered separately from the rest of the city. Sensing that their privileges would be revoked by the Ottomans, the Genoese traders

began moving back to Genoa. As they moved out, liberal, well-to-do Turks, Jews, and assorted European consular staff and businessmen began moving in, attracted to the privacy, the view, and the cosmopolitan flavor of the architecture. The only problem, from the perspective of these new residents, was the hill. Except for those who owned stores on Le Grande Rue de Pera, that wide sun-dappled boulevard between Galata Tower and Taksim Square, the new residents of Beyoglu were forced every day to walk down and back up the steep, ungraded hill.

And so, the men of Beyoglu tripped down and trudged back up the hill every day for two and a half centuries, wearing out the soles of their shoes and building up their calf muscles, until one day Eugene-Henri Gavand, a French engineer who had injured his hamstring in a careless descent, devised a plan to build a one-stop funicular from Galata, at the bottom of the hill, to Pera, at the top. Once he had drawn up the blueprints, the mechanics of which involved a steam engine, a steel cable, and two counterbalanced cars, it took six more years for his dream to be realized: three years of convincing the sultan to grant him a commission, two to dig the tunnel, lay track and, once the mechanical problems were all worked out, a final year of testing it with cattle. The opening of the funicular, or Tunel, as it was called, was presided over by the sultan's second vizer in a grand imperial ceremony outside the Pera station. The vizer himself, Gavand, and the mayor of Stamboul were among the Tunel's first passengers, and it has been taking people up the hill from Galata to Pera ever since.

At the time, Eleonora had never heard of the Tunel and, truth be told, had only a vague idea of what a funicular was. But this would soon change. After leaving the Hajj's store, Eleonora, her father, and the Bey rode back down to Eminounu and across the

Bosphorus in silence. The Bey appeared to Eleonora preoccupied with some private concern, rhythmically flipping and unflipping his pocket watch while Eleonora's father scribbled figures in his notebook with a stub of graphite. For her part, Eleonora was happy to continue staring out the window, watching what she had seen that morning scroll back in reverse. The second time, the city seemed much more real, more solid and historical, the Bosphorus a grimy green waterway and buildings built objects with a past history of architects, engineers, and laborers.

That's enough business for one day, the Bey said as they disembarked in Galatia. Let's enjoy ourselves. Following his lead, Eleonora and her father stepped out of the carriage and began towards the Galata station, a blue and white tiled arch with riders streaming in one side and out the other. At that time of day, the station was filled almost entirely with European ladies and their porters, as well as a few lower-class Turks who worked as waiters and janitors in Pera. The Bey cut a striking figure as he strode up to the ticket office and bought three tickets. Although he wore the same fez and same cut of suit as the other men in the station, the Bey's garments were clearly superior. But it was more than clothes that made the man, it was his posture, his aspect, the trim of his moustache, the way his pince nez sat on his nose, all of which declared, Here is a man of substance. Even the European ladies, with their haughty dresses, their silk fans and airs of superiority, watched him with approving, almost desiring eyes. Standing next to him, Eleonora had the reassuring feeling that if anything were to happen, a fire or some sort of equipment malfunction, everyone would immediately, naturally defer to the Bey.

Thankfully, there were no fires or mechanical malfunctions of any sort. After waiting a few minutes on the right side of the platform, admiring the pale yellow and

pink tiles on the rim of the tunnel, a gas light appeared on the top edge of the darkness and, slowly, with no small amount of creaking, a single red-lacquered wood car emerged, supported only by a steel cable. Eleonora watched in amazement as the car approached and, with a loud pneumatic screech, braked to a stop in front of them. She had some idea of how these things worked, the steam engine and counterbalance, but to know how something works and to see it work are two different things entirely.

Oh my, Eleonora exclaimed, as the Bey held the door for her. And that was all she could say. More than her room at the Bey's house, more than the architectural wonders of old Stamboul, the funicular truly astounded her. At Eleonora's request they stood at the front of the car and she watched with unadulterated marvel as the car made its way slowly up the hill, her hands on either side of her face so she could see what was going on in the darkness of the tunnel.

Here we are, said the Bey as they stepped out of the Pera station, motioning to a wide, inclining cobblestone boulevard lined on either side with shops, restaurants, and theatres, as well as more than a few consulates and embassies. There they were. It was as if the funicular had transported them to an entirely different city, a cosmopolitan, modern city of the future. Standing there at the base of Le Grande Rue de Pera, watching the European ladies and their porters fan off into the crowd, Eleonora felt as if she had been dropped into the middle of Bucharest, Vienna, or Paris, as if she had stepped into the pages of *The Hourglass*. The boulevard was busy, but not crowded, with women in wide dresses and umbrellas, dignified-looking men strolling leisurely in well-tailored suits and hats, porters, and the occasional beggar who only served as a contrast to the rest of the population. The shops and restaurants all had windows with their names written in gold

gilt lettering and in each, an orderly and attractive display of the various wares. It felt to Eleonora more like something to look at than a place one could actually enter, but before she knew it the Bey clicked his heels and was walking up the boulevard, motioning for her and her father to follow him.

The first and, as it turns out, only store they visited that day was located a few dozen meters from the Pera station, a large, well-appointed dress shop with the words Madame Poiret, Dressmaker written across the window in gold. As they entered the store, the Bey, followed by Eleonora's father, and Eleonora herself, the woman at the counter, presumably Madame Poiret, looked down at them over the tops of her glasses, her stork neck craning to the left.

Good afternoon, she said haughtily, as if they had interrupted her in her living room, and slowly came around the front of the counter. How may I help you?

The Bey, who had seated himself comfortably on a plush green divan next to the dressing mirrors, glanced up at Eleonora and her father, both still standing between the door and the counter. We would like to have a dress made for the young lady, the Bey said motioning to Eleonora. Something modern, but still classic.

Madame Poiret nodded and walked back around the counter to retrieve her samples. As she was kneeling there, behind the counter, Eleonora's father coughed significantly into his handkerchief, as he had the night before, but this time the single, orchestrated cough let loose a unanticipated violent torrent of subsequent coughs. When he finished, his daughter, the Bey, and Madame Poiret were all looking up at him with concern.

Really Moncef, he said, trying to regain control. There's no need. I know she needs new clothes, but this shop is a bit beyond our means. I am sure the products are of the first quality, but she is just a little girl.

Watching the exchange with interest, Madame Poiret raised her eyebrows.

I insist, said the Bey, emphatically. And truly it's no trouble at all. A girl really should have at least two beautiful dresses. Don't you agree Miss Cohen?

Although the question was mostly rhetorical, the three adults all turned towards Eleonora, who was still standing next to her father between the counter and the door. She looked to her father and then to the Bey, but she could not tell from either of them how she should answer, or if she was expected to answer at all. In spite of all that she had read about the world of adults, Eleonora had never really understood the intricacies of politeness. She understood, at the most basic level, why people sometimes refused presents or offered to do things they didn't really want or expect to do, but she could never figure out what it was these people actually wanted. She did very much want a new dress. But more than she wanted a new dress, Eleonora wanted not to upset either her father or the Bey.

Yes, certainly, Madame Poiret interjected after a long silence, and sat down on a blue chaise lounge with a stack of samples and styles shuffled between her long, veiny hands. A young lady without a beautiful dress is like a swan without feathers. Now, Miss Cohen if you will just have a seat here next to me, we can choose a style and fabric.

## Chapter Nine

The remainder of Eleonora and her father's stay in Stamboul was spent in much this same manner. Mornings they set out after breakfast for the textile district, driving in the hull of the Bey's carriage past mosques, palaces, and spice markets, the totality of which Eleonora took in with nose pressed to the latticework. In the afternoon, after her father had haggled and sold off a bit more stock, they drove back across the river to Galata and rode the funicular, always in the front car, up to Le Grande Rue de Pera. These trips, to the jeweler, the haberdasher, the cobbler, and the dressmaker, had no purpose, Eleonora and her father soon discovered, other than to buy gifts for Eleonora, a notion they both at first thought rather strange, Eleonora because she had never received presents from anyone and her father because it put him in an awkward position.

He didn't want to inconvenience his host, as he said repeatedly. And then there was the somewhat more uncomfortable and unspoken problem of money, to say nothing of his questions as to the Bey's motivation for buying his daughter so many expensive baubles. But in spite of this, Eleonora's father's protestations withered as the visit wore on, and soon he began to accept the Bey's argument that since he didn't have any children of his own, he needed someone to lavish gifts upon. By the tenth day of their visit, Eleonora's father even allowed the Bey to buy him a new suit.

In the late afternoons they rested, each tending separately to their own affairs, the Bey in his private apartments, Eleonora's father bent over his accounts in the library, and Eleonora in the far corner of her room under the bay windows, reading deep in the light

brown leather armchair she had dragged across the room for just that purpose. Having read nothing for the greater part of a month, Eleonora worried that she might have lost her ability to read, but when she sat down that first afternoon with *Don Quixote*, she found that, if anything, her powers had increased. In the course of the afternoon she read *Don Quixote* in its entirety, a feat the Bey had difficulty believing even after participating in a protracted discussion with her at dinner that night as to whether what occurred in the Cave of the Montesinos should or shouldn't be considered apocryphal.

Every night after dinner they retired to the Bey's library, where, as on their first night in Stamboul, they were served tea and baklava, with cigars and cognac for the men. Some nights Eleonora would join in the backgammon, continuing her winning streak far beyond the possibilities of chance. Other nights she sat curled up with a book in one of the Bey's armchairs, reading contentedly next to the fire, the click of the dice and backgammon pieces in the background.

It was on an evening such as this, towards the end of Eleonora and her father's visit, that the Bey announced he had arranged for the three of them to take a cruise up the Bosphorus. The cruise, which had been organized by the American Consulate in honor of the Vice Consul's seventy-fifth birthday, would occur, he said, on what was to be on their second to last day in Stamboul, and would be attended by much of the city's polite society. Although he usually didn't accept such invitations, the Bey said he thought that Eleonora and her father might enjoy it and so accepted on their account.

Really, Moncef, Eleonora's father said. You needn't go to all this trouble for us. Although he had ceased objecting regularly to the Bey's hospitality, Eleonora's father still continued to protest what he saw as the more extravagant gestures.

Truly, the Bey responded, tapping his cigar on the edge of the stand-up ashtray to his right. It was no trouble at all. I merely responded to an invitation.

Well, Eleonora's father said. We do very much appreciate what you have done for us here. And I know we will both be very sad to leave.

At the mention of leaving, Eleonora looked up over the top of her book and scrunched up her nose, as if she had eaten something that profoundly disagreed with her. She had known all along that she and her father would, at some point, have to leave, but she had never spoken about it, and had tried her best to put the thought out of her mind.

Leave? she asked. For the first time in more than a week, Eleonora thought about what returning home would entail: the town square, the Constanta Inn, school.

But can't we stay longer, she pleaded, setting her book face down on the side table. With a sad face, Eleonora looked from her father to the Bey and back again, unsure which of them had the power to grant her wish.

I wish we could stay too, Ellie, her father said. But we have to be getting home soon. The store has been closed for almost a month now and school starts again in September.

Neither of these seemed to Eleonora very good reasons to go back to Constanta. But she didn't want to contradict her father. Why can't we just stay here, she thought, as she walked upstairs to her room, or rather, the room that she had been staying in for the past two weeks. Pushing open the door, Eleonora immediately noticed that one of the panes in the right hand bay window was open. A cool dark breeze was rustling the curtains and a shaft of moonlight illuminated a circle in the middle of the carpet.

That's strange, she thought, crossing the room, I don't remember opening that window. Perhaps it was the Handmaid, wanting to air the room out. As she reached up to shut it, Eleonora noticed that there was a small bright red and yellow bird perched on the ledge of the windowsill.

Instead of flying away, as most birds would, this little bird looked directly at her, jerking its bright red head from side to side. Moving slowly, so as not to disturb her avian visitor, Eleonora kneeled down and, folding her arms on the windowsill, rested her chin in the valley between them. Her nose was now only a few centimeters away from the little bright red and yellow bird, still jerking its head back and forth.

Why can't we stay here? Eleonora asked aloud, staring out at the city, sparkling hazily like a collection of stars reflected in the Bosphorus. At the sound of her voice, the little bird stopped, its head cocked to one side as if to listen more carefully. It seemed to her as if the whole world became quiet, waiting to hear what she would say next. And so she said it.

I wish I could stay in Stamboul. At this, her visitor hopped once and flew off into the darkness, pumping its wings, and gliding, curving softly down to the water, where it joined a flock of other small bright red and yellow birds and disappeared into the night.

On the morning of the day before they were supposed to leave Stamboul, the morning of that famous, ill-fated voyage of *The Sultan's Delight*, Eleonora and her father stepped out of their rooms at precisely the same moment, the cogs of fate precisely aligned. Standing at the bottom of the stairs, even more dashing than usual in his tuxedo, tails, and fez, the Bey watched Eleonora and her father exit their rooms and walk along

opposite ends of the banister to the top of the staircase, she in the pale green double-breasted polonaise gown which he had bought for her on the first day of their visit, and her father in his Sabbath best, looking very much the small-town merchant that he was. Coming to the top of the staircase at precisely the same moment, they descended hand in hand. Upon their arrival at the penultimate step, the Bey turned and all three walked in unison across the anteroom and out the door, none of them, not even Eleonora, with any idea of how profoundly their lives would be changed by the end of the day.

Although she was vaguely excited by the thought of the cruise and still quite upset at the prospect of leaving, Eleonora was, as she walked across the cobbled driveway with her father and the Bey, overwhelmed by a powerful sense of serenity, a feeling which she attributed, not entirely incorrectly, to the light bright blue sky overhead. But there was something else overhead as well. Indeed, there is always something else overhead. In the branches of a large linden tree hanging over the Bey's driveway sat a flock of bright red and yellow birds, each just like the one Eleonora had seen the night before on her windowsill, chattering, flapping their wings, and hopping from branch to branch like an anxious crowd of peasants lining the streets of the capitol for an imperial parade.

Look Tata, Eleonora said, pulling down on the bottom of her father's suit jacket.

Eleonora's father, who was engrossed in a series of complex mental calculations, looked down at her and followed her finger up to the birds.

Bulbuls, the Bey said under his breath and then, more loudly, for the benefit of his guests, repeated himself. Those birds are called bulbuls.

As if that settled the matter, he helped Eleonora and her father into the carriage, climbed in, and shut the door behind him.

While it would be impossible to definitively establish the exact role this flock of bulbuls played in the tragic events that were to transpire later that day, no one can doubt their significance, at least as a harbinger of the crash. When they recounted what they had seen to the various newspaper reporters and maritime engineers, each and every witness mentioned a flock of bright red and yellow birds that seemed to be following along with the ill-fated steamer. Indeed, many members of the imperial commission that was set up to investigate the causes of the accident privately concluded that the presence of feathers in the air vent was at least an instigating factor. On board the doomed ship, the bulbuls were a constant topic of conversation and the source of not a few ribald jokes. But no one, with the exception of Eleonora, her father, and the Bey, knew that the birds had followed the Bey's carriage all the way from his house to the Besiktas dock, flocking low over Galatasaray, Dolmabache Palace, and the campus of Robert's College.

The Sultan's Delight, on loan from the newly incorporated Municipal Maritime Transportation Authority, pushed off from the Besiktas ferry building a few minutes after the noontime call to prayer, carrying approximately 12,500 kilos of cargo, in addition to the more ethereal weight of history, or fate, or whatever one would call the forces that conspired to sink that sturdy steamer, taking with it the lives of all but two of the eighty-six passengers on board. Watching the grand, white, three-story ferry pull away from the shore and choke up black puffs of smoke from its triple-expansion steam engine, an attentive observer might have noticed that she sat a good two or three meters lower in the water than The Duchess, a ferry of the same make and model that passed her on its way back from an early morning trip to the Princess Islands. But no one, not even the crew,

noticed The Sultan's suspiciously low gait, being focused primarily on the flock of bulbuls that had congregated above the bow of The Sultan's Delight and seemed to be following it as it made its way to the mouth of the Black Sea.

To the passengers, who included many of Stamboul's most important foreign residents, as well as a number of notable Turks, the position of the boat was, at best, of tertiary concern, the conversation on deck being dominated by the flock of bulbuls and the Mahdi's siege of Khartoum, which had begun just two days earlier. Besides these two topics, which would have been enough to sustain conversation for the entire afternoon, there was also quite a bit of interest in Eleonora, whom the Bey introduced, not without a bit of playfulness, as Miss Cohen of Constanta, the best-read child he had ever met.

Although she was exceedingly embarrassed by this appellation and still not particularly comfortable around strange adults, Eleonora did her best to respond fully to the questions she was asked, as her father had reminded her to, and duly impressed the few passengers who tried to test her knowledge of literature. She made a particularly strong impression on the Bey's good friend, the Reverend James Muhler, an American from the state of Connecticut who had served as the Rector of Robert's College for the past four years.

About an hour into the cruise, the Bey, sensing a bit of discomfort from both Eleonora and her father, gathered them and brought them along the side deck to a secluded bench at the stern of the boat, between a large winch of some sort and a wooden chest full of life jackets. Exhaling in unison, the three least sociable members of the party sat pressed next to each other on the short, lacquered wooden bench, watching the city pass into the wide wake of The Sultan's Delight.

The light bright blue sky of the morning had slipped a few shades darker and there were, as far as Eleonora could see, no clouds left in the sky. Not much bigger than the tip of her thumb held out at arm's length, Topkapai Palace, The New Mosque, and Suleiman, looked to Eleonora like a painting, or the edges of a dream receding into memory. On either side of her, the banks of the Bosphorus were overwhelmed by conifers, interrupted every few kilometers by a dock, a small square, and a few men with tattered fezzes sitting outside a café, drinking hot red tea and commenting on the large flock of bright red and yellow birds that seemed to be following above the ferry.

A few minutes after escaping to the stern, the ferry hit a patch of rough waters, a tumble and roll that seemed to be coming from the direction of Leander's tower. In both the immediate and the long term, this patch was trouble for Eleonora's father. Although he was quite experienced with maritime travel, and had, in his younger years, weathered more than his fair share of rough waters, Eleonora's father had always had somewhat of a sensitive stomach. And this being the first time that he had been out on the water since Eleonora's birth, he was particularly susceptible to the tumble and roll of the waves, a weakness which would have repercussions greater than any of them could ever had imagined. With his hand clutched to his stomach, Eleonora's father stood up, looking as if he had been shaken by a ghost.

Excuse me, he choked and, rushing down the stairs to the head, almost tripped over a loose oar.

As the sound of his footsteps fell away, Eleonora and the Bey looked at each other with a bit of humor. It would have been the perfect time for the Bey to present to her his parting gift, a custom-made cedar backgammon board inlaid with mother-of pearl, but at

that moment the ship lurched, as if it had hit a rock, which indeed it had, and amidst screams on deck, began quickly to sink.

## Chapter Ten

In the history of the world, not to mention the history of literature, there has been no shortage of notable orphans. Louis XV, Rabbi Mordechai of Nadvorna, Romulus, and of course, may God's blessing be upon him, the Prophet Muhammad, not to mention Moses and Oedipus, both of whom were abandoned by their parents, and so orphans of a sort. For its part, the world of literature offers an even greater number of examples. In Dickens alone we have Pip, Oliver Twist, Rosa Bud, and David Copperfield. There is Tom Sawyer, Jane Eyre, Marie Chantegreil, and, of course, the young Miss Holvert, that indomitable, unexpected heroine of *The Hourglass*, who, after watching her parents' carriage tumble off the edge of a steep mountain road, walked fifty kilometers through the snow to her Uncle Olaf's house, clutching her suitcase in one hand and her favorite doll in the other.

One would think this preponderance of exemplary orphans might somehow ease the news of ones' own orphanhood. In fact, it does not. Indeed, the passive knowledge of orphanhood is so utterly different from the actual experience, the sensation of waking up one morning to find oneself totally and completely alone in the world, without parents or relatives to speak of, with no one to look after you and, the bitterly delicious reverse, no one to tell you what to do, that one hesitates to mention them in the same breath.

When Eleonora Cohen awoke on the morning of March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1884, a shaft of light was streaming through her window, picking bits of dust out of the stale late morning air and swirling them haphazardly about. Propping herself up against the coterie of fluffy

white pillows along the top of her bed, Eleonora looked sleepily around what had been, for the past weeks, her room, from the window to the desk to the bathroom door to the dresser to the single red velvet chair next to her bed. Propped up as she was, Eleonora's feet reached less than a quarter of the bed's full length. As she pondered the impression her feet made, sticking up under the blanket, a small bright red and yellow bird alighted furtively on her windowsill, glanced at her, and flew off.

At the sight of this bird, Eleonora's memories of the day before poured back and, like the rip tide of a colossal wave, pulled her under. The bulbuls and the backgammon; the starboard pitch of a quickly-sinking boat, the screams on deck, the explosion in the steam room, and her cold, pale white arms clinging to the Bey clinging to a piece of wood; the great white boat gurgling beneath the surface of the water, the unsuccessful rescue attempts, and the hairy brown outstretched arm of a passing boatman. Although no one had yet informed her, Eleonora knew what happened. She knew her father was dead and she knew.

Closing her eyes gently against her memory, Eleonora dropped her face into her hands and exhaled deeply, exhaled until there was no breath left in her lungs. She wanted to cry. She wanted very much to cry, to let go of her sadness like a steam whistle, to let it build up then release it again. But somewhere, deep inside her, a single horrible thought blocked her tears, bottled them up like a small, intractable rubber stopper. It was a thought so truly horrible, so horribly true, that she could think it only in a whisper.

It was her fault. Everything. The bulbuls, the ship wreck, the explosion in the steam room, her father's death. It was all her fault. None of it would have happened if she had not uttered that one terribly selfish and ill-advised wish. It was all so simple. The

birds, the rock, the pitch of the boat. It was all so dreadfully simple. Eleonora felt sick in the deepest, darkest pit of her stomach, as if that rubber stopper had rotted and was at the same time growing, infecting her entire body with a sickness she could never throw up.

Opening her eyes, just a crack, Eleonora slid back down the bed and pulled her blanket up to her neck so that only her head was visible, porcelain white framed with lank curly light brown hair. Could all of that really have been caused by one little wish? Could all that really be my fault? Eleonora asked herself these questions even though deep down she knew the answer. Shuddering violently, she pulled her blanket up over her nose so that only her eyes and forehead were visible. More than the sadness and the guilt, more than anything, Eleonora was overcome with a positively overwhelming sense of responsibility. If one small wish could sink a cruise ship, what might happen if she really put her mind to it? What other tragedies might she cause? Who else might she kill?

Why can't I just be a normal child, Eleonora pleaded desperately, though she knew not to whom, a child of mediocre intelligence, with regular parents, and limited possibilities for the future? She pleaded, but she was who she was, and she knew that. No matter how much she wanted to change, that's who she would always be. And now, here she was, utterly and completely alone, in a strange house, with no family to speak of, and only herself to keep.

In spite of everything, in spite of all the horrible, devastating things that happen every day, life finds a way of continuing on down its path. And so it was with Eleonora. After laying in bed with the covers pulled up over her nose for most of the morning, she

slowly pushed the edge of her blanket back down below her chin and looked around her room.

Well, she thought suddenly, I can't cause any harm if I don't go outside. Even as she thought this, Eleonora knew it wasn't true. She knew that no matter what she did, fate would run its course. And even if there was no such thing as fate, her own free will could be exercised from indoors. Hadn't she made that unfortunate wish from inside, from that very same window she was then looking out of? Even with all these logical impediments, the idea of sequestering herself in the Bey's house gave Eleonora a sense of comfort. And comfort was what she needed, not logic. So she decided, scooting herself back up against her pillows, that she would not leave the house until she had good reason to do otherwise. That is, she thought, if the Bey will have me.

Thinking these thoughts, Eleonora slipped out of bed, pulled on the first dress she saw, and shuffled out of her room, dragging her heels on the long greenish-blue carpet that traversed the length of the hall. As she approached the top of the stairs, she was possessed with the strange, vaguely discomfoting feeling that everything around her was unreal. It was as if the entire house might slip away suddenly and fold in on itself, as if, at any moment, the walls might collapse and leave her standing in a pile of rubble, alone, with a cold wind on her knees.

She put a hand up to the railing and made her way down the stairs to the dining room, where she found the Bey seated securely at the head of the table. He was wearing his normal dark blue suit, his hair parted loosely to the right, and was sitting, as always, as straight as a rod. But in spite of these details, the Bey looked haggard, like a worn-

down, dried-out replica of himself. His face was profoundly creased, hastily shaven, and his eyes shot through with little lightning bolts of blood.

He nodded weakly as Eleonora sat down, took the napkin off her plate, and spread it out in her lap. For a long while, she stared down at the rumpled white napkin, her hair hanging loosely over her eyes. She was not hungry at all. Indeed, she wasn't really even sure what time it was, what meal they were sitting for, if any. Blinking softly, Eleonora looked up at the Bey, her wide, pistachio green eyes peeking through the gaps in her hair. He had been observing her closely since she first came into the room, but it wasn't until that moment that Eleonora really noticed him, the patch of tiny grey hairs under the corners of his chin, the sad, deeply creased smile lines, and blurry bloodshot eyes.

They looked at each other for what felt like a very very long time, while the house groaned sympathetically around them, the chandelier tinkled, the walls creaked, and the servants shuffled about in the background. The Bey's eyes, Eleonora noticed, were filled with flashing, tiny little flecks of gold. She smiled at this thought, smiled almost inadvertently, and with that small smile felt something inside her begin to lift. As it lifted, whatever it was, Eleonora noticed a soft, pattering sound on the table in front of her. Looking down, she saw that there were little drops of water plinking steadily into her bowl, sliding down the rim and pooling together in the center.

Perhaps there is a leak in the roof, she thought, glancing up at the ceiling. Maybe the house really is falling apart. But, of course, Eleonora herself was the source of the water. Those little drops were tears, streaming steadily down her now quite flushed cheeks. She was crying. Carefully, Eleonora reached up and touched her face with her fingertips. She was crying. Dropping her head into her hands, she rocked herself,

clenching into a little ball as the sobs increased steadily in both frequency and magnitude. As she cried, sniffing and softly howling, Eleonora felt a weight rise up from the very bottom of her stomach. It rose slowly, like a massively ugly deep sea monster surfacing for the first time in a thousand years, through her stomach, her lungs, her throat, and into her mouth.

I haf nuffing, she sputtered into her hands, the tears running now in rivulets down her face. She had not realized how hard it would be to speak, nor how stuffed up her nose was. Nuf-fing.

Hearing the timorous, nasal sound of her own voice as she struggled to pronounce even that one word, Eleonora was overcome again. Coughing and sputtering, she sat up, took the napkin from her lap and blew her nose, hard. She looked at the Bey, her eyes red and blurry, her face covered with snot and her hair tangled up in a mess of curls. I have nothing, she whispered, helpless, but clear. She looked at him, held his eyes in her own, and inhaled deeply before bursting into a rack of dry, heaving sobs.

If there was ever a time to wrap his arms around her in comfort, it was now. Cautious and dignified, but not without a profound sense of empathy, the Bey rose from his chair, stepped toward Eleonora, and wrapped his arms around her, holding her head somewhat awkwardly against his hip as she heaved. The feeling of his arms on her shoulder, the roughness of his suit jacket, and the sharp, smoky smell of his cologne only redoubled Eleonora's sobbing, for her father, for the sons and daughters of everyone who died, and most of all, for herself. Which is not to say our heroine was in the least bit solipsistic. Indeed, for what, really, is anyone crying, but themselves?

After a long while, Eleonora stopped. Not because she was finished, but because she was worn out to the very bare thread of her existence. Heaving a final heave, she paused, looked up at the Bey and blew her nose, hard, on the sleeve of his suit jacket.

No, the Bey said. Gurgling, he cleared his throat, and began again. No, he said. You do not have nothing. They were still quite close, physically. She could see the pores in his skin, the bags of flesh that ran dark circles around his eyes. You have me.

Then, as if suddenly realizing his position, he stood, straightened himself out and, patting down the place where Eleonora had blown her nose, stepped backwards towards his chair. You have us, he said, glancing over his shoulder at the Butler and the Handmaid. We are at your disposal.

Eleonora blew her nose again, into the napkin this time. Could I have another? she asked, smiling meekly.

Of course, said the Bey. Without another word, the Butler and the Handmaid both disappeared into the kitchen. Although she did not, to the best of anyone's knowledge, understand French, it was the Handmaid who returned first.

Whispering condolences in a language neither Eleonora nor the Bey could understand, she approached Eleonora's chair and, with a kiss on the forehead, placed a fresh napkin on the table in front of her. A few moments later, the Butler returned with a domed silver platter.

If the young lady has any appetite, he said, laying it down in front of her. Eleonora had not even thought of food for a long while. But when the Butler pulled off the dome, revealing a whole grilled fish, surrounded by garlic and lemons, Eleonora realized she was absolutely famished.

In the weeks following her father's death, Eleonora began slowly to establish a routine. She slept regularly, read with an almost obsessive perseverance, and wandered aimlessly through the less-frequented chambers of the Bey's house. But in spite of these positive signs, she was not the ruddy, wide-eyed little girl she had once been. Listless and pale, she ate with timidity, spoke only when spoken to, and, in the three weeks since her father's death, had still not once left the Bey's house. All this, of course, is to be expected from a young girl who has just lost her only parent. But as the weeks progressed, the Bey began to become worried. Although he was of the firm belief that Eleonora knew what was best for herself, he thought it not healthy to be shut inside all day. It seemed a subject worth raising, but being as he was totally inexperienced with young children, he wasn't quite sure how to address it, and on the whole was reluctant to disrupt her routine.

Each morning Eleonora awoke to the sound of the Handmaid knocking gently on her door. Without waiting for a response, she shuffled into the room and, after setting a fresh pile of bedclothes on the red velvet chair next to Eleonora's bed, disappeared into the adjacent bathroom. Drawn out of sleep by the sound of warm water splashing against tile, Eleonora slipped from bed and padded across her room towards the bathroom door, through which she could see the old Handmaid bent in half over the tub. Once inside the steam-filled room, she automatically raised her arms over her head and let herself be undressed. Stepping high over the edge of the tub, Eleonora crouched in the calf-high pool of perfectly warmed water, splashing herself with it as she waited for the Handmaid to take up her washcloth and scrub, an occurrence that, although happened each morning, was always a bit of a shock to Eleonora's tender skin. Once scrubbed, she rinsed herself

in the now gray and soapy bathwater, then stepped back out over the edge of the tub into a large, fresh white towel.

After her bath, Eleonora dressed and headed downstairs to the dining room, where she knew, without fail, she would find the Bey seated at the head of the table. It gave her great comfort to see him sitting there every morning, with his effortlessly good posture and his serious dark blue suit, his hair parted loosely to the right and his moustache neatly trimmed.

Good morning Miss Cohen, he said when she reached the bottom of the stairs.

Good morning Mr. Bey. As she spread her napkin out in her lap, the butler appeared with breakfast, which, with a few seasonal variations, always included yoghurt, dates, honey, and Turkish flat bread.

Eleonora and the Bey breakfasted, for the most part, in silence, not because they were uncomfortable around each other and certainly not because they had nothing to say. Indeed, each wanted very much to speak, but held back for the sake of the other, the Bey out of deference to Eleonora's grief and Eleonora for fear of breaking the decorum. There was an occasional comment on the ripeness of the figs, the taste of a particular jam, and the requisite requests to pass the butter. But even when a strain of conversation carried on past these halting beginnings, it never lasted much longer than a few exchanges, after which they both reverted back to silence, embarrassed and regretful of the breach.

Following breakfast, the Bey stood from the table, donned his fez and, with a muffled goodbye, set out for the textile district. He was always quite busy with some thing or another and most days did not return until dinner time, leaving Eleonora virtually alone in the house for eight hours a day. In such a situation, most children would at least

be tempted to explore and get themselves into trouble, but aside from the occasional peripatetic urge, Eleonora did not feel up to exploration, to say nothing of getting into trouble. Most days, she felt like little more than reading, and would sit for hours at a time in the leather armchair next to the bay window, letting herself fall into the books she had picked out, essentially at random, from the Bey's library.

Occasionally, she glanced up at the Bosphorus and lost herself in quiet contemplation of the clouds. But truth be told, she usually didn't even really contemplate much. More often, she just watched the boatmen rowing back and forth across the straits or, when there was one, let her eyes drift along with the slow progress of a steamer puffing towards the Black Sea. She finished four, five, sometimes even six books a day, losing herself in the narcotic, distant world of literature with only the calls to prayer and the steady darkening of the sky to remind her that time in her own world was passing, which indeed it was.

Every day, a few minutes after the evening call to prayer, the Bey's carriage pulled up in front of his house and stopped with a whinny and a snort. Stepping out onto the drive, the Bey looked up to Eleonora's window. If she was there, which she usually was, he waved to her. And by the time he had removed his coat, she was at the bottom of the stairs, ready to receive the avuncular kiss on the forehead that was, at that time, the only tenderness between them. Dinner was much like breakfast, except that, after dinner, instead of heading off to work, the Bey excused himself to the library, while Eleonora went upstairs to bed.

Of all the ways Eleonora chose to pass time in the weeks following her father's death, the only thing that gave her even a twinge of excitement was the discovery, one

rainy late March afternoon, of a series of suspended, covered balconies above the public rooms on the first floor of the house. Originally designed so the ladies of the house could observe gatherings and parties without compromising their honor, the balconies were hidden by a wooden latticework screen almost exactly the same as that which concealed the interior of the Bey's carriage. This type of contrivance was, Eleonora later learned, quite common in the great houses of Stamboul and enjoyed regular use even in her own time. However, without any women resident in the house, the Bey's balconies had fallen into disuse. They were worn-down, dusty, and filled with cobwebs, a state that served only to increase Eleonora's attraction towards them.

Although she still spent the vast majority of her time reading in the armchair next to her bay window, after discovering the balconies, Eleonora often felt compelled to take a book up there and read by the light streaming through the holes in the wooden screen. Sometimes she would go up even without a book and spend the afternoon creeping around the house, watching the servants bustle about, regarding them from above as if characters in a book. On the rare occasion that the Bey had company, the Rector, the Imam, or the Hajj, Eleonora would, after listening to them talk through dinner about politics, religion, or business, depending on the guest, sneak up into the balconies and watch the more candid, though still for the most part uninteresting, conversations in the library, in secret from above.

## Chapter Eleven

It has been said that time heals all wounds. And while this may very well be true, the aphorism provides little comfort to the bereaved. For time is endless, but we are only here for a short while. In the case of young Eleonora, the situation was beginning to look, if not bleak, than at least intractable. As the weeks following her father's death turned into months, it became clear that, despite the daily comforts of her routine, Eleonora's wounds had done little healing, which is not much of a surprise considering she still had not left the house.

Unlike most parents, who would by this point have taken their children by the collar and thrown them out into the world, the Bey continued to believe whole-heartedly that Eleonora would eventually leave the house on her own accord. For more than three months, the Bey went about his business while Eleonora whiled her days away in the lap of her armchair. Then, one day as he rose from the breakfast table, he was struck by the thought that unless something was done, unless some sort of initiative was taken, Eleonora would stay inside forever. What that initiative was he had no clue, but the idea initiative could and should be taken was in itself a sea change. After long consideration, the Bey decided to take counsel in his friend the Rector. Being as he was a private man, the Bey rarely discussed his personal life with anyone, but of all his possible confidantes the Rector seemed the best choice. As an educator and reverend, he had a great deal of experience with children, and as an American, could be relied on for his frankness.

That next afternoon, the Bey sent up an invitation to Robert's College. And within the end of the week, the Rector, the Bey, and Eleonora were seated around the far end of the long, oak dining room table, eating a five-course meal of kebab, rice pilaf, stuffed peppers, and Tarte Taitan, which the Bey knew was the Rector's favorite dessert. As usual, Eleonora was reserved but courteous, answering the Rector's inquiries with short, usually no more than three-word replies and, for most of the meal, looking down at her plate. As soon the fruit was taken away, Eleonora excused herself and the men retired to the library.

Instead of readying herself for sleep, as she normally did, Eleonora snuck to the women's wing and up into the balcony, crawling on all fours to the place where she could look down on the library. From her vantage point the room looked very much like a stage, or the setting of a detective novel, its gigantic sideboards distended with carvings and antique, leather-bound books. She could see the Bey quite clearly, sitting in the usual armchair, his left ankle balanced on the opposite knee, but of the Rector she could see only half a forehead, nose, and knees, and that only when she craned her neck.

How does Miss Cohen seem to you? the Bey asked, leaning forward to hand his guest a glass of cognac.

Not very well, he replied, picking his teeth with an ivory toothpick. Not very well at all. I was going to bring it up, in fact. But thought it best to wait until after dinner.

Eleonora looked down at herself, at her green velvet-covered knees, which were now almost flush against the lattice. Am I not doing well? she thought. Once asked, it seemed an obvious question, but she had not, up until that point, considered how she was

doing. She wasn't particularly happy. But she also hadn't been sad for a long while. Come to think of it, she hadn't been much of anything lately.

She hasn't left the house since the accident, the Bey continued, flattening down the ends of his moustache. As you know, that was more than three months ago.

Wow, the Rector said, whistling through his teeth.

It was not an overtly vulgar response, but typically American, the kind of manners that ruffled the Bey's sensibilities. For a moment, he regretted having introduced the subject at all. And yet, even just mentioning it, he felt a weight off his chest. The Rector nodded in silent reflection, lit the end of his cigar, and leisurely puffed. He was the kind of man who took an inordinate amount of time to answer even the simplest question, partially out of deep consideration and partially as a means of maintaining attention.

Perhaps, he said, finally, tapping his ash in the stand-up ashtray to his right. Have you considered employing a tutor? It might stimulate her to have more serious reading material. Direct her learning. He took another long draw on the cigar. If you're interested, I know of quite a few very good ones. The best in Stamboul.

The Bey, who had been waiting with his fingers tented tensely in front of his face, raised his eyebrows in skepticism. I had always been of the opinion that reading was the problem.

True, true. But maybe the problem isn't *that* she's reading, but rather *what* she's reading. I have never held the novel in much esteem. Maybe it holds some appeal for women and romantic young boys. But such frivolousness cannot have any real utility. Perhaps it might stimulate her mind if she were given more serious material.

Although the Rector's advice wasn't truly what he wanted, the Bey was grateful, frankly, for anything. He was, by that point, quite close to the end of his rope and most likely would have taken any suggestion to heart.

Miss Cohen? he asked, that next morning, towards the end of a particularly silent breakfast. Might I have a word with you?

Eleonora looked up at him with expectant eyes and an expression of studied ignorance. All morning, she had been anticipating that the Bey would broach the subject of a tutor. She nodded demurely and laid her fork diagonally across her plate, which was what she imagined an attentive and unsuspecting child would do in such a situation.

Yes, Mr. Bey?

Coughing lightly into his hand, the Bey cleared his throat and readjusted his cufflinks. He made a small purse of his lips, then loosened it slightly to exhale. He and Eleonora hardly ever spoke about matters of importance.

I was speaking with the Rector last night.

Eleonora nodded again, looking directly at him with wide, expectant eyes.

And he suggested, the Bey paused again and looked behind him to the Butler, standing as always at attention in the corner of the room. He suggested that perhaps you might benefit from a tutor. To stimulate you a bit. Direct your learning.

Again, she nodded and looked down at her fork, laid diagonally across her plate. She did not particularly want a tutor. But, she told herself. If it makes the Bey happy, than I will do it. He has been so kind to me and the last thing I want is to be in his bad graces. For, as much as she knew he cared about her, an orphan is always a guest.

What do you think about that? the Bey asked after a period.

That sounds very nice, she said.

Of course, it would be entirely for your benefit and enjoyment.

Thank you, Mr. Bey, said Eleonora. I do very much appreciate it.

He nodded, though it was unclear whether Eleonora appreciated the procurement of a tutor or the caveat that the tutor was entirely for her enjoyment.

Then it's decided, he said, standing up from the table. I will contact the Rector this afternoon.

Three days later, just as Eleonora and the Bey were finishing their breakfast, Mehmet il-Gafsi, a third-year scholarship student at Robert's College whom the Rector had recommended most highly, knocked smartly at the front door, somewhat startling both Eleonora and the Bey, neither of whom had expected their visitor so early. Unfazed, the Butler, who had just moments before cleared the breakfast dishes from the table, glided into the anteroom and opened the front door wide. Gafsi, as the young man was called, was possessed of a swarthy complexion and the tentative wisps of a moustache peeking out above the corners of his upper lip. As he would be going to class directly after the lesson, he was wearing his Robert's College uniform, a burgundy coat and khaki slacks with a blue and gold striped tie.

Is Miss Cohen in? he asked, in a surprisingly deep voice.

One moment, said the Butler, turning sharply on his heels. But, as he saw, Eleonora and the Bey had already fetched themselves.

Mr. Gafsi, said the Bey, striding across the room with Eleonora trailing a few half-steps behind him. The Rector has recommended you with the highest praise.

Stifling a smile, the tutor nodded gravely and, transferring his stack of books from his right arm to left, shook the Bey's outstretched hand. He had the shy, slightly arrogant demeanor of someone who has succeeded solely on his own merit.

And this is Miss Cohen, said the Bey, sheparding her out from behind his legs. Eleonora smiled almost imperceptibly and, bending at the knees, pulled down the hem of her dress, a motion that fell somewhere in between a curtsy and a nervous tic.

Charmed, said the tutor. He had been duly appraised of, what the Rector called, Eleonora's situation. In fact, the Rector had selected him as Eleonora's tutor in large part because he thought they might get along, them both being outsiders of a sort. But in spite of the doubts that he, a tailor's son, had faced and overcome, the tutor was skeptical Eleonora could handle the rigorous curriculum the Rector had set out for her.

She may not look like much of a scholar, said the Bey, as if reading the tutor's mind. But I can assure you Miss Cohen will not fall short of your expectations. If anything she will exceed them.

The tutor nodded again, gravely. But one could tell he was unpersuaded.

Now, the Bey said, clasping his hands together. Where shall we set up?

Neither Eleonora nor the tutor responded, each of them thinking the Bey's question was directed toward the other.

Does the library suit you, Miss Cohen?

Yes, she nodded. That suits me well.

Turning, the Bey led them down the hall to the library and, after pointing out a few of the room's more obvious features, left them, as he put it, to commence their studies. Standing in the middle of the room, next to the ashtray the Rector had used a few

nights earlier, Eleonora and her tutor appraised each other anew. Taking charge, the tutor crossed the room and set his books down on top of the great oak desk the Bey had indicated.

Why don't we begin? he asked, only partially rhetorically, as he pulled a straight-backed wooden chair up to the desk and seated himself. Once seated, he looked back over his shoulder at Eleonora. She was standing next to the ashtray, one hand in a fist and the tip of the other thumb thrust squarely between her teeth. The two children looked at each other from across the room. Then, slowly, Eleonora took her thumb out of her mouth, wiped it on the side of her dress, and walked over to the desk.

We'll start with something easy, said the tutor. Smiling smugly, he took out his first-year Latin primer, which he had brought on the chance that Eleonora was unable to read the more difficult texts the Rector had suggested for her.

Begin here, he said, pointing at the first line of the first page.

Although almost inaudibly at first, Eleonora read with unimpeachable accuracy, as she did the next book, and the next book after that. By the end of the three hours allotted them, Eleonora had exhausted all of the books the tutor had brought with him, the assortment of which was supposed to last at least a month. Astounded, he sat back in his chair and looked down at her, a delicate creature, perched on the edge of her chair.

I will bring some more difficult books tomorrow, he said.

The next morning and every morning after that for three months, Eleonora and her tutor sat side by side at the great oak desk in the corner of the library, Eleonora hunched over, reading aloud from whatever book she had been assigned, and the tutor, straight-backed, interrupting her to correct what very few mistakes he could catch. By the end of

the first week, there had developed between the two a healthy sort of rivalry, in which Eleonora strove to pronounce each word perfectly, to conjugate each verb correctly, to remember the argument of each philosopher exactly, while the tutor, who was forced to assign an increasingly difficult curriculum, the content of which rubbed uncomfortably against the boundaries of his own knowledge, tried his best to point out even the smallest mistakes.

As with everything she put her mind to, Eleonora was voracious in her studies, a hunger only further fueled by her desire to best the tutor. She was constantly requesting more and more books, harder lessons, more irregular verb forms to memorize. And her tutor was obliged to provide them. By the beginning of the summer break, Eleonora had read Pliny, Livy, Tacitus, and Josephus; Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, and Cleanthes; the Cynics, the Stoics, and most of the pre-Socratics. She had mastered Latin, Greek, German, and was beginning to be comfortable with Arabic. Such quick progress, her tutor told the Bey, was unheard of even among the brightest students at Robert's College, adding, a bit more softly, that if she wanted to continue her studies, he would need to employ another, more advanced tutor.

In spite of the, even by her own standards, astoundingly swift progress Eleonora made through the cannon of classical Philosophy, History, and Rhetoric, she was still just as listless and pale as she had been three months before, if not more so. She had learned three languages; her analytical skills had greatly improved; and she had a solid grasp of ancient History, from Herodotus up through Saint Augustine. But what good does any of this do for a listless and pale little girl who hasn't left the house in more than six months?

Not very much. Although Eleonora was, as the Rector had predicted, quite stimulated by this more serious material, the Bey's fundamental concern was still as of yet unresolved. In spite of her success with the curriculum he had devised, the Rector's basic premise, that the problem wasn't *that* she was reading, but rather *what* she was reading, had proven false.

In many ways, Eleonora's situation was now even worse. Whereas previously she had rationalized her desire to stay inside with a flabby and somewhat specious argument about fate, determination, and free will, Eleonora was now able to develop new, more sophisticated arguments to buttress her desires. As her analytical skills sharpened, whetted on the hard black flint of Socrates and Cicero, she built up, tore down, and built up again a series of increasingly sturdy positions. By the end of that three month period she had constructed about her a nearly impregnable fortress, centered on the notion that inside was, or had at least become, her natural state.

What, she would ask, whenever the thought of leaving crossed her mind. What would be gained by leaving? For me or for anyone else? Might anyone benefit from my presence in the outside world? And if so, does this, as of yet unproven, benefit outweigh the known dangers? As much as she tried, Eleonora could not answer any of these questions in the affirmative. And so she continued to stay inside.

For his part, the Bey had grown steadily ever more dismayed by the situation. Although he still strongly believed, in principle at least, that Eleonora would leave the house when she was ready, he had resolved, a few weeks earlier, when it first became apparent to him that the Rector's suggestion had failed, to raise the subject in a casual sort of way. But being as he was a very serious man and one exceedingly uncomfortable

with personal conversations, the Bey kept finding reason to put it off. One night Eleonora was in a bad mood; one night he was in a bad mood; one night, when they were both in good moods, the food was too salty; one night, when they were both in good moods and the food was delicious, Eleonora excused herself from the table earlier than normal; and once everything was perfect, except that it was breakfast, which didn't seem to him an appropriate time to raise such an important issue.

Finally, after weeks of vacillation and excuses, the perfect moment arrived. Both he and Eleonora were in good moods, the meal, dinner, had been quite excellent, roast lamb with apricots and saffron rice, and long past the time that Eleonora usually excused herself, she was still there, her hands folded neatly on the table in front of her. Unable to make any of the normal excuses, and fearful that this moment would pass and be lost forever, the Bey jumped head long into the conversation, the way one jumps into a very cold lake.

How would you like to go out for a ride tomorrow, he asked, surprised at the ease with which he said these words.

Eleonora, who had been pondering what book she would read next, was caught somewhat off guard by the casualness of the Bey's suggestion. If he had approached the conversation in a more logical manner, she would have been able to produce a litany of irrefutable arguments, just as she did in her own mind. But such a lighthearted suggestion she could not respond to with logic.

I don't know, she said, looking down at the empty plate in front of her. She knew the Bey was concerned by her behavior, and she truly didn't want to displease him, but

the thought of leaving his house, notwithstanding the logical edifice she had constructed, made her sick to the stomach. I don't much feel like going out.

I think it might be great fun, said the Bey.

Eleonora looked back down at her plate, a clean white plate in which she could see the watery lights of the chandelier reflected. If the Bey had questioned her reluctance to leave the house, she would have any number of responses at her disposal. But fun, fun was not something she had considered in a long while. Eleonora thought back to the carriage ride they had taken on her first day in Stamboul, so many months ago. Her face pressed up against the latticework screen, the sound of fishermen hawking their wares in Eminounu, the smell of the spice market, and her father and the Bey in their seats, each watching the city out their own windows. As she thought this, Eleonora could feel herself tearing up for the first time in a long while, the weight lifting and the slightly salty taste at the back of her mouth.

Excuse me, she said and rushed up stairs to her bedroom, her napkin forgotten on the floor next to her chair.

## Chapter Twelve

The next day, a sunny, cloudless Wednesday afternoon, one of those bright halcyon mid-winter days that still holds a promise of spring, something extraordinary happened. Eleonora was reading, as usual, in the far corner of her room, sitting in the armchair next to the bay window with her feet tucked under her and a large red copy of Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Volume Two* perched in her lap. The window was open and she could feel a small, cold breeze on the back of her neck. She had paused, licking her finger to turn the page, when, out of nowhere, a small white paper airplane floated high over her head, into her room, and landed on the seat of the red velvet chair next to her bed.

Eleonora put her book face down over the arm of the chair and stuck her head out the open window. Where could that plane have come from? she thought. Directly in front of her was, as always, the Bosphorus, grimy and clogged with the midday boat traffic. It was impossible the plane could have come from down there. Her window was at least fifteen meters above the water and, in any case, who would have thrown it? Leaning out even further, she looked to her left. There, about thirty meters away, was the Jengahir Mosque. It *was* possible, she reasoned, given the right conditions, that a paper airplane could be thrown from the top balcony of the minaret and land her room. But at present, the breeze was blowing in the exact wrong direction and, even if it had been favorable, Eleonora found it quite hard to imagine the stogy old muezzin folding, let alone throwing, a paper airplane. To her right, a bit closer than the mosque, but still relatively far away,

was the residence of the Egyptian Khedive, a square and deeply fenestrated building enclosed by a wrought iron gate. Although it was the right height and the wind was blowing the right direction, it still didn't seem to Eleonora very likely that anyone could throw a paper airplane such a great distance. But there, in spite of all likelihood, sitting quietly on the seat of her red velvet chair, was the airplane.

Untucking her legs, Eleonora got up off her chair, and walked across the room to where the plane had landed. For a long while, she just stood there dumbfounded, staring down at this illogical little plane. Then, flattening out the front of her dress, she knelt down so that her eyes were level with the seat of the chair, and took it into her hands. Turning it over a couple of times, carefully, like a recently-fallen meteor or some newly-revealed relic, Eleonora unfolded the plane and smoothed it out on the red velvet seat. Written neatly across the creased sheet of paper in heavy black India ink were two words: SAVE ME. She turned the sheet over, to see if perhaps there was another message on the back. There wasn't.

How am I supposed to save this person? Eleonora thought. If I have no idea where he is or what I'm saving him from.

Just then, as if in answer to her doubts, a second, virtually identical paper airplane floated into the room and landed in the middle of the carpet. Standing, she walked back across the room, unfolded it, and read, in the same neat, deep black handwriting: BEING HELD PRISONER BY THE KHEDIVE. AWAIT FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS.

By this point, Eleonora had forgotten completely about Gibbon, not to mention Socrates and the Plinies, she had forgotten her tutor, the Bey, and even, for a split second, her father. Clutching the second message in her hand, she rushed over to the window,

scrambled up onto her armchair, and reevaluated the Khedive's residence. It was, she had to admit, awfully far for a paper airplane to travel, even with the aid of a fortuitous breeze. Shielding her eyes from the sun, Eleonora squinted and leaned forward, her head and shoulders both sticking fully out the window.

There he was! On the top story, which was just about even with her own, in the third window from the left, Eleonora could just make out what appeared to be a small boy, frantically waving his arms. When the boy saw that she had noticed him, he pointed at the ground. Following his finger, Eleonora saw that the space in between the two great houses was littered with hundreds of other, less fortunate planes.

These two successful attempts had been, it seemed, miracles of a sort. Miracles or, at the very least, highly coincidental confluences of mutually agreeable factors. Regardless of what they were, the power or forces or what have you that had enabled the first two planes to land in her room was less concerned with the plight of the third, or perhaps had more urgent business to attend to at the moment. Between the second and third successes, there were more than a hundred attempts that, for one reason or another, could not find their way into Eleonora's hands. And for each attempt, the boy not only had to fold up the airplane and throw it, he had also to sit down at his desk and compose the message, which considering how long it took him between throws, was quite lengthy.

And so, Eleonora spent the remainder of that afternoon leant over the back of her armchair, reaching out to catch those attempts that came close enough to reach for. She was so eager to get the third message that she more than once nearly fell out the window, and probably would have had it not been for the ponderous weight of the armchair rocking her back down to safety. Time after time she watched the unsuccessful attempts,

carried away by a gust of wind, condemned by faulty engineering, or knocked down by a malevolent bird. Finally, just as dusk was beginning to settle over the river, the third plane floated in over Eleonora's head and landed squarely in the middle of her bed.

In this message, the boy had provided for her a thorough map of the Khedive's residence, along with explicit instruction as to how she should go about sneaking past the guard. While questioning the wisdom of scattering such instructions to the wind, as it were, Eleonora took it upon herself to rescue this unfortunate young prisoner, whomever he may be, and whatever danger she may incur in the process. Finally, she had a mission worth leaving the house for.

That evening, Eleonora was more animated than she had been in a long while. As soon as the Bey's carriage pulled up the house, she rushed down the stairs and began gibbering excitedly about Gibbon, a monologue which continued all through dinner while she bolted down her fish baked in tahini. Of course, as interesting as the decline and fall of the Roman Empire may be and as tasty as the fish was, the source of Eleonora's animation really had nothing to do with what she had read that afternoon. But Eleonora knew that she couldn't reveal the true cause of her excitement to anyone, especially not the Bey. For if he were to discover what she planned to do that night, he would surely forbid her from it. The Bey did suspect something was afoot, but in his reckoning, Eleonora's agitation was caused by his proposal the night before. Seeing an opportune moment, he decided to raise the issue again. However, just as he was about to bring it up, Eleonora asked to be excused, pleading she was very tired and wanted to go to bed.

Eleonora was, of course, not at all tired. Indeed, she hadn't been more awake in a long time. But true to her word, she did go directly to bed. Running back up the stairs, she changed into her night gown, closed her shades, put out the lights, and slipped under the covers of her enormous white poster bed. Then she waited. She lay like that for the next five hours, watching the lacy shadows of her canopy move across the wall and planning the details of her escape, all the while straining to hear the faint traces of movement downstairs.

At least fifteen minutes after she heard the butler put out the main gas lights, Eleonora slipped silently out the side of her bed, folded the third airplane into the front pocket of her nightgown and, tiptoeing across her room, carefully cracked open the door. Poking her head out into the darkened hall, she looked both ways and, seeing no one, proceeded to creep out and down the hall. The Bey's house was possessed of a certain eeriness at night, the slow creeping of shadows, the chandelier tinkling in the darkness, the phalanx of dead, befezzed men staring down at her from the walls, and the occasional creak of a floorboard. It would be untrue to say that Eleonora was not a little scared, standing there at the top of the wide marble staircase and listening to the house moan. She was more than a little scared. She was quite terrified and, truth be told, very nearly abandoned her mission.

But, she told herself, there are some missions greater than our fears. Touching the note in her front pocket, Eleonora steeled her nerves. This boy's fate is in my hands, she whispered aloud.

Closing her cold, sweaty little hands about themselves, Eleonora crept down the stairs and crossed the great Hereke that, lit by the chandelier's reflections of the moon,

flashed red and at points seemed almost to be smoldering. Once on the other side of the anteroom, Eleonora looked up at the giant cedar door looming above her. She had not, until that moment, fully appreciated the size of the Bey's front door, taller than a carriage and as wide as a full-grown man was tall. Standing on the farthest reached of her tiptoes, she palmed the cold brass doorknob, turned it and, with a barely audible click, pushed it open. Squeezing through the small crack, then closing it, even more carefully, behind her, Eleonora heard another click, a click she dearly hoped was not a lock. But she had no occasion to contemplate this much. For the first time since her father's death, Eleonora was outside.

There was a slight wind at her calves, ruffling the bottom of her nightgown. But aside from that, she thought, being outside wasn't really very different than being inside. In normal circumstances, Eleonora would have allowed herself to consider more deeply the novel feeling of being outside. But, she reminded herself. There are more important and pressing matters that need attending to. Turning her gaze on the gigantic, square and deeply fenestrated residence of the Khedive, Eleonora set her face in a determined scowl. She reached into the front pocket of her nightgown, removed the note, unfolded it and, even though she had memorized it long ago, carefully reread the directions. Then, clutching the former airplane in her cold sweaty palm, Eleonora ran as sneakily as she could along the breakwater to the location where there was, supposedly, a breach in the gate large enough for a small child to fit through. Before slipping through the breach, which she found quite easily, Eleonora allowed herself a moment to look up at the starry black night and catch her breath.

Luckily I am a small child, she thought. Otherwise there's no telling how I would get into the house.

The next step, after slipping through the gate, was to sneak past the night guard, through the courtyard, and into the house itself. According to the note, this part of the mission was by far the most difficult, in that it afforded the greatest chance of capture. Never one to be caught off-guard, Eleonora figured that if, in the worst case scenario, she were caught, she could pretend she had been sleepwalking, which was one of the reasons she had worn her nightgown. Of course, given the Khedive's history with such matters, it was more than likely that she would be taken prisoner.

But, Eleonora told herself, that is a chance I will have to take. Fearlessly, she crept around the perimeter of the monstrous edifice to the west entrance, which was guarded, as the note said, by a particularly sleepy guard. Sleepy, indeed! Peering around the south-west corner of the house, Eleonora saw that the post was completely empty save for a chair and recently extinguished hubby-bubbly. Although she knew her mission was far from over, she could not help but crack a grin as she snuck under the arched stone entrance and into the Khedive's courtyard.

Panting now quite heavily, more from nerves than physical exertion, Eleonora stood in the entrance of the courtyard, her face glazed with sweat and nightgown marked from the dirt of the gate. In spite of her excitement, Eleonora could not help but pause for a moment and marvel at the beauty of the courtyard. As evil as he may be, the Khedive's courtyard was really truly stunning. Walled in by three stories of repeating and graduated arches, all adorned by red and green engraved plaster, the courtyard was laid out in concentric circles of fruit trees, arranged in such a way that, as the seasons turned, they

bloomed outward towards the perimeter, cherry followed by almond followed by orange followed by peach followed again by cherry. At the very center of the courtyard, peeking through the branches of the fruit trees, was a magnificent fountain covered with blue and white Izmir tiles, shimmering in the reflection of the half moon. Inhaling the sweet, tenuous smell of orange blossoms, Eleonora was transported. For a moment she considered spending the rest of the night, if not the rest of her life, living amongst the fruit trees in this courtyard. But, biting down on the inside of her cheek, she steeled herself and resolved to go forward.

Carefully, Eleonora tiptoed through the kitchen door, which, as the note said, was left slightly ajar, through the kitchen, the dining room, and up two flights of creaky, wooden stairs to the third floor. There she paused, breathing heavily, her hands on her knees. At the end of the hall she could see, as the note said, a single doorway lit from within. She crept step by step down the hall and, doing her utmost to control the now nearly frantic beating of her own heart, Eleonora reached out, knocked three times and, in a last paroxysm of fear, hid herself behind a wooden pillar. You never did know who was behind such doors. After what felt like nearly an eternity, the door cracked open, illuminating a thin triangle of light and a pale, dark-haired boy of about her own age.

Who goes there? he whispered out into the darkness.

I got your letter, Eleonora said from behind the pillar. I'm here to save you from the Khedive.

The boy opened the door a crack and motioned for her to come in, quickly, which she did. Once they were safe inside, the door closed behind them and securely locked, the boy plopped himself down on the edge of his bed.

What took you so long?

Eleonora, still panting slightly and red in the face, was not quite sure how to respond to this question. She had expected a response ranging somewhere between astonishment and gratitude, perhaps even a small reward. But now here, the boy was questioning her with impudence. How could she possibly have come earlier?

I had to wait until dark, she said.

Well, better late than never.

Eleonora stood in the middle of the room, her hands on the hips of her nightgown, regarding the boy with astonishment. Why isn't he being more surreptitious? she thought as he brazenly picked his nose. He doesn't even seem very eager to leave his prison cell. In the silence that followed, Eleonora looked more closely around the room. It didn't at all look like the room of a prisoner. In fact, with its canopy bed, blue-green Persian carpet, and bay window facing the Bosphorus, the room looked more than anything like her own. Indeed, the only difference was that, in place of her reading chair, the boy had a large, British roll-top writing desk.

So, Eleonora said finally. How are we going to escape?

Escape?

Escape, she repeated. Escape from the Khedive.

What? The boy threw himself backwards onto his bed in exaggerated disbelief. Laughing, he put his hands on his head and opened his mouth wide. You believed that?

Eleonora glanced down at her feet and then back up at the boy with as cross a look as she could muster. She had believed that.

Tell me the truth, he said, sitting up. Did you or did you not really believe that I was being held prisoner by the Khedive?

Well, she asked. If you're not his prisoner, then what are you doing in the Khedive's house?

I'm his son, he said, as if that were self-evident. Well, not exactly his son. Really, I'm his nephew. But my parents were too poor to take care of me.

Then, motioning for her to follow him, the Khedive's nephew, whose name she later learned was Ahmed, jumped up off his bed and ran downstairs.

As the realization that this boy, was not, in fact, a prisoner at all, began to sink in, Eleonora was at first angry and repulsed. How could one joke about such a serious thing? She could have hurt herself sneaking across the breakwater, not to mention the trouble she would be in if the Bey discovered her. Hadn't he ever heard of the boy that cried wolf. We will see if I help him, Eleonora thought to herself. When he really is a prisoner. But in spite of her anger, Eleonora was also strangely fascinated by Ahmed, a lanky and energetic, dark-haired boy, who, upon arriving downstairs proceeded to remove a drawer entirely from its casement and dump its contents, a large collection of silver daggers, on the dining room table.

Aren't you worried you will wake the Khedive? Eleonora asked.

Ahmed, who had pulled a dagger out of its sheath, and was holding it rigid in both hands, as if he were about to plunge it into his own stomach, looked at her askance.

No, he said, in the same derisive tone of voice with which he had revealed his true identity. He's as deaf as a lump of coal. The only thing we have to worry about is my

Governess. But I found her last week in the stable embracing a groom. So we shouldn't have any trouble with her.

Okay, Eleonora said. She unlocked her hands and, as if that had been her only concern, sat down in one of the chairs across from Ahmed. After watching him for a while, she reached out and took one of the daggers at random.

That one was made by a Circassian horseman, he said, leaning across the table to look at it more closely. It was presented to my uncle by Czar Nicolas II.

Eleonora turned over the small, curved dagger, balancing the weight of it in her hand. The sheath was engraved with a picture of a beturbaned warrior riding his horse above a chain of mountains. The hilt, which continued the crescent, was made of what seemed to be an antler, though she knew not of what. Eleonora had never held such a thing in her hand. She unsheathed the blade, carefully pulling it out in a curve. Glinting softly, the blade revealed itself with an almost bashful reticence. She thought of touching it with her finger, but could not bring herself to do so. There seemed to be in this dagger a brutal urge beyond that of the others, a violent destiny buried within it. Shuddering, she quickly resheathed the blade and set it down.

You can have it if you want, said Ahmed.

What? Eleonora asked, pushing the dagger into the middle of the table like a noxious vegetable. But isn't it the Khedive's? Didn't Nicholas II present it to him?

I made that up, said Ahmed, though Eleonora couldn't even be sure about that. It *is* a part of his collection. But he's too busy to ever check. Anyways, what's the point of a dagger collection if you keep them all locked away in a drawer.

No, said Eleonora, shaking her head. I would never use it anyway.

You don't have to stab anyone, said Ahmed, laughing. Just keep it in your dresser. It's good to have a dagger around.

Eleonora picked it up by the tip of the sheath, letting it swing back and forth until it came to a rest. Although she was still upset about being tricked, she enjoyed being with Ahmed. He was not at all like any other child she had ever met. And now, without hardly even knowing her, he had offered to give her this dagger.

Do you want to see my uncle's big game trophies? Ahmed asked, and before she could answer, ran out of the room, knocking his chair to the ground.

Eleonora stood up from her seat and followed him, clutching the dagger, around the hilt now, in her left hand.

You never know, she said to herself and skipped down the hall to a musty, dark wood-paneled room filled entirely with the taxidermied heads of gazelles, boars, bears, and rhinos, even an elephant.

## Chapter Thirteen

The afternoon following Eleonora's visit to the Khedive's residence, she received a call from her newfound friend and his governess. Perched, as usual, in her armchair next to the bay window, she had been half-heartedly trying to finish *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* when she spotted Ahmed and his governess making their way between the two houses. Closing the book in her lap, Eleonora leaned forward so she could better watch them approach. From her vantage point on the second floor, the visitors looked like a pair of insects traversing some insignificant, rocky stretch of terrain. She had often thought this very same thing watching the peddlers, servants, and boatsmen pass below her window every day, but it seemed strange to think of her newfound friend as an insect. Not that she ever really thought of anyone as an insect.

Ahmed had not had much difficulty convincing his governess to accompany him across the way to the Bey's house. Although she was somewhat surprised by the request, seeing as he generally spent his days devising new means of tormenting her, and had never, to her knowledge, had any playmates to speak of, the governess was relieved that Ahmed's energies were diverted, temporarily at least, from making her life difficult. But for the servants at the Bey's house, the call was nothing less than a shock. Having, of course, no knowledge of Eleonora's nocturnal visit, they regarded her still as a shut-in. And for a shut-in to have a visitor is quite strange indeed.

Good afternoon, said the Butler, holding the door as he took in the unexpected visitors. The governess was a buxom young British lady with a lively complexion and a

grey frock well-befitting a woman of her stature. Ahmed, standing to her right, was a pale and fidgeting dark-eyed boy with smart blue pants and black hair pressed flat against his forehead. While the Butler regarded them in silence, Eleonora came skipping down the stairs to meet her new friend, nearly tripping over an unseen fold in the carpet a few feet in front of the door. The Butler glanced down at Eleonora with a look of calm disapproval before addressing himself to the visitors. How may I help you?

We would like to request the young mistresses' company for lunch, said the governess in formal, heavily accented French.

Yes, Eleonora replied immediately. She looked up at the Butler. I can have lunch with them, can't I?

The Butler had of course been privy to the previous months' conversations, and knew as well as anyone how much the Bey wanted for Eleonora to leave the house. But even so, without his master's express permission, it would be highly improper to grant the young mistress consent to leave the house unaccompanied.

I'm sorry, said the Butler, laying his white glove on the doorknob. We need first to discuss the matter with the Bey. Perhaps if you call again tomorrow.

But, Eleonora said. She looked at Ahmed, entreating him to do something. When she realized that he was as impotent as herself, she stomped her foot in protest. There were any number of reasons why she should be allowed to have lunch with Ahmed, but every argument she might make would reveal her trip the night before. But, she repeated in a more supplicating tone. She looked up at the Butler, whose gloved white hand was draped over the doorknob, and stomped her foot again, this time with less vigor.

Tomorrow then, said the governess and, placing a hand on Ahmed's shoulder, began to shepherd him back towards the Khedive's residence. Just then, there was a creaking sound and a voice loud enough for all four of the concerned parties to hear. It was the old Handmaid, who had been watching the proceeding from across the room at the base of the staircase, a pile of clean, folded bed clothes in her outstretched arms. There was a long silence before the Butler appreciated that he was the only one of the four who understood Turkish. Realizing this, he said a few curt words to the Handmaid and turned his back on her. Unbowed, she repeated herself, lay the laundry down on the bottom step, and began crossing the anteroom.

The Butler's grip on the doorknob tightened and he squared himself, puffing out his dark black and white chest. Ahmed and Eleonora exchanged an apprehensive glance and the governess adjusted her bodice. The clock rang twelve times as the Handmaid walked slowly across the room. By the twelfth ring, she had come within a meter of the doorway, her stoop and soiled clothes starkly contrasted with the Butler's straight back and impeccably clean uniform. He was just about to speak, raising himself for what seemed would be a final, irrefutable verbal blow, when the Handmaid spoke, this time in a more diplomatic tone. There was a short pause before the Butler deflated and looked back at Eleonora. Although none of the others understood Turkish, they all three knew at this moment that the Butler had relented. Clearing his throat haughtily, he turned to the governess.

This Handmaid has graciously offered to accompany the young mistress. But before he could finish his sentence, she had taken Eleonora by the wrist and was leading her across the way.

Architecturally, the Khedive's residence was quite similar to the Bey's house. The same wide, white marble staircase rose up from the far end of the anteroom to the second floor and the same tall, thin corridors trailed off to either side. But the mood of the house was much darker, dustier, and old. Instead of Persian carpets, Louis XIV furniture, and ancestral oil paintings, the Khedive's residence was decorated with mementos of an illustrious military career. Everywhere Eleonora looked there were bayonets, bows, arrows, swords, all sorts of guns, and a pair of medieval French suits of armor standing guard at the base of the stairs. The floors were covered with dull, geometric kilims and the wood paneling was a shade darker than that of the Bey's house, which caused one to feel as if it were always a few hours later in the day there. Although she had been in that very same anteroom less than twelve hours before, Eleonora was still a bit uncomfortable in this new setting. Fiddling with a clasp at the front of her dress, she looked up and to the left at her Handmaid, who was herself examining a Russian bayonet on the wall. To her right, Ahmed and his governess were bickering about when and where lunch would be served. All this fiddling, examining, and bickering stopped suddenly at the appearance of the Khedive's butler, a gaunt, rusty snake of a man, who coughed and motioned for them to follow him to the study.

The study was, Eleonora realized as the butler held the door open for them, the very same room Ahmed had showed her the night before. It was quite a large room, with high ceilings and all four walls covered by taxidermied heads. There was an elephant in the middle of the back wall, an ancient bull with two curled yellowing tusks jutting out from either side of its deflated trunk. There was a flaccid yellow and black giraffe

stretching its neck out over the fireplace, a lioness sneering contemptuously next to the window, a sad rhinoceros stuck in between two bookshelves, a wild boar, a cheetah, and a ibex. In the dark, the animals had seemed vaguely dangerous and foreboding, but under the afternoon light, even that small amount able to peek through the velvet curtains and stained glass, they had a sad aspect of death and ignominy. Below the animals, below the elephant specifically, sat the Khedive. Buried deep in a blue velvet armchair, he was a frail, unmoving man with fine wrinkles and a long mane of stark white hair. As the group approached he stirred and carefully examined each of the faces in front of him. He looked, Eleonora thought, just as she had imagined Wemmick's aged parent in *Great Expectations*, and was just as deaf.

Sir, said the Butler. The Khedive, who was still closely examining Eleonora, apparently did not hear him. Sir, the Butler repeated, a bit louder. Again, the Khedive made no movement. Although he was an old man, and not in good health, he retained a penetrating stare. Sir! the Butler said a third time, in as loud a voice as he could muster without yelling. Finally, the patrician old general turned towards his Butler. Sir, I would like to present Miss Eleonora Cohen, the charge of your neighbor, Moncef Barcou Bey.

Eleonora smiled and curtsied as best she could. Still silent and meditating on her, the Khedive lifted his hand and motioned for her to draw closer, which she did. Bright green irises flashed below his wrinkled lids, themselves topped by bushy white eyebrows. Again, he motioned for Eleonora to draw closer, and she did. Glancing back at the rest of the party, she stood motionless in front of the Khedive, so close that her knee brushed against the side of his armchair.

What is your name? the Khedive asked in a fluent and surprisingly steady voice.

Eleonora Cohen, sir. Considering this information, the Khedive sunk back into his chair and, slowly nodding, tented his fingers in front of his face. He continued to stare at her for what seemed a very long time before finally closing his eyes in contentment.

Yes, he said to himself. Eleonora Cohen.

The Khedive's butler, the Governess, Ahmed, Eleonora, and the Handmaid all stood in a small semicircle around the Khedive's chair, waiting to see if he had anything else to say. When it became clear that he did not, the Butler sheperded them out of the room and called for his master's nurse.

Come on, said Ahmed. He poked Eleonora in the side and ran off, two steps at a time up the back stairs, as if the preceding interview had never occurred. Or rather, as if it were the height of normalcy.

Have you killed anyone yet? Ahmed asked when Eleonora arrived at the third floor landing, a few steps behind him.

Somewhat taken aback, she did not immediately respond.

What do you mean?

Have you killed anyone? he repeated, pushing open his door. With your dagger.

No, she said. She thought about where she had hidden the dagger, in the recess of an old shoe at the back of her dresser. I haven't killed anyone yet. Nor do I intend to.

Ahmed cocked his head to the side and examined Eleonora as if she were a peculiar type of tropical bird. You're a strange one, he said. But I like you.

When the Bey returned that evening, his carriage wheels rattling over the cobblestones, Eleonora and Ahmed were sitting up on the roof of the Khedive's

residence, watching the sky sink deeper and deeper into blue. They had been up there for a good part of the day, playing marbles and watching the boats pass by below. Although Eleonora had quite a good view of the city from her bay window, it shrank in comparison to this. From the Khedive's roof she could see as far as the Princess Islands, from the Galata Tower, Beyoglu, and Roberts' College around to the Sultan's Palace and the Suleymanie Mosque. Up there she could hear the peddlers calling out their wares. She could smell the freshly-caught fish piled up in straw baskets along the shore, feel the wind on her knees, and the sun warming her scalp.

It was just after the evening call to prayer, the last waves of it pushing out over the sea of rooftops, that the Bey's carriage pulled rattlingly up to his house. From where they were sitting, Eleonora and Ahmed could plainly see him step out onto the drive and glance up at her bedroom window. Although it was not entirely unheard of that Eleonora would be elsewhere, the library, for instance, or the kitchen, the Bey seemed quite troubled by her absence. He stared up at the window for a full minute, as if waiting for her to return from the bathroom, then shook his head and walked the remaining few steps to the front door. Not wanting to distress her guardian any more than he already was, Eleonora bid Ahmed a quick goodbye, ran downstairs and, grabbing the handmaid away from her conversation with one of the kitchen girls, dragged her back across the way.

As soon as the Bey entered his house, indeed, before he could even remove his coat, the Butler rushed in from the dining room. Excited as he had ever been, he informed his master what had happened that morning, making sure to include his protests without having it appear that he had been overpowered by the Handmaid. The Bey removed his coat then asked his Butler to repeat himself, more slowly. Not knowing, of course, about

her nocturnal visit to the Khedive's residence the night before, the news that Eleonora had left the house, and at her own free will, was nothing short of a revelation.

And she's over there, right now as we speak? the Bey asked.

As far as I know, sir, said the Butler. As far as I know, sir, yes.

In fact, Eleonora was, at that very moment, standing at the Bey's door. A moment later, the Handmaid knocked three times, loudly, using a force intended to be heard at the back of the house. At this sound, the Butler and the Bey both jumped, the Bey straight up and the Butler, ever diligent, towards the door.

Well, Miss Cohen, said the Bey slowly and with an air of accusation. Eleonora blinked nervously and her wide pistachio green eyes pooled up in anticipation of his censure. She knew that it was improper to leave the house without permission. But she had thought the Bey would appreciate her situation.

I heard you spent the afternoon at the Khedive's. Eleonora looked down at her shoes, the tops of which were covered in dust. Timidly, she rubbed them on the backs of her stockings and then brought her eyes up to her guardian. She imagined herself turned out of the house, forced to fend for herself on the streets of Stamboul.

The Bey, being a man of what could generally be called a liberal attitude, had nothing of this sort in mind. In fact, he was quite happy that Eleonora had finally left his house and found herself a playmate. But he could not ignore the impropriety of going out without permission, especially with the Butler and the Handmaid looking on. Putting on a face of stern disapproval, he looked down at his charge for a long while before he spoke again.

Did you enjoy yourself?

Yes, Eleonora responded, meekly, not sure whether or not she was being admonished. Very much so. I quite enjoy Ahmed's company and the house is very interesting.

Indeed, said the Bey. He set his lips and, staring off into the distance, stroked his moustache, as if calculating what punishment would best match this level of enjoyment. He held this face for as long as he could. Then, breaking into a smile, he told Eleonora to go upstairs and change. We will hear more about your day at dinner.

Thus began a new stage of Eleonora's life in Stamboul. The next day, the day following that, and almost every day after, Eleonora and the Handmaid walked over to the Khedive's residence to visit with her new friend. Except for Fridays, when Ahmed accompanied his uncle to the mosque, and those occasional days that the Bey took Eleonora out on an excursion, the two children saw each other every day. For those times that Eleonora and Ahmed were apart, they rigged up a pulley system between their bedroom windows, by means of which they could exchange notes in secret. Eleonora enjoyed herself so much that she had a hard time remembering why she had refused to leave the Bey's house in the first place. Rather, she could remember the reason, but could not recall the feeling that had motivated it. Of course, Eleonora still thought often about her father and still often experienced waves of sadness. But now, for the most part, her mind and time was occupied with the world outside.

Although they were the best of friends, Ahmed and Eleonora did not speak much about their families or home towns. Indeed, what child does? Nonetheless, in those first few weeks of their friendship, each was able to establish a rough outline of the other's

personal history. Sitting one halcyon Tuesday afternoon on the lip of the fountain at the middle of the Khedive's courtyard, Eleonora told Ahmed all about Constanta and her various adventures on the road to Stamboul. It was, she realized, as she related the story of the gypsy encampment, which Ahmed was particularly impressed by, the first time she had told anyone the story of her life. The Bey knew her circumstances, she assumed, from his discussions with her father. But this was the first time she had actually narrated her life to someone.

What would it change, she wondered, dipping her hand into the fountain, if she had not told him of her first day at school or if she had gone into greater detail in relating her final dinner at the Constanta Inn. Would *Jane Eyre*, she wondered by analogy, be any different if Jane hadn't been banished that afternoon to the Red Room? Would our impressions of Mr. Rochester change if we knew more about his youthful adventures on the continent? What if Jane's favorite book had been *The Hourglass* or *A Thousand and One Nights* instead of *Bewick's History of British Birds*?

Ahmed was a bit less forthcoming with the details of his life, but he told her things as they came up and was never reticent to answer any questions she may have. Over those first few weeks, Eleonora learned that Ahmed was the seventh child of the imam of a small village in the Egyptian delta named Tawarka. Being as his father could not support such a large family, they sent Ahmed to live with his rich uncle the Khedive, who was at that time the Egyptian military attaché in Stamboul. The Khedive was eager to help his brother, who had always been quite generous to him as a student at al-Azhar. But, being considerably advanced in years and also quite busy, the Khedive was in no condition to concern himself with the upbringing and education of a young child. And so,

Ahmed's upbringing and education, from the small age of three upwards, was performed by a string of nurses and governesses, which from the first, he tormented mercilessly.

Preferring that his charge be educated in a European language, as opposed to his native Arabic or Turkish, the Khedive hired as Ahmed's first governess a pretty, dark-eyed young French-speaking girl named Miss Jonfil, the third daughter of a Egyptian Jewish rubber merchant in Alexandria. Though intelligent and gentle, Miss Jonfil had what the Butler described as an exceedingly wistful character. Much of her first few months at the Khedive's was spent writing letters to her sisters and staring mournfully at an etching of Alexandria's Crusader Fort, which she had discovered on the far back wall of an otherwise unused drawing room. Meanwhile, Ahmed had free reign of the house. As Miss Jonfil sat sighing and wiping the tears from her eyes, Ahmed was knocking weapons off the wall, upending sacks of flour, and breaking furniture at will.

After sending Miss Jonfil back to Alexandria, which she was more than happy to oblige, the Khedive thought it best to hire a governess who made her permanent home in Stamboul. And so, he took into his employ a stout, severe Czech woman named Miss Jundl, the maiden sister of a clerk in the Habsburg consul's office. Miss Jundl had been for twenty years a teacher in Pilsn before she abandoned what slim marriage prospects she could be assumed to have and joined her brother in Stamboul. Having dealt with children for so long, without having any of her own, she tended to regard them as unmolded lumps of clay, as means to an end rather than an end itself. The first time she saw Ahmed, running through the library with his face painted like an Indian, Miss Jundl turned to the Khedive and said with the utmost confidence, I will tame him like a beast. But a child is not a beast and, as Miss Jundl learned, will not abide being treated as one.

Ahmed's next governess was Miss Ipek, a silken haired and somewhat forgetful young Turkish girl from Bursa. Then came Mrs. Gharbi, the corpulent, alcoholic widow of a Moroccan lieutenant. There was Miss Fayette, Mrs. Hauser, Mrs. al-Wazzan and so on. All in all, Ahmed was subject to more than twenty governesses, each of whom was in some way deficient to the task at hand. For his part, the Khedive didn't much mind the situation. And as he grew older, he cared even less. The only thing that really mattered to the Khedive was that Ahmed learn to speak French, which he had, long before, and that stay out of bodily harm, which for the most part he did as well.

Ahmed's most recent governess, Miss Dover, had been at the Khedive's residence for a period of almost a year, by far the longest tenure of any governess in that house. She was firm but not too strict, lenient but not frail, and seemed almost to relish the daily combat with the young master, or at least she regarded it as part and parcel of the job. And while her behavior in the house, specifically the unconcealed amorous exploits with other servants, was certainly most scandalous, the Khedive didn't seem much to mind. Thus, over time, there developed between Ahmed and Miss Dover a war of attrition. Each had found, in the other, a perfectly matched adversary and regarded the other with the respect due to a worthy enemy.

## Chapter Fourteen

Eleonora herself had no antipathy towards Miss Dover. In fact, she found her friend's governess quite kind and affable. Nevertheless, she was compelled, through her allegiance to Ahmed, to participate in the planning and implementation of various plots against her. Eleonora was able to justify her actions only because the stakes were so low. Although Ahmed considered himself at war, he was content with small strikes such as stealing the enemy's ink or slipping salt into her sugar bowl, and would never dream of physically harming her person.

In spite of her misgivings towards the project, Eleonora was a brilliant general, an uncommon military strategist whose complex subterfuge and strategy brought the conflict to a new level. It was she who proposed forging a passionate love letter from the Butler, and she who finally succeeded in stealing Miss Dover's bodice. For the most part, they were little more than childish pranks. But the most genius of Eleonora's plans, known to the two children as Operation Cat, was to have reverberations far beyond what either of them could ever have predicted.

It all began one drizzling Tuesday afternoon in early spring. The two children and the Governess were eating a lunch of cold chicken in the kitchen, as they were wont to do when it was raining, for the kitchen was the warmest room in the house. As soon as they sat down to eat, a troop of stray cats massed together outside the back door and began meowing plaintively for scraps. As usual, they ignored the foul creatures and as usual the creatures continued with an even greater insistence. Towards the end of the meal, but still

before Eleonora and the Governess had finished, Ahmed rose from the table and, with a nearly full plate, began making his way to the door. He was halfway across the kitchen when Miss Dover, suddenly realizing his intentions, sprang up and blocked his path.

You cannot encourage them, she said. Then, as punctuation to her reprimand, she opened the door and kicked out at the mess of fur gathered there, scattering the cats for a brief moment before they came back.

Miss Dover had numerous times expressed her aversion towards the gangs of stray cats that roamed the streets of Stamboul, but it wasn't until that moment that the true depth of her disgust was revealed. Luminous military mind that she was, Eleonora saw this weakness for what it was and right then conceived the outlines of a plan to exploit it. As with all her plans, she was excited more by the idea itself than by the prospect of its application. Nonetheless, she felt compelled to impart it to her friend. Upon hearing the plan, Ahmed was so excited that he insisted they begin right then to figure out the details.

The words *Felis silvestris catus* for many readers no doubt conjure up the image of a furry, capricious creature stretched out in front of a fire, yawning and lazily licking its forelocks. While there are surely many attractive, pleasant cats in the world, it should be noted that the cats of Stamboul, do not in any way resemble the aforementioned image. Stamboul's feline denizens are a vile and disgusting bunch, a cursed, malevolent race from who knows not what ancestry. Meowing and hissing, they stalk the streets in gangs, sulking in corners and striking as a body upon any victuals in their range. These cats, these small, feral, hungry creatures, with diseased eyes, missing paws, mottled tails,

matted fur, and pus-caked maws were those Eleonora had in mind when she devised Operation Cat.

That next afternoon, having spent a good portion of the morning working out some of the plan's more technical details, Ahmed and Eleonora rigged up a pulley system by which they could lower an empty basket from the roof of the Khedive's residence to the ground and, once filled with cats, pull it back up again.

This should work, said Ahmed, pulling tight a knot that secured the basket to the pulley rope. What do you think?

Eleonora, who knew nothing whatsoever about knots, was standing off to the side and had been watching Ahmed work with great interest. I hope it does, she said. Though truthfully, she rather hoped it failed. As her idea grew closer and closer to execution, Eleonora began more and more to consider the ill effects it might have on the Governess, as well as Ahmed and herself. But there was little, she could say to convince Ahmed to stop. And, even though she dreaded its outcome, she also wanted to see her idea in action.

Once he had tied the pulley rope, Ahmed opened a can of sardines and, peeling two of them off, placed them at the bottom of the basket, which he then lowered slowly down.

Do you want one, Ahmed asked, waggling a sardine at her.

Eleonora shook her head. She did not particularly dislike sardines, but the thought of eating what those vile cats were at that very moment fighting over, disgusted her.

Suit yourself, said Ahmed and, popping it in his mouth, proceeded to pull the now much heavier basket back up to the roof.

Ahmed and Eleonora spent the remainder of that week collecting, transporting, feeding, and generally tending to the cats, all of which activity was conducted in the utmost secrecy. The entire operation was nearly foiled more than once by a nosy charmaid who swore that she heard something inhuman coming from Ahmed's dressing room. But, by the grace of God, or whatever it was working in their favor, Ahmed and Eleonora made it safely until the day of implementation, a bright, pollen-filled Thursday without a cloud in the sky.

As planned, the two plotters took their lunch that afternoon in Ahmed's room, pretending to be inexorably involved in a game of backgammon. Just as they had expected, Miss Dover seized on this opportunity to pay a visit to her current beau, a lanky tousle-haired groomsman named Vartan. Still somewhat reticent about the whole affair, Eleonora sat looking dolefully at her chicken leg and spinach pie while Ahmed bolted his and stood up.

You watch the door, he said, reiterating their roles as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. And I lower them down to the window.

Eleonora nodded and pushed her plate away from her. Patting her lips with a napkin, although she had hardly eaten anything, Eleonora rose from the table and took up her post. There she stood, with her ear to the door, watching Ahmed coax the cats into his basket with a new tin of sardines.

As Ahmed soon discovered, enticing the cats back into the basket that had been the initial means of their capture was somewhat more difficult than either of them had imagined. But with a few strategically placed sardines, he was able to convince five or so of the boldest animals to hop in. Her ear still pressed to the door, hoping somewhere deep

in her stomach that they would be discovered, Eleonora watched Ahmed lower the basket to Miss Dover's window. He held it level for a long while, clicking his tongue nervously, and periodically glancing back over his shoulder at his co-conspirator.

One of them jumped the wrong way, he said, his head stuck fully out the window. The grey and white one with one eye.

Is it alive? Eleonora asked. As disgusting as the cats were, she would still be sad if her plan had caused a death.

It is, he said after a tense pause. And it's angry.

Within less than an hour Ahmed was able to transport almost a hundred of these vile, angry, distended creatures from his dressing room to his governess's bedroom. It was, Eleonora thought, as she watched him trying to coax a pair of hissing, three-legged creatures down from the top of the dresser, quite an unpleasant procedure. And as careful as he was, Ahmed did not emerge without a few scratches. But given everything that could have gone wrong, the operation was a success. Whether it was a good idea or not to begin with, that was another question.

When he had finished lowering all the cats down to Miss Dover's room, Ahmed joined Eleonora at the door to wait. It wasn't long before they heard the unmistakable sound of Miss Dover climbing the stairs. Exchanging a look of anxious silence, they both mashed their ears harder against the door, listening as the governess whistled to herself. Eleonora could feel her blood beating in her ears, her temples throbbing with anticipation and concern. So as to better hear, she got down on her knees and pressed her ear to the narrow crack between the floor and bottom of the door, a position Ahmed soon emulated. Anxiously, they waited, listening to the footsteps of the governess muffled in the rug that

ran along the second floor landing to her room. But what was that? There was another, hitherto unheard set of footsteps, a bit lighter and a half step behind Miss Dover. Eleonora was on the verge of asking Ahmed if he heard it too, when the footsteps stopped. There was a changle of keys removed from a pocket, the secret sound of a key fitting into a lock, then turning and, as the door swung open, a blood freezing scream, the likes of which even the Khedive could hear.

## Chapter Fifteen

How is it that a particular punishment is deemed the appropriate consequence of a crime? Apart from fundamental concerns, such as the extent of the victim's injury, what details need be considered in meting out justice? Premeditation? Insanity? Compulsion? Prior convictions? And how is one to account for those who are injured by association with the criminal? There was no doubt that Count Olaf's footman deserved the harsh punishment he received for stealing those silver candlesticks from the buffet. But what about his wife and children? Is it just that, as a corollary to his punishment, they were sentenced also to a life of mean penury?

Eleonora sat deep in her armchair next to the bay window, fiddling with its tassels and watching the boatsmen skiddle back and forth through the rain. It was a grey, muted, hazy day through which she could just make out the outlines of the city. Her cheeks were flushed from the chill and her feet tucked cozily under the backs of her thighs. A copy of *Les Trois Mousquetaires* lay over the arm of her chair, but she was not much interested in reading.

As punishment for his role in Operation Cat, Ahmed had been confined to his room for the past two weeks and, according to the brief and infrequent messages he sent to Eleonora via their pulley system, he would remain so for the foreseeable future. Such is fate. He would have gotten off with no punishment whatsoever had the Khedive, who was at the time in the courtyard taking some air, not heard the Governess's chandelier-rattling scream from the second floor landing. Though physically decrepit, Ahmed's

guardian still retained a strict, military sense of justice, which he meted out quickly, without respect for circumstance or familial connection. Upon learning the details of the prank from his nurse, the Khedive immediately sent Eleonora home and began his nephew's court marshal. For her part, Eleonora fared quite well. Although the Bey eventually learned of the prank from his servants, he let her off with little more than a reprimand. It was, he reasoned, her first offense and, in any case, he would rather have her getting into a bit of trouble than languishing away in her room.

But fate will always bring us back to where we began. With her only playmate now truly a prisoner in his own room, Eleonora was without a companion and in danger of falling back into her old routine. So as to avoid this, the Bey began taking her with him on business calls. When he had no business to attend to, he brought her along with him to the cafes and restaurants he sometimes frequented. At first, Eleonora enjoyed the novelty of these excursions. But, after a week or so, she grew tired of running about town, watching game after game of backgammon in smoke-filled cafes, and smiling while the Bey's acquaintances tousled her hair. One evening at dinner, after a particularly long afternoon at Café Angles, Eleonora asked the Bey if she might be allowed to stay home that next day. It wasn't that she minded going out, but the constant rush of it was somewhat trying and she did miss her reading. The Bey, who was in truth quite busy with his business dealings, gladly assented, but only after she assured him that she would come out with him at least once a week.

Eleonora was still staring absently out at the rain when she heard the pulley above her window creak and begin to rotate. Tilting her head in curiosity, she wiped a streak of condensation from the window and put her face up to the glass. She could not see the

Khedive's residence very well through the fog and drizzle, but after a while she was able to distinguish an envelope, making its way slowly across the misty gulf between the houses. When the message came to a halt, with a small bump against her pulley, she pushed open the window and took the rain-dampened envelope off the line. Giving the string a quick tug, so as to let Ahmed know that she had received his note, she quickly closed the window and tore it open. Although the envelope was wet, the letter itself was only slightly smudged along the edges. Written in the same solid hand as his other messages, it read: MEET ME OUTSIDE IN TEN MINUTES. UNDER THE EUCALYPTUS TREE. DO NOT RESPOND.

Eleonora looked back out the window. Condensation was already filling up the streak she had made with her hand. The rain was falling with a steady determination that showed no signs of slacking anytime soon. What on earth did Ahmed want? It must be something important if it couldn't wait until the rain stopped. Slipping off the seat of her chair and onto the floor, Eleonora took her long black woolen coat from the closet, laced up her boots, and donned the most impervious hat she could find, a floppy sort of fisherman's hat, probably left over from a former servant or an ancient game of charades. Although she knew that it was after lunch and the servants would be in their apartments, Eleonora was deathly careful making her way down the stairs. If anyone saw her, dressed as she was, she would certainly be stopped.

And with good reason, she thought, as she stood in the front doorway, watching the rain fall hard on the cobblestoned drive. No one in their right mind would go outside in weather like this. But duty called, and she was a loyal friend. Keeping close to the walls, Eleonora made her way around the edge of the Bey's house to the eucalyptus tree,

a dripping giant, which had many years ago been a gift to the Bey's grandfather from the British ambassador. Before she could fully see it, Eleonora smelled the great tree and saw its sickle-shaped leaves and bell pods scattered at her feet. When, turning a corner of the Bey's house, she did finally see the tree itself, she also saw Ahmed, bent over slightly with his head resting in his hands. He was as wet as she, if not wetter, and arrayed similarly to herself except that his hat looked less silly and he had a sack hanging from his elbow. Eleonora knew something was out of the ordinary, but it wasn't until he looked up that she saw he had been crying. His eyes were all red, his nose raw along the bottom, and tracks of tears were dried down his cheeks.

I'm running away, he said, and lifted his sack to show her he was serious.

Eleonora stood a short distance from her friend, regarding him with confusion as the rain dripped onto her from the eucalyptus leaves. It was strange to see Ahmed cry. She wasn't sure how to react. How did people usually react in such circumstances? Should she hug him? Put a hand on his shoulder? Ignore the tears entirely?

What happened? she asked, finally, pushing a strand of curly wet light brown hair off her forehead.

Ahmed sniffed hard and wiped his nose on his coat sleeve.

They want to send me to school, he stuttered. Next semester they want to put me in Robert's College.

Eleonora nodded as she watched Ahmed choke back his tears. Stepping towards him, she lifted a hand and put it on his back. It was quite wet from leaning against the tree and from the rain.

I'm not going to go, he said, sniffing violently. I'm running away.

Eleonora let her hand fall off his back and continued looking at him. She didn't see what was so bad about Robert's College. Indeed, if she were a boy she would have liked to go there. And she certainly couldn't see how going to Robert's College would be worse than living in the woods. But in spite of this she felt sorry for her friend. Ahmed raised his bloodshot, light blue eyes to hers. He had a very serious, almost possessed look to him.

I want you to come with me, he said.

Eleonora involuntarily took a step back, almost tripping over an exposed root. Come with him? How could she come with him? The Bey was the closest thing she had to family and one can't very well give up the closest thing one has to family and go into the woods. Yet it also didn't seem right to let the only friend she had ever had fend for himself in the woods.

Don't run away, Eleonora said, finally, stepping towards him again. Robert's won't be so bad. And we can still see each other after school.

Ahmed hardened his lips and scrunched up his eyebrows.

Whose side are you on?

Eleonora thought about the question, even though she knew it was meant rhetorically. Whose side was she on? She knew she was on her own side. But was that even a side to be on? Before she could answer, Ahmed interrupted her thoughts.

Well, he said. I'm going to run away. I've made up my mind and that's what I'm going to do. Saying this, he threw his bag over his right shoulder and shoved his left hand into his pocket. And I'm going to do it with you or without you.

Then he turned to leave, slowly, as if this were the last time they would ever see each other. Could this really be the end of the only friendship Eleonora had ever had?

Wait, she said, reaching out to put a hand on his shoulder. Ahmed stopped and looked back at her with a sly smile. I'll walk with you for a little bit at least, she said. You should have some company for the beginning of the trip.

Once well on their way, having crossed into the scraggly pine forest that rose up from behind their houses, Ahmed expanded on the plan he had recently revealed to her. For the first few days, he told her as they tromped through the dripping underbrush, he would subsist on the bread and cheese in his sack, as well as any birds' eggs and blackberries he might find along the way. When he reached the outskirts of the city, he would catch a ride on a passing coach, make his way south to the Mediterranean coast and, once there, take passage on a steamer to Alexandria, from where he could easily get down the Nile to Tawarka. For her part, Eleonora was beginning to think about turning back and, in spite of all her friend's plans, still hoped she might be able to convince him to come with her. But she knew she would have to accompany him at least a little while longer, to prove she was on his side.

After walking for little more than a hour, through an unending swath of pine trees, newly-formed rivulets, and up over small craggy cliffs, the two children came upon a meadow, a circular field filled with sopping wet dandelions, in the middle of which was a large, dome-shaped rock. It had stopped raining just a few minutes before and the sun was, at least momentarily, shining brightly through a cloud. There was no rainbow, but it seemed that one might appear at any moment.

Are you hungry? Ahmed asked, as they stood at the edge of the clearing.

Although they had been talking about food all afternoon, Eleonora had not really considered her own hunger, gnawing at the sides of her stomach. Yes, she said. I am. And her stomach growled in assent.

Once both seated securely on the down slope of the rock, the sun warming them but not strong enough to fully dry their clothes, Ahmed opened his sack on his lap and set its contents out in front of him. There were three thick, hastily-sliced pieces of black bread, a quarter of a wheel of cheese, and an already half-eaten tin of sweetmeats. Looking somewhat disappointedly at his provisions, Ahmed took a slice of bread, broke it in two and handed one of the halves to Eleonora. Considering the cheese, he broke off two small pieces and, handing one to Eleonora, repacked the remaining supplies.

They ate their lunch in silence, apart from their chewing and the occasional chirp of a bluebird. When they finished, they both stretched out on their backs and crossed their arms behind their heads. The sky was filled with fluffy grey and white clouds, a tranquil sky except for the rim of dark grey thunderheads looming to the north and west. When the sun came out from behind the clouds or broke through them with its light, Eleonora could feel the warmth permeate her wet clothes. But it was a deceptive warmth, a warmth she knew would turn to chill as soon as they left the meadow. They lay in silence for a long time before Eleonora finally spoke.

Why do you want to run away? she asked.

Ahmed sat up suddenly, as if bitten by a caterpillar

I told you, he said, leaning over her.

Eleonora paused. She watched a flock of birds pass over head and sneezed into her sleeve.

But what's so bad about Robert's College? she asked.

Everyone there is stupid. They make you wear that ugly uniform and the teachers hit you if you make a mistake. With a stick.

Why don't you just try it out for a few weeks? Eleonora asked.

As the question left her lips, Ahmed sat up straight and looked down at her with disgust. A change washed over his face, a hardening of features. He shook his head, not so much at her as at some other, more distant proposal.

If you don't want to come you should turn around right now.

It wasn't a bad suggestion. Eleonora was already starting to feel a bit chilled, even in the sun, and she wanted to get back home before the Bey did. But even so, she didn't want to leave Ahmed alone in the forest. And, in spite of his apparent determination not to, she still held onto the hope that he would return home with her.

I'll come with you, Eleonora said. But only until the top of the hill, then I'm going home. Just as she said this, a gaggle of small purple and grey birds, quails, they later agreed, ran across a corner of the meadow and disappeared into the forest, leading the way up the hill.

## Chapter Seven (Revised)

As the sun set behind the Bosphorus, pooling in a cypress forest on the Asian side of the straits, Eleonora and her father's carriage slowed to a clomping stop. Unlatching and snapping the various buckles and straps, their driver swung to the ground, followed close behind by Eleonora's father. Up in the driver's seat, Eleonora herself stirred quietly and lifted her head. Yawning, she stretched out like a house cat and looked about her. They were close to the water, not more than twenty meters, in a valley between two mansions. She was alone on the seat, her legs wrapped in a dusty grey blanket and the crease of her father's pants embedded in her cheek. On the ground behind her, she could hear him settling up with the coachman and directing the grooms unloading his baggage.

Yawning again, Eleonora rubbed the sleep out of her wide, pistachio green eyes and regarded the light yellow-colored mansion in front of her. It was, without a doubt, the biggest house she had ever seen. Lined with windows, it sat stretched out along the shore of the Bosphorus, watching the boats pass like an impeccably-dressed old man feeding pigeons from a park bench. From where she was sitting, at the eastern approach, Eleonora could see the front door straight on, an enormous cedar slab the same size as each of the twelve bay windows arranged above it. She was trying to calculate about how high the door was when it swung open.

Welcome!

A strong, masculine voice called out from within the house and moments later its owner was striding towards the carriage. He was a tall, mustached man with a Persian

nose, black hair, and sparkling green eyes hidden behind a pair of gold-rimmed pince nez. Wearing a sharp dark blue suit and a red woolen fez, he seemed the kind of person one might encounter in a book, the kind of person one would not be surprised to find in Count Olaf's drawing room, discussing matters of great importance, or in the Von Hertzog's private box at the opera, watching the young Miss Evelina von Hertzog sing the part of Rigoletto. Indeed, it was none other than Moncef Barcouc Bey, her father's longtime business partner and their host in Stamboul.

May I? asked the Bey, looking up at Eleonora. He placed his shoe on the back wheel of the carriage and, raising himself slightly, extended an arm to her. Eleonora nodded timidly and was about to take his hand when her father came around the front of the carriage.

Moncef! he exclaimed and the two men embraced heartily.

My dear Yakub, the Bey said, holding her father out by his shoulders. It has been much, much too long.

Indeed, he said. Indeed it has.

After they had embraced a number of times, the Bey glanced up at Eleonora, who was still seated on top of the carriage. And this, he inquired delicately. This lovely little girl must be your daughter.

Indeed it is, her father said, reaching up to help her down. Indeed it is.

Once Eleonora was solidly on the ground, he continued. I hope she won't be any inconvenience. If I had known she was coming I would have sent ahead.

Not at all, said the Bey and, with a flick of the wrist dismissed any concerns her father might have had. Then, turning on his heels, he motioned for them to follow and strode back across the drive.

The antechamber of the Bey's house was presided over by an enormous yellow crystal chandelier. Just below it, a wide marble staircase curved softly to the second floor. Two grand halls ran perpendicular to the main entrance, each of them hung with portraits of the Barcos clan, serious men, all with the same thick black moustache and red woolen fez. There was a collection of Louis XIV furniture, a battery of antique swords, an endless line of intricately-carved plaster molding, and at their feet, an enormous purple, blue, white, and green silk Hereke carpet, which stretched more than ten meters from the front door to the foot of the staircase. It was the largest and most magnificent carpet Eleonora had ever seen, with a thick flowered border surrounding a triptych of telescoped medallions. She wanted very much to bend down and run her fingers along it. But, fearing this might be rude, she contented herself with extending her left shoe slightly and swishing it back and forth along the border.

It's been in the family for more than three generations, the Bey said. Thinking that he was speaking to her about the carpet, Eleonora pulled her foot back quickly. But when she looked up, she realized the Bey was actually telling her father about the house. As you know I never married, and so have been the sole inhabitant since I came into it eight years ago.

Unfortunately, he continued, removing his pince nez and wiping it on the bottom of his coat jacket. The women's wing is shuttered. But if Miss Cohen doesn't mind staying in the men's wing, I have a room in mind that should be perfect.

The Bey paused and looked down at Eleonora.

Yes, she said, blushing. I would be much obliged.

Excellent, said the Bey. At this the butler emerged from his corner and nodded. Monsieur Karom will show you up.

Considering herself in the large ornate mirror atop the dressing table, Eleonora scrunched up her face and lifted her left arm. Then she lifted her right arm. Then, for good measure, she lifted them both. Eleonora had seen her reflection before, at the tailor's shop in Constanta, but she was not well accustomed to looking at herself, especially not in such a large and ornate mirror.

Is that really what I look like? she thought. She took a step forward and put her nose up to the glass so that she could see only her eyes and the top half of her face. Her irises were the same pistachio green color they had always been and her lashes a dark dark brown. Mashing her nose up against the mirror, she tried to focus into her eyes. But the harder she looked, the more blurry they became, until they were one giant, blurry green pistachio. She knew that wasn't right. Pulling away, she stepped back from the mirror and considered herself again from a distance.

Although she had bathed the night before, her dress was stained in a number of places and her curly light brown hair was matted to one side. She was quite a good deal skinnier than she had been a month ago and her eyes were drawn back into their sockets. None of this would have bothered Eleonora much had she not been standing in the midst of such luxury. It was an enormous room the Butler had shown her to, with ceilings as high as a small house, two sixteen-pane bay windows, and a gigantic multipartite poster-

bed draped in white lace. In addition to the bed, the room was furnished with a light brown suede armchair, a wide oak writing table, two red velvet chairs, and a bureau, not to mention the dressing table she was standing in front of, a massive white Victorian affair with a large gilded mirror and more drawers than she could think of what to put inside. And this room, which could easily have contained her and her father's entire house, was, for the time being at least, hers.

But who was she to stay in a room like this? Who was she but a middling textile merchant's daughter in a dirty red cotton dress and tattered black shoes. If only, she thought. If only I had something else to wear.

Just then, Eleonora saw something move in the corner of the mirror.

Hello? she said, spinning around. The door was ajar, but whoever opened it had not entered. Hello? Eleonora repeated herself, louder than before and not without a quiver of fear. Still, there was no response. Hello? she said, a third time, even louder.

She was starting to become truly concerned when a small, leather-skinned woman backed into the room and set a stack of towels down on one of the red velvet chairs next to the door. She was dressed in a modest dark blue frock and wore a dirty grey kerchief over her hair. After setting down the towels, she wiped her forehead, then turned and regarded Eleonora with a complete lack of surprise.

She said something in a language Eleonora could not understand then began slowly to cross the room.

Do you speak French? Eleonora asked. Or Latin?

But the Handmaid continued talking in that same incomprehensible language, prattling on as she took Eleonora by the hand and dragged her into a small blue and white

tiled bathroom. Trying her best to understand, Eleonora stared at the blank white porcelain tub in the corner of the room. She looked at the tub, concentrating as hard as she could on what the old Handmaid was saying. Then something clicked. And, like a gas light sputtering to life, Eleonora understood. At first the words sounded jumbled together, like someone with a very strong accent speaking very quickly. But as she listened, holding the old woman's eyes in her own, Eleonora found that she could understand almost every word.

...get you in a bath and clean you up good. And find you a dress for dinner because the one you have won't do at all.

And then, with a few words about the bath water muttered under her breath, the old Handmaid left Eleonora standing alone in the steamy blue and white tiled room. What she said was not particularly interesting, and nothing Eleonora wouldn't have eventually been able to figure out. But that was besides the point. The point was that she could understand. Without having studied Turkish a day in her life, Eleonora knew its grammar, vocabulary, conjugations, and declensions as if it were her mother tongue.

As one can imagine this came as somewhat of a shock, even to Eleonora. Staring blankly at the deep white porcelain tub, she sat down on the edge of what looked like a foot bath of some sort and considered her situation. She had never read about anyone who could understand a language without studying or at least being immersed in it for a long time. But there was no denying that she could understand the old woman. And what there is no denying, one might as well accept. Raising her gaze to the sink, Eleonora whispered to herself.

I can speak Turkish, she said. I can speak Turkish very well. She knocked her heels against the side of the bidet and smiled. I can say anything I please. I can say anything I please, in Turkish. But, Eleonora thought, unraveling her smile, how would people react to this news? They were already so amazed that she could read. How would they react if they knew she had learnt Turkish in a matter of minutes? The Handmaid didn't seem to think it was strange. But she wasn't worried about the Handmaid. She wasn't sure who she was worried about. But still, Eleonora decided it was probably best to keep her Turkish to herself.

What seemed to her a long while later, the Handmaid returned carrying a large copper cauldron by its handles. Exhaling heavily, she set it down next to the tub and tilted hot water into the bath.

Okay, she said, pushing back her kerchief. With little more ceremony than that, she whisked Eleonora's dress off over her head and plopped her into the tub.

Squatting automatically onto her haunches, Eleonora tried to conceal her nakedness from the Handmaid. Except for the first few years of her life, which she didn't remember very well, Eleonora had always bathed herself. And so one can understand why she would be, at least initially, a bit bashful, even in front of such a kind old woman. But there was little time for bashfulness.

Without another word, the Handmaid took her soapy wet washcloth in hand and began vigorously to scrub Eleonora's back. The water was much warmer than she was used to and the washcloth much rougher. But in a certain way, it was nice to be scrubbed so hard with such warm water.

Now stand up, said the Handmaid.

Eleonora complied with this and every other order the Handmaid gave her. Turn around. Bend over. Stick out your left arm. Stick out your right. Lift your leg. And so on, until the bathwater was grey with dead skin and dirt.

Back in her room, Eleonora considered herself again in the mirror. Wrapped up in a towel, her hair washed and elbows scrubbed, she felt like an entirely different person. It was as if the Handmaid had scrubbed away the old Eleonora, leaving behind a fresh, rosy-cheeked girl. And there, hanging next to the bureau, was a beautiful lace-collared blue velvet evening dress which, although it was a bit itchy and old-fashioned, fit her surprisingly well.

Following a four-course dinner of beet soup, tomato salad, flaky cheese pastries, and Cornish game hens on jeweled rice, the Bey led Eleonora and her father down the hall to the library. Proudly wearing her high lace-collared blue velvet dress, Eleonora trailed a few steps behind her father and the Bey, examining the portraits of the Barcous family and running her finger along the wainscoting.

The library was a dark wood-paneled room filled with old books, globes, and landscape paintings, exactly the kind of library Eleonora had imagined the Bey would have. One half of the tall, lushly-appointed room was lined from floor to ceiling with bookcases, organized first by language and then by genre. In French, Latin, German, English, Turkish, Arabic, and Persian, there were philological treatises, encyclopedias, ancient geographies, biographical dictionaries, epic poems, novels, and more than a few religious books, all bound in gilt red morocco leather. The Bey and his two guests were seated on the other, bookless end of the room, ranged around the fire in a trio of light

brown suede armchairs. As soon as they were seated, the butler served sweet red tea and pistachio baklava on a finely-engraved silver tray. For the men, he also brought cigars and a set up of fine bois cognac.

The chairs were arranged such that the Bey and her father sat facing a square knee-high table with Eleonora at the point of the triangle. She watched her father very carefully pour out two glasses of cognac while the Bey set out a game of backgammon. In her life, Eleonora had seen a great number of backgammon boards, at the Constanta Inn, the town square, and on the way to Stamboul. But all these were, without deviation, hastily painted, utilitarian boxes, which bore little resemblance to the Bey's own board. Not noticing Eleonora's gaze, the Bey opened his board and with a subdued clattering, placed it on the low, square table between himself and her father. It was composed of tiny geometric cedar wood pieces, stained in a multitude of tones, and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Once open the Bey's large hairy knuckles moved over the surface of the board, placing the cut glass and agate pieces into formation. Eleonora had never cared much for backgammon. But now she felt she had to learn, if only for the chance to play on such a splendid board.

Feel free to browse, said the Bey, motioning to the bookshelves at the other end of the room as he passed the dice to her father.

Thank you, Eleonora said. She looked over at the books, flattened down the front of her dress, then turned back to her father and the Bey. But I think I might watch you play, if that's okay.

Eleonora's father looked over at her and smiled. Are you sure Ellie? he asked, raising his closed hand to roll. It is a large library.

She nodded. Scooting her chair up alongside the table, so close that her knees brushed against up it, she leaned forward onto her hands to watch. Her father and the Bey played with a forcefulness that was almost violent, slapping the pieces and throwing the dice hard down into the corner of the board. Every so often they would pause to take a sip of cognac or to exhale a cloud of cigar smoke. But their rhythm was the game, the frantic clatter of ivory on wood, the shuffle of agate and glass. They played without pausing, without considering their moves, without caring who won. And in the midst of all this, they seemed to forget that Eleonora was there, just a few feet away, watching silently with her chin in her upturned hands.

How is business? the Bey asked, in the middle of the third game. He threw a double four and moved his pieces accordingly.

It's been a long year, her father said, scooping up the dice and throwing, one three. I hate to complain. But it really has been a long year.

The Bey did not say anything. Her father hadn't yet moved his one three, so there was nothing for the Bey to do but lean back and sip his cognac.

They just raised the tariff on textiles, the Russians. School fees are going up. And it seems that carpets are going out of fashion in Constanta.

Eleonora held her breath. She had never heard her father talk like this, not to his friends in the town square, not to the other patrons at the Constanta Inn, and not to Aunt Sheidel. She inspected him in this new light as if he were a stranger, a stranger with tired smile lines around his eyes and dark black curly hair speckled with silver. His eyebrows frowning, he pushed his pieces into the next row.

Sighing, the Bey picked up the dice and rolled. Well, he said. Carpets are very much in fashion here. You should have no problem selling your stock off at a good price.

That's what I'm hoping, he said. He paused and took a long sip of cognac. That is exactly what I'm hoping.

All in all, Eleonora's father and the Bey played seven games, of which her father won four and the Bey three. They did not seem to be keeping count, but after the seventh game they both stopped as if by previous arrangement. The Bey was closing the board and her father had already risen from his chair, when Eleonora spoke up for the first time in more than two hours.

Will you play a game with me Tata? she asked, looking up at her father with bright, pleading eyes. He exhaled heavily.

I'll play, said the Bey before her father could say no. That is, if you don't mind.

No, no, of course not. Slowly her father let himself back down into his chair. There's nothing wrong with a little backgammon. It's just that I am exhausted from the journey.

Naturally, said the Bey. He then rotated the board so that it faced Eleonora and began setting up the pieces. Are you quite certain you understand the rules?

Yes, she said, quietly, staring down at the board. I think so.

The Bey handed Eleonora the dice, which she took and, after a moment's pause feeling the ivory cubes in her palm, rolled, one two. She scooted herself to the edge of the chair, leaned over the board, and considering her shiny black pieces from above, slid one of them three spaces.

Are you sure you want to do that? the Bey said. It leaves you open to attack. You see, he went on, hypothetically moving his pieces onto hers. If I roll a two or a four, I can bump you.

Eleonora looked down at the board again and nodded.

Shrugging, the Bey picked up the dice and rolled, three five. You were lucky that time, he said, smiling. But you can't always count on luck.

I know, she said.

Although she was not quite as fast or forceful as the Bey, Eleonora made the best move every time. Indeed, the Bey's two double fives should have sealed his win, but Eleonora beat him handily, that game and the next two.

Well, I'll say, the Bey said, leaning back in his chair after the end of the third game. Maybe you can count on luck.

## Chapter Eight (Revised)

The next morning, after a more modest meal of yoghurt, figs, honey, and flat bread, the Bey brought Eleonora and her father outside to his carriage, a rubber-wheeled, oak-paneled, Viennese contraption with brass fixtures, red velvet seats, and four light grey Arabian horses. It was the kind of carriage, Eleonora thought, that Miss Ionescu would ride to the Grand Ball, her two rival prospects seated next to each other on the opposite bench, the upstanding, vigorous country squire on the left and the romantic, dark-eyed consumptive on the right. Settling herself into the red velvet seat, Eleonora imagined that she too was going to a ball, that her father and the Bey were rivals vying for her attention, and her itchy lace-collared blue velvet dress was made instead of flowing light green silk.

Like every other carriage in Stamboul, the Bey's coach and four was outfitted with wooden latticework screens instead of windows, a contrivance which played the dual purpose of shading the carriage's interior and preventing the rabble from seeing the house's ladies as they went about town. As they pulled out of the drive, Eleonora kneeled on her seat and pressed her face up against the latticework, so that from outside one could see the tip of her nose peeking out. It was still morning and the Bosphorus was teeming with skiffs, steamers, and small wooden fishing boats. Across the straits, three gigantic testudine mosques loomed over a mass of dirty grey stone, thick dark green cypresses, and the crush of miniature people bustling about the Egyptian Bazaar. And there, emerging into view from around the corner, was Topkapai Palace, the crown jewel of

Stamboul. Perched regally on the tip of the Golden Horn, its white marble walls glistened in the sun, and its various edifices stood guarded by a glass regiment of towers, all reaching towards the perfect turquoise sky.

We must disembark here, said the Bey as the carriage came to a stop. Beyond this, the streets are much too steep for horses. Following his lead, Eleonora and her father stepped out of the carriage and crossed the street to the Galata funicular station.

Shad! Grouper! Carp! Get your fresh fish here. Eleonora turned with surprise and stared at the fishmongers lined up outside the blue and white tiled arch of the station. She had forgotten that she could understand Turkish. But when she opened her ears to the bustle around her, she understood everything. Recollecting also her resolution to keep these powers a secret, she turned her gaze from the unshaven fisherman and fixed it on the tightly huddled mass of stone houses rising above them.

It was on this hill, to the top of which they were headed, that Captain Orhan Barcou, the founder of the Barcou family fortune, first established his textile manufacturing business. To this day, a distant, much disliked branch of the Bey's family still maintains a store on Le Grande Rue de Pera. But that is neither here nor there.

The funicular station was filled almost entirely with posh European ladies, their porters, and the lower-class Turks who worked as waiters and janitors up on the hill. Standing in small, segregated groups along the platform they spoke in low voices, glancing occasionally at the yellow and pink rimmed tunnel from which the train was supposed to emerge.

Wait here, the Bey said, leaving Eleonora and her father at the platform.

Striding up to the ticket office in his dark grey three-piece suit and red woolen fez, the Bey cut a positively striking figure. But it was more than clothes that made the man. It was his posture, the trim of his moustache, the way his pince nez sat perched atop his nose. All of this declared: Here is a man of substance. Even the European ladies, with their haughty dresses and fluttering silk fans, watched the Bey with approving, almost desiring eyes. Standing next to him on the platform, Eleonora had the comforting feeling that if anything were to happen, a fire or some sort of equipment malfunction, everyone in the station would immediately, naturally defer to the Bey. Thankfully, there was no opportunity to test this hypothesis, at least not for the moment.

After a few minutes, a gas light appeared at the top edge of the tunnel and, slowly, with no small amount of creaking, a single, red-lacquered wooden car emerged from the darkness. Eleonora watched in awe as it approached and, with a loud pneumatic screech, braked to a stop. At Eleonora's request they stood at the front of the car. And she rode with her nose pressed up to the glass, hands cupped on either side of her face in an effort to make out what was in front of them.

Here we are, said the Bey at the end of the short ride. Following behind him, Eleonora and her father stepped out into the bright mid-morning sun. Indeed, there they were. The boulevard was busy, but not crowded, with European women in wide dresses and umbrellas, dignified-looking men in well-tailored suits, and more than a few porters, waiters, and beggars who served as contrast to the rest of the population. The shops, restaurants, cafes, and theatres that lined this gently inclining boulevard all had their names written in gold letters across the front glass. And in each window there was an orderly, attractive display of the various wares for sale.

Standing there at the base of Le Grande Rue de Pera, watching the European ladies and their porters fan off into the crowd, Eleonora felt as if she had been dropped into the middle of Bucharest, Vienna, or Paris, as if she had stepped into the pages of *The Hourglass* or some other, equally elegant book. Her nose twitching, Eleonora noticed the smell of sweet roasted almonds drifting down from one of the vendors set up in front of Café Europa. As strong as it was, the smell seemed to be coming from another world. The whole scene in front of them looked like an elaborate tableaux, something to marvel at and consider rather than a space one could actually enter into. Then the Bey clicked his heels and began walking up the street, motioning for Eleonora and her father to follow.

The first and, as it turns out, only shop they visited that day, the sole purpose of their trip to Le Grande Rue de Pera, was just a few dozen meters from the Pera funicular station. Cutting a diagonal across the boulevard, the Bey strode past a confectionary, a haberdashery, and a cobbler before turning into a large, luxuriously appointed shop with the words *Madame Poiret, Dressmaker* written across the window in gold letters. As they entered, a small bell tinkled and the woman at the counter, presumably Madame Poiret herself, looked down at them over the tops of her glasses. She had a surprised expression of forced civility, as if the three of them had just walked into her drawing room unannounced.

Good afternoon? she asked. How may I help you?

We would like to have a dress made for the young lady, said the Bey as he seated himself on a plush green divan next to the dressing mirrors. He glanced up at Eleonora

and her father, both of whom were still standing somewhat awkwardly between the doorway and the front counter.

Brushing a piece of lint off his lapel, Eleonora's father pulled his handkerchief out of his front pocket and coughed into it. Really, Moncef. There's no need.

Oh, but I object, said the Bey. There is every need.

I know she needs new clothes, he said. He glanced at the handkerchief before stuffing it back into his pocket. But this shop is a bit beyond our means.

At this, Madame Poiret raised her eyebrows and shrugged, like a stork ruffling its own feathers.

I am sure your products are first quality, her father continued, addressing himself to the Madame. And well worth the price. But, she's just a little girl.

Not at all, said the Bey. I insist. And truly, it's no trouble. Saying this, he pulled out his gold pocket watch and glanced at the time, as if to show how little trouble it was. Every girl should have at least two beautiful dresses. Don't you agree Miss Cohen?

Eleonora looked up at her father and then across to the Bey. They both seemed to be waiting for a response, as was Madame Poiret. But what could she say? In spite of all she had read, Eleonora never understood the politeness of adults. She never understood why anyone would refuse a present as a point of pride or decorum. It was not that she was naïve. She understood why Nastasya Fillipovna would throw Rogozhin's dirty rubles into the fireplace and why Gania would, at least initially, keep himself from pulling them out. But why would someone refuse a gift offered with no conditions? Why, for example, did the elder Miss von Hertzog send back the diamond solitaire her cousin gave her as a wedding gift? Still standing somewhat awkwardly between the doorway and the front

counter, Eleonora fiddled with one of the clasps at the front of her itchy blue velvet dress. She did very much want a new dress. But more than a new dress, she wanted not to upset her father and the Bey.

Yes, Madame Poiret finally interjected. A young lady without a beautiful dress is like a swan without feathers. She then turned her head and shouted in Turkish. Ipek! Get out here with the fabrics.

A few moments later, a slight, nervous girl with stringy long brown hair emerged from the back room and handed over a tall stack of fabric samples and a book of designs. Brushing her away, Madame Poiret then turned to Eleonora and smiled. Miss Cohen if you will just have a seat here next to me, we can choose the style and fabric that best suits you.

Eleonora looked back up again at her father. Clearing his throat, he smiled weakly and shrugged. She figured that this was the closest she would get to a positive response, and so Eleonora smiled back at him and sat down next to Madame Poiret on the dark blue chaise lounge.

Here, said the Madame, producing a square of fabric from the middle of the stack. Is an exquisite, light green silk that I think will suit the young lady immensely well.

Docking at the Eminounu pier, on the Asian side of the straits, they got off the ferry and drove through the large stone square that separated the New Mosque from the Egyptian Bazaar, scaring up a flock of pigeons as they went. From across the water, Eminounu had looked to Eleonora like a painting, framed on either side by the mosque and the bazaar, and filled in by a colorful assortment of humanity. Up close it was loud,

crowded, and pervaded by a smell of rotting fish, cherry juice, and a spice she thought might be nutmeg but wasn't sure. After inspecting her surroundings, Eleonora retreated from the lattice and, covering her nose with her father's handkerchief, scooted herself towards the middle of the bench. At the end of the square, they turned up a steep narrow dirt street crammed with barefoot beggar children, shifty shopkeepers, and old men laden with mule-sized loads, not to mention the mules themselves, the pigeons, and what seemed a veritable army of stray cats. Passing through the textile market, the Bey's carriage turned left, right, left again, and then stopped at the end of a dim cul-de-sac, rowed on either side by small-time gold dealers.

A time for pleasure, the Bey muttered to himself. And a time for business.

Eleonora and her father got out with the Bey and followed him down towards the end of the cul-de-sac. All but two or three of the gold dealers were sitting in front of their dingy little stalls, each with a strand of jangly gold bracelets strung over their heads. As they made their way past the gold stalls, Eleonora noticed in most of them a small child bent over an anvil in the back. How horrible, she thought, averting her eyes. But she did not have to avert her eyes for long. It soon became clear that their destination was not one of these gold stalls, but a ramshackle storefront at the base of the cul-de-sac.

Hung with geometric, wide-woven Bedouins rugs, the entrance of the store they were headed for was not much bigger than any of the gold stalls. But once inside, it opened up into a store as large, if not larger than the antechamber of the Bey's house, though not quite as high. Lit with a single gas lamp and whatever sun could make it through the dirty skylight overhead, the floor of the showroom was covered haphazardly

with carpets of almost every variety, and the walls lined with piles significantly taller than Eleonora.

As they entered, a small, barefoot boy sitting on the ground in a far corner of the room, stood up and scurried into the back recesses of the store. They stood quietly in the entrance, shifting and admiring the carpets from a distance. Eleonora wanted very much to touch a deep red Kashan she spotted on her left, but she restrained herself. There was no telling who the owner was or how he would react if he caught her touching his carpets. Following a series of violent and distant crashes, an obese, pockmarked, and sweaty man emerged from the door the boy had disappeared into. Dressed in a white robe and red checkered kafiyya, he grumbled with each lumbering step as he made his way slowly across the room. Upon his arrival, he wheezed profoundly and clasped the Bey hard on his shoulder.

Who is this Jew you brought me? he said in Turkish.

Eleonora blinked twice and looked up at her father to see how he would react to this. But then, remembering he could not understand, she looked down at her shoes in shame. After a short pause, the Bey coughed disapprovingly into his handkerchief and turned towards her father.

Mr. Cohen, said the Bey, in French, I would like for you to meet my dear friend and business partner, Hajj Ali Ibrahim Osman Bekir.

Nodding, although clearly not understanding a word the Bey had said, the Hajj reached out and violently shook Eleonora's father by the hand, simultaneously placing his other hand in the region of his heart. Who's this banana? he asked, in Turkish, nudging the Bey with his elbow as he motioned at Eleonora.

Still staring firmly at her shoes, Eleonora could feel the Hajj's gaze on the top of her head. She did not know what the word banana referred to, but the Bey was obviously offended. Clearing his throat significantly, he turned to ignore the comment. When the Hajj saw that he wasn't going to get a response, he shouted into the back room for tea. Then, seating himself on a small wood and leather stool, motioned for Eleonora and her father to sit on the carpet covered bench that ran along the back wall of the storeroom. Claspng his hands together, the Hajj greedily eyed the three trunks that the Bey's groom had earlier brought into the store.

Let's see the goods, he said.

If you don't mind, the Bey translated for Eleonora and her father, Hajj Bekir would like to examine the carpets you have brought. Her father nodded.

Yes, of course, he said quietly. Before the Bey could translate, the Hajj had lifted himself up off his stool and, unlatching the trunks in one swift motion, began removing their contents. Eleonora watched her father nervously twirling the ends of his moustache as the Hajj hastily laid out the carpets. Running her hands along the rough red and black kilim she was sitting on, she watched the Hajj handle her father's carpets. She did not have a very good feeling about this man. Even apart from what he had said about her and her father, she had sensed something bad about him from the very beginning.

Would you like some tea Miss Cohen? Eleonora felt the Bey's hand lightly on her shoulder.

Yes, please, she said. When she turned back a small boy was standing in front of her with a tray of tea. It was the same boy who had been sitting in the corner of the room when they arrived, a dirty, caramel-colored child with no shoes and dark brown eyes. He

looked like Cosimo, like an oriental Oliver Twist. Blushing at the sight of him, although she was not sure why, she took one of the glasses by the top rim, and averted her eyes. Her father did the same, as did the Bey, both thanking the child as he moved down the wall. When the boy came to the Hajj, he smacked him on the back of the head.

Get out of here you son of a whore, he said in Turkish. Can't you see I'm busy.

Shocked, Eleonora looked up at the Hajj, who was bent over her father's carpets. What had that boy done to deserve such ill use? She stared at the Hajj, burning with the desire to say something. But she could not say anything without revealing her ability to understand Turkish. And even then, what could she say?

By the time Eleonora was finished with her tea, her indignation had died down to a smoldering pile of ashes. The Hajj had removed all of her father's carpets from the trunks and laid them out into two piles, one just a bit higher than the bottom of his robe and one that reached almost to the top of his large belly. Sucking his teeth, he pulled down on the bottom of his face and stared coolly at her father. Glancing at the piles of carpets that lined the walls of his storeroom, the Hajj cleared his throat loudly and pointed to the smaller pile.

I'll give him five hundred for this, he said to the Bey. He obviously needs it.

The Bey lifted his fez, which was then resting in his lap, and put it back down. Five hundred? he said, in shock. But before the Bey could say anything else, the Hajj shook his head decisively and blew out sharply towards his forehead, as if trying to get a mosquito off his face.

The Hajj says that your carpets are very beautiful, said the Bey, in French, turning to face Eleonora and her father. But at this time he can only offer a price for the pieces on

his left. Pausing again, the Bey turned towards the Hajj, whose arms were crossed on top of his enormous belly. He opened his mouth again, but the Hajj shook his head no. He says he can offer you five hundred pounds.

Although she was well versed in the history and typology of carpets, Eleonora knew very little about the business side of her father's trade and so had no idea whether five hundred pounds was a fair price for the carpets piled up next to the Hajj's left ankle. But from her father's reaction, a lowering of eyebrows and silence, she could tell he was not happy with the initial offer. Unhappy, but not unwilling to bargain.

Rising slowly from the bench, Eleonora's father walked towards the center of the room and, without so much as looking at the Hajj, squatted down next to the carpets in question. One by one, he lifted them off the pile, inspected them lovingly, like a father looking at his newborn son, and laid them out one by one in the space between the trunks and the wall. Whereas the Hajj had given each piece no more than ten or fifteen seconds' attention, Eleonora's father took his time, touching them, turning them over and, even smelling a few of what, one could tell, were pieces of art he truly knew and loved. When he finished, more than a third of the Hajj's showroom was covered with his carpets, each of them given the space it deserved.

It was only then, after he had inspected and laid out each of the carpets in question, that he looked at the Hajj, who had, for his part, been standing silently the whole time with his arms crossed over his belly. The two men stared at each other for a long time in silence, until the Hajj, who seemed quite ill at ease, finally relented. Scratching the top of his head, he looked down at the carpets laid out in front of him and said two quick words. Six hundred.

On further consideration, the Bey translated, Hajj Bekir would be happy to pay six hundred pounds for the lot.

Without pausing, indeed, as if the Hajj's second offer was of no consequence whatsoever, Eleonora's father looked him square in the eye and said, I will sell them for no less than a thousand.

The Bey began to translate what he had said, but as soon as the number was named, the Hajj cut him off with a snort. Gaping at Eleonora's father in disbelief, and feigned insult, he repeated his offer of six hundred pounds and stamped his foot, as if inscribing a period in the middle of the floor.

And so, the haggling went on, back and forth, the Bey translating and mollifying as best he could, and Eleonora listening in, trying not to let on that she understood. In the end, the two men agreed, with not a small bit of intervention on the Bey's part, to a price of nine hundred pounds sterling, paid in full on the spot.

As Eleonora, her father, and the Bey were rising to leave, the Hajj turned over his shoulder and shouted into the back room. Get out here you little piece of shit!

It was not so much this particular insult as it was the accumulation of insults, the Bey's aloof disregard, and her sympathy for the boy that made Eleonora snap. Whatever it was, she turned on her heels and, without considering the repercussions of her action, boldly faced the Hajj. Shaking visibly, she took a deep breath.

You sir, Eleonora said, in the most eloquent Turkish. Are a vile and detestable man. And I, for one, don't appreciate you calling your boy a little shit. If anything, you are the piece of shit. A big fat piece of shit.

## Chapter Nine (Revised)

Eleonora's father and the Bey were, understandably, quite shocked by her ability to speak Turkish, not to mention the harsh words she used with the Hajj. But in the end, what there is no denying, one had better start getting used to. At any event, the ability to speak a foreign language without instruction is not so very different than the ability to read at an early age or to play backgammon perfectly. After an evening of discussing the matter and deciding as a group the same thing Eleonora had decided by herself—that it was best she not reveal her ability to anyone else—they went on with their visit as planned. Indeed, what else could they do?

Apart from this discussion, the remainder of Eleonora and her father's stay in Stamboul was spent very much like their first day. After breakfast they set out for Galata, rode the funicular up the hill, and shopped on Le Grande Rue de Pera. These shopping excursions, Eleonora and her father soon discovered, had no purpose other than buying clothes, perfume, and jewelry for Eleonora. It was a notion they both at first thought rather strange, Eleonora because she had never received presents from anyone, and her father because he didn't, as he said repeatedly, want to inconvenience their host. But the Bey insisted. He had obviously taken a liking to Eleonora and, having no children of his own, relished the opportunity to buy her gifts. After a while, Eleonora's father stopped protesting and, by the tenth day of their visit even allowed the Bey to buy him a new suit.

In the late afternoon, after visiting the textile market, they rested, each tending privately to their own affairs. While Eleonora's father was bent over his accounts in the

library, the Bey did whatever it was he did in his private apartments, and Eleonora read under the bay window in the far corner of her bedroom. Having read nothing for the greater part of the month, Eleonora was at first worried that she might have lost her ability. It didn't seem likely, especially in light of her capacity for Turkish, not to mention her aptitude at backgammon. But one never knew.

That first afternoon, having chosen a volume at random from the small collection of books piled up on top of the desk, Eleonora dragged the light brown suede armchair over to the bay window. Crossing her legs under themselves, she hauled the book up onto her lap and, straightening her back, inspected the cover. *Don Quixote de La Mancha*. It was a large book, in both breadth and height, bound in dark blue leather and embossed with silver letters. She adjusted the volume on her lap and opened it up to the first page. The frontispiece was a black and white steel etching of the great knight errant, seated nobly on his Rosalinda and seconded by his ever loyal squire. Eleonora adjusted her legs and tilted the book onto her knees. She felt, she thought, like Jane Eyre returning to Thornfield Hall for the first time in twelve years. Biting her bottom lip inadvertently, Eleonora turned the vellum and began.

*Idle reader: thou mayest believe me without any oath that I would this book, as it is the child of my brain, were the fairest, gayest, and cleverest that could be imagined.*

Eleonora smiled. Nothing had changed. Indeed, if anything, her abilities had increased. She read the entire first part, and was well on her way through the second when the Butler knocked to announce dinner. In spite of all he had seen of her, the Bey had difficulty believing that Eleonora had read so much so quickly. And he retained a small portion of this doubt even after participating in a protracted discussion as to

whether what occurred in the Cave of the Montesinos should be considered reality or a dream.

After dinner they retired to the library, where, as on the first night, they were served hot tea and baklava with cigars and cognac for the men. Some nights Eleonora would join in the backgammon, switching off games with her father as she continued her unbroken winning streak far beyond the possibility of chance. Other nights she sat curled up with a book in her armchair, happily reading next to the fire. And happy she was. Sitting with a book on her lap, the click and clatter of backgammon in the background, Eleonora could not have been more content.

One evening after dinner, towards what was to be the end of Eleonora and her father's visit, the Bey announced that he had arranged for the three of them to take a cruise up the Bosphorus. Actually, the cruise had been arranged by the American Consulate, in honor of the Vice Consul's seventy-fifth birthday. But it was the Bey who had secured an extra invitation for Eleonora and her father.

I usually don't attend these types of events, he said. But I thought you and Miss Cohen might enjoy seeing the sights before you leave.

Really, Moncef, Eleonora's father said. You needn't go to all this trouble for us. Although he had ceased objecting regularly to the Bey's hospitality, Eleonora's father still continued to protest what he saw as the more extravagant gestures.

It was no trouble at all, the Bey said, tapping his cigar on the edge of the stand-up ashtray to his right. Truly. I merely responded to the invitation.

Well, Eleonora's father said. He dropped a lump of sugar into his tea. In any case, we do appreciate all that you have done for us. I know both me and Ellie will be very sad to leave.

At the sound of her name, Eleonora looked up over the top of her book. She had been sitting, as usual, deep in a light brown suede armchair next to the fire, and had not been paying much attention to the conversation.

I was just saying, her father repeated. That we will be very sad to leave.

Eleonora put her book face down on the side table and cocked her head, as if trying to better understand what her father was saying. Although she was not altogether comfortable with the Bey's manner of living, Eleonora had grown accustomed to their routine in Stamboul, to the hot baths, velvet dresses, and pistachio baklava. Why would she want to go back to home? She didn't have any friends, she didn't like school, and the library in the Bey's house was almost as large as the one in Constanta. She had known all along that they would, at some point, have to leave. But knowing that one has to leave at some point is much different than facing an impending departure. Eleonora looked from her father to the Bey and back again. Leave? she asked.

Well we can't stay here forever, said her father. The store has been closed for almost a month now and school starts again in September.

Neither of these seemed to Eleonora very compelling reasons to go back home. But she didn't want to contradict her father. And so, with a heavy sigh, she picked her book back up off the side table and looked at the page. But as much as she tried to concentrate on the words in front of her, she was overcome by the thought of leaving. A

few minutes later, finding that she was wholly unable to concentrate, Eleonora forced a yawn and excused herself.

Why can't we just stay here? she thought, walking upstairs to her room. It's so much nicer here than it is in Constanta.

As she opened the door, Eleonora noticed that one of the panes of the bay window was wide open. A cool dark breeze was rustling the curtains and a shaft of moonlight illuminated a circle in the middle of the carpet. That's strange, she thought, I don't remember opening that window. Still thinking about leaving, Eleonora crossed the room and reached up to close the window. As her finger touched the cold brass handle, she noticed a small bright red and yellow bird perched on the ledge of the windowsill.

Instead of flying away, as most birds would, this little bird looked directly at her, jerking its bright red head from side to side. Moving carefully, so as not to disturb it, Eleonora knelt down, folded her arms on the windowsill, and rested her chin in the valley between them. Her nose was now just a few centimeters away from the little bright red and yellow bird.

Why can't we just stay here? she asked aloud. At the sound of her voice, the bird stopped twitching and cocked its head to one side, as if to listen more carefully. Eleonora looked out at the city, sparkling hazily like a collection of stars reflected in the Bosphorus. It seemed as if the whole world had become quiet, waiting to hear what she said next.

I wish I could stay in Stamboul, she said. I wish I could stay in Stamboul and never leave. At this, her visitor hopped once and flew off into the darkness, pumping its

wings and curving softly down to the water, where it joined a flock of other small bright red and yellow birds and disappeared into the night.

The Sultan's Delight pushed off from the Besiktas ferry building at precisely one o'clock in the afternoon. There was a cool breeze blowing up the Bosphorus and the sky was a light bright blue that seemed to have trapped the sunlight and held it for its own. Standing with the rest of the passengers along the rail, Eleonora waved her father's handkerchief at the various dock workers and boatsmen standing around the ferry building. She was wearing the pale green silk polonaise gown the Bey had bought for her on the first day of their visit. Her father was wearing his new suit too. As they pulled away from the shore, Eleonora noticed a flock of bright red and yellow birds sitting in the branches of a large linden tree next to the ferry building. Each of the birds was just like the one she had seen the night before on her windowsill, chattering, flapping their wings, and hopping from branch to branch like an anxious crowd of peasants lining the streets of the capitol for an imperial parade.

Look Tata, Eleonora said, pulling down on the sleeve of his suit jacket. He looked down at his daughter and followed her finger back to the birds.

Bulbuls, the Bey said under his breath and then, more loudly, for the benefit of those around him, he repeated himself. Those birds are called bulbuls.

The Bey then turned to face the deck, leaning back uncomfortably onto the rail. The guests were arranged in small groups of three, four, and sometimes five, the men in tuxedos and the ladies in wide circular hoopy dresses. Everyone had a drink in hand and waiters maneuvered through the crowd with platters of caviar and canapés. Among those

present were the Lady Katherine de Berg, the Prussian military attaché, an avant-garde Viennese painter of some recognition, and of course, the American Vice Counsel, in whose honor the cruise had been arranged. It was precisely, Eleonora thought, the sort of party Miss Ionescu would attend. But instead of standing at the rail next to her father and his introverted business partner, Miss Ionescu would be flitting about among the circles, dazzling everyone assembled with her wit and beauty.

Who have we here? said a loud voice coming from a pasty-faced man in the plain black and white habit of a priest. Making his way across the deck, he shook the Bey's hand vigorously and patted him on the back. Moncef Barcou Bey. What a surprise.

May I introduce, the Bey said, after exchanging the requisite greetings. My dear friend the Reverend James Muhler, Rector of Robert's College and an American from the state of Connecticut. And this is my dear friend and business partner, Mr. Yakub Cohen, and his daughter, Miss Eleonora Cohen of Constanta.

Eleonora's father shook the Rector's hand while Eleonora made a small curtsy.

Pleased, said the Rector. Very pleased. It is quite an honor.

Miss Cohen, said the Bey, when he realized that it was incumbent upon him to start the conversation. Is quite a reader. In fact, I feel comfortable saying that she is by far the best read child I have ever met.

Is that so? said the Rector. He took a long sip of his gin and tonic as he observed Eleonora. And what is your favorite book, Miss Cohen?

Eleonora looked back up over her shoulder to her father.

Go on, Ellie, he said, putting a hand on her sleeve. What is your favorite book?

Eleonora looked down at her light green silk shoes against the sea varnished deck. There are so many great books, she said, glancing up at the Rector through her eyelashes. But if I had to choose one, it would be *The Hourglass*.

Is that a novel? he asked. I am not much a reader of novels. But I do think I have heard of it. The Rector swallowed the last of his drink and gave the empty glass to a passing waiter. How old are you?

Not quite six years old, Eleonora said demurely.

Quite impressive, he said. Quite impressive, indeed.

When the Rector moved on to a new group and another drink, the Bey brought Eleonora and her father along the side deck to the stern of the boat. There, they all sat pressed next to each other on the short, lacquered wooden bench between a large winch of some sort and a wooden chest full of life jackets.

The light bright blue sky of the morning had slipped a few shades darker and there were, as far as Eleonora could see, no clouds left in the sky. Not much bigger than the tip of a thumb held out at arm's length, Stamboul looked, from where they sat, like a painting, or the edges of a dream receding into memory. On either side of them, the banks of the Bosphorus were overwhelmed by conifers, interrupted every few kilometers by a dock, a small square, and a few men with tattered fezzes drinking tea. Out there on the water, the wind smelled salty with a touch of green. Inhaling deeply, Eleonora tried to hold this smell in her memory. This would be the smell by which she would remember the past few weeks, the city that would soon, she thought, be nothing but a memory.

As she was thinking this, the ship hit a patch of rough waters, a tumble and roll coming from the direction of Leander's tower. When the first pitch stopped, her father's

face was the same pale green as her dress. Although he had, in his younger years, weathered more than his fair share of storms, he had always had somewhat of a sensitive stomach. And this being the first time in a long while that he had been out on the water, he was particularly susceptible to the tumble and roll of the waves. Looking as if he had been shaken by a ghost, he clutched his hand to his stomach and stood.

Excuse me, he choked and, rushing down the stairs to the head, almost tripped over a loose oar.

As his footsteps fell away, the sound of people singing Happy Birthday drifted over from the front deck. Eleonora and the Bey looked at each other with a bit of humor. At that very moment the ship lurched, as if it had hit a rock, which indeed it had, and amidst screams below deck, began quickly to sink.