

Prologue

A light snow falls, slowly coating the deep-red rooftops of Prague. I look up into a chill gunmetal sky as the gray stones beneath me are already disappearing under a blanket of white. There's a frigid hush over the square. Shops are closed, chairs perched upside down on café tables. In the distance I hear church bells. A strong wind sighs and moans, picks up some stray papers and dances them past me. The morning would be beautiful in its blustery quiet if I weren't in so much pain—if I weren't so *cold*.

The side of my body that rests against the ground is stiff and numb. With difficulty, sore muscles protesting, I struggle to sit. I use the back of a park bench to pull myself to my feet. With the harsh wind pulling at my cuffs and collar, I wonder, How long have I been lying on the freezing stone, in the middle of this empty square? How did I get here? The last thing I remember clearly is a question I asked of a young girl with tattoos on her face. I remember her eyes—very young, damaged, afraid. I asked her:

“Kde?” *Where?* She looked at me, startled; I remember her darting eyes, how she shifted from foot to foot, anxious, desperate. “Prosim,” I said. *Please.* “Kde je Kristof Ragan?” *Where is Kristof Ragan?*

Distantly, I remember her answer. But it's buried too deep in my aching head for me to retrieve. *Get moving*, a voice inside me says. *Get help.* I have the sense that there's an imminent threat, but I'm not sure what it is.

Still, I find myself rooted, leaning heavily against the bench, afraid of the tilting I perceive in my world, afraid of how hard that stone will feel if I hit it again. I am wearing jeans. My leather jacket is unbuttoned to reveal the lace of my bra through a tear in my sweater. My chest is raw and red from the cold. My right pant leg is ripped open, exposing a wound that has bled down my shin; I am having trouble putting weight onto this leg. My feet are so cold, they have gone completely numb.

The square is empty. It is just after dawn, the light gauzy and dim. A tall Christmas tree towers, its lights glowing electric blue. Smaller trees, also decorated, are clustered about, glinting and shimmering. The square is lined with wooden stalls erected for the Christmas market, the ornate black lampposts wrapped in glowing lights; wreathes adorn windows and doors. The fountain, dry for winter, is filling with snow. Old Town Square is a fairy tale. I think it must be Christmas Day. Any other day the tourists might already be strolling about, locals heading to work, bachelors stumbling home from a late night of partying. I used to love this place, feel as though I was welcome here, but not today. I am as alone as if the apocalypse has come. I've missed the action and been left behind.

I make my way slowly toward the road, holding on to the sides of buildings and benches, careful not to stumble. Tall spires reach into the sky; moaning saints look down upon me. I catch sight of myself in a shop window. My hair is a rat's nest; even in this state, vanity causes me to run my fingers through it, try to smooth it out a bit. There's a smear of mascara under each eye. I lick my finger and try to rub it away. My jacket is ripped at the shoulder. There's a bruise on my jaw. I am angry at the woman I see in this reflection. She's all ego, sick with her own hubris. I release a sharp breath in disgust with myself, creating a cloud that dissipates quickly into the air.

I move on, unable to bear my own reflection any longer. Up ahead I see a green-and-white police car. It is small and compact, barely a car at all—more like a tube of lipstick. I wish for the blue and white of a

Chevy Caprice with screaming sirens and two tough New York City cops. But this will have to do. I pick up my pace as best I can, lift a hand to wave.

“Hello!” I call. “Can you help me?”

A female officer emerges from the driver’s side of the vehicle and moves toward me. As I approach her, I see she wears an unkind smirk. She is small for the bulky black uniform she wears. Her hair is dyed a brash, unflattering red but her skin is milky, her eyes an unearthly blue.

“Do you speak English?” I ask her when we are closer.

“A little,” she says. *Uh leetle*. She narrows her eyes at me. Snowflakes fall and linger in her hair. *A hungover American stumbling through the streets*, her expression reads. Oh, she’s seen it a hundred times before. *What a mess*.

“I need help,” I tell her, lifting my chin at her disapproval. “I need to go to the U.S. Embassy.” She’s looking at me harder now, her expression going from some combination of disdain and amusement to outright suspicion.

“What is your name?” she asks me. I see how she slowly, casually rests her hand on her gun, a nasty-looking black affair that seems too big for her tiny white hand. I hesitate; for some reason I’m suddenly sorry I flagged her down. I don’t want to tell her my name. I want to turn and run from her.

“Please show me your passport,” she says more sternly. Now I see a little glimmer of fear in her blue eyes, and a little excitement, too. I realize I’m backing away from her. She doesn’t like it, moves in closer.

“Stay still,” she says to me sharply, pulling her shoulders back, standing up taller. I obey. There’s more dead air between us as I struggle with what to do next.

“Tell me your name.”

I turn and start to run, stumble really, and make my way slowly, gracelessly away. She starts barking at me in Czech and I don’t need to understand the language to know I’m in deep trouble. Then I feel her

hands on me and I'm on the ground again; this small woman is amazingly strong with her knee in my back. She's knocked the wind out of me and I'm struggling to get air again with her weight on top of me. I can hear my own desperate, rattling attempts to inhale. She's on her radio, yelling. She's pulling my hands behind me when I feel her whole body jerk as her weight seems to suddenly shift off of me. I hear her gun drop and clatter on the stones. I scurry away from her and turn around. She has fallen to the ground and is lying on her side, looking at me with those shocking blue eyes, wide now with terror and pain. I find myself moving toward her but I stop when her mouth opens and a river of blood flows onto the snow around her. I see a growing dark stain on her abdomen. She's trying to staunch the flow with her hand; blood seeps through her thin fingers.

Then I look up and see him. He is a black column against the white surrounding him. He has let the gun drop to his side, is standing still and silent, the wind tossing his hair. I get to my feet, never taking my eyes from him, and start to move away.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask him.

He comes closer, the muted sound of his footfalls bouncing off the buildings around us.

"*Why?*" I scream, voice echoing. But he is impervious, his face expressionless, as though I've never meant anything to him. And maybe I haven't. As I turn to get away from him, I see him lift his gun. Before he opens fire, I run for my life.

part one

parting

*You shall be together when the white wings of death
scatter your days.*

—KAHLIL GIBRAN, *The Prophet*

I

The last time I saw my husband, he had a tiny teardrop of raspberry jam in the blond hairs of his goatee. We'd just shared cappuccinos he'd made in the ridiculously expensive machine I'd bought on a whim three weeks earlier, and croissants he'd picked up on his way in from his five-mile run, the irony lost on him. His lean, hard body was a machine, never gaining weight without his express design. Unlike me. The very aroma of baked goods and my thighs start to expand.

They were warm, the croissants. And as I tried to resist, he sliced them open and slathered them with butter, then jam on top of that, left one eviscerated and gooey, waiting on the white plate. I fought the internal battle and lost, finally reaching for it. It was perfect—flaky, melty, salty, sweet. And then—gone.

"You're not a very good influence," I said, licking butter from my fingertips. "It would take over an hour on the elliptical trainer to burn that off. And we both know *that's* not going to happen." He turned his blue eyes on me, all apology.

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry." Then the smile. Oh, the smile. It demanded a smile in return, no matter how angry, how frustrated, how *fed up* I was. "But it was so good, wasn't it? You'll remember it all day." Was he talking about the croissant or our predawn lovemaking?

"Yes," I said as he kissed me, a strong arm snaking around the small

of my back pulling me in urgently, an invitation really, not the goodbye that it was. “I will.”

That’s when I saw the bit of jam. I motioned that he should wipe his face. He was dressed for an important meeting. *Crucial* was the word he used when he told me about it. He peered at his reflection in the glass door of the microwave and wiped the jam away.

“Thanks,” he said, moving toward the door. He picked up his leather laptop case and draped it over his shoulder. It looked heavy; I was afraid he’d wrinkle his suit, a sharp, expensive black wool affair he’d bought recently, but I didn’t say so. Too mothering.

“Thanks for what?” I asked. Already I’d forgotten that I’d spared him from the minor embarrassment of going to an important meeting with food on his face.

“For being the most beautiful thing I’ll see all day.” He was an opportunistic charmer. Had always been that.

I laughed, wrapped my arms around his neck, kissed him again. He knew what to say, knew how to make me feel good. I *would* think about our lovemaking, that croissant, his smile, that one sentence all day.

“Go get ’em,” I said as I saw him out of the apartment door, watched him walk to the elevator at the end of the short hallway. He pressed the button and waited. The hallway had sold us on the apartment before we’d even walked through the door: the thick red carpet, the wainscoting, and the ten-foot ceilings—New York City prewar elegance. The elevator doors slid open. Maybe it was then, just before he started to move away, that I saw a shadow cross his face. Or maybe later I just imagined it, to give some meaning to those moments. But if it was there at all, that flicker of what—Sadness? Fear?—it passed over him quickly; was gone so fast it barely even registered with me then.

“You know I will,” he said with the usual cool confidence. But I heard it, the lick of his native accent on his words, something that only surfaced when he was stressed or drunk. But I wasn’t worried for him. I

d i e f o r y o u

never doubted him. Whatever he had to pull off that day, something vague about investors for his company, there was no doubt in my mind that he'd do it. That was just him: What he wanted, he got. With a wave and a cheeky backward glance, he stepped into the elevator and the doors closed on him. And then—gone.

"I love you, Izzy!" I thought I heard him yell, clowning around, as the elevator dropped down the shaft, taking him and his voice away.

I smiled. After five years of marriage, a miscarriage, at least five knock-'em-down, drag-'em-outs that lasted into the wee hours of the morning, hot sex, dull sex, good days, hard days, all the little heartbreaks and disappointments (and not-so-little ones) inevitable in a relationship that doesn't crash and burn right away, after some dark moments when I thought we weren't going to make it, that I'd be better off without him, and all the breathless moments when I was sure I couldn't even *survive* without him—after all of that he didn't have to say it, but I was glad he still did.

I closed the door and the morning was under way. Within five minutes, I was chatting on the phone with Jack Mannes, my old friend and longtime agent.

"Any sign of that check?" The author's eternal question.

"I'll follow up." The agent's eternal reply. "How's the manuscript going?"

"It's . . . going."

Within twenty minutes, I was headed out for a run, the taste of Marc's buttery, raspberry-jam kiss still on my lips.

WHEN HE STEPPED onto the street, he was blasted by a cold, bitter wind that made him wish he'd worn a coat. He thought about turning around but it was too late for that. Instead he buttoned his suit jacket, slung the strap of his laptop bag across his chest, and dug his hands

deep into his pockets. He moved fast on West Eighty-sixth Street toward Broadway. At the corner, he jogged down the yellow-tiled stairway into the subway station, was glad for the warmth of it even with the particularly pungent stench of urine that morning. He swiped his card and passed through the turnstile, waited for the downtown train.

It was past nine, so the crowd on the platform was thinner than it would have been an hour before. A young businessman kept alternately leaning over the tracks, trying to catch sight of the oncoming train lights, and glancing at his watch. In spite of the rich drape of his black wool coat, his expensive shoes, he looked harried, disheveled. Marcus Raine felt a wash of disdain for him, for his obvious tardiness, and for his even more obvious distress, though he couldn't have explained why.

Marcus leaned his back against the far wall, hands still in his pockets, and waited. It was the perpetual condition of the New Yorker to wait—for trains, buses, or taxis, in impossibly long lines for a cup of coffee, in crowds to see a film or visit a particular museum exhibit. The rest of the world saw New Yorkers as rude, impatient. But they had been conditioned to queue one behind the other with the resignation of the damned, perhaps moaning in discontent, but waiting nonetheless.

He'd been living in this city since he was eighteen years old, but he never quite saw himself as a New Yorker. He saw himself more as a spectator at a zoo, one who'd been allowed to wander around inside the cage of the beast. But then he'd always felt that way, even as a child, even in his native home. Always apart, watching. He accepted this as the natural condition of his life, without a trace of unhappiness about it or any self-pity. Isabel had always understood this about him; as a writer, she was in a similar position. *You can't really observe, unless you stand apart.*

It was one of the things that first drew him to her, this sentence. He'd read a novel she'd written, found it uncommonly deep and involving. Her picture on the back of the jacket intrigued him and he'd searched her out on the Internet, read some things about her that interested him—that she was the child of privilege but successful in her own

right as the author of eight bestselling novels, that she'd traveled the world and written remarkably insightful essays about the places she visited. "Prague is a city of secrets," she'd written. "Fairy-tale rues taper off into dark alleys, a secret square hides behind a heavy oak and iron door, ornate facades shelter dark histories. Her face is exquisite, finely wrought and so lovely, but her eyes are cool. She'll smirk but never laugh. She knows, but she won't tell." This was true in a way that no outsider could ever really understand, but this American writer caught a glimpse of the real city and it moved him.

It was the river of ink-black curls, those dark eyes, jet in a landscape of snowy skin, the turn of her neck, the birdlike delicacy of her hands, that caused him to seek her out at one of her book signings. He knew right away that *she was the one*, as Americans were so fond of saying—as if their whole lives were nothing but the search to make themselves whole by finding another. He meant it in another way entirely, at first.

It seemed like such a long time ago, that initial thrill, that rush of desire. He often wished he could go back to the night they first met, relive their years together. He'd done so many wrong things—some she knew about, some she did not, could never, know. He remembered that there was something in her gaze when she first loved him that filled an empty place inside him. Even with all the things she didn't understand, she didn't look at him like that anymore. Her gaze seemed to drift past him. Even when she held his eyes, he believed she was seeing someone who wasn't there. And maybe that was his fault.

He heard the rumble of the train approaching, and pushed himself off the wall. He'd started moving toward the edge when he felt a hand on his arm. It was a firm, hard grip and Marcus, on instinct, rolled his arm and broke the grasp, bringing his fist up fast and taking a step back.

"Take it easy, Marcus," the other man said with a throaty laugh. "Relax." He lifted two beefy hands and pressed the air between them. "Why so tense?"

"Ivan," Marcus said coolly, though his heart was an adrenaline-fueled

hammer. The moment took on an unreal cast, the tenor of a dark fantasy. Ivan was a ghost, someone so deeply buried in Marcus's memory that he might as well have been looking at a resurrected corpse. Once a tall, wiry young man, manic and strange, Ivan had gained a lot of weight. Not fat but muscle; he looked like a bulldozer, squat and powerful, ready to break concrete and the earth itself.

"What?" That deep laugh again, with less amusement in its tone. "No 'How are you'? No 'So good to see you?'"

Marcus watched Ivan's face. The wide smile beneath cheekbones like cliffs, the glittering dark eyes—they could all freeze like ice. Even jovial like this, there was something vacant about Ivan, something unsettling. It was so odd to see him in this context, in this life, that for a moment Marcus could almost believe that he was dreaming, that he was still in bed beside Isabel. That he'd wake from this as he had from any of the nightmares that plagued him.

Marcus still didn't say anything as his train came and went, leaving them alone on the platform. The woman in the fare booth read a paperback novel. Marcus could hear the rush of trains below, hear the hum and horns of the street above. Too much time passed. In the silence between them, Marcus watched Ivan's expression cool and harden.

Then Marcus let go of a loud laugh that echoed off the concrete and caused the clerk to look up briefly before she went back to her book.

"Ivan!" Marcus said, forcing a smile. "Why so tense?"

Ivan laughed uncertainly, then reached out and punched Marcus on the arm. Marcus pulled Ivan into an enthusiastic embrace and they patted each other vigorously on the back.

"Do you have some time for me?" Ivan asked, dropping an arm over Marcus's shoulder and moving him toward the exit. Ivan's gigantic arm felt like a side of beef, its weight impossible to move without machinery. Marcus pretended not to hear the threat behind the question.

"Of course, Ivan," Marcus said. "Of course I do."

Marcus heard a catch in his own voice, which he tried to cover with

a cough. If Ivan noticed, he didn't let on. A current of foreboding cut a valley from his throat into his belly as they walked up the stairs, Ivan still holding on tight. He was talking, telling a joke about a hooker and a priest, but Marcus wasn't listening. He was thinking about Isabel. He was thinking about how she looked this morning, a little sleepy, pretty in her pajamas, her hair a cloud of untamed curls, smelling like honey-suckle and sex, tasting like butter and jam.

On the street, Ivan was laughing uproariously at his own joke and Marcus found himself laughing along, though he had no idea what the punch line had been. Ivan knew a lot of jokes, one more inane than the last. He'd learned a good deal of his English this way, reading joke books and watching stand-up comedians, insisted that one could not really understand a language without understanding its humor, without knowing what native speakers considered funny. Marcus wasn't sure this was true. But there was no arguing with Ivan. It wasn't healthy. The smallest things caused a flip to switch in the big man. He'd be laughing one minute and then the next he'd be beating you with those fists the size of hams. This had been true since they were children together, a lifetime ago.

Ivan approached a late-model Lincoln parked illegally on Eighty-sixth. With the remote in his hand he unlocked it, then reached to open the front passenger door. It was an expensive vehicle, one that Ivan would not have been able to afford given his circumstances of the last few years. Marcus knew what this meant, that he'd returned to the life that had gotten him into trouble in the first place.

Marcus could see the front entrance to his building, gleaming glass and polished wood, a wide circular drive. A large holiday wreath hung on the awning, reminding him that Christmas was right around the corner.

He watched as a young mother who lived there—was her name Janie?—left with her two small children. He found himself thinking suddenly, urgently, of the baby Isabel had wanted. He'd never wanted children, had been angry when Isabel got pregnant, even relieved when she miscarried. Somehow the sight of this woman with her little girls

caused a sharp stab of regret. Marcus turned his face so that they wouldn't see him as they passed on the other side of the street.

"You've been living well," Ivan said, his eyes, too, on the building entrance. In the bright morning light, Marcus could see the blue smudges under Ivan's eyes, a deep scar on the side of his face that Marcus didn't remember. Ivan's clothes were cheap, dirty; his nails bitten to the quick. He didn't look well, had the look of someone without the money or the inclination to take care of himself, someone who'd spent too many years indoors. Ivan still wore a smile, but all the warmth was gone. It was stone cold.

"And you? Are you well?" Marcus asked, feeling a tightness in his chest.

Ivan gave a slow shrug, offered his palms. "Not as well."

Marcus let a beat pass. "What do you want, Ivan?"

"You didn't think you'd see me again."

"It has been a long time."

"Yes, Marcus," he said, leaning on the name with heavy sarcasm. "It has been."

Marcus felt himself moving toward the car; there was really no way around it. As he put his hand on the door, Marcus saw his wife leave the building, her hair back—the chaos of it barely tamed with a thin band—her workout clothes on, an old beat-up blue sweatshirt, well-worn sneakers. He thought of the breakfast they'd shared, how she'd worried about the calories. He ducked into the car and watched her pause, look about her. She had that steely expression on her face, the one she got when she was forcing herself to do something she didn't want to do. He could see it, even from a distance. Then she turned, quickly, suddenly, and ran away. Everything in him wanted to race after her but Ivan climbed into the driver's seat. The car bucked with the other man's weight, filled with his scent—cigarettes and body odor.

"Don't worry," Ivan said, issuing a throaty laugh. "I only want to talk. To come to a new arrangement."

d i e f o r y o u

“Do I look worried, Ivan?” Marcus said with a cool smile. Ivan didn’t answer.

As they pulled into traffic, a line from the *The Prophet* came back to Marcus: “It is not a garment I cast off this day, but a skin that I tear with my own hands.” Marcus could feel the life he’d been living shifting, fading. With every city block they passed, he left a gauzy sliver of himself behind. The strand that connected him to Isabel, he felt it pull taut and then snap. It caused him a pointed and intense physical pain in the center of his chest. But he took comfort in a strange thought: The man she would grieve and come to hate, the one she would not be able to forgive, had never existed in the first place.