

# COPPER PENNIES

*Book 1 in The Red Twins Series*

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PART 1

# Magda

## Chapter 1

### March 1937

Prague, Czechoslovakia

“Mrs. Hlavacova?”

At the older woman’s sharp tone, Magda’s gloved fingers tightened around the weathered handbag she clutched to her midsection. She dipped her head in reply.

“You are *quite* early.”

Vaclav’s threat of a beating should Magda be late had put her in motion at sunrise. She’d bargained the wrath of her new employer would be nothing compared to his.

The woman, clad in a plain wool dress nearly the same color as her hair, studied Magda from head to toe, her lips disappearing into a thin line. She stood only an inch or two taller yet was double her width. Magda fought the urge to take a step down.

A blast of icy wind whipped around them, whisking the scarf from Magda’s head and taking her breath away. The older woman shivered, retreating.

“Well, you’d better come in.”

Magda stepped over the threshold, turning sideways as the woman hadn’t moved aside nearly enough. She tucked a wayward lock of her thick black hair back into its bun as the woman continued her inspection. She fidgeted, worry needling her skin. *What will I do if she turns me away? What will Vaclav do?* There was always a chance of rejection wherever Magda sought employment. Her light brown skin and almond-shaped eyes, gifts of her mixed Romani heritage, often brought judgement and ridicule despite her beauty.

“Show me your hands.”

Magda lifted her hands, palms up, the handbag dangling on one wrist. Despite her small frame and young age, Magda bore the callouses of years of hard work.

The woman gave a curt nod. “I am Mrs. Tumova, the housekeeper. We may as well get started.” She turned and moved toward the back of the house. “Follow me.” The housekeeper pulled her right hip higher than the left, each step landing hard on the polished wood floor.

Magda lifted her eyes to take in the spacious room. The foyer of the three-story townhome was lined with rich, dark wood panels and divided into a staircase and hallway at the back. The wall to the left held four leather armchairs facing a door exhibiting an engraved brass plaque. *Doktor Josef Straka*. Beside the door stood an entry table, which held a ledger for patients to sign in and a porcelain vase filled with bright, fresh flowers. Their fragrance mingled with the unmistakable smell of baking bread coming from the kitchen. Magda inhaled deeply, the scents calming her nerves.

The hallway was bare except for a large portrait of a finely dressed older lady in black chiffon and high lace collar. Her face was soft, with the hint of a smile in her eyes. Two electric sconces provided golden light, keeping the shadows in the corridor at bay. Magda loosened the grip on her handbag, a bit more at ease in the warm surroundings despite the housekeeper’s ill temper.

Once in the kitchen, Mrs. Tumova stopped abruptly and turned to face Magda, who took an involuntary step back from the woman’s rigid form.

“Now, your husband should have told you what this job entails. But since he is a man and they are prone to forget, let me review.” She clasped her hands at her waist. Mrs. Tumova’s fingers were slightly misshapen and her knuckles enlarged, made white by her clenched hands. Magda did not meet her eyes.

“I am getting old, and you’re to help me.” She paused, her thin lips pinched, the words clearly the worst she could have said about herself. “You’ll do what I cannot: clean mostly, and whatever is needed upstairs or in the cellar as I can no longer manage the stairs. I do the cooking but sometimes will need help with the larger pots. You’ll not interact with Doctor Straka until specifically requested.”

Magda nodded, her gaze rising enough to rest on the ivory brooch at Mrs. Tumova’s banded collar.

The woman let out an exaggerated sigh. “Look at me.”

Magda’s eyes darted up but couldn’t hold the housekeeper’s for more than a few seconds.

“I think you may work out well,” Mrs. Tumova said. “Most pretty young women, girls”—she

snorted—“try to get work here just to catch the eye of a handsome, unmarried doctor. But you...” She was silent for several breaths, making Magda’s mouth go dry. “I like the look of you. You keep your head down.”

It was a mannerism first beaten into Magda by the nuns at the orphanage, who were free with their scolding and their slaps, and reinforced by her husband’s mood swings. Now it had won her a job.

“And your hands seem no stranger to hard work.”

Magda swallowed. “I just need to earn, Mrs. Tumova. Sewing and washing no longer bring in what they had.” Vaclav had been very clear on that score.

The woman grunted her acknowledgement. “Let’s get started. You can hang your things there.” She waved a hand at the row of pegs on the wall by the pantry and turned to the large cookstove. Magda paused and gripped her handbag again. She didn’t know how to operate a gas range.

“Get that black pot behind you, top shelf.”

As the housekeeper pattered at the stove with her back to Magda, she continued the lecture.

“Doctor Straka comes down at eight and takes breakfast in his study. He takes all his meals in his study. He *lives* in that room.” She shook her head. “The patients start coming at ten—I’ll see to them—with the last one seen at four. You’ve no need to address him or his patients. Except on Wednesdays.” She stopped her stirring and pushed out a breath. “Wednesday is hell every week, girl.”

She half turned to Magda. “He sees the poor then, those who can’t pay. Even the Jews and your people, bless him. On those days, you’ll need to linger unseen with an eye to the reception area.” She flicked a hand toward the front door. “Those people are filthy, and nearly every week someone fouls the floor. You’ll need to clean up any mess at once. He may also call for assistance in his study should someone become ill.”

Magda grimaced at the idea of cleaning up sick but hid her revulsion. This was a good job for her and paid well; she was lucky to have it.

This opportunity came from one of Vaclav’s coworkers, his sister being Mrs. Tumova. Vaclav was adamant she give up her “silly sewing” and take a “real” job. Her earnings had never been enough for him, and he had grown tired of her laziness, something he reminded her of frequently. He’d take every koruna she made, scoffing at the meager amounts. He paid for everything, he told her often, and she should be more grateful he’d taken in someone like her. No other man would

have; she'd be a whore on the street, or dead, if it wasn't for him. When Vaclav discovered she'd been withholding a small amount for herself, his lesson ensured she'd never do it again.

Earning here would bring in more than everything else had, and perhaps Vaclav would stop expressing his constant dissatisfaction with her. She would enjoy this time away from their loveless and dingy apartment.



Mrs. Tumova had not exaggerated about Wednesday. When Magda arrived at half past seven, a line of pitiful figures, with faces downcast under tattered hats and scarfs, had formed outside Doctor Straka's home. Each respectfully quiet and careful not to lean against the short, white-painted iron fence hemming the patch of garden on each side of the front door. Those at the front of the line hung back from the stoop as if they had no right to be there in the first place.

Magda considered herself blessed, for she could easily be standing in that line if it hadn't been for a chance meeting with Vaclav four years ago. Magda had been released from the orphanage when she turned eighteen. They had no work she could do to pay for her keep, nor did they wish her to stay. After seven months, she'd nearly turned to prostitution as a means to survive but decided she'd rather starve to death than do that. Luckily, she'd not needed to do either.

On a busy street one bitterly cold evening, she'd collided with Vaclav, who was in a drunken stupor. He proceeded to cry about his lot: his wife dead, his loneliness growing each day. He wasn't handsome. He was heavysset and rough faced, with bushy brown hair that proceeded down the sides of his face to an unkempt beard, and small brown eyes too close together. But he had a good, steady job at the new automotive plant. She'd taken pity on him and helped the man home, and she'd not left since. They had come to an unspoken agreement—she would be his wife and do all that was needed of one, and he would provide her a home and the protection a husband afforded. It started out agreeable enough, until he began expressing himself with his hands.

Resigned to her fate, she slipped into a melancholy as the months and years crept by. But she had a home and food, and got work when she could at the only skill the nuns had taught her. If she stayed quiet, Vaclav was usually fine, unless his bad day or his gambling losses came home with him.

“Good morning,” Magda mumbled as she pushed open the door. The people in line remained silent, arms wrapped tightly around their bodies to fend off the blustering wind.

*Yes, I am very lucky.*

While Magda scrubbed the lunch dishes, Mrs. Tumova busied herself with kneading dough—bread for tonight’s dinner. The older woman had softened over the last two days. Magda assumed she’d proven herself to the housekeeper with her diligent work and lack of outward interest in the doctor.

“I’ll make an extra loaf for you to take home,” she said, wiping her fingers on her apron. “You look as if you need all the food you can get.” Magda had learned this was the level of Mrs. Tumova’s humor and smiled at her, muttering a ‘thank you.’

“Assistance!” The shout came from the doctor’s study, startling Magda. Mrs. Tumova’s brows quirked up.

“That’s you, girl. Here, take these.” She handed Magda a bundle of rags and a bucket, and steered her forward by the shoulders, giving her a little push in the direction of the hallway.

Magda went swiftly down the hall but hesitated at the door to the study. Her stomach fluttered at the thought of meeting the handsome doctor, someone who put aside any bias and gave his services to the poor. The man behind the warm and jovial voice that greeted each patient and boomed through the walls when he laughed, which was often.

*But I won’t be meeting him. I will do my job and be gone.* She nodded to herself.

Magda opened the door, eyes trained on the wood floor, quickly surveying for the mess. Her nose found it first; the sour stench filled the air, and she stopped herself from lifting a hand to her nose. It was beside the doctor’s examination table. Not looking at either the doctor or his patient, she set to her task in rapid fashion.

As she scooped up the putrid remnants of someone’s meager breakfast, the doctor continued his examination of the patient, who profusely apologized for soiling his lovely floor. Doctor Straka reassured the woman in such a caring tone Magda longed to see his face. She settled for a view of his pant cuffs and shoes, made of the highest-quality wool and leather. But there was a splash of a wet, yellow substance on his shoe—he must not know.

Not wanting to interrupt him or bring attention to herself, her hand shot out from under the table and swiped across the toe of his shoe. His sermon to the patient on the importance of not eating spoiled food, no matter how hungry she was, did not falter. Magda gathered up her things and left the room with all the stealth she could muster.

Once more he’d called for assistance, later in the afternoon when only one patient remained. There’d been an endless stream of them! This time, she cleaned the seat of a chair and a portion of the dark green—papered wall. A man coughed wretchedly, wetness rattling in his chest. Magda stole a

glance.

The doctor stood beside the elderly man hunched over on the examination table, with a hand on his back. Doctor Straka was tall and lean, dressed in a plain white doctor's coat over a black suit. She frowned. His back was to her. The doctor's hand rubbed across the old man's thin shoulders. The gesture tugged at Magda's heart.

"I prayed my remedy would have helped you, Mr. Straub." The doctor's words sounded to Magda like genuine remorse, and the deep baritone warmed her cheeks. He retrieved a handkerchief from his pocket and gave it to Mr. Straub. The old man expelled the bloody contents of his mouth into it. The doctor took the wadded cloth and extended his arm behind him, holding the handkerchief out to Magda without a glance. She took it immediately.

"I can give you something for the pain, but I fear you are past my help now. I am very sorry." Doctor Straka squeezed his shoulder. "God will reunite you with your dear wife fairly soon."

Mr. Straub wiped his watering eyes with an arthritic hand. "You've my thanks, Doctor, for even trying on this ol' sack of bones." He tried to chuckle but coughed instead.

Doctor Straka retrieved an amber bottle from the metal tray stand, dosing out viscous, red liquid into a spoon, and helped the man put it to his lips. In a few seconds, the elderly man took a deep breath, marveling in his ability to do so. His aged, brown eyes shined up at the one person who gave him relief... and respect.

Magda turned to the door, swallowing the lump in her throat. Her eyes flitted to the floor-to-ceiling shelves of books and various medical instruments lining the back wall. A human skull stared back, the large, empty sockets making her cringe. Her gaze was pulled to his desk. More precisely, to a large book atop it.

Her vision narrowed; the sounds behind her vanished. Magda locked her knees to keep from collapsing as the room fell away, piece by piece, until nothing remained but her and the book.

The cover was a sickly gray and uneven; it was puckered and grooved, even along the spine. If it was leather, it was very poor quality. No title or lettering provided clues to its contents. The pages were thick, perhaps vellum, and slightly rippled as if they'd once been wet.

A chill prickled the hairs on the back of her neck, yet she stepped forward, responding to the overwhelming urge to pick it up. She'd never been much of a reader, but her fingers itched for it.

*Take it! Take it and run.* Magda balked. Not even when she'd lived on the streets, begging for work, had the thought of *stealing* something entered her mind. But now—

A grunt from far away snapped her back. Magda gripped the edge of the desk to remain

upright, the sudden vertigo washing away her curiosity, her *need* to have that book. The doctor hadn't noticed her, his attention taken with helping the weak man from the table.

Magda left the room and leaned against the doorframe, inhaling a shaky breath to calm herself.

*What was that?*

She put a hand to her moist forehead. She'd cleaned up worse messes, and the old man's fate was certainly tragic, but neither would account for Magda's near swoon. It must be from the doctor's manner. Of course. Never had she witnessed such kindness from a man before, or anyone for that matter. She felt honored to be able to help him in his work, no matter how paltry it might be.

"See?" came the condescending tone of Mrs. Tumova, arms across her chest. Magda only nodded, lowering her head, and scurried back to the kitchen to wash her hands.



As Magda pulled the heavy fish poacher from the oven, the doctor's door opened and closed. She expected his steps to continue up the stairwell as he washed and changed before dinner, but instead they proceeded forward.

"Doctor Straka." Mrs. Tumova greeted him as he entered the kitchen. Magda kept her back to them, placing the poacher on the stove top.

"Mrs. Tumova, the salmon smells wonderful." His voice reminded her of rich velvet. She busied herself with the fish.

"That poor old man is done for, I take it."

He sighed. "His fate rests with God now."

"Tis a shame."

There were several breaths of silence. Magda's cheeks burned, and she wished she was invisible.

"Mrs. Hlavacova, Doctor," the housekeeper said, apparently answering the doctor's unspoken question. When Magda didn't turn, Mrs. Tumova cleared her throat. "Magda?"

She pushed the emotion from her face before she turned, another skill learned early at the orphanage, wiping her hands on her apron to keep them busy.

"Doctor Straka." Magda's voice was small as she inclined her head stiffly. Her eyes rested on a few drops of blood splattered on his white shirt. He seemed even taller now as he stood beside the housekeeper, his hands clasped behind him. His jet-black hair arced downward along his jawline into

a smooth beard, neatly trimmed to a blunt point, and joined with a mustache surrounding full lips. She kept her breathing even and prayed they couldn't hear the rapid thumping of her heart.

“Thank you for your assistance today, Mrs. Hlavacova.” The doctor inclined his head, enough to catch her eyes. Magda's breath caught. His eyes were midnight blue—set deep and surrounded by dense, black lashes—and held the smile he kept from his lips. She dropped her gaze, certain he could see into her very soul. Magda's head dipped in reply.

“I look forward to dinner,” he said to Mrs. Tumova and withdrew from the room.

Magda turned to continue her work on the fish. She felt the woman's eyes on her back.

“Yes, yes,” Mrs. Tumova said, not keeping the laugh from her voice. “You'll do just fine here.”

## Chapter 2

### April 1937

Magda was late. She hurried to the kitchen, not acknowledging Mrs. Tumova's sour expression, and hung her coat and handbag on a peg. She hesitated before removing her scarf, then unwrapped it, knowing she couldn't hide in it all day.

The housekeeper brought her flour-covered hands to her hips. "You'd better have a good reason for being late."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Tumova." Magda slipped on her apron and went directly to the sink full of dishes, head and shoulders slumped.

The older woman grunted and snatched a hand towel from the counter beside her, the sudden movement making Magda flinch.

"What is it, girl?" She stepped forward, and Magda recoiled on instinct, then silently chided herself for being stupid. She focused on scrubbing the cast-iron skillet. Perhaps if she appeared busy, Mrs. Tumova would return to her own work.

But Mrs. Tumova did not. She paused, then laid a gentle hand atop Magda's hastily moving ones.

"Stop," she said in a softer tone. "Sit." Magda obeyed.

Resting an elbow on the table, she cradled her forehead in her palm, listening to the housekeeper rattle cups and saucers. Magda's head ached bitterly. She wanted nothing more than to lie down. Mrs. Tumova placed a steaming teacup on the table and eased into the chair across from her. Magda stared at the elegant china reserved solely for distinguished patients and guests, the plum-and-black floral band blurring through her tears. She blinked, and a tear tumbled down her

cheek.

Mrs. Tumova cleared her throat. "Look at me."

She raised her face. Mrs. Tumova compressed her thin lips until they were nearly white. She studied the angry cut above Magda's left eyebrow, the blood crusting the length of it, and the red welt around her eye. Magda put the cup to her trembling lips.

Magda was almost finished with her tea before Mrs. Tumova spoke again, her voice tight. "I will ask Doctor Straka to look at that." She left the kitchen before Magda could protest.



"Come in, Mrs. Hlavacova." Doctor Straka gestured to the examination table beside him as he sorted items on the tray stand. Mrs. Tumova guided the young woman in by her shoulders and closed the door upon leaving. Magda wiped her clammy palms on her apron. It was very kind of the doctor to see her before his first patient, but she didn't want to be there. The attention and his ministrations weren't necessary. This was a small thing that would heal just as the others had.

She glanced at his desk for the book, then scanned the room when it wasn't there. Magda hadn't seen it in weeks; she couldn't help but look for it whenever she entered his study.

*What use do I have for a book?* Magda shook her head at herself, stopping abruptly as the throbbing increased.

Magda sat on the cool leather, hands clasped in her lap. Her mind wandering to escape her predicament, she studied the doctor's lean form as his back was turned. He hadn't donned his white coat yet. His impeccable black suit fit well across his narrow frame; his glossy black hair lay smoothly against his head, trimmed just above the collar.

*I wonder if it's as soft as it looks?* She blushed at the thought as he turned to face her.

The doctor let out a controlled breath at the sight of her injury, his nostrils flaring slightly. Magda kept her eyes on the top button of his suit jacket.

With his forefinger and thumb, he lifted her chin. Her breath caught at the intimate touch.

*But it's not intimate, stupid girl. He's a doctor examining his patient.* She focused on the fine stitching of his shirtfront.

Doctor Straka turned her head side to side as he examined the eye, then used two fingers to inspect the angry cut. They were cool against her hot skin, yet Magda winced, and he pulled back.

"Tell me what happened," he said in the same deep, caring voice he used with his patients. Magda exhaled, and her resolve escaped with the breath she'd been holding. She slumped, covering

her face with her hands. Doctor Straka rested a hand on her shoulder as she sobbed.

A gentle squeeze brought her back, and she used both hands to wipe her cheeks. “Please forgive me, Doctor.”

“There is nothing to forgive, Mrs. Hlavacova.” He returned to the tray and soaked a cotton ball with alcohol. “I assume this is your husband’s doing.”

Magda’s eyes fell to her lap.

“I will take your silence as a ‘yes.’” The doctor’s voice deepened with a hint of sadness, and Magda blinked away fresh tears. He turned back to her. “Now, this will sting, but the good news is you don’t need stitches.”

Magda closed her eyes as he ministered to her, relieved to hide in the darkness behind them. His face was close to hers, yet not near enough to feel his breath. She listened to his measured breathing, surreptitiously inhaling his scent, picking out the slightly spiced aroma of the beeswax pomade in his hair from the tang of the alcohol. The doctor took care cleaning her wound with slow, gentle strokes. After he finished, Magda heard him rattling items on the tray and grimaced at the whiff of sulfur but kept her eyes closed.

“This ointment does not have a pleasant aroma. I apologize for that. But it is a formula of my own making and quite effective at relieving swelling and pain.” As Doctor Straka smoothed the pungent salve on the wound and welt, the pain ceased immediately, replaced by a pleasant cooling sensation. “It also ensures no scarring.”

When the doctor stepped back, she opened her eyes to find him gazing at her. Magda’s heart leapt. His dark indigo eyes brimmed with compassion, accentuating the tenderness of his smile. His hair, slicked back from his forehead, had a well-defined part on the left, and his graceful beard softened the sharp angles of his cheekbones. She’d never seen a more striking man. Doctor Straka’s small smile grew under her momentary ogling. Magda’s cheeks flushed, and she pulled her gaze from his.

“I notice you have a scar on your temple.” The hard edge to his voice told Magda he no longer smiled. “Does your husband do this often?”

Magda slid from the table, and he stepped back. “Thank you, Doctor. I must get back to work now.”

“Nonsense. I am your employer, and I have yet to cause a mess.”

Her eyes flitted to his face and caught the playful curve of his mouth. She couldn’t help but grin. “They usually aren’t *your* messes.”

“Quite.” His shoulders relaxed. “You haven’t answered my question.”

Magda frowned, thinking back to his words. “Oh.” She stared once again at the button on his jacket. “Only when I deserve it, he says.”

Doctor Straka’s jaw tightened. “What did he hit you with? This was not done with a hand or a fist.”

“A bowl.” Vaclav had become angry when the spoonful of porridge was too hot, claiming it burnt his mouth and she’d served it that way on purpose. But Magda didn’t say this.

He clicked his tongue, closing the distance between them. Her height brought her to his chest. Magda couldn’t retreat; the table stood stationary against her backside. She fought her overwhelming desire to lean against him, to know what it felt like to be held in his arms, enveloped in the compassion radiating from him. Magda remained stock-still with no idea what to do with her hands or where to look. He was quiet for several breaths, not that she could hear them over the blood pounding in her ears.

“Would you like me to speak with him... Magda?”

Her head snapped up; his expression was earnest. “No!” The doctor backed away. “Please, Doctor Straka, that won’t be necessary. It would do me more harm than good.” She covered her mouth, wishing she hadn’t revealed so much.

His brows came together. Magda turned away from his pity, muttering another ‘thank you’ as she hurriedly left the room.



The following day, not long after the last patient had departed, Magda and Mrs. Tumova were startled by a shattering sound. A mild oath followed, provoking a rare grin from the housekeeper. She sent Magda off with the bucket and bundle of rags before the doctor called for assistance.

Magda halted after opening the door. Clear glass shards littered the floor around the long worktable that stood against the far wall. The waning sunlight glittered within the glass bits, momentarily dazzling her. She wrinkled her nose as the smell of something akin to burnt sugar reached her.

The gray book lay open on the worktable, surrounded by jars and vials of all sizes—some clear, some amber, and each labeled with tiny markings Magda couldn’t make out. The doctor closed the book, its stiff spine cracking at the movement. He laid a palm atop its oddly shriveled cover, his long fingers curving protectively around the edge. She felt no desire to pick it up, to *steal* it, this time.

Her eyes traveled from his hand to his face, his expression making Magda take a step back, her skin prickling.

Doctor Straka glared at her, deep grooves creasing his smooth forehead as his face darkened.

Magda blinked and his scowl was gone, replaced by a welcoming smile. The smile and soft gaze coaxed her into the room, yet embarrassment brought heat to her cheeks. Of course, Doctor Straka wouldn't want someone like her staring at his possessions. *I hope he doesn't think me a thief.* She knew well the sordid reputation her gypsy heritage carried with it. *I would never have taken it. Never.*

"My apologies, Mrs. Hlavacova." His voice brought a different kind of heat to her cheeks. "My clumsiness has revealed itself. I hope you brought gloves—the thin glass is quite sharp."

Magda skirted around the opposite side of the exam table. She knelt, picking up each bit of glass gingerly with a rag. Bending over too far made the lump on her eyebrow throb, yet the cut seemed a week old rather than just a day. She wanted to thank him, ask him what was in his miracle ointment, but her courage failed.

She felt his eyes follow her as she moved. Her hands trembled under the weight of his gaze. *He wants to ensure I don't take anything. Stupid girl.*

"I'd like to examine your wound before you go." The kindness in the doctor's voice eased the tautness of her spine.

"Certainly, Doctor."

Magda took longer than necessary to clean up the glass, marshalling her courage. The mere thought of his fingertips on her skin made her pulse increase. She sighed inwardly. He was simply being a doctor to her. It was foolish to think he bore any feelings beyond that. Yet he'd offered to speak to her husband; that must mean something, surely. *Only as a concerned employer, nothing more.*

When she'd finished, Magda exhaled a deep breath and rose, turning to face the doctor. A full smile overtook his mouth, making butterflies dance in her stomach.

Once she was on the examination table, he studied the healing cut and applied a tiny amount of his sulfurous ointment. "Good," he mumbled, nodding. "Very good."

Magda thanked him as she met his gaze. Doctor Straka's dark eyes explored her face with such intensity she clenched her fists to keep from looking away. Men had stared at her before, but their looks had been salacious, or filled with loathing. This man's look warmed her, emboldened her, and roused a desire she'd never felt before.

His gaze came to rest on her parted lips. She held her breath as his hand returned to her face. His fingers trailed along her jaw, sending pleasant ripples across her skin. He bent near. Magda lifted

her chin, longing to feel the touch of his lips. She inhaled his warm breath, arching her back slightly to close the gap between them. His palm cupped her cheek, and she leaned into it, letting her worries fall away. He raised his hand to her other cheek, his palms cool against her hot skin.

“You are very beautiful, Magda. You would be a prize to any man.” His voice was low, rough, and he swallowed. “Your husband is a fool.”

The longing vanished from his face as he seemed to realize the impertinence of his words and the placement of his hands. The doctor straightened and stepped back. “Forgive me.”

The rush left her light-headed, disappointment deflating her. Yet Magda stood and snatched the handle of the bucket with sweaty palms.

“I forgive you,” tumbled from her lips.

Magda darted from the room. After pulling the door closed, she stopped herself and pushed her forehead against the frame. The pressure of his palms lingered on her cheeks. Magda inhaled deep breaths through her nose, calming herself before returning to the kitchen.



Magda quickened her pace, not only from the blustery chill but because it was Wednesday. She would see the doctor again! The weekend had seemed unreasonably long, and the days felt as if they purposefully crawled simply to torment her.

It pained Magda to not steal glances at him when he traveled the stairs. She had considered offering to take him his lunch tray, but she couldn't risk giving Mrs. Tumova any reason to suspect that her interest had changed.

The line outside Doctor Straka's home was forming, and she slowed her pace. A little girl, clothed in a coat she'd clearly outgrown several winters ago and a threadbare scarf, lingered at the bottom of the stoop. Magda immediately wanted to give the child her own scarf.

As Magda approached, the little girl fidgeted and lowered her face but not before she had seen the girl's watering eyes and tear-streaked cheeks.

The child's hand shot out from her pocket. Dirt outlined the tiny nails of her fingers, which clutched a bit of torn paper. Eyes still downcast, she waved the paper at Magda, muttering words in a language Magda didn't know.

When Magda didn't take the paper, the girl dropped it, turned, and ran. She disappeared across the street before Magda could protest.

“She say that is for doctor,” came the broken speech of the woman at the front of the line.

“Oh.” Magda retrieved the paper and thanked the woman.

Without unfolding it, Magda presented it to Mrs. Tumova.

“What’s this?” Mrs. Tumova took the dirty slip of paper.

“A little girl gave it to me. She said it was for the doctor.”

The housekeeper frowned at its contents. “I can’t read this. Looks to be Yiddish, I think.” She handed it back to Magda. “Doctor Straka is down already.” Mrs. Tumova thrust her chin in the direction of his study.

Magda hoped she’d hidden the joy on her face as she turned to leave the kitchen. She stopped at his door to smooth her hair and straighten her coat, to wipe her sweating palms on her sleeves. She knocked lightly on the door.

“Enter.”

As Magda did, she halted, unsure whether she should close the door behind her or not. For Mrs. Tumova’s sake, she left it open.

“This note was left for you, Doctor Straka.”

His eyes flitted to the open door. “Thank you, Mrs. Hlavacova.” He took the paper; his gaze made Magda’s cheeks flame.

The corners of his mouth turned down as he read the note. “Mr. Straub passed on two nights ago.”

Magda’s heart ached as she watched the gravity of the loss reflect on the doctor’s face. Although he had known the old man’s fate, it was obvious that the reality of it came as a blow.

She wanted to go to him, but she hesitated. Who was she to comfort such a man?

The doctor’s shoulders slumped, and he leaned against his desk. Magda stepped to him, unable to stop herself. Much to her surprise, he reached out and grasped her hands.

Magda did not shy away but savored the sensations the doctor’s strong hands induced. He pulled her closer, until only the distance of their joined hands separated them.

Her name fell whispered from his lips, and she peered into his face. Gone was the sadness that had been there only a second ago. Desire now burned in his eyes.

Magda’s knees threatened to give way when he bent toward her. His warm breath caressed her ear, her neck.

“I will call for assistance when the last patient has gone.”

Magda was certain her heart had stopped beating. His lips lingered against her ear but did not touch. Delicious goose bumps tightened her skin. If she turned her head only a little, their lips would

meet. Magda's ache grew deeper.

She was reluctant to break away, but she knew she had already stayed too long to deliver a note. He didn't resist when Magda pulled her hands from his. Not meeting his gaze, she nodded and left the room on wobbly legs.