

1

*L*ISA JURA took her appearance very seriously. She stood in front of the mirror for an eternity, arranging her dark red hair so that it peeked stylishly from under the wool hat she had just bought in the hand-me-down store. The hat needed the perfect tilt . . . just so. She had seen the models do it in the fashion magazines.

She was determined to look more sophisticated than her fourteen years. She was going to her piano lesson and there was nothing more important. Finally turning from the mirror, she smiled at the image of a saucy young girl.

After opening the front door quietly, so as not to disturb her family, she walked down the hallway of the crowded tenement and emerged from the solemn gray building, stepping onto the sidewalk of Franzensbrückestrasse in the heart of the Jewish section of the city.

As she had done every Sunday since her tenth birthday, Lisa boarded the lumbering streetcar and crossed Vienna, heading for Professor Isseles's studio.

She loved the ride.

THE CHILDREN OF WILLESDEN LANE

The images rushed by her window—the glorious Ferris wheel of the Prater amusement park and the blue and serene Danube—eerily accompanied by the distant rhythm of an oompah band. To go across the city was to enter another century—the era of grand palaces and stately ballrooms. Street upon street of marble and granite, of pillar and pediment. The spire of St. Stephen’s Cathedral danced by. Her father called it “*Der Alte Steffe*”—“Old Stevie.” Lisa thought it a silly name; it was much more grand than that, rising to the heavens like a castle in a fairy tale.

As the streetcar descended the broad avenue and passed Symphony Hall, Lisa closed her eyes, just as she had many times before, and imagined herself sitting perfectly still in front of the grand piano on the stage of the great auditorium. A hush fell over the audience. The keys shimmered in front of her, ebony against ivory. She could hear the opening of Grieg’s heroic piano concerto: the soft roll of the tympani building until the moment of her entrance. She straightened her back into the elegant posture her mother had taught her, and when the tension was almost unbearable she took a breath and began to play.

She could sense the excitement of the audience and feel their hearts beat in time with hers. The exhilaration of hearing the music inside her was so extreme that the bumps of the ride and the noise of the street no longer disturbed her.

When she finally opened her eyes, the car was passing the Ringstrasse, the majestic tree-lined boulevard where the Grand Court Opera House stood. She looked out the window in awe and waited for the driver to call her stop.

This was the Vienna of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Mahler, and Strauss, the greatest composers of all time.

Lisa's mother had filled her head with their stories, and she had made a secret vow to live up to their legacy. She could hear their music in the marble of the buildings and the stones of the streets. They were here. They were listening.

In a booming voice, the driver called out her stop. But today his words were strange and different. In place of the familiar "Mahler-Strasse" she was expecting, he called another name: "Meistersinger-Strasse." Lisa's heart stopped momentarily.

She climbed down into the great plaza. All the street signs had been changed; the Nazis did not approve of such a grand avenue being named after a Jew. She felt her fury grow but tried to contain herself. Getting upset would only interfere with her music. She forced herself to think about the lesson ahead, knowing that once she was at the piano, the world outside would disappear.

Although it was early, the café-lined streets bustled with energy. The gentle sounds of the "Blue Danube" waltz, mixing with raucous Dixieland jazz, returned the smile to Lisa's face. The aroma of warm, fresh *apfelstrudel*, thick with sliced apples and cinnamon, made her long for a taste of her mother's recipe—surely the best in all of Vienna.

Inside the cafés, well-dressed young men and women sipped their coffee, deep in animated conversation. Lisa imagined them all to be composers, artists, and poets passionately defending their latest works. She yearned to join them, to wear fine clothes and speak of Beethoven and Mozart—to be a part of that intoxicating café society. One day, when she made her musical debut, these streets, these cafés, would be hers.

When Lisa reached her destination, she stopped short. A German soldier, tall and emotionless, stood in the door-

THE CHILDREN OF WILLESDEN LANE

way of the old stone building that housed Professor Isseles's music studio. The sun glinted harshly off the black rifle he held against his gray uniform.

She had been coming to the professor's studio for nearly four years, but this was the first time anyone had been standing guard. She shouldn't have been surprised, though; Nazi guards were becoming an increasingly menacing sight on the streets of Vienna.

He asked coldly, "What business do you have here?"

"I have a piano lesson," she replied, trying not to be frightened by the soldier's commanding presence or by the firearm on his shoulder.

"The professor will be waiting," she continued in a loud, clear voice, the force of her words belying her true state of mind. The soldier looked up to the second-floor window. A figure stared down, then motioned that it was all right for the girl to come up. Lowering his weapon, the soldier moved away from the door and grudgingly allowed Lisa to pass.

"Come in, Miss Jura," Professor Isseles said, greeting Lisa with his customary warm handshake. The stoop-shouldered, white-haired gentleman ushered her in past a chipped bust of Beethoven and a sideboard covered with stacks of yellow sheet music. She breathed in the aroma of the professor's pipe tobacco. These sights and scents had become a friendly greeting—a signal that for the next hour, she could turn away from all else and be a part of the music she loved.

The professor's stately Blüthner piano stood in the middle of the studio. It was richly polished, with ornately carved legs and a scroll-patterned music stand. On the wall

hung her teacher's prized possession—a photograph of Franz Liszt as an old man, surrounded by several students, including the professor's teacher. He boasted that his teachings were a direct line from the master himself, and there was a worn mark on the photograph where he had so often placed his finger.

As usual, there was little small talk. Lisa put the score of Beethoven's Piano Concerto no. 1 in C on the music stand and sat on the worn piano bench. She adjusted its height to fit her small stature.

"So, Miss Jura, was it difficult?" asked the professor.

"It was much too easy," she teased.

"Then I expect nothing less than perfection," he responded, smiling.

Lisa began to play the tender C-major opening theme. The professor sat forward in his chair and followed her progress with his copy of the score. When the simple theme erupted into cascades of descending arpeggios, she peered out of the corner of her eye to judge his reaction.

She hoped to catch him smiling. After all, she had learned the complicated first movement in only a week and had often heard him say that she was his best student.

But the professor continued listening with a stern concentration. When he had this expression, she imagined it was his sadness at not being able to play the piano anymore. Arthritis had stiffened his fingers, making it impossible to demonstrate the correct way of playing. What a cruel trick of fate to deny a pianist the ability to perform, she thought. She could not imagine a day when she would not be able to play.

To illustrate his lessons, Professor Isseles would play recordings for her on his gramophone. He was in awe of Horowitz's playing of Rachmaninoff, but it was the lyri-

cism of Myra Hess performing Beethoven that he most appreciated.

"Listen to the tone of her legato," the professor would say with a sigh.

Lisa listened and listened and listened.

For most of the hour Lisa played uninterrupted, as the old man sat in silence, occasionally bringing his hand down to emphasize an accent in the music. Finally, he put down his music and just listened. She looked over and saw a distressed expression on his face. Was she playing that badly?

At the end of the piece, the professor made no comment. Lisa went on to her customary scales and waited anxiously for her assignment. The professor focused on scraping the bowl of his pipe into the ashtray.

"May I do the adagio for next week?" she asked nervously. She loved the second movement and yearned to show him her improving legato.

He looked at her for a long moment, then finally spoke, looking uncomfortable and ashamed: "I am sorry, Miss Jura. But I am required to tell you that I cannot continue to teach you."

Lisa was stunned and unable to move. The professor walked to his window and opened the curtain. He stared at the people in the street. "There is a new ordinance," he said slowly. "It is now a crime to teach a Jewish child." He continued mumbling under his breath, then added in despair, "Can you imagine!"

Lisa felt tears rising.

"I am not a brave man," he said softly. "I am so sorry."

He came over to the piano, lifted up her slender young hands, and held them in his grip. "You have a remarkable gift, Lisa, never forget that."

THE CHILDREN OF WILLESDEN LANE

Through her tears, she watched the professor pick up a thin gold chain that lay on top of the piano. It held a tiny charm in the shape of a piano.

“It is not much, but perhaps it will help you to remember the music we shared here,” he said softly, fastening the gold chain around her neck with trembling fingers.

She stared through her tears at the stacks of music, the picture of Liszt on the wall, and tried to memorize every detail. She was afraid she might never see them again. Gathering her composure, she thanked the professor and collected her things, then turned and fled.

The cold November wind sent a deep shiver through Lisa’s slender body as she pulled her coat tight around her and waited for the next streetcar. German SS, storm troopers, were everywhere she looked. Were they all staring at her? She threw her head back and walked defiantly toward the approaching car, climbing onto the landing and grabbing the frozen pole tightly with her woolen mittens. Staring back at the huge building, she memorized the pattern of its beveled glass windows, the size of its portico, and the gleam of the bronze door handle, shining from the polish of thousands of handclasps. The professor waved sadly before disappearing from his window.

Why were Germans telling Austrians what they could or couldn’t do? It wasn’t fair, and why were the Austrians letting them? There must be an answer—there must be someone to blame.

The faces on the streetcar were staring at her with pity. She quickly yanked the hat off her head and covered her face, realizing she had been crying since she’d left the studio. She wouldn’t give these horrible people the satisfaction of watching her.

THE CHILDREN OF WILLESDEN LANE

The ride was endless, its magic gone. She couldn't wait to get back to Franzensbrückestrasse, where everyone in the old neighborhood knew her—the little girl who played the piano. The neighbors had gossiped at first about her mother, Malka, when she had bought that expensive upright piano from Mr. Minsky's secondhand store. How could the Juras afford it? Such an extravagant purchase in these tense times.

But five years later, the neighbors had realized their shortsightedness. Malka's daughter was special. She had a gift. You could hear it in the butcher's shop, you could hear it in the bakery—the music drifted everywhere. The street itself seemed to smile when the little girl played. People started calling her by that special word: Lisa Jura was a prodigy.

Sometimes Lisa played so loudly that her banging octaves could be heard above the clatter of the trashcans and mixed into the teeming loudness of tenement clatter.

But when she played softly and sweetly, old couples would move to their windows and stop whatever they were doing. Schubert and Mozart would float down the stairs, in and out of apartments, and fill the neighborhood with grace.

The music transported the mind of this precocious teenager into fanciful imaginings. As she played the first bars of a Strauss waltz, she saw herself in a satin ball gown, her hand held high by some count or marquis, being led to the dance floor. The elegant crowd parted as she made her entrance.

From the time she was a little girl, Malka taught Lisa to surrender herself completely to the music by telling her stories and painting fantastic images. For Lisa the music became her whole world: an escape from the dark streets,

the rundown flats, shops, and markets that were home to Vienna's working-class Jews. And now, the most important escape of all, from the Nazis.

As she neared 13 Franzensbrückestrasse, Lisa's steps were uncharacteristically slow. Her heels barely left the ground; her upright posture sagged. She arrived in her living room and dropped her music on the bench with a gesture that alarmed her mother.

"What is it, Liseleh, what's wrong?" Malka took her daughter in her arms and stroked her hair. Lisa cried desperately. Malka guessed what must have happened. "Is it Professor Isseles?"

Lisa nodded.

"Don't worry, I taught you before. I will teach you again." Lisa tried to smile at her mother's offer, but they both knew that Lisa had long ago surpassed her mother's ability.

"Let's play something now. Let's begin the day all over again."

"I can't play now, Mama. I'm too upset."

"Oh, Lisa, have you forgotten all I've taught you? It's at times like this that your music is most important."

Malka went to the cupboard and pulled out the complete preludes by Chopin; after opening the book to the number four in E Minor, she sat at the piano.

"I'll play the right hand, you play the left," Malka insisted.

"I can't."

"Play what is in your heart."

Lisa sat beside her, playing the four-four rhythm of the marching, repeating chords. When she'd mastered the left hand, she took over from her mother, blending the plaintive melody of the upper register with the somber chords

THE CHILDREN OF WILLESDEN LANE

of the base. The melody reached its final question and found resolution in an exquisite pianissimo.

Outside, an old woman put down her heavy groceries, leaned against the building, and listened.

When she finished the Chopin, Lisa went to her room and lay down, crying as silently as possible into the pillow.

A few minutes later she felt a warm hand on her shoulder, stroking her gently. It was her older sister, Rosie. "Don't cry, Lisa," she urged. "Come on. I'll show you something."

Lisa finally rolled over and looked up at the smartly dressed twenty-year-old. She was always happy when her older sister made time for her, since Rosie had been spending most of her time these days with her fiancé, Leo.

"Crying won't help, Lisa. Let me show you something I just learned, come on," Rosie insisted, taking Lisa by the hand.

Lisa stumbled into the bathroom behind her sister and glimpsed her tearstained face in the mirror. Rosie emptied out the contents of a cloth bag and spread all manner of powder and paints on the bathroom dresser.

"I'll show you a new way to do your lips—you'll look just like Marlene Dietrich."

As they had so many times before, Rosie carefully applied lipstick and eye makeup to Lisa's face.

"See? A little bit wider than the lip line."

Her sister should know, Lisa thought. She had been the runner-up in a Miss Vienna contest—two years earlier—when they had still allowed non-Aryan contestants. Without warning, their twelve-year-old sister Sonia burst through the door.

"What are you two doing in here!"

THE CHILDREN OF WILLESDEN LANE

“Look at Lisa, doesn’t she look like a movie star?”

Lisa stared excitedly at her new face in the mirror. She looked five years older! The sound of footsteps approaching stopped them in their tracks.

“Quick! Mama’s coming!”

In a well-rehearsed drill, Lisa scrubbed her face with soap and water and Rosie scrambled to hide the cosmetics, as little Sonia looked on and giggled. Rosie put a protective arm around Lisa, and for a moment the sorrow of Professor Isseles seemed far away. The three sisters joined hands and emerged to greet their mother.