



AGAINST A CRIMSON SKY

BOOK 2 OF THE
POLAND
TRILOGY

JAMES CONROYD MARTIN

Author of
PUSH NOT THE RIVER

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Against a Crimson Sky

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JAMES CONROYD MARTIN



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

For Scott, Barbara, John, Rick, Faye, Bob, and Jeanie

Also by James Conroyd Martin

Push Not the River Book One

The Warsaw Conspiracy Book Three

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Glossary

dog's blood—damn; damn it

kołacz (kaw-watch)—bread made for the wedding celebration

Marzanna—the Polish Goddess Death, depicted in white and carrying a scythe

“*Napoleoni Magni Caesari et Victori*”—“To Napoléon, the Great Caesar and Victor!”

Opłatek—an unconsecrated bread wafer usually shared among those participating in wigilia meal while sharing the wafer, each participant forgives past transgressions and wishes everyone health, luck, wealth, and after death, a crown in heaven.

owczarek niziny—the lowland sheepdog

Shepherds' Watch—Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve

starosta—the local magistrate

szlachta (shlach-ta)—the gentry; officially of equal status, in actuality their wealth and holdings often varied greatly

Szkoła Rycerska—The school of knighthood, a military school founded by King Stanisław

Third of May Constitution—Ratified in 1791, the first written constitution in Europe initiating democratic reform; overthrown in 1794 when certain disgruntled Polish magnates invited Catherine of Russia in to protect their interests; Poland's final partition occurred in 1795 with Russia, Prussia, and Austria dividing the spoils

wigilia—the Christmas Eve meal and celebration; it is valued more highly than Christmas Day.

Name Pronunciation Key

Halicz = Hah-leech

Jan = Yahn

Józef = Yú-zef

Kościuszko = Kawsh-chew-shkaw

Kraków = Krah-koof

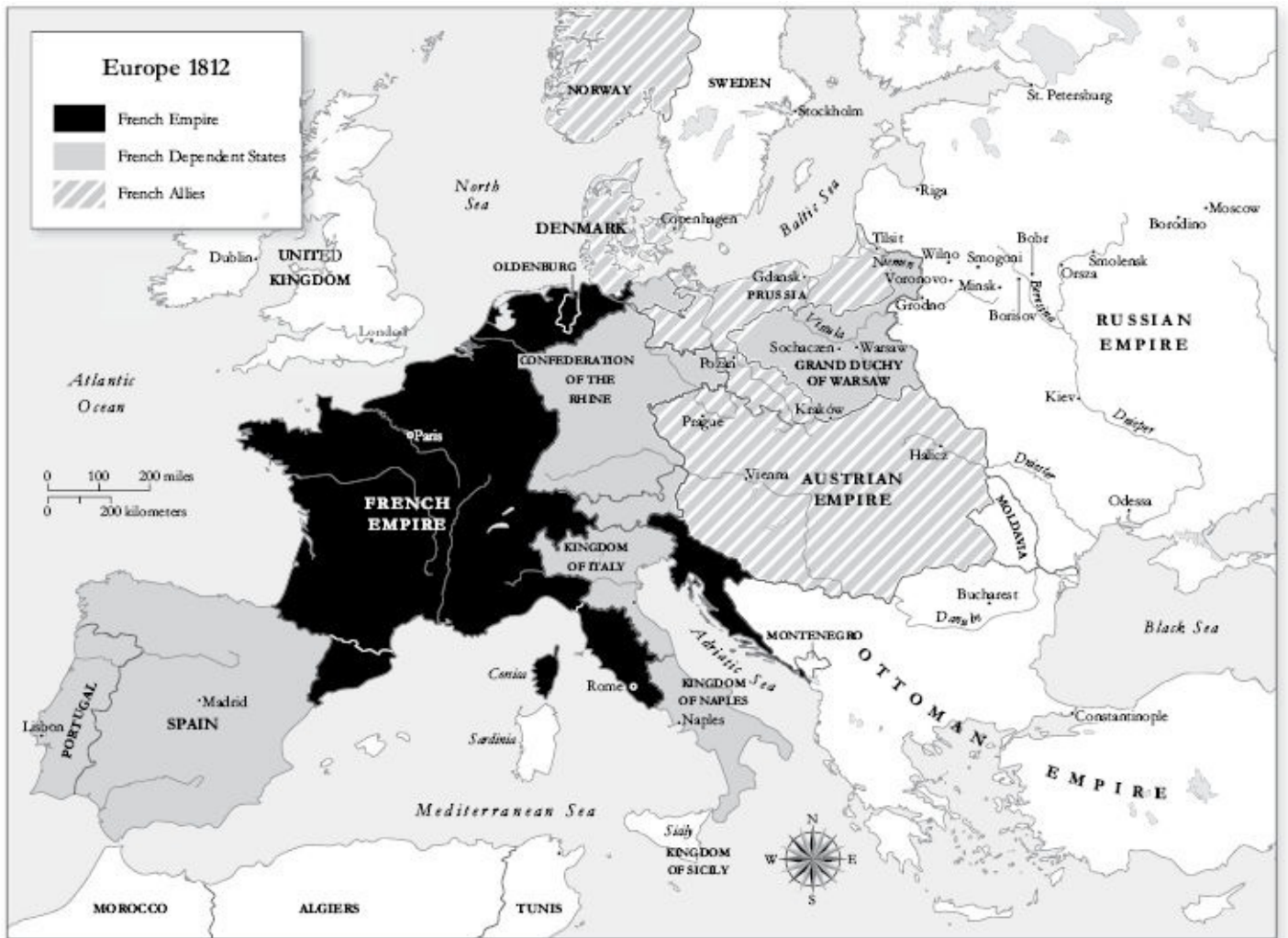
Michał = Mee-how

Paweł = Pah-vel

Sochaczew = Saw-hah-cheff

Stanisław = Stan-neess-wahf

Wilanów = Vee-lahn-ooff



Prologue



Whom the Gods Love
Die Young

—Polish Proverb

Poland 1794

2 November All Souls Day

Swollen with recent rains, the river heaved and churned, flowing rapidly away from Warsaw, its burden of bodies propelled carelessly along, like so much flotsam.

A partially clad woman clung to something as the current took her. A log? A piece of plank from the broken bridge? Delirious from the fall, she was certain she was dying—or had died. Her faint memories—or the hazy filaments of a childhood belief that she conjured now—suggested she might expect to ascend into heaven as if on wings. Or plummet to a hell she had thought little about.

But she was being carried now in an undulating line—like a weightless twig—through the drumming rush of water. The sparkling interplay of the afternoon sunshine on the water was deceiving, for the river was brutally cold.

The woman's mind inexplicably fastened onto the mythical river that was thought to usher one to the Greek Underworld. Her cousin had told her about it—the river Acheron, was it? She dared not open her eyes.

What was she to expect in the Underworld? There would be the fee for the ferry boat operator. Did she have any coins? She thought not, and without a coin he would not bring her across. Everyone knew that. Might she use her charms on him? Were charms of her kind taken as legal tender in the Underworld? She had her doubts.

Her heart felt the icy fingers of the river upon it. How was she to account for her life? The things she had done?

The frigid, pulsating water seemed to run faster now—like her fear—rushing her to her fate.

The ancient Poles had believed that those who died by drowning were doomed to become water spirits, forever residing in the waters where they had met death. She imagined Marzanna, Goddess of Death, waiting for her at the river's end, dressed in white and carrying her scythe.

The woman pushed the Polish deity from her mind. At the age of twenty, she had run out of time. So?—what of it? She had often proclaimed that the years of her youth were ducats to be spent. Wishing she had lived a better life was useless. Just as well, she thought—she had never been one for apologies. Or regrets.

She was cold, cold to the bone. She took in a mouthful of water and coughed. Despite the urge, she knew not to move a hand to her face. To do so would cause her to lose her grip, and the river would draw her to its bottom. Her arms and hands were frozen in position, locked onto the object they were

holding . . . holding.

And if God was the Christian God of her parents' beliefs, she wondered, would he forgive her?

With the numbing cold, she felt darkness descending—and the angry resignation that death was imminent. It was as certain as the fall of night's curtain. . . . *Dog's Blood!* How had she come to such an ignominious end?



The villagers who had hurried down to the river's edge stared in horror at the cargo the River Vistula was carrying past them. Those transfixed with wide eyes were mostly women, their men having gone off to fight with Kościuszko against the invading forces. An old man gawked much like the others—in silence—as the flotilla of human bodies moved steadily along. Sometimes a corpse became enmeshed in the weeds and foliage at the bank of the river, but the force of other bodies following a similar fateful journey goaded it once again on its way—or the water's strong current drew it down.

In disbelief, the old man turned toward Warsaw; the city was a great distance away, twenty miles upriver, but he could see an eerie, orange glow and above that, thick, black smoke rising high into the air. Had the capital fallen to the Russians? *God help us all*, he prayed. Then aloud: "God and the Black Madonna!"

The man's grandson had braved the sight, going close to the shore.

The old man called him back. This was no sight for a sixteen-year-old, even one already wounded in the patriots' cause. The boy seemed not to hear.

"Jerzy, come back!" he called again.

His grandson turned, a queer look on his face, and waved him forward.

Without questioning, the old man obeyed.

When he came to the shore, his eyes widened at the sight that held Jerzy spellbound. A raven-haired woman clung to what looked like planking that had become caught in the thick reeds and tubers at the river's side. Her skirt was red as blood, and she was naked above the waist. She was both young and beautiful . . . something about her told him she must certainly be noble.

The old man saw now what Jerzy had seen. Little bubbles at her mouth. *Damn!* The woman was gasping for breath. She was alive!

The peasant understood what his grandson meant to do and moved closer to assist.

Jerzy immediately stepped into the water, reaching for the woman with one arm while the other linked him to his grandfather and to the river's bank.

Jerzy tugged at one of the woman's arms, trying to force her to let go of what had held her afloat. Her skin was a grayish blue. "Let go! Let go!" he cried.

She remained insensible to his directions. The mouth seemed to twist and tighten. Her talonlike hands held fast.

The current spun her body now, pulling her, whipping her legs and lower body out toward the river's middle, as if the river had mighty hands that would not allow her to be rescued.

Jerzy held on, persisting in loosening her grip, pulling back one finger, then another. At last his hand came free and came to clasp hers as he pulled her to him. Her other hand willingly released the tubers which had held her afloat the long distance from Warsaw, and as the old man aided his grandson in

pulling the woman to safety, he saw that she had set free the red uniformed body of a Russian soldier
its mustachioed face blue and bloated beneath the waters.

Part One



The Doorstep of the Palace
Is Slippery.

—Polish Proverb

Warsaw 1794

The West Gate
13 December

Her heart contracting in fear, Anna returned the ice blue gaze of the Russian soldier who stared u through the open doorway of the covered carriage—and she thought she could do murder.

Here was a man with power, the power to keep her from the home she had not seen in three years from the child who had been sent to safety there two months before, and from the man who should have been her husband in '91 had it not been for fate and the interference of others. . . .

The soldier's beadlike, wolfish eyes moved over her, and Anna instantly felt a shiver travel u from the base of her spine—until she had to fend off a trembling at her shoulders. She would not b cowed. Her back stiffened as she steeled her nerves.

“What is your destination?” he demanded in broken Polish for the second time.

“Sochaczew.” She kept her voice steady. “To my family home.” Her reply came in Polish. She would not let him know she could speak his tongue.

“Papers!”

His brusqueness did not surprise Anna. Nothing since the fall of Warsaw into Russian hands surprised her anymore. “Here,” she said, handing him the parchment Paweł had given her.

She tried not to watch as he officiously perused the documents. Her upper teeth tore at her lower lip as she silently cursed him—and a fate that had brought thousands of such interlopers into Poland catapulting them into positions of power.

The open door allowed for the coach interior to go cold as a vault. But Anna had more serious concerns and a chill that ran deeper. What if she was denied egress from the city? What if he saw fit to take her into custody? What if —?

“Your purpose in Sochaczew?” he barked, failing to address her properly. The man was impudent. She knew that if he could read, he had to be aware of her title.

“My mother is near death.”

His eyes narrowed as if to assess her veracity. “Too bad.”

It was a lie, of course, but Anna felt confident that he could have no way of knowing both of her parents had died in '91. She neither flinched nor turned away her gaze. The ruddiness of his face—the

not hidden by a great black moustache—was enlivened by the red of his uniform.

“And when will you return to Warsaw?”

“I am not certain. Such things are hard to predict.”

“Of course,” he said, without a trace of empathy. “And this?” He nodded toward the passenger opposite Anna, as if she were a parcel.

“Lutisha, my servant.”

He looked from one to the other. “Any weapons to declare?”

“No.”

“Certain?”

Were they to be searched? Her pulse quickened at the possibility. “I am quite certain, Captain.” Anna smiled nicely. She knew well the soldier’s uniform was that of a lieutenant. It couldn’t hurt to inflate his stature a bit.

He did not correct her. “Very well.” Without further questions, he handed the document back to Anna and slammed the door. “Move on!” he called to Anna’s driver.

The carriage lurched and rumbled forward, passing through the city’s western gate. The fingers of her right hand moved over the folds of her dress, lightly tracing the object stowed in a hidden pocket—her pistol.

Anna smiled at the wide-eyed Lutisha—so faithful a servant—hoping to reassure her, but her own heart continued to race. *The swine! The filthy swine!* She had won the little battle with the Russian soldier but cursed him nonetheless. He, with the assumed power he held over her, *had* put fear into her heart, and she was tired to death of being fearful.

As the carriage moved away from the city, Anna took herself to task, for it was fear that had made her draw closed the leather window curtains at the outset of their journey. In leaving Paweł’s town house on Piwna Street, they had passed through the Outer Courtyard of the Royal Castle, and Anna could not bear to look at the palace, knowing as she did, that Poland’s monarchy was most likely at an end. Even less did she want to see across the River Vistula to the once vibrant suburb of Praga, now charred ruins, her aunt’s pristine white town house on the bluff burnt to cinders. She smiled tightly at Lutisha’s puzzlement and gave no explanation for shutting out the light.

The cobblestones now gave way to the hard earth of winter, and the carriage started to bounce and roll through the countryside at a moderate clip.

Anna’s fear ebbed. The journey—barring the unforeseen—would take less than a day. They should arrive at her estate in time for supper. She would be home. She felt lucky, indeed, for her family estate remained intact, but she felt a foreign sort of guilt, too, because Jan had lost his estate at Uściszewo, Zeilone and Zofia had lost both the family estate at Halicz and the town house in Praga, all to the invading Russians.

Anna and Lutisha sat in silence and semi-darkness for half an hour.

“May I open my curtain, madame?” Lutisha asked at last.

“What? Oh, yes, of course.” The briefest of knowing looks on Lutisha’s face told Anna she had misjudged her, that the servant knew exactly why Anna had closed it.

Anna opened her own curtain now, too. The sun was shining brightly for a cold December day. She

sat at the small window, her eyes on the passing flat expanses of whitened fields, patches of birch and evergreen forests, an occasional manor house—and myriad cottages and huts where people tended their animals, living their lives as their ancestors had done. Each blink of the eye produced a new living portrait. She wondered at the sights, for they gave no clue to what Poland had endured, no clue to what had befallen her country. The sights touched a place in her heart, a sad place, because she knew that this was merely the appearance of things, for the peasants' losses were as heart-rending as those of any other patriot. A close examination of the passing scenes revealed many more women than men at their tasks. A multitude of their men had willingly taken up scythes at the call of Tadeusz Kościuszko. Many of them had been slain by the allied powers of Austria, Prussia, and Russia. They would not be returning to their modest homes.

Lutisha sat across from Anna, her large, round face a stoic mask, her fingers moving over the beads of a well-worn rosary. Still, the gray eyes of the old and corpulent servant could not veil the sadness, blinking at long intervals like those of a falcon. *How loyal she is*, Anna thought, *loyal and brave and strong!* With the Russians descending on Warsaw, she had chosen to stay with Anna and Zofia in the city, rather than leave with her daughter's family for the safety of the country.

"You'll see Marta and her family in time for supper, Lutisha."

The woman's toothless smile lighted Anna's heart. It struck Anna how alike was this peasant to Aunt Stella, the countess Lutisha had served all her life. One noble at birth, one peasant—and yet both born with Polish hearts and souls. Aunt Stella . . . Anna's own heart caught. Countess Stella Grońska had been fortunate in that she had not lived to see the destruction of her Praga town house, the fall of Warsaw, and the impending dissolution of her beloved homeland. Anna turned her gaze again to the passing landscape. She could not help but wonder whether her own son would grow up to call this land *Poland*.

The thought cut to the quick, and Anna tried to think of other things. It was good fortune that they had left a Russian-held Warsaw with so little fuss. How had Paweł made it possible for her to leave? In early November, after the Russians retook the capital, they threw about it a fine net of security, tightening it as if the city were the Golden Fleece. How had he produced the documents? Had he bribed someone? "Anna," he had cautioned her earlier that morning as he helped her into the coach and provided her with the traveling papers, "this document refers to you only as Countess Berezowska-Grawlińska. No mention is made of your having been recently named *princess*. I suggest that remain a secret."

What was this concern over her title? She guessed that being a member of the *szlachta*, the minor nobility of which there were many, made her less suspect than being of the higher nobility—or even the magnate class. But there had been no time to question Paweł in the matter.

King Stanisław August had meant the title as a reward for her patriotism, but because he ignored the warning she had dared to bring him about the untimely uprising against the Russians, it mattered little to her. And what gave an even hollower ring to the appellation of "princess" was that for decades now, titles came to Polish citizens only through foreign powers; Stanisław had bestowed her title under the auspices of Catherine of Russia. Catherine—Poland's inveterate enemy! Her body tensed at the thought.

Anna stared out at the blur of scenery. Thoughts and time fell away.

At last, her eyes found focus and she realized the landscape was becoming more and more familiar. She was returning home to Sochaczew. She thought how much her life had changed since she had left her family manor house more than three years before. Both she and her country had changed. There was much to regret, things best forgotten.

The carriage moved now through a forest, the daylight dimming as if dusk had fallen. With a start Anna recognized an almost indiscernible path that led into a thick patch of evergreens. She took in a deep breath, then expelled it slowly. When she closed her eyes, the old memory washed over her uninvited, like the cold, dark, and turbid waters of the pond she knew lay a few miles into the blackest heart of the forest. Her usual powers of repression failed.

For the moment, she was alone again in the dense and eerie woods on the shore of that pond. Night had fallen, a moonless, starless, night. Everything about her was still and black, and she could not help but recall the superstition that the forest was home to the devil. With her sprained ankle, she had lain in the pungent fall leaves for hours, like a wounded bird, awaiting the rescue party while holding on to the bone-chilling cold and fighting the ignition of real panic.

She could not imagine what was keeping Zofia, who had gone for help. And then came the senseless alarm—of someone, something, lurking nearby. Something dangerous. Watching her. A long moment passed with only the drumming sound of her own beating heart.

Suddenly a figure stumbled out of the shrubbery and moved toward her in a deliberate and menacing way. Despite the injury she began running—running—insensible to pain—fear propelling her on, her feet padding along the water-parched bank of the pond.

A tree trunk provided only a momentary hiding place, and when the beast found her, she managed to push him into the pond. But he held fast, pulling her with him into the cold, murky depths. Struggling to free herself, she worked her way to shore—knowing he was close behind.

Then came the clawlike hand upon her back—the stink of liquor on his breath—the earth rising up—and a white-hot explosion as her head hit the stony ground. His body on hers—crushing her—rending her—terror giving way to torn flesh and raw pain.

Then, oblivion.

Anna pushed the memory into the dark and empty place inside her where she held it prisoner. She did not have to admit to herself that from that violent and terrible night in the forest had come Jan Michał, her beloved child. Who could explain that? He was at Sochaczew, where he had been taken for safety's sake before the Russian onslaught.

And Count Jan Stelnicki was there at Sochaczew, too, waiting for her. Anna felt hot tears beading in her eyes at the mere thought. Her fears seemed to vanish. In the letter she carried near to her heart Jan had pledged his love and proposed marriage. He would adopt Jan Michał. Anna wondered whether he would be allowed to keep his title, for he had fought with Kościuszko against the allied forces. Perhaps even she would be denied her royalty. But what did it matter? They would be together. She would have him at last. Happiness was within reach. She suppressed the thought that years before she had seemed within reach, too.

Anna recalled, as she often did, that warm afternoon in September of '91, before *it* had happened.

that night in the forest. They had met in a meadow at midday. Jan, with his blond hair, cobalt blue eyes, and dimpled chin was the most handsome man she had ever seen. In but a few weeks she discovered that beneath his iconoclastic leanings, bold gaze, and glib forwardness, lay a sturdy foundation of patriotism, passion, gentleness. Her love for him took root and endured—increased—through the intervening months and years, years in which they saw almost nothing of each other. It frightened her now to think she might at last live her life with this man, find contentment with him. Did she deserve happiness? Was it truly a possibility? she wondered, for caution had set up a barrier about her heart.

She called to mind now the saying that the most important things in life happen only once. Surely this was the meeting with Jan Stelnicki.

And yet, somehow she had lived to see this day. A day of reunion. There was a God. There was! . . . mere six weeks earlier, she had miraculously survived the flight from the Russians across the burning Praga bridge—just before it collapsed into the River Vistula. Her cousin Zofia had not been so fortunate. Anna made the sign of the cross now. Her heart went out, guiltily, to her cousin, but she tried not to linger upon the loss, as she had all this while. . . . Today she would be reunited with her son and with Jan. It was not a time to dwell on the past and the dead . . . not today! The carriage trundled on.



In no time they came into Sochaczew. The Market Square seemed oddly deserted. Soon they would pass the cemetery. So much death—and yet Anna felt her heart beat rapidly. “We’re not far now!—a few more miles out of town.” Her family home, Topolostan—Poplar Estate—was named for the two columns of trees that lined the long, curving drive from the road to the house.

She remembered that Lutisha had never been to Sochaczew. “Oh, don’t put your expectations too high, Lutisha. It’s not as large as Aunt Stella’s estate at Halicz, mind you, or as elegant as her Praga town house.”

A flicker of hurt in Lutisha’s eyes halted Anna’s train of thought. She immediately regretted the mention of the two homes where Lutisha had spent the bulk of her years. Lutisha had taken lessons in the French ways of tending a home and had passed on the methods, as well as the etiquette, to her daughter and granddaughters. Barring outright ownership, she could have been no prouder of those residences. The town house was destroyed, as was nearly all of Praga, and the Groński manor house—“the great house,” the servants called it—had been burned in the summer of ’93 soon after the Russians invaded in support of the Confederacy of Targowica, the gathering of Polish magnates that had so foolishly invited Catherine into Poland to depose the Third of May Constitution.

While Anna was grasping for some comment that would assure Lutisha that her new home would be safe and welcoming, someone outside the coach shouted, and the vehicle ground to a an abrupt halt. Her excitement at being in Sochaczew was immediately snuffed by a dark presentiment.

“What is it?” Anna called to the driver. She could hear his raised voice amidst several others. She called out again.

“It’s the Russians, milady,” the driver called back, urgency in his tone. “The town’s been garrisoned. They want you to step out for interrogation.”

Interrogation. Looking to Lutisha, whose eyes had waxed like twin moons, Anna attempted a smile that she hoped would calm the aging servant and belie the cold terror that had seized her own heart.



Haunted by memories of the frigid river, the woman lay in the dark, unable to fasten her mind to any sustained thought. Despite a heavy counterpane and a fur covering over that, she shook continuously against the cold. Her eyes remained closed. When she shifted, even slightly, pain ran through her like a hundred piercing knives. Beneath her was the consolatory scent of fresh hay. She knew that she had come close to the surface of consciousness many times before this, hovering only briefly in the presence of strange, whispering voices. Somewhere, too, were the sounds of animals. Her mind did not attempt to distinguish what kind. Then she would again descend into a welcoming darkness that benumbed every sense.

It was the silence, the terrible and empty silence, that now worked at her, keeping her from her descent. Her eyelids lifted slowly, grudgingly, like tiny, weighted curtains. What she saw, she saw with stark objectivity, for her mind was unable to think. Gray light was beginning to filter in through the square, four-paned window on the wall to the foot of her bed. The play of the morning rays passed through the *wycinanki* that served as curtains, the delicate papercuts casting a striking design of flowers on the beaten earth that formed the floor. Her eyes moved to the opposite wall where a little table held a shrine consisting of icons and candles. Framed religious pictures hung on the wall above it. To the right of the table was a doorway through which a bread stove glowed white in the dimness.

To the right of the door hung a voluminous red skirt she vaguely recognized. On the floor rested a pair of once-elegant black boots. These, too, seemed familiar. Her eyes took in all of this, but it was not until she heard a door open and close that her mind formed real thought. *Who is entering?* She could hear footfalls. And for the first time, an alarm went off somewhere within her, breathing life into her dormant nerves. *Where am I?*

These cramped and rustic surroundings were unknown to her—and less than pleasing, although she wasn't sure why. She closed her eyes. She could hear bits of conversation between a man and a woman in the other room. They spoke in a low Polish dialect, their tones hushed. Who were the people?

The whispering lessened as the sounds of preparation for a meal began. The little room she was in—more an alcove, really—took on warmth as the stove was fed. She pulled the cover up to her neck and lulled into drowsiness by the smells of chickory and baking bread. She slept.

Some time later, she came suddenly awake. Some instinct told her she was being observed, and she immediately opened her eyes. An hour or two had passed. Daylight brightened the room. Two figures stood just a pace away, looking down at her.

“I told you she moved, I did,” the peasant woman said.

“You did,” said the weathered old man at her side. He smiled now. “It is good to see life with you, milady.” He had few teeth.

The woman wished they had not disturbed her, longed to fade back into the comfortable straw of her bed. But it wasn't her bed. Hers was made of—what? Something softer? Goose down? She

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