

THE MISSING PIECE

CHAPTER 1

The bus churned up the hill, its engine groaning, its tires spewing gravel at each twist in the switchback road. A man pulled himself out of his seat and trudged up the lurching aisle to crouch behind the driver's ear.

"Let me off at *Koponya*," the man said.

The driver yanked the stick shift out of one gear and jammed it into another. The bus bucked, knocking the man onto his ass. Someone in the second row laughed, and the man glared.

"No one gets off at *Koponya*," said the driver. The word meant *skull*.

"I do."

The two locked eyes in the large mirror over the windshield. The man's head was shaved, his deep-set eyes were lost in their own cavernous shadows. His slow grin revealed two cracked teeth.

"Yes, maybe you do," said the driver. "Go back to your seat. We have a way to go. I will stop. *Koponya*." The driver spat.

The man waded back down the aisle. The bus continued upward, the pitch of its engine deepening as the driver shifted into a lower gear. The trees thinned and then disappeared altogether, leaving nothing out the windows but scrub grass, rocks, and sky. The metal fence appeared suddenly, running jaggedly alongside the bus. The swirls of razor-wire were gone, the steel poles showed patches of rust.

The driver stopped the bus at the top of the hill and opened the door.

"*Koponya*, all out for *Koponya*," he called in a mocking tone.

The man walked down the aisle, intentionally bumping the driver's shoulder with his hip before stepping down the stairwell. The last three years had taught him a simple lesson: avenge every slight.

He jumped off the bottom step and slid several feet on the sloping gravel shoulder before catching himself. The bus pulled away in a black diesel cloud quickly torn apart by the wind. After a few seconds, all was quiet. He cupped his hands over his eyes. The sky was a brilliant blue, the sunlight blinding. Beyond the valley, rows of hills mounted toward the horizon where a curtain of haze hung over Lake Balaton. He backed away from the shoulder, then turned to cross the road. The shirt he had

grabbed from the bin that morning was too tight, the pants too loose. The cuffs dragged beneath the heels of patent-leather loafers more suitable for dancing than rock climbing.

Across the road, large boulders blocked the gated entrance to the army base that had been known as The Skull. He climbed between the boulders and settled down out of the wind.

Koponya, his mother had whispered to him during her last visit when his release date had been set. *Hide yourself, and I will find you.*

He took the last plug of beef jerky from his pocket and tore it in half with his teeth. The salty rush filled his mouth with saliva. As he chewed, a deep rumble rose beneath the wind. He swallowed the last of the jerky and raised his head, careful not to expose himself. A battered Yugo idled on the roadside. His mother stood behind it. She wore a long black skirt and a dull gray apron with a matching scarf tied around her head. The scarf and apron rippled in the wind. The neighbor sat behind the wheel of the Yugo, a hat pulled low over his eyes. The man rushed to the car and hugged his mother, but her arms remained at her side. She smelled of potatoes and vinegar.

“We must go quickly,” she said.

The man climbed into the back seat, which was littered with bleached chicken bones and crumpled bits of aluminum foil.

The neighbor put the Yugo into gear and headed in the same direction as the bus. At the bottom of the hill, he stopped at a crossroads with many signposts. The woman pointed left, and the neighbor turned.

“Why not Polgardi?” said the man.

“People have been asking about you.”

“What people?”

“The soldiers,” said his mother.

The neighbor nodded grimly, and the man sank back amid the bones and the foil.

At Keleti Railway Station in Budapest, they stayed in the car while the neighbor got out to open the Yugo’s trunk. The man’s mother fished a billfold from beneath her skirt.

“Your passport, tickets, some money,” she said. “Not much but enough.”

“Where am I going?”

“To meet your brother.”

Cadiz, thought the man. “Why?”

The neighbor slammed the trunk and slowly climbed in behind the wheel.

“Come,” said the mother.

A single suitcase stood on the curb. The man recognized it as a battered remnant of his father’s fine leather luggage. He gripped the

handle.

“In the suitcase is a letter,” said his mother. “Don’t read it until you get there. You never know who is watching. Speak to no one on the train. You never know who is listening.”

She kissed him twice on the cheeks.

“You must never come back,” she said. “No matter what happens, no matter what you hear. Promise me.”

“But...”

“Promise me.”

“I promise,” he said.

The train pulled out, and the man, sitting alone in the compartment, watched the city pass outside the window. Curiosity about the letter gnawed at him, but he respected his mother’s warning and knew he needed to wait.

In Bratislava, a family of three – mother, father, and daughter – joined him in the compartment, heading for Vienna. The man closed his eyes, first pretending and then actually falling asleep.

Some time later, the man opened his eyes. The family was gone, while outside the window a gray smog hung in a forest of blackened trees. He dragged the suitcase down from the rack and opened it on his lap. He pawed through the clothes, but found no letter.

At about the same time the train left Bratislava, the man’s mother returned to her home in Polgardi. She filled a pot with water and set it on the stove to boil. A distant rumble shook the house, a blast from the quarry three miles away.

Her eldest had been the talker, she thought as she sat to peel potatoes. He couldn’t keep his mouth shut, and that’s how they found him. The younger boys were more careful. They would survive.

She peeled the potatoes quickly, the skins falling onto her apron and sticking together in heavy clumps. Another blast from the quarry rolled over the house, rattling glasses in an open cupboard.

She heard something behind her, a creak in the floorboards. Strange, she thought, believing it connected to the blast then realizing there could be no connection. She stood silently, listening, until the creak sounded again. Moving quickly, she yanked open a cabinet door. The boy crouched among the big iron pots.

“My little one.” She hauled him out and hugged him. “I thought you went home. Why are you still here?”

“I’m hiding,” said the boy.

“Hiding from who? From me?”

The boy shook his head. “From the men.”

“What men?”

“The men in the dark clothes.”

Gravel crunched out front. One car door slammed shut, then

another. The woman pushed the boy back into the cabinet.

“Don’t move. Don’t make a sound.”

The boy’s eyes widened, frightened by her tone as much as by her words. He sat on a pot as she closed the door.

She stood at the sink, the paring knife in her hand like a dagger. Out the window, the treeless hill stood starkly against the harsh blue sky. The yellow grass trembled in the wind. A boot thumped on the wooden floor, and before she could turn the rope cut across her throat. A hand prised the paring knife from her fingers.

The rope tightened, lifting her off her feet. She kicked, she gagged. The rope lifted her higher. She could feel it dragging across the ceiling rafter. She could see the sink below her, the floor littered with potato skins.

She dangled helplessly, fighting for breath with each jolt of the rope. Finally, as her last breath burned in her lungs, she saw the wine cellar. The forest was green and warm. Her eldest son stood at the door, smiling at her. He stepped back as she floated inside toward a wall of sparkling silver.

In the cabinet, the boy watched through the tiny latticework of the door. He saw dark figures struggling, the paring knife drop to the wooden floor. He heard stifled screams and animal grunts. He watched her feet kick until they slowly gave up the struggle.

The men spoke to each other in a strange language. Then suddenly, one of them crouched. Through the lattice, the boy saw the hard face and the cold blue eyes. He held his breath, terrified that the man would open the cabinet. But the man only grabbed the knife from the floor. In a few moments, the front door closed, the car engines started, and the cars drove away.

The boy pushed out of the cabinet. He crawled beneath the slowly swinging feet, then ran out the back door and over the hill.