UNDER GROUND

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This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to anyone living or dead is purely coincidental. Although many of the locations in this book are real, they are used in a fictitious manner, and the people associated with them are purely the product of the author's imagination.

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For my father, Bernard “Fuzzy” Marsnik,
who always fought for the underdog.

And for Iron Range women everywhere.

The woman holds up three corners of the house.

Tell the truth and run.

—Slovenian proverbs

CHAPTER 1

THERE WAS PLENTY OF DUST, PLENTY OF WHISKEY, plenty of red earth, trees, and rock. There were not enough women. So they were sent for.

The women came from many countries. Italy, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Croatia, and Slovenia. They mostly traveled alone, but some dragged along small children or nursing babies. The lucky ones had been sent for by their husbands, who had been living in the iron mining community for a year, perhaps more. They had someone to greet them when they arrived.

The least lucky were sent for by the brothel owners. Their passages out of the old country were paid in exchange for a year of service. Most of these immigrant women thought they would be tending bar, serving pints to the exhausted miners and lumberjacks. When they arrived, they quickly learned that other services were expected. They had no money and could not turn back.

Sixteen-year-old Katka Kovich did not fall into any of the usual categories. Her parents died on March 30 and April 7, 1915, both from cholera. Five weeks later, a young man with an unruly mass of black curls and a thick mustache arrived on the doorstep of the tiny cottage where she lived, suddenly

alone, at the foot of the mountains in the small village of Zirovnica, Slovenia. No one had visited in weeks, and Katka's long brown hair was shamefully unbraided. A few unwashed strands blew in wisps across her sunburned face, indicating an innate wildness about her. She was eating very little, and as the fleshiness of youth and comfort disappeared, it was as if that wildness magnified. Her skinny body was covered with an old, torn frock that had belonged to her mother. The elders from town told her to burn all of her parents' clothing, but she had been wearing this garment for days and had not become remotely sick.

"Paul Schmidt," the young man said, bowing politely. "So sorry to hear about your ma and your *ata*. I had people, too, who caught the fever."

Katka stared at him. Paul Schmidt was clean and smart looking. She wished she had washed her face in the morning, the way her mother had always instructed her to do. The wildness had been speaking to her lately, drowning out the voice of her dead mother. Her hands were smudged with dirt and blackberries. Katka buried her hands in the pocket of her apron.

Paul Schmidt peered back at her, curiously. "Are you mute?" he asked.

"Not mute," she said, clearing her throat. Her voice felt scratchy from lack of use.

"Here," Paul said. He fumbled around in his coat pocket until he found what he was looking for. He thrust a letter into her hands. The same message was written twice, once in Slovenian and once in English.

> *Dear Niece,*
> *Words cannot express my sorrow. What a terrible accident. My wife and I are prepared to*

offer you a home in the town of Biwabik, in the state of Minnesota in America. I am sending passage and hope you will accept.

Sincerely,
Your uncle, Mr. Anton Kovich
Biwabik, Minnesota, United States of America

Katka folded the letter and handed it back to Paul. "Why didn't he mention you?"

"If something happened to me, I would have given the letter to someone else to deliver. Your uncle and I had a tough crossing ten years ago, when I first went to America. It is better now."

"Why did you come back?"

"My mother died."

Katka said nothing but her eyes softened. "What was her name?" He told her, and she took his hand in hers, for just a moment. When she offered a blessing, he squeezed her hand once and let it go. In that instance, she felt a slight jolt. He had a bit of the wildness in him, too, she realized. Grief. It was love with no place to go. Too powerful to keep subdued underneath skin.

"My people live not far from here," Paul said. "Your uncle Anton and his wife begged me to look after you, persuade you to come back with me. They are good people, and Anton cared a great deal for your father."

"Why did he call their deaths an accident?"

"You may need that letter when you accompany me to the States. Cholera is not a word you should mention."

"It's not a word I *enjoy* to mention," she said. She looked around the rickety cottage where she and her grief had lived alone, feeding off each other for weeks. Although the place was relatively clean now, to her it would always smell of diarrhea, urine, and death. After the burial Masses, none of

her distant family had offered to take her in because, she supposed, of the word she was not mentioning.

"I leave from Trieste on the vessel *Lapland* in two days," Paul said. "Will you accompany me?"

Katka's eyes widened. "Two days?"

"I know. It's not a lot of time to make a decision."

She beckoned him into the cottage. A skeletal mouse ran across the dirt floor and disappeared into a tiny hole near a mostly empty bag of dried food.

"Ugly critter," Paul said, shivering in queasy disgust. "I hate vermin."

"It's just a mouse."

The day after her mother's burial, the mouse had emerged from under the woodpile. He didn't run along the walls of the shack; he ran straight across the floor, quickly making his way toward the slowly diminishing bags of rice and grain. The first time she saw it, Katka picked up a book and threw it at the mouse. She missed. Over the next few days she threw more books. She also threw a clay bowl, a rock, the broom. The mouse eluded her every time. After more than a week of this, she gave up trying to kill it. "You again," she would say, watching. And her voice, surrounded by the unfamiliar silence that follows new death, sounded barbarically loud no matter how quietly she uttered the words.

"Do you want me to kill it?" Paul asked.

She smiled, ever so slightly. "It's not doing anything I wouldn't do."

"It's eating your food."

"What's a grain or two to me? I have half a sack."

"To last how long?"

Katka shrugged. "I'm sorry I have no coffee to offer you, Mr. Schmidt."

"Never cared for coffee," Paul said. "Gives me a gut ache."

"How about some water? I came from the well just a bit ago. And I did some picking. Please. Rest your weary feet."

They sat at the small wooden table. Katka poured water from a pitcher into two goblets and put a basket of blackberries between them. She popped a berry in her mouth. "Eat," she said. He grabbed a few berries.

"Who owns your land, girl?" Paul asked.

"I've never seen him," Katka said. "Can't remember his name. But the man who collects the lease, he will come in five days. He demands fifteen *krona*."

"How much do you have?"

"Seven."

"If you like, I'll give you the money. The money your uncle sent."

"How much is it?"

"Enough for three months' rent. Maybe four. Ah!" The mouse was on the loose again. Paul stood up, looked around for something to throw.

Katka laughed and gestured him to leave it alone. "I wish I were like that strange little mouse. Always, he knows where he's going. I'd run in a straight line and not stop until I got there."

Paul pointed to the letter from her uncle that she had placed on the table. "There's no straight line to get to your uncle's house. There are only crooked lines, but I know them well enough."

"Perhaps a crooked line is better than no line," Katka said softly.

"It is cold where your uncle lives. Colder than the coldest day of your life. Pack your valuables in warm clothes. Dress in many layers. Bring cookware and utensils. Books, if you have

any. Lots of books. Your baptismal papers. Do you have any photographs?"

"I have one of all of us, when I was a baby. And the coffin pictures. Cost me twenty-two *hellers*."

"You won't be sorry. Most have no photographs at all. You will come?" He stood up to leave.

"What choice do I have?"

"You have many choices, Miss Katka." He bent down slightly and kissed her on her left cheek. "But I will send word to Anton today. I will purchase your passage directly. I will meet you at sunup at the train station in two days."

Katka thanked him, this stranger who had arrived like a ghost. She stood in the doorway and watched as he slowly walked down the mountain pass, his masculine silhouette growing smaller and smaller as he approached the bend in the soft road that was lined with violet crocus flowers. She watched as he stopped and picked something up off the road. A toad, she suspected. He held it up to his face, as if saying hello, before putting it down gently. His rambunctious locks escaped from the back of his hat. When she was alive, her mother used to joke about handsome men. "Best to find a plain one," she had told Katka. "They make better husbands."

A few hours later, after combing and braiding her tangled mane of hair, Katka walked three miles to the market square to buy provisions for her journey. She spent three *hellers* and filled her basket with dried meat, canned beans, walnuts, and rice. On the way home, she stopped at the church. She said goodbye to Father Leo. Of all the people left in the village, he would be the one she would miss. He was a kindly man with seventy-two years. She had worked for him as a cook and secretary since she was nine years old.

"Father Leo?" She peered into his private quarters and saw the old man crumpled in his chair, a blanket over his legs, his eyes closed.

When he heard her voice, he took to his feet and embraced her. “What is it, my child?” She told him the news, and he hugged her tight. He didn’t speak for a long time. “It is to be expected, I suppose. Every day, another of God’s children leaving the homeland. How I will miss you, my little pony! Now who will I talk to during the long days? Only God. He’s a good listener, but not much of a conversationalist.”

Father Leo gave her some books and a blessing. Finally, he stood on a chair and grabbed a simple clay chalice that was resting on top of a bookshelf. He got off the chair and told Katka to open her apron pocket. He emptied the chalice. As she walked back up the pass, the coins clinked optimistically.

The next day Father Leo arrived at her cottage with a wheelbarrow. “Father!” Katka bellowed when she saw the old man pushing such a lugubrious load. “Did you haul that all this way?”

“A present,” he said, smiling his toothless smile. “To bring to America.” Inside the wheelbarrow, draped in wool blankets, was Father Leo’s typewriter; the one Katka had used to type his sermons.