

# I

SWEET HANKUS! I saw a magic act in Warsaw once. I was sixteen years old—it seems a long time ago. My best friend Tamar and I were searching the marketplace for my father, it was late, and I had a message for him from home. Well, by the time we got to his bookstall it was all closed up, tight as a drum, and we couldn't find him anywhere. The rest of the marketplace wasn't exactly dead. Other stalls were open, and there were still plenty of people milling about. Close by, a handful of women bargained with vendors for the last rotten fish of the day while half a dozen Russian soldiers in sharp creased uniforms stood around smoking cigarettes and laughing at absolutely nothing. The vendors kept arguing when we walked past, but the soldiers whistled. We giggled because they embarrassed us. When we didn't stop to admire their big guns, though, they spat at us: "Jews!"

Tamar's thin shoulders went up around her ears. Mine did too, but I couldn't resist the urge to turn around to those soldiers and stick out my tongue. One of them raised his hammy fist at us; the others held him back. In my heart of hearts I prayed that his comrades wouldn't

let him strangle a young girl in broad daylight. Still, one never knew: he was, after all, a soldier, and we were, after all, in Warsaw. Suddenly, I became terrified. I grabbed Tamar's hand and we ran to join the small crowd that was gathered in the center of the square.

What they were watching, what Tamar and I watched too, was a man eating fire. He was remarkable, Hankus! In his satin vest and pantaloons he sucked in huge gulps of flame and then breathed them out again in a steady stream. But remarkable as that fire eater was, he was nothing compared to the magician who followed.

When he stepped forth and swirled about in his sorcerer's cape, when he spun in a circle with his tall silk hat, those stupid soldiers with their quick fists and bad tempers disappeared from my mind as quickly as they'd frozen my heart. For what a magician he was!

He snapped his long fingers and gold coins spilled out the tips; he shook a crimson scarf and it turned into roses. He pulled a rabbit from his top hat and a dove from his own gleeful mouth. Then he clapped his hands and a tall woman with brassy blonde hair in a skinny blue gown appeared. He bowed to her like a gentleman, lifted her up with one hand, and laid her into a splendidly painted wooden box.

Tamar and I stood with our mouths wide open while the magician proffered a snaggle-toothed saw and waved it in the air. We held our breath as he proceeded to saw the beautiful box and the woman inside it in half. The woman screamed as the saw went back and forth across what was by now her belly, but to me it sounded fake. Then the magician pulled the two brightly colored box halves apart and she screamed again. That time it sounded a little more real. He tickled the feet of her sliced-in-two bottom and the top part of her laughed. He kissed her laughing mouth and her split-off toes curled. Then he pushed the two halves of the crated woman together and spun them around. A minute later he opened the box with great flourish and up she stood, all put together exactly the right way. I never forgot that for the rest of my life. It's a lucky thing, too.

Tamar and I couldn't stop talking as we walked home. "How do you think she got back in one piece?" I burst out.

"It's a trick," answered Tamar flatly. She snapped her fingers over a *groszy* and tried to make it disappear.

"I know it's a trick, but could you do it?"

"The woman's part or the man's?" she asked, a wicked glint in her eye.

"The woman's part is harder," I said. "Think of it. You have to act like you're enjoying yourself even when you're cut off from your own head. All the man has to do is wave a wand around and say some silly words."

I could smell spring in the breeze that blew up from the Vistula. It was still a little chilly, but the trees were budding. I watched Tamar's red hair blow in that breeze; I also watched her lovely mouth. I wondered if I were to cut her in half whether that mouth would keep smiling mischievously, and if she screamed whether her scream would be anguished or false. Then I wondered what would happen if she were the magician and I were the one cut in two, and a little thrill went all the way through me.

"It can't be that hard," said Tamar. One last time she snapped her fingers. To our great satisfaction, the *groszy* was gone.

"Let's try it." My eyes flashed. "You be the woman."

"No, you," Tamar whispered, and she leaned over and kissed me right on the mouth in the middle of Grzybowski Street! "Catch me!" she shouted, and took off toward home.

It made my heart beat unbelievably hard to chase her, yet I chased her fast as I could. Her wondrous red hair blowing back in the breeze pulled me toward her, and the taste of her dazzling lips on my own. You have those same lips, Hankus. When I look at you now, when I saw you for the first time all those years ago, I thought of Tamar. Yes, I said to myself, Hankus Lubarsky has the same dangerous mouth as Tamar. She may be alive still, and maybe she isn't. Maybe that speedy kiss she gave me on Grzybowski Street was the last Tamar ever bestowed on a woman, maybe it was one of many. I never kept track of her after I left Warsaw. For the longest time after I was taken—until I met you—I thought only of myself. I couldn't imagine life in Warsaw after I was stolen from it. If I imagined such a life I was certain I would die of a broken heart.

But at that moment I didn't think about exile, although my fate had been sealed that same afternoon. I thought about soldiers and also magicians and Tamar's thick red hair and her lips on my own. I wanted her to kiss me again on the mouth as that magician had done his divided assistant. I wanted her to linger, though, to kiss me slowly and take all the time in the world. I wanted to catch her, take her up in my arms, and let her whisper love into my hungry ears.