Opening extract from

The Star of Kazan

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Chapter One

A Person Is Found

Ellie had gone into the church because of her feet. This is not the best reason for entering a church, but Ellie was plump and middle-aged and her feet were hurting her. They were hurting her badly.

It was a beautiful sunny day in June and Ellie and her friend Sigrid (who was as thin as Ellie was portly) had set out early from Vienna in the little train which took them to the mountains, so that they could climb up to the top of a peak called the Dorfelspitze.

They went to the mountains on the last Sunday of every month, which was their day off, changing their aprons for dirndls and filling their rucksacks with salami sandwiches and slices of plum cake, so that when they got to the top they could admire the view without getting hungry. It was how they refreshed their souls after the hard work they did all week, cleaning and cooking and shopping and scrubbing for the professors who employed them, and who were fussy about how things were done. Ellie was the cook and Sigrid was the housemaid and they had been friends for many years.

But on this particular Sunday, Ellie was wearing new boots, which is a silly thing to do when you are going on a long excursion. They were about halfway up the

mountain when they came to a flower-filled meadow and on the far side of it, standing quite by itself, a small white church with an onion dome.

Ellie stopped.

'You know, Sigrid, I think I'd like to say a prayer for my mother. I had a dream about her last night. Why don't you go on and I'll catch you up.'

Sigrid snorted.

'I told you not to wear new boots.'

But she agreed to go ahead slowly, and Ellie crossed the wooden bridge over a little stream, and went into the church.

It was a lovely church – one of those places which look as though God might be about to give a marvellous party. There was a painted ceiling full of angels and golden stars and a picture of St Ursula holding out her arms, which made Ellie's feet feel better straight away. The holy relic wasn't something worrying like a toe bone or a withered hand but a lock of the saint's hair in a glass dome decorated with pearls, and though the church stood all by itself away from the village, someone had put a bunch of fresh alpenroses in a vase at the Virgin's feet.

Ellie slipped into a pew and loosened her shoelaces. She said a prayer for her mother, who had passed on many years ago . . . and closed her eyes.

She only slept for a few minutes. When she awoke the church was still empty, but she thought she had been woken by a noise of some sort. She looked round carefully, but she could find nothing. Then, peering over the edge of the pew, she saw, lying on the crimson carpet at the foot of the altar steps – a parcel.

It was about the size of a vegetable marrow – quite a large one – and Ellie's first thought was that someone had left it there as a harvest offering. But harvest festivals happen in September not in June. And now, to Ellie's amazement, the marrow made a noise. A small, mewing noise . . .

A kitten . . . a puppy?

Ellie did up her shoelaces and went over to look.

But it was worse than a kitten or a puppy.

'Oh dear,' said Ellie. 'Oh dear, dear, dear!'

Sigrid had reached the top of the mountain. She had admired the view, she had eaten a salami sandwich and she had breathed deeply several times, but there was still no sign of Ellie.

Sigrid was annoyed. When you are on top of a mountain admiring a view you want somebody to do it *with*. She waited a while longer, then she packed the rucksack and made her way back down the rocky slope, through the pine woods, till she came to the meadow with the little church.

Ellie was still inside, sitting in the front pew – but she was holding something and she looked bewildered, and flushed, and strange . . .

'Someone left this,' she said.

Ellie pushed back the edge of the shawl and Sigrid bent down to look.

'Good heavens!'

The baby was very, very young, not more than a few days old, but it was quite amazingly . . . alive. Warmth came from it; it steamed like a fresh-baked loaf, its legs

worked under the shawl – and when Sigrid stretched out a bony forefinger to touch its cheek, it opened its eyes, and there, gazing up at them, was a *person*.

'There was a note pinned to her shawl,' said Ellie.

On a piece of paper, smudged with tears, were the words: 'Please be good to my little daughter and take her to Vienna to the nuns.'

'What are we going to do?' asked Sigrid.

She was upset. Neither she nor Ellie was married; they knew nothing about babies.

'Take her to Vienna to the nuns, like it says in the note. What else can we do?'

It took them an hour to carry the baby down to the little village of Pettelsdorf. No one there knew anything about a baby, no one had seen anyone go into the church.

'She'll have come up from the other side, over the pass,' they said.

A peasant woman gave them a bottle and some diluted milk from her cow, and they trudged on to the small lake-side station to wait for the train back to Vienna.

It was late by the time they arrived in the city with their damp and fretful bundle, and they were very tired. The only convent that they knew of which took in foundlings was a long way from the house of the professors, where they lived and worked, and they didn't have the money for a cab.

So they took the tram, and though it was one of the new electric ones it was almost dark as they walked up the drive to the Convent of the Sacred Heart.

The wrought-iron gates were shut; from the low white building came the sound of singing.

‘She’ll be all right in there,’ said Ellie, touching the baby’s head.

Sigrid pulled the bell rope. They heard the bell pealing inside, but nobody came.

She pulled it again, and they waited. Then at last an elderly nun came hurrying across the courtyard.

‘What is it?’ she asked, peering into the dusk.

‘We’ve brought you a foundling, Sister,’ said Sigrid. ‘She was left in a church in the mountains.’

‘No, no, NO!’ The nun threw up her hands. She seemed to be horrified. ‘Take her away, don’t stay for a minute; you shouldn’t have come! We’re in quarantine for typhus. Three of the sisters have got it and it’s spreading to the children.’

‘Typhus!’ Ellie shivered. It was a terrible disease, everyone knew that.

‘Take her away quickly, quickly,’ said the nun, and she began to flap with her arms as though she were shooing away geese.

‘But where can we take her?’ began Sigrid. ‘There must be somewhere else.’

‘No one in Vienna will take in children while the epidemic lasts,’ she said. ‘It’ll be six weeks at least.’

Left outside, the friends stared at each other.

‘We’ll have to take her back with us and try again tomorrow.’

‘What will the professors say?’

‘They needn’t know,’ said Ellie. ‘We’ll keep her below stairs. They never come down to the kitchen.’

But there she was wrong.

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The three professors had lived in the same house since they were born.

It was on the south side of a small square in the oldest part of the town, not far from the emperor's palace and the Spanish Riding School. If you leaned out of the upstairs windows you could see the pigeons wheeling round the spires of St Stephen's Cathedral, which stood at the very heart of the city and therefore (to the people who lived in it) of the world.

But though one could walk from the square to all the important places, it was as quiet and contained as a room. In the centre of the cobbles was a statue of General Brenner riding a bronze charger, which pleased the children who lived there because there is a lot you can do with the statue of a horse: pretend to ride it, pat it, shelter under it when it rains. The general had been a hero and fought against Napoleon, and because of this the square was named after him: Brenner Square.

Next to the general on his horse, there was a fountain with a shallow basin and a wide stone rim, and sometimes there were goldfish swimming in it because the children who won fish at the funfair in the Prater, a park in the north-east of the city, tipped them in on the way home.

The west side of the square was taken up by a church named after St Florian, who was the patron saint of fire engines. It was a pretty church with a grassy graveyard where wild flowers had seeded themselves, and on the opposite side to the church was a row of chestnut trees in iron corsets, which sheltered the square from the bustle of the street that led into the centre of the town. There was also a small bookshop on one corner, and a cafe with

a striped awning on the other, so really the square had everything a person could need.

The house the professors lived in was in the middle of the row. It was the largest and the nicest and had a wrought-iron balcony on the first floor and window boxes and a door knocker shaped like the head of an owl.

Professor Julius was the oldest. He had a pointed grey beard and was tall and serious. Once many years ago he had very nearly got married, but the bride he had chosen had died a week before her wedding day, and since then Professor Julius had become solemn and stern. He was a scientist – a geologist – and lectured in the university, where he told the students about fluorspar and granite and how to hit rocks with a hammer so that they did not get splinters in their eyes.

His brother, Professor Emil, was quite different. He was small and round and had almost no hair, and when he went upstairs he wheezed a little, but he was a cheerful man. His subject was art history and he could tell just by looking at the toes of a painted angel whether the picture was by Tintoretto or by Titian.

The third professor was a woman, their sister and the youngest of the three. Her name was Gertrude and what she knew about was music. She gave lectures on harmony and counterpoint and she played the harp in the City Orchestra. Having a harp is rather like having a large and wayward child who has to be carried about and kept from draughts and helped into carriages, and Professor Gertrude – like many harpists – often looked worried and dismayed.

Needless to say, none of the three had ever in their lives

boiled an egg or washed a pair of socks or made their beds, and when Ellie and Sigrid had their day off they always left a cold lunch laid out. But by evening, the professors needed help again. Professor Julius had a whisky and soda brought to his room to help him sleep; Professor Emil, who had a delicate stomach, needed a glass of warm milk and honey; and Professor Gertrude suffered from cold feet and always had a hot-water bottle brought to her before she got between the sheets. So now they waited for their servants to return. Sigrid and Ellie were always back by nine o'clock – but not today.

'What shall we do?' asked Professor Julius, putting his head round the door of his room.

'I suppose we had better go down and investigate,' said his brother.

So they made their way downstairs, past the drawing room and the library, to the thick green-baize-covered door that separated the house from the kitchen.

Carefully they opened it. The wooden table was scrubbed white, the fender was polished, the stove had stayed alight.

But where were Ellie and Sigrid?

And where were the whisky and the warm milk and the hot-water bottle?

Just at this moment the back door was opened and the two women came in. Sigrid's hat was crooked, Ellie's hair was coming down – and she carried something in her arms.

Silence fell.

'What . . . is . . . that?' enquired Professor Julius, pointing his long finger at the bundle.

'It's a baby, sir. We found her in a church; she'd been left,' said Sigrid.

'We tried to take her to the nuns,' said Ellie, 'but they were in quarantine for typhus.'

The baby turned its head and snuffled. Professor Emil looked at it in amazement. He was used to pictures of the baby Jesus lying stiff and silent in his mother's arms, but this was different.

'It's absolutely out of the question that we should allow a baby to stay in this house,' said Professor Julius. 'Even for a day.'

Professor Emil nodded. 'The noise . . .'

'The disturbance,' said Professor Gertrude. 'Not to mention what happens to them . . . at the far end.'

'It would only be till the quarantine is over,' said Ellie. 'A few weeks . . .'

Professor Julius shook his head. 'Certainly not. I forbid it.'

'Very well, sir,' said Ellie listlessly. 'We'll take her to the police station in the morning. They'll have somewhere to put unwanted babies.'

'The police station?' said Professor Emil.

The child stirred and opened her eyes. Then she did that thing that even tiny babies do. She *looked*.

'Good heavens!' said Professor Julius.

It was not the look of somebody who belonged in a police station along with criminals and drunks.

Professor Julius cleared his throat.

'She must be kept out of our sight. Absolutely,' he said.

'She must make no sound,' said Emil.

‘Our work must not be disturbed even for a minute,’ said Gertrude.

‘And the day the quarantine is over she goes to the convent. Now where is my whisky?’

‘And my warm milk?’

‘And my hot-water bottle?’

The professors were in bed. The baby lay in a borrowed nappy on a folded blanket in a drawer which had been emptied of table mats.

‘She ought to have a name, even if we can’t keep her,’ said Sigrid.

‘I’d like to call her by my mother’s name,’ said Ellie.

‘What was that?’

‘Annika.’

Sigrid nodded. ‘Annika. Yes, that will do.’