

PROLOGUE

EAGLE LAKE, IDAHO

WINTER 1999

The moon gazed across Eagle Lake through a veil of mist, watching over this valley of lofty white pines and locked gates that welcomed only those with the purest of blood. Those who fought boldly for the strength of their humanity.

Fresh snowmelt lapped against the muddy bank, its sting icing Sarah's toes, blasting up her ivory skin like the storms that thundered through these rocky canyons each spring. In this early morning hour, dressed in a cotton nightie, she didn't feel the noble strength of her Aryan blood. Didn't feel it at any hour really. Her blood seemed to fail her whenever she needed it most.

These nights alone on the lakeshore, she wasn't even certain what she believed, but Lukas stockpiled enough passion in his heart for

both her and their baby. Before they'd married, Lukas had assured her that he would erase any doubts lingering in her mind, but she was fifteen now and the doubts only swelled with age.

The bright eye of the moon blinked—or had it winked at her? Perhaps it was mocking her like those who didn't want them in this valley.

Town was just twenty minutes away. She'd attended public school in Coeur d'Alene for a short time until Father found out she was required to pledge that every citizen in their nation was under God. He pulled her out of second grade but not before a classmate—a black friend—told her that God was love and He had the audacity to love everyone, no matter the color of their skin. Her school friend told her about this love and so did her brother, before Father banned her from speaking with both of them.

The glazed surface disappeared for a moment, black and then a white sheen frosting the lake. Two colors that haunted her both day and night.

As the black and white melded into gray before her, it seemed, in the strangest sense, that they needed each other.

If God created mankind and a world full of color, why would He love only those with the lightest of skin? Why were those who reflected the variety of nature's palette seemingly less in His eyes?

These questions burned like the icy water on her toes, but she didn't dare ask them. The Aryan Council, led by her father, didn't appreciate questions. Their nation was supposed to be of one mind. Always. The lesser races, Father had explained, were spawn of Satan's alliance with Eve, after she'd been banned from the Garden.

Sarah was supposed to believe that anyone stained brown was marked as an enemy of God, but out here her mind could go rogue. She could be who God created her to be, far beneath her layers of skin. Ask the questions churning inside her. Out here all the colors of night, the sweet smell of pine, replenished her soul.

Lukas and their sweet daughter, three months on this earth, were asleep in the cabin behind her. Fifty other members of their esteemed council, including her parents, were also sleeping in the cluster of cabins.

She'd found no peace in this remote enclave, its chapel rumbling with hatred, the armory stocked with enough weapons to take out the entire town and a good chunk of Idaho along with it.

But a different God seemed to reign along the shores of Eagle Lake. One that embraced peace instead.

Lukas and Father had tried to erase her doubts, but neither had succeeded. When her soul cried out in desperation, she could find a glimpse of God here and feel, for the briefest of moments, as if she were truly alive. On nights like this, when her heart longed for answers, she desperately needed this glimpse.

A smooth stone glimmered by her foot, and she plucked it from the mud, tossing it back into the water. Then she listened to its gentle splash before it disappeared.

What would it be like to untie one of the boats along the dock and drift away? Or wander into the cold water, let it swallow her up in depths that dropped hundreds of feet, mirroring the height of snow-swept mountains around them?

What would it feel like to just be *gone*?

A coyote howled in the distance, mimicking a baby's cry. And the cry brought her back. No matter how much she wanted to leave this compound, this life, she couldn't leave Elsie behind.

The mist shivered as if it knew the sunlight would chase it away soon. That everything was about to change.

She should return to bed before Lukas awakened, but she couldn't think inside their cabin—couldn't worry or even wonder what would happen if she tried to step outside the gates, the barbed wire, alone. Inside the cabin, she tried not to feel at all.

All she did was hold her daughter and wish they could steal away together in the night. A wish she could never tell another soul, not

even whisper to Elsie. Others in the Aryan Council had longed for an escape, but they never ran far. Her father wouldn't allow it.

Often they never ran at all—those people simply disappeared like the sinking stone.

The lake lapped over her toes again, delivering its chill from a long journey down the mountains. Then a light flickered through the fog, a tiny spark on the water. A lone star in this galaxy of night.

She stared at the spark until a flame, as sharp as her husband's sword, dipped and curled itself in the black space, piercing the edge of the veil, its glow burning through her mind.

A nightmare, she thought, of fire and screaming and people trying to scale the barbs and spikes on their property's fence. She must still be asleep in the cottage above the lake, Lukas at her side, Elsie rocking in her cradle beside them.

Only a dream—

A siren shattered the silence, rippling across her skin, slicing through the mist in her mind.

This was no dream. Nor was it a drill. Her father wouldn't allow the guards in their gatehouse to train without warning. A siren meant the men must fight. The women and children run.

She knew exactly what she was supposed to do if the enemy attacked. Father had boats waiting to transport the women and children and eventually the men to the opposite shore. Deep in the mountains, far from town, was another compound called Eagle's Nest, a fortress stockpiled with weapons and enough food to last a decade if necessary.

A hiding place their enemy would never find.

She was supposed to run, but her feet froze in the mud.

The flames lapped against her parents' cottage, like the water across her feet, and in a blink, the fire devoured the pine.

People poured out of their homes now, screaming with the blare of sirens.

Was Lukas still in their cottage? He'd been asleep when she crept down to the shore, but sometimes he left during the night as well.

Had he—had they—left Elsie alone?

Fear swept through her, igniting her feet. Instead of climbing into a boat, Sarah raced up the hill until another young woman—Aimee—grabbed her arm, tried to pull her toward the water. “You can’t go back, Sarah.”

A second cottage succumbed to the blaze, then one beside it. Her cabin was next.

“Elsie!” she cried out, shaking off the woman’s hold.

Not that her daughter could respond, but she must know her mom was coming. That she would never leave her baby alone to face this fire.

She coughed as she ran, the smoke burning its way into her lungs, stinging her eyes.

“Sarah—” Lukas’s voice roared over the chaos. “I’ve got her.”

The fire licked against the cottage as she squinted through the haze, searching for her husband and the girl in his arms.

A glimpse was all she needed. Then she would know.

“We’ll meet at Eagle’s Nest,” he shouted.

Sarah pushed through the crowd, her arms outstretched as she pressed toward his voice. “Give her to me.”

“No.” The sound was fainter now, as if the fire was swallowing him. “I’ll carry her to the mountain.”

Aimee took her arm again, tugging toward the dock. “We have to go.”

“Get into the boat,” Lukas commanded from behind, his face lost in the blur of smoke and haze. Others climbed into the old pontoon, but her wet toes hung on the edge of the slippery dock, refusing to move.

“Not without Elsie—”

“We’re on the next boat.”

Always, she did what Lukas said, but defiance blazed through her now with the swirl of light. Red laced with black and the heat of white, the stench of charring wood and—her heart dropped—gunpowder in the shed.

A push, and she fell into the pontoon as an explosion ricocheted across the shore, rocking the boat. The driver didn't wait for their entire stockpile to catch fire. He pulled back the throttle and raced through the smoke to the opposite shore.

The Aryan Council never made the climb to Eagle's Nest. On the other side of the lake an army of camouflage surrounded them. Sarah, they swept to one side before corralling the adults into the waiting vans.

She searched the water's edge for another boat, through the curtain of mist that glowed orange. The others couldn't be far behind. In minutes—seconds—Lukas's boat would join them.

These camouflaged men couldn't keep her from her baby.

"My daughter," she pleaded when a man directed her to his car, grasping her arm so she couldn't run back to the lake.

He shook his head, told her he was sorry.

A new name, he said. A new name for her and a new life.

But he couldn't tell her what happened to Elsie.

PART ONE

*National Socialism is . . . the care and leadership
of a people defined by a common blood-
relationship. . . . We thus serve the maintenance
of a divine work and fulfill a divine will—
not in the secret twilight of a new house of worship,
but openly before the face of the Lord.*

**ADOLF HITLER
FINAL NUREMBERG RALLY
SEPTEMBER 1938**

HANNA

MONTSÉGUR, FRANCE

SPRING 1940

Secret keepers—that was what Hanna Tillich called the sect of Cathars who once hid in this cavern. And she respected anyone who could keep a secret, especially one this big, to their death.

A breeze drummed against the rock walls, whispering stories from this old passage. Secrets that Hanna was determined to find.

If only she could decipher the cadence of the wind.

While her fellow archaeologists worked to excavate the cave's front room, she'd stolen back into this tunnel. Candlelight flickered across the wall, illuminating the charcoal etchings of three shields, each one marked by a rust-colored symbol that looked like an Iron Cross, the carvings well-preserved in the darkness of this grotto.

Hanna shivered in spite of the fur-lined jacket issued to her by Heinrich Himmler, the trowel in her other hand clanging against the

metal lantern. Hundreds of Cathars had gathered in the ruined castle above this cavern in the thirteenth century, most of them killed by Catholic crusaders for refusing to renounce their faith.

Had some of the members been murdered inside this cave? Perhaps they'd left these symbols behind as a warning. Or a clue as to where they'd hidden their secrets.

She studied the crosses on the shields, so like the cross that had decorated her father's military coat when he fought against France. Like the cross the Führer awarded men today who were fighting for the *Vaterland*.

Hanna wasn't fighting, but her service for Germany, Reichsführer Himmler had said, was just as important as their soldiers. He'd hand-selected her and each archaeologist in his Ahnenerbe team to unearth evidence that would prove to the entire world that the German people had descended from the Aryan Nordic race. The Noble Ones.

But her team of archaeologists had traveled to Montségur for another reason. Seven hundred years had passed since the massacre here, but no one had discovered where the Cathars had hidden the Emerald Cup—the Holy Grail—that once pressed against Christ's lips at the Last Supper, later collecting drops of His blood. Three years ago, German explorer Otto Rahn had stolen secretly into this region and climbed the treacherous cliff up to this cavern, convinced that the Cathars had buried the jeweled cup in one of its passages.

Rahn had been the only German, to Hanna's knowledge, to ever excavate this cave, but no one knew exactly what he found. Rahn had died last year, taking yet another secret to the grave.

As strong as Himmler's drive was to unearth the Aryan roots of Germany, the man was also obsessed with finding this Holy Grail. A Christian artifact with mystical powers, he said, that could win the current war.

Hanna didn't obsess over power like Himmler and the Nazi leadership. Stories were her lifeblood, especially those from the past

that could root a generation struggling to find its identity. After the devastation—the humiliation—of losing the *Weltkrieg* in 1918, the German people were desperate to pour a new foundation.

In the past months, Germany had finally begun to overcome the defeat of this World War by expanding their *Lebensraum*—living space—into France. Now Himmler had commissioned Hanna's team to find the Grail. They could search this entire region without government interference.

He'd promised to keep the Holy Grail safe under the mantle of the home forces and his SS officers so it wouldn't be destroyed like so many of the artifacts of Germanic roots, just like he'd promised to protect every German who'd rooted themselves in a Christian heritage. Their team still needed to keep the work quiet, though, as many who lived along the Pyrenees weren't fond of the new government or its interest in holy relics.

Another light bridged the chain of shields, and Hanna swiveled in her military boots, almost stabbing her superior, Kolman Strauss, with her trowel.

He knocked the blade away swiftly with the handle of his tripod as if it were a sword. She'd learned plenty in her four years at the University of Berlin, but fencing was not a required class for her studies in anthropology.

"These were carved by the Knights Templar," Kolman said, his easy smile excusing her ineptness.

She picked her trowel off the dirt floor and turned back to examine the sharp lines of each shield beside him. "One of the many mysteries in this place."

"She'll share her secrets with us."

The Brylcreem in Kolman's hair defied even the temperament of the wind, and his Aryan blue eyes had secured him a lifelong membership as regiment leader in Himmler's *Schutzstaffel*. His gray sleeves were rolled up to his elbows as if he were warm inside this

frigid cavern, ready to capture on motion-picture film whatever this medieval religious sect had left behind.

Some historians thought the Knights Templar had collaborated with the Cathars to guard the holiest relics, but these etchings might not be artwork from the Cathars or Templars. It was quite possible that others, like Rahn and Hanna's team, had scaled the mountain-side in recent years to seek treasure or simply to commemorate the six hundred thousand Cathars who'd been massacred during the Crusades.

"Kill them all for the Lord knows them that are His."

That's what the abbot supposedly said to validate the bloodshed of Cathars and Catholics alike in 1209. Let God sort it out in the end.

How exactly, she wondered, did God sort those who'd vowed to serve Him?

Despite Kolman's confidence about finding the Grail, the contents of this cavern were a mystery to all of them, shrouded in centuries of legend and literature. No amount of threatening or even coaxing would force her to give up her secrets if she wasn't willing to share.

But Hanna and Kolman and two other archaeologists could work here for days or weeks if necessary, however long it took to unearth any artifacts left by the Cathars. They would spend their nights at a vineyard, and each morning, they'd use ropes and the mountain's footholds to bring their gear up into the cavern while German soldiers guarded the cliffside entrance and waited in the surrounding forest below, in case the local residents decided to rebel.

Hanna prayed no one would threaten them or the soldiers. It would be senseless for any more blood to be shed here while she and her team were trying to protect the holy relics from harm.

She pointed with her lantern toward the narrow corridor. "I'm going farther in."

The feet on Kolman's tripod punctured the ground. "I'll retrieve my camera."

He had hauled his motion-picture camera up to this cavern with all of their supplies, just like he'd taken his camera with them to film their work across the continents, but she didn't want the camera peering over her shoulder this morning. The flood of Kolman's lights. He had plenty of earlier film to prove her worth, but if she didn't find anything today, all Himmler would see when they returned home was her failure.

"No," she insisted. "This is something I want to do alone."

A defiant strand of straw-blonde hair escaped from its prison of pins, and she set her lantern and trowel on the ground to remove a glove and return the strand to its messy chignon.

As her superior, Kolman could insist on accompanying her, but he stepped back. "You're a brave soul, Hanna."

"More curious than brave, I'm afraid."

"Both are important to the Ahnenerbe. It's unfortunate you're not a . . ." He stopped himself, but the unspoken word still dangled between them.

A man.

It truly was unfortunate. The few professional women in Germany were slowly being reassigned to other jobs. Hanna was the only female archaeologist still working in the field, but she suspected that would not last much longer. Himmler had recently moved the department of the Ahnenerbe under the umbrella of the powerful Schutzstaffel. As a woman, she would never qualify to become an SS officer.

But if the Holy Grail was hidden in this cave, if Hanna was the one to excavate it, surely Himmler would keep her employed. More than anything, she wanted to continue her work of preserving the history, the stories, of her people before their heritage was completely lost, but if she didn't prove her worth, her dedication, Himmler would reassign her to type, file, and transfer reports for one of his men.

"If I find it," she assured Kolman, "then I'll bury it again so you can film our discovery."

His sharp nod was one of respect for a colleague who was equally as focused on this task. "We're going to find it."

The other archaeologists had stopped in the front room to dig under a stalagmite, a fixture that French literature had deemed the Altar. A worthy location for a religious sect to bury their relics or bones, but it was too close to the entrance, she thought, for a powerful treasure like the Holy Grail. If the Cathars were willing to die for their secrets, they'd have taken great care about where they buried them.

Another gust shuddered through the entrance, loosened hair from her knot, and the strands folded themselves over her eyes, blinding her from the light. Kolman brushed the hair away from her eyes, and her skin flickered at his touch. Had he felt it too, the spark that passed between them?

"Hanna—"

"We have to find this cup," she said, hoping to dampen the flicker.

He smiled again. "I know."

"We can't lose our focus now."

He wrapped the hair over her ear, the flame sparking again.

Her first—her only—love now was digging for artifacts. She had to extinguish these schoolgirl notions before she made another choice she'd regret.

The trail of lamplight led her away from Kolman, into the unknown. A place where she thrived. She followed the wind and light through the narrow entrance, into a chamber with a ceiling that soared far beyond the range of her lantern. Like the nave of Lorenzkirche back home, the church she'd attended with Luisa each Sunday.

How she missed Luisa, her cousin who'd come to live with Hanna's family after she lost both parents in an accident. Only a few years older than Hanna, her cousin had become a tutor, sister, and friend, teaching her to search for answers to questions others didn't even know to ask.

Hanna smoothed her gloved hand over the ridges on the limestone wall, trekking over the hard-packed dirt embedded with stones, into an underground cathedral. Here the air was still and damp on her skin, the smell musty like the attic where she'd once played. Like the old graphite mine on her family's property.

The Cathars wouldn't have buried their treasure in a grand chamber like this, but they might have hidden it nearby.

The cave's ridges bowed into alcoves and tiny rooms notched into the sides. Cupboards, she thought, as she stepped into one. Or a cellar.

Hanna dropped her rucksack along a wall and then crawled with her lantern and steel trowel into a jug-sized room that spilled into an even smaller chamber. Lantern light danced across shells embedded in the walls and then something else—

The faintest sketching on *dem Stein*, a line—two lines—drawn in a white ochre faded with time, parallel in their fall to the ground.

She followed the stripes down to her knees and at the bottom of the wall was a triangular tip, stained a faint red like the Iron Crosses. A lance. Or a blood-tipped arrow.

Hanna swept her trowel across the surface as if it were a brush before edging out a neat square with the blade. This was what she lived for. The possibility of finding answers if only she chose the right place. Digging deep enough to locate whatever her team was searching for.

The utmost care was necessary when excavating, but she worked swiftly this morning, her heart pounding as she shaved away the dirt. When they were looking for remnants of Atlantis, the archaeologists used sifters so they wouldn't miss the smallest pieces that hinted toward the greater story. Here, though, they weren't looking for the pieces. Himmler wanted the entire cup. Intact. As if it were a white rabbit to pull out of their magician's hat.

He wanted the impossible really, but it was her job to either deliver it or produce enough evidence to continue their search.

Since receiving her degree in Berlin, Hanna had been trekking across Sweden and Tibet with the Ahnenerbe to discover where the Aryan people had originated and how Himmler could replicate their strength today. Power and proof of the Germanic heritage—the two things that Himmler seemed to crave more than anything.

They hadn't found conclusive evidence about Aryans in Tibet or Sweden, but they'd found dozens of shards in Sweden that pointed to an advanced civilization. Whatever Kolman reported back seemed to satisfy the Reichsführer.

In the light of a new candle, Hanna started to dig, willing the dirt to reveal its secrets. Square by square, meter by meter, she would search this room until she found either the cup or another clue.

An hour passed as she carved through the pressed soil, finding fragments of bone and pottery. Her trowel hit a stone, and she pushed her way around it, the rounded edges of this rock reminding her of home. The stones in the nearby labyrinth where her mother used to pray.

The steel blade clanked against something, and her heart lurched as the candlelight caught a glimmer of green.

She removed her pocketknife and had just begun to ease away the dirt when she heard Kolman's voice, shouting her name from another room.

Quickly she dumped the dirt back into the hole, smoothing it over, and then turned, lantern in hand, to crawl back into the chamber.

She wanted to film her discovery and then carry the treasured cup out in triumph so the entire team could see what she'd found hidden. So word would trickle back that Hanna Tillich had discovered this holy relic on her own.

If Kolman found it, he and his camera would take full credit.

Tossing her trowel beside her rucksack, she rushed back toward the cathedral chamber, the shadows from her lantern rocking across the walls.

“What is it?” she asked when she reemerged in the main hall.

Kolman grasped her wrist. “We have to leave.”

“But—”

“Now,” he said, his rank as an officer punctuating this word.

She shook off his hand. “I’ll gather my things.”

“We don’t have time.”

But her pocketknife and trowel, her pack with its notebook and pencils and extra candles were inside. She couldn’t just leave them all behind.

“Time for wh—?”

A distant thunder echoed through the grotto, and she stared at the arc of light leading to the entrance, confused. The skies had been clear when they climbed to the cave.

“Someone doesn’t want us in France.” He was pulling her now into the passage, away from her things.

“I need my pack.” And a glimpse at whatever was buried in the dirt.

“The others have already started down.” It was his job to guide their team in and then out of this cave safely, but surely she had time to fetch her rucksack.

The sound of another explosion placed her firmly on Kolman’s side.

She clipped into the mountainside hold before rappelling back into the forest.

In the morning, she’d retrieve her pack, after the soldiers had calmed this storm.