

# KRÁLOVE EPIC

August 30, 1968

*9 days after the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia*

## KRÁLOVE EPIC

# 1

On the village streets, the lamps burned bright and the night was clear, star-speckled, and smelled of rain. The pub had closed early because of a political debate turned brawl and now the intoxicated patrons spilled angrily into the street. Standing at her second floor window, Katerina Caslavská had witnessed everything: the yelling, the tossed bottles, and the chair that crashed through the pub's windowpanes.

“Go home!” she shouted. “Some of us are trying to sleep.”

“But we are raising an army,” replied an elderly man. “We are going to fight the Russians.”

The butcher pointed to her window and shook his finger. “You should be protesting, young woman. Not sleeping. How can you close your eyes at a time like this?”

“Go home,” she said again, pushing the black hair from her face. “It is almost midnight. You are obnoxious—all of you.”

The revelers stood arm in arm for some while longer, gentlemen of prior world wars, singing patriotic songs and shouting, “Death to the Soviets!” and “Long live Czechoslovakia!”

But these courageous words were meaningless, Katerina knew. Love for country? Their patriotism would diminish by morning, when the alcohol wore off, when the reality

## KRÁLOVE EPIC

surfaced: the Soviets had automatic weapons; the drunks had pitchforks. It would be a quick death for the men outside her window.

“An army of inebriants,” she scoffed, turning for bed. “They are capable of raising nothing but a pint.”

At twenty-five years old, she felt more mature than the oldest man on the street. She was reasonable. It was the warmongering men with their stinky breath who were impractical. *Pitchforks?* Ridiculous. Impossible. Impractical! The sound of their car doors opening and shutting and engines turning over flooded the room. She found the brass lamp and clicked off the light. She had never understood why they stayed out so late anyway. After some moments more of shouting, the slurred chatter outside her window finally faded, surrendering, as she had expected, to the dead calm of silence.

All this talk of war was giving her an excruciating headache. She cuddled a patchwork blanket and rested her head comfortably on the pillow. Just close your eyes and forget all the hatred, she thought. *You are safe here.* The bedroom was her sanctuary: grandmother’s rocking chair, the down filled feather pillows, an old porcelain doll, her prized Rogeri cello, and the sheet music—this week mostly Smetana—scattered across the floor. She was imagining her fingers on the long neck of her cello, working the Quartet in E minor “From My Life,” when the quiet ushered back memories of her lover Georges Lanik, and pangs of despair. Three years had passed since the car accident tragically took his life. It had been a struggle to accept his passing. Even tonight she could still see the smallest details of his handsome face, the widow’s peak and his dark green eyes, that generous smile making her feel safe. She rolled into her pillow and tried not to think about anything but falling asleep. Better that way. But how could

## KRÁLOVE EPIC

she forget the long walks in the rain? The picnics along the river? Or playing hide and seek at the monastery? The memories were unbearable, especially at night, in darkness, where even the bedroom, the place she felt most secure, could no longer save her from sorrow.

The next morning she awoke to the thunder of Soviet military jets soaring across the sky. After the boom faded she heard someone sweeping up glass from the street. She turned on the radio; news was the same; Warsaw Pact armies still occupied her homeland. A week after the invasion, she wondered if they would ever go away. She wrapped a blanket over her shoulders and walked across the room.

From the window, she saw adjoining rowhouses, the bakery, brewpub, café, and the flower shop. The structures surrounded a centuries-old cobbled square and a broken water fountain in the shape of a woman angel. While Soviet tanks had seized the avenues of Prague and Pilsen and Ostrava, life in Králove, on these cobbled streets, remained tirelessly predictable. Today could be a Monday, a Thursday or even a Saturday. She pointed her finger mockingly and wondered which home's window held the key to her misery? Was it the oval window where Karel sang to the birds, or the blue multi-paned window where Oflan and Anna sat and listened to the radio broadcast from Prague, or another window, this one always open, where crazy old Evzen shouted at the boys and told them to play their football someplace else?

She pulled her hair back to a pony tail, and sighed. Her dark, sleepy-lidded eyes were witness to the daily routines. There seemed to be some kind of universal voice saying, "Today you burn the autumn leaves," or "Today you prune the trees," or

## KRÁLOVE EPIC

“Today you milk the cows.”

She wanted none of it.

She resisted the local way of thinking.

Long ago she had decided that moving to Prague was the answer to her troubles. After all, the wonderful home of Kafka was full of such life, with many parks to explore, beautiful art to consume, grand opera houses, and most importantly, progressive ideas. She could free herself from the local habits of Králove, from a medieval lifestyle, and, she was thinking, *from men who thought they could defeat a modern army with pitchforks!* Once the Soviets withdrew from her country, she planned to take her son and make that bold move. There was a cellist friend she could stay with on Holandska Street; he had always said the invitation was open, including help finding a decent job.

Except for the wonderful year she had spent with Georges, she had always felt an outsider in Králove. Watching a group of women go to market to collect freshly picked raspberries, peas, and currants, she worried that if she stayed, one day she would end up old and uninspired like them.

Her spirits lifted when she saw Josef Novak on the street. Good ol’ Josef the Baker. He was a sturdy man with graying muttonchops and an infectious grin. Standing beneath the window, he held a leash while his mutt dog sniffed around a trashcan.

“Good morning,” she called down. “How do things taste at your bakery this morning?”

“Sweet and delicious,” said Josef. His bakery served the surrounding farms and villages. “The blackberries are aplenty. Come see me this afternoon. I have baked something special for your son.”

“Oh?”

## KRÁLOVE EPIC

“Kolache. With blackberry filling.”

“His favorite,” she agreed. “But what of the Russians? Any news of tanks?”

“The Russians were spotted yesterday in Kaplice,” he said.

“Kaplice? But that is very close!”

“I hear there is even a roadblock on the road leading to Horni Dvoriste.”

“People are afraid soldiers will come to our village.”

“There is fear. There will always be fear.”

“But would they actually come here?”

“No.” He shrugged. “Why would they?”

“I heard the Russians are looking for people who have spoken out against the Communists.”

“Ah, well there are no dissenters on these streets. Just law-abiding citizens. Some stray dogs. A few chickens. We do not even have a police station.”

“This is true, Josef.”

Crimes in Králove were rare; violent crimes were nonexistent. In fact, there had not been a murder in over thirty years. Because life was so peaceful, the government had shut down the police station and moved its jurisdiction to Kaplice a decade ago, where pick-pocketing and petty thefts were all the rage.

“I am not worried about the Russians. But if they do come to Králove, no kolache for them, eh?”

“Thank you, Josef.”

She waved goodbye while he strode cheerfully along. He had been her father’s closest friend, and the last man to see him alive twenty-two years ago. She loved listening to his stories of the “good years” and his account of the “horrendous war.” Josef insisted her father was a hero for standing up to the Nazis. He always reminded her, “I am merely half the man

## KRÁLOVE EPIC

your father was . . .”

Maybe it really is going to be all right, thought Katerina. The Soviet Union had invaded the country just over a week ago, but thankfully few people had been killed. Regardless of the drunks and their false bravado last night, with strong men like Josef Novak to protect the village, the people were safe.

Late now for rehearsal, she grabbed her cello and headed for the door.

Still she had this ugly, nagging feeling . . .