

**LA TUMBA DE AURORA K.
(The Tomb of Aurora K.)**

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Chapter One

The hire car wouldn't start.

Grandma would have interpreted the incident as a bad omen and would have tried everything to convince us to just forget about the whole thing and go back home. She's got a good sense for that sort of thing. But Grandma wasn't there, and we had no intention of calling it off. My father picked up the rucksack and his briefcase from the back seat of the car and handed me my scarf.

"Come on, Anna," he said. "We can walk."

The cemetery was located outside the village, about twenty minutes away on foot. The dirt track we followed ran in a straight line between frosty fields with noisy crows wheeling around them. The ground was potted with frozen puddles, some bigger, some smaller, with a tempting layer of cloudy white ice on top. Normally I loved treading on them and watching the ice crack beneath my shoe. But that day I didn't step on any. I wanted to show my father that I was able to behave with the maturity required by the situation.

Through the mist, we could just make out the cemetery walls. In the weak dawn light, it had a sinister look about it. I turned to my father. He smiled at me. His eyes were a light, bright blue and they radiated his habitual serenity.

It was an old, sombre cemetery.

The ivy had invaded everywhere; it crept up the trees and had devoured most of the brickwork. Just a few old crosses and the statue of an angel weeping over a grave seemed to be the only things that had, in part, withstood the vegetation's voracious appetite.

My father had been sent a map by e-mail and he now took the printed page out and unfolded it. He studied the plan and looked around, and then he led me up a cracked-concrete. Walking through an old stone archway, we arrived in a wide-open, treeless space that appeared more modern and better maintained. The ivy barely reached higher than just a few centimetres and plastic flowers and spent altar candles lay on some of the graves.

The funerary recesses were located at the back.

As we got closer, I felt my father speeding up. When we reached the final column, he checked the map again. He continued more slowly now, focusing on the recesses three rows up from the ground. He stopped in front of one that caught his attention. On the marble plaque, the surname was represented by one single letter: "Aurora K."

He stood there for a long time with his eyes on the inscription.

Suddenly, there was the sound of voices and laughter.

I turned my head towards the stone archway and saw two men wearing blue overalls appear beneath it. The older one of the two had white hair and was carrying a ladder on one shoulder. His companion was much younger; his hair was pulled back into a ponytail and he was lugging a toolbox. A third man followed them, tall and slender, wearing a blazer and tie, with a dark anorak over the top. He was holding a brown file.

We stayed where we were, watching them approach. They had also seen us and fell quiet and serious. Over the last few metres, the man with the brown file overtook and came to the front. He

was close-shaven and smelled of cologne. He said good morning and shook my father's hand really rather energetically, at the same time as asking, "Mike Peterson?"

"No. I'm Stefan Malnik. I'm in charge of taking the samples."

"No problem. The paperwork is all in order. Shall we proceed?"

My father nodded.

The man with the white hair leant the ladder next to the recess of Aurora K and held it firmly. His colleague climbed up, holding a large hammer and chisel. Very carefully, he began to chip away at the cement attaching the marble plaque to the recess wall, working his way around the whole perimeter. His tapping was rhythmic. Every so often, our silence was interrupted by the white-haired man giving instructions, telling his assistant to hammer more gently, or warning him not to change the angle of the chisel too much. A shower of small stones rained down on the path. One of them bounced towards my feet and came to rest balanced on the end of my shoe. I was watching it when there was a loud crack. I looked up just in time to see a chunk of the marble stone break off and shatter into pieces on the floor. My father put his arm around me and squeezed my shoulder, comfortingly.

The young man with the hammer looked at his colleague as if to apologise and, receiving a nod, he finished off the stone by smashing away at it with none of his previous care. Afterwards, he took hold of the casket inside and, summoning all of his strength, he pulled it out of the wall. Between the two workmen, they lowered it to the ground and set it at our feet.

It was a plain, pine coffin without any sort of adornment and pretty badly deteriorated due to the humidity.

The older man picked up a crowbar from the toolbox and wedged it in under the lid of the coffin. Then he glanced at me and turned questioningly towards my father. He must have been thinking that this wasn't an appropriate act for a fifteen-year-old girl to be witnessing. With a nod, my father motioned to continue. The man levered up the lid, putting his whole weight into it and we heard a loud cracking sound. He had to repeat the action three times to release all of the nails.

When they removed the lid, a cry escaped my lips. Glaring at my father and me was a skull with empty eye sockets and a furious expression. It seemed to be reprimanding us, silently shouting at us for having dared disturb its rest. And although my father would later deny it, I know it had a similar effect on him, because his hand was squeezing my shoulder so tightly it hurt.

"Are you OK, Anna?" he asked me in a whisper.

"Yes..." I replied, although I can't have sounded all that convincing.

"Her head is tilted towards us; that's why it feels like she's looking at us," he said. "But it's just a skeleton. It can't hurt us."

I knew he was right. The reason she looked like she was shouting at us was because her jaw had become dislocated. But still, I'd have felt a bit calmer had Aurora K.'s skeleton been facing the three men who were now looking at us with serious faces. I shrugged off my father and stepped away, far enough to be out of the line of sight of that hateful skull. Only then did I realise that the skeleton was very large; it only just fitted in the coffin and it had enormous feet.

"Can I have some space, please?" my father asked the others.

The three men stepped back several metres.

My father rested his briefcase on the floor and opened it. While he was looking down at his instruments, as if trying to decide which one to use to take the samples, he sneaked his hand into the coffin and removed a small object. It was a tiny glass bottle. Before it disappeared into his hand, I saw a tiny rolled up piece of paper inside. I thought I could see some writing; a message. The three men didn't notice anything because my father had shielded the action with his body. I felt my pulse racing. What message was Aurora K. sending us from beyond the grave? Then, as I turned away, I noticed three keys on an iron ring underneath the skeleton's left hand.

"Dad..." I called out, pointing at them.

They all looked at me curiously. Fortunately, from where they were standing, the three men couldn't see the keys because the coffin itself was blocking their view.

"She's got such long arms," I added to justify my reaction.

"Why don't you go for a little walk," my father suggested, and he winked to show me that he'd seen the keys. "This might take me a while."

I obeyed.

I walked up and down in front of the recesses. I was no longer remembering all the awful things that had happened to me over the last few weeks. All I was thinking about was opening that little bottle and embarking on an investigation that I felt would be fascinating. Right then I was convinced we would find the clues that would lead us to the treasure.

We had travelled to the small village of Clayton so my father could take some DNA samples and find out whether that woman, Aurora K., was my "father's mother". The biological one. And I say it like that, my "father's mother", because for me, that woman will never be my grandma. My grandma was the other lady, the one who'd been there my whole life; the one who organised mass card games with the cousins; the one who made me chicken empanadillas for my birthday; the one who told us those astonishing stories about life in Turenia before the war; the superstitious woman who closed all of the windows in the middle of summer because she was terrified of the air currents; the one who would sneak into her best friend's garden at night and pull out all the hortensias, convinced that they brought bad luck. Grandma. And no DNA test was going to change that. I didn't care that her blood didn't run through my veins, or Grandad's blood, or my cousins'. They were my family. I was and always would be a Pekar.

But I'm afraid I'm getting it all mixed up.

My father always tells me that you have to start telling a story from the beginning. I usually get carried away, start in the middle and then have to go back, explain everything and end up making everyone so confused they get completely lost. In fact, my cousins have banned me from telling stories because they say I ruin them. That doesn't stop me, of course. That's another way you can tell I'm a Pekar. All it takes is for them to tell me not to do something for me to want to do it even more.

However, this story is too extraordinary and I'd like to tell it well, so I'll start all over again. Right from the beginning. I don't know if you're pushed for time; it might take several hours. I know myself and given how nervous I am, I know I'm not going to get any sleep tonight. But I promise you, it'll be worth it.

It all started a long, long time ago, way before I was born, when my father was a little boy and the war in Turenia was raging....

Chapter Two

In school, they showed us a series of images from the first few months of the war in Turenia. It made a big impression on me.

We could see a stream of civilian Tavarians escaping the combat along a mountain road. The luckiest ones were travelling by lorry. The backs of the vehicles were so jam-packed it would have been impossible to squeeze anyone else in. Not even a pin would fit. Around the lorries, hundreds of people were fleeing on foot, carrying the few belongings they could manage. They were poor people, inadequately dressed, exhausted and dirty. Snow lay along the edges of the road, so it must have been cold. Suddenly, one of the women on foot approached a lorry and gave the child she'd been carrying in her arms to the people travelling inside.

The teacher explained to us that the woman acted to try and save her son's life; during that horrific journey to escape, many believed that the Urena militias would catch them and kill everyone.

However, the boy, who must have only been about two years old, didn't want to leave his mother. In the images, you could see him wailing, struggling with all his might against the strangers in the lorry holding him, until it disappeared from sight. The woman remained frozen, like a statue made of salt, her gaze lost in the distance. Around her, people continued to file past on foot. Indifferent to the terrible scene that had just played out before their very eyes: the war had just separated a mother from her child, perhaps for ever.

The boy in the images was not my father, but it could have been.

When Grandad Josef was twenty-three he left his village, crammed in the back of a lorry. With him were the women and children of his family: his wife, his two young children, three sisters-in-law and seven nieces and nephews. On the way, along a mountain pass much like that in the images, taking advantage of the fact the lorry had stopped for a moment, a man on foot entrusted his three-year-old son to my grandfather and begged him to save his child. As the lorry started to move again, the man only had time to tell them the child's name: Stefan Malnik. My father.

Grandad Josef did whatever he could to reunite father and son. They spent the next eight months in a refugee camp. They often received visits from members of an NGO who were trying to bring families back together who had been separated during the chaotic exodus. They circulated photos of my father among the other refugee camps and his name was included on various lists, but nobody ever stepped forward to claim a boy called Stefan Malnik.

Then they were granted the visas to emigrate to the United States.

Grandad took my father with him, although he remained in contact with the NGO, just in case the man reappeared and they could reunite him with his son. But it never happened. Three years after he arrived in the US, Grandad Josef discovered why. He saw a book of black and white photographs of the war in Turenia and there, on page sixteen, was the man, piled on top of a heap of corpses. On his face, torso and arms, there were clear signs that he had been tortured before being shot in the chest. He had cuts and cigarette burns all over his body, and using a knife they had carved the symbol of a Double U on his chest. His name didn't appear anywhere in the book, but Grandad Josef recognised him without a doubt. Moreover, underneath the photo, it stated that the incident had been photographed in Grébovo, a village just ten kilometres from where the stranger had handed over the little boy, and just two days later. It all fitted together.

Grandad contacted the war reporter who had taken the photo and asked if they had any more information about the man. He didn't. However, he remembered that morning perfectly well, not only because of the horror scenes he witnessed, but because of the fear he had felt. He had been scared that the militants would not allow them to leave the village alive, ensuring there were no witnesses to the massacre. The photographer saw how they loaded twenty or so bodies onto a lorry and took them away. That was the standard practice for the Urena militias. They would bury the civilians they killed in mass graves hidden deep in the forest to conceal any evidence of their crimes, just in case anyone should ever investigate in the future.

And that is all my father came to know about his real family, until a few months ago when he received an anonymous letter suggesting that Aurora K. might be his mother.

This was the clue that had led us to the cemetery in Clayton that morning. My father had received permission to exhume the body of Aurora K. and take DNA samples.

But I'm getting ahead of myself again, and I need to carry on with the story of Grandad Josef...