

## CHAPTER ONE

The August sun had begun to travel its evening path. Grasshoppers chirped drowsily in the lawn. In the bird-cherries along the waterfront the summer brood of a family of magpies chattered. The asphalt, melted in the heat of the day, caught like chewing gum at the soles of sandals. The street was empty. A lone, passing car caused the thin fabric of a dress to flap in its wind stream. The only shadow in the bare bus stop fell from the wide brim of a straw hat.

A thin girl looked countless times at her wristwatch. Its wide, white strap held tightly to her small wrist. Another glance at the timepiece, and the girl dug through the compartments of her sizeable shoulder bag until, grabbing it by its wooly fur pendant, she pulled out her mobile phone.

- Hey! - A loud greeting made the girl jump and throw the mobile phone back into her bag.

- Elfa? Don't scare me like that! I've been waiting for you for ten minutes already. Only from... the other direction.

- But I thought we were meeting at the pond. I waited and waited... I finally came to see if Edith had turned up.

- You're blonde!

- It's the same color! - Laughing, the fair-haired Elfa tore off her girlfriend's straw hat and, running a bit farther off, coquettishly placed it on her own head.

- And now you're blonde squared! - The hat's owner, sticking out her tongue, began to braid her unraveled hair over her shoulder. Its golden brown chestnut tone shimmered in the sun.

The girls' laughter and babbling didn't dissipate either when, exhaling heavily, a city bus pulled up to the bus stop. From out behind sweaty women with heavy shopping bags and boys in whose earbuds the music thundered so loudly that those standing next to them could hear it, Edith jumped down from the hot bus.

- Hey Elfa, hey Eleanora! What have I missed now? - the girl asked, while her greeters, mouths filled with laughter, gently poked each other.

- Our recent discussion about mental strength in relation to hair color, the girl spoke, snapping back at Eleanora.

- Again your little jokes, yeah? Edith stated rather than asked, demonstratively twisting a strand of black hair around her finger.

A red BMW, honking loudly, braked suddenly at the bus stop. The curly-haired head of a boy pushed up through the sunroof and whistled.

- Ziggy, - angrily whispered Eleanora.

- And Heinrich, - Edith added enthusiastically.

- With a new car, - approvingly concluded Elfa.

- Hey babes! Wanna go to the lake? - a dark, handsome boy called out to them, proudly leaning out the driver's side window and exhaling cigarette smoke. Tossing out the cigarette butt, he put on a pair of sunglasses with an idle motion. - Let's get these new wheels wet!

The girlfriends looks at each other. They were enchanted by thoughts of a swim in the lake after a humid day, but the company threw them. The moody glorious red car jolted ahead of its owner. Elfa nudged Eleanora in the back, gently nudging her forward. There was no other choice, as always, she had to say something.

- Thanks for the offer. Another time. Today we're having girl time.

Eleanora thought that the boy at the steering wheel looked her up and down curiously. The girl couldn't say for sure, the boy's eyes were hidden behind the black lenses of his sunglasses. Was there something wrong with her outfit? Maybe with her hair? Her fingers untwisted the golden brown braid and twisted it back again.

- Nora, why do you always fight like an old lady! - the curly haired boy tossed out angrily, half sliding out of the hatch.

- Zigmunds, cut it out, yeah? - hissed Edith.

- Maybe we should go with them? - Elfa whispered quietly.

- No, if you do then you're going without me! - Eleanora withdrew instantly.

A bus approached the stop, honking persistently. Zigmunds, who stood in the car's hatch, looked impatiently behind him and again even more impatiently called to the girls:

- Hey, ladies, let's move it!

- Hey, dudes, get lost! - Eleanora had to shout over the bus's horn.

Heinrich didn't have to be told twice. Over the frames of his sunglasses, casting one brief evaluating glance at the bellicose girl, he stepped on the gas pedal and the car lunged forward. The three girlfriends, seen off by the angry words of the bus driver, flew running along the old wall of Kreicburg Castle, across the street and stopped only when

they had reached the row of tall linden trees along the edge of the river. The girls' laughter tinkled the foliage of the century old trees.

Their destination was the old courtyard of the Kreicburg Church. The gray masonry of the courtyard stones always seduced viewers with its beautiful view. Warmed in the sun, if someone needed to be warmed. Cooled in the shade, if the overheated were looking for a refreshing escape from the summer swelter. And the river was always below your feet. Calm and even in its tide, as if fallen in slumber, letting canes and rushes grow in its womb, giving a plentiful supply of fish to the anglers, providing brisk strokes to those who wished to swim.

The church itself, moss overgrowing the lindens and embracing the maples, stood in an undisturbed peace in the most beautiful spot on the shore of the wide river. From one side it stood upright majestically and stately on the river's shore, from the other side the little Dzirna River raised rather mundanely, flowing in a deep ravine gnawed out by time and water. White and glistening, the dark red steeple stood erect against the August sky, the church quietly received visitors.

- So, my lovely models! - From her shoulder bag, Eleanora pulled out her mother's gift for primary school graduation - a digital camera. - Time for our photo session, "A Farewell to Childhood and Summer."

Like bright butterflies, Edith and Elfa fluttered along the gray stone wall. A gentle breeze like the exhalation of the sleepy river rustled the girls' floral dresses and mussed their hair.

- Will I have to stand here long? - Elfa started to whine, lowering her elegantly raised hand, which held the straw hat filched from her friend.

- And you, naive one, you think that being a model is easy work? - Eleanora laughed, continuing to release the shutter, bringing the girls closer to the lens, then stepping back to get the best light, background, facial expressions.

- Nora, be careful! - Edith cried, catching Eleanora by the hand. The girl, concentrating on the camera's screen, didn't even notice that one more step to the side and she would have fallen from the stone wall into the church's garden.

- Ugh! Now I've really had enough. - Elfa rubbed her numb arms and sat on the edge of the stone wall.

- Okay, smoke break. - Edith sat down next to her and pulled a pack of candy from her bag. - Treat yourselves! Just 0.5 calories in each piece. Dietary.

Looking through the photos saved in the camera's memory, Eleanora absentmindedly reached for the candy and sat down next to her girlfriends.

- It's great here! - Edith lay back on the warm stone wall with a happy expression.

- Yes! Stay there, don't move! - Eleanora called to her, while her hand worked with the camera controls. - Who knows when we'll finally get serious?

- In the fall, - Elfa answered, without hesitating.

Edith and Eleanora exchanged perplexed glances, Elfa, meaningfully rolling her eyes over her friends' slow minds, repeated her statement:

- In the fall, when school starts up again.

- Don't talk about it! I want eternal summer, - Edith continued to philosophize.

- I don't. - Elfa's thoughts were occupied in a totally different direction. - At the end of the week I'm going to a new school. I still have to settle into the dorms, walk around the shops, get to know the city.

- Traitor! - Edith sat up sharply. - Who would have thought that you'd be the first to desert us and leave us here alone.

- And you? - Eleanora, tearing herself away from the camera, asked. - Why did you change your mind about high school?

The happy expression disappeared from Edith's face.

- You know why... Mama... First you need to get a trade, so college, and the practical choice: accounting. She considers staying in high school a waste of time.

Eleanora put the camera away in her bag and grabbed a handful of Edith's dietary candy.

- Yes, Elfa knows she'll be a painter. You, Edith, will put your damn good math skills to use. But me? I like to take pictures. But mama says that fifteen year olds can't know yet...

- Sixteen! - Elfa interrupted.

- Nora's not sixteen until the fall, - Edith reminded her.

- Whatever, - Eleanora persistently continued. - Mama says that in three years of high school your thoughts of the future can change a hundred times still.

- Even though we've already made our first choice, - Edith said optimistically.

A gentle breeze, just like the babbling ripples of the river, had gathered strength. The leaves of the maples rustled, entangled chicories whispered beyond the stone wall. The girls' spotted dresses flapped in the wind. Eleanora braided her hair again in a hurry, so that her unruly chestnut curls wouldn't run with the wind.

- It's gonna rain. - She looked at the dark sky that gathered a bit over the river.

- The water is probably really warm right now, just ahead of the storm, - Edith said in frustration. - We should have gone to the lake.

- With that stupid Zigmunds? - Eleanora huffed.

- Do you still hold a grudge against him? - Edith wanted to know, but Nora just turned her cheek in reply.

- If he had bossed you around like that? - Elfa reminded her.

- So for Zigmunds' sins we didn't go with Heinrich? - Edith pouted. - That's how boys are! Did you at least notice his new ride?

- Girls, - Elfa interrupted her girlfriends' chatter, - I'm going to tell you something now, but promise that you won't stare right away. There's someone sitting behind me, farther up the wall. And he's been watching us for like an hour.

- Where?! - Eleanora jumped over Elfa's shoulder, and Edith jumped to her feet. Just before the corner of the church garden, the stone wall was shaped like the rise and fall of a kiddie slide. Right atop the crest sat a man. The distance between the stranger and the girls was enough, but not too much, to allow them to gather that he was very young, almost the same age as the girls.

An unexpected gust of wind blew the stranger's white shirt, mischievously turning the pages of the book that he had with him on the stone wall. Noticing that the girls were watching him curiously, the boy grabbed the book, and placing it in his lap, began to turn its pages quickly, fighting the wind that raged incessantly. The stranger's features were hard to make out. They were obscured by his dark, long hair, mussed by the wind slipping from the book.

- Why didn't you say sooner? - Edith reproached her. - We're clowning around here, acting like models; we looked totally silly.

- I thought that you saw him yourselves. - Elfa apologized. - But he's totally sympathetic. I saw. He was even smiling.

- So? - Eleanora said loudly. - We'll enjoy ourselves however we want to. If someone doesn't like it, they don't have to watch!

- But I think he liked it, - Elfa answered, uncertainly.

A clap of thunder sounded almost right above the girls' heads. From the thickening sky, the first rough drops of rain began to pour. As they hit the warm, gray stones of the wall, they marked out small, darker gray stains that disappeared as quickly as they appeared. Edith and Elfa caught the windblown straw hat, shawls, and kerchiefs. Eleanora shoved the camera deeper into her bag. Hiking their long dresses up above the knee, all three began to run.

Large drops, striking the dry path, bounced and, splintering into dozens of tiny splashes, together with the dust fill on the girl's bare legs. At the end of the row of ancient linden trees, Eleanora slipped and fell behind her friends. The girl looked back involuntarily. Sharp drops of rain cut at Eleanora's face, caught in her unraveled braid, soaked the fabric of her thin dress. But all the while the boy in the white shirt continued to sit undisturbed on the church wall. The rain gathered strength and didn't allow her to clearly make it out, but for a moment it seemed to the girl that he was completely dry and lit up as if by the sun. Eleanora had already taken a few steps back when she was blinded by a harsh, brightly shining light.



In the piercing clap of thunder, even the earth under the linden trees on the waterfront shook. It seemed that the air, saturated with drops of water, would tear in half. Eleanora went numb. Lightning had struck very close. It could have hit the church garden, or one of the trees growing there, or maybe even the steeple.

- Nora! Nora, what's the hold up? Let's run! - Edith and Elfa called. It was her last chance. Heavy clouds, spreading out over the river, the church, and all of Kreicburg, were transformed into heavy rainfall.

Eleanora leisurely clicked the mouse of the computer, and the photographs taken the day before were replaced one after another on the monitor. Long dresses, the curls of the girls' hair, graceful movements and a century-old stone wall - none of it looked like the real world. Something caught Eleanora's glance, and the girl jumped one frame back. How on earth did she not notice it before? The stranger from the stone wall had gotten into the frame. Head proudly raised. Hair mussed by the wind. A high forehead, a slightly hooked nose, chin bent stubbornly. She had only got the line of the stranger's profile - strangely familiar and foreign at the same time. The girl fell into the chair, disturbed. She could really do with a sip of soothing meadowsweet tea about now.

The tea sat aromatic in a big porcelain mug with a funny illustration of a cow on its side. During summer, mother was obsessed with gathering medicinal herbs. At one point all the hooks and tension cords in the hallway of their apartment held bundles of various aromatic plants. Clover, yarrow, St. John's wort. When Eleanora was relating her experience with the thunder to everyone back at home, it didn't leave anyone indifferent. Even her brother, who was normally entrenched in the world of his computer, surfaced for

a bit this time to pontificate with his opinions on the flash of lightning and instructive tips on how his sister should have acted during a thunderstorm.

“How annoying!” Eleanora thought and turned back again to the monitor. Yes, now even the uninvited visitor in the frame was annoying. But the church wall didn’t belong just to her. And the boy had been sitting at a polite distance, he hadn’t come up to them and talked nonsense. Oh, not like that awful Zigmunds! He was the last thing the girl wanted to think about. Remembering Heinrich, Eleanora had to blush involuntarily again. The other boys in her class seemed childish, but Heinrich, as Edith who knew everything said, would finish his studies in the graduating high school class.

While sending the selected pictures to her girlfriends, Eleanora tried to drown out her concerns about her new school. What would her classmates be like, the teachers? To switch from a small school to a big high school, where everyone would be strangers, it was rather disturbing and a bit terrifying. Only at night, in bed, while thinking about what awaited her, a question flashed into Eleanora’s sleepy consciousness: “Who was that stranger on the church wall?”