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The Storyteller

Written by Jodi Picoult

Published by Hodder & Stoughton Ltd

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JODI PICOULT

THE STORYTELLER

HODDER &
STOUGHTON

First published in America in 2013 by Atria Books
An imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 444 76663 9
Ebook ISBN 978 1 444 76665 3

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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London NW1 3BH

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On the second Thursday of the month, Mrs. Dombrowski brings her dead husband to our therapy group.

It's just past 3PM, and most of us are still filling our paper cups with bad coffee. I've brought a plate of baked goods – last week, Stuart told me that the reason he keeps coming to Helping Hands isn't for the grief counseling but for my butterscotch pecan muffins – and just as I am setting them down, Mrs. Dumbrowski shyly nods toward the urn she is holding. "This," she tells me, "is Herb. Herbie, meet Sage. She's the one I told you about, the baker."

I stand frozen. I'm sure there's a protocol for meeting a spouse who's been cremated but I'm pretty much at a loss. Am I supposed to say hello? Shake his handle?

"Wow," I finally say, because although there are few rules to this group, the ones we have are steadfast: be a good listener, don't judge, and don't put boundaries on someone else's grief. I know this better than anyone. After all, I've been coming for two years, now, since my mother's death.

Today, our facilitator, Marge, has asked us to bring in mementos. "That's disgusting!" says Jocelyn, another group member. "We weren't supposed to bring something dead. We were supposed to bring a memory."

"He's not a *something*, he's a *someone*," Mrs. Dombrowski says.

I step away as they start to argue and nearly mow down an old man. I am taller than him – tall enough to see the pink of his scalp through the whorl of his white hair. "I am late again," he says, his English accented. "I was lost."

This man is new here; he's only been coming for two weeks. He has yet to say a single word during a session. Yet the first time I saw him, I recognized him; I just couldn't remember why.

Now, I do. The bakery. He comes in often with his dog, a little dachshund, and he orders a fresh roll with butter and a black coffee. He spends hours writing in a little black notebook, while his dog sleeps at his feet.

"You are Sage?" When I nod, so does he. "You lost your mother," he says.

"Yes." Mr. Weber hasn't been ready to share his story. But I figure it can't hurt to ask. "What about you?"

He smooths his tie. "Too many to count," he says, and slowly, he walks away.

#

My boss, Mary DeAngelis, used to be Sister Mary Robert, a nun. One Easter, when she heard the priest say *He is risen,* she had a vision. Six months later, she opened Our Daily Bread at the Foothills of the Our Lady of Mercy Shrine in Westerbrook, NH. It was a fair-weather shrine; business dropped off dramatically during New England winters. Which was Mary's selling point: what could be more secular than freshly baked bread?

The only catch was that she had no idea how to bake.

That's where I come in. I was twenty-one years old, and I had just dropped out of college. My academic decline began three months earlier with my father's funeral – afterward, at school, I couldn't get myself out of bed to go to classes. I missed one exam, then another. I stopped turning in papers. Then one night I woke up in my dorm room and smelled flour – so much flour I felt as if I'd been rolling in it, as if it were dusting my hair. I took a shower and couldn't get rid of the smell. It reminded me of Sunday mornings as a kid, when I would awaken to the scent of fresh bagels and bialys, crafted by my father.

He'd always tried to teach my sisters and me, but mostly we were too busy with school and field hockey and boys to listen. Or so I thought, until I started to sneak into the residential college dining hall kitchen and bake bread every night.

I left the loaves like abandoned babies on the thresholds of the offices of professors I admired, of the dorm rooms of boys with smiles so beautiful that they stunned me into awkward silence. I left a finial rail of sourdough rolls on a lectern podium and slipped a boule into the oversized purse of the cafeteria lady who pressed plates of pancakes and bacon at me, telling me I was too skinny. On the day my academic advisor told me that I was failing three of my four classes, I had nothing to say in my defense, but gave her a honey baguette seeded with anise, the bitter and the sweet.

Mary says it's divine intervention that she ran into me. Me, I don't believe in God; I think it was pure luck that the first Classifieds section I read when I slunk home with my proverbial tail between my legs included an ad for a master baker.

Baker's hours can do strange things to a brain. When your workday begins at 5 PM and lasts through dawn, you hear each click of the minute hand on the clock over the stove, you see movements in the shadows, your heart skips beats. You do not recognize the echo of your own voice; you begin to think you might be the only person left alive on earth. I'm convinced there's a reason most murders happen at night. The world just feels different, more fragile and unreal, a replica of the one everyone else gets to live in.

I've been living in reverse for so long now that it's not a hardship to go to bed when the sun is rising; and to wake when it's low in the sky. Most days this means I get about six hours of sleep before I return to start all over again, but being a baker means accepting a

fringe existence. The people I see most often are convenience store clerks, Dunkin' Donuts drive-through cashiers, nurses switching shifts. And Mary, who closes up the bakery shortly after I arrive. She locks me in, like the princess in Rumplestiltskin, not to count grain but to transform it before morning into the quick breads and yeasted loaves that fill the shelves and glass counters.

I am already well into making the one hundred pounds of product I make every night by the time I hear Mary start to close up shop. Rinsing my hands in the industrial sink, I pull off the cap I wear to cover my hair while baking and walk into the front of the shop. I hear a bark, and realize that the bakery isn't empty. The one lone customer is Mr. Weber, from my grief group, and his little dog. Mary is sitting with him, a cup of tea in her hands.

He struggles to get to his feet when he sees me and does an awkward little bow. "Hello again," he says.

"You know Josef?" Mary asks.

Grief group is a little like AA – you don't "out" someone unless you have his permission. "We've met," I say, and leave it at that.

His dachshund comes closer on its leash to lick at a spot of flour on my pants. "Eva," he scolds. "Manners!"

"It's okay," I tell him, crouching down to pat the dog.

Mr. Weber slips the loop of the leash over his wrist and stands. "I am keeping you from going home," he says apologetically to Mary.

"Not at all," she says. "I enjoy the company." She glances down at the old man's mug, which is still three-quarters full.

I don't know what makes me say what I say. After all, I have plenty to do. And I am not one to socialize. But it has started to pour, now, a torrential sheet of rain. The only vehicle in the lot is Mary's Harley, which means Mr. Weber is either walking home or waiting for the

bus. "You can stay until Advanced Transit shows up," I tell him.

He nods in gratitude and sits down again. As he cups his hands around the coffee mug, Eva the dog settles over his left foot and closes her eyes.

"Have a nice night," Mary says to me. "Bake your little heart out."

But instead of staying with Mr. Weber, I follow Mary into the back room where she keeps her biker rain gear. I fold my arms and lean against the door's threshold. "I'm not cleaning up after him."

"You invited him to stay," Mary reminds me.

"I don't know anything about him. What if he tries to rob us? Or worse?"

"Sage, he's ninety. Do you think he's going to cut your throat with his dentures?" She shakes her head. "Josef Weber is as close as you can get to being canonized while you're still alive," Mary says. "Everyone in Westerbrook knows the guy – he used to coach kids' baseball and be a Boy Scout leader; he was the guy who organized the cleanup of Riverhead Park; he taught German at the high school for a zillion years and when he retired, the street leading up to the school building was renamed after him. He's everyone's adoptive, cuddly grandfather. I don't think he's going to sneak into the kitchen and stab you with a bread knife while your back is turned."

"I've never heard of him," I murmur.

"Then clearly you've been living under a rock," Mary says.

"Or in a kitchen." When you sleep all day and work all night, you don't have time for things like newspapers or television. It was three days before I heard that Osama bin Laden had been killed.

"Good night." She gives me a quick hug. "Josef's harmless. Really. The worst he could do is talk you to death."

I watch her open the rear door of the bakery. She ducks at the

onslaught of driving rain and waves without looking back. I close the door behind her and lock it.

By the time I return to the bakery's dining room, Mr. Weber's mug is empty and the dog is on his lap. "Sorry," I say. "Work stuff."

"You don't have to entertain me," he replies. "I know you have much to do."

I have a hundred loaves to shape; bagels to boil; bialys to fill. Yes, you could say I'm busy. "It can wait a few minutes."

Mr. Weber gestures to the chair Mary had occupied. "Then please. Sit."

I do, but I check my watch. My timer will go off in three minutes, then I will have to go back into the kitchen. "So," I say. "I guess we're in for some weather."

"We are always in for some weather," Mr. Weber replies. His words sound as if he is biting them off a long string: precise, clipped. "Tonight however we are in for some *bad* weather." He glances up at me. "You have been a baker long?"

"A few years," I answer.

"You are very good at what you do."

"Anyone can bake bread," I say.

"But not everyone can do it well."

I smile. "My father taught me."

From the kitchen comes the sound of the timer buzzing; it wakes up Eva, who begins to bark. Almost simultaneously there is a sweep of approaching lights through the glass windows of the bakery as the Advance Transit bus slows at its corner stop. "Thank you for letting me stay a bit," he says.

"No problem, Mr. Weber," I say.

His face softens. "Please. Call me Josef." As he walks out of the

bakery he squints into the bright beams of the bus.

I notice that Mr. Weber – Josef – has left behind the little black book he is always writing in when he sits here. It is banded with elastic. I grab it and run into the storm. I step right into a gigantic puddle, which soaks my clog. "Josef," I call out, my hair plastered to my head. He turns, Eva's beady little eyes poking out from between the folds of his raincoat. "You left this."

I hold up the black book and walk toward him. "Thank you," he says, safely slipping it into his pocket. "I don't know what I would have done without it." He tips his umbrella, so that it shelters me as well.

"Your Great American Novel?" I guess.

He looks startled. "Oh, no. This is just a place to keep all my thoughts. At my age, they get away from me, otherwise. If I don't write down that I like your Kaiser rolls, for example, I won't remember to order them the next time I come."

"I think most people could use a book like that."

The driver of the Advanced Transit bus honks twice. We both turn in the direction of the noise.

Josef pats his pocket. "It's important to remember," he says.

#

In a town the size of Westerbrook, which was derived of Yankee Mayflower stock, being Jewish made my sisters and I anomalies, as different from our classmates as if our skin happened to be bright blue. "Rounding out the bell curve," my father used to say, when I asked him why we had to stop eating bread for a week roughly the same time everyone else in my school was bringing their hard-boiled Easter eggs in their lunchboxes. I wasn't picked on – to the contrary,

when our elementary school teachers taught holiday alternatives to Christmas, I became a virtual celebrity, along with Julius, the only African-American kid in my school, whose grandmother celebrated Kwanzaa. I went to Hebrew school because my sisters did, but when the time came for me to be bat mitvahed, I begged to drop out. When I wasn't allowed, I went on a hunger strike. It was enough that my family didn't match other families; I had no desire to call attention to myself any more than I had to.

My parents were what I call fair-weather Jews. They didn't keep kosher; they didn't go to services (except for the years prior to Pepper and Saffron's bat mitzvahs, when it was mandatory). My parents were adamant, however, about fasting on Yom Kippur and not having a Christmas tree. It was as if they followed the *Reader's Digest* version of Judaism.

When I was lobbying to not have a bat mitzvah, I said as much to them. My father got very quiet. *The reason it's important to believe in something,* he said*, is because you can*. Then he sent me to my room without supper, which was truly shocking because in our household we were encouraged to state our opinions, no matter how controversial. It was my mother who snuck upstairs with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for me. "Your father may not be as religious as the rabbi," she said, "but he believes in tradition."

"Okay," I argued. "I promise to do my back-to-school shopping in July before all the good binders and backpacks get sold out; and I'll always make sweet potato-marshmallow casserole for Thanksgiving. I don't have a problem with tradition, Mom. I have a problem going to Hebrew school. Religion isn't in your DNA. You don't believe just because your parents believe."

"Grandma Minka wears sweaters," my mother said. "All the time."

This was a seemingly random observation. My father's mother lived in Massachusetts in an assisted living community. She had been born in Poland and still had an accent that made it sound like she was always singing. And yeah, Grandma Minka wore sweaters, even when it was ninety degrees out, but she also wore too much blush and leopard print.

"A lot of survivors had their tattoos surgically removed, but she said seeing it every morning reminds her that she won."

It took me a moment to realize what my mother was telling me. My grandmother had been in a concentration camp? How had I made it to age twelve without knowing this?

"She doesn't talk about it," my mother said simply. "And she doesn't like her arm to show in public."

We had studied the Holocaust in social studies class. It was hard to imagine the pictures in my textbook of living skeletons matching the plump woman who always smelled like lilacs, who never missed her weekly hair appointment, who kept brightly colored canes in every room of her house so that she always had easy access to one. She was not part of history. She was just my grandma.

"She doesn't go to temple," my mother said. "I guess after all that, you'd have a pretty complicated relationship with God. But your father, he started going. I think it was his way of processing what happened to his mother."

Here I was, trying desperately to shed my religion so I could blend in, and it turned out I was an über-Jew; one descended from a Holocaust survivor. I couldn't shake this religion even if I tried my hardest. Frustrated, angry, and selfish, I threw myself backward against my pillows. "That's Dad's problem. It has nothing to do with me."

My mother hesitated. "If she hadn't lived, Sage, neither would you."

That night, I dreamed of a moment I hadn't remembered, from when I was very tiny, and was sitting on my grandmother's lap while she turned the pages of a book and told me the story. I realize now that it wasn't the right story at all. The picture book was of Cinderella, but she must have been thinking of something else, because there was a dark forest and wolves and monsters; a trail of oats and grain.

I also recall that I wasn't paying much attention, because I was mesmerized by the gold bracelet on my grandmother's wrist. I kept reaching for it, pulling at her sweater. At one point, the wool rode up just far enough for me to be distracted by something else – the faded blue numbers on her inner forearm. *What's that?* I had asked.

My telephone number.

I had memorized my telephone number the previous year in preschool, so that if I got lost, the police could call home.

What if you move? I had asked.

Oh Sage, she had laughed. *I'm here to stay.*

#

The next day, when Josef Weber comes into the bakery at 4:30, I bring out a small bag of homemade dog biscuits for Eva, and a loaf of bread for him.

"I saved you the best one of the night," I tell him. I know it's a good loaf. You can smell it, when an artisanal bread comes out of the oven: the earthy, dark roast scent, as if you are in the thick of a forest. I glance with pride at the variegated crumb. Josef closes his eyes in delight. "I am lucky to know the baker personally," Josef says.

I don't know why it is so easy for me to talk to him. I can't even make casual conversation with the teller at the bank without breaking out in a sweat, sometimes – that's how crippling my social anxiety can

be. But Josef seems sweeter, gentler. With most people, I'm afraid of saying the wrong thing; with Josef, it's as if there is no wrong thing I could say. "How long have you lived here?"

"Twenty-two years," Josef says. "I used to live in New York. I wanted a place that was quieter."

"Do you have family around here?"

His hand shakes as he reaches for his mug of coffee. "I have no one," Josef answers, and he starts to get to his feet. "I must go."

Immediately, my stomach turns over. *Stupid*, I think, berating myself. I'd put my foot in my mouth after all. I'd met Josef at grief group; it stands to reason that he joined because of a family member whom he'd recently lost. "I'm sorry," I say, putting my hand on his arm, but he jerks away at my touch. "I didn't mean to upset you. I don't see many people, because of the hours I keep. So my conversation skills are a little rusty." I offer him an unhemmed smile. "I'm twenty-five, and both of my parents are gone. They won't see me get married. I won't get to cook them Thanksgiving dinner or visit them with grandkids. My sisters have minivans and soccer practices and careers with bonuses. I have nothing in common with them." The words are a flood rushing out of me; just speaking them, I am drowning. I have no idea why I've told Josef, a virtual stranger, more about me than I've told anyone else in years. "I also have no one," I admit.

Josef meets my gaze. "Maybe now," he replies, "we can have each other."

#

Two weeks later, Josef and I carpool to our next grief group meeting. We sit beside each other, and it is as if we have a subtle telepathy

between us as the other group members speak. Sometimes he catches my gaze and hides a smile, sometimes I roll my eyes at him. We are partners, suddenly, in crime.

The facilitator's prompt today is to talk about what happens to us after we die. "Do we stick around?" she asks. "Watch over our loved ones?"

"I think so. I can still feel Sheila sometimes," Stuart says. "It's like the air gets more humid, the way it does before a thunderstorm." He shrugs. "I talk out loud to her."

"When my mother was in hospice, her rabbi told her a story about what happens afterward," I say, my throat growing tight. "He said that in Heaven and Hell people sit at banquet tables filled with amazing food, but no one can bend their elbows. In Hell, everyone starves because they can't feed themselves. In Heaven, everyone's stuffed, because they feed each other."

I can feel Josef staring at me.

"Mr. Weber?" The facilitator smiles at him, encouraging.

I assume Josef will ignore her question, or shake his head, like usual. But to my surprise, he speaks. "When you die you die. And everything is over."

His blunt words settle like a shroud over the rest of us. He pushes himself to his feet and steps outside the circle. "Excuse me," he says, and he walks out of the meeting room.

I look at him, and I stand. All eyes focus on me, as if everyone expects me to explain what just happened. "I – I'm his ride," I stammer, and I run after Josef.

I find him waiting in the hallway of the church. "That story you told, about the banquet," Josef says. "Do you believe it?"

"I guess I'd like to," I say. "For my mother's sake."

"But your rabbi—"

"Not my rabbi. My mother's." I start walking toward the door. "I'm not religious."

"But you believe in an afterlife?" Josef says, curious.

"And you don't."

"I believe in Hell," he replies. "But it's here on earth." He shakes his head. "Good people and bad people. As if it is this easy. Everyone is both of these at once."

"Don't you think one outweighs the other?"

Josef stops walking. "You tell me," he says.

#

The next day, Josef doesn't come to the bakery. He doesn't come the following day either. Replaying our conversation – and how abruptly it ended – I have come to the only viable conclusion: Josef is either angry at me, or he's lying comatose in his bed.

In all the years I've worked at Our Daily Bread, I've never left the bakery unattended overnight. It's a practical consideration – when you are working nonstop for ten hours and you are at the mercy of yeast, which can overrise if left alone too long, you calculate every step of the process. Sometimes I have six or seven timers going at once for different projects, in different stages. All of this is simply an explanation why a baker who works alone doesn't run out to satisfy a craving for a Big Mac or to grab a cup of coffee at 7-Eleven. But after I've burned a batch of brioche and overmixed 50 kilos of dough, I realize that I'm not going to be of any use until I go to Josef's house, and make sure he's still breathing.

I drive the fifteen miles to Josef's house, wondering who you call first when someone is found unresponsive – the cops? An ambulance?

Immediately I see a light on in the kitchen. That's all it takes for me to feel like a fool.

Before I can back out of his driveway, however, Eva starts barking. Josef opens the door that leads into the kitchen from a side porch along the drive. He is wearing a bathrobe tied over his pajamas and the dog weaves between his legs. "Sage," he says, surprised. He sneezes violently and wipes his nose with a white cloth handkerchief. "Is everything all right?"

"You have a cold," I say, the obvious. Immediately, I feel like an idiot.

"Did you come all this way to tell me what I already know?"

"No. I thought – I mean, I wanted to check on you, since I hadn't seen you in a few days."

"Ach. Well, as you can see, I am still standing." He gestures to his kitchen. "You will come in?"

"I can't," I say. "I have to get back to work." But I make no move to leave.

The moon is full tonight; it makes it possible for me to see the resignation in his eyes when he says this. Adam told me once that deaths seem to peak during a full moon.

"I thought you might be angry at me," I blurt out. "I thought that was the reason you haven't come back to the bakery."

He hesitates, his hand on the doorknob. "This bothered you?"

"Enough for me to be here, now," I admit. "The way I acted…it's not how you treat a friend."

"A friend," Josef repeats, beaming. "We are friends, now?"

A twenty-five-year-old girl and a nonagenarian? I suppose there have been stranger duos.

"I would like this very much," he says formally. "I will see you

tomorrow, Sage. Now you must go back to work so that I can have a roll with my coffee."

Twenty minutes later, I am back in the kitchen, turning off a half-dozen angry timers and assessing the damage caused by my hour AWOL. There are loaves that have proofed too much; the dough has lost its shape and sags to one side or the other. My output for the whole night will be affected.

I burst into tears.

I wish I could bake for my mother: boules and pains au chocolat and brioches, piled high on her table in Heaven. I wish I could be the one to feed her. But I can't. It's like Josef said – no matter what we survivors like to tell ourselves about the afterlife, when someone dies, everything is over.

But this. I look around the bakery kitchen. This, I can reclaim, by working the dough very briefly and letting it rise again.

So I knead. I knead, I knead.

#

The next day, a miracle occurs.

Mary, who at first is tight-lipped and angry at my nightly output, slices open a ciabatta. "What am I supposed to do, Sage?" she sighs. "Tell customers to just go down the street to Rudy's?"

Rudy's is our competition. "You could give them a rain check."

"Peanut butter and jelly tastes like crap on a rain check."

I've told her that I got a migraine and fell asleep for two hours. "I'm sorry," I say, and I really do mean it. "It won't happen again."

Mary purses her lips, which tells me she still hasn't forgiven me yet. Then she picks up a slice of the bread, ready to spread it with strawberry jam.

Except she doesn't.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," she gasps, and she drops the slice as if it's burned her fingers.

I retrieve it, wondering if maybe I was so tired last night that I actually did manage to bake a razorblade into the loaf. But Mary reverently tugs the bread out of my hand. "Do you see Him?"

If I squint, I can sort of make out what looks like the shape of a face.

Then it becomes more clear. A beard. Robes.

Apparently I've baked the face of God into my loaf.

The first visitors to our little miracle are the women who work in the shrine gift shop, who take a picture on a cell phone with the piece of bread between them and say they plan to hang it behind the counter. Then Father Dupree arrives. "Fascinating," he says, peering over the edge of his bifocals. "Absolutely fascinating."

The door flies open and a reporter with frizzy red hair enters, trailed by a bear of a cameraman toting the biggest camera I've ever seen. "Is this where the Jesus Loaf is?"

Mary steps forward. "Yes, I'm Mary DeAngelis," she says. "I own the bakery."

"Great," the reporter says. "I'm Harriet Yarrow from WMUR. We'd like to talk to you and your employees, if that's all right." While she interviews Mary and Father Dupree, I ring up three baguettes, a hot chocolate, and a semolina loaf. Then Harriet sticks her microphone in my face. "The baker behind this New Hampshire miracle is Sage Singer. Sage, was there anything unusual about this particular loaf?"

"Um," I say, feeling naked under the eye of the camera. "No." I am consumed by the thought that the whole of this state will see me on the midday news. It's enough to paralyze me. "I'm sorry – I have to go," I mutter, and I run out the door.

I take the Holy Stairs two at a time, to my favorite place in the shrine. It's an area nobody ever visits, actually. Which, of course, is the way I like it.

This is why I'm surprised when I hear footsteps. When Josef appears, leaning heavily on the railing, I rush over to help him. "What is going on down there? Is someone famous having coffee?"

"Sort of. Mary thinks she saw the face of Jesus in one of my loaves."

I expect him to scoff, but instead Josef tilts his head, considering this. "I suppose God tends to show up in places we would not expect."

"You believe in God?" I say, truly surprised. After our conversation about Heaven and Hell, I had assumed that he was an atheist too.

"Yes," Josef replies. "He judges us at the end. The Old Testament God. You must know about this, as a Jew."

"I never said I was Jewish."

Now Josef looks surprised. "But your mother—"

"-Is not me."

Josef hesitates. "I did not mean to offend," he says stiffly. "I came to ask a favor, and I just needed to be certain you were who I thought you were."

"I'm your friend," I say. "Isn't that all that counts?"

Josef takes a deep breath and when he exhales, the words he speaks hang between us. "I would like you to help me die."

He is having a senile moment, I think. But Josef's eyes are bright and focused. "I know this is a surprising request," Josef says. "But it is one that I have thought much about. And you are the right person."

"Are you sick?" I ask. "Because I know all about hospice, after my mother . . . "

He smiles sadly. “My doctor says I have the constitution of a much younger man. This is God’s joke on me. He makes me so strong that I cannot die even when I want to.

“I have had cancer, twice. I survived a car crash and a broken hip. I can’t die, Sage, although I should be dead. Which is why I need your help.”

It strikes me that I know nothing about this man, not really. I shake my head, backing away. “Look Josef,” I say calmly. “You do need help, but not for the reason you think. I don’t go around committing murder.”

“Perhaps not.” He reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a small photograph, its edges scalloped. He pushes the photograph into my palm.

I am expecting a photo of the person he lost, the one he never talks about. Instead, I see a man, much younger than Josef, with the same widow’s peak, the same hooked nose, a ghosting of his features. He is dressed in the uniform of an SS guard, and he is smiling.

“But I did,” he says.