

THE LAST VICTIM

A Novel

Elaine Bossik



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PORTABLE  HOPPER, LLC

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*For
Ray, Eric and Glenn,
my extraordinary husband and sons, who have always believed in me*

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*“While our eyes wait to see
the destined final day,
we must call no one happy
who is of mortal race,
until he hath crossed life’s border,
free from pain*

—SOPHOCLES
Oedipus The King

Chapter 1

Blue, green and yellow lights hung precariously on wires strung over the doorways of the shops and across the tops of the pushcarts, transforming the otherwise drab Brooklyn marketplace into a mock carnival. Tonight was unusual. The marketplace was open late. By sundown tomorrow it would be Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and the market would be empty and silent. The excitement of the coming holiday permeated the cool autumn evening as women hurried about pushing shopping carts, tugging heavy bags and pulling unruly children.

Makeshift wooden tables set up outside the shops were piled high with second-hand clothing. Peddlers shouted against the din, “Men’s suits, slightly used! Like new! Two for five dollars!”

“Apples for the New Year, fresh from the trees! Five pounds for a dime!”

Sophie Rothman stopped at Hershel’s pushcart to buy apples. She seemed like a large woman, yet she was only five feet one. She was broad, almost shapeless, except for her huge breasts, which strained against the buttons on her blouse. Sophie would complain about the burden of such large breasts, but she knew they were her greatest asset. She had brought three babies into the world and they never went hungry. And weren’t her breasts what attracted her husband? She knew it was not her face. It was a plain face, not homely, but certainly not beautiful. She had an aristocratic nose and dark wavy hair that she wore short because she could never manage it. Life was too busy and hard for Sophie to waste time fussing over her hair.

Sophie fingered the apples in her chapped reddened hands. Jeanie stood close to her mother, her feet tapping restlessly as her mother selected apples. Though she was only five, she sensed the excitement vibrating through the marketplace.

Resting her heavy shopping bags on the sidewalk, Sophie examined an apple closely. "The apples have brown spots," she told the peddler. "I'll take six pounds for a dime."

"It's five pounds for a dime," Hershel insisted. "The apples are perfect."

"I'll give you ten cents for six pounds, or I'll go up the block to Moshe's." Sophie drove a hard bargain and usually won.

Hershel stuffed apples into a brown paper bag and placed the bag on a dented metal scale that hung from the top of the pushcart.

"Take out the paper wrappings," Sophie ordered. "I'm only paying for apples."

Hershel pulled several tissue wrappings out of the bag. "My children go hungry because of you," he complained.

"With all these apples, how could they starve?"

Sophie placed a coin in Hershel's callused hand and stuffed the bag of apples into her bulging shopping bag. Then she took the discarded tissue wrappings and tucked them in next to the apples. She would use the tissues for toilet paper. Sophie let nothing go to waste, especially now with the war dragging on. It was 1943 and there were shortages of everything. You never knew from one day to the next what would be scarce.

A cart with freshly made jelly apples glowed deliciously under the red light, catching Jeanie's eyes. "Momma, can I have a jelly apple?" She tugged Sophie's skirt.

"No," Sophie snapped. "It's bad for your teeth."

They walked on, passing the knish peddler who stood over his dented metal cart where knishes warmed inside. "Momma, can I have a knish?" The inviting smell of warm dough and potatoes made Jeanie's mouth water.

"No, you just ate dinner."

"But I'm still hungry."

Sophie ignored her daughter, hurrying to the pickle store, which was crowded with shoppers. The pungent smell of vinegar and freshly souring pickles mingled with the smell of knishes, sweet jelly apples and fresh oranges from the fruit stands. Huge barrels filled with vinegar, spices and pickles were lined up like obedient soldiers outside the store. Sophie put down her heavy shopping bags and reached for a wax paper bag and the pickle tongs. She sniffed out each barrel like a bloodhound stalking its prey. After selecting two choice pickles, Sophie paid the merchant and moved on, with Jeanie trailing close behind.

The sweet smell of freshly baked rolls and challah breads drifted into the street through the half-opened doorway of the tiny bakery. Sophie walked in to buy a fresh challah for the New Year. Trays of charlotte russes lined the case next to the challahs. Jeanie pressed her face against the glass. She could

almost taste the soft mounds of whipped cream piled high on top of the delicate little cakes. She marveled at how each was wrapped so neatly in its own little white cardboard frame. Jeanie hardly ever got to have one. When she did, she slowly licked the sweet whipped cream off, letting it linger in her mouth and then finally nibbled the soft white spongy cake at the bottom. "Momma, can I have a charlotte russe?" Jeanie's small voice begged, her eyes pleaded.

"They're only five cents today for the holiday," said Mrs. Gerber, the baker's wife. "Buy one for the *shane maidel*, the sweet girl," she coaxed.

"I only came in for a challah," Sophie said sharply.

The baker's wife had four sons and longed for a daughter to pamper. "If I had such a *shane maidel*, a charlotte russe would be in her mouth every day," she said.

"She can live without it." Sophie picked up her bread and departed hastily from the bakery, dragging Jeanie from the case window.

"Momma, can't I have just one? I won't ask you for anything else ever again."

"No! And if you nag me again, this will be the last time I take you with me when I go shopping."

Jeanie trailed behind Sophie, her head down, hoping to find some lost pennies in the cracks on the sidewalk. They plodded slowly along the crowded streets. A sudden shrill scream pierced the air, falling like a shroud over the marketplace. All eyes sought out the source of such agony. Reva stood near the narrow doorway of the apartment building where she lived above a sweater shop. She pressed her three-month-old infant against her heaving breasts, her face twisted with grief. Animal cries choked out of her throat. "She's dead! She's dead! My baby's dead!" An empty carriage rocked beside her.

"Call an ambulance!" a peddler shouted.

Two women ran to comfort Reva, who held tighter to her dead baby.

Sophie set her shopping bags down on the sidewalk, her arms suddenly devoid of their former strength. Her breasts rose and fell under her tight blouse as her breath caught in short gasps. Her face paled as she asked a nearby peddler, "What happened?"

"Who knows?" he answered. "She was rocking the baby... One minute she was alive and the next minute she was dead."

Jeanie tugged Sophie's skirt. "Why's the baby dead, Momma?"

"God only knows." A distant frightened look clouded Sophie's face. Then she took Jeanie's small hand in hers and led her back to Gerber's bakery. "I'll take a charlotte russe for my *shane maidel*," she told the baker's wife, as she handed her the last five pennies in her purse.

Chapter 2

Jeanie and Sophie entered the three-story tenement building where they lived. The large building loomed above the stores in the heart of the busy street. Gray and unfriendly, it stood squashed between a dry goods store and a produce market. Sophie pushed open the heavy iron door that led to a long narrow hallway. It was lit by a bare light bulb that hung from the ceiling, casting tomb-like shadows on the walls.

Jeanie's heart quickened, as it always did, when she walked through the hallway, which held some unspeakable fear for her. It haunted her dreams long after she had grown up and left the place. There was a particularly dark cavernous spot beneath the first stairwell that led to a doorway and a dirty yard that terrified her. It was here, she feared, where a bogeyman with overpowering strength would one day grab her.

Sophie and Jeanie climbed the three flights of stairs to their third floor apartment, stopping at each landing so Sophie could put down her heavy bags and rest. Breathless and pale, Sophie brushed away beads of perspiration on her upper lip. Still shaken by the death of Reva's baby, she couldn't drive the scene from her mind. The screams still echoed in her ears. She would have to inform her relatives if they hadn't already learned of the tragedy. Bad news had a way of traveling with lightning speed. She would get the children to bed and then go down to the floor below where her younger sister, Ida, lived with her family. Then she would have to go upstairs where her brothers, Isaac and Leon, lived with their wives and children. Cousins, aunts and uncles occupied many of the other apartments in the building.

Though Sophie shared ownership of the building with Ida and her brothers, she didn't feel much like a landlord. Landlords were supposed to be rich. She hadn't seen a nickel from her inheritance yet and she probably

wouldn't unless the property was sold. The meager rents that the tenants paid barely covered maintenance of the building. Then she had to listen to complaints from tenants, like Mr. Seline, who stopped her in the hallway every day. "Sophie, what's the matter? You can't give hot water? A cold bath I have to take all the time," he'd complain.

Sophie could hear Mitzi whining and scratching on the door as she fumbled with the key. She opened the heavy door and the puppy licked her legs affectionately and ran around in wild excited joy at seeing her again. Sophie was glad she had taken the puppy from a neighbor's litter. With Harry away in Newfoundland on a government job for the past three years, a woman alone with three children needed some protection. Mitzi would grow into a good watchdog, and the children had begged to keep her.

Jeanie ran through the five rooms of the apartment chasing the puppy. Mitzi jumped from the beds to the floor, to the kitchen table, and finally overturned a vase that stood on a mahogany hand-me-down table in the living room. Jeanie giggled with glee until the vase clattered to the floor. She quickly retrieved it, anticipating Sophie's anger. "It's not broken, Momma," she called out, hiding a large chip and carefully replacing the vase on the table.

"If you make the dog wild, I'll get rid of her," Sophie warned. If it wasn't Jeanie, it was Ruthie or Albert who over-excited the puppy. But the truth was that Sophie had grown attached to Mitzi, whose warm affection and blind devotion to her were very appealing. Unlike people, the dog demanded only Sophie's occasional attention, some food and a warm place to live.

Jeanie loved Mitzi. She stroked her black silky hair now and hugged her a little too hard, sending the puppy under the bed, yelping in pain. "I'm sorry, Mitzi," Jeanie apologized, trying to coax the puppy out from under Albert's bed. But Mitzi only whimpered, refusing to come out.

Sophie unpacked her purchases now, wondering how she would get all the holiday preparations completed by sundown tomorrow. All the golden honey cakes and Harry's favorite—apple cake fragrant with cinnamon—she would bake again. But for the third year, Harry would not be here to enjoy the holiday with them. She smiled, remembering how Harry would sit at the kitchen table eating one helping after another of her apple cake. "This is *some* apple cake," he'd praise between mouthfuls. "Sophie, I don't know how you do it." He'd smile, his even white teeth gleaming.

Sophie missed Harry's smile, his strong arms around her and his presence, which always made her feel safe. She knew it was her own anger that had driven him away, but why did he have to go so far? Newfoundland. He may as well have gone to another world.

Sophie removed apples from a paper bag, placed them next to the sink,

and began washing them. The icy water ran through her fingers and her memory carried her back to a cold winter day when Harry returned from job hunting to tell her he was going away. He walked into the kitchen where she was drying dinner dishes.

"You're so late... I was worried. I kept your dinner warm." Sophie bent to open the oven door.

"I'm not hungry," Harry said, his arms hanging limply at his sides. His face was drawn, his dark eyes dulled by defeat. He sat listlessly in a kitchen chair, unbuttoning his coat.

"You look tired," Sophie said. "A warm dinner will do you good."

"I found a job today." Harry's voice was flat.

"That's wonderful." Sophie smiled, setting a dinner plate on the table, relieved by Harry's news. Harry had been out of work and she worried endlessly about money.

"It's in Newfoundland... I have to go away for a while."

"What? Where? Where's Newfoundland? Why are you going there?" Sophie stammered, her momentary joy turning to anxiety as she remembered Harry's absence only a few years ago when he had run off to Panama. She shuddered, recalling the devastating effect it had had on their marriage.

"It was the only job I could find," Harry explained. "It's a government job. I'll be part of a construction team building a military base."

"Where's Newfoundland? When will you come home?" Sophie twisted the dishtowel in her hands.

"It's off the coast of Canada. Not so far away."

"How could you take a job like that without asking me?" Sophie bristled.

Harry clenched his fists. "You want money! I'm going to make a lot of money there."

"You don't have to go away. There are plenty of factory jobs here if you're not so proud."

"I'm sick of listening to your complaints about money." Harry pushed his dinner plate away, untouched.

"I have a right to complain. It's my money you lost in that lousy service station business with your good-for-nothing brother," Sophie spat.

"There you go again. You'll get all your money back!" Harry's face reddened and his hands trembled.

"You don't have to go away. You want to. You... you like running away from your problems," Sophie shouted.

"You create the problems, Sophie. And then you tell me I'm running away from them."

"What did I do, Harry? You lost the business."

"How many times do I have to tell you it was nobody's fault. It was bad

timing with a war on... Shortages of gasoline and car parts... I never asked you for your damned money! It was your idea. I know you well, Sophie. You'll never let me live in peace. Not until I pay you back every last cent. That's why I'm going to Newfoundland, so you can get your goddamned money back. It's settled," Harry told her with finality.

Sophie felt the muscles of her face tighten even now as she thought of her money lost in the business. The thousands of dollars she had carefully saved over the years before she even met Harry, by denying herself all the things a young girl wants. She had worked hard since she was fourteen, in millinery shops, in dry good stores, in dress shops, selling her heart out for a few pennies a day. But she had managed to save all that money, only to have Harry lose it. And the money Harry had sent her when he was away in Panama she thought of as hers, not theirs. She was the one who had sacrificed and saved it.

Sophie turned off the cold tap water and began drying apples with the dishtowel. Her face relaxed. She could forgive Harry now, she thought. He had more than repaid her with the money he sent home after his first year in Newfoundland. Why, she agonized, did he have to drag what was supposed to be a one year job into three? She had written and begged him to come home after the first year. *Please come home*, she wrote. *Albert and Ruthie miss you. Jeanie hardly remembers you.*

I'll be home as soon as I can, Harry wrote back. *I'm making a lot of money.*

Sophie couldn't deny that. Harry would be surprised at how much she had saved in three years. But she wondered if the job and the money were the only reasons Harry stayed away for so long. Surely he couldn't still be angry with her. She doubted that he had been faithful to her all these years. He was a handsome man and women were attracted to him. Well, she didn't condemn him for it. She couldn't. She had her own shame to bear. A pang of remorse swept over Sophie as her eyes rested on Jeanie, who sat on the floor now playing with clothespin dolls. She remembered with regret the two lonely years she had spent when Harry had gone off to Panama. Albert was six years old and Ruthie only three. Harry said he would only be gone for a year. But a year dragged into two and Sophie found the loneliness unbearable. She drew a deep breath, forcing herself to stop thinking about the past now. Surely Harry would be home soon, in time for Albert's Bar Mitzvah.

"Go downstairs to Aunt Ida and tell Ruthie and Albert to come home," Sophie told Jeanie. "It's time for bed."

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