Praise for *Love and Treasure*

'*Love and Treasure* is something of a treasure trove of a novel. Where the opening chapters evoke the nightmare of Europe in the aftermath of World War II with the hallucinatory vividness of Anselm Kiefer's disturbing canvases, the concluding chapters, set decades before, are a bittersweet evocation of thwarted personal destinies that yet yield to something like cultural triumph. Ayelet Waldman is not afraid to create characters for whom we feel an urgency of emotion, and she does not resolve what is unresolvable in this ambitious, absorbing and poignantly moving work of fiction.'

Joyce Carol Oates

'One is quickly caught up in *Love and Treasure* with its shifting tones and voices – at times a document, a thriller, a love story, a search – telescoping time backwards and forwards to vividly depict a story found in the preludes and then the after-effects of the Holocaust. Waldman gives us remarkable characters in a time of complex and surprising politics.'

Michael Ondaatje

'*Love and Treasure* is like the treasure train it chases: fast-paced, bound by a fierce mission, full of bright secrets and racingly, relentlessly moving.'

Daniel Handler (aka Lemony Snicket)

Love and Treasure

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AYELET WALDMAN

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To Michael. Only and always.

Prologue

MAINE

2013

Jack Wiseman, immersed as ever in the pages of a book, did not notice the arrival of the bus until alerted by the stir among the other people waiting in the overheated station lounge. The pugnacious chin he aimed at the coach's windows had a bit of Kleenex clinging to it, printed with a comma of blood, and his starched and ironed shirt gaped at the collar, revealing pleats in the drapery of his neck and a thick white thatch of fur on his chest. He squinted, caught a glimpse of the glory of his granddaughter's hair, and pulled himself to his feet. He tore a corner from the back page of somebody's discarded *Ellsworth American* and tucked it between the pages of his old Loeb edition of Herodotus, measuring with a rueful snort the remaining unread inches. He had never been a man to leave a job unfinished, a fact on which he supposed he must have been relying, perhaps unconsciously, in undertaking to reread, for what must be the eighth or ninth time, this most garrulous of classical historians.

As the bus disgorged its first passengers, Jack got momentarily lost in contemplation of the disembarking soldiers, home on leave from the very ancient battlefields as in the book he was reading, from Babylon and Bactria, their camouflage fatigues the colour of ashes and dust, the pattern jagged, like the pixels of a computer screen. Then Natalie's hair kindled in the bus's doorway, and he held up the little green-backed volume to catch her attention. He

could tell from the look of shock that crossed her face in the instant before she smiled that pancreatic cancer had taken even worse a toll on him than he'd imagined. Her lips moved.

He lifted a finger, motioning her to wait. He pressed a button on his hearing aid and said, 'Sweetheart! You made it.'

'Hey, Grandpa.' Her eyes were bleary, the red dent in her cheek from whatever she had been leaning against reminding him of how she used to look as a child, waking from an afternoon nap. Or perhaps it was her mother he was remembering, an image coming from farther away and longer ago. He took note of her pallor, the bruised look of the skin under her green eyes, and thought that she had likely come to Maine as much to flee her own troubles as to lose herself in the alleviation of his. Indeed the possibility of her finding consolation in worry over him was one of the reasons, not that you needed a reason to want to see your only granddaughter, he had agreed so quickly when she first called to say that she wanted to make the trip.

'Are you hungry?' he said. 'There's not much in Bangor, but if you can wait, the Grill's open. I could take you there.'

'You could take me? You drove?' she said.

He just blinked at her, tempted to employ one of her own favourite childhood expressions: *Duh*. He had been expecting this line of inquiry.

'How else would I pick you up?' he said.

'I figured you'd call a taxi!'

'Dave had a fare. Round trip to Portland. I couldn't very well ask him to turn it down, not in the off-season. Business is slow.'

'Oh, is it?' She shook her head with disapproval that was affectionate but sincere. 'So this isn't about you being stubborn and proud?'

'They make a great pumpkin pie at the Grill,' he said. 'How's that sound?'

She reached for his chin, and with a mixture of tenderness and reproof picked the bit of Kleenex from his shaving cut.

'Why didn't you call a Bangor cab?' she said, having inherited the full genetic complement of Wiseman stubbornness, if not pride.

'A Bangor cab!' he said, sincerely horrified by the notion. 'Those guys only take Route One! We'd be stuck in mill traffic for hours, this time of day.'

By now they had reached the car, a Volvo DL wagon that for twenty-three years, in the summertime, over breaks and sabbaticals, had ferried first Jack and his wife, then Jack alone, from New York City to Maine and back again. He wondered if it was worth leaving the blue behemoth to Natalie. Like all his possessions, like everything that chance or fate had ever entrusted to his care, he had kept the car in impeccable order. Properly maintained, it might run for years to come. But Natalie might not care to pay the steep New York parking fees. She might, once he was gone, never again care to make the long drive to Red Hook, Maine. And though she was, and would always be, his *tzatzkeleh*, his little treasure, his love for her was as free of illusion as it was of reservation. There was little evidence in the way that she had recently conducted her life to suggest that she knew how to maintain anything at all.

'Do you think you'll want the car?' he said as he opened the driver's-side door for her. He walked around, opened his own door, got in, and handed her the key. 'Or should I put an ad in the paper?'

'Don't sell it right now. We'll need it while I'm up here. Unless you're planning on coming down to New York?'

'There are hospices here, same as there. Except here I'm in my own home, and in New York I'd be forced into some misbegotten nursing home. Thanks to the grateful generosity of Columbia University.'

'Grandpa, you weren't really living in that apartment. You were there like, what? Three months a year?'

'More like four.'

'They have so many full-time faculty members to house. You can't blame them . . .'

'Forty-six years, Natalie. It wouldn't have killed them to make it forty-six and a half.'

She started the engine and then let it idle, warming it up the way his regimen required. They sat listening to the engine in the chill of the car's interior, giving him ample time to regret his bitter words. Having faced or lived through some of the choicest calamities, both personal and world historical, that the twentieth century had to offer, Jack Wiseman had rarely given way to bitterness until now. He supposed it must be a symptom of the disease that was killing him.

'You could stay with me,' Natalie said at last. 'There's plenty of room now that Daniel's moved out.'

'I'm here,' Jack said. 'And you're here now, too.'

'Yes.'

'Might I ask how long you plan to stay?'

'As long as you need me.'

'It shouldn't be too long.'

'Grandpa.'

'Anyway. Good of the firm to let you go.'

'I had vacation saved up.' She put the car into reverse with a show, again for his benefit, of checking the rearview and both side mirrors. Then she sighed and put the car back into park. 'Actually, that's not true.'

'What's not true?'

'I'm not taking my vacation time. I quit.'

'You quit?' He thumped his hand on the dashboard. 'To take care of me? That's absolutely unacceptable, Natalie. I won't allow it.'

'It wasn't because of you. They would have given me leave.' She eased out into the street, speeding up slowly so as not to risk a skid on the icy road or, more likely, his reprimand for taking it too fast.

'Why then?' he said.

'Why.' She sounded exasperated, with his question, with herself, maybe just with having to tell the story again. 'Well, I was in a co-worker's office, and she was responding to a set of interrogatories. Those are, like, questions from opposing counsel in a lawsuit.'

He waited.

'They were from Daniel's firm.'

'He wrote the questions?'

'No. He's in the corporate department. This was a litigation document.'

'And?' He noticed that she had put her indicator on. 'Not Route One,' he said sharply. 'Keep going until you hit Forty-Six.'

'Okay.'

'Seeing a document from Daniel's firm made you quit your job?' he asked, wondering if his brain was slowing, if there was some obvious connection here that anyone but a dying old fool could see.

'It made me realise how entangled our lives are. He could end up at my office for a closing. Or I could end up at his for a settlement conference. I just don't want that to happen.'

'You quit a job making twice as much money as I made in my last year as a tenured professor because you were afraid you might bump into your ex-husband in a conference room?'

'It sounds ridiculous.'

'It *is* ridiculous.'

'I just want a fresh start.'

'Doing what?'

'I don't know. I don't want to talk about this any more. Is that okay?'

He nodded. Not talking about things was always, in the view of Jack Wiseman, a viable if not preferable option. In this case, in particular, because all that he could think of that he wanted to say to his granddaughter boiled down, in the end, to: *What the hell happened to you?* She had always been so sensible, resilient, purposeful, even single-minded. But ever since her divorce – no, from the moment she had unaccountably decided on her hasty and ill-advised marriage to Daniel Friedman – the kid had been a fucking mess.

'Turn right at the blinking yellow,' he said, but her turn signal was already on. In this regard, at least, she still knew her way.

The Red Hook Grill, an arrangement of vinyl-sided boxes stacked like lobster traps alongside Caldecott Falls, was the only restaurant in town that stayed open all through the off-season. In the gathering grey twilight of a frozen afternoon it blazed like a gaudy promise of warmth and comfort, and though the bar was topped with Formica and the pie with Cool Whip, the locals depended on it – Jack depended on it, too – to cheer the endless dark tunnel of a Down East winter. Jack placed his usual order, fish-and-chips, with onion rings swapped for the fries, though he knew he wouldn't be able to eat more than a bite or two. He hadn't been able to tolerate much of anything for a while now, despite what the doctors had promised when they'd convinced him to have the stent put in to relieve his jaundice. He was dropping weight so fast he thought he might vanish before the cancer killed him.

Natalie's usual was a hamburger and a Diet Coke, but today she ordered a milk shake, a black and white, and, when Louise brought the food, dropped a straw into the frosty metal blender

cup that the Grill always served alongside its shakes and slid it across the table towards Jack.

'It might be easier to get that down.'

He patted her hand and out of gratitude and good manners took a sip, with a show of relish, of the thick and saccharine confection. He loathed milk shakes.

At the end of the meal, Louise came over with a piece of pie, on the house, baked that morning from blueberries frozen at the end of last summer.

'Tide you over till next summer,' she said.

She and Natalie exchanged a look. Louise put her hand on Jack's shoulder.

'How are you, Jack?'

'Fine, Louise,' he said.

And then he felt obliged to take a bite of pie. It tasted to his dysfunctional palate like vinegar and salt.

'Very tasty,' he said.

'Thank you, Louise,' Natalie said.

As they watched Louise make her way back to the kitchen Natalie said, 'Ever since Daniel left, everyone's always asking me, "Natalie, how are you?" like they expect me to break down crying or tear out my hair or something. I never know what to say.'

'It's for just such moments that the word "fine" was invented.'

'I guess. Daddy calls me every morning and says, "How bad is it today, Sugarbear?" and I give him a number from one to ten. For the first month or two, I was pretty steadily in the ones and twos, but eventually I worked my way up to around a five.'

'Your father does the same with me. Every morning.' Jack was fond of Neil Stein, his son-in-law, closer to him than he'd been to his daughter. Close enough, in fact, that this daily ritual of checking in comforted rather than annoyed him.

'What number do you give him?' Natalie asked.

'I try to stay above a six.'

'Pancreatic cancer and you're a six. My dumbfuck husband cheats on me, and I'm a one. Okay, that makes me the most selfish person in the world.'

That made Jack smile.

'I'm glad you're here, darling,' he said. 'Now come on.' He pushed back in his chair. 'Let's go out and look at the falls before it's too dark to see anything.'

'It's probably really slippery. And it's still snowing.'

Jack shrugged on his coat and pulled on his gloves. He handed her his scarf. 'Put this on. I don't know what you were thinking, bringing a coat like that to Maine in January.'

'I wanted to look nice for you.'

'You always look nice to me.'

'I wanted to look nice for me, then. It, you know, it helps.'

Because, she meant, she felt ugly and unwanted on the inside.

'I understand,' he said. 'Come on, gorgeous.'

He took her arm as they walked through the snow to the edge of the water, whether to steady her or himself he wasn't sure. They reached the falls, a mysterious tidal churn of seawater that reversed direction with each turn of the tide. It must have been slack tide; the water milled in the narrows between the near and far shores as if uncertain which way to turn. Natalie threw a stick into the water, and they watched it drift irresolute on the swell.

'Your life is not over, Natalie. You will meet someone new.'

'Will I? I want what you had with Grandma. That kind of great romance. The first time you saw her, you knew.'

'Did I? How interesting. Tell me, what did I know?'

He could see that he had shocked her.

'That, you know. That she was the one.'

'The "one".' He shook his head.

'Grandma wasn't the one?'

'Your grandmother was a beautiful woman with a good heart, and I loved her very much. Was she "the one"? That I don't know. That strikes me as awfully simplistic.'

'What happened with Daniel wasn't too complicated, Grandpa. He loved me. Then he didn't. Or maybe he just loved her more.'

'Perhaps. Or maybe he is just a little shit.'

'Whoa!'

'Is that simple enough for you?'

She laughed so hard that she was obliged to take a Kleenex out of her pocket and blow her nose.

'Look,' he said, pointing to the water where a seal's slick head had popped up. 'That's how seals sleep. With their bodies below and their heads like snorkels just above the surface.'

'Oh, my God,' she said. 'You never liked Daniel.'

'I never liked Daniel.'

'Why didn't you say something before we got married?'

'I didn't think you were very likely to listen.'

Though she had been going out with Daniel Friedman for years with marriage a frequently discussed, oft-deferred possibility, in the end they had married on an impulse, without advance notice or, as far as Jack could tell, any discussion at all. Daniel's parents were on their way to a vacation in Nova Scotia; Jack had offered them his guest room and a chance to break the long trip from New York before they headed up to catch the ferry in St John. Natalie and Daniel were already scheduled to spend the week with Jack, along with Neil. It was on realising that what remained of their respective families was going imminently to assemble in the same house for a day and a night that Natalie had abruptly decided to get married. Jack thought it was a rotten idea, but he held his tongue, figuring that the young man would find a way to weasel out of it. But Daniel, true to his weasel soul, had allowed the ship to sail knowing that its hull was

ruptured, and so Jack had found himself hosting a pretty little ceremony by the seaside, at which Natalie's and Daniel's immediate families were joined by a haphazard collection of acquaintances who happened to be in the vicinity of Red Hook, Maine, on the afternoon of 20 June. When, a mere three months later, Daniel had stunned poor Natalie by confessing to having been, for the last two years, sleeping with a junior associate, Jack had not been surprised.

'You're right,' Natalie said now. 'I wouldn't have listened, because I'm an ass.' She kept her gaze fixed on the seal, and Jack saw a worried look come into her eyes, familiar to him from the time she was a toddler. 'If a shark comes up while he's sleeping, does he wake up?'

The chills began a few miles from home, and by the time they reached the pair of whitewashed posts that marked the entrance to his long gravel drive, Jack's whole body was shaking, legs shuddering, teeth clacking together. He grasped one hand with the other to keep them from flopping around in his lap like fish on a line. The car crunched through a blue-white canyon of banked snow up the drive. As Natalie pulled all the way to the front steps of the house, Jack closed his eyes. He did not have the strength even to open his door, let alone to get out of the car. He waited, listening to the creak and slam of the trunk lid, the banging of her bags against the steps of the porch.

'Grandpa?' Natalie said. She had opened his door and was hovering over him, a note of panic in her voice. 'Are you okay?'

'Just tired,' he said.

'You're sweating.'

He could feel sweat pouring down his forehead, pooling in his armpits and between his legs.

'I could use a nap,' he said.

He allowed her to hoist him out of the car and help him into the house, but when she tried to follow him into his bedroom, he drew the line. He closed the door and, after a feeble attempt at the buttons of his shirt, crawled under the duvet and let the fever overtake him. He slept for twelve hours and woke at six feeling better than he had in weeks, well enough even to load and light the woodstove. Well enough to put a pot of coffee on, if not to drink it.

Natalie came down soon after. In her flannel nightshirt, with her hair tousled, her eyes puffy with sleep, she was again the little girl with whom he had passed so many early mornings, telling stories of the sack of Troy, the Peloponnesian War, Antigone and Polynices, Odysseus and Penelope. Wildly inappropriate tales, some of them, for a small child, stories of slaughter and mayhem and betrayal. She had adored them.

'You hungry? Want me to make you a pancake in the shape of an N?' He meant it as a joke, but the offer came out sounding unexpectedly sincere.

She smiled. 'It's been a long time since I had one of those.'

'Oh!' he said, mildly panicked now that she seemed to be taking him up on his foolish offer, wondering if he had the wherewithal, either in his pantry or in his constitution. 'I . . . I'm sure I could . . .'

'I'm not hungry,' she said.

'Ah,' he said, absurdly disappointed.

'How are you feeling, Grandpa?'

'I'm feeling much better.' He looked at her. 'Did you sleep well?'

'Not really.'

'Was the bed . . .'

'The bed's fine. I don't sleep well in New York, either.' She went to the counter, poured herself a cup of coffee, splashed in a

little milk from the refrigerator. When she turned back to him she was holding a slip of paper.

'This is for you,' she said. She handed him a cheque, folded in two. When he opened it, he saw that she had made it out to him in the amount of five hundred dollars.

'It's what you gave me and Daniel. For our wedding. I'm returning it.'

'Honey, that's crazy. This is just five hundred bucks more you'll have to pay inheritance tax on.' He crossed to the woodstove, opened the door, and tossed the cheque into the blaze.

'So much for that part of my plan,' she said, sounding so lost that he almost regretted his action.

'What plan is that?' he said. 'Returning your gifts?'

'Don't you think I should? Since the marriage lasted only three months?'

'You want to know what I think? I think that if your little shit of a husband leaves you for some dolly after you gave him twelve years of your life, you are entitled to enjoy the modest consolation of an automatic bread maker. Or a five-hundred-dollar cheque from your grandfather.'

She nodded, a small, childlike nod of submission that made his heart ache.

'I guess I need a new plan,' she said.

That was when she started to cry. Softly, for a long time, saying nothing about the grandfather she would soon be losing or the husband she had already lost. He patted her on the back and then, when she showed no sign of stopping, went to try to find her a box of Kleenex. He had forgotten to restock. He considered bringing her a roll of toilet paper, then remembered that in his bedroom he had a drawer full of old linen handkerchiefs, ironed flat. As he peeled one off the stack, he saw in the drawer a little pouch of worn black velvet. He hefted it, remembering with a

faint pang the weight of it against his palm. At one time the contents of the pouch had been a kind of obsession. Now the velvet pouch was just one of the things stuffed into his dresser drawers. He wished there was a way to help Natalie understand the flimsiness, the feebleness, of objects, of memory, even of emotions, in the face of time with its annihilating power, greater than that of Darius of Persia or Hitler of Germany. But she would just have to live long and lose enough to find out for herself.

He feared what Natalie might do after he died, with no job to distract her. He imagined her sitting alone in the midst of a Maine winter, growing ever more depressed, losing the last of the spark that had made her the delight of his life. He weighed the cinched pouch of velvet in his hands for another moment, then took it with him back in the kitchen. He handed her a handkerchief and then, as she wiped her eyes and blew her nose, tipped the contents of the pouch into his palm. He caught hold of the gold chain. The gold-filigreed pendant dangled. It bore the image, in vitreous enamel, of a peacock, a perfect gemstone staring from the tip of each painted feather.

She flinched when she saw it, as if it were not a pretty little art nouveau bauble but something hideous to contemplate.

'Ugh,' she said.

'What's wrong?'

'I wish I'd listened to you. You didn't want me to wear it at the wedding, and I did anyway. And now I'll think of him every time I look at it and feel ashamed.'

'That hardly seems fair. After all, I had this necklace long before you and Daniel were even born.'

'Did you buy it for Grandma, or did she inherit it?'

'Neither. It was mine.'

'It wasn't Grandma's?'

'No.'

'Are you serious? Why did you tell me it was hers? That's the only reason I wore it!'

'I never told you it was hers. Why would I tell you that, when it wasn't?'

She narrowed her eyes, trying to remember.

'Huh,' she said, as if to concede the point. 'Well, whose was it? Your mother's?'

'No.'

'So whose?'

'Well, that's the thing. I don't know.' He could see the glimmer of interest in her eyes, a revival of the spark that had, until recently, always flickered in the eyes of Natalie Stein. He was going to feed that small fire with whatever tinder came to hand. 'That's why I need your help.'

One

SALZBURG

1945–1946

I

They found the train parked on an open spur not far from the station at Werfen. When they pulled up to the siding in their jeeps, Captain Rigsdale jumped out with a show of alacrity, but Jack hung back, eyeing the train. More than forty wagons, both passenger and freight. The nature of the cargo was as yet undetermined, but in this green and mountainous corner of the American Zone, a string of boxcars was never something Jack felt eager to explore.

Fencing the train were enemy troops uniformed in ragged khaki. They carried FÉG 35M rifles, but they had flagged their right sleeves with strips torn from white bedsheets, and they displayed no apparent satisfaction with their prize. By the side of the rails, a woman crouched over a wooden bucket filled with soapy water, wringing out a length of white cotton shirting. Two small boys took turns leaping from the door of one of the passenger cars, marking the lengths of their jumps with pebbles and bickering over who had leapt further. They spoke a language unknown to Jack, but he assumed, based on what Rigsdale had told him, that it was Hungarian.

'Come on, Wiseman,' Rigsdale called over his shoulder. 'You're supposed to be fluent in gibberish.'

'Yes, sir.'

Jack climbed down from the jeep and followed Rigsdale towards the train. He had never worked for this particular captain before,

but by now he was used to receiving sudden assignments to the command of senior officers tasked with undertaking excursions into obscure and doubtful backwaters of the Occupied Zone. Jack had a gift for topography and a photographic memory for maps. He had a feel for landscape and a true inner compass, and in his imagination the most cursory and vague of descriptions, a two-dimensional scrawl on a scrap of paper, took on depth and accuracy. This aptitude, which in civilian life had meant little more than always knowing whether he was facing uptown or downtown when he came up out of the subway, had found its perfect application in the war. Even during the confusion of battle, command had always been able to rely on Wiseman's company to be where it was supposed to be and, even more important, to be moving in the right direction, something not always true of the rest of the division. This spatial acuity, along with his fluency in German, French, Italian, and (less usefully) Latin and ancient Greek, kept him in demand with the brass, who contended among themselves to have him attached to their commands.

'What're they saying?' Rigsdale said.

'I don't know, sir.'

'Well, figure it out, goddamn it.'

'Yes, sir.'

One of the enemy soldiers ducked back into the passenger car from which the boys were leaping. Jack lifted his rifle. A moment later, a portly little man in a grey suit, complete with vest and watch fob, emerged from the same carriage and stepped down, wiping his mouth with a handkerchief, still chewing a mouthful of something. Like the guards, he had tied a scrap of white fabric around his upper arm.

The man hurried over to the half-dozen American soldiers standing by their two jeeps, his expression at once servile and calculating, as if they were potential customers of undetermined

means. He extended his hand to shake Captain Rigsdale's, seemed to think the better of it, and instead gave him a crisp, theatrical salute.

Rigsdale kept his own hands tucked by the thumbs into the webbed belt at his hips.

'Captain John F. Rigsdale, US Army, Forty-Second Division. You the conductor of this choo-choo?'

The man shook his head, frowning. 'No English. Deutsch? Français?'

'Go ahead, Lieutenant,' Rigsdale said, motioning Jack forward.

'Deutsch,' Jack said.

The man's German was fluent, although the Hungarian accent made the language sound softer, mellifluous, the *r*'s rolled on the tongue rather than the back of the throat, the emphasis placed on the beginning of the words. Jack's accent had its own peculiarities. Beneath the elegant High German cultivated by the Berliner refugee who had taught his German classes at Columbia University, Jack spoke with a touch of the Galicianer Yiddish of his maternal grandparents. His father's parents, of authentic German Jewish stock, had never to his knowledge uttered a word in that language.

'His name is Avar László,' Jack told Rigsdale. 'He's in charge of the train.'

'Ask him if he's a military officer, and if so why he's not in uniform.'

He was, Avar said, a civil servant, the former mayor of the town of Zenta, currently working for something he called the Property Office.

'Ask Mr László why the hell his men haven't turned their arms over to the US government,' Rigsdale said.

'Avar,' the Hungarian said in German. 'My surname is Avar. Dr Avar. László is my first name.'

Jack asked Dr Avar if he was aware that the terms of surrender required that enemy soldiers turn over their weapons.

Avar said that he was aware of the order, but regrettably the guns were necessary to protect the train's cargo. He said his men had been fighting off looters since the train's departure from Hungary. In May they'd been in a shoot-out with a group of German soldiers, and recently they'd been dealing with increasing problems from the local population, whose greed was inflamed by rumours of what was held in the wagons.

'Tell him I'm deeply sorry to hear how hard his life has been lately and that the US Army is here to unburden him of all his sorrows,' Captain Rigsdale said. 'And his guns, too.'

By now a small group of civilians had descended from the passenger carriages. One of them stepped forward and conferred with Avar, who nodded vigorously.

Jack translated. 'They want us to know that nobody's given them any provisions. Avar says they've been starving.' Jack looked doubtfully at the vigorous guards, the men in their neat suits, the plump-cheeked children. 'Starving', he supposed, was a relative term.

The captain said, 'Tell him they'll all be fed once they get to the DP camps. Now I want to have a look inside the cars. See what all the fuss is about.'

Avar led them to the first of the cargo wagons, its doors officially sealed with bureaucratic wallpaper bearing an elaborate pattern of stamps and insignia. Jack looked down the row of boxcars. Some of the seals along the train remained intact. Others looked tattered, torn away. What that proved or didn't prove, he wasn't sure. There was no way of knowing whether the seals had been put there six months or six hours before.

At the door of the first cargo wagon, Avar hesitated. He conferred in Hungarian with one of his colleagues, a lanky,

elderly gentleman with an extravagant moustache waxed to points, before making his wishes known to Jack.

'What now?' Rigsdale said.

'He's asking for a receipt.'

'The fuck he is.'

'To show that we assume protection of this property on behalf of the Hungarian government.'

Avar didn't need Jack to translate the look on the captain's face. Puffing up his chest, the little man asked Jack to remind his commanding officer that the cargo of the train was Hungarian state property, and therefore he, Avar, with all due respect, could only turn over the custody of said cargo if assurances were made that it would, in due time, be returned to the government of Hungary.

'Lieutenant, please remind Mr Avar that the government of Hungary just got its ass handed to it, and suggest to him, if you would be so kind, that he, his men, and his whole damn country are now under the authority of the Allied forces. I am not going to give him a goddamn receipt, and he should please open this motherfucking door now, before I use his fat head as a battering ram.'

In as formal a German as he could muster, Jack said, 'Captain Rigsdale reminds you that he speaks with the full authority of the United States Army, and requests that you delay opening the boxcar no longer.'

Avar glanced at his guards, and Jack silently cursed the military command that had sent six men to disarm sixty. Though he never made vocal his disapproval, he had learned by hard experience that a soldier rarely lost money betting against the wisdom of the brass. The institutionalised idiocy was one of the many reasons that for nearly all of the past year and a half since his enlistment Jack had hated the war, hated the army, hated even the civilians who all too often seemed to despise their American

liberators far more than they had their German conquerors. The only people he didn't hate were the men with whom he served in the 222nd Battalion of the 42nd Infantry, the Rainbow Division, none of whom he'd known for longer than a year and all of whom he loved with a devotion he had never felt before for anyone, not even the girlfriend who had predictably broken his heart in a letter a mere three weeks after he received his commission. He was especially fond of the men of H Company, whose dwindling ranks he had led on a relentless slog through the torn-up landscape, through France and across the Siegfried line until they reached Fürth, where the battalion commanding officer, after a gruelling exchange with a recalcitrant local farmer, had decided that he needed the assistance of an aide conversant in German and transferred Jack away from the men who were all that he cared about in this miserable war. His many attempts to return to his company defeated, Jack was left stewing in his loathing and waiting to earn enough points for a discharge. Even considering the battle decorations he'd received at a recent cluster muster, he was three points shy of the eighty-five he needed to be sent home. Best possible outcome, eighty-two points put him in Salzburg for three more months. Worst possible, he was heading to the Pacific.

The Hungarian having failed to respond to his order, Jack repeated, 'Please open the boxcars.'

Across Avar's face seemed to pass the entire history of his benighted people in this interminable war: pride, belligerence, bravado, defensiveness, anxiety, despair. And, finally, resignation. He removed a large iron key from the inside breast pocket of his suit jacket, inserted it into the heavy padlock, and, with a grunt, sprung the lock. When he pushed the door back, the seals tore with a pop like the bursting of an inflated paper bag. The door rumbled open on its runners.

The boxcar was heaped with wooden cases and crates. Some of the cases had iron hinges and clasps; others were nailed shut. Towards the back of the car they stood in orderly stacks, but many of those nearest the door had been pried open and were piled haphazardly one upon the other.

'Pull a couple of those over here, Lieutenant,' Rigsdale said. 'Let's see what we're dealing with.'

Jack climbed up into the car and dragged over an open crate. He dug through the straw and pulled out a teacup decorated with a pink rose and a scattering of green leaves. The gilt-edged handle came off in his hand.

'*Vorsicht!*' Avar said.

Jack gave a meaningful glance at the jumble of open boxes. No one else had bothered to take the care that Avar seemed to expect of him.

'Try another crate,' the captain said.

The next crate contained a pile of expensive-looking camera equipment, none of it padded with straw or excelsior. Some of the lenses were cracked. What, Jack wondered, were these Hungarians doing riding around the Austrian countryside with a trainload of household goods?

Captain Rigsdale ordered Avar to open another boxcar. This one contained mainly rolls of carpets. Most were stacked neatly, but someone had been pilfering those nearest to the door; smaller carpets had been unrolled and draped over the piles, and there were muddy boot tracks everywhere.

'Looters,' Avar said.

'After the treasure,' Captain Rigsdale said after Jack had translated. 'All this must have been on its way to the *Alpenfestung*.'

Among the strange ideas held in common both by the Allies and the defeated German troops was the chimera that, hidden in the mountains of southern Bavaria, defended by one hundred

thousand SS officers, the Nazis had erected a final stronghold. Although there was no more evidence for the existence of this national redoubt than there was for that of the city of Atlantis or the valley of Shangri-La, everyone on both sides seemed to be sure that it was there, hovering high above them, a Valhalla for the desperate Germans and an anxiety dream for the Allies, many of whom had a hard time accepting that their mythic Teutonic-warrior opponents had not fought to the end predicted by their death's-head insignia.

'Strange kind of treasure,' Jack said, holding up a crystal liqueur glass. 'Sir, this doesn't look like bank assets. It just seems to be a lot of, well, stuff.'

'Let's keep looking,' Rigsdale said.

Avar led them through the train, a car at a time. He showed them crude pine crates of bed linens and fur coats, cases of men's pocket and wrist watches, of women's jewellery. Jack opened up a box full of evening purses, most of them beaded or decorated with silver chains. Another of silver sugar basins, silver teapots engraved with monograms, bronze statuettes of men on horseback. In some cars they found heaps of leather wallets alongside silver cigarette cases, heavy musty-smelling furs piled on top of brightly coloured Oriental carpets, tangles of costume jewellery, paintings of all sizes stacked one upon the other. The contents of other cars had been painstakingly sorted, the radios neatly loaded into wooden crates, the silver candle-sticks separated from the vases, the sets of china plates and porcelain platters carefully packed.

In the fifth car, Avar opened an unlocked small wooden casket with brass hinges. It was full to the brim with small misshapen loaves of gold and gold coins stamped with mysterious insignia. This indeed was treasure, like a child's imaginary pirate's trove, lustrous in the sunlight.

'You see?' Avar said in German. 'Untouched since we left Brennbergbánya.'

'Where is Brennbergbánya?' Jack asked. 'Is that where you came from?'

'This train was loaded in Brennbergbánya. Before that we did the sorting and organising in the Óbánya Castle in Zirc. Before that most items were stored in the warehouses of the Postal Savings Bank.'

'But who does it belong to?'

One of Avar's companions said something in Hungarian.

Avar said, 'All property belongs to the people of Hungary. It must be returned to the people of Hungary.'

When Jack translated this, Rigsdale said, 'Tell him the American government is not in the business of stealing anybody's property.' Rigsdale pointed at the small casket. 'Is this all the gold?' he asked.

There was more gold, Avar told them, but they had distributed it throughout the train to make it more difficult for looters to find. There were also a small number of precious gems. Avar had done his best to protect the most valuable property, but there had, as he'd said, been looters. And also government officials had removed much of it.

'US government?' Rigsdale asked.

'No,' Avar replied. 'Hungarian government.'

'Wait a minute,' the captain said when Jack translated Avar's response. 'Hungarian government officials have been here?'

No, not here in Werfen, Avar said. But before the end of the war, there had been individual government officials who had taken items from the train. He had tried to keep an inventory. He would show them.

'Anything else of value in this car?' Captain Rigsdale barked.

Avar opened another case. 'Watches,' he said. 'Gold. Gold plate. Very valuable. And you see? Also untouched.'

In another car, Avar pulled out an old steel box, unlocked, that appeared to contain mostly envelopes.

Jack crouched down next to the box and pulled out an envelope. It was torn open and empty. 'What does this say?' Jack asked, showing it to Avar.

'It is a name,' Avar said. 'Korvin György. This is an address in Kolozsvár, a city in Transylvania.' He pointed to another line. 'And this says, "Gold ring set with diamonds. One carat."'

'Where's the ring?'

Avar shook his head. 'When we did the sorting, we removed the items from the envelopes. And also, we usually removed the precious stones from the jewellery.'

'Why?' Jack asked.

'So we could protect what was most valuable.'

Or, Jack thought, to make it easier to sell.

The rest of the steel casket was filled with pages of paper covered in ornate and spidery handwriting, liberally decorated with accents and umlauts.

'Inventory,' the Hungarian said. 'With names.'

It was while going through a boxcar that contained household silver – cutlery, tea services, platters and bowls, candlesticks – that Jack caught on to the origin of the treasure on the train. Up to his elbows in a crate his superior officer had instructed him to open, he grabbed hold of a heavy silver candelabra. For a moment he wasn't sure. But there were four arms on either side, and one in the middle. He disentangled the menorah from the other silver pieces in the crate and then dug out a silver cup decorated with Hebrew writing. A kiddush cup like the one his grandmother had on her mantel. Without seeking Rigsdale's permission, he grabbed another crate and split it open with a crowbar. In this one he found a silver breastplate and crowns that looked very much like the ones that had decorated the Torah from which he

had chanted on his bar mitzvah at Temple Emanu-El on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, nine years before.

'Everything in this wagon is silver?' Rigsdale asked Avar.

Avar gazed at him blankly.

'You know, silver? Wiseman, ask him if this car's all silver.'

'Captain,' Jack said, the only evidence of his distress the beads of sweat collecting on his lip. 'All this stuff is Jewish, sir.'

'What do you mean?'

He held up the Torah breastplate, pointing to the Hebrew words. He picked up the caps for the Torah handles. They were hung with silver bells that tinkled in his trembling hands. 'This is from a synagogue.'

He turned on Avar. 'Where did you get this?' he said. 'And this?'

Avar looked blank but not quite blank enough.

'This is stolen from Jews!' Jack said. He pawed through the pile of silver, yanking out candlesticks and kiddush cups, waving them, piece after piece, at the man.

Avar let loose with a string of German, but Jack was far too upset to understand more than a few phrases, 'civil servant', 'official government business'. Avar shrank into himself, like a turtle hiding beneath its bureaucratic shell.

'What's this "Property Office" that you work for? What property?' Jack shouted.

Avar raised his chin defensively and informed Jack that he was an employee of the Jewish Property Office, a division of the Hungarian Ministry of Finance, and that it was in his role as an employee of that department that he had protected this property on behalf of the Hungarian government.

'Wiseman!' Captain Rigsdale said. 'Get down here. Now.'

Jack willed his body to still, his breath to even out.

'Yes, sir,' he said and leapt lightly to the ground.

'Your orders are to translate, Lieutenant. That is all.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Do your job.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Now, what the hell is going on?'

It was important that the Americans understood, Avar said, that he and the other officials on the train were civil servants, tasked with carrying out the law and protecting the assets under their control. These assets had come from the banks.

And before that? Captain Rigsdale pressed him.

Avar admitted that the valuables had been collected from the Jews of Hungary by the commissioner for Jewish Affairs.

'Why?' Jack asked.

'Why?' Avar repeated. 'To help in the war effort.' He himself was responsible only for the transport of the property, not for its collection. The Jews had turned in their property to the banks; the banks had turned it in to the Jewish Property Office; officials from the office had sorted it and loaded it into the boxcars, at which point it had been turned over to him. He had protected the property, he told them, at great risk to his life.

As Jack translated this last for Captain Rigsdale, he wondered at Avar's confidence that the danger to his life had passed.

Rigsdale said, 'Ask him if there's anything else he needs to show me.'

'Moment,' Avar said, and spun on his heel. Jack thought how easy it would be to lift his weapon, fire off a single bullet, and send the man crumpling to the ground.

Avar returned a moment later with a small suitcase, which he balanced in the opening of the boxcar and unsnapped. In the suitcase were bundles of currency in a rainbow of colours. Hungarian pengő, US dollars, British pounds sterling, Swiss francs, Reichsmarks. Even a small banded-together stack of green-and-yellow bills: Palestinian

pounds. Jack had never seen those before. Avar opened a small sachet and poured a handful of coloured gemstones and pearls into his palm.

'That's what we've been looking for,' Rigsdale said. Avar put the gems back in the sachet, tied it closed, and tucked it into the suitcase. Then he buckled the suitcase and, with great solemnity, handed it to the American officer.

On Captain Rigsdale's orders, Avar's men turned over their ammunition. Rigsdale sent a GI to the station to bring back the stationmaster and a few railroad workers to uncouple the passenger cars. Arrangements were made to escort Avar and the rest of the Hungarian civilians to a DP camp. Rigsdale ordered the now-unarmed guards to accompany the train to Salzburg, under the guard of a few GIs. Then he turned to Jack.

'You. With me.'

Jack followed Rigsdale to the jeep. Rigsdale, though he'd ridden beside the driver on the way to Werfen, swung himself into the backseat. Jack began to climb into the front when the captain barked, 'With me.'

Rigsdale didn't speak for the first part of the journey back to Salzburg, and Jack remained silent beside him, waiting for the inevitable reprimand and busying himself with trying to clean a smear of dirt from the knee of his trouser. Though he loathed all things military, Jack was punctilious about his uniform. Whenever possible, he kept it clean and tidy, his collar and cuffs crisp, his shirt tails tucked tightly into his webbed belt. Unlike many of the other US Army officers and certainly the men, he refused to slip into slovenliness, even when covered with battle filth. He tried to shave every day, had done so even during the long weeks of battle, when the possibility of bathing was as remote as the idea of going home. The more furious he became at the perverse machinery of the military, the more his belt buckle gleamed, as if to prove that

it wasn't he who was unfit for the service but the service that was unfit for him.

When they reached the outskirts of Salzburg, Rigsdale said, 'That was quite a performance, Lieutenant.'

No reply seemed called for, so Jack provided none.

'You need to remember something, soldier. This is a war, not a crusade, and you're an American soldier, not a rabbi.'

'Yes, sir,' he said, the only evidence of his furious embarrassment the flutter of muscle in his clenched jaw.