



## PRAGUE, KINGDOM OF BOHEMIA, 12 DECEMBER 1877

**I**t was a night so dusky the streetlamps looked like fallen stars. A night seized by a fierce frost, which crept up the spires of Prague until they glimmered like diamond stalagmites, then inched across the Vltava River until its entire surface was as smooth as marble.

It was a night that would bear a new small life.

And, alas, a *smidge* of death.

The Vaškov residence stood – tall, wide and regal – on the south-western corner of Big Old Town Square, looming smugly over the ancient, brightly painted zodiacs of the Astronomical Clock just across the street. Despite the late hour, all twelve of its ornate windows were aglow, revealing a well-to-do household abuzz with nervous activity.

## *Hana Tooke*

On the ground floor, maids raced between rooms with buckets of water and fresh linen.

On the first floor, Karel Vaškov sat in his leather armchair, puffing profusely on a Toscano cigar while the three eldest Vaškov children played cards by his feet.

On the second floor, six younger children were eating a box of Swiss chocolates they'd pilfered.

On the third floor, a tired-looking nursemaid was slumped in the rocking chair, having given up on trying to get the two smallest, crib-scaling children to sleep.

And on the fourth floor, Milena Vašková lay in bed, surrounded by midwives, wondering what was taking this baby so much longer to appear than all her others had.

The already large Vaškov family was about to grow by one.

Across the frozen river, another residence stood – narrow, crooked and forlorn – at the bottom of a dark street below the lamplit castle. All its weather-beaten windows were dark, except for the round one just below the gabled roof. It glowed like a single golden eye, staring ominously out into the gloomy night.

Beneath the creaking rafters of the attic room, the soon-to-be-born child's grandmother, Liliana, lay in her bed. Yellow candlelight trembled across her age-weathered face, revealing the feverish sweat that glistened on her forehead.

## *The Midnighters*

A man wearing oil-spattered overalls sat on the edge of the bed, frowning down at Liliana in concern.

‘Milena’s new child is on the way,’ Josef said, dabbing his mother’s brow with the cleanest corner of his handkerchief. ‘Isn’t that wonderful, *Maminka*?’

‘It’s terrible,’ Liliana muttered. ‘Worse than terrible, in fact. Nothing short of *hellish*.’

‘That’s no way to speak of a new grandchild. The other eleven children all seem perfectly tolerable. I’m sure this one will be too.’

Liliana seemed not to hear him. ‘It’s bad enough that it’s the twelfth child. But born on the *twelfth* day of the *twelfth* month too.’

‘A mere coincidence—’

‘I caught you eating *twelve* fruit dumplings this morning.’

‘You can hardly blame me. Those things were divine.’

‘There were *twelve* crows circling the Tŷn spires.’

‘You’re giving me twelve different headaches right now.’

Liliana’s eyelids fluttered weakly; her voice dropped to a raspy whisper. ‘This new child . . . I sense—’

‘*Maminka*, let’s not get into prophecies again; it wears you out—’

‘I sense dark shadows. And I see —’ she squeezed her eyes closed, then immediately snapped them open again — ‘an eyeball.’

Josef let out a long sigh. ‘Just the one?’

## *Hana Tooke*

Liliana's bleary gaze turned to where many ink-smeared words had been scrawled on the wall. 'This new child is the one I've been dreaming about.'

Josef pinched the bridge of his nose. 'You should sleep. The doctor said you'd feel better in the morning.'

'The doctor was wrong,' Liliana whispered, summoning a weak smile. 'My time is nigh, and I am more than ready.'

'Don't say that.'

'One day you'll believe me again,' Liliana rasped. 'One day, you'll see I'm not the foolish old woman your sister insists I am.'

'I don't think you're foolish, but you are rather pale.'

Across the river, the clunking gears of the Astronomical Clock echoed through Big Old Town Square. Despite being too far away to hear it, Liliana turned her gaze in its direction.

On the top floor of the Vaškov residence, the scream of a newborn baby filled the air, and at the very same moment, in the candlelit attic room, Liliana sagged into her pillow.

The baby's first breath had coincided – *precisely* – with Liliana's last.

The Astronomical Clock began to chime the hour.

*Twelve* strikes.

Midnight.