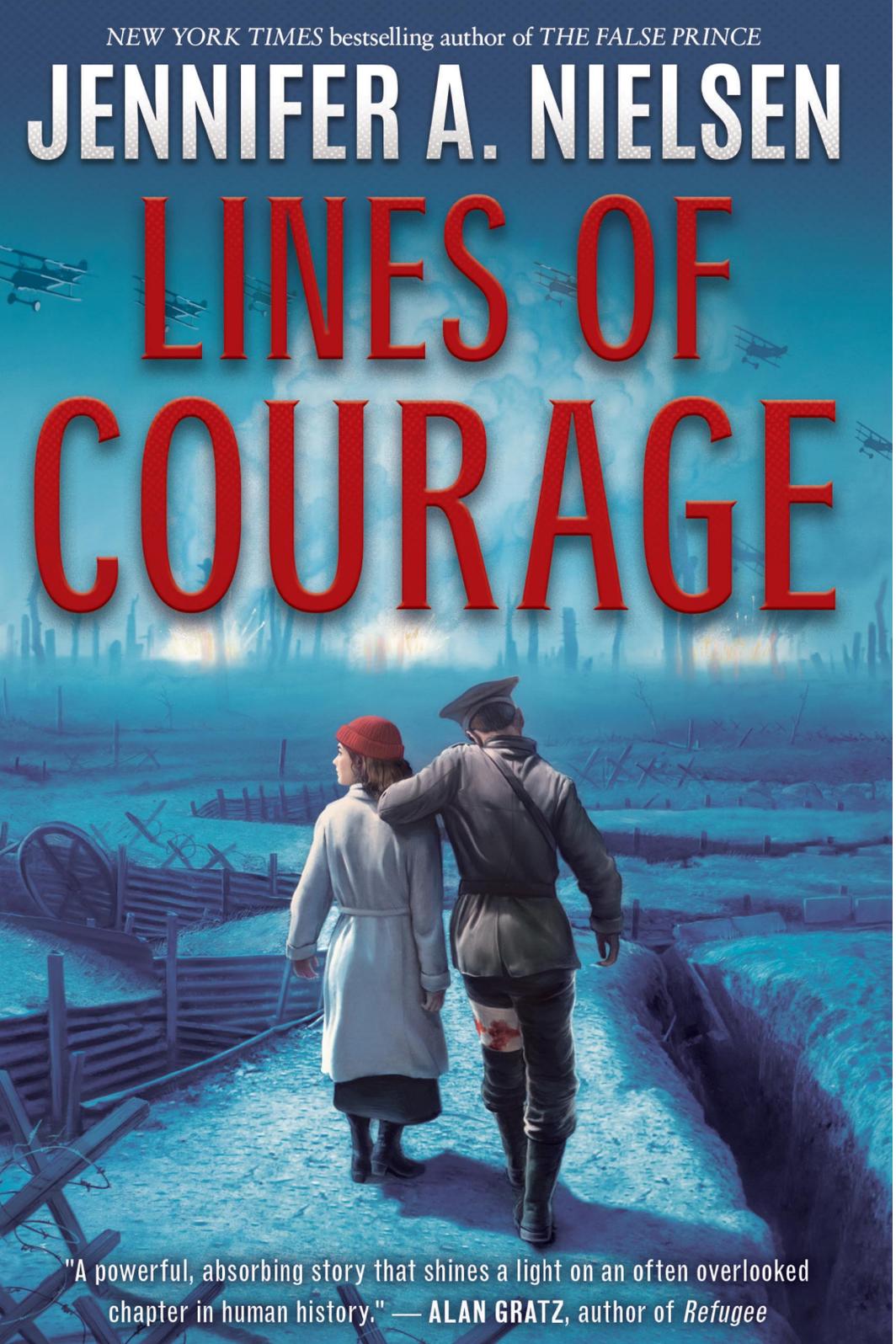


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To Sergeant Alvin C. York, a true hero

1914

FELIX

AUSTRIA-HUNGARY

The most terrible August in the history of the world.

—*Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1914)*

CHAPTER ONE

June 28, 1914

Deep inside, Felix knew something was wrong. A pinch had settled in his gut from the first moment he and his father stepped off the train in Sarajevo. It was the same feeling he'd had before his grandfather died last year.

"Are we safe here, Papa?" he asked.

But his father didn't answer. Instead, he was staring at a crowd that had gathered nearby. Felix arched his head in the same direction.

"Look there." Papa pointed to the man at the center of the crowd. "Remember this moment always, my son. Be proud of our empire."

Of course he was proud. Austria-Hungary was one of the largest and oldest empires in the world, and there, only meters away, was its future emperor.

Archduke Franz Ferdinand was square faced with brown

hair combed straight back and a wide mustache that turned up at the ends. He wore a high-collared light blue uniform decorated with more medals than Felix had ever seen before in one place. His wife was just as elegant, wearing a pale brown traveling coat, with her brown hair, the same color as Felix's mother had, swept up beneath a wide hat.

Papa leaned in close to Felix. "If our day begins with this much excitement, imagine how it may end! Shall we go now?"

The walk to their hotel would take less than an hour, though Felix was soon distracted by crowds of people lining the road, waiting for their own opportunity to see the Archduke and his wife.

The pinch in Felix's gut returned. He looked over at his father. "No one looks happy to be here."

Papa nodded. "They are not happy at all. They came to see their conqueror, not their future emperor."

Felix already understood that. Sarajevo was the capital city of Bosnia, which the empire had annexed into its territory six years ago. Bosnia had not come willingly.

Mama had warned them to postpone the trip. "Bosnia is not a safe place these days," she had said. "Sarajevo might be the most dangerous place in all of Europe right now!"

"The Archduke and his wife will be on the same train as us," Papa had said. "Do you really think they would go to Sarajevo if it was not safe?"

But Mama was insistent. "There are a lot of angry people in

the area. The Black Hand will be in Sarajevo! You should not be there too.”

Those words replayed in Felix’s mind as they continued walking. He looked up at his father. “What is the Black Hand?”

Papa glanced around them, then said, “Austria-Hungary is the finest empire in all of Europe, are we not? Yet Bosnia was not happy to be brought into the empire. Even angrier is its neighbor, Serbia. And why? Because Serbia wanted Bosnia for itself, to build their own empire. The Black Hand is a small group of Serbians who want to take Bosnia away from us, at any cost.”

“Do you think they are here today?”

After a heavy sigh, Papa only said, “I did not think so before. But I do now. Come, let us hurry to our hotel.”

Yet within another minute, they heard the rising sound of motors. Felix turned to see a black limousine slowly headed toward them, the first in a long line of fine automobiles.

“There is the Archduke again!” Felix pushed through the crowd to get a better look. The top was down on the limousine and the Archduke and his wife were waving at the people as they drove past.

Papa pulled Felix away from the side of the road so they could continue walking, following along with the limousine. “The Archduke is not wise to be so public. They would be honored in Vienna or even in Lemberg, but nobody here is celebrating.” By that time, they had reached a bridge across a wide and shallow river.

Felix climbed onto the ledge of the bridge, where he could

have a better view of the limousine. How happy the Archduke and his wife looked, so different from those who stood beside the road to watch them. Did the Archduke know how unwelcome his visit was? From where he sat, he couldn't have heard the way the people on the streets spoke his name, with sharp voices that dissolved into angry conversations. But surely he saw their expressions, the stiff wave of their hands as if a puppet master were lifting their arms on command.

That's when Felix saw the man with the grenade.

He was in a rumpled suit and wore an old cap over a head of thick black hair. The man pushed through the crowd, pulled the pin, and threw it at the Archduke's car.

The limousine driver must have seen the grenade too, for he sped up the car, although now the grenade headed directly for the Archduke. In one sharp, swift motion, the Archduke swatted it behind him just before it exploded.

The car that had been following the limousine was caught in the explosion. The force of the blast knocked Felix off his perch and he fell onto the bridge, even as others went running in all directions.

Papa gave Felix a quick glance before racing into the street to help those who had been injured. That's where he needed to be; Felix understood that. His father was a reserve soldier in the army, one of the rare people of the Jewish faith with the rank of Sergeant. Of course he needed to help in any emergency. Yet Felix was trembling so much, he wished

Papa had run to him instead. Wasn't he part of the emergency too?

Felix was still on the ground when his father finally returned. He helped Felix stand and brushed him off, then asked, "Is your leg all right?"

Felix looked down at his pants, now with a wide hole revealing his badly scraped knee. Until now, he hadn't even realized he was injured. He continued staring at it as he asked, "Where is the man who did this?"

Papa gestured to the river below the bridge. "He tried to jump in the water to escape, but as it's only a few centimeters deep, it was easy for the authorities to capture him."

"Was he part of the Black Hand?"

"He must have been, but he won't be a problem for us any longer."

Maybe. The pinch in Felix's gut was worse than ever. He knew this wasn't over and he wanted to say that, but Papa had never been wrong about anything before. So Felix nodded and quietly followed his father off the bridge.

Papa said, "We can be grateful that you are safe, that most of these people will be all right, and especially that the Archduke is safe. Can you imagine the consequences if that assassin had succeeded?"

Felix couldn't imagine anything. What was the point of imagining when his mind was already too full of reality?

They continued along the street in the same direction as the Archduke's car had gone after the explosion, Felix limping

now to protect his scraped knee. He wished they were walking back to the train station instead. All he wanted was to go home.

Papa pointed across the street at a delicatessen. “I will go in and buy us a couple of pastries. Then you’ll feel better.”

No, he wouldn’t. A few bites of *burek* didn’t matter, not after what he’d just seen.

“It will all be forgotten in time,” Papa said. “Our hotel is not much farther ahead. I’ll finish my business tomorrow, then we can take the next train back to Lemberg, all right?”

Felix nodded because that’s what he was supposed to do. But he didn’t want a pastry—he didn’t want anything except to go home.

“Do you think there are more assassins here?” he asked.

Papa only grunted, a quiet admission that yes, there had surely been more than one assassin. But he did say, “They had their chance, and that man failed. Besides, the Archduke and his wife are long gone by now.”

He went inside the delicatessen while Felix stood outside and tried to tell himself that his father was right, because his father was always right.

Yet even as he did, he heard a familiar sound of a motor and looked toward the street. His jaw fell open as he saw the Archduke’s black limousine driving toward him, headed back toward the bridge, where the grenade had exploded only an hour ago. Once again, the Archduke and his wife were in the back, still with the top down so they could wave at the people.

Papa hurried outside. He must have already seen the

limousine too, for he said to Felix, “Why would they come back here?”

The Archduke seemed to be wondering the same thing. He leaned forward and said something to the driver, who immediately turned onto a side road, stopping almost directly in front of Felix.

“There, see? He’s turning around.” Papa moved forward to hold the crowds back.

But Felix remained where he was, his eyes fixed on the royals directly ahead of him. He was so intent on them, he almost ignored the sudden movement in the corner of his vision. Sunlight reflected from a glint of metal and Felix turned, seeing a man hurrying toward the vehicle. He was young with dark hair and a short mustache and wore a dark suit jacket. He crossed between Felix and the Archduke, so close now, he could reach out and touch the limousine.

Scream, Felix thought. *Warn them!* But the words froze in his throat and the fear flooding through him made it impossible to move.

The limousine driver began to back up, his attention focused on the road rather than on the crowd around them.

He didn’t see the man at the side of the limousine raise the gun in his hand. The man fired twice, killing the Archduke first and then his wife.

Horrified, Felix dropped to his knees. Papa and others in the crowd rushed at the man, but he had already pulled a vial of liquid from his mouth and swallowed its contents. If it was a poison he expected would kill him, then it did not seem to work.

He was visibly ill but on his feet when the crowd dragged him away.

Minutes passed, or maybe seconds or hours, Felix wasn't sure. He only knew that at some point, his father pulled him back to his feet and told him to begin walking.

Somehow—Felix couldn't quite remember the details—his father got him back to the train station. He was sitting alone on a bench on the train platform when he jumped, hearing a sound beside him, then felt Papa's hand on his shoulder. "It's all right. You're all right." He held up two tickets. "Wherever the next train goes, we'll be on it."

Felix shrugged. "Then let's hope it does not go to Serbia."

Papa smiled grimly, then sat beside him. "I know that was an awful thing to witness today, but you're safe now."

Felix nodded, but deep inside, he wondered if it was possible for his father to be wrong a second time in a single day. Was he truly safe?

"I should have warned them," Felix said. He could have done it. He had known what was about to happen, almost before anyone else did.

But he hadn't made a sound. He'd only stood there, helpless, paralyzed with fear, watching everything happen in slow motion. If he had said something, anything at all, maybe he could have saved the man who would have been his next emperor.

"What happened back there wasn't your fault," Papa said. "You must not blame yourself."

Felix kicked at a pebble along the platform while mumbling, "The Archduke and his wife are dead, aren't they?"

“Yes,” Papa answered. “And the entire world shall pay for it.”

Felix lowered his head. He should have warned them.

CHAPTER TWO

July 1, 1914

The train journey home took three days, but even when they finally set foot in Lemberg, Felix still felt as if he were looking at the world through someone else's eyes. It was someone else who had seen the assassination, not him. Someone else who'd had the chance to warn the Archduke but only stood back, mute and helpless. Not him.

He felt relieved to live so far from Vienna, the empire's capital city. Surely the uproar over the assassination would be greater there.

Here in Lemberg, much farther east, things were quieter. The newspapers acknowledged the death of the crown prince, of course, but the headlines were smaller, and the mourning was as simple as flags flown at half-mast. Otherwise, people here were going on with their lives.

That was Felix's plan too: just try to pretend that everything was normal.

Mama seemed to have the same plan. As soon as they arrived home, she offered them warm hugs, then said, “Go upstairs and clean up from your journey. We have company arriving soon for supper.”

“What company?” Papa asked. “Parties are inappropriate so soon after the Archduke’s death.”

“It’s not a party, it’s a quiet dinner with old friends. Major Dressler has been touring the area with his family while he is on military leave. They’ve come all the way from Germany. We cannot cancel on them now.”

“No, I suppose not.” Papa turned to Felix. “Do as your mother says, clean up. The Dresslers have a daughter a little younger than you, a girl named Elsa, I believe. I’m sure the two of you will get along fine while the adults talk.”

Getting along with some girl Felix had never met before was the last thing he wanted. He would have much rather sat with the adults for supper to hear their thoughts about the assassination. It’s all that anyone on the train had talked about on the way home. Several of them had mentioned war.

But there was nothing he could do. When evening came, there he was in the parlor room, staring at Elsa, an eleven-year-old girl with brown curls that bounced when she talked, and who was staring back at him with wide, curious eyes.

“We should be long-distance friends,” she said. “We would have the most fun writing back and forth, don’t you agree?”

Felix squinted back at her. “I don’t even know you.”

“Not yet.” She twirled a curl of her hair around one finger. “What do you like to do?”

“I, uh . . .” He liked to read, but he hadn’t read a single page in the last few days. He had been fascinated with automobiles once, but now he didn’t care if he ever saw one again.

“I raise carrier pigeons,” she said, apparently unaware that Felix hadn’t answered. “I train them too.”

“Oh.” He truly didn’t care. But they needed to have some conversation, so he asked, “Why?”

Elsa leaned forward. “Why? Because they are the most amazing animals. My father says they’ll be most useful in the war.”

Elsa said *most* a lot. Felix wondered about using the word too, as in “You are the *most* talkative girl I’ve ever met,” or “You are making me the *most* annoyed.”

But even if he had said something, she’d have just talked right over the top of his words. “Soldiers keep the pigeons in baskets and take them into battle. When they need to send a message back to the base, they simply attach it to the pigeon’s leg, then release it. No matter where it is, the pigeon will find its way home. Even if the pigeon’s home is moved to a different location, the pigeon will still find it. Isn’t that the most amazing?”

It was a little amazing, Felix had to admit that.

“My father says our scientists have even developed a camera that the pigeon can wear. It can fly over enemy territory and take pictures. Now, that is the—”

“—most amazing, I agree,” Felix said. “Anyway—”

“I brought you one of my birds,” Elsa said. “My favorite bird, actually. I named him Wilhelm, after our Kaiser. Isn’t that the most funny thing?”

No, it really wasn't. He asked, "What am I supposed to do with a homing pigeon?"

"I already told you, if we are friends, we should write letters to each other. So maybe in a few weeks, you could use Wilhelm to send me a letter. Unless you want to keep Wilhelm if you and your mother are ever in trouble. When your father goes off to war—"

Felix's heart leapt into his throat. "Why would he go to war?"

Elsa tilted her head as if the answer was obvious. "There must be a war, after the assassination. My father says you were there, that you saw the assassination yourself! Is that true?"

Felix's eyes shifted toward the doors of the dining room, wishing they were open so that he could escape through them. He searched his mind for any reason to leave, anything at all, but now his head was filled again with what he had seen back in Sarajevo. He shrugged and said, "I don't want to talk about it."

She clearly did. "How can you say that? That is probably the most amazing thing that will ever happen in your life!"

What if she was right? What if that horrible day turned out to be the biggest day of his life? Would the rest of his life be empty and boring by comparison?

Elsa wasn't finished. "If you *could* go to war, that would be the most wonderful thing you could do for Austria-Hungary. But, of course, the war should be over by Christmas, long before you're old enough to join."

That was interesting. Felix looked up. "I think the same way. Serbia barely shows up on a map compared to our empire. Of course the war won't last long."

Elsa shook her head. “That would change, of course, if Russia decides to fight with Serbia. Russia has the largest military in the world. But,” she quickly added, “if war comes, Germany will join you.” She leaned closer to him and whispered, “Truthfully, I think most of the German officers want war. Papa says we are ready and will have our victory.”

Because Elsa’s father was a major in the German army, she probably knew more than most about what might happen if a war began. That led Felix to another thought, one that brought that familiar pinch back in his gut.

Was Elsa right, that Papa would have to go to war? If so, he’d likely be sent to the front lines of the battle. Jews weren’t given the ranks that kept them away from the fighting.

Felix added that to the list of things he never wanted to think about. He tried again to defend his empire. “Austria-Hungary is the strongest empire in all of Europe. We’ve lasted for hundreds of years already. We don’t need Germany’s help to defeat Serbia.”

Elsa waved that idea away with one hand. “Just because your empire is old does not mean it is strong. See here. I’ll show you how my mother explained it to me.” She nodded at a game table in the far corner. “Do you have cards in there?”

He stood and retrieved a deck of cards from a drawer in the table, then gave them to Elsa. She divided the cards into four piles, which she set on the table.

She said, “Europe has always been a land of empires, no? Can you name the four empires in Europe now?”

He hesitated, not wanting to start with the obvious. So he began, “The British Empire.”

Elsa nodded. She picked up four cards and laid them on their sides in a square, then placed other cards on top of the square, creating a small card house. "They'll be on Russia's side, and Serbia's, and they are strong, but mostly because for centuries, they've had the finest navy in the world. Germany has a navy too, but we also have airships that the world has never seen before. We have new weapons, enormous weapons. This will be a war beyond anyone's imagination!"

A shudder rose through Felix. Elsa spoke as if the idea of war was almost exciting to her.

"The second empire?" Elsa asked.

"The Russian Empire."

Elsa made another card house for Russia, though this one was twice as large as Britain's. As she worked, she said, "Russia has an enormous army, but their Tsar is unpopular, and his hold on the throne is not good. Now, do you know the third empire?"

"Your home. Germany."

Elsa built a third house of cards. "My father says that Germany has never been stronger. We are the only empire that is prepared to fight in this century while the others still live in the past. Do you know the fourth empire?"

The answer to this question was obvious. Felix said, "My own. Austria-Hungary."

"Yes. Now, you think you are strong enough to challenge Serbia in a war, but I will show you the problem." This time, the house of cards was different. Elsa built many smaller squares, all of them separate from one another, connected only by a single roof. "Your empire is made up of several small countries all

controlled by one Kaiser. Each country has a different language and religion and culture. Worse still, all the countries hate one another. In fact, there is only one thing they agree on, and that is who they hate the most.”

Felix frowned. “They hate our Kaiser. They hate that he rules over them.” His mind drifted again to Bosnia, at the way the people had glared at the Archduke as he passed by. Did all of the countries within the empire feel the same way?

Elsa leaned in and gently blew on the many card houses. The first to fall was Austria-Hungary’s. She glanced up at Felix. “If there is war, that is the most likely outcome for your empire. That is why you need Germany’s help.”

The door opened and Papa walked in. “Would you two like to join us? I’m sure you both have many questions.”

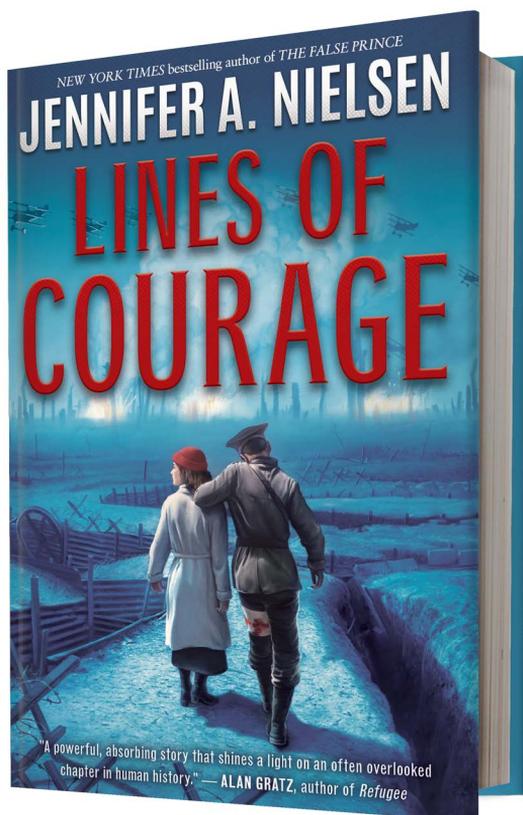
“Yes, please!” Elsa jumped out of her seat.

But Felix remained where he was, staring at the cards flat on the table. It had taken so little for these houses to collapse. What if Elsa was right, and this was the future for Austria-Hungary? What if this was the future for all the empires?

All that remained was to wonder who would be left when the last card fell.

Elsa glanced back at the fallen cards, then looked over at Felix. “And *that* is why I am leaving one of my homing pigeons with you.”

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