

April 19, 1943. The train to Auschwitz thundered through the Belgian countryside, its iron wheels shrieking against the tracks. Inside, the air was thick—damp wool, stale bread, the metallic tang of fear. Maria Livschitz pressed her cheek to Anne's, their breath mingling, their small bodies trembling with every jolt. The world outside was a blur of gray fields and distant smoke, but inside the carriage, time slowed to the rhythm of their mother's whispered lullabies and the distant sobs of strangers.

Suddenly, the night exploded. Gunshots cracked like thunder, shouts ricocheted off steel. The door burst open, and a man—Youra Livchitz, wild-eyed, smelling of sweat and gunpowder—grabbed the twins, thrusting them into the chaos. Anne's hand caught on a jagged edge; blood welled, warm and shocking. Maria watched, paralyzed, as the wound was stitched in the flickering lamplight, the acrid scent of iodine burning her nose. The scar, raw and angry, became a secret map etched into Anne's palm—and into Maria's memory.

Years unraveled. Odessa's winters bit at Maria's skin, the taste of black bread and cabbage lingering on her tongue. Gymnastics halls echoed with the slap of bare feet on polished wood, the sharp tang of chalk dust. Maria learned to master her body, to silence the ache in her chest with perfect landings and rigid discipline. In Los Angeles, Anne soared beneath golden light, her laughter ringing through sunlit gyms, her scar hidden beneath layers of rosin and hope.

Tokyo, 1964. The Olympic stadium shimmered with heat and tension, banners snapping in the breeze. Maria, draped in Soviet red, stood behind Anne, the American star, as they prepared for the vault. The air was electric—sweat, anticipation, the faint sweetness of cherry blossoms drifting in from the city. Anne dipped her hands into chalk, the powder swirling, settling into the creases of her scar. Maria's heart hammered. The past surged: the train, the blood, the loss.

Irina Ivanovna Volkova's voice sliced through the haze. "Focus, Maria. The past is weakness." Her breath was sharp, her perfume a cold blend of tobacco and lavender. Maria's muscles tensed, but her gaze remained fixed on Anne's hand. The scar was not just Anne's—it was a bridge, a wound that refused to heal.

Anne vaulted, her body arcing through the air, the crowd's roar swelling and fading. Maria stepped forward, the floor cool beneath her feet, the taste of adrenaline sharp on her tongue. She felt the weight of history, the pull of memory, and the possibility of peace.

After the competition, the sisters found each other in a quiet corridor, the hum of distant applause muffled by thick walls. Anne reached out, her palm open, scar gleaming in the fluorescent light. Maria touched it, her fingers trembling. The silence between them was heavy, fragrant with longing and forgiveness. Words were unnecessary; the touch said everything.

Irina's footsteps echoed, but Maria no longer flinched. She had faced the wound, embraced the pain, and in that moment, the world narrowed to the warmth of Anne's hand in hers. The war outside raged on, but for two sisters, peace had finally arrived—tasting of salt, chalk, and the sweetness of reunion.