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The *Girl*  
J  
*left* behind

To save her friend,  
she'll sell their secrets.



### 3

Claudia told me not to leave the square with the key in my pocket, but there I was, standing in the courtyard of Claudia's old house in the Am Oberg, staring at the back door with my feet sinking into mud. *Maybe the Jews are already gone?* I thumbed through probable scenarios like pages in a book. The more quiet seconds I stood looking at the house, thinking about what to do, the harder my chest pounded. I needed to do this or go home. After all, it was late. I was sure I had missed my League meeting, and my aunt was probably wondering where I was.

My heart moved into my ears, ebbing and thumping, and I slid the key into the lock. Two clinks and a shove later, the door creaked open with a dull moan. I left my shoes in the mud and stepped into the room. When my bare feet hit the wood floor, they stuck to it like a pair of clammy dead fish.

'*Hallo,*' I whispered. 'Claudia sent me.'

A few moments passed before I heard the pop of snapping floorboards. My eyes swung to the ground, searching for the noise. A little old lady hobbled out from the darkness. She had bottle-thick glasses and frizzy, grey hair that hadn't been set in days; some parts lay flat, other parts curled behind her ears. But as she stepped out from behind the velvety blue curtains, it was the relief in her eyes I noticed first, and my heart stopped pounding so much.

She clutched her chest. 'Oh, I thought we were forgotten!'

An old man climbed out from behind the divan. 'Not so fast, Maria.' He shuffled toward me, reaching into the inside pocket of his wool jacket to pull out a pair of round spectacles. Not the type a grandfather would wear, but the type I had seen young aristocrats wear with leather ear wraps. Slicks of silver-streaked hair hung over his eyes as he fitted them to his head. 'Another girl?' He leaned forward, taking a long, scrutinizing look at me.

A young woman slid out from along the baseboards and scurried to his side. 'We're rescued!' She was in her mid-twenties with wavy brown hair pinned behind her ears with gold, glittery clips. I backed up into the crack of the door, feeling every bit of my drab uniform hidden under my coat, thinking if she were in one of my magazines, I'd clip her out and paste her to my wall.

'Don't be afraid,' she said, holding her hand out as if trying to catch a bird. 'We're not going to eat you.'

A man, who I thought might be her father, rested muscular hands on her shoulders. 'Well, not until we know your name at least,' he said.

'Karl!' The old lady snapped. 'Don't tease the poor thing. She's here to help us, after all.'

‘Would everyone shut up?’ The old man growled as he spoke. ‘She hasn’t told us why she’s here.’ He dissected me with his eyes, moving his mouth back-and-forth as if he was chewing on something tough and needed to spit.

‘I’m sorry.’ I cleared my throat, not sure what to say other than the truth. ‘I didn’t know what to expect when I got here.’

‘Expect?’ he said. ‘Four people in a house with no lights or food, that’s what you can expect!’

I backed up further into the crack.

Karl touched the old man’s shoulder. ‘Papa, Mama is right,’ he said. ‘Let’s give her a chance to speak.’

Maria gently took my hands and moved me away from the door. ‘We’re the Kortens, and we’ve been waiting for you all day.’ She gazed into my eyes batting sparse lashes, and I saw my reflection in the lenses of her glasses. ‘What’s your name, dear?’ Her fingers curled around mine.

‘I’m... Sascha.’ I stuttered when I said my name. Only Auntie called me Sascha.

The old man grumbled. ‘That’s a boy’s name.’

Maria put her arm around the girl’s shoulders and pulled her forward. ‘This is my granddaughter, Elsie. My son Karl is her Papa, and, well, you probably have guessed this old man giving you the treatment is my husband, Bart,’ she said, giving him a scowl.

Bart took a step back and his eyes wandered to the ground. ‘You understand though, right, *fräulein*?’

His words sounded like an apology, and I accepted it with a nod.

They talked about freedom and hugged each other, but my thoughts slowly drowned out their voices when I realized I hadn’t thought things through. *Where should I take them? They can’t stay here. It’s not safe. The renters could be here any minute.* My face hardened and felt as plastic as a cheap doll’s frozen in a quizzical expression.

Then something odd happened. A rumble in the distance—akin to a million boulders hurling down the street. Shouting voices zigzagged into a perverse roar. *A raid.* We stood paralyzed like a handful of mice shining in a cat’s eye.

Elsie pointed a shaking finger at the wall.

Against the floral wallpaper a silhouetted string of gingerbread-shaped figures marched military-like with what looked like guns jutting from their bodies. A booming kick to the house next door made me jolt, and then the screams from those hiding inside waved like a shiver over us all. Men pleaded for their lives, and women cried for their babies. Crashing glass spraying across the stone step sounded like wet potato strings thrown into hot oil.

Then without warning, it just stopped.

‘The Reich!’ Elsie cried. ‘They’re going to get us!’

‘They’ll kill us before we get out of Nuremberg,’ Bart said.

My instinct was to hide, and my aunt’s shop wasn’t far away.

‘There’s an antiques shop a block from here. On Obere Schmiedgasse. It will have to work for now. Grab your things,’ I said, but everyone had already covered their heads with hoods and scarves before I finished talking.

We gathered quietly by the door, listening, waiting for the right moment to escape, and then snuck out the back.

The castle lights shone over the wall—*too much light*, I thought, *too much light*.

I slipped backward in my shoes, and Karl hurriedly scraped our footprints away with a rake he'd found propped against the fence. We reached the open street, but once there the sheer darkness of the city made us all stop in our tracks. Black figures scattered like insects, some ran, others hooded themselves with cloaks or ducked into alleyways. Then we heard the terrifying noise of a beating fist.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Elsie locked arms with me. Screams were everywhere—in the eaves, from the dark windows, and through doors that swung open from broken hinges.

'It's a roundup,' Bart yelled.

A line of Gestapo marched down the road. They banged on doors before barrelling up staircases, all the way into the lofts, and then dragged the people from inside out into the street and into giant armoured trucks. They tore the women's jewels from their necks and took money from the men's pockets.

Karl pushed Elsie and me to keep moving, and we did; Bart and Maria followed just a step behind, through shards of glass that pierced the soles of our shoes.

Herr Rudin's bakery next to Auntie's shop was a sad sight. His front door lay in the street and a dark, cavernous hole marred by broken brick and toppled tables had replaced his display window. Fresh breads and strudel baskets rolled into the street; other bits sucked their way toward the back of his shop like a sinister void—Herr Rudin's wife was a Jew.

My heart sank, thinking the Gestapo had dragged her away, and then raced when I heard them marching back toward us.

I snatched the spare keys from the window well and fumbled my way around the ring with heavy, rapid breaths. Bart and Maria stumbled into my backside, knocking my face into the door and the keys right out of my hand. With a pounding heart I picked them off the ground and started my search all over.

'Hurry,' Karl said, looking over his shoulder. 'Open it!'

Maria and Elsie tapped my shoulders, each saying something different with urgent, almost tearful voices. Bart's breath blew hot on my neck. 'It's that one,' he said, trying to grab the keys.

The deadbolt clicked over and like dominoes we fell into the shop, one on top of the other, while the bell chimed wildly. Someone's knee hit my back, another's elbow jabbed my face. Elsie threw her arms around my neck, and I dragged her body away from a beam of light that shone through the window and streaked across the floor.

A voice yelled just outside the shop. '*Aufhören!* Stop!' Two policemen rushed past the window and tackled someone to the ground, bones and flesh smacking against the pavement. I closed the door from the floor, and we scuttled along the dark wall toward the back of the shop and the basement.

We filed in blind with our hands on each other's shoulders, down three stone steps I searched desperately for the light cord hanging from the ceiling and then pulled forcefully

enough to break it when I found it. The snap of the light echoed off the wall like a struck match: something felt off.

The twinge in my spine twisted me around. The stove-sized cast iron door that led into the abandoned sixteenth-century beer cellar on the other side was cracked open a finger's width from the wall. Its rusted latch had been replaced by a silver pin hook, and the blackhead screws that anchored it into the brick wall looked brand new. The door had been there for years, before I was born, but never in my life had I seen it open, until now.

'That's odd.'

Bart pushed Elsie to the side to get a closer look. 'Odd? What's odd?'

'That door.'

'What about it?' he asked. 'You act as if you didn't know it was there. Didn't you say you've been here before?' Bart sounded condescending.

Maria adjusted her glasses with trembling hands. 'Should we be alarmed, dear?' She looked over the top of her lenses and squinted at the door.

'No. I don't think so.' I pulled the door open and peeked inside but saw only darkness. A quick shiver bumped across my skin when I thought about the rats that lived in there. I clamped the door shut. There was little I could do other than lock it with its pin hook. So that's what I did.

'Is everyone all right?' I said.

'You mean besides our damaged egos?' Bart said. 'I guess we're all right.' He shifted his eyes from wall to wall, rubbing his chin with one hand as if judging the basement's security. Satisfied, he sat down on a bench carved into the wall, brushed the space off next to him with his hand and motioned for Maria. Their bodies fit snugly together like a puzzle.

There was a loud boom, as if someone had lit a stick of dynamite not far away. The floor shook from the blast. Then all went quiet. Elsie turned her back and covered her mouth with her hand, but I saw her torso bobbing up and down as she silently wept. Karl stood in the middle of the room with muscled arms braced between two wooden beams.

My stomach growled, and I'm sure I heard theirs too. 'I'm going back up to get some food.' I paused, waiting for a response, then Maria's eyes slid upward.

'Maybe you should wait a few minutes, dear. We just got down here. What if the police are still outside?' I had seen the police arrest people before, and they worked fast, but something in her voice made me sit back down.

'All right.' My stomach growled again. 'I'll wait.' My back scraped against the stone wall as I slid into a squat next to a few storage boxes. 'When I go back out, I'm going to check for some blankets too.'

Karl nodded.

I started taking my coat off, pulling it down off my arms. Elsie's glance turned into a stare, and then Karl's and Bart's while Maria blinked behind her large lenses at the sight of my Youth League uniform shining up before them, stiff black tie against my white shirt and the thick belt around my waist.

I put my coat back on, and they slowly looked away.

Bart pulled a white-faced watch from his pocket, the Kaiser's image and the year 1914 engraved in the silver. I recognized it instantly as an award watch given to German officers

for bravery. My uncle had one just like it, and I wondered how he'd got one.

'You fought in the war?'

Bart's eyes swung to mine, his jaw tightening, and then Karl answered for him in a heavy tone. 'We are Germans, Sascha. Gentiles of Jewish descent.'

Bart's breathing grew rapid, so much so Maria put a hand on his shoulder; then he stood up. 'I grew up proud of my country after emancipation,' he said. 'Now that iron cross I earned fighting for this country doesn't mean a Goddamn thing.' His voice crumbled, and he sat back down. 'Not the way the country is now.'

Karl uncrossed his arms. 'Papa—'

Bart slammed a closed fist against his knee. 'Damn the Race Laws. Damn them!' Maria cringed from the anger in his voice.

'But if you're Gentiles why—'

'The edict is complicated,' Karl said. 'If you have a Jewish grandparent you're legally defined as a *Mischling*, or mixed blood. It doesn't matter if you're German, if you're a Gentile, or how many medals you earned in the war if you don't follow the Reich's demands and do what they tell you to do.' He ran his fingers through his hair and laced them together at the top of his head. 'It's about genetics.'

'My son and I,' Bart said, pointing to Karl, 'run a very profitable company here in Nuremberg called Maschine Arbeitet. That is, until a few days ago when they came after us.'

'Ach! Do we have to relive this again, Bart?' Maria lifted her hands up in the air and dropped them into her lap. 'I don't want to think about everything we left behind, what we are now.' Her lips quaked as she talked, which made Bart kiss her forehead.

Elsie pounded the fleshy part of her hand into the brick wall. 'What we are?' She swiped her nose with a wet hankie and glared through blotchy, meatball-swelled eyes. 'The Nazis may call us criminals, but that's their term, not ours. I'm not ashamed of the Jewish blood in my veins.'

Karl put his arm around her. 'None of us are.' He looked at me, his eyes heavy, and asked if I had any other questions.

Claudia would be aghast to know how much I had pried into their lives already, reminding me that the less I knew the better. But I couldn't help myself. It was just me and them in the quiet basement, and I wanted to know. He did ask if I had any questions.

'How did it happen?' I said. 'How did you end up in the Am Oberg?'

Karl waved everyone closer, and below the dangling light they recounted their story to me in great detail. They ran a post-war corporation that employed hundreds of people, buying dilapidated industrial parks, restructuring them and turning them into thriving manufacturing centres. Last week Karl received a summons ordering him to sell the company to an Aryan conglomerate. When he didn't, a friend at the documentation office told him that his family's name was on a deportation list for the east, despite his iron cross which he said should have been enough to keep him off the list.

'Deport us east?' Bart breathed heavily, ripping his glasses from his face only to put them back on. 'Never.'