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# THE SECRET THEY HID

MARGOT'S SECRET



ROBERTA  
KAGAN

**THE  
SECRET  
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# PROLOGUE



1907 VIENNA, AUSTRIA

Alex Schroder leaned against the red brick building, tapping his fist against the stones. He was angry, furious, actually. Things like this didn't happen to him. He was handsome, and most women adored him. Not her. She used him, and he was not going to let her get away with it. So, he waited. He looked longingly at the building just a few feet away, nestled behind a high fence that kept him out. *What wouldn't I give to attend that university?*

Then she came walking out of the large wooden door. From a distance, the woman was attractive. She wore a dark, fitted dress. Her graying dark hair hung gracefully to her shoulders in a sleek, perfectly styled coif.

When Alex saw her walk out of the building, he came to life. She opened the gate and exited the quiet grounds of the University. As soon as she did, He ran up to her. But she didn't stop to greet him. As he got closer to her, he could see the wrinkles on her face. She was well put together, but she was no beauty. "Please, I must speak to you," Alex said.

She continued walking as if she didn't hear him, but he knew she did. Controlling his anger, he said, "*Frau* Weisman. You made a promise to me. Did you forget what you promised? Yesterday, I received another rejection letter."

She ignored him, didn't even turn her head to look at him. She just continued walking. She was about to turn the corner.

He ran a few steps to catch up with her, and when he did, he grabbed her arm. She let out a small scream.

“Be quiet. If you scream, the police will come, and then your husband will find out what you’ve been up to. Besides, I’m not going to hurt you. I only want to talk to you,” he growled. Then he shook her arm a little. “You promised me. You said if I slept with you, you said that if I was your lover, you would get me into the art school.”

“Oh, Alex, you and I know you just don’t have what it takes. You’re all right as a painter, but you’re just not good enough to study at the Academy of Fine Art. I can’t pull enough strings to make them accept you. Why don’t you paint portraits or landscapes and sell your work on the street right over there like the rest of the rejects?” She pointed to a row of artists trying to sell their work.

The word reject enraged him. He wanted to hit her, to pound her face into a bloody pulp. For a man who was usually calm and passive, he was out of his element. In Berlin, he was used to having women fawn over him. Not this one. She was cold and calculating, the wife of an important artist. And although he had come to hate her, he wouldn’t get violent. It was not in his nature. She must have sensed the weakness in him as she pulled her arm away. “Now, listen to me, Alex, I tried. I did what I could for you. The board won’t budge on their decision. So, please, just let me go.”

“You are a bitch,” he yelled after her. “You used me.” She walked away from him, tossing her hair carelessly.

*Leo, I’m lost. I don’t know what to do. Alex missed his brother. I wish you were here with me, Leo. You would know what to do.* This attempt to get into art school had been his first venture away from home and his first time being without Leo by his side.

It was a beautiful spring day in Vienna. The sky was cloudless and blue. The trees were filling with leaves, and tiny seedlings were growing into flowers. But Alex saw none of it. His eyes were blinded by angry tears.

Just then, he heard a man's voice. "She's a good-for-nothing Jew."

The man stood at the back of the building, setting up a few paintings on easels to sell. Alex had done this many times to make enough money to buy food to survive another day. "That's how they are. They only want other Jews in the academy. That's because Jews stick together. If I had my way, I would rid the world of all of them. Can you imagine how wonderful the world would be without those swine?"

Alex shrugged. "I never thought about it." Alex didn't care about politics. He couldn't see how they had much effect on his life.

"Well, I can imagine it. I can see what our world would be like without Jews. It would be better, far better. I can see it clearly in my mind."

Alex was annoyed. He glanced over at the man's artwork, and he was unimpressed. *He's not really very good. I can see why they rejected him. But I am much better. I don't know why they would reject me. I am tired of the crazy artists who stand outside the academy talking nonsense to each other. I've had enough of all of this.* "I think I might go back home," he said.

"Where is home?"

"Germany, Berlin."

"I love Germany, but I was born here in Austria." The man straightened one of his paintings. "I haven't seen you here before. What's your name?"

"Alex Schroder."

"Nice to meet you, Alex. I'm Adolf, Adolf Hitler."

Alex gave the man a half smile. *He seems really crazy.*

"Remember my name, Alex Schroder, because someday I will be an important man. I am going to change the world. I am going to get rid of all the Jews."



# PART I

# CHAPTER 1



BERLIN 1915

**L**eo Schroder was on his way home from his job at the textile factory when he turned the corner to stop at the bakery, where he often purchased daily bread for his family. Before he entered the shop, he heard his brother Alex call out to him from across the street. Leo winced. He had been flirting with Adelaide, the girl who worked at the bakery for months now. And he'd planned to go to the bakery alone that day because he had mustered up all of his courage to try to ask Adelaide to have dinner with him. He believed that she liked him because she was kind, a little flirtatious, and she always gave him a smile and a few extra cookies when he went in to purchase the bread. They had been flirting with each other with easy banter for several months, and he was taken with her beauty. She was only twenty years old, ten years younger than himself. But he knew from the first time he saw her that she was the girl he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. His father took to calling him a late bloomer because he refused to marry at nineteen like the rest of his peers. Try as he might to please his parents, Leo had always fallen short. He had never been their favorite. He was the responsible one of the two Schroder brothers. And his parents thought nothing of taking his pay each week, which he was generous enough to give them. But, even so, even with all that Leo did for them, they had a soft spot for his brother Alex. Alex, who was their ne'er-do-well, lazy, but always happy, and very handsome son.

Perhaps, Leo thought, they loved Alex more because he needed their love a little more. Alex was softer, a failed artist,

a gentle soul who could not hold a job. He often drank too much and stayed out all night. But his parents forgave him. They made the excuse that he was just trying to cope with life. Alex, like Leo, was unmarried. However, he refused to work at a factory like his brother. If he couldn't work as an artist, he was determined not to work at all. He brought nothing into the house to help pay his own way. But Leo never fought with him about it. He loved his brother too much and hoped that something would somehow come along and change Alex. It wasn't that Alex was unable to find work. In fact, he had gone through plenty of decent jobs where he was readily hired. Alex had a warm and charming personality and his father's rakish good looks. And for a few weeks, he was very proud of his accomplishments. But Alex couldn't keep a job. He quickly lost interest in his work and was back to drinking heavily, and was often asleep at a whorehouse when he should have been on his way to work in the morning.

Like his mother, Leo was a hard worker, responsible, and generous to the family. But sadly, neither his mother nor Leo would be considered charming. He was too serious to be charming. Leo was tall and thickly built, not a particularly handsome man. He had dark hair and eyes, and he wore a serious expression. This was just the opposite of his brother Alex, who was light-haired, dreamy-eyed, and always smiling.

As the boys grew up, Leo proved to be the superior athlete. He was stronger, and in many ways, he was smarter than his brother. Alex was a dreamer. He liked to spend his days painting and had no interest in working hard to earn money. Although employers were quick to hire Alex because of his attractive disposition, he never kept a job very long.

Leo found his first job while he was still in school and worked hard each week. At the end of the week, he gave his mother his pay envelope to help her run the house. But when Alex worked, which was not often, he spent whatever he earned on drinking and women.

Leo loved Alex despite the occasional twinges of jealousy he felt towards Alex, brought on by his parents' coddling. Leo stood up for Alex whenever Alex needed him. He defended

him against school bullies and unsuccessfully tried to train him to be better at sports.

However, although Leo adored his brother, today, he didn't want to see him. He wanted to go to the bakery alone to talk to Adelaide without Alex interrupting.

But this was not to be. Alex had already seen him, and he was making his way towards his brother. "Wait up," Alex yelled. Then he ran towards Leo, who stopped walking and waited. "Where are you going?" Alex asked because his brother was walking in the opposite direction of their home.

"I'm headed to the bakery. You can go on home. I'll be there shortly."

"No, no, I'll go with you to the bakery," Alex smiled. "What are you going for?"

"I want to buy some rolls. Maybe some bread and pastries, too."

"Mother will be so pleased," Alex smiled.

Leo didn't want to explain why he preferred to go alone. He didn't want to admit that he liked the girl who worked there, just in case he had read her wrong and she didn't like him. So, instead of trying to explain this to Alex, Leo just smiled and said, "Sure."

When they entered the bakery, there was a line of people waiting to purchase baked goods. And there was Adelaide, her golden hair braided and wrapped around her head. She wore a dress that accented her ample bosom. And when she saw Leo, she smiled at him. He smiled back, his lips trembling. His heart melted.

"She's pretty, isn't she?" Alex said innocently.

"She is," Leo said, trying not to show how much he liked her.

Alex and Leo overheard two young men in front of them talking about the country going to war. "Germany will be victorious. It won't be a long war," one of the men said proudly.

“I quite agree.”

Leo listened, but he wasn't as certain as the others that this war was going to be good for Germany. He was worried, not only about the state of his country but also because if he and his brother were conscripted, he would have to watch out, not only for himself but also for Alex as he always had. And then, who would be at home to protect his parents? Leo took a sidelong glance at Alex. He knew that if they went to war and were together in battle, it was far more dangerous to have excess baggage to worry about. Leo knew his brother was an artist and not a fighter, and Alex would die without Leo's protection. He cursed under his breath. But he said nothing. Instead, he vowed to himself that if they were sent off to war, he would do whatever was necessary to bring his brother home safely.

“What can I get for you two gentlemen today?” Adelaide said. Her smile was so bright that it lit up the room. Leo was smitten.

He couldn't look into her eyes. His stomach was in knots, his heart was racing, and he was afraid if he looked directly at her, she would see how he felt about her. After all, he was sure it was written all over his face. “Umm...” he said, forcing himself to fix his eyes on the pastries in the case. “Two of these,” he pointed to tiny cakes on the display. “And a bread, dark bread.”

“You look lovely today.” Alex didn't even look at the goods in the display case. He fixed his eyes directly on Adelaide's face. “But then again, you always look lovely. Every time I see you.”

Leo looked up at his brother, and then he cast a quick glance over at Adelaide, who stood behind the counter smiling. He was annoyed with Alex. But he couldn't say anything because Alex didn't know he had spent the last several months of his life daydreaming about Adelaide. But now that he had finally found the courage to ask her to have dinner with him, she wasn't paying him any attention. Adelaide was taken with Alex. She was staring at him from beneath her long eyelashes and blushing. *She likes my brother.*

*Of course, she does. They all do. And why not? His face is boyish, and his smile is charming. That's because he never worries about anything. And why should he? I do it for him. I worry about everything. I protect him from everything. I always have. And he knows I always will.*

Adelaide put several small cakes into a bag. Then she glanced quickly towards the back of the bakery to see if the owner was watching. He wasn't. She handed the bag to Alex. "No charge today," she whispered.

"Oh, *fraulein*, you are not only beautiful, but you are kind and generous too. Would you like to take a walk with me one afternoon?"

She beamed, "Yes. I would love to."

"Perhaps after church on Sunday?"

*He never goes to church.* Leo thought as he watched his brother charm the girl he was secretly in love with. I have to take mother to church on Sundays because neither Alex nor my father are ever willing to go. *But of course, Alex will go this Sunday so that he can go walking with Adelaide afterward.* Leo felt he could almost spit from the bitter taste in his mouth.

Alex and Adelaide continued speaking, but Leo didn't want to listen. He walked outside feeling defeated and was about to leave and go home. Just then, Alex came waltzing out behind him, whistling a tune. "Have a cake," he said to Leo.

"No, thanks."

Alex began eating one of the pastries. "It's very good," he said with his mouth full. "You should try it."

Leo nodded his head but didn't answer.

Then Alex asked, "By the way, what kind of rolls were you looking for?"

"Never mind. I didn't see them in the case."

"What kind?"

"A certain type of roll. That's all."

“If you would just tell me what you want, maybe we could ask Adelaide to make them for you,” Alex said innocently.

Leo glared at his brother out of the corner of his eye. *He doesn't even suspect that I have feelings for the girl. He has no idea.* “Don't bother,” Leo said, trying to hide the bitterness in his voice. “I changed my mind anyway.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, Alex. Nothing is wrong.” Leo said. But it was. His whole life felt like it had been blown to bits in the last few minutes.

## CHAPTER 2



**A**lex began to court Adelaide, and this continued for the next several months. Everyone who saw them together could see that Adelaide was smitten with Alex. And for the first time in his life, he seemed to be wrapped up in a girl. She was the prettiest girl in town, and everyone said that even Alex, a handsome devil that, until now, no one could pin down, had fallen in love with her.

As time passed, Leo accepted the fact that his dream girl preferred his brother. *What else can I do? Adelaide was not in love with me.* So, he settled for the next best thing. Leo became Adelaide's best friend. She treated him like a brother. And he was grateful to be in her life. But deep in his heart, where he kept his darkest secrets, he knew he was still in love with her. So many times, when Alex would do something thoughtless, which Alex could be known to do, Leo wished that he had the courage to declare his feelings to Adelaide. But he never did because he was certain that even if she knew that he would do anything for her, Adelaide would still choose Alex. It had always been that way with Alex. Everyone who got to know him would eventually discover he could not be depended upon. And everyone in town knew Alex was a heavy drinker, a womanizer, and a gambler. But that didn't matter to the girls in town. Any of them would marry him in a second if they had the chance. Alex's charm always won them over, no matter how bad he was. And no matter how much he betrayed them, women forgave him.

Adelaide was far from Alex's first conquest. There had been a terrible scandal with a young woman several years ago.



No one in Alex's family even knew about her until one evening, she and her angry father came to the Schroder home declaring she was pregnant and Alex was the father. "You've ruined my innocent daughter. Now you must marry her," the girl's father said to Alex in a loud, very thunderous voice.

He blatantly refused, and the girl began to weep. "How can I be sure the child in her belly is mine?" Alex asked innocently.

"Because my daughter says it is. She is only fourteen. You are the first boy she has ever had anything to do with. There has been no one else," the father stated boldly.

"Well, just because she says it's mine doesn't make it true. She could be lying with all kinds of men. How would I know? Her word is just not enough for me."

The older man went to strike Alex, but Leo, who was stronger than both of them, blocked the way. Leo knew Alex and was sure that the child belonged to his brother, but as always, he stood by Alex. "Don't touch him," he said to the girl's father, "Or you'll have me to contend with."

The older man looked Leo up and down. He saw how large Leo's frame was and eyed the definition of his well-honed muscles. Fear came over the father's face. He knew he would lose and face serious injury if he got into a fight with Leo.

"But, then tell me, what are we to do?" The father threw his hands up. "Your brother has ruined my daughter. How will she ever find a man willing to marry her once she has a child out of wedlock?"

Leo felt sorry for the girl, and even though this was not his responsibility, he said, "Wait here." Then he went into his bedroom and took the money he'd saved from his drawer. "Here, take this. This is all I can do. Find a midwife or a doctor who can help her get rid of it. Or keep it and raise it. I don't care what you do. Just go now. On your way."

The girl's father looked at the marks in his hand. Then he looked at his daughter. "This money will help. The boy will not marry you. You made a mistake. Now, you must live with

the consequences. This is all they will do. And it's better than nothing. So, let's go."

They left. And no one in the family had heard from them since.

Leo and Alex knew Adelaide's brother, Felix Eckermann, long before they had met Adelaide. He was her older brother, and Alex knew him from school because he was a year older than Alex. But they had not been friends. Felix excelled at sports. He was a cruel bully of a boy who had often tormented Alex. Alex had told Leo about him, and Leo went to talk to him one afternoon when he was off work for the day. He waited outside the school until Felix came out with a few of his male friends. "You there," Leo called to Felix.

"Me?" Felix asked.

"Yes, you. Come here. The rest of you boys can go on home." Leo said. And because he was older, larger, and spoke with authority, they listened to him.

"Yes?" Felix asked.

"I'm Alex Schroder's brother. You know him?" Leo said, knowing that Felix not only knew his brother but also tormented him. He grabbed Felix's shirt collar and nearly lifted him off the ground.

"Oh yes, sure, I know him," Felix said. Leo could see the fear growing in Felix's eyes.

"I just dropped by to tell you that if you touch my brother or bother him again, I'll be back to see you. And you won't be happy. Unless, of course, you like broken bones." Leo smiled a sinister smile. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes... yes... I understand," he said, stammering, "A-a-and... I will stay far away from your brother. I didn't mean anything. I was just teasing him in a friendly way. I would never have hurt him. I swear it."

"Shut up and just leave him alone from now on. You understand? Just say yes."

"Yes."

Leo nodded. He dropped his hold on the boy's shirt collar and walked away.

Alex didn't know that Felix was Adelaide's brother until she invited him to her home to meet her family. Felix was there. He gave Alex looks of disgust but refrained from openly saying anything about their past together. And then, a week later, Alex invited Adelaide's family to his home, and it was then that Felix saw Leo. At first, Felix was uncomfortable, but Leo acted as if they had never met. There was no mention of the day Leo warned Felix to leave Alex alone. Soon, Felix began to relax, and slowly, he began to accept that these two men were going to be a part of his family. Leo was warm and friendly towards Felix. It was as if the uncomfortable past had never happened. And yet, Felix was careful about what he said. Leo and Felix had a lot in common. They both worked at local factories, and they both agreed that there was a great need for better worker support. Both of them enjoyed sports, like playing football, and they got up early to go out for a walk or run before they began their long shifts at work. Alex had no interest in sports, but Felix was careful to include him in the conversation.

Adelaide's parents liked Leo. They liked the way he carried himself with integrity. They were especially impressed to find out that he helped his parents financially. This was because they thought that if he were their son-in-law and they ever needed help, he would likely offer it. And because of this, they wished that Leo was the one their daughter had chosen rather than his brother. Although Adelaide never knew it, Felix had secretly informed his parents that Alex had not done well in school, and he also told them that Alex had trouble keeping a job. Adelaide's parents tried to persuade their daughter to give up on Alex and perhaps set her sights on his older brother. But she just shook her head and said, "I can't. Alex is the only one for me."

Adelaide was bewitched by Alex's charm. And she could not see his faults.

"You won't have an easy life with a man like that," her mother warned.

But Adelaide refused to hear her. Her mother had never been her best friend. There was plenty of bad blood between Adelaide and her parents, so she didn't care what they thought of her choice.

After several months of courtship, which Adelaide found exciting and terribly romantic, Alex proposed. Leo was worried about Adelaide because he was sure his brother was only getting married to silence his parents. Leo was sure that Alex felt that if he was married, his parents would stop bothering him to find a job so he could help them financially. After all, if Alex had a wife, he would have his own financial responsibilities, and there would be no hope of helping his parents. Leo was concerned about this because he found it hard to believe that Alex was ready to take on the financial responsibilities of a wife and a home. But none of this mattered.

No one was surprised when Adelaide accepted Alex's proposal, especially not Leo. He knew that Adelaide was crazy about his brother, and it hurt him each time he saw how she looked at Alex. But even though he could blow the entire engagement because he knew that Alex had not given up his weekly visits to the local brothel, Leo would not do it. He knew Alex had not changed. He still drank to excess almost every night. And although Alex found bits of work here and there, he never saved anything. He spent everything he earned to drink himself sick. Leo tried to talk to him. He tried to tell him that he needed to start being more responsible. Alex always agreed, but in the end, he was unable to keep a permanent job. Leo resented this because he had always been responsible. He worked steadily at one of the local factories and inwardly thought his brother was lazy. But even with all of Alex's faults, Leo loved his brother. He'd loved him from the day their mother gave birth to him. From the first time Leo saw Alex crying in his crib, he decided that as the older brother, it was his job to protect his younger sibling for the rest of his life. And so it had always been. Regardless of what Alex did, Leo stood by him. He defended Alex both physically and mentally against the world.

Leo was lonely. It wasn't that he couldn't find a woman. But he just couldn't find one who fulfilled him like Adelaide did. So rather than just date someone who didn't spark his flame, sometimes out of physical necessity, Leo accompanied Alex on his visits to the brothels. Unlike Alex, Leo was pledged to no one. And the brothels were set up for lonely men like Leo. They had main rooms where piano players pounded out gay tunes, and scantily dressed women showed off their wares and sold expensive drinks to the customers. The prostitutes were more than happy to take some of Leo's hard-earned money. However, most of the prostitutes had a soft spot for Alex, and so they often refused to accept payment from him. Even the madam, a hard-boiled old woman with wrinkled skin, red lipstick, rouge, and too much dark eye makeup, occasionally bought him drinks. And although Leo fought his feelings of envy towards Alex, he was jealous.

One night, the brothers noticed that a new girl had come to the brothel. She was different than the others. Her long, dark, wavy hair hung down her back, and she was tall and slender with large breasts. She wore a tight blouse to show off her cleavage, and it looked like her breasts were made of porcelain. Her name was Mia Kleinman. What really made her different was that she wore a Star of David on a chain that hung around her delicate neck. Alex was taken with her almost immediately. "I've never met anyone like her before. She doesn't try to solicit us. She never tries to make us drink or go upstairs with her. She is just so quiet and introspective. I wonder what she thinks about."

"She's just a woman like all the other women. You think she's different because she's a Jew. But that only makes her more trouble. I'd say you should just leave her alone. In fact, I think you should stop coming here at all. You're getting married. You don't know how fortunate you are to have a girl like Adelaide. Why are you doing these things? If I were in your place getting married to Adelaide, I would be trying to earn as much money as possible to build a home for her. That is what you should be doing. Perhaps it's time you stopped going to the brothel at all. Perhaps it's time you grew up, Alex," Leo warned.

Alex winked at his brother, and a knowing smile crossed his lips. “There are girls for marrying and girls for playing with. Right? And a healthy man needs a little of both.”

“Addy is a special girl,” Leo said. “She deserves your respect. She’s going to be your wife and your life partner. You shouldn’t need anyone else.” *I wouldn’t. Not if she were mine.* Leo thought. Leo had begun calling Adelaide ‘Addy.’ She was, after all, his brother’s wife. Which sort of made her his sister. And he loved having a special affectionate name for her. But now, as he looked into Alex’s thoughtless, careless eyes, bitterness towards his brother pierced his heart like an arrow. *Why is it that he has such a wonderful woman and treats her like she is nothing? If she were mine, I would move heaven and earth for her.*

“I couldn’t agree more. Adelaide is special. That’s why I am going to marry her. But she will never be my only girl. No one could expect that of a fellow. To have only one woman for your entire life? That’s madness.”

“But that is what is expected when you get married, Alex.”

Alex laughed. “Let them expect whatever they choose to expect. I know what I need. And my time here with these women at the brothel has nothing to do with my marriage to Adelaide.”

Leo sighed. *I wish I could tell him how Adelaide means the world to me. I wish he knew how much I love her. I know Alex, and no matter what she does, he could never care for her the way I do. But he is going to be her husband. She chose him. I must accept that. And I can’t ever say a word to him about it. He might love her in his own way, but he doesn’t love her. Not the way I do. And I always will.*

## CHAPTER 3



The wedding was simple, just family and a few very close friends. Times were hard, and large weddings were far too expensive for the families of working-class people. Leo felt the irony as he gave his mother some money to put towards the wedding. *This wedding should have been mine.*

Leo's heart swelled when Adelaide entered the room in her traditional German wedding costume. Her eyes were shining with love when she looked at Alex. The ache Leo felt in his heart was real, and he clutched his chest for a moment. He felt sorry for Adelaide because she loved Alex so much, and he knew his brother would never be faithful to her.

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IRMGARD BERKEMEIER WAS Adelaide's best friend. They had known each other since they were children, and she was the only girlfriend that Adelaide had invited to her wedding. As the bride and groom walked arm and arm into the restaurant where the reception was to be held, Irmgard winked at her friend. A tear of joy ran down Adelaide's face. Then she smiled and winked back at Irmgard.

The day before, Adelaide had mentioned to Irmgard that Alex had a single brother. And now Irmgard was eyeing Leo, but he did not return her gaze.

At the reception, Leo walked over and congratulated his brother, who was standing at the bar. Alex had already begun

drinking heavily. “Best of luck to you both,” Leo said with as much sincerity and generosity of spirit as he could muster.

“Yes, yes...” Alex smiled an inebriated smile. “Thank you.” Leo studied his brother and wondered how long Alex would stay married to Adelaide.

Then, in a soft voice, Leo asked, “You do love her, don’t you?”

“Of course. What’s not to love? Just look at her. She’s gorgeous.” Alex said as he took a large swig of beer.

“Yes, she is,” Leo said, and his heart ached with yearning.

A little while later, Leo sought out Adelaide to extend congratulations. “Best wishes to you,” he said, kissing her on the cheek. His lips burned with longing.

“Thank you,” she smiled wearily, then added, “your brother is a handful, but I love him.”

“I know you do,” Leo said, his heart crying out to her in silence.

“You should ask Irmgard out. She’s my best friend, and she’s pretty too,” Adelaide said to Leo in her sweet, sisterly way.

Leo smiled. But hearing her say this cut him even more deeply. He didn’t want Irmgard. He wanted to scream. *It’s you that I love. If only you could see me. If only you would realize that I would be a better husband to you than Alex ever could be because I really love you.* But he didn’t say any of that. All he could muster was, “We’ll see.”

“Why not, Leo? I know she likes you. She’s told me as much.”

Leo nodded. “She’s a nice girl. We’ll see.” *But she’s not you.*

“Please, just give it a try. You might find you like her. I believe you two will get along very well.”

“You really want me to? You really want me to go out with her?” Leo asked.



“Yes, I do. You’re my brother now, and I want to see you happy. Besides, wouldn’t it be fun if you two got married and we were couples living in the same building? We could have dinner at each other’s apartments. Our children would grow up together.”

“All right, if this is what you want, I will ask her to go out with me. But I have to tell you the truth. I am not ready to get married.” *Not to her. Not to anyone but you.*

“Oh Leo, I’m sure you must be lonely. Alex says you never go out with anyone. He told me that you spend most of your time working.”

“I do work a lot. I must admit. That’s because we need the money.” Leo said, but he blushed with embarrassment as he remembered the nights at the brothel. *I am lonely. But I can’t just get married to anyone to fill the emptiness inside of me. If I get married, it would have to be to someone special. It would have to be to you, Addy.*

“Well, there’s no need to think about marriage right now. Why don’t you just take one evening and have a coffee or dinner with Irmgard and see how you feel about her?”

“I can do that.” *I can do anything for you.*

## CHAPTER 4



Leo took some of the money out of the small savings he kept from working over the years and gave it as a wedding gift to Adelaide and Alex. It was not a lot, but it was enough money to rent an apartment right next door to the one where Leo lived with his parents.

Then, as he promised Adelaide, Leo began dating Irmgard. She was a shy and quiet girl. Tall and gawky with dull brown hair. He found her to be plain. But she had soft brown eyes and a nice smile. The clothes she wore were modest and always immaculate. And she seemed to be a good and honest person. Leo enjoyed the time he spent with her, but he was not falling in love.

Irmgard told him how her parents had to take her out of school when she was very young so that she could go to work. "I was young when I first had to do my part to help to keep the family going," Irmgard explained that she was not bitter about this. She told Leo that she understood that she had to make this sacrifice for the people she loved. They had this love of family in common. But in her own way, Irmgard was a remarkable girl. She hadn't had much in the form of opportunities, but she taught herself to read. And because she loved to read, it was easy for her to speak about almost any subject. Leo found her interesting to talk to. And he liked her. But Leo's heart was taken. And there was no room for anyone else. At night, he lay alone in his bed, thinking about Adelaide. *Adelaide... how could any man resist her? She was a magnificent-looking girl with an easy laugh that made him smile. She could dance all night without getting tired. Perhaps, he had to admit, Adelaide*

*might be a little less intelligent than her friend Irmgard. But what she lacked in intellect, she made up for in beauty. Her form was slender but curvy. And her eyes, those eyes.*

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NOW THAT LEO was her brother-in-law, Adelaide grew closer to him. This was because she needed someone to confide in about Alex's difficult behavior. Before they had married, Alex had promised Adelaide that once they were wed, he would quit drinking to excess and find a job. However, he had not kept this promise. Adelaide continued to work at the bakery, getting up and going to work before the sun rose. But she didn't earn enough to keep the apartment, and it was only with the financial help that Leo provided that Alex and Adelaide were able to survive. Because he refused to see Adelaide on the street, Leo got a second job. Although he could have used the money himself, Leo was happy to give it to Adelaide because he secretly believed that helping her kept her close to him.

## CHAPTER 5



**A**delaide had her parents, her brother Felix, Leo, and Alex's parents over for dinner every Sunday. However, Alex often would not be at home when everyone was visiting. Adelaide tried hard to pretend that it didn't bother her. She tried to make light of it and make up valid excuses for Alex. But Leo knew the truth. And he knew that Adelaide knew, too. Adelaide was not stupid. She knew Alex had other women, and he didn't care enough to be present at her family dinners. Alex was bored with their marriage already. He was legally married, but in name only. Even so, Adelaide still loved him fiercely. And she was always trying to find a way to make him happy. Leo often wondered how Adelaide could still be in love with Alex, knowing he had other women and spent all of his money on drinking. Adelaide's parents didn't seem to care how Alex treated their daughter. They ignored it. However, her brother, Felix, hated Alex. Although he never said it outright, he called attention to Alex's shortcomings at every turn.

Leo agreed with Felix that Alex was behaving like a jerk, but he hated to see the pain on Adelaide's face when Felix asked hurtful questions like, "Where does your husband go at night?" or "Is he ever at home with you?" And because Felix hurt Adelaide, Leo didn't care for Felix. He found him to be unnecessarily cruel and a troublemaker. However, because Felix was Adelaide's only sibling, Leo treated him as respectfully as he could. Felix, on the other hand, really liked Leo. When they saw each other at Sunday dinners, Felix always tried to win Leo's friendship. He brought him cigars to

share after dinner. And once, he even brought a bottle of *schnaps*. But try as he might, Felix was too outspoken and far too critical for Leo's taste.

Leo tried to ignore the fact that Felix was filled with anger and hatred for the wealthy factory owners he worked for, which he discussed with venom at every Sunday dinner. But it annoyed Leo, who didn't want to dwell on it. He was glad he had a job and a way to earn a living. He tried to listen politely as Felix ranted, but after a few moments, Leo excused himself to help Adelaide in the kitchen. Little wonder he wasn't surprised, a few weeks later, when he heard Felix had gone off to Russia to join the Bolsheviks.

## CHAPTER 6



APRIL 1916

**T**wo months after Alex and Adelaide were wed, Adelaide became pregnant. She was thrilled to be having a child. She told Leo how happy she was. But Alex was not happy about the pregnancy. Adelaide was too ashamed to tell Leo, but before she'd become pregnant, Alex was very sexually attracted to her. However, now, he looked at her differently. At first, she thought their sex life had gone sour because she was growing large. And she was sure Alex's sexual desire for her would return after she gave birth. So, after she gave birth to beautiful twin girls, Adelaide worked hard to lose any excess weight she'd gained. But Alex had changed permanently. He had lost his desire for her; no matter what she did, he never wanted to make love to her. This made Adelaide feel sick to her stomach because she knew that when she became a mother, she had somehow become sexually repulsive to her husband.

Alex had no interest in the baby girls. In fact, he didn't even take part in naming his twin daughters. He left that to his wife, who gave birth to them with the help of a midwife on a chilly evening in early spring. Leo waited in the living room, anxious and worried, as if he were the father. And then, when the children were born, Leo was by Adelaide's side when she held her babies for the first time. Alex was not home. He was at the brothel with Mia.

"I'll call this one Matilda and this one Gertrude. What do you think, Leo?"

“I like those names. Everyone will call them Mattie and Trudy.”

“Yes, Mattie and Trudy.” Adelaide’s face shined with the ethereal love of motherhood as she smiled at Leo. And for a moment, his heart swelled. He could almost make believe that he was the father of these little babies. He had never thought he could love Adelaide any more than he did, but right now, his love had grown even stronger. He squeezed her hand and felt butterflies in his stomach. But then he looked into Adelaide’s eyes and saw the hurt and misery there, and for a moment, he hated his brother.

## CHAPTER 7



Since Leo had started dating Irmgard, he found he didn't need to go the brothels as often. They had a nice casual relationship. She didn't ask for much. She cooked him dinner once a week, and they had sex a couple of times a month. This was more than enough for Leo. Besides, he did not have much money now because after the babies had been born, he insisted on giving money to Adelaide so she could afford to quit her job at the bakery and stay at home with the children.

Despite Alex's faults, Leo still loved his brother. But when he saw how Alex behaved with Mia, it justified his right to love Adelaide. It also helped him to assuage his guilt at betraying Alex. Leo was already working two jobs, but one was a part-time position. However, he needed to earn two good salaries, so he found a second full-time job that provided him with a good salary. Now, he had enough money to go to the brothel at least once a month, but his reasons for going weren't the usual. He went to watch Alex. Most of the time, he didn't bother with the women, who hardly held much excitement for him. Leo went to assure himself that his brother was not worthy of Adelaide. And because of what he saw at the brothel, he was able to believe this. And because he did believe it, he allowed himself to love her without guilt.

Many evenings, when Leo returned to his apartment after an evening with Irmgard, Alex would still be out. Adelaide would be awake and waiting for him. When she heard Leo opening the door to his apartment next door, she would come out of her doorway to say 'hello.' Then, she would invite him



in for a coffee or a cup of tea. He knew she was feeling abandoned by his brother, but neither of them ever mentioned it. Instead, they talked about his date, and she constantly reassured him of how much Irmgard liked him.

“She’s a good girl. You could do worse in a wife,” Adelaide said.

“Yes, I know. But I am just not ready to get married.”

Adelaide shook her head. She filled a pot with water and put it on the stove for tea. “I have a few cookies that my old boss from the bakery brought over today. He came to see the babies. Can I offer you some?”

“No, thanks.” He smiled.

They sat in her kitchen and talked for hours. This happened often, and many nights, even though Leo had to be up for work in the morning, he was still visiting with Adelaide when Alex got home in the wee hours of the morning. Alex never worried about his wife’s friendship with his brother. If he suspected Leo had feelings for Adelaide, he never mentioned it and never seemed to care.

## CHAPTER 8



The following day, Leo went to see Irmgard after work. He hated to break up with her, but he knew he had to. He knew he would never love her and couldn't lead her on anymore. She opened the door and smiled when she saw him. "Leo, what brings you here?"

"I have to talk to you."

"Of course. Would you like something to eat?"

"No, no. That's really not necessary."

"How about a beer?" she asked.

"No, really, Irmgard." He cleared his throat. "I don't know how to say this."

"What's wrong, Leo?"

"I have to end things with us."

She looked at him and shook her head. "You are in love with Adelaide, aren't you?"

"Oh, Irmgard. I'm sorry."

She nodded, her eyes welling up with tears. "It's all right."

"How did you know?"

"I would have to be either blind or a fool not to know. It's a shame. I would have made you a good wife."

"I believe you would have," he said. Then he got up and walked out the door.

## CHAPTER 9



Leo had mixed feelings about Alex's affair with Mia. He hated that Alex was married to Adelaide, the girl of Leo's dreams, and that he was so taken with a Jewish prostitute. But, at the same time, he was glad that his brother was not in love with Adelaide because it was easier for Leo to feel less guilty about his love for her.

As Alex's relationship with Mia grew and intensified, he became even less discreet than he'd been in the beginning. Leo knew that Adelaide was aware of Alex's cheating, but he wasn't sure if she knew who he was sleeping with. But it didn't matter to Alex. He never seemed to care how he made those who loved him feel. He cared only for his own pleasure. And right now, he was obsessed with Mia. And Leo was sure it was because Mia was different. He had to admit to himself that Mia was beautiful, but in a way that was foreign and frightening to him. She was dark and mysterious. When Mia and Alex had begun seeing each other, she treated him like he meant nothing to her. Leo knew that this intrigued his brother. That was because women were never indifferent to Alex. But as time passed, Mia grew warmer. And at first, the more she began to value Alex's affection, the more he adored her. Alex even found a job so that he could pay the madam at the house enough money to ensure that he was Mia's only client. Leo realized that Mia had become Alex's mistress, and he was supporting her instead of his wife and children. Leo could have put a stop to it. He could have forced Alex to use the money he earned to support his wife, but he chose not to. He

was growing closer to Adelaide, and that meant everything to him. And so, things went on the way they had been.

One night, when Leo had not accompanied Alex to the brothel, something happened. Alex returned that night filled with anger. He knocked on the door to Leo's apartment and told him it was over between himself and Mia, and he vowed never to set eyes on Mia again. When Leo asked Alex what had happened, Alex confided in him. "She's gone and gotten herself pregnant. If she had said something earlier, she might have been able to terminate it, but she's six months pregnant now. I can't believe she's allowed this to happen. She promised me she couldn't have children. Now, she's going to have a baby. She claims it's mine. I don't believe it is."

"Didn't you make arrangements with the madam to be Mia's only customer?"

"Yes, but I can't be sure she didn't take on another man when I wasn't there. Damn it, Leo. How can I ever explain this to Adelaide? She will leave me."

For the first time, Leo realized that his brother did love Adelaide. He just had no idea of how to love. And he couldn't help having affairs with other women. It was his nature.

Although he was disappointed, Leo dared not tell Alex what he felt. All he could do was hope that Alex would change his mind and decide he wanted to be with Mia. Then, he would have to divorce Adelaide. *If they divorced, I would marry her in a second. I would adopt their daughters and raise them as my own.*

Alex gave up on Mia. But he grew sullen and melancholy. He went out as he had always done in the evenings, but now he didn't come home at night. He would sometimes stay away for days at a time. Leo had no idea where Alex went or who he was seeing. All he knew was that Adelaide was miserable. She had changed. She hardly ever laughed anymore. And it had been long since he last saw her dancing and singing as she hung the laundry out to dry.

## CHAPTER 10



JULY 1916

Leo sat at the kitchen table of his parents' apartment, wearing only his undershirt. He was sipping on a warm, dark beer and drumming his fingers on the top of the table. It was far too hot to sleep. He rubbed his eyes. His head was heavy and aching, and he wished he could get some rest. But whenever he tried to lie down, he found that the sheets were wet with sweat within minutes. *It's pointless to even try.* He laid his head on his hands on the table and closed his eyes for a moment. But he was disturbed by the sound of commotion in the hallway. Leo instantly thought of Adelaide, and he jumped up. *She could be in trouble. She might need me.* He rushed out the door of his apartment, still in his sleeveless undershirt, and ran into the hallway, where he saw a young girl pounding on the door of Alex and Adelaide's apartment. The girl was screaming, "Alex, come out right now. Alex, I know you're in there."

Adelaide opened the door just a crack. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"I need to see Alex right away. I know he lives here."

"Yes, he does." Adelaide said calmly, "I'm his wife. Who are you?"

Leo didn't know what all of this was about. But it seemed that Alex was in some kind of trouble, and Leo was concerned that Adelaide might get hurt. Before she could answer, Leo rushed over to the girl. And when he got closer, he thought he

recognized her as one of the young women he'd seen occasionally at the brothel.

"I'm..." But before the girl could answer.

"I'm Alex's brother," Leo said, cutting her off, putting his arm about the girl's shoulder in a fatherly way, and leading her away from Adelaide. Then he turned around and said, "Don't worry about this, Adelaide. I'll handle it."

"But who is she? What does she want?" Adelaide's voice was stressed.

"Don't worry. It's all right. She's confused. It's not Alex she needs to see. It's me. Why don't you go back into your apartment and take care of the children? I'll come and talk to you about this later."

Adelaide cocked her head. "I don't understand."

"I know. I'll explain as soon as she leaves. Now, please go inside and don't worry about anything."

Adelaide did as he asked. Then Leo took the girl outside. They stood in the courtyard of the building, and he looked down at her small, dark head and asked, "What is it? Who are you to my brother, and what do you want?"

"I'm not here for myself. I'm here for my sister. It's Mia." The girl was crying now.

"Mia?" At first, Leo was confused. "Mia from the whorehouse? She's your sister?"

The girl nodded. "Don't you recognize me?"

"Should I?"

"I'm Selma. I saw you at the house a few times with Alex."

"All right. So, what do you want?"

"Mia is having the baby. She's giving birth right now. It's Alex's baby. She needs him. She's doing very badly. I'm afraid she will die."

Leo ran his hands through his hair. “A baby? With a prostitute? I’m surprised Mia let herself get pregnant.” Leo did not want to admit that he already knew about the pregnancy because he felt he should have done more to help Mia. But when Alex told him that Mia was pregnant, he was annoyed. Leo was tired of fixing every mess Alex got himself into. And so he’d ignored the situation. At least until now, when this girl appeared at his doorstep, and he could no longer look the other way.

“Please, you must help me find Alex for her. Didn’t you hear me? I said I think my sister is dying.”

He stared at her wide-eyed now. “I never knew she had a sister. I thought she was all alone in the world.”

“No one knows. It’s bad enough that we’re Jewish and were down on our luck, so we ended up in a brothel. But the madam wanted us to keep the fact that we are sisters a secret. Right now, I don’t care about the madam. My sister needs help. She needs a doctor immediately, and there’s no money to pay for one. If she doesn’t get help soon, she won’t make it. I’m sure of it.”

“How do you know the baby belongs to Alex?”

“Because she has been his mistress exclusively for months now. I know she has been faithful to him. He has been growing less interested since she told him she was pregnant. He has stopped coming around. He can lie to himself all he wants. But deep down inside, he knows that the child is his. He has to.”

Leo was tired. He was exhausted, in fact. He’d worked all day, and the last thing he wanted to do was go to the bed of a dying woman. But Alex, as usual, was nowhere to be found. Leo sighed. *I can’t just let this woman die. Alex has caused some trouble again. And now she is giving birth to my brother’s child. I don’t know what I am going to do, but I have to go to the brothel, and even though I don’t really have money to spare, I can’t, with good conscience, let this woman die. So, I must dig into whatever cash I have and pay for a doctor.*

“Wait here,” he said to Selma, “I’m going to get my shirt, and then I will go with you back to the brothel.”

“But what about Alex? My sister is calling for Alex.”

“I don’t know where he is. I couldn’t find him if I tried. But, even so, you say she is dying, so we don’t have time to waste. On our way to the brothel, we will stop at the doctor’s office. Then we can bring him to the brothel with us.”

“But I don’t have the money to pay for a doctor. The madam at our house charges us to stay there and charges us for food and protection. Once we’ve paid for all of that, we don’t have much left. Maybe just enough for cigarettes. That’s why Mia didn’t get a midwife or a doctor on her own.”

“Yes, I know you don’t have the money. I am prepared to pay for it,” Leo said. “Now, wait here. I’m going to put on some clothes. I’ll be right back, and then we can be on our way.”

Leo’s father had slept through the chaos in the hallway, but his mother was awake. When he entered the apartment, she asked him what was going on.

“Nothing, Mother. Go back to sleep.”

“Is Alex all right?”

“Yes, he’s fine. This is my problem; I’ll take care of it.”

“But that girl asked for Alex.”

“Yes, she did. But she was actually looking for me. Just go back to sleep. I’ll return in a little while.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s all right, Mother. Please. Stop asking questions. I’ll explain everything in the morning.”

He slipped his shirt on. *There I go, protecting my wayward brother again.*

“But Leo, where is Alex?”

“I don’t know.” He was growing impatient with her questions. “I said I’ll explain when I return.”



Then he walked out of the apartment and closed the door. Adelaide was standing outside the door of her apartment. She was red-faced, and he could see she'd been crying. "It's all right, Adelaide. Go to bed. I'll take care of everything."

"What did Alex do?"

"He didn't do anything," he assured her gently. "Everything is all right. This is my problem. I'll take care of it. Please don't worry. Just go back inside the apartment and get some rest. You don't want to wake your daughters now, do you?" He smiled at her gently.

"Are you sure it will be all right?"

His heart swelled with love for her as he looked into her eyes. "I am sure," he said. "I promise you, I'll make it all right."

She nodded. Then she turned and entered her apartment, closing the door behind her.

## CHAPTER 11



**W**hen Leo and Selma arrived at the brothel with a young, idealistic doctor at their heels, Mia was already in a bad state. The white sheets that she lay upon were wet with blood. Her eyes were glassy and had a faraway look. She no longer cried out with pain, and Leo was certain that was a bad sign.

Leo paid the doctor even before he agreed to accompany them back to the brothel. When they arrived, the doctor went into Mia's room, followed by Selma and Leo. But the doctor insisted that they leave the room so he might examine the patient. Selma was weak with fear and sadness. "I'm going to lose my sister," she whispered to Leo. "I can feel it. The whole room smells of death."

"Shhh, not necessarily. You shouldn't say such things. The doctor is here now. He is taking care of her."

"Mia and I came here together from Russia. She is all the family I have. We didn't want to come to work at a brothel. We came from a good family. But we had no other way to survive. If we didn't do this, we would have died of starvation. Our parents are dead. They were murdered by the White Russians because we are Jewish. You can't imagine the horrors we went through together. I can't let her go. I can't."

Leo soothed the young woman to the best of his ability. But he couldn't lie and say he thought that Mia was going to live. He had seen the amount of blood that had soaked the sheets of her bed and knew that there was a strong possibility she would die and the unborn baby along with her.

Two hours passed before the sound of the hearty cry of a child filled the hallway. A few minutes later, the doctor came out of Mia's room. His hands were stained with blood, and the look on his face was wretched. He turned to Leo and said, "You have a daughter, sir." But then the doctor looked down at the ground. He cleared his throat and continued, "I did everything I could. And I am sorry. But the young woman didn't make it."

Selma gasped. "My sister is dead," she said in a voice barely above a whisper. Tears fell down her cheeks.

Leo put his arms around the girl, and she wept in his arms for a few minutes.

"I'm so sorry about your sister."

"I wish I had died instead. I can't go on without her."

"You must. You have a beautiful niece," Leo said as gently as he could. "She will need you."

"I can't take care of a baby. And this house of ill repute is no place for a child," Selma said. "I don't want her. I don't even want to look at her. I'll have the madam send her to an orphanage in the morning." She broke away from Leo. Then she turned and left the room.

The doctor had gone back into the room. He returned, holding a tiny bundle wrapped in a white, blood-stained blanket. When he saw Selma was no longer there, he put the baby in Leo's arms. Leo's hands were shaking as he looked down into the tiny face. Even though the child was just born, Leo thought she already resembled Alex. She had Alex's light hair and bright and sparkling blue eyes. He looked at her tiny fists and at her tiny ears, and something came over him. *I can't put this helpless baby into an orphanage. I just can't. Everyone knows that life in an orphanage is hell for a child. But how can I raise her? I can't stay at home and care for a baby. I am the provider for everyone in my family. I must go to work. My mother is old, she can't do it, either.* Then he thought of Adelaide. He'd recently insisted that she quit her job so that she could take care of her own two children. *I would do anything for Adelaide. She is such a good mother. She loves*

*children. I must be crazy, but I wonder. I just wonder. And... I would do anything for Alex, my crazy, wayward brother, who I still love no matter what he does.* He shook his head. Then he looked down at the baby, and a tremendous wave of pity came over him.

Leo held the infant for a moment. The doctor and Selma were gone. He walked into the room where Mia died and stood alone beside the dead body of the beautiful young woman. But no one in the brothel other than himself seemed to care. No one even seemed to be paying any attention to the newborn. Everything at the brothel was going on as usual. No one knew or cared that a young woman had just died there. The piano player continued to play gay tunes. The prostitutes wandered through the main room, half undressed, drinking and flirting with the male guests. The sweet, pungent smell of cigar smoke filled the air. All of this went on as usual. No one even took notice of the little room at the top of the stairs where the body lay. No one seemed to hear the whimpers of the infant in Leo's arms. *If I leave this child here and no one tends to her, she'll be dead by morning.* He shook his head. He couldn't do that. So, he carried the tiny bundle out the door without anyone even asking what he was doing. Then, he brought the baby back to his apartment building. Leo climbed the stairs, carrying the small bundle carefully. But then he realized he didn't even have a bottle to feed her. Leo would have to wait until morning to do something about feeding the baby. Although he had no idea what to feed her. *Milk? Do I just give her milk?* Then, as he walked past Adelaide's apartment, her door opened, and she slipped out into the hall.

"It's so late. Where have you been? I was waiting for you. I was worried." She whispered so as not to wake the neighbors. Then she glanced down at the baby in his arms. "Leo? What happened? Whose child is that?"

He looked into her eyes and knew he must tread carefully because he didn't want to hurt her. He couldn't bear to tell her that her husband had fathered a child by another woman. So, he lied. "She's mine." He cleared his throat. "Her mother is dead; she was a prostitute."

“You were seeing a prostitute, Leo?” she looked at him and cocked her head.

He wasn't sure she believed that the child belonged to him. From the look on her face, he was not sure that she didn't know the truth about the baby belonging to Alex. However, he knew how much she loved his brother, so he assumed she wanted to believe. For a moment, she studied him skeptically, but she said nothing more. Instead, she just moved the blanket away from the baby's face.

“Oh, she's so pretty,” Adelaide said. The sweet maternal gentleness shone like a light in her eyes. “Can I hold her?”

“Of course. Why don't we go inside your apartment so we don't wake the whole building? By the way, is Alex home yet?”

“No, he's not. Sometimes he stays out for a couple of days at a time,” she said, and he bristled at the sadness he heard in her voice.

He didn't say anything else about Alex. There was nothing to say.

Adelaide opened the door, and they walked inside the apartment. As soon as Adelaide locked the door, he handed the tiny bundle to her. She sat down and cuddled the child. “What are you going to do with her?” she asked him.

“I don't know. I have to go to work, and I can't take care of her. But I was afraid that she would die if I left her at the brothel. No one was even paying any attention to her. However, I think they planned to send her to an orphanage in the morning. I didn't know what to do...”

“It's all right. Let me give her some water.” She stood up and handed the infant to Leo. He held the infant while Adelaide took an empty glass baby bottle out of the pantry and filled it with water. Next, she filled a pan with water and set it on the stove to boil. Once it came to a rapid boil, she placed the bottle in the water for a couple of minutes, removing it and squirting some of the water onto her wrist to test the temperature. Then Adelaide took the infant from Leo and sat

down. She put the nipple of the bottle into the baby's mouth. At first, the child's mouth hung open as if she didn't know what to do. But Adelaide gently massed her cheek until she began to suck greedily.

"That's only water. She will need nourishment. What does she eat? What would be better for her, goat's milk or cow's milk? I can go to the store and buy whatever you need on my way home from work tomorrow," Leo said.

"That's not necessary." Adelaide blushed. "I am still nursing my girls. I have milk. I will feed her when she and I are alone."

"I understand. Of course, I understand," he said, blushing too. Then, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the window. He looked happy in this domestic setting, with Adelaide by his side, holding the infant in her arms. *I am a handsome man, perhaps not as handsome as my brother. But I am tall and well-built.* His brown hair was thick and wavy, and his brown eyes were soft and sincere. *It's such a shame my brother is so good-looking. If he had been less good-looking, I might have had a chance. But as it stands, it's no wonder she chose him. I wonder if she is ever sorry. I wonder if she ever wishes she had chosen me instead. What a silly thing to wonder about. It doesn't matter now. She's married to Alex...*

Adelaide was studying him. He turned to look into her eyes, and she said, "It would be different if you had a wife to help you with a child." Then she shook her head. "That's not really true. I mean, well, actually, it might be worse. But as it stands, I suppose I could help you out. After all, you have been kind enough to pay our bills so that I could take off work to care for my own babies. And since I am at home with my own girls all day, I could take this little one and raise her until she is old enough to move in with you. And because you live right next door, you could come and see her all the time. I don't know how Alex will feel about all of this, but what do you think?"

"I think that's very kind of you," he said. He didn't care what Alex thought. After all, Alex had caused the problem. And he'd covered for Alex again. Besides that, Leo knew this

was the only solution. In fact, he suddenly realized that he had been hoping for this when he took the child. Leo wished he hadn't had to lie to Adelaide, telling her that he'd been seeing a prostitute. He was ashamed to have her think he spent his time at brothels. But he was a single man, and she didn't mention it again.

After the baby finished drinking half the bottle of water, she fell asleep. Adelaide lay the baby on the sofa. "Keep an eye on her. I am going to take everything out of one of my dresser drawers so I can make a baby bed for her."

Leo nodded. Then he sat on the sofa next to the baby and watched her sleep.

A few minutes later, Adelaide returned and took the child in her arms. "I'm going to put her to bed," she said. Then I'll put a pot of water on the stove for coffee. "It's too late for you to try to get any sleep. It's almost time for you to go to work."

"I know."

"You poor dear, you haven't slept all night. I hope the coffee will help you stay awake at work today. I'll prepare some breakfast for you as well. Would that be all right?"

"I would greatly appreciate it."

He watched her as she prepared his food, and once again, he thought of how wonderful life would be if she had been his wife instead of his brother's. After the food was done, she sat down beside him as he ate. "We should give her a name," she said softly.

"Yes, I haven't even thought about it. Do you have any ideas?"

"I like the name 'Margot,'" she said.

"I do, too," he smiled. And somehow, he was sure she knew deep inside that the child was not his. However, she did not resent the baby at all. One of the things Leo loved about Adelaide was that she was so tender-hearted that he thought he already saw the love in her eyes when she looked at the infant. And he knew she chose to believe the story just as he'd told it to her.

## CHAPTER 12



Leo didn't see Alex until the following evening when he returned home from work. As Leo walked towards the apartment building, he noticed Alex sitting on the stoop outside, waiting for him. At first, he was going to tell Alex the truth about the baby. But as he watched his wayward brother sipping on a beer bottle and smoking a cigarette, he decided to tell him the same story he'd told Adelaide. It would be better for the child if she grew up believing that he, Leo, was her father and not Alex.

"Want a swig?" Alex offered Leo the bottle. Leo took it from him and took a swig of the warm beer. Then he sat down on the stoop beside his brother. "What the hell happened last night?" Alex asked. "I got home today, and Adelaide said you brought her this baby? What the heck is going on, Leo?"

"One of the gals I have been seeing had a baby."

"Are you sure it's yours?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Leo lied. He couldn't believe that his brother was so dumb. *How does he not know that this child is his by Mia? He must not realize it because he has too many women to keep track of.*

"And Adelaide agreed to care for the child for you?"

"Exactly."

"Well," Alex sighed, "It doesn't bother me. As long as she's not a screamer. I hate when the babies cry all night."



*Idiot.* Leo thought. *He has no idea.* “How was she last night?”

“I’m not sure. I didn’t get home until this afternoon. But Addy didn’t complain.”

Leo nodded. “Last time I checked, you were working at the textile factory. So, How’s your job?”

“I lost this last one,” Alex said. “I’m out looking again.”

“Your wife could use your help, financial and otherwise.”

“I’m sure she could. She expects too much of me. Oh, Leo,” he sighed. “I had no idea how much responsibility marriage was, or I would never have gotten married. You don’t know how lucky you are to be single.”

“So, why did you get married?” Leo asked. There were so many things he wanted to say, but he controlled himself because he didn’t want any of it to ever get back to Adelaide. But Leo would have liked to tell Alex that because Alex was such a ne’er-do-well, he, Leo, had been forced to take on the financial responsibility of Alex’s wife and children. Leo would have liked to let out all his anger and tell his brother how he was carrying all the burdens while Alex had all the pleasures. However, Leo just glared at Alex, and he said nothing.

“The truth?”

“Of course.”

“Adelaide was so pretty, and I wanted to bed her, but she refused to sleep with me. I knew she wasn’t the kind of girl to go to bed with a man who wasn’t her husband. She wouldn’t even let me touch her until I made it legal. So, I married her.”

“Alex, you’re a good-for-nothing louse,” Leo said. “Marriage is forever. Getting married should have meant a lot more to you than a way to conquer someone you wanted to bed.”

“Yes, you’re probably right. Actually, Leo, you should have married Adelaide. You two are so much alike.”

Leo’s throat closed with emotion. He was unable to speak. So, he stood up and began walking up the stairs to the

building.

“Hey, where are you going? We were in the middle of a conversation,” Alex asked. “I didn’t make you mad, did I?”

“No, I’m just tired,” Leo managed to say. Then he went inside and slowly climbed up the stairs to his apartment.

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SINCE ALEX WAS ALMOST NEVER HOME, Leo took over the role of surrogate father for all three girls. On Sundays, when Leo was not at work, he and Adelaide took the children out in carriages. They sometimes stopped for coffee and a pastry while the babies slept. Sometimes, they sat in the park. They talked for hours, and sometimes Leo felt certain he could see the love in Adelaide’s eyes when she looked at him.

But then, one afternoon, when Leo returned from work, he found a letter in his mailbox. His hands trembled as he opened it. Leo had hoped this letter would never come, but he knew it would and had been expecting it for a while. He read the letter silently to himself. It said that he was being called to serve his country. He was being conscripted into the army. Germany was at war, and most of his friends had volunteered several years ago. He would have done so as well, even though he hated war. But he believed it was the right thing to do. However, if he had gone to war, there would be no one to support his old, sickly parents, Adelaide, and the children who needed him, too. This was not his choice, but he was now forced to go. And now, somehow, he would have to convince Alex how important it was that Alex grow up and take on the responsibility of supporting the family. Responsibilities that he was being forced to leave behind. The paper felt like it was on fire. It burned in his hand. If only he could just tear it up and pretend it had never arrived. Leo didn’t want to go to war. Unlike many of his peers, who had been excited to prove themselves to be heroes, he knew there was no glory in it, only misery and death. Not only this, he had finally found some form of happiness in the domestic situation he shared with

Adelaide. It wasn't perfect, but it was as good as he could make it, and now he would have to leave.

The letter made it clear that Leo was expected to report for duty on the following Monday. So, that evening, he planned to speak with Alex. He must somehow make sure that Alex knew how important it was that he did not let everyone down. He must be made aware that their parents, his wife, and the three children were all dependent on him. And if anyone knew how undependable Alex could be, it was Leo.

After a quick dinner at home, Leo walked down the hall and knocked on Alex's and Adelaide's apartment door. The table was still cluttered with dishes. She was trying to clean up as the babies played on a blanket on the floor. "Leo," she said with a big smile. Adelaide was happy to see him. She always was.

"Is Alex at home?" he asked.

"He's in the bedroom. Let me get him for you."

"First, let me help you clear the table," Leo offered.

She smiled warmly and looked at him with those blue eyes that always melted his heart. "That would be so kind. I have my hands full with these three lovely little ones. But I wouldn't trade it for the world."

He wished he could hug her and plant a soft kiss on her lips. But of course, he couldn't. So, he just nodded and smiled, then began picking up dishes and carrying them to the sink.

"I heard your voice," Alex said to his brother as he walked out of the bedroom in a white sleeveless undershirt and a pair of brown trousers. "Sit down. I've got a little *schnaps*. Do you want a glass?"

"Sure, but let me help your wife first." Leo shot a look of disgust at his brother, but only for a second. Then he turned away. He knew he must not anger Alex in any way, not tonight. Tonight, he needed to talk to Alex. *Alex should be helping her. But then, of course, Alex never does anything for anyone other than himself. How am I going to make him*

*understand how important his role as the man of the house is about to become?*

After clearing the table, Adelaide washed the dishes while Leo dried them. Once they'd finished, Leo walked over to Alex, who sat on the only thick and well-made easy chair in the apartment. Then Leo said, "Let's go outside so we can talk."

"Should I bring the bottle?"

"Sure."

They walked outside. It was a balmy night. It was not as hot as it had been the last couple of days, and Leo was glad for the relief from the heat. They sat down on a bench in the courtyard of the building. Alex took a swig and then handed the bottle to Leo. He took a swig, too, and then, in a serious voice, he began to speak, "I've been drafted into the army. I received the letter today. I'm to report for duty on Monday."

"What?"

"Yes, you know that they passed that law recently, and now, because I am single, I am required to serve."

"But we both did our two years of training service. I don't know why they are calling you up now."

"Because, in case you didn't realize it, Germany is at war, and our country needs its men to fight." Even as he said these words, Leo felt a chill run through him.

Alex took a longer swig from the bottle. "You'll be a hero, I guess." His voice was wistful.

"If I survive," Leo said ruefully. "But that's not why I came to speak to you tonight. I don't want your pity."

"No, I'm sure you don't. I know why you came; you came to brag because you are single and free, and I am burdened with a wife and children, one of which belongs to you," he said a little bitterly. "I am stuck here at home while you will earn respect. You'll wear a fancy uniform with badges and metals."

“Don’t be an idiot. Listen to me. It’s no pleasure to fight in the army. I could die.”

“Yes, but you won’t. I’m sure you will come home as a war hero. When you return, everyone at the tavern will buy you drinks and sing your praises. And me? I will be stuck here. I’ll just be a nobody. My life will be a bore.”

“Boring or not, I have to depend on you. You are the only one capable of providing for the family. So, you’re going to have to get a job.”

“Pa is still working.”

“He’s old, and he’s growing feeble. He hardly earns enough to make any difference. Besides, I am sure that soon they will let him go. You must see that this is true. I’m sure you do. I need you to promise me that you will find a job and take care of Ma, Pa, Adelaide, and the little girls while I’m gone.” *This is not going well. My brother is such a fool. He’s jealous of the fact that I am going to war. I can’t trust him to do what must be done. Yet, I have no choice. He is the only person who can take care of things. I must put my faith in him.*

“I suppose, if I must work, then I will,” Alex said, but he was obviously put off by the idea.

“Just do it for a while. Please. When I return, I will take over again. All you need to do is handle things while I am gone. I know you are capable. I know you can do this for me.”

Alex shrugged. “Sure. I suppose I can.”

“Well, good. Then I can count on you?”

“Yeah, why not.”

## CHAPTER 13



Leo tried to reassure himself that Alex would keep his word. But when he returned from work the following day, Alex ran up to him with a paper in his hand. “Look,” he said, “You’re not the only one who is going to be a hero. I’m going to war too. I’ve enlisted.”

“You did what?” Leo shook his head. He wanted to punch his brother in the face. It took everything he had to restrain himself. “Why the hell would you do this? The family needs you. I need you.”

“I told you, I want the opportunity to be a hero, to show everyone in town what I am made of. Why should you be the only one?”

“If I had known you planned to do such a stupid thing, I would have sent you to serve in my place. You stupid fool.”

“I’m no fool, Leo. I don’t want to serve in your place. I want to make a name for myself. I want people to respect me, not you. Everyone has always thought that you were so much better than me.”

Leo was exhausted and defeated. He wanted to punch Alex in the stomach to knock the wind out of him. But instead, he just shook his head and walked away from his brother.

## CHAPTER 14



Leo and Alex's parents, Tilda and Edmon, were only in their late fifties. Still, a life of hard work and disappointment had left them both looking and feeling far older. They had met and married late in life. This was a second marriage for Edmon, whose first wife, Marie, had died of a food-borne illness after only a few months of marriage. Marie had been the love of Edmon's life. Even now, when he spoke of her, he spoke with such longing that his current wife, Tilda, couldn't bear to listen to him. In his youth, Edmon had been a handsome devil of a man, much like Alex, who resembled him with his blonde hair and azure-colored eyes. So, when he was widowed and met Tilda, the plain daughter of a shoemaker, on a hot day in early August, she'd been shy but impressed by his looks. Then, when he flirted openly with her, she was bowled over by his attention. Tilda had been working at her father's store when Edmon entered. He needed to have a pair of boots reheel. He'd smiled at Tilda and winked. "Your daughter is quite lovely."

Tilda blushed. Her father ignored the comment and shook his head as he studied the boots the customer had brought in to be fixed.

"I need them as soon as possible," Edmon said.

"I will do what I can. But I have a few other customers who brought orders in before you. I need to do them first. But I can have your boots ready by this Friday," Tilda's father said.

"Friday is too long. I don't have another pair and must go to work."

“You’re wearing shoes now.”

“Yes, but I work in a factory with heavy machines. I need the boots to protect my feet.”

“I’ll do what I can. But I can’t promise,” Tilda’s father said. “Do you want to leave them here or not?”

There was no other shoemaker in the area, and Edmon could not afford a new pair of boots, so he nodded. “I have no choice.” Then he walked out of the shop.

It was a brave move for Tilda to run out after a man, but something inside of her told her she must. She smoothed her brown hair down and raced out of the store. “Where are you going?” her father asked, but she didn’t bother to answer. Tilda was twenty-two, almost an old maid, and this was a handsome young man. He’d shown her some interest. She had to speak to him, charm him somehow. Even though she’d never been one to know how to be charming. He was halfway down the street before she caught up with him, breathless. “Don’t worry, I’ll have your boots ready for you this afternoon,” she blurted out.

He turned and looked at her for a moment. Her frizzy brown hair had escaped the severe twist at the back of her neck. Her eyes were the color of golden-brown whiskey. She wasn’t as beautiful as his dead wife, but she was attractive in an impish sort of way. Edmon smiled his most appealing smile. “I certainly would appreciate that. I really need those boots.”

“Of course. I understand. Can you come back to the store at around five this afternoon?”

“I’ll be here.”

She turned around and ran back to the shop.

“What happened to you?” her father asked.

“I am going to work on these boots right now,” she said.

“But there are other customers whose jobs must be done first. We don’t pick favorites.”

“I don’t care,” she said. “I am going to do it this time.”



Her father laughed. “Well,” he said, adding, “All right. But hurry up. We are getting behind.” With money being tight for everyone, it was almost impossible to purchase new shoes, so the shoemaker business was thriving.

## CHAPTER 15



**B**y the time Edmon returned that afternoon, his boots were fixed, and Tilda had washed her face and had combed and restyled her hair. She smiled at him when he entered the store. “Your boots are ready.”

“That’s what happens when you’re a very handsome man. Women look at you and put you first. My daughter certainly did,” her father said slyly. Tilda whipped around to give her father a look of pure anger. But he just laughed.

*Oh, Pa, why are you so damn crude? Keep your mouth shut, please. This is hard enough for me. I like this man...* She smiled, and her lips trembled. “I’m sorry. Please excuse my father. Here are your boots.”

“I’m flattered. And...” Edmon hesitated for a moment. “Actually, I’m quite grateful.”

She smiled.

“In fact, I am so grateful that I would like to buy you a beer to show my appreciation.”

“Oh,” she gasped. This was exactly what she’d been hoping for.

“Will you have a beer with me?”

“Yes, I’d love to.”

And that was how it began. They dated for a short time and were married only three months later. It was a small church ceremony with only their families and very close friends attending.

Edmon was not a good provider, so Tilda continued to work for her father even after her children were born. She brought her babies with her to the shop until they were old enough to go to school. She and her father had worked together for so many years that they had an understanding between them. They didn't need to talk all day. Even in silence, they shared a comradery that Tilda never found with her husband. She worked day and night beside her father until he passed away. Then, she continued her work at the shoemaker shop alone for several years. Sometimes, she felt as if her father were still there beside her. But then she glanced over to his bench and saw it was empty. Tears filled her eyes. But she had no one to talk to about her grief. So, she threw herself into her work. She worked hard and even made shoes, belts, and handbags for wealthy clients.

The shop was very busy, and she needed help, so she tried to teach the business to Edmon, but he had no interest in learning. He was very much like his son, Alex, would be. He only worked occasionally, drank heavily, and was irresponsible. The only difference between Edmon and Alex was that Edmon was faithful to his wife. And Tilda knew that Edmon truly loved her in his own way. Not in the fiery, passionate way that he loved his first wife. But in a quiet and simple way. He was dependent upon her, but it was more than just financial. She was his best friend.

Then something terrible happened. When Tilda was in her late thirties, she became very sick. It was a breathing disease that made it difficult for her to take a deep breath. She began to cough up mucus, and then she began to cough up blood. The doctor told her that she must stop using the chemicals that were used to tan leather at the store. But she couldn't stop. This business was all she knew, and it supported her family. Edmon tried to find work, but he failed miserably. She knew he wanted to change, but it seemed impossible for him. Her condition worsened until it was so bad that she was forced to consider selling the business. By then, Leo, her oldest son, was old enough to take over the financial support of the family. He wanted to learn the leather trade. But his mother was afraid that he would become sick with the same disease she had, and

she couldn't allow him to ruin his lungs. So, Leo found a job at a factory, and his mother sold her store. From then on, the Schrodgers struggled financially.

Even though Tilda had suffered a loss and was still suffering from an illness, she was a happy-go-lucky kind of woman. And she liked Adelaide from the first time they met. Adelaide was kind and always respectful. And although Tilda loved her son, Alex, she knew him well, and because of this, she felt sorry for Adelaide. She knew how much Alex was like his father and how hard it was to be married to a man who was irresponsible. Tilda watched in silence because there was nothing she could do to help the situation as Adelaide followed in Tilda's path.

*A mother knows her own children better than anyone else in the world. Although she might not share their truths with anyone, she can see and feel her children's deepest fears and most pressing longings.* Therefore, from the day Tilda first laid eyes on Adelaide and saw how her sons interacted with the girl, Tilda knew that Leo was secretly in love with Adelaide. She could see it in his eyes when he looked at her. And although she hurt for Leo because his love was not returned, at least not in the same way, she knew why Adelaide had chosen Alex. It was the same reason she had been smitten with Edmon. Leo was very much like his mother, hardworking and kind, but his mother always had a soft spot for Alex. Even when Alex was a small boy, he had a way of looking at Tilda that melted her heart. She would have done anything for him; now, Adelaide had fallen under that very same spell.

At the train station, as Leo and Alex were about to board the train that would carry them off to war and an uncertain future, Leo watched Adelaide. She was trembling as she kissed Alex. There was a look of despair on her face as she hung on to the sleeve of his new fancy pressed uniform. Leo stood alone. He had to fight off the jealousy in his heart, which manifested as anger towards his brother. He still could not understand why Alex enlisted when he could have stayed home with his family. But there was no understanding Alex. He wasn't logical. In a moment of passion and stupid jealousy,

he'd decided that he was going to become a war hero. And this, Leo knew, was going to be a terrible mistake.

The train whistle blew. Edmon stood beside Tilda. The three little girls huddled together in their pram. Edmon put his arm under Tilda's, steadying her. But her face grew pale as the newly conscripted soldiers began to board. On the platform, wives and mothers wept, and fathers shook their sons' hands. And Alex smiled at Adelaide. He was lost in the romance of it all as he said in a dramatic voice, "Goodbye, my darling." Then he turned and kissed his mother, who had tears in her eyes. "I'll return," he said.

Leo scoffed. He was annoyed. It was as if Alex was playing at being a soldier and a hero. Disgusted, Leo turned away from his brother and said to his mother, "Now, don't forget... in the top drawer of my dresser, there is a small pouch with some money inside. Use it for emergencies. But don't worry because I will send my pay home for you, Pa, Adelaide, and the children."

"Leo, you have always been such a good boy. Please be careful," his mother said as she hugged him tightly.

"I will, Mother. I will."

"And you." His mother grabbed Alex. "Don't do anything foolish? Do you understand me?"

"Of course I won't, Mother." Alex smiled and winked over her head at Leo, who turned away.

Then, both boys shook hands with their father, who stood quietly watching them and looking uncomfortable.

The whistle sounded again. Last call to board. Alex swung his suitcase up the stairs and climbed onto the train, with Leo behind him.

## CHAPTER 16



**W**hen they returned home, Tilda asked Adelaide to bring the babies and come over for a cup of coffee. Adelaide accepted. In the state she was in, she was relieved not to be alone with her thoughts. Tilda put a pot of water to boil while Adelaide laid a blanket on the floor. She put the few toys the children owned on the blanket, then sat the two older ones down and laid Margot beside them. All three girls were tired, and although the two older ones played with their toys for a few minutes, within a half hour, all three of them were asleep.

After Tilda poured two cups of steaming coffee, she sat across from Adelaide. They sipped the coffee for a few minutes, then Tilda said, “I was thinking...” She hesitated for a moment, “...I was thinking.”

“Yes, mother?” Adelaide said gently, “What is it?”

“Well, of course, you can say no. But I was thinking, why should we pay rent for two apartments? You and the girls could move in here with Pa and me.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to impose on the two of you.”

“Listen. It would be good for us, too. We are getting older, and if we should need help with something. Well, you would be here...”

“I would be here for you. Of course, I would.”

“And it would cut down on our expenses. With Leo gone, we have the room. And if you want to get a job, you can. I would watch the children all day. I see that a lot of the girls

whose husbands have been conscripted are getting jobs at the factories. The factories need the girls because all the men are gone to war.”

Adelaide considered this for a moment. *It might be nice to get out of the house sometimes. To make friends, to earn money. I used to enjoy working at the bakery. But I think I would prefer to work at one of the factories, especially now that the factories are hiring women to take the jobs men used to do. The pay would certainly be better. And I could make friends.* “Yes, I think I would like that,” Adelaide agreed.

The following day, Adelaide and the three little girls moved in with Tilda and Edmon. A few days later, Adelaide got up early, dressed in her best black skirt and a white blouse, and went out to look for a job. It didn’t take long. Within a few hours, she found employment at *Deutsche Waffen- und Munitionsfabriken*, a munitions factory. After she left her interview, she felt good. Not only would she be earning some money for the family, but she was also going to be helping in the war effort. Adelaide felt that every shell she helped to make would somehow be instrumental in ending the war more quickly so that the men she cared for would return home before they got hurt... or worse.

At first, getting used to working at a factory job was very difficult for Adelaide. The hours were long, and she was learning to operate a dangerous machine, so she had to be alert even though she was very tired. But each evening, after she finished her shift, she returned home to find that Tilda had done all the food shopping. Adelaide’s dinner was hot and on the table, and the girls were bathed and had already been fed.

Within a month, Adelaide began to feel confident that she had mastered the machine she was assigned to work on. The factory was large, and many women were employed there. But it was hot in the rooms, and when she worked, Adelaide was covered in sweat, not only from the heat but from the constant stress of working with dangerous equipment. Even so, she felt that it was good to be earning extra money.

True to his promise, Leo sent whatever money he could in every letter he wrote to her.

Then, one hot and muggy Wednesday afternoon, there was an accident at the factory. One of the girls was sucked into a machine. Her body was mangled. When Adelaide saw the girl, who was now just a mass of blood and bones, unrecognizable, Adelaide let out an involuntary scream. *That could have been me.* She thought. *And it still could. Every day I am here, I am in danger.*

That night, when Adelaide returned home, she told Tilda what had happened to the girl at work. “It was horrible. So, horrible.” Adelaide shook as she explained.

“Yes, I am sure it was. We must do something. This job is far too dangerous for you to continue. I have to find a way to help you. To get you out of there if I can.”

“I know you mean well, mother. But how can you help?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know yet. But I will find a way,” Tilda said, shaking her head.

After Adelaide told Tilda about the accident, Tilda was so worried about Adelaide working at the munitions factory that she couldn’t sleep at night. Until Adelaide relayed the story to her about the young woman who had been shredded and killed at the factory, Tilda had not realized just how dangerous this job was. “I don’t like you working at the factory. I wish you could go back to the bakery,” Tilda said. “It was safer.”

“Yes, it was. But it had its own dangers. Still, I know how you feel, and I agree with you. I’ve already tried to get my old job back, but the baker has already hired someone else to fill my position. I can’t expect him to let this girl go just because I am now available. He says she is doing a good job and is happy with her. Anyway, don’t worry too much.” Adelaide tapped Tilda’s forearm. “Once the war ends and the boys come home, I will quit again and stay home with the children.”

Tilda couldn’t say anything. So, she just shook her head. She wished they could afford for Adelaide to quit her job at the factory and stay at home, but she knew that they could not. Although Leo sent money home, they couldn’t depend upon it. So, Tilda decided she would do what she could to help Adelaide find a safer job.



When Tilda went to the market daily to buy food, she began socializing. She would speak to everyone, asking if anyone had heard of a job opening. Most of the people she talked to suggested the munitions factories, giving her the names of the ones in town that were hiring. Tilda thanked them. But of course, Adelaide already had a job at a munitions factory, and she wanted to find her something else, something safer. Then, one afternoon, Tilda was buying flour from a vendor who had become flirtatious with her after his wife died the previous year. He was an old man, far older than she was. She knew nothing would come of it and didn't want it to. But, because she'd always been considered plain, she was flattered by his attentions. As he poured the flour into a cloth sack, he asked, "I remember you said something last week about your daughter-in-law looking for work? Am I right?"

"Yes, you're quite right. I did. Are you hiring, Herr Schmidt?" she asked him.

"Unfortunately, no. With all the men gone off to war, there is less business, and because I am not earning as much, I am afraid I don't need any help. I can hardly earn enough to support my own family. However, my son's wife just got a job working for the telephone company *Deutsche Reichspost*. It's not as dangerous as working in a munitions factory."

"The postal company?"

"Yes, they are currently training girls to work on something they call a switchboard. My daughter-in-law says it's hard to learn. But even though it might be difficult, I've met Adelaide, and she's a smart girl. I think she can learn it."

"Yes, she is. Thank you for the information, Herr Schmidt. You've been so helpful. I'll talk to her tonight."

He beamed.

## CHAPTER 17



Leo wrote to Adelaide as often as he could. He wrote to his parents too. They each received a letter from him every couple of weeks. Adelaide read his letters eagerly. She devoured every word. And he always promised that both he and Alex were doing fine. He always told her everything was all right and they were not in danger. Leo never mentioned a battle or the horrors he'd witnessed on the battlefield. Instead, he told her funny stories about the other men in his platoon. Or he told her how much he'd missed her cooking and how he'd been forced to get used to the food in the army. "It's much like what you might feed a dog," he wrote, and she smiled as she read it. "Nothing at all like your wonderful cooking. As soon as I return home, I want you to promise you will make us some *sauerbraten*. And some *schnitzel*. Oh yes, and your wonderful potato salad. Did you know that Alex and I talk about your *sauerbraten* all the time? Of course, you couldn't know that. But you know now because I am telling you," he wrote. Then he continued, "I have no doubt you are the best cook in all of Germany. And you have spoiled us."

Alex never wrote a single letter home.

## CHAPTER 18



**M**ost of what Leo wrote in his letters to Adelaide was light and funny and also not true. He had been subjected to plenty of battles and witnessed the horrors of bloodshed. He'd dragged dying men out of trenches, pleading for help. He'd watched friends die in his arms. And afterward, he had returned to the front to fight again, his hands covered in blood. If he could have his way, he would return home immediately, and there would never be another war. But he was tied to his platoon and at the mercy of God.

Alex was a member of the same troop as Leo. This was both good and bad for Leo. It gave him the opportunity to watch over his brother, but at the same time, watching over Alex was distracting. And because of Alex, Leo had come very close to mortal danger several times.

Once, during a surprise attack on his unit when they were in France, Leo rushed and pulled his brother Alex into a trench as the sky rained with bullets. Leo's heart raced with fear. Another friend of Alex's followed them. The three of them lay on their bellies in the trench and watched as the shells exploded all around them.

Since the day Leo entered the army, he'd heard the more experienced men talk about mustard gas. But until that day in France, he had not had any experience with it. This was the first time he had seen its effects first-hand.

Leo and his brother were still huddled in the trench as, all around them, the roar of the blasts was deafening. The sound was frightening but not nearly as horrifying as the results of

the release of the mustard gas. Leo watched in shock as men who had not been wearing their gas masks staggered away from the blasts, coughing, choking, their noses bleeding, the skin on their faces scorched and blistered. He shivered and put on his mask quickly. Then he helped Alex to put on his.

Just then, an enemy soldier, a young and handsome Frenchman seeking a hiding place, jumped into the trench. Alex let out a scream, which alerted Leo. Leo turned to see Alex's friend, who was still in the trench with them, standing over the enemy with a gun pointed at the Frenchman's head. The enemy soldier seemed able to tell that the soldier who had him at gunpoint was not able to shoot. He stared into the German's eyes, raised his gun, and was just about to shoot. But before he could, Leo shot him in the face. Alex turned and looked at his brother wide-eyed. "You killed him," he said, as if he was surprised.

Leo nodded. He looked at the dead young man who lay faceless on the ground and trembled. He'd killed before, but never at such a close range. The noise of the explosions around him suddenly went silent as he retreated into his mind. *I saw this man alive just a moment ago. And then I killed him. And now he's dead. I saw his face, his eyes. He is dead, and it was by my hand. I had no choice but to kill him, or he would have killed us. But now that I remember his eyes, I wonder who he was. And I am suddenly afraid. I don't know what I am afraid of. I've removed the moral danger by killing him. Yet I am frightened of something bigger. Something omnipresent. It's much easier to kill from a distance. Now, I feel like a murderer.* That was when he vomited.

## CHAPTER 19



Leo wasn't lying when he told Adelaide that the food was terrible and that he missed her cooking. But he missed so much more than that. And sometimes, when he tried to sleep at night, he lay on the ground looking up at the stars and wishing he had the courage to tell Adelaide his feelings. This haunted him. *If only I could tell her I love her just in case I die in battle. I would hate to go to my grave without her ever knowing. And yet, it's probably best that she doesn't. It's selfish of me to share this with her. Besides, it wouldn't change anything. She loves Alex. He is her husband. It would only make her feel sorry for me. And she doesn't need that.*

One night, as Leo and Alex ate their evening meal, Leo noticed a young corporal sitting alone in a corner. He was not eating. Instead, he sat with his head in his hands, rocking back and forth. He looked troubled. Very troubled. Leo nudged his brother's arm. "Look at that fellow. He looks like he might be going mad from all of this."

"That doesn't surprise me. Sometimes I feel like I am going mad," Alex said. "I must admit you were right. War isn't a heroic task. In fact, it is far worse than I ever thought it would be."

Leo had an urge to punch his brother, but he didn't. Instead, he just nodded and watched the strange corporal in the corner who, although he was still rocking back and forth, had now gotten up. He was on his feet, but he looked unsteady. His face was red with rage, and he was shouting so loudly that everyone stopped talking for a moment to hear what he was

saying. "These guns that are being shot at us may destroy our bodies. But take my word for it, brothers; they are not the greatest enemy of the German people." He began to race through the groups of other soldiers, excited by the attention. Still shouting, he continued. "Germany has invisible enemies. People who pretend to be Germans. They are living right inside our own borders. Our fatherland is in the greatest danger from within. And that danger is greater than any danger from our enemies beyond our borders."

"He's insane," Leo whispered to Alex. "I don't know what the hell he's even talking about."

"Perhaps he is crazy. Plenty of the men here are crazy." Alex said, not paying much attention to the corporal, who was still ranting.

"Sit down and shut up," a young soldier with a weathered face said, annoyed at being disturbed during his meal. It was rare that the soldiers could enjoy a peaceful dinner without an explosion or a battle erupting. And most of the battle-weary men resented being interrupted by the rantings of a madman.

But the corporal didn't stop. His fists were clenched. "I am telling you, there are enemies in our midst. They are posing as Germans, but they are bankers and they are business owners. Most importantly, they are the Jews."

At this, one of the soldiers got up and punched the corporal in the face. He fell backward and landed on his back. "I am Jewish. Shut your mouth," the soldier said. "Or I'll finish you off. I'm tired of your ranting."

The Jewish soldier was tall and thickly built. The corporal, who was a little man, lay on the ground bleeding. Leo felt sorry for the little man. He was just a weak man who had gone crazy from the battles. Leo shook his head. He hated to see the men turn on each other. They were all Germans, after all. They were brothers. Leo stood up and shook the grass off his uniform pants. Then he walked over to the little man who lay on the ground. "Are you all right?" he asked, extending his hand to help him up.

“I’m all right. Thank you,” the man said, taking Leo’s hand.

“Here,” Leo reached into his pocket and handed the corporal a handkerchief. “You’re bleeding.”

“I know.” He wiped his face with Leo’s handkerchief.

“I’m Leo Schroder.”

“Adolf Hitler. And let me tell you this: that Jew and all the other Jews are going to be sorry. He may have silenced me for the moment. But I promise you, I won’t be silenced forever. I will make sure the Jews get what’s coming to them,” the little man said as he wiped the dripping blood from the small mustache under his nose.

“Why don’t you just relax? There is no need for this. We are all on the same side here.”

“Not the Jews.”

“Yes, even the Jews, Adolf. We are all Germans.”

There was a long silence, and Leo thought the man was finally done ranting. Leo was going to turn and go back to his seat next to his brother. But then Adolf glanced up at Leo and said, “Schroder...” Hitler cleared his throat. “I used to know a fellow named Schroder when I was living in Vienna. Alex was his name.”

“Alex Schroder is my brother. He’s here with me now,” Leo motioned to Alex to come over.

Alex ignored him.

“Alex Schroder is here? My old friend is here?” Hitler said.

“Yes,” Leo said, motioning to Alex again.

Alex shook his head, looking annoyed, but stood up and walked over. When he saw Adolf, he smiled in recognition. Then he said, “Well, well, it’s been years.”

“It certainly has. Are you still painting?”

“Sometimes. How about you?”

“Sometimes, but not as often. I have higher ambitions now. You do remember that it was the Jews who kept us both out of the art schools?”

“Of course, I remember,” Alex said.

Leo watched them as they both sat down together to talk. He wasn't listening to any more of what they had to say. However, he'd heard the vicious remarks about Jews, and it made him think of Mia and Margot. He didn't like this kind of thinking at all. Leo was smart, and he knew that this was dangerous. Leo shivered for a moment even though it was not cold. But then he reminded himself that these two men were small, insignificant people. Neither of them would be considered brilliant, and Leo doubted that either would ever have any influence over anyone other than people like themselves. So, it really didn't matter what they thought.



## CHAPTER 20



Adelaide took her mother-in-law's suggestion and applied for a job at the postal company. She wore her best clothes, a black skirt and blouse that had once been white but was now shredding with age. Her hair was neatly combed away from her face into a low bun. And she wore just a hint of lipstick that looked almost natural.

The girl at the desk at the phone company was young and pretty but very aloof. "Fill out this application," she said, handing Adelaide an application and a pencil. Adelaide sat down and filled in the paperwork. Once she had finished, she stood up and gave the girl the paper. "We will be in touch," she said.

Adelaide felt her shoulders slump. She was disappointed. She'd hoped that she would be interviewed on the spot. But now she doubted that she would be interviewed at all.

"Thank you," she said demurely. Then she left the building. The following day, she went back to work at the munitions factory. She'd almost forgotten about the telephone company when a young boy brought a telegram to her home a week later, inviting her to come in the following day for a personal interview.

"I have to take off work again tomorrow to go to this interview," she said to Tilda.

"I know. But if you get the job, it will be worth it. I've been asking around, and everyone says that working at the phone company is a very good job. The pay is excellent."

Adelaide grabbed Tilda's hands and squeezed them in her own. "I hope I get it."

The following day, she dressed with care. Once again, she wore her best clothes. This time, the young woman at the desk was more friendly as she ushered Adelaide into a small room where a tall, slim gentleman with hair graying at the temples sat behind a desk.

"What's your name?" he asked. Adelaide could see that he held her application in his hands. Her name was right in front of him on her paperwork. Yet he asked her to tell him her name.

"Adelaide Schroder, sir," she said obediently.

For a few very uncomfortable moments, there was silence. She fidgeted in her chair. *If I don't get this job, I will be in trouble. I've taken time off to be here for this interview. I might get fired.*

"I am *Hauptmann* Ernst Decker. I'm in charge of hiring girls to work on a switchboard. Do you know what a switchboard is?" He looked her up and down. Adelaide could see the desire in his eyes and had to look away.

"Yes, sir. I do."

"Well, then, do you have any switchboard experience?" he stared at her breasts with blue-gray eyes that seemed like they were made of ice.

"No, sir. I'm sorry I don't. But I really need this job. And I am a very fast learner." She stammered. "Please, I hope you will consider giving me a chance."

The interviewer didn't answer for a moment. Then he nodded, "I see." He was more concerned with security than he was with experience. He knew that he could teach a girl who was smart how to work a switchboard, but he couldn't teach her loyalty to Germany, and it was this undying loyalty that was what he was looking for.

"You were born in Germany, yes?"

"Yes, my parents were born here as well."

“That’s good.”

“To be exact, my entire family lineage is from Germany. I don’t know anyone in my family from anywhere else.”

“And your husband? What about his family?”

“I don’t know for certain, but I think they, too, have a long German lineage.”

“I see. And your husband, is he at war?”

“He is. My brother-in-law is fighting for our country as well.”

“Do you know where they are stationed?”

“The last I heard, they were in France. But I don’t know exactly where. They can’t tell me because of security reasons,” she admitted.

He nodded. “Do you have any children?”

She told him she had three little girls and her in-laws to support while her husband was away fighting for his country. “It’s difficult to make enough money to support the family without my brother-in-law and my husband’s help. Although they send some of the money they earn back home to us.” It was a half-truth. Leo sent his money home, but Alex never did.

“Hmmm,” *Hauptmann* Decker grunted. “I see. And how does this make you feel about Germany and the war effort? I mean, sometimes you must find that you are angry at our country for putting you in such a difficult financial position,” the interviewer said slyly.

But Adelaide assured him she was as devoted to Germany as any German soldier and wanted to see her country win the war at all costs.

“I’ll need to check your background,” he said coldly. “I’ll be in touch.” But he had already checked her background before he called her in for the interview.

Adelaide was about to stand up, but she hesitated a moment. “Please,” she said, “I am so afraid of getting hurt

when working at the munitions factory. The machines are terribly loud, and they scare me to death. I have seen girls get injured and killed, and I am afraid this could happen to me. If it did, who would take care of my family? They are dependent on me. Please, sir, I need this job. I really need this job.” She looked down demurely, batting her eyelashes at him.

He smiled, looking like a wolf hungry for its prey.

The interviewer studied her for several moments. It didn't hurt that she was still very pretty. He liked the way she looked. But he desperately needed capable, smart people to work on the switchboard. More importantly, he needed people who were trustworthy and who could be taught a secret code. This girl looked trustworthy, and he'd always been a good judge of character, but she would have to prove herself before he shared a code with her. He watched her closely. Watched how she held her handbag. Watched how she crossed her legs. Watched how she scratched her eyebrow. He continued to scrutinize her every move and finally decided that she appeared sincere. He closed his eyes and listened to his intuition. *I can't let her go. I want her too badly. However, I doubt she is a spy. And she is a good communicator, she's well-spoken. But most importantly, she's gorgeous. I am going to give her a chance.*

He tapped his pencil on the table and said, “Come in on Monday morning at eight o'clock. Don't be late. We are a twenty-four-hour operation, so you will have to be prepared to work overnight sometimes. Will you be able to do that?”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“And what about those three little girls you told me about? Who is going to keep an eye on them when you're at work?”

“We live with my in-laws. My mother-in-law is quite capable. The children will be cared for. I am available to work any shift that you need.”

“Well, good. That's what I like to hear. Because this is a difficult job. I am taking a chance on you. I hope for your sake that you don't disappoint me because if you do, the consequences could be terrible. You must be loyal to your

country at all costs,” he said, then he coughed and continued, “Adelaide Schroder, you are a young mother with children who need you. You don’t want to make any mistakes. Do you understand my meaning?”

She nodded and took a deep breath. “Yes, I understand.”

“The most important factor in working here is trust. Can’t stress this enough. I need people I can trust. For your sake, I hope you will make sure you never betray that trust.” He looked directly into her eyes. She didn’t flinch or look away. Then he smiled a half smile, “All right then, you can go now. I’ll see you on Monday. But before you leave, my secretary will show you how to get into the switchboard rooms.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said as she picked up her handbag and left his office. The rooms were located underground. Adelaide was led to a hidden door on the side of the building. The secretary put a key in the lock and turned it. The door opened. Once inside, she walked down a long flight of narrow stairs and then down a corridor that led to a large wooden door. The secretary opened the door, and Adelaide walked inside. There, she found a long switchboard with women seated in a row. There were private offices behind the switchboard.

“This is where you will be expected to report to at 8am Monday morning,” the secretary said. “And here, take this key. You will need it to open the hidden door. You will receive a new key each month. We change the locks for security purposes.”

## CHAPTER 21



**T**hat night, *Frau* Decker, Ernst's wife, had his dinner on the table when he arrived home. She had been married to him for fifteen years, and she had studied his moods over that time. He was not in the mood for a conversation tonight. So, when he sat at the table, she asked, "Can I get you anything else?"

"No," he said, "nothing else."

"Shall I sit with you and keep you company?"

"No, I have some things on my mind. I prefer to be alone," Ernst said.

She nodded and left the room. He carefully unfolded his napkin. He was a stickler for table manners, even when he was eating alone. Ernst ate slowly, and as he did, he thought of Adelaide Schroder. *When she walked out of my office after the interview today, and her hips swayed from side to side, I knew I had to have her. I've had plenty of pretty women, but this one is special. And I don't know what it will take to win her over, but I'll find a way to do it. It's a challenge. There's no doubt about that. She's married, and she's the type to be faithful. But that makes her all the more exciting. I wonder how long it will take me to bring her to my bed. How long will it be before she is lying beside me naked?*

Just then, he was interrupted by a little blond boy with big blue eyes. "Fritz, what are you doing still awake?"

"I was asleep, *Vater*. But I sneaked out of bed when I heard your voice because I wanted to kiss you good night."

“Well, come here then,” Ernst said, picking his son up and holding him in his arms. He kissed the child’s forehead. “There you go. Now, you must go back to bed. I’ll take you and tuck you in.”

The child smiled at his father as he carried him to his bed, tucked him in, and kissed him again. Fritz had been a surprise, a late-in-life child who had brought great joy to his mother but not nearly as much joy to Ernst.

After Ernst left the child’s room, he stopped in the living room, where his wife sat. “Why is he coming out of bed like that when I am trying to eat my dinner? You should be watching him. I don’t know what to do with you. As you’re growing older, you’ve not only put on weight, but you’ve gotten dumber.”

Tears welled in her eyes. But she didn’t say a word. He just shook his head and returned to the kitchen to finish his meal.

## CHAPTER 22



On Monday morning, Adelaide left the apartment early. She took the bus to a stop that was located a half mile away from the *Deutsche Reichspost*. She walked the rest of the way. Then she put her key in the lock and entered the building through the hidden door.

Learning to work the switchboard at the *Deutsche Reichspost* was challenging but not more than Adelaide had expected. The more she learned, the more she found that she enjoyed it. She had always been nervous when working with the machines in the munitions factory. But this was different. Here, the danger was not from the machines. It was from the outside and the people who watched her constantly. The other girls told her that it was likely that the security people were following her when she wasn't at work. The girls told her that for the first few months, security would check out her friends and family to be sure she had no objectionable connections.

Because the switchboard room was hidden underground, it was often very hot, and the air was stifling. The board was always lighting up. It seemed to be alive because it was constantly busy. Her trainer taught her that she must weigh every word she said on and off the phone. Even so, the work was exciting. She was learning new things each day, and every call was different and always interesting. She found herself speaking to important people who called and wanted to be connected to other important people. This made her feel like she, too, had a vital position in the war effort. Some of the callers were only civilians, the families of soldiers like Alex or Leo, telephoning because they had an emergency and had to



get in touch with their loved ones far away. These were always calls that were filled with emotion. They often needed to talk and sometimes felt compelled to tell Adelaide their stories. She would listen, and tears ran down her cheeks as she did.

There were three large working rooms and a lunchroom beside several offices in that underground building. The switchboard room was the largest. Next was a room where special people sat reading messages in code. Then, there was a very small private room exclusive to a certain group of workers who were specially trained in breaking enemy codes.

The cramped switchboard room was lined with girls who sat facing the large switchboards. Most of the girls were close to the same age as Adelaide. At first, these girls were not welcoming to Adelaide. She was an outsider. But she didn't give up. Adelaide attributed their lack of friendliness to their fear of saying something wrong or divulging too much information to a newcomer. But as the months passed and she got to know the others, they began to warm up.

To leave her seat at the switchboard for even a moment to go to the ladies' room, she had to raise her hand so that one of the supervisors could come and relieve her. Each switchboard was manned twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, without exception. Adelaide worked six days a week, ten-to-twelve-hour shifts, and sometimes more. However, the work was so fast-paced that she was never bored, and her time at the switchboard seemed to go by very fast.

## CHAPTER 23



1917

**A**delaide was a hard worker. She was trustworthy and reliable, and the higher-ups took notice of this. Not only that, but she was competent on the switchboard. She listened and learned from every call. She was always pleasant, and her superiors liked her attitude. So, she was promoted to supervisor.

One afternoon, when Adelaide returned from her lunch break, she was called into her supervisor's office. Her supervisor was an older woman with dark hair sprinkled with gunmetal-colored silver. A dark blue matronly dress covered her shapeless figure. But her gray-green eyes sparkled as Adelaide entered the room. Across from her sat a handsome young soldier. He was tall, and his hair was the color of copper.

"Adelaide," the woman said with a smile. "This is *Hauptmann* Decker. I believe he interviewed you. However, he has been promoted. He is no longer an interviewer. He is going to be taking my position, as I have recently been promoted."

"I remember you, *Hauptmann*," Adelaide said politely.

"And I have good news for you. You recently were promoted to supervisor, but we would like to offer you another promotion. How would you like to train new girls that we hire to work on the switchboard?"

“Oh!” Adelaide was surprised and flattered. She blushed. “Yes, I would like that very much. But we don’t hire often. So, would I work my regular job when not training?”

“No. Actually, I have something else I would like to discuss with you.”

“Yes?” Adelaide said. She began to worry. What else could her boss want to tell her? What if this promotion was not as good as she had hoped? What if it meant that she would be working fewer hours and, therefore, she would be paid less? *I can’t take a pay cut. With the children growing up, we need every penny I earn.*

“I have been watching you since you started working here. And I find you to be very responsible. We’ve looked into your home life and your background. And everything appears to be quite satisfactory. You’re a smart girl, and I believe you would do well learning to send messages in secret code. You could do this when you weren’t training new people. And since this is a very important position, you would receive a pay increase. But before we go any further, I want to be sure that you understand what this means. Do you know what code is?”

“I believe so.”

“Why don’t you explain, *Hauptmann*?”

“Of course,” he said, looking directly at Adelaide. “When you send an important message across the airways, there is a possibility that the enemy could be listening. And if the message is high security, crucial to the safety of our men in the field, it is important that they cannot ascertain this information. So, we send it in code. Do you understand?”

“I do. That’s why I have been transferring calls pertaining to classified information to the special code room. Is that correct?”

“Exactly the reason,” he said.

“I see,” Adelaide nodded.

“So, since you have been transferring these calls to the special code room, you must have some understanding as to how important this job is? A small error in translation could

cost us gravely in German lives.” He had a strong jaw and high cheekbones, and his face was firm.

“I understand.”

“Do you want the position?” *She will be my right-hand girl. With her husband away, I’ll bet she is very lonely and willing to do just about anything to keep this job.*

“Yes, sir. I do.”

“Do you think you can do it well?”

“Yes, sir. I do.”

“Good. I am glad to hear it. I have confidence in you. I believe you will be just fine. So, you and I will begin your training tomorrow. When you come to work in the morning, report to my office so we can get started. It’s right over there.” He pointed to a private office in the corner.

“Yes, *Hauptmann* Decker.”

## CHAPTER 24



**A**delaide didn't tell Tilda or Edmon about her new job. She knew that Tilda would be happy about the pay raise. Still, she wanted to be sure she was able to do the work before she said anything to anyone about the promotion. It would be terrible to disappoint Tilda. *I don't know if I am smart enough to learn this. And this job is so important that it scares me. I am afraid of someone getting hurt or worse because of a mistake I made.* She thought as she gave the children their evening bath. Once she put the children to bed, she told Tilda she was tired and went to her room. As she lay in bed that night staring at the ceiling, Adelaide wished she could talk to Leo. She knew Leo would not only listen, but he would also build up her confidence. It was very strange, but she had no desire to speak to Alex. Because she knew he wouldn't care or take anything she said seriously. He would tell her in as few words as possible that she would do just fine. And he would say this only because he was happy she was getting a pay raise. But Leo, her best friend, would understand her fears, and he would listen to all of them even if she needed to talk for hours. Not only that, but Leo understood her, and he would know what to say and how to give her the encouragement she needed right now.

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ADELAIDE WAS TREMBLING as she knocked on the door to *Hauptmann* Decker's office the following morning. She was ten minutes early and wondered if she should have waited ten

minutes before knocking. But she didn't have much time to contemplate her decision because he told her to enter almost immediately.

"You may sit here," he said. There was a small desk situated right beside his larger one. She sat down. "Now, I am going to give you a code. You must memorize it. You cannot write it down. Therefore, every minute you are here at work today, you must spend memorizing this code. Each letter of the alphabet will have a symbol. You must know that symbol backward and forward. There is absolutely no room for error here. You must be quick in your translation from code to the German language. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, *Hauptmann*," she said as he handed her a paper.

"You'll need to get started right now."

She nodded, taking the paper from him. The code looked so foreign to her that she was almost certain she would never be able to memorize it. It was like learning a completely new and unexplored language that was not spoken but only communicated in letters, numbers, and symbols.

All morning, she studied the paper, yet she felt as if she were getting nowhere. The *Hauptmann* did not say a word to her. He sat at his desk, working silently with a pencil tucked behind his ear. His face was very serious, but Adelaide had no idea what he was working on.

After a quick lunch, she began again. And by the time she left that day, she wished she had not accepted this promotion. She wished she was still working on the switchboard. This job was too difficult. Her eyes hurt, and she had a terrible headache. Besides that, she felt like she'd spent the entire day without accomplishing anything. That evening, when she went home and put the children to bed, she sat at the kitchen table and tried to write the code. She only got through a few of the first letters of the alphabet before she found she could not remember anything. Frustrated and worried about losing her job, she went to take a bath. But she found that even as she lay in the warm water, her mind continued to try to remember the code.

By her third day working at her new position, Adelaide dreamed of code at night.

“How are you doing?” *Hauptmann* Decker asked her, “Have you got it memorized?”

“Not completely,” she admitted.

“Well, get on with it then,” he said as he walked away.

Adelaide didn't like him very much. When she'd first seen him, she thought he was very handsome, but now that she'd gotten to know him a little better, she found him to be cold and distant.

On Friday, when Adelaide walked into the office and sat down, she saw that the paper with the code written on it was gone. A wave of panic came over her. She didn't know the code well enough to start working. She glanced over at *Hauptmann* Decker and saw that he was watching her.

“I am going to test you today,” he said.

She felt sick to her stomach. *I'm not ready to be tested.*

He handed her a paper with a message written on it in code. “Translate that,” he said frostily.

Her hands were shaking as she tried to translate the message he gave her. But after a few moments. He said, “Stop. You're not ready.” Then he shook his head. “What have you been doing every day? Are you a stupid girl, or have you been daydreaming?”

“I'm sorry, sir. I don't know if I can learn this. I am trying, but I can't seem to grasp it.” Hot tears threatened to fall down her cheeks.

He shook his head. Then he slammed his fist on his desk. “Perhaps you just aren't as smart as we thought.”

Now, the tears came. She looked away from him.

“There is no time for this crying. There is a war on. You have a job to do. Now, do it. Learn the code,” he demanded. Adelaide glanced at him and nodded. She hated him.

By the end of the day, she expected him to say she was fired. She'd been trying to learn the code all day, but she had been unable to stay focused, and she knew he could see that her mind was wandering. But when she picked up her handbag to go home, he said, "Are you still having problems?"

"Yes. I don't know what to do."

"Would you like me to help you?" he asked. This was the first time he'd ever said anything warm or kind to her.

"Yes, please help me," she said, tears welling in her eyes.

"You are trying to learn this thing all at once. That would be impossible, even if you were a genius. If you will learn it, the only way to do that is to take it in small increments. For instance, take five letters at a time and memorize them. Then, take another five, and so on. You will see that the code is much more manageable that way."

"I'll try it," she said, feeling a little more confident.

"When something looks too big to handle, divide it into small parts, and it becomes manageable."

"Yes, I can see how that would work," she said. *He's right.*

"Go home. Get some rest. I'll see you Tomorrow."

The following day, she had a new resolve to try even harder. Adelaide did as *Hauptmann* Decker suggested. She memorized five letters at a time. Then, she tested herself until she had mastered those five letters. She did this, and by the end of the week, she had learned the entire code.

When she passed the test on Friday, she saw *Hauptmann* Decker smiling broadly. "Very good work, *Frau* Schroder," he said, and he seemed to be looking at her differently than he had before. This time, there was admiration in his eyes. And she found that she was not only flattered but also felt a wave of happiness at having pleased him.

"Thank you, sir." Adelaide was beaming inside. That night, she wrote to Leo to tell him the good news. But she knew that she must not reveal too much about where the switchboard was located or about what she actually was doing



because she knew it was top secret. So, all she said was that she'd been promoted and was doing well at her new job.

Over the next week, Adelaide was not working on the code. She was busy training a recruit for the switchboard. As she worked, she noticed *Hauptmann* Decker came out of his office more often than usual. He was watching her, and when their eyes met, she felt a twinge of desire stirring inside her. *This is madness. He is my boss, and I think we are both married. At least, I think he is married. I am not sure. But either way, anything other than a working relationship with him would be trouble. I am married. And I have not been myself. I have been without a man for too long. It's not him I want. It's just that I am missing my husband.* But she knew she was deceiving herself.

Adelaide was not missing Alex. She was missing Leo. In a way, it was a relief not to have to wonder where Alex was on the nights he stayed out all night, arriving home at the crack of dawn with his clothes disheveled and smelling of alcohol. Even before Alex left for the army, she had been growing tired of his sleeping on the sofa all day, then coming to life once the sun went down, and leaving the apartment without ever offering to help with anything. It had gotten on her nerves when he covered his head with a pillow when the children cried and demanded that she shut them up. She had begun to resent his refusal to work and the fact that if she and the children were to survive, the only person she could depend upon was Leo. And, boy, oh boy, did she miss Leo.

It took the new girl that Adelaide was training almost a full month to grasp the operations of the switchboard. And it seemed that the longer she was away from *Hauptmann* Decker's office, the more he found reasons to come out and ask her questions. Adelaide didn't care what he did. She was more worried about the possibility that she might forget the code. So, when she was at home, she wrote the code out on a sheet of paper even though she knew it was against the rules. She kept the paper on the small nightstand by her bed, and each night before she went to sleep, she went over it repeatedly.

By the time the new girl was ready to take her position on the board, Adelaide was ready to work in the code office translating messages. She began slowly. *Hauptmann* Decker sat at her side and watched her every move. He wore a headset like hers that was plugged into her phone so that he could make sure she was getting the message correctly. Sometimes, his hand brushed against hers as she wrote down the messages. She glanced up at him. He was staring at her, his eyes intense. Adelaide felt an invisible electric heat generating from him, and she was drawn to it. But she kept her focus on her work because she knew the importance of it. *What if my translation of one of these messages is the thing that stands between life and death for Leo? I must remember that my work is essential in keeping our soldiers safe.*

“You’re doing a very good job,” *Hauptmann* Decker said one afternoon. “Exceptional, actually.”

“Thank you, *Hauptmann.*” She smiled.

“Call me Ernst,” he said.

She felt a flush of heat come to her cheeks and knew she was blushing. *He knows I am attracted to him.* Adelaide looked away and went back to work.

It was almost three months after she started working in the code office that Adelaide received an emergency message. It began with the words, “High alert. Utmost importance.” Her heart began to race. Her fingers began to tremble. Although she had never gotten a code wrong, now that this message was crucial, she was terrified of making a mistake. She froze, and for several moments, she could not remember the code at all. Tears ran down her face. Her entire body was shaking. Ernst rushed over to her and said, “What is it? What’s the matter?”

She showed him the message.

“Stay calm. Now, translate it.”

“I can’t,” she said. “I can’t remember the code. My mind has gone blank.”

“You’re panicking. Slow down. Take a long, deep breath.”

She did as he instructed, but she was shaking, and although she tried desperately to remember the code, she couldn't. Adelaide dropped her pencil as more messages came in from the same location. They were coming very fast now. Adelaide was lost. "I'm sorry. I can't do this. I need help."

"Move over," Ernst Decker said. She did. And he began to translate the messages as fast as they came in. Adelaide did not say a word. She sat and watched him helplessly. He was fast and impressive as he handled the emergency, translating messages and coding answers to the correct parties. The situation lasted less than an hour. But to Adelaide, it was the most exhausting hour she'd ever experienced at work. And she was certain *Hauptmann* Decker would fire her by the time it was over. *I can't blame him. I was worthless when I was most needed.*

He stood up, and without speaking to her or even looking at her, he left the room. It was a half hour before he returned. When he did, he sat down beside her. "Adelaide," he said gently, "I was hoping you could handle this work. However, I think that it might be too intense for you."

"So, you are letting me go," she said, and her voice cracked. "I need this job."

He cleared his throat. "No, I am not going to let you go." He shook his head. Then he patted her hand. And she couldn't decide if it was a brotherly gesture or a flirtation. "This is a tough job. It's not for everyone."

"Then will I be going back on the switchboard? I would be happy to do that." Adelaide had to admit that she enjoyed the extra money she earned from her promotion. However, she much preferred working on the switchboard.

"Well, that is a possibility. However, I was thinking... perhaps you might be my personal secretary. How would you like that? You would continue to receive your current salary. The job would entail taking dictation from me, typing my letters, answering my phones, making sure I have my morning coffee." He smiled. "You know how difficult I am when I don't have my coffee?"

She smiled.

He studied her and thought, *There she goes. She's smiling. It worked. It was a brilliant idea on my part to have my friend make that call to trip her up. I needed her to be a little more insecure, so she would be more willing to do whatever I asked.*

“What do you think? Which would you prefer, being my secretary or going back to work on the switchboard? By the way, if you are my secretary, you will no longer be required to train new hires. You won't have time for that.”

“Well,” she said without looking at him. “I have three little girls at home who depend on me and my in-laws, who are old and unable to work. So, the extra money I've received from this raise has certainly helped. However, I don't know shorthand, and although I can type, I am not a fast typist.”

“I see,” he said. “That's a shame. So, you would like to go back on the switchboard?”

“I think it might be best,” she said, looking down at the desk in front of her. *I like him. I feel some strange attraction to him. And I shouldn't. Something like this can cause us both trouble and end badly for me. Maybe it's for the best if I am not his secretary. Maybe it's better that I am not working so closely with him.*

The following day, Adelaide was returned to her prior position on the switchboard. It felt very strange to be demoted. And because the other girls weren't as friendly as they had been before she had been promoted, she felt very alone and alienated. No one invited her to sit with them during lunch. She was no longer their equal. They somehow felt that she was part of a different group, a higher group.

The afternoon dragged on. Where she once found the switchboard fun and stimulating, she now found it boring. To make matters worse, she would often stare out into space, occasionally glancing at the door to *Hauptmann* Decker's office and thinking about how exciting the challenges had been of working with the code. And also how much she enjoyed working with *Hauptmann* Decker.

By the end of the week, she was feeling depressed. *Hauptmann* Decker had believed in her abilities, and she had failed miserably. *How could I have been so incapable when that call came in? I had been training for that moment, training for an emergency, for a long time, and then when the emergency call came in, I froze.* Not only was she missing the feeling of importance she had when she was working on the job in the code room, but she was also sure she was going to miss the extra money. Earning a little more had made her family's life a little more bearable. Things were tough in Germany. Money was losing its value. With each passing hour, it was worth less, and less. Adelaide and her family were having a hard time living on the rations that were allotted. She noticed that her mother-in-law was growing so thin and weak that Adelaide was beginning to worry about her. She knew Tilda was dividing the better part of her rations between her husband and Adelaide. But every time Adelaide tried to force her mother-in-law to eat, Tilda simply smiled and said she wasn't hungry. And even though she was painfully thin and tired all the time, she didn't rest. She was still wonderful with the children.

On Sundays, Tilda dressed her little girls in dresses she'd made for them from bedsheets and her old hair ribbons and took them to church. Adelaide tried to join them as often as possible, but sometimes, she was just too tired and couldn't get out of bed. When she chose to sleep instead of going to church, she was always secretly worried that God might become angry with her and cause something bad to happen to Leo or Alex. But when she finally told Tilda about her fears, Tilda just smiled. "God is kind," she said, "he understands."

Edmon never attended church with the family. And as much as Adelaide loved her mother-in-law, she had grown to hate Alex's father. He had too many of Alex's bad traits. He was very conniving. In fact, he'd found a way to convince the war recruit office that he was too sick to serve his country. And even though the family could have used the money, and he was capable of helping, he found a thousand excuses as to why he was unable to work. Not only this, but he was demanding, constantly complaining about the children being

too noisy during the day or about them keeping him up at night. Regardless of how much Tilda tried to please him by giving him her rations, he was always hungry and said he never had enough to eat.

As they sat in church that Sunday, Adelaide's mind began to wander. *I owe it to Tilda to get back my job working on the codes. She never says a word about it. But I know it's very hard on her trying to make ends meet. And the extra money would really help. Tomorrow, I am going to speak to Hauptmann Decker. I'll tell him how I feel about working with the codes again. I'll have to win his confidence. I think I can do it.*

Adelaide went in to work early that Monday morning. She knocked on the door to the *Hauptmann's* office. His new secretary opened the door. He'd hired one of the other girls from the switchboard. Adelaide knew who she was, but they had never been friends. Her name was Helga, and she was a tall, willowy blonde. Adelaide assessed her immediately and felt a small pang of jealousy. *She's so young and fresh, much prettier than me.*

"Yes, *Frau* Schroder. How can I help you?" Helga asked.

"Is the *Hauptmann* available to speak with me?"

"He's here. Let me see if he has a moment to speak to you," Helga said. Her voice was soft and refined. "Wait here, please."

"Thank you," Adelaide said. She sat down, and her mind began to wander. *I never paid much attention to her before, but Helga is very poised and quite lovely. Her dress looks expensive. I wonder how she can afford such an expensive dress. Could she be Hauptmann Decker's mistress? I wonder if he bought that dress for her. And I wonder if he would have done the same for me if I had accepted his advances. What am I thinking? I am a married woman.*

"*Frau* Schroder." Helga interrupted Adelaide's thoughts. "Please come in. *Hauptmann* Decker will see you now."

Adelaide nodded. Then she stood up and followed Helga through the familiar office.

“Good morning to you,” the *Hauptmann* said. “Helga, please close the door and leave us.”

Helga did as the *Hauptmann* requested.

“So,” he said to Adelaide once they were alone. His voice was cheerful. “How have you been doing?” He folded his hands in his lap and sat back in his chair.

“I’m doing fine.”

“Good, very good,” he said, nodding. Then he picked up his pencil and began tapping it on his desk. Having worked with him for a while, Adelaide knew he tapped his pencil when deep in thought. Yet, he gave no indication of thinking about anything. His face was a frozen smile, emotionless. “So, then, what is it that I can do for you today?”

She cleared her throat. *He’s no longer interested in me. I should be glad. It’s the best. So, why do I feel so strange, so hurt, so rejected? And so damn jealous of Helga.* “I was wondering...” She hesitated. “I was wondering if there is any way possible that you might be willing to give me another chance at working the code phones.” *There, I’ve said it. Now, all I can do is wait for his answer. I am sweating. I can feel sweat running down my armpits. Damn, but I feel so vulnerable. And that Helga is much too pretty. She makes me look like a poor church mouse.* “I was...” she stammered again, “I was hoping...I mean...”

“Yes. You were hoping that I would consider allowing you to try again?”

“Yes, please. I would like to try again. I would like to have my old job back. I miss the challenge of it. I miss the work.”

“Is that all you miss?” He was tapping the pencil harder now.

She didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry? I don’t know what you mean.” She couldn’t look into his eyes. But she knew what he meant. He wanted her to say that she missed him. She missed his attention. There were no other men

around. They'd all been taken away because of the war. It felt good to have a man look at her. It made her feel desirable. Yet she could not tell him this. It would open a very dangerous phase in their relationship. Right now, he was her boss, and although he would sometimes flatter her with his eyes, there had been no verbal acknowledgment of the attraction between them.

“Oh? Don't you?” he asked suggestively.

“I'm sorry, but no. I know I made a mistake, and I understand there is no room for errors in a job like this. However, I will work harder. I will try harder. I will not make this mistake again. I swear it. I won't.” She heard begging in her voice, and she felt ashamed. Clearing her throat, she added, “I want to help my country. And... my family needs the extra money.”

“I see.” He put the pencil down, and she knew that meant he'd come to a decision.

*There is no reason he should give me this position. I've already proven that I don't have the steel nerves it takes to do it well.* She closed her eyes for a second and said a prayer.

“Against my better judgment,” he began, then he cleared his throat, and she looked up into his eyes. “I am going to give you another chance. I am doing this because I believe in you. When I began my career in the army, I was afraid. I was promoted, and then I made mistakes, too. But someone believed in me, and he gave me a second chance. And because he had given me a second chance, I worked so much harder than anyone else. I believe you will do this, too.”

“Oh, yes, I will. I promise you I will.” Adelaide sighed. “Thank you.” She knew how happy Tilda would be when she told her that she would be receiving her former salary once again. Although it was illegal and very dangerous, and Tilda had never told Adelaide, Adelaide knew that when there was extra money, Tilda was buying food on the black market.

*Ahhh, now she's falling into my hands like putty. Very soon, I will be able to do whatever I want with her.*



## CHAPTER 25



The following day, when Adelaide returned to work in the code room, she found that *Hauptmann* Decker was giving her special attention. He was harder on her than before, working closely with her to ensure she did not make a single error. He was leaning over her, far closer than he should have been. She could feel his breath on her neck. And, by afternoon, she knew he was more interested in her than he was in Helga. He took his lunch with Adelaide in the lunchroom that day. They did not speak of the codes during their break because they were forbidden to speak of them when they were not in the code room. However, he asked her questions about her life, children, husband, and in-laws. And she found herself talking about everything and everyone she missed, especially Leo.

“It sounds like he was the one you were in love with. So, why did you marry Alex?”

She was stunned by his question. It was so embarrassing, so intrusive. When she did not speak, *Hauptmann* Decker repeated, “So, you’re not answering. Why did you marry Alex?”

Adelaide thought about it for a moment, and she realized that perhaps he was right. Perhaps she had always been in love with Leo and not realized it. “Alex was exciting. He was so terribly handsome. And he had this crazy way of making me feel beautiful. I don’t know how he did it, actually. But, as time went on, and he started drinking heavily, his allure began to fade.”

*Hauptmann* Decker nodded, "Yes, it can be that way." There were a few silent moments, and then he looked directly at her. "I am married. I have two children. A boy and a girl."

"Oh," she stammered. "How nice." *Why am I so taken aback by his candid words? Perhaps he's never been attracted to me. Perhaps I imagined it, and it's me who has been attracted to him all along.* She was ashamed. And she felt her face grow red.

"Yes, my children are lovely," he said. "But my wife and I... well, there is no love left in our marriage. Let's just say we have an understanding."

She didn't know how to respond, so she said nothing.

Their lunch hour was over, and they went back to work.

Over the next few weeks, while working long hours together, he finally convinced her to call him Ernst. And with Ernst's special attention, Adelaide became proficient at her job. In fact, she was the best code translator in the department.

Adelaide never mentioned a word about Ernst to anyone in her family. But she thought about him a lot and took extra time to get dressed in the morning. Sometimes, she spent an hour just styling her hair. She even splurged and bought a new dress. A dark emerald green dress that looked stunning with her golden hair and slightly golden skin color. Ernst noticed the dress the moment she walked into work wearing it, and he complimented her. A few weeks later, she took a little money out of her check and bought a tube of red lipstick, which she used as a stain on her lips and rouge on her cheeks.

Tilda never said a word about Adelaide's meticulous grooming or about her use of lipstick, but Adelaide was sure she noticed. "I've good news for you," Ernst said the following day when Adelaide came to work. "Come into my office. This is for your ears only."

Adelaide got up and followed him into his office. They sat down.

"Please, tell me. What is it?" she asked. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were shining. He'd given her a reason to

feel good, and she was holding on to that reason with both hands. With the hyperinflation, the lack of food, the rations, and the constant worry that someone she loved might be killed, anything that felt good was very welcome.

“I negotiated with the bosses and got you a raise.”

“You did?” She exclaimed, leaning forward and putting her hands on the desk in front of her. “Oh, Ernst. That’s wonderful.”

“I knew you’d be glad.”

“I am. You can’t know how much this means to me, how much it will help my family.”

“I know,” he said softly. Then he reached across the desk and put his hand on hers. “That’s why I fought so hard for you.”

She didn’t move her hand away.

## CHAPTER 26



**A**delaide's two girls, Gertrude and Matilda, or Trudy and Mattie as they were affectionately referred to, had been sleeping through the night for over six months. And, recently, Margot had begun to sleep through the night. This was a relief for Adelaide and for Tilda. It was a welcome change for Adelaide because she had been trying to wean Margot off breastfeeding for the last several months. It was so difficult to be awakened during the night when she had to get up early for work. And sometimes, she felt guilty because she thought it was too soon to wean the baby. Margot was only a year old, and if Adelaide had not been working, she would probably have continued to nurse her for another year. Not only was it hard to wake up to feed her at night, but during the day, it was impossible when Adelaide was at work. Because of this, Tilda began to feed the baby goat's milk she had been able to purchase on the black market.

Although the three little girls were still just babies, each girl was already developing her own unique personality. Trudy was a difficult baby. She needed constant attention and was already showing signs of jealousy when either Tilda or Adelaide picked up one of the other children. Mattie was quiet, contemplative, and easy to handle. She could be entertained by a small toy for hours and hardly ever cried. While Margot was just the opposite. Margot walked early. She wanted to move and be in control of her own life. When she cried, it was out of pure frustration.

Adelaide and Tilda took care of everything in the apartment, while Edmon was no help with the children or the

housework. Once in a while, he did an odd job where he earned a little money, but he spent it immediately on alcohol. Occasionally, Adelaide lost patience with him. Once or twice, she surprised herself by speaking to him in a disrespectful manner. But she couldn't help herself. She worked hard, long hours for her money and couldn't understand how he could be so irresponsible. But Tilda still loved him. She tried to calm Adelaide and tell her that this was just Edmon's way, but Adelaide had begun to hate him.

As time passed, letters from Leo stopped arriving each week. Most often, they came once a month. The family received a letter in September but none in October. And when there was no letter, Adelaide became anxious. She checked the mail every day, but she did not hear from Leo in November or early December, and she began to panic. By the time Christmas came, she was frantic. She wondered if his letters had stopped coming weekly because he had gone into battle. And now, having not heard from him at all, Adelaide was terrified that Leo was dead. Although she didn't want to discuss her fears with Tilda, she knew that Tilda was feeling the same. They both tried to pretend that all was well. And on Christmas Eve, Tilda and Adelaide dressed up and took the children to church. They tried to put up a cheerful front, but underneath, they were both anxious and edgy.

When Adelaide returned to work the day after Christmas, Ernst was waiting for her. "Adelaide, can you come into my office, please?"

"Yes, of course."

She followed him into the office. "Sit down," he said. Then he took a small box out of the drawer of his desk. "This is for you." He handed her the box.

She was surprised. She hardly expected a present. But she picked it up and looked at the small box. It was wrapped in newsprint. "I don't know what to say. I wasn't expecting a gift. And I'm sorry, but I don't have anything for you."

He smiled warmly. "I know. Believe me, I didn't expect anything from you. It's just that I love Christmas. You know?"

It's such a beautiful time of year. What I love most about it is that it is a time for giving. Let me give you this gift. I hope you like it."

Because she had been holding back her emotions for so long, this kindness touched her deeply. She bent her head and began to open the gift. Then tears sprung from her eyes, and she put the half-unwrapped gift on the desk in front of her and covered her eyes with her hands as she began to weep. The tears came like sheets of rain. Her heart was heavy.

"What is it?" he asked. His concern was genuine. "What's wrong, Adelaide?"

"I have been so worried. I can't sleep. I can't eat. I haven't heard from my husband or brother-in-law in a couple of months. I am so afraid for them."

He nodded. Then he got up and walked over to the other side of the desk and sat down on a chair beside her. He took both of her hands in his.

In a gentle voice, he said, "Sometimes, when the men are at the front, they can't write home."

She nodded. "I know. I've heard that." But then she looked into his eyes, and she could see that he knew she was afraid they were both dead. "But somehow, my brother-in-law always managed to write to us. I wouldn't be worried if it was just my husband I hadn't heard from. He's done this before. But I could always count on getting letters from Leo. He has always been so reliable. If there was any way he could get a letter to me, he would. I know that. Even if he was at the front. As long as he was alive, he would write. The only thing that would stop him..."

"Shh, not necessarily. As I said, he might not be permitted to send mail from where he is. Don't be alarmed. Try to stay calm." He squeezed her hands.

She nodded. "You're right."

Then he smiled at her. "Wait a few months before you panic, yes?"

"I'll try." She managed to smile.

He smiled back at her. “Now, won’t you please take a moment and open your gift?” he said softly.

She tore the newspaper off the box. Then she opened it to find a necklace. It was a gold pendant shaped like a small telephone receiver with a tiny clear stone in the mouthpiece that hung on a thin gold chain.

“It’s a real diamond,” he said proudly.

She gasped.

“And real gold.”

“I’ve never owned anything so lovely.”

“Well, I was hoping it would be a constant reminder to you of the good job you’re doing here with your work on the phones.”

In spite of her tears, a big smile came over her face. “Thank you. This was so thoughtful of you.”

He leaned over and planted a quick, soft kiss on her lips. As soon as he did, he said, “I’m sorry. I had no right to do that. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

She looked down at her hands. *I am so confused. I know it was wrong for him to kiss me. But I loved the way it felt to be kissed and comforted by a man. I am a horrible person. I completely forgot about my vows. I should have thought about Alex. I should have said no. And I should feel guilty. But I don’t feel guilty about Alex. It’s Leo I am thinking of. If I am ashamed, it is not because I care what Alex thinks of me. It’s because I care what Leo thinks of me, and I wouldn’t want him to think of me as the sort of woman who could be an adulteress. I would never want him to know that I am feeling desire for a man who is not my husband. I would be ashamed if he ever found out. But I can’t help it. I know it’s so much more than just lust. I am lonely. I am desperately in need of a man with a soft voice and a warm touch.* “I’d better go back to work,” she said, trying not to look directly at him.

“Yes,” he cleared his throat, “you’re right.” He straightened up.

“Thank you again for the lovely gift.” She stood up to go.

He coughed a little, then said, “Adelaide?”

“Yes?”

“The necklace may be pretty, but be assured, it’s not as lovely as you.”

In spite of herself, a smile came over her face. Then she went to her desk and began her day.

That afternoon, when she ate her lunch, she overheard some girls at another table complaining about always being scheduled for overnight shifts. It seemed no one liked working all night. But they all seemed to be forced to do it. All except for Adelaide. *I haven’t been scheduled for even one overnighiter yet.*

As she was finishing her lunch break, Ernst walked into the room. He sat down at the table across from her and smiled.

She returned his smile. *I am surprised he doesn’t care what everyone is thinking when he comes to sit by me so brazenly. Some of these girls must know he is married, yet he is not ashamed. He will just come to sit with me every day.* “I have to go. My break is almost over,” she said.

“Ahhh, I missed our lunch together. I’m sorry. I had a bit of an emergency.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Yes, it is now. I took care of it.”

They looked into each other’s eyes for a moment. Then Adelaide smiled, “Well, I have to go.” She got up. “I’ll see you later.”

“I look forward to it.”



## CHAPTER 27



**A**delaide received an emergency phone call that day, which required her to translate several codes before she was able to connect the call to the correct party. Because of this, she had been forced to stay late and left later than the other girls working the same shift. Once she finished her call, she turned off her phone, took off her headset, and began gathering her things together to leave. She walked into the coatroom to retrieve her coat. Just then, Ernst walked into the room. They were alone. Helga had left earlier that day, and everyone else was on the switchboard or the phones. Her hands were trembling as she picked up her coat and her handbag.

“Adelaide,” Ernst said, “may I help you put your necklace on?”

*Yes, no, yes, yes.* “I am just going home. I... I don’t need to wear it to go home,” she stammered. “I’ll save it for special occasions.”

“I would like you to wear it all the time. Would you do that for me?”

She nodded. She didn’t know what to say, but she felt awkward and uncomfortable.

“Please, let me help you put it on.”

“All right,” Adelaide nodded. Her hand trembled, and her palm was sweating as she took the little box out of her handbag and handed it to him.

“It’s so delicate, and I’m so clumsy,” he said, giving a short laugh as he undid the chain. “There we go. I got it. Now turn around so I can do the clasp behind your neck.”

She did as he asked, and he put the necklace over her head and clasped it at the back of her neck. “Thank you again,” she said as she touched the tiny gold phone receiver.

“Turn around, and let me see how it looks.”

She turned to face him. He was close to her now. He looked down at the necklace. “It looks beautiful. But I don’t think it’s the necklace. I have a feeling it looks extra beautiful because you are beautiful.”

*Are you flirting with me? Of course you are. It’s wrong. I should say something to stop it. But what can I do? What can I say? I don’t want you to stop it.* Adelaide looked down shyly. “I don’t know if that’s true.”

“Oh, yes, it is. You are a very beautiful woman.”

She could feel herself blushing. “Well, I’d better go home. I’m late already. And I’m sure Tilda could use my help with the girls,” she said but was trembling, and she didn’t move. He leaned down and gently kissed her. It was like a bolt of lightning shot through her body, leaving her weak and wanting more. *You’d better go home now.* She couldn’t speak. She just turned and ran out of the office, and she kept running down the street until she arrived at the bus stop, panting and unable to catch her breath.

All the way home, Adelaide thought of that kiss. And the thought of it made her tingle all over. *I must be crazy to be thinking about this man. He’s married. I am too. I have children to think of. This must stop right now. Tomorrow, when I go to work, I must tell him that this romantic flirtation between us cannot continue.* Her fingers caressed the pendant around her neck. *And I must return this gift to him. It’s not right that I should accept his gifts, especially something so expensive.*

As she walked towards her apartment, she thought about Tilda. What would Tilda think if she knew about Ernst and the

necklace? Would she think poorly of her daughter-in-law? Would she forgive her? *What will I tell her when she sees it? She will surely ask me where I got it. I could lie. I could say that I got it as an award for good work from my office. But I don't want to start lying to Tilda. She is so much more than a mother-in-law to me. She is closer to me than my own mother. Perhaps I should stop and take it off here. Then I can give it back to Ernst tomorrow, and it will be as if this never happened.* Adelaide stopped walking and stood in the corner. Carefully, she removed the necklace. Then she returned it to the box it came in and put it back into her purse. Taking a deep breath, she turned and headed for home.

When Adelaide walked inside the apartment, Edmon was waiting for her as she walked in the door. The three children were sitting on the floor on a blanket. They were crying. And immediately, Adelaide could smell their dirty diapers. “When was the last time you changed the babies?” she asked Edmon. But he ignored her.

“Tilda is sick. She thinks maybe some of the food she bought from the black market was bad. She was tasting it while she was cooking. And now, she's very sick,” Edmon said. He started wringing his hands. “She said to tell you to throw it away. But, if we don't eat it, we will have nothing to eat. What will we do?”

Adelaide was annoyed with him. She avoided answering his question. Instead, she asked, “Where is Tilda? Is she in her bed?”

“Yes.”

“Don't eat any of the food. And make sure you don't give a single drop of it to the children. I'll get rid of it later. I have to go in and see Tilda right now. So, I am going to her room. While I am gone, make sure you change the babies' diapers. Can't you smell that? They need to be changed right away,” Adelaide said, taking control of the situation.

There was a horrible stench of stomach sickness coming from Tilda's room as Adelaide entered. “Tilda, what's going on? What's wrong?”

“Don’t eat that food,” Tilda said. Her voice was weak, but there was a note of warning in her tone.

“I heard. Edmon told me. But are you all right?”

“No, I am not. My stomach is aching terribly. I have dreadful cramps, and I cannot control my bowels.”

“I’ll go and get a doctor right away.”

“We can’t waste money on a doctor. We hardly have enough for food and rent. Money is worth so little these days. Don’t worry about me. This will pass. I’ll be all right.”

“There should be some money in the jar in the kitchen. It’s for emergencies. And this is an emergency. I’ll use it to pay the doctor.”

“All right,” Tilda said, and Adelaide could see she was too weak to argue.

“I’ll be right back.” Adelaide ran into the kitchen and grabbed the jar in the pantry where Tilda kept whatever money she could save for urgent situations. Her hands shook as she opened the jar. But she looked inside, and her mouth fell open. She was suddenly sick to her stomach. The jar was empty, and she knew who was to blame.

“Edmon!” she said aloud. Then she called his name in an angry, panicked voice, “Edmon!”

There was no answer. She put the jar on the counter and ran into the living room, where she saw him lying on the couch. He was halfheartedly trying to quiet the girls, who were still sitting on a blanket beside him. He cooed at them from the spot where he was lying but didn’t make a move to pick them up. Adelaide was frustrated, and her voice reflected her emotions. “Where is the money that Tilda keeps in the emergency jar?”

“I don’t know,” he said blankly.

“I think you do.” She was angry. “Tilda needs a doctor, and we can’t afford to pay one because you took the money.”

“I... I... I didn’t take the money.”

“Don’t lie to me. The least you could do is not lie right now.”

He sat up and let his head hang low. “I had an emergency. I took the money to go to the doctor.”

“Liar!” she screamed. Her screaming set the three little girls off, and they began to cry. “You took it so you could drink,” she said. She wanted to pick up the children, hold them, and comfort them. But she couldn’t. She had to get to the doctor’s office. But first, she had to think of a way to pay him. *If only Leo were here, he would know what to do. I could always count on him. But since he’s gone, it seems like everything depends on me. And I feel like I am carrying a weight on my shoulders. Tilda helps with the children, and God knows I don’t know what I would do without her. But, since I haven’t received any money from Leo for a while, everything financial must come from me.*

She slipped her coat back on. *There is no use in fighting with Edmon. What’s done is done. I can’t get the money back that he wasted on drinking.* There was no hiding the disgust in her voice when she commanded. “Throw that food away and Clean up the dirty pot. The babies are still dirty. You’d better make sure that you change each one of these girls’ diapers by the time I get home, or you can just get out of here. I’m sick of it, Edmon. I need your help, and you’d better own up to it. I don’t want to hear any excuses. I’ll be back.” She didn’t wait for him to speak. Instead, she grabbed her coat and her purse and left the apartment. She ran down the stairs and out the door, and then she began to walk as fast as she could to the doctor’s office.

The sky was gray and cloudy when it began to rain. Her clothes and hair were quickly soaked. She ignored it. She couldn’t stop for a second. Adelaide had to hurry and get help for Tilda. When she arrived at the doctor’s office, the door was locked. The office was closed. Adelaide expected this. But she knew that the doctor lived in an apartment upstairs of his office, and he took emergency calls at night. This was an emergency. She rang the bell and trembled from being cold and wet while she waited.

“Yes?” It was a woman’s voice that answered.

“Please, my name is Adelaide Schroder. I need help. My mother-in-law ate something bad, and she is very sick. Please, she must see the doctor. Please, I know the office is closed for the day. But is he available so I can speak to him.?”

There were a few moments of silence. “Come upstairs,” the woman said. Adelaide opened the door. She practically ran up the two flights of stairs. When she saw the old woman in a housedress waiting in the doorway, she said, “I’m so sorry to bother you at night, but I need to see the doctor.”

“Yes, I understand. I am the doctor’s wife. Please, come in.”

Adelaide walked inside the modest apartment. She did not sit down on the sofa because she was soaked. A minute later, the doctor came out of a room in the back of the apartment and walked down the hallway to the living room. He was a small, thin, gray-haired man with thick glasses. When he saw Adelaide wet and frantic, he asked. “What’s the problem?”

“It’s my mother-in-law. I think she got food poisoning.”

“All right,” he said, taking a breath and nodding. “Well, let me get my coat and my bag, and we’ll go to your home, and I’ll have a look at her.”

Adelaide’s lips were quivering. She was afraid she might cry. She stammered. “I don’t have any money to pay you.”

The old doctor looked at her, “So you would have me come to your home on a rainy night and charge you nothing?”

The curtness of his words hurt Adelaide deeply. She was tired from a long day at work. She was wet, cold, and very frightened, and now Adelaide began to cry. “I came because I didn’t know what else to do. I had nowhere else to go. Please, doctor. Please help me. Please help us.” Then she remembered the necklace. “I can give you this,” she said. With trembling hands, she reached into her handbag and took the little box out. Then she opened it and showed him what was inside. “It’s real gold and a real diamond.” She handed it to him.

“A telephone receiver?” he said as he examined the pendant.

“Yes, I work for the government on the telephones for the war effort.”

“I see.” He held the small gold pendant dangling in his large fingers.

Then his wife spoke up, “We lost our son to an accident last year; God rest his soul. But our grandson is currently in the army fighting for our country. I pray for him every day.” Then she looked directly at her husband and said in a small voice. “Don’t take that from her, Hans. Let her keep it. She is helping our boys, our soldiers. The least we can do is help her when she needs us.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right, Alice,” the doctor murmured. Then he took a deep breath and, turning to Adelaide, said, “Well, all right. I am going to help you. So, let me get my coat and bag, and we’ll go.” A few moments later, he returned wearing a dark gray coat and hat and carrying a black bag. “Take me to your mother-in-law.”

The doctor did not complain as the rain soaked through his hat and coat. By the time they arrived at the Schroder home, he was drenched. But he took off his coat and followed Adelaide to Tilda’s bedside.

Tilda’s face was as pale as her white bed sheet when Adelaide entered the room with the doctor. “How are you feeling, *Frau Schroder*?”

“Terrible.”

“All right, now tell me everything. Show me where it hurts.”

She indicated her upper stomach and her belly. The doctor nodded. “Now tell me what you ate. Tell me everything you put in your mouth.”

In a weak voice, Tilda responded. The doctor listened without a word while standing by quietly. The doctor nodded, then he turned to Adelaide and said in a gentle voice, “I am

going to examine *Frau* Schroder now. So, you will need to leave the room.”

“Yes, doctor.”

Adelaide left and walked to the bathroom, where she blotted her wet hair with a towel. Then she went into the living room, where she was surprised to find that Edmon had done as she asked. The pot where the bad food had been cooked was cleaned and hung back on its hook. And all three children’s diapers and sleepers had been changed, and they were now sleeping quietly in their beds.

Adelaide glanced at Edmon, surprised at how much he’d accomplished. “Thank you. This was very helpful,” she said. *He is more capable than he lets on. I almost have to blame Tilda for his laziness. She never let him do anything. He needs more responsibility, and when he shirks it, he must be punished like a child. His food should be taken away or some other form of punishment.*

A little while later, the doctor came downstairs. He looked grave. “I am sorry to say that your mother-in-law is very sick,” he said. “I think she has a bad case of food poisoning. She confided in me that she purchased some fish on the black market. She’s very dehydrated right now. I gave her something. But she is in bad shape. If she were younger and stronger, I would be more optimistic.”

“Is she dying?” Adelaide asked in disbelief.

“Only time will tell. But, like I said, she is very ill.”

Edmon began to cry. Adelaide glanced at him, and a wave of pity came over her. *He loves her. He has never shown it. At least not for as long as I have known him. But he does. And he is dependent upon her, and he knows it. So am I. So are the girls. She’s the backbone of this family.*

“What can I do? How can I help her?” Adelaide asked.

“Nothing really, just make her comfortable. Time will tell.”

Adelaide asked in a small voice, “Can I pay you over time?” Although she was uncertain about how she could



continue to work if Tilda could not take care of the children. Her mind was racing. *I hate to turn to my mother. But I have no choice. There is no one else. I will have to ask my mother for help. I can't count on Edmon.*

“You needn't pay me. It's all right. For now, I've done what I can,” the doctor said as he slipped his coat on and opened the door. Then he quietly walked down the stairs of the building and outside into the rain, which was falling even faster now. Adelaide felt a sense of dread as she watched the doctor through the front window, and her heart was heavy.

## CHAPTER 28



**T**ilda Schroder did not last the night. She went quietly with Edmon and Adelaide by her side. Adelaide took a bus to work to inform them she would need a few days off. Ernst was very kind and accommodating.

The funeral was modest. Tilda spent most of her time caring for her family. So, she didn't have many friends. There weren't many mourners. However, to Adelaide's surprise, Ernst Decker, her boss, came to the funeral. He was dressed in a black suit and stood in the corner by himself. When she saw him, he nodded at her, his face full of sympathy. She returned his nod. But she was too devastated at losing Tilda to care much about his presence. *Tilda has been more of a mother to me than my own mother ever was. She has been a friend and such a help with everything. How am I ever going to get along without her?* Adelaide asked herself, but she had no answers.

After the burial, the few neighbors who did show up walked over to Adelaide and Edmon to say they were sorry for the loss of Tilda. Then, as Adelaide stood alone with the wind blowing across her face, tangling in her hair, *Hauptmann* Decker walked up to her. In a gentle voice, he said, "Take as much time off work as you need to get settled. I know your mother-in-law was your friend and your babysitter. Do you know what you are going to do about getting someone to watch the children?"

"Yes, I am going to move back in with my parents, and my mother will help me."

He nodded.

Adelaide felt so empty, but she didn't cry at the burial. She stood quietly and watched as Tilda's casket was lowered into the earth. It seemed unreal to her. She was in shock, unable to grasp the situation fully. But once she was back at home, the grief and pain of her loss became unbearable. She wept as she fed the children. She could not bear to think of a future without Tilda. But the children still needed to be cared for. So, she took them, bathed each little girl one at a time, and then put them to bed.

After the girls were asleep, Adelaide was on her way to her room when Edmon asked, "What about us? We need to eat too. There's no food in the house for us."

"I'm not hungry."

"But there's nothing to eat here. What am I going to do?"

"How should I know? Go and find something. Go out and work and buy food. I don't know what else to say. I'm tired. I am going to bed." She glared at him. Then she went into her room and slammed the door. *He's going to have to get used to taking care of himself. I'm not Tilda and won't cater to his every need.* Adelaide thought as she got undressed. Then she got into bed. In the quiet darkness, now that she was alone and everything was done, she felt the loss even deeper, and again, she wept. She wept hard, bitter tears until the wee hours of the morning when, exhausted, she finally slept.

It was a fitful sleep filled with dreams. Some of them were good, and others were frightening. She finally woke after dreaming that she heard Tilda speaking to her. It was so realistic that she searched the dark room for her mother-in-law only to find herself alone when she opened her eyes.

*I dread this, but I must write to Leo and Alex and tell them about their mother.* She got up from the bed and turned on the small desk lamp. Then she sat down at the little writing desk in her room and composed two letters she planned to mail first thing in the morning. *I can't be sure they will ever receive these, but I have to try to get word to them. I'll tell them everything, including where I am going with the children.*

## CHAPTER 29



“I’m moving in with my parents and brother,” Adelaide told Edmon the following morning. “You’ll have to find a way to pay the rent here on your own.”

“But what will happen to me?”

“You should have thought of that before you stole that emergency money from the jar.”

“I never knew you were so mean. If Tilda had known this...”

“I am too tired to fight with you. I have three little children to take care of. And I must return to work because, unlike you, I can’t depend on other people to pay my bills. Unfortunately, I can’t trust you to care for the children while I am working. You’ve proven yourself to be irresponsible, so I must move in with my mother.”

“I can care for the children while you work. I won’t disappoint you.”

“You already have. Edmon, you always disappoint me,” she said. “The rent is paid for the month. If I were you, I’d go out and find a job now so you won’t be out on the street when it runs out.” Then she walked away from him and went into her room to pack.

“Alex married a witch of a woman. Who knew? I am cursed.” He yelled after her. But she didn’t turn around. She pretended not to hear him.

After Adelaide was done packing, she waited for her mother to arrive to help her carry the children and the suitcase with their belongings back to her parents' house. She was grateful that her two older girls were able to walk, and even Margot was able to walk a little on her own. This made the grueling task of getting back to Adelaide's childhood home a little easier. But the children complained and cried because their feet hurt. And Adelaide took turns carrying each one of them. There wasn't much room for Adelaide and her children because after she'd married Alex, her parents had rented out her bedroom to an old gentleman.

"I'm sorry, Adelaide, but you won't have much privacy. You'll have to sleep in the living room with the girls," her mother said in a matter-of-fact tone. "It's the best I can do."

"It's all right, mother. I am just so glad that you are able to help me so I can continue to work. If you couldn't, I don't know what I would do," Adelaide said, but she thought she caught a look of disgust passing quickly over her mother's face. *She doesn't want to do this, but she feels obligated. So, she can't say no.*

Adelaide's mother had always been a hard disciplinarian. Growing up with her was difficult, and Adelaide was not happy to return to live with her again. She was very different from Tilda, who was warm and loving. Adelaide's mother was strict and cold. She could be outright mean if provoked. *Will she be tolerant of my girls? They are just little children. Will she understand? I should know better. She was never understanding with me and my brother. She was always hard and unaffectionate. I hope her cold, distant ways don't affect the girls. I wish I had another option. I wish I could stay home and care for them, but that's just impossible. We are going to need the money I earn even more now.*

As they walked quietly towards the house where Adelaide had spent the early years of her life, she felt herself tensing up. It had been much easier to deal with her parents and her past when she was not living with them. Now, she would be forced to look into her father's eyes every day and remember the terrible nights when he came to her room and forced her to do

unthinkable things. Her body shuddered as she closed her eyes and tried to forget. But even though she tried to forget, she couldn't. Adelaide had prayed to God to take away the hate she felt for her parents, but it still burned bitterly in her heart. She'd tried to tell her mother about those nights. It had been one of the hardest things she'd ever done. But after she'd wept and told her mother everything, her mother slapped her hard across the face and accused her of lying. In her eyes, Adelaide was not an innocent child. She was the enemy. This was never to be discussed again, her mother warned. And for several days after Adelaide had told her mother, her mother could not look her in the eyes. She was so angry that she told Adelaide to take her dinner and eat alone in her room. A week later, her mother seemed to forgive her. But this did not stop her father's visits, and she knew she must never try to ask for her mother's help again. So, she bore her pain in silence. Now, she was returning to this terrible house. And she was worried about her little girls. She didn't know how she was going to keep her girls out of her father's sight once they were old enough to suffer the same fate she had suffered at his hands. *He won't do anything now because they are babies. But I will have to do something if we still live here when they turn eleven or twelve. I know what he is capable of. If this war would only end, Leo would come home, and everything would be all right. Leo would help me. I can't count on Alex, but I know Leo would do whatever he could to help me find a safe place to live with my girls. I am so ashamed of what happened, and I would hate to have to tell Leo about the horrible things my father did. But I will tell him if I must, to protect my children. Dear sweet Jesus, please watch over my dear Leo, and please, I am begging you, keep him safe.* But even as these thoughts passed through her mind, she felt a pang of fear. Adelaide hadn't heard from Leo in a long time.

## CHAPTER 30



FRANCE 1917

It was during a sun shower. The rain was light. There was a rainbow in the distance as the platoon of handsome, healthy young men dressed in uniforms ran through the open field. Pop, pop, pop. The loud, intrusive sound of gunfire. The smell of sulfur. The air was heavy with smoke. It didn't seem real as the ground grew red and dark with blood, and the young men fell like rag dolls or puppets. If somehow, the ear-shattering rattle of gunfire could be silenced, and the men could be watched without sound, it might seem as if they were engaged in a macabre dance of death, twirling and falling to the ground. The blood was almost like a painting in different shades of red, as it ran like small rivers and pooled, soaking into the soil surrounding the dead.

"Keep moving," Leo said in a warning voice to his brother.

"I'm scared," Alex answered directly to Leo, but two other soldiers overheard him.

"I know. I'm scared, too. But we don't want to be left behind. The last thing we need is to be captured by the enemy. If you think dying on the field is bad, torture would be worse. So, don't stop moving, and move fast. Stay with me." Leo grabbed Alex's hand as he jumped into the nearest foxhole. Alex fell in after him. Then Leo peeked out to survey the situation.

"What is that smell? It stinks like garlic," Alex asked.

Leo didn't answer. He was watching the men running forward and wondering if he should stay in the safety of the foxhole or get out and run with them. Then he saw groups of German soldiers turning and running back towards him. They were screaming. Their hands covered their eyes, and mucus was running from their noses and mouths. Leo felt a sudden shot of panic shoot through him. "Get your mask. Put it on. Hurry."

Alex froze. "Do you think it's gas?"

"Yes, hurry up," Leo said as he grabbed the piece of cloth which he'd made into a mask. He checked it to make sure it was still wet from where he'd urinated on it. Then he quickly put it over his nose and mouth.

Alex searched for his face covering, but he couldn't find it. "I can't find mine," he said desperately. Then he began to cough, and although he could hardly speak, he said, "My eyes. My eyes."

Alex put his hands over his eyes and screamed. Leo rushed over to him and put the rag he'd made into a mask over his brother's eyes. Leo was finding it even harder to breathe without the mask. His lungs were on fire. But he knew he must not stay here. The foxhole was no longer safe. He must take Alex and find a way to get far away from the gas. So, he grabbed Alex by the shirt and pulled him out of the foxhole. Alex was still crying and holding his eyes. He couldn't see. Leo ignored Alex's crying. Instead, he held on to his brother tightly and dragged him as he tried to run away from the battle and the terrible effects of the mustard gas. Leo couldn't take a minute to look down at Alex. He just held on to his collar and ran. Alex began to run with Leo, but then he tripped and fell. Somehow, he lost the cloth he had been holding over his nose and mouth. Alex was weeping hard now, but Leo refused to pay any attention to his complaining. He lifted Alex up, and once again, holding on to him tightly, they began to run. The sounds of the gunfire and the men screaming in pain filled the air. And for a split-second, Leo thought, *I will be haunted by this sound for the rest of my life.*



It seemed like they were running forever. But finally, Leo was completely out of breath. He could no longer carry Alex and run. So, he pulled his brother into a ditch and waited. Leo tested the air. *We must be far enough away from the gas to be all right because I can breathe.* But when he tried to take a deep breath, his lungs still ached from where they'd been burned. Then, for the first time since they'd begun running, Leo looked down at Alex, who was lying on his back and trying desperately to catch his breath. What he saw shocked him.

## CHAPTER 31



A week later, Adelaide returned to work. When he saw her, *Hauptmann* Decker called her into his office.

“Please, sit down. How are you doing?” he asked warmly. “Is there anything you need? Anything I might be able to do to help you?”

“We are doing all right. The children and I have moved in with my parents.”

“And your husband’s father? Is he with you, too?”

“No, my parents didn’t have enough room for him, I am afraid. So, he is living on his own.” She answered.

“I see.” He nodded. “And your mother watches the children for you now?”

“Yes.”

“It must be hard. But these are difficult times for all of us,” he said.

She nodded.

“Well, I would like to help you in any way that I can. Perhaps you will allow me to.”

She cocked her head, unsure of what he was trying to say.

“I can’t do much. But at least allow me to bring some food to your home. You see, because of my position, I get extra rations, and I don’t mind sharing them with you. They are too much for my family and me, but I’m sure they will help you and your family in these trying times.”

“Oh, that’s really not necessary.”

“I know you are fine on your own, but I would like to help. Would you please let me help you? I expect nothing in return. It’s just that you are such a good employee, and I would like to show you my appreciation for all the good work that you do here.”

*We could use the extra food.* “Thank you, but really, it’s not necessary.”

“All right.” He smiled at her. “Whatever you say.”

However, that Sunday, when a young messenger boy knocked on the door of her parents’ home delivering a package of food, she was surprised and deeply moved. She presented the package to her mother, who excitedly unpacked it. Inside, there were firm potatoes and fresh cabbage. And chocolate, which was so hard to get right now. But when her mother saw the thick slab of mutton, she let out a little gasp, and her eyes lit up. It had been a long time since they’d had a large slab of mutton like this.

“My goodness, who sent this?” her mother asked Adelaide.

There was no card inside, but Adelaide knew who it was from. “It’s a gift from the place where I work.”

“From work? Who is it from at your job?”

“Does it matter, Mother? If you don’t want it, I’ll send it back.”

“Of course, I want it. But who would you send it back to?”

“Stop asking me questions, please?” Adelaide said. Her tone was snippy because she was annoyed.

Her mother slapped her hard across the face, and Adelaide was instantly transported back to the time when she was a little girl who was terrified of this woman. Inwardly, she was furious, but she couldn’t look directly at her mother.

“Don’t you dare open your mouth to me in that manner. When you speak to me, you will speak to me with respect. I am your mother. Don’t you ever forget it,” her mother said, then she began to put the food away.

Adelaide stared down at the ground. She had been away from her mother's house for several years now. Why didn't she have the courage to stand up to her mother? She hated herself for being weak. *I am a grown woman now, and I am still afraid of her. I wish sometimes I could slap her back and let her know that she would not treat me that way anymore. Oh, how I wish I could afford to leave here. I hate my mother and father. But even worse, I don't trust my father with the girls. I know they are only babies, but after what he did to me...*

Adelaide's mother stood staring at her with her eyes glaring. She was daring Adelaide to challenge her.

Adelaide did not speak. She stood up and left the room with a red impression of her mother's hand still burning on her cheek.

## CHAPTER 32



The following day was Monday, and Adelaide went to work. She was planning to go to Ernst's office and thank him as soon as she put her things away. But he was waiting for her at her desk. "Good morning," he said cheerfully.

"Good morning," she said, "and thank you for the food. It was very kind of you."

"I was hoping you wouldn't be angry."

"Angry?"

"Yes, well, you told me not to send you any food. But, when I went to the market, I just couldn't resist. I thought you and your family would enjoy having a special Sunday dinner."

"I'm not angry. Not at all. I am grateful." She sighed. "It was very kind. Thank you for sending it. We all enjoyed it."

"Adelaide?"

"Yes."

"I know that this is a bold question. And I hope you will forgive my being so forward. But will you have dinner with me tonight?"

"Oh." Her hands began to tremble. "I couldn't. I must get home. The children... I mean... my mother will be expecting me, too."

"Yes, I am sure she will. But... you could tell her you were detained in an emergency at work. I'm sure you've told her

that you work for the government and that sometimes you will be late because of emergency situations.”

“Yes, I have explained that to her,” Adelaide admitted because she had told her mother.

*Dinner in a restaurant. It would be such a pleasure to be away from my parents for an evening. I am ashamed to admit it, but I would also enjoy having a quiet evening where the girls weren't crying or fussing. I am either working at a highly intense job or dealing with my family. Sometimes, I would just like a break from it all. I know I am a married woman, and I should say no. But this man has been so kind to me. And it's just dinner. It's only one quiet dinner.*

“I hate to lie to my mother,” she said sincerely, but her resolve was weakening.

“I know. I understand. But you could use the night out. Couldn't you?”

“I really could,” she admitted.

“So, will you have dinner with me, then? I know a lovely little place that I really think you will enjoy. Just say yes.”

Adelaide paused for a moment, then something came over her, and the single syllable ‘yes’ whispered from her lips.

## CHAPTER 33



**T**hey went to a small, intimate café a few streets away from work. It was a lovely candlelit room with a table covered in white tablecloths. Ernst ordered a bottle of red wine. When it arrived, he poured two glasses. Then he raised his glass and toasted to the wonderful job she was doing. Adelaide blushed, but she sipped her wine. She had never tasted wine like this.

“It’s wonderful,” she said, smiling at him.

“I knew you’d like it,” he said, smiling. And she couldn’t help but think he was incredibly handsome. Then he continued, “Please, order whatever you would like.”

She ordered pork schnitzel, and he ordered the same. It was prepared perfectly.

“Do you like it?” he asked when she took her first bite.

“It’s delicious,” she admitted.

“I’m glad.”

The conversation was so pleasant that she forgot about her troubles for a little while. Ernst was charming and funny as he entertained her with lighthearted stories of the time he spent in the army. She knew that beneath all these amusing tales, there must be memories of the battlefield filled with horror and pain. But he did not mention them. And in spite of the guilt she felt for having accepted this dinner with Ernst, she was really enjoying herself. For the first time since Leo had left to go to war, she was laughing out loud. It was a wonderful evening.

A little while later, Ernst asked her, “You must get lonely without your husband. You do, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

“So, what do you do about it?”

“Nothing, because I am not the sort of woman who takes on lovers. I think it’s important that you know that. Having dinner with you is very nice, and I am enjoying it very much. But, *Hauptmann* Decker...”

“Ernst.”

“Ernst,” she said, then she cleared her throat, “I am not a child, and I know what you expect of me in exchange for all of this. I must make it clear right now that I cannot give you what you want. I have a husband and little children to think of. My reputation is important. If not for my own sake, then for theirs.”

He hesitated, and for a moment, he didn’t speak. Then he looked into her eyes and smiled. “How do you know what I expect? Perhaps I don’t really expect anything at all. Perhaps I, too, get lonely and am just happy to have the company of a beautiful lady for a quiet dinner.”

“But you have a wife. Isn’t she company enough?”

“No. Sadly, we don’t have a good marriage. You see, we’re both from affluent families. From the time we were young children, our families expected that someday we would marry. But we have very little in common. She’s a hard woman. Very cold.”

“I see. And so, you are looking for warmth outside your marriage, is that it?”

“I am only asking that you be a friend to me. I don’t expect you to be my lover.”

She blushed and looked away.

He continued, “All I ask is that you have dinner with me sometimes. Like a friend, someone to talk to. Once a week would be lovely. I mean, if that is all right with you? Nothing



more. Just a quiet dinner, with a nice conversation. I ask for nothing more.”

*Dinner. I know where this could lead. But perhaps he is telling me the truth. Perhaps it won't lead to anything else. If he is willing to be friends. I could give him friendship. I do enjoy his company. And, of course, I've enjoyed this fantastic food. Although I hate to admit it even to myself, it is flattering that he is so attracted to me.*

At the end of the meal, he asked her if he could drive her home. “My car is right by the office. We could walk back there, and then I could drive you home.”

“That’s very kind of you. But no, thank you. I can take the bus.” She was thinking of her mother watching out the window when she arrived. If her mother saw her get out of a car with a man driving, she would never hear the end of it.

“I understand, but if you prefer to take the bus, I can take it with you just to make sure you get home safely.”

“No, please. I prefer to go home on my own,” she said. *He is such a gentleman. He has so much class and breeding.*

“Very well. Whatever you wish. But I will walk you to the bus stop. Would that be all right?”

“Yes, that would be nice.”

They walked to the bus stop. Ernst sat beside her on the bench, waiting until the bus arrived. When he saw the bus turn around the corner, he said, “Well, it looks like we have to say goodnight. Your bus is here.”

“Yes, so it is. Thank you, Ernst, for a lovely evening.”

Then, just as she was about to board the bus, he reminded her that she had agreed to have dinner with him again the following week. “I’m looking forward to it,” he said as she climbed the stairs and found a seat. Several other passengers boarded. Adelaide glanced out the window and saw him standing by the bench where they’d waited for the bus. He was so handsome that it made her heart ache. He waved, and she waved back. Then, the bus pulled away.

When she walked into her house, her mother was awake and waiting for her. Adelaide could see that she was angry. “Where were you?” she asked.

“I had to take some special training for my job. They scheduled it for after work. So, for the next few months, I am going to be in class one night each week.” She didn’t expect to be having dinner with Ernst every week, but this lie would give her the opportunity to do so if she chose to.

“And, this class is mandatory?”

“Yes, mother. It is. And I need this job, as you know.”

“Yes, you do.” Her mother calmed down.

“Where are the children?”

“Asleep. Where do you think they would be at this time of night?”

It was only eight o’clock, but it was past their bedtime. “Thank you for putting them to bed for me.”

“Well, of course. But it wasn’t me who gave them their bath. You can thank your father. It was him.”

Adelaide suddenly felt cold all over. She shivered. *They are too young for him to do the terrible things he did to me, aren’t they? But why would he volunteer to bathe them? He’s never been one to take on extra work. What if he has already started to touch them? I can’t trust him. I have to get these children out of here. I can’t let them suffer the same way I did. I won’t.*

“What’s the matter with you?” her mother asked, but her tone warned Adelaide not to say what she was thinking. “Your face has turned gray. Have you had anything to eat?”

“Yes, mother. I’m fine. They brought food into the office, so I already ate,” Adelaide said. “I’m going to bed.”

Adelaide wasn’t fine. She couldn’t sleep. The terrible memories of her father coming to her room at night haunted her. She thought about the terrible things he did to her and how he told her that if she ever said a word to anyone, he would send her away to an orphanage. And she remembered how

angry her mother had been when she finally found the courage to tell her. Now, she is an adult and should be brave enough to confront the situation. But she couldn't. *They are still just babies. When I moved here, I thought I had a couple of years before I had to get them out of this house. I can't remember the exact age when he first started doing those things to me, but I was at least eight. Oh, dear God, what have I done? It's a terrible mistake to trust my parents to watch my children.*

That night, Adelaide didn't sleep at all. She wished Leo were home. He was the only person she felt she might find the courage to talk to about what her father did. He would understand, and he would not judge or blame her. But, of course, he wasn't there. Sadly, she remembered how she had been ashamed to tell him when they talked. Once or twice, she'd come close, but something had always stopped her. She still didn't know what had stopped her. Perhaps it was the fear that he would look at her and think about her father's horrible visits to her bedroom or her mother's frightening disciplinary tactics, including terrible beatings. *I must be crazy thinking I could tell Leo all about this. How could I ever explain my childhood to someone like him? He was raised by Tilda, and she loved her sons so much that she would never have beaten them as my mother did. And as far as my father, I couldn't bear for him to have that picture in his mind. It would bring me such shame.*

At that moment, she decided the best thing to do was to never tell anyone her fears for her children. But the following day, when she was having lunch with Ernst, she broke down. Perhaps it had been the lack of sleep, or maybe she had no one else to turn to, but she felt weak and vulnerable. She needed to talk. And because she was broken down, she told him everything. She told him things she never thought she could tell anyone, the ugly things her father did to her, the horrible response of her mother. His face was a mask. He didn't say a word. He just listened in silence. Then he looked at her, and there was sympathy, not judgment, in his eyes as he said softly, "I think I can help you."

"But how?"

“You can’t stay with your parents. You can’t trust your father with those little girls. I will get you an apartment. I’ll pay for it. I know you don’t earn enough to pay rent in a decent place and pay a babysitter for the girls. So, I’ll help you. Each week, I’ll bring food too. What do you say?”

*I will be obligated to him if I agree with this plan of his. But I can take my girls away from my parents. The children and I will have our own place to live. My little ones will be safe. But I am not a fool. I know that Ernst is going to expect more from me than just a thank you. Well, I’ll do what I have to do for my children. But when my husband comes home, it’s over. I will tell Ernst that. My father is a monster. He may already have done things to my little girls. Unthinkable things. Well, I am not proud of what I am going to do. But, I must admit that I would rather become Ernst’s mistress than have my children molested by my father and beaten by my mother. They are innocent, just like I was once long ago. I would hate to see their innocence destroyed the way mine was.* She heaved a sigh. Then she looked into Ernst’s eyes. He looked so sincere, almost like a young teenage boy in love. *I hope God will understand. I hope he will forgive me.* She thought as she put her marriage vows out of her mind. She refused to think about what would happen when Leo and Alex returned. Instead, she put her entire focus on the safety of her children. Then she said, “What can I say? I am so grateful that you want to help me.”

“So, you’ll allow me to help you, then?”

“If you are sure that this is not an imposition.”

“I am sure. It would be my honor to help you.” He smiled warmly. “I’ll find a place for you to live that’s not far from here, so it will be easy for you to come to work. I’ll spend tomorrow morning looking. So, don’t be concerned if I come into the office late. Now, as far as a babysitter is concerned, there is a very nice girl who works on the switchboard. Her name is Catrin. Do you know her?”

“Yes, well, I don’t actually know her, but I know who she is. The pretty blonde who sits at the end of the board all the way to the right, is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s her. She asked me if I could help her by giving her extra work or extra hours because she is in need of money. I haven’t been able to offer her anything thus far, but a babysitting job should help. I can arrange her hours so she is on a different shift than you. If she agrees to take the job working for you, I’ll change her shift here to midnight. That way, she can babysit during the day. What do you think?”

“I think that would be fine. I mean, I don’t know her, but if she works all night like that and then watches the children during the day. But when would she sleep?”

“After she was done babysitting for you, she could go home, get some rest, and then come in and work the night shift here on the switchboard.”

“If she is willing, I am willing to try it.” Adelaide smiled. “It’s better than leaving the girls with my parents all day.”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll speak to her tomorrow.”

Adelaide smiled at him. He returned her smile. Then he said in a soft voice, “We better get back to work.”

“Yes, of course,” she said.

## CHAPTER 34



**T**hat night, when Adelaide returned home, she noticed that her children were fussier than usual. They were crying and out of sorts. She felt their heads to see if they were warm, but they weren't. However, when she went to change Trudy's diaper, she saw a large black and blue mark on the child's backside. Adelaide gasped. *I would bet that my mother hit her. I wish I could get my children out of my parent's home tonight rather than waiting another minute.*

The following day, Ernst walked into the office beaming. He was only a half hour late. When he spotted Adelaide, he winked at her. She smiled at him, but her lips were quivering. She assumed he'd found her a place. But she was nervous about the entire setup. Still, after what she saw last night, she knew she must go through with it.

Ernst didn't call her into his office. He waited until lunchtime to talk to her. "I have good news," he whispered so no one at the other tables could hear him.

Although neither of them mentioned it, they could see by the way people stared at them that the other people who worked in their office had taken notice of the fact that they ate lunch together every day.

"Tell me," Adelaide whispered.

"By the way, you do look lovely today."

She did look exceptionally pretty with her blond hair braided and wrapped around her head.

"Thank you, but please, tell me." She was shaking.

He laughed. "I just wanted to keep up the suspense for another moment. You look so pretty when you are nervous."

"That's not nice," she said, but she wasn't really angry. "Just tell me the news already."

Ernst clicked his tongue, "You have no patience," he said teasingly. Then, still whispering, he went on. "Well, all right. Here's the news. I found you an apartment that's within walking distance from here. It has two bedrooms. So, it has plenty of room. It has a nice kitchen and even a lovely bathroom right in the apartment, so you won't have to share a bathroom with the other people down the hall."

Adelaide closed her eyes for a second.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Is there something I forgot? Oh yes, I spoke with Catrin. She said she was sorry, but she couldn't take the job. However, on my way here this morning, I stopped at the market to have a cup of coffee and met a young lady living in the area. She has a child of her own and is more than willing to babysit if she could bring her little boy with her. He's three, a bit of a handful, but also rather adorable. I saw him. He was with her this morning."

"Thank you for everything," she said, closing her eyes again, fighting back tears of joy. "I'd like to meet her. And if we decide that she is right for the job. I understand that she needs a place for her child. So, of course, she can bring her son."

"You're all right with that?"

"Yes, I am more than all right. I am happy. I need to hurry and get my children out of that house. How soon can we move in?"

"Today after work. I've already rented the apartment. I hope that's all right with you."

"Of course it is! Thank you so much, Ernst. I can't wait to get my babies out of that house."

"I've arranged it so you can take tomorrow off work to set up your new home. By the way, the girl I met this morning is Heidi Kraus. That's her name. I told her to come by the

apartment I rented tonight to meet you. I told her to bring her son. I think the little boy's name is Max.”

“All right. That will be wonderful. I am looking forward to meeting her,” Adelaide said. Then she hesitated for a moment. She knew she must say this even if it ruined everything. “Ernst,” she said softly, “I have to tell you something.”

“Yes, of course, tell me. What is it? You can tell me anything.”

“It's just that when my husband returns home, our arrangement will have to end. I want to be fair to you and let you know this in advance, even though I desperately need your help right now. I can't lie to you. I will have to return to my husband.”

“I know that. I have always known. It's all right, my dear. It's all right.”

“And I won't promise you that I will give you what you expect.”

“Now, then,” he smiled. “What is it you think I expect?”

“Well, I'm not a child. I know what men expect from women who they... well... take care of. And, well, Ernst, I'm not that kind of woman. Do you know what I am trying to say?”

He smiled reassuringly. “Of course I do. I would never expect you to compromise yourself for me. Now, stop worrying about all of this, and trust me. Everything is going to be just fine.”

She needed to hear that. And she allowed herself to be reassured. With a calm mind, she returned to her work.

That evening, Adelaide got the keys to her new apartment. Her parents were angry with her because they enjoyed the extra money she brought in every week. But she glared at them both. Then she turned to her father and said, “You were an animal. You did things to me that are disgusting and unspeakable. I can't forgive you, and I can't give you the chance to do those things to my children.”



He was speechless.

Then she turned to her mother and said, “You are despicable. How could you allow it, mother? And the way you beat me was horrific, but when you hit my daughter, that was unforgivable.”

“You are an ungrateful child, Adelaide. You always were. You made up terrible stories about things you said your father did to you. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Oh, but you know those stories were true. In your heart, Mother, you know.”

Then Adelaide put her daughters into their pram and left. She walked to the apartment, where she lay a blanket down on the hardwood floor. Then she took the little girls out of the pram and put them on the blanket while she began to set up the apartment. Then, as promised, Heidi knocked on the door. Adelaide opened it.

“You must be Heidi? I’m Adelaide.”

“Yes, I am. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“And who is this little man?” Adelaide asked, smiling and looking down at the little boy beside Heidi.

“This is Max, my son.” Heidi’s son, Max, was a helpful little boy Adelaide found charming.

When Adelaide introduced Heidi to the girls, Trudy was afraid of her. She was a stranger, and Trudy did not take well with strangers. She cried and begged for Adelaide to pick her up. But Heidi shook her head and said, “Come and sit on the floor with me.” I am going to play with her. Let her get used to me with you around. It would be good if you played too. Adelaide shrugged and agreed to try it. At first, Trudy continued to reach for her mother, but then Heidi began to play with a doll with Adelaide. Trudy was intrigued, and soon, she was willing to play with Heidi. By the end of the meeting, she was allowing Heidi to hold her on her lap. The other two girls took to Heidi immediately. “See, it’s all going to work out just fine,” Heidi told Adelaide. “I’m good with children.”

“Yes, I think it will work out well. When can you start?”

“Is tomorrow too soon?”

“Yes, I am going to be home until the end of the week. Then, I’ll be returning to work. So, that’s when I’ll need you.”

“Sounds good,” she said, looking around at the empty rooms. “I’m assuming you’re moving in?”

Adelaide nodded.

“I could come and help you by watching the children while you organize things around here. No charge, of course.”

“That’s very kind of you. I would like that very much.”

“And it is ok that I will bring Max with me?”

“Of course. He would be more than welcome.”

Adelaide knew why Trudy was afraid of strangers. She had seen bruises on Trudy’s little body, and she knew they had been inflicted by her mother. For some reason, her mother had seemed to dislike Trudy, and she was harder on her than the other two girls. Not that she was kind to Margot or Matilda, but she was most vicious towards Trudy. Adelaide and her daughters had only lived with Adelaide’s parents for six months, but it was long enough to scar Trudy. And now she was a difficult child who trusted no one completely, not even Adelaide. Sometimes, Trudy cried for no reason at all. But Heidi had tremendous patience. She picked Trudy up and held her until she stopped crying. Then, in a soft voice, she soothed Adelaide’s fears. “She’ll grow out of it,” she promised.

Max was a delight. He was an attractive, mild-mannered child, toilet-trained and quiet. Adelaide adored him almost immediately. He sometimes sat beside her, quietly looking at the pages of a picture book. She ruffled his blond hair and thought he must be an old soul because he was mature for being only four years old. Before she’d met Max, Adelaide had been worried that Max would be jealous of his mother’s attention to the other children. But he wasn’t. Instead, he tried to be helpful. Sometimes, he would bring Heidi a fresh diaper when he thought she was going to change one of the girls, and he would always play with the girls while his mother made food for them.

Ernst visited Adelaide at the apartment one evening a week and sometimes on Sunday for an hour or two. He brought toys and played with the children. He often brought gifts for Adelaide, and sometimes he even brought chocolate. He was always a gentleman. Several months passed, and he made no attempt to take her to bed. And because of this, she grew more comfortable with him all the time. When they were at work, they kept their arrangement secret but exchanged knowing smiles across the room. But they still ate lunch together every day, and Adelaide knew that the girls resented her for it, but she hardly cared. It was good to have a man in her life again, even if both he and she were married to other people. She justified her situation by telling herself that they were only friends. *After all, we have never been lovers.* But then, one night, things changed. It was very late when Ernst arrived at Adelaide's apartment and was very drunk. She had been asleep, so when she heard the knock on the door, it frightened her. "Who is it?" she asked, standing in her robe with her hair in pin curls.

"Ernst. I must see you."

She opened the door. Outside, the rain poured down in sheets, and he was soaked. "Come in. Let me take your coat and hat. Are you all right?"

"I was furious with Marta today. What she did was foolish. But now I feel bad. I hate to see women cry." He shook his head. "After I thought about it, I realized she didn't say anything that terrible. I handled it all very poorly. I should never have embarrassed her in front of the entire staff. It would have been more professional to call her into my office and quietly let her go. I mean, I had to let her go. Her judgment is not good for this job. I can't trust her not to say the wrong thing. You know?" Ernst walked into Adelaide's apartment and plopped down on the sofa. Then he asked her for a beer. She didn't argue with him. She just brought him one, even though it was easy to see that he'd had enough alcohol.

It had been an intense day at work, and one of the girls on the switchboard had made a crucial mistake, accidentally

talking too long with a caller with whom she had shared too much information. Ernst had overheard her, but it was too late. She had already said too much. He lost his temper, which was unusual for him. In fact, he yelled at the girl and made her cry in front of everyone in the office. Then he fired her. She'd run out of the building, still in tears. At the time, he'd been furious. Adelaide watched him slam the door to his office, where he'd stayed for the rest of the day.

"Come, Adelaide, sit beside me and make me feel better. Come and tell me what a kind and generous fellow I am. I need to hear that right now," he said bitterly.

"You've always been kind and generous with me, Ernst."

"Have I? And haven't you always known that the day would come when I would expect payment for my generosity? You always said it. Didn't you? Well, it's time to pay up, my dear. I'm sure you've been expecting this."

She was stunned. This was a conversation she didn't want to have. Adelaide and the girls were comfortable in this small, clean apartment, far away from the pain and fear of living with Adelaide's parents. The children had put on weight and were looking healthier than ever. Trudy was finally getting used to Heidi, and she was no longer screaming when she was held. In short, Adelaide was beginning to believe that the horrors of living with her parents were in the past. *And now, it's time to pay.* She felt a shiver run up her spine. "You don't mean that, Ernst. You're drunk."

"I'm drunk, yes. That's quite true. But I do mean it. I do."

"I don't know what to say," she said in a soft, pathetic voice. She wanted to cry, to make him pity her. But she dared not make him angry because he might tell her to take the girls and get out if she did. Then, she would have to return to her parents' home.

"There's nothing to say, dear. Either you care for me, or you don't. But I have to believe that you must have some affection for me. Don't you?"

“I do,” she said. She wasn’t lying. She cared for him and appreciated all he did for her. There was no doubt in her mind that she found him attractive. After all, he was a handsome man. But he was married, and so was she, and she didn’t like the idea of having sex with a man who was not her husband.

“Then this should not be difficult for you.” He smiled. “I’ve done a lot to prove myself worthy of your affections.” He smiled; his voice had a lilt to it, as if he were jesting. However, Adelaide knew he was very serious. She knew what he expected. And the time had come for her to either move out of this wonderful place or pay up for all he’d given her.

“Yes, you have.” Her voice was barely a whisper. She closed her eyes and saw her father’s face in her mind’s eye. A shiver ran down her back. She felt bile rise in her throat, but she knew she must not vomit. Swallowing hard, she kept her eyes glued to the floor. *This is not the Ernst I have come to know. This man is horrible. He reminds me of my father.* And like it had been when she was just a helpless child, Adelaide knew she must close her eyes and allow it to happen. Ernst didn’t say another word. He reached over and took her hand. Then he led her to the bedroom. It was late Autumn, and there was a chill in the air. She shivered as he removed her robe and then her nightgown.

“Take those pins out of your hair. I love your hair when it’s loose.”

She nodded and did as he asked, but her fingers trembled as he took down her pin curls. Her hair fell, brushing her shoulders.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” he said, slurring his words.

There were so many things she wished she could say. She wanted to tell him that she didn’t want to do this. At least not this way. But her voice froze in her throat. And when she closed her eyes, she saw her father’s face looming over her.

As a child, she’d survived her father’s visits by escaping from him in her mind. She would imagine herself in her mother’s sewing room, designing intricate dresses for her dolls. She would focus hard on the details, the color of the

fabric, the darts and pleats, and fancy buttons. And somehow, this would help her get through those terrible hours. Now, she closed her eyes and thought of the children. She forced herself to remember why she needed to keep this apartment. He touched her breast, and the room began to spin. She felt Ernst's hands on her body, tracing every curve, and she wanted to cry. Adelaide closed her eyes so she didn't have to look at Ernst. Tears escaped her eyes and ran off the sides of her face. Then, in her mind's eye, she saw Leo's face and felt shameful and sad. *Why is it that I am more concerned with what Leo thinks of me than I am with upsetting my own husband?* She closed her eyes even tighter, and in her mind, she heard Leo's voice. *"It's all right, Addie. Do what you have to do for now. I'm coming home soon, and once I get home, you'll never have to do anything like this again. I promise you. You'll see. I'll take care of you and the girls."*

## CHAPTER 35



**A**n open field somewhere in France.

Leo carried his brother on his back all the way to the makeshift hospital. His arms shook from the weight of his brother's limp body. But he dared not stop to check and see if Alex was still alive. Leo was certain that if he put Alex down for a moment, his muscles would tense up, and he would be unable to carry Alex any further. When they finally arrived at the makeshift hospital, Leo looked around him. Alex was not the only man who'd been burned by the mustard gas. There were men all around. Some were on stretchers, others were lying on the ground. Some were severely burned, and their skin was red and blistering. Leo steeled himself as he looked down at his brother for the first time since he'd first seen the damage that had been done by the gas. A mixture of strange emotions overwhelmed him. Alex's entire face was badly burned, but he was breathing. He was still alive. Leo stared at Alex's ruined face, and a strange thought came to him. *He was always the handsome one. The fellow that charmed all the girls. From the day he was born, I had to learn to be second best. And I did learn it, and I always did my best for him even though I had to fight feelings of jealousy. There is no reason to envy my poor brother anymore. His face is gone. People will be repulsed by him now.*

Leo was ashamed of his thoughts, yet he couldn't help himself. *And Adelaide. Dear sweet Adelaide. She will think of me as a hero for rescuing Alex. Or will she? He was never a good husband to her. Now, of course, that he is no longer handsome, he won't have so many opportunities to run around*

*with other women. They won't fall at his feet anymore. Leo was unsure of how he felt. In a way, it felt good to see Alex lose his advantage over him, but at the same time, it hurt Leo to see Alex suffering. I love my brother. I've been his protector since we were little boys.*

Leo had always thought that Alex was weak. But he was wrong. Alex proved to have a strong constitution. He didn't die from his burns. But when he saw his new face, he became very depressed. Alex spent the winter recovering in a hospital while Leo went back to fight on the front lines. Leo was worried about his brother, but he worried more about Adelaide. Whenever he could, he sent letters and money to his parent's address, but he never received an answer from his parents or Adelaide. In his letters to Adelaide, he told her about what had happened to Alex, and now that she hadn't written back to him, he regretted doing so. He wondered if she had stopped writing because she was shocked and devastated by the news. Leo wished he could go home, hold her in his arms, and promise that he would somehow make everything right. At night, he dreamed of her and woke up with such longing that he sometimes wept.



## CHAPTER 36



**E**rnst and Adelaide were finally lovers. However, their lovemaking turned out to be a terrible disappointment to Ernst. He knew about her father, yet he couldn't understand why she wasn't the lover he had hoped she would be. Making love to Adelaide was almost like making love to a dead woman. She lay beneath him without looking at him, subservient and not making a sound. A few months of this passed, and Ernst began to lose interest. Things had changed. Where he had once enjoyed playing with the children, he now found them annoying. The children were active and noisy, and they required a lot of Adelaide's attention. As time went on, he found that he had begun to hate going to see Adelaide. He no longer made any effort to look her way during working hours. And recently, he'd left her sitting alone in the lunchroom while he went to sit with Catrin, the new girl, who was pretty, flirtatious, and young. Adelaide felt rejected as she watched Ernst and Catrin. She could see by the way Ernst looked at Catrin that he found her beguiling. He never even turned his head to look at Adelaide.

For a while, Ernst continued to pay the rent for Adelaide's apartment. But he soon realized he no longer wanted any intimate relationship with her, so he stopped paying. When the landlord came to the door demanding payment, Adelaide asked him if he'd spoken with Ernst Decker.

"Yes, he came in and told me you are now responsible for the rent. He will no longer be paying it," the landlord said.

Adelaide shook with fear. "Please, give me a couple of days to see what I can do."

"I can give you until Friday. No longer. If you can't pay by Friday, you must go," he said, then left.

When Adelaide arrived at work the following morning, she knocked on Ernst's office door.

"Yes?" he said.

"It's Adelaide."

"Come in," he said, and she could hear the dread in his voice.

She walked into his office. Her eyes were red, and he knew she'd been crying. "Sit down," he said.

She did.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, and even as he did, he hated how his voice sounded. He knew he sounded crass and uncaring. And just looking at her made him feel guilty.

"Ernst," she whispered his name. "The landlord came to see me last night. He said you haven't paid the rent. I don't have enough money to afford to live in the apartment on my own. I didn't want to come to you. Believe me, I didn't. I know you've grown tired of me, and it brings me shame to be here and beg for your help. But I have no other choice." She began to cry.

He turned away; he couldn't bear to look at her. "It wasn't working out with us. You knew it too. I was hoping once you realized we weren't going to make it, you would be smart enough to find a second job so you could pay your own way."

"I didn't know it was over between us. I did everything you asked of me."

"But you never cared for me."

"That's not true, Ernst. I do care for you."

"Well, the way you made love to me didn't seem that way. Anyway, it doesn't matter now," he said. Then he took a deep breath. This conversation was annoying to him. She knew she

was putting him in a terrible position, but there was nothing she could do. She needed him, so she was willing to beg.

He sighed, then he said, “All right. I’ll give you the rent for one more month, but then you’re on your own.”

“Ernst, please. I have no one to turn to. Please help me. I can’t afford the apartment on what I earn. Is there any extra work I can do here at the office to make extra money? I’ll clean and do anything. But I can’t put my children out in the street.” She was begging him.

“One month. I’ll give you the money to pay for one month. Then you will have to be on your own. I think that’s very generous of me. If you can’t afford to live on your own, you’ll have to go back to your parents or your husband’s father’s house. I can’t help you forever.” He took some marks from his pocket and laid them on the desk. “Here, this will cover the month.”

She slowly picked up the money. *He can’t look at me.*

Ernst stared down at the papers on his desk. Just looking at her made him feel bad about himself. *I’m going to have to let her go. I can’t have her working here. Who knows what she might tell people about me, about us? But I can’t talk to her about it. I’ll just put a note in her pay envelope telling her she is fired.*

“Thank you,” she whispered, and she could hear the shame in her own voice.

He nodded as she left the office, and his thoughts turned to Catrin.

## CHAPTER 37



**A**delaide was devastated. She'd never been in love with Ernst, but she had trusted him, and now she was heartbroken and rejected. She felt that she had been used by Ernst. But more importantly, she was terrified because she knew she and her children faced an uncertain future. It had been terribly difficult to go into Ernst's office and beg him for help. And it had hurt to be discarded by him like a piece of trash. But because her children were little and dependent on her for their sake, she would bend her head and swallow her pride.

But even though she'd pleaded with him not to abandon her, he had made it clear in no uncertain terms that he was done with her. He'd given her just enough money to get her through one more month. Then she was on her own. *Somehow, I must get through the day. I must not let everyone here see me cry. They've all seen how Ernst no longer sits with me at lunch. Some of them pity me, others look at me, and I can see in their eyes that they think I got what I deserve.* She walked by Catrin's desk. Catrin glanced up at her, and a sly smile came over Catrin's face. It made Adelaide feel sick to her stomach. *Just look at that grin on her face. Catrin is so happy to have replaced me. It makes her feel good to watch me fall. What she doesn't realize is that he cheated on his wife with me, and now he has thrown me away. It's only a matter of time before he will tire of her, too. Then she will be tossed aside, just like I have been. This is the kind of man he is. She'll experience it soon enough.*

Adelaide went into the bathroom. She hid in a private stall where she took the money Ernst had given her out of her purse. She sat down on the toilet seat and counted it. It was just enough to pay the rent for one more month and not a penny more. *Everyone says the war is ending. And with God's help, Leo and Alex are safe and will come home soon. But while I am waiting, I must find a secure place for my children. I don't know which way to turn. My choices are not good. I am caught between two evils: my terrible parents and drunken father-in-law. My father-in-law would be the better choice. But I am sure he has probably lost the apartment by now. He's probably living on the street with the rest of the alcoholic bums. But I will have to go and see him.*

*Maybe by some miracle, he has managed to keep the apartment. And I would rather use a drunken alcoholic as a babysitter than go back to my parents. I am sure he won't want to help me after the way I left things. But he is money-hungry. So, If I tell him that I will pay the rent with my salary and even give him a mark or two for alcohol as long as he is willing to watch the girls, he might agree. And what about poor Heidi? I will have to let her go. I know she needs the job, but there is nothing I can do. I can't afford to pay her and pay the rent, too. I know she needs the money, and she's been wonderful with the children, but I'll just have to tell her that Ernst and I broke up, and now I can't afford her anymore.*

## CHAPTER 38



**A**delaide returned home late from work that evening. She was exhausted. So she was relieved to find that the girls had been fed and bathed. They were already in bed. “They might still be awake,” Heidi said. “I just put them down.”

Max was sitting on the floor, drawing a picture. Although he could be rambunctious at times, he was a good boy for the most part. For a few moments, Adelaide watched him. *How is it that he is such a smart boy? He is only a toddler, but somehow, he seems to understand that his mother needs his cooperation because his father is away at war.*

“I’ll go and kiss the girls goodnight,” Adelaide said.

“All right, I’m going to get going home then,” Heidi answered her. “I want to get Max to bed.”

“No, please,” Adelaide said, clearing her throat. “Can you please wait for just a moment? I need to speak with you.”

“Yes, of course.”

“I’ll be right back.” Adelaide slipped into the girl’s room. They were already asleep. She placed a kiss on each of their soft cheeks. Then she returned to the living room and sat on the chair across from the sofa where Heidi sat. “Heidi,” she began, “I have bad news.”

“What is it?” Heidi asked. There was genuine concern in her voice.

“I am going to have to move back in with my parents or my father-in-law. I am not going to be able to afford the rent here anymore. So I won’t be able to afford a babysitter.”

“I see,” Heidi said. She sucked in a deep breath. Then, in a small voice, she asked, “So, you and Ernst broke up?”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” Heidi said. “I suppose I should be going.” But she didn’t get up. Instead, she sat there for a few moments in silence.

Adelaide looked over at Heidi. She looked so lost. “I might have an idea.”

“I’m ready to try anything.” Heidi said, “Tell me your idea.”

“Well,” Adelaide said, “My salary is enough to pay the rent. But then, if I am working all day, I need a babysitter. And there is not enough money left over to pay for a sitter. Right?”

“Right.”

“Well,” Adelaide said, “Right now, you and I are paying rent on two apartments. Mine is a little bigger, so what if you moved in here and we split the rent? I earn a larger salary, so I would keep my job. But, unfortunately, you would have to work at night so that you could watch the children during the day. Would you be able to do that?”

“I could find a night job.”

“Then we could make it,” Adelaide said. “It won’t be easy, but at least we would both have a place to raise our little ones. We could split the rest of the expenses.” Then Adelaide asked, “The only problem is when would you be able to sleep?”

“When they nap. They take naps throughout the day. And besides, I don’t sleep well at night, anyway. So, I always sleep when they are napping,” Heidi said.

“It will be hard on you if you are working all night.”

“Yes, it will. But my son is the light of my life. So, I am more than willing to do this for him. What do you say? Should

we do it?”

“I say yes! Of course, I say yes,” Adelaide said. She was so relieved that she got up and hugged Heidi. “You don’t know how wonderful this idea sounds to me. I was backed up into a corner.”

“You saved us,” Heidi said. “Max and I need you, and you need us. We’ll be like a family.”



## CHAPTER 39



**H**eidi and Max moved in. The little family grew closer as the weeks passed. For the first time in Adelaide's life, she felt she had a real friend, a sister. Heidi got a job at one of the munitions factories. Adelaide was worried about the dangers of working at the munitions factory. She even tried getting Heidi a night shift job at the phone company. But Ernst refused to hire her. He was no longer willing to help Adelaide. He made it clear that she was lucky he was allowing her to continue working there and that if she bothered him too much, he would fire her. Heidi said she didn't mind working at the factory. She promised Adelaide that she would be careful. Even so, Adelaide was always worried. She tried to give Heidi extra time to sleep by doing household chores when she got home. But Heidi refused to let Adelaide carry the extra load. She made sure that she always did her part. And so, they prepared meals together, washed clothes together, cleaned the house, and cared for the children. And as their sisterhood bond grew, so did the bond between the children.

Adelaide found that she enjoyed having someone she could talk to about the price of turnips and whether it was worth the money to pay for bus fare or if she was better off just walking even though she was dead tired. It was nice to have a friend who understood her. Heidi told Adelaide about how much she loved and missed her husband. They had been childhood sweethearts. "We are very much in love," she said wistfully. "And you and Alex? How did you meet?"

Adelaide told Heidi about Alex and how they'd met and married. Then, as she and Heidi grew closer and became more

candid, Adelaide admitted to Heidi that Alex had turned out to be a disappointment. Then, one rainy night, when Heidi was off from work and the gray skies were making Adelaide feel melancholy, she and Heidi were drinking wine and talking. Perhaps it was the alcohol, or maybe it was just the need to share her feelings with someone, but Adelaide finally told Heidi about the deep friendship she shared with Leo. “Sometimes,” she admitted, “I think maybe I married the wrong brother.”

Another evening, several weeks later, when Heidi was off from work, and the children were in bed, the two women sat in the living room. This time, they did not have a bottle of wine. But they were close enough to talk about anything. “Did you ever think you might be in love with your brother-in-law?” Heidi asked.

“Me? In love with Leo?” Adelaide said. “I don’t think so. But...” she admitted, “Maybe I am. I don’t know.”

“I think so,” Heidi said.

“No, no, it’s impossible. I think maybe you’ve gone mad.” Adelaide laughed, although she knew there was some truth to Heidi’s statement. Then she asked, “Do we still have that little bit of *schnaps* in the cupboard?”

“Yep, we sure do,” Heidi said. They laughed, and Heidi got up and poured them a glass of *schnaps*.

## CHAPTER 40



**E**rnst called Adelaide into his office. Catrin, his new secretary, was sitting at her desk. She wore a very expensive cashmere sweater, and Adelaide was sure Ernst had given it to her. She smiled at Adelaide, but her smile was insincere, and it seemed to Adelaide that she was gloating. It had been over two months since their breakup, but he still felt uncomfortable every time he looked at her.

“Yes, *Hauptmann* Decker,” she said as she entered the room. “You called for me?” Adelaide was worried. She tried to stay out of his way because she could see that he was repulsed by her whenever he looked at her. And now, as she entered his office, she didn’t look into his eyes and was careful not to refer to him by his first name.

“I have something I must discuss with you,” he said, looking away from her.

“Yes,” she said, her breath catching in her throat. It felt strange sitting across from him. And as much as she told herself she didn’t care, she still felt the sting of his rejection. But she knew she must not let her hurt feelings get in the way. She dared not say an offensive word to him. Instead, she must show him respect because he had the power to fire her, and she needed this job.

“I am sorry, but I am going to have to let you go. We are overstaffed, you see,” he said, and she noted a twinge of apology in his voice. But she also knew they were not overstaffed. He just couldn’t bear to look at her every day now that he was no longer interested in her.

“Please,” she hated to beg, but in her mind’s eye, she saw the faces of her little girls, and she knew she must. “I need this job. I have no other way to feed my children.”

He didn’t meet her eyes. “I understand,” his voice was cold now, “but it’s not in my hands. I’ve been told by my supervisor that I am to let you go. So, Adelaide, I must do as I am told.”

There was no emotion in his voice. Not even when he said her name. She felt tears threaten to fall, but she refused to cry in front of him. Clearing her throat, she stood up and said, “All right. I’ll get my things and go.”

He nodded, still not looking at her.

Adelaide picked up her handbag from the floor where she’d put it when she sat down. Then she turned and left the room. She saw Catrin watching her and smiling. *Look at her. She’s evil, mean, and heartless. She’s happy to see me dragged through the mud. And I’m sure she told him she wanted me gone. From the look on her face, I’m sure she’s behind this.* Adelaide’s hands trembled as she took her jacket down from the coat rack. A few other women looked at her sympathetically as she walked out of the offices with her head bent and shoulders slumped. Without looking back, she made her way through the tunnel, which would take her out of the underground building for the last time.

All four children and Heidi were napping when Adelaide arrived at the apartment. She walked in and tossed her coat and handbag down on the table. Now that she was alone, tears spilled down her cheeks. She felt horrible and anxious. *I dread having to tell Heidi what happened. But I have no choice. But, tomorrow I will go out early in the morning and look for a job at one of the factories.*

If Adelaide had learned anything, the most important lesson she’d ever learned was that tears never fixed a single problem. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Then she stood up and went to the sink in the kitchen, where she splashed her face with cold water.

Heidi, who was always listening for the children, had learned to hear things even as she slept. When she heard the water running, she was afraid that Max had awakened and was now busy doing things he shouldn't be doing in the kitchen. Still half asleep, she got out of bed and ran into the kitchen. When she saw Adelaide, she couldn't hide the shock on her face. "What are you doing at home at this hour?" Heidi ran her hands through her disheveled hair.

"I got fired. Ernst let me go."

"What? Why?"

"You know all about Ernst and me."

"Yes..."

"Well, he has a new girlfriend who has taken my place not only in his heart but also at my old job. I have a feeling she wanted me gone. And he did it for her."

"Oh no," Heidi said. Then she went to the stove. "I'm going to put on a pot of water so we can have some tea. Then we'll figure out what to do next."

## CHAPTER 41



**T**hey sat across from each other, sipping the tea. “I’m going to look for another job in the morning,” Adelaide said. She didn’t feel so alone because Heidi was on her side, and it was nice to have someone else she could trust.

Heidi nodded. Then she thought for a moment. “You know, there is another choice.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I have a friend who lives in a house down the street. I’ve known her for years. She has two children, a girl and a boy. The other day, when I took our children to the park, she was there. We talked, and she told me she was losing her house because she couldn’t afford to keep it and to pay a babysitter, just like us. So, I wonder if she would be interested in an arrangement similar to the one we have. Only this time, she and I would keep our jobs, and you would be the full-time babysitter. You wouldn’t have to work outside the home at all.”

“That’s not fair to the two of you.”

“I think it could be. Listen to me. You could be in charge of the children, having the meals prepared, washing the clothes, and keeping the house while the two of us would pay the bills. What do you think?”

“I think that if she is willing, I would be elated.”

“I’ll go and speak to her tomorrow while you stay here and watch the children.”

Adelaide smiled. "There's something I have to tell you."

"Of course, go on."

"You know, Ernst was a terrible thing that happened in my life. But, even so, he did help me out when I needed it. However, what's more important is that he introduced me to you. And you have been a best friend to me, a godsend."

Heidi blushed. "I'm no godsend. I'm just a resourceful girl." Then she smiled and said, "I grew up poor, and I had to come up with ways to work things out even when I was very young. So, I guess those lessons stayed with me."

"Well, I'm certainly glad they did."

They smiled at each other.

The following day, Heidi got up early and went to see the neighbor. A half-hour later, she returned with a young woman who was holding the hands of two children. The woman looked tired and worn out. "This is Gretchen." Heidi introduced her to Adelaide, then she turned to Gretchen, "And this is my friend Adelaide."

"Allo," Gretchen said.

"Allo."

Heidi smiled at them both, then she took charge of the situation, and in an authoritative voice, she said, "Gretchen and I discussed everything, and she is very much in favor of the idea. She has a job right now at one of the factories where she works all night, just like I do. But she's been taking a terrible risk by leaving her children alone when they are asleep at night."

"Oh, my goodness, that must be difficult. You must be worried about them all night long," Adelaide said sympathetically.

"It's true, I am. But what could I do? I had to put food on the table, no?" Gretchen said.

"Of course," Adelaide agreed.

“This arrangement will work out well for all of us. Gretchen and I will sleep during the afternoon, and during that time, you will be in charge of watching the children,” she said to Adelaide. “Then, when we go to work at night, you’ll be at home with the children while they are asleep. So, they will never be home alone.”

“Yes. That sounds very good,” Adelaide agreed.

“So, you two would move into my house? It’s large enough for all of us. It has belonged to my husband’s family for centuries,” Gretchen said. “I can show it to you.”

“You go on, Adelaide. I’ve already seen the house. It’s very nice. I’ll stay here with the children,” Heidi said.

It wasn’t a far walk. Gretchen was warm and friendly; her two children were quiet and obedient. As they made their way to Gretchen’s house, she told Adelaide how grateful she was that Heidi had come up with this idea. “I know plenty of girls leave their young ones alone in the house at night while they work. But it was always difficult for me.”

“It would be difficult for me, too,” Adelaide agreed.

They walked up a short walkway to the house. There was a large shade tree and under it patches of grass. Heidi unlocked the door to the old house, and they entered. It was not the home of a rich family. That was easy to see. The furnishings were very worn. But it was clean and large enough to accommodate all three families. Adelaide breathed a sigh of relief. Once again, she had evaded disaster, and she was grateful.

“We are paid up on our rent at the apartment by the end of this month. So, if it’s all right with you, perhaps we could move in before the first of January.”

“That would be fine,” Gretchen said.



## CHAPTER 42



JANUARY 1918

**T**hey began to move their things into Gretchen's house the following week, but they weren't completely moved in until the first day of January. Adelaide felt a pang of sadness as she handed the key to the landlord. Even though, in the beginning, she had to put up with Ernst's advances, this apartment had been an escape from her parents. But that phase of her life was now over, and she had no choice but to embrace whatever the future had in store.

Gretchen's house was indeed quite large, but at the same time, it was drafty. And the children were always cold. But Adelaide had to look on the bright side. Because of how they'd arranged things, there was money left to afford warm clothes and blankets and plenty of food.

Often at night, after Adelaide put the children to bed, she lay in her room alone and unable to sleep. She would close her eyes, and in her mind, she would see Leo's face. Sometimes, she said a prayer, begging God to watch over him. And she often wondered if he had written to her and sent the letters to his parents' home. She'd been forced to move around so much that she knew it would be impossible for his letters to find her. And she doubted that her father-in-law would ever try to deliver a letter to her from Leo. That is if, by some miracle, he was still living in the house and had received mail for her. Many nights, she dreamed of Leo. Sometimes, those dreams were pleasant, but other times, her fears that something terrible had happened to him haunted her. On those nights, she would

dream of his dead body lying on a battlefield or burned beyond recognition. When she had those nightmares, she woke up breathless and afraid to go back to sleep. Then, one night at the end of February, she had a vivid dream. This dream was different than all the others. In her dream, Leo spoke to her. He told her that she should go and see his father. His father, he told her, had answers for her to all of her questions. Leo touched her hand, and the dream was so real that she could feel his warm flesh on hers. She'd laid her head on his shoulder and unburdened herself by telling him everything that had happened to her and the children since he'd been gone. He'd listened, and then he touched her cheek. Their eyes met. Adelaide wished she could go on sleeping forever, but she woke up to find that her pillow was soaked in tears. She had been crying.

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THE WINTER ADELAIDE and the girls moved into Gretchen's home had been exceptionally brutal. It snowed almost every day, leaving deep drifts that didn't melt. But her dream of Leo and his request that she speak to his father stayed with her. So, she decided that despite the weather, she must go and see her father-in-law. Unfortunately, even with the snow and ice on the ground, she would have to take all the children with her. One morning, she dressed all the children, and they began walking to her father-in-law's home. But one of Gretchen's two daughters fell on a patch of ice, and she began to wail. Max tried to help her, but she wouldn't take his hand. She sat on the ground, screaming. This triggered the rest of the bunch, and they, too, started to wail as they complained that they were cold. It was impossible to walk the three miles to her in-law's home. So, Adelaide took the children back to their house. Then she decided that as soon as the weather warmed up, she would make her way to the apartment where she had lived with her in-laws, hoping her father-in-law was still there. But if he wasn't, she thought he might have left a forwarding address.

## CHAPTER 43



MAY 1918

It was May before the weather broke. But the memory of Adelaide's dream of Leo and the message he gave her was still fresh in her mind. So, on a brisk but sun-kissed day, Adelaide dressed all the children. She told them she had to go and see someone, but if they were good, she would take them to the park after it was over. Then she put them in their pram and returned to the apartment to search for her father-in-law. To her surprise, he was still living there. The place smelled of sweat, alcohol, and rotting food. There were dirty dishes and clothes with dried sweat strewn on the floor. Edmon looked shocked when he answered the door and saw Adelaide standing there. "What do you want?" he asked curtly. She hadn't expected a warm welcome from him because she'd left him to fend for himself. But she looked around her and realized that somehow he had managed to keep this house. Adelaide didn't speak. Instead, she ushered all six children into the living room.

"What are you doing here?" he was even colder now. "How dare you bring all these children to my home?"

"I want to talk to you."

"About what? I have nothing to say to you." He glared at her.

"I want to know if you have heard anything from Leo. Did he send me any letters?"

"I'm not your secretary. I don't take mail for you."

She ignored his nasty comment and asked again, “Did he send any letters addressed to me?”

“No,” her father-in-law said, then he added, “Get out. Just take this nasty brood and be on your way.” He pointed to the door.

“I have to know if he’s all right.”

“Do you? Or do you want to know if he sent you any money?”

“I need to know if he’s all right, Edmon. Are you saying you haven’t heard from him? Is that what you’re telling me? Or have you? And have you heard from Alex?”

“I haven’t heard from either of them. They’re probably both dead by now. Just go home. I have nothing more to say to you. You have no business here anymore.”

Adelaide ignored him and asked boldly, “How are you affording to keep this place?”

“That’s not your business,” he said, then he began pushing the children out the door. They looked at Adelaide, their eyes full of terror. She shook her head and followed them out. Then, her father-in-law slammed the door in her face.

“Who was that man?” Gretchen’s daughter asked. She was old enough to see something was wrong with the old man they’d just spoken to.

“He’s my husband’s father,” Gretchen said.

“He looks like a monster.”

“Yes, well, let that be a lesson for you. Don’t drink alcohol.”

“What? I don’t understand.” The little girl looked at her, puzzled.

“Never mind. Let’s just go to the park.”

## CHAPTER 44



1918

**T**he summer of 1918 was hot and often unbearable. The children were often moody and uncomfortable. But just when it seemed like Adelaide would lose her mind, the leaves fell from the trees, and the blessed cool air of fall descended upon them. But when Autumn came, it brought a wave of the flu that was so terrifying that Adelaide grew numb with fear. The disease seemed to have gained strength. Makeshift hospitals were set up everywhere. And people were dying by the hundreds. She knew the symptoms. Everyone did. It began with a high fever. A severe headache and a dry cough followed. The doctors were left puzzled. They had never seen a flu like this. And so there was no treatment available. When Adelaide went to the market, she and the children wore masks that covered their noses and mouths in hopes of preventing the spread of the virus. Heidi and Gretchen wore masks to work. Everyone at the factories wore them. And even so... the death toll continued to climb.

And then, like a wonderful miracle, the war ended in November. Adelaide rejoiced with all the other women in town, including Heidi and Gretchen. Everyone waited in nervous anticipation for their loved ones to return, praying they would. But the soldiers who had survived didn't even begin to trickle back home until that winter. And then they returned slowly and quietly. They were not the war heroes they thought they would be when this all began. Germany had lost the war, and these soldiers were broken, skinny, sickly, and bitter. The German people suffered the loss heavily. By the

summer of 1919, the streets were filled with men who had seen the horrors of battle. Now, most of them were out of work, some were injured, some maimed, and many had lost their sanity. They lined up in soup lines for food and unemployment lines for help to find work. Many of the women who had been working at the factories were let go so that the men could reclaim their jobs.

Then, on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1919, Germany was hit by another lightning bolt when the Treaty of Versailles was signed. This document made the loss of the war even greater by bringing more shame to the German people. There were huge debts to be paid to the Allies in reparations. Not only that, but the treaty forbade Germany from having anything but a very small army, leaving it vulnerable. The men who had fought in the war and survived now lived with the constant reminder that they were a defeated lot. They'd left their families and homes to serve their country. They'd held their friends and watched helplessly as they took their last breath. They had lived in fear every day that it might be their last. All of these sacrifices they'd made, only to end up scorned. Money was tight, but that didn't matter. Alcohol became the chosen escape for many soldiers who returned, and the taverns grew busier.

It was a blessing that the war had ended, but the soldiers returned home defeated and depressed. And, although the flu was not nearly as prevalent as it had been, there were still cases, and there were still deaths. Adelaide only took the children outside when it was absolutely necessary. Gretchen and Heidi had to continue to go to work. And they were always afraid of contracting the illness.

The three women waited, but so far, their soldiers had not returned. And Adelaide still had not heard anything from Leo or Alex. She wondered if they had returned but had no way of finding her. *I am going to have to go back to my father-in-law's house again. That is where they will go when they return.* She told herself that now she should go and see her father-in-law to see if there had been any word from Leo or Alex. However, she continued to procrastinate. She finally admitted to herself that she was not going because she was afraid she

might find out that Leo was dead. She told herself it would be easier to take the children once the weather cooled off.

## CHAPTER 45



OCTOBER 1919

One morning, while Heidi was at work, her husband returned to Germany. He went to the apartment where he and Heidi had lived before he went off to war, but Heidi was not there. Not knowing where else to turn, he went to the apartment next door to ask the old couple who lived there if they had any idea where his wife and son had moved. There was a bit of gossip that her husband had never liked the old lady before, but now he was glad that she was a busybody because she knew the address where Heidi and Max were living. He was tired and weak, but he ran all the way to the house and knocked on the door. His face fell when Adelaide opened it. “I’m sorry. The old woman who gave me this address must have been mistaken. I am looking for someone else,” he said, still out of breath from running. Adelaide recognized him from his pictures. “Are you here to see Heidi?”

“Yes! I am her husband, Artur. Please tell me, is she all right?” He looked distraught.

“She is.”

He heaved a sigh of relief and looked like he was about to pass out.

“Won’t you come in?” Adelaide asked, “Let me get you a cup of tea.”

“Heidi? Where is she?”

“She’s fine. She’s at work. But Max is here with me.”



“Are you the babysitter?” he asked.

“Well, you could say that. Come on in. I’ll explain everything.”

Adelaide prepared a sandwich and a cup of tea for Artur, then explained how the three women had come to live together at Gretchen’s house.

“That was rather brilliant,” he said as he gobbled the food down.

“Yes, well, thank you. I don’t know that it was brilliant. What I do know is that it saved us.”

Just then, they heard the sound of small feet padding down the hallway. “I’m hungry.” It was Max. They heard him before he entered the room. But when he did, he stopped cold in his tracks. It was rare that the children had any contact with men, and he looked at Artur with fear in his eyes. Then he ran over to Adelaide and hid behind her chair.

“Don’t be afraid, Max. This man is your father.”

“Come here, son. Let me look at you,” Artur said, tears welling in his eyes.

But Max would not go close to Artur. He was a stranger in Max’s eyes, and Max was afraid. That was until his mother came home from work. When she saw Artur sitting in her kitchen, she began to cry. Then she fell into his arms, kissing his face and holding his hands. Max watched her in shock, and a wave of jealousy came over him. Until this very moment, he had been the center of his mother’s universe. And now, this man had taken his place. He hated him. That was until later that evening when Artur sat on the floor and played a game of marbles with his son. Heidi, Gretchen, and Adelaide had played this very game with Max in the past, but none of them were as much fun as his father.

That night, Heidi and Artur slept in her room. In the morning, he got up and went out to find them an apartment. By the end of the week, they had moved out. The apartment was not nearly as nice or as spacious as Gretchen’s home. But it was the best Artur could do for his family, and Heidi did not

complain. Artur found work and immediately insisted that Heidi quit her job. This gave her plenty of free time, and she and Max visited Adelaide, Gretchen, and the girls at least once a week. They were like a family. Over the time they had lived together, they had grown so close that they were inseparable. In fact, Gretchen and Adelaide were like Heidi's sisters. So, on one of her visits, she confided in them about how much her husband had changed. "He is not the same man who left me to go to war. Then, he was so carefree and so romantic. Now, he hardly speaks to me. He's not rude or mean. I can't say that he ever treats me badly. He is just distant. It's as if he is always remembering what happened to him when he was at war. He seems stuck in the memories in his mind. I begged him to talk to me. I think it might help. But he won't talk about it."

"War is horrible. I can just imagine the terrible things he must have seen," Gretchen said.

"Gretchen's right. I say, just give him time. That's all you can do," Adelaide said.

Now, it was only Gretchen and Adelaide who were left still living in the house. Adelaide tried to find work but could not because the factories were no longer hiring women. They were hiring the soldiers who were returning home. But even with their efforts to help the soldiers get back on their feet, many were still unemployed, either unable to find work or too broken to keep a job. Gretchen was fortunate her boss had not let her go, so she continued working at night at the factory. They had to curb their spending and live very modestly because now all they had coming in was Gretchen's salary.

## CHAPTER 46



DECEMBER 1919

**C**hristmas was just a few weeks away, and Adelaide still could not find a job. Times were hard, and she and Gretchen were struggling financially. But they wanted to make the holiday special for their children. So, Adelaide went to the local church and offered to clean it in exchange for a small tree. The pastor agreed. So, she brought the girls with her each day, and while Gretchen worked, Adelaide worked at the church, where she polished the wooden pews, cleaned the windows, and scrubbed the floors. Two days before Christmas, she brought home the tree. The children helped their mothers decorate the little tree with pinecones. The following day, Gretchen took some money from their scant savings and purchased a small bolt of pink ribbon, which she used to make hair bows for each girl as a gift. Then, the pastor, who had gotten to know the little girls, offered Adelaide a few secondhand dolls that had been donated to the church. “These would make wonderful Christmas presents,” Adelaide said. “How can I ever thank you?”

The pastor smiled.

Each girl would receive a doll. And even though the dolls were old, the paint on their faces was worn off, and their clothes were tattered and torn, the girls screamed with delight when they saw them. These were the first dolls the girls would own. When the children opened their gifts on Christmas morning, the girls were excited about their new hair ornaments, but they played all day with their new dolls. The

factory where Gretchen worked was closed for the holiday. So, that evening, both mothers and their children went to the church, where they enjoyed a special Christmas dinner. It was a lovely day, and Adelaide was pleased with how well things had turned out. The only thing that could have made it more wonderful was if Leo had been there.

And then, one afternoon only a month later, while Gretchen was at work, there was a knock on the door of the house. Margot had been fussy all day, so Adelaide carried her around to keep her quiet. She heard the knock and went to the door with Margot in her arms. When she opened the door, she stared into the face of a more mature Leo. A gasp escaped her throat as she gently placed the child on the floor, then she rushed over, put her arms around Leo, and hugged him so tightly that it hurt her arms. “You’re home. You’re here. Oh, how I prayed for you,” she said as she looked him over. Just like a mother, when she is handed her newborn child for the first time, Adelaide checked Leo’s arms, hands, and legs to assure herself that he was real and not a dream. That he was alive and his body was still intact.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m home.”

She threw her arms around him again and hugged him tighter. Tears of joy fell down her cheeks. “Thank God, you’re all right. I have been so worried.”

“Yes, I was worried about you, too,” he admitted, squeezing her as hard as she squeezed him.

“Well, come in, don’t stand in the doorway. Come in.” She pulled him inside. “Let me make you some tea or coffee. Some food? Are you hungry?”

“Yes, I am. Thank you. That would be nice,” he said. She picked up Margot and carried her into the kitchen. Leo followed them.

Adelaide was excited, joyful, and so nervous that her hands trembled as she put the pot of water on the burner on the stove. After she turned it on, she turned to look at Leo again. “How did you find me? I mean, I had to move. I was hoping

you would find me. In fact, I was going to go and see your father again to see if he had heard from you. But...”

“You know how it is here in town. Everyone knows everything about everyone else. It wasn’t hard to find you. I just went to the market and asked around.” He smiled.

She smiled. “I’m so glad you did.”

“While I was in the army, I was worried about you every day and how you and the children would survive. Every time I was in a battle, I told myself that it was for you that I was fighting. I told myself I kept the enemy away from you and the children. I missed you, and I missed our talks,” he admitted.

“Me too,” she said softly.

He cleared his throat and said, “I wrote to you, but you never returned my letters. Why, Addy?”

“I never got them,” she said, handing Margot a wooden spoon to play with.

“You didn’t?”

“No. I had to move out of the apartment after your mother passed away. Your father was no help, and I couldn’t stay there with his drinking. You know?”

“Ahh, yes, I do know. And now everything makes sense. No wonder you never got my letters. My father got them. I was sending you money. He must have been taking that money. How else would he have been able to stay in the apartment?” There was a pinch of anger in his voice.

“Yes, that sounds right,” she said.

“Bastard.”

She saw that he was upset and didn’t want him to be, so she said, “Never mind about all of that. It doesn’t matter anymore. You’re alive. That’s all that matters.”

He was quiet for a few minutes. The tea kettle let out a long, low whistle. She took it off the burner and poured him a cup of tea. He sipped it and then asked. “Is that Margot?” he was looking at the child on the floor.

Adelaide nodded. "It is."

"She's gotten so big."

"Yes, they all have." Adelaide, in all of her excitement at seeing Leo again, had forgotten to ask how her husband, Alex, was. She felt ashamed. "Leo," she said, almost afraid of his answer. "Alex. Is Alex... all right?"

"Yes, he's all right. He's at the old apartment with our father. Listen, before you go to see Alex, there is something I must tell you about him."

"What is it?" She poured tea into her own cup.

"Alex isn't the same. He was injured. He didn't come with me to see you today because he is worried about what you will think when you see him."

"I don't understand."

"Well." Leo cleared his throat. "You see, it's his face. His face was burned by mustard gas. He doesn't look the same, Addy. I wanted to warn you before you saw him. So, you wouldn't be so shocked. But I am afraid that his face has been destroyed."

"Oh," she gasped. A wave of pity for Alex came over her, but at the same time, she was so glad that Leo had returned unharmed.

"So, I was hoping that you might come back to the house with me this afternoon. But only if you're ready to see him."

"Yes, I will come. But I hate to see your father. He was so wrong to do what he did."

Leo cleared his throat. "Yes, well, you don't have to worry about seeing him. He passed away from the flu a month ago. Just a few weeks before Alex and I returned. Mrs. Schneider, our landlord, told us what happened. She was trying to rent the apartment when we returned. I paid the rent, so it's ours."

"Oh, my goodness," Adelaide said, sinking in the chair. "He wasn't always the kindest person. I mean, we certainly had our differences, but I wouldn't wish that horrible flu on anyone."

“Yes, I know. I’ve seen people die from it, and it’s a terrible disease.”

She nodded.

“So, you’ll come back to the house with me? You and the girls will move back in with Alex and me, yes?”

“Yes, of course we will.” She cleared her throat. “Alex is my husband, and these are his children. I must return to him, but I can’t just leave. I must speak to my friend I have been living with before I go. The little girls I am watching are her daughters. She will need to find a babysitter if I move.”

“Of course. I completely understand. When do you expect her home?”

“Early evening. She works in a factory. She used to work nights, but now she’s been transferred to days. So, I will speak to her as soon as she gets home. But, by the time I talk to her, it will probably be too late in the day to move the children. They go to sleep early. So, if it’s all right, we’ll come in the morning.”

“Yes, that would be fine. In fact, why don’t I come and help you carry all of your belongings? It will be difficult with the children,” he said.

“That would be nice. I know it’s going to be hard to move with the children and all of our stuff, too.”

“Don’t worry. You just get yourself packed and ready to go, and I’ll be here in the morning to help you.”

“Leo, you’ve always been so good to me.” Then she added, “Like a brother.”

He cleared his throat and looked away from her. Then, softly, he said, “Well, I am your brother. A brother-in-law is just a brother by marriage rather than by birth, right?”

She nodded, “Yes, right.”

That evening, Adelaide told Gretchen her husband had returned home from the war. “I know you will need money to survive. I have a little saved,” Adelaide said. “I will give you what I have.”

“I couldn’t take your money,” Gretchen said.

“You must. How will you ever survive otherwise? Now, please take it.” Adelaide went into the drawer in the dresser in her room and pulled out a small bag with money inside. She handed it to Gretchen. “It’s not much, but I hope it helps, if even a little.”

“Thank you,” Gretchen said. “I’ll take the girls to my mother’s house tomorrow on my way to work. She will watch them until I get home.”

The last night Adelaide spent at Gretchen’s house was bittersweet. Adelaide watched the children playing on the floor and thought about how the three women had helped each other survive a very difficult time. She hoped that Gretchen’s husband was all right and that he would return soon. So many of the men she’d known growing up never returned home. But this was a subject that she, Heidi, and Gretchen had never once discussed. They all knew that many women were widowed, but they were too afraid to acknowledge it openly. Gretchen’s father had recently passed away from the flu, so Adelaide assumed Gretchen’s mother would probably move in with her daughter and grandchildren.

Morning came, and Adelaide packed her things. Then she fed the children and dressed them.

Leo arrived early. Adelaide’s heart skipped a beat when she heard his knock at the door. He was smiling warmly when she opened it. *He matured so much during the war. He was always a handsome man, but now he’s even more handsome.*

“Come in. Can I get you some coffee or breakfast?” she asked.

He smiled, “I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. Go ahead and get the children ready to go.”

“They are,” Adelaide said. “Are you sure I can’t get you something to eat?”

“No, I ate already.”

“Well, then...I guess we should get going.”



“Yes. Let’s go home,” he said.

As they walked through the streets, he carried three bags filled with her possessions. Margot, the youngest, rode in the carriage. And although the other two could have fit inside, they refused to ride. So, she held Trudy’s hand, and Trudy held Mattie’s hand. Then, they walked this way until the children were too tired to walk anymore. Adelaide glanced over at Leo. “We’re going to have to stop for a few minutes. The children need to sit down.”

“All right,” he agreed.

Adelaide handed each of the girls a slice of bread. They ate it quickly. And when they were ready to continue, Mattie and Trudy joined Margot in the carriage. Although it was harder to push the carriage with the extra weight. It was easier for Adelaide to keep an eye on the children this way.

Adelaide and Leo walked side by side, almost like husband and wife, without any need to talk. There was a sort of understanding between them, a rhythm to their movement. And as they walked side by side, a thought crossed her mind. *What if he were my husband, and this was our family? How happy I would be to be returning home. But as things are, I’m not really looking forward to seeing Alex again.*

The brisk winter wind grew more intense as the day went on. The children began to complain about being cold. It seemed to take a long time before they saw the familiar brick apartment building. But when they did, Adelaide let out a sigh of relief.

They walked inside. Leo climbed the stairs and then he unlocked the door. The girls were unable to climb the stairs, so he carried them up. Mattie and Margot first, then Trudy.

When Adelaide entered the apartment, Alex was not waiting in the kitchen or the living room. Leo turned to her and said, “Let me go and get Alex.” Then, in a quiet voice, he added, “I’m sure you must remember what I told you about him being burned?”

“Of course.”

“Well, that’s why he’s hiding. He’s ashamed of his face. Try not to look shocked when you see him.”

Leo walked into the bedroom while Adelaide washed the children’s faces with a cool rag. Trudy and Mattie were nervous and fussy. This made Margot fussy, too, and she began to cry and reach for Adelaide. It isn’t their fault. *They aren’t familiar with this house.* The children clung to her. She spoke to them in soft, quiet tones, and all three of them began to settle down. Adelaide had begun to sing to the children softly when Leo walked out of the bedroom with Alex at his side. Despite Leo’s warning, Adelaide was shocked when she saw Alex. She tried to hide the look of horror that came over her face by turning away from him. But she couldn’t even see a single trace of the magnificent features that had once been his. He was burned beyond recognition. The skin on his face was bubbled, peeled, and red, and his features were distorted. Adelaide felt the breath catch in her throat. She wished she had the strength to pretend nothing was wrong, but she found it unbearable to look at him. Looking away, she quickly wiped a tear that fell from her eye.

For a few moments, no one said a word.

Then Alex spoke in a defeated and resigned voice, “You don’t have to hide your disgust. I know I am hideous.”

“No. No, you’re not.” Adelaide tried to sound convincing.

Alex shook his head. For a moment, he didn’t speak or move. Adelaide felt sick to her stomach. She didn’t know what to do or say next. But when she finally turned to look at Alex, his fists were clenched, and his eyes were red. He looked like a monster. Then, out of nowhere, his voice grew loud and angry. “You are a good-for-nothing little liar. Don’t think I don’t see the truth in your eyes, because I do. I am ruined. And for what? For a country that hardly deserves it. Germany is nothing on the world stage anymore. I am ashamed of my face, and I am ashamed to be German.”

She gasped, but she could not find the right words. So, she stayed silent. Leo moved to her side. “It’s all right. He’ll be all right in a few minutes. He gets like this.” Then he whispered

in her ear, “He has fits of rage sometimes. Who can blame him?”

“Will I, Leo? Will I ever be all right again?” His tone stung with anger as he spat the words at Leo. Then he smiled a bitter smile and turned to look at Adelaide. She cringed. “Did he tell you that he saved me?” Alex indicated Leo. “Yes, that’s right. He saved my life, didn’t you, Leo? Yep, my brave, indestructible brother carried my burned and broken body to safety. What a favor he did me,” he said. His words dripped with sarcasm. “I can’t hold it against him, though. I know he thought he was doing me a favor. But he wasn’t. Just look at me. Look at the life I have ahead of me. All I want to do is lie on a bed in a dark room. I can’t bear the light, and I can’t stand mirrors,” he said to Adelaide. “I should have died on that field. I would have died a hero. I would never have seen my face destroyed or had to see Germany reduced to a broken country.” Alex had worked himself into an angry rage. He was shouting now, and his face was redder than normal. He slammed his fist on the table. Adelaide jumped, and the three of the little girls began to wail.

“That’s enough, Alex. I’m warning you,” Leo said. His voice was soft, but it was threatening.

Alex glared at his brother. Then he spit on the floor, but he stopped yelling. “I have no more to say to either of you.” Alex turned and walked down the hall into his bedroom. Then he slammed the door behind him.

Adelaide got down on the floor and gathered all three girls to her. She spoke to them soothingly and took turns stroking each of their backs. Finally, they quieted down. Their crying fit left the three of them exhausted, and within a half hour, they were napping in the makeshift cribs that Leo had set up. They were so tired that they didn’t even awaken when Adelaide changed their clothes. And she was glad because she needed a break. It had been a long morning.

“Let me make you a cup of tea,” Leo said.

“Thank you, I could use it.” Adelaide plopped down on a kitchen chair while the water was set to boil. Then, in a tired

voice, she said, “I am wondering if it might have been a mistake to bring the children back here. They were used to Gretchen’s house. And I can see that Alex is not happy to see us.”

“I know he is bitter, and he seems like he will be impossible to live with. But give him some time. He has to get used to his new face, and that won’t be easy, but he will come around. You’ll see. As we both know, my brother always relied heavily on his looks. Now, he will have to find other qualities within himself.”

She nodded. “I know.”

With Alex locked in his bedroom and the children asleep, the room was quiet and peaceful. It was such a pleasure to sit beside Leo again. Adelaide glanced out the window. A blanket of white snow covered the ground. “I’m so cold,” she said softly. He took her hands and held them to his cheeks to warm them. It had been a simple act, but he suddenly realized how inappropriate it had been. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. I shouldn’t have done that.”

She smiled. “It’s all right. I’m glad you’re home.”

His voice was husky with emotion. “I’m glad you’re here.”

They had said so much without saying anything at all, and suddenly Adelaide felt awkward. The tea kettle whistled, startling them both. They both jumped and then they laughed as Leo stood up and quickly took the pot off the heat so that the whistle would not wake the girls. He looked into her eyes. “I forgot we were boiling water in the kettle,” Leo said.

“Me too,” she giggled softly.

He poured her a cup of tea, and they sat together and sipped at the very hot tea in their cups.

“I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad you’ve come home. I was afraid that you might not return once you saw Alex,” he said honestly.

“I’m glad to be home.”

## CHAPTER 47



**T**he following morning, Leo awoke early. While everyone slept, he went out to look for work, leaving Adelaide with Alex and the girls. He interviewed all day and found a job at one of the factories by promising he would be willing to do anything. And he did. He worked twelve-to-fourteen-hour days in the freezing cold. The owner of the factory did not provide enough heat, so the men worked with their coats, hats, and scarves still on. But he provided for the family while Alex almost never left his room. He demanded that Adelaide bring his food to him. She didn't argue because she didn't mind. The children were afraid of his face, and because they hardly ever saw him, they were frightened anew each time he came out of his room. And besides, when Leo was at home, she was glad to be alone with him. Even though they never did anything more than talk and share their problems.

The winter with her dreaded snow and ice seemed never-ending. But to make matters worse, Leo lost his job. He defended another man against a boss because he believed the other worker was right. It had happened so quickly that Leo hadn't had a chance to weigh the consequences of his actions.

“One of the machines broke down, and this was slowing production down. So, the boss told the man who worked the machine that he must work it even though it wasn't working properly. The man was afraid because it was dangerous. He begged our boss to wait until the machine was fixed. But our boss had no tolerance. He needed to make a quota, or he might lose his job. So, he demanded that the man work the machine.

The man began to work, but the machine almost took off his hand, so he stopped, refusing to do anything more until the machine was fixed. The boss was angry. He punched the man so hard he flew across the room with his nose bleeding. Then, without thinking, I got up and punched the boss. And the next thing I knew, I was out of work,” Leo told Adelaide.

“You did the right thing.”

“But what about us? What about our needs? I am a fool.” Leo put his head in his hands.

“No, you’re not a fool, Leo. You’re just too good of a man.”

The following morning was so cold that icicles formed overnight on the bare tree limbs. Leo was not feeling well. He had not slept all night because he was worried about finding work. He blamed himself for being foolish and went over the scene with his boss in his mind at least a hundred times. How he wished he had not gotten involved. But he had. And now, there was no time for him to feel sorry for himself. The only thing he could do was get up, get dressed, and go out and find another job.

Adelaide prepared his breakfast, but he wasn’t very hungry. Still, he forced himself to eat a piece of bread and a cup of coffee. Then he went out to look for work. That afternoon, Leo still had not returned, but the sky turned gray, and a snowstorm descended upon Germany. Adelaide watched it from the window. The snow fell in heavy, thick flakes stuck to the ground, building into deep, large drifts. It continued all day and through the early evening. By the time Leo returned that night, there were hills of snow everywhere. He was trembling from the chill, and his teeth were chattering. His clothes and hair were wet, and small icicles had formed on his eyelashes. Leo shook the loose snow from his coat. Then he removed his coat and hung it on the coat rack to dry. He sat down to take off his boots, but water had soaked through his boots and socks, and his feet were red and freezing.

“Go and change into some dry clothes. I have some soup on the stove. I’ll pour you a bowl,” Adelaide said.

“All right. I’ll be right back.” He went into his room and changed into dry clothes. Then he returned and sat down at the table. A bowl of thick potato soup was already steaming in front of him. The tea kettle was on the stove.

Leo could not get warm. His body was still trembling as he tried to eat his soup. “Has Alex come out of his room?”

“No, not yet. I haven’t gone into the bedroom either. I slept on the sofa last night,” Adelaide said. “I’m worried about you. You’re shaking from the cold,” she said, more to herself than to him. “I’ll be right back.” Adelaide left the room and returned in seconds carrying a blanket, which she draped over Leo’s shoulders.

He smiled. “I feel like an old man with this blanket covering me.”

“Please keep it on. I don’t want you to get sick.”

The tea kettle began to whistle. Adelaide removed it from the heat.

Leo did as Adelaide asked, keeping the blanket wrapped around himself. When he finished the soup, she poured him a cup of tea.

“Were you able to find work?”

“No, I tried. I went everywhere I could think of. But so far... nothing. I’ll try again tomorrow. And if I don’t find anything, I’ll try again the day after that. Eventually, I’ll find work.”

She nodded, but she was worried. “I could try to find work, too.”

“No, you can’t. You must stay at home and care for the children. Let’s face it. We can’t trust Alex to watch them. He’s too angry and... well... could we ever really trust him to do anything? Even before he went to war, could we trust him?” Leo looked at her.

“No, not really. He was never responsible.”

“Exactly. So, it’s best if you stay home with the girls and I go out and find a job. Together, you and I will take of this

family. Don't worry about anything."

She hesitated for a moment. Then she sighed. "It's not fair to you, Leo. You deserve to have your own life." *I hate to think of him having a life outside of the one we have as a family. But it's only right. Even though I hate to think of him sleeping with a woman and sharing his life with someone here. However, it's selfish of me to feel that way. And I won't be selfish where Leo is concerned. I can't. I care too much about him.*

"This is my life, Addy." Then he brought his voice down to a whisper. "Remember, Margot is my child. I owe it to her to be a father and to provide."

"But you not only provide for her, but you also provide for all of us. It's not that I don't appreciate it. I do. Believe me. But sometimes I think you might be lonely. You might want to have a wife of your own."

He smiled, "I'm not lonely." Then he swallowed hard, and his Adam's apple bobbed. "I'm happy to take care of you and the girls."

Adelaide smiled at him. "Is the tea helping you to warm up?"

"It is. Thank you," he said. And he felt a little better for a while. But she watched him and could see that he could hardly keep his eyes from closing. "I'm sorry, Addy. I'm exhausted. I suppose the day took a lot out of me. I'm going to get some rest. I'll see you in the morning."

"Of course. Go and get some sleep." She nodded and watched him as he went to his room. It was quiet in the house. Adelaide poured herself another cup of tea and sat at the table for a long time before she lay down on the sofa and fell asleep.

It was well after midnight when Adelaide was awakened by a strange noise. It sounded like the barking of a large dog. She sat up quickly and listened. And then she realized that it was not a dog. It was someone coughing, a hard bark of a dry cough. Quietly, she stood up and went to listen by the bedrooms. It was not the children, and it was not Alex. She felt



the breath catch in her throat. *It's Leo. He's sick.* Fear struck her like a bolt of lightning. She tried to calm herself. *It's probably nothing. He's probably just caught a chill.* But she knew in her heart that it was far more than this.

Adelaide opened the door to Leo's room and found he was awake. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine," he said, but his voice was hoarse. She put her hand on his forehead.

"You're burning up with fever."

"Damn it," he cursed. "You've got to get out of this house. You must get far away from me. Take the children with you. You must leave right now. Can you go back and stay at the house where you were living with Gretchen?"

She looked at him. It was dark in the room, but her eyes were wide with fear. *Please, dear God, don't let him die.* "Yes, we can stay there. But I am not going anywhere. I am going to stay here with you. I'll send Alex and the girls."

"No, you must go too. If this is what I think it is, it's very contagious."

"I won't leave you. I will stay here and take care of you. There is nothing you can say or do to change my mind. I simply will not leave you, Leo," she whispered. "But I am going to go and wake Alex and the girls and send them to Gretchen's house. I will get them out of here before they catch this."

"All right," he said. He was too sick to argue.

Adelaide explained everything to Alex in the darkness of his room. For a moment, he didn't speak. And she was afraid he would refuse to leave. And if he did, who would take the girls? But he didn't. Like everyone else in town, he was terrified of this Spanish Flu. "Now," she began, "you'll have to explain the situation to Gretchen when you arrive at her house," Adelaide instructed Alex. "And then, you're going to have to help her with the children as much as possible when she goes to work. She has been sending her girls to her

mother's house. But she can't send our three too. So, you will have to care for all of them."

Alex didn't answer. He just climbed out of bed and got dressed in the dark.

While Alex was preparing to leave, Adelaide tiptoed into the children's room. Mattie and Trudy were both half-awake while she dressed them in warm clothes. But Margot was angry at being awakened from a deep sleep and began screaming. Soon, all three of the girls were wailing. Adelaide ignored their cries. She had to get them out of that house fast. So, she layered their clothing and then wrapped them in blankets. Quickly, she put Margot and Trudy into the carriage, and then she put Mattie in, too. She was glad that all three of them were small and could still fit in the carriage together, even if it was getting too crowded.

Alex was waiting in the living room when she entered. "Can you manage to get them to the house without my help? They are all in the carriage. All you have to do is push it. I'll give you Gretchen's address," she said.

He nodded. "I can get them there. But aren't you coming?"

"I can't leave Leo with no one to take care of him."

"But he's sick. You have to leave him, or you'll catch it. Then what?"

In the background, they heard Leo coughing. Adelaide looked at Alex. He was white with fear.

"I don't know, Alex. All I know is that I won't leave him. I guess I just must take that risk."

After Alex and the girls left, Adelaide went into Leo's room. He had fallen asleep. Without making a sound, she left the room. Then she collapsed on the sofa and prayed to God, begging him to spare Leo's life.

Outside, the snow fell relentlessly. There'd been a time when Adelaide had thought the snow to be beautiful. But now it looked like a white casket covering the earth and burying those she loved in its cold heart.

Nothing she did could warm Leo's shivering body. His forehead was hot and covered in sweat. She knew he was running a fever, but his body was freezing, especially his feet and hands. She covered him with every blanket in the house. Then she put her coat and his coat on top of the blankets. But when she touched his arm, the skin was still ice cold. He drifted in and out of consciousness. She begged him to sip some tea, but he found it too difficult to swallow. The liquid spilled out of the side of his mouth. Tears came to her eyes as he collapsed back onto the pillow and closed his eyes. "Oh, Leo," she sighed with frustration and fear. "I can't lose you."

He didn't speak. But his eyes fluttered. She knew he had heard her. No one else was in the house. There was no one to help her, but she had to find a way to bring his temperature to normal. She looked at him, and her heart ached. For the first time, she accepted the fact that she was truly in love with him. She'd always known she cared deeply for him, but she never allowed herself to believe that he was the love of her life. Her feelings for every other man she had ever known paled in comparison. Adelaide removed her shoes. Then she pulled aside the blankets and climbed into the bed beside him. *I'll warm him with my body heat. If I catch this and we both die, we will die together. Because I don't want to live without him.* She thought as she moved as close to Leo as she could get. Putting her arms around him, she gently caressed his chest. He came into consciousness and whispered her name. "Addy?"

"Yes, it's me. I'm here with you," she said. "And I am staying here with you. Whatever happens, we are together."

It was hard for him to speak. His voice was strained, but he said, "No, Addy, you shouldn't be in this bed beside me. I don't want you to catch this. The children need..."

She stopped him by putting her hand over his mouth gently. "Don't try to speak. I'm going to warm you."

He cuddled closer to her.

"I love you, Addy. I've always loved you," he said, and then he fell into a fit of coughing.

Her heart broke, and tears flowed down her cheeks as she looked at him. He felt her tears run down his shoulder. “You’re crying,” he whispered. “Please don’t cry. Not for me. I would never want you to cry for me.”

“I love you too, Leo. I never realized it. I mean, I always knew I cared for you. I thought you were like a brother to me. But... It’s more than that. I love you. You are the man I should have married. We wasted all this time. And now... oh, Leo. I hope it’s not too late.”

There was a long silence, and she thought he might have lost consciousness again. His breathing was ragged. But then she knew he was awake because every so often, he let out a short, dry cough. She was so sad she could not speak. She would gladly have taken years off her own life and given them to him if that were only possible. Adelaide laid her head on his shoulder. There was a long silence. Then, in a very soft voice, he said, “I’ve been waiting to hear you say that since the day I first saw you.”

“You knew I loved you?” she asked.

“No, but I knew I loved you. Then you married my brother, and I wanted to do everything I could to make you happy. So, I backed off. I was willing to do anything for you, even lose you to my brother, if that was what it took to make you happy. But in my secret dreams, I always loved you. Then, when Alex was not a good husband to you, I began to hope and pray that someday you might love me.”

“I do,” she said, holding him tight. But when she looked up at him, he had fallen asleep.

## CHAPTER 48



**A**delaide lay beside Leo the entire day and all through the night. She didn't leave his side except once to urinate.

But she couldn't sleep. She was afraid she might wake up and find that he had passed away while she slept. Her thoughts consumed her. *This might well be the last night I will ever see Leo alive. I don't want to be apart from him for even a second. All the time we wasted... I wasted. We could have been husband and wife. And now... now that we know how much we care for each other, it's the end.*

"Please, Leo. Don't die. You must not die. I am begging you to get well," she whispered. But she didn't know if he heard her. He didn't say a word. His breathing was still slow and ragged, and she assumed he was asleep.

But it was not the end. In the morning, to her joy and surprise, Leo awakened. He had stopped shivering but was still very weak. Adelaide felt his forehead. It was no longer hot and sweaty. She took his hand in hers. "How do you feel?" she asked in a soft whisper.

"Happy," he said. "Elated. I am in love, and you love me, too."

She giggled despite the fear she felt in her heart. "I mean, how do you feel physically?"

"So much better than I did." He coughed a little. Then he cleared his throat. She reached up and touched his forehead again.

“Your fever seems to have broken. And you’re not shivering.”

“I am not,” he said, glancing down at her and smiling.

“Let me get you some hot tea,” she said. “Do you think you could maybe eat something?”

“I do!” he said excitedly.

She jumped out of bed and ran to the kitchen, where she filled the teapot and put it up to boil. Then she cut him a small piece of bread and buttered it. As soon as the tea was ready, she put everything on a tray and brought it to him. He was sitting up and waiting. He was still coughing, but his skin was no longer gray. The color had returned to his face, and he looked so much better. She watched him sip the tea. He took a bite of the bread but still found it very difficult to swallow. She watched him as he chewed slowly. It took him over half an hour to finish. But he did.

After he’d eaten the entire piece of bread and drank the full cup of tea, he said, “I’m very tired. I need to get some sleep.”

“Of course,” she said. Then, in a small voice, she asked him, “Would you like me to lay beside you?”

“Yes. I would. I would like you to lay beside me for the rest of my life.”

## CHAPTER 49



Leo was recovering, but his recovery was slow. He still coughed, and because the coughing often woke him up, he found it difficult to get enough rest. But his fever did not return, and he and Adelaide took that to be a very good sign. Adelaide cared for him like a nurse. She brought him food and hot tea. Leo had no appetite, but she begged him to eat, and so he tried to eat as much as he could. In the afternoons, she read to him. Most of the time, he drifted in and out of sleep. She hardly ever left his side, but by some miracle, she didn't catch his illness.

Adelaide did not even go to Gretchen's house to see the children. The only time she left Leo was to go to the market or to go to the kitchen to prepare food. She helped him walk to the bathroom, which at first was a monumental task. But as time passed, he grew stronger, and it became easier for him to get around. Two weeks later, he was able to sit up in bed for an hour at a time. And by the third week, he could walk around the house on his own.

"Thank you for everything," he said one night as he was getting ready to go to bed.

"You don't need to thank me."

He smiled. Then his voice cracked. "Do you remember that night when I was very sick, and you lay in bed beside me to keep me warm?"

"Of course, I remember." She blushed. "That was the night your fever broke, and you started to get better."

“That was the happiest night of my life. You were beside me like I always dreamed you would be someday.”

They had not discussed their feelings for each other since that night. Adelaide felt guilty about Alex, and she was sure that Leo did, too. But she would never forget that night. For her, it had been a revelation. Every word she'd said to Leo was true. *I have no idea what I am going to do about Alex, but what I do know is that I love this man, and I no longer want to be Alex's wife.*

They had been sitting in the living room. He was sitting on the sofa; she was on the chair across from him. Adelaide stood up and walked over to Leo. She took his hand and said, “Come with me.”

He stood up and followed her to the bedroom. She turned to look at him. Their eyes met. Neither of them said a word as she unbuttoned her dress.

When she stood before him in her slip, he sighed, “You are the most beautiful woman in the world.”

She smiled. “I doubt that. But it's nice to hear.”

“To me, you are. You can't deny that now, can you?”

She shook her head. “I don't suppose I can. You're entitled to your opinion,” she said softly. Then she added, “And... I'm glad you feel that way.” Alex popped into her mind for a moment, and with him came a wave of guilt and pity, but she pushed the thoughts away. Leo removed his robe and undershorts. The disease had left him thin. But he was still a handsome man, and even though he had grown slender, she could still see the muscles in his arms and stomach.

He stood up and took her into his arms. She couldn't be sure if he felt any guilt about Alex. He didn't mention him at all.

Then he kissed her. And for the first time, Adelaide understood the power of love when it came to sexual attraction. She'd been very attracted to Alex when they were first married. And the sex had been good. But this was beyond good. It was magic. The kiss set her entire body trembling. It



was as if her brain had shut off. Alex and any vows she'd ever made to him disappeared. She was lost in the moment, so completely engulfed in this man that she thought of nothing else. His kisses were warm, slow, and tender. He pressed his lips to her eyes, her cheeks, her neck, her palms, her fingers. And when they joined together to become one, for the first time in her life, she felt whole and complete. Afterward, he lay beside her. She cuddled up to him and laid her head on his chest. Gently, he ran his fingers through her hair. Neither of them said a word, but they were comfortable in their silence. A few minutes passed, and she heard Leo's slow, steady breathing. He had fallen asleep. For a long time, she lay there listening to his breath and his heartbeat. She closed her eyes and realized that this was the first time she'd ever been with a man and not had to fight the terrible memories she had of the times her father had raped her. Not once during the time Leo made love to her did she think of her father. She smiled, and then she fell asleep.

## CHAPTER 50



**A**nother week passed. Adelaide was never happier. But even though neither she nor Leo mentioned Alex, they both knew that sooner or later, they would have to see him. Soon, Alex and the girls would return home. Each week since they left, Adelaide sent them a letter telling them about Leo's progress. Alex had never written back. But then, she knew that he was not one to write. He had never written to her or his parents while he was in the army either.

Adelaide didn't miss having Alex around, and she worried about how things would change once he returned. However, she did miss the children. Sometimes, she spent hours telling Leo all about them. She told him funny stories about things they did while he was away. And they laughed together. *I wish the children could return without Alex.*

Meanwhile, Adelaide and Leo made love passionately, in desperation, worried that someday soon, when Alex returned, they would be forced to end their love affair. *I don't know how life is going to be between Leo and me once Alex comes back home. We've never had a perfect marriage. I can't even say we had a good marriage. He was always running around with women and drinking. I have wanted to leave him many times. I should have. But I didn't know where to go or what to do at the time. I didn't want to go home to my parents' house. And then I had the girls and... well, I thought it was unfair of me to take them away from their father. And now that his face is burned, how can I divorce him? I can't leave him like this. But what about Leo? What about Leo and me and our feelings for each other?*

Leo was growing stronger each day. “I’m going to go out and find a job,” he said one morning.

“Are you sure you’re well enough to work?”

“I’m fine. Look at me. I feel wonderful.”

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you too.”

From that day on, he got up every morning, dressed, and then went out hunting for a job. “I’ll take anything. I don’t care as long as I can earn enough money to take care of you and the children,” he told Adelaide. But each evening, he returned disappointed and worried. “So far, nothing,” he said, then added, “I have to find work soon. My savings are dwindling.”

“I know.” She took his hands in hers. *I can’t keep secrets from him. I must tell him the truth. I care too much for him to keep things from him.* “Sit down,” she said softly. “I have something to tell you.”

He sat beside her on the sofa. “What is it? What’s wrong?” he looked puzzled.

She took a long, deep breath. Then she began, “When you left to go to the war, I got a job. For a while, I worked at a munitions factory. They were hiring women because the men were off fighting. It was very dangerous work. Women were always getting hurt and even killed. I was afraid all the time. Your mother, God rest her soul, was afraid for me, too. She wanted me out of that factory, but we needed the money. So, she found a job for me working on a government switchboard. I worked there, and everything was fine. Your mother watched the children while I worked, but then your mother passed away, and I didn’t have anyone to watch the children. I hadn’t received any money from you, so I had to keep working. I had no other choice but to move in with my parents.”

“Damn my father. That drunken louse. That’s when he must have started stealing my letters to you with the money in them,” Leo said.

She shrugged, “Yes, probably. But that’s in the past, and it’s not why I am telling you about all of this. I am telling you because I did something very bad.”

“Oh? What could be so very bad?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

She sighed. Then she told him about her father. She told him how her father had done terrible things to her when she was a child. She told him how her mother had been very strict and often very mean. As she spoke, tears began to run down her cheeks. Leo took her into his arms and held her close to him. She pushed away. “I still have more to tell you. You see, I had to get the girls out of my parents’ house. And that’s when I did something that I would never have done under different circumstances.” Adelaide wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. Then she told him all about Ernst. She admitted that she had let Ernst make love to her. He listened without a word. His face was expressionless. She was terrified that he would be repulsed by her. When she finished speaking, there was a long silence. Her heart beat so hard in her chest that it hurt. It seemed like hours that she waited for his reply. *Please don’t walk out on me, Leo. Please forgive me.*

“I’m so sorry, Adelaide,” he said. “I’m so sorry you have suffered so much. And I am furious that my father stole that money and you were forced to do these things.”

“You don’t hate me?” she asked in a small voice.

“Of course not.”

“You don’t blame me for behaving like a...”

“No, I don’t blame you.” He cut her off mid-sentence. “If anything, I blame myself for not finding a better way to make sure you and the children were provided for.” Gut-wrenching sobs escaped from her throat. Then she put her arms around his neck and pulled him close to her. He held her tightly. “Shhh, don’t cry. We can’t change the past, love. But we can and we will change the future.”

“How, how can we change the future? Alex is your brother; he is my husband. And I don’t love him. I love you.

But I can't leave him. Not in the state he is in now. So, what can we do?"

"We can love each other. I will be your secret husband. You won't have to divorce Alex if you don't want to. We will just keep our love a secret. I'll continue to take care of Alex. He will be glad that he's not expected to go to work."

"Do you think we will be able to do this?"

"We'll try."

She kissed him.

"There's something I must tell you," he said. "Since we are both confessing things these days."

"Yes..." She cocked her head.

"I lied to you once," he said.

"About what?"

"Do you remember when I told you that Margot was my daughter?"

"I remember. It was that night when that woman came knocking at the door. She was in a panic. She said her sister was having a baby and that her sister might not make it."

"Yes, exactly."

"And when you got home that night, you had Margot with you. You said her mother died in childbirth."

"Yes, and all of that was true. Everything I told you was true." He looked away from her and took a deep breath. "Except for one thing."

"Go on. Tell me. What is the one thing that was not true?"

"Margot is not my daughter. She's Alex's child. I should have told you the truth, but I didn't want to see you hurt. I didn't want you to know that he had an affair and had a child with another woman."

"Who was Margot's birthmother?"

"A Jewish prostitute who died in childbirth."

“Why didn’t you tell Alex? Why did you take the child instead of putting the responsibility on him?”

“Because I knew he would just walk away from the whole thing. He is that way. I’ve known my brother his whole life. Alex doesn’t take responsibility for his actions. He never has. And I felt sorry for the baby. She was born in a brothel. They wouldn’t keep her. There was no one there to care for her. The sister of her birth mother didn’t want her. The madam would have sent her to an orphanage. And I figured she might die because there would probably not be a wet nurse who could feed her. I knew you were still nursing your daughters. Please don’t be angry, Adelaide. My heart broke when I looked at this tiny infant so badly in need of a home and a mother. If I could have, I would have provided that for her. But I needed your help. I was a single young man.”

“I know. I am not angry,” she said.

“Since we were young children, Alex created problems and then walked away and left them for me to straighten out.”

“It must have been terrible for you.”

“The hardest part of everything for me that night when I brought Margot home was lying to you. And before I brought her home, I walked the streets carrying a tiny infant in my arms. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do. All I knew was that everyone was dependent on me. We needed my money to live. I was working long hours, and I couldn’t take care of this baby in my arms. And then I thought of you. You were always such a good mother to your own girls. I hoped you would look down at Margot’s innocent face and feel the compassion I knew you were capable of. I hoped you would raise her if you thought she was mine. You see, I was afraid you might resent her if you knew she was your husband’s baby by another woman.”

“It’s all right,” Adelaide said. “I’m glad you brought her to me. I adore her. She’s a wonderful little girl, full of spunk and spirit. But you could have told me the truth. I would never have held it against the baby.”

“I should have known that about you. But we were young then. And besides, like I said, I didn’t want to hurt you by telling you that Alex had a mistress.”

She let out a short laugh. “He had more than one. This is the only one who had a child. At least the only one I know about.”

He nodded. “So, you knew he was cheating? You knew all the time?”

“I knew he was never faithful. How could I not know it? And for all we know, Margot might not have been the only child he fathered. She might just be the only one we know about.”

“That’s true,” he said. “I’m sorry my brother is such a terrible man.”

She smiled. “There was a time when Alex’s behavior could still make me cry. When we were first married, I wanted him to love me. But not anymore. I don’t care about him in that way anymore. I haven’t cared for a long time, but you know what is very strange?”

“What?”

“There were times before you boys went off to fight when I thought of leaving him. And I would have done so. But I didn’t want to lose contact with you. I was afraid that because you were his brother, you would disappear out of my life if I divorced Alex. So, by then, it was you I didn’t want to lose. I guess I always loved you. I just didn’t realize it. Or if I did, I couldn’t put it into words. I couldn’t tell you.”

“I always loved you, and I did realize it.” He smiled and winked at her flirtatiously.

“Tell me what you know about Margot’s mother. I’m curious to know more about her. Not because of Alex, but because sometimes I look at Margot and, well, she’s different from my other two. I mean, she is so spirited. Even though she’s just a child, I can see the spark in her.”

“Well, I didn’t know her, really. But I can tell you that she was very beautiful. Not as beautiful as you are, of course.”

She laughed. “Of course you would say that.”

“It’s true. You are the most beautiful woman on earth. At least you are to me. But Margot’s mother was beautiful in a dark, mysterious way. Like I said, she was a Jew. And she might have been the only Jew I ever met. She had long black hair and very dark eyes. And she wore a silver necklace with a Star of David.”

“I’ve never known a Jew. At least, not that I was aware of. I grew up afraid of them because my parents told me they kidnapped Christian children and drank their blood. Do you think it’s true?” Adelaide asked.

“No. I think it’s an old scary legend, made to terrify children. For some reason, people are afraid of Jews. But I got to know some of them when I was in the army. We had Jewish men in our platoon.”

“What were they like?”

“Like everyone else. Some of them were religious, and they said prayers on Friday night. Others played poker on Friday nights with the rest of us. They’re really no different from non-Jews.”

“Did they do anything strange or frightening when they said those prayers?”

“Not really. The prayers were in some other language. And they would put on these tiny little caps in the middle of their heads. But that’s all. Nothing too terrifying,” he said, smiling as he stroked her arm.

She returned his smile. There was a short silence. He continued to massage her forearm. Then she said, “I’m glad we both told each other the truth about everything.”

“Yes, so am I. I never want there to be any secrets between us.”



## CHAPTER 51



Alex and the girls returned home late afternoon on the following Wednesday. “Gretchen’s husband came home last night,” Alex said to Adelaide as he walked in. “She said we had to go. Anyway, where’s Leo?”

“He went out to look for a job. He’s been looking for work for weeks now with no prospects. But he should be back soon,” Adelaide said as she picked up each of the children and planted a kiss on their soft cheeks. Then she glanced up at Alex and quickly looked away. *His face is going to take some getting used to. I can hardly stand to look at him.*

It was as if Alex had heard her thoughts. “You find me unbearable to look at, don’t you?”

“No,” she said, still not looking at him. “Of course not. You’re a war hero,” she lied, trying to comfort him.

“A war hero,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “I am anything but a hero, Addy. I was never very heroic. I thought I was when I was young. But war teaches a man a lot about himself. And I know now that if Leo hadn’t pulled me out of that foxhole and carried me to safety, I would be dead. And you know what? I wish I was dead. I mean, living with this face is like being alive but not really alive. I hate myself. I hate my life. Do you know how many times I have wished he would have left me in that foxhole to die?”

“Let’s not talk about this. There’s no point in it. It only causes you more pain. You have to learn to live with yourself as you are.”

“No point? Leo rescued me, and now I am forced to live my life looking like a monster. Every child on the street that sees me is terrified of me. Do you remember how handsome I was? Do you?”

She didn't know how to answer him. She'd been hoping to talk to him about a divorce. She hoped that maybe he would want his freedom the way he did before he left for the war. But now that she had heard him speak, she knew that she would never be able to leave him. If she did, it might change Leo's opinion of her. He might see that she was not as kind as he thought, and she couldn't bear to lose his admiration.

Several minutes passed. She didn't say a word. Then she said, “Have the girls been all right?”

“Yes, they're fine.”

“Good. That's good. I thought about that so many times. I wanted to go to Gretchen's house to see them. But I was afraid that I might bring the flu with me if I came. ”

“Yes. Gretchen is very good with the children..”

“I'm sure she helped a lot. Gretchen is a wonderful girl.”

“She was nice at first. Then she kicked me out when her husband got home,” he said.

She cocked her head and looked at him. “That's not like her. I thought surely she would have allowed you to stay until you felt it was safe to come home.”

“Her husband returned,” he said, looking away.

Adelaide wondered if that was the truth or if he'd done something wrong and had made up that story. She made a mental note to take the girls and go and see Gretchen soon. Gretchen would tell her the truth.

“Do you want something to eat?”

“Sure. What do you have?”

“Not a lot. But I can give you some bread and tea.”

“Sounds good.”

She made him a cup of tea and cut him a thick slice of bread. He didn't thank her. But he sat and ate quietly. Adelaide watched him eating, and she realized that not once had he asked how Leo was feeling.

## CHAPTER 52



Leo returned late that day, just before dark. He was exhausted but happy when he walked into the house. “I found a job!” he said with a big smile on his face. But the smile crumbled, and he couldn’t hide his disappointment when he saw Alex sitting on the sofa. “When did you get back?” Leo asked.

“The girls and I got home this afternoon.”

“Good. Good to see you,” Leo said, but his voice and the little smile he tried to muster weren’t convincing. He was clearly uncomfortable. Adelaide was sure he was trying to hide the guilt he felt for making love to Adelaide.

Adelaide did not go to her husband’s bed that night. She couldn’t lie beside him anymore. So, she slept on the sofa, even though she felt bad because she knew he would think she’d lost her attraction to him because of his face. Adelaide was up early with the children in the morning when Leo came out of his room. Their eyes met, and her heart melted. “I wanted some time alone with you before Alex got up. I’m starting my new job tomorrow,” Leo said.

“You didn’t tell me anything about it. I’d love to hear everything.”

He smiled. “It’s nothing I’m proud of. It’s just factory work.”

“I don’t care what kind of work it is. I’m proud of you. I’m proud of everything you do.”

They spoke in whispers. “You are my angel,” he said. “The money isn’t good, but at least it’s something, and it will keep us going until I can find a better job.”

“Yes, we’ll manage,” Adelaide said. Then she added, “What about Alex? I know he was injured, but isn’t there some kind of job he could get? Or maybe he could stay here and watch the children while I work.”

“Are you serious? I wouldn’t trust him to watch children.”

“What if I could pay Gretchen to watch the girls during the day? If the girls were taken care of, I could work.”

“You should not worry about working. That’s for me to worry about. You just take care of the girls. As far as Alex is concerned, he should get a job and help us out. I know he is ashamed of his face. But there is nothing we can do about that. We need to live. And if we are all going to live here together, we need to work together, too. So, I’ll talk to him and tell him that he must go to work.”

She nodded and put a pot of water to boil on the stove for coffee. Then she sliced him two slices of bread, buttered them, and put them on a plate. The children were sitting on the kitchen floor, playing quietly. She’d fed them earlier, and they were content to play together until their morning nap. Leo was sitting at the table. But he bent down to ruffle Mattie’s hair. She giggled.

“I wish I could say that this job I got would be enough,” Leo said. Then he added, “I feel sorry for Alex. But he is going to have to contribute. We need the money.”

Then, softly, she added, “And you and I need some time alone. I’m hoping he will find a job where he works at night when you are at home. Just so we can have a few hours together.”

He looked away. “Yes, that’s what I was thinking, too.”

“It’s all right, Leo. Alex was never a good husband. You and I both know that. Please don’t feel guilty about us. You’ve made me happy. I have never been happy like this before.”

“I love you,” he said, his voice cracking with emotion, and just then, the door to Alex’s room opened. Alex came walking slowly into the kitchen.

“First day of your new job?” Alex asked his brother.

“No, I start tomorrow. But I do need to speak to you.”

“Oh? Go on.” Alex said, grabbing a slice of bread from Leo’s plate. He sat down and began eating.

“As you know, things are rough for us right now. Jobs are scarce, and I had a very hard time finding work.”

“Yes. But you did find work,” Alex said.

“Yes, I did.” Leo cleared his throat. “However, I’m not earning enough to pay all of our bills by myself. So, I am going to need you to get a job and help.”

“I don’t want to go out and work. I don’t want to face the public every day. Look at me. I can’t be seen by people. Why doesn’t Addy get a job? I can stay home and watch the children.”

“No, Alex. I can’t trust you with the children.” Leo said firmly. Then, in a gentler tone, he added, “I realize that it’s going to be difficult for you to go back out into the world. But you have to learn to live with your new face. There is no going back to the way you were, and you can’t spend the rest of your life in the house hiding.”

“Oh, Leo. If anyone knows how hard this is for me, it’s you. I was the most handsome man in town, and now, just look at me. I wish I was dead. I’d rather be dead than look like this. Even my own wife can’t bear to sleep beside me. Can you, Addy?”

She was at a loss for words, so she didn’t say anything. But Alex persisted. “Addy, you didn’t come to my bed last night. Admit it. You’re repulsed by me.”

Adelaide took a deep breath. Then she sat down between Leo and Alex. “Alex...” she said. Her tone was sincere, but she wasn’t looking into his eyes. “...We have never had a good marriage. I can’t pretend that we were ever great lovers.

Even in the beginning, you were always looking for someone better, someone else. And well... while you were away at war, I changed. I suppose the only way to put this is that I stopped loving you. It was before I saw that your face was burned. It was when I thought about all the things you did to me, to us, when we were together. It was all the other women you had affairs with and all the drinking and carousing at night. This is what ended my feelings for you. Not your face.”

“Liar!” he screamed and slammed his fist on the table. Then he pointed his finger at her nose and stared straight into her eyes. “You used to worship me. When I left for the war, you cried. You still adored me. And now that I have returned looking like this, you say you no longer love me. Who is the other man who was in my bed while I was gone? Who is he? Or is there more than one? I know there is either someone else or that you can’t bear to look at my face. Which is it, Adelaide? Which is it?”

“Stop it, Alex. Sit down and behave like a gentleman,” Leo said in a warning tone.

“How can I be a gentleman when I am married to a whore?”

Leo stood up. Without taking a moment to think, he punched his brother in the face. Alex fell to the ground; blood ran from his lips and nose. He touched his lip and looked at the red stain on his fingers. “I’m bleeding,” he said, shocked. “You hit me, Leo.”

“You’re behaving like an animal. Stop it right now,” Leo said. But Adelaide could see the pity, guilt, and regret in Leo’s eyes. “Listen, I didn’t mean to hit you. But you’re out of line here. Don’t you ever call Addy that again. Ever. Do you understand me? Now, if you can be civil, we can talk. Otherwise, go and clean up that blood.”

“I have nothing left to say to you,” Alex said. Then he stood up, blood dripping down his face and onto the wood floor. He began to walk towards the bathroom, and then he stopped. For a moment, he stood with his back to Leo and Adelaide without saying a word. The silence was deafening.

Leo finally turned around, and there was a knowing in his eyes. He glanced from Leo to Adelaide and shook his head. In a small voice, filled with quiet rage, he said, "How did I miss this? I needn't have looked outside this house for the man my whore wife was sleeping with. It's you, Leo. My very own brother. The brother who I've always trusted and admired. Both of you have betrayed me."

Adelaide stole a glance at Leo. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. But he didn't move.

"Go ahead, try to lie to me," Alex went on. "Tell me that it's not true. Just try to tell me that."

Leo walked towards the window and looked outside. Without turning back to look his brother's way, he said, "I won't lie to you. You're right, Alex. I'm in love with Adelaide. I've always been in love with Adelaide. In the beginning, when she first met you, she loved you. If you had treated her right, she would never have looked my way. But you didn't treat her well. You treated her like she was nothing. And as time passed, she came to care for me."

"Betrayal," Alex said. The blood was still streaming down the front of his shirt. Then he shook his head and asked, "So, what happens now? Who leaves here, and who stays? This house belonged to our parents, so it belongs to both of us now."

"Adelaide and I are staying. We have three little girls to care for. All of them are yours, Alex. One is yours by another woman. But Addy doesn't care. Her heart is so big that she has accepted your child out of wedlock. What other woman would have done that for you? But the point I am trying to make is that Addy, the girls, and I are not leaving here. We can't be on the street with three young children. Now, as far as you're concerned, you can stay or go. I don't care. It's your choice. But if you stay, you will get a job and help with the finances. Otherwise, you should leave."

Alex laughed. "You can't kick me out of here. This house is as much mine as it is yours. I'm staying. You can do as you like."



“That’s perfectly all right. But if you don’t work. You don’t eat,” Leo said.

“You’ve really changed. You’re not the brother you were. This terrible woman has bewitched you.”

“There’s no need for you to say anything else about Adelaide. Just decide what you are going to do and then do it,” Leo said, and he walked out of the room.

“Whore,” Alex said as he stared into Adelaide’s eyes. Then he turned and walked back to his room.

Adelaide sat staring out the window for a long time. She hoped that Alex would move out. He was no help financially, and it would be far easier to live day to day without him sulking around the house. She still had some feelings of guilt about breaking her wedding vows, not once, but twice. But she rationalized her behavior. *The first time I was unfaithful was with Ernst. It was out of necessity. The second time I broke my vows with Leo was different. I slept with him because I truly love him, and I have never wanted any man more than I want him.*

Adelaide sat in the window until it was time to put the children down for their nap.

When the girls woke up, Adelaide heard them stirring and went to them. On her way, she saw that the door to Alex’s room was open. He was not there. She went inside and looked in his closet and in the drawers of his dresser. His clothes were gone. *He’s packed and gone.* She thought, breathing a sigh of relief. *We might never have to see him again.*

When Leo came out of his room an hour later, Adelaide told him Alex had packed his things and left. He shrugged. But she could see that he felt bad.

Alex did not return that night. And he had not returned by the following morning when Leo was getting ready to go to work.

“Where will he go?” Adelaide asked. “I’m worried about him.”

“I know. So am I. But there’s nothing we can do for him. He has to find his own way from now on. I’ve taken care of him all his life. Now, he is an adult, and I chose to take care of you and the girls. I can’t go and look for him today. I have to be on time for my new job, or I will risk losing it. And without it, we won’t be able to put any food on the table.”

“You’re right. Don’t think about any of this. Try to have a good day,” Adelaide said.

Leo kissed her softly, and then he left for work. When he returned late that evening, he was worn out. He sat down on the sofa and rubbed his neck. He looked around the room. The children were asleep. But Alex was not there. “Did Alex return? Is he in his room?”

She shook her head, “No.”

“You didn’t hear anything at all from him?”

“No, nothing at all.”

Leo nodded. Then he leaned his head back onto the top of the sofa. “I’m hungry,” he said. “Do you have something prepared for dinner?”

“Yes, of course,” she answered. “I have a nice *hasenpfeffer* for you.”

“Ahhh, I love rabbit stew,” he said. But she could see in his eyes that he was still worried about Alex.

“I know. That’s why I made it for you.”

Leo did not mention his brother again for the rest of the evening. That night, when he went to bed, Adelaide lay beside him. But he didn’t try to make love to her. And she assumed it was because he was sick with worry and guilt about Alex.

They each lay on their own side of the bed, and for a long while, there was silence. Adelaide thought Leo had fallen asleep. But then he said, “It’s not going to be easy for him to get by with his face burned the way it is.”

“I know,” Adelaide said. Then she reached over and took Leo’s hand in her own and squeezed it tightly. “Leo. I’m

worried about him. I feel sick with guilt. I'm afraid he might kill himself."

"I thought about that. But doubt it would happen. Alex is too selfish to ever hurt himself."

"I know he was never a good husband or father, but even so, I am his wife and am racked with guilt."

"I know. I feel guilty too. But just not guilty enough to give you up."

He took her in his arms and held her there until morning.

Adelaide and Leo both had begun to accept the fact that Alex was not going to return. They were so happy together that the guilt they felt was dissolved by the joy of their love. But then it was two days shy of three weeks when Alex returned in the middle of the night. During the time since he had been gone, Adelaide shared Leo's bed every night as if he were her husband.

Adelaide got up to prepare Leo's breakfast, and that was when she saw Alex. She walked into the kitchen to find him sipping a cup of coffee. "Good morning, Adelaide," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "It's been a while since we last saw each other, hasn't it, my dear virtuous and faithful wife? I hope you weren't too worried about me. But then again, my brother kept you warm in his bed, didn't he?"

She felt the color rise in her cheeks. "I want a divorce," she said.

"Oh, do you now?"

"Yes, I do."

"And how will that look to the neighborhood? Adelaide Schroder, the wife of a man who was scarred for life in the service of his country, has decided that she no longer loves him because he is damaged."

"You and I know that is not why I want to divorce you."

"Does it matter what we know? Or does it matter more how the neighbors see you? You tell me? And think about this.

How will people treat your children when they know you are a filthy adulteress?"

Leo walked into the room and brushed the hair out of his eyes with his hand. "Well, Alex, you're back. Aren't you? I was in the bathroom, and I overheard you both talking," he said. "The insults to Adelaide must stop if you are going to stay here. And since you've returned, I am assuming that's what you plan to do. So, I've decided that this is what we are going to do," Leo said in his strongest take-charge voice. Alex was silent.

Adelaide turned to look at Leo. *I'm so glad he came into the kitchen. I didn't know what to say to Alex.*

Leo sat down and motioned for Adelaide to sit beside him. "Now, Alex, you and I know you weren't a very good husband. But you are still my brother, and I don't want to have to put you out on the street. You are the father of these little girls, too. So, I've decided that as long as you are respectful to Addy, you can stay here. Work if you want. Don't if you don't want to. I'll find a second job if I must. I don't care. I'm healthy and strong, and work never bothered me. But, know this: you and Addy need not get a formal divorce, but you are done."

"But you would like me to give her a divorce, Leo? Wouldn't you? You should be ashamed of yourself for stealing your brother's wife."

"Shut your mouth, or I will shut it permanently. I am trying to be fair to you, Alex. I am willing to take care of you, and I don't care about the divorce. But, I want you to know that if you don't divorce, you'll be man and wife in name only. Addy is mine now."

"Looks like you two pushed me out, doesn't it?" Alex said. "Well, I suppose that's that, isn't it? There's not much I can say anymore. I don't have anywhere else to go. Believe me, if I did, I would never have come back. So, this is how it is, then?"

"Yes, this is how it is. And remember, you will be respectful of Addy at all times. If I hear that you have been

unkind, I swear, Alex, I will put you out on the street.” Leo said firmly. “Now, you never cared much for the children either, so I will raise your daughters as my own. Addy will be their mother, and I will be their father. They will think of you as their uncle. This will make life less confusing for them, seeing that Addy and I will share a bed and live as man and wife.”

Adelaide blushed, but Leo continued to speak firmly. “In exchange for this, I pay for everything. You will never have to go to work. You can live here with us, and I will provide for you.”

“I see,” Alex said.

“But we can’t do this, Leo. It’s just not right,” Adelaide said. “Alex and I will still be married.”

“In name only. And that is so that the neighbors don’t put any kind of stigma on the girls as they grow up.”

“You know this is wrong?” Alex said in a small voice. “I’m your brother. You are making me give up my wife in trade for you taking care of me. Is this any way to treat a wounded man?”

“Right or wrong, I am telling you, my brother, the way things will be. Do you want to be a father to your children, Alex? Do you want to go out and work and support them? I don’t think you do.”

Alex shook his head. “No,” he said softly, “you’re right. Maybe this is better. You go ahead and claim them and take care of them. I guess this is what’s best for everyone in the long run.”

Adelaide saw the hate in Alex’s eyes, and it made the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand up. *I’m afraid of him. He’s angry, and he’s backed into a corner. I don’t believe he cares about the children, but I do think he hates his brother right now, and I’m afraid he could do something terrible to seek revenge.*

“Well, since it’s all settled, I’m going to my room. I don’t have to sit here and look at you while I eat or drink coffee.”

Alex stood up and left.

Leo took a deep breath. Then he glanced over at Adelaide and seemed to read her mind. In a soft, reassuring voice, he said, “It will be all right. You’ll see. He’ll get used to it.”

“He feels betrayed.”

“If he didn’t want this to happen, he should have been a good husband to you while you two were married. If you had been happy with Alex, I would never have told you about my feelings for you. But you weren’t happy with him. Not ever. He was always running around with other women. I won’t be doing that to you, Addy. To me, you are the greatest gift any man could receive. And I am truly grateful to have your love.”

## CHAPTER 53



**T**wo weeks later, Gretchen and her husband took their children and moved to his uncle's farm in Austria.

Before they left, Heidi and Adelaide went to say goodbye and to wish them well.

Over the coming years, Heidi's husband Artur, a carpenter by trade, built his business. He wasn't rich by any means, but he was a hard worker. And a perfectionist. He built beautiful furnishings, and through his hard work, he was able to purchase a small house for his family. But for Adelaide, the years that followed were a struggle. Alex never went to work, and because of that, Leo and Addy had to make do on one salary. Food was hard to come by. It was expensive. But this problem not only affected the Schrodgers, but it was also happening all over Germany, and many of their neighbors lost their jobs. Then, to their dismay, the factory where Leo worked cut back on employees, and Leo lost his job. He went searching for work every morning regardless of the weather. But for a while, the family lined up with their three small children each night alongside the rest of the poor and unemployed to eat a small meal provided by the local church. Then, out of sheer persistence, Leo found a job at the local hospital, cleaning at night. It was often dirty and nauseating work. He cleaned feces and vomit from the floor and from bed sheets. But he never complained. And he never said a word about it to Adelaide.

To make matters worse, the country was experiencing hyperinflation, and his small earnings bought less and less food every day. German currency was rapidly losing its value.

Adelaide did what she could to help. She planted a garden of turnips in the backyard, and many times, when the soup kitchen was unable to provide meals, the family ate a simple soup made from the turnips. Alex had become a recluse. Not only did he almost never leave the house, but he never left his room. He refused to accompany the rest of them to the soup kitchen. This frustrated Leo. He told his brother he would not eat that day if he didn't go with them. Alex still did not go. But Adelaide always brought home half of her food for him. It was not out of love but more out of guilt and pity. She knew him, and she knew he couldn't get used to the way people stared at his face in horror. So, he spent most of his time alone in his room.

The girls grew up in a time of financial uncertainty. When they started school, Adelaide began cleaning houses during the day when Leo was at work. He didn't approve but had no choice but to allow it. They needed the money.

Once the girls started school, their individual personalities became even more apparent. Margot was popular among her peers at school. But even though she was well-liked, she was a loner. As they grew into preteen women, Margot often went off by herself to read or to think. Her sisters were more bonded to each other than they were to her. Perhaps, she thought, it was because they were twins, not identical, but the same age, and she was younger. And the truth was, they both looked like their parents. Their uncle, Alex, had the same coloring too. But Margot didn't look like her sisters or either of her parents. Alex, Adelaide, Mattie, and Trudy were all blond, with light skin and blue eyes. Leo had light brown hair, but his features were similar to Mattie's and Trudy's. But Margot had dark raven black hair, olive skin, and deep-set dark eyes.

The years passed, and by the time Margot was eleven, she had become more introverted. She loved to read, and she was able to entertain herself. One afternoon, she found a stray dog. At first, the dog growled at her when she tried to pet him. However, Margot knew how to wait for what she wanted. Sitting on the sidewalk, she held out her hand and did not move a muscle. Over the next several minutes, the dog sat there watching her, not moving towards her but not running



away either. She waited patiently until, finally, the dog gingerly walked over and sniffed her hand. He was a skinny mutt with a dirty, ragged coat. She waited until he was satisfied and stopped sniffing. Then, slowly, she began to pet him. The dog sat beside her.

For the next two summer months, while school was out, Margot and that hound became best friends. Each night, she saved a bit of food from her dinner for her friend, whom she had named Charlie. He came to expect that food and he waited for it. Margot begged Adelaide to let her bring him in and bathe him. “We don’t have the money to have a pet,” Adelaide told her. “We can barely afford to feed ourselves.”

“Please, mother. Please. I have been sharing my food with him already. When we have to go to the church to eat, I bring some of my food home for him at night.”

“If I let him live in the house, you must keep him very clean, and you must be in charge of feeding him. And, each day, you must clean up the yard in the back of the building, where he goes to the bathroom. And you must make sure he doesn’t get into my garden.”

“I will do all of that, I promise you.”

“Very well then,” Adelaide said.

Before Margot brought Charlie into the house, she bathed him. Like everything else at that time, soap was hard to come by. But she gave him a bath using the soap her mother made from fat and lye. He didn’t resist. Charlie had grown to trust her, and he would have allowed her to do anything to him. Each day, she walked almost two miles to the Red Cross station, where she got an early meal. This one she ate, and then when she went with her parents to the church, she brought that food home for Charlie.

Adelaide smiled when she saw how clever Margot was. It was admirable how much she loved that dog and how willing she was to take care of the poor creature.

Over the summer, Charlie became a part of the family. Trudy and Mattie came to love him, too.

Fall came, and Margot had to go to school each day. During the day, Charlie would sit by Alex's bed or walk behind Adelaide as she did the housework. Recently, Adelaide stopped cleaning homes and began sewing by hand for wealthy women. But some of the women who came for fittings were afraid of Charlie, even though Adelaide promised them that he would never harm them. One of them was *Frau* Miller, a society lady who was slender and very fashionable. She insisted that Charlie was dirty and forced Adelaide to put him in the yard while she was being fitted for her latest frock.

Adelaide disliked *Frau* Miller, who was snooty and made it clear that she thought Adelaide was below her. But Adelaide knew how hard Leo worked and that the family needed the money *Frau* Miller paid her, so Charlie went into the yard. The first two dresses Adelaide made for *Frau* Miller went well. Charlie waited by the door of the building quietly. But then, for some odd reason, when *Frau* Miller came by for her third garment, Charlie, who was already outside, growled at her. He sat outside barking during the entire fitting. When *Frau* Miller finally left, Adelaide went to let Charlie back in, but he was gone. He did not return that evening, nor did he return the following day. Margot was distraught. She ran to the homes of each of her neighbors, begging for some information about Charlie. But no one had seen him. Then, one afternoon the following week, the girl at school, who was known as one of the school bullies, told Margot that she knew for certain that one of the neighbors had eaten Charlie.

Margot couldn't breathe. She was devastated when she heard this. She leaned up against the wall and held her throat, gasping. Then, once she was able to breathe again, she left school and ran all the way home. Adelaide was in the kitchen cutting up turnips for soup when she entered.

"It's all your fault, mama. You and those fancy ladies with their dresses." Margot's face was red and stained with tears.

"What are you talking about? What happened? Why are you not in school?" Adelaide asked.

Margot told Adelaide everything. Then she ran to her room and wept. Adelaide closed her eyes in horror and gasped. She

didn't doubt that it was true. People were starving. They would do anything for meat. Her heart ached for Margot and the little dog the whole family had come to love.

Margot didn't return to school that entire week.

Then, at the beginning of the following week, Margot heard whining at her window. She felt her heart leap in hope. When she opened the drapes and saw the little mutt sitting in front of her window, she let out a scream of delight. Then she ran outside, picked Charlie up, and held him in her arms. "Don't ever run away like that again. I missed you so much." She kissed the pup all over his face, and he returned the kisses.

# PART II

## CHAPTER 54



1932 GERMANY

**O**n a spring day when the clouds were like cotton candy and the sky was a bright Wedgewood blue, the three teenage Schroder sisters were on their way home from school. As always, Margot was singing to herself and dancing a little as she walked. “What are you wearing to the dance?” Matilda asked Margot.

“I don’t know. I have that yellow dress with the tiny white flowers. But I’m not really mad about it or anything,” Margot said. “I wish I had a dress that made me look like a film star.”

The three girls laughed.

“*Mutti* said that your yellow dress is made of very fine fabric. It’s made from the left-over fabric from *Frau* Bloomberg’s last dress.”

“I know. And the fabric looks expensive. But the style is so old-fashioned.” Margot sighed.

“Well, *mutti* wouldn’t want you running around at the dance in some satin gown like Marlene Dietrich,” Trudy said. “What would people say?”

“I don’t care what people say. I would love to look like Marlene Dietrich. She’s so sophisticated and chic,” Margot said.

“*Mutti* wants you to look like a decent girl, not like a floozy. And I think she’s right,” Trudy said.

“Well, I think you look beautiful no matter what you wear. Everyone thinks so. All the boys love you, Margot, and your yellow dress is stunning,” Matilda said.

“I’m not impressed with it. And I don’t know why all the boys make such a fuss over you,” Trudy said, shrugging her shoulders. “You’re just not that special.”

Margot gave her sister, Trudy, a light punch in the shoulder. “You would say that, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course,” Trudy said. “You’re not that special. You’re just my baby sister. Not a movie idol or anything like that.”

The three of them laughed again.

Then Mattie said, “I hate to complain, but the dress mutti made for me had a stain in the fabric. Mutti says no one will notice. But I think it looks awful, and I wish I could buy something new.”

“Mattie, do you want to wear my yellow dress?” Margot asked sincerely.

“You mean it? Could I? But then, what will you wear?”

“I’ll go to the secondhand store and see what they have. I’ve been babysitting for the neighbor’s little brat every Saturday for the last four months, so I have a few marks. And sometimes you can find nice things at the secondhand store,” Margot said.

“I should have done some babysitting. But I had to study on the weekends, or I was afraid I wouldn’t pass my classes,” Trudy said, then she turned to Margot. “You’ve always been lucky. School was always easy for you. It seems like you never have a hard time with anything.”

“Don’t be like that. I hate it when you get bitter like this. Yeah, school is easy for me. I am lucky. But you are smart. You just need to work a little harder,” Margot said to Trudy. Then she added, “Do you have any money at all?”

“No, nothing at all.”

“All right. Let me see how I can help you in some way,” Margot said. “Why don’t we all go to the thrift store this

afternoon and see what they have and what kind of deal I can make with the owner? She's open to negotiations, and I'll do what I can. We're sisters, right?"

"Right. And... I'd love that," Trudy admitted.

"I can't promise anything. Because if there's something I like, I am going to buy it for myself first. But if I have any money left over... well... we'll see."

"I know you better," Matilda said.

"You're right, Mattie. I always put everyone else first. But not this time. This time, for the first time, I am thinking of myself first," Margot smiled.

"Sure, we'll see," Matilda said.

Trudy and Matilda were blonde and blue-eyed. They looked good in pastels. But Margot looked best in jewel colors because she was dark-haired, and her eyes looked like coal that had burned and turned to a deep charcoal gray, the color of the clouds right before a storm.

Each of the girls was pretty in her own way. But, although Trudy was a tall, lovely blonde with beautiful features like her mother, her jealousy of everyone and everything took away from her beauty. Their father, Leo Schroder, worked all night cleaning at the local hospital. While the girls were growing up, their mother had taken on odd jobs whenever she could. Lately, she was busy making dresses for rich women, dresses she and her daughters would never be able to afford to wear. Trudy was ashamed that her mother had to work. And she hated the rich women who came to their small apartment to have their fine dresses made. It made her sick to hear them negotiate prices with *mutti* when she knew how much *mutti* and *vater* struggled to make ends meet. But Adelaide was always in a good mood. She sang as she worked, and none of this seemed to bother her. The love between her and Leo was strong, and they cradled their three daughters in that love. Even their brooding, strange uncle Alex, who lived in his room at the back of the apartment, didn't bother *mutti*. She served him his food in his room like he was a king. She

washed his clothes and took care of his needs, never once complaining.

Matilda, referred to as Mattie by everyone, was not like Trudy, even though they were twins. She was not bitter or jealous. She was a quiet girl, never seeking the spotlight, happy to follow her sisters. If anyone were to ask her what she wanted more than anything, she would have told them that she wanted to be liked. She longed to fit in. Not only amongst her peers but with everyone, even her parents and her uncle Alex. She did everything she could to please others. And because of her even temper and her willingness to please, Adelaide tended to favor Mattie. Mattie was always ready to help her mother with the housework or in the kitchen. She was the only one of her sisters who showed any interest in learning to sew. And Adelaide was more than happy to teach her. Once Mattie became a good seamstress, she told Adelaide that she wanted to help her with her work making dresses. Mattie was pretty, but not as pretty as her sisters. She was a shy, quiet girl who laughed when others laughed and was serious when others were serious. Mattie was quick to love and quick to forgive.

On the other hand, Margot was different from both of her sisters, not only in looks but in every possible way. She wasn't wealthy or influential, but against all odds, she was the most popular girl with her classmates at school. Her teachers, on the other hand, found her to be difficult and frustrating because she was smart, headstrong, and often argumentative. Unlike Mattie, she didn't care who liked her and who didn't. She had her own mind, and she and her father argued often because he told her she was too outspoken. Margot was not bitter like Trudy. She didn't care who was richer or who was prettier. She believed that she could achieve anything if she chose to. And nothing anyone else ever said or did mattered very much to her. When the girls were younger, Margot would compete with the neighborhood boys in sports, like running or high jump. Sometimes, she got hurt badly, but she never cried. If she lost a race, she practiced until she won. And as they all grew into teenagers, the boys began to find her fascinating.

The girls arrived home, where they dropped off their books. Adelaide was working on her sewing and waiting for



them when they walked into the apartment. Adelaide was still beautiful, but the years and the struggles she had endured had taken the sharp angles out of her beauty. Her cheekbones were still high, and her chin was still chiseled, but she looked softer and fuller. Her skin, which had once been like cream, was now lined with deep worry lines, and her bright aqua eyes were warm, but they no longer sparkled. A lifetime of financial struggle showed on her face. But even so, in her eyes, there was joy because Adelaide and Leo were still very much in love, and if the girls had little else, they were loved.

“We’ll be back in a little while, mutti,” Margot said.

“Where are you girls going?” Adelaide asked.

“The secondhand store, mama,” Mattie said.

“Oh? And what’s at the secondhand store?”

Margot gave Mattie a sharp look. She knew that if Adelaide found out they were going to look for dresses, she would stop whatever she was working on and try to make over their old dresses so they would be happy with them. Margot felt sorry for her mother, who had enough work without adding more. Besides, she was tired of her old dresses. She wanted something new. That was why she’d spent the last several months working and saving. “We’re just going to look. Not necessarily to buy,” Margot assured their mother.

“Well, please don’t spend your money foolishly, girls. I know you have been working hard, Margot. But money is just too difficult to come by.”

“Yes, mother,” Trudy said. Then, three of them lined up, and each planted a kiss on Adelaide’s cheek before they left the apartment. They walked three streets into town and went directly to the used clothing store. Margot picked out several dresses. Trudy watched her with envy. She wanted every dress that Margot tried on. “Which one are you going to buy for yourself?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. But I like this red one. Don’t you love it?”

“I think *mutti* would kill you. Red? You must be crazy. *Vater* would never let you wear it.” Trudy said.

“You’re probably right. I love this Kelly green one, too.” Margot spun around, holding the dress to her body.

“I wanted that one,” Trudy said.

“Of course you did. I knew you would.” Margot laughed. “You always want the one I want.” Then she took a midnight blue dress off the rack and tried it on. “I love this. It fits me perfectly. It hugs me in all the right places. I feel like Marlene Dietrich already.”

“I love it too. I’d rather have that one than the green,” Trudy whispered under her breath.

“Too bad. I’m buying this one for me. I’m going to try to make a deal so I can buy the other one for you. That is if you still want it.”

“You mean the green one?”

“Of course, she means the green one,” Mattie said. “That’s the one you said you wanted. I personally think you should try on that pale pink on the rack over there. I think it would look good on you, Trudy.”

“I don’t like that at all, Mattie.”

Mattie looked away; she was hurt. But then again, her feelings were always easily hurt.

“Yes, I still want the Kelly green,” Trudy said, but she looked longingly at the dark blue gown that Margot held.

Margot said, “All right. Get dressed. I’m going to talk to the owner and see what I can do.” Margot negotiated with the woman who owned the thrift store and was able to purchase both dresses. She turned and winked at her sisters. Then, the three girls walked outside carrying their purchases and headed back home.

As they passed the barbershop, Max, Heidi’s son, who had grown into a painfully handsome man, came strolling out and stopped them. “Hello,” he said cheerfully.

“Hello!” Trudy said, beaming. She was crazy about him.

Over the years, Adelaide, Gretchen, and Heidi had remained good friends, and so the girls had remained friends with Max, too. He had already graduated from school and was apprenticing as a carpenter under his father.

“Hello,” he said, addressing them all, but his gaze was on Margot.

“Hello, Max,” Margot answered.

“Hello,” Mattie said, blushing as she looked down at her shoes.

“What did you girls buy?” he asked, glancing at the bag in Margot’s hand.

“Dresses for the spring dance,” Trudy answered.

“Oh yes, I remember the spring dance.” He smiled. “I went with Alice Heidelman. Do you know her?”

“No,” Trudy beamed.

“Nice girl.”

“Are you still dating her?” Trudy asked gingerly.

“Nope. We are just friends. We went to the dance together. That’s all. I don’t know what she’s doing these days.” He smiled. His teeth were perfect and very white. “So, who are you going with?” he looked directly at Margot as if he wanted her to answer, but Trudy answered instead. “I’m going with Emil Bauer. But there’s nothing serious between us. We’re just friends too.”

He smiled again. “And you?” he asked Mattie, still looking at Margot.

“Traeger Bierwirth. Do you know him?”

“Yes, actually. He plays football with us sometimes on Sunday.”

“I’ve seen you boys playing at the park,” Mattie said.

“And what about you, Margot?”

“What about me?” she said coyly, pretending not to know what he was asking.

“Who’s the lucky fellow?”

She laughed. “A boy from my chemistry class.”

“Does he have a name?”

“All God’s creatures have names, Max. You should know that,” Margot said coquettishly.

“Of course I do. But I am not asking if he has a name. I am asking what his name is.”

“Ahhh, I see. And somehow, that’s your business? Or are you just being nosey?”

“I’m just wondering.”

“Well, never mind then. You shouldn’t be so nosey.” She flipped her dark wavy hair back from her shoulder, then turned to her sisters and said, “Let’s go. Mother is going to need our help with dinner. And we have been standing around here much too long.”

“All right. Well, goodbye,” Max said.

Trudy said, “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” Mattie said.

“See you around, Max,” Margot said. Then she winked at him and smiled, and his face lit up.

“Yes, see you around,” he answered, looking helplessly smitten. She laughed a little and then wove her arm through Mattie’s, and the three girls began to walk home.

“He likes you,” Mattie said to Margot.

“I like him,” Margot answered.

“Well, if you do, you have a terrible way of showing it,” Trudy sneered. “You act so snippy around him. He probably thinks you hate him.”

“I don’t want to show him that I am interested. I want to keep him guessing,” Margot admitted.

“Has he ever asked you out on a date or anything?” Trudy asked.

“Nope, not yet.”

“Would you go if he did?”

“Absolutely,” Margot smiled.

“Well, then you oughta treat him better, or he’ll probably never ask,” Trudy said.

“I’ll take my chances and do it my way,” Margot said.

## CHAPTER 55



**A**delaide was squinting over a garment as she pulled the needle through and tightened the thread when the girls walked into the house.

“What did you buy?” she asked, glancing at the bag in Margot’s hand.

“Nothing important, Mother,” Margot said. Then she sat down on a chair beside Adelaide and said, “What do you have left to do? Let me help.”

“I have to hem that dress,” Adelaide said, pointing to a forest green frock on the table.

“I can do it. Is it all pinned?” Margot asked as she discreetly put the bag with the dresses she’d purchased under the chair, hoping Adelaide would forget about it and not ask to see what was inside.

“Yes, *Frau* Meier was here yesterday for her fitting.”

Adelaide would allow Margot and Trudy to hem garments and make seams. But only Mattie, who was still taking the time to learn, could do fittings and sometimes even make simple garments.

“Oh, good. I’ll do it now before dinner,” Margot said.

“I can do the sewing if you prefer, or if not, I can help Mother and make dinner?” Mattie suggested.

“I’ll do the sewing if that’s all right. A hem is easy and can be very relaxing,” Margot said.

“Then I’ll make dinner,” Mattie said as she entered the kitchen.

“I’ll come and help you,” Adelaide said, getting up, and when she did, Margot quickly grabbed the bag and put it in her room.

Adelaide took a bunch of turnips, a few carrots, and an onion out of the cabinet. She handed the carrots to Mattie. “Here, can you chop these?”

“Of course, mother.”

“I got so busy working that time just slipped away from me,” Adelaide admitted as she reached up and took a cabbage that was turning brown off the shelf. “We’d better use this tonight. It’s already going bad.”

“I’ll peel the dark leaves,” Trudy offered. “When I am done, I can go and pick some lettuce from the garden?”

“The rabbits have gotten into it again, I’m afraid.”

“I thought you and *vater* built that enclosure that the rabbits couldn’t get into?” Trudy asked.

“Yes, well, somehow they got in. So, we might not have any lettuce. But, after you peel the cabbage, you can go and check.”

“I will, Mother,” Trudy said.

“Thank you, dear.”

“If I could catch one of those lousy rabbits, I’d wring its neck with my bare hands,” Trudy said softly under her breath.

“Well, if you ever do, be sure to bring it home for supper,” Mattie said, laughing. “You know how much *vater* loves *hasenpfeffer*.”

“He certainly does. And a little meat would do all of us good,” Margot added, looking at her flat belly.

“So why don’t you go out there and catch some rabbits? I’d like to see that,” Trudy said sarcastically.

“You never know, I just might,” Margot said, and she winked at Mattie, who giggled.



## CHAPTER 56



**T**he following day, Ben Weisman, Margot's date for the spring dance, was walking her home from school. He was a studious boy with dark hair and thick glasses. He was extremely quiet and withdrawn unless he was discussing something related to science. Margot knew this about him. But when she was assigned to be his lab partner, she found that he was incredibly smart. And since she knew he would never have had the courage to ask a girl as pretty and popular as Margot to the dance, she asked him. He was so surprised that he could hardly speak. However, once she asked him to the dance, he began to open up to her and talk to her more candidly than any boy she'd ever known. He admitted that he found her to be not only beautiful but incredibly intelligent, and not only that, but he said she was a good listener and that he was able to tell her anything. After a few months of shared work on lab projects, they became very good friends. They began to walk home from school together at least twice the week, and often, on the way, he treated her to a dish of ice cream. One afternoon, they were sitting at the ice cream parlor discussing their latest science project when she asked him to tell her all about himself. At first, he was tied. "I don't know what to tell you," he said honestly.

"It's all right. I'll tell you all about me, then," she said, and she told him about her family, her sisters, her mother, and her very strange uncle. Margot liked that he looked into her eyes when she spoke, and he listened intently. She was bold enough to tell him as much. "I have never known anyone who is so interested in what I have to say. I mean, most boys our age are

only interested in flirting and, well... you know." She blushed. But then she continued. "I just want to say that it feels really good to have someone like you to talk to who actually cares how I feel about things."

"I want you to feel comfortable talking to me about anything," he said, and then he smiled. Ben wasn't handsome in the traditional sense. But when he smiled, his eyes were soft and compassionate, and his smile was so sincere that it melted Margot's heart. His eyes never traveled to her breasts when she was talking, like the eyes of most of the other boys she'd dated. He told her she was pretty, but he seemed interested in more than her body.

Then, one afternoon, as they walked home from the ice cream parlor, he said, "You have two sisters, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"You're fortunate to have sisters. I am an only child. It's just my parents and me."

"Ahh, so they must dote on you then?"

"I suppose you could say that," he said. "My mother can be very overprotective. I suppose she figures she only has one child, so she has to be careful not to let anything happen to me."

Margot laughed a little. "Well, I can understand that."

"It's trying at times, I must admit. But I know she does it out of love."

"I've heard your father is a professor at the university."

"Yes, he is."

"So, your marks must be important to him?"

"They are."

"And you? Do you want to become a professor as well?"

"No." He shook his head. "I want to study medicine. I always have. I want to use my life to save the lives of others. I want to do something miraculous someday, like help someone who is crippled to walk again. Something like that. Not that

teaching isn't very important, because it is. Without teachers, there would be no doctors, writers, or scientists. Teaching may well be the most important profession there is. But there is just something about medicine that draws me to it. You know what I mean?"

"Yes, I understand."

"So, what about you, Margot? What do you want to do with your life?"

She shook her head. "I never thought about it. I never thought there would be any choices for me. I'm a woman, after all. I'm supposed to get married and have a family. That's the only future I've ever even considered."

"You're so brilliant. I've watched you in class. You're really smart. You're much smarter than a lot of the boys in class. Being a female shouldn't stop you. You could do anything a male could do."

She glanced at him. "That sounds wonderful. But the truth is, there's no money for me to go to university. My father and mother can barely get by. They struggle to keep food on the table. Times are hard."

"Yes, they are. They are hard for everyone right now. But you could get a scholarship."

"Dreams," she said with a sad smile. "I don't see that happening for me. In fact, I felt guilty the other day when I went to buy something at the secondhand store with the money I saved from babysitting. I knew my parents could use that money. And I know it was selfish of me to spend it recklessly. But, the truth is, when I earn money, I give them most of it. I just don't give them all of it."

He nodded. "If you want to go to University, I'll talk to my father about it and find out what is involved in getting a scholarship. I'll let you know."

And that was how their friendship began.

## CHAPTER 57



**M**attie was the kind of person who had always been shy around boys. And so, she was grateful that someone had asked her to the dance. Until Traeger Bierwirth asked her, she was not planning to go. She was a quiet, introverted girl who expected very little from anyone. And Traeger seemed to be the same type of person. They had known each other from the neighborhood since they were very young. He was not a popular boy because his family did not have a good reputation. Everyone knew that his father had been arrested for stealing. People said that his mother drank heavily when she got her hands on any money. And women whispered that his mother had been seen going home from the local tavern with men who were not her husband. All those terrible rumors about his family fell upon Traeger. But he seemed to take it in stride, as if he accepted his lot in life. He was always quiet, kind, and respectful. To Mattie, these qualities were enough. She didn't judge him on his family's reputation. She liked him as a person and accepted him as he was. They didn't talk much because they were both quiet and introverted. But it worked for them, and they got along well. Then, one day, as they sat in the park watching the birds, he reached over and held her hand for the first time. She saw the birds flying overhead and felt a fluttering of wings in her heart.

Traeger was friends with Emil, who was Trudy's date for the dance. Trudy didn't feel any magic when she looked at Emil, so she was glad that they would be going on a double

date with her sister and Traeger. She really had no desire to be alone with Emil.

Trudy had known Emil since his family moved into the neighborhood a few years before. She thought he was nice but childish. And she thought of him as a friend rather than a potential suitor. No one knew it, but her heart belonged to Max. And Emil wasn't nearly as handsome as Max, who was older and seemed much more sophisticated. When they were younger children, sometimes Emil could be a bully. And he often directed his harsh words at Trudy. She still remembered this. But her mother told her not to be too upset with Emil. She said, "Sometimes, boys are mean to girls they like."

Trudy accepted this, but Margot didn't. She hated bullies, and she fought with them every chance she got. But when Emil asked Trudy to the dance, she accepted because she wanted to go, and this was the only invitation she received. It was then that she decided her mother had been right. Emil liked her and wanted to be her boyfriend. That was why he was so mean when they were young. The only problem was she didn't feel the same way he did.

Although Emil had stopped treating Trudy badly, he was an outspoken boy with a cruel tongue toward others. If someone had a fault, he was the first to mention it. For instance, Werner Schmidt, another boy from the neighborhood who also went to the park where they all congregated, had a deformed foot. Because of this, he was unable to run like the other boys. He tried, but his foot made him slow, and his stride was more of a hop than a run. When they were younger, Emil often teased him mercilessly, making jokes that had all the other children at the playground laughing. Werner tried to laugh, too. He wanted to fit in so badly. This made Trudy feel sorry for him. But Emil would not let up. He continued to batter Werner until Werner left the park in tears. Even now that they had all grown up and were in their teens, Emil poked fun at Werner whenever he saw him.

Because Trudy knew that Emil could be cruel, in a way, she was afraid of him. So, she was always careful as to what she said to him. If he turned on a person and decided to make

that person's life miserable, there was no doubt he would succeed. Trudy didn't want to be the butt of his jokes. So, she smiled a lot when she was around him and agreed with everything he said. She laughed at his jokes even when they were cruel, as long as they were directed at someone else. And when he got loud, which he often did, and he got on her nerves, she kept her mouth shut.

The four of them, Emil and Trudy, and Mattie and Traeger were sitting on a bench outside the school one afternoon having lunch. It was four days before the dance, and there was excitement in the air. School was closed early today, so there would be no afternoon classes. Once they finished lunch, the girls would spend the rest of the afternoon at home. At first, the conversation was about the upcoming dance and what the three of them planned to do this coming summer. But then, there was a lull in the conversation, and Emil asked in a serious tone, "Have any of you heard of Adolf Hitler? I hear he is going to be our new chancellor. He has some awfully good ideas for the future of Germany."

"Yeah, I've heard of him," Traeger said. "My father likes him. He says Hitler is a war hero and that he will restore our pride in our fatherland."

"Yes, I believe he will. But it's not only our pride he will fix. He also promises to put an end to unemployment," Emil said.

Trudy glanced at Mattie and gave her a look that told Mattie that she found this conversation boring. Mattie suppressed a short giggle.

"What's the matter, girls? So, are you telling me that you don't care about what happens in our government?" Emil said curtly.

Trudy shrugged her shoulders and gave a coy smile. Then, in a small voice, she admitted, "Not really. That's boy's stuff."

"Imagine this then. What if Germany had a better economy? What if you could buy meat or chicken whenever you wanted it? And what if we were a world power that people everywhere respected?" Emil's eyes lit up.

“I suppose you’re right. That would be a good thing,” Mattie agreed.

“And how about this? This should have a marked effect on you, even if nothing else does. What if you could afford to buy pretty clothes all the time? Now you would like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Well, of course,” Trudy said. “I would like all of it. But, well...” she stammered, “I’m afraid it’s all just a pipe dream.”

“Oh, but that’s where you’re wrong. Hitler is a smart man. He knows what he’s doing. Imagine this, Trudy: What if your family owned an automobile and you could drive around town instead of waiting for the bus?” Emil’s eyes were lit up. “I wish I could go to Nuremberg to hear Hitler speak, but I don’t have the money to travel. And as much as my father admires Hitler, he can’t afford to give me any money either. I don’t know if you realize this, but Hitler says that all the financial problems we Germans face are because of the Jewish bankers. They are the reason Germany lost the war. The Jews in this country are our biggest problem. They have everything. Just look at them. They’re rich, and they’re educated. But what no one realizes is that everything they have was stolen from the good German people. They’ve done nothing good for Germany. All they’ve done is to bring our beloved fatherland to its knees. Do you have any Jews in your classes at school?” he asked Trudy.

“I don’t know. I don’t pay attention,” she admitted.

“Do you, Traeger, or you Mattie?”

They both shrugged.

“You should all be paying close attention. I am watching the Jews very carefully. I don’t know what they are up to next, but I can guarantee they can’t be trusted.”

“I’ll definitely remember that,” Trudy said. She was getting bored with his rant. “However, it’s getting late. Mattie and I have to go. Our mother is expecting us to come home early. She needs our help with her sewing. Come on, Mattie. Let’s go home,” Trudy said.

They both got up and cleaned up the mess from lunch before they said goodbye to the boys. Then, they picked up their books and began to walk the familiar path towards their home.

“I know you really don’t like Emil,” Mattie said. “I can tell by the way you look at him.”

“He’s so boring,” Trudy admitted. “And to make matters worse, he’s not very handsome. Why would he think we would want to sit and listen to him talk about Jews and politics? Especially when there’s a dance coming up and following that comes summer vacation from school. We could talk about what we want to do during vacation. I would love to take a day and go to the lake or maybe make a trip to the Alps or Munich. Wouldn’t that be amazing?”

“It would, but we don’t have the money.”

“Yes, but dreaming about it is more fun than talking about politics. Emil is a bore.”

“I have to agree with you. But I wish you liked him even just a little. After all, he is your date,” Mattie said.

“I wish it was someone else.”

“Yes, and I know who... Max,” Mattie said. “But you shouldn’t be thinking of him in that way. I think he already belongs to Margot.”

“Margot,” Trudy said with a sneer. “Everything good always goes to Margot. It’s no surprise that Max is crazy about her. All the boys like her. They always have.”

“She’s spirited. That’s why the boys like her. And she’s so pretty.”

“I guess she is. But I wouldn’t say she’s exceptional. She has dark hair, and most fellows prefer blondes.”

“If it’s not her looks, then it’s her lively personality that gets them. She was always challenging them. When we were children, she could run as fast and jump as high as any boy. That made them crazy. Do you remember that?”



“Of course. How could I forget? And I hate the way she always gets good marks at school. It makes me sick that *Mutti* and *Vater* are always praising her good grades.”

“She reads a lot and studies,” Mattie said.

“And to make matters worse, she is popular. All the girls try to dress like her, even though I happen to know that they secretly hate her.”

“You are just angry with Margot right now because Max likes her. So, you’re looking for all the things you resent about her. But I know this: Margot adores you and me. She’s a good sister. She’s always trying to make things better for all of us,” Mattie said.

“I suppose,” Trudy said, “but I guess I just don’t see what Max sees in her.”

Mattie didn’t answer.

They walked the rest of the way home in silence.

## CHAPTER 58



**E**mil and Traeger showed up at the Schroder home to pick up the girls. They both wore suits that were too big for them. But they each brought a flower corsage for their dates. Leo smiled at Adelaide when he saw them. He remembered his first dance. The girls looked pretty and mature in their new dresses, and although neither of them was crazy about her date, they were excited about the dance. “All right. You be careful and make sure you have the girls home by nine,” Leo said.

A few minutes after they left, Ben arrived. He looked so skinny in a dark blue suit with a white shirt and dark tie. Margot walked into the room, and Leo was stunned. She looked so much like her mother. And she seemed so right with this Jewish boy. It made him nervous.

After they left, Leo turned to Adelaide. “They all look so grown up,” he said.

“They do, don’t they? I guess our baby girls aren’t babies anymore.”

## CHAPTER 59



FEBRUARY 1, 1933

**T**he Schrodgers were too poor to own their own radio. However, Heidi and Artur owned one. And since Heidi and Adelaide were still the best of friends, Heidi invited Adelaide and her family to come over and listen to the broadcast that was to be given by the new chancellor, who had been appointed only a few days before, a fellow by the name of Adolf Hitler.

The evening that Adelaide received the invitation, she mentioned it to Leo. Alex happened to be on his way into the kitchen when he overheard her.

“Leo, Heidi invited us to come to her home this Wednesday to listen to the speech by the new chancellor. Would you like to go?”

“Sure, I’ll go. I’ve heard about this new chancellor. But, from what I’ve heard, I’m not sure I like him much,” Leo said.

“I’d like to join you at Heidi’s house. I’d like to hear the speech,” Alex said.

Adelaide looked at him, surprised. Alex never wanted to leave the house. “Really?”

“I know him.”

“You know him?” Adelaide said, not sure she believed Alex.

“Yes, I met him when I was trying to get into art school in Vienna.”

“Hmmm, that’s interesting. What was he doing there?”

“Trying to get into art school. Leo knows him, too. Do you remember him, Leo?”

“No. How do I know him?”

“From the war. You met him. Remember the fellow with that little mustache who was acting crazy?”

“Ahhh, yes, I do remember that.”

“Well, that was Adolf.”

Adelaide and Leo glanced at each other. Adelaide thought she saw a look in Leo’s eyes that told her he was uncomfortable with Alex attending. “Are you sure you want to, Alex?” she asked.

“I’m positive.”

Trudy had started babysitting after school for a woman who lived in an apartment a few streets away. The woman had started working, but no one knew what kind of work she was doing. Trudy didn’t care. All she cared about was the few marks she earned each week. When her mother told her that her family had been invited to Max’s home that night to listen to the chancellor speak on the radio, she wanted to do something special. Something that would get Max’s attention. So, she took some of the money she earned from babysitting and walked to the bakery in town. There, she purchased a small cake to bring with her family to Max’s home. Then she ran home and quickly put on her prettiest dress and smeared red lipstick on her lips and cheeks. Lipstick she’d stolen from the woman whose children she babysat.

After dinner, all the Schrodgers walked to Heidi and Artur’s home.

When the girls arrived and Heidi saw them, she kissed each one on the cheek and squealed with delight.

Trudy handed Heidi the cake. “How very nice of you,” Heidi said sincerely.

Trudy smiled at Heidi, but she wasn’t looking at her. Trudy’s eyes searched the room until she found Max. He saw

her smile, and he smiled back at her. For a moment, her heart leaped with hope. But then he turned away from Trudy and cast his glance at Margot. “So, I haven’t seen you in a while. How have you been?”

“I’m doing just fine,” Margot said.

“I heard you were thinking about trying to get into University.”

“Now, who told you that?”

“Oh, let’s see... maybe a little birdy told me,” Max said, winking.

“I’ll bet it was one of my sisters.”

“Yes, it was Mattie.”

“It’s true. I am trying to get in and to get a scholarship to pay for it, but it’s not as easy for a girl as it would be if I were a boy.”

“Yes, so I hear,” he said. “What is it you want to study?”

“I want to be a doctor.”

“You do? A woman doctor?” Max said, shaking his head. “That’s impressive.” He sounded patronizing.

She nodded.

“Some boy in one of her science classes has been filling her head with this nonsense,” Trudy said

“A boy? Is it anyone special?” Max asked, and Margot could hear a twinge of insecurity in his voice.

“He’s very nice. I’ve known him for a long time. We went to the spring dance together last year.”

“He’s a Jew,” Trudy grumbled.

“A Jew? Really, Margot?”

“Yes, he is. So, what? I don’t care.”

“So,” Max looked directly into Margot’s eyes. He cleared his throat, and then, trying to pretend that her answer didn’t matter to him, he asked, “This boy, is he your boyfriend?”

There was a moment of silence. Max was smiling, but when Margot looked more closely at him, she could see that his lips were quivering.

“No, he’s not my boyfriend. But he is my friend. We’ve known each other for a while now, and he is very encouraging as far as my dreams of getting an education are concerned.”

“You mean he believes you have a chance of getting into the University?” Max asked.

“Yes, and he also believes in my dreams of being a successful doctor.”

“He gives her false hope,” Trudy said. “She is a girl and not only a girl but a girl from a family that can’t possibly afford to send her to University.”

“Come on, all of you,” Max’s father said. “The chancellor is about to speak. I’m turning on the radio. Sit down. Gather around.”

They all sat at the dining room table. Heidi had made coffee and split the tiny cake into pieces so everyone had a sliver in front of them. “*Bienenstich!*” she exclaimed about the cake, “My favorite. Max loves bee sting cake, too. Such a lovely indulgence. Thank you for being so kind and considerate, Trudy.”

Trudy smiled. “You’re welcome,” she said shyly.

“*Mutti* is right. It is my favorite.” Max beamed at Trudy. “I love the almond and honey on the top.”

“I know. That’s why I brought it,” Trudy said.

Then Artur, Heidi’s husband, looked at his watch and said, “Shhh, everyone. It’s about to start.” He was excited as he turned the knobs and flipped the switches on the big black box. Then, the radio came to life. Everyone was silent as the new chancellor was announced. This was to be his first speech, and people were talking about it for the past few days everywhere in Germany. They were hopeful as they speculated about what he would say and about his plans for the future. And Adolf Hitler began to speak...

“Over fourteen years have passed since that unhappy day when the German people, blinded by promises made by those at home and abroad, forgot the highest values of our past, of the Reich, of its honor and its freedom, and thereby lost everything.”

No one spoke. Everyone was captivated by the words of the new chancellor. No one touched their cake. No one sipped their coffee. An eerie silence filled the room as if something macabre was about to unfold. Everyone at the table seemed mesmerized as Margot glanced at their lit-up faces. Their eyes glowed as if they were listening to a God. Then the chancellor finished his speech.

The crowds roared over the radio. There was a long silence in the room. Then Alex, who hardly ever spoke publicly, said proudly, “I know him.”

“You do?” Artur said. “How?”

“I knew him in Vienna when I was trying to get into art school. He’s brilliant.” Alex never thought he was brilliant before. In fact, he thought he was crazy. But now that Hitler was chancellor and Alex knew him, he was the first to support him.

“Oh? I heard his speech in 1922. He has a lot of strange ideas. He thinks the Jews are a pestilence in Germany,” Artur said.

“Yes, I remember him from the war. He was ranting about some Jew even then, and he said some crazy things,” Leo said.

“You met him too?” Artur asked.

“Yes, he was in the army. In the Great War. Alex remembered him, and then he introduced me.”

“He never liked Jews,” Alex said. “He blamed them for keeping him out of art school. He saw them as rich and spoiled. And he thought that they were only allowing other Jews to flourish and prosper. And I must admit, the Jews I’ve met have been like that. No good. A problem for Germans. A pestilence.”

“I can’t agree with you,” Leo said. “I’ve met a lot of Jews. Most of them I met during the war. And they’re just like anyone else. There’s good and bad.”

“I never had any problems with them. They used to come into the bakery sometimes when I was younger, and I worked there. They were always respectful. I never had a problem with any of them,” Adelaide said.

“I have to admit I don’t know any,” Heidi said, “but my parents didn’t like them. They said that where there were Jews, trouble would surely follow. My parents said that the Jews had all the wealth. They were always rich while the rest of us were struggling.”

Margot, Trudy, and Mattie took their cake and left the table. But they were close enough to hear what the adults were saying. Margot was pale. She felt sick as she thought about Ben. *This Hitler might turn out to be very dangerous.* She thought. Max smiled broadly at Margot. She half smiled back at him. But if he noticed that she was worried, he didn’t let on. Margot didn’t speak but was truly shaken by the chancellor’s speech. She couldn’t eat the cake. Closing her eyes, she thought of Ben. *Ben is not wealthy. His family has struggled, too. But they worked and saved for education. That is how they got better jobs. His father became a professor, and his mother teaches school. Ben said they always lived simply. They never spent money on alcohol. Instead, they saved for his education.* Margot had been to Ben’s home when she and Ben had worked on a science project together. The house was not large. It was modest but very clean. The family had a lot of books, but that was to be expected considering the parents’ careers. And all the furnishings were old. Not at all lavish. *I don’t believe Heidi... I don’t believe Ben’s family has ever stolen anything from anyone. The truth is simple. They educated themselves, and so now they have good jobs.*

“Margot.” Max interrupted her thoughts. “Will you take a walk with me? I’d love to speak with you.”

She glanced up at him. “Yes, I’d actually like to get some fresh air,” she said. “Give me a moment to get my coat.”



Max held Margot's coat as she slipped her arms into it. She put on her hat, and then he grabbed his coat, flipped it on without buttoning it, and they walked outside.

A blast of cold wind hit their faces as they walked down the walkway.

Trudy stood in front of the large picture window in the living room, watching them.

## CHAPTER 60



I hate Margot. *If truth be told, I've always hated her.* Trudy thought. She'd always known she despised her sister, but this was the first time she had ever allowed herself to acknowledge it. She'd spent years denying herself how jealous she was of Margot. But right now, as she watched Max put his arm around Margot's shoulder, the hatred in her heart grew into a dark hole where only demons could live. *Just look at her. She didn't bring any cake. She doesn't have to do anything special. All she does is smile, and he falls all over himself for her attention. I wish I could kill her. I would if I could. She's always stood in the way of my happiness. And she always gets everything I want.*

Mattie walked over to Trudy. "Come on, don't stand there and watch them. It only hurts you. It doesn't do you any good." She put her arm around Trudy's waist. "Come on, I am going to help with the dishes. I'll wash if you'll dry."

"I don't feel like it."

"But it's the right thing to do, Trudy. There isn't much to wash, just a few cake plates and coffee cups. It will take your mind off Max and Margot."

"Yes, perhaps it's the right thing to do. But I don't care. Margot's not doing the dishes. Look at her. She's halfway down the street, walking with Max's arm around her shoulder. And me? I brought the cake. I am always trying to win his affection, and all I get is an opportunity to dry the dishes." She scoffed.

“Trudy, you’ll find your special man. But it’s not Max. Can’t you see they like each other? They always have. And there is nothing you can do. I know you like him. But you’ll meet someone else if you just let yourself,” Mattie said.

“But I want him. I’ve always wanted him. I don’t know what to do to win him over. I’ve tried everything.”

“You can’t win him over because he’s in love with her.”

“I can. I know it. I am so miserable. He’s the one I want. He’s the only one I want, Mattie.” Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Trudy, you are only going to continue to feel bad if you carry on this way. You must give up on Max and try to find another boy who you like just as much.”

“What do you think about that Jew boy Margot is always with at school? Why doesn’t she go out with him? He would make a perfect husband for her. They both have that dark curly hair and those black devil eyes. She looks like a Jew. Don’t you think so?”

Mattie patted Trudy’s shoulder. “She’s our sister. She doesn’t look like a Jew. You are just hurt right now and angry. Try to forgive her. She likes Max, and he likes her.”

“All right. You think I am just making this up because of what Artur and Heidi said about Jews, but hear me out. Look at you and look at me. I’m blonde with blue eyes, and so are you. Max is too. But not Margot. She’s dark and swarthy, like a Jew. Just like that Jew boy she is always with, Ben, I think his name is. Face it, Mattie, Margot doesn’t look like us,” Trudy said. “And just look at her. There’s something wrong with her. She’s not one of us.”

“I understand what you are trying to say. But you’re wrong. Margot is just as German as you and I. She’s our sister. She’s our blood,” Mattie said. “Now come on. Let’s go and help Heidi and Mutti.”

## CHAPTER 61



**M**ax put his arm around Margot's shoulder and tried to snuggle closer to her. "May I?" he asked. "Just to keep you warm, of course."

She giggled. "Of course." Margot had always liked Max, and he had always liked her. But the other day, when he saw Trudy in town, she told him that Margot had become friends with another boy named Ben. Max became worried that he might lose his chance with Margot. So, he decided he had to be bolder. They had been flirting with each other for years, but he wanted more than casual flirtations. He planned to marry her someday. So, why not get engaged now? He had a good apprenticeship with his father. When he was finished, he would be a carpenter, and eventually, as his father got older, he would take over his father's business. Max had listened to her hopes and dreams of going to university to study medicine. But to be honest, he didn't take them seriously. He was quite certain that she would forget all about that once they became engaged. Margot was different from the other girls. He knew that. But he refused to believe that she was that different. Every girl he'd ever met wanted to get married and have a home and children. Once he proposed, he believed Margot would realize she wanted this, too.

Margot knew she should be glad that Max was smitten with her. There had been a time when she'd hoped for this. But that was before she met Ben, and he gave her hope for a more fulfilling future. Now, she found that she wasn't satisfied with the life she had once thought was her only option. Besides all of this, her feelings for Ben were constantly growing. At first,

she and Ben had been just friends, but the last time they were together, he'd leaned close to her to show her a passage in a book. She had turned to look at him when he spoke. And then, out of the blue, he kissed her. Sometimes, she closed her eyes at night, and she could still feel the warmth of his lips on hers. She smiled even now as she remembered it. After he kissed her, Ben apologized profusely. He was genuinely embarrassed by his own behavior. But she wasn't embarrassed at all. In fact, it felt so natural, more natural than walking with Max's arm around her shoulder. She thought of how she had wanted Ben to kiss her again that day. Of course, he didn't. He was shy the rest of the afternoon as they both concentrated on their schoolwork. When they saw each other in science class the following day, Margot felt her stomach flutter. She smiled at Ben, and he smiled back shyly at her. But when they went to study later that day, he was reserved and careful not to get too close to her.

Max gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze, taking her out of her thoughts and bringing her back to the present. "It's cold."

"Yes, it is."

"So, I was wondering, what did you think of Hitler's speech tonight?" Max asked.

"Oh, I don't know," she sighed.

"Do you believe he can do it?"

"Do what?"

"Bring Germany to greatness? Do you think Adolf Hitler can do it?"

"I don't know. But if he can, what will be the price we will all pay for it? Will it turn out that the price is too high?"

"I am not sure what you mean," Max said sincerely.

"I'm not sure either," she admitted, "but I know he is getting his audience very excited and angry. He was spreading a lot of hatred towards the Marxists, whoever they are, but that can't be a good thing."

“I suppose not. But I don’t think it’s anything to worry about. I think it’s just a way for him to build a rapport with the people. Nothing serious will come of it. I wouldn’t worry. However, I do believe he can make some very good changes here in Germany.”

“I hope you’re right,” she said.

“I’m sure I am. Don’t worry about anything.”

They walked side by side for a while. Then he took a deep breath and said, “Margot, I don’t know how to say this. I mean... I’ve been thinking about it for a long time. Perhaps as long as I can remember. But now, we are both getting older. And... well. I mean, I have been doing a lot of thinking.”

“Thinking about what?” she asked. But she already knew. He was going to propose. It had been becoming apparent to her for the last five years at least that someday she and Max would probably marry. Margot couldn’t remember a time when she had not known him. Her first memories were of them playing together as children. Then, when they got older, she and her sisters would watch him show off playing football in the park. As the years passed, and she began to turn from a child into a young lady, Max began shooting flirtatious glances her way. And until she met Ben, she’d been sure Max was everything she wanted. Their flirtations had made her feel lightheaded and giddy. And at that time, she had been waiting for him to finally come around and make their future official. However, now her feelings were confused. She was still wildly attracted to Max. After all, he was painfully handsome, tall, well-built, and blonde with strong German features. But there was something in Ben that brought out the best in her. There was something in Ben that made her believe that she might hope to be someone other than just a wife and mother someday. *Ben believes in me. He thinks I am smart enough to do anything I want to do. When I am with him, I feel strong and sure of myself.*

“Margot. You seem so distracted.” Max cleared his throat. “Do you understand what I am trying to say to you? I mean... this is very difficult for me. I am trying to ask you to marry me.”

She gasped even though she'd been expecting this. When he said the words out loud, she was suddenly afraid. "I don't know what to say."

"Say yes, of course."

"But what about school? I have another year after this one. And then what about university?"

"You don't have to finish school. You won't be needing it. I'll work. You'll stay at home and have babies." He smiled.

"I want to finish school. I want to go to University."

"How do you ever plan to afford to go to University? It's very expensive. Besides, being a woman, you can hardly expect to receive a scholarship. I know that this is a dream of yours. But I am so sorry, dear," he said gently. "The truth is, it's just a dream."

*She felt like crying. He's right. I must be crazy to pass up an opportunity to marry such a handsome man with such a good future ahead of him. I am a girl. And because of that, I am never going to get a scholarship.*

"How does this sound? What if we wait to marry until you've finished school? But we can get engaged. What do you think? Come on, this is no time to be coy. Say yes."

She looked directly into his eyes. She could see that he was nervous, too. *How can I turn him down? I doubt Ben will want me, anyway. He's never even mentioned marriage. I'm sure he'll marry a Jewish girl who is educated like him. That's why he doesn't even try to kiss me again. And let's face it, Max, like I, has always believed that he and I would be married one day. So, now he asks me. I have to say yes, even though I have misgivings. I think it's the right thing to do.* "Yes," she said in a small voice.

"Yes!" He laughed, pulling her close to him and kissing her. "This is wonderful news. It is very cold out here tonight. I say we go back and tell everyone the good news. I'm sure our parents will want to have a drink to celebrate."

She had been waiting and hoping for that kiss from Max for years. And yet, now that he had kissed her, she was even

more uncertain whether agreeing to this marriage was a mistake.



## CHAPTER 62



**B**oth of their faces were red from the cold, but Max wore a big smile when he opened the front door to his home and Margot stepped inside. He followed her in. He took her coat, leaned over, and quickly kissed her cheek. Then he turned to their families, who were sitting in the living room talking. “Margot and I have some news, and since we are all here together tonight, we think this is the perfect time to tell you.” He walked over to the kitchen table. “Come everyone, sit down at the table, please.” He reached up and got a bottle of *schnaps* from the top of the hutch, then he took out enough glasses for everyone.

Heidi smiled at Adelaide as everyone gathered around the table.

Max did not sit down. He was standing with Margot at his side. She plastered on a fake smile to cover the worry on her face. “Margot and I are engaged. We got engaged tonight. I asked her, and she accepted my proposal,” Max said proudly.

“Congratulations! That’s wonderful news!” Heidi cried as she grabbed her son and kissed him on both cheeks. Then she kissed Margot. “Welcome to our family. Not that this is new. You and your family have always been a part of ours.”

Next, Artur, Max’s father, kissed them both, followed by Adelaide and Leo.

“Congratulations,” Mattie said, smiling shyly, kissing them both quickly.

Then Alex patted Margot and Max on the shoulders shyly. “Congratulations. I wish you both a lot of good luck,” he said.

Only Trudy did not give her congratulations. Only Margot seemed to notice. Artur had begun to pour drinks from the bottle of *schnaps*. “You were right to take down the *schnaps*, son. This calls for a celebration,” he said, smiling. Artur handed Margot a glass of *schnaps*, and as she thanked him, she happened to catch a glimpse of Trudy, who stood alone in the corner. The look in Trudy’s eyes sent chills down Margot’s spine. Margot looked away.

“To the newly engaged couple!” Max’s father said.

“To the new couple,” everyone repeated as they raised their glasses. Then they all drank.

The *schnaps* burned as it snaked down Margot’s throat.

## CHAPTER 63



**T**he next day, Margot saw Ben in science class. The teacher was lecturing, so she had to wait until class was over, and they were walking to the lunchroom to eat to tell him about her engagement. She hated to tell him. But she had to. She wouldn't lead him on. Besides, he'd never made any attempt to be a boyfriend to her. And she believed that all the romantic feelings blossoming between them were one-sided. She was falling for him, but he gave no indication of falling for her. That was until she told him that she had accepted a marriage proposal. He didn't say anything at first. So she glanced over at him. When she saw the pain in his eyes, she felt sick. "What about medical school?" he asked, trying to hide his own hurt feelings. "What about your dreams of becoming a doctor?"

When she first looked at him and saw the hurt in his eyes, she thought for a moment that he, too, might be falling in love. But when he mentioned her giving up her dreams of getting an education, she decided that he wasn't romantically interested in her. He was only sorry that she wasn't going to try to be a doctor. "That was just a dream," she said, sighing.

"I didn't think so. Margot, listen to me. I know you can do anything you really want to do. Are you sure this is what you want?"

She shrugged. "It's what's expected of me."

"I didn't ask you that. I asked you if it's what you want," he said, his voice was harsh and cold. She'd never seen this side of him. She was so shocked at the change in him that she

couldn't answer. Margot felt like she might start to cry. So, without another word, she turned and ran away from him. She ran all the way to the women's bathroom. When she was safely inside, she leaned against the wall and wept.

## CHAPTER 64



**N**ow that Margot and Max were officially engaged, he came by the house more often. At least two evenings each week, Max dropped by after he finished work. He never came without a small gift for Margot, a book of romantic poetry, or a small bunch of flowers. Once, he brought her a tortoiseshell comb for her hair. And then, three weeks after his proposal, he surprised her with an engagement ring to show the sincerity of his commitment to their future. When Margot saw the tiny purple stone set in the thin gold band, she felt tears begin to form in the back of her eyes. “Oh, Max, it’s lovely,” she said. She knew he had spent money that he had worked hard for on this ring. And she wanted to be happy. She wanted to be in love. But all she could feel was sorry that she had accepted his proposal so quickly.

Trudy, who was standing with Mattie and watching as Max slipped the ring on her sister’s finger, said, “Well, Max, I would have thought you would have gotten her a diamond. Isn’t that the popular thing to do these days?”

“I suppose it is if a fellow is rich. But this ring means a lot to me. It is the best I could do.” Then he turned to Margot. There was a faint look of embarrassment and a fear of failure on his face. “I really hope you honestly like it.”

“Of course I do,” she said. *What else could I say? I’m not bothered by the fact that the ring is not a diamond. I don’t care about that at all. But I am worried that I am just not ready for a lifetime commitment. I still wish I were going to University. I just didn’t know what to do or what to say when he proposed.*

*And I still don't know what to say. So, I just keep going along with everything, and soon school will be over, and I will be married. Then there will be no turning back.*

“Well, if a fellow wanted to marry me, I would expect a diamond. Even if it was small.” Trudy said haughtily, but Margot knew that if Max had proposed to Trudy, she would have been overjoyed to marry him without any ring at all. She would have been so happy to have him as her husband that nothing else would have mattered. And for a few minutes, Margot wished that when Max proposed to her, she had somehow steered him in Trudy’s direction. Now, it was too late. It was getting later every minute, and she was becoming more committed.

Food was still scarce, but the Schrodgers managed to invite Max to join them for dinner whenever he came to visit. Adelaide never complained, and only Margot noticed that her mother was cutting back on her own portion in order to have enough to feed their guest. When Max ate with them, he was very considerate. He purposely ate less than he would have eaten if he were at home. And he always refused second helpings. Max could eat a lot more than he did at Margot’s house. Margot had seen him eat when she went to his home for dinner. He was young but still growing. A tall, muscular man who spent each day working long hours at a very physical job. Consequently, his appetite, by Margot’s standards, was tremendous. Margot wondered how Heidi ever managed to keep him fed.

If anyone asked Margot what she liked about Max, she would have said he was kind and generous. And he was. On one occasion, he took her out for dinner to a local beer hall that served food. She knew he helped his parents by giving them half of the money he earned, yet Max told Margot to order whatever she liked when the waiter came to take their order.

The more Max came to visit, the more bitter Trudy became. She no longer pretended to like Margot. She became snippy with her at first, and then she stopped talking to her

altogether. In fact, when the two girls were in the same room, Trudy never even looked at Margot.

Trudy was becoming ugly. Lines had formed between her eyes, and her hair had started to thin. She hated her sister so much that the hatred was eating her up inside, and still, she didn't try to stop it. And so it grew stronger, so strong that it oozed from her pores. When Margot was eating or drinking, Trudy would cast a quick glance her way and secretly make a wish that Margot would choke and die.

One night, Margot went out for a walk with Max. Trudy and Mattie were alone in the room that the three girls shared. Trudy was pin-curling Mattie's hair with small hairpins. "I don't think I will ever be happy. I think I am destined to live a miserable life," Trudy said gloomily.

"You just have to forget Max. You have to find someone else. You will be better off once you face the fact that Max is in love with Margot, and she is in love with him, and that soon they will be married, and he'll be your brother-in-law."

"Even hearing you say that only makes me feel worse."

"I know how you feel, Trudy. But you are hoping for something that will never happen."

"What do you think I am hoping for?" Trudy asked bitterly, spitting out the words like they had a foul taste.

"I think you're hoping they'll break up. But you and I both know that won't happen."

"I'm hoping she'll die," Trudy said.

"God forbid! Don't even say that jokingly. That's horrible. Margot is our sister, Trudy."

"Yes, well, it's true. But she has managed to steal every bit of happiness I could ever hope to have. Even my friends at school like her better than me. Do you know what happened last week?"

"What?"

"I was walking down the corridor, and someone said to me, 'Aren't you Margot Schroder's sister?'"

“So, aren’t you?”

“That’s not the point. This girl asked me if I was Margot’s sister. She didn’t even know my name. All she knew was Margot’s name.”

“I think you’re being too sensitive,” Mattie said. “She didn’t know your name, that’s all. Maybe she was in one of Margot’s classes. It didn’t mean anything.”

“Yes, it did. It meant everything. Don’t you see? Margot is adored by everyone. She’s popular. You and I are nothing next to her. She steals all the attention. All the time.”



## CHAPTER 65



**T**hings at school changed after April 7th, when several laws went into effect, each of them robbing Jews of more of their rights. By April 25th, a law was passed that limited the number of Jews permitted to attend public schools. The Jews had never been well-liked in school. But now, their fellow students began to ostracize them. The boys, and even some of the girls, had taken to intimidating them in the halls. The words “*JUDE*, NOT WANTED HERE.” Were written in paint on several lockers belonging to Jewish students.

One afternoon, as Margot was running toward her literature class, she saw two boys harassing a girl she knew was Jewish. The girl’s name was Sara, and she had been in one of Margot’s math classes the previous year. She was a quiet girl, small in stature, who had always kept to herself. Margot hardly knew her. But when Margot saw one of the boys grab Sara’s breast, Margot stopped in her tracks. Margot knew the boys. They’d never behaved this way before.

“Helmut, what are you doing?” Margot challenged him.

Helmut dropped his hand and looked ashamed. “Nothing, Margot,” he said sheepishly.

She shook her head. “Well, don’t do it again.”

Seeing her chance to get away, Sara quickly escaped and ran down the hall, holding her books protectively against her chest.

“Don’t get so upset, Margot. That girl is just a Jew. Helmut and I were only having a little fun,” the other boy said.

“Well, I am ashamed of the both of you.” Margot hissed. “I can’t even look at you. I’m leaving, but make sure you don’t do anything like that again. Now, I have to go get to my class.” Then she turned and walked away, leaving the two boys staring after her and looking embarrassed at each other.

There had always been persecution of Jews. Margot knew this. Everyone knew this. But since the new chancellor had made his speech, the harassment of Jewish students grew. It seemed to Margot that it had escalated to a new height. But this was nothing compared to what was to come later.

Margot met Ben for lunch that afternoon, and when she did, she told him what had happened with Sara and the two boys.

As they were eating, her books fell off the table, and Ben bent down to pick them up. When he did, his shirtsleeve rode up on his arm, and she saw a nasty purple mark. “What happened? Did you hurt yourself?”

“I got into a fight the other day.”

“You?” She looked at him, surprised. “I can’t imagine you fighting.”

“Well, I was with a friend of mine; we went to the market to pick some flour up for my mother. And a group of thugs were picking on an old woman in my neighborhood because she was Jewish. She was old enough to be their grandmother. She had just purchased a bag of potatoes, and they took the bag and scattered her potatoes all over the street. My friend said to walk away, but I couldn’t. They should have been ashamed of themselves. How could I let these boys terrorize an old woman? I’m no fighter, but I had to get involved.”

“Oh my,” she said, her hand covering her mouth. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. But they got me good. My back is all bruised. They threw me on the ground and kicked me. It hurt like hell.” He laughed a little. “But the old lady got away. And I’m all right now.”

“This whole thing is just terrifying. Everyone thinks this new chancellor is going to be good for Germany. I can’t see how. He is promoting violence, and it’s already out of hand.”

“Yes, it is. I don’t like the looks of it either. But my father says he thinks it will blow over. My mother thinks so too. The other day, some of their friends, other Jewish professors, came over for dinner. They could talk of nothing else but Adolf Hitler. Most of them seemed to be optimistic, like my parents, but not all of them. Some are even leaving the country. My parents refuse to even consider leaving. They have built their lives here. They have their friends, their homes, their jobs. I can’t blame them. But I am worried.”

“Do you think it will blow over? Or do you think you should leave?” Margot asked sincerely.

“I honestly don’t know. But, if it weren’t for you, I think I might try to convince my father to do what he could to get us into the U.S. My uncle lives there. He would help us. He would sponsor my parents.”

“Me? If it weren’t for me?”

“I probably shouldn’t have said that,” Ben said. “I mean, you’re engaged to someone else and...”

“And?” she said. Her heart began to dance wildly in her chest.

“And I have no right. I mean, yes, we are friends. And don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful for our friendship. But I have these feelings for you, and I must remind myself constantly that you are going to get married to someone else.” He cleared his throat. “I can’t believe I am even telling you all of this. But it’s all I think of. It’s on my mind all the time. Forgive me.”

“I never knew.”

“I have always felt this way about you. But I realize that even if you weren’t engaged to someone else, your parents probably wouldn’t want you to marry a Jew. Especially now, with the way Hitler is stirring things against the Jews.”

“Marry me? You? You never said anything about marriage between us before this,” she said.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Then, without looking at her, he said, "I know. I always thought of it as just a dream, a fantasy, really. But now that you are going to marry another boy, I thought I should tell you. Maybe I shouldn't have. Maybe I was wrong to tell you. I hope it won't hurt our friendship. I expect nothing from you, Margot."

*She looked into his eyes, unable to speak. What would it be like to be married to Ben Weisman? Would his father help me get into the university? Would his parents encourage me the same way they encourage him? Or would they would be appalled that he had married a Christian girl? And... what about Ben? What kind of husband would he be? We come from such different worlds. And yet, I am so attracted to the differences between us. I really do like him. I am so comfortable when I'm with him. And if I am honest with myself, I know I would be happy if I were engaged to Ben. I like Max, but more as a friend. Our engagement has never made me truly happy.*

She looked down at the engagement ring that Max had given her. It was only an amethyst, but she knew he'd spent more on her ring than he could afford. The tiny purple stone twinkled in the sunlight. Margot felt like crying. *Poor Max. I really believed he was the one for me until I met Ben. Now, I just don't feel the same. But I do still care about Max. He's like a part of my family. We've known each other since we were babies, and I don't want to hurt him. But when I am with Ben, I feel something I have never felt before. I feel free. I feel powerful, like I can do anything. I know he believes in me. He would never try to hold me back from my dreams.*

"I'm sorry if I made you sad," Ben said. "You don't have to feel bad for me. I know you are in love with someone else, and I understand. I want you to be happy. Of course, I do." He smiled, but she could see that there was pain in his eyes, sadness that he was trying hard to hide. "But I hope you will still think about pursuing your education. You're such a smart girl, Margot. I would hate to see that brilliance go to waste."

"Brilliance?" She let out a laugh. "I'm anything but brilliant." She looked down at the table. "I have something to

tell you, and I don't know how to say this, Ben.”

“What is it?”

“I've made a terrible mistake.” She glanced up at him, and there were tears in her eyes.

He took her hand and looked into her eyes, but she turned away. Gently, he turned her head back towards him. “What happened? What kind of mistake did you make?” he asked. “It's all right. You can tell me anything.”

“I should never have accepted Max's proposal. I don't love him. I mean, I do love him. Just not in that way. Not in the way a wife loves her husband. Do you know what I mean?”

He nodded. “I understand.”

“I thought I wanted to marry him when we were young. I mean, everyone expected it of me, and I just thought that it was meant to be. You know?”

He nodded, still holding her hand but not speaking.

Then she went on, “But, then... then...” the words stuck in her dry throat. “Then I met you.”

She saw the surprise on his face. “Me?”

She nodded. “Yes, you.”

“Really? I don't understand.”

She couldn't sit beside him. She had to stand up and walk away. Tears began to flow down her cheeks. “I feel foolish telling you this.”

“Please don't. Don't ever feel foolish when you're with me. Just tell me what you need to say. I want to listen. I want to help.” He turned to keep his eyes on her, but her back was turned to him.

“You can't help me. No one can. If I end my engagement to Max, it will break his heart. I don't want to hurt him. It will upset our parents. Everyone expects this of me. I don't know what to do.”

“I understand, but you can’t marry a man you don’t love. Can you?”

“Women do it all the time.” She wiped the tears from her eyes. “I have to swallow my own feelings to make everyone else happy. I have to hide my feelings forever.”

He looked down at the ground. Then, in a small voice, he asked, “What did you mean when you said I changed your perspective on marrying Max?”

“I think I might be in love with you.” She cleared her throat. “I mean, I don’t know for sure if it’s love. But I do know that I want to marry a man who sees my potential as a person, not just as a wife. You do that for me. You make me feel important and special. And...”

He stood up and went to her side. Then he gently turned her to face him, and without another word, he kissed her softly on the lips. “I love you too, Margot. I always have.”

## CHAPTER 66



APRIL 1933

It was raining hard on Friday, the seventh of April, in 1933. Leah Weisman left the Jewish school, where she taught early on Friday afternoons to prepare for the Sabbath. She did her shopping on the way home, and by the time she arrived at her house, she was soaked. She quickly changed her clothes and took the dough she'd made earlier that morning for challah and braided it. Next, she prepared her husband Jonathan's favorite dish, *kishka*, according to his mother's recipe. She stuffed the empty cow's intestine with corn meal, matzo meal, ground carrots, onions, potato, and spices, then put it in the oven. Within a short time, the house was filled with a delicious fragrance that reminded her of when she was a young newlywed and her mother-in-law, who had recently passed on, God rest her soul, had taught her to cook.

Leah diced vegetables and put them into a pot with a little bit of chicken. She set the pot to boil. Then she took a few tablespoons of schmaltz—chicken fat—and began to sauté it in a pan to render it into a liquid. She added the chicken livers she'd bought and set out to make chopped liver. Leah sang softly to herself. She loved to cook; she loved her home; she loved the children in her class, but most of all, she loved her family.

Ben had arrived home early and was currently in his room doing his homework, but soon, the fragrance of the food brought him into the kitchen.

“Everything smells delicious,” Ben said, eyeing the freshly baked braided bread that Leah had just taken out of the oven. It was golden brown. It was Ben’s favorite food. He loved the way the soft bread melted in his mouth. And he was especially glad to see it on the table tonight because Passover was going to begin in a week. And once Passover began, there was no bread. Only Matzo would be allowed in the Weisman’s home. But even though there would be no bread, Ben had always loved Passover. He enjoyed the special meal, but more importantly, he had always been in awe of the story of Passover and what it meant to the Jewish people. When he was just a little boy, his father told him the story, and Ben listened wide-eyed and enthralled. With the drama of a man who had to keep the interest of a classroom of students for hours, Johnathan Weisman told his son the biblical tale of Moses. He told him how the Jews were slaves to Egypt, and Moses had gone to the pharaoh, asking the pharaoh to free his people from bondage. In a loud booming voice, his father said, “And Moses said, let my people go.” Leah had come into the room to see little Ben wide-eyed as he sat on his father’s lap. “The pharaoh refused, and he put a curse on the Jews. He declared that all the first-born sons of the Jewish families would die. However, more powerful than any pharaoh, God turned that curse around.”

Ben, a precocious five-year-old at the time, clapped his hands. His parents smiled at each other.

Then his father asked, “Do you know what God did next?”

Ben shook his head. “He turned that curse against the pharaoh’s own people. And that night, when the angel of death came to claim the first-born sons, he had passed over the Jewish homes, leaving the Jewish children alive. And instead, the angel of death took the sons of their Egyptian captors.”

Ben remembered his father telling him this story so many times, and he smiled at the memory. *My papa has always been a wonderful storyteller, and even now, even though I know how the story ends, he has a way of making it interesting each time he tells it.*



And he enjoyed the Matzo they ate on Passover, a thin white cracker made from flour and water. But it was nothing compared to his mother's challah. He loved the way her special bread tasted and the smell that drifted through the house when she baked it on Shabbat. Throughout his life, he would cherish this memory.

"I haven't made *kishka* in a long time. Your father is going to be thrilled," his mother said when she saw that Ben had come into the kitchen. "He loves it."

"I'm thrilled because I love it too," Ben admitted.

"So, if you're so thrilled, *boychik*, why don't you help me and set the table, nu?" she teased him. *Boychik* is an affectionate name in Yiddish, meaning boy child.

"Yes, mother, of course. I will help." Ben took down three meat plates from the cabinet. His parents were religious, so there were two sets of plates, pots, pans, flatware, and even two ice boxes. One was for meals that contained meat, and the other was for dairy and fish. As he set the table, Ben thought about Margot. They had both declared their love for each other. They had kissed. He was so hopeful, but he still could not convince her to break off her engagement. If she did, he told her he would tell both of their parents that he planned to marry her, even though he knew his parents would be vehemently opposed. "I would face a firing squad if it meant you would be mine forever," Ben had said to Margot one day as they sat under a tree in the school courtyard. But she couldn't bring herself to hurt Max. So, things were moving rapidly forward towards a wedding that Margot regretted agreeing to. Ben sighed. There was nothing he could say or do to change her mind, yet he had to keep trying. Once she was married, their kisses and hugs would become a sin.

Ben was brought out of his inner thoughts when his father opened the front door. Ben watched as his father reached up and kissed the mezuzah on the doorpost. Then he ran his hand through his hair, dripping wet from the rain.

"Good *Shabbos*," Ben's father said. Then he kissed his wife and hugged his son.

“Good *Shabbos*, Papa,” Ben answered.

The family gathered around the table. Leah lit the candles, covered her eyes with her hands, and said the Shabbat prayers. Once the prayers were said, the family enjoyed the wonderful meal Leah had prepared.

Neither Leah nor Ben could tell by looking at Johnathan that his heart was heavy. He smiled at them and talked about how Leah had outdone herself with this wonderful meal. He refused to ruin the Sabbath for the others. So, he kept the burden of the terrible news he’d received that day buried deep in the darkest corner of his heart. But when the Sabbath ended at sundown that Saturday night and Ben went into his room to finish his homework, Jonathan knew that the conversation he had been dreading must begin. The time had come to share his heavy burden with his Leah.

“Leah, darling, come sit by me,” Johnathan said gently.

“Do you want some coffee or tea?” she said.

“No, love. Just sit here beside me on the sofa.”

She looked at him skeptically, but she did as he asked.

“I have something I must discuss with you.”

“What is it?” She took his hand in both of hers.

He lifted his eyebrows, and then he dropped his shoulders. “The University let me go on Friday.”

“You were fired from your job? Why? You’re an excellent professor. The students love you.”

“Well,” he said, sighing, “It’s this new government. They passed this law. It’s called the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service.” He scoffed. “It says that Jews can’t work at civil jobs anymore. So, Jewish teachers and professors are no longer permitted to work at public schools. I don’t know what we are going to do.”

“It’s all right,” Leah said, jutting her chin. “I still have my job. We can make do with less until this all blows over.”

“I have been thinking about my options all day. I could tutor young people in our home in the evening.”

She nodded. Then she said, “Yes, that’s a good idea.”

“Leah,” his voice grew serious, “I am getting worried. I just don’t know if this strong wave of hatred toward the Jews will ever blow over. I am afraid that perhaps we should consider leaving Germany. As you know, I have that cousin who lives in New York in America. If I write to him, I am certain he would sponsor us.”

“But our lives are here, Jon. Everyone we know and love is here. Our synagogue is here. If we moved away from Germany to America, we would have to start all over again. Besides, my English is not so good. And neither is yours. I don’t think we should panic and do something hasty that we will regret. I think we should wait a little while and see what happens. I believe that this maniac of a chancellor will calm down after he has won over the admiration of all the goyim—the non-Jews—with his crazy lies. He is telling them what they want to hear. And they are listening. But once he has enough followers who he can count on to keep him safe in his political position, I believe he will grow tired of harassing the Jews. He’ll find other things to put his attention on. You’ll see.”

## CHAPTER 67



JULY 1933

**O**n a hot day nearing the end of July in 1933, Ben received a letter. He opened it in his father's study. A wave of shock came over him. The letter was a form letter. It was polite but firm. He read it over twice before he sat down and put his head in his hands.

"What's wrong with you, boychik?" his mother asked as she walked by the study. "I thought you were reading in your bedroom."

He looked up, and his face was flushed. There were unshed tears in his eyes. "I've been kicked out of school," Ben said, throwing his hands up in the air.

"But why?" Leah sat down in the chair beside her son. Her expression was serious.

"The letter says that the government is limiting the number of Jewish students permitted to attend German schools."

"But you? I can't believe they would tell you to leave. You're such a good student."

"Yes, well, maybe I made a mistake when I said I wanted to attend a German school, not a Jewish school."

"I was angry at the time," his mother admitted, "but you said you wanted to meet people of all kinds. You didn't want to limit yourself to only having contact with other Jewish students. And since you were doing so well at the German

school, I thought maybe you were right and had made the right choice. Now, I'm not so sure."

"Me either," he said. "They are also limiting the number of Jewish students that they will be accepting into the German Universities. I was counting on going on to a German University."

"Perhaps you'll have to consider attending a University in France or London."

He nodded. "I suppose I am going to have to do that. Right now, I am going to transfer to the Jewish school so I can finish."

She nodded.

The following day, Ben met Margot in town at the library. They sat outside on the stairs.

"I have bad news," he told her. "I've been kicked out of school."

She looked at him, shocked. "That's terrible. This whole business is wrong. I don't know why the chancellor has decided to create so many problems for the Jewish people."

"It's been like this throughout history," he said. "No one likes Jews."

"That's not true. I do."

"Yes, you do. But, you don't like them enough to marry one. I mean, you say you love me, but you won't marry me. Now, will you?" he said.

She shook her head. "Let's not start this again, please. I can't marry you. It's not only that you're Jewish. It's also that I can't hurt Max that way. Even if you weren't Jewish, I couldn't marry you." She sighed. Then she closed her eyes. "My sister tells him every time she finds out that you and I meet. She's causing me so many problems at home."

"So, why don't you just use this to tell him the truth?"

"I can't. I told him that you and I are just friends. School friends. He seems satisfied with that. I can't tell him that I am

in love with you.”

“So, you’re going to marry him? You’re going to marry him, so you don’t hurt him. That’s ridiculous. You don’t want to hurt Max, but you’re willing to hurt yourself and me.”

She felt tears welling up in her eyes. “I know you can’t understand this, but I have no choice. The wedding is all planned. My family and his family are involved, and I can’t change things now.”

He shook his head. “You’re making a mistake,” he said, “but I can’t blame you. How could I expect you to marry a Jew in the middle of all of this? It would be selfish to expect you to bring all of this hatred down on yourself. And that’s what would happen. You would be labeled a Jew lover. You’re right; I should stop begging you. I should be glad that at least one of us is sensible.”

“Please stop. We don’t have a lot of time to spend together. This isn’t the way I want to spend the time we have. Please, Ben?”

He nodded. “I’m sorry.”

## CHAPTER 68



1934

**T**he wedding was all planned. It was to take place in the summer. Neither Max's family nor Margot's could afford much, so it was to be a simple ceremony, followed by a dinner for the immediate family at a local beer hall. Adelaide and Heidi were both very excited. They were far too engrossed in wedding plans to take notice of the tension spreading through the country due to the threats to the Jews by the new chancellor and his laws. Adelaide tried hard to ignore the conversations she overheard when she went into town to buy food each day. But even if she refused to acknowledge it, Germany was on a high-speed train headed for disaster.

## CHAPTER 69



On a blistering hot day in early July, Margot stood before the pastor she had known since she was a child and married Max Kraus. Heidi and Artur had plenty of room, so the newlyweds moved into their home. On the first night of their marriage, Margot discovered that Max was a considerate and gentle lover. She found living with Heidi to be easy. And each week, Max gave his paycheck to his wife, who shared it with his parents. Together, Margot and Heidi ran the house. Heidi had always adored Margot. Although she didn't know Artur as well as Heidi, she found him kind and fatherly. But she missed her afternoon meetings with Ben, whom she had stopped seeing when she married. *I have nothing to complain about because my life with Max is good. She had to remind herself each day. I have a good husband. He's handsome and hardworking. What else could a girl hope for?* But she missed the long intellectual conversations she had shared with Ben. They'd talked about everything: philosophy, modern medicine, politics, and life. Max was a practical man who didn't care much for long conversations. When he got home from a hard day at work, he preferred to have dinner, an occasional glass of *schnaps*, or a beer, and just relax. Most of all, he did not like talking about the chancellor, so they never discussed Hitler. But Margot didn't think Max approved of all the hate propaganda that Hitler stirred up. Even so, she knew he didn't care enough to be bothered to protest against it. Max was determined to be a good carpenter. He wanted to be worthy of being his father's business partner and was willing to work hard to achieve this. But when his workday was done,



he looked forward to a good meal and making love to the wife he adored. Little else was of interest to him.

Early one Monday morning, Margot went into town to buy some vegetables to make soup. While picking through a pile of a vendor's cabbages, she caught a glimpse of Ben walking across the street. It had been months since they had last spoken. As she watched him walking down the street, she felt a strong longing. *I am starved for a good conversation. What can it hurt if we don't kiss or hug? It's not wrong, is it if we are only just talking?* Margot put the cabbage down and ran across the street. "Ben!" she called out. He turned around, and when he saw her, a bright smile came over his face.

"Margot!" he said, his voice deep and husky. He'd grown taller, and he had filled out. His body was not thick, but it was muscular. And now he was more handsome than she remembered.

She walked closer to him. "How have you been?"

"All right," he said, "how about you? You're married now, right?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Happy? I hope."

She shrugged. "I suppose."

"How about we go and get some ice cream for old times' sake? I miss our conversations over bowls of ice cream," he said. "Would you like to talk for a while?"

"Yes. I'd like that."

They walked two streets in silence until they arrived at the ice cream parlor. He bought them both a dish of vanilla ice cream and then they sat at a table in the back. The owner of the shop was eyeing them suspiciously.

"He's looking at us like that because he knows I'm Jewish," Ben said sadly. "Would you just look at his face? He doesn't even really know me. But because I'm a Jew, he doesn't like me, and he would like to throw me out of here."

“Ben, please stop that. I haven’t seen you in so long. Can’t we just have a nice time?”

“I know you can see it too when you look at his face. It looks like he would spit fire at me if he could.”

She nodded. “I admit that I see it.”

He shook his head.

The shop owner cast looks of disapproval their way, but he allowed them to stay and finish their ice cream. They stayed and talked for almost an hour, and it was the most enjoyable time Margot had experienced since she got married.

Finally, the shop owner walked over to them and asked quietly, “Are you two finished eating?”

There was no denying it. Their bowls were empty. Margot nodded warily.

“Then you best be on your way,” the owner of the ice cream parlor said.

“But we are paying customers. It’s not right for you to throw us out of here,” Margot said.

“Listen,” the owner whispered, “I don’t like what’s happening here in Germany. But I have a store to run. I don’t want everyone in the neighborhood to boycott my business because I serve Jews. I have a family to feed.”

“It’s all right. I’d better go, anyway,” Ben said, forcing a smile. “I have to get home. I came into town for my mother. She sent me to pick up some potatoes. I’ve been gone for a while, and she’s probably wondering where I am.”

Margot nodded. “It was really good to see you.”

“Yes, it was very good to see you, too.”

She saw the longing in his eyes, and she felt the same longing in her soul. *It would be so wonderful if he could kiss me.* She thought, but she knew it was something that must never happen again.

“So, goodbye, then,” she said, standing up and walking towards the door. Her eyes never left his. She was sure she

could see his heart yearning for her in his gaze.

“Goodbye,” he said softly as he opened the door for her, and she walked out. He followed her. Then he stood on the street watching her, helpless, as she walked away.

## CHAPTER 70



**T**hat evening, when Max was eating his dinner, there was a knock on the door. It was Trudy. Margot was surprised to see her sister because Trudy almost never came to visit. But today, Trudy's hair was curled, and she was wearing a new dress, white with yellow roses on it. She wore a stain of red lipstick and a bit of rouge on her cheeks. Margot smiled at Trudy. "You look very pretty," she said, but she was wondering why Trudy had come by.

"Well, thank you," Trudy said haughtily as she walked inside the house and sat at the table next to Max.

"Would you like something to eat?" Margot asked suspiciously. She knew how resentful Trudy was that she'd married Max. Trudy made no secret of her feelings. *What is she doing here? She never comes here.*

"No, thank you. I have just come by to talk to both of you."

"Go on. What is it you need to talk about?" Max said. There was a twinge of annoyance in his tone. He was hungry and tired and wanted to be left alone to enjoy his dinner.

"Quite frankly, I'm here because I am worried about my sister," Trudy said directly to Max.

Margot's eyebrows flew up. *This is a new approach for Trudy. I just know she is going to try to cause trouble.* "You needn't be worried about me."

"Well, I heard from Frances Beck that you were sitting in the ice cream parlor with your that Jew. Shall we call him your

‘friend’?”

Margot glared at her with razor blades shooting out of her eyes. “You and Frances Beck have no right to sit around and talk about me. What I do is none of your business.”

“I’m only trying to help. You shouldn’t be meeting with other men while your husband is at work, Margot. You know better than that. Now, I realize you would never cheat on Max. Would you?” Trudy looked at Margot slyly. Then she continued, “No, of course you wouldn’t.” Her tone was sarcastic. “But it doesn’t look good to anyone who sees you and that Jew having ice cream together. Do you realize what kind of gossip something like this is going to cause all over town? You are going to shame our entire family. But most of all, you are going to bring shame down on your sweet husband, who doesn’t deserve to be treated this way.”

If she could have, Margot would have slapped Trudy so hard she would have fallen off her chair. But she dared not do that. If she reacted that strongly, it might make Max believe she was having an affair. The best thing to do was to make light of the whole incident. “Ben is just an old-school chum. I happened to see him in town, and we decided to have an ice cream. It was really nothing. We used to be lab partners in science class. I assure you there’s nothing romantic between us.” She let out a short laugh. “You see, it was all quite innocent.” Max was looking at Margot, and the look in his eyes made her nervous. “You see, I had this taste for ice cream. So, I went in to have some by myself when I was in town. Then, out of the blue, Ben walked in. When he saw me, he brought his ice cream over and sat down across the table from me. We talked for a bit. I didn’t mention it to Max because I didn’t think much of it.”

“It’s not like you to go for ice cream by yourself,” Max said. He put the spoon down and looked directly at her.

Trudy was gloating. Her face was bright, and her eyes were shining. She had won. Max was nervous. He doubted Margot. And this was exactly what Trudy had hoped for.

Margot took a deep breath. She had been keeping a secret that she was planning to share with Max when the time was right. This wasn't how she wanted to tell him. But he looked so sad and nervous that she decided that she would tell him now. She would use this secret to explain why she had wanted ice cream so badly.

"Well," Margot said slowly, "that's true. I wouldn't normally have stopped for ice cream by myself in the middle of the afternoon. I wouldn't have spent the money. However, I had this overpowering craving for it. It was such a strong craving." Then she gave Max her prettiest smile. "You see, I have been meaning to tell you this, but I wanted to be sure it was true before I said anything."

He cocked his head. "What are you talking about?"

"Max," she hesitated for emphasis. Then she smiled again and said, "I'm pregnant."

His eyes lit up. He stood up and lifted her from her chair gently until she was standing. Then he put his arms around her. "I'm so happy," he said, forgetting all about her meeting with Ben. "We're going to have a child. That's why you were craving ice cream?"

"Yes," Margot said.

He began to laugh and to hug her close to him. "I love you," he said, "and you can have ice cream whenever you want."

Trudy was fuming. Her face fell. She glared at Margot. Then she got up and said, "Well, I suppose congratulations are in order."

"Yes, it is. And thank you," Margot said softly.

"But you still shouldn't be seen talking with Jews. It's just not a good idea. What will people think? What will they say about our family? I know you've always been headstrong, but for once in your life, Margot, think of someone other than yourself. You're going to have a child now; you should think of your unborn child's reputation," Trudy said. Then she stood

up, straightened her back, and clenched her jaw. Trudy glared at Margot, shook her head, and left the house.

## CHAPTER 71



In March, Margot gave birth to a little boy whom she and Max named Erik. When he was born, the midwife saw a crow who had settled outside on the windowsill, cawing loudly. The old midwife saw the bird and let out a gasp. Margot turned her head to look out the window. Her eyes met the black eyes of the crow, and she trembled. “That blackbird is bad luck for this child,” the midwife said under her breath. Margot never forgot those words. And so she was devastated but not surprised when Erik turned out to be a sickly infant. Right after Erik was born, Margot took him for a visit with the local doctor. When he told Margot that her son had one arm and one leg that was shorter than the other, she was worried. She’d grown up with Adelaide, who had always been superstitious. In fact, before Margot got married, she’d had overheard her mother and Heidi talking about a neighbor whose child was born on a Friday that fell on the thirteenth of the month. They didn’t know that Margot heard them when they whispered to each other that this was a sign that the baby might be possessed by the devil. At the time, Margot thought that it was nonsense and she hadn’t paid them much attention. However, now that the midwife had said her son might have bad luck, she was fighting the nagging fears. Margot was well read and, consequently, more self-educated than her mother. She tried to rationalize things, but it was almost impossible. Intellectually, she was certain that there was no such thing as demon possession or bad luck. But, sometimes, the old superstitious fears she grew up with would sneak into her thoughts. However, her little boy was a sweet child with a handsome little face, and his parents loved him fiercely.



## CHAPTER 72



MID-SEPTEMBER 1935

**D**eep in the beautiful region of Bavaria, in a bustling, modern, and heavily populated city called Nuremberg, the Nazi Party hosted its annual rally. This was a big event for the party, during which new laws were passed. New and terrible laws would end up changing the lives of the Jews in Europe forever. These laws would decide who was to be considered Jewish. It was not according to a person's beliefs but according to the bloodline of their ancestors. Once a person was deemed a Jew, it was not only acceptable but encouraged to discriminate against them in every way. This included Jewish men who had fought for Germany in the previous war. Marriage between Jews and non-Jews was no longer just frowned upon. It was now prohibited by law. And Jews were now required to register themselves as Jews and declare everything they owned to the government. In short, these laws stripped Jews of their German citizenship. Later, they would strip them of their lives.

## CHAPTER 73



OCTOBER 1935

**B**en's parents were growing more uneasy. One night in mid-October, they attended a meeting at the local synagogue. This was the same synagogue his family attended each Saturday morning for as long as Ben could remember. The same synagogue where they celebrated the Jewish holidays, where he had built a *sukkah* with the other children on Sukkot as a child. And where he had heard the sacred sound of the blowing of the *shofar* on the holiest of days, Yom Kippur. This was the very same podium where Ben, at thirteen, had been issued into the covenant of Jewish manhood as he read from the Torah on his bar-mitzvah. He had attended weddings and funerals here and knew most of the congregants by name. They were family friends, neighbors, and parents of children who his mother taught at the Jewish school. He looked around him. The room was filled with terrified people. Ben could feel their angst as the Rabbi walked up to the podium. The Rabbi smiled lovingly at the congregation, but there was uncertainty and sadness in his eyes. He was a kind old man with a white beard and white hair. Clearing his throat, the Rabbi began to give a recap of the new laws that had been passed in Nuremberg the month before, just in case anyone was unclear about them. Then, he opened the floor to his congregants for discussion.

Ben tried to concentrate, but he couldn't. Even now, his mind was on Margot. He had seen her twice a week prior to the new laws being passed. The first time, he had been walking by the park, and she was sitting on the bench playing

with her little boy. He knew he should keep walking; he knew he should leave her alone. She had a child now. But he couldn't. He had to stop and say hello. They talked for over an hour. And the love he had been trying so hard to suppress came shooting back at him like a comet. Ben wished he could kiss her. He wished he could hold her hand. But he knew better than to do such a thing. It was such a joy to just sit beside her for a while.

That night, he lay in bed, wondering what it might be like to be Margot's husband. Margot told him that Erik was born with physical problems, and he wished more than anything that he was a doctor who could help. If he could only help Margot's child, he might always have a place in her life. And that was the best he could hope for. But his dreams of studying medicine had been thwarted. And now, he was uncertain of what the future held for him. As he sat in the park looking into Erik's tiny face, Ben was overcome with love and a desire to protect this small, innocent life. Then Margot said something that made his heart sing. "I want to have a friendship with you. I miss our talks. So, I am going to discuss it with my husband, Max. I am going to tell him that you and I are friends and that is all. He is going to have to trust me."

Ben had been happy that she wanted to resume friendship, but he was also terrified that her husband would put an end to it.

"Can you meet me back here tomorrow? I'll talk to Max tonight. He's not a bad fellow. In fact, I think you would like him."

Ben tried to smile. He couldn't imagine himself liking the man to whom he lost the love of his life.

When she arrived at the park the next day, pushing Erik in his pram, she sat beside Ben.

"Well, I told him about our friendship," she said brightly.

"What did he say?"

"Max is a good man. He was a little worried, but I reassured him that nothing would happen between us. So, he

was understanding.”

“I have to admit, Max sounds like a good man.” *And if I cannot be Margot’s husband, at least she married well.*

“So, I think you should come over for dinner and meet Max. I want our friendship to be out in the open. Max agrees. How about one evening next week?”

Ben was all for it. If he couldn’t have Margot for himself, he would gladly become a friend of the family. He would embrace a friendship with Max. It was better than nothing, he told himself. And he was prepared to go and meet Margot’s husband. But that was before these laws were passed. Now, it was forbidden.

## CHAPTER 74



**A**delaide had kept her fears to herself. But she was haunted by that tiny bit of information Leo had shared with her so long ago. That tiny bit of information about Margot. It kept her up at night and often woke her from her sleep. These new laws made the fact that Margot's mother was Jewish far more serious than before. And she wondered what would happen if anyone ever found out.

Adelaide had trouble sleeping. But she still had not told Leo why. Then, one night, she had fallen into a fitful sleep and awoke screaming. Leo was awakened. He took her into his arms and held her close to him. "Shhh, it's all right?" he said.

But she was weeping.

"It was just a bad dream, my darling. Shh, don't be so afraid."

Mattie was out that night. She was on a date with a boy she'd met recently. But Trudy was at home, and when she heard her mother scream, Trudy jumped out of bed and went to her parents' room. She was going to go inside, but she heard her mother crying and her father comforting her. She didn't want to interrupt. But she needed to be sure her mother was all right. So, she listened by the door.

"I'm worried, Leo. I've been worried ever since these new laws were passed."

"Worried for what reason? You have no reason to worry."

"That's not true. I'm so afraid for our Margot. I had a dream that the authorities found out."

“They won’t find out. No one knows anything.”

“But if they should somehow find out, what would happen to Margot?”

“How would they find out if no one knows, love?”

“I don’t know. But you know how people are. What if someone hears it from someone else?”

“But who? How?”

“I don’t know. But I am afraid that someone out there knows the truth. They know that Margot’s mother was Jewish and a whore besides. I am going mad with worry. I don’t know what will become of her. Will the law force Max to divorce her? And then what about poor little Erik? This is so terrible.”

Trudy couldn’t believe what she was hearing. *Could this be true? I am lucky to have overheard this. Now I have all the information I need. Margot stole Max from me. But she can’t keep him because her mother was a Jewish whore.*

She closed her eyes, and a smile of satisfaction came over her face.

## A Note From The Author

I always enjoy hearing from my readers, and your thoughts about my work are very important to me. If you enjoyed my novel, please consider telling your friends and posting a short review on [Amazon](#) and/or [Goodreads](#). Word of mouth is an author's best friend.

Also, it would be my honor to have you join my mailing list. As my gift to you for joining, you will receive 3 **free** short stories and my USA Today award-winning novella complimentary in your email! To sign up, just go to my website at [www.RobertaKagan.com](http://www.RobertaKagan.com)

I send blessings to each and every one of you,

Roberta

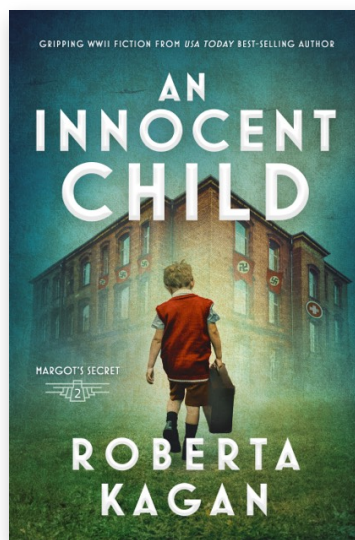
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p.s. Keep reading for the first chapter of the next book in the *Margot's Secret Series - An Innocent Child*. Now available to [pre-order on Amazon!](#)

# **AN INNOCENT CHILD**



## AN EXCERPT



**In the haunting backdrop of a world in turmoil, love, loyalty, and lineage converge in this gripping sequel.**

As the specter of Nazism looms over Germany, Margot finds herself torn between two men—Ben, the Jewish doctor who sees her potential, and Max, her childhood confidant and now husband.

Their lives are further complicated by Margot's sickly son, Erik, who grapples with a life-threatening illness. Ben might have the expertise to help Erik, but the rising tide of anti-Semitism means he lacks the resources.

In a desperate bid to save his son, Max is forced to make a heart-wrenching choice that shatters bonds and creates unlikely alliances.

In this dire situation, Margot's sister, Trudy, plays a dangerous game. Married to an ambitious Nazi officer and harboring

feelings for Max, she is armed with a secret that could devastate her sister's life. One wrong move could shatter families, and betrayals could be fatal.

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Book Two in the *Margot's Secret Series*, ***An Innocent Child*** is available to [pre-order today!](#)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I wanted to take a moment to introduce myself. My name is Roberta, and I am an author of Historical Fiction, mainly based on World War 2 and the Holocaust. While I never discount the horrors of the Holocaust and the Nazis, my novels are constantly inspired by love, kindness, and the small special moments that make life worth living.

I always knew I wanted to reach people through art when I was younger. I just always thought I would be an actress. That dream died in my late 20's, after many attempts and failures. For the next several years, I tried so many different professions. I worked as a hairstylist and a wedding coordinator, amongst many other jobs. But I was never satisfied. Finally, in my 50's, I worked for a hospital on the PBX board. Every day I would drive to work, I would dread clocking in. I would count the hours until I clocked out. And, the next day, I would do it all over again. I couldn't see a way out, but I prayed, and I prayed, and then I prayed some more. Until one morning at 4 am, I woke up with a voice in my head, and you might know that voice as Detrick. He told me to write his story, and together we sat at the computer; we wrote the novel that is now known as All My Love, Detrick. I now have over 30 books published, and I have had the honor of being a USA Today Best-Selling Author. I have met such incredible people in this industry, and I am so blessed to be meeting you.

I tell this story a lot. And a lot of people think I am crazy, but it is true. I always found solace in books growing up but didn't start writing until I was in my late 50s. I try to tell this story to as many people as possible to inspire them. No matter where you are in your life, remember there is always a flicker of light no matter how dark it seems.

I send you many blessings, and I hope you enjoy my novels. They are all written with love.

Roberta



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ISBN (eBook): 978-1-957207-51-3

ISBN (Paperback): 978-1-957207-52-0

ISBN (Hardcover): 978-1-957207-53-7

ISBN (Large Print): 978-1-957207-54-4

Title Production by [The Book Whisperer](#)

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