

# 1

RACHEL KRAMER dropped her linen napkin across the morning newspaper's inflammatory headline: "Cold Spring Harbor Scientist in League with Hitler." She glanced up, willing herself to smile innocently as her father strode into the formal breakfast room.

"You needn't bother to hide it." His eyes, bloodshot and mildly accusing, met hers as he took his chair at the head of the polished mahogany table. "I've already received a phone call from the Institute."

Rachel glanced at their butler's stoic face as he poured her father's coffee, then carefully framed her statement. "It isn't true, of course."

"In league with the Führer? You believe the ravings of that maniac hack Young?" he scoffed. "Come now, Rachel—" he jerked his napkin from its ring—"you know me better than that."

"Of course, Father. But I need to understand—"

"Which is why this trip is essential. You'll see for yourself that those foreign correspondents exaggerate—to sell American papers, no doubt, but at the expense of international relations and good men doing crucial work."

She might be little more than an inexperienced college graduate, but she wouldn't be shot down. "He also claims that Hitler accuses the Poles of disturbing the peace of Europe—that he's blaming them for impending war, creating a ruse to justify an invasion. If that's true—if he'd truly attack Poland—then you really can't trust him, Father. And if this reporter is right about that, then people will believe—"

"People will believe what they wish to believe—what is expedient

and profitable for them to believe.” He pushed from the table, toast points in hand. “You mustn’t pay attention to the rags. It’s all propaganda. I’m sure Herr Hitler knows what he’s doing. The car will be here any moment. Are you packed?”

“Father, no sane person is going to Germany now. Americans have evacuated.”

“I assure you that I am completely sane.” He stopped and, uncharacteristically, stroked her cheek. “And you are destined for greatness.” He tugged his starched cuffs into place. “Remember, Rachel, it is ‘Herr Hitler.’ The Germans do not take kindly to disrespect.”

“Yes, Father, but you and I—we must have an understanding—”

But he’d already crossed the room, motioning for his coat. “Jeffries, watch for the driver. We mustn’t miss our plane. Where are your bags, Rachel?”

She folded her napkin deliberately, willing her temper into submission—for this trip only . . . *until I make you understand that this is my last trip to Frankfurt—to Germany—and that our relationship must drastically change . . . just as soon as we return to New York.* “My bags are waiting by the door.”



Two days later, Rachel tugged summer-white gloves over her wrists, as if that might erect a strategic barrier between her person and the German city once familiar to her. It had been five years since she’d ridden down the wide, pristine avenues of Frankfurt. The medieval spires and colorful geometric brickwork looked just the same. But every towering, spreading linden tree that had graced the main thoroughfare—each a landmark in its own right—had been ripped from its roots, replaced by steel poles slung with twenty-foot scarlet banners sporting black swastikas on white circles. *Ebony spiders soaked in shame.*

“There is no need to fret. It won’t be long now. The examination will soon be over. You missed the last one, so you mustn’t object

if this one takes a bit longer.” Her father, his hair thinning by the minute, smiled absently, moistened and flattened his lips. “Our train leaves at seven,” he muttered, staring out the window. “We will not be detained.”

She forced her fingers to lie still in her lap. His affected reassurance gave little comfort. Why she’d agreed to the hated biennial physical examination by doctors she detested or to coming to Germany at all, she couldn’t fathom.

Well, yes . . . she could. Rachel sighed audibly and glanced at the too-thin, self-absorbed man beside her. It was because he’d insisted, because they’d argued as never before, because he’d begged, then badgered, and finally ordered. Because, being adopted, she’d known no other father, and because her mother had loved him—at least the way he used to be, the way he was when she was alive. And, significantly, because Rachel’s new employer had agreed to delay her date of hire until September 20.

She leaned back into the comfort of the cool leather seat, forcing herself to breathe. She supposed she could afford him this parting gift of time, this assertion of her belief in him, though she’d come to question—if not doubt—his life’s work.

That work had taken a twisted turn from his quest to eradicate tuberculosis, her mother’s killer. The publicity against his beloved eugenics research was growing, getting ugly, thanks to the outcries of investigative-journalist crusader types at home and abroad. She would be glad to distance herself when the ordeal was done.

Perhaps this peace offering would soften her announcement that she’d been hired by the Campbell Playhouse—as a gofer and underling to start. But if she proved herself indispensable, they might include her in their November move to Los Angeles—one step closer to radio theatre performance. All of which would send her father into a tizzy. He disdained radio theatre more than he’d detested her modern theatre productions in college, blaming the influence of her

professors and “theatrical peers” for her independent thinking. She’d tell him the moment they returned to New York. As far as Rachel was concerned, that could not be soon enough.

But there were the medical examination in Frankfurt and the gala in Berlin to endure first—the gala to honor her father and German scientists for their breakthrough work in eugenics. The gala, which would include Gerhardt and her childhood friend Kristine. She brushed the air as if a fly had landed on her cheek. What had Kristine meant in her letter about “Gerhardt, and things impossible to write,” that she was “terrified” for her daughter, Amelie? It was the first letter Rachel had received from her former friend in five years.

She placed one ankle deliberately over the other. *Perhaps Kristine’s grown tired of playing the sweet German Hausfrau. It would serve her right for betraying me.* Rachel bit her lip. That sounded harsh, even to her.

The black Mercedes skirted the banks of the free-flowing Main and glided at last into the paved drive of the sprawling Institute for Hereditary Biology and Racial Hygiene. The driver—black-booted, square-jawed, the picture of German efficiency in the uniform of the SS—opened her door.

Rachel drew a deep breath. Taking his hand, she stepped onto the walk.



Lea Hartman gripped her husband’s hand as she waited her turn in the long, sterile corridor. What a gift that Friederich had been granted a three-day military pass! She couldn’t imagine making the train trip alone, especially with the fearful knot that had grown and tightened in her stomach with every town they’d passed.

She’d been coming to the Institute every two years for as long as she could remember. The money and demand for the examinations had come from the Institute itself, though exactly why, she’d never

understood—only that it had something to do with her mother, who'd died giving her birth at the Institute.

As a young child it had afforded the opportunity for a long, exciting train trip with her Oma. Even the doctors' authoritarian stance and scathing disapproval hadn't entirely dimmed the joy of the magical journey far from Oberammergau. But as a teen she'd grown shy of the probing doctors, intimidated by the caustic nurses, yet fearful of refusing their demands. At sixteen she'd written, bravely stating that she no longer wished to come, that her health was quite good, and that she no longer saw the purpose. The next week a car from the Institute had screeched to a stop outside her grandmother's door. Despite Oma's protests, the driver had produced some sort of contract that Oma had signed when Lea was given to her and raced the teen all the way to Frankfurt—alone. She'd been kept in a white enamel room, in a confined portion of the sterile Institute, for a fortnight. The nurses had woken her hourly; the doctors examined her daily—intimately and thoroughly. Lea dared not refuse again.

She shifted in her seat. Friederich smiled at her, squeezing her hand in reassurance. Lea breathed deeply and leaned back against the wall.

Now she was married—almost eighteen months—and though she dreaded the ritual examination, she dared hope they could tell her why she'd been unable to conceive. There was no apparent reason, and she and Friederich wanted a child—several children—desperately. She closed her eyes and once more begged silently for mercy, for the opening of her womb.

Her husband encircled her with his arm, rubbing the tension from her back. His were the strong, roughened hands of a woodcarver—large and sensitive to the nuances of wood, even more sensitive to her needs, her emotions, her every breath. How she loved him! How she missed him when he was stationed with the First Mountain Division—no matter that the barracks flanked their

own Oberammergau. How she feared he might be sent on one of the Führer's missions to gain more "living space" for the *Volk*. How she feared he might stop loving her.

The door to the examination room opened.

"Dr. Mengele!" She recognized him from two years before. She would not have chosen this doctor, though she could not say precisely why. The examinations, no matter who performed them, were technically the same. It was only a feeling, and hadn't they told her countless times not to trust her feelings, her instincts? They were not reliable and would mislead her. Neither they nor she could be trusted.

"May I come with my wife, Herr Doctor?" Friederich stood by her side. Lea felt her husband's strength seep into her vertebrae.

"For the examination?" Dr. Mengele raised eyebrows in amusement. "*Nein.*" And then more gruffly, "Wait here."

"But we would like to talk with you, Herr Doctor," Friederich persisted, "about a matter of great importance to us."

"Can a grown woman not speak for herself?" Dr. Mengele's amusement turned scornful. He didn't acknowledge Lea, but snorted and walked through the door.

Lea glanced once more into her husband's worried eyes, felt his courage squeezed into her hand, and followed Dr. Josef Mengele into the examination room.



Friederich checked his watch. If the clock in the hallway was to be believed, Lea had been behind the closed door for only forty-seven minutes, but it seemed a lifetime.

He'd not been in favor of her coming to Frankfurt. He'd never understood the hold the Institute maintained over his wife, why she both feared and nearly fawned at the feet of these doctors. But he'd married her—the woman he saw much more in than she saw in herself—for better or for worse, and this, he'd decided, was part of

that package. He would not forbid her to come; she feared them too much for that.

And these days, putting your foot down against authority figures carried consequences—consequences Lea could not afford now that Friederich was not regularly at home. The last thing he wanted was men from the Institute on his wife's doorstep when he was not there to protect her. Better for her to remain invisible. From what little he knew of the Führer's "negotiations" with Poland, he and his unit could be shipped east at any moment. He'd been lucky to get leave at all.

Friederich pushed his hands through his hair, sat heavily once again on the backless bench, and knotted his fingers between his knees.

He was a simple man. He loved his wife, his Lord and his church, his country, his woodcarving, Oberammergau with all its quirks and passion for its Passion Play. He was a grateful man, and the only thing missing in his life was children that he and Lea would bear and rear. He didn't think it selfish to ask God for such a thing.

But he wondered if Lea would ask the right questions of the doctor, if she might miss something. She was a smart and insightful woman, but the nearer they'd come to Frankfurt, the more childlike she'd become. And this Dr. Mengele, whoever he was, seemed less than approachable.

Friederich checked his pocket watch, then the clock again. He wanted to take his wife from this place, go home to Oberammergau—home to their cool Alpine valley, to all they knew and loved. He only wished he didn't have to return to his barracks, wished he could take his wife home and make love to her. It wasn't that he didn't want to serve his country or that he loved Germany less than others. At least, he loved the Germany he'd grown up in. But this New Germany—this Germany of the last seven years with its hate-filled Nuremberg Laws that persecuted Jews, its eternal harassment of the church, its

constant demand for greater living space and focus on pure Aryan race—was something different, something he could not grasp as a man grasps wood.

Like any German, he'd hoped and cheered when Adolf Hitler had promised to raise his country from the degradation of the Treaty of Versailles. He wanted to be more than a stench in the world's nostrils and to forge a good life for his family. But not at the expense of what was human or decent. Not if it meant dishonoring God in heaven or making an idol of their Führer.

He closed his eyes to suppress his anxiety about Lea, about politics, to clear his head. This was not the time to argue within himself about things he could not control.

He'd focus on the Nativity carving on his workbench at home. Wood was something he could rely upon. Just before being conscripted, he'd finished the last of a flock of sheep. Now he envisioned the delicate swirls of wood wool and the slight stain he would tell Lea to use in their crevices. Yes, something with a tinge of burnt umber would add depth, create dimension. His wife had the perfect touch. Watching her paint the wooden figures he'd carved was a pleasure to him—a creation they shared.

Friederich was counting the cost of the pigment and stain mixtures she would need for the entire set when the sharp click of a woman's heels on the polished tile floor caused him to lose focus. Her perfume preceded her. He opened his eyes, only to feel that he'd fallen into another world. There was something about the woman's face that struck him as frighteningly familiar, but the window dressing was unrecognizable.

Striking. He'd say she was striking. The same medium height. Her eyes were the same clear blue. Her hair the same gold, but not wrapped in braids about her head as they'd been an hour ago. Her locks hung loose, in rolling coils, so fluid they nearly shimmered. Her nails—fiery red—matched her lips. She wore seamed stockings

the color of her skin and slim, high-heeled shoes that, when she paused and half turned toward the door, emphasized slender ankles and showed toned calves to good advantage.

All of that he noticed before he took in the belted sapphire suit, trim and fitted in all the right places. He closed his eyes and opened them again. But she was still there, and coming closer.

The thin, middle-aged man beside her stepped in front, blocking his view. "*Entschuldigung*, is this where we wait for Dr. Verschuer?"

But Friederich couldn't speak, couldn't quite think. And he didn't know a Dr. Verschuer—did he?

At that moment a pale and agitated woman in nurse's uniform pushed through the door at the far end of the corridor, hurrying toward them. "Dr. Kramer—please, you have entered the wrong corridor. Dr. Verschuer is this way." Casting a furtive glance toward Friederich, she hurried the man with the thinning gray hair and the beautiful young woman back the way they'd come.

"Lea," Friederich whispered. "Lea," he called louder.

The woman in the belted suit turned. He stepped expectantly toward her, but her eyes held no recognition of him. The nurse grabbed the woman's arm, pulling her down the hallway and through the door.

Friederich stood half a moment, uncertain what he should do, if he should follow her. And then the examination room door beside him opened, and his wife, her face stricken and braids askew, walked into his arms.