

Chapter One



It had been five and a half weeks since David Saidel killed his parents, and the ten-year-old still despised the mere idea of getting in a car. In Munich there was a

dearth of public transportation and his phobia had been catered to: court appointments, police interviews, hospital visits, all easy enough to reach by bus, subway, or train.

But his grandfather's house was far away from the big city and its many travel options. His reclusive Grandpa Ernst resided in a village by the name of Brennenbach, a village so small David hadn't been able to find it on a map. There was no train that stopped in Brennenbach, no bus or subway. The only way to get there was to drive.

"Sorry about this, Davie," Gerta the social worker said, peering into the rearview mirror and offering the boy a smile. If Gerta had a last name, she hadn't been keen to share it with the boy, insisting to the point of aggression that he call her Gerta.

Tempestuously friendly, that was Gerta. Her kindness was as intense as any other human's wrath. She was a plump old lady with a history of fostering Jewish children—in secret during Hitler's reign and proudly after his demise. She had offered to foster David when the boy had ignorantly declared that he had no family left, but David's grandfather had called, declaring himself to be David's new guardian. Some paper-work from David's mother had confirmed that, despite David's assumptions, his grandfather had not perished in the Holocaust.

"Your Opa lives a little out of the way—well, a *lot* out of the way. The railroad to Brennenbach got bombed and was never reconnected. Sorry, Davie, I know you and cars are still...well, on bad terms..."

"It's okay, Gerta," David said. It wasn't, but it was better than staying close to home and receiving one more *I'm-sorry-for-your-loss*. He would move to the most isolated part of West Germany if it meant never having to receive another condolence.

David laid down across the backseat and curled into a fetal position, trying to fall asleep. He opened one eye and brushed some of his flame-colored hair out of his face. They had come to a stop, and Gerta was craning her neck to look back at him. She smiled, and though manners mandated he smile in return, he couldn't. He hadn't smiled since the accident, and he was determined to never smile again.

"Have you ever been to Brennenbach, David?" Gerta asked.

"No, ma'am," he answered. His father, Isak Saidel, had been a writer by trade, a passionate storyteller, especially where it concerned the sad story of his family. He had talked and typed about his mother, his father, his siblings, all of whom had been butchered by Hitler. David's mother, however, had never spoken about her parents or any of her wartime experiences. David, who was not a nosy boy by nature, had never even considered asking.

"Well...your mother didn't cut contact. He knew where you were...he knew a lot about you, actually. He mentioned you and your father playing Skee-Ball, and he said there's an arcade in Brennenbach. So...he won't be a *total* stranger." David turned his back on the social worker.

"It's fine," he said, squeezing his eyes shut. He knew she wouldn't let it go, she wouldn't just accept those two words. Although he was grateful for her kindness, he felt his chest burn with ire when she inevitably kept at it.

"I know it's not fine, David," she said. "It's perfectly fine for you to *not* be fine, and I want you to know that if some- thing goes wrong, I will be a phone call away. If something goes wrong, you *have* to tell me...David, you *will* tell me, yes?"

"Yes, ma'am..." he said, pressing his face against the car seat's backrest, which smelled of pine. She must have had the car cleaned just for him. He wanted to vomit.

"Please don't think that you're a bother. I know you're thinking that...I know you haven't been thinking good thoughts, David, but you must consider your own health and happiness. Your mama and papa would have wanted you to be happy..."

David had not eaten breakfast or lunch that day, and he was grateful for that. If his stomach had been digesting anything right then, he would have hacked it into Gerta's perfectly perfumed car. She kept going on and on, and he wanted to cover his ears and scream for her to *be quiet, just shut up, please shut up*, but he kept his jaw clenched. He wanted to scream. *They would have wanted to be alive, too...*

"Jesus and Joseph! Fucking kids!"

The car suddenly halted, and David's heart almost stopped right then. His mind buzzed with memories. His nose burned as the stench of fire and oil filled his nostrils. He heard his father scream, and Isak Saidel never screamed, never, not even when he dreamed of Auschwitz. Ruth Saidel didn't scream...she was dead before she could scream...

"Davie, oh dear! Breathe, okay? It's all right, just some stupid college kids!"

Gerta's shrill voice brought him back to the present, and a cacophony of young voices replaced the ringing of his father's scream in his ears. He sat up, gasping as though his head had been shoved underwater.

"Davie, dear, roll down the window; you need some fresh air!" Gerta begged, reaching back as far as she could and gesturing to the crank.

David, obedient by nature, did as he was told even though the idea of shoving his head out of the car didn't seem like a good one to him. Then again, Isak had always warned him that if he stuck his head out too far, he might hit a stop sign with his face and lose his head.

That would be nice, he thought, hastily cranking the window down and thrusting his head outside.

The "stupid college kids" that Gerta had been forced to stop for were gathered in the middle of the road, some sitting, some standing, and almost all of them were holding signs. Signs with crossed out swastikas and slogans.

"Destroy what destroys you!"

"Fascists Fuck Off!"

"Benno+Rudi."

One particular sign caught David's eye: a painting of an angel's silhouette pressing its foot against the sliced neck of a Nazi. David felt a slight shiver wrack his body, for he knew exactly what the protester was referencing. He remembered that mere days before the accident, during the first day of Hanukkah, Ruth had turned on the radio and heard a report about a former SS officer who had escaped justice. He'd been found in his home, dead, along with his wife and children.

Ruth had shut off the radio before David could hear the gory details, but David had heard the announcer declare that this incident was only the latest in a string of murders going back to the fifties. The mysterious killer, the so-called Avenging Angel, had been targeting former SS officers.

David stared at the drawing of the Avenging Angel held aloft by a scowling German teen. Methods and collateral damage notwithstanding, the Angel had every reason to be upset. David had heard Ruth and Isak mutter disparagingly about the number of former Nazis, friends, and comrades of Hitler, who had weaseled their way back into power. Many unrepentant Nazis had become judges, politicians, policemen, and none of them were eager to hunt down and prosecute their former comrades.

It was an injustice that the Angel was attempting to rectify one Nazi at a time, and the teenage protestors surrounding David were evidently supportive of the killer's methods. Unsurprising, for the students were also determined to excise all former Nazis from West German society.

"Eins, zwei drei, vier, Nazi fucks get outta here!" the boy holding the angel sign chanted, and the rest of the students echoed. *"Eins, zwei, drei, vier, Nazi fucks get outta here!"*

Several cars started honking their horns, but the students refused to budge. David could remember his mother and father discussing this brand of unrest. Ruth Saidel had spoken of the protesting youth with enthusiasm, Isak with worry.

"I remember well enough how it all started...Nazis and commies clashing in the streets," Isak had whispered when he was sure his son wasn't listening. Ruth had just smiled and put her hand over his, squeezing tenderly.

"I think it's lovely. They care...they're not just moving on like nothing happened. That's good. They're not going to be their parents. That's good."

"Nazi fucks get out of here!" One girl who seemed to be the loudest of the party spotted David. Her eyes flitted to the top of his red hair: a blue kippah was clipped to the top of David's skull, announcing his faith and his ethnicity.

"Hey, let that car through!" the girl commanded, gesturing to the Jewish child. The students parted like the red sea, letting Gerta's car slowly chug through the throng. "Hey, little buddy!" One boy offered David a high-five as the car passed, and David, not wanting to be rude, lightly tapped his palm against the protestor's hand. A few of the students offered him smiles and cheers, and David felt embarrassment rush to his cheeks. The students must have never seen a Jew before, or at least not an *obvious* Jew. Most Jews who stayed in Germany chose to hide their faith, keeping their kippahs in their pockets and Germanizing their Hebrew names.

"Stupid kids," whispered Gerta as the students swiftly closed ranks again once her car was through the ocean of protestors, restricting the road for the gentile driver behind them.

"They let us through," David muttered.

"Yes, but you shouldn't treat someone better because of what they are, just like you shouldn't treat them worse," Gerta sighed. "What will the people they're still blocking think?"

"Bad things, maybe..." David conceded. The car picked up speed and he watched the cluster of college students vanish into the distance. He reached up and plucked his kippah off his head, shoving it into his pocket lest the wind steal it from him. He shut his eyes and let the wind smack his cheeks, enjoying the sensation of the wind whipping at his hair. It was like a rough caress. Ruth had stroked his hair like that: a bit too harshly, as though she was trying to tousle his hair and not lull him to sleep, as though she didn't know what a gentle touch was supposed to be.

He forgot he was in the car for some time as they chugged along. For a few moments, he was back at home. Isak was sitting at the typewriter, hammering out another draft of the memoir he had only just started writing, a book he would never finish that told his story of surviving the Holocaust. David could practically hear the click-clack-ding as he felt the phantom hand of his mother roughly stroking his hair. He would rest with his head on her lap while she read a book or a magazine. He could practically hear her chuckling at the silly books she always loved. She adored comedy, and he had always loved it when one of her books would make her giggle and she would say, "*Mauschen, Mauschen*, listen to this one!" And then she would make him laugh with a silly recreation of the joke that had brought her such joy...

The car halted suddenly at the stop sign and the fantasy vanished into nothingness. He scowled and sat back in the car, rolling up the window and chastising himself for enjoying memories of his mother. He didn't deserve to. He didn't deserve to hear her laugh, even in his head, not when it was his fault she would never laugh again.

He laid down, letting the sickness take him again, curling into a ball and squeezing his eyes shut, trying to sleep. If he slept, he knew he would have a nightmare, which was all well and good. He needed one. He had gotten too comfortable for a minute. He had almost smiled.

He eventually slept, though he didn't dream, nor did he have any nightmares. He awoke to Gerta tut-tutting. "Davie, we're here! It's...ah...well, let's not sightsee too much. Let's get you to your grandpa's, get out of this car..." David slowly sat up, rubbing his eyes and stealing a peek at his new hometown. The village sat on the edge of a river, and David chewed his lip when he saw the state of the place. "Ghost town" didn't describe it as much as "unfixed." Piles of rubble lay here and there, buildings were partially broken. That it had been bombed during the war was obvious. Evidently, the West German government hadn't cared enough about the little village to bother rebuilding it.

"Dear me...ah...well, your grandfather did say he gets a pension. Between that and your inheritance, perhaps you two could plan on moving somewhere a bit more...."

"I like it," David announced, his voice stronger and sterner than it had been before when speaking to Gerta. The David Sidel of five and a half weeks ago would have regarded the village with a wrinkled nose and a scornful scowl, but the ruin filled town was so unlike Munich in every way that there would be nothing here to remind him of home or his parents. "Oh! Well, uhm...as long as you're happy, Davie...that's what's important!" She glanced at the rearview mirror, flashing him a big grin, eager to see him return a smile of his own. When he refused to break, she pursed her lips, nodded, and focused again on the road.

The road swiftly morphed into a cobblestone horror, which made the drive down to his grandfather's house far too bumpy for David's liking. Every jolt and jostle summoned a memory from the Eighth Night. He was tempted to ask Gerta if they could just walk the rest of the way, but he was far too shy to make such a request. The town looked ripe for crime, and he wouldn't want the nice lady to lose her car because of him.

Luckily, they were relatively close to their destination. As soon as the car came to a halt and Gerta announced they had arrived, David leapt from the damned vehicle, taking a great gulp of air and stretching his arms and legs. Out of that moving prison at last. He took a moment to recover from his confinement.

"Here, Davie, I'll get your bags!" Gerta offered. "Don't wander too far!"

"Yes, ma'am," David said, hastily scooching away from the car and stepping towards his new home.

It was, on its surface, certainly more impressive than the little apartment he had called home in Munich. A three-story tall half-timbered wonder of old German architecture. White window shutters meshed well with the blue painted wood and the slightly yellowing plaster. The fish-scale tiled roof was missing a few pieces here and there, but otherwise, the manor was easily the most intact building in Brennenbach.

All of the windows were shuttered and shut save one, the smallest window that rested among the blue tiles on the roof, higher than any other window, which looked to be boarded up from the inside. There must have been an attic bedroom. David wondered if that was to be his room. It might be a little too nice if the boards were taken down. The top story would give him a perfect view of Brennenbach and the river nearby. It would certainly be more scenic than the view of his apartment complex's back-alley dumpster he had enjoyed in Munich.

David's eyes flitted to the grounds. A greenhouse with foggy, moldy windows stood on one side of the manor. He couldn't see the inside and therefore couldn't tell if it was still in use, but the presence of a water can and a few bags of fresh fertilizer that rested nearby implied that his grandfather hadn't completely abandoned his gardening habit.

A little away from the greenhouse, there was a birdbath where a few robins were splashing about. Past that, there was a stretch of empty space by the river. David trudged around the greenhouse and realized that there was a small bench resting near the riverbank, a bench that looked to be made of metal. Red with rust, it sat in the midst of a small sea of stones. The river must have once been larger, deeper, but when it had retreated, it had left a massive horde of smooth stones behind.

David's eyes flitted from the manor to the greenhouse, eventually settling on the rusty bench. He realized with a modicum of amusement that the greenhouse was so large that it almost totally blocked off the Manor's view of the river—a view that the builder must have been eager to monopolize upon. Ruth had once said that waterfront property always cost an arm, a leg, and a soul. Apparently, some people liked to be able to look out their windows and watch the water flow, but the only window that would have been able to offer such a view would be the tiny boarded-up attic window.

"Davie!"

David winced and turned back. He hadn't even realized how far he had wandered. He scurried back to Gerta, grabbing one of his bags, the heftiest of the lot. She had already moved most of his belongings onto the porch, no doubt wanting to save David and his grandfather the trouble of lifting every one of the boy's belongings.

"Sorry, ma'am," David squeaked.

"Not a problem, dear! Well, this house is lovely! Old style, you know! I see these in magazines all the time! Hopefully, there are some kids in Brennenbach. You could have some marvelous sleepovers and playdates here!"

"Uhm...yeah..." David said with a nod. He looked up at the grand building, his lips tightening. He hadn't had any friends in Munich and didn't expect to make any in Brennenbach, but he had always wanted a dog. A true friend, a dog...they hadn't been able to get one in Munich, their apartment being too small even for a Chihuahua. But this house would be perfect for a dog.

He gnawed on his bottom lip, cursing himself for even thinking of such a thing. His parents were dead and all he could think of was getting a dog out of it. He bit down harsher, so hard it hurt, stopping just short of breaking the skin above his chin.

"Ready to meet your grandpa?" Gerta asked. David patted himself down, making sure that his vest was straightened out, that his red hair was neat, that he was presentable. He realized he hadn't put his kippah back on and fished it out of his pocket, clipping it back onto his tidy hair.

"Ready," David confirmed.

"Hmmm...no doorbell..." Gerta muttered. David's eyes searched the massive double doors. He also couldn't find a doorbell, but more pressingly he couldn't find a *mezuzah*. He started nibbling nervously on his thumbnail. A *mezuzah* was a staple of any Jewish home, a piece of the Torah housed in a decorative case that guarded the house with a heavenly blessing. Jews who didn't put the *mezuzah* on their door normally refrained either because of faithlessness or fearfulness. He wondered which was present in his grandfather. "Oh! That's lovely, look at the knocker!" Gerta gestured to the ornate door knocker: a hefty iron ring being held in the mouth of a stoic lion.

"That's *Aryeh Yehuda*, the Lion of Judah," David observed, leaning close and noticing a few scratched-off Hebraic symbols decorating the lion's copper mane.

"The Lion of Judah? How nice! This house must have been in your family for a very long time. You know, a lot of Jewish families had trouble getting their homes back after the war. Shameful affair, but it seems your grandfather managed to wrestle yours back," Gerta said. "Hope it doesn't break the door..."

She lifted up the knocker and smacked it against the oaken door several times, causing the manor to tremble. David's eyes brightened when he heard a dog bark inside. His grandfather had evidently agreed that this house was too big to go without a dog.

"Down, Mozart! One moment!" a raspy voice called out from inside. David's grandfather must have been waiting close by because Gerta barely had time to let go of the knocker before he opened the double doors.

"Ernst Buch?" Gerta queried. The old man nodded at her before his eyes darted to David. David's grandfather was a healthy-looking gent. Silver, slightly curly hair sprouted from his head, not a bald spot to be found. He was taller than David had expected since Ruth had been the shortest woman in the congregation. He clutched an ornately decorated cane, and David realized that it wasn't just for show: Ernst had a lame leg. A war injury? Maybe he had been in

the camps, just like Isak. David had no intention of asking such horrible questions. Not now. Probably not ever.

Ernst reached up and stroked his bushy beard, tracing his finger over his handlebar moustache before jamming his thumb in his mouth. David lifted an eyebrow and almost broke his vow by smiling. It seemed his thumb-chewing habit came from his mother's side of the family. The obviously anxious old man offered the boy a half-smile. David realized with a wince that Ernst had given Ruth his emerald-green eyes. Looking into them made David's gut writhe with guilt, and he viciously gnawed on his own thumbnail.

"You're my grandson, then..." Ernst muttered, his voice slightly ragged, as though he had smoked too many cigars during his youth and the old habit was coming back to bite. "You look like your father."

David did, though since Isak and Ruth had both been redheads, he had also been told he looked like his mother. His brown eyes were his father's, though. Isak had said many times that David looked just like he had when he was a child, but the Holocaust had stolen all of the Saidel family's old photos, and he'd never been able to prove that assertion.

Ernst bent down a bit, carefully examining his grandson, perhaps searching for a feature that was indisputably Ruth's. He snorted. "Little like your mama, though. I'll have to feed you better. It's...good to meet you, Enkel. I wish...I wish the circumstances could be...oh!"

Before he could say another word, a bark so booming that David assumed it must have belonged to a German shepherd sounded off and a gray blur leapt at David. Gerta lifted up her purse, ready to smack the attack dog, but Ernst's reflexes were admirable for a crippled senior, and he managed to grab his hound by its collar.

"Mozart, no! Mozart, heel!" Ernst commanded. "Don't worry about him, Enkel. He's just enthusiastic. Wouldn't hurt a cat."

David didn't doubt it, and besides, the little dog probably wouldn't be able to harm a cat if he tried. His bark was certainly bigger than his bite. Even though he had sounded like a mighty German shepherd, Mozart was merely a small schnauzer. Not a gram over twenty-five pounds with muddy paws and an unkept moustache. The schnauzer gazed at the boy with curious brown eyes, his tiny tail wagging furiously, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. David had to bite down on his bottom lip to keep himself from smiling. He would need to avoid this dog. It would break him too quickly, make him too happy.

"Kneel down, Enkel. Let him sniff you," Ernst advised. "And don't touch his head. He hates that. Scratch his chin and he'll calm down."

David obeyed, biting down so hard on the inside of his cheek that he was sure his teeth would pierce his flesh. He gingerly tickled the dog's chin. Mozart sat down, licking David's wrist in appreciation.

"You two will be good friends, it seems!" Gerta said. "Ah...you don't have any allergies, Enkel?" Ernst queried. "Herr Ahles at the pet shop said little Mozart was hypo-some- thing-or-other. Your mama used to get a rash when she got licked by dogs; I dunno if you got the same...issue." "No, sir," David said. Even if he was allergic, he would have lied and said no. He wouldn't have Mozart sent back to the pet shop for his sake.

"Good! Little fellow seems to like you. Ah, why don't you come in, both of you? Ma'am, I guess we have some paper- work and such?"

"A bit. A few questions."

"Right. Come on in. Mozart, calm down, boy! Enkel, will you hold him? He tends to escape, and whenever he does, he's gone for days. Careful when you open the door."

David gripped the dog's collar and wrestled him inside. The interior of the manor was something to behold; there was a cold sort of majesty to it all. The grand staircase, fashioned of onyx stone, led up to the second story, which offered two stairways to the third story. Three chandeliers twinkled above his head, and David's eyes glistened with wonder when he realized the ceiling was painted violet with a sea of yellow stars and a crescent moon making it appear like a twilight sky. A fireplace crackled nearby, built of white marble with two carved lions on both sides and a phoenix stretching its pearl colored wings above the mantle. A few photo frames hung above the tips of the phoenix's wings, but they were empty and slightly crooked, as though someone had just recently taken them down and sloppily removed their contents.

The furnishings were not nearly as beautiful as the structure itself. The red and blue rug that featured an ornate, mosaic-like design was frayed and stained with mud and pawprints. The furniture must have once been quite nice, but Ernst either hadn't wanted to replace it or couldn't afford to do so. The couch had been stitched up several times, the leather cozy chair was peeling, and when David peeked into the dining room, he discovered that the chairs were stacked up on the table, covered in cobwebs. It must have been years since Ernst had invited someone over for dinner.

David wandered into the kitchen, a massive space that must have once served several families. A tiny silver refrigerator rested in the corner, criminally out of place and clearly a recent purchase. David rifled through the cupboards. Fine china and crystal glasses covered in a thick layer of dust. His grandfather evidently didn't do a lot of cooking. Not anymore.

There was a small window above the stove. David peeked out at the barely visible village of Brennenbach. He could see a broken tower of some sort peeking above the rest of the buildings. It must have taken heavy damage during the war. He couldn't tell what had once been perched atop the tower, but he guessed it might have been a clock. The bell tower of the church, the second tallest building in the village, stood adjacent to the broken tower. David pursed his lips and decided that he would have to look around town later. Maybe there was a synagogue, or at least a Rabbi. Maybe. Probably not.

Thunk!

David spun around and looked down. Mozart had deposited a rope with a ball hanging from the end at his feet. The dog barked twice, his big brown eyes flitting expectantly from David to his toy.

“No, boy, sorry,” David sighed. The selfish part of him that still stubbornly insisted he have some fun demanded he play with the poor pooch, but he hushed it, striding out of the kitchen. Mozart, not one to be deterred so easily, grabbed his toy and trotted after David, intent on harassing the boy until he gave in and played tug-o-war.

David returned to the den. Gerta and Ernst were wrap- ping things up.

“So, what’s the schooling situation here?” Gerta queried, her smile faltering slightly.

“Oh, school bus comes by in the early morning. Aren’t enough kids in Brennenbach to have a schoolhouse, not anymore. There’s another village forty minutes from here; they all go there. Some folks just teach their kids at home. I was going to do that for the first year for the boy. I figured he already has enough to get used to without adding a new school on top of everything.”

“That’s a nice idea. There, ah, *are* children in the village, right? In Brennenbach?”

“A few. Enough. Ahles, owner of the pet shop, he has a boy the same age as the lad. I dunno if they’ll get along, though. Apple kinda fell far from the tree. *Kinda*. Oh, Mozart, leave the boy alone if he doesn’t want to play with you! C’mere!”

Mozart finally decided to stop pawing at rigid boy’s heels. With a disappointed whine, he brought his toy to his master. Ernst gripped the rope and multitasked admirably, signing the forms whilst holding his own against the determined pup in a round of tug-o-war. With a flourish, he initialed the final paper and shook the social worker’s hand.

“Come by whenever,” he said.

“I intend to,” Gerta declared. She stood, dusted off her dress, and traipsed over to David, leaving Ernst to wrestle with his dog. She knelt before the ten-year-old, straightening out the collar of his vest and tenderly patting his cheek.

“You call me if anything happens, anything at all, even if you just want to talk. If you don’t call me, I’ll call you. If it sounds like you’re not happy, I’ll come back.”

“Okay, ma’am—err, Gerta,” David corrected himself quickly, knowing that Gerta would not abide by such formality. She giggled and kissed his cheeks.

“Ah! One moment! I almost forgot!” With Mozart distracted by Ernst, Gerta managed to slip out of the house. She returned a moment later with two small boxes in her arms. One was a simple lockbox, the other was a gift wrapped in yellow paper topped with a blue ribbon.

"Your father, before he passed, asked us to arrange some things for you," Gerta explained. She handed him the lock-box. "This is his manuscript. He mentioned I should give it to you."

David took the box with the hesitation of a sinner being offered a holy artifact. Isak's manuscript, the autobiography he had agonized over for almost all of David's life. Two hundred carefully numbered pages of history typed and re-typed one thousand times. It felt like he was holding his father's soul in his arms, and the heft was too much. He set it down on an ottoman and opened his arms to receive the wrapped box in its stead.

"And your father said that he and your mother were planning on giving you some things on your thirteenth birthday. Some notes and family artifacts, and he also wanted me to put your mother's brooch in with the rest of the gifts. He didn't say to wait, so you're free to open it now or wait until you're thirteen if you want. I wrapped it up either way."

He grabbed the box with trembling hands and quietly thanked her. The box, though substantially lighter than every other parcel he had brought to Brennenbach, felt heavy as a car. His mother's brooch, a precious little cheap trinket, a Star-of-David made of scrap metal and a clothespin. Isak, having barely a coin to his name, hadn't been able to buy her a ring and had therefore fashioned the ornament himself and proposed with it. Ruth had apparently worn it every day for many years before it started to degrade and she decided to put it away, only donning it for the Sabbath and special occasions. Their anniversary, Passover, Hanukkah...

The last time David had seen the brooch, it had been dangling from Ruth's breast, covered in her blood. Gerta had probably cleaned it, but the thought of looking at it again made him want to jump in a fire. He dug his nails into the wrapping paper and resolved to never open the box.

Gerta saw his distress and knelt down again, gently cupping his face in her hands. "Your father and mother wanted you to be happy..."

"Yes," David said, his tongue feeling numb.

"You *will* try to be happy here, yes?"

He stared down at the wrapped gift and prayed that God would forgive him when he lied by nodding. Gerta gave the boy a hug, gentler than any embrace she had offered previously.

"Do your best, Davie," she said, releasing him with a smile that was at once nervous and hopeful.

She bade a polite farewell to Ernst and exited, barely keeping Mozart from door-dashing as she slipped out the hefty doors. Ernst stood up as soon as she was gone and limped towards his grandson. David took a deep breath, bracing himself for a smack or a barb. He didn't know why his mother had not told him about her living parent, and he wasn't interested in being rude or probing, but he expected harshness. Wanted it, really. He deserved to be under a tyrant's thumb.

But Ernst, it seemed, didn't have any abusive skeletons in his closet. He reached out, hesitating for a moment before giving the boy a brief, comforting pat on the shoulder. "You'll need to help me bring your things to your room," Ernst said. "You'll get the cellar. It's a bit chilly, but it's the biggest space in the house. And Mozart can sleep down there with you if ya want. He may hog your pillow, though. Never learned what the 'foot' of the bed is, Mozart."

"Thanks, sir," David said, still avoiding the old man's too familiar eyes. He heard Ernst grunt in disapproval. The old man tapped the boy's chin, a clear command to look up. David obeyed, meeting his grandfather's eyes. Seeing those green irises made him want to die even more.

"You really should call me Opa," Ernst declared. "Lis- ten...this is already...strange enough, isn't it? Let's try to make it a bit less so, shall we?"

"Uhm...okay, s—Opa Ernst," David muttered, and Opa Ernst's lips curled with amusement.

"Raised a polite boy. There's a shock," he gestured back towards the abandoned dining room. "You should have seen your mother when she was a little girl. No table manners, couldn't spank them into her, couldn't bribe her into using a fork...wild thing, she was."

David almost broke his vow and smiled. Isak had teasingly called Ruth "Lady Tarzan" because of her lack of table manners. She would eat everything with her fingers, even salad. Isak had often said that if his wife could somehow figure out a way to eat soup with her fingers, she would have never touched a spoon again.

Ernst sounded fond of his daughter. "Mama didn't talk about you at all," David said. Ernst's smile wilted into a bitter smirk.

"Not surprising," he muttered. "I told her not to both- er...well...that's a long story. Maybe one for another time. We really have to get you settled in."

David nodded. He had no desire to be pushy. As he followed his grandfather towards the cellar door, carrying the lockbox and Isak's gift in his arms, he realized that there were dozens upon dozens of empty picture frames hanging along the walls, just like the empty frames above the fireplace.

"What happened to the pictures, Opa?" David asked. Ernst stopped dead in his tracks and released a shuddering breath.

"I...put them away. I... I mean, I figured *you*...wouldn't want to...have her staring at you from every corner. Not yet..."

"Thank you, you were right," David sighed. Ernst turned to face the boy, his eyes crinkling fondly.

"You and me both, hm? Well...maybe I can put some pictures of you up there at some point. Here we are. I tried to make it cozy. Had some help from Ms. Bodmann from the flower shop

and Herr Roschmann, the baker. They're, ah, well, I guess they'll be wanting to meet you soon. They're good friends."

The cellar featured a stove for heat, a twin bed, a little desk, soft carpets, and a rich assortment of brand-new toys and books. David dropped the boxes on his new bed and ran to the dresser and bookshelf, admiring the new toys even as his conscience chastised him for daring to enjoy the spoils of his sin.

Ernst must have had a fair bit of money to throw around, for it seemed like he had bought half the contents of the local toy store: toy GIs imported from America, tops, jacks, a base- ball bat and a ball, several board games, a teddy bear, a sling- shot, a train set, even a pair of roller skates leaning against the dresser, shiny and blue. David glanced at the bookshelf and ran his thumb along the ample spines.

"There are more books in the library, but I figured they might be too old. Bought some popular things at the book- shop. I don't know your tastes, so I just got a bunch of stuff. I hope you like it."

David's eyes fell upon one book. He pulled it off the shelf. A flutter in his heart almost broke him as he gazed at the cover, which featured a familiar illustration of a mouse-shaped boy. He flung his satchel off his back and pulled the same book out of his bag.

"*Stuart Little*," he said, holding up the two copies. His was dog-eared and well-worn while the gift from his grandfather was glossy and smelled like pine.

"Ah! Well...no harm in having two good books. *Are they good books?*" queried Ernst.

"Uh huh, it's about a boy that looks like a mouse," David said, refusing to smile though he let a note of enthusiasm enter his tone. "He's human, but he's little and he looks like a mouse. Uhm..."

The vivacity left his voice. "Me and mom used to read it a lot."

"Really?" said Ernst, tilting his head sideways. "She was never really one for reading. She preferred the funnies." "And joke books," David added.

"When she could find them!"

"She said I'm like Stuart. I like cheese and I'm quiet, she said I'm like a mouse that looks like a little boy instead of a little boy who looks like a mouse," David explained, setting the newer *Stuart Little* version down and hugging the older copy, the one his mother had read to him almost every night. "She used to call me *Mauschen*."

"That's...well, that's something," sighed Ernst, and there was an acerbic edge to his tone that David didn't want to question. David put his copy of *Stuart Little* on the bookshelf, setting the newer one by his nightstand.

"I like it all, Opa. Thank you. You didn't have to get me all this," David said. Ernst limped to David's desk and sat down, grunting as he tried to get comfortable on the tiny chair.

"Oh, don't be stupid, lad. What else am I supposed to spend my money on?" he sighed. "I get a good check from the government for my troubles, and even Mozart can't eat his way through it...ah, there he goes."

Mozart had hopped onto David's bed and was busily digging at the cover and sheets, trying to make himself a cozy nest of fabric. David stole a glance at the pup but grunted and averted his eyes. That dog would be the end of him.

"All right, well, we should get some ground rules out of the way," Ernst said, leaning his cane against the bookshelf and clapping his wrinkled hands together. "This shouldn't take long. You seem like a nice boy, so I have a feeling you won't be setting fire to the greenhouse, but for your safety, we have some rules. Number one: no swimming in the river. It runs too fast, you'll drown. Even if you aren't swept away, you'll die if you reach the bridge. Did you see the broken bridge on your way over?"

"Uh-huh."

"If you've seen it up close, you'll realize that it's broken because something fell on it. A bomb. But the way it broke, if you look at it, it's clear that the bomb didn't blow." "There's a bomb in the river, then?"

"That's what I think. I'm sure of it, in fact. Sure enough that I don't want you to go near that bridge or try to swim to the Island, all right? If there's a bomb down there, it's unexploded, and anything could set it off. I don't want that *anything* to be you, all right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Lad..."

"Yes, Opa," David said, and Ernst clicked his tongue and winked.

"You'll get it. Number two: you can go anywhere in the house that you want. I sleep in the attic. You're welcome to go in there, though I'd prefer if you didn't since I like my space to be my space. If you *do* go in there, just don't break anything."

"You sleep all the way up in the attic?" David said, his eyes darting to the old man's bad leg with concern.

"Oh, not you too! I've heard it enough from Irma, Enkel! Don't worry, Mozart's fallen down the stairs more often than I have. Number three, and this one is the most important..." Ernst leaned close, his smile vanishing, his face becoming severe. "I have a strict curfew. You will be in your room by eleven, asleep at midnight. No argument, no 'but Herr So and-So lets his son stay up till three in the morning!' No excuses, no exceptions *ever*. In your room before midnight. You

can keep snacks down here if you're desperate, and I even had a bathroom installed down here just for you."

Ernst gestured towards a small walled-off area with a new door in the corner. David arched an eyebrow—not at the curfew itself, which to him was perfectly reasonable, but at his grandfather's tone. He sounded more distressed about the curfew than the unexploded bomb in the river. Ernst must have seen inquisitiveness sparkle in the boy's brown eyes.

"There are wolves and nasty things all over the place," the old man explained. "There have been a few kids who stayed out after night and didn't come home. Hugo Roschmann lost his son that way, little Anton. Don't, ah, don't mention Anton around town, especially to Herr Roschmann. It's a touchy subject. But, ah, the point is...I don't want it happening to you. So, let's hear one 'yes sir' on that subject and then move on."

"Yes, sir," David said.

"Right! Well, then...ah...should I leave you to unpack or...?"

"Uhm...yeah, I think."

"I'll call you for dinner. Hey, if you like cheese, we'll try to work that into something. Maybe some schnitzel. Any particular cheese you like?"

"Uhm...cheddar. And, uh, I can't eat cheese and meat... I'm kosher," David pointed towards the skullcap on his head. "Ah...*that*." Ernst's eyes shifted towards Mozart and his thumb flew to his mouth. He chewed on his nail nervously for a few moments before finally sighing.

"Enkel, I know your parents were very...*visible* about their...Jewishness, but around here...around here it may be better to keep your head down and cover that thing up. Here..."

Ernst stood, limped over to the dresser, and pulled out a grey newsboy cap, offering it to David. "Just keep it covered. You know, these people, as far as they're concerned, this town is Jew-free, and they like it that way. It's, ah, safer to just cross yourself when you walk past the church and forget about the whole Jew thing. Best to just be German, German as possible."

David slowly took the cap from his grandfather and plopped it on his head. Ernst beamed and pinched the boy's freckled cheek.

"There you are! You look like a real little gentleman. Ah, by the way, you may still get called a Jew around town if they see your hair. Just deny it."

"My hair?" David queried, reaching up and pinching a lock of his fiery hair between his fingers. He had been ridiculed for being a redhead even in synagogue. In Munich he hadn't had any friends, and his outcast status could probably be attributed to his hair. Isak, who had grown up in a village where redheads were the majority, hadn't understood the prejudice, but Ruth had.

"Anything different," she had once muttered after spoiling David with ice cream to comfort him after a particularly harsh day of bullying. "Anything, anywhere, anytime, even with our people. It's human nature, *Mauschen*. Don't let them get to you."

"In some places, rural places usually, red hair is considered a Jewish trait," Ernst explained. "Like big noses, you know, and curly hair. Your hair isn't curly, but it's red enough that you'll be noticed. Just, ah, just deny it if anyone calls you a Jew because of the hair. If you want, we could even dye it darker, black or brown or whatever you want."

"Uhm...I'll think about that," David said.

"Good lad! All right, well...you're going to need to give me a list of the things you can't eat. I've forgotten what the rules are for the kosher thing. Don't be picky, though. Better to eat something than nothing. If God is real, and He made every- thing, no sense in rejecting His works, eh?"

"I'll...write something up," David said, and he winced when his grandfather's eyes flashed with disappointment. "Very well. I'm upstairs. Unpack your things, then we'll figure something out for dinner. Something all three of us can appreciate. Mozart, come up! Moz...well, he's fast asleep. I think you'll have yourself a new roommate. I'll leave the door open."

Ernst grabbed his cane and made his way up the stairs. Mozart, fast asleep in the little cocoon of blankets and sheets he had made, didn't stir. Though David was tempted to wake the dog up and kick him out before his ridiculously cute snoring made him smile, he refrained. Sleeping dogs and all that.

He started unpacking. He had left most of his old toys in the synagogue's donation bin back at Munch, but there were a few odds and ends he hadn't been able to part with despite himself: a toy gun he and Isak had used to play cops and robbers, a slinky he and Ruth had sent hopping down their apartment complex staircase so many times that it was now a tangled mess of wire, a tin of silly putty he had won at a carnival game. He put his toys beside the gifts from his grand- father, then unpacked his clothes, his books, then...

The two boxes Greta had given him. His eyes shifted to the yellow gift-wrapped box first. A small part of him wanted to unwrap it, to hold his mother's brooch in his palm and feel the lingering traces of her, to break down completely. He deserved the pain it would give him, but he didn't deserve to touch it. He grabbed the box and slid it under his bed.

With the wrapped box safely hidden, he turned his attention to the lockbox. He was tempted to slide it under the bed with the wrapped gift, but that would be a sin in and of itself. His father had worked so hard to try and share his story with the world. To hide it, to try and forget it, that would be the worst betrayal. He unfixed the lock and pulled out the brick of papers.

Isak Saidel's unfinished story. He had never gotten to his time in Auschwitz. And now he never would.

David carefully carried the manuscript to his desk, setting it on the smooth, polished surface and thumbing to the last page.

I had, at this point, forgotten what my feet felt like, and if I had suddenly found myself snuggled by a fireplace, I likely wouldn't have even remembered how to wiggle my toes. When I walked with Mama to stand in line, clutching my ration card in my once-plump fingers, the snow would seep into my one-size-too big-boots and soak my feet. Mama did her best to carry me on days when the snow was above my ankles, but she was...

And that was where it ended. David remembered running up to Isak and tugging on his arm as he click-clacked away at his work, begging him to finish it later. *It's time to go, Papa! Come on, Papa!*

David had been eager, desperate really, to get to the synagogue for the final night of Hanukkah. The Rabbi had chosen him, *him*, little unpopular David Saidel had been chosen to light the menorah for the Eighth Night. He had been so proud. Ruth and Isak had been so proud.

David looked down at a tiny burn mark on his right hand. To an outsider it would be indistinguishable from any of the other light injuries he had sustained in the "accident," but it stuck out to him. He had been clumsy, clumsy and arrogant. He, the quiet one, the mouse boy, had been chosen for the great honor and he had felt the envious eyes of his fellows upon him. He had basked in the glory for too long and the hot wax of the candle had dripped onto his hand. Then he'd cried like a baby. Then he'd asked his parents if they could go home early because he was not only in pain but horribly embarrassed.

And Ruth had said yes. Isak had said something cheerful about getting to finish that paragraph.

And now they were dead. Murdered, according to the police and the media and everyone else. A small cluster of Hitler-loyalists, neo-Nazis and Nazi holdouts, had decided to cut the breaks of every car in the synagogue parking lot that night. He and his parents had left first, and the Saidels were the only casualty.

The Rabbi had told him that he and his parents had saved the whole congregation. Perhaps they had. Little comfort that was from the grave. Or in Isak's case, from the hospital. Ruth had died right away, but Isak had spent a few horrific nights succumbing to his burns. He had barely been able to choke out a final farewell to David, a final assurance.

Isak's last words rang in his ears, laced with pain. "Not your fault."

But it was.

The media had been in fits. The student protestors too. Two Jews murdered two decades after the Holocaust had ended in an incident that could have killed dozens. How many more Nazis were waiting to strike? Would the Jews ever be safe in Germany? In a way, David was glad to be so far away from it all. Gerta had promised to keep him out of the papers as much as she could,

but moving out here offered more protection from them and their probing questions and fake smiles than she could have hoped. None of them would follow him to Brennenbach.

Nobody in this little town knew him. Or his family. Or what had happened. Or what he had done.

They didn't even have to know he was a Jew. He touched the rim of the hat his grandfather had given him. There was a comfort to that. A comfort to blending in, to being just another German.

A comfort he didn't deserve. He plucked the hat from his head and flung it under the bed with the yellow box. No. Everyone in town would know he was a Jew. They would know, and he wouldn't stop them from giving him their worst. From giving him everything he should have gotten on that eighth night of Hanukkah.