

28 DAYS

A NOVEL OF RESISTANCE
IN THE WARSAW GHETTO

David Safer

Translated by Helen MacCormac



Feiwei and Friends

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A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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(“Lullaby for My Little Son in the Crematorium”)

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For my mother and father and for my sister

They'd spotted me.

The hyenas had spotted me!

And they were out to get me.

I could tell by instinct. Without actually having seen or heard them yet. The same way an animal in the wilderness can sense when it is in imminent danger, before it has actually sighted the enemy. This market, this perfectly ordinary market, where the Poles bought their vegetables, bread and bacon, clothes, and roses, even, was the wilderness for people like me. A place where I was the prey. Where I could die if they found out who or, more importantly, what I really was.

Don't walk any faster, I thought. Don't slow down. Or change direction. And whatever you do, don't look back. Don't do anything to arouse more suspicion.

I found it incredibly difficult to keep moving, pretending to stroll through the market as if I was enjoying the sunshine on an unexpectedly warm spring day. Everything about me wanted to run, but then the hyenas would have known that they were

right. That I wasn't an ordinary Pole carrying groceries home to her parents; that I was a smuggler.

I stopped for a moment, pretended to admire an apple on a farmer's stall and wondered if I could risk taking a quick look. After all, there was a chance that I was imagining that I was being followed. But every inch of my body wanted to flee. And I'd learned to trust my instincts a long time ago. Otherwise I would never have managed to survive till sixteen.

I moved on slowly. The old farmer's wife was disgustingly fat. She obviously had more than enough to eat, far too much in fact. She kept on croaking, "These are the best apples in all of Warsaw."

I didn't tell her that every single apple looked amazing. For most of the people forced to live within the walls, even a moldy apple would have been a treat. Not to mention the eggs in my pockets or the plums or, best of all, the butter I was going to sell on the black market for a great deal of money.

I had to find out how many people were after me before I had the slightest chance of ever getting back behind the wall. They couldn't be 100 percent sure yet, or else they would have stopped me by now. I needed to get a look at them without being noticed. Without causing any more suspicion.

I looked down at the cobbled street. The heels of my lovely blue shoes clacked on the stones. They matched my blue dress with the red flowers perfectly. My mother had given me these clothes when we still had some money, and I always wore them when I was out smuggling. All my other clothes were threadbare, and most of them had been mended again and again. If I had been wearing those, I wouldn't have lasted two minutes at the market without being noticed. The pretty dress and shoes were my work clothes, disguise and armor all in one. I took great care of them.

I casually let my heel get caught between two stones. I buckled my ankle a bit and swore out loud, “Oh, crap!” Then I put my bags down, glanced over my shoulder and saw them: the hyenas. And they were smiling.

My instincts hadn’t deceived me. They never did, unfortunately. Or fortunately, depending on how you looked at it. There were three of them. A short, unshaven, stocky man with a brown leather jacket and a gray peaked cap was up front. He was about forty years old and was obviously the leader. He was followed by a big man with a beard who looked as if he could throw a rock or two, and by a boy about my age who was wearing the same leather jacket and cap and was like a mini version of the leader. Maybe they were father and son? At any rate, the boy didn’t go to school—otherwise he wouldn’t be able to hang around markets in the morning, looking for someone to hunt.

Behind the walls, we weren’t allowed to go to school anymore, because the Germans had banned all classes. There were illegal schools in the underground, but not everyone could go and I left ages ago. I had to feed my family.

This Polish boy could go to school and get educated, but chose not to. Of course, there was a lot of money to be made by a gang of *szmalcowniks*, or hyenas, as we called them—people who hunted Jews and then handed them over to the Germans for a bounty. There were loads of them in Warsaw, and none of them cared if the Germans shot every illegal person found on the wrong side of the wall.

It was spring 1942, and anyone found in the Polish sector of the city without a permit was sentenced to death. And that wasn’t the worst of it. There were the most awful rumors about how the Germans tortured prisoners before they put them to death. Men, women, and children alike. They actually tortured children

to death! Just thinking about it terrified me, but I wasn't dead yet. And I needed it to stay that way for my sister Hannah's sake.

There was no one in the whole world I loved as much as that little girl. Due to the appalling food rations, Hannah was far too small for her twelve years, and pale as a shadow, except for her eyes. They were big and wide awake and inquisitive, and deserved to see something better than the nightmare behind the walls.

All the power of an endless imagination shone in those eyes. So what if she wasn't very good at most of the subjects taught at the Szulkult underground school, like math, biology, or geography; when it came to telling the other children stories during the breaks, no one could do it better. She made up stories about a ranger called Sarah, who freed her beloved Prince Joseph from the clutches of the three-headed dragon; or about Marek the rabbit, who won the war for the Allies; and the ghetto boy Hans who was able to bring stones to life but never wanted to, because they were always so cross and grumpy. Anyone who listened to Hannah found the world a brighter and better place.

Who would take care of her if I let myself get caught here? Not my mother. She was so despondent that she never left the shabby hole where we lived anymore. And certainly not my brother. He was far too busy worrying about himself.

I looked away from the *szmalcowniks* and let my hand rest on the cobblestones for a moment. Often, when fear gets too strong, I touch the surface of something to calm myself: metal, stones, cloth—it doesn't matter—the main thing is to feel something else apart from fear.

The bright stones beneath my fingers had been warmed by the sun. I took a deep breath, grabbed my bags, and set off again.

The *szmalcowniks* were following me. I could tell. I could

hear the sound of their footsteps speeding up, although the market was full of so many other sounds: the voices of the sellers praising their goods, buyers haggling over prices, birds chirping, or the sound of cars passing on the street behind the market. People strolled past at a leisurely pace. A young blond man wearing the same gray suit most of the Polish students wore whistled away to himself. I could hear everything, but the sounds were muted somehow. All I could hear properly was the sound of my breathing, which was getting hectic, although I wasn't going any faster whatsoever, and my heart racing more and more from one second to the next. But the loudest thing was the sound of my pursuers' footsteps.

They were getting closer.

And closer, and closer.

They'd catch me in a moment and would confront me. They'd probably try to blackmail me, demand all my money for a promise not to hand me over. And then, when I paid, they'd do it anyway, and take the Nazis' bounty, too.

I'd known that this was going to happen sooner or later, ever since I started smuggling. That was a few weeks after Papa abandoned us. We didn't have any money left to buy food on the black market, and the food rations the Germans allowed us per person were only 360 calories a day. Most of the time, the food they gave to us Jews at the food dispensary was rotten. We got whatever was too lousy to send to the troops on the Eastern Front: spoiled turnips, bad eggs, or frozen potatoes that couldn't be cooked but could be turned into a more or less edible patty with a bit of luck. Last winter, the whole ghetto smelled of those patties on some days. So if I wanted my family to eat, I had to do something about it. My friend Ruth sold her body at the Britannia Hotel and had offered to get me in, even though she did grin

and say that my figure was a bit boyish, but I preferred to risk my life smuggling rather than doing that.

Just in case I did get caught by the *szmalcowniki*, I'd concocted a story: I was Dana Smuda, a Polish schoolgirl from another part of Warsaw, who liked to come to the market because it's the only place you can buy a special sweet puff pastry cake with the most wonderful apple filling. It was important that my fake address was a long way away, because otherwise the hyenas would just walk me to my given address and find out that I was lying. I always bought a piece of cake every time I came to the market and put it in my bag to prove my story, just in case.

I also always wore a necklace with a cross. And I had learned a number of Christian prayers by heart, so that I could pretend to be a good Catholic if I had to. Prayers like the Rosary, Sanctus, or Magnificat: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior . . ." As if any sane spirit could rejoice in God these days.

If He were to appear in front of me, I'd throw eggs at Him for sure, even though they were worth a fortune in the ghetto. I didn't believe in religion, or politics, or in grown-ups anymore. All I believed in was surviving.

"Stop!" one of my pursuers shouted. Probably the voice belonged to the leader of the gang.

I pretended that he couldn't mean me. I was just an ordinary Polish girl; why should I turn around to a stranger's command?

I went through everything in my mind one more time: My name is Dana Smuda, I live at 23 Miodawa Street, I love puff pastry cakes . . .

The hyenas blocked my path and crowded in on me.

"You can't get rid of us that easily, you Jew-whore," the leader said with a grin on his face.

“What?” I asked, acting angry. It was a matter of life and death not to look scared.

“Two thousand zlotys,” the leader demanded, while his son—it had to be his son, they both shared the same slightly crooked build—looked me up and down in a way that suggested that he was disgusted by me, the Jew, and that he was also using his dirty mind to picture me with nothing on.

“This is a one-time offer: two thousand and we’ll leave you alone.”

Suddenly I could feel sweat on the back of my neck. Not ordinary sweat caused by, say, the sun shining on a warm midday. No, this was sweat caused by fear. It smells terrible, and I had known nothing about it until a few years ago when my sheltered life ended.

As long as it stayed at the back of my neck and ran down my armpits, it wouldn’t betray me, but I had to keep it off my face. The hyenas were very good at registering the smallest sign of weakness.

“Don’t you understand, you Jew-whore?”

I couldn’t say a word.

I suddenly understood why people in my situation were prepared to give all their money to crooks and criminals, even when they knew they would be betrayed regardless. They clung on to the absurd hope that the *szmalcowniki* would stick to their side of the bargain. If I’d had the money, I might have confessed I was a Jew and given it all to them. But I’d never had that kind of money. So I forced myself to smile and said, “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t pretend we’re stupid,” the leader hissed.

I knew that my innocent little story wouldn’t work with him. I might have been able to trick his son and the coarse-

looking thug, but not him. He'd probably tracked down loads of Jews in the past few years and heard many stories better than the one about the girl who liked puff pastry. Way better. And he wasn't going to be tricked by a cross necklace, either.

My lies would be useless, worth less than nothing. How could I be so stupid, so badly prepared? It would be my fault if my mother died in our room at 70 Miła Street in a couple of weeks' time, and Hannah wouldn't survive much longer. Maybe she'd get by, begging on the streets of the ghetto. That could work for a bit, but the beggar children would freeze to death in the night when the next winter came, at the latest.

I couldn't allow that to happen to Hannah. Never.

I concentrated on the fact that the necklace and my lies weren't the only things I had going for me. There was one more thing I could bank on: I didn't really look Jewish. My hair was dark, like most of the Jews but also like many Poles. And I had a little snub nose and something that didn't fit the picture of a Jew at all: green eyes.

In one of his rare romantic moments, my boyfriend, Daniel, told me that my eyes looked like two mountain lakes, sparkling in the sun. I hadn't actually ever seen a mountain lake, so I had no idea if they could sparkle green and would probably never find out now.

The color of my eyes made me unusual on either side of the wall.

I fought back my fear and looked the leader of the *szmalcowniks* straight in the eye. The green got to him. And then without planning to, I burst out laughing. The few people who really know me, know that I hardly ever laugh. And when I do, it's never like that. But it sounded real to the *szmalcowniks*, and it disconcerted them.

“You are so wrong,” I said, and pushed past the dumb-founded men who obviously had never been laughed at by someone they thought was Jewish. Then I walked away, carrying my bags. It was incredible—my audacity had paid off. I nearly grinned.

But then the stocky leader charged after me, followed by the other two and blocked my path again. I caught my breath. I wouldn’t manage another bold laugh.

“You’re a Jew. I can smell it,” the man barked, and pushed his cap back. “I’m an expert at rooting out vermin.”

“The very best,” the boy said proudly.

Really? He was proud of a father who blackmailed Jews and then sent them to death?

It was all so unfair: My father had healed people, Poles and Jews. He’d even helped a young German soldier shot in our street during the last days of the invasion. But no matter how many people he had saved or how respected he had been as a doctor, now, when we really needed him, my father was not there.

“Stop bothering me,” I threatened angrily, “or I’ll call the police!”

The boy and the bearded man were impressed by my hollow threat. The Polish police didn’t like the *szmalcowniks*. They were rivals when it came to earning money with the Jews found on the Aryan side. And if the *szmalcowniks* were caught harassing innocent Polish girls, then they’d be in real trouble, and they knew it.

But their leader wasn’t going to be intimidated by me. He stared at my eyes, looking for a trace of insecurity somewhere, some sign no matter how small; my green eyes hadn’t dislodged his suspicion.

I met his gaze. With all my might.

“I mean it,” I repeated.

“No, you don’t,” he said quietly.

“You bet I do!”

“Well, then, let’s go to the police together,” he suggested, and pointed to a policeman wearing a blue uniform standing at the fat old woman’s stall. He had just bitten into an apple and was pulling a sour face because it didn’t taste anywhere as good as he’d expected.

What was I going to do now? I was done for, either way, whether I went to the police or not. There were beads of sweat on my forehead all of a sudden, and the leader noticed and started to smile. There was no more point in lying.

I could hear the student whistling again. I was going to die. Tomorrow at the latest, they’d put me up against the wall. My mother and my little sister wouldn’t survive without me. And this guy was whistling a merry little tune!

Should I run? There was no real chance of getting away. Even if I was able to outrun the *szmalcowniki* with my heels on, they would start shouting and calling to people, and there’d be enough Jew haters in the market to catch me. So many Poles despised us. They hated being occupied by the Germans, but they didn’t mind if they got rid of the Jews in the process.

And what if I did actually manage to flee from the market? I would never make it to the wall unseen. Not in a million years! I’d never get back into the ghetto. Running away was hopeless. But it was my only chance. I was about to drop the bags with all my precious goods and run for my life when I suddenly found myself staring at a rose.

It was a real rose!

Right in front of me.

Its strong scent actually replaced the bitter smell of my own fear for a moment. When was the last time I’d smelled a rose?

There weren't any in the ghetto. Whenever I went to the Polish market to buy goods, I never had time to look at the flowers. I'd never even thought of it. And suddenly, when I was just about to be handed over to the Germans, somebody offered me a rose?

It was the student.

He was standing beside me, beaming at me with his bright blue eyes, as if I was the most amazing and beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Close up, he looked younger than a student; more like seventeen, eighteen than in his early twenties. Before either the *szmalcowniks* or I could say anything, he laughed and took me into his arms.

"A rose for my rose!"

It was the most ridiculous thing to say, but he was so obviously in love that it didn't sound a bit silly the way he said it.

Suddenly I realized that this boy was trying to save my life. Was he a Jew, too? Or a Pole, maybe? He could even have been German with his blond hair and blue eyes, and his freckles. At any rate, he was a fantastic actor. It didn't matter what he was. He was risking his life for me—a total stranger!

"You're the rose of my life," he said. He sounded so happy.

The hyenas had no idea what to make of him. Could someone pretending to be in love overdo it like this? I had to start playing along if I wanted to convince them and save us both.

But I was too flustered. I tried to take the rose, but I couldn't move. It was as if I'd been paralyzed by Hannah's poison worm Xala from her story about the crazy caterpillars who hated butterflies.

The boy could feel how tense I was and pulled me closer. He held me tight, and his arms were far stronger than I would have thought possible for such a skinny guy. I still couldn't react. I was

all fear and surprise, like a dummy in his arms. He increased his antics to cover for me, and all at once he kissed me.

He kissed me!

His rough lips pressed against mine, and his tongue pushed into my mouth as if it had done so a thousand times before. As if this was the most natural thing in the world. I had to answer his kiss. This was my last chance. If I didn't, then everything would be over, for both of us.

The knowledge that I was going to die if I didn't react gave me a new lease of life, and I kissed him back just as wildly.

I had no idea if I liked being kissed, but when the boy finally stopped, I pretended to be over the moon.

"Thank you for the rose, Stefan." I'd made up a name for him in an instant.

"I can't live without you, Lenka!" He had a name for me, too. He must have been relieved that I had started to play along.

The hyenas were pretty impressed by our performance. The young *szmalcownik* even looked a bit envious. He'd probably never kissed a Polish girl like that.

"Are these guys annoying you?" Stefan asked, pretending that he hadn't noticed them before.

"They think I'm a Jew!"

Stefan stared at them as if they were completely mad. But he wasn't laughing like me on my first attempt to get rid of them. He scowled at them.

"Are you trying to insult my girlfriend?"

He was a proud Pole now, whose girl had had her dignity offended. A Jew? No one would dare say something like that to a decent Pole!

"No . . . no," the leader stammered. He stepped back a bit. So did his men.

“Well, they did!” I said in an angry voice. I was only pretending to be offended, but my anger was real enough.

Stefan shook his fist at the *szmalcowniks*. They stepped back again. Of course, they could have simply beaten him up. Three against one would have been no problem for them. But they didn’t touch Poles. That would have got them into trouble with the police. They even looked slightly shamefaced to have been so very wrong about me. They didn’t bother to apologize, but the leader turned away from us without a word and signaled the other two hyenas to follow him.

Stefan picked up my heavy bags like a real gentleman and put his free arm around my shoulder. We pretended to be two people in love, strolling through the market with me holding his rose.

I did worry that he might run off with my goods. Maybe he was a smuggler, too. But would an ordinary smuggler risk his life for someone like me? And if he did steal the food, wasn’t it a small price to pay for my life?

“Thank you,” I said to him.

“It was my pleasure,” he laughed, and I almost believed him. “You’re a great kisser.”

He said it with all the authority of a boy who knew what he was talking about, who’d kissed a lot of girls.

“I am if my life depends on it,” I whispered so that the passersby wouldn’t be able to hear. This wasn’t the right time or place to be swapping compliments. “Our lives! You risked your life for me!”

I still couldn’t believe it. In a world where everyone only thought about themselves, someone had put everything on the line for me!

“I knew it would work,” he said just as quietly. He wasn’t play-acting anymore; he was smiling honestly now.

“Well, you knew more than me, then.” I gave him an apologetic smile.

“For two reasons,” he explained.

“Oh?”

“Your green eyes . . .”

I was flattered, which surprised me.

“And?” I asked.

“Anyone out smuggling in times like this must be a really quick thinker. Or else he’d be dead. Or she would be.”

He was impressed! And that pleased me even more and made me feel a tiny bit proud. Of course, I didn’t want him to know, so I said, “A really quick thinker or truly insane.”

He laughed. A lovely, natural laugh. Nothing like the laughter in the ghetto. Was he a Pole after all? Maybe he really was called Stefan.

“Are you a smuggler, too?” I asked.

He stopped walking, grew serious, and hesitated for a moment, as if he was wondering how much he should let me know. In the end, he said, “Not like you.”

What was that supposed to mean? Did he smuggle for the ghetto’s black market kings? Was he one of the Polish criminals who supported those people?

Stefan took his arm away.

“It’s better if you don’t know anything about me,” he said, and suddenly he seemed much older than seventeen.

“Oh, I can handle it,” I replied.

“I used to think like that,” he answered. His eyes had lost the bold sparkle. I would have loved to know what he was talking about, but it was none of my business. He handed me my bags. Good! I wouldn’t have to go home without any food.

“We should say goodbye,” Stefan said.

All at once, I felt sad. I wanted to know more about him, but I knew it wasn't going to happen. "Yes, we should," I said quietly.

He looked so serious. Was he sorry that we were going different ways, too? But as soon as he felt me watching him, he switched his smile back on.

"When you get home, you need to wash."

"Excuse me?"

"You stink of fear!" he said, and gave me a broad grin.

I didn't know whether to laugh or hit him, so I did both.

"Ouch!" He burst out laughing.

"Mind what you say," I said, "or there'll be more where that came from."

That made him laugh even more. "There you go!" he said. "Never trust a pretty woman."

Damn, I was pleased again!

Stefan planted a kiss on my cheek and disappeared into the crowd. Out of my life forever, probably, without telling me his name or ever knowing that I was called Mira.

And I still held his rose in my hand.

Sometimes when something exciting happens, the feelings don't catch up with you until after it's over.

The rose thorns pricked the tips of my fingers, and suddenly I was overwhelmed by the memory of our kiss. The way Stefan had kissed me. The way I'd kissed him back.

I was shocked. Daniel had never kissed me like that.

Daniel.

I felt guilty all of a sudden. Why on earth was I so overwhelmed by a kiss from a stranger?

Daniel was the only person in the world who gave me any strength. He was the most decent person I knew. And he was always there for me. Unlike everyone else.

I probably wouldn't see Stefan ever again, and even if I did . . . Daniel and me! We were going to go to America together. Someday. We were going to walk down Broadway with Hannah, and see that great city for real. I'd only ever seen it in black and white, in the cinema we used to watch before the Nazis invaded.

Daniel and I had made a New York vow.

I pulled myself together and tried to block off the emotions caused by the kiss. I blamed them on all the danger and excitement, and forced myself to stop thinking about Stefan. The day wasn't over. I hadn't survived yet. The hardest part was still to come. I had to get back into the ghetto. Without being caught by the German guards.

2

The wall the Jewish slave workers had built—it's true, the Jews were forced to build their own prison—was three meters high. It was topped with broken glass and another half a meter of barbed wire. It was guarded by three different units: German soldiers, Polish soldiers, and the Jewish ghetto police on our side of the wall. Those pigs did anything the Germans wanted, just to have a slightly better life than the rest of us. They weren't to be trusted, not even my charming older brother.

Professional smugglers bribed the guards at the few gates that led into the ghetto—guards were always prepared to take money, no matter which group they belonged to. Once the guards had been paid, the carts with the smuggled goods could pass. Often these were stowed under false floors, but sometimes the animals pulling the carts were the goods themselves. Carts could be pulled into the ghetto by horses and back out again by men.

It wasn't as easy for me to get in or out of the ghetto. I didn't have enough money to bribe the guards, and although I was slim,

I was too big to fit through one of the gaps under the wall used by the smaller children who had to help make ends meet. These ragged little creatures were the unsung heroes of the ghetto. They forced their way through cracks and holes, crept through sewers, and even climbed over the wall, cutting their hands open on the broken glass. Most of them were under ten years old, and some no more than six. But if you looked into their eyes you'd have thought they'd roamed the earth for a thousand years. Whenever I saw one of those poor old-young creatures, I thanked my lucky stars that I could give Hannah a better life.

The little smugglers were all doomed. Sooner or later, they got caught by someone like Frankenstein. Frankenstein was our name for one of the more brutal German guards. He enjoyed shooting the small smugglers down off the wall with a cold smile, like sparrows.

In order to get into the Polish part of the city without ending up like a dead sparrow myself, I used the one place that had actually been designed to transport people from one world to another: the graveyard.

We are all the same in death—even if the different religions don't think so—and the Catholic and Jewish cemeteries lay side by side, separated by just a wall. Ruth had told me how to get through. One of her favorite customers, a notorious ghetto gangster called Shmuel Asher, had boasted to her about his smuggling tricks.

I left the market, walked along a couple of streets, and went into the Catholic cemetery. There was hardly ever anyone here, and today it was deserted. The Poles didn't have much time for their dead at present. Maybe people never did.

I headed straight toward the wall. I looked at the graves on the way and was surprised how luxurious some of them were.

Some of the tombs were larger than the room I occupied with my family. And they probably had fewer bugs, too. I was thinking about this when I noticed a blue policeman on patrol in the distance. Whatever happened, he mustn't speak to me or ask for my papers. I couldn't afford a forged passport like the professional smugglers, and I'd be caught at once.

I went on my way without hurrying and stopped at the next grave. I put down my bags, laid my rose beside a wreath, and started to pray quietly. I was a good Catholic girl taking a moment to remember the dead after visiting the market. The man who was buried here was called Waldemar Baszanowski, born on the twelfth of March 1916 and dead on the third of September 1939. He was probably a soldier in the Polish army, shot by the Germans in the first days of the war. I was Waldemar's little sister now. God rest his soul.

The policeman walked past without speaking to me. He left me alone to say my prayers for the dead. Once he'd gone, I let out a sharp breath. I was sorry that I'd have to leave my rose on this stranger's grave. Stefan had used it to save my life, after all. I picked up the rose and toyed with the idea of taking it back to the ghetto. But that was unwise. If I met the policeman again, the rose would give me away. I'd never be able to explain not leaving it on the grave. I could hardly say, "Oh well, the dead man won't mind."

I told myself I had to stop getting distracted by that boy. I left the rose on the grave. "Thank you, Waldemar," I said, and went up to the wall bordering the Jewish cemetery. I looked around, but I couldn't see any soldiers or police, and so I hurried over to a certain spot where the carefully arranged stones could be removed to make a passable hole for the professional smugglers. This was where they brought tons of smuggled goods into the

ghetto, including cows and horses. I took out the smallest stone and peered through the hole. As far as I could see, there was no one on the other side, so I started to pull out more stones, as quickly as possible. This was the most dangerous part. I could be discovered on either side as I removed the stones. And there would be no chance of explaining myself or escaping.

My heart beat wildly, and I started to sweat again. I could be caught and shot at any moment. Well, at least I'd be close to my grave.

As soon as the hole was big enough, I squeezed through and started to put the stones back, as fast as I could. I didn't want the guards to notice the hole while they were patrolling the wall and close it for good. And I didn't want the smugglers to suspect that someone was using their secret passage, or they'd pounce on me the next time I went over to the Polish side. Ruth had warned me that they were a nasty bunch of people.

My hands shook. I was more nervous than usual, probably because of my encounter with the *szmalcowniks*. I dropped a stone on my foot and gritted my teeth, so as not to make a sound. I wanted to be gone, but I had to seal the hole in the wall.

To calm myself, I touched the moss growing in front of the wall. It was soft and damp. Once again, I could sense that there was more to the world than just my fear. A bit calmer now, I picked up the stone from the ground—my hands weren't shaking quite as much anymore—and put it in the gap. Only five stones left: In the distance I could hear prayers being chanted loudly all of a sudden. Somewhere, there was a funeral going on. People died all the time in the ghetto. Only four stones left: One of the mourners sneezed. Only three stones: I could hear heavy steps coming from the other direction. Guards? I didn't dare look. Looking would take up invaluable time. Only two stones

left: Were the footsteps getting closer? One more stone left: No, they were moving away. The hole was closed. At last.

I turned around and saw that the footsteps came from two German soldiers. They were heading toward the funeral party about two hundred meters away from me. Maybe to torment the mourners. They liked to do that.

I ducked away from the wall, taking my bags with me. Two graves to the left, then two to the right. I stood still to take off my chain with the crucifix, and threw it in with the things I'd bought. Then I reached into a bush, felt for a little piece of cloth, and pulled it out. It was my armband with the Star of David. I put it on.

Now I wasn't Dana the Pole anymore; I was Mira the Jew.

The Germans could do whatever they wanted with me. So could the Poles, and even the Jewish police.

Whenever I put the armband on, I was reminded of the very first time we had had to wear them. I was thirteen then; the ghetto didn't exist yet, but there were other cruelties toward Jews. In 1939, the Nazis had ordered that every Jew had to wear the star.

Of course, the armbands weren't handed out. The Jews had to make them themselves or buy them. On the very first day of this order, I was walking through the freezing November rain with my father and brother, on our way to the market. We still had our good coats, so the cold couldn't get to us.

Until the German soldier appeared.

He walked toward us on the pavement, and we children didn't know what to do. Should we walk past or stop and say hello? A friend had told my father how he had been beaten, just the night before, because he had dared to pay his humble respects to a German soldier. So Papa said, "Lower your eyes."

We walked on, staring at the ground, past the German soldier. But the soldier stopped and started shouting, “What’s wrong, Jew, you refuse to greet me?”

Before my father could say anything, the soldier hit him. He hit my father! This honorable man, a respected doctor, the father we looked up to and who seemed so powerful and almighty to us—was beaten.

“Forgive me,” he said, while he tried to get up and the blood dripped from his lip down onto his gray beard.

My strong father was apologizing for being hit?

“And what are you doing on the pavement. Your place is in the street!”

“Of course,” Papa said, and pulled us into the road. “Bare-foot!” the soldier ordered.

We looked at him in disbelief. He took his gun off his shoulder to underline his order. I stared at the enormous puddles in front of us.

“Children, take off your shoes,” my father insisted, “and your socks!”

He did so himself and stood barefooted in a freezing puddle. I was too shocked to react at all, but Simon, my brother who was seventeen, got angry. Papa’s humiliation made him go red in the face. He went up to the soldier, even though he was small like everyone in our family, and shouted,

“Leave him alone!”

“Shut up!”

“My father saved a German soldier’s life!”

Instead of an answer, the soldier took the butt of his gun and struck Simon in the face. My brother fell to the ground, and Papa and I ran to him at once. His nose was broken and a tooth knocked out.

“Take off your shoes!”

Simon couldn't move. He was crying in pain. It was the first time my brother had ever been hit. And it was so brutal.

My father took off Simon's shoes and socks to prevent the soldier from hitting him again. I was terrified and took off my shoes and socks, too. We helped Simon, who was still crying, to get up. Father took hold of each of us by the hand and squeezed our fingers tightly. As if he hoped to give us strength, somehow. We walked through the freezing puddles.

And the soldier shouted, “I hope you have learned your lesson.”

We had. Father realized that the Germans weren't making rules anyone could rely on: Greeting, not greeting, it didn't matter, the rules were only there to torment us. And Simon knew from this moment on that he was never going to stand up to the Germans again. One blow, a knocked-out tooth, a broken nose, and his will to fight had disappeared. I had also learned something. As I walked through the icy puddles in my bare feet, and my toes ached with pain and then slowly went numb, my father, full of shame, watched me, and I realized that the grown-ups couldn't protect me anymore.

Papa knew, too. I could see it in his sad eyes. He was suffering far more than I was. I would have liked to cuddle him like he used to cuddle me if I had a nightmare. But this wasn't just a bad dream we could wake up from. The German soldier made us march through the puddles, back and forth. We were a spectacle for everyone to see. The Polish pedestrians looked away, embarrassed, or most of them did. But some laughed, and one man bellowed, “The Jews are in the gutter at last.” While we were being humiliated, I pressed Papa's hand and whispered, “I love you, no matter what happens.”

Of course, I had no idea what was going to happen.

I could hear the Germans' laughter coming from the funeral. Apparently, they really were having a bit of fun with the mourners. Maybe they were making them dance. I'd heard about awful jokes like that.

Whatever was going on, I couldn't waste any more time. I grabbed my bags and ducked from one gravestone to the next, in the direction of the exit.

One of the soldiers shouted, "Laugh!" And then I heard the tortured laughter of the people by the graveside. I couldn't help them.

This was the ghetto. This was my home.

3

Ignore, ignore, ignore.

I hurried through the streets of the ghetto and tried to block out everything, like I always did, so that I could bear it all—the lack of space, the noise, the smell.

Many, many people lived here. We constantly jostled one another, even though I tried to avoid physical contact with anyone. All the ghetto inhabitants did. The fear of catching typhus was painfully real.

And it was so loud, not due to traffic—cars weren't allowed in the ghetto—but because of the sheer number of people living here, talking to one another, arguing. There was always someone shouting. Either they'd been robbed, or conned, or they had simply gone mad.

The stench was the worst thing of all. There were bodies lying in several doorways. This was something I never got used to. Many people didn't have the money or the strength to bury their dead. They simply put them out on the streets at night, so that they would be disposed of like rubbish the next day.

The corpses were stripped of their clothes overnight. I understood why: the living needed coats and trousers and shoes far more than the dead did.

I ignored all the begging children I passed. Some were sitting listlessly on the curb. Others with a bit more strength tugged at my clothes. They'd have clawed one another's eyes out for a single piece of bread out of my pocket.

I wasn't going to let Hannah end up like them.

Ignore. I had to ignore the screaming injustice of it all.

Apart from all the poor and desperate people in rags, there were rich people being carted to the delicatessen shops in bicycle rickshaws. A woman passed by, yelling at her driver to go faster. She was actually wearing a fur coat on a warm day like today. Still, despite the smell, I could breathe more freely here. Despite the cramped conditions, I could move without being terrified the whole time. There were no hyenas lurking in these overcrowded, stinking streets, waiting to hunt me down. I was among my own kind. People who were trying to keep their dignity somehow, despite everything.

They wore decent clothes, kept themselves clean, and walked through the streets with their heads held high. They existed without hurting anyone. Without turning into animals.

The ghetto had not managed to break all of us yet, not by a long shot. There were still good people. I wasn't one of them, of course. The good ones were the teachers, volunteers working in the soup kitchens, and people like Daniel. Especially people like Daniel.

I made my way through the masses and headed toward the little shop belonging to Jurek. The bearded old man was one of the few people who managed to endure the circumstances. He was often in a good mood, not necessarily because he made a liv-

ing buying goods from me and the other smugglers, but because he had lived his life already.

“I have had sixty-seven great years on earth,” he’d told me once. “That’s more than most people will ever get, be they German or Jew or Congolese. Even if the last years are more of a struggle, they don’t count for much.”

As I entered his shop carrying my bags, the broken doorbell rattled instead of ringing and he was glad to see me.

“Mira, my darling!”

I liked the way he called me darling, although I knew very well that he called everyone a darling who brought him decent goods. I took a look at his display counter and made a mental note of the current food prices: An egg—three zlotys, a liter of milk—twelve zlotys, a kilo of butter—115 zlotys, a kilo of coffee—660 zlotys . . . If only I could smuggle coffee. The profits were incredible. But I needed more money first, to be able to buy some on the Polish side. The goods in Jurek’s shop were too expensive for ordinary people. Someone working in the German factories within the ghetto earned about 250 zlotys a month. So he could only afford about two kilos of butter and a liter of milk.

Jurek looked into my bags and said, “You really are my darling!”

This time he said it in a way that sounded different. Perhaps it wasn’t just meaningless chitchat. Perhaps he really did care for me the most.

After we’d sorted out what I would keep for my family—eggs, carrots, a little bit of jam, and a pound of butter—he took a bite of puff pastry and decided what he was going to pay me. Normally, he gave me half the amount he would get by selling the goods himself. I hadn’t found anyone who would pay me more. I was no good at selling anything myself, and

the longer I held on to the goods, the more likely they were to be stolen.

Jurek took some money out of the till, which was covered in a thick layer of dust—he didn't care much for cleaning—and put the banknotes into my hand. I counted them to make sure he hadn't slighted me and was surprised: He'd given me far too much money. At least two hundred zlotys too much. I would be able to buy coffee next time, after all. Had Jurek made a mistake? Should I ask? I decided not to. I needed every zloty I could get. If he'd got his sums wrong, then it was his own fault. And he could absorb the loss, anyway.

"I didn't get it wrong," he said, laughing. "It's all right."

Damn! My face was like a book; everyone could see what I was thinking. Or at least crooks like Jurek or the leader of the *szmalcowniks* could. I needed to do something about that!

"You wanted to give me more?" I didn't understand.

"Yes, because I really do like you, Mira . . .," the old man replied, and stroked my cheek. It wasn't an indecent gesture. It was kind, almost fatherly. He wasn't expecting anything in return for his money. I'd heard a rumor that Jurek had never been interested in women. He preferred men.

"Anyway, money is not going to be worth anything, soon."

Why did he say that? "You mean because of inflation?" I asked, confused.

The prices kept going up in the ghetto, month by month. An egg had cost a zloty at the beginning of the year, and it was worth three times that now.

"No, that's not what I meant." Jurek laughed, and then he said something that frightened me. "You should enjoy life while you still can."

What did he mean? Of course I risked my life every time

I went over the wall and it had been a close shave today—*close* wasn't the right word—but I wasn't going to get killed. I was going to be even more careful and better prepared.

"I'll be all right," I said.

"I'm not talking about that," he sighed. "Things are going to get pretty nasty around here soon."

"What do you mean? What did you hear?"

"Oh, I have been hearing things, bad things . . ." Jurek didn't want to say any more.

"What things?" I asked again. "Who from?"

"From an SS man I do business with."

Although I liked Jurek, I hated the fact that he did business with the SS. "What did he tell you?"

"He was dropping hints, saying that our peaceful life here was going to be over tomorrow." Jurek's laughter turned bitter. "As if you could call this a peaceful life."

"What do you think he means?"

"I've no idea. But I'm expecting the worst."

I was worried. Jurek was usually so optimistic. It wasn't like him to take gossip seriously. There were often rumors that the Germans were about to murder us all. That it wasn't enough if half of us starved to death. But they were just rumors. And Jurek didn't normally pay attention to stuff like that.

"Nothing's going to happen," I said. "The Germans need us to work."

Thousands of Jews worked as cheap labor in the ghetto factories and produced all sorts of things for the Germans: furniture, airplane parts, even German *Wehrmacht* uniforms. It would be foolish to do without them.

"Ah yes, they need us for slave labor," Jurek agreed. "But do they need four hundred thousand of us?"

“And they keep bringing in Jews from all over the place,” I continued to argue. “If they’d wanted to kill them, they’d have done it before they left home.”

Thousands of Jews from Czechoslovakia and Germany had been brought into the ghetto over the past few weeks. The German Jews wanted nothing to do with us Polish Jews. They thought they were something better. A lot of them were tall with blond hair and blue eyes and looked German; some were even Christians who were simply unlucky enough to have a grandfather they might not have ever known who happened to be a Jew. The Germans had allowed these Christian Jews to bring a priest along, to hold services for them in the ghetto. What must this be like for them? They had gone to church every Sunday, and then they were chased out of their homes, had to wear armbands with the star, and were dragged to this hell, simply because they’d had a Jewish grandfather or grandmother! The God they still believed in had a very strange sense of humor.

“It would make sense,” Jurek agreed, “to kill the people where they live.”

“But?” I asked.

“The Nazis have their own special logic.”

Suddenly, I remembered the soldier beating my father because he had not greeted him. How he would have been struck just the same if he had greeted him. Yes, the Nazis had their own sick logic all right.

And yet, it didn’t feel as if something catastrophic was about to happen. “It won’t be so bad,” I said to myself as much as to Jurek.

Jurek forced a smile. “Does that mean you’ve decided to give me my money back?”

“I can buy coffee on the Polish side,” I said, and sidled toward the door.

That made him laugh properly, again. “Mira, you are my one and only darling!”

I left Jurek’s shop and joined the crowds outside. For all the stink and lack of space and noise, the ghetto was so alive that I couldn’t imagine it ever dying. For each person who died now, three new ones were forced into the ghetto. As long as there were Jews, there would always be a ghetto.

I decided to let the rumors lie and concentrated on life instead of death: I was on my way home to cook my family a lovely omelet with fresh eggs.

4

I had only gone a few meters when I saw a dirty little man in rags jumping around on the street. It was Rubinstein.

Hundreds of thousands of people lived in the ghetto, but there were three people everyone knew. One was despised, one revered, and one made everyone smile. That was Rubinstein. He pranced about in the street like a clown or like a madman, maybe. He leaped in my direction and stopped right in front of me with a sweeping bow, as if he were a nobleman and me a princess. And he greeted me with his favorite words: “All the same.”

Of course, my common sense told me that people were not all the same in the ghetto, but every time I heard Rubinstein saying or shouting these words, I wondered if he might be right, after all. Especially now, after what Jurek had just told me. We all shared the same ghetto hell, the same fear of dying. Didn't that make us all the same? Whether we were rich or poor, young or old, sane or insane?

And weren't the Germans in the same boat, despite all their

power over us? They could still lose this war they were fighting—they hadn't conquered the whole world yet.

Anyway, Rubinstein was the only person in the ghetto who wasn't afraid of the Germans. When he met SS men he jumped around them in just the same way he jumped around us. He would point at them and then at us and keep saying "All the same," until the Germans started to laugh and joined in, chanting "All the same," too. They probably thought it was funny, but perhaps deep inside they could sense that they were just as vulnerable as we were, although they would never admit it.

Perhaps Rubinstein wasn't insane after all. Maybe it was wise not to be afraid of the Germans. Maybe our fear amused him in the same way that his madness amused us.

Now Rubinstein suddenly laughed out loud. I followed his gaze: At the end of the street a group of SS men were out on patrol. Rubinstein was the only Jew I knew who could laugh when he saw SS soldiers. He bounded on a few meters until he landed in front of Jurek's shop and started shouting loudly enough for the old man to hear through the window. "Hitler stinks!"

I could see Jurek flinch behind his dusty till.

"Hitler," Rubinstein shouted, "gave his dog a good old bone!"

Jurek started to panic. The pedestrians around us all hurried away from Rubinstein. I started to feel worried. What happened if the SS men heard this nonsense?

I looked around, but the patrol hadn't noticed the madman yet—he must be mad; why else would he do something this insane? And so I stayed, wanting to see what would happen next, and forgot the most important rule of survival. It is never, ever a good idea to be too curious.

“Hitler is making love with his own hound.” Rubinstein wouldn’t give up. Jurek grabbed a load of food from the shelf: ham, bread, butter, and dashed out to Rubinstein. He thrust it all into his arms and hissed, “Shut up!”

Jurek was terrified that the Nazis would come and shoot Rubinstein, and then shoot him, too, because someone had been shouting obscenities outside his shop. Even though the old man believed that we were all going to die soon, he didn’t want to be executed today.

Rubinstein grinned at Jurek. “I like jam, too.”

“You little . . .” Jurek glared at him.

I understood what was going on here: What Rubinstein was doing was the most insane way to blackmail someone.

“I could tell everyone that you’d like to sleep with Hitler, too.” Rubinstein grinned even more broadly. The old shopkeeper couldn’t say a word.

Rubinstein turned around to face the soldiers, cupped his hands round his mouth like a megaphone, and started to shout. “Jurek wants to . . .”

The SS soldiers looked in our direction. Suddenly, I panicked. I was such an idiot. I should have been gone ages ago.

Jurek put his hand over Rubinstein’s mouth and hissed, “You’ll get your bloody jam.”

The blackmailer nodded happily. Jurek took his hand off Rubinstein’s mouth, and the little man pressed a finger to his lips, to show that he was going to be quiet now.

The SS men looked away. Jurek caught his breath, charged into his shop, and came back out with a large jar.

I had never been so happy to see a jar of jam in my life.

“Strawberry!” Rubinstein was delighted and opened the jar

right away. He grabbed a handful of jam and stuffed it into his mouth with pleasure.

There are prettier sights in the world. Rubinstein smiled at me and offered me some, too. I looked at Jurek. I didn't want to be rude, but I hadn't had strawberry jam for ages; it cost almost as much as butter on the black market. The old man looked at me and sighed.

"It's all right, Mira," he said. "At least he's stopped shouting."

As soon as Jurek had disappeared into his shop, I put my hand into the jar and stuffed a huge helping of jam into my mouth. I didn't care if Rubinstein had already stirred it with his filthy fingers. It tasted amazing.

While I was enjoying the glorious, sweet, fruity flavor, I realized that Rubinstein probably wasn't mad at all, he was simply ingenious.

"Maybe I could be your apprentice," I joked.

"Then," the man joked back, "I'll show you how to get the richest Jews to give you a five-course meal."

"I'd really like to be able to do that," I laughed.

A madman's apprentice! And I'd wanted to be a doctor.

Rubinstein put his tongue into the jar and started to lick the sides. Now I didn't think I'd have any more.

"Do you really think that we're all the same?" I asked.

He took his face out of the jar and answered, while red blobs of red jam dripped down his chin.

"Of course I do, and we are all free, too."

Was he being ironic?

"But that's ridiculous," I replied.

But Rubinstein turned dead serious all of a sudden. "No, it's not!"

He wasn't a madman anymore, or a clown. He was suddenly a man who saw the light.

“Everyone is free to choose what kind of human he wants to be,” Rubinstein said, looking straight into my eyes. “The question is, little Mira, what kind of human do you want to be?”

“One who can survive,” I answered quietly, fending him off.

“I’m not sure that’s enough to justify life,” he answered. He wasn’t laughing at me, but he was smiling. Then he bounded off with his bounty and left me wondering what kind of person I wanted to be.

5

I climbed up the stairs of 70 Miła Street. It was terribly crowded. Not because too many people were heading back to their flats at the same time. No, for lots of people, the staircase was all they had. Whole families slept on the stairs and landings, ate their rations sitting on the steps, and stared listlessly out through the broken windows no one ever repaired. When the Nazis set up the ghetto, they didn't care whether it was going to be big enough for all the people it would have to hold. There weren't nearly enough flats. Which meant that many people lived in every room of every house, and in the rafters, on the staircases, or in the cold damp cellars. And now, in the spring of 1942, the numbers were actually increasing every day, as more Jews were brought in from other countries.

When we were relocated, our family was lucky enough—or rather we had enough money—to get our own room. Before we moved into the ghetto, we'd lived in a spacious five-room flat. But we were forced to give it to a childless Polish couple, who were very happy to have our furniture, as well. All we were allowed

to take with us was a handcart loaded with a few suitcases. We pulled our cart through the streets of Warsaw among the silent, ghostlike procession of thousands of Jews on their way to the ghetto. We were guarded by Germans. And stared at by the Poles who lined the pavements or sat at their windows, and didn't seem to mind that their part of Warsaw would be Jew-free from now on.

When we entered the place where we were going to live at 70 Miła Street, my mother burst into tears. One single room. For five people. Without any beds. And a broken window. There were tears in my father's eyes, too. He had spent the few days between the announcement that a ghetto was being set up in the most run-down streets of Warsaw and the start of the resettlement doing everything he could to find an abode for us. He had run from department to department, had bribed officials of the *Judenrat*—the Jewish council set up by the Nazis—and ended up paying thousands of zlotys. Papa had managed to make sure that we wouldn't freeze to death in the streets when winter came.

When we entered that tiny empty room we didn't feel grateful, though. And he never forgave himself for not doing more to help his family and his dear wife who suffered so much.

I had to walk through a larger room to get to our own. An extended family from Kraków lived there. We had not managed to become friends over the past couple of years. These people were quite religious. The women wore head scarfs, and all the men had beards and curled side locks, which went down to their shoulders. While the women did the housework, the men spent the whole day praying. That wasn't exactly my idea of a happy marriage.

The women were washing clothes in large metal tubs and

looked down their noses at me as usual. I was young, I wasn't wearing a head scarf, I had a boyfriend, and I was a smuggler—reasons enough to despise me.

But I'd stopped caring about what they thought a long time ago. And I'd stopped trying to be nice.

Ignore, ignore, ignore.

I opened the door to our room. Mama had drawn the curtains again. She didn't want any sun in the darkness of her life. I closed the door behind me and opened the curtains and the window to air the room. Mama groaned quietly because of the sunlight. But she couldn't manage any real protest. She lay on a mattress we had swapped her favorite golden necklace for during the first winter. The necklace had been a present from Papa on their tenth anniversary.

Mama's long gray hair stuck to her face, her eyes stared into the distance. It was hard to believe that this woman had once been a beauty, or that my father and a Polish general had fought over her. It almost ended in a duel, but she had intervened and saved Papa from being shot.

She had loved him. Loved him incredibly. More than anything in the world. Even more than us children. His death had destroyed her completely. Since then, I'd started to think it was a bad idea to love someone too much.

My boyfriend, Daniel, saw things differently. He thought love was our only hope. He was probably the last surviving romantic in the ghetto.

I took off my best dress, carefully put it on a clothes hanger, and then hung that up on a nail on the wall. I changed into a patched blue blouse and a pair of black baggy trousers, and started to make the omelet. Hannah was due back from the underground school any minute. In fact, she should have been

back by now. Hopefully nothing had happened to her. I was always worrying about that child.

Mama never said much, and she never asked me any questions. I still wanted her to share in my life in the outside world, though, so I usually pretended to have a conversation with her where I spoke both parts:

“And how was your day, today, Mira?” I asked.

“Quite successful so far, thank you!” I replied.

“Really, Mira?”

“Yes, really. I made lots of money and have bought loads of food . . .”

I wondered for a moment if I should mention the *szmalcowniks*, but I didn’t want Mama to worry about me, assuming that she was actually capable of worrying about anyone anymore.

So instead, without even thinking about it, I said,

“I kissed a boy I didn’t know!”

And she smiled. Mama hardly ever smiled. A little explosion of happiness went off in my heart. I desperately wanted her to keep smiling, and so I chatted away:

“It was wild, and passionate and daft . . . And fantastic somehow . . .” Goodness, it really had been fantastic! I suddenly had a desperate wish to kiss Stefan again.

Mama smiled even more. That was so lovely. When I saw her looking like that, I couldn’t help hoping that she might be able to be happy again.

Hannah came in at this moment. She could be light-footed and boisterous at the same time. She was an elflike creature, shabby clothes with cropped short hair—she’d had lice last month and I had to cut off all her hair. When I’d fetched the scissors, I’d actually expected her to have a tantrum, but she’d turned the whole incident into one of her stories.

“If my hair grew any longer, I could wind it into twelve long braids. I’d use them like extra arms and capture people. I’d be able to hurl my enemies through the air because of the mighty strength of my hair. And I’d win every fight.”

“Well, then,” I’d said, laughing, “why don’t you mind me cutting it off?”

“Because everyone would notice those braids and they would come and get me. I could use them to beat up soldiers and throw them through walls, even, but the soldiers have guns. And not even my hair can stop a gun. The Germans would shoot me. And then cut off my braids as a warning to everyone who wanted to grow their hair to fight. It’s better to lose my hair now, before it turns into a weapon and the Germans find me out.”

Hannah didn’t want to be strong, she wanted to be invisible. If you were invisible you had more chance of surviving in the ghetto. As soon as I put the plate with the omelet onto the table, Hannah pounced on the food and started gobbling. Mama pulled herself up from the mattress, sat down beside me on the last available chair—I’d used the others as firewood last winter—and we both started eating, more slowly than Hannah. We let her eat more than us, but we always stopped her before she ate too much.

“Why was Mama smiling when I came in?” Hannah asked with her mouth full. Her manners were appalling. But no one had the time or patience to teach this child any manners.

“Tell me, what was going on?” she asked again. A bit of egg threatened to fall out of the corner of her mouth. Just in time, she caught it with the tip of her tongue.

“Mira kissed a boy,” Mama explained in her thin voice. “And it wasn’t Daniel!”

Before I could explain that the kiss had meant absolutely

nothing at all, except for the fact that it had saved my life, and that I loved Daniel and only Daniel, and that it didn't mean a thing if talking about this kiss made me feel nervous or made me go red, Hannah said,

“Oh, so did I!”

Now it was my turn to nearly drop my omelet.

“You!—You kissed someone?”

“After school.” So that was why she was late.

“Who?”

“Ben.”

“Does he go to school with you?” I started to smile. I thought that the idea of a twelve-year-old giving my sister a kiss on the cheek was very sweet.

“Nope,” she answered.

With all this talk of kissing, Mama was drifting away again, back to the days when my father was alive and they were still happy together.

“Is this boy even smaller than you?” I teased Hannah.

“No, he's fifteen.”

Now I really did drop a bit of omelet.

“And he is really, really nice,” Hannah said.

“Any boy nearly my age out kissing twelve-year-olds is not nice!”

“And he does French kissing.”

“Whaaat?”

“He's a good tongue kisser,” Hannah explained, as if this was a perfectly normal thing to say.

She was far too young for this. Not to mention what it might lead to. I looked at Mama—she should do something! Anything! She was Hannah's mother, not me! But Mama got up from the table and went to lie down again.

“Hannah,” I said while she grabbed Mama’s plate, “don’t you think the boy is too old for you?”

“Nope!” she said, chewing away. “Just a bit too shy.”

“You kissed him?” I was shocked.

“Isn’t that what princesses do?”

“Not exactly,” I said.

“Well, they do in my stories!” Hannah gave me a huge smile. If the Nazis didn’t manage it first, this girl was going to be the end of me. How could I stop all this nonsense? I needed help. Someone who knew more about dealing with children than I did. Daniel.