

ACCIDENTAL SAVIORS

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Can't Put It Down Books

Accidental Saviors
A Novel
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CHAPTER ONE

Berlin: March 12, 1940

Felix Kersten's eyes opened from sleep with a jolt at the ungodly knocking at the front door of his flat. It was six o'clock on a March morning; the sun had not yet risen over Berlin.

"Open the door!" a man's forceful voice shouted through the locked door. "This is the SS."

Why in hell's name is the SS at the door to my home? They must know that I'll be at SS headquarters in just a few hours. Why can't they wait?

Kersten threw off the covers on his bed with an angry force. He hadn't been sleeping well since overhearing the conversation in the SS dining room about Holland. The repulsion of the ugly nightmare of the previous night left a foul taste in his mouth like jungle breath on the morning after a shot too many of the cheap vodka he'd consumed in his student days. He'd been irritable and fretful for a couple of days now.

He fumbled groggily at the edge of the bed with his right foot for his slippers. He grabbed his silk dressing gown off the back of the chair and threw it over his pajamas. He mumbled a curse to himself as he left the bedroom and rushed through his well-appointed living room to the front door.

"Open the door, Doctor Kersten. It's the SS." It was a different, less overtly threatening voice this time. There was further impatient knocking, sounding as though his uninvited visitors were using their clubs against the wooden door.

"Coming, coming. Stop your knocking. You'll wake up everybody else in the building."

When the tall, meaty Kersten opened the door, he found three men there, two privates in the field-grey SS uniform with the ancient **⚡** runes pinned on the front of their collar; and an officer in a shiny black leather overcoat. For a moment, Kersten was overtaken first by surprise, then alarm.

Whatever you say or do, Felix, don't reveal the slightest hint of fear. The SS can smell blood from a mile away.

“Dr. Felix Kersten?” the officer asked.

“Well, now we know you can read the name tag on the door,” Kersten countered irritably.

The privates remained impassive. The officer didn’t look the least bit amused by Kersten’s mockery.

“May we come in, Doctor?” the officer asked with gentlemanly courtesy. Kersten knew that SS officers were trained to begin interrogations with apparent benign politeness, with Aryans at least. Eventually, however, like a cat stalking its prey, sitting absolutely still until the bird is lulled into inattention, the interrogator leaps suddenly just at that moment and administers the fatal attack.

“Do I really have a choice?” Kersten asked as he pulled the door open to let them into the living room.

The officer forced a smile and nodded his gratitude for Kersten’s cooperation. The officer was accustomed, however, to an exhibition of more anxiety, even fear, whenever he entered the residence of a host off his guard.

“I am *Leutnant* Rohrbach, Doctor. We have been sent by my superiors to pose a few questions.”

“Why don’t you have a seat here, *Leutnant*.”

“Thank you. Always stand when I am working, if you don’t mind.” The officer gave no indication that he would remove his black leather coat.

Good. This isn’t going to take long.

Rohrbach remained the epitome of politeness and respect, despite his threatening errand. He nodded to the two privates, who gamboled off immediately in separate directions of the flat.

“I’m at your service, of course, *Leutnant*,” Kersten said in a tone that matched the officer’s affected courteousness. He had imagined the SS to be gruffer if not spiteful in their methods of interrogation. Perhaps they were aware of his unique position. “But is it really necessary for your men to inspect the rest of the flat. My servants are asleep and deserve their rest.”

“It’s just customary and routine procedure, Doctor, on a call such as this. I’m sure that they will return empty-handed, with nothing untoward to report.”

Sure enough, barely had Rohrbach finished his sentence than the two privates returned to the living room. One greeted the lieutenant with, “*Nichts, Herr Leutnant*.”

“You see, Doctor? They found nothing suspicious hidden in your flat, just as I predicted,” Rohrbach said to Kersten with a well-bred

grin.

Kersten's head ached. He was growing increasingly vexed by Rohrbach's superficial courtliness and solicitude.

"You said you have been dispatched here to ask questions," Kersten asked impatiently. "What you need to know?"

"If you're impatient to get right to the point, then, as you wish, Doctor."

"Who is it that wants to know my answers to your questions, if I may ask?"

The lieutenant flashed an indulgent, patronizing smile. "Of course, that you may not ask, Doctor. I'm sure you understand. Instead, let me begin by asking you, do you ever use this residence as a clinic in which to treat any of your patients?"

"*Herr Leutnant*, I am sure that whoever is your superior in the SS who sent you here on this...this...fool's errand, has my building under surveillance and has a very accurate record of who enters and who exits the building."

"There's no need for impertinence, Doctor. You must be sufficiently familiar with SS procedure by now to know that we are seeking an answer that corroborates information we have gathered by other means. Or, contradicts it."

"Then, since you ask, I'll give you a straight answer. Yes, I do occasionally receive patients in my flat here, particularly if they are from out of town, or I do not have access to their residence for some reason."

"Aha, if I may continue, Doctor, why is it that you may not have access to the residences of some of your patients?"

Kersten was beginning to feel more testy. He wasn't consciously afraid of Rohrbach, but he noticed that his mouth was dry.

"As you undoubtedly know, *Leutnant*, some individuals and families no longer have their accustomed residence, but are in temporary arrangements, sometimes with relatives."

"Oh, yes...I vaguely remember hearing something back in 1938 about some families being evacuated to make room for *Herr Speer's* plans to honor the *Führer* by rebuilding sections of Berlin that even Paris could not rival."

"Vaguely remember," my ass! He knows full well the details of the displacement of hundreds of households to make room for Speer's grandiose architectural delusions. For Hitler's grandiose delusions, in other words. It was the SS that was dispatched to evict the residents.

"As I recall—though, as I say, my memory about the event is only

imprecise, I'm afraid—that the households that were appropriated were those of Jews. Am I remembering correctly, Doctor?"

"Yes."

"Then, can we deduce, Doctor, that some of the patients to whose residence you do not have access, whom you therefore need to receive here in your private flat, are Jews?"

It suddenly dawned on Kersten that this was precisely the matter that this circuitous charade was about. Rohrbach had the gratified look of someone about to checkmate an opponent in a game of chess.

These Nazis, and their obsession with the Jews.

"Yes, that is an accurate deduction, *Leutnant*. That's really no surprise, is it? Or a secret?"

"No, indeed, Doctor, we've suspected the same for quite some time."

Rohrbach's face became sterner suddenly, his voice more severe, like that of a drill sergeant. He raised the volume a notch. "You do realize, do you not, Doctor Kersten, that to treat Jewish patients is forbidden, absolutely forbidden?"

"No, actually I do not...Besides, that does not concern me in the least."

Rohrbach had had enough pleantry, and of this masseur's defiance. His piercing eyes looked directly into Kersten's. "Then you place yourself outside the law of the German people?"

"No, not at all, *Leutnant*," Kersten said with a forced smile. "My driver obeys traffic signals. I pay my taxes. I purchase only my rationed portion of bacon."

Rohrbach's face was turning a shade of crimson now, especially at his neck. "You mock me, Doctor, but you do so, I warn you, at your risk. You are not behaving as a German doctor should behave. It is unlawful for a German doctor to treat Jewish patients. They have their own doctors."

Kersten smiled inwardly as he paused for effect.

"Perhaps so, *Leutnant*. Though among my various medical degrees, one is from Berlin, Nonetheless, I am *not* a German doctor. I believe that this law does not pertain to me." Kersten said as civilly as his glee at evading Rohrbach's checkmate allowed him.

Rohrbach looked at the two privates confusedly, as if expecting one of them to bail him out.

"Doctor Kersten, such insolence and impertinence are unnecessary. They can land you in the kind of trouble with the SS that I would hate to have happen to a man of your standing."

“Surely your superiors know that I am, in fact, a *Finnish* doctor.”

An awkward, embarrassed silence overtook the room. Puzzlement was all over Rohrbach’s face. The two privates looked back at Rohrbach equally baffled.

“Finnish? So, you say, at least,” Rohrbach finally said a little self-consciously, though Kersten was humored by Rohrbach’s scrambling to reverse the tables and resume his position of strength.

“Then I presume you can afford us the pleasure of inspecting your passport?”

“The pleasure is all mine, *Leutnant*. If you would wait a moment, I will produce it, and anything else you want, for that matter.” With that, Kersten nodded at all three SS men to excuse himself, and exited to his bedroom.

After barely a minute, he reappeared holding the oxblood-colored booklet that was his Finnish passport. He handed it to Rohrbach with an air of satisfaction. “Suomi-Finland” was etched in golden letters into the front of it below the new coat of arms of the republic. Though he was trying his best to appear nonplussed, Rohrbach’s eyes grew a little larger and revealed surprise mixed with embarrassment.

“It...seems to be in order, Doctor. A Finnish citizen for over twenty years? With temporary stays in the Netherlands and Germany? But not originally a citizen of Finland?”

“Just as it reads right there on the page in black and white.” Kersten had to discipline his urge to be mocking.

Rohrbach handed the passport back to Kersten sheepishly, although he tried to maintain a front of official decorum. “Apparently, I have been misinformed. We regret the early hour for this visit, Doctor.”

“I will see you and your men out, *Leutnant*,” Kersten said with a feigned smile. “Now if you do not mind, I would be appreciative if you corrected your superior’s information.”

Rohrbach stood in the open doorway, turned towards Kersten, and said noncommittally, “As you wish, Doctor.” Then, he added, with no trace of a smile, “But be aware, Doctor, that this may not be the last time my superiors seek some answers from you.”

CHAPTER TWO

Berlin: November 9, 1938

The moment Algot Niska stepped off the train from Brussels at the *HauptBahnhof* in Berlin, he knew that something momentous and sinister was happening. The sky over Berlin was quivering with a malevolent electricity. November was already eight days old, but this evening, for some mysterious reason a wall of hellish heat cooked the air. As he exited the terminal onto *Friedrichstrasse*, he was almost knocked to the pavement by members of the Hitlerjugend running up and down the street as if let out of school on the last day before summer vacation, boys screaming riotously and pig-tailed girls running beside them. Flames lit the sky a brilliant shade of hot orange. Furniture, beds, dressers, tables, chairs, paintings were strewn and toppled chaotically on the sidewalk; sheets of paper were being carried hither and thither by the wind.

The almost fifty-year-old Niska carried his small valise and walked quickly towards his hotel in the Charlottenburg district which was in the opposite direction of this insane violence and destruction. He wanted to be as far away as possible from the chaos.

His latest smuggling project had been more hazardous and risky than he had expected. He felt satisfied with a job completed, and gratified that he had succeeded in smuggling the Gottfrieds' jewelry into Brussels and on to the United States, far from the clutches of the Nazis. But, he was ready for rest and relaxation. For that, he needed peace and quiet. This evening, Berlin was not co-operating.

He passed a synagogue at an intersection that had descended to all-out, open warfare. Youth were tearing up some of the abandoned objects on the street for projectiles to hurl at people they judged to be Jews. Young men and women were running around with grotesque, wolfish faces, shouting, "There's one! Stone him! Kill her!"

Although Niska was a tall and thin man, he was engulfed in the human congestion on the side of the street opposite the synagogue. The crowd was so densely packed that Niska was prevented from making further progress towards his hotel. Whether he wanted to or not, he was

seeing the devastating effects of an unrestrained hatred.

Some of the older people—whether they were members of the synagogue, Niska couldn't tell—were covering their faces with their hands. They could not comprehend the madness. An elderly woman moaned, tears streaming down her cheeks, “Oh, dear God, what are the young *goyim* doing?”

Suddenly an enormous cheer erupted as though a soccer team on a pitch nearby had scored a winning goal. “The synagogue is burning! The synagogue is burning!”

Niska saw an older, bearded man, probably the rabbi, appear on the front steps of the synagogue. His longish locks were gray. He was in his white shirtsleeves, not the way a rabbi was usually dressed in public. There hadn't been time to don his suit jacket. He had his right arm around two large scrolls, and with his left hand he was holding the hand of a terrified woman Niska assumed was his wife. They were trying to escape the burning building. They almost tripped in tandem as they shuffled down the steps to the street.

A renewed burst of rage erupted among the pack of youthful participants. In the next moment, a rainstorm of rocks and projectiles pelted the synagogue. One rock hit the arched frame of the huge, stained-glass window on the front of the building. The remainder of the frame, with what stained glass still remained came crashing down on the heads of the rabbi and his wife. The mob howled with triumph as the couple became one with the flames on the window frame. In no time at all, the roof of the synagogue collapsed and came crashing down to join the smoldering rubble below.

Niska was literally a very seaworthy man. He had been on boats of one kind or another since at least 1908; not one, in other words, prone to nausea. But now he felt a bitter, abrasive fluid rise into the base of his throat. Niska had to concentrate on not letting the vomit erupt from his mouth onto the others beside him in the crowd on the sidewalk.

Niska ground his teeth tightly together in fury at the youthful violence and wanton celebration. The ferocity of his rage was fueled further when he noticed several middle-aged men in civilian clothes standing before the youth, like directors of an orchestra, urging them on. His stomach turned when he saw a woman of about forty, her face contorted into a thoroughly ugly, almost inhuman, Edvard Munch-like scowl as she yelled out to the destroyers, “Kill them! Kill them all! Bloody Christ murderers!”

As if at her beckoning, a rock flew through the air over the street from the direction of the indignant mob. It struck a young woman holding her small daughter by the hand. As she bent over to shield her daughter, she crumpled in a screaming mass onto the pavement. The orphaned child turned in circles on the one spot desperately seeking her mother. When she saw her body on the pavement, she covered her face with her hands.

Several vans with blue lights flashing and ear-splitting sirens blaring made their way onto the street. One by one firemen and police emerged from the back of the van. Niska began to hope that order would now be restored. Instead, the police laid into the defenseless Jews with their truncheons; while, exempt from the attention of the police, the rampaging mob chased and wrestled to the ground any Jews who tried to escape down the street, and beat them. Niska felt the blow of the truncheons, as though on his own skull, his own flesh.

He hadn't been particularly enamored by Jewish contacts with whom he carried on transactions in the past. If anything, they had struck him as rather shrewd and difficult to please, often imperious. But surely no one deserved such unbridled hostility and savagery as he was witnessing. As a Finn living and working in self-imposed exile in Germany for several years now, Niska felt an instinctive racial affinity to Germans, their blue eyes, their fair hair, their tireless work ethic, so familiar in that regard to his own countrymen. But he hadn't learned to understand their visceral hatred of the Jews.

As he stood helplessly on the sidewalk, he felt an unexpected and peculiar compassion for the rabbi and his wife. So, too, for the startled men and women struck by the police, the little orphan girl left screaming on the street, and the would-be escapees wrestled to the pavement and beaten to a pulp.

Some of the Hitlerjugend joined hands and formed a circle and started to dance in the light of the flames emanating from the destroyed synagogue. To what music, Niska wondered. The music of madness and hatred, he supposed, that they, but not he, could hear, but an echo of which he was beginning to discern within the chambers of his own heart towards the perpetrators.

It was a grisly, macabre, godless dance of *death*, Niska thought. The German youth sang a mocking tune, an off-key charade of the Jewish folk song, starting slowly:

*Hava nagila, hava nagila,
Hava nagila venishmeja.*

Then speeding up and bringing their hands together, they inserted

their own obscene German lyrics and cheered lustily at their own cleverness.

*Let's burn a Jew boy, let's burn a Jew girl,
Let's burn every last one of them, yay!*

Niska had not lived what one could describe as a sheltered life, not even in childhood. But he had never before experienced chaos and violence like this, not even when brother fought brother to the death in the bloodletting of the Finnish civil war after independence in 1917.

Such peach-faced, middle-class youth born with silver spoons in their mouths. Just schoolboys, really. Shouldn't they be out on the soccer pitch, or in their homes playing chess with their grandfathers? Aren't they too young, too childlike, to be chanting such hate-filled verses sated with superstition and ignorance learned from their fathers and uncles?

The mocking voices mixed with the acrid crackling of flames and the unforgettable shattering of glass. It reminded Niska of descriptions of hell he had heard from his pious Finnish Lutheran grandmother. Though he wanted in the worst way to go to his hotel room and not have to see the violence or hear the screams, he stood motionless as though the soles of his shoes were nailed to the sidewalk. His face was lit in the deviant light of the surrounding madness. His eyes were wet and hazy from the heat and smoke...Or, were they tears evoked by the lurid spectacle that kept repeating over and over in his mind, of the rabbi and his wife, crushed under the huge window frame and burning to ash to the cheers of the mob, while the youth danced? Was this a portent of a malicious future?

CHAPTER THREE

Berlin: March 20, 1940

Once Rohrbach and the two SS privates were out the door leading out of his flat, Kersten retreated to his bedroom. When he took off the silk dressing gown he was surprised to find enormous, dark splotches of perspiration underneath the two armpits of his pajamas.

It's a damn good thing I put on the dressing gown at the last second before answering the knocking at the door. I am relieved that the SS men could not see the fact that I was perspiring so copiously during the interrogation. If Rohrbach had detected any fear or anxiety in me, he would have turned the screws more tightly.

In the stillness and privacy of his bedroom he was able finally to exhale deeply. He had been in control of his breathing during the interrogation itself; a skill he had learned in his surgical training days in Helsinki. Uneven breathing by a surgeon could cause the hand on the scalpel to move ever so slightly, just enough to cut a nerve or capillary inadvertently. It could be fatal.

He plunked his rear end down on the bed. He was exhausted from the effort to maintain a non-anxious affect in front of his SS interrogators.

Kersten picked up the glass of water on the night table beside his bed. He noticed the hand holding the glass was starting to tremble almost uncontrollably. Beads of perspiration formed on his forehead and pooled in his armpits. The close-call nature of the encounter in his living room just moments earlier was beginning to register in his brain.

What was this all about, anyway? Surely, the SS would have done their homework before sending these men? It's not a classified secret that I am a Finnish citizen. What was this, then? A warning of some sort? An exercise in intimidation?

How could they have initiated their mission without my patient himself knowing about it? Very little occurs in the SS without my patient's knowledge or permission.

Or...is that it? Did my patient himself actually order this early-morning social call? For what reason? He's never given me any

indication of mistrust in me. Is he going back on his assurance to me that I will enjoy immunity from the usual spying and intimidation tactics of his organization?

When I started out in this profession years ago, I could not have imagined in my wildest fantasies that I'd end up in the private service of a man such as he. My God!

Kersten began to feel the familiar, ancient aching in the pit of his stomach. He began to rub it in an effort to chase away the discomfort.

It's so ironic now, don't you think, Felix, that your expertise in ridding your patient of his fierce stomach spasms is now causing you pains in your own gut?

He thought wistfully of his beloved Irmgaard back in The Hague, and their comfortable flat near the royal palace where he was employed. It wasn't apt to be invaded by the SS like this. He could still remember the sweet aroma of streets in The Hague. It was not just the aroma of the tulips, but of freedom.

I'm nothing but a captive here in Berlin. How did I ever allow myself to get into this damnable situation? Whatever caused me to leave behind that cheery life and exchange it for this surreal, insane existence in the midst of all this folly and madness? What were you possibly thinking, Felix?

Auguste Diehn: as much as I love you, old friend, damn you all the same for your appointment almost two years ago!

CHAPTER FOUR

Berlin: November 21, 1938

Even though Auguste Diehn was a captain of German industry, of advanced years, and one of the therapist's oldest patients and dearest friends, he had to wait at least two months for an appointment with Dr. Felix Kersten, just like everybody else. Kersten's physio-neuro therapy practice had experienced explosive growth. It was split between two countries now, Germany and the Netherlands. And there were the occasional trips to Vienna, Brussels and Rome to see patients.

The fortyish, beefy Kersten greeted Diehn, the president of the German Potassium Syndicate, in his customary warm and expansive manner. The doctor noticed at once, however, that his old friend was nervous and ill at ease.

"Auguste, take a seat, please. Are you working too much again? Ignoring my advice to get some rest? You've come for another treatment?"

"No, I am not here for myself," replied Diehn, avoiding Kersten's eyes for some reason.

"No?"

There was a silence. Kersten was curious why.

"Doctor, I have a favor to ask of you...a personal one."

"We've known each other long enough, haven't we, that you don't need to feel ashamed to ask for one?"

"Well, I'm not sure how to put it...Would you be willing to examine Himmler?"

"What? Who?"

"Himmler . . . *Heinrich* Himmler."

"*The* Heinrich Himmler? The head of the feared SS? The man with no apparent conscience? Do you realize what you are asking, Auguste?"

Kersten shook his head in disbelief. Diehn hoped earnestly that his doctor wasn't refusing.

"Let me ask again just to be sure. Am I hearing you correctly, Auguste? Heinrich Himmler? Me, be his doctor? I should be grateful, I

suppose, that you didn't ask me to treat Adolf Hitler. Are you playing some kind of joke? If you are, it's not funny in the least, Auguste."

"Yes, you heard right, Doctor. And no, this is not a joke."

Diehn bowed his head. Kersten said nothing, not knowing what to say. Silently, he studied the man's familiar gray-haired profile.

Diehn continued. "You see, Himmler has orders from Hitler himself to nationalize the potash industry. The *Führer* needs the potash so that German farmers have ample fertilizer to grow the crops to feed the *Wehrmacht* that multiplies every day, it seems."

"I don't see the connection, Auguste. What does that have to do with me? I don't know the first thing about potash."

"Doctor, if your miraculous hands work the same wonders on Himmler as they have on me, in no time he'll be very beholden to you."

"Yes? And...?"

Diehn could see that the famed doctor-therapist either wasn't catching his drift, or was deliberately not understanding something that he was finding unpleasant. Probably the latter.

"I'm asking you to speak a few well-chosen words while treating him. I am confident that you are the only man in Germany right now who can make a dent in Himmler's excruciating pain, which he is keeping a secret, by the way. Your conversing casually with Himmler on behalf of the potash producers of Germany just might convince him to go back to his *Führer* with an alternate plan to nationalizing the entire industry. Surely you see what I am getting at?"

Truth be told, Kersten, indeed, *could* see. But wasn't this an abuse of the doctor-patient relationship?

"You say, he's keeping his condition a secret? Then, Auguste, how it is that it's not a secret to you?"

"Certainly, Felix, you know that industrialists like me have, how shall I put it, information inroads within the Nazi hierarchy."

Kersten rubbed his double-chin and seemed to consider Diehn's request. Diehn knew him well enough not to rush him to a decision.

Finally, Kersten said, "Ah, no! Thank you very much. This doesn't sound like my cup of tea." The black rings that surrounded his eyes seemed to turn even darker.

"I've been able to avoid having anything to do with that insane element up to now, and I have no intention of starting with the very worst of the bunch. I hate politics and the games they play, hate them with a passion. I just want to be left in peace to be a doctor."

There was another silence, a much longer one. Diehn took up the

conversation with a visible effort to suppress his disappointment.

“I understand your hesitation, Doctor. I am sure you will agree however, when I say that I have never asked you to do anything but treat my condition. In ordinary times, that would suffice. But alas, these are not ordinary times. On the contrary, these are very extraordinary ones. Which is why I come before you with this extraordinary request.”

Kersten maintained a reflective silence. He recalled the complete confidence that Diehn had had in him at the start of his career; how Diehn had referred friends and associates to his practice, men and women who could reimburse him generously. He recalled also how Diehn had been instrumental in helping Kersten, an *Ausländer*, get the loan under the table from one of his colleagues to purchase the one blessed place on this earth where he could recharge his batteries, his delightful country estate a little north of Berlin, Hartzwalde.

On the other hand, Kersten reflected, how could he have anything to do with a man like Himmler? Wouldn't that be to take a seat in the devil's lair, a place in the warren of the beast? For his own peace of mind and serenity he had until now forbidden himself even to think about the regime of which the head of the SS was considered the most monstrous personification. The possibility offended to the core Kersten's innate Finnish sense of justice, his love of tolerance, decency and moderation that had been reinforced by his time in Holland. As he even contemplated the possibility of accepting Diehn's request, he tried to shake off the repulsion he felt in his stomach at the gross arrogance, the primitive racial superstition, the crude police-state tactics, the fanatical blind adoration of the *Führer*, Hitler's promise of easy solutions to Germany's complex problems; everything, in short, about the events and personalities in Germany of the last five years.

“Auguste, partly thanks to you, my practice has expanded almost beyond my ability to handle it all. But you know that for a decade now, I have been retained by the royal family of Holland as Queen Wilhelmina's personal therapist. I'm afraid I would have trouble squeezing Himmler into my normal schedule.”

Kersten thought this would surely discourage Diehn from pursuing the ludicrous proposition any further.

Diehn's voice was almost a whisper as he leaned over conspiratorially to Kersten and pleaded, “It would be such a great service...to me, Doctor.”

Then, resuming a normal conversation volume and raising his head, “Besides, is it not your professional duty to treat anyone who is sick?”

The room became silent. Instinctively, Kersten began to massage the area of his stomach. Although he tried to camouflage it, a grimace of discomfort came over his ruddy face. He was gripped by a nascent nausea. He recognized the source of his queasiness, and he knew it wasn't anything physical.

Immediately, Kersten's mind was borne back to a day in the spring of 1922 when he and his classmates were preparing to graduate from the medical school of Helsinki University. How proud he was that he had arrived at the threshold of a medical career. How far he had come from his humble Baltic agrarian roots. He could hear now, as though it were just yesterday, the eminent voice of the dean leading the class in the recital of the ancient Hippocratic Oath. "*Primum non nocere. First do no harm.*" He understood that within the prohibition there was an implicit command. "*Secondly, share your medical expertise and knowledge when it requested or needed.*"

Kersten had noted then how mechanically and nonchalantly some of his classmates were reciting the oath. *How is it that these future doctors consider this as merely an empty formality, like mindlessly reciting the Lord's Prayer in church, when I recite it so earnestly, solemnly even? The oath isn't a trivial string of words; it's the code by which I am pledging to practice the healing arts, the guiding principle by which I will live my life.*

"Ah, very well, then, I will consider it at least," Kersten sighed. "But with the caveat that it be only *one* session. Is that clear, Auguste? Just *one*."

CHAPTER FIVE

Berlin: November 22, 1938

It was almost 23:00 when Algot Niska finished a late-night dinner at the *Osteria Bavaria*. Given the late hour, Niska considered hailing a taxi. However, he wanted to refresh himself with a walk to his apartment hotel, even though there was still a residue of the fetid odor of the night of Nazi terror ten or so days prior. Nevertheless, the relatively brisk November air was a welcome relief from the smoke-filled restaurant.

After some forty minutes on the streets of Berlin, Niska walked through the semi-dark lobby of the apartment hotel. He took the stairs to his apartment on the fourth floor. He put the key into the lock. But before he had fully turned it to the right to unlock it, he paused. He thought he heard above him, from the direction of the ceiling, a faint sound like that of the crinkling of paper.

Probably a mouse scampering about in the attic.

But Niska wasn't fully convinced. He heard the sound again. His curiosity made him walk down the corridor to the trap door in the ceiling that led to the attic. He pulled down the wooden ladder connected to it. He climbed up two or three rungs so that he could insert his head through the opening above the level of the attic floor.

In the dim light he could make out a tiny figure, perhaps a child's stuffed animal. The figure was larger than his daughter's teddy bear, but barely bigger than that of a child. He struck a match on the rough surface of the floor of the attic. He was unprepared and shocked to see the outline of a human form. Hesitantly, he climbed the rest of the way into the attic, still holding the match. He saw the stub of a candle someone had left fortuitously on top of an old crate to his right. Before he burned his fingers on the match, he blew it out and struck another one to light the candle.

What he saw in the dim candlelight was not a drunken vagrant, however, such as the one he had discovered trespassing in the building on another occasion. This figure scampered backward on

its behind and cowered under Niska's stare. Its eyes were open as large as two silver *Reichsmarks* and emitted a look of panic and fear. The person, whoever he or she was, had found some old newspapers in the attic, apparently, and spread them out on the dusty wooden floor to make a bed. One stocking was torn, but otherwise, the figure was dressed in almost new shoes and fashionable clothes—*female* clothes, even though they were wrinkled. Part of her chest was daringly exposed to the upper part of her snow-white virgin breasts which heaved as she breathed anxiously.

The girl's shiny black hair covered her shoulders and neck like a silk scarf. Her small hands, in fists, were smudged with dirt, and her carmine-colored lips were slightly apart. From her dark hair and facial structure, Niska judged that she must be a young girl, possibly Jewish. She put her hands over her face to hide it from Niska's view.

Niska tried to calm the fearful girl by speaking to her in as soft and mild a voice as he could make it.

"You will freeze here, girl. The attic is no place for one as slight as you, and with only such dainty clothing."

Slowly, the girl lowered her small, delicate hands from her face.

"Sir, I have nowhere else to go." Her voice quavered like a child's.

"Not your home? With your mother and father?"

The girl just shook her head slowly. As if begging for pardon, she looked into Niska's eyes.

"You can't stay here. Come, my apartment is nearby."

Niska was half-surprised when she pulled herself tentatively off the floor and started to walk slowly towards him at the trap door by the flickering light of the candle.

Niska didn't usually care what others thought of him. But, he hoped, now that the girl had complied with his coaxing and descended the ladder behind him, none of his neighbors were up and about in the corridor at this late hour to see their middle-aged neighbor leading a scantily clad young girl into his flat.

A couple of minutes later they were sitting in Niska's cramped living room, the girl in an overstuffed Victorian armchair. She was trying to hide her ruined stocking with her other leg. Her fists were

still clenched on her lap. She shifted her position in the chair nervously several times.

Niska went to his tiny pantry of a kitchen and made a couple of sandwiches with the rye bread he had in the ice box, probably stale by now, he feared. There was no milk, so he poured out a couple of glasses of red wine.

She almost attacked her sandwich as though she hadn't seen one in a long time. When she noticed Niska regarding her, she blushed. She released her small hands from their clenched pose. Niska could see a network of minor scratches on them, some of which were still oozing blood. He led her to the closet-sized lavatory and handed her a clean towel.

"On the shelf there to your right you'll find some soap. And a brush if you need one," Niska said as he closed the door behind him, leaving her to her privacy.

When she had re-entered the living room and assumed her seat in the armchair, she didn't pick up the remainder of her sandwich, but sat observing Niska.

"I haven't even asked you your name. I apologize. Mine is Niska, Algot Niska."

She looked a little confused by what to her ears must have sounded like a very foreign name.

After a while, almost as if not sure she should divulge her name to this stranger, she said diffidently, "I am Hannah. Hannah Hirtschel."

"Eat, for God's sake then, Hannah Hirtschel," Niska urged. "It's for you. I can see you haven't eaten for quite some time. Make yourself at home, please. Nobody is going to disturb us here."

Hannah almost threw herself at the sandwich. Niska was caught up in pity for the girl. He stepped back into the kitchen and made a couple of more sandwiches.

"I was out for dinner this evening," Niska explained, for no apparent reason. "The food tastes good even if it's late. I'm really hungry even though I finished a large dinner barely an hour ago."

Niska hoped that casual conversation might allay her fears. It seemed to work.

"I haven't eaten for three days," she confessed.

"Such things are not rare these days," Niska said with a mouth full of food. "These are difficult times. But I am sorry you have not eaten."

She was twirling a lock of her hair absentmindedly with a

finger of her left hand. Niska sensed that she was self-conscious about being watched. He got up to brush his teeth and fetch some clean bedsheets for the girl.

When he returned and resumed his seat she looked different somehow. Suddenly, she got up out of the armchair, and with only her slightly torn blouse and her thin underwear on, she approached Niska with strange look in her eyes, distant, but with a practiced expression of tenderness and gratitude.

She knelt beside Niska's chair and whispered, "You are such a good and kind person, Sir. I cannot in any way compensate you...but if you want..."

Niska lurched back; he had no doubt what the girl intended.

"You little fool!" he said perplexedly. "What are you doing? I am old enough to be your father!"

Niska rose out of the chair and held her hard by her shoulders, pushing her slight body away from his.

"You're just a child, Hannah," he said.

He covered her all the way up to her neck with the coverlet on his spartan couch, as if to protect her from every evil thought... maybe his own.

She stepped back bewildered. Niska gathered his scattered thoughts and feelings strewn about the room. It took him a while to make sense of the sudden, unwelcome change in Hannah.

Why would a fifteen-year-old girl offer herself unbidden to a total stranger, a man well over fifty? There was a time long ago when I might have found the prospect titillating, but not now, not under these circumstances, not with this poor waif. What kind of life has she been leading?

"Now, be a nice girl and sleep well and dream only sweet dreams," he said to her awkwardly. "I'm sorry that I have no other bed to offer you. You'll need to make do with the armchair."

Hannah looked embarrassed and confused at first. Then a smile of relief and happiness spread over her face. To Niska, she looked like what she really was: a young helpless child in an evil and cruel world.

"It's much better than the hard floors of the attics I've been sleeping in."

Niska turned off the light in the living room, and exited to his own bedroom, as though he couldn't retreat there fast enough. He

said, “*Gute Nacht, Hannah.*”

The following morning, Hannah was awake in her armchair as though waiting for him to emerge from his bedroom. He laid out a small breakfast of slices of rye bread and canned fish on the scarred wooden coffee table.

“Usually, when a woman spends the night in my flat, I ask her to tell me more about herself,” Niska said with a friendly, knowing smile.

Hannah caught Niska’s drift. She had trusted him thus far, so, apparently, she felt she had nothing to lose by reciting a synopsis at least of her story.

She had been raised in a small town in the eastern part of Germany near the border with Poland. Her mother had died when she was eight years old. Suddenly, out of nowhere, her father was charged by the local SS with spying. His barber shop was confiscated and given to a gentile barber in the Aryanization program.

“My *Papa* was grateful that *Mutti* didn’t have to endure such humiliation.”

Niska shook his head slowly, remaining silent.

“*Papa* and I tried to escape to Poland. But we were apprehended at the border. *Papa* was wounded by a couple of shots by border guards on the German side. He died in the holding cell a few days later.”

Her eyes became misty as she related the story.

“And you? How did you survive?”

“I was taken to a camp. An awful camp for Polish prisoners, even though I am not Polish. It was called Ravensbrück. You’ve heard of it?”

“Yes, unfortunately I have.”

A few days after she arrived there, an SS officer approached her and whispered to her, “*Fräulein*, there is a way for you to leave from here. This is no place for you. I can tell you are German. You should be comfortable. I can arrange for you to have accommodations, good food, and warmth. You are a beautiful girl. That is good. How old are you?”

“I’m fifteen, sir,” Hannah said in a trembling voice.

“Good. From now on, let us say that you are eighteen years old. It is better. So, remember, whenever someone asks you your age, always say that you are eighteen.”

Hannah was sent to a beautiful house in the nearby village of

Furstenberg. To her, the house resembled a small hotel with individual rooms. One room on the first floor looked like a dim private dining room with a bar.

A dark, elderly lady, rather world-weary and not terribly friendly, led her to a room on the second floor. The door to her room had a number on it as did the other rooms. The corridor was covered by soft red carpet.

“This will be your room now,” the woman told Hannah. “You’ll find linens and towels in the closet. And use all the toiletries and lotions and perfumes on the counter that you like.”

Hannah sensed the woman looking her up and down as if evaluating her.

“You look awfully young. How old are you?”

Hannah remembered to say she was eighteen.

The woman didn’t look very convinced.

“Ah, I see. You also? So is everyone else in here. Of course, that is not any of my concern,” she said as she closed the door and left.

For a couple of days, Hannah was undisturbed. In the closet she found a couple of dresses, but strangely, no underwear. On the shelves were only a couple of fashionable silk camisoles, stockings with leg straps, and bras.

The next morning, she discovered that her own clothes had disappeared. She complained about the scanty wardrobe to the older woman who brought breakfast in a tray.

“Your own clothes are in the laundry,” the woman replied indifferently. “You’ll just have to be satisfied for now with what’s there in the closet.”

An hour or so later the old woman returned with two pairs of shoes for Hannah. One pair had low heels, almost like slippers, the pair she was wearing in the attic when Niska discovered her. The other pair was shiny black and had French stiletto heels. Later in the day she was given a bracelet, earrings and a couple of rings.

On the second morning, for some reason Hannah couldn’t understand, she was photographed by a very uninterested, disheveled man. The dress she wore had a low, revealing neckline, which made her look older than her fifteen years. The photographer had her pose in some of the more daring positions she had seen in some of the magazines the boys had smuggled into the schoolyard

at home. One was with her in her pajamas lying face-down on top of the bed, another a close-up of her neck and shoulders with a part of her breast exposed.

These details about her experience practically poured out of Hannah. But then suddenly, she stopped, averting her eyes from Niska, her gaze riveted to the floor of the flat. After a pause, she launched back into her narrative.

“I am embarrassed to talk about this, Sir.”

“I understand. But please, go on.”

“One night, at around 22:00, there was a knock on my door. I was just getting dressed to go to bed.”

“You have company,” the old woman announced from behind the closed door, “a *Luftwaffe* officer. For God’s sake, remember to behave politely towards him. And don’t forget that he is a captain serving our people.”

The young, handsome guest arrived in the room a short time later, dressed in a uniform consisting of a blue-grey single-breasted, open-collared jacket, white shirt and black necktie, and blue-grey trousers held up by a black belt. Most impressive to Hannah, and most intimidating, too, were the shiny black leather boots on his feet.

“He looked as proud as a peacock,” Hannah continued. “I was afraid of him, but he smiled at me in a way that disarmed my fear. I felt almost naked in my pajamas. He sat down beside me on the sofa. I moved instinctively a few centimeters closer to the armrest at the end of the sofa. Then he poured some wine into two glasses. I was also given a couple of glasses of cognac, which caused me to cough. That made the officer laugh gently.”

““You are a very attractive young lady,” the officer said to me as he moved closer and put his arm on the top of the sofa and then lowered it so that it draped my shoulders. He told me I was not old and ugly and dirty like the Polish women in the other rooms.

“He then leaned over and tried to kiss me and placed his hand roughly on my breast. I tried to resist, but he was too strong. I even threatened to scream for help if he didn’t behave himself, but the captain only laughed.

““Go ahead and try it,” he said. ‘You’ll notice that there is no help to be had.’

“Finally, the officer cursed in German and violently threw me down onto the bed.”

This hell continued for several days before Hannah finally

realized what kind of place she had been brought to. When she later became acquainted with several of the other women, she discovered that they had experienced worse, especially the Poles.

“And Jews like me,” Hannah added.

“A certain older officer became a ‘regular,’ a gray-haired retired lieutenant-colonel, he said he was. He called me, ‘*meine Rosenknöpfchen,*’ my *Little Rosebud*. He did rather strange things with me, but I wasn’t afraid of him as I was of the others. He took off his clothes, and I took off mine, just as I had learned was expected of me. But he didn’t try to touch or penetrate my private parts like the others. He couldn’t, because his small thing remained limp through the whole visit.

“I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. I had learned what to do with the other men. But this was strange, I thought.

“He just continued to look at my naked body lying on the bed while he stood up over me and tried to rub his thing. It didn’t seem to help. It seemed to take a long time for him to finish. I was afraid that the old woman would come to the door and tell me some officer or soldier was waiting and to hurry up and finish. But thankfully, the old lieutenant-colonel finally gave out a weak groan, kind of like a muffled imitation of the other men when they reach that point. Only, his hands were completely dry. Not a drop fell on the bed or the floor or my body.

“‘Thank you, *meine kleine Rosenknöpfchen,*’ he said softly as she handed me my bra and panties. None of the others ever did that. ‘I know this was probably confusing to you, not to mention very demeaning for me. But you are very dear and beautiful.’”

The old lieutenant-colonel came by her room several more times, and each time, the routine was similar. Hannah was relieved that she didn’t need to fear an unknown disease with him, just pose patiently and passively allow him to admire her naked body until he was finished. Afterwards, he was always very kind to her.

“Once, in a moment of weakness, I confided to him my real age,” Hannah confessed. “I don’t know why. But I started to regret it as soon as the words were out of my mouth.

“‘The bastards!’ he exclaimed. I was surprised and even a little afraid, because I had never seen him angry before. ‘How dare they do this?’ he asked. ‘That bloody Himmler!’

“I thought that he was confused and that he meant ‘Hitler.’ I

didn't know who Himmler was.”

“No, you heard correctly,” Niska said. “The brothels are Heinrich Himmler's doing.”

“The man just ranted on. ‘Himmler's too unmanly even to make love to his own wife. But he opens up these dens of iniquity all over the *Reich* so that his officers can have their lust satisfied. Doesn't he know there are fifteen-year-old girls in these places? The bastard!’

“I was afraid that he was unsatisfied with me and would report his displeasure to the old woman, even though I had always done as he requested. Perhaps now I would be sent to another and altogether worse place.”

The old officer, though, had grown helplessly, dementedly in love with Hannah. And what was more, the old man was angered that other men had access to her. He was protective of her. That other men visited her was an affront to his grandfatherly instinct to shield her.

“‘*Meine Rosenknöpfchen,*’ he confessed one evening to me. ‘I have been thinking about your situation. I am a man who can arrange things, you know. I have enjoyed my visits with you. But you do not belong here. My intention is to rescue you from this miserable cave.’

“This set off alarms in my mind, of course.”

Hannah did not know what the lieutenant-colonel said, or paid to the old woman to get to her to give permission for Hannah to leave the premises with him. He was a fixture at the house. Perhaps the old woman surmised that such an old man wouldn't pose a danger to the girl. But one morning, after another of their strange but tender sexual encounters, he led her to his home not far away. The old man had never harmed her. But Hannah wasn't sure if this was some kind of carefully-veiled abduction of her that would not end well.

“In his comfortable study, he showed me the photographs on top of his large piano. He pointed out his late wife. I could tell from his voice that he missed her. I felt so sorry for him.

“That evening, when the old, kind officer fell asleep on the sofa, I saw my chance to escape. I liked the old man, but he had been, after all, a German soldier in the war. I didn't know if, after he used me, he would turn me over to the SS. So, I fled the house and hid in an empty cart at the railroad station—you know, the kind of cart they use to carry mail and other cargo to the freight cars?

When I awoke the next morning, I discovered that I was on a freight train. But I had no idea of where it was going. Without knowing it, they must have loaded me onto the train with the other freight.”

“You were fortunate that whoever ‘they’ are didn’t turn you over to the police, or the SS.”

When the train halted at a station to pick up the mail in the cover of night, I jumped out of the car on the other side. I had only these flimsy clothes on. People looked at me curiously, but luckily, I didn’t run into any police or men from SS or *Wehrmacht*. One kind old lady told me where I was when I asked her. I was in Wandlitz. I walked on country roads through the darkness to Berlin.”

“You must have been exhausted from all that walking.”

“For several nights I wandered the streets of Berlin. I felt like a tramp, with no food or a place to sleep. I didn’t know what to do, where to turn. I was thoroughly drained and in despair—like an orphan, which is what I am, I suppose. I wasn’t sure I wanted to go on living. Then one evening, I happened upon the door to your building. Thankfully, someone had carelessly left it unlocked. Maybe it was even you?”

Niska’s eyes were getting misty as he listened to her report. He thought of his own daughter, Eeva, back in Finland, just a few years older than Hannah, whom his precarious legal situation prevented him from returning to Finland to see. As a seaman, he knew, of course, about brothels, that they existed, and that some women made a living working in them. But the thought of the girl before him, so much like his own daughter, seized and hoodwinked into becoming a sex slave, both angered him profoundly, and saddened him to the core.

“What will you do with me now?” she asked him, almost as a matter of course, as though she assumed that she was at the mercy of yet another man. “Give me up to the SS?” She was still twirling the lock of her hair girlishly.

Niska felt a sharp pang of disappointment in himself. The girl had no paperwork to identify her. If he tried to smuggle her into Poland, or any country, for that matter, the border guards would detect immediately from her appearance that she is a Jew. It would be pointless to try to convince them that she was his daughter, so

little did she exhibit classic Finnish features.

“I can buy you a train ticket back to your town in the east, if you like.”

“My family is gone. I don’t really have anyone there anymore.”

“Do you have others anywhere, grandparents, perhaps, or friends of the family, who might be able to take you in?”

In asking this, Niska felt a sliver of shame because he knew that given the madness of those unforgettable nights of November 9 and 10, it was quite possible, if not likely, that her grandparents or family friends had been rounded up by the SS.

“I do have a great-aunt, in Bautzen, I think, near the Polish border. But I have not spoken with her for many years. I am not sure she still lives there, or even if she is still alive.”

“Well, for now, it’s the best we have.”

Without giving them any explanation, Niska borrowed some clothing from a family on the fifth floor that he knew had a daughter about Hannah’s age. Fortunately, Hannah fit into them as if they were her own, and the two walked together to the *HauptBahnhof*. They had to be careful as they walked, needing every now and then to step over shards of glass and charred pieces of furniture that had yet to be cleared off the sidewalks after the nights of Brownshirt fury. Hannah looked apprehensive; Niska was weighed down with a load of sadness and feeling of inadequacy.

On the platform on which the train to Dresden was about to depart, Niska took some bank notes from his wallet and gave them to her so that she could purchase a meal or two. She stepped onto the train without a suitcase. As Niska waved his hand in farewell to her, he could see that she wiped a tear from her eye with a new, clean handkerchief he had given her back at his flat. Niska was overtaken by a feeling of grief. From his pants’ pocket, he pulled out his own, less clean handkerchief and blew his nose.

As he walked home, more slowly than usual, oblivious to his surroundings, Niska tried to sort through his muddled emotions and thoughts.

I feel so helpless to help her. I feel like an abject failure. What will become of her? Will she find her great aunt? Will she be received warmly? Will the great aunt even be there to begin with? Can she evade the SS or Gestapo that in time, I’m sure, will catch up to her, maybe eventually almost all Jews in Germany?

What was it that I was feeling as she was telling me her sad story? I’ve always loved smuggling, because it was a way of

helping people get what someone else in authority has used his power to say that they can't have. But, alas, I couldn't smuggle her.

Algot Niska, former whiskey runner during the years of Finnish prohibition, was now growing moderately comfortable as a smuggler out of Germany of the property of wealthy Jews. He was a thoroughly pragmatic and opportunistic man, who until that very moment was preoccupied with his own illicit business and livelihood. But that evening, this usually stoical offender of the law on the lam from the Finnish authorities, felt an unfamiliar and overpowering tug somewhere within him, or from without, some unseen benevolent power pulling him compellingly outward towards those, like Hannah, who were being victimized and beaten, yanking him irresistibly towards some new version of himself.