

a v a n t

Aachen, Germany to Montgenoux, France

November 20th-24th 1943

Greta Schneider squeezed her eyes closed so tightly it felt as if her lids were pushing her eyeballs into her skull but it was what her father had told her to do. *Close your eyes and remember your mother and her sweet smiling face because she is watching over you and me from her place next to God.* Despite only being eight years old, Greta knew enough, had seen enough to know if there was this mysterious man called God, who her father was so keen to lament, she was getting more and more annoyed at him for sitting and watching and not getting off his throne to help them when they desperately needed him to. And if he was so good and almighty then why had he taken her mother? And in such a way that Greta could not wipe the image from her head. Seeing her mother, lying in the rubble, the daisy still in her hair, her ankle twisted backwards and resting on the back of her knee as Greta had sometimes seen her dolls fall. The memory of her eyes staring so lifelessly told Greta one thing for certain, whoever was watching her, it was not her mother and most certainly not with those once-golden eyes now a dull grey.

Greta had been lying in the same position for what seemed like hours, but could have been ten minutes, so confused was she by the myriad of noises and the darkness which enveloped her. She was not used to her body being coiled, the bones of her knees pressing into her chest. She could smell the dry blood from where she had fallen, the scab of the skin scraped against the flimsy material of her undershirt. She was bitterly cold and it was all she could do to stop her teeth from chattering against each other but before they left the man had told them they must travel light and carry nothing with them.

Greta pressed her back against the wall, feeling the hardness of the frames. She spread her fingers out and traced them across the canvas, the grooves of paint feeling strange under her nails. If she was able to smile, she would have as she pressed her fingernail into the canvas and dragged it across and she could feel the paint filling them. She knew she should not do it. The man had told them the paintings were what would pay for them all to have a new life, perhaps he was right, she did not know. All she did know was there had been nothing wrong with her old life and she did not see why it had to change. Why people suddenly started running around Aachen, their faces as pale as snow, their voices so low it was almost impossible to hear what they said. She stopped and pulled her hand away from the painting. As far as she was concerned, everyone was more worried about the stupid boring paintings and getting them out of Germany. The ugly swirls of paint meant nothing to her and she did not care about their story, or where they came from. Only her story mattered to her, and how it had ended exactly one week earlier. She hoped the painting she now shared a shelf with in the back of a ramshackle van would find a home where the owner, oblivious to its origins would forever be irked by the two-inch long scratch on it.

She gulped as the van edged over the cobbles she immediately recognised as those which surrounded the Cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle and she realised the chances were she would never see it again. The thought struck her as odd. Why would she never see something again? She was after all only eight years old and her mother had told her she would live until she was a very old lady, probably older than Great Nana Inga, a thought which had horrified Greta. Great Nana Inga smelled of cabbage and pungent, sickly perfume and had the strange habit of hacking phlegm from her throat as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Greta did not know how, but she knew she would never return to the place of her birth, it was just a feeling, but she did not understand what it meant. Would she die? Her father had said they were not going on what Greta's friends called "the trains to hell," and that he was

using the painting he had inherited to take them on another journey, but this one was to a new life. It was always those words.

Pack your best dress only, dear Greta. You'll have plenty more, nicer ones when we start our new life.

Don't make a noise right now, dear Greta, but when we start our new life, you'll be able to make as much noise as you like.

At that moment, her body wrapped as tight as a parcel, all Greta could think of was jumping out of the van and running through the fields behind her house. Running and running and never stopping, never stopping until she was stopped.

She sucked in her breath as the van pulled to a halt and the driver's door creaked open, two heavy-footed boots dropping onto the gravel. Greta pressed her ear against the floor of the van as hard as she could in a desperate attempt to try to hear the words being spoken but it was no good, all she could make out were hushed and panicked voices in a heated debate. They did not sound angry, not in the way the guards with the pointed helmets sounded when they spoke, the same guards who threw their right arm into the air as if they were pushing the foul air away from their delicate noses. She held her breath, barely daring to let it out should it be heard. Another eternity seemed to pass before the door slammed shut and the old van recommenced its journey. Greta closed her eyes and hoped for sleep to take her away.

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She had been dreaming about her mother and the time they had played together in the snow-capped Zugspitze Mountains, with father watching as he lay on the picnic blanket, pretending he was too tired to play but really it was so he could watch them skipping, leaving dainty footprints in the virgin snow. But then things had changed and before Greta's eyes, her mother began to disappear, like a snowman melting in the burning sun until all that was left was a piece of string which had been tied around the neck. It was the only thing Greta had belonging to her mother now, a ring tied to a piece of string secured tightly around her neck.

It took her a moment to figure out where she was. The van was pitch black except for a tiny crack in the back doors. The air had changed, she was sure of it, as if day had turned into night, the cold air squeezing her lungs. She had no idea how long she had been asleep and she lifted her head, hoping to hear her father. After a moment of concentration as she tried to get her bearings the silence was broken by the sound of crunching gravel and she gasped. She recognised the sound of the boots because it was always the same sound, angry leather boots stamping against the ground, grinding out angry wordless instructions. *I am your master, obey me, or perish.* She knew she could make no sound. Her life depended on it.

'Zeig mir deine papiere!' A voice hissed from outside the van. If Greta had been able to move, she would have sat bolt upright. She was right. She did not need to see the owner of the voice to know who he was. WHAT he was.

'Zeig mir deine papiere!' the man repeated, spitting the words with venom.

Greta realised she did not know the name of the man who was driving them. Her father had just said he was a saintly man, taking a great risk to get them to their new life. She strained her ears but all she could hear was the laboured breath of her father. It must have been only a minute before she heard the same voice, this time speaking in an aside as if speaking to someone next to him.

'Öffnen!' The man barked. The back doors of the van shook as if they had been kicked and Greta wriggled her hand free to cover her mouth, sure she was going to scream. The doors reverberated again, the sound of grinding metal filling the air and then they burst open, filling the back

of the van with the eerie glow of street lights and a whoosh of ice-cold air. A second passed and the van shook as if suddenly filled with a heavy load. Greta did not need to see to know the heavy footsteps did not belong to their driver rather the man with the horrible voice. She could hear boxes being thrown to the ground.

‘What are you looking for?’ The driver asked, his voice desperate and urgent. ‘You’ve seen my papers, I’m just an honest businessman.’

The other man laughed, but to Greta it sounded like a growl in his throat, not the soft gay laugh of her father, even though she had not heard it for some time, she sought the memory of it often. The man said something to the driver which Greta did not comprehend but she knew enough to understand the message behind the tone. The man did not believe the driver. *WHACK. WHACK WHACK WHACK.* Greta stifled another scream. The driver cried out in pain and desperation, his cry like the wail of a wounded animal. The guard spoke again, this time his voice calm and levelled, but still with a bite to it. Greta could hear the driver scrambling about on the gravel beneath the van, his feet slapping against it as he seemed to be pulling himself away, all the time muttering the same words over and over. *Honest businessman.*

‘Filthy Französisch lügner!’

‘Nein, Geschäftsmann.’

‘Lügner, schmutziger Lügner.’

Filthy liar. Greta knew enough to understand the nasty man did not believe the driver which could only mean one thing. There would be no magical new life for her and her father. A silence descended, the only noise was the driver’s feet scraping against the gravel. Greta could hear him pull himself up.

‘I have money,’ the driver said finally, defeated.

The other man snorted as if he did not care. ‘Lots of money,’ the driver added, ‘and if you let me go, I can give you some.’

A moment passed. ‘How much?’

‘A lot, more than you can imagine,’ the driver said, ‘and remember, the Yanks and the Russians are coming and one way or another, if any of us make it out of this war, we’re going to need a new start and the only way to do so is with money.’

‘How much?’ The man asked again. Greta could hear keenness seeping into his voice.

‘Enough for us all. The Jews are rich, you know that, and there’s a lot they’ve hidden away ready for when this is all over. Enough for us all, and it’s there for the taking, they can’t claim it’s theirs after all, as your führer says, the Jews don’t really exist.’

A silence.

‘What do you want?’ The question came rapidly like bullets from a gun.

The driver answered quickly. ‘Let me go, turn the other way when I pass the border and I’ll make sure you’re rich beyond your wildest dreams.’

Another silence. ‘Do you think we’re here by accident? One of Thomas Schneider’s neighbours ratted him out, told us he was paying someone to get him and his family over the border.’ He snorted. ‘The only loyalty anyone has these days is to themselves.’

Greta felt anger growing in her. Who had told on them, and why? For the price of their freedom, no doubt. Or the price of a meal, she thought as her stomach began its hourly protest, it had been so long since she had eaten anything decent she had begun to forget how food used to taste.

The driver did not reply. It was as if he was counting, Greta thought, counting the clicks of the crickets.

The other guard finally broke the silence. 'Listen, old man, it's late and I'm tired and you're right, it's in none of our best interests to forget what's coming, but I can't let you go, not now there's been a report made.'

'If I give him to you, will you let me go?'

The man laughed raucously. 'And there we have it. Saving yourself, huh?'

'I have my own family, my loyalty has to be to them,' the driver answered. There was an edge to his voice which Greta did not understand, she had heard it before in the lies her father had told her mother. *The war won't affect us.* 'If you let me go,' the driver whispered, 'I'll pay you and then each week we do the same. There's a lot of money to be made, even the Jews who haven't hidden their money, they have paintings, jewellery, expensive stuff which might be worthless now, but one day soon they'll hit the payload and we can all benefit from it. There's enough to go around. If you take me in, you know as well as I do, once the war is over, there's going to be poverty for us all like we've never known before.'

The man laughed again. 'I like you, you disgusting French pig, you're right, I see you're a businessman to the core, the rotten core. Very well, make it worth my while, and we'll talk.'

Greta heard the driver scrabbling to his feet. 'Here,' he said, 'and that's only the start.' Greta frowned, what had the driver just handed the guard? Money?

The other man let out an impressed whistle. 'That's a lot of money old man, a LOT of money.' He stopped as if wrestling with a thought. 'Okay, give me Schneider and his family and I'll say you got away in the commotion.'

'Merci,' the driver responded, relief evident in his voice, 'but I don't know what you're talking about, there was no family, only Schneider. He told me his wife and daughter were killed in the bombing and that's why he wanted to get away, to forget them and the place they died. I know nothing about any family or else I would have charged him more than the price of a measly painting.'

The Guard did not respond immediately. 'Okay, where is he?' His tone reminded Greta of when she had told her mother a white lie and she could tell by her mother's reaction she was not sure, but she wanted to believe Greta to be telling the truth.

A moment later Greta heard the two men clambering into the van. She felt the panic beginning to consume her and was sure they would be able to see her rapid breathing under the flimsy blanket at the back of the van covering her. She wanted to scream, she wanted to jump up but she could not move, no matter how much she wanted to. It was as if her mother, her father, were both whispering frantically into her ears. *Don't move, angel girl, just lay still and be quiet.*

A second later Greta felt a pair of feet pressing against her blanket and then the dull thud of her father being pulled from his hiding place on the shelf above her.

'Ah, there we have our filthy coward,' the man said, the triumph evident in his voice. 'You have your deal, businessman, and I'll see you this time next week, but you'd better make it worth my while if you know what's good for you, you understand? I won't take a risk for Jewish pond scum such as you.'

'Of course,' the driver replied. *But you'll happily steal our money and possessions from us,* Greta thought.

The man chuckled. Greta could tell he had moved away from the driver and she could hear what sounded like something heavy being dragged across the gravel. 'Come with me coward, we have a special place where we deal with your sort!' The man said.

Greta thought she had never hated anything as much as she did the man's voice. She knew she would never see him but would never forget him for as long as she lived. It was all she could do to stop herself from screaming when she heard her father's voice.

Wieder zusammen. Together again.

The words he had said to her over and over again after her mother had died, trying his best to assure her they would all be together again one day soon. She wanted to run to him but she could not such was her fear and the unseen force pressing itself against her chest, forbidding her to move. It was only when the doors slammed shut did she allow a stifled scream to overtake her fisted mouth. She jumped as the engine roared into life once more and the rickety old van pulled away. Through the darkness, Greta could picture her father being led away by the soldiers, and somehow, in a way she did not understand, she knew he was smiling.

‘I have my own family to think of,’ the driver called out from the front of the van. His voice reminded her of her schoolteacher when forced to read the Nazi Propaganda leaflets in class. ‘Your father would have wanted me to do that, he DID want me to do that. The last thing he said to me was to make sure you got out of Germany in one piece, no matter what the price. And I’m sorry, but I had no choice because neither of us is dying today, my darling. You’re alive, and that’s what your parents would have wanted, and you can hate me as much as you like, but you know it’s the truth. You are alive.’

Alive. Greta thought to herself. Alive was the last thing she felt at that moment and she was not sure she ever would again.

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The moonlight sliced through the trees lining the Beaupain vineyard, illuminating the man’s forearm, the numbers appearing like a shadow in the flickering light. 4544564. His lips moved slowly as he silently spoke the words as if they belonged to an ancient prayer. 4544564. His name. This was his name now. He may have been born Gael Cohan in another lifetime, and those around him may still use it to address him, but in his heart he was now 45445564 and it was who he would be until the day he died. Not that what he did now could be described as anything close to living. He had stopped living in the real sense of the word when he and his family had been dragged by their ankles and thrown into the hold of a rotten, stinking cargo ship. They did not know where they were going but it did not really matter because they knew even if they were one of the lucky ones to come back, they would be forever changed.

He stopped, his heart pounding against his chest, beating an angry protest so loud he felt sure anybody near would be able to hear it. He was instantly transported back to the night of his escape, when he was sure he would be caught, that what was left of his frail body would fail him at the final furlong. It had not. He emerged half a man, dead in more ways than one, but alive enough to know he owed it to those corpses he was forced to step over to move ahead. To live the life they could not. At first, he had not known how to do it, such was the bottomless hell his soul had become, his brain a kaleidoscope of flashes of memories, stabbing at him, dragging him further into his hell. All the time, the last words of his father ringing in his ears.

You have a chance to live, go and do not look back because I am already gone, go back to the place of the Seven Dials and take the key. Find what is ours, all of ours, and if need be, snatch it back with the ruthlessness in which it was taken. They can have our bodies but they cannot have our heritage. We will not be erased.

Gael had not understood his father’s words, he had after all only been twenty years old when the war had crashed into his life, obliterating the landscape of his ordered routine as if he had awoken one morning in the same bed but on a different planet. Everything appeared the same but everything was different, especially the scent of the air.

He drew the old van to a halt and he thought it sounded relieved to be resting. He climbed out of the cab, stretching his back and yawning. It felt good to be back, albeit for a short time. The war had taught him many things but one of the most important was the preciousness of time.

‘Come out little Greta, don’t be scared, you are safe now,’ he called over his shoulder. ‘Come and see the beautiful French sun in your new home. Welcome to Montgenoux, you’re going to be happy here, we all are.’