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Historical Note

Nazi Germany invaded the neutral Netherlands on 10 May 1940, destroying much of the historic city of Rotterdam in a blitzkrieg attack, and took power five days later. The fanatically anti-Semitic Austrian Arthur Seyss-Inquart, who had colluded with Adolf Hitler in the Anschluss and Kristallnacht in 1938, was then appointed Reichskommissar (Reich commissioner) of the Netherlands, setting in motion the terror to come.

Anne Frank is the most famous victim of the Dutch Holocaust. Her story – resisting, hiding, betrayal, murder – was not unusual. More Jews were killed in the Netherlands than in any other Nazi-occupied European country: an estimated 75 per cent (approximately 102,000 individuals) did not survive the war. To explain these numbers, survivors and historians have argued that the flat, densely populated geography of the Netherlands made it a difficult place in which to hide; there were no vast forests or mountain ranges into which one might disappear. Another factor in the Dutch experience might have been the relatively slow implementation of anti-Jewish measures by the Nazis in the Netherlands, which delayed the development of the Resistance movement.

Yet the Netherlands was also the site of the remarkable February strike of 1941, the first and only mass protest by non-Jews against anti-Semitic Nazi policies in Europe. Organized by the Dutch Communist Party, approximately three hundred thousand Dutch citizens mounted a huge nationwide general strike and demonstrations for three days, until

it was violently put down by the Nazi occupiers and dozens of the movement's organizers were killed.

As the war went on, Dutch citizens engaged in forms of passive resistance such as displaying the national colour, orange; reading contraband Resistance newspapers; and listening to Radio Oranje, the London-based radio programmes of the exiled Dutch government. Among the general population of the Netherlands, approximately 5 per cent are estimated to have openly collaborated with the Nazis. It is estimated that another 5 per cent of the Dutch population participated in active resistance by sheltering Jews, spying on the Germans for the Allies, or taking up arms in direct confrontation with the Nazi occupiers. Of these armed resisters, only a few were women.

Prologue

1945

Amstelveenseweg Prison, Amsterdam

You can walk right past your fate your whole life without seeing it, but prisons are inconspicuous by design. The Amstelveenseweg prison occupies an entire city block, hewn out of slabs of pitted grey stone like something built for a pharaoh. I must have seen the building a thousand times on my way to the university. Yet none of this is familiar.

As I'm escorted into the central atrium, the air cools, the acoustics sharpen. Low whispers echo off soaring steel beams. If there are male captives here, I don't see them. Instead, women of all ages, from lanky teenagers to the hunched and elderly, are grouped by twos and threes in their cells, talking or praying, trying to sleep.

Heads snap up when I pass by, and I feel their eyes on me from behind. That's when the murmurs begin. The guards on either side of me tighten their grip, greedy fingers fanged around my upper arms.

'Mach,' the guard says. Keep going.

We do, but the whispering slips past us like an incoming fog, rushing ahead into the hundreds of tiny, cold cells stacked four storeys high. With each step I take, the sound grows stronger, thicker, louder.

The shuffle of women moving to the bars of their cells to watch. The clang of a shaken cell door, metal banging on

metal. Something is growing. Somewhere high above me I hear clapping . . .

‘Ruhe!’ a guard above us says. Silence.

There is silence, for a moment. Then, across the atrium on another floor, two inspired souls let out a low whoop. The fog unfurls itself everywhere, swirling around us in the quietest of uproars, a floating, growing mist of righteousness. The sound of hope. Even here, in this place.

By the time I reach the end of the walkway, the women are greeting me by name.

Hannie, Hannie. Het meisje met het rode haar. Hannie Schaft.

The Girl with Red Hair. Hannie.

I don’t acknowledge them.

When I pass the last cell, I pause to look inside. An older woman with deep-socketed eyes and long, uncombed hair rests on a cot, one knobby shoulder against the cell’s cold wall for support. Her skin is ashen, and with her eyes closed she looks dead. They slowly open.

She sees me. I see her. Somehow, this corpse lifts her claw of a trembling hand. I’ve never met her, but I know her.

Too weak to stand, she raises one bony fist in salute.

‘Verzet!’ she whispers.

Resist.

I intend to.

PART ONE

OZO

1940—1943

Amsterdam

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I

Autumn 1940

I wasn't always an only child.

Sitting on the chipped sink before me, the silver bird waits, frozen in flight, a silhouette like a bomber plane with two wings outstretched, tail swirling into a flirtatious spiral. A sparrow. I'd tried it on the last time I went to a music concert. Months ago.

It was Annie's pin, of course. Father gave it to her after the real sparrow flew away. I was young, about four at the time, so Annie was nine. It had been after midnight, and I was asleep when Annie poked me in the arm.

'Johanna, look.' Holding a candle in one hand, she pointed with the other to the floor beside the bed we shared. There stood a small brown-and-grey bird, his head cocked to look at us as if listening to Annie's words. He peeped. I gasped and Annie threw her hand across me. 'Shh!'

'Let him fly out of the window,' I said.

'I tried,' she said. 'But he flew right back in.'

I didn't believe her. Peering over my sister's shoulder, I watched the ball of fluff bob and strut, his tiny claws a whisper on the floorboards. He finally fluttered up to the open window and flung himself outside. 'See?' I said. 'He's gone.'

But half a second later the bird was back at the window, flapping against the glass in a zigzag panic before slipping inside, landing, then hopping to his chosen spot on the floor beside our bed. He peeped at us again.

‘What do we do with him?’ I asked.

‘We keep him,’ Annie said. Annie always knew the answer.

We did keep him, for a while. When he finally flew away for good, Father gave Annie the silver bird pin, a hand-me-down from our oma. I was jealous, but it made sense: Annie was sparrow-like in her energy, her spark, her curiosity. They said Oma had been like that, too. A few months later, Father gave me my own pin: a small silver fox. It was brand-new.

‘Mijn kleine vos,’ he said, ‘for you.’ My little fox.

‘But I didn’t find a fox,’ I said, confused. ‘Annie found a bird.’

He laughed. ‘Your red hair, silly.’ He picked me up and buried his face in my curls.

It was the first time I understood that there was a difference between who I knew I was, on the inside, and who other people thought I must be.

Just pin the damn thing on. I snatched the sparrow from the edge of the sink and poked its pin through the double-ply wool of my coat’s lapel, instantly piercing my thumb on the other side. ‘Damn it.’

‘This is why they warn innocent young girls about the evil big city,’ said Nellie. ‘She’s swearing like a pirate already.’ She and Eva tumbled through the door of the attic apartment we shared, laughing.

‘Damn it, damn it.’ I’d tried to remove the brooch with my bleeding thumb and now the camel-coloured wool was stained. I thrust it under the tap.

‘Here, let me,’ said Eva, the mother of our group. The three of us had gone through school together in Haarlem, though we hadn’t been close. They’d picked me because they knew me: the shy girl who did as much extra credit work as the teacher would give her; the girl who wore two sweaters

on a spring day because her mother was sure she'd die of the common cold. I wasn't the type to cause trouble.

'My, where did this come from?' Nellie held up the pin, glinting in the low light. 'It's pretty.'

'My sister,' I said, grabbing it back. 'Thanks, I've got to get going, I'm late.'

'Sorry,' said Nellie.

'It's fine, I'm just late,' I said, already out on the landing and heading down the narrow stairs. My cheeks flamed and my lashes were wet. Annie had been dead thirteen years now. Stupid sparrow.

I was an expert at being nobody. I'd practised it for years. So that evening I took my place in the university's grand ballroom in the spot I always felt safest: the back of the room. I made sure to take a glass of seltzer when it was offered to me, to have something to do with my hands. I sipped it while the room filled with university students, their conversations humming around me. The girls on the entertainment committee of the AVSV, the Amsterdam Female Student Association, flocked by the entrance with their bright dresses and musical voices. They welcomed everyone inside, especially the boys, whose arms and shoulders they touched as they talked. Sometimes they even hugged the boys and kissed them on the cheek. What did it feel like to be so relaxed with boys? Was I supposed to call them men? They seemed so boyish.

'Scuse me,' said one now, a male student backing into me as he searched for his companions.

'Excuse you,' I agreed. Like baby giants, these young men, trampling on the world around them.

'Can I have a light?'

I flinched, annoyed. But it was a young woman about my age.

‘Didn’t mean to scare you,’ she said.

She was taller than me by several inches, which made her about five foot seven, but her presence was so grand she seemed even taller. Glossy brown-black hair fell to her bare shoulders in waves, the midnight darkness of her hair contrasting with the pale blue sky of her crinoline party dress. Her eyes were amber, with long, curled lashes and a surprisingly innocent gaze. Her lips were painted a tropical coral pink. She looked like a movie star. With my beige skirt and plain white blouse, I was surprised she’d even noticed me. She kept smiling. She blinked.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I don’t have one.’ I really was sorry because I didn’t want her to walk away yet. I’d tried smoking; it made me cough. But now I made a mental note to try again. It might make moments like this easier.

‘What, a light?’ she said. ‘Or a cigarette?’

‘Either,’ I said, then corrected myself: ‘Neither.’

She laughed, a chiming giggle that was friendly, not mean. ‘Philine! Over here.’ She waved at another dark-haired girl weaving her way through the crowd. This new girl, Philine, was a bit taller than me and slightly less of a spectacle than her friend. She was pretty, but in a more approachable way. Brown hair, brown eyes, a relaxed smile. Her dress looked as if it had been taken in and let out a few times at the hem, following the fashion. Mine had, too. Like her friend, Philine carried herself with a natural confidence. I could picture both of them on a movie screen. I, on the other hand, might be eligible to audition for the heroine’s plain but intelligent friend. The sensible one.

‘Why are you hiding back here, Sonja?’ Philine asked her friend. ‘Trying to escape your suitors?’

‘Something like that,’ Sonja said. ‘I thought members of the AVSV were supposed to look out for each other, but this

one won't give me a light.' She winked at me. My face flamed with embarrassment. I was twenty; I should have learned how to smoke by now.

Philine smiled at me. 'I'm Philine. What's your name?'

'Hannie,' I said, shocking myself. Everyone had always called me Johanna or Jo, but I had been contemplating giving myself a new identity when I started at the University of Amsterdam a year earlier. I hadn't actually tried it until now. The name seemed pretentious. Too bold. And I wasn't sure I'd really earned the right to think of myself as a different person.

'Hannie,' she said, accepting my name without a blink. Like anyone would. Mother always said I thought too much.

Philine shook my hand. 'And you've already met Princess Sonja.' My eyes widened. 'She's not a real princess,' Philine said, smiling and still clasping my hand.

'Well, I am related to the Habsburgs on my mother's side,' said Sonja with a hint of pride.

'I'll believe it when you marry a prince,' said Philine. 'What about you? Are you a princess? Or just a normal boring law student like us?'

I beamed back at them. They were so smart and pretty and bursting with energy, and I was desperate to keep talking to them. I'd hoped to make more friends at university than I had at school, but I was making the same mistakes all over again, turning down invitations for coffee by claiming I had too much homework to do. I didn't have more than anybody else, but the thought of socializing with strangers made my palms sweat. They were damp now. I was only at this party because I'd made a vow earlier in the week to go and stay for at least thirty minutes. There were eight more to go.

'Just a boring law student,' I said, feeling a bit more relaxed in the sunny presence of these two. How novel. 'I'm from Haarlem.'

‘Lovely,’ said Philine.

‘Never been,’ said Sonja.

‘Sonja!’ said Philine.

‘What?’

‘You’ve been to Paris and Rome, but you’ve never been to Haarlem? It’s ten miles away.’

‘Well, Paris has the Louvre and Rome has the Colosseum. What does Haarlem have?’

‘Sonja!’ Philine slapped her on the hand.

‘Sorry, sorry,’ Sonja said, turning to me. ‘I’m sure it’s lovely. I’ll go this weekend.’

‘No, you won’t.’ Philine turned to me, too. ‘You can see why we call her Princess.’

‘Princess?’ a deep voice interrupted our circle as a tall young blond man in a pressed navy suit approached us. ‘Sonja? Here you are. I’ve been looking for you.’

Hair smoothly groomed, a confident smile, he was the kind of handsome that made me nervous. Too good-looking. Too sure of himself. I avoided men like him because how would I ever speak to them? Fortunately, in Sonja’s presence, Philine and I seemed to be invisible.

‘Piet!’ Sonja cried, draping her elegant arms around him in the same casual yet flirty hug the entertainment committee girls had perfected. She looked so natural. ‘How have you been?’

Piet’s square jaw softened into a broad smile, relaxed and happy like a boy watching his birthday cake arrive. ‘I waited for you at the library yesterday,’ he said.

‘Did you?’ Sonja whispered something into his ear, and his eyes went wide with delight. I tried to imagine what one could say to get that effect but came up with nothing. She pulled herself away from his arms and introduced us. ‘Piet, you know Philine.’

He nodded and took Philine's hand and kissed it with exaggerated formality. She curtsied, playing along.

'And this is our friend Hannah.'

'Hannie,' Philine corrected her.

'Hannie.' Piet reached for my hand and I jerked it back, afraid he would kiss it, too. He looked abashed.

'Sorry,' he said, checking to see if he'd offended Sonja.

'No, I am,' I said, embarrassed and irritated at myself.

'What have you done to the poor girl?' Sonja said, teasing him. I knew it was all a joke, yet I felt a stab of gratification, watching her defend me. 'Do you know, Piet, we were just about to leave,' Sonja said. 'But I'm so glad I saw you before we did.' She kissed him on the cheek, leaving a perfect pink rosebud, and then grabbed one of Philine's hands and one of mine. 'We have to get Hannie home,' she said, pulling us toward the exit. 'She's got a big day tomorrow. She's being honoured by the queen.'

Piet's confidence faded. 'But the dance just started,' he said.

'I know, but . . .' Sonja skipped faster, as if pulled by gravity toward the door against her will. 'It's the queen.' She blew him a kiss and dragged us past the AVSV girls ringing the doorway, who stared at her as she left, not entirely sorry to see this starlet go.

'Coats!' said Philine, turning and pulling us with her with a crack-of-the-whip effect. Sonja shrieked and I went sliding across the tiled floor to the coat check. We scurried out of the door and to the courtyard and finally stopped, laughing at our silly adventure.

'Who was that?' Philine said.

Sonja rolled her eyes. 'Pieter Hauer. I've been avoiding him for weeks.'

'He seems nice,' said Philine. 'And good-looking.'

Sonja looked at me. ‘What did you think?’

I tried to think of a clever thing to say about her suitor but failed. It was easier to just tell the truth. ‘I didn’t like him much.’

‘Ha!’ Sonja hugged me. ‘I knew you were a good one,’ she said. ‘Even if you won’t give me a light.’

‘What’s that?’ Philine watched me fussing with my coat. I’d pinned Annie’s brooch on top. ‘Pretty,’ she said, leaning in. ‘Is it a starling?’

‘A sparrow,’ I said.

‘Just like you,’ said Sonja with a generous smile, ‘sweet and plucky. See, this is what I was saying the other day,’ she said to Philine. ‘I’m so bored by these social mixers. We need to expand our circle. I was just saying that! And then Hannie appeared. Like a little sparrow.’

I stood between them, mute with shock but encouraged. Sonja touched a lock of my hair, petting me. ‘I would die for hair like this.’

‘This?’ I put my hand to my head and pulled a strand of my bright red hair straight. It bounced back into a curl when I let it go. My father’s *kleine vos* – and my curse. Just ask any of the kids who teased me about the colour growing up.

‘Remember when you peroxidized your hair?’ said Philine to Sonja with a grimace.

‘Ugh, cockroach brown. But this,’ Sonja said, rearranging one of my ringlets so it fell across one eye, ‘you have to be born with it. It’s your glory.’

I’d received more compliments in the past ten minutes than in the previous twenty years of my life, or at least it felt that way. I always blushed easily, and now my face was bright pink with embarrassment. And happiness.

‘Let’s go to your house and listen to records,’ Philine said to Sonja.

‘Don’t believe her,’ said Sonja, dropping her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. ‘We go to my house to tune in to Radio Oranje and drink wine.’

Me, go with them, two glamorous big-city girls listening to Resistance radio from London? I thought Nellie and I were the only students who regularly tuned in for our exiled queen’s nightly update. And drinking?

I wasn’t sure how it happened, but these girls were interested in me. They didn’t know I was a timid little fox who spent her nights alone, thinking and dreaming. They thought I was a sparrow, bold and ‘plucky’. Best of all, to them I was simply Hannie.

And thanks to Sonja and Philine, all those things became true.

Winter 1941

I might never have joined the Resistance if I hadn't got my period that Tuesday morning. Waking up, I saw a rusty wash of blood on my sheets.

I had my own nook of our tiny attic apartment, which was just one room cleverly arranged, with slanted ceilings like my childhood bedroom back in Haarlem. Nellie's and Eva's beds took up the two far corners of the room; mine was squeezed into an alcove by the fireplace. What Holland lacked in mountains, we made up for in tall, narrow buildings. We were constantly fashioning two or three rooms out of one, finding free space where, technically, none existed. As a country we prided ourselves on practical solutions, a small but tough nation of no-nonsense people who knew that the success of a tiny, crowded kingdom depended on good manners and respect for the rules.

'Morning,' Nellie said, leaning over the cold-water sink to check her face in the mirror. Blond hair, blue eyes, a classic Dutch beauty, just like Eva. The kind I'd always wanted to be.

'Ugh,' I said, 'this stupid sanitary belt,' twisting at the waist to fasten the thing back together with steel pins. Like most girls I knew, I used a belt my mother had made for me, and it was now falling apart without her here to repair it. I'd refused to learn to sew, a rare expression of rebellion for me. But I didn't want to get stuck mending things in my spare time, like my mother did.

‘You can probably get a better one from the place where my aunt is volunteering,’ Nellie said. ‘They have the best stuff. Elastic belts, Kotex, all the modern things.’

‘They do?’ I stood up and looked down at my bedsheets. Like a murder scene. ‘And they just let you have them?’

‘I think so,’ she said. ‘They have piles of stuff.’ She gathered her coat and bag, preparing to leave.

I felt the shabby sanitary belt hanging from my hips underneath my ruined nightgown. ‘Can I get the address?’

Although I was still attending law school, nothing I was being taught about justice seemed to apply to the quickly changing world outside. I was born in 1920, two years after the War to End All Wars. Nobody imagined there would be a second one. And when Germany invaded, I wanted to fight or at least do something to help. But what could I do? The tiny Dutch military had disbanded after the invasion, and there were no female soldiers, anyway. Flee the country? I wouldn’t abandon my home. I wanted to stay and do . . . something. I’d walked over to the office of the refugee alliance in search of a better sanitary belt and ended up volunteering twice a week.

The alliance was staffed by a few politically active older women around my mother’s age, under the leadership of our formidable overseer, Nurse Dekker, who provided access to hospital medical supplies. These women had been volunteering on behalf of refugees – mostly Polish and German Jews fleeing the Nazis – since the early days of the Spanish Civil War. It wasn’t dramatic, just folding linens and packing emergency parcels for needy families, but it was helpful. Something worth doing.

It also gave me another way to help my new friends Sonja and Philine. Just a few weeks after I met them, all Jewish

students, staff and professors were expelled from public schools, including the University of Amsterdam. I made myself useful by attending classes in the morning and repeating the lessons back to Sonja and Philine in the afternoon. I appeared at one of our study sessions with a whole box of the latest women's sanitary products, extras for Sonja and Philine, and it was done. Nothing cements female friendship like commiserating over bloodstains.

'Nurse Dekker said we're going to need twice as many care packages now,' I said as we walked through Sonja's neighbourhood one afternoon. It had been eight months since the German invasion and two months since I'd first met the girls.

'They're getting their money's worth out of you,' said Sonja. When I'd started, the volunteer work had seemed quaint, sitting at long wooden tables packing toiletries, shaving kits, and potted meat into neat bundles. The kind of thing I'd done with my mother for church projects when I was growing up. But there was a sense of urgency lately, and the pace of work increased by the day.

'Where are they sending all those care packages?' asked Philine as we navigated through the afternoon shoppers on the pavement.

'Westerbork, mostly,' I said. Westerbork was a camp with barracks and a train depot about a hundred miles northeast of Amsterdam, constructed before the war to house Jewish refugees already fleeing Germany. I'd heard rumours the Nazis were going to transform it into a site to imprison Dutch Jews, but that seemed dramatic. You heard all kinds of whispers about what might happen to Jews, to Gypsies, or to anyone working on their behalf, but this was the Netherlands, home to Erasmus and Spinoza and centuries of religious tolerance. I tried to dismiss any worries. Just as I'd dismissed the possibility of a second world war.

‘Why are these tables so crowded?’ Sonja said. We’d planned to stop for a coffee, but Sonja was right: every café we passed was packed with people. We were used to seeing the streets flooded with German soldiers. The young ones in their peaked caps and short jackets were the friendliest, no doubt happy to get a posting in delightful, defenseless Amsterdam.

‘Disgusting,’ said Philine in a low voice as we noticed a throng of soldiers across the street. They tossed brightly wrapped German candies to a group of schoolchildren. The kids screamed, thrilled and fearful as they snatched up the rare treats.

‘So friendly in their hideous uniforms,’ said Sonja.

‘Feldgrau,’ I spat the word out as if it left a bad taste in my mouth, which it did. Field grey. The basic colour of most of the German troops, a nauseating greenish grey that had silently become part of the Amsterdam landscape, draped across their bodies, their trucks, their military checkpoints.

‘It’s barely a colour,’ said Philine. ‘Like the sole of a shoe.’

‘The underside of a sofa,’ said Sonja.

‘Or the linoleum they use in insane asylums,’ I said.

‘Yes!’ said Sonja, laughing.

‘Hallo!’ a soldier shouted, waving at Sonja.

‘Ignore them,’ said Philine.

‘Let’s find somewhere to sit down,’ said Sonja, ever practised at evading unwanted male attention. We rounded the corner, expecting to slip into one of several cafés in the square, and stopped cold. The small plaza had been taken over by a portable bandstand, a raised stage with a canvas roof under which a brass band of perhaps two dozen musicians sat in front of black music stands, each in uniform, holding his instrument. A conductor, also in uniform, tapped a baton to get the musicians’ attention.

A banner spread across the front of the stage read *Musikkorps der Ordnungspolizei*.

‘The Orpo has a band?’

‘Where do you learn this stuff?’ asked Philine, still trying to decipher all the letters on the banner.

‘The refugee alliance,’ I answered. The women there knew everything.

We lingered at the edge of the square, watching the musicians prepare. The band was crowded onto a small stage, but the rest of the plaza was only sparsely populated, with a group of German soldiers and commanders in flashy uniforms crowded near the front of the square and a few scattered groups of curious Dutch citizens, mostly teenagers and children, dispersed farther back. The square’s many cafés had been cleared away.

So that’s why the side streets were so full. The spectacle offended me to the marrow: the idea that the Germans could devote time and resources to something as useless as this police band, shipping all those instruments and music stands and even sheet music in trains from Berlin, forcing their poisoned culture on us even as they stole the country from beneath our feet. They could at least ship in some food. Shelves in the shops were already bare.

‘At least they’re a nicer colour,’ said Sonja. The Orpo wore uniforms of a lighter, but still institutional, green-grey.

‘Don’t be fooled,’ I said. ‘They’re still SS.’ It had taken only a few weeks after the initial invasion to learn the abbreviations for the absurdly complicated Nazi regiments. The Ordnungspolizei were the Orpo, the everyday cops; the dreaded Schutzstaffel were the SS, who filled a role somewhere between street police and back-alley thugs, and the Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers-SS were the SD, the intelligence service of the SS – the spies. It helped that I’d

taken German in school. As I spoke, the conductor made a pronouncement in German, and the musicians began to play. The brassy blare of a military march filled the plaza with a defiantly upbeat oompah-pah. ‘Ugh,’ said Sonja, who preferred jazz on her phonograph at home.

‘What else did you hear about Westerbork?’ asked Philine in a lower voice, leaning into me to be heard over the music.

‘Dekker said everything is being directed there now. The Germans showed up at her hospital and confiscated all the files on the patients, doctors, staff, everyone. They said they needed them to reorganize the relief efforts.’

‘Files?’ asked Philine. ‘What files?’

‘Just identification forms, I think. Name, address, where you work, et cetera. As if the Germans need their own system to replace ours.’ Nobody could beat the Dutch when it came to the orderly and efficient function of government; in the Netherlands, the civil service was more powerful than the army. ‘It’s a gross invasion of privacy,’ I continued in my stage whisper to Philine, confident in my legal analysis, ‘one I’m sure is illegal under the 1929 Geneva Conventions.’

‘They’re singling out the Jews,’ Philine said softly, staring down at the cobblestones. I could barely hear her.

‘What?’ I said. ‘No, they wanted all the files. Not just the Jewish ones.’ Sonja and Philine looked at me, incredulous. It took a second; then I felt the gulf of circumstance give way between us for the first time. I could see it in their faces: if the Germans ever wanted to segregate the hospital’s staff and patients by religious or ethnic identification, the forms would make it simple to do so. That’s how they’d started in Germany, before the war even began. I knew that. The shame of my stupidity made it difficult to look Philine and Sonja in the eye. ‘Oh,’ I said. From the stage, the song lifted in a crescendo and the mood of the German officials in the audience

rose with it. We each fell quiet, staring blankly as the band played on.

When I'd first met Sonja and Philine a few months earlier, I had no idea they were anything but typical Dutch girls like myself. Which they were. Once I learned they were Jewish, it was like learning they were Catholic: it didn't matter. My mother was the pious daughter of a Protestant minister while my father was a secular socialist; that was never a problem for the two of them as a couple. Nobody I knew was particularly religious, apart from attending church on the big holidays. I didn't consciously know many Jews growing up in middle-class Haarlem, though they surely existed. They were, no doubt, much like Philine and Sonja, raised in nominally Jewish households but not especially observant. Philine's and Sonja's families had been in the Netherlands for hundreds of years, which was typical of most Dutch Jews. The very reason refugees from fascism were drawn to the Netherlands was because we were known as much for our religious tolerance as for our windmills and wooden clogs.

When the Nazis invaded, they'd made a big show of how much they loved us, too, their little Dutch brothers and sisters in the Tausendjähriges Reich, the vision of the next thousand years of Nazi rule promised by Adolf Hitler. The Germans didn't want to destroy the Netherlands, they insisted; they wanted to save it. Embrace us. It was pure propaganda. But apart from blitzing the city of Rotterdam into dust on that first day of invasion, they had generally left the Dutch people alone. Even the Jews. The Germans were here, but they were not building ghettos or bombing the countryside. It seemed as if things might proceed differently in the Netherlands from how they had in Germany and Austria. Yet as each day passed, the sour tang of Nazism began

to spread into every corner of daily life. We weren't the Nazis' siblings, and they had no plans to go easy on us.

I'd sat through innumerable arguments at home over the past decade listening to my parents fret about the rise of Mussolini, Franco and Hitler. Older, bolder Annie liked to be a part of those adult conversations. I engaged by staying quiet and listening. As a ten-year-old, I often wished they would change the subject to the things I imagined normal families talked about, like the weather. Now I was grateful for those nightly debates; at least I had a sense of what we might be facing. My parents spoke of defiance and the brave sacrifices of the partisans in Italy and Spain. We all knew how those conflicts ended. Mussolini and Franco were still in power, united now in Hitler's Axis. I was less naïve than some of my fellow twenty-year-olds, those whose families discussed the weather. But sneaking a glance at the girls who had quickly become my best friends, the first ones I'd had since Annie died, I knew I had much more to learn. We stood together at the corner of the plaza farthest from the band, listening as the music resolved itself in the final flourish and a tuba boomed. Sonja flinched. As horrible as the occupation was for me, it was a thousand times worse for Sonja and Philine. They were afraid of things I hadn't even considered.

The Germans in front clapped and shouted. The rest of the crowd stayed silent. Sonja surveyed the scene. 'Things are getting worse,' she whispered. I couldn't tell if she'd meant to say it out loud.

'Let's go,' said Philine, taking Sonja's hand. We walked across the back of the square and turned down a smaller street, this one also absorbing the crowds of everyday people who would otherwise be in the plaza.

'I've been trying to talk to my father about leaving, but

he's so stubborn,' Philine said as we walked. 'He says, "As long as we follow the law, we won't get in trouble." And since he's "never broken a law in his life" . . .' She frowned.

'Ten years ago, my father persuaded my German aunts and uncles to come to Amsterdam for safety,' Sonja said, shaking her head. 'Now they don't know what to do. My parents and their friends talk about it, but so far, only the Baums have actually left. My mother said they were overreacting.'

Philine and Sonja rarely spoke this frankly in front of me, though they must have been thinking about these questions constantly. Rising shame pinked my cheeks. I wanted them to be able to confide in me. Suddenly their trust seemed like the most important thing in the world.

'Where did they go?' I asked. 'The Baums?'

'America,' said Sonja. 'Apparently they have cousins in . . . Detroit? Wherever that is.'

The tone of our conversation changed. I had the feeling we were no longer stopping at a café. 'Turn here,' said Philine. We turned down a quieter street and all music died behind us, save the thump of a bass drum. 'Detroit is where Henry Ford makes the cars,' she said. Of course Philine knew. Thank God I'd never had to compete against her at school, where I'd enjoyed my easy status at the head of the class.

'How did they get out?' I asked Sonja. Jews had been banned from leaving the country as soon as the Germans took over.

'As my father says, "With money, everything is possible,"' said Philine. Then she looked at Sonja. 'I only meant —'

'No, it's true,' Sonja said with a shrug. 'The Baums were wealthy. They sold everything they could, packed what they could carry, and got their money out of the bank — well, as much as they could get. Mother said the bank wouldn't let

them take it all. She said Mrs Baum left the country with at least one ring on every finger and toe, including her thumbs.' She wiggled her fingers, each nail beautifully polished, for effect.

'Even if we had enough money to leave,' said Philine, 'my father refuses. "I'm a French teacher," he says. "What will I do in America? Shine shoes?"' She rolled her eyes. 'Everybody knows there are plenty of jobs in America.'

Yes, that's what people said. People also said that on the day of the German invasion, dozens of Dutch Jews committed suicide, convinced death was coming. But afterwards not much happened, and it seemed – to me, anyway – as if they had overreacted in the most horrifying way. Now I wondered. What about the other assumptions I'd made, the idea that this war would only last four years, like the Great War? It might go on forever. Nobody knew.

'Would you really leave?' I asked Philine.

'If I had to,' she said. We were in front of her building. 'You should come up,' she said to both of us. I was relieved to still be included.

'I'm going,' said Sonja.

'You should stay,' said Philine.

'No,' said Sonja, 'I mean to America. I've already decided.'

'To America?' I asked. 'When?'

'Sometime,' she said, following me up the stairs. 'Not yet, but sometime. I'll go with or without my parents, but I'm not going to sit around and wait for . . .' She paused and lowered her voice in the close hallway. 'If they're not ready when I am, I'll go on my own.' She gave a quick nod at the end, as if to seal a promise to herself.

'No, Sonja,' said Philine, twisting back around, her grip on the banister white with worry, 'it's not safe, you can't go alone.'

Sonja rolled her eyes and laughed. 'Look at the two of you, clucking like hens! You can relax, girls. I haven't booked my stateroom just yet.'

I said nothing. I didn't think it was my place. Philine sighed. 'Oh, Sonja,' she said.

'Oh, what?' Sonja snapped, done with this dreary conversation. 'Are we going in?'

'Nothing,' said Philine. 'Nothing.'

‘Ah, ma chérie.’

Philine stood at the open door to her apartment, her father’s soft voice floating through the hallway like a French ghost.

‘Bonjour, Papa,’ she said. As she turned toward him, her expression rearranged itself from worry to its usual steady sweetness. ‘Sonja and Hannie are here.’

I’d met Mr Polak before. We walked into the sitting room, and there he was, as always, with a blanket over his knees and a book in his hands. He was in his early forties but had the look of someone who’d never been young, his hair silvered and his eyes perpetually asquint. It was a kind face, just like his daughter’s. Philine’s gentle father, the French teacher. Their bond was obvious, his love for her so tender. Like my bond with my father, also a teacher. But my father wasn’t in the same kind of danger as Mr Polak. I felt a lump in my throat. What was so bad, really, about shining shoes?

‘I should be going,’ I said.

‘But we haven’t even studied yet,’ said Philine.

The Polaks’ longtime maid, Marie, walked in with a steaming cup of tea and set it beside Mr Polak. At least sixty years old, Marie was a German refugee. Not a Jew, just an impoverished German citizen who’d left her homeland during the depression of the 1920s, coming to Amsterdam for work. She’d been with the Polak family for the past twenty years and was like a mother to Philine, whose own mother had

died of a fever when she was just a baby. Though technically still an employee of the Polaks, Marie was starting to act as the public face of the family, doing all the shopping and interacting with strangers, since she was the only non-Jew in the household. She could shop in the better stores, where Jews were increasingly unwelcome. With her white hair in a bun and her spine curved from a lifetime of housework, she could have passed for Mr Polak's mother. Not that having one gentile parent would have made a difference for Mr Polak: according to the Nazis, a person was considered a Mischling – of mixed Jewish blood – even if they had just one Jewish grandparent.

Technically speaking, it was no longer legal for a gentile to work for Jews. But Marie went on, invisible the way only older women can be. 'Will she ever leave, do you think?' I once asked Philine, who looked at me in horror. 'Of course not,' Philine said and then paused, searching for her reasoning. 'She loves us,' she explained. 'And she has nowhere else to go.'

'Merci, Marie,' Mr Polak said. Marie nodded and disappeared into the kitchen.

'Hannie,' Mr Polak said, 'la petite dernière.' The little last one. It was his nickname for me, trailing behind the two swans. A sympathetic smile. 'Where are you off to on a cold evening like this? Home, I hope?' He was always fretting about the fact that I lived away from my family and ate bean soup most nights for dinner.

'A quick errand and then I'm going home, I promise.'

'Watch your step out there.' He pulled at the hem of the curtain beside him and looked out at the darkening streets. The sun set early at this time of year, and its warmth disappeared with the light. Ever since the Luftwaffe had begun storming across the English Channel to bomb Britain

months earlier, the streetlights had been removed or shot out. We had all started learning to find our way in the shadows.

‘I will,’ I said.

‘Eh,’ he said, letting the curtain fall, ‘at least we don’t have to worry about the Germans bombing us, n’est-ce pas?’ He chuckled. ‘Perhaps the one benefit of having them as neighbours.’

‘I suppose,’ I said, disturbed by his determination to see anything hopeful about the situation. It must have been how Philine and Sonja felt when they talked to me.

‘We’re lucky to not be in London,’ he went on, gesturing to a newspaper on the table beside him. ‘They’re blitzing churches now, can you imagine?’ He looked thoughtful. ‘Rebbe de Hond says, “The synagogue is our shelter and the tefillin are our anti-aircraft guns,” eh?’ He smiled weakly and sighed. ‘Well, it’s awful what the British are enduring.’

I didn’t know how to respond. The tiny black tefillin boxes contained scrolls of the Torah inside . . . and nobody in the Polak family even attended synagogue, as far as I was aware. He was looking for hope wherever it appeared. I couldn’t blame him for that. I did it myself all the time.

‘I fear for our queen,’ Mr Polak continued, patting the withered white carnation tucked into the buttonhole of his lapel. The favourite flower of Prince Bernhard, wearing a carnation had lately become an expression of loyalty to the Dutch royal family. Queen Wilhelmina, Prince Bernhard, and the rest of the family had fled to London at the beginning of the war, where they now operated a government in exile. We all listened to her rallying speeches on the Radio Oranje broadcasts, though it was forbidden to do so. ‘She can’t be safe, in the midst of all this.’

‘Mmm,’ I said. I pictured the Orpo band we’d just seen in the plaza, the way the German troops walked through our

city, claiming it for themselves. I could still see the looks on Sonja's and Philine's faces as we watched the band play. The apprehension. The disgust. 'I'm sure the queen is worried about us, too,' I said.

'Of course she is,' he agreed. 'But she has faith in us. On last night's broadcast she praised the "courage of our resistance and the strength of our national character".' Mr Polak smiled, soothed by the queen's spectral presence.

I wasn't. It was something you said to a child, though I knew the queen had good intentions. I was interested, however, in her explicit mention of resistance. There had been a lot of talk of resistance in the early days of the war, but the word itself had quickly disappeared from the public conversation and was only spoken aloud by people like the queen, who was free to say anything she wanted from London. Yet somehow the vanishing of the word seemed like a portent of something powerful. Everything that might make a difference in this war was receding from view, from language to tools like guns and printing presses. But when the Germans outlawed home radio sets, resisters adapted. They stripped the sets down to jumbles of wire and metal and hid the disassembled parts under the floorboards, putting them back together solely to listen to the queen's nightly broadcast with a lookout by the front door, then hiding them again. The Resistance hadn't disappeared; it was just lying in wait, like the radios.

'That's good to hear,' I said.

Mr Polak put on his queen voice to quote her again: "'Those who want good will not be prevented from accomplishing it,'" she said.' He leaned back in his chair, content.

Had he not read the rest of the newspaper? Had he not seen the photos we had all seen, thousands of hard-helmeted German soldiers brandishing their shiny Imperial Eagle as they marched through the Arc de Triomphe? Sickening

tourist snapshots of Adolf Hitler at the Eiffel Tower? Paris was only three hundred miles away. The Nazi-run newspapers that now flooded the city were full of updates on the continuing success of the Wehrmacht in Eastern Europe, too. Did he not realize those who wanted good were, in fact, being prevented from accomplishing it nearly everywhere? I swallowed my emotions with a wince. Each of us had to fight the war in our own way.

‘Good night, Mr Polak,’ I said, ‘it’s so nice to see you.’

‘You’re a good girl, Hannie,’ Mr Polak said, as if reassuring himself. ‘À bientôt, mademoiselle.’ As I left the room, he began rearranging the wilting carnation on his lapel. Surely he realized it was becoming dangerous to wear those out in public. Marie, I hoped, would warn him.

‘See you tomorrow?’ Sonja kissed me on the cheek as I stood at the door to leave, Philine smiling beside her.

‘My father loves you,’ said Philine.

I smiled. ‘Parents usually do.’ We hugged, and I ran down the stairs and back out to the darkening streets. So much had changed, I thought, since I’d met Sonja and Philine. I felt much more connected to the city, the people around me. After that night at the dance, I’d hoped to run into them again on campus but never expected them to include me in their friendship. Yet they had. They liked me. I suspected my presence also unlocked something between them. Most of the time, my presence kept them from rehashing the same grim dialogue with every passing week of the occupation. Instead of needling each other about the dreadful state of everything, they could focus on explaining things to me: the big city of Amsterdam, how to have confidence when talking to boys, what coloured sweaters looked best on redheads. Things I knew nothing about. Topics that kept us from dwelling on the obvious.

But today everything suddenly felt different. Things that had always been obvious to them were now, finally, becoming obvious to me.

The commuter train lurched to a stop on the west side of Amsterdam. Just across the tracks loomed the bricked peaks of the Westergas factory and the massive, cylindrical steel tanks that towered over the canal running through the working-class neighbourhoods on this side of town. I disembarked onto the nearly empty platform, the air freezing and black in the evening gloom.

Nurse Dekker had asked me to drop off an envelope at a refugee safe house here on the outskirts of the city. ‘You seem like a sensible girl,’ she’d said that morning. ‘Can you do something for me?’ She handed me an envelope and then a separate slip of paper with an address. ‘Just deliver this envelope to this address, yes? But keep the address to yourself.’

I nodded. I did whatever she asked, always. Her brusque busyness reminded me of my mother, the quiet yet powerful force of gravity that held everything together in my childhood home. As with my mother, I rarely argued or even asked questions, something Nurse Dekker appreciated.

After stumbling through a few unfamiliar blocks of shabby buildings, I found the number and knocked on the door, convinced I was in the wrong place. A fortress of freezing red bricks five stories high, it was quiet and desolate on the pavement. Apartment 6 had no identifying name card; it looked as if someone had pried it out with a fingernail. But a cracked doorbell sat next to it, so I pushed the button.

‘Ja?’ A gruff voice emerged from above. I looked up. ‘Ja?’ he said again. A wrinkled old man in a navy cap leaned out of a window two floors above me.

‘The alliance?’ I said. I held up the envelope. I had assumed I was just delivering paperwork to another refugee assistance group. I wasn’t so sure now. He gestured toward the door, and I pushed inside. The interior of the building was even darker than the starlit streets outside, the hallway lights either burned out or missing. I shuffled to the stairway and followed a slanted rectangle of light cast by an open door.

‘Who sent you?’ the man said, peeking through the slit in the doorway.

‘Nurse Dekker.’

He blinked. ‘Are you the new girl?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I suppose.’ I glanced past his shoulder. ‘Is this the alliance?’

He shrugged. ‘I suppose.’ He put his hand out for the envelope. I handed it to him through the gap. He chuckled, three missing teeth in his grin. He cracked the door open slightly wider. Warmth and light came from inside the apartment, but also the stuffy fug of overcrowding, the scent of food, wood fires, and human bodies. Behind him I spotted two adults and three children huddled under a homemade quilt on a lumpy mattress on the floor. This was not the refugee alliance. These were the refugees.

‘Thank Nurse Dekker for me,’ the man said. ‘And thank you, miss.’ Just before the door closed he gave me a wink. ‘Oranje zal overwinnen,’ he said. The door shut and the lock clicked into place before I could respond.

Orange will overcome.

I stood in darkness for a moment. The sound of voices whispered on the other side of the door, nothing that could be heard from the street. All those people in such a small room. Refugees. From Germany, from Poland? From here? The whole building reeked of sadness. And although I wasn’t

Jewish, or a refugee, I knew the terror of watching family disappear.

Annie.

I clung to the shadows of buildings as I walked back to the train station. I adored Annie. Everyone did. But she died of diphtheria at the age of twelve, when I was only seven. With her gone from our lives, my parents fell to pieces, each of us retreating into our own little islands of existence. My father's shelter was the Teachers' Union; my mother's was worry; mine was work. I had been a studious girl before Annie's death, but afterwards I was possessed. Life became a scrolling slideshow of reading, writing, studying and test taking. I kept my head down, waiting for something to change.

Not being Annie had defined my life up to the moment I met Sonja and Philine. Now I found myself being the kind of girl who found herself out on the edge of the city at night, knocking on the doors of strangers, exchanging secret passwords like some sort of swashbuckling spy: *Oranje zal overwinnen*. To Philine, to Sonja, even to Nurse Dekker now, I was Hannie.

'Ha!' I actually laughed out loud at myself for being so dense. Annie . . . Hannie. I'd never even noticed it before. Annie was still with me – within me, in fact. And I still had so much to learn from her.

I jogged through the cold November air until I got to the train station. It was empty except for a couple of German soldiers leaning against a pillar, smoking and talking. A swastika flag flew from the station flagpole as I picked up my bike and rode home as fast as I could, partly for warmth but mostly to distract myself from my thoughts. I parked my bike in the walkway between my building and the next, and

when I did, I noticed a series of posters pasted up in the hours since I'd left home in the morning.

Six hung in a row, all with the same image. The Germans liked to hang them that way, repeating the message like a melody you hate yet gets stuck in your head. This poster showed a map of Europe with a surging wave of bright crimson blood flooding toward it from the Soviet Union, being held off by two flags, the swastika of the Third Reich and the double lightning bolts of the despicable SS.

Storm tegen het Bolsjewisme!

Storm against Bolshevism. The Nazis hated the Communists, of course. But this was code. I only knew this because Philine had told me a few days earlier, after sighting another poster with a similar message. When the Nazis said *Bolsheviks*, it was usually code for Jews. The day's shame and confusion and sadness and dread began to churn into a hot, hard rock in the pit of my stomach. My breathing quickened as I stared at the bloody tidal wave meant to intimidate me into hating Sonja and Philine and sweet Mr Polak. I glanced around my quiet street, and as if watching myself from some otherworldly vantage point, I grabbed the edge of the poster and ripped it down the middle, flinging its strips to the ground as I moved on to the next one and the next and the next, stomping the ribbons of red and black paper beneath my worn-down shoes.

Afterwards I ran up my stairs with my heart hammering, a smile on my face for the first time all day. Perhaps Mr Polak and Queen Wilhelmina were right, after all: those who want good will not be prevented from accomplishing it.