

Day Old Hate
By Randal Walton

Chapter I

Humanity is screaming.

Flames race up the wooden frame of a building; a rafter collapses into the street, crushing the legs of a woman in a long, lilac gown – her child tugs on her flailing arms, trying to pull her free; sweltering winds blow fire in different directions and a man’s tuxedo jacket erupts, a human inferno is born; a mass of coal by the river sparks and the light tinges with darkness; a golden dog, crazed, barks at the flames stretching from an open window; women in silk gowns and cotton rags sprint towards clean air, covering their mouths and their infants in an attempt to protect themselves from the smoke; a blond, green-eyed man looks directly ahead, his mouth open as if in the middle of yelling –

“Cecylia?”

My eyes refocused on a painted scene of the famous Chicago Fire. The realism frightened me: screaming women and children, uncertain yet painful death, and the harsh choking on smoke and invisible gases. I rubbed my eyes with my fists, the dull pain grounding me in reality. My paintbrush froze in midair, a bit of burnt orange color on the tip; it seemed as if the brush itself were enflamed.

Good riddance to them, the scum of the Earth, their voices hissed.

I gazed at the blond man in the painting, his eyes boring into mine. I felt his fear and his screams vibrate through my body. His expression seemed as if he had something very important to say, something that I needed to know. He felt familiar to me, this creation of oil and pigment.

“Cecylia!”

Turning my head, I saw the producer, Judith, studying me with a pitied and worried look.

“Are you all right?” She asked.

“Yes I’m fine,” I said. “I just had a bit of a moment, that’s all.”

“Is it...are you...?” She hesitated, stepping closer. “Did you have a flashback or something? Do you need to leave? ‘Cause I understand if you do, after what you’ve been through. I just can’t imagine the nightmares you must have about those camps, how terrible. So many people killed, children too. I don’t know what I would do if—“

“I said I’m fine,” I snapped.

As Judith’s eyes drifted to my left arm, she tilted her head. Instinctively, I tugged on the sleeve of my blouse, but it couldn’t go any further down my arm. Judith softly sighed, meeting my eyes.

“Yes I’m sure you are. I just wanted you to know that I’d understand if you weren’t,” she said. “But you’re probably right. I’m sure you are.”

Sunlight bounced off steel and glass skyscrapers, making them shine like newly polished diamonds. The cacophony of car horns, howling street vendors, and police sirens flooded my ears. My head throbbed; I pinched the bridge of my nose, pushing upwards. On the sidewalk, I tried to stay close to the left side, away from the road, but I ran into shoulders, hands, arms, and chests.

I held my navy pocketbook close to my body – one hand clutching the strap on my chest and the other wrapped over the top flap of the purse. My tense shoulders almost touched my earlobes and my eyes frantically scanned the crowd. Slick men with briefcases deftly slithered past overly painted, gossiping women – but not before letting their eyes trail down their bodies. I felt those same eyes trained on me, sending a shudder down my spine.

Lovesick couples clung to each other, hands cemented together. A raven haired girl laid her head on her lover's shoulder. The brunette boy kissed her temple, pulling her closer. I averted my eyes as they passed me; the young girl giggled. The boy's arm bumped mine, hard enough that it knocked me sideways.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Are you O.K.?"

I glanced up quickly, tugging the sleeve on my left arm. "Yes, I'm fine."

I moved faster, trying to squeeze my way through the crowd. The sun hung directly above the street, beating down on my head. I tugged on the collar of my blouse trying to cool myself. The other women looked carefree and comfortable in their short sleeved, billowy dresses. They laughed loudly, smiled broadly, and flirted shamelessly. I, however, tried to duck under the few awnings I found to escape the blistering heat.

"Kielbasa! Get your kielbasa right here! A Polish delicacy, get your kielbasa here, folks!"

My feet followed the thick, hearty smell of Polish sausage to a storefront with thick, swirly letters painted on the window: "KIELBASA," "PEROGI," "SERNIK." I remembered my grandmother's sernik, or what the Americans call "cheesecake." I could taste the creamy, rich cheese and the crunchy crackers. She always topped it with a mixture of strawberries, raspberries, and blueberries. No else in the neighborhood liked the idea of mixing berries very much – but they always stopped by, happily, for a slice of Grandma Alenka's cheesecake.

A middle aged man in a bright white apron stood outside a propped door, calling out to passersby.

"Kielbasa, ladies and gentlemen! Get it right here!"

I stood a couple of feet from him, breathing the familiar scent. A slight breeze ruffled my hair, more of the scent wafting in my face. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

“Miss?”

Opening my eyes, I saw the middle aged man gesture to the open doorway.

“Kielbasa?” He asked.

I glanced inside, seeing a handful of people pointing to dishes underneath a sheet of glass. A child tugged on the hem of his mother’s deep violet dress, pointing to a plate of cookies. I smiled slightly.

“No thank you. Not today,” I said.

The man stared at me for a while before taking a glance at my arm. I tugged it closer to my body.

“Are you one of them?”

My body jerked with surprise – the man spoke to me in Polish. I narrowed my eyes, inching backwards. How would this man know? This stranger, how can he see what few want to see?

“I’m sorry to ask, but I noticed your sleeves,” he said, still in Polish. “My sister, she refuses to wear short sleeves either. She doesn’t want anyone to know. But, you are a survivor, right?”

“Yes,” I replied in my native tongue. The word felt natural on my lips.

“Please, come back anytime,” he said. “You’ll pay nothing as long as I’m alive.”

I flushed with embarrassment. Although I felt flattered, I didn’t appreciate special treatment. I didn’t survive the camps for free meals and pity. I survived because the only other

choice was death. I rubbed my left arm, feeling the raised tattoo through the thin fabric of my blouse.

“Thank you,” I said. “But I must get going.”

“Broadway let you out early today, huh?”

Robert’s booming voice reached me before I noticed him precariously balancing atop a wooden ladder, struggling to hang a painting that looked more like a child’s finger painting project than fine art.

“Sort of, the art director wanted to rethink some things,” I answered. “Robert, do you need some help with that?”

“Nope, I’m all right,” he said.

The burnished gold frame tipped slightly to the left and knocked a swinging lamp which sent Robert slightly off balance. He let out a small cry before grabbing a ledge on the wall and steadying himself. I didn’t have much time to move; I’d only set my handbag down before Robert regained his balance. He hitched up his knee on a higher rung and set the painting on it. He looked over his shoulder, giving me a sheepish smile.

“I think I spoke too soon,” he chuckled. Giving me an once-over, he clucked his teeth. “You really need to consider wearing shorter sleeves. You’re gonna get a heat stroke if you keep wearing those long-sleeved blouses.”

I crossed my arms, protecting myself.

“It’s better this way,” I said. “Less questions.”

“Yeah, well. Questions or not, I don’t want to see my best artist in a hospital gown.” He leaned forward, swiping the frame at a small nail in the wall. He missed it and swore.

“I’m your only artist,” I reminded him with a slight smile.

“Exactly.” He missed again. “This godda—”

A bell tinkled behind me and I turned to see Robert’s daughter, Rose, carrying a bright red picnic basket. Her vibrant orange hair, coupled with the basket, catapulted my thoughts back to fire.

“Father, please,” she playfully scolded. “Not before lunch. Hello Cecylia, how are you?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I came here right after work to touch up that sketch of Mrs. Patterson. She’s coming by to pick it up tomorrow.”

Rose set the basket next to the desk that sat on the far left wall across from her struggling father. She flipped through the pages of her ever-present mauve agenda, rubbing her eyebrow.

“Yes, she is. I completely forgot.” She smiled at me. “I’m glad you remembered.”

“I can’t forget Mrs. Patterson,” I said.

“Ah yes,” Robert chimed, swiping at the wall. “Who could forget the pudgy woman who skips – as much as she can anyway – in here, requesting a sketched portrait of herself wearing only her most precious purring black cat?”

Rose and I laughed. I clutched my ribs, still not used to sensation of laughing. After three years in the camps, laughing doesn’t come easy anymore. Things I used to laugh at – the sun shining through rain drops, making them look like liquid crystals falling from the sky; my brother Michal pushing Papa into a pool of mud after a tedious morning in the synagogue; my best friend Ania’s laugh, a cackle coming straight from the guts that I always couldn’t help but smile at – don’t exist anymore. The hard part is finding new joys to laugh at.

Robert swiped at the nail twice before the back of the painting stuck. He thrust up both fists in victory.

“Finally!” He said, shoulders slumping. “Now, let’s eat.”

Robert and I crammed two chairs around Rose’s small desk while she fumbled with papers, pens, and notebooks, thrusting them into whatever drawer or crevice she found. Robert watched his flame-haired daughter with amusement.

“What happened to all that organization you did yesterday?”

“What organization?”

“If I remember correctly, you said, ‘Daddy, I think it’s time for me to put everything in its right place and keep in its right place.’ Am I remembering correctly?”

“Yes I suppose you are,” Rose said. She placed a sandwich in front of her father and me, the wax paper crackling. The paper was slightly darker in spots where the grease soaked through. Bits of red sauce sprinkled the inside and I could smell the combination of rich bread, hearty meat, and thick melted cheese. “But guess what?” She asked.

“What?”

“Everything is in its right place. So hush up and eat your sandwich.”

I snorted, my sandwich between my teeth. Rose shot me a surreptitious smile.

“Don’t you go encouraging her Cecylia,” Robert warned.

“I’m not encouraging her,” I said. “I’m merely enjoying her company.”

From his six-inch sandwich, Robert took a large bite. The bite probably measured about two inches.

“Weah, weah,” he said through a mouthful.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Rose giggled.

I chuckled. Robert narrowed his eyes at the both of us, a look that said, “Don’t you dare start.”

A comfortable silence then pervaded our lunch, something to which I had grown accustomed. I used to fear silences because uncertainty never fell far behind. A silent room could denote a room full of death or a room full of life – if only for now. I remembered rumbling through suitcases of men, women, and children – my people – never looking left or right. Only three sounds penetrated the silence: the jingling of jewelry and coins clanging together as women dropped them in metal boxes, the rustling of paper money, and the harsh, ruthless voices of the German men “complimenting” us as their eyes appraised our bodies.

But, I enjoyed the silences with Rose and Robert. They looked like a family – sharing the same warm, jade eyes and long, nimble fingers. Their smiles mirrored each other’s, full of light and affection. Neither of them looked at me with the pity I loathed. They cared and, for right now, that was enough.

“Oh I forgot to tell you, Cecylia.” Rose primly wiped the corner of her mouth, using only one finger to keep her crimson lipstick intact.

“You have another customer coming in Friday,” she said, smirking. “He’s quite handsome.”

“What’s his name?” I asked, taking a sip of my root beer. The sweating bottle made my hands slippery.

“He’s got brilliant blond hair,” she continued.

“What’s his name?” I repeated.

“Strong, well-muscled arms –“

“His name?”

“A nice, firm backs—“

“For God’s sake, Rose!” Robert slammed down his bottle. “What’s his damn name?”

She smirked again. “Sorry I got a little carried away.”

“Geez, only a little?” I stuck my thumb in my mouth, licking off some tomato sauce.

She glared at me.

“His name?” I said.

“Oh, right.” She tugged on a drawer, crumbling and ripping papers that she had unceremoniously shoved into it. Her hands deftly navigated its depths, rummaging through receipts, invoices, memos, phone numbers, photographs, and addresses until she yanked out a small yellow notepad blanketed with random words, phrases, and sentences. Rose’s fingers quickly scanned the river of ink.

“His name is...” she hesitated, still searching. “Ah! It’s Nikolaus Christensen.”

My blood stopped flowing. My throat closed. My soul cried. I stared down the neck of my root beer bottle at the caramel foam churning like a patient volcano. With a deep gulp, I attempted to steady my breathing, which started to labor.

“That’s a different name,” Robert said. “Did he say where he was from?”

“No, but he had an accent,” Rose answered. “At least, I’m pretty sure he did.”

“What type of accent?”

“I don’t know, thick maybe? Kind of like Cecylia’s, but not like it.”

“You’re not making any sense, Rose.”

“Neither did his accent.”

“What kind of name is Nikolaus?”

“It’s German,” I said. “It’s a German name.”

Rose took in a sharp breath through her teeth and Robert stayed silent. I kept my eyes down, staring at the volcano simmering in the bottle. The caramel bubbles stretched up the neck of the bottle, reaching, reaching. Ready to spill over, they almost reached the tip, but they ran out of steam. Cold oxygen burned my eyes, but I didn't blink. I didn't close them because I didn't want to see the **pictures** that would appear behind my eyelids. I fixedly stared at the toffee-colored froth sinking, sinking.

Robert cleared his throat loudly.

"Just because he's German doesn't mean that he's a Naz... one of them," he said.

"Maybe his family moved here before the war and he's been in New York the whole time."

"Maybe," I said.

But I hadn't come in contact with a German in two years; how else should I react when one was about stroll through my door?

"I can call and cancel if that's what you need," Rose offered.

What I need? What do I need? Hmm... I needed Mama, Papa, Michal, Ania, my niece and my nephew. But they won't ever breathe again. I needed the rich smell of wood and the warmth emanating from the fire on a biting Polish winter's night. But Germans live in my house now. I needed Cecylia Danek to return to her reflection every morning and every night. But her soul was robbed.

"No one can give me what I need," I whispered. "Don't cancel it. It's just business."

It's just business, love. Don't you worry about a thing.

Even now, they can't leave me alone.

Chapter II

The subway jerked forward, knocking a man into me from behind. I would have believed it was an accident if his hand didn't grab my backside for support and if the subway catapulted any of the other passengers as violently as it did him.

"Sorry darlin', I didn't mean to thrust up on you like that."

I straightened my back and deftly turned my hips away from him. A sly, arrogant smile greeted me, along with a burst of foul onions. I turned my head to the side, grabbing some fresh air – which came in the form of a man's large army green velvet jacket, and smelled like old, crisp lace curtains – before turning to him.

"I'm sure you didn't."

"Where you heading?"

"Work."

"And where would that be, if you don't mind me asking."

I grasped more lace curtains. "I do mind you asking."

"Your accent's different. Where you from?"

"Europe."

"You gonna be specific?"

The subway lurched to a halt and I clutched the unclean pole, leaning my head closer to the more appealing jacket. I let out a small breath as I saw the bright green block letters on the soiled brick walls of the underground station, indicating my stop.

"Hey, I said are you gonna be specific?"

The doors pulled open and I lunged for them.

"Nope," I said. "Europe should do."

American men amused me. They strutted down sidewalks with arrogant smirks permanently etched on their faces. Their delicately parted, slick hair shone like molded plastic in the shade and light reflected off it like glass in the sun. Lustful eyes inspected every feminine form within a ten-foot radius and their tongues appreciatively glided over their lips once they saw something they liked. They didn't dare learn a woman's name; "darlin'," "sugar," and "honey" sufficed. Women's situations changed over the past century, sure. We get to vote, ensuring that our voices would be heard. We get to wear trousers if we wanted, instead of slopping through puddles of mud through the rain in our finest cotton dresses. We get to cut our hair as short as the men – but I just can't do that.

We get many privileges that our grandmothers only dreamed about, but some things never changed. Men still – always – see us as another pot of gold to seize. Men still – always – prefer that we remain behind locked doors and drawn curtains with the children. Men still – always – take what they want from us, whether or not they see our innocence.

American men amused me, but they frightened me as well. All men, no matter the flag they lugged on their backs, were the same.

Entering the Ambassador Theatre, I paused in the lobby to admire the architecture. Every morning when I came to work, I gazed at the intricate moldings, still a pristine white. The pastel blue walls reminded me of a clear sky, while the pastel yellow inlays looked like a dulled sun. The bright white cornices gave the theatre an elegant feel. Tall, vaulted ceilings framed decadent crystal and diamond chandeliers hanging patiently from the ceiling. The lights twinkled, casting shadows in the corners. I didn't like shadows; the light always seemed safer.

"Single file! I said single file! James, stop that! You're fifteen years old; I shouldn't have to act like your mother!"

A smartly dressed ebony-haired woman marched through the wooden doors, with about twenty raucous teenagers following her. Young girls linked arms, creating a barrier for the young men to get through. A cacophony of whispers preceded flirtatious giggles and coy glances – be careful where you flutter those eyelashes. One boy, who wore his confident movie star looks quite well, slung his arms over two girls’ shoulders, ignoring their connection.

“Ladies, ladies. Why all the secrecy?” His mouth dangled precariously close to their cheeks.

I saw the fire in both girls’ eyes and the depths of their friendship. Something would go wrong and more than one heart would be broken very soon indeed.

One girl, a petite blond, flushed pink. She bit her lip, gazing at the boy through her lashes.

“Oh James, wipe that goofy smile off your face,” she said. “This lead’s gone cold.”

I scuttled out of the way, pushing myself up against the nearest wall. Did I come on the wrong day? I ducked my head, making my way towards a side door as soon as I saw an opening. In the crew’s quarters, Marilyn removed her wedding band, placing it in her purse before turning to me.

“Morning, Cecylia,” she greeted. “Ready for a new day?”

“I guess so. Why are all those children outside?”

“Oh, Walter mentioned that he’s opening up the theater to high schools. Giving them tours and stuff, showing them what Hollywood’s really like.”

I transferred my money from my purse to my bra.

“But this is New York.”

Marilyn shrugged. “Hollywood, New York. What difference does it make? People go where the stars are.”

I found it hard to work with horny kids examining my every move. My strokes got slower, palms sweatier, brain more befuddled. I started to breathe in a steady rhythm, focusing on colors, shapes, and lines. A couple of times I caught a few eyes gazing at my sleeves. It’s so hot outside; why is she wearing long sleeves? I know they wondered. Everyone else exposed their elbows when I covered my wrists. Their shirts had a bit of sheerness to them and mine held secrets. I know they wondered.

“What do you do, Miss?” A girl’s bell-like voice interrupted the calm.

“I make costumes,” Marilyn said. “Of course, I’m not the only one. But I measure the actors, make the costumes, and make sure they stay in tip-top shape.”

“Is that hard to do? It sounds like a lot of work.” I recognized James’s voice – still suave and convincing, even to me.

Work, you haven’t seen work yet. Their voices cut me like icicles falling from a rooftop.

“Not if you know what you’re doing it’s not.”

I closed my ears, shutting off the noise with an inward breath. I concentrated on the blackening sky in the scene. I wanted a gradient in the sky, from black to charcoal to blue. A black sky screamed fear and desperation, but a little blue whispered hope. Hope, even the tiniest sliver, protected one from surrendering. It doesn’t, however, protect one from pain.

A light touch on my shoulder caused me to turn, abandoning my sky of hope. Marilyn stood behind me, a phony smile plastered on her face. The students and their teacher surrounded her in a lopsided semicircle. Their eyes pierced me, inspected me.

“And this is Cecylia, one of our set dressers,” Marilyn said. “As you can probably tell, she’s an amazing artist, an astonishing feat when you consider that she survived Hitler’s camps.”

I tensed, my eyes trained on the mahogany floor of the stage. I didn’t dare move, trying to breathe in a rhythm. Marilyn wrapped her arm around me, tugging me to her side in a gesture of camaraderie. No tears came. No anger reddened my neck. No fear seeped into my bones. Voices bombarded my ears, blocking my thoughts.

“What was it like when –?”

“Did you see –?”

“How many dead –?”

I pushed Marilyn away from me with my hips. I meant to turn around and silently resume my painting. That’s what I should have done. Instead, I paused mid-turn, looking directly into the eyes of each person that stood in front of me. Their eyes brightened with curiosity and...pleasure? My shoulders sagged a bit; me, the living museum exhibit.

“You don’t want to know,” I said quietly.

I moved to return to my paintings, but Marilyn grabbed my arm. She still had that politely phony smile fixed on her lips, but her eyes revealed annoyance, impatience, and a hint of anger.

“Cecylia, it’s been three years. Don’t you think it’s been long enough?” She said.

“Don’t you think you owe these nice kids an explanation?”

And then I could feel it; the fire rolling in my stomach, burning through my heart and coloring my neck. I gripped my paintbrush as if it were the handle of a knife. Focusing on the dark wooden floor, I tried to stay calm. But words came through involuntarily clenched teeth.

“You don’t want to know.”

You can't rid yourself of memories; they always follow, continuing to haunt you like an unwelcome ghost.

Friday came a lot sooner than I expected. I threw myself into painting scenes, touching up portraits, and tidying up around the gallery. I tried not to think about it because my imagination only conjured up more anxiety. Rose and Robert didn't mention it either, although apprehension exuded from the both of them. Their eyes watched me when they thought I wasn't looking, their hands brushed my shoulders, arms, and head when they thought I needed comfort. My heart allowed me to be grateful, but my mind wouldn't comply.

I walked around the gallery, my heels clicking loudly on the slate floor. The artworks Robert chose to hang in his gallery always calmed me; their uniqueness forced me to think about them, freeing my mind from other occupations. A bout of sadness always consumed me whenever he sold one of the artworks. It always felt like the buyer stole a piece of me attached to them.

However, Robert had yet to sell my favorite painting. I halted my stroll to gaze at it. Set in a simple silver frame, the painting seemed ordinary at first – a wide pathway blanketed in white snow flanked by a dense forest of bare beech trees on either side. Small fluffs of snow still fell from the light grey sky. A feathery willow tree dominated the portrait, one of the only trees in the painting that still had its leaves. Although snow covered the limbs of the other trees in the portrait, the willow tree was only sprinkled with snow. The wispy leaves paused in mid-sway, flexible branches reaching for flurries.

I patiently scanned the willow tree, waiting. I noted the various shades of green – celery, mint, olive, grass – that created a conscious tangibility. Green filled my eyes until purple

interrupted them. Two purple orbs peered at me through the leaves. I saw nothing else of this little girl, nothing but her eyes. I liked to imagine her flinging snow into the air, then trying to catch it on her tongue. I saw her climbing the tree, reveling in the isolated darkness. I saw her happy.

I stared at my face reflecting off the glass. Chestnut hair cascaded down my shoulders in natural curls. Robert always said I'd look better with short hair, but Rose – thankfully – refused to let me cut it. My chocolate eyes rarely saw any light. I attempted a smile. The left side of my mouth didn't raise far enough, so I looked like a really sad clown. I stared at my little girl in the painting. Wondered where she found her happiness.

“Cecylia?”

Rose lightly grazed my arm with her fingertips.

“Yes?”

She took a deep breath, holding my gaze. “I'm worried about you. Are you sure that you can do this?”

I absently rubbed my left arm and shrugged. “I don't have much of a choice, do I?”

“You always have a choice.”

Do I? Do I really *always* have a choice?

“I'm not sure if I can do this,” I admitted. “But I'm going to try.”

Rose gripped my shoulders and studied me. Her emerald eyes considered every inch of my face; I avoided her gaze, counting the burnt sienna freckles on her nose and cheeks.

“You're not budging on this, are you?”

I shook my head just as the bell chimed behind me. Rose heaved another breath, then assumed her “polite smile.”

“Mr. Christensen, it’s good to see you. I’m Rose Pearce; we spoke on the phone yesterday. How are you this afternoon?”

As Rose went to greet my new client, I closed my eyes and kept my back to the door, remembering a pale man in a forest green suit leading me down a semi-darkened hall. I drag my feet a bit, trying to prolong the inevitable. His hand roughly clutches my hair, pushing my face into the pillow to muffle my screams. I thrash around, keeping him from ripping off my pants. Spots of red dance behind my eyelids as I try to endure the pain. Hot tears flood the fabric underneath me. His words demean me, humiliate me, break me. Then, my mother’s voice tears through the pain.

“Do not fear people with power,” she says. “Fear those who never knew it.”

I lifted my eyes, trying to look through the ceiling of the gallery to the sky.

“Thank you,” I said.

I turned my head, meeting clear, blue eyes and golden hair that complemented suntanned skin. He wore a sharp khaki suit and twirled a black bowler hat in his hands. Smiling sheepishly, he rubbed the back of his neck with a shaky hand.

“I apologize for being late,” he said. “I met with a student after school and time got away from me.”

I tensed at the familiar accent, training my eyes on the floor.

“You’re only fifteen minutes late. Besides, you’re here now,” Rose said.

“Are you the artist?”

His eyebrows furrowed as he stared at Rose, considering her. Rose laughed – she should grace the Broadway stage. If I didn’t know her so well, I wouldn’t have heard the slight nervous vibration in her voice.

“No, no. I just sort the paperwork. Your artist is right over there,” she said. “Cecylia?”

My steps sounded heavier than normal and my feet felt like someone weighed them down with lead. I glanced back and forth between Rose and him, blinking profusely. His hair, dear God. It was just so bright. I stopped next to Rose, giving him a small smile.

“Hello Mr. Christensen,” I said.

“Please, call me Nikolaus. It’s very nice to meet you, Cecylia.” His grin widened as he extended his hand.

I stared at him, my breath hitching in my throat. His hand looked smoother than my shiny new aluminum palette, his nails perfectly shaped. He didn’t have particularly meaty fingers, but they weren’t slender either. His hand had a noticeable strength; it never wobbled as he patiently held it in front of me. I cradled my right hand to my chest.

Rose chuckled, gently taking my hand.

“I’m sorry Mr. Christensen – I mean Nikolaus,” she said. “Cecylia doesn’t like germs. Or strangers.”

He slowly lowered his hand. “I’m sorry then. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“It’s all right,” I said softly.

He spun the black hat in his hand. “Well, do you want to get started?”

I swallowed. “Sure. We’ll start with a brief meeting, just to figure out what you want. Please, follow me.”

I tried to slow my walk to a normal pace, keeping my eyes straight ahead of me.

Nikolaus probably thought me rude, but I couldn’t force my mouth to open. What could I say?

Was I acting silly? Of course, I couldn't blame every German in the world. Even so, his accent exhumed ghosts I desperately tried to keep buried.

I led Nikolaus to a half wall in the back of the gallery. Beyond it sat a plain, delicate wood desk with curved legs. It had only one drawer, where I kept two notebooks, black ballpoint pens (always black), and colored pencils. I gestured to a charcoal gray folding chair resting against the wall and seated myself behind my desk. I pulled out my notebook and uncapped my pen, clearing my throat.

"Before I work with my clients, I like to talk with them first," I said. "To know what they want."

I made the mistake of meeting his eyes. The color reminded me of a trip my family and I took to Greece before the war. I remembered the frothy ocean washing over my feet, smiling when the cold surprised me. I felt my feet sinking into the sand, leaving footprints only until the waves swallowed them. The warmth of the sun caressed my face as laughed into the sky. His eyes reminded me of the ocean, of life, of a time when I remembered true happiness.

"You know," he said. "I can't get over your accent. You're not American."

"No, I'm not."

Nikolaus pursed his lips, examining me. "Czech?"

"No, Polish."

"Really? You speak good English for a Pole."

I straightened in my chair. "So do you, for a German."

"How did you know I was German?"

"I recognize the name."

"From where?"

“Germany.”

“Of course,” he said. He sat back and crossed his legs. I inferred from his amused smile that he realized I’d never been to Germany.

I tapped my pen on my notepad. “What is it that you want done, Mr. Christensen? A painted portrait or a drawn one?”

“Nikolaus,” he reminded me. “And a painted one. More lifelike, don’t you think?”

“It’s not my job to think. I just do the portraits,” I said. “How big would you like your portrait?”

He hesitated before answering, his eyes locked on me. “Not too big; I don’t live in a chateau where I can devote an entire wall to myself. Your standard size is fine.”

I scribbled quickly, not even bothering to write between the lines. “Is there anything special I need to know? Do you want to wear a special outfit or use a certain prop?”

“Me, my suit, and my hat will be just fine,” he said. “Wait, I do have something that’s especially important.”

He dug into the pockets of his trousers before rummaging through his jacket. He laid a tarnished bronze pin on my desk. It thumped lightly on the table, sounding like a pawn falling over on a chessboard. Two feathers crossed over each other, making a distinct “X.” An Edelweiss blossom sat directly in the center of the crossing. I couldn’t deny the pin’s delicate beauty, even if it did have a German flower on it.

“It was my father’s and my grandfather’s before that, and so on,” Nikolaus said. “I’ll be wearing it while you paint me. Even if you don’t paint my face correctly, I hope this looks true to life.”

“Okay,” I said. “I can do that.”

Nikolaus grinned, replacing the pin in his pocket. “I’m sure you can. When do we start?”

I blinked, then took out my calendar. “What days can you come in?”

He twirled his hat. “Saturdays and Sundays are best; though I could come in the evenings during the week after I finish school.”

“You’re a teacher?”

“Yes, I teach chemistry in high school. It’s very rewarding.”

I tried to imagine Nikolaus standing in front of twenty school children, slamming a ruler on a large Periodic table tacked to the chalkboard.

“You teach chemistry?” I asked.

“Yes, it was part of my learning when I was in school. Plus, I’ve always had a knack for blowing things up.”

My pen dug into the notepad, a large blot started to spread outward on the paper.

“Why don’t you teach German?”

“Germany isn’t anyone’s favorite country right now,” he said.

I kept writing, attempting to stay casual. “Does the school know you’re German?”

Nikolaus didn’t answer. I glanced up and opened my mouth to repeat myself, but my throat closed at his steely glare. Every hair on my body stood up and I felt cold, goose bumps rising on my neck. I had an intense urge to scream and to pray – though God probably wouldn’t have listened.

He stood up, dipping his head to put on his hat.

“What time is our first meeting?”

I glanced down. “Tomorrow morning at nine.”

“I’ll see you then. Have a nice day Miss...?”

“Danek,” I said.

He smirked. “Now I can tell you’re Polish.”

He stepped around the wall and I stood up. Leaning against the wall, I watched Nikolaus stroll across the gallery, one hand in his pocket. He had a confident gait, as if he knew the world better than it knew itself. His light steps sounded like he barely put any weight on his feet. I bit my lip as Nikolaus tipped his hat slightly to Rose as he passed her desk. I didn’t know what I expected, but I didn’t expect to be left with a sense of confusion and intrigue. I wasn’t supposed to be intrigued by a German, yet I couldn’t help but admit it.

The bell chimed as Nikolaus stepped out into the bright sunlight.

I was intrigued, yes. But I vowed never to forget.

Chapter III

White, crinkled metal tubes of paint lay in three impeccably straight, color-coded lines on the table: warm, cool, and neutral. A painted dot in the middle of each tube matched the color inside. I carefully ordered all my brushes according to size, and set my new aluminum palette on the outskirts. Rose waltzed into the room, carrying a blank canvas.

“Your standard size canvas, ma’am,” she said.

After setting the canvas on my easel, she curtsied. I chuckled, shaking my head.

“Did you watch *Gone with the Wind* again?” I asked.

“They showed it at the cinema last night for a nickel,” she said. “Of course I did.”

I rolled my eyes and positioned my easel.

“You know, I don’t think Nikolaus is a bad guy,” Rose said.

“I never said he was.”

“Yes, but you assumed.”

“How do you figure that?”

She put her hands on hips, giving me an exasperated look. “You have a biased opinion of Germans.”

I straightened a few brushes on the table. “Don’t you think I have reason to?”

“Yes I do. But not every German belonged to the Nazi party and not every one of them served at Auschwitz.”

I cut my eyes to Rose, warning her, but she never averted her eyes. She only pursed her lips. Rose, unlike her father, didn’t approve of never talking about my past. She believed that ignoring it only made the situation worse and my recovery slower. She never corrected herself when she said things she knew dredged up memories. Although I preferred Rose not mention

my past, I respected her for it. I never found the strength to tell anyone my story – except Rose. I absently arranged the perfectly straight paintbrushes, remembering the time when I first opened up to Rose.

Last year, I sat in my apartment above the gallery reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, one of Robert’s favorite novels. The apartment wasn’t large; it only had room for a bed, a small, couch, a coffee table, and square wooden table with two chairs. The kitchen consisted of a grungy white refrigerator, a two-burner electric stove, and two cabinets: one lower and one upper. Robert managed to squeeze in a small bathroom in the back with a toilet, a sink, and a cramped shower stall. Robert allowed me to live in the apartment rent-free as long as I painted – not for him, necessarily.

“Never stop painting,” he told me. “You’re too good for no one to see anything you do.”

I had set up an easel next to one of the windows in my apartment. I could see the outline of the Brooklyn Bridge, alight with fuzzy yellow car headlights. I gaze outside the window at the cityscape, forgetting the book I held in my hands for the moment – the modern world always fascinated me with its constantly changing technologies like cars SOMETHING

How did my life get so fractured, yet tinged with hope? Despite two years of trying to rediscover life, I still can’t appreciate it. I glance at the small Star of David charm that glints in the moonlight. I gave up on God a while ago; I did not keep the charm for its precious religious sentiment. It looked like one my niece used to wear – how I miss her twinkling laugh that made the stars look like obsidian rocks. I miss her small hands tenderly curling around my fingers, a playful smile on her face. I miss her buoyant walk and the way she propelled herself off the pavement. I miss her –

A loud bang sounds from downstairs. My body tenses and I drop my book; it landed directly on its spine, a couple of pages spilling out on the floor. I look around my apartment, frantic. What do I do? Do I call Robert or Rose? But, they live twenty minutes away. How long would it take for them to get to me? Would I already be dead by the time they get here? I don't want to die like this. I survive Auschwitz only to have a thief murder me over some cheap paintings? That didn't sound right.

My feet move before my mind processes anything. I swipe a small palette knife off my kitchen table; the blade was the same size as my pinky finger. I hear glass shatter on the tile floor downstairs and my hand freezes on the doorknob.

"You survived Nazis," I say. "You can survive this."

Quickly, before I lose my nerve along with my mind, I open the door and cringe when the hinges creak. I stick to the right side of the unlevelled stairs, walking on my tiptoes in an attempt to muffle the sounds of my steps.

I see hunched figure on the floor and hear glass scraping. Her bright red dress provides a contrast to the cool colors that adorn the gallery. I approach her slowly, silently, with the inadequate weapon poised by my ear. I glance over her shoulder to see bright, ginger hair –

"Rose?"

She looks up at me, her eyes slightly glassy. A sheepish smile appears on her face as she tries to sweep up a vase she apparently knocked over.

"Cecylia! Hello, darling!"

I lower the palette knife before slipping it into the pocket of my blouse. Carefully, I study Rose. She hums as she picks up shards of enameled clay and glass, tossing them into a garbage bin one by one. I chuckle quietly as I smell a hint of liquor.

“Rose, are you drunk?”

She grins again. “Oh no, honey. Not yet I’m not; I’m just a bit buzzed.”

I roll my eyes. “What are you doing here so late? It’s almost eleven-thirty.”

She attempts to stand up, but trips over her feet and starts falling to the ground. I grip one her arms as her other arm clings to the newly vacant stand next to her.

“Just a bit buzzed,” she says.

I bite the inside of my cheek and look away.

“Don’t tease me!”

“I’m not, Rose. What are you doing here?”

“Well,” she starts. She stumbles over to her desk and I follow close behind, my arms extended slightly to catch her if she slips again. After throwing herself in her chair, I heave a relieved sigh and lean against the desk.

“I went on a small bender at the bar down the street, with Molly. You remember Molly, right? I like Molly,” Rose continues. “And after we were done, I thought ‘Rosey, you can’t get on a subway like this. You might get yourself taken advantage of.’”

I nod. At least the booze didn’t drain all the good sense out of the girl.

“So I then I thought, ‘Rosey, where are you gonna go?’ So I sat on the sidewalk and put my thinking cap on. And then I thought, ‘Rosey, you’re right down the street from the gallery. Why don’t you stay with Cecylia for the night?’ You don’t mind, do you Cecylia?”

I rub her forehead with my thumb, smiling slightly. “No, I don’t mind. I’ll go get you some water and I’ll be right back.”

“Kay, I like water.”

I couldn't hold my laughter that time. But I quickly duck away from Rose's swatting hand – not that she would've reached me anyway. Her hand barely reached over the arm of the chair.

In my apartment, I put the pen knife on the highest shelf of the upper cabinet. I didn't need Rose hurting herself; I never could handle blood very well. I couldn't find any clean glasses because I had planned to wash dishes the next afternoon. I turn on the faucet, patiently waiting as it sputtered. The plumbing sounded like an axe striking a piece of wood over and over again. The water turned from a deep chocolate brown to a light caramel and finally to a milky hue.

I like watching detergent foam up in dishes because it always reminds me of the comfort of a good bubble bath. The foam rises and rises, covering my entire body. I always feel like I am floating on weightless clouds that carry me to paradise.

“Cecylia! What's taking you so long with my water?”

Rose stumbles into my apartment, tripping over a pillow I'd thrown in my fright over sudden noise I heard. She lands on the couch, her face breaking her fall. I laugh heartily this time, not trying to hide my amusement. Rose glares at me, her hair matted to her face.

“Stop laughing at my pity!” she said.

“You're not in pity, Rose. You're pitiful,” I say, helping her sit up.

She snatches the glass from my hands. “You won't be laughing when you get buzzed.”

I sit next to her and run a hand through my hair. “I don't think I'll be getting buzzed in the near future.”

Silently, Rose stares at me. I feel completely naked, stripped before her perceptive gaze. She reaches over and strokes my arm, the branding on it. I shudder as I realize I forgot to throw on sleeves before catapulting myself downstairs.

“It’s horrible,” she whispers. “Yet so beautiful.”

I scoff and tuck my arm under my leg. “Beautiful? They branded me like an animal, Rose.”

“I said it was horrible. I don’t like that. But, it’s beautiful because I get to see it. And that means that you made it through. You’re alive, and that’s something to be proud of.”

I squint at Rose. “Did you drink the booze or inhale it?”

She waves me off, sipping her water. “You’re alive, Cecylia. Deal with it.”

I’d never met anyone as blunt as Rose. She always said what you didn’t want to hear precisely because you needed to hear it. However, dealing with my existence meant dealing with the extinction of my family. Neither task was easy, although missing my family came more naturally.

Rose didn’t understand extinction like I did, only death. She lost her mother at seventeen; a cab driver struck her down as she walked across the street. Rose knew loss, yes. But she didn’t know utter annihilation – that was the difference.

“Have you ever talked about it?” She asks. “Have you ever told anyone what happened?”

I cross my arms, shaking my head. “It’s too hard.”

“Most things worth doing are hard, Cecylia. Stumbling down a street in New York City buzzed and in heels is hard,” she snickers.

I smile slightly. “It’s not the same.”

“I know, but it got you to smile.”

Rose and I stare at each other for a while. I’m not sure what she sees as she looks at me, but I see a strength in her that I wish I could hold. Even drunk, she still manages peel back my carefully constructed mask to reveal my fractured self. Then, she sets her glass on the coffee table, turning on the couch so that her back rests against the arm of the couch. Facing me, she looks at me with a tender expression.

“Cecylia,” she says. “I will listen.”

I look into her eyes, which remind me of the evergreen trees that surrounded my grandparents’ house. Her eyes, like a mother’s eternally open arms, envelop me with warmth and call me home. I shut my eyes tight, feeling Rose’s warmth, and open my heart to let her in.

“It all started in 1940,” I begin. “My father saw a story in the newspaper ordering all the Jews to move to the ghetto.”

Ever since that night, Rose never stopped listening. She never stopped talking, either. She traced the edge of the canvas with her fingers as she raised an eyebrow at me.

“Give him a chance,” she said. “Don’t snub him because he’s German. No one’s done that to you because of who you are. Well, except Marilyn. But I refuse to acknowledge that backwards broad.”

I laughed, my eyes squinting a bit. “That’s a bit harsh, Rose.”

“It’s not harsh enough,” she mutters.

Robert hovers in the door, a smirk on his lips. “Mr. Christensen’s here for you, Cecylia.”

I take a deep breath as he disappears, looking up at Rose.

“Just a chance,” she said. “That’s all I’m asking.”

Nikolaus waited in the gallery, studying a collage of photographs on the wall depicting the Great Depression. He had a navy suit in a plastic garment bag draped over his arm and balanced deep brown wingtips with two fingers on his other hand. I hesitated by the wall that separated my “office” from the rest of the gallery. His hair still shone as bright as before, even brighter with the sunlight directly hitting it. Rose placed a hand on my back, very softly. She then shoved me forward, my steps echoing loudly throughout the quiet gallery.

Nikolaus turned to me, his face coming alive.

“Miss Danek, it’s nice to see you again,” he said.

I tossed an annoyed look at Rose. She shrugged and smirked shamelessly.

“You too, Mr. Christensen,” I said.

“Nikolaus,” he said, walking towards me. “I brought a suit with me, the one I would like to be painted in. Is there anywhere I can change?”

I pointed down the hall. “The bathroom. It’s the second door on your right.”

“Thank you.” He smiled.

I blinked, dazed. It was like he had diamonds for teeth.

“I’m going to my studio,” I said to Rose.

She watched Nikolaus’s form as he walked down the hall. “Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Rose,” Robert warned.

“What? He is extremely handsome,” she said.

“Hands off the customer,” Robert said.

“Who said I was going to put my hands on him?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Do you even need to say it?”

Robert laughed and Rose pursed her lips.

“I thought you were going to your studio?”

I threw up my hands with a smile. “I’m going, I’m going.”

I needed Rose and Robert. They helped me rediscover the joy of laughter, especially during times when I my ghosts held me prisoner. When Robert found out about my past – when he glimpsed my mark – he didn’t pity or judge me. He offered me a job, a home, and a new family. I always wondered why neither Rose nor Robert pitied me because I pitied myself. I spent almost of a quarter of my life in fear, and may very well spend the rest of my life with fear. However, I figured that I wouldn’t have to spend it alone.

Love, however, I couldn’t need. Why would anyone dare love someone as broken and scarred as me? I had seen too much: men and women stumbling around muddy grass nude and emaciated, each heartbeat clearly visible; a woman returning from a rape by a Nazi, sometimes with a ripped uniform or a purpling eye or a bite mark on her neck; a female officer leading identical twin children by the hands for torture; a woman screaming in the morning after awakening to find one of us dead by own our hand. I knew too much about hate to welcome love.

I twirled a paintbrush in my hand, staring at my canvas. I’ve seen hate and felt it so strongly, it threatened to consume me. But, Rose’s words replayed in my head.

“Give him a chance,” she’d said. “Just a chance.”

But was a chance *just* a chance? I was Jewish. He was German. Those two natures naturally clashed.

“All right Cecylia, how do I look?”

I looked up. Nikolaus strode towards me in his navy suit and smart shoes, grasping a black fedora and his family pin on the right lapel of his suit jacket. He also wore a matching vest

underneath the jacket, something I hadn't seen in the garment bag. I also had to admit that Rose had a good eye – he was extremely handsome.

I tried to hide my rising blush by turning away. “You look fine, Mr. Christensen.”

He sighed, shaking his head. “It's Nikolaus, remember? It seems like I'll have to repeat that a lot, won't I?”

“Probably,” I admitted. “Usually people only refer to their friends by their first name.”

“Then we'll just have to become friends, won't we?”

When I looked up, he didn't have a smile on his face. In fact, he didn't have any expression at all. His blue eyes – even bluer by his suit – studied me carefully. They casually scanned my body, but I didn't feel violated as I often did on the streets or the subway. He didn't understand me, I could tell. He wanted to figure me out, crack my shell. I watched him as he watched me. His gaze faltered on my sleeves and his eyebrows furrowed. I resisted the urge to tug on my left sleeve.

“It's summertime,” he said. “Why do you still wear long sleeves?”

“I like it. I get cold a lot.”

“Then why don't you stay in the sun?”

“I burn easily.”

He smiled softly. “Ah, something I can relate to. It's the curse of living in a country the sun forgets.”

I tilted my head. “I never thought about it that way, but yes. I guess you're right about that.”

I told a German he was right. Granted it was just about the sun, but still. A German should never be right about anything, and they especially shouldn't be praised for it.

I cleared my throat and gestured to the marbled charcoal and white backdrop.

“Will that work for you?”

Nikolaus surveyed his, groaning in approval. “It matches my suit quite well. Do I stand or sit?”

“Whatever you’d like,” I said. “It is your portrait.”

He scratched his chin. “How long will this portrait take?”

“That depends on how often we meet,” I said.

“It could take a while, then.”

“It could.”

“Then I think I’ll sit,” he said.

A row of mismatched chairs and couches sat on the far side of the room. Some had more ornate forms with dark wood and curved legs while others had modern characteristics with straight lines and even colors. I paused, trying to figure which chair suited Nikolaus best – and the portrait, of course. I looked at an antiqued, scratched walnut Queen Anne chair with its curved legs and elegant back – too feminine. The black modern chair seemed harsh with its straight lines – perfectly fit for a German.

“What’s this back here?”

Nikolaus pointed to a mahogany leather wing-backed chair at the very end of the row. I forgot that chair even existed. None of my clients ever wanted to sit in it.

“It’s so medieval,” Mrs. Patterson had said. “Only King Arthur would ever dare to sit in that chair.”

I didn’t think Nikolaus as any sort of monarch, but his eyes lit up as he gazed at the chair.

“It was Robert’s,” I said.

“Why did he get rid of it?”

“He got a new one.”

Nikolaus laughed. “A man after my own nature. Wing chairs are the ultimate symbol of power besides a cohort of women. Something my grandfather used to say. It’s a little offensive, I know.”

I bit my lip and looked away. *You are powerless here, they whisper. Never forget that.*

“Is that the chair you want?” I asked.

“I think so,” he said. “I’ll get Robert to help me lift it.”

“There’s no need for that,” I said, approaching him. “I can lift it.”

“I can’t let a woman do a man’s job. I’ll get Robert.”

I positioned myself on the left side of the chair, stretching my arms. “I’ll get this side, you get the other.”

Nikolaus and I stared at each other, neither of us moving. His had an expression of amazement on his face. I gestured towards the chair.

“I really need to get started on this portrait, Mr. Christensen. Would you please help me move this chair?”

He chuckled, then nodded. “If you say so, Cecylia.”

It felt odd to hear my name in German accent, and all too familiar. But, Nikolaus said it with such ease, as if he were returning home to greet an old friend. He smiled too easily, spoke too swiftly, joked too naturally. And yet, I couldn’t stop myself from wanting to know more about him. His smile, as much as I didn’t want to admit it, made me flush. His words made me want to ask questions. His jokes made me want to laugh.

But, I knew too much hate.

I instructed Nikolaus to help me position the chair so that it wasn't fully facing me. I always thought portraits with the subject directly facing the painter looked cheap and tacky. And I refused to assume either of those qualities. Then, I sat at my easel and prepared my paint as I allowed him to get settled into any position he chose. When I looked up, he sat with his arms resting the arms of the chair. His right foot sat atop his left knee, his fedora balanced on the top of his right knee. His face was patient; he waited for me.

I picked up a paintbrush with a precise tip and dipped it into a dark brown hue. I chose to start with the top of the chair.

"Am I allowed to speak?" Nikolaus asked.

"Yes," I reluctantly said.

"Good, I'm not used to keeping my mouth shut. It's one of my many faults."

I bit the inside of my cheek and rubbed my left arm.

"How long have you been painting?" He asked.

"For as long as I can remember," I said, looking up. "I don't remember a time when I didn't have a paintbrush in my hand."

"It must be nice to have a creative nature. It's probably easier to express your emotions when you have a creative outlet to go to."

"For some. But it's harder to find a job. Nothing like chemistry."

"No, it's nothing like chemistry. There's always going to be a need for chemists. Especially now that the Americans created a new weapon."

I remained silent, sketching the outline of his coat on the canvas.

"But painting, there's always going to be a need for that."

“Why do you say that?” I asked. “I would think people would turn towards photography more now than painting.”

“Machines create photographs, but humans create paintings. I’d choose a painting over a photograph anytime, just because of that.”

I sniffed. “Those are odd words coming from a chemist.”

“I’m a chemistry teacher, not a chemist.”

“But don’t you have to be a chemist to be a chemistry teacher?”

He paused. Then, he grinned. “Yes. You’re right, Cecylia.”

As I traced his arms, I could see his muscles even through the layers of his suit. They didn’t seem overly bulky like he balanced boulders on his biceps, but curved comfortably so I didn’t feel too intimidated. An awkward silence permeated the studio. At least, I felt awkward. Nikolaus’s face remained composed and his body seemed unusually calm. As I glanced back and forth between Nikolaus and the canvas, I tried to avoid his penetrating gaze that never left me.

“When did you leave Poland?”

I froze. His question caught me off guard and I didn’t know how to answer it. Although I wanted to know more about him, I wouldn’t allow him to know more about me. He would not know my secrets – that chance, he would not get.

“Was it before or after the war?” He asked.

“During,” I lied.

“During? How did you manage that?” He sounded impressed.

“Not easily.”

“Where did you go?”

“Switzerland,” I answered quickly. Robert had told me about the other war – besides the one my people had to fight – and I knew Switzerland was a neutral country.

“What did you there?”

“I worked in a factory.” Not completely a lie.

Nikolaus tilted his head. “A factory? Doing what?”

“Sorting.” Not a lie, either.

“Sorting what?”

“Clothes.”

“Did you paint?”

I shook my head. “I mostly drew. Paint and materials were too expensive.”

“What happened to your family? Did they come with you?”

My paintbrush dug deeper into the pool of brown paint, dousing the brush with too much paint. The faces of my family flashed before my eyes, their laughs bombarded my ears, and their scents filled my nose. I closed my eyes tightly, suppressing tears of sadness and anger. How dare he, a German, ask about my family?

I opened my eyes to see that Nikolaus’s posture no longer remained calm. A bit of apprehension had entered his face. But, once he noticed me looking at him, he tried to compose his face again into a mask of patience.

“I would rather not talk about my family,” I said.

“Of course,” he said. “I’m sorry if I upset you.”

“Yes,” I said. “Actually, I would rather not talk at all.”

Chapter IV

Students kept entering the Ambassador Theatre as we tried to not to pay attention to them. Marilyn had kept her distance from me ever since our first incident. We didn't even greet each other in the mornings anymore. I tried to ignore the children around me, but I started to realize their gazes lingered on me more than any of the other workers. Specifically, their gazes lingered on my sleeves. I tugged at them often, making sure my arms stayed covered. Kids talk, I remembered. Especially teenagers.

I tried to paint the scene in front of me with precision, but my lines wavered a bit as I heard Walter's booming voice behind me explaining the premise of the play to the students. I liked Walter, the owner of the theatre. He reminded me of a bald Santa Claus with a gravelly voice that sounded as if he swallowed sheets of sandpaper. A tin of cigarettes and a gold Zippo lighter always accompanied him. He never smoked in the theatre, though, as much as he loved cigarettes. He didn't want to get ash on all the pretty women's dresses, he said. Walter loved the ladies, but the ladies had better prospects.

"Tell me, can any of you kids remember the Great Chicago Fire? I betcha you can't, given most of you weren't even born yet. Killed millions, it did!" Walter waved his hands dramatically, trying to emulate flames blowing in the wind.

"Um, sir? Only a couple hundred got killed in that fire, not millions."

I glanced over to see a petite freckled brunette girl flush pink. She looked down, nervously.

Walter patted his robust belly, which threatened to burst the buttons on his shirt. He eyed her with disdain. This girl didn't know Walter. When it's his show, it's his show. You don't get a speaking part.

“Very well then,” he said. “It looks like someone does know about the fire after all.”

I bit my lip to suppress my laughter, the lines on the board getting wavier.

“This fire killed hundreds, burned down the whole city!” Walter continued.

“It only burned down some of the city, sir,” the girl interrupted.

He patted his belly again, his mouth set in a straight line.

“Very well then.” His voice dropped a bit and I could tell that he was getting impatient.

“Money came from tons of people! Whole cities even donated to the victims!” He looked over at the young girl. “Is there anything you would like to add?”

She blushed again, shaking her head. “No, you’ve got that right, sir.”

“Well, hot damn. There’s something,” Walter said.

A couple of the students snickered. Even the teacher cracked a small grin.

I studied the girl, whose head hung down in embarrassment.

“Forget about them,” I wanted to tell her. “You’ll always be better than them.”

She didn’t style her hair in the same way as the other girls – coiffed buns or perfect curls cascading down their shoulders. She pulled her unstyled back into a ponytail, which appeared frizzy like the humidity had certainly gotten to it. Her dark, almost black, eyes glanced around her nervously. Her neck turned even more crimson as her classmates snickered around her. I could tell that she had smarts, that she knew her history. My eyes narrowed at the gold Star of David charm she wore around her neck. She liked to correct people when they got the facts wrong – so did I. As I kept looking at the young red-faced girl with her knees awkwardly buckled, I couldn’t help but think of myself.

“Keep your brains, girl.” I whisper. “Keep your brains.”

Nikolaus was already waiting for me in my studio by the time I arrived at the gallery. He sat in the same navy suit that he wore the previous week. I didn't prepare myself for this, our first meeting since the fiasco that ensued during our previous meeting. It wasn't exactly the way to begin a working relationship that could possibly last more than a month, but I vowed to keep my resolve.

"Hello Cecylia," he greeted. "Beautiful day outside isn't it?"

"Yes, Mr. Christensen. It is a nice day," I answered, settling in my chair.

"It's very hot, don't you think?"

He pointedly gaze at me, never leaving my eyes. I shifted in my seat. I didn't like the way his eyes fixed on me, trying to unravel my secrets and reveal my ghosts.

"For some," I said. "But I'm fine."

"Is that why you're sweating?"

I clenched my teeth and stared directly at my canvas. "I'll cool down in a minute."

Nikolaus crossed his legs, getting into his portrait position. "I'm sure you will."

Picking up my paintbrush, I got ready to mix a navy shade. Still, I remained silent. What do you say to a person who decided to investigate you? You give them nothing. A dog can't chew if they don't have a bone.

I started to sketch his pants, then looked up. His gaze changed from inquisitive to merely thoughtful. I hesitated, my brush in mid-air.

"What do you do for a living?" He asked.

"I paint."

Nikolaus laughed. "I can see that. But, don't you have another job? You can't just work here at the gallery."

“I do have another job. I paint scenes for Broadway.”

“Really? I love the theatre. Which theatre do you work at?”

I swallowed, shading the wings of the chair. “Different ones. It depends.”

“Which one do you work at now?”

I glanced up quickly. “Just one in Manhattan.”

He squinted. “That doesn’t narrow it down very much.”

“I know.”

Then came silence. I focused on keeping my lines precise, as they hadn’t been earlier in the day. As I glanced back and forth between the canvas and Nikolaus, I tried to avoid his eyes, which I could feel studying me. Even if he never told me his profession, I would have guessed that he was a scientist. He carefully studied everything he found intriguing, relentlessly, until he figured it out. Unfortunately, it seems he made me his next subject – or did I do that to myself?

“Why do you dislike me so much?”

I could still hear his voice, though it barely reached above a whisper. I paused mid-stroke to glance at him. He didn’t look like a chemist. He looked more like a wounded soldier with his curious and sad eyes. His shoulders drooped slightly and my heart twitched with something like regret.

I turned my attention back to the canvas. “You’re German.”

“Yes, I am.”

“You said it yourself: Germany isn’t exactly anyone’s favorite country right now.”

Nikolaus looked down, his eyes closing. “Now, I see.”

My hand paused for a moment, then I composed myself and started to paint again. I needed to learn to control my emotions around him, but he was unnerving. I tried to be discreet

as I tugged my sleeve down a bit on my left arm. I tilted my head a bit higher, purposely focusing on my canvas.

“You see what?” I asked.

My knees trembled. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked that question. I never should have given a chemist a problem to solve.

“Your family didn’t make it out of the war.”

My heartbeats slowed. He got close, but didn’t hit the target. I swallowed and narrowed my eyes at him.

“I don’t want to talk about my family,” I said.

“Yes, I know. You said that before.”

“Then why do you keep bringing up the subject?”

He shrugged. “Cause I’m curious.”

“It’s not your job to be curious.”

“Oh yeah, then what is my job?”

“To sit there and let me paint,” I said. “And my job is to paint you.”

“So there’s no hope, then?”

I furrowed my eyebrows. “Hope for what?”

“For you and me to be friends.”

My face molded in a mixture of surprise and confusion. I looked into Nikolaus’s warm, green eyes. He gazed at me with such open sincerity and I couldn’t handle it; I didn’t know what to say. So, I said nothing. We stared at each other for a few moments, trying to decipher each other.

“So, how’s it going in here?”

Rose's heels clicked delicately on the floor. Her graceful steps differed from my heavy, horse-like gait. She glanced back and forth between us, her head tilted.

"It's just fine," Nikolaus said. "I can't wait to see what Cecylia comes up with."

Rose stared at me and I avoided her eyes. "Is that so? Let me see how she's getting along."

Pulling up a chair close to me, she sighed. Nikolaus and I had only met up for two days; therefore, I didn't have much except the outlines of the chair, his head, and his suit. I focused mostly on shading within my paintings and sketches. Throughout my artistic career, I learned that a gradient of color appears more realistic than shading with just one color. Rose nodded her head.

"It looks good so far, Nikolaus," she said. "I wouldn't expect anything less from Cecylia, though."

I looked at Rose from the corner of my eye. Since when did they get on a first-name basis?

"Do you mind if I stay here a bit? I'm a bit bored out in the front of the gallery since we've closed for the rest of the evening."

"You're closed?" Nikolaus asked. "Why?"

"My dad had a meeting and I didn't feel like running the gallery by myself," she answered, leaning back in her chair and crossing her legs.

"I don't mind," I said. In fact, I'd like that very much. Thank you, Rose.

"How's it really going?" Rose asked me.

She spoke in a low whisper, one that I knew Nikolaus wouldn't hear.

"He's asking too many questions," I said.

She smirked. “Well, then. Let’s turn the tables on him, shall we?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. What on earth was she planning to do and how much trouble would she get me into?

Rose cleared her throat. “So, Nikolaus. You said you were from Germany?”

He nodded. “Yes, I am.”

“You don’t sound too happy about that.”

He glanced up towards the ceiling. “No, I don’t. But, can you blame me?”

“Honestly, no. No I can’t,” Rose said. “But how did you get here?”

Nikolaus didn’t answer. Rose stared fixedly at him. I glanced between the both of them, slightly amused. Rose was a bloodhound – all she needed was a scent.

“I came after the war,” he said.

“Were you a soldier?”

Again, Nikolaus didn’t answer. Instead, he rubbed his forehead and then pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Miss Pearce, are you asking me if I was a Nazi?”

“If that’s how you want to take my question, then yes,” she said.

I recognized the distant, yet anger-tinged, look on Nikolaus’s face. I remembered asking him whether or not his work knew his nationality on our first meeting.

“You don’t like being German,” I said.

He turned his head, our eyes meeting again.

“No I don’t,” he said. “I don’t like being German.”

I nodded and then muttered, “I don’t like it, either.”

My voice was only loud enough for Rose to hear. She put a comforting hand on my shoulder and squeezed. I shot her an awkward smile. Nikolaus looked at the two of us and leaned back in his chair.

“You two seem close,” he said.

“We’re like sisters,” Rose said. “Cecylia’s the closest thing to a sibling I’ve ever had.”

I smiled at her.

“Are you the same age?”

“Yeah, twenty-six,” Rose said. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-seven.”

“Still young.”

“Young in years, but not in mind,” Nikolaus said.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve seen a lot, that’s all. I’ve seen a lot,” he said.

“I bet. What’s like being here?”

“It’s nice most of the time. Americans love accents.” He smiled.

Rose laughed. “Yes, they do. Where do you live?”

Nikolaus pointed behind him. “Not far from here, I only live in Yorkville.”

I swallowed. He lived not twenty minutes from where I slept.

“That’s nice. Do you like it there?” Rose asked.

“It’s all right. A lot of Germans.”

“But you said you didn’t like Germans?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like Germans, I said I didn’t like being German. Being German comes with its difficulties.”

Sounded like the same thing to me.

“And you’re a high school chemistry teacher?”

“Yes,” Nikolaus answered easily.

Rose continued to grill him throughout the rest of our session. I rarely spoke, if only to ask him to turn a bit to the left or to stop fidgeting. Honestly, I rather enjoyed watching Rose interrogate Nikolaus. I always felt uncomfortable as he bombarded me with questions and I was delighted when his turn finally came. Rose was absolutely relentless. She asked him about almost everything except whether or not he was a Nazi sympathizer or worse. However, I noticed one small detail. He, like me, refused to speak about his family.

“What do your parents think of you being in America?” Rose asked. “Do you call them a lot?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” he said. “But, my family is a very touchy subject.”

As I painted him, I watched him. He remained perfectly composed in the dark chocolate wing chair, looking like a well-behaved king. Or a well-trained soldier. I watched the way he focused his eyes on Rose, noting her every movement and every inflection in tone. I watched how he paused before answering her questions, carefully crafting his answer. I noticed how he tapped his foot on the floor a couple of times before answering a particularly intimate question.

“Are you single?” Rose asked him. “I’m sure a man as handsome as yourself can’t be.”

“I’m flattered, Rose,” Nikolaus said. “But, I am.”

She shot me a knowing look, wagging her eyebrows up and down a couple of times. I bit my lip and tried to keep from laughing out loud.

I watched him like he watched me – like a scientist inspecting a specimen. By watching Nikolaus, I came to one conclusion: he was a German soldier. He always sat completely

straight, as if someone had welded a steel rod to his back. He studied too thoroughly and thought too much. And, his attitude matched those of the German soldiers I'd encountered – superior, arrogant, and poised.

We'll make sure you never forget us, pigs. We promise you that.

Nikolaus Christensen was a Nazi.

I dropped my paintbrush on my khaki shirtdress, royal blue paint splattering over it. Rose leaped up, stumbling out of the way before she became the paint's next victim. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nikolaus rise from his chair. My hand shook as I tried to clean up.

"I'm sorry," I stammered. "I don't know what happened."

A Nazi, a Nazi. I'm in a room with a Nazi. I'm in a room with a Nazi again. My soul erupted and beads of sweat started to form on my forehead.

"I'm going to get a towel." Rose rushed out of the room.

"Are you okay?"

I jumped. I hadn't realized Nikolaus got so close.

"I'm fine." I couldn't get my voice to quit wavering. "I'm perfectly fine."

"Here, let me help you," he said, reaching for me.

I swatted his hand away. "No, I don't need your help."

"Cecylia, if you don't soak your dress, the paint's going to stain it," he said. "Here, let me take some—"

I slapped his hand away again. "I said I don't need your help!"

"Cecylia—"

"Stop it," I said.

I tried to move around Nikolaus, but he grabbed my left arm. I tried to jerk it from his grasp. He pulled it, trying to tug me to him. As we both pulled, my sleeve ripped, leaving everything from my elbow down exposed. The both of us froze; I shivered as the cold air hit my bare skin. Nikolaus held my frayed taupe sleeve in his hand, but his eyes stayed locked on my arm. My tattoo, a faded gray, lay fully exposed. Neither of us spoke, but I saw fear and recognition spark in his eyes. I pulled my arm to my chest, cradling it. He stared at me, a gilded statue.

Rose ran into the room, a wet towel dripping onto the floor.

“Let me see that dress,” she called out.

She stopped as she noticed the tension in the room. After glancing back and forth between Nikolaus and me, her gaze honed in on the sleeve in Nikolaus’s hand and my arm nestled against my chest. Her back straightened and she took a few steps forward, standing in front of me.

“I think that’ll be all for today Mr. Christensen,” she said. “We’ll see you at your next appointment.”

Nikolaus blinked as if he’d been slapped out of a reverie. I cowered behind Rose, grabbing her hand with my still-clothed arm. Still, I never looked away from him. He stood quietly in front of us for a few moments before nodding.

“Goodbye, then,” he said. I listened for his footsteps, but they barely made any sound on the concrete floors.

Rose turned to me, sighing. “Are you okay?”

I shook my head. “He’s one of them, Rose.”

“One of who?”

“A Na-” I paused, shutting my eyes tight. “A Nazi.”

“Cecylia –”

“No,” I stopped her. “He recognized it, Rose. He recognized my mark; I could see it in his eyes. He’s one of them.”

Placing her hands on either side of my face, she studied it. I stared into her jade eyes, allowing her calmness to envelop me. My knees stopped buckling, my heart slowed, my hands stopped shaking, my breathing labored less. Finally, Rose placed a soft kiss on my forehead, giving me a small smile.

“We’ll deal with that later,” she said. Then, she examined my dress and clucked her teeth.

“And I really liked that dress,” Rose said.

I smiled.