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BEHIND THE BEDROOM WALL



LAURA E. WILLIAMS.



*Behind the
Bedroom Wall*



ILLUSTRATOR

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MILKWEED EDITIONS

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Behind the Bedroom Wall



Chapter One

“Jew-lover!” spat the tall, blond Gestapo officer, pushing Herr Haase toward the car. Herr Haase, wearing no jacket or shoes against the February cold, slipped on a patch of ice and fell.

Frau Haase stood in the open doorway of her house. Her two children clutched her skirt, watching their father with wide, tear-filled eyes.

“Get up, Jew-lover!” said a second officer, his dark leather boots glinting in the fading evening light. He kicked the fallen man. “Get up or I’ll shoot you now just to get it over with,” he threatened.

Herr Haase slowly rose to his knees, one arm clamped to his side where he had been kicked. On the icy snow where his head had rested, a patch of red stained the whiteness.

“Faster!” the first officer commanded. He nudged Herr Haase with his boot so that the prisoner faltered again before he finally struggled to his feet.

Three girls stood on the opposite side of the road, watching, their blue and white *Jungmädels* uniforms hidden under their heavy woolen coats.

“Isn’t Hans handsome?” Rita asked proudly, as her tall, blond brother viciously kicked Herr Haase again.

“I think it’s just awful,” Eva whispered, her voice quivering slightly. “Why are they beating poor Herr Haase? What’s he done wrong?”



Korinna shifted her bulky book bag from one frozen hand to the other. “They’re calling him a Jew-lover.”

“Who’d want to hide a stinking Jew? Besides, he’d be dead already if he’d been hiding a Jew,” Rita said. “I heard Hans tell Papa they’re supposed to shoot first and ask questions later. Herr Haase must have been seen talking to a Jew.”

“How can it be so terrible just to be talking to a Jew?” Eva asked, shaking her head, her short, dirty blond hair swinging against her cheeks.

Rita looked at her sideways, her eyes narrowing slightly. “You don’t see anything wrong with it?” she asked, forgetting to keep her voice down. “Jews are the enemy! They are the root of all our problems. Without them Germany will be strong!”

Korinna nodded absently in agreement, even as she winced as one of the officers shoved Herr Haase toward the car.

Eva kicked at a mound of snow. “I don’t think—”

“My brother wouldn’t arrest just anyone,” Rita interrupted, flipping her long, blond braid over her shoulder like a whip. “Herr Haase is a traitor to Germany. He’s been fooling everyone into thinking he’s a nice man by giving extra meat from his butcher shop to the poor people, but that was just a cover-up. He’s a traitor, or why would they arrest him?”

She pointed across the street as though to prove her point. The Gestapo officers pushed Herr Haase into the back of the car.

Korinna suddenly remembered the hard candies the butcher had always given her when she used to visit his shop with her mother before the war had started. Pity for him welled up in her. Immediately she squashed it. He must be an enemy for Hans to be arresting him, she told herself firmly. It would be un-German of her to pity a traitor.

The car roared off. Without a word, Eva turned from her two comrades and fled down the street through the thickening gloom.

Rita shook her head. "Eva's stupid. One day, someone is going to turn her in for being un-German. She almost sounds like a Jew-lover herself."

"Leave her alone," Korinna said to her best friend. "You know how Eva is. She cries when someone kills a wasp. She'll get over this."

Rita shrugged. "She's a baby. When the Führer makes Germany strong again, and we can all hold up our heads, she won't feel so sorry for those Jew-lovers."

Korinna stomped her feet to warm them up. "You're right, but I'm freezing. Let's go."

Rita smiled and took Korinna's arm. For a moment, they walked quietly arm in arm. Then Rita said, "Wasn't our meeting fun today?"

Korinna laughed. "You looked so funny with all that flour in your hair."

Rita grinned. "Don't worry, I'll get Ute back at our next meeting. I wonder how she'll look with flour in *her* hair, and all over her uniform, too!"

“You wouldn’t!” Korinna said with a gasp.

Rita just looked at her and laughed.

“Poor Ute,” Korinna moaned. “The poor girl didn’t know what she was starting.”

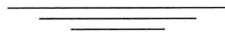
Still laughing, Rita said, “Did you ask your mother if you could come over for dinner?”

Korinna nodded. “But she said you should come over to our house instead. Sometime this week.”

Rita squeezed her arm. “I’d like that. Your mother is the best cook around.”

When they came to the corner where they parted, they simply waved at each other. Best friends didn’t need to say anything, Korinna thought as she walked home. And Rita had been her best friend for two years now, ever since they had both turned eleven and discovered that their birthdays were in the same week.

Rita was like the sister she’d always wanted. They shared all their secrets and dreams. They shared everything. But, of course, that’s what best friends were for.



“Mother, I’m home!” Korinna called as she stepped into the cozy warmth of her house. She put down her heavy book bag and immediately pulled off her winter boots and coat. Her fingers and toes started to tingle painfully as they warmed up. It felt as though someone were stabbing her with millions of needles.

Frau Rehme came through the kitchen door. “Hello, *Liebling*.” She kissed her daughter’s cheek. “Brrrr. You feel like an icicle.” She smiled and took Korinna’s hands between her own and rubbed them vigorously back and forth. “How was school?”

Korinna shrugged. “The same. We received new history books today, though.”

“Oh, really? What was wrong with the old ones?”

“We had to paste together too many pages because our teacher told us those pages were no longer accurate. Things are changing so quickly that we needed an updated book.”

Her mother squeezed Korinna’s chilly hands. “But history doesn’t change,” she said softly. “Just people’s perception of it.”

“What did you say?”

Frau Rehme shook her head. “Nothing, dear. Nothing important.”

Korinna shrugged and pulled her hands free. “It must be Rita yelling in my ear all the time. It’s making me deaf. Anyway, our new books have pages and pages about our Führer and all he’s doing for Germany. He’s making jobs for people. He has such exciting plans for us all. Hitler is the most wonderful man, Mother. Don’t you think so?”

Frau Rehme looked at the framed picture of Adolf Hitler hanging above the couch. “Yes, he’s a wonderful man,” she said slowly.

Korinna hugged her. “Don’t worry, Mother, the Führer says it’s only a matter of weeks, months at the

most, before Germany will be great again and we win the war.”

Frau Rehme sighed and looked as if she were about to say something, but instead she turned and walked back into the kitchen. Korinna followed her.

“Where’s Papa?”

“He’s correcting school papers upstairs. Call him for supper, please.”

Korinna walked halfway up the narrow stairs to the second floor of the house where the two bedrooms were. She shivered in the cold stairway. “Papa,” she called. “Time to eat!” She waited until she heard the scrape of his chair being pushed back, then she hurried downstairs to the warmth of the kitchen.

“The butcher was arrested tonight,” Korinna said, once they were sitting down to eat.

“Herr Haase?” her mother asked sharply, glancing at her husband.

Korinna nodded. “Hans Damerau was one of the officers. Rita and Eva and I saw the whole thing. They called Herr Haase a Jew-lover.”

“Oh, my God!” Frau Rehme exclaimed, nearly dropping her fork. “A Jew-lover! Poor Frau Haase. What will she do with those little children? She’ll have to work extra long hours to keep food on the table. No one will help her now that her husband’s been arrested. It will be too dangerous.”

“Someone will help her,” comforted Korinna’s father. “Herr Haase helped many people. No one will forget it that quickly.”

Korinna looked up from her plate, her eyes wide with surprise. “But he’s a Jew-lover. Why would anyone dare to help a traitor or his family?”

“First of all, we don’t know for sure Herr Haase is, in fact, a so called ‘Jew-lover,’ and secondly, it’s none of our business,” Herr Rehme said firmly. “And I don’t want you standing around watching people get arrested. It’s dangerous.”

Korinna shrugged. She didn’t see anything dangerous about watching an arrest. She didn’t see many of them because they usually happened late at night when she was asleep, but she was glad to see traitors to Germany get arrested.

She shifted in her chair, trying not to picture the blood on Herr Haase’s head, or the wide, sad eyes of his children. If he were a traitor to Germany, then it was right he should be taken away. It was all for the good of the Fatherland.

While her parents ate in silence, Korinna played with a piece of bread on her plate.

“Why aren’t you eating?” her mother asked, eyeing Korinna’s full plate.

“I’m not really hungry,” she said, intently studying the tines of her fork.

Korinna’s father raised his bushy, red eyebrows. “Not hungry? Hundreds of poor people would do anything for what you have on your plate, and you say you’re not hungry?”

Korinna didn’t look up. “After our hike, we—we made sweet buns.”

“Sweet buns? For what?”

“Just to eat, I guess. Anyway, they weren’t very sweet because we didn’t have enough sugar. Just a couple of pinches.”

“Don’t you do anything worthwhile at those *Jungmadel* meetings?” her father growled.

Korinna brightened. “Oh yes, we help the poor and babysit for people. And today we got bundles of new pamphlets to pass out. They’re very nice. They even have the Führer’s picture on the front. Would you like to see them?”

Her father put down his fork with a loud clang. “No!”

Her mother stood to clear the table. “Maybe later. Right now your father is tired. It’s been a long day at school for him, too.”

Herr Rehme pushed himself away from the table and took out a pipe from his pocket. “Every day gets longer,” he said, sighing. “Longer and longer.”

Korinna looked at her father. He looked tired and so did her mother. “Maybe I shouldn’t be in the *Jungmadel*. Especially now that we’re often meeting more than once a week.”

“What?” her mother said, her hand poised above the pile of dirty dishes.

“Maybe I should come home after school and help you. I can help you clean and cook, and in the summer I can work in the garden.”

Herr Rehme drew on his pipe to light it. “No, you’ll go to the meetings just the way you have been.”

“But Mother looks tired,” Korinna insisted. “I want to help her.”

“You’ll help her by going to the meetings, Korinna.” Her father removed the smoking pipe from his mouth and used the stem as a pointer for emphasis. “It would be un-German of you not to be a member of *Jungmädel*. You would get into trouble for quitting.”

Korinna smiled. “Oh no, Papa, the leaders at the *Jungmädel* are very nice. They wouldn’t think I’m un-German just for wanting to stay home to help Mother.”

Korinna’s parents glanced at each other.

Her mother plunged the dishes into the steaming water. “That’s very thoughtful of you, dear, but we don’t want you to give up your meetings. We know you enjoy them. You just go and have fun.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” her father said firmly, blowing out a big puff of fragrant smoke. Then he smiled. “I have a surprise for you.”

Korinna clapped her hands together. “Really? What is it?”

Korinna’s father checked his pockets as if he were looking for something. “Now where did I put it? Helga, do you know where I put it?”

His wife smiled, but shook her head.

He finally knocked his broad knuckles on his forehead. “Oh, I remember, next to my boots.”

Korinna frowned. “In the hall, Papa?”

“Go look, I tell you. Quickly!”

Korinna got up from the table and walked to the front hall where she had left her book bag. Next to her father’s large boots sat a box she hadn’t noticed before. Someone had punched holes in the top. Korinna held her breath and slowly lifted the lid. Inside, a small bundle of fur trembled in one corner. Korinna gently lifted the little black and white kitten out of the box and, hugging it close, walked back into the kitchen.



“Oh, Papa,” she said breathlessly, “he’s beautiful! Look at the little white nose!

Thank you so much! I’ll take good care of him, I promise.”

“I think he’s a she, but you’re welcome. She comes from a long line of mice killers.”

“Don’t tease her, Bernd,” Korinna’s mother chided.

Korinna blushed. “I heard the mice, Papa. I swear it. They live behind my bedroom wall.”

“I know, I’m just teasing you. I put a mousetrap up there for them. Did you hear any mice last night?”

“No, not last night.”

Her father nodded with approval. “Good. The traps must have scared the little rodents away. Anyway, now if they come back you have a mouse-catcher.”

“Thank you,” Korinna said, touching her nose to the kitten’s. “What shall I call her?”

Herr Rehme shrugged. “That’s your decision, Korinna. I trust you’ll make the right choice.”

Korinna glanced over at her father, looking for the teasing glint in his eyes, but instead he looked quite serious. She wouldn’t have thought that naming a cat would be such a serious event, but then, she’d never had a cat before.

“Don’t worry, Papa,” she said, hoping she sounded solemn enough for this occasion. “You can trust me to make the right choice.”