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After what had been a sombre evening, I was glad to be alone in my bedroom that night. Tante Elya and Onkel Georg had sat pale-faced and quiet over dinner and we'd barely touched our food. Little had been mentioned about the registration. I understood that it was still too much of a shock to talk about just yet, but nobody really knew what to say to ease the tension in the room. Only Leo thought to play his mother's favourite songs on the balalaika after dinner, bringing a smile to her face.

Still humming a Russian folk tune, I sat at my dressing table and stared into the mirror as I brushed my long fair hair to a gleam before bed. I didn't want to think about the implications of Tante Elya's letter, it was too frightening. I touched my cheek where Leo's hand had stroked me in the kitchen, even now it tingled with the memory. There was something between us that couldn't be denied, and yet he kept pushing me away.

In the beginning, it was Leo who made the pain of losing my family bearable. Despite the love that Tante Elya lavished upon me and the kind words from Onkel Georg, some days I still felt so alone in the world.

I'd been crying one day, a few months after arriving at Gut Birkenhof. I missed my mother so much, her arms encircling me when I snuggled on her soft lap, the way she'd whisper *Susielein* to me, her cheek warm against my face. The smell of roses, her favourite perfume. I'd slipped away after luncheon, barely eating anything, and was wandering aimlessly around the garden and farm sheds. Eventually I'd curled up next to a stack of hay in the barn, the breeze and warm sunshine drying the tears on my face and lulling me into an exhausted doze.

'Susie.' I'd roused at the sound of my name. Friedrich and Leo were the only ones who called me that. I'd half expected Friedrich to be there, grinning at some mischief he'd just

created and ready to involve me in his elaborate plan, but it was Leo, his arm outstretched towards me. 'I made something for you,' he'd said shyly.

I reached up and took the object from his hand, staring at it for a moment.

'It's a horse. I carved it from wood ... I thought it might cheer you up.'

I nodded, touched by his gift and unable to speak. I wondered if he knew I loved horses, just like my mother had. I stroked the small wooden figure, smooth from careful sanding. I'd seen him practising his carving and I knew how much effort he'd gone to for me.

'Do you like strawberries?'

I nodded again, still staring at the carving.

'There's a meadow where the best strawberries grow. Come on, I'll take you there. They're sweet and ripe. You can fill your belly.'

I looked up at him, expecting to see the concern and sympathy that was on everyone else's face, but I saw only hope that I'd join him in his adventure. 'All right,' I whispered.

'Don't tell Mutti,' he said seriously. 'She'll skin both of us if she thinks we won't eat our dinner.' Then he'd smiled cheekily and held out his hand.

His fingers around mine were warm and reassuring. 'Thank you for the horse. It's beautiful.' His face had lit up, making me smile. 'I like horses.'

'Well, I'll show you how to brush them and feed them if you like, and when you're ready, I'll teach you to ride.' The eagerness on his thin ten-year-old face, dark wavy hair falling across his eyes, had made me wonder if he was lonely too.

I'd nodded, overcome with gratitude. 'I'd like that.' Maybe I wasn't so alone after all.

I kept that carved horse with me for months, often in a pocket where I could touch its smooth surface when I was feeling sad. It followed me to boarding school and Beelitz. And the

strawberry patch was just the start. Leo showed me all the special places on the estate. During the summers we ran wild, splashing about in the shallow bend of the river where the sandy beach beckoned us to lie and sun ourselves. As I got older, we swam in the deeper waters and took the little boat out fishing, gliding across the smooth surface of the river for hours. While we were young, we hiked the cool, dark depths of the forest with Onkel Georg and his good friend Onkel Julius. He was part of the family and a regular visitor to Gut Birkenhof, after spending much of his childhood on the estate with Onkel Georg. When we knew the forest trails like the back of our hand, we'd go out on our own for hours with bread, cheese and meat packed in bags on our backs. Some days we came home with our bags full of plump brown pine mushrooms. Leo taught me to hunt – hare and pheasant at first and then deer, and he always impressed on me the importance of a clean, quick kill and respect for the animal.

But it was the tiny wooden cabin in the forest that meant the most to us.

The first time Leo showed it to me I was eleven years old. 'This is my special place,' he'd said on the edge of the clearing, pine forest surrounding us in all directions. 'It's where I come when everything gets too much.'

'Can I come here too?' I'd asked anxiously.

'Does everything get too much for you sometimes, Nightingale?' he'd asked, his big brown eyes soft with compassion. He'd given me the pet name the first time he'd taken me birdwatching, when I'd been enthralled by the exquisite song of the small brown bird.

I'd nodded solemnly. 'Sometimes I still have bad dreams about Mutti, Vati and Friedrich.'

Leo had crouched down beside me on the carpet of pine needles. 'It can be your special place too. It will be our secret.' I'd smiled at that.

Later that year, it became a place of refuge. One day Onkel Georg had brought Leo home

from boarding school and he'd disappeared into the forest. I knew where he'd be.

'Leo!' I'd yelled outside the cabin. There'd been no reply, just the wind whistling through the trees. I opened the door slowly and peered into the gloom, but found nothing. Then I heard the sound of muffled crying. Pulling the torch out of my pocket, I trained the beam of light to the corner of the cabin. There was Leo curled up into a ball.

I knelt beside him and shook him gently. 'Leo, what's the matter? What's happened?'

'Go away,' he whispered in an anguished voice. 'Leave me here. I want to die.' I stared at him, shocked. Then I wrapped my arms about him.

'You're not going to die,' I said. 'I won't let you.'

He lifted his head after a while and struggled upright so we were sitting side by side on the dusty wooden floor.

'Tell me what happened.'

'I couldn't stand it anymore. My new teacher was explaining the differences between the Jewish race and the Aryans, as if anyone can really tell. Jewish people are banned from the school now, but one of my best friends, Fritz, pointed to me and said that I looked like a Jew. I told him that my mother was Jewish, and so was I and proud of it, but the teacher said that I was *mischling*, only half Jew. After class, Fritz called me a mongrel and wiped his hands on his pants in disgust because he'd touched me. My other friends told me to stay away and called me names that I won't repeat. It was my fault. I threw the first punch ... but they're my best friends.' His face crumpled then and he sobbed until he was spent.

'You don't need them, Leo,' I'd whispered, taking hold of his cold hand. 'I still love you, and I always will.' He'd kissed the top of my head and we'd sat there until the sun sank behind the trees.

Now, my face flushed at the memory of what had happened at the cabin eighteen months earlier, the last summer I'd spent at home. Leo and I had been hunting and were caught unexpectedly in a storm moving quickly across the mountain range. Rather than push on toward home in the driving rain and high winds, we'd decided to wait it out in the cabin, but the wild weather continued to rage into the night.

'Your parents will be worried,' I said, after laying our belongings and outer clothing out to dry. I shivered in my wet underwear, pulling the blanket from the small camp bed further around my shoulders.

'There's nothing we can do about it.' Leo's chest was bare, his skin glowing in the light of the fire, chest hairs ruddy against the flames and shoulders broader than I'd realised. The muscles of his upper arm bulged as he turned the makeshift spit. I couldn't look away. I'd been feeling things change between us over the summer and this was confirmation that I was attracted to him. 'It's stupidity to travel back in the dark with the risk of trees coming down ... They'll know it's safer if we take shelter until morning.'

Outside the wind was howling and heavy rain pelted the cabin without break. The temperature was dropping quickly, but the fire was roaring and the smell of roasting hare was comforting.

My stomach grumbled loudly. It had been a long time since we'd eaten.

'You're hungry,' said Leo. He cut away a chunk of meat with his knife and presented it to me on the tip of his blade. 'Careful, it's hot.'

The blanket slipped to my waist as I reached for the meat. It burned my fingers, but I didn't care. It smelt too good. Juice dribbled down my fingers and my chin as I crammed the succulent morsel in my mouth. 'It's delicious.'

‘You’re messy, Nightingale,’ he’d said softly. He wiped the juice from my chin with his thumb and I watched in fascination as he sucked it clean. Suddenly I was no longer hungry. Leo was looking back at me with the same intensity that I was feeling and my stomach lurched. I didn’t know what to do. All I knew was that I didn’t want the moment to end.

He reached across and caressed my arm as he picked up the edge of my blanket. ‘Aren’t you cold?’

I shook my head. His dark eyes were fixed on my mouth and he was so close. I held my breath as I waited for him to kiss me. I had never wanted anything more.

He leaned in and his lips touched mine, soft and warm. My hands rested against his broad chest and slid around his neck as the kiss deepened. I was hardly aware that my blanket had slipped to the floor. He gathered me into his arms, pulling me against the hard planes of his body.

He kissed me again with such passion I thought I’d explode, but then he broke away. ‘We can’t,’ he said, his face contorted with terrible conflict.

I shook my head, not wanting to stop. I reached for him again but he took me by the shoulders, holding me at arm’s length.

‘The law forbids us to be together: a *mischling* and an Aryan. If we take this any further, I can’t guarantee that either of us will be able to stop. One day our feelings will betray us and we’ll be discovered.’

‘We can be careful,’ I said desperately. I knew the laws as well as he did but I didn’t want to believe that they applied to us, especially on the estate where we were surrounded by people who would support us.

He lifted the blanket gently around my shoulders. ‘It takes only one slip and one person to

report us.'

'But you're all that I want.'

Leo took my hand and brought it to his lips. 'I won't deny my feelings for you, Susie, but I can't place you in harm's way.'

I shook my head again in irritation, even though my heart flipped to hear those words. 'But there must be some way.'

'We'd be placing Mutti at greater risk, after everything Vati's done to keep her safe.'

It was a chilling thought and I pulled the blanket around me tighter. 'I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to her or to you.'

'While the Nazis are in power, it's not possible for us. In another time or place, I'd be a happy man, but as it is ...' His eyes were misty.

I threw my arms around him and hugged him tight. 'Nothing's impossible. One day we'll be together, I know it.'

'There's always hope.' He drew away. 'I'd better get this off before it burns,' he said, glancing at the meat on the fire.

Holding the blanket firmly at my throat once more, I watched him lift the roasted hare from the flames and carefully slice the meat with his knife, but his gaze kept slipping back to me. Whenever our eyes met, I could see the yearning there and knew that what we both were feeling was real. But it didn't change the fact that we had to deny it all for the sake of our family. It was a bitter pill to swallow. We passed the rest of the night pretending that nothing had changed.

But everything changed that night. Leo had kept his distance from me ever since, but it hadn't stopped my feelings for him from growing stronger. And from the way he'd looked at me in the kitchen, I knew that his had too. We loved each other and were meant to be together. I

knew why Leo stayed away, but I wasn't going to have the Nazis tell me who I could and couldn't love.

