

THE
ROAD
REMEMBERED

A NOVEL

KAYE D. SCHMITZ

THE ROAD REMEMBERED BY KAYE D. SCHMITZ

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OTHER BOOKS
BY KAYE D. SCHMITZ

THE CONSORT CONSPIRACY

ON DEADLY GROUNDS

To my wonderful father, the late Herman Dykes, whose account of his time in the Army during World War II served as my primary inspiration for this novel.

To the World War II veterans I interviewed, all of whom allowed me to use their names and actual experiences as characters and plot points in my story. These heroic veterans include Erwin Davis and his late twin brother, Ervin, Army, who fought in the 89th Infantry Division, European Theater Operation; the late Cecil Reese, Army, who served in the battle of Pearl Harbor; Gloria Porter Bowie, the fifth class of WAVES, stationed in Hawaii; Mabel Toth, Canadian Women's Army Corps, who served all of her time in Canada; Joe D'Aloia, Marine, who served in the Pacific; and the late Mike Spencer, Army Air Corps, who fought in the European Theater Operation, and protected the 89th Infantry Division from the air.

And, as always, to my darling husband, Michael, my best friend, my first reader, my sounding board, the one who encourages me when I get frustrated and declare my words "garbage," and my co-collaborator through the giggles of life.

LETTER TO MY READERS

Dear Friends,

This novel was inspired by not one, but nine true stories, as well as actual battles during the European Theater Operation of World War II. Those of you who know the history may notice I took a few liberties with both battles and timelines during the telling of this story so I hope you will read the “Note from the Author” at the end of the book to find out why.

The story first came to me not long after my father died at age ninety-three. At his funeral we displayed a map he had received when he left the service in 1945 that traced his steps with the 89th Infantry Division across Europe from LeHavre, France, to Zwickau, Germany. (See map at the end of this section.)

Later, I found the transcript of an oral history he had done with one of my cousins who interviewed him about his war experiences for a class she was taking. When they talked, they referred to the map, so as I read Dad’s words with the map open in front of me, it was as if he were sitting beside me, telling me about his journey. His story inspired my character, Sam Ryan.

What struck me most about the transcript was Dad’s attitude about the war. He was a nonviolent person with a soft heart, so to read about his horror when he knew that a bullet he fired had cost another person his life was gut-wrenching. I had heard some of his stories through the years, but in the transcript, they took on a life of their own and swirled around in my head until I had no choice but to write them down. I researched World War II, the 89th Infantry Division, and Patton’s Third Army. The treasure trove of information cascaded down around me like gold dust and before long, I discovered

Erwin Davis in Austin, TX, who, with his twin brother, Ervin, had been bazooka gunners with the old “Rolling W,” as the 89th Infantry was called. I was thrilled to find someone who had trod the same ground as my father—and who was still alive! After several Google attempts to find an email address, I stumbled on a phone number and called it. Imagine my surprise when he actually picked up. And what did I do? I started to cry. Sobbed, in fact. When I could finally speak again, I explained that I felt as if I had contacted my father from the grave. I flew to Texas and spent a marvelous afternoon with Mr. Davis and his family, where he presented me with a copy of the diary he kept during his time in Europe.

Once I started writing this story, it became my passion project. But something was missing. The novel began as a study about humanity in the midst of war, but my research continued to portray worse and worse atrocities, especially for children and the Jewish people. So I dug into war resistance efforts and discovered Irena Sendler, a Polish Social-Worker and nurse, who saved more than 2,500 children, mostly Jewish, from extinction at the hands of the Nazis. A number of stories were written about her life, the most famous of which is *Life in a Jar* by Jack Mayer. She was such a remarkable woman that a movie is being made about her life and will star Gal Gadot. Irena’s life was the inspiration for my character, Gerda Zeigler.

I hope you enjoy my story and that you will also read the first chapter of the follow-on story, located after the conclusion of this one.

Kaye D. Schmitz



Route of the 89th Infantry Division, across Europe from its January 7, 1945, arrival in England through V-E Day just outside Zwickau, Germany, on May 9, 1945. This map was reprinted courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, Cartographic Branch, College Park, MD.

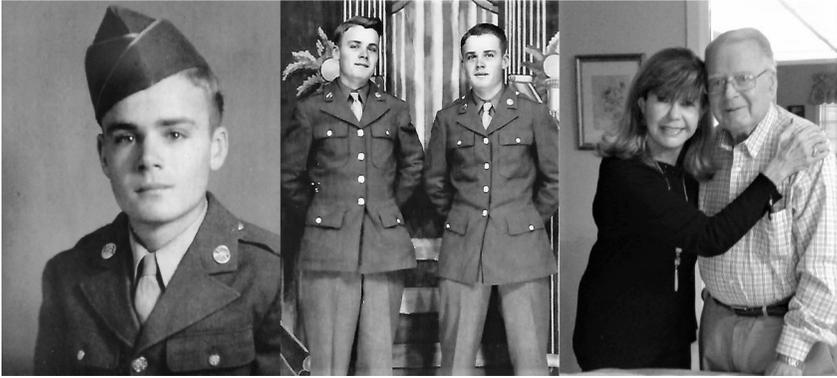
VETERANS INTERVIEWED



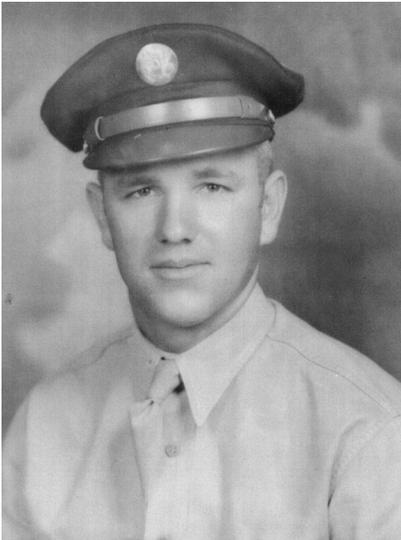
Private First Class Herman N. Dykes; U.S. Army; 89th Infantry Division, 353rd Regiment, K Company; part of General Patton's Third Army operating in the European Theater. The late Herman Dykes was my father and the inspiration for Sam Ryan.



Additional pictures of Dad with his Army buddies at Fort Meade. My Dad is the soldier to the far right in both pictures. These pictures served as inspiration for the soldier camaraderie described within my story. I never learned the names of the other soldiers.



Left: Pfc. Erwin Davis; Middle: Erwin on left and twin Ervin on right; Right: Erwin and me The Davis twins served in the U. S. Army; 89th Infantry Division, 354th Regiment, B Company; part of General Patton's Third Army, serving as bazooka gunners. Erwin Davis became acting Sergeant Major before his discharge.



Gunner Sergeant, Cecil Reese, U.S. Army; 9th Infantry Division, Battery H, 64th CA. Mr. Reese's first battle was the attack on Pearl Harbor and it so devastated him, he never had the desire to return to Hawaii. He was 99 when I interviewed him and he lived to be 100 but passed away in September 2020.



Major Howard "Mike" Spencer enlisted in the Army Air Corps and supported Patton's Third Army from a P-47 Thunderbolt. He allowed me to alter his story. The day he was hit by German flak guns, he didn't crash, but got his engine restarted and made it back to base. His book, One Man's Journey, is an account of his life and service. Mr. Spencer passed away in November 2020 at the age of 99.



Gloria Porter Bowie joined the fifth class of WAVES once the Navy allowed women in. After training, she was sent to Hawaii where she repaired gull wings on Corsair airplanes. She allowed me to take liberties with her story so she could meet my main characters.



Joe D'Aloia served in the 3rd Division of the Marines and spent his entire military career in the Pacific Front. He advanced to Sergeant when he was sent to Samoa. His other bases included Guadalcanal and the island of Bougainville. He is now 99.



Mabel Toth was only 18 when war broke out with Germany so she traveled from her home in Detroit, Michigan, to join the Canadian Women's Army Corps. She served her entire time in Ottawa, with the Adjutant General's office.

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CHAPTER ONE

SUZANNE

My father's name was Sam Ryan and I had adored him my whole life.

On the day of our trip, I trudged up his driveway in the semi-blackness of pre-dawn, my calves screaming in protest at the steep climb in spite of the number of hours I spent weekly in spin and Pilates classes.

Dad had insisted I be there at “zero-dark-thirty.” Yeah, Army-speak spilled from his lips regularly, even though seventy years had passed since his drill sergeant—somebody named Miller, I think—had barked that phrase at him. I got an “As you were” occasionally too.

The driveway leveled off, but even before I saw him, the comfortable fragrance of Old Spice reached me from where he stood on the front porch and caressed me like a warm hug. He walked slowly toward me, his appearance still impressive. Despite his years, he held himself proudly erect, having lost only half an inch or so of his former six-foot-two height.

He reached the edge of the top step and if I hadn't known better, I would have sworn he posed there, waiting as the early morning sun crept over the fence that lined his driveway and peeped through the new leaves of the crape myrtles. In seconds, the rays strengthened and found his thick white hair, brushing it with soft gold and transforming it into a halo around his still-handsome face.

His Tyrone Power face, according to Mother. I saw it, too, from the old movies I watched with her. Dad's eyes glowed with the same

warm brown, and in the pictures I saw of him as a young man, his hair gleamed coal black in the sun. For my money, however, his gorgeous face looked more like George Clooney, especially as they both aged.

He paused on the top step after refusing my offer to help him down. Regardless of the minor stroke he'd suffered ten years earlier, his fierce independence continued to dominate his spirit. Damned stubbornness, I called it. Funny. Even though I'd been adopted, he used those same words to describe me too.

The one bit of help he'd accepted was for driving. Oh, he hadn't wanted to. He fought it kicking and screaming. But after the second time in six months old Elmer Henderson hauled him out of the ditch—during a snowstorm, for goodness sake, when he'd shivered alone for hours because he forgot to charge the cell phone I'd given him—his good friend, Judge Tom Bennett, convinced him to hand over his keys. He did it. But he wasn't happy about it.

Fortunately, I lived close by, and after Mother died, Dad lived independently with my help and a few services from the community. Meals on Wheels did most of the cooking, but I became Dad's primary caretaker, his shopper, chauffeur, property manager, and friend, with the help of my grown son, Stephen, who also lived on our street. Steve excelled in the "friend" category and he loved taking his own sons to spend time with their great-granddad.

I watched Dad descend the stairs, leaning on his cane, one slow step at a time. Excitement filled his face. He tried to hide it, but he couldn't fool me. He loved adventures. And we were headed for a doozy.

He'd received the invitation close to a year earlier, four months before Mother died, and to her delight, made up his mind to attend right away. She knew she couldn't go with him. Her cancer was too advanced by then. So she convinced me to put the trip on my calendar and to cajole him into attending if he waffled at the last minute.

But he hadn't. So there we were, the day of the trip, preparing to fly overseas to attend the seventieth anniversary celebration of V-E Day—the end of World War II in Europe. We'd join several of his former Army buddies from K Company in the 353rd Regiment of the

89th Infantry Division at Le Havre, France, where the former soldiers first touched the European mainland on their way to join the war. From there, the old “Rolling W,” as the 89th Infantry was called, would reprise its trek across Europe—France, Luxembourg, and Germany, all the way to Zwickau, close to the Czech border—and culminate with a huge party on May 9, 2015. Other Divisions planned celebrations too, Dad told me, so the gathering included all military who helped defeat Hitler. And, surprising to me, even German citizens.

At precisely half past six in the morning on May 1, 2015, I backed Dad’s Buick Park Avenue onto Frederick Street in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, where we had lived since the early fifties, and we were on our way. A union man all his adult life, “Buy American” governed his purchases, so I drove the 2005 model, the last year of the Park Avenue in the United States before its manufacturing moved to Shanghai.

Commuter traffic was light so early in the day, and we reached Paul Mack Boulevard in record time. Our route wound through the base of the Appalachian Mountains and, for a while, he stared in silence. Then he tapped the window with the crook of his cane. “Those hills,” he said, “remind me of the ones we crossed in Germany. We scaled the first range just north of the Black Forest and the second, the Erzgebirge, after we crossed the Rhine River. Close to Zwickau.”

“Tell me about it, Dad,” I said. He’d always been reluctant to talk about his stint in combat, although I’d asked him countless times. True to form, he let my request hang and continued to stare at the landscape. I waited. His chin sank into his chest and a faint “har-rumph” reached me from the second button on his freshly laundered shirt. Even with Mother gone, he remained fastidious about his appearance—shaved every day, selected a clean shirt from the top of the stack placed in his middle drawer twice a week by Emma, the housekeeper, and had his shoes shined and his hair cut every Wednesday two blocks from his house. Like clockwork.

Silence followed and I wondered if he’d fallen asleep.

But after a long pause the words began, slowly at first, trickling out in snatched thoughts and broken phrases before gaining momentum. His narrative bloomed in rich detail and his voice grew stronger. He

sat straighter in his seat and I swear, when I glanced at him, his face looked more youthful, as if his body had retreated in time to match his younger-man recollections. His descriptions painted vivid pictures of a brutal time in our world's history.

And I hung on every word, fascinated.

CHAPTER TWO

SAM

I've always been reluctant to talk about the war. Especially to Suzanne. When she asked me again en route to the sites of those battles, however, I decided it was time.

I didn't share my initial thoughts, which had centered on memories from seventy years earlier for days now, during my preparation for our trip. I relished the thought of a reunion with the guys from my Army unit, the old "Rolling W." We'd rarely gathered during the intervening years. I'd only seen them at occasional celebrations and lately, at the more frequent funerals.

They had popped into my head, one by one, the previous afternoon, along with the German baker's daughter, Gerda. Memories of them and our time together brought a smile to my face and a skip to my step. Oh, I didn't really skip. I was almost ninety, so everybody, even Suzanne, wanted to tell me what I could do. Mostly what I *couldn't* do. Like skipping. So I was forced to give up a lot of things that made me happy in favor of things that kept me safe.

And I was damned sick and tired of it. None of the young people in my life—not one—understood that I still felt young too. Nineteen or twenty. Twenty-six, tops.

But those guys from my unit would.

Which is why, when the reunion invitation reached me more than a year ago, I made up my mind, then and there, to attend. To test myself one more time and to remember myself as a young man through the eyes of those who were young right along with me.

My wife, Betty, applauded my decision. But then she up and died

on me four months later. On my eighty-ninth birthday, of all horrible times.

With my buddies still in my head the previous afternoon, I rose from my recliner to retrieve my passport in Betty's memory box on the top shelf of her closet. To reach it, I balanced on the decrepit kitchen stool and stretched on my tiptoes until my fingers brushed against the container. Suzanne would have had a fit if she knew, so I didn't plan to tell her.

I pulled the decorative tin toward me. Words on the top read "Berghmann's *Bäckerie*," from a lovely little shop tucked behind Hauptmarkt Straße, off the main square at the center of Zwickau, around the corner from the site of our anniversary celebration.

Back in the den, my "Zen Zone" as Suzanne called it, with the box cradled in my lap, Betty's presence leaped out at me, flowed through my fingers as small vibrations that pulsed with her spirit and throbbed with her love. Still palpable on its surface months after her death.

Betty's Beautiful Box. That's what she called it from the moment I placed it in her hands after my return from the war. The family-owned bakery specialized in *Lebkuchen*, baked daily for generations from an ancient family recipe. My Betty delighted in the earthy flavor of the spicy cookies, her first taste of anything German. But the rectangular box that held them tickled the whimsy in her soul. Every surface of the tooled tin bloomed in raised flowers, woven into intricate vines that climbed exotic trees and populated a fanciful forest, perfect for the likes of Hansel and Gretel to explore.

Exactly as Betty did. I remember seeing her massage its embossed exterior with her delicate fingers, her fascination with the craftsmanship glowing on her face. After she ate all the cookies, she couldn't bring herself to throw the box away. So she layered it with memories, decade after decade.

I watched her hold it from time to time and reminisce through its contents, more often in the months before she died. She'd show me items, whatever memory held special meaning for her that particular day, and I'd laugh or cry along with her. More tears than smiles after

her cancer snarled aggressive. The helplessness I felt overwhelmed me.

Which I found ironic. She'd always considered *me* the strong one. Stable Sam. Sturdy Sam. Solid Sam. But I couldn't make her cancer go away. I couldn't fix it as I had fixed a thousand things during our lives together.

She was my constant companion for almost seventy years and before she died, I couldn't imagine facing even one day without her beside me. Neither could I imagine getting out of bed and having the focus to put one foot in front of the other. When she left me, she took the joy, the very color of the universe with her and for the first few months, my days drifted by in gray shadow, smoky wisps of life that passed me by and left me cold.

Suzanne saved me. "It's no good burying your grief, Dad," she said. "You have to go through it, to embrace it. To learn who you were *with* Mom so you can discover who you'll become *without* her." It took months, but I finally understood she was right.

So my gratitude for Suzanne's help, coupled with the anticipation of seeing my old friends again, released the floodgates of my war memories.

I began my story in July of 1944.

CHAPTER THREE

SAM

My nineteenth birthday, July 5, 1944, fell almost a month to the day after the battle on the beaches of Normandy. Most birthdays are memorable, but that one especially so.

Even now, I clearly remember how everyone in our small town of Prospect Park, Pennsylvania, waited anxiously for word of casualties from across the ocean. To find out if our loved ones had survived the slaughter of Operation Overlord, now known as D-Day.

The newspapers weren't any help. They didn't report deaths until families were notified so the rumor mill filled the empty spaces. The buzz of half-truths and outright lies careened through the streets scattering gossip with the speed of flying leaves in a hurricane. Thousands of our boys, the busybodies whispered, fell during that battle, victims of German mortars and machine guns. Of course none of us wanted to believe any of those boys had belonged to us.

So for the month after the battle, we waited. And experienced the war in our small-town way, always on the periphery of our awareness, but mostly as an inconvenience. Like blackout curtains, for instance. Which, by the way, enhanced our view of the stars from the front porch swing. Or the sugar shortage, which forced the mother of my friend, Billy Wainwright, to sweeten her chocolate cake with Karo syrup. Funny thing was, once she switched to Karo, she won top prize at the county fair. So despite the few hardships, if you could call them that, and the worry about our boys in the thick of the fighting, our lives drifted along in everyday sameness on the fifteen-acre family

farm my mother had inherited from her father just outside Prospect Park.

My nineteenth birthday changed all that. It still remains as one of those “moments in time” when I understood, as it happened, my life would never be the same again.

My mother had added my favorite cupcake to my lunch bag. Vanilla with butter cream frosting. I savored every bite of it at my station on the Driscoll Bearings manufacturing line where my friend, Billy, who worked at the local selective service office, found me licking my fingers clean.

“I have news, Sam,” he said. “And I thought I should tell you in person.”

I waited.

He shifted from foot to foot and refused to meet my eyes. “Your draft classification changed,” he said, “with Driscoll’s loss of the military contract. You’re classified as One-A now.”

Billy referred to the government contract Driscoll held to supply thrust bearings for Liberty Ships. The cancellation notice came through a week earlier, effective at the end of the month.

Which meant no more job and no more military deferment for a bunch of us welders.

I shrugged. I’d expected it.

That part didn’t bother me. The thought of following my older brother, Walter, into the war, in fact, pumped pride into my chest. I did worry about Mother, though, with one fewer pair of hands to help with the younger kids in the family.

So I’d expected to get my letter in the mail any day. Instead, Billy came to tell me in person. That was weird. Something was up.

“That’s not all you came to tell me, is it, Billy?” Fear ran a cold finger down my spine.

“No.” His voice barely made it past a croak, but he stopped fidgeting and squared his shoulders. His eyes found mine. “Walter was killed on Omaha Beach, Sam. He died a hero.”

The manufacturing din of metal clanging against metal and the buzz and pop from acetylene torches faded away with Billy’s words.

“The battle was a bloodbath,” he added quietly. “Six of the eighteen crafts on Omaha beach were lost. Along with thousands of soldiers.”

Billy continued to talk. I saw his mouth moving and I caught most of his words before a fuzzy roar seized my ears as if I’d suddenly been dunked in the pond behind our house.

My mother’s favorite picture floated into my head, the one taken the night before Walter left for basic training. She’d insisted we stand in birth order with Walter beside her, me on his other side. Richard, the next oldest, stood by me, with his arm around his twin, Kathleen. Then Sarah and Winnie with our little brother, Freddie, last.

My mother’s smile sent sparkles to her eyes with all of her children beside her.

For the last time, as it turned out.

Walter had assumed the role of man of the house after our dad took off the night little Freddie, his seventh child, made his appearance in the world. On my fifteenth birthday. Until then, Dad’s drinking binges normally kept him away for a week or two, not more than a month, usually. But that night Walter and I agreed, if Dad ever showed up again, bringing the stench of stale beer and vomit to our front porch, we’d send him packing, back the way he came. We’d all had enough.

Even all these years later, I still can’t understand how a man could justify leaving his wife and family after fathering seven children. Too many mouths to feed for a man with too little ambition, perhaps? Who’s to say? Regardless, the reason didn’t change the facts. He was gone. And Walter, at seventeen, picked up the slack the best he could while the rest of us rallied around him with part-time jobs to keep the family together.

Our Dad had never been into farming—didn’t have time for it with all his drinking, I guess—so after my grandfather died when Walter and I were toddlers, my mother rented out most of the tillable acreage to our neighbor, Robert Reynolds, who kept the land planted in soybeans and corn. His land butted up to ours and he raised the same crops on his own farm, except he had an acre or so planted with the

best strawberries I ever tasted. My family was invited over to sample them whenever we pleased.

On the remaining three acres that surrounded the house and included the small patch of woods that led to the family cemetery, we raised a few animals and had a garden.

As second oldest, I dropped out of school, and Walter and I worked at whatever jobs we could to help our mother feed and clothe the younger ones. I got a job with Elmer Henderson's father at the auto shop where he taught me to weld and then helped me get the job at Driscoll Bearings at quite an increase over what he paid me.

Richard picked up a few part-time hours at the sawmill after school and Kathleen helped Billy Wainwright's mother fill her cake orders. The younger girls, Sarah and Winnie, planted and tended the Victory Garden and cared for our animals—chickens and pigs, our little black sheep, Inky, and our cows, Bonnie and Belle. We all pitched in to take care of Freddie.

With our combined earnings, the rent from the farm, and Mother's wages at the shirt factory, we made do.

Oh sure, we were poor. Everybody was. But most times we didn't know it. In fact, right after the family picture was taken, we butchered "Pig-malion"—over Winnie's anguished protests since she had raised and named him—and had ourselves a good old-fashioned pig roast. We invited everybody for miles around and ate great for the next week.

Billy's mouth kept moving, but his words never registered past the roaring in my ears.

He shook my arm. Gently. "Sam," he said, "you still with me?"

The roaring calmed. "I saw a newsreel," I blurted. "American warships, planes. To protect the soldiers. What...?"

"At Omaha," he interrupted, "the clouds rolled in so thick that morning, the Navy and air crews worried they would hit their own boys. So the shells they did fire didn't even come close to the Germans." His voice was low. "I'm sorry, Sam, but the first few boats didn't stand a chance."

"Ryan. Sam Ryan." Butch Cantwell, my supervisor, shouted my

name down the line and all the industrial noise from the factory floor crashed back into my head. “You’re holding things up, Ryan. What gives?”

“Sorry, sir. I got bad news.” My voice faltered. “I need to take the rest of the day off.”

I had to be with my mother when Western Union arrived. Hearing about Walter would be really hard for her. And finding out I was One-A would only make it worse.

Butch nodded. During the war, many Driscoll employees had lost family members and took time away from the line. For him, it was no big deal. He’d get my station covered, then business as usual.

But for me, everything had changed.

Walter was dead.

I was One-A. Next in line to take his place at the front.

That’s when the cold reality of war left the periphery of my mind and shot into my brain, clawing its way into every cell.

I took the long route home, jouncing over rutted roads in Walter’s old jalopy, a makeshift vehicle with an ancient Oldsmobile chassis and engine surrounded by multicolored Ford body parts. We built it ourselves with whatever we could scavenge. And did without the stuff we couldn’t. Like floorboards. The ground whizzed by under our feet at fifteen miles per hour or so, although most days we didn’t come close to getting that kind of speed.

I eased past the shirt factory where Mother worked but didn’t stop since I knew she planned to hitch a ride home with the Gibbons girls. I swung by the sawmill, instead, to get Richard.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

Normally I loved going to the mill where the earthy smell of newly cut lumber filled me with visions of fresh forests and new beginnings. But that day, Walter’s loss drove everything else from my head.

“See if Mr. Harding will let you go early today,” I said.

“Why would I do that?” Richard puffed himself up and his hostility rose. “Mr. Harding said I could work eight...” He stopped short and his face paled. “Oh my God.” His words barely made any sound. “It’s Walter, isn’t it?”

“See if you can leave and let’s go.”

“Sam. My God, Sam. You have to tell me.” His face twisted in fear.

Several bouts with rheumatic fever during his childhood had affected his frame, left his body small for his age, his face almost delicate. His work boots sported thick heels, but they didn’t help. Not enough, anyway. He remained almost three inches shorter than I was and even the heavy work at the sawmill hadn’t filled out his muscles to match Walter’s or mine. Worse, he’d inherited our father’s quick temper and walked around with a chip on his shoulder.

He’d waited impatiently to turn eighteen and dreamed of fighting beside Walter in France and Germany. On his birthday—two days before Freddie’s and mine—he marched proudly into the selective service office and registered for the draft, then reported for his physical right away.

“Yes, Richie, it’s Walter. And it *is* bad news. The worst. We need to be with Mother when Western Union comes.”

Despite my devastation at losing my older brother, I had managed to control my tears but the primal sound of Richard’s grief was more than I could stand. He fell to his knees, raw emotion consuming his body, and I leaped from the car, rocking him in my arms, the way I’d seen Mother do. And I cried with him.

We sat in the mud for a long time, the cool dampness of it seeping into my hips and numbing my knees. Mr. Harding came over and I managed to tell him about Walter. He helped Richard into the jalopy, and my brother sobbed the few remaining miles from town to our small farm. We reached the house shortly before the Gibbons girls’ car cleared our long lane.

But the Western Union boy’s bicycle was already visible, resting on a juniper bush by the front porch. When Mother and the girls drove up, I watched Mother’s face. She saw the bicycle right away and I could tell from her expression she assumed it brought bad news.

She stumbled out of the car and I rushed over to keep her from falling. But one look at my face—and Richard’s—confirmed her fears. Still, she forced me to read the telegram’s message out loud.

“The Secretary of War desires me to express his deepest regret that your son, Private First Class Walter James Ryan—”

I couldn't finish. And despite my best efforts, Mother fell to her knees anyway. My sisters ran out of the house and hung on her. We all cried. All of us, even the Gibbons girls. Deep, racking sobs that drove the birds from the trees and the poor little Western Union boy back down the lane as fast as his legs could pedal.

I don't remember how long we huddled in a pile on the grass but eventually the Gibbons girls rose and went home. Then Billy and his mother rumbled up our lane in Billy's big blue Packard and brought us a chicken casserole and chocolate cake. Mrs. Wainwright's famous award-winning chocolate cake. She hugged my mother and they cried together. Billy and my sisters took the food in the house and found Freddie asleep on the floor of Walter's closet, his face filthy and tear-stained.

The military memo declaring Walter a war hero arrived the following day along with a letter from a Private Jerry Chambers, one of Walter's friends lucky enough to survive the D-Day slaughter. I'd hoped to read it alone to spare Mother any gory details, but she saw it and insisted we read it together.

Dear Ryan Family,

Walter and I became friends the first day of basic training and remained so until he breathed his last breath. I don't mean to make his death harder on you but wanted you to know about his final moments.

The operation was different from our expectations right from the start. As you can imagine, the reality of the approaching H-Hour pierced our hearts aboard the Empire Javelin as each second in the steely gray of pre-dawn ticked us closer to combat.

The weather was much worse than anyone had anticipated with angry clouds that obliterated the sky, then raced across the English Channel and plunged into a north wind that thrashed the water into whitecaps.

Churning through them, our ship's bow smacked every wave—rearing and then diving—before shooting plumes of spray straight up as we huddled together on the top deck.

Standing behind Walter, I clutched his rucksack as shoulder to shoulder and helmet to helmet we stepped from the pitching ship into our waiting landing crafts, dangling in the air above the rough seas. We sandwiched together and strained to remain upright while the winches, screeching with each jolt, jerked us downward and allowed icy swells to tower over us and drench us to our very souls.

Our commanding officer, Lieutenant Harold May, although young and green, had gained our confidence when he described the German fortifications awaiting us on Omaha Beach. The Atlantic Wall, he called it, almost two thousand miles of mines, barricades, and barbed wire obstacles, stretching from the tip of Norway to Spain.

To counter this threat, the lieutenant explained, the Allies planned to bomb the area from both air and sea before our squads landed, so we anticipated weak German resistance and a cratered beach for cover on our way to the sea wall, our first objective.

As we expected, the dawn crept in quietly, a whistling wind the only sound that reached us. No gunfire broke the stillness. Our confidence soared and we were ready to get back on solid ground and do what we'd been trained to do. When our landing craft slammed the sandy beach bottom, the ramp lowered and slapped the water. The lieutenant, in front of Walter, told us to move out and I felt Walter tense.

But machine gun fire erupted before we could surge forward and Walter crashed backward into me. I was afraid he'd been hit. We righted ourselves and I heard the lieutenant's helmet clatter to the bottom of the boat, then saw his head fall forward as he slumped against Walter. Walter pushed the lieutenant's shoulders away to reveal the front of his own uniform soaked with the lieutenant's blood. We both gagged.

Machine gun fire was steady and beside us, others fell. We staggered down the ramp together, searching for the bunkers we'd been told awaited us.

But the beach was smooth. Unmarked. No craters where we could hunker down.

We splashed into the water, swirling red from the floating bodies of our friends. Mortars whistled overhead and machine gun bullets kicked up sand, dancing it in front of us. We picked our way around dead and dying soldiers, some of whom cradled exposed bones from severed limbs and cried out for their mothers.

My eyes teared and my brain clouded but I was vaguely aware that Walter staggered ahead. Dazed, I followed him as fireworks from tracer ammunition exploded, illuminating the dark clouds to daylight. A mortar shell whizzed past us and shrapnel claimed a hunk of his upper arm, sending a whiff of almonds from the plasticine straight into my nostrils. Seeing him get hit cleared my brain. Restored clarity.

Walter zigzagged across the beach toward a triangular anti-tank obstruction rising from the sand, then threw himself behind it. In seconds, I joined him, but tracers flared again, a yard over our heads. Bullets thwacked the obstacle above us.

"There's an anti-tank mine strapped to this obstacle," he said and pointed up with his good arm. He tied a handkerchief around the other one, to stem the blood flow, I assumed. His face twisted in pain, but he continued. "If that gunner hits it, anything close to it will be blown all to hell. We have to get to that sea wall." The bullets slowed and Walter said, "Go! I'll be right behind you." So I took off running and thought I heard Walter follow me. But the machine gunner started again, that anti-tank mine as his main target. I reached the sea wall at the same second his bullets connected with the mine. I turned and saw Walter fall,

halfway between the obstruction and me. He died immediately and didn't have time to suffer.

Walter saved my life that day and is a hero. But I have wished every second since that we had left that obstacle together so he'd still be here.

*Sincerely and with deep-felt emotion,
Private Jerry Chambers*

I found the letter from Private Chambers both heartbreaking and oddly comforting at the same time. I'm not certain how my mother felt about it, but I appreciated the fact that he took the time to give us details about Walter's death we would never have gotten any other way.

Walter's body arrived the day after we received those letters and was sent straight to Carruthers Funeral Home. Mother and Richard and I went to identify him, but Mr. Carruthers stopped me in the hall.

"I did the best I could, Sam, but you probably don't want your mother to see him."

She heard what he said and hesitated, but Richard bulldozed into the room where Walter's body lay. I followed. The unmistakable odor of formaldehyde, overlaid with lilac, slammed into our senses but the flowery fragrance did nothing to mask the stench of death.

Mr. Carruthers had spoken the truth. His repair work couldn't conceal the fact that chunks of Walter's head must have been missing. His whole body rested under a red, white and blue covering that sank in spots, as if other pieces of him might be gone too.

I was glad Mother hadn't seen him.

Richard took one look and backed into the wall. His emotions spilled over again, and he stood there and cried. Then screamed, "Those damned, dirty Germans. I'll kill every last one of them." His fists beat the wall and he ran from the room, knocking Mother off-balance. She grabbed for the door jamb to keep from falling.

"I hate having to ask this, Sam," Mr. Carruthers said, "but I need

you to tell me definitely whether this is your brother, Walter.” His voice fell to a whisper. “I’m so sorry. It’s a formality.”

Walter’s face was waxy and held none of the devilish humor for which he’d been known in the family. I saw a resemblance, but I wasn’t absolutely certain. “He has a birthmark,” I said, “a dark diamond shape just below his Adam’s apple.” Mr. Carruthers lifted the covering and moved Walter’s tie to the side. I kept my eyes steady on his uniform shirt, forcing myself to avoid looking for parts of him that might be absent. I undid the buttons, hands shaking and mind clutching desperately at the last little bit of hope that the Army was wrong and I wouldn’t see the dark diamond birthmark.

But it was there. My heart sank. “It’s him,” I said. Despite the difference in his face, I was certain beyond a doubt the ravaged body in front of me had once been my older brother.

I returned to the hallway and avoided Mother’s eyes. In a few minutes, Mr. Carruthers led us to a small conference room to discuss details of the funeral.

“We will not want an open casket,” I said and covered Mother’s hand with mine. “We will bring a picture of Walter in his uniform. People should remember him that way.”

Methodically, Mother and I answered the final arrangements questions and had almost finished when Billy burst into the room, his eyes huge, his hair wild.

“Sam, it’s Richard.” Urgency laced Billy’s voice. “I had to tell you right away.”

Mother half rose beside me. “What’s happened?” she asked.

“He told me you were here and I guess he had just seen his... Walter,” Billy said. “He stormed into our office and demanded to know the results of his physical. Said he wanted to enlist right then. On the spot. Wanted to be overseas, killing Germans before the week was over.”

Mother covered her face with her hands and her shoulders shook.

“Well,” Billy hesitated, “you know we normally mail the results out.” He shifted from one foot to the other. “But Richard insisted on knowing. He was loud, disruptive. So, I took him in the back room

and told him his childhood fevers had affected his heart. His paperwork came back Four-F. I'm so sorry. I had to tell him the truth. I know there's no reconsideration—no negotiation—for heart issues. I didn't—"

"Then what?" I asked. "What did he do?" Fear gripped me.

"He ran out. Like a crazy man. Jumped into Walter's jalopy, took the road out of town."

I rose and started for the door.

"My car's right outside," Billy said. "I'll drive you."

"We'll find him, Mother," I called back to her. "Please finish with Mr. Carruthers."

We hopped into Billy's Packard. "Where do you want to start?" he asked.

"At the house," I said. He drove out of town and at the intersection with our dirt lane, found the tire marks where Richard turned too sharply, obviously causing the jalopy to spin out and stir up a dust cloud. We followed it and Billy braked at the porch. I ran in and startled the girls but a quick glance told me what I needed to know.

"Which way did Richard go?"

"I thought he was with you and Mother," Kathleen said from the kitchen sink with the other girls crowded around her. Freddie perched on the countertop. "We all walked over to the Reynolds Farm to pick strawberries. You know how much Freddie loves that. We just got back and never saw—"

"Stay in here," I interrupted. "Whatever happens, do not come outside."

I ran out the back door and Billy met me at the side of the house. We rushed to the barn and I called Richard's name. No answer.

The barn door wouldn't open so Billy and I threw our whole bodies into pushing until we heard a loud snap. Then the door moved easily.

I jerked it open at the same instant the gunshot blasted.

It exploded in my ears and ripped a hole in my heart.

Billy stepped back, and I entered alone. The odor of gunpowder attacked my nose and settled in my throat, a caustic smoky taste in the back of my mouth.

Richard's body lay draped over a bale of hay. Our father's shotgun, missing from the hooks over the fireplace, rested at a weird angle on top of him. Traces of black powder circled his lips and bloody bits of his skull covered the distance between him and the far wall.

I didn't recognize the anguished wail piercing the air around me. To my knowledge, I'd never made that sound before.

I was furious with him. Still am all these years later. How could he have been so stupid? So selfish? Didn't he know our mother had enough to deal with? That with Walter gone, the family needed him more than ever?

Through the years, he'd exhibited our father's tendency to raise hell first and fix things later. But what he did that day couldn't be fixed. One squeeze from his finger on the trigger, and there was no turning back.

The fury left me, and grief flooded in. Overwhelming, all-consuming grief. With no tears left to cry, I choked out dry sobs. I sat with Richard for a while, but didn't touch him, and left him lying exactly the way I'd found him. I figured the sheriff would prefer it that way.

Kathleen and Sarah had run outside at the sound of the shot, but Billy stopped them from opening the barn door. They swarmed around me when I stepped back out and I told them what had happened. I also told them to stay in the house with the younger ones and that none of them should set foot in the barn. Under any circumstances.

Billy led the way back to town and I followed in Walter's jalopy. I saw the sheriff first, then dragged myself back to the funeral home to rejoin my mother.

She had already guessed what happened. We hugged hard and she collapsed in my arms.

I arranged for a double funeral instead of the one we'd discussed and assured Mr. Carruthers the second casket needed to be closed too.

During the days that followed, we all drifted in a daze, numb to the outside world, other than our neighbors streaming into our house with enough food, I remember thinking, to feed an Army regiment. Of course, given what I learned later about the scant contents in C-

Rations, the mountain of food would easily have fed several regiments.

The double funeral for my brothers took place at our church, where the choir sang without Mother's soprano to support them. We buried them both in the family plot at the edge of the farm rather than sending Walter to Arlington National Cemetery because Mother wanted to keep him close.

Not one person suggested we try to find my father to let him know what had happened.

We reached the gravesite through a cold rain that set in for the day. Mother could barely stand, so we sat her in a kitchen chair and surrounded her with umbrellas. Despite the weather, soldiers in dress uniforms completed the military rituals—folding the flag covering Walter's coffin, solemnly handing it to Mother, and then firing three volleys into the air in an age-old battlefield custom. Funny. I had always assumed gunfire at a soldier's grave was considered a twenty-one gun salute. But I learned, during my own Army training, that the volleys stemmed from a much older custom to let everyone know the dead soldiers had been properly cared for. A nice tradition, I thought, but it did nothing to ease my pain.

After the mournful notes of *Taps*, Reverend Perdue struggled to be heard above Mother's sobs, but he cut the service short, so she could be put to bed. Her church ladies busied themselves in our kitchen and organized the donated dishes into a feast for those who had gathered to pay their final respects.

At the end of the month, I finished my job at Driscoll Bearings and passed my military physical with flying colors. I tried to keep the news of my status change from Mother, who had caught a cold at my brothers' funeral service. She was sick at home the day my letter arrived with notice to report to Fort Meade, Maryland, the following week. My face betrayed me, and she collapsed again.

My last night at home, Mother's fever shot up and her church ladies joined us in taking turns to sit beside her. The next morning her improvement amazed us all. She even joined the family for breakfast and my heart lifted.

“How’s your mother doing?” Mrs. Wainwright asked from the front porch when she arrived for her turn with my mother.

“She’s much better,” I said. “In fact, we’re all better. I think the worst is over.”

How naïve of me.

The world clashed in a global conflict that had already devastated my family and turned my life upside down.

I should have known the worst was yet to come.



I STOPPED TALKING AND TOOK A SMALL BREAK TO COMPOSE myself after the still painful memories of my brothers’ deaths.

I stole a quick glance at my daughter, who wiped tears from her cheeks with one hand and drove with the other. She had turned seventy months earlier, and to me, she was still beautiful.

We’d adopted her as a toddler, so our DNA wasn’t part of her genes. But we’d always been told we looked alike. Her hair had been dark when she was younger—not as black as mine—but curly, like Betty’s. And with her brown eyes and five-foot-eight height, most people didn’t know she’d been adopted. Not that we cared what people knew or didn’t know. Or thought. Suzanne was ours the same as if Betty and I had gone through pregnancy and labor.

I remembered the picture I had found of her college graduation in Betty’s Beautiful Box the day before—right on top of my Engineering Diploma from Drexel University in Philadelphia, courtesy of the GI Bill. Without conscious thought, after replacing the picture and my diploma, I let my fingers trace the raised letters of the shop’s name on the decorative tin. Berghmann’s.

As had happened yesterday, my mind shot back seventy years and drifted through the ornate bakery door, with its little bell tinkling the first notes of *Edelweiss*, and into the spicy smells swirling around me from all directions. My car’s interior faded and I was surrounded by the enticing bouquets of honey, ginger, and citrus mingled with the

fragrances of baking bread and hot strudel that formed an unmistakable scent not found anywhere else on Earth.

Except on Gerda, I remembered. The baker's daughter. Savory aromas from the ovens wafted from her hair and clung to her apron. Even floated on her smile. Or so it seemed.

Gerda. What an extraordinary woman.

I wondered if she were still alive.

CHAPTER FOUR

GERDA

1941

“**B**ekah,” Gerda pleaded, “please stop crying.”

They sat on the roof outside Gerda’s bedroom window, their honey-colored braids touching as Gerda hugged the younger girl’s thin shoulders and tried to calm her.

Their friendship began on Rebekah’s first birthday when the two families closed their shops early to celebrate. Not once during the fifteen years since had Gerda looked at Rebekah differently because of her religion. Not once.

Maintaining the appearance of a normal life, however, complete with long-time friendships, grew increasingly difficult all over Germany with each new law passed by Hitler’s Nazi regime. Everyone felt the sting of it, including the two girls huddled together.

“But they’re sending us away. Making us leave our home. Only a few hours from now. That’s why I woke you. To let you know,” Rebekah whispered, tears tightening her throat. “How will I see you? How can we still be friends?”

“We’ll always be friends,” Gerda said. “Like our parents and grandparents.”

Their families’ friendship had begun two generations earlier, when the first Rosenbaums, Rebekah’s grandparents, started the butcher shop and helped Gerda’s grandparents, the Berghmanns, open the bakery right next door. For years, the families worked together to help each other’s businesses. When customers at Berghmann’s outside café ordered a sandwich, Gerda’s mother, Karla, ran over to Rosenbaum’s

for freshly cut meat while her father, Otto, prepared the bread, hot from the oven. Likewise, when people bought meat from Rosenbaum's, Rebecca's parents, Ruth and Hiram, always recommended Berghmann's for bread and dessert.

The families' easy camaraderie through the years and the birth of their children—Gerda and Ernst to Otto and Karla, and Jakob and Rebekah to Ruth and Hiram—hit its first bump when the *Führer* declared a national boycott of Jewish businesses in 1933. Nazi party members made a point of visiting Berghmann's after that and refused sandwiches made with meat from Rosenbaum's, so nine-year-old Gerda ran to the butcher shop through the back yard, instead, and her father lied to his customers about where the meat came from.

"Times are different now," Rebekah said through her tears. "Your family could get in trouble for being friends with us."

Gerda knew she was right.

After the fervor of the 1933 boycott died down, the butcher shop continued to do a good business since their long-term customers trusted Rosenbaum's to carry the freshest meat at a good value. But in the years that followed, the Nazis increasingly denied the family access to markets and advertising in local newspapers. With Zwickau so far from Berlin, Jewish harassment remained light, so the two families made the best of things and lived as normal a life as possible.

Once the Nuremberg Laws passed in 1935, however, Jewish people were stripped of their citizenship and declared "enemies of the race-based state." Officials warned Otto and Karla that prison loomed if they maintained their friendship with the Rosenbaums. After the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, while the world busied itself with other things, Nazi leaders assumed an aggressive stance and more violently enforced Anti-Semitic Laws. But in 1938, *Kristallnacht*, or the November pogroms, began a more sinister surge in anti-Semitic abuse, with businesses and synagogues destroyed and shards of glass from their shattered windows littering the street. The Rosenbaum's had been lucky. Their butcher shop had been spared. Until now.

Luck no longer protected them and they faced forced evacuation in mere hours.

“I don’t think we’ll be in trouble, Bekah,” Gerda lied. “We’ll find a way to stay friends.”

“You don’t understand. Have you seen our front door? And our shop windows?” Without waiting for an answer, she rushed on. “The SS painted the word *Jude* all over them. And they dragged Jakob out of the house this morning. On his eighteenth birthday. They didn’t even tell us where they were taking him. My father thinks he’ll go to a forced labor camp. My mother couldn’t...” Sobs overtook her and drowned out her words.

“You’re right, Bekah,” Gerda said. “That’s not good. It’s really bad, in fact. But Jakob’s strong. I’m sure he’ll be fine. And maybe you can go see him after he’s—”

“No!” Gerda had never heard her friend scream before. “No, we can’t. I already told you, we’re being evacuated in a couple of hours. The SS gave my father a long list of instructions about what we can take and what we must leave. For them.” She spat out the last words through clenched teeth and fresh tears traced new tracks on her already-wet cheeks.

As the bakery’s delivery person, Gerda had seen the horror Rebekah described. In every sector of the city, she witnessed Jewish families forced to leave their homes, thrown out by the SS and allowed to take very few possessions.

“I don’t know where they’ll send us,” Rebekah continued. She drew a deep breath and held out her hand, her fist clenched. “And we’ll be forced to wear this.” Her fingers parted to reveal a patch of yellow fabric, a six-pointed star outlined in black with the word *Jude* printed in its center. “As if we were cattle requiring a brand.”

Gerda had seen that too. People she knew and liked, forced to wear the Jewish Star of David as a badge of shame. She had also seen the Jewish-only sector’s cramped conditions and its filth. The thought of her friend living there sent shudders through her body.

She closed her eyes against her memories of Jewish people singled out by roaming SS soldiers, who delighted in inflicting pain on them by yanking gold-filled teeth from gums and severing ring-laden fingers from hands.

Her worst shocks stemmed from seeing old or disabled people shot in the streets as if those conditions were crimes against the state.

Rebekah hung her head and then looked up into the eyes of her friend, returning to her initial fear. "Once we're gone, we can no longer be friends. It will be too dangerous for you."

Gerda struggled to find words of comfort. "Of course we'll still be friends," she said. "I know we can figure it out. Look," she continued, "here's what we'll do. I'll follow you in the morning with my bread wagon. The SS, and even the *Gestapo*, let me take it all over the city for deliveries. So I'll see where you go and then it will be easier for me to find you again. To come and see you. To help you. And your family." She hugged her friend one more time. "It will be okay, Bekah. We'll make it work. Please stop crying."



GERDA SLEPT FITFULLY FOR THE NEXT COUPLE OF HOURS, then woke to shouts followed by screams. She eased her curtains away from the window and looked down to the sidewalk, horrified at the scene. Two uniformed men dragged Rebekah's mother out the front door of the butcher shop and down the three steps to the street while a third forced a silver menorah from her fingers.

Gerda flung her clothes on and sped down the stairs.

"*Mutti*," she whispered when she stepped into the bakery's back room, "the SS have evicted Rebekah's family. They're dragging *Frau* Rosenbaum out her front door. We have to help."

"*Nein, Liebchen*," her mother whispered back, hugging her close. "We're being watched. If we do anything to help, we could be taken too."

"But...but..."

"I know, *Liebling*. It is terrible." Gerda's mother swiped tears from her own cheeks. "The world is crazy right now. But Mr. Rosenbaum knew it was coming. And your father and I have talked about it. There is nothing we can do." At Gerda's stricken face, her mother continued, "We've been warned, *mein Schatz*. And we must protect you and Ernst."

And our business.” Tears flowed freely down her face. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Without another word, Gerda loaded her bread wagon for the day’s deliveries, one of which was close to the Flossenbürg sub-camp near the Auto Union plant, now known as the “Jewish-only” sector of the city. She figured that’s where Rebekah and her family would be taken. Without her mother’s knowledge, she added several pieces of strudel and left by the bakery’s front door.

Rebekah’s mother sat on the curb in front of her shop with Rebekah’s arm around her shoulders. The uniformed men guarded their door and wicked grins stretched their faces as they watched Mr. Rosenbaum struggle to get his two-wheeled cart, piled high with the family’s belongings, down the stairs. With only one step to go, a guard pushed him and he tripped, falling to the sidewalk with his right leg twisted under him. Another of the men turned the cart over, spilling its contents to the ground.

The sound of their laughter filled Gerda with disgust but she didn’t allow it to show on her face.

“*Hallo,*” Gerda called, her voice pleasant. The uniformed men turned to her and their faces transformed from mocking sneers to obscene leers. “Would you gentlemen care for some fresh-baked strudel?” Her face was a mask of innocence. She couldn’t ask them to leave her friends alone, but she could give the Rosenbaums time to pull themselves together.

Right away, the men surrounded her wagon, but she managed to stay out of their reach as she handed out the confections. While Gerda had the SS men occupied, Rebekah straightened the cart and secured their belongings. Her parents rose slowly from the sidewalk, her father wincing with pain. The yellow Star of David adorned their breast pockets.

Gerda was embarrassed for them, but worse, for the monster her German government had become.

“*Danke, Fräulein,*” one of the uniformed men told her. He touched her arm and she pulled away, pretending to reach for napkins. When

they finished eating, the men rounded up Rebekah's family and herded them into the street.

Gerda waited a few minutes, then followed behind. She wasn't sure what she would do if the men continued to abuse her friends, but she kept them within her sight, regardless. They stopped at more houses along the way, wielding the same kind of rough treatment on the new families, swelling the crowd of Jewish people and marching them through the streets. Non-Jewish children taunted the group and threw stones and rotten fruit at them.

Her tears streaming, Gerda grabbed several children by their shoulders and sent them away but stopped and hung back again when the soldiers fixed her with icy stares.

Her friends reached their destination and were forced to stop in front of a table with two men in Nazi uniforms at the entrance to the Jewish-only sector. More SS soldiers waited beside them and, along with the original three, blew whistles, shouted, and shoved the Jewish people to the registration table. In the confusion of too many bodies pressing through too small a space, an elderly man fell and was trampled. When he couldn't rise, a guard shot him in the head.

Which prompted anguished shrieks from his wife.

They shot her too.

Gerda's hand flew to her mouth and she sank her teeth into its flesh to keep from crying out. She swallowed several times and took deep breaths but the bile rose and found her throat anyway. Fresh tears flooded her face as she pushed away thoughts of the dead couple's family and how devastated their children and grandchildren must be. She looked around, helpless, wishing she could do something, anything.

A sickening silence hung over the throng after that, but the remainder of the relocation finished without further incident.

She watched the families file through and was astounded at the number of small children who entered, many only babies. Her heart ached. She had heard rumors that Jewish children too small to work were often killed on the spot. She hadn't seen that while she watched, but she feared it was only a matter of time.

Rebekah turned before disappearing into the crowd. Neither of them dared wave, but their eyes locked.

Reluctantly, she turned her wagon to the street of her first delivery, wiping her tears, and forcing her face into a pleasant expression, while inside, her stomach burned and her mind seethed.

Something had to be done. If her parents were too afraid, then she'd do it.

Whatever "it" turned out to be.

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