

FAMILIES AT WAR

This book is dedicated to Hans Scharpf and Tom Kennedy and all our families.

“Me miserable! Which way shall I fly
Infinite wrath and infinite despair?
Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell;
And in the lowest deep a lower deep,
Still threat’ning to devour me, opens wide,
To which the hell I suffer seems a heaven.”

– John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Chapter 1

July 1938 – The Art Room

The third-best place to work in the art room was occupied by Judith Lareine, a twenty-year-old English Jewess. She was looking out of the big bay window at Lake Constance, watching the little sailing boats fluttering their ways to and fro in the blue afternoon of the July sun. It was 1938 and certainly not the best of times for Jews in Germany. The worst were yet to come.

The room was really a community chamber of the Saint Nikolas Catholic Church, Friedrichshafen, which was used by its members for various cultural activities. It had an old wooden floor and always a musty smell of catechism and boredom. Herr Ganther, a resident, eccentric artist, had offered to teach artistic techniques and appreciation in an after-school course to students of the local grammar schools. Today, only three young people had turned up to finish their work.

School: it was the last day of their final year, and she had attained very good grades in her Abitur; an average of 1,3, which would be the equivalent of top marks in England. If they accepted the German Abi. Although she had had to repeat two years since 1932 (which was allowed in Germany), she had made such excellent progress in German in word and script that she had achieved a straight 2,0, or an eighty per cent mark. And she had worked hard to get it. In French she was also competent, having received private lessons with Brigitte Rollet since she was eight years of age.

It was a wonder that they had been able to finish at Abitur level; everything was changing in Germany. She could now choose any university she wanted to study languages at, but not in this frightening country that had become so horrible. What to

do? Surely her father would soon finish his research work at Freiburg University, and they could go home. The storm clouds had now gathered. It would seem that, officially, she and Matthias would soon be enemies...

To her left and diagonally in front of her (at the second-best place in the art room) sat Matthias Krieger. He was carving what seemed to be the silhouette of a woman's face, simple, yet so delicately, exquisitely, formed. He said it was of and for his mother, who loved to sit outside their farmhouse at night and observe the moon as it moved around and over the lake. Matthias was one year younger and slightly smaller than her. He was broad-shouldered, strong-armed with a sturdy, robust figure. She loved his curly, untidy, dark hair and his contrastingly strong but fine, delicate-looking hands, which she would like very much to feel on her body.

She had been to his house and had met his parents. They were nice, characteristically Catholic Swabian. They had welcomed her into their home in the polite yet reserved manner that was typical of the region. Matthias took after his father, who not only ran a small farm but also built roof frameworks for houses and sometimes boats. Just of late, they had won a contract with the German army to repair wooden transport carts. Matthias helped him after school, specialising also in making furniture. She very much liked the table he was making for a family in the town centre – of cherrywood with a centrepiece that could be folded out from underneath, thus enlarging it. She liked his quiet, thoughtful manner when they conversed. He was a creative, honest, hardworking, very gentle young man who was delightful to be with. He had an Abitur average of grade 3,0, an average mark, apart from mathematics, in which he had got a 2,0. He was unsure if he should study engineering (or even art), or stay on and help his father run the family business and at the same time qualify to become a master carpenter.

On Wednesday evening, whilst ironing her blouse to get ready for school the next day, she had been struck by the sudden realisation that she wanted to be with this artistic, yet sturdy, kind, somewhat reticent young man for the rest of her life. She wanted his babies. Of this, she was sure. Simultaneously, she felt a sense of foreboding that was darkening her mind.

To cap it all, to be indoors on a hot summer's day was not where she wanted to be at all. All the other members of the art group were down at the lake, where she should be – i.e. at Matthias's home by the lakeside in Eriskirch watching him work outside on his table for the Fischer family and then sitting under the oak tree by the lake. Talking and laughing, drinking his mother's homemade lemonade. Then into the lake, splashing, fooling about, and laughing again with lovely Matthias. Simultaneously, as she thought this, Matthias shifted about in his seat. He could now feel Judith's eyes on him. He turned slightly away from his carving to look over at her and was met by a cross-eyed gaze aimed straight at him.

He burst out laughing and said: "You look like a new Picasso portrait, Lady Lareine!"

"And you like something from Grosz and his horror paintings!" Judith shot back.

"Sssshh, modernists are perverts, don't forget!"

They both laughed and their looks lingered on each other. Judith stared at Matthias long and longingly, until he blushed bright red and turned back to his carving piece, to the sound of Judith's giggles. She looked at her painting of Matthias's house by the lake in the style of Gabriele Münter of the Blue Rider Group around Wassily Kandinsky. She was pretty sure that the expressionist style of painting was classified as degenerate by the Nazi government – she was taking a risk.

Old Herr Ganther, who always smelt of turpentine and onions, did not seem bothered and, after looking long and hard, he said: "Nice use of colour and an unusual perspective, Fräulein Lareine – I see that you have observed your subject with great care." This was Ganther's credo: do not just gaze; look and observe in detail and observe again.

At the biggest window, Hinrich Richter had claimed the very best position in the room. He was also the most beautiful boy in the school. Judith had thought so too, at first, admiring his long, elegant, athletic, and muscular form, his almost perfectly chiselled features, his beautiful blond, wavy hair, and his outstanding intelligence. Two years ago, he had asked her out for a walk along the lake, and she had found him to be charming but superficial and very much in love with himself. He was also a member of the Hitler Youth, which she despised and feared. Apparently, his father had become an important figure in the SS in recent years. At that time, nobody knew she was Jewish. He had asked her out again. She had refused, being more abrupt than she had intended to be.

Recently she had told Matthias (the only person) that she was a Jew. He reacted somewhat surprised, then shrugged his shoulders and said: "It makes no difference to the way I feel about you, Judith, but we have to be careful."

That was the first time they kissed. As luck would have it, Frau Krieger had just come out onto the yard and had observed them and the kiss on the bench under the oak tree beside the lake in the evening sunshine. She had smiled.

Hinrich Richter was a different kettle of fish altogether. In his Abitur, he had an average grade of 1,0 – over ninety per cent in all subjects. However, art was not his strongest skill set. Although he was good at sketching, he knew a lot more about art than he could practise competently at a high level. Judith was certain that it would be

most irksome for him to see that others were better than him; he no doubt took satisfaction in the knowledge that he was going to make a lot of money dealing with art in general. Through his father, he had bragged about what treasures the SS had captured in Austria and the Sudetenland. He had delighted openly more than once that Papa had brought such treasures into the house and Mama was absolutely delighted to wear such beautiful pearls (although stolen). Judith was frightened of him, for she knew, if Hinrich could be believed, that up to now, he had done well in the Hitler Youth Organisation and saw his future in the SS or in the safer option, with the Gestapo. Hinrich had told her quite candidly that 'it was important to have direct power over people in order to achieve one's aims, with the least possible risk to oneself'.

Hinrich was sketching, with charcoal, a somewhat clumsy copy from Rembrandt's *The Jewish Bride*, a print of which he had before him. Charcoal was the appropriate medium for Jews, so he thought. He was going to use this. He had announced at the start of their session that although the theme of the painting was repulsive, van Gogh had said of this painting: "One must have died many times to paint like this." And that van Gogh, the mad, Dutch, perverted artist, had, in October 1885, spent many hours and days in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, gazing at the painting in wonderment. Later, he had committed suicide, which was a good thing as far as Hinrich was concerned; only the strong must prevail. *The law of nature*, he concluded smugly.

Everybody seemed to stir uneasily, their chairs scratching against the surface of the pinewood floor, as he made this pronouncement. No one dared to contradict him. He continued his lecture by describing the tenderness of the two figures, their

loving devotion, and their inward gaze on what they were together and perhaps what the future may bring.

After that, Hinrich continued his sketching, and gradually it became apparent that the man was not resting his hand on the young woman's heart in gentle affection and she touching it with her own hand with unconscious love. No! Judith looked across again. The hand Hinrich had sketched was squeezing a much fuller bosom and the young woman's face was showing pain. The man's face had been changed to look like Hinrich and was showing pleasure. The young woman's face (and bosom) were Judith's.

Hinrich, seeing Judith's shocked expression, smiled, and said: "My farewell Jewish present for you, my dear *Jew-dith!* Are you coming to the end-of-school party down at the lake this evening? Please do. There will be plenty of pork steaks and sausages for you to enjoy, *Jew-dith!*"

Judith paled and shrank back under the force of Hinrich's attack.

"He knows, he knows!" she exclaimed to herself, sinking down miserably into her chair, her mind filled with the humiliations, beatings and murders the Jews in Germany had had to endure. Why did her father want to stay so long in this nightmare of a country? It could not be just his work at the university.

"Shut up, Richter, you poisonous snake!" shouted Matthias instantly, placing himself between the two of them, with Judith behind him.

"You be careful, stumpy little farmer boy in your silly short trousers, or I might just deal you out the thrashing you deserve."

"You arrogant Nazi piece of dirt!" cried Matthias and lunged towards Hinrich in red-faced fury.

"That's enough!"

Judith looked across and saw Herr Ganther moving surprisingly quickly between the two would-be fighters. He pivoted and then held Matthias from behind, locking both arms. Matthias began to struggle and was driving them both towards a pale-faced Hinrich, who was beginning to realise what he had set off. They were all standing by the big window in the full glare of the sun, Matthias sweating heavily, with Hinrich giving off a fearful smell. The room seemed to grow smaller around them. Hinrich, realising he wasn't cutting a good figure by backing off, took up his piece of charcoal and dabbed Matthias deftly on both cheeks. Matthias roared with anger and, freeing himself with a wild wrench, threw himself at Hinrich, the two of them rolling on the floor exchanging blows, although Hinrich was scratching and biting rather than punching.

Hinrich's easel came crashing down on top of them both, with Herr Ganther screaming at the top of his voice for them to stop. There was a sudden lull, when only the snorting and gasping of the two combatants was audible, and Judith called out, half imploring, half commanding: "Matthias, please *stop!*"

Matthias, suddenly motionless, seemed momentarily lost in thought. Then, he let go of Hinrich and with one huge, strong shrug, shook off Hinrich's hold on himself. He stood glaring over Hinrich. For a full minute, there was silence in this house of God, until Herr Ganther spoke with a firm, yet somewhat quivery voice: "Now then, you two, enough is enough. I want you both to shake hands and put this incident behind you. Otherwise, I shall see myself forced to inform both your parents, for fear you should continue with this stupid, distasteful fight later on."

"He started it, Herr Ganther, and I have got a splinter in my behind, my trousers are ruined!" blurted out Hinrich, causing the others to laugh with astonishment at his childishness.

Herr Ganther soldiered on regardless. "This evening, you have the end-of-school celebrations down at the lake with the rest of your class. So, shake hands and leave in peace. Shame on you both; this is a spiritual place," said Herr Ganther calmly, now completely composed again. "Shame on you both."

Matthias hesitated and somewhat shamefacedly then stuck out his hand.

Hinrich half-heartedly gave it a weak shake and, looking down on Matthias, announced: "I really don't know what all the fuss is about, Herr Ganther; most disturbing, I must say."

Judith groaned and, glancing across again at Hinrich's fallen easel, noticed that he had removed the offensive drawing. There was nothing more to be said.

"Come on, Matthias, let's go. Thank you for everything, Herr Ganther," she said quietly.

"Yes, it would be better if you left now. You can pick up your work tomorrow. I will tidy up the rest. Hinrich will help me, will you not, Hinrich..."

Hinrich smarted, thought about it, and nodded his agreement. Some minutes later, just as Matthias and Judith were leaving the room and standing behind Herr Ganther, he called out: "See you down at the lake, *Jew-dith*, and I'll save a couple of nice pork sausages for you. I'm sure you will like them, their form especially."

Matthias made to turn back, but Judith held him tight and so they struggled their way out of the door and into the hot sunshine, holding on to each other tightly.