

Bluebird



SHARON
CAMERON



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CHAPTER ONE

— *August 1946* —

IT IS A LAND WITHOUT RUBBLE.

Eva leans over the top rail of the ship, gazing across the leaden sea. And there are no piles of charred stone. No smoking pits or chunks of broken concrete. Just walls. A city of them. Whole and strong-looking, rising brick by solid brick. Beautiful, unbombed buildings floating in a bank of gray and sooty fog.

This is a new world now. That's what they'd told her. The old world is ash. Burnt like paper in the fire winds of Berlin.

Sometimes, Eva thinks, people tell you lies.

There's supposed to be a statue, but she can't find it in the mist.

Up onto the first rung of the rail and Eva leans out again, hands free, knees braced against the metal, hooked in place by her shoe heels. She can see the tops of heads and hats on the lower deck, water churning into foam far below them. And the city spreads, bigger, closer, anchored to the moving horizon.

She closes her eyes. Lets the wind snatch her hair. Slap her cheeks. It's like driving fast with the windows down. Like diving off a cliff.

It feels a little like flying.

When she opens her eyes again, the city is lost to the fog bank and an island has taken its place. She can see children down there, playing in the haze, jumping up and down on a seawall built to keep them

from falling into the harbor. The children are fascinating. These children don't know about unexploded grenades. Or teetering walls that collapse when climbed. And no one here is going to shoot them for their shoes.

She'd forgotten there could be children like that.

The barest brush of a moth wing, and Brigit is beside her. Eva steps down quickly to the deck and takes Brigit's hand. Brigit smiles at the children. A smile that lights the fog. And then the second mate hurries past and she cringes. Shrinks into herself. The mate touches his cap, like he has a hundred times, disappearing catlike down a ladder, and Eva puts her arm through Brigit's arm. Tightens her grip on Brigit's hand.

Brigit is not like the children. She will never be like the children again.

Sharp heels come clicking across the deck.

"Eva! Brigit!" says Miss Schaffer. "What are you doing up here? Where are your hats? Where are your bags?"

"Our suitcases are in the cabin, Miss Schaffer," Eva replies.

Her English is careful. Correct. But she doesn't understand Miss Schaffer's use of the word *bag*. The suitcases they were given do not even resemble a sack. It's hard to know what Brigit understands, because Brigit does not speak. But she must have learned a little English, because Eva sees her hand dart suddenly to her head, as if surprised not to find a hat there.

"Well, hurry, please," Miss Schaffer fusses. She has a clipboard clutched to her chest, a badge with an eight-pointed black-and-red starburst sewn onto her sleeve. "We couldn't have you greeting America with bare heads. It would be indecent."

Indecent, Eva thinks. The opposite of *decent*, which means "nice." Civilized. She'd known many indecent people in her life, and most of them had been wearing their hats.

Miss Schaffer disappears down the stairwell, and the second mate comes back up the ladder. And now that Miss Schaffer isn't near, he gives an extra smile to Eva. A sly one. Because she let him kiss her. And put his hands on her blouse. For aspirin. When Brigit was sick and the doctor said others were sicker.

"Fair is fair." That's what the second mate had said.

And then Brigit has a foot up on the rail, her body pitching forward, over and down to the lower decks. Eva grabs a handful of skirt and yanks her back again.

You have to be quick with Brigit.

"No," Eva whispers, taking her hand again, patting her arm. "Not that way."

She never should have let Brigit see her up on the rail.

The second mate shakes his head, disgusted. But Brigit was only trying to see the children. It's Eva who would have jumped. Or let herself fall.

The second mate doesn't know it was Eva who put the dead rat in his laundry bag.

Fair is fair.

"*Kommen Sie mit,*" Eva whispers. Her German is only for Brigit now. She leads her away from the rail, away from the mate, down two flights of stairs into the electric-yellow light of belowdecks. Around the corner, and Eva opens a small wooden door.

Their hats are side by side on a narrow bed in the narrow cabin they have shared across a wilderness of sea water. Eva hates the cabin. The walls are too close. But she can turn the lock whenever she wants, and this, she loves. The other passengers love it, too. The other passengers are afraid of Brigit.

They probably should be.

Eva turns the lock now and sits Brigit on the only chair.

She straightens Brigit's blouse—not as white as it had once been, but crisply ironed—pulling the buttonholes downward where they want to gap across her bust. Then she pins on Brigit's hat. It's an ugly hat, black-coffee brown and without shape, but Brigit makes it beautiful. She blinks two clear blue eyes, while Eva turns to the mirror. Eva's hair is wild and the color of Brigit's hat. She'd pinned it up the night before, like her mother used to make her do. To tame the curls.

Anything tame is gone now. Lost to the sea wind.

Her mother is gone now, too. Burnt up with the past.

Eva squashes her own hat on her head and then smooths her skirt, feeling for the papers she has sewn inside the lining. Safe. She stands up Brigit and checks her skirt. The papers are safe there, too. She can feel them. Will anyone else be able to feel them? How thoroughly will they be searched? What if the plan doesn't work?

The man said it would work.

She knows the man tells lies.

Eva turns to the basin, playing with the water like she's washing her hands. Brigit cannot be allowed to see fear.

So she breathes. And breathes. And pretends to wash her hands.

Then Eva dries her hands and gives Brigit her suitcase, wrapping each of Brigit's fingers around the handle. She smiles when she doesn't want to.

"Time to go," she says. "Stay with me, yes?"

Brigit blinks.

Eva picks up her purse and her suitcase, and they step out of their small, safe cabin for the last time, up the metal stairs, and out into the smell of a harbor. Flags snap along the halyards, the anchor motor buzzing the boards beneath her feet. Brigit cringes. The lower deck is swarming now—refugees and war brides and bits and pieces of families, hanging over the rails, yelling and crying, waving their

arms and their handkerchiefs. The docking point is in sight and it is also swarming, people cheering and crying and waving their arms and their handkerchiefs.

There is no one down there waving for her.

Eva turns Brigit quickly toward the bulkhead, getting her back to the noise and the crowd, pulling down her hat brim to make a little tent around her face. Brigit holds out her hand like she's been taught, and Eva gets two buttons from her purse and puts them in Brigit's palm. Brigit smiles, touching the buttons, distracted, and then Miss Schaffer comes, clicking on her heels.

"There you are! Eva Gerst and Brigit Heidelmann." She ticks two boxes on her list. "You have your papers?"

Eva holds up two sets of papers, the ones she will allow Miss Schaffer to see. The ones she will not allow her to see are rustling in their skirts. Miss Schaffer nods, and moves on down the line she is forming. There are thirty-eight in their group, from toddlers to grandparents, Polish, French, Ukrainian, Latvian, and Hungarian. Eva and Brigit are the only Germans. Because Germans are the enemy.

But they all have new suitcases. The lucky ones. Coming to America. Leaving hell like a dream behind them.

Or bringing it with them.

"Show the man at the desk your papers," Miss Schaffer shouts at her line. The noise of the cheering is deafening. "Nothing to be afraid of! Just answer the questions truthfully, and there won't be a thing to worry about . . ."

Only Eva will not be answering truthfully. And Brigit will not be answering at all.

The movement of the ship slows to nothing, the flags hang limp, and the deck boards go still beneath Eva's feet.

America.

They wait a long time. Brigit gets bored with her buttons. Eva adds a blue one, held back for this purpose. The gulls wheel and squawk. And at last their line moves down the gangway, people carrying trunks and cases, tagged bundles propped on their heads. Eva takes away the buttons and holds tight to Brigit's hand. One step. Two steps. The dock comes closer, closer, the crowd calling out names, the babble of so much English wild and strange in Eva's ears. The man in front of them is crying with happiness.

So much hope. But hope isn't what Eva came for.

She's come for justice.

Their feet land together on solid ground. American ground.

And suddenly, America is enormous.

A beam of sunlight finds a crack in the clouds, coloring the ship, the faces. Eva sees the statue now, on its own island across the water, arm held high to the sun. Brigit raises her chin. She has always loved the light. Her smile is beatific. Angelic.

"Welcome to America," says a man. A young man, pausing on his way to somewhere. Men always pause for Brigit. He has a short haircut, a duffel bag on his shoulder, and a uniform. Army.

So he has been to hell, too.

Brigit cringes and Eva steps a little in front of her. The young man in the uniform doesn't notice. He tosses something shiny into the air.

Eva drops her suitcase to catch it. A little candy, wrapped in gold foil, glittering like a gem. Brigit stops shivering, distracted. She knows something sweet when she sees it. She smiles until she dimples.

"Thank you," Eva says, and at the sound of her voice, the young man's face goes hard. Like gun metal.

"Kraut," he says. And spits on her shoe.