

# ARTIFICE

SHARON  
CAMERON



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# 1

## *Amsterdam, The Netherlands* — September 1943 —

*EVERY EYE FOLLOWS* when you walk like you have something to hide.

So Isa de Smit slowed her steps. Hummed. Dug for a handkerchief in the pocket of her tatty wool coat. Blended into the background. Faded into a landscape of steep-stepped gables and moving feet. And the gazes passed her by on the morning-misted street, glancing across her cheeks with the barest of brushstrokes.

Isa wanted to be seen and remain unnoticed.

Because Isa had something to hide.

She tucked her package tight beneath her arm.

Amsterdam was a colorful city. Blue boats and blue doors. A butter-framed window in marmalade brick. Leaves that were autumn-tinted, fog-frosted, marbling the pale acid-lime of a copper patina. But there were new shades on the city's palette now. Spattered on the walls, dripping down the flagpoles.

Black on bloodred. Army olive. Khaki brown.

Nazi brown.

A German soldier leaned against the iron railing of the canal bridge, rifle in one hand, cigarette in the other, a silhouette against waters of rippling viridian. His gaze flicked to Isa once and away. The package under her arm was awkward—flat, square, and

slippery—wrapped in brown paper and tied up with string. As if she'd decided to truss up a window and take it for a stroll. Isa adjusted her grip. The soldier studied the curling smoke of his cigarette. And her feet changed their rhythm.

Faster. Closer. A little faster.

She was eyeing the middle button of the soldier's jacket, a spot of gleaming brass set squarely in the center of his drab brown chest. Imagining the coolness of the metal. How it might press into her palm when she gave it a sharp and sudden shove. Imagining the indignation. The surprise.

The splash.

Her feet went faster. Closer.

And now the Nazi was watching her walk, a line between his eyes. And then the number 14 tram rolled to a stop and Isa took it. She made her way down the narrow aisle, to the very last seat, package perched on her knees. The tram lurched, and the electric motor purred.

It was not the tram she had meant to take. Now she would have to change. Now she was late.

But she had removed temptation.

The polished wood interior was dim where it should have gleamed, dull where it should have been cheerful. The passengers rode in silence. And then four Nazi soldiers climbed on, taking the two front seats on either side of the aisle. The tram was loud with German. Laughing. Joking. Isa saw her stop, and let it pass. She let the next stop pass, and the next. She did not want to thread the narrow way between the soldiers. Not with her package. They might as well have formed a blockade.

The tram bumped and leaned around a curve. No one got off. Some elected not to get on. Shoulders brushed, umbrellas knocking

against knees, until the soldiers finally stood and left the tram at Plantage. The passengers breathed a collective sigh. Then the tram hurtled around the corner to the next stop and disgorged.

Isa stepped down to the sidewalk with her package. Chin up. Eyes up. Invisible.

She walked past burnt-umber roof tiles. Wine-purple pansies spilling from their pots. The clean lead-white of a grocer's empty shelves. Around the corner, and the trees were torches lit with russet-gold. Across the street, and the windows were smoke-stained, blackened teeth of broken glass, soft gray soot smearing the cinnabar bricks of the Records Office, firebombed five months ago by the Resistance.

Arondeus had done that, with thirteen others—artists, musicians, and students—burning up records so the Nazis couldn't uncover false identities. So they couldn't find Jews. Only, the Nazis had found someone. They'd found Arondeus. And ten more.

And they had shot them.

Isa had liked Arondeus, a shy man—odd, but funny—a favorite in her mother's studio. She missed him. She missed them all. And then she turned the corner and there was the stop where she could catch the number 4. And there was the brown again, Nazi brown—too much brown—the soldiers who had been on the tram now passing a bottle with the guard of a derelict theater on the other side of the street. The theater had been gutted, windows boarded over, the handles of its grand doors chained.

It was a deportation site. A holding place. A prison for Jews.

And here came the tram, the number 8, clattering down the center of the pavement, blocking the view of the soldiers. And here came Truus, quick down the steps of the teaching college, the soles of her sensible lace-ups making a bright, smart slap against the stone. She had

a leather overnight bag gripped by its handles, swinging at the level of her skirt hem.

Truus was supposed to be away. Living in a forest. Blowing up train tracks and cutting telephone wires.

Isa was supposed to be at home. With her father. Making sure he didn't burn down the kitchen.

The people locked in the theater should have been at home, too, and the Nazis should have stayed in Germany.

No one was where they were supposed to be today.

Isa paused on the pavement. "Truus!" she said.

Truus froze, one foot behind her on the step.

"What are you doing in the city?" Isa asked.

Truus had eyes as soft as a new spring sky. Isa could remember a time when they were innocent. The leather bag in her hand squirmed. Once. Twice. And then Truus walked away, fast down the street. Shoulders hunched. Eyes down, locked on her path. Like she didn't want to be seen. Like she didn't want to be seen so much that she was going to make herself be seen.

Isa turned her back. So she couldn't watch Truus go. She breathed, and didn't let the air out again.

The tram squeaked and rumbled away, and there were the Germans, still milling in front of the prison-theater, leaning against the columns. Two of them were laughing, one unlocking the chain looped through the handles of the building's front doors. And one soldier had his gaze fixed on Isa, with her awkward package and a lock of flame-red hair sticking out from a hole in her knitted hat, standing stock-still and staring on the opposite side of the street.

Exposed.

Memorable.

Isa released the air from her lungs, and she walked slow—too

slow—hesitating down the sidewalk. Looking back. Looking front and looking back again. Letting the soldier see. Letting his eyes follow her instead of Truus. Remember her instead of Truus. Two steps. Three. Away from the teaching college, clutching the package against her side.

There was a drawing inside her package. A Rembrandt. Irreplaceable and priceless.

Or worthless, depending on who you asked.

Because the picture inside Isa's package was a fake.

What Truus had been carrying was priceless, too. Or worthless, depending on who you asked. Only what Truus had was real. All too real.

Because what Truus had been carrying in that bag was a baby.

Isa glanced back. The soldier was still watching her while the others chatted. She met his eyes over the slick, black metal of a slow-moving car. And then she hurried. Let him remember the girl half running down the street with a strange, window-shaped, paper-wrapped package. So the memory of another girl—a girl with a precious leather bag—would fade, bleached like a print left too long in the sun.

It must have been a Jewish baby. There was no other sort of baby Truus would need to smuggle. But what was a Jewish baby doing in the teaching college? And where was Truus taking it?

One cry. One whimper. One wrong glance from the wrong person. One soldier watching Truus walk like she had something to hide and she would be caught.

Truus would be shot. Or worse.

If Isa was caught selling forgeries, then the Nazis might shoot her, too.

Or worse.

And if Isa was found selling away her country's artistic heritage, feeding the greed of the invading Nazis with the art treasures of the Netherlands, then Truus might be the one doing the shooting, because shooting was what could happen to a collaborator in Amsterdam. Or a bomb. Or a rope around the neck. A quiet drowning, at midnight in the canal.

The Nazi gaze on her back felt like a rubber band—stretching, stretching—until a truck, its tall back draped in olive canvas, cranked to a stop in front of the theater, snapping their connection. The truck motor chugged, brash over the rattle of the door chains, and Isa risked a last backward glance. Truus and her bag were gone, lost to the color and the thinning fog. The rear gate of the truck screeched down onto the pavement, a metal tongue scraping the street. An open mouth.

The guard who had been watching her was fully occupied now, beating and bullying prisoners out of the theater. She could hear the sound of sticks and rifle butts, the soft, sickening thwack of wood against flesh, the cries and the protests. Dutch. Yiddish. The bark of a German order. And the prisoners vanished into the wide, dark mouth. Like Moshe had. Like Levvy and Hilde.

She knew what *deportation* meant now. What it really meant. Everyone knew what the trucks meant now.

Damn the Nazis. Damn them straight into the flames of Goya's hell.  
Isa walked to the next tram stop, package held tight against her side.  
Blending. Fading.  
Invisible.  
There were so many different ways to die today.