

## IN SIGHT OF SHORE

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Excerpt: First Chapter

Hamburg, Germany

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Rosa

A red flag cracked in the wind as I walked toward the ship that hulked on the pier. Bold black lines slashed into a white circle in the flag's center. Of course the Swastika scarred the ship that would carry us away from Germany. I tightened my grip on my suitcase, as if I were grasping my family's safety, as if red knuckles could keep us from harm. A crowd milled around us—mainly fellow passengers, but also crew members, in white uniforms, and Nazi officials, in grey. Swastikas marred the armbands of crew and Nazis alike. I tried to lead my family closer to crew members, not Nazis, in the vain hope they would treat us more fairly, despite their show of allegiance. War was coming for everyone in Germany, but peril had already arrived for us. *If we made it on the ship, we'd be safe. If we made it on the ship, we'd live.*

A camera flashed in front of me, dazzlingly bright, and I teetered in my too-small pumps. Mother had insisted I wear my best shoes, and it had been hard to get new ones for some time. I stumbled sideways into my little sister, Erika. She put a hand on my back to steady me and I blinked until the bright lights faded from my vision.

"Klutz." Erika smiled, but my stomach roiled.

The photographer made me feel like another Jewish *rat* Hitler could brag about pushing out of Germany. I glared at the photographer, who wasn't even trying to get a picture of us. Of course the Nazis didn't want images of well-dressed Jews. Instead, the photographer focused on a thin man whose crumpled suit jacket hung off his hunched shoulders. I imagined this man as he would have looked as a customer at my father's jewelry store, suit freshly ironed, shopping for a present for his wife, shoulders tall and broad. I'd heard Father whispering about men being released from Dachau on the condition they left on the *St. Louis*. I wondered if this man was one of them. My uncle had been sent to Dachau, and was still there, as far as we knew. He'd been a round and joyous man. I wondered if he looked this thin and broken now, too. I promised myself I'd be particularly kind to this man if I saw him on the ship.

We'd feared boarding the ship would be chaotic, even dangerous. We'd dressed in the best clothes we had, despite the shortages, anticipating the cameras. Besides, we needed to be at our best for the entire trip, as the Grubers would be traveling with us. Our fate once we disembarked in Cuba rested upon their connections. I wore a thick jacket, though the day was warm, to save space in my suitcase and hide the jewelry we'd sewn into the lining. My neck and ears felt bare; gold and silver had been forbidden to Jews, and it was better not to wear imitations and give the Nazis an excuse to ask questions. The sketchbook in my pocket weighed down my

coat as well. The ocean was like a million sparkling emeralds, and I took a deep breath, calming myself with thoughts of sketching a design of a necklace that would capture its brilliance.

The camera flashed again, jarring me back to reality. The photographer moved on from the hunched man to a woman standing nearby with children dressed in threadbare jackets so small they couldn't button closed. Those children deserved help, not to be sensationalized for Nazi propaganda.

My anger made my hands sweat and my luggage threatened to slip out of my grip. I switched hands and tightened my fingers, being careful not to lose my suitcase in the jostling of the crowd.

A squat, blond Nazi official uniform bumped into Father. "Watch where you're going."

Father looked down at his shoes. Nausea surged up from my gut.

My father used to stand up to everyone. Once, a burglar came into Father's jewelry store, and Father chased him out with a tongue lashing and a broomstick.

The Nazi official looked at me. His cheeks were red, like he'd been doing hard manual labor all morning rather than patrolling docile refugees boarding a cruise ship.

I wanted to glare at him, dare him to arrest me, kill me for my gaze. A few years ago, I would never have thought I *could* be arrested for looking at someone the wrong way. But I knew better now. *If we made it on the ship, we'd be safe. If we made it on the ship, we'd live.*

I looked down too, and he moved on, shoving his way through the crowd, which was growing denser as we neared the ship.

No one stood up to him. No one wanted to risk it when they were so close to freedom. I remembered how Father and I had cowered, hidden in the jewelry store closet, while men screamed on the street and raided the display cases. The memory was so real I could hear the

windows breaking. I looked around to remind myself I was on a pier, far from breaking glass—or *crystal*, as the Nazis had called it, in their cruel pretending that *Kristallnacht* had been some kind of glorious victory. I refused to call it their name—it was the Night of Broken Glass, not crystal. We were lucky that years ago, Father had disguised the closet door with a cabinet to protect the safe. His clever design may have saved our lives. I wanted to survive just like everyone else, but every time I looked down instead of standing up for myself, I felt another splinter break off in my soul, like a cracked window just waiting to shatter.

My nausea threatened to erupt and I grabbed Erika's hand. She gave me a little squeeze and smiled up at me, her warmth bringing me back to reality. I wondered if she'd even noticed how rude the Nazi had been. I hoped she hadn't. I couldn't protect her forever. She knew what was going on. But a small, hopeful part of me—maybe the best part—had this idea that as long as Erika was safe, shielded, whole, there was a chance that one day, I could feel whole again too.

A small band played, and Mother lifted her shoulders as though she were marching in a parade. We walked toward the first-class gangway. We hadn't exactly lived a first-class lifestyle in Berlin. Not many people had. It was tough to own a jewelry store in these times, but people would go to quite some lengths to give each other beauty. My father had sold what was left of his business after the Night of Broken Glass and before the Nazis made it illegal for Jews to own silver and gold, and we'd been living on that money ever since. Yet we weren't allowed to take more than ten Reichsmarks out of Germany, so Mother and Father decided to book fancy cabins for the trip. We'd have to survive on ten Reichsmarks once we got to Cuba no matter how much we spent on our cabins. Ten Reichsmarks wasn't even enough to feed us for a week. Mr. Gruber had assured us his family in Cuba would take care of our needs until we established an income. It was a fragile promise based on friendship, and when it came to the Grubers' son and me,

possibly more than friendship. David Gruber was nice. And handsome. Everything my parents wanted me to want.

“Are you excited to go on the boat? I hope we’ll see whales and dolphins.” Erika’s high voice rattled against my skull like a whistling tea kettle. I tried to let the pressure out, let Erika’s voice lift me up and keep me sane the way it had ever since I huddled in the store on Kristallnacht and she was home safe.

“I would love to see a dolphin.” In the store, we had carried a sweet dolphin charm necklace which was a popular gift for little girls. Maybe this journey could inspire me to draw my own line. If we survived it.

Erika’s optimism didn’t keep my suitcase from feeling heavier with each step. The ship loomed impossibly large, taller than many of the buildings behind us in Hamburg. Mother navigated between other passengers, port officials, and crew. My ankles wobbled, and I almost bumped into several other passengers in the crowd. I cursed Mother for making me wear these old shoes.

“Rosa, there’s David Gruber,” Mother said as we drew closer to the gangway.

I dropped Erika’s hand and spun to find him. When the crowd thinned enough for him to see me, he smiled, teeth sparkling in the sunlight. With his symmetrical face and wavy brown hair, he could have been a model for an ad in *BIZ* magazine. But his eyes never crinkled when he smiled.

I waved back and Mother led us over toward his family, weaving through the crowd.

“We’re glad to see you arrived safely,” Mr. Gruber said. He was an older, thicker version of his son.

“Leopold.” Father shook Mr. Gruber’s hand as though they were strangers, as though they hadn’t met once a week after work for a drink for years.

The crowd parted around us as we stood still. Someone jostled me into Erika, and I put my hand on her shoulder, fighting the urge to clench. It wasn’t a Nazi. Just another passenger. I wanted to get moving, not stand still talking, but I felt stuck in the show of manners. *If we made it on the ship, we’d be safe. If we made it on the ship, we’d live.* It was easy to think that way, to get to the next moment, but our relationship with the Grubers was just as important to our long-term survival.

Mrs. Gruber tittered, her voice even higher than usual. “I’m so glad we’ll be on our way. I thought we’d all have to write letters to movie stars, and I don’t know any movie stars.”

My mother smiled, but I raised a weary brow. We’d all heard of the Berlin woman who skipped the quota line and went straight to America because she’d telegraphed her cousin who was a movie star. I didn’t know any movie stars either. As I watched the red-cheeked Nazi official from earlier inspect a suitcase, I didn’t feel we were *on our way* yet at all. I wouldn’t feel safe until we were on the ship, or even better, on the ground in Cuba. Or better yet, in our final destination, New York City.

A large hand slipped into mine, and I jumped.

“It’s just me.” David lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it.

My stomach should have fluttered, but instead I counted the seconds until David released my hand and dropped it back down to my side.

“You look beautiful today, Rosa.” David turned to Erika. “And you will be just as gorgeous as your sister one day.”

I blushed even though I didn't want to, and Erika raised one eyebrow in an expression that looked all too familiar. Maybe too much of my skepticism had worn off on her. I smiled at her unconscious mimicry. I wanted to tell David that Erika was already gorgeous, yet too young to be told such things by boys, but I just turned my smile on him. Perhaps I could grow to love him and we'd end up as happy as our parents thought we'd be. I had to keep the possibility open until we were safely set up in Cuba with the help of his family members who had already arrived and established businesses.

"I'm glad we found each other," David said, his voice deep and kind. "I'll take care of you on the ship."

"That sounds nice." Revulsion rose up in my stomach. I didn't want anyone taking care of me. After all, my mother had stopped her singing career to let my father *take care* of her. Sure, we'd had a good enough life back in Germany, but I'd hear her singing late at night sometimes, and it sounded, well, sad. I wanted to be the one to take care of people. I wanted to help my father reestablish his business in America, and one day take it over, and grow it into a design business, not just a reseller. I'd told David that, back home, and he'd laughed and said something about not having time to run a business while taking care of the children.

"May I?" David reached for my hand again.

Why he didn't ask me the first time, I didn't know, but I would take the manners where I could get them. I reached for his hand, and he gave me a small squeeze. Despite myself, his warm hand, strong but gentle, felt good in mine. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe it was nice to be taken care of. My father had taken care of me during the Night of Broken Glass, guiding me into the hidden closet, and I had taken care of him—I could tell my deep breaths and quiet calmed

him. Maybe, in these times, I needed to let go of my independence, and take all the help I could get.

Mrs. Gruber motioned to the first-class gangway. David dropped my hand to pick up two suitcases—he was carrying his and his mother’s, I assumed, since she didn’t have one in hand. I thought perhaps I should offer to carry my mother’s suitcase, but mine was heavy enough on its own.

As we moved closer to the gangway, the crowd tightened, and the Grubers had to file ahead of us. Erika stopped to fiddle with her shoe—which was also too small. Mother beckoned for me to walk ahead of the family.

A man in a crisp uniform walked in front of me, blocking me from the gangway. My breath sawed in and out of my chest, matching the wild waving of the Swastika flag. *If we made it on the ship, we’d be safe. If we made it on the ship, we’d live.* I hadn’t stood up to the Nazi, but this steward would not stand in my way.

“Miss?” His voice was loud against the crowd. I tried to keep moving, and looked down, hoping he’d be distracted, that he’d turn away, that he’d still let me and my family board the ship. I grasped my suitcase with both hands. It was so heavy, I wasn’t sure whether I could swing it as a weapon, but I could try. I was surrounded on three sides by the crowd of passengers. On the fourth side, the ship rested a few feet away from the dock. I wondered what would happen if I jumped in—would I be crushed between the ship and the dock?

“Miss, may I take your luggage?” his voice lilted, full and soft.

“What?” Disarmed by his kind voice, I looked up at him. An old scar jagged across his cheek, and his face was wrinkled with smile lines.



Still, I didn't want to give him my bag. Most of my belongings were in that bag. Except for the clothes on my back, the sketchbook and pencil in my pocket, and the jewelry sewn into my coat. The pier blurred into blue and white and brown and red, and I backed away from the man.

"May I take your luggage, Miss Rubinstein?"

My vision cleared, and I saw my parents and sister handing over their luggage to smiling stewards, who loaded the cases onto a cart.

"You—you're sure it will be safe?" My voice cracked.

His eyebrows relaxed and his cheeks lifted into a smile that was too wide for his thin face. "I'm sure."

My cheeks flushed as I realized that he was being kind, and I was being rude. "Of course. I apologize."

I handed over my luggage. As he loaded it into the cart and waved us forward, I rolled my shoulders to recover from carrying all that weight.

Erika bounced onto the gangway, following the Grubers, toward the front of the ship where the Nazi flag snapped. Even though she was six years younger than me, teetering on the edge of the end of her childhood, it seemed strange to see her so excited underneath that symbol of hate. She wasn't alone. Other kids ran up the gangway and stood on their toes to peer over the sides. Even David Gruber had a bounce in his step, now that he was free of carrying two suitcases. Two sisters, who looked similar in age to Erika and me—11 and 17—held hands and swung their arms back and forth. I wondered if the older sister was pretending to be joyous for the benefit of her sister. As I watched them smile, together, I saw what Erika and I may still have

been, if the Night of Broken Glass had never happened. I pictured a silver charm: one large hand, one smaller one, clasped together, whole.

Then the Swastika flag waved into my vision, and I stopped looking around, so it wouldn't assault my eyes again.

I followed my parents up the gangway. The suspended stairway was only a few feet from the pier, but it felt as if I had crossed a chasm, away from Germany, away from the place I'd always called home.