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## Gliewitz, Germany 1858

On an early spring morning, just past dawn, Rosalia Wolfson and Annaleya Steinberger trudged downtown to the fish market together. They clutched their wool shawls to keep the brisk vernal breeze from blowing them open. White bonnets framed their faces but couldn't prevent a few stray locks from flying out from under them. Each had a thick, coarse cotton shopping bag lined with newspaper, and pfennigs in their apron pockets. They were under orders of their respective mothers to select with discrimination the freshest, tastiest whitefish or herring they could find at the lowest price. As they passed the brickyard, a group of masons in black overalls and stained, tan shirts taking a beer break made kissing noises and leered at them.

"Ach, I would love to go over there and kick them in the shins," Rosalia groaned.

"Don't you like the attention?" Annaleya teased her. "Now that we aren't children, the men notice us. Especially you, *sheyna*, with your golden head of hair."

At thirteen, Rosalia Wolfson had only one friend, Annaleya Steinberger. She had argued with every other girl in the neighborhood. Even Annaleya exchanged cross comments

with her now and then, but she loved Rosalia well enough to overlook their spats. Their looks contrasted comically as they trudged through the town of Gliewitz arm in arm. Rosalia's short strides could barely keep up with Annaleya's long ones. Her fine blonde hair, escaping in strands from underneath her white bonnet, made Annaleya's long, thick, frizzy copper braid appear positively red as a tomato in contrast.

"Don't be silly! It's you they're ogling now that you have a bosom. I have practically nothing there," Rosalia griped, grasping her shopping bag tightly to her chest. She imagined the eyes of the brickyard masons penetrating through her clothes to the flatness of that area and laughing.

"Well, you will get a bosom soon enough. But look at you, like a tiny, beautiful doll. Who wouldn't be attracted? All the boys in yeshiva are."

"Those boys? They are still children themselves. And idiots. Especially my cousin Daniel. Oh, I can't bear him. He teases me so much when his family comes for dinner, and when we go to his house, he tries to get me alone and then pushes and shoves me."

"That means he's attracted to you, *sheyna*."

"I will show him some attraction. Maybe a crack on the head with the butter churn. Won't he like that? That will give him something to talk about to his friends, especially Jacob. He gives me the creeps. I think he'll grow up to be a *ganef*, a thief. He was already caught stealing something from the Rabbi, a gold ring or something like that."

"That's just idle gossip."

They turned a corner and the shopping district of Gliewitz splayed out before them. Vendors with carts called out their wares, and vendors with stands overflowing with fruits, vegetables, cuts of meat and seafood piled goods into customers' bags and wagons. The two girls veered sharply to the left where they knew the fish seller always stationed his stand. They had to stop abruptly and wait for a rattling buggy drawn by a tough, huffing brown mule to cross in front of them.

"Ach, the smell of fresh mule droppings. What a way to start a morning," Rosalia moaned.

"Stop complaining. There are fragrant odors here as well. I smell Frau Becker's fresh baked bread and pastries. Let's buy one each if we have a few pfennigs left at the end."

The girls stood elbow to elbow, eyeing the catch that Herr Weiner had on display. Large fillets of sturgeon gleamed in the morning sunlight. Perch, rainbow trout, and walleye stared with one dead eye out, scales wet and shiny.

"I will have three of those trout. What a good price! And a little bag of herring, bitte, Herr Weiner," Annaleya requested politely.

"Why so costly the herring?" Rosalia scowled. "Last week it was half that."

"Last week was last week," replied the fish seller as he filled Annaleya's thick leather tote with trout wrapped in butcher paper. "These herring I imported from Denmark." He paused to scoop up the very herring he was praising for Annaleya's smaller bag. "They are the best, the tastiest. Might go up even higher next week, who knows? Depends on the Danes and

import taxes.” He grinned and winked at Rosalia, wiping his chapped, swarthy hands on his apron. His dark eyes moved across their faces and down. “You are both growing up so fast! I remember when your mamas held your little hands while they shopped.”

Both girls blushed and giggled. When Rosalia finished her purchases, they strolled across the town square to Frau Becker’s bakery and bought a small pastry each to share with their mothers when they got home. The cobblestones of the downtown district rolled uncomfortably under their thickly soled, black leather boots. They walked in the shadows cast by blocky three-story apartment buildings to escape the increasingly stiff wind. Then they reached the dusty, unpaved dirt roads of the Jewish quarter, where familiar, small clapboard homes squeezed together. Neat little gardens sprouted around most of these poor abodes like multi-colored salads waving and curling in their loamy beds. Rosalia eyed the gardens that were visible from the front and side, comparing them to her own. She loved to work in Mama’s garden, digging her petite, roughened hands into the soil, planting seedlings, watering and observing their daily growth with anticipation.

As they rounded the final corner to their respective houses – Annaleya lived just down the block – they almost collided with two boys running towards them.

“Daniel! Look where you are going,” scolded Rosalia her cousin once she realized who was jogging away down the street. “Why aren’t you and Jacob in yeshiva?”

Yeshiva was for boys only, led by the Rabbi and sometimes the cantor. They studied Torah and Talmud, deciphering the

strange lines and dots that comprised the written Hebrew language. Rosalia watched with envy and longing after breakfast as her own two younger brothers, Henry and Jake, walked out the front door with their satchels and study books every morning except Saturday, which was reserved for Shabbat services.

Daniel slowed down and turned back towards Rosalia, with Jacob not far behind. His long, curling black payes framed both cheeks. At fourteen, he was much taller than Rosalia, but who in town wasn't?

"Rosie?" He used his affectionate nickname for her. "Don't tell your parents you saw me. They'll just tell my parents, and then I'll get in trouble." He strode over to her and Annaleya, leaned down and attempted to kiss Rosalia's lips. She ducked and stepped backward.

"What is wrong with you? I should scratch out your eyes and put them in your mouth! Get away from me."

Daniel's chestnut eyes narrowed and his plump lips hung in a frown.

"Where I am going, you cannot imagine in your craziest dreams."

Then he shrugged and sauntered off to join Jacob again.

"There is something evil about that boy," murmured Annaleya.

"I would have to agree. What is wrong with him, trying to kiss me like that?"

"He has a crush on you. It's obvious."

"Well, the feelings aren't mutual. I wonder where they're going that is so special?"

“I wouldn’t have the slightest idea. Let’s follow them.”

The girls watched from the corners of their eyes as Daniel and Jacob walked hurriedly down the street, their identical, long black wool coats flapping behind them. Yeshiva had just let out two blocks away, and Daniel, the tallest and most boisterous of the class, and his best friend Jacob Levy, shoved the younger boys in front of them out of the way. They had been called to the Bar Mitzvah a year ago, which made them ‘men’ in a ritual sense. They stomped down the street together, scuffing their leather boots along the unpaved road. Rosalia and Annaleya watched from a short distance to make sure the boys wouldn’t spot them. Then they ran to catch up as the boys turned a corner. Daniel was bragging loudly, so it was not difficult to overhear their conversation. *As usual*, Rosalia told herself with a roll of her deep azure eyes.

“Come on, Jacob, let’s go find the gypsies living under the Neisse River Bridge,” said Daniel, pulling on his left payot, curling the dark sidelock around his finger.

“Gypsies? Hold onto your pockets, I hear they steal for a living.”

“I’ll cuff any of them who tries to take my pfennigs! Right in the face.”

He punched his fist into the air.

“Oh yeah?” taunted Jacob. “I’d like to see you try to fight a gypsy. You’ll be dead in a minute with a knife in your heart. That’s how they fight.”

Daniel grinned and shook his long black side curls and sneered,

“I’m too fast for any of them.”

They continued down the street and turned a corner.

“Did you hear that, Annaleya? They’re going to the Neisse River, where the gypsies have set up camp. Do we dare follow them there?”

Annaleya shifted her bulky bag nervously. “I don’t know. Maybe the fish will spoil by the time we get home. That may not be a good idea.”

“No, the fish will be fine. Herr Weiner put them on a small block of ice in our bags. That’s why they’re so heavy.”

“Yes, but the ice is melting! See it dripping on the ground?”

“I’m sure the fish will keep for another half hour. I’m dying to see what kind of mischief Daniel and Jacob are getting into.”

Annaleya shrugged and followed her friend as they shadowed the boys around the corner and down the street, ducking behind the occasional white elm or overgrown gooseberry patch.

They all hurried down Kaiserstrasse Avenue, where the one-story, clapboard houses looked more dilapidated. As they continued east, the houses became smaller, spaced farther apart, with sagging porches, splintered roofs, missing steps. Finally, they came to the bridge over the Neisse River stretching like an indigo velvet ribbon embroidered with delicate white lace rivulets. Under the bridge, three Romany wagons were lined up below an embankment. The wagons were decorated with brightly colored banners, swirls of green, turquoise and vermilion, that hung attached to steel hooks from each top corner. Three thin, saggy-spined black and

white dobbins stood tied up nearby, munching in their feed buckets. Not a person was in sight.

Rosalia stopped abruptly to avoid being spotted, and Annaleya almost slammed into her. They crouched behind an old, ivy-covered fence running along the embankment and peered cautiously above it toward the bridge. The boys were tiptoeing around the gaudy wagons, and periodically glancing behind their shoulders, and at those moments Rosalia and Annaleya sank behind the fence. Suddenly, a flap of the middle wagon was flung aside and a woman with long, unbrushed ebony waves of hair like twisted yarn, stuck her head out.

“Hello, young mans. You want something?” she asked sweetly, staring at them with large eyes the deep grey of wet river stones, a firm line of black kohl drawn above and below each lid. Silver hoops dangled at her cheeks, reflecting the sun in sudden glints. She scooted nimbly out of the gypsy wagon and stood before them with muscular arms crossed under her swarthy-skinned bosom. Daniel and Jacob stood frozen, staring back silently.

“Look at this woman,” Rosalia hissed in her friend’s ear. “No bonnet, hair flying around. And her neckline is very, very low. Shameful!”

“Quite low. How I would love to dress like that sometime.”

Both girls giggled softly.

The Roma woman lowered her chest so that the boys could catch a glimpse of her cleavage just forming a swollen Y at the edge of her scoop-necked mustard and rose-colored



dress. She stepped easily out of the wagon and approached them, hips swaying in an exaggerated motion.

“Do you see the hair?” squeaked Rosalia. “It’s all the way down past her bottom! Now she is saying something to the boys.” The two girls strained to hear, their heads now above the fence line. The gypsy’s voice, loud and vibrant, floated up the embankment.

“You like to buy something for your mothers? I have sweet perfumes for them.” Her German was heavily accented by the consonants and vowels of the Roma language, but the girls could still understand her. She smiled broadly, showing several glinting golden front and canine teeth. The girls gasped as the gold reflected the sunlight like tiny beacons in her mouth.

They saw Daniel suddenly reach out and touched her left breast.

“Get your hands off me!” she scolded angrily, shoving him backward with surprising strength. Immediately a large bulk of a man leapt out of the wagon, hurled himself at Daniel and knocked him to the ground. He began hollering at him in Romani and stepping on his neck with a heavy brown leather boot. The girls watched as Daniel gagged and attempted to grasp the offending boot to lift it from his throat. The boot stayed as firm as the leg of the irate Roma appended to it. Jacob flushed a deep red, turned and scurried up the embankment, legs churning like leaping trout. When he had completely disappeared, the boot rose and released Daniel. He pulled himself up and spanked off the dirt that had

been ground into his black wool coat. The husky Roman immediately turned on the teenager, bellowing in broken German,

“I break you neck the next time I see you, boy!”

A shimmering, gaudy gold headscarf was wrapped around his brow like a circus bandage. He elongated his neck so that his face was only inches from Daniel and scowled, round eyes flashing, eyebrows like black slashes pointed at the bridge of his ample and slightly crooked nose. Behind the fence, Rosalia was covering her mouth tightly with one hand, trying to stifle the laughter that bubbled up. She could feel Annaleya stiffening beside her.

“I don’t know why this is so funny to me,” Rosalia whispered to her friend. “He is awful to do that.”

“It’s not funny, it’s hateful. I want to go home now.” Annaleya’s deep set hazel brown eyes filled with tears, and she grabbed her tote bag.

Suddenly Rosalia realized that a small group of people were gathered nearby on the broad wooden bridge overlooking the river. A short, hefty bell of a man in a heavy, long black coat made his way down the embankment like an oversized crow to Daniel and the gypsy man.

“What is going on here?” he asked, his voice high-pitched and imperious. One hand held down the embroidered yarmulke perched on his head, under which a few strands of salt and pepper hair curled tightly.

The gypsy woman ducked back inside the wagon. Her husband turned to Rabbi Schultz, anger contorting his swarthy features.

“This .... this devil boy, he put hand on my wife, he insult her!”

The rabbi backed away several steps and cleared his throat, pulled on his scraggly frosted beard, glanced away for a moment.

“I do not know what happened, I was not here. But Daniel is a good boy and would not do such a thing. “Daniel,” he turned to the disheveled boy who was slowly backing away from them. “Did you touch the lady?”

“No, rebbe. He’s lying. He threw me on the ground and tried to steal my money!”

Rabbi Yeshivatz and the gypsy squared off face to face.

“I will kill your son if I see him again!” hissed the gypsy, the tails of his gold headscarf blowing in the sudden gust of wind that was passing through. The rabbi touched his dark felt top hat.

“He is not my son. But he is a son of this town. There will be no killing, Hashem forbid. You come into our town and make trouble. Daniel did not touch your, your.....wife. Leave!” He pulled his short and wide figure up to its maximum height and spun on a booted heel, stiffly walking away and back toward the bridge. But the gypsy did nothing, only stared at the disappearing figure of the Jewish community’s religious leader. He shook his head, ambled over to his bony white mare, whacked her hard on the rump, and clambered back into the wagon.

“You go along home now,” the rabbi turned and called sternly to Daniel.

“Yes, Rabbi.”

Daniel walked hurriedly until he reached the far end of the bridge. The chilly Neisse River flowed below it, growling like a large hungry bear. Then he slowed down and began clambering up the embankment. Rosalia grasped Annaleya's hand and they both ran back the way they had come, looking for a corner to turn so that Daniel wouldn't spot them. They didn't stop running until they arrived at Annaleya's house. Trying to catch her breath, Rosalia gave Annaleya's hand a squeeze as they parted at the gate of the Steinburgers' rickety garden fence.

"Don't tell your Mama, Papa, or anybody, what we saw."

"We don't need to. The Rabbi and his friends on the bridge will not be able to keep it to themselves anyway."

"True. But I want to be the one to tell. I would love to get Daniel in as much trouble as possible."

Annaleya shook her head and flipped her russet braid with a pale, freckled hand, looking unhappily at her best friend. Still, she gave her a kiss on the forehead and disappeared behind her front door. Rosalia turned away and immediately felt a pounding weight, a heavy bulk whack into her. She fell on the ground and her shopping bag went flying into the street. Squinting up toward the glaring sun, she saw two glaring brown eyes and a scowling face hovering over her. Jacob Levy hissed,

"You better not get Daniel in trouble, or there will be vengeance! I saw you and Annaleya spying on us behind the fence!"

Shaken and flushed, Rosalia jumped up and quickly smoothed her dress and apron. Her golden hair was spilling out on one side from under her bonnet.

“Ach! How dare you touch me? We saw you run off like a coward when Daniel got in trouble!” Rosalia was shouting now, unable to hold back a wave of fury.

Jacob reached down and yanked the strands of hair that had come loose to Rosalia’s shoulder, then stomped off down the street.