

*The Stolen
Ones*

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USBORNE

Prologue

For my husband TB and in memory of my
great-grandfather Lewis Lubinski,
who was born in Chodecz, Poland.

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Extract from Love Song by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Jessie Lemont.

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HE MEETS ME ON THE corner of the close, a little out
of breath.

“Here, Inge,” he says, kissing me on the cheek and
handing me a small parcel wrapped in brown paper and
tied up with a pink ribbon. “Happy sixteenth birthday.”

It is not my birthday until tomorrow, but this is not
a new tradition. I have been meeting Wilf the day before
my birthday for three years now.

“Thank you,” I say, stretching up to plant a kiss on his
cheek.

“Open it,” says Wilf, a shy smile on his thin face,
his features delicate beneath his thick wavy hair.

I pull at the pink ribbon and the brown paper unfurls
its stiff limbs, revealing a small red leather-bound volume.

“Rilke,” I say, smiling up at him. We are both mad for the poet, but I’ve always borrowed volumes from the school library. “Thank you, kind Wilf.” I know that this will have cost him money he does not have.

I open the page and read some lines at random, smiling up at him.

*When my soul touches yours a great chord sings!
How shall I tune it then to other things?
O! That some spot in darkness could be found
That does not vibrate whene’er your depth sound.
But everything that touches you and me
Welds us as played strings sound one melody.*

Wilf puts his hand on my head for a moment and looks down at me with his blue-grey eyes, the corners crinkling when he smiles. “Sixteen is special,” he says. “It calls for a special present.”

I smile back up at him, but inside, my heart contracts with pain.

“I wish you could come to the house,” I say. “It seems so unfair that I can’t invite you over after all this time.”

Wilf pulls me into an embrace. His hugs tend to stop the outside world when I’m inside them.

“I know,” he says. “But what matters is what we have

between us right here, Inge. That’s what counts.”

I nod, my face muffled by his shoulder, but inside I’m still hurting.

I want to take Wilf home. I want to invite him over to our house on my birthday and have him sit at the table in Mama’s conservatory while she cuts into her home-made raspberry torte. I want my parents to smile at him and ask him about his life and for there to be an easy atmosphere of warmth and love all around us.

I hate that my boyfriend must remain a secret. I want to shout our relationship from the rooftops of Munich and discuss it with Mama over hot chocolate when we’re out shopping.

But I can’t.

I can never do this.

I will never be able to do this.

Wilf has been my secret for three years now.

And that is the way it will have to stay.

Chapter One

Munich, 1956

THE LETTER ARRIVES ON THE twenty-eighth of May, four days before my sixteenth birthday.

It is lying on our doormat among some early cards in their garish envelopes of pink and green, but this one is a plain cream colour with an unfamiliar name and our address typed onto it in neat black letters. On the back of the envelope is a box containing the name and address of the Red Cross in Bad Arolsen. There is a stamp, so I hold the letter up to the light streaming through the glass of our porch and stare at it more closely. Strangely it is stuck over another which looks far less familiar. I just have time to make out the letter P and the image of a strange man in a wig, before a hand comes from behind me and whips the letter out of my fingers so fast that I am left with a paper cut.

“I’ll take that, thank you,” says Mama. “It’s not for your eyes.”

She looks out of sorts. Usually Mama is up two hours earlier than the rest of us and I never see the first post, because she sorts and opens it before we even come down for breakfast. But today she has overslept.

“Why?” I say. “It’s my birthday soon. It’s probably for me.” I say this in the full knowledge that the name on the envelope wasn’t mine.

“It’s not your birthday for another four days, Inge,” she says.

I watch from the hall as she goes into the study, throws the letter into the drawer at the top of her mahogany desk and turns the tiny gold key in the lock. Mama and Papa each have their own desks. She drops the key down the front of her dress.

“There,” she says, patting her bosom. “Not for prying eyes.”

There is no point trying to wrestle it off her. My mother is a substantial woman, built like the typical *hausfrau*. Even in her flat lace-up shoes she towers a good two centimetres over my father and he is not short. Her face is large and square and tends to look stern, but when she smiles the sternness breaks apart and her eyes fill up with mischief. I guess that’s why my father fell for her.

Papa comes downstairs and kisses me on the cheek as he passes. I give him my broadest smile. Papa is my best friend. He knows me better than anyone, even Mama.

“I will be making you a birthday torte,” Mama is saying. “It contains both coffee and chocolate. Only the best for my Inge.” She’s referring to the chronic shortage of anything good in the shops. It has been like this since the end of the war, almost as long as I can remember. “We’ll have it on your birthday at midday.”

That’s typical of Mama. She runs everything to a schedule in this house.

We live near the centre of Munich in a building full of glass and light and neat angles. I suppose from the outside it looks a lot like a plain box, but inside it is sleek and modern and there’s plenty of space for three people and a cat.

Mama doesn’t like to be caged in, or so she’s always telling us. She likes air and space. I’ve noticed that when she’s in crowds of people on the tram going through central Munich, she sucks her breath in tight and focuses her gaze on some point outside the window, as if the people packed in around her are invisible, or maybe as if she is – I can never tell which.

Mama chose the house five years ago. Papa just went along with it, as he often does. Mama took one look at the sparse white walls and smooth wooden floorboards and her face broke into that smile.

Papa is just the opposite. He likes to be part of a crowd and is often to be found propping up the bar at The Jugged Hare in Munich’s old quarter, regaling anybody who’ll listen with stories about the war. Life in Munich has become more relaxed since the military occupation by America and England finally ended last year. Although there is still not much in the way of luxury food, Mama can buy her beloved strong coffee beans from her favourite shop in town. She is very fussy about coffee. It has to be expensive, hot, black and strong. Anything else sends her into a bad temper.

My mother once told me that before the war she had wanted to become a concert pianist. We have a Bechstein concert piano in our living room. But then everything changed and, like so many German housewives, she found herself doing war work and sending parcels out to our soldiers and allowing refugees to shelter in the house.

I don’t remember any of this, of course. I wasn’t even five years old when the war finished. I know that Papa fought as a soldier and had to retrain to be an accountant once it was over, but that’s about all I know.

It is eleven years since the war ended. I reckon that most Germans now view Hitler's rule of our country as a disaster, because of the ruined buildings and unemployment levels which haunt the cities. But I still hear people expressing anti-Semitic views from time to time and my father even has a painting of Herr Hitler hanging above his writing desk, which sits opposite Mama's. It's a small portrait of the *Führer* with his arms crossed, unsmiling.

My mother never mentions the painting. She rarely disturbs my father in his study, but I notice that once a week she flicks a duster over the faded gilt which runs around the edge of that portrait. Sometimes I run my finger over the ornate lumps and bumps of the frame. But Papa frowns when he sees me touching it.

"Leave that alone, Inge," he says. "Show some respect."

"Why?" I say. "Why should I respect him?"

Papa removes his glasses and rubs at his eyes.

"I meant, show some respect for my belongings," he says. "Anyway. The war is over now. No need to talk about it at home."

It's this sort of thing that makes me feel as if there is a large barrier between me and my parents, even though I'm so close to Papa in other ways. From what I've learned at school, the war was filthy and bloody and harsh.

Although Papa still occasionally seems proud of his role in it, Mama's eyes are full of a sort of remote untouchable pain, which I guess confirms the fact that ordinary people suffered more than anybody else. The streets of Munich are still peppered with bullet holes and lined with the jagged ruins of bombed-out buildings. Many men of Papa's age, who otherwise would just resemble workers in grey suits, are given away by a telltale limp or a half-closed eyelid. But I am lucky. Despite the lingering signs of the war, my life, at least, is easy.

Our family routine ticks on.

Papa eats breakfast with me every morning and then kisses the top of my head before departing for his office.

Mama takes care of the house and seeks out bargains at the market to try and make the evening meals more interesting.

I go to my school and get a thrill in my stomach every time I lay eyes upon my sweet, gentle boyfriend, Wilf.

My life would be pretty much perfect if it wasn't for one thing.

I'm afraid to go to sleep at night.