

CAROL MATAS

A STORM UNLEASHED

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CHAPTER ONE

"I am taking your dog."

I look up to see a girl in a uniform standing over me. She's around my age, maybe twelve or thirteen. Her uniform means she must belong to the League of German Girls. The Hitler Youth.

I'm sitting on a bench in the park. I had just sighted a common redstart and catalogued it in my notebook, as usual, under place, time and date: *Berlin, afternoon, May 3, 1935.*

"Are you deaf? Hand over your dog! Now! Schnell!"

I freeze. She can't take Max — or can she?

Maybe she knows Father is Jewish. No, she couldn't know that. In fact, she and I look almost identical with our long blond braids and blue eyes.

She reaches for Max's lead. He is still lying quietly on the ground, although his ears are up, so I know he is listening.

I try to stay calm. "Why?" I ask.

"That is none of your business!" she declares, her cheeks turning pink with anger. "What are you waiting for? Hand him over!"

I need to think.

Slowly, I slip my notebook into my bag. Max's lead is wrapped loosely around my wrist, a trick I've learned to keep him close while doing my birdwatching. Not that he normally needs more than a command to stay close, but there is the odd squirrel that is beyond even Max's patience.

I stand up so I am facing the girl. Then I do the only thing I can think of.

I take one step to the side and run.

"Stop!" she screams. "Halt! Halt!"

I sprint down the path. Max doesn't hesitate and runs with me.

Fortunately, no one in the park pays us much attention. To them it must look like two girls of the same age talking, maybe having a fight. Perhaps they even think we are sisters.

Max and I shoot out of the park. I make a split-second decision and take a sharp turn down a side street, almost tripping over Max when I change direction suddenly. We step into a doorway and I peek out. I can't see her. I hope we ducked in here before she spotted us.

We are standing in the foyer of an apartment building. I give Max's lead a small tug, and he walks beside me

through the main hallway until we exit by the rear doors.

Once outside I take my bearings. I realize we are near the train station. That's it — Oma and Opa's farm! We need to get far away from here as quickly as possible.

"Come, Max," I whisper. "Coast is clear. Heel."

I set a brisk pace. Fortunately, I always make sure I look presentable before leaving home. I am wearing a pleated navy skirt and a white shirt — almost like a uniform but not quite. My plain navy cardigan matches my skirt. I am the picture of a German maiden.

Father has trained me never to leave the apartment without emergency money. I used to ask him what kind of emergency could possibly happen, but these days, well, nothing seems impossible. I have enough for a train ticket.

I scan the next street, which leads to the train station. Some people nod to me, and I can see that many are admiring Max. Who wouldn't? He is the perfect specimen, a male German shepherd who reaches almost to my waist. Of course, I am rather short for my twelve years, and thin, so I think we must weigh about the same. His eyes are bright, his ears stick up and he always looks like he is laughing because his mouth is usually open with his tongue lolling slightly to the side.

We enter the station and walk to the ticket booth,

but there is a line because many people have just finished work and are returning home. There are lots of students here as well. I force myself not to look back. Finally, it is our turn.

I buy a ticket for Oma and Opa's station. They don't know we are coming, so they won't be there to meet us with Bertha and the wagon, but it is only an hour walk and the day is fine. Max loves being in the country. In fact, he is getting excited now, knowing where we must be going. He and Bertha are such great friends and it's a treat to watch them. Max trails her everywhere as if she is his mother, not a horse!

We board the train. I find us a window seat. Max sits nicely on the floor, as I've trained him to do. I peer out the window. I'm clutching my bag in my lap. I notice my knuckles are white and try to relax my hands.

An announcement is made — the train is leaving. Slowly, it starts to move. And then, there she is! The Nazi girl has run onto the platform and is looking around frantically.

"Down, Max," I say, but I am so scared I can barely get the words out.

Max lies down, and I drop to the floor too.

"Is there something in your eye?" I say, pretending to

check him while trying to keep my voice from trembling.

The train keeps moving, despite my fear she could somehow stop it. Once it picks up speed and I am sure we are well away from the station, I resume my seat. My breath comes out in shaky gasps. I fold my hands and sit demurely so no one can see anything is wrong.

There is an older gentleman sitting across the aisle from us, but he is reading a newspaper and seems uninterested in me or Max. No one is sitting in the two seats that face us.

I glance down at Max. How long can we run for? What will happen? Will we be safe at Oma and Opa's?

How has it come to this? That girl . . . before Hitler, she was probably a normal everyday girl, no one special. Maybe she was popular at school. Maybe she wasn't. But now . . . now she has all the power. She can take what she wants, including Max. And all I can do is run away.

Still, in a way it's because of the Nazis and their hate that I even have Max. I know why Father gave Max to me. It was because of that awful, awful day just over two years ago.