

**TRAPPED
IN
HITLER'S
WEB**

A novel by
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FOR TUSIO, MUSIA, OREST, AND ROMAN

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CHAPTER NINE

HITLER GIRLS

The Blockleiter began dropping in unexpectedly more than once a day. Had someone told her that the foreign workers were being fed more than was legal? I could only hope and pray that it wasn't the case and that soon Blockleiter Doris Schutt would find something else to be interested in.

A couple of weeks passed with very little in the way of extra food. While I was getting mightily sick of hard black bread, raw potatoes, and the occasional mouthful of milk, I was more worried about the OST girls. They could sneak bites of potato and vegetable while they worked in the fields, but they couldn't risk trying to smuggle such bulky items back into the camp for their friends. I worried that their friends might starve.

And then as October turned to November, the OST girls stopped coming to the farm altogether. When I asked

what happened to them, Frau Lang said their entire camp was assigned to work in a munitions factory. I was a bundle of nerves, thinking of our friends doing such dangerous work. And it made me sick to think of them helping our enemy make more weapons. I also wondered whether the story was really true or they were actually taken from the farm because someone found out they were being given extra food. The Aryan guest workers still lived at the farm, eating and sleeping in the house and working their shortened hours, but without the OST girls, the bulk of the hard work fell to me and Bianka.

One night, Herr Lang surprised us with a visit after the cows were bedded down. He held onto a bulge under his shirt: two thick slices of rye bread slathered with lard. “Doris just left. She’s very interested in this farm,” he said as he gave us each a piece of bread. “She’s practically been living in our kitchen, going through the ledger with Beatrice and threatening to send someone else in to manage the farm.”

“Would she actually do that?” I asked, taking a big bite of the bread and chewing it slowly. The bread was fresh, and the lard was filling. It was so kind of Herr Lang to risk sneaking it to us.

“She would if there was someone else to run it,” he answered. “But anyone more qualified than my daughter is fighting in the war.”

“If she had more workers, there wouldn’t be a problem,” said Bianka, pulling off bits of her bread and popping them into her mouth. “I wish our OST friends could work here instead of at the munitions plant.”

“If only I could create more workers out of thin air,” said Herr Lang. “Good night, girls, and thank you for your hard work.”

As I enjoyed the rest of my rye bread, I thought about the possibility of Frau Huber losing her farm. She and her parents were kind and they were caught in Hitler’s web almost as much as me. But the shortage of farmworkers was probably happening all over the Reich. If Nazi soldiers couldn’t get enough to eat, maybe the war would end. Maybe Nathan wouldn’t be hunted for being Jewish anymore and we would both be able to go home.

That thought thrilled me.

Bianka and I had just finished cleaning out the manure and were sitting at our table with half a potato each and a cup of water, waiting for Frau Huber to bang her pot, when the silhouette of a girl filled our doorway. I quickly shoved the potato into my pocket, hoping that the intruder wouldn’t see it.

When she walked toward us I saw that she had blond

pigtails, and while she seemed young, she was taller and heavier than either of us. She was dressed in an old skirt and blouse and heavy shoes, so at first I thought she was a new foreign worker.

“That’s Sophie, Frau Huber’s daughter,” whispered Bianka.

I knew Frau Huber had a daughter, but she had slipped my mind. I had been here nearly a month and had never seen her before. Bianka stumbled to her feet as the girl walked up to our table.

“Good afternoon, Fraulein Huber,” said Bianka.

“What’s her name?” Sophie asked, jerking her head toward me.

“I’m Maria Fediuk,” I said, getting to my feet.

Sophie pointed to the bulges in our pockets. “Does Frau Huber know that you’ve stolen from the fields?”

“Fraulein, we must eat something,” said Bianka, her face white. “Otherwise we’ll faint and get no work done.”

“Our produce quota is nearly impossible to meet. I can’t imagine Frau Huber letting you Slavs eat whatever you want.”

Anger bristled through me at her words. Why didn’t Bianka tell Sophie that Frau Huber told us to take potatoes? I thought about saying this but reconsidered. Maybe Sophie snooped for the Nazis just like the Blockleiter.

Bianka held out her last bite of potato, her head cast down. “Fraulein, would you like to take this?”

Sophie crossed her arms. “Now you’re being insolent. If the Blockleiter catches you stealing produce, we could all be in trouble.”

“I’m sorry,” said Bianka.

“You need to be on your best behavior today.” Sophie’s face lit up with a smile. “I’ve managed to convince my unit leader to let the League of German Girls help with the harvest. Several units are joining in. Finish up here and report to Frau Huber. The girls should be arriving within the hour.”

With that, she turned and left.

I held my breath as she walked away, and when she was out of earshot, I asked Bianka, “Why does she call her own mother Frau Huber instead of *Mutter*?”

“Hitler’s rules. Those in the League of German Girls are his children, not their parents’ anymore.”

“They don’t wear uniforms here?” I asked.

“Usually, she does,” said Bianka. “But that was old clothing she had on. Probably so she doesn’t ruin her uniform with field work.”

I thought about the dark skirt and white blouse that Bianka had kept in her clothing stash. Sophie was tall and strong. I couldn’t imagine her ever being small enough to

fit into that tiny skirt and blouse. “How old was she when she started in that Hitler club?” I asked.

“Aryan girls are required to join the junior group by the time they’re ten years old,” said Bianka. “She turned fourteen this year and is now a full-fledged ‘Hitler Girl.’”

“So she’s been calling her own mother Frau Huber for the last four years?”

Bianka nodded. “I can’t imagine how horrible that would be, witnessing your daughter’s mind being warped against you.”

My heart ached for Frau Huber and that made me think of my own mother. Even though I was far away from her, Mama knew that I loved her and that Krystia loved her too.

There were Hitler Girls in Viteretz too, and I knew one of their members—Marga. She would march around in uniform with her group and sing songs that praised Hitler. She was brainwashed into hating Poles and Ukrainians and Jews and she tormented my sister. I bit into the last of my potato and slowly chewed. “It should be an interesting day, working side by side with girls who hate us.”

The front door opened just as we got to the house, and Frau Huber stepped out. Instead of wearing her usual overalls,

she wore a dirndl—a traditional German woman’s peasant skirt, blouse, and apron. Her hair was braided and coiled around her head and her face was flushed pink. I’m sure it was from embarrassment because she looked ridiculous.

My own shock at her appearance must have shown on my face, because she said, “This is my daughter’s doing. She reported me to her unit leader. Apparently, my work clothing does not live up to the Nazi feminine ideal.”

So her daughter *was* a snoop.

We stood beside her and watched as a truck pulled up in front of the fields. The back was filled with girls who laughed and chattered among themselves. None were wearing their official uniforms but were instead dressed like Sophie, in worn skirts and blouses appropriate for field work. They hopped off and walked over to Sophie, who stood at the edge of the potato field beside a wheelbarrow stacked with burlap sacks. She handed each girl a couple of sacks and pointed to what part of the field that girl should go to. The first truck pulled away, another one arrived, and more girls piled out. In all, there were four trucks and about sixty girls, who acted more like they were going to a party than working in the field.

From the passenger seat of the last truck, an athletic-looking woman got out and strode toward us. She was dressed much like the Blockleiter, only her suit was more tailored. She didn’t look to be that much older than the

girls she supervised. “*Heil* Hitler,” she said, saluting. “I take it you’re Sophie’s mother, Beatrice Huber?”

Frau Huber saluted back. “I am,” she said. “And you are Gruppenführerin Winter?”

“Yes,” said the group leader. “What a beautiful dirndl you’re wearing.” She stepped back a bit to take in the full glory of Frau Huber’s costume. “You are a credit to Aryan womanhood.”

Frau Huber opened her mouth, but no words came out. Her hands clenched but she meekly nodded.

The group leader turned her attention to us. “These Slavs cannot work in the field today,” she said. “My girls shouldn’t be in such close contact with subhumans.”

“Yes, Gruppenführerin Winter,” replied Frau Huber. “I was going to have them help me prepare a lunch for the girls.”

“Sophie told me you have Aryan guest workers living here. Why not get them to help you?”

“My parents have taken the guest workers into town today,” said Frau Huber. “So that leaves just me, and these two Slavs.”

The group leader clicked her tongue. “Not good planning.”

Her eyes landed on Bianka’s filthy clothing, and then on mine. I could feel my face going hot with shame.

“See that they’re bathed and dressed in clean clothing before they come in contact with food served to my girls,” she said.

“That was the plan, Gruppenführerin Winter,” said Frau Huber.

“Off with you, then,” said the group leader, with a dismissive flick of her wrist. She turned and walked a few steps toward the potato field, then stopped and looked back. “I’ve requested extra rations to be delivered so you can make the girls something special for their dessert. It should be arriving any time.”

With that, she strode off.

When the group leader was out of earshot, Frau Huber muttered, “This is going to be a long day.”

“Frau Huber,” said Bianka. “Do you want us to go back to the barn and wash up? We could put on our sleep outfits. They’re cleaner than our work clothes.”

Frau Huber frowned in thought. “There should be some old dresses here that you can use. Come with me to the washhouse. I had been warming up water for the laundry, but I guess that will now be your bathwater.”

Bianka bathed first since she had been at the farm longer, and I helped her wash her hair, vigorously scrubbing her scalp with the bar of soap. When it was my turn, the water was gray and scummy, but I didn’t mind. It felt so

good to plunge into warm water instead of trying to clean myself with an icy sponge bath at the pump. Bianka lathered my hair into a froth and then I closed my eyes and dunked under, rinsing off all the soap. Even though the water was brown, I felt so clean and refreshed as I stepped out of the tub.

Frau Huber had brought fresh slips and underwear as well as soft worn cotton housedresses. We both dried off and slipped into the clean clothing, then tiptoed barefoot across the grass to the back door of the house.

“Put these on,” said Frau Huber, handing us each a pair of socks.

As she ushered us through the hallway, we passed an opened door. I caught a glimpse of a long room with a row of bunk beds on either side. Six of the beds looked like they were in use. So this was where the Aryan guest workers slept.

Frau Huber saw me glancing in. “If it were up to me, you two girls would be sleeping in there instead of the barn, but the Blockleiter has forbidden it.”

We passed an indoor bathroom, with a white enamel sink, a flush toilet, and even a tub. Beside the bathroom was a set of stairs going up to the second floor. Across the hallway from the bathroom was a cozy sitting room with bookshelves. Above the fireplace were two pictures. One

was the usual photograph of Hitler, and beside it was a photograph of Frau Huber and family. The fact that she was the only one not in uniform made me shiver. Sophie smiled proudly in the white shirt and black scarf of the League of German Girls, her brother was a regular soldier, and Herr Huber was an officer of some sort.

At the front of the house was a dining room with a table for eight and a glass-fronted china cabinet, displaying tarnished silver service ware and dusty crystal and china.

Across from that was a large kitchen, and it seemed to be the heart of the house, with a long wooden table, a six-burner woodstove, icebox, and a sink with taps instead of a pump. I imagined a scene before the war with all of Frau Huber's family and farmhands gathered around the table eating together, with everyone equal and no one in uniform.

As we stood waiting to be told what to do, a couple of soldiers came into the kitchen and deposited packages on the kitchen table: a cotton sack of sugar and another of flour, both from Ukraine, and a tin of lard and raspberry preserves from Poland.

All last winter, the Nazis went from house to house in Viteretz, confiscating practically all the food they could find. How many people had starved so these Hitler Girls could have their treats?

Frau Huber assembled measuring cups, bowls, and bakeware on the counter, and she hummed a tune under her breath. “We’ll make rosti from our own supplies for their lunch, and with what we got from the warehouse, we’ll make Linzer cookies for dessert.”

As Frau Huber measured out ingredients for the cookies, Bianka and I peeled a whole lot of potatoes for the rosti. Linzer cookies were basically a nutty shortbread dough rolled out and cut into circles that were baked and then assembled like little sandwiches with jam in the middle. During every step of the process, my stomach growled, reminding me that all I had eaten since yesterday was half a raw potato. How I would have loved to eat a spoonful of the cookie dough or a dollop of jam. It was downright painful, assembling those sweet treats on an empty stomach.

We made enough cookies so that each girl would be able to have at least three of them if they wanted. Once the cookies were cooled and assembled, Frau Huber arranged them in artful pyramids on a couple of large metal trays. There were some left over so Frau Huber put them away for when her parents and the guest workers came back from town.

She reserved two cookies and gave one to each of us. I put the whole thing into my mouth and chewed slowly,

reveling in the burst of raspberry and nutty sweetness. Eating that one cookie made me even hungrier, though, so when the time came to fry up the rosti, it was agonizing to be enveloped in the scent of sizzling bacon, onions, and fried potatoes.

Frau Huber transferred each fresh batch of rosti into giant roasting pans that she'd kept warm in the oven. Once all the rosti were finished, we cracked dozens of eggs and fried them up, then garnished the rosti with the eggs.

Frau Huber banged a pot and lid together on the porch to let the Hitler Girls know it was time to come out of the fields for lunch. As the girls washed their hands at the water pump, Bianka and I used oven mitts to carry out the steaming pans of rosti and set them on the long table outside. We hefted stacks of plates and cutlery, pitchers of fresh milk and glasses. The girls lined up and served themselves, talking and joking. Some sat at the table, but most relaxed cross-legged in groups of twos and threes on the grass and chattered happily as they ate.

Bianka and I ran around, making sure to replace dirty dishes with clean and to wipe up any spills. The Gruppenführerin stood to one side, a plate of rosti balanced in one hand. She observed her girls' behavior and also ours as she carefully chewed small forkfuls of rosti.

As we carried a near-empty rosti pan back to the kitchen, Frau Huber touched my shoulder and whispered, “Eat this leftover rosti, but don’t let anyone see you.” In a louder voice, she said, “Please bring out the dessert.”

Bianka and I each brought out a tray of Linzer cookies and I watched the Gruppenführerin’s expression slowly turn to a smile as we set each pyramid of cookies down for her girls.

Most of the girls lined up in an orderly way for dessert, but one abandoned her half-eaten plate of rosti under a tree and ran to the cookies.

The action filled me with rage. These girls were given so much while others starved and they didn’t even appreciate it.

All at once, there was a loud clap. “Unacceptable,” shouted the Gruppenführerin.

The chattering girls stood rigid, suddenly silent.

“Rita, do not take a cookie until you have finished your lunch.”

I stifled a smile as the girl backed away from the cookies but was surprised by the fear on her face. She walked back to her abandoned plate and slumped down to eat in solemn silence.

Was every single person, even those most favored, being watched and judged and risking punishment?

And what sort of punishment did a Hitler Girl get if she disobeyed?

Bianka and I slipped back into the kitchen, away from the chatter. As the door closed behind us, I was relieved to be away from those privileged people.

We heaped two plates with delectable leftover potato and egg and I stood at the edge of the window so I could see out to the Gruppenführerin, but she couldn't see me. The rosti was delicious and filling and I enjoyed every mouthful.

Washing the pots and pans and dishes after serving sixty girls was a big task and it took a couple of hours, but it was a nice change to be working with soap and water instead of digging up potatoes or shoveling manure.

Frau Huber came inside midafternoon. "The girls have harvested the potatoes and are now working on the vegetable fields."

"Does this mean you'll meet your quota?" asked Bianka.

Frau Huber nodded. "The army will get what they want. I just hope they'll leave enough potatoes and vegetables to get us through the winter."

"Those supplies should help over winter," I said, pointing to the flour and sugar and preserves that the soldiers had dropped off.

“That doesn’t stay here,” said Frau Huber. “When you’ve finished the dishes, can you please pack it up? When the truck comes for the produce, they’ll also be taking this back.”

“The League members are treated very well,” I said.

Frau Huber nodded. “They get treats, special trips, attend Nazi rallies. I barely see Sophie, and when I do, we argue. It’s like she thinks the Nazi Party is her true family.”

“Yet without Sophie’s intervention, the harvest would have rotted in the fields,” said Bianka. “She did that to help *you*—her real family.”

Frau Huber took a deep breath. “You’re right, she did. But it scares me, the things she thinks and does.”