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CHAPTER ONE

# A Letter From the Secret Service

It was Mr Harte who started it all.

"We're going to be learning about World War Two," he told us on our first day in Year 6.

Everyone was excited, especially Jacob and Murphy, who actually cheered. They're obsessed with war, those two.

"Do any of you know anyone who lived through the Second World War?" Mr Harte asked.

I put my hand up, and so did a few other people. Mr Harte looked around the classroom and his eyes came to rest on me.

"Yes, Daniel?"

"My granny," I said. "She came over from Germany just before the war started."

"That's so interesting. Did your granny come to England as a refugee?"

"I think so," I said, feeling embarrassed now, because actually I wasn't sure. Granny didn't seem like a refugee to me.

Other people started asking questions.

"How old was she when she came to England?"

"I'm not sure."

"Was she a Nazi?"

"Of course she wasn't. She's really nice."

But that was the only thing I was sure about. The more questions they asked, the more I realised I didn't really know anything about Granny's childhood. I knew she left Germany to get away from Hitler, but anyone would want to get away from Hitler, wouldn't they? So I'd never asked any more questions. I'd always had the feeling that I shouldn't ask.

But now I really wanted to know more.

I decided to visit Granny on my way home. I often call in after school on a Wednesday. It's the only afternoon she isn't busy. Granny's eighty-nine years old, but she seems a lot younger.

"You have to keep active," she always says. "There's too much to do to sit around wasting time." So she goes on a two-mile walk with friends every morning, "to stop me seizing up". She also spends a lot of time working with a charity that helps refugees to settle in England, and she belongs to lots of clubs in the village, so she's hardly ever at home in the daytime.

I love going to Granny's. She's always pleased to see me and, as soon as I arrive, she puts the kettle on for tea and gets out the chocolate biscuits.

That afternoon was lovely and sunny, so we took the tea tray out to the garden table. As soon as Granny sat down, Inka, her black-and-white cat, jumped up on to her lap.

Inka came from a rescue centre, and she adores



Granny. I do like cats, but Inka is quite annoying. It would be fine if she just sat there, but instead she walks round and round on Granny's lap, miaowing really loudly, and then she starts clawing at Granny's clothes and sneezing all over her hands. I don't know how Granny stands it, but she's incredibly patient. She says Inka was probably taken away from her mother too early, so she has separation issues that make her needy and anxious.

I was waiting for Inka to settle down, and wondering how to bring up the topic of Granny's childhood, when she kind of did it for me.

"What are you doing at school at the moment?" she asked.

"We've just started learning about the Second World War," I said, taking a chocolate biscuit from the plate.

Granny reached for a teaspoon. "Oh?"

I took my chance.

"Mr Harte asked if any of us had relatives who were alive then. So I told him you came over from Germany just before the war."

Granny slowly stirred her tea. Her eyes were fixed on the blue and white mug.

"Everyone was really interested," I said. "They had lots of questions about it. But I didn't really know anything else."

Granny stayed silent for a minute. Then she said, "How strange that you should say that today."

"Is it? Why?"

"Such an odd coincidence."

"Why?" I asked again.

She raised her eyes from her mug and looked at me.

"I had a letter this morning. Completely out of the blue. From MI5."

I stared at her. "MI5? The spy agency?"

"That's right. The Secret Service. They're planning to release my Second World War files, and they're asking if I wish to remain anonymous or if I want to have my name and picture published."

I was baffled.

"Your Second World War files? Why does the Secret Service have files on you? You were only a child in the war, weren't you?"

"I was twelve when I came to England. But when all this happened, in 1940, I was thirteen."

"When what happened? When MI5 were spying on you? So did they spy on all Germans? Even children?"

Granny paused. "Not exactly." Then she gave me a mischievous, twinkly-eyed smile. "Well, not at all, in fact. No. They weren't spying on me."

"So why do they have files on you?"

Granny was silent for a very long time. Her eyes gazed across the garden, but she wasn't looking at the flowers, or the village street, or even the hills beyond. She was looking much further into the distance than that.

Just when I was beginning to think she might never speak again, she turned to look at me.

"Do you really want to know about it?"



"Yes," I said. "I really do."

Granny looked at me thoughtfully. "It feels right that I should tell you now, when you're almost the same age as I was when it all started."

"So what happened?" I asked impatiently.

She smiled. "I need to find some things first. Can you wait a few days?"

"Sure," I said, though I was a bit disappointed. I was bursting with curiosity since she'd mentioned MI5.

"How about Sunday? I should be ready by then."

*Ready for what?* I wondered. But I didn't ask any more questions. We talked about other things until I'd finished all the biscuits and it was time to go home.

When I went round to Granny's on Sunday, there was a box I hadn't seen before lying open on the living-room table. There were lots of old letters in it, and a faded notebook. Next to the box sat a framed black-and-white photo of a man in a shirt and trousers, and a woman in a flower-patterned dress. They both had kind, gentle faces. He had his arm around her shoulders and they were smiling at the camera.

I had seen the photo before. It normally sat on Granny's bedside table. Once, when I was younger, I asked her who the people were. She said they were her parents, but there was something in the way she said it that meant I didn't ask any more questions.

I had no idea what to expect when I sat down with Granny that afternoon, armed with Mum's phone to record our conversation.

I certainly didn't expect the story I heard. And I also didn't expect it to give me an idea for Granny's ninetieth birthday present.

Mum had been worrying about what to get Granny for her ninetieth birthday. There didn't seem to be anything she really wanted. But Granny's story gave me an idea. The best idea for a present I've ever had.

Granny seemed to take longer than usual making the tea that day. When I carried in the tray and we sat down, she told me she had never really talked about her childhood before. Not even to her own children. Some parts of it had been too painful to remember, she said. Other parts had been top secret.

"But now I want you to hear it. There aren't too many of us left, and it would be a shame if our stories died with us."

So here it is, in her own words. The extraordinary wartime story of my grandmother, Anna Schlesinger.



CHAPTER TWO

# Open Up!

I shall never forget the night my life changed forever. It was the ninth of November, 1938, and Uncle Paul had come for supper.

They thought I was in bed, but I wasn't. I was sitting on the hall floor, leaning against the living-room door, listening to every word they said.

Listening at the door was the only way to find out what was really going on. These days, my parents' conversations always seemed to stop when I came into the room. I knew they were trying to protect me from the truth. As if that was possible.

So all through our supper with Uncle Paul, we talked cheerfully about nothing in particular. It was only now, after they had sent me off to bed, that they would speak honestly about the situation.

Uncle Paul was my favourite relative after Mama and Papa. He was Mama's younger brother, and he was one of those people who could make everything fun, even something completely normal, like a walk to the shops. My parents were quite serious, so I always loved spending time with Paul.

But now, even Paul was leaving me. He was a

doctor, but Hitler had said Jewish doctors weren't allowed to treat non-Jews. Since there were hardly any Jewish families in our little town, Paul couldn't afford to live here any more. And he had friends in Paris who said they could find him work there.

Even though I knew this, I was angry with him for deserting me. Everything in my world seemed to be falling apart. School was awful. The other children didn't speak to me any more. Even my best friend Ingrid, who lived across the street, had stopped coming round to play.

"So that's it," said Mama. I heard the rattle of the coffee cups as she put them on the table. "Once you go tomorrow, we'll be the only members of the family still in Germany."

"And you need to get out too," said Paul. "When are you going to wake up? You're like ostriches, the pair of you, with your heads buried in the sand. You're intelligent people, for goodness' sake. I don't understand it."

"We're not free-and-easy youngsters like you," said Papa. "We can't just get on a train with a rucksack on our backs. Where would we go? What would we do? I don't want my family to be refugees in a foreign country, with no money and nowhere to live. I'm too old to start again. And how would I find work in a country where I don't even speak the language?"

"Hans and Ruth found work in England," said Paul.

"As servants! And then only because that cousin



of Ruth's in Manchester begged a favour from her rich neighbour. And Hans is a professor of law!"

"*Was* a professor of law," said Uncle Paul, "until the Nazis took away his job."

"He's never even picked up a spade," said Mama. "How on earth is he going to work as a gardener? With his bad back too. And Ruth employed as a cook, when she's never made a meal in her life. They'll be fired within a week, and then they'll be homeless in a foreign country. What will happen to them then?"

"At least they won't be here," said Uncle Paul. "That's the only thing that matters now."

"It was different for them," said Papa. "Hans can't work here any more. But I have my own business."

I heard Uncle Paul groan in frustration. "The Nazis are taking away Jewish businesses every day. You know what happened to Alfred's shop. What makes you think you're special?"

"Shops, yes," said Papa, "but we're a highly respected publishing house. The business has been in the family for three generations. They can't take that away."

"They can do whatever they want, and nobody lifts a finger to stop them. All the Polish Jews have already been deported. I don't know why you think they won't touch you."

"We're not Polish," said Papa. "We're German. We've been German for generations."

"And you're Jewish," said Paul.

"But we're not even religious," said Mama.

Uncle Paul gave a bitter laugh. "And you think that will save you? You think Hitler's thugs will spare you because you don't go to synagogue? You're a pair of idiots."

My father never shouted. He went dangerously quiet instead. His voice was very quiet now.

"That's enough, Paul," he said. "You'll wake Anna."

I tensed, ready for a silent sprint to my room in case somebody decided to come and check on me. But it didn't seem as though anyone was going to move. My mother spoke in a strained, quavery voice.

"Walter is a war hero. He won the Iron Cross. Even Hitler isn't going to turn on war veterans."

"I don't understand you," said Paul, and his voice was quiet and despairing now. "You do listen to the radio, don't you? You have heard his speeches?"

I had heard his speeches, although my parents didn't know that. They turned off the radio if I came into the room when he was speaking. So I listened from the hall instead.

Hitler never seemed to speak in a normal voice. He shouted and screamed, and he sounded completely mad. It was really frightening, especially when he ranted and raved about how the Jews were responsible for all the problems in Germany.

I couldn't make sense of the world any more. Why was it such a terrible thing to be Jewish?

I tensed up. Harsh voices were shouting in the street. I heard glass smashing and then boots clattering down the road.



"There," said Paul. "That's your friendly, understanding Nazis, just having a bit of fun."

"Let's not argue any more," said Mama. "This is the last time we'll see you for who knows how long. Are you really taking Mitzi to France with you?"

Mitzi was Paul's cat, a big, fluffy, black-and-white beauty. Paul adored her.

"Of course I am," he said. "She likes train journeys. She'll be happy in her basket."

"Let's have some music," said Papa.

That was one of his favourite sentences. It was the cue for Mama to sit at the beautiful grand piano. Sometimes, if it was earlier in the evening, they would ask me to play for them too.

The dining chairs scraped back across the polished floor. I tried to spring to my feet, but my legs were stiff from crouching and I nearly fell over. I managed to steady myself and pad across the hall to my bedroom.

I lay awake for a while, listening to the music. It must have lulled me to sleep, because the next thing I remember is waking with a violent lurch of the stomach. Somebody was thumping on the front door of our apartment, and a man's voice shouted, "Open up! Open up now!"