

“FROM THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR”

Early draft passage from BJORN’S GIFT

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## SECRETS WITHIN SECRETS

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By late summer Mari felt more confident treating simple injuries and illnesses. Most days she would get the laundry washed and hung outside, then hurry to the clinic in the doctor’s parlor. She checked and treated patients with simple complaints on her own, and made others comfortable until the doctor could see them.

One morning when things quieted down, she hurried home to fold laundry and start ironing. The soldiers hadn’t yet returned from their patrol and the sheets weren’t dry, so she went to the cellar to write to Bjorn. Her days were passing in a blur, but she’d sort out highlights to catch him up.

She opened the hidden door and pulled the string on the bulb.

A hand covered her mouth, and she felt her arm twist behind her back.

After a moment the grip on her wrist eased a bit, but she couldn’t wiggle free.

“Don’t scream. I won’t hurt you.”

Although her heart was racing in utter panic, she noted that the voice in her ear spoke English. She had studied English for two years in basic school. BBC reports were mostly in Norwegian, but some parts were in English. She craned her head to one side but she couldn’t see her attacker.

She felt a chair push at the back of her knees, and she sat down suddenly. The man shuffled past the chair to face her but didn’t uncover her mouth.

“Please. Don’t scream. I won’t hurt you. I thought you were one of the Krauts.”

Crouched before her in the tiny space was a man about Bjorn’s age in a uniform she’d never seen before. His eyes pleaded with her. His sleeve was ripped, and he had

a bandage on his forehead.

“Will you stay quiet? Please?”

She nodded, unsure whether she could force her way past the injured man to reach the exit. He uncovered her mouth but kept his hand on her shoulder.

She worked at finding the right words in English. “Who are you? Why are you here?” she whispered.

“First, who are YOU? What are YOU doing here?” He was suddenly more soldier-like, his tone sounding like an officer drilling a new recruit.

Maybe he was from a special branch of the Gestapo, trying to trap her.

Mari was confused, but thought it best to answer. “I live here. I came to do laundry. Sometimes I come here to read.” She wondered if he had found the notebook. “Now who are you?”

“You live here? Anders said no one knows about this space, even his daughter.”

He looked flustered and confused. Mari’s limited medical experience told her he was probably in pain and needed to sit down.

“You’re hurt. I can help. I work with our doctor in town.” She slowly rose from the chair and gestured for him to sit there. He no longer seemed to think she was a threat, so he followed her directions, moving stiffly. She felt his face, which was hot, and then lifted the edge of his bandage. A nasty gash was inflamed and seeping.

“Wait.”

Surprisingly, he made no effort to stop her. She hurried to the sink in the basement and soaked two clean washcloths with warm soapy water.

For the next several minutes she cleaned and examined the gash. It should be stitched, but not until the infection cleared. She didn’t have her clinic supplies so she used a small towel to rewrap his wound.

“Thank you, miss. For such a young lass you’re a right good nurse. I apologize for scaring the stuffing out of you before. I’ve been jumpy as a flea on a field hound knowing there’s a den of wolves prowling overhead. I was sure you were one of ’em.”

She wasn’t clear on everything he had said, but he was looking more settled, and Mari needed answers.

“Who is Anders? Why are you here?”

“Well, missy, you make as good an interrogator as you do a medic, don’cha now?” He smiled at her confusion. “If you are who you say you are, then Anders is your father. He offered me the use of this lovely little apartment for my brief stay in your beautiful country.”

Mari was puzzled by his words and accent, but his face had the same look as Bjorn’s and Per’s when they were teasing.

She clicked the light off and leaned out the small doorway to listen. She ducked back in and chose her words carefully, hoping they made sense. “If Anders bring you here, you stay. Do you eat today? I bring you food. Soldiers come back soon.”

“I could do with some fish and chips, but I doubt they’re on the menu. I’ll be fine, lass, you’d best be out of here now. Much obliged for your help.” He waved her out and tried to close the door.

“Wait,” she said. She scurried through the cellar, collecting two jars of canned beans, a jar of plums, two large towels, and a blanket from summer storage. In minutes she arranged a makeshift mat on the floor with a rolled-towel pillow.

“Now is better. Eat and rest. Someone come back when time more safe. Please, not hurt me when I come?” She smiled and hoped she had said in English what she intended.

“You’ve made a right cozy cottage for me, miss. When he comes, Anders does this...” He tapped a pattern on the brick wall. “Then I know not to tackle the intruder with my massive brute force. Give it a try.”

She tapped the pattern, but he corrected her. Then she did it right.

“There, you see, if you give me that little signal you’ll be welcome in my quarters anytime you want to visit.”

She smiled at his relentless good humor in defiance of his dangerous situation. “Rest. Stay quiet.”

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Mari’s day dragged on endlessly, despite being busier than usual. She visited her list of patients in their homes, prepared supplies for the next day, and went home to

study.

All the while her mind was working on the puzzle of the stranger's identity. Papa wouldn't return to the cottage until late, and she couldn't say a word to anyone else. The German patrol returned in late afternoon and the garden was filled with their smoke and chatter, leaving her feeling trapped in the cottage and helpless. She could only imagine how the man under the stairs must feel, as she was certain he could hear them, too.

When Papa finally arrived, he had no sooner clicked the lock shut than Mari dragged him to the back of the kitchen.

"Papa, did you hide someone under the cellar stairs?"

*What if he said no?*

His eyes got so big, and his answer was so long in coming she wondered if she had been tricked.

"Little one, what are you talking about?" He gripped her elbows and leaned in close. "What do you mean, 'under the stairs'?"

Now she was as irritated as she was afraid. "The hiding space you built for Lise. Papa, you know what I mean. She showed it to me during her visit. And I go there sometimes for a little peace and quiet. Did you hide someone there or not? Because someone IS there, right this minute, and he's hurt!"

Her father covered his face with his hands, then ran his fingers through his hair. "Oh, Mari, why didn't you tell me you knew about that space? You should never have been involved in this."

"In what? Tell me, because I *am* involved, and he needs to be treated. I can do it, but not until tomorrow morning. Why is he here? How long will he be here?"

Her initial relief at knowing that the man under the stairs was under Papa's protection was overshadowed by worry about what would come next.

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What came next was more than two hours of explanation and planning. The man was an English agent who was injured in a fall in the rugged hills of the Norwegian interior, trying to reach a resistance unit. They had found him just in time, before he was

done in by the weather, or wild animals, or German patrols.

Papa said the Brits should have sent mountain-trained agents, but that advice was too late for this one. He had been brought secretly back to the shores of Sorfjord to wait for a boat that would help him return to England. If the weather held, that would happen two nights from now.

Papa shared so few details, but she wondered if the little skiff tied at their pier was involved. She would have no part in that operation. In the meantime she was offered yet another challenge: could she help the man while he was here, or not? Papa's rescue plans had intentionally left her out, but since she now knew about the soldier hidden in the basemen, her medical training was valuable.

She arrived at her answer easily.

She pictured Bjorn in such a situation.

*Yes, I want to help.*