

Chapter Six

Mila, 1942

‘Have you got everything?’

Mama stood at our bedroom door. I was sitting on my bed, folding clothes and packing them into the case that was to contain my whole life for the next – how long?

‘Mama, we will come back, won’t we?’ The words felt thick and gummy in my throat.

She came to sit beside me. ‘Of course you’ll come back, my darling girl. As soon as it’s safe. Papa and I will be counting the days.’ She smiled at me as she put an arm round my shoulders. ‘Don’t you worry.’

She sounded so positive, so definite, that it cheered me a little. At least, it would have done if she hadn’t held me so tightly, if her voice hadn’t broken as she whispered, ‘I promise everything will be fine,’ into my hair.

I tried to take it all in. The fading scent of perfume on her neck, the feel of her arm round me, my bedroom, all of it. I wanted to capture it, as if it was a photograph I could keep in my pocket and take out to look at whenever I needed comfort.

All too soon, Papa was at the bedroom door. 'The Van de Bergs are here,' he said.

This was it. Time to go. It was really happening.

Everything seemed to unfold in a blur after that. I closed my case. Papa took it downstairs. Hannie fetched our coats. Mama was in the hall talking to Mrs Van de Berg.

One final hug with our parents. Too short. I wanted it to last for ever. And then my sister and I were walking out of our home into the pitch-dark with two strangers.

I turned back to the house. Mama had stopped pretending now. Tears were flowing freely down her cheeks. Her arms were wrapped round her body as if they were holding her in place. Papa stood beside her, an arm encircling her, gripping her shoulder, his face grey.

'Take good care of yourselves. We'll be thinking of you every minute,' Papa said.

'We love you,' Mama whispered. 'We will always, always love you.'

Please don't make us leave.

The words were there. Inside me, in my heart, in my throat, threatening to come out of my mouth if I wasn't careful.

Hannie took my hand. 'Come on, Mimi. We have to go.' She was the grown-up now.

Mrs Van de Berg was ahead of us. She stopped and waited for us to catch up. 'You'll be back before you know it,' she said with a quick, tight smile.

I glanced back, but our parents had closed the door. It was late and the last thing we wanted to do was attract attention. We were Jews out past our curfew and had to be careful.

So I swiped a hand over my eyes, wiped my nose with my sleeve and followed my big sister and two strangers into the dark night.

Chapter Seven

Liv, Present Day

Bubbe had been living at Rocklands for a couple of weeks when the decision was made to sell her house.

Dad's hired a van and is going over there today to get the place ready. Mum's got a training day at work so they'll both be out all day.

Gabi's come over to hang out and work on our family trees, and I'm glad I can spend time with her without my parents breathing down our necks. We haven't really got going on our history projects yet. So far, we've spent most of the time sharing videos of dogs doing cute things and discussing hairstyles. Gabi has amazing braids, and she says she'll have a go at putting them in my hair sometime.

It feels as if we've been friends for ever, even though it's only been a few weeks. She makes friendship feel easy. She

makes me realize how my friendship with Karly was always more like a competition, or a series of tests, and how it was always filled with anxiety and hope that what I'd said or how I looked would be good enough to keep my place as Karly's best friend.

Which, in the end, it wasn't.

I've seen her around at school a couple of times lately, but always spotted her before she's noticed me, and nowadays I just do an immediate swerve to avoid her. Even in history and maths, where we're in the same set, I've started doing what she's spent weeks doing to me – pretending she doesn't exist. It's made school more bearable. That and hanging out with Gabi at break times. And now we've got all day together.

Except ten minutes after she's arrived, Dad is knocking on my bedroom door.

'You ready?' he asks. Then he spots Gabi. He'd been in the garden when she arrived and hadn't seen her. 'Oh,' he says. 'I didn't know you had a friend round.'

'I'm Gabi,' Gabi says with a smile.

Dad smiles back. 'Hi, Gabi. Sorry to cut your visit short, but Liv's promised to help me clear out her grandma's house.'

'Dad!' I say, my cheeks burning up. Way to impress my new friend, Dad. Show her what an exciting life I have. Hanging out with my dad at my gran's house on a Saturday afternoon!

'You said you'd help, remember?' Dad says. 'When I

came back from visiting her last weekend.'

'I forgot,' I say. 'I'm sorry. Is there any chance you can manage without me? Gabi and I have got to work on our history project.'

Before Dad has time to reply, Gabi says, 'It's fine. I'm happy to help.'

I stare at her. 'Seriously?'

'Why not? It'll be fun!'

Dad nods approvingly at Gabi. 'That's very kind of you, Gabi,' he says. 'And, to show my appreciation, how about I treat us all to a takeaway for dinner afterwards?'

I nudge Gabi. 'That's basically Dad's way of getting out of doing the cooking tonight. Mum's out all day and it's his turn.'

Gabi laughs. 'Sounds great but I can't stay for dinner, sorry,' she says. 'I have to be home by six. I promised I'd babysit for my younger brother. Another time, though? Perhaps we could hang out next Saturday, too?'

I grin back at her. 'Definitely!'

'Takeaway two weeks running? I reckon I can just about stretch to that,' Dad says with a wink as we head out to the van.

When we arrive, Bubbe's house is dark and it smells musty and stale. 'Right, let's get some windows open before we do anything,' Dad says, going into the kitchen and leaving us in the front room.

I sense Gabi looking around and I feel embarrassed. 'We haven't been here for ages,' I say quickly as I open a window. I want to distance myself from the house.

She surprises me again. 'It reminds me of my grandma's house,' she says.

For a second I think she's making a joke. That would be the kind of thing Karly would do. Draw you in, make you say something caring and understanding, then punch you on the arm and tell you what an idiot you are for falling for it. I brace myself.

But then Gabi adds, 'She died last year.'

'Oh. I'm sorry,' I say, feeling awkward and a bit guilty for assuming she was joking. Before I can think of anything else to say, Dad comes back in from the kitchen.

'Okay, do you girls want to start upstairs?' he suggests. 'Main thing is to get the rooms clean and tidy for the estate agent. They're coming to take photos next week. So just clear away clutter, then a quick dust and vac and we'll hopefully make the place presentable.' He passes me a couple of dusters and a can of polish. 'How does that sound?'

It sounds like child labour to me. 'Great!' I say, raising my eyebrows at Gabi. 'Can't wait to get started.'

'That's the spirit,' Dad says, ignoring the sarcasm. 'Right. Off you go. I'll start downstairs. See you on the other side!'

Gabi and I climb the stairs and have a quick look at the

rooms. Bubbe's bedroom is at the front of the house; the bathroom's at the back with a spare room in between. I used to sleep in there the odd time I stayed over as a kid. Hard to believe I used to beg my parents to let me do that.

Gabi opens the door to the spare room. 'Holy moly!' she bursts out.

I look over her shoulder. The single bed is piled high with clothes. The carpet is barely visible for random objects lying around. Framed pictures are stacked up against one wall; an ironing board is propped up in a corner; several bags, half-filled and open, lie strewn around.

'How did she let it get like this?' I murmur, realizing it's literally years since I've been in this room.

'My grandma was the same,' Gabi says. 'Towards the end.' Then she bites her lip. 'I mean, I'm not saying it's the end.'

'It's okay. I know what you mean.'

'It was like she gave up a bit. Didn't bother putting things away. She'd wear the same clothes day after day.' Gabi's cheeks flush. 'She didn't realize that she'd started to smell a bit. It was . . .'

'Embarrassing,' I say.

'Yeah. But I'd feel guilty for thinking that.'

'I know exactly what you mean. Come on, let's see if her bedroom's any better.'

We close the spare-room door behind us, but before we get to the bedroom I have a thought. The attic. There's a

hatch in the ceiling out on the landing. You have to stand on a chair to open it and then pull a ladder down from inside the hatch to get in.

The attic was another thing that had always been on Bubbe's 'out of bounds' list. That had always made me want to go in there even more, but I was never allowed.

It's dangerous, Bubbe would say. She meant that the ladder was dodgy and the floorboards up there were weak. But I always wondered if she meant something more than that, too. I don't know why. Something about the darkness that crossed her eyes whenever we mentioned it. I imagined there was a secret world up there. I'd make up stories about it: tales of a land that only existed in Bubbe's attic, with a princess imprisoned in a tower and a monster standing guard outside the big bolted doors.

Now I had the chance to find out what was really up there.

'Hey. Want to check out the secret chamber?' I ask.

'Secret chamber?' Gabi laughs.

'Come on!'

I go into Bubbe's bedroom and look around. There's a wooden chair in the bay window. I feel a tiny pang in my chest at the thought of her sitting here, looking out, her little frame hunched over in the chair, watching the world coming and going below.

I pick up the chair and take it out to the landing. 'Hold on to the legs,' I say to Gabi as I stand on it. All the years of

being told it was dangerous have left a mark and I'm shaking as I reach up to open the hatch.

Then I pull down the ladder, and Gabi and I climb up into the darkness. I feel around on the wall for the switch. I flick it and the dark, dusty space is filled with light.

I feel deflated and weirdly cheated as I look round.

There's barely anything up here. A few cardboard boxes scattered about. A row of shelves at the far end stacked with paperwork and files. A TV aerial. Abandoned bits of junk. A couple of rolled-up rugs. That's it.

No monster. No imprisoned princess.

'Should we gather this stuff together and take it down?' Gabi asks.

'I guess,' I say.

Gabi looks at me. 'What's up?'

I shrug. 'I don't know. Bubbe always made such a big deal of us not being allowed in the attic. I suppose I thought there'd be something really exciting hidden up here.'

Gabi points at the boxes. 'Perhaps there is,' she says. 'You never know – these boxes might be full of wigs and outfits. Maybe your great-grandfather was an international spy.' She raises her eyebrows and pretends to twirl a moustache. 'He might be the person you write about for the history project.'

'Okay,' I say, laughing. 'Let's have a quick look before Dad comes upstairs and cracks the whip.'

We make our way over to the boxes. Gabi starts on one as I open up another and start rifling through it. It smells so musty it makes me sneeze. Nothing of interest inside it, though, just files full of bills, bank statements, old magazines.

I move to another box. It's a similar story. Nothing exciting. Certainly no evidence of international spying antics.

Gabi calls me over. 'Hey, Liv, check this out.' She lifts something out of a box. It's a small, brown, old-fashioned kind of chest. It looks like a treasure box.

As she passes it to me, I know in my gut that this is it. This is the secret that was always up here, the thing Bubbe was protecting. This is my imprisoned princess.

Only trouble is, it's locked with a tiny brass padlock and there's no sign of a key.

'I'll see if the key is in the cardboard box,' Gabi says. 'It might have fallen down to the bottom.'

'Okay,' I say. 'I'll check out the rest of the place, see if it's been put somewhere else.'

I glance around. Maybe the shelving unit. There are four shelves. The top three are filled with paperwork, but the lowest one is crammed with all sorts of odds and ends. A box of drawing pins, an old stapler, a tangled mess of paperclips, a pencil sharpener. As I shuffle through the random objects in search of a key, the shelves wobble and a stack of papers falls from the top shelf.

I reach down to pick them up, and, as I do, my eye is

caught by a photograph in the middle of the pile.

I pick it up. It's an old black-and-white family photo. Standing at the back is a man in a dark suit and tie, with a small moustache and a big smile. Beside him is a woman in a long flowery-patterned dress, tightly tied-up plaits crossed over her head and a face that looks to be held in place almost as tightly as her hair.

In front are four children. Three of them stand in a row before their parents. First, a girl who looks about my age. The man has a hand on her shoulder, and she's smiling – but in a way that looks as if she's been told to smile, rather than she's been caught mid-laughter.

Next is a boy standing up straight and looking into the camera as if it's going to eat him. He's wearing a suit like his dad's. It's a bit big on him and looks like something he only wears for special occasions, the collar stiff and high on his neck. His eyes are wide and his hair is neatly parted.

On the other side of the boy is an older girl. She's wearing a pinafore dress. Her hair hangs in a ponytail that's loose and ragged at the bottom. Her mum has an arm round the girl's waist. The woman's arm looks stiff, as though the cameraman had told her to be affectionate, but it's not her natural style. The girl is leaning back against her mum and staring straight at the camera. Her eyes are bold, almost as if they're challenging the camera, daring it to catch her not smiling. I'm instantly drawn to her. I

want to know what's behind those eyes.

In front of the three children is a younger boy, sitting on the ground. He's wearing shorts and his knees look scuffed. His face is a sulky pout. I smile as I look at him.

Still smiling, I turn the photograph over. In the top-left corner, it says 'Amsterdam, July 1942'. Below that is a list of names placed in the same positions as the people on the opposite side. The top line says 'Hans Van d B, Ingrid Van d B', the bottom 'Markus'.

It's the middle row that almost makes me drop the photo: 'Mila, Dirk, Hannie'.

Hannie.

That's what Bubbe called me the other day when we were leaving the house. A shiver goes through me.

I turn the photo back round and look at the girl on the right. The one with the loose ponytail and the bold stare. That must be Hannie. My eyes drift to the other girl, the one on the left – the girl with the forced smile I now realize I recognize from all the times I've seen that smile, the way it doesn't reach her eyes. It's Bubbe. I'm sure of it.

I flip the photo round again. This girl's name is Mila. Bubbe's name is Mimi. Could they be the same person? The names are quite similar, I guess. I look at her again. Maybe Mila was her middle name? I don't know, but I'm *sure* this is Bubbe.

Who's Hannie, then? Her sister? All these years, did

Bubbe have a sister she never told us about? And what about the others, the boys? Were they her brothers?

Am I actually looking at my own family tree?

I'm deep in questions and confusion when Gabi breaks me out of my thoughts. 'Found it!' she says, holding a key in the air and grinning at me.

I don't reply. Gabi puts the key down and comes over to me. 'You okay, Liv?'

I hold the photo out to show her. 'I think this is Bubbe,' I say simply. 'My grandma. With her family.'

We look at the photograph together. I can't take my eyes off Mila. She smiles woodenly at the camera, and I smile sadly back at her.

It's Bubbe, I know it. And, in knowing it, I realize that I know even less about my family and my past than I'd thought.