



CHAPTER 1

1948



German State Adoption Bureau,
Munich, Germany

*B*ertha and Abe Hoffmann, both short, stout, and gray-haired and dressed in identical drab-gray coats, sat in stiff-backed wooden chairs in the drafty outer office of the Munich Bureau of Adoption, waiting for their names to be called. At sixty-five and sixty-eight, respectively, they'd managed to survive the war, but just barely. The years in hiding had taken their toll, but now the fighting had finally ceased, and they had returned home to Munich and their beloved bookshop and their cozy apartment above. Both had been looted then sealed by the Nazis, but they'd found everything was relatively intact and they had just begun to feel some semblance of normalcy when they'd received a letter from a *Fraulein* Sigrid Webber at the adoption bureau notifying them that their request to adopt a

child had been granted and that they should come to the office at once to discuss the details.

Bertha, with her dark eyes and face creased from worry, sat nervously pushing wisps of hair back into her bun while fingering a handkerchief. She studied the faces of the children in the photographs taped to the faded green walls.

So many sad faces, she thought. So many children are alone and unloved. It breaks my heart.

She nudged Abe, who was nervously jiggling the change in his pocket. “Stop it,” she whispered. “You’re making too much noise.”

“Sorry,” he said, taking his hand out of his pocket and pushing back the wire-rimmed glasses that had slid down his large nose. “I wish they would hurry.”

“*Shhhh,*” Bertha hissed. “We’ve waited this long for a child, we can wait a few more minutes.”

Just then, a door opened and a young woman in a dark skirt and blazer motioned for them to come inside and take seats opposite her desk.

“Good afternoon, *Herr Hoffmann, Frau Hoffmann.* I am *Fraulein Webber.* How are you this fine day?”

“We are doing well,” Abe said, smiling broadly.

“A little nervous,” Bertha added, twisting her hankie in her hands.

“There is no need to be, *Frau Hoffmann,*” Sigrid said. “We are in the business of helping people, not scaring them.”

“*Wunderbar,*” said Abe, beaming at his wife.

“Now, I understand you submitted an adoption application several years before the war, am I correct?” Sigrid asked.

“Yes. We’ve always wanted children, but we’ve never been blessed,” Bertha said.

“I see,” Sigrid said. “You requested a Jewish child, so I assume you are also of that faith?”

Bertha glanced at Abe, who took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow. They hadn’t admitted to being Jewish since they’d returned to Munich a year ago from Füssen, the small town near the Austrian border they’d fled to when the Nazis forced them to close the shop. Though it had been forbidden at the time, they’d changed their names to Joseph and Marie Schmidt and spent the war years quietly passing as Christians. Now that the war was over and they were back in Munich, they were once again Bertha and Abe Hoffmann, but their religion was still something they were not comfortable openly admitting. However, if it meant they could adopt a child, Bertha believed it was worth the risk.

“Yes, *Fraulein*, we are,” Bertha said.

“Again, I apologize if this is making you uncomfortable, but I must ask.”

“We don’t mind. Please go ahead,” said Abe, stuffing the handkerchief back in his pocket.

“Of course,” Sigrid said. “I only ask your religious preference because I would like to propose something a bit irregular.”

“Irregular?” asked Abe. “How so?”

“Well, the children I have in mind for you—there are two of them, sisters—are not of Jewish parentage, but they are definitely in need of a loving home.”

“Two?” Bertha asked, not believing her luck. “Sisters?”

“Yes,” Sigrid replied. “However, these two have been very difficult to place in a Christian home for reasons I will explain to you, and that is why we contacted you.”

“Why couldn’t you place them?” Bertha asked, sounding alarmed.

Sigrid sighed and opened a folder on her desk. “Have you ever heard the name Karl-Otto Koch?”

Abe nodded and said, “Yes, I have. I remember reading about him in the papers. He was a cruel, evil man, the commandant at Buchenwald. He murdered many of our people in that camp. Now he’s dead, *Baruch Hashem*. The Nazis executed him. Too bad they didn’t kill more of their own.”

Bertha grabbed her husband’s hand. “Abe, don’t. Remember your blood pressure.”

“Sorry, Bertie,” Abe said. “You’re right. I apologize, *Fraulein*.”

“No need,” Sigrid said. “I understand perfectly.”

“Please continue,” Abe said, again mopping his brow.

“Karl Koch and his wife, Ilse, have two children, two little girls.”

“And where is the wife now that she can’t care for them?” Bertha asked.

“She was arrested by the Americans and is currently serving a life sentence in Aichach Prison.”

“Oh, no,” Bertha said. “What did *she* do?”

Now it was Abe’s turn to gently take his wife’s hand. “Bertie,” he said, “I don’t think you want to hear this.”

Bertha blinked but nodded at Sigrid. “Go ahead, please.”

“All right,” Sigrid said. She glanced at a sheet of paper laying on her desk, shuddered, and read: “She was convicted of abusing prisoners, with having them beaten, tortured, and murdered.”

She paused and looked up at the couple. "But that is not the worst of it, I'm afraid. Are you sure you want me to continue?"

"Yes, please," Bertha said, swallowing hard.

Sigrid inhaled deeply and said, "She is accused of having lampshades and other items manufactured out of human skin."

Abe tightened his grip on his wife's hand as she sat staring at the *Fraulein*. "Bertie?" he asked.

Bertha looked shaken but she nodded at Abe and said, "I'm fine." Then, turning to the *Fraulein*, she asked, "Where are the children now?"

"They are in an orphanage, but it is terribly overcrowded. We need to find them a permanent home."

"These sisters, how old are they?" Abe asked.

"Petra is six and her sister, Krista, is four. They are sweet little girls, but their parentage has made them pariahs. I have a picture of them with their parents that was taken several years ago." She handed Bertha a sepia-toned picture of a man in a Nazi uniform holding an infant in his arms. Next to the man stood a petite woman with shoulder-length hair wearing a tight-fitting sweater and skirt. She had laughing eyes and a wide smile as did the pretty little girl in a flowered dress standing in front of her.

Bertha quickly glanced at the photo, then slipped it into her handbag. Finally, with a hint of excitement in her voice, she said, "*Fraulein* Webber, may I have a minute to speak with my husband in private?"

"Of course," Sigrid said. She left the office and closed the door behind her.

"Abe?" Bertha asked, grabbing her husband's hand. "What do you think?"

"I don't know, Bertie," Abe said. "What if these children grow up to be like their parents? We could be taking on more trouble than we can handle."

"But Abe, we have waited so long. We have a chance to raise these girls in a loving Jewish home. Think of it. After all our people have been through, after all the death, this is a chance to give life."

"But they are the children of Nazis," Abe said. "Do you think we can raise them to be Jews?"

"Why not?" Bertha asked. "They are too young to understand what their parents did. They are innocents. We don't have to tell them where they came from, not for a good long while anyway. We can tell them that their mother is too ill to take care of them and had to give them up. They will believe what we tell them to believe."

"But that would be deceiving them."

"It would be *saving* them, Abe. No one else will take them in. Do you want them to rot in that stinking children's home with no one to love them?"

"No, of course not."

"Then let's do it. Abe, please!"

"All right. If it will make you happy, Bertie."

"Thank you, *Liebling*," Bertha said and gave Abe a peck on the cheek. "I will let the *Fraulein* know." Bertha went to the door, opened it, and summoned Sigrid, who came back and took her seat behind the desk.

"*Frau Hoffmann, Herr Hoffmann*, what have you decided?"

"We will be happy to take the children," Bertha said.

"I am so pleased," Sigrid said. "I will prepare the paper-work at once."

“When do you think we can have them?” Bertha asked.

“Would tomorrow afternoon be too soon?”

“Tomorrow will be perfect,” Bertha said. “Come, Abe,” she said, taking her husband’s arm. “We have some shopping to do.”