

DINEY COSTELOE

*The
Girl With
No Name*



Prologue

Hanau, Germany, 9 November 1938

‘Jews out! Jews out! Jews out!’ The chanting grew ever nearer and was accompanied by bangs and crashes and cries of terror. The Becker family huddled in their kitchen with the lights off and all the curtains in the apartment drawn against the night and against the terrifying sounds from the street below. Their apartment was on the first floor of the building. Once Franz Becker had had his surgery on the ground floor, but that had long since gone, taken over by a neighbour when the new laws forbade Franz from practising as a doctor. But the house and the apartment were marked. Marta pushed her children, Lisa and Martin, into the small broom cupboard, and saying, ‘Lisa, you have to! Be brave!’ she closed the door firmly on Lisa’s frightened eyes. She knew that her daughter was terrified of being shut in small places, she always had been, but it was for her own safety and Marta had to be strong for them all.

As the baying crowd passed along the street, Marta crept under the kitchen table. Bricks were hurled through the windows and shards of glass showered down on the table where she crouched, curled into a ball in an effort to protect herself from the flying splinters. The sound of excited chanting moved on, but even as Marta crept from beneath the table and was opening the broom cupboard, there was the sound of boots on the staircase and the door to the apartment was kicked open. Two storm troopers burst in, one holding a pistol, the other armed with a long wooden club. They

were followed by a man from the Gestapo, tall and sinister in his trade-mark long, dark coat and trilby hat. He paused in the doorway looking round.

'I can't believe that filthy Jews are still living in an apartment like this when there are so many true Germans without proper homes.' His tone was one of disgust as his eyes ran over the woman and two children cowering in the kitchen. 'Where is your husband?' he demanded. 'Where is he hiding?'

'He's not here,' faltered Marta. 'He's... he's out... looking after a patient.'

'Find him,' the Gestapo officer snapped out the order. 'He has no patients!' The two storm troopers jumped to obey and crashed their way round the flat, tipping up beds, pulling at curtains, opening cupboard doors, until one said, 'Nobody here, sir.'

The Gestapo man looked angry and turning to Marta, he said, 'We will find him. Pack one case and then out! Take your Jew-spawn with you and be gone... before I come back!' With that all three men stamped back down the stairs.

When they'd gone, Marta sank down on to a chair and buried her head in her hands. Thank God Franz had indeed been visiting a patient, a young Jewish mother about to give birth, and thank God that in the gloom of the darkened room, neither the storm troopers nor the Gestapo officer had realised that Martin was blind. For the moment her two men were safe, but not, she knew, for long.

What should they do? Her brain seemed numb and she had to force herself to think. If they stayed put the Gestapo would almost certainly be back, looking for Franz and checking to be sure she and her children had left the apartment; but if they went now they would be out on the streets where a frenzied mob was still chanting, still setting fires, smashing windows, and beating up anyone fool enough to protest.

'Mutti,' whispered Lisa, 'where's Papa?'

'I don't know, Lisa,' replied her mother. It was the truth. Franz could be anywhere, just not, she prayed, in the clutches of the mob outside.

'What are we going to do, Mother?' asked Martin quietly.

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‘I’m going to pack a case now, before they come back looking for us, then if they do, we can simply walk out into the street and we shall have some things to keep us going.’

‘It’s not safe to stay here,’ Martin said.

‘It’s not safe out on the streets either,’ replied his mother. ‘We’re not safe anywhere, but for the moment I think it’s better to stay here. If they see us walking through the dark, carrying a case, they’ll simply grab it and beat us up. For the moment it sounds as if they’ve moved on.’ She went cautiously to the window and keeping well behind the curtain, peered out into the grey of dawn. There were a few shadows moving about in the street below, dark silhouettes against the red-orange glow of fire, blazing through the synagogue at the end of the street and the rabbi’s house beyond. The sky itself seemed on fire and Marta wondered why their home had been spared. Probably because a good ‘German’ family would like to live in it. For whatever reason, she decided, it might give them shelter for another hour or two yet. To venture out into the street now with two children, one of them blind, would be suicidal, Marta realised, but they should prepare for flight.

Lisa watched as her mother pulled out the biggest case they had and began to fill it with some clothes for each of them. In the pocket of a skirt, she slipped the pearl necklace Lisa knew Papa had given her on their wedding day and a ring that had been her grandmother’s.

‘Fetch the flour jar,’ Mutti said, and when Lisa brought it to her, she plunged her hand into the flour and pulled out the roll of Reichsmarks that had been hidden there.

‘Put these in your knickers,’ she said to a startled Lisa and turned her attention back to the suitcase.

Outside, the chanting and the sound of smashing glass continued, but further off; the crowd was turning its attention elsewhere. Martin sat on a chair, his head in his hands, listening. He could see nothing and his blindness made him even more frightened. The room had been turned over and he no longer knew where the furniture was. If he moved he knew he’d fall over.

‘Where shall we go, Mother?’ he asked.

‘To Aunt Trudi’s,’ replied Marta firmly, though she really had no idea where. ‘I’m sure Papa will come and find us there, if ...’ she hesitated, biting back the words, ‘if they haven’t caught him’ and saying instead, ‘if he can.’

The three of them spent the early hours sitting, waiting. Gradually the children nodded off into uneasy sleep, but Marta remained wide awake. There was no point in her trying to sleep, indeed, Marta knew it would be foolish. She needed to be alert in case the Gestapo man returned. Outside she could still hear shouts and as daylight filled the sky she went once again to the window to look out. What she saw made her gasp. Was this really the street in which she lived? It was strewn with glass, the wood of smashed doors and broken furniture. The windows of the two houses opposite gaped back at her, a few jagged shards still clinging to the frames, the front door of one lay flat on the ground, that of the other hung crazily from one hinge. The houses on either side seemed undamaged and Marta realised with a jolt that they belonged to two of her non-Jewish neighbours. There were not many non-Jews living in the area, but as far as she could see their homes had remained untouched. None of the houses showed a light, but she could see Frau Klein in the road outside her house, picking through the contents of her home which lay trampled in the gutter.

It’s time to move, she thought. About to turn back to wake the children, she caught a movement in the shadows at the entrance of an alley a little further down the street. Someone was there. As she watched she saw that it was Franz, peering anxiously round the corner. She raised her hand to wave, but even as she did so, two men stepped out of a doorway and confronted him. Franz turned to run, but a third man was behind him, swinging a wooden baton, and without a cry Franz crumpled to the ground. Two of the men grabbed him by the feet and dragged him, his head banging against the cobbles, unceremoniously up the road and round the corner.

Marta crammed her hand into her mouth to stop herself from crying out and stared at the place where Franz had stood. The third man, still standing there, glanced up towards the window. Though Marta was sure he couldn’t see her concealed by the heavy

velvet of the curtain, he fixed his eyes on her window and smiled, before turning away and following his companions, and Franz, out of sight.

With renewed panic she crossed the room and shook the children. 'Wake up,' she said, 'it's time to go.'

'Go where?' asked Lisa sleepily, the events of the night momentarily forgotten.

'To Aunt Trudi's, now. Before they come back. Come on, both of you. There's no time to be lost.' She could only pray that her sister Trudi's apartment had not been wrecked as well, that the madness had been localised.

The two children dressed quickly and at their mother's insistence put on two sets of underwear, two jerseys and thick woollen stockings. She wanted them to wear as many clothes as possible, for she knew they could well lose their precious suitcase if they were seen carrying it in the street.

'And these,' she said, handing them their winter coats. It would be cold outside at this time on a November morning. 'Hats, scarves and gloves too,' she insisted as she donned her own winter clothes, 'and your winter boots.'

Moments later they were ready to leave. The suitcase was heavy. Marta had crammed it as full as she could, for she knew that they wouldn't be coming back to this apartment for a long time... if ever.

'Hold Martin's hand,' Marta instructed her daughter, 'and don't let go whatever happens, understand?'

'Yes, Mutti,' replied the girl and taking hold of her brother she said, 'Don't let go of me, Martin.'

'My stick,' Martin cried in alarm, 'I need my stick.'

'No,' snapped his mother. 'No stick. We can't let them know that you're blind. Put your hand here.' She took his hand and put it on the handle of the case. 'You have to help me with this. I'll carry it with you, but they may not realise that I'm leading you with it.' With a final glance round the apartment that had been her home for more than fifteen years, she said quietly, 'We're going to walk downstairs and then out into the street. Stay together, but if we do get separated, go to Aunt Trudi's house.'

Chapter One

London, 1939

When Naomi Federman read an advertisement in the *Evening Standard* asking for people to become foster parents to refugee children from Germany, it gave her pause and she began to consider the idea. She showed it to her husband, Dan, when he got home that evening.

‘It’s something we could do, don’t you think?’ she said. ‘We’ve got room here for a child.’

Dan knew that there was a space in Naomi’s life that she’d always hoped would be filled by children of their own, but there had been none, and now that she was past thirty-five, he knew, too, that she’d given up hope of having a family. Her suggestion of fostering a refugee child might, he thought, help fill the void.

‘Right-ho, love,’ he said. ‘If that’s what you want to do, we’ll find out about it.’

They went to Bloomsbury House where the arrival of Jewish refugee children from Germany was being co-ordinated and their offer was accepted.

‘We’d really love a baby or a toddler,’ Naomi said hesitantly to the woman behind the desk who was taking down their details.

‘I’m afraid we can’t possibly guarantee that,’ she replied. ‘We’re never quite sure who is coming in on the trains these days. Most of the children, those whose names we’ve been given, have already been paired with families, but there are sometimes children we aren’t expecting, those who’ve been pushed on to the train at the last

minute. Those are the ones who'll need families when they get here.' She smiled up at the Federmans. 'Generous people like you, ready to take them in and give them a home.'

'We quite understand,' Daniel said. 'We're happy to provide a home for any child who needs one, aren't we, love?' And Naomi had nodded.

So, one afternoon in July, they found themselves at Liverpool Street station, waiting for the arrival of their new child. There was a group of other prospective foster parents waiting in a large hall at the station. Many of them had already been assigned children, knew their names and ages, but the people at Bloomsbury House had contacted the Federmans just yesterday and told them there was an unexpected child on this train due from Frankfurt and asked them to come to the station.

The sight of a line of children straggling wearily into the hall tugged at Naomi's heart. Each wore a label, each carried one small suitcase, all were tired and pale, grubby and frightened. Several were tearful at the end of the long journey, already homesick, arriving in an alien country where everything looked different and they couldn't understand what was being said to them.

A woman, who introduced herself as Mrs Carter and who spoke German, had come from Bloomsbury House. With quiet efficiency she had introduced the arrivals to their new families, checking off their names and addresses on her list. Gradually they left the hall, foster mothers leading their new charges by the hand, foster fathers carrying suitcases, out into the sprawl of London to begin their new lives.

At last there was only one child left, a girl of about thirteen, small for her age, with tangled brown hair and smudges of dirt on her face. She stood forlorn, her case at her feet, and unshed tears gleaming in her brown eyes. She had been a last-minute addition to the fleeing children and had no sponsor.

Mrs Carter crossed over to her and said with a smile, 'Now then, who've we got here? What's your name, my dear?'

'Lisa Becker,' came the whispered reply.

'Well, Lisa, we're very pleased to see you. We didn't know you

were on the train until it arrived in Holland, but we're very glad you were. Where do you come from?'

'Hanau.'

Hanau. Not the first from there, Mrs Carter thought sadly, but all she said was, 'Well, you're safe in London now. Did they give you a letter to give me when you arrived?'

Lisa nodded and feeling in her pocket, handed over an envelope. Mrs Carter opened it quickly and perused the contents.

She turned to the Federmans and reverting to English said, 'Her name is Lieselotte Becker, aged thirteen, and she's come from Hanau, which is a town not far from Frankfurt. She is Jewish, but according to this letter, not observant.' She glanced at Naomi. 'Are you?'

Naomi shook her head. Her father had been Jewish, but her family had not followed the Jewish laws of daily living. 'No,' she said.

Mrs Carter nodded. 'Well, Lieselotte follows no dietary rules, so you have no worries there, she can eat whatever you do.'

Naomi looked at the girl, waiting fearfully in the now-empty hall. With her grubby face and straggly hair, she was not an attractive prospective daughter, but they had promised to give a refugee child a home and Lieselotte was such a child.

Mrs Carter turned back to her. 'Lieselotte,' she said, 'these are the kind people who you're going to live with. Mr and Mrs Federman. You'll be going home with them now and that's where you'll be living. You must write to your parents to let them know that you've arrived and give them the address.'

Lisa looked at the couple standing, waiting. The man was small with a wiry frame. He wore rather baggy, dark trousers and a checked jacket over a collarless shirt. His hair, showing from under the flat cap that perched on his head, was touched with grey, but his eyes were a deep blue, laughter lines etched at the corners. He was smiling at her now, his eyes crinkling as he did so.

So different from Papa, Lisa thought, as a picture of her father in his neat suit, collar and tie, flashed before her, but he has a kind face.

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His wife was only a little shorter than he and built on far more generous lines. Her hair, a dark blonde, was caught up at the back of her head, she was wearing a blue cotton frock that strained a little across her ample bosom, and her arms, emerging from cotton sleeves, looked strong and capable. She was smiling too, but her eyes, a sharp, light grey, were noting Lisa's travel-worn state and somehow Lisa felt she was being assessed and found wanting. She hung back, waiting for Mrs Carter to speak again. How was she going to talk to this couple once German-speaking Mrs Carter had gone? she wondered, an edge of panic rising through her. But Mrs Carter said nothing, it was the woman who addressed her next.

'Hallo, Lieselotte,' she said. 'Welcome to London.'

Lisa stared at her uncomprehendingly until Mrs Carter translated, then she spoke one of the few English sentences she had learned and said, 'Good day, madam.' She pointed to herself and added, 'Lisa. *Bitte*, Lisa.'

'It's a diminutive of her name,' explained Mrs Carter to Naomi's look of enquiry. She smiled. 'And a lot easier to say. I think you should call her Lisa. By the way,' she added, 'how would you like Lisa to address you?'

The Federmans looked at each other. The husband shrugged, but his wife suggested tentatively, 'Aunt Naomi and Uncle Dan?'

'Perfect,' agreed Mrs Carter cheerfully, and reverting again to German explained this to Lisa.

Before they left the station Mrs Carter noted Lisa's details on her clipboard and then shaking the Federmans by the hand, she sent them all home.

With Dan carrying the suitcase, they left the station and boarded a bus, climbing the stairs to its upper deck. Lisa had never seen a double-decker bus before and was pleased they had gone upstairs.

'There you are... Liesel... Lisa,' Dan said, stumbling a little over her unfamiliar name, 'you can see a bit of London on our way home.' He waved an expansive hand at the window and what lay beyond. As the bus wove its way through the city Lisa, wide-eyed, peered out of the window at her first sight of London. All was bustle and rush. She had never seen such busy streets; buses, cars, lorries,

taxis, seemed to be coming from every direction, horns hooting, engines roaring. People thronged the pavements, in and out of shops and offices, disappearing into the jumble of narrow streets that twisted away from the main road. Would she ever, Lisa wondered, dare venture out into streets such as these?

Naomi and Daniel sat in the seat behind her and spoke in low voices.

‘Not quite what we’d hoped for,’ Dan said cautiously.

‘No,’ Naomi agreed, ‘but we couldn’t leave her, could we?’

‘Course not, love,’ Dan said with some relief in his voice. He knew that Naomi had set her heart on a much younger child. ‘She’ll be fine.’

‘This way,’ Dan said when they got off the bus. ‘Not far now.’ Carrying Lisa’s case he strode ahead, leaving Naomi and Lisa to follow him, threading their way through the web of streets that spread beyond the main road. They were lined with houses, some set back in pairs behind a tiny front garden, but most of them flat-faced terraced houses which opened directly on to the pavement, each identical to its neighbour like a row of cut-out paper dolls. To Lisa the roads all looked the same and as they took first one turning and then another, she wondered how on earth she was going to find her way through this maze another time.

Aunt Naomi was chatting to her, even though it was perfectly clear that Lisa couldn’t understand a word she was saying. And then they were there, after one final turn they entered yet another street, looking to Lisa identical to all the others.

Uncle Dan had waited for them on the corner and when they caught up with him he pointed at a street name, high up on a wall. ‘Kemble Street,’ he said. ‘Kemble Street. We live in Kemble Street.’ He looked expectantly at Lisa and when she didn’t say anything he said, ‘Kemble Street,’ and touched her with his pointed finger. ‘You,’ he said, ‘you say, “I live in Kemble Street.”’

Once she had realised what he wanted of her, Lisa made a valiant effort to repeat the name and a stammering, ‘I live in Kemple Street,’ earned her a warm smile of approval.

‘Good!’ Dan said. ‘Good girl!’

Lisa recognised the word 'good', so like the German '*gut*', and for the first time since she had met her foster parents, they saw her smile, and her pale face was transformed.

They walked a little way along the street and then stopped outside one of the small terrace houses. It had a green door with the number 65 painted on it.

'Here we are,' Dan said. 'Number sixty-five. This is where we live, Lisa. Sixty-five Kemble Street.' He unlocked the front door and led the way inside. Lisa followed him into a narrow hallway with a room to the left, a passageway to the back of the house and immediately in front of her, a steep staircase to the floor above. Dan put down the suitcase and said, 'Welcome to your new home, Lisa.'

'I'll show Lisa where she's going to sleep,' Naomi said, 'you put the kettle on, Dan, and we'll all have a cuppa. This way, Lisa.' Naomi picked up the case and beckoning Lisa to follow her, led the way upstairs. At the top of the stairs she pointed to a door and then to herself saying, 'Our bedroom.' She opened a second door to show a tiny bathroom and then a third, gesturing Lisa to go in. 'Your room, Lisa.'

Lisa went in and looked about her. It was a small room furnished with a bed, a chest of drawers and a chair. The bed was covered with a floral quilt and on the chest there was a china bowl and a jug patterned with roses. On one wall was a mirror and on another was a picture of a horse pulling a plough.

Naomi put the suitcase on the bed. 'Why don't you unpack your things and then come down to the kitchen.' And when Lisa looked at her uncomprehendingly, she pulled open the drawers and then pointed to the suitcase, miming unpacking.

Lisa nodded and Naomi gave her a smile and went back downstairs.

Left alone, Lisa went to the window and looked out. Below her was an untidy yard bounded by wooden fences, with identical yards on either side. Beyond was what looked like an alleyway and the backs of the houses crowding along the next street. She turned back to the bed and opened her case. It held all she now possessed in the world. Her mother had packed what few clothes she had and

had managed to buy her a new coat for the coming winter, but she was wearing her only pair of shoes. Tears flooded her eyes as she looked at the clothes so carefully mended and folded by Mutti. What was Mutti doing now? Where was Papa, had he come home yet? How was Martin coping living in an unfamiliar, cramped apartment? Had he learned his way around the furniture? She picked up the photo of them, taken in happier days, all smiling at the camera. Her family. It was the only photograph she had of them. She put it into her pocket and with a determined effort blew her nose and began to put her clothes into the open drawers. When the case was empty she pushed it under the bed and sat down. Here she was, in London, in a tiny house, with people she didn't know and all she wanted to do was go home, back to Hanau; to be with her family, no matter how difficult life there was becoming. Tears trickled down her cheeks. She felt entirely bereft and alone and she wanted to howl.

Papa had thought they were safe. He was a well-known doctor in the town, his practice flourishing. The fact that his mother happened to be Jewish had never concerned him. They were fully assimilated and he considered himself, first and foremost, a German. He had been an army doctor in the Great War and had received a medal for his service. But now that counted for nothing. His mother was a Jew, so he was a Jew. He was no longer allowed to treat anyone but Jews; his former colleagues treated him as if he had the plague and when he had gone to the aid of one of his pregnant patients who was in early labour, he had been arrested by the Gestapo and had disappeared. On the now notorious 'Kristallnacht' they had been turned out of their home, left to find shelter wherever they could while another, Aryan, doctor who'd already taken over the surgery, now took the apartment above it. They had taken temporary refuge with Mutti's sister Trudi and her family, but their apartment was small and crowded and it was almost impossible to house so many, particularly a blind child, so they'd had to move on. Marta had found two rooms in an old tenement building on the edge of the town and there they had managed to stay. Martin, Lisa's blind older brother, had gradually learned to find his way about and

for a short while some sort of normality had returned. Except there was no Papa. He hadn't been released, he had simply disappeared and so Marta had decided that she must try and get her children to safety. Lisa's name had been added to the list of Jewish children waiting for places on one of the Kindertransport trains to take them to safety, out of the country.

'I don't want to go,' Lisa had pleaded, but her mother was insistent.

'If a place comes up, darling, you're going. I need to know you're safe.'

'But what about Martin?'

'They won't take Martin,' her mother said bitterly. 'They won't even put his name on the list; blind children are too much trouble.'

The days and weeks had passed. There had been no news of Papa, despite every effort her mother made to find out what had happened to him, where he had been taken. Lisa got her passport, but she had not been given a place on the train. She was relieved. She didn't want to go and she hoped against hope that she wouldn't be chosen. Then suddenly, one afternoon, a man came to the apartment and said there was a place on the train leaving Frankfurt the next day. Someone was not going after all. There was room for Lisa if she had her passport and wanted to go. She didn't want to go, but her mother was determined that she should and began to pack. The next day Lisa had bid a tearful farewell to Martin and then gone to the station with her mother.

'The war is coming,' Mutti had said. 'I can't leave Germany without your father and Martin can't leave without me. As soon as you get to London, you must send me your address and we can write to each other, but if the war comes and you can't write directly, you can try to get letters to us through your father's cousin Nikolaus, in Switzerland.' She pressed a folded sheet of paper into Lisa's hand. 'Here's his address in Zurich, and we'll write to you the same way. If we can, we'll go to him. It may be possible, because Switzerland will surely stay neutral.'

Lisa looked at the paper now, Nikolaus Becker's name and address. Would Papa ever come home, she wondered. And if he did,

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would the three of them be allowed to leave Germany, to go to Zurich?

She looked round the bleak little room that was now hers. She was here, she must make the best of it, but it wasn't going to be easy. She got to her feet and went into the little bathroom that jutted out, a precarious afterthought, on the back of the house. She splashed cold water on her face and then determined to pull herself together, she went downstairs.

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