**The Path Divided**

**by Jeanne Moran**

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We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims [caught] beneath the wheels of injustice.

We are to drive a spoke

into the wheel itself.

*—Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

Humanitarianism is the expression of stupidity

and cowardice.

*—Adolf Hitler*

**Chapter One**

**Rennie**

U

ntil the picture frame showed me otherwise, I thought my corner of the world was green. I didn’t know I’d already colored the paths in front of my best friend, my unsuspecting brother, and me.

None of us would ever be the same.

Freising, Germany

25 July 1938

I eased the screen door closed behind me and slipped into the dewy grass. A few dozen meters from the farmhouse, I sat atop a rock and opened *Julius Caesar*. It’s not like I planned to audition for a starring role. Those parts were for experienced actors, not a fourteen-year-old like me. But I wouldn’t settle for a voiceless face in a crowd scene either.

I paged through the script in search of a supporting character, one whose role was small but essential. The part I played had to make a difference.

And there it was—the Soothsayer! I hissed the famous warning of Caesar’s day of betrayal and death, “Beware the Ides of March.” Hunching forward, I tried the line with a growl and then rose and straightened to deliver it with a shout. “Beware the Ides of March!”

I was startled by the approach of rumbling wheels and clomping hooves. A dusty workhorse pulling a gypsy wagon stopped in front of me. A woman climbed down from the wagon driver’s seat. She was short and soft, as if a feather pillow were stuffed in her faded blouse and crumpled black skirt.

A small door on the wagon’s roof pushed open and clanked backward as the head of a dark-haired boy popped out. He looked at me and grinned. “That’s her. Rennie, she calls herself. Renate Müller, from Munich.” His head disappeared, and the door banged shut.

I slid from the rock and stepped closer. “Have we met? Frau…”

“Wait here,” the woman ordered as she entered the wagon’s back door. “I have something for you.”

So, I waited. The wagon’s peeling sides exposed patches of weathered wood, yet freshly painted flowers and scrolls decorated the roofline. From what I knew of these travelers—Roma, they called themselves—they lived in wagons like that. The whole family and everything they owned were crammed into that narrow rectangle. Where did they store winter clothing? Where did they keep their grandmother’s dishes?

The woman stepped out of the wagon with the boy—her son, I assumed—at her heels. His stained white shirt and dusty trousers sagged from his thin frame. Poor kid. Not more than ten years old, wearing someone else’s clothes and living in a wagon.

The Romany woman approached me and swept both hands forward in a grand gesture. A dull silver object sat on her open palms. I stated the obvious. “It’s a picture frame.”

“I told her you wanted one,” the boy said.

How did he know? I stepped back, ready to bolt to the Huber’s farmhouse.

He tugged at his pants as he spoke. “I saw you in town a couple days ago. You asked the shopkeeper about picture frames.” That was true. I’d visited a shop in search of a frame for my favorite photo of me and my best friend Sophie. In case one the right size turned up, I’d left my name with the store’s owner. The boy smiled. “Shopkeeper shooed me out, thought I’d steal something. But I don’t steal. I get leads.”

“Leads,” I repeated.

“Like this. You need a picture frame.” He gestured to the item still in his mother’s outstretched hands. “A special one.”

Actually, the frame looked quite ordinary. The sides of the empty rectangle were dull silver with engraved vines that were partially worn away. But when the Romany woman shoved the frame into my hands, I felt a connection. Familiarity, maybe. For the photo of Sophie and me in happier times, best friends together, the frame was perfect. “If you’ll wait here, I’ll get the money…” I began.

The woman drew her face close and examined me for several moments. I was about to pull away when she snapped, “It belongs to you.”

I shook my head. “I’m afraid you’re mistaken. I’ve never seen it before.”

“The frame is yours. Look how you cradle it. As if holding a babe.”

Sure enough, it was nestled into the crook of my arm. I even swayed a little, rocking it. I froze.

“The photo you want the frame for, it is special to you?” Her face wasn’t as close as it had been, but her eyes continued their fine examination of me.

“Very special.”

“And a person in the photo, something has happened to her, *ja*?”

I was about to answer yes, my best friend Sophie had gotten polio a few months earlier, but I clamped my slack jaw shut. This woman, this entire encounter…

She continued, her tone urgent. “Any picture frame shows what is real. This”—she poked a finger at the frame even as I tugged it close to save it from her jab—“this frame shows what is possible.”

“I…I don’t understand.”

“The past is past, paved in stone. But the future—that is mystery. All depends on which path you choose.” She climbed to the wagon driver’s seat, then clucked her tongue and snapped the reins. “Let’s go, Bruno.” The boy hurried through the wagon’s door.

As the horse started walking, I called out, “Wait! I need to pay you!”

For the first time, the woman smiled at me, a sad, tight smile. “Oh, you will pay,” she said. “Be careful, Renate Müller. Once a path is chosen, there is no turning back.”

She may as well have said “Beware the Ides of March.” I shivered.

The door on the roof opened, and Bruno popped up, calling, “I’ll watch for you in town.” He waved, and the wagon rolled on, spewing dust.

From the farmhouse up the hill, I heard the stirrings and voices typical of every morning. The four Huber children were waking. Time to start my day’s work. I hurried to my room and tucked the frame in a drawer. I’d puzzle over the Romany and her odd words later.

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I’d finished stocking the pantry with fresh-made jam when eight-year-old Conrad flung open the back door. Grinning all the while, he shoved the largest basket I’d ever seen into the kitchen. “It’s a two-bushel basket,” he announced.

Anticipating more jam making, I groaned. “What’s in there? Peaches?”

“The basket’s not for you, Rennie. It’s for Ada.” He stepped past me in search of his little sister.

 I blocked his path. “Show me first.”

Conrad whipped off the basket’s gingham cover. Empty. Then I heard it—a dry scrape like footsteps through autumn leaves.

I followed the sound to the basket’s base, squatted, and squinted into the space created between the woven fibers. Something moved. I jerked back and bolted upright, then peered inside the basket again. Empty. I used my best threatening tone. “Conrad.”

Still grinning, he reached deep inside the basket, stuck a finger in a small hole, and lifted. “A false bottom.” Coiled at the basket’s true bottom half a meter lower lay a thin black snake. Before I could speak, he reached in, grabbed the creature, and dropped it at my feet. Somewhere behind me, little Ada squealed. Her footsteps skittered away.

I wished I could join her, but I was in charge until the children’s mother returned home. I willed my voice steady and picked up the horrid thing. “Nice snake. Weren’t you afraid it would suffocate in there?”

“There’s space between the weaves. Air holes.” The boy’s eyebrows pulled together. “Why didn’t you scream? Girls always scream at snakes.” He sounded disappointed.

Good. I fixed my gaze on him. “This fellow’s mother will come looking for him soon. I hope she’s not mad.” I shook my head. “A mad mother snake.” Conrad’s eyes widened, so I embellished as if I were onstage. “I wonder how big she is. Maybe she’s—” I spread my arms and let the snake dangle from one hand, suppressing a shudder as the creature squirmed and tried to gain purchase on my arm.

“I…I better put him back,” Conrad stammered. He grabbed the snake and raced outside, leaving his precious trick basket behind.

While I scrubbed my trembling hands, Ada peeked around the doorframe. “He’s gone,” I said. “The snake too.”

She drew close to me and whispered, “Why does Conrad do that?”

I kissed the coiled braids on top of her head. “Because he’s eight and you’re five.”

“How old are you, Rennie?”

“Fourteen. Fifteen next month.”

Ada peered up at me. “I want to be just like you when I’m fourteen, fifteen next month. Not afraid of anything. Not even snakes.”

“Can you keep a secret?” She nodded and used a finger to draw a cross on her chest. “I was just acting brave. I’m scared of snakes too.”

“You are? Does anyone else know?”

“Nope. Our secret. Grab your book. I’ll give you a piggyback ride to the couch.”

When I was halfway through reading “Cinderella,” the children’s mother came in. “Frau Huber,” I said, rising to greet her.

She pulled off her kerchief and smoothed her brown waves. “How’s my Ada?” she said, opening her arms to the little girl’s embrace. She lifted Ada against a hip and peppered me with questions. I detailed the chores I'd done and told her of the snake incident. Frau Huber tipped her head and smiled. “I don’t know how I managed before you came, Renate.”

I liked my summer Youth assignment at the Huber’s farm. Herr Huber oversaw the farm itself—the crops, the animals, and the machinery. Between eight and twelve Youth worked with him and lived in the farm’s bunkhouse. Since I was mother’s helper, I lived in the family’s home. Daily household chores and childcare were my jobs.

Frau Huber sold the farm’s goods at the town market a few mornings a week. Ten-year-old Otto usually went along to help with lifting and toting. That left me in charge of the house and three younger children, Conrad, Ada, and Martin, a toddler with a constant runny nose and full diaper, until Frau Huber returned midafternoon.

The woman smiled at me. “There’s mail for you on the kitchen table.”

The word “mail” brought a lump to my throat. “*Danke*. I’ll take it to my room.” I didn’t want to get teary-eyed in front of Ada—not when she thought I was so brave.

As I raced upstairs with the two envelopes addressed to me in hand, Frau Huber called, “When you’re done, take the other mail to the bunkhouse.”

In my stuffy attic room, I kicked off my shoes and climbed on the bed, nesting both envelopes between my crossed ankles. One had been posted back home in Munich a few days earlier. I didn’t recognize the handwriting.

*Dear Rennie,*

*I am Luana Weber, a nurse at University Hospital, writing this on behalf of Sophie Adler. Because of her arm injury and surgery, Sophie could not write you herself.*

I almost dropped the letter. What arm injury and surgery? When did my best friend leave the polio hospital and go to University Hospital?

*I thought you would want the enclosed letter Sophie and I began, even in its unfinished state. She began to dictate it late one day but grew tired and asked to finish another time, so I placed the letter in my uniform pocket and took it home. When I returned for my next shift, Sophie had been discharged. The cleaning staff found some personal correspondence stuffed under her mattress, including a letter with your return address on the envelope.*

*Sophie spoke of you often. She treasures your friendship. When you see her, give her my best.*

*L.W.*

I removed the second sheet of paper from the same envelope, also written in Nurse Weber’s hand. I knew who had dictated those words. Sophie!

*Dear Rennie,*

*I found the missing items and sent them on their way! But I think the Pied Piper figured it out. All of it. Can you*

I turned the paper over. Blank. I looked inside the envelope. Nothing else.

My stomach lurched. Had Werner really figured it all out? Even my role in helping Sophie?

And can I what?

The second piece of mail I’d received was written in my own hand. I’d addressed it to Sophie at the polio hospital, and it was postmarked two weeks earlier. Stamped across the envelope’s front was **Return to Sender. No forwarding address.**

No forwarding address? If Sophie wasn’t at the polio hospital and wasn’t at University Hospital, she must have gone home. Why didn’t they send her mail home?

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From the doorway of the converted barn the Hubers used as a bunkhouse, I hollered, “Mail’s here!” In moments, six girls appeared. As I called names, the girls crowded me, snatched envelopes, then darted off. Before I called two of the girls, Uta and Marie, I asked to speak with them in private. They were from my Munich neighborhood and had been childhood friends of mine and of Sophie’s. With the others out of earshot, I handed Uta and Marie their mail and asked if they’d heard from Sophie.

“Um, no,” Uta said. “Not for weeks.”

Marie shook her head. “Me neither.”

I shared the incomplete news I’d received. Marie was dating Sophie’s stepbrother Klaus, so I was disappointed when all she offered was, “Klaus didn’t mention her. I know he’s back in Munich taking care of the bakery.” She glanced around and lowered her voice. “You know, because of their parents’ arrest.”

Poor Herr and Frau Adler. Treason charges. I shuddered. “So, if Klaus is back home,” I asked, “is that where Sophie went?” The two girls stared at me. I couldn’t tell if they thought I had a point or if they thought I was a fool for asking. “And if she’s home, why didn’t the hospital forward her mail?”

Uta dismissed this with a wave of her hand. “Clerical error.”

Marie chimed in. “Yes. Hospital staff saw an empty bed and didn’t look further.” They both turned heel and walked away.

That evening, I opened a drawer to get a nightgown and stopped short. The picture frame. I’d forgotten! Now I could display my favorite photo of Sophie and me.

An avid photographer, Sophie had snapped the photo several months before she got sick. We’d been on a Youth outing to the Neuschwanstein Castle. She posed me before a castle wall, set a timer on her camera, then hurried beside me. The photo captured us in profile, pointing and laughing at little brown birds that pecked at her nearby lunch. Our shared delight was as genuine and comfortable as our friendship.

I slid the precious photo into the Romany woman’s frame and settled it in view on my nightstand. It was the last thing I saw when I turned off the light.

The next morning, I wrote two letters to try to learn Sophie’s whereabouts. One was to my mother back home in Munich, asking her to inquire of Klaus at the Adler’s family business, the *Bäckerei* Adler.

As I began the second letter, the one to Erich Fischer, I worked to steady my thoughts. Erich was a classmate of ours, a fine, handsome boy. He and Sophie were sweet on one another. Neither of them knew I was sweet on Erich too.

I kept the tone of my letter to Erich friendly. I shared the information I’d gotten from the nurse and asked if he’d heard from Sophie. After sealing the envelope, I held it to my chest, wishing, hoping. But I would never betray Sophie. A wish would have to do.

X

 I busied myself with duty. From breakfast until midafternoon each day, I cared for the children, canned fruit, mended clothing, and kissed scraped knees. I delivered mail to the bunkhouse, weeded flower beds, and bathed the little ones. Before I collapsed into bed each night, I said my prayers, always including one for Erich and one for Sophie.

Sometimes, I was convinced Uta and Marie were right. Sophie had to be home with her brother, and “address unknown” was a clerical error. Other times, when the children’s demands grated me raw and prevented my rest, a dark dread found its way into my heart. What if Werner really did know what Sophie had done? And what if he knew how I helped?

A day or two later, I auditioned for *Julius Caesar.* The director told me I was too young for any speaking part, even the role of the Soothsayer. I was to be part of the crowd scenes. No lines to learn and only the tiniest bit of makeup and costume. Nothing to practice. I thanked him for the chance to be onstage and kept my disappointment to myself.

About ten days after I mailed my letters, three envelopes arrived addressed to me. In the privacy of my attic room, I read my mother's letter first. I scanned her typical courtesies, asking about my health, that of the Huber family, the weather, and all manner of ordinary things. Then,

*Regarding your friend, Sophie Adler. I stopped at her family’s bakery to get some stollen. Sophie’s stepbrother Klaus was there. He is running the shop by himself now, working dawn until dusk every day to keep the business going. Such a good boy. His parents’ arrests have driven customers away, so the shop is not as busy as it had once been. Klaus closes for a few hours every day to make deliveries.*

*I inquired about Sophie. The last Klaus knew, she was at University Hospital. When I explained your confusing correspondence, he said she is not home and must have gone back to the polio hospital. Being such a hardworking boy, he hasn’t had time to visit.*

No help there.

The second letter was unexpected. It was from my troop leader in BDM, the League of German Girls.

*Greetings, Renate.*

*I’m going to the Nuremberg Rally for the Hitler Youth Day in September. I’ve arranged for you to join me to represent our troop. This is a real opportunity for BDM to be part of the Rally’s festivities.*

*We will stay at the home of my Tante Sabine right in Nuremberg. Enclosed please find the rail tickets for your round-trip passage.*

*Helga*

While thrilled to be asked to represent my troop, I wondered—why me? Older members had put in more time and were more committed to the Movement than I was.

Getting to the Rally wasn’t cheap either. Many Youth collected bottles and cashed in tin cans to fund their way. Here Helga had gone and bought my rail ticket and provided housing too. Was she buttering me up because of the positions my brother and my uncle held?

I didn't know if my *Onkel* Edmund would attend the Rally, but I knew for sure my brother Werner would. Werner was the local *Scharführer,* the Youth Master Sergeant for our Munich neighborhood. He was always just so, all spit and polish and proper behavior. He demanded the same of me, urging me to tame my short, curly hair into impossibly neat braids, wondering aloud how I got gray eyes when our parents’ eyes were blue. Everything about Werner shouted Party loyalty. Now, with the possibility he knew what Sophie and I had done…

I couldn’t think about it.

I allowed the prospect of adventure in Nuremberg to bubble and energize me. I’d speak with Frau Huber about time off as soon as the children were in bed.

Seeing my name written in Erich’s hand on the last envelope sent a little thrill through me. There, in the privacy of my room, I relished each word.

*Dear Rennie,*

*Great to hear from you! Sounds as if you’re busy this summer too.*

*To answer your main question, no. I haven’t heard from Sophie, not since I saw her in July back home in Munich. Something happened that day. It’s a long story, and I’m not fond of writing.*

*Are you going to the Nuremberg Rally? If so, perhaps we can meet so I can tell you the whole tale in private. Let me know so we might arrange a place and time.*

*Erich*

I could picture it. There, in the midst of tens of thousands of people and a schedule jam-packed with parades and competitions and speeches, Erich would pull me away and walk with me, alone. Maybe our arms would brush, ever so lightly. Maybe as his gentle voice washed over me, I’d sink into his coffee-colored eyes…

I checked myself. My feelings couldn’t interfere. Something important happened to Sophie in July, something Erich knew about. I’d listen to all he had to say. My emotions would have to stay locked inside my heart.

I touched the framed photo of Sophie and me on the nightstand. “Don’t worry,” I whispered. “I won’t…” I pulled back and stared, then drew the frame close.

The image of Sophie and me seemed right, her arm outstretched and pointing, both of us laughing. But something was off. The individual stone blocks of the castle wall behind us were blurry, out of focus. I’d never noticed.

As I reached to replace the frame on the nightstand, I stopped midair and pulled it close a second time. I was certain that when the shutter clicked, I had been standing in place. Yet there in the photo, one of my feet was a bit ahead of the other. As if I’d taken a step.

I stared at the image for another few moments, then shrugged it off.