

I AM DEFIANCE

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ALSO BY JENNI L. WALSH

The She Dared Series

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CHAPTER 1

The younger girls sit in rows, the whites of their shirts and yellows of their heads reminding me of a field of chamomile flowers. They are Germany's newest blooms.

In matching uniforms, us older girls watch on from behind them, my best friend, Marianne, and I standing side by side.

Today's the twentieth of April. That's our leader Adolf Hitler's birthday. We respectfully call him our Führer. And every year on the Führer's birthday, all of Germany celebrates with parades, with speeches, but also with the induction of the new ten-year-olds into the Hitler Youth for boys and into the Young Maidens for us girls, otherwise known as the League of German

Girls, otherwise known as Jungmädelbund, otherwise simplified to JM. I prefer JM.

The Führer isn't at our specific ceremony in our local München clubhouse, though Marianne had whispered to me about what an honor that'd be. Our leader is off, as always, his location a secret from our English and French enemies so he can continue his important work for our country.

But, of course, there's an enormous portrait of Adolf Hitler on the wood-paneled wall, so it's almost like he's here, and his powerful voice often flows from our radios. He shows himself mostly at rallies, getting everyone talking and excited about his ideas.

As it is, the leader of our JM group, Frau Weber, is currently talking about the importance of what the Führer calls his master race. That means people who are known as Aryans, or people who are racially pure. That can mean blonde hair and blue eyes, like me.

Marianne's eyes are blue, but her hair isn't blonde. It's brown, with braids that reach most of the way down her back. But her hair color is still okay. She's still Aryan, too, because she doesn't have a drop of Jewish

blood in her body. Besides, she's very proud that her hair is the exact same shade of brown as Adolf Hitler's.

It's the combination of brown hair and brown eyes that can be the problem, I've been told, because those people are the most likely to have ancestors who were Jewish.

"Those who aren't Aryan like us will only hurt our country and our survival," Frau Weber says now. Behind a podium, she stands before the rows of girls with her neat brown hair and starched jacket. Her blue eyes sweep the room. Beside her, one of our teen leaders, Elisabeth, bobs her head in agreement with each point our JM leader makes.

Frau Weber goes on, "And by sitting here today and pledging your allegiance to Adolf Hitler, you are declaring yourself of German heritage and that you are free of hereditary diseases or disabilities that may hurt the future of our master race."

Frau Weber doesn't specify in this moment, but I know what ailments she means: anyone with mental illnesses, learning disabilities, deformities, paralysis, epilepsy, blindness, deafness . . .

I swallow roughly, trying not to let the action show, because I'm thinking about my sister and *her* disability.

The new inductees sitting before us nod vigorously, as if proclaiming, *Yes! I'm healthy and of pure German blood!*

Beside me, Marianne nods, too.

The movement catches the eye of Elisabeth, who smiles at Marianne from the front of the room. My best friend subtly pokes me with her elbow. I force a smile for her. She relishes praise from our leaders.

It's not that I don't. I like my JM leaders, especially Elisabeth. She's fifteen, closer in age to me than even my own sister, who is eighteen. And Elisabeth seems eager to talk with me in a way that my sister, Angelika, doesn't. In fact, Elisabeth always encourages me to come to her if I have any questions or if I hear or see anything that confuses me.

"We'll talk," she says. "Like friends do. Sometimes it can be hard to talk to our parents or brothers or sisters, you know?"

I only have a papa and a sister. I haven't confided

in Elisabeth yet. But it's as if Elisabeth's in my head. It's as if she knows I have something to hide about my sister. As if she knows I've heard Papa and Angelika secretly talking about things I don't fully understand, their little rendezvous always when they don't think I'm listening, and always ever so quietly.

Loudly, at the ceremony, the new girls stand from their identical green chairs. They recite in unison, chins raised, shoulders back, right arms in the air, "I promise always to do my duty in the League of German Girls, in love and loyalty to the Führer."

I spoke those words two years ago during my own ceremony when I was ten. To be fair, I would've said anything to be part of something beyond my family.

It's not that my family is bad. But my sister is so much older, and feels more mother than sister, without all the coddling I think a mama would do. And with Papa so often at the university, I find myself dawdling away my hours—alone—with only Papa's plants and my tabby cat, Tigerlily, for company.

So when it came time to join JM, I was giddy, my toes

wiggling in my new marching shoes. I wore my new white shirt, my new black necktie, my new blue skirt. It was all gloriously new, new, new.

Being a part of something still feels glorious. I have Marianne, and my JM group, with my other friends like Adelita and Rita. We call them the *itas*. We play games and soccer. There's gossip and giggling. There's volunteering. There are other exciting activities, like ball games and competitions. Those are the reasons I couldn't wait to join. Of course, joining also meant meetings—dare I say, boring meetings—where mostly political things are hammered into our heads about how to spot the Jewish enemy or how there's no need for us to have ambitions beyond “Children, Church, and Kitchen.” I've heard it all before at school, for as long as I can remember.

The fact that we're fighting a war is more recent, only three years. When it began, I was nine, but Papa tried to shield me from the newsreels, from the soldiers who returned wounded, from the fact that there were soldiers who'd never return. But after I joined JM, Papa couldn't shield me in the way he wanted to.

Frau Weber was quick to talk about the war. She told us how the Führer was trying to make Germany as big and as great as possible. To do so, he wanted to unify all German-speaking people under one nation. That's why he annexed parts of countries like Czechoslovakia, Austria, and France.

Frau Weber was more than pleased to explain what *annex* meant when I raised my hand. "It means those areas are now a part of Germany. We are one. One nation. One empire. One leader, Adolf Hitler.

"However," she went on at our JM meeting, "some other countries didn't like that. Poland, for example. They attacked us, leaving our Führer no choice but to invade and conquer Poland." Frau Weber shook her head. "Great Britain and France became angry with us, declaring war. It all began with Poland."

When Frau Weber told us girls this, the room was silent.

But my mind was anything but quiet.

Prior to that day, while no one had spoken to me about the war, I *had* overheard Papa and Angelika speaking during one of their late-night talks. Papa didn't

believe that Poland attacked first. “Why would such a small military attack our German empire?” he had mused. “I wonder if there’s something to the rumors that Hitler only made it *look* like Poland attacked first. I heard claims that he set off his own bombs, because he wanted a *reason* to invade there, where there are hardly any German-speaking people. Hitler only wants more power.”

So in our silent clubhouse room, I raised my hand.

“Yes, Brigitte,” Frau Weber said in a warm voice.

“Why did the Führer want Poland, though, when there are few Germans there?”

Frau Weber frowned at me.

Marianne looked like she wanted to murder me.

The *itas* looked embarrassed for me.

My question—which I realized, too late, questioned Adolf Hitler—went unanswered.

Because of that day, nearly two years later, I’m slow to ask questions. Elisabeth says I can confide in her, but I just don’t know if that’s true. All of it makes me uneasy.

I squeeze Marianne’s hand, happy to have her next

to me at the ceremony. I haven't confided in her either, only because Marianne would 100 percent make me tell Elisabeth everything I've ever overheard my family say. "Do it right now," she would say in a high-pitched voice. She's hasty like that. "It's our duty," she would add.

Even now, I know she thinks my hand squeeze is from my excitement about our new members and not simply wanting a hand to hold.

With the new girls having spoken their oaths, one by one, they stand in front of Elisabeth to receive a membership certificate, then continue across the front of the room to Frau Weber to shake her hand and receive a personal welcome.

"I want to be a group leader," Marianne whispers, and not for the first time. Our teen leaders are from the older girls' group, called the Bund Deutscher Mädel, known more simply as the BDM. "Elisabeth became a leader when she was fourteen years and ten months old."

I smirk. "I'm surprised you don't know the exact day, too."

“Quiet,” Marianne says playfully. Then more seriously: “That could be us in two years. Don’t you want to lead?”

“Sure.”

But I’m not certain I mean it. I don’t consider myself a leader. Not really. I only agree because Marianne is smiling and I know what she’ll say next: “We’ll lead together.”

And to be honest, I’m at my happiest when we’re together. So I simply reply, “I can barely wait for summer camp.”

“Scavenger hunts,” Marianne says, her eyes widening. I copycat her eyes. “Gymnastics.”

“Swimming.”

She’s still saying the word when I say, “Crafts.”

And then we’re tossing plans back and forth:

“Campfires.”

“Tents.”

“Hiking.”

Adelita overhears and chimes in with: “Singing.”

We all laugh behind our hands.

Someone shushes us. Marianne quickly checks to

make sure it's just another girl and not a group leader or someone else of importance. She relaxes.

When the ceremony is over and all the girls disperse in high spirits, Elisabeth asks me and Marianne to stay after, to help clean up. Marianne jumps at the chance, and I'm happy to stay and help, too. I feel pride in all the activities I've done as part of our JM group. Frau Weber and Elisabeth say even the little things we do can help the Führer defend our country.

No one has invaded Germany by land and I'm proud of that. There are bombings from English planes in other German cities sometimes, though, but luckily not here in München. So we try to help from afar as our army fights in other countries and while our air force makes their own strikes from the sky.

"Do you think camp will be the same as last time?" Marianne asks me as we relocate the green chairs to the back of the room, returning to our favorite topic. "Or do you think it will be even better?"

I smile. Camp is more than the fun of campfires, tents, hiking, and singing that Marianne and I grinned about.

Camp is freedom. After I joined JM, camp was the first time I traveled without Papa. That summer had been filled with whispers between him and Angelika about her illness, and I was so happy for the break from his worried face, from wondering if I should tell anyone about their hushed conversations. Summer camp was weeks of laughter with Marianne and the *itas*.

“I think camp will be even better than last time,” I say. “Remember the twelve-year-olds could pick more of their activities? That’ll be us this year.” I’ve been aching for that freedom again. I know Marianne has been, too. She doesn’t talk about it, but her family can’t afford to travel. While I’m the younger of two, she’s the oldest of six, and her mama counts on her to help with just about everything. But at summer camps, the rich and poor are mixed together. Us city kids get to experience the countryside. Plus, Marianne’s the only one in her family old enough to go, the twins only nine and the rest of her siblings even younger. JM is my place of belonging. For Marianne, it’s her escape.

We finish moving the chairs and Elisabeth hurries us out the door with an approving nod. Marianne

gives me a quick hug before we head to our homes, our neighborhoods in opposite directions. As I walk into our apartment, I call, “I’m home.” Tigerlily promptly winds through and around my feet, meowing as she goes. I scoop her up. Papa has all the window shades open, the afternoon sun pouring in, feeding his many, many plants.

Papa’s a professor of biology at the university, but more importantly—to him at least—he’s a botanist.

When I was a tiny thing, I thought his vocation was “potanist” because our apartment overflowed with potted plants. Still, wherever light seeps through the windows, there’s a plant, perfectly placed based on how much sunlight that particular plant needs for its photosynthesis, a process I know entirely too much about.

Papa told me that when I was a baby, he carried me from window to window, soaking up every ounce of sunshine. He said, “Your eyes are so blue they’re almost purple, like the petals of a cornflower. And cornflowers need full sun.”

“Papa?” I say, progressing from the foyer toward the

back kitchen, where I can hear him and Angelika, too. As I near, I realize their words are low and quick, and not entirely happy. Tigerlily wiggles, not wanting to go where I'm taking her. I place her on the ground, and she bounds for a quieter, less hostile-sounding room.

I worry what I'll find in the kitchen. Angelika is spirited and stubborn—she is Papa's tough and resilient petunia. But they usually see eye to eye.

What's got them both so upset?

I wonder if they'll even tell me.

"Papa," I say, announcing myself as I enter the room. A big map is spread out across the table. Towns are circled in red. I hesitate, but I'm too curious not to ask, "What's going on?"