

DAUGHTERS OF THE FATHERLAND



JERICO J JOHNSON

Chapter 1

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Nazi Germany, somewhere east of Cologne

Little Rosa sat on the back steps of her horse-drawn wagon, as it ambled through the German villages perched alongside the great Rhine River. Hers was the last of the more-than-twenty Romani wagons—Rosa stopped counting at twenty because she couldn't count any higher—but last night, she'd heard her father say that there were now thirty-five wagons. She could tell her father was worried about the number of wagons by the number of wrinkles in his very wrinkly brow—way more than twenty.

When they'd set out, there were only seven, with the wagons looking like a giant wooden barrel had been cut in half to provide a rounded top and sides. And, although these didn't have any windows, they were robust in all forms of extreme weather. But now, with all the additional Romani, their wagons came with a lot of variety, such as open-top wagons, some with a makeshift tent to keep out the sun and rain. Others were square and were probably used in previous centuries but had long-since been abandoned, only to be claimed and repurposed by the passing Romani. Most had two horses pulling, but the smaller ones had only one, with spare horses trailing behind. In between were Romani of various ages walking with the occasional horse rider. But the Romani caravans had one thing in common: they were all painted with bright colours, some with intricate patterns, and some had flower pots hanging at the front and back to add even more colour.

Rosa turned the well-worn pages of her book. *Little Red Riding Hood* and Rosa had so much in common: they both loved their grandmothers, and, just as the heroine's grandmother had given

her the red hood, so too Rosa's grandmother had given her this *Brother's Grimm Book of Fairy Tales* along with her now favourite red scarf. When Little Red Riding Hood met the wolf on the path, she wasn't scared, nor had Rosa been scared a few years ago when she ran into her first wolf while collecting firewood one day in the woods of Romania. The she-wolf stared into Rosa's eyes for a long moment before disappearing back into the forest. Rosa knew that the she-wolf would never have eaten a fellow wood spirit. They were both sisters of the woods, as she'd told her father about this encounter afterwards. Her father had laughed it off and told her the wolf must have decided that Rosa was all skin and bones, no meat, so she wasn't worth the effort. But that meeting with her forest sister had filled Rosa with an exhilarating sense of confidence.

Rosa often imagined the evil, story-book wolf, satisfied with his trickery and a full belly, sleeping with a contented smile. All of a sudden, his eyes would flash open, and he would howl so loudly that the full moon would hide from fright. Looking down, the wolf would see something sticking out of his furry stomach: a small hand holding a large pair of shiny scissors, which Red Riding Hood had hidden in her apron. And Rosa imagined that if she had killed the wolf, like in the children's tale, she would have made a cloak from the wolf's fur. And from that day onwards, she would forever be known as the Wolf Slayer, but they would only whisper that name, as no one would dare say it aloud to Rosa's face. She knew the original story was meant to frighten children, so they wouldn't wander off the path to pick flowers. But she would write her own story, and, as the Wolf Slayer, she could make her own path and pick and smell all the flowers she wanted.

Rosa stopped reading as she watched the uniformed boys on bicycles stalking her Romani caravan. The boys rode in perfect formation, their handlebars and polished tire spokes gleaming. She was familiar with their uniforms; according to her father, they were the Hitler Youth or Hitler wolf-pups, very dangerous, to be avoided at all costs. Rosa found herself mesmerised by the spectacle of six

blue-eyed boys cycling towards her, their chocolate-brown ties flowing in the breeze.

From out of nowhere, something flew at her. She ducked as the object slammed against the back door of her caravan and landed on the step beside her. She picked it up and stared at the hefty rock. She looked at the boys, identifying the rock thrower by his broad, toothy grin. She stood up on the back steps and, with both hands, slung it up in a high arc, throwing it back at her attacker. He let out a yelp as it narrowly missed him. The boys stopped their bicycles and glared at her.

“How dare you?” the leader shouted at her. “You dirty little Gypsy. We’ll teach you a lesson.” Then he lifted his front wheels, turning and speeding away in the opposite direction. His mustard-shirted friends followed him.

She watched as their blonde-haired heads disappeared behind the long grass. *Good riddance.*

She felt light-headed from this attack out of nowhere and sat back down on the steps. She felt the blood return to her body as what happened began to sink in. She hadn’t meant to throw the rock at the boys, who were all about her age—ten. She’d promised her mother there would be no more fighting with other kids. But Rosa’s promise only extended to the children from her own tribe, not outsiders. She fingered the scuff marks on her knees and her bruised calves. It wasn’t her fault she got into so many fights. She had to defend herself, didn’t she, when the other children accused her of not being a real Romani? She did her best to ignore their taunts, but eventually, her resolve would crack, and she would answer her accusers with loud thunderous fists.

She could feel her anger rising, so she picked up her book and paused to look at the front cover before opening it. She didn’t understand why, but reading was the only way to make her anger disappear. Perhaps, for a short while, while she was reading anyway, she wasn’t Rosa. She was somebody else—anybody but herself.

Rosa was startled by a bang followed by a loud crack. The tired and worn wagon suddenly bucked and jolted like a young bull. The wagon's steel-rimmed wheels had lurched over a large pothole, and then her house-on-wheels groaned stubbornly onwards. The wagon righted itself as it ambled along. Over the grumbling of wheels, Rosa heard someone moving inside the laden wagon, attempting to settle the disturbed, caged and tethered animals.

She stiffened.

"Rosa?" her mother yelled from inside the patchwork-painted rear door. "You better not be reading again instead of doing your chores!"

Rosa always hid her threadbare library—nine books and a tattered old Lutheran Bible, all inherited from her grandmother—so her mother wouldn't use them as kindling again. She closed the book. "No, Mama."

Her mother opened the top half of the wagon's rear door and emptied a bucket of water without looking down at Rosa. "You lazy little thing," her mother said. "You'd let your father go hungry? Get in here and cook his breakfast."

Rosa slid the book discreetly into a loose wall panel and stood to attention on the wagon's back steps. "I'm sorry, Mama, I'm coming—"

"Don't bother, little one," her father's deep voice boomed from the front of the wagon. "I'm not hungry."

"I guess that means I'll have to do it," her mother said from inside. "You'd better have your scarf on."

Rosa's hands reached her head and touched her red headscarf. She always felt like her favourite, wolf-defeating heroine when she wore it. "Yes, Mama."

"At least you can do that right," her mother said with her usual gruffness, especially whenever Rosa had done something wrong, which seemed to be all the time.

Rosa heard the stove door creak open. She'd forgotten to fill it with firewood as part of her morning chores. Her heart skipped a

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