

Chapter 1

Karla licked the crispy cone, trying to catch the sliding droplets before they hit the ground. The raspberry ice cream was a dark purple, her favorite color. She wrinkled her nose as she caught another whiff of exhaust from the busy street along the Limmat River in the city of Zurich. It was August and hot in Switzerland. The six-year-old girl scanned the scenery in front of her with dreamy eyes.

A longish canoe was sliding by a tourist boat on the river. People with funny-looking sun hats and dark glasses sat on the benches of the boat. Along the river on the other side, the built-together stone houses looked like a row of uneven different-colored teeth, gray, yellow, white, and some with a tint of orange. Behind the houses, on top of the hill, the linden trees at the park shimmered in their pale-green foliage and a curtain of dark-green ivy hid part of the gray granite wall.

Karla took another lick from her ice-cream cone, then turned around and peered through the window of the art shop, where her aunt picked up two framed pictures. When she looked back at the sidewalk, her breath caught.

“Mama?” she whispered.

She saw the woman only from behind, but the bounce in her step, the long, reddish-blond hair flowing down her back, swaying left and right, the tall, slender figure—it must be her mother. She tossed the rest of the ice cream into the trash can, got up, and ran after the woman.

“Mama!” she called as the woman got ready to cross the street. The light turned from blinking red to solid red, just as the woman reached the other side. Karla rushed after her, barely aware of the honking around her or of the shrill warning bell of the blue-and-white streetcar. She heard someone yell at her but by then she had arrived at the other side. The woman was walking along the river toward the Lake of Zurich.

“Mama, wait!” Karla bumped into someone.

“Watch it, kiddo.” A man stepped aside.

“Mama . . .”

The woman finally turned around and looked back, scanning the people behind her, then walked on. Karla stopped dumbfounded. It was the face of a stranger.

A wave of despair washed over her. Not believing that she could have been so wrong, she started to run again. She didn't see the slight indentation in the pavement. As she fell, she barely noticed the searing pain in her knees; the disappointment hurt more. She covered her face with her hands and sobbed. Mama would have helped her. Mama would have picked her up, hugged her, and even sang a little tune to her to make her feel better. But her mother was gone.

“Are you hurt, honey?” a dark voice said. Karla felt a hand on her back. “Come on, let me see.”

A pair of strong arms lifted her up. She looked into a face with a gray-white beard and kind, blue eyes below thick tufts of eyebrows. The man was tall and sturdy. He had wildish white hair. He reminded her of Saint Nicholas. But it was summer and Saint Nicholas only appeared in December.

“Are you here alone?” he asked. “Where's your mother?”

The question brought a new flood of tears. “I thought it was Mama,” Karla managed to say, her chest heaving with sobs.

“Karla, what happened? Why did you run away?” Aunt Anna came rushing toward her, clutching her purse and a large package. “I thought I’d lost you. Jesus, what happened to your knees?” She bent down, put the package on the concrete and examined Karla’s legs. Brushing a strand of wavy brown hair out of her face, she peered at the man with gray-blue eyes, the color of ice. “What’s going on here?”

“I just happened to walk by when she fell,” he explained. “She said something about looking for her mother. Are you her mother?”

Anna shook her head. “No, I’m her aunt. Her mother . . . died half a year ago.”

“I’m so sorry.” The old man gently touched Karla’s cheek. “But she thought she saw her mother.”

Anna sighed. “She still hasn’t accepted the truth.” She turned to Karla. “Tell me what happened, sweetie?”

Karla told her between sobs that a woman had walked by who looked exactly like her mama.

“But you know that’s not possible, don’t you?” Aunt Anna hugged her. Karla leaned her face against Anna’s chest and poured her sorrow into her sweater. It was soft but didn’t smell like her mama’s. Anna waited for her to calm down. “We have to take care of your knees.”

“There’s a pharmacy right over there. I’m sure they have something to clean the wound and some bandages. May I?” Saint Nicholas gave Anna an inquiring look.

Anna nodded and the man lifted Karla up. His thick hair tickled her cheek. Karla wrinkled her nose. He gave off a faint whiff of smoke, which reminded her of Anna’s woodstove. It felt a little comforting.

At the pharmacy, a friendly lady took care of Karla’s knees. She wiped them clean, trying not to hurt Karla, who flinched and gave an occasional sob. “Sorry, hon, but we don’t want it to get infected.”

While the woman bandaged Karla’s legs, Anna unwrapped the package she had been carrying. She handed Karla one of the pictures and held the other one up for her to see. “Don’t they look beautiful?”

Karla nodded with a weak smile. They did look nice. She barely recognized them again behind the glass and surrounded by a fine wooden frame. One of them showed a woman, sitting on a chair and holding a little girl in her arm. The woman had long reddish-brown hair and the girl’s hair was black. They were sitting in front of a house. The stones in the wall had an irregular shape; they looked a little bit like cobblestones. It had taken Karla a while to make them look right. The other picture showed a tree with large purple and cream-colored blossoms. It was the chestnut tree in front of Karla’s old home. She had painted the pictures with her favorite pastel pens.

“They’re gorgeous,” Saint Nicholas said in his deep voice. “Who painted those?”

“Karla did,” Aunt Anna said.

Saint Nicholas stared at her, then at the pictures, then at Karla. “How old is she?”

“Six,” Karla said, brushing the last tears off her face. Anna handed her a Kleenex.

“And she painted those by herself, without help?” The man squinted as he scanned the pictures. The wrinkles on his forehead and around his eyes deepened. He truly did look like Saint Nicholas.

“Yes,” Anna said.

“This child is very talented. Does she get any instruction?”

“I’m actually looking for a teacher for her. She loves to draw and paint. If it was up to her, she’d do it all day long. And it seems to help her with . . . you know, the loss.”

“Amazing.” Saint Nicholas shook his head and continued to scan the pictures. “Well, I happen to be a painter myself. I also teach a few children.” He looked at Karla and Anna with a serious face. “I’d love to have her as a student.”

“I’ll think about it. That would be great,” Anna said.

“Why don’t you check me out?” The man pulled his wallet from his back pocket, opened it, and took out a small gray card. “Here is my address and phone number and on the back a few references.” He handed Anna the card. “Whatever you decide to do though, you don’t want a talent like this go to waste.”

Anna studied the card. “Very interesting, Mr. Bergman.”

“Call me Jonas,” the man said.

“Anna,” Karla’s aunt said as the two shook hands.

“You’re not Saint Nicholas?” Karla asked, surprised.

Aunt Anna and the man laughed. “No, I’m sorry. You think I look like him?” He brushed through his wavy white hair.

Karla nodded. “But you wouldn’t come in summer, would you?” She looked down at her neatly wrapped knees. The talk of drawing and painting had pulled her out of her deep misery. “Are you going to teach me?”

The man smiled at her. “You talk this over with your aunt, all right?” Then he glanced at his watch. “Oops. I guess I missed my appointment.”

“I’m so sorry,” Anna said. “We caused you all this trouble.”

“Don’t worry. No problem at all.” He bent down and put a hand on Karla’s shoulder. “And, Karla, I know how much it hurts. I lost my dear wife a few years ago. We were together for over twenty years. I still miss her. But I can promise you, things will get better with time.”

Karla took a deep breath and nodded. She had heard the words many times before. “Maja lost her mother, too.”

“Maja is a friend of hers, a girl from Croatia,” Anna explained.

At home, in their house in a small town near Zurich, Aunt Anna fixed lunch. She heated up the leftover bean and vegetable soup and made grilled cheese sandwiches with tomatoes. The smell of food awakened Karla’s appetite. She was quiet and thoughtful but no longer desperate.

“He was a nice man,” she said, folding the colorful paper napkins she had made herself with potato stamps. She put them on the blue-and-white placemats on the oak-wood table in the kitchen.

“Would you like to take drawing and painting lessons from him?” Anna poured the soup into bowls and slid the toasted sandwiches onto the plates.

Karla nodded. “Yeah, that’d be cool.” She smiled and traced her finger along the spots on the tabletop, where the sunlight, filtered by the leaves of the magnolia tree in front of the kitchen window, had sketched a pattern of light and shadows.

“Cool, huh?” Anna smiled and gave the girl a hug.