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Kal Ganis of Kavala

Kal's parents whisper about the Nazis and how Jews are in danger. From behind a door, she's listened to them say that the children must be hidden. She's heard about "deportations" and asked them what that means, but they don't answer. Her sister Ada, two years older, tells her that the Nazis send you away forever. Mama had been crying for a week before her brother, Nikki, left in a rush to hide in Athens.

Now, Mama and Papa plan to send her and Ada to live with strangers too. But if she's forced to leave her parents, when will they get her? How will they know where she is? Will she keep her doll? All she hears in response is "I don't know, don't ask so many questions." Papa will tell her only that God will make sure His will is done.

She wants to ask Papa why God lets these bad things happen, but can't bring herself to do so. Papa's connection to God has changed; the Nazis have shut down the synagogues, and Papa has stopped studying Talmud. Kal used to sit with him as he'd try to explain what it meant, but lately the books gather dust.

Then, despite being warned, her leaving unfolds so quickly that she's caught unprepared. One minute she's finishing her supper of boiled potatoes and sour cream and the next Mama's pushing a small bag into her hand and hustling her out the door, screaming "Go with Alex! He'll take care of you!" Kal tries to run back into the house, but her mother grabs her and drags her toward Alex's truck. Kal fights back as hard as she can, kicking and hitting at Mama until Alex rushes to help. Together, they force her inside. Mama holds the door shut for the few seconds it takes Alex to get moving, and, as a last memory, Kal and her Mama see each other's tear-streaked faces.

The young man is a friend of Papa's, the friend who drove Nikki away too. The road out of the city is full of holes, and Kal's insides shake until she feels she might be sick. The light fades quickly from the sky, and they've been driving for an hour before he speaks to her.

"Do you know my name, Kal?"

"Alex," she says.

"Right. My last name is Ganis. From now on, if anyone asks your name, your name is Kal Ganis. Can you remember?"

"My name is Kal Covo."

"You have to be Kal Ganis for a while. Our lives depend upon it. If you say

'Covo,' everyone will know you're Jewish, and then we'll both be shot."

Nazis shoot Jews. That much she understands. She thinks about what her name means and whether she can pretend to be someone she's not.

"Do you want to be shot?"

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"No."

"Then what is your name?"

"Kal ... Ganis."

"Say it again."

"Kal Ganis."

"Good. Now listen carefully. You're my niece. Call me 'Uncle Alex.'"

"Uncle Alex."

"You visited me in Salonika. Now I'm driving you home to Kavala, where you live with your mother."

Kal sees that it's a game of pretend, like she plays with Ada. They make up stories. So, she's supposed to have a story. But ... what was the story?

"Tell me again, Al . . . Uncle Alex. I'm your niece. I visited. And now you're taking me home to ..?"

"Kavala. It's a port city. You know, on the water, where boats come in, just like Salonika. Kavala. Say it."

They practice for hours. She repeats the name of the city, her new last name, the purpose of her being with Alex, and then repeats it again and again as they drive through the night.

"Good," says Alex finally. "Now, try to relax, we'll be there in just ..."

He swears, and she's about to chastise him when he jumps on the brakes and the truck stops so suddenly that she's thrown forward and hits her head. She cries in pain, even as she sees flashing lights around the truck, even as she's dragged out and thrown onto the ground.

Someone pulls Alex out from the other side, and there's yelling in Greek and another language she doesn't recognize. These are soldiers, and they cuss at Alex. Her knees are bruised and her head hurts, but she sees Alex fighting, and the soldier who yanked her from the truck rushes to help his comrades. Alex yells at her to run into the woods, to keep running. Without another thought, she picks herself up and dashes into a stand of trees, then keeps going until the voices fade and keeps going until she finds herself on the edge of a beach and can hear the light lapping of waves. Then the night shakes with the blast of a gunshot.

Kal's lost her bag, and sand has worked its way into her shoes as she moves toward the lights of a city in the distance. If she keeps going that way, maybe she'll find help.

She's dreaming of challah that Mama has just removed from the oven. It smells wonderful, the anise seeds giving the slight aroma of black licorice, and she'd like to eat a piece at once, begs Mama for a slice, but it's too hot. She'll die of hunger before it cools. Ignoring the warning, she reaches her hand out to grab the steaming loaf, but she's slapped away, a harsh slap on her head, and then she opens her eyes, sleep replaced by fear.

She's in the woods, freezing in the night, and a man wearing a dark coat stands before her.

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"Are you all right, little girl?" His voice is low, but sweet and melodious. Kal doesn't trust her ears, however. He's a stranger, and she must be careful.

"My name is Kal Ganis, and I'm from Kavala."

"I'm Demetrios, Kal Ganis from Kavala." He smiles and holds out his hand to pick her off the ground. She lets him, but once on her feet she shies away. He does not come closer, but continues to speak softly. "If you're from Kavala, why are you out here so far from the city?"

"I was ...," she stops, forgetting what she's supposed to say. Then a notion comes back. "I was visiting with my aunt, I mean, my uncle, in Salonika."

"So you walked all this way from Salonika?"

"No, you see Alex ...Uncle Alex ..." She catches herself too late, remembering the soldiers, her flight through the woods, the shot.

"Ah, Uncle Alex," Demetrios repeats. "Is he nearby?"

She cannot help herself, but starts to cry. Demetrios bends down, holds his arms out to her, and her need for comfort overwhelms her fear. She goes to him and cries into the wool of his black coat. Demetrios holds her, not trying to assure her that everything will be all right. When the tears slow, he stands, takes her hand, and starts walking quickly.

"Come with me," he orders. "You're lucky I – and not the Bulgarian soldiers – stumbled upon you. You wouldn't have done well with them, Kal Ganis of Kavala. For some reason, bless God, I couldn't sleep tonight and decided to take a long walk. And look what I found! Tell me again who were you visiting in Salonika?"

She doesn't respond because she doesn't know what she could possibly say. She can't remember. She couldn't tell him anything about Kavala. She doesn't know the names of her pretend parents or where in Kavala they live. The best way to hide her ignorance is to keep her mouth closed. But Demetrios doesn't seem to mind. He walks fast, and she can barely keep up with him.

Demetrios brings her behind a small church as dawn breaks. The church sits on a hill overlooking a city of hills and the Aegean has opened to her view, breathtakingly large and blue. Across the bay, she can see houses of shimmering of white walls and brilliant red roofs scattered up the steep streets.

He makes her kneel next to a stone wall and warns her to stay hidden while he goes inside. She complies, hoping to be able to enter the building soon and get warm.

Everything is cold, rough stone: the wall, the patch of land, the emptiness in her heart. She wants to call out for Mama and Papa, for Ada and for Nikki, but she strangles the desire. She must continue to be Kal Ganis if she wants to live.

Demetrios comes out of the church, looks around, and then beckons her to run inside. When she enters, she can't see a thing in the darkness except a few candles burning, but she's accosted by the fragrance of incense.

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Kal hears the door slammed shut. "This is Kal Ganis, Most Reverend Father."

One of the burning candles elevates and approaches her, and as her eyes adjust she sees that it's held by an old priest. She's never been so close to a priest before.

"Come here, little girl." The priest pulls a chair close to where she stands and sits on it so that their faces are at the same level. He turns to Demetrios and says, "I don't think she understood me."

"She can talk."

Kal still feels that she's best off remaining silent. If she talks, someone will discover that she's Jewish and that she's not from Kavala, and they'll want to kill her.

"Can you say something, Kal Ganis?"

She shakes her head.

"What are we going to do with her, Demetrios?"

Demetrios ponders for a second before answering. "We can't just let her wander in the woods."

They start a small fire in a fireplace. She watches, almost dropping from hunger, but resolves to stand fast and wait. When the fire gets going, they invite her to sit near it, and she obliges. Then the priest gives her two stale biscuits, which she gobbles down. He hands her a cup of water, which she sips carefully.

"Are you going to talk to us now?" asks the priest.

Kal shakes of her head.

Three or four days pass. Then maybe a month. She's not sure, but she's learned that they Demetrios mean her no harm. They hide her in the priest's adjoining cottage, where Demetrios also lives. She's given a tiny closet in which to sleep, covered only by a thin blanket. But the Most Reverend Theodoros – she's learned his name -- and Demetrios manage to keep fires going, and finally the weather starts to turn warm as the spring of 1943 unfolds into summer.

Kal refuses to speak. There's little for her to do other than to read the religious books and listen to them discuss the Risen Lord and the Son of David and Theodokos, the Mother of God. The discussions help her understand what she's reading. Demetrios tries to get her to talk about these wondrous people, but Kal just smiles and goes back to reading without uttering a syllable. She wants just to sit near the men as they study and pray. She enjoys listening to their prayer, and they enjoy her company.

Then comes the day that she's reading and the Most Reverend Theodoros and Demetrios run into the cottage, out of breath, slamming the door and yelling for her to get into the closet. Bulgarian soldiers are searching for Jews. She must hide until one of them lets her out. They will lock the closet and, if asked, claim the key is lost. She must be absolutely silent, their lives are at stake.

Still holding her book, Kal's pushed into the darkness, and the door

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pounds shut. She moves to one side, quietly taking two of the priest's black cassocks and draping them over herself as she lies down. She makes herself very small.

Through the closet door, Kal hears the soft, calm voices of the priest and

Demetrios, hears enough to understand that they are reciting their final prayers.

"Worthy of praise ... every tongue ... glorious name ... who didst create the world by thy grace ..." Kal has read this prayer.

Then she reminds herself to say, if she's discovered, that she's Kal Ganis of Kavala. But what is she doing in the closet? Staying warm, she decides. But why isn't she with her family? She was visiting her uncle in ... visiting her uncle in ... she can't recall where she was supposed to have been. Her heart seems to jump into her throat, and she fights back tears. Kavala is a port. Boats come in. But why is she with this poor priest? She has no idea.

She hears banging on the cottage door and yelling and screaming, she hears the

Most Reverend trying to explain that he can't open the closet.

The rapid gunfire deafens her. Bullets pierce their way into the closet, but she's to one side and not hit. For a minute she hears a man groaning, then silence. She's remembered not to cry.

Waking from a deep sleep, it takes Kal a minute to remember where she is. Kal listens, but there are no sounds. She remembers that she's to stay put until they let her out, but she needs to pee. She crawls as quietly as she can to the opposite end of the closet and relieves herself. When she's finished, she crawls back, trying not to wet her clothes, and waits. Someone will let her out soon, she's sure.

But no one does.

Hours pass, and finally she realizes that the Most Reverend and Demetrios are dead. She's lived with them so long, depended upon them for food and water, the only friends she can remember. Now, they've been taken from her, and tears begin to flow. She has not yet grasped that she's locked away in a place where no one will ever find her.

From the light seeping in, it looks like night has passed. Kal can hear the sound of cars or trucks driving down the nearby road. There's been no sound from the cottage for an entire day, and she decides she's going to get out of the closet. She finds the door locked. Of course. They locked her in just before the Bulgarians came to shoot.

Kal opens the book she'd been holding. "Thy majesty, o my Lord, thousand thousands of those on high bow down and worship ... Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God of hosts, the entire universe filled with His praise ..." The words are familiar, reminding her of something or someone, a time when she felt safe, when the world around her was filled with love, when the people near her would protect her. She's fallen since then, but continuing to read reminds her that the Lord God has restored the fallen.

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Kal closes her eyes, thinking about the words, trying to understand what she's read, and at some point is startled by the opening of the closet door and a flash of warm, orange-tinted brilliance filling the space around her. She should be afraid at having been discovered, but she's not. The warmth of the light spreads through her, reaching every cell in her body. A woman steps into the closet, and immediately Kal knows who this woman is, the woman whose picture she's seen in the framed icon in the church and the priest's cottage and in drawings in the books she's read. It is Theotokos, the Mother of God, the Mother of Jesus.

"Who are you, my child?" asks Theotokos, but Kal cannot answer at first, she's in such awe of being in Her presence, and she's amazed to see that the orange-tinted light spills directly from Her heart. "Don't be afraid. Tell me your name, please."

"I am ... Kal Ganis of Kavala."

"Kal Ganis. You've prayed that I come to you, yes?"

Has she? Kal doesn't think so, but fears that denying will cause the Mother of God to disappear, to leave her locked again in the dark closet. Kal fears that, with denial, she'll lose the warmth of the orange-tinted light.

Kal says simply, "I wanted to be saved."

"Prayer that rises in someone's heart serves to open the door of heaven, my child. Do you want to serve God all your life? Do you want to help open the door of heaven?"

Kal has no idea what she's being asked. To serve God? It's not something she's

contemplated and she doesn't know what it means.

"How?" she asks.

"Before there's a how there must be a will. Is it something that you desire, to love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might?"

Kal recognizes the phrase and feels the burning of desire, the ferocity of love. "I do."

"Then come with me, Kal Ganis of Kavala. Blessed is the young girl who has consented to become the close friend of faith and of prayer."

In a few days, Kal finds herself in a monastery on a mountain in northern Greece. How she got there is a blur in her memory. All she remembers is Theotokos bringing her so close to Her light that Kal thought she'd be burned and then the embrace of the loving Mother of God and then darkness and peace for a long time and then finding herself in a tiny cell at the Holy Monastery of St. Vlassios, what was to be her home for the rest of her life.

She is named Sister Theodora, but in the back of her mind remembers that her real name is Kal Ganis of Kavala.