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THE BABY BLANKET

Excerpt from BRED FOR THE CAUSE

Mia collapsed into her bed after a thirteen-hour flight from Heidelberg and a two-hour drive to Sedona. Her aunt's deathbed confession, the box filled with letters from her birth mother, and most hauntingly, the pink baby blanket in her still-unpacked suitcase, pushed the comforting scent of desert air and the sound of rustling pine trees from her mind.

After an hour of restless tossing and turning, she rose, unzipped her suitcase, and gently lifted the tissue-wrapped blanket onto her lap. Despite sixty-two years, its pale pink fabric remained pristine, though the silk border looked thin and fragile. A chill ran through her as her fingers traced the outline of the black swastika hand-embroidered in one corner. She imagined her birth mother, pregnant and nestled in a rocking chair, skillfully stitching the hateful symbol into the fabric with meticulous care, each thread pulling tight with silent purpose.

How could someone embroider such a tender item with a symbol of hate? What had her mother been thinking? Did she truly want to meet her if she were alive?

The thought lingered, compounded by the revelation that her mother used an alias when she gave birth to her in the secretive Nazi breeding Lebensborn home. Finding her could be a challenge.

Mia clutched the blanket to her chest and walked through her house. Every step felt heavy, burdened by words spoken in the past weeks.

Your mother was my sister. She was a Nazi. You were the fourth child she bred for the cause.

She pushed open the door to the garage and switched on the light. Though she forgave the parents who raised her, she still harbored anger towards them for hiding the truth for so long.

We had to protect you. After the war, the children born in the Lebensborn homes became a hated symbol of the occupation, facing ridicule everywhere they went. Anyone with any kind of affiliation with Nazism was ridiculed, shunned, and persecuted. Your Oma, who was not a Nazi in any way, had to go through denazification because she was a teacher. You can't imagine what it was like.

Truthfully, she had no understanding of what her parents went through—they refused to discuss anything to do with the war except to say they hated the Nazis. Although she always carried a genetic guilt for being German, even while living in the United States, she imagined that her experience was vastly different from the profound shame, guilt, and fear that her parents' generation had internalized.

From what she discovered in the last few weeks, it was understandable why they hid the truth of her birth. And she had to give them credit. They did a hell of a job at keeping the secret. Growing up, there wasn't the slightest hint they weren't her biological parents. Though she had none of

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her father's characteristics, luckily she was the mirror image of her Oma and possessed the same stubborn streak as her aunt.

She was grateful for the lie during her childhood and had told her aunt so before she died. But as far as she could tell, there was no threat to them or her when she became an adult. They should have told her.

Gazing into the garage, among the remnants of her daughter's short life and unfinished projects, leaving the blanket in the garage seemed oddly fitting. Testing family members to find the best donor for her daughter's transplant had inadvertently led her to discover that her sister Chrisa was actually her cousin.

Her hands began to sweat, leaving marks on the delicate silk border. Had it been a mistake to bring the blanket home? Chrisa tried to talk her out of it, offering to dispose of it. She agreed but changed her mind at the last minute. Was it the recurring vision of confronting her mother with it? Or a symbolic link to a past and a woman she never knew—a connection she couldn't sever, no matter how painful?

"What do I do with you?" she whispered in the cold silence.

In the corner, away from her daughter's things, sat her art supplies and canvases—a hobby she tried after Bernadette died but found no talent in. She emptied a see-through plastic container of a few art supplies and placed the blanket inside, then covered it with a painter's cloth. At least it was away from her living space and would silence its whisper.

Closing the garage door, Mia noted a slight release of tension. Hiding the blanket offered only temporary relief, she knew that. Eventually, it would have to be destroyed. Perhaps once she learned the entire truth of how she ended up on Oma's doorstep days before the war's end.

The exhaustion from the jet lag was catching up to her as she climbed back into bed. But sleep remained elusive. She stared at the ceiling, her mind replaying words from a letter she discovered that her mother wrote to her parents at eighteen:

I'm thrilled to share with you that I have passed the racial screening test and have been accepted into the Lebensborn Project! You'll be happy to know we have no trace whatsoever in our family history of impurities. The Aryan race, to which I am so proud to be part of, is a race whose blood (soul) embodies the highest degree a soul can achieve. God Himself created the Aryans as the most perfect humans on earth, both physically and spiritually.

We are part of this, dear family. We are building a race to lead the world. The souls of Aryans contain specific spiritual energies, Hitler calls 'racial primal elements' which will create the culture and beauty and dignity of a higher humanity. I have never been prouder in my life. Thank you, Father, for guiding me here. I will be leaving for Steinhoeing to the Lebensborn Home in a few weeks.

She wished the words weren't etched into her memory.

She knew she could let it go and return to a life where laughter finally came naturally after two years of faking it. A life where grief had lightened, and simplicity prevailed. But she knew herself too well to back down, even at her age. Was it simple curiosity? The chance to meet sib-

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lings? Or was it her Oma's words, spoken when she was seven and replaying in her mind since she opened the box of secrets, that was driving her?

One day, when you grow up, you'll have a big job to do. Do your best to right the wrongs of the past.

Mia took a long, deep sigh. She was only just beginning her journey, yet she already uncovered so many wrongs. She had no idea how to make them right. And if she somehow did, what purpose would it serve, and who would benefit? She had no offspring . . . Maybe it was about something larger than just her?

A sense that Bernadette and Oma would somehow guide her on this journey brought a smile to her lips. Finally, the weight of her eyelids grew heavier, and her thoughts became slow and hazy as she surrendered to the comforting pull of sleep.