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Kascha North-Northeast

Chapter 1

Never again. Two small words can crash down on your head like a collapsing roof, and it was exactly like that for me when my sister stepped into the kitchen. At the same time, deep in my heart I had already known what was going on for a while. I had put two and two together and had been keeping an eye on Zippi for weeks. And in this particular case, to be honest, you didn't exactly need to be Inspector Columbo to figure it out.

“Save all your coins for the pay phone, please!” (We have had a phone of our own for more than a year now.)

“I sorted out some clothes for you. Look in that box, Kasha.” (It was normal for me to get Zippi's hand me downs, but she had never parted with this many things at once. There were even books and makeup that she used in the box.)

“Don't you ever dream of having the whole room all to yourself?” (No, I had never dreamed of that, and Zippi knew it, too, so the question could only mean one thing: you'd better get ready, because soon there won't be anyone to talk to.)

Our village, Greater Mooren, is not very well suited for sneaking along behind someone undetected. The land up here is as flat as a page in an atlas; if you stand on our wall, on a clear day you can look between our neighbors' barn and their house all the way to a dark stripe on the horizon. That stripe is the dike and it's exactly 1.7 kilometers from our property. Behind the dike is the beach. When the dike breaks, which has happened before, you will either be lying in the Baltic Sea or on the roof, until the helicopter comes.

Admittedly, the dike had held since we moved to Greater Mooren. It was our third winter on the coast and I waited in vain for something out of the ordinary to happen. I only described the landscape to explain why you can't necessarily sneak around following your sister undetected in Greater Mooren. When you do it anyway and she doesn't stop walking to call out, *Hey, Kasha, what are you doing there, behind that utility pole that isn't more than 15 centimeters wide?*, then she knows exactly where you are, and just doesn't want to embarrass you (which doesn't mean that you feel any less silly for it).

It was only after dinner that Zippi made her way into town, from which I deduced that her boyfriend must have been working, because otherwise Zippi could have called him in the afternoon from the phone booth in front of the factory. I didn't figure that she wanted to make herself pretty and shower off the fishy smell; after all, the unknown person on the telephone wouldn't have had anything of it.

Keeping a safe distance, I hurried after Zippi along the edge of the road. Spots of light from the windows of the neighboring farms brightened the dark winter evening. There are four properties on the way to the village that look just like ours and are exactly the same size, and the same driveway leads from each one to the street, as straight as a ruler. At the end of the driveways stand the power poles already mentioned and matching mailboxes. And there's a dog living on every farm.

Inferno! In Greater Mooren, all the dogs are crazy because they're bound to their doghouses with chains all day. When someone shows up in our driveway, our Muggele first goes to see whether he's announcing a friend or a foe. The Greater Mooren dogs, on the other hand, have no choice but to go completely insane at the slightest motion on the streets. It's their only freedom, and they take full advantage of it. As soon as one starts, the rest join in. Don't talk to me about the quiet of the countryside!

The village spokesman had been to see us several times already because of Muggele. So far they haven't done anything, though.

Not even the dogs were enough to make Zippi turn around, which I found pretty careless of her. It could have been a wanted criminal chasing after her instead of me, after all. My sister is very pretty, and whenever the lights of the cars appeared, I convinced myself that I was protecting her instead of spying on her. But the drivers only braked a little when they first saw Zippi, then me on the left side of the street, slowed down a little, then drove on.

Greater Mooren extends along the left and right sides of the main road, which is called Village Street within the town limits, and is also the only street in Greater Mooren, like beads on a necklace. In a second row there are more houses, reachable via driveways between the first row of houses. Exactly in the middle of the village there is a tiny supermarket, the Whale Pub, a kiosk and a telephone booth. You can look up and down Greater Mooren just once, and then you know your way around the entire place. (You don't even need to look for the school, church, pharmacy and post office; those are 8 kilometers away in Gelting.)

The yellow telephone booth on the sidewalk was weakly illuminated and I saw Zippi pick up the receiver, throw in coins and lean against the scratched, handprint-covered side panel with her back to me. From my place behind the hedge of house number 17, I stared at her with such intensity that I could smell the typical telephone booth smell in my nose: that special mixture of cold cigarette smoke, foreign body odor and rusting metal. There are often empty bottles lying around, the sole of your shoe is sticky from a puddle of beer or soda, or, as a particular highlight, you might need to free the coin slot of chewing gum before you can use it. Was I ever glad that we finally had our own phone at home!

But none of that mattered to Zippi; after a few seconds a happy little shock ran through her body – and I wracked my brain trying to figure out who might be on the other end of the line.

And it could have been so easy, too. *Where* fate had brought these two together wasn't too hard to guess. The previous summer, because of our grandfather's illness, we were only at a single gathering, the pilgrimage in France. To my frustration, I couldn't remember which boy Zippi had been conspicuously friendly to, who she had spoken with particularly often, or who she

had preferred to sit next to. There had definitely been someone; unfortunately I had been utterly and completely busy staying away from Donny Leverenz (think “hopeless first love”) and hanging out with girls and boys my age. Which was the entire point of the gatherings, right? So that our widely spread out families wouldn’t lose sight of each other, friendships were made, and deepened...

... and the older ones found a partner for life. Too dumb that I hadn’t made the connection between that part of the plan and my own sister all summer long! So now I had to go undercover behind the low hedge of house number 17 and fret and watch.

That went well for exactly two evenings.

When we moved to Greater Mooren in the autumn of 1976, even my little brother Janko had quickly understood what was going on. The inhabitants of Greater Mooren had taken a vote, and the only reason we were allowed to take over Miller Zwo’s property in the end was because his son and heir couldn’t find another buyer. I mean honestly, who wanted to move to Greater Mooren? To a run down farm where the wind blew through every gap, water dripped through the roof, where the clutter in the farmhouse was piled up to the ceiling and the flooring of the future ‘antique barn’ consisted of meter-thick, bone-hard, steam rolled cow shit from twenty years ago?

Miller Zwo’s son was so happy when we rolled into the courtyard with our mobile home that he ran toward us, flung open the gate and closed and locked it behind us again at the speed of light. He sunk the key deep into his pockets, probably intending to hand it over only when Dada’s signature stood at the bottom of the contract, black on white.

Ever since then, no one in the village had anything good to say about Miller Zwo’s son. He couldn’t care less. He lived in the city of Kiel.

Later, as the son’s Renault rode away from the farm with excessive speed, Dada lined us up in a row facing the street: me, Janko and Zippi, and my older brothers Hanno and Gecko, and next to us our puro (grandfather), Mama and good old Muggele.

“Once you reach the road, you will speak only German,” my father impressed upon us, “always, even if you are amongst yourselves, so you don’t forget it. Wear clean clothes when you leave the farm. Anyone you meet will be greeted. Be polite and don’t get involved in any fights.” And after a short pause he added, “Stay away from their houses after dark.”

That hit a nerve. Mama and Puro got all ashen-faced when my father said that. But even Janko and I, who were the youngest, had expected that after the long trip from southern Germany we would arrive and finally be *at home*. That we could leave the dead behind — not forget them, certainly not, but possibly that the whole affair wouldn’t play such a big role way up north.

That was stupid of me. I know that now. Mama thinks of her own mother and the two sisters constantly, even though she was only five years old when the murders happened. She and Pura-Dada, my grandfather, were not home when it happened. That’s the only reason they are still alive and why Zippi, my brothers and I exist.

But at the time, I didn't suspect anything more than that. I only sensed it when the adults had been talking about the events again, when they abruptly shut up as soon as I entered the room. And that happened relatively often.

In spite of that, I only remembered Dada's warning to stay away from the houses of the Gadjo (= *non-gypsies*) after dark when it was too late. I must have been staring so intently at Zippi's back that I only noticed the men on the street when there was no chance for me to disappear anymore. Instinctively, I threw myself on the ground behind the hedge, but their steps and voices continued to approach me, from in front, from the sides and from behind.

I clamped my eyes shut when shadows fell on me. Fear invaded my knees, my chest, my head, it coursed through my body and out again. And it seemed to take some part of me with it, because I suddenly felt myself begin to float. Grateful and full of wonder, I expected that I would just fly off into the air and over the hedge any moment.

A flashlight shone as someone pulled me up and hissed, "Where are the others?"

I felt like a fish; I wriggled and opened my mouth to yell, but no sound came out. The Gadjo with the flashlight boxed me on the ear.

"I knew it," he growled. "The rabble from the Miller farm."

As if I could observe myself from outside my body, I saw myself standing among their shadows: seven or eight men who were all familiar to me. I had waited at the kiosk alongside them, and passed them on the street.

"There are sure to be more of them! Anyone got a gun?"

"Watch out, they're quick. Better take care if you don't want a knife in your ribs!"

"We'd better call the cops."

"By the time they get here, these guys here will be long gone..."

I felt blood in my mouth and poked around with my tongue, shocked, but my teeth appeared to still be intact. Did that even matter now? Lights switched on in the neighboring houses and people appeared in the windows. No one wanted to miss anything, now that there was finally some action. Additional men and two women ran across the road, pulling on their coats as they came. One of them had a dog with him.

Only my sister Zippi in her phone booth didn't notice any of this. She leaned on the glass wall, weaving the phone cord through her fingers and listening to the voice in the receiver with an expression of bliss.

"Ziiiiippiiii!" Finally, I found my voice again. "Zippi, run away!"

Still laughing, she turned halfway around and put her forehead on the glass to have a better view out into the dark. I saw how her mouth fell open and the receiver dropped from her hand. I saw how she pushed open the door, and instead of running away, she ran toward me.

I have to admit that in spite of everything I was deeply relieved. After all, it's harder to beat up two girls than just one scrawny little thing like me. But my sister Zippi, I noticed with great astonishment that evening, was not a girl anymore.

She pushed the men aside, put her hands on her hips, and glared at the man who held on to me, fearless and enraged. "Are you out of your mind? Let go of that child right now!"

“That child,” the Gadjo spat, “invaded my property!”

“Are you talking about this joke of a hedge?” Zippi asked scornfully. “How can you talk about *invading* if you don’t even have a fence?”

“Bold as brass,” another one grumbled, but at least no one stopped my sister from approaching me and freeing my arm.

“Is that blood, Kascha? Did he hit you?”

“No one hit anyone here!”

“That’s true, I’m a witness to that.”

Zippi turned me into the light of the street lantern and studied my lip. “Shame on you,” she said scornfully. “An eight year old child.”

“She’s not eight, she’s in my class at school!” Standing in the driveway a few steps behind me was a boy they called Jellyfish at school because of his round face, grinning triumphantly. He was probably delighted that he knew something, too, for a change. In school, Jellyfish was not exactly the brightest of the bunch.

“They lie when they open their mouths!” a woman screeched. “Someone should hurry up and call the police. Two more of them just ran away back there!”

Ran away? I thought. If they did, they certainly aren’t any of us.

Several villagers halfheartedly set out in the direction the woman indicated—only to stop again after a few steps. “We’ll never get them anymore anyway. And who knows if it’s really only two...”

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I was glad when it was time for the evening news and other catastrophes provided a little distraction.

First, we heard the flood report from the towns where the storm had pushed the Baltic Sea into the bays. Then the moderator excitedly described how enormous ice floes were piling up in the harbors and turning into impenetrable bands of ice. Several giant ships already were firmly stuck in the ice—as soon as the snow stopped falling we would be able to see them from the top of our own dike.

After that came the news about frozen train tracks and switches — this we were used to already — the army’s futile struggle to keep transportation moving in order to bring in supplies and evacuate sick people and pregnant women via helicopter. At the end of the program, the anchorman addressed the audience with an urgent appeal:

“Don’t wait for help from the cities and communities; their offices are not even open during the holidays. Take action yourselves! Are there families in your neighborhood that only have an electric stove? Let them use your gas stove so they can cook warm meals. Do you have food you can spare? Younger people, especially, may not be used to stocking up and might be

running out of things they need. Are there any neighbors you haven't seen or heard from in days? If it's possible, please check on them and make sure they are okay. Are there any farms near you? All the feeding and milking machines stopped working days ago, and one farmer can't take care of his animals all by himself. Please, keep your eyes open and help wherever you can!"

When the program started to play music again, my grandfather turned the radio off to save the battery. For a few seconds it was very quiet, as if we were all thinking the same thing: it hadn't been days since we had seen or heard from our neighbors, it had been more than two years. And the only exception to that was sitting right here at the table with us.

Suddenly Gecko got up, without a word of explanation, took the flashlight we used to get from the house to the barn, and climbed up the ladder to the open loft. We heard him rummage around up there for a moment, then he reappeared at the top of the ladder with the flashlight between his teeth.

"Can you take these for me?" he asked. In his arms, he held a pair of skis.

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But as soon as I stood in the door to the barn and gazed out at the cold, hostile landscape all the doubts I had temporarily suppressed during my little power struggle with my cousin, Chicken Feet, came back to life. What in the world was I doing here? The town of Greater Mooren and us, those are two different planets. The fact that my dad thought that we could coexist just because of a little snow made me seriously question his sanity. Unlike Mama I didn't really expect anyone to physically attack us, but to be the idiot in the end... Was I really supposed to look forward to that?

You hang out here in your barn, Dada, but Janko and I have to go back to school with them next week. Did you ever think about that?

Honestly, this so-called "snow catastrophe" couldn't possibly be so bad that the people of Greater Mooren needed our help. I looked around. The wall that separates our farm from our neighbor's had completely disappeared; only the snow-covered, pointed roof of the Hugomüller's house towered above the snow like a little watchtower. But between us and the farm on the other side, where there was no dividing wall but instead a pasture surrounded by a fence, it looked better. The wind had blown across that open space and piled up the snow everywhere that buildings, walls and vehicles formed obstacles in its path. But in the pastures, the fence posts still poked out of the white covering. The snow couldn't be more than half a meter high there.

The main road seemed to be free, too. The snowplow had cleared it several times even though no one was out driving because of the driving prohibition that was currently in place. The plows had piled up the snow alongside the road so high that the only problem now was to get to the street in the first place. At our place, the experienced team had shoveled a narrow passageway to the street that looked as if a mouse had eaten its way through a cheese.

It smelled fresh and white and salty. Greater Mooren had never smelled quite like this to me, and the longer I stood there, the more apprehensive I felt. This was not regular snow. This snow had a purpose. If we didn't pay attention it could turn everything upside down. Donny in winter, a gadjo (a kind of gypsy—not a Roma) moving in with us, Chicken Feet wearing my clothes as of this morning... as if everything we were used to wasn't valid anymore.

But was that a reason to impose ourselves on the people of Greater Mooren and potentially put ourselves in danger? Suddenly it wasn't difficult for me to see the results of what we intended to do from Mama's perspective: my family and I as the sad stars of a Friday evening, recognizable from behind as we bravely struggle along in our skis toward a white wall, the first of us already disappearing into the white. The moment when everyone who watches *America's Most Wanted* wants to scream STOP! at the screen.

Witnesses last saw the family of seven around 10 am near the entrance to the village...

No. Stop it. Enough! I would go back into the barn and declare that I had had a vision, a warning from the Puri (= grandmother), and no, I'm sorry, it's not the first time, Puro asks, but now please take off those ski boots and believe me, it's better ...

I was pretty sure that I could give a convincing performance. I had seen us in danger quite clearly, and how did I know that it *wasn't* a vision? According to everything Puro had explained to me there was only one rule: the only thing that counts is what happens in the end.

Oh, well. Never play around with higher powers! Subconsciously, I had already noticed the rumbling on the road, but only as it grew louder did I turn around to see where the noise might be coming from. I blinked and could not believe what I saw. I almost wet my pants.

Behind the wall of snow a huge *snout* appeared. A snout that was moving—slowly, but still, there was no doubt it was moving, and it's direction was unmistakable. Almost as soon as I noticed it, it turned off the road and glared at me, and in the next moment I saw it bite into the wall of snow.

“Dada!” I screeched and rushed back into the house.

The others were coming to meet me. They had heard the rumbling, too, and I felt like an idiot when I stood in front of the house in the safety of my family and looked at the thing that was eating its way through the snow.

Come on, Kascha, have you never seen a tractor shovel before?

The tractor dug its way through our mouse hole, leaving a wide gap in its wake. Then it came to a stop. The engine died. Two people, bundled up from head to toe, complete with scarves wound around their hats, crouched motionless in front of us. Then one of them grumbled, “Morning. Y'all okay here?”

“Helmut, is that you?” Hugomüller asked doubtfully. This initiated a short discussion in Platt dialect, a secret language that we understand as little as the Gadjo our Romanes language.

“We thank you for your help,” Dada finally interjected. “Wouldn't you like to come in and warm up? We've got some tea and sandwiches.”

“It’d be nice to warm up,” both of them admitted and clumsily climbed down from their tractor. Only when they took off their caps in the barn did we recognize our neighbor from two farms over and notice that the second guy was actually his wife.

“It’s beautiful in here!” she marveled.

These two were the first people from Greater Mooren who had ever set foot in our barn, apart from Hugomüller, and they couldn’t have been expecting much, judging by how they acted during the next few minutes. They walked around looking at everything, checked the price tags on the furniture, and took turns exclaiming, “When I think of what it looked like in here before!”

My parents beamed, but I had a strange feeling. Sure, it looked great here. After all, Dada and my brothers had worked on the barn for years. And as nice as it was to hear unexpected praise from our neighbors, still that was no reason to get so excited about it.

All of a sudden the man extended his hand and grumbled, “Schick,” and Dada eagerly shook his hand and thanked him. Finally he realized his mistake and added, “Johannes Natzweiler, pleased to meet you.”

“We were just about to go out and see if anyone needs help,” Hanno said.

“Do you know how to milk a cow, young man?” Mrs. Schick asked.

“Absolutely,” Hanno replied with a smile and you could practically see the tentacles of his charm immediately start to envelope Mrs. Schick.

Her husband needed a moment longer. “Well, I don’t know,” he said slowly before his wife simply waved away his hesitation with a gesture of her hand.

“Then I’d suggest you head right over to the Friedrich farm,” she said.

“I’d be happy to. Where is that?”

“The one right next to ours. Those two have thirty cows.”

“It’s strange, isn’t it,” Puro piped up from his place at the table, “that we don’t even know the names of our neighbors.”

“Well, you could have come and introduced yourselves,” Mrs. Schick replied pointedly.

Puro smiled. “We wanted to, we did. Unfortunately, no one opened their doors.”

Dada glanced at my grandfather, alarmed. *Do you want to ruin everything?* Apparently, he had forgotten how we had dressed in our Sunday best and gone to call on all the neighboring farms; how the curtains had moved behind many of the windows, and in front of every doghouse a dog had gone crazy barking, but no one had come out. How were we supposed to know who the Friedrichs were?

“Is there anyone we can offer the use of our gas stove or camping cooker?” Dada asked quickly.

“Well, you might want to just go to the Crisis Center. There are volunteers at the *Whale Inn* all day long who coordinate help in the immediate area.”

As they were talking, Mama placed a tray with freshly brewed tea, sandwiches and Christmas cookies on the table. Then she made a gesture inviting the Schicks to take a seat. She still hadn’t said a word. Maybe she needed some time to adjust to what the snow did to us and the people of Greater Mooren, like me.

The couple hesitated slightly, then sat down and helped themselves. Dada sat down with them and ate a cookie himself even though we had just finished breakfast.

“Why don’t you all go ahead without me, I’ll catch up,” he told us. We stood around the table as if we were waiting for a free spot.

I wanted to yell, “Wait a minute – this was your idea in the first place, and now you don’t even want to come along?”