

# BEST *Seller*

An H&G Mystery  
book one

# CHRISTINA ROST



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*To the heroes who protect and preserve the memory of those who are  
persecuted because of their faith.*



*“Where they burn books, they will, in the end, burn human beings  
too.” ~Heinrich Heine*





## PROLOGUE

*Germany 1933*

Flames and hazy smoke licked the ethereal sky. Ten-year-old Abram Zucker stepped out from behind his mother and stared at the streams of people herding into the village square.

“What’s going on?” Abram looked up, hoping to read his mother’s expression. Her brow wrinkled, but she didn’t answer. Instead, she draped an arm around him and drew him close. Cozy warmth encircled him as the lingering, homey scents of flour and sugar drifted up to his nose. He leaned closer.

Disturbing the tender moment, a group of university-aged men pushed past them, their arms weighed down with stacks of textbooks.

“Where are they going?” Abram scanned the street while several more curious onlookers strolled out of their shops and homes.

As three cargo trucks rumbled across the cobbled streets, his mother’s posture straightened. “I’m going to get your father.”

Abram turned to stop her, but she broke away and scurried across the lane to their apartment above the bakery.

Slicing through the hum of activity, the town clock’s chime struck nine, and a gentle breeze picked up the pungent scents of

burning paper interlaced with charred wood. When Abram stepped into the street, Henrich and Karl, his neighbors, fell in step beside him.

“Do you think we can bring the *buchs* from Mrs. Fischer’s class?” They bobbed and weaved past the adults, pulling Abram along. “Then we don’t have to read them next year.”

Abram snorted and shook his head. The waning sunlight cast a blood orange glow over the town as he struggled to make sense of the scene unfolding in front of him. Neighbors and friends milled about, with expressions of pensive expectation. A man he recognized as the grocer knelt and laid a spark to one of the books. The group cheered and applauded.

Glancing over his shoulder, Abram skimmed the crowd for his mother. Feeling the brush of a small hand sliding into his, Abram glanced down. “Rachel?” His heart dropped when the girl peered up at him through wet lashes. “What are you doing here?”

She sniffled, and a handful of tears trickled down her flushed cheeks.

“You shouldn’t be out here.” Abram looked around, hoping to see her parents.

Rachel tugged on his hand and pointed to the mound of books. “They took my book.”

He followed her gaze and spotted a children’s book poking out of the bottom of the pile. “That one?” Abram pointed to the thin hardback then cut his eyes to the crowd pushing in on them. “Is that your book?”

When he glanced back at her, she nodded. Her forlorn expression pressed a lump into his throat. He’d known Rachel since her family had moved into town a few years ago, when they’d opened a dressmaker’s shop across the street. She was only a few years younger than him, but the urge to act as her protector clung to his soul.

“It’s my grandmother’s. She gave it to me before she died.”



Rachel nibbled on her bottom lip while she fiddled with the long braid sloping over her shoulder.

Someone shouted across the street, and a sea of heads turned like a wave crashing onto the beach. Abram followed their gaze. A group of soldiers lifted tinted glass bottles and yelled out a hoot of victory. The crowd shouted and raised their right arms in unison as if yanked by a conjoined string.

A shudder shook Abram's spine despite the heat wrapping around him from the rising flames. What was going on tonight? In only fifteen minutes, the crowd had doubled in size. He lifted Rachel's chin with his forefinger. "I want you to go back home."

"Will you get my book?" Rachel leaned forward, and her breath brushed across his cheek. "I'll love you forever if you do, Abram."

He stifled a chuckle. "I'll get your book, little lamb." He tousled her wispy bangs. "Go home before this crowd gets any larger."

She slipped her hand out of his. Abram watched as she weaved in and out of the throng like a medieval sprite bent on escaping a foe.

"Here, throw it."

"What?" Startled out of his thoughts, Abram turned. Karl had sidled up next to him and thrust a book into his hands.

"Just throw it in like this." Karl stepped back and hurled a book into the flames. The pages fanned out then ignited in an array of cool white and orange. Karl nudged him and pointed at the pile. "Do it."

The bonfire reflected in Karl's pupils, and like a brush of unseen fingers, a shiver worked its way across Abram's skin. He glanced down at the book in his hand and shook off the troubling image. *I need a diversion.* He drew his arm back and launched the textbook into the center of the flames.

"Nice throw." Karl whooped and threw up his hands.

Abram pointed to the books not yet touched by the flames.

“Let’s grab the ones on the bottom and see who can throw them the farthest.”

“I’ll win for sure.”

“Grab that one.” Abram pointed to a hard-bound art book. “It’s big.”

As Karl yanked the book free then pulled back to launch it, Abram snatched Rachel’s book from the fire. A sharp flame licked the inside of his forearm and a cry wedged in his throat. He shoved the book under his shirt and tore through the crowd. Determination propelled him forward as the singed corner of the hardback pressed like a firebrand against the tender skin of his belly.

“Abram, are you okay?”

Abram ran headlong into his mother’s open arms. “*Mutter.*” The endearment fell off his lips in a whispered gasp.

His mother and father wrapped their arms around him and steered him through the door of their bakery. As soon as the door slammed shut, he ripped the book out from under his clothes and yelped in pain.

“Abram.” His mother sucked in a breath when she examined the glossy welts on his arm and across his belly. “What did you do?”

“I had to.” He swallowed hard and tried to hold back the waterfall of tears threatening to break free. “It’s Rachel’s book.”

His father took the book from him and stared at the cover. “*The Twelve Story Stones.*” Abram’s heart thudded as he struggled to read the expression on the aging man’s face. His father handed the book back to him. “You can return it tomorrow.”

He nodded as his mother went to the cupboard. “Sit down, son. Let me look at those burns.”

After she finished applying a sticky balm, Abram climbed to his room on the third floor. Through the window, he watched as golden flames soared higher in the ebony sky. He looked down at his hands. The fingers he’d wrapped around the book were

white-knuckled and shaking. *What have I done?* He took a deep breath and tried to organize his competing thoughts.

*We must obey authority.* Recalling the words of his schoolteacher caused his blood to ice.

As he glanced across the street toward the dressmaker's shop, Abram's heart stalled. Where there was once a window display of fine fabric and dresses stood a board painted with angry words. Gripping the book with a clenched fist, he slumped onto the edge of his bed. Pinching his eyes shut, Abram forced a swallow. *Don't be a baby. They're just burning a few books.*

Abram's eyes shot open as he recalled Rachel's words. *My grandmother gave it to me.*

A sour taste settled on his parched tongue. It was more than just a book; it was a family heirloom.

Collapsing to his knees, he yanked up the floorboard loosened years ago to hide his childhood treasures. Carefully, Abram slid the book into the dusty crevice and clicked the plank back into place. He made a promise to himself—no matter what the cost, no one would ever take Rachel's book again.