

Anna Claire
WOMEN OF FORTUNE – THE TASTE OF FREEDOM
(*Women of Fortune* Vol. 1)

Sample Translation by Catherine Venner



Novel

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Chapter 1

Berlin, July 1936

Flags, flags, everywhere flags. All over Berlin, they were fluttering in the warm summer wind. The Olympic Summer Games were about to begin in just a few weeks. *Summer Games*, what a lovely phrase Luise thought. Summer games in the summer wind almost sounded like a poem. But only almost. She hurried along the bumpy pavement in Schöneberg, kicking a small stone in front of her and pushing her wild blonde curls from her face. She loved puns; words had so many meanings, words could arouse feelings and conceal secret messages.

As she turned the next street corner, the smell of freshly baked goods wafted towards her. But even here in front of her favourite bakery, where she and her friends would meet every Thursday lunchtime for their beloved Berliner crumb cake and a gossip, they were fluttering. Two flags. Red with a white circle and a black distorted cross. Luise shivered despite the heat. She paused for a moment and rearranged her hat. How was she going to tell her friends? About what had happened a few days ago and what would happen to them if they didn't finally make a decision?

"Run, Luise! Run for your life!" Richard had yelled in panic. And Luise had run, faster than ever before.

But her friends didn't want to see the inhumanity happening in Germany. They closed their eyes and like so many others, they hoped that all would be well. But weren't all these fluttering flags sneering at this hope?

"There you are!" she heard Maria's voice and looked up. Maria, the pragmatic one, who was well-read and married to Jakob, a bookseller. They had two wonderful children: three-year-old Tabea and six-year-old Noah. Like so often, Maria had a book tucked under her arm. Her black hair was curled to the side and a few strands from her fringe formed small curls on her temples. In one hand, she was holding a slice of crumb cake and in the other a paper bag from the bakery. Next to her stood Anni, the third of the trio. She was winding her blonde hair around her fingers. She'd rolled her long, wavy hair to the side and pinned it up. She was

also balancing a slice of cake on the palm of her hand. Her pale blue eyes looked searchingly at Luise.

“I’ve already bought you a piece, Luise,” said Maria and held out the paper bag to her and smiled.

“Thank you,” Luise took hold of the bag but didn’t open it. “Something has happened,” she burst out.

“I knew right away,” Anni answered triumphantly and smoothed down her blue dress. As usual she looked fantastic and smelled of lavender soap. Anni was the most romantic of the three friends. And she had good taste, at least where material things were concerned. “Luise, something has always happened with you,” she teased her friend. “What is it now?” With relish, she bit into her cake and licked her lips.

Luise took a deep breath, her hands were suddenly shaking causing the paper bag to rustle. “It’s Richard. Richard’s gone.”

“He left you?” Anni was full of sympathy. She was a good soul, always believing in the good in things. One day, she would fulfil her desire to be a great mother. With her hearty and cheerful way, you couldn’t help liking her and she could always be relied upon.

“No, we were discovered.” Luise said. “Yesterday. In the cellar with the printing press our group uses for the flyers.”

Maria clasped her hand over her mouth in shock. Anni calmly continued to chew.

“Richard talked them into the ground, those blustering Nazis. He made up fantastical excuses and claimed he had contacts to the higher-ups. They weren’t interested in me. Not yet. But Richard thinks I’m also in danger because I write texts for the flyers. Although he also says that they don’t think women are capable of much. That’s why they didn’t take me seriously in the cellar. But they really should,” she said with a hint of rebelliousness at the end.

A cake crumb caught in Anni’s throat and she coughed. Maria gave her a hearty thwack on her back. When she could breathe again Anni said, “Well of course they have to do something, if you’re ... spreading such things.”

“We’re not spreading lies,” Luise retorted angrily. She knew there was no point talking to Anni about it. Anni worshipped her Siegfried, who she’d known since she started school, who was in the Gestapo and in whom she nevertheless only saw the good.

“At least Siegfried is protecting Maria and her family,” Anni had once said. “Even though they’re Jews, nothing will happen to them.” Even though they’re Jews – words like that could make you doubt her love for her friends. In the worst case even destroy their friendship. Or at least leave a dent in it. Luise had often

discussed it with Anni. She'd tried to open her loved-up eyes but Anni also had a stubborn side and she was a past master in suppression. Even a philosophy student like Luise had no retort when she said things like, "every person has the right to think what he wants, that's what you always say Luise."

Richard could have done it. At first he'd just been her lecturer at the uni, and a year ago he'd become her sweetheart. A well respected man of words. A few weeks ago, he'd proposed. "Shall we get married, Luise?" Commonplace words. But it had felt as if all her happiness simply had to burst out of her chest.

Just then, two soldiers approached them. They wore brown uniforms and were probably the same age as the women. They surveyed them with arrogant, cold eyes. Luise made an effort to appear cheerful and say something funny to her friends. But Maria stiffened. Only Anni laughed at Luise's joke, smiled at the two soldiers and greeted them with "Heil Hitler." They answered "Heil Hitler" and continued past. "That's how to do it Luise. Being opportune is also clever," Anni explained.

Luise took a deep breath.

"So, where's Richard?" Maria whispered, concerned.

"Right now ... he'll already be on the train to Hamburg and soon he'll be on the ship." Luise answered.

"What?" Maria probed, "without you?"

Luise swallowed. Her disappointment that he'd gone without her welled up. She pushed it back down. It was the only way. They'd discussed this eventuality a lot. Whether they should emigrate as victims of political persecution, just like others had done? And if so, where to? "Now we're being persecuted, Luise, now is the time. New York." Richard had said. "I know George there. He'll surely send me an affidavit of support. Pretend he's a distant relative. And from there we could do even more, I'm sure of it."

"Why not Paris? Or somewhere in Europe. Then we'd be closer to home," Luise had asked.

But Richard shook his head with certainty. "Immigrants aren't allowed to work there, so I've heard. Many of them live in poverty. And it's too close. We have to think bigger, Luise. You can only fight might with might, do you understand?" Of course she understood.

"I can only ask George for an affidavit for me initially, once I'm there I'll ask for one for you too. In the meantime, you'll have to organise everything for us. You do that so well. You're the best," he'd said.

"But didn't you want to go together? You wanted to get married?" Anni now asked puzzled.

“Yes, and we still will. In New York.” Luise answered bravely. She knew that Anni didn’t understand her. “I’ll follow him. Once I’ve dealt with everything here. I’m to sell everything I can. We need the money for the new start. Richard had already arranged a little in advance for all eventualities, otherwise he couldn’t have left so quickly. What about you Maria, and your family? Please come with me before it’s too late,” she urgently addressed her friend.

As always Maria shook her head to this question. “I tried to persuade Jakob again. I’m frightened every day that he will have to close his book shop. But he says we’ll find a way. He just doesn’t want to give up the book shop. You know what he’s like. And because of the Reich Flight Tax we’d lose a lot of our assets. It can’t get any worse.”

“Exactly,” Anni agreed, “It won’t. I also really believe that.”

“But I don’t! Why don’t we all go to New York before it’s too late, and we can open our restaurant there? We’ve all been dreaming of it for years. And then we can live from the income in America.”

“Luise, we wanted to open it here in Berlin,” Anni said and took another bite of her crumb cake. A large crumb fell from her mouth.

“They wouldn’t let me open a restaurant here any more,” Maria noted bitterly. “Luise is right. If at some point we do have to emigrate, it’d be the best chance to start something new. A small restaurant of our own. I love our book shop, but in a foreign land it’d be easier to live from a restaurant. Luise will cook and philosophise with the guests, Anni has a good eye for interior design and will pick out the fresh flowers every day, and I’ll serve. And in my free time I can read as much as I like.”

Anni shook her head. “In America, what nonsense.”

“No it’s not,” Luise countered, “We women, we have to be independent not reliant on our husbands.” She grew serious, “Maria, I’m really worried about you. All of you. Promise me one thing: if it gets more dangerous in Germany, you’ll come straight to New York, I’ll send you the documents, the affidavits of support, as soon as I’m there. And then you can apply for a visa. Anni can join us later at some point.”

“No, I won’t.”

“It could get dangerous for you too, don’t you have distant Jewish relations?”

Anni winced, then nodded pensively, “Very, very distant!”

“We need a plan, an objective for us all in case it gets worse here and unfortunately that’s what it’s looking like. It’s safe in America and we’d all be together,” Luise continued, “So me going there now and living there is the best solution. When I’m there I can sort everything out, like finding out how and where to open a restaurant in New York.”

Anni now laughed, uncertain. She'd been very quiet but now she said, "You and your mad ideas."

"But it's a good idea," Maria butted in. "Just most likely very expensive, I don't know how we will manage it?"

"I know, but that can't be the reason we don't do it," Luise said with fight, "Other emigrants have managed it. Of course something like this is expensive, but people always have to eat. Even in times of adversity. Even in America. German food will surely go down well. Not to mention Berliner crumb cake for dessert."

Maria nodded thoughtfully, "We will each give Luise money and if we don't follow her she can pay us back."

"Of course," Luise reassured. Anni didn't look happy.

"And what's it going to cost?" Maria wondered.

"Around a year's wages, I have done some research," Luise answered, "but it will likely go ok with much less."

"So much?" Anni looked horrified.

"Give me, let's say, 150 Reichmark each, around a month's pay. Or two months would be better. Then it could work. Maybe I could take over a restaurant with all the fittings cheaply." Luise was undeterred.

"Three hundred Reichmark," repeated Anni hesitantly.

"I know, it's a lot of money and they deduct some when I transfer it over there. I can only take ten Reichsmarks with me but that's for our own safety." Luise looked pleadingly at Anni.

Maria now nodded with certainty. "Jakob will agree to that. It's a contingency plan. A way to freedom, if we need it. Even you don't know how things are really going to develop here, Anni."

She started to protest but Maria continued, "Either we will follow you to America and run the restaurant together, or Luise will transfer the money back to us as soon as she can. In this way, we have nothing to lose. Didn't you inherit some money from your father Anni?"

"Yes, I did."

"It's a good venture, believe me. An investment. Maybe in your life."

Luise looked at Anni anxiously. Her share also came from her inheritance. Her late mother would have thought the women's plans were clever. She was sure of it. "If everyone gives a deposit, then our restaurant will succeed," she added.

"Ok. Investing my money now isn't a bad idea. We'll do it," Anni answered, "Every woman needs a way out. That's what my dad always used to say."

"You're amazing. Let's swear that we'll do everything to realise our dream," Luise suggested. "We'll do it like we used to." The friends all placed their hands over each other and looked each other in the eye. Without uttering a single word.

Chapter 2

New York, 2023

The scent of lavender hung in the air, sending a wave of sorrow through her. It was many years since she'd last been here, the home of her grandmother, Luise. June looked around the bedroom, stood forlornly in the centre of the room and felt the dizziness that had kept coming over her since Luise's death five years ago. June had been born in America and after her parents had died young, she'd grown up in Washington Heights in New York. Her grandmother had owned a large, charming house that was decorated with elegant furniture and antiques, and surrounded by a park-like garden tended by a gardener. She'd also employed a domestic help but Luise had always done the cooking herself.

Now, Luise's last husband, Bill, had also died. He'd been a little younger than June's elderly grandmother and had been given a life-long right of residence in her house. June hadn't known him well; she hadn't been back to New York since Luise's funeral.

To sort her grandmother's affairs she'd left her home in Berlin, where she'd been living since university. Luise's will was at her lawyer's, who was her "personal representative" as they called it in the USA when it came to matters of inheritance. After the death of her grandmother, this lawyer had told her about Bill's life long right of residence and that she was behind Bill in the order of inheritance, but also that there was a sealed letter to June from her grandmother that he was only permitted to read after Bill's death, as stipulated by her will. The reading also had to be in person. As if there were something to hide, June had thought at the time. A strange thought. Had her grandmother really been keeping a secret?

The room felt as if Luise had just popped out. Bill hadn't changed anything, it looked as if he'd loved her very much. And she him? "If you love someone, do it with all of your heart in the here and now, or leave it," she'd once said to June. And, "In a woman's life, there's always one very special love."

June sank into the old rose coloured stool at the dressing table. Everything in this room looked as if time had stood still in the sixties. It went through June's head that she'd visited her grandmother far too seldomly in her last years, she'd

worked too much. And her grandmother had absolutely refused to come to Berlin, not even when June started university and Luise was still spritely.

After her parents' death, six-year-old June had often sneaked into bed next to Luise. The loss of June's parents had deeply shaken them both. June's mother Linda had been her grandmother's only daughter. She'd looked so peaceful in the coffin. Not a single scratch on her face, though clearly she had many injuries on her body. Details that June didn't want to know. But who is concerned with the thoughts of a child when they're standing next to a coffin. Her grandmother was the only one who saw her there and held her hands over her eyes and ears. "A child doesn't have to see everything," she whispered, "I'd really hoped to save you from this sight."

Just a few neighbours had attended Luise's funeral in the small chapel. June had wanted to contact old friends and acquaintances, but without her grandmother's personal address book it had been impossible. Most likely they were all dead too. And June had never really thought about her grandmother having close friends. Luise had always appeared content, looked after sick neighbours and cooked for them, but otherwise lived rather secludedly in this beautiful house. Now even the old neighbours who Luise had been in contact with had died or moved away.

Did Bill have friends or acquaintances? June only knew from talking to her grandmother that he no longer had any family, not any more. He'd never been a big talker.

She glanced around Luise's bedroom one last time, then she got up and went down the stairs into the hallway. June had once asked her where she'd got enough money to be able to afford this house. "We don't talk about money," was her grandmother's motto, and then June had never asked again.

She stopped in front of a gold-framed painting. Luise had been like a mother to her. Often a cheerful mother, but sometimes also a sad one. The loss of her daughter had nearly broken her, something she later admitted to June. Being there for her granddaughter was the only thing that had kept her alive, "You saved my life, darling," she'd said, "Thank you so much, you gave my life meaning again. And reduced my guilt."

Back then June hadn't understood the final sentence but her grandmother hadn't wanted to talk about it.

Now when June looked at the painting, she thought of it again. Her grandmother had said it directly in front of this picture of Ellis Island. The Island of Tears. June pushed the thought out of her mind.

At the age of twenty, June had moved to Berlin to study journalism and then worked in a series of exploitative internships. If it hadn't been for her

grandmother's monthly cheques, she wouldn't have survived. Just before the end of her studies, June met Micha, a musician. They got married in a hurry and June had to quickly earn money since Micha lived for his music and from her.

Out of necessity, she'd taken on a temporary role as an editor at a gossip magazine. In the beginning, she'd even liked this kind of job, taking one after another. But now, in her late thirties, her work felt empty and pointless. It made June dissatisfied and grumpy, something her partner Anton was constantly accusing her of. Anton, with whom she'd been living for four years, after her failed marriage to Micha on account of his cheating. She'd met Anton at a friend's barbecue; he hadn't been wearing his banker's suit then, but jeans and a t-shirt.

Her relationship with Anton was also difficult now. He would often nag her. But she'd only noticed that in recent months. And she'd also noticed she was on the verge of burnout and her hands would often shake. She was glad her temporary contract with an entertainment magazine had just ended and she was able to take a breather. Or was it her discovery about Anton that still plagued her so much? She felt more lonely than ever before.

June looked at the clock and pulled the letter she'd received last week from the Manhattan lawyer out of her handbag. She quickly reread it.

Dear Ms. Zeiler,

As we informed you after the death of your grandmother, your grandmother's sealed letter must be read to you in person after the death of Mr Bill Blixton. Please make an appointment at our office for the reading.

Yours Sincerely

Walter Brown

June lowered the letter. The appointment was in an hour. What could it be? She would inherit this beautiful house, that was for sure. But since she lived in Berlin and was planning to buy a small house on the outskirts with Anton, she would have to sell it. The thought already hurt her soul.

June stuffed the lawyer's letter back into her handbag, quickly watered the flowers in the living room and carefully locked the house door. How much she missed her grandmother. How much she regretted not talking to her about her past, her life and her loves.

[END OF SAMPLE]