



the SOUND
of LIGHT

A NOVEL

SARAH SUNDIN

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of **LIGHT**

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A N O V E L
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SARAH SUNDIN



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1940

1

COPENHAGEN, DENMARK
TUESDAY, APRIL 9, 1940

The sun rose on the first day of another year in the wasted life of Baron Henrik Ahlefeldt.

Henrik stopped outside his family's night-darkened home on Bredgade.

"Thirty. I'm thirty," he murmured to Svend Østergaard, who was the kind of friend willing to endure Henrik's crowd of dissolute aristocrats to celebrate his birthday, the kind of friend who understood what Henrik couldn't voice.

By thirty he'd planned to have Olympic gold, a seat in parliament, and a wife as brilliant and sweet as his own dear mother, God rest her soul.

Instead his nostrils stung from the Danish tradition of tossing pepper at bachelors on their thirtieth birthdays.

"It isn't too late, Henning," Svend said. "I've never known anyone with so much—"

"Don't say it." Henrik raised one hand to block the hated word. "The only standard I've ever met is wasting my potential. And that standard I've surpassed most exceedingly."

Svend loosed a sigh into the dawn chill. "You think you're punishing your father, but you're only punishing yourself."

Henrik winced and restrained his fists. He'd known Svend since

their first day at Latin school. As the only person in his life who spoke both honestly and kindly, Svend deserved to have his say.

A strange sound arose about a block over. A faint, rhythmic pounding. Like feet, lots of feet, marching in unison.

“What is—”

Pops rang out—sharp and cracking. Like fireworks. Or . . . gunfire?

Svend let out a strangled cry. “The Germans.”

Henrik’s eyes strained in the pale light. For months, Svend had ranted about how the Nazis would someday invade Norway to protect their shipping route for Swedish iron ore.

And tiny neutral Denmark stood in the way.

More shots.

“Come on!” Henrik ran toward the sound, toward Frederiksgade, which ran to Amalienborg Palace, home of King Christian X.

Svend ran beside him. “Our army . . .”

Curses filled Henrik’s head. Small and poorly equipped, the Danish Army didn’t stand a chance against the German Wehrmacht.

He rounded the corner onto Frederiksgade. A block ahead, men in uniform filled Amalienborg Square. Not the scarlet coats of the Royal Life Guards. German uniforms.

“Stop!” Svend grabbed Henrik’s arm. “We can’t help.”

Henrik shook off his friend and kept running. This was his country. His king.

“Henning! You’re one man.”

He skidded to a stop. One man. Unarmed. His heart and his shoulders slumped.

“I—I need to leave.” Svend looked ill, although he hadn’t had a drop to drink all night.

With a sigh, Henrik gestured back the way they’d come. “Let’s get you home.”

Svend strode away. “No. They’ll look for me there. I need to leave the country.”

“The—country?” Henrik jogged to catch up.

“You read those articles I wrote.”

Henrik hadn't, but the titles had screamed of the evils of Nazi Germany.

Svend turned onto Bredgade. "That bag I asked you to keep? I need it."

"But—but Birgitte—the children."

"I'll call Birgitte from your house. We knew this day would come. And right now I need you to row me to Sweden."

Henrik gaped at his friend. Svend always made sense—except now. "Row?"

"It's about ten miles across the Sound. You can row that far."

"Yes, but—"

Svend spun to him and gripped Henrik's arm, his eyes sapphire daggers. "You rowed for Olympic gold. You row for your own pleasure. Now I'm asking you—begging you—to row to save my life."

Something stirred in Henrik's chest, something he hadn't felt for ages. The desire to do a good and noble deed. A stirring not to be ignored.



WEDNESDAY, APRIL 10, 1940

With each stroke of his oars on the way back from Sweden, Henrik mulled Svend's proposal.

Under the stars, he dipped his oars into the water, shoved with his legs, and leaned into the layback. Svend was crazy. He thought too highly of Henrik.

He released the oars from the water and slid forward to the crouched position. What if Henrik did what Svend proposed?

His double scull, built wider and sturdier by Thorvald Thorup, allowed Henrik to row in the Øresund, the strait separating Denmark's island of Zealand from the southern tip of Sweden.

His muscles felt warm and twitchy from the night's row.

After seeing the German soldiers, Henrik and Svend had fetched Svend's bag and driven north to Lyd-af-Lys, the Ahlefeldt seaside villa in Vedbæk.

All day, they'd flipped the radio dial between Denmark's State

Radio and the BBC as they reported on the German invasion of both Norway and Denmark.

Denmark had fallen in under two hours.

At six in the morning, King Christian had accepted the surrender terms. Germany would occupy Danish military facilities and control the press. But they'd kept Denmark's king and parliament in place and even allowed the Army and Navy to remain on duty.

That evening, the Danish government asked the citizens to behave, obey the law, and treat the Germans correctly.

"Correctly." Henrik yanked the oars. When he'd heard that announcement, he'd packed his own bag, determined to go to Sweden with Svend. How could he live in an occupied shell of a nation?

A house full of priceless possessions, and Henrik had taken only cash, some clothing, a shaving kit, and photos of his mother and sisters, his American fraternity brothers, and the 1936 Danish Olympic rowing team. And his mother's Bible.

As they'd crossed the Øresund, Svend had developed his idea and had persuaded Henrik to return to Copenhagen to think it over. If he accepted Svend's plan, he would stay in Denmark. If he didn't, he'd row to Sweden another night.

A lifetime of rowing infused his stroke, refined by coaching and diligence, and fueled by his love for the resistance of water, which allowed him to speed over the waves.

In neutral Sweden, Svend planned to visit the British legation and offer his services to the Allies. With his connections in Danish government, military, and commerce, he could provide a great deal of intelligence. But his plan relied on Henrik.

Henrik and his scull, skimming across the Sound, carrying information and documents.

It was crazy. Dangerous. It'd disrupt his life. And yet . . .

His boat passed the tip of Nordhavn, leading into Copenhagen's harbor. The Trekroner Fort in the center of the channel hadn't stopped German ships the night before, but Henrik wasn't taking any chances. A dark cap covered his fair hair, and a black overcoat blotted out the bulk of his frame.

He slowed his pace to silence his strokes. When he neared the

breakwater extending from the fort, he folded himself low and let the boat glide past.

In a few minutes, he sat up and scanned for patrol boats.

Ahlefeldt Shipbuilding Company lay on the east side of the narrow harbor. Henrik would nap at the shipyard pier until his shift started. If he slept through his shift again, his father would rant. But Henrik had stopped living for Far's approval at the age of fourteen and he'd stopped caring about Far's opinion after Mor died.

He resumed rowing, slow and silent. Far would hate Svend's idea, and a smile cracked Henrik's chapped lips.

Then his smile drifted low. If rumors spread about an aristocrat rowing secrets to Sweden, it wouldn't take long for them to arrest Henrik, well-known man-about-town and Olympic rower.

As empty as his life was, he didn't want to lose it.

The boat glided toward the statue of Den Lille Havfrue.

Henrik planted his oars until the boat stopped. Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid sat on a rock with her bronze fins tucked beneath her, gazing wistfully to sea.

To gain what she wanted, she gave up her voice so she could have legs.

"What do I want?" Henrik asked as if the mermaid had the answer.

He already knew. He wanted to help someone other than himself for a change. Aid his country. But his voice would call attention to himself. His nobility stood in his way.

To have legs, he needed to sacrifice his voice.

To have mobility, he needed to sacrifice his nobility.

On the dark waters in the dark night before the wistful dark Havfrue, light flooded his mind. Baron Henrik Ahlefeldt had to disappear.

And in his place . . .

Henrik whispered his new identity. "The Havmand."



1943

2

COPENHAGEN

MONDAY, JANUARY 25, 1943

The light in the laboratory had a flat quality, but Dr. Elsebeth Jensen didn't mind. Although indoor light lacked the brightness, the wildness of sunlight, it served its purpose. It illuminated.

At the Institute for Theoretical Physics in Copenhagen, the light illuminated Dr. Georg von Hevesy, a balding physical chemist in his fifties, a refugee from Hungary. Cages lined the walls, filled with rats, squeaking and skittering.

Else jotted down the quantity of phosphorus-32 Hevesy needed from the cyclotron. His research used radioactive indicators to trace chemical reactions in animals, research with exciting possibilities in medicine. She smiled at Hevesy. "We'll bring the P-32 tomorrow."

"Thank you, Jensen." Hevesy spoke in English, the official language of the institute. "I do wish you were on my team."

She'd never win the Nobel Prize continuing to serve as an assistant, so she tipped him a smile. "You already have Hilde Levi. Wouldn't the others be jealous if you had *two* women on your team?"

The corners of his mustache bent up. "Ah yes. It's only fair to spread the wealth."

“It is.” High on a shelf sat two glass beakers full of brilliant orange liquid. The color of dreams dissolved, of dreams preserved for a brighter day.

Hevesy followed her gaze and winked at Else.

On that horrible day almost three years ago when the Nazis occupied Denmark, Hevesy had shown Else the beakers, full of aqua regia, a mixture of fuming hydrochloric acid and nitric acid.

At the bottom of each beaker, bubbles had covered corroding discs—Nobel medals belonging to Max von Laue and James Franck. If the Nazis learned Laue had smuggled gold out of Germany, he would have been arrested. And Franck was Jewish.

With Jewish blood himself, Hevesy had entrusted Else with his secret due to her blond Danish looks and her American passport.

Thank goodness, the Germans treated Denmark as a “model protectorate.” The Danish government protected its citizens from the harsh conditions and antisemitic laws seen in other occupied countries.

If the war ever ended and the Germans ever left Denmark, the scientists would precipitate out the Nobel gold and cast new medals.

Else closed her notebook, said goodbye to Hevesy, and left the lab. Time for her appointment with Niels Bohr.

Her fingers danced by her side in anticipation. She cherished the times when Bohr called her into his office to chat.

Three and a half years had passed since she’d arrived in Denmark, but she still thrilled to be at the institute founded by Dr. Niels Bohr himself. Niels Bohr, whose model of the atom had earned him the Nobel Prize. Niels Bohr, whose complementarity principle had inspired Else’s doctoral thesis.

In his office, the Nobel Laureate stood to greet Else, his smile electrifying his heavy-jowled face. Then he glanced over Else’s shoulder to the doorway. “Ah, Wolff.”

Dr. Jørgen Wolff stepped inside. “Good day, Bohr, Jensen.”

Else returned his greeting. One of her favorite physicists, Wolff had been at the institute since Bohr founded it in 1921. About the

same age, both men had dark hair—although Bohr had received more salt and Wolff more pepper.

Bohr sat behind his desk under a painting of Danish physicist Hans Christian Ørsted from the early 1800s, while Wolff perched his lean frame on the corner of Bohr's desk.

Else took a seat and fiddled with her lab coat. Wolff's presence elevated the appointment from a chat to a meeting.

Bohr pointed his pipe at her. "We'd like to discuss your new position."

Else's breath swirled in her lungs in expectation. After years of serving as an assistant, would she finally be able to conduct her own research?

Bohr puffed on his pipe. "With your experience on the cyclotron, you're the perfect choice."

The swirl stilled. The cyclotron? But her field of research was light. "Choice for . . . ?"

Wolff crossed stick-like arms. "Mortensen's assistant quit. Said he'd rather teach physics at a Latin school."

Dread molded around Else's windpipe. Norup quit because Mortensen harangued him.

"Koch says you're the best assistant he's had," Bohr said. "We need someone good on Mortensen's team."

"What do you think, Jensen?" Wolff peered down his nose as if preparing for a childish fit.

What did Else think? She wanted to do her own research. If she had to be an assistant, she'd rather work with anyone but Sigurd Mortensen.

She wove her fingers into a basket so they wouldn't betray her with an anxious gesture. "What does Mortensen say?"

"Mortensen has no choice," Bohr said. "We're short staffed. Since the occupation, scientists can't come from abroad."

Else was the only remaining physicist from an Allied country. In 1940, the Germans had interned men from Britain, France, and Poland. But after the US entered the war in December 1941, American men hadn't been interned. As a woman with dual nationality, Else felt doubly safe.

Her grandparents had urged her to go home to California, but she'd worked too hard for an invitation to the prestigious institute. Besides, she cherished her weekend visits to her grandparents' home outside Copenhagen.

Wolff sniffed. "You didn't answer my question, Jensen. What do *you* think?"

Else glanced between the men. At twenty-eight and with no independent publications, she had little standing. To protest would be the height of arrogance. She forced a smile. "I'd be honored."

Wolff's mouth turned down—in disappointment?

"Excellent." Bohr shuffled some papers. "You start tomorrow."

Wolff leaned closer, resting one elbow on his knee. "You understand Bohr and I don't mediate personal squabbles."

When Norup had complained, Wolff had told him to solve the problem himself. Else's throat thickened. "Yes, sir."

"You also understand this will be your last position as an assistant." A drumbeat pounded in Wolff's tone.

Else held her breath. The institute served to kindle bright minds into full brilliance. A fading light didn't belong. "Yes, sir. I understand."

At the end of the day, Else exchanged her lab coat for her cobalt blue winter coat and left the institute's complex of creamy buildings with red roofs and red-sashed windows.

Norup had a prickly nature, and he'd snapped every time Mortensen bit. But Else had smoothed over some tensions in Koch's lab. Surely she could do the same in Mortensen's.

The setting sun shot orange and pink into the clouds as Else passed through the wrought-iron gate onto Blegdamsvej.

Next door, Dr. Laila Berend stepped out of the Mathematics Institute, run by Niels Bohr's brother, Harald. Else hurried to her friend, and her muscles relaxed in anticipation of Laila's righteous indignation and comfort.

"Look." Laila gave the street a furtive scan, making her black

curls swing, and she pulled a newspaper from inside her coat. The masthead read *Frit Danmark*—Free Denmark.

Else gasped. “It’s back.”

Laila slid the illegal newspaper inside her coat. “Let’s go home so we can read it.”

The Germans did their best to shut down the underground papers, and in December they’d arrested half a dozen leaders of *Frit Danmark*. Apparently, some brave souls had taken on the dangerous task of printing the paper again.

Else strode in the icy air toward the Trianglen, where they could catch a tram. The Germans didn’t officially censor the press, but they hovered over the reporters’ shoulders. Thank goodness, the Germans hadn’t banned listening to the BBC, because the British shortwave broadcasts in Danish provided news from the outside world.

“I think I’ll help,” Laila said.

“Help?”

Laila patted her chest, and the paper crinkled. “The Allies have the Germans on the run—at Stalingrad, in the Caucasus, in North Africa.”

“Finally.” For several years, the Germans had seemed invincible.

“We Danes are so well behaved.” Sarcasm snaked into Laila’s voice. “So they don’t need many soldiers to watch us. If that were to change . . .”

German soldiers would flood Denmark, flowing away from Russia and Tunisia, easing pressure on the Soviets, the British, and Else’s American friends. Maybe even her own older brothers. But at what cost to Denmark?

“I thought . . .” Else lowered her voice as they approached the busy triangle-shaped intersection. “I thought you’d been told not to help.”

Laila’s narrow chin edged forward. “The Jewish leaders are afraid that if we get involved, the Germans will use it as an excuse to force antisemitic laws. But I’m tired of this. Throughout Europe, Jews have lost their jobs and freedoms. They’ve been forced to wear yellow stars. They’ve been deported and murdered. The Danish people need to know.”

“Even if—”

“Even if it happens here too?” The light faded from the evening sky and from Laila’s brown eyes. “Shouldn’t we be willing to take that risk?”

A frigid wind puffed, and Else pulled her scarf over her mouth.

“There’s Line 4.” Laila pointed to a tram with a white numeral four on a green square.

Else followed her friend onto the electric tram car and paid her fare. As she settled into her seat, two German soldiers boarded, wearing sickly greenish-gray overcoats and laughing at some joke.

A frigid hush fell over the car, and Else nudged Laila. Time for *Den Kolde Skulder*, the cold shoulder the Danes used in the presence of their unwanted visitors.

Passengers stood and stepped off the tram, and Else and Laila joined them. For this thrill of silent resistance, Else would gladly forfeit her fare and walk home.

Before long, they reached Lotte Riber’s boardinghouse, a skinny redbrick building with hunched-up shoulders squeezed between two larger structures. A barbershop occupied the ground floor.

Else and Laila climbed a flight of stairs to the first floor, and Else opened the door to the living room. “Fru Riber! Laila and I are home.”

Their landlady leaned out from the kitchen and smiled. “Hello, girls. Dinner’s at five thirty.”

“Perfect.” Else unwound her scarf. “I’ll change, then I’ll come down to help.”

“I need to warm up first.” Laila dashed to the woodstove.

“All right.” Else turned back to the stairway and almost ran into a . . . Viking? “Oh! Excuse me.”

“Excuse me.” The man backed up, filling the doorway. Easily a foot taller than Else’s five foot five, he boasted a full reddish-gold beard, a sharp nose, and deep-set eyes of brilliant blue. Instead of Viking garb, a poorly cut worker’s jacket draped his large frame.

He still stood in her way, looking a bit lost, so she gave him a polite smile. “Are you here to fix something?”

He paused. “*Nej.*”

Fru Riber darted over. “My apologies. I didn’t have a chance to introduce you ladies to our new boarder. This is Henning Andersen. He’s a shipyard worker, but don’t worry. He’s in the garret room, and he’ll give you no trouble.” That was half promise, half warning.

The poor man’s eyebrows rose.

Well, Else was no snob. She extended her hand. “I’m Else Jensen. Henning Andersen, was it?”

“Nej, Hemming.” He drew out the *M* and engulfed her hand in his, rough and chapped.

“Ah, Hemming. After the mythological shapeshifter.”

Golden eyebrows jolted high, he dropped her hand, and his gaze slid away. “After my grandfather.”

Fru Riber patted Else’s shoulder. “Else is a professor. Remember that.”

“I’m not a professor yet.” She gave Herre Andersen an apologetic smile. “I’m doing my postdoctoral studies in theoretical physics.”

His eyes widened.

Perhaps she was a snob after all. Why not cite her PhD from the University of California and state that she worked with *the* Niels Bohr? “I’m a scientist,” she translated.

“Oh,” he said. “Ja.”

Fru Riber made a shooping motion. “Out of her way. Your old landlady said you were quiet and polite. I expect you to act that way.”

“Ja, Fru.” He bowed his head and stepped aside.

“I am glad to meet you, Herre Andersen.” Else smiled and headed upstairs.

As she climbed, the day’s heaviness settled back in place. A lot of good a PhD and a position at the world-renowned institute would do if she became an eternal assistant.

Like pungent, fuming aqua regia, failure to advance would dissolve her dream of Nobel gold.