

motherland



Hannesburg

December 1944



When Liesl heard the noise from the cellar, her hand shook and the coffee spilled. The liquid spread in claws across the counter, its color neither brown nor red nor black, but some combination of all three, earthen and old. A hopeless feeling rose in her chest. She had discovered the grounds deep in the pantry yesterday, tucked behind a post, in a tiny tin next to a tiny pot of jam, both labeled in the first wife's hand. It was surely the last real coffee in all of Hannesburg, boiled with the last of the morning coal, the sharp selfish heaven of its scent rising toward her face. Then it splashed everywhere.

She heard the noise again, a grating, chinking sound, and then the murmur of the boys. What were they doing down there? Everything made her startle this morning. She had sent the package to Frank two weeks ago, confidently inking the address of the Weimar hospital where he was stationed as a reconstructive surgeon. *Nothing suspicious in here*, she hoped her bright, erect letters would imply. Yet she hadn't heard back from him. Two weeks, and two more letters had passed. She told herself that with disrupted railway schedules and parcel searches, the package could take much longer to arrive. If the officials found what she'd hidden inside, if, if—she pressed her hands to her temples.

The baby stirred in the cradle by her feet. He refused to sleep in his crib by day, preferring the small portable nest of wood that moved from

room to room. He refused stillness, too. Whenever the house went too quiet or his cradle stopped swaying, he woke and cried.

She used her shin to shift the cradle side-to-side, side-to-side, as she tried to scoop the coffee back into her cup. She wanted it. She wanted it for herself, and because Susi must have wanted it once, to have gone through the effort of preserving such a miniscule portion. Then again, Susi had saved everything: thread too short to sew with, buttons to lost shirts, the heel of a shoe, the page of a missing book. In the kitchen, relics from the former cook still lingered, too: the hourglass, a cast-iron cauldron for cooking on a hearth. Because the former Frau Kappus had thrown out none of them, neither would her replacement. This made the rooms impossible to keep clean. There were so many objects and they each demanded the particular attention of a household used to servants, and not the friendless new mother of three boys.

Downstairs, a dull thud. Ani said something in his exuberant voice.

Liesl didn't want to see what they were doing. She had potatoes to peel and Hans's hems to let out and a quick trip to the butcher to make, all the while darting glances above the treetops for Allied planes. She had to finish knitting six pairs of socks for the Frauenschaft collection to send to soldiers in the Ardennes. She had to grit her teeth through the radio program that Hans liked switching on, that always started with the "Horst Wessel Song," its notes marching through her head like a line of ants, eating up everything. She wasn't sure what bothered her more—that motherhood was so much more unnerving than she'd expected, or that the Party's speeches now sickened her. Every day, panic and mistrust pooled like black water in her gut.

She reached for her cup, then a soup pan, pouring the coffee back. It was silly to warm it again, but all morning she'd longed for one hot sip, almost burning. For the heat and the sour bitterness to fill her mouth. To taste the quiet, simple mornings before her marriage, when she'd

sat by the window of her room at the spa, lonely, but full of hope and purpose.

Another thud below. It sounded like meat falling. Liesl rushed for the stairs.

The boys stood before a crack in the cellar's west wall, their faces silvered by weak window light. A giant chunk of wall lay on the floor. Hans stood closer to it. He looked much older than ten; in a few years he would have the height and shoulders of a man. His face resembled his father's more than ever: the same craggy mouth and jaw, same blue eyes under a thunder of brows. In contrast, Ani's features were still fluid and childlike, shifting with every thought. Right now, they rippled with surprise as the crack quivered and widened.

"What's going on here?" Liesl demanded.

Neither of them answered. Hans had his arms down, his palms open and aimed back, as if he were shielding his brother from an attack. He winced when the crack split and a metal spade poked through, but Ani ran forward, saying, "Look, look!" The spade retreated. Pale worms shoved the grit aside, wiggled for space. It took Liesl a moment to realize that the five tiny heads all belonged to one hand. Filth crusted the fingernails and knuckles, but the flat palm shone. The hand's twisting made something go cold inside her, and she backed up a step, bashing into one of the shelves Hans had carefully organized for their air raid shelter. The boys ignored her.

"You're through," said Ani, and he reached out formally and shook the hand. It engulfed his fist up to the wrist. "Welcome to our cellar, Herr Geiss."

"Thank you, young man," said a gruff, muffled voice, and the hand retreated.

“It’s Herr Geiss,” Ani said, finally acknowledging Liesl’s presence. “He’s connecting us.”

“Connecting who?” said Liesl.

“Us. Cellar to cellar,” said Ani.

Metal glinted in the hole again. “Good morning, Frau Kappus,” said the voice.

“I don’t know what your father will say about this,” said Liesl.

“It’s for our safety,” interrupted Hans. “People can get trapped. It happened in Kassel and Darmstadt. If we neighbors adjoin our cellars, then we have a better chance of survival. Everyone knows that.”

“But a hole might weaken the wall.” Liesl put her hands on Ani’s shoulders and pulled him back. “Herr Geiss, I must ask you to cease this until I correspond with my husband—”

She heard her voice falter as the spade continued to work, as Ani shook free and hurried to the crack again, breathing into it. Two weeks ago, Liesl had woken to the thumps of Herr Geiss sandbagging both their roofs, clambering from red tile to red tile on his thick old legs. She knew he called her the “young wife,” as if Susi were still alive and Frank had somehow acquired an auxiliary spouse. She knew that Herr Geiss was the reason Hans never got caught for poaching kindling from the willows in the Kurpark. Herr Geiss had ties high up in the Nazi Party, and people feared him. He had been Frank’s neighbor since Frank’s boyhood. He had helped delay the surgeon’s deployment after Frank’s first wife had died. Every week, he gave Liesl extra ration cards, ones meant for his widowed daughter-in-law, his only living relation, who refused to leave Berlin.

Yet Liesl also knew that Herr Geiss didn’t trust her. Herr Geiss had told Frank that if his “young wife” did not watch his boys well, he’d see them safely away from her, to a farm in the country. All over Germany, families were splitting up in order to protect their children, but Liesl couldn’t bear the idea, and had told Frank so.

“He won’t send anyone away,” Frank had scoffed. “He likes you.”

One afternoon following a thunderstorm, she'd opened the gray living room blinds to see Herr Geiss looming over their house from his second floor. At the sight of her, he'd flinched, then frowned. She'd blushed, suddenly aware of her narrow hips, her red springy hair, and their contrast to Susi's blond, groomed curves. The young wife. Or maybe the wrong wife.

"It'll weaken the wall," she said again, over the scraping.

There was a grunt. "I'll brick it up after I make the hole," Herr Geiss said. "You'll hardly know it's there."

The basement light stripped the flush from the boys' skin and accentuated their skulls. Even plump-cheeked Ani looked like a statue poured from molten metal, his rosy lips darkened to brass. She realized that she'd never heard the boys laugh down here.

A thin cry came from upstairs.

"All right," Liesl said, not moving. "But I'm writing to Herr Kappus about this."

The cry lengthened to a scream.

The scraping paused. "Where's that child?" said the voice from behind the wall. "I hear a child crying."

She did not answer Herr Geiss, but she turned and mounted the first step. "Ani, Hans, time to go upstairs."

"I want to stay here," said Hans.

"I want to stay here," said Ani.

"It's time to go upstairs," she said, louder.

The baby wailed. The boys did not move. They stared at the hole, transfixed.

"If you don't come, there will be no dinner for either of you," she snapped.

The mention of food made the boys wilt back from the wall.

"We were just looking," Ani said, his eyes wide. He was such a beautiful boy—it struck her every day like a splash of water to the face.

She cleared her throat, sure Herr Geiss was still listening, thinking, *Cruel stepmother, depriving these growing boys.*

Or was he thinking that she ought to have a firmer hand with them?

“I found some elderberry jam,” she said.

Ani started toward her, but Hans hooked his fingers over his brother’s shoulder, holding him back.

“Fine, then. Two minutes,” she said, hastening up the stairs. Slap-slap-slap, a pathetic retreat in house slippers.

Later, when the older boys were washing up, she carried Jürgen carefully back down the steps and listened to the silence until she was sure Herr Geiss had gone.

A thin veil of light fell through the cellar’s low window. Blinking, she felt her way along the crumbly wall. After five paces, she sensed a shift in the air, a cold draft stinging her ankles where her tights had ripped. She stopped, peered. The gap was the size of a man’s shoulders. Through it, blackness poured, the same coal-soaked air as their own cellar’s, but somehow richer, deeper. She looked closer. At least a meter of packed dirt and stones separated the houses’ two walls. It must have taken days to dig, and probably the help of other men. Herr Geiss could have asked her first. But why would he? Herr Geiss knew best. He was a member of the local air raid committee, and he had studied everything there was to know about protecting their houses from bombs.

“What do you think of this?” she murmured to the baby, holding him up to the crumbling edge. Jürgen stretched out a fat paw and batted the dirt and stones. “Do you think your *Vati* will approve?”

A few stones tumbled. The baby swatted at the wall again and more dirt fell. He began to giggle, and reached out with both hands, grabbing the rim with open fingers.

“Stop,” she cried. She pulled the baby back to her chest with her left hand and lurched back toward the steps.

Her knee thudded against something heavy and cold. It was the vat that had held the family’s sauerkraut every winter. This year, the sauerkraut had rotted in the weeks after Liesl had arrived, after the housekeeper had abandoned the family. Liesl hadn’t known that pushing down the cabbage was part of the housekeeper’s daily duties until the morning she looked out from the second story and saw Frank dumping the moldy brew out onto the grass. She couldn’t get the image out of her mind: Frank’s back quaking uncontrollably as he upended the earthenware tub and scrubbed it clean. But he’d never said anything to her—no accusation, no explanation.

For his last package, she’d made a stollen dough from Susi’s handwritten recipe, kneaded and shaped it carefully around a film canister stuffed with reichsmark and a map of Germany, and paid a local bakery more than the loaf was worth to bake it hard and golden. In every step of the stollen’s production, Liesl was conscious of her inevitable failure. It would never taste like Susi’s. It would never get past the censors. Nevertheless she’d wrapped the loaf carefully in butcher paper so it wouldn’t grow stale and wrote a note warning Frank about the “fig” she’d baked whole inside. She wondered if he’d understand. She could tell by the soft way Frank looked at her that he didn’t think she was capable of deceit. He’d ironed her old life flat with his desire, then molded her into what he needed. The young wife. She leaned her cheek into Jürgen’s warm skull. The new mother.

Ani held the badge in one hand, rubbing it clean with his other cuff. Then he raised the eight-pointed star to a place above his heart and addressed her solemnly, “Could you please sew this on for me, please?”

The white metal glowed. “What is it?”

“The badge of the Reichsluftschutzbund,” said Hans, hovering behind. “Herr Geiss has asked us to be members.”

“I see,” said Liesl. They were all in the kitchen, Jürgen awake and fiddling with a cup, Hans and Ani dusty and triumphant and hungry. The blood had returned to their faces. They no longer looked like statues but poorly tended children, their hair shaggy and clothes mended past politeness. Hans climbed into the chair at the head of the table and picked at his nose.

“Hans,” she said.

He withdrew his hand and rubbed it on his leg.

“Are you sure he meant to give you that?” she said. “It looks official.”

“It is official.” Hans hunched over his plate and picked up his knife and fork. “What’s for dinner?”

Liesl showed him her saucepan. Hans scowled but said nothing. Ani continued to grin, adjusting the placement of the star. “Herr Geiss says we need to paint our beams with limes so they don’t burn,” he said.

“Limes!” exclaimed Liesl.

“He means quicklime,” said Hans.

Ani adjusted the star again and gave a quick, one-armed salute. “And our neighbors’, too.”

Liesl winced. “The two of you are—” She could just imagine Frank’s face if he saw a military badge on his six-year-old’s chest. “Your father will say you are too young for this.”

“I’m almost old enough to join the Jungvolk. That makes me old enough for duty,” said Hans. The word “duty” sounded dark and cold coming from his young throat. He met her eyes. “But I want Ani to have it.”

As their gazes locked, Liesl felt an understanding flash between them: The unhappiness they both shared should not be spread to Ani, radiant Ani, fingering his eight-pointed star and imagining that green limes could be found in a winter so barren that all Liesl could drum

up for dinner that night was boiled potatoes, applesauce, and a quarter of wurst for each of them. Ani could eat sawdust and sleep on nails as long as his faith in one thing was not broken—that his father would come home. He had a skinny body and a handsome head, and his grin split his face like a knife did a melon, pure and true. In school other boys teased him for his innocence, for his big questions—“Why are our ears shaped like bathtubs?” he asked her one day—and Hans defended him. Hans wrote his father careful, stern letters, and he always reported about Ani’s safety, his contentment, in an overly mature tone, as if Ani were an inside joke they shared. *Anselm is learning his letters, he wrote. You can guess that he has his own way of holding the pen.*

She began to serve out the potatoes, their buttery aroma filling the kitchen. “You can carry the star in your pocket for now,” she said.

“It’s not the same,” Ani protested.

“I know,” said Liesl. She had drunk the coffee cold, in one gulp, after coming back upstairs, and tasted none of it.



It took Liesl a long time to cut up the rabbit she had bought from Herr Unter, a neighbor who raised them in hutches behind his house. The white animal had looked plumper alive. Now it was as flat as a sock, and the small sinews kept slipping in her hands as she tried to separate skin and flesh. When she finished, she had only a handful of meat. She dumped it in boiling water, adding chopped carrot, onion, barley, and a pinch of brittle, graying rosemary.

It was a small meal, but she still felt obligated to be grateful for it. She had grown up with her aunt's and uncle's stories of starvation after the last war. Her aunt claimed that she'd chewed yarn dipped in grease to make her stomach feel full. Her uncle said he'd eaten a soup made from boiled crickets. They told, and sometimes shouted, these stories to their six children and Liesl, to remind them all to appreciate their laden table. Liesl had excelled at gratitude. She ate it for supper, always the last to be served. She wore it on her back, always clothed in her aunt's stained, cast-off jumpers. She listened to it all night, positioned as nurse outside each incoming baby's room, ordered to wake if he cried. She would be in Franconia still, head bowed and dutiful, if her friend Uta had not rescued her with the chance to work at the spa in Hannesburg.

She set a lid ajar on the pot and crept upstairs to find Ani swooping

his wooden plane through the air, Jürgen sleeping under an afghan by his brother's hip. Hans was out gathering sticks for kindling.

“He wakes up if I move,” Ani whispered, and then made a crashing sound through his teeth as his plane dove down. The view beyond the half-fogged window was gray-white and peaceful. It had been an entire week since the last air raid, and Liesl had a strange slack feeling whenever she looked at the sky, as if a rope once pulled taut was suddenly ripped free and falling.

“You're a good brother,” Liesl said.

Ani put his nose to the window, avoiding her tender gaze. “How come you don't have any brothers or sisters?”

His frank question made her flush. “My parents just had me,” Liesl said.

Ani drew a circle in the fog on the glass. “But how come they don't visit?”

Liesl sighed. She had been wanting to tell the boys that her mother had died when she was six. That she knew and understood their loneliness. But another part of her resisted. She did not like Hans and Ani thinking this was how the world worked: that mothers died and fathers disappeared, as hers had, soon after the pneumonia had taken her mother. War-addled brains, her uncle had said. Shiftless, said her aunt. They'd received one postcard from him from Chicago, USA, and never heard from him again. Liesl did not want Ani to know that once both parents vanished, a child became a burden to be passed around until some practical use was found for her. If she had favored her bonny, buxom *Mutti*, it might have been easier. But Liesl had resembled her father—thin and serious, with brown-red hair that frizzed loose from its braids. She wasn't good at mending or strong enough for mucking stalls. She thrived at enduring the pummeling devotion of small children, however, and finally found her place as the caregiver for her sturdy, wild cousins, teaching them each to read and write and swim in the Badensee,

as her mother had begun to teach her before she died. It wasn't until Liesl had abandoned them for a position at the spa that she'd realized what she wanted: her own life, and one day, her own family.

"They passed away," she said finally. "But maybe you can meet my cousins sometime," she added, though she knew her relatives would never leave their farm and village, much less Franconia.

Jürgen stirred and woke, lifting his head, staring at them with wide, uncomprehending eyes.

"How did your parents die?" Ani asked.

"In the war. Your brother's hungry," she said, and carried Jürgen down to the kitchen to heat his milk.

Someone knocked loudly on the front door. A hard, official sound.

The fist dug into the wood and made it ring.

Liesl felt her body moving across the kitchen with Jürgen, heard her voice call to Ani to stay upstairs.

Her hand circled the doorknob but did not twist it open. The brass went from cool to warm, as she waited through another round of knocking. Jürgen slumped against her shoulder, sucking at his fingers. She sorted through the worst scenarios. Officials had opened her package to Frank. Officials had lifted the loaf of Christmas stollen, surprised at its weight, and broken it open to find the canister at its center, filled with the money and map he'd requested. They'd arrested Frank and sent him to a prison camp. Worse, someone had shot him on the spot for attempted desertion.

Bile rose up her throat. She couldn't speak. She couldn't open the door panicked like this.

She gripped the handle and imagined lesser problems. Someone had caught Hans cutting willow sticks for kindling. Someone—many someones—didn't approve of her marrying the handsome doctor two months after his beloved wife had died in childbirth. "We've done nothing wrong," she would tell whomever it was, but that wasn't really

the point, was it? The point was to be liked, or if you couldn't be liked, to be overlooked.

The baby twisted his face into her neck. She turned the knob and opened the door.

“*Heil* Hitler.” Herr Geiss’s arm flashed.

Liesl adjusted Jürgen on her shoulder and raised her right hand. “It’s you,” she mumbled, flooded with relief and irritation. His physique reminded her of a pig’s—compact, strong, and small. She could see bare skin peeping out above his house slippers, the sliver of neck-flesh that his coat did not cover.

“He’s getting big,” her neighbor said, nodding at Jürgen. The baby gurgled, revealing his six teeth.

“Almost nine kilos now,” Liesl said. “Are you coming about your badge? I’ll get Ani to fetch it.”

Herr Geiss’s slippers whispered on the snow. They were so old that his big toes cracked out the bottom edges. He blew out a gray cloud. “No, not about the badge,” he said.

Did he know something about Frank? The thought chilled her. “Would you like to come in?” She stepped back, but Herr Geiss did not follow.

“My daughter-in-law is arriving,” he said. “In a week’s time. She’s finally decided to leave Berlin and move in with me.” He huffed another cloud. “She has no other kin now. Her mother died in an air raid.”

“That’s—that’s sad news,” Liesl said, unable to stop herself mentally calculating. An old widower and an unrelated young woman sharing a roof. An unseemly combination. And one that would use up all her neighbor’s extra ration coupons.

Herr Geiss continued to stand there. He pulled a pair of black gloves from his pocket but did not put them on. The dark fingers hung from his pale hand. “My house . . .” He paused and cleared his throat. “I have an acceptable house, of course, but it needs some improvement.”

“It’s a lovely home,” Liesl said, puzzled, as Jürgen snuggled into her neck. “You should really come in,” she told her neighbor. “The baby’s getting cold.”

Herr Geiss shook his head. In the street behind him, a car bumped slowly through the dusk, stirring up slush.

“I have good brooms and mops,” he said. “My Hilda used the best wax. I still have four good cans of it.”

The first flakes of snow began to fall, brushing the brick garden wall and melting. Liesl blinked hard. “You want me to clean your house,” she said slowly. “Don’t you have a *Putzfrau* who comes?”

A white fleck landed on Herr Geiss’s bald skull and vanished. “She’s expecting any day. I don’t know anyone else I trust—”

So that’s how he saw her in his dismal hierarchy of human beings: not fit to mother, but fit to polish his floors. Yet she couldn’t refuse. Liesl tried to smile. “Then of course you can count on me.”

He looked relieved. His heavy chin wagged as he thanked her. Suddenly he seemed to her like an aging caricature of the Aryan face she’d once admired: his fair hair melted away, his eyes too blue, his jaw too strong, his thick soldier’s body grown squat as a headstone.

“I’ll set things straight in no time,” she said with false lightness.

The snow fell harder, faster. It frosted the black gate and the heap of frozen dog turds that a fat dachshund deposited there every morning, led on its leash by Frau Hefter, a woman made invincible to neighborly criticism by the silver Mother’s Cross pinned to her coat for bearing six healthy German children.

Her neighbor flashed his own tobacco-stained dentures. “Good night, then,” he said cheerily and reached out to squeeze Jürgen’s foot. The baby chuckled and pawed at the air. “Such a nice boy,” he said, turning away. “He has his mother’s smile.”

Herr Geiss trudged down the walk, pausing when he reached the gate. “Tomorrow would be best,” he said, glancing back over his shoulder.

“Tomorrow,” she repeated.



Liesl was on the edge of the bed, her head pitched toward Jürgen's cradle, when she woke to the sirens. Without opening her eyes, she threw off the eiderdown and grabbed the coat she kept hanging by the bed. She shoved her feet in Frank's old Wandervögel boots. They gapped around her ankles even when she yanked the laces. She lit the lantern with a clumsy match. Her hands fumbled around Jürgen's ribs as she lifted him, and he looked around dopyly and sank against her arm.

She clomped to the hallway, calling for Hans and Ani.

Ani burst alone from their bedroom in his pajamas, his eyes melted black by the lantern.

"Where's Hans?" she said.

The boy pointed behind him. Liesl hurried into the bedroom where Hans was kneeling over a long row of white Juno cigarettes, each of them fat as a finger. He plucked them up one by one. He had "found" them by the railroad tracks that morning.

A plane droned in the distance. Jürgen cried and writhed, his pelvis grinding into her hip.

"What are you doing?" she shouted at Hans.

"Here." He held a Juno up to Jürgen.

The baby grabbed it before Liesl could stop him. The cigarette poked from his fist.

“He can’t play with that,” Liesl said, prying at the baby’s fingers. “Now get down to the cellar with your brother.”

“It’s not a real attack,” said Hans.

Jürgen ripped the cigarette free from her, shoved it in his mouth. He chortled, his six teeth crawling with hairs of tobacco. The siren groaned again.

“That’s going to make him sick,” Liesl exclaimed as she forked the tobacco from the baby’s mouth and flicked it on the floor. Jürgen licked his lips and stared down at the mess.

“I could have traded that,” Hans muttered.

“Why would you want to make your brother sick?” she demanded.

“I’m scared,” Ani said from the pitch-black hallway. “I don’t wanna go down there.”

“Don’t be a baby,” said Hans. “You’re not the baby.”

As if on cue, Jürgen began to cry.

“Both of you. Downstairs. Now,” Liesl shouted. Her hand closed on Hans’s collar. He recoiled as if stabbed. The siren cut off in midmoan. They stared at each other, waiting, the silence huge and terrifying. The sky rumbled but the siren did not respond. Although Hannesburg had not been hit directly, the Allies had decimated neighboring Frankfurt last spring. A waiter at the spa had gone there and taken pictures of the destruction: buildings burned to hollow ruins, littered streets, and lines of women, standing on the rubble, passing buckets from an unseen reservoir while the city fixed its busted pipes. Liesl had been more troubled by the women’s hard, stiff faces than the fires—they looked as if someone had fixed their dread in stone.

“See. It’s over,” said Hans. He held up his bouquet of cigarettes. “I knew it was far away.”

“They haven’t sounded the all clear,” said Liesl.

“But you know it’s over,” said Hans. “We can’t even hear any planes.” Liesl listened, waiting for the drone, the crash.

Ani whimpered into her waist. His head was a warm soft ball. “It’s so cold,” he said in a muffled voice.

“Grow up.” Hans raised his free hand and whacked Ani across the back of his knees.

Ani moaned.

“Stop,” Liesl said, suddenly beyond exhaustion. She took a breath to shout at Hans again but her voice didn’t come. She couldn’t even look at him, this stubborn, angry, miniature Frank, so she held Ani and Jürgen closer. “It’s safe to go back to bed now,” she said gently.

“I want to be with you,” Ani said. “Please, Mutti?”

At the word “Mutti,” her heart stuttered. She saw Hans dart a look at her. It was the first time either of them had called her any name but “her” and “you.”

“You can all sleep in my room,” she heard herself say in a buoyant voice. “In our room. You can have Vati’s bed.”

Ani clapped his hands. Hans’s eyes narrowed, his lips shriveling as if he tasted something bad.

She couldn’t stop herself. “Or we can push them together and make one big bed,” she added. Heat filled her face as she stared defiantly down at the boy. His expression did not change but it hardened and pulsed.

“Hurrah!” Ani cried and grabbed his eiderdown. “I want my own blanket.”

“Moving the beds will mark the floor,” said Hans. “Vati will see the scratches.”

“Nonsense,” said Liesl. “We’ll be careful.” She touched his shoulder. He flinched.

“We’ll be warm! I want to keep Mutti warmy-warm,” said Ani.

“You’re not the baby.” Hans twisted away from her, pushing ahead of Ani to get into the bedroom first, his bouquet of cigarettes still held high.

Air raids unsettled Liesl's stomach, so she set Jürgen in his cradle and left the boys alone to go to the bathroom. Frank jokingly called it "the Icebox" because its temperature was always several degrees colder than the lined metal cupboard where they kept their milk and butter. She felt her way to the frigid toilet and sat down.

Frost caked the lone window in the Icebox. The pane was small and Frank had covered it poorly with blackout drape, so she could see out a crack to the closed shutters of Herr Geiss's house. Liesl wondered what she would find there tomorrow. Herr Geiss had lost his only son to friendly fire more than a year ago. His wife had died years before. He lived in the villa alone, three floors all to himself, and rarely entertained any guests. Even Frank told her that he had not entered the Geiss house since Frau Geiss had passed. What would the rooms be like? How would she possibly finish cleaning them?

A loud continuous moan broke her reverie: the all clear. As she clumped back down the darkened hallway to the bedroom, she resolved to tell the boys the plan was off. They could sleep in their own beds now.

"We made a bad scratch," Hans said from inside.

Hans stood at the foot of the beds, holding the sputtering lantern. Ani had already claimed his spot in the center of the two mattresses, his eiderdown pulled up to his chin. Jürgen dozed in his cradle. Liesl hesitated, her order dying on her lips.

"We made a baaaaad scratch," Hans said again.

Liesl couldn't see anything on the boards but dust and some long, fine, golden strands. Susi's hair. She fought the urge to wipe them up.

"Save the kerosene. We'll attend to it in the morning," she told Hans, and tucked Jürgen's blanket tighter around him. Then she climbed in next to Ani. Bone-tired. She slumped back on the pillow and shut her eyes. Her lids blinked when the room went black.

"I'm warmy-warm next to Mutti," Ani announced.

"Sorry, Ani," said Hans. From the placement of his voice, Liesl

could tell that he was still standing at the edge of the bed. “You’ve got the crack.”

“I’m next to Mutti,” Ani said again, and she felt one of his small fists push into her eiderdown and softly brush her shoulder. She kept her eyes closed.

“It’s still the crack,” said Hans. “In the middle of the night, you’ll fall through.”

“Hans,” said Liesl.

But the older boy’s voice went on. “You’ll fall down through the floor and the cellar and all the way to the center of the earth where there is a big-nosed, hairy dwarf who will cook you in his stew.”

“Will not,” said Ani, but his voice was uncertain.

“Enough,” Liesl said wearily. “That’s an awful story.”

“And then he’ll take your skin and wear it,” Hans said, his voice sly.

“Enough!” Liesl sat up and glared in his direction. She could barely make out the slump of his shoulders.

Instead of complying, Hans crawled onto the bed, over his brother’s body, leaning close to his ear. “When you wake up, we’ll think your body is you, but inside you’ll be a big-nosed, hairy dwarf,” he said rapidly. “The real Anselm will be dead.”

“GO TO YOUR ROOM,” Liesl shouted, surprised by the force and volume of her voice. Hans scrambled off the bed. Ani whimpered under his blanket. Jürgen began to cry. With a curse, she threw herself out of bed and fumbled toward the baby, to rock him.

The room filled with the baby’s aggravated sobs. Ignoring the other two boys, Liesl sang and danced with him until her shin slammed the bed. Pain jolted up her leg and she yelped. The baby cried on as if he’d been hit.

She heard Hans grab something on the bedside. A match hissed, struck, the flame making his face flower in the darkness. He glowered, motionless.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself,” she said to him. “Don’t they have enough to give them nightmares?”

Hans didn’t answer.

Liesl turned away from him, stroking the baby’s sturdy, muscled spine. She walked to the shuttered window where she always looked down on the garden, and paced back again, bouncing and shushing. “Please go back to your room,” she said to Hans.

He cast his eyes downward at the cigarettes on the table. His long lashes brushed his cheeks. Then he gave a tough little laugh and scooped up the white handful.

“I’ll sell these for you,” he said in Frank’s jocular, teasing voice. “What do you want, a new dress?”

Later, alone again, Liesl tossed on her bed. She’d shared the room with Frank for only thirty-six nights before he was ordered to serve in Weimar. For thirty-one of those nights they’d slept across the room from each other, her breath whispering, Frank’s soft snores rising. Thirty-one nights before she’d woken to him sitting at the edge of her bed, like a father watching his sleeping child. She’d opened her blankets and taken him in. *Is it all right?* he’d whispered when she’d shuddered at his touch. *Yes. It’s all right. Yes.* Five nights with their bodies moving against each other, awkward at first, then falling into pattern, into sleep afterward, legs twined like roots below soil. Had she disappointed him in comparison to Susi? Frank had always returned to his own bed by morning.

They’d never spoken about it. They’d rarely spoken aloud about anything but the house and the children and the war. Of Frank’s childhood, she knew little. Of hers, he knew only the name of a town, a pleasant description of a farm. They hadn’t reminisced about their

brief courtship at the Hartwald Spa, where she'd run the *Kinderhaus* and he'd treated the minor ailments of Nazi officers and their wives. She supposed Frank didn't think about the past or the present because they were too mixed up. He was grieving, and then he was married, and then he was drafted. And then he was gone, and still grieving, and still married. When he went to sleep at night in Weimar, which wife did he miss?

Liesl lay on her stomach, eyes open. In the dark she couldn't see the wardrobe that still hung some of Susi's dresses, or the dresser that held Susi's jewels, or the mirror above the vanity that had once reflected back a blond woman with round cheeks. But she felt the objects watching her with their sharp corners, their creaks. And beyond them she felt the great open space around her, space enough for two beds, a man and wife, and a baby, too. How different this room seemed compared to her tiny alcove at the spa, where there was nowhere to sit but one chair and the narrow cot, and whenever her best friend Uta came, Uta took the cot, messing up Liesl's neat coverlet while she chatted and smoked. That room had reeked of girlhood, of their long, gossipy talks, of ash, of the herbs Liesl gathered and made into fragrant sachets, of wool stockings hung up to dry. She wished Uta would write. But Uta never wrote letters, except once, to announce she'd made it to Berlin and liked her job at the private officers' club.

Liesl curled her fingers in her blanket and pulled it tight over her shoulders, around her chin, tighter and tighter, the way she'd done as a girl when she was scared of the dark. *Miss me*, she thought, first to Frank, and then to her oldest friend, and then to the dim, loving face that had become her memory of her mother. She pulled again until the wool strained over her back and she couldn't move for holding herself.