

An Excerpt from

THE ORPHAN COLLECTOR

ELLEN MARIE WISEMAN



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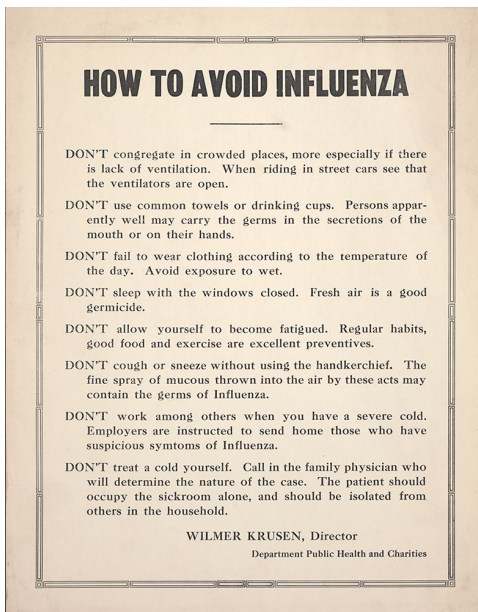
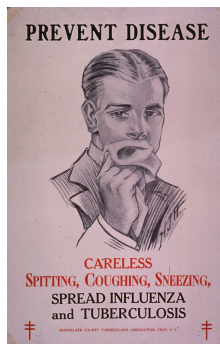
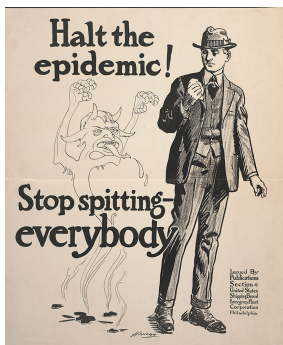
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*For my beloved family
I treasure each and every one of you*

Historical Images from the 1918 Spanish Flu Epidemic



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CHAPTER ONE



PIA

September 28, 1918

The deadly virus stole unnoticed through the crowded cobblestone streets of Philadelphia on a sunny September day, unseen and unheard amidst the jubilant chaos of the Liberty Loan parade and the patriotic marches of John Philip Sousa. More than 200,000 men, women, and children waved American flags and jostled one another for prime viewing space along the two-mile route, while the people behind shouted encouragement over shoulders and past faces to the bands, Boy Scouts, women's auxiliaries, marines, sailors, and soldiers in the street. Planes flew overhead, draft horses pulled eight-inch howitzers, military groups performed bayonet drills, church bells clanged, and police whistles blew; old friends hugged and shook hands, couples kissed, and children shared candy and soda. Unaware that the lethal illness had escaped the Naval Yard, the eager spectators had no idea that the local hospitals had admitted over two hundred people the previous day, or that numerous infectious disease experts had pressured the mayor to cancel the event. Not that it would have mattered. They were there to support the troops, buy war bonds, and show their patriotism during a time of war. Victory in Europe—and keeping the Huns out of America—was first and foremost on their minds.

Many of the onlookers had heard about the flu hitting Boston and New York, but the director of laboratories at the Phipps Institute of Philadelphia had just announced he'd identified the cause of the specific influenza causing so much trouble—Pfeiffer's bacillus—and the local newspapers said influenza posed no danger because it was as old as history and usually accompanied by foul air, fog, and plagues of insects. None of those things were happening in Philadelphia. Therefore, it stood to reason that as long as everyone did what the Board of Health advised—kept their feet dry, stayed warm, ate more onions, and kept their bowels and windows open—they'd be fine.

But thirteen-year-old Pia Lange knew something was wrong. And not because her best friend, Finn Duffy, had told her about the dead sailors his older brother had seen outside a local pub. Not because of the posters on telephone poles and buildings that read: "When obliged to cough or sneeze, always place a handkerchief, paper napkin, or fabric of some kind before the face," or "Cover your mouth! Influenza Is Spread by Droplets Sprayed from Nose and Mouth!"

Pia knew something was wrong because the minute she had followed her mother—who was pushing Pia's twin brothers in a wicker baby pram—onto the packed parade route, a sense of unease had come over her, like the thick air before a summer thunderstorm or the swirling discomfort in her belly right before she got sick. Feeling distraught in crowds was nothing new to her—she would never forget the panic she'd felt the first time she walked the busy streets of Philadelphia, or when Finn had dragged her to the maiden launch of a warship from Hog Island, where President Wilson and thirty thousand people were in attendance, and the water was filled with tugboats, steamboats, and barges decorated with American flags.

But this was different. Something she couldn't name seemed to push against her from all sides, something heavy and invisible and threatening. At first she thought it was the heat and the congested sidewalks, but then she recognized the familiar sinking sensation she had grown up trying to avoid, and the sudden, overwhelming awareness that something was horribly wrong. She felt like the little

girl she had once been, the little girl who hid behind Mutti's apron when company came, unable to explain why she always wanted to play alone. The little girl who didn't want to shake hands or hug, or sit on anyone's lap. The little girl who was grateful to be left out of kickball and jump rope, while at the same time it broke her heart.

Looking up at the boys in worn jackets and patched trousers clambering up streetlamps to get a better view of the parade, she wished she could join them to escape the crush of the growing throng. The boys shouted and laughed and waved their newsboy caps, hanging like monkeys below giant American flags. More than anything she wanted to be like them too, carefree and unaware that anything was wrong. But that was impossible. No matter how hard she tried, she'd never be like everyone else.

When she looked back down at the sidewalk, her mother had disappeared. She opened her mouth to shout for her, then bit her tongue. She wasn't supposed to call her Mutti anymore—not out loud, anyway. Speaking German in public was no longer allowed. Her parents would always be Mutti and Vater in her head, no matter what the law said, but she didn't dare draw attention by calling her that in a crowd. Standing on her tiptoes to see over shoulders and backs, she spotted the top of Mutti's faded brown hat a few yards away and hurried to catch up to her, stopping short and moving sideways to avoid bumping into people on the way.

Finally behind Mutti again, she wiped the sweat from her upper lip and breathed a sigh of relief. The last thing she needed was to get lost in the city. Bunching her shoulders to make herself smaller, she stayed as close to Mutti as possible, weaving and ducking to avoid the sea of bare arms and hands all around her, wishing her mother would slow down. If only she could crawl into the baby pram with her twin brothers and hide beneath their blankets. She had known coming to the parade would be difficult, but she hadn't expected this.

As far back as she could remember she'd been extraordinarily shy; Mutti said few people could hold her when she was a baby because she'd cry like the world was coming to an end. And she used to think being bashful was the same for everyone; that it was something you could feel, like a fever or stomachache or scratchy throat.

Sometimes she wondered what would have happened if Mutti hadn't been there to protect her from men wanting to pinch her cheeks, and little old ladies wagging their fingers at her to prove they were harmless. But gradually those feelings had changed, even more so in the last couple of months. She'd started to notice other sensations when she touched someone's bare skin, like a dull pain in her head or chest, or a strange discomfort in an arm or leg. It didn't happen every time, but often enough to make her wonder if something was wrong with her. Now, whenever she went to the dry goods store or vegetable market, she took the streets—dodging horses, wagons, bicycles, and automobiles—to avoid the congested sidewalks. And handing coins to the peddlers nearly gave her the vapors, so she dropped them on the counter more often than not. Unfortunately there was nothing she could do about any of it. Telling Mutti—or anyone else, for that matter—was out of the question, especially after hearing about her great-aunt Lottie, who spent the second half of her life locked in an insane asylum in Germany because she saw things that weren't there. No matter how confused or scared Pia got, she wasn't willing to take the chance of getting locked up too.

Now, following Mutti along the packed sidewalks, her worst fears that something was wrong were confirmed when a man in a linen suit and straw gambler cut across the flow of pedestrians and bumped into her, laughing at first, then apologizing when he realized what he'd done. Having been taught to always smile and be polite, she forced a smile—she was so good at it that it sometimes frightened her—but then the man pinched her cheek and a sharp pain stabbed her chest, like her heart had been split in two. She shuddered and looked down at herself, certain a knife would be sticking out of her rib cage. But there was no knife, no blood trickling down the front of her flour-sack dress. The thin bodice was smooth and spotless, as clean as it had been that morning when she first put it on. She stepped backward to get away from the man, but he was already gone, the pain disappearing with him. The strength of it left her shaky and weak.

Then a small, cool hand latched on to hers and her chest constricted, tightening with every breath. She swore she heard her lungs rattle, but couldn't be sure with all the noise. She yanked her hand

away and looked down. A little girl in a white ruffled dress gazed up at her, smiling—until she realized Pia was a stranger. Then fear crumpled her face and she searched the crowd with frantic eyes before running off, calling for her mother. When she was gone, Pia could breathe normally again.

How Pia longed to be back in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, where open spaces were filled with blue skies, swaths of wildflowers, and herds of deer, instead of miles of pavement, side-by-side buildings, and hordes of people. In Philadelphia, she couldn't walk ten feet without bumping into someone, and every sight, sound, and smell seemed menacing and foreign. The neighborhood alleys were strewn with garbage and sewage, and the biggest rats she'd ever seen crawled in nooks and crannies, scampering between walls and passageways. Trolleys and wagons and motorcars fought for space on every street, and more people than she had ever seen at one time seemed to crowd every sidewalk. The city reminded her of a clogged beehive, teeming with people instead of insects. Even the row houses were full to overflowing, with multiple families squeezed into two and three rooms. Certainly there had been hardships in the mining village back in Hazleton—the walls of their shack were paper-thin, everything from their clothes to their kitchen table seemed covered in coal dust, and worst of all, Vater's job digging for coal was dangerous and grueling—but it didn't make her any less homesick. She was glad her father had found less dangerous work in the city a little over a year ago, but she missed the chickens in the yard and the neighbor's hound dog sleeping under their front porch. She missed taking the dirt path to Widow Wilcox's shack to learn how to read and write. She missed the mountain trails and the grass outside their front door. Vater said she missed Hazleton because she longed for the rolling hills and green fields of Bavaria. And when she reminded him she was only four years old when they boarded the ship to America, he laughed and said Germany was in her blood, like her fondness for sweets and his love for her mother.

Thinking of her father, her eyes burned. If he were here with them now, she could hold his wide, weathered hand in hers and lean against his tall, muscular frame. He'd squeeze her fingers twice, in quick succession like he always did, which meant "I love you"; then

she'd squeeze his back and they'd smile at each other, delighted with their little secret. No one would guess by looking at Vater that he was tenderhearted and always whistling, singing, and making jokes; instead they tended to hurry out of his path because of his imposing presence and piano-wide shoulders. With him by her side, she could have moved through the crowd nearly untouched. But that was impossible because he'd enlisted in the army three months ago, along with two of his German-American friends, to prove their loyalty to the United States. Now he was somewhere in France, and she had no idea when he was coming home. Like Mutti said through her tears when he left, moving to the city to keep him safe had done no good at all.

Suddenly a woman in a Lady Liberty costume pushed between Pia and her mother, jarring her from her thoughts. When the woman's bare forearm brushed her hand, Pia held her breath, waiting for the strange sensations to start. But to her relief, she felt nothing. She relaxed her tight shoulders and exhaled, trying to calm down. She only had to get through the next hour or so. That was it. Then she could go home, to their rooms on Shunk Alley in the Fifth Ward, where no one but her loved ones could reach her.

Then Mutti stopped to talk to a woman from the greengrocers' and a pair of clammy hands clamped over Pia's eyes. Someone snickered in her ear. A sharp pain instantly twisted near her rib cage, making her hot and dizzy. She yanked the hands away from her face and spun around. It was Tommy Costa, the freckle-faced boy who teased her during school recess, and two of his friends, Angelo DiPrizzi and Skip Turner. They laughed and stuck out their tongues at her, then ran away. The discomfort in her ribs went with them.

By the time Mutti chose a spot to watch the parade, Pia was shaking. She'd begged her mother to let her stay home, even promising to straighten up their two-room apartment while she and the twins were gone. But despite knowing how Pia felt about large gatherings, Mutti insisted.

"Going to the parade is the only way to prove we are loyal Americans," Mutti said in heavily accented English. "It's hard enough

after President Wilson said all German citizens are alien enemies. I follow the new laws. I sign the papers they want me to sign refusing my German citizenship. I do the fingerprinting. But I have no money to buy Liberty loans or make a donation to the Red Cross. I have to feed you and your brothers. So we must go to the parade. All of us. Even your father fighting in the war is not enough to keep the neighbors happy."

"But it won't matter if I'm with you or not," Pia said. "Everyone will see you there, and the twins will enjoy it. I could make dinner and have it ready when you return."

"*Nein*," her mother said. As soon as the word came out of her mouth, worry flickered across her face. "I mean, no. You must come with us. The radio and newspapers tell everyone to be watchful of their German-American neighbors and to report to the authorities. Before your father left, a woman shouted at me, saying he stole a real American's job. She spit and said to go back where I came from. I am not leaving you home alone."

Pia knew Mutti was right; she'd suffered enough bullying at school to know everything she said was true. Rumors were flying that German spies were poisoning food, and German-Americans were secretly hoarding arms. Some Germans had even been sent to jail or internment camps. The city was plastered with posters showing Germans standing over dead bodies and ads directing people to buy war bonds to "Beat back the Hun!" Churches with German congregations had been painted yellow, German-language newspapers were shut down, and schoolchildren were forced to sign pledges promising not to use any foreign language whatsoever. As if that weren't enough, a special police group called the Home Guard, originally formed to patrol the streets with guns to ensure adequate protection of important points in the city—the Water Works and pumping station, the electric light distributing plant, the telephone service, and various power stations at manufacturing plants—now also patrolled the south end of the city to keep an eye on German immigrants. Some companies refused to employ Germans, so Mutti lost her job at the textile mill. And because she needed a permit to withdraw money from the bank, what little cash

they had left was kept under a floorboard inside a bedroom cubby. Even sauerkraut and hamburgers were renamed “liberty cabbage” and “liberty sandwiches.”

But knowing Mutti was right didn’t make going to the parade any easier.

Three days after the parade, while her schoolmates laughed and played hopscotch and jump rope during recess, Pia sat alone in her usual spot, on a flat rock near the back fence of the schoolyard, pretending to read. The air was pale, as gray as smoke, and the breeze carried a slight chill. Luckily, she’d remembered to bring her sweater, especially since the school windows were being kept open to ward off the gripe. Her three-quarter-length dress had long sleeves and her cotton stockings were thick, but the flour-sack material of her skirt and bodice was worn and thin. She put the book down, pulled her sleeves over her fists, and tried to stop shivering. Was she trembling because of the cold, or because she couldn’t stop thinking about what she’d seen and heard since the Liberty Loan parade?

Mrs. Schmidt had told Mutti that within seventy-two hours of the parade, every bed in each of the city’s thirty-one hospitals was filled with victims of a new illness called the Spanish influenza, and the hospitals were starting to refuse patients. By day four, the illness had infected over six hundred Philadelphians, and killed well over a hundred in one day. Pia overheard the teachers talking about a shortage of doctors and nurses because of the war, and that poor-houses and churches were being used as temporary hospitals. More posters went up that read “Spitting Equals Death,” and the police arrested anyone who disobeyed. Another poster showed a man in a suit standing next to the outline of a clawed demon rising from what appeared to be a pool of saliva on the sidewalk, with the words “Halt the Epidemic! Stop Spitting, Everybody!” And because everyone was wearing pouches of garlic or camphor balls in cheesecloth around their necks, the streets were filled with a foul, peculiar odor that she couldn’t help thinking was the smell of death. Most frightening of all, she heard that those who fell sick were often dead

by nightfall; their faces turned black and blue, blood gushing from their mouth, nose, ears, and even their eyes.

She'd been having nightmares too, filled with ghastly images of the parade spectators flashing in her mind like the jerky moving pictures in a penny arcade—each face with black lips and purple cheeks, and blood coming from their mouths and eyes. Every time it happened she woke up in a sweat, her arms and legs tangled in the sheets, her stomach and chest sore and aching. Just thinking about it made her queasy. The stench wafting up from the garlic tied around her neck didn't help.

She took the putrid necklace off and laid it in the grass, then lifted her chin and took a deep breath, inhaling the familiar scents of fall—a mixture of moist earth, sunburnt leaves, and chimney smoke. But despite the fact that the air smelled significantly better than the strong odor of garlic, it still reminded her of her first dreadful day in her new school last year. She could still hear the voices of her mother and new teacher.

"Did you see the letter I send in to school, Mrs. Derry?" Mutti had said.

"Yes, Mrs. Lange, I received the note. But I'm not sure I understand it."

"Forgive me, I only wish to make sure . . ." Mutti said, hesitating. "My Pia is, how do you say, delicate? She does not like crowds, or anyone touching her. I am not sure why. . . ." Her mother started wringing her hands. "But she is a normal girl and smart. Please. Can you be sure the other children—"

"Mrs. Lange, I don't see how—"

"Pia needs to learn. She needs to be at school. I don't want her to . . ."

"All right, Mrs. Lange," Mrs. Derry said. "Yes, I'll do my best. But children come into contact with each other while playing all the time, especially during recess. It's part of learning. Sometimes I won't be able to stop it from happening."

"Yes, I understand," Mutti said. "But if Pia doesn't want . . . if one of the other children does not know to leave her alone . . . please . . ."

Mrs. Derry put a hand on her mother's arm, looked at her with pity-filled eyes, and said, "Don't worry, I'll take care of her. And I'll let the other teachers know too."

Mutti nodded and gave her a tired smile, then said goodbye to Pia and left.

After that first day, for the most part, Mrs. Derry and the rest of the teachers had done little to look out for Pia. And the memory of that encounter—her mother wringing her hands and trying to communicate her odd concerns to a confused Mrs. Derry while Pia cringed at her side and the other kids watched—recurred to her every time she stepped foot in the classroom. While the other children played Duck, Duck, Goose or Ring-Around-the-Rosy, Pia stood off to the side, sad and relieved at the same time. Inevitably, when the teachers weren't looking, some of the kids taunted and poked her, calling her names like freak girl or scaredy-cat. And now, because of the war, they called her a Hun.

Thankfully she'd met Finn before school started, while he could form his own opinion without the influence of the other kids. It was the day after she and her family had moved in, when Mutti sent her out to sit on the stoop with strict instructions not to wander off while she and Vater talked—about what, Pia wasn't sure. She'd been homesick and near tears, frightened to discover that the jumble of trash-strewn alleys and cobblestone streets and closely built row houses made her feel trapped, and wondering how she'd ever get used to living there, when he approached from across the alley. She tried to ignore him, hoping he was headed for the entrance behind her, but he stopped at the bottom of the steps, swept his copper-colored bangs out of his eyes, and gave her a friendly grin.

"Yer a new lass around here, aren't ye?" he said in a heavy Irish brogue. "I'm Finn Duffy, your neighbor from across the way." He pointed at the shabby building across from hers, a four-story brick with narrow windows and a black fire escape.

She nodded and forced a smile. She didn't feel like talking but didn't want to be rude either. "Yes," she said. "We moved in yesterday."

"Nice to meet you, um . . . What did you say yer name was?"

"Oh, sorry," she said. "I'm Pia Lange."

“Well, nice to meet ye, Pia Lange. Can I interest you in a game of marbles?” He pulled a cloth sack from the pocket of his threadbare trousers.

She shook her head. “No, thank you.”

“Would ye mind if I sit with you, then?” he said. “You look rather lonesome, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

She thought about telling him she wanted to be left alone, but didn’t want to start off by making enemies. Instead she nodded and moved over to make room, gathering her pleated skirt beneath her legs and sitting on her hands. He smiled and sat beside her, a polite distance away. To her relief, he kept quiet, almost as if he knew she didn’t feel like making conversation. Together they sat lost in their own thoughts, watching three colored girls with braids and pig-tails play hopscotch across the way. One held a rag doll under her arm, the doll’s limp head flopping up and down with every jump. A group of ruddy-cheeked boys in patched pants and worn shoes kicked a can along the cobblestones, shouting at each other to pass the can their way. Snippets of laughter, conversation, and the tinny music of a phonograph drifted down from open windows, along with the smell of fried onions and baking bread. Line after line of laundry hung damp and unmoving in the humid air above their heads, crisscrossing the row of buildings like layers of circus flags. People of all colors and ages and sizes spilled out onto the fire escapes, some sitting on overturned washtubs and kettles, all looking for relief from the heat.

An old colored woman in a dirty scarf and laceless boots limped past, humming and pulling a wooden cart filled with rags and old bottles. She skirted around two boys of about seven or eight playing cards on their knees in front of a stone building three doors down. One of the boys glanced over his shoulder at her, then jumped to his feet, grabbed something from her cart, and ran, laughing, back to his friend. The old woman kept going, oblivious to the fact that she had been robbed. The second boy gathered up the cards and did the same; then they both started to run away.

Finn shot to his feet and chased after them, cutting them off before they disappeared down a side alley. He yelled something Pia couldn’t make out, then grabbed them by the ears and dragged

them back to the old woman. After returning her things to the cart, the boys hurried away, rubbing their ears and scowling back at him, muttering under their breath. The old woman stopped and looked around, finally aware that something was amiss. When she saw Finn, she shooed him away and swatted at him with a thin, gnarled hand. He laughed and made his way back to Pia, shrugging and lifting his palms in the air.

Pia couldn't help but smile. "Do you know her?" she said.

"I don't," he said, catching his breath. He sat back on the stoop beside her and wiped the sweat from his brow. "But I see her every day, selling rags and bottles on the corner. I know the lads, though, and they're always causin' a ruckus."

"They didn't look very happy with you," she said.

"I suppose they're not," he said. "But they won't cause trouble for me."

"Well," she said. "It was very nice of you to stop them and make them return what they took."

He gave her a sideways grin. "Why, isn't that grand? Ye think I'm nice. Thank you, Pia Lange."

Heat crawled up her face. She nodded because she didn't know what to say, then went back to watching the girls play hopscotch. Did he really think what she said was grand, or was he making fun of her? His smile made her think he appreciated the compliment, so she told herself that was the case. Not that it mattered. Once he found out she was German he'd probably never speak to her again.

He sat forward, his elbows on his knees, and watched the girls play hopscotch too. "We came from Ireland three years ago," he said. "How long have you been in the States?"

"Since I was four," she said.

He raised his eyebrows at her. "That long?"

She nodded.

"Livin' here in Philly the entire time?"

She shook her head. "We came here from Hazleton, Pennsylvania. Vater . . . I mean, my father worked in the coal mines."

He forced a hard breath between his teeth. "That's a bloody hard way to make a living."

She nodded. At least he didn't react to the German word. Or maybe he didn't notice.

"This city can be a mite overwhelming when you first arrive," he said. "But you'll get used to it. My da was the one who wanted to come, but he never got to see it."

"Why not?"

"He didn't survive the voyage."

"I'm sorry."

"Aye, I appreciate it. My mam has been having a hard time of it since then, so my older brothers and I have been taking care of her and my granddad. Then the army took one of my brothers six months ago, and my other brother had to start working double shifts at the textile mill. I'm ready to take a job, but Mam insists I finish my schoolin' first. Things were hard in Dublin, but I'm not sure they're much better here. It makes ye long for home, even when you know leaving was the right thing to do."

She really looked at him then, at his kind face and hazel eyes. It was almost as if he were reading her mind.

From that day on, they were fast friends. He didn't care that she and her family were German, or ask her to explain why she didn't want to play cat's cradle or any other game that might involve close contact. After he sent her a note on the clothesline between their fourth-floor apartments that said, *'Twas nice to meet ye, lass!* they started sending each other messages on Sunday nights when the line was empty—but only if the windows weren't frozen shut and they were able to find scraps of paper not set aside for the war effort. The notes were silly and meaningless, just hello or a funny joke or a drawing, but it was their little secret. One of the few things Pia didn't have to share with anyone else.

Once school started and they discovered they were in the same classroom despite him being a grade ahead, he offered to sit with her at recess, but she said she'd rather not have the added attention. While he played kickball and marbles with the other boys, he always looked over to offer a smile or a wave. And that small gesture made everything easier.

Most days she didn't mind sitting alone. But today was differ-

ent. She wished he'd stop playing ball and come sit with her, even if it was just for a few minutes. Because no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop thinking about the flu, and was constantly distracted by an overwhelming feeling of worry and dread. When a group of girls skipping rope began to chant a new rhyme, chills shivered up her spine.

*There was a little girl, and she had a little bird,
And she called it by the pretty name of Enza;
But one day it flew away, but it didn't go to stay,
For when she raised the window, in-flu-enza.*

"What are you staring at, scaredy-cat?"

Pia looked up to see who had spoken, unaware she'd been staring. A thin girl with brown pigtails glared down at her, a disgusted look on her face. It was Mary Helen Burrows, the girl everyone liked or feared, depending on which day you asked, and whether or not Mary Helen was within earshot. No one had ever seen her get into an actual brawl, but permanent anger knitted her brows, and bruises marked her arms and legs. Two other girls stood behind her, Beverly Hansom and Selma Jones, their arms crossed over their chests.

"I wasn't staring at anything," Pia said, reaching for her book.

"I'm telling you, Mary Helen," Beverly said. "She was staring at us, like she was coming up with some nasty German scheme or somethin'."

Mary Helen knocked the book out of Pia's hand. "You spying on us?"

Pia shook her head. "No, I was just—"

"What's going on?" someone said. "Are you all right, Pia?" It was Finn. He was out of breath, his face red and his hair disheveled.

"Your girlfriend was giving us the stink-eye," Mary Helen said.

"She's not my girlfriend," Finn said.

"Shut up, Mary Helen," Pia said.

Mary Helen ignored her and glared at Finn. "I just wanna know one thing. What would your mother think if she knew you were

friends with a filthy Hun, 'specially with your older brother over there fighting to keep you safe?"

Pia bounced to her feet. "Take that back!"

Mary Helen's head snapped around and she gaped at Pia, shocked to hear her standing up for herself. "What'd you say?"

"I said take it back!"

Mary Helen held up her bony fists. "You want a fat lip to go with that stink-eye, scaredy-cat?"

"Jaysus," Finn said. "In the name of all that's holy, shut up, Mary Helen. You're not gonna fight."

"Oh yeah?" Mary Helen said. Suddenly her hand shot out and grabbed the front of Pia's dress. She yanked Pia forward and pushed her contorted face into hers, the stench of garlic and onions wafting from the bag around her neck almost making Pia gag. Thinking only of escape, Pia grabbed Mary Helen's wrist with both hands and tried to pull her off. A quick stab of pain twisted in her chest, sharp and immediate, and she gasped, unable to get air. She let go of Mary Helen's wrist and tried to step away, suddenly disoriented and dizzy. Finn pried Mary Helen's fist from Pia's dress, moved Pia behind him, and stood between them. Pia sat down hard on the ground and tried to catch her breath.

One of the teachers hurried over. "What in heaven's name is going on over here?" she said. It was Miss Herrick. She towered above them, willowy as a flower stem.

"Nothing, ma'am," Mary Helen said. "You must be balled up. We were just playing a game."

"Well, it doesn't look like a game to me," Miss Herrick said. "You and your friends run along now, Mary Helen, and leave Pia alone."

Mary Helen harrumphed, but did as she was told. The other girls followed, their faces pinched.

"Are you all right, Pia?" Miss Herrick said. She bent down to help her up, reaching for her arm.

"Don't touch me," Pia said, louder than intended.

Miss Herrick gasped and clapped a hand to her chest.

Pia instantly regretted her outburst. The last thing she needed

was to get in trouble at school. Mutti would never understand. She got up and brushed off her dress. "I'm sorry, Miss Herrick," she said. "I didn't mean to be rude. I was frightened, that's all."

Miss Herrick sighed. "That's understandable, I suppose. I know Mary Helen likes to start trouble, and everyone is feeling anxious these days, but are you sure you're all right? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

Pia mustered a weak smile. "I'm fine. Thank you, Miss Herrick." She wasn't anywhere near fine, but how could she explain to the teacher what she'd felt when she grabbed Mary Helen's wrist? She'd think she was crazy.

The next day, Mary Helen was absent from school and Selma Jones fainted while unpacking her sandwich during lunch. Miss Herrick rushed over to Selma and shook her while the class watched, mouths agape, but Selma didn't move. Miss Herrick ran out into the hall yelling, and two teachers carried Selma away. Beverly Hansom's mother pulled her out of class shortly afterward, scurrying into the room and wrapping a protective arm around her daughter, her face pale. On the playground that afternoon, the teachers spoke in hushed voices behind their hands, their brows lined with worry. Rumors flew that Mary Helen and Selma had the flu and Mary Helen was already dead.

After the last lesson of the day, Pia hurried out of the building and started for home, her books held to her chest, her head down. Normally she would have waited for Finn on the school steps, but she had to get away from there. She needed to go back to her family's rooms, where she could close the door and hide from everyone and everything. A block from the school, a Red Cross ambulance sped by, and a man on a bench was reading a newspaper with the headline: ALL CITIZENS ORDERED TO WEAR GAUZE MASKS IN PUBLIC. On the streetlamp above him, an advertisement for masks read: "Obey the laws and wear the gauze, protect your jaws from septic paws."

Deciding she didn't want to walk the rest of the way alone, she ducked into a landing to wait for Finn, away from the congested sidewalks, and leaned against the doorframe, wishing she could disappear. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry. Two women with scarves over their mouths darted by arm in arm, walking as fast as

they could without running. A gray-haired couple wearing gauze masks and carrying suitcases rushed out of a building and hailed a cab, the old man practically pushing other pedestrians aside with his cane. Even the motorcars and horse-drawn wagons seemed to go by faster than normal. A strange awareness seemed to fill the air, like the lightheartedness on the day before Christmas, or the shared excitement she'd felt before the fireworks display on her first Independence Day in Philadelphia. Except this awareness felt ominous and full of menace, like the sensation she felt at the parade, but ten times worse. And now everyone could feel it.

When Finn came walking down the block, her shoulders dropped in relief. She stepped out of the landing onto the sidewalk in front of him.

"Hey," he said, surprised. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I did," she said. "I'm right here, aren't I?" She started walking and he fell in beside her.

"Ye are, but I didn't know where you were. I thought . . ."

"You thought what?"

He shrugged and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Everyone's getting sick. Remember we heard Tommy Costa and his family left town?"

She nodded.

"Aye, well, his best pal, Skip, said he died last night."

Pia stopped in her tracks. Tommy was the boy who had put his hands over her eyes at the parade. "Was it the flu?"

"I can't think of anything else that'd take him that quick."

She hugged her books to her chest and started walking again. Tommy and Mary Helen were young and strong. How could they be dead from influenza? How could Selma Jones be fine one day and fainting the next? And why had she felt pain when she'd touched them? Was it the flu she'd felt? No. She couldn't feel sickness in another person. It had to be a coincidence. Or maybe her shyness really was starting to become a physical ailment. More than anything, she wanted to tell Finn what was going on, to ask him what he thought. But she couldn't. Not yet.

At the end of the fourth block, they turned left into Jacob's Alley, a cart path lined with bakers, shoe cobblers, tailors, and cigar

makers working out of storefronts in brick houses, their families' apartments above. Some of the homes had been turned into boardinghouses, or rented-out rooms to sailors. Crepe ribbons hung from several doorknobs, black and gray and white, swirling in the afternoon breeze. Some doors were marked with signs that read: "QUARANTINE INFLUENZA: Keep out of this house." At the end of the alley, a woman in a black dress came out of the silver-smith's shop and tied a piece of white crepe to the doorknob, sobbing uncontrollably.

Pia couldn't help staring, new tremors of fear climbing up her back. She knew what the different colors of crepe meant; she'd seen enough of it in the mining village after cave-ins and explosions, and during the wave of tuberculosis that hit the village when she was seven. Black meant the death of an adult; gray an elderly person; white a child. She and Finn looked at each other. A silent alarm passed between them and they started walking faster. When they turned the corner onto Lombard Street, they slowed. Dozens of policemen, all wearing gauze masks, patrolled the sidewalks, telling people to keep moving. A line of people snaked out the door of the pharmacy, holding empty glass bottles and barely speaking. Their faces were drawn by worry, their eyes hollowed out by fear. Some of these anxious souls wore white masks and kept their distance from others and the pedestrians pushing by on the sidewalk, newspapers held over their mouths. A sign in the pharmacy window read: "Formaldehyde tablets. Melt under your tongue. Proven to kill germs and prevent infection and contagion. Fifty tablets for fifty cents."

"What kind of medicine do you think they're waiting for?" Pia asked Finn.

"Anything they can get, I suppose," he said. "But whiskey, mostly."

In the window of a sporting goods store next door, an advertisement for phonographs read: "This machine is guaranteed to drive away Spanish flu. Stay at home. Keep away from crowds and theaters. Doctor's Orders. Hear the new October records on your new phonograph and you'll never know you had to stay in nights or miss gasless Sundays." Across the road, people holding sacks and baskets crowded around a truck with a sign that said: "Eat More Onions,

One of the Best Preventatives for Influenza.” A gathering of colored people stood to one side, waiting to see if there would be any onions left over for them.

Seeing the onion truck, Pia thought of what Mutti had said that morning—they were short on supplies and she needed to go to the market but didn’t want to have to take the twins, so she might wait until Pia came home from school. Hopefully Mutti had stayed home. Pia needed to tell her it wasn’t a good idea to go out, not until things returned to normal.

A streetcar rattled past and stopped a few yards away. Two men in black bowlers hurried toward it, one wearing a mask. The conductor, also wearing a mask, came to the door and pointed at one of the men.

“You’re not getting on without a mask,” the conductor said. He let the other man on, then blocked the maskless man from boarding.

Anger hardened the man’s face. “I have a meeting and I can’t be late,” he said. “I insist you allow me to get on.”

“Sorry,” the conductor said. “Those are the rules.”

A policeman approached, one hand on his billy club. “You heard him,” he said to the man. “No mask, no ride.”

The man cursed and stomped away. The policeman waved the trolley on, but before the conductor could climb back up, a woman screamed and the passengers scrambled out the door onto the street, nearly knocking the conductor over and running in all directions. Pia and Finn stopped to watch. The policeman clambered up the trolley steps, then jumped back down. Two more policemen appeared and spoke to him. One hurried away while the other turned to face the gathering crowd.

“Stay clear!” he shouted. “We’re sending for the coroner!”

When Pia saw why the passengers were in such a hurry to get off the trolley, she gasped and put a hand over her mouth. A man sat slumped over in his seat, his forehead against the window, a stained mask ripped and dangling from his chin, his face a strange mixture of gray, blue, and red. Blood spilled from his eyes and mouth and nose, smearing the glass with dark clots. Horror knotted in Pia’s stomach. She started walking again, as fast as her shaking legs could carry her. Finn followed.

"Finn?" she said, breathing hard.

"Aye?"

"I'm scared."

"I know."

"Aren't you?"

"I am."

They strode in silence for another few minutes, then Finn said, "Have you gotten any more letters from your father?"

If she hadn't been so terrified, she would have smiled at him. As usual, he was trying to distract her from her distress. That was Finn, always thinking about other people. She wanted to hug him, now more than ever, but at the same time, now more than ever, she was afraid to touch anyone. "No," she said. "We haven't heard anything from him in weeks."

"Ye will soon, I bet."

She nodded. "Mutti . . . I mean, my mother says we should, any day now. I wish he was here now." Her chest tightened and she blinked back a sudden flood of tears. If Vater were here now, maybe he'd know what to do. Maybe he'd take them out of the city, away from what was happening. Because for as far back as she could remember, he'd always been their protector. Like that time a sudden lightning storm hit while they were on a Sunday picnic and he'd herded her and Mutti into a cave. Or when she accidentally knocked a hornets' nest out from under the front porch and he picked her up, covered her with his jacket, and raced her inside their shack. He wouldn't have been able to do anything about the flu, but just having him here would have made her feel safer.

Finn glanced at her with concern. "Try not to worry too much, lass. It takes a long time for a letter to get across that great ocean."

She nodded again, thankful for Finn's kindness but unable to speak around the burning lump in her throat.

After turning left on Broad Street, they made their way toward the congested maze of alleys and gritty blocks of row houses they called home—the section of Philadelphia labeled the Bloody Fifth Ward because of the area's violent reputation. In the last week alone, two men on their block had been murdered—one shot and the other stabbed—and a colored man was beaten and left for dead

in an alley behind a warehouse on the corner. Other than the ever-present Home Guard, whose job was to spy on German immigrants, it seemed like the only time the police came into the neighborhood was to raid the speakeasies, arrest women for vagrancy and “night walking,” and apprehend men for gambling, assaults, and drunkenness. Some people said crime had heightened because of the growing number of immigrants and colored who’d moved in looking for work since the start of the war, but Finn said the streets of the Fifth Ward had always been dangerous. He told her stories about a colored rights advocate being murdered, a church being torched, and a number of homes being destroyed during race riots. Pia and her family had only been there a few months when a policeman was shot and killed during a heated race for Select Councilmen, when eighteen men called the Frog Hollow Gang came all the way down from New York to attack one of the candidates.

Had her parents been aware of the dangers of a large city when they’d decided to move here? Did they know and decide to come anyway? She wasn’t even allowed to go outside after dark anymore, which made her all the more homesick for the mountains, where she used to watch fireflies in the switch grass and search for the Big Dipper in the stars. And there was no Spanish flu back in Hazleton, she’d bet. She couldn’t help thinking how different her life would be if they’d never come to Philadelphia.

But then she and Finn turned off the main street into Shunk Alley, and something strange happened. Whether it was the group of boys playing stickball or the little girls having a pretend tea party on a building stoop, she wasn’t sure, but for some reason, her fear seemed to lessen. No one was wearing masks or running from a dead man on a trolley. No signs on doors warned of quarantine. No new posters had been put up. Everything looked normal. When they reached the steps outside her row house, she loosened the grip on her schoolbooks, and a sense of calm washed over her. Maybe the flu wouldn’t reach their little part of the city.

Then the sound of a woman sobbing floated down from an open window.

Finn glanced up at the window, then gazed at her, his forehead furrowed. Clearly he was wondering the same thing. Had the flu

already reached Shunk Alley? He opened his mouth to say something when his mother yelled down from the fire escape outside their apartment.

“Finn, come quick! It’s yer brother!”

He shot Pia a worried look, then turned to leave. “I’ll see ye later, lass,” he said over his shoulder. “Take care of yourself, all right?”

Before she could respond, he sprinted across the street and went inside. She fixed her eyes on the door after it closed, shivering. His parting words felt weighed down with apprehension and misery, like an omen or a warning. Would she ever see him again? Dread fell over her shoulders like a heavy blanket. She suddenly wished she had told him what happened with Tommy Costa and Mary Helen, how she had felt something strange when they touched her. He couldn’t have done anything to help, but maybe sharing her secret would have made her feel less alone.

Behind her, someone called her name. She jumped and spun around, almost dropping her books. Mutti stood in the open doorway of their building, scrubbing a calloused hand on her apron, the telltale sign that she was worried. Pia had seen her do it a thousand times—every day when Vater left to work in the mines; when the Black Maria came into the village carrying the injured and dead after a mining accident; when Vater said they were moving to Philadelphia; when she thought she might miscarry the twins the same way she’d miscarried three other babies; when Vater left for the war.

“Hurry, Pia,” Mutti said, gesturing frantically. “Come inside.”

Pia’s heart skipped a beat. Had something happened to Vater? Or the twins? No. That wasn’t it. Fear darkened her mother’s eyes, not sorrow.

“What is it?” Pia said, running up the steps and hurrying inside. “What’s wrong?”

Mutti closed the door behind her, giving it a little extra push after it was shut, as if trying to keep something from slipping inside. “The churches and schools are to be closed,” she said. “All places for gathering, even the factories and moving picture houses, will not be open. No funerals are to be allowed either. Many people are getting sick, so everyone is to stay home.” She moved across the dim foyer, scrubbing her hand on her apron. Pia followed.

"How do you know everything is being closed?" Pia said. "Who told you?" They didn't own a radio and hadn't gotten the newspaper since Vater left because Mutti couldn't read.

"Frau Metzger heard it at the butcher shop," Mutti said. "And Mrs. Schmidt heard it on the radio." She stopped and pointed toward the front door, her face a curious mixture of anger and fear. "Those mothers still letting their children outside? They are *Ver-ruckt!*" She spun her finger near her temple. "You must stay inside until this is over, you understand?"

Pia nodded and put a finger to her lips.

"What?" Mutti said. "Why are you shushing me?"

"You were speaking German," Pia whispered.

Mutti gasped and put a hand over her mouth. Then she glanced at Pia's neck and her eyes went wide. "Where is your garlic?"

Pia felt for the rank necklace, only then remembering she had taken it off and laid it on the grass during recess, like she'd done the day before when Mary Helen came over to pick a fight. "I must have lost it," she said.

"You must be more careful, Pia," Mutti said. "Mrs. Schmidt was very kind to give us the garlic and I have no more."

"I'm sorry. It was an accident."

Mutti threw her hands up in exasperation, then started down the hall toward the back of the building. "Come help with the water, *bitte*," she said, too upset to realize she was speaking German again. "The twins will wake up again soon."

Pia followed her mother down the hall, squinting as her eyes adjusted to the deepening gloom. Except for the front apartments on each floor, which had the only windows in the building, the hallways and the rest of the rooms were shrouded in darkness, even in the middle of the day. She tried not to think about their little shack back in Hazleton, with windows on three walls to let in the sunshine and mountain breezes. Thankfully, though, her family lived in one of the front apartments, with a window in the main room to let in natural light. She couldn't imagine what it was like living in the back and middle of the row house, where the only light came from candles or lanterns. Not to mention no fresh air to ward off the flu. With that thought, frightening images formed in her mind

of the people in the back apartments, sick and dying in the dark, where no one would find them for days.

Clenching her jaw, she pushed the gruesome thoughts away and followed Mutti through the back door and outside, into the fenced backyard that housed the water pump and outhouse. Mutti picked up one of two buckets and put it beneath the cast-iron spout. Pia set her books on the back step and pumped the handle, grateful to be getting water now instead of being sent to fetch it after supper. She hated coming down to the backyard alone, especially to use the outhouse. Sharing outhouses and water pumps with other families was nothing new—they had done it in the mining village—but the fences and closeness of the surrounding buildings made her feel like a pig in a pen, vulnerable to whomever else was in there at the same time. Like Mrs. Nagy, who kept asking questions in Hungarian, then stared at her waiting for an answer, as if Pia could speak the language. And especially old Mr. Hill, who rattled the outhouse handle when it was occupied and started pulling down his pants before shutting the door when it was his turn. Sometimes he talked to her until she came out of the outhouse, then grinned like they were best friends. He always shook his head and chuckled, making excuses about being old and senile, but she could see the cunning in his eyes. He knew exactly what he was doing.

When they finished filling the two buckets, Pia picked up her books and helped Mutti carry the water inside, down the shadowy hallway and up the narrow stairs, their hard-soled shoes crunching on dirt and plaster. What seemed like a hundred thick odors layered the floors of the row house—boiled cabbage, fried potatoes, warm curry, simmered tomatoes, sautéed sausage, roasted garlic, baked bread—each one more fragrant than the one before. Despite her fear and unease, Pia's stomach growled with hunger. It had been over six hours since her breakfast of rye bread and hot tea, and there hadn't been enough food to pack a lunch.

On the third floor, Mrs. Ferrelli was outside her door, tying a piece of black crepe to the handle, her face red, her cheeks wet with tears. Dark streaks and maroon blotches stained the front of her yellow dress, striping the swell of her pregnant belly.

No, Pia thought. *Not Mr. Ferrelli*. He was too young and too

strong, a broad-shouldered brick mason who filled the halls with laughter and had been hoping to see the birth of his first child before reporting for the draft. Not to mention he and his wife were one of their few English-speaking neighbors who weren't afraid to be friends with Germans. How could the flu kill someone like him?

Mutti came to a halt and Pia stopped beside her, not knowing what to do or say. The bucket handle dug into her fingers. She felt awful for Mrs. Ferrelli and her baby, but more than anything, she wanted to keep going, to get to the safety of their rooms.

"I'm very sorry for you," Mutti said.

"I'm sorry too," Pia said.

Mrs. Ferrelli murmured a quiet thank you.

"Was it flu?" Mutti said.

Mrs. Ferrelli nodded, her face contorting with grief, then hurried back inside.

Mutti glanced at Pia with tears in her eyes.

"Did you know he was sick?" Pia said.

Mutti shook her head, her free hand scrubbing her apron, then rushed up the last flight of stairs. Pia followed her up the steps, across the hall, and inside their apartment, closing the door behind them. At last, she was home. The dark-walled space consisted of two rooms—a combination kitchen/living room, and a windowless bedroom no bigger than the chicken coop they'd had back in the mining village. An oil lantern cast a dim light over the necessities of life that filled every square inch of space. Rough-hewn shelves lined with graying eyelet doilies held a crock of silverware, a stack of white plates, baking tins, a mismatched assortment of cups and glasses, baby bottles, a clay pitcher, and a mantel clock. Frying pans hung from hooks above a narrow wooden table with three mismatched chairs that had been repaired and strengthened with twine and pieces of wood. Baskets, a metal tub, and empty pails sat stacked beneath the table, along with a bucket of cleaning rags and a short broom. Across from the table, a chipped enamel teakettle and matching pot sat simmering on a coal stove with a crooked pipe that leaked smoke at every joint. A cloth calendar hung on the wall above a metal washbasin sitting on wooden crates, and clean diapers hung from clotheslines strung across the ceiling. The only

decorations were a blue bud vase and a faded embroidered tablecloth that had belonged to Pia's late *oma*. To the left of the stove, Pia's narrow bed sat beneath the only window, lengthwise along a wall covered with newspapers to keep out the cold. Drapes made out of flour sacks fluttered above the peeling sill.

Remembering how crowded it had been when they'd shared the rooms with her paternal aunt and uncle for ten months after they arrived in Philadelphia—Mutti and Vater on the narrow kitchen bed, Pia sleeping on the floor—she knew how lucky she was to have an entire bed to herself. Eventually her luck would change, either when the landlord found out her aunt and uncle had moved to New York and he needed room for more tenants, or when the twins got too big to sleep with Mutti. But for now, she relished being able to stretch out and turn over on the horsehair mattress.

Thinking about it now, she couldn't wait to go to bed later. Exhaustion weighed her down, making her lungs and limbs feel heavy and slow, every thought and movement an effort. She couldn't wait to eat, then escape into sleep, so she could stop thinking about the little girl who grabbed her hand during the parade, and Mary Helen and Tommy Costa, Mr. Ferrelli, and the man in the trolley. She wanted to stop thinking about the trolley man's bloody face, and the flu, and the horrible things happening in the city, and in this very building. It was too much. Then she remembered Finn's brother and prayed he wasn't sick too, even though in her heart of hearts she knew the truth. Hopefully Finn would send her a note saying she was wrong, if she heard from him at all.

After setting her water bucket next to Mutti's near the washbasin, Pia put her books on her bed, the familiar aroma of vinegar, boiled potatoes, and the sharp tang of lye soap wrapping her in an invisible cocoon of home and safety. She wanted to close the window to keep the comforting smells in and whatever was happening in the city out. It made no sense, of course—fresh air was supposed to ward off influenza—but the urge to shut out the disease and fear-filled air everyone else was breathing outweighed any common sense. She knelt on the bed and put her hands on the sash, ready to pull it down.

“What are you doing?” Mutti said.

“It’s chilly in here,” Pia said. “May I close the window?”

“We will shut it when the boys wake up,” Mutti said. “The fresh air is good. We need to keep it open when they are sleeping.” She went over to the table, picked up a spoon, and held it out to Pia. “Mrs. Schmidt brought this over. To keep away the flu.”

Before getting off the bed, Pia glanced over at Finn’s window. It was open, but no one looked out. She got down and went over to her mother. “What is it?”

“A sugar cube soaking in . . .” Mutti furrowed her brow. “I cannot think of the word. Kar . . . karo . . .”

“Kerosene?”

Mutti nodded. “*Ja*. I took one and gave one to the boys too, with a little water. This is for you.”

Pia made a face. Back in Hazleton, they ate violets and drank sassafras tea to keep sickness away, not kerosene. But no violets or sassafras trees grew in the Fifth Ward, or anywhere in the city as far as she knew. Knowing she had no choice, she took the spoon and put the sugar cube in her mouth. It tasted sweet and oily at the same time, as if she were eating a piece of candy rolled in tar. Trying not to gag, she chewed and swallowed as fast as she could. Mutti gave her a ladle of water from the bucket, but it didn’t help. The inside of her mouth tasted like mud and lantern oil. She grimaced and wiped her lips with the back of her hand.

“That was awful,” she cried.

Mutti put a finger to her lips. “Shh, don’t wake your brothers. They have not been happy all day.” She took the spoon and put it in the washbasin, then sat down at the table and picked up a darning egg from her mending basket.

“They probably didn’t like the medicine,” Pia said.

“Medicine is not meant to taste good,” Mutti said.

Hoping supper would get rid of the horrible taste in her mouth, Pia went over to the coal stove and lifted the lid on the simmering pot. Potato soup. Again. Due to the war, they were supposed to sacrifice by having wheatless Wednesdays and meatless Mondays, but she couldn’t remember the last time they’d had meat at all. Maybe

it was Easter, or Christmas. Vater had tacked the newspaper articles on the wall before he left, to remind them to keep sacrificing while he was gone. As if they had a choice.

*If you eat—THESE—you eat no wheat/CONTAINS NO WHEAT:
Oatmeal, potatoes, rice, hominy, barley, and 100 percent substitute bread.*

100 percent breads:

Corn pone, muffins, and biscuits, all kinds of bread made only from corn, oats, barley, and all other wheat substitutes.

Don't waste ice. Don't waste ammonia.

A ton of ice waived may mean one pound of ammonia saved. One pound of ammonia saved may mean twenty hand grenades. Twenty hand grenades may win a battle.

Potatoes are a splendid food. Excellent for your body. Delicious when well cooked.

What they do for your body: They are good fuel. They furnish starch, which burns in your muscles to let you work, much as the gasoline burns in an automobile engine to make it go. One medium-size potato gives you as much starch as two slices of bread. When you have potatoes for a meal, you need less bread. Potatoes can save wheat. They give you salts like other vegetables. You need the salts to build and renew all the parts of your body and keep it in order. You can even use potatoes in cake!

If only we could get muffins and biscuits and meat, Pia thought. She glanced at her mother, who was picking up a tattered sock and scrubbing one hand on her apron. Her flour-sack blouse hung loose on her shoulders, exposing her thin neck and jutting collarbones, and her brown skirt hung like a faded tent over her legs. Her jawline and cheekbones stood out in sharp angles in her pale face, and her waist-length blond hair, which Pia used to love to brush and Mutti now wore in a loose braid, looked limp and dull. Pia wasn't sure how much longer her mother could keep nursing the twins

without eating more, but Mutti refused to spend what little money they had on formula when she could feed her babies for free, and she didn't want to use the jars of Mellin's Infant Food on the shelf until absolutely necessary, even though doctors said Mellin's mixed with cow's milk was superior to mother's milk. But they only had water to mix it with, anyway.

Pia wanted to look for a job to bring in more money, but Mutti hoped the war would be over soon, Vater would return, and things would go back to normal. In the meantime, Pia was only thirteen and needed to stay in school as long as possible, especially because the laws for Germans seemed to change every day, and there was no way of knowing how much longer she'd be allowed to attend. Finn had offered to teach her how to steal food at the open-air market, but she refused. Mutti would never eat stolen food, not to mention the trouble she'd be in if she got caught. The first time she saw Finn stuff a brisket under his jacket, she'd been shocked—and asked him afterward how taking meat was any different from robbing bottles and rags from the old colored woman. He said the boys who did that were trying to cause trouble by stealing from someone who already had nothing, but he was trying to help his family survive. Like him and everyone else unlucky enough to live in the Fifth Ward, she'd been dealt an unpredictable lot in life, he said, and someday she might need to slip a loaf of bread beneath her shirt to stay alive. Having been taught that taking something that didn't belong to her was wrong, no matter what, she hadn't been convinced. But she had to admit she was beginning to understand. Desperation was a powerful thing. Now she wished she'd listened to him. She supposed she could still try stealing if things got any worse; then she remembered she was too scared to leave the house.

"Did you go to the market this morning?" she asked her mother.

Mutti shook her head. "I was waiting for you to stay with the boys. Then Mrs. Schmidt told me everything was closing and I should stay home."

Just then, one of the twins started crying in the other room. Mutti sighed and pushed herself up from her chair, her hands on her knees, her face contorting in pain.

"What's wrong?" Pia said. "Did you hurt yourself?"

Mutti shook her head. “*Nein*, I am only getting old.”

Pia frowned. At thirty-two, Mutti wasn’t *that* old. “Stay there,” she said. “I’ll get the boys.”

Her mother sat back down and sighed. “*Danke*.”

Opening the door a crack, Pia peeked inside the bedroom. Maybe whoever was crying would fall back asleep. The lantern light from the kitchen fell over a wooden washstand, a dresser with mismatched handles and crooked drawers, and her parents’ rusty iron bed filling half the room. Near the head of the bed, a floor-level cubby and open closet took up one wall. The twins lay on the bedcovers in cotton gowns and day caps, their rattles and swaddling blankets on the floor. One was on his back with the toes of his foot in his mouth, the other on his stomach, red-faced and howling. Their names were Oliver and Maxwell, Ollie and Max for short—good American names, according to Mutti, who wanted Pia to change her name to Polly or Peg after the war started. But Pia liked being named after her great-grandmother, even though some of her schoolmates used it as another reason to pick on her, and in the end, Vater said she could keep it. Max was the one howling.

She entered the bedroom, lit the lantern on the dresser, picked up the rattles and blankets, and stood by the bed, waiting to see what the twins would do when they saw her. Max noticed her first. He stopped crying and gave her a teary-eyed grin, his drool-covered lips still quivering. She wrapped one of the blankets around him, scooped him up, and sat on the edge of the bed, cradling him in one arm. He grabbed a handful of her hair, and Ollie cooed up at her from the bed, then stuck his toes back in his mouth. Then she remembered something and stiffened. What if she felt something strange when she held her brothers? What if her chest hurt or her lungs burned? Touching family had never troubled her before, but that was before the parade and the flu, before Mary Helen and Tommy Costa. She took Max’s tiny hand in hers, held her breath, and waited. To her relief, she felt nothing but his warm body against hers, and the silky soft skin of his little fingers and palm. She exhaled, her breath shuddering in her chest, and wiped the tears from his face.

“What’s the matter, little one?” she said in a soft, singsong voice.

“Did you think we left you home all alone? Don’t you know we’d never do that?” She kissed his forehead. “Never, ever, ever.”

Max grinned up at her again, bubbles of spit forming between his lips.

Unlike everyone else, she could always tell her brothers apart. Even Vater joked about hanging numbers around their necks so he would know who was who. Looking at their white-blond hair and cobalt blue eyes—traits inherited from Mutti—it would be easy to get them confused. But Pia knew Max’s face was the slightest bit thinner than Ollie’s, his button nose a tad flatter on the end. His dimples were deeper too.

She’d never forget the day four months ago when the twins were born, the tense minutes after Ollie’s appearance when Mutti continued to groan and hold her still-bulging stomach. Vater sent Pia to get Mrs. Schmidt, but by the time she returned, a second baby had arrived, much to everyone’s surprise. Mrs. Schmidt, holding a jar of lard to “lubricate the parts of passage,” seemed unfazed.

“I knew you were having more than one when you said the kicking felt like the baby was wearing hobnailed boots,” she said proudly.

While Mrs. Schmidt helped Mutti remove her soiled skirt and get cleaned up, Pia swaddled the newborn twins and studied their tiny faces, grateful and amazed to finally have two brand-new brothers. From that day on, telling them apart had been easy.

“I know who you are,” Pia said to Max now, as she cradled him on the edge of her parents’ bed. “Yes, I do.” She bent down and kissed Ollie’s forehead. “You too, Ollie boy.”

Ollie smiled, chuckling around the toes in his mouth.

Pia picked up one of their rattles and held it out for him, trying to get him to let go of his foot. Vater had carved the rattles out of wood before he left for the war, sanding them over and over until every spot was smooth and soft. He used twine threaded through holes to hold four brass bells on each side, and carved each boy’s initials on the handles. The sound they made when shook reminded Pia of sleigh bells at Christmas.

Ollie was more interested in playing with his feet. She put the rattle down and noticed Max was falling back asleep, his long dark

lashes like feathers against his pale cheeks. She rocked him in her arms and sang a lullaby in a soft voice. Ollie lay still and listened, then let go of his toes, put his thumb in his mouth, and gazed up at her with sleepy eyes. Within minutes they were both napping again. She covered Ollie with the other blanket, then stood and carefully laid Max next to him. After waiting a few seconds to make sure they'd stay asleep, she turned the knob on the oil lantern and the thick wick receded, reducing the flame. Then she tiptoed out of the room, giving them one last look before letting the door latch slip quietly back into place.

When she turned around, her mother was still at the table, her head in her hands, her mending forgotten in her lap. A knot of fear twisted in Pia's stomach.

"What is it, Mutti?" Pia said. "What's wrong?"

Mutti looked up. "Oh, *liebchen*," she said. "Nothing. I'm only tired."

Her words did little to lessen Pia's alarm. She studied her mother's face, worried she wasn't telling the truth. It wasn't like her to complain about being tired. Or anything else, for that matter. "Did you eat today?"

Mutti nodded. "*Kartoffelpfannkuchen*, a potato pancake, and applesauce."

"That's not enough," Pia said. "Why don't you have something to eat and take a nap while the twins are sleeping? I can work on the mending."

To Pia's surprise, Mutti nodded, put the mending on the table, and stood. "*Ja*, I think I will lie down for a little bit." She went over to Pia's bed, moved her schoolbooks to the floor, and got under the blanket. "The soup is almost finished," she said. "Be careful not to let it burn." She took a deep breath, then exhaled with a shuddering sigh.

Pia dug her nails into her palms. Mutti never lay down in the afternoon. She went over to the bed and knelt beside her. "Are you sure you're feeling all right? Maybe I should get Mrs. Schmidt."

Mutti gave her a weak smile. "Do not worry, *liebchen*, I'm fine," she said. "Remember I said the twins were fussing today. They were

awake all night too. I'm only tired from that." She closed her eyes. "And Mrs. Schmidt is not here."

"What do you mean? Where is she?"

"On the train to her mother's house. In Pittsburgh."

"Maybe I should go look for a doctor, then," Pia said. The thought of leaving and going into the city again terrified her, but she'd do it for Mutti. Then she remembered what her teachers said about the shortage of doctors and nurses because of the war—that those left behind were overwhelmed and the hospitals were full—and a cold block of fear settled in her chest.

Mutti opened her eyes and looked at her, her face serious. "I am not sick, Pia. I only need to rest, just for a few minutes. Then I will feel better."

Pia sighed. She prayed Mutti was right, but she hated feeling so helpless. "Then let me close the window so you don't get chilled."

Mutti turned on her side and pulled the blanket up to her chin. "*Nein*, fresh air is good to keep away the flu."

Pia lifted her hand to check her mother's forehead for fever, then froze. What if she felt pain in her chest or became short of breath when she touched her? What would she do then? Mrs. Schmidt was gone and the hospitals were full. Chewing her lip, she went over to the table, picked up the darning egg with trembling fingers, and dropped it into a sock. Maybe she *should* feel her mother's forehead. The sooner she knew if she was getting sick, the sooner she could try to find some kind of help. Maybe someone else in the building would know what to do. Maybe they'd have whiskey or some other kind of medicine. If only Mrs. Schmidt were still there.

After a little while, she put down the mending, went over to the foot of the bed, and gazed down at Mutti. She was sound asleep, her mouth hanging open, thin strands of hair stuck to her cheeks and lips. Exhaustion clung to her features, aging her beyond her years. Pia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. What should she do? She looked out the window toward Finn's apartment. If only she could send him a note to ask for help. But undershirts and baby-wear filled the clothesline. She couldn't take them off without waking Mutti. Who knew if he'd answer in time, anyway? She thought

about hurrying across the alley and knocking on his door, but what if the twins woke up and Mutti didn't hear them? Not to mention she didn't want to go out in the hall, let alone outside.

As if roused by her thoughts, the twins started crying. Mutti opened her eyes and started to sit up.

"Stay there," Pia said. "I'll get them."

"*Nein*," Mutti said. "They are hungry and I have too much to do." She moved to the edge of the bed and stood, her hands on the small of her back as she straightened, and started toward the bedroom. "Please take some soft potatoes from the soup for their supper."

"Yes, Mutti," Pia said.

"And close the window. It may be too cold for them."

Pia pulled the window sash all the way down, then went over to the stove. She took a slotted spoon from the kitchen shelf, fished several floury potatoes out of the soup, and put them in a bowl. Mutti came out of the bedroom with Ollie and Max, laid them on the bed, unpinned two clean diapers from the ceiling clothesline, and started to change them. She smiled and kissed the boys' faces, laughing when they babbled and cooed.

"You are the best little boys in the world," she said, cooing back at them. "And the most handsome too. Are you hungry? *Ja*? Your sister is getting your dinner ready for you."

Pia mashed the potatoes in the bowl and softened them with a little broth, one eye on her mother. Maybe she'd been wrong to worry. Maybe Mutti really was just tired and the short nap had helped. In any case, she was acting normal now. Fear seeped out of Pia's chest and relief loosened her shoulders.

Mutti picked Ollie up and kissed him on the cheek, then put him back down on the mattress. She made a move to pick Max up, then hesitated, put a hand to her head, and sat down hard on the edge of the bed. Red blotches bloomed on her pale face.

Pia put down the soup bowl and rushed to her side. "What is it, Mutti?" she said.

Mutti closed her eyes and moaned. "I'm not sure," she said. "I . . . I'm feeling a little dizzy."

Panic flared in Pia's chest again, beating against her rib cage like stone wings. "I'll go try to find a doctor."

"*Nein*," Mutti said. "You are not leaving. It's not safe."

"But what if . . ." Pia hesitated, trying to keep her voice from trembling. "What if you're getting sick?"

"I'm all right. I am not coughing or too hot, only tired. Besides, there is no money for a doctor. And they don't want to help a German, anyway."

"Is there anyone else in the building like Mrs. Schmidt? Someone who might know what to do?"

Mutti shook her head. "Our neighbors have their own troubles right now. I only need to sleep. It is the best medicine." She pushed herself off the bed and stood. "Will you take care of the boys for a few hours while I lie down in the bedroom?"

"Yes, of course. And I'll bring you some soup."

Mutti nodded and started toward the bedroom, walking slowly. Pia followed, struggling to stay calm. For as long as she could remember, her mother had never complained about not feeling well, not even after having the twins, when Mrs. Schmidt instructed her to spend two weeks in bed. Not even when she had a horrible headache that seemed to last for weeks, or when she broke her big toe. Mutti always kept quiet and kept going as best she could. She never gave up or gave in. To hear her say she didn't feel well sent a flood of terror through Pia's bones. Mutti sat on the edge of the bed and Pia knelt down, unbuttoned her boots, and pulled them off.

"*Danke*," Mutti said, lying back on the pillow. Pia covered her with a blanket, wondering what else she should do.

Out in the other room, Ollie and Max started crying.

"*Bitte*, feed the boys and let me rest," Mutti said, shooing her away with one hand. "I will be much better when I wake up."

"Will you promise to call me if you need anything?"

"*Ja*, now go."

Pia started out of the room, then stopped at the door and turned. "And tell me if you start feeling worse?"

"*Ja, ja*," Mutti said. She laid her forearm across her forehead, her pale wrist turned up, and closed her eyes.

“Promise?” Pia said.

“Ja, Pia.”

With growing dread, Pia left the room and closed the door. Hopefully Mutti was right; she was only overworked and exhausted. It made sense, with the twins waking up several times a night to nurse, then barely sleeping during the day. Still, Pia couldn’t help fearing the worst. She prayed she was wrong.

After feeding Max and Ollie mashed potatoes softened with broth, she put them on a blanket in the middle of the floor with their rattles, then filled a bowl with soup and slowly opened the bedroom door, trying not to make any noise. A slice of weak light fell across Mutti’s pale face. She was sound asleep again, her mouth agape.

“Mutti?” Pia said in a quiet voice. “I brought you some soup.” She went over to the bed and looked down at her. “Mutti?”

Mutti didn’t blink or move. Pia thought about waking her, but decided to let her rest. The few minutes she’d gotten earlier probably weren’t enough. She needed an entire night of uninterrupted sleep, then maybe she’d be back to her old self by morning. Pia left the bedroom, quietly closed the door, took the soup over to the table, and sat down. From the blanket on the floor, the boys watched her eat, grinning and gurgling, and reaching for each other’s hands and faces. She would take care of them tonight. She would mix a jar of Mellin’s Infant Food with water and feed them that so Mutti wouldn’t have to wake up and nurse. They weren’t used to drinking from bottles, but if they were hungry enough, they’d figure it out.

When she was done with her soup, she got up, knelt on her bed, opened the window, and, working fast, pulled the clothes off the line and piled them beside her. The undershirts and nightdresses were still damp from the fall air, but she’d hang them up again inside, when she had time. When everything was off the line, she closed the window and stacked the laundry on the kitchen chairs, then took her math book out from beneath her bed and tore out the first page, which was blank, except for the title and copyright. Damaging a schoolbook would likely get her in trouble, but there was no other paper in the house, and this was an emergency. She found a pencil, sat down at the table again, and wrote to Finn.

Are you all right? What's wrong with your brother? Mutti might be getting sick and I don't know what to do. I have no medicine or whiskey. She says I shouldn't leave the house to find a doctor, and I don't really want to, anyway. Please help. I'm scared.

She folded the paper, crawled up on her bed again, opened the window partway, fastened the note to the line with a clothespin, and sent it across the alley. The pulley squeaked while the clothesline lurched and paused, lurched and paused, until finally the note reached the ledge outside Finn's window. Afraid to blink, she watched to see if he would reach out and take it, but no one came to the open window, or looked out. She glanced over her shoulder at her brothers, content and playing on the blanket, then pushed the window open all the way and leaned out as far as she dared. Praying Mutti wouldn't hear, she called out, "Finn!"

No answer.

"Hey, Finn! Are you over there? It's me, Pia!"

Still no answer.

She pulled the sash down and watched for a few more minutes, but no one came to the window. Looking out over the eerily silent Fifth Ward, a cold eddy of loneliness began to swirl inside her chest. The sun blazed on the distant horizon, casting a yellow glow over the cool fall evening, the perfect weather for a brisk walk or a rousing game of stickball. But no children played in the alley below. No delivery wagons rattled along the cobblestones. No women gossiped on the front stoops or called their children in from open windows. A hollow draft of fear swept through her. It felt like the end of the world.

While Mutti slept and Pia took care of her brothers, panic gripped the city. The director of the Philadelphia General Hospital pleaded for volunteers to relieve nurses who had collapsed from overwork. Doctors and nurses started dying, three one day, two another, four the next. Undertakers ran out of embalming fluid and coffins, and masked policemen guarded what coffins were left. Gravediggers were either ill, overcharging people, or refusing to

bury influenza victims. The director of the city jail offered prisoners to help dig graves, but withdrew the offer when he realized there were no healthy guards to watch them. Thirty-three policemen had already died. The citizens of Philadelphia began whispering the word *plague*.

Meanwhile, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* scorned the closing of public places:

What are the authorities trying to do? Scare everyone to death? What is to be gained by shutting up well-ventilated churches and theaters and letting people press into trolley cars? What then should a man do to prevent panic and fear? Live a calm life. Do not discuss influenza. Worry is useless. Talk of cheerful things instead of disease.

For Pia, getting the twins to drink formula out of bottles proved to be more difficult than she thought. By the time the first feeding was over, all three of them were exhausted. When her brothers finally collapsed into a restless sleep on her bed, it was after midnight. She edged off the mattress, moving slowly and quietly, and peeked into the dark bedroom, surprised her mother hadn't heard the boys' frustrated cries. Mutti was still sound asleep, her breath like sandpaper against wood. Pia tiptoed into the room, stood by the bed, and, with trembling fingers, reached out to feel her mother's forehead. As soon as her hand touched Mutti's clammy skin, heat lit up her face and neck, and an invisible weight pressed against her chest. She yanked her hand away and the frightening sensations disappeared. Tears filled Pia's eyes. *No. Mutti can't be sick. She just can't be.*

Turning toward the dresser, she quietly opened the bottom drawer, took out a sweater, and laid it over her mother's chest and shoulders, pulling it and the blanket up beneath her chin. She didn't know what else to do.

Queasy with fear, she crept out of the room and closed the door. The thought of leaving the safety of their apartment, going out into the city in the middle of the night to search for a doctor, not knowing if anyone would even help, terrified her. And who would take care of the babies while she was gone? Mutti might be

too sick to watch them. And the boys probably shouldn't be near her, anyway.

Paralyzed by indecision, she turned down the lantern and lay in her bed, the boys' small bodies snuggled between her and the wall. She needed to organize her thoughts and gather her courage. The sun would be up in a few hours. Then she could ask a neighbor to watch the twins. Mutti always said everything looked less frightening in the light. She hoped so, because right now she was scared to death. Knowing she couldn't sleep, she tried to come up with a plan.

When her frantic dreams ended, she opened her eyes, confused and trying to remember what day it was. An eerie, grayish glow filtered in under the flour-sack drapes. She turned her head and looked up. A jagged water stain colored the gray ceiling paper like a small yellow lake, making her think of the spring runoff near the culm banks in Hazleton. Then she remembered—the schools and churches and all public meeting places had been closed. And Mutti might be sick with the flu. The twins still lay between her and the wall. She sat up with a start and nearly fell off the edge of the bed, then blinked and looked around, trying to figure out how long she'd slept. She got up on her knees and pulled aside the drapes.

It was dawn.

And her note to Finn still dangled on the clothesline.

Ollie turned toward her, kicking his legs and starting to fuss. Max was starting to wake up too. She picked Ollie up and bounced him on her hip, her eyes fixed on Finn's window.

"Shh, Ollie boy," she said, patting his back. "Everything's going to be all right."

She watched Finn's window for another few seconds. No one moved behind the glass. Had they taken his brother to the hospital? Or were they all sick? Ollie started to wail, his face turning red, his small hands in fists.

"I know," she said to him. "You want your mommy. Have you had enough of me?" She got down from the bed, snuggled his cheek against hers, and moved toward the bedroom. "All right, all right. I'll take you to your *mutti*." Then she stopped and glanced over her shoulder at Max. "Stay right there, good boy. I'll be right back."

Max blinked and grinned at her, still half asleep, while Ollie howled in her ear, loud enough to wake the people next door. She started toward the bedroom again, a growing surge of fear coursing through her, making her chest hurt. Surely Mutti could hear Ollie crying. Why hadn't she come out to see what was wrong?

Pia knocked lightly on the door. "Mutti? Are you up?"

No answer.

"Mutti?"

Pia opened the door and entered slowly, keeping her eyes down in case her mother was dressing. "I'm sorry to wake you, but Ollie's hungry. I fed him some Mellin's a while ago, but—" Then she looked up and went rigid.

Mutti lay on her side in the bed, her clawed hands frozen at her throat, her mouth agape as if stuck mid-scream. A dark fluid ran from her nose and mouth and eyes, red and crusty and black, and her skin was the color of a bruise. The coppery smell of warm blood filled the thick air.

"Mutti?" Pia managed.

No response.

"Mutti?"

Realization, sudden and horrible, struck Pia. Her legs turned to water and she bent over, gagging and almost dropping Ollie. She grabbed the iron footboard to stay upright. The floor seemed to tilt beneath her feet.

Ollie wailed louder, filling the room.

Pia fell to her knees, her heartbeat thrashing in her ears. *No. This can't be happening. It can't be.* Dizzy and hyperventilating, she edged around to the side of the bed, the wood floor like a rasp on her bare knees, her shaking arms struggling to hold on to her baby brother.

"Mutti," she cried. "Get up! You can't leave us! You can't!" She held her breath and reached out with trembling fingers, as if one touch would shatter her mother like glass. "Please, Mutti. Wake up!" Her fingertips grazed the sleeve of Mutti's sweater, and she drew back, her stomach turning over. She didn't need to touch her mother's skin to know something was horribly wrong. She didn't

want to touch her and feel *death*. Grabbing the side of the damp mattress, she pulled herself to her feet, put a hand on Mutti's shoulder, and shook her. Mutti's body wobbled back and forth, like a life-size doll lying on a shelf.

A scream built up in Pia's throat, but she clamped her teeth against it. She fell to her knees again and let Ollie slide to the floor, her arms too weak to hold him. He lay on his back, his face red, and cried harder. In the other room, Max started wailing too. Pia buried her face in her hands and squeezed her eyes shut, hoping the image of her dead mother would be gone when she opened them. *This can't be true! It can't be! Mutti is not dead. She's not!*

She dropped her hands to the floor to keep from collapsing and opened her eyes. Her mother was still there, on the bed, covered in blood. Pia moaned and slumped to the floor, her legs and arms vibrating out of control, her breath coming in short, shallow gasps. Violent sobs burst from her throat one after the other, before she could catch her next mouthful of air. Each wail wrenched the strength from her body. Ollie howled beside her, oblivious to the fact that his mother was dead and his life had been changed forever. He reached for Pia's arm, clutching her sleeve in his small fist. She picked him up and hugged him to her chest, her shoulders convulsing, her mind screaming in terror and grief.

More than anything, she wanted to lose consciousness, to faint and escape into nothingness, where pain and fear couldn't reach her. But she had to take care of the boys. She had to go out to the other room and get Max, who was crying even harder now. When she trusted herself to stand, she staggered to her feet, still hugging Ollie, and stumbled out to the kitchen. She hefted Max onto her other hip and carried her brothers back into the bedroom on quivering legs, then slid down the wall opposite the bed, dizzy and out of breath. Her body felt like kindling, her nerves stripped and sparking, ready to burst into flames at any second. Her mind raced and her stomach churned, overwhelmed with grief and horror and disbelief. How could Mutti be dead? Dead? She rarely caught cold. How could she catch the flu? She kept her feet dry. She stayed warm. She even ate sugar cubes soaked in kerosene.

Pia stared at her mother, bile rising in the back of her throat, the babies howling in her arms. What were she and the twins going to do without her? Who was going to take care of them now? Pia wailed with her brothers, fighting the urge to scream and vomit, the black manacle of grief closing around her shattered heart and locking into place with a horrible, sickening thud.

CHAPTER TWO



BERNICE

October 11, 1918

For what seemed like the thousandth time in the past few days, twenty-year-old Bernice Groves stared out the third-floor window of her row house on Shunk Alley in the Fifth Ward, trying to figure out how to kill herself. She thought about jumping out the window, but worried the fall would only break her legs, not end her life. Slitting her wrists with a kitchen knife was an option, but she hated the sight of blood. She could swallow the rat poison her husband had brought home before he was drafted, but she didn't want to die writhing in agony. Her death needed to be as quick and painless as possible. Maybe that made her a coward, but she didn't care. There was no one left to notice, anyway. Then her eyes traveled to the clotheslines between the buildings, crisscrossing the alley like the threads of a giant spiderweb. Braiding several lengths of it together might make a rope strong enough to hold her weight so she could hang herself. But how would she get that much? She couldn't very well go door to door asking her neighbors to loan out their clotheslines. Not that they would answer their doors, anyway. Since the epidemic started—Had it been a week? Ten days? Fourteen?—no one dared let anyone but family into their homes, and sometimes not even them.

No children played in the alley below, no women hurried out to run errands, no men whistled or smoked on their way home from work. Even the laundry lines hung empty. The only living things she'd seen over the past few days were a street sweeper sprinkling some kind of powder along the cobblestones and a brown dog sniffing two sheet-wrapped bodies across the way before dashing down the alley, his nose to the ground. More often than not, she wondered if she was the last person alive on earth.

It was easy to understand why the man who lived upstairs, Mr. Werkner, had shot his wife and two children before putting a gun to his own head instead of letting the flu decide their fate. While the rest of the city waited in fear and bodies piled up outside the morgues and cemeteries, he had taken matters into his own hands. She would have done the same thing if she'd known a week ago what she knew now. And if she had a gun.

Hopefully she already had the flu and would be dead soon, anyway. Then she would be with her husband and son. Except she didn't want to wait that long. She wanted to die *now*, to escape this wretched grief, this horrible, heavy ache in her chest. She couldn't stand the agony another minute. The Bible said taking your own life was a sin, but surely God would understand that a mother couldn't live without her child. Surely He would understand why she longed to be reunited with her son in heaven. Everything she knew to be good was gone. Everything she knew to be true and absolute and fair about the world had been destroyed.

Maybe she should just stop eating. Not that she had been eating much, anyway. How could she think about food when her baby boy was dead? How could she swallow a bite of doughy bread with sweet jam, or soothe her dry throat with hot tea with honey? How could she do any of those things when Wallis would never taste a strawberry or an egg, eat an apple or a warm piece of johnnycake? It seemed blasphemous to even think about eating when he couldn't, as if she were betraying him.

A loaf of bread wrapped in cheesecloth sat untouched in her dresser drawer, along with a pound of lard, a few strips of cooked bacon, and a dozen eggs in the larder, three boxes of cereal, several jars of pears and tomatoes, and a half-dozen cans of beans and car-

rots on the kitchen shelves. She thought about leaving the food outside her neighbors' doors, but couldn't find the strength or desire to pack it up and take it out. And despite her revulsion at the thought of eating, every now and then the desperate gnaw of hunger grew unbearable, as if her stomach were eating itself from the inside out. She tried to ignore it by lying down and hoping she would pass out or starve to death, but an involuntary will to survive always seemed to win and she'd tear into a box of cornflakes, disgusted and crying and hating herself as she shoved them into her mouth. Then, with her hunger abated, she'd make a vow to start starving herself all over again, and beg Wallis to forgive her for being so weak.

Thinking about her beautiful baby boy, her burning eyes filled and she looked over at him. A week ago, he'd been the picture of health, giggling and babbling and reaching for her with his chubby little hands. Then he woke up with a fever and a cough, refusing to nurse. After two days of trying every recommended cure for the flu—onion syrup, chloride of lime, whiskey, Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup—she bundled him up and ran what seemed like a hundred blocks to the nearest emergency hospital—the local poorhouse, which had been converted after the epidemic started. Crying the whole way, she prayed that the good Lord would save her only child. She'd already lost her husband to war. How much misery was one person supposed to endure?

But when she reached the hospital, she'd slowed. Every type of vehicle she could imagine crowded the street—trucks and cars and wagons and carts, all of them bringing the sick, the dying, and the dead. Even police cars were bringing in victims. What looked like thousands of people—some wearing yarmulkes and dark clothes, others in babushka scarves and colorful skirts—swarmed the building, trying to get inside. Some sat or lay on the ground wrapped in blankets, while others were half-naked and soaked in sweat, moaning, coughing, and struggling to breathe. A number of them were already dead, their faces as purple as plums, their mouths and noses and eyes caked with dark blood. A colored man stumbled in front of her toward the hospital, begging to be let in, and a white man pushed him backward, telling him to go somewhere else. The colored man collapsed on the sidewalk, then lay

there, lifeless. Masked policemen did their best to keep order, while nuns in white aprons prayed over the living and the dead. Beneath a canopy on the sidewalk, Red Cross workers handed out masks and sewed burial shrouds. A chorus of voices cried out for water and prayed in what seemed like a dozen different languages—English, Russian, Italian, Yiddish, Polish, German.

She fought her way through the crowd, claspings Wallis to her chest. “Please,” she cried out. “Please let me through! I need help! My son is sick!”

“Hey,” someone shouted. “Get in line!”

“Wait your turn,” a woman yelled.

Bernice ignored them and kept going, pushing and shoving her way through. A policeman and a nun stood guard at the hospital entrance, both wearing gauze masks. When Bernice reached them, the policeman stepped between her and the nun.

“Please,” Bernice said, trying to catch her breath. “You have to help me. My boy is sick.”

“I’m sorry, dear,” the nun said. “We’ve run out of room.”

“But he’s just a baby,” Bernice wailed. “My only child!”

“I understand,” the nun said. “But there are other mothers with children here too.”

Bernice looked around, tears blurring her vision. A young, dark-haired woman wearing a scarf over her mouth knelt on the sidewalk beside a pale, coughing toddler, her eyes filled with fear. Another woman held a young girl on her hip, swaying back and forth, trying to comfort her child. The little girl’s legs dangled skinny and limp against her mother’s skirt, and her skin was tinged a strange, bluish gray. A thousand faces stared back at Bernice, some gasping for air, others weary with pain, all knotted in terror.

Bernice gazed up at the nun. “Why aren’t you helping us?” she cried. “What’s wrong with you?”

“All of our beds and even the hallways are full,” the nun said. “We’re crowded to the doors, and most of our doctors and nurses are overseas. We’ve put a call out for volunteers, but I’m afraid we’re overwhelmed. I’m so sorry, dear, but you must get in line.”

Just then, a man carrying a little boy ran up the steps with a wad of money in his hand. He begged the nun to take his son inside,

but the policeman pushed him back, threatening to arrest him for bribery.

Seizing the opportunity, Bernice darted around the policeman and started for the entrance, shoving the nun to one side with her shoulder. Suddenly a woman in a peasant skirt appeared out of nowhere, blocking her way. A feverish-looking toddler slumped in the cloth sling strapped around her chest.

“Volte!” the woman said. *“Você tem que esperar como todo mundo!”*

Bernice tried forcing her way past, but the woman stood her ground, snarling and pushing her back with rough hands. A broad-shouldered man came to the woman’s rescue and got between them, his arms out to keep Bernice at a distance.

“Não toque nela!” he shouted.

Bernice didn’t understand his words, but menace filled his voice. She tried to get around them again, but the policeman gripped her by the shoulders and pulled her backward.

“Come on, lady,” he said. “You can’t go in yet.”

The immigrant couple kept yelling at her, pointing their fingers and shaking their fists.

“What about them?” Bernice shouted. “You can’t let them in either!”

The policeman ignored her. She struggled to get away from him, twisting and pulling and bending, but it was no use.

“Who do you think you are, trying to stop me from getting help?” she screamed at the couple. “You don’t even belong here!”

The woman shouted something else, and the nun ushered her and the man away from the door. “It’s all right,” she said to them. “Please, calm down. We’re not letting anyone in ahead of you.”

The policeman turned Bernice around and took her down the steps, one hand gripping her arm, the other putting pressure on her back—almost pushing, but not quite. At the bottom of the stairs, he let go and went back to his post. She gazed down at her sweet little Wallis, gasping for air and struggling to stay alive in her arms. How could they make him wait in line behind people who should have been looking for help from their own kind? She’d tried minding her own business when it came to the strangers who had invaded

her city, but this was too much. Between a German stealing her father's job and this, she was done being civil.

She turned and looked up at the nun and policeman again. "What are you doing?" she cried. "Half these people are foreigners. They shouldn't be trying to get help from doctors meant to help Americans. It's not right!"

"We're here to help everyone," the nun said. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to wait like everyone else."

Above the din of the wailing, pleading crowd, Bernice heard her heart break. No one was going to help her boy. No one was going to give him medicine or ease his pain. Not until they'd helped the hordes of people who didn't belong here. It didn't make sense. The immigrants should have been turned away, not her son. On legs that felt like stone, she turned and staggered through the frightened swarm of tormented and dying people. She would take Wallis home. She would take him home and they would die together.

Except she didn't die. She didn't even get a fever. She didn't have a cough or as much as a tickle in her throat. The only thing she had was a headache, which always happened when she was distraught.

Wallis, on the other hand, had died the next morning.

She'd never forget the last minutes and seconds of her baby boy struggling in her arms, the fear and panic in his innocent eyes, the way he'd gripped her finger in his little hand as he fought for air and life. After a while, his face changed and grew gray, then got darker and darker. Blood seeped from his nose and rimmed the lower lids of his eyes. Then, with one final gasp, his tiny body shuddered and went slack. His hand loosened around her finger, and his eyelids drifted partway closed. She held him in her arms and stared at his face for what seemed like forever, then got up, laid him in his crib, and collapsed on the floor, shrieking over and over until she tasted blood. When she finally stopped screaming, the world started to close in around her like a curtain being drawn. Certain she was dying of a broken heart, she welcomed the relief. Finally she would be at peace, blessed with the knowledge that she would be with her husband and son. She felt like she was floating in a pool of liquid silver, and a smile played around her lips. Then everything went black.

She had no idea how much time passed before she came to, but the room was getting dark, the grayish light of dusk sliding down the bedroom wall. At first she thought she had fallen asleep and it was all a horrible nightmare; then she bolted upright and looked over at the crib, her heart roaring in her chest. Wallis lay where she had left him, wrapped in his favorite blue blanket, his face the color of a storm cloud, his nose and mouth smeared with dried blood, his eyes swollen shut.

Dead.

Her son was dead.

She covered her face with clawed hands, her mouth twisting in agony, her mind screaming. *He can't be dead! Not my baby! Not my little boy!* She pounded the floor with her fists, cursing God and howling, then crumpled forward, still on her knees, slumped over like a rag doll. She cupped her swollen bosom in her hands, her throbbing breasts engorged with milk her son would never drink, her own body betraying her with a painful reminder of all she had lost. She squeezed her breasts and screeched in pain, punishing herself for letting Wallis get sick. She had seen the signs and read the warnings. She should have stayed home until the danger was over instead of going to the parade. She should have kept Wallis safe, away from the man selling balloons and the mobs of immigrants on the sidewalks. She should have shoved the dark-skinned boy away from Wallis's buggy and told him to keep his filthy fingers away from her son when he had dropped his miniature flag on Wallis's blanket and reached in to pick it up without asking. It was her fault. Her fault Wallis got sick and died.

Then, after a few minutes of anguished sobbing, she pushed herself up on her hands and knees, swayed upright, and sat on the bed, her mind reeling. How was her heart still beating? Her lungs still drawing air? She picked up her son with gentle hands and kissed his cold forehead, his tiny lips, his miniature fingers, and prayed that her bleeding, shattered heart would kill her and put an end to her suffering. Then she lay on her side on the mattress and cradled him to her chest, hoping her mind would shut down and release her from the pain. She closed her eyes and willed her lungs to quit working, her blood to stop moving through her veins. She cursed God

for taking her child, for deserting her in her hour of need. Then she begged Him to take her too. Her prayers went unanswered.

That was three days ago.

Now Wallis lay like a stone in his crib while she stared out the window, trying to figure out how to end her life. The radio said the city's funeral homes were overwhelmed, but she wouldn't have been able to bring herself to take him to the undertaker anyway, to hand over his tiny body to be embalmed, to be laid in a tiny casket and buried in the cold, hard earth. She couldn't part with him. Ever. The only thing she wanted to do was to join him.

Down in the alley, a woman in a red babushka and tiered skirt pushed a wicker pram with wobbly wheels past the row houses. Then she stopped, lifted a baby from the buggy, and entered one of the buildings across the way. Bernice clenched her jaw in frustration. What was that immigrant woman doing out there when the city was under quarantine? And with a baby no less! Was she crazy or just plain ignorant?

Seeing the woman made her think of the immigrants at the hospital, trying to get help from doctors meant for Americans instead of turning to the witches and wizards they believed could heal them through some kind of sorcery. Wallis might have lived if it hadn't been for them. Then again, it seemed like the entire neighborhood had been taken over by migrants and Negroes since the war started, all of them looking for work in the shipyard and munitions factory. They weren't like her and her family, whose relatives had lived in South Philly since the 1830s, when her grandfather had moved here from Canada to work as a stonemason. Now the entire city was teeming with large ghettos housing every type of foreigner she could think of, and they were stealing jobs from real Americans, like her late father, who had worked at the shipyard for over forty years until a German who lived across the way, Mr. Lange, was hired to replace him. Just six days after he was let go, her father had died—liver failure, the doctors said. But losing his job to a foreigner was what killed him.

Like they'd done outside the hospital, the newcomers crowded around the market stands in their odd clothes, holding up check-out lines because they couldn't speak English. Bernice could hear

her father's voice now: "This is America, they need to learn our language or go back where they came from!" Even the editor of the newspaper had expressed his opposition to "*the flood of undesirables from the darker sections of the Old World who are arriving in the United States with no conception of American ideas.*"

As if that wasn't bad enough, the heavy aromas of their peculiar cuisine stank up the hallways—boiled lamb, paprika, curry, and peppered cabbage—and children of all colors filled the alleys and streets, shouting and playing games in strange languages. Even the number of homeless had increased since the waves of peasants arrived. She wouldn't have been surprised to learn the flu started with them. After all, everyone knew migrants brought disease across the nation's ports and borders—the Irish brought cholera, the Jews brought tuberculosis, the Italians brought polio, and the Chinese brought bubonic plague. She and some of the other women in her prayer group had often discussed the personal hygiene habits, unhealthy tendencies, and questionable morals of foreign-born people. And they all agreed the "Don't Spit" signs should have been printed in all languages, not just English.

Why weren't *their* children dying? Why had her son, a true American, gotten sick and passed away? It wasn't fair.

As soon as the thought crossed her mind, a rush of guilt twisted in her chest. She had seen the immigrant mothers at the hospital with their sick children. She had seen the anguish on Mr. and Mrs. Yankovich's pale faces when they brought out their dead daughter, how Mrs. Yankovich had nearly collapsed and her husband had held her up. She had seen the white crepe on the Costas' door after little Tommy died. Deep down, she knew all mothers loved their children and grieved the same way, no matter their nationality, race, or religion. And yet . . . and yet it seemed as though the newcomers always had three or four offspring to replace the children they lost. She only had one. And he was gone.

No one was immune to getting sick.

Except, it seemed, for her.

After the lady in the babushka disappeared into the row house, a low, lone voice echoed between the brick buildings, and the dry creak of wagon wheels drew closer and closer. Bernice craned her

neck out the window to see. Two men on a horse-drawn wagon moved along the alley toward her building, both wearing masks.

"Bring out your dead!" one of them called out. His voice sounded weary, yet indifferent, like a newspaper hawker on an empty street corner.

Bernice pulled her head back inside to watch. She couldn't help but remember the stories she'd heard about the yellow fever, when the rush to get victims in the grave had resulted in some people being buried alive. Was that happening during this epidemic too? According to radio newscasts, there'd been over five thousand flu deaths since the parade. Embalming students and morticians had come from hundreds of miles away to help take care of the victims, but it wasn't enough. In the last newspaper she'd read before Wallis got sick, the daily notices of death from the flu filled an entire page—along with those killed and missing in the war—seven columns of small print with a repetitive litany: Cecil Newman of pneumonia, age twenty-one; Mavis Rivers of influenza, age twenty-six; William Flint of influenza, age fifteen. Another article stated trucks were being used to carry bodies from the morgue to potter's field. Corpses were tagged for later identification before being buried in a trench dug by a steam shovel, and the men filling in the mass graves were falling sick. On the radio, the Pennsylvania Council of National Defense explained: "*It is doubtful that the city of Philadelphia has, at any time in its history, been confronted by a more serious situation than that presented in connection with the care and burial of the dead during the recent epidemic.*" With everything going on, people being buried alive was certainly a possibility. Just the thought of it made her shiver.

Down in the alley, the driver slowed the horses, pulled to a stop outside one of the row houses, and tied the reins to the wagon. Three bodies wrapped in dirty, bloodstained sheets lay in the wagon bed. The driver and the other man climbed down, went over to the front stoop, lifted a sheet-draped body from beside the steps, and piled it on the back with the others. Then they returned to the steps and picked up another body, this one smaller than the first. With the wagon loaded, they climbed back on and moved closer to Bernice's building, continuing the call for people to bring out their dead.

She would not hand Wallis over to those men. They couldn't take her baby. She wouldn't let them. Then she realized they had no idea she was there, watching from her third-floor window. They didn't know her boy was dead. And she needed to keep it that way. Otherwise, they might put him on that horrible wagon, and once they got a good look at her, they'd force her to go to an asylum.

She had seen her reflection in the cracked mirror above the washbasin. It was that of a stranger, with dull eyes and tangled hair, sunken cheekbones and sallow skin. She looked like a woman insane. They'd think she was sick and needed help. But she didn't want help. There was nothing they could do for her, anyway. She wanted to die. She wanted to be with her husband and son. She shrank back when the men passed beneath her window, but not before catching sight of a small, pale hand sticking out of the bloody pile of sheet-wrapped bodies in the wagon bed.

The men stopped two more times to load dead bodies, then drove along the alley as if it were a normal routine, like delivering milk or lighting the streetlamps. Finally they turned the corner and disappeared, the low, indifferent voice calling for people to bring out their dead echoing once more in the empty alley before growing fainter and fainter. Then the afternoon went silent and Bernice was alone again.

Seeing the men in the wagon made her think of her older brother, Daniel, how he used to shut her in a storage crate and tell her their parents were getting rid of her. He'd say the postman was coming to pick her up to mail her to a different family, or the nuns were coming to take her to an orphanage. He said orphans slept on wooden planks in cold attics, and the only thing they got to eat was cold gruel. If they were bad, the nuns beat them or locked them in closets, and sometimes forgot to let them out. The first time he did it Bernice was five years old, and she stayed in the box for hours, crying and waiting to be taken away. She finally snatched on him when she turned eight, but her mother refused to believe her precious son would do anything so horrible. Instead, she accused Bernice of making up stories and sent her to bed without supper. Then, finally, her father caught Daniel sitting on top of the crate while she wept inside, and punished him with a belt. After that, Daniel never

did it again. But from that day on, after their mother blew out their bedroom lantern every night, he whispered across the room in a menacing voice that the nuns were still coming to get her. Or he crept across the floor in the dark and grabbed her ankles, scaring her so badly she nearly wet the bed. For years she didn't dare fall asleep until she heard him snoring. Sometimes he asked if she could taste the rat poison in her oatmeal, or left a noose lying between her sheets. When he died of typhoid at thirteen, she was inconsolable. No one knew she was crying tears of relief.

Suddenly a flash of movement caught her attention, pulling her from her thoughts. The door in the row house across the alley opened partway and someone peeked out, a small, pinched face looking up and down the street. It looked like a young girl, with blond braids and a red scarf over her nose and mouth. After checking both ways, the girl came out and stood on the stoop, her shoulders hunched as if trying to make herself smaller. She wore an oversize coat with baggy pockets over her long dress and carried what looked like an empty sack in one hand.

Bernice couldn't be sure, but it looked like Mr. and Mrs. Lange's daughter, the one with the bluest eyes she'd ever seen and the odd-sounding name. What was it? Gia? Pia? Yes, that was it. Pia. She remembered because she'd heard the Duffy boy calling out to her as she sat reading on the steps one day. At first she thought he was yelling in a different language, but then the girl waved and went to greet him. That's when Bernice realized the strange word was a name. Another time at a vegetable stand, she'd heard Mrs. Lange talking to the same girl and realized it was her daughter. Neither of them paid any attention to her, but Bernice had noticed the striking color of Pia's eyes, like the deep cobalt of a blue jay's wing. At the time Bernice had been only weeks away from giving birth to Wallis and had almost stopped to admire Mrs. Lange's new twins—but she kept going because Mr. Lange had taken her father's job. Not to mention she couldn't let the neighbors see her talking to Germans. She'd wondered briefly if she'd temporarily lost her mind, then reminded herself the twins were only babies, too young to be swayed by German views and behaviors. She couldn't fault herself for being drawn to their sweet, newborn faces.

Now she couldn't imagine why Pia was leaving the safety of their row house during a citywide quarantine. Where was her mother? And what about her brothers, those beautiful twin boys? Mrs. Lange had to be out of her mind to allow her young daughter to venture out at a time like this. Pia couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen. Even if Mrs. Lange couldn't read the newspaper and didn't own a radio, she had to know people were getting sick and dying. She had to know it wasn't safe for Pia to leave their apartment. The thought briefly crossed her mind that the Germans had started the epidemic and Pia and her family were immune, but she pushed it away. Mr. and Mrs. Bach and their four daughters were German too, and every last one of them was dead.

In spite of her anger with Mr. Lange for stealing her father's job, and the fact that they were German, Bernice could tell that normally, Mrs. Lange was a good mother. If there was a chill in the air, the twins and Pia always wore warm coats and knitted hats. Whenever she came out of the building with the twins, Mrs. Lange kissed them both before putting them in their pram, then smiled and talked to them while pushing them down the sidewalk. She caressed Pia's cheek with a gentle hand and kissed her forehead when seeing her off to school. So why would Mrs. Lange risk her daughter's life by letting her go outside during a flu epidemic?

Then Bernice had another thought. One that made her blood run cold.

Maybe Mrs. Lange was dead.

Maybe the twins were dead too.

No. Not those beautiful baby boys!

Nausea stirred in Bernice's stomach, and the room seemed to spin around her. She grasped the back of a kitchen chair to steady herself, and fixed watery eyes on the body of her dead son. How was it possible that babies were getting sick and dying? How was such a horrendous nightmare allowed? And where was the God she knew and loved? The Lange boys were a little older than Wallis, but just as innocent and pure, even if they were German. Pulling her gaze back to the window, she tried to focus. Pia was hurrying along the alley with her head down, occasionally glancing over her shoulder and looking around as if worried she might be seen.

Bernice couldn't imagine where she was headed. Maybe she was going to try to find medicine but hadn't heard that the pharmacies had run out of everything but whiskey—now that the saloons were closed, it was the only place you could get it. Maybe she was going to the hospital to look for help. But if the boys were sick, Mrs. Lange should have gone instead of sending her young daughter. It wasn't right. Unless Mrs. Lange was sick too.

Then Pia climbed the steps of the next building and went inside. What was she doing?