

Chapter 1

August 4, 2004

New York City

Sunlight slaps me with jarring rhythm, jumping out from behind the abandoned buildings lining the street. “This is how epilepsy gets started,” I say, tapping the top of my head in search of my sunglasses, and sliding them down over my eyes. As the train gathers speed, I lean in against the window to get a better view of the buildings in the distance as they pop up out of the morning fog, one after the other like that old Whac-A-Mole game. At least I hope it’s fog and not the dull-white film covering the windowpane, formed from the sticky fingers of countless travelers.

“See over there?” my husband says, standing up and leaning over the seat in front of us. Our boys both look out their window as he continues. “That’s Yankee Stadium. What do you say we check it out if we have time? It’s a long way from where we’re staying but we can take the subway to the Bronx . . .”

As Jon continues pointing out other New York landmarks, I gaze out my window, drinking in the energy of the emerging city. Jon knows we’re not just here to stand at the top of the Empire State Building or to catch *The Lion King* on Broadway. Across the aisle, an older woman in a worn housecoat lets out a hacking cough, reminding me just how my window acquired the lovely white filter. I lean back from the glass and look over to the young man who

has been sitting next to the woman for at least as long as we have been on the train. He was sleeping but his eyes are open now. He shifts his position away from her just as she lets out another dry cough that comes from deep inside her chest.

“This is our stop,” Jon says, grabbing his luggage. He turns to me and smiles. “We’re going to find it, honey. If it’s out there, we’re damn well going to find it for you.”

“We’ll see,” I say, throwing back a half-cocked smile.

As we step off the train, rolling our suitcases behind us, we’re blocked momentarily by the woman fishing around in her large mesh bag. She pulls out a cigarette and lights it, taking a long drag so that the bright ash on the tip grows before our eyes. She exhales, and I’m hit with a familiar scent: Virginia Slims, the preferred choice for my mother who only smoked using her black cigarette holder even though the cigarettes had filters—all while striking the pose of Audrey Hepburn on a movie set.

Only it wasn’t a movie . . .

Chapter 2

February 3, 1940

Eschbach, Baden-Württemberg, Germany

“*Ich bin* home!” Didi called out, kicking the door shut behind her. She tossed her mittens across the floor, watching them land just short of the heater. For the third day in a row, snow had fallen hard outside, making her half-mile walk from school seem longer. It felt good to be inside again. She slipped her boots off and set them on the braided rug, careful to keep the melting snow from landing on the hardwood floor. Thawed ice crystals dripped from her hair as she pulled her coat off. Picking up her satchel, she started for the kitchen, dreading the afternoon chores that she had to complete before getting started on her homework.

Suddenly she stopped and looked towards the kitchen. Someone was crying.

“*Mutter?*” she called out, setting her bag down. Just past the kitchen table, she found her mother crumpled on the floor in the corner of the room, crying so hard that she gasped for breath between each sob.

“Oh, *mein gott*,” Didi cried out, covering her mouth with her hands before running to her mother. “*Was ist* wrong?” she asked, kneeling down to help her up. Her mother raised her hand, and Didi reached out only to be met with a violent slap across her face causing Didi to lose her balance. As her feet flew out from under her, her head slammed against the linoleum floor.

“Wha-what did I do?!” Didi stammered, climbing back onto her feet while cupping her ear in an attempt to stop the painful ringing.

“What did you do? The better question is, what did *we* do?” Didi’s mother whispered, looking down toward the floor, making no attempt to brush back her long bangs hanging over her eyes. “What didn’t we do?” She gasped for breath and let out another sob. “That is the problem, isn’t it? No one is doing anything to stop it.”

Still holding her ear, Didi stared at her mother who made no attempt to get up and remained sprawled on the floor. Slowly, her mother sat up, and, with her back to Didi, she looked down the hall toward the front door and pointed in the general direction of the street. She let out a long shuddering sigh. “This wasn’t supposed to turn into madness. He boasted about giving power back to the people—back to us. But this . . . this is a nightmare.”

Didi stood still and waited for her mother to continue, but her mother only let out another sob. Afraid that her mother might strike her again, Didi backed up and kept a safe distance. In a soft voice, she asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t act so innocent. You know what I’m talking about, or at least you should. The Shusters are gone. They took them.” She spun around and gazed at her daughter as if she had just noticed her. She brushed her bangs away from her eyes, but they immediately fell back. “I knew something was wrong when I saw that damn swastika on the truck in front of their house.” She let out an uncontrollable sob. “God damn him and his ideals. God damn him! We should never have listened to his promises! ‘I’m going to bring pride back to the German people!’ he said. He sucked on our fears, and now he’s spitting on us.” She looked back toward the street and whispered, “Dear Lord, what did we do?”

Her mother began sobbing again as Didi walked back into the front room to look out the window. Snow was gently falling and it was starting to get dark out, but she could still see across the street. A car drove by, and everything looked just how it should. She peered down the road over to the Shusters' house and noticed the snow-covered front stoop. Mr. Shuster was meticulous about keeping the front walk free of snow and ice. The front curtains were open, showing a lighted living room, but no one was moving about inside the house. Everything looked normal, but in recent months it was difficult to call any day normal, where it was common for Jewish children and their entire families to disappear without notice. "They're being relocated," was the official answer provided by nervous teachers questioned by students as to the whereabouts of their friends. Thinking back on the day, Didi realized that Elke didn't show up for school, and as she looked out the window again toward the Shusters' house, she knew that her friend wouldn't be opening the front door.

Didi stepped away from the window but before she could walk back into the kitchen, a thunderous explosion shook the house, making her stumble. She steadied herself on the arm of the sofa, and the sharp pain in her ear returned as she looked to her mother for guidance as to what to do.

Meanwhile, her mother stopped crying and her face hardened. Without emotion, she picked herself up from the floor and started rubbing her dress, trying to smooth out the creases. She laughed as sirens blared in the distance. "Of course, there it is—it never stops. They never hurt anyone!" she screamed while raising her shaking fist. "Frieda never hurt a flea, so what in the hell did she ever do to him? What the hell did she ever do to anyone? Tell me what she did to deserve this!"

"Mother, the sirens. Should we go down to the—"

“I don’t care what the hell you do, just get away from me! What do I need with you anyway? You only care about yourself, sassing back, ignoring your chores. Just go.” When Didi didn’t move, she repeated sharply, “Go!”

Didi ran out of the kitchen and pulled the cellar door open, shutting it behind her. At the top of the stairs, she reached for the string, turning on the light as it swayed in the darkness, casting a dancing shadow while Didi made her way down the narrow staircase. She stopped at a small table that held three cardboard boxes containing Christmas decorations, reminding her that her mother had told her to put them away days ago. She moved one of the boxes over and looked around the room, regretting not bringing her satchel down with her. Sometimes the sirens would go off for hours, and with no radio for information on where the bombing was taking place, she had no idea as to how long this one would last. She looked up the staircase, wondering if her mother would soon follow her, but the door remained shut. Didi cocked her head and put her hand to her ear, which was still hot from the slap. She remembered a time when her mother didn’t hit her, but in the past two years, her mother’s anger grew, and Didi seemed to be the closest and easiest target more often than not.

Didi sighed, picked up one of the Christmas boxes, and started toward the back room, but as she spun around, another blast exploded, shaking the house and causing her to trip. As she fell onto the cold cement floor, the box landed with a crash, and a light-blue Christmas bulb rolled out and stopped beside Didi. Heat rose from her ear as a thin stream of blood formed a small puddle on the cement floor beside her. She tried to get up, but her muscles stiffened, and her body shook uncontrollably. As the sirens screamed, Didi’s vision faded to black.

Chapter 3

January 17, 1970

Kalamazoo, Michigan

I scrunched my nose at the funky but familiar smell—a mixture of cough syrup, ammonia, and body odor. Few children ever set foot in this place, and probably no more than a handful knew of its existence, but you would find me there as regularly as kids go for dental cleanings. Only there wasn't a *Highlights* magazine to be found anywhere in this lobby—sparsely furnished with four mismatched vinyl chairs and two art deco end tables. It was not exactly inviting but not surprising considering the inhabitants. I slid down further into the worn seat cushion of my chair until my feet touched the floor.

“I'm not supposed to tell you this,” Silvia whispered, glancing around like she was searching for someone, but there was no one in the lobby but the two of us. My sister then bent down so we were face-to-face, with our noses almost touching. “Don't let your guard down for one second while you're down here all by yourself.” She paused as if afraid to continue. “They keep the craziest patients locked up in the very top of the tower here, and every once in a while, one of them escapes and comes bursting through . . . that door!” With great exaggeration, she threw her finger out toward something I couldn't see. I pushed the hood of my parka down and turned to see what she was pointing at—a closed door on the far side of the lobby. Hanging above the door, a faded yellow sign warned visitors with one lone word—PRIVATE. “The

escapees have been known to sneak up on small children hanging out here all by themselves. They snatch them up and run off with them into the woods.”

“Oh, shut up,” I said, swatting Silvia’s arm away from me. I was finally warming up, so I took my parka off and threw it over the back of my chair.

“Silvia,” Hanna, called out from the top of the staircase. “Come on!”

A sour-looking woman dressed in a thick white cotton dress, even thicker white nylons, and white orthopedic shoes stood at the top of the stairs next to Hanna, my oldest sister. Her black hair was pulled back into a bun with such force that she looked pained. Standing beside this ray of sunshine, Hanna looked even more miserable. I couldn’t say I blamed her.

“Brat. You’re so lucky that you’re not old enough,” Silvia said.

“Being the smallest doesn’t work to my advantage very often. You have to give me this one.”

“I hate you,” Silvia groaned, slapping down on the bill of my baseball cap before climbing the stairs to join the others. As she reached the top, the nurse unlocked a door, and the three of them walked through the doorway. The door shut behind them with a thunderous *clank*, and with that, the Kalamazoo Insane Asylum swallowed up my sisters.

Good riddance, I thought, pushing my cap back. Looking around, it occurred to me that the next hour would be incredibly boring. Since there was two feet of snow on the ground and it was continuing to fall, I wasn’t going to be venturing outside. I looked back over toward the door marked PRIVATE . Of course, Silvia was just pulling my leg. *Right?*

A Sunday edition of the *Kalamazoo Gazette* from the previous month and a *Health Matters* magazine sat on the end table next to me. Even if I did want to read about prostate

cancer, the lighting would have made it a challenge. As the low insistent hum from the fluorescent bulbs drilled through my ears, I sighed and slouched further into my seat.

For the first time since we had arrived, I noticed a man sitting behind the reception desk. His stringy uncombed hair and dull white uniform contrasted sharply with the nurse who was holding my sisters captive. He was watching several TV screens displaying a variety of community patient areas. Or rather, he was supposed to be watching the screens. Instead, his eyelids drooped, and his head bobbed—like that drinking-bird toy that slowly rocks back and forth until his head finally dips into the glass of water. I kept watching, mesmerized. Just when the man was about to hit the top of his desk with his forehead, he jerked awake. Quickly scanning the room, his eyes landed on me staring back at him. Embarrassed, he let out a cough and glanced down at his watch as I just as quickly looked away, only to find myself staring at that damn door again. *Crazy people do not sometimes come screaming through that door, snatching up innocent children.*

Stupid door.

Still, I had to admit I was relieved to be down in the lobby instead of upstairs in the pulsing heart of the mental hospital where our mother had been spending the last week. With good intentions, our father believed it would be nice for her to see her children. Again, I was thankful that visitors under the age of twelve were not allowed beyond the lobby—my win.

“Son of a—!” I yelled as two hands came down heavily on my shoulders from behind. Jumping in my seat, I turned to find Silvia standing over me, with Hanna walking up. “Don’t you know that you don’t sneak up on someone in an insane asylum?”

“Sorry, kiddo,” Silvia said, snatching my baseball cap.

Hanna took a seat next to me, with a serious look on her face. “Popi asked us to check on you since it looks like we’re going to be here for a while. The doctor is talking about moving Mutti to a hospital in Detroit.”

“Why would they move Mutti to a different hospital?” This was a new development, and as I tried to weigh the importance of Hanna’s announcement, a weird smile appeared on Silvia’s face. She pulled a brochure out from under her coat and handed it to me. On the cover was a photo of a three-story brick hospital along with a photo of a woman lying in a hospital bed. A doctor stood next to her bed, and they were both smiling, because who wouldn’t be smiling while staying in a mental institution? Just another spa vacation. The woman’s hair was styled, and she looked like she had just finished writing out her postcards. *Having a great time. The doctors are so nice. Wish you were here!*

I read the caption below the photos. *Eloise Sanitarium—Part of Wayne County Hospital. Serving Detroit and beyond. Offering the latest treatments in insulin and electric shock therapy.*

“Shock what?” I asked, looking up at Hanna. “Are they really going to shock Mutti?”

“Oh man, Mutti is getting electrocuted!” Silvia said, yanking the brochure away from me. “That should finally fix her or kill her. Either way—”

“Knock it off,” Hanna snapped, grabbing the brochure out of Silvia’s hands.

“Um, Hanna?” I asked, putting my feet up onto the wooden frame of the chair. “Are they really going to electrocute Mutti?” I was suddenly acutely aware of my wet socks inside my sneakers. Hanna had told me to put on my snow boots, but I didn’t listen, and I was paying the price with cold feet.

Hanna reached over and tucked my hair back behind my ear so she could see my face. I let her do it only because she was old—sixteen, and years smarter than me. She took her glasses

off and started rubbing the lenses clean with her shirt. They were cool aqua-colored cat-eyes, making me wish that I had bad eyesight and had to wear glasses. “Don’t worry,” she said in a soothing voice. “No one is electrocuting Mutti. They’re talking about moving her to the Detroit hospital for a new treatment called electroshock therapy. The doctor here thinks that Mutti might be a good candidate for it. She’ll go through a series of electric zaps. It’s like jump-starting the brain.”

Silvia leaned over and whispered into my ear, “They’re electrocuting her.” A vision appeared in my mind of our mother lying on a bed with jumper-cables clamped onto her ears, with flames shooting from her hair. “Hopefully they’ll shock the cuckoo out of her!”

“Shut up,” I said, giving her a shove.

“Stop it,” Hanna scolded, shooting Silvia a look, but Silvia responded with another “cuckoo” while rolling her eyes in circles. Hanna turned back to me. “All you need to know is that she’s not getting electrocuted. Electroshock therapy is supposed to help people with epilepsy and other mental problems. Come on,” she said softly, handing me my hat and throwing her coat on the back of the seat over my own coat. “Let’s walk around. I need to find a bathroom.”

I stayed seated, running my finger along the raised English D on the front of my baseball cap. Without looking back up at Hanna, I whispered, “How long will Mutti be in the hospital this time?”

“I don’t know,” Hanna sighed, looking out the front lobby windows, where the snow was coming down harder. “I wish I knew.”