

CHAPTER 1

The younger girls sit in rows, the whites of their shirts and yellows of their heads reminding me of a field of chamomile flowers. They are Germany's newest blooms.

In matching uniforms, us older girls watch on from behind them, my best friend, Marianne, and I standing side by side.

Today's the twentieth of April. That's our leader Adolf Hitler's birthday. We respectfully call him our Führer. And every year on the Führer's birthday, all of Germany celebrates with parades, with speeches, but also with the induction of the new ten-year-olds into the Hitler Youth for boys and into the Young Maidens for us girls, otherwise known as the League of German

Girls, otherwise known as Jungmädelbund, otherwise simplified to JM. I prefer JM.

The Führer isn't at our specific ceremony in our local München clubhouse, though Marianne had whispered to me about what an honor that'd be. Our leader is off, as always, his location a secret from our English and French enemies so he can continue his important work for our country.

But, of course, there's an enormous portrait of Adolf Hitler on the wood-paneled wall, so it's almost like he's here, and his powerful voice often flows from our radios. He shows himself mostly at rallies, getting everyone talking and excited about his ideas.

As it is, the leader of our JM group, Frau Weber, is currently talking about the importance of what the Führer calls his master race. That means people who are known as Aryans, or people who are racially pure. That can mean blonde hair and blue eyes, like me.

Marianne's eyes are blue, but her hair isn't blonde. It's brown, with braids that reach most of the way down her back. But her hair color is still okay. She's still Aryan, too, because she doesn't have a drop of Jewish

blood in her body. Besides, she's very proud that her hair is the exact same shade of brown as Adolf Hitler's.

It's the combination of brown hair and brown eyes that can be the problem, I've been told, because those people are the most likely to have ancestors who were Jewish.

"Those who aren't Aryan like us will only hurt our country and our survival," Frau Weber says now. Behind a podium, she stands before the rows of girls with her neat brown hair and starched jacket. Her blue eyes sweep the room. Beside her, one of our teen leaders, Elisabeth, bobs her head in agreement with each point our JM leader makes.

Frau Weber goes on, "And by sitting here today and pledging your allegiance to Adolf Hitler, you are declaring yourself of German heritage and that you are free of hereditary diseases or disabilities that may hurt the future of our master race."

Frau Weber doesn't specify in this moment, but I know what ailments she means: anyone with mental illnesses, learning disabilities, deformities, paralysis, epilepsy, blindness, deafness . . .

I swallow roughly, trying not to let the action show, because I'm thinking about my sister and *her* disability.

The new inductees sitting before us nod vigorously, as if proclaiming, *Yes! I'm healthy and of pure German blood!*

Beside me, Marianne nods, too.

The movement catches the eye of Elisabeth, who smiles at Marianne from the front of the room. My best friend subtly pokes me with her elbow. I force a smile for her. She relishes praise from our leaders.

It's not that I don't. I like my JM leaders, especially Elisabeth. She's fifteen, closer in age to me than even my own sister, who is eighteen. And Elisabeth seems eager to talk with me in a way that my sister, Angelika, doesn't. In fact, Elisabeth always encourages me to come to her if I have any questions or if I hear or see anything that confuses me.

"We'll talk," she says. "Like friends do. Sometimes it can be hard to talk to our parents or brothers or sisters, you know?"

I only have a papa and a sister. I haven't confided

in Elisabeth yet. But it's as if Elisabeth's in my head. It's as if she knows I have something to hide about my sister. As if she knows I've heard Papa and Angelika secretly talking about things I don't fully understand, their little rendezvous always when they don't think I'm listening, and always ever so quietly.

Loudly, at the ceremony, the new girls stand from their identical green chairs. They recite in unison, chins raised, shoulders back, right arms in the air, "I promise always to do my duty in the League of German Girls, in love and loyalty to the Führer."

I spoke those words two years ago during my own ceremony when I was ten. To be fair, I would've said anything to be part of something beyond my family.

It's not that my family is bad. But my sister is so much older, and feels more mother than sister, without all the coddling I think a mama would do. And with Papa so often at the university, I find myself dawdling away my hours—alone—with only Papa's plants and my tabby cat, Tigerlily, for company.

So when it came time to join JM, I was giddy, my toes

wiggling in my new marching shoes. I wore my new white shirt, my new black necktie, my new blue skirt. It was all gloriously new, new, new.

Being a part of something still feels glorious. I have Marianne, and my JM group, with my other friends like Adelita and Rita. We call them the *itas*. We play games and soccer. There's gossip and giggling. There's volunteering. There are other exciting activities, like ball games and competitions. Those are the reasons I couldn't wait to join. Of course, joining also meant meetings—dare I say, boring meetings—where mostly political things are hammered into our heads about how to spot the Jewish enemy or how there's no need for us to have ambitions beyond “Children, Church, and Kitchen.” I've heard it all before at school, for as long as I can remember.

The fact that we're fighting a war is more recent, only three years. When it began, I was nine, but Papa tried to shield me from the newsreels, from the soldiers who returned wounded, from the fact that there were soldiers who'd never return. But after I joined JM, Papa couldn't shield me in the way he wanted to.