When the War is Over

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Chapter 1

July 20, 1944, Breslau, Silesia, Germany

If only we weren't at war. It could be the most beautiful summer's day. The sun warms my calves as I grip the second-to-last rung of the ladder with my bare feet, trying to reach the branches higher up. There, cherries dangle in thick clusters, tempting me. As I slip one of the fruits into my mouth, its sweet juice running down my throat, I almost believe I'm on summer vacation, just like during my school days. Since I started my apprenticeship last year, I've had little time off. But today it's too hot to work, so my master's wife gave me the afternoon off to pick cherries for her.

I can hear the Brahms violin concerto playing softly through the open kitchen window, mingling with the song of the blackbirds. The aroma of fried onions drifts out into the garden. Already, my mouth is watering.

Suddenly the music stops, and the voice of a newscaster breaks in. It sounds distorted, tinny. I can only make out scattered phrases and don't bother to listen any further. But then one word catches my attention.

I look at the window as if this could help me hear better. Did I get that right? Or am I imagining things? Maybe I've been out in the sun too long?

Frau Pollack, the master's wife, throws the window all the way open and leans her head out. Her round cheeks are redder than usual, like the baked apples that we make at home for Christmas. She fixes me with a puzzled gaze and glassy eyes.

"Anton," she gasps, while the newscaster's voice buzzes on in the background. She pauses briefly like she's out of breath. "There has been an attack on our *Führer*."

So I did understand correctly.

I freeze on the ladder. The only thought running through my head is: did they succeed this time? The answer to this question will determine everything: what will happen to Germany, to my brother Helmut, Uncle Emil, and all of the other soldiers on the front. It will decide about winning or losing, about the end of the war.

I draw in a breath. My heart is thundering in my ears, so I nearly miss the next words.

"The *Führer* is alive! He's alive!" shrieks the newscaster hysterically.

What? My fingers and toes slip on the rung, and I fall blustering and crashing down the ladder. With a dull thump, I land on the ground, hardly noticing that I've skinned my knees. I have to keep listening.

"I repeat. Our *Führer*, Adolf Hitler, is alive. By the grace of God he has survived another cowardly attempt on his life and sustained only slight injuries. Immediately after the attack, the *Führer* resumed his mission to bring peace and prosperity to the German people. Later tonight, he himself will address all citizens in a radio broadcast."

"By the grace of God"? By witchcraft, more like! It's practically a miracle. This bastard has as many lives as a cat; he always escapes death at the last second. Or is the fact

that he has survived so many previous assassination attempts really a sign that he's "destined to lead us Germans"?

But lead us where?

Frau Pollack beams at me from the window. Her face has returned to its normal color. She disappears into the kitchen and turns the radio down. I look at my bloody knees and pull a few blades of grass from the scrapes. My holiday mood has vanished.

At dinner, the attack is the number one topic of conversation.

"Boy oh boy, that was quite the news, wasn't it! Enough to make your blood freeze in your veins," says Master Pollack. He sounds indignant, but at the same time excited, like a small child who has witnessed an air battle on the weekly news for the first time.

"Heavens, I almost burned the onions," *Frau* Pollack chimes in. "And the boy fell straight off the ladder, that's how hard it hit him. Right, Anton?"

"This miraculous rescue, all of the Party members agree: it's an omen! A sign that the *Endsieg*, the ultimate victory, will come soon. With a *Führer* who's invulnerable, immortal—what could possibly happen to us?"

"Oh, Hermann, I'd like to believe that, I really would. One always hears such awful things. But if the *Führer*…I can't even say it. If we'd lost him, we'd be finished. Over and done with. Just like that."

"Come now, you must have more faith in him, Hilda!"

"Aren't you hungry, Anton?"

I startle at the sound of my name and notice that, up until now, I've just been pushing the food around on my plate. The mountain of mashed potatoes has hardly shrunk, and I'm cutting the bratwurst into smaller and smaller pieces.

I shake my head. "It's delicious, *Frau* Pollack."

If only Mother were here. Or Gerhard. Someone I could talk to.

"What's the matter, boy? Frog in your throat?"

The master laughs so hard that his gray walrus-mustache trembles and bits of mashed potato fly through the air. He wipes his mouth with a checkered napkin.

Master Pollack likes to laugh and laughs a lot. He also likes to eat and eats a lot. I'm always amazed at the skill of his sausage-like fingers when he changes the tiny gears of pocket-watch mechanisms. Only his eyes have been growing weaker over the years.

"I'm happy that I have a pair of young eyes to help me," he always says, thumping me on the shoulder.

I started my apprenticeship as a watchmaker about a year ago, after the death of my father, who was also a watchmaker. He and Pollack knew each other from their apprenticeship days. I'm pretty good at it; my hands are steady and clever, and my eyes are sharp. But staring through a magnifying glass all day long, looking at the insides of watches, bores me to death.

"Come now, what's going on, boy?" the master presses, his voice laden with good-natured concern.

"I just…" I can't think of an answer. I stare at the portrait on the opposite wall, which covers the blue flower pattern of the wallpaper. From his dark wooden frame, the *Führer* glares down at me, almost life-sized, with a stern gaze and hair parted just as strictly. The square mustache on his upper lip lends his features a hard and unforgiving quality.

"The boy is probably still a bit shocked about today's news," suggests *Frau* Pollack.

I nod. That's almost true.

"No wonder," booms the master. "Even full-grown men who've seen a whole lot more than you, boy, had their hearts in their mouths. I felt the same way myself! And you should have seen old Petzold—he was white as a sheet. But everything turned out alright, didn't it? The *Führer* will catch these traitors and put them to death."

"Tonight, my boy, you may stay up until after the *Führer* has delivered his address," *Herr* Pollack adds.

Oh, wonderful! I can hardly wait to hear his blabbering. I force a grateful smile, but I'm still not able to eat very much.

After dinner, we all sit down on the sofa in the parlor, more or less spellbound by the radio on the table in front of us. As it does every evening, the *Wehrmacht* bulletin reports on our brave soldiers' victories and some "alterations" of the front line—that's what they call it when we're forced to withdraw. Apparently, our troops on the western front have continued to retreat since the Americans started their offensive about a month ago. And in the east, not far from Breslau, the Russians are already stepping on our toes. I ask myself again and again whether things would be different if the attack on Hitler had succeeded. Would Germany now have a new government? Would there be a cease-fire?

As the evening wears on, special messages and urgent reports—none of which provide any new information—are interspersed with irritating march music to bolster the spirit. I'm considering whether I should fake a headache and retreat to my room when the telephone rings.

Master Pollack lifts himself laboriously from his armchair, grumbling. "That will be *Frau* Fegerlein. Old gossip."

He shuffles over to where the telephone hangs on the corridor wall and puts the receiver to his ear.

"Yes?" He shouts into the mouthpiece as if he still doesn't understand that the telephone bridges long distances between people *without* them having to scream at each other.

"Oh, it's you, *Frau* Köhler! Yes, he's here…ah…yes, of course…Anton! Your mother would like to speak to you."

A call from Mother? At this hour? We don't have a telephone at home. To call me, she has to go to the town post office. This can't mean anything good.

"Are you okay?" I ask as soon as I reach the phone.

"Yes."

"And the kids?"

My seven younger siblings are a lot of work for Mother, especially now that I'm not there to help her. Maybe Max and Fritz, the twins, have been up to trouble again?

"Don't worry, Anton."

"Helmut?" I croak.

"According to his last letter, he's arrived in the anti-aircraft barracks in Aachen."

Relieved, I let my shoulders slump forward.

"And how are you, Anton?" she asks.

I hesitate for a moment. With the master and his wife in the next room, I can't say what's really bothering me. "I'm doing fine. Why are you calling?"

"It's Uncle Emil. Martha sent me a telegram. He was badly wounded in the east, and they've put him in a military hospital in Breslau. He'll be released soon, but he needs help to get back to Leipzig."

Mother pauses for a few seconds, and all I hear is buzzing on the line.

"They say he's been blinded, in both eyes."

I swallow hard. Blinded. "Permanently?"

"I don't know exactly. But I promised Martha that we would take care of him." She sounds resolute. "Unfortunately I can't leave here, but if Master Pollack agrees to give you a few days' leave, you could accompany Uncle Emil on the train to Leipzig and deliver him safely to your aunt's."

"Of course." It's a sensible solution. I'm already in Breslau, very close to Uncle Emil.

"You will have to go to the transport office at City Hall and get special permission for the trip."

"Okay," I say, although my head is swirling.

I have so many questions, but here in the hall, under the watchful eyes of the Pollacks, I cannot ask them.

"I'll bring him home in one piece," I say, by way of conclusion.

When I explain the situation to *Herr* Pollack, he immediately understands and agrees to let me go for a few days. Then I excuse myself before Hitler has spoken, and thankfully, nobody stops me. I climb the creaky wooden stairs to my tiny attic room, which has just enough space for a narrow bed and a chest of drawers. At least there's a window. I throw it wide open to admit the mild night air. Outside, the wind has died down, and the crickets chirp their song as though the world were still in order.

I throw myself onto the bed stomach-first, ignoring the loud creaking, and pull out my small leather suitcase from underneath. Since I go home every weekend, it's not worth it to unpack the few things that I take along each time. *Frau* Pollack has given up lecturing me about it. I open the suitcase and slide my hand into the side pocket, where I keep all of my personal treasures: soccer trading cards, sheet music, postcards depicting city scenes, tattered adventure novels, and a small leather folder with photographs.

I pull out the photos. They show me with my brothers and sisters in our garden and on walks in the forest. In Mother's favorite picture, all eight children—including me—are arranged by size in front of our house, like the pipes of an organ. That was two years ago, when father was still alive. Back then little Erich wasn't born yet, and Helmut wasn't at the front. I'm standing between Helmut and Fritz. My hair is parted and smoothed for Sunday. Like the twins Max and Fritz, I have inherited father's chestnut-brown shimmer in my hair and Mother's hazel eyes.

And then there are the pictures of my summer vacation. Back when I was in school, I spent two weeks in Leipzig with Uncle Emil and Aunt Martha nearly every summer.

Though the occasion is not a pleasant one, I find myself growing increasingly excited. I will see Gert and Walter again, my cousins. In the picture, we're standing in front of the swing in the neighbors' garden. Next to me is a girl, her thick braids hanging over her shoulders. Her eyes are as blue as cornflowers, although the black and white picture doesn't show it. Luise Hofmann. My stomach turns a few flips when I think about how I might see her again quite soon.

Chapter 2

The hospital sits on the bank of the Oder River, near the center of Breslau. Rather than get off there, however, I hop off the streetcar in the center so I can have a look around: I don't get into the city very often. Luckily, Breslau hasn't been touched by the war. The old city center, with its Gothic city hall and church spires stretching high into the sky, never fails to impress me. It's all so different from my hometown. The marketplace, edged by medieval patricians' houses, transports me to a time I've only read about in my father's history books. I wish they'd taught us more history in school, and not just about the Germanic conquests and the Jewish infiltration of Germany.

In the market square, farmers have set up colorful stands with canvas awnings. People have formed long lines, eager to snatch up fresh tomatoes and cucumbers, ripe plums and apricots. These are not rationed, but they're difficult to come by in the city.

Frau Pollack has given me a food parcel containing two pounds of the cherries I picked, among other things, so I'm not tempted to stop and look at the produce.

At the hospital, I ask one of the nurses where I can find Emil Schmidt. She directs me to Room 114, in the right-hand wing, where the convalescing soldiers are housed. The facility is now serving as a reserve hospital for soldiers from

the front lines who are no longer in critical condition and are stable enough to be transferred. I peek into one of the rooms as I pass. More than a dozen cots have been set up next to one another, but the men in them are all wrapped in clean white bandages. I skirt around a nurse who hurries by, dressed in a neat white coat and a little hat marked with a red cross. A one-legged man hobbles down the hall on crutches, his eyes dull.

When I arrive at Room 114, my courage deserts me. I don't know what to expect when I meet Uncle Emil, can't imagine how it must feel for him to have lost his eyesight forever.

But the cry of "come in!" that answers my knock doesn't sound dismissive or harsh. Uncle Emil occupies a double room, a privilege reserved for officers. In a bed by the window lies a gray-haired man with a pale face and one arm and leg in plaster casts. He stares out of the wide-open window, seemingly unaware of my presence. Uncle Emil sits on the other bed, wearing his uniform, upright and clean-shaven. His brown hair is trimmed and neatly parted, just as I remember him. But one thing is different: a black blindfold has been wrapped around his head, and a long scar mars his left cheek, still red and horribly ragged along the edges. It runs from below the bandage to the corner of his mouth.

"Uncle Emil," I say, then add, "It's me, Anton."

He smiles. "Anton! It's nice to…" he falls silent, but reaches out a hand to grope the air in front of him, searching. I grip it with both of my hands and squeeze hard.

"So you've come to take me out of here, yes?"

I nod, before remembering that he can't see me.

"Yes. Aunt Martha will be so happy to have you back."

Uncle Emil's hand finds my cheek and lingers there.

"Should I pack anything else?" I ask, my gaze sweeping the room.

"The nurse already took care of that. I just have to sign out, then they'll give me my medical discharge papers. That way no one can say I've bound up my eyes for fun, just to shirk my duty."

I peer at the gray-haired man in the other bed. Though he doesn't seem to hear us, I don't dare speak openly in front of him. I want to ask Uncle Emil whether the rumors I've heard are true—those rumors about soldiers in Russia, especially those caught in the battles around Stalingrad, who wounded themselves to escape the front. But nobody can accuse Uncle Emil of cowardice under fire, I'm sure of that.

I grip Uncle Emil's right arm and take his suitcase in my free hand. Just as we reach the door, he motions for me to stop.

"The flowers," he says, gesturing at the bed with a tilt of his head.

On the nightstand sits a small bouquet of violets. I'm confused: why would he want the flowers if he can't see them? But then I realize he can smell them. I lift the bouquet out of the water, let it drip dry, and hand it to Uncle Emil. He places it in the breast pocket of his uniform, and we leave the hospital room.

Wheels must roll for victory, announces an enormous propaganda poster over the entrance to the central train station. Next to it hangs the red swastika flag, so large that it covers almost half of the old building's façade. Once we're inside, Uncle Emil stops and tilts his head, apparently listening. In

the vaulting station hall, the echo of clicking heels on the stone floor intermingles with the indistinct murmuring of dozens of voices. The stationmaster's announcements resound above the clamor. In the distance, trains wheeze and clatter, their wheels squealing on the tracks.

"Our train leaves from platform three," I say, after studying the display board. We have a strenuous trip ahead of us: nearly seven hours' ride, and we have to change trains twice. Once we cross the Neisse River to Saxony, passenger trains are only allowed to run at night because of the danger of air raids.

As I lead Uncle Emil to the track, I notice a host of armed men in uniform patrolling the train station with German shepherds on short leashes. Some of the men are standing next to the trains, guarding the doors. The uniforms tell me they're SS and Gestapo. What are *they* doing here? Though we aren't scheduled to leave for another half hour, our train is already waiting on the track. It too is being watched. All of the doors are still closed, except for the first one, in the carriage directly behind the engine. A knot of people has gathered there: passengers with luggage, like us, clearly eager to board.

"What's happening?" asks Uncle Emil.

"They're checking passengers' papers individually," I say quietly. "We have to wait in line. This might take a while."

"It's because of the assassination attempt," Uncle Emil says, speaking still more softly.

"Are they looking for the conspirators?"

My uncle places his forefinger on his lips, and I'm forced to accept that I'll have to wait for answers. I help him light a cigarette. Then we wait until the line thins out and it's our turn to be inspected.

"Papers!" the officer says gruffly, and, after studying us carefully, "Where are you headed?"

"To Leipzig. *Oberleutnant* Emil Schmidt has been released to his family after sustaining severe wounds in service of the Fatherland," I answer.

The officer glances at Uncle Emil's bound eyes before scrutinizing our travel documents once more. "And you, boy?"

"I'm just accompanying him."

Apparently, the officer can't find anything to object to. He waves us through, and I release a breath I didn't know I was holding.

"*Herr* Schmidt!" he calls back to us as we move toward the train. "Have a good trip. *Heil Hitler*!"

Uncle Emil freezes for a moment, then nods in the officer's direction. I help him board. Uncle Emil is a war hero, now. He'll have to get used to this.

The walls of the train carriage are plastered with wanted posters depicting the heads of the "high traitors," with their names listed below. Some of them look familiar. When I tell Uncle Emil that Carl Friedrich Goerdeler, Leipzig's former mayor, is among the wanted, he just nods slowly. Without looking into his eyes, I can't tell what he is thinking.

I find us a compartment occupied only by a woman and her young daughter. The little girl stares anxiously at my uncle, but the woman greets us amicably. I guide Uncle Emil to a seat by the window and help him get settled. A few minutes later, I pull the bag of cherries out of my suitcase and let him reach in. I also offer some to the little girl and her mother. We nibble silently on the fruits as the train gains speed.

We travel westward, passing fields and small towns. From time to time, heavily armed men patrol the corridor outside our compartment. After our first stop at a small train station in a town just outside of Breslau, the SS combs the entire train, and we have to show our papers again. The little girl hides behind her mother, probably frightened by the machine guns that the officers carry slung over their shoulders.

They repeat the procedure at every stop. I would really like to ask Uncle Emil some questions, but the presence of the woman and her daughter prevents me.

Suddenly, there's a commotion in the corridor. The door from the adjacent car opens with a squeak. I hear the footfalls of heavy boots at a run. "Hey, stop!" somebody bellows. A dog barks.

I rush to the compartment door to peer through the glass, just as a man in a gray jacket hustles by through the corridor.

In a few seconds, he reaches the end of the car and realizes he's trapped as it's the last one. He looks around frantically, and for a brief moment, I can see his face, distorted by fear. Now his pursuers come into view, wearing black coats. One of them is holding a sheepdog, which strains against its short leash, stretching it almost to breaking. The man they're chasing tears open the rear door of the car and throws himself out of the moving train with an anguished cry.

My heart is hammering. Though I don't know the man, I'm on his side; I want him to escape. Is he one of the men on the posters? Could he have survived the plunge?

"Stop the train!" the SS men roar as they storm by. For a mad, fleeting moment, I imagine myself opening the

compartment door and sticking my leg out into the aisle to trip them up. But of course, I don't. The officers pull up short at the door the man just jumped out and point their Mausers outside. The rattling of the gunshots drowns out even the clattering of the train. The little girl screams and presses close to her mother.

"Don't be afraid, sweetie. They won't hurt you," Uncle Emil tries to comfort her.

The train comes to a stop, squealing and puffing.

"All passengers must stay where they are," the announcement blares through the loudspeaker.

I sigh and sit back down next to Uncle Emil, who is talking quietly to the woman. He seems to know what's happening, even though he can't see any of it. After what feels like an eternity, the train starts up again. We don't find out who the fugitive was and whether he got away. I hope so.

Our companions disembark in Liegnitz. Now we're alone, finally. I sit across from Uncle Emil at the window. Slowly he undoes the knot of the blindfold at the back of his head. As he removes the black cloth, I see that there's a gauze bandage underneath. He unwinds this as well until the only things covering his eyes are two round cotton pads. Carefully, he pulls off one, then the other.

I stare at what's hidden underneath. His eyes are closed, his lids and lashes stuck together with white goo. The deep scar that runs over his left cheek continues across his swollen eyelid, dividing it in two.

"Anton, can you please get the salve from my bag, and some fresh cotton pads? It itches really badly."

I rummage in the bag and hand him what he asked for. My hand trembles as I grasp the jar of ointment. "Do you…need help?"

"No, it's okay, son."

Uncle Emil carefully wipes away the old, greasy cream with the cotton pads and applies a new layer. I wonder whether there are even still eyes underneath those bruised lids. If not—what then? Empty sockets? I shudder.

"Uncle?" I begin.

He pauses in re-winding the bandage around his head. "Yes, son?"

I gather my courage. "How did it happen?"

Uncle Emil nods as if he was expecting this question. Then, without a word, he resumes tying the bandage, appearing completely immersed in the activity. He's silent for such a long time that I'm afraid I've asked the wrong thing. I look out the window, fearing that he'd know if I stared at him—but of course, that's stupid.

"It was about a month ago," he finally says, his voice flat. "The Red Army began an offensive to drive us out of their territories. A clever move after the Americans had just landed in Western France. We'd been waiting for the Russians to advance, but the attack still hit us harder than we expected. My division received the command to close a gap in our defenses at Ludsen. But the Russians had much better equipment—tanks, airplanes, weapons—and many more soldiers. Every day we fought for our lives, and we were constantly in retreat."

Uncle Emil seems to look right at me through his bandage.

"It was one of our own mines. We'd laid it to keep the Bolsheviks in check. As we were retreating, one of my comrades set it off. I was just hit by a few splinters. After that, they promoted me to *Oberleutnant* and awarded me the Iron Cross." Uncle Emil laughs bitterly.

I stare at the small silver pin on his uniform jacket. Just a piece of metal that won't replace his eyesight.

"How are things where you're living, Anton? Have you been hit as well?"

"Up until now, the bombers have left Breslau alone."

"That's why they call it the Reich's bomb shelter. It's true, then. I just wouldn't bet that things will stay that way forever."

I shake my head.

"When will you be sixteen?" he asks suddenly.

"In March."

"Let's hope the war is over by then."

"Do you believe…?" I falter when one of the SS men comes running down the aisle of our car, passing our compartment. Only when he's gone, I begin again. "Do you believe we still have a chance?" I whisper.

"A chance?"

"At winning the war."

Once again, Uncle Emil is silent for a long time. He pulls a cigarette out of his case, and I light it for him. Uncle Emil blows a fine plume of smoke out from between his lips. I watch as it curls and puffs in the air, almost giving up hope that he'll answer. Then he leans in closer.

"In my opinion, the war has been lost for a long time," he says in a clear voice. "But our *Führer*"—it sounds as if he's spitting out the word—"will never capitulate until the last German soldier has fallen in his name."

Chapter 3

Aunt Martha greets her husband with tears and kisses. Even though it's six in the morning, the whole family is awake when we reach the Schmidts' house. If my aunt and cousins are shocked by the blindfold, they hide it well.

Aunt Martha serves us cake. She must have saved extra sugar and flour coupons for it. Now we sit in the spacious living room, Uncle Emil surrounded by his sons and holding little Mathilde on his lap. We talk about everything under the sun, except the war and Uncle Emil's injury.

The doorbell rings. I jump to answer it so the family can stay together. Who could be visiting so early in the morning? I open the door, and an army of butterflies flutters up in my stomach.

It's Luise.

"Oh my God, Anton, is it really you?"

My voice fails me. All I can do is raise my hand feebly, but I lower it again when I see that Luise is clutching the handle of a wicker basket with both hands. How long we stand there, staring at each other, I don't know. I'd forgotten how bright her hair is, like ripe fields of wheat shining in the sun.

"Did *you* bring *Herr* Schmidt home?" she asks, finally.

I can only nod.

"So…may I come in?"

She holds her basket up higher; I can see the neck of a bottle protruding from underneath a checkered cloth.

"Oh, of course!" I croak and take a step to the side. In my hurry to let her through, my right shoulder bumps against the door, which hits the wall with a loud thump. We both cringe, startled. Then our eyes meet, and we begin to laugh. Even me. *Smooth, Anton, really smooth!* as my best friend Gerhard would say.

Luise passes me cautiously, holding the basket protectively in front of her as if I were a watchdog that might bare its teeth and charge her at any moment. I follow her back into the living room.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," she says. "I just wanted to bring you a little something, *Herr* Schmidt. A welcome present from Mother and the rest of us."

Smiling, Aunt Martha accepts the basket and pulls out a bottle of Cognac from its bed of juicy, blue-black plums.

"Thank you, Luise!" Uncle Emil says earnestly. "Send your mother my best. When I have a chance, I'll come over and thank her in person."

Luise grasps Uncle Emil's hand. "*Herr* Schmidt, I wanted to tell you how much I admire your service. You are a true German hero. If we didn't have soldiers such as you and my father, who are prepared to make such sacrifices for the Fatherland…"

Suddenly the room falls quiet. Luise falters, perhaps sensing the change in mood. Uncle Emil's expression is wooden, mask-like.

"That's really a lot of plums," says Aunt Martha into the silence. "If I'd known, I would have baked a plum cake…" She rushes into the kitchen.

Luise glances at me, but I look down at my feet.

"Have you heard anything from your father?" Uncle Emil asks her.

"Oh, yes! We get news in the mail almost every day. He's still in the military hospital in Lemberg, behind the Ukrainian lines, convalescing."

"Is he badly hurt?"

"His arms and legs were hit by grenade shrapnel. The fragments are still moving around, but he says he's healing well. Maybe he'll have home leave soon. And once his leg is better, he'll be deployed again, I'm sure. Are you also headed back to the front?"

"What would they want with a blind soldier?"

Luise looks sheepishly at the floor, then quickly says goodbye because she has service with the BDM, the League of German Girls. I'm a little disappointed as I'm leaving again tomorrow. If I don't see her again before then, she will always remember me as the guy who mumbles nonsense and bumps into doors. Just great!

"Hello, Anton!"

I've spent the entire afternoon outdoors, playing soccer with Gert and Walter, or sitting on the grass with little Mathilde and reading to her from *Der Struwwelpeter*. I even made an effort to comb my hair to the side with water, though usually I hardly pay any attention to my looks. Smoothed this way, my hair gleams like ripe chestnuts. I'm just about to head back into the house because Aunt Martha shouted from the kitchen window to say that dinner is almost ready when Luise appears at the fence that separates her garden from the Schmidts'.

She's wearing her BDM uniform, a knee-length skirt of coarse dark blue cotton and a bright white blouse with a

black neckerchief. Even in that plain getup she looks like an angel. I wish Gerhard were here now, to be my wingman. What would he do?

Oh, come on! he'd say. *You managed just fine before.* I see myself sitting side by side with Luise on the wide wooden swing that hangs from the apple tree in her garden. Back then we laughed and talked effortlessly, the way children do. The memory gives me back my voice.

"How was service?" I ask, ambling over to the green wooden fence.

"Just some clearing-up work. We helped remove the rubble from the streets," she says, studying me. I can sense her forget-me-not-blue gaze traveling up and down my body, and I suddenly feel very hot.

"Wow, Anton, it's been a long time!"

"Nearly two years," I confirm.

"You look really different. But at the same time, you don't. I recognized you right away," she says with a smile.

I realize that I'm now almost a head taller than she is—that didn't use to be the case. But she has changed, too. I don't remember her being so…curvy. I clear my throat and hope that she won't notice my red ears in the sunlight.

"Everything looks the same here. Your house is still there, that's good…" Man, what am I babbling on about? "I mean, if you look at the rest of Leipzig…when we drove through the streets this morning…there's debris everywhere, holes in the pavement…even the main train station took a hit."

"Yeah, that happened last December. But at least it's still standing. The Allied terrorists can't blow it away that easily! Our part of the city hasn't been hit so hard because we're so far away from the center. Only a few emergency bomb

drops. It's just a little annoying that we have to run to the cellar whenever there's an alarm." She says this as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if all the citizens of Leipzig were already accustomed to the constant air raids.

"Do they come during the day, too?"

"They do now. And usually right in the middle of my favorite subjects. Of course, Oskar is happy when there's no school. But normally they're on their way somewhere else, to Dresden or the industrial part of Leuna, places like that. They look like a cloud of locusts, the way they darken the sky. And then the thundering starts, when our flak shoots back at them. At night they drop those parachute flares to illuminate their targets—Christmas trees, we call them—and the whole city is lit up bright as day. I guess that could be useful if it weren't so scary: saving electricity, you know. During the December fourth attack, when they hit the main station, even the walls of our house shook. And afterward, the sky above the whole city center was fiery red. But we won't let that intimidate us." She takes a breath. "What about you? What have you been up to?"

I tell her haltingly that I started an apprenticeship after Father's death. Her bright eyebrows draw together slightly, causing a tiny wrinkle to appear on her forehead.

"So you're going to be a watchmaker." She sounds almost disappointed.

"It looks that way," I say a bit uncertainly.

"What happened…with your music? Our dream. Do you remember?"

Of course I remember. We wanted to become a famous duo and learn to play Schumann's *Träumerei* together, me on the violin, Luise on the piano. But that was just a childish fantasy.

I shake my head. "I can't even play an instrument."

"You could still learn," she says with conviction.

"And who will earn money in the meantime?"

Luise opens her mouth, but says nothing.

I wrap my hands around the fence pickets and stare at the worn-out toes of my shoes. It's not just the fence that separates us. Luise doesn't have to worry about money. Her family owns the house she lives in; they rent it out to other people, too. Her father is a teacher, and she's brilliant herself. She goes to the *Gymnasium*, while I only attended a country school through the eighth grade because my parents couldn't afford more. It's clear that I'm not good enough for her.

That didn't matter when we were children, but now it suddenly does. She's so pretty, a true German girl with her flashing blue eyes, her dimples and golden hair; and so slender, too. Suddenly, I can no longer imagine the two of us side by side.

"I…" she hesitates, "I learned a new Mozart sonata. Father gave me the music last time he visited. Would you like to hear it?"

I nod, and forget everything I was just thinking. In one fluid motion I jump over the low fence. As we walk toward the house, she asks, "Did you see *The Punch Bowl* at the movies, with Heinz Rühmann? It was a blast, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. *Pfeiffer* with three *f*s. One before and two after the *ei*," I quote.

"Sit down," Luise mimics one of the movie-teachers and pretends to inspect me over an imaginary pince-nez. "Too bad my teachers aren't that funny."

"At my school we had a teacher who actually talked like that," I say. "Old Monse. Once I was daydreaming in German

class, and all of a sudden I heard him say my name. I nearly jumped out of my seat—I was scrambling to figure out what he'd asked me. But he just looked at me like I'd grown three heads. The whole class stared."

Luise opens the door to the house and turns to me. "And what *was* he asking?"

I grin. "Nothing. He just said *the weather's getting Köhler*. He meant cooler, get it?"

Luise bursts into laughter. I'm a little proud that I can make her laugh.

We enter the living room, where the grand piano, made of shiny dark wood, still stands against one wall. On the opposite wall is a bay window crowded with flower pots. Through it, I can see the apple tree with the swing in the garden. It smells fresh and flowery, and everything is immaculately clean.

Luise sits down on the piano bench and, for a moment, places her hands gently on the keys without pressing them. Then her slim fingers begin to fly across the piano, climbing up and down and taking on a life of their own. She plays from memory, without so much as a glance at the music, keeping her eyes closed for most of the time, while the tones tumble forth from beneath her nimble hands. I watch her and listen spellbound, wanting to remember as much of her as possible.

When the final chord sounds, I can barely keep myself from bursting into applause.

She turns to me with shining eyes.

"Would you like to try?" she asks, and slides over on the bench, which is wide enough for two.

I stare at the polished wood floor, unable to look her in the eye. "But I can't play."

"I can teach you." Her voice sounds strange, shy and inviting at the same time.

At that moment, her mother emerges from the kitchen. "Oh, *hallo* Anton, it's nice to see you again."

She has pinned her hair up in the latest fashionable style, and even in her apron she looks smart. A "*fan*-tastic" woman, Gerhard would say. I think she could be an actress.

"Do you mind if I turn on the radio? It's time for the *Wehrmacht* report" her mother says.

Luise looks down at her hands. I shake my head, but inside I'm kicking myself. Why didn't I just sit down next to her?

Now both of us act as if we're listening intently to the news. Everything is as usual: losses on all fronts—which are played down, of course. Then the newscaster rambles on about how the German soldiers are bravely putting themselves in the line of fire to keep the enemy from advancing. In the end, he urges all Germans, especially the women on the home front, to make sacrifices for the total war, for the *Führer* and the soldiers.

"As if we aren't already doing that," cries Luise, after the report is over. "Every week, my BDM group helps the refugees that arrive at the train station. We serve them bread and tea, you know. Those people are so thankful! We Germans have to stick together at a time like this. My BDM leader, Gertrud, always says that as long as the *Führer* has young people like us, and soldiers like Father and your uncle, Germany cannot perish. And then there's the *Wunderwaffe*."

"The *Wunderwaffe*?" I ask contemptuously, before I can stop myself.

"Yes, it's supposed to be ready soon."

I snort. Does she actually believe that some miracle weapon will save us? It's all just propaganda, anyway. I'm a bit disappointed in Luise. I thought she was smart enough not to believe everything we're told. Hasn't she ever listened to an enemy radio station?

She looks at me, astonished. "Don't you think so?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure the *Wunderwaffe* exists." *In fairy tales!* I add mentally.

For an instant, our eyes meet. There is so much desperate hope in her gaze that I can't hold it against her. Still, I'm sad that I can't speak openly with Luise. Mother and Father drilled into me that I shouldn't trust anyone with my true thoughts unless I'm absolutely certain that they feel the same way. That's what things have come to in Germany!

Luise's mother turns off the radio. I can see that it's time to take my leave when she begins to set the table.

"I have to go," I stammer, suddenly feeling awkward again. Luise gets up slowly and faces me, her hands playing with the folds of her skirt.

"When are you going back?"

"Tomorrow morning."

Her eyes seem to dim. Then she nods. "Travel safe, Anton! I hope your train gets back without any trouble. And take care of yourself in Silesia."

"Yeah, you too," I reply. I realize that I probably won't see Luise again for a long time.

Chapter 4

Winter has descended upon us, and that's not all: since October, bombs have been falling on Breslau, too. We are not the "Reich's bomb shelter" anymore. Now the trains only travel at night, and after sunset, you have to take special care to pull down the blackout blinds on all windows.

But today we're not thinking about that. It's Christmas, the sixth wartime Christmas. It has snowed and outside everything is still. Beyond the blinds, the white coat glistens in the pale moonlight, illuminating the night. No lanterns burn, no candlelight gleams through the windows of the neighbors' houses. But in our living room, the Christmas tree glows.

Earlier today, I went to the woods with the twins, Max and Fritz, to cut down a cute little fir, which we dragged home. Mother and the girls have hung straw stars on its branches and lighted a few candles. We can't burn them for long, because wax is in short supply, like everything else. Still, my siblings are delighted by the sight. When they're finally allowed into the room, they clap their hands, and little Erich coos with enthusiasm. We all sing "Silent Night" and then "Ring, Little Bell." Mother has put the framed photo of Father on the table next to the sofa so he can be with us.

"Why isn't Helmut here?" asks Lieschen when the last note fades. She must be thinking about how he used to accompany us on the violin. Helmut, my older brother, was drafted to an anti-aircraft unit. They sent him to Western Germany a while ago to defend us against air raids.

"He's indispensable to the war," I say.

"What's 'indispensable' mean?" asks Max.

"It means that he's too important and they can't do without him." When I see my sister's face fall, I add, "But that's why Gerhard is here."

"Yayyyy," Lieschen clings to Gerhard's leg.

Gerhard is basically part of the family. He's the same age as I am, and we went to school together. Back when he still lived in the orphanage at the edge of town, he visited us nearly every day. Mother and Father probably thought, privately, that one more child didn't really make a difference. Now Gerhard is working for farmer Moltke, who gave him the day off.

With a gesture at the presents under the tree, I distract my sisters from asking any more questions. The little ones pounce on the packages. I watch them from Father's worn-out leather armchair, amazed at what Mother has scrounged up. Even if it's just a handful of hazelnuts or a crocheted woolen hat, there's something for everyone. Fritz is pleased with the whittling knife I've given him.

I'm not expecting any presents, so I'm even more surprised when Lotta comes running toward Gerhard and me, her face shining, and hands us a package wrapped in brown paper and tied with a simple hemp cord. Gerhard and I exchange glances. From the shape

and softness, I can already guess that it contains something knitted. Gerhard is the first to unwrap his gift: a pair of thick socks made of coarse gray wool. He beams like he's just received the nicest present in the world.

"*Fan*-tastic, *Frau* Köhler!"

Mother smiles. "Farmer Moltke gave me the wool. Please thank him for me. I thought that you two could really use thick socks. *Frau* Weber is predicting a long, hard winter. And her aches and pains are almost always right, as you know."

I unpack my own pair and unfold them. In the process, I notice something glimmering from where it's been tucked between the socks. Curious, I pull the object out.

It's a pocket watch, about the size of a walnut, with a thin casing of matte gold. I open the cover and examine the faded Roman numerals on the face, the delicate hands, which have frozen in place. I know it well: the watch belonged to Father. On the cover is an etched inscription. The lettering is tiny, already partially scratched off, and it's hard to decipher. But I know exactly what it says:

> *When heart and conscience are aligned,*
> *The right path you'll always find.*
> *J.W.v. Goethe*

I smile. That's what Father always said to Helmut and me: "In the end, a man answers only to his conscience." He wholeheartedly believed that, and he acted accordingly. Once, when Father and I were secretly listening to enemy broadcasts, he said, "If you want to get an accurate read on a situation, you can't listen to just one side. One side can

always lie. But if you listen to several lies, perhaps you can find the truth somewhere in between."

Suddenly, Mother is standing beside me, her hand resting on my shoulder. "Ernst would have wanted you to have it," she says quietly.

Me! Not Helmut. Not the eldest son, this time. I turn the little wheel to wind the watch and hear its satisfying ticking sound as the hands resume their work. Then I close the cover and put it in my pocket so that I will always have it with me.

Fritz and Max come tumbling over to show me the model airplane that Gerhard has built for them. The short wings and tail are made of cardboard, and the body is constructed out of tiny sticks, with a propeller on the nose. He's even fastened a pair of wheels underneath, made of hard paper wads.

"Is it a dive-bomber?" asks Fritz.

"Exactly! It's the Junkers Ju 87. A little out of date, but wow, could it do some damage," says Gerhard, taking the model from his hand. "They call it a dive-bomber because it dives on its prey, like a hawk." Gerhard makes the plane swish vertically downward. "And just before it reaches its target, it drops the bomb. It almost always hits its mark. Then the pilot brings the plane out of the dive…and *vrooom*…he pulls the machine back up, into the air."

Max and Fritz listen, wide-eyed. "Do the enemies have planes like that too?" Max asks.

"Of course. The Tommies have Barracudas, the Yankees have Apaches…"

I leave Gerhard behind, as he rambles on about various countries' airplanes, and go to give Mother a hand in the kitchen. A fire crackles in the old iron stove. It already

smells like baked apples. Tonight we're having potato pancakes with applesauce because there's not much else. Not that I mind; I love Mother's potato pancakes. The ingredients come from our own garden. I even helped preserve the apples in the fall, though I can't help Mother much otherwise, what with my apprenticeship. But she believes the money I bring home each week is support enough.

Mother smiles at me and presses the grater into my hand. She hands me the peeled potatoes, and I grate them into a bowl, to which she adds eggs, onions, salt, and pepper. While we're doing this, we listen silently to radio broadcasts: the *Wehrmacht* report and Goebbels' speech.

"In this hour of celebration, our people will stand before the *Führer* like a wall," he roars.

"That's exactly right," says Mother. "We're supposed to form a wall of bodies. Become human shields—just so the people in Berlin can live a little longer."

I stop grating and look at her. Mother hardly ever speaks this way.

"How many soldiers have given their lives for nothing because of that stupid order that says they can't surrender territory under any circumstances, even when it's already lost? And now it's the civilians' turn. The *Volkssturm* will have to make it right: old men, teenage boys, and women. And then the last sacrifice, the children."

I notice with a start that Mother has stopped peeling potatoes and is wiping her eyes on her forearm. I've never seen her cry before. Her eyes have sunk deep into their sockets, and the gray strands in her hair have multiplied. Today she is showing her worry for the first time.

"I can't stop thinking about Helmut," she says, resuming her work. "How he's doing on the front. It won't be long

now. If he can just stick it out! I almost wish he'd be taken prisoner, by the Americans or the English. Just not by the Russians. Anyone but them." She looks at me, concern etched into her face. "What are we going to do if the Russians keep advancing?"

The Russians. Everybody here is afraid of them. In recent months they've gained more and more ground, crossed the borders of the Reich in the east, and now they're at the Vistula River, just two hundred miles from Breslau. In East Prussia, they've already forced thousands of people to flee. It's rumored that they've laid waste to whole towns, assaulting women and girls, killing children and the elderly…and supposedly, German POWs have been taken to work camps in Siberia, where they're treated like animals and left to starve or freeze.

I don't know how much of what I've heard is true. But I do know one thing: the Russians have good reason to hate us. Didn't we do the same thing to their villages in '41 and '42? I heard Father say that often enough.

If the Red Army breaks through our defenses—and it's just a matter of time—what will happen to my family?

I don't know how to answer that question. But I'm determined to protect Mother and my younger siblings as best I can.

After dinner, I slip out of the living room, where Mother is playing a game of *Mensch ärgere dich nicht* with the children. I walk down the long hallway, with its creaking floorboards, to the last door, which leads into a small workroom: Father's old shop.

I haven't been in there in a long time, but today I feel drawn to it, somehow. Perhaps because it's Christmas and Father isn't with us. I open the door carefully and flick on

the light. The weak ceiling lamp illuminates the long wooden table where Father sat hunched over for hours, working with pincers on the tiny screws and wheels of watch mechanisms.

And that's also where I found him: slumped over his last project. That was nearly a year and a half ago. The endless work was too much for his heart, Mother says. I stroke the unfinished wood of the workbench, leaving a stripe the width of my finger in the dust. In the far corner, there's an old grandfather clock whose pendulum hasn't been wound for a long time. And next to that…Father's violin in its case.

I take a quick peek over my shoulder before I open the well-worn black leather case. There it is, lying on a bed of midnight-blue velvet. Its amber body glistens as if freshly polished. I can almost hear Helmut's voice, rebuking me for having picked up his violin. *His* violin! He was the one who skipped music class as often as possible. Of course Mother and Father knew nothing about that; otherwise, they might've spent the money for his lessons on me instead.

But Helmut isn't here anymore.

Suddenly I remember my last conversation with Luise. *What happened with your music? Our dream.*

My heart pounding, I stretch out my hand and, gingerly, wrap my fingers around the slim neck; the raw metal strings bite into my fingertips. I lift the violin from its case and place it on my left shoulder. My fingers tentatively strum across the fingerboard. Then I take the bow in my right hand and touch it to the strings, ever so gently. The note's vibrations run through my hand and into my arm, spreading from there throughout my body. I don't just hear the tone, I feel it. The hairs on my arm stand up. I imagine myself playing not just a few shaky notes, but whole songs,

concertos, symphonies. If only I could play like the great violinists, like George Boulanger and Yehudi Menuhin, who I've heard on the radio…if only I could excite other people with my music, make them dream….

"Oh, so that's where you've gone off to."

I cringe so violently that the bow skitters over the metal strings, making a screeching noise that gives me goosebumps. Guiltily, I lower the violin and turn around. Gerhard is leaning on the door, his lanky figure almost as tall as the frame.

He makes a face. "Ouch! Looks like you could use some practice."

I redden and clear my throat, putting the violin back in its case. "I was just…"

"I get it. You've always looked at the violin like it was a pretty girl, all dreamy-eyed."

"No, I didn't!" I say, hurrying towards the door.

He gives me a crooked grin. "Sorry I disturbed you two. I can leave if you want…"

"Just let me through!" I punch him lightly in the ribs. He bends over theatrically and takes a step back so I can pass.

After Gerhard has left the workshop, I pull the door closed behind us with a bang. "Do *I* laugh at you because you want to be an aerospace engineer—*farmhand*?"

"Hey, why so sensitive all of a sudden?"

"It's nothing!" Knowing that my ears are still red, I storm back down the hall to the living room. He runs after me and grabs my arm before I can open the door.

"Sorry, man."

I turn to him. "Forget it. I was being stupid."

"I won't tell anyone," he whispers conspiratorially, winking. I can't help but laugh.

Chapter 5

The holidays and the days after pass much too quickly. We have snowball fights, sled down the cemetery hill, and skate on the frozen town pond. The only unusual thing is that Mother has started to pack bags and suitcases with our most important possessions, in case we have to leave in a hurry.

On New Year's Day, notice arrives that all boys born in 1929 should report to the Hitler Youth center in my town. The command surprises me and leaves me feeling uneasy. Since I began my apprenticeship in Breslau, I have been going to the HY center there. Why are they calling us here now?

When I arrive in the courtyard of the old weaving mill, I see Gerhard and many of my other former groupmates already gathered. I went to school with some of them. Unfortunately, Wilhelm Braun is also there.

"Hey Anton, how's it going?" Herbert slaps me on the back in a friendly fashion. He was the captain of our soccer team. "Do you know what all this is about?"

"Maybe they want us to shovel snow," I answer hopefully.

Wilhelm raises his eyebrows. He looks smug, like he knows more than we do. I don't do him the favor of letting on how curious I am. We never liked each other much back at school because I couldn't stand him bullying weaker kids.

But since his father held such a high position in the SS, nobody could say anything.

Wilhelm saunters over. He stops in front of me and regards me like I'm an obnoxious insect. "So, Köhler, you're back, are you?"

"I'm on vacation," I mumble.

He is at least a head taller than I am. With his blond crew-cut and penetrating gray eyes, he looks as if he's sprung directly from the pages of one of those Nazi magazines. Gerhard stands next to me. He's as tall as Braun is, but thin and lanky, while Wilhelm acquired his muscles from boxing. I'm neither as tall as Gerhard nor as muscular as Wilhelm. "Wiry as a wildcat," is what Mother always says—meaning that my build comes from having spent a lot of time in the forest climbing trees when I was growing up.

"Oh yeah, now you're a *watchmaker*. Like your old man."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I squeeze out between my teeth.

Gerhard puts a hand on my arm and shoots me a warning glance.

"Work that's truly essential for the war," scoffs Wilhelm. "But perhaps you'll do something useful soon."

"Without watches, the *Wehrmacht* wouldn't be able to function," says a thin voice behind me. "Military precision. Punctuality."

I turn around and smile at August. In the past he wouldn't have stood up to Wilhelm—he was always the one who suffered the most under Braun. Once, when Wilhelm filled in for our corps leader, he drilled August so hard that the smaller boy nearly broke down in the summer heat. August was never much of an athlete, but he was the best student in the class.

"Who asked you?" Wilhelm snarls at him.

I ignore him. "How are you, August?"

"Doing well. I'm going to the *Gymnasium* now."

Like Luise, I think wistfully. "Do you know what they're going to do with us?"

August shakes his curly head. "Maybe we're going to be drafted," he whispers wide-eyed.

"I don't think so. We're not even sixteen yet."

"Why are you grinning like that?" Gerhard snaps at Wilhelm.

Wilhelm shrugs nonchalantly. "What if they do enlist us? Do you soil yourself at the thought?"

"I'm ready to do my duty," says Herbert, the officer's son, with his head held high. "I won't just sit around while the Russians advance on us."

"I wouldn't mind finally doing something either," adds Gustav. "That's what we were trained for."

Trained? I guess he means the boot camp where we were tormented for a few weeks at age fourteen, and the drills with the air defense force…but my groupmates are shooting their mouths off.

The clock in the church tower chimes one. At that moment, a tall man in a long black coat rounds the corner into the courtyard.

"Form a line," bellows Wilhelm.

Though the command catches us by surprise, we obey. We can do drills in our sleep.

"Stand still. Eyes forward. Count off!" he calls as the man approaches. Now I recognize him. It's Wilhelm's father, SS-*Hauptsturmführer* Braun.

We quickly count to twelve.

"Köhler, where are your feet?" Wilhelm barks at me.

"Heels in line with everyone else's! Didn't they teach you anything?"

I clench my teeth and slide a few inches forward.

Herr Braun stands next to Wilhelm, surveying us. He is just as tall, with the same blond, parted hair and the same unforgiving steel-gray eyes. Around his upper arm, he wears the red swastika band, and I can see the two silver lightning-bolt-shaped insignia on the lapels of his uniform. The iron eagle standing on a skull gleams on his cap. I've always thought the skull was a fitting symbol for the SS, Himmler's band of thugs.

"Father," says Wilhelm, sounding suddenly less sure of himself.

His father shoots him a sharp glance.

"I mean…SS-*Hauptsturmführer* Braun! I dutifully report that twelve Hitler Youth appeared as ordered." He salutes, and so do we.

"*Heil* Hitler!" cries *Hauptsturmführer* Braun, eying each of us like a falcon about to dive on his prey.

My whole body begins to tingle as though I were covered in ants. The longer the *Hauptsturmführer* is silent, the worse it gets.

"I've come to see for myself what a fine group of young men you are."

There's a general scraping of feet on the swept cobblestones. Nobody was expecting this. Braun generously ignores the disturbance.

"My son Wilhelm has already reported back to me. Some here are in good shape. Others…less so." His eyes rest on August, who shrinks by another head. "But each of you, I'm sure, will greet the message I'm about to convey with joy."

He pauses and strides back and forth in front of us, his hands folded behind him. With each word, a little cloud of steam issues from his lips.

"I don't have to tell you how things are looking on the front. Despite some setbacks, the *Wehrmacht* still stands like a rock in the face of the Bolsheviks. There is no doubt that we will stem the red tide and strike back with twice the force. But for this, we'll need every man who is willing to fight. We have arrived at a crucial point. From here we can only go forward. To victory—or defeat."

He stops, turns to us again, and seems to hold all of our gazes at once. "Which will you choose?"

"Victory!" we bellow. All of us—even me. There is no other answer.

He nods with satisfaction. "You're not yet sixteen, and therefore you're not entitled to enlist. But you don't have to sit at home uselessly and watch your mothers and siblings, your grandparents and aunts fall into Ivan's hands. *You* will have the opportunity to do your part. To propel us to victory! Effective immediately, you're all *Wehrmacht* helpers."

Everybody stares at him, dumbfounded. *Wehrmacht* helpers? I try to figure out what that means.

"Boys," bellows *Hauptsturmführer* Braun suddenly. I flinch. "Are you willing to leverage your youthful strength and vigor for the health and well-being of your fellow citizens? Are you willing to sacrifice yourselves for our *Führer*? Are you willing to contribute to the victory of the Thousand-Year German Reich?"

"Yes, sir!" resounds around me. The words pound in my ears, pulse in my arteries. I say them too, almost involuntarily.

"Good!" cries Braun. "I expected nothing less. At eight a.m. on Tuesday you will report to the Breslau-Rosenthal

barracks, where you'll receive your orders. You may bring your winter clothes."

Again, the *Hauptsturmführer* bores into the group with his falcon-like eyes. I feel numb.

"*Sieg Heil*," he cries, his right arm flashing upwards. Then he turns on his heel and leaves.