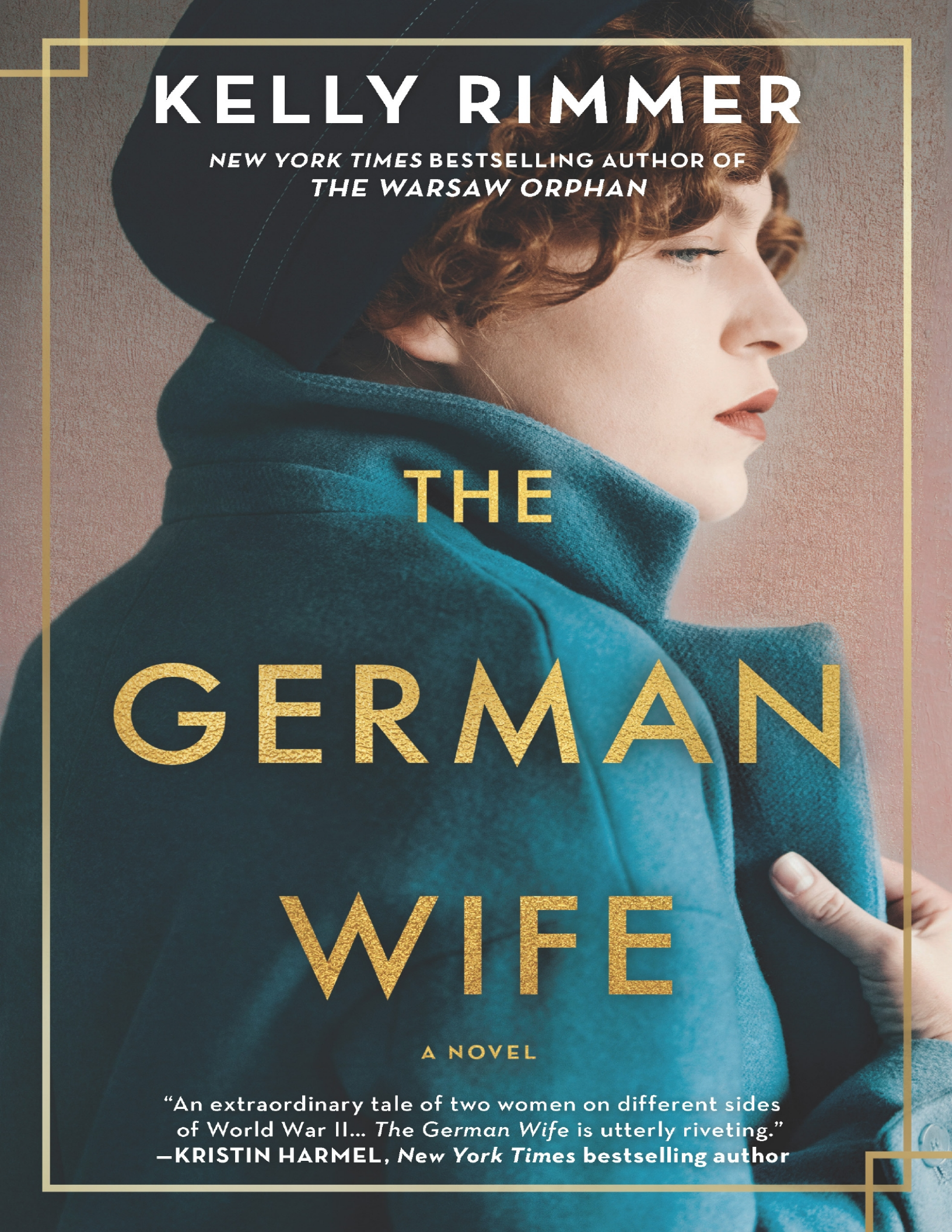
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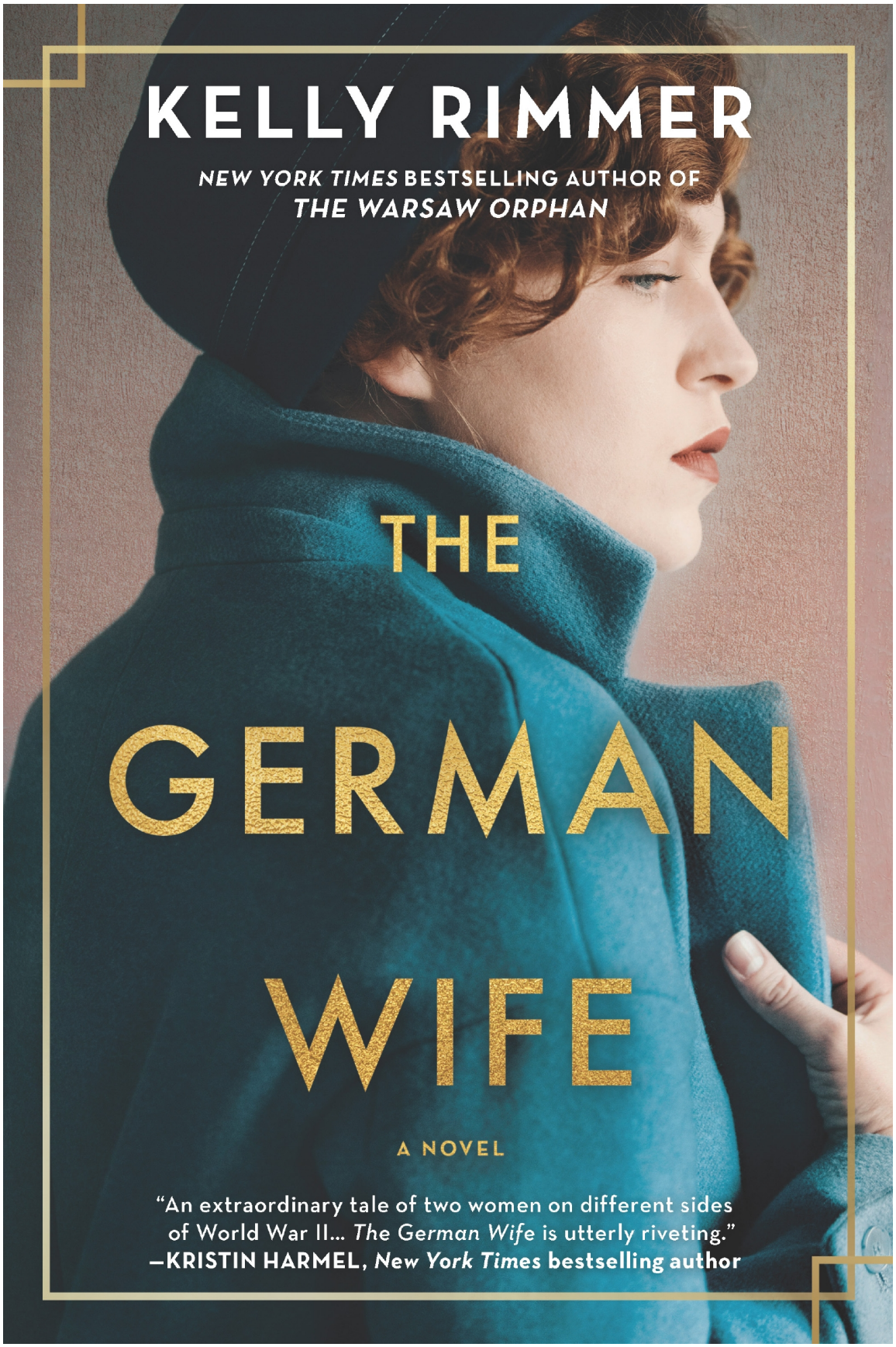
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Kelly Rimmer is the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA TODAY* and international bestselling author of *The Warsaw Orphan* and *The Things We Cannot Say*. Kelly lives in rural Australia with her family and a whole menagerie of badly behaved animals. Her novels have been translated into more than twenty languages.

Praise for the novels of Kelly Rimmer

THE GERMAN WIFE

"Skillfully researched and powerfully written, *The German Wife* will capture you from the first page. Kelly Rimmer always delivers a poignant story—this book is no exception."

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"*The German Wife* is a heart-wrenching, uplifting story about love and family and the choices people make in impossible situations. Kelly Rimmer writes with deep compassion for human flaws and frailty, bringing us insight into the rise of Nazism through the eyes of her protagonist. An unforgettable historical novel that explores important questions highly relevant to the world today."

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"Once again, Kelly Rimmer has turned my emotions upside down. With every book of hers I read, I become a more thoughtful and empathetic person, but *The German Wife* is, without a doubt, the jewel in her crown."

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—Karen Robards, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Black Swan of Paris*

“A surefire hit [and] a heartbreaking and hopeful story of family, duty, love, salvation, and resistance. A thoughtful, beautiful novel.”

—Kristin Harmel, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Book of Lost Names*

The German Wife

Kelly Rimmer

For Amy Tannenbaum Gottlieb

Contents

1

Sofie

Huntsville, *Alabama*
1950

“Wake up, Gisela,” I murmured, gently shaking my daughter awake. “It’s time to see Papa.”

After the better part of a day on a stuffy, hot bus, I was so tired my eyes were burning, my skin gritty with dried sweat from head to toe. I had one sleeping child on my lap and the other leaning into me as she sprawled across the seat. After three long weeks of boats and trains and buses, my long journey from Berlin to Alabama was finally at an end.

My youngest daughter had always been smaller than her peers, her body round and soft, with a head of auburn hair like mine, and my husband’s bright blue eyes. Over the last few months, a sudden growth spurt transformed her. She was now taller than me. The childhood softness had stretched right out of her, leaving her rail thin and lanky.

Gisela stirred, then slowly pushed herself to a sitting position. Her eyes scanned along the aisle of the bus as if she were reorienting herself. Finally, cautiously, she turned to look out the window.

“Mama. It really doesn’t look like much...”

We were driving down a wide main street lined with small stores and restaurants. So far, Huntsville looked about as I’d expected it would—neat, tidy...segregated.

Minnie’s Salon. Whites Only.

Seamstress for Colored.

Ada’s Café. The Best Pancakes in Town. Whites ONLY!

When I decided to make the journey to join my husband in America, segregation was one of a million worries I consciously put off for later. Now, faced with the stark reality of it, I dreaded the discussions I’d be

having with my children once we had enough rest for productive conversation. They needed to understand exactly why those signs sent ice through my veins.

"Papa did tell us that this is a small town, remember?" I said gently. "There are only fifteen thousand people in Huntsville and it will be very different from Berlin, but we can build a good life here. And most importantly, we'll be together again."

"Not all of us," Gisela muttered.

"No, not all of us," I conceded quietly. Loss was like a shadow to me. Every now and again, I'd get distracted and I'd forget it was there. Then I'd turn around and feel the shock of it all over again. It was the same for my children, especially for Gisela. Every year of her life had been impacted by the horrors of war, or by grief and change.

I couldn't dwell on that—not now. I was about to see my husband for the first time in almost five years and I was every bit as anxious as I was excited. I had second-guessed my decision to join him in the United States a million or more times since I shepherded the children onto that first bus in Berlin, bound for the port in Hamburg where we boarded the cross-Atlantic steamship.

I looked down at my son. Felix woke when I shook his sister, but was still sitting on my lap, pale and silent. He had a head of sandy curls and his father's curious mind. Until now, they'd never been on the same continent.

* * *

The first thing I noticed was that Jürgen looked different. It was almost summer and warm out, but he was wearing a light blue suit with a white shirt and a dark blue bow tie. Back home, he never wore a suit that color and he *never* would have opted for a bow tie. And instead of his customary silver-framed glasses, he was wearing a pair with thick black plastic frames. They were modern and suited him. Of course he had new glasses—five years had passed. Why was I so bothered by those frames?

I couldn't blame him if he reinvented himself, but what if this new version of Jürgen didn't love me, or was someone I couldn't continue to love?

He took a step forward as we shuffled off the bus but didn't even manage a second before Gisela ran to him and threw her arms around his neck.

“Treasure,” he said, voice thick with emotion. “You’ve grown up so much.”

There was a faint but noticeable American twang in his German words, which was as jarring as the new glasses.

Jürgen’s gaze settled on Felix, who was holding my hand with a grip so tight my fingers throbbed. I felt anxious for both children but I was scared for Felix. We’d moved halfway across the world to a country I feared would be wary of us at best, maybe even hostile toward us. For Gisela and me, a reunion with Jürgen was enough reason to take that risk. But Felix was nervous around strangers at the best of times, and he knew his father only through anecdotes and photographs.

“Felix,” Jürgen said, keeping one arm around Gisela as he started to walk toward us. I could see that he was trying to remain composed, but his eyes shone. “Son...”

Felix gave a whimper of alarm and hid behind my legs.

“Give him time,” I said quietly, reaching behind myself to touch Felix’s hair. “He’s tired and this is a lot to take in.”

“He looks just like—” Jürgen’s voice broke. I knew the struggle well. It hurt to name our grief, but it was important to do so anyway. Our son Georg should have been twenty years old, living out the best days of his life. Instead, he was another casualty of a war that the world would never make sense of. But I came to realize that Georg would always be a part of our family, and every time I found the strength to speak his name, he was brought to life, at least in my memories.

“I know,” I said. “Felix looks just like Georg.” It was fitting that I’d chosen Georg for Felix’s middle name, a nod to the brother he’d never know.

Jürgen raised his gaze to mine and I saw the depth of my grief reflected in his. No one would ever understand my loss like he did.

I realized that our years apart meant unfathomable changes in the world and in each of us, but my connection with Jürgen would never change. It already survived the impossible. At this thought, I rushed to close the distance between us.

Gisela was gently shuffled to the side and Jürgen’s arms were finally around me again. I thought I’d be dignified and cautious when we reunited, but the minute we touched, my eyes filled with tears as relief and joy washed over me in cascading waves.

I was on the wrong side of the world in a country I did not trust, but I was also back in Jürgen's arms, and I was instantly at home.

"My God," Jürgen whispered roughly, his body trembling against mine. "You are a sight for sore eyes, Sofie von Meyer Rhodes."

"Promise me you'll never let me go again."

Jürgen was a scientist—endlessly literal, at least under normal circumstances. Once upon a time, he'd have pointed out all the reasons why such a promise could not be made in good faith—but now his arms contracted around me and he whispered into my hair, "It would kill me to do so, Sofie. If there's one thing I want for the rest of my life, it's to spend every day of it with you."

* * *

"Many of our neighbors are Germans—most have just arrived in Huntsville in the last few weeks or months, so you will all be settling in together. There's a party for us tomorrow at the base where I work, so you'll meet most of them then," Jürgen told me as he drove us through the town in his sleek black 1949 Ford. He glanced at the children in the rearview mirror, his expression one of wonder, as if he couldn't believe his eyes. "You'll like it here, I promise."

We'd be living in a leafy, quiet suburb called Maple Hill, on a small block the Americans nicknamed "Sauerkraut Hill" because it was now home to a cluster of German families. I translated the street signs for the children and they chuckled at the unfamiliar style. Our new street, Beetle Avenue, amused Gisela the most.

"Is there an insect plague we should worry about?" she chuckled.

"I really hope so," Felix whispered, so quietly I had to strain to hear him. "I like beetles."

As Jürgen pulled the car into the driveway, I couldn't help but compare the simple house to the palatial homes I'd grown up in. This was a single-story dwelling, with a small porch leading to the front door, one window on either side. The house was clad in horizontal paneling, its white paint peeling. There were garden beds in front of the house, but they were overgrown with weeds. There was no lawn to speak of, only patchy grass in places, and the concrete path from the road to the porch was cracked and uneven.

I felt Jürgen's eyes on my face as I stared out through the windshield, taking it all in.

"It needs a little work," he conceded, suddenly uncertain. "It's been so busy since I moved here, I haven't had time to make it nice for you the way I hoped."

"It's perfect," I said. I could easily picture the house with a fresh coat of paint, gardens bursting to life, Gisela and Felix running around, happy and safe and free as they made friends with the neighborhood children.

Just then, a woman emerged from the house to the left of ours, wearing a dress not unlike mine, her long hair in a thick braid, just like mine.

"Welcome, neighbors!" she called in German, beaming.

"This is Claudia Schmidt," Jürgen said quietly as he reached to open his car door. "She's married to Klaus, a chemical engineer. Klaus has been at Fort Bliss with me for a few years, but Claudia arrived from Frankfurt a few days ago."

Sudden, sickening anxiety washed over me.

"Did you know him—"

"No," Jürgen interrupted me, reading my distress. "He worked in a plant at Frankfurt and our paths never crossed. We will talk later, I promise," he said, dropping his voice as he nodded toward the children. I reluctantly nodded, as my heart continued to race.

There was so much Jürgen and I needed to discuss, including just how he came to be a free man in America. Phone calls from Europe to America were not available to the general public, so Jürgen and I planned the move via letters—a slow-motion, careful conversation that took almost two years to finalize. We assumed everything we wrote down would be read by a government official, so I hadn't asked and he hadn't offered an explanation about how this unlikely arrangement in America came to be.

I couldn't get answers yet, not with the children in earshot, so it would have to be enough reassurance for me to know our neighbors were probably not privy to the worst aspects of our past.

Jürgen left the car and walked over to greet Claudia, and I climbed out my side. As I walked around the car to follow him, I noticed a man walking along the opposite side of the street, watching us. He was tall and broad, and dressed in a nondescript, light brown uniform that was at least a size or two too small. I offered him a wave, assuming him to be a German neighbor, but he scoffed and shook his head in disgust and looked away.

I'd been prepared for some hostility, but the man's reaction stung more than I'd expected it to. I took a breath, calming myself. One unfriendly pedestrian was not going to ruin my first day in our new home—my first day reunited with Jürgen—so I forced a bright smile and rounded the car to meet Claudia.

"I'm Sofie."

She nodded enthusiastically. "Since we arrived last week, you are all I've heard about from your husband! He has been so excited for you to come."

"I sure have." Jürgen grinned.

"Are you and the children coming to the party tomorrow?" Claudia asked.

"We are," I said, and she beamed again. I liked her immediately. It was a relief to think I might have a friend to help me navigate our new life.

"Us too," Claudia said, but then her face fell a little and she pressed her palms against her abdomen, as if soothing a tender stomach. "I am so nervous. I know two English words—*hello* and *soda*."

"That's a start," I offered, laughing softly.

"I've only met a few of the other wives, but they're all in the same boat. How on earth is this party going to work? Will we have to stay by our husbands' sides so they can translate for us?"

"I speak English," I told her. I was fluent as a child, taking lessons with British nannies, then honing my skills on business trips with my parents. Into my adulthood, I grew rusty from lack of speaking it, but the influx of American soldiers in Berlin after the war gave me endless opportunities for practice. Claudia's expression lifted again and now she clapped her hands in front of her chest.

"You can help us learn."

"Do you have children? I want Gisela and Felix to learn as quickly as they can. Perhaps we could do some lessons all together."

"Three," she told me. "They are inside watching television."

"You have a *television*?" I said, eyebrows lifting.

"We have a television too," Jürgen told us. "I bought it as a housewarming gift for you all." Gisela gasped, and he laughed and extended his hand to her. I wasn't surprised when she immediately tugged him toward the front door. She'd long dreamed of owning a television set, but such a luxury was out of reach for us in Berlin.

I waved goodbye to Claudia and followed my family, but I was distracted, thinking about the look of disgust in the eyes of that passing man.

2

Lizzie

Dallam County, *Texas*
1930

I spent the whole day plowing, and even ten minutes after I climbed down from the tractor, phantom vibrations ran through my hands as if I were still holding the steering wheel.

“It’ll rain now. Sure as anything,” Dad said. He and my brother, Henry, had been plowing another field with the horses earlier in the day, but horses tire quicker than tractors, so they’d taken them to rest in the barn and come to survey my work. “When you cultivate the soil, it exposes the moisture in the deep dirt to the sky. That’s what attracts the clouds. Rain follows the plow, sure as sunset follows the sunrise. You remember that, kids. It’s science you can trust.”

This was not the first time he’d dropped that kernel of wisdom, and me and my brother had been farming with our daddy since we first learned to walk, so we knew the theory as well as he did. We always plowed twice after harvest—first to pulverize the topsoil, to break the upper crust into small sods. After that, we’d go over the land with the disc harrows, a process that broke the little sods up completely—leaving the soil fine and silky, which Dad said gave the seeds room to grow. We bought the tractor brand-new after the bumper crop in 1929 and it made the whole process so much easier.

But that day, as I watched a dust haze settle back over the field, I felt a pang of anxiety. It usually rained in the autumn shortly after we plowed, just as Dad said. But it was supposed to rain during the spring and summer too, and that year, the clouds seemed to have forgotten how to work.

“I hope you’re right about the rain, Daddy,” I said cautiously. “It’s been awful dry lately.”

“Dry comes and goes.” Dad shrugged. “You’ll see that in life. Good, bad...exciting, boring. Life is all about the ebb and flow between those extremes, and sometimes, you just have to patiently ride it out.”

It was all well and good for Daddy to talk like that. His entire life was riding out the waves of his moods. Even when things were easier, before that dry year, Dad had good days and bad days, and it was me, Henry, and Mother who picked up the slack when he was down. I adored my dad, but he was so passive sometimes, he just about drove me crazy. Me and Henry exchanged a glance, and I knew my brother was thinking the same.

“Let’s head back to the house,” Dad said. “We have just enough time to go past the pond before sunset.”

I sighed as we all climbed up onto the tractor. This time, Dad was driving, and Henry and me sat on the little platform at the back, traveling backward.

“There’s going to be cows in the mud,” I said, leaning close to whisper in my brother’s ear. We farmed grain mostly, but we also kept a small herd of cows for meat and, when we could borrow a bull to breed them, calves to sell and milk to drink.

The cows lived in a narrow rectangle field adjacent to our yard, with a large pond at the edge. The water was almost gone from the pond after the dry year, leaving a wide band of stagnant mud around the edges. Even that was rapidly drying, but while it was still wet enough for a cow to sink into, it was dangerous as all hell.

At any other time we might have moved those cows to another field, but we needed to plow to prepare for sowing, which meant churning up what might have been feed. And there was no easy way to keep them out of that mud. Every day for over a week, we’d had to drag at least one cow free of it.

“There’s clean water right there,” Henry complained. We’d set up a brand-new trough for them against the fence, just a few dozen feet away. “Why the heck do those stupid cows keep getting stuck?”

“They’ve been drinking from that pond since they were born, that’s why,” I told him. “We need to face facts and sell them. We’ll run out of feed in that field sooner or later anyway.”

Not one but two cows were in the mud now—one in mud halfway up her legs, the other buried up past her shoulders and left weak from struggling all day.

Working together, me, Dad and Henry managed to push the first cow out of the shallow mud by hand. The other cow's rescue operation was more complicated because she was too tired to help herself. Daddy looped some rope around her neck and tied it to the tractor, and I drove it slowly away from the pond's edge, pulling her, while Henry and Dad stood in the mud and pushed her from behind.

We were all exhausted, filthy, and deflated by the time we finished—coated in a thick layer of mud that smelled so bad, it would stick to our skin for days.

"We should sell the cows," I said.

Dad sighed impatiently. "It'll rain any day and soon enough that pond will be full again. And anyway, the cows will eventually realize there's an easy way to drink without risking their neck."

"Well, the way things are going in this county, the price per head is sure to drop," I said.

"Leave the business decisions up to me," Dad said abruptly. "We're not selling the damned cows."

With that, he stomped back to the tractor and started off toward the barn without us. That was fine by me and Henry—the house was only a few hundred feet away.

"So in the meantime we just keep pulling the cows out of the mud every damned day?" I complained.

"They'll have to learn to use the trough when the last of the water dries up." Henry shrugged. Then his tone softened. "You need to stop assuming the worst all the time."

I groaned and started walking toward the house.

"You're as stubborn as the cows, Lizzie," Henry called after me, chuckling. I ignored him, stomping all the way up to the house. I washed up as well as I could with cold water from the hand pump. As I was finishing, Mother brought me a towel.

"What's got your father in such a low mood?" she asked quietly.

"Cows in the mud at the pond again," I muttered, taking the towel gratefully. "I told him we should sell them."

"He's convinced the rain is coming," she sighed, then shrugged easily in that gentle, patient way of hers. "Daddy is doing his best. We all are."

I couldn't sleep that night. There was so little I could control. I couldn't make it rain; I couldn't make Dad face reality; I couldn't move the cows