Chapter One

Come in, Child. Oh, please don't apologize. You're not interrupting anything. Besides, I knew you were coming. No, Liebchen, you're not lost. You're just not quite sure of where you are. Never mind that now. You're cold. Sit by the fire. Have some bread. I just made it. See? It's still warm. And here's some good, hot lentil soup. There's tea steeping on the stove if you'd like.

My name is Judy, not that it matters. Everyone here calls me Babcia. That's Polish for grandmother. And you're Inga, are you not? Yes I thought so. Well, Inga, it's good to meet you. I don't see many healthy young people like you. Most people don't knock on my door until they're so sick the doctors can no longer heal them or until they've tried all the medicine they can afford.

Oh, no, I didn't mean to imply that I'm lonely. I'm not lonely. Why, I'm not even alone. In fact, my life is one long conversation. The woods are full of voices. Listen. Even now Matka Sosna, Mother Pine, is whispering a sweet and haunting tune. Can you hear her? Yes she has a lovely voice. She and the rest of the forest raised me, though I called her by a different name at the time.

You look quizzical. You don't believe the woods raised me? Well, I'll tell you about my growing up if you have the time. I know how busy you people are out there—always rushing here and there, always in a hurry to do whatever it is you do. But you look tired. Would you like a nap? No? Good. Then sit back and relax. And eat. Wait. Let me get your tea. Honey? Lemon? I'm afraid there is no milk. There. Good. No, I've already eaten. You arrived later than I anticipated, and I got too hungry to wait. But you go ahead.

Now if I can just get these cushions right. My back's been grieving me today. Ah, yes, that's better. Now where should I begin? Well, at the beginning I suppose, or at least at the age of seven.

I was smaller than a meter of pump water then, all arms and legs and long yellow hair that Mama kept plaited in tight French braids. But I was strong for my size, even then. And I was in love with the woods.

My first memory is of the forest's call. Oh, no, it wasn't the wind in the trees or the splashing of rain against arthritic trunks. Those sounds were there, in their proper seasons, along with the singing of the birds by day and the chirping of the crickets at night. But there was something else curling through all that, wispy and fragile that I sometimes could not catch, something as sweet as wistfulness that would whisper near my ear as I lay in my bed. Sometimes late at night I'd awaken with a start and stand on my bed near my slot of a window and watch the shimmering white halo dance like angel wings around the crowns of the trees, and I'd promise, "I'm coming. I'm coming soon."

We lived just at the edge of the frontier, as Mama called it, at the border of civilization. According to her the woods beyond our field was a lawless place, full of perils far worse than I could imagine, and so she made me promise to stay in our back yard or, if I was with my brother or an adult, the field beyond. But never did she allow me near the woods. She worried about the forest and other dangers too, man dangers. That's what she called them. Man dangers.

She wouldn't talk about the man dangers much. All she told me was to stay away from men I didn't know. But she talked about the forest day and night, weaving stories of a dark and hostile place full of girl eating vines and plants that would grab my ankles and drag me underground, never to be seen again. And she warned of bears and wolves, about their sharp claws and teeth and how they loved to eat children leaving nothing behind but splintered bones and bits of tattered cloth. And bandits. She was adamant about the bandits—terrible men with straggly hair and ragged clothes, and eye patches and angry scars, men who snatched up little girls and sold them as slaves. Each time she told them her stories got worse. The forest was darker, her villains more vicious. Her voice would tremble as she described their fearsome features. And I didn't believe a single word. Nothing she said comported with what I knew about the forest. Yet every time she spun her yarns I shivered with excitement, wishing them to be true. I thought it would be thrilling to see a bear or a wolf or even a bandit, but when I said so Mama shook her head and complained that I was a willful wild thing.

She scolded me daily for my willfulness, and I guess she was right, because I shot for the trees at every opportunity. Occasionally, with other children or alone, I managed to race through the oats or meadow grass to the wood line, but I never got beyond the forest's edge before Mama or Papa or Johann, my big brother, would yank me back. Just inside the door, she'd strip me naked and check my body from head to toe for ticks and fleas and signs of other damage. Papa would spank me with his belt, and Mama would lecture me again. And they'd send me to bed without supper. I would listen, my ear pressed against the wall, catching isolated words and the odd phrase or two while they ate their soup and talked about what to do with me.

And later, after our parents were in bed, Johann would sneak some bread to me. I'd pump him for the parts of the conversation I'd missed, and, in conspiratorial tones, he'd tell me what he could remember. I'd gobble up the bread and, when it was gone, I'd lick my fingers and dab the crumbs from my lap while he told me all he knew. Just a shadow in the dark, his silver blond hair glinting in the moonlight slanting across my bed, he'd glance over his shoulder every few seconds to assure himself that our parents were still asleep. I cherished those moments with my brother. And, to thank him for the chance I knew he was taking, I often let my free hand rest on his knee while I coaxed more from him than he thought he knew.

Less often Mama would tiptoe in, careful to wait until Papa was snoring. She'd bring an apple or some raisins or a chunk of cold potato wrapped in a cabbage leaf. And she'd will the food into my body as if, no matter how fast I ate, it wasn't fast enough. Her wide eyes darting from my mouth to the door, she'd swear me to silence by all that was holy. I knew not to ask her anything.

*****

It was a beautiful dawn before Herr Schuler came—orange and pink and full of hope and warm for the end of March. The yellow and purple crocuses Mama had planted as a bride had erupted, having spread from a mere handful to a veritable crazy quilt of blooms. Squirrels berated feral cats while newly returned birds squabbled over nesting sites. The earth smelled heavy and wet and rich, and I knew something wonderful would happen before dark. *I'm Coming*, I promised silently to the woods from my narrow

bedroom window. *Today is the day*. And I felt the truth of it as surely as I felt the truth of the coming summer.

He arrived just after daybreak, his rickety wagon loaded with iron. I'd never liked the grinning blacksmith. In truth I still don't, though he's been dead now for years. He looked at me in a way that made me ashamed, as if he could see through my clothes. Short for a grown man, he used his bulk to make up his lack of height. And, though he was bald, he wore a full beard, which made him look like a bold and hairy bear, much more dangerous than any bandit or wolf my mother could devise. I ran to my room when I saw him.

All winter long my father had been threatening to put a fence around our yard. And all season long I'd taken comfort in the fact that winter passes slowly. Suddenly, however, the snow was gone, and the blacksmith was there with his load of iron. Papa and he took lengths of it from the wagon and laid them side-by-side in the lane. And people came from all over our little town—the men to help erect the fence, the women bringing food and to help with the cooking.

Jochen Bruner, who lived on the next farm, was there with his laughing, robust mother and his ruddy ox of a father. Twice my age and nearly twice my height, he was my brother's friend, and I had a crush on him. A skinny boy with dusk colored eyes and a broad face full of freckles, he was as beautiful as any god I could imagine. I adored his light brown hair, the way the ends curled at the nape of his neck and bleached every summer to almost blond.

I loved that he pulled on his ear when he was thinking, that he always considered his words before he spoke. Jochen was wise and could talk about anything, but his special talent was with machines. With a touch as sure as the gentlest healer, he could caress a broken contraption in his hands, intuit what had gone awry, and fix it better than any man we knew. All the farmers, including Papa, went to Jochen with equipment they couldn't fix on their own, and every time he made it right, returning it with a shy little smile and refusing to be paid. Jochen worked for the love of machines, not for financial reward. I was convinced that he knew all there was to know about how the universe worked.

And he was kind to me, much kinder than most boys so that I fostered a fantasy that he had a crush on me too. Normally I would have been glad to see him, might have even flirted a little. But I did not want to see him that day, did not want him to be part of my defeat.

Mama and the women cooked all day, filling canning pots with cabbages and mashed potatoes and making loaves of whole-wheat bread. There was thick, dark ale and even sausages oozing clear fat through their crispy skins. And it was up to the children to serve it all in oversized bowls and borrowed pitchers and tin meat platters as heavy as shields. Jochen tried to help me with the heavier things, but I was too embarrassed to let him.

We set up a table just beside the cellar door at the base of the steps from the kitchen. And all day long I ran in and out with the children from the neighboring farms, fetching pitchers of ale and plates of meat while the women washed dishes and filled them up again.

The men dug holes with their clanking picks, gouging great ugly wounds in the earth as deep as Papa's forearm, as wide as Mama's hand, not caring that sometimes they pried up flowers with the stones. Yellow-brown dust flew like swarms of gnats, colonizing

everybody's hair. Some of it gritted between my teeth and crusted the ale I carried. The air stank of food and of ale and of sweat and of my humiliation.

Herr Schuler followed me with his eyes, wiping his ale-dribbled beard on his sleeve and grinning as though I had nothing on. Somehow he managed to position himself so that I could not avoid him. When I picked up an empty pitcher he was there, smirking over his pick and demanding more to drink. When I staggered under the weight of a full one he appeared just behind me, his body brushing mine as he reached around me to fill another mug.

I deliberately chose to carry bread when I could, or cabbage or sausage, anything but ale, anything that would keep the blacksmith away. But whatever I carried he was there. Once, when I picked up a tray with only a single sausage left on it, he stayed my hand. He grabbed the sausage and poked my crotch with it, laughing his stinking alcohol laugh, the laugh that made me want to wriggle out of my skin. He took a bite then shoved it at my mouth. Jochen saw and turned bright red. I dropped the tray and raced to the kitchen. I wanted to vomit. But Mama shoved a bowl of potatoes into my arms and made me carry it out.

Without warning Herr Schuler swept me up and held me over his head, leering with his crooked yellow-brown teeth. "We're building a cage for this one," he roared, his broad hands rough on my body as, helpless, I dangled like a trophy on display. "This one's a wild bird," he bellowed. "Can't let her fly away!"

And all the men laughed except Johann, who, at sixteen, had been working with them. "Put her down!" His face red with rage, his hands balled to fists, he trembled, actually trembled from his silver-blond hair to the tips of his dirt caked shoes, every muscle hair trigger tense, demanding an excuse to attack. Herr Schuler snorted and, balancing me on one hand by the crotch, he performed a grotesque pirouette.

"Put her down!" he mimicked Johann's tenor voice, making a song of the taunt. "Oh yes, I have to put the wild bird down."

My brother grabbed a pick and lunged at us, swinging the tool like a broad axe. Papa and Herr Bruner tackled Johann and disarmed him, but my brother glared at us from the ground, a warning that his anger was not spent.

When Herr Schuler put me down, brusquely rubbing his coarse hands between my legs, my shame overflowed in stinging tears, striping my gritty face. I raced back to the kitchen and collapsed on a chair, my organs quivering with the fever of disgrace. The women were too busy to notice.

I saw no point in begging to work inside. Mama liked the blacksmith's wife and, therefore, trusted him. And so, after I had taken a moment, I forced myself to rise, forced my legs to move, forced my arms to carry bowls and pitchers and trays, and ground dust and the remains of my dignity between my teeth.

Papa and Johann were mixing concrete in a wheelbarrow, Papa nagging it with a long wooden paddle while my brother added water. I wanted to go over to Johann, to thank him for standing up for me, but he and my father were arguing, their body language shouting though their voices were hushed. I let the moment pass.

After the men had dug all the holes and had filled them with Papa's slurry, they dropped the upright into place and relaxed while they waited for mixture to set. They ate and smoked and drank too much, their voices too loud, their jokes too crude.

The respite gave the blacksmith ample time to torment me again. But he didn't. Whereas I had spent the morning dodging him, suddenly he was side stepping me. I virtually bubbled with the thrill of owning my body, got drunk on the excitement of moving unmolested. I actually felt like a wild bird, rollicking and free. I even allowed myself to look at Jochen. I think I even sang.

When dusk had roosted like a gray dusty hen, the women built fires so the men could see to hoist the barred iron panels and slide them down, matching the holes to the uprights. My heart collapsed in on itself.

I'd known there would be a fence at the end of the day, but I hadn't understood that it would be so big. Taller even than my father, with bars as unyielding and straight as soldiers, it was graveyard black, a monstrous jail.

All business, the men labored in the dark, faces slick with exertion and with the heat of the fires, the flames shooting sparks in the opaque night like love-seeking lightning bugs.

"It's like fireworks!" Mama exclaimed from the kitchen door, drying her hands on her dirty apron, her face beatific and streaked with light as the yellow sparks arched and died.

The blacksmith guided the gate in place, swinging it open and letting it close until he was pleased with the way it moved. When he clanged it shut for a final time and affixed the lock and gave Papa the key Mama released an involuntary sigh, and my hatred for her was so pure it frightened me.

Once the neighbors had all gone, reclaiming their pitchers and platters and taking packets of leftover food, Mama filled a bath for me, but I wouldn't take my clothes off until she'd left the room. I could not be naked in front of her, couldn't stand the idea of her hands in my hair lathering the soap and rinsing it. I refused to hear her bedtime story, and, when she tucked me in and blew out the lamp, I turned from her goodnight kiss.

That night, for the first time, I was too disheartened to answer the forest's call.

In the morning when the forest didn't wake me with a song, I remembered the fence and my heart ached once again. I stood up in bed and peered from the window. The early morning shadows of the fence made bars, black and hostile, across the ravaged crocuses. Anger and hurt and outrage and shame roiled in my stomach, sourly erupted, and stuck, a gooey glob, in my throat. I lay back down, pulled the covers over my head, settled into my gloom, and wept.

I wept savagely, viciously, abandoning myself to brutal, bed battering sobs. I wept with the passion of a late April storm. And then I resolved to defeat the fence.

When Mama came to wake me, I was already up, already dressed, already yanking the brush through my sleep tangled hair. I'd expected Papa to wake me with his belt because of my rudeness to Mama over the bath. Papa did not tolerate disrespectful children. But Mama coaxed the hairbrush from my hand and, like a lover who hopes to charm his way out of a lie, she brushed my hair until it shone and then braided it with ribbons.

"Guess what!" She worked too hard at perkiness while she sectioned and plaited my hair. "I have a wonderful surprise for you!"

I took some satisfaction in her grief-clogged voice. For the first time I used my smile as a tool. Charm and compliance would serve me well until I could plan my escape.

"Yes!" She shook her head too vigorously, taking heart in my lying smile. "We're going to visit Frau Felden." She clapped her hands once and rubbed her palms together, grinning as if to convince herself. "You like her, remember?" She bounded from the bed and rooted through my closet, pulling out my newest dress, the one I wore to church. "Here, take that off and put this on." She held up the dress, pink and flowered with a starched white collar and a bright green ribbon sash.

I did as she said, and she tied the sash in a big fluffy bow at the small of my back. "You'll want to look your best." She patted my hair. "Yes, yes."

It wasn't exactly true that I liked Frau Felden. Since I'd met her only once three years before when I'd been four, I barely recalled the woman, though I had a vivid memory of her china figurines.

Frau Felden had a rosewood étagère on which she kept the statuettes, most of which would fit in a woman's hand. Some blonde, some dark, all dressed in glossy gowns, their petticoats ruffling at their too-small feet, they drew me like a garden of butterflies. The last time I was there, I had run to the collection, had reached for a doll, had burned with shame when Mama had snatched my hands and clutched them behind my back. I remembered the thrill when Frau Felden had pried me free and had wrapped my fingers around a brown haired beauty. Walking backwards, her hands supporting mine, Frau Felden had somehow found an easy chair, had sat, and had allowed me to hold the figurine over her lap. She'd allowed me to handle the pretty face, the cascading curls, the fancy green dress. And, when I had thoroughly examined the doll, she had let me carry it back to its shelf and place it next to the others. I'd felt deliciously grown up.

Mama pinned a towel over my dress so I wouldn't spill and spooned out our daily oatmeal. When we'd eaten in silence and she'd finished with the dishes, she checked my hair for a third and final time, tied her shawl over her shoulders, and pulled my winter coat over my arms, buttoning it up to my neck. She kissed Papa and Johann. And then she started walking.

Most people we knew didn't own cars then, and neither did we. We didn't even have a horse, though we did own a wagon with a broken wheel. And so we did whatever business we had to do within our small community. Frau Felden, however, lived two towns away, which was a six-hour walk, even at Mama's pace.

She walked and I trotted through the early spring muck past meadows still bristly from autumn's harvesting. Most of them were empty except for family dogs straining at their chains and ferociously barking while frenetically wagging their tails. My shoes, which were really hand-me-downs from Johann that Mama kept polished so they looked almost new, got streaked with mud to the ankles. Mama's did too, so I knew she wouldn't scold. Frau Dingler, the pretty rotund woman who sold eggs on Saturdays, was feeding her hens. She waved in mid-toss, and we waved back, but we didn't stop to talk. She wiped her hands on her apron and waved again, this time in farewell, and went back to tossing seed.

Bored with the monotonous, still sleeping landscape and the silence of the walk, I picked up small clumps of time-dirtied snow and twigs and stones, examined then discarded them, plotting all the while my escape from the fence, alternately falling behind my mother then racing to catch up. My heels began to hurt, though Mama had stuffed my shoes with wool so they wouldn't rub too much.

The clapboard houses huddled closer together as we approached the town, green tulip stems thumbing their way through the mud against the stone foundations. When we reached the stone sidewalks Mama stamped her feet in a useless attempt to clean them of mud. Following her lead, I did the same with exactly the same results. I paid more attention once we hit the town, watching as merchants opened their stores, nodding whenever Mama did to people who nodded back. We past Herr Schuler's smithy, our steps synchronizing with the clanging of his hammer, and I tried to disappear behind my mother's skirts. Three men loitered outside near an old milk wagon, its horse waiting to be shod. Herr Schuler was too busy to notice us, but I didn't breathe freely until we had put the shop a block behind us.

We rushed past the cheese shop, its pungent odors assaulting our nostrils and lingering. Mama pretended not to notice, and so I did the same. We passed the butcher's and the bank and Golgotha Moravian Church where we attended services when the snow wasn't too deep or the spring rains hadn't washed away the roads. We passed Fraulein Hornberger's millinery shop and the dress shop her sister owned. And, as always, I was struck that the mannequins didn't look like any woman I'd ever known. They were too tall, too slender, their painted hair too perfectly waved. Their lips were too red and their cheeks fever bright, and none of them looked harried or tired. We passed the bakery, its window a garden of pink and yellow sugar flowers. The delicious aroma of freshly baked bread followed us for a block, and I begged to buy a loaf.

"Mama, it would be nice to take Frau Felden something—maybe some cookies or a loaf of bread?" We'd have tea, I thought, with cinnamon cookies or warm fragrant bread with jelly or jam. But Mama ignored me, maintaining her pace, and I had to jog to keep up.

I looked over my shoulder as we past the last shop and stepped down into mud again. We had just crossed the border of all I knew. I wanted to linger, to say goodbye to the town. For some reason I felt I'd never see it again quite the way it was. I wanted to weep. But Mama kept her footsteps steady and quick, tugging me smartly along.

I don't know why, but I expected the country beyond our town to be exotic, maybe wild and a little dangerous. But the fields were the same as the ones we had just past—muddy and shabby, just molting their snowy down, not yet plumed with the showy colors of spring. We hurried past homesteads just like ours, Mama fiercely trudging at a pace I could not match. My shoes rubbed sore spots on my heels. I could not walk without limping.

Though the air was chilly, sweat trickled down my back; my face burned from within. Knowing Mama wouldn't let me take off my coat, I unbuttoned it, allowing the front to flap in the current of our gait. Cool air trickled through my dress raising goose bumps of relief.

"Have you lost your mind?" Mama stopped in her tracks. "You'll catch your death of cold!" she scolded, doing up the coat around my throat.

I sighed and quietly whined to myself, promising I'd never wear a coat again or shoes that rubbed once I got into the woods. Hot and hungry, tired and wanting a nap, my feet so sore I didn't think I could go on, I limped behind my mother, knowing better than to ask how much farther we had to go.

"If you need to pee you'd better do it now," Mama squatted by the road and relieved herself.

Nothing about the barren panorama looked different from what we had seen until then. I didn't understand what made that place special. Nonetheless, I obediently squatted and made water. We adjusted our clothing and plodded on, my feet screaming with each step.

When the houses began to cluster I took hope. My heels hurt less, and, though I was hot and hungry, like a mare smelling the hay of her barn after a day of work, I quickened my pace to stay abreast of my mother. I wasn't even terribly disappointed that the houses were as small as ours, just as threadbare, just as badly in need of paint. I didn't mind that their windows were just as shiny, as if the women here, like the ones at home, believed that constant cleaning could wash away the rot. Ordinary laundry just like ours flapped on clotheslines strung between trees. Chickens scratched at the ragged, slimy ground and dogs just like the ones at home pulled at their chains with a terrible racket, their tails wagging just as frantically.

The town was very much like ours as well. The shops were arranged slightly differently, but their windows shone just as brilliantly; their dark canvas awnings were fringed just the same. The sidewalks were paved with the same kind of stone, and old men played chess at the café tables, just as they did at home.

Mama stopped abruptly, and I bumped into her. She plucked a crumbled paper from her pocket, read it, nodded once, and walked again, this time much more slowly, checking the names on shop windows as we went. We stopped in front of Felden's Dry Goods. Mama checked my hair again, straightened my coat, and fretted over my shoes. She dampened her handkerchief with a little spit and swabbed beside my eye.

"Wipe your feet," she warned, wiping hers on the mat just outside the little shop's door. "And don't forget your pleases and thank yous." She laid her hand on the doorknob and stopped again. "And don't touch anything." She opened the door, and a bell I couldn't see jingled a merry welcome.

The store was a fairy tale of cloth. Aside from the clothes on the window mannequins that stood in postures no woman could endure, dresses, aprons, shirts, and blouses overlapped on hangers against the back wall. To the right bolts of cotton—prints and solids and stripes and plaids—and wool and corduroy leftover from winter's need and fabrics I couldn't identify were arranged on shelves according to color. And in front of them maple display cases showed off spools of thread and needles and binding, bias tape, buttons, zippers and cards of snaps and hooks and eyes. Rolls of ribbon and lace and braids and other trims were stacked in the middle of the store on a large round table. And on the left, hanks of yarn were strewn on a counter around busts of men and children in knitted sweaters and vests. Mama made all the clothes we wore, but I'd never seen so much fabric in single place. She usually used whatever was at hand—left over material from things she'd made for neighbors or pieces she'd torn from her own old dresses. Mama had warned me not to touch, but I couldn't keep my hands from the fancy stuff. She snatched my wrist then clapped her hands on my shoulders, turning me toward the young woman at the counter.

"Good day." She nodded once. "Fraulein Felden?" Her fingernails dug into my coat.

"Good day. How may I help you?" Much taller than Mama, Fraulein Felden was as elegant as a queen. Her black hair was bobbed bluntly at her chin, and her lips and cheeks were mannequin red. When she smiled she crinkled her nose and tilted her head

as if to punctuate the question. She was knitting needle thin in her red drop-waist dress, and she looked like she had no breasts. She wore a long strand of pearls around her neck that framed a gold heart locket. She fondled the pendant, sliding it on its chain, realized what she was doing, and let her hand drop to a skein of yarn. Her nails were talon long and as red as her lips, and I didn't understand how she could do anything without their getting in the way.

"Yes, thank you," Mama said, squeezing my shoulders and backing me into her belly. "I'm Elsa Baumann. I have an appointment with Frau Felden."

"Oh yes, she's been expecting you." Fraulein Felden smiled again, tilting her head, and knocked quietly on the door beside the wall of hanging clothes. Opening it, she motioned for us to wait, and then she disappeared. In a moment she was back to guide us through a short, narrow hall to another door. She rapped and opened it, inviting us into the most elegant room I'd ever seen.

Everything in the room was covered with cloth. Mahogany tables, reflecting pond glossy wore doilies of genuine lace. The chairs were cushioned with flowered cloth and draped over their backs with pretty fringed shawls. The widows had two layers of cloth as well—floor length lacy sheers that gathered at the top and deeply pleated drapes that were flowered to match the chairs. There was even a cloth on the parquet floor, pearl gray with flowers that matched the drapes and chairs.

Fraulein Felden disappeared with my coat and Mama's shawl, but Mama nodded that it was all right and fluffed the bow she'd made of my sash. Frau Felden, seated on an overstuffed chair, a book resting in her lap, greeted my mother then turned to me.

"Judy, my sweet! Look how you've grown!" Her smile was just as red as her daughter's, and her nails were just as long. Her cheeks were pink, though her face was very pale against her bobbed auburn hair. Her baby blue calf-length dress was shorter than any I'd ever seen on a woman so old. (You see, I thought she was ancient at the time, though now I think she was in her early fifties.) And her navy blue shoes, blunt-toed with little heels and a strap across each instep, were nothing like the work shoes my mother and I wore. "Come, Liebchen. Do you remember me?" She tilted her head and smiled her daughter's crinkled nose smile. She laid the book on the chair-side table and patted the cushion, making room for me. She was as thin as her daughter.

I knew Mama wanted me to mind my manners, and that meant going promptly to the woman. But she'd also warned me not to touch. To reach Frau Felden I had to walk on the fancy fabric stretched across the floor. I didn't know what to do. Frozen at the edge of the carpet's fringe, I fought tears of indecision until Mama took my hand and strode with me across the woven garden as naturally as if she were walking on wood planks. Frau Felden leaned forward. For less than a moment a frown puckered her brow, giving the lie to her unbroken smile. Mama placed her hand at the small of my back, pushing me closer. I mumbled a greeting.

Frau Felden cupped my face. Her hand was velvet soft. Not a hint of a callus marred her touch. A strong whiff of lavender stuck in my throat, stealing my next breath. I swallowed hard and gulped air. Oxygen filled my lungs; I held it there while she kissed me on both cheeks. She took my hands. My nails were dirty. She winced at my mother then smiled again.

"You're limping, child. What's wrong with your feet?" Her red lips went flat, and the frown came again, making itself at home.

"Nothing," I lied, my trembling chin betraying me. I wanted to be home. I wanted to eat. I wanted to take off my shoes and go to bed. I swiped a renegade tear from my cheek.

"She's fine." Mama rested her hand on my shoulder, a warning not to cry.

I knew I had shamed her with my dirty nails and limp. I wanted to sob for the disgrace I'd caused. I didn't belong in a room with real lace and a rug and windows that had two layers of cloth. I had no business standing in front of a lady who smelled of lavender, whose long polished nails were clean, who had time to read in the middle of the day. Mama squeezed my shoulders. Obediently I sat on the chair beside the woman and allowed her to take off my shoes.

Over Mama's objection, the lady placed my muddy shoes on her lap, unlaced them, pulled them off, and let them drop, one by one, onto the flowered rug. I flinched as the right one rubbed the wound on my heel and again when the left one did the same. She rolled my socks to my ankles and tried to slip them over my feet, but blood had soaked through the cotton and dried. My socks were brown spotted, stiff, and firmly stuck. Frau Felden shook her head.

"I can't take these off without hurting her," she commented to my feet. Then, as if apologizing for a breach of hospitality, she excused herself, held up my legs and, swinging her torso under them, got up from the chair.

When she'd left the room Mama dropped to her knees, petted my shins and insteps, and quietly wept. I could not look at her.

Frau Felden returned with a basin of warm water and placed it on the floor. "Here, Liebchen." She put my feet into the liquid. "Soak your feet while I fetch some salve and bandages."

My shoes had left mud stains her dress, but she didn't seem to notice. Mama begged her with her eyes, but I didn't know if she was begging for help or to be forgiven or for the woman to return to the role of lady and let my mother to do the tending. Maybe she begged for all those things, maybe for something else. I never asked, and she never told.

Blood leached from my socks tingeing the water pink, as if by adding water Frau Felden had brought it back to life. I wiggled my toes in the soothing pool. The sopping cotton clung to them, but the heels of my socks hung heavily from my feet. In moments Frau Felden returned wearing an apron and carrying medical supplies on a silver tray, which she set on the chair-side table. She knelt in front of me, and Mama let out a moan so soft I almost didn't hear it. The lady easily peeled the socks from my feet and laid them on a kitchen towel folded on the tray.

"I'm afraid I've set the stain," she apologized.

Mama didn't respond. I knew that, discolored or not, those socks would appear in my underwear drawer again. The lady unfolded another towel and dried my feet, gently patting the open wounds. I hardly felt a thing. The black salve stung coldly when she applied it with gauze, but in seconds the pain was gone. She cut strips of white tape and stuck them to the tray so they hung like fringe then deftly cut and folded clean gauze, which she positioned over the wounds. She nodded at Mama to hold the gauze in place and ripped the tape strips from the tray. In a blink the bandages were in place, and my heels didn't hurt anymore. It's hard to believe now, but I actually thought she'd performed a magical act. Now that I think of it, I guess in a way she had.

"There, now." Frau Felden got to her feet, smoothed her apron, and placed the tray on a table. She smiled her crinkled nose smile again, and I noticed for the first time that her eyes crinkled too. "You've had a long journey." It was a simple statement of fact. "I imagine you'd like to wash up before lunch."

I'd nearly forgotten how hungry I was, but the moment she mentioned food my stomach growled. Mama looked like she wanted to hide.

"Come then." The lady gestured to the kitchen as if she hadn't heard my complaining stomach. Mama and I took her suggestion as a command and obediently followed her to the kitchen sink. The lady offered a step stool so I could reach the sink and primed the pump to get the water running. I lathered up. The soap smelled of lilacs, very different from the lye soap we used at home. Using the nailbrush the woman had handed her, Mama scrubbed my nails until they gleamed and dried my hands on yet another towel.

"Watch what they do and do the same," Mama whispered hoarsely directly into my ear then turned to follow the lady into the dining room.

"Is there something I can do to help?" Mama's voice was too loud, her footfalls too heavy. Though my mother was small she seemed somehow too big, too fleshy, too real, to fit in the fancy room. Frau Felden shook her head.

Sunshine saturated the room, pouring through lace curtains on the double windows directly ahead and through matching curtains on the French doors at the left. Though the garden was dormant and the view through the doors was of nothing but the stone walls that enclosed it, I could imagine daisies and irises, a lilac and surely some roses in summer. I pictured Frau Felden, wearing gloves against the thorns, maybe with a hat to protect her from the sun, strolling along the flagstone paths and cutting flowers for a crystal vase. And I promised myself that when I grew up I'd have a flower garden with flagstone paths and a chin high wall of stone. I'd fill vases with roses and put at least one on every table in the house. Though she'd made no effort to dig up our bulbs that had spread so crazily, Mama hadn't approved of growing flowers since she'd borne the two of us. "They'd take up space," she'd protested, "that we need for vegetables."

A mahogany sideboard with a creamy lace runner basked in the windows' sun and on top of it a crystal bowl filled with greens, a china salver loaded with meat, a tureen and two ornate silver candelabra sporting five purple candles each. Just beside the kitchen door, there was a tall china closet with beveled glass doors in which the Feldens displayed silver platters and decorative china and cut crystal glasses and bowls.

But the queen of the room was the dining room table. Long and broad with graceful curved legs and shiny brass feet, it occupied the center of the room and, hovering over it like a crown, a crystal chandelier with facets that sunshine had turned to dancing rainbows. The table was covered with a real linen cloth, pure white without any stains, and was set with cloth napkins and silver flatware and genuine china dishes—so many dishes, so many spoons and forks. It looked like a table set for a banquet. My breath hissed when I sucked it in.

"No, thank you, Frau Baumann." Acknowledging my mother's offer, the lady gestured for us to sit. "Gerda's taken care of everything. Such a good daughter." Fraulein Felden glowed in her mother's praise.

Mama sat in the chair the lady had touched, and I sat next to her on the rose colored pillow Gerda Felden had added to boost me to a comfortable height. I felt like a princess

on such a soft seat, but in truth everybody's chair was soft, cushioned with mauve and purple flowered fabric like the violets on the walls.

Frau Felden sat at one end of the table and her daughter at the other. Mama and I were seated on the side, facing the window, our backs to the china closet. From that vantage point I finally noticed a teacart on one side and the étagère on the other of the door that led to the parlor. I was sure I'd remembered the étagère in the parlor, but maybe I'd been wrong. Or perhaps they had moved it.

Frau Felden said a blessing in a tongue I didn't know. Mama bowed her head with her and, therefore, so did I. When the prayer was ended and we'd all said "Amen", the lady rose, brought the tureen to the table, and served each of us, one ladle of steaming soup per bowl. I grabbed for a spoon, but Mama touched my thigh. I waited, promising my empty stomach as I'd promised the woods—soon, soon. The ladies unfolded their napkins and laid them neatly in their laps. Mama and I did the same. Each lifted the large spoon to her right, and so did we. Each skimmed her soup from the middle to the far edge of the bowl, and Mama followed suit. But I noticed that I could see my face in the silver. Fascinated, I stared, holding the utensil like a mirror. Mama kicked my shin. I skimmed with the ladies and ate without slurping and daintily dabbed the corners of my mouth whenever Frau Felden did. The steamy golden soup was full of chicken chunks and celery leaves with bits of carrot and lots of parsley. When my bowl was nearly empty I automatically moved to lift it to drink the last of the broth. Mama stayed my wrist, and, sure enough, the ladies left the last of the soup in their bowls. I couldn't understand why I had to leave food when my stomach was still complaining.

Gerda Felden cleared the bowls and the plates under them, placing them on the sideboard, and gave each of us a dinner plate. She transferred the tureen to the sideboard too and replaced it with a loaf of bread, a bowl of honey and another little bowl of jam. She added the salver of cold roast beef sliced and rolled and arranged like the spokes of a wheel, a small bowl of horseradish acting as a hub. Mama and I waited. Frau Felden cut the bread with a long silver knife.

"Would you like some bread?" she asked my mother, passing the partially cut loaf.

I did. I'd never seen white bread. To me it was a delicacy, and I simply had to taste. But Mama declined, and Fraulein Felden understood her refusal to apply to me too. Before I could snatch a piece she'd accepted the serving plate from my mother. She took a slice and laid the loaf to her right, too far for me to reach. Three times I mentally asked for bread, trying three different combinations of words. But each time I thought I had gotten it right I remembered Frau Felden's grimace when she'd noticed my dirty nails. I didn't want to do it wrong. And so I waited while Gerda Felden spread honey on her slice, while her mother tried, as she'd done since we'd sat down, to engage my mother in conversation. She asked about my father's health. Mama said he was fine.

"And Johann? He must be so big by now."

"Yes, quite big," Mama agreed. "He's well too, thank you."

And so it went, with solitary words dangling on long strands of awkward silence.

At last our hostess took a slice of meat and spooned a dab of horseradish onto her plate. She passed the salver to my mother and she served herself and me, passing the meat to Gerda Felden. We cut and speared the meat with knives and forks instead of eating it with our fingers. I thought it tasted better with a fork.

I began to fidget when Frau Felden removed the meat to the sideboard and replaced it with the salad. I wasn't used to sitting so long, and my booster pillow was getting lumpy. Mama put her arm around my shoulder and leaned into my face.

"Sit still," she hissed and kissed me roughly on the cheek.

I did my best, wrapping my legs around the chair to keep them from dangling and finally settling on resting my feet on the rung. The lady chose a little fork, and we did the same, pronging small bits of spinach and walnut flesh and juicy orange sections.

There was nothing on the sideboard that had not been served. My hunger well sated, I promised restless muscles that the meal was over and soon I'd be able to move. But just when I was ready to get up, Fraulein Felden cleared the table taking the dishes to the kitchen and returning with a chocolate layer cake. She placed it in front of her mother. She returned to the kitchen and came back with a tray containing a matching silver coffee set—a pot, a sugar bowl with ornately fashioned tongs, and a dainty pitcher of cream. Taking small plates from the sideboard, our hostess cut the cake while her daughter poured coffee into small china cups. We never had dessert at home. Mama said she had enough to do without having to make confections.

"Would you like a glass of milk?" Frau Felden asked smiling her daughter's crinkly smile.

"Oh, yes!" Milk was a luxury at home. Mama poked her elbow into my ribs. "Yes, please. Thank you," I amended. Frau Felden moved to rise, but her daughter patted her shoulder.

"I'm up, Mama. I'll get it." But when she brought the frosty glass, I didn't know what to do. No one at the table was drinking milk but me. Frau Felden gave me a subtle nod and raised her eyebrows wrinkling her forehead as if we were sharing a private joke. I gulped half the milk, stopped to gasp for breath then guzzled the rest much too noisily. Mama was mortified. Frau Felden was amused.

"Would you like some more?" Gerda Felden asked, her brown eyes twinkling.

I did. I wanted it more than the cake. But I shook my head. "No, thank you," I mumbled.

Mama let out a sigh and ate her cake, but I did not. I took a bite to make it mine and hoped the Feldens would send it home with me so I could to give it to Johann for having stood up to the blacksmith. And that's exactly what they did. When the meal was finally over and I could move again Frau Felden wrapped the cake in a piece of wax paper, placed it in a little mesh bag, and set it on top of my shoe. She put a large bundle next to my shoes as well.

"Next week will be fine," she told my mother. But I was too busy admiring the figurines on the étagère to pay attention to the women. Gerda Felden came up behind me and placed her hands on my shoulders.

"Would you like to have one?"

My mouth dropped open in panic and hope. I glanced at Mama. She was busy with Frau Felden. I nodded, unable to trust my voice.

"It's all right, Liebchen." She stroked my head and ran her fingers down my right braid. "Pick one. Choose her carefully, though. Make sure she's the one you really want."

I touched a fine one, a lady with hair as black as Fraulein Felden's but wavy and long and swept up over her head. She had pretty green eyes and a little red mouth and a

nose as fragile as a wish. Her sleeveless dress was emerald green and tight at the bodice, but its full gathered skirt flowed from her tiny waist as if caught in the wind, showing off a white petticoat of ribbons and lace. She wore pointy black shoes and stood on a little round base that was as green as her dress. I liked her well enough, but she wasn't the one.

I touched others too—blonde ones in red and one in yellow with a sun bonnet hanging down her back. I picked up a red head with flowers in her hair and roses all over her ruffled white dress and little pink shoes with tiny blossoms at the toes. All were beautiful, but none was quite right. Then in the back, partially hidden behind the others, the perfect one winked at me.

She was smaller than the others, about twelve centimeters high, and she wasn't a lady at all. She was a little girl. Her yellow hair was pulled up in a red bow at the top of her head and fell down to her neck in long finger curls. She had big blue eyes and fat rosy cheeks and a little pink nose. Her bright red lips were parted in a smile as if she wanted to tell me a secret. I could almost hear her voice whispering through her glossy teeth. Her dress was baby blue and had long sleeves. A ribbon sash tied at the waist to a flat bow at her back, its ends streaming down to her ankle length hem. Her bell-shaped skirt showed the last snowy ruffle of her frilly pantaloons. And in front of her dress, as though it were an apron, she held a broad brimmed garden hat in both fists. But the thing I liked best about the figurine, the thing that made her mine, was that she wore brown work shoes that looked to be about a size too large. I held her in both hands and stroked her face with my thumb.

"Is she the one?"

I'd forgotten Fraulein Felden at my shoulder. I nodded.

"Well, then, you'll have to name her."

I already had. Her name was Heidi. I opened my mouth, but Fraulein Felden shushed me, placing her fingertip over my mouth. "No, don't tell. Keep her name secret. That way you'll be the only one she'll talk to."

"Come, Judy," Mama called from the parlor. "It's time to go." Reflexively I hid Heidi behind my back.

"It's all right, Liebchen." Fraulein Felden rubbed a little circle on my back with the flat of her hand and addressed my mother. "I've given Judy a little gift, something to remember us by," she said with her crinkled nose smile, her head tilted to the right. "It's just a little something. I hope you don't mind." She was all charm. I took mental notes. Mama shrugged and thanked her.

"Say 'thank you', Judy," Mama reminded, "and come get your shoes."

It was official. I could keep the figurine. I hugged it and thanked Gerda Felden. "Her name is Heidi," I whispered to the woman. "I don't mind if she talks to you too." I had no way of knowing how glad I'd be years later that I'd shared Heidi's name. I carefully placed Heidi in the bag with my cake and sat down to put on my shoes.

"I don't think it's a good idea for her to put those on just yet," Frau Felden suggested. "Why don't I drive you home?"

Mama's protest was tepid. She knew I could not walk, and she knew she couldn't carry both Frau Felden's package and me.

"Do you mind, Gerda?"

Fraulein Felden shook her head, beaming at me as I stroked little Heidi through the mesh of the bag.

"Leave the dishes. I'll do them when I get back. You'll have enough tending the store."

Mama helped Frau Felden hitch up the carriage, and we rode like ladies, all the way to our front gate.

The minute I saw the fence my world closed in on me again, and I wanted to bolt with Heidi and the cake while I could, before Mama or Frau Felden could catch me. As though she'd read my mind Mama grabbed my wrist and held it much too tight. Frau Felden winced at the iron bars the same way she'd winced when she'd noticed my dirty nails.

"I see you have a new fence, Frau Baumann," she observed, immediately recovering her smile.

Still gripping my hand, Mama nodded without comment and thanked her for the ride. She lifted me out of the carriage then, still clutching my wrist, pulled the parcel out as well. We stood and waved Frau Felden down the road while we waited for Papa to unlock the gate.

Supper was as supper is. Papa and Johann reeked of manure, their work clothes smeared and smudged from having spent the day wiping their hands on their pants and their faces on their sleeves. We ate watered down cabbage and potato soup from mismatched bowls on the bare little table, the men slurping and grunting and smacking their lips as they dipped the brown bread into their broth to soak up every bit.

When the soup was gone and Mama had already gotten up to wash the dishes I went over to the counter and retrieved the wax paper package I'd been saving for Johann. And, as if it were the crown jewels resting on a pillow, I carried it the few steps to his chair.

"I saved this for you," I said simply. *Thank you*, I wished into his heart, *for Herr Schuler and for all the food you've brought to me.*

And, as I'd done with the bread he'd brought me so many times, he gobbled it up and wet his fingers to dab up every crumb.

That night I placed Heidi on the bureau in my room and, after Mama had kissed me good night, she went over, picked up the doll, and examined her. Without a word, she shook her head, put the little girl statue back on the bureau, and blew out the lamp.

With only a sliver of the moon to guide me, I tiptoed to the bureau, cradled Heidi in my hands, and returned with her to my bed. Leaning toward the glass to gather the silver light, I sat with the statuette, telling her everything I could think of about Johann and Mama and Papa and me. I told her about the call of the woods and about the fence and my plans to defeat it. I talked to her for such a long time, staring into her face, that her head seemed to nod, and her mouth appeared to move. And so I sat quietly and listened for her voice.

I strained for a long time to hear what she was saying, holding her to my ear so I could catch the faintest sound. I listened so hard and for such a long time I didn't even notice that the moon had moved on, leaving us in total darkness. Still listening, I oozed into a thick, black sleep, waking once in the night to crawl under the covers and cuddle little Heidi on my pillow.

I awoke just as the sky was turning gray and heard the familiar forest song.

“Do you hear that?” I asked Heidi, thrilled that, in spite of the fence, the forest still had faith in me.

She didn’t respond.

“Yes, I hear you,” I assured the woods. “We’re coming,” I promised, as I had so often before. “We’re coming soon.” But my eyes would not stay open. Sleep overtook me on sweet stealthy feet, and this time it carried a dream.

In my dream I sat at a rough wood table inside a windowless house that I did not know but in which I knew I lived. There were three candles on the table, each burning at a different rate. The white one was just about gone while the red one, the thickest of the three, still stood about the height of my hand. The black one, the thinnest of them all, looked practically new, but it was burning fast. I worried that before long it would burn down too, and I’d have only the flicker of a single candle to light my important work.

Pottery shards littered the table, and I was sorting them by color. There was a jar of glue at my elbow, and I knew I had to reassemble the pieces before the light was gone. But each time I thought I had the colors separated I found they were intermingled again. Bits of crystal glinted in the mixture too, shining rainbows into my eyes so that, even with the light, I couldn’t quite see what I was doing.

Heidi was there, a living girl, but the same size as the figurine, and she glowed with a blue light as if she wore a halo. She worked beside me at a frantic pace, kneeling among the colored splinters trying to push them to the proper piles, bloodying her knees and her dress and her hands. I looked at my hands, and they were bloody too. I woke up sobbing in my mother’s arms.

“Hush, Judy, hush.” She rocked me, resting her chin on my head and petting my hair. “It was just a bad dream. It’s all over now.” But, of course, it hadn’t even begun.