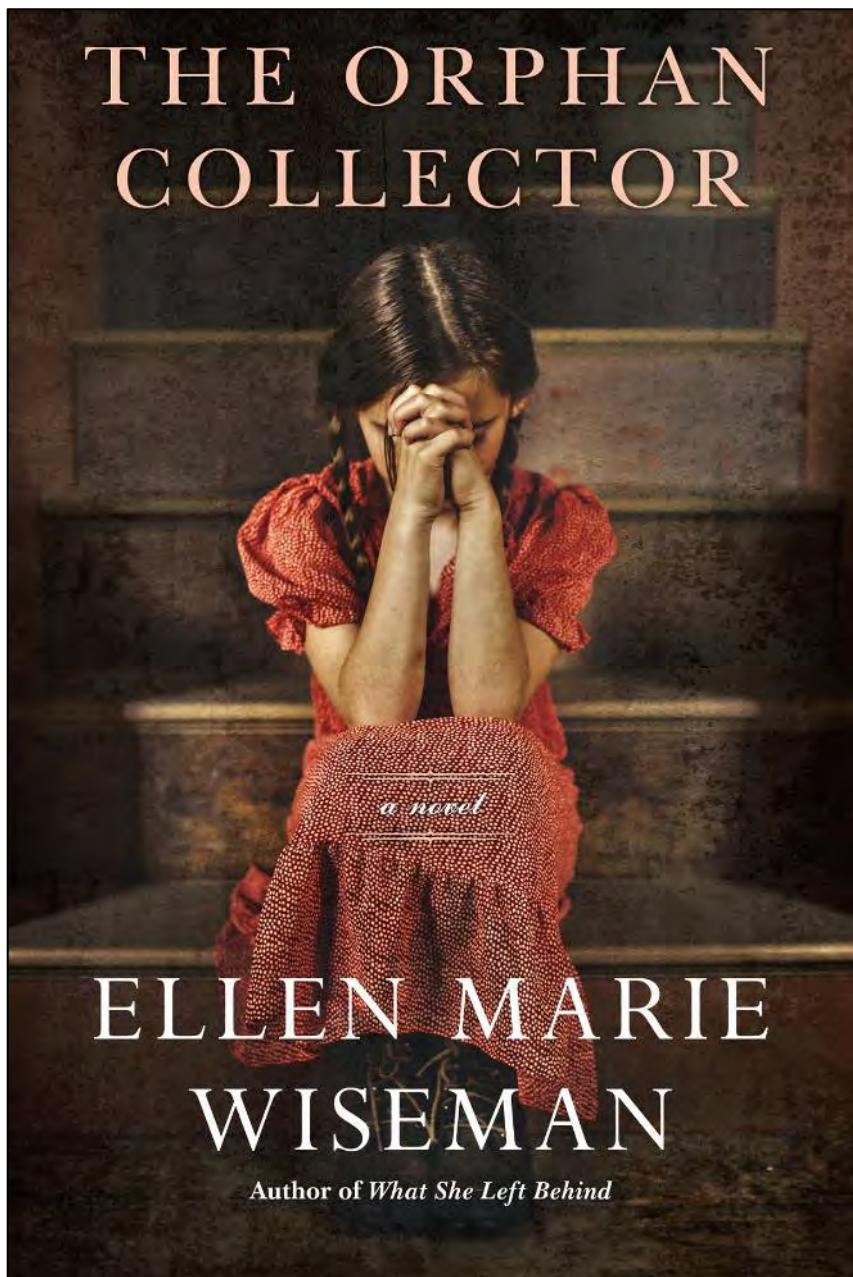


Discussion Guide & Excerpt Booklet



**For review copies, virtual events, and other
publicity-related queries, please contact:**

Vida Engstrand, Director of Communications / VEngstrand@KensingtonBooks.com



Dear Reader,

Last year, as I was researching the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic and finishing *The Orphan Collector*, it was inconceivable that another powerful virus would once again bring the world to its knees. Yet here we are in the summer of 2020, when words like “social distancing,” “quarantine,” “face mask,” and “ventilators” are a part of daily conversation. I’m praying hard that by the time you read this, we’re closer to coming out on the other side together, more resilient, more compassionate, and stronger than ever.

The Orphan Collector tells the story of a young German immigrant in Philadelphia, Pia Lange, struggling to keep her family together at a time when more Americans were dying in our nation’s streets and homes than on the battlefields of WWI. It’s also about a grieving mother, Bernice Groves, who uses her hatred of immigrants as an excuse to tear families apart when they’re at their most vulnerable.

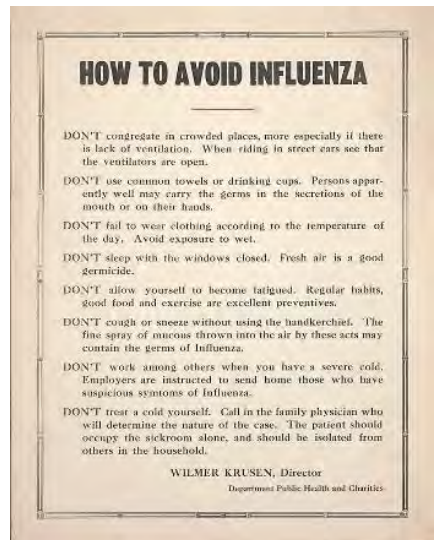
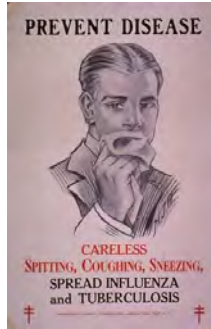
I hope you will be drawn to Pia’s resiliency, courage, and determination in the face of impossible odds, even when shame and fear threaten to swallow her whole. I also hope Bernice’s story will remind readers that empathy for others, no matter their race, nationality, or religion, is always the right choice.

Best Wishes,



Ellen Marie Wiseman, author of *The Orphan Collector*

Historical images from the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic



Images courtesy of Bridgeman Images; Everett Collection/Bridgeman Images; National Archives; Free Library of Philadelphia/ Bridgeman Images

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CHAPTER ONE



PIA

September 28, 1918

The deadly virus stole unnoticed through the crowded cobblestone streets of Philadelphia on a sunny September day, unseen and unheard amidst the jubilant chaos of the Liberty Loan parade and the patriotic marches of John Philip Sousa. More than 200,000 men, women, and children waved American flags and jostled one another for prime viewing space along the two-mile route, while the people behind shouted encouragement over shoulders and past faces to the bands, Boy Scouts, women's auxiliaries, marines, sailors, and soldiers in the street. Planes flew overhead, draft horses pulled eight-inch howitzers, military groups performed bayonet drills, church bells clanged, and police whistles blew; old friends hugged and shook hands, couples kissed, and children shared candy and soda. Unaware that the lethal illness had escaped the Naval Yard, the eager spectators had no idea that the local hospitals had admitted over two hundred people the previous day, or that numerous infectious disease experts had pressured the mayor to cancel the event. Not that it would have mattered. They were there to support the troops, buy war bonds, and show their patriotism during a time of war. Victory in Europe—and keeping the Huns out of America—was first and foremost on their minds.

Many of the onlookers had heard about the flu hitting Boston and New York, but the director of laboratories at the Phipps Institute of Philadelphia had just announced he'd identified the cause of the specific influenza causing so much trouble—Pfeiffer's bacillus—and the local newspapers said influenza posed no danger because it was as old as history and usually accompanied by foul air, fog, and plagues of insects. None of those things were happening in Philadelphia. Therefore, it stood to reason that as long as everyone did what the Board of Health advised—kept their feet dry, stayed warm, ate more onions, and kept their bowels and windows open—they'd be fine.

But thirteen-year-old Pia Lange knew something was wrong. And not because her best friend, Finn Duffy, had told her about the dead sailors his older brother had seen outside a local pub. Not because of the posters on telephone poles and buildings that read: "When obliged to cough or sneeze, always place a handkerchief, paper napkin, or fabric of some kind before the face," or "Cover your mouth! Influenza Is Spread by Droplets Sprayed from Nose and Mouth!"

Pia knew something was wrong because the minute she had followed her mother—who was pushing Pia's twin brothers in a wicker baby pram—onto the packed parade route, a sense of unease had come over her, like the thick air before a summer thunderstorm or the swirling discomfort in her belly right before she got sick. Feeling distraught in crowds was nothing new to her—she would never forget the panic she'd felt the first time she walked the busy streets of Philadelphia, or when Finn had dragged her to the maiden launch of a warship from Hog Island, where President Wilson and thirty thousand people were in attendance, and the water was filled with tugboats, steamboats, and barges decorated with American flags.

But this was different. Something she couldn't name seemed to push against her from all sides, something heavy and invisible and threatening. At first she thought it was the heat and the congested sidewalks, but then she recognized the familiar sinking sensation she had grown up trying to avoid, and the sudden, overwhelming awareness that something was horribly wrong. She felt like the little

girl she had once been, the little girl who hid behind Mutti's apron when company came, unable to explain why she always wanted to play alone. The little girl who didn't want to shake hands or hug, or sit on anyone's lap. The little girl who was grateful to be left out of kickball and jump rope, while at the same time it broke her heart.

Looking up at the boys in worn jackets and patched trousers clambering up streetlamps to get a better view of the parade, she wished she could join them to escape the crush of the growing throng. The boys shouted and laughed and waved their newsboy caps, hanging like monkeys below giant American flags. More than anything she wanted to be like them too, carefree and unaware that anything was wrong. But that was impossible. No matter how hard she tried, she'd never be like everyone else.

When she looked back down at the sidewalk, her mother had disappeared. She opened her mouth to shout for her, then bit her tongue. She wasn't supposed to call her Mutti anymore—not out loud, anyway. Speaking German in public was no longer allowed. Her parents would always be Mutti and Vater in her head, no matter what the law said, but she didn't dare draw attention by calling her that in a crowd. Standing on her tiptoes to see over shoulders and backs, she spotted the top of Mutti's faded brown hat a few yards away and hurried to catch up to her, stopping short and moving sideways to avoid bumping into people on the way.

Finally behind Mutti again, she wiped the sweat from her upper lip and breathed a sigh of relief. The last thing she needed was to get lost in the city. Bunching her shoulders to make herself smaller, she stayed as close to Mutti as possible, weaving and ducking to avoid the sea of bare arms and hands all around her, wishing her mother would slow down. If only she could crawl into the baby pram with her twin brothers and hide beneath their blankets. She had known coming to the parade would be difficult, but she hadn't expected this.

As far back as she could remember she'd been extraordinarily shy; Mutti said few people could hold her when she was a baby because she'd cry like the world was coming to an end. And she used to think being bashful was the same for everyone; that it was something you could feel, like a fever or stomachache or scratchy throat.

Sometimes she wondered what would have happened if Mutti hadn't been there to protect her from men wanting to pinch her cheeks, and little old ladies wagging their fingers at her to prove they were harmless. But gradually those feelings had changed, even more so in the last couple of months. She'd started to notice other sensations when she touched someone's bare skin, like a dull pain in her head or chest, or a strange discomfort in an arm or leg. It didn't happen every time, but often enough to make her wonder if something was wrong with her. Now, whenever she went to the dry goods store or vegetable market, she took the streets—dodging horses, wagons, bicycles, and automobiles—to avoid the congested sidewalks. And handing coins to the peddlers nearly gave her the vapors, so she dropped them on the counter more often than not. Unfortunately there was nothing she could do about any of it. Telling Mutti—or anyone else, for that matter—was out of the question, especially after hearing about her great-aunt Lottie, who spent the second half of her life locked in an insane asylum in Germany because she saw things that weren't there. No matter how confused or scared Pia got, she wasn't willing to take the chance of getting locked up too.

Now, following Mutti along the packed sidewalks, her worst fears that something was wrong were confirmed when a man in a linen suit and straw gambler cut across the flow of pedestrians and bumped into her, laughing at first, then apologizing when he realized what he'd done. Having been taught to always smile and be polite, she forced a smile—she was so good at it that it sometimes frightened her—but then the man pinched her cheek and a sharp pain stabbed her chest, like her heart had been split in two. She shuddered and looked down at herself, certain a knife would be sticking out of her rib cage. But there was no knife, no blood trickling down the front of her flour-sack dress. The thin bodice was smooth and spotless, as clean as it had been that morning when she first put it on. She stepped backward to get away from the man, but he was already gone, the pain disappearing with him. The strength of it left her shaky and weak.

Then a small, cool hand latched on to hers and her chest constricted, tightening with every breath. She swore she heard her lungs rattle, but couldn't be sure with all the noise. She yanked her hand

away and looked down. A little girl in a white ruffled dress gazed up at her, smiling—until she realized Pia was a stranger. Then fear crumpled her face and she searched the crowd with frantic eyes before running off, calling for her mother. When she was gone, Pia could breathe normally again.

How Pia longed to be back in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, where open spaces were filled with blue skies, swaths of wildflowers, and herds of deer, instead of miles of pavement, side-by-side buildings, and hordes of people. In Philadelphia, she couldn't walk ten feet without bumping into someone, and every sight, sound, and smell seemed menacing and foreign. The neighborhood alleys were strewn with garbage and sewage, and the biggest rats she'd ever seen crawled in nooks and crannies, scampering between walls and passageways. Trolleys and wagons and motorcars fought for space on every street, and more people than she had ever seen at one time seemed to crowd every sidewalk. The city reminded her of a clogged beehive, teeming with people instead of insects. Even the row houses were full to overflowing, with multiple families squeezed into two and three rooms. Certainly there had been hardships in the mining village back in Hazleton—the walls of their shack were paper-thin, everything from their clothes to their kitchen table seemed covered in coal dust, and worst of all, Vater's job digging for coal was dangerous and grueling—but it didn't make her any less homesick. She was glad her father had found less dangerous work in the city a little over a year ago, but she missed the chickens in the yard and the neighbor's hound dog sleeping under their front porch. She missed taking the dirt path to Widow Wilcox's shack to learn how to read and write. She missed the mountain trails and the grass outside their front door. Vater said she missed Hazleton because she longed for the rolling hills and green fields of Bavaria. And when she reminded him she was only four years old when they boarded the ship to America, he laughed and said Germany was in her blood, like her fondness for sweets and his love for her mother.

Thinking of her father, her eyes burned. If he were here with them now, she could hold his wide, weathered hand in hers and lean against his tall, muscular frame. He'd squeeze her fingers twice, in quick succession like he always did, which meant "I love you"; then

she'd squeeze his back and they'd smile at each other, delighted with their little secret. No one would guess by looking at Vater that he was tenderhearted and always whistling, singing, and making jokes; instead they tended to hurry out of his path because of his imposing presence and piano-wide shoulders. With him by her side, she could have moved through the crowd nearly untouched. But that was impossible because he'd enlisted in the army three months ago, along with two of his German-American friends, to prove their loyalty to the United States. Now he was somewhere in France, and she had no idea when he was coming home. Like Mutti said through her tears when he left, moving to the city to keep him safe had done no good at all.

Suddenly a woman in a Lady Liberty costume pushed between Pia and her mother, jarring her from her thoughts. When the woman's bare forearm brushed her hand, Pia held her breath, waiting for the strange sensations to start. But to her relief, she felt nothing. She relaxed her tight shoulders and exhaled, trying to calm down. She only had to get through the next hour or so. That was it. Then she could go home, to their rooms on Shunk Alley in the Fifth Ward, where no one but her loved ones could reach her.

Then Mutti stopped to talk to a woman from the greengrocers' and a pair of clammy hands clamped over Pia's eyes. Someone snickered in her ear. A sharp pain instantly twisted near her rib cage, making her hot and dizzy. She yanked the hands away from her face and spun around. It was Tommy Costa, the freckle-faced boy who teased her during school recess, and two of his friends, Angelo DiPrizzi and Skip Turner. They laughed and stuck out their tongues at her, then ran away. The discomfort in her ribs went with them.

By the time Mutti chose a spot to watch the parade, Pia was shaking. She'd begged her mother to let her stay home, even promising to straighten up their two-room apartment while she and the twins were gone. But despite knowing how Pia felt about large gatherings, Mutti insisted.

"Going to the parade is the only way to prove we are loyal Americans," Mutti said in heavily accented English. "It's hard enough

after President Wilson said all German citizens are alien enemies. I follow the new laws. I sign the papers they want me to sign refusing my German citizenship. I do the fingerprinting. But I have no money to buy Liberty loans or make a donation to the Red Cross. I have to feed you and your brothers. So we must go to the parade. All of us. Even your father fighting in the war is not enough to keep the neighbors happy.”

“But it won’t matter if I’m with you or not,” Pia said. “Everyone will see you there, and the twins will enjoy it. I could make dinner and have it ready when you return.”

“*Nein*,” her mother said. As soon as the word came out of her mouth, worry flickered across her face. “I mean, no. You must come with us. The radio and newspapers tell everyone to be watchful of their German-American neighbors and to report to the authorities. Before your father left, a woman shouted at me, saying he stole a real American’s job. She spit and said to go back where I came from. I am not leaving you home alone.”

Pia knew Mutti was right; she’d suffered enough bullying at school to know everything she said was true. Rumors were flying that German spies were poisoning food, and German-Americans were secretly hoarding arms. Some Germans had even been sent to jail or internment camps. The city was plastered with posters showing Germans standing over dead bodies and ads directing people to buy war bonds to “Beat back the Hun!” Churches with German congregations had been painted yellow, German-language newspapers were shut down, and schoolchildren were forced to sign pledges promising not to use any foreign language whatsoever. As if that weren’t enough, a special police group called the Home Guard, originally formed to patrol the streets with guns to ensure adequate protection of important points in the city—the Water Works and pumping station, the electric light distributing plant, the telephone service, and various power stations at manufacturing plants—now also patrolled the south end of the city to keep an eye on German immigrants. Some companies refused to employ Germans, so Mutti lost her job at the textile mill. And because she needed a permit to withdraw money from the bank, what little cash

they had left was kept under a floorboard inside a bedroom cubby. Even sauerkraut and hamburgers were renamed “liberty cabbage” and “liberty sandwiches.”

But knowing Mutti was right didn’t make going to the parade any easier.

Three days after the parade, while her schoolmates laughed and played hopscotch and jump rope during recess, Pia sat alone in her usual spot, on a flat rock near the back fence of the schoolyard, pretending to read. The air was pale, as gray as smoke, and the breeze carried a slight chill. Luckily, she’d remembered to bring her sweater, especially since the school windows were being kept open to ward off the gripe. Her three-quarter-length dress had long sleeves and her cotton stockings were thick, but the flour-sack material of her skirt and bodice was worn and thin. She put the book down, pulled her sleeves over her fists, and tried to stop shivering. Was she trembling because of the cold, or because she couldn’t stop thinking about what she’d seen and heard since the Liberty Loan parade?

Mrs. Schmidt had told Mutti that within seventy-two hours of the parade, every bed in each of the city’s thirty-one hospitals was filled with victims of a new illness called the Spanish influenza, and the hospitals were starting to refuse patients. By day four, the illness had infected over six hundred Philadelphians, and killed well over a hundred in one day. Pia overheard the teachers talking about a shortage of doctors and nurses because of the war, and that poorhouses and churches were being used as temporary hospitals. More posters went up that read “Spitting Equals Death,” and the police arrested anyone who disobeyed. Another poster showed a man in a suit standing next to the outline of a clawed demon rising from what appeared to be a pool of saliva on the sidewalk, with the words “Halt the Epidemic! Stop Spitting, Everybody!” And because everyone was wearing pouches of garlic or camphor balls in cheesecloth around their necks, the streets were filled with a foul, peculiar odor that she couldn’t help thinking was the smell of death. Most frightening of all, she heard that those who fell sick were often dead

by nightfall; their faces turned black and blue, blood gushing from their mouth, nose, ears, and even their eyes.

She'd been having nightmares too, filled with ghastly images of the parade spectators flashing in her mind like the jerky moving pictures in a penny arcade—each face with black lips and purple cheeks, and blood coming from their mouths and eyes. Every time it happened she woke up in a sweat, her arms and legs tangled in the sheets, her stomach and chest sore and aching. Just thinking about it made her queasy. The stench wafting up from the garlic tied around her neck didn't help.

She took the putrid necklace off and laid it in the grass, then lifted her chin and took a deep breath, inhaling the familiar scents of fall—a mixture of moist earth, sunburnt leaves, and chimney smoke. But despite the fact that the air smelled significantly better than the strong odor of garlic, it still reminded her of her first dreadful day in her new school last year. She could still hear the voices of her mother and new teacher.

“Did you see the letter I send in to school, Mrs. Derry?” Mutti had said.

“Yes, Mrs. Lange, I received the note. But I'm not sure I understand it.”

“Forgive me, I only wish to make sure . . .” Mutti said, hesitating. “My Pia is, how do you say, delicate? She does not like crowds, or anyone touching her. I am not sure why. . . .” Her mother started wringing her hands. “But she is a normal girl and smart. Please. Can you be sure the other children—”

“Mrs. Lange, I don't see how—”

“Pia needs to learn. She needs to be at school. I don't want her to . . .”

“All right, Mrs. Lange,” Mrs. Derry said. “Yes, I'll do my best. But children come into contact with each other while playing all the time, especially during recess. It's part of learning. Sometimes I won't be able to stop it from happening.”

“Yes, I understand,” Mutti said. “But if Pia doesn't want . . . if one of the other children does not know to leave her alone . . . please . . .”

Mrs. Derry put a hand on her mother's arm, looked at her with pity-filled eyes, and said, "Don't worry, I'll take care of her. And I'll let the other teachers know too."

Mutti nodded and gave her a tired smile, then said goodbye to Pia and left.

After that first day, for the most part, Mrs. Derry and the rest of the teachers had done little to look out for Pia. And the memory of that encounter—her mother wringing her hands and trying to communicate her odd concerns to a confused Mrs. Derry while Pia cringed at her side and the other kids watched—recurred to her every time she stepped foot in the classroom. While the other children played Duck, Duck, Goose or Ring-Around-the-Rosy, Pia stood off to the side, sad and relieved at the same time. Inevitably, when the teachers weren't looking, some of the kids taunted and poked her, calling her names like freak girl or scaredy-cat. And now, because of the war, they called her a Hun.

Thankfully she'd met Finn before school started, while he could form his own opinion without the influence of the other kids. It was the day after she and her family had moved in, when Mutti sent her out to sit on the stoop with strict instructions not to wander off while she and Vater talked—about what, Pia wasn't sure. She'd been homesick and near tears, frightened to discover that the jumble of trash-strewn alleys and cobblestone streets and closely built row houses made her feel trapped, and wondering how she'd ever get used to living there, when he approached from across the alley. She tried to ignore him, hoping he was headed for the entrance behind her, but he stopped at the bottom of the steps, swept his copper-colored bangs out of his eyes, and gave her a friendly grin.

"Yer a new lass around here, aren't ye?" he said in a heavy Irish brogue. "I'm Finn Duffy, your neighbor from across the way." He pointed at the shabby building across from hers, a four-story brick with narrow windows and a black fire escape.

She nodded and forced a smile. She didn't feel like talking but didn't want to be rude either. "Yes," she said. "We moved in yesterday."

"Nice to meet you, um . . . What did you say yer name was?"

"Oh, sorry," she said. "I'm Pia Lange."

“Well, nice to meet ye, Pia Lange. Can I interest you in a game of marbles?” He pulled a cloth sack from the pocket of his threadbare trousers.

She shook her head. “No, thank you.”

“Would ye mind if I sit with you, then?” he said. “You look rather lonesome, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

She thought about telling him she wanted to be left alone, but didn’t want to start off by making enemies. Instead she nodded and moved over to make room, gathering her pleated skirt beneath her legs and sitting on her hands. He smiled and sat beside her, a polite distance away. To her relief, he kept quiet, almost as if he knew she didn’t feel like making conversation. Together they sat lost in their own thoughts, watching three colored girls with braids and pig-tails play hopscotch across the way. One held a rag doll under her arm, the doll’s limp head flopping up and down with every jump. A group of ruddy-cheeked boys in patched pants and worn shoes kicked a can along the cobblestones, shouting at each other to pass the can their way. Snippets of laughter, conversation, and the tinny music of a phonograph drifted down from open windows, along with the smell of fried onions and baking bread. Line after line of laundry hung damp and unmoving in the humid air above their heads, crisscrossing the row of buildings like layers of circus flags. People of all colors and ages and sizes spilled out onto the fire escapes, some sitting on overturned washtubs and kettles, all looking for relief from the heat.

An old colored woman in a dirty scarf and laceless boots limped past, humming and pulling a wooden cart filled with rags and old bottles. She skirted around two boys of about seven or eight playing cards on their knees in front of a stone building three doors down. One of the boys glanced over his shoulder at her, then jumped to his feet, grabbed something from her cart, and ran, laughing, back to his friend. The old woman kept going, oblivious to the fact that she had been robbed. The second boy gathered up the cards and did the same; then they both started to run away.

Finn shot to his feet and chased after them, cutting them off before they disappeared down a side alley. He yelled something Pia couldn’t make out, then grabbed them by the ears and dragged

them back to the old woman. After returning her things to the cart, the boys hurried away, rubbing their ears and scowling back at him, muttering under their breath. The old woman stopped and looked around, finally aware that something was amiss. When she saw Finn, she shooed him away and swatted at him with a thin, gnarled hand. He laughed and made his way back to Pia, shrugging and lifting his palms in the air.

Pia couldn't help but smile. "Do you know her?" she said.

"I don't," he said, catching his breath. He sat back on the stoop beside her and wiped the sweat from his brow. "But I see her every day, selling rags and bottles on the corner. I know the lads, though, and they're always causin' a ruckus."

"They didn't look very happy with you," she said.

"I suppose they're not," he said. "But they won't cause trouble for me."

"Well," she said. "It was very nice of you to stop them and make them return what they took."

He gave her a sideways grin. "Why, isn't that grand? Ye think I'm nice. Thank you, Pia Lange."

Heat crawled up her face. She nodded because she didn't know what to say, then went back to watching the girls play hopscotch. Did he really think what she said was grand, or was he making fun of her? His smile made her think he appreciated the compliment, so she told herself that was the case. Not that it mattered. Once he found out she was German he'd probably never speak to her again.

He sat forward, his elbows on his knees, and watched the girls play hopscotch too. "We came from Ireland three years ago," he said. "How long have you been in the States?"

"Since I was four," she said.

He raised his eyebrows at her. "That long?"

She nodded.

"Livin' here in Philly the entire time?"

She shook her head. "We came here from Hazleton, Pennsylvania. Vater . . . I mean, my father worked in the coal mines."

He forced a hard breath between his teeth. "That's a bloody hard way to make a living."

She nodded. At least he didn't react to the German word. Or maybe he didn't notice.

"This city can be a mite overwhelming when you first arrive," he said. "But you'll get used to it. My da was the one who wanted to come, but he never got to see it."

"Why not?"

"He didn't survive the voyage."

"I'm sorry."

"Aye, I appreciate it. My mam has been having a hard time of it since then, so my older brothers and I have been taking care of her and my granddad. Then the army took one of my brothers six months ago, and my other brother had to start working double shifts at the textile mill. I'm ready to take a job, but Mam insists I finish my schoolin' first. Things were hard in Dublin, but I'm not sure they're much better here. It makes ye long for home, even when you know leaving was the right thing to do."

She really looked at him then, at his kind face and hazel eyes. It was almost as if he were reading her mind.

From that day on, they were fast friends. He didn't care that she and her family were German, or ask her to explain why she didn't want to play cat's cradle or any other game that might involve close contact. After he sent her a note on the clothesline between their fourth-floor apartments that said, *'Twas nice to meet ye, lass!* they started sending each other messages on Sunday nights when the line was empty—but only if the windows weren't frozen shut and they were able to find scraps of paper not set aside for the war effort. The notes were silly and meaningless, just hello or a funny joke or a drawing, but it was their little secret. One of the few things Pia didn't have to share with anyone else.

Once school started and they discovered they were in the same classroom despite him being a grade ahead, he offered to sit with her at recess, but she said she'd rather not have the added attention. While he played kickball and marbles with the other boys, he always looked over to offer a smile or a wave. And that small gesture made everything easier.

Most days she didn't mind sitting alone. But today was differ-

ent. She wished he'd stop playing ball and come sit with her, even if it was just for a few minutes. Because no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop thinking about the flu, and was constantly distracted by an overwhelming feeling of worry and dread. When a group of girls skipping rope began to chant a new rhyme, chills shivered up her spine.

*There was a little girl, and she had a little bird,
And she called it by the pretty name of Enza;
But one day it flew away, but it didn't go to stay,
For when she raised the window, in-flu-enza.*

“What are you staring at, scaredy-cat?”

Pia looked up to see who had spoken, unaware she'd been staring. A thin girl with brown pigtails glared down at her, a disgusted look on her face. It was Mary Helen Burrows, the girl everyone liked or feared, depending on which day you asked, and whether or not Mary Helen was within earshot. No one had ever seen her get into an actual brawl, but permanent anger knitted her brows, and bruises marked her arms and legs. Two other girls stood behind her, Beverly Hansom and Selma Jones, their arms crossed over their chests.

“I wasn't staring at anything,” Pia said, reaching for her book.

“I'm telling you, Mary Helen,” Beverly said. “She was staring at us, like she was coming up with some nasty German scheme or somethin'.”

Mary Helen knocked the book out of Pia's hand. “You spying on us?”

Pia shook her head. “No, I was just—”

“What's going on?” someone said. “Are you all right, Pia?” It was Finn. He was out of breath, his face red and his hair disheveled.

“Your girlfriend was giving us the stink-eye,” Mary Helen said.

“She's not my girlfriend,” Finn said.

“Shut up, Mary Helen,” Pia said.

Mary Helen ignored her and glared at Finn. “I just wanna know one thing. What would your mother think if she knew you were

friends with a filthy Hun, 'specially with your older brother over there fighting to keep you safe?"

Pia bounced to her feet. "Take that back!"

Mary Helen's head snapped around and she gaped at Pia, shocked to hear her standing up for herself. "What'd you say?"

"I said take it back!"

Mary Helen held up her bony fists. "You want a fat lip to go with that stink-eye, scaredy-cat?"

"Jaysus," Finn said. "In the name of all that's holy, shut up, Mary Helen. You're not gonna fight."

"Oh yeah?" Mary Helen said. Suddenly her hand shot out and grabbed the front of Pia's dress. She yanked Pia forward and pushed her contorted face into hers, the stench of garlic and onions wafting from the bag around her neck almost making Pia gag. Thinking only of escape, Pia grabbed Mary Helen's wrist with both hands and tried to pull her off. A quick stab of pain twisted in her chest, sharp and immediate, and she gasped, unable to get air. She let go of Mary Helen's wrist and tried to step away, suddenly disoriented and dizzy. Finn pried Mary Helen's fist from Pia's dress, moved Pia behind him, and stood between them. Pia sat down hard on the ground and tried to catch her breath.

One of the teachers hurried over. "What in heaven's name is going on over here?" she said. It was Miss Herrick. She towered above them, willowy as a flower stem.

"Nothing, ma'am," Mary Helen said. "You must be balled up. We were just playing a game."

"Well, it doesn't look like a game to me," Miss Herrick said. "You and your friends run along now, Mary Helen, and leave Pia alone."

Mary Helen harrumphed, but did as she was told. The other girls followed, their faces pinched.

"Are you all right, Pia?" Miss Herrick said. She bent down to help her up, reaching for her arm.

"Don't touch me," Pia said, louder than intended.

Miss Herrick gasped and clapped a hand to her chest.

Pia instantly regretted her outburst. The last thing she needed

was to get in trouble at school. Mutti would never understand. She got up and brushed off her dress. "I'm sorry, Miss Herrick," she said. "I didn't mean to be rude. I was frightened, that's all."

Miss Herrick sighed. "That's understandable, I suppose. I know Mary Helen likes to start trouble, and everyone is feeling anxious these days, but are you sure you're all right? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

Pia mustered a weak smile. "I'm fine. Thank you, Miss Herrick." She wasn't anywhere near fine, but how could she explain to the teacher what she'd felt when she grabbed Mary Helen's wrist? She'd think she was crazy.

The next day, Mary Helen was absent from school and Selma Jones fainted while unpacking her sandwich during lunch. Miss Herrick rushed over to Selma and shook her while the class watched, mouths agape, but Selma didn't move. Miss Herrick ran out into the hall yelling, and two teachers carried Selma away. Beverly Hansom's mother pulled her out of class shortly afterward, scurrying into the room and wrapping a protective arm around her daughter, her face pale. On the playground that afternoon, the teachers spoke in hushed voices behind their hands, their brows lined with worry. Rumors flew that Mary Helen and Selma had the flu and Mary Helen was already dead.

After the last lesson of the day, Pia hurried out of the building and started for home, her books held to her chest, her head down. Normally she would have waited for Finn on the school steps, but she had to get away from there. She needed to go back to her family's rooms, where she could close the door and hide from everyone and everything. A block from the school, a Red Cross ambulance sped by, and a man on a bench was reading a newspaper with the headline: ALL CITIZENS ORDERED TO WEAR GAUZE MASKS IN PUBLIC. On the streetlamp above him, an advertisement for masks read: "Obey the laws and wear the gauze, protect your jaws from septic paws."

Deciding she didn't want to walk the rest of the way alone, she ducked into a landing to wait for Finn, away from the congested sidewalks, and leaned against the doorframe, wishing she could disappear. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry. Two women with scarves over their mouths darted by arm in arm, walking as fast as

they could without running. A gray-haired couple wearing gauze masks and carrying suitcases rushed out of a building and hailed a cab, the old man practically pushing other pedestrians aside with his cane. Even the motorcars and horse-drawn wagons seemed to go by faster than normal. A strange awareness seemed to fill the air, like the lightheartedness on the day before Christmas, or the shared excitement she'd felt before the fireworks display on her first Independence Day in Philadelphia. Except this awareness felt ominous and full of menace, like the sensation she felt at the parade, but ten times worse. And now everyone could feel it.

When Finn came walking down the block, her shoulders dropped in relief. She stepped out of the landing onto the sidewalk in front of him.

"Hey," he said, surprised. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I did," she said. "I'm right here, aren't I?" She started walking and he fell in beside her.

"Ye are, but I didn't know where you were. I thought . . ."

"You thought what?"

He shrugged and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Everyone's getting sick. Remember we heard Tommy Costa and his family left town?"

She nodded.

"Aye, well, his best pal, Skip, said he died last night."

Pia stopped in her tracks. Tommy was the boy who had put his hands over her eyes at the parade. "Was it the flu?"

"I can't think of anything else that'd take him that quick."

She hugged her books to her chest and started walking again. Tommy and Mary Helen were young and strong. How could they be dead from influenza? How could Selma Jones be fine one day and fainting the next? And why had she felt pain when she'd touched them? Was it the flu she'd felt? No. She couldn't feel sickness in another person. It had to be a coincidence. Or maybe her shyness really was starting to become a physical ailment. More than anything, she wanted to tell Finn what was going on, to ask him what he thought. But she couldn't. Not yet.

At the end of the fourth block, they turned left into Jacob's Alley, a cart path lined with bakers, shoe cobblers, tailors, and cigar

makers working out of storefronts in brick houses, their families' apartments above. Some of the homes had been turned into boardinghouses, or rented-out rooms to sailors. Crepe ribbons hung from several doorknobs, black and gray and white, swirling in the afternoon breeze. Some doors were marked with signs that read: "QUARANTINE INFLUENZA: Keep out of this house." At the end of the alley, a woman in a black dress came out of the silversmith's shop and tied a piece of white crepe to the doorknob, sobbing uncontrollably.

Pia couldn't help staring, new tremors of fear climbing up her back. She knew what the different colors of crepe meant; she'd seen enough of it in the mining village after cave-ins and explosions, and during the wave of tuberculosis that hit the village when she was seven. Black meant the death of an adult; gray an elderly person; white a child. She and Finn looked at each other. A silent alarm passed between them and they started walking faster. When they turned the corner onto Lombard Street, they slowed. Dozens of policemen, all wearing gauze masks, patrolled the sidewalks, telling people to keep moving. A line of people snaked out the door of the pharmacy, holding empty glass bottles and barely speaking. Their faces were drawn by worry, their eyes hollowed out by fear. Some of these anxious souls wore white masks and kept their distance from others and the pedestrians pushing by on the sidewalk, newspapers held over their mouths. A sign in the pharmacy window read: "Formaldehyde tablets. Melt under your tongue. Proven to kill germs and prevent infection and contagion. Fifty tablets for fifty cents."

"What kind of medicine do you think they're waiting for?" Pia asked Finn.

"Anything they can get, I suppose," he said. "But whiskey, mostly."

In the window of a sporting goods store next door, an advertisement for phonographs read: "This machine is guaranteed to drive away Spanish flu. Stay at home. Keep away from crowds and theaters. Doctor's Orders. Hear the new October records on your new phonograph and you'll never know you had to stay in nights or miss gasless Sundays." Across the road, people holding sacks and baskets crowded around a truck with a sign that said: "Eat More Onions,

One of the Best Preventatives for Influenza.” A gathering of colored people stood to one side, waiting to see if there would be any onions left over for them.

Seeing the onion truck, Pia thought of what Mutti had said that morning—they were short on supplies and she needed to go to the market but didn’t want to have to take the twins, so she might wait until Pia came home from school. Hopefully Mutti had stayed home. Pia needed to tell her it wasn’t a good idea to go out, not until things returned to normal.

A streetcar rattled past and stopped a few yards away. Two men in black bowlers hurried toward it, one wearing a mask. The conductor, also wearing a mask, came to the door and pointed at one of the men.

“You’re not getting on without a mask,” the conductor said. He let the other man on, then blocked the maskless man from boarding.

Anger hardened the man’s face. “I have a meeting and I can’t be late,” he said. “I insist you allow me to get on.”

“Sorry,” the conductor said. “Those are the rules.”

A policeman approached, one hand on his billy club. “You heard him,” he said to the man. “No mask, no ride.”

The man cursed and stomped away. The policeman waved the trolley on, but before the conductor could climb back up, a woman screamed and the passengers scrambled out the door onto the street, nearly knocking the conductor over and running in all directions. Pia and Finn stopped to watch. The policeman clambered up the trolley steps, then jumped back down. Two more policemen appeared and spoke to him. One hurried away while the other turned to face the gathering crowd.

“Stay clear!” he shouted. “We’re sending for the coroner!”

When Pia saw why the passengers were in such a hurry to get off the trolley, she gasped and put a hand over her mouth. A man sat slumped over in his seat, his forehead against the window, a stained mask ripped and dangling from his chin, his face a strange mixture of gray, blue, and red. Blood spilled from his eyes and mouth and nose, smearing the glass with dark clots. Horror knotted in Pia’s stomach. She started walking again, as fast as her shaking legs could carry her. Finn followed.

“Finn?” she said, breathing hard.

“Aye?”

“I’m scared.”

“I know.”

“Aren’t you?”

“I am.”

They strode in silence for another few minutes, then Finn said, “Have you gotten any more letters from your father?”

If she hadn’t been so terrified, she would have smiled at him. As usual, he was trying to distract her from her distress. That was Finn, always thinking about other people. She wanted to hug him, now more than ever, but at the same time, now more than ever, she was afraid to touch anyone. “No,” she said. “We haven’t heard anything from him in weeks.”

“Ye will soon, I bet.”

She nodded. “Mutti . . . I mean, my mother says we should, any day now. I wish he was here now.” Her chest tightened and she blinked back a sudden flood of tears. If Vater were here now, maybe he’d know what to do. Maybe he’d take them out of the city, away from what was happening. Because for as far back as she could remember, he’d always been their protector. Like that time a sudden lightning storm hit while they were on a Sunday picnic and he’d herded her and Mutti into a cave. Or when she accidentally knocked a hornets’ nest out from under the front porch and he picked her up, covered her with his jacket, and raced her inside their shack. He wouldn’t have been able to do anything about the flu, but just having him here would have made her feel safer.

Finn glanced at her with concern. “Try not to worry too much, lass. It takes a long time for a letter to get across that great ocean.”

She nodded again, thankful for Finn’s kindness but unable to speak around the burning lump in her throat.

After turning left on Broad Street, they made their way toward the congested maze of alleys and gritty blocks of row houses they called home—the section of Philadelphia labeled the Bloody Fifth Ward because of the area’s violent reputation. In the last week alone, two men on their block had been murdered—one shot and the other stabbed—and a colored man was beaten and left for dead

in an alley behind a warehouse on the corner. Other than the ever-present Home Guard, whose job was to spy on German immigrants, it seemed like the only time the police came into the neighborhood was to raid the speakeasies, arrest women for vagrancy and “night walking,” and apprehend men for gambling, assaults, and drunkenness. Some people said crime had heightened because of the growing number of immigrants and colored who’d moved in looking for work since the start of the war, but Finn said the streets of the Fifth Ward had always been dangerous. He told her stories about a colored rights advocate being murdered, a church being torched, and a number of homes being destroyed during race riots. Pia and her family had only been there a few months when a policeman was shot and killed during a heated race for Select Councilmen, when eighteen men called the Frog Hollow Gang came all the way down from New York to attack one of the candidates.

Had her parents been aware of the dangers of a large city when they’d decided to move here? Did they know and decide to come anyway? She wasn’t even allowed to go outside after dark anymore, which made her all the more homesick for the mountains, where she used to watch fireflies in the switch grass and search for the Big Dipper in the stars. And there was no Spanish flu back in Hazleton, she’d bet. She couldn’t help thinking how different her life would be if they’d never come to Philadelphia.

But then she and Finn turned off the main street into Shunk Alley, and something strange happened. Whether it was the group of boys playing stickball or the little girls having a pretend tea party on a building stoop, she wasn’t sure, but for some reason, her fear seemed to lessen. No one was wearing masks or running from a dead man on a trolley. No signs on doors warned of quarantine. No new posters had been put up. Everything looked normal. When they reached the steps outside her row house, she loosened the grip on her schoolbooks, and a sense of calm washed over her. Maybe the flu wouldn’t reach their little part of the city.

Then the sound of a woman sobbing floated down from an open window.

Finn glanced up at the window, then gazed at her, his forehead furrowed. Clearly he was wondering the same thing. Had the flu

already reached Shunk Alley? He opened his mouth to say something when his mother yelled down from the fire escape outside their apartment.

“Finn, come quick! It’s yer brother!”

He shot Pia a worried look, then turned to leave. “I’ll see ye later, lass,” he said over his shoulder. “Take care of yourself, all right?”

Before she could respond, he sprinted across the street and went inside. She fixed her eyes on the door after it closed, shivering. His parting words felt weighed down with apprehension and misery, like an omen or a warning. Would she ever see him again? Dread fell over her shoulders like a heavy blanket. She suddenly wished she had told him what happened with Tommy Costa and Mary Helen, how she had felt something strange when they touched her. He couldn’t have done anything to help, but maybe sharing her secret would have made her feel less alone.

Behind her, someone called her name. She jumped and spun around, almost dropping her books. Mutti stood in the open doorway of their building, scrubbing a calloused hand on her apron, the telltale sign that she was worried. Pia had seen her do it a thousand times—every day when Vater left to work in the mines; when the Black Maria came into the village carrying the injured and dead after a mining accident; when Vater said they were moving to Philadelphia; when she thought she might miscarry the twins the same way she’d miscarried three other babies; when Vater left for the war.

“Hurry, Pia,” Mutti said, gesturing frantically. “Come inside.”

Pia’s heart skipped a beat. Had something happened to Vater? Or the twins? No. That wasn’t it. Fear darkened her mother’s eyes, not sorrow.

“What is it?” Pia said, running up the steps and hurrying inside. “What’s wrong?”

Mutti closed the door behind her, giving it a little extra push after it was shut, as if trying to keep something from slipping inside. “The churches and schools are to be closed,” she said. “All places for gathering, even the factories and moving picture houses, will not be open. No funerals are to be allowed either. Many people are getting sick, so everyone is to stay home.” She moved across the dim foyer, scrubbing her hand on her apron. Pia followed.