




*The  
Baker's  
Daughter*

A NOVEL

SARAH MCCOY

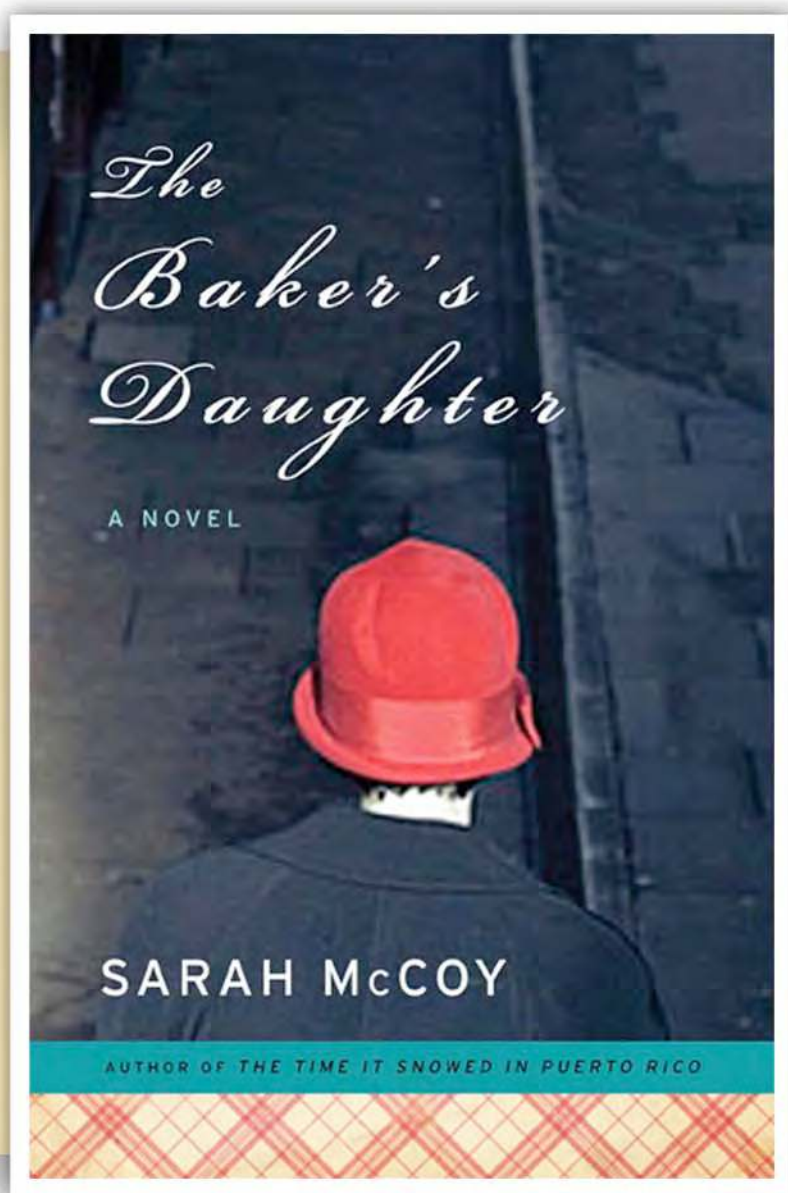
AUTHOR OF *THE TIME IT SNOWED IN PUERTO RICO*



Purchase a copy of

# THE BAKER'S DAUGHTER

at one of these retailers:



amazon.com

BARNES & NOBLE  
BOOKSELLERS

Google  
books

iBookstore

INDIEBOUND



THE CROWN PUBLISHING GROUP

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2012 by Sarah McCoy

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Crown, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

[www.crownpublishing.com](http://www.crownpublishing.com)

Crown and colophon are trademarks of Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-0-307-46018-9

eISBN 978-0-307-46020-2

Printed in the United States of America

BOOK DESIGN BY ELINA D. NUDELMAN

JACKET DESIGN BY CHIN-YEE LAI

JACKET PHOTOGRAPHY BY MYLES WICKHAM/MILLENNIUM IMAGES LTD.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition



*prologue*

GARMISCH, GERMANY  
JULY 1945

**L**ong after the downstairs oven had cooled to the touch and the upstairs had grown warm with bodies cocooned in cotton sheets, she slipped her feet from beneath the thin coverlet and quietly made her way through the darkness, neglecting her slippers for fear that their clip might wake her sleeping husband. She paused momentarily at the girl's room, hand on the knob, and leaned an ear against the door. A light snore trembled through the wood, and she matched her breath to it. If only she could halt the seasons, forget the past and present, turn the handle and climb in beside her like old times. But she could not forget. Her secret pulled her away, down the narrow steps that creaked under weight, so she walked on tiptoe, one hand balancing against the wall.

In the kitchen, bundled dough mounds as white and round as babies lined the countertop and filled the space with the smell of milk and honey, and promises of a full tomorrow. She lit a match. Its black head flamed and licked the candlewick before fuming to nothing. She preferred the candle's burning ribbons to the electric bulb, buzzing bright and incriminating high above. Armed soldiers patrolled outside their doors; she couldn't risk inciting curiosity or waking her family.

She bent to her knees beneath the rising bread, pushed aside a blackened pot, and groped in the darkness for the split in the floorboard where she'd hidden the new letter. Her palms, callused from the rolling pin, snagged on the timber planks. Shallow splinters embedded in her skin, but she did not take notice. Her heart pounded in her ears and radiated heat through her

arm and fingertips until she heard and felt the crackle of the paper she'd bunched into the crevice earlier.

It had arrived in the day's mail, sandwiched between a receipt from their local miller and a long-since-forgotten edition of *Signal Magazine*: its cover torn off; its pages watermarked beyond legibility, except for a pristine BMW ad boasting an aluminum bicycle for the "modern" rider. This tiresome correspondence made the letter's delicate handwriting and old-fashioned wax stand out. She'd recognized it at once and quickly tucked it into her dirndl pocket before anyone in the post office could catch a suspicious glimpse.

At home, her husband had called to her, "What's the news?"

"Nothing new. Buy or pay." She'd handed him the magazine and bill. "Take, take, take, the world never stops." She shoved her hands into her pockets, gripping the letter tight.

Her husband grunted, tossed the disintegrated magazine into the trash, then slid a pointed blade across the top of the miller's note. He retrieved the receipt and held it close, summing the numbers in his mind and nodding in agreement. "As long as it keeps on turning, man will wake with hunger each morning. And thank God for that. Otherwise, we'd be out of business, ja?"

"Ja," she'd echoed. "Where are the children?"

"Out doing their chores," he'd replied.

She'd nodded, then retreated to the empty kitchen to hide the letter until it was safe.

Now, with the sickle moon hanging high above like a fishbone, she crouched low and brought the candle to the ground. The letter's waxy seal had been cracked by her earlier clutch. Fragments littered the tiles. She carefully swept them into the base of the burning candlestick, unfolded the paper, and read the familiar script. Her hands trembled with each weighty word, the sentences tallied; her breath came faster and faster until she had to cover her lips to keep quiet.

The candle flame arched and quivered. A blue vein pulsed in its core. The air had changed. She stiffened on the floor and listened to a faint rustle of movement on the other side of the kitchen. A mouse, she prayed. A stray dog sniffing at the back door. An alpine gust or passing ghost. Anything but someone. She could not be discovered. Not with this letter in hand.

She scooted farther beneath the countertop, crumpling the paper into her lap and hugging the iron pot that stank of yesterday's stewed onions. She waited for the flame to curl upright and steady, staring so hard that her eyes began to burn. She closed them for relief and saw scenes like old

photographs: girls with matching bows at the end of plaited pigtails sitting beneath a fruit tree; a boy with limbs so thin they looked like bent reeds on the river's edge; a man with a face marred by shadows swallowing chocolate that oozed out a hole in his chest; a woman dancing in a bonfire without smoldering; crowds of children eating mountains of bread.

When she opened her eyes, the flame had gone out. The black of night was lifting to velvet blue. She'd fallen asleep in the hiding place. But morning was coming, and it would no longer be safe. She crawled out, bones creaking and popping.

She carried the letter with her, hidden in the flimsy folds of her nightgown, and once more took the steps on tiptoe, past the girl's room; through her bedroom door, she slipped back beneath the covers; her husband abided in dreamlessness. Slowly and with great precision, she reached around the bedside and pushed the paper beneath the mattress, then rested her hand on her chest.

Her heart felt foreign, as if someone else's thudded within, moving ceremoniously, while the rest of her lay numb and cold. The clock ticked on the bedside table—*tick, tick, tick* without the *tock* of the pendulum swing. Her heartbeat filled the balancing pulse. In her mind, she read the letter's words to the rhythm of the metronome. Then suddenly, the clock erupted in clattering shouts. The hammer struck the bell again and again.

She did not flinch.

Her husband rolled over, pulling the blanket with him and exposing her body. She remained rigid as a corpse. He switched off the alarm clock, turned back to kiss her cheek, and rose. She feigned deep sleep. The kind that, when true, gives glimpse to eternity.

Soon enough she would join him in the day, keeping silent what she knew and welcoming the white-hot sun as blamelessly as possible. She would tend to the children, scrub the dishes, wind the cuckoos, and sweep the floors. She would bake bread and glaze the buns in melted sugar.

*one*

3168 FRANKLIN RIDGE DRIVE  
EL PASO, TEXAS

NOVEMBER 5, 2007

**R**eba had called Elsie's German Bakery every day for over a week without getting through. Each time, she was greeted by a twangy West Texan voice on the answering machine. She took a swig of orange juice to coat her voice sunny and sweet before the beep.

"Hi, this is Reba Adams from *Sun City* magazine. I was calling again to reach Elsie Meriwether. I left my number in my last two messages, so if you could ring me back . . . that'd be great. Thanks." She hung up and threw the cordless onto the couch. "P.S. Get your head out of the oven, and pick up the damn phone!"

"Why don't you go over there?" Riki pulled on his coat.

"Guess I don't have a choice. My deadline is in two weeks," Reba complained. "I thought this would be an easy, *fun* one to write. An hour on the phone, send the photographer to take some shots, and I'd be done. It's just a feel-good profile." She went to the refrigerator and eyed the caramel cheesecake Riki was saving for tonight. "Christmas-round-the-world with a local slant."

"Uh-huh." Riki jingled his car keys. "Well, that shouldn't be too hard. We got Texas and Mexico—what else matters?" He smirked.

Reba rolled her eyes and wished he'd hurry up and go. The happy anticipation of his departure made her sadly nostalgic. Once upon a time, his presence had incited waves of giddiness, like she'd drunk too many glasses

of wine. The smart-aleck remarks had been cute in a cowboy way; his dark looks and Spanish accent made everything feel exotic and aflame, brazen and irresistible.

While doing a story on immigration, she'd followed him around his border patrol station, barely able to keep her pen steady enough to take notes; the vibrations of his voice down her spine carried through to her fingertips like a tuning fork.

The station tour and interview ended where it began, at the entrance. "We're just everyday guys doing our jobs," he'd said and opened the door for her exit.

She'd nodded and stood for an uncomfortably long moment, unable to convince her feet to move out of his dark, magnetic stare.

"I may need a little more info—would you be available later?" she'd asked, and he'd promptly dictated his cell phone number.

A few weeks later, she lay naked beside him, wondering who was this woman that possessed her body. Not Reba Adams. Or at least not the Reba Adams from Richmond, Virginia. That girl would never have slept with a man after knowing him such little time. Scandalous! But this girl felt shiny new, and that was exactly what she wanted. So she had curled her body around his and leaned her chin on his tanned chest, knowing full well that she could get up and leave anytime she wanted. The power of that made her light-headed with satisfaction, but she didn't want to leave, didn't want him to either. There and then, she prayed for him to stay. He had, and now she felt like a migrant bird tethered to a desert rock.

She jiggled her foot anxiously. Her stomach growled.

"See you later." Riki kissed the back of her head.

Reba didn't turn around.

The door opened and shut, and a cool draft of November air swept round her bare ankles. After his white-and-green US Customs and Border Protection pickup passed the front window, she pulled the cake from the shelf and to keep them perfectly symmetrical, she cut slivers from each of the three remaining pieces, then licked along the blade of the butter knife.



*Midafternoon, Reba parked out front of Elsie's German Bakery on Trawood Drive. The shop was smaller than she'd imagined. A carved wooden sign hung over the door: Bäckerei. The smell of yeasty breads and honey glazes hovered in the air despite the blustery wind sweeping round the Franklin*



Mountains. Reba pulled her jacket collar up under her chin. It was a chilly day for El Paso, a high of 63 degrees.

The bell over the bakery door chimed as a dark-haired woman and her son tottered out. The boy held a pretzel, studded with salt and half chewed.

"But when can we have gingerbread?" he asked.

"After dinner." She took his free hand.

"What's for dinner?" The boy bit into the knotted middle.

"Menudo." She shook her head. "Eat, eat, eat. That's all you think about." She pulled the boy past Reba. Sweet cinnamon and allspice clung to them.

Reba marched into the shop, ready to finally get answers. A jazzy, big-band tune played overhead. A man reading the newspaper sat in the corner with a cup of coffee and a slice of stollen. A slim but sturdy woman with silver-blond hair worked deftly behind the display case, sliding a tray of crusty rolls into a basket.

"Jane! You put the sunflowers seeds in when I say to put caraway!" yelled someone from beyond the curtained doorway dividing the café from the kitchen.

"I'm with a customer, Mom," Jane said. She pushed a graying bang behind her ear.

Reba recognized her Texan twang from the answering machine.

"What can I get you? This is the last batch of *brötchen* for today. It's fresh." She nodded to the basket.

"Thanks, but I—well, I'm Reba Adams." She paused, but Jane showed no flicker of recognition. "I've left a few messages on your machine."

"A cake order?"

"No. I'm a writer for *Sun City* magazine. I wanted to interview Elsie Meriwether."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I usually check the messages on Sundays, but I didn't get around to it this past weekend." She turned to the kitchen. "Mom, there's someone here for you." She tapped her fingers on the register to the beat of the jazz trumpets, then tried again. "Mom!"

A pan clattered. "I am kneading!"

Jane gave an apologetic shrug. "I'll be right back." She pushed through the curtains, revealing steel kitchen appliances and a wide oak baker's table.

Reba examined the golden loaves stacked in baskets on the open shelves: *Roggenbrot* (Light Rye), *Bauernbrot* (Farmer's Bread), *Doppelback* (Double-baked), *Simonsbrot* (Whole Grain), Black Forest, Onion Rye, Pretzels, Poppy Seed Rolls, *Brötchen* (Wheat Rolls). Inside a glass display case were neat rows of labeled sweets: Marzipan Tarts, Amarettis, three different

kinds of *kuchen* (Cake: Hazelnut, Cherry-cheese, and Cinnamon-butter), Almond Honey Bars, Strudel, Stollen, Orange *Quittenspeck* (Quince Paste), Cream Cheese Danishes, and *Lebkuchen* (Gingerbread). A paper taped to the register read: "Celebration cakes to order."

Reba's stomach growled. She turned away from the case and focused on the willowy leaves of the dill plant by the register. *You can't, you can't*, she reminded herself, then dug in her purse for a roll of fruit-flavored Tums and popped a disk. It tasted like candy and satisfied the same.

Another pan clattered, followed by a stream of choppy German. Jane returned with fresh flour on her apron and forearms. "She's finishing up some tarts. Cup of coffee while you wait, miss?"

Reba shook her head. "I'm fine. I'll just take a seat."

Jane motioned to the café tables, noticed her dusted arms, and brushed the wheat airborne. Reba sat, took out her notepad and tape recorder. She wanted to make sure to get print-worthy quotes now and avoid another trip. Jane wiped the glass case with something lavender scented, then continued to the tables around the bakery.

On the wall beside Reba hung a framed black-and-white photograph. At first glance, she thought it was Jane standing beside an older woman—Elsie, perhaps. But their clothing was all wrong. The young woman wore a long cape over a white dress, her light hair swept up in a chignon. The older woman at her side wore a traditional German dirndl embroidered with what looked to be daisies. She clasped her hands in front and gave a meek glance, while the younger cocked a shoulder to the camera and smiled wide; her eyes bright and slightly indignant to whomever behind the camera.

"My *oma* and mom—Christmas 1944," said Jane.

Reba nodded to the photograph. "I can see the family resemblance."

"That was Garmisch before the war ended. She's never been one to talk much about her childhood. She married Dad a few years after, as soon as the military nonfraternization laws lifted. He was stationed there eighteen months with the Army Medical Corps."

"That sounds like a good story," said Reba. "Two people from totally different worlds meeting like that."

Jane flicked the cleaning rag in the air. "Isn't that the way of it?"

"What?"

"Love." She shrugged. "Just kind of hits you—BAM." She squirted lavender and wiped the table.

Love was the last thing Reba wanted to talk about, especially with a stranger. "So your dad's American and your mom's German?" She scribbled a helix on her pad and hoped Jane would simply answer her questions, not ask any more.

"Yup. Dad was Texan, born and raised." On mentioning her father, Jane's eyes brightened. "After the war, he put in to get stationed at Fort Sam Houston and the army gave him Fort Bliss." She laughed. "But Dad always said anywhere in Texas was better than Louisiana, Florida, or the damned North, for God's sake." She shook her head, then looked up. "You ain't got family in New York or Massachusetts or anything, right? Can't tell by accent these days. Have to excuse me. I had a bad run-in with a Jersey pizza baker. Left a sour impression."

"No offense taken," said Reba.

She had a distant cousin who went to Syracuse University and ended up staying in New York for keeps. Her family couldn't imagine how anybody could stand the cold winters and conjectured that the bitter temperature imbued itself on the people, too. Reba had only visited the Northeast a handful of times and always in the summer. She was partial to warm regions. The people in them always appeared tanned and smiling—happy.

"I'm from down south. Virginia. Richmond area," she said.

"What's a 'Ginia girl doing out here?"

"Lure of the Wild West." She shrugged. "I came to write for *Sun City* magazine."

"Well, shoot. They recruit that far?" Jane flipped her cleaning rag over her shoulder.

"Not exactly. I thought I'd start here and eventually make my way to California—L.A., Santa Barbara, San Francisco." It was a dream that still made her restless with hope. Reba shifted her weight in the chair. "Two years later, I'm still here." She cleared her throat. She was doing all the talking when what she needed was for Jane to start.

"I understand, honey." Jane took a seat at the café table and set her lavender cleaner on the ground. "This is a border town, for sure, a transient, crossover place, but some never get to crossing. Stuck in between where they were and where they were headed. And after a few years go by, nobody can recall their original destination anyhow. So here they stay."

"That's quotable." Reba tapped her pen. "But you've lived here awhile, correct?"

"All my life. Born at Beaumont Hospital on Fort Bliss."

“So where are you headed if you’re already home?”

Jane smiled. “Just ‘cause you’re born in a place don’t make it home. Sometimes I watch the trains go by and wish I could jump on. Watch the planes scratch the blue and wish I was inside. Mom’s always called me a daydreamer, a stargazer, a rambler—whatever I am, I wished to God I wasn’t. Dreaming doesn’t do me a bit of good.”



*two*

THE LEBENSBORN PROGRAM  
STEINHÖRING, GERMANY

DECEMBER 20, 1944

Dear Elsie,

With news that Estonia has fallen to the Red Army, I write this letter with mounting anxiety for our good German forces and a heavy heart for the loss of our men. The compound here at Steinhöring and all the adjacent apartments have covered their windows in black. A handful of the girls lost family members—fathers and brothers. In addition, a number of Lebensborn companions perished, one of whom fathered my own twins. Poor Cristof. I only made his acquaintance the one time last spring. He was not yet twenty-two years old, skin still soft as a nectarine. Far too young to die. It makes me furious—this continued waste of life, this warring. I understand there is no better way to die than for the cause of our Fatherland, but I curse the foreign devils that spilt Aryan blood. We will not be trampled. This will only light a fire to our communal torch and Germany will be victorious! As the führer said, "The confidence of the German people will always accompany their soldiers." And our confidence will remain steadfast.

Instead of wallowing in despair, the Program is committed to making the upcoming holidays the most spectacular ever. I am helping to organize the decorations for the Julefest feast. Already we have a number of commended officers who have accepted the Program's holiday invitation. Our soldiers need companionship and support now more than ever. We are foraging the local communities for whatever meats and vegetables we can procure, and I'm determined to provide good quality bread and pastries like those in Papa's kitchen. I have yet to find a baker who can match the Schmidt recipes and feel as though I've swallowed hardened mud after eating the things these Steinhöring bakers make. I miss home and our family so very much.

With the birth of the twins, I have had little time to spend with Julius. I hope to do so now that the babies are in the Lebensborn nursery. I'll only admit this to you, sister, but I worry for them. They are both smaller than Julius was at birth. I hope that is simply a consequence of sharing a womb and soon they will grow round and healthy as any Aryan child. I can't be perceived as producing inferior offspring. Already, it has taken far too many years to conceive again. The only reason I was allowed to stay was because I proved to be a faithful daughter of the Reich.

The officers enjoy my company, though I will not and could not tell even you the things I have had to do to remain by Julius's side at the Program. Some of these men, while outwardly dignified, have debauched expectations in the bedroom. You are a virgin, Elsie, you do not know, and I pray every night that a compassionate German man will make you a wife before a mistress. That was the hope for Peter and me. I think of our last Christmas together when he asked for my hand by giving us the kitchen cuckoo clock and placing the gold band on the wooden figurine's head like a crown. What a glorious Christmas Day! The cuckoo chimed and out came the ring. Mutti and Papa were so proud. How simple and happy life was then.

How are the Christmas preparations coming? Does the bakery continue to have many customers despite the lack of rations? One of the girls here has family in Berlin, and she said there is barely a burnt crumb to be had. Berliners are bartering gems and gold for unleavened bread and dried pork skins. I suspect these rumors are lies spread by spies to scare the faithful. Things are in short supply here, but one can still buy a sweet cake and a stein of dark beer on any given day. What is it like in Garmisch? How are Mutti and Papa? I must write them soon. I send them my love and the same to you.

Heil Hitler,  
Hazel



SCHMIDT BÄCKEREI  
56 LUDWIGSTRASSE  
GARMISCH, GERMANY

DECEMBER 21, 1944

Dear Hazel,

Good Saint Thomas Day! The bäckerei is so busy this time of the year. With only the three of us to knead the dough, work the oven, stock the shelves, and manage the till, I can't find a moment to enjoy the Christmas cheer. And then there are customers like Frau Rattelmüller who make it almost unbearable. Such a pest! Always complaining and

making rude remarks about my hair being a mess or I'm lazy or asking if I still have yesterday's dirt under my fingernails. (Which I do not. I scrub them every night!) She makes such a scene to Mutti and Papa, still treating me like a child. That's the donkey chiding the other for having long ears. She's acting so peculiar lately.

She used to come round at the normal hour like everybody else, but not anymore. 5:30 in the morning and she's at our back door, peeping in the windows, banging her cane when she knows good and well we've always opened at six o'clock. I believe she's gone senile. Not to mention that a dozen brötchen is a gluttonous amount. Doesn't she know there's a shortage of flour and milk! You should see the SS rations Papa has resorted to using. The powdered milk and flour bake hard as brick. Many customers have complained of finding pebbles in their rolls and almost breaking a tooth. So now I have the added chore of sieving all the supplies we receive. Frau Rattelmüller swears if she cuts her gums and dies of infection, her blood will be on our hands. But it'll take more than a pebble to bring down that old witch. I suspect she'll be showing up for the next century munching her way through all our bread and bang-bang-banging that ridiculous cane. We'll never be free of her.

This morning I was fed up to my ears, so I woke up early with Papa and forced myself out of bed despite the chill. (It's colder this winter than last. Too cold for even the snow to melt into ice on the eaves. Remember that December we ate icicles dusted in sugar. You told me that snow sprites dined on them every night, and I believed you because I wanted to... even though I knew there were no such things.) I was downstairs with a tray of hot brötchen when Frau came hobbling up the street in her long coat and cap.

Before she had a chance to knock her cane, I opened the door. "Good morning, Frau Rattelmüller." I smiled wide as Lake Eibsee. "Your brötchen has been waiting for you. Dear, dear, I pray it isn't cold. You must've been visited by the dream gnomes to have slept in so late." I looked over my shoulder to the cuckoo for emphasis. "Why, you are almost a minute past."

That sent Papa into a fit. He laughed so loud it echoed round all the pans in the kitchen and made Frau mad as a honeybee. She bought two loaves of onion bread instead of her usual. Mutti said Papa ruined a whole batch of lebkuchen with his salty tears. But it was worth it. How I wish you had been here! You would've laughed yourself to crying like you used to do when Papa wore his jester cap in the Fasching carnival. Mutti was not so pleased. She told me not to play with the old woman. She's hanging by a thread, she said. But I told Mutti that Frau has been playing with me for far too long already. Besides, this is wartime. Who isn't hanging by a thread!

Mutti, being Mutti, pulled out the currants that very minute and made thom-asplitzchen buns to take over to Frau's as a peace offering. She's there now as I write.

I wonder what you're doing in Steinhöring. I miss you terribly. Can you believe you've been gone six Christmases? Feels like an eternity, and this war seems even longer. There's nothing new here. The Zugspitze Mountain is a bore. Nobody's skiing this season anyhow. I wish we could go back to sea. Remember that summer trip to the coast of Yugoslavia when we were girls? Walking the pebble beach and eating cold cucumbers in the sun? We were so happy then. It feels a hundred years ago. Not that we could go back now. War, war, war. It's everywhere, and I'm sick of it.

On to happier tidings: Did you hear the news? Our friend Josef Hub was promoted to lieutenant colonel and transferred to the Garmisch SS. He is rumored to dispatch information from the Mountain Troops to Reichsführer Himmler. Imagine that! But he's not like the others. His rank hasn't changed him a bit. He still comes to the *Bäckerei* and eats raisin kuchen with Papa every Saturday. Mutti swears he has the bluest eyes in the country, but I told her there are plenty of perfectly blue eyes all around. She's just partial to Josef for all he's done for us.

How is Julius? You said they enrolled him in a special kindergarten for future officers. Papa nearly burst his buttons when I read that part to him. He's so proud. We all are, of both of you.

Don't worry about us and the *Bäckerei*. The SS rations are small and of poor quality, but they are more than any other baker in town. Josef and Papa have a deal. The Gestapo bring SS flour, sugar, butter, and salt to the back door on Sunday afternoons, and Papa takes a cart of bread to headquarters each Monday. Business couldn't be better. I know I shouldn't complain about the long hours when so many of our countrymen are facing harder times than us.

Did Mutti tell you? I'm going to the Nazi Weihnachten party. Josef said it is time I attend one. He gave me the most beautiful ivory dress. Though the tag has been cut out, he said it came from Paris. At first I thought I oughtn't to accept, but he gave Mutti an iridescent clamshell compact and Papa a rosewood pipe. So I assume these are our Christmas presents. Quite extravagant! Not having any family of his own, Josef dotes on Mutti and Papa like his own parents, God rest their souls. His company has been a godsend, and I hope it means more sacks of sugar and presents! The dress is proof of his good taste.

I'll have Papa take a photograph before I go to the party. I want you to see the dress. I'll write again at Christmas. I hope you get this letter soon. Mail is moving slow these days.

Heil Hitler.

Your loving sister,  
Elsie





three

SCHMIDT BÄCKEREI  
56 LUDWIGSTRASSE  
GARMISCH, GERMANY

DECEMBER 24, 1944

**E**lsie, hurry! You don't want to keep Herr Hub waiting," Mutti called from downstairs.

Elsie fumbled with the buttons on her kid gloves. She'd worn them only once—years before at her First Holy Communion. They made everything she touched feel like newly risen dough. At communion, she'd kept them on when the Lutheran minister handed her the chalice. The smooth cup against gloved hands felt truly divine; the bite of red wine, not so much. She'd instinctively put a hand to her mouth after tasting the tart sacrament and stained her right fingers. Mutti thought it a sacrilege and soaked the gloves in water and vinegar for nearly an entire day. Still, the index finger retained a slight blush.

Elsie dabbed a last bit of rouge on her bottom lip and smeared it round, checked that all her hairpins were hidden and blinked hard to make her eyes glossy bright. She was ready. It was her first official Nazi event—a coming-out party—and she couldn't make a better appearance. The dress, ivory silk chiffon trimmed in crystal beading, hung at just the right angle so as to give the illusion her breasts and hips were rounder than their actuality. She puckered her lips at the mirror and thought she looked exactly like the American actress Jean Harlow in *Libeled Lady*.

Her older sister, Hazel, and she had spent one whole summer holiday

sneaking into matinee showings of pirated Hollywood films. *Libeled Lady* was a favorite of the owner who also operated the reel. He ran it twice a week. Elsie had just completed an abridged English language course in *Grundschule* and eagerly plucked familiar words and phrases from the actors' lines. By the time school resumed, she was performing whole scenes for Hazel in their bedroom adorned in Mutti's feather hats and fake pearls. So accurate in her English clip with its musical up and downs, Hazel swore she could've passed as the American blond bombshell's doppelgänger. That was before Jean Harlow died and the Nazis closed the cinema for displaying American movies. The owner, like so many, had quietly disappeared.

Shortly thereafter, the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* was made mandatory, and Elsie and Hazel participated in replacing all the beautiful theater posters of Jean Harlow and William Powell with stark images of the führer. It was their local BDM's community service project, and Elsie had loathed doing it. In fact, she hated most everything about the BDM. She failed at all the "wife, mother, homemaker" training activities except baking, and she detested that her Saturdays were spent in group calisthenics. While Hazel thrived and grew more popular, Elsie felt oppressed and stifled by the uniforms and strict codes of conduct. So at the tender age of eleven, she begged Mutti to work in the bakery. She'd overheard her papa discussing a new assistant to work the front of the shop, taking orders and helping customers. She'd eagerly jockeyed for the job. It would mean a reprieve from the BDM for her and save their family from paying out their earnings. While Papa agreed, he championed the national agenda and made Elsie promise to learn the Hitler Youth's Belief & Beauty doctrine from her older sister. She had, to some extent, but then Hazel became engaged and the BDM forbade participation of girls who were married. When her pregnancy was revealed, she moved to Steinhöring. The BDM didn't admit mothers, either. Thus, by the time Elsie reached the proper age to practice the principles, there was no one to teach her, and the war had made her participation in the bakery paramount. She didn't see the value in the BDM's "harmonic cultivation of mind, body, and spirit" if her family was struggling to make ends meet.

Now, a few hours before an official Nazi party, she wished she'd paid more attention to the BDM lessons of her childhood. It was like trying to conjure the taste of a fruit you've seen in paintings but have never eaten. She wished Hazel could give her solid advice. Elsie's only instruction on the art of glamour came from those faraway memories of a starlet sashay-

ing about the silver screen. Tonight was the first time she had ever been escorted by a man, and she couldn't afford to make a mistake.

"You dance divinely," she whispered in English to the mirror and visualized William dancing with Jean, the image all silver-tipped and shimmering.

"Elsie!" Papa called.

Elsie quickly pulled her burgundy cape over her shoulders and took one last look in the mirror, liking the sophisticated woman she saw, then she proceeded downstairs.

At the base, Mutti, dressed in her best edelweiss-embroidered dirndl, swept crumbs out of sight. The rough broom bristled the burnished floor.

"I doubt Josef's attention will be on the *doppelback* crumbs. Leave the mice a Christmas present."

Mutti stopped sweeping when she saw her and put a fist to her hip. "Ach ja, you'll stand up well with all those fine girls this evening."

"Freilich!" Papa came from the kitchen. "You'll make Josef proud." He put an arm around Mutti's shoulder, and she eased into his side.

"I promised Hazel I'd send a photograph," explained Elsie.

Papa went to find the Bosley camera.

Mutti adjusted the folds of her hooded cape. "Be sure to laugh at his jokes," she said. "Men always like that. And try—try to be temperate. The führer praises this in women."

Elsie groaned. "I know, I know. Now stop fussing at me, Mutti."

"Please, dear, try."

Elsie yanked away. "Papa, did you find it?" she called out.

Mutti kept on, "Don't act like a gypsy or Jewess—unpredictable spirits. Remember your sister in the Program. Remember the *bäckerei*. Herr Hub has been so generous." She cleared her throat. "We'd be as bad off as the rest if it wasn't for his kindness. Look at Herr Kaufmann. The Gestapo came in the middle of the day and packed him off to one of those camps. And all he did was refuse to have his son join the *Deutsches Jungvolk*. One cross word—that's all it takes, Elsie."

Papa returned with the Bosley. "I'm not sure the film is good." He opened the shutter and wound the knob.

"Kein Thema." Elsie sighed.

Mutti worried too much. Like most women in Germany, she wanted her children to be proper, her marriage to be superlative, and her household to be a paragon of decorum. But try as she may, Elsie had never been proficient in the set standards.

"He'll be here any minute. Papa, hurry." Elsie arranged herself beside

Mutti and prayed to God she wouldn't let them all down this night. She wanted them to be proud.

"Look," said Papa. "Two of the three finest women in Germany. You'll be a good wife, Elsie. As the führer says"—he paused and lifted a stiff palm to the air—"Your world is your husband, your family, your children, and your home.' Mutti and Hazel are excellent examples."

Within the last six months, Papa had begun perpetually referring to her as wife material and quoting the führer with every reference. It wore on Elsie's nerves. She'd never understood why people quoted others. She tried never to quote anyone. She had ideas of her own.

"Gut. I understand. I'll be on my best behavior. Now take the picture."

Papa looked through the back of the camera lens. "Luana, get closer to your daughter."

Mutti scooted in, smelling of dillweed and boiled rye berries. Elsie worried the scent would stick, so she squared her shoulders hard to keep a margin between them.

"Ready?" Papa lifted his finger over the button.

Elsie smiled for the camera and prayed Josef would come soon. She was anxious to have her first glass of champagne. He'd promised.



"*It's so beautiful,*" said Elsie as the driver pulled up to the Nazi banquet hall on Gernackerstrasse.

The timbered lodge was ornamented with heart-carved balconies and colorful frescoes depicting shepherds in lederhosen, jeweled baronesses, and angels with widespread wings. From each window, red-and-black swastika flags joined their flight, fluttering in the alpine breeze. Cascading lights had been masterfully strung over the snow, illuminating icicles and casting a stunning corona about the structure. Its frosted eaves looked like piped sugar on a lebkuchen. A fairy-tale gingerbread house. Right off the pages of the Brothers Grimm.

"*You are beautiful.*" Josef laid his palm on Elsie's knee. His warmth emanated through the wool cape and chiffon dress.

The driver opened the door. A burgundy carpet had been placed over the snow to keep the attendees from slipping or ruining the shine of their boots. Josef took Elsie's hand and helped her from the cab. She hurried to step out and let the swathe of ivory and crystal gems hide her feet. Although Josef had purchased her dress, she had no shoes to match.

Reluctantly, she'd borrowed Mutti's nicest pair of black T-straps, which still looked worn after an hour of buffing.

Josef took her gloved hand and threaded it through the crook of his arm. "You shouldn't be nervous," he consoled. "Not with such a pretty German face. They will love you the moment they see you." He touched her cheek with a leather-gloved finger. Her stomach jumped—the same lurch she felt when the pretzels were a minute from baking to brick. She knew exactly what to do then, rush to pull them from the fire and cool by the window. But here, dressed like a film star, she hadn't a clue. So she took a deep breath. The smell of burning pine air stung her nose. Her eyes watered. The lights ran together, and she gripped Josef's arm to keep steady.

"There, there." He patted her hand. "Just smile."

She did as he said.

The door of the lodge swung open and strains of violins cut the wind. Inside, the doorman took her cape. Exposed to the lamplight, the crystal beads cast miniature rainbows against Josef's uniform.

"Heil Hitler, Josef!" greeted a stocky man with a poof of a mustache above his lip, and the remnants of some sticky food caught in the sprout.

Elsie wondered what other bits might be lodged there and tried to hide her repulsion.

"Who is this?" he asked.

"May I present Fräulein Elsie Schmidt." Josef clicked his heels. "And this is Major Günther Kremer of the SiPo."

Elsie nodded. "A pleasure."

Kremer turned to Josef. "Charming." He winked.

"Günther and I have known each other for many years. He was one of my men in Munich. Is Frau Kremer here tonight?"

"Ja, ja. Somewhere." He waved over his shoulder. "No doubt discussing her pewter spoons or some such nonsense. Shall we have a drink?"

Down a corridor lined with Nazi flags and fir trees covered in candied fruits, they followed Kremer as he chatted about the wine and food and glitterati in attendance. Elsie wasn't listening, too caught up by the brilliance of the scene. It was everything she'd dreamed, exactly like the lavish ballrooms and festive parties in the Hollywood films of her youth. Her pulse raced. Oh, how she wanted this world: Josef's world of power, prestige, and uncensored euphoria. It dripped off everyone and everything in the room, like fruit glaze on a strawberry tart. For this moment, the dust of the baking board and black cinders of the oven were forgotten; the smudge of labored coins and soiled ration coupons in her palm, washed clean. By

Josef's side, she could pretend to be one of them, a royal princess of the Third Reich. She could pretend the world outside this place wasn't full of hunger and fear.

The corridor opened to the grand banquet hall. Long white tables striped the floor with silver candelabras at each fourth chair. A string quartet sat on a platform, their bows moving back and forth in perfect unison. Couples spun in slow circles on the dance floor like miniature figures on clock gears. The men wore SS uniforms, a background pattern of tan dress coats and beet red armbands. The women highlighted the scene in vibrant dress shades, plum and apricot, orange and cucumber green—a harvest of young and old.

A fleshy brunette in a scarlet lamé dress examined Elsie from head to toe, pausing at her feet. Elsie followed her gaze to the toe of Mutti's T-strap. She quickly scooted it back under the hem. A waiter approached with a tray of bubbling blond flutes. Josef handed one to Elsie.

"Here you are. I always keep my word. But be careful. One never knows the effect of champagne until you've tried it."

Champagne. Elsie's mouth went wet. She'd only ever watched as screen stars sipped and grew giddy on the beverage. She hoped it would have the same magical effect now. She took a glass and marveled. She'd never known its color: light gold, like the wheat shafts just before cutting. She guessed it would be as sweet as honey and as filling as bread. She licked her lips and drank.

The tangy bubbles bit hard. Brüt dry. A mouthful of baking yeast bloomed in water. She gulped to keep from spitting back into the flute but was not quick enough to hide her expression.

Josef laughed. "You'll get used to it."

"Try another sip and then another. If you don't love it by the third, I'll drink the rest for you." Kremer chuckled. The buttons of his coat strained against his portly stomach.

Despite herself, Elsie recalled Mutti's advice and forced a dainty laugh. He was Josef's comrade, after all. She wanted him to like her. So she did as he instructed and drank again, attempting to finish the glass and be done entirely.

"Prost! It looks like you've got yourself a strong fräulein," said Kremer. "How about a dance while Josef gets you another?"

Elsie held Josef's gaze. "I'm not very good," she said.

"No matter." Kremer took Elsie by the elbow and led her to the dance floor. "I promise to go slow." He pulled her close and placed one hand on

the small of her back while clasping her gloved fingers. His stiff uniform pushed the dress's crystals into her skin, a thousand nails tacking them together.

Elsie looked over her shoulder at Josef. He smiled and lifted her empty glass. When he turned to call the waiter, Kremer slid his hand down the back of her chiffon.

Elsie pulled away. Her cheeks flushed hot. "Herr Kremer!"

He grabbed her hand and yanked her forcefully against him. "Hush. It's a party. *Don't* cause a scene, *fräulein*." He smiled a toothy grin and spun her deeper into the dancing crowd. "I wanted to speak with you privately. You see, there are those who find it odd that someone of Josef's stature would take up with the uneducated daughter of a common baker when there are far superior options, including your own sister."

She winced at his mention of her academic record. While Hazel had attended *Gymnasium* and graduated at the top of her class, Elsie had stopped early of graduation from *Hauptschule* to work full-time in the bakery. Though she'd just met Major Kremer, he obviously had great knowledge of her and her family.

"There are so many spies these days. Everyone suspects beautiful, new faces." He leaned in and examined her face uncomfortably close, his hot breath like rotten eggs.

Elsie sharply turned her cheek. "My family has known Josef for years."

"Ja, and who knows how many secrets you have already gathered to pass on to our enemies?"

"I am not a spy!" she hissed. "My papa bakes bread for the Nazi headquarters in Garmisch. My sister is in the Lebensborn Program."

"I am not curious about them. I am curious about you." He sucked his teeth.

They moved in circles on the floor. A woman with peacock feathers in her silver hair wriggled her nose when they bumped elbows. Elsie swallowed hard. Her head reeled. She was a loyal German, but how else could she prove her allegiance? All she had was her word.

Kremer's uniform stank of sweat and cigarettes. Champagne bubbles came up her throat. She wanted to slap him, to cry out for Josef, but the sharp pins of Kremer's Security Police uniform reminded her of the possible consequences, not just for herself but also for her family. So she gulped down the sourness.

The song ended. The quartet removed their bows from the strings, stood and bowed.

"Here you are, dear."

Startled, Elsie jumped and knocked the glass from Josef's hand; effervescent wine fizzed over them.

"I'm sorry." She wiped droplets from his uniform lapels. The starch kept them from soaking in. Her dress was not so fortunate. The champagne streaked the ivory hemline.

"No harm." Josef took her arm. "I know a cleaner who can get anything out with lye soap and a boar brush." He kissed her hand.

"Thank you for the dance. It was a delight." Kremer clicked his boots and left with a smirk.

The quartet leader came to the podium. "Ladies and gentlemen, if you would take a seat, we would like to begin our Weihnachten presentation."

Josef led her to the middle of their banquet table. At the far end sat Kremer beside Frau Kremer, a dark twig of a woman with wan cheeks and a sharp nose. She caught Elsie's stare and narrowed her eyes.

Elsie turned her chair toward Josef to avoid her. "Josef," Elsie began. Her voice shook, so she cleared her throat to steady it. "I need to speak to you about—"

"Look, look!" He cut her off and pointed to the stage. "We have a surprise. Do you like music? Wagner, Hotter, Clemens Krauss?"

Elsie's fingers had gone numb. She undid the mousquetaire buttons of her gloves and pulled at the champagne-soaked fingers. "Ja, but I've never been to an opera."

He furrowed his brow and *tsked*. "I should send you some recordings then."

Elsie didn't own a record player but hadn't the composure to explain that to him now. She took off her gloves and felt instantly naked, the air over her palms intrusive. She laced her fingers together in an effort to but-tress herself.

"Josef," she tried again.

"And now!" announced the bandleader. "A short musical performance for your dinner entertainment." He lowered the microphone, set a small footstool before it, and took a seat with his violin.

Josef tapped his index finger against his lips. "Later," he whispered.

A murmur of curiosity rippled through the crowd, then fell silent as a stout SS-Gefolge woman with a shock of white hair down the center of her crown led a boy, no more than six or seven years old, up the platform steps. He wore a simple white linen shirt with matching gloves, black trousers,



and a bow tie. He might've looked like any boy dressed for Christmas Eve if his hair hadn't been cropped to his scalp, the color of his skin so sallow that he seemed featureless, a walking apparition. The woman instructed him to step onto the stool, and he did so with lowered head. Then, he looked up with eyes as big and brilliant as springwater.

The leader played a long, high note on the violin. The boy, with fists at his side, took a deep breath, opened his mouth, and sang. His countertenor voice rang out through the corridors. Everyone quieted their conversations and turned. Pure and smooth as new butter, it took Elsie's breath away. She'd heard the Christmas hymn her whole life, sang it herself, but never before had "Silent Night" sounded like this.

"All is calm, all is bright . . ."

The violin fell away, but his voice remained.

"Only the Chancellor steadfast in fight, watches o'er Germany by day and by night . . ."

Before he'd finished, the dinner service began. Waiters clinked china plates on varnished trays and poured jewel-toned wine into waiting goblets. Conversations resumed. A woman laughed too loud.

"Always caring for us . . . always caring for us . . ."

Elsie closed her eyes.

"Wine?" asked the waiter from behind.

"Silent night, holy night . . ." The boy's voice never faltered or strayed from its perfect pitch.

A lump rose in Elsie's throat, brimming emotions she'd tried to suppress earlier.

"He has an excellent voice," said Josef.

Elsie nodded and blinked dewy eyes. "Where is he from?"

"He sang to the arriving detainees at the Dachau camp," explained Josef. "Sturmscharführer Wicker heard him and had him sing at a handful of his dinner parties. Everyone seemed to enjoy it. He has a unique voice, mesmerizing if you aren't careful to remember from where it comes."

"Ja, unique." Elsie collected herself.

"Brings us greatness, favor, and health. Oh give the Germans all power." The boy finished.

The violinist came to the microphone. "I quote our führer: 'All nature is a gigantic struggle between strength and weakness, an eternal victory of the strong over the weak.'" He clicked his heels together and raised his bow in party fashion. "Guten appetit."

The bubbling crowd broke into a cacophony of clanking silverware and chatter. The violinist began a new song to which the boy sang, but Elsie could barely make it out above the dinner crowd.

"Is he a Jew?" she asked Josef.

"His mother was a Jewess singer. His father, a Polish composer. Music is in his blood." Josef pulled a brötchen roll apart and spread butter on either half.

"My nephew, Julius, sings. Hazel says he's rather good."

"We should have him sing for us some time." He laid one half on Elsie's plate. "Tonight is this boy's last performance. He's going back to the camp tomorrow. With everything going on in the Ardennes . . ." He crunched his bread and swallowed hard. "I apologize. That is no subject for Weihnachten."

She'd first heard about the camps years before when the Grüns, a merchant family that sold the best soaps and shampoos in the area, vanished in the middle of the night. Elsie had visited their store at least once a month. Their son, Isaac, was two years her senior and the handsomest boy in town. He winked at her once when she bought honey milk soap. Secretly, she'd imagined him while lying in her warm bathtub, the steam rising like a fragrant veil around her. The memory shamed her now. Though Jewish, they were well liked in the community. Then one day, their store was boarded up and marked "Juden," and they were gone.

A week later, while waiting in line at the meat shop, she overheard the shoemaker's wife whispering to the butcher that the Grüns had been sent to the Dachau camp where they were sprayed with lye water like cattle and didn't need shampoo because their heads were shaved. The image sent Elsie running out the door. When Mutti asked for the lamb, Elsie said the butcher hadn't any, though there were clearly half a dozen in his pen. She never told her parents or anyone about what she heard nor did she ask about the Grüns. No one spoke of them. And while the shoemaker's wife was not prone to gossip like the other town wives, Elsie chose not to believe her. Now, however, she could not deny the shaved head of the little boy.

Josef sniffed his wine, then sipped. "I have something else I'd like to discuss." He reached into his uniform jacket and pulled out a small box. "When I saw it, I knew it was a sign." He opened the lid, revealing a gold engagement ring studded with rubies and diamonds. "I think we'd be very happy together." Without waiting for an answer, he slid it on her finger.

The waiters interrupted, setting large platters between the candelabras. The snout of a roasted piglet faced Elsie; its eyeballs were cooked blank;

its crispy ears perked and listening. Bowls of creamy potatoes flanked the swine with white sausages at the rear, a ghostly tail. Though it was the most food she'd seen in all her life, Elsie's stomach turned with distaste.

"Will you be my wife?"

A ringing commenced in Elsie's ears. Josef was nearly twice her age, a friend of her father's, beloved as a kind uncle or older brother perhaps, but not as a husband. The sideways stares of the Nazi guests seemed to press in on her like a wooden-toothed nutcracker. Josef waited with casual confidence. Had he always seen her this way? Was she so naive that she'd missed the indications?

The gemstones winked blood red in the candlelight.

Elsie dropped her hands to her lap. "It's too much," she said.

Josef forked the pig belly, piling stringy meat onto his plate. He took Elsie's plate and did the same. "I know. I shouldn't have asked tonight with so much going on, but I couldn't help myself." He laughed and kissed her cheek. "A superb Christmas feast!"

Elsie focused on the food before her and not the ring on her hand. But the pork was so lardy she needn't chew; the jelly rind slid down her throat; the potatoes were gray and mushy; the sausage mealy and undercooked. She washed it all down with red wine and tasted again her First Communion host. Acid crept up her throat. Bread. She took a bite of the buttered brötchen, the taste and smell familiar and comforting.

She didn't speak the entire meal. At the end of the main course, the boy's musical performance also concluded. The orchestra, having had their break, returned to the stage in preparation for dessert and dancing. Elsie watched over the seated crowd as the SS guard marched her caged songbird to the back of the hall and through a service door.

"That boy." She turned to Josef. "Does he have to go back?"

The silver candelabras reflected the empty cavity of the piglet's body and Nazi uniforms at every other chair.

Midair, Josef halted a last spoonful of potato spaetzle. "He's a Jew." He ladled the wormy noodles into his mouth before the waiter retrieved his empty plate.

Elsie tried to sound casual. "He's only half Jewish . . . and that voice." She shrugged. "Doesn't seem to belong with the rest."

"A Jew is a Jew." Josef took her hand, fingering the ring. "You are too softhearted. Forget those things. Tonight is a celebration."

From the candles, heat rose in wavy reflections. Elsie's temples pulsed. The pitchy squeal in her head crescendoed.

"Josef, would you excuse me." She pushed her chair back and stood.

"Is everything all right?"

"Please, don't let me interrupt. I need a minute to . . ."

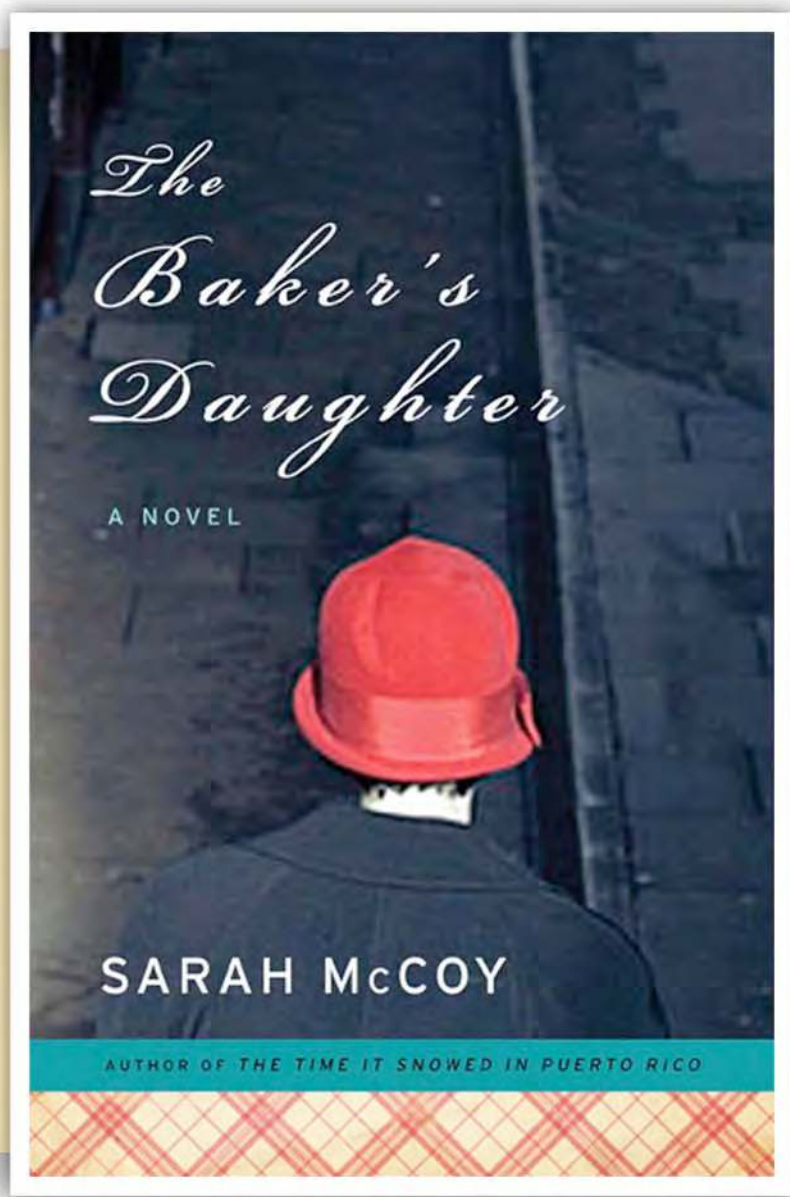
"Oh." Josef nodded. "The WC is down the hall, to the right. Don't get lost or we'll have to send the Gestapo to find you." He laughed.

Elsie gulped and forced a feeble smile. She walked leisurely through the glittering banquet hall but quickened her pace alone in the shadowed corridor, past the sign marked *Toilette* until she reached the double doors leading to the back alley.

Purchase a copy of

# THE BAKER'S DAUGHTER

at one of these retailers:



amazon.com

BARNES & NOBLE  
BOOKSELLERS

Google  
books

iBookstore

INDIEBOUND



THE CROWN PUBLISHING GROUP