

Chapter 1

The past is never dead. It's not even past.
—William Faulkner

Luce

Calabria, California
September 2004

“Lucie?” A late night voice rasps over the phone.

Only one person calls me Lucie—Papa. I have gone from my Dutch given name, Liesbet, after my grandma, to Lucie as an Americanized teen. And for decades now, just Luce. The name Luce (pronounced *loose*) amuses me, as if even in all my recent years with one home town, one home, one family, one job, I am a loose woman.

“I didn’t want to call you last night,” he says. “It was so late already.”

“Papa.” I click off the music, letting my journal clatter to the floor. “What happened?

Who is it?”

“Ja-akob!” I hear Mama in the background. “It’s not good for you to call her up so late; it can wait for the morning.”

“*Stil* and quiet *nu*, Nikki. We must do something, make a plan.”

“Hey Papa, no fighting between you two now. What’s wrong? Are you sick?”

“No, not me.”

My ears buzz. “Mama is sick? What’s wrong?”

“Albert,” he breathes out.

Not my brother, not again. This has to be bad. It's midnight in Houston, and two hours earlier for me here in California. "Alby? What happened?" I ask. "Are Cindy and the kids okay?"

"Well, he's in the hospital. The family, *ach*, all in shock I think. Your niece was alone with him at home when it happened yesterday. She had to call 911."

Mama picks up an extension, her tone soft. "*Liefje*, I don't want Papa to keep you up so late now. Jakob, there's nothing Lucie can do from there so late at night."

Liefje. Little love. *Help, help, help*, begins a prayer in me. "Ma-ahma," I try.

Papa interrupts. "I didn't know if he was going to live until two a.m. this morning, and then after that, all the calls."

"Live?" My voice is shrill. "Mama, I'm wide awake now, and I still don't know what's wrong. Let us talk now and then we'll all get some rest."

"Off the line," Papa orders Mama. "I'll be to bed in a few minutes."

"Both of you don't make yourselves too tired. Alby is fine for now." She had to get the last word in.

"Back to Alby." I sigh. Papa's meticulous retired-engineer habits are failing him. I have no coherent story yet. "And yes, why call so late?"

"Well, first I thought, what can you do from California? But then, you know me, I got to worrying and I know my daughter, you would still be up. You're tough. And ... you need to jump on this first thing in the morning." His voice sounds proud; he always thinks I'm strong.

"Okay. And now please start at the beginning." At forty-five, I flush like a ten-year-old to think he's proud of strong me, while my eyes well with tears. My little brother, the one whose hand I held in each and every move across the continents of our lives. What if he's near death?
Help, help, dear God, help.

“We found out Cindy’s had a tough time of it with Alby lately, and didn’t wish to scare us, until she had to call. She was at the grocery store when your niece had to make that nine-one-one call. We had no idea your brother was so bad again. I had to talk to Marina today, the little *liefje*—sweetheart. She thought her daddy, Alby, was asleep, but then she couldn’t wake him.”

“She’s only thirteen. That must have been so traumatic for her.”

“*Ja*, and happy-go-lucky she called emergency so quick. Thank God your nephew was at a friend’s house, so he didn’t have to see the paramedics come. When Cindy rushed to the ER, Marina was all alone in the waiting room, shaking and crying.”

“Which hospital?”

“He’s in ... how you say it ...the *intense* unit, right next door to a new treatment program. *Feast* something.” He inhales and exhales haggardly. I wonder if he’s smoking again. No he quit smoking twenty years ago. “That’s where he’s going next, same hospital, *Feasta*.” Two decades after retiring and tired as he is now, Papa slips into more and more Dutch-English. He sounds a decade older, overnight. Usually he’s upset over the details of life—lateness, wasted food—and calm during crisis. Now this. A real crisis and it’s hitting him hard.

Our talk has no anchor for me. I know nothing. I ease my grip on the phone. After all, everyone’s alive.

“So he’s in the intensive care unit ... ICU? What was it, the drugs? Are you okay?”

“Oh, *ja*. Fine,” he says. “Yes, it was the drugs. Pills and an overdose. They think it was no accident, but a suicide attempt.” Papa’s breathing stays choppy, but his words even, as if he’s trying to hold it together for me. I can see his white-gray hair, his sagging face.

“I bet it’s both. Too many pills and wanting to die.” I kick away the pen at my feet. He could be dying, and so selfish, letting Marina find him. None of this had to be. “Ach, ja, stupid brilliant Alby. Why is he so stubborn with getting help?”

Papa wheezes. “I tried to tell Alby, ‘Enough already, stop it.’ But he and I couldn’t really talk well today.” He exhales, sounding *ziefelig*. The Dutch word for pitiful, sad, wrapped around the word *ziel*—soul. His soul is hurting, not that he would ever tell me that.

“It’s been a long time since any of us have talked well with him. Don’t worry so, Papa. He’s the one who has to be ready in this treatment program, not you.”

“And you, you have worked for these so-called treatment programs,” he hisses in accusation. “We need your help. Why don’t you get this *Feasta* outfit to do a good job this time, make these people earn their living, make him really think and stop his nonsense?”

“Papa, he does think. They have to help him think a different way. You know I believe treatment programs work, if *he* wants to work. You went with me oh so long ago when I was a teen, to HOW meetings, remember? I was ready. So it can work out great for Alby. But he’ll think he’s the smartest one in the place, and that’s when he stops listening.”

“Well, he is the smartest. Who else there has patents for their bio-research medications?”

“Really?” I growl. “Plenty of smart people other than him get help.” *Like me.*

“*Liefje*, stop it with worrying about your stubborn brother taking it all in.” Like always, his voice rises. “We’ll make him. What we have to focus on is he’s not just landed himself in some other lousy chicken-outfit rehab. That’s my worry.”

Here it is, Papa and *ruzie*. He calls me late at night to do what he’s always done, fight and rage. I squirm back in my easy chair, determined to be clear. “You asked me, so I said what I

thought, Papa. He needs one more rehab. What is this, number three? This has to be the one where he doesn't leave."

"According to Cindy, he wasn't even conscious until the end of the day yesterday. The doctor told her he had liver damage. Doesn't that mean he's ready to listen?"

"For most people, sure." I think of my baby sister, how she is usually right in the middle of things and way easier to talk to than Papa. "Has Corrie been to see him?"

"I'm sure Corrie will see him soon. But what good will it do?"

Familiar words for the Vanderveers—*what good will it do?* "If he wants help, our visits," I repeat, "the treatment program will do a lot of good." Then again, might as well stop repeating. Thirty years ago in HOW meetings, I gave up my own magic elixir, alcohol, and at first told our parents nothing. When there is a problem, it is worse once Papa or Mama make *ruzie* over it. I recall roaming the dusty church halls where I attended my HOW rehab meetings, one of the kids with no family, until I dragged Papa along.

I know Mama can't sleep now, and Papa will worry endlessly. I hate for them to have this pain. My head swims with rage and worry. Alby will live. Alby will die. Either way, my brother's been gone from us so long. Whether here in Calabria, or in Houston, I can connect with Cindy and the kids, not Alby.

We've been silent awhile; I hear my own asthmatic breathing. This is another family thing, the silence with words screaming to be said. I aimlessly say, "Corrie and I have wondered for years. He's looked so bad."

"Oh *ja*, I think your mama thought everything was fine these last years. To me, no. He just looked too ... how you say ... *sieke*. Too sick to be okay." He raises his voice. "I didn't go with my *insinks*. That crazy bio research and Alby being in charge of the project exhausted him. I

told myself that's why he looked like living death—not that he was still on pills.” His fist thuds down on something. Sounds like he's working himself up again.

I feel the familiar tightening of my gut when Papa is riled up and *ruzie* could take us both down. One of the most frightening things is when I rage into the *ruzie* too, after promising myself to be calm. “Well, at least he can't check himself out of treatment since he's so bad off.”

“*Liefje*, I'm just worried. He came”—he coughs—“so close to dying.” No pounding the furniture. Maybe he's crying. I wish we could cry together. He tries to order me around and sounds so strong, but he isn't. He's seventy-five and frail after the accident thirty years ago. If I were with him, he'd be often looking away, as if he sees things I don't. “I asked Cindy to not tell Mama about the liver damage yet.”

“Oh Papa, might as well tell her. I'm sure this time will be different.” I bump a cup of herbal tea gone cold. I don't believe my words.

“I thought you should know, and that's why I had to send Mama to bed.” I hear a click on their line. So she's heard everything. “The people from this *Feasta* program have been calling the rest of us too. I don't pick up, just let it go on the answering machine. What can we do? But you, you can make those people shape up.”

“No, I can't make them. But I can check them out, Papa. And of course you must talk to them.”

“You will call *Feasta* first thing in the morning? We have little time.”

“Okay.” I sigh. “I will call if you also call the *Feasta* Family Program people back.” To agree has always been the only way to buy brief peace from Papa.

He's silent for a long while. “Yes, okay. And get some rest.”

“I love you, Papa.”

“I love you too, liefje.”

He doesn't always do the *I love you* reply, and his love doesn't settle me. The scariest part of this call is Papa trying to sound like his old self—demanding. I heard the effort in each and every word, his exhaustion.

The phone receiver is still against my ear. First, dial tone, then the screeching phone-off-the-hook warning. I drop the phone on the hook. A whirring outer space noise rings out. The printer. Next, nothing, silence. The room collapses into darkness. My heart pounds and I feel paralyzed. This is just one of our usual California power outages, yet my throat and chest burn with panic, and I gasp for air. The digital kitchen clock flashes green—an upside-down four and ones almost spell *hell*, as if warnings come from California power glitches, and bad news comes from Texas.

Hell, help, help. I go back to prayer.

I force slow breathing, long on the exhale, like I do with my counseling clients. This one's bad, so I lower my head from the dizziness.

Keep breathing.

Finally, my brain stops screaming panic and I concentrate on deep slow breaths. The asthma wheezes also stop. I lean forward to gather everything at my feet and find the flashlight in the drawer next to me, just as lights come on, the refrigerator hums, the printer stutters, static music plays. So it is over.

I reset the clock. It's midnight and I'm tired.

Forty-five suddenly feels old. Alby is old too. Forty-two is too old to have a death wish and not know how to live. Thirty-nine is too old for my sister, Corrie, to let Papa be the one to

inform me, instead of warning me herself. She knows we're all worriers and none of us needs another shock. I have had enough shocks in my life.

I think about calling my AA sponsor, Kemble. She's a night owl and would be up. It's been decades since my last panic attack. Back then and now, calling is not my way. No one, not even Kemble, fully understands. Our parents' *ruzie*, multiplied today with the fact that Alby could die, is all too crushing. A thousand miles away from Houston, I'm surrounded by their stress, and my own words choked down like bitter bile—never said.

I touch a soft wall tapestry as I tiptoe to my teen son's room. Another trick I teach my clients is ground yourself, touch your world. I slowly pry open the door as Vincent's snores greet me. His flashing clock glows green on his face and longish curls drape his pillow. Like always for Vanderveer problems, I see my Vincent and believe all is well.

I head for Daniel, his comfort. Chilled autumn air fills our bedroom from the open window. I wish I could wake him to talk. He wouldn't mind, yet I don't want to try out the words with him: *This time Alby almost died.*

Moonlight from our window casts a silver glow on the photo Papa sent us. Verdant terraced rice paddies, like gently curved stair steps for a giant, reach up to steep hills.

"*Tja,*" he had said, "so beautiful, not my home island of Billiton, but Java. I had to take this picture for you kids when Mama and I went on that world cruise. We have one too. Almost home, almost home."

Until recently, when I did my internet research, I had always wondered why he said some words twice out of habit. If you say a word twice in Indonesian, it is plural.

His homes, almost home.

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For several nights I sleep, but never soundly, dreaming of lost packages, lost passports, and the worst—lost babies, children, sisters, brothers, parents, grandparents. I'm sent back at every border crossing to countries full of shadows and danger. I never have my papers, never am I ready, never do I have a home.

Then I wake up in my country, in familiar cold-weather flannel sheets, and recognize the return of the dull ache where all my family pain lives. One way or another, my brother is dying.

Maybe, maybe this time he won't leave.

This is a lot to shake awake from. So I find Vincent as quickly as possible and ask to check his homework folder. I open my calendar to ordinary days with lists of clients. No Vanderveers have called. I find time to do reconnaissance, and my ex-colleagues in Texas report that the "*Feasta* Something Program" is Vista Treatment Program, a well-respected rehab south of Houston. Well-respected, so *no more calls*. I break my promise to Papa to "shape up" *Feasta* Treatment Program. Maybe if those *Feasta* people call me, I won't call back either. This time around I'll have no careful notebook with lists of names and numbers, no calls from me as an ex-clinic director to Alby's clinic director. I tried in the previous hospitalizations, and what did I learn? That a therapist can't help her own family.

When Papa calls me back about my supposedly urgent call to *Feasta*, I will have no report. I'll challenge him. Did he call the family program? I grin and shake my head—no chance of that. Papa loves us deeply, but to talk of his ever-renewing worries or his own past or the present, this he will never do.

Chapter 2

“Each man carries within him the soul of a poet who died young.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Jakob

Billiton Island
Dutch East Indies—Indonesia
December 1941

Jakob knew that Mollie was not beautiful to everyone.

Others might have picked her litter mates. Perhaps the orange-striped kittens, or the lone black kitten with white paws. They would end up with ordinary names such as Tiger or Socks. But Jakob noticed the powerful and mysterious gray kitten and named her Mollie. Her fur gleamed like dusky silver and she purred from the moment he first held her close.

She was his, and she was the most beautiful cat in the world.

Mollie had been with Jakob since he was five years old. When his big brothers Wim and Albert were in school, their housemaid, Baboe Min, asked Mammie for permission to take Jakob to her *kampong*—village. He remembered every moment.

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“*Mevrouw*, I can take Jakob with me now. The kittens are old enough to go to their new homes.”

Mammie was in the kitchen, and looked up from meal planning with Kokkie. At first she frowned, but then her eyes crinkled with a smile. “Oh, the kittens. A cat trains itself, so not much trouble.”

“Ja,” Min nodded.

They were out the door as Mammie called out. “Watch him every second in the *kampong*. Remember, no foul water or food, only clean!”

Jakob danced along with the excitement. Going to the *kampong* chased away the longing to be big enough for school. He loved Baboe Min, holding her hand, hearing her Indonesian fairy tales and hearing her sing. They sang together on his favorites, *I am a Captain* and *I am Happy Everywhere*.

The children saw Mammie mornings and afternoons for an hour or so. They would join Mammie and be on their best behavior to make her happy. Best behaviors or worst behaviors, Min was happy, and loved him all the time.

Now that he was thirteen, and Mollie eight, they skirted the edges of their home’s large rooms, mostly to stay out of Pappie’s way. Pappie was important and busy, and not to be bothered when home for the afternoon rest of *tidur siang*—or most other times.

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Jakob rushed in; Mammie’s piano playing beckoned him indoors. He skidded across the veranda out of breath. Once inside, he scuffled along cool tile, purposely switching to tiptoe as he entered the thick-walled coolness of the living room. Catching his breath, he eased himself onto a carved teak couch, his arms resting on an orange cushion. He tried to copy Mammie’s long hands flying over the keys. Mollie jumped up, knocked his hands off the keyboard pillow, and settled into his lap, purring.

If he stayed very still, he could remain alone with Mammie. Jakob filled up with her music, noting her feet on the pedals as notes crept louder, then softer. Mollie dug her claws in and leapt off his lap. Jakob's jaw clenched and the back of his neck prickled; Mollie never clawed. Something was wrong, very wrong. As wrong as when Pappie was furious with him all day, working up to punishment. But this was a good day, Sara's birthday.

The veranda drew the best of the cool breezes from the sea a few kilometers away. Voices and dishes rattling told him the servants were preparing Sara's birthday table there. Soon they would all congregate to clap and sing. Their cook Kokkie called, "Ready!"

Mammie walked away from the piano, her hand trailing over Jakob's shoulder. She knew he was there all along. Jakob followed, still struck with unease, a tingling creeping down his spine as the family gathered. Sara's cake with sliced fruit all around stood ready. Jakob edged closer, hoping for a taste of the syrupy goodness soaking into the buttery pastry below.

Fourteen-year-old Albert settled quietly at the table. The empty chair, today decorated for Sara, used to be for their oldest brother. Sixteen by now, Wim was still stuck in the Netherlands—with no communication since the German invasion in May 1940. Two long months later, Radio Orange broadcasted for the first time via the BBC. Exiled Queen Wilhelmina spoke of hope and strength, but that didn't mean that anyone knew where Wim was.

Jakob scrunched his eyes, until everyone at the table became blurry, trying to imagine Wim there. But all he could see was the cruel goodbye, Wim being handed his photo album at the last minute; he'd been given no warning. Like many Dutch Indonesian children, he was being left in the Netherlands for his high school education. Jakob recalled leaning on the ship's deck railings and his own excitement on the voyage back from the Netherlands when Pappie handed over an important gift for him alone, a compass.

Every day thereafter, Pappie and Jakob plotted the ship's course home. They visited the bridge during the day, rolled out the map, and used a sextant at night to navigate by the stars, verifying their plotted course with the compass. The only time Jakob felt at ease with Pappie was during their time at sea.

About Wim, Pappie said, "Our clever firstborn," and Sara he called "our darling one, the light of the family." In the ship's dining room, Pappie had presented Albert with a gift—a botany book. "Our scientist," he said. "And you," he said turning to Jakob, "you are our adventurer." Pappie knew him on the trip home, knew he wasn't always a troublemaker—he truly was an adventurer.

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Sara jumped up and down next to her chair before bending to blow out the candles on her birthday cake. Pappie steadied her chair. "Sit, sit. Sit now." But he did not force her to sit down. Sara whirled around in her new sailor dress, lifting the broad collar that matched her blue and white hair ribbons.

Mammie cried out, "Time to sing!"

"Daar is er een jarig, hoera, hoera, dat kun je wel zien dat is zij!" There is one whose birthday is today, hurray, hurray, you can see it is she! The song ended with everyone pointing at Sara.

Pappie patted her hand. "Ah, you are eight."

The white ribbon almost fell from her hair, and was caught up precariously by her ear. Sara grinned wide and clutched the table edge as if otherwise she might fly away.

With some effort, Sara calmed herself and sat down to open her gifts, saving the biggest for last. She playfully elbowed the tallest box as she opened the other gifts. Each time its oblong length trembled and almost fell.

Jakob stared. Even at age thirteen, waiting defeated him. He would have opened it first.

At last Sara grabbed the mystery package, tore it open, and peeked inside. “Oh, so beautiful!” She scooped her hands around decimeters of blue and white fabric, and all leaned in to see. Out came a pink doll, not porcelain, but with real-looking pink skin. “She’s dressed just like me—her new Mammie.” Sara blushed and pointed at herself. “I will call her Tina.” She angled Tina back and forth causing the doll’s blue eyes to flash out from moving eyelids. She cradled and rocked Tina as she ate her cake.

Jakob wanted to hold Tina but didn’t dare ask in front of Pappie. He wondered about the mechanics of her eyes. Perhaps he could see how they opened and closed. His fingers itched to find out. Instead he reached for a second piece of cake, which he justified as his since Wim wasn’t there to claim his share. Mammie shook her head at him, too greedy. Every morsel dissolved in Jakob’s mouth. His jaw ached from the sweet fruit. Good.

Just as Pappie gathered his work papers and went inside, the children all ran out to play. Sara stripped off her dress on the veranda and raced into the yard in her white under-slip, Tina tucked securely under one arm.

“Come in soon,” Mammie called. “Afternoon rains are about to start.”

“I’ll be a soldier,” yelled Jakob. “You Indians hide.” He stopped where the machete-trimmed lawn edged into rainforest shrubs and trees. The Indians ran in that direction; he could still hear their progress crashing through the foliage. One eye in each direction like a snake, he surveyed their home and the jungle. Their house stretched out friendly, the verandas on either

side like hugging arms. Albert and Sara were quiet now. They must indeed be hiding in the growth, Jakob thought, not doubling back to sneak into the house. Only Adri, their house *djongos* and chauffeur, crossed the lawn. An ocean breeze caressed Jakob's shoulder blades and cooled the sweat dripping down his back. Perhaps tomorrow he and Albert would take a native prow, a sail-rigged canoe, along the coast. The outrigger would skim along, while they turned in and out of harbors for a swim.

He leaped up—time to capture the Indians. Seeing a flash of white, he grabbed Sara's wrist and tried to grab Albert, who pulled back hard just as Kokkie screamed. "Aieeh! *Oeler* snake!" The whole house emptied. The children dropped hands and clustered close to Mammie and Pappie on the lawn.

Adri carried two hoes and a machete from the garden as weapons. Min stood nearby, her sweet round face calm. Kokkie stood tall. The snake had been after their food, her food. Her chin jutted out as she readied herself to go back in the house.

Jakob whispered in Sara's ear: "*Oelers* always travel in pairs."

She nodded; this was well known. Holding Tina close, the doll's head tucked under her chin, Sara whispered, "Still now Tina. All will be well."

Adri stood in front of Papa. Skinny, brown, he looked like a palm tree to be climbed next to Pappie's sturdy roundness. Adri nodded at Pappie's whispered words. The family never spoke much once snake-in-the-house maneuvers started. It was the one time Pappie did not yell. Jakob dug his feet in the dirt as Adri, Kokkie, and Min crept into the house. A bird called in the distance, and in the silence, it was like a gunshot. A whack sounded in the house and everyone jumped. In a moment, Min yelled, "Here!" Another thump. Soon Adri emerged, thin rivulets of blood on his hands. He hoisted two heads with long bodies twitching, trailing in the dirt.

Jakob and Albert rushed up to Adri, and Sara ran to Baboe.

“See how they are camouflaged killers.” Albert tapped the still-twitching cobras from behind as the children followed Adri to the servants’ quarters. Strange how many times they had found snakes in their home, but never cobras. Jakob’s sense of unease returned. Dark came quickly every day of the year. Within minutes, outdoor lanterns were lit. Shadows flickered in yellow light as the sharp knife in Adri’s skilled hands finished the beheadings.

The boys squinted into a halo of light as Adri carefully skinned each snake. Tools hung on the walls. Friendly smells emerged: oil for hinges, petrol for the car, and a wheelbarrow of fresh machete-cut grass to be hauled away. Adri tacked each long skin against the wall. A happy shiver ran down Jakob’s back. “Let’s ask Pappie about the time he shot the huge python.” He leapt up and ran toward the house.

Jakob dashed into the living room ahead of Albert. Mammie and Pappie’s heads huddled close to the radio. “Pappie!”

“Not now.” Pappie’s hand swatted him away, stinging his wrist. Albert caught up and jerked him further back, pushing in front of him. Everyone always wanted him out of the way, because then he was no trouble. The grown-ups attended to war reports every night now, especially the broadcasts of the BBC’s Dutch Radio Orange from their exiled *Koningin* Queen Wilhelmina

The boys paused long enough that Mammie and Pappie turned their attention again to the radio. After a bit, so patient, Albert whispered, “What is happening?” He ventured towards the radio. They heard *America, attack, war.*

Jakob yanked him back, surprised Albert would now be the bold one. Grownups never responded to war questions.

“Our Governor-General van Starckenborgh’s report. Nothing for children,” said Mammie. “Off to sleep. All will be well.”

Oh, if only Albert hadn’t spoken one more time. Then they could stay up longer, and overhear every word. They could work out their own puzzle about Royal Dutch soldiers, allies, evil Japanese, and bravery.

They walked away and Pappie called after them. “Never mind boys, you may as well come in.”

Pappie clicked the radio off, and pointed for them to sit. “First a year and a half on no contact with Wim because of Hitler, and now Hirohito bombed Pearl Harbor in America’s Hawaii. The United States declared war on Japan, as has Queen Wilhelmina from her exile in Great Britain.”

The boys sat, stunned. “Will be fighting now?” asked Jakob.

Pappie nodded. “Boys, we are prepared. We could be next, along with Borneo. The Japanese have no natural resources of their own, they will want our oil.”

“And now, off to bed. Like Pappie said, we will be safe.”

Baboe came to check that they were in bed. “Boys, stay.” She spoke in musical Malaysian, which could never sound stern. They stayed put for her; Pappie would be mad at Baboe if they got up again.

Jakob pulled feathers from the seams of his pillow and punched it hard. He whispered, “Do you think we could kill two snakes on our own? You and I, the garden *patjols*?”

Albert’s white-blond head remained silent in the silver moonlight. He had the annoying habit of pausing, then sometimes not answering at all. Finally, just as Jakob was drifting into sleep he said, “*Ja*, we could. We would do it together.”

“*Ja,*” Jakob echoed. They would each creep through the house, detect their foes, and slice down right behind their heads. Dead snakes meant the family was safe.