

SEPARATED from their parents by the war, in 1918, Hannah Gold and her two younger sisters live with their aunt in Boston. Strict rationing makes life difficult for the family, and Hannah does what she can to be useful. She sells newspapers, helps Tanta Rose with the sewing she takes in, and vigilantly watches her younger sisters. When Hannah can find a moment for herself, she draws. It is her one indulgence. And lately she's been drawing angels, because that's what she sees. Tanta Rose is certain the angels are a sign of foreboding, and urges Hannah to ignore them. But when the influenza epidemic ravages their community, and Hannah finds herself again separated from those she loves, it may just be an angel that reunites her family at last.

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chapter one



Tuesday, September 10, 1918

MY APRON HEAVY WITH COINS, I pushed open the front door of our tenement and raced down the steps. Hesitating a moment in the dark stairwell, I breathed in the odors from the other apartments. Ham. Bacon. Smells that made my mouth swim with hope. But in our apartment only the foul stink of weeds waited for me.

Vashti sorted her roots and leaves in the sitting room. Her two-colored eyes, the blue and the brown, swept over me, glaring, as I entered.

“There’s an article in today’s paper,” I said, brushing a stray curl back from my face with newsprint-stained hands. “A hundred sailors, sick with influenza.”

Vashti, the companion of my Tanta Rose, was like a great buzzard. She enjoyed news of other people’s illnesses. It gave her the chance to descend on them with her weedy cures. A plant hung limp in Vashti’s fist. “I have heard.”

Rubbing the side of my nose, I waited for her to say more. Of course, she did not.

“Hannah?” The high voice of Tanta Rose floated under the

door between the sitting room and the kitchen. “Hannah? Home so soon?”

It surprised me to hear Tanta Rose still in the apartment.

Usually she left for the factory before I returned from North Station.

Pushing open the door, I entered the kitchen.

My sisters, Libbie and Eve, dawdled over their oatmeal—Eve dropping the cooling lumps back into her bowl, Libbie grumbling about sugar. I came up behind my sisters and stroked their talcum-powdered heads, Libbie’s red head and Eve’s brown one.

Tanta Rose rested her hand on my dog-eared sketchbook. Most of the time I kept the book in my apron pocket, but in my haste to meet Pilasky that morning to pick up our bundles of newspapers, I’d left it behind.

My sketchbook didn’t come from a stationery shop; it wasn’t store bought like the ones we used at the Settlement House for art lessons. I’d made my sketchbook myself, cutting and sewing together the unused wrapping paper from Mrs. Schwartz’s fish shop.

With one hand, Tanta Rose held my sketchbook open on the kitchen table. The other hand wrapped around her blue flowered teacup. She was half in, half out of her overcoat. She did not need an overcoat, not on such a mild morning. But Tanta Rose wore her coat starting the first of September, no matter the temperature.

The door swung open, and Vashti strode into the kitchen. I gripped my sisters’ shoulders; Eve and Libbie stopped their bickering instantly. Eve’s hand closed over the tattered piece of silk she always kept in sight. In the suddenly silent room, Vashti

passed Tanta Rose on her way to the shelf beside the stove. She counted the number of empty glass jars stored there, jars she used for her infusions and decoctions, then silently she returned to the sitting room.

As soon as the door swung shut behind her, I relaxed my grip on my sisters, and they immediately resumed their argument over who had eaten the most oatmeal.

The stack of folded khaki trousers on the kitchen chair was twice as tall as it had been when I went to bed the night before. “How late were you up sewing, Tanta Rose?” I had to shout over the squawks of my sisters.

Tanta Rose shrugged and raised her eyebrows. “Not so late.”

I opened the icebox door, slipped my newspaper earnings into the jar on the bottom shelf, and nosed around, looking for something to eat.

“Hannelah, please, you’re letting out the cold. Girls, you will each finish two more bites of oatmeal.” Tanta Rose showed no sign of hurry. She kept staring at my little book of drawings.

Libbie teased Eve, inching her bowl away each time Eve tried spooning up some oatmeal.

Tanta Rose inspected me through her thick glasses. “Hannah. What are these pictures?”

I knew which pictures she meant. She’d found my drawings of angels. “They are—they are just pictures, Tanta Rose,” I said.

Tanta Rose raised one eyebrow. She stared again at my drawings.

At night, when Eve and Libbie, Tanta Rose and Vashti slept in the big bed, out the window I saw angels. The angels I saw

weren't the fierce angels of the Torah. But they were angels just the same.

Tanta Rose cocked her head sideways. She looked like a small bird, her russet eyes magnified by the thick lenses of her glasses. "You don't really *see* angels, Hannelah."

I didn't know what to tell her.

"Hannah?"

My sisters stared at me, too.

I shrugged.

Tanta Rose's hand trembled as she shut my sketchbook. "Don't think about it. Maybe they'll go away."

How could I not think about it? I rubbed my nose with my stained hand.

"Girls, you will listen to Hannah today? Eve?"

Eve looked up at Tanta Rose, affection shining in her wide green eyes.

"Don't leave your *schmatte* at school again, darling. The janitor didn't like when Hannah made him open up yesterday afternoon.

Eve lowered her eyes and held her silky in her lap.

"And Libbie?"

Libbie's dark eyes blinked behind her wire-rimmed glasses. She looked like a miniature Tanta Rose, except Tanta Rose's hair had turned from wooly red to wooly white.

Tanta Rose placed her empty teacup on the table and hobbled over to Libbie. She stroked Libbie's cheek, looked fondly into the round pouting face, then turned back to me, fishing for her other coat sleeve. "Hannah, make certain Libbie gets *inside* her classroom this morning, yes?"

"Yes, Tanta Rose."

I turned to Libbie; freckles covered every inch of her face.

Tanta Rose had freckles, too, though hers had faded and blurred. Papa used to call Libbie's freckles angel kisses. Angel kisses and angel whispers. That was my sister Libbie and my Tanta Rose.

"Oy, *Gottenyu*, look at the time!" Tanta Rose cried. She surrounded us each with quick hugs, filling our noses with the smell of balm of Gilead. Then, scooping her night's work of hemmed trousers into her arms, she headed through the swinging door into the sitting room.

"Be good," she called over her shoulder. She exchanged a quick good-bye with Vashti, and then she was out the sitting room door and up the steps leading from our basement flat to the street above.

"Okay, you two," I said.

But instead of getting ready to leave for school, Eve and Libbie raced from kitchen to sitting room to bedroom in our long narrow apartment. I followed them, tucking my sketchbook into my apron pocket.

In the bedroom, one small window looked up to street level. Tanta Rose emerged in her dark coat and sensible shoes. She hobbled down the front tenement steps, and started up Chambers Street.

"Tanta Rosie," Eve called, making her small voice heard through the glass.

Tanta Rose turned, glanced down at the three of us, blew us a kiss.

Libbie, grabbing Eve's hand, ran giggling back toward the kitchen.

But I stayed at the window and slid out my sketchbook. I drew quickly as Tanta Rose walked away. I was still drawing when Vashti came up behind me.

"Hannah!"

I jumped.

With Vashti it was always the same. The stern glare. The silent reproach. She held her hand out.

I pulled myself up as tall and stubborn as I could manage.

Vashti never approved of anything I did—particularly my drawing.

Taking the sketchbook from me, she glanced over it, then carelessly threw it onto the bed. “A waste of time,” she said. “A waste of paper.” Turning sharply, she left the bedroom. Moments later her footsteps snapped out of the apartment. I watched her out the window until she passed from sight.

“Hannah?” Eve appeared at the bedroom door.

My sketch of Tanta Rose had creased along one side. I made it worse with my fist of anger.

“Hannah, be careful,” Eve cried. Wisps of brown curls escaped her braids. Eve always looked a little tattered, like a soft old collar, but a sweetness about her made people smile. “May I see the picture?”

I tore the page out of my sketchbook and handed it to my little sister.

Smoothing the paper on the bed, Eve touched my drawing of Tanta Rose, the lines that formed her head, her swayed back, her long coat.

“Oh, Hannah,” she said. “May I keep it?”

“Just don’t let Vashti see it.”

Eve nodded.

I took her hand and led her through the apartment. In the kitchen, Libbie sat at the crusty table, surrounded by dirty dishes, her nose in a copy of *Tarzan of the Apes*. In her school notebook, she had just written a new word. *Countenance*.