

# THE BOOK THIEF

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Copyright Page

For Elisabeth and Helmut Zusak,  
with love and admiration

# PROLOGUE

a mountain range of rubble

in which our narrator introduces:  
himself—the colors—and the book thief

# DEATH AND CHOCOLATE

First the colors.

Then the humans.

That's usually how I see things.

Or at least, how I try.

## **HERE IS A SMALL FACT**

**You are going to die.**

I am in all truthfulness attempting to be cheerful about this whole topic, though most people find themselves hindered in believing me, no matter my protestations. Please, trust me. I most definitely *can* be cheerful. I can be amiable. Agreeable. Affable. And that's only the A's. Just don't ask me to be nice. Nice has nothing to do with me.

## **REACTION TO THE AFOREMENTIONED FACT**

**Does this worry you?**

**I urge you—don't be afraid.**

**I'm nothing if not fair.**

—Of course, an introduction.

A beginning.

Where are my manners?

I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough, depending on a diverse range of variables. It suffices to say that at some point in time, I will be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. A color will be perched on my shoulder. I will carry you gently away.

At that moment, you will be lying there (I rarely find people standing up). You will be caked in your own body. There might be a discovery; a scream will dribble down the air. The only sound I'll hear after that will be my own breathing, and the sound of the smell, of my footsteps.

The question is, what color will everything be at that moment when I come for you? What will the sky be saying?

Personally, I like a chocolate-colored sky. Dark, dark chocolate. People say it suits me. I do, however, try to enjoy every color I see—the whole spectrum. A billion or so flavors, none of them quite the same, and a sky to slowly suck on. It takes the edge off the stress. It helps me relax.

## **A SMALL THEORY**

**People observe the colors of a day only at its beginnings and ends, but to me it's quite clear that a day merges through a multitude of shades and intonations, with each passing**

**moment. A single *hour* can consist of thousands of different colors. Waxy yellows, cloud-spat blues. Murky darknesses. In my line of work, I make it a point to notice them.**

As I've been alluding to, my one saving grace is distraction. It keeps me sane. It helps me cope, considering the length of time I've been performing this job. The trouble is, who could ever replace me? Who could step in while I take a break in your stock-standard resort-style vacation destination, whether it be tropical or of the ski trip variety? The answer, of course, is nobody, which has prompted me to make a conscious, deliberate decision—to make distraction my vacation. Needless to say, I vacation in increments. In colors.

Still, it's possible that you might be asking, why does he even need a vacation? What does he need distraction *from*?

Which brings me to my next point.

It's the leftover humans.

The survivors.

They're the ones I can't stand to look at, although on many occasions I still fail. I deliberately seek out the colors to keep my mind off them, but now and then, I witness the ones who are left behind, crumbling among the jigsaw puzzle of realization, despair, and surprise. They have punctured hearts. They have beaten lungs.

Which in turn brings me to the subject I am telling you about tonight, or today, or whatever the hour and color. It's the story of one of those perpetual survivors—an expert at being left behind.

It's just a small story really, about, among other things:

- A girl
- Some words
- An accordionist
- Some fanatical Germans
- A Jewish fist fighter
- And quite a lot of thievery

I saw the book thief three times.



## BESIDE THE RAILWAY LINE

First up is something white. Of the blinding kind.

Some of you are most likely thinking that white is not really a color and all of that tired sort of nonsense. Well, I'm here to tell you that it is. White is without question a color, and personally, I don't think you want to argue with me.

**A REASSURING ANNOUNCEMENT**  
**Please, be calm, despite that previous threat.**  
**I am all bluster—**  
**I am not violent.**  
**I am not malicious.**  
**I am a result.**

Yes, it was white.

It felt as though the whole globe was dressed in snow. Like it had pulled it on, the way you pull on a sweater. Next to the train line, footprints were sunken to their shins. Trees wore blankets of ice.

As you might expect, someone had died.

They couldn't just leave him on the ground. For now, it wasn't such a problem, but very soon, the track ahead would be cleared and the train would need to move on.

There were two guards.

There was one mother and her daughter.

One corpse.

The mother, the girl, and the corpse remained stubborn and silent.

"Well, what else do you want me to do?"

The guards were tall and short. The tall one always spoke first, though he was not in charge. He looked at the smaller, rounder one. The one with the juicy red face.

"Well," was the response, "we can't just leave them like this, can we?"

The tall one was losing patience. "Why not?"

And the smaller one damn near exploded. He looked up at the tall one's chin and cried, "*Spinnst du?! Are you stupid?!* " The abhorrence on his cheeks was growing thicker by the moment. His skin widened. "Come on," he said, traipsing over the snow. "We'll carry all three of them back on if we have to. We'll notify the next stop."

As for me, I had already made the most elementary of mistakes. I can't explain to you the severity of my self-disappointment. Originally, I'd done everything right:

I studied the blinding, white-snow sky who stood at the window of the moving train. I practically *inhaled* it, but still, I wavered. I buckled—I became interested. In the girl. Curiosity got the better of me, and I resigned myself to stay as long as my schedule allowed, and I watched.

Twenty-three minutes later, when the train was stopped, I climbed out with them.

A small soul was in my arms.

I stood a little to the right.

The dynamic train guard duo made their way back to the mother, the girl, and the small male corpse. I clearly remember that my breath was loud that day. I'm surprised the guards didn't notice me as they walked by. The world was sagging now, under the weight of all that snow.

Perhaps ten meters to my left, the pale, empty-stomached girl was standing, frost-stricken.

Her mouth jittered.

Her cold arms were folded.

Tears were frozen to the book thief's face.

# THE ECLIPSE

Next is a signature black, to show the poles of my versatility, if you like. It was the darkest moment before the dawn.

This time, I had come for a man of perhaps twenty-four years of age. It was a beautiful thing in some ways. The plane was still coughing. Smoke was leaking from both its lungs.

When it crashed, three deep gashes were made in the earth. Its wings were now sawn-off arms. No more flapping. Not for this metallic little bird.

## **SOME OTHER SMALL FACTS**

**Sometimes I arrive too early.**

**I rush,**

**and some people cling longer  
to life than expected.**

After a small collection of minutes, the smoke exhausted itself. There was nothing left to give.

A boy arrived first, with cluttered breath and what appeared to be a toolbox. With great trepidation, he approached the cockpit and watched the pilot, gauging if he was alive, at which point, he still was. The book thief arrived perhaps thirty seconds later.

Years had passed, but I recognized her.

She was panting.

From the toolbox, the boy took out, of all things, a teddy bear.

He reached in through the torn windshield and placed it on the pilot's chest. The smiling bear sat huddled among the crowded wreckage of the man and the blood. A few minutes later, I took my chance. The time was right.

I walked in, loosened his soul, and carried it gently away.

All that was left was the body, the dwindling smell of smoke, and the smiling teddy bear.

As the crowd arrived in full, things, of course, had changed. The horizon was beginning to charcoal. What was left of the blackness above was nothing now but a scribble, and disappearing fast.

The man, in comparison, was the color of bone. Skeleton-colored skin. A ruffled uniform. His eyes were cold and brown—like coffee stains—and the last scrawl from above formed what, to me, appeared an odd, yet familiar, shape. A signature.

The crowd did what crowds do.

As I made my way through, each person stood and played with the quietness of it. It was a small concoction of disjointed hand movements, muffled sentences, and mute, self-conscious turns.

When I glanced back at the plane, the pilot's open mouth appeared to be smiling.

A final dirty joke.

Another human punch line.

He remained shrouded in his uniform as the graying light arm-wrestled the sky. As with many of the others, when I began my journey away, there seemed a quick shadow again, a final moment of eclipse—the recognition of another soul gone.

You see, to me, for just a moment, despite all of the colors that touch and grapple with what I see in this world, I will often catch an eclipse when a human dies.

I've seen millions of them.

I've seen more eclipses than I care to remember.

# THE FLAG

The last time I saw her was red. The sky was like soup, boiling and stirring. In some places, it was burned. There were black crumbs, and pepper, streaked across the redness.

Earlier, kids had been playing hopscotch there, on the street that looked like oil-stained pages. When I arrived, I could still hear the echoes. The feet tapping the road. The children-voices laughing, and the smiles like salt, but decaying fast.

Then, bombs.

This time, everything was too late.

The sirens. The cuckoo shrieks in the radio. All too late.

Within minutes, mounds of concrete and earth were stacked and piled. The streets were ruptured veins. Blood streamed till it was dried on the road, and the bodies were stuck there, like driftwood after the flood.

They were glued down, every last one of them. A packet of souls.

Was it fate?

Misfortune?

Is that what glued them down like that?

Of course not.

Let's not be stupid.

It probably had more to do with the hurled bombs, thrown down by humans hiding in the clouds.

Yes, the sky was now a devastating, home-cooked red. The small German town had been flung apart one more time. Snowflakes of ash fell so *lovelily* you were tempted to stretch out your tongue to catch them, taste them. Only, they would have scorched your lips. They would have cooked your mouth.

Clearly, I see it.

I was just about to leave when I found her kneeling there.

A mountain range of rubble was written, designed, erected around her. She was clutching at a book.

Apart from everything else, the book thief wanted desperately to go back to the basement, to write, or to read through her story one last time. In hindsight, I see it so obviously on her face. She was dying for it—the safety of it, the home of it—but she could not move. Also, the basement didn't even exist anymore. It was part of the mangled landscape.

Please, again, I ask you to believe me.

I wanted to stop. To crouch down.

I wanted to say:

“I’m sorry, child.”

But that is not allowed.

I did not crouch down. I did not speak.

Instead, I watched her awhile. When she was able to move, I followed her.

She dropped the book.

She knelt.

The book thief howled.

Her book was stepped on several times as the cleanup began, and although orders were given only to clear the mess of concrete, the girl’s most precious item was thrown aboard a garbage truck, at which point I was compelled. I climbed aboard and took it in my hand, not realizing that I would keep it and view it several thousand times over the years. I would watch the places where we intersect, and marvel at what the girl saw and how she survived. That is the best I can do— watch it fall into line with everything else I spectated during that time.

When I recollect her, I see a long list of colors, but it’s the three in which I saw her in the flesh that resonate the most. Sometimes I manage to float far above those three moments. I hang suspended, until a septic truth bleeds toward clarity.

That’s when I see them formulate.

### THE COLORS

RED:  WHITE:  BLACK: 

They fall on top of each other. The scribbled signature black, onto the blinding global white, onto the thick soupy red.

Yes, often, I am reminded of her, and in one of my vast array of pockets, I have kept her story to retell. It is one of the small legion I carry, each one extraordinary in its own right. Each one an attempt— an immense leap of an attempt—to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it.

Here it is. One of a handful.

*The Book Thief.*

If you feel like it, come with me. I will tell you a story.

I’ll show you something.

# PART ONE

the grave digger's handbook

featuring:

himmel street—the art of *saumensching*—an ironfisted  
woman—a kiss attempt—jesse owens—  
sandpaper—the smell of friendship—a heavyweight  
champion—and the mother of all *watschens*

# ARRIVAL ON HIMMEL STREET

That last time.

That red sky . . .

How does a book thief end up kneeling and howling and flanked by a man-made heap of ridiculous, greasy, cooked-up rubble?

Years earlier, the start was snow.

The time had come. For one.

## **A SPECTACULARLY TRAGIC MOMENT**

**A train was moving quickly.**

**It was packed with humans.**

**A six-year-old boy died in the third carriage.**

The book thief and her brother were traveling down toward Munich, where they would soon be given over to foster parents. We now know, of course, that the boy didn't make it.

## **HOW IT HAPPENED**

**There was an intense spurt of coughing.**

**Almost an *inspired* spurt.**

**And soon after—nothing.**

When the coughing stopped, there was nothing but the nothingness of life moving on with a shuffle, or a near-silent twitch. A suddenness found its way onto his lips then, which were a corroded brown color and peeling, like old paint. In desperate need of redoing.

Their mother was asleep.

I entered the train.

My feet stepped through the cluttered aisle and my palm was over his mouth in an instant.

No one noticed.

The train galloped on.

Except the girl.

With one eye open, one still in a dream, the book thief—also known as Liesel Meminger—could see without question that her younger brother, Werner, was now sideways and dead.

His blue eyes stared at the floor.

Seeing nothing.



Prior to waking up, the book thief was dreaming about the *Führer*, Adolf Hitler. In the dream, she was attending a rally at which he spoke, looking at the skull-colored part in his hair and the perfect square of his mustache. She was listening contentedly to the torrent of words spilling from his mouth. His sentences glowed in the light. In a quieter moment, he actually crouched down and smiled at her. She returned the smile and said, "*Guten Tag, Herr Führer. Wie geht's dir heute?*" She hadn't learned to speak too well, or even to read, as she had rarely frequented school. The reason for that she would find out in due course.

Just as the *Führer* was about to reply, she woke up.

It was January 1939. She was nine years old, soon to be ten.

Her brother was dead.

One eye open.

One still in a dream.

It would be better for a complete dream, I think, but I really have no control over that.

The second eye jumped awake and she caught me out, no doubt about it. It was exactly when I knelt down and extracted his soul, holding it limply in my swollen arms. He warmed up soon after, but when I picked him up originally, the boy's spirit was soft and cold, like ice cream. He started melting in my arms. Then warming up completely. Healing.

For Liesel Meminger, there was the imprisoned stiffness of movement and the staggered onslaught of thoughts. *Es stimmt nicht*. This isn't happening. This isn't happening.

And the shaking.

Why do they always shake them?

Yes, I know, I know, I assume it has something to do with instinct. To stem the flow of truth. Her heart at that point was slippery and hot, and loud, so loud so loud.

Stupidly, I stayed. I watched.

Next, her mother.

She woke her up with the same distraught shake.

If you can't imagine it, think clumsy silence. Think bits and pieces of floating despair. And drowning in a train.

Snow had been falling consistently, and the service to Munich was forced to stop due to faulty track work. There was a woman wailing. A girl stood numbly next to her.

In panic, the mother opened the door.

She climbed down into the snow, holding the small body.

What could the girl do but follow?

As you've been informed, two guards also exited the train. They discussed and argued over what to do. The situation was unsavory to say the least. It was eventually decided that all three of them should be taken to the next township and left there to sort things out.

This time, the train limped through the snowed-in country.

It hobbled in and stopped.

They stepped onto the platform, the body in her mother's arms.

They stood.

The boy was getting heavy.

Liesel had no idea where she was. All was white, and as they remained at the station, she could only stare at the faded lettering of the sign in front of her. For Liesel, the town was nameless, and it was there that her brother, Werner, was buried two days later. Witnesses included a priest and two shivering grave diggers.

#### **AN OBSERVATION**

**A pair of train guards.**

**A pair of grave diggers.**

**When it came down to it, one of them called the shots.**

**The other did what he was told.**

**The question is, what if the *other* is a lot more than one?**

Mistakes, mistakes, it's all I seem capable of at times.

For two days, I went about my business. I traveled the globe as always, handing souls to the conveyor belt of eternity. I watched them trundle passively on. Several times, I warned myself that I should keep a good distance from the burial of Liesel Meminger's brother. I did not heed my advice.

From miles away, as I approached, I could already see the small group of humans standing frigidly among the wasteland of snow. The cemetery welcomed me like a friend, and soon, I was with them. I bowed my head.

Standing to Liesel's left, the grave diggers were rubbing their hands together and whining about the snow and the current digging conditions. "So hard getting through all the ice," and so forth. One of them couldn't have been more than fourteen. An apprentice. When he walked away, after a few dozen paces, a black book fell innocuously from his coat pocket without his knowledge.

A few minutes later, Liesel's mother started leaving with the priest. She was thanking him for his performance of the ceremony.

The girl, however, stayed.

Her knees entered the ground. Her moment had arrived.

Still in disbelief, she started to dig. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't—

Within seconds, snow was carved into her skin.

Frozen blood was cracked across her hands.

Somewhere in all the snow, she could see her broken heart, in two pieces. Each half was glowing, and beating under all that white. She realized her mother had come back for her only when she felt the boniness of a hand on her shoulder. She was being dragged away. A warm scream filled her throat.

**A SMALL IMAGE, PERHAPS \*  
TWENTY METERS AWAY  
When the dragging was done, the mother and  
the girl stood and breathed.  
There was something black and rectangular  
lodged in the snow.  
Only the girl saw it.  
She bent down and picked it up and  
held it firmly in her fingers.  
The book had silver writing on it.**

They held hands.

A final, soaking farewell was let go of, and they turned and left the cemetery, looking back several times.

As for me, I remained a few moments longer.

I waved.

No one waved back.

Mother and daughter vacated the cemetery and made their way toward the next train to Munich.

Both were skinny and pale.

Both had sores on their lips.

Liesel noticed it in the dirty, fogged-up window of the train when they boarded just before midday. In the written words of the book thief herself, the journey continued like *everything* had happened.

When the train pulled into the *Bahnhof* in Munich, the passengers slid out as if from a torn package. There were people of every stature, but among them, the poor were the most easily recognized. The impoverished always try to keep moving, as if relocating might help. They ignore the reality that a new version of the same old problem will be waiting at the end of the trip—the relative you cringe to kiss.

I think her mother knew this quite well. She wasn't delivering her children to the higher echelons of Munich, but a foster home had apparently been found, and if nothing else, the new family could at least feed the girl and the boy a little better, and educate them properly.

The boy.

Liesel was sure her mother carried the memory of him, slung over her shoulder. She dropped him. She saw his feet and legs and body slap the platform.

How could that woman walk?

How could she move?

That's the sort of thing I'll never know, or comprehend—what humans are capable of.

She picked him up and continued walking, the girl clinging now to her side.

Authorities were met and questions of lateness and the boy raised their vulnerable heads. Liesel remained in the corner of the small, dusty office as her mother sat with clenched thoughts on a very hard chair.

There was the chaos of goodbye.

It was a goodbye that was wet, with the girl's head buried into the woolly, worn shallows of her mother's coat. There had been some more dragging.

Quite a way beyond the outskirts of Munich, there was a town called Molching, said best by the likes of you and me as "Molking." That's where they were taking her, to a street by the name of Himmel.

#### A TRANSLATION

***Himmel* = Heaven**

Whoever named Himmel Street certainly had a healthy sense of irony. Not that it was a living hell. It wasn't. But it sure as hell wasn't heaven, either.

Regardless, Liesel's foster parents were waiting.

The Hubermanns.

They'd been expecting a girl and a boy and would be paid a small allowance for having them. Nobody wanted to be the one to tell Rosa Hubermann that the boy didn't survive the trip. In fact, no one ever really wanted to tell her anything. As far as dispositions go, hers wasn't really enviable, although she had a good record with foster kids in the past. Apparently, she'd straightened a few out.

For Liesel, it was a ride in a car.

She'd never been in one before.

There was the constant rise and fall of her stomach, and the futile hopes that they'd lose their way or change their minds. Among it all, her thoughts couldn't help turning toward her mother, back at the *Bahnhof*, waiting to leave again. Shivering. Bundled up in that useless coat. She'd be eating her nails, waiting for the train. The platform would be long and uncomfortable—a slice of cold cement. Would she keep an eye out for the approximate burial site of her son on the return trip? Or would sleep be too heavy?

The car moved on, with Liesel dreading the last, lethal turn.

The day was gray, the color of Europe.

Curtains of rain were drawn around the car.

"Nearly there." The foster care lady, Frau Heinrich, turned around and smiled. "*Dein neues Heim*. Your new home."

Liesel made a clear circle on the dribbled glass and looked out.

## **A PHOTO OF HIMMEL STREET**

**The buildings appear to be glued together, mostly small houses  
and apartment blocks that look nervous.  
There is murky snow spread out like carpet.  
There is concrete, empty hat-stand trees, and gray air.**

A man was also in the car. He remained with the girl while Frau Heinrich disappeared inside. He never spoke. Liesel assumed he was there to make sure she wouldn't run away or to force her inside if she gave them any trouble. Later, however, when the trouble did start, he simply sat there and watched. Perhaps he was only the last resort, the final solution.

After a few minutes, a very tall man came out. Hans Hubermann, Liesel's foster father. On one side of him was the medium-height Frau Heinrich. On the other was the squat shape of Rosa Hubermann, who looked like a small wardrobe with a coat thrown over it. There was a distinct waddle to her walk. Almost cute, if it wasn't for her face, which was like creased-up cardboard and annoyed, as if she was merely tolerating all of it. Her husband walked straight, with a cigarette smoldering between his fingers. He rolled his own.

The fact was this:

Liesel would not get out of the car.

*"Was ist los mit dem Kind?"* Rosa Hubermann inquired. She said it again. "What's wrong with this child?" She stuck her face inside the car and said, *"Na, komm. Komm."*

The seat in front was flung forward. A corridor of cold light invited her out. She would not move.

Outside, through the circle she'd made, Liesel could see the tall man's fingers, still holding the cigarette. Ash stumbled from its edge and lunged and lifted several times until it hit the ground. It took nearly fifteen minutes to coax her from the car. It was the tall man who did it.

Quietly.

There was the gate next, which she clung to.

A gang of tears trudged from her eyes as she held on and refused to go inside. People started to gather on the street until Rosa Hubermann swore at them, after which they reversed back, whence they came.

## **A TRANSLATION OF ROSA HUBERMANN'S ANNOUNCEMENT "What are you assholes looking at?"**

Eventually, Liesel Meminger walked gingerly inside. Hans Hubermann had her by one hand. Her small suitcase had her by the other. Buried beneath the folded layer of clothes in that suitcase was a small black book, which, for all we know, a fourteen-year-old grave digger in a nameless town had probably spent the last few hours looking for. "I promise you," I imagine him saying to his boss, "I have no idea what happened to it. I've looked everywhere. *Everywhere!*" I'm sure he would never have suspected the girl, and yet, there it was—a black book with silver words written against the ceiling of her clothes:

## **THE GRAVE DIGGER'S HANDBOOK A Twelve-Step Guide to**

**Grave-Digging Success**  
**Published by the Bayern Cemetery Association**

The book thief had struck for the first time—the beginning of an illustrious career.