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Photograph of Czesława Kwoka attributed to Wilhelm Brasse, taken in 1942 or 1943, exhibited at Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

For more information about Kate Birkin and her books, please visit <https://www.katebirkinbooks.com>.

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Dedicated to Sir Nicholas George Winton, who organized the rescue of 669 children from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia on the eve of World War II, thereby sparing them from the horrors of the Holocaust. Dubbed the “British Schindler” and knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2003 for services to humanity, his operation became known as the *Czech Kindertransport* (*children’s transport*). The survivors called themselves “Nicky’s children,” and by the time of Winton’s death at 106 years of age in 2015, their descendants numbered over 6,000 around the world.



*Who they were before the Holocaust.
It became my obsession . . .*



*Czesława Kwoka.
Auschwitz prisoner number 26947 and child victim.
Beautiful even with a bruised face from being beaten.
Confused and frightened but still brave.
Her mother nowhere in sight as she posed for her final photograph.*

Dear Reader,

The first time I saw the photo of fourteen-year-old Czesława Kwoka, a Polish girl photographed by fellow prisoner Wilhelm Brasse, it struck me with such great sadness and anger. An innocent little girl had been sent to Auschwitz with her mother, both of whom were murdered within three months.

There is so little known about her, other than she was from the small town of Wólka Złojcka, Poland, and she had been beaten just before the photo was taken. And I wanted to know more. I wanted to know who this pretty, blue-eyed little angel was before she found herself in this living nightmare. What was she like? What music did she listen to and what books did she read? What was her favorite color, her favorite candy? Did she have any hobbies, aspirations, or dreams? What about a sister, or a brother, or a

crush on a boy?

So many unanswered questions.

And yet all that the world knows about her is captured in a few snapshots taken while she was a prisoner at Auschwitz. A prisoner at fourteen! That is her only story. Her legacy. And it is heartbreaking.

I began researching other photographs from the Holocaust, images millions of others have also seen, and it bothered me that so many had no story beyond the haunting stare into the camera lens. Who they once were, the lives they lived, and the love they shared before mercilessly taken away and murdered because of their race or religion. It troubled me to the point of losing sleep, and it moved me to action in the only way I knew how . . . by giving them a voice, creating their story for them. A melting pot of true accounts, all blended together. And not just about the Holocaust but also prior to it, when they lived on beautiful farms, owned successful businesses, had loving families and friends, and lived life to the full.

Ava and Shalom is inspired by all those people. A myriad of stories in honor of the millions of innocent victims who died during the Holocaust, like fourteen-year-old Czesława Kwoka. They were more than a haunting stare into a camera lens. More than the identification number on their prison uniform or tattooed on their arm. More than their injustice and suffering.

Yes, they were beautiful human beings, just like you, and they had lives, loves, and dreams . . .



“Hell is empty and all the devils are here.”

– William Shakespeare



“There was so much innocent blood
hidden from the eyes of the rest of the
world. Enough blood to fill an ocean.”

– Holocaust Survivor



Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp

1943

The gates of Auschwitz loomed in the distance as the train, overflowing with humanity, screeched to a halt. The air was heavy with the stench of despair, the fetid smell of vomit, urine, and excrement permeating the cramped carriage. Within, hundreds of Jewish prisoners, their bodies weary and spirits broken, braced themselves for the unknown horrors that awaited them.

Ava and Shalom, twenty-two-year-old twin sisters raised in a loving German family, had only recently learned of their Semitic heritage. Once living fairy tale lives, they now found themselves in a horrible nightmare, in shock over how they ended up in this hellish camp. As if a theatrical oil painting of Gemini's twin stars, Castor and Pollux, dramatically personified into human form with eyes wide in fear, faces pale, skin stained with tears, dirt, and blood, they huddled close together, clinging to one another in the

crowded boxcar like two mirror images embracing in a sorrowful kiss before death.

As the doors flung open, a flood of frightened souls poured out into the night, their faces etched with crippling dread and anxiety. The moon cast a ghostly glow over the scene, its light filtered through a thin veil of clouds creating an eerie, sinister atmosphere.

SS officers with vicious German Shepherds immediately began the process of sorting the prisoners. Their faces were cold and impassive and their voices harsh, barking orders that sent waves of panic through the crowd. Some of the people were destined to work until they collapsed from sickness or exhaustion, others marked for the gas chambers. Confusion, crying, and the sound of families being torn apart were everywhere.

The sudden crack of a gunshot elevated the fear. An older man, too slow for the officers' liking, fell to the ground, his life extinguished in an instant. Nearby, a woman clung desperately to her young son, refusing to let him go. She, too, met the same fate, her body crumpling to the ground as her little boy's screams pierced the night.

Another woman, grimacing in pain, stepped away from the line, clutching her swollen belly. When an older woman rushed to her aid, both were ordered back in line. She complained that the girl was starting early labor, and the officer responded with two more bullets. Both women lay still, their lives snuffed out in a cruel and senseless act.

Amidst this chaos, Ava reached over and held her sister's hand. Her grip was vice-like, her knuckles white with the force of her fear. Shalom's menses had started, blood running down her leg, and she thought of their adoptive German mother, how she would always make them a hot bath scented with vanilla and lavender when they were children, singing as she washed her daughters' hair. "Oh, Mama," Shalom cried out in desperation and sadness. Though she was now a young woman, she felt no different from that little boy who had just screamed for his dead mother.

An SS officer singled Ava and Shalom out among the crowd of terrorized Jews. "Are you twins?" he asked, his interest piqued.

Paralyzed, the sisters remained mute, praying silent pleas.

The officer pressed his gun firmly against Ava's sternum. "Are you twins?" he repeated, his scarred face, crooked rotting teeth, and bulbous nose a fitting motif to his heinous persona.

"*Ja (Yes)*," Ava managed to whisper, barely audible.

Dr. Josef Rudolf Mengele approached, his gaze scrutinizing the siblings

with a chilling intensity. “Of course they are, you fool,” he said dismissively to the officer. “Look at them.” His eyes lingered with fascination on Ava and Shalom, a twisted smile playing on his lips. “And such pretty green eyes.”

Both girls felt as if they were staring into the soul of a demon. A cold shiver ran down their spines.

More gunshots rang out, adding to the cacophony of death and despair. One of the fallen, only a few feet from where the sisters stood, was a man who had earlier offered Shalom his jacket, an act of kindness in a world devoid of compassion. Now, his lifeless body lay in the mud, the leather coat still carrying his scent.

Another man was shot for mere sport, his body refusing to fall despite the bullet tearing through his flesh. Two of the officers found amusement in his resilience, their laughter a grotesque soundtrack to the cruelty, and it irritated the one with the gun. He walked over to the man, shooting him point blank between the eyes. “*Die Ratte war stärker als er aussah (The rat was stronger than he looked),*” he said with a smirk, spitting on the dead man.

Josef Mengele, unfazed by the atrocities happening around him, as if it were just another day at the office, motioned for Ava and Shalom to follow. “You two are special,” he said, his voice carrying an evil timbre. “I’m taking you to a place where I can examine you closer.”

The twin sisters followed the doctor, stepping over bodies and through pools of blood. Their fate, now in the hands of a merciless man known for his monstrous experiments, seemed more uncertain than ever. As they walked, the camp’s lights flickered ominously, casting long shadows that danced across the ground like specters of death, reminding them they had entered a realm where survival and hope were mere illusions.

No benefactors were there to help them.

No heroes were coming to rescue them.

No saviors could possibly save them.

Unless . . .

PART ONE



Berlin, 1997

I was twenty-five, fresh out of college, working as a correspondent at a major newspaper and doing side work for a TV news station. Despite my young age, I was already an accomplished writer, winning a few journalism awards and covering a story about the Cold War that aired on television. I met celebrities, went to wild parties, and navigated the social scenes from the sun-kissed boulevards of Los Angeles to the pulsating heart of New York. I was moving up in the world, and fast.

From the outside, everything looked as promising as a birthday present wrapped in shiny paper with a colorful bow. But on the inside, I was drowning. Beneath the facade, I was completely unhappy with my work and the direction of my life, fading into a chasm of dissatisfaction. I wanted to be a *real* writer, not just crafting narratives that filled the pages of a newspaper but creating something of significance. Something that bore weight, that whispered of truth, and that would leave an indelible mark on those who read it. But such paragons are not easily found; they are rare, hidden gems. To unearth one is like winning the lottery.

Only in my mid-twenties and already tapped out, my inspiration was gone. Like tumbleweed blowing across the Arizona desert, I searched for my oasis, but everything I came across was nothing more than a mirage, leaving me parched and desperate for a drop of meaning in a wasteland of mediocrity.

“Charlie!” my pop said to me in his large, Old English-style study after one of our weekly chess games, a cigar in one hand and a brandy in the other. Being a retired journalist who had traveled the world, his gruff and distinctive voice now dispensed advice like it was candy. “What you need is an adventure. A damn good one, too. One that will inspire you to write your book.” He leaned in and looked me directly in the eye. “An account that puts fire in the bellies of people, teaching them something and making them feel again. The world has gone numb, son, and it needs an electrifying piece to shake ‘em up.” Exhaling a billow of smoke, he tossed back his brandy.

My pop was right. What I desperately needed to get me out of this funk was an adventure. One that would lead me to a genuine, salt of the earth, life-changing story.

Compelled by a fortuitous mettle, I made a rash decision that veered sharply from the path expected of me. It had to be done. Ignoring the protests of close family and friends—my pop being my only supporter—with a single, defiant stroke, I severed my connections to the familiar, quitting my job, ending my stale relationship with my girlfriend, and giving up my apartment. In a leap of faith and forfeiture of collective thinking, I bought a plane ticket to Germany to seek my providence elsewhere, in a new environment, one that bore the unspeakable scars of history, yet at the same time the triumphant and indomitable spirit of humanity. Being half Jewish, I had heard the Holocaust horror stories from my grandfather who survived Auschwitz-Birkenau, and I thought maybe there I would find my inspiration again, stumbling across something of value that hadn't already been written. I've always wanted to visit this place of tragedy and sorrow, anyway, and something was now drawing me there. Perhaps, amidst the shadows of the past and the solemnity of the Holocaust memorials, I would find the spark to ignite my passion once more.

Berlin welcomed me with open arms and a sky ablaze with promise on that glorious morn I arrived. It was there, on a serendipitous summer day in 1997, that luck intertwined my path with that of Gretchen Axmann. Gretchen rented a two-bedroom flat in an old Victorian home, and it just so happened she needed a roommate. Well, you can guess what happened next . . . I now had a place to stay. It didn't hurt that she was a beauty, as well, with a vivacious and quirky personality that made me laugh—the perfect antidote to my somewhat refined demeanor.

Soon Gretchen and I became more than just roommates; we became best friends and lovers. We partied with the locals in Berlin's nightlife, coming home at dawn. We slept till noon, crawling out of bed to go for a late *Frühstück* (breakfast) at Gretchen's favorite diner while lazily reading the newspaper. And we strolled leisurely through the park, hand in hand, lounging on the grass under the warm German sun. Neither one of us thought much about the future at that point, living in the moment, enjoying the fruits of each other.

Using the money I had saved, we bought new furniture for the flat, hung pictures on the walls, and put house plants everywhere. I grew a beard, let my hair grow long, and immersed myself in everything European culture had to offer. Gretchen was my personal tour guide and curator, and even taught me German as we lay in each other's arms in bed.

I remember one special night, with the moon shining through the window, the classical music serenading us in the room, and the wine coursing through our veins. She whispered to me, “*Ich liebe dich (I love you)*, Charlie John Rankin.” I looked at her and replied, “*Und ich liebe dich (And I love you)*, Gretchen Axmann.” That was the first time we said we loved each other, and it was in perfect German.

Those carefree days were such a fun diversion for me, and a refreshing change from my ex-girlfriend back home, who constantly hinted about getting married, or pestered me about buying a house, or pushed me about advancing my career. With Gretchen, there was freedom and no judgment, and I loved that. She was also an artist, and I think that’s why she adored me; or at least liked the idea of having a writer as a boyfriend, finding it romantic. She also ran with the artsy crowd of Berlin; boy was that interesting and entertaining. We’d all go down to the local coffee shop and drink specialty java while reciting poetry, or crowd into someone’s small apartment and smoke herb, or linger in bohemian shops and enclaves. True, I wasn’t writing my groundbreaking story yet, but I was having the time of my life.

This breezy lifestyle went on for months, and I thoroughly enjoyed it, not having a care in the world, every day filled with whatever I wanted to do. It was great, until I grew restless. The endless cycle of hedonistic partying and next-day hangovers started to become tiresome and boring, and the insouciant way of life was losing its charm. I was running out of money, too, and that worried me. I figured I had maybe six months left to carve out my masterpiece before I’d have to pack it all in and head back to South Carolina. What an embarrassment that would be, proving the naysayers right. But it was either that or get a mundane job in Berlin to support myself, and that’s not what I wanted. No, something important had drawn me here, and I knew it. But what?

Returning to why I had come to Germany in the first place, I reinvigorated my zeal to find my literary pearl. I visited all the tourist sights about the Holocaust, read historical books on it, and talked to those who had survived the death camps. But listening to their stories, though tragic and heartbreaking, did not compel me to sit down and write it all out. That is until the other shoe dropped . . .

My fun-loving, free-spirited, no-strings-attached blonde vixen came home one day from the doctor’s office in tears. She sat down, her face in her hands, and mumbled in German that she was pregnant. Neither of us were

expecting that, as we had been careful, but the Devil always laughs at our plans. At the time, with a new baby on the way, I saw my book spontaneously combust before my eyes, disintegrating into ashes before I had even penned the first word. I did love Gretchen, though, and I would not abandon her and our child, so I asked her to marry me.

Gretchen said yes, but she didn't want to move to South Carolina. That meant, for the time being, I was stuck in Germany, with no job, no direction, and no book. We had a simple wedding with a dozen of Gretchen's family and friends in a medieval German church, Gretchen wearing her grandmother's lace wedding gown and intricate gossamer veil, and me a rented vintage tux with a pink carnation. Afterward, we settled into married life.

I cut my hair, shaved my beard, and found a job as a drywaller at a construction company . . . I know, I know, but it paid the bills . . . and Gretchen opened a quaint little used bookstore nearby. She decorated it with colorful beanbag chairs, flowers and plants, and various knickknacks from the bohemian shops, serving her customers coffee and Danishes as they perused and read her books. Sometimes she bought more than she sold, though, and within a few weeks, our apartment was full of an assortment of tomes on a variety of subjects, ranging from French poetry to how to grow a prize-winning garden. Occasionally, she'd find a real gem, like the life story of Gustav Klimt, the nineteenth-century Austrian symbolist painter and one of the most prominent members of the Vienna Secession movement. He painted *The Kiss*—perhaps his most famous work—adding gold leaf, silver, and platinum to the piece depicting a couple embracing each other, their bodies wrapped in elaborate robes decorated in a style influenced by the contemporary Art Nouveau style. Gretchen, feeling inspired one day, tried to replicate it as a painting of us. Of course I didn't tell her, but it looked more like a Pablo Picasso disaster, or a child's watercolor portrait, than it did a work of art. Nevertheless, because I loved her, I complimented her profusely on it and proudly hung it above our bed.

During this sublime period, I surrendered and settled in, imagining myself years from now, speaking fluent German, eating Bavarian pretzels and bratwurst while surrounded by little blond children in lederhosen, crawling all over me and calling me Papa. And yet, still, the reason I originally came to Germany ate at me. I had all but given up hope of finding that elusive, erudite gold, until something pivotal happened, opening the unexpected door of fate in one of those miraculous ways.

Gretchen had asked the landlady, a sweet woman in her seventies everyone called Mrs. Kuchen, if we could remove some wallpaper in the second bedroom and paint it a pastel color in preparation for the baby. Mrs. Kuchen agreed, and when I peeled back a section of the paper, hidden beneath layers of time and paint I saw four names carved into the wall: Ava, Shaylee, Luka, Christian—Best Friends Forever, 1939. This bond forged in the crucible of history, promising eternal friendship at the beginning of a most epoch and harrowing time, intrigued me, as if desperately reaching across the decades to grab hold of my heart. As I stared at it, something strange, something *outré*, and even dreadful, came over me.

Later when I got the mail, I asked Mrs. Kuchen if she knew who these people were, and she looked at me with curiosity. “Tell me,” she said, her German accent as strong and thick as molasses. “Your last name Rankin . . . is that related to the abolitionist Presbyterian minister, John Rankin, from the 1800s?”

“Yes,” I said, surprised that she knew of him. “As a matter of fact, he’s a distant relative.”

“He helped 2,000 runaway slaves as a conductor on the Underground Railroad.”

Her knowledge of American slavery intrigued me. “I know. My father taught me all about him when I was a young teenager.”

“Hmm . . . You must be very proud to be related to such a man.”

I nodded. “John Rankin was a true hero.”

“*Ja (Yes)*, a hero,” said Mrs. Kuchen, almost under her breath. I could see in her eyes that she was thinking of something. Or someone she knew. Someone important to her. “Your wife tells me you’re a writer,” she said, a soft smile touching her lips.

“Yes. I was a journalist in the States,” I replied, sticking my hands in my pockets, embarrassed of my present situation. “I came here to write a book, but it never happened. I couldn’t find that special story to inspire me.”

She paused. “Why don’t you and your wife come over for dinner tonight. I might have a story for you.”

“We’d love to, but she’s going to her mother’s for the weekend,” I said.

“Then just you. Eight o’clock.” She smiled at me. “I think you will find that . . . how you say . . . inspiration you are looking for.” With a quick wink, she turned and disappeared down the long hallway.



That night, I brought a bottle of *Spätburgunder* (*Pinot Noir*) wine and some Allgäu Emmental cheese along with me to dinner. Mrs. Kuchen was most appreciative of my gift. She lived in the bottom half of the old Victorian home, which was separate from the upstairs flat. Her living room looked like something out of an 1800s-era movie set, with original decor—velvet wing-back chairs, silk curtains, Tiffany lamps, Art Nouveau styling. Being a quintessential German woman, she also made the best Germanic cuisine, which was such a treat. Though Gretchen was amazing at reciting poetry and making love, she could not cook to save her life, and I had forgotten how good unburnt food tasted.

While we ate dinner together, I was impressed with how elegant and charming Mrs. Kuchen was. Bright and witty, she made me laugh, and we talked into the night. When the Pinot Noir was finished, she brought out a special German liqueur in a green glass bottle, pouring us each a double shot. “Jägermeister is my favorite,” she said, handing it to me.

I took a sip. “My wife had mentioned this drink to me before. It’s good.”

She smiled, gazing at me as if seeing into my soul. “You’re in love, no?”

“Yes,” I replied, smiling back.

Mrs. Kuchen leaned in closer, her large emerald eyes shimmering. “But have you ever been heartbroken?”

I thought for a moment. “No, I haven’t experienced heartbreak yet.”

She lit a cigarette and exhaled a billow of smoke, staring into the dancing flames of the fireplace, her mien turning rueful. “You will after the story I’m about to tell you.”

As I observed her, lost in her cogitation, I could see something profound awakening in her mind. Something cataclysmal. I put the tape recorder on the table, and the second I hit “record,” she came alive. There was a magic that settled around the room, and we both felt it. This meeting between us was meant to happen. Destiny, fate, kismet—all silent cousins listening as she spoke of two Jewish babies, Ava and Shalom, given to a German farmer and his wife in 1921. Secretly raised as German, for years everything was bliss, until their Jewish mother came back to the farm one evening, running away from the Nazis. The lie was eventually exposed, and all the demons were released from the abyss.

I sat there listening to her tale, absolutely mesmerized. Yes, this decorous, enchanting if not haunting lady—a keeper of secrets and stories—was right.

I had found my inspiration . . .

CHAPTER 1

Seventy-Seven Years Earlier *Germany, 1920*

The two boxers had been fighting a grueling match. An intense fight, now in the thirteenth round. The agitated crowd, drinking and chain-smoking, yelling and thrusting their fists in the air, had picked their sides, hoping to cash in on their bets. Eckstein No. 5 cigarettes and Loeser & Wolff cigars filled the large room with a velvety blanket of smoke, hovering in the air like an apparition.

Ding! Ding! Ding!

The bell rang, ending the round, and each boxer retreated to his corner. A young woman dressed in marmalade-colored shorts that fit as snug as the tobacco leaf wrapper on the cigars she sold, strutted through the audience, selling her goods. Inebriated men whistled and shouted, catcalling until she disappeared.

Randolph Kowalski, a seasoned pugilist who had won many titles across Europe, was the favorite. Burly, broad-shouldered, solid on his feet, the Polish man with prominent brow and hairy frame was known for his strength and stamina, able to take a solid punch as well as release one. He reminded boxing fans of a bull, which is why they gave him the moniker, Randolph the Bull.

A muscular young German man named Albrecht Braun was the challenger. Untested but tall and strong, with lemon blond hair and chiseled face, he had a reputation with the ladies, several of whom were in the crowd that night, cheering him on. One in particular was absolutely smitten, and whenever Albrecht took a punch to the face, she would yell at his opponent, "*Tu ihm nicht weh, du polnisches Schwein* (Don't hurt him, you Polish pig!)"

The bell rang, and round fourteen began. Surprisingly, Albrecht Braun was winning the fight, having broken the Polish fighter's nose in the previous round, and cutting him below the left eye, now swollen shut. Though inexperienced and battered himself, he had studied his opponent well, noticing one important flaw in Randolph the Bull's technique: Every time the veteran fighter threw a jab, he lowered his shoulder slightly, leaving his chin exposed to the German's powerful right hand. Albrecht exploited that mistake mercilessly, and though Randolph the Bull was still standing, his endurance was under threat. The question was, could he turn things around with only two rounds left?

Interestingly, every time they answered the bell, the young German fighter always extended his arm to touch gloves in a virtual handshake, nodding out of respect, even though he knew he was winning. Randolph the Bull would swat it away rather than extend his in return.

"Shows you kindness and respect does not mean weakness," Hanz Wolff, a German farmer in the crowd, said to his friend, motioning at the gesture.

Ollie van Heinz saw it differently. The epitome of a white-haired Ichabod Crane, tall and skinny like a Q-Tip, with a large, crooked nose and mischievous smile, he had known Hanz since childhood. "I don't blame the Bull for snubbing him," he said, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing as he spoke. "Why shake the hand of the man who's trying to slaughter you?" He stuck the comic book he was flipping through back into his rear pocket. Ollie always had one on hand.

"It's *gute* (good) sportsmanship, that's why."

"*Nein* (No). That's like shaking the hand of your enemy at war before he spills your blood."

Hanz took a large swig of his beer, swallowing down sudden unwelcome memories. "Not the same thing. This is sport. War is much different."

Ollie took his eyes off the fight and glanced over at his friend. Though they had both been in the Great War, which would later become known as World War I, only Hanz saw fierce combat, nearly losing his life in it. Ollie could almost see the terror-filled images of what Hanz had experienced as a soldier, now ricocheting in his head because of that comment.

"War is blood in the air, blood in the sea, blood in the field, and blood in the rich men's pockets," Hanz said, lighting a cigarette. "There is no comparison."

Both men thought of the ramifications the Great War had on them personally and for their country. The global conflict that raged from July 28, 1914, to November 11, 1918, pitting the Central Powers—mainly Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire—against the Allies, or Entente—mainly France, Great Britain, Russia, Italy, Japan, and, from 1917, the United States—had ended with the catastrophic defeat of the Central Powers. With the Kaiser’s abdication, the creation of the new Weimer Republic, and the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles, signed on June 28, 1919, came severe hardship throughout Germany. Thousands of factories closed, unemployment and hyperinflation soared, many people lost all their possessions, and some even starved. Confusion, chaos, and anger escalated, resulting in violent uprisings. And that’s why the boxing match in town that night had been so welcomed. Most of the men, living close to poverty, were able to forget their troubles for one night of excitement.

As they were talking, the German boxer pulled his left arm back to release another blow, but it was only a cunning trick. When Randolph the Bull went to block it, Albrecht Braun instead released a vicious uppercut with his right, landing squarely on the Polish fighter’s chin. His head snapped back; he staggered to the side; a single gold tooth flew through the air, landing by Hanz’s foot. The crowd went silent for a moment, holding its collective breath. Even Albrecht waited to see if the Bull would remain standing.

Ding! Ding! Ding! . . . Saved by the bell!

Each boxer retreated again to his corner, and Randolph’s trainer brought out the smelling salts.

“Why don’t you shake his hand now!” a man shouted from the crowd. Laughter followed.

“The Bull has been slaughtered!” yelled another. “Throw in the towel!” More laughter.

“I think he’s right,” said Hanz, looking at the Polish man’s bloodied face. With his nose in the wrong spot, one eye closed and the other a mere slit, his mug was so swollen it looked as if he’d been attacked by killer bees. “Randolph the Bull underestimated the young German. He should quit now while he’s still breathing.”

The entire room was abuzz with commotion. And when the bell rang, the Bull answered it, lifting from his chair to meet his opponent for the final round. Again, the audience held their breath—a combination of fear for Randolph’s life, and respect for his tenacity, stubbornness, and resilience.

“Good God, this is going to be murder,” Ollie said.

“I don’t think I can even watch,” replied Hanz.

But of course, both men couldn’t look away.

As the two boxers faced each other in the center of the ring, Randolph the Bull was the first to extend his arm, touching gloves with the German and nodding. The spectators began to chant Albrecht Braun’s name, and then the slaughter continued, right to the very end of round fifteen. When the final bell rang, Randolph the Bull, still standing, released a wide, toothless smile at the crowd, then slowly fell backward, out cold on the canvas.

The crowd went absolutely wild.

Hanz looked down and stared at Randolph’s tooth by his foot, twinkling at him, reflecting a light from some unknown source. Picking it up, he wiped it off and stuck it in his pocket.



With the fight over, Hanz and Ollie started making their way to a local tavern called *Die Teufelsnadel* (*The Devil’s Needle*). Popular within the small German town, it was often full, being one of only a few the town had to offer.

On one side of the street, a group of rabbis walked toward the Jewish quarter, while on the street corner outside the pub, a homeless older man and beggar, with long, gray beard and ragged clothes, stood shouting out scriptures at passersby. Holding a worn Bible in one hand and a shepherd’s staff in the other, he resembled the image of Moses. Most people just ignored him, dismissing his proclamations. But occasionally a curious few would stop and listen, leaving a few coins in his hat sitting nearby.

As Hanz and Ollie drew close, he yelled out to them 1 Corinthians 15:41: “*There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory.*” He pointed at the luminaries in the night sky, and added, “Look how beautiful they are! Behold, the glory of God!”

Ollie laughed. “There’s the nutcase, ranting about God again.”

“You laugh at the glory of the Creator! How dare you!” yelled the older man, anger in his voice. “I will tell you what the Almighty said to Job . . . *Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding, who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together*

and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” After quoting Job 38:4-7 from memory, the homeless man scrunched up his face and began to giggle in a demented way, dancing and waving his arms in the air, shouting out, “He made the earth, the sky, and the sea! He did, he did, he did!” Then he howled at the moon.

“The man may be mentally unwell, but he sure knows his Bible,” Hanz said. “That was quite a profound scripture. God, declaring his awe-inspiring handiwork.”

Ollie shrugged. “Don’t know much about the Word of God. But the wife reads from it on Sundays and makes me and the kids listen. Last week she said overindulging in alcohol is a sin, and that drunkards won’t inherit God’s Kingdom. But if that’s true, how can heaven be a paradise?”

Hanz only chuckled.

Nila Vogel, a little person who bartended at The Devil’s Needle, tried to shoo the homeless man away. “Oh, hush, you crazy fool,” she said, stepping out of the tavern to pour a bucket of hot water on the sidewalk, steam rising from the ground. Earlier, two drunken Germans had gotten into a brawl, one vomiting and the other bleeding on the doorstep to the pub. “Go rant somewhere else.”

But that only encouraged the man further, moving him to recite Joel 2:30-31 about Judgment Day: “*And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.*”

Nila just shook her head and went back inside.

Hanz and Ollie entered the pub, waving at the regulars as they headed to their usual spot at the bar.

“After that intense fight, I think I need a splash of vodka in my lemonade,” Ollie said, grinning.

Hanz laughed. “You mean a splash of lemonade in your quart of vodka.” He took off his hat and got comfortable at the bar. “I’ve never known a man who could drink like you. A skinny noodle with a hollow leg.”

Ollie often included vodka in his speech, using his favorite drink as a panacea for life’s travails. He’d get a real serious expression on, squint his eyes, and say something like, “You need some vodka in your blood, *mein Freund* (my friend). After a shot, or two, or three, everything will be all right.” Or if someone was upset, he’d say, “No worries! No worries! Calm down, *mein Freund*! Just pour some vodka in your lemonade, and that’ll fix it!”

The men at the bar would all laugh. It was something Ollie had coined, his own interpretation of the more common phrase, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” No matter how bad the situation, it always seemed to brighten the mood.

“You two lose any money on the fight tonight?” Nila asked, pushing strands of blonde hair out of her large, friendly brown eyes as she walked over to them. Though a grown woman, she stood only four feet three inches tall, barely visible from behind the bar.

“I didn’t have any money to bet,” said Ollie. “And Hanz never bets. He picked up an interesting souvenir, though.”

Nila stepped onto a bench behind the bar, gaining an extra foot. “Oh yeah? What’s that?”

Ollie nudged him. “Show her.”

Hanz pulled Randolph the Bull’s gold tooth from his pocket and placed it on the counter.

“Nice,” said Nila. “From the winner or loser?”

“Loser.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

Hanz shrugged. He had a habit of collecting eccentric things, some odd, some not. Like an old Roman coin he had found in his wheat field one day. Or a black pearl with the most beautiful hue—a mixture of onyx, deep purple, and a touch of some color with no name—that he found in an oyster. The coin might be worth something to a museum, and the pearl definitely worth something to a jeweler, but he had no intention of selling them. And now he had a gold tooth from a well-known professional boxer to add to his unique collection.

“I’ve got something to show you too,” Nila said, a twinkle in her eye. “I came across it when I was visiting my mother in Berlin.” She pulled out a leatherbound tome from under the bar and slid it to him.

Hanz glanced at the title of the book: *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. “Looks like a special edition of the original.”

“It is. Found it in an old bookstore.”

Hanz opened the cover and flipped through the first few pages of Mary Shelley’s 1818 classic novel. He loved books, especially ones that had a knack for creativity and concepts that transcended any era or societal milieu. Often, when unable to find sleep, he would read for hours in the quiet of the night while his wife slept.

"It's yours, Hanz," Nila said, smiling even wider. Like all his friends, she knew of his love for literature.

He looked up at her. "Really?"

"Ja. My gift to you for the portrait you painted of me."

"But you paid me for that." Hanz didn't just love reading. He liked to paint, too, and play his violin. When not plowing in his fields, the farmer indulged his artistic passions in a makeshift art studio in his barn, selling some of his work.

"I know, but barely enough to cover the paint. Besides, I wanted to do something more. You're such a kind, *guter Freund* (good friend), Hanz, and I wanted to show you my appreciation." More than once over the years, he had stepped in when some drunken boor started mouthing off at Nila, making fun of her small stature to the point of bringing her to tears.

Hanz started going through the book again. "I love it, Nila. *Danke* (Thank you)."

"*Gern geschehen* (You're welcome). Now what can I get you boys to drink?"

"I'll have my usual vodka," said Ollie.

"Chartreuse, please," answered Hanz. "I feel like a *guten* French liqueur to go along with this *schönes Geschenk* (beautiful gift)."

"Coming right up."

As Nila left to retrieve the drinks, a sultry young woman named Gisela Lang walked over to the bar and smiled seductively at Hanz. He noticed her lips shining a candy apple red, and that her breath smelled of rum. "Handsome Hanz, how are you doing tonight?" she asked, leaning on the bar, wrapping her arm around his neck.

A grin born of flattery played at the corner of his mouth. "*Gute*. And you?"

"You know me—just looking for a *gute* time."

Ollie was lovestruck, smiling so big it hurt. "You look very lovely tonight, Gisela."

She ignored him. "How come you and I have never dated, Hanz?"

"Because I married Maria."

Gisela smirked. "That's right; you married that Austrian girl. But are you *happily* married?" Like the snake in the Garden of Eden, her tone attempted to inject doubt.

Hanz thought about his beautiful, deaf wife, Maria, with her long, curly, fiery red hair, sapphire blue eyes of wonder, and scarlet cheeks aflame on

freckled skin. Such a good, sweet woman, too. He had met her right after the war when he was traumatized, broken, and lost. Rescued from his own private hell by an angel. A soulful and kind woman who seemed to never let her feet touch the ground. She reminded him of a mermaid, a Siren, and he would follow her to the depths of the sea. Without a doubt, Hanz Wolff loved his wife dearly. “*Ja*, I am happily married,” he said. “Very much so.”

Gisela kept pressing. “Took you a moment to answer.”

He didn’t reply.

“It was always curious to me why you married a deaf girl from Austria when there are so many pretty girls here in Germany.” She pulled the pack of Eckstein No. 5 cigarettes from Hanz’s shirt pocket, removed one and placed it between her lips, expecting him to light it. But it was Ollie who leaned forward, eager to oblige. “You even told me I was pretty, remember?” Gisela exhaled a billow of smoke over her shoulder. “Do you still think I am?”

“I sure do!” said Ollie.

“But does Hanz,” she said, gazing at him with her enormous amber eyes.

“Everyone knows you’re a *bübsche Frau* (*pretty woman*),” he admitted, staring down at his wedding ring—a simple gold band with Norwegian symbols. It had belonged to Maria’s grandfather who had Viking roots.

Gisela looked at the wedding ring too. “You know, I have always wondered about deaf women. When a man makes love to one, she cannot hear his sweet nothings. And what does she do when he . . .” Gisela leaned in and whispered something crass into his ear.

Ollie overheard and turned red.

“Get your hand off my thigh, woman,” was all Hanz said.

“*Mein süßer* (*My sweet*) Hanz, it’s not on your thigh.” She threw her head back and laughed.

“You tart, get away from him before I scratch your eyes out!” Nila demanded, returning with the drinks. She knew the woman was trouble. The whole town did. “He’s a married man, you hussy!”

Gisela ignored Nila, like she did Ollie, then kissed Hanz on the cheek before sauntering off.

Ollie gawked at her like a pubescent teenage boy as she floated back to her table. “Wish she’d proposition *me* like that. And why is she always flirting with you and insulting Maria?”

“Because I’m the only one who says *nein* (*no*) to her.”

Nila shook her head. "What decent woman flirts with a married man? She has no shame, that trollop. If I were tall enough, I'd grab her by the hair and drag her outside, then teach her a thing or two."

Ollie laughed. "Now that would be a fight I'd pay to see!"

Around midnight, Randolph the Bull walked in, surprising everyone. Though he had cleaned up some, his face was still badly cut, bruised, and swollen, and he probably should have been under observation in the hospital. Gossip and murmuring filled the room, people staring, some in admiration for the gladiator, others in disdain for the gambling losses they incurred because of him, turning their backs. But Randolph didn't care. He needed a cold drink and some hot food, so he ignored them all and looked around for a place to sit.

Hanz waved him over; there was an empty seat at the bar next to him and Ollie.

"*Verräter (Traitor)*," a disgruntled older man murmured at him. He had lost his pension check on the fight.

Randolph sat down on the stool and nodded at the German farmer for his goodwill.

"What can I get you, sir?" Nila asked, glancing excitedly at Hanz, having never met a celebrity before. After all, Randolph the Bull was a well-known, respected champion boxer throughout Europe, despite his loss that night.

"I'll have a Mampe Halb & Halb," he answered, his deep voice intimidating, just like his physique.

Hanz looked at him and almost laughed. Though he himself was drinking Chartreuse, he didn't expect the brawny boxer to order a liqueur as well. But then again, the German drink made from bitter oranges and 160 herbs, labeled *Halb & Halb (Half & Half)* because it was half bitter and half sweet, was so good it won the grand prize at the World Fair in 1904.

"And I'm hungry," Randolph said. "Go fetch me something to eat, woman."

"What do I look like, your personal chef?" Nila barked, scowling at him. Randolph's face sobered. "*Nein*, ah . . . I just need a *gute* meal."

"Then learn to ask with some manners."

"*Entschuldigung (Sorry)*."

Nila softened somewhat. "The kitchen is closed now, but there's some tasty roast beef in the back, just cooked today. I could make you a sandwich with a bowl of hot pea soup."

Randolph the Bull nodded. "Please add some sauerkraut with that. *Danke (Thank you)*," he said, winking at her.

Nila smiled, poured his Mampe Halb & Halb and left the bottle, then went to the kitchen to make his dinner.

"Damn," Randolph said when she was no longer within earshot, eyeing her as she walked away. "That one's a firecracker."

Hanz chuckled. "More like dynamite, *mein Freund*. Don't let her tiny size fool you."

"No, sir!" added Ollie. "Our little Nila is thunder and lightning in a bottle."

All three men laughed.

Hanz watched as the Bull downed a shot, then another, and another. "That was quite a fight tonight," he said. "Fifteen brutal rounds."

Ollie nodded enthusiastically. "It was, it was. A fight to remember."

Randolph glanced at them and grunted.

"But the young German seemed ready for you."

"I'll get him next time," Randolph mumbled.

"Don't worry," said Ollie. "Just add enough vodka to that lemonade, and soon you won't even remember you lost."

This time the Bull didn't laugh. Glancing at Hanz again, he said, "You look a bit like the man I just fought. Is Albrecht Braun your *Bruder (brother)*?"

"*Nein*, my younger *Bruder* is only sixteen years old," said Hanz, noticing the Star of David around Randolph's neck. "And my older *Bruder*, he . . . he passed away some years ago."

"Sorry to hear. Was it the war?"

Hanz simply shook his head and tossed back his drink.

Randolph could tell there was a sad story there. He examined Hanz more closely, taking note of his height and solid frame. "Have you ever boxed?"

"*Nein*, I'm just a farmer."

"And a mortician," said Ollie with a chuckle.

Randolph looked surprised. "No kidding. I'm sharing a drink with an undertaker? Holy Mother of God, I almost required your services tonight."

Hanz's father had served as the local mortician before one became available in town. He had trained his son to be the same, and even now many would bring their deceased loved ones to Hanz to prepare them for the wake that would take place at the surviving family's home. He didn't enjoy the work, but he performed the duty, nonetheless. "I only do that when called

upon,” he said. “I won’t deny a grieving family member.”

Ollie brought the conversation back to boxing. “I’ve thought about becoming a boxer myself,” he said, nonchalantly taking a drink, trying to impress the Bull. “In the lightweight division, of course.”

Randolph looked at Ollie and laughed, displaying his missing tooth. “Yeah, the *really* lightweight division.”

Ollie laughed too. Feeling confident from the alcohol, he asked, “What makes a man want to go into a ring and try to kill another man with his bare hands?”

“Or be killed,” added Hanz.

Randolph contemplated the question. No one had ever asked him that before. Downing a fourth shot of Mampe Halb & Halb, he stared at the empty shot glass and answered, “It’s an addiction like this alcohol. Once it’s in your blood, it excites, liberates, and poisons you all at once. You love it and hate it at the same time.”

The men sat in silence for a moment, musing over their own love-hate addictions.

Three Italian girls walked past, and Ollie, now rather inebriated, whistled and shouted out to them in broken Italian, “*Posso sposare il tuo prezioso cane per stasera?*” His wife was from Sicily, and she had taught him a few words. He thought he had asked, “Would one of you beautiful women marry me for tonight?”, but what he really said was, “I can marry your precious dog for tonight?”

The women looked confused, frowning and shaking their heads at the creep. Randolph, fluent in Italian, laughed like hell. He laughed so hard the sound bellowed through the entire pub, and when he translated for Hanz what Ollie had said, all three of them practically rolled on the floor.

This went on all night, drinking, joking, and laughing like they’d known each other all their lives.

At one point, and Hanz didn’t know why, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the boxer’s gold tooth. “Here,” he said. “I believe this belongs to you.”

Randolph the Bull stared at it as if trying to decide whether or not to take back an unfaithful lover. He remembered the day the dentist had added the gold veneer, and how it made him smile more because he liked how it shined. “What *gute* is that to me now?”

“Maybe it’ll bring you better luck next time.”

"I lost the fight, and the tooth. You keep it if you think it's lucky."

Hanz stuck the gold tooth back in his pocket. "You're a champion boxer, *mein Freund*. If that doesn't make this tooth lucky, I don't know what would."

And with that, a friendship began between a German farmer named Hanz Wolff, his skinny sidekick named Ollie van Heinz, and a professional boxer—a Polish Jew—named Randolph the Bull.



The Devil's Needle finally closed, but Hanz and Ollie didn't want to go home, and Randolph the Bull didn't want to go back to his hotel. Hanz for reasons he didn't want to talk about, Ollie because he was glad to have a night off from the responsibilities of his wife and four small children, and Randolph because he had nothing else to do before leaving the small town.

Before the three men left the tavern, however, Randolph said to Nila, "*Danke für die verwässerten Getränke (Thanks for the watered-down drinks).*"

That offended Nila greatly, and she would have slapped him had it not been for his already bruised up face. An argument ensued—she called him a rude beast; he called her a nag. Seconds later, as they stared each other down, they both broke out in laughter.

"How did you know I'm a beast?" he asked.

She coyly smiled. "Isn't it obvious?"

"I'll tell you what's obvious," Ollie said in a low voice to Hanz. "Those two like each other."

Though Randolph the Bull was a professional boxer who had traveled throughout Europe and made a decent income, deep down he was a simple man of few pleasures. Give him a roof over his head, a change of clothes, his Mampe Halb & Halb and a pot of hot stew, and he was a happy man. What was missing, however, was a woman after his own heart, and now that he could see the end of his fighting career on the horizon, he found himself searching for one. Something about Nila grabbed him, and though she tried to hide it, something about the Bull hooked her too.

"Instead of nagging me, maybe you can show me around your *schöne Stadt (beautiful town)* tomorrow," Randolph said, smiling with a gaping hole between his teeth, no longer shining with gold.

Nila blushed. "All right. You need some culture in that brute head of yours, anyway."

“*Ja, ja, ja, los geht’s (Yeab, yeab, yeab, let’s go)*,” Hanz said to the Bull, interrupting the new lovebirds. He knew that his neighbor, Günther Nachtnebel, had a makeshift pub in his barn with a homemade distillery, and that’s where he wanted to go next. It smelled like a barn but looked like a laboratory, its labyrinthine maze of copper and iron machinery producing the sweet secret nectar.

Several farmers were already there when they arrived, congregating like horses at a watering hole, and they eagerly joined them. Before long, all the men were staggering outside, gazing up at the German night sky sparkling with an infinite tapestry of lustrous stars—a poor man’s diamonds—singing while Günther serenaded them on his hümmelchen. With warm bellies and lifted spirits, their troubles were far away.

One of the farmers made an enormous bonfire, and the inebriated men gathered around and started talking about boxing, each giving Randolph the Bull his two cents on fighting.

“You need to keep your head up, son,” one farmer slurred. “That’s the key.”

“Are you crazy?” said another, swaying side to side. “That’s how you get knocked out. He needs to keep his chin down.”

A third offered his own boxing expertise. “Keep your fists high, then strike your opponent. Like this,” he said, trying to demonstrate his technique, stumbling as he punched at the air. Everyone laughed when the man tumbled to the ground from his own punch.

Close to sunrise, the party was over. Randolph was passed out in the horse and buggy, still holding a bottle of moonshine and murmuring something about a rematch, and Ollie offered to drive Hanz all the way home. But Hanz refused, wanting to walk the rest of the way. Ollie saw the sadness returning in his friend’s eyes and patted him on the back before leaving, trying to comfort him. “My prayers are for the little one you just lost, *mein Freund*,” he said. “May God bless you and Maria with children someday.”

“*Danke*, Ollie. Make sure the Bull gets back to his hotel safely. *Gute Nacht (Good night)*.”

“I will. *Gute Nacht*, Hanz.”

As he made his way down the long dirt road to his home—a house now steeped in mourning—moonshine coursing through his veins, the reverberations of the bell from the boxing match and his neighbor’s bagpipes still tingling his skin, a sense of melancholy settled over Hanz, thinking about

the infant he had recently buried. Small, pink, and scrunched up like a bud before bloom, the tiny boy had not survived this world. Oh, how his heart ached for the life his son could have lived, and for the love the child had both lost and taken with him into the cold earth.

The moon was out, full and white, like a polished pearl poking out from a deep black sea. A fog drifted in, floating halfway up the trees. And a chill settled in the air. Hanz tried to push the sad thoughts out of his mind, and that's when he saw her . . .

A ghost.

A young girl, not any older than sixteen, draped in a cloak.

He stopped, his hips seemingly locking in place, and stared at her in disbelief. Her small, pale face seemed to glow in the darkness, radiating an ethereal light against a backdrop of towering trees. Was she there as another somber reminder of his life's inherent sadness—a despondency that no amount of alcohol could quell?

Standing there on the deserted road, Hanz rubbed his eyes to better focus on this mysterious forest apparition. Perhaps she was the ghost of someone he had previously prepared for burial. Or maybe just a stranger reaching out from the other side. Regardless, he knew we all encounter a spectral presence at some point in our life, whether we recognize it or not. A prickly breeze on the nape of our neck, a soundless whisper that echoes in the heart, a fleeting shadow grasping at something just out of reach, or a long-lost lover forever etched in memory. Everyone was haunted in one form or another, either by the past or fear of the future, and no one was exempt from life's cruel, unbidden intrusions that curse us at will.

And yet, to Hanz's surprise, he felt no fear. Why am I not afraid, he questioned as their eyes locked in a prolonged, intense stare—hers glistening with an infinite, glossy dark hue, his a curious sky blue? When she didn't vanish, it occurred to him that he might be hallucinating. It wouldn't have been surprising. After all, his wife Maria had just suffered a terrible stillbirth, and due to complications they were told she'd never bear children again. She had since confined herself to bed, and their home had become a barren landscape, devoid of her once vibrant laughter. The stress of it all, the emotional exhaustion, and the overindulgence in alcohol that night could easily be playing tricks on his eyes.

Suddenly she cried out, "Help me, please! Help me!"

Startled, Hanz hurried over to her, and she collapsed into his arms . . .



The strong, musty smell of hay, manure, and farm animals saturated his nose when Hanz woke up late that morning. What am I doing in the barn, he wondered, lying on a bed of straw as the room slightly spun? It felt as if someone had driven an axe into his head, and his mouth had become the Sahara Desert. I guess I passed out here last night.

Hanz got up slowly, his stomach threatening to purge. The strange dream he had started filtering through the haziness in his mind, materializing into coherent thoughts. And then it hit him . . .

The girl! That was no dream; she was real!

Climbing up into the loft where he had let her spend the night, he looked around but she was nowhere to be found. Hmm . . . was she a ghost after all? No, she was definitely real. He remembered staying with her until she had calmed, asking her what happened and why she was in such distress, her face bruised and lip cut. But all she would say was, “My family is going to disown me,” over and over and, “My life is ruined now,” wringing her hands and sobbing. It almost seemed as if she wanted to say more yet was afraid. Shame, regret, fear—they are powerful deterrents.

People handle sorrow differently, and for Hanz it was the drink that softened the sharp spear of grief. Still, he was disappointed in himself—again—for drinking so much the night before. “A man takes a drink, the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes the man,” his mother used to say, her words ricocheting in his mind.

Leaving the barn, Hanz went to the hand pump in the yard to splash water on his face, then headed to the farmhouse. As he opened the door, one of the cats brushed up against his leg, and he knelt to pet it. The house was quiet, and even though it was nearly noon, he knew his wife would still be in bed. A part of him wanted to undress and go lie next to her; another part wanted him to run and never look back.

When he entered their bedroom, Maria was lying on her side, the curve of her hip exposed from the brown linen sheet like a seashell poking up from the sand. Hanz reached down and gently caressed her skin with the back of his hand; she turned to look up at him. She didn’t have to say anything; her sad eyes reflected it all.

The husband and wife in their mid-twenties had previously epitomized a happy German couple. That is until the tragedy suddenly struck, bringing a profound emptiness into their lives. An ache that infiltrated deep to their

very core. They had yearned to start a family, to have children of their own, but the universe was determined to deny them that simple joy.

"Are you absolutely certain of this?" Hanz had asked Dr. Schultz that calamitous day. "She's now infertile?"

The doctor somberly nodded. "I'm sorry, *mein Freund*."

Hanz observed his sleeping wife recovering in the hospital bed. Maria's womb had cradled their dream for nine months, and now it was all over. "I promised her a happy life with children," he said. "How can I tell her this now?"

Dr. Schultz patted him on the back and left the room.

When Maria later found out, she wailed and wailed. Never before had Hanz heard someone cry that way. For a woman who was deaf, the excruciating sounds that expelled deep from within her soul were spine-chilling.

Hanz chased that traumatic memory from his mind and slowly undressed.

"Sometimes I wish I had died during the delivery," Maria whispered, her voice small and sad. "At least I'd be with my child in heaven now." She began to cry.

Hanz lifted her chin to meet his gaze. "But you're alive, *meine Liebe* (*my love*). You're alive, and I need you here with me among the living."

Maria just kept weeping.

Hanz simply held her.



The following day, Hanz was working with the Jewish family who helped him maintain the vineyard. They had been working this farm for many years, and to him they were like his own family. One of them called out to him that a visitor was approaching, and when Hanz looked up, he saw the looming figure of his uncle Jürgen. A banker in Berlin, Jürgen Wolff had been wanting his nephew to sell the property and move with Maria to the city. They shook hands and walked along the field together.

"You really should have hired a *gute* German family to help you with the vineyard," Jürgen said, eyeing the Jewish workers with concern.

"Why?" asked Hanz.

"For appearances' sake."

Hanz rebuffed him. "'*From one man He made all the nations.*' Isn't that what we learned in church?" It was a scripture his wife often quoted whenever

she saw bigotry or oppression of any kind.

Jürgen scanned the property. “It’s a beautiful place here, Hanz; no one’s going to deny that. But knowing Maria can never have children now, you should sell this farm and start over in the city. It’ll be a new and easier life for you both. More comforts, no more hard labor in the fields, and I can get you a decent job with the bank.”

Hanz contemplated his uncle’s offer as he too scanned his property. “Maybe I’ll consider it sometime in the future.”

“The hell with future! You’re not listening to me!”

“Why do you care, anyway?”

“Because I feel a responsibility for you, damn it! You’re my *Bruder’s* son, and his three children need my direction now.”

“I appreciate your concern, Uncle Jürgen, but I’m a grown man now too, and I make my own decisions. This is my father’s legacy, and my grandfather’s before that. I promised I would carry it on. Besides, Maria and I are happy here.”

“Happy?” Jürgen scoffed, cleaning his spectacles with his shirt. “She’s now barren and depressed, and from what I hear, you’re becoming a drunkard. With no children in your future, it’s going to get lonely as hell out here, and you’ll both spiral further until you eventually lose this place anyway.”

“That’s not true,” Hanz said, frowning at his uncle’s assertion. “Maria and I can still have a family.”

“Oh yeah? How?”

“We can adopt.”

Jürgen shrugged. “Perhaps. There are plenty of orphans who need homes. But it’s too bad you couldn’t have one of your own.” They stopped at a small pond on the property where the water shimmered as if liquid mercury, the sun’s reflection adding molten gold. Jürgen shook his head and said, “Bad luck follows this family.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hanz.

“First your older *Bruder* commits suicide after shaming the family. Then your father is killed by his damn horse. And now this.”

The subject of Hanz’s brother Andrew had always been an open wound with him. He was only a young boy when Andrew took his own life, and he missed his brother terribly. The kind, soft-spoken older sibling had many secrets and demons but was always good to Hanz. After his death, not one family member ever spoke of him. As if he didn’t exist. “Andrew suffered,”

was all Hanz said.

“*Ja*, and we all know why. Shame. Pure shame.”

“Why was there no funeral?” Hanz asked. “I was young, and I don’t remember. And why didn’t my father prepare his body for burial?”

Jürgen didn’t answer him. He only took out crumbs from his pocket and walked over to the edge of the pond to feed the visiting swans.

Just then, the wind carried with it *The Song of the Sea*, the archaic Hebrew poem from the Book of Exodus, where the Israelites exalted their God for saving them from Pharaoh’s army after crossing the Red Sea. The Jewish family was singing it as they worked, and it pulled Hanz in. As he listened to the powerful song, the invisible force created a division between him and his uncle, like the pillar of fire God had erected to guide and protect His people as they left Egypt and wandered through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. The sound grew stronger, his heartbeat quickened, and no sooner did his uncle wave him over to continue the debate over selling his property than Hanz abruptly turned and walked away, leaving Jürgen standing there, returning to help his Jewish workers.



Another week had passed, and Maria was up by dawn one morning, making breakfast in the kitchen.

“*Guten Morgen, meine Liebe* (Good morning, my love),” Hanz said, surprised to see her up and about so early as he entered the house. He had just finished talking to a grieving father in the yard. The man had brought his deceased nine-year-old son to the Wolff farm for burial preparation.

“What happened to that little boy?” Maria asked, having watched the men through the kitchen window.

“He drowned in the Tauber River. Poor lad went fishing by himself and fell in. His father said he couldn’t swim.”

“I want to help prepare his body.”

Hanz hesitated. “Are you sure, *meine Liebe*? It might be better if you don’t.”

“*Nein*, let me help you,” she said, placing a plate of eggs and sausage on the table and pouring a cup of coffee for him. “I want to.”

After breakfast, the couple went to the special one-room building next to the barn where Hanz always prepared the dead bodies. A large metal table

sat in the middle with the little boy on top, covered by a white sheet, his head forming a round bump under the material and his toes poking up at the end. He looked so small under there. So helpless. Lifeless.

Hanz and Maria both washed up at the sink using the pine tar soap made from the resin of the pine trees on their property. Used for centuries, its antibacterial and antifungal properties were well-suited for the task. Next, Hanz began the process he had been taught by his father, while Maria assisted, taking direction from her husband.

When Hanz first removed the sheet, they both stared at the little boy for a long moment. Was this what their own son would have looked like, had he lived and grown to this age, they each wondered?

Maria recalled the miraculous resurrection recorded in the Holy Scriptures at 2 Kings 4:34-35, where the prophet Elisha had restored the life of the son of a Shunammite woman. The boy had suddenly died, and after Elisha beseeched Almighty God in prayer, he got up on the bed and lay down on the child, putting his own mouth on the boy's mouth, his own eyes on his eyes, and his own palms on his palms. Soon the child's body started to grow warm, and the boy sneezed seven times, after which he opened his eyes. If only she could do the same, Maria wished. What joy she could bring to that grieving mother and father, wiping out their unbearable pain. Pain which she was all too familiar with.

Hanz was slow and deliberate as he gently washed the body, as if he were painting a portrait, dignity and respect in each stroke. He took this task extremely seriously, honoring the dead. Maria followed her husband's lead.

After the entire process was done, the boy's body washed and prepped, dressed and ready to be picked up, Hanz looked at his wife. She placed the back of her hand on the boy's cheek, tears falling down her own. When he came around the table to hold her, she buried her face into his collar, smothering her tears and wrapping her arms around him.

Strangely, in that moment, Hanz thought of the young girl he had met in the forest several days earlier. The one he had thought was a ghost. She too had fallen into his arms and wept, and he held her just as he was holding his wife now. Curious over who she was, why she was there, and where she went, he wondered if he'd ever see her again . . .

CHAPTER 2



Nine Months Later

Hanz Wolff was a good man.

Quiet, thoughtful, mild-mannered and slow to anger, his towering figure could easily be spotted miles away as he ambled along his property inspecting his crops, his stride slow and his gait conspicuous. The Great War had left him with a bad knee, but he was grateful to have survived.

Everyone in the village trusted and admired Hanz, forthright and principled as he was, never having told a falsehood in his life. That is until the day he received the precious gifts that resurrected Maria's spirit, restored joy to the farm, and fortified him with an unbreakable resolve to protect their newfound happiness—with his life, if necessary.

Yes, “Honest Hanz,” the friendly farmer and mortician with a gentle hand, was prepared to take that lie to his grave . . .



In the hinterlands of 1920s Germany, where the musty tang of soil and the sweet redolence of pastures lingered in the air, the modest Wolff farm lay nestled in the countryside west of the picturesque town of Rothenburg ob der Tauber. The area was a Shangri-La of God’s creation, surrounded by thousand-year-old linden trees growing in the forest, holding secrets of the land, their thick trunks covered in electric green moss at the base and their roots sunk deep into the ground, drinking from silver-blue streams bleeding through it.

Hanz and his deaf wife Maria had created a humble sanctuary in this empyrean setting, far removed from the looming chaos of city life. Shielded by straw hats from the relentless summer sun, they toiled diligently in the fields, their callused hands nurturing the meager crops and livestock that sustained their simple lives.

Rothenburg ob der Tauber, in the heart of Northern Bavaria, was several miles from the Wolff farm. Like a gem in a crown of rolling hills, seemingly conjured from the pages of a fairy tale, its monicker meant “red fortress above the Tauber”—an eighty-two-mile tributary that snaked its way through the land. The town was founded in 1274 and stood as a testament to medieval charm, with its winding cobblestone streets, enchanting alleyways, and whimsical half-timbered houses. These quaint abodes, with their playful facades, resembled gingerbread creations adorned with windows of plated sugar and shutters of white frosting, captivating every onlooker’s imagination.

The town was also a fortified citadel, complete with preserved gatehouses and towers offering panoramic views of the surrounding countryside. Its defensive stone walls, lined with patrol paths, watchtowers, and front battlements bearing silent cannons, spoke of a time when Rothenburg stood as a sentinel against the tides of war.

In the bustling *Marktplatz* (*marketplace*), the air was alive with the scent of sweet pastries and aromatic coffee from nearby cafés, mingling with the earthy fragrance of the morning’s harvest. Vendors arranged their stalls with a cheerful diligence, laying out wares that ranged from handcrafted goods

to the freshest of local produce. The iconic *Rathaus (Town Hall)*, a magnificent Renaissance building, cast an observant eye over the square. Its 200-foot clock tower, standing proudly against the sky, chimed the hour, its sound echoing off the ancient walls and down the winding, narrow lanes.

St. Jakobskirche (St. Jacob's Church), with its intricate, late Gothic, Holy Blood altarpiece by the renowned woodcarver Tilman Riemenschneider, sat prominently close to the town center. It was within these hallowed walls that many lovers had exchanged their vows, under the watchful gaze of history and the Divine.

Throughout the day, the town pulsed with a life uniquely its own. Elderly locals, their faces etched with the wisdom of years, sat on wooden benches, exchanging news and playing chess. Their laughter and chatter added to the symphony of daily life, as children ran past them, their games and shouts permeating the neighborhood with youthful energy.

Down by the Tauber River, the reflection of the town shimmered on the water's surface. Fishermen prepared their boats, casting nets with the hope of a bountiful catch, the smell of fish and packing salt in the air; while women scrubbed clothes at the water's edge, their gossip and singing accompanied by birds chirping with flair.

Nightfall always brought a hush over Rothenburg ob der Tauber. The lamps flickered to life, diffusing a warm, golden light over the cobblestones. The town, cradled within its ancient walls, would then whisper tales of yesteryear to those who walked its paths—a living chronicle of resilience, beauty, and a spirit steeped in the annals of time.

Hanz tied his horse and buggy to a tree and walked to the heart of the town. He was there for a special reason that day—to buy his wife a replacement ring for the trinket band he had bought her when they got engaged. Married right after the Great War and unable to afford a wedding ring worthy of his bride, he wanted to rectify that flaw. Though he had sold a cow and two sheep to raise the money, he still didn't have enough, so he planned on selling one of his paintings to garner the rest. It was not the first time the German farmer had sold his impressive artwork to raise some cash. He even made violins and sold them too.

"*Mein Freund!*" Mr. Giovanni Mandolini greeted as Hanz opened the door to his art gallery, door chimes ringing. "Come in, come in!" It was still early, and the Italian owner was opening the curtains, letting the morning light flood the shop. "The other two pieces you brought me last month sold

the same day.”

Hanz nodded, happy to hear they had sold. He pulled his new piece out of the protective leather cover—a painting of an orchard in the Bavarian Alps.

Mr. Mandolini lifted the canvas to the light to better inspect it. “Magnifico!” he said.

Hanz grinned.

“How do you make these look like photographs?”

“A lot of practice,” said Hanz. “And patience.”

The Italian art dealer hung it on the wall, went behind the counter, and pulled out the money. “You should go to France with your paintings,” he said, handing the cash to Hanz. “Here in this tiny town, you will always be a farmer; but display your work there, and you’ll become famous. Sell your land and take your wife to Paris; it will change your life.”

Hanz thanked the man, accepted the money, and went on his way.



Stanley Horowitz was inspecting a two-carat diamond with his monocular loupe when Hanz entered the jeweler’s store. The gemstone, emitting a mesmerizing sparkle, belonged to a Jewish woman standing with her back to Hanz, her posture tense as she anxiously awaited a fair price from the jeweler.

“I’ll be with you in a minute, *mein Freund*,” said Stanley, not looking up from the precious stone.

A Stollwerck chocolate vending machine stood conspicuously among the glass showcases full of glittering jewelry. Hanz had never seen one before and went up to examine the intriguing novelty.

“Go ahead and try it,” Stanley encouraged, proud of his new contraption. “Put a coin from the dish in the top, and pull out your chocolate from the bottom. Compliments of the house.”

“*Danke*,” said Hanz. He smiled as the incongruous machine amid timeless treasures automatically dispensed its gift, putting the small chocolate bar in his pocket to give to Maria later.

Turning his attention to why he was there, Hanz stared through the glass of the display cabinet housing countless different rings, necklaces, earrings, and bracelets. An assortment of colors and styles winked back at him, twinkling like stars in the midnight sky. His eyes zeroed in on the sapphire ring

he had picked out for Maria weeks earlier, relieved to see it was still there. But as he counted his money, to his chagrin he was short.

“How much will you give me for these too?” the Jewish woman asked Stanley, removing her diamond earrings and handing them to him. Her voice sounded familiar to Hanz. “They belonged to my great-grandmother, but I need the money now.”

Stanley examined the earrings, just as he did the two-carat diamond. Buyer and seller agreed on a price, and the jeweler went to the back room to retrieve money from his safe.

As she waited, the woman glanced over at Hanz, her large brown eyes instantly changing from sad to surprised. “Hanz? . . . My goodness, is that you?”

Hanz, too, was caught off guard. “Josie . . .”

Josie Blum was her name. The two had been childhood sweethearts, each the other’s first love. But her family was Jewish and his Catholic, so their parents put an end to the nascent romance before it had a chance to flourish. Josie was forced to marry a man she didn’t love, whom her parents arranged through the Semitic tradition of shidduch, and Hanz went off to war. He found it ironic that on the day he was going to buy his wife a legitimate wedding ring, he’d meet the woman he first thought he was going to marry.

“It’s *gute* to see you,” said Hanz. “How are you?”

Josie removed a tissue from her clutch bag and wiped her nose. “Not so *gute*,” she replied, her eyes returning to their former glum. “My husband ran off on me, and both my parents recently died from illness. I’ve had to sell what few valuables I have, and now I’m moving to Poland to live with my sister.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that, Josie.”

She steeled herself, bristling at his words, as if he were pitying her rather than showing empathy. “I saw your artwork for sale in Giovanni Mando-
lini’s store,” she said, shifting the focus away from her troubles. “It’s outstanding. You’ve become quite the painter.”

Hanz smiled. “*Danke*.”

“I still have the portrait you did of me when we were . . .” She stopped herself, unable to finish her sentence. The pain of their breakup was still raw, even after so many years.

“*Ja*, I remember,” said Hanz. He had poured his heart and soul into that

glorious painting years ago, her waist-length hair—black as night—flowing over her pale shoulders like a silken waterfall and her ebony eyes large and innocent.

“I’m taking it with me to Poland.”

Hanz nodded.

“Remember when we used to lie on a bed of hay in the loft of your parents’ barn, holding hands and dreaming of running off to Paris together? You were going to make violins and paint all day, selling your artwork in the market, and I was going to stay at home and raise our babies.” She chuckled, mocking their youthful naïveté.

Hanz wondered why she was bringing this up, especially since they hadn’t seen or heard from each other since before the war.

“You ever regret us not running off like we wanted to?” she asked, her eyes becoming sad again. “I do.”

Though he loved Maria, Hanz too had often thought of the life he could have had with Josie, and how different it would have been living as an artist in Paris rather than a farmer in Germany. But there was no point in speculating about that now, and he chose not to answer.

Josie smiled, as if reading his mind. “How is your wife? Maria, right?”

“Ja. And she’s *gute*.”

“Are you here to buy her something special?”

Hanz hesitated, then nodded.

“May I see what you picked out for her?”

He pointed at the sapphire ring beneath the vitrine glass.

“It’s beautiful, Hanz. She’s going to love it.”

Stanley returned and handed Josie her money. As she counted it, he turned to Hanz and said, “I still have that ring for your wife, *mein Freund*.”

“I appreciate that,” said Hanz, “but I’ll have to come back for it another time. I miscounted my money and I’m short 6,000 Marks.”

Josie placed 6,000 Marks on the counter. Both men looked up with surprise. “It’s my gift to you, Hanz,” she said, winking at him. “Have a happy life, and tell Maria I said *ballo (bello)*.”

“*Nein*, Josie, I can’t . . .”

“Ja, you can,” she interrupted. Walking toward the door, she added over her shoulder, “Maybe someday you’ll return the favor.”



As Hanz guided his horse and buggy home along the winding dirt road, a rare and enchanting vision caught his eye: an albino fawn. Its seraphic beauty was stark against the green backdrop of the countryside, but the delicate creature was in distress, caught between the unforgiving rails of a farmer's fence.

Hanz immediately brought his horse to a halt. His boots crunched softly on the underbrush as he slowly approached the distressed animal, its spotless white coat shimmering like a ghostly specter in the sunlight. "It's all right, little one," he said in a calm voice. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The fawn's large, doe eyes, rimmed with the faintest touch of pink, met his gaze, frozen in fear and pain. With careful hands, Hanz worked to free it. The creature trembled but seemed to sense his compassionate intent, its panicked breaths slowing. Finally, with a gentle tug, the fawn was liberated, though it crumpled to the ground, its slender leg broken and unable to support its weight.

Hanz couldn't leave the baby deer to the mercy of wild predators, so he tenderly scooped it into his arms and brought it to his carriage, wrapping it in a blanket to keep it warm. The animal's eyes closed, comforted by the security of this stranger's care.

As he resumed his trek home, Hanz kept glancing back at the fawn, now resting peacefully. He knew this unexpected encounter had imposed on him a vital responsibility—to nurture this rare and beautiful creation back to health, just as he had done with himself and Maria.

The nine months that had passed since the tragedy seemed like an eternity. Maria was finally doing better, and life had gone somewhat back to normal. The bitter bite of winter, the promising renewal of spring, the warm kiss of summer—each season had progressively softened the scars as if God's hand were in the breeze, wiping everything clean. And even though the couple was still disheartened, the world seemed livable again, with hope resting on the horizon.

Hanz sat by the fireside in his favorite chair that evening, sipping on his vodka. As he gazed at his wife—a smoky blend of love and regret—she sat quietly on the sofa, knitting a sweater for him, manipulating the needles with innate precision while the dwindling daylight filtered through the living room window. A million crickets stridulated outside, and the burning wood in the fireplace crackled.

Hanz not only loved his wife but also admired her immensely. Bacterial

meningitis had robbed her of the priceless gift of hearing when she was a child, but she did not let it define who she was, or how she'd live, or what her future had in store. No, as she grew up in her native Austria, she thrived with a silent strength, learning Austrian Sign Language but rarely using it, choosing instead to become proficient at reading lips, communicating with others as if she were no different from them. Though her speech had changed slightly over the years, she managed to retain most of her enunciation.

Growing up in a world of silence, Maria had found joy in the little things in life: The swaying wheat fields, undulating like a golden sea in the gusty breeze. The soft moonlight shining down on a babbling brook. The bumblebees pollinating the earth. The warmth of the sun on her face and the texture of the earth beneath her bare feet. She had an infectious spirit that touched everyone in her path, and her geniality made people smile. Not to mention her striking appearance—something to behold. With fiery red hair and unblemished fair skin, her beauty rivaled the Austrian Alps themselves.

An inspiration to all who knew her, Maria was not a victim of her circumstance but a master of her destiny. She did not think of all the things she couldn't do, but rather, all the things she could. Because Maria Wolff was not defined by being deaf . . . Being deaf was defined by her.

While remaining focused on her work, Maria sensed her husband watching her. "That's something rare and special to find an albino fawn," she said. "I remember reading somewhere that the American Indians consider a white deer to be sacred and a bringer of *gute* fortune."

"Interesting," replied Hanz.

"Too bad you didn't find it nine months ago," she muttered, crestfallen in tone.

The mood in the room turned doleful, and the couple sat in silence, sequestered by their melancholic thoughts.

"I heard Elise had a daughter," Maria finally said, breaking the reticence. Their neighbors were seeking to start a family too.

"*Ja*, Clovis came and told me."

"What a blessing for her." Maria put down her knitting needles and stared sadly into nothing. "I should have held our baby," she said, lamenting about the past. Unable to bring herself to hold their dead child the day they removed it from her womb, she had regretted it ever since. "Before you buried it, I should have."

Hanz recalled burying their stillborn son, planting a rosebush above the grave. For weeks afterward, Maria had knelt before it, whispering to herself and praying. It was hard to witness his wife in such pain. Getting up from his chair, he went over to the couch and sat next to her. "We have a life here, *meine Liebe* (*my love*)," he said softly, trying to be positive. "A home. You'll recover from this."

Maria, who had a personality to match her scarlet locks, could go from hot to cold in an instant. She pulled away and wiped her teary eyes. "*Nein*, we just share the same cage, that's all. If we don't have children, I don't want to live here anymore. And I don't even want to be married."

"Maria . . . I know you don't mean that."

She frowned and folded her arms over her chest. "I mean it, Hanz."

He looked at her for a moment, then reached into his pocket and gave her the chocolate bar he had saved for her.

"*Danke*," she said, without a commensurate smile.

"I got it from a Stollwerck device called a vending machine. You should see it, Maria. You put a coin in it and out comes a chocolate bar."

She narrowed her eyes at him, thinking he was teasing her.

"It's true. Stanley Horowitz has one in his jewelry store."

Maria opened the wrapper and took a bite of the sweet confection, her mood instantly improving.

"I saw Josie Blum there, too. Poor girl. She was selling her jewelry because her husband left her, and then her parents both died. Now she has to move to Poland and live with her sister."

"Why were you at the jewelry store?"

Hanz smiled, caressing her cheek. Reaching into his other pocket, he pulled out a small velvet box. "I have something for you, *meine Liebe*."

Maria blinked hard as he opened it, staring down at the sapphire stone ring in his hand. The indigo blue caught the dancing flames in the fireplace and sparkled.

"Something worthy of my *süße Braut* (*sweet bride*)."

"Oh, Hanz," Maria said, smiling widely. "*Es ist wunderschön* (*It's beautiful*)."

He placed it on her ring finger. "Let this symbolize a new beginning for us. Please say you'll keep trying for me."

Maria leaned in and kissed him, allowing a sense of hope to infuse her heart. "I will, Hanz. I will try for us both."



Maria retired early, and Hanz took out his cherished violin, an instrument he had made with his own two hands. He played one of Mozart's most famous works: *Violin Concerto No. 5 in A Major*, sometimes referred to by its nickname, "Turkish," due to some Turkish style elements in the final movement that added flavor to the piece. Written in 1775 in Maria's home country of Austria, it was one of Hanz's favorites. He loved Mozart and played the Renaissance great's five violin concertos often, and it saddened him that his wife could not experience the wondrous joy of music. Music from his own hand.

Before turning in for the night, Hanz went to check on the albino fawn convalescing in his barn. There, nestled in the cozy enclave of hay he had meticulously prepared for it, the tiny deer lay quietly slumbering, its pristine white coat shining under the glow of his kerosene lamp.

Hanz inspected its broken leg, carefully set with a homemade splint, mindful not to startle the quiescent creature. He remembered bottle-feeding it goat milk earlier, the fawn's trusting eyes locking onto his as it drank hungrily, and it made him smile. "Be strong, little one," he whispered to the genetic marvel. "Tomorrow will be a better day. For all of us."



The following morning, when Hanz opened the barn door, the familiar scent of hay, manure, and farm animals thrust through his nostrils. His horses, cows, sheep, goats, and chickens were all safely ensconced inside—he had brought them in the night before for protection from the threat of a storm. Their typical ease around each other was disrupted this morning, though, behaving rather oddly, as if they knew something fragile was in their midst. The last time this happened, a litter of kittens had been born in the loft, and now there was an albino fawn sharing their space. That must be it, he figured.

At the far end of the barn, Agatha, his usually gluttonous cow, faced away from her hay, her large brown eyes twinkling. Bucephalus, his beloved stallion named after Alexander the Great's horse, leaned his head over the stall, his velvety muzzle gently sniffing at something on the ground. Hanz's curiosity piqued, and he approached the object . . .

“What the . . . What in God’s name . . . My God!”

Hanz couldn’t believe his eyes. There, in a double wicker basket among the straw, lay two Sleeping Beauties! The twin girls—perhaps only a few days old—slept peacefully under the watchful care of Agatha and Bucephalus who seemed to know that two new lives had entered the Homo sapiens world.

As the early morning light filtered through the wooden slats of the barn wall, illuminating the babies’ innocent faces, Hanz stared in shock at the astonishing sight, his azure blue eyes unblinking. His heart thumped in his chest. Where was their mother? Looking around inside the barn, he saw no one. “*Hallo?*” he called out. “Is there anyone here?” Running outside, he only saw the birds singing in the trees and heard the distant barking of a dog.

Hanz ran back inside the barn to inspect the babies. Wrapped in woolen blankets embroidered with the unmistakable Star of David, their peaceful slumber belied their mysterious arrival. With his heart still racing, he knelt beside the basket, and a tiny hand emerged, accompanied by a soft coo. He touched the baby’s hand, and it opened its eyes, grasping his finger.

Overwhelmed, Hanz ever so gently picked up the infant. It felt like a small bag of warm mashed potatoes. Tender feelings came over him, and he softly spoke to it, just as he had done to the stillborn he held before burying it. The baby wriggled in his arms, and he smiled at the miracle of life.

As he placed the child back in the basket, a weathered note became visible, tucked between the newborns. Hanz read the letter, from a girl named Abigail Katz, her words resonating with despair as she pleaded with the German couple to care for her babies as their own. It detailed the young Jewish mother’s plight: abandoned by her boyfriend, unsupported by her parents, disgraced and forced to give them away. She said she had heard Hanz and his wife had recently lost a child, and believed that her daughters would be loved and cherished by them.

Picking up the wicker basket, Hanz held it tight with both hands and rushed to the farmhouse.



“Hanz, let me sleep a little longer,” Maria mumbled as her husband shook her in bed. When he didn’t leave, she slowly rolled over to face him, pushing her messy red hair away from her face.

"Look!" Hanz lowered the wicker basket onto the mattress. "Something *wunderbar* (*wonderful*) has happened!" he said, smiling the same way he had when they first met in Austria. The same way he had when he asked for her hand in marriage, and when he told her he inherited the farm.

Maria peered into the basket, her eyes growing wide.

"I found them in the barn, and there was a note that said a young mother had died giving birth to them." Hanz lied. "She was a teenager, and her strict parents don't want her illegitimate babies. The father is a teenager too, and he abandoned them."

"What? Slow down; you're talking too fast."

Hanz repeated what he said, slowing down so she could read every word off his lips.

"This is a dream," said Maria, as if trying to wake herself from it.

"*Nein, meine Liebe*, you're not dreaming! God has heard our prayers! We have two beautiful daughters now!"

Maria blinked hard to ensure she was indeed awake. "Where is this note, Hanz? I want to read it."

"I . . . I burned it." Again, he lied. But how could he tell his wife the truth? If Maria knew the mother was alive, she would try to find her. She would perpetually worry that someday the girl would come back for her children.

"Why would you do that?"

"Maria, the babies were left for us. And the note said to burn it if we accept them as our own."

One of the infants began to cry, and Maria picked it up. "There, there," she comforted, cradling it close in her arms. "Don't cry, little one. I'm here." To her utter joy, the baby stopped crying and reached out to touch her, staring up at her in absolute wonder.



Time froze on the farm that day as a surrealness enveloped the German couple, coming to terms with what this meant: These two precious Jewish babies were purposely left for them to raise and call their own. The horrendous stillbirth, the heartache and shattered dreams—all of it didn't seem to matter now. Finally they could live the life they yearned for, planning their future with newfound exultation rather than going through the motions

with mundane rigor.

What a miracle!

But what about their neighbors? And the townsfolk? Abigail Katz had said in her letter that her parents sent her away to Poland when she started showing, and that no one in the village must know of her past pregnancy, or that Ava and Shalom—the babies' birth names—were hers. She wanted them to swear an oath to God that they would keep her secret. Their secret.

"Hanz, what are we going to tell people?" Maria asked, still unsure of this unbelievable providence.

"We'll say we got them from an orphanage," he replied, determined to take this secret to his grave.

Maria rocked the cradle he had built for the child they lost nine months earlier, the twin girls sleeping soundly in the wooden crib. "*Nein*, I want to say I gave birth to them. I want people to believe they are mine."

"But Dr. Schultz knows you can't bear children anymore."

"Doctors can be wrong."

"What are you saying—that we pretend you were pregnant and didn't tell anyone?"

"*Ja*."

Hanz looked intently at his wife, his stern eyes and furrowed brow revealing the maelstrom of thoughts, plans, falsehoods, coverups, and repercussions thrashing about in his head. "I don't know, Maria."

"We'll say we kept it private because of the stillbirth. People will understand. Besides, we live out here alone in the middle of nowhere, and we only need to pretend for a few weeks since no one has seen me in months. I can stay out of sight for that long."

"What about the delivery?"

"It happened suddenly, and there was no time to go to the hospital." Maria gave him a smile of confidence, pulling him into her embrace to reassure him that this would work.

He reluctantly agreed.

"We have two daughters, Hanz," she whispered, tears welling in her eyes. "They're ours forever, right? Gifts from God."

"*Ja, meine Liebe*. Two precious gifts from God," he replied, tenderly kissing his wife.

CHAPTER 3

Hanz had to be sure. Though the letter from Abigail Katz had made her intentions clear, he was determined to talk to her, to look her in the eye and ascertain her veracity and fortitude. The gravity of the situation was too great—a life-changing outcome for her, for them—and before introducing the baby girls to the world as their own, he had to know that Abigail Katz was of sound mind, mentally and emotionally, and not making a rash decision under duress.

Saddling his horse Bucephalus, Hanz made the trip to Rothenburg ob der Tauber. The Jewish quarter was in the northern section of the town. Upon arrival, he tied his stallion to a tree and proceeded on foot, an entire world, both familiar and foreign, unfolding before him. Woodsmoke and roasted meats scented the air, and children played in the cobblestone streets, squabbling in Yiddish. His golden hair and pale skin were stark amid the dark locks and olive complexions, a vivid contrast to the Semitic heritage that surrounded him.

As he navigated the community, he wondered if, in the broad light of day, he would recognize the girl whose life was now intricately woven with his own in such a far-reaching way. A young boy with sidelocks and noticeably thick lashes approached with an air of curiosity. “Who are you looking for?” he asked, his innocent tone void of suspicion.

“Abigail Katz,” replied Hanz.

With a knowledgeable nod, the boy pointed toward the river where she often washed clothes in the afternoon. Hanz thanked him and made his way down the cobblestone path, a strange symphony of emotions growing with each step—apprehension, gratitude, and a tangle of what might be guilt. As he neared the river, he heard the rhythmic sound of wet cloth meeting stone, a domestic percussion that set his heart racing. Finally, he spotted

her. Abigail was knee-deep in the river, her skirt hiked up to avoid the water. Her eyes were focused, her hands working methodically as she scrubbed fabric against rock, a bundle of wet clothes resting in a basket on the riverbank.

“*Hallo*, Abigail,” he greeted as he came near.

She looked up, and for a suspended moment the world fell silent around them. Her dark brown eyes glistened in the sun, searching through his, wondering why he was there. “Are they all right? Has something happened?” she asked in a rush of words.

“*Ja, ja, sie sind in Ordnung* (Yes, yes, they’re fine),” Hanz said, removing his hat, holding it with both hands. “I just came to see how you’re managing.”

Abigail stepped out from the water, placing the wet garment in the basket. “You frightened me. I thought something was wrong.” Her voice slightly cracked as she spoke, fighting back strong emotions.

“*Nein, alles ist gut. Sehr gut.* (No, everything is good. Very good).” Hanz softly smiled, thinking of the little girls, even as he examined their mother closely, discerning again how she was just a child herself. “But one is much smaller than the other.”

Abigail hesitated, fearful he wanted to return the twins. Or at least Shalom. “Does that mean you don’t want her?”

“*Nein*, not at all. We want them both.”

Her intense gaze lingered on him, asking a dozen silent questions, yet relieved he wasn’t there to bring back the babies. If the Jewish quarter ever discovered she had given birth out of wedlock, they would ostracize her. “How is your wife taking to them?”

“*Wunderbar* (Wonderfully). Maria loves them like her own. They’ve brought an indescribable joy to our home.” He looked out at the calm Tauber River, winding its way through town, a silent witness to eons of human trials and triumphs, strengths and frailties. “But you should know what I told her. I did not show her your letter.”

Abigail appeared confused.

“Instead, I told her a teenage mother had died giving birth to these twins, and neither her parents nor the teenage father wanted them. I know my wife, and if she thought you were alive, she’d try to find you. She’d forever worry that you’d change your mind in the future and want your daughters back.”

That stung Abigail, the finality of it, as if she truly were dead to her girls.

Howbeit, she knew it was for the best.

“As for everyone else, no one knows your secret. *Our* secret. And they never will.” Hanz glanced around and lowered his voice. “We’ll say that Maria gave birth to them, and that we kept her pregnancy private because of her recent stillbirth. People will understand.” He wiped his brow and ran his hand through his hair, once more grappling with the turmoil proliferating in his mind over the falsehoods and coverups he and Maria were embarking on. “And this is why I came to see you today. I wanted to talk to you before going down this path.”

“About what?”

“About whether or not you know what you’re doing. I need to hear it from your own mouth that you understand the seriousness of this. There’s no going back.”

As the sun held the sky in a warm embrace, Abigail appeared as if a fluttering bird caught in a gust. Hesitant yet impelled, her eyes carried the burden of her choice. “I understand, Herr Hanz.”

“Abigail,” Hanz said, his voice as gentle as the breeze, pressing her further, “I know what you wrote in your letter, but are you *really* certain this is what you want? I need you to be sure, because once we take them as our own, it must be forever,” he added, ensuring the irrevocability was understood.

Abigail recalled that heart-wrenching day when her parents wanted her to give the babies to an orphanage in Poland. She couldn’t bear to leave them to an unknown fate, and that’s when she thought of Moses’ mother, Jochebed. The Holy Scriptures tell how the Levite woman bravely defied the Egyptian Pharaoh who decreed that all Israelite boys be killed at birth to control the Hebrew population. She hid her son in a papyrus basket and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile River, where Pharaoh’s own daughter found him while bathing. Taking pity on the beautiful child, she named him Moses and raised him as her own. That act of love by his mother saved his life, and in an astonishing example of God’s munificence and compassion, Jochebed became Moses’ nurse and was able to see her son grow into a mighty man.

Likewise, Abigail had decided she would do the same for her daughters, placing the babies in a double wicker basket and leaving them for the Wolffs to find. Instead of the girls suffering in a rundown orphanage, they would be adopted by a childless couple who would shower them with love, raising

them on a beautiful farm by the river. The one with the large porch and a porch swing, with sheep, goats, and chickens in the yard. A magical place. A place where, if her daughters couldn't be with her, perhaps they could be raised in a loving home near her.

"I am sure," Abigail finally replied, the simplicity of her answer belying the tremors in her heart. "I can't raise them. My parents were very angry, and they would never allow it."

Hanz recalled her bruised face and cut lip that night they met on the dirt road. No doubt her father had hit her, shamed by his daughter's shocking indiscretion.

"I'd be shunned by my village, too."

"Why choose a German family, though?" Hanz questioned. "Why not a Jewish one?"

"Even if I took them to a different village, the rabbi would eventually find out. Jewish communities talk. Besides, all I wanted was a loving home for them."

"You took a chance identifying yourself in the letter. Why?"

"Because I trusted you. After you helped me that night in the forest, I knew you were a *gute*, kind man." A tear traced a solitary path down her cheek, and she quickly wiped it away. "You will love and care for them, right Herr Hanz? You and Frau Maria?"

"Ja, Abigail, we will. More than words can say. Maria and I are forever in your debt. Forever grateful."

She allowed a brief smile to touch her lips, despite the obvious pain it masked.

Hanz observed her carefully, the lines of his face etched with the concern of a man who understood the weight of the world all too well. "And what of you, Abigail? What will you do?"

Her resolve seemed to fortify at his question, straightening her spine as if the very act could steel her for the journey ahead. "I will go on, Herr Hanz. I will live my life anew, and not repeat the same mistakes I've made."

"If you ever need anything, anything at all . . ."

"*Danke*," she interrupted. Plucking two wildflowers from the riverbank, she handed them to him. "For Ava and Shalom," she softly said, her voice thick with resignation, as if uttering their names for the last time. And with that, she picked up her basket and headed back to the village, leaving him standing alone at the water's edge.

Hanz watched her walk away, her sacrifice now flowing like a silent river through his veins, tugging on his conscience. An impulse goaded him to call after her, to offer something more tangible than words of gratitude, but he restrained himself. What could he offer that wouldn't further complicate things? Besides, he had accomplished what he came to do, impressed with her mental and emotional resilience under the circumstances, especially at such a young age. It reassured him about the future for his new family and the decisions that would come next. Without even realizing it, a subtle smile formed on his lips, and he headed back to Maria and their newborn twins.



As Hanz rode Bucephalus back to the farm, clutching the wildflowers, he reminisced about his life. About how he had gotten to where he was today. From first falling in love with a deaf woman, marrying her and becoming a farmer when his true aspirations were to be an artist, to now being a father . . .

While still a teenager, Hanz fought in the Great War. The War to End All Wars, as it was posthumously called. Among the carnage and the blood, when the heavens rained down Satan's fury on mankind, the sky a continual blaze of fire and metal, shedding tears of bullets and bombs that tore mercilessly into human flesh.

A fighter pilot in the German *Luftstreitkräfte* (*Air Force*), Hanz flew the Fokker DR-1, a premier dogfighter of the time, celebrated for its unrivaled agility and maneuverability, and the same plane used by his famous comrade Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron. He loved flying that plane, soaring through the troposphere, free as a bird. But it wasn't a novelty of leisure; it was an instrument of war.

A newly trained pilot and reluctant gladiator, Hanz had not yet been engaged in air-to-air combat, and he certainly wasn't looking forward to his first dogfight. One fateful foggy morning on April 9, 1917, however, a day that would later become infamously known as Bloody April, he had no choice—the fight came to him . . .

"Bratakka-takka-takka!"

"Bratakka-takka-takka!"

"Boom!"

"Bang!"

"I've been hit!" he yelled out to no one.

Taken by surprise, the British Royal Flying Corps (RFC) had shot Hanz down, his plane spiraling out of control and plummeting to the earth. But God must have read this young man's heart, seeing that he was not a true killer, and decided to spare him because by some miracle, he had managed to survive, landing his wounded bird in an open field, half-conscious, his right leg shattered.

Hanz woke up in a French military hospital, a prisoner of war. He wondered how he had survived that crash. He could still hear the deafening sounds of the bullets whizzing past his head, taste the metallic bitterness of the gunpowder on his tongue, and feel the excruciating pain in his vitiated leg. At night, he'd wake up sweating profusely and screaming in the dark; and during the day, he'd dwell on those he knew who didn't make it home. One friend killed, two friends killed, three then four, one after the other, wiped out like ants on the ground, robbed of their youth, their future, their families.

After the war had ended, Hanz was repatriated. He was lucky, because most of his fellow prisoners of war weren't immediately released from Allied captivity, kept instead for a period of forced labor. But Hanz's permanent injury precluded that, and he went to Austria to convalesce. Not from his physical wound, which had already healed, but his mental and emotional ones, seeking to slay his new demons. His father had been to the Inntal Valley of Tyrol, a region known for its stunning alpine scenery, and told him of many intriguing tales about the history and beauty of the place. It was exactly what Hanz needed to suppress his bad memories, replacing them with good.

Known beyond the borders of Tyrol as the Capital of the Alps, Innsbruck is where Hanz stayed. With the mighty Nordkette mountains of the Karwendel Massif to the north and the Stubai and Tux Alps to the south, one's problems seemed so small and insignificant. Humbled before God, the creator of such magnificence, Hanz stared at them in awe.

While walking with his cane along an endless field of green one morning, he saw a young woman with flaming red hair, barefoot and shepherding sheep. So taken by the elysian scene he thought it was a mirage. "Am I dreaming?" he asked himself, blinking hard to focus.

"*Nein*," said an elderly voice behind him. "You're not dreaming, son."

That there is a rare *Fräulein* (young lady). Only the Austrian Alps could produce such beauty.”

Hanz turned toward the older man sitting quietly on a nearby rock. “Who is she?”

“Maria Jager is her name. The deaf girl who knows how to read lips and speak like you and me. Her poor mother passed away last year; the consumption got her. Now the *Fräulein* looks after her four younger sisters, two older brothers, and her father. She’ll cook you a meal you’ll never forget, and that’s no lie.”

Standing there, gazing at the young woman, her fiery locks tussling with the breeze, her cerulean eyes rivaling the bluest sky, her fair skin mocking the sun, Hanz was immediately lovestruck. *Mein Herr, sie ist wunderschön* (My lord, she’s beautiful), he thought. Without taking his eyes off her, he said to the older man, “I’m going to marry her,” an all-knowing confidence in his voice. “She’s going to be my wife.”

The old man chuckled as he lit his pipe. “Spring is a time for new life and love to burst forth. God bless you, son, and may the *Fräulein* feel the same.”

For the next week, Hanz walked down to that same field of green each morning, watching Maria Jager shepherd her sheep. The fact that she was deaf mattered none to him, and he wanted to meet her, but he had always been shy with women and didn’t know how to approach. Then he saw the train in the distance, barreling through the valley. With her back to it, kneeling on the tracks to admire a solitary wildflower growing between the rails, the train was going to hit her if she didn’t move!

Hanz immediately sprang into action and sprinted toward her. In the nick of time, he grabbed her, and they both rolled into the grass. When they came to a stop, she started to laugh.

“I saved your life,” Hanz said, out of breath and still holding her, looking down into her heavenly face.

She read his lips and smiled. “I knew the train was coming. I could feel the vibrations in my feet.”

Hanz was confused. “Then why?”

“Because I also knew you would save me.”

The twinkle in her eye mesmerized him, and he spontaneously kissed her. He kissed her as if he had always kissed her. He kissed her as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

And so it began . . . From the beating drums of war, the screeching whistles of bombs, the whizzing hiss of bullets, and the screaming cries of soldiers, Hanz Wolff found peace, serenity, and contentment in the Inntal Valley of Tyrol, all in the form of a young, alluring Austrian woman who was deaf.

Before they knew it, six months of blissful courtship had passed, and the two lovebirds were completely besotted. One afternoon, as they promenaded through Hofgarten park, the imperial gardens once exclusive to the ruling elite and favored by the royals for hundreds of years, Hanz had something weighty on his mind. "*Es ist wunderschön hier (It's beautiful here)*," he said, coming to a stop on a bridge crossing the Inn River, a 317-mile tributary of the Danube that ran straight through the city center. "But I need to make a better living than working at the textile mill." He thought of the farm he grew up on back home, by the winding Tauber River, with the animals, the crops, and the small vineyard. "As you know," he continued, looking directly at Maria so she could easily read his lips, "when I was at war, my father's horse rolled over in the field and killed him. My mother and *Bruder* took on the farm, doing the best they could, but I just got word that my mother wants to move to my sister's in Hamburg now. Since my *Bruder* is still too young to be on his own, he'll be going with her."

Maria's expression turned timorous, and she looked down at the ground, anticipating what was coming next. "You want to return to Germany?"

He took her chin gently in his hand, bringing her gaze back to his. "*Ja*, but not without you, *meine Liebe*." Pausing for the perfect words to match his emotions, he confessed, "Because when I am with you, I feel a happiness unknown to mortal man." Ever so softly he kissed her lips, gazing down into her face. "When I am with you, Maria Jager . . . I am home."



The Wolff farm in the distance brought Hanz back to the present, and he stopped his horse on the dirt road to look at the surrounding area. As if something out of a scenic painting—like the ones he sold to the Italian art dealer, Giovanni Mandolini—the view was stunning. Rolling meadows, verdant forests, tranquil ponds, trickling streams, and the winding Tauber River accentuated the land's beauty. Much like the area where Maria grew

up, minus the imposing Alps.

On the Wolff property itself, the small vineyard flared out on one side like the wing of a bird, with wheat and corn grown on the other. Between them was a small brook feeding the tiny pond where two white swans would often visit. Cows, sheep, goats, and chickens roamed freely over the farm, munching on grass and insects, and the barn provided shelter and storage. The farmhouse, built by Hanz's grandfather, stood solid overlooking it all. Made out of timber and stone, it had a large living room with stone fireplace, a well-equipped kitchen, a bathroom with Victorian claw-foot tub, and three bedrooms. A porch in front of the house spanned the length of it, with a swing that gently oscillated in the breeze.

The well-made German farmhouse was both a relic and an heirloom. Before the twins came into their lives, Hanz often wondered who would inherit it, along with the land. His younger brother Severin had always said he never wanted to be a farmer, toiling with the sun on his back and the dirt under his nails. But now he and Maria had two daughters, and it would all go to them. Their children, their legacy. It filled Hanz with joy, knowing there were roots again—the family tree would survive.

Years and years ago before Hanz was born, before his father was born, before his grandfather and great-grandfather were born, only the meadows, forests, ponds, and streams existed, flanking either side of the Tauber River. The land was wild, with no inhabitants. Prior to 1871, Germany wasn't even yet Germany but a conglomeration of many kingdoms and empires, often referred to as Germania, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Franks. But now eons later, countless German families cultivated and lived on the land, including the neighboring farms close by to the Wolffs.

On the south side, an older Jewish couple—the Friedmans—ran a goat farm. To the west, a German family—Clovis and Elise Steinburg with their newborn daughter and toddler son—grew wheat and barley. To the East, a young German man named Leon Dreisler, who had also survived the Great War, lived with his Jewish mail-order bride from Hungary—they raised cows and sheep. And in the North, another German farmer—Günther Nachtnebel, with his homemade distillery and his self-righteous wife Elvira—grew corn and soy.

And then there were a few in the area who didn't farm the land but just lived on it. Like Aadan Omari and his wife Chiumbo. A Black couple originally from Cameroon, Africa, they emigrated to France in their youth, only

to settle in Germany. He was a skilled tile maker. And the eccentric Jewish widow, Willamina Benowitz, who lived with her mentally challenged adult daughter and five orphans whom she had magnanimously taken in. “I am a bountiful tree,” she would say, “with deep roots and many branches for the lost little birds.” And lastly, a wealthy Jewish woman, Nora Yurkovich, and her husband Maximillian, who lived in the fanciest home of them all. Her large house was on top of a hill overlooking all the other properties below.

These were Hanz and Maria’s neighbors and friends, a diverse group who not only socialized with each other but also looked out for one another like family. And though Hanz’s best friend, Ollie van Heinz, lived in Rothenburg ob der Tauber with his wife and kids, he’d often come by and visit too.

When Hanz finally got home, Maria was sitting on the porch swing, gently swaying with both infants slumbering peacefully on either side of her. Barefoot as always in the summer, her fingers stained dark magenta from picking wild berries in the forest, her hands were on the chest of each child, reveling in the sensation of their tiny heartbeats vibrating into her skin. She hummed an off-key, tender tune for her children, despite being unable to hear it, and smiled as her husband approached. “Where did you go?” she asked him. “I thought you were out in the vineyard.”

“I went to Rothenburg,” he said, admiring the angelic scene.

“Why?”

“To take care of some business. It’s all settled now.” He kissed her on the forehead and picked up little Ava, sitting down with his new family.

Later that evening, when Maria was tending to the newborns, washing and preparing them for bed, Hanz carefully folded Abigail’s letter and the two woolen blankets embroidered with the Star of David. He took them down to a secret room next to the cellar, hiding them in a compartment in the brick wall.

Why he decided to keep them, he did not know . . .

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