

ONE

April 28, 1945
St. Georgen, Austria

Helene breathed deeply and pretended to sleep as Friedrich staggered into the darkened bedroom. He'd been out later than usual. Through the silent, lonely hours her wandering imagination had tried to picture whom her husband was with and what he'd been doing. A hundred scenarios crossed her mind. None of them good.

She could distinguish three scents as Friedrich carelessly fell upon the bed beside her: sweat, vodka, and a sick, flowery perfume. Sweat from beating half-dead prisoners. Vodka to help him face the monster he'd become. And the perfume . . . She pressed her face deeper into her pillow.

Friedrich panted heavily as he leaned over her. She

huddled deep under the thick white comforter and let out a dreamlike sigh, hoping to keep him at bay.

Friedrich lingered for a moment. He twisted one of her loose curls on his finger, then rose from the bed and crossed the floor.

She pulled the comforter back over her body as he moved to the black military chest in the corner. Steel hinges creaked as it opened.

Helene watched from beneath the covers. Any loving wife would awaken to tell her husband good-bye, to help him pack, to assist his escape from the enemy's approach. Helene felt anything but loving.

Friedrich tossed a few items into a small, dark suitcase. She watched him pull his German *luger* from its holster and remove the empty magazine. With the *click-click* of the new magazine, Helene pictured the tormented, rigid faces of the dead strung up on barbed-wire fences like clothes on a laundry line. Sightless eyes reflecting horror, disbelief.

Friedrich shrugged out of his uniform, brass buttons knocking against the wooden floor. He pulled brown pants, a white shirt, boots, and a blue jacket over his muscular frame. Civilian attire. Helene remained motionless.

Over the past few days, whispered rumors had passed from wife to wife at the camp store. Many of the high-ranking guards were leaving. Fleeing the advancing troops.

"The Americans have crossed the Rhine," a friend had shared in hushed tones. "They are fighting their way through Germany and into Austria. Some claim the Russians are coming in fast from the north." Helene

knew it was anyone's guess who'd arrive first to discover the nightmare she'd lived since that dark winter of 1940.

Now it seemed the rumor was true. Friedrich was leaving. Abandoning her, his four-year-old daughter, and the child in her womb. Leaving just like that.

Anika cried out from across the hall, and Friedrich swore under his breath.

Helene jumped from the bed and hurried to the child's room. Muted white light from the guard towers filled the room, and Helene could clearly make out Anika's outstretched arms.

Helene sat on the bed. She took the small girl into her embrace and pressed her cheek into her child's sweet-smelling hair. Helene felt Anika's arms encircle her neck, and she willed her daughter to stay calm. "Quiet, shhh, quiet," she murmured.

Anika's body tensed as Friedrich stalked into the room and hovered near the doorway. Helene shivered, remembering the last time he had been drinking. The rantings, the threats.

"*Please, just leave,*" Helene wanted to say. She pulled her daughter tight to her chest and longed for freedom from all that this man represented. Tonight, again, she remembered that winter . . . cattle cars stuck in snow . . . prisoners left to freeze to death because they weren't worth the effort it would take to carry them to the camp.

Her stomach tightened as she remembered the chilling screams that had journeyed through the night air to her

window. Urgent pleas from men, women, and children. Then finally, with morning's light, silence.

All through that night, she had implored Friedrich to do something. She had screamed at him, called him a murderer. Still he refused, his cold gaze resting upon her as it surely did now. He told her she didn't understand. He said he was protecting her, but Helene didn't believe him. Instead of standing up to the evil, he allowed it to become a part of him.

"I'll be back to get you," Friedrich said, his voice determined. "I'll get settled and come back for you both."

"You mean us *three*?" Helene corrected, pressing Anika against her bulging middle.

"*Ja*, of course."

She slowly rocked her daughter. "We'll be fine. I'll go back to my father's *gasthaus*. He can always use an extra hand at the inn."

Friedrich cursed and pounded the doorjamb with his fist.

"If Father will take me back," she added.

"He's a foolish, naïve old man. Don't think I'm blind to what he's been doing. I've looked the other way for your sake." Friedrich started to leave, then stopped. He let out a deep breath. "I wasn't a bad guard, Helene," he said, his back to her. "Not like some."

"Of course," she said.

"You will be safe. No one will hurt you or Anika."

"No, I'm sure we'll be fine."

Anika whimpered again. Helene lay down with her, close enough to touch noses. Friedrich whistled a

solemn tune that Helene faintly recognized. Anika's eyes grew wide.

What's that song? Helene wondered. But before she could ask, he was gone.

Heavy, booted footsteps crossed the wooden floor and pounded down the stairs. After a brief pause, the front door opened and closed. Shouts echoed in the streets. Nazi trucks rumbled through the night.

He's gone.

Moments passed with the ticking of the old wall clock. Helene felt her daughter's body relax. After a few minutes, the child's fingers crawled up Helene's chest and tickled her chin.

"In there hidden, in there deep, is laughter happy waitin' to peep," Anika whispered.

How many times had Helene recited that simple poem to her daughter during these dismal days of war?

The girl's tickles continued until unforeseen laughter gushed from Helene. It caught both her and Anika by surprise. Then, equally unexpected, with the laughter came tears. And with the tears, Helene's quiet sobs that gently rocked her child to sleep.

Yet for her, sleep would not come. *I'm free, I'm free*, she kept telling herself. But she knew it wasn't true. She felt no freedom inside, only pain. Pain that constricted around her heart like a hangman's noose and cinched tighter with each haunted memory.



APRIL 30, 1945
FÜSSEN, GERMANY
SOUTHERN GERMAN/AUSTRIAN BORDER

The two men ran through the moonlit woods with strength they didn't realize they possessed. Time was running out. The hunters would soon be hunted.

To the one in the lead, the countryside was familiar. Friedrich recognized the landforms, the scent of the air. Despite his sense of urgency, he relished the feeling of his feet pounding on the soft, dark soil. Although dense trees blocked his view, he knew the green farmlands of Germany spread to the north. Behind him, the Swiss Alps veered to the southwest, the Austrian Alps to the southeast. Ahead was the tiny town of Füssen, their destination.

The thick-waisted soldier who ran behind him lacked in both knowledge of the area and in stamina. Arno rumbled through the forest like an armored tank. A crash sounded from the woodland floor, and Friedrich stopped, then swore. He turned to find his companion sprawled in the underbrush like a gunned-down prisoner.

Friedrich's breathing was labored as he leaned over the man. "Get up, you useless fool," he hissed. "What was I thinking bringing you?"

The man lifted his unshaven face from the soil. In the near-full moon, Friedrich noticed sweat beaded on his companion's brow.

Arno pushed himself up from the dirt and wiped his mud-smearred cheek with his shirtsleeve. "Forget it. We are a day behind schedule as it is," he seethed. "I am

going back before they leave without us.” He took two steps in the opposite direction.

Friedrich gripped Arno’s arm. His teeth clenched as he attempted to calm his screaming nerves. If he hadn’t needed an extra hand, he wouldn’t have sought help in the first place. Arno had no idea what he was walking away from. Perhaps now the time had come to sweeten the lure.

“I don’t care if you come or not, but you have no idea . . .” Friedrich pushed Arno’s arm away and lowered his voice. “What if I told you all the golden trinkets we’ve confiscated over the last five years were merely pocket change?”

Arno’s eyebrows lifted, and Friedrich knew the man was picturing towering piles of booty from the camp storehouse.

Friedrich searched the man’s round face, weighing if Arno could be trusted. He saw the same dull expression he’d seen every day at work. But he had no choice. He needed help claiming the prize.

He glanced behind him and spoke low and quickly. “I was in Vienna in ’38. All Jews were ordered to give a detailed declaration of their valuables. I was a clerk, and those money-grubbers acknowledged enough wealth to make my superiors tremble with greed.”

“And you pocketed your own share?”

Friedrich shrugged. “It was easier than I imagined.”

“How can you be sure the person holding the loot has not cashed in?”

Friedrich grinned, realizing Arno was once again in his grasp. “If you can’t trust your own mother, who can

you trust? Besides, we're not too far off course." He dug into his left trouser pocket and pulled out the forged travel papers and his new identity card. "After this, we have one more stop, then on to Italy." He patted his other pockets. Where was the map, the address?

"Something wrong?" Arno asked.

Friedrich shook his head. "It's of no consequence. I left something in the house. But not to worry." He tapped his head. "It's all up here."

The sound of a distant vehicle echoed through the trees. Arno wiped his brow, his eyes hungry. "Does anyone else know?"

A tune lilted through Friedrich's mind. He pushed it out of his thoughts. "*Nein*. No one."

Arno nodded.

"But before we claim the spoils, I need you to deliver this." Friedrich reached into his jacket and produced a clean white envelope. Pulling a three-inch knife out of the swastika-embellished sheath on his belt, he sliced a small gash in his palm, letting a few drops of blood stain the envelope. "A messenger will meet you in front of the stone church on the edge of town. Tell him you found this on my dead body. He'll know what to do. Then wait at the church. There's a hiding spot in a clump of trees near the cemetery. I'll find you. We only have a few hours, so hurry."

Arno snatched the bloodied envelope. The sound of trucks rumbled nearer. "What about you? Where will you be?"

Friedrich pretended not to hear the question. He re-

sheathed the knife and pulled his luger from its holster. “We must split up.” He pointed straight ahead. “The church is that way, no more than a kilometer. Now go.”

Arno raced toward the town. Friedrich ran the opposite direction. He was close; he could feel it. Soon, he’d have the bounty he’d waited five years to retrieve. By morning, he would be a rich man on his way to Italy. Then Argentina after that.

Friedrich picked up his pace. He spotted the small farm in the distance. A curl of white smoke rose from the brick chimney. *Almost there.*

A branch cracked beside him. Friedrich spun around. Three men crouched behind a large boulder. He recognized their uniforms immediately. Olive-green shirts and trousers. Steel helmets. M1 rifles. *Americans!*

“Halt!” one man called.

Friedrich aimed his handgun at that man. Gunfire sounded.

Then only blackness.

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The roar of the trucks reverberated even louder, but Arno couldn’t tell which direction they were coming from. He was a fool for listening to Friedrich. Perhaps it was a trap. He’d seen the way Friedrich had played his hand with his superiors, allowing everyone else to do his dirty work while he paraded around town with his lovely wife.

Still . . . the riches were tempting.

Shouts split the air. Arno paused midstep, his heart pounding. Gunfire rang out. He dashed behind a tree and peered in the direction Friedrich had run. He could make out the silhouettes of helmets bent over someone on the ground. *Friedrich.*

Arno cursed. His legs trembled. He couldn't believe this was happening. In one second Friedrich was out of the picture. Even if the man wasn't already dead, he would be soon. Arno vowed he would not be next.

He backed away. His hands shook, but he was determined not to make a sound, determined not to attract attention. When Arno felt he was a safe distance away, he whirled around and sprinted. The woods began to thin as he ran. A church steeple rose in the distance. Arno slowed. Now what?

He stopped and kicked the ground. They would leave without him. Sail away to safety. *And I'll be stuck here. Friedrich, you idiot! Why'd I listen to you? I'll never get out of this now.*

Then Arno thought of the man who awaited him, Friedrich's messenger. Only a small clearing separated him from the church.

Arno stared at the envelope clutched in his hand. He ducked behind a tree and ripped it open. He pulled out the letter, read it, then slipped it back in the envelope.

Then again, he thought, a smirk crossing his face, *perhaps I don't want to leave the country after all.*



MAY 1, 1945

Arno blew warm air onto his cold hands. He adjusted the thin blanket around his shoulders. The wall he leaned against rose high above him, ending in a jagged line. Beyond that there was only night sky, just beginning to lighten. Friedrich's messenger—not a man, but a boy of thirteen—had brought him to this castle ruin in hopes of finding safety. So far it had worked.

Arno glanced at the boy, sleeping soundly under the stars. Shaggy, straw-colored hair covered most of his freckled face. Over the past few days he'd discovered that Henri was a dedicated Nazi youth and a hired hand to Friedrich's mother. Arno reached over and shook the boy. Henri stirred, then sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"It is time," Arno said. "You will go to the old woman as planned. I will watch from a distance. Tell her Friedrich wants to know if she still has the treasure. Ask if it is safe."

The boy hesitated. Arno knew what he was waiting for. He tossed a few cigarettes to him. "That is a down payment. I am much more generous than Friedrich, ja?"

Henri's eyes sparkled. "Ask Frau Völkner about the treasure. I understand." He jumped to his feet and brushed the dust from his tan shirt and knickers. Together they advanced down the hill, an ebbing moon brightening their path.

When they reached the small cottage, they saw a light flickering inside. Arno hung back in the covering of trees. He watched Henri stroll up to the house and tap on the door. The woman eagerly welcomed him inside.

Arno leaned against a tree and lit up a cigarette. As he surveyed his surroundings, he noticed castles high up on the hill. Not ruins like he'd stayed in the previous night, but two full-fledged castles with tall windows and massive turrets. He wondered what it must have been like for young Friedrich to grow up under the shadow of such wealth.

Arno waited an hour, then two. He'd just about decided to storm the door when the boy emerged from the house, waved, and jogged away. The stooped-over old woman waved back.

Henri sauntered down the road for a while before slipping back into the woods. As he approached, Arno caught a whiff of bacon and eggs. His stomach growled, but hunger was the least of his concerns.

"Well?" Arno asked impatiently.

"Frau Völkner is a nice lady," Henri commented. "She fed me breakfast and told me how her goats were doing, and—"

"What did she say about Friedrich?"

"She laughed when I mentioned treasure. She thought I was joking. She asked about her son. I told her he was doing well." Henri paused. "He is doing well, isn't he?"

"Of course." Arno patted the boy's shoulder. "He has just been detained for a while. Now, go on."

"She's a poor woman, living off the few schillings her son sends every month. She obviously knows nothing about a treasure."

Arno thought back to Friedrich's words: "*If you*

can't trust your mother, who can you trust?" Surely the woman knew something. Maybe he'd have to get it out of her himself.

Henri's brow furrowed. "There was one thing—" Arno straightened. "Stacks of Friedrich's letters. He writes weekly and has since joining the military."

A smirk curled on Arno's lips. *That's it. Information about the treasure has to be hidden in those letters.*

"You are going back tomorrow," Arno said, folding his arms across his chest. "Only this time, I am going with you."

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