



*For thy power standeth not in multitude
nor thy might in strong men:
for thou art a God of the afflicted,
an helper of the oppressed . . .
a saviour of them that are without hope.*

JUDITH 9:11 (APOCRYPHA)





CHAPTER 1

ANNIKA

LAKE HALLSTATT, AUSTRIA

MARCH 1938

The blade of a shovel, cutting through frosted grass. That's what she remembered most from the spring of 1938. In the year that followed, on the darkest of nights, she could almost hear the whisper of digging again. The sound of Max Dornbach calling her name.

"Annika?" His confident voice bled into the fluid sounds of that evening, but her heart took on a rhythm of its own, twirling like the feathery seeds of dandelion caught in an Alpine storm.

How did Max know she was hidden behind the pines?

When she peeked between the branches, he was looking straight at her. Reluctantly, or at least attempting to appear reluctant, she

stepped out from her haven, into the cast of blue moonlight, Vati's winter coat buttoned over her calico chemise.

Temperatures had dipped to near freezing again, but Max wore a linen shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Strength swelled under those sleeves, arms that had rowed a wooden *fuhr* boat around Lake Hallstatt nearly every summer of his seventeen years, carving his muscles like the fallen birch her father liked to shape into benches and chairs.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked, though she should have been the one questioning him. He'd awakened her when he snuck by the cottage she and her father shared in the woods.

At first she'd thought it was Vati who crept by her window, on his way to the tavern, but then, in the beam of light, she'd seen the threads of blond in Max's brown hair, the shovel resting against his shoulder as if it were a rifle readied for battle. She liked to think he'd purposely rustled the branches because he'd missed her these winter months as much as she'd missed him.

"You woke me." Annika took another step toward him. "I didn't know you'd returned from Vienna."

"My parents wanted a holiday."

The Dornbachs visited at Christmastime, but rarely in the spring while Max was studying in *Gymnasium*. Unlike Annika's father, his parents thought an education with books and such was important.

"I'll tell Vati you're home," she said. "He can light the furnace."

"It's not necessary." Max stomped the heel of his boot onto the shovel to remove another pile of earth. She imagined the rust-colored clumps yawning after their hibernation this winter, shivering in the frigid air. "My father already lit it."

She hadn't realized Herr Dornbach could do such things on

his own, but then again, even after living fifteen years—her entire life—on this estate, Annika knew little about Max’s parents. Neither Herr nor Frau Dornbach bothered to befriend someone beneath their rank. Certainly not their caretaker’s girl.

Annika scanned this knobby plot of land, harbored between the pines. “Why are you digging at night?”

When he shook his head, refusing to trust her with this, her heart wrenched. She’d never told another soul any of his secrets. Not about the dent in Herr Dornbach’s motorboat four summers past or the gash in Max’s leg that she’d helped wrap or the evening he’d cried when he lost Pascal, the pet fox he’d rescued from the forest.

Pascal now rested peacefully in this piece of earth along with numerous rabbits, four cats, two squirrels, and a goldfinch, each grave marked by a pyramid of stones that Max collected from the cliffs on Hoher Sarstein, the mountain towering over his family’s estate.

When they were younger, Annika had helped Max conduct a service for each animal, solemnly crossing herself as they transferred the care for these animals over to *Gott*. Once a laugh slipped from her lips, as they’d been reciting the words from Job.

“But as for me I know that my Redeemer liveth, And at last he will stand upon the earth: And after my skin, even this body, is destroyed, Then without my flesh shall I see God. . . .”

They’d been burying a beetle named Charlie in the dirt, and the thought of this creature standing before a heavenly being, his six spindly legs trembling in awe, made Annika laugh. Looking back, it wasn’t funny—irreverent, even—but she was only eight and quite nervous at both the thought of death and the unknowns surrounding the afterlife. All she could see was a

frightened Charlie, feeling as small as she would feel under the gaze of the almighty God.

Max hadn't invited her to another funeral since that summer, seven years past. She thought he'd stopped burying his pets, but apparently he'd been burying them in the night, when no one would ridicule him.

She moved closer to the hole. A cloth seed bag rested near the shovel, partially hidden behind Max. "What are you burying?"

"Oh, *Kätzchen*," he said, shaking his head. He'd called her *kitten* since she was in kindergarten. As if she were one of his pets.

Annika's hands balled into fists, and she buried them deep in Vati's pockets. "I am not a kitten."

Max resumed his work. Blade against earth, determined to conquer the soil. When she lifted the bag, he swatted her away. "That's not for you."

"Did you lose another animal?" she asked, still holding the cloth rim. It was heavier than she'd expected.

He shook his head again, this time more slowly. "I fear we're about to lose everything."

This new tone frightened her. "I don't understand."

He scooped out two more mounds of dirt, and she dropped the bag into the hole. Then he pushed the dirt in and smoothed his shovel back and forth over the ground as if he were trying to iron out the wrinkles. "Come along," he finally said, hiking toward the wall of pine trees that separated this plot from Schloss Schwansee, his family's castle.

"What's wrong, Max?"

"The parliament approved our annexation into Germany."

"I know," she replied, glad she was already privy to this bit of news. "Vati is pleased."

“The German Reich is no longer willing to tolerate the suppression of ten million Germans across the border.”

That’s what Hitler had said on the wireless last month. Salvation was what he promised, the rescue of Austrians who’d been mistreated. *Anschluss*—as he called it—was prohibited by the Treaty of Versailles, but their new Führer didn’t seem to be daunted by treaties or the fact that the Austrian chancellor wasn’t interested in a union between his country and Germany.

Her father had celebrated the *Anschluss* at the beer hall. He’d fought as a foot soldier in the Great War, and this new union, he thought, not only would revitalize Austria, it was reparation for their empire’s bitter losses twenty years ago. This time, Vati said, no one would defeat a unified Germany.

Max stopped at the edge of the trees, light from the castle’s windows filtering out onto the lawn, erasing the blue haze of moon. “Your father’s pleased because he isn’t Jewish.”

Annika shrugged. “None of us are Jewish.” Except her friend Sarah, but Hitler would hardly concern himself with the Jewish Austrians who lived back in these Alps. Only summer tourists—and the occasional skier—visited their mountains and lake.

Max planted his hands on her shoulders, anchoring them so she couldn’t shrug again. She tried to focus on his eyes, but his touch electrified her, a jolt that ricocheted between her fingers, her toes.

“Adolf Hitler isn’t a savior. He’s the devil incarnate.” Max’s eyes flashed, the fierce edge in his voice frightening her. “And he won’t be satisfied with the devotion of our country, *Kätzchen*. He’ll want the hearts of our people, too.”

She’d heard the stories about Hitler and his thugs, about the years Hitler stirred up trouble in the streets of Austria, but still she protested. “Hitler’s home is in Berlin now.”

Max released her shoulders and stepped out from the mantle of pine. "It won't stop him from trying to build his Reich here."

Annika shivered as she followed him toward the cottage she shared with her father, though she tried to pretend that the trembling deep inside her, flaring across her skin, was from the cold. She'd never heard Max speak of politics before. Usually he talked about his animals or school or the music he loved in Vienna. She, his devoted audience, listened to his stories every summer and in the winter weeks when he came to ski.

To her right, the gray slate on the castle's turrets glowed in the moonlight. Back in the seventeenth century, the owner of the local salt mine had built this place as a fortress between the mountains and the lake. The upkeep and expansions kept her father and now her employed year round, though one day she dreamed of being the mistress of this castle, sipping tea in the parlor instead of scrubbing its floors.

Max tucked his shovel into the large shed where Vati kept his tools and equipment. "You'd best go home. Before your father begins to worry."

Annika dug her hands into the coat pockets. "I'm glad you're here."

"It's only for a day."

"Still, I'm glad."

He lifted her right hand from the warmth of her pocket and pressed his lips against it. "Don't let one of Hitler's men steal your heart, Annika."

He released her hand, but it stayed before her, suspended in the air.

Shouting erupted inside the main house, Herr Dornbach swearing. And then the voice of Frau Dornbach stole through the

open library window, yelling back at him. Max moved quickly through a side door that led into the castle, and then he closed the window to silence the fight, at least to her ears.

Annika shuffled across the ice-glazed grass, to the lakeshore. Birch benches were scattered across the property, but this bench near the reeds was her favorite.

Sitting, she pulled her arms out of the large sleeves and wrapped them tightly over her chest. Tiny clouds rose with her breath, each one climbing in the air as if it wanted to scale the mountain ridge that curled around the lake, a glorious sea creature guarding its den.

Moonlight shimmered on the water, and several lights flickered on the other side of the lake in the village called Hallstatt. When they were children, she and Max had dreamed about one day swimming across this expanse of lake together, racing to see who would win. They'd never done it, of course. Vati wouldn't have cared if she tried, but Frau Dornbach took great care in keeping her only son safe.

Why had Herr Dornbach been yelling tonight? The arguing between him and Frau Dornbach had escalated this past summer, their words escaping through the windows and finding Annika in the garden or hammering nails into a board as she helped Vati build a bench or fix a wall.

Herr Dornbach yelled at Vati last summer as well, though usually because Vati didn't arrive early enough for work, too sluggish after a night in the beer hall.

Sometimes she wondered if her parents would have fought like the Dornbachs if her mother had lived. Or perhaps Vati wouldn't drink if her mother were still alive. Sometimes her father still called out to Kathrin—her mother—in his dreams, his sorrow a storm that shook the cottage rafters and pine walls.

When her father woke, he often called Annika's name, but only because he wanted her to bring black coffee to chase away the fog in his brain.

She closed her eyes, the cold settling over her face as her thoughts returned to the young man who'd been digging in the forest. If only Max could have seen her with her hair properly curled, dressed in the pale-pink summer frock she'd sewn for his return, instead of lumped up inside Vati's ragged coat.

Her gaze wandered back over her shoulder to the light on the ground floor of the castle, to the library where Max enjoyed reading one of the many books that trimmed its shelves. Was he looking out at the lake like her? Or perhaps he was missing whatever he'd buried.

The thought of buried bones made her stomach roll, but these animals were important to Max, so they were important to her—just as important as keeping his secrets.

A breeze rustled through the branches, stirring up the depths of this lake before her and the longings in her heart. And her mind wandered back to Max's hands on her shoulders, his lips pressed against her hand.

No one else could steal her heart because it had already been stolen. And nothing could ever change her love for Max Dornbach.

Nothing at all.