

# INHERITANCE OF SECRETS

Sonya Bates



## CHAPTER 1

I'd never seen a dead body before. Sure, there'd been dead birds in the yard once or twice, dead cats on the side of the road, kangaroos on the highway, but nothing that mattered. Now, here I was, following a detective down a bare corridor at the Adelaide city morgue, about to be confronted with not one, but two bodies. The bodies of my grandparents.

My heels were loud on the concrete floor, the slow rhythmic clicking the only sound in the passage. I don't know what had prompted me to wear those shoes, some misguided notion of respect for my grandparents, but I regretted it now.

We came to a door and I followed the detective into a small viewing room no bigger than a large cupboard, with a curtain along one wall. We'd left his female colleague in the reception area, and now I understood why. There would be no room for the three of us in there. The detective was tall and bulky and seemed to fill the tiny space. He had a hair on his collar, a steel-grey hair clearly visible against his dark jacket. I wanted to pick it off, to tidy him up for my grandparents.

'Take as much time as you need,' he said.

I stared at the hair and his eyes flicked down, but he couldn't see it.

'All right then?'

'Yeah,' I said, but no sound came out so I nodded.

He turned towards the curtain, found the draw-cord and pulled.

I don't know what I expected. The detectives had filled me in on what would happen, that the bodies would be visible through a window into an adjoining room, that they would be presented one at a time, that they would be covered with a sheet except for their faces. I was to identify them by name, if possible. They had told me the bodies had been found in my grandparents' home, in their bedroom, with the time of death estimated to be between one and three am. Who else could it have been?

The curtain swung back and I put a hand on the wall to steady myself. Opa. He lay on a metal gurney, his eyes closed, his hair combed back exposing his broad forehead. His normally ruddy face was pale, almost grey, the skin imbued with a waxy, papery sheen. He wasn't wearing his glasses. Of course he wasn't. I'd heard people say that their loved one looked peaceful in death, as if they were asleep. Opa was always restless in sleep, eyes fluttering, mouth twitching, as if his mind couldn't rest even while his body did. Now he just looked lifeless.

'That's him,' I said, turning away. 'Karl Gerhard Weiss.'

'Thank you,' said the detective. I looked up into his face, so full of the life that was absent in my grandfather. I couldn't remember his name, and suddenly it really mattered that I knew.

'Are you all right? Do you want to sit down?'

'No, thank you, Detective ...?'

'Norton. Henry Norton.'

I filed that away. Henry Norton. The man who was with me while viewing my dead grandfather.

The second viewing should have been easier. I thought I was prepared for what I would see, but the sight of Oma on the cold metal sliced through me and burst the bubble of unreality that had enveloped me until then. She was covered only by a thin sheet, a smaller one draped over the side of her head. Instantly, I wondered what it was covering. A gunshot wound? A contusion? Knife wound? The detectives hadn't said, only that the cause of death would be determined by an autopsy.

I crossed my arms, pressing them into my stomach.

'Yeah, that's her.' I couldn't seem to take my eyes off that sheet.

'Name?'

'Margarete Elsbeth Weiss.'

My teeth were clenched. I wanted to break through the glass and shake her back to life. I wanted her to open her eyes and smile her watery smile, ask me to get her a blanket. I wanted the colour to wash back into her cheeks and that damned sheet to magically disappear.

The seconds stretched out and finally I dragged my gaze away.

Detective Norton closed the curtain. 'If you'll accompany me upstairs, we'll need to fill out some paperwork. Unless you need a minute?'

My legs were wobbly. I was cold.

'No, let's get this over with.'

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I signed and dated the papers, 'Juliet Dunne, 24 July 2009',

officially declaring that the two lifeless bodies now resting in a bank of refrigerated storage drawers were, indeed, my grandparents. My hands shook as I put the pen down and followed the detective and his female colleague back out to their car.

It was close to peak hour, and the din of the traffic out on the street pounded through my skull. I couldn't stand the silence in the morgue, but I couldn't tolerate the noise outside either. I shrank from it, retreating behind Detective Norton as we exited the building, as if his bulk could protect me.

'Is there somewhere we can drop you, Miss Dunne?' the female detective asked.

I'd forgotten her name.

'Someone you could be with? It's probably best not to be alone right now.'

'No, there's no one,' I said. Oma and Opa were my only family. Had been my only family since I was ten, when Lily left. 'Just take me home. I'll be fine.'

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We arrived at the beachside cottage as dusk was falling. I couldn't remember the drive back to Victor Harbor. We must have made our way through the city, down the expressway and onto the winding road that led south, but the memory of it escaped me. All I could see was Oma lying on the gurney. She'd felt the cold so keenly these past winters, wrapping herself in wool cardigans and sitting by the gas fire. Having spent her childhood on the edge of the Black Forest, it amused her that she could feel the cold at all in a city where snow never fell.

The last of the daylight was filtering through the kitchen

window as I threw my bag onto the table and kicked off the ridiculous shoes, standing barefoot in the fading light, numb, exhausted. There must be something I should be doing. Contacting a funeral parlour, preparing a death notice, finding Lily, or at least trying to. And Mum. How would I ever find Mum? She needed to know that her parents were dead.

I sank onto a chair, staring blindly into the distance as dark closed in. My grandparents had raised me since I was nine, were like parents to me. They'd been there for me when no one else was, had loved me when I'd thought I was unlovable. And now they were gone, their lives snuffed out in a senseless killing. I should be crying. But the tears weren't coming, and I couldn't face thinking about any of the rest of it.

I rose and snapped on the light, looked around the kitchen. The breakfast dishes were still in the sink and I ran the hot water over them, then turned it off before the sink could fill. Leaning on the kitchen bench, I put my head in my hands, images of the day running through my mind. I wished I could remember the name of the female detective. Was it Sally or Sue? Something with an S, I was sure. I rummaged in my bag and found the card they gave me when they dropped me off. Henry Norton, Detective Brevet Sergeant, Major Crime Investigation Unit, with a mobile number and an email address. I flipped it over, but there was nothing else. I could see her face. Youngish, dark hair. A serious face. Then Oma's face appeared, pale and cold and lifeless. And Opa's, so still ... I pushed the images away. I didn't want to think of them. Not like that.

In the lounge room my laptop was open, in sleep mode, concealing the manuscript I'd been working on that morning. It seemed as if days had passed since then. I could hardly remember

what I'd been writing. There were two new emails, one from a writer in New York I'd met at a conference last year and one from my editor. She'd be looking for a progress report on the manuscript. I closed it all down, shut off the computer.

The phone shrilled in the silence, the landline, a remnant from the days when my grandparents used the beach house as the holiday house it was meant to be. I stared at it, then lifted the receiver.

'Juliet? I've been trying to call you.' It was Jason.

A piece of my memory slotted into place. I was supposed to meet him in the city after work. We had tickets to a show. I rubbed my temple where a dull ache pulsed.

'Jason, I'm sorry, I completely forgot.'

'You forgot?' There was a pause on the other end of the line but I couldn't bring myself to give him an explanation. 'Is everything okay?' he said finally.

I took a deep breath. 'No, everything's not okay. Something's happened.' I didn't want to say it. Saying it would make it real. Despite everything that had happened, it all still felt like a dream. The man and the woman I'd seen that afternoon weren't really my grandparents. They hadn't really been murdered. Things like this just didn't happen to me. Couldn't have happened to them. They were the things you read about in the paper, heard about on the news, about other people. Strangers. Faceless, anonymous strangers.

'What? What's happened?' Jason's voice was insistent.

'My grandparents are dead.'

I heard him suck in his breath. 'Oh, Juliet. I'm so sorry.' His voice was deep and husky. 'What happened? Were they in an accident?'

I swallowed. 'No, someone broke into their house. They —'

'Jesus.'

My throat closed over. I couldn't go on.

'It's okay, Juliet. You don't have to say any more. I'm on my way. I'll be there as soon as I can.'

I returned the phone to its cradle as the tears started to flow.

## CHAPTER 2

*Halle an der Saale, Germany, January 1943*

Karl's footsteps rang on the cobblestones as he hurried across the market square under the long-drawn shadow of Marktkirche St Marien. The square was deserted, except for the pastor descending the church steps, the bells silenced and the lights extinguished for the night. A chill wind bit Karl's cheeks, hinting of snow to come. It hadn't been as easy as he'd hoped to extricate himself from the family dinner and the sun was already low on the horizon. Nodding to the pastor, he quickened his pace as he strode past into Grosse Klausstrasse, heading towards the river. Grete would be waiting for him.

His mother had gone to a lot of trouble to make this day special. With food rations as low as they were, she must have been hoarding for weeks to put on a feast such as the one she'd laid out: rouladen, potato dumplings, red cabbage, even apfelkuchen with the coffee, or what substituted for coffee in the current times. She'd been complaining that she hadn't seen apples at the market for weeks. Where she'd managed to find enough for the cake, and a suitable cut of beef for the rouladen, was a mystery.

But if she was nothing else, Karl's mother was resourceful. In all the time since the war started, he'd rarely gone hungry. The fare was monotonous, poor quality at times, supplies erratic and unpredictable, but she always managed to put food on the table, supplementing with vegetables from the small garden she'd scratched out at the back of the bakery, acquiring an extra hock of pork or a bag of onions from a local farmer in one of her many trips out of the city.

'It's not every day my son turns eighteen,' she'd said, when he commented on the abundant fare laid out before him. She'd glanced at Karl's father as she said it, and he saw a look of pride and sadness pass between them.

'I'll be all right, Mutter,' Karl said, placing a hand on her arm. 'By all reports, the war is going well. Once Stalingrad is taken, it will be all but over. I'll be home before the end of the year.'

She looked away and he glanced at his father for support. He smiled tiredly at Karl, but said nothing.

'I can take care of myself.'

'Pffft,' his mother said, pulling her arm from under his hand and fishing a handkerchief out of her apron pocket. 'I will pray to God to protect you. It is in His hands.'

It was with a mixture of regret and impatience that Karl had left them, kissing his mother's cheek in passing. She'd clutched his hand, reluctant to let go, and he'd assured her he wouldn't be long. Time was precious, and he knew they were counting every moment they had with him.

He was, in truth, both fearful and excited about what lay ahead. He'd heard so many stories at the Hitler Youth meetings, stories of courage and bravery, of sacrifice in the face of the enemy, had been told again and again how it was an honour and

a duty to fight for the Fatherland. He'd imagined this day since the beginning of the war, watched as first his brother and then his friends had received their marching orders and left for the front. Now it was his turn. He was departing for training camp in the morning and he didn't know quite what to think or to feel. When it came to battle, when he was actually faced with firing his rifle, using his bayonet or succumbing to the enemy, would he have what it took?

The river came into view and Karl scanned the opposite bank as he hurried across the bridge, even though he had little hope of spotting Grete in the fading light. She was cautious, wouldn't stand in full view, if she was even there at all. He was very late, and it was cold. He wouldn't have blamed her if she'd given up waiting for him.

The woods were quiet, the bare branches overhead seeming to insulate the small island from the noise of the city across the river. It was darker here than out in the open, a haze of dark shapes and shadows. Patches of dirty snow lay where the sun hadn't been able to apply its cool winter warmth through the trees. Karl moved eagerly along the path, heedless of the slippery footing. As he neared their meeting spot, his heartrate increased and he found himself almost running in his haste.

He saw her before she saw him, and for a brief mad moment he wondered if the woman he was so rapidly approaching was really her. Her short hair, curling around her face, was almost black in the fading light, although in reality it was a lovely honey brown, with shimmering natural highlights in the sun. Then she looked up and a smile lit her face. It was her. Of course it was her.

'You came.'

'Of course I came,' he said taking her hands in his. They were

cold, icy. 'I'm so sorry I kept you waiting. Mutter was –'

'There's no need to explain. I understand.'

Her eyes, almost level with his, were dark and unreadable. Her lips were trembling. No, not trembling. She was shivering.

'Where's your coat?' he asked, finally noticing the short jacket she wore, more suited to autumn than winter. 'You're freezing.'

She tightened her grip on his hands. 'It's Ava's first BDM meeting tonight. She needed it.'

Karl made a noise of impatience in his throat and removed his thick woollen overcoat, wrapping it around Grete and embracing her in its warmth. He held her until the shivering stopped.

'Look at you. So handsome in your Sunday best,' she said when he stepped back.

He held his arms out and twirled around, displaying the new coat and trousers he wore, his brother's suit, cut down and sewed to measure by his mother. When he turned to face Grete again, he saw the fear and worry in her face.

'I don't want you to go,' she said, almost a whisper.

He took her hands in his again, enclosed them in his warm ones. 'I must.'

'I've heard things, Karl. I fear the war is not going as well as we've been led to believe.'

'Who have you been speaking to? Who's spreading these lies?'

'They're not lies, Karl. I heard it with my own ears.' She glanced around, and lowered her voice. 'The English radio. I've been listening –'

Karl caught his breath. 'Grete, you mustn't.'

Her gaze met his. 'But I have. And, Karl ... the things they are saying.'

'You would believe the English over our own Führer?'

She sighed and her shoulders slumped beneath the drape of Karl's coat. 'I don't know what to believe any more. But it worries me. They say that Stalingrad will not fall, that our soldiers are dying by the hundreds, thousands. Freezing to death, unprepared ...'

Karl pulled her close. 'Shhhhh. You cannot believe everything you hear.'

She struggled out of his arms. 'And neither can you, Karl. War is not all that the Hitler Youth would have you believe. The soldiers who've come back from the front are but a shell of themselves. I see them when they get off those trains. Their wounds ... their eyes ... I don't want that to happen to you. Promise me you'll be careful. Don't go out there seeking glory.'

'You know that I won't,' Karl said seriously. 'But you must promise me in return.' He stroked her cheek, pink with the cold. 'Promise me you won't do anything foolish. No more English radio. No more sneaking extra food to Frau Bernstein.'

'But her husband was arrested!'

'And she will get by until his return.' He tried to say it gently, but he couldn't help the urgency in his voice. 'You know what the consequences would be if you were caught.'

'I won't get caught, Karl. I'm very careful.'

'Promise me,' he said, gripping her arms. 'If I am to risk my life on the Eastern Front, I must know that you are safe.'

She searched his eyes for a moment, then nodded slowly. 'I promise I will stay safe.'

The change in wording wasn't lost on him, and he shook his head helplessly. 'Grete, my Gretchen,' he murmured, sweeping her hair away from her face and planting a kiss on her lips. 'I should know better than to try to tell you what to do. You've always been a free spirit. Stay safe, then.'

She smiled. 'We should get back. You're getting cold. Here, take your coat.' She made a move to withdraw it from her shoulders, but he stopped her.

'Keep it. I'm not cold.'

They turned and walked slowly hand-in-hand along the path towards the bridge. Across the river a quarter moon shone between the clouds onto the grassy bank where in summer children played and swam. Further downstream, boats were tied to a small wharf.

'Grete.' Karl stopped and turned towards her. 'I want to ask —'

A droning wail sounded from across the river. Three short howls that were an all-too-familiar sound interrupting the night. They both glanced at the sky.

'They're early tonight,' said Karl.

'On their way to Berlin, perhaps?'

'Or surprising us, as they did Leipzig.'

Without further discussion they hurried across the bridge and into the dark streets of the city. Blackout restrictions made negotiating the cobbled streets challenging, the drop in temperature creating patches of ice on the wet stones. Karl held tight to Grete's hand as they darted through the dark laneways.

'You won't make it home,' said Grete. 'You must come to my apartment. The cellar is secure.'

'I could go to the bunker.' The cellar in Grete's building would be crowded enough with residents.

'It's too far.'

Overhead a distant hum heralded the approach of the enemy aircraft. The air-raid siren sounded again, a long protracted rising and falling that triggered a reactive increase in Karl's heartrate. He glanced up again, but could see nothing.

Grete turned down a side street and Karl let her pull him along. The citizens of Halle had been fortunate. While the air-raid sirens sounded every night, so far the Allied bombers had taken their deadly cargo to choicer targets – Berlin, of course, but also Magdeburg, Dessau and Leipzig, so close. But no city, it seemed, was safe and it was impossible to tell what or who would be hit next. The uncertainty of it, the constant tension, was wearing on all.

Grete led him past the botanical gardens and on towards the block of apartments near the university where she and her mother lived with her aunt and uncle and their three children. Karl had only been there once before, while making a bakery delivery to the family in the early years of the war, before supplies had become so scarce. Grete's Tante Gertrud was strict and didn't welcome visitors to the flat, especially not boys.

'This way,' said Grete, ducking down an alley. Piles of rubbish rested alongside the curb and the smell of garbage and urine was almost overwhelming. Here, between the buildings, it was almost pitch black and Karl tightened his grip on Grete's hand, allowing her to guide him in the dark.

Up ahead, a lightening of the blackness signalled the exit to the street. Grete slowed as a shadow darkened the path, then disappeared down a stairwell, a sliver of dim light flashing as the man slipped through the door at the bottom of the stairs.

'It's just here,' she said.

The air-raid siren stopped as suddenly as it had started, the ensuing silence punctuated by a buzzing, angry drone of propellers, almost overhead.

Karl started down the stairs but was pulled up short by Grete, poised at the top. 'Wait, I hear something,' she said. Her hand

slipped out of his and she darted out of the alley into the moonlit street.

Karl hurried after her. 'What are you doing? They'll be here any second.'

Grete knelt in the street next to a small dark mound. 'It's Frau Bernstein,' she said over her shoulder. Karl heard the woman groan as she struggled to rise.

'Frau Bernstein, it's me, Grete.'

The woman turned her gaze to Grete, and slumped back to the ground. 'Grete, dear. I seem to have slipped on the ice.'

The sound of the bombers was growing louder. Karl detected movement in the sky to the west, searchlights reflected off the clouds. He caught the flicker of a wing briefly silhouetted against the moon. They were coming in high and fast. The sound of flak guns sounded in the distance.

'We have to get to shelter,' he said.

'Help me lift her.' Grete draped Frau Bernstein's arm over her shoulder and Karl bent to take the woman in his arms.

'No, please, I'll be fine,' she protested. 'I can make it to my apartment.'

'Nonsense.' She weighed less than a child, her bones frail beneath the layered thickness of her clothing. Karl set her on her feet and they moved towards the alley, the elderly woman supported between them. His gaze was again drawn to the sky.

Frau Bernstein's voice was almost drowned out in the din. 'But Herr Wagner said ...'

Grete's face was resolute as she glanced at Karl. 'We're not leaving you.'

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The cellar was crowded when they pried the door open, and all eyes turned in their direction.

‘Close the door! Quickly!’ someone cried.

Karl and Grete shuffled in with Frau Bernstein, closing the door behind them, muffling the incessant drone of the bombers. Silence descended on the cellar, a sea of faces stared at them in the dim light. The air was thick and dank, rank with the smell of fear and perspiration.

‘What’s she doing here?’ The question came from a tall, elderly woman whose stern face reminded Karl of one of his teachers at the Gymnasium. There was a murmur of agreement through the crowd. Some rose to their feet, peering over the heads of those closest to get a better view. Two children pushed between the legs of the adults and stood staring.

‘She slipped on the ice,’ said Grete. ‘We couldn’t leave her on the street.’

‘She’s a Jew!’ A voice from the back. ‘No Jews allowed.’

The tension in the room was palpable, the muted noise of the planes heightening everyone’s senses, inflaming their emotions.

‘She’s not a Jew,’ said Grete firmly. ‘I know her. She’s a good Christian. She goes to my church.’

‘She’s married to a Jew.’

‘Yeah, she may as well be one.’

Frau Bernstein squirmed. ‘I told you, I’m not wanted here,’ she murmured to Grete. She tried to move back towards the door, but her legs gave out under her and she almost fell.

Karl tightened his grip, supporting her weight. ‘Where is the warden?’

The group looked around at each other, as if the man would appear from beneath their feet, then a small matronly woman

spoke up. 'Herr Wagner and his wife are my neighbours. They went to visit family today.'

'Then there is no one in charge here?'

'We're all in charge,' said a man, stepping forward. He had small eyes and a fleshy round face despite the food rationing of the last few years. 'And she's not welcome.'

Karl frowned at him. 'You would turn an elderly woman out in the middle of an air raid? She's injured. She would never make it to another shelter.'

The man scowled. 'Who are you to tell us what to do? You have no authority here. You're just a kid.'

'He's with me,' said Grete quickly. 'Herr Schneider, please. You know Frau Bernstein. She is a good, charitable Christian. You used to shop in her husband's leather shop.'

The man pointed a finger at her. 'That was before the Führer opened our eyes to what the Jews were doing.'

'Herr Bernstein wasn't doing anything —'

There was movement from the back of the shelter and a woman pushed her way to the front of the group, her greying brown hair pulled back into a bun, her hands wrung tight together. Frau Strauss, Grete's mother.

'That's enough.' She placed a hand on Grete's arm and turned to Herr Schneider. 'Let's not start talking politics, Herr Schneider. I can vouch for Frau Bernstein. She attends St Marien every Sunday. And she works with me at the Red Cross. Does she not, Gertrud?' Her gaze turned towards another, taller woman who had been standing next to her at the back of the cellar. The woman pressed her lips together, but nodded.

Herr Schneider's eyes narrowed as he turned to contemplate Grete's aunt. Her face remained impassive, her gaze steady.

‘We shouldn’t be fighting among ourselves,’ said Grete’s mother. ‘It’s the Allied forces who are the enemy, not an old woman or a boy. We must rally together if we’re to defeat the true enemy.’

Herr Schneider’s gaze flicked to Karl. ‘Looks old enough to be out there fighting if you ask me,’ he muttered.

‘You’re right, sir, I am,’ said Karl. ‘My training starts next week. I leave at first light.’

Herr Schneider glared at him a moment and then inclined his head and turned away. Seating himself at a wooden bench along the wall, he glanced upwards, as if he could see the enemy planes flying overhead through the reinforced ceiling of the cellar and the six storeys above. ‘Damn Brits. Can’t they give us a break? Just for one lousy night?’

There was a murmur of agreement, as the others moved away. Some muttered as they returned to their positions sitting along the low benches or leaning against the wooden shelving, but the attention had largely moved away from Frau Bernstein to the more immediate danger. Karl eased her onto a bench next to Herr Wagner’s neighbour, who took out her rosary beads and began to pray under her breath.

The planes droned on overhead, several squadrons by the sound of it, passing over the city. Standing next to Grete, their fingers linked, Karl strained to hear any change in the engine noise, the tell-tale whistle of bombs being dropped, the blast of an explosion. What would it be like out in the open with only the trees or a dugout for shelter, knowing that the enemy was there, not dropping bombs at random in a city, but targeting him, Karl, with a rifle or a machine gun, a grenade or even a tank. The thought made his gut clench and he swallowed down the fear

that rose in his throat. He glanced over at Grete and took a deep calming breath.

Gradually the sound of the planes diminished and a hum of conversation started up, relieved, exhausted. Another night, another city. Someone else's nightmare.

When the all-clear sounded, Karl helped Frau Bernstein up the stairs. At the top, Frau Strauss took her arm.

'Margarete, don't be long,' she said to her daughter.

'I won't, Mutti. I'll be right in.'

Frau Strauss gave Karl a small smile before escorting Frau Bernstein in the direction of her apartment.

Karl waited, hand-in-hand with Grete, while the others quickly dispersed to their homes.

'I must get back,' he said. 'My parents will be worried.'

She took his face in her hands, her gaze roaming over his features as if to memorise them. 'You are my hero, Karl. Come back to me.'

'I will.' He kissed her, savouring the taste of her lips. Then, with one last look at her face, he turned and walked quickly away.

## CHAPTER 3

It was late by the time Jason arrived, his Audi S5 pulling into the drive with a squeal of tyres. He held me wordlessly and I clung to his warmth, taken by an inner cold that I couldn't dispel.

He didn't ask questions as I explained what had happened, my voice raw and shaky.

'I'm so sorry,' he said, when I'd finished. 'So, so sorry.' He took me in his arms again, stroked my hair. He knew what my grandparents had meant to me, had eaten at their table countless times while we were at university, helped plan the surprise party for their fiftieth wedding anniversary. His arms held me tight. Solid, alive.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

'I'm fine.' If you could define 'fine' as wanting to crawl into a hole, curl into a ball and hibernate until the nightmare went away. If it meant shivering with a cold that permeated far beyond the surface, one that no amount of blankets could cure. If it meant turning images over and over in my mind until I felt I would go crazy, then yeah, I was fine.

'Can I get you anything? Have you eaten?'

'I just want to sleep,' I said.

'Of course.'

I lay down on the bed next to him, staring at the ceiling and listening to his measured breaths as the night wore on. Despite the physical exhaustion, my brain wouldn't stop, replaying the events of the day, imagining what might have occurred in my grandparents' house, the terror they must have felt and the helplessness as they realised their fate. Wondering if they died quickly or had been left to suffer a lingering death, if one of them had experienced the horror of witnessing the attack on the other, if they'd tried to defend themselves or were murdered in cold blood. Wondering how they had died, and what was hidden under that sheet.

As the first rays of daylight filtered through the curtains, I slipped out of bed, donned a hoodie and track pants and headed for the beach, stumbling down the sandy path through the sea grass in my haste. I could hear the surf up ahead, saw the waves breaking onto the shore to bubble up the beach and recede again, and didn't slow until my feet were making footprints in the wet sand below the tideline. Kicking off my thongs, I waded through the freezing surf, feeling the sand slip away beneath my feet with every step. The waves pummelled against my legs, drenching the bottom of my pants.

Oma had loved this beach. The first time she'd seen the sea was when she'd arrived in Bremerhaven prior to boarding the ship for Australia. She'd been awed by its vastness, and fascinated by the unique ecosystem below the surface. Along the journey they'd seen dozens of dolphins, hundreds of fish and seabirds, and whales. Giants of the deep, she'd said.

I remembered the first time we'd spotted whales off this coast.

I was six and Lily had just turned thirteen and we were staying at the beach house with Oma and Opa while Mum and Dad were away in Melbourne. Lily was in one of her moods, refusing to come out of the bedroom, not even for whale-watching. So the three of us left her at the shack and took our picnic up on the rocks in the hopes of spotting a southern right or perhaps a humpback. We'd been there all afternoon, and were packing to leave when I spotted them barely a hundred metres off shore. There were three of them, two females and a calf, or at least that's what Oma thought. They put on a show the likes of which I've never seen since, jumping and diving and showing off as if they knew they had an audience.

Today the seas were empty, grey and choppy, as if it were reflecting my inner state, not even a fishing boat or a freighter in the distance.

I turned and looked back towards the beach house half-hidden by the dunes. It had been Oma's idea that I move down here once I'd finished university.

'It's a waste that place sitting empty,' she said, 'while you crowd my dining room with your computers and books and papers. It would be nice to have a meal without sharing it with your stories.'

I'd thought it was a good move. The peace and quiet of the beach was the perfect environment for writing, and I'd managed to write two novels in less time than it had taken me to write my first. Oma and Opa had regained their independence. Years had gone by that way and we'd all been happy with the arrangement. Until strangers had come and invaded my grandparents' home. And I hadn't been there to protect them.

I kept walking. Scenarios played like silent films in my head. Was it Oma, with her sharp hearing, who had first sensed that

something was wrong? Had Opa confronted the intruder, trying to protect her? Or had he surprised them on his way to the bathroom? Caught them in the act of burgling the house? Either way, why did the intruder kill them? They were in their eighties. What sort of threat could they be? Who could possibly hurt two elderly people asleep in their beds? What sort of monster did that?

Jason was in the kitchen when I returned, his hair wet from the shower. He'd made himself a coffee, using one of the good cups that Oma had insisted on giving me when I'd moved into the beach house. Seeing it on the table irritated me, although I didn't know why. All the other cups were in the sink waiting to be washed.

'There you are,' he said. 'I was worried.'

'Sorry. Couldn't sleep.'

He narrowed his eyes. 'You all right?'

'I'm fine.' Those words. When would they start to have meaning again?

'Do you want coffee? I can make you one.'

I shook my head. My wet track pants clung to my legs and I started to shiver.

'I need to contact Lily,' I said. 'And Erin. There's no way I'll get those revisions done by Monday.'

'She'll understand,' said Jason.

'And I need to try to find Mum.' I ran my hand through my hair. 'God, I have no idea how to even start doing that.'

'That's okay. I can help you.'

'I think Oma might have a number for her – I mean she might have when she was ... It would be in her address book.' I bit my lip.

Jason rubbed my shoulders. 'Relax. We'll get it done.'

‘Relax?’ I pulled away from his hands. ‘How can I relax? My grandparents have been murdered.’

‘I didn’t mean it like that,’ he said. His voice was steady, conciliatory. ‘I just meant that you don’t need to do everything right this minute. It can wait.’

I let my shoulders drop, took a deep breath. My emotions seemed to be taking over, swinging from one extreme to the other, heedless of the consequences.

‘Look, why don’t you come stay at my place for a few days? I have some work to do this weekend, but I can work from home and help you sort all this out.’ He took my hands in his. ‘I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be alone right now.’

I looked up and studied his features, the long straight nose, blue eyes set narrow on a broad face, his smile a little crooked. It was the smile that had drawn me to him in the first place, a smile that seemed conspiratorial and mocking at the same time, as if the two of us shared a secret joke unknown to anyone else in the room. I knew now that it was just an accident of birth, a genetic variation that had given him a dimple on one side and not the other.

‘I don’t know ...’

‘Think about it,’ he said, cupping my cheek and stroking it with his thumb. ‘Jeez, you’re freezing. Go and have a shower. I’ll make you something to eat.’

I nodded, although I wasn’t hungry. Logic told me he was right. That I needed to get on with the business of life: eat, sleep, shower, brush my teeth. It seemed too much of an effort.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I dug it out, glanced at the screen. An unknown number.

‘Juliet? It’s Detective Sophie Romanos from Major Crime.’

Sophie Romanos. I’d known it started with an ‘S’. I slotted

that name into my memory bank alongside Henry Norton's.

'Of course, how are you, Detective?' What a stupid question. I didn't care how she was. Unless someone had come knocking on her door to tell her a loved one had been murdered, I couldn't sympathise with any complaints.

'I'm well, thank you.' She didn't bother asking me how I was. 'Detective Norton and I would like to pop down to ask you a few more questions, if you don't mind. Some information has come up that we'd like to clarify with you.'

I hesitated, glanced up at Jason who was watching me with interest.

'Don't bother coming all the way down here,' I said, making a decision. The first real decision since I'd heard the news. 'I'll be in the city later today. I'd be happy to meet with you then.'

Jason smiled.

'Unless it's urgent?' Could they have apprehended a suspect already?

'No, it's not urgent,' said Detective Romanos. 'This afternoon will be fine.'

I disconnected the call and pocketed the phone. 'I'll pack some things.'

## CHAPTER 4

After Jason left, the beach house took on an oppressive quiet that was shrouded with memories. Driving up the highway to Adelaide in my Beetle, the memories continued to torture me no matter how I tried to stop them. Oma and Opa, Mum and Dad and Lily, and weekends we'd spent at the shack when I was a child. There had been happy times, plenty of them, but those memories were elusive, slipping away in the face of others full of drama and heartbreak. Like the night Dad caught Lily smoking pot on the beach with the neighbour's boy who was three years older than her; the time Mum found messages for Dad on the answering machine from a woman she didn't know and I'd cowered behind the bed all night with a pillow over my ears to escape the shouting in the next room; the day Dad got the results of his CT scan and found out he had brain cancer; the day Mum walked out and never came back. Memories that were all competing for top spot in my mind with the day Detectives Norton and Romanos knocked on the door to tell me my grandparents were dead. The words played over and over in my head like a loop tape. We're very sorry to tell you that they've both been found dead at the

scene. Dead at the scene. Identify the bodies.

A horn blared and I jerked the wheel to the left, narrowly missing the oncoming SUV. The road came into focus again as I took my foot off the accelerator, heart pounding. I pulled over to the side of the road and rested my head on the steering wheel. Getting myself killed wouldn't help anyone. It wouldn't erase any of the past, and it certainly wouldn't bring Oma and Opa back. I turned the radio on, flicking the tuner off RN to a commercial station, hoping to drown out the incessant questioning and bickering in my brain. Carefully, I pulled out onto the highway again and crawled the rest of the way to Adelaide.

As I approached the city the news came on, the reporter's voice deadpan and nasal as he reported on the latest drop in the polls for the prime minister, a thunderstorm in Perth that was causing flooding, and airport closures interrupting the holiday plans of travellers on the east coast. When he turned to the local news I felt a prickle crawl up my spine.

'Investigations have begun into the deaths of an elderly couple found dead in their home in Semaphore, early Friday morning. Police attended the scene at approximately 6 am after a neighbour noticed a broken window at the side of the house. A spokesperson from SAPOL stated that the deaths were considered as suspicious. Anyone with any information that may be of assistance to police is asked to call Crime Stoppers. An accident on the Southern Expressway has left two people dead and another in hospital, bringing the road toll -'

I snapped off the radio and continued to drive in silence.

It was 3:15 by the time I manoeuvred my Beetle into a parking space in the U-Park on Rundle Street. The detectives were waiting for me, as promised, in a booth at the back of the

café where we'd arranged to meet, two untouched cappuccinos on the table in front of them. Sophie Romanos's eyebrows rose almost imperceptibly when she saw me. Perhaps she'd thought I wouldn't come.

'Traffic, sorry,' I murmured as I slid into the booth.

'Not a problem,' said Detective Romanos. Was there a hint of disapproval in her voice? Her face was impassive.

'We appreciate you meeting with us,' said Detective Norton. 'I know this is a difficult time for you.'

I nodded. 'Anything I can do to help with the investigation. Have you figured out what happened? Do you have a suspect?'

He looked worn, weary, as if he'd seen too many crimes in his life. 'Not yet. The crime-scene technicians are still examining the site. We do know that a window was forced. We'll need your help to determine if anything was stolen.'

'Surely this wasn't just a break-in?' It seemed too inconsequential, too ordinary to explain the horrible thing that had happened. 'My grandparents didn't have anything of real value.'

'We're considering all possibilities. Crimes are often as much a matter of opportunity as design. They may have seen your grandparents as an easy target, perhaps a window left open at night, a door with a faulty lock.'

'No.' I shook my head emphatically. How many times had Opa lectured me about locking the beach house when I was home alone, even during the day? 'My grandfather was a stickler for security. It was the last thing he did at night, check all the locks. He had the deadbolt changed on the laundry door after some renovations because he thought the tradesmen may have made a copy of the key. He wasn't careless.'

‘Elderly people are often seen as easy targets,’ said Detective Romanos. ‘Your grandfather was ...?’

‘Eighty-four,’ I said, holding Romanos’s intense gaze. Her eyes were a strange colour, somewhere between green and grey, and hadn’t yet acquired the resigned acceptance apparent in her partner. ‘But he was as sharp as a tack. They both were.’

‘I’m not suggesting they weren’t,’ she said, ‘but the fact is that an elderly person is less likely to resist. And easier to frighten. Thieves know that, they capitalise on it.’

I stiffened. Opa wouldn’t have been easy to frighten. He wouldn’t lie down quietly and allow thieves to steal from him, or to threaten Oma. It wasn’t in his nature.

‘Can you think of anyone who might have wanted to harm your grandparents?’ asked Detective Norton.

I’d already thought about that question far too much. ‘No. They were ordinary people. Members of the German Club and the Bowls Club. They were friendly with their neighbours. They didn’t have any enemies.’

‘What about your grandfather’s business? Any disputes with employees? Money problems? Outstanding debts or unresolved claims?’

‘Nothing that I know of. The bakeries are doing well – there are plans to open one in Mile End next year. But he hasn’t been actively involved in running the company for years.’

‘Yes, but he still owns it, or so I understand? So he would still receive a substantial income from it.’

I nodded and he didn’t say any more, jotted down some notes.

‘We found something at the house and we’re hoping you may be able to shed some light on it,’ Detective Romanos said. ‘The imprint of a note written on a pad near the telephone. It said: *Lily*,

*Monday 20/6, 4:00.* Does that mean anything to you?’

Of course it did. It meant Lily was in town. Or had been. And no one had told me.

‘Lily’s my sister,’ I said. ‘I meant to try to contact her today, but somehow I haven’t managed to get around to it. We’re ... not talking. I haven’t spoken to her in almost a year. And this –’ I cleared my throat. ‘I don’t know how to tell her.’

I shouldn’t have let one fight get between us. I should have kept in touch.

‘Did she have regular contact with your grandparents?’

‘No. Well, Oma talks to her on the phone sometimes. Talked, I mean. From what I can gather, she rarely went to their house. We lived with Oma and Opa after Mum left, and they were pretty strict. Lily couldn’t handle it and she rebelled, big time. I can’t really remember if she ran away in the end or Opa threw her out, but I know he said that if she left she would never be coming back. That was decades ago. They never reconciled.’ And now they never would.

‘So you could say she was estranged from your grandfather?’

‘Yes, but –’

‘And what made you and her stop talking?’

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. ‘Money.’ It was always about money.

‘We’ll need to speak to her,’ said Detective Norton.

I swallowed, nodded without speaking.

‘And your mother, she’s Karl and Margarete’s daughter. Where is she? Have you contacted her?’ The question came from Detective Romanos.

‘I haven’t seen my mother since I was nine. I don’t know where to even begin looking for her.’ I stared at her as I said this,

and was somewhat gratified to see her drop her gaze. She looked not much older than me, maybe early thirties, but I sensed she hadn't been in this job long.

'You said she left?'

I turned back to Detective Norton. 'My father had brain cancer. It was a really tough time for all of us. After he died, my mum kind of fell apart. I didn't understand it at the time, but I suspect it was some form of mental illness. Depression. Anxiety. She walked out one day and didn't come back.'

'I'm sorry.'

I folded my arms, pressed them against my stomach. 'It was a long time ago.'

'Did your grandparents keep in contact with her?' asked Detective Romanos.

'I don't know. I've never asked. It just wasn't something we spoke about.'

'Has she ever tried to contact you?'

'Not that I know of.'

'Have you ever tried to find her?'

I paused before shaking my head. It was a good question. Why hadn't I tried to find her? 'I was hoping Oma might have a number for her in her address book.'

'What was her relationship like with your grandparents? Is it possible she came back after all these years?'

'If you're asking me if I think she could have killed them, then the answer is no. Not the woman I knew.'

She didn't flinch. 'But that was, what? Over twenty years ago?'

I stared at her. 'Look, she may not have been the perfect daughter – or mother – but she was never violent. She didn't do this.'

There was a pause and I thought she might push further, but Detective Norton intervened.

‘The pathologist noted that your grandfather had an indentation on the fourth finger of his right hand, as if he usually wore a ring?’

Immediately I saw Opa’s hands in my mind, gripping a favourite book in the evening, sanding a bit of wood to fix Oma’s linen chest, working with the beloved orchids that he cultured in a special hothouse at the back of the garden. Small, broad hands with short agile fingers and well-groomed fingernails, his wedding band on his left hand and the signet ring on the right.

‘He wore two rings. Why?’

‘He was wearing only one when the body was discovered. A wedding band, on his left hand. The other ring may have been taken. Was it valuable?’

‘I never thought so.’ Opa never took those rings off. It was as if his body had been desecrated.

‘We may still find it somewhere in the house,’ he said. ‘What does it look like?’

‘It’s a signet ring,’ I said, absorbing this new fact. It disturbed me far more than I would have expected. ‘Gold, with a W on the face.’

‘We’ll keep an eye out for it,’ he said. He had a kind face, his stubble flecked with grey, laugh lines around his eyes, or was it just from squinting into the sun?

‘When did you last see your grandparents?’ asked Detective Romanos.

‘Last Sunday. I had dinner with them.’ I’d left early to meet Jason and his friends for drinks. Had I even hugged them goodbye?

‘And you haven’t spoken to them since then?’ Her tone was neutral, but I sensed some judgement.

I flushed. 'No – I've been working.'

'And can you tell us where you were on the night of July 23rd into the early hours of the 24th?'

Although I should have been expecting it, the question took me by surprise and it must have shown on my face as I glanced from one to the other, at a loss for words.

'A routine question,' said Detective Norton. 'Nothing to worry about.'

'I – I was at home.' Unreasonably, my heart was thumping in my chest, as if I actually were guilty.

'All night?'

I turned my gaze to Detective Romanos. 'Yes, I was working. I have a deadline coming up.'

She nodded. 'Can anyone verify that?'

I pressed my lips together. 'No. I live alone. No one came to the house.'

She wrote something in her notebook.

'Did you speak to anyone on the phone?' asked Detective Norton.

'I – yes, Jason. Jason Forrester, my boyfriend. He called at about eleven.' My heart rate slowed. 'We spoke for half an hour or so.'

Detective Romanos nodded and kept writing before looking up. 'We'll need contact details for your sister.'

'She lives in Melbourne.' I opened the contacts on my phone and gave them Lily's number. 'I'd like to talk to her before you call. She should hear it from me.' And I knew she'd never forgive me if she found out I'd given her number to the police.

'We understand,' said Detective Norton. 'We'll be contacting her in due course. If you speak to her before us, please tell her

to get in touch. It's important we establish your grandparents' movements in the last few days prior to their deaths.'

I nodded.

'Thank you for your time.' He rose to his feet.

'We may have more questions in the next few days,' said Detective Romanos. 'Make sure you're contactable.'

'Of course. I'm not going anywhere,' I said. Was that what she wanted to hear? I couldn't tell and right then I didn't care. I hurried out.

## CHAPTER 5

Jason's apartment was dark when I arrived. There was no need to call out, I could tell he wasn't home. Flicking on the lights, I put my bag in the bedroom and collapsed on the sleek leather sofa, pulling off my shoes.

The interview with the detectives had rattled me, especially the news that Lily had been in town. What was she doing here three days before Oma and Opa were murdered? It was a coincidence, it had to be.

But the last time I'd seen her, she'd been in pretty bad shape. Asking for money, like she did every time she came to see me. That time I'd said no. Why, oh why, had I said no? If we hadn't fought, if she'd come to me instead, would things be different?

I pushed the traitorous thought away, grabbed my phone.

Lily's number came up as soon as I opened the contacts, still displayed from when I gave it to the detectives. What was I going to say to her? Or worse, what sort of message could I leave if I got a voicemail? Hi Lily, it's Juliet. Oma and Opa have been murdered. Give me a ring. It was ludicrous.

I took a deep breath and pushed the call button.

A mechanical voice came on after two rings. 'The number you have reached is not in service —'

I hung up. She'd changed her mobile number. Did that mean something? I scrolled up to the home number she'd given me when she first moved to Victoria five years ago, hesitated with my finger poised above the call symbol. An emergency number, she'd said. Well, this was an emergency.

Ten rings later, I was about to hang up when a male voice came on the line.

'Yeah, what?' It sounded like I'd woken him.

'Hello, could I speak with Lily Dunne please?' I cringed. If I was trying to sound like a government official I was doing a good job.

'You mean Lily Edwards?'

So she was married.

'She's not here.'

I could sense he was about to hang up. 'Wait! Do you know where I can reach her?'

'Why, what do you want with her?' He sounded suspicious now. 'What's she done?'

'Nothing. She hasn't done anything.' I took a deep breath. 'I'm her sister, Juliet. There's been a family emergency and I need to speak to her.'

There was a pause on the other end. 'You're that author lady?'

'Yes, that's right, Juliet Dunne, Lily's sister.'

Another pause. 'You got the money, then?'

He said it so quietly I wasn't sure I'd heard him correctly. 'Money?'

'Yeah, you know, from the old man.'

My heart started pounding. I'd been right. She was looking for

money. But from Opa? He'd vowed he'd never give her any, or help her in any way, and he'd stuck to it. What made her think he would change his mind? How had she convinced him to even meet with her?

'I need to talk to Lily.'

He hesitated, and for a minute I thought he was going to hang up on me, was already regretting what he'd said. 'She's not here. She went to Adelaide.'

So she was still in town.

'Where's she staying? Does she have a new mobile number?'

'She got a room at a hostel.'

'But you must have a number for her,' I insisted.

'Look, Lily would have rung you if she wanted to talk to you.'

'Please,' I said. 'You have to give me her number. I – I can help you get the money. She won't get a cent off my grandfather if I don't.'

He swore. 'I knew it. I told her to go to you first, but no, she had to do it her way. Wouldn't even give you a call. Stupid bitch never listens.' It sounded like Lily hadn't changed much. 'You really think you can get the money?'

'Of course,' I said. 'I just need to talk to Lily first.'

Heavy breathing and swearing under his breath.

'I don't know where she is, and that's the truth,' he said, finally. 'She went to Adelaide and she hasn't come back. I figured she couldn't get the money and was too chicken to tell me. Either that or she got the money and pissed off. She won't answer my calls, or my texts. The lady at the hostel said she left a couple of days ago.'

I was getting worried now. 'Have you reported her missing?'

'Don't be stupid.' His voice was agitated again. 'She's just

pissed off, like she's done a hundred times before. Don't go calling no cops.'

'I just meant she might have had an accident or something.'

'Yeah, an accidental memory failure. Forgettin' what old Earl's done for her.' His laugh sent a chill down my spine. There was a pause as if he was weighing up the advisability of trusting me. 'Don't go calling no cops,' he repeated. 'I'll give you the number for her mobile. And when you find her, tell her to get her fucking arse home with or without the money.'

He gave me the number and I rang off.

Despite what he'd said, I knew something had happened. I felt it in my gut. I'd always half expected to get a call from someone saying she was dead, but now, with what had happened to Oma and Opa ... She was tied into it somehow. It couldn't be a coincidence that she'd contacted them days before they were murdered. And now she'd disappeared. Had she been kidnapped? Was she locked in a shed somewhere, a cabin in the woods, the boot of a car? Lying dead in an alley, as Oma and Opa had lain dead in their house? I clenched my teeth together as the other thought slipped unbidden into my mind. Or was she on the run? Could she have ...? I pushed the thought away. I couldn't go there. I wouldn't.

My hands shook as I punched the number into my phone.

'Hi, it's Lily. Can't talk right now. You know what to do.' It hadn't even rung once. The phone was turned off. Or dead.

'Lily? It's Jules.' The nickname came out automatically even though I hadn't used it for years. 'I need to talk to you. Something's happened.' I cleared my throat. This wasn't the message I'd wanted to leave, panicked, out of control. I pitched my voice a bit lower. 'Ring me as soon as you get this. It's really important.' I paused. 'Seriously, Lily. Ring me. Whatever's going on, I can help.'

## CHAPTER 6

*Stuttgart, Germany, August 1948*

The train pulled into the crowded station, brakes squealing, steam belching from the locomotive. The acrid smell of burning coal poured unhampered into the open boxcar where Karl sat propped against the wall, the smell mingling with the funk of unwashed bodies and the stink of the bucket in the corner that served as a latrine. After five days of train travel, his skin was smothered with greasy soot and he longed for a tub of steaming hot water. Failing that, a cold-water tap would do and he vowed to search for one as soon as he disembarked.

As the train lurched to a stop, the elderly woman next to Karl fell against him, unwilling to let go of the bulging sack in her arms.

*‘Entschuldigung,’* she muttered, clutching the hessian sack closer to her chest. The action caused the base of a candlestick to project from a small hole in the bottom and she carefully tucked it back into the bulk of the bag. The sack itself was grimy and threadbare, the farmer’s stamp on the side faded.

*‘Macht nichts,’* Karl said. *‘Allow me to assist you.’* He reached

down and helped her to rise. It was a warm day, but she wore a thick overcoat, much too large and patched at the elbows, a kerchief over her grey hair, and heavy boots, dull and scuffed with wear. Although Karl wasn't a tall man, he stood head and shoulders above her. Looking closer, he realised she was perhaps not as old as he'd first thought, only prematurely aged by exhaustion and malnutrition.

She smiled tiredly up at him. *'Danke.'*

'You are alone?' asked Karl, concerned for the woman. It was a dangerous time to be travelling alone, even for a young man like himself.

Tears welled in her eyes and for a moment Karl regretted his question. No one had been left untouched by the war and he hadn't meant to cause her pain.

She didn't appear to be offended, however. 'My husband and I were to meet with my son in Freiburg,' she said. 'Josef, my husband ... he fell ill ...' She let the statement hang in the air and shuffled towards the door of the boxcar.

'I'm sorry,' said Karl. He jumped onto the platform and then helped her down, shielding her from the jostling passengers alighting from the train. He hesitated, but there was nothing he could do for her. 'I hope you find your son,' he said finally. 'And guard your belongings. There are desperate men who wouldn't hesitate to relieve you of your bread.' He nodded towards the loaf of overcooked cornbread visible through the top of the sack.

*'Danke,'* she said. 'God bless.'

Karl watched her disappear into the crowd, the sight of her hunched back drawing a tightness within his throat. He could imagine too easily that somewhere in Germany his own mother also was homeless and alone, crossing a platform in search of

refuge. Running a hand through his hair, he turned away. There were thousands, possibly millions like her; men, women, even children wandering, searching for family and friends. He couldn't help them all, and this woman would be just as likely to find her son without his help as with it. At least she knew where he was. That was more than Karl could say for his own family.

He pushed his way through the crowd towards the station. Men and women jostled for position inside the entrance, scouring the message wall for a familiar name: husband, wife, neighbour, anyone who might give them news of a loved one. Of greatest concern to Karl, his parents, Dietrich and Kirsten Weiss. His eyes skimmed the wall without much hope. He'd spent months searching for them, ever since he'd been released from the POW camp, moving from city to city, zone to zone, scrounging for food scraps, begging work from farmers, sleeping under bridges and in haystacks, hitching rides on trains and trucks. All in hopes of finding some word of his parents. With no success. He'd spoken to many people from Halle, all with their own tales of the bombings and the occupation, their own questions about whom he had seen on his travels, whether he had word of a cousin, a brother, a family friend. Not one of them had heard anything of Dietrich and Kirsten Weiss. He was beginning to think he would never find them.

He moved further along the wall, murmuring apologies as he manoeuvred through the tightly packed horde, craning to see. Catching a glimpse of the word 'Halle', he pushed forward, reading quickly.

*Looking for our son, Kurt.*

Despite himself, he couldn't stop the weight of disappointment from sinking into his gut. He read no further, except to glance

at the names at the bottom of the notice. Konrad and Amelie Schultz. Strangers.

At least Grete was safe, or as safe as she could be in the Soviet Zone. The few letters that had reached him at the POW camp had been blunt. He wasn't to come home. Conditions were inhumane, rations at starvation levels, older folk like her mother falling ill, many dying from malnutrition and disease, and young men such as him drafted into forced labour, shipped to the Soviet Union with no prospect of release. Besides, she reasoned, there was nothing for him in Halle. With his parents evacuated in the last stages of the war, and his only brother killed when his fighter plane was shot down in an air raid, only Grete was left in Halle. And she would not allow him to risk his freedom for her. The truth was, however, that no amount of logic could stop the urgent yearning in his heart to be with her. It was a constant ache in his breast.

He had just turned away, when he heard a voice calling out.

'Karl! Karl Weiss!'

Tall and gangly, a man came limping towards him, painfully thin. At first Karl couldn't think who it was, but as the man came closer, the gaunt features morphed into a face that he recognised.

'Hans?' Karl said. 'Hans Whemar? Is it really you?' The last time he'd seen Hans was in a small village in Poland, sprawled on the cobblestones, his leg a bloody mess, shells whistling overhead.

'Of course it's me, *du Dummkopf*. What's the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost.' Hans embraced him warmly, thumping him on the back.

In some ways, Karl had ceased to be awed by fate. Being in the right place at the right time had been the survival guide of the war years. If you were in the right place at the right time, you lived.

If you were in the wrong place at the wrong time, you died. Fate had been good to Karl. It looked like it had been kind to Hans as well.

‘I thought I’d never see you again,’ he said.

‘You think I’d let a little thing like a grenade do me in? The Whemars are made of tougher stuff than that.’

‘Where have you been then? Did they send you home?’

‘They did indeed send me home,’ said Hans, ‘but not for long. Come, let’s get out of this madhouse and I’ll tell you.’

They left the station and joined the slow-moving stream of refugees making their way towards the city. A few of them pushed carts or wagons loaded with possessions. Most carried their belongings on their backs, or clutched to their person, like the old woman on the train. Trucks and jeeps darted here and there, their drivers intent on their business, blaring their horns to clear the way. Karl followed Hans in silence, adjusting his pace to accommodate his friend’s limping gait. The sight of bombed-out buildings and piles of rubble lining the road was an all-too-familiar picture that he had seen in every major centre across Germany. And yet, still, it pained him to see this thriving, vibrant city reduced to a shell.

Hans turned down a side street where a long line of women queued in front of a row of shops; a butcher, a greengrocer, a bakery. Karl glanced at each woman surreptitiously as he passed them, as he always did, on the off-chance that one of the shabby, bone-weary figures was his mother. He even paused to peer through the window of the bakery at the shopkeeper behind the counter, for his parents’ bakery in Halle had been their life, and he couldn’t pass one without the small hope that his mother might be there, an apron tied tight around her waist, smiling and joking

with the customers. The shelves were almost bare, however, and the young woman behind the counter was not smiling, but arguing loudly with the customer at the front of the line over a small loaf of coarse unleavened bread on the counter between them.

‘Come,’ said Hans, with a touch on his arm. ‘It’s just here.’

He led Karl into an alley, where he pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked a heavy wooden door.

Karl followed him up the stone stairway. ‘What is this place?’

‘My lodgings,’ said Hans, opening another door at the top of the stairs. ‘We won’t be disturbed here.’

The room was not large, but well furnished with two beds pushed together, a polished oak dressing table with a porcelain wash basin and jug resting on top, and a sturdy table with two chairs. There was a radiator under the window, a window that had real glass still intact, and an electric hot plate on a folding table in the corner.

‘You’re fortunate to acquire such luxurious quarters for you and your family,’ said Karl.

Hans tossed the satchel he’d had slung over his shoulder onto the bed and removed his overcoat before turning to face Karl. ‘I have no family,’ he said in a voice that did not invite discussion.

Karl didn’t ask questions. Another small hollow opened up inside him and swallowed up Hans’s wife, Annaliese, and their infant son, Jürgen. Although Karl hadn’t met them, he felt as if he’d known them well, through the stories and photographs Hans had shared during those long nights on the Eastern Front.

‘This is all for you?’ he said instead.

Hans nodded. ‘*Wunderbar, nicht wahr?*’

‘But how?’ Karl had seen whole families accommodated in

rooms of this size, parents, children, grandparents all crowded together, the furniture long ago broken up for firewood, a thin mattress on the floor the only comfort.

Hans shrugged. 'Does it matter? Now I'll share it with you. Come, clean yourself up and we'll talk. I want to hear about all your travels, my friend.'

\*

Hans had food. Real food. Dark rye bread, an entire loaf, cracked and crusty on top. Blood sausage, cheese, an orange, even beer. Karl hadn't seen food such as this in years and was embarrassed to find himself salivating as Hans cut into the Blutwurst and the rich meaty smell burst forth. The cheese was Cambozola, pungent and creamy, and they spread it on thick slices of the bread, along with the sausage. Hans arranged the meal on china plates and they sat at the table, covered with a faded linen tablecloth, and feasted until Karl felt he would burst. Sitting back, he swallowed the last of his beer, sparing a thought for the woman he had helped from the train. She could have used some of this food.

'So tell me,' said Karl as Hans pulled a cigarette from his pocket, offered one to Karl, and then lit up when he declined. 'What happened after I left you on the banks of the Gniloy Tikich? I thought for sure you were dead.'

Hans took a long drag from his cigarette and let the smoke drift from his mouth. 'I would have been, if you hadn't dragged me away from the bridge. The Russians were hunting down anything that moved.'

'I remember,' said Karl, although he wished he didn't. He'd dragged Hans as far south as he could, and then been forced to

abandon him and scramble across a makeshift bridge with the remains of his unit.

‘I played possum for several hours until the rear guard came through. They picked me up and tossed me onto a wagon along with the other wounded. I owe you my thanks.’

Karl shrugged. ‘*Nichts zu danken*. You’d have done the same for me.’ And he would have. It was what you did in the army. No one was left behind, not if it was at all possible to evacuate them. Besides, Hans was more than a fellow soldier, he was a friend. Six years older than Karl, and a veteran of the war since its inception in 1939, he was like the older brother Karl had lost, looking out for him as a brother would, teaching him, guiding him. Karl would have been dead within a week if it hadn’t been for Hans taking him under his wing.

‘Nevertheless, I do thank you. Look what it’s got me.’ The bitterness was apparent in Hans’s voice, as he made a gesture with his hand to encompass the room, the remains of the food and his lame leg.

‘It looks to me like you’ve done pretty well for yourself. You’re alive, for one. And this apartment, the food. How do you manage it?’

Hans stared a moment at Karl and then looked away, taking a quick pull on his cigarette. ‘I paid a great price, Karl, and I would give it all away in a second if it would change things.’ Draining the last of his beer, he put the empty bottle on the table with a thump, then laughed harshly. ‘Pay no mind to a maudlin cripple,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘There are things that are best left unsaid.’

Karl frowned, but didn’t press the matter. ‘What happened then, after you were rescued?’

Hans leaned back in his chair, his face pensive. ‘You know how it goes. There were so many casualties in the field hospital that day. Not enough doctors, not enough nurses and not nearly enough pain medication.’ He rubbed his leg, as if in memory. ‘They set my leg as best they could and sent me on my way to the military hospital in Marienbad. It took me over a week to get there. The trains, when there was one ... well, shall we just say infection set in on the journey ... it wasn’t unusual.’ He shrugged. ‘I was in a bad way when I arrived, but I healed, eventually, and when they were sure I was no longer in danger of dying, they sent me home to Berlin.’ He took another drag on his cigarette. ‘Have you seen what’s happened to Berlin?’

‘I’ve heard stories.’

Hans shook his head. ‘The city I knew is gone. It’s in ruins. Stuttgart looks like a city reborn compared to Berlin.’

‘The war has left the whole of Germany in ruins, I think,’ Karl said.

Hans grunted. ‘And carved up among the victors like a piece of meat shared between the dogs.’ He pulled on his cigarette and exhaled the smoke forcefully from his mouth.

‘You said you weren’t home for long. Surely they didn’t send you back to the front?’

‘With this leg?’ Hans gave it a flick with his hand. ‘No. Unfit for active duty. But some poor bugger got himself killed on the way to work in a general’s office one day, and they needed a replacement quick smart. I was a legal clerk before I signed up, I was an obvious choice.’ He raised an eyebrow sardonically. ‘The leg is not a hindrance to sitting at a desk.’

Karl had heard similar stories from others. The war had left a shortage of workers across the breadth of the land, and even those

honourably discharged from active duty were pressed into service elsewhere.

‘And what about you, *mein Freund?*’ said Hans after a moment of silence. ‘I’m glad to see you alive and well.’

Karl shrugged. ‘My story isn’t so interesting. I received a couple of minor injuries during action near Daleszyce not long after you were injured; a burst eardrum, a concussion. Spent a few days in the field hospital and then was given new marching orders. We were in Czechoslovakia when we heard of the Führer’s suicide. A month later we surrendered to the Americans and that was it.’

Not entirely, of course. His experiences in the POW camp were fresh in his mind. He’d been treated fairly well, by all accounts, his English skills allowing him to act as a liaison between the American soldiers and the POWs. But still, the hunger, the cold, and the fear of being turned over to the Soviets, had worn on all their psyches. There had been talk of escape those first days, when rumours of prisoner handovers were widespread and all that stood between them and freedom was a barbed wire fence around a muddy field. Two men made a panicked attempt to sneak out one night in the dark of the moon. They’d been gunned down as they ran. A week later the whole camp was loaded onto trucks and moved to a larger centre in the American Zone. Starvation rations still, meagre shelter, and disease rampant among the prisoners, but as safe as they could be from the vengeance of the Soviets.

‘What will you do now?’ asked Hans, squinting through the smoky haze that was building around him.

‘I don’t know. I’ve been searching for word of my parents, but there’s been nothing. No sign of them at all despite checking every message board from Hamburg to Munich, asking at churches, town halls, the DP camps. Even the Red Cross can find no trace

of them after all this time. I don't want to give up, but ...' He glanced up at Hans. 'My inclination is to go back to Halle, to be with Grete. She's all I have left.'

'The Soviet Zone is not a place you want to be right now, Karl.'

'I know. She's warned me against it as well. If I return, I'll most likely be shipped off to a labour camp in Siberia, but what can I do? I have no mind to do anything else.'

Hans took a last drag on his cigarette, then leaned forward and stubbed it out in the dish that served as an ashtray. 'I'm sorry to say your story is not uncommon.' He shrugged and flipped his hand in dismissal. 'I don't need to tell you, you've seen it yourself.'

'I have.' The streets were full of refugees from all parts of Europe, the message board at the train station plastered with notes in a dozen languages.

'Will she not leave Halle, come to you? Many have fled the Soviet Zone.'

Karl shook his head. 'Her mother is ill. She won't leave her.'

'So.' Hans was watching him. 'The question then is, what will you do now? You, Karl Weiss.' He pointed his finger at Karl for emphasis. 'Will you spend your life searching for something you may never find? Because, let me tell you, as much as the war has separated families and displaced them from their homes, it's made widows and orphans of far more.'

Karl looked up at the tone of his voice. 'It has, and I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry for you, Hans. Anneliese –' Hans's jaw tensed and he stopped before pushing on. 'I know how much Anneliese meant to you, and Jürgen. I'm truly sorry for your loss.'

A moment of silence passed before Hans relaxed back in his chair. 'Thank you, Karl. I'll tell you the truth. I'm lost without

them. I wake each morning, and for a split second, I expect to see her in the bed next to me. Each time, it's like I've lost her all over again.'

Karl didn't know what to say.

'It's hard, so hard. You must have something more, Karl. You must make something more for yourself.'

'I can't just abandon my family.'

Hans turned his gaze on Karl again. 'Of course not. And if there was any hope of finding them, I would never suggest otherwise. But truthfully, if they're alive, they're likely starting a new life elsewhere. Without you, for surely if they were looking for you, you would have found them. And if they're dead ...' His voice softened. 'Likely you will never know how or where or why no matter how long you search.'

Karl swallowed.

'Look at you,' said Hans, gesturing towards Karl's gaunt frame, his tattered clothing. 'Is this what they would want for you?'

Karl said nothing for a long time. The sausage seemed to stir in his stomach, a fatty lump on the verge of being regurgitated.

'Grete is right. As much as I want to, I can't return to Halle,' he said finally. 'Perhaps Lahr, where I'm registered with the French. It's Grete's hometown, and I claimed it as my own.'

Hans shrugged. 'Halle, Lahr, it's much the same. You'll be living in a Germany under foreign control, where the defeated are at the mercy of the victors.'

'If not Germany, then where? What are you suggesting?'

Hans leaned forward and looked Karl directly in the eyes. 'Europe is a wasteland. It'll take years to rebuild and even longer for the scars to heal. This war will not be easily forgotten, and Germans will be made to pay long into the future. Come with me

and make a new life for yourself, in a new land.'

Karl frowned. 'Where? America?' It hadn't occurred to him to leave Germany, let alone Europe.

'No, not America. I'm talking about Australia.'

'Australia?' The word sat strangely on Karl's tongue. He knew very little of Australia except that it was a long way from Germany. A very long way.

'Australia,' said Hans. 'Do you know how much land there is in Australia? Over seven million square kilometres. And a population of only seven and a half million. They're crying out for immigrants, even paying their passage to entice them to come.' He poked Karl in the chest. 'You're a survivor, Karl. You were meant for great things. In Australia you can make that happen.'

'But Grete —'

'Grete has chosen to stay in Halle.'

'Only because her mother is ill.'

'Whatever the reason,' said Hans. 'I know how much she means to you, Karl, but if she won't come to you, then you're apart wherever you are. You can't return to Halle. A strong young man like you will be hauled off to a Russian labour camp before your feet hit the station platform.'

Karl couldn't deny it.

Hans gestured towards the window. 'Is this how you want to live? Is this how you want her to live? Struggling day in and day out just to put enough food on the table, a roof over your head? In Australia, you can have land, a good job, a chance to make a better life. When you're settled you can send for her, and her mother too, once she recovers. Make a new life for all of you.'

'I'm not sure it's that easy,' said Karl. 'The Russians are making it more and more difficult for Germans to leave the Soviet Zone.'

‘And your being here makes it easier? I think not.’ Hans’s voice was persuasive. ‘Come. Isn’t that what your parents would want for you? The opportunity to be successful? To build a good life for you and your family?’

Karl stood and went to look out the window. The building across the street had been bombed, the glass blown from all the windows, half the roof caved in, the walls crumbling in places. And yet a small boy stood at a window, looking out into the street as Karl was. Behind him, an elderly woman stooped over a pot where something boiled on a hotplate. Karl didn’t think they were having blood sausage and beer for their dinner. More likely the watery, tasteless swill that the authorities called split pea soup and the Germans called ‘the green horror’. What life would there be for him and Grete here? Would they bring children into this world of devastation? Would Grete even think of leaving Halle if all he had to offer was what he saw before him? He gave a thought to his parents, his stomach tightening at the thought of leaving Germany with no word of their whereabouts. But it had been three years since they were evacuated, and not a word of them to be found. What were the chances of finding them now?

A figure loomed behind the small boy, his mother, her hair in a dishevelled knot at the base of her neck. Strain and weariness were etched into her very being. Karl caught her eye and put up his hand in greeting. She turned hastily away, pulling the boy with her.

Karl sighed and turned back to see Hans watching him closely.

‘It’s tempting,’ he said. ‘If I could only speak to Grete ...’

‘That could be arranged.’

Hans’s face was unreadable. Karl studied him a moment longer before nodding. ‘Okay, I’ll think about it.’

‘That’s all I can ask.’