

## Chapter 1

It was September 10th, 1978. Back in those days, I was still very much a working man; over a decade and a half spent into a career that provided very well, though lacking any of the vigors or flights of fancy that attracted my peers. In my own way, I can say that I was proud of the position. I served as a traveling petrographer for one of the largest coal mining conglomerates in all of Europe.

As you might imagine, petrography is highly regulated work. Testing of peat and soil samples must be done periodically and in consistent intervals. The coal itself must be microanalyzed quarterly to ensure that the properties and qualities of the material being extracted is suitable for our clients.

In a word, the job was routine. Even with the travel, there was a schedule with the places in which I visited and when they were to be visited - a loop of mining facilities scattered throughout the black forest region of Germany and France. The only exceptions to my strictly planned workload being when new mining ground was being tested, or expansions to existing operations were being made.

August and September of that year had been an exception to the rule.

Reports of dust explosions from volatile product had begun circulating among our buyers, and sure enough, contaminated samples began coming in from all across the eastern regions of the Black Forest shortly thereafter. As a result, my days became even more filled with talking to mine supervisors and collecting earthen samples, my evenings with train and car rides through the low

mountains and dales of the region, and my nights with the tedious beleaguerments of tuning electron microscopes.

After the first month of testing, I was tired, and feeling quite ragged, but eventually there was only one more site to go - a decent sized town named Freiberg in Germany.

Freiberg was a quaint place, though at this point in my career it had become slightly familiar to me. The populace itself had no figures of great renown, nor did the town possess any standout attractions which appealed to the modern traveller, yet the city itself was so long lasting that every junction felt that it could have been at one point a location of prominence and significance. That is to say, there was a charm to the place. The elevation differential of any two places was exceedingly low, and the pitch of the roofing on the Gothic-style buildings was similarly gentle in almost all cases - excluding the Church of Saint Petri and that of the local cathedral.

Speaking again of the locals, they presented gentle in nature. However, there was always something ever so off about our interactions. Nothing particularly hostile, or even unfriendly, just something... odd. An uncomfortably long pause when conversing here and there, a squint of the eyes when asked particular questions, and many of the folk of older generations would refuse to stay out for drinks past nightfall.

I never felt put off enough to inquire about any of these behaviors, but these quirks were ever present.

Perhaps it was some issue of translation. I was a stranger to them. No matter how much of their language I had learned, my native tongue and customs were not of their own. At the time you can be sure I thought nothing of it.

As I stepped off the train and onto Freiberg's station platform, with nothing but the briefcase in my hand and the clothes on my back, I was greeted by a warm column of late summer air. Shimmering rays of golden light intermingled overhead with the cloud cover on the horizon, marking that day was soon to close.

With little time remaining, I hurriedly made my way to a familiar haunt – a cozy bed and breakfast at the edge of town, *Erika's Haus*. The establishment was simply but aptly named. The sole proprietor, Erika Gross, had inherited the property following her husband's death in the war. Perhaps by some matter of fiscal or social necessity, she had converted a large portion of the home into accommodations for travelers.

As I neared Erika's, a new peculiarity of the locals was imposed upon me. Several times throughout the walk to my destination, groups of neighbors of an older cohort, conversing outside their homes, ceased their discussions to serve me wary, sidelong glares as I passed them by. At times, they waited until satisfied in the belief that I was out of earshot before continuing their conversations in hushed tones. At other points, the feeling of their stares lingered on the back of my head until they could no longer see me. My neck hairs stood on end.

The walk, normally a pleasant fifteen-minute stroll, felt like the better part of an hour. When the familiar white walls intermixed with timber beams, *Fachwerkhäuser*, though you and I are more familiar calling such construction Tudor, and orange roof of the two-story cottage came into view, the anxiety that had built up from innumerable concerned, distrustful, and at points even hateful looking stares began seeping out from my body.

Imagine my horror when I saw the sign on the door, *geschlossen* - closed!

"No, no!" marching up to the door, I rasped my knuckles against it, knocking loudly thrice against heavy oak. A pair of young women who had been walking in my direction down the center of the street watched my sideshow intently as I continued knocking.

"Erika, it's Matthew. Matthew Donovan."

Above me, I heard the sound of a window being unlatched, shortly followed by a *cuh-thunk* of it being opened. A grey-haired head poked out from the window above, and a pair of rather angrily-squinted blue eyes glared down on me.

"Herr Donovan?" The old lady's scowl diminished into a look of confusion, which reflected in her intonation. "Herr Donovan, you must be going."

"Missus Gross, I would not ask it of you if I were not in need." Laying on my best charm, I took two small steps away from the door, which had previously been subject to my beating, in order to make it easier for her to see me. "Besides, I have no companions with me which would also need put up."

"Did you see the sign?"

"Yes," I responded, sheepishly.

"Did you skip learning to read in your studies, Herr Donovan?"

Her eyes permeated an aura suggesting that she was attempting to will the manifestation of daggers into my countenance. It added a mere fraction of a moment of pause to my response.

"*Deutsch* was not mandatory learning, my good lady." Having nothing of any true value besides currency to offer, I pressed an attempt at appealing to the virtue of my reluctant host.

“- Ah hah, and yet you say *Deutsch*, instead of German!” Suddenly, Mrs. Gross’ head blipped out from my view, and the window forcefully slammed shut.

“Great,” I muttered to myself.

Erika’s was far and away the closest inn to the mine, but a cab ride departing from anywhere else in town would not add much more time. Walking to another inn at this point, however, was not an activity in which I had much of a fancy in undertaking. Setting my suitcase down gently on the ground, I allowed myself a moment to satisfy an anxiety-reducing tick of running my hands through my hair.

After a few seconds of meticulous hand-combing, I retrieved my briefcase, and turned back to the street.

As I began to walk, a voice called out behind me, “*Herr*, Donovan? Where are you going?”

## Chapter 2

There was no doubt in my mind that the front room of Erika's Haus had at one point been a mudroom - perhaps even a lavish one. It had all the proper trappings; a wide amount of space for an entryway, cabinetry on one side which had been converted into sequestered coat racks, and on the other side, hidden away behind two sealed doors, were the hookups for a washing machine and dryer — though those had long been removed, as I had at one point discovered while rummaging around for a misplaced scarf during one of my previous visits.

Presently, it was serving as Erika's lecture hall.

The woman, around half my height, looked like a marching ant as she paced back and forth as she rambled on a list of instructions, "- and then you will replace the blinds over the kitchen window."

"Missus Gross, please, I can just pay you double your standard rate. I can afford it," I pleaded.

She stopped her pacing and stared at me with a stone-cold expression, "You will do that too." She said, deadpan.

"Consider this my gift to you. One day, when you have a wife, you will need to be able to do these things without complaining like an English boy." Erika said, surely teasing, but neither her voice nor her expression bore any indication of it.

Writing the delivery off as typical German-humor, I changed topic, "Missus Gross, why was your sign set to closed? You seem in good health, is -"

Something flashed in Erika's eyes as I asked, and the hints of a frown dragged at the corners of her mouth, "Because we are closed. I trust you can find your way to a room without trouble."

Erika's eyes fell to the floor for a moment, as if she were unable to look me in the eye, but she just as quickly returned them to meet my own, "*Herr* Donovan, please be in by sundown."

Turning away from me, she walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.  
*She said 'please'*, I thought, in disbelief.

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