

Revontuli

A novel

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Chapter 1

Traundorf, Southern Bavaria, July 1st, 2013

The cemetery was not behind the church, as is so often the case in Europe. It was a short walk up a path on the hillside that looked out over the valley. Long ago, there had been a chapel, but the roof and walls had given way to vines and bushes, until only piled stones and an arch could be seen emerging from the forest's edge. It was hard to see where the forest stopped and the churchyard began. The villagers continued to use the graveyard on the hill long after the chapel was only a ruin, even after the new church was built in the valley below, fifty years ago. The tallest of the markers are visible from the village, crowning the winding path that leads up from below.

Marit started up the path. It was sunny and hot, and she could hear her own rhythmic huffing and puffing as she took each step. Her legs strained against the slope, but she kept a steady pace, leaning more heavily against her walking stick and sweating beneath the scarf that covered her head. The swallows from the park had followed her, and she smiled as they flitted back and forth through the bushes on either side of the path. She was happy for their company.

The sounds of the valley became more distinct as she climbed, each one marking a different note in a pastoral symphony: the cars from the road that ran around the village on the far side of the Ache River, accelerating as they left the houses behind them; the cabinet maker sawing lumber in his workshop; a tractor spreading fertilizer over a field, or maybe cutting hay. She heard each one alone, a separate layer on backdrop that was the forest and fields where she walked.

Gradually, each faded, before becoming lost in the growing sounds of the alpine meadows: first, the chirping of the birds, then the crickets in the afternoon sun. A brook off to the right, probably the same one that ran into the village, cascaded noisily down a

rocky face into a shallow pool of water. A cow's bell clanged high above her as she finally reached the top of the path and the gate to the cemetery.

She paused and turned back toward the valley, both to catch her breath and admire the view. It was three hundred feet down to the houses below.

She looked at the beading sweat on her wrinkled hands. Her veins were swollen rivers, bulging and pulling at her skin instead of carving valleys through the ridges. Her heart beat strongly in her head. She was still breathing very heavily, but the sounds of the meadow were louder than her breathing now. *Perhaps it is not just the steep walk*, she thought.

She had arrived, and the determined serenity of the last weeks gave way to a gripping anxiety that the birds and the sun and the view could not truly quell. In her heart she was seventeen again, but her body could not forget nearly seventy years of waiting. Sixty-nine years since she had held him and been held, since she had touched his lips and seen the smile in his eyes that revealed the softness and gentle life of these mountains she was seeing for the first time.

It is a beautiful country, she thought, looking out again over the valley, *very different from Norway—not as rugged, not as untamed, but also beautiful*. A different beauty, a shaped, tailored beauty. *God's country*, Hans used to say. *Yes, this was God's country*. A lot more like her native Norway than California. After the long years in America, it was good to be back in Europe.

Behind her, the small graveyard was a world unto itself. Every plot was meticulously manicured, with fresh flowers laid out at many of the markers. Beyond the small iron fence that ran around the yard and lost itself in the woods, there were meadows and pastures that fell off toward the valley below. The meadows were awash with the flowers of the mountain. At her feet lay the entire narrow valley: Traundorf directly below, held close to the hillock by the winding arm of the Ache River, sliced in two by the stream that flowed down from above. The river flowed from right to left, and behind it were a few houses, as though they had slipped through its strong grasp and

spilled over to the other side. The road ran through the valley, and beyond were more fields and the majestic Oberstein Mountains. Even at this distance, the mountains loomed over her, dark in shadow. She faced them bathed in sunlight.

Marit turned and pushed the gate open. It answered with a loud creak. Hans' plot was not hard to find, toward the back, a single marker, at the end of a row.

Grass had not yet grown to cover the freshly turned earth. His wife was not there.

Just Hans, beneath a simple marker.

Hans wanted to be alone, and he was.

Marit laid her walking stick on the ground and sat down next to Hans. She breathed more slowly now, but still her heart raced. She ran her fingers through the blades of grass next to the grave, as though she were stroking his hair.

He was with her for the first time since coming to the village from her American home, for the first time since parting almost seventy years ago, in far away Norway. She bent her head forward slightly and wiped the tears that began to trickle down her cheeks.

Tears.

She tried to remember when she had last cried, but it was a long time ago. She couldn't remember when, and she couldn't remember the feeling. They flowed steadily now: tears of joy, not the grief she had expected. She had grieved quietly for Hans for most of her life. Around her she again sensed the heat of the afternoon sun, but the warmth also came from inside now, from the knowledge that he was here.