

## One

# ESCAPE TO THE BARN

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OH NO, IT WAS happening again! Conflict regarding religion necessitated flight. Kalman ran from the house to the barn, ardently attempting to remove the avalanche of anxiety that had just enveloped him. Yes, indeed, it was an ardent attempt! If you could only have seen the anguished look on his face, you would have thought the world was coming to an end. And it was—in *his* mind. He was truly scared. At only five years old, he was overwhelmed with sadness every time his mother and father argued about their different religious beliefs. He just wanted God to make everyone in his family happy. It seemed easy enough for God to accomplish. To a five-year-old, anything was possible. He just wanted peace. So off to the barn he ran. It was his escape place. His big sister Teri followed him with a children's Bible storybook under her arm. "There goes Kalman again," she always muttered whenever her parents got angry with each other. Even though she was only eleven years old, she'd been entrusted to care for her little brother. After all, there were eleven of them, and since their mother was nearly always overwhelmed with tending to her many responsibilities, she'd made assignments for the older children to look after the younger ones.

Kalman looked up from his crouched position. Teri! She always helped make him feel better. Kalman loved her. She was the bright star that shone through every dark cloud of fear that came over him. What



a sensitive boy he was. He hadn't learned anything about bravery yet. So far in his young life, he knew he could count on Teri, and that was all that mattered.

They curled up together with the book. She opened it to his favorite story and began reading. Nearing the end, she read, "And in the furnace were four men."

"But three were thrown in," Kalman argued with a mischievous grin on his face.

They'd read the Bible story in the book of Daniel about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego many times. Kalman looked up at Teri's eyes and smiled. He knew who the fourth person was. "And they didn't burn."

"But why?" Teri urged. She loved to push Kalman to think.

"Because they did what was right, and God saved them," Kalman responded with surety.

"If you always do what's right and stand up for God, then God will always protect you, and nothing bad will ever happen."

*If only!* she thought.

Teri explained, "We learned in our Sabbath school class that the more obedient you are, the more the devil will come after you." Yikes!

Kalman continued with childlike innocence, "Well, if he came after me, I would be brave and be like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and God would not let me be hurt!" Kalman's innocence mocked reality. His belief that God would always reward him with abundant blessings for undying faith and devotion began early in his life, and his knowing-for-sure attitude continued into adulthood, often to his detriment. Good fortune happens. For some more than others, sure, but life isn't easy. Kalman would find that out the hard way.

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Kalman Hartig ironically entered the world on Hitler's forty-first birthday, April 20, 1930. He would be nine when World War II began and fifteen when the war left Europe in ash and ruin. Sharing the birth date was, for a while, a special deal, but that would certainly change.

He was the ninth child of eleven.

## Two

# THE RUMOR

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KALMAN'S FATHER, ALBERT HARTIG, was born October 25, 1882, in Kassa (now called Košice), Slovakia. It may be said that Albert's entry into the world was startling but, of course, not unheard of.

Albert's mother, Terez Elis Materny, was a beautiful woman, yet her life had been one of poor means. Her parents had sent her from their home in Slovakia to Austria to search for work of higher-ranking servitude than they'd been able to find in their own country. She made better wages than they did when she found a job as a cook for one who has been described as, according to family talk, a minor Austrian nobleman. Allegedly, and according to the neighbors' and the family's speculation, which to this day they still refer to as a rumor, Albert was the illegitimate son of this nobleman, simply because pregnant Terez left Austria and returned to Slovakia to have her baby. She soon thereafter constructed a new life for herself and Albert in Yugoslavia. Terez and her child prospered. How? Well, this is where the rumor could most likely be considered a surety. This proud nobleman must have been discretely sending them money to stay quiet. Terez and Albert wanted for nothing.

After a few years as a single, unwed mother, Terez met Gyula (Hungarian for Julius) Karoly Hartig, whose birth was recorded on July 9, 1850. Nothing is known about Gyula, but he must have been a kind soul to take on an unwed mother and her child. One could wonder



whether he wanted to share in her good fortune or whether he really and truly loved her. Nevertheless, they married on November 10, 1889, when Albert was seven years old. Gyula adopted the child. Although a more detailed love story could be written here, all we know is that he died only two years later in 1891. Terez was single again. We can imagine that she was an intelligent as well as a strong woman because Albert turned out well. (Nothing more is known about her or her involvement in Albert's life. The death date on her tombstone reads March 14, 1921.)

Albert's alleged birth father, the Austrian nobleman, as well as his adoptive father, Gyula Hartig, both had Germanic backgrounds. And because of the elevation of German culture in central Europe, Albert chose to embrace a Germanic heritage as opposed to his mother's Slavic ethnicity. Being German in Yugoslavia was complicated. More will be told about this later on in Kalman's story. Back to Albert.

## Three

# THE BACHELOR

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WITH ALL THE MONEY coming in from his birth father, Albert was able to study and receive a stellar education. Where, we don't know, but he did. Just before his twenty-second birthday, and after graduating and obtaining a diploma in academics and music, Albert began his service to the community of Petrovgrad, what is now known as Zrenjanin, Serbia. He was offered the coveted position of organist and cantor at the Slovak Evangelical Church. Albert was proficient, and the villagers adored him. Most of them attended this church and looked forward to Sunday services. The acoustics of the cathedral ceiling accommodated Albert's rich voice as well as the pipe organ's majestic tonal quality and overtones.

And then things got even better. He was also hired to be the headmaster as well as a teacher at the Kralj Aleksandar I Ujeditelj (King Alexander I School). The children at the school grew to respect Gospodin (Mister in Serbo-Croatian) Hartig. It wasn't difficult, for he was fatherly and disciplined fairly when necessary.

Albert's noble birth seemed to be a certainty because he maintained an extremely well-to-do lifestyle. He owned a grand house full of fine furniture and collectibles that celebrated his fondness for the various ethnicities of the peoples in and surrounding Petrovgrad. Now the salary from the church and school would not have allowed Albert to live in such a home as this. How else could he have lived this way if he hadn't



inherited a lot of money? It didn't seem to be malicious gossip, however, because he was well liked and admired.

Holding a reputable presence as an upstanding member of Petrovgrad had its advantages. It brought with it valuable opportunities to entertain his colleagues in his home. He spoke Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian, and German, and harboring no prejudices, he welcomed and celebrated diversity among the various ethnicities and religions of his neighbors and associates. Albert was happiest when he was surrounded by his friends. He seemed to have everything, and yet there was something missing. His friends and colleagues were all married, and he felt a little out of place being the only bachelor. He'd never given it much thought, as he was bookish and studious, but now that he was working steadily and was admired by so many in the community, he was often asked, "When will you pursue a courtship and marry?" Most of the time, he just shrugged. There were eligible young women in the community, but Albert was shy and insecure around women. It inevitably hindered his finding a companion. It wouldn't happen unless someone was literally dropped in his lap.

## Four

# THE WIDOW

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ALBERT WAS IN HIS study at the school on a cold, late-December Sunday afternoon in 1918, only a little over a month after the Great War had ended. (According to our story, Petrovgrad didn't seem to have been affected much by the war.) It was nearing Christmas, and Albert, being Evangelical, would be celebrating on December 25, while others in the area, being Orthodox, would be celebrating on January 7, as is the tradition in Slavic countries. The students were enjoying the winter break in their homes, and Albert was taking some time to shelve books, organize the first school semester's paperwork, and finish marking the children's report cards, all while enjoying some quiet time to himself. As he shuffled papers and browsed through materials for the new year, he whistled and hummed Christmas hymns still lingering in his head from the church service earlier that day. He anticipated the party he would be holding that evening for his colleagues as a sort of end-of-the-school-semester/Christmas gala. A couple of hours passed, and Albert prepared to return home. His guests would be arriving in a little while. As he reached for his overcoat, someone knocked on the door of his office. It just so happened that it faced the street, making it easy for anyone to find him if they needed him. Albert couldn't imagine who would be standing outside, as the church congregants had returned to their homes hours ago.

He opened the door to an attractive woman. Before he could say



anything, she introduced herself in Hungarian so he would know it was her native language.

“My name is Anna Kiss.” (Pronounced Kish.)

Albert smiled. “How may I help you?” (Albert answered her in Hungarian.)

“Forgive me for the abrupt intrusion. I live in the next village. I’m looking for work. I saw you through the window and decided to take the chance of perhaps speaking with you.”

The stranger’s light brown eyes were full of hope and kindness, while her square jaw and thin, straight lips revealed her rugged determination. She stood tall with unhesitating confidence as she grasped the hands of two small boys, while another, only slightly taller than the others, peered around from behind her skirt. *Well, this came out of nowhere*, thought Albert. Surprised and curious, he examined the visitors.

One month before, Anna had been widowed. She briefly explained that her first husband had sustained injuries on the front line during the Great War and had passed away shortly thereafter.

Anna was born Anna Antal on February 28, 1892, in Torda, Serbia. She and her parents, Ferenc Antal and Anna Keresztes, were of Hungarian ancestry. She’d married Peter Kiss, also Hungarian, in 1910 when she was eighteen years old. They had three sons. Endre was born in 1911, Pal in 1912, and Istvan in 1914, the same year the Great War began. Peter had been inducted into the army and had left only weeks after their youngest had joined the family. As she stood in front of Albert, Anna’s thoughts raced back to the day when Peter was to return home, although she didn’t share the story with Albert right away. The war had ended on November 11, 1918. The story passed down is that later that month, Anna waited for Peter, with their sons, at the appointed time at the train station. As one weary soldier after another climbed from the train and stepped onto the platform, each one had been greeted by friends and family members. Peter had not been among them. Approaching one of the exhausted yet relieved soldiers who’d been basking in the warm reception he’d been receiving, Anna had asked him whether her husband was aboard the train. “I’m sorry. I don’t know him,” he’d answered.





Anna cried out for her husband but got no response. Finally, another soldier, stooped over and suffering from his injuries, sadly related to Anna that her husband had been severely wounded on the front lines and had died while traveling home. His body had been thrown from the train. Anna reeled. Who throws bodies from a train? Why would that have happened? “Why?” she asked flabbergasted.

The soldier shrugged. “We were packed in tightly, and there was no place else to put him.”

How would she care for their three sons alone? Grief-stricken, she slowly walked back home with her young boys, tears streaming down her cheeks, knowing she must find a way to support them all. Unable to pay the rent for long, she knew she and her children couldn’t remain there. Anna tried not to sound overly desperate, but her voice shook as she asked, “Do you know anyone who needs a cook? I’m very good and will work hard.”

Albert sensed goodness and integrity from the woman. Her face wore the anguish of sorrow, yet her eyes reflected resoluteness.

As Anna listed a few dishes she was fond of preparing and offered references who could attest to her culinary skills, Albert smiled. He liked her. “Well, I don’t know if Providence has intervened, but I need someone to cook the lunches for the children of this school. Our previous cook won’t be returning for the spring semester. Would you like the job?”

Anna later wondered how she’d managed not to faint. She was overjoyed! Letting go of her little boys’ hands, she brought hers to her face and covered her mouth as she tried to contain her excitement even just a little.

“Mama?”

Anna looked down at little Istvan, his eyes full of hope. She lifted him into her arms.

“Well, my sons, you heard the gentleman. Mama will be cooking for the students here.” To Albert, she posed the question, “And my boys? May Pal and Endre attend school here?”

“Of course.” Albert answered with a lilt of exuberance in his voice. “I’ll fill out the paperwork straightaway.”



He continued, “There’s a room here where our last cook stayed. You’re welcome to move in as soon as it’s convenient for you. It might be a little small for the four of you, but—”

“We’ll manage,” Anna gratefully interrupted, gazing over her sons and breathing a sigh of relief.

“School begins again on Monday, January 13.”