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CHAPTER ONE

SEBASTOPOL, CALIFORNIA
Autumn, Present Day

Tatianna! Tatianna!”

“It’s okay, Grandma. Calm down.”

“Tatianna!” Grandma Celia’s frail cry rose to a shriek.

“Grandma, wake up!” Darby Evans tried to hold thrashing arms and shoulders. Her grandmother was slow to calm and return to her pillow. The woman’s eyes did not open, but her mumbling quieted.

“*Hilfe*,” she whispered, and Darby remembered it was German for “help.” But her grandmother never spoke her native tongue. Why now?

Darby put her hand on Grandma Celia’s warm forehead.

“*Machen Sie schnell!*” The older woman’s expression turned fearful again. “Tatianna!”

Darby held her grandmother’s shoulders. “It’s okay, Grandma.” Her grandmother’s hands grasped and fought unseen devils; her features contorted with inward struggles.

“I’m here, Grandma. It’s Darby. There’s nothing to worry about.” The old woman calmed once again. Darby opened the

fingers clutching her arm and held them within her own. She brought the bony hands to her lips. They felt like tissue paper drawn over bone and blue veins.

Darby moved a chair close and rested her arms around the old woman. She hummed a Mozart tune, one her grandmother had hummed to her in the late-night hours of her childhood, and watched Grandma Celia slowly slip into a peaceful sleep. After a while, Darby tenderly pulled the covers up and smoothed strands of gray hair from her grandmother's face.

The dim lamp cast shadows along the top of the bedroom walls, creating dark eyes that followed every movement, listened to every word. This house of her youth had never held the presence of shadows, at least none Darby had known. But tonight it seemed that a secret had slipped from the lips of her dying grandmother. It was the name of a stranger. Tatianna. The callings in German had quickly turned to frantic cries that sent a shiver down Darby's spine. It frightened her to think that, although flowery body powder—a familiar childhood aroma—scented the room, and her grandmother's personal items appeared in proper order, there were secrets in this house. And now the shadows, like a pack of jackals, circled their prey. She could almost hear their high-pitched laughter and leering words: "There are secrets here. We know them, but we won't tell."

Her grandmother stirred, and Darby could see the name on her lips before breath brought it to life. "Tatianna."

She waited for another rise of panic, but Grandma Celia slid more deeply into sleep. Darby stood and walked toward the window. The moonlight brought an ethereal glow to the backyard. Even the rosebushes around the gazebo looked ghostly, with silhouetted fingers pointing skyward. The dim light exposed stray weeds twisted along the stone pathway. She shook her head to cast away the fears. This was home. Even though she now lived a few hundred miles north in Redding,

California, Grandma's home in Sebastopol always welcomed her back. How could her grandmother's cries for a stranger bring such darkness here?

Darby could see herself from the age of five until she left for college, growing, changing, all here in this house. Had hidden secrets stalked and crept while she, in childhood oblivion, laughed and played unaware?

Perhaps she was making too much of this, and there was a simple explanation. Maybe her grandmother was reliving wartime memories. Or could the elderly woman be hallucinating from the myriad of painkillers and medicines? Yet Grandma Celia's anguish appeared real, not imagined.

Darby extracted a letter from her jeans pocket and smoothed the envelope. Another secret, but this one Darby would keep. She probably should have followed her first reaction to burn the letter. How dare this man, Brant Collins, write such words to her grandmother? The stamp and return address were evidence of its European origin. Her grandmother would have eagerly checked the mail each day in hopes of receiving this letter if her illness hadn't progressed so rapidly.

Darby reached to touch the top of her grandmother's head. She held her hand an inch above her skin, not wanting to disturb her, but wishing to hold the woman against all pain.

I don't care about some inheritance. I only want you, Darby thought, tracing her grandmother's face without touching her cheek. Her grandmother had begun searching for the family inheritance, hoping the recovered treasure could be a gift for her grandchildren. "I want to pass on what belongs to our family," she'd stated firmly. Grandma Celia had written Holocaust organizations and even learned to use e-mail and the Internet.

"Can you believe your old grandmother is surfing the Web?" she'd asked Darby on the phone. It hadn't really surprised Darby. Grandma Celia was always involved in something—country and western dancing at the senior center,

volunteering in the local kindergarten class, sending letters to congressmen. The notion that Nazis had confiscated her family inheritance wasn't new—only Grandma's sudden search. Why now? Perhaps terminal illness and the reluctant opening of Swiss banks? Darby usually tried to encourage or help her grandmother, but this time she was involved in the remodeling of her photography studio and she thought the pursuit of fortune a bit far-fetched.

Darby examined the soft lines in her grandmother's face. Her cheeks revealed sharp bones beneath; her eyes had sunk deeper into their sockets. It had only been a few months since Darby's summer visit. The cancer had progressed more rapidly in the last months than anyone had expected—except, perhaps, Grandma Celia. Darby had found a paper on the table when she'd arrived that evening from the local hospice care. The information gave signs for patients who had one to two weeks left of life: "Agitation, talking with the unseen, confusion, pale and bluish, sleeping, but not responding." Many were the signs she'd seen in Grandma Celia. The list moved down to the signs for patients with only days and hours left: "Surge of energy, irregular breathing, glassy eyes . . ." The list went on and on, but the last sign, "fish-out-of-water breathing," terrified Darby.

Darby's anger rose as she thought again of Brant Collins and his letter. The most endearing, honest woman rested before her, and that man had actually accused her of illegal activities. He wrote that he knew the truth about the Lange family, and if Celia continued her pursuit, impersonators would be prosecuted. Darby would keep that secret from her mother and grandmother—she'd deal with it herself.

"Where are you, Grandma?" Darby whispered. "I want my fireball grandmother who'd call this Collins character and give him a piece of her mind."

She could picture it now. Grandma got stirred up when she

believed in something. It had only been a month ago that Grandma had declared to Darby over the phone, “Those Nazi pirates aren’t keeping what belongs to my family!”

Darby had laughed. She’d enjoyed the story about one of her grandparents being an archaeologist and finding two rare Celtic coins. Her favorite part of the inheritance story was the relative who had helped an Austrian empress, receiving the empress’s personal brooch as a gift. Yes, she’d enjoyed the story, especially as a child, but that was as far as Darby had taken it. It was simply another story. The family inheritance, if it had ever existed at all, was certainly long lost or forgotten in some museum or personal collection. Darby had been surprised by Grandma’s fierce determination. The dear woman certainly would have been upset by Mr. Collins’s words.

Darby blinked as she sat in the recliner beside her grandmother’s hospital-style bed. Her eyes wouldn’t stay closed. Sleep wouldn’t come. Were there many things she didn’t know?

Footsteps sounded down the hall. Darby’s mother peered in from the darkened doorway. “How is she?” she called softly.

“She’s fine—now,” Darby answered as she tiptoed into the hall. “You’re supposed to be sleeping. Tonight’s my watch.”

“I know. But I heard her call out and couldn’t go back to sleep,” Carole Evans said. “I’m so glad you came.”

Darby rested her head against the doorjamb, the collection of family photos catching her eye on the opposite wall. Though the dim light hid the faces, she knew each picture by heart. The top three portraits displayed her all-female family: Mother, Grandma Celia, her younger sister, Maureen, and herself. Uncle Marc and Aunt Helen’s photos were below. Beside those was Darby’s favorite. The framed photograph captured her mother sitting beside a window with Grandma Celia brushing her hair. The lighting had been perfect, and the expressions on their faces depicted an older version of mother and child. Darby had won an award in college for that photograph.

As Carole peered into Grandma Celia's room, Darby noticed how the late-night shadows heightened the circles under her mother's eyes.

"You should have called me sooner. I would have come, you know."

"I know, but you have a life too, and I didn't want you to cancel that photo trip."

"Grandma's more important. Have the doctors said anything more?"

"Well," her mother admitted, "they say she's at the two-week stage. I try to prepare, but even though I see her decline, I'm not ready. There are so many things I still want to do with her. Things I want to know about her. I'm not ready to lose my mother."

Darby looked over her mother's shoulder toward her grandmother. *I'm not ready to lose her either.*

She wanted to pull her mother into her arms. Instead she placed a hand on her shoulder. Even that slight touch seemed to break something within the older woman as a quiet sob erupted. Darby patted her awkwardly, as if her hand was out of rhythm to the beat of a song. This was not her mother's way. While love had always been given freely in this house, sorrow and tears were kept to the privacy of their hearts. Darby fought her own grief and fear, remembering the only other time, outside of a romantic movie or a memorable event, that she'd seen her mother in tears. While playing hide-and-seek with her younger sister, seven-year-old Darby was under her mother's bed when she heard sobbing. Her father had left that morning, but Darby expected him to return. He always had before.

"Mommy, why are you crying?" she asked as she slid from under the bed. "Is it 'cause of Daddy leaving?"

"Yes, honey." Her mother had turned away.

"I'm sad too. But Daddy said he'd write lots and lots of letters while he's working in Texas."

Her mother wiped her eyes. “I just wanted you raised with a daddy. Not without one like I was. . . .” She’d wrapped her arms around Darby, and the tears broke out again.

Darby hadn’t known her father was more than just working in that place three states from their Californian home. He’d found a new woman to build a family with. Darby received a few letters, but eventually they stopped. Soon after, Darby, her mother, and sister had moved into her grandmother’s home in Sebastopol, a stone’s toss north of San Francisco.

Somewhere over the years and conversations with her mother, Darby surmised that much of her mother’s sorrow wasn’t from the loss of her husband, but from the loss of a father for her children. Her many comments about never knowing her own father emphasized that point.

Now Darby’s mother cried again. Darby’s father had disappeared almost as if he’d only existed in a dream. But this time it was Grandma, the solid rock of the family. The anchor that kept everyone grounded. Darby had never lost a loved one to death, especially someone so close to her heart.

“Oh, for pity’s sake,” her mother said as she cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, Darby.”

“This is Grandma we’re losing. That’s reason for tears.”

Her mother breathed a long sigh and smiled. “Grandma would say, ‘Look, you’ve gone and watered the carpet.’ ”

“She’s right. And tomorrow we may find a bean stalk here. I never did find those magic seeds of mine.”

Carole chuckled. “I’m so glad you’re here. You could always handle hardships better than your sister. Maureen tried to help, but she was so emotional and with the kids running around, well, I’m afraid she was more of a burden than a blessing.”

“I’m here for as long as it takes.” Darby nodded toward her grandmother. “Clarise can handle everything at the studio, and I’m caught up on my deadlines for a while. I’ll take night

watch. After all, you never were a night owl. I don't know how you've handled it these last months."

"I'm simply thankful for some help now." Her mother patted Darby's hand, then took a step down the hall.

"Mom?" Darby hesitated. "Grandma keeps calling for someone. Who is Tatianna?"

The hallway had little light, but Darby could see the weariness in her mother's expression. "Honey, I don't know. Grandma has called that name during her bad spells for weeks. She also says words in German. I've started to ask a dozen times, but I haven't. She has so few good moments."

"Grandma's never mentioned her before?"

"I've never heard the name *Tatianna* until last month. And Grandma has never mentioned her except in her sleep."

"Okay. Now *you* need to sleep."

"Good night, honey."

When her mother disappeared into the darkness, Darby turned back to Grandma's bedroom. She stared at the shadows that now hid her grandmother's face. After a lifetime of family and love, why were Grandma Celia's last thoughts possessed by a stranger?

Darby leaned over the edge of the bed and touched her grandmother's skin-and-bone arm. She remembered how Grandma Celia would pat the mattress and gather Darby into her bed whenever Darby had a bad dream. It was Grandma who always soothed away her troubles with a story during a tea party or while brushing Darby's long, brown hair.

"Princesses didn't have dirt-colored hair and eyes," Darby had whined at age five.

"No, but our princess has dark gold strands that look like sunshine on the mountain. Our princess has eyes like a tender doe in the meadow and a pretty heart-shaped face."

Tonight it was Darby who lowered the bed rail and gathered her grandmother in her arms. "I love you, Grandma." She

closed her eyes to the shadows surrounding them while one question returned to her mind: *Who was Tatianna?*



HALLSTATT, AUSTRIA

His wooden cane slipped in the loose rocks and the flashlight's beam made a wild dance as the man caught his balance and limped onward. The shuffle of his footsteps along the road harmonized with the mournful song of a cricket. One sang and another more distant joined the tune.

He tried to keep his steps quiet as he trudged along the narrow lakeside road. At the end of a cement wall, he found familiar steps leading up the darkened mountain. Higher, through blind turns and covered walkways, he headed toward the church spire that was silhouetted against the moonless night sky. He was almost there. His chest grew tight with the raspy breaths that fought the frozen air. The last turns up the mountain, the steps he once could run up with stealth, now stole his strength. He rested at the wooden gate, leaning heavily against his cane. When he pushed the gate open, its familiar creak welcomed him to the sentry of headstones and soft red candles that lit his way.

He moved forward, past names he didn't need to read. He knew them all by heart. With great care, he climbed the steps to the upper level of the cemetery and plodded toward a large, white structure. The graveyard and church were cut into the mountainside just like the village below. When autumn leaves crunched beneath his boots, he stopped abruptly and bent before the grave, looking for any weeds. None. He'd made sure the rectangular patch would be well cared for in his absence. He sat on the edge of the concrete border and laid his cane on the ground.

"I—" His voice caught, and he cleared his throat. "I've come again."

He examined his work and smiled. Such passion of youth had stirred him to spend hours on the wrought-iron headstone. Other headstones were iron or wood, but he could not purchase her marker. He had to do it himself, to feel the metal turn in his hands, to sweat, to cut his hands and bleed as she had—though so much less than she had. He'd needed to carry the finished work on his back—his cross to bear forever. Though friends believed the war had turned him crazy, he'd needed the work to survive the day and the day after that, until he stood here now all these years later. For his work was more than a headstone; it was his memorial to his young wife. It was the closest thing he could have of her. For no, she wasn't here. Her body didn't rest beneath the earth. That had tormented him in the beginning. For there was nowhere he could go to find it, except to take a bit of ground from the place where she'd died. That was all he had left of her and so he brought only dirt to where he could visit and feel close to her again.

The old man removed his tweed hat and set it on the edge of the cement. He strained to rise and limped toward a stone faucet capped into a mountain spring. He turned the handle, and water gushed loudly into the tin watering can. He closed the valve and carried the can to the grave.

"Let's give those flowers some water," he said to himself, glad that the pansies and fall daffodils appeared healthy. The man reached to yank some dead petals from the rosebush that grew around the base of her headstone, and a thorn pricked his gnarled finger. He opened the iron cover plate to see her name. His fingers traced the neat letters on the metal, leaving a smear of blood around the curve of the C.

"I feel this could be my last visit," he told her tenderly. "No, it's not our anniversary already. I just needed to come tonight. You've been in my thoughts so often lately. But it won't be much longer until I can't hike this trail. I won't have to

wonder and fear. I'll know everything for certain. And we'll be together—at last. And, my dearest, I'm very ready to be with you again.”

In the red candlelit night, the man studied the last blooming rose on the bush. Its petals were perfect. The pale yellow roses continued to blossom well in the early autumn days. It seemed they knew this would be the last chance for him to see them grace her grave. So for one last time, he'd see his final offering of love.

The man bent to place his lips upon the cold metal nameplate. Just one more look at her name before he closed the cover. That name he loved so well, even after all these years. If he suspected correctly, soon he'd speak her name, and they'd be together again. Forever.