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A LAUREL BOOK

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Behold, I am against thee,
saith the Lord of hosts, and
I will burn her chariots
in the smoke, and the sword
shall devour thy young lions:
and I will cut off thy
prey from the earth,
and the voice of thy messengers
shall no more be heard.

NAHUM: 2, 13

CHAPTER ONE

THE TOWN SHONE IN the snowy twilight like a Christmas window, with the electric railway's lights tiny and festive at the foot of the white slope, among the muffled winter hills of the Tyrol. People smiled at each other broadly, skiers and natives alike, in their brilliant clothes, as they passed each other on the snow-draped streets, and there were wreaths on the windows and doors of the white and brown houses because this was the eve of the new and hopeful year of 1938.

Margaret Freemantle listened to her ski boots crunch in the packed snow as she walked up the hill. She smiled at the pure twilight and the sound of children singing somewhere in the village below. It had been raining in Vienna when she left that morning and people had been hurrying through the streets with that gloomy sense of being imposed upon that rain brings to a large city. The soaring hills and the clear sky and the good snow, the athletic, cozy gaiety of the village seemed like a personal gift to her because she was young and pretty and on vacation.

Her legs felt relaxed and pleasantly weary as she scuffed little spurts of snow in her path. The two cherry brandies she had drunk after the afternoon's skiing had warmed her throat and she could feel the warmth spreading out to her shoulders and arms in thin, rich tendrils under her sweaters.

"Dort oben am Berge," the children sang, *"da wettert der Wind,"* their voices clear and plangent in the rare air.

"Da sitzet Maria," Margaret sang softly to herself, *"und weiget ihr Kind."* Her German was halting and as she sang she was pleased not only with the melody and delicacy of the song, but her audacity in singing in German at all.

She was a tall, thin girl, with a slender face. She had green eyes and a spattering of what Joseph called American freckles across the bridge of her nose. Joseph was coming up on the early train the next morning, and when she thought of him she grinned.

At the door of her hotel she stopped and took one last look at the rearing, noble mountains and the winking lights. She

breathed deeply of the twilight air. Then she opened the door and went in.

The main room of the small hotel was bright with holly and green leaves, and there was a sweet, rich smell of generous baking. It was a simple room, furnished in heavy oak and leather, with the spectacular, brilliant cleanliness found so often in the mountain villages, that became a definite property of the room, as real and substantial as the tables and chairs.

Mrs. Langerman was walking through the room, carefully carrying a huge cutglass punchbowl, her round, cherry face pursed with concentration. She stopped when she saw Margaret and, beaming, put the punchbowl down on a table.

"Good evening," she said in her soft German. "How was the skiing?"

"Wonderful," Margaret said.

"I hope you didn't get too tired." Mrs. Langerman's eyes crinkled slyly at the corners. "A little party here tonight. Dancing. A great many young men. It wouldn't do to be tired."

Margaret laughed. "I'll be able to dance. If they teach me how."

"Oh!" Mrs. Langerman put up her hands deprecatingly. "You'll have no trouble. They dance every style. They will be delighted with you." She peered critically at Margaret. "Of course, you are rather thin, but the taste seems to be in that direction. The American movies, you know. Finally, only women with tuberculosis will be popular." She grinned and picked up the punchbowl again, her flushed face pleasant and hospitable as an open fire, and started toward the kitchen. "Beware of my son, Frederick," she said. "Great God, he is fond of the girls!" She chuckled and went into the kitchen.

Margaret sniffed luxuriously of the sudden strong odor of spice and butter that came in from the kitchen. She went up the steps to her room, humming.

The party started out very sedately. The older people sat rather stiffly in the corners, the young men congregated uneasily in impermanent groups, drinking gravely and sparely of the strong spiced punch. The girls, most of them large, strong-armed creatures, looked a little uncomfortable and out of place in their frilly party finery. There was an accordionist, but after playing two numbers to which nobody danced he moodily stationed himself at the punchbowl and gave way to the phonograph with American records.

Most of the guests were townspeople, farmers, merchants, relatives of the Langermans, all of them tanned a deep red-brown by the mountain sun, looking solid and somehow immortal, even in their clumsy clothes, as though no seed of illness or decay could exist in that firm mountain flesh, no

premonition of death ever be admitted under that glowing skin. Most of the city people who were staying in the few rooms of the Langermans' inn had politely drunk one cup of punch and then had gone on to gayer parties in the larger hotels. Finally Margaret was the only non-villager left. She was not drinking much and she was resolved to go to bed early and get a good night's sleep, because Joseph's train was getting in at eight-thirty in the morning. She wanted to be fresh and rested when she met him. As the evening wore on, the party became gayer. Margaret danced with most of the young men, waltzes and American fox-trots. Along about eleven o'clock, when the room was hot and noisy and the third bowl of punch had been brought on, and the faces of the guests had lost the shy, outdoor look of dumb, simple health and taken on an indoor glitter, she started to teach Frederick how to rhumba. The others stood around and watched and applauded when she had finished, and old man Langerman insisted that she dance with him. He was a round, squat old man with a bald pink head, and he perspired enormously as she tried to explain in her mediocre German, between bursts of laughter, the mystery of the delayed beat and the subtle Caribbean rhythm.

"Ah, God," the old man said when the song ended, "I have been wasting my life in these hills." Margaret laughed and leaned over and kissed him. The guests, assembled on the polished floor in a close circle around them, applauded loudly, and Frederick grinned and stepped forward and put his arms up. "Teacher," he said, "me again."

They put the record on again and they made Margaret drink another cup of punch before they began. Frederick was clumsy and heavy-footed, but his arms around her felt pleasantly strong and secure in the spinning, warm dance.

The song ended and the accordionist, now freighted with a dozen glasses of punch, started up. He sang, too, as he played, and one by one the others joined him, standing around him in the firelight, their voices and the rich, swelling notes of the accordion rising in the high, beamed room. Margaret stood with Frederick's arm around her, singing softly, almost to herself, her face flushed, thinking, how kind, how warm these people are, how friendly and childlike, how good to strangers, singing the new year in, their rough outdoor voices tenderly curbed to the sweet necessities of the music.

"Röslein, Röslein, Röslein rot, Röslein auf der Heide," they sang, old man Langerman's voice rising above the chorus, bull-like and ridiculously plaintive, and Margaret sang with them. She looked across the fireplace at the dozen singing faces. Only one person in the room remained still.

Christian Diestl was a tall, slender young man, with a solemn, abstracted face and close-cut hair, his skin burned dark

by the sun, his eyes light and almost golden with the yellow flecks you find in an animal's eyes. Margaret had seen him on the slopes, gravely teaching beginners how to ski, and had momentarily envied him the rippling, long way he had moved across the snow. Now he was standing a little behind and away from the singers, an open white shirt brilliant in contrast to his dark skin, soberly holding a glass and watching the singers with considering, remote eyes.

Margaret caught his glance. She smiled at him. "Sing," she said.

He smiled gravely back and lifted his glass. She saw him obediently begin to sing, although in the general confusion of voices she could not hear what addition he made to the music.

Now, with the hour and the strong punch and the imminence of a new year, the party had become less polite. In dark corners of the room couples kissed and pawed each other, and the voices grew louder and more confident and the songs became harder for Margaret to follow and understand, full of slang and double meanings that made the older women giggle, the men roar with laughter.

Then, just before midnight, old man Langerman stood up on a chair, called for silence, gave a signal to the accordionist, and said in an oratorical, slightly drunken, tone, "As a veteran of the Western Front, wounded three times, 1915 to 18, I would like everyone to join me in a song." He waved to the accordionist, who went into the opening chords of *Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles*. This was the first time Margaret had ever heard the song sung in Austria, but she had learned it from a German maid when she was five. She still remembered the words and she sang with them, feeling drunk and intelligent and international. Frederick held her tighter and kissed her forehead, delighted that she knew the song, and old man Langerman, still on his chair, lifted his glass and offered a toast, "To America. To the young ladies of America!" Margaret drained her glass and bowed. "In the name of the young ladies of America," she said formally, "permit me to say that I am delighted."

Frederick kissed her neck, but before she could decide what to do about that, the accordionist struck up once more, ringing, primitive chords, and all the voices sang out, harshly and triumphantly, in the chorus. For a moment Margaret didn't know what the song was. It was one which she had heard only once or twice before, in surreptitious snatches in Vienna, and the male, roaring voices, obscured by drink, made the tangled German words hard to understand.

Frederick was standing stiffly next to her, clutching her, and she could feel his muscles straining with the passion of the

song. She concentrated on him and, finally, she recognized the song.

"Die Fahne hoch, die Reihen fest geschlossen," he sang, the cords standing out on his throat, *"S. A. marschiert in ruhig festen Schritt. Kameraden die Rotfront und Reaktion erschossen."*

Margaret listened, her face stiffening. She closed her eyes and felt weak and half strangled in the grinding music and tried to pull away from Frederick. But his arm was clamped around her and she stood there and listened. When she opened her eyes she looked across at the ski-teacher. He was not singing, but was watching her, his eyes somehow troubled and understanding.

The voices became louder and louder, full of threat and thunder, as they crashed to the end of the Horst Wessel song. Then men stood up straight, eyes flashing, proud and dangerous, and the women, joining in, sank like opera nuns before an operatic god. Only Margaret and the dark young man with the yellow-flecked eyes were silent when the last *"Marschieren mit uns in ihrem Geiste mit,"* rang through the room.

Margaret began to weep, silently, weakly, hating herself for the softness, clamped in Frederick's embrace, as the bells of the village churches rang out in thin, joyous pealing, echoing against the hills in the winter night air.

Old man Langerman, beet-red by now, the sweat running off his round bald dome, his eyes glistening as they might have glistened on the Western Front when first he arrived there in 1915, raised his glass. "To the Fuehrer," he said in a deep, religious voice.

"To the Fuehrer!" The glasses flashed in the firelight and the mouths were eager and holy as they drank.

"Happy New Year! Happy New Year! God bless you this year!" The high patriotic spell was broken, and the guests laughed and shook hands and clapped each other on the back, and kissed each other, cozy and intimate and unwarlike.

Frederick turned Margaret around and tried to kiss her, but she ducked her head. The tears turned into sobs and she broke away. She ran up the steps to her room on the floor above.

"American girls," she heard Frederick say, laughing. "They pretend they know how to drink."

The tears stopped slowly. Margaret felt weak and foolish and tried to ignore them, methodically washing her teeth and putting her hair up and patting cold water on the red stained eyes, so that in the morning, when Joseph came, she would be lively and as pretty as possible.

She undressed in the shining clean whitewashed room, with a thoughtful brown wood Christ hanging on a crucifix over the

bed. She put out the light, opened the window and scrambled into the big bed as the wind and the moonlight came soaring in off the powdery, bright-mountains. She shivered once or twice in the cold sheets, but in a moment it was warm, under the piled feathers. The linen smelled like fresh laundry back home in her grandmother's house when she was a child, and the stiff white curtains whispered against the window frame. By now the accordionist was playing softly below, sad, autumn songs of love and departure, muffled and heartbreaking with so many doors between. In a little while she was asleep, her face serious and peaceful, childish and undefended in the cold air above the counterpane.

Dreams were often like that. A hand going softly over your skin. A dark, generalized body next to yours, a strange, anonymous breath against your cheek, a clasping, powerful arm, pressing you . . .

Then Margaret woke up.

"Be quiet," the man said, in German. "I won't harm you."

He has been drinking brandy, Margaret thought irrelevantly. I can smell it on his breath.

She lay still for a moment, staring into the man's eyes, little jets of light in the darkness of the eyesockets. The hand went over her belly softly and expertly, slid down her leg. She could feel his leg thrown over hers. He was dressed and the cloth was rough and heavy and scratched her. With a sudden jerk, she threw herself to the other side of the bed and sat up, but he was very swift and powerful and pulled her down again and covered her mouth with his hand. He chuckled.

"Little animal," he said, "little quick squirrel."

She recognized the voice now. "It's only me," Frederick said, "I am merely paying a little visit. Nothing to be frightened of." He took his hand tentatively from her mouth. "You won't scream," he whispered, still the small chuckle in his voice, as though he were being amused by a child. "There is no point in screaming. For one thing, everyone is drunk. For another, I will say that you invited me, and then maybe changed your mind. And they will believe me, because I have a reputation with the girls anyway, and you are a foreigner, besides . . ."

"Please go away," Margaret whispered. "Please. I won't tell anyone."

Frederick chuckled. He was a little drunk, but not as drunk as he pretended. "You are a graceful little darling girl. You are the prettiest girl who has come up here this season. . . ."

"Why do you want me?" Margaret desperately took the cue, trying to tense her body, make it stony, so that the inquisitive hand would meet only cold, antagonistic surfaces. "There are so many others who would be delighted."

"I want you." Frederick kissed her neck with what he obviously thought was irresistible tenderness. "I have a great deal of regard for you."

"I don't want you," Margaret said. Insanely, caught there next to that huge, tough body in the dark bed, deep in the night, she felt herself worrying that her German would fail her, that she would forget vocabulary, construction, idioms, and be taken because of that schoolgirl failure. "I don't want you."

"It is always more pleasant," Frederick said, "when the person pretends in the beginning she is unwilling. It is more ladylike, more refined." She felt him sure of himself, making fun of her. "There are many like that."

"I'll tell your mother," Margaret said, "I swear it."

Frederick laughed softly, the sound confident and easy in the quiet room. "Tell my mother," Frederick said. "Why do you think she always puts the pretty young girls in this room, with the shed under it, so it is simple to get in through the window?"

It isn't possible, Margaret thought, that little round, cherry-faced, beaming woman, who had hung crucifixes in all the rooms, that clean, industrious, church-going. . . . Suddenly, Margaret remembered how Mrs. Langerman had looked when the singing had gripped them all in the room below, the wild, obstinate stare, the sweating, sensual face swept by the coarse music. It *is* possible, Margaret thought, it is, this foolish eighteen-year-old boy couldn't have made it up. . . .

"How many times," she asked, talking swiftly, postponing the final moment as long as possible, "how many times have you climbed in here?"

He grinned and she could see the gleam of his teeth. For a moment his hand lay still as he answered, pleased with himself. "Often enough," he said. "Now I am getting very particular. It is a hard climb, and it's slippery with the snow on the shed. They have to be very pretty, like you, before I will do it."

The hand moved on, soft and knowing and insistent. Her own hands were pinned under her by his arm. At her core she felt flaming and weak, violated and dissolved all at once. She rolled her head and shoulders and tried to move her legs, but she couldn't. Frederick held her tight, smiling at her, pleased at this small, titillating resistance.

"You're so pretty," Frederick whispered, "you are so well joined together."

"I'm going to scream, I warn you."

"It will be terrible for you if you do," Frederick said. "Terrible. My mother will call you all sorts of names in front of the other guests, and will demand that you go out of her house at once, for luring her little eighteen-year-old son into your room and getting him into trouble. And your gentleman friend will

come here tomorrow and the whole town will be talking about it . . ." Frederick's voice was amused and confidential, "I really advise you not to scream."

Margaret closed her eyes and lay still. For a moment she had a vision of all the faces of the people at the party that evening, grinning, leering conspirators, disguised in their mountain health and cleanliness, plotting against her among themselves in their snowy fortress.

Suddenly Frederick rolled over and was on top of her. His clothes were open and she could feel the smooth, warm skin of his chest against her. He was huge. She felt smothered and lost beneath him. She felt the tears coming into her eyes and fought them back.

Slowly and methodically he was pulling her legs apart. Her hands were free now and she scratched at his eyes. She could feel the skin tearing and hear the rasping ugly sound. Again and again, swiftly, before he could grasp her hands, she ripped at his face.

"Bitch!" Frederick grabbed her hands, held them, hurting the wrists, in one great hand. He swung the other and hit her across the mouth. She felt the blood come. "Cheap little American bitch!" He was sitting astride her. She was lying rigid, staring up at him, triumphant, bloody and defiant, with the level moon lighting the scene in peaceful silver.

He hit her again, backhanded. With the taste of his knuckles, and the feel of bone against her mouth, she got a fleeting ugly whiff of the kitchen where he worked.

"If you don't go," she said clearly, although her head was dipping and whirling, "I'll kill you tomorrow. My friend and I will kill you. I promise you."

He sat above her, holding her hands in one of his. He was cut and bleeding, his long blond hair down over his eyes, his breath coming hard as he loomed over her, glaring at her. There was a moment of silence while he stared at her. Then his eyes swung indecisively. "Aaah," he said, "I am not interested in girls who don't want me. It's not worth the trouble."

He dropped her hands, pushed her face with the heel of his hand, cruelly and hard, and got off the bed, purposely hitting her with his knee as he crossed over. He stood at the window, arranging his clothing, sucking at his torn lip. In the calm light of the moon, he looked boyish and a little pathetic, disappointed and clumsy, buttoning his clothes.

He strode across the room heavily. "I am leaving by the door," he said. "After all, I have a right."

Margaret lay absolutely still, looking up at the ceiling.

Frederick stood at the door, loath to go without some shred of victory to take with him. Margaret could feel him groping heavily in his farmboy mind for some devastating thing to say

to her before leaving. "Aaah," he said, "go back to the Jews in Vienna."

He threw the door open and left without closing it. Margaret got up and quietly shut the door. She heard the heavy footsteps going down the stairs toward the kitchen, echoing and re-echoing through the old wooden walls of the sleeping, winter-claimed house.

The wind had died and the room was still and cold. Margaret shivered suddenly in her rumpled pajamas. She went over to the window and shut it. The moon had gone down and the night was paling, the sky, and mountains dead and mysterious in the graying air.

Margaret looked at the bed. One of the sheets was torn, and there were blood spots on the pillow, dark and enigmatic, and the bedclothes were rumpled and crushed. She dressed, shivering, her body feeling fragile and damaged, her wrist-bones aching in the cold. She got into her warmest ski-clothes, with two pairs of wool socks, and put her coat on over them. Still shivering and unwarmed, she sat in the small rocker at the window, staring out at the hills as they swam up out of the night, touched now on their pale summits by the first green light of dawn.

The green turned to rose. The light marched down until all the snow on the slopes glistened, bright with the arrival of morning. Margaret stood up and left the room, not looking at the bed. Softly she went down through the quiet house, with the last shades of night still lying in the corners and a weary smell of old celebration hanging over the lobby downstairs. She opened the heavy door and stepped out into the sleeping, white and indigo New Year.

The streets were empty. She walked aimlessly between the piled drifts on the side of the walks, feeling her lungs tender and sensitive under the impact of the thin dawn air. A door opened and a round little woman with a dustcap and apron stood there, red-cheeked and cheery. "Good morning, Fräulein," she said. "Isn't it a beautiful morning?"

Margaret glanced at her, then hurried on. The woman looked after her, her face first puzzled, then snubbed and angry, and she slammed the door loudly.

Margaret turned off the street and onto the road leading toward the hills. She walked methodically, looking at her feet, climbing slowly toward the ski-slopes, wide and empty now and glistening in the first light. She left the road and went across the packed surface toward the ski-hut, pretty, like a child's dream of Europe, with its heavy beams and low, peaked roof, crusted heavily with snow.

There was a bench in front of the hut and Margaret sank onto it suddenly feeling drained and incapable of further effort.

She stared up at the swelling, gentle slopes, curving creamily up to the high, forbidding rocks of the summit, now sharp and purple against the blue sky.

I will not think about it, she told herself. I will not. She stared stonily at the soaring mountain, consciously trying to make herself map out Christies and stem turns for an imaginary perfect descent. I will not think about it. Her tongue licked at the dried blood over her cut lip. Later on, perhaps, I will think about it, when I am calmer, not so shaken . . . The dangerous part was the deep snow along the edge of the ravine over to the right, because you'd be coming blind over that knoll and swinging wide to avoid that outcropping of rock and you might panic . .

"Good morning, Miss Freemantle," a voice said beside her.

She jerked her head around. It was the ski-instructor, the slender, burned-dark young man whom she had smiled at and asked to sing when the accordionist played. Without thinking, she stood up and started away.

Diestl took a step after her. "Is anything wrong?" he asked. The voice, following her, was deep, polite and gentle. She stopped, remembering that of all the loud, shouting people the evening before, when Frederick had stood with his arm around her, braying at the top of his voice, only the ski-instructor had remained silent. She remembered the way he had looked at her when she wept, the sympathetic, shy, baffled attempt to show her that she was not alone at that moment.

She turned back to him. "I'm sorry." She even essayed a smile. "I was thinking and I suppose you frightened me."

"Are you sure nothing's the matter?" he asked. He was standing there, bareheaded, looking more boyish and more shy than he had at the party.

"Nothing." Margaret sat down. "I was just sitting here admiring the mountains."

"Perhaps you would prefer being left alone?" He even took a tentative step back.

"No," Margaret said. "Really not." She had suddenly realized that she had to talk about what had happened to someone, make some decision in her own mind about what it meant. It would be impossible to tell Joseph, and the ski-instructor invited confidence. He even looked a little like Joseph, dark and intellectual and grave. "Please stay," she said.

He stood before her, his legs slightly apart, his collar open and his hands bare, as though there were no wind and no cold. He was graceful and compact in his beautifully cut ski clothes. His skin seemed to be naturally olive-colored under the tan, and his blood pulsed a kind of coral-red under the clear tone of his cheeks.

The ski-instructor took out a pack of cigarettes and offered