

Chapter 1

December, 1945
Berlin

The train gained speed as Ernst grabbed the snow-covered ladder. His feet slipped, leaving him dangling by his hands. He kicked the air, seeking support, his freezing fingers beginning to slip. Just before he lost his grip, his foot connected with the rung again. Pulling his body up, he climbed to the top of the coal car.

He was at the back of the car, and could see Axel standing at its front, his left foot on the edge as he prepared to jump the four-foot distance to the next car.

Suddenly the train whistle blew a blast that could only mean someone was on the track ahead. The cars smacked together as the train slammed on its brakes. Ernst saw the chain reaction of controlled collisions, one after the other as the braking moved from the front of the train to the rear. Axel, however, seemed hypnotized, staring only at the car in front of him.

“Axel, get back!” Ernst yelled, but Axel was in a trance. If his timing had been right, it would have been a jump of beauty; but the collision threw him head first between cars. He managed to grab the edge of the front one, but it had a full load. Ernst saw that his friend’s grip was not secure; he couldn’t pull himself up.

“*Ernst! Ernst!*” Axel cried.

“I’m coming,” yelled Ernst, but he couldn’t run across the mounded coal. He had no idea what he was going to do even if he got to Axel.

Ernst couldn’t see what happened to Axel when he fell, but saw the end result. Axel’s body, minus his legs from mid-thigh down, was on the side of the tracks.

Ernst watched, mesmerized, as his friend lay writhing on the ground, blood spurting everywhere.

Ernst clambered down the ladder, jumped clear of the train, and ran back. When he got to Axel, his friend was shouting “*Gott im Himmel! Gott im Himmel.*” God in Heaven; but God had taken the day off.

Ernst told him, “Lie still,” but Axel kept pushing himself up with his arms, trying to stand on legs that no longer existed.

“I’ve got to get home,” he said, over and over, until he couldn’t struggle anymore and fell back. By then, the rest of the gang was there.

“He wants to go home,” Ernst told them, as if everything would be all right if they could just get Axel back to the hole in the ground he called home.

“He can’t go anywhere,” said one of the other boys. “He doesn’t have any legs.”

“It’s all right,” Axel said. “I’ll stay here tonight.”

In five minutes he was dead.

“We need to tell the Americans,” someone said.

“Yeah, and explain that we were stealing coal off the train?” asked Carl. “I don’t think so.”

“Then what are we going to do?” asked another.

“We’re going to get the hell out of here,” said Carl. “This won’t be the first dead body the Americans find. Remember, nobody knows anything. Now, scatter.”

The boys ran off in different directions; none even glanced back.

“Where have you been?” Aunt Marta asked when Ernst got home.

“Getting coal.” Ernst put a lump by the fireplace and brushed himself. His clothes, face and hands were filthy from the wet coal, but he had managed to get the piece home without having it stolen by a bigger boy, so it had been a good day.

“Where do you get such large lumps of coal?” his aunt asked, examining it.

“Lying on the ground near the train tracks. I guess they fall off the train when it hits a bump.”

She looked at him sternly and put her hands on her hips. “There are no bumps on train tracks.”

His eyes widened and he shrugged. “Then I don’t know why they fall off, but there they are, lying on the ground. I bet you want me to wash up,” he said, scooting into the bathroom.

Even though he was only eight, Ernst was familiar with death. Most of the other deaths, like his parents’, he had only heard about; this time it had happened right in front of him. He had no intention of ever telling Aunt Marta about Axel. If he did, he’d have to tell her about climbing on the trains and stealing coal. Either one of those admissions would give her all she needed to forbid his hanging out with the gang, and he wasn’t going to let that happen.

The next day, Axel was replaced by Wolfie, a boy a year older and a head taller than Ernst. He was chosen by their leader, Carl, who had put the gang together to scavenge anything of value they could find. Whatever they scavenged, they sold for cigarettes, which they could exchange for some bread or, on a really good day, a little meat.

The military authorities didn't call it scavenging, they called it stealing; but the Americans had all the food they desired, and could kick people out of any of the homes still standing in Berlin if they wanted it for their own housing. Meanwhile, Germans of all ages, even orphaned children, lived in the rubble of destroyed buildings, hiding like Axel had in holes they had dug in the debris.

"You have to prove yourself," said Carl to Wolfie, as the gang gathered the next day.

"All right," said Wolfie through gritted teeth. He balled his hands into fists. "What do I have to do?" he asked, but Ernst could tell from the fists he made that he already knew.

"You have to fight one of us," Carl replied.

"Do I have to win?" Ernst watched him roll his shoulders to loosen his muscles.

"No, you just have to show that you're willing to take a beating for the gang," said Carl, smiling.

"Or give one," said Wolfie, with a smirk. "Who do I have to fight? You?"

Carl shook his head. "You choose. It can be me," he swept his hand toward the motley bunch of boys, "or anyone in the gang."

Of the nine youths in the gang, Ernst was by far the smallest. Sometimes people mistook him for five years of age. The last four boys to join had chosen to fight him, but there was nothing he could do about it. Carl started the gang, Carl made the rules. As long as he was so much smaller than the others, he expected to be picked. He kept hoping they'd get someone smaller than him so that he wouldn't automatically be chosen.

The rest of the gang, as if to emphasize his small stature, began to move away from him as Wolfie looked them over. Spying Ernst, his eyes lit up. Wolfie pointed straight at him and said, "I choose him."

Ernst reached into his pocket and cupped his hand around a rock. It was smooth, fit perfectly inside his fingers, and made his fist hard as a hammer. He immediately walked toward Wolfie, squinting at something behind the new boy. "What in the world is that?" he asked, as he approached to within five feet of his opponent.

“What?” asked Wolfie.

“*That*,” said Ernst, pointing over the boy’s head with his empty hand.

The new boy turned and looked behind him. As soon as he did, Ernst pulled the rock out and swung his fist as hard as he could, burying it in the boy’s stomach. Gasping, Wolfie doubled over, grabbed his stomach, and struggled to pull air into his lungs. Ernst brought his knee up into the bigger boy’s face, standing him up straight. Blood spurted from his nose, and Wolfie raised his hands to cover it. Ernst brought his rock-hardened fist into the now exposed stomach, again, and Wolfie dropped to the ground like a lump of coal the boys dropped off the train. His hands gripped his stomach. Ernst drew his foot back and prepared to kick him in the face, but sensed that his adversary was already whipped.

He squatted down next to Wolfie and said, “This is where I would normally kick your teeth out. If you agree you’re beat, I won’t.”

Wolfie nodded his head quickly.

Ernst stood up, and stepped back, the whole time continuing to watch Wolfie. “We’re done, Carl,” he said over his shoulder.

“You didn’t fight fair,” gasped Wolfie between hard-to-draw breaths.

Carl laughed and walked over next to Ernst. Putting his hand on Ernst’s shoulder, he said, “I didn’t say it had to be a *fair* fight. I just said it had to be a fight. Welcome to the gang, and let this be your first lesson. Somebody’s always out to trick you, so be prepared.” Looking at Ernst, he said, “That makes five wins in a row.”

“I’m tired of it, Carl,” said Ernst, walking behind his recent adversary and putting his hands under Wolfie’s armpits. Lifting him up, Ernst said, “One of these days my ‘look-over-there’ routine’s not going to work and I’m going to get my ass kicked. Why don’t *you* fight the next one?” Ernst looked at Wolfie. He was bent over, hands on his knees. “And Wolfie,” Ernst said, “when you’re in a fight, *never* look away. My papa taught me that when I was three. *Verdammt*.”

It was two days before Wolfie felt like climbing onto trains. Before he did, Ernst warned him about falling. “You’ve got to stay away from between the cars,” Ernst said. “Axel fell between the cars, so he landed on the tracks.”

“Was there a lot of blood?” asked Wolfie, as they walked toward where the train would be slowing down on its approach to the station.

“Yeah. It was everywhere. I even had some on my shirt. I had to rub some of the coal on top of it to keep Aunt Marta from seeing it.”

“You got family? You’re the only boy I know with family.”

Ernst shrugged. “Most of the people I know are dead. My father, my mother, grandparents, Axel. I could be next. I’ve learned to expect it.”

“Me, too. But you don’t seem to mind. I hate my parents for dying. Why did they have me if they were going to die? It’s not fair.” He kicked at a clump of coal, then hopped on one foot for a few steps when it hurt his foot.

“I guess I mind about Papa,” admitted Ernst, on the lookout for American soldiers, “because I don’t know for sure he *is* dead.”

“What do you mean?” asked Wolfie.

They were about twenty feet from the train, the locomotive having already passed. It was on a curve away from the boys so the engineer wouldn’t be able to see them. “I’ll tell you when we finish,” Ernst said as he broke into a trot. “Time to get some coal, now.” He jumped up, grabbed the ladder, making sure he got his feet in the rungs, and climbed up, followed immediately by Wolfie.

It was too noisy on the car to talk. Ernst had learned to get four or five lumps over the side, then get off. Getting greedy and staying too long was the surest way to get caught. Besides, the railroad men didn’t seem to care if they limited themselves to just a few lumps each.

When they were finished and were walking back toward the rest of the gang, Ernst said, “Papa was a U-boat *kapitän*. He came home for Christmas one year, then we never heard from him again. Nobody told us anything.

“It wasn’t like Carl’s father. He was on the *Scharnhorst*. Somebody came to his house and told them it sank and Carl’s papa was dead. If my papa *is* dead, I want them to do that for me, but they never have.” Ernst kicked a bottle, as if he were kicking some unknown, uncooperative messenger. “Aunt Marta says they don’t have time to do that for the U-boats. I don’t care about the boat, I want to know what happened to Papa.”

The two boys were almost back to where the rest of the gang was dividing the coal they had scavenged. Wolfie said, “Maybe he’s still alive.”

“Maybe,” said Ernst. “I knew a girl who thought her father was dead. Then he showed up one day. Two months later he left again and never came back. He was in the army. Why’d he even bother to come home if he wasn’t going to stay?”

“What happened to him?”

“I don’t know, but the girl was killed by the Russians. I heard they fucked her to death, but I don’t know how that kills you. Do you?”

Wolfie shrugged and shook his head.

“Anyway, everybody dies; that’s what Aunt Marta says.”

“Why can’t we find out what happened to Papa?” Ernst asked his aunt that night.

“Because we don’t even have tram service right now,” she replied. “How do you expect them to know what happened to a U-boat halfway across the world four years ago when we can’t catch a tram down at the corner in the morning?”

He didn’t understand the logic of that statement, but Aunt Marta was going to have a baby and that made her more grumpy, less logical. She didn’t seem happy about having a baby, which didn’t make sense, either, because she used to tell him she wanted lots and lots of babies. But Ernst decided he shouldn’t ask about that, either.

Later that evening, Ernst wrote a list of things he shouldn’t ask his aunt about.

1. Papa
2. The babie
3. The soljiers. Spechally the soljiers. It makes her hed hurt.

Despite his age, Ernst understood that his father probably was dead, for the reason he had given Wolfie. Everybody in his family except Aunt Marta and him were dead. Nevertheless, he *hoped* Papa was still alive. And sometimes, on those nights that Aunt Marta stopped crying and drifted off to sleep before him, Ernst would sneak out of bed, open the box he kept hidden under it, and pull out a bosun’s pipe with “U-112” inscribed on the side of it. Clutching it, he would pretend he and his father were sailing on the open sea. In his imagination, Ernst stood next to him, waiting for a command. When papa gave him one, he would pretend to blow it on the pipe, just like his father had told him sailors did. Then, before he put the pipe away, he would speak into the void that was his life.

“I’m going to find you one day, papa. I promise.”