

Love Thine Enemy, Fear Thy Love

~1~

Eyes! They bored into Mara's brain! Even if she closed hers, she could still see them. She also remembered what went with the eyes, two small swastikas, by now indelibly printed on her brain. She opened her eyes again and saw a man's bare chest. It brought her back to the present, to the safe confines of her familiar bedroom. The chest she looked at belonged to her husband, Max.

She remembered.

They both felt in an unusually light mood all that morning and had gone out shopping. They had lunch together, one thing led to another, and they wound up back at their apartment for a lazy afternoon of lovemaking—one nice thing about middle age—an activity that took place at a more leisurely pace.

But why had she seen those particular eyes? After all these years, she had finally stopped dreaming about them and thought she had finally purged her memory of that horrible time.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?" Max asked. "Is something wrong?"

Mara shook her head. "It's nothing really, a thought just struck me."

"Oh." Max said.

Mara almost laughed. Just like Max. Any other man would take umbrage at such a comment right in the middle of lovemaking, but not Max. She found his manner so courtly, so apologetic, yet his painful reticence didn't make him an emotional cripple, but a tender, compassionate man, so full of love and decency.

Her mind drifted again. She herself stood in no position to judge another's emotional state. She proved more of an emotional wreck than he. Because of what had happened to her, she thought she would never be able to experience feelings like a normal person again. Consigned to a life of mere existence, she had met Max, a guest of one of the other employees, at her annual office picnic. Mara and Max would never have met under normal and usual circumstances, both being so shy and reticent, but they quite literally ran into each other. Max's inoffensive attempts to apologize for something no more his fault than hers intrigued Mara. Of medium height, somewhat slight of build, possessing a full head of dark hair, graying only at the temples, Max gave no outer indication of what she later found to be his age—fifty-five years—ten years older than she, yet looking younger. A handsome man, really, with strong features softened by an inner gentleness. They talked a lot that afternoon, extricating themselves from the round of activities to sit quietly in the shade. When it came time to leave, she felt as though Max had been an old friend.

"Oh, God! No!" Mara cried out again. Her questions about the eyes had come clear in her mind. She had the answer!

"What's wrong, Mara!" Max exclaimed. "Have I hurt you?"

Mara looked up into the eyes of the gentle man she had married and the sight stunned her. The eyes now looking down at her had plagued her dreams for decades.

Those eyes—the eyes of her tormentor—belonged to Max!

~2~

Mara and Max went on their first date a couple of days after the picnic. God only knew how Max got up the courage to ask, but he did and Mara gladly accepted, her acquiescence due to more than the fact that he proved to be a German expatriate like herself. Something deep inside her wanted to reach out to this unusual man, to rescue herself from the aura of deadness that surrounded her and rescue him from his apparent sadness. In a few weeks, she began to come alive, to respond to the warmth this man brought her.

After dating for a while, Mara had been able to penetrate Max's reluctance to talk about himself and learned that he worked as a doctor, a general practitioner who saw mostly children. When she asked him why not a pediatrician, he told her he felt he wasn't specialist material, just a country doctor at heart. When she came to know Max better, she found that his offhanded comment turned out to be a gross understatement. The man proved nothing short of brilliant, working in a capacity far below his capabilities. Mara suspected he harbored some dark secret in his past, but she didn't push him about it. Besides, it really didn't matter to her, Mara felt too happy in the present. Why conjure up ghosts and bad memories? Better not to break the spell of love in her heart.

"It's *you!*" she cried out, pushing against Max, trying to move him off her.
"Mara! What's the matter?" Max asked, as he rolled to his side. "What do you mean, it's me?"

After seeing each other for nearly two years, Mara and Max married. He never really came right out and asked her the question; she knew he would be too reserved for that, so she directed the conversation and Max dutifully got around to asking her. She eagerly said "Yes!" for she had grown to love this enigmatic man deeply.

They married in a civil ceremony that took place in the office of the Justice of the Peace, followed by an extended honeymoon to Hawaii. Europe would have been out of the question; it held too many bad memories for the two of them.

After the honeymoon, they settled in to the routines of married life. It may have seemed a completely tame life, devoid of any adventure, but it suited the two of them to a tee. For the first time in each of their lives, they didn't feel alone and the comfort of that fact gave them a form of peace. Even the fact that neither of them slept soundly worked in their favor, for they could spend those waking hours together.

"Get away from me!" Mara screamed, her mind a confused jumble of thoughts. As she fought to reject the answer her mind had just given her, as if bringing together the pieces of a decades-old puzzle, she saw, there in Max's widening eyes, not confusion, but recognition! He knew!

"Mein Gott!" he said, lapsing into his native tongue. "Wie kann dies sein?"

"How can it be?" Mara asked, accusation in her tone. "Then it is you! You were the doctor from the camp!"

Why it took so long for her to remember, she didn't know. Maybe the mental wall she had built around her past had prevented immediate recognition, but now she knew and that knowledge filled her with a fear that, after what she had gone through, she did not think she could experience again. That fear took her back thirty years, back to when she had been but a girl of fifteen; back to Germany.

Back to the hell of the concentration camp known as Bergestaagen.

Terrified nearly out of her mind, Mara didn't know why, exactly, they had brought her to this horrible place. Her side ached terribly and she wanted Mama, but Mama wouldn't come ... ever again; nor would Papa. They had both died in this horrible place. Now she lay on a cold table and her side hurt and eyes looked down at her ... *gentle* eyes. But how could this be? How could there be gentle eyes in a place like this? She looked into those eyes, hypnotized by them.

Hands removed her dirty shift, leaving her naked and shivering. Other hands began to wash her filthy body, to probe at her side, to make it hurt some more. Hands placed a funny smelling, rubber mask over her nose and mouth and a sweet, cloying smell filled her lungs. Sleepiness overpowered her and she began to dream.

She floated in a pool of clear, cold water, just below the surface. Above the surface, a pair of eyes—those kind, gentle eyes—looked down, down into her brain. Hands reached down into the water, under her body, lifting her up and out of the water. All the while, the eyes never left her.

She felt scared, scared and alone. Yet, when she looked into those kind, gentle eyes, those wonderful, clear blue eyes the color of an alpine lake, she just knew that everything would be all right.

Mara became aware of waking up. As she drifted towards consciousness, she tried to open her eyelids, but they felt as if someone had cemented them shut. Finally, they separated and, for a moment, the sudden light blinded her. Soon, she saw the eyes again and, this time, they had a face; a kind face, with a smile.

Mara lay in a bed, a clean bed, with white sheets; not the filthy burlap bag in the barracks in which she lived, filled with stinking, vermin infested straw. Bugs would crawl out while she slept and bite her. The place where she now lay smelled clean, with just a hint of medicine in the air.

Mara looked around the room, filled with sunlight streaming in from the large window. The buff colored walls looked clean, with pictures on them. Mara wondered where this wondrous room could be. The face that held the kind, gentle eyes spoke.

“Ah, sie sind wach, mein liebster,” said the pleasant, baritone voice. “Wie fühlen sie?”

Mara just looked at that face, realizing it belonged to a doctor, not an old doctor, but a young one; a doctor who had called her “my dear” and asked how she felt. She said nothing.

“That's all right, you don't have to speak. I'll leave you now and come see you when you've rested.” He turned and walked away.

Mara saw the doctor again many times during her stay in the camp hospital. Always pleasant, he brought her little treats each time he came, yet he never stayed long. At first, she didn't talk to him but soon saw no reason not to. Her first words were not very friendly.

“Wie können sie in diesem schrecklichen ort arbeiten?” she spat at him, wanting him to tell her how he could work in such a terrible place.

“I am a doctor, schatzie; I work where I am needed.”

“They kill people in this awful place!”

Sadness filled his kind, gentle eyes. “My country has called upon me to serve here because of the war and I answered.”

“How can you serve people here?” Mara shot back.

The doctor looked at her with a great sadness in his eyes. "I know," he said and left the room.

When the young doctor came back the next time, Mara didn't speak harshly to him again, for she didn't want to drive him away. She liked him and inwardly enjoyed his visits. He always proved nice to her and they talked of many things.

The doctor told her his name, Wilhelm, and informed her that she had had appendicitis and that he had to remove her appendix or she would have died. Mara believed him. He also told her about his home in Bavaria. When he remembered it, his eyes got a far away, dreamy look. He spoke of his mother, who had raised him herself after his father's death when he had been but a boy of three. He also spoke of his girlfriend, a nurse in a hospital in Berlin. Mara could tell that he missed them very much. He told her that his medical specialty had been in pediatrics and she could tell that he loved children.

One day, Wilhelm came again to see Mara. He didn't wear his white coat this time, but his uniform. He looked very handsome in it, too. Mara began to smile until she saw the two little swastikas on his lapels. How she hated them; symbols of her people's misery!

"I wanted to see you one last time, schatzie," he said in a soft, sad voice. "I have been called elsewhere. I will never see you again, but I will always remember you."

He looked into Mara's eyes for a long time, as if to read something there and tears welled up in his eyes. Without another word, he spun on his heel and walked quickly from the room, his brightly polished boot heels rapping on the tile floor. Mara ran to the window and saw the handsome, young doctor leave the building and walk to a big, black car. He got in with two other men in the black uniforms of the dreaded SS and the car drove away. Mara ran back to the bed and threw herself upon it, crying for a long time, not quite sure why.

~4~

Max looked at Mara and saw a look of utter revulsion on her face. At first, as they made love, he had no idea what had been troubling her, causing her fear, but her accusations hit Max like a hammer blow and he knew the cause. He felt doomed, condemned. Through some cruel twist of fate, after all these years of rebuilding his shattered life, he ended up married to one of the victims of Bergestaagen!

A name he had tried to forget for thirty years rose unbidden in his memory.

Wilhelm Kroeger.

Wilhelm Kroeger looked at the new nurse and could see the revulsion in her eyes. After all, the Butcher of Bergestaagen confronted her. Most of them reacted the same way. Ironically, it proved a good thing for Wilhelm, for it made his job easier. Now, he needed to get her on his side.

"What is your name frauline?" he asked coolly.

"Gretel, mein herr," she replied diffidently.

"Don't be frightened by the stories you may have heard about me."

"I'm not frightened, mein herr."

He could see the fear in her gaze. "Of course not, but let me just say that not all you have heard is the truth, I assure you. I think you should see for yourself and then decide. Come with me."

All Wilhelm's interviews with new staff began the same way. They began by fearing him and, as they followed him from his office to the wards to see the facilities, he could almost read the thoughts in their minds. They all wondered what horrors awaited them around the next corner. This turned out to be good in its own way, for it told him that those on the outside considered him a monster.

By the time they finished the tour, the reality of the situation slowly became apparent. Yet, sometimes, a new arrival proved difficult to sway and it took Wilhelm some time to convince them. In the end, however, he usually won them over to his side. Those few he couldn't he transferred out as soon as possible, usually for incompetence. Though not completely true, he had no use for their particular brand of stubbornness.

Mara sat huddled in a corner of the bedroom, trying to hide her nakedness with her hands and arms. Max sat naked on the bed, cradling his head in his hands. The initial shock had begun to ebb, and Mara's heart had slowed somewhat, but, for a moment, she thought it would burst and she would die. However, that tenacious something that humans call "the will to live" kept it beating.

Poised like that for what seemed like hours, Mara finally spoke.

"I remember you from Bergestaagen, but I'm not quite sure who you really are. You were a doctor there, right?"

"Ja," Max said through his fingers.

"Is Max your real name?"

"Nein. It's Wilhelm. Wilhelm Kroeger. I was the chief medical officer at the camp when you came to me as a patient."

Mara tried to sort out the jumble of her thoughts, when it hit her. For the first time in thirty years, they came clearly, not all muddled up with the horror. "You're the doctor who operated on me at Bergestaagen!" she exclaimed.

"Ja, it is so," Max said, finally looking up at her.

"I liked you then; you seemed kind."

"Perhaps *weak* would be a better word."

Wilhelm walked down the hospital corridor, his mind awhirl. They had found him out! Perhaps a spy, an informer, had turned him in, in spite of all his carefully laid plans, which now lay in shambles. What would happen with him out of the picture? How would the rest of the staff fare? The high command would know that they worked in cooperation with him. What would happen to his patients?

Wilhelm worried for all of them. Along with them, he worried for himself. What would become of him? Would he be court-martialed? Shot? The uncertainty of the future caused a chill to run down his back.

He reached the front doors of the hospital and stepped through the front door into the sunshine. The beautiful fall day struck Wilhelm as ironic. Two men of the SS waited there and fell in on either side, to escort him to the waiting car. Before getting in, he cast a quick glance at the building behind him. There, framed in the window of the children's ward, stood a small, frail figure. Mara. Getting into the car, he lifted his hand in a farewell salute. Wilhelm Kroeger, the Beast of Bergestaagen, felt as if his life had ended.

In spite of herself, Mara found her heart going out to Max/Wilhelm. She steeled herself, though, and met his look with what she hoped looked like firm resolve.

“What happened to you that day, when you left the hospital?”

“My senior officers were unhappy with my work at the camp. They sent me to the Russian front, to do field duty there. They would have stripped me of my officer’s rank, but they reasoned I needed it to do my work effectively. Nevertheless, I kept only the lowest rank of lieutenant.”

“But why? Did you not do your job?” Mara asked, puzzled.

He smiled wanly. “Not the job they wanted me to do. They perceived me as weak. My job at the camp was to perform medical experiments to further the cause of medicine in the Third Reich. I didn’t want to do this. I resisted as long as I could in my own way, but they eventually discovered my little subterfuges and relieved me of my duties. They didn’t expect me to survive on the Russian front and sent me there to die. So much death and destruction! The German army was being crushed, crushed by the brutal Russian winter and by the equally brutal Russian army.”

“If what you say is true, why did you go to the Bergestaagen in the first place?”

“I was a young and idealistic medical student, fresh out of school in Berlin, my head filled with the glories of the Third Reich. I had been taught these things as a child in the Youth Corps. Please believe me when I say that I knew nothing of Juden and of the things going on in the extermination camps.

“I was seeking a career in pediatrics when ‘the Fatherland’ called upon me to do my duty as a soldier. They sent me to be the chief medical officer of Bergestaagen, a new camp they had opened. I realized the need to imprison certain factions which worked against the purposes of the Fuhrer, but I was not prepared for what I saw. I came to realize how blind I had been.”

When Max started his explanation, it released a torrent of words, as if a dam had burst. He lapsed into German, and it poured forth like a river. He became more animated, as though by speaking the words in his native tongue, he could purge himself of the past.

“At first, I was indignant, furiously trying to bring some semblance of sanity and medical care to the camp. I was confronted by the Commandant, told to change my ways. If I wanted to provide a show of medical aid that would be allowed, but I had to consider the work the Fuhrer expected of me. It was my duty as an officer of the Third Reich!

“I realized that, if I wished to do any good there at all, I must try to deceive them. I ostensibly performed my experiments, usually on cadavers and the terminally ill, but only with their permission.”

Considering his last statement, Max looked up and saw the look in Mara’s eyes. “No! No! I never tortured or maimed any of my patients, Mara,” he said, the first time he had used her name since the shock of the discovery. “I did do some experimentation, usually trying some new drug, or performing some radical new surgical technique, but always to the end of trying to prolong each life and only with the patient’s consent. The patient usually died anyway, they were so pathetically wasted away. I always made sure though, that everyone in my hospital ate well and the staff kept the wards clean. I also had many working with me who secretly hated what went on. Together we tried to provide the Commandant with evidence that we were doing what he wished.” Max got up and began to move toward Mara but stopped when he saw her flinch.

“Mara, please try to understand when I say that, since then, I have spent the years of my life agonizing over what went on at Bergestaagen. I have spent the last thirty years praying that God would forgive me for being so weak. I was afraid for my own safety and thought I could save

myself and provide some measure of comfort to the innocent wretches who daily worked their fingers to the bone and were paid for their labors by being hauled off to the ovens when they were too sick or died. I know now that I was deluded. I should have spoken out against the horror of it, lost my life if necessary to cry out against the evil that corrupted Germany!”

Max broke down then, releasing a torrent of suppressed tears. He dropped to his knees on the floor and slumped there, sobbing; great, wracking sobs torn from his innermost being. They sounded so forlorn, so animal-like; Mara marveled that a human throat could make them.

At that moment, something broke in Mara. She saw Max/Wilhelm, the devil of thirty years of nightmares, in an entirely different light. She realized then how much Max had suffered. In her own misery over what had happened to her, she had failed to recognize that others suffer too. Max, who saw the other side of the horror, had tried to do what he could to change what he saw as a blight on his beloved country. He had spent thirty years trying to atone for something that made him as much a victim of that terrible war as she. It caused Mara to marvel at the weight of sorrow a human heart could carry.

She went to Max, kneeling before him. She took him in her arms and hugged him to her as Max sobbed like a little child. She could feel his tears, like gentle rain, fall on her, running down her breasts to her belly, down past her appendectomy scar ... her memento of Bergestaagen.

~5~

Mara regarded Max from across the table in their kitchen, where they sat drinking coffee. In another life, he had been a German doctor in the concentration camp where the Germans had exterminated thousands of her people. For thirty years, his eyes dwelled in her memory as the eyes of a monster that left its legacy of terror inside her very thoughts and dreams. Yet, now, Wilhelm Kroeger no longer played the part of a monster. He had become Max. Dear, loving Max, the man who had brought her from the tomb of her grief.

“After you left,” Mara said softly, “Bergestaagen became the hell that you had tried to stave off. So many of my dear friends died, either in the camp or in the ovens, when Nazi Germany stepped up the carnage like some crazed, wounded, dying animal. The comparatively pleasant time I spent in the hospital was soon forgotten in the horror of that last year before liberation.

“After the war, your eyes haunted my dreams for almost thirty years. In my confusion and grief, I somehow blotted out the kind, young doctor and remembered only the eyes, coupled with the swastikas on your uniform lapels, as the eyes of some demented monster. This afternoon, my thoughts finally came clearly.”

Max, looking forlornly into his coffee cup, spoke. “I am so very, very sorry to have caused you such pain. I cannot help but feel guilt over what my people were responsible for. It is a cruel irony that I should meet and fall in love with one of the victims of that madness. We should never have met.”

“No, don’t say that!” Mara remonstrated and he looked up to meet Mara’s gaze. “I’m not sorry we met. The man I have grown to love these last two years could never have been the monster of my nightmares. There’s nothing to forgive. You’ve brought me the first real happiness I’ve known in too long a time. Your love and kindness has taken me from the prison of my sorrow, just as it did when I was a child in another prison. Your presence brought a measure of happiness, then. When you left, my life became hell. Please don’t leave me again.”

A look of utter amazement crossed Max's features. "You mean ... you don't hate me? You *want* me to stay?"

"Yes Max; or should I call you Wilhelm?"

"Please, call me Max. Wilhelm died many years ago."

Mara reached across the table and took Max's hands in hers. "After all the years we have bottled up our sorrow, I think it's time for us to speak of it. In spite of all the madness in this world, God has granted us the joy of loving one another. We shouldn't let the past rob us of the happiness we've been given."

"Oh, Mara! I"

Max couldn't finish and lowered his head onto his arms, crying. Mara left her seat and went around to him, kneeling next to his chair, her hand on his thigh. He turned, slipped off the chair and embraced her. They both huddled there, weeping softly, the tears they both shed like a medicine, washing over their emotional scars and furthering the healing process.

After a long while, they got up and went back to the bed. They sat there for a time, simply looking into each other's eyes. Occasionally, one of them reached out to touch the other, a gesture performed silently, ritualistically, a rite to bridge the gulf that time and circumstance had caused between them. Finally, they undressed each other and made love again, slowly and tenderly, while the afternoon sun shed slanting rays into the room, striping their intertwined bodies. This time, the eyes in her memory belonged to her loving husband.

Afterwards, the room now dark, they slept, wrapped in each other's embrace, like children warding off fears of the dark.

Mara awoke before dawn the following morning. The nightmares that had haunted her sleep for more than thirty years had not come and she felt more rested than she had in years. She looked over at Max. He lay on his back, snoring softly; even he seemed to be sleeping more soundly.

Carefully slipping out of bed, Mara wrapped her robe around her and padded to the kitchen, where she busied herself making breakfast. Her mind went back to the times she and her best friend Mary would have an early breakfast together on Sunday, preparing to go to Mary's church. All through her preparations, she remembered her dear friend.

After breakfast, as Max and Mara enjoyed a second cup of coffee, Mara asked him a question.

"Max, let's go to services at Mary's church tomorrow."

He looked up at her. "I thought you were a confirmed agnostic. Didn't you always say that a God who could let the Holocaust happen wasn't a God to be trusted?"

"Yes, I did," she said, chuckling, "and I'm still an agnostic, but it's just that I've done a lot of thinking about my friend Mary. Faced with the aftermath of the war as a Red Cross nurse, it never changed her gentle, optimistic nature. I always attributed that to her religious views. She never stopped encouraging me to get to know God better. She claimed it was more than a religion with her, that it was a relationship she had with her Savior. It certainly made a difference in her life."

"And you want to see for yourself?"

"Something like that, although I'm not sure I'll find anything I haven't already."

All that day, Mara and Max spent a lot of time reliving the past, something they both wanted to do, the catharsis of it what they needed to open the floodgates of their pent up memories; memories they needed to hold as shared memories.

~6~

Max explained how he had come to America via Switzerland, where he had gone after his release from a Russian prisoner of war camp, not much different from Bergestaagen. He went to the authorities there and voluntarily offered to have the war crimes board examine him. It didn't take long. Once they located the proper papers and examined the proper witnesses, they exonerated him from any war crimes and rendered him "de-Nazified."

When Max arrived in America, he officially changed his name and worked long and hard to obtain a license to practice medicine again. He threw himself into his work, as if to erase the stigma of the past by his efforts, finally able to set up a practice, where he became a trusted friend-of-the-family to his patients.

Fear dogged his tracks though. Fear of his past catching up with him, guilt his constant companion, his dreams filled with the many faces of Bergestaagen.

Mara, in turn, described her arduous story. Released from her own hell by the Liberation Forces, she went to a relocation camp for a few months, along with the other survivors, to recover from her ordeal. She then went back to her home near Rostock to try to track down any remaining family members. She found no one. Never in her life did she feel so utterly alone!

Most of the time she went around in a daze, picking up a little work here and there to keep body and soul together, one notable exception to the routine the American Red Cross worker Mara met, who later became her best friend.

At fifty-eight and much older than Mara, she took a personal interest in Mara's future. Coincidentally, she bore the name *Mary*, the Anglicized version of Mara, and she told Mara about her relationship with her Savior, Jesus Christ. At first Mara put her off, arguing that, first, she was a Jew and second, if God had so much love for humanity, why had he allowed a place like Bergestaagen to exist?

Mary finally succeeded in breaking down some of Mara's resistance, not only with her persuasive argument, but by how she demonstrated her faith with her life. She coaxed Mara to come back to America with her, to begin a new life there. Mara, her seventeen-year-old mind piqued by the adventure of the move and the excitement of a new culture, agreed. After the newness wore off, however, the deadness returned and life became a dull routine again. A couple of uneventful years passed. Mara, a student of English in school, found a job in an elementary school office as a secretary, kept to herself and spent her evenings in the small apartment she and Mary shared in San Diego. On Sundays, they went to a small, evangelical church together. Occasionally, they would travel, until ill health turned Mary into a semi-invalid. Mara cared for her faithfully, marveling at Mary's sweet and uncomplaining spirit. Mary spoke often to Mara about how she looked forward to seeing her Savior, urging Mara to give her life to Him, until she died suddenly one day of heart failure. Mara grieved inconsolably for her dear friend and companion, her only family.

Mary's death proved yet another link in her chain of resentment against God. She stayed on in the apartment and lived a comfortable, if not happy, life. She had her salary, plus a sizable

inheritance from Mary, who had made Mara the beneficiary of her insurance, her estate, her possessions and her beloved Bible.

She stopped attending Mary's church and, other than work, never went anywhere. Slowly she settled deeper and deeper into her melancholic, reclusive life, rapidly becoming a dried up old spinster.

... Until she met Max.

Mara sat in the pew, on the aisle, near the back of the church with Max at her side. She couldn't seem to make out a familiar face since the last time she visited long ago. The minister, a young man seemingly just out of seminary, replaced the pastor she knew. She looked over at Max, who shifted nervously in his seat, looking as uncomfortable as she.

Mara felt like a hypocrite after so many years of not darkening the doorstep of any church. After some preliminaries, and a couple of unfamiliar hymns, sung in a rousing style by the mostly young congregation, the minister rose and walked to the pulpit to deliver his sermon.

He began with a simple, direct, yet passionate prayer. Its lack of ecclesiastical phrases surprised Mara. As he began his message, he spoke in a low, well-modulated voice, in an easy, off-handed manner, which impressed Mara. She settled in to enjoy the message, looking over at Max. He leaned forward, his hands on his thighs, listening with an intensity that surprised her.

The atmosphere changed and the minister's message changed in tone as well, seemingly aimed directly at Mara. He began to use examples and illustrations specifically describing things about her life that he couldn't possibly know. She looked furtively at Max, but he still stared forward intently, heedless of those around him.

As the message progressed, Mara squirmed in her seat.

I didn't come here for this, she thought. *I came here seeking answers, not to feel uncomfortable.*

Yet, the words of the sermon wormed their way into Mara's innermost being, convicting, illuminating, reminding, accusing. Before long, she began to see the truth behind what Mary had told her about Jesus and she could not ignore it. She had to come face to face with him on a personal level. She had to choose between rejecting his claims or believing him to be who he claimed to be; the God-man, Savior of the world. Her being a Jew didn't matter and couldn't serve as a valid argument. Jesus, as the minister explained it, in his man form existed *as* a Jew, living and dying in Israel. Nevertheless, his claims proved universal.

Finally, the sermon came to a close and Mara felt relief. It proved short-lived, however, for the young minister asked all those present to bow their heads. He prayed for those in the congregation who felt the Holy Spirit's call to believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to confess his or her sins and become a born again child of God.

"Now, I'm going to ask some of you to do a very difficult thing," he said. "If the Lord has been speaking to your heart and you have heeded His call, I want you to acknowledge Him publicly as your Savior and Lord by rising where you sit and making your way to the front here. It won't be easy, but the Scripture says we must believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths. Are there any who will come?"

Mara's mind whirled and her heart raced. After hearing everything the minister had to say, she knew she should respond, but the thought of making her way to the front went against her demure nature. As though the minister heard her thoughts, he continued.

"Don't let those around you stop you from doing what you *know* in your heart is the right thing. With heads bowed in prayer, no one will laugh at you or think ill of you for obeying the

call of the Lord. I'm going to step down in front of the pulpit to meet with those who come. I'd love to meet you there."

The organ began to play softly and Mara wrestled with her conscience. She wanted to go, but her knees felt like water. Then, she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked to her right into Max's kind face, wet with tears.

"Ich denke, dass wir dort steigen müssen, schatzie," he said, smiling, indicating his desire to go forward.

Mara remembered when he had called her "schatzie" so very long ago. "You feel it too, Max?" she asked in a whisper and he nodded. His quiet encouragement providing the strength she needed to rise from her seat and make her way up the aisle. Taking his hand, she stood. As they made their way up front, she saw four people standing with the young minister, who smiled at her and Max.

In the parking lot of the small church a half-hour later, Mara sat beside Max in their car, their faces still wet with tears; the cool, healing tears of the newly saved. Instead of feeling wrung out, she felt exhilarated, energized; the terrible load of grief and deadness lifted from her. Meeting Max had begun the process, but meeting Jesus had completed it. She wondered why she had resisted it for so long.

"Let's go away somewhere, Max." she said, as eager as a child.

Max smiled at her. "Where should we go?"

"Oh, I don't know. It really doesn't matter where. I feel like we were running from something on our honeymoon. It's not that I didn't enjoy being with you, I did, but we were both so sorrowful, still so much prisoners of the past, it dampened our enjoyment. This will be very different."

"All right. We'll go wherever our fancy takes us. We can simply drive; see more of this big, wonderful country, perhaps."

Max looked ten years younger to Mara and she thanked God from the bottom of her heart that he had miraculously brought them together, a miracle indeed! Out of the pain and horror of the past he had brought them into the light of His love and grace.

She felt that her heart would burst, only, this time, from the joy of it all. Instead of looking at the long string of deadened years before her, she now couldn't wait to see what the next day would bring.

"Let's go home." Max said and twisted the key in the ignition.

Mara tucked her hand in under his right arm and laid her head on his shoulder. All her life, she wondered if anything could possibly rescue her from the corrupt legacy of Nazi Germany, the legacy of Bergestaagen, and knew that they would for the rest of their lives bear the deep scars of that place. Faces of loved ones and friends would inhabit their memories always.

Yet, she also knew that the pain, the nightmares, the bleakness of the past could no longer hold her or Max in its thrall. They were newborn children of God, their sins forgiven and their spirits and souls healed.

Thank you, Mary, she said in her mind, certain that her dear friend in heaven rejoiced with her.