

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

OLD STONES

Elin Austin

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

OLD STONES

By Elin Austen

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A priest holds an axe over the chains of a second man... a prisoner, preparing to strike. Do these two men know each other, maybe from childhood? Why did they go down separate paths and how did they end up here?

Story Letter

Dear Author,

As you see, one of these men is a priest, the other, an escaped prisoner. I feel they knew each other since boyhood. How could they end on such different paths? What was it that broke their friendship?

Please no BDSM, D/s, poly, no evil females.

I don't mind if there is no sex or if the story is not HEA—write as your muse dictates you.

Bonus for historical fic, amateur detective work, revenge.

Thank you

Sincerely,

Anna

Story Info

Genre: 20th century historical

Tags: captivity, in the closet, men with pets, priest, researcher, religion, post-war WWII

Word Count: 9,247

OLD STONES

By Elin Austen

CHAPTER 1

Russian Zone, Allied-occupied Germany, Spring, 1946

Father Anton walked along the riverbank with his dog in the quiet evening, praying to God for help in understanding the feelings of anger and futility that had plagued him the last four days. Saying a funeral Mass for one of his parishioners was part of the job, and he knew that saying the words of life everlasting eased the sense of loss for those who believed. Sometimes death was a comfort, a final end to the long-suffering of illness or old age; sometimes it was a surprise, coming too soon and shrouded in sudden tragedy. Sometimes it was massive and unimaginable. Anton was struggling with one more senseless death, on top of all the others that had come to light.

Anton and the rest of the people in his village had at first not believed the news that started to filter out in the Allied-controlled newspapers last summer, describing the liberation of work camps filled with starving people in Germany and Poland and other places overrun by the Third Reich. Then photos of opened mass graves were printed, and the count of the dead kept rising as summer turned to fall and then to winter. Millions of people gone from the earth in a monstrous act of utter insanity. Father Anton still wondered where God had been the last several years, and his faith had faltered. All through the harsh winter, one of the coldest on record, Anton wondered just what the fuck God's plan was. Now that spring had finally come to a land stripped lean by the war, Anton had felt his spirit rising along with the warming breeze, and allowed himself to hope that a reason would be made clear to him and that he would once again find comfort in God's word. And then four days ago he had been called to young Tabbart's home late in the night.

"A queer beating," the constable had told him privately out of hearing of the grieving parents. "He tried to kiss a boy," the outraged constable fumed.

“Don’t know what he was thinking. He was attacked by persons unknown and left by the side of the road. No one’s saying anything. Nothing more I can do.” The constable snapped his notepad closed and stalked out of the house. Anton knew the constable did not consider the beating of a homosexual a crime, and the thugs would likely never face punishment. Tabbart breathed his last breath and slipped away early the next morning without ever waking.

Anton’s shoulders slumped as his thoughts returned to earlier this day, when he had led a small group of mourners in a Mass of the Angels, asking God’s blessing for the teenager buried today. Anton had been especially aware of young Tabbart, ever since the day the ten-year-old was brought to church by his proud parents to serve as an altar boy for a brand new Father Anton, fresh out of seminary and newly ordained. Tabbart served at every Mass said by Anton and as such held a special place in his heart. A sweet and happy child, Tabbart had grown into a confused and depressed teen. It was only in the confessional that Father Anton learned what bothered Tabbart. He had come to realize that he liked boys and believed he was damned to hell because of it. Anton had counseled Tabbart to accept himself, for who was he to question how God made him? Anton had gently spoken from the heart, echoing the words he had privately told himself through the years. Tabbart had seemed calmer in the weeks following that guilt-ridden confession, and Anton had believed the teen had benefited from the kind words of acceptance and absolution he had granted him. Then Tabbart had been beaten and died.

On this evening after laying Tabbart to rest in the church graveyard, Anton wondered again if he should have strongly counseled Tabbart to not act on his feelings, to harshly condemn him and perhaps save his life by doing so. Now he would never know. He bowed his head and stared down into the churning grey water of the river, rising with snowmelt and close to overrunning its banks. One more senseless death seemed to be pushing Anton over a line, a line he had drawn six years ago when he entered the seminary and had a heartfelt one-sided conversation with God.

Anton wasn’t sure how long he had stood in silent contemplation when his dog Duzzi caught his attention. Duzzi snuffled excitedly under the copse of

trees by the riverbank, probably searching for hares. Anton pulled the small throw net from his pocket and waited for a hare to come bounding out of the brush, not wanting to miss an opportunity to capture fresh meat. Anton could stretch a single hare to several days' worth of meals. He was so tired of boiled turnips and dried apples from the root cellar, with an occasional fish if he was lucky enough to catch one. Duzzi backed out of the tangle by the trees, dragging something. Anton peered closer and bent down to inspect the dark object Duzzi proudly held in his mouth. A shoe? Thoroughly soaked but in good repair, he noted. Perhaps its mate was in the tangle, too? Good shoes were hard to come by these days, and the Allied occupiers weren't keen on providing such items to the defeated citizenry. Anton pushed his way into the brush, pulling low branches aside as he searched the ground. There! That dark lump resembled a shoe, even covered with a good layer of river mud. Anton grasped it and pulled, and it came loose with a sucking sound.

He sat down hard and stared at a newly uncovered bare foot. The skin was white and wrinkled, not bloated or purpled with decay. Anton lightly sniffed the air and did not detect any scent of rot. He pushed more branches aside, uncovering legs and then the torso of a thin man lying on his belly in the mud and partially submerged in the chill river. Anton reached over and laid a hand on the man's neck, and felt a faint pulse. Not dead yet. Anton didn't wait for the man to wake up, knowing the cold water would probably kill him if he didn't get him warmed up and quickly. He tugged, trying to get him free of the mud and tree limbs but he seemed stuck on something. He reached around and felt the man's sides, moving up to his chest. He found a leather strap looped diagonally across the man's back and tightly knotted to one of the tree branches hanging over the riverbank. The knotted leather was hopelessly swollen. Anton pulled a penknife from his pocket and began to saw at the strap while Duzzi nudged the man's face and licked him. The knife did its job and the leather strap finally came free, and a leather satchel dropped from the strap onto the mud. Anton idly wondered if he had tied himself to the low branch or if someone else had knotted the leather around the branch and left him to drown when the water level reached the branches.

Anton was relieved the darkening evening provided some cover for moving the man to his nearby parish cottage. He pulled the man up from the mud and for the first time saw the chain linking his wrists. Anton dropped him back in the mud and stepped back, not wanting anything to do with a prisoner. He thought the man was either an escaped Allied prisoner, or perhaps he had escaped from a regular German prison. He couldn't have come from one of those wretched camps; they had all been emptied before winter and the man didn't look as deathly thin as those men had. If he was a prisoner of the Allies, then he might be a war criminal. Anton didn't want to help one of those. Then again the man may have simply been a common criminal in which case Anton thought he should just be returned to jail. He frowned as Duzzi curled up in the mud next to the prone body and placed his furry face on the man's shoulder. Anton sighed. The dog's approval settled the matter. He grabbed the man under his arms and pulled him free of the branches and tangle, then hauled him up and threw him over his shoulder.

He carried him back to his cottage behind the church, thankful that the funeral participants had left hours ago. Anton placed him on the rug in front of the hearth in the old stone kitchen, the warmest place in the old cottage, and turned to put water on to heat. Duzzi trotted in behind him and dropped the leather satchel at his feet, then went back outside. Anton once again lamented the lack of a village doctor, but they hadn't had one since Dr. Stein disappeared five years ago. Anton didn't think the midwife could help the man on his hearth, and decided to simply get him warm and feed him if he woke up. When he heard the man's story, he would decide whether to fetch the constable. He stepped outside to the woodpile on the porch and grabbed an armful of firewood, noticing the chill in the air as night came. His mood lightened somewhat as he realized he didn't want this man's death on his conscience, and he immediately felt better about bringing the man in from the cold riverbank.

Duzzi returned with the shoes and dropped them by the hearth and sat down next to the unconscious man. Anton added wood to the fire and coaxed it into a fine blaze, then set a basin of warm water down and proceeded to wipe away the mud from the prone man's face. As he cleaned away the grime, the

man's swollen features emerged. A firm jaw and a once-fine nose, broken numerous times and never set correctly. Raised scars on his face, probably from repeated beatings. Fresh bumps and scrapes from contact with tree limbs and debris in the water. Dark hair. The man looked vaguely familiar, but it was hard to be sure of anything until the swelling went down. His clothes had started to dry in the heat from the fire, and Anton went to retrieve some bedding to make a pallet. The man needed a good soaking in a hot bath, but Anton wasn't trying that until he woke. He checked the man's pulse again and breathed with relief as he noted it was stronger and his skin had pinked up a bit. Anton settled him close to the hearth and turned to survey his available food. Tabbart's family had gifted him with some sausage, and without a hare tonight that would be his dinner. Or rather his and his guest's dinner, he corrected himself as he set to peeling and slicing turnips. His mind continued to work at the niggling thought that he might know the man as he fried the sliced sausage and turnips and stirred potato starch into the drippings. He ladled the last of the milk into the pan and stirred the thickening gravy. He jumped and dropped the spoon when a tired voice croaked, "That smells good, Anton."

CHAPTER 2

Anton turned his head and looked into deep blue eyes and his breath caught. “Karl?” he murmured in disbelief, finally recognizing the face of the man he had loved years before.

“Yes, it’s me.” He coughed and grabbed his side, grimacing in pain. “Where am I?”

Speechless, Anton knelt by the pallet. “What happened?” he finally asked, trying to stay calm as his heart pounded and his gut churned.

“Fucking rocks in the river. Fucking Russians. Fucking Nazis,” gasped Karl, as he attempted to get up. Anton gently eased him into a sitting position and draped the blanket over his thin shoulders, then handed him a mug of hot tea. “Where am I?” he repeated as he glanced at the leather satchel.

“At my church, in Schelekberg. How badly are you hurt?”

“I’ll live.” He shivered and rattled the chain linking the manacles on his wrists. He stared down at them, turning his forearms and inspecting the reddened skin under the metal. “These need to come off.”

Anton held a wrist in his hands and examined the rusting manacle. “I suppose I could try to pick the lock,” he said dubiously.

“No time.” He glanced around the worn room and his eyes landed on the firewood piled by the hearth. “Get your axe,” he urged. “The chain is rusted. If you manage to break it, I can tie the ends out of sight. For both our sakes, no one can see me like this.”

Anton grabbed his axe from the porch and after glancing into the night, came back to the kitchen. His eyes narrowed. “Maybe you should explain first why you’re in chains. I might be setting a murderer free.”

“I didn’t kill anyone!” he hissed. “All I did was love men. This is the first time in six years that I’ve been free. You know what happened to me in Berlin?”

“I heard. You got yourself arrested for depraved acts. You idiot. I warned you not to look for those clubs. You put all of us at risk,” Anton said bitterly. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, willing the harsh feelings back down. “What happened to Otto and Klaus?” he asked with a steady voice.

“Arrested. Sentenced to a work camp and to wear a pink triangle like the rest of us queers. Otto died the first winter. I don’t know what happened to Klaus. He was alive the last time I saw him, but that was five years ago.” He was silent for a few moments as they both remembered their absent friends. “After the first year they moved me to a private estate to assess and catalog items liberated from their former owners. You remember I studied antiquities at University, right?” Karl asked. Anton nodded, and Karl continued. “Paintings, sculptures, jewelry, rare books and maps, and oddities from all the museums they raided from as far away as Africa. They had so much plunder coming in they needed help figuring out what they had. Work was easier at the estate than in the camps so I did what they ordered. When the Russians pushed into Germany they overran the estate and liberated it.” He looked Anton in the eye. “You were the smartest of all of us, going home instead of coming with us to Berlin. No one there ever knew of you and we never told them when they interrogated us, looking for associates. We kept your secret, Anton.”

“The Allies cleared the camps almost a year ago. Why are you still chained?” asked Anton, not feeling particularly grateful. The fools should never have gone to Berlin.

“The Russians didn’t feel obligated to free me, and kept me at the estate to explain the catalog of items they had just taken from the Germans. They don’t trust anyone and they don’t want the other Allies to know what they found, so not many people knew I was there. I was almost finished with the task and the last shipment was due out to Russia in a few days. I don’t think they would have let me live. I had to liberate myself.” He pulled the leather satchel closer and looked intently at Anton. “They’ll come looking for me... with dogs.” He shuddered involuntarily. “Please help me.”

Anton had no argument for that. “Come over here next to the block,” he told him, helping him move into position. He settled the chain across the old

chopping block and inspected the links. He took a few practice swings. “Close your eyes,” he ordered, and swung the axe hard. It took three hard swings of the axe to break one link, but that was all that was needed. “I can still try to pick these,” Anton said, almost to himself as he lifted Karl’s manacled wrist. “How long before they come looking for you?”

“Maybe daybreak. Is that food ready yet?” Karl sniffed the air appreciatively. “And do you have a washtub and soap?” he asked hopefully. Anton helped him to stand and pointed to the sink. Karl washed his hands and face while Anton ladled the hot sausage and gravy into bowls.

“Sorry. No bread. No garden vegetables either. Just turnip. It was a long winter.” Anton bowed his head and clasped his hands together, murmuring a prayer of thanks for the food he did have. Karl stopped shoveling food into his mouth until the prayer was finished. His bowl was empty a few moments later. “I hope that sausage doesn’t come back up. There isn’t any more,” Anton remarked as he watched Karl lick gravy from his fingers. “The Russians take most of the food. Sometimes the parishioners bring some to me, sharing what they have. There are still a few dairy cows hidden outside the village, and a few hogs. I can trap hares.”

“Don’t they put money in the collection plate?”

“There hasn’t been money in the collection plate for a long time. Not much to buy with it, anyway. Last week someone left me a few bars of homemade soap and some tea in the collection plate. Not many churchgoers left in the village, I’m afraid. Folks have been leaving, most just before the Russians came.” Anton sighed. “I expect a letter from the Bishop anytime now, closing this little church.” He looked wistfully at the water-stained whitewashed stone walls with the ancient crucifix hanging in silent watch over the kitchen. “I wonder what will happen to these old stones when I leave.” He sighed heavily and his gaze landed on Karl. “You want a bath?” Karl nodded. “This way.”

Anton helped him into an alcove in the cottage and showed him a copper tub plumbed with running water. “Can you manage on your own?” he asked as he opened the tap. Warm water from the cistern splashed into the tub.

“No. Ribs hurt like hell,” Karl answered as he fumbled with the threadbare linen shirt he wore. Anton eased the shirt off Karl’s shoulders and growled when he saw the bruises over his ribs and the scars covering his back. He worked the sleeves over each manacled wrist and tossed the shirt aside. Karl unbuttoned his still-damp muddy trousers and pushed them down his hips, not getting them very far. Anton stepped closer and yanked them down further to peel them off of Karl’s legs. He stepped out of them and stood nude by the tub.

Anton found himself unexpectedly remembering a similar scene. Years ago, he and Karl had spent a cold and rainy afternoon soaking in a steaming tub after getting caught in a fall rainstorm while running across the university campus. They had sat facing each other, Karl straddling Anton’s lap in the small tub intended for just one person. Their kissing and mutual cockstroking had led to their first penetration. The hot water and Anton’s oiled fingers had relaxed Karl’s back entrance so much he had simply sat down straight onto Anton’s thick cock as it jutted above the surface of the water, with just a smear of oil to ease the way. The thunder and sleet beating hard against the windows masked their groans of pleasure as Anton pushed in deeper, inch by inch. Half the water splashed out onto the floor as Karl worked up and down on Anton’s cock and howled his release. The intimate contact between them had been a turning point in their friendship, and afterwards the two had spent what free time they had, for the remainder of the university term, together in bed. They touched and stroked, rubbed warm skin against warm skin, learned each other’s sensitive spots and how to interpret whimpered responses. And they fucked. Jesus, did they fuck.

Anton shook his head to dispel his thoughts of the past. The reminder of what he had given up for the priesthood knocked him breathless, and deepened the sadness he felt.

Karl held onto Anton’s strong arm as he gingerly stepped into the tub and settled into the warm water. Anton handed him the soap and a washcloth, then he left and returned with a bucket of steaming water from the stove. He carefully poured it in the tub as Karl pulled his knees up to avoid the hot water, then settled back with an exhausted sigh as the heat worked its way into

sore muscles. Anton frowned when he saw Karl's groin through the water, sensing something was off. Without speaking, he stepped back and removed his black long-sleeved cassock. He wore a thin undershirt and wool trousers underneath. Anton scooped water from the tub and poured it over Karl's head, then soaped up his hair. He gently worked his fingers through the grimy dark locks, working the soap close to his scalp. Karl winced.

"Sorry," said Anton as he feathered his fingers over the lumps he had discovered on Karl's head. He poured more water to rinse his hair, then washed Karl's back. Anton felt himself stirring to life as he started on Karl's arms, working the soaped cloth around the manacles. He hadn't had a man in over six years. He leaned across to reach Karl's other arm, and felt Karl's soft breath on his neck. He turned and looked into those deep blue eyes. Karl watched him with half-closed eyes and a slight smile on his lips. "Feeling better?" asked Anton.

"Much. A hot meal, a warm bath, my favorite man's hands on my naked body... and no fucking Nazis or Russians." He eyed Anton speculatively. "Miss me?"

Anton snorted, marveling as Karl's innate exuberance surfaced even as he slumped, exhausted and injured. "Priest, vows of celibacy, debauchery forbidden," he stated succinctly as he pointed to himself. "Don't try to start anything with me," he warned. "That part of my life is over." He stood up. "Soak a while longer. I'll find you some clothes. How well did you cover your tracks?"

Karl closed his eyes. "The dogs would have tracked me to the western road towards Berlin. They would have searched the towns along the road first. But I hid in an eastbound truck and when it stopped on a bridge I dropped into the river. It was night and no one saw me. I sort of swam to a barge... do you know how hard that is with chained wrists? I managed to climb aboard and hid under a canvas cargo cover. I stayed hidden while it moved south. When I saw the tower at Riverpoint, I slipped overboard and held onto a log and kicked my way to the mouth of the tributary. The current brought me further southwest but it was strong and I got banged up. Fucking rocks. At the bend, I grabbed

some tree branches hanging over the water and tied myself there before I got swept downstream. And that's where you found me. Thank you, by the way."

Anton rolled the scenarios through his head, and decided that if the Russians figured out to search the east road, the dogs might find Karl's scent on the bridge, and start looking at towns along the river. If the Russians came this far south with the dogs, they might find him. At his church. It was a stretch, but it was possible. "Would they go to that much trouble to find you?"

Karl pointed to his head. "Yes. For the knowledge in my head... or rather to keep the knowledge from getting out. They'll shoot me, and arrest you for helping me. Or possibly shoot you, too. Sorry."

Anton grimaced and left to find some clothing for him. As he rummaged through his own meager wardrobe, Anton decided to get Karl into the American zone and away from the Russians as soon as possible. But the closest American-controlled territory was in divided Berlin, and Karl had sent the Russians in that direction. Perhaps they could circle around Berlin and enter from the west side. From there, eventually Karl could travel to Frankfurt or Munich. Anton knew people there from the seminary. At least his old lover would be away from the Russians. But first he had to get him out of the Russian zone. Relieved to have a plan, Anton brought some loose sleeping pants and a long sleeved undershirt to Karl.

The chains clanked against the tub as Karl awkwardly washed his leg. "I'll get that," said Anton as he again knelt by the tub. He gently lifted each leg and ran the soapy cloth over bony feet and thin limbs, following Karl's thigh under the water. Anton stopped in confusion. Karl watched him.

"What...?"

Karl exhaled heavily. "Help me up." Anton put his arms behind Karl's shoulders and helped him to stand and step from the tub. He looked at the flaccid penis as Karl lifted it. Anton saw thin red scars where testicles should have been. "Nazis cut them off. Thought it would stop me from being a queer. Didn't work. I still like cock."

Anton closed his eyes, anger rising to the surface and outweighing sympathy. He breathed through it and opened his eyes when he calmed some. “Jesus!” he blasphemed.

“He wasn’t around when we needed Him,” replied Karl. He bowed his head. “We all could have used a miracle,” he murmured.

Anton silently handed a towel to Karl and left the clothes for him. He turned on his way out. “Get into my bed and rest, I have some arrangements to make,” he ordered, and left.

CHAPTER 3

Anton walked into the uncrowded *bierhaus*, looking for Stanis. He had only a small amount of petrol for his motorbike and needed more. He hoped to talk the Catholic into donating some. He sat at the long common table and surreptitiously looked for any strangers wearing a Russian uniform. As he finished his scan of the room, Ruland sat down across from him.

“Got a letter for you, Father. Came in the post yesterday.” He handed a letter to Anton and swallowed some beer. Anton was puzzled how beer was always available here, when most people were struggling to get enough to eat. “Look at those fools.” Ruland slopped beer onto the table as he gestured with his stein to a table in the corner. “Those three been drinkin’ all afternoon. Said they’re celebratin’,” explained Ruland. Anton murmured something appropriate and examined the postmark on his letter. Ruland kept chatting. “Said they got one put in the ground today, and they know where to find more. You think they’re talkin’ ’bout seed? ’Cause seed is hard to come by this season.”

Anton froze. The hairs rose on the back of his neck and his heart beat so hard he thought Ruland might actually hear it. He looked over at the three drinkers and knew they weren’t discussing seed. None of them were known for any type of hard work... like farming. Anton knew those three were used to getting what they wanted with their fists. They were suspected of burning down Dr. Stein’s place, but no one could prove it. It all clicked into place in Anton’s mind. He was looking at Tabbart’s killers. He thought about getting the constable, then changed his mind. That man wouldn’t lift a finger on behalf of justice for Tabbart. Anton swallowed hard and sat still, pushing his anger away. He focused on his task. Get more petrol. Where the hell was Stanis? “Ruland, where is Stanis tonight?”

“Left town last week. Went to the west.”

Anton slumped. It was common these days to hear of whole families leaving behind farms they had worked for generations, and settling in the west of the country. He quickly ran names through his mind, pondering who else

might have petrol. He sighed and quickly left the *bierhaus* and returned to the cottage behind the church, dropping the letter on the kitchen table and going to check on Karl.

He found Karl resting in bed as ordered. “Not sleepy?” he asked.

“I’m tired as hell. Hurt too much to sleep. Find what you were looking for?”

“In a way.” He glanced at Karl’s wrist, and then reached for a small leather case from a shelf in the armoire and sat on the bed. “I don’t know if this will work...” He pulled the coal oil lamp closer and lifted one of Karl’s manacled wrists, peering closely at the locking mechanism. He opened the case and pulled out several thin metal picks. Inserting one, then another, he turned and twisted them in a methodical pattern. He sat back and rubbed his eyes after ten minutes, and tried again. “This is harder than I thought. I wonder how Horst managed it so easily.”

“Your brother was a scoundrel, that’s how,” answered Karl. “Give it here.” He held out his hand. Anton lifted an eyebrow, then shrugged and handed him the picks. Karl inserted one into the manacle lock. He closed his eyes and softly counted to himself, “One, two... there are two,” he announced. He positioned the pick, then another. “Hold these just like this,” he ordered Anton. Anton complied and Karl picked up a third pick and carefully inserted it. With a gentle push, the lock snicked open and the manacle dropped off Karl’s wrist. They looked at each other and grinned. They had the second manacle off in short order. Karl lay back on the pillow and sighed. “You should throw those things in the river.”

“I have a better use for them,” Anton told him. “Get some rest.”

CHAPTER 4

Anton rose at dawn and went to start tea, wondering what he could feed Karl for breakfast. He found his letter forgotten on the kitchen table. He pulled the letter out of the envelope and a small piece of colored cardboard fell out. He read the letter from the Bishop in Berlin. As expected, he was summoned back to his order for reassignment... it wasn't safe in the east anymore—train ticket enclosed—leave as soon as possible. Anton looked at the train ticket and realized he had another option to help Karl.

Anton packed his belongings in a battered black valise. He dressed in his cassock and roman collar, and set out an older, smaller one from his days as a skinny seminarian for Karl. Today, Karl would be a priest. Anton carefully removed the crucifix from the old stone kitchen and wrapped it in a faded cloth. He set it inside his valise. He would not leave it for vandals. He picked up the manacles and Karl's dirty linen shirt. Leaving the cottage, he walked up the street in the early grey light. He stopped at the intersection and dropped part of the shirt so it lay in the dirt. He casually dragged the shirt as he walked to the house shared by the three thugs he knew had killed Tabbart. The door was unlocked and as expected, they were out cold, snoring off their drunken evening. He dragged the shirt along the floor, into the kitchen and out onto the porch. He looked around and stuffed the shirt and manacles under the porch, out of sight. Satisfied, he walked back to the church and woke up Karl.

“You look better, even with the swelling. If anyone asks, you fell off a horse while traveling to perform a wedding, got it?” Anton asked as he adjusted the roman collar at Karl's neck, then lightly ran his fingers along Karl's chin. Anton felt his trousers getting tight, and was glad he wore the long roomy cassock over them.

“I fucking hate horses. They stink and they bite, and do you *know* how much dung they produce on a daily basis?” complained Karl. “They chained me in the stable every night, you know. The horses got treated better than I did, and I had to clean their stalls.”

“Don’t say fuck. You’re a priest now and no one should hear us swear,” Anton smiled, picked up their shared luggage and whistled for Duzzi. He settled them somewhat precariously on the motorbike and after one last look at the old stone church, they took off for the larger town further west. The petrol in the tank would just get them there, where a better selection of departing trains was available. He traded in his first class ticket to Heidelberg for two third class tickets to Frankfurt. There was just enough left over to pay for cargo space for Duzzi and the motorbike, and buy hot oat cakes and tea for breakfast. Their train left on time and they sat on a padded wooden bench in the crowded third class car.

Anton felt Karl tense up as they entered Berlin several hours later. It was a major hub and most trains from the east stopped there. Anton could only pray that the Russians wouldn’t think to search a train for an escaped prisoner on foot. Russian soldiers walked the platform, their very presence intimidating passengers. Anton had his papers ready, and his dead brother Horst’s as well. He rested his arm along Karl’s and he could feel Karl’s thundering heartbeat as he sat calmly on the bench waiting their turn to be scrutinized by the Russian guards. Several families were told to get off, and Anton closed his eyes and prayed. Karl heard him and did the same. They were both whispering a Hail Mary when the guard demanded their identity papers and tickets. The guard took an interminable amount of time inspecting the papers. He gave Horst’s papers back to Karl, and frowned at Anton’s. He hadn’t registered himself with the Russian occupiers and his papers were out of date. Horst had lived in Frankfurt, now in the American zone, and his papers had been in the package of his belongings that was sent to Anton three years ago after his death. Karl didn’t resemble Horst much beyond dark hair and blue eyes, but Karl’s beaten face wouldn’t have resembled his own photo from three years ago, let alone anyone else’s.

“What is the purpose of your travel?” demanded the guard.

“My brother and I are traveling home for our mother’s funeral,” lied Karl. “It was unexpected and we did not have time for new papers.” The guard must have been a Catholic, because he crossed himself and handed the papers back

to Anton. They both held their breath until the guard moved further down the car and finally exited. The entire carload exhaled in relief, and shortly the train started moving again. It traveled down the track and stopped at another station, and this time the guards who boarded spoke English. An American soldier looked at their papers and shook his head.

“Come with me,” he ordered. Anton and Karl retrieved their valise and left the train. They sat in an office while two soldiers argued back and forth. “At least we made it to the American section,” muttered Karl. Anton agreed and smiled nervously. The soldier sat down in front of him and spoke to him in flawless German.

“Do you plan on returning to the east?”

“No. My bishop ordered me to leave, said it’s too dangerous in the east,” replied Anton.

“He’s correct. Catholic priests are being imprisoned farther east and your bishop has requested assistance for any of you who make it this far. This qualifies both of you for emergency identity papers issued by the American occupation authority. You’ll miss your train, but there’s another one leaving every day. I’ll call the local parish so you have a place to spend the night, and Father Horst looks like he needs a doctor.”

Once Duzzi and the motorbike were removed, the train left as scheduled without them. They spent a restful evening with Father Henri, the local priest who cheerfully fed them and asked about conditions in the east. Anton told him and he didn’t smile very much after that. An American military doctor stopped by and examined Karl. He taped up his ribs, ordered him to eat more, treated him for parasites and gave him some pain pills to help him sleep. Anton curled up on the one spare bed they shared and watched him sleep, feeling a sense of rightness that had eluded him lately. He slowly reached over and wrapped his arm around Karl’s waist and pulled him close, then finally drifted off to sleep.

In the morning, an American came by and interviewed them and took new photographs. They had eggs and buttered toast for breakfast and Karl closed

his eyes as he savored the simple meal. Karl rested some more while Anton walked around the neighborhood in deep thought, Duzzi at his side. In the afternoon Father Henri left to attend to church business, leaving Anton and a rested Karl alone in the house.

Karl looked up as Anton walked into the sitting room. He put aside the newspaper he was reading and watched Anton pace across the room. “What’s wrong?”

Anton stared at him. “I’m a bad priest,” he announced.

“So maybe you shouldn’t be one,” replied Karl.

Anton stopped, considering. That was so like Karl, he thought, always able to instantly get to the heart of the matter.

“But you look like you want to talk, so go ahead. I’ll listen. Why are you a bad priest?”

“I anger quickly. I think first of vengeance instead of forgiveness. I don’t want people to burden me with their problems. I don’t want to console someone when what I really want to do is tell them to stop doing stupid things,” he burst out and paced some more. “And you make my cock hard. But that’s supposed to be a bad thing. I don’t think it’s bad. I damn well *need* to feel the love of another human and know someone cares about me that strongly.”

Karl cleared his throat. “I make your cock hard?”

“*That’s* what you got out of all that?”

“Well... yes. Everything you said is normal, especially the bit about telling people they’re stupid. We all feel those things. Why should a priest be any different? But I usually don’t make anyone hard. For what it’s worth, you make my cock hard, too.”

Anton glanced in surprise at Karl’s crotch. “Your cock gets hard... without balls?”

“It helps to have the right inspiration, but yes, my cock can briefly rise to the occasion if needed. With increased stimulation, a castrated man can get an

erection and have sex, and even climax. My cum is not what it used to be, though.”

Anton mulled that over in silence, then turned and paced back. “I don’t believe God listens anymore,” he whispered, finally stating his greatest fear out loud for the first time. He stopped next to Karl and frowned. “I need to reconcile this before I go to Heidelberg. I shouldn’t be reassigned to a new church when I feel these things.” He walked to the window and stared out into the street.

Karl considered for a few moments, choosing what words might ease his friend’s agitation. “You’re only human, Anton. Your vocation has put constraints on what is normal for you, and you don’t seem to be getting what you need back to balance that, from God or anyone else. When you figure out what that is, you’ll know what path to take next,” Karl told him. “Just know that I am here for you, my friend,” he added quietly.

They shared another friendly dinner with Father Henri, and after a quiet evening they went to bed. Anton didn’t wait until Karl was asleep. He stripped to his underwear, crawled into bed, and curled himself around Karl. Karl nestled back into Anton’s arms and they stayed that way, just feeling. Anton fell asleep with Karl filling his senses.

The next morning after breakfast, Father Henri pressed a small box of sandwiches and fruit into Anton’s hand and sent them off with a quiet blessing for a safe journey. An American soldier picked them up in a Jeep and brought them back to the train station, then handed them their new papers and two upgraded tickets to Frankfurt. Karl was almost humming with excitement as they waited for their train. They finally boarded, and Duzzi was allowed to stay with them on the floor between their feet. Anton finally let himself relax as the train left Berlin.

Karl leaned on Anton’s shoulder as he dozed, waking only when Anton gently nudged him and gave him his meal. He bit into an apple, juice running down his chin. “The horse in the stall next to mine used to chew his daily apple while he looked at me over the half-wall between our stalls. Those bits of apple he dropped were the only fresh fruit I ate these last years. He was the

only horse I missed when the Russians took them away,” Karl chatted. “Apples are my favorite fruit now.”

Anton smiled warmly. “I’m happy to see you looking back with such cheer. I admire you for that. I don’t believe I could be so... unburdened.”

“The past is over and I can’t relive it differently. I can only decide what I want my life to be, and then do my best to make it so. These years have taught me that life is short and heartbreak is never far away...” Karl exhaled and looked straight into Anton’s eyes. “I want you in my future, and I hope you want that as well,” he said softly. “Just remember that you can always change the path you’re on, if you want to badly enough.”

Karl dozed off again, and Anton found comfort in his warmth as his body rested against his. For the first time since he entered the seminary, Anton wondered what life with Karl would be like, and he was smiling as he fell asleep.

Their train stopped once during the evening at the far western edge of the Russian zone, and the guards barely looked at their new identity papers. Their train arrived uneventfully in Frankfurt early the next morning.

CHAPTER 5

“Just stay here and rest, will you?” argued Anton. “I’ve been ordered to Heidelberg, but there’s no reason you need to go there. My mind will rest easier if I know you are sleeping, eating, and getting your strength back.”

“What if they send you somewhere else right away?” Karl chewed his lip. “I thought of you so often during the last years. Sometimes those memories were the only thing that let me forget the day; and the thought that I might one day see you again let me face the morning. I’m not willing to watch you walk away again.” He shuddered. “The last time you left me, awful things happened,” he said in a haunted voice.

“I promise I’ll return, or at least send word.” Anton’s face softened. “I had memories, too,” he whispered as he brushed his hand along Karl’s cheek. “You’ll be safe here with my friends. Think about what you want to do next. I’ll be back soon. And PLEASE stay out of trouble. Don’t give my brother a bad name.” Anton gently pulled Karl’s hands off his cassock and before he could push him away, Karl leaned forward impulsively and kissed him on the mouth. That kiss shot straight to his cock. Anton glanced around them and breathed with relief when he saw no one else was in the room. He placed his hands on Karl’s shoulders, prepared to ask him to wait for his return. He changed his mind and just nodded good-bye and left. If Karl wanted to move on while he was gone, Anton wouldn’t hold him back.

The train to Heidelberg was tedious and Anton was relieved to finally be in the beautiful city once again, happy the Allies hadn’t bombed it like so many other German cities. He arrived at his order’s regional headquarters in time for evening prayers, and afterwards he retired to his assigned cell for contemplation and sleep.

After a simple breakfast of porridge and tea, Anton met the regional head of his order in the priest’s study. “Good morning, Monsignor Mathias,” he murmured, ever mindful of the quiet grace of the old complex.

“God be with you my son,” replied Father Mathias with a heartfelt grasp on his arm. “I feared we might not see you again. I hope you can spend some

time with us. I have always found this to be a healing place. God knows a lot of us need it these days.”

Anton took a seat on the faded sofa and clasped his hands between his knees. “Father, my faith is no longer as strong as it was. I have doubts,” confessed Anton. The Monsignor listened attentively as Anton described his feelings after learning of the death camps, and how he openly wondered now if God was really listening to anyone at all. He ended by talking about Tabbart’s death, and how angry he felt. “I found myself plotting vengeance instead of forgiving them,” he said quietly.

Father Mathias nodded his head occasionally and finally spoke after a period of silence. “Evil sometimes wins, but you must pick yourself up and keep going, because what is the alternative?” He counseled. “And do something good in Tabbart’s memory. I’ve always believed that if every act of evil is met with two acts of good, then evil will never win. And look for God in small things... He is still with us. In time, perhaps your faith will return.”

Anton spent several days in contemplation while enjoying the serenity of the old church. He found he missed Karl fiercely, and to quiet certain images in his head he did what he always had as a boy. He sought out old stones. Proximity to old stones always left him with a feeling of calm acceptance. Anton smiled to himself at his personal quirk, and let his mind wander down paths he had not examined before. He came to a disturbing discovery. Anton realized that when he was younger, he associated that feeling of calmness with a calling to serve God because he always felt it while sitting in the old stone church attending Mass with his family. That sense of peace led him towards the priesthood.

And how many hours had he spent sitting on a pew and silently talking to God about his feelings for Karl? It’s what led him to privately accept his own preference for men, although he was never brave enough to live openly with the man he had loved since his teens. While at university, Anton became a worse coward than that. He had known Karl wouldn’t be contained, and Anton had been frightened by the Nazi’s policies and tactics regarding homosexuals. He hid his nature and backed away from his flamboyant lover, claiming a

calling to serve God. He knew the forced celibacy of the priesthood would excuse him from ever touching Karl again. Anton suddenly stopped midstride, astounded at the clarity of his revelation. Had he become a priest for all the wrong reasons?

He sat down on a low stone wall and rubbed his hair. Where did he go from here? He knew he could ask permission to leave the priesthood, and this wasn't the first time he had considered it. Was he brave enough to accept Karl's love, and return it? Jesus, they could still get arrested for that in this country. The Allies had validated Nazi prison sentences for queers and were enforcing some of them, although they used regular prisons now instead of the work camps.

Anton met again with Father Mathias, and shared his thoughts. "I can forward your request to be released from your vows to the Vatican, but before you take that last step I have someone I want you to meet," said Father Mathias. "But bear in mind that whatever you decide, you can still perform acts of good... help us start to balance the scales."

Anton believed he could do that... wanted to do that, and the first two acts would be in memory of Tabbart. Anton met with Father Mathias's friend and talked long into the evening. His future path solidified in his mind, and he knew where he was going now. He trembled with new purpose and couldn't wait until he returned to Karl and told him of his plans. He made arrangements to be on the next train back to Frankfurt. Anton felt in his heart that he had been in exile these last several years and was now going home... to Karl.

CHAPTER 6

Kibbutz Chaver, Palestine, Spring, 1948

“A new country soon, and we’re part of it.” Karl lifted his glass of imported apple juice in a toast. “And we don’t have to convert unless we want to.”

“Maybe they’ll make you an honorary Jew in recognition of all the kids you brought here for resettlement, if you ask them to, Father Horst,” laughed Anton.

Karl snorted. “No such thing, and I’m as much a priest as you are these days, *ex-Father Anton*.” Karl reached out and grabbed his lover’s hand. He leaned back onto the lounge chair set up on their patio and squinted as he looked at the bright blue sky. “How many times did we take groups of good little ‘Catholic’ kids on trips to the Holy Land?”

“One group about every two months for two years, as long as we kept finding Jewish kids hidden in Catholic orphanages and not claimed by a family member after the war ended. It was good of Father Mathias to suggest it, and I know the old Rabbi he hid during the war masterminded the whole thing. Many acts of good, don’t you think?”

“Yes. Too bad we’ve been made by every border patrol in Europe. I think I need to retire Father Horst. Now aren’t you glad I got another set of identity papers in my real name while you were in Heidelberg searching your soul?”

Anton sighed. “You still had a legally-imposed sentence in Germany that the Allies could have made you serve, you debauched pervert,” he said fondly. “You risked going to jail for I don’t know how many years. I hope you’ve gotten that out of your system. I’d hate to be thrown out of the new State of Israel because you misbehaved spectacularly.”

He squeezed Anton’s hand. “They don’t care what we do in private. And as long as I have Dr. Stein’s testosterone injections and you, I don’t think I’ll want to leave our bedroom often.” He swung their clasped hands. “By the way, did you know the university in Jerusalem will honor my degree in antiquities,

even though the Nazi's nullified it? I can teach there if I want. Or I can make a career of helping all those museums locate items looted by the Germans during the war. Several are offering finder's fees. I still have the lists I took when I escaped, you know. I am eternally grateful your dog rescued my satchel from the mud that day." He gave Duzzi a pat on the head as he snoozed under the chair. "How about you? Any plans for the real ex-priest? Maybe become an apple farmer?" he suggested hopefully.

"Wrong climate," Anton laughed. "Maybe I'll try importing, starting with apples. It'd be a shame to waste all those contacts we established." He looked out at the neat green rows of vegetables thriving in the desert with the aid of an innovative irrigation system, and at the dry bone-colored rock cliffs in the distance. "I can see staying here," he murmured. "Lots of old stones."

THE END

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