

MUNICH

Tuesday, May 17, 1949

12:01 a.m.

Max Kaspar learned about his brother, Harry, from the little man who brought him the severed ear. The nasty fellow even had the gall to bring it to the Kuckoo Nightclub, keeping it in a small purple box on his table along the wall.

Up on the club's small stage, Max had just finished belting out a recent jump blues hit from the States, "Good Rockin' Tonight," everybody clapping along. He flubbed a couple lines but his few fellow Germans had no idea and the Americans were too drunk to care.

The little man never clapped along. He'd just stared at Max. Max used to be fairly certain that a man watching like that was either a talent agent or a producer. But that was before Total War, before fire bombings, and concentration camps, stranded orphans, souls scarred for life. Before his own rehabilitation.

As the applause died, Max kept the man in a corner of his eye. Small head on narrow shoulders, an outdated curly greased mustache, and a frenzied glare like Peter Lorre, his eyes bulging, never blinking.

Max forced out a grin. "Thank you, folks, meine Damen und Herren," he said in that mix of English and German everyone used to please both occupier and occupied.

Then he pulled their young waitress Eva onto the stage.

Eva gasped. "Now, Herr Kaspar?" Between them, they embraced speaking their native German. "You said you want a chance, my dear, so now's your shot," Max told her.

Eva beamed at him. Their four-piece band made anyone sound good since they had a hepcat GI playing drums and another on piano, a former Swing Kid from Cologne on the horn, and a steady old Kabarett veteran on bass. Eva's dimples and curves and sweet voice did the rest. She launched into a rousing version of "Slow Boat to China" festooned by her thick accent and the crowd cheered her on.

Not bad for a Tuesday. But Max was creating diversions. He'd needed to surveil the man, which meant throwing him off. He made for the bar. Then he disappeared into the kitchen and went down into the cellar, passing under the dance floor and tables above.

What could the little man want? He threatened to throw Max's shaky world spinning out of kilter. The day had started like any other here in Schwabing, that Munich quarter once home to pioneering artists, then to a small-handed, fatheaded blowhard named Adolf, and now to free-spending American occupiers. Max had peacetime, normalcy, a cozy routine. Fresh white bread from his American friends, toasted, with real butter and orange marmalade. Real coffee. He was finally forgetting what ersatz coffee tasted like, thank god or whoever was responsible. He'd arrived early at the club like usual, before noon, before anyone. Drank another real coffee. He went through the ledgers and checked the earnings stacked in the cellar safe, if only to confirm all truly was well and normal. Then he wandered the Kuckoo, his Kuckoo, wincing at the few dirty ashtrays and beer glasses left out from the previous night. He rolled up his sleeves, emptied the ashes and cleared the glasses, and wiped things down. His staff could do this, but a little chore always gave him something like peace of mind. A part of him was even hoping that Eva would arrive early and see him doing it. He went through his mail, finding the usual inquiries from bands and singers, and bills he had no problem paying now, at last. The occasional letter came from Mutti und Vati in America. But, still nothing from his brother, Harry, here in Europe. The void of letters, postcards, or even a surprise visit had been growing, swelling, prickling at him low in his gut. Just this morning, Max had gotten that creeping feeling he knew from combat: Things were all too quiet.

Down in the Kuckoo cellar, Max now felt a shudder, deep in his chest, and the normalcy dwindled as only a memory, a fog. An opened bottle of American rye stood atop the safe and he thought about taking a shot for courage, then decided he didn't need it. He needed to move.

He came back upstairs on the other side, behind their red curtain at the back of the stage. He eyed the little man closer from the shadows while Eva gave it all she had. The man was now watching the bar, craning his compact noodle for any sight of Max. That purple box stood in equal proportion to his short neat glass of Fernet, to his fresh pack of Chesterfields, to his sterling jeweled lighter, his gnarled knuckles revealing him to be older than his shiny face let on.

Why show off, Max thought, when any secure communication would do? This peacock was certainly not CIA. The Munich desk was more likely to send some new kid with a crew cut.

Eva was bowing now, the crowd whooping and stomping. As if sensing Max, the man slowly swiveled Max's way, still not blinking.

Max rushed out along the wall and sat down next to the man. They waited for the crowd to quiet, silent like two passengers aboard an airliner off to a rocky start.

"Good evening, Herr Kaspar," the man said in German, his accent as inscrutable as Max expected.

"I enjoyed your routine."

"It's not a routine," Max blurted, sounding more annoyed than he'd wanted.

The man smirked, which released a snuffle. "You did not know all the words, yes? Tricky, keeping up with these Americans."

"What in the devil do you want?"

His waiter came over, Gerd. Max sent poor Gerd away with a snap of fingers.

The little man lost the smirk. He slid the small purple box over to Max.

It was larger than a ring box, smaller than for a necklace. Max pushed the box open with his index finger. He saw one human ear, lying on its side, with a neat cut and cleaned up.

"Harry Kaspar," the man said. "Perhaps he hears too much."

"My brother?" Max's head spun. Everything blurred and he shut his eyes a moment. "Just tell me what you want."

"Harry Kaspar is your brother, yes?"

The man had said brother like a curse word. Hot pressure filled Max's chest, and he wiped away the sweat instantly sopping his eyebrows. He grabbed the man by the collar. He could smell the man's toilet water, and possibly a bad tooth. "Why, you . . ." he roared.

"Now, now. Listen. You will find instructions with the ear, which I leave with you. You deliver the ransom soon? Perhaps the ear can be reattached, yes?"

Max had to assume it was Harry's ear. He realized he didn't know what his brother's ear looked like, not exactly, and the thought made his heart squeeze a little. He let go of the man.

"Why Harry?" he asked.

"I told you: He hears too much. But I suppose it could've been an eye—"

"Listen to me. You don't know who you're playing with. Harry's an American."

The man gave the slightest shrug. "Naturalized American. Unlike you. Still a lowly German . . ." He gave a tsk-tsk sound. "But with means now, I see."

Max's jaw clenched from loathing. "Who are you? I thought kidnapers were supposed to be anonymous."

The man pressed a hand to his chest. "Oh, we're better than kidnapers. And we're confident that you will comply. Because Harry told us that you would pay."

"He did? Why?"

The man smiled. "I don't think he wanted his embassy involved, and certainly not the Soviets."

"The Soviets? Hold on. Where did you come from anyway?"

The man gave another slight shrug. He nodded at the box. He scooped up his Chesterfields and lighter, stood, straightened his black crushed velvet blazer, blinked around the room, and left. Harry smoked Chesterfields, Max recalled, and the thought stiffened his neck with worry. The ear box remained on the table. He pulled it closer, glanced around for privacy, and then opened it again. Tucked up into the lid was a note, typed on a small white square of paper:

Ransom: \$1,000 or equivalent.
Come alone. No tricks.
9 Lessinggasse, Vienna