

## CHAPTER 1

“People go missing all the time,” Adelfried said as he rocked side to side, pondering the placement of his newly purchased old thrift store bookcase.

Constance stopped wiping down its dusty shelves and turned to gauge her husband’s face.

“That’s a strange thing to say,” she replied.

Locking eyes with his wife, Adelfried stilled his swaying and whispered, “I know where they go.”

Startled by his unexpected response, she whispered back, “Where do they go?”

Adelfried remained quiet.

“Ade. Where do they go?” Constance pressed.

“I think it will be easier to show you,” he said as he pushed his palm forward and stepped through the blazing column of light that burst forth from his hand.

Although she had seen him perform this trick many times, she was always in awe of Adelfried’s magic. However, with her question still unanswered, his disappearance left her ill at ease.

A moment later he reappeared with an old storage trunk, heavy in his arms. Placing it on the floor with a thud, he knelt down and unbuckled the worn leather straps then popped open the two brass latches holding it closed. The center lock had long since broken and required no key. As he lifted the lid, muffled voices filled the room.

"Do you hear that?" she asked, searching for the source of the sounds.

Adelfried sighed but did not respond. Instead, he ran his hand across the spines of the books stowed in rows inside the chest and considered the consequences of his impending confession.

Having delayed long enough, he said, "Here we go," as he retrieved a book and closed the trunk, quelling the chatter that confused his wife. Taking her hand, he said, "Connie, let's talk."

He led her over to a spot where they could lean against a wall, and together they sat shoulder to shoulder on the concrete floor. In his hands, Adelfried held an old book that was bound by a ribbon which was tied in a bow.

"There's something I've been meaning to tell you," he said, stopping to clear his throat. Glancing over at her, he added, "But I don't know how."

"You can tell me anything," Constance encouraged.

"I know," Adelfried nodded, but said nothing more.

"There's this thing I can do..." he began, but left the thought lingering.

When it became obvious he was not going to continue, Constance said, "Ade, you're making me nervous."

He met her eyes and grinned but said nothing as he searched for the right words.

Constance practiced her patience as Adelfried fiddled with the frayed end of the faded ribbon, but when his pause lasted too long, in exasperation she demanded, "Spit it out!"

Adelfried chuckled, amused by his wife's wit's end.

"I've often joked about being a man of many talents," he said.

"Yes, you have. And?" she replied, urging him to go on.

"And," he repeated, mimicking his wife's tone, "I can do a bit more than travel through time."

"Oh really?" Constance said with a smirk, appreciating the return to levity, "Well please tell me, without further ado, what are you hiding from me?"

"It's not so much of a what as a who," he replied, untying and removing the ribbon.

As he opened the front cover, Adelfried gazed over at Constance, awaiting her reaction as she stared intently at the book in his lap. Her eyes widened in astonishment when the pages swiftly flipped forward on their own coming to an abrupt stop somewhere in the middle.

"What do you want now?!" a boy's voice boomed from the book.

"Hush!" commanded Adelfried, and the voice obeyed.

Constance was speechless as she looked from the pages to her husband's face and back to the book. The words the boy had yelled now appeared as typed text on the page, as did her husband's "Hush!" Their exchange was now part of the story.

"Wh-what is happening?" she asked while second-guessing her sanity.

With a deep breath Adelfried launched into his rationale, believing a secret of this magnitude demanded a heaping helping of justification. He meandered through possible reasons and plausible explanations, speaking

of confrontations, consternations, and life moving in unexpected directions. He spoke of his history and upbringing, and the undisciplined masses who required the kind of guidance only he could provide due to his fortuitous access to fictitious creations fabricated by authors he held in the highest esteem.

For well over an hour, he rambled on uninterrupted in hopes of convincing Constance to see his side. Finally, having said far more than there was to say, and unsure he had truly addressed the matter at hand, he wrapped up his long winded explanation with an unceremonious "That's all."

Adelfried desired his wife's understanding, but would settle for her reservation of judgment. What he received was a long stretch of silence as Constance remained lost in thought. Her lack of response lasted much too long for an anxious Adelfried, so he nudged her with his elbow.

"I have a lot of questions," she said.

"Oh, I bet you do," he replied.

"First, what's with the ribbon you tie around the book?"

"That's an interesting first question. The ribbon is to keep them trapped inside the pages."

"Them? There are others?"

Adelfried stood and helped his wife to her feet. As they walked back over to the timeworn trunk, he said, "People go missing all the time, Connie. I know where they go."

Crouching down, he lifted the lid. Just as before, the room filled with the sound of distant voices. Inside the trunk, Constance saw two rows of books, all bound with ribbons tied in bows.

"Are people trapped in all of those?" she asked, fearing his answer.

"No," he replied as he interlaced his fingers with hers. With his free hand he pushed the space in front of them and together they stepped through the ray of light into darkness. As he had done countless times, Adelfried tugged the chain dangling from the ceiling. With a click a lone bulb flickered on revealing a room stacked full of chests, boxes and suitcases.

Constance's eyes widened in disbelief, realization dawning.

"People are trapped in the books in the trunk," Adelfried said, "And in all of these."

"Oh my," she breathed.

"Oh my," he agreed.

"How in the world did this happen?" she asked.

"I have no idea where to start," he replied.

"How about at the beginning?" she suggested.

"That's a very good idea."

## CHAPTER 2

Once upon a time - relatively speaking, of course - brilliant twin boys were born. By all assessable standards, both boys were geniuses, but one became known as the greatest mind of all time. He was world renowned and his accomplishments were profound and timeless. His mind remains the marker by which intelligence is measured. He is legendary. However, all would be astounded to learn he was the less exceptional of the two. To be sure, he was remarkable, but his brother was phenomenal.

Adelfried Einstein was born in Ulm, Germany on March 14, 1879, exactly three minutes and fourteen seconds before his identical twin brother, Albert. Adelfried entered the world with a giggle and sported a satisfied smile on his face, as if reveling in his very first accomplishment.

Albert was an entirely different story. Upon his birth, he did not make a sound, but rather emerged quietly into existence wearing a perplexed look upon his face. The doctor hardly had a moment to note his expression before becoming completely distracted by the enormity of his misshapen head.

“First things first,” the doctor mumbled to himself as he redirected his attention to the unnatural silence in the room. With one swift smack on the newborn baby’s bum, Albert let out an ear-splitting wail before falling silent once again with a countenance of complete annoyance, as if comprehending he had come in second in the very first competition of his life.

Shortly after the twins’ births, the doctor came into the room where Mama Pauline was trying to rest while Papa Hermann sat fidgeting by her

bedside. Sensing their anxiety, the doctor assured the first-time parents there was no need to worry. The boys were both perfectly healthy, and Albert's head would sort itself out in time, which fortunately it did.

Then with an air of fascination, the doctor told Pauline and Hermann if they looked very closely at little Albert's huge head, there was an indentation there the exact size and shape as Adelfried's tiny foot. In retelling the tale of the births of the giddy baby boy and his befuddled brother, the doctor would say Adelfried had used his twin's head as a launching pad to make his way out into the world first, leaving Albert behind - dented.

In the first year of his life, Adelfried was a very good baby. He was the first to lift his head, the first to laugh and giggle and smile, the first to roll over and sit up, to speak and crawl and walk.

Hermann and Pauline loved both of their baby boys, as all parents do, but notably doted upon Albert, as they considered him the runt, and in need of extra care. They feared he was a bit slow, which he was compared to Adelfried.

When the twins were still quite young, Hermann and Pauline packed up the Einstein clan and moved from the small town of Ulm to the big city of Munich. Hermann and his brother, Jakob, had started a new business in hopes of creating a better life for the family. This meant long days at the office for Hermann while his wife was left home alone to care for the baby boys.

Pauline was only twenty-two years old, and in a strange new place with no nearby friends or family. She was a new mother of two babies, had

very little money and no time to herself. She was sleep deprived, lonely, and exceedingly overwhelmed.

Between their mother's struggle to raise them alone, and their father's endeavor to make ends meet, the stress became too much, and these first-time parents of twin baby boys came to what should have been an impossible decision. They were going to give one of the babies away.

Two babies had not been in their plans. Two babies was one too many.

Albert still was not walking or talking, and Pauline and Hermann opted to keep him because they thought he needed them more. At least that is what they told themselves to try to feel less guilt. If they were to admit the real reason for choosing Albert over Adelfried, it was simply because he was the simpler of the two. Albert slept a lot and rarely cried. He did not crawl or babble at all. More easily than they cared to admit, they chose to give Adelfried away when he was only one year and three months old.

On the morning the parents picked as "give-away-a-baby day," Pauline woke up early and bathed Adelfried. After dressing him in his best outfit, she pinned a note upon his shirt. She stacked a few old blankets in a basket he had slept in as a newborn, and laid Adelfried on top. With nothing more to do, she and Hermann waited anxiously by the door. Uncle Jakob arrived before the sun came up and took the basket of blankets, with the sleeping baby boy, and left without saying a word.

Pauline and Hermann shut the door behind him, and instead of breaking down in tears, they breathed a collective sigh of relief. They did



not know where Uncle Jakob was taking Adelfried and did not ask. They went about their day just like any other day, only now they were the proud parents of only one little baby boy.

Uncle Jakob was never really a fan of children. He was not paternal by nature, and although he eventually married, he never wanted children of his own. The day before the baby giveaway day, he mentioned to his brother that he was headed out of town to pick up supplies. Nonchalantly, Hermann asked if he could drop something off on the way. Uncle Jakob was happy to oblige, and barely flinched when he was told the something he was dropping off would be one of his twin nephews.

In his many excursions out of town, Uncle Jakob had seen the tall blonde woman with her bevy of youngsters in tow. She was of such a stately stature that she was impossible not to notice. He had learned her name was Liselotte Lange. She was a widow with a large house full of orphaned children she raised as her own. He figured since she already had countless kids, she would hardly notice one more.

He stopped by her farmhouse at the edge of town and placed the blanket-filled basket and baby boy outside her front door. With a tip of his hat, Uncle Jakob wished his nephew good luck as he turned to leave the widow's front yard. He never once glanced back as he walked away, and never gave his nephew another thought.

For a while, Adelfried's parents tried to convince themselves they had done the right thing. They told each other that because of their sacrifice Adelfried would have a chance at a better life. Neither believed this nonsense, but they felt less guilty when they said it aloud. With each

passing day, Albert's parents spoke less about their firstborn son, until one day, Adelfried was never mentioned again.

A year and a half later, Pauline and Hermann welcomed a baby girl named Maria into the family. They told Albert he had a sister now and was no longer alone in the world. By the time he was walking and talking, Albert should have had no memory of a sibling other than her, but he did.

Throughout his life, Albert often said to his parents that he felt like something was missing. Although he never told them, he always knew exactly what the missing something was. It was Adelfried.

## CHAPTER 3

Liselotte had lived in the same small rural town in Germany all her life, just like her parents and her parents' parents before them. She grew up working on a farm that had been passed down through the generations for as long as anyone could remember. Her family could be described as a sturdy bunch. All of them were big brawny blondes with light eyes and faces filled with smile lines. They worked hard, laughed hard and loved hard.

Liselotte married Niklas Lange just before her eighteenth birthday. He was the boy she had always known and loved, and eighteen years was as long as she could wait to start her life with him. After two years of constant pleading for her parents' blessing, and incessant insistence that her love was true, they relented. They loved Niklas and knew their Lotti well - once her mind was made up, there was no changing it. If she said she loved Niklas, then she really loved him, and would love him forever. That was that.

With the help of his parents, Niklas bought a rundown farmhouse on the edge of town. The old house was near enough to the newlyweds' family farms that they could go back and work each day but was far enough away they could start a life that was all their own.

Although the place was old, it had good bones. Most of the Lange men were farmers, but a few skilled stone workers and carpenters filled out the family tree. Niklas' friends and relatives all pitched in when they had spare time. The couple lived in a tight-knit community where everyone felt

as close as kin. Together they worked to help Niklas fix up the house in little ways he knew his Lotti would love.

The place he remodeled for his bride was a spacious two-story house made of stone and wood. When it was new, the stone had all been plastered white, and the wood all stained dark. Through the years, the elements had aged it. The plaster was chipped away in places and the wood was worn and weathered, revealing hues of red, gold and gray on the sides that saw the sun.

A balcony ran the full length of the second story and provided a shady covered porch on the front of the house. It could be accessed from the loft inside, or outside from a set of stairs leading up to the second floor. Niklas imagined Lotti coming home from a hard day's work and heading straight upstairs to see the setting sun. The outside stairway would help her reach the best spot on the balcony to watch her favorite scene without worry of tracking in the workday's muck and mud.

Though townsfolk thought it odd, Niklas built not one, but two wooden swings he hung on each side of the covered porch. They were secured to the roof with thick twisted ropes, and each was large enough for a couple to sit side by side.

Since they were young children, no more than five or six years old, Lotti liked to imagine her future. She often said when she grew up, she hoped to live in a huge white house with a picket fence. More than once, she told Niklas she wanted two porch swings. She wanted to swing as fast or as slow as she liked, and she could not do that if she had to share.

Niklas listened to her dreams his entire life, and he wanted nothing more than to fulfill them all.

On the day Niklas surprised Lotti with the finished house, she ran from room to room exclaiming, "Niklas, there are so many rooms! There are too many rooms! We'll never fill this many rooms!"

She ran back to him and leapt into his arms, burying her face in his neck. Lotti was laughing and crying as she declared, "I love it! It's perfect! There are even two swings!"

"It's all for you, sweetheart!" Niklas replied. "One day this house will be filled with children!"

"It's all for us!" Lotti corrected him. "And not that many children," she added before falling into a fit of laughter and back into his arms. In this moment, she felt not only like a woman in love, but also like a child whose every wish had been granted.

A year later, Niklas and Lotti welcomed their son, Otto, into the world. She had never been happier.

A year after that, Niklas fell ill, and Lotti found herself faced with the reality she would be living in a house with so many rooms - too many rooms - with only her baby boy and without her Niklas. She had never been sadder.

As she sat silently in a swing by herself on the porch, she had never felt more alone. All she could think was she wished she could share her swing with him.

Lotti let herself live in her grief for only a week after her husband's funeral. For seven full days, she allowed herself to feel all her feelings, and

live in her despair. After that, she knew she had to find a way to keep living her life for the sake of her boy.

Her folks kept Otto with them at the farm since Lotti asked to be left alone. Although they wanted to stay with their daughter and take care of her in her time of need, they respected her wishes. Lotti needed time to mourn the loss of her love. If others were around, she would hide her grief. She had to be by herself.

For the woebegone week, she did not leave the house her husband built. On the first day, she ate very little and slept even less. She cried a lot and prayed nonstop for the pain to go away.

Lotti pulled on one of Niklas' soft undershirts so she could feel closer to him. His scent still lingered in the fabric. Room by room, she wandered through the empty house, remembering all the dreams she and Niklas had that were left unfulfilled, and then wiping them from her mind as nevermores.

Unable to bear the thought of sleeping in the bed she had shared with her husband, Lotti moved into the room intended for Otto, when he was old enough to have his own. This was the space she and Niklas imagined their son would one day share with a baby brother. They had imagined he might have his papa's eyes, or the same smirk of a smile. Another nevermore she wiped from her mind, as she wiped away the tears.

People from town wanted to check on her but, out of respect, kept their distance. Neighbors snuck into her yard and left a basket by her door each night for her to find. They filled it with fresh bread, milk, cheese and whatever fruits and vegetables were ripe enough to pick that day. Their

children collected wildflowers for her and bound them into bouquets with hair ribbons. These gestures seemed minor but made them feel like they were supporting Lotti in some small measure, letting her know she was not alone.

The young widow heard them come into her yard after dark, as they opened the creaky gate. Even though she was not ready to see them, she was comforted by their nearness and heartened by their concern. Before daybreak, she opened her door a crack and peeked out, to make sure no one was around before bending down and picking up the basket. The townsfolk were relieved each morning to find it had been brought inside.

On the second and third day, she cried a little less, and prayed a little more. Sleep lasted a bit longer each night, but Lotti still could not leave the house. On the fourth day, she rearranged furniture to make the spaces inside feel different. She switched out quilts and blankets, boxed up knickknacks, and put away the tablecloth, leaving the wooden table bare. When she and Niklas moved in, she had wanted to decorate every inch, making the house look long lived-in and homey, the way she thought all married couple's houses should be. Now she wanted less, a simple home with fewer things around to remind her of all she had lost.

On the fifth day, she boxed up all of Niklas' belongings, fresh tears falling from her red, swollen eyes with each item she touched. Lotti took off his shirt she had been living in, aching with the loss of this final thing. She sobbed as she slipped on something of her own. As she held his shirt up to her face, she felt the softness and breathed it in one last time. When she

found it no longer smelled like Niklas, she folded and placed it with the rest of his things.

On the sixth day, she drew back the curtains and opened the windows, letting the light back in. On the seventh day, Lotti stepped outside and walked to her family's farm to fetch her son.

The doors and windows were all open at her folks' house, but Lotti knocked as she stepped through the front door, and hollered out, "Hello! Anyone home?"

"We're out back!" her mother called out in response.

As Lotti walked out the back door, she saw Otto. He was sitting on the ground at her mother's feet, grabbing at the soft blades of grass with his chubby hands, and cooing happily. When he saw his mama, Otto started chattering, and crawled as quickly as he could towards her.

Picking up her pace, Lotti reached down and swung the happy boy up into her arms, then covered his face with kisses. "I've missed you, my little man!"

With Otto on her lap, she sat down on the bench next to her mother. The happy baby boy sat facing her, reaching out to gently pat her cheeks, as if making sure she was real. Further back in the yard, there were two children inspecting a bird's nest that had fallen from a tree. The boy poked at it with a stick, while the girl squatted down to get a closer look at the tiny, speckled eggs.

"Why are Erich's and Elisabeth's kids here?" Lotti asked.

Lotti's parents stayed quiet, then after a moment, her mother reached out her hand and placed it on her daughter's knee.



"What is it, Mama?"

"I don't know how to tell you. The same sickness that took Niklas..."

Lotti's mother tried to talk through the tears she was fighting, but sobbed when she said, "Erich and Elisabeth are gone, Liselotte. Their kids have no one. They have nowhere else to go."

Without hesitation, as if the solution were obvious, Lotti stated, "Yes they do. They have Otto and me."

As she heard herself say the words, she knew they were true. The children were hers now, and she felt the certainty of that in her soul.

Her mother began to protest, imploring her daughter to take more time to heal, and insisting she already had her hands full in taking care of Otto alone. Lotti's father cleared his throat, instantly quieting the quibbling women.

Her papa had been sitting silently, stoically watching the two children play off in the distance. He looked into the heartbroken eyes of his newly widowed daughter. Seeing past her sadness, there was the fire of determination in her, with a flicker of fresh hope in its flames. After a moment, he gave her a hint of a smile as he nodded his head.

Turning to his wife, he said, "My dear, they are Liselotte's children." And so they were.

Over the next two years, the same illness that had taken Lotti's husband from her continued to sweep through the countryside. Many perished, leaving families heartbroken and children orphaned, with no one left behind to care for them.

Word had spread about the widow with the big house and giant heart, and at the end of it all, Lotti Lange found herself the mother to eleven kids. Niklas had been correct in his prediction that one day the house would be filled with children. Lotti just never dreamed this was what he meant.