

JAMIE WRESTON - 18

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CHAPTER 18

(Revisiting Chapter 17)

"I don't know what to say, Herr Matt," the boy whispered. "I guess this is the best thing that has ever happened to me. Know that you can count on me...all the way. I'm going to be the best friend you can possibly imagine!" Seeing the headlights of the taxi turn a corner two streets down, Matt simply threw his arms around the boy. "It's gonna be ok, Jupp," he whispered into his ear. "It's gonna be ok!"

(Continuing Our Story: The New Assignment)

Vigorously stirring his cup of coffee, Herr Hoffmann looked at Matt Wrexton with decidedly mixed feelings. Since the young American had left his home last night - in truth, since speaking with his father...and his lifelong friend...some weeks before - he had been wondering how to handle this meeting.

"Herr Professor Wrexton," he began formally, "you must realize that we - you and I - are related...cousins many times removed, to use your terms, but related for all of that. Additionally, though younger than my four sons, you are very much like them...and I cannot forget that you are the son of my 'friend of friends'." "I realize all that, sire," Matt responded with great feeling. "Will you allow me to add that my feelings for you are most similar to those I hold for my father? We have always had a relationship of love and deep respect, feelings that I also hold for you? Cultural factors aside, I find it painful that you must address me as 'Herr Professor Wrexton'. Could you possibly find

it in your heart simply to call me 'Matt'?" "Come, stand before me, young man." Holding the young American in a surprising strong embrace, Herr Hoffmann said solemnly, "In the truest sense, I accept you into my family, Matthew. If and when you are comfortable doing so, I should be honored if you would call me 'Onkel [Uncle] Erich'."

"Now," the old German continued, "we must move on to business matters. Please remember two things, my boy. First, the wise man approaches...difficult...topics tangentially and most gently. He has no need to hurt the individual with whom he is speaking - nor does he wish to harm the ongoing negotiation. Unfortunately, time constraints occasionally force him to approach these topics head on. You will forgive me, my dear boy, if I use words that will occasionally hurt you. It is not my purpose, and I beg your forgiveness." Now in complete confusion, Matt merely murmured, "I shall hold you blameless, sir."

"Secondly," the patriarch continued, "by principle I try to tell the truth. All too often, voicing one lie demands introducing a half dozen others." Matt smiled in quiet agreement. "Unfortunately, I have yet to find a principle that never allows an exception - and this is one of those times. What I told you last night about Dieter was true. His parents are still quite young, and he is their first. As you saw, he is bright, most active and, shall we say, somewhat mischievous. They both needed to give their full time and energy to establishing a new home in Germany. Dieter is our grandchild, and we love him dearly. He has a right to our love and support.

"By contrast, you do not have the full truth with regard to Josef. Yes, he is our grandchild; we love him as we love all the others; his parents are in Germany, building their new life. Unlike Dieter, however, they did not request our help in caring for him until he could join them. The doctors tell us that he entered puberty late in his tenth year - and that he was an extremely 'early developer' in every way. His sexual play resulted in serious problems in his school in Kronstadt...called Brasov today. Worse, from the very beginning, Josef has wanted to engage in these...activities with males. Gradually, they had a most negative effect upon my son Helmut, his wife, and Josef's older sister. As he entered his twelfth year, and then his thirteenth, both the Germans and Romanians in Kronstadt became increasingly outraged. Finally, Helmut said that either Josef had to go or he was leaving.

"At this point, I interrupted the cycle and suggested that the young man live with us rather than being lost to the family. He's been with us for approximately three months and is already a lightning rod for controversy throughout the town. He has no friends of his own age. As a matter of fact, the only youngsters I ever see with him are older. Indeed, the two hoodlums about whom am speaking have spent time in jail and, I'm sure, they will return. I have no intention of inviting them into my home. (Pause.) "And that bring me to you - and the part that you might play in all this, yes?" "Yes, sir - and the conversation you had recently with my father," Matt murmured in response.

"My plans," Herr Hoffmann continued, "call for returning to the Fatherland in late August or early September of this year. There are only a few thousands of us now, and most are old. Our day has passed. In the early 1900s, eight to nine hundred thousand Germans lived in towns and villages founded in medieval times. World War II and its aftermath effectively ended our history. Nearly 100,000 of us returned west with the German armed forces. The Soviet forces gathered another 75,000 and sent them to slave labor in Russia. Only a handful ever returned home. The policies of the Communists destroyed all hope that we could remain in our homes, especially when it became financially advantageous for them to allow several thousand to emigrate to Germany each year. A massive emigration took place with the fall of Ceausescu in 1989. Almost all of us who remain are convinced that our future lies in Germany.

Josef Becker brought his family into disrepute in Kronstadt among both the Romanians and the Germans. He has done much the same to us in Marburg, though my position in the community has given him some protection. I cannot...I WILL not...allow that to happen in Germany. In large part, that is why I spoke to your father in America. You should know that we communicated many, many times over the years. His was always the advice of a trusted Councillor, an elder of the people. (Pause.) In large part, that is why I - and I alone in Europe, by the way - know that you are homosexual." As Matt slowly slumped down in his chair, covering his face with his hands, the patriarch added that he had asked his father's advice on handling several "situations" over the years. In turn, his father had asked his advice on how best to raise his son as a free, brave, and loving human being. Onkel Erich concluded, "He obviously succeeded magnificently."

"What do you demand of me?" Matt asked weakly. "Demand?" the proud leader asked. "We share our blood, young man; we share our history; I believe we share our respect and our love. In such situations, Matthew, I do not believe that one DEMANDS." Knowing (all too well) how his father proceeded in such "discussions," Matt persisted. "May I ask, sire, what it is that you hope I might contribute in this situation?" "Sire?" the old man needled him gently. "Whatever happened to 'Onkel Erich'?" Still having partial control of his faculties, Matt at least had the grace to grin, begin to remove his hands from his face, and sit up in the chair.

Pushing a button on his desk, "Onkel Erich" relaxed and grinned right back at his "youngest son". "I understand that you are a highly educated and respected University professor in the United States. As a secretary entered his office, Herr Hoffmann asked his guest if he would prefer coffee...or something stronger such as Slivovitz, the plum brandy beloved throughout much of Central and Southeastern Europe.

Sniffing the aromatic liquid in the beautifully cut crystal glass - a close cousin of "White Lightning" if there ever was one - Matt quietly said, "I'm honored that I hold your confidence, Onkel Erich. I trust that I shall never do anything to lose it. I fear, however, that homosexuality is simply not a medical disorder. Nor can it be changed by medication or any other treatment known to science. Rather, it is a 'sexual

orientation' shared by approximately eleven percent of our species, as well as being found in other forms of higher life." Hoffmann quickly interrupted, stating that he knew that to be true, but this was not what he would suggest to Matt. "I need your commonsense, Matthew," he continued, "as well as your trained powers of observation. I need the sensitivity engendered by your own sexual orientation. I am still looking for some way to help this young lad, whom I love, without bringing serious harm to many others as we try to fashion a new life. Will you help me as best you can?"

After a full minute's silence had ensued, the patriarch continued, "I suggest that you continue your vacation. The expenses, including the cost of renting an auto and arranging lodging and food will be mine, as will the cost of an experienced guide. Josef knows Siebenbuergen like we know the back of our hands. He will uncover wondrous sights for you that you may still enjoy as the flood carries them to the precipice to be swept out of our lives. When you return, we shall talk. I shall hope on hope that we shall uncover a possibility that I have missed. Again, Matthew, will you help me as best you can?"

Matt enjoyed the last sip of the distinctive brandy, sniffed the empty glass appreciatively, and said, simply, "Yes, Onkel Erich...of course."

(Siebenbuergen [Transylvania])

As long as he lived, Matt Weston never forgot the joys of the days that followed. Nor did he forget the fact that they were enjoyed in the company of a midteen who was not only highly intelligent and impossibly beautiful, but also looked longingly to him for support as only a lonely, confused youngster can. His feelings were not unlike those he held for Jamie.

His forebearers, Germans from the Rhineland and Moselle River regions had come into the heart of that which we now know as Romania in the 12th Century. (The small band of miners who arrived first, however, came from another region, viz., Saxony. Misnomer or not, those who followed were forever stamped as "Saxons". Then, too, in the present time, it is easier for other Europeans to say 'Saxon' than 'German'!) Settling in the inner elbow of the Transylvanian Alps, they built strong cities, as well as numerous villages, and developed powerful guilds. They came at a very disturbed period in this part of Europe. Bands of nomadic warriors came in waves from the East, including the most feared of all, the Tatars, descendants of Genghis Khan's Mongols. Arson and slaughter were the lot of medieval Europeans as far west as Vienna. Consequently, the Transylvanian Germans developed architectural styles that featured defensive strongholds, walls, and places (often fortified churches) to which village folk could withdraw when the alarm was raised.

Early in their history, their presence eagerly desired by as a bulwark against the barbarians and Ottoman Turks to the east, they were accorded all sorts of political and cultural freedom. Over the centuries, however, caught up in rivalries between

Hungarians, Austrians, Russians, and Romanians for the region, their autonomy was gradually reduced. As mentioned earlier, World War II and its consequences sounded their death knell as a viable constituent of the region. Those ethnic Germans inducted into the Wehrmacht and the SS who did not die in the German onslaught against Russia, or civilians who departed with the retreating Wehrmacht, or those who were carried off into a long Siberian captivity by victorious Soviet forces were further reduced by Cold War poverty and prejudicial policies. Finally, the policy of the Ceausescu government to allow ethnic Germans to return to their native land on payment of a hefty fee by the West German government reduced their numbers below that needed to sustain a viable political-cultural entity. With relatively few exceptions, little more than remnants remained. It was the rich legacy they left in Eastern Europe that Matt Weston and Jupp Becker were now exploring. (**Author's Note:** You might like to see photos of southern Transylvanian sights. One of the best sources will be found at www.saxontransylvania.com. Check the map and, then, some of the photos.)

"Wow, Jupp! I've never seen anything like that," Matt exclaimed as they drove along. (The young men had just visited the ruins of a massive medieval fortress built by the Knights Templar in the 12th Century.) "Yeah," Jupp replied. "We brought something pretty great to these green hills. Makes you kinda proud to be part of it, doesn't it?" After pausing to visit a fortified church in Deutschweisskirch/Viscri, they arrived in the city of Schaessburg/Sighisoara in time for a late lunch. (**Author's Note:** The German name of the location is given first, followed by the Romanian name. Note that many locations in Transylvania also have an Hungarian name.)

"This is pure catnip for a history teacher, Jupp," Matt moaned as he tried simultaneously to look around the square and keep his mind on the good lunch directly in front of him. Licking a blob of dressing off his finger, Jupp mumbled, "I guess so! My teacher last year said that the only places in Europe that compare for beauty and true medieval sights are Prague and Vienna. Haven't been to either place, so I can't say." "Well, I have," Matt replied, "and I think your teacher was correct. This is magnificent! But why haven't you been to places like Prague and Vienna, Jupp? They're not all that far, and train fares seem pretty cheap." "Many reasons, Herr Matt. Most of our people have left Romania, and those who are left are generally as poor as church mice." Hungrily eyeing the last tasty bite of meat and cheese left in his sandwich, he added in an offhand manner. "And there are other reasons...I guess."

"Do you trust me enough to mention some of them, Jupp?" Matt asked. His mouth temporarily full of meat, cheese, and bread, Jupp couldn't speak out, but he slowly nodded his head in the affirmative. When he had managed to swallow most of it, he mumbled, "You're my friend, Matt. If I tell you what I know, will you promise not to get me in more trouble with Großpapa?" "I think we're likely to talk about your situation, Jupp, but I can promise you that I'll not share 'special confidences'...i.e., things that he doesn't know anything about. If there's anything else you want me to stay away from, just let me know. Ok?" "Yeah, Matt, ok," the boy responded. "I miss my family. My dad and I always fought, but I really miss him. Even though they all hated me, I miss

them. It's not all their fault. If I had been my dad, I would have hung me up in the barn by my balls a long time ago!" "Why, Jupp?" Matt asked quietly. Jupp's eye clouded over, but he kept going. "Cause I've acted like a snake for a long time. I've made everyone's life so unpleasant!" "Why do you feel ready to strike out at someone all the time, Jupp?" Matt persisted. At this point, the sweat was literally pouring down the Volksdeutscher's [ethnic German's] body. He was trying so hard to be the friend on whom his hero could depend...honest, dependable, worthy of his trust. After a few minutes of silence, Jupp set his chin and plunged ahead. "Our people go to church, Herr Matt - and they learn that loving men like others love women is going to send you straight to hell. (Pause.) I can't help it. I've tried everything I know not to feel this way, but it's men who turn me on, not girls. When people find out, they don't want to know anything more about me. They just get a look of disgust on their faces as if they want to grind me under their boots...like you would grind a viper. I'm so miserable, Herr Matt. I don't want to hurt people, and I'm so sick of being hurt that I just want to die."

"Can you believe, Jupp, that I don't feel that way about people - and I sure don't feel that way about you!?" There at a lunch table in a little outdoor café in Schaessburg, surrounded by people, Matt Weston inched his hand across the tabletop until a finger contacted Jupp's. He held it there for a long time as he talked with the lad about the boy's feelings...and about his. He would rather have put an arm around the lad's shoulders and kissed his forehead, but the first "dose" of healing couldn't wait - and there were people all around them. Eventually, the youngster's pain receded and they returned to sampling the medieval glories of this wonderful place into which they had wandered. The mix of winding cobbled alleys, steep stairways, secluded squares, towers, turrets, and the enchantingly preserved citadel was pure magic. On the other side of the historical ledger, Matt managed to find an "internet café," check his e-mail, and even send one message.

Some time later - as they found their way back to the car, their arms touching the other - Jupp looked up at his new friend and in as neutral, as mature a tone as he could manage, said, "Onkel Erich says you have a son, a son whom you love very much. Is there any chance that you could love another person that much?" Almost whispering, he added, "And would you ever want to put up with a loser like me?" "You're no loser," Matt responded carefully. "I think we're making a good start on really getting to know each other, don't you? As for Jamie, you're going to have the opportunity to meet him sooner than you might expect. He's arriving at the Hermannstadt/Sibiu airport this evening! He's completed his photo shoot in Constanta and will be rejoining us." The boy smiled nervously as he looked up as his companion. Matt grinned back and lightly swatted him on the side of his head. Jupp's peal of laughter rang true - like one of the ancient bells in the old city. At least for the moment they were truly communicating.

"Don't I get to see the Dracula Castle?" Matt asked mischievously as they reached the car. "Sorry, Herr Matt, I can't arrange an impaling today. Bran Castle's in the wrong direction. Maybe tomorrow with Jamie... The afternoon found the duo on roads that led west by southwest in the general direction of Hermannstadt, the historic center of

Transylvania German life. Moving through a green valley along a pleasant stream, Matt knew he would never forget the glorious succession of villages and fortified churches. (In fact, six of them had been designated "UNESCO World Heritage Sites".) Sometimes the church was Romanesque in design; sometimes Gothic. Sometimes, surrounded by its heavy walls, it was set down in the middle of a village; sometimes it simply stood in the middle of a field. Matt could hear the tolling of bells, the blowing of bugles, and the shouts of terrified peasants as they fled into the church, screaming that a band of Huns or Turks had been sighted. Sometimes his mind's eye could see smoke in the distance, smoke that said the homes of friends in a nearby town, homes set close together on straight streets, were burning...again. Perhaps all that remained were tumbled stones and bricks; perhaps a solitary watchman allowed the two young men to enter a church. In a few places, they undoubtedly gaped at the beauty of the great altar that still pointed to the majesty of the god they worshiped...and the skill of the artisans who had come to this land. Many villages were totally deserted. Even when there were handfuls of people, however, the heart and soul of the country had clearly departed.

At one point, Matt shook his head, turned momentarily to Jupp, and asked if it would all be jumbled stone in not too many years. "Well, Herr Matt," Jupp responded, "a few sites will probably remain as museums and Romanians will live in some of the larger towns like Schaessburg or Mediasch/Medias just ahead. Still, not all will be saved, for there are simply too many of them. In some ways, Matt was nearly overcome by the beauty of his ancestral homeland. Though it was a powerful experience no matter how considered, he also found it strangely depressing. Now early evening, he was relieved that he was something less than 35 miles from Hermannstadt/Sibiu...and Jamie.

They spotted the big redheaded kid coming up the arrival ramp only a short time after arriving at the airport. Matt felt his heart turn over with joy. He was just opening his arms when he heard a gasp at his side. Turning to Jupp, he noted that the boy stood as if paralyzed. His eyes were glassy, his mouth was slightly open, and there were definite signs of stirring in his crotch!

(To Be Continued)