

Something True, Something Cruel, Something Real The Stories of Mr G

by Marc Wagenbach
(Sample – First Chapter)

The House at the Edge of the Woods

1941. Albertine washed the blood from her hands. The kitchen was bitterly cold that night, out in the house at the edge of the forest. She was relieved the boy had finally fallen asleep upstairs. The sharp scent of cleanser and chlorine still hung in the air. Her hands burned and throbbed, but at last the floor was clean – free of blood. It had been her duty. For the boy. For the family. For Ekeby. Only then could there be a future. Only then would they be free.

She went into the clock room and lit the fire. At first the wood resisted; then it caught. Carefully, she gathered the rags and cloths and fed them into the flames. She watched until the blaze held, then added more wood. For a long time, she simply stared into it. Her thoughts drifted to the Brothers Grimm – the tale of Mother Holle, stern and just. To Goldmarie, rewarded for her labour after she had fallen down the well and woken in another world, where she shook the bedding and the feathers fell like winter snow.

Albertine glanced at the door. Nothing. Slowly, she undressed. She poured spirits over her clothes and tossed them, piece by piece, into the fire. “And when she passed through the gate,” she whispered, almost absently, “a great shower of gold rained down on Marie, clinging to her until she was covered head to toe.”

Wrapped in a red bathrobe and sheepskin slippers, Max sat in the library, gazing out into the garden. Dawn had just broken. Winter had settled over Ekeby; frost and ice sealed the fields. 8:32 a.m. Out among the apple trees, a man in a wool cap bent down and spread thick paste over the gnawed bark. “I can hardly read anymore,” Max thought, annoyed, reaching for the glasses on the desk behind him. For more than ten years he had lived here with Hieronymus, in the old colonial summer house at the forest’s edge – part of a former estate in the Appense Bos, between Zutphen, Apeldoorn, and Deventer, close to the IJssel.

“A few days ago, we came back from a long journey,” he wrote. “This morning I went down early. The house was still dark. I switched on the lamp in the library and sat at the long wooden desk. I had to begin my story, because I no longer understand what is happening to me. Why have those old voices returned – voices I thought I’d forgotten? He set down his pen and looked out again. Hieronymus was still out there, smearing paste along the trunks. “He still looks good,” Max thought – the tall frame, the fine bones, that mischievous smile that could drive him mad. He rubbed his forehead. Mid-forties, short dark hair, a few first strands of grey.

“Since childhood I’ve had strange dreams,” he wrote. Max had grown up with his parents – and later his sister Doro – in a rented flat in a rainy town somewhere in western Germany. In autumn, fog wrapped itself around the long main street. It seemed to rain all year. There had once been a small Italian ice-cream parlour and an overheated indoor pool. Both had long since closed – like most of the shops. Only fog remained. And rain.

His childhood was sheltered. He spent hours playing with snails, collected wilted flowers from the cemetery, built huts in the woods and on abandoned lots overgrown with nettles. Places like the patch beside the big glass container at the bus stop into town.

His first ‘dream walk’ came when he was seven. He remembered the night clearly. The wind was warm for early June. His parents were going to his uncle’s wedding-eve party and had dressed up. “Tonight, you stay on your own,” his mother said. “We’ll be close by.” “Sleep well,” his father added, kissing his cheek. “We love you.”

Then they left.

Max had lain in his little bed and closed his eyes. At family gatherings, when he grew bored, he would curl up in a corner and fall asleep – not to rest, but to cross into another world. It was almost a game, though he didn’t yet know the word. That night, the dream was different. Not a nightmare, but one of those visions he would never understand. He dreamed he was lying in the maternity ward of an empty hospital, a new-born among a swarm of fairies and guardian spirits. More than three hundred beings whirled around him – singing, dancing, streaking through the air. The scent of incense was thick, the voices incomprehensible.

He was entranced by their strangeness – their songs of deer and wolves and wild birds. Songs of something that would save the world. Something that had always been part of him. Since the beginning of time. Something so warm and welcoming that, even years later, he could still feel it – opening his heart, widening everything inside.

Then his parents woke him.

“What are you doing here?” his mother cried when she found him standing at the front door.

“I was only dreaming,” he said, dazed.

“Aren’t you cold?” she asked, pulling him close. “No. It was beautiful there,” he whispered.

“There were elves and fairies. So many. They sang and danced, Mama. Really!” His father carried him back to bed.

The next day they bought a new lock for the door, and somehow Max stopped dreaming. He didn’t know why. Why he had unlearned it. Why he no longer played with snails, gathered wilted flowers, or hid in the nettles.

“What happened to Mr G?” he wondered now, staring into the garden. “What’s wrong with Maximilian Grünbaum?”

Enough, he thought. Move, Max. Eat.

He pushed back his chair and went into the kitchen. “Jet lag,” he told himself. Sixteen hours on a plane – from Singapore to Frankfurt to Amsterdam. “I’m too old for this.” He took the silver thermos from the cupboard – the one engraved ‘For Hieronymus and Max’ – and made coffee. “Black bread with cheese. God, I’ve missed that,” he said, rubbing his face as he spread the butter. Their last journey had taken them from San Francisco to Sydney, Tasmania, New Zealand, Fiji, and finally Singapore. A step back, a chance to recover after years of work.

“A little rest. A fresh start,” they had told everyone. But it felt good to be home.

He thought of Hieronymus tending the wounded trees, of the deer that had done such damage. “We’ll see if they make it through winter,” he murmured, sipping his coffee. “At least he’s caring for them. Otherwise, they’d dry out and die – from the inside, once they’ve lost their protection.” Sometimes the deer slept right beside the house – under the copper beech, between the rhododendrons. Once he had seen a stag lying there in the snow, its imprint pressed into the ground. He remembered the winter when they’d been snowed in, the forest floor a maze of tracks. A sudden crash came from the garage. Hieronymus appeared, hands and jacket smeared with brown paste.

“Don’t come in here like that!” Max shouted, laughing.

“Here, the towel,” he said, rushing to help.

They wrestled with the trousers, stumbled into a rack. Five bicycles crashed to the floor.

“You’re so clumsy,” Max laughed.

“Help instead of laughing,” Hieronymus said, grinning, and pulled him close. They toppled to the ground, laughing, breathless.

“Unfair!” Max shouted.

“Yeah, yeah – always complaining,” Hieronymus teased, sliding his freezing hands under Max’s shirt.

“Ah! You’re insane!”

They struggled, laughed again, and finally lay still on the cold concrete.

“Sauna,” Hieronymus said, conciliatory, giving him a quick kiss. “It’ll do us good.”

He jogged down the hall in just his underwear.

“I’ll be right there,” Max called. “I just need to write something down. An important thought.”

He went back to the library and opened his journal.

“You coming?” echoed from upstairs.

“One minute,” he called, pen poised above the page.

He wrote a heading: “Still foreign”.

Then, without thinking, continued.

“My first real victory was football – or maybe kindergarten, with the shovel. But that was an accident. A reflex. The day I nearly split open the head of the girl behind me – the one I couldn’t stand. *Bong!* Twelve points. Blood everywhere. At least she went quiet. With Jonny it was different. And I hated football anyway. Jonny was a bastard. Maybe twelve. He lived nearby and never missed a chance to mock my size. At nine I was smaller, thinner, weaker. He challenged me in the street. Maybe he sensed I was different; maybe he was just guarding his ground. I didn’t care. He laughed in my face. And the others laughed with him. They played football and mocked me. So, I learned their game. Defend yourself. Play along – just to win. Max shifted in his chair, set down the pen, then took it up again. “I was up against an army. David against Goliath. Max against Jonny. Humiliated and cast out – that’s how it felt. But it was my street. My home. Some of them were my friends. I had to defend myself, whatever it cost. I had to bring him down.” Outside, the garden was darkening.

“Jonny was fast. Too fast. He controlled the ball. I couldn’t beat him. So? Forget the game. Make your own rules. Find his weakness. I kicked him. Full force. Straight to the shin. ‘Hey,

what was that?’ he cried, startled. I’d already taken the ball and was running. ‘What was what?’ I shouted, sprinting – eyes not even on the ball. Next attack: not the game. Just his shin. It’s strange how memory floods back – the fear, the shame, the rage. The raw sense of being excluded. I was afraid he’d beat me to a pulp if I stopped. But then something shifted. For the first time I saw respect in the others’ eyes. Respect that I’d fought back, hadn’t swallowed it, refused the role they gave me. ‘Yes, you’re good,’ he told himself. ‘Damn good.’ Kick by kick, wound by wound, I kept striking until Jonny couldn’t get up. Exact. Precise. Always the same spot. In the end, I’d won. I belonged. I’d passed the test.”

“Are you coming or not?” Hieronymus called from upstairs. “It’s perfect in here!”
“Coming,” Max said, closing the journal. He went upstairs, shedding the bathrobe, T-shirt, and pyjamas, grabbing a towel on the way. The hallway was cold. He ran the last few steps and opened the sauna door. “God, it’s freezing,” he gasped – and then the heat struck him.

Hieronymus lay on the top bench, sweat running down his face and chest.

“What took you so long?”

“Had to write something down,” Max said, spreading his towel. “Something from the past.”

“Feels good,” Hieronymus sighed. “That flight had me all knotted up. Now I’m loosening again.” He rose, poured birch water over the glowing stones. Steam hissed and curled.

“A head-hunter called yesterday,” he said, sitting back down. “Amsterdam. They’re looking for someone to reorganize a public company.”

“Interested?”

“Maybe. I’ve got a meeting in two days.”

“That’s fast.”

“They need someone right away – finances, mostly. But it’s just a first talk.”

He stood, the sound of running water beginning in the next room. “Should we call Leander and Hanna after?” he called over the shower.

“Good idea,” Max answered, his voice low against the hiss of steam.

Leander

Winter in Berlin. The city grey, the air sharp. Leander walked through it wrapped in a heavy wool coat and black scarf, his breath rising in pale shapes before him. It could have been a scene from an old Cold War film.

At the lights he waited, hands buried in brown leather gloves, then crossed when they turned green. “What’s wrong with me again? Why this winter gloom every year?” he thought. Lately he had been imagining a move – closer to Max and Hieronymus, maybe a small house in Zutphen. Just to leave Berlin. To leave Germany.

And yet he still loved his flat, the small balcony in Prenzlauer Berg. He loved Zutphen too – the wide floodplains of the IJssel, the old Hanseatic walls, the medieval squares and quiet cafés. A postcard town, neat and self-contained. Nothing like Berlin, with its noise and endless strain.

“Maybe I’ve simply grown too old for this, he thought,” turning toward the corner shop to buy instant soup. Thirty years earlier he had fled the narrowness of Drenthe and thrown himself into Berlin. In the mid-nineties he’d met a man in a border-town bar. The Beat Club, where everyone came from across the region: Twente, Groningen, the Dutch side. They came searching for freedom – in the darkrooms, in themselves. So had he.

The next day he left with him. Bad Bentheim to Ostbahnhof. Into the wild city where, after the Wall, people danced on Hitler’s desk in the Russian embassy. Everything was possible then. The Love Parade, the endless techno nights, the euphoria of beginning again. But the relationship hadn’t lasted. It simply ended.

As an interior designer he had thrived, though most of his clients came from the West. Everyone wanted a new story, a clean identity, a brighter life. He gave it to them. *Bright storytelling*, he called it. Berlin remade itself. The grey and broken turned glossy and chic so that the wounds could finally fade. The party was endless. Capitalism had won – or so they believed. Leander had sold them dreams: the dream of being light, witty, unburdened Germans at last. “Plenty of colour from the colonies,” he used to joke. “Not dull and German – but bright, bright, bright.” Work came easily. He designed their homes, their apartments, their well-arranged lives. In the end he bought his own flat in Prenzlauer Berg, balcony to the street.

Now, climbing the stairs again, he pulled off his coat. Beneath the surface, he wanted out. He no longer wished to feel like a stranger – not in Germany, not anywhere. His phone rang.

Hieronymus and Max. He had hoped they would call. He had seen the photos of their long journey – San Francisco, Australia, Fiji – and now, hearing their voices, warmth spread through him. They talked a while. Relaxed from the sauna, Max and Hieronymus lay in their robes, the call on speaker.

“We really have to see each other soon,” Hieronymus said as the call drew to an end.

“Darling, we miss you,” Max added.

“I miss you too,” Leander said. “So glad you’re back. Welcome home to the Old World.” He stretched the goodbye into a playful *Tschüüüsss* and hung up.

“Nice, wasn’t it?” Hieronymus said.

“Absolutely. Let’s plan something for Pentecost – they’ll have time off,” Max replied, smiling.

“Good idea,” Hieronymus said. “We’ll do it.”

“I’ll call Hanna,” Max said.

“Then I’ll make lunch. Must be noon by now. I still can’t tell the time,” Hieronymus called, tightening the belt of his robe as he went downstairs.

“One minute,” Max called after him.

“No rush,” came the reply from the stairwell. “I know you.”

Max dialled Hanna. Since the holiday they had exchanged only brief messages, a few emojis. “A pity”, he thought when she didn’t answer, though he tried several times. “She’s busy. So busy with herself.”

Hanna

Midday, the same day. Hanna sat in her kitchen in Hamburg, a spread of tarot cards before her. She lived in an old flat in St. Pauli, not far from the Reeperbahn, and had lit an expensive scented candle for the session. Her phone buzzed on the counter – Max calling. She ignored it. She wanted only the deck. Only her own energy. Not today. Not now. This was about her life. Her future.

Max had known her for what felt like forever. They had studied together in Bayreuth – he history, she literature. At least two years had passed since they had last seen each other, that Christmas when she had driven from Hamburg to Ekeby in her small car with the huge orange suitcase. Back then he had been consumed by work and frustration. Yet he had enjoyed the comfort of the holiday – his father’s odd jokes, his mother’s warmth, his sister’s humour. Even if Hieronymus had sometimes dominated the dinner talk with his projects – and found in Doro’s husband a willing partner – the evening had been soothing.

“Let them lick their wounds,” Doro had whispered as they carried the plates to the kitchen. “That’s part of the ritual too.” They had smiled. Dessert had been bread soaked in milk with poppy seeds and walnuts – Mákûfki. A silent, holy night. His nephews Anton and Paul spoiled by too many gifts.

Now Hanna shuffled slowly. Past. Present. Future. “Trust your intuition. Take your time,” she told herself. “Think of your strong feminine energy. Open. Be ready,” she murmured, and drew three cards.

Meanwhile, Max remembered her sitting in his kitchen chair two years earlier – blonde hair pinned up, lips pressed in concentration, that tiny movement of the mouth when she was focused. The first night with friends at Ekeby always turned wild, he thought.

They sat in the kitchen until dark – hysterical, high on life. Politics, nonsense, laughter. That evening it had been her hairpins that caught his eye – three silver clips with white pearls, holding together her dyed hair as if to keep something from breaking apart.

“I’m glad I’m here. Thank you,” she had said. “I’m fine – even if the time without Gregor was hard. After ten years it takes work to find yourself again.”

She had smiled, uncertain. “Now I want to listen to my gut. Not be afraid to open up. Then I’ll find my Scorpio man. Or someone else.”

Max had pulled on a green sweater.

“That’s what Avi, my Kurdish seer, says too,” she’d laughed. “Then it takes off. Female empowerment.”

She had risen, her body swaying with theatrical grace. Max had smiled at her openness. “I always admired that,” he thought. “Always loved it.”

Later, after Hieronymus had gone to bed, they had staggered drunk into the woods. He had insisted on showing her the prehistoric burial mound near the house.

“You have to see this!” he had shouted into the dark.

“Where are you? I can’t see you. Do you have your phone?”

“Here, Max. Here,” she had called back.

Like Hansel and Gretel, they had clung to each other until they found the mound, dusted with snow among the trees. Hanna had lain down on it at once, her back pressed to the frozen ground.

“Ah, this is beautiful,” she cried. “So soft. Fantastic.”

Max had remained standing – he didn’t want to dirty his coat; the earth looked too cold, too damp.

She had lain there for several minutes.

“Shall we go?” he had asked, impatient. “Hey, are you asleep? I want to move on.”

Then she had risen, wordless, and walked back the way they had come – as if she had understood the forest and merged with it in her own way.

Now, in Hamburg, Hanna placed her hand on the first card. “Let’s see what the Norns have for me. Be with me, goddesses of fate,” she said softly and turned it over.

“The Tower,” she murmured. “Upheaval. Change.”

Her hand moved to the second.

“The present,” she said into the quiet. “The High Priestess. Didn’t expect that. Intuition. Inner knowing.”

Only one card remained. She shifted, placed her left hand on it, waited, and turned it.

Hieronymus

The next day, Hieronymus sat waiting in a glass-walled conference room – a cappuccino and a glass of water before him. Amsterdam-Zuid. A new tower that gleamed with power and global ambition. Transparent yet exclusive. Playful, and cold. A place scrubbed clean, ready to be used again. A place where nothing stuck.

When the head-hunter entered, the outcome was already clear. They wanted him. The only question was the price. And Hieronymus wanted it too. He didn't want to stop working. He didn't want a life only with Max at Ekeby. He needed something to push against – a way not to feel foreign inside himself. The head-hunter saw it at once. From then on, the meeting felt like a dance.

Hieronymus stood, buttoned his jacket, extended his hand. Smiled. Shook. Sat. Spoke. A rehearsed play, though neither had written it. Even the smile was choreographed – exactly 1.58 seconds. Not two. Exactly 1.58.

Afterwards, he went to the restroom overlooking the city and washed his hands – almost a full minute, until the skin flushed red.

He already had the job.

That afternoon, driving back to Ekeby, he told Max nothing at first.

“It's all about framing,” he murmured. “Max will understand. First a bath. Then we'll see.”

Max sat in the clock room beside a mountain of laundry, surrounded by the ticking and chiming of time: two classic wall clocks; a cuckoo from his grandmother in the Black Forest; the great pendulum clock from his father, its tone resonating through the house; and the antique clock Hieronymus had bought at an auction in Twente – English mechanism, French face.

“Together they're our jumble of time,” Max liked to tell visitors. “Our shared time. But at Ekeby, time runs differently anyway.”

“This was his favourite room now,” he thought, folding the laundry.

He loved the moment when all the clocks struck the hour and the whole room joined in – a chorus of chimes and cuckoos. Anyone sleeping here would bolt upright.

He chuckled. Leander nearly had a heart attack every time.

He was still in his red flannel robe, gingerbread pyjamas, and loose T-shirt. Piles were forming: dark grey towels, T-shirts, black underwear.

“Strange”, Max thought. “When Hieronymus had come in for coffee earlier, he had said almost nothing about Amsterdam. Just that it had gone well, that he would think about it. Then he had gone straight to the bath.”

“He’s been odd lately,” Max thought.

“Why another job? He was meant to stop – that was the deal.” He propped up a fallen stack. “I’ll wait. It’s my problem too. Better to focus on what I want this year.”

He folded another shirt.

So far there was only the historians’ conference on Viking raids in Cologne that autumn. The larger question was whether he even wanted to stay in that academic circus. Maybe what he needed was a real break. The T-shirt pile grew – black and white, M and L.

Then all the clocks struck at once, a deep, resonant sound that filled the room.

“And what about Hanna? Why no call back?”

He sighed. “I hate how complicated things get as you grow older – all those sensitivities, expectations, everyone so wrapped up in themselves. Why can’t she just pick up? This time I won’t be the one.”

He finished the folding, tried to stack everything into one basket – failed – fetched a second, sorted the last pieces, and carried both to the table.

“Maybe I should write a letter,” he thought.

“Leander’s waiting for an invitation anyway.” He pulled paper from the cabinet, sat at the desk, and began to write in his neatest hand.

Dear Hanna, dear Leander,

The holiday is over, and we'd be so happy to see you soon. I miss you – and so does Hieronymus. Please come to Ekeby for Pentecost. We could walk along the IJssel, visit Het Loo, or have a drink at the market in Zutphen. Deventer is always worth a trip as well. Let us know if you'd like to come.

*Warmest greetings and kusjes,
M and H*

The doorbell rang.

“I can't get it. I'm still wet!” Hieronymus called from upstairs.

“Okay, I'll go,” Max replied.

He didn't relish opening the door in his robe, but someone had to.

On the step stood a woman in a green raincoat, collar turned up, matching rubber boots. She looked tense, lips pressed thin, eyes narrowed. Fragile and sharp at once – like a wolf about to spring.

“Tell me if it's true,” she demanded, stepping closer. Her voice shook.

“Tell me if my grandfather lived here. I want the truth. Now.”

Early January in the Lotharii Regnum, a small independent corner of the Frankish realm. The light was dim, the cold damp. The floodplains of the IJssel between Deventer and Zutphen lay frozen; Epiphany was nearby.

Mathilda was alone – as she preferred it. Silence reigned, broken only by the distant calls of wild geese. Fog hung low over the river. She should have stayed indoors. During the Rauhnächte – the twelve holy nights after the birth of light – the realms of the living and the dead overlapped, and fate was weighed anew. But today she could not shake the feeling that something was coming. Something unseen. Something to do with Gottfried. It would happen tonight, on Perchnacht – January sixth – when the divine child appears before the Three Kings.

“Damn it, faster,” she muttered as she slipped on a patch of ice and caught herself just in time.

“Faster, Mathilda, or it will be too late. Gottfried is unpredictable.”

She fixed her eyes on her feet, measuring each step.

Seven years earlier she had met Erik. She had still been a child then.

His and Gottfried’s families had long lived upriver, having come with the Great Heathen Army from England to settle on the IJssel. She should never have met him – he a Viking, she a Frankish girl – but she hadn’t cared. She liked him: his calm voice, his open face, the way he sang. They sang together sometimes – songs of the river, of Yule, of old kings. She rarely understood the words, but the melodies filled her with joy.

Erik was her friend. That was what mattered. When he sang, he pulled faces and leapt into the air until she laughed. Everything between them was light – like the birds circling above. Since the last summer, everything had changed.

She ran along the riverbank toward Zutphen, remembering Erik and Gottfried swimming naked in the water, the closeness of their bodies, the midsummer light on their skin.

Erik loved Gottfried. She had always known.

He loved his scent, his skin, the strength of his thighs. His presence. Erik had known it early, especially since that first night they had lain together.

Gottfried was the warrior. Erik’s admiration was boundless – for his strength, his focus, the clarity of his eyes. Gottfried knew what he wanted. In battle he was whole. He did not think. He was only force, only will. Every day he trained with the sword. Tireless. Ambitious. Determined to be the best. To win. He honed reflex, speed, endurance. Everything in him strained to seize his fate with his own hands.

The old seer had once spoken: “Gottfried, you will do great things. You are the born warrior. You will destroy what others hold most dear. Greater and mightier than those before you. For you will see their deepest desires – that is your gift. To see when darkness reigns, to know what must be taken from them. Then they will be defenceless, and no wound will heal. But you – you will prevail.”

Evening fell. Ekeby. Max stood in the kitchen, unsettled by the woman's visit. Darkness pressed against the windows. "Did her grandfather really live here?" he wondered, stirring the cake batter: five eggs, eleven spoons of flour, sixteen of sugar, vanilla sugar, baking powder, 250 grams of butter, a pinch of salt.

"There was something strange about her," he thought, turning up the old transistor radio.

People often wandered up their drive – asking for directions, or combing the meadow with metal detectors in search of some rumoured wartime treasure. But today had been different. The way she had vanished the moment she saw him. She had turned, bolted, disappeared – like a ghost.

Max poured the batter into the tin and shook his head.

"The world has gone mad." He remembered how Hieronymus had finally come down – towel found; bath foam gone – but the woman had already disappeared.

"Is any of it even true? True about what?" He slid the pan into the oven. "Tonight, bed early. Calm down. As soon as the cake's done." He poured himself a glass of white wine. "What a day".

That night he slept fitfully. New moon. The house was dark.

Outside the kitchen window stood a man in a felt coat, medium height, his face lost to shadow.

He had been waiting a long time – for the moment the two men would finally return home.

Tonight, he would reach out to Max.

The kitchen clock showed 2:03. In a striped undershirt and boxer shorts, Max crept downstairs. The fridge light spilled across his face. He took a bottle of juice and drank.

From outside, the man watched. He longed to make himself known –without frightening him. He needed a way to connect.

Softly, he began to hum, moving in small, jerky gestures. Max did not notice. He could not see him.

After a while, the man fell silent and stepped back into the dark.

“It doesn’t work. Why can’t he see me?”

In truth, he no longer knew why he had come to this place. Why he had left his family. His daughter. Why he had written that letter, sealed it, and left it on the kitchen table. Had shut the door and never returned.

It had been a night like this – a new-moon night. “Leave, to find peace”, he had thought. For his daughter. For his wife. His duty as husband.

He had to regain his strength. It was meant to be temporary – weeks, perhaps a summer. Just a short retreat in the east. “I’ll write”, he had thought. “Once it’s better”. They would understand. His wife would. His daughter too.

At first, he had hidden near this estate, in the Appense Veld – the woods he had known as a child. But that was long ago. Then, hiding had meant survival – so that no one could find him. Not his wife. Not the Germans. No one.

It had been too dangerous. He had to protect his family.

Max shut the fridge and stood for a moment in the darkness before leaving the kitchen.

“Something’s strange in this house tonight,” he thought. “As if someone else were here with us.”