

Opening Chapter of *The Daisy Grave*  
by Jo Harthan.

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## CHAPTER 1

Antje was hurrying along the path that skirted the potato field on the lower slopes of Todeshügel. The fine spring morning was helping to alleviate the guilt she was feeling at having left her mother alone, today of all days.

The path climbed more steeply at the field boundary but she kept up the pace. She knew every stone and crevice on this path and could come up here in the dark if she had a mind to. On the eastern horizon, the towering sentinels of Frankfurt soon came into view—guarding the entrance to the modern world, shimmering and scintillating in the morning haze.

The climb was making her breathless. Wrenching seventy kilos out of the grip of gravity was no easy matter. Only this morning, as she struggled to fasten her *Relax Fit* jeans, she had wondered why these daily hikes up Todeshügel were not having the slightest effect on her figure. She pushed on regardless, determined not to slow

down until she reached the old oak at the edge of the forest.

As she neared the top of the hill, beyond where the woods gave way to couch grass and bracken, she stopped to catch her breath and admire the view.

She could see her mother's house from here, slumped on the hillside like a vagrant cast out from society. Yet its decaying exterior looked comfortable in its isolation. Below the house, a culvert had made a deep tear in the hillside. There had been many stormy days when the walk to the village school in Niederglabach was too perilous to attempt because the culvert had become a raging torrent. It meant that Antje had huge gaps in her education that were still an embarrassment to her.

Three miles away, nestled into a wooded valley, were the grey slate roofs of the neat white houses in Niederglabach. The towering spire of St Ägidius reached up to heaven at the head of the valley, as if declaring itself to be the head of the community. Which in truth, it was. Life in the village had always revolved around the church.

The view of the village from here was as pretty as a picture postcard. But, as Antje knew only too well, looks can deceive. There was nothing pretty about the way her family had sometimes been

treated by the more well-to-do, self-righteous inhabitants of Niederglabach.

Continuing up the steep path, her thoughts turned to her destination. Such an emotive word, denoting as it did, the end of a journey. It had certainly been journey's end for the people buried there.

It wasn't that Antje had any morbid fascination for graveyards. In her mind, death was just the end of life; the end of suffering. She didn't believe in resurrection or redemption, but that didn't mean she didn't believe in God. If ever she was asked, she always said she did, despite not having set foot inside a church since escaping to Munich as a naïve eighteen-year old. Though she did keep rosary beads in her pocket; a present from her mother on her thirteenth birthday. She carried them more out of habit than anything else; only using them in dire emergencies.

Arriving at the graveyard, she sat down in her usual spot on the low stone wall. Although she had always thought of it as a graveyard, it wasn't really. It was more a burial ground; as if the dead had been covered in earth, naked, rather than laid to rest in a *hölzerner mantel* like the people buried at St. Ägidius.

This ground had never been consecrated, which meant that the people buried here must have

committed some terrible sin and been condemned by the Church to eternal damnation. Antje wondered how they had felt about that. Perhaps like her they had not believed in an afterlife anyway. She hoped they hadn't. To be condemned by your fellowman in this life was surely punishment enough.

Whatever the sufferings of the poor souls buried here—this was a peaceful place and, because of its remoteness and the steep climb, few people came. So why did she? There were other, more scenic walks she could choose. It wasn't that anyone close to her had ever died, though she was aware that was about to change. The only excuse she could give herself was that this was one of her childhood playgrounds and she was in need of some happy memories.

She and her two younger brothers, Franz and Wolfgang, had played amongst these graves when they were children, oblivious to what might lie beneath. They had never considered what it meant to be dead, never having been called upon to have any respect for or understanding of it. Though she did have a memory of death that was almost lost in the fog of childhood. It was when her mother had told her Grandpa Bergen had died.

“Goodbye and good riddance,” her mother had said when she threw his sour smelling clay pipe

into the fire. Antje learned later that he hadn't died at all but had simply disappeared from their lives. There hadn't been any contact since.

Their childhood had been blighted by so many things she hadn't understood—things that had never been explained. Running her hand along the rough stone of the crumbling wall reminded her of how the walls of her childhood had come crashing down the day the world imposed its moral values. It seems the absence of a father made her less than a decent human being. Until then she had never questioned why there was only mother; it just hadn't seemed important.

Her eyes came to rest on one of the headstones inside the overgrown enclosure. It had no inscription or words of comfort; no clue as to who might be buried there. There was only a single monogram, carved roughly into the weathered stone. Its shape had always reminded Antje of a daisy. Perhaps it was the grave of a child who had played on these hills long ago. A child who, just like her, had picked the daisies as they pushed their sunny crowns up towards the sky.

Scrambling over the wall, she sat down beside it. Her hands caressed the soft grass, seeking out a single daisy to twirl between her fingers. There was something here. She knew it. She could feel it. She had always felt it. As if something was calling

to her. Something she couldn't understand because the feeling was muted like the sound of a foetus in the womb.

A bluebottle had begun to buzz around her and she waved her arms around in an effort to drive it away. But the promise of a sweaty drink was too much for the creature and it landed momentarily on her face. An attempt to swat it resulted only in giving herself a good hard slap on the cheek. Escaping the onslaught, the fly settled on the gravestone and began grooming itself like a cat savouring the sweet remnants of a creamy treat; sliding its front legs backwards and forwards over its head. Its actions fascinated Antje.

To her surprise, a feeling resembling affection came over her. It was a fly doing what flies do. It didn't ask to be a fly just as she hadn't asked to be a bastard child.

As that thought crystallised, the fly stopped its grooming and seemed to look at her with its huge, black eyes, as though it sensed her watching. She wondered what it saw.

And then, as if a curtain had been drawn back in a darkened room, she knew the reason she kept coming here. It was because this place stirred within her an emotion she recognised yet had never acknowledged. It had been a silent companion for many years like a friend who had

been abandoned, leaving memories of heartache and separation behind.

It was here, in this place—a feeling of rejection and a yearning to belong.

And she understood something else too; something the fly had shown her.

Whatever it was, it wanted to come back.

