



# OUTBACK VENGEANCE

Outback Adventures Book  
3

Seven Chapter Sample

1.

## ALICE SPRINGS, CENTRAL AUSTRALIA, 1985

Pam Forbes couldn't concentrate, her friend doing the work for two as the rugged, deep-red grandeur of the MacDonnell Range overshadowed as they toiled. Clouds threatened, an unwelcome surprise from the sky's normally ever-present blue.

*Finally a stable future? Security?*

All with a man who'd been part of her life since arriving in the small town of Alice Springs. Her home in the dry, remote centre of Australia.

She'd overlooked him twice, despite their lives being linked for a generation. Twice he'd rescued her from the greatest of dangers.

Finally a new destiny.

*But does he feel the same?*

Stability until two nights ago when certainty vanished. Now confusion. Expectations crumbling. Their romantic dinner shattered by two men who emerged into the restaurant. Emerged from her past.

The Californian accent caught her attention even before she turned, not believing the one-time Bruins footballer was here in Central Australia. The man she'd shared twelve euphoric days with. Twelve unforgettable days that were indelibly etched into her memory.

Then a second voice. The unmistakable Hungarian accent of Marton Landor. Another ecstatic island encounter crushed at the last minute by her irrational accusation. An accusation she found had no foundation.

Both had given her the most incredible times of her life.

*Why appear now?*

Both forcing her to reassess her relationship with Mike. Challenge her fate.

Reminding of euphoria past. Of dangers past.

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Tension ravaged every cell of Marton Landor's body.

*Concentrate.*

He never conceived there could be stress levels greater than his Hungarian border escape. But at least this time he was not the hunted.

He was the hunter.

A tension magnified by the Central Australian heat beating down on his steel roofed hideaway.

While his father had planned his boyhood escape, today's planning was all his own. A year of organising. Of researching. Of equipping. Of assembling.

Finally ready.

Ready for the ultimate act.

Totally confident of his plan, his sacrifice until two nights ago. But Pam's sudden re-appearance make total concentration impossible, her presence lingering. Made worse by her interest in the policeman who'd been a thorn in his side since arriving in the town.

The only woman he'd truly loved. Spurned at the last minute after their twelve ecstatic days.

Fighting to block out the past, he failed to note his timing unravel.

*Shit! He should have arrived half an hour ago.*

The police aircraft made a sweep.

Why here?

Why the delay?

They can't have discovered the real plot.

*Surely not all for nothing.*

## BUDAPEST. HUNGARY, 1950

Thirty-five years earlier, seven-year-old Márton Landor woke with a start.

Sensed danger.

Not unusual. Like all in Communist Hungary, he fought to retain even the smallest of possessions. But this wasn't a street scuffle.

It was silent. After midnight.

Mind racing, he lay rigid on the floor, determined not to disturb his parents who shared the wafer thin, horsehair mattress. Another family of four slept in the opposite corner.

His rigidity fuelled by the tentacles of fear penetrating ever deeper. Outside, the frigid mantle of fog penetrated Pest's every crevice; that flat part of the country's capital east of the River Danube. A fog that blocked the smattering of lights from the heights of Buda.

Eyes straining, he saw nothing through the small, grime covered window.

*Something coming.*

The all-enveloping silence was shattered as a truck screeched to a halt.

Bodies jumped onto a frost covered roadway.

Scores of nearby families woke at the sound, praying they wouldn't be tonight's target.

Jackboots pounded up the stairwell. Rifle butts destroyed Márton's door and six AVH secret police stormed the two-room apartment. Its twelve residents trembled as they shuffled into the slightly larger room, Márton gripping his mother's legs as she in turn seized her husband's waist.

"Landor family! Landor family!" The man in charge short, portly, arrogant.

Three families shuffled backwards, cringing to the farthest corner, relief sweeping their faces.

Márton, Péter and Isabella remained in the centre of the room.

"I'm Péter Landor." Márton's father took a defiant step forward, attempting to disguise a gut in turmoil. "Why this intrusion in the middle of the night?"

Márton forced himself even tighter between Isabella's legs, eyes hiding from the intruders' malicious leers.

"Come! Now!"

"Why?" Despite his fear, Péter attempted to appear unruffled.

"No". Isabella's eyes pleaded but Péter stood firm.

"I ask again. Why?"

“Declared an Enemy of the People.” The sergeant sneered. “Each get a coat. Nothing else!”

“Don’t be absurd. We’ve done nothing wrong!”

Márton saw a secret policeman lift his rifle, ready to strike. He fought his mother’s grasp, frantic to protect his father. But there was no escape from his mother’s hold.

The rifle butt cracked against Péter’s jaw. Collapsing on the floor, he curled into a foetal ball as steel capped boots kicked at his ribs. At his head.

“Reward for your obstinacy.”

Márton screamed and finally pulling free, dived onto his father. Scrawny limbs thrashing, he attempted to give protection.

“Leave him alone.” Márton screamed defiance. “He’s my Father!”

Contemptuous of the boy’s efforts, one soldier reversed his rifle, about to club the young annoyance.

Despite kicks raining over his body, Péter grabbed Márton and rolled over, his back protecting his only son.

The soldier swore at his target’s disappearance.

“Roll him back. Need to get a full swipe at the little bastard.”

“Stop!” The sergeant ordered, glaring down his troops. Although as savage as his subordinates he also was a father, horrified that a child the same age as his own was about to be beaten to pulp. “They’re to be arrested. Not killed!”

Frustration flushed across the policemen’s face, thwarted in his blood lust.

“Coats! Then down to the truck!” The sergeant still had his orders.

In their night attire and each with a single coat, they were prodded, kicked and herded down the stairs. Two AVH agents remained, sharing the little of value left behind.

“Onto the truck!”

Márton and Isabella climbed up, leant over, and each grabbed one of Péter’s blood-covered hands. Straining, they hauled their bruised and battered patriarch onto the vehicle and were herded into the front corner, the AVH men sitting between the prisoners and escape. As the lorry drove through the city wasteland, Márton gripped his mother and father, desperate for their comforting embrace. Péter pulled the boy further into his shoulder. “Stay strong son.”

“But I’m not afraid.” Desperate to keep the swelling tears from cascading down his cheeks, Márton forced his mind to repeat the well-drilled mantra. *Show courage against your enemies.*

“Why are they doing this?”

Péter gently stroked Márton’s head. “Not sure. But we’ve no option but obey. Things will change one day.”

“People aren’t always like this?”

“Life was wonderful before the Nazis and the Communists. Someday we’ll be free again. But we must bide our time.”

They swept by jagged rubble just visible through the gloom, passing bombed-out street after bombed-out street, eighty percent of Budapest’s pre-war magnificence still in ruins. The Soviets had defeated the Nazis and their Hungarian partners and seized control. With assassination, torture, intimidation, propaganda and terror their weapons; the country once more lived in fear. Hitler’s Gestapo now replaced by the Communist’s equally callous AVH, the ‘Fists of the Party’. A shadow of informers watched over every family, every house, every street, every factory, every office, every school, every shop, every university, every church, every theatre and every sporting activity.

Every move noted.

Every move reported.

No one safe.

Márton, Péter and Isabella were victims of one of the thousands of informers.

Prodded out of the truck at the Nyugati railway station, horror bored deep into the eighty pairs of eyes assembled by the open cattle wagons. All human cargo. Mainly male but with six families. All had fallen foul of the dreaded secret police, a casualty of petty jealousy like Péter, or as revenge for real or imagined past or present scores.

War had not only destroyed the city, but also destroyed Péter’s pre-war wine business. With a wife and son to support he duplicated the origins of his old partner’s hospitality empire, setting up a street stall outside the gates of the main Soviet barracks and selling traditional pork filled cabbage rolls in sauerkraut. Despite the Soviet troops having little money, business was brisk as Péter’s delicacies were a relief from the Red Army’s scarce and monotonous rations.

Péter’s ‘crime’ was operating his own food stall business as any private business activity was now considered a ‘Crime against the People’. Even the smallest. ‘Bourgeois Traitor to the Working Class’, the accusation, ‘Enemy of the People’.

Prodded at rifle point, they were crammed into the cattle wagons.

Destination unknown.

### 3.

#### EASTERN HUNGARY

Despair enveloped the prisoners like a poisonous mist as they headed east. Cold, cramped and fearful as the train journeyed through Miskolc towards the Soviet border.

“God! Not Siberia!” Péter gripped his family. All had a similar fear, aware that untold thousands of Hungarians had disappeared to the Soviet Union Gulags. Despair intensified as they passed through Kisváda. Heading further east.

But on stopping on the town’s outskirts, a sigh of relief rattled down the cattle cars.

“Hopefully no further,” Péter whispered to Isabella, fear buried deep in his eyes.

“Out!” The order spat.

Forced onto open lorries, despondency returned as they continued east, passing the village of Benk, the Tisa River flowing through its centre.

“No!” screamed a prisoner. A signpost showed three kilometres to the border with Ukraine, the first of the Soviet republics.

But the trucks stopped at an abandoned farm on a flat river plain, just short of the boundary. A sight made even more depressing by a weak dawn struggling to make its presence felt through the all-compassing fog. Droplets of dew covered the prisoners’ shoulders and hair, coats soaked from the icy damp.

Debussed at rifle point, guards prodded the motley group into a U. Terrified, Márton stood between his parents, their arms interlocked behind his back. Their touch his only protection.

Grossly fat, an officer stood at the head, snarling dogs at the rear and armed men on either side.

“Welcome to Benk East Work Camp.” The overseer sneered. “I am Comrade Repka, officer in charge. Here you will work hard. Do as ordered. Whenever ordered. Disobedience or idleness will be treated as treason. Punishment Siberia or death.”

“Why are we here?” demanded Márton’s father. “No one’s been charged.”

Repka gave a guttural laugh. “You’ve all not only been charged. You’ve all been convicted.”

“But there’s been no trial!” Marton’s father refused to accept such an outrage. *Fight injustice*. The family code rose from deep within. “We’ve given no defence.”

The other prisoners shrunk at Péter’s defiance.

“The People’s Court convicted you in your absence. Doesn’t waste time with reactionary traitors.” Repka strode down the line and after a contemptuous glare at Márton, stared into his father’s face. Nose millimetres away.

“Name!”

Péter responded curtly, wincing at the stench of rotting teeth.

“Trade?”

“Wine merchant.”

“Wine merchant eh! Fine wines for the rich parasites now brought down to earth by the People! Have you ever done a real day’s work in your life?”

“Of course. You only succeed in business through hard work.”

“Sitting at a desk’s not work. Ever got your hands dirty? Amongst the vines?”

“No. But no one working in the vineyards would have been paid without merchants like me.”

Repka had no interest or understanding of business.

“You and the remainder of your bloodsucking friends will soon know about farming. About hard work! Work till you drop. But I’ll make sure you work hardest of all Landor. Hold you personally responsible for the farm’s output!”

Grinning at his scapegoat decision for the farm’s tedious management arrangements, Repka continued waddling down the row of prisoners. He stopped in front of the Catholic priest. “A priest eh! A boot licker of the rich, bloated church! Taking money from the poor, pretending it will buy a place in Heaven. The new People’s Hungary has no place for your freeloading church and its pantomime of false hopes. Religion was an opiate for the masses. But now the masses are in control.”

“Only those who serve the Lord will live an eternal life,” Father Benedict stammered, eyes avoiding the officer’s fanatical stare.

Deeply religious himself, Péter could see fear in the old priest’s face, his heart going out to the holy man. *Protect the weak and unfortunate*. He flared in anger, took a deep breath, about to launch in the priest’s defence. But reality struck. Prepared to personally suffer the guard’s retaliation, he realised confrontation would only worsen the cleric’s predicament. Despite seething within, Péter bit his tongue.

“You say only those who serve the Lord will live an eternal life, eh!” laughed Repka. “Heed my words old man. In this this place, I’m the closest thing to God and you can all forget about any future life. It’s me who’ll determine your suffering here on earth. But while

the Party rejects your Church, it does respect its clergy. You're lucky! You're the only man excused from endless slaving in the fields for the rest of your lives."

Repka then moved to the head of the prisoners.

"That large cattle shed is your sleeping shelter." He contemptuously waved his finger in the direction of the ram-shackle structure. "In the corner you'll each find a blanket and single set of clothes. But first you must remove the century old layer of cow dung cemented to its floor."

#### 4.

#### SLEEPING SHELTER, BENK WORK CAMP

Many hours later, Repka inspected the work. With manure removed down to the bare earth, all were in a filthy state.

"March to the river. You will wash yourselves and your clothes once each month."

Naked and blue with cold, Márton lined up with the other prisoners by the near-freezing river.

Repka searched their bodies and clothing.

Gloating, he forced off Isabella's wedding ring. "The People will have a far better use for this than you." Fortunately, her engagement ring with its enormous diamond had been secretly stored before the end of the war.

After the Soviet invasion, to be from a noble family meant death so Count Bargossy Péter and Countess Bargossy Isabella had changed their names to simply Péter and Isabella Landor. Their son Bargossy Márton was now Márton Landor. With the abolition of all private ownership, their imposing butter coloured villa with its curved roof, Baroque inspired facade and generous grounds was seized by peasant troops of a Soviet horse transport unit. Pigs and chickens shared the villa's ornate rooms while horses destroyed the once manicured grounds. Knowing they'd never live in their home again, Péter had searched for accommodation in the devastated city. Fábián Dobrosi, his old wine business foreman had offered shelter in his undamaged, one bedroom apartment. It was there they'd been seized by the AHV.

Continuing his theft, Repka turned to Márton's father, his eyes lighting at the sight of the heavy gold crucifix hanging from Péter's neck. A family heirloom, the family crest was etched into the thick, solid gold.

"Another treasure bought from the sweat of your peasants?" Repka ripped the cross from Péter's neck and put it into his pocket, pleased it would bring a good price.



“That’s been passed down through the family for centuries,” objected Péter.

“Not anymore!” Repka and Péter’s eyes locked, fury deep within those of the guard. “I think I’m going to enjoy having you here Landor,” he fumed. “Forget about any help from your God. I’m going to make your life here Hell!”

Repka ordered Péter aside when they returned to the camp.

“You’re the only one with farming experience.”

“No I haven’t.”

“You said you know about vineyards.”

“I said I’ve visited many vineyards with the vigneron. But I’ve never actually worked with the vines.”

“The commissars demand a high output from this farm and I’m holding you personally responsible for its output. If production falls below Budapest’s targets, you’ll regret every moment of your failure.”

## 5.

### PIG ENCLOSURE, BENK WORK CAMP

Nine months later, Márton Landor herded the pigs down the timber railed race, forcing his way through ankle deep excrement. Threadbare trousers were caked to his skin.

“Look Young Count,” mocked Comrade Repka, aware of the boy’s aristocratic origins. “Look how your subjects grovel on all fours before your regal presence”.

The tips of his ears purple with cold, the camp’s overseer positioned himself by the timber fence, level with the emaciated seven-year-old. Aiming his heavy club between the top and bottom rail and with the full power of his solid, bull-necked body, he swung it against the back of the Márton’s knees.

The boy’s legs crumpled, his face sinking into a putrid mix of mud and shit.

“That’s it! Return your subjects’ bow.”

Márton froze. *Show courage against your enemies*. Prone in the putrid muck, he forced himself to control his anger. To react would worsen his treatment.

“What’s up my noble friend? Too arrogant to stand?”

Márton remained motionless, his gut on fire. With his chest and chin buried, only his lips were clear of the filth. He loathed Repka. He loathed the work camp. He loathed the torment heaped on his mother and father. He loathed that there could be such evil in the world. Freedom his obsession.

*But how can we escape this torture? Be in control of our lives?*

But no matter how oppressive his family's position, he could only see more of the same. For now, silence was his only defence.

Repka finally lost interest and shuffled off, his gross torso swaying side to side.

Márton slowly stood when the coast was finally clear, drawing as little attention to himself as possible.

Father Benedict had observed the boy's humiliation and walked over to provide solace. "Never fear My Son." The old man's hand possessively held the boy's shoulder.

"How can God let there be evil like this?" Márton's face contorted, he tried to control his revulsion at the old priest's recurring and uninvited signs of affection.

"Repka will pay for his sins in the afterlife. It's God the Father who ultimately meters out justice."

Márton extracted himself from the priest's ramblings and having completed his morning chores, made his way to the corner of the old hay store, now the inmates eating mess and kitchen. Mother Isabella and another woman were hard at work.

"There's a small ration of decaying potatoes, onions and parsnips," said a matronly prisoner. Six pig thigh bones joined the rotting vegetables in the large cast iron cauldron which simmered over an open fire. "Bones have a hint of flesh and we've picked some wild herbs to give the soup some flavour."

Breakfast and lunch comprised a small quantity of mouldy bread.

## 6.

### BENK WORK CAMP

Exhausted after securing the pigs for the night, Márton walked to the sleeping quarters. Horrified that the pigs ate far better than he and his fellow inmates.

Sickness, starvation, beatings and over work reduced the camp to 52 survivors in the first year. All city folk and with their combined skills, could have efficiently run a small town. But none had experience in cultivating corn, barley and potatoes. With no expertise, no suitable clothing, no waterproof footwear, primitive and inadequate tools, minimal rations and the guards' ongoing brutality, it was impossible to meet the inflated quotas set by commissars in faraway Budapest.

“Makes my heart bleed,” Péter’s eyes watered one night as he told Isabella of being ordered to rip out hectares of prime vineyards and replace them with rice. A crop unsuitable for the cold, local conditions. “Some of those vines have been tendered for centuries. It’s sickening.”

To everyone’s surprise, an ancient, tank like bulldozer appeared. Despite its unreliability, levelling the land and building irrigation banks was no longer purely back-breaking labour. All took turns driving the machine when it worked, a break from the gruelling workload. With no formal spare parts, the mechanic achieved wonders in keeping the decrepit vehicle operating.

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As Marton’s father predicted, the first year’s output was well below the Commissars’ farcical quotas and Repka’s revenge was a ‘re-education cell’. A deep hole in the ground slightly wider than Márton’s father’s shoulders.

“Production’s well below target, the fault of your capitalist laziness. You’re their leader. After four weeks in your new ‘bedroom’, I’m sure you’ll improve things next year.” Budapest was putting pressure on Repka. “And only half the rations you complain about.”

“We’re not the problem.” Péter stood his ground. “The problem’s your so-called management. Your out of touch government. Sending peasant farmworkers to run factories and city folk to run farms. Political dogma doesn’t produce food. You need realistic targets, proper tools, proper food, proper seed and proper management by capable people.”

“Don’t try to shift the blame to me. Four weeks in this cell will bring you to your senses.”

“Torture me all you like but it won’t make a difference.”

“You’ll be crying for mercy.” Repka snarled, his face crimson, hands quivering. “You can’t lie down; there’ll be no light and food only every second day. After four weeks in this hell hole, just try to say you can’t do better.”

Márton and Isabella stood helplessly as Péter was lowered into the hole.

He stood upright as long as possible, pushing tightly into one corner to help support his body. When weariness finally engulfed, his legs collapsed, body slipping lower and lower. Howling inwardly, a dribbling mess in the lonely dark, he sank cramped into the ice-cold mud.

*Show no weakness. Show courage against your enemies.*

He was determined Repka would never know how unbearable the pain. Twisted awkwardly for hour after hour he was unable to move. Head throbbing, excruciating spasms radiated from his shoulder. Totally numb, his lower arm was locked under his body, his hip twisted to fit the space. His legs convulsed at their contorted angle; feet paralysed by further distortion. Every muscle in revolt.

*The bastard mustn't know how close he's come to breaking me.*

In an attempt to remain sane, each night he forced his mind to happier times, the first night going back ten years. To the approaching war. To the time of Count Bargossy Péter and wife, Countess Bargossy Isabella. To the baroque splendour of Buda castle and the Citadel looking down from the rugged heights of the Danube's opposite bank. To the gilded drawing room of Villa Bargossy on the outskirts of Pest.

*Péter sat next to his brother-in-law on an ornate chaise lounge, bathed in the light of an opulent chandelier. Rosinger had looked into his steel blue eyes. "I must admit when I married your sister, I believed you conceited and irresponsible."*

*Péter had squirmed at the remark, certain his fencing scar had darkened, no longer merging into his blonde, aristocratic moustache.*

*Then Rosinger grinned, a rare occurrence given the normally serious set of his partner's jaw. "I believed your financial misfortune was through extravagance, idleness and bad management; completely overlooking wars, political upheaval and revolution. Fortunately, my opinion's changed."*

*His face had erupted into an engaging smile as he embraced his sister-in-law. "You chose well after all Isabella! Our two families inseparable. Our lives locked as one."*

*"A toast!"*

*The two blonde sisters and their distinctly different husbands raised their champagne coups. "The closest of families!"*

At the memory, a warm feeling surged through Péter's every tormented cell.

## 7.

### RE-EDUCATION CELL, BENK WORK CAMP

By morning, only by clenching his teeth could Péter hold back the screams.

*Steel yourself! Don't show weakness!* Only his time-honoured, aristocratic code gave him the strength to continue. It was a battle of wills. But it was only he who suffered the physical torture.

When fellow prisoners dragged Péter out of his hell hole each morning his body was close to shut down. They would arrive just in time.

Comatose, his body prostrate, he was unable to move. He clamped his jaw, imprisoning the cries so desperate to escape.

“An enjoyable night Count?” Repka gloated. “Hope you’re looking forward to even more fun tonight.”

“I look forward to it.” Péter forced a reply.

“I’ll break you if it’s the last thing I do.” The guard’s snarl preceded a smirk of expected victory.

Strengthened by the guard’s remarks and with each arm over the shoulder of a fellow prisoner, Péter staggered forward. He forced his back straight despite the muscles wanting to return to the curve of hours past. Struggled to raise his head against tendons that pulled ever downwards.

Márton and Isabella always rushed forward, hugging Péter for dear life. But the guards viciously pulled them away.

Forcing one jelly foot in front of the other, his fellow prisoners nursed Péter to yet another day of hard physical labour.

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Péter fought the torment again the second night. Forced a smile in spite of the pain. In spite of the blackness.

*Visions of the two weddings. Two sisters. Isabella marrying Péter and Theresa marrying hard-working Rosinger.*

*Rosinger Bálint and wife Theresa’s opulent apartment appeared next, above their Empire Restaurant, Budapest’s finest eatery. Rosinger lighting the last of the Menorah lamp’s nine flames. Jewish and Catholic celebrations shared. Easter and Christmas from the Count’s side and Passover and Hanukah from Rosinger’s. Not so much as religious rites but as shared family traditions.*

*Memories of their wine business flooded next. Of Rosinger’s invitation to partner a new wine wholesale operation, the next venture in his growing*

*hospitality empire. Of how Péter's elegant wife, his noble Bargossy family name, his title and family crest had opened doors everywhere. Of their business blossoming with substantial cellar holdings of Europe's finest vintages.*

*Of war looming. "With our country linked to the Nazis, our business is at risk," Rosinger's defiant nose added gravity to his words. "We need to protect the most valuable of our wine stocks and all that our families hold dear." Everyone nodded agreement.*

*"But valuables and wine aren't the only thing that could disappear in the uncertainty ahead." Rosinger's face became even more earnest as he detailed his proposal.*

*While Péter and Isabella were startled by its nature, they willingly agreed. But there were complications and the four family members deliberated well into the night. Their plan only emerging at dawn.*

Péter's smile shattered as he unsuccessfully shuffled his body to reduce the agony.

And so it went for the full 14 nights. Márton and Isabella's tearful faces the last thing he'd see each night. Relief on their faces each morning.

*Stay strong*, he would command throughout the ordeal, determined not to let the fiend defeat him.

He fought the torture. Painful second by painful second. Tormented minute by tormented minute. Agonising hour by agonising hour. The two hours before daybreak the worst. His mind descending to the same level of depravity as the demonic Repka.

## 8.

### BENK WORK CAMP

Márton and Péter were inconsolable when Isabella's health deteriorated the next year. The doctor treated her after his backbreaking day in the fields, but without medicines there was little he could do to reduce her suffering.

Father Benedict constantly offered solace. "When faith is tested, we must keep our trust in the Lord."

Isabella needed no encouragement to pray, the old priest joining her for hour after hour. “Have total faith in The Lord.” So their prayers went on.

Even when alone, Rosary Beads clacked at her almost endless appeals. Prayers said out loud. Prayers quietly mumbled. Prayers silent in her mind.

But despite their prayers, her condition worsened.

When not working with the animals, Márton spent every moment with his mother. Heartbroken at her decline, his anger built over the priest’s endless protestations on the benevolence and mercy of the Lord. Of how God showed mercy on all who believed and prayed to him.

In Márton’s young mind, God showed no mercy to his mother’s suffering.

*If God really loved his people, he’d make her well.*

For hours he comforted her, holding her hand, hoping that by osmosis his love would give her the strength she so desperately needed. “Mama, I love you so much. You mustn’t die.”

Each night it was Péter’s turn to hold her hand, mopping her brow and talking of happy times. Of their villa, their wine business, their special celebrations and their special bond with Márton’s godparents, Theresa and Rossinger.

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Repka was apoplectic when results of an even more disastrous year were announced and Péter immediately confined to the tiny dug-out.

But to Péter, the perils of the tiny re-education cell were insignificant compared to his concern over Isabella’s condition.

With Péter lowered into his tortuous hell, only Márton could give his mother encouragement each evening. There was only Márton to cheer each morning, Isabella restricted to the thread-bare, sweat-soaked blanket that comprised her bed.

Delirious, propped against the corner of his tomb, Péter fought the desire to end it all. He again forced his mind back to the past.

*The war continued and like the never-ending conflict, the rain permeated every crevice of the city that day.*

*On weekend leave from the army, Péter summonsed the local Priest. Heavily cloaked to escape the rain, the cleric scurried up the carriageway. To the butter-coloured villa with its Baroque facade.*

*His dripping coat was taken on entering the grand foyer, the clergyman ushered into the adjoining drawing room. Dressed in a white baptismal gown, a young child lay in an equally white crib. Isabella's graceful, gymnast-like figure stood by the boy's side. The same height but heavily built and with a generous bust, her equally blonde-headed sister Theresa stood close by, clasping Rosinger's hand.*

*"Just in time," Péter panted, joining the other three adults. "The boy may not last the night. Your ordination is imperative!"*

*The Priest performed the Sacrament of Baptism, welcoming Bargossy Márton into the Catholic faith, freeing him of original sin. Péter noted the priest's surprise at Rosinger and Theresa making their commitment as God Parents. But the generous contribution for his services softened the cleric's concern that a man of apparent Jewish ancestry became godfather to a Catholic child. That, and the fact that he'd seen hundreds of mothers with extended, milk filled breasts but never one as slim as the graceful Countess.*

*Later that afternoon a Jewish Mohel conducted a service.*

*The rain had stopped by the time Péter and Isabella farewelled Rosinger and Theresa, Péter returning to army the next day. It was the last time the four close family members would ever be together.*

Without the strength to juggle his body to limit the pain, Péter's head pounded, his joints aflame. *Death must be better than this.* He toyed with the idea of wrapping himself in its welcoming embrace. Of joining Rossinger and Theresa in another world. Anything to stop the pain.

But no! Fought the temptation. Fought the grim reaper's release. Isabella needed him. He must survive. He needed to focus on his ailing wife and Márton's future.

The only people that enabled him to withstand the torture of each and every minute.

## 9.

### SLEEPING SHELTER, BENK WORK CAMP

"I'm so proud of how you behave in this terrible place." Isabella gave Márton the weakest of smiles, her grip growing ever more faint. "Soon I'll be gone but your father will always be at your side."



“But Mama. You’ll always be with us.”

But Márton’s hopes made no difference to his mother’s deteriorating condition. “Now I’ve struggled through the last month to support of your father, my life’s work’s done.”

“No Mama!”

“You’ll both grieve when I’m gone but you must comfort each other,” she whispered.

“Your father is an honest man, a proud man. Follow his example, for despite our circumstances, our family values have treated us well.”

“But Mama.”

“Say you will.”

“But of course Mama.” Márton’s reply belied his belief that his mother would surely improve.

But improve she did not.

“Promise me you’ll follow all that your father has taught.”

“Of course. Whatever you ask.”

“Promise?”

“I promise! I promise!”

Despite Márton and Péter’s love, care and attention and the priest’s endless prayers and rituals; starvation, freezing weather, threadbare clothes, inhuman conditions and the lack of medical supplies led to the inevitable.

A great void opened after Isabella’s loss, Péter and Márton left empty. Disillusioned. Angry.

Father Benedict administered the Last Rights.

“But Papa, Mama was a good woman.” Tears streamed down the boy’s cheeks. “Always prayed to God so why didn’t God and the Catholic Church save her?”

Márton’s father had a strong, ingrained belief in the Church but understood his son’s disenchantment. “As Jesus taught, your mother had love, compassion and tenderness. But neither God nor the Church could protect her from the cold.” It was his best reply to a question he constantly asked himself.

“Look into the sky.” Péter tried to divert his son’s grief.

“Mother is now with the Lord and look there! She’s smiling from above.” Péter pointed at the darkened sky. “See that star on the southern horizon. It’s her! Wasn’t there yesterday. She’ll watch over you. Always.”

Despite staring lovingly at the star each night, Márton drew further and further into his shell. God, Father Benedict and the Catholic Church became the scapegoats for his anguish and pain. They'd done nothing to prevent his mother's suffering. To halt his mother's death.

Despite his own overwhelming grief, Péter's sole focus was now the safety of his son. In his early years, Márton had been the centre of attention of four adults. He, Isabella and Godparents Rosinger and Theresa had all doted on the young blonde child.

Now Márton only had his father.

## 10.

### BENK WORK CAMP

Repka became more and more agitated as the fourth year's production reports approached. LHe lashed. "Prepare the cell for your father," he ordered Márton. "This year, pour an extra 60 centimetres of sloppy pig shit to remind him of his idleness."

"Do it yourself!" Márton ran and hid.

Repka attempted to follow but his overweight body was no match for the nimble boy. Enraged, he ordered another guard to barrow double the planned thickness of faeces to the cell floor.

That evening, when the men returned from their two kilometre walk from the fields, two guards seized Péter and frog-marched him to the cell-hole.

"There's been another production shortfall Landor. All your fault!" Repka fumed. "Budapest is furious."

"How many times do I have to tell you," Péter replied. "The problem's not me or the men that you torture into the ground. How do you expect productivity from sick, starving, overworked men with hopeless tools and poor seed stock?"

"You're the only problem! Your sense of superiority. Your high and mighty manner. I've told the Commissars you're to blame for the farm's output."

"If there's a production disaster, it's the fault of you and your so-called government. With an incompetent overseer and inept commissars, no wonder there's a problem."

"Don't speak like that! Don't you know I'm God here? You're totally at my mercy."

"Well, shoot me then. Or shoot the lot of us. With no workers for your paltry little farm, your big friends in Budapest will make your life even more unbearable. You've got neither the intelligence nor guts to do what it takes."

“How do you know the commissars are threatening?”

“Even in your inept Communist system, individual incompetence can’t be hidden forever.”

“You’ve obstructed me at every turn and Budapest’s threatening me with Siberia.”

“While you’ve made our treatment here intolerable, Siberia will be far worse. Even I feel sorry for you if that’s where you’re headed.”

“All your fault!” He spat at Péter. “You’ve stood in my way at every turn. Sabotaged my every effort. You’re just a ...”

Repka choked.

His hand pummelled his chest. Heart hammering in crisis.

Repka’s knees buckled, his grotesque frame collapsing at the count’s feet.

“Priest!” Repka croaked as he forced out each shallow breath. “The priest! The priest!”

Father Benedict ran as fast as his wobbly legs allowed.

“Absolution. Absolution.”

The priest began administering the Last Rights to the dying Repka.

Turning away, the prisoners gave privacy to the old priest and the dying man.

“Why asking for Absolution?” one asked. “He’s only ever shown contempt for the Church.”

“Strange things happen when death is imminent,” answered one of the teachers. “Life’s end brings a sudden re-assessment.”

Márton was amongst the departing prisoners. He turned, petrified at the priest doing his work.

“Repka is an evil man. Tortured and beat us,” he said to his father. “But he’s being given the Last Rights. He’ll never go to Heaven, will he?”

Péter knelt down to his son’s level, staring kindly into the boy’s enflamed eyes.

“Regardless of past behaviour, God forgives those who confess their sins. Once he’s received Absolution, God will welcome him into his heavenly home.”

“But Mama believed in God and the Church’s laws and Repka fought against them. Mama continually prayed but I’ve never seen Repka pray. Mother was good and kind to everyone but Repka was cruel. Why does God treat bad people the same as a wonderful person like Mama?”

Silence descended over the camp on Repka’s death, the remaining guards unsure how to react at the loss of their leader.

Stunned, the prisoners feared massive retribution. “Things have been bad enough. God knows what’s in store now.”

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Two days later, the setting sun reflected off the bulbous roof of a shining GAZ-14 limousine, dazzling the weary worker’s eyes as they approached the camp. The guards were listening to a stranger.

The meeting broke up as the inmates arrived, a rumble spreading through the group of approaching prisoners. Disgruntled guards stood to the rear as the prisoners lined up for muster, Márton again forcing his shoulder deep into his father’s armpit.

The stranger addressed the group.

“There’s been a change in the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Hungary,” he reported. “Imre Nagy, our new Chairman, has ordered a new course in Socialism.”

Márton and the other inmates had no interest in the machinations of their new rulers. They braced themselves for further deprivations.

“Before I continue, I require Comrade Landor to step forward.”

A murmur echoed along the line.

Gritting his teeth, Péter stepped forward, fists clenched at his sides. Proud and unfaltering, he looked straight ahead, requiring the stranger to walk down the line to face him.

“You’re all part of the People’s Farm Work-Camp Program,” the stranger said, “designed to escalate our Homeland’s agricultural production. Unfortunately, the program has not met the success the Party expected.”

“No surprise there,” Péter mumbled under his breath.

“When forwarding his annual production report each year, the late Comrade Repka always stressed Comrade Landor’s role in the farm’s level of productivity.”

Márton steeled himself for his father’s punishment.

“While the Program has fallen below expectations, I’m pleased to announce that this farm has consistently exceeded the output of all similar farms. As Comrade Landor was instrumental in achieving these results, the People of Hungary are honoured to recognise his work with the award of a *Service to the Fatherland Medal – 4th Class*.”

Márton gave a sigh of relief. A sigh that murmured down the prisoner line.

The stranger continued. “The commissars are re-structuring the Work-Camp Program and in future, farms will be run by people with proven agricultural experience. Because of the

unfortunate death of Comrade Repka and your excellent performance, your camp will be the first to be re-staffed. Be ready with all your possessions to return to Budapest at seven a.m.”

Márton was ecstatic. His wish finally real.

Freedom! But his eyes watered at the terrible price. Without his mother, life would never be the same.

All gathered by the appointed hour of 7 a.m.

None had possessions to take on their journey.

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