

CHAPTER 1

A Foreign Time and Place

The loneliest moment in someone's life is when they are watching their whole world fall apart, and all they can do is stare blankly.

— F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

2:49 AM. Having gradually lost much of life's vigor over the past several years, Jakob Schleicher's gaunt, seventy-four-year-old body lay in bed. Jakob was wide awake, confused and conflicted. He had endured many restless and sleepless nights within these last few weeks as a result of recurring, troubling thoughts. Partially out of frustration, but also as a means of being productive, he quietly sat up in bed. Jakob still abided by two lessons he learned in his youth: time is precious; don't waste it. *Indeed, there is no second to be lost or wasted* was his adopted mantra. If he could not sleep, he simply would not waste a full hours' time lying awake in bed.

It was the winter of 1925. With his sunset years behind him and now drifting in his final stage in life, Jakob took a little longer to exit his bed and shuffle across his bedroom. As he slowly made his way from the room he rented, working his way down the hallway of this two-story, Victorian-style home, the creaking sound of the hardwood floors interrupted the early morning silence. So as not to disturb the landlord downstairs, Jakob slowed his pace and walked delicately toward his library.

Jakob's library was not a large room, perhaps ten feet by twelve feet, but it had become something special to him. Much like a sanctuary, it was a place where, over the past several weeks, he spent the majority of his days focusing on his favorite activities: reading his beloved literature, crafting poetry, and penning an assortment of other writings. More than just a retreat, his library was also where Jakob found solace and security in his unstable and scary world.

Knowledgeable, savvy and still sharp-witted a decade after his unexpected retirement, Jakob Schleicher spent a portion of each day reflecting on various subjects. While some days he spent time critically analyzing current events, lately he had begun spending increasing amounts of time nostalgically looking back on the most cherished events throughout his life.

Arriving in his library, Jakob quietly turned on the light and closed the door. Once inside, he powered on his battery-operated Atwater Kent radiola, which with its many dials and corresponding horn speaker, was a portable, shoebox-sized unit. While its dark mahogany cabinet exhibited a clean and pristine appearance, it revealed something more. The high gloss and sheen was an outward symbol of Jakob's inward pride, as he always took utmost and meticulous care of his wares. Although he was only able to receive two stations on his radiola in his hometown of Merchantville, New Jersey, Jakob enjoyed

with discriminating pleasure listening to the day's programming, no matter how minimal the selection.

Having warmed up, the radiola began to play music softly in the background, albeit with a scratchy and muffled quality. Momentarily pausing to look at the radiola, Jakob ran his hand across the top of the cabinet with a slow and gentle sweep. He then turned and walked to the nearby sofa where he seated himself.

Jakob's thoughts dwelled on various events that had taken place over the past six to eight years. In America, around the world, and even in his own life, dramatic changes seemed to have swept across every surface. After the tragedies that took place during the Great War (World War I), everyone seemed to discard old beliefs, old regimes and former ways of doing things in exchange for embracing a newer way of life.

By 1925 many long-held and cherished traditions had been broken or had morphed unrecognizably. American society no longer held itself to what Jakob felt were the proper Victorian standards of earlier years. In their modes of dress and even in the way they interacted with others, younger Americans were carrying themselves differently. To Jakob the flappers, for example, looked and acted in ways that were utterly unfamiliar and foreign, calling it their "artistic expression."

Dubbed flappers in reference to a young bird flapping its wings while learning how to fly, these young women, in style and attitude, had come to define an entire generation. To start, flappers exemplified the emergence of a "new, modern woman." With her bobbed hair, provocative dress and wild dancing, she was considered by many older people in society to be too brash and rebellious. *If this is what happens when young women*

start working and earning their own money, I'll have none of it, Jakob scoffed.

Jakob was fully aware that every generation's standards and attitudes varied from its previous counterpart's. As a youth growing up in the old country of Belgium, he remembered how his parents once held strict, traditional values that he thought were too rigid and too old-fashioned. Still, one had to draw a line somewhere.

Another disturbing development had come about just a few months prior. In July 1925, John T. Scopes, a Tennessee teacher, was convicted in court of teaching evolution. The very idea that God could have created species of plants and animals that weren't perfect in the first place, that they had to undergo changes over time to become what one saw around one today – ridiculous! God wanted people to be the rational, thinking creatures we are today. Else why would God have created monkeys at all, if what He really wanted (millennia later, mind you) was humans? Rubbish. Having lived in America for fifty years, Jakob simply could not decipher these new standards of the day. What's more, he knew he was not alone in feeling as if he were a stranger who had traveled to a foreign time and place.

From his sofa Jakob's attention was drawn to a framed photo atop his desk. It was a picture of him and his wife. Staring at it, he thought back to a happier time and place – a time when he was younger, when he had a partner and the world was a less complicated place. With all of these social changes, he anxiously thought to himself that life was becoming more complex, confusing and scary. As his body slowed down, Jakob was feeling more and more out of place. Unlike earlier years when life had brought prosperity and happiness, Jakob now faced the challenges of old age with loneliness as his only companion.

Retired for a number of years, Jakob rented a room located in the upper-middle class suburb of Merchantville from a pleasant, middle-aged German couple and their children. He and another tenant rented the two upstairs bedrooms. But with no real bond or deep connection with this family, and with his wife having passed away what seemed like a lifetime ago, emotionally Jakob lived alone. Finding himself with ample amounts of time and no one with whom to argue or commiserate over society's ills, he thought more and more of his past, where he had come from, what he had seen and experienced and what it all meant.

It was also during these years that Jakob was finding that the certainties of the Enlightenment—from his most cherished beliefs to his long-held core values—had seemingly become antiquated and outdated. Furthermore, if his morals and standards no longer had a place in the world, Jakob began to wonder what, if any importance *he* still had, and to whom?

Then, in an odd-feeling moment—experiencing what one might call a paradox—as he sat in his library on that early morning winter day, Jakob suddenly thought: *The world is changing, yes. It is, in fact, evolving. Everyone in it is on their own journey of discovery.* As the flappers, Prohibition and evolution itself were making the 1920s an age of extremes, Jakob realized that it was not such a stark contrast with the way life used to be. Rather, a more accurate description was that his life had gone full circle from an unfamiliar beginning, returning back to an unfamiliar ending. It was also at that moment that Jakob had a premonition that he had completed the circle of life. His life was approaching its end. As if preparing for a final exam, Jakob felt inclined to reexamine his life one last time, analyzing the various pieces of it and penning it into a memoir.