

ETCH of a PROMISE

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FIRST CHAPTER

'PEEK'

One

Bavaria, southern Germany: Spring 1884

Nicklaus

A journeyman carpenter strutted westward on a new adventure. Through Bavaria's wine country, his bell-bottom pants swung as he whistled the chorus of "The Happy Wanderer." He patted his pocket and the *Deutschmarks* that he'd saved from doing odd jobs for the last few months.

Nicklaus Zimmer's artistic imagination had erupted in the carpentry workshop the day before when the teacher spoke of a new vehicle. He couldn't fall asleep that night as he envisioned this new invention. It could save him time visiting the ancient churches in Cologne, which was his final destination. He'd left the camaraderie of the journeymen group for the last leg of his journey. Casting out on his own wasn't all that unusual for him. *It will be worth leaving the journeymen group to see that new gadget. I could even buy one!*

He'd set out before dawn to cover the distance to Strasbourg, France, where the teacher had said the new invention would be. He stopped to wipe his brow, first removing the black wide-brimmed hat of his traditional journeymen's outfit. His eyes caught a golden ray on the grapevine buds as he gazed back. He shielded his eyes, looking toward the way he'd come—from Stuttgart—where the sun was now bursting on the horizon.

The vastness of the blue sky stretched above him, just like the endless opportunities he expected to come. The velocipede would make the last few months of his Journey successful. He tucked his scrubby brown hair back underneath his hat and stepped out on the path again, following the beat of his own drum.

A little while later, a vineyard owner appeared at the end of a row of vines and offered Nicklaus a ride in the back of his tool cart. This saved him time and gave him a chance to take a short nap while the landscape rolled by. When he came to the Rhine River, he jumped off, tipped his hat and picked up his rucksack, bidding the owner a farewell.

Then he stepped onto a ferry, and before long, he was across the Rhine River in France at the border town of Strasbourg. Here was where he'd find the velocipede—supposedly an improved version of both the penny-farthing and the swiftwalker. But what it actually looked like, Nicklaus had no idea, only his imagination, which was very active.

Strolling alongside several Frenchmen on a Strasbourg road, he asked where he could find an inventor, a craftsman, or an artisan. Growing up in Luxembourg, he knew the languages spoken there—French and German—but he used his hands to express himself. At last, a stooped man with a limp—who could have been a pauper, considering his worn clothing—offered to take Nicklaus through town to find it in exchange for some food.

“Where will we go?” Nicklaus asked, handing him an apple.

“There is a clever fellow I know,” he said in French, turning. Nicklaus picked up his pace to follow. “He makes many odd things.” Then he took a bite of the apple and wiped his chin with a dirty shawl that covered his tattered clothes. His toes peeked from his shoes as he stepped on the narrow, cobblestone lanes.

Nicklaus saw several similarities between himself and this resourceful man. His toes didn't stick out, but his shoe soles were equally bare. He hadn't washed his hole-ridden socks in weeks, and he was sure he had an odor. Yes, journeymen could be taken for bums like this.

But taking baths was a luxury he couldn't afford. From tales of journeymen handed down through the generations, he'd always known that a journeyman's life wasn't a life of comfort.

Yet, his apprenticeship Journey he'd undertaken almost two years ago had offered him the freedom he highly valued. His way was to search, seek, and become. It suited Nicklaus perfectly. He'd always thought of life as one grand adventure after another. He pitied those who didn't or couldn't see the spur-of-the-moment, once-in-a-lifetime beauty of living.

Nicklaus was just one of the traveling artisans, sculptors, and craftsmen who sought instruction from like-minded artisans in each town they entered on their Journey around Germany. Learning how to use the resources of each area, journeymen lived off the kindness of citizens. They sometimes had to sleep on benches and miss meals unless someone offered them help or food. As Nicklaus mused on these things, he'd followed the pauper around several turns and had begun to wonder if they'd ever find this 'clever fellow.'

But suddenly, the pauper ducked into a door and shouted a string of French words to another man. He wielded a screwdriver when Nicklaus saw him while crouching near a gadget. But Nicklaus's eyes glued themselves to the gadget.

His eyes scanned it disbelievingly, as his heart pounded against his ribcage. He flew about it then—circling to take it all in—while the man with the screwdriver still tinkered.

After a while the pauper, waiting by the door, coughed. But Nicklaus put his hand up for him to wait a bit longer. He wanted to study the strange details of this contraption and turn them over in his mind to understand exactly what this was that stood before him. *Hmm, a person sits on the wooden seat, his feet turn the pedals which turn these iron wheels, and then quickly! It takes me down the road to Cologne!*

“Ach!” Nicklaus exclaimed, startling the craftsman. “This has to be it! The velocipede!” Nicklaus was buoyant as he pulled a coin from his pocket to give the pauper. “You brought us to the right place! Thank you! *Merci beaucoup!*”

The pauper tipped his head. "With pleasure." Then he reached for it and hurried away.

Nicklaus glanced around the shop. The abundance of bright light came in from a high window above. Shelves filled with hundreds of differently shaped pieces of wood and metal filled one entire wall. Cans of bolts sat around, and the smell of turpentine was strong. Soiled rags hung on shelves, hooks, and chair backs. An oily, dingy cloth hung across one corner.

A form like a cat sprang after something that skittered across the floor. It all happened so fast it was not possible to see what it was. Then a stool tipped over, surprising the craftsman, who quickly stood up. A keen interest in the iron and wooden velocipede was written all over Nicklaus's face.

The man grinned widely at him and wasted no time setting a price for his model of the French invention. Nicklaus's intense interest was his downfall as they began their negotiations. After quite some time, Nicklaus had to submit to the craftsman's hard offer.

When Nicklaus handed over the money, the man counted and recounted every single Deutschmark, his mouth stretched into a wide, toothy grin. Then when he was satisfied, he turned away from Nicklaus dismissively.

Nicklaus took the handlebars and guided the velocipede outside. Then he jumped on and coasted down a hill, asking one person then another where he might find the nearest ferry-crossing on the river.

Later, Nicklaus boarded a paddleboat going north, proudly rolling his very own velocipede up the ramp alongside vineyard workers and peasants. The ramp rose after they'd all boarded, and water began to churn through the big, round wheel as it rotated to push them along.

In the bright light of the noonday heat, cicadas buzzed high in the trees. But the curious passengers buzzed amongst themselves, wondering about Nicklaus's odd iron and wooden bike, the likes of which they'd never seen.

One of them, a beautiful young French woman with full lips, asked Nicklaus the first of many questions he'd encounter. "Journeyman, what is this? How do you know of it?" She flung her purple scarf across her arms and tilted her chin to show her slender neck. Nicklaus smoothed his coat, expanding his chest.

"You are correct, kind woman. I am a journeyman," he said as he tipped his hat. He'd joined the long-established tradition of *die Wanderjahre*, which dated back into history's centuries. The journeymen perfected their skills on their two-years-and-one-day Journey throughout Germany.

"I heard of it in a carpentry class in Stuttgart only yesterday. This velocipede is an improvement on the penny-farthing, which you may know, proved to be very dangerous." Nicklaus wasn't shy and was known for his knack for spinning a yarn. He loved the glow of curiosity on people's faces. But when the woman's lips curled—her gaze lingering on him—he had to turn away. *I must discipline myself. Flirting will never do! No matter how pretty she is, I cannot risk my career for a relationship.*

Nicklaus rested on a bench, thinking of how his busy life as a Master Carpenter would leave no room for romance or any type of attachment. Then, when a medieval castle came into view on a nearby hill, he was overcome with the familiar urgency—he couldn't wait to see Cologne's cathedrals and learn about their ancient carpentry! He'd fill his sketchbook with every woodworking detail and keep it for future use. But a man in dirt-stained clothes interrupted him to ask for a look at his gadget.

“*Natürlich*,” Nicklaus said, nodding. *Naturally, I’ll allow this curiosity. No one has seen one of these. And I don’t mind getting the attention either.* As the vineyard worker bent over to admire the pedal mechanism, Nicklaus noticed the man’s low, snug-fitting hat.

“What do you call this hat of yours, *si’l vous plaît?*” he asked. “If you please?”

“It is French,” The man stood, straightening it. “It is called a beret.”

Nicklaus tilted his head, nodding his approval. Meanwhile, a tall red-haired boy had approached confidently and pointed to the pedals.

“Those pedals there, sir,” he stated, “are on the crank that connects to that gear.” He lifted his young face, sprinkled with freckles across the nose, for affirmation.

“Ja! Smart young man!” Nicklaus said. When the teenage boy straddled the velocipede’s wooden frame, he jutted his chin, squared his shoulders, and beamed at his mother nearby. When the passengers laughed, his face reddened, and he quickly got off.

A little later, a sudden crack-whack-thwack interrupted the peaceful ride. Sleepy women jumped awake, and the men rubbernecked to see the cause of the commotion while the boat slowed to a sluggish stop. The passengers squirmed and grumbled. Nicklaus drummed his fingers until the skipper finally came up to explain.

“The wheel’s got caught in some branches in the water!” he yelled in cupped hands. “All passengers must land here at Mannheim.” The passengers complained even louder.

“Why don’t ya watch out!”

“Mercy me, I must get home!”

Then, the skipper added, “And”—he blew out through his mouth—”repairs will have to be made.”

Everyone shuffled to disembark, but Nicklaus decided not to wait. He was anxious to give the velocipede a try. Give it a test, first thing. As soon as the gangway lowered, he pushed it down the incline. But before he hopped on, he turned to wave. His smile widened when everyone's hands swayed, including the Frenchman, the beauty, and the red-headed boy. He swung his wide-brimmed hat in a grand gesture, then plopped it back on his brown head and pushed off onto the riverside path.

It took Nicklaus a while to get used to this new ride. Several times, he lost his balance, dodging sandstone from the jagged slope. Whenever he fell, he got up, brushed his pants off, and soon, his balance improved. He pushed the bike up a steep grade while frogs croaked on the shore. Then, later, as a crane took flight, he spotted *Hinterwälder* cattle grazing on the grassy hills across the river.

The afternoon sun warmed even the shady spots as he entered the Black Forest. Barely missing two scampering squirrels, Nicklaus fell off again. But he straightened wearily this time. Leaning the velocipede against a basswood tree, he sat against it and pulled an apple from his rucksack. In the warmth, his eyes fluttered, and he took his hat off. For almost two years, he'd napped under many trees, in nooks, and on benches. Soon he dozed again, the nubby bark pressing into his back.

When a crack of lightning rumbled through the woods, Nicklaus's eyes burst open.

Where am I? How long did I sleep?

He moved his stiff legs, keeping them on top so that the velocipede would be safe. But when he reached for his rucksack, his hand hit hard dirt. He groped but found nothing! *My sack!*

And my hat that was inside! Ach!

He slammed the dirt with his fist. “*Wo ist meine Hut?*” he bellowed, but no answer came to where his hat was. He jumped to his feet and bent over, rustling the bushes around him. But then he stood. Putting his knuckles to his forehead, he cursed, “*Donnervetter!* Damn it! I’ve been robbed! I’ll be naked without my hat! And my tools! They’re my livelihood.”

Nicklaus grimaced and squeezed his eyes shut, thinking of the leather pouch that held his tools, which Pop had made for him before he set out on his Journey. A dark cloud came over him, losing something he loved so much. But then he leaped into action, shrugging off the sadness.

He grabbed his velocipede, glanced at the sun’s high afternoon position, and hopped on. He thrust it forward, his thighs flexing as he planted his feet on the pedals and fiercely rode off. *I didn’t sleep long, so those guys might be just down the road.*

Only a kilometer later, he detected a smoldering stink, and when he listened, he heard hushed voices too. Quickly hiding the velocipede, he sneaked through the brush, but his boots crushed the brittle twigs. He knew they might have heard him! Just when he caught sight of three figures, they all froze, then shot up and disappeared into the bushes!

Pushing through, Nicklaus found their small fire and the stones surrounding it. His tools splayed haphazardly in the loose soil. He poked them into his pockets. *Danke Gott! Thank God, those hooligans didn’t keep them and I don’t have to replace them.*

He spent a long time searching for the other items. But there was no rucksack and no hat. He kicked dirt in disgust and stomped to his velocipede, scolding himself. *What a fix this is! I should have been more alert.*

Rattling along the bumpy road again, Nicklaus hung his head, sadness overshadowing the joy of his new purchase. As he passed Mainz, the land leveled out, but bricks lay on the path

from the building of a bridge to cross over the river. He swayed and strained, weaving through the rubble.

The day had taken its toll on Nicklaus as he bent over his white knuckles holding the handlebars. He bit his lip, yearning for a bit of shade to stop. But when he saw straggling sheep going this way and that, blocking the road ahead, his weary face broke into a wide grin. *Ah, now, I will have to stop.*

A tanned old shepherd stood within a cloud of dust. Despite the tall, hooked staff and three yelping dogs, his large flock of sheep resisted his control. Nicklaus gladly jumped off then and leaned the bike against the smooth bark of a beech tree. He put his fists to his back and stretched; then, he studied the shepherd and the bleating animals.

The shepherd noticed the velocipede. “*Vas ist das?*” he asked, pointing his staff to it.

“What is it?” Nicklaus repeated amidst the noise. “A velocipede.”

The shepherd cupped his ear. “Eh?”

“A vel-o-cip-ede.”

“Vat you say?” the shepherd asked, squinting and coming closer.

Nicklaus smiled. “Bike. Just call it a bike. I bought it in France because I thought it could save me some time.”

“Ah?” The shepherd’s eyes brightened. “So, does it?” His smile showed a missing tooth.

Nicklaus wiped his brow with a kerchief, chuckling, “*Nein*, it does not.”

“Oh? *Varum nicht?*”

“Why not? Oh, *meine Gute!* My goodness, I had to get off so much! My shoulders hurt, my arms, my butt!” He rubbed his behind and hoped he didn’t have a rash back there. Nicklaus

wanted to kick the iron and wooden tires, but he knew that would hurt. “I was a *dummkopf* to buy it.”

“Ha! Ha! You were not dumb.” The man laughed, then coughed some, leaning hard on his staff. “Nein, nein. Curious, perhaps. You took a chance.”

Nicklaus appreciated the shepherd’s insight into his personality.

“How long you journey?” He asked, noticing Nicklaus’s clothes.

“Almost two years. I’ll become a Master Carpenter in just a few more months after more training in Cologne.”

The old man touched his head with a question on his face.

“Oh, my hat? My hat was stolen in the forest.”

“Ach! Bum luck!

“Ja! Indeed! I already miss it badly.”

“Hey, you hungry?” the man asked, pulling out a large bundle from his shoulder pouch. Before Nicklaus could answer, the man handed him half of a sandwich. Nicklaus took it hungrily. “Mm,” he said as he stuffed the pumpernickel sandwich into his mouth. After wiping the egg salad from his chin, he lowered his eyes. “Uh, so sorry for my bad manners.” Then he hummed again. “Mm, this is *zehr gut!* Very good, indeed. Danke schön!”

“*Bitte, schön,*” the man said, tipping his head a bit.

Nicklaus finished it quickly and wiped his hands on his pants. *I must get going, but the sheep still block the way!* Suddenly the level of the bleating rose a notch, so the shepherd went to see about it. The old man waved to Nicklaus, but Nicklaus’s eyes widened. He needed to keep traveling, but he could still taste the egg salad. *I guess I’m obliged to help, and maybe if I rush through, I can still get going soon.*

He went to see how he could help and found an overweight sheep in the center of the musty-smelling flock. Lying on the ground, it bleated and bleated as if in pain. The shepherd squatted next to her, then gazed at Nicklaus. “We need to help this ewe. Her labor starts, but no lamb comes.”

The shepherd handed Nicklaus the staff and pointed a crinkled finger. “Take them to their pen.” Following the direction of the man’s finger, he saw a farm atop the hill. *Oh, that sheep isn’t overweight either; she’s pregnant!*

“Uh,” Nicklaus regarded the staff. “I don’t know a thing about farm animals.” *Perhaps I should rely on my instincts? It could turn out to be exciting if I hurry.*

Nicklaus whistled through his teeth, and to his amazement, the dogs turned. He pointed the staff to the hilltop, and the well-trained dogs surrounded the flock, barking. He used the staff to move them away from the lambing ewe and up the hill.

He turned back just in time to see the shepherd’s forearm vanish into the ewe’s behind! He snapped around, blinking. He willed the disgusting sight out of his memory, then led the sheep into the pen, shut the gate, and turned to go back down the hill. He sucked in the fresh air, admiring the azure-blue sky. But towering thunderheads on the horizon caught his eye. *Ach, I must go before that storm comes.*

“All go okay?” Nicklaus asked, while the shepherd blew into a wrinkled lamb’s pink nose. He put the staff next to the shepherd. When the lamb moved, the ewe started licking it.

The shepherd wiped his hands on a kerchief. “Ja. Ja. Only a little help she needed.”

“Can you tell me what distance Cologne is from here?” Nicklaus asked, rolling his pant - cuff again quickly before anything else could come up to stall him.

“*Dreiunddreissig Kilometer*, Journeyman. Thirty-three kilometers to the North, on this road by the river.”

Nicklaus rushed to the bike and grabbed the cooled handlebars with new energy from the rest. The shepherding experience had been fun. “Congratulations!” Pedaling past, he yelled, “*Bis später!*” But Nicklaus knew he would not see him later.

Unexpectedly, Nicklaus had to swerve again when a new lamb popped up on its feet and wobbled in front of him. When he fell, the shepherd guffawed and bent over, coughing hard. *With that nasty cough of his, I hope that poor shepherd doesn't laugh too much.*

Nicklaus wasn't a stranger to obstructions, and he'd dealt with many distractions. He had handled impositions before as well. But all of this was more than he was accustomed to. *What else can beset me today on my way to my destination?*

But, finally setting off down the last stretch of road, the answer wafted in as the familiar scent of moist air. The clouds converged behind him as he rode, muting the sun, a cool breeze catching him on the back of his neck. Then, large, singular drops came down to pelt his bare head, and he could only flip his coat collar and hunker his neck into it.

Within a few minutes, the clouds opened, sending sheets of hard rain down onto the earth and the rider on the wooden velocipede. Nicklaus bent his head to see the road, with no hat to protect his eyes. He strained with each rotation of the pedals, praying the wheels kept traction in the slippery dirt. But when they stuck, he got off to push the bike through the muck. *Ach, this pain in my butt! Though I am twenty-four, I wish to yell like a child.*

Nicklaus knew he'd fallen behind schedule, struggling with the mud sucking at his boots. *I must keep going because this road could become a stream. And I won't be able to see to find shelter when it turns dark.*

The constant sound of rain gradually calmed, to a gentle drizzle, then to a hush of sprinkles falling softly. That's when he found himself on the outskirts of Cologne, and excitement exploded in his bosom.

Only a few kilometers away, Nicklaus caught sight of the spires of Cologne Cathedral. He laughed aloud, wishing to make a celebration. But he couldn't dance with his mud-laden boots, and he didn't have any kind of hat to throw in the air. Even so, he let out a big 'whoop'—the kind he did when he drank with his journeymen buddies. When the sun peeked out, he joyfully recounted this leg of his laborious trek, ignoring the wet dog feeling of his sopping clothes and boggy boots.

He'd roamed from Stuttgart to Strasbourg, bought a never-before-seen invention there. Then he'd floated down the Rhein and pedaled through the Black Forest. He had slept through a robbery but found most of his valuables, watched the birthing of two lambs, and shared a delicious lunch with a generous but quirky shepherd. Then he'd survived a solitary walk through a violent storm and somehow kept from being drowned in his own dwindling courage. *Some might call that deluge a glorious spring shower, but to me, it was a frightening and brutal downpour! Not the welcome I would have wanted, for sure!*

Like an almost forgotten dream, a verdant park spread before him. Tall, erect trees stood amidst thick grass, their long late-afternoon shadows stretching across manicured gardens that edged winding pathways. A wooden sign swung near a teal-tinged lake that read 'Volksgarten.' A small flock of colored ducks waddled toward a small lake.

Despite the water that had fallen around him, his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He caught a droplet of rain from his hair, but it tasted like salt. He yearned for some cool *Wasser*.

He pushed his new velocipede while he looked for a fountain. Water was all he wanted, even though the heavy humidity formed droplets that slid down his neck.

Suddenly, an uproar of wings swooped around him and in front of him. Dozens of birds rushed towards a teenage girl with a triangle-shaped scarf and a golden braid snaking halfway down her back. A drab brown skirt hung to her ankles, where small leather boots peeked out.

As she tossed breadcrumbs on the wet grass and cooed to them, small brown birds fluttered from the branches like falling leaves. Wrens, starlings, pigeons, and all types of feathered creatures clustered around her feet, pecking at each other. When she brushed her hands and skirt, Nicklaus decided to approach before she left.

“Hallo.” Though he almost whispered, the birds heard anyway and took off with a whoosh. She glanced from the corner of her eye. “Uh, sorry,” he said. “Do you know of a drinking fountain around here?”

He could see her scowl, even though she didn’t lift her face to him. “*Der Trinkbrunnen,*” she repeated flatly. “There.” She thumbed toward it.

“Danke. I am so thirsty!” Nicklaus fanned his mouth and couldn’t help but notice her hunched posture and downcast eyes. *Could she be ill or tired?* “Sorry, where is it again, *bitte?*”

“Ach,” she groaned, tensing her arms. “The fort.” Then she stomped off. “This way.”

They rounded the brown masonry walls, ivy hanging on them like drapes. There was a sudden chill, and Nicklaus wondered if it was the fort or the unfriendly girl. He laid his bike down, motioned for her to drink first, then side-stepped to hide a hole in his sock.

He spied her slender neck and milky skin while she took a quick sip. When she’d finished, he stepped to the fountain and gulped fiercely. But when he almost choked, he raised up and chuckled, “ah, ha,” as he wiped his chin of a dribble.

She tensed her lips, then turned to leave, sending her braid flying over her shoulder.

Nicklaus grabbed his velocipede and hurried to walk next to her. “Hello, there. I—I just—arrived here,” he said, adding a lilt to his voice, hoping she would say something.

“*Guten Tag*,” she said and turned in the other direction.

“Wait!” he yelled, wondering how a person could really be that unfriendly. “Do you know where the Minorite Church is?”