

The Next Reich

A Novella

By Mel Zimmerman

CHAPTER 1

Built by King Solomon in Jerusalem during his reign, the second temple was destroyed in 70 CE. Israelites who had survived the swords and torches of the Roman conquerors had few options. Many Jews who had lived through the mêlée, fled in any sea worthy craft that would get them across the Suez and into east Africa. Many settled in Ethiopia and found refuge in the serene highlands. Not far from Lake Tana, at the foot of the deeply sculpted, jagged mountains, a garden oasis of plentiful water and ample fertile land meant survival and peace for the Hebrew nomads for centuries.

For more than a hundred years before the onset of WW II, Ethiopian Jews were singled out for a life of deprivation and hardship. When World II came to east Africa, it brought no greater angst—not even for the black Israelis. One family though in 1939, ventured too close to the unfamiliar.

Ethiopia: 1939

On a warm morning on the plains of Ethiopia, Yaquob Salowezi and his eleven-year-old son David observed a pitched tent from afar while on his morning chores. Sewn above the fabric doors were two black swastikas.

Tucked behind a rocky outcrop, the Africans' limited view of the hems of white laboratory coats, cuffed and creased trousers and tightly laced high boots worn by some inside the tent were images alien to the Salowezzis. Wild monkeys confined in chain link cages drove the inquisitive Yaquob closer to the German medical scientists.

Outside the tent entrance, a lone Nazi soldier in a gray, black trimmed military uniform kept guard.

Daybreak brought the early morning beats of nature. The sweet smell from a variety of indigenous grasses and native trees in flower made their way across the grasslands.

Boisterous herds of wildlife echoed across the fields of long grass. The growl of hungry carnivores from the night of a failed hunt contrasted with the thumping hooves of their prey at play. In the trees, one

of a small group of monkeys caught the scent of danger and sounded the alarm with a burst of chatter. The alert triggered a thundercloud of birds that took flight from the treetops.

The uneasy hand of the German soldier hovered over his holster. An SS superior dressed in a black uniform accented in silver, came from inside the tent and joined the guard.

For a closer look, the Ethiopian native and his son wriggled nearer to the encampment, using the tall grass for cover. "Why are they here, Father?" the African lad spoke in Hebrew.

In like tongue, his excited father told him, "In the Bible, David, God promised He will send a Messiah to deliver the black tribes of King Solomon into the Holy Land."

"Then, Father, it is written?"

"It is, my son."

Standing tall, the Salowezzis slight stature did not reach the full height of the long grass. Around their necks, each wore a Star of David. Made of braided stems and small fine roots, the Stars' six points were fixed with colorful berries—young David's with green, his father's red. The ripe red and the immature green fruit were symbolic of age and wisdom.

A barrage of gunfire crashed through the quiet of the early morning. The German guard reloaded.

Most of the monkeys scattered, unharmed. Like a dead weight, some dropped from the trees. A small thud and a puff of dust rose after each hit the parched earth.

Yaquob threw himself to the ground and pulled his son down beside him. On his belly, the lean, muscular native protected his son's body with his. Gripped with fear, they listened to the clomping boot steps as the soldiers brushed by the grass where they lay still as night.

With automatic weapons at their side, the Nazis poked the fallen monkeys. A stunned primate quivered. Struggling to its feet, the dazed animal began to limp away. The German soldier pulled his side arm and fired once. The gloat in his eyes and easy smile would convince no one the action he took was for the sake of the animal. The soldiers marched back to the tent, leaving the Africans to exhale with relief.

Holding onto his father, David whispered, "They do not appear as the Messiah, Father."

Careful not to be seen or heard, on all fours, the Africans scurried away from the tent.

Inside the makeshift laboratory, each of the cages housed a lone primate. Some animals were alert and vigorous, others flaccid and gaunt. A German scientist filled a syringe from a vial of yellow viscous fluid labeled, IIS (Infectious Immune Serum).

With his hands clasped behind him, the SS superior in Ethiopia, Field Captain Hauptsturmführer, Klaus vonFritzen. The captain hovered over the shoulder of a scientist with a distrusting stare.

Holding the IIS vial, the scientist declared, "With this, I can reproduce their disease."

His words as abrasive as sandpaper, the SS Captain ordered, "This newest formulation must not take long for a specimen to die. Death must come quickly and quiet for any who oppose Adolf Hitler."

"It will require more time to perfect its power." The scientist tapped on the glass syringe to free an air bubble. "More time to modify the virus to kill in hours — not months or years."

"Schnel!" The commander tempered the demand with a fraudulent smile. "The sickness will cleanse the world of its undesirables. Mach schnel!"

The scientist aspirated the syringe and then injected a frisky, healthy primate with the newly formulated concoction. In another cage, an animal cowered in the corner. It coughed persistently until exhausted. A thickened, bloody mucous oozed from the animal's body cavities.

Running through the dry grass, David and his father hurried toward safer higher ground. The rustling from the sway of the long grass rode the brisk wind farther than usual.

Walking to where he believed the sound emanated, the soldier heard faint breathing mixed with intermittent panting. As the late morning winds shifted, jungle sounds were not always where they seemed. "Come out." Threateningly, he cocked his weapon. "Show yourself. You will be spared. No harm will come to you." His trigger finger tensed.

Unable to understand the foreign speech, Yaquob had no difficulty interpreting its menacing tone. He and David hugged the earth.

The guard waved the Field Captain to him. Urging them to be still, he pointed the gun barrel into the field of high grass and fired, emptying the magazine.

"You are too easily spooked," vonFritzen told the guard. "It was an animal. We are in the jungle." He laughed. "The only other animals to be leery of here are two-legged schwärze." The Captain warned the lone German soldier, "Do not spend Der Führer's bullets unwisely."

With the Nazis far enough away, the Africans rose to their full height and ran like the cheetah.

The wary soldier took a last look back and saw the freshly trampled serpentine path through the high grass. "Halt! Halt!" He fired ahead of the sway in the long grass. "Whoever you are, I will kill you." He fired his pistol as fast as he could pull the trigger.

Blood gushed from Yaquob's leg. David yelled, then stopped himself.

The soldier stepped lightly toward the boy's cry.

Blood spurted from the torn femoral artery. With a small knife, David cut a length of a slender, pliable aerial root from a nearby tree, and tied it above the wound high on his father's leg.

The pool of blood beneath the wounded native soaked rapidly into the thirsty earth. The tourniquet of roots slowed the flow to a trickle. The loss of blood left Yaquob weaker and weaker. In a soft whisper, his father pleaded, "David, you must go."

Cradling Yaquob's head in his lap, David stroked his father's perspiring forehead. As the German soldier hoofed closer, he helped his father into denser jungle.

"Run," Yaquob's plea faded to a murmur. "Run, my son, ruuu" His body fell limp in David's arms. The tourniquet loosened. Blood drained until Yaquob's eyes fluttered, then shut.

The soldier had found the fresh blood of their presence, but was uncertain of the Africans' new location. The lone Nazi sprayed gunfire, mowing patches of the high grass.

David could not lift his gaze from his father's expressionless face. The barrage of bullets around him went unnoticed. Holding Yaquob in his arms, David hesitated as if to burn in the images and sounds of that day — for all time.

The Nazi guard reloaded his weapon, then stomped through the bush.

David heard the lumbering plod of the soldier's hooves grow louder. The sweat from his brow mixed with tears that rained down the boy's round cheeks. He eased his father's head onto the pillow of leaves. After a last, lingering glance, he raced off. Blasts of gunfire nearly tagged him. As David galloped through the dense jungle, the Star of David around his neck snagged on a low-slung tree branch. It ripped free from around his neck. He stopped cold. His eyes searched frantically. Once he found it, he freed the keepsake his father had crafted for him and ran with the wind.

Nearly dusk, other German militia carried Yaquob's body to the tent. Before entering, they passed two bare-chested black men digging a grave.

Inside the laboratory, Yaquob's limp body was tossed into the same cage as the diseased and dying primate.

"You can throw both of them into the same pit." The SS filed officer pointed to the shallow gravesite being shoveled.

“Neither is dead, Hauptsturmführer, vonFritzen,” the German scientist advised. “The man has a weak but steady pulse and . . .”

“. . . and once buried, neither will register a breath,” the Hauptsturmführer, pleasure taken in his grin. The sight of the handcrafted Star of David with a red berry missing lying crooked around Yaquob’s throat drew vonFritzen to it. “Jews! Here?” He laughed, shrugging an unyielding shoulder. He caught a scientist studying his interest in the keepsake and barked, “Go! Do your work.” When no audience remained, he yanked the artifact from around Yaquob’s neck and pocketed it.

Later that night, Field Captain vonFritzen eased a shoebox from under his cot. Opening it exposed a variety of war souvenirs. Making certain no one looked on, he dropped the Hebrew artifact into the shoebox. Returning the shoebox to its hiding place, vonFritzen palm exposed a German cross flanked by two swastikas burned into his flesh left him with the keloidal signature.

The wartime souvenir would hibernate for decades. When revealed, it will foreshadow, bring doubt between longtime friends and a family once trusting. In a final decree, it will shine a light on a menacing evil greater than Adolf Hitler’s.

Short Straw

CHAPTER 2: Warsaw: early Summer of 1944

Not more than a few weeks had passed since the Germans crushed the Warsaw Uprising.

A once quaint and quiet street evolved, as rogue cancer cells might, into a blighted neighborhood of shattered buildings and fractured lives—for the lucky ones, some would say—for those who lived on. The malignancy spread beyond the physical and emotional wreckage it had caused. It crept into the lives of children who had never known war.

While personally devastated with the outcome of the Polish insurrection, a young woman some might assume was too young to understand, offered a remedy to kill the cancer.

Twenty years old, Barie stroked the ruby red center stone embedded in her silver crucifix. She wore it high around her neck. Assessing the sentimental damage, she stepped over jagged, bullet-riddled walls and through a field of glass shards she, her mother and sister had once known as home. Barie brushed away a tear before it fell. Not for herself. For those too young, too innocent to have been condemned to die. It is the way of war. She spread her arms before her as if to receive a new birth and shouted, “We must never forget to remember any of this — all of this.” The broken buildings and lives pillaged, her large round eyes saw had not left her disillusioned. Rather, it drove her to invent a way to bring justice to the families who had survived and for those who had not.

She could hear the faint rumble of laboring bulldozers. In the aftermath, German forces worked diligently to raze the shelled out homes and businesses, once belonging to the Polish people. Their new living quarters would be Nazi encampments framed in barbed wire on the property their owners once called home.

In a corner of her family’s bombarded two-bedroom apartment, Barie gathered clothes from the charred remains of her wardrobe. The suitcase she packed had some room for a few sentimental remains. From twisted picture frames, Barie separated bent and torn photographs of family and friends. Too many who had resisted the Nazis, and had not survived, were closest to her. In the debris all around her, that would suffocate many, she found reason to be bright. She searched for a gift among battered and strewn about belongings. The 35mm camera her father had given to her before he died, a year earlier, must have tumbled wildly, she thought, when she discovered its lens was shattered. Nonetheless, she packed it

lovingly between layers of soft clothing.

From across the large room of missing walls and blown out windows, Paul came up behind her. As she turned to him, he lifted her into his arms.

Barie welcomed the warmth of his embrace as the chilly afternoon gusts coursed around her.

In the adjacent apartment building, the brothers Martin and Yoseph witnessed the lingering kiss between friends, who had grown up in the same village. They had a clear view inside Barie's apartment. No walls stood between them. The young brothers continued to pack.

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Once at Barie's, the brothers and Paul set their satchels on end and used them as seats.

With her mother's fabric shears, Barie cut a single strand of straw into three pieces. One half the length of the other two.

Apprehension grew among the Polish men. The brothers' vacant stare worried Barie.

"We have to leave soon." Paul did not get up from the makeshift seat.

"That is right. The car arranged for us by the Angels of Mercy will be here any moment."

"Thank God there are Jews living in places outside of Germany's reach, who are free to help us," Martin trumpeted.

"The Angels of Mercy have no Jews among them," Paul told his friend.

"Shhhush!" Yoseph warned. "Germans are everywhere, Martin. Paul and Barie are correct. We have to hurry."

She held a clenched fist of straw to her heart. With her other hand, a solemn Barie evened their ends. Turning to face her young friends, slowly she outstretched her arm, inviting each of the male comrades to pick.

"Why now?" Yoseph said. Apprehension flickered in his narrowing eyes.

"It was decided," Paul reminded his friends. "It must be now. Once in Berchtesgaden, it will be impossible to choose. Any one of us in Barie's disguise will be equally convincing."

"All of us agreed," Martin reminded Yoseph. "It was decided weeks ago. You know this."

Each of the young men reached for a straw.

The reticent brothers were last to pick.

Without examining them, each closed a fist around their length of hay.

In the quiet of her soul, Barie prayed it would not be Paul. She accepted that the one chosen to replace Adolf Hitler, until they stole away the original into safekeeping, might well have his destiny sealed.

“3,2,1,” Paul counted down.

Three fists sprang open.

Amidst the howling wind, Barie heard the swirl of a sorrowful gasp. She would not open her eyes— not right away.

Before sunrise, on their way to Berchtesgaden, the borrowed car the Angels delivered had broken down. The delay placed the Warsaw 4 in a safe house in greater Germany, not far from Auschwitz. Late into the night, after too many glasses of wine, the Polish brothers determined the mayhem all around them should have been prevented.

The hurt allowed was God’s neglect, the brothers concluded.

Early the next day, Barie helped her friends realize that being so close to so much dying was not God’s fault.

“Then He must be on a very long vacation,” Martin concluded.

“Creating this world for us was no small job.” Paul laughed. “If anyone deserves time to Himself after finishing so mighty a task, God does.”

“It is His way of reminding us not to shrink from the dangers that lie ahead,” Barie told the men with the warmth of a mother’s touch.

On cars, streets and rooftops, ash deposited its reminder of overworked German furnaces. The Poles would not forget the stench of searing and burning flesh that joined with the grey of morning. The odor invaded every pore. It seeped into the fibers of their clothing and attached itself to the tiny hairs inside their nostrils. Like a hungry lion whose prey struggles to be free of the big cat’s grip, the malodor refused to let go.

The German family they stayed with had repaired Barie’s camera. After all, a German had invented the single lens reflex, 35mm camera; she remembered her father’s boast.

Necessary repairs to the vehicle were made by the Mister. Barie smiled, remembering how the man’s wife called to him.

Berchtesgaden: Fall of 1944

Along the scenic route of dense trees and snow-capped mountain peaks of the Bavarian Alps, Paul voiced his worry as to whom among those the Angels recommended they approach for work in Adolf Hitler's chalet, would pose the least risk to their kidnap plan.

The journey took longer than they had hoped, Barie wrote in her diary on the bumpy ride along the base of the mountain. The fresh scent of pine saturated the air. It washed the reek of death and dying they knew only days before. If Adolf Hitler were only close enough to those who were touched by the damnation he ordered, would it matter? she wrote in her diary, careful to use words that would not reveal her intent, should her journal be found by an adversary.

Once in the center of Berchtesgaden, Barie and Paul screened many on the list given to them by the Angels. She shared Paul's concern. Who would help secure the work they sought without jeopardizing the kidnap plan? Several offered to assist, then recanted. One had not.

The Warsaw 4 were the newest among nearly a hundred servants who labored in Hitler's Bavarian retreat.

Barie awoke to a light dusting of snow, a blue sky and a chill that reached into the marrow in her bones. Stretching her long, lean body released the hold sleep had on her.

The splendor here must have known the hand of God. She lingered in thought too long. Could He be oblivious to the wickedness all around Him? Was Martin right? Is the Lord on holiday? Suddenly she realized she was running late. Hastily, she buttoned up her servant's uniform and headed for the kitchen.

Vigorously cleaning the stainless pantry doors and countertops from the night's residue of cooking, Barie figured she had dodged the watchful eye of the head matron, who had hired them.

After laboring for six weeks, the work they performed was still on trial. Chores had to be carried out exactly as the gruff Bavarian matron prescribed.

Also in domestic uniform, Paul, Yoseph and Martin feverishly performed last minute duties in preparation of the evening's Nazi soirée.

The robust head matron did not miss Barie's misstep. A woman with a heart of gold and a tongue of rust, Hildi showed no mercy as she berated Barie.

Nearby, the kitchen help, who carried out their chores with the rhythmical precision that would

please Wilhelm Wagner, placed no import in the reprimand. It was as if each of them had felt the sting of the head matron's scold at a time early in their own service.

Paul heard the tongue-lashing and feared their plan would be derailed before it began. Steam billowed from pots of simmering garden vegetables and a kettle of stewing beef on a pot-bellied stovetop. One boiled over. Workers rushed to mop up the spill. The incident redirected Hildi's attention.

Martin and Yoseph looked out of the foyer window, a short distance from the kitchen, and watched Hitler's caravan pull onto the property — yet again.

When unfinished kitchen work remained . . . , Hildi's mantra rattled through Paul's head. Shooing the brothers back to work, Hildi's words, and the brothers' disregard for them, rekindled Paul's vexation.

Diary

CHAPTER 3

The caravan of Mercedes Benz' and Volkswagen vans drove up to the Bavarian Alps retreat and delivered Adolf Hitler for yet another time since the Warsaw 4 had arrived.

In a diary small enough to fit in her palm, Barie flipped through its pages until a blank appeared.

Paul nudged her. "Be careful not to let anyone see the entries you write."

Barie entered the date below a listing of prior visits Adolf Hitler made into the chalet. An arrival and departure pattern would help the Poles to schedule the implementation of their plan. Her last entry read, Time is near! An earlier note reminded her that Yoseph was to test a drug on Hitler's dog to be sure the dog would sleep soundly at the foot of his master's bed. Before she closed the journal, she felt the presence of another.

"Do you want us both killed?" Hildi bumped Barie, waving a finger. "Work undone must be done before all else. Work is not writing your memoirs."

Yoseph and Martin waved Paul to them.

Paul watched the admonition. With an easy saunter, he passed between Yoseph and Martin and inconspicuously elbowed them. All made their way to Barie's side.

"I know you are working here to save money to travel to America, but you must . . ."

"And when we get to the United States, we will locate your sisters," Paul said, in an attempt to bring Hildi's bubbling anger down to a simmer.

"Your sisters will know you are all right," Martin said to further reassure the head matron.

"That is correct, Hildi." Paul smiled. "In time it will be arranged for you and your sisters to be together."

"If the SS would read your journal and decide it is not about working here to save money for travel, they would not hesitate to kill every one of you—and me for sponsoring you."

Barie's voice crackled, "I will not be as careless." She closed the little book and cupped it in her palm. "It will not happen again, Fräulein Hildi," she whispered, respectfully. "I would not intentionally place our friendship, or you, in peril."

The car in which Hitler traveled parked closest to the chalet's entrance. Adolf Hitler stepped from the Mercedes, surrounded by the usual throng of political confidantes and military leaders. A short blast of incessant coughing left Hitler unsteady. An official reached in front of Germany's Chancellor to open the villa's entry door. Refusing the help, Hitler whisked away the hand of the SS General and grabbed the door handle himself. Turning it left Hitler's arm trembling.

That evening, snow flurries whirled in the wind. Dancing in the moonlight, wind-blown snowdrifts formed figure eights as graceful as a troupe of skating ballerinas. Inside the chalet, a fireplace crackled. A dozen timbers ablaze with glow and warmth. The light from the amber lamp on the foyer table cast a shimmering shadow on personalized menus of entrée choices to welcome Hitler's dinner guests.

"Martin," Hildi called to him.

"Me?" He scuttled to her.

"I did not want to call to your brother by name." She viewed the horde of Nazi echelon, taking their places at the old world Bavarian bar, then whispered, "Yoseph is too dangerous a name to say aloud."

Martin nodded. "What do you want of me?"

"Not you, Martin. Your brother. He knows German. I want Yoseph to serve the guests their cocktails."

"Where is the usual bartender?" Martin wrung his hands.

"Out ill."

"Is there no one else?"

Hildi shrugged. "Peasant stock is hard-working." She pointed to some who scrubbed dishes, polished silverware and ironed table covers and linen napkins. On their knees, others cleaned and hand buffed the wooden floors. "They do not understand the brisk orders from Hitler's fast-speaking Germans. On this night, Yoseph will be more than a domestic."

"Hildi, Yoseph has little experience in tavern work." Martin moved closer. A plea in his voice appealed to her. "He prepared tavern drinks at only two of our village Bar Mitzvahs and only one wedding party."

"And your resume, Martin? It is more robust with tavern experience?"

Not only had Yoseph drawn the short straw, but this too! Martin felt a queasiness run deep. *After this*

night, will Yoseph be fit for the part he must play? Groveling, he groaned. "My brother will become nervous with so many to serve, Fräulein Hildi. He will stutter when . . ."

"Yoseph will not have to speak a word. Only to serve the Nazis their schnapps."

From across the kitchen, Yoseph glanced up and found worry in his brother's furrowed brow. He walked closer to him and Hildi and listened in. In only a few minutes, he had good reason to share his brother's fear.

Hildi smiled pleasantly. "You have smart eyes, Yoseph. The Germans will notice. You will not be bothered."

Yoseph looked away, dubiously.

Hildi turned away from the brothers and began to walk off. After a few steps, she turned back and reassured them, "I will not let Yoseph falter."

Outfitted in formal uniforms, domestics carried platters of Hors D'oeuvres from the kitchen to the Bavarian lounge and bar.

Yoseph served the Nazi brass shot glass after shot glass of their favorite libations.

An SS officer watched the jerky hesitation in Yoseph's movements between pouring drinks. "You are new?"

Yoseph squeezed out a pleasant smile.

"What is your name?"

He wiped down the countertop, pretending to be in thought.

With a crazed disdain in his bloodshot eyes, the German officer downed another whisky. In a single thrust, he grabbed the collar of Yoseph's uniform. Pulling him across the bar top amid crashing glasses, the officer yelled his demand yet another time. "You are not Aryan. You possess the curly hair of a Jew or a schwärze. And the beak of a kike." He laughed. "No?"

His superiors found nothing humorous about the SS officer's indecorous behavior and turned away.

Yoseph would not answer nor cry out for help.

Servants stole a glance from their chores, but dared not rally to help as Yoseph was splayed across the bar top.

The gentle, but resolute tap of Hildi's hand on the Nazi officer's shoulder caused him to turn to her.

The fiery ire in his drawn face cooled when he saw Hildi holding a dish of schnitzel. A whiff of the

boldly seasoned veal distracted him. Unwilling to give into his favorite dish, he spun his bar chair and faced the distressed Yoseph. The Nazi officer drew his weapon and cocked it. Grinning, he shoved the gun barrel into Yoseph's clammy forehead.

The officer's bizarre behavior attracted the attention of other high-ranking Nazis. More sober than their comrade, the German officials near him frowned with disapproval at the newly commissioned officer's behavior.

Sporting a caustic grin, the SS official uncocked the pistol, reholstered the weapon, then submitted to Hildi's offering.

In a half turn from behind the counter, Yoseph's appreciative glance found Hildi's smile. After swabbing chunks of melting ice, spilled drinks and broken glass from the bar top, he mopped his brow.

Hildi flashed Yoseph a consoling wink as the troublesome SS officer followed the scent of her schnitzel into the dining room, as though she were the chalet's piped piper.

The dining room boasted a flamboyant chandelier too big for the intimate soirée.

With more than a few setbacks in the prosecution of the war, Hitler warned his generals they must deliver victory for Germany no matter the sacrifice. On an elevated platform, Hitler's table looked down on the political and military leaders. It would be Hitler's bully pulpit where he orchestrated the revised strategic blueprint for regaining lost ground.

Hildi placed the last of the cleaned dinner dishes and sparkling crystal glassware from the night's soirée back into their cupboards. Her usual speed and efficiency was replaced with trepidation and hesitancy. The Nazis noticed Yoseph appeared unlike the others on her staff, she realized. Their curiosity will become obsessive. Hildi had witnessed SS security interrogate others and, and whether guilty or not the result was always . . . she turned away from the memory she knew. In time, she would be the aim of their inquiry—so long as the Poles remained. Once she became the object of Hitler's minions, she would not live to see her sisters.

The decision to expel the Poles gnawed at her. Hildi's heard a distinct set of footsteps coming toward her.

Soirée's Aftermath: Evicted

CHAPTER 4

At the end of the long night of cleaning up from the Nazi dinner party, the Warsaw 4 reviewed the kidnap plan in Paul and Barie's room.

Barie finished cleaning the repaired lens, then mated it with the 35mm camera body. "As Hitler sleeps, I'll photograph him." This step brought her closer to the realization the plan's purpose was at hand. "As much of him as I can photograph, before you and Martin carry him off," she told Paul. "It will authenticate he is genuine when we deliver him to the Angels of Mercy in Rome."

Martin and Yoseph sat at a card table. Its chairs wobbled on the uneven floor.

"Only one guard stands post at Hitler's bedroom door," Paul highlighted the crucial elements of the plan with the brothers. "After Yoseph feeds the dogs their sleep medicine, he will stay hidden in the clothes closet when Hitler retires. Once Martin and I arrive, it is imperative Hitler be ready to leave with us. Use only enough chloroform to keep him groggy."

With the viewfinder to her eye, Barie panned the room. "If I get no closer than standing across the corridor from the doorway into his room, with this lens I can photograph the fracture lines of the silver fillings in his mouth."

"So long as Hitler sleeps with his mouth open." Paul's jaw tightened around a small smile. Every chance he could, he searched within himself to find the levity to slice through the uncertainty they lived with every day they were in Hitler's Bavarian retreat.

"In the next three to four days, we'll make the switch when Hitler returns from his afternoon walk, and nap."

"So long as things continue to progress well and Hildi is not further spooked by your diary." Paul joked, "Or our stay could be shorter than we planned."

"Come, we'll go to her." Barie clasped hands with Paul. "We'll help Hildi complete her work so everyone can get some sleep before the next shift begins."

The carved Bavarian wall clock in the villa's main kitchen told the head matron first light was only a

couple of hours away. Were the footsteps she heard moments before imagined? Or was she simply overtired? she asked herself. Ready to leave, an exhausted Hildi placed a hand behind the flame of a stout candle.

The approaching Poles watched her draw a labored breath, then extinguish the glow.

Seemingly, from nowhere, German sentries stepped to Hildi.

"I already verified the guest list," she told the guards. "Everyone who was invited attended."

The sentry stood rigid before the head matron. "It is not about those you served," one said, their stance cold and rigid as stonework. "Some at the celebration became ill. You know, Fräulein Hildi, how Der Führer becomes when he suspects his food has been tampered with."

"Every dish I serve is tested. Every platter of food I prepare is sampled for taste. All of what I do in my kitchen is in accordance with Gestapo policy." Hildi hid a nervous twitch in her wrist behind her. "Do not insinuate something so prosperous for which there is no basis." Her eyes hunted her surroundings for a logical reason for Hitler's men becoming ill. "It can be explained easily." She climbed into a high back chair off the kitchen. "The men mixed their mixed drinks. Simple! Too schnapps with their cognac. Then they ate their bellies full and became sick. Nothing more."

"If the sickness was from the food you prepared, you know what will follow." The sentries stared down the Poles. "Or poisoned by someone in your employ."

Could some of the drug Yoseph gave Hitler's dogs, intended to quiet them, have gotten into the food served to the Germans? Paul swallowed hard.

Waiting for Hildi's answer, the sentries stood in front of the head matron, blocking her view of the Warsaw 4. Following few spoken words, a sentry handed Hildi a copy of the revised attendees list. Before leaving the kitchen, he warned, "The contamination testing results will be back in two days."

Tending to the last of the chores before retiring, Hildi looked up and found the sentries had not left. It was odd, unusual that they would remain, she thought, watching them watch her. "Is there something more?" her tone abrupt.

The sentries trained their weapons on her. She squirmed in her own skin. One held Barie's diary in his hand. He demanded to know whose it was and the meaning of its entries.

While her flesh crawled with worry, Hildi stepped in front of the Poles. Her gesture pure, her intent to protect.

One of the sentries pointed to notes made in a variety of languages mixed with numbers. "Code?"

Thinking as quickly as ever she had, Hildi said, "I found it weeks ago. After Herr Hitler's last visit. I put

it away for safekeeping. It belongs to one in the Chancellor's party."

The Poles shuddered in their bed slippers.

With only a shrug from their prime suspect, one of the angry sentries threw the journal to the floor and crushed it beneath his boot. "We have photographed every page. It will be analyzed. The results will be known. In days. You will account then."

Hildi bent her tired back and picked up the twisted diary. Holding it high above her head, she bellowed, "You forgot to take . . ." The sentries continued to walk. "I will keep the diary in a safe," her cry faded as the men left her sight. "Someone in my employ led them to your diary's concealment. But who? She slipped the journal into Barie's palm. "Keep it in another place—until . . ."

In appreciation, Barie nodded her agreement.

From a washroom attached to the kitchen, a man with a tattoo of the National Socialist German Workers' Party [Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei/NSDAP] flag on his upper arm smiled at Hildi.

Appreciative that the youth stayed on and helped, she returned the gratitude. "Danka!" The young domestic walked off humbled.

"Until?" Paul said as the Poles looked on. "You said, until, Hildi. Until what—or when?"

Hildi's concentration shifted to the revised list of Hitler's guests given to her by the sentry. She explained the SS officer, who had encountered Yoseph would be transferred. "He will not return to Berchtesgaden," she summed.

"Then he will not make trouble again."

"What happened at the bar," said Yoseph, rising swiftly to his feet. "I promise will not occur again."

"It was not your fault, Yoseph," Martin consoled his brother.

"I do not blame you either," Hildi told Yoseph. "That incident alone was not of concern to me." Hildi walked away to checked that the gas burners were turned off.

"It would be only a matter of time when your diary came into question, I had warned you only days ago," Paul reminded Barie, he watched Hildi to be certain she was not within earshot.

"They will conclude nothing from the journal." Barie smiled shyly, placing her hand in Paul's.

"I am worried not only for yours, but for the safety of the others who work here." Hildi wiped her hands with a towel, then tossed it into the laundry. "If, in two more days, you are still here, and the Nazis decide you are guilty, you will be killed."

Unconcerned with the risk, Paul had to negotiate to neutralize her concern. The indelible scowl on

the face of Fräulein Hildi stopped him cold.

“These incidents have brought on too much attention,” Hildi said. “I have arranged for your transportation off the mountain.”

Paul stammered, holding Barie’s hand tightly. “If we leave now, Hildi not we, nor you, will be free to go to America.”

Wary, Hildi looked in every direction to be sure no one else remained. She stepped lightly toward the Poles. In a whisper, she told them, “It is too dangerous for you to stay on.”

“But, I, I,” Paul stumbled over thoughts that moved through him too quickly to process.

“Get a good night’s rest. At the end of your next shift, you must pack to leave.” Hildi’s eyes traveled to each of the Warsaw 4. “By sunrise!”

By late afternoon on the following day when their shift ended, the Poles packed their meager belongings.

“Hildi and the Angels of Mercy have not kept their part of the bargain.” Martin said, seated next to his brother on Paul and Barie’s bed.

Barie understood Hildi’s reason for expelling them. “If not for Hildi, we would still be in search of a sponsor.”

“It is too soon to go,” Yoseph balked. “To administer the proper amount of the sleep drug to the dogs, and to verify the dosage I will need for you to control Hitler when you take him down the mountain. It will take more days before I can be sure.”

“No more days remain. Only hours are left,” Barie said.

“We have 12 hours to be ready,” Paul advised the brothers. Studying every inch of Yoseph, he imagined the transformation. “Hitler will be in the hands of the Angels—by sunrise.”

In the hallway outside Barie and Paul’s room, a man holding his food-stained apron lingered. His shirtsleeve covered most of the Nazi flag tattoo. The fragmented pieces of the conversation he overheard left him confused, irresolute.

The Last Straw

CHAPTER 5

Barie closed the supply room door behind her. Walking along the aisle of shelves stacked with fresh towels, she felt Paul's tug pull her close to him. Dissolving into each other's arms, they kissed with guarded passion. Wasting no time, she pulled away from Paul's embrace and began to collect the clothing she and Paul had hidden that would transform Yoseph into Adolf Hitler.

Paul swept Barie behind him as he watched the door handle turn. Once Yoseph and Martin showed themselves, Paul hustled the brothers inside.

The dull click of the storage room door latching spooked the already skittish Martin.

At the realization, he would be the Hitler replacement, Yoseph reached into his shirt pocket. The short straw he drew back in Warsaw floated to the floor.

"Eight minutes after we leave," Paul told Yoseph, "we should have traveled half the distance to the bottom of the mountain. You must hurry and join us—then."

"Hitler's security will check on him only every 20 minutes," Barie read from a coded note in her diary. "You'll have ample time to leave." The pause for introspection often preceded thoughts that troubled her from the moment she conceived the kidnap plan. If Nazi generals could not succeed in killing Hitler, could we just take him—alive? Barie twisted a lock of her hair. "And remember, Yoseph, use the amount of chloroform for Hitler as prescribed by the Angels' doctors."

Amid buffing one of Hitler's boots, Paul warned, "He must only be groggy, not unconscious when Martin and I take him. It will be a long hike down the mountain." With Barie on his arm, he summed, "Hitler must be steady enough to walk on his own."

Reviewing an entry in her diary, she lifted her glance and found a fire building in Martin's widening, glazed-over eyes. On her guard not to further fuel his anger; nevertheless, she had to remind him, "Martin, you will not forget to . . ."

"Barie, I have already salted the dog's hamburger meat," Martin snapped. "When Hitler awakens, the dog in his room will not."

The worry lines in the brothers' faces deepened as the eleventh hour neared.

Paul shot out an arm, signaling no one take an unnecessary breath and whispered, "Shhhush."

The sharp hammer of jackboots struck the wooden floor in the hallway just outside the storage room. The echoing footsteps rumbled less mightily. Periodic laughter faded as had the beat of their footsteps.

"It's this time of day when the guards put down their guard." Paul took the dark moment and spotlighted it with a boyish grin.

Barie reciprocated when her fingers raked through Paul's wavy mane. Leafing through her diary, she advised, "It's their routine." Reminding herself of a note she had glanced to, she asked, "And, Yoseph, be sure plenty of wood is in Hitler's fireplace. We cannot trust the guards will do that. He will awaken too soon if his bedroom becomes cold." She scratched out a last note into her diary. "The sentries who stand watch outside will look for smoke coming from the chimney in Hitler's room."

"Why do you keep writing in that, that?" Yoseph began to ask.

Anticipating her friend's question, Barie interrupted, "The Angels will need these notes to corroborate and confirm the sequence of events we report." The look on Martin's face told her the brothers knew the reasons even though they pretended not to.

On a hook behind the domestic bed whites, Hitler's dress military uniform hung.

Yoseph perched himself on the top step of the foot ladder and removed the servant's cap he wore.

Barie worked Yoseph's curly hair straight. She studied the close-up shot from a news magazine, making certain the comb and cut matched Hitler's perfectly.

After fixing the signature mustache, Yoseph climbed into Adolf Hitler's trousers and tucked in the last of his brown shirt before cinching the belt buckle.

Barie closed the camera's film-loading compartment with a click. "You are the exact, the perfect likeness to convince anyone close to Hitler that you are he." I pray that test will not become needed. Her eyes could not pull away from the frightful likeness of Adolf Hitler standing so close to her. She read the dismay in the brothers' troubled eyes and the bitterness in their hearts for what had to be. "God will watch over Yoseph. He will watch over all of us."

"You should have asked my God, Barie," a sarcastic Martin mimicked her. "My God might have found another way."

"Martin," Paul raised his voice above the whisper, violating his own rule for quiet. Only inches from Barie, his finger poked the air around her satin smooth facial contours. "Of all of us, she, Martin, she does not have to be here. To risk her life for ours is not her duty."

"She is in no danger here, Paul. Look at her. She appears as one of them. Barie could not know the

pain. The suffering. The indignation of finding murdered Jews simply because of the way they look or act or where they live or . . .”

This is not the Martin with whom I grew up. Of course, she understood, he is frightened for his brother. Yoseph will brave what lies before him. She held her hands together in prayer. After unclasping them, she placed a sympathetic arm around the slight-framed Yoseph. A single stream of tears skated down her porcelain cheeks.

Brushing her touch from his shoulder, Yoseph fired back, “I do not need your pity.”

With a lump stuck in her throat, Barie reminded her friend, “The same murderers who killed your families slaughtered mine, Yoseph. You are my family.” She rubbed the ruby center stone of the crucifix she wore high around her neck. “I know no other,”

Martin pointed to the framed portrait of Adolf Hitler over a stack of folded bed linens. His eyes teared. His jaw clenched to avoid spilling a one. “I don’t know what kind of God could have made him.”

“He is the same God who made all of us,” Barie said.

“Adolf Hitler, also?” Yoseph smarted.

Martin stretched, standing a bit taller than his 5’7” height. “Whether it is your God or mine, He sees evil everywhere and does nothing?” He said in support of his brother. “Is it then Satan to whom we pray? Is it not the devil that brings us what we ask God not to?”

“I don’t know why I cannot simply kill him, Paul.” Yoseph pushed his other foot into the second boot.

“It would permit all of us to leave together.” Martin watched his brother firmly press the edges of the cropped mustache into place, his fingers trembling. Martin’s penetrating stare confronted Paul.

“This, too, you know about, Martin,” Paul said. “History must not tell of another Adolf Hitler a hundred years from now—or sooner. Adolf Hitler must be taken—alive. Now!”

The Day of Reckoning

CHAPTER 6

Paul, Barie, Martin and Adolf Hitler were farther down the mountain than they had expected.

Martin looked at the pocket watch his grandfather had gifted him. "In only four minutes, Yoseph will be with us."

From the window inside Hitler's bedroom, Yoseph could no longer see his friends steering Hitler through the forest. The last time-check by the guard outside Hitler's room, Yoseph feigned sleep. The sentry suspected nothing irregular. The disguise worked. Only two minutes remained until the young Pole would be free to flee. Perched on the windowsill, he found the snow 12 feet below inviting. Only a minute remained. Ready to drop to the ground below in half a minute, he felt an arm around his neck and another around his chest, pulling him back until he could resist no more.

The SS Obergruppenführer ripped the mustache from Yoseph's lip. Others pinned him against the window.

Hildi's domestic helper stood just inside Hitler's room.

The High Commander, SS-Oberstgruppen-Führer watched him and nodded. His jaw fixed, angry, annoyed.

The domestic youth returned the look with worry in his widened stare. The finger at the end of the arm with the National Socialist German Workers' Party flag, fingered one of the enemy within.

The chill of the predawn turned stormy as the Poles threaded themselves through the forest of mature evergreens with Adolf Hitler in tow. Occasional moonlight weaved itself through gathering clouds to help guide them.

The waiting ambulance arranged for by the Angels of Mercy appeared little more than a toy car parked on the service road at the bottom of the hill.

As the light snow fell and settled on the ground, it iced. The earth became steeper. It hampered the

Poles' descent.

To document the kidnap in progress, Barie continued to photograph the prisoner while prodding him gingerly along the escape route.

Even though the steep decline preoccupied the Poles, Martin took a quick look at the pocket watch and with glee yowled, "It is time, Paul. Yoseph will be here in only . . ."

Two gunshots coming a few breaths apart ricocheted off the mountain wall. A faint horror of a scream from the direction of the chalet followed each gun blast, barely audible from so far a distance.

"Warning shots!" Martin feared the worst. "Yoseph is . . .!"

"Do not think those thoughts," Paul told Martin. Looking through binoculars, he watched another's hand force Yoseph's face tight to the window. Each of Yoseph's palms pierced with a single bullet hole. Blood trickled down the glass. Except for the occasional glare, Paul had a clear view into Hitler's lighted bedroom window. The Nazi High Commander, the SS-Oberstgruppen-Führer pistol-whipped the wounded Yoseph. His friend's loosened mustache dangled. Paul turned to Martin and placed a comforting arm around his boyhood friend.

"Hitler's dog awakened too soon and found Yoseph was not their master," a shaken Martin speculated. "Not enough sedative in the meat? My fault."

With a gun pressed to Yoseph's temple, the SS Commander fired once. Yoseph's body went limp and dropped from view. Burly German shepherds barked ferociously, pawing at their master's window. Paul would not relay all he had witnessed. It would be a day that would leave him with nightmares for all of his days. Driven to complete the capture and kidnap plan, he reached for Martin's arm. With a gentle, but firm tug, he pulled Martin from thoughts that paralyzed him.

"Do not blame yourself, Paul," Martin said in an attempt to rekindle Paul and Barie's friendship after the belligerence he had shown the day before. "We do not know what went wrong." For a last look, he turned toward the chalet. No smoke flowed from the chimney in Hitler's bedroom. "We will never know," Martin decided, then looked into Barie's tearful eyes. "He is with God now."

From deep within her, Barie nodded in agreement. Yoseph's destiny had been sealed back in Warsaw. "Yoseph gave the Germans nothing they sought . . ." except his life, a thought she could not say aloud.

Relieved, Martin said, "If my brother had told any of our plan, the Germans would have begun their search for us sooner."

"And the ambulance would have been known about and destroyed by now," Paul said. "Your

brother, Martin, was at his bravest.” Paul shook Barie. “Come, we must hurry.”

Paul’s slight shake of her, and her reflection of Yoseph’s life and death, Barie became light headed, disoriented and lost her balance on a patch of ice. In the short slide, her camera caught in the crevice of an outcrop of rocks. The camera strap she wore had fallen from around her shoulder to the crook of her arm. It stopped her slide with a start. It prevented her from becoming one with a tree whose diameter appeared as robust as a theater in the round. The camera and lens were crushed. Before abandoning it, she collected the film from inside. Barie would not again see the gift her father gave her. The sentiment it held would live on.

Unsure of the route used by those who confiscated Germany’s leader, soldiers scrambled. The order came to seal off the perimeter around the cabin. “Search inside. Every floor. Every ancillary structure throughout the compound,” an SS lieutenant ordered the scant numbers of infantry as the soldiers armed for the hunt. “They are still here. They will not chance an escape until dawn,” he supposed.

“Secure the perimeter alone?” Cynically, the seasoned SS High Commander overheard his lieutenant’s shout and laughed. “Nonsense! They are already down the mountain.” He pointed to recent tracks in the snow illuminated by filtered moonlight. Small whirlwinds of snow filled in their imprints.

“Search the mountain!”

“On horseback?” the lieutenant cowered.

“Mach schnell!”

German militia combed the property uncertain of whom they were seeking, or where the abductors would be. Others hurried down the mountain on foot, their trigger finger eager to squeeze.

The leading Nazi scout pointed to a rustling in the low tree branches, 100 yards of steep terrain from where most of the infantry were. “They must be there.” Passing the fractured camera, he scooped it up.

“Do not shoot until you can see them.”

The High Commander in Hitler’s room, scolded Hildi’s domestic informer, “Why did you not come and tell about these traitors sooner?”

“I didn’t have all of the information I needed until only yesterd . . .”

“Dummkoff!” Brandishing his luger, he stuffed the gun barrel between the eyes of the kitchen

servant and pulled the trigger.

Surrounded by Nazi brass in a small room off the kitchen, Hildi fielded questions that stung like a swarm of wasps.

“They only wanted to go to America,” she said, holding her emotions in check. “It is all I know.”

An officer raised his baton within an inch of Hildi’s fleshy cheek. “You did not know they were Jews?”

The momentary distraction of seeing the ambulance parked only yards away caused Paul to misstep on to a wet bed of pine needles. In a downhill slide, nothing was nearby for him to grab onto to slow or to stop him. He managed to turn himself only to begin a sideways roll. He headed for a cluster of menacing rocks.

“Paul!” Barie cried out, “No! Do not take him, God.”

As the grade became less steep, Paul’s spin slowed. Regaining his balance, he shot out an arm and grabbed onto the tree trunk of a young conifer. His leg wedged in the grouping of jagged rocks, ominous as butcher knives that pierced through the earth. His pant leg torn and bloody. Chunks of flesh clung to strands of raw cartilage. Never losing presence of mind, Paul gathered leaves and pine needles and covered the blood soaked snow with them.

Martin and Barie ran to catch up to Paul some 20 yards away. Sandwiched between them, the blindfolded with his hands bound behind him, Adolf Hitler strained to keep pace. In their haste, the Poles pushed him beyond his physical limits. Too tired to go on, Hitler stumbled and fell face first into the snow. His misstep caused Barie and Martin to lose their footing and roll ahead of their prisoner.

Having regained her equilibrium, Barie reached out to Martin to slow his sideways tumble. When he unexpectedly swerved and changed direction, he became less visible through the snowfall. The hooves of galloping horses grew louder. Looking back up the mountain, her eyes could not find Adolf Hitler.

8 Ball

CHAPTER 7

Continuing his downhill free-fall, Martin saw Paul's hand reaching for him. Shifting his weight, Martin redirected himself and came at Paul faster than either of them had expected. After shaking off the pain from their body collision, Paul and Martin gave one another an at-a-boy slap on the back.

Not only from the leg injury, but also from the body slam, Paul limped. A slab of tree bark slightly covered by the snowfall, caught his eye. Thick enough to support his leg, the bark would provide ample pressure to stop the bleeding. Martin tore his shirtsleeve and with it secured the tree bark splint for his friend.

Downwind from Barie, the Polish men looked at each other, shrugged and, fought through the driving wind and snow back up the mountain to find Barie and their prisoner. Searching for her behind tree trunks the size of truck tires and an enormous outcrop of boulders big enough to conceal a locomotive, they found nothing. Paul thought he saw her. Before he would call to Barie, he had to be certain.

Soldiers scouring about seemed to be everywhere.

Weaving through a stand of majestic trees, Barie followed channels grooved into the snow. Fresh tracks! They led her to a snow-capped grotto. He's in there. Rustling inside the cave gave her reason to pause. A bear? 'Barie! Barie!' She heard Paul's call. "Over here." Careful to reply to her friends while not alerting the Germans, she whispered as loud as she dared in the direction she expected they would be. "Quickly! Hurry!"

Winded, Paul and Martin hustled toward Barie's controlled shout.

With her companions at her side, Barie directed the men to the mouth of the cave. A muffled gravely cough and wheezy breathing came from inside.

"It could be a bear," Martin warned, his arms spread, holding back his friends.

"We'll soon find out." Paul pushed Martin out of his way. With a limp in his step, he dropped to his knees and followed the tracks into the cave.

"Schweinhund!" Hitler's voice ebbed, hoarse, huddling inside the shallow hollow. "Ich bin Der

Führer!” Paul towed the fragile Hitler just outside.

The duct tape across Hitler’s mouth that assured his silence loosened. Paul peeled off what little stuck to his lower lip. “He has to breathe freely.” Resuming the downhill push, Paul would not move too swiftly along the icy slope. While the ploy slowed their final descent, the strategy lessened the likelihood of losing control of their prisoner—yet again.

“Paul!” Martin pointed to the frosty puffs of air coming from Hitler’s untaped mouth.

“It’s all right, Martin. He’s weak. He won’t sound the alarm.”

“What I worry over, Paul, is will he survive to the bottom of the mountain,” Barie said.

A backward glance to the tight opening into the cave brought a smile to Paul. “Like an 8 ball in the side pocket, Hitler shot himself a near perfect game.”

“Paul!” Barie snapped, “It is not the time for joking.”

The threesome of Poles could see the parked ambulance. Its tail pipe blew a steady stream of exhaust.

In an unexpected emotional gush, Martin wept. Like the metamorphous between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Martin’s demeanor quickly transformed from profound sadness into a rampage. He attacked Hitler, driving their captive into another near slide. “Murderer!” Martin railed, “You piece of dung.”

Paul grabbed Martin and slammed him face down into a patch of icy dirt. Intensely angered over Martin’s outrage that could have jeopardized their entire plan, Paul’s face flushed. Flecks of snow that stuck to his whiskery stubble melted. He would not let Martin up for air until heeding Barie’s plea to free him as she held a pistol to Hitler’s head.

“He is, he was my brother.” Martin spit up earth and blood from the scuffle.

“Yoseph is and will always be your brother, Martin.” Barie forced back tears, running a step or two in front of her friends. “His death is our loss also.”

Martin’s grieving lasted only a moment.

Horses carrying German soldiers kicked clods of wet earth. Chunks of mud hurled through low tree branches, whirling just above the heads of the Poles.

On the other side of the thicket of windbreakers that separated and protected the Poles, Barie heard German equestrians slog.

“They are near,” Paul said in a hush.

“But they do not know how near.” Her words simple and straightforward. Her tone, she hoped would bring a moment of repose to her friends.

The mountain steepened. Soldiers rode their horses harder. In the fervor to catch Hitler's abductors, an explosion of impatient and resolute soldiers, collided into one another. Their horses falling, tumbling, backsliding. Germans thrown, rose quickly to continue the search on foot.

As if some Divine force intervened, a momentary peace came amid the disarray. Riderless horses trotting playfully, simply meandering, snorting occasionally, emitting small puffs of warm air from their nostrils harmonized with the abundance of nature. The calm would not hold.

The ambulance was only steps away. "I pray Hildi was not hurt," said Barie, with a lingering glance back to the chalet. Except for the top of the chimney in Hitler's room, none of the compound was visible.

"We have to hurry," Paul said, sympathetically. "Hildi is a stalwartly woman. The Germans need her."

A storm of gunfire exploded from the ridge above them. "They found us, Paul." Tree trunks stopped most of the bullets. The get-away car was close enough to touch. So were the Nazis.

With its human cargo loaded into the ambulance, the vehicle's rear lift hatch slammed shut. It sped away. Bursts of automatic weapons fire chased it.

"Kill only the driver," the SS Oberstgruppen-Führer shouted amidst the crescendo of gunfire. Though his horse had thrown him and galloped off, he climbed to his feet. "Do not chance killing Der Führer!" the High Commander ordered.

Soldiers who heard the warning used discretionary firepower. They took careful aim before opening with surgical spurts of gunfire.

Infantry out of earshot of the Oberstgruppen-Führer order fired wildly at the escaping ambulance.

Hit over and over again, the ambulance vanished into a blind on the road. When it emerged from the last of the S curve, the vehicle became erratic. The Nazis took up positions and aimed to finish off the ambulance when the High Commander rescinded the order.

The ambulance lost control. It veered off the winding narrow road. Like the ricocheting silver ball in a game of pinball, it flipped and spun violently. Plunging into a rocky ravine, it collided with a cluster of jagged boulders that cut into its metal skin like a can opener. The rain of sparks ignited old, dry branches. Balls of fire erupted. Soon flames towered, rumbled. In minutes, the blaze consumed the vehicle. The last of the fire terminated in a plume of black smoke that dissolved into the treetops.

With the last of the fire snuffed, the ambulance had disintegrated into a pile of debris small enough to fit into a coffin. A contingent of German horsemen patrolled the edges of the wreckage. On occasion,

galloping hooves unearthed a charred bone.

Field Captain, Hauptsturmführer, Klaus vonFritzen, who had served in the medical laboratory kiosk in Ethiopia, signaled his superior.

The Oberstgruppen-Führer acknowledged him.

In the Field Captain's palm, lay a charred medallion. "I found it."

"Proof?" The SS High Commander feigned interest on his way to examine the Field Captain's discovery. "You are new here, Hauptsturmführer, vonFritzen," he said. "Neither the terrain nor Der Führer's personal items are familiar to you. Are you certain it is not a rock you hold?"

"It is the proof you seek, Oberstgruppen-Führer." The Field Captain closed his hand over the medallion. Stretching his arm high, his fist tight. "Der Führer's it is!"

On closer inspection of the medallion, the High Commander declared, "Herr Hitler is dead!" He turned to the Hauptsturmführer, "Destroy the medallion. No evidence of this day must remain."

After a few more minutes of stirring through the rubble, vonFritzen found the hard cover of Barie's diary resting on a pillow of fallen leaves. Again, he summoned the High Commander to him.

"Good observation, Hauptsturmführer. The Jews will never tell of their victory. Even German traitors inside Hitler's confidence could not kill him." The High Commander shook off a moment of despair. "Der Führer is not dead. Adolf Hitler will return."

"Oberstgruppen-Führer!" the Field Captain pointed to a large bone that stuck up through the soft earth. A bloody chunk of tree bark and a shred of shirtsleeve fabric a few feet away puzzled him. "The grandest of all victories for der Fatherland is the Jews are dead." The Hauptsturmführer laughed.

The High Commander remounted. Before he set the stallion to gallop back up the mountain, he turned to the Field Captain and concurred with a nod.

Storm clouds regathered, bringing near nighttime darkness. A blade of daylight illuminated the rear lift hatch and mangled twist handle from the gutted ambulance. It should have been peppered with bullet holes. Alone at the site, vonFritzen observed. It was not. Looking back to the seldom-travelled mountain road, he watched the rear lights of a second ambulance. It traveled in the opposite direction. Its sheet metal skin riddled with bullet holes. Instinctively, the Field Captain raised his weapon and aimed. Before deciding to empty its magazine, he stared quizzically at the steel skeletal remains of the burned-out ambulance, then slowly lowered the weapon. The Oberstgruppen-Führer's plan, it must be. He remembered the High Commander's words before the superior officer rode off. The war effort is not going well. The High Commander staged this. To preserve the Third Reich. To protect and keep Der Führer for

another day, he hypothesized. Hauptsturmführer Klaus vonFritzen tossed the medallion in the air a time or two, then pocketed it.

The Unveiling

CHAPTER 8: Berlin – Winter 1944

Several months passed since Nazi gunfire destroyed the ambulance in Berchtesgaden.

In the National Socialist German Workers Party headquarters, the SS High Commander sat in Hitler's favorite chair.

Inside the Chancellery compound, a Nazi party official asked, "The one who found the medallion?"

"Captured." The Oberstgruppen-Führer picked at a sore on the tip of his nose. A droplet of blood dribbled.

"By whom?"

With his handkerchief, he blotted the trickle. "He is in American hands."

"Are you troubled?"

"After the wreckage had cooled, the area was thoroughly examined. None of the inspectors would say to whom the remains found belonged."

"No test performed was conclusive?"

The High Commander rolled his eyes. "None."

"Not a single bone could be identified? Or verified?"

"We did not learn who all of the Polish resisters were." His leg twitched, setting off his foot to tap the floor. The distraction quelled the questions posed by the party leader. "Or their friends who might have helped them while they worked in Berchtesgaden. We cannot be certain all of them were in the ambulance that exploded."

"Or any of them at all, Oberstgruppen-Führer." Annoyed, the party official proposed, "What if Hitler is not dead? What if he is in the company of the Jews who you allowed to escape?"

"That is for me to worry over. Yours is to keep Germany patriotic."

"I will do my part. Yours is to advance on the front lines we hold. Not retreat! Never retreat!"

An SS lieutenant entered Hitler's private office and announced, "They are ready." He clicked his heels twice, twisted himself into a 1800 turn and faced the door from which he had entered. "You only have to summon them," he beckoned, then left the room.

The German leaders rose. Walking toward the balcony doors, they stood off to one side and watched

loyalist Germans collect on the courtyard below.

Most of those assembled turned their heads upward, toward the empty terrace, their eyes eager for the first glimpse. The hastily announced appearance by their Führer found German faces anticipated his arrival.

It was uncommon for their Führer to speak at a rally on the Chancellery grounds. Yet this would be an uncommon trial for an untested revelation. In a room across the hall from Hitler's office, the doppelgängers went through a final rehearsal and grooming.

The same door the SS lieutenant had exited opened slowly.

The party official drew a protracted breath. "The unveiling."

In the center of the private office, the pair of Adolf Hitler doubles faced one another. Appearing as mirror images, it was impossible to tell one doppelgänger from the other—or either from the original. One of them walked to the balcony doors and flung them open. His posture rigid with resolve.

Amid cheering, and in a blur of German nationalism, flags of the Third Reich waved vigorously.

About to address his countrymen, the doppelgänger leaned against the balcony railing, his eyes cast down on the terrace floor. In a blink, he lifted his head and snapped out an arm. "Sieg Heil." The gathered cheered wildly. "Sieg Heil. Sieg Heil." The doppelgänger spoke the caustic words of retaliation. "Germans must fight on. Do not believe what you hear. My word is the truth. I am the only truth. We will fight until the enemy and the Jews are no more. You must defeat the defeatists among you!" The political double promised to retake land lost and demanded unwavering allegiance.

As if Adolf Hitler himself delivered the message, the doppelgänger's passion pleased the German patriots. The amassed heralded their Chancellor, "Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!"

European Theater – Spring 1945

In an American POW camp, U.S Army Captain Garamond 'Gary' IGruber interrogated the SS Field Captain, Klaus vonFritzen. Others on the interrogation team, who had arrived late observed the grueling questioning technique. At the end of the exchange between the adversarial men of war, IGruber searched in all directions for others in his company who might be nearby. When convinced no one looked on, he shook hands and smiled warmly at the POW.

To reciprocate, vonFritzen kneeled at the foot of IGruber's wheelchair. At eye level with his captor, he braced himself by holding onto the chair's armrest. He then leaned into Captain IGruber and kissed him

on each cheek.

I Gruber returned the smile. Rhythmically, he tapped on a rectangular box tucked between his legs. The Stars and Stripes blanket that warmed his lap concealed it.

“Ahh, the shoebox. My collection of souvenirs. A gift, mein Captain.”

“I shall not forget the good Der Führer began, Herr von Fritzen. Adolf Hitler’s work will once again begin. When it does, it will not go unfinished. The Next Reich will be the last.”

In the summer of 1945, one horrifying war ended.

Russians were first to reach Berlin. In Hitler’s bunker, they found evidence of human remains and told the world they were Adolf Hitler’s.

Dead? In Hiding? Kidnapped? German hierarchy who had escaped the allies must have wondered.

Not too long after the war ended, reported Hitler sightings began. Not unlike other famous and infamous persons who had vanished or somehow had not fully lived out their lives, Hitler was thought seen in unimaginable places across the globe. Imagined or not, Adolf Hitler was destined not to be forgotten.

The American officer, and war hero had anointed himself and assumed the mantle from Germany’s last Führer.

In the millennium that followed, a more perfectly planned war began. Certain not to err where his predecessor had, he would leave nothing to chance. The seemingly unremarkable military man confined to his wheelchair prepared to lead the planet into the Next Reich.

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