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A L A N G R A T Z

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DINNER WITH NAZIS

IT'S HARD TO SMILE WHEN YOU'RE HAVING DINNER with Nazis.

There were Nazis all up and down the long table, talking and laughing and eating. There were Nazi soldiers in their gray German army uniforms. There were SS officers, members of Adolf Hitler's private Protection Squadron, in their black uniforms and red armbands. There were regular civilian Nazis who didn't fight in the military, who ran banks and factories and newspapers and wore suits and ties and Nazi pins.

And then there was me, Michael O'Shaunessey, wearing my brown long-sleeved shirt, black shorts, white knee socks, and black hiking boots polished to a shine. And just like the SS, the most fearsome killers in all the land, I wore a red armband with a big black swastika in the center of it, the hooked-cross symbol the Nazis plastered all over everything. I wore the uniform of the Hitler Youth, Germany's version of the Boy Scouts. Because I was a Nazi too.

Or at least I was pretending to be.

“More cake?” the Nazi next to me asked, offering me another slice. Light from the chandelier glinted on the silver skull pin on his collar.

“Um, sure. Thanks,” I said. “That’s very kind of you.” I remembered to smile, even though it took effort. I hated pretending to like these people, hated pretending to agree with their awful hatred of the Jews, hated pretending I wanted them to win the war and conquer the world. But I smiled because I had to. If they ever discovered I wasn’t really one of them, my family and I would disappear into a concentration camp, never to be seen or heard from again.

“Your German is so good!” the woman on my other side told me. She was the wife of a captain in the German army. “If I didn’t know your father was the Irish ambassador, I would think you grew up here in Berlin!”

I sagged in my chair. I heard this every time my family attended one of these dinners. I wasn’t exactly the blue-eyed, blond-haired “Aryan ideal,” but with my flawless German accent and my brown hair that fell like a mop into my brown eyes, I could pass for an average German boy any day. I wasn’t proud of it, but it was definitely useful.

“Michael’s always had a good head for languages,” my father said in German. He sat across from me at the table, my mother two seats down from him. “We’ve only been here for six years, but he already speaks better German than I do!”

1937. That was the year my father was named Irish ambassador

to Germany and we moved from London, where he'd been stationed, to Berlin. It was 1943 now, and I was thirteen years old. Things had changed so much in those six years. Berlin had been a wonderland when I first arrived, all towering columns with eagle statues on top and red flags fluttering from every building and parades ten thousand people strong. Hitler was already the chancellor of Germany, and the Nazis, his political party, were well in control. Germany wasn't at war yet, and not everybody was a Nazi back then, but it was hard to argue with their success. Everywhere I'd looked I'd seen faces full of smiles and laughter. But then, overnight, the party had ended. Not the Nazi Party. They had only gotten stronger. The other party — the feeling of unbounded German cheerfulness — was gone. I had finally seen the horror behind the smiles, and so had the rest of the world.

What happened that one night still haunted me.

"Michael's always had an exceptional memory, haven't you, son?" Ma said, breaking into my thoughts.

"It's true," my father said. "Michael reads in German, tells jokes in German. I think he even dreams in German!"

The adults around us at the table gave him a polite chuckle. Da the diplomat, doing what he did best. His mustache widened as he beamed at me, but the eyes that peered at me over his glasses weren't smiling. They were reminding *me* to smile. To be friendly. To play my part.

I picked up my glass of grape juice and took a drink to hide my frown.

"You are a better German than some Germans," the Nazi who

had offered me cake said. His name was Trumbauer, and his rank within the SS was Obersturmführer, which meant senior assault leader. He was a tall, thin man with slicked-back, jet-black hair, and a nose like a parrot's beak. "Just today, we raided the home of a German couple who were hiding a Jew in their attic. Right here in Berlin!" He shook his head as if he couldn't believe the stupidity of some people.

"How did you know they were hiding a Jew?" the woman next to me asked.

SS-Obersturmführer Trumbauer cut out a bite of cake with his fork and lifted it. "Their son reported them."

I shuddered. Their own son, ratting them out to the secret police. I couldn't imagine ever doing something like that to my own parents.

"What happened to them?" I asked.

"Hmm?" SS-Obersturmführer Trumbauer said, swallowing his cake. "Oh. The Germans were taken into protective custody at Dachau, of course. The Jew was shot while trying to escape."

The SS-Obersturmführer's words rattled me, and I knocked over my glass trying to set it back down. It struck the rim of my plate and shattered, sending glass and grape juice everywhere. I caught my reflection in every one of the tiny shards, half a dozen little Michael O'Shaunesseys looking up at me in horror. Suddenly, I was back again on that Berlin street, that night four years ago, when everything had changed.

When I'd finally learned what monsters the Nazis really were.