

THE PLOT TO KILL HITLER

BOOK THREE

ESCAPE

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ONE

Karl Hoffmann kept his back against the brick wall on the south side of the Gethsemane Church. At the other end of the street, headlights from two parked army cars lit up the Nazi checkpoint: half a dozen plain-clothes Gestapo agents and a pair of SS men in helmets stopping pedestrian traffic and checking papers. Between the two military vehicles loomed a green minna, sinister and dark. Karl imagined the rough hands of those Gestapo pigs shoving Max inside the truck, pounding on the back door to alert the driver that he could take the prisoner to Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse and throw him in a cell.

As a surgeon, Karl had become immune to the parade of horrors the war visited upon the citizens of Berlin, but imagining Max a prisoner of the Nazis filled him with teeth-grinding dread. He stepped into a small fenced-in garden at the rear of the church, where linden trees sheltered a pair of wrought-iron benches.

“Herr Doktor Hoffmann.” The low, polite voice came from the darkness off to his left.

Karl moved around the side of a tree. There was a slight woman slouching against the trunk. Her eyes were a pair of dull stones peeking out from beneath the short brim of her cloche hat. She reminded Karl of a theatrical tramp from one of Bertolt Brecht’s plays, which he’d grown fond of during the 1920s and early 1930s. Before the Nazis rose to power and outlawed Brecht’s work, of course.

“Ilse,” he said. “Thank you for meeting me.”

“You picked a fine night for it.” Ilse lifted a small silver flask to her lips and took a long pull.

Karl knew that “Ilse” was not this woman’s real name. Where she fit in Berlin’s underground resistance network, he wasn’t entirely sure. It was to Ilse that he had passed the vials of sulfuric acid that Colonel Stauffenberg had used for his bomb fuses. And it was Ilse who had persuaded the communists to make the weekly food drops in the backyard of the Hoffmanns’ safe house.

She could be a communist. A Jew living on false papers and borrowed time. Or someone like himself: a German doing what she could to resist the Nazis.

Either way, one telephone call to a switchboard operator, a few coded phrases, and here she was—prompt, reliable Ilse. He wondered what her profession had been in the years before the war.

“Drink,” she said, holding out the flask. It wasn’t a question. Karl took the flask and poured schnapps down his throat. Instantly, the herbal bite of the alcohol warmed his chest and stomach.

“Thank you,” he said, returning the flask. “Is it true, what they’re saying about Hitler being alive?”

“Here’s what I know,” Ilse said. “There were actions planned for tonight. We were set to move against Nazi targets throughout Berlin, once the army began to arrest the SS and Gestapo agents. But we’re standing down, because that hasn’t happened.” She shook her head. “Operation Valkyrie seems to be at a standstill. Whether that is because Hitler survives, or simply because Colonel Stauffenberg is losing control of the situation, we can’t be sure.”

The schnapps curdled in Karl’s stomach. A cramp like a tight, heavy knot took hold. If the Gestapo and the SS were being neutralized, then maybe Max would have a chance. But if Valkyrie was headed for failure, the Nazis would strike back hard.

A boy caught firebombing a Hitler Youth building today, of all days, would not be treated leniently.

Karl clenched his fists as a bolt of white-hot anger surged through him. “How could Stauffenberg have failed? This was our one chance!”

“Keep your voice down,” Ilse said.

“I’m sorry,” Karl said, ashamed of his outburst. He

pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. "I'm not myself."

That's an understatement, he thought. Every so often he would find himself marveling at the difference a few months could make. Last winter he had still been the head of the trauma surgery department at the university hospital, a man of steady competence who commanded respect from his colleagues and even from the Nazi administrators who tried to persuade him to join the Party. But just as the summer's poor diet had taken its toll on his body, the endless days cooped up in the safe house had worn away at his mind. He had always held desperation at bay, but now he could feel a frantic, nervous energy clawing at the edges of his awareness.

"My son is missing, and I fear he's been taken." He couldn't bring himself to say *by the Gestapo*. Ilse would know what he meant.

"We can find out if he's being held," she said, "but it will take time. We lost our eyes inside Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse, and after today things will be much more difficult."

Karl swallowed the lump in his throat. He had always been a practical man, but some part of him had clung to the hope that Ilse could work miracles.

"He's twelve years old," he said.

"I understand," Ilse said. "My youngest brother was thirteen."

Was, Karl thought. Ilse didn't have to say anything more.

"I'm sorry," Ilse said, reading the pain in his silence. "I didn't mean—"

"It's all right," Karl said. "I just can't accept that there's nothing I can do."

"That's the surgeon in you—always looking for a way to solve the problem. A little incision, a tube here, a snip there—but sometimes, as hard as it is, we have to accept that the best thing to do is nothing at all."

"And so I'm to leave my son in the hands of those animals?" He shook his head. "No. There must be *something*."

Ilse sighed. "Perhaps, if you weren't already a wanted fugitive with false papers, a known member of the Becker Circle, you could find some sympathetic official to plead your case with the Gestapo. But even if you were an upstanding Nazi Party member, it would still be difficult. Since you are an enemy of the Reich, attempting such a thing would be suicide."

"I could offer to trade myself for him."

"*Herr Doktor*, we're speaking of the Gestapo here. They will simply take you both."

Karl sighed. "You're right, Ilse. I'm sorry. I don't know what I expected of you tonight, of all nights."

Ilse put a hand on his shoulder. "What is expected of us tonight is changing by the minute, I'm afraid."

"So where does that leave me?"

“Do you want an honest answer?”

“I do.”

“Take your wife, your daughter, and the Vogel girl, and get out of Berlin. I’m sure your son is a tough boy, but the Gestapo will sniff out what they want to know. It won’t take them long to find your safe house.”

Karl closed his eyes. Ilse was talking about the interrogation of his twelve-year-old son. Perhaps even his torture.

“It’s not the kind of choice anyone should have to make,” she continued, “and I’m truly sorry, but you do have to make it: your son, or your entire family.”

He opened his eyes. “I’ve already told Ingrid and the girls to flee if I’m not back by midnight tonight. They know the contacts and the route.”

“Good. Go home and join them, and don’t wait until midnight. Berlin is no place for you anymore.”

“I won’t leave the city without Max.”

There was a long silence. A procession of vehicles roared past the church. Karl and Ilse huddled close together, keeping the fat linden trunk between themselves and the street. They watched as a pair of the long, sleek Mercedes cars favored by SS officers turned the corner, followed by another green minna.

Checkpoints were popping up all over Prenzlauer Berg (and, undoubtedly, all over Berlin), sprouting like some

fast-growing, insidious fungus to blanket the city. Ilse was right—the Hoffmanns shouldn't wait until midnight. If Valkyrie was sputtering into failure, things would get worse by the hour. Still, he tried to hold on to an ember of hope. Perhaps Max was just hiding out somewhere. Even if he was hurt, it would be better than being in the hands of the Gestapo.

Or perhaps Stauffenberg had succeeded and Hitler truly was dead. There was always a chance!

Ilse's soft voice brought him back to reality.

"You're a good man who has to make a bad choice. Whatever you decide, do it quickly. Don't let the Nazis make the choice for you."

Karl knew what was coming next. He could hear the *farewell* coursing through her words, the strain coupled with the steel of bitter resolve forged by years of permanent goodbyes.

"I'm afraid you won't be able to contact me again, Herr Doktor Hoffmann."

"I understand, Ilse."

She clasped his hands in her own, looked him in the eyes, and then she was gone.