

BLITZKRIEG

B R I A N F A L K N E R

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THE STRANGER

Thursday, October 13, 1938

The stranger arrived well after midnight. The boy was awake instantly, alerted by the tiniest sound of the scullery door being gently closed. A glance at his cuckoo clock told him the time.

His parents must have been expecting the stranger because they had waited up, and Joe could hear the soft murmurings of their voices. The stranger had come in by the back door, which was odd. Visitors usually entered through the front door. But then again, visitors did not usually call after midnight. Something out of the ordinary was happening this night.

Joe lay still for a moment, breathing in an awareness of the immediate universe that surrounded him. That's what the hero always did, like Lieutenant Urquhart in *Detective Yarns*, or Secret Agent Troy in *Hutchinson's Adventure-Story Magazine*, the most recent issue of which he had received for his twelfth birthday. He used all his senses, like the hero always did. Feeling, tasting, smelling, listening, looking.

The bed he lay in *felt* warm and soft, the big goose-down quilt a warm cloud enveloping him. The pillow was thin and a little hard, but he preferred it like that. Big, soft pillows always seemed to be trying to smother him.

He *tasted* a lingering aftertaste of Doramad, the toothpaste that his mother made him use twice a day. She liked it because it was slightly radioactive and killed germs. Joe didn't like it. He was afraid it would make his teeth glow in the dark.

He *smelled* the tang of pipe smoke in the air. His father only smoked when he was upset and almost never this late at night.

From a small wicker basket in the corner, he *heard* a soft snuffle from Blondie, his new German shepherd puppy. She was a gift from the ambassador himself for Joe's birthday and was the center of Joe's life. He had wanted to call her Betty, after Betty Grable, the beautiful American actress, but his mother hadn't approved of "that temptress," so he had compromised and called her Blondie instead.

He *saw* the drapes were open, letting in the clear night sky. The lower three stars of the Orion constellation were visible just below the top of the window. The sword of Orion. The telescope (actually a big, old brass ship's telescope that his father had borrowed from the embassy) stood proudly on its wooden tripod by the window, staring endlessly out the window at the sky and stars beyond. Keeping watch over the night skies . . . for what, Joe didn't know.

His soccer ball sat on the dresser at the end of the bed. The brown leather showed shiny edges from years of battering but commanded pride of place in the room. That ball had helped his team win the school age-group championship. It was a great ball. On the far wall was pinned a poster of Fritz Szepan, captain of the German national team through the last two World Cups.

A sliver of light from the slightly open bedroom door lay across the face of the cuckoo clock on the wall. The small hand was nearly at the one, but the big hand was camouflaged by the gloom. The cuckoo, half in and half out of its little home, looked back at him, its eyes twinkling with amusement. The cuckoo never went home any more, nor did it fully emerge to announce the hours in its mechanical cuckoo voice. Not since Joe had decided to take the clock apart to find out how it had worked.

Joe lay still for a moment longer, his eyes on the bird, but his mind occupied listening to all the clues that the quiet of the night brought him. The low, but urgent, murmur of voices. The soft footsteps in the passageway downstairs. The quiet clunk of the hallway door closing and a small click as it was latched.

Finally happy that he was fully aware of the world that surrounded him, the complete master of this little piece of the universe, he rolled out from under the thick quilt and stood up . . . putting his right foot smack in the center of his chamber pot. He was relieved to find it was empty.

He padded silently in his thick bed socks to the door of his room. On a hook on the back of the door was his bathrobe, which he quickly donned against the cold night air.

He drew the door open with a sharp jerk that he knew would prevent it from creaking, then paused to assemble his team. This was not a mission he wanted to undertake by himself. Four of his favorite tin soldiers immediately volunteered and, secreting them in the pocket of his gown, he moved stealthily into the hall.

Down the staircase, missing the third step because it creaked . . . so did the seventh . . . and the last. Around the corner to the hallway. Listening at the door for any noise in the passageway beyond. A quick glance through the crack between the door and the jamb to confirm. Then carefully sliding the door latch upward with a slip of thick cardboard that he kept in the pocket of his dressing gown for just that purpose. Pushing the door open wide enough to slip through and easing the latch silently back into place. Leaving the door open a tiny fraction so that it looked closed but would allow him a quick exit. You must always have an escape route. That's what Agent Troy said.

The voices from the scullery were louder now, but still muffled. Joe slid his bed-socked feet across the polished floorboards into the kitchen, which adjoined the scullery. The room was warm. The coal stove had been kept stoked up; no doubt in anticipation of the stranger's arrival. It was dark and he moved carefully so as not to trip over a pot or other utensil that the maid might have left on the floor.

From the next door room he heard his mother's voice. Reassuring, calming. Then his father's more urgent, querying tone. "Why do you think Michaelson didn't show?"

Joe's mother replied quietly, "Perhaps he was delayed, or it just wasn't safe to travel."

"Perhaps," his father agreed, "but these days . . ."

Joe sat, stretching out his legs on the hard wooden floor. He slipped a hand into the pocket of his bathrobe and pulled out the four toy soldiers, placing them on the floor in front of him.

Three were British grenadiers, resplendent in their bright red uniforms. The fourth was a French musketeer. The French one was a little worse for wear, the blue paint having worn off in a number of places, exposing the tin beneath. The French never did very well in Joe's battles.

"If the Gestapo have him . . ." This was a voice Joe didn't recognize. A stranger. There was a tone to it that was unsettling. Joe identified it as desperation, or terror, or both.

The night was getting interesting.

"He wouldn't talk," his mother said quietly. "And in any case, he doesn't know anything about you but your code name."

Joe's musketeer became Michaelson, suddenly trapped in a dark, lonely alley by the three grenadiers, now evil agents of the much-feared Gestapo.

Bam! Michaelson kicked away the gun of the first agent and head-butted the next one in the stomach. The third took a shot at him with his Luger, but Michaelson was too fast and dived to the ground, picking up the first agent's gun and killing the third Gestapo man with a single shot, before escaping down the alleyway that was actually Joe's legs.

He dropped one of the Gestapo agents, and there was a light clunk as it hit the hard wooden floor of the kitchen.

"What was that?" the stranger asked nervously from the other room.

Joe held absolutely still.

"Nothing," his mother said. "Nothing at all. No, no, I don't think that was anything to worry about. This house often makes odd noises like that . . ."

She was talking too much. And his father was silent. She was obviously covering, while his father moved around to deal with the threat. At least that's what Agent Troy would do.

There it was. The faintest click from the scullery door to the hall. His mother was still going on about the old house and the strange creaks and groans it made.

Joe knew he was going to have to move, and move now. But silently. And to where? He urgently scanned the kitchen. There was a small pile of towels in the laundry basket waiting to be washed the next day. It would have to do. He slid across the floor to the basket, climbed over the edge, and curled inside, scooping the towels up and spreading them on top of himself. They were damp and cold, and he gave an involuntary shiver as they touched his face, before commanding his body to absolute stillness. He shut his mouth tightly, in case his teeth really did glow in the dark.

There was a bang, and a glare all around him as the light in the kitchen flicked on. Through a tiny crack in the weave of the basket he saw his father enter the room, poised, alert, and dangerous. In his hand he held a dark metal object and it took Joe several moments to realize what it was. He didn't even know his father owned a pistol!

He knew he was not completely hidden but hoped that the wool of his bathrobe would look like another towel to his father's searching eyes. There would be severe punishment if he got caught. He knew that for sure.

A piece of coal coughed and shifted in the coal range, and after a moment, the lights snapped off again. Joe remained

motionless until he heard the scullery door close and his father's voice in the other room.

"Must have been the coal range. Nobody there."

Joe eased himself out of the basket and slid back to his position by the wall.

"You have the documents?" his mother was asking.

"Yes. They were in the dead-letter box as planned," the stranger said.

"No chance of a trap?"

"No. I was very careful."

There was a long silence, broken only by the rustle of paper. Joe staged a few more battles between tattered blue Michaelson and the bright red Gestapo agents to fill in the time.

"Okay," his father said at last. "We'll microfilm these and get them to London."

"I hope to God we're not too late." That was his mother speaking.

"Do I go back?" the stranger wanted to know.

"No, we can't risk it. If Michaelson has been taken . . ." His father trailed off.

"Here's the address of the safe house." His mother's voice, and the scratch of a fountain pen. "They'll ask you for a password, it's *Violet*—don't forget it."

His father said, "Good luck, Dusko."

Joe sensed the meeting was over. Quickly and quietly he re-latched the hallway door and tiptoed back upstairs, pushing his bedroom door to the same angle it had been before.

He was in bed by the time he heard the back scullery door

open and the man named Dusko stumble out into the cold and dark of the night.

Joe lay facing away from the door, in case his parents should check on him, and stared out of the window. If he moved his head forward just a little, to get a better angle, he could see the rest of the constellation.

Orion, the hunter, was in the night sky.

And Joe's father owned a gun.