

THE  
EXORCISM  
OF  
ADOLF HITLER  
A HORROR NOVEL

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CONNOR GUNNIN

Chapters 1-2

# Chapter 1

## The Angel

Frightening things were not supposed to happen in broad daylight. They were supposed to belong to the darkness of night, when more is unknown and the mind is prone to playing tricks. But this particular day in Bruna Stengel's young life was no ordinary day, and her mind had always been just a bit different. Indeed, there was little more frightening in the world than the mind of a child, save perhaps one thing. Children were so unable to discern what was real from what was not, the literal from the metaphorical, the physical from the ethereal, the truth from a lie. Their minds were uncooked, sometimes malformed, and often operated in realms that, for adults, had long fallen dormant. Adults wondered what terrible machinations of a child's own creation they might be forced to protect them from.

These were the thoughts scattered through Bruna's head on a clear autumn afternoon in a sprawling central park, though at fourteen years old, she didn't know how to articulate them. They exited her consciousness as quickly as they entered it and she soon forgot what she had been thinking about at all.

Bruna and two-dozen other teenage girls stood shoulder-to-shoulder in a straight line, dressed in sleeveless black leotards and skirts. Some smiled, bouncing lightly on their toes, while others nervously squeezed their lips together, making fleeting eye contact with the motion picture director, awkwardly handsome in a youthful sort of way, lining up his camera tripod in front of them. A brutish, middle-aged woman in a pressed, white blouse and ankle-length black skirt monitored the girls from over the director's shoulder. She was their troupe leader and carried herself with a practiced, encouraging demeanor always threatening to give way at a moment's notice. Bruna avoided her eyeline entirely.

The year was 1934 and the park was in Berlin. Bruna and the rest of the girls were members of the *Bund Deutscher Mädel*, or League of German Girls—the female division of the Hitler Youth.

The director straightened up from the camera and looked back at the troupe leader with a nod, satisfied with his framing. The girls settled and went still. The director counted down from three on the fingers of his right hand and turned the hand-crank movie camera with his left. The girls waited for their cue.

“Gas has fallen!” the troupe leader shouted.

The girls remained still for the split second it took her to blow a shrill whistle, then broke from their line and rushed to a pile of gas masks on the lawn nearby. Bruna was crowded out by several older, faster girls at first—she was among the youngest in her four-year age bracket—but managed to avoid being one of the last to grab a mask. Once they each had one, the girls rushed back to their positions in line in front of the director. They awaited further instruction with their gas masks held neatly in front of their waists. This delay would not be seen in the finished cut. Bruna had seen reels like this before and knew the pauses would be intercut with title cards relaying instructions for how to properly don and secure the gas mask. She was thankful for the recordings of German folk music that would supplant her troupe leader's barking voice.

“Gas masks on!”

The girls brought their masks up and secured a pair of straps that crisscrossed over their heads and fastened under their chins. The masks were heavy, just a notch below army grade, and covered their entire faces. Thick, black rubber cupped everything from Bruna's scalp to her jaw where the unit terminated in a flat, broad, filter canister that lent the appearance of a blunted snout.

“Seal test!”

They covered the end of the filters with their palms and inhaled. If the gas mask was properly fitted, the rubber would contract, indicating an airtight seal over the skin. Bruna had rushed tightening the straps so she wouldn't fall behind and didn't know if hers would seal correctly. Relief washed over her when it did. But the lenses of her mask fogged almost immediately and her heart rate started to rise. She could not see her troupe leader, the director, or anything directly in front of her. She stood still, awaiting instruction, trying not to panic.

“Begin exercises!”

At the sound of the troupe leader's whistle, the girls split into two rows, one in front of the other. Bruna followed the blur of the girl to her left and snuck a finger under the gas mask, hoping she wasn't facing the camera and her leader wouldn't notice. The lenses began to clear just as the girls commenced their routine, beginning by swaying their bodies side to side and lifting and swinging their arms in unison. Expressionist gymnastics was a trend that had swept the Reich in recent years. Created around a principle known as “belief and beauty,” it was choreographed to combine calisthenics, ballet, and exercises with swinging hoops, balls, and clubs. Though Bruna enjoyed it, she always thought it looked a bit like synchronized swimming on dry ground. The instructors who taught it said it was meant to “display grace and rhythm to form a picture of a happy affirmation of life and embody the harmony of German maidens.” Bruna didn't know what that meant, but instructors spoke of it with such pride, she could only assume it was something profound. Her troupe leader liked to say that girls could only be beautiful inside and out if they learned to move in a way that was uniform with one another. That was slightly easier for Bruna to grasp. And they were supposed to do all of it while wearing gas masks. Bruna could picture the title card preceding it. It would say something like ‘sport and art under the gas mask.’

Civilian gas masks were not an unusual sight in the Germany Bruna grew up in. British soldiers had deployed chlorine and mustard gas against their German counterparts in the last war—killing tens of thousands—and it was generally accepted gas would be used again in the event of another war. All Germans were encouraged to own a gas mask and to practice wearing it for fifteen minutes at least one day a week. If the Brits were doing it, the thought was, so should Germans. Families happily walking together and factory workers operating machinery while wearing their gas masks were becoming commonplace in magazine photographs and newsreels like the one Bruna's troupe was filming now. In her leader's words, they needed to "show how anything can be done while following instructions to serve the Fatherland."

Bruna snuck a look to her left to gauge her distance from the girl nearest to her. She knew the routine, but she was less coordinated than the others, still a few years away from growing into her frame, and it reflected in her level of confidence. She worried she wasn't projecting it well enough. She didn't feel like she belonged. It didn't matter that she had been handpicked for the occasion. She figured it must have been the extra hours of practice she put in on her own. Or it was because of her father. Maybe he was the only reason she was there. Bruna realized her thoughts were drifting again, which meant she had kept up with the other girls without being aware of it. This made her proud. Then she saw the angel.

It appeared on a low hill across an unblemished length of grass on the other side of the park. The angel was veiled, yet luminous, like the midmorning sun in a hazy sky. Bruna had seen the angel many times before. Sometimes it appeared to her in moments of need, such as the times she grieved over seeing her father so little or growing up not knowing her mother at all. Other times it came as a blatant distraction, as if to remind her it served an agenda other than her own. She was never certain if she should be afraid of it or not, an unknown which made the very idea of it all the more frightening. Bruna was familiar with the idea of a guardian angel, but when people spoke of them, they did it casually, and usually as a figure of speech. Hers was certainly more than that. She hoped it was there to watch over her, but she was never sure. It never let her see it in full or up close. She would glimpse a face in a window, a silhouette in the sky, feel its touch on the back of her neck, or hear the flap of a wing when no one was around. She felt intimately familiar with it yet had little idea of what it looked like. But this time would be different. She knew she could see it if only she took off that gas mask.

Bruna went still and broke from the routine while the other girls continued, uncertain what they should do when one of them deviated. Bruna pulled off her mask and squinted to help her eyes adjust. Even from a distance, the angel was almost too bright. It had the general shape of a human figure until something unfolded from its back. She had finally glimpsed the angel's wings. She held her breath in awe as they spread.

Her troupe leader blocked her view. "Bruna, you've wasted our director's take. Is something wrong?"  
"Do you see that?" Bruna asked, pointing at the angel.

The troupe leader turned and looked without reacting. "Why did you take off your gas mask?"

The director stopped cranking the camera. The other girls gathered around her. Bruna suddenly felt regretful and embarrassed. "Please, I—I'm sorry, I thought I saw something."

“This isn’t helpful. You know why we wear our masks, don’t you?”

The troupe leader waited, her heavily made-up eyes piercing Bruna’s. Bruna thought she looked nothing like the pure, natural women they were told to be. She could hear the other girls giggling at her under their masks. She felt flustered and couldn’t answer.

Another girl shouted through her mask, “To make powerful images for the *Führer’s* films!”

“Correct.” The troupe leader nodded. “But why cover our faces? Bruna this time.”

Bruna looked down at her gas mask, and for the first time, she wished not to see the angel again. She was getting older. The benefits of fitting in were too great and telling people she had a guardian angel didn’t help. Besides, she thought, she had new ideas and goals now. It was time for her to draw strength from the system instead. She put the gas mask back on.

“To train us to act as one,” Bruna said.

Her troupe leader’s demeanor changed. “Very good. Now start again.”

While the girls walked back to their positions, Bruna noticed a group of men in brown and gray suits watching them from afar. Reich government types. She hoped her father wasn’t one of them to spare herself the shame of him seeing her singled out. Bruna’s father was a Nazi, as were the fathers of most children she knew. Successful men now either worked for the party directly or openly brandished their party membership at their homes and businesses. Werner Stengel was the former, a government official, and Minister of the Interior no less. Still, he was different than most because prior to becoming a Nazi, Werner Stengel had been a Catholic priest. Bruna never quite understood the path her father took to get where he was. He had always been a vague and private man. Something happened between his two divergent lives and the mystery of it frustrated her. How does a man leave the church to work for the Nazis? And more importantly, why was she not allowed to know about it? In time, she became convinced it had to do with her mother. Bruna knew very little about her. She died not long after Bruna was born. She had been a nurse when her parents met during the war. Had her father been a different man before then? A less distant one? Priests were not supposed to have children, after all. Was all this somehow Bruna’s fault? It couldn’t be. Germans were supposed to have as many children as they could. The Reich needed to grow. Bruna told herself she would get her answers someday, once she earned her father’s respect.

For now, the respect Bruna had for herself came through the League. The idea of a national organization to educate girls in the traditions of their homeland and train them to be homemakers and wives in their new society sounded romantic and exciting to Bruna when she first joined in 1932, a full year before Hitler came to power and the League’s popularity soared. Bruna was proud to have been a part of it longer than many older girls who joined later. League membership still wasn’t mandatory for all girls, but it was coming. It felt good knowing she made the choice for herself. The Hitler Youth was for molding boys into obedient fighting men, but war was not something that would ever be expected of Bruna. In the League, girls like her went hiking and learned songs, dance, first aid, and home economics. League Girls aspired to one day earn the Mother’s Cross.

A bronze one was issued to a woman who birthed five children, six earned her a cross made of silver, and eight earned her gold. They were growing their race and doing so married to a handsome SS officer was considered the highest ideal. The future was always on their minds. And it was not solely their own, but Germany's.

The girls started their routine from the beginning. Bruna did everything she could to blend in. But it was a conscious effort, and her heightened self-awareness made the routine more strenuous than the last time. She felt stiff, not graceful, and trying to put the angel out of her mind only caused her to think of it more. But they completed the take. The director stopped the hand crank and peered at them without expression. Bruna was certain she had done poorly and that her troupe leader would pull her aside or even replace her. But the director turned to the troupe leader and gave a short, single nod.

“Again,” the troupe leader said. “Begin exercises!”

The camera cranked and the whistle blew. The gas mask rubbed across Bruna's cheeks as she grinned beneath it. Relief radiated down on her. She hadn't been singled out. Moreover, she stopped feeling alone. During the next take it felt like the others moved through her and she through them. She completed the routine without even once contemplating the angel. This time the director was satisfied. He did nothing to congratulate them, he simply folded up the legs of his camera tripod and began packing up his equipment. Not one of the girls removed their gas masks.

“Line up straight, girls!” It was subtle enough to miss, but in the middle of her shout, the troupe leader's voice quaked.

The suited men approached—a large entourage from across the park, fanning out from the one at the center. They all wore the same brown or gray four-button suits with thick, red armbands emblazoned with the swastika around their left arms. Bruna knew this look well. Her father wore it daily. The troupe leader and director stood erect, right hands held high in their stiffest Nazi salutes. At the center was Adolf Hitler. The Chancellor. *The Führer*. It occurred to Bruna that she had never seen him up close before. She knew other party ministers' children who had met him, but her father had never granted her the privilege. He was of average height and slight of build, but he carried himself with the presence of an Olympic strong man or film star. Subtle details distinguished him from his aids—his military visor cap, the black pants he wore with his brown suit jacket, and how he faced straight ahead, never looking toward the men at his sides the way they did at him. Bruna found herself thinking for the first time about how young he seemed for a head of state, only forty-four. And as far as she or anyone else knew, he was still a bachelor. The other girls were already saluting, so Bruna quickly extended her arm.

Hitler's entourage neared. Of all the girls in Bruna's troupe, he walked up to her. Awestruck, she didn't think to remove her gas mask. Hitler did it for her, lifting the mask to expose her young face.

“What pretty, young girls sprout from our German soil.” Hitler's voice was gruff but calm, different than how Bruna had heard it on radio and film. His eyes were hypnotic. She tingled as she looked into them. Then he moved on from her. “Off with your masks. Let me see you!”

There was a moment's hesitation from the other girls, but once the first of them tossed her gas mask aside, so did the rest. Bruna watched as they swarmed him and pushed her to the outside. They fawned over him, swooning over their charismatic, world-famous chancellor. He was everything they knew to admire and the emotions he stirred in them were as real to Bruna as any she had known. The party officials accompanying Hitler stood and observed. Everything the girls knew came from people like them, packaged and delivered by the newspapers and radio stations that answered to them.

A pair of photographers with the entourage began to stage the girls around Hitler. Bruna had seen this image before in the papers and magazines—an affable, gregarious Hitler surrounded by reveling, young League Girls. Now she saw the same type of picture being assembled before her eyes. It was her troupe now. Now it was their turn to be by his side and they would be the ones admired and envied. If only she could get closer, Bruna thought, craning her neck from the fringes, hoping to make it into the frame.

“Wait! Her. Yes, her. Put her in front.” Bruna realized the photographer was referring to her. Before she could react, a set of hands grabbed her arms and moved her in front of the other girls who had laughed at her only moments before. She looked up and Hitler looked down. He placed a firm hand on her shoulder. He looked back to the camera, but she could not look away from him.

“Face here!” The photographer's words startled her. She followed his voice to the camera and smiled.

Bruna imagined the places her picture might be seen. Not only had her troupe been filmed for what might be a newsreel or documentary, but she had been photographed with the Führer himself. No longer would she have to feel lesser than her peers.

“Bruna!” Her troupe leader alerted her that she was now standing by herself. Hitler and his men were now walking back across the park while the other girls had collected their gas masks and now waited on her a short distance away. She picked up her mask and followed. All, however, was not at ease within the shifting, vacillating walls of Bruna's mind. As good and empowering as it all felt, something still seemed not quite right about how the grownups around her had acted, something she couldn't quite put a finger on. There had been a moment, perhaps only a second, when her troupe leader's grating voice was interrogating her over removing her mask, that Bruna pieced it together. Her elders all thought the same way about all things. Many of them truly believed it. But even the ones she suspected didn't act as though they did, and for some reason, they were often the loudest.

She glanced back over her shoulder at the hill across the park. The angel was gone. It was the last time she would ever look for it. As she followed her troupe, Bruna remembered her thoughts from earlier. There was still one thing more frightening than the mind of a child. Yes, she realized, it was the mind of an adult. When children didn't see the world around them for what it was, it came from a place of innocence. Adults, on the other hand, did it because they chose to. And this, to Bruna, was scarier somehow. She joined up with her troupe, and then, as before, Bruna forgot what she had been thinking about at all.

# Chapter 2

## The Castle

**B**runa stared into the depths of Germany's Black Forest from a third-story window on a desolate, gray afternoon, four years later in March of 1938. She was eighteen now and a fresh graduate of the League of German Girls. People had begun treating her as a young woman, and although she didn't always see herself that way, it felt good to know that others did. She had become a graceful dancer and gymnast, though now that her time in the League had ended, she often wondered what use those skills would be. She had finally grown into her body and saw the men around her starting to notice. She was the only daughter of Interior Minister Stengel and told herself the party and German society would want to open doors for her.

But in private, she felt directionless. She wanted to lead and make a difference, not for the sake of power, but to set an example and be more than just the recipient of some bronze cross. There were a few women in high positions that came to mind. She thought of Magda Goebbels or Lena Heydrich, but they were wives of powerful men. Bruna felt she could settle for that, but then she also thought of Gertrud Scholz-Klink, the highest-ranking woman in the Nazi Party, and Leni Riefenstahl, the filmmaker. Yes, those were the women she wanted to be like. While the SS officers, *Luftwaffe* pilots, and other aspirational young men noticed her, they always kept their distance, and she didn't know why. At some point, Bruna determined her wandering mind was the problem. Sometimes it felt like the people around her were all of one mind while she was another. They all said the same things and seemed to get along the better for it. Conversation never strayed too far from the point of view of the party's latest radio bulletin or that morning's paper. It dawned on Bruna that she had much to learn if she was to get along with them too. From that point on, she decided she would do best to find her answers within the party.

Bruna had spent the past three days cloistered in Falkenhayn Castle, a remote place she had never heard of, hidden deep in the mountainous terrain of the Black Forest where she had never been. It was not like the towering, opulent castles of Hohenzollern or Neuschwanstein she was familiar with. Falkenhayn Castle was a starkly medieval place with Gothic architectural cues adorning a structure that spoke to utility over grandeur and function over form. It was built of rough-cut granite blocks from the mountain it clung to, with a fit and finish somewhat cruder than the craftsmanship seen in the larger, more recent castles. Pointed arches and



narrow lancet windows broke up the barrenness of its walls and the early spring mist that hovered around the mountain left the castle in a state of perpetual dampness. Inside, there were no grand staircases or flowing tapestries, and the artwork was of a brooding, religious sort, as if only the most solemn images from the Old Testament were allowed to interrupt the monotony of dark stone. This castle could not hold a candle to the great architect Speer's new Reich Chancellery building back in Berlin, Bruna thought.

Her father was away on some official duty and had told Bruna neither what he was doing nor why he had taken her there. He left her under the supervision of Eloise, the castle's elderly caretaker of at least seventy. Like Bruna's father, Eloise had been deliberately vague about the reason for Bruna's stay. At first, Bruna settled on the idea that Falkenhayn Castle might have been selected as the site for a secret meeting of party leaders. Perhaps this would be her formal introduction to the inner circle. But if it was truly so secret, then why would she, a fresh League graduate, be permitted to attend? She had spent the last three days trying to work it out in her head. Eloise carried on as though this was nothing out of the ordinary, but Bruna was convinced otherwise.

Despite this, Bruna liked Eloise. She was guarded, but kind, with stern eyes that belied a gentle demeanor, and she had known Bruna's father since his days as a young priest before the Great War. Compared to women like her former troupe leader, Eloise was a wealth of fresh knowledge. She told Bruna about the Rhineland and Baden regions from where her family hailed, as well as the history of Falkenhayn Castle itself. Its location at the entrance to a mountain pass was chosen by the storied family of House Margrave in the 14th century to protect a trade route traveling through the Rhine Valley into France. While not an especially large castle now, Waldbaden Castle, as it was then called, was smaller still in those days. Its main keep was enlarged in 1636 as an army fortification to protect against a French invasion during the Thirty Years' War. A series of stone and wrought-iron jail cells in the castle's cellar and upper stories still remained as a reminder of a time when French soldiers were imprisoned there. The castle fell into disuse when the war ended in 1648. Eventually, its outer walls and secondary structures were dismantled and pillaged for building materials until only the five-story main keep remained. Another noble family, the von Falkenhayns, purchased the castle in 1830. They restored the castle as a summer residence, though they seldom used it due to its remoteness—the trade route it was built to protect having been long since abandoned. They were Eloise's ancestors, Bruna learned, and their last addition had been a telephone line running down the mountain built in the 1890s. By the 20th century, nature had reclaimed all of the ground up to the main keep and trees had grown tall enough to block all but the partial fourth and fifth stories on the castle's north end from view. The westbound road into the Rhine Valley was no more, leaving only a one-way dirt road descending east through the forest into the German countryside. Falkenhayn Castle, now forgotten, was more remote than it had ever been, its present purpose a mystery to the outside world, and Eloise von Falkenhayn, the last of her line, seemed intent on keeping that secret from Bruna.

If there was anyone besides her father and Eloise who knew their purpose there, it was Brother Jürgen, a strange and frankly intimidating Catholic monk. He was tall, probably a full two meters if Bruna had to guess, and nearly as old as Eloise. His long face, thick eyebrows, smoke-gray beard, and flowing, silver hair gave him

an intensely dramatic appearance, made even more so by his black robes and heavy, wooden walking cane that could be heard from almost anywhere in the castle. Jürgen was a monk of the Benedictine Order from Metten Abbey, a monastery in Bavaria, and a colleague of Eloise's who came and went from Falkenhayn Castle as needed. His every movement conveyed physical strength instilled from decades of hard, monastery labor. The cane, Eloise explained, was to help him ease the burden of an old hip injury. He was also completely silent. His vow of silence was apparently not permanent, but rather something he undertook ahead of what Bruna knew only to be "a ritual." He had spent the past two days fasting and praying in a small room on the second floor that had once been for the castle's servants. He would join them in the dining hall at supper time, eating nothing, and consuming only water and a cup of red wine which he blessed ahead of the meal. When Bruna inquired about Jürgen's habits and the ritual he was preparing for, Eloise told her that for now, the less she knew, the better.

Brother Jürgen's presence confirmed to Bruna this was no meeting of party officials. What would men like that need with some weird, old monk? And where was the castle's staff? She figured Eloise would need a staff of at least three or four to keep the premises clean, cook the food, and maintain the modern plumbing and electricity. Surely the creaky, gasoline-powered generator in the cellar needed constant work. And someone must have had to regularly get supplies from Schramberg or wherever the nearest town was. But Eloise had sent them all away. She alone ran the castle now. Bruna would have to wait until her father's return for answers. He was supposed to arrive that afternoon. She periodically watched the dirt road leading to the tight clearing around the main keep from the window of her bed chamber. She did not have to wait long.

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A matte-gray sedan barreled along the dirt road, carving uphill through the Black Forest's unforgiving landscape. It was a Horch 830, a civilian road car adapted into a stout, off-road vehicle for the *Wehrmacht*, the armed forces of Nazi Germany. While the civil model wore the popular, contemporary body style of a four-door convertible, the army 830R version had a boxed-in cab fixed to the frame with a reinforced roof and riveted paneling around its sides. Thick tires with bulging tread blocks bit into the road surface, fighting not to spin through what fresh rain had turned to mud. The front passenger door was riddled with the kind of wide, flared bullet holes that only large-bore rounds could deliver.

The driver, Werner Stengel, fought to keep his vision trained on the road while he nervously monitored the man sitting in the front passenger seat. The passenger's face was pale and his breathing labored. He opened the flap of his black uniform jacket and felt inside it. His palm returned smeared and dripping red. He looked at Stengel, crestfallen, struggling to keep his eyes open.

"Friedhelm? *Friedhelm?*" Stengel repeated his passenger's name in a plea to stay alive. Stengel lamented the lack of a reply as he lifted his dark brown homburg hat to wipe the sweat from his forehead. His grave,

contemplative eyes suggested a man whose lifetime of decisions had taken an immense toll on him. None were greater than the one he had made just days prior, which had brought him here and put his own life, the life of his daughter, and the fate of a continent all on a harrowing precipice. He felt as if the last twenty-four hours had aged him a year and he knew it was only the beginning. But the castle was close. His only immediate goal was getting there.

Friedhelm's throat gurgled and he slumped against the window. At the sound of his skull hitting the glass, something grunted and jostled behind the second-row bench seat. Stengel looked over his shoulder past Friedhelm through a sheet of wire mesh, taking his eyes off the road for several seconds. When no further commotion came, Stengel looked back to Friedhelm. He shook him by the shoulder to no avail. Stengel had known for hours that Friedhelm's fate was sealed. But stopping wasn't an option. Pulling off the road to attend to his wounded colleague would have risked everything they had worked for. He hated the choice he had to make, but he knew Friedhelm would have done the same had their roles been reversed. Stengel dragged his eyes back to the road as he crossed over a short, wooden bridge spanning a section of the mountain pass that had been lost to a rockslide many decades ago. Falkenhayn Castle awaited through the mass of trees ahead. For the first time, Stengel noticed how dead trees outnumbered the living as he neared the end of the dirt road. The compact stone castle, weathered deep gray and mossy green, seemed to shrink back from the vastness of the forest as the sedan cleared the tree line and came to a halt over a patch of weeds.



Bruna watched from her narrow window as the gray sedan emerged from the trees into the clearing. It was not the type of black Mercedes-Benz men like her father usually rode in, and even a small detail like that forbode something awful to her. Why was there only one car and not many? She doubted for a moment that it even was her father, but his Homburg hat gave him away as she saw him leap from the driver's seat and run around the hood to the other side. She moved to another window to watch as he pulled a man from the passenger door and lowered him to the ground. She saw the blood on the man's clothing and bullet holes in the door. Her anticipation dissipated, replaced by a plaguing concern that pushed her stomach toward her throat. What had her father involved her in? She observed as he crouched over the bleeding man. When Stengel stood up and the other man remained motionless, Brunna realized he was dead. She had never seen a dead body before.

Stengel went around the back of the car, opened a hatch behind the driver side, rear door, and dragged a third man out through the opening. Stengel took a quick step back when he dumped the man on the moist ground, reflexively keeping his distance. Brunna pressed her face to the window. He was handcuffed and his head was bound and covered in a burlap sack. Brunna's first thought was that this man was a political prisoner, but then why would her father, a high-ranking minister, be transporting him? A pair of dogs started barking a floor below, reminding Brunna to breathe. She followed their barking downstairs.

Bruna passed beneath the vaulted ceilings of the great hall on the castle's main floor and into a windowless entryway where Diamond and Prinz, two 120-pound Rottweilers, stood on their hind legs and pawed at the big, oak double doors. They had been Bruna's companions over the past three days, and they were glad for the attention since their owner, some associate of her father's, was away as well. Now her two new friends were snarling and making scratch marks on the doors. Bruna reached between them and unbolted the lock. The dogs forced the doors open and ran outside.

"Diamond, Prinz, stop!" Bruna chased after them across a short terrace and down a half-flight of granite steps onto the clearing. They crouched and growled at the prisoner lying on the ground and made several aggressive feints toward him. Prinz, the male, snipped at Stengel's hand when he reached out to keep them at bay. They let Bruna grab them by their collars when she caught up, but their warning display continued. "Father, what's going on?" asked Bruna.

Stengel looked up from the prisoner with an expression that made Bruna think he had all but forgotten she was there. "Stay back, Bruna!" he shouted to make himself heard over the dogs' incessant barking. Werner Stengel was forty-seven years old with hair starting to thin and a face and neck that seemed to develop more creases every time Bruna saw him. Blood stained the sleeve of his brown suit jacket below his red, swastika armband.

"Are you alright?" Bruna asked him.

"It's not my blood," Stengel explained, eying Friedhelm's body. "It's his."

A second gray sedan emerged from the forest and came to a stop beside them. A young man dressed in the all-black uniform of an SS officer stepped out. He and Bruna made instant and lingering eye contact. He was certainly handsome, she thought, average height, but with a well-defined bone structure and the kind of stubble she liked that never truly went away. He was probably twenty-five or twenty-six, and wore the rank of *obersturmführer*, equivalent to a first lieutenant in the armies of other nations. Bruna had met young officers of his mold before. They were supremely competent, usually arrogant, and yet something always drew her to them. His badge displayed the name 'Dahlgren.' He looked alert, but exhausted, with sharp eyes weighted down in a half-squint. They both looked away when they realized they were staring. Diamond and Prinz bounded up to him and their barks turned excited and affectionate.

"Down, down! Shhhhhh, I know, I'm glad to see you, too."

They were his dogs, Bruna realized, and with him there they seemed to completely forget about her. Then, from out the passenger door of Dahlgren's sedan, climbed a third man. He was older, about her father's age, and wore a similar black SS uniform to Dahlgren's, only more decorated with additional patches and insignias denoting him as an *obersturmbannführer*, equivalent to a lieutenant colonel. He was red in the cheeks, half-bald with close-cropped hair, and had an abbreviated mustache modeled on the Führer's. His name badge read 'Auerbach.' He stepped around the corpse by his feet, eyes glued to the shrouded prisoner on the ground. He seemed flustered, Bruna thought, as if whatever they had done perturbed him more than the other two.

Stengel spoke up. "Dahlgren, Auerbach, were either of you shot?"

"No," Dahlgren answered. "Were you?"

"No. But they got Father Friedhelm. One caught him straight through the door."

Dahlgren saw Friedhelm's body and the bullet holes in the car's sheet metal. His mood sank. "Then what are we going to do?"

"We proceed," said Stengel.

Dahlgren looked annoyed by Stengel's effort to project a sense of calm. "You said we needed him," he stated flatly.

"I'll figure it out." Stengel lifted his hat to wipe his forehead once more. "What happened to Klaus? When did we lose him?"

Auerbach spoke up. "We lost sight of his car a few kilometers outside Obersalzberg."

Stengel let out a discouraged sigh. "We can't afford to wait for him. We'll stick to the plan and hope Klaus arrives soon."

Bruna had no idea what they were talking about. She took it all in, afraid to wade into the matter. They heard a kicking sound coming from the rear compartment of Dahlgren's sedan. The dogs resumed barking. Dahlgren opened the hatch and pulled out a second prisoner, much fatter than the first, also handcuffed with his head smothered in a burlap sack. The fat prisoner landed awkwardly on his neck and moaned after the second it took for the shock to wear off. Stengel and Dahlgren paid him no mind, concerned only with the thin prisoner.

Dahlgren's eyes met Brunas again. "Is this your daughter?" he asked Stengel.

"She is. And I recall telling her to remain in the—" Stengel cut himself off. The dogs had also fallen silent. The thin prisoner had staggered to his feet behind Stengel. There was something threatening about it, how he had gotten up silently and unnoticed without the use of his hands. Stengel extended an arm to keep his distance. "Stand your ground, everyone."

Dahlgren's hand wrapped around the silver pistol at his waist. Auerbach was frozen.

It all felt very wrong to Brunas. She didn't understand why they were acting like this. "Father, what's going on?"

The thin prisoner's body went taut at the sound of her voice. His head swiveled toward her, and she noticed a strange buzz surrounding her, like the air had come alive with static. Brunas felt paralyzed in the prisoner's gaze, even with his entire head shrouded. Her muscles collectively twinged, her ears rang, and she was overcome with nausea while her skin turned ice cold.

Stengel reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a round, silver-plated medal about five centimeters across, engraved with Latin inscriptions, and attached to a leather cord. He let it dangle from his outstretched arm as he mouthed a stream of words under his breath. It seemed to draw the thin prisoner's attention away from Brunas. Even covered under the burlap sack, it was like he could sense it.

A wooden plunk sounded from the granite steps behind them. Bruna turned around to see Brother Jürgen approaching, the sound of his heavy cane echoing off each step. With his dark robes, beard, and hardened features, he looked like a piece of the castle itself that had ventured outward. Jürgen walked to Stengel, who handed him the medal.

Then, as unexpectedly as it came on, the static, ringing, and nausea in Bruna ceased. It was so sudden she wondered if she'd imagined it. Jürgen hung the mysterious medal around the prisoner's neck and his body immediately slackened.

Stengel exhaled. "We need to get them inside at once. Dahlgren, Auerbach, you handle Bernstorff. And Brother Jürgen, you help me with—" he eyed Bruna and stopped himself, as if on the cusp of divulging a secret, "*—him.*"

Stengel grabbed the thin prisoner's handcuffs from behind, and he and Jürgen pushed him ahead, guiding him up the steps to the castle's double doors. Dahlgren and Auerbach pulled the fat prisoner to his feet and walked him closely behind. Bruna was left alone with the dead body on the ground. She wondered why he had been shot and what it meant for the rest of them. Had her father been the real target?

"Bruna!" Stengel's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Don't just stand there. Bring Father Friedhelm inside."

She looked down at him, the corpse they called Friedhelm. Uncertain how to go about it, she grabbed his wrists and pulled. But his forearms were slick with blood. She let go and grabbed his feet instead. She lifted his legs, tucked his boots under her arms, and pulled him backwards toward the stone steps. As strange and unwelcome as it seemed to her then, Bruna would later give anything to be back in that moment, when dragging a dead stranger, apparently a priest like her father once was, into a hidden castle was the most frightening thing ever to happen to her.

Inside, Stengel locked the doors as soon as Bruna slipped through with Friedhelm. "Take Bernstorff to his cell in the tower," he said to Dahlgren and Auerbach.

Auerbach went up first and Dahlgren shoved the fat prisoner, Bernstorff, into the cold shaft of the spiral stairwell situated between the entryway and the great hall. Bernstorff stumbled, kept upright only by the strength of the two men, as they disappeared into the upper floors.

The name rang a bell to Bruna. League of German Girls members were taught the names and roles of all the Nazi leadership.

"Bernstorff who?" she asked her father tepidly.

"Albert."

"Albert *von Bernstorff*? Reich Minister of Finance, Albert von Bernstorff?"

Stengel gave a nod. Bruna knew that gesture, the way he allowed his head to dip for an instant instead of moving it deliberately. He did it when he was about to do something he dreaded and wished to avoid.

"Then who is *that*?" Bruna asked, suddenly alarmed, indicating the thin prisoner.

“I don’t have time to explain,” Stengel said. “Follow us.”

“But what do I do with him?” Bruna asked, motioning to Friedhelm’s body on the floor.

“Leave him there,” it pained Stengel to say. “I’ll come back for him.”

Stengel and Brother Jürgen listened until the sound of the others’ footsteps higher up the stairwell ceased. “Now,” Stengel said. Jürgen nodded and together they pushed the thin prisoner up the stairs. “Follow us, Bruna,” Stengel repeated. Curious and afraid, Bruna followed them up.

The spiral stairwell was dark except for the scant light coming through a small, round window on each floor. These windows overlooked a central courtyard the castle wrapped around on four sides. The courtyard was not large, only six-by-eight meters, and had been long-untended, with weeds devouring a dried-out fountain and rusted furniture. Beneath the courtyard was the cellar, a semi-recessed basement dug into the side of the mountain on its west end and level with the ground on the east. It was home to the furnace and generator rooms, utility and laundry closets, the oldest of the prison cells, and the mouth of a tunnel once used as an escape route during the Thirty Years’ War. The main level was actually the second floor, up the short steps from the forest clearing and home to the entryway, great hall, kitchen, dining hall, and a pair of bed chambers. The third floor had a corridor framing the courtyard below. It connected to an expansive library, a study, a master bed chamber for Eloise, and three smaller bed chambers, one of which was Bruna’s.

As they passed the third floor, the thin prisoner lurched, dislodging the medal from around his neck, and elbowing Stengel in the ribs. Jürgen grabbed the prisoner but lost his cane down the stairwell.

“Bruna, help!” Stengel said hoarsely, the wind knocked from his chest.

Bruna looked up to see her father and Jürgen bracing, struggling to pin the prisoner against the wall with all the strength they could muster. “What do I do?” she asked.

“The Saint Benedict medal—grab it!” Stengel wheezed as the handcuffed prisoner twisted and bucked to free himself.

“This? What is it?” Bruna asked, picking up the medal.

“Not now! Put it around his neck!”

“Why? Who is he?”

“I’ll tell you once he’s secure. Now help us!”

“No. Who is he?”

“Once he’s secure in the turret! Now put it around his neck!”

Bruna relented and looped the strange medal over the prisoner’s covered head. His writhing slowed, and his head angled toward Bruna once more, prompting her to back down a step. They tried to push the prisoner along, but something had changed. Moving him proved almost impossible.

“Dahlgren!” Stengel shouted up the stairwell. “Is Bernstorff secure?”

“He’s locked up,” Dahlgren’s voice carried down. “Do you need help?”

“Yes, both of you, now!”

Dahlgren and Auerbach hurried down.

“Help us move him,” Stengel instructed. “Bruna, stay back and follow us.”

Together, the four men managed to budge the prisoner off the wall and push him up the stairwell. “It’s like he’s strong as a boar,” said Auerbach.

“It’s growing stronger inside him before it manifests,” Stengel said in a reply that left Bruna confused.

“But the Saint Benedict Medal...” Auerbach trailed off.

“It won’t restrain him forever,” said Stengel, continuing to push.

They made it up to the fourth floor, present only on the castle’s north corner and known as the tower. One wing off the stairwell led to a series of prison cells added when the castle keep was expanded. Albert von Bernstorff was in one of them. Opposite the cell block wing was a corridor leading to a locked, forbidden room Eloise called the ‘saints gallery.’ She had been unwilling to even discuss with Bruna what resided behind its heavy, double-thick door.

The spiral stairwell went one floor higher, through another wooden door, and up into a spire above the roof called the turret. The castle’s highest point, the turret was hexagonal in shape and the chamber inside was bisected by a thick wall with a steel door at its center. In the middle of the door was a roughly 30-centimeter square opening housing a set of bars. Behind it was another prison cell, the most secure in the castle.

The men dragged the thin prisoner out of the stairwell and into the turret chamber. Stengel looked at Bruna. “I don’t expect you to understand this at first. I ask only that you trust me.” It was the first glimpse of empathy she had seen from him since arriving. “The rest will become clear soon. Now stand back.”

At eighteen, Bruna was not one to accept her father’s word on blind faith, but at that moment, she was too nervous to do otherwise. She backed up to the wall. Stengel opened the steel door with a brass key from a keyring he kept on his belt, then he and Jürgen dragged the prisoner into the cell. Stengel removed the medal from around the prisoner’s neck and pulled the burlap sack from over his head. Even from behind, Bruna knew exactly who it was. There was no mistaking him. They backed out of the cell, and Stengel closed the steel door and locked it with the brass key.

“Is it—? It’s not—” Bruna stammered, looking at her father in shock.

“Give my daughter and I a moment,” Stengel told the others. They nodded and went down the stairwell, leaving Stengel and Bruna alone with the prisoner.

“It is,” Stengel answered her.

Bruna approached the cell. A face appeared in the opening behind the bars, a face known to the whole world, but seeing it like this made her feel ill. She looked into the blazing eyes of the Führer, Adolf Hitler. A piece of duct tape covered his mouth. Bruna reached for it instinctively.

“No, don’t!” Stengel shouted too late.

Bruna had already peeled it off. Then Hitler spoke. “Stengel, why have you deprived us of your lovely daughter for so long?”



It all came fluttering back to Bruna. She felt like she was fourteen years old again at Berlin Central Park, as if the emotions he stirred in her that day had never left.

Stengel stepped in. "Bruna, get out. Don't let him talk to you."

"Your father's a religious maniac!" Hitler shouted back. "He thinks I'm possessed by a demon!"

"*What?*" Bruna could hardly comprehend everything that was happening. "Wait, stop! What have you done?" she exclaimed, but Stengel had already begun to pull her away.

Hitler continued. "Listen to me, girl, he's a traitor to me, to you, and to all of Germany!"

Stengel pulled her into the stairwell. "Don't believe anything he says to you."

"You put her in danger, Stengel! Do you even care for her?"

Stengel slammed the wooden door to the turret chamber, muffling Hitler's voice. He saw Bruna shaking and guided her down to the fourth-floor landing. She stood still, watching his face for a sign of madness, anything she could use to still see him in a sympathetic light. If her father were a madman, she could at least try to help him, but if he had done this as a sane man, then there was nothing to help. This was far bigger than her relationship with her father. This was about the German people. They had lost everything after The Great War and recovered so much in the five years since Hitler came to power. If she couldn't help her father, then she would have to resist him.

"Please tell me it isn't true," she pleaded.

"I'm afraid it is."

"But how can Hitler be possessed?"

"Eloise and I will explain everything shortly. There's going to be an exorcism."

"But you're not even a priest anymore!" She now doubted every word her father said. She heard him as a man so convinced of himself that he had shunned all other voices to rely solely on his own judgment, as if that were somehow freer of error. To Bruna, it was worse than madness.

"I know," Stengel said. "I've made some terrible choices and I'm doing everything I can to atone for them now. But I need you to be patient and understand me when I promise you this is not one of them."

"But why did you bring me here? Why did you make me part of this?"

"Because Berlin is no longer safe for you. The Nazis know only that I've disappeared with Hitler, not that I'm responsible for taking him. But they'll still see me as a suspect and the SS will go after anyone associated with me. You're the first one they'd come for. You wouldn't be safe anywhere else."

"But they'll kill all of us if they find him now."

"We've planned for that. Falkenhayn Castle is well hidden, and we've taken steps to ensure they can't trace us here. We'll be long gone and finished even if they manage to find it."

"And you'll just stroll back into Berlin with him? They'll arrest you on sight!"

"No. We have a cover story. As far as anyone outside this castle knows, Auerbach and I were abducted with Hitler from Obersalzberg. That's why we also took Albert von Bernstorff. To be the patsy."

“You’re going to frame him? You can’t just—he’s innocent!”

“He’s hardly innocent. As Minister of Finance, he’s robbed Jewish bank accounts to enrich himself.”

“And me?” Bruna’s flailed her arms in frustration. “No one will believe they’d kidnap me.”

“You have a cover story too. Against my wishes, you took a train to Stuttgart to meet your mother’s family. I even purchased a ticket for—”

“—Stop!” It was all too much for Bruna and she was fed up with the secrecy and lies. “I just graduated. You said you’d help me be whatever I wanted to be. You said I could be the Reich’s first female minister.”

Stengel maintained his calm tone. “Because if we succeed it will be a very different Reich. Hitler and the Nazis aren’t what you think they are. He’s going to start a war.”

That sounded preposterous to Bruna. “A war? How could you say that?”

“Look at the signs. His political opponents are in camps, Jews are losing their rights, he’s seizing sovereign territories and growing the army in violation of the Treaty of Versailles. What do you think it means?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why do you insist on not thinking for yourself?”

Stengel waited while Bruna stayed silent, unable to produce a response. It wounded her and she knew her father could tell. She needed to be alone. She ran down the stairwell and bumped into Eloise, almost causing her to drop the tray and pot of coffee she was carrying. “I’m sorry,” Bruna sniffled as she continued past her. Eloise blinked and shook her head knowingly, continuing up to where Stengel lingered on the fourth floor.

Bruna paused at the third floor. She could hear their voices above, but they couldn’t see her around the curve of the stairwell.

“You should have let me prepare her,” Eloise started. Her voice was firm and resonant for a woman her age, but her eyes were heavy, her face numb. It was a look of weathered permanence Stengel had seen only in survivors of the Great War and in exorcists who had waged war of a different kind. She had the look of a wax figure in mourning.

“She’s too indoctrinated,” he said. “I couldn’t take that risk.”

“So were you not too many years ago.”

“I was a grown man. I knew the world before this. Bruna is young. This is all she knows.”

“And she’s your responsibility. You’re the one who insisted on letting her see him. Auerbach wanted me to lock her in her bed chamber.”

Bruna scoffed inwardly. She was no prisoner. Who were they to consider that?

“Auerbach’s a useful idiot,” Stengel said quietly.

“That may be so,” said Eloise. “But he helped us get this far.”

“I trust Bruna more than I do him. I won’t use him in the exorcism, but Bruna will come around.”

“Without Father Friedhelm and Klaus, you’re going to need her.”

“I know.” He nodded in admission.

It made no sense to Bruna. What could she possibly do? And why did they think she'd help them?

Eloise sat down on an alcove beneath a window. "If you want to convince her, our meal this evening is all the time you'll have...Werner, sit, please. You've had an exhausting day. I brought your coffee."

Stengel sat down beside her. He watched the coffee pot clanging against the serving tray as Eloise poured him a cup. It took all her effort not to spill.

Bruna heard the clanging too. She'd noticed before how Eloise's hands sometimes shook uncontrollably. Eloise tried to hide it, but Bruna caught it happening a number of times.

Stengel remarked on it. "And what about you? Has it gotten worse?"

The clanging stopped as Eloise set down the pot. "I could sense Hitler getting nearer all afternoon. The shaking got worse once you arrived with him. This demon is powerful, Werner, I can feel it."

Stengel heeded her with a solemn nod. "Do you need help preparing the materials for the exorcism?"

"Shame on you. I'm old, not useless. Now drink your coffee before it gets any colder. I'm not making it again."

Bruna had heard enough and went quietly to the main floor. Eloise and her father spoke like old friends, but he had never mentioned her to Bruna until recently. She was much older than him and said the kinds of things no one dared say to a party minister. Bruna knew little about her father's time as a priest in the years before she was born, but this strange woman must have been a part of it. And Eloise apparently believed the same things about demonic possession her father did. Bruna could dismiss one person's belief in the absurd, but two? Or even three, counting Brother Jürgen? No, she thought seconds later, Eloise was an old hermit who lived in a castle and Jürgen thought not speaking or eating for days at a time was somehow a good thing. People like that could probably believe anything. What Bruna truly couldn't understand was how they thought she was indoctrinated. She said the same things their party leaders, newspapers, teachers, and industrialists did. If they were all in agreement, who was her father to start questioning them? It seemed so obvious—wouldn't that make him wrong?