

THE PLOT TO KILL HITLER
BOOK TWO
EXECUTION

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ONE

The cramped upper rooms of the two-story flat in Prenzlauer Berg baked in the summer sun. Max Hoffmann never thought he would miss frigid winter nights, but the June heat was making him nostalgic for snow, ice, and the bitter wind that howled through the streets of Berlin. He mopped sweat from his brow with the edge of a bedsheet. The humid air of the safe house smelled of mold, despite the Hoffmanns' best efforts to keep their new home clean and dry.

Max, Gerta, Mutti, Papa—all of them attacking the nooks and crannies of the dismal old flat with brooms and dust rags, scouring the washroom with what little cleaning powder they received with their meager rations, stashed weekly in the flat's overgrown backyard by the communist underground. Their benefactors might as well be ghosts. Max had never seen them.

The Hoffmanns cleaned and cleaned. The mold persisted.

Max remembered Frau Becker sliding the curtain of her car window aside to take in the view of her beloved Berlin back

in February, when she had discussed plans with the Hoffmanns for exposing the Nazi spy in their midst. *Smells like rot*, she'd said. Max wondered if it wasn't just their safe house that was redolent of decay, but the city itself. The entire Third Reich positively reeked of it these days.

By now, Frau Becker was decaying, too, he thought darkly. A mound of bones in some unmarked traitor's grave—if the Nazis hadn't just thrown her corpse on the fire. The fierce old woman deserved so much better. Max felt a dizzying rush forming in the pit of his stomach. He sat cross-legged on his narrow cot with his back against the wall and clenched the thin sheet in his fists. He bunched up the fabric as if holding on tight could anchor him against what was about to happen. The wall across from his bed was no more than three or four paces away, but as dizziness took hold, the small room seemed to stretch out in front of him and the wall hazed into some unreal distance. It was as if he were looking through a telescope in reverse. Pins and needles shot down into his legs and prickled his chest as a peculiar weightlessness took hold.

His knuckles turned white as he clung to the sheet and gritted his teeth. This was what happened when he thought too much about the Becker Circle's demise. He was rocketed along at a million kilometers per hour, propelled by a deep and terrible sense of the sheer *unfairness* of it all. It was a sensation like nothing he had ever known.

It wasn't fair that Hans Meier, the person he had liked

best in the Becker Circle, turned out to be a Nazi spy.

It wasn't fair that Frau Becker never got to see the Nazi flags torn down in the city that she loved.

It wasn't fair that Max, Gerta, Mutti, and Papa had been forced to leave their old lives behind and trade their airy villa in Dahlem for a smelly, old row house in Prenzlauer Berg, where they weren't even allowed to go outside.

It wasn't fair that Herr Trott and General Vogel had been executed, and Albert and Princess Marie had vanished without a trace.

Finally, it wasn't fair that Adolf Hitler was alive and Frau Becker was dead. That alone was proof that the universe was tilted in favor of evil over good.

The room spun. Max felt like he was in free fall, a pilot ejected from a burning plane without a parachute. Fragments of winter nights danced madly in his head—death in the shadows of the ruined opera house, wet chalk on blackened brick . . .

“Stop stop stop stop stop,” Max said. If he didn't pull himself back to reality, this little episode would leave him feeling awful for the rest of the day.

He closed his eyes and tried to blank his mind. A few weeks ago, after an episode at the dinner table, Papa had taught him breathing exercises to help keep him tethered to the real world when his body and mind started to spin out of his control. He inhaled to a count of five and exhaled to a count of seven, the whole time thinking *sloooowwww downwwwnnnnnn*,

stretching the word like a piece of toffee in his mind.

After several long, slow breaths, he risked opening his eyes. The wall had returned to its proper place. He let go of the bedsheet and sat perfectly still for a moment, thinking: *calm*.

He focused on sounds from other parts of the flat: Mutti and Papa pattering around downstairs, sipping weak ersatz coffee and munching on stale bread. Gerta and Kat Vogel talking quietly in their room across the narrow hallway.

Here was another fine example of the unfairness of it all: Now that they'd moved to a much smaller house, Max had to share it with not one older girl, but *two*.

He knew it was a horribly selfish thought. Kat's father had been executed by the Nazis, her mother sent to a camp in Poland. Kat herself had narrowly escaped the same fate. He was glad that she was alive. But couldn't she be alive somewhere else?

There was barely enough food for the four Hoffmanns, and most everything came with substitute ingredients—sawdust instead of flour, roasted grain instead of coffee beans. They weren't starving, but they had all lost a little bit of weight. Max's hunger was a small bright pebble in his stomach, always there to remind him that he was surviving on scraps.

It was time to go downstairs and force down a slice of dry, mealy bread for breakfast.

He decided he would wait until Gerta and Kat went down, ate, and came back up to their room. He didn't feel like talking to anyone this morning. To pass the time, he thumbed

through one of the French theatrical programs some previous occupant of the safe house had left in a pile in the corner of the bedroom. Since the Hoffmanns had arrived at the house in February, Max had actually managed to teach himself to read a little bit of French, but today he just let the words of *Le Coeur Dispose* wash over him.

A bead of sweat fell from the tip of his nose and splatted against the program, splotching the print. Max tossed the booklet aside and mopped his forehead with the sheet.

It was hard to imagine a time when he had ever been cold. He hugged his arms to his chest and tried to make himself shiver, as if he could lower the temperature by memory alone.

Suddenly, footsteps pounded up the stairs. Max hopped out of bed in alarm—the whole family was supposed to tread lightly in the safe house. Mutti appeared in his doorway, wide-eyed and breathless.

“It’s begun!” she said. Then she turned and poked her head into Gerta and Kat’s room. “Get up, get up, they’ve finally done it!”

“Done what?” Max said, going out into the hall. His mother took him by the shoulders and laughed.

“They’ve just announced it on the radio!”

Max was stunned by this abrupt burst of energy. His family had been moping around the house for weeks, barely speaking, and now it seemed as if Mutti had gone mad.

“The Allies have landed in France!”