

FINAL SECURITY

RYAN JONES

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And to the many people who let me use their real names for fictional characters in *Final Security*, I hope you enjoy what I've done with your namesakes and that your characters survive! No promises!

Author's note: while several historical figures are used as characters in *Final Security*, this book remains a work of fiction and their activities herein are wholly fictional as well.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE BELL: A secret German technology project during WWII

PRINCE BERNHARD: Prince of the Netherlands, founder of a cabal of ultra-rich power brokers called The Group

LLOYD CAMERON: President of the United States

GAVIN CARTER: CIA talent scout and recruiter of Angela Conrad

WENDY CHO: FBI agent, reports to Perry Pugliano

ANGELA CONRAD: Rogue CIA agent and freelance spy

IAN COSGROVE: Former SAS commando and associate of Conrad

SIMON CRANE: The Executor, leader of an organization more powerful than the President of the United States

KURT DEBUS: Senior engineer on the Bell, and later a NASA official

MEIR EITAN: *Chargé d'Affaires* at the Israeli Consulate in San Francisco and a covert member of the Mossad

WILLIAM FITZMAURICE: Director of the FBI

NANOVEX: A nanotechnology firm in San Jose, California

JACOB FLEISCHER: Fellow damage control lawyer Mike Manning befriends in San Francisco

MEGHAN GALLAGHER: Former IRA terrorist and associate of Conrad

MONICA GELDMAN: An alias of Angela Conrad

WALTHER GERLACH: Nobel laureate, senior engineer on the Bell

SETH GRAVES: Defense Advanced Projects Agency, or DARPA, representative at Nanovex for the US government

THE GROUP: A cabal of ultra-rich power brokers

RAFI HAREL: Mossad Chief of Station in Washington, D.C.

SCOTT HENDRIX: CIA Station Chief for San Francisco

HANS KAMMLER: German Major General in charge of all WWII secret Nazi research

VICTOR KAMMLER: Hans Kammler's son

DIETER KINBERG: Former German commando and associate of Conrad

YURI KONALEV: Angela Conrad's Russian ex-KGB henchman

DOUG LYMAN: CEO of Nanovex

MIKE MANNING: Damage control lawyer for Norquist-Feldman law firm

AMANDA MANNING: Wife of Mike Manning

DEREK MEDINA: County coroner for San Jose

REESE MILLER: Security chief of Nanovex, reports to Douglas Lyman

ARI NESHER: Angela Conrad's Israeli ex-Mossad henchman

PERRY PUGLIANO: FBI Special Agent in Charge (SAC) for San Francisco

RASHID BEN-JABIR: Saudi "playboy prince," nephew of Saudi Intelligence Chief

LINN SHAOZANG: Former Chinese intelligence operative and associate of Conrad

JAKOB SPORRENBURG: German Brigadier General in charge of the Nazi Bell project during WWII

VASILY ORLOV: Russian intelligence agent, associate of Angela Conrad

JEFF WOOD: Nanotechnology project leader at Nanovex

PROLOGUE

APRIL 28, 1945 – PILSEN, CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The German scientists huddled together in the back of the cargo truck. With only a canvas cover over the truck bed, the ride was numbingly cold, but every one of the scientists was happy to be on board. The Third Reich was nearing complete military collapse, with both the Russians and American troops driving deep into Germany to cut out its Nazi heart.

Much to the relief of the scientists, trucks showed up that morning to carry them to the American front lines. None of them wished to sample the mercies of Josef Stalin and his Red Army. As scientists, they had been shielded from the horrors of the war. But they doubted the Russians would differentiate between SS soldiers and scientists on an SS-controlled project once they arrived.

They also knew both the Americans and the Russians would gladly kill to gain possession of their project's technology. Many of the scientists had previously been assigned to Germany's atomic bomb program. But their new program had an even higher war priority rating than the atom bomb. After their first accomplishments, there had been hopes of their technology turning the tide of war. But as the enemy armies tightened their stranglehold on the Fatherland, the SS began to look at their project more as a bargaining chip to buy favor with the Americans than as a tool for national salvation.

The importance of their program was further emphasized by the direct involvement of SS General Walter Spoerrenberg. The General regularly made rounds among the scientists, calming their fears about the advancing enemies and assuring them that they and their families would be safely spirited to the American lines long before the Russians approached. He urged them to keep working, since their value to the West was directly related to the completion of their project. They had spent the last week methodically boxing up their documentation and indexing the entire collection. Strangely, General Spoerrenberg oversaw even this activity, concerned that every drawing and notebook associated with the project was collected and boxed.

Today was supposed to be the team's last day of work before they were released to prepare their families for evacuation. Instead, they were herded with great haste into the trucks. The Russians had broken through the German army's defenses and were headed directly toward the Pilsen facility. Spoerrenberg promised the scientists that the trucks would be sent back for their families once they themselves were safe. The men reluctantly acquiesced.

The trucks groaned to a halt about a half-hour's drive away from the facility. The SS guards lowered the tailgate and threw open the canvas cover. They shouted and pulled the scientists along, marshalling them into

a rough formation beside the vehicles. They had parked along a forest road, with no civilization visible.

"Gentlemen," Spoerrenberg announced, "we are exceptionally close to the American lines. My troops have made contact with their reconnaissance units, just on the other side of this forest. If we proceed further in vehicles, we risk being fired upon, so we will cover the last few kilometers on foot. I apologize for any discomfort. Hopefully when the trucks return with your families, this precaution will be unnecessary."

"Follow me!" an SS Sergeant barked, holding his MP-40 submachine gun over his head as he led them into the trees.

Lead Scientist Victor Schilling looked to his left, toward the head of the convoy. A large piece of equipment rested on a flatbed truck, concealed under a tarp. A group of officers milled beside the trailer, only casually glancing at their direction.

"Is that the *device*?" Schilling asked his friend Ernest Koenig incredulously. Until today, the bell-shaped apparatus had been the most fiercely guarded machine in all of the Third Reich. Their laboratory had been concealed deep in a tunnel carved from solid rock by slave labor from a nearby concentration camp. The device was brought out for testing only in the cover of darkness, with night fighters circling overhead. To see the Bell in broad daylight concealed only by a sheet of fabric provoked an almost physical reaction in Schilling. Security rules at Pilsen were enforced by the threat of execution, or at least shipment to the Russian front, which was essentially the same thing. Whoever would allow their project to travel exposed in such a way?

Koenig let out a breath, which froze and trailed over his shoulders as he walked. "*Gott in himmel*, is that General Kammler by the Bell?"

Obergeneral Hans Kammler was a legendary figure in the German secret weapons programs. Possessing a doctorate in engineering, Kammler could hold his own in any technical discussion, and he reported directly to Hitler's number two man, Martin Bormann. This enabled him to forcibly procure any resource he needed for his projects. Combined with his support for high-risk, high-payoff endeavors, working for Kammler had been an intellectually stimulating experience, even if the man's aura of evil made it somewhat unnerving.

Just before Schilling entered the forest, Kammler made eye contact with him. Schilling shivered, and not just from the cold. There was always death in Kammler's eyes, even when he smiled. Schilling turned away and walked faster into the forest.

"Schilling," his friend whispered, "look at these footprints." A path several men wide was already beaten into the forest floor.

"Spoerrenberg said his soldiers had already come this way."

"Victor, some of these prints were made by bare feet," Koenig retorted.

"Quiet!" the Sergeant hissed.

They continued their march for over a kilometer, ending in a clearing ringed by SS soldiers. Two large tents had been pitched in the center of the clearing. The Sergeant led them until they stood alongside the nearest tent.

"Face me!" he shouted. "Present your identity papers!"

The scientists were confused, but knew that the only safe response to an SS soldier's order was instant compliance.

"Schilling," Koenig whispered, jerking his head toward the tents. "Are we setting up camp?"

"No talking!" the guard barked. "Pass your papers to the right! They will be returned to you by the Americans."

Schilling felt a deep misgiving at parting with his papers. In Nazi Germany, one would rather go outside without their clothes than their papers. But with escape from the war zone literally within walking distance, he suppressed his anxiety and complied.

A *Kubelwagen* scout car bounced down the forest track into the clearing. Generals Kammler and Spoerrenberg sat in the backseat.

"Step back!" the guard ordered, motioning for the scientists to make room for the vehicle to cross the clearing. The scout car turned around so the generals faced the group. The smug smile on Kammler's face did nothing to calm Schilling's fears.

Schilling heard Koenig suck in a startled breath. The guards had moved behind them, pulling away the fabric of the two tents, revealing a mound of freshly dug earth under one. But directly behind them was a narrow trench cut into the forest floor. At the bottom of the trench lay the intertwined corpses of a dozen slave laborers from the Pilsen facility. The prisoner's black-and-white striped uniforms were splashed with blood. Schilling started shaking uncontrollably.

"Ready!" Spoerrenberg yelled. The guards leveled their weapons at the scientists. The soldier sitting in the front passenger seat of the scout car racked the action of his MG-42 heavy machine-gun with a loud *clack*.

"It was good knowing you, Victor," Koenig whispered. The entire group had worked under the oppression of the SS for so long, the idea of resistance wasn't even seriously considered.

"*Endsicherheit!*" Spoerrenberg shouted.

The frosty silence of the clearing was split by a dozen tongues of flame as the SS guards opened fire. Bullets tore through the scientists' bodies, throwing up puffs of dirt in the mound behind them. Their bodies tumbled backwards like rag dolls into the trench. The SS troopers fired continuously until the last body disappeared below ground level. The gunfire echoed off the hillsides for several seconds after the shooting stopped.

The SS Sergeant then walked the length of the trench, putting a pistol round into the head of each scientist. It was a courtesy not afforded to the Polish slave laborers who had dug the trench earlier in the day. Some of them had taken several minutes to die, but the suffering of subhumans was

not the concern of the SS soldiers. They slung their weapons and doused the trench with petrol.

After tossing the identity papers into the trench, the Sergeant loaded a small flare pistol and fired it into the hole. Flames leapt a meter above ground level, then slowly died down as the petrol was consumed, its combustion replaced by the contents of the trench.

Suddenly a scream pierced the air. Someone in the mass grave had been feigning death, only to be exposed by the spreading flames. The Sergeant drew his 9 mm pistol and walked to the edge of the trench. He pointed the gun at the tormented victim, but did not fire.

"*Gottverdammt Slav*," the Sergeant declared to the assembly, explaining that it was a Polish worker burning, unworthy of a bullet's mercy. The screaming continued for a surprisingly long time.

"Let's see the Americans or Russians duplicate our experiment now," Kammler boasted. "I'm the only person still breathing who knows how the Bell works."

"Indeed, *Herr General*," Sporrerberg agreed with a grin.

"What was the phrase you used when the guards opened fire?" Kammler asked over the wails of torment.

"*Endsicherheit*," Sporrerberg said.

"Final Security," Kammler repeated. "I like that." ¹

¹ The incident of the murdered scientists is true. Between April 28 and May 4, 1945, the SS executed 62 scientists associated with a Nazi research program known as "the Bell." The purpose of the executions was to prevent their knowledge from falling into Russian—or other Allied—hands. (Source: *The Hunt for Zero Point* by Nick Cook, p. 184)

CHAPTER 1

CANDY MAN

PRESENT DAY – SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

Mike Manning was a successful American in every way. He had a trophy wife, two children he hardly knew, two leased BMWs he could barely afford, and a showcase home built on a mountain of debt. Like a shark, the only way Manning could survive was to keep moving.

Manning's law firm specialized in corporate damage control. Executives for companies like Chemtrox had learned long ago that when their products hurt someone, one lawyer with a briefcase full of money was more effective than a courtroom full of lawyers at trial. Mike Manning was the lawyer with that briefcase.

His latest trip to San Francisco was a routine one. Chemtrox had long known that PCBs from their transformer plant in San Carlos had been leaching into the groundwater, but had successfully hidden that fact from the EPA for almost two decades, knowing that the slow bleed of poison would take years to start killing off the plant's neighbors. That day of reckoning had finally come.

His job was simple. Pay off the few victims who could trace their cancers back to Chemtrox's property line and keep them silenced long enough for Chemtrox to shut down the plant, move the production equipment to Chile, destroy any sensitive records, and transfer the executives with incriminating knowledge to cushy overseas assignments that would buy their silence and place them out of easy reach of a subpoena.

Yesterday had been hell. The instigating litigant was an old lady whose flower garden was in the backwash of Chemtrox's PCB spoor. Her constant digging in the contaminated soil had led to aggressive cancers necessitating the amputation of her right arm at the elbow. But it was the PCB-laced soil she had inhaled over the years that was going to do Ethel in. A nasal cannula fed oxygen into her tumor-infested lungs. The small, neglected house reeked of impending death.

But Ethel wasn't the real problem. Ethel's daughter Rose was the thorn in Chemtrox's side. She was a paralegal at San Francisco's largest ambulance-chasing firm. Rose knew she had Chemtrox by the nuggets, and she wasn't about to let go.

But Chemtrox had been greasing the palms of highly placed San Francisco-area officials for several years for just such a contingency. They had stroked city and police officials with trips to Chemtrox's luxury box for sporting events, followed by trips to a corporate penthouse with the buxom and well-compensated whores who had served them free drinks all evening. Along with that sizable carrot, Chemtrox also possessed the stick

of videotapes made in that same corporate penthouse. With those inducements in hand, leveraging the officials to plant enough drugs in Rose's house and car to justify the seizure of both her vehicles and property hadn't been too hard to arrange.

Manning shrugged off the destruction of the young woman's life. Once the loss of her home, her job, and her reputation was assured, the DA would offer a generous plea agreement with no jail time. And the check Manning left with Ethel would more than buy back Rose's property, once Mom pushed off to the big flower garden in the sky.

He would warn his superiors that he had bought them two months of maneuvering room, three tops.

* * *

Manning was in an upbeat mood. After yesterday's trip to hell, today's rounds would be easy by comparison. Today he would visit Ethel's neighbors, stuffing checks into the hands of potential litigants like rolled gauze into a bullet wound. He actually enjoyed these outings. He was the Candy Man, and there was plenty to go around for everyone. The size of the checks almost always blinded his marks to the fact that a settlement wouldn't be offered unless they were in mortal danger, and the simple piece of paper they signed in exchange for their winning lottery ticket totally foreclosed their legal rights, in the event their number came up in a lottery no one wanted to win.

He called the effect "dumb down digits," surmising that people's IQ went down ten points for every zero in the check he waved in front of them. With the size of the checks in his briefcase, he would be reducing several people to a vegetative state today.

Seated in the lounge of his hotel in San Jose, he munched a stale blueberry muffin from the hotel's meager continental breakfast buffet and tried to concentrate on his book. He liked reading conspiracy books while on the road. The idea that the government could be lying, cheating, selling drugs and hiding alien spaceships out in the desert strangely comforted to him. At least he lied and cheated for concrete reasons like money, not nebulous concepts like national pride or world domination.

"I've been out there," a tenor voice said behind him. "Scary place."

Manning craned his neck. "I'm sorry?"

A wiry man with a shaved head and hooked nose pointed at Manning's book. "Area 51. I've been there."

He pushed out the adjacent chair with his foot as an unspoken invitation. The slightly younger man slid into the offered seat and slathered cream cheese on his bagel with quick, nervous movements. "Of course, they don't call it Area 51," his visitor whispered, biting off a piece of bagel and chewing with an open mouth. "They just called it 'the remote location.'"

Manning looked directly into the man's dark, darting eyes. They communicated honesty, or at least forthright insanity. He knew the two could be easily confused. "What were you doing there, if you can say?"

The man swallowed a huge chunk of bagel, almost choking himself in his eagerness to reply. "Taking statements. The company I represented had employees out there in the vicinity of a chemical spill. The Air Force wouldn't let them off the base until they agreed to sign away their rights to sue."

"Sounds familiar," Manning grumbled.

"Two of them were dead from cancer a year later. The rest feel like every day is a game of Russian roulette. They're always wondering what day their number is going to come up. Of course the company denies the event ever took place and won't give them a dime."

"Sounds *real* familiar."

The visitor nodded his head spastically. "That's my job every day. Sucks."

He frowned. "I hear you."

The man stuck out a bony hand. "Jacob, by the way. Call me Jake."

He stretched his arm across the table. "Mike." Neither man mentioned his last name or company, an understood anonymity between them.

"So what's your book about, other than Area 51?" Tim asked.

"This guy says the military engineered 9/11 so they could take over the Afghan poppy fields and use the proceeds to finance their classified R&D programs. Like at Area 51," Manning explained.

A low whistle. "Wow, that's almost as good as some of the stories I've heard at work."

He would have raised an eyebrow at the other lawyer even hinting at the secrets he guarded, but Manning was always willing to benefit from someone else's indiscretion. "I'm here in town until tomorrow morning, how long are you staying?"

* * *

Neither man noticed the bored-looking blonde in the corner, fidgeting with her phone and picking at a cup of fruit with her fork. "SO WHOS THE NEW GUY?" she texted, after taking a photo of the two men seated across the room.

"NO IDEA," was the reply. "RUNNING FACIALS NOW."

"SEE NO HOSTILE INTENT."

"AGREED," came back a few seconds later. "BUST ON FACIALS. NOT A PLAYER."

* * *

Jake rolled his eyes. "Oh God, with the mess I've got on my hands, I could be here for weeks. Ever hear of a company called Nanovex?"

"No, should I have?" Manning answered.

He laughed. "Not if you're lucky!"

A plastic smile. "Maybe we could have a beer after work."

An overeager grin. "Yeah, we could swap stories!"

Or I could pump you for information and give you absolutely nothing in return. "Sure. That would be great."

Manning excused himself to brush his teeth before beginning his rounds. The other lawyer shoved the last three bites of his bagel into his mouth and stood to follow.

* * *

The blonde cursed under her breath and texted quickly. "LEAVING. GOT2 FLLW."

But before she could rise, another man insinuated himself behind her mark and the newcomer, following only a few steps behind them out of the breakfast room.

"NEED BACKUP," she texted on the way out the door.

"ON THE WAY," appeared a few seconds later.

* * *

Jake continued nattering throughout the elevator ride and got off at Manning's floor, as did an Arabic-looking man who had gotten on with them. The stranger walked the opposite way, but Manning began to wonder if Jake was going to follow him all the way to his room. The lawyer stopped two doors short.

"Hey! We're practically neighbors!" Jake gushed. "See you tonight, about six?"

He gave the gullible man a friendly wink. "You bet. Sounds good."

* * *

Knowing Jacob Fleischer's destination, the blonde sprinted to the stairwell and ran to the second floor landing, extracting a pistol from her jacket and flicking off the safety. She peered through the glass in the fire door, watching a trio of men exit the elevator. One turned toward her. Dammit. She ducked back under cover, pulling a mirror from her purse. She used it to peek down the hallway again. Fleischer and the newcomer continued down the corridor, while the third man fumbled with his keycard at a nearby door. Was her contact meeting with this guy in his *room*? Was he *that* big of an idiot?

But Fleischer carded into his suite and the newcomer walked on, entering his own room two doors down. As Fleischer closed his door, the third man glanced over his shoulder, then pocketed his keycard and returned to the elevator. The hallway was empty again.

She tucked the pistol back out of sight just as her back-up mounted the steps below her at a run. She waved her man away, signaling that all was well. *Too much time in this business*, she mused. *I'm getting paranoid. But on second thought...*

"Ari," she told her man, "I need you to put a tail on that guy with Fleischer, just out of curiosity." *On second thought*, she pondered, *I'm still alive today because I'm paranoid.*

* * *

The Arabic man exited the elevator on the first floor, passed through the lobby and walked to the taxi stand outside. He got in the back seat of the last cab.

"I have our target's location," Faisal announced to the driver in Arabic.

"That is excellent news," the driver replied. "The emir will be pleased."

"Of course he will," Faisal snapped back. "Take me to him."

NO-SHOW

SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

The day went better than Manning had hoped. Stupid people made his job so much easier. After dumping his briefcase in his room, he tugged off his jacket and tie and headed downstairs to the hotel bar.

* * *

With orders from the emir in hand, Faisal returned to the hotel that evening. Donning a stolen hotel employee's jacket and nametag, he entered by a side door and made his way to his target's room. The surveillance team indicated that the man had returned less than five minutes ago. He knocked at the door.

"Who is it?" replied a timid voice.

"Room service!" he said cheerfully. *Cowardly lapdog.*

"I didn't order room service."

"Indeed, sir," Faisal said without hesitation. "The pretty blond-haired lady in the bar sent up a bottle of champagne. She said to congratulate you." He held the bottle he had just purchased at an infidel's liquor store in case this *jahash* had worked up the courage to peer out the peephole.

The door cracked open. "Congratulate me for what?" the little Jew wheedled. "Did she say?"

Faisal kicked the door open and shoved his stun baton into the skinny spy's chest. His target collapsed like a bundle of sticks. Faisal closed the door behind him and set the bottle beside his victim. "She said to congratulate you on your stupidity, you *kalet*."

Fleischer quivered at his feet, his mouth gaping like a landed fish. Faisal reached for his cell phone, calling his partner. "He is ready. Send up the cart."

To his astonishment, the Jew grabbed the bottle of champagne and started to swing it at his assailant's knee. The operative easily dodged the clumsy blow and jammed his stun baton into his target's neck. He held the arcing rod into the Jew's flesh until his back arched with convulsions. When Faisal finally pulled the implement back, Fleischer went limp, his eyes unblinking and a guttural rasp escaping his lips. He lay completely still. Faisal finally bent down and checked for a pulse. There was none.

"*Wald il qahbaa!*" he gasped. *Son of a bitch!*

* * *

Two beers and almost an hour later, Jake was still a no-show. Manning ordered a club sandwich. He had half of it down when he felt long fingernails rake lightly across his shoulder blades and heard a female voice behind him.

"So, Mr. Manning, scouting out new territory for Chemtrox to poison?"

He coughed a masticated morsel of bacon onto the table. He jerked his body around as if preparing to fight off an attacker. What he saw froze him in place as effectively as an armed robber.

The woman was model-gorgeous, with short blond hair, a slender muscled body, and a pricey red dress that clung to her assets in just the right places. Manning assumed she was a hooker.

"You've been making a lot of house calls in the San Carlos area," she said casually. "Do you have a contamination problem up there?"

Definitely not a hooker. His throat constricted around a half-swallowed bite of sandwich, almost gagging him. "Who the hell are *you*?" he coughed.

She slid into the chair opposite him, offering her hand. "Monica Goldman. Sorry for the sneak attack, I know Jacob Fleischer. I saw you two eating breakfast together this morning."

Her hand remained outstretched. It was clear it would remain so until Manning took it. Reluctantly, he wiped his hand and extended it. Her grip was cool and firm. She was stunning, but her sudden appearance and knowledge of his business screamed *threat* to his practiced instincts. "Fleischer? I never learned Jake's last name."

Her smile was professionally disarming. "Glad to hear it."

He searched her face for tells of what lay behind the frozen smile, but it was like trying to read the emotions of a locked door. "What exactly *is* your relationship with Jake, if you don't mind me asking?"

Her smile never wavered. "Let's just say we work together, and I have an interest in any aspect of our business that he might have shared with you."

Oh great, corporate security. Apparently he wasn't the only one to whom Jake had blabbed his secrets, and she was here to clean up the mess he had made with his mouth. "We didn't discuss work," he lied. "He was interested in the book I was reading, so that's what we talked about. I never told him *my* business either, so how the hell do *you* know about it? Have you been following me?"

Geldman propped her chin delicately on her hand, sporting a sly grin. "Oh, I don't go into sources and methods, Mr. Manning."

Sources and methods? He had read enough to know that was spy jargon. He began to worry that Geldman might be something even more dangerous to his firm's secrets than a corporate security goon. "Sources and methods?" he demanded. "I want to know what company you work for, *right now.*" He would need to call his firm right away to report the breach, but he needed more information.

It wasn't her reaction that rang his alarm bells. It was how quickly she recovered from her slip. After one surprised blink, she spun in her chair to look in the direction of the door. She turned back, and leaning in close, whispered, "You've been watching the door since I got here. Are you expecting someone? Perhaps a beer with Mr. Fleischer?" She raised one of her plucked eyebrows slightly.

He threw the remainder of his sandwich on the plate and started to push away, but thought better of it and wrapped it in a napkin to take with him. This nosy corporate gumshoe wasn't worth going hungry for.

She switched gears as smoothly as a Jaguar. Her eyes turned from probing to plaintive in an instant. "I'm sorry Mike, I'm pushing too hard. Let me buy you a beer. I'm just looking out after the needs of my firm." Her smile turned from professional to something a good deal warmer. "Besides, I'm here from out of town too. I could use the company."

He felt her studied seduction tug at him, but he was determined not to be played. He dropped a twenty on the table for the waitress. "Thanks for the offer," he muttered, "but I don't socialize with people who poke their nose into my business."

Her enticing smile dissolved into fuming silence.

He left the bar and headed back to his third-floor room. He almost passed by Jake's room, but noticed a small tool sandwiched between the door and the jamb at floor level, holding the door open a fraction of an inch. The noise of a TV blared from inside the room. Jake had obviously rushed in a few minutes ago and dropped it on the way in. He would probably come downstairs looking for Manning in the bar as soon as he

walked away. He needed to warn him about Geldman. Not that he owed Jake anything, but anything he could do to make Geldman's work harder was a plus as far as he was concerned.

His boss would have a cow that another company's security department had been following him around on the Chemtrox operation. They would have to find out who this Monica Geldman worked for, and more importantly if what her company wanted was at odds with his firm's interests. Jake Fleischer might be able to give him some answers in that regard. He needed to talk with him, now. He rapped on the door, which pushed it open an inch. The tool fell glinting onto the carpet. It was a scalpel. *What the hell was a lawyer doing with a scalpel?* A buzzing like a shaver came from inside the room.

"Hey, Jake?"

Manning could see a sheet of plastic draped over the bed, up the headboard and taped to the wall. The buzzing sound grew louder. Perplexed, he cautiously pushed the door open wider. He saw red flecks of what looked like paint smattered on the plastic as he kept pushing.

Then he saw a hand. Pale. Lifeless. Then a blood-speckled arm. Mesmerized with morbid fascination, Manning pushed the door open further. Jacob Fleischer lay face up on the bed, naked, his death-frozen eyes staring up at the ceiling.

Horrified, Manning pushed the door open fully. A dark-skinned man and woman stood at the foot of the bed in medical scrubs, rubber gloves, and safety glasses. The man held Jake's left leg up while the woman cut through it with a cordless bone saw. His right leg already ended in a bloody stump. The buzzing grew louder as the door hit the stop, the saw's noise competing with the blaring TV.

The bone saw screeched and Jake's left leg came off in a spray of crimson, his thigh dropping as dead weight back to the mattress. The man turned and deposited the severed limb into a black plastic drum at the foot of the bed. The man and woman looked up at the same time. Manning stood transfixed in the open doorway. The woman shouted something in a foreign language. She lowered the bone saw and reached under her blood-splattered blouse.

Manning's world started moving in slow motion when her hand drew out a pistol. The time it took for the bulky silencer to clear the woman's shirt gave Manning the split-second for his athletic instincts to kick in. He lunged to the right just before a bullet smacked into the wall behind him. He dropped his sandwich and ran flat out for the stairwell at the end of the hall. Just before he hit the stairwell door, he heard a surprised shout and heavy thud.

Manning shoved open the heavy fire door and risked a look back. The man had slipped on the sandwich. He hit the floor hard, his safety glasses tumbling crazily in Manning's direction. Before he could gloat over his pursuer's bad fortune, the woman leaned around the doorway and squeezed

off two shots. The first smashed the wired glass in the fire door and the second ripped past his face, ricocheting down the stairwell.

Manning pushed through the doorway and bolted down the stairs, taking steps two or three at a time. One slip and he would have tumbled head over heels, but his adrenaline-charged reflexes didn't fail him as he fled toward the ground floor.

He burst out of the stairwell, his wild-eyed expressions startling the hotel guests passing through the lobby. He cut left again, hoping to deny his pursuers a clear line of sight when they exited the stairs.

That hallway was blessedly empty and he dashed flat out, almost running out of his dress shoes. He shouldered open a side door leading outside and froze. He realized his car was on the parking lot on the *other* side of the hotel. Before he could decide what to do, Manning heard a female voice chuckle behind him.

"Well I knew I pissed you off, but I didn't know I scared you into running for your life."

Monica Goldman leaned against the wall, smoking. "I'd love to get my hands on the Nazi who made the whole damn hotel non-smoking." She took a long drag. "You look like hell. Was there a ghost in your room?"

He briefly told her of his traumatic experience, then leaned forward cautiously to see if he was still being pursued. Goldman yanked him back from the door. She was surprisingly strong.

"*Stop, idiot!*" she snapped. "What did you say they looked like again?"

He took deep, measured breaths, trying not to hyperventilate. "Man and a woman, mid-thirties, dark skin, Indian, or maybe Mexican."

"Shit," Goldman bristled, venting smoke. Her face hardened. "Okay, we got to get you out of here." She stepped casually in front of the glass door, her eyes scanning the hallway. She spoke in a harsh whisper, "When I say go, I want you to *run* to the driveway in front of the hotel, got it?"

Manning nodded.

Her eyes never moved from the doorway. "Give me an audible!"

"*Got it!*"

She flicked her cigarette away forcefully. "*RUN!*"

LAW OF THE JUNGLE

NOVEMBER 1979 - PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA



“Next!” the judge called.

“Case 3852, Angela Renee Kellerman,” the social worker responded.

Three-year-old Angela Kellerman would barely remember her mother once she was grown. She would vaguely recall a dirty apartment where she was only free to play during the day. At nights she was locked in a closet and told if she didn’t stay quiet she wouldn’t eat the next day. Then she heard men’s voices and Mommy made funny sounds. Mommy said if she didn’t make the funny sounds for the men she wouldn’t get paid and they would be homeless like Wally the drunk who slept in the alley below their window. Angela didn’t want to sleep outside like Wally the drunk.

The judge flipped absently through her file. “Recommendation?”

“The child was taken into state custody when the mother was arrested for prostitution,” the social worker said.

Angela didn’t know what prostitution was. She only knew Mommy didn’t come home one night. Angela ate dry cereal for two days, then there was no more. She took the empty cereal box and knocked on the doors down the hall, asking for more. Then the police came and took her away. At first she was scared. She had seen the police beat Wally the drunk from her window. But to her they were nice. They gave her food and candy. Then the black woman who didn’t smile much took her to a big house with lots of kids who fought and screamed a lot. Angela missed her mother. She cried, but her nights in the closet had taught her to do so silently. Mommy beat her if she made noise. These people probably would too.

The judge removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “I take it you’re proposing permanent removal.”

The black woman nodded. “Yes, your honor. The mother is addicted to heroin. I would say the odds of escaping her current lifestyle are virtually nil.”

The judge hit his desk with a wooden hammer. The sound made Angela jump. “So ordered. The child is remanded into the state foster care system immediately.”

Angela didn’t know what foster care was, but she learned soon enough. It basically meant being shuffled from one house to another every few weeks. Some of the grown-ups were nice, some of them were mean. But *all* of the kids were mean. That was a given. She learned quickly that you didn’t ask for what you wanted. You grabbed and punched. And if they cried you punched them again so the grown-ups wouldn’t come. After a

few violent years, she had learned to hit and kick and bite well enough to hold off children much bigger than herself.

But at least the grown-ups fed her, and while she was moved from one house to another when her behavior became a problem, no one had threatened to throw her in the alley with Wally the drunk. In fact, no one said much to her at all. They just shuffled her along, putting her clothes in a garbage bag and making her wait on the porch for the social worker to pick her up.

ALIAS

PRESENT DAY – SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

Manning dashed past the cars parked beside the hotel. He thought he was making good time, but he heard the sharp smack of leather gaining on him. She grabbed the back of his collar and hauled him to a stop before he reached the corner of the building. For a slender woman, she generated an amazing amount of force.

"How can you run in those heels?" Manning asked, slightly out of breath.

"Rule number one, Mr. Manning. Never take anyone at face value." She shouldered past him to see the front drive of the hotel. "I'm going to hail a cab. As soon as I get the door open, come a-runnin'."

"Got it."

Geldman sauntered like a runway model to the front drive. She didn't have any trouble getting the attention of a cab parked at the opposite end of the driveway, watching the lobby. The car screeched to a halt at the curb, the driver seeming to catch her sense of urgency.

She opened the taxi's rear door and signaled Manning with a jerk of her head. He jogged forward, willing himself not to look back toward the hotel, since that was the likely direction of any incoming bullets. He ducked his head, following Geldman into the back seat.

"Airport! Punch it!" Geldman ordered. The cab started rolling before Manning even closed the door.

"You got it." the driver replied. The cab surged onto the street with a lurch that made Manning grab for a handhold.

"Airport?" he asked. "Why are we going to the airport?"

"To get you the hell out of town," she replied, obviously guarding her words in the cabby's presence. "If your 'friends' can't find you in an hour or two, they'll skip town themselves, so I want you long gone."

"What about the police? They might still be able to catch those two!" It finally dawned on him that he was now a witness in a murder investigation. As a lawyer, the idea of being a *participant* rather than a *spectator* in a legal proceeding was almost as terrifying as being shot at.

"The police would be worse than useless. Your 'friends' know too many people who can finish the job for them, and if even *one* policeman is on that list, you're toast. No, your best protection is to get you out of town, ASAP."

He mulled over Geldman's cold logic. "So why are *you* helping me?"

Geldman frowned, choosing her words carefully. "Jacob was under investigation. I obviously underestimated the threat to his person, so I may be in danger myself. I need to get to the bottom of this, and you're the only witness I have. Pardon me if it's in my own self interest to keep you alive."

"No, no complaints here," Manning stammered. Once the immediate threat to his survival was addressed, his mind drifted to less urgent matters. "What about my bags? All my stuff is back at the hotel."

"Anything in your room worth dying for?" she scoffed. After thinking for a moment she added, "But unclaimed bags might make people start asking questions. Give me your key card and I'll go back for them." She did her best to affect a charming smile. "It'll give you an incentive to stay in touch once I get you home safe."

They were so involved in their discussion they didn't notice the cab pulling over until it had almost reached the curb.

"Wait!" she protested. "Why are you pulling over? I told you we're in a hurry!"

The cabbie flashed an apologetic smile, his white teeth contrasting sharply with his olive complexion. "I am sorry!" He said in a thick accent. "My wife is expecting; I need every fare I can get." The cab pulled to a stop next to a man flagging from the curb.

Manning glanced at Geldman, whose fuming silence was building toward an explosion. He didn't shift his full attention to the new passenger until the gun came over the front seat. The man's attention and his pistol were fixed firmly on Geldman.

"Ms. Conrad!" the new arrival purred. "Your reputation precedes you. I'm so glad I can finally make your acquaintance, if only for a few minutes." The pistol remained pointed at Geldman, but the man turned his gaze toward Manning. "And who might you be, sir?"

Manning started to speak, but Geldman's shoe pressed down firmly on his foot. He remained silent, which was just as well, since his brain was completely devoid of plausible lies, for once.

The front seat passenger spoke to the driver, never taking his eyes off Manning. "Hamid, what was the description Gaya gave you of the subject who interrupted them?"

"White male, forties, average height, medium to stocky build, light brown hair," the driver recited. Manning realized the driver and the passenger spoke with the same accent.

The passenger moved the barrel of his pistol to split the difference between Goldman and Manning. "So we have captured the famous Angela Conrad and a member of her cell. How fortunate."

"Allah is merciful," the driver agreed.

Her cell? What the hell is he talking about? And why does he keep calling her Conrad?

"There is a parking garage a block down the street," the man with the gun instructed. "Pull in and find an empty level."

"As you wish, *emir*," the driver replied. The cab pulled away from the curb again.

"He has nothing to do with this, let him go," Goldman said in an authoritative voice.

"If he has nothing to do with this, why were you fleeing the hotel together?" countered the man with the gun.

Goldman remained silent. Apparently she was out of plausible lies as well.

The cab pulled into the garage and prowled slowly up the ramps, the parked cars thinning as they climbed. By the third level cars were sparse. By the fourth level it was almost deserted.

"Stop here," the leader ordered.

Manning's heart pounded out what he fully expected to be the last few beats of his life. He briefly considered making a hero play of lunging across the front seat to grab the gun, but he doubted he could wrest the passenger's gun away before the driver shot Goldman and him first. The defeatist part of his brain reminded him that such a move would likely get him shot in the gut to bleed out slowly on the concrete, while cooperating would result in a quick headshot. At least he wouldn't have to watch himself bleed to death.

His arms and legs were rubbery and shaking when he emerged from the backseat of the cab, with the gun of the driver covering him. Goldman looked just as frightened as he felt, which brought him even closer to panic. This was it. He was going to die on the floor of some damned parking garage. The leader was out of the cab and motioned them toward the wall with his gun. In his mind's eye he could already see two sprawled chalk outlines on the concrete, with sticky-wet puddles congealed around their heads. He pictured his body being sawn and sectioned just like Jake Fleischer. He felt woozy.

But I don't want to die! His adrenaline-charged brain raced from one morbid thought to another. He cringed at the thought of his wife having to identify his body. If they shot him in the back of his head, would he have any face left, or would there just be a spongy mess? Would they find his body at all? How would his boys turn out without him in their life? With the amount of time he spent on the road, would they even notice? Was his life insurance paid up? Of course it was, he was worth more dead than alive. With that kind of money at her disposal, would his wife take up with

the pool boy or some other worthless man? How long would it be before another man was sleeping with his wife? That thought alone almost made him vomit.

"I can pay you!" Goldman pleaded. "I don't know how much you're making on this operation, but I can double it!"

"You assume this is a mercenary operation," the leader replied coolly. "You are the mercenary here, Miss Conrad, not me."

Her voice rose in pitch and volume. "You have no idea who you are dealing with! If anything happens to me, my team will hunt you down, every one of you!"

His tone was dismissive. "Your team are dogs, Miss Conrad, who will fight amongst themselves until a new leader emerges. Avenging your death will be the least of their concerns. Move."

Goldman was shaking and her voice rapidly rose to a scream. "*No! NO!* Don't do this! We can work together! I can help you!" Her knees buckled slightly. "*No! Please! I don't want to die!*" she wept. Seeing the woman who a few minutes ago had been his savior come apart so completely pushed Manning to the edge of melting down himself. He started to hyperventilate and needed to pee desperately.

"Get control of her!" the leader barked.

The driver grabbed her roughly, hindered by having his gun hand occupied. The leader jabbed his gun into Manning's neck. "Allah is merciful," he whispered. "This will all be over in a moment, but if you struggle I will see to it that you die slowly." Manning remained still, except for the shaking of his knees. That he was unable to stop, regardless of his effort.

Goldman *was* screaming now. The driver was forced to wrap an arm around her, as she continued to struggle.

"Shoot her!" the leader ordered.

Her screams were frenzied now. Her legs were up against her chest, nearly pulling her captor forward off his feet. Almost faster than Manning's eyes could follow, her hand reached up under her skirt. Then she straightened her legs, driving her slender body and the man holding her backward. She twisted and grabbed the driver's gun. Manning thought he saw the flash of metal in Goldman's other hand, but everything happened so fast.

The driver staggered and fired his weapon, trying to end the struggle. The bullet sparked against the concrete and passed inches from Manning's face. The leader wrapped his forearm around Manning's neck, pulling him backward as a shield. Goldman's struggle continued, and the leader's gun left Manning's neck to draw a bead on her.

Another shot rang out, followed by a wet crunch next to Manning's ear. The grip around his neck relaxed, followed by a thud as the leader hit the pavement, a hole bored neatly between his staring, sightless eyes. While Manning looked down, there was a second shot. He looked up in time to

see the driver spun to the floor by a judo throw. He was shot in the neck but still wrestled with her, trying to free his gun hand. She thrust a small black pistol under the driver's chin and fired again. His head jerked, a black puddle flowing outward rapidly. She bolted to the leader and repeated the chin shot, holding the gun on him for several seconds until she was sure he was dead.

Geldman jumped to her feet. "You okay?" she asked breathlessly.

Without the rigid hold of the leader around his neck, Manning found himself wobbling like a drunk. "W-what?" he stammered.

"Are you *shot*?" she snapped.

He checked himself with tingly, shaking hands. "No, I'm okay."

She felt her face. A powder burn from a point-blank gunshot during the struggle marked her cheek. She jerked in pain when she touched the soot-marked skin. "Son of a bitch, that was close!" She surveyed the carnage with hands on her hips, like it was a household project somehow gone awry. "Help me get these bodies into the trunk," she ordered.

"What the hell are you talking about? We have to call the police!" He reached for his cell phone.

She leveled her tiny pistol at his face. "Put the phone away and pull these bodies over to the taxi. *Now.*"

After a short staring contest, he closed his phone. He would rather be Geldman's accomplice than her next victim. He grabbed the leader's limp arm and started dragging, painting a bloody trail with the man's head. He made it all the way to the trunk before he finally lost his composure. He could feel his gut convulsing from the gore and adrenaline overload. He spun away and vomited onto the concrete. His body kept retching in terror long after his stomach was empty. He doubled over with his hands on his knees, shaking uncontrollably.

She placed her hand on his back. "I threw up the first time I saw a man shot dead, too. No shame in that." She paused, looking down at his feet. "Of course, I didn't get it on my shoes."

He still shook, but his anger started to overtake his fear. He turned back to the leader and wiped his shoes on the corpse's pant leg in a futile gesture of contempt. "This guy really wanted you dead," he said with a glance at Geldman. "What the hell did you do, short him on cab fare?"

She laughed. "That's a good one. Come on, I'll help you with King Kong over there." They walked over to the driver, Manning taking care not to step in the two-foot-wide puddle when he grabbed an arm.

"I've found it easier to drag a body by the legs," she corrected. "Less chance of getting your clothes bloody."

Jesus, you do this often, lady? He almost asked. He grabbed a leg. It was easier to drag the body that way. They pulled the driver's corpse next to the leader's. She still had her pistol in her right hand.

"I'll show you a *secret*," she said seductively. She hiked up her dress, revealing a black nylon holster sown to an elastic sleeve around her shapely thigh. "Most of the men who've seen this are dead now," she said with a wink. She holstered her weapon, then bent over to fish for the driver's keys. She popped the trunk. "Okay, let's get Godzilla out of sight." She grabbed an arm and jerked her head impatiently. "Come on, let's go!"

He got a good grip and helped her lift the driver headfirst into the trunk. She was amazingly strong, hardly struggling at all with the load, despite her much smaller frame. The driver's shattered skull hit the bumper, leaving a broad crimson stripe on the yellow plastic.

Manning flinched. "Whoa! Is that gonna be a problem?"

She shoved the driver's legs into the trunk. "Nah. We'll be moving." She had already moved to the leader's body, lingering over it momentarily. "Sorry about this, Rashid, not that you didn't try to do it to me first."

"You *know* this guy?"

"We met at a party," she dodged. "Come on, we gotta get out of here."

He grabbed an arm. "Must've been a hell of a party."

After more lifting and shoving, the leader was also tucked away. Goldman slammed the trunk and tossed him the keys. "Drive."

Manning froze in place. He wanted to walk *away* from Goldman, not get in a car with her and two dead bodies. A heavy metal door opened behind them. A young woman came out of the stairwell at the far end of the garage. She glanced at them and the empty cab curiously, but got in her car and drove away.

When Manning didn't immediately respond, Goldman walked casually to the weapons their assailants dropped, returned to his side, and thrust them both into his gut. "Mike, I need a reason to keep you alive. *Give* me a reason to keep you alive."

He swallowed, his bile having turned his throat dry and gritty. "I'll drive."

"Good boy."

She trotted over to the passenger side and slid into the seat. When he took the wheel, he noticed she kept the seized guns out of sight, but one was in her hand, tucked beside her right thigh. "Exit the garage slowly and turn right at the street. If anything happens, stomp on the gas and get the hell away, don't wait for me to tell you what to do."

Another dry swallow. "Got it."

She retrieved her purse from the back seat and pulled out a cell phone. "Ari, change of plans. I'm coming to you, ETA about two minutes. I got ambushed. No, I'm okay, I just need to get out of sight to plan our next move." She grabbed the rearview mirror and turned it toward her. "I don't think so, but we'll drive past your position just in case."

They drove a few blocks and she told him to turn right, never taking her eyes off the rearview mirror. "Keep turning right, circle the block slowly," she ordered.

"So what's your real name, Monica?" he asked.

Her eyes never moved from the mirror. "Sorry?"

Manning stole a glance at the side view mirror, straining to see whoever Goldman was looking for. "You told me your name was Goldman, but the guy with the gun kept calling you Conrad. Somehow I have a feeling he knew you better than I do. So which is it?"

"You can call me whatever you want," she offered, adopting a tone one might use when negotiating with a child. "Stop. We're here. Back into this alley."

He saw no sign of Goldman's cohorts until he had backed well away from the street. Two men emerged from a white van parked in the shadows. Her pistol came out again. "Pop the trunk and go stand against that wall," she ordered. He complied.

She waved her gun toward the car. "Yuri, Ari, I've got two deads in the trunk. Move them to the van and search them."

Her henchmen opened the trunk. The bigger of the two was Caucasian, with bristly dark hair cropped close against his head. The shorter one was dark-skinned and powerfully muscled, with wavy black hair. Both drew back slightly at the Goldman-induced carnage inside. "We need bags," the taller one said with a Russian accent.

"Come on," she jibed, "you two act like you've never seen headshot before."

The shorter one cocked his head as if critiquing a work of art. "It's just that you're always so...thorough."

She shrugged. "If it's worth shootin', it's worth shootin' twice."

He nodded thoughtfully. "How true."

The taller one, Manning guessed it was Yuri, returned from a van with two black body bags. The pair paused before lifting out the first body, glancing at Goldman. She trotted to the mouth of the alley to stand watch. Manning marveled again at how athletically she could move in a dress and high heels. She nodded to Yuri and Ari.

The pair grunted at the weight of the larger terrorist. They quickly zipped him up and trundled his bulk to the van. They started to lift the leader's corpse from the trunk, but Ari froze and exclaimed something in a foreign language. Manning thought it sounded like Arabic, or maybe Hebrew. She left her watcher's post to see what Ari had found. He noticed a distinct swagger in her step as she approached. She craned her neck over the trunk rim as if to survey her handiwork.

"Yep, Rashid Ben-Jabir," Goldman explained. "His uncle is the head of Saudi intelligence. They're dead serious about this op, no pun intended."

Yuri's brow furrowed. "We are in danger, yes?"

She gave him a dismissive wave. "Not if we put them in danger first. Get their phones and radios. I want to be ready to track when their underlings check in. Ari, warm up your impersonation act."

The pair bagged the leader and hustled him back to the van, closing the doors behind them. Geldman rejoined Manning once her team was out of sight. "Let's dump this taxi, then we'll get out of here," she said.

Manning retook the driver seat and drove a few blocks. She waved him into the parking lot of a building with a "For Lease" sign. After he parked in a far corner of the lot, Geldman examined the two pistols she had captured. She curled her lip at the first gun, wiping it down with a wetnap from her purse before wrapping it in a newspaper she found on the floor. She frowned at the grease stain the pistol left on the cloth. "Cheap Russian crap!" she muttered to herself.

The second gun was ornately engraved and earned a whistle of admiration from Geldman. She handed him the gun by the barrel. "War trophy," she explained. "I'm a little short on pockets—stick this under your jacket somewhere."

Manning was incredulous. "You threatened to kill me not half an hour ago; now you're handing me a gun?"

She smiled impishly. "Can you even find the safety?"

Manning examined the lavish weapon and pressed the button near the trigger. The pistol's magazine slid out smoothly and bounced on the seat.

Geldman threw her head back and laughed. "Yeah, you're a real threat, Manning." She retrieved the pistol and reinserted the magazine. She then moved a lever near the hammer several times with her thumb. "As long as the safety is engaged like this, the gun can't go bang." She handed the pistol back. "Don't shoot yourself, cowboy." He grimaced and slowly stuck the gun in his waistband, trying not to make her joke a reality. She had another laugh at his expense.

She handed him the used cloth. "Wipe down the steering wheel, all the door handles, and anything else you touched." She exited the taxi and walked to a nearby dumpster. She lifted some of the garbage inside and held up the newspaper, allowing it to unroll and deposit the pistol into the depths of the dumpster. She threw the newspaper on the ground for the wind to take.

She returned to the cab and motioned him out. "Done? Did you do the mirror? I touched that. No? Give me the rag." She leaned into the open door and readjusted the mirror to the driver's point of view, wiping it down at the same time. "Keys?" She stuck them in the ignition, wiping them as well. "If we're lucky, somebody will steal this POS and dispose of it for us. Okay, let's go."

They returned on foot to the alley. The sun had relinquished its touch on all but the tallest buildings around them. Other than his life having been turned completely upside down, it was a beautiful evening. The fact that she had trusted him with a loaded gun gave him the courage to inquire

again about his fate. "So what *are* you going to do with me when we're done here?"

One corner of her mouth twisted upward. "Mike, if you knew what I'm planning next, you'd be more worried about surviving the next couple of hours, not what's going to happen after that."

CHAPTER 2

THE BELL

JUNE, 1943 – DRESDEN, GERMANY



The Bell started out as a uranium enrichment device. To create the explosive core for Germany's atom bomb program, the rare and fissionable isotope of uranium-235 had to be extracted from the abundant but useless uranium-238 in mined uranium ore.

A promising enrichment method involved vaporizing the uranium and feeding the gas into a centrifuge. The centrifuge spun the minutely heavier U-238 atoms toward the outside wall, while the desired U-235 stayed closer to the center, where it was collected. By constructing "cascades" of centrifuges, the raw uranium gas would be purified over and over again, obtaining a slightly higher purity of U-235 after each trip through the system.

The Nazi atom bomb program was not only underway when the war began, but had been an integral component of Hitler's strategic plan. Uranium mines in Czechoslovakia would provide the raw materials for the bomb, and the synthetic rubber factory near Auschwitz, Poland had abundant supplies of electricity and water for the enrichment machines. It would eventually have abundant supplies of expendable slave labor to cheaply handle radioactive materials as well. Both of these sites were early on Hitler's list of planned conquests.

But two years into the war, it was becoming painfully apparent that uranium enrichment was a far more daunting technical challenge than the academics on Hitler's Physics Planning Staff had predicted. With German troops taking heavy casualties on the Russian front and allied troops preparing to invade Italy after driving Rommel's elite *Afrika Korps* from that continent in defeat, no one wanted to tell *der Fuhrer* that the atom bomb they had promised him was *kaput*. Another way had to be found.

The idea for the Bell sprang from the German engineering philosophy that if a little of something was good, then a truly massive amount of the same thing would be *wunderbar*. The Bell increased the speed of the centrifuge to tens of thousands of revolutions per minute, and added a powerful magnetic field to aid in separating the uranium isotopes.

At the center of the Bell, two concentric cylinders containing uranium gas spun in opposite directions, multiplying the force to separate the U-235

and U-238 isotopes. A flared ceramic shield covered the three-meter-tall assembly, giving the mechanism its moniker. The theoretical physicist behind the Bell, Professor Walther Gerlach, estimated at least a five-fold increase in uranium enrichment, so obtaining the scarce materials and skilled labor for the device's construction had not been a problem.¹

The Bell's first test would take place at a military airfield near Dresden, Germany. The test was scheduled for shortly after midnight to minimize the impact of the power-hungry experiment on the electrical grid.

* * *



SS General Jakob Spoerrenberg entered the hangar a few minutes before midnight to check their status. The Bell dominated the center of the hangar, surrounded by transformers, electrical control panels, and cylinders of raw uranium gas. Power cables branched outward from the device like the tentacles of an electric octopus. A dozen technicians in white lab coats flocked around the apparatus, double-checking its readiness for the test. A loudspeaker overhead droned the hourly Radio Berlin reports from the front. A male voice announced with level Prussian formality the imminent victory of the Third Reich over the Russian tank forces at Kursk. At times Spoerrenberg wished he didn't know the truth about the horrific losses the *Wehrmacht* was suffering.

Dr. Gerlach approached him. "All is in readiness, *Herr General*. We await your orders."

The general frowned at the number of technicians so close to the untested device. "Are these personnel all necessary for the test, *Herr Doktor*?"

"*Nein*, General, only five technicians will be in the hangar with the device."

"Very well, proceed."

Orders were shouted, transformers charged, and pressurized gas hissed and steamed. A low hum rose in pitch from inside the Bell, then stabilized at an almost-threatening growl. One of the technicians nodded to Gerlach.

"Evacuate the building!" Gerlach shouted. He gestured toward the door. "General, I will show you to the observation room." They stepped into the warm air on the tarmac, followed by most of the technicians.

Spoerrenberg fought a sense of foreboding. The towering oddness of Gerlach's brainchild tugged at his more primal fears, like some unknown monster hauled from the depths and trapped in the lab for study. He wondered whether the engineers staying with the device were selected by matters of specialization, or had merely drawn a short straw.

The general and his adjutant, a battle-hardened lieutenant who had lost an eye on the Eastern front, followed Gerlach into another hangar. A young technician named Kurt Debus huddled over a console crowded with instruments. An intercom speaker and microphone sat on the table beside him.

Gerlach keyed the microphone. "Ernst, we are ready, please begin."

"*Jawhol, Herr Doktor,*" the intercom crackled.

Spoerrenberg watched the pressures and RPM's gradually increase. He felt a faint rumbling beneath his feet. "It is a pity we do not have one of *Herr Goebel's* new television cameras to watch the test, eh *Doktor?*" It was frustrating to him to have no visual feedback other than a few trembling gauges, especially since his career was riding on the success of this test.

Gerlach's eyes never left the instrument panel. "I can see all I need to see here, *Herr General.*" He tapped one of the RPM gauges. "Kurt, that speed is too high." He took the microphone. "Ernst, your outer rotor speed is too high."

"We see that, *Doktor,*" Ernst replied, over a hiss of static not present a moment ago. "We are reducing the motor voltage now."

Spoerrenberg felt the rumble beneath his feet become a discernible shake. It reminded him of an earthquake tremor. The lights flickered slightly.

Gerlach's voice had a tone of urgency. "Ernst, you must reduce your rotor speed! The magnetic field is becoming unstable!"

The hiss of static grew to a roar, almost drowning out the technician's response. "We have reduced power to zero! The rotor is self-accelerating!"

Self-accelerating? Spoerrenberg thought. *How is that possible?*

Gerlach was frantic now. "Ernst! Check your radiation levels! If you cannot stop the rotors you must evacuate!"

Spoerrenberg grasped his adjutant by the arm. "I don't like this," he whispered. "Get our men away from that thing."

"*Jawhol, Herr General!*" The lieutenant disappeared from the hangar.

The interference drowned out all but an occasional word from the technicians inside the hangar. "Extreme...vibration...blue glow."

In his frustration and panic, Gerlach lost all professional decorum. "*Vas ist das sheist?*" he cried out.

Suddenly above the static came the unearthly sound of several men screaming in terror and agony. A blue shock wave rocketed through the control room, driving a sharp electric shock through his body.

Spoerrenberg was still checking himself for harm when he realized the shaking had completely stopped. The speakers fell silent as well.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"I wish I knew, General!" Gerlach replied.

Already out the door, he ran for the hangar, his troops sprinting ahead of him. The soldiers bunched up just inside the door. He pushed past his men, then stopped cold. The five Bell technicians writhed on the floor, their backs arched in agony. They tried to scream, but only gagging sounds escaped. He ran to the closest worker, grasping the man's arms to comfort and steady him, as he would a desperately wounded soldier.

Black, shiny fluid flowed from the technician's eyes and nose. He retched, a gush of the thick black goo flowing over his chin. Choking, his limbs thrashing wildly as he tried to breathe.

Spoerrenberg started to roll the man over on his stomach to clear his airway, but the seizures suddenly stopped. The man's eyes rolled back. He was dead.

Spoerrenberg released his hold on the technician and stood. He realized he was shaking. His men examined the other technicians, but they were now dead as well. The only sound was the fading whine of the Bell's rotors coasting to a stop. His eyes rose from the carnage on the hangar floor.

The Bell was missing.

Heavy cables snaked from the control panels to the spot where the Bell once rested, the mounting brackets that secured the heavy device to the floor were either ripped in half or missing entirely. Yet he still heard the device, so his eyes followed the sound.

Upward.

Hidden in the shadows above the hanging ceiling lights, the cylindrical mass of the Bell was barely visible. "Get me a light!" he ordered.

One of the soldiers pointed a flashlight toward the ceiling. The Bell had almost punched through the hangar roof, stopped only by a heavy structural beam, its truss mashed flat against the ceiling.

"*What the hell?*" he exclaimed. With a groan of protesting metal, the Bell broke free from the mangled beams and fell back toward the hangar floor.

"*GET BACK!*" his adjutant yelled, grabbing Spoerrenberg by the arm and pulling him forcefully away.

Instead of plummeting to earth, the Bell descended gracefully, wobbling slowly about its axis, like a toy top winding down. With the sound of metal grinding on concrete, the Bell settled to the floor. The massive device crushed the prostrate body of a technician, forcefully extruding oily goop from the corpse's nose and mouth like jet-black toothpaste. The turbine whine of the Bell's rotors slowly faded to a stop.

Spoerrenberg turned away from the otherworldly carnage. "Dear God, what have we done?" he whispered. ²

MIMIC

PRESENT DAY – SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

Manning walked ahead of her, toward the van parked in the alley. Geldman relieved him of the ornately engraved pistol she had liberated from their would-be killers, as well as his cell phone, when they reached the vehicle. She reached over the pistol with her left arm and gave the van's back doors a coded knock, then opened one of the doors.

"After you," she offered in false courtesy.

He stepped inside. When his eyes adjusted he found himself staring into another gun. The operative she had called Ari sat at a computer console, holding a pistol in his left hand. Recognizing Manning he reholstered his weapon. Manning climbed inside.

Two chairs faced the computer consoles on the right side of the van. The two body bags filled the narrow space behind the chairs. Manning stood hunched between the two chairs when Geldman entered. "Sit," she ordered.

He sat in the remaining chair, but felt Geldman's gun poke him in the arm. "Not *there*," she scolded. "Have a seat on our two friends. They don't mind, trust me."

He cringed, but maneuvered into a crouch over the body bags, then lowered himself slowly to contact. The bags were sickeningly warm against his buttocks, sagging turgidly against his weight. The gases forced out of both bodies formed a loud duet of flatulence in the confined space, making Manning flinch.

"That would've happened anyway as their sphincters relaxed," Geldman explained. "The smell is probably going to get pretty thick in here." She wasn't kidding. The fetid smell mingled with the tang of blood in a nauseating mixture. He gagged repeatedly, the spasms working their way down to his emptied stomach.

Geldman ignored Manning's distress, taking the remaining seat to Manning's front and right. "Talk to me, Ari."

"Both subjects had cell phones, and the leader also had a radio," Ari reported. "The cell phones are both throwaways. Speed dials indicate at least three other phones in their network. I hacked the cell phone company's server and all the phones are in range of the nearest cell tower. The leader's phone has an additional local number and a Saudi number loaded. Both his cell phone and the radio have squawked once, so his

network is going to get nervous very soon. But we'll have to move the van if we want to localize their phones."

Why in God's name would they want to find the rest of that bastard's network? Manning wondered. He was just hoping to get the hell away before the rest of the Arab goons found out Geldman had bagged their leader. He hunched over the body bags, his head almost touching Ari's back in the cramped interior. Geldman elbowed him out of the way and yelled into the front of the van. "Yuri, get ready to move! Ari's sending you the GPS of the nearest cell tower. Set up a search pattern."

"You got it," a heavily accented voice replied.

"See if you can put a name with the local and Saudi numbers on Ben-Jabir's phone," she told Ari. "Let's roll and get some air moving back here," she called to the driver.

"Da!" came the enthusiastic reply, along with the sound of the engine turning over. The van started moving a few seconds later.

She leaned over Ari's console and tapped her finger on the captured cell phones. "When these guys call again, you'll have to imitate Ben-Jabir and convince them to stay put once we DF their position."

"The Saudi dialect will be no problem. I worked undercover in Riyadh for almost a year."

"Good."

The van rocked, exiting the alley and turning on to the side street. "Okay, I've got a signal," Ari announced. "Hold this direction for a couple of minutes!" he called forward, his attention focused on a large screen. Colored spikes projected from the center, moving slowly as the van traveled. "Can you give me a left turn? A couple of my bearings are almost constant."

The van turned, the spikes on the screen moving with it. A compass on the display said they were now heading west. Two of the spikes rotated counterclockwise rapidly. "We're close," Geldman whispered, as if their targets might hear her. One of the captured cell phones gave a shrill ring, making Manning jump.

"Remember Ari," she coached, "Ben-Jabir is used to being in charge. Be an asshole. Be a *big* asshole."

"Understood." Ari took the call, firing off a string in Arabic. Manning could hear excited jabbering on the other end. Geldman made a "lower, lower" motion at her throat. The pitch of Ari's voice dropped with the next exchange, which was loud and abusive, even though Manning couldn't understand the words.

Two of the spikes on Ari's screen continued their rapid counterclockwise march. He keyed in a command to his console. The same spikes were overlaid on a moving map display, tracing a pie wedge that got

shorter and slimmer as the van traveled. As Manning watched, the wedges shrank to points and flashed, inside a square labeled, San Jose Sheraton.

They're inside my hotel, Manning thought. Could they be the two who murdered Jake Fleischer? That crime seemed like it had occurred days ago, back when his previous life had ended the minute he pushed open Fleischer's hotel room door.

Geldman texted quickly on her phone and held it up for Ari. It read, HOW MANY?

Ari continued his bombastic exchange. Taking the phone from Geldman he texted back, 2 HOTEL 2 CMD POST.

A third spike on Ari's monitor pointed the opposite direction and rotated clockwise at a much lower speed. The wedge traced on the screen filled most of the square labeled San Jose Exhibition Center Plaza. Ari tapped the display and shook his head.

Geldman took back her phone, texting GET THEM TO CMD POST. Ari harangued another set of Arabic commands into the cell.

Manning heard what could only have been protests on the other end of the conversation. That earned them a string of vitriol from Ari, probably filled with Arabic expletives. He gave her a thumbs-up.

When he terminated the call, Geldman yelled, "Yuri! U-turn! Get us back to the hotel! Kick it!" The van reversed course, its engine roaring and tires squealing. The body bags shifted underneath Manning with a sickening, gelatinous motion. The vehicle bumped its way onto the parking lot, stopping abruptly. Geldman pushed him out of the way and moved to the front.

"Both contacts due east, bearing constant!" Ari called out.

"Take us behind the hotel. Get us an angle on these bastards," she ordered. The van lurched into motion again.

"Motion! West to east!" Ari declared.

Geldman raised a pair of binoculars to her eyes. "Got 'em! Two Arab males, mid-twenties, walking to their car. Manning, get up here!"

After a moment's hesitation, he rose to a crouch and shuffled to the front. She thrust the binoculars into his hands. "Are those the two that shot at you?"

He leaned around her to bring the pair into his field of view. "No, I told you it was a man and a woman in that room, not two men. And they looked Indian, not Arabic."

"Dammit," she muttered. "Ari, they're at their car, confirm motion stopped!"

"Confirmed," Ari replied. "Bearing zero-four-zero, range about one hundred-twenty meters. Wait, they're back in motion again."

Manning watched the pair pull away in their gold Ford Taurus. She snatched the binoculars from his hands. "They're our boys, whether you recognize them or not," she snapped. "Go back and sit down!"

He sheepishly complied, convinced he would join the Saudis in a body bag the second he had outlived his usefulness. That second seemed to be approaching rapidly, but what could he do about it? If he bolted for the back doors, Ari would drill him in the back. If he managed to knock out Ari, Goldman could easily turn and shoot him. He felt like a trapped animal.

"Wait till they go around the corner before you roll so we don't spook them," she ordered. "Ari, call their command post and tell them the whole gang's coming, then see if you can come up with good enough disguise to get us past the door."

"Understood," Ari replied, picking up a captured cell phone and making another call in Arabic. That completed, he turned in his chair and unzipped the top body bag. He examined the leader's bloodied face carefully, then retrieved a black bag from a rack over Manning's shoulder.

From the bag he pulled a square of what looked like black fur and a small pair of scissors. He cut several pieces of the fur, holding them up to the leader's face for comparison. Once he was satisfied, he peeled backing paper and applied them to his face. Ari now wore a reasonable approximation of the leader's beard.

He then compared the Saudi's dark gray suit to the slightly lighter shade of Manning's jacket. He grabbed Manning's sleeve and held it over the leader's suit. "Close enough," he said. "Give me your jacket."

Manning complied, but mentally compared Ari's build with his own. "Won't it be a bit big?"

Ari snorted in derision, half amused that Manning would dare to offer his opinion. "Not once I get geared up." He pulled a pair of expensive sunglasses from the Saudi's breast pocket. "Hold these," he ordered.

Ari retrieved a key from a chain around his neck. He opened a locker behind Manning filled with pistols and submachine guns, along with boxes of ammunition and other gear. Ari leaned over to retrieve several items. Manning looked down. Ari's holster was only inches from Manning's right hand. Should he chance it? He glanced left. Goldman had turned in her chair, her gaze locked on him. Her look seemed to say, *Don't even think about it*. He sighed, slumping down further on his body bag sofa.

Ari pulled some kind of black nylon webbing from the locker. He stuck his arms through loops of the webbing, securing a thick strap across his chest, a heavy clasp in its center. Next, he retrieved a small submachine gun, screwed a silencer onto the stubby gun barrel, shoved in a magazine, and slapped the bolt shut. He snapped the weapon onto the chest clasp and pulled Manning's too-large jacket over it. The bulk of the gun took up

much of the extra chest volume, although the jacket was still a little baggy on the operative's shoulders.

Ari snatched the sunglasses from Manning's hands, hooking them over his ears. "You saw this guy alive," he said. "Would this fool someone looking through a peephole?"

It was a remarkable transformation. "Enough to get them to open the door, at least."

"That's all I need," Ari replied, his voice quiet and deadly. "Boss," he called to the front of the van, "I'm ready to go back here."

"Good," she answered. "Load up an HK for Yuri, will you?"

"Sure." He pulled another small submachine gun from the locker and readied it with a silencer, tossing it to Manning. "Here, pass this up."

Manning startled at the slap of cold gunmetal in his hands. He couldn't believe they would just *hand* him a gun, but then he realized the magazine well was empty. The gun was harmless, except maybe as a club.

Geldman extended a hand. "He didn't say stare at it, he said pass it up."

He complied, then was handed four loaded magazines. "That's right, we're not stupid," Ari growled, as he closed and secured the weapons locker.

The van pulled to the curb. "We're here, get ready," she announced. "We'll need some way of localizing them inside the building."

Ari reached past Manning again and retrieved a black plastic case. He opened it, revealing a mass of electronics inside. "That won't be a problem, just let me program in their cell numbers."

She opened the passenger door. "While you're doing that, I'll go check the lobby for watchers. Back in two minutes." She stepped out and walked away, the click of her high heels on the sidewalk fading into the distance.

The silence allowed Manning's imagination to drift toward thoughts that were dark as the inside of the van. Who *were* these people? FBI? CIA? Criminals? They were awfully well-equipped. If they *were* criminals, they certainly weren't *common* criminals. Mafia? That was a chilling thought, but why would a Saudi terrorist cell lock horns with the Mafia? Or *visa versa*?

And how the *hell* did he get mixed up in this? He couldn't imagine Geldman letting him live after all he'd seen, but he remembered this whole mess started with her trying to get him *away* from the Saudi gunmen. Confusion held off panic for the moment. He just didn't know *what* the hell was going on.

A two-tone beep sounded from both Yuri and Ari's cell phones. After a crackle of static, Geldman's voice came over in walkie-talkie mode. "Guys," she said in a lilting voice, "I found someone who can help us. Could you come join me in the lobby?"

"Ah, sure," Ari answered. He shrugged, and snapped the electronics case closed. "Let's go," he ordered Manning. Ari exited and held one of the rear doors open for him.

Manning half-stepped, half-stumbled onto the street, the post-sunset dusk deepened by the shadows of the buildings around them. The street lights had just switched on, each glowing a deep orange, but not yet casting any useful light. The sidewalk stretched ahead into a twilight gloom. Ari closed and locked the doors, then pointed at Yuri. "Follow him," he ordered.

Manning tagged along behind Yuri, who also carried a black plastic case. He was glad to get out of the airless confines of the van, but realized he was still a prisoner even as he walked the streets. They approached the glass-enclosed lobby of a tall office building. He could see Goldman chatting up a middle-aged security guard inside, standing on her tiptoes to lean seductively over the elevated counter. The muscles on her legs flexed, the fabric of her dress pulling tight over her heart-shaped bottom.

Yuri stopped him before they entered the lobby. "You do stupid things, I kill guard *and* you. Stay cool and nobody die. Okay?"

"Okay," Manning agreed.

Yuri pulled out an ID badge that read, "Y. Konalev, Network Associates." He clipped it to his shirt pocket, then poked his finger into Manning's chest. "You Mike Johnson, supervisor, just here to watch, no answer questions. Got it?" Without waiting for Manning's response, he led the trio through the revolving door.

The guard didn't even glance in their direction as they approached, his eyes fixed on Goldman's cleavage. She was doing her best giggling blonde routine, her laughter jiggling her ample curves in a way sure to temporarily lobotomize the guard. Manning cringed at the man's probable fate.

On hearing their approach, she turned in a way that maximized the guard's view down her blouse. The man didn't look up, his gaze fixed on her like a dog eyeing a piece of meat. She waved at them, her smile as vacuous as a Hollywood starlet's. "Hi guys! Stan here says he can help us! Ari, show Stan our Wi-Fi locator."

"Sure." Ari swung his case onto the guard stand as if the ruse was rehearsed. He opened the electronics box toward Stan. "Our customer wants to set up a wireless network in his office, but we need to map out the networks that are already operating inside the building."

Stan stood to look more closely at Ari's box. "Okay...."

"To do that," Ari continued, "we'll need to run a scan on several floors to make sure we avoid conflicts." Manning noticed Goldman stepping nonchalantly out of Stan's field of view while Ari kept him occupied.

"You can't *do* that," Stan interrupted. "Most of our floors have restricted access. I can't just let you wander...."

Before the guard could finish, Geldman stepped behind him and drove her high heel into the back of his leg. Yelping in pain, he dropped heavily to one knee. She followed through by banging his forehead sharply against the edge of the desk. When Stan reached up to steady himself, Geldman grabbed his right hand and twisted it behind his back. She used the arm lock to force him back to his feet and bent him forward until his cheek rested against the countertop.

Ari drew his pistol and pressed it against Stan's temple. "Don't struggle, please."

The guard's eyes widened with fear, his gaze darting between his assailants, finally coming to rest on Manning, the only one of his attackers he could see without turning his head. Manning knew that look of terror well. *My God*, he thought, *I'm one of them now*.

She tightened her arm lock. "Key card. Where is it?"

"Left shirt pocket," Stan said with difficulty.

She jerked him upright so Ari could fish in Stan's pocket. He pulled out the key card.

"What's the pass code?" she demanded.

"What?"

She twisted his arm until he cried out in pain. "I noticed you're married, Stan. Would you like to see your wife again?"

"Yes!"

"Then what's the pass code for this key card?" she hissed between her teeth.

"There isn't one!" Stan pleaded. "Just swipe the card!"

"How convenient. What about the security tapes for the lobby cameras?"

"They record on a hard drive in the security office. Down the hallway and to the left. The key card works for that door too!"

Geldman relaxed her arm lock slightly. "See now? Wasn't that easy? Yuri, would you carry Stan's gun for him and take him someplace where he can relax until we're done?"

Yuri reached around her and retrieved Stan's pistol from its holster. He chambered a round and flicked off the safety. "This way," he said to Stan, leading him toward the back of the lobby, with Ari close behind. Geldman returned to Manning's side, standing slightly behind him.

"Please tell me you're not going to kill him," Manning murmured as the three men disappeared into the security office.

One of Geldman's plucked eyebrows lifted. "Are you worried about Stan or yourself? Don't worry, the next shift will find Stan duct-taped to a chair. Maybe a little humiliated, but very much alive." Her hand grasped the back of his arm like a pincer.

"You, on the other hand, I'm still thinking about." She locked eyes with him. "I guess that depends on whether I think you're going to be a problem or not."

Manning had to work to keep a pleading tone out of his voice. "How can I convince you I won't be?"

She leaned forward and whispered like a lover into his ear. "*Behave.*"

CHILD PRISON

MARCH 1983 – PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA



Six-year-old Angela Kellerman knew something was wrong when she entered the foster home of Ed and Silvia Groutman. The house didn't smell like urine and mold like the last place, but Angela's finely tuned instincts immediately sensed danger.

"I don't like it here," she protested.

The social worker pushed her forward. "This is Mrs. Groutman. She's going to take care of you now."

Angela tried to struggle free from the social worker's grasp. "I want to go!" she cried.

The social worker ignored her. "Thank you for agreeing to take Angela on short notice, Mrs. Groutman. She was having problems with the male siblings at her previous home, so we were hoping that a home without boys might help calm her down."

Angela looked up at Mrs. Groutman. While the woman's mouth smiled, her eyes did not. "I'm sure little Angela will get along fine with the other girls, won't you dear?" She took Angela's hand and pulled her away from the social worker, hugging Angela against her flower-print dress. Mrs. Groutman smelled funny. Not stinky like sweat or sweet like perfume. Just clean, like she wasn't even there.

Angela heard the social worker close the door behind her. She tensed instinctively, like an animal sensing its path of escape had just been cut off.

Mrs. Groutman smiled down on her again. "Let's go make some lemonade, shall we? Then I'll introduce you to the rest of the girls."

Mrs. Groutman led her through the family room, where four girls ranging from her age to several years older sat. Two read books, two worked on sewing projects. They all wore identical flower-print dresses to Mrs. Groutman. They all sat ruler-straight in their chairs. They all avoided her gaze as Mrs. Groutman led her to the kitchen. The oldest girl made

brief eye contact with Angela as she passed and gave her a strange look. If Angela had been older, she would have recognized it as pity.

* * *

Mrs. Groutman was very strict. She carried around a small paddle and popped all of the girls at the slightest hint of disobedience or backtalk. “She knows how to swing it just right,” her roommate Sarah warned. “Hard enough to make it burn like fire, but not enough to leave a mark you could show the social worker.” Angela learned quickly to fear Mrs. Groutman’s paddle and give the woman what she wanted in exchange for not feeling its bite.

What Mrs. Groutman wanted was order. Order and quiet. She dressed up all the girls like dolls and expected them to act like dolls too. Angela had never worn a dress before and found it strange, but not unpleasant. Likewise she had never learned things like manners, cooking, and sewing, but she was a quick learner, much to the delight of Mrs. Groutman.

She even made a friend, which was an entirely new experience for her. Her oldest foster sister Rachel was twelve, a willowy beauty with long brown hair and sad eyes. Rachel became a mother figure for Angela, patiently teaching her things like cutting dress patterns and how to wash silverware in a way that wouldn’t leave spots, thereby avoiding a swat from Mrs. Groutman. Angela began to feel a very strange sensation whenever Rachel was around. A normal child would immediately have identified the feeling as love, but Angela had no context for such emotions.

She did not have those feeling for her roommate Sarah. Sarah was a year older and resented sharing a bed with her as much as she detested the special treatment Mrs. Groutman gave Angela. “She only likes you because you’re pretty and you know how to suck up!” Sarah hissed at her one night.

Angela didn’t know what sucking up meant, but she was sure it deserved a punch in the face. So she delivered, mashing Sarah’s nose like one of Mrs. Groutman’s puffy dinner rolls. It bled a gusher, and Sarah screamed like a banshee. This pleased Angela, because previous experience had taught her that siblings who received such beatings seldom caused trouble after that. This would be well worth a few swats from Mrs. Groutman’s paddle.

Then the bedroom door exploded open and *Mr.* Groutman stormed into the room, his eyes bloodshot and fiery in the sudden blaze of the hall light. Mrs. Groutman rushed past him to tend to Sarah’s wailing performance, which went up another notch now that she had an audience. Mr. Groutman’s nostrils flared. He shook with anger.

“You little ungrateful brat!” he screamed, grabbing Angela by the hair and lifting her off the floor. She instinctively defended herself, pulling up on his arm and sinking her teeth into his wrist with all her might. He howled in pain and dropped her, then kicked her hard with his bare foot, launching her into the corner. Her head hit the wall hard enough to see stars.

“Don’t!” Mrs. Groutman shouted. “It’ll leave a bruise!”

Angela never forgot the terror of Mr. Groutman’s towering form blocking out the light as he descended upon her in fury. Despite her kicking and screaming, he manhandled her into the bathroom, lifted the toilet seat with his foot, and stuck her tiny head and shoulders into the bowl, ramming her head into the porcelain. She sucked in a surprised breath, her mouth and throat filling with water.

She had experienced a toilet dunking before from a teenage foster brother and had expected it to be merely the humiliating opening to a memorable paddling. But to her horror, Mr. Groutman held her under the water, his grip like iron on the back of her neck.

“How do you like *this*, you little bitch?” she heard, the water giving Groutman’s rant a hollow, far away sound. “Do you think *this* will leave a mark?” He held her under until she began to convulse, then hauled her clear of the water, the force that yanked her up as irresistible as the grip that had held her under. He held his snarling face up to hers as the water drained from her nose and mouth onto her nightgown.

“Do you think anybody will care if you live or die, you little shit?” He shoved her head back into the bowl. “I could bury your body out in the woods and nobody would even *look* for you, do you know that?” This time he held her under so long she became convinced he intended to do exactly that. Then it stopped hurting and the lights in the bathroom went out. He pulled her up and she vomited toilet water on both of them. She heard Mrs. Groutman weeping.

“Ed, *please!*” she sobbed. “She’s only been here a few weeks! I’m sorry I lost control of her! Please! I promise I’ll do better with her!”

He threw Angela like a rag doll on the bathroom floor. “She’s right, you’re not worth going to jail for, you little cockroach!” he growled, stalking away. Later that night Angela heard Mr. Groutman take out his remaining anger on Mrs. Groutman, the sounds of slaps and sobs seeping through the bedroom wall well into the night.

* * *

The next day the social worker came for a visit. Mrs. Groutman dressed them all up in matching tea dresses and put bows in their hair. Angela felt like one of the dolls on her sisters’ shelves, fancy and useless. She failed to

see the utility of dolls and didn't understand Mrs. Groutman's fascination with dressing up them or her. The only use Angela had ever found for a doll was as a club, especially if the doll was the victim's favorite.

Mrs. Groutman pulled her aside. "Angela, do you understand that if you tell the social worker what happened last night they will take you away from here?" Angela noticed Mrs. Groutman wore even more make-up than usual today, and the skin underneath had a bluish color.

"Yes," she answered politely. The thought of squealing and escape had occurred to her.

Mrs. Groutman squatted to look Angela in the eye. "But do you understand that we are absolutely the *last* family that will ever take you? Everyone else is tired of your fighting and your smart mouth. If the social worker takes you away this time, it won't be to another foster family, it will be to the child prison."

"The child prison?" Angela whispered. She had never heard of that before.

Mrs. Groutman nodded solemnly. "Yes, dear. You don't sleep in beds in the child prison, you sleep in a cage. You never get to come out, even for Christmas, and they feed you nothing but creamed spinach through the bars."

Angela swallowed hard. She had gotten a Christmas present only once, but she knew she hated creamed spinach.

Mrs. Groutman shook her head grimly. "And you'll never get to see Rachel, ever again. Wouldn't that be sad?"

Angela felt a tightness in her chest. "I don't want to go to the child prison, Mrs. Groutman."

Mrs. Groutman reached out to puff the sleeves of Angela's tea dress. "Well then, don't you think it would be better for everyone if we pretend that last night never happened?"

Angela nodded. "Yes, Mrs. Groutman."



¹ Doctor Walther Gerlach was a professor of physics at the University of Munich, one of the pioneers of quantum mechanics. Co-creator of the Stern-Gerlach experiment for which Polish physicist Otto Stern won the 1943 Nobel Prize for Physics. Because Gerlach was actively working for the Nazis at that time, he was denied his share of the prize. Gerlach may have been involved in much smaller projects similar to the Bell as early as 1924. (Source: *The SS Brotherhood of the Bell* by Joseph Farrell, p. 272, photo credit: Physics University of Frankfurt)



² Jakob Sporrenberg was captured by the Allies and interrogated at length by war crimes investigators because of his status as an SS general. Eventually he was extradited to Poland to stand trial for the executions of the Polish POWs depicted in the prologue. He was executed by hanging in Warsaw on December 6, 1952. Before his death he told Polish Intelligence officers everything he knew about the Bell in an attempt to bargain for his life. In 1998 Polish World War II researcher Igor Witkowski was allowed to read the transcripts of these

interrogations, which formed the basis for his 2003 book *The Truth about the Wonder Weapons*, which was the first public mention of an SS project called the Bell. (Source: *The Hunt for Zero Point* by Nick Cook, p. 184, photo credit: Axis History Forum)