

Berlin, Germany: December 1933

Your Stars Today: Now is the time to act on your bold visions of the future, but only if you have the determination and leadership strengths needed to do what must be done.

The door was unlocked. He knew it would be. He entered the old half-timbered house, pausing for a moment to savor the lingering aroma of fattened carp poached in a pungent vinegar sauce.

There was no need to flick on the foyer light. The stairway leading to the second-floor bedrooms was right in front of him. He headed up, carefully treading toe-to-heel so his shoes wouldn't make a noise as they struck the wooden steps. The door to the children's room was directly across from the landing. With a thin-gloved hand he turned the knob, which was still sticky from some jelly dessert, pushed it and went in. The moonlight, which had bathed everything in bluish white, made it bright enough for him to see all he needed.

The eight-year-old was asleep in the first bed, next to his most prized possession, a toy helmet, adorned with an Iron Cross decal on one side and a swastika on the other. For now the boy was a pretend soldier, but in two years he would join the Hitler Youth, receive his first military training and pledge his life to Adolf Hitler. How quickly time passes, he thought as he leaned over, lifted an unused pillow and, in a single motion, pressed it firmly over the boy's face. It only took a moment.

There was no resistance.

As he backed away from the bed, his foot caught on a lamp wire. He managed to grab the shade before the lamp went tumbling, but the slight commotion was enough to awaken Liesl, the six-year-old.

"Shhh," he said before she could speak. "It's all right." He knelt beside his favorite and brushed a wisp of fine blondish-brown hair from her eyes.

"I thought you were *Krist Kindl* come with the presents," she said.

"Not yet, Liesl." He pressed his lips against her forehead as he had done so many times before. "Are you disappointed?"

"No." She reached up and put her hand on his neck. "I love you."

“And I love you, too, little one.”

“Did you bring it?”

“Of course. Don’t I always?”

“Where is it?” she asked.

“Here.” He tapped his left coat pocket, which responded with a crinkling sound.

“Can I see it?”

“It’s all tightly wrapped. But it’ll be there in the morning. I promise. Now go back to sleep.”

“Wait! Where’s Teddy?”

He scanned the bed. “Oh, poor Teddy’s trapped!” He put his hand over his mouth in mock horror before dislodging a stuffed Steiff bear, which had gotten jammed between the mattress and the footboard. “But look. . . .” He ran his hand over the bear, fluffing its matted blond mohair fur as best he could. “I’ve saved him.” He placed the bear in her waiting arms. “Off to sleep, Liesl. You and Teddy.”

“Will you stay awhile?” she asked, cradling the bear.

“Only if you shut your eyes.” He waited. “That’s a good girl.” He reached into his right coat pocket and drew out a Walther PPK pistol, small and not too loud.

“Are you still there?” she asked.

“Yes, but if you open your eyes, I won’t be.”

“Then I’ll keep them shut.”

“Very good.” He lifted the pistol and held it close to her temple, making sure the tip of the barrel didn’t touch her skin. He would have preferred to use the pillow again, but she was awake and might struggle, and he didn’t want to cause her any pain. “Very, very good,” he said, and squeezed the trigger.

Anticipating what would come next, he headed to the hallway.

“What’s happened?” The woman burst out of her bedroom not even bothering to put on her robe. “What’s happened? What was that noise?”

The first shot hit her shoulder and spun her around. She grabbed hold of a picture on the wall, a Dürer pencil study for his *Christ as the Man of Sorrows* that had been a wedding gift from her parents.

The second shot hit the back of her head. She crumpled to the floor, taking the Dürer with her. The impact of the fall drove her elbow through the picture. Pity. It was a regrettable accident, but still he was dismayed over destroying such a thing of beauty.

He walked over to where she was lying, not quite dead, trying to say something but managing only a gurgle. It didn’t matter. He could read her

question in her dilated eyes, and he answered by firing two more bullets, one into her heart, the other into her skull. Satisfied, he went back to the children's room and shot the last bullet into the middle of the dead boy's forehead.

Only a few housekeeping matters remained. He removed an ash-wood crucifix that hung on the wall between the children's beds and carefully pried off the crucifix corpus—the figure of Jesus on the cross—which he placed in his shirt pocket. Then he broke off the crossbar, lifted the boy's nightshirt and, with a single forceful swing, plunged the piece into the exposed left side, just beneath the ribs. Using the cross stand, he repeated the process with the girl.

Returning to the hallway, he knelt and ripped off the dead woman's sleeping gown, leaving her naked. From the side pocket of his suit jacket he took two communion wafers, which he moistened with the tip of his tongue until their centers were slightly sticky, then placed them on her nipples, applying just enough pressure so they adhered. Next, using the overlapping feet of the crucifix corpus as a pen and her blood as ink, he drew a faint line from each of her breasts to a spot at the base of her sternum. Finally he positioned the crucifix corpus on her body so the head with its crown of thorns was just below where the lines converged. When he finished, he stood and with her torn gown blotted away the little stray blood still on his hands. Looking down at his handiwork, he smiled approvingly.

Now everything was perfect.

He walked down the stairs, and turned into the study where two other men were waiting.

"Just making sure," one of them said.

"There was no need," he snapped. "I did what I had to do. Now get out of here, both of you, and do what *you* have to do."

"Who are you to give orders?" the other man said.

"Do you want to debate, or do you want to finish?"

After some grumbling, the other two men headed for the foyer, and he accompanied them, opening the door to make sure they left. He watched them trudge down the walk, then closed the door and went back to the study to refocus. Music always helped, so he flicked the switch on the nearby low-boy radio console and pushed in one of the eight small ivory tuning buttons jutting out from the face of the mahogany cabinet. A fast flow of words streamed from the radio's arched speaker grill urging "all true Germans" not to buy from Jews. He immediately recognized the impassioned, high-pitched voice. Even at this late hour, a radio station was trying to curry favor

with the new Nazi government by running State Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels' wire-recorded message

He pressed another button and got another speech. No, wait. . . . Not a speech, but a sermon, and from the snippets he caught—"tonight God has given us a new Prince of Peace in Adolf Hitler" and "God speaks in blood"—he knew who was giving it: Joachim Hossenfelder, leader of the Berlin branch of the rapidly growing German Christian Church movement, which was nothing more than an arm of the Nazi Party.

"Let us never forget that the German Christians are the storm troopers of Jesus Christ." When he heard Hossenfelder bellow his signature line, he switched off the radio in frustration and turned to the tabletop gramophone. The needle was already on a disk. He gave the handle a few cranks and sound began to flow. He recognized the piece immediately, the immolation scene from Wagner's opera *Die Walküre*, one of his favorites and, by chance, a fitting selection.

He lifted a half-full crystal decanter of cognac from a silver tray to the left of the gramophone, poured some into a snifter, then settled into a chair where a book had been left open, straddling the wooden arm. He picked it up, looked at the ornate gold title stamped into the green cloth cover—*New German Poetry*—and flipped the volume over to see what she had been reading before going off to bed. Something by Georg Heym—"The Demons of the City"—written, the notes said, in 1910. He scanned the first lines:

*Through the city night the roam,
Darkness cowering under
Their chins adorned with sailors' beards the clouds
Of soot and smoke-blackened clouds.*

Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeply, recalling the smell of the curling smoke that rose from the great square near the Berlin opera house on a May evening this year. There he watched as thousands of chanting university students heaved tons of books the Reich leaders considered incompatible with Nazi ideology onto a massive bonfire. Despite raucous cheering from the throng of spectators, he was close enough to hear the crackle as fingers of flame thumbed through the pages, notating them in ash. *Heinrich Heine, Thomas Mann, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx*—degenerates all being cleansed by fire from Germany's soul. He turned back to the poem.

*The city's shoulders crack.
They straddle the ridge of a ruptured roof,
Amid the flares of freed flames,
Howling at the heavens.*

Leaning forward, he tossed the book onto a pyre of logs in the fireplace and watched as bright orange flames reduced the book to a small pile of charcoal and ash. Then he reached for the phone and placed a call.

Wagner's seductive "Slumber Music" filled the room. Wotan, the much-feared Father of the Gods, had placed his favorite daughter, Brünhilde, leader of the Valkyries, into a deep sleep and surrounded her with a magic wall of fire. Only the kiss of a hero who braves the fire can awaken her. Siegfried was that hero then, and Hitler that hero now, braving the fire and awakening Germany from the nightmare created by Jews and communists. He listened to the magnificent "Slumber Music" with its promise of rebirth and unbounded greatness, thinking of the wondrous destiny that lay ahead for Germany.

And for him.

The voice at the other end of the telephone brought him back to the present. At first he spoke softly, but soon he grew more agitated. "I don't care what night it is. Tell him that I'm on the phone and tell him now!"

While he waited, he noticed some blood that he had missed was trickling down the back of his left hand. Putting the receiver down, he took a neatly pressed handkerchief from his breast pocket, dabbed it in the cognac and began to rub. The blood was still fresh and came off easily, revealing a small tattoo just above his wrist.

"Are you there?"

He heard the faint voice on the phone and quickly picked up the headset. "*Herr Reichsführer?* . . . Good. Krist Kindl has left you a present. . . . No, no problems. Have the police come in twenty minutes. Everyone will be gone. . . . Yes, thank you, *Herr Reichsführer*, and a most blessed Christmas Eve to you as well."

Drawing himself up, he started for the foyer but stopped abruptly. With everything, he had almost forgotten, and that would have been unforgivable.

The tree, a seven-foot balsam, was in the corner of the study, wedged between two windows, the needles of its outspread branches tickling the glass panes. As usual, it wasn't overly decorated, which only enhanced its beauty. Laced with two electrified strands of tulip-shaped handblown

and -painted glass bulbs, its green was mottled with a small and tasteful collection of colorful ornaments, some new, others dating well back to the last century.

From his right coat pocket he removed a small, crinkly bundle and carefully tore away the tissue wrapping to reveal a five-inch Dresden Angel in white holding a palm leaf on which the name "Liesl" had been carefully lettered. Having already decided on the proper spot, he draped the gold hanger over the end of a branch, positioning the ornament so it was prominent.

As he stepped back and looked at the ornament dangling there, he felt a sense of satisfaction over the wonderful and unique Christmas surprise he had given Liesl, his "favorite."

He had made her an angel.

Talbot, Iowa: December 24, 1933

Your Stars Today: You may find that legal matters and travel plans demand all of your attention right now.

He woke up to screaming.

The sounds were so violent and piercing they drowned out the old Emerson radio perched on a nearby table. Startled and groggy, the police chief of tiny Talbot, Iowa, lifted his head from the desk and realized he must have dozed off. That meant he was the only one in town who missed Fibber McGee and Molly's special Christmas Eve show.

"Damn, boy, what's that commotion?" he called out to the sole prisoner in a nearby cell.

But the horrible screaming continued.

"You, Kilian! Jack Kilian! I'm talkin' to you!" Now the prisoner was howling.

"That won't do you any good. We're on the outskirts of town. There's no one to hear."

Howling, like some crazed beast.

"Goddamn, Kilian, *what* is your problem?" The chief swiveled around in his chair. "Are you sick or something?"

The howling continued.

"Boy, I'm gonna beat you silly if you don't answer me!"

"The . . . the . . . the . . ."

"Jesus H. Christ!" The sheriff rose with a frustrated shake of his head. Why was it, he wondered, that every time his deputy got sick a crazy landed in

town? Not that Talbot attracted many people from the outside, especially on Christmas Eve. And the few who did stumble in were usually lost and always normal. But whenever his deputy got sick and couldn't do night duty at the jail, the crazies appeared and, without fail, did something wrong enough to get locked up. Like this one, who was howling. There had been screamers. There had been shouters. But in his entire twenty-eight years as sheriff there had only been one other howler that he could remember and that one actually might have been a shrieker. But this one was a certified howler. There wasn't even a full moon and he was howling. Damn!

"I warned you, boy. If you're sick, you best tell me right now!"

"There! There!"

"Gonna make me come over, right? OK, boy, you got it." There would be no need for his gun, so he left it on the desk. Still, he took his billy club, just in case. In twenty-eight years, he only had to use a billy club twice. But with a howler, well, with a howler you never knew what to expect. Whatever happened to "all is calm" on Christmas Eve? Come to think of it, whatever happened to "Silent Night"?

In the faint glow of a dangling sixty-watt bulb, the sheriff could see his detainee hunched on the thin bunk mattress in the small cell, cowering and pointing.

"There! There!"

Damn! And Kilian was so quiet when they picked him up and brought him in. Normally they'd just drive him across the line and make him Kansas' problem. God knows, they'd done that enough with gambling cheats. Beat 'em up a bit, then over the border they'd go with a stem warning. But not this time, because of the phony twenty-dollar bills. Cheating's one thing; passing bad money's another. The Feds had to be called in, but there was no telling when the lone overworked agent, stationed in Des Moines, would make his way over.

"There! Over there!"

The sheriff squinted in the dim light as he followed his prisoner's shaking outstretched arm toward the corner of the cell where a book was lying on the floor. "The Bible? Kilian, you tellin' me you're makin' all that racket because of that Bible over there? Damn, boy, you really are loony. Now stop all this foolishness and keep your damn mouth shut."

He was heading back to his desk when he heard something.

"Claude."

The voice was weak, but distinct. "Claude."

The sheriff stomped back to the cell. "Boy, you don't know me good enough to call me by my name and you ain't never gonna know me that good."

“Claude.”

His eyes shifted from the prisoner.

“Claude, I forgive you.” The voice was coming from the Bible.

“What the . . .”

“It wasn’t your fault, Claude.” The Bible began to rise.

“What the . . .”

The Bible continued its ascent, first three inches, then five. “It wasn’t your fault.”

The Bible was now a good foot off the cell floor.

“What the hell?”

Then the Bible crashed to the floor, causing the prisoner to start screaming again.

“Hush your mouth, boy.” This time the sheriff spoke softly, his eyes never leaving the Bible.

“Not your fault.” The voice was getting weaker as it drifted from the Bible toward the top of the cell. “Going now, Claude. Not your fault.” And then it was gone.

“Kilian, you hush now and come over here.”

The prisoner didn’t move.

“Please, come here.”

This time the prisoner did as he was told.

“Now stick your arms through the bars toward me.” Again, he did as he was told. “Good.” The sheriff uncoupled a pair of handcuffs from his belt and fastened them around the prisoner’s wrists. Satisfied that they were secure, the sheriff unlocked the cell door and moved slowly toward the Bible. Kneeling, he cautiously lifted it. The back was wet. He looked at his hand. It was covered with blood.

Breathing more rapidly, the sheriff looked down at the floor where there were traces of something scrawled in blood. He had to put his face almost on the concrete to make it out.

Colos. 1:14.

He tore through the Bible until he reached Paul’s “Letter to the Colossians.” There, marked with blood, was the fourteenth verse of the first chapter: *In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.* And yet another word was scrawled in blood across the bottom of the page.

Betty.

The sheriff gazed at the book in disbelief, then let it drop from his hands as he backed toward the cell door until his shoulders hit the bars. That’s when he remembered his prisoner. He turned his head, but there was nobody there.

He spun around, grabbed the cell door, which was now closed, and tugged on it, to no avail. It was locked. And he realized he was alone.

Slowly the sheriff sank to the bunk and put his head in his hands. A few moments later, he started to howl.

There was no one to hear.