Prologue

Berlin, Germany 1940.

The man's head throbbed from where they'd hit him. He'd regained consciousness about five minutes ago and was taking in his surroundings. As his swollen eyes adjusted to the dull light coming from the single bulb above him, his other senses began to catch up. He was slumped in a wooden chair with his hands bound behind him. His clothes were soiled with dirt and blood. Most of it his.

The ceiling and walls were made of stone and were slick with condensation. He couldn't see a door, so assumed it was behind him. The room was damp and he could taste the metallic tang of blood in his mouth. The latter was also encrusted to his face, around his nose and lips. The only sounds he could hear were a low buzz coming from the bulb and the occasional scream from outside the room. He could sense other people with him, but did not know how many. He had a feeling he knew where he was and hoped he was wrong.

How did he get here?

Of course. It was the woman.

A pushover for a damsel in distress, he knew it had to be because of her. He'd been driving in the rain when he'd noticed her struggling to change a tyre on her car by the side of the road. Without hesitation, he'd pulled over to help and had immediately been transfixed by her red hair and green eyes. So much so that he failed to hear the group of soldiers that had been lying in wait for him until it was too late. Although he gave almost as good as he got, he'd eventually been overpowered and bundled into a waiting car. They must have sedated

him as he felt lightheaded and lethargic, or it could just be from the blow to the head he'd received. Either way, he felt groggy and disorientated.

With a wry smile, he wondered what the woman was doing now and whether she was thinking about him. Probably not, he concluded.

He was brought back to reality by the scraping sound of a bolt being drawn and a door opening. Footsteps echoed on the stone floor as someone approached him from behind. The flick of a switchblade caused him to flinch, but it was just to cut the ropes around his hands. He rubbed them together, attempting to ease the uncomfortable feeling in them.

A soldier in a high-ranking military uniform stood in front of the chair and regarded his prisoner.

"I shall speak to you in English, as we don't have much time. Or, rather, you don't have much time because soon you shall be dead," the officer said. "Do you know who I am?"

The prisoner appraised him for a few moments. He was of average height, had a slight paunch to his otherwise slim body, a weak chin, a thin moustache not quite extending to the edges of his lips and wore gold-rimmed glasses with large lenses.

"Yes, I think I do. You're the American president. It's an honour to meet you, President Roosevelt. I'd stand to greet you but I'm a little tied up."

The officer clenched his jaw.

"English humour, I presume. But you do not make me laugh. I know you know who I am."

“Then why the hell did you bother asking me, you fool?” the prisoner laughed and spat a wad of blood towards the officer which splattered one of his lenses. He calmly removed his glasses, produced a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the blood away whilst, from behind the prisoner, a guard tilted back his chair and another rained punches onto his face.

As he replaced his glasses, the officer said, “Please do not do that again, Mr Stevens.”

At the mention of his name, the prisoner looked slightly perturbed, but tried to hide it. The officer noticed and smiled.

“Yes, John. We know who you are and what you protect. You will tell me where it is.”

“Go to hell.”

“You are already in hell, John, as you will soon find out.”

The two men stared at each other as the sound of the door opening again broke the silence. The officer immediately stood to attention and strode purposefully away.

A muffled conversation was taking place behind John, and he turned his head to see what was happening. His view was restricted, however, and all he could see was the back of the officer he had just been speaking with.

Looking forward once again, John sensed the atmosphere in the room change as a figure slowly made its way towards him. He suddenly felt very cold, and the hairs on his arms and neck began to rise.

A feeling of despair arose from deep within him and for the first time since he'd been brought to this place, John felt an emotion that he hadn't felt in a long time: fear.

His heart beat faster as the figure took his place before him. John was looking at the new arrival's feet and saw boots that were immaculately polished and blacker than the darkest night. The presence said nothing, letting the silence linger until John could stand it no more. He raised his head and his suspicions were confirmed.

He was indeed in hell.

And the Satan before him was Adolf Hitler.

CHAPTER 1

PRESENT DAY

Luke Stevens grunted at his alarm clock to switch it off. The smart speaker continued its incessant buzzing and refused to listen to him. Admitting defeat, he rose from his bed and turned the stupid thing off manually, glaring at the 7:30 am display. So much for voice recognition.

He could hear his Aunt, Sarah, downstairs whistling to a song on the radio whilst she prepared breakfast. The aroma of toast and coffee did little to raise his spirits. The thought of going to school lowered them even more. Although Luke wasn't particularly academically gifted, his grades were above average and he worked hard to keep them that way. In a couple of years, he would have to make decisions about what he wanted to study after he left school. Luke had an interest in art and history so perhaps there was some mileage in exploring those options. Too bad there wasn't a course in PlayStation gaming for him to enrol in.

Luke had a quick shower and threw on his school uniform, doing his best to look as cool as a 13-year-old boy in a school uniform could. Unfortunately, the clothes weren't in the best condition. There were several patches where tears had been repaired and its once jet-black colour was now more of a shabby grey. His wavy, light brown hair was parted on the side and he had a fringe that kept falling over one of his startling blue eyes. Grabbing his bag, he went downstairs and was greeted by Aunt Sarah doing a crossword, munching on toast and slurping her coffee.

"The demon rises from his pit. Good morning, Prince of Darkness. Did you remember to close your coffin?" quipped Aunt Sarah, looking up from her paper.

“No, I thought I’d leave it open for you. After all, you’re doing a crossword and listening to Radio 4. If you tell me you’re going to Bingo tonight, I’ll say my farewell now,” retorted Luke.

“Touché. Help yourself to breakfast.”

Luke poured himself a glass of orange juice and began buttering some toast.

“So, what’s on for today? Double Latin followed by embroidery and cross-stitching or don’t they teach those anymore?” joked Aunt Sarah.

“We’re visiting the National Gallery as part of our history project.”

“That’s today?” Aunt Sarah looked up from her paper.

“Yes. I told you about it ages ago. You even signed my permission slip.”

“Did I? Oh.”

Luke smiled to himself at his aunt’s memory lapse. Although she was in her early forties, she appeared much older. Not just in her looks, which were old-fashioned, and – he’d never say this to her face – frumpy, but in her personality and behaviour. She always wore her hair in a bun, usually sported an apron around her waist, even when she wasn’t cooking, and had the habit of regularly pushing her black plastic-framed glasses further up her nose when they began to slide down.

Luke had come to live with Aunt Sarah five years ago, after his parents were killed in a car accident. Not a day went by where Luke didn't think about them several times. At first,

he had found Aunt Sarah to be tedious and dull, but he soon warmed to her and now appreciated her for what she was, quirks and all.

Aunt Sarah had only met Luke a few times before he moved in, and even then, the meetings were brief. Single and not particularly comfortable around children, Sarah had struggled to engage with Luke until a mutual passion for art had brought the two closer together. Now, they were more like brother and sister than aunt and nephew.

"What are your plans for the day?" asked Luke.

"Well, the cushions need plumping, and I might look out of the window for a while. Oh, wait. I did that yesterday," she chuckled. "I've some business to attend to in town."

"What sort of business?"

"Just business, and I'll thank you to mind your own beeswax."

Luke laughed, finished his breakfast, and went to gather his school things. Just as he was about to leave the house, Aunt Sarah called to him.

"Enjoy the gallery. Why don't you check out Tintoretto's painting in room nine? It's one of my favourites. I'd be interested to hear your thoughts."

"Will do. I'll see you later."

"Oh, and Luke? Happy birthday." She threw him a present which he deftly caught.

"Thanks, Aunt Sarah, but you know how I feel about birthdays."

"Luke, I miss them, too. He was my brother. They'd want you to be happy."

“I am happy, Aunt Sarah. I just don’t like birthdays.”

There was a slightly uncomfortable silence between them.

“Fair enough. But I can still give you a present, right? Something tells me you’ll like it.”

Luke smiled. “Thanks. I’ll open it on the bus. See you.”

He turned and left the house, leaving Aunt Sarah smiling after him as she went back to her crossword.

Luke stared at the gift as he made the ten-minute bus journey to school. He put it in his bag, refusing to acknowledge that today was his birthday. It was five years ago to this day that Luke’s parents were tragically killed. The present took him back to that dreadful morning when Aunt Sarah had turned up unexpectedly at his school and told him the awful news. Luke’s parents were never coming home. Numb with grief and with only the distant Aunt Sarah to comfort him, Luke packed a few things from his house and, in a daze, went to live with her.

The two weeks leading up to his parent's funeral dragged on until, finally, they were laid to rest. Luke only knew Aunt Sarah at the service and was surprised to see at least twenty other people there. Luke, Aunt Sarah and his parents were the only members of his family that he knew of, so he assumed the others were his parent’s work colleagues from their office where they used to be accountants. On that painfully dark day, Luke’s thoughts also drifted to the two men he had seen standing far enough away from the service to not intrude, but close enough to pay their respects. One was small and old, but the other young, tall and powerfully

built. Luke thought he recognised the older man as something about him seemed so familiar and he thought he saw Aunt Sarah smiling at the younger guy, but by the time several strangers had passed on their condolences to him, both had vanished.

The excited chatter of his schoolmates leaving the bus broke Luke's melancholy, and he joined the throng of children walking towards their school.