ZINC

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troika

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To Benjy – I wrote Zinc *for you.*

And to Mum (Ruth) – your support has been immeasurable.

Chapter 1

GEORGE

Weimar, Germany, November 1938

A distant drumming filled the air and people began to call and pull each other to the side of the street, forming a line along it in expectation of something coming. Some stepped out on to the road, craning their necks for the first sight. They tried to get a place closest to the front, as though they were at the theatre, and threw bits of excited conversation at each other.

'Can you see them?'

'They must have passed the post office by now!'

'Are there many of them?'

The crowd thickened as people ran out of their houses, and George found himself jostled forward, becoming warm in the cold November evening with the

pressure of bodies against his. The drumming became louder until it was a regular thump, seeming to steadily multiply; then George realized that it wasn't drums at all but the harder sound of marching on stone. By the time the source of the noise came into view it was a thunder of hundreds of boots striking the road in unison. For a moment he felt as he had as a child, scared in bed with a storm approaching, and he wanted to put his hands over his ears. He closed his eyes for a moment and a memory filled his mind.

The dark of his bedroom, moonlight through the curtains. On the ceiling, leaf shadows tossing, restless. His little brother, John, was whimpering in his cot while outside the wind howled. 'Shhh,' whispered his sister, Eva. Thunder shook the sky, once, twice. 'Don't cry, John,' George heard himself say clearly, though his own heart was beating so hard he felt it might escape from his chest. 'There's nothing to be afraid of...'

People were pushing to get a better view, their eyes shining with expectancy. Being tall, George could see quite well, but when the man in front of him hoisted a child on to his shoulders he had to twist uncomfortably to see between the heads. Through this small window he watched soldiers marching past in rows, rhythmical and identical as robots. The noise filled his head like a swelling that wouldn't stop. And the light! The

soldiers held flaming torches and the fire tore through the darkness. Fear began to grip George as he thought how easily they could run out of control and start a blaze. And then the singing began. He calmed himself, remembering that he had been sent to Germany by Britain's Secret Service to report back on the madness that had possessed the people. He focused his mind on translating the song into English:

The flags are held high!
The ranks firmly closed!
The Nazis are marching!
With a firm tread!

The faces in the crowd were lit up as the torches passed by; bright for a moment, revealing their excitement, then plunged into darkness like ghouls on Halloween as one row of soldiers succeeded the next. George could not bear to see such expressions of delight, but the bodies that jammed him in on all sides made it impossible to turn away.

He glanced up at the houses opposite. Two small figures stood on a second-floor balcony, silhouetted by the light from the room behind them. They were children, staring down at the firelight procession below. The smaller one ran inside. He returned a moment

later carrying his own tiny flame and held it out over the edge of the balcony. It came from a single candle sitting in a wide candleholder. 'Of course!' thought George. 'Tonight is the first night of Chanukah.' Jewish people everywhere would be lighting candles now, celebrating how in ancient times they defeated the army that wanted to destroy them. But as the little boy waved the flickering candle over the side of the balcony, a larger figure darted out from the room behind and pulled it swiftly out of his hand, pushing him and his brother inside and closing the shutters tightly against the night and the soldiers and the crowds and the fire. George didn't know if he imagined it, but he thought he could hear the boy crying in confusion and his older brother comforting him. He wanted to kneel down and take both the little boy's small hands in his, just as he had done for his own brother, John, when he was upset when they were children.

The soldiers eventually passed by, and the crowd turned all together to follow them. George found himself being swept along by a tide of people heading for the square. He was one of thousands now, looking towards a stage flanked by more fiery torches. A huge flag at the back bore the sign that he hated more than anything: the black swastika on a white and red background was like a dark star spinning in a sky of blood. Long flags

draped from lampposts showed the same symbol and there was a line of gold standards with imperial eagles at the top of them.

And then the word went around: 'The Fuhrer's coming!' Hitler entered the stage, lit like a Roman emperor but in full army uniform. He raised his right arm straight up in front of him in a caricature of a salute and the crowd seemed to go mad all around him, raising their arms in reply and chanting louder than the boots, louder than a storm:

'Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!'

'Hail Victory! Hail Victory! Hail Victory!' George translated in his head.

His arm felt heavy as stone, but he made himself raise it so that he wouldn't stand out from the crowd, and he mouthed the words. His mission was to blend in, unnoticed like a shadow, watching and listening. The Fuhrer's arm went down as sharply as it had gone up and for several seconds he stood in silence, chin raised, soaking up the adoration like a conductor waiting for the applause to end before beginning his performance. To George, standing some distance from the stage, Hitler's eyes were two black staring circles. The shouts died down, but he waited a whole minute more, asserting his dominance over the thousands. He then began to speak – in low, moderate tones at first, but his voice quickly rose

and one arm shot out before him, pointing insistently as though at a person or people. George's knowledge of German wasn't good enough to understand everything, but he knew that Hitler was talking about Jews. His voice became a shout, shrill and emphatic as he repeated the gesture again and again, as if to pin blame. And then both arms were beating the air in fast, sharp movements, while he bellowed like a person filled with a sense of being wronged and determined for revenge.

Face raised to the sky, Hitler shook his outstretched arms as if begging the swastika to hear him and then broke off as more cheers of '*Sieg Heil!*' erupted. He lowered his head slowly back down until he was facing the audience again and waited until the noise subsided. As before, when his performance continued it was quietly at first but soon rose until he was shouting and slicing the air with the blades of his hands in an unending variety of gestures. Then he clenched his fists as though he would explode with anger, shook them to the skies and abruptly stopped, crossing both his arms over his chest like a statue. The crowd roared deafeningly as Hitler shook hands with Nazi officials in black uniforms and turned round, exiting the stage behind a black curtain.

George realized that he had been fidgeting with a pebble in his pocket all the way through, turning it round and round in his palm. He loosened his grip on

it now, remembering that he had come here as a spy, not to take action. As the crowd began to disperse, George dodged through the gaps, making his way out as quickly as possible, back towards his hotel and then to the station. He had to get back to England and report his findings. As he passed the house where he had seen the Jewish children, he looked up, hoping to see them again, but it was completely dark.

George's swirling thoughts hardened into a decision: 'We have got to stop that man.'

Chapter 2

JOHN

London, England, September 1939

John looked miserably at his boiled egg. Even the bread soldiers, ready and waiting to be dipped, didn't appeal to him. Instead, his gaze flitted back to his watch and he said out loud, half to himself and half to his father, who had wandered into the kitchen on confused feet, 'It's five to.'

Izidor nodded a thank you, as if he hadn't been looking at the clock every few minutes as well.

'I'll put on the radio.'

He swivelled abruptly and strode more purposefully back out of the room, which was the signal for John to abandon his egg. He stood up and followed his father

into the sitting room where his mother, Ilonka, was wiping the framed photographs on the mantelpiece with a damp cloth, trying to distract herself from the situation that was on all of their minds.

The big wooden radio hissed as Izidor tuned it to the BBC. Long impatient minutes of calming classical music followed. John perched on the edge of the armchair, leaning forward as though it would help him to hear the news sooner. Izidor bent awkwardly over the radio, ready to adjust the dial if a crackle got in the way. Ilona kept going with her yellow cloth, determined that life should go on as normal.

The heavy beeps that signalled the eleven o'clock news began. The prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, started to speak.

> 'This morning, the British ambassador in Berlin handed the German government a final note stating that unless we heard from them by eleven o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany…Hitler's action shows convincingly that there is no chance of expecting that this

man will ever give up his practice of using force to gain his will. He can only be stopped by force.'

John looked up at his father in alarm, questions crowding into his mind. But Izidor's hunched position made him look suddenly old, and John kept silent. The three stayed frozen in their own thoughts until John could no longer help it.

'What if the Germans invade Britain?'

Izidor raised his shoulders in a helpless shrug and didn't reply.

'We know that Hitler doesn't like Jewish people, so what will happen to us?'

John turned to Ilonka, but she was just staring with heavy blinks at the radio.

Izidor straightened up creakily.

'I know it's worrying, John, but try not to panic,' he said as firmly as he could manage. 'Thinking "What if?" can drive you mad. We have to take one step at a time. Mr Chamberlain is absolutely right – we cannot let Hitler and the Nazis take over the countries around them; if we stop them doing that, they won't invade Britain.'

This was enough to rouse Ilonka, who nodded vigorously.

'You're right, Izzy,' she said.

There was another silence. John got up from his uncomfortable seat and found himself looking down on Izidor's bald head and Ilonka's greying bun.

Ilonka returned to her dusting with determination, as if she was trying to clean all the bad bits off the world. She lifted a photograph of John and his brother and sister, George and Eva, when they were children. The lines on her forehead softened slightly as she turned it towards John.

'Do you remember the day we went to the photographer's studio to have this taken? We stopped for ice creams on the way and you got so cross with me because I wouldn't let you have chocolate in case it dropped on your white shirt.'

John smiled. 'I was only four!' he said, a bit ashamed that he had made such a fuss. 'I was really upset; look, you can see my eyes are still a bit puffy.'

John noticed that his sister Eva had her arm around him, and he remembered how cosy it always felt to rest against the warmth of her pinafore and feel her breathing. He moved closer to his mother, who picked up another picture.

'See how blond your hair used to be?' She gazed up at him. 'You've still got the same round cheeks and blue eyes...And look, you had the Klauber ears even then!'

John peered down and, sure enough, he could see his large lobes.

'Nothing to do with my side of the family,' protested Izidor, pretending to take offence.

'Well, they're certainly not mine!' insisted Ilonka with a giggle.

John held his hands behind his ears and flapped them back and forth. 'Perhaps I'm related to an elephant.'

He peered at his parents in another photograph. 'How young you look,' he said. His mother, smiling proudly with her children around her, and his father, one hand around Eva's shoulder, the other resting over the little pocket in his waistcoat, as though to protect the precious watch inside. How they teased him about that old watch back then: 'No wonder you love it so much, Dad; it's an antique just like you.' His father would just pat his pocket contentedly. 'John,' he'd say, 'my watch is the heartbeat of the family.'

John's gaze wandered across the other framed photographs. Aunts and uncles, grandparents and cousins, but mostly the pictures were of the three of them: Eva, George and John. Some of the pictures featured their cousin Janosh, who was the same age as George but half a head taller. 'Look at these ones of us on holiday in Hungary,' John said. 'Was the sun always shining when we were there?'

'Nearly always,' said his mother, her face taking on a glow, as though warmed by the sunny scenes in the pictures. 'You children had so much fun playing in the woods until it went down. Do you remember, John?'

John thought back. He remembered sunbeams filtered through pine trees. The snap of dry twigs underfoot. Greasy suntan lotion making his fingers sticky.

He peered at another photograph. 'Look at George and Janosh in this one,' He angled the picture towards his mother. Two boys grinned out at them, their flushed faces streaked with mud. They were standing with their arms wrapped around each other's shoulders. Both held a homemade bow upright in their free hand. Behind their heads, clusters of arrows could be seen poking out from the drawstring quivers they carried on their backs. 'Do you remember the game they played every summer?' John asked.

'I remember they were always up to no good,' said Izidor with a chuckle. He was over at the grandfather clock now, making some small adjustment with a tool he carried in his trouser pocket, glad to be distracted from thoughts of war.

'Well, actually,' said John, 'in the game, they were heroes. You grown-ups may not have realized it, but George and Janosh spent every summer protecting us.'

As he spoke, John remembered…

Standing in the garden bordering the wood, looking up into Janosh's green eyes. 'You mustn't follow George and me into the woods, John, OK?'

'Why not?'

Janosh peered around him furtively and lowered his voice as though he was afraid of being overheard. 'Because of the evil king.'

'Wh-what evil king?'

'Shhh, John, not so loud. The evil king who lives there, of course. His lair is under the roots of a huge oak, right in the middle of the forest. Haven't you heard the strange noises, deep in the night – when you're lying in your bed? Twigs snapping, leaves rustling, that sort of thing?'

John thought. Maybe he had…

'Well, that's him on his great black stallion, circling the house. If you listen carefully, you can hear it snort and stamp. Janosh scraped at the grass with his hand in imitation of the horse and rolled his eyes alarmingly.

'Wh-wh-what does he want?'

'Well, he's a thief, John, always on the lookout for other people's treasure. He'll take anything that's precious.'

Precious…precious. The word echoed in John's head. His mother sometimes told him that he himself was precious. The most precious thing in the world, she once said.

'Wh-what does he do with the precious things?'

Janosh cupped his hands in front of him as though he was cradling a priceless object. Then, suddenly, he clapped them together, hard. 'He destroys them!' he said with relish.

A watery feeling seeming to melt John's stomach then. Searching his mind for something else that was precious. Something the king might like better than him. Blurting out, 'I know what our most precious thing is…it's Daddy's watch.' Looking up at his brother, who was standing alongside them, checking the tension of his bowstring. 'It's even more precious than me, don't you think, Georgie?'

George rolled his eyes. 'Definitely more precious than you, *John. We've had the watch in our family for more than a hundred years. We've only had you for five!'*

John felt his face get hot. 'Not true! I'm nearly six.'

'Well, anyway,' said George. 'Dad's watch is made of gold, so that definitely makes it more precious than you.'

Janosh stood up quickly and put his hand on George's shoulder. 'Better keep your voice down,' he said, looking around him. His spies are everywhere. 'Where does your dad keep this precious watch of his?'

Piping up proudly, before George could answer, John said: 'In the drawer of his dresser. He only takes it off when he's on holiday, and that's where he always keeps it. I know because once I asked him if it was lunchtime yet and he had to get it out to check.'

'OK, Mister Know-it-all,' hissed George. 'Button it

now. Didn't you hear what Janosh said? The king probably heard that, right down in his lair!' He started off at a jog but turned back round to add: 'And no following us.'

'Don't worry, John,' whispered Janosh, scooping up his bow from the ground. 'You don't need to be afraid of the king. Not with us around.'

How fearless the older boys looked as they sprinted off into the woods, the bath-towels they had tied around their necks flying out behind them like capes...

Ilonka spoke, breaking John's reverie. 'Who on earth were they protecting, John?'

'Us,' said John.

'*Us*?' repeated Izidor. 'From whom exactly?'

'From the evil king who lived in the forest, of course, and…and his henchmen…'

His mother looked at him as though he'd gone mad. 'His henchmen?'

A smile crept on to John's face as he realized how ridiculous it sounded. 'Well, the henchmen were just tourists really. The ones who came to swim and sunbathe at Lake Balaton.'

They all laughed.

'Well, that explains all the commotion they used to make when they were swimming in the lake,' said Ilonka. 'I was forever telling them to stop splashing people. Do you remember, John, how you plunged in

that day before you could swim? I think you must have been trying to join in with them.'

At his mother's words, another memory flooded John's mind.

Tiptoeing out into the cool lake, toes first, feet, ankles, thighs, shivering as the water reached his tummy. Suddenly the muddy lake bottom dropping away from under his feet. Kicking, struggling, sinking fast, the panic as the water reached his chin. Strong arms gripping him then, pulling him upwards, dragging him thrashing and spluttering to the bank. Feeling himself wrapped briskly in a towel. George's dark-brown eyes serious, looking deeply into his. 'Don't be stupid, John. You can't join in our adventures. You can't even swim yet…' Hot tears springing into his eyes, sucking the edge of the towel to try to stop them from spilling. George sighing. 'Oh, do put a sock in it, John. I tell you what, you can hold one of my arrows while I'm swimming, OK?' Letting the towel drop to the ground, reaching out for the arrow. Feeling the roughness of the shaft, the point of the head. A warm breeze stroking his back, drying the tears on his face as, squinting, he angled the arrow towards the sun...

'Thank goodness Georgie spotted you in the water!' said his mother, interrupting his thoughts again. 'He was quite the hero that day.'

Hero. The word landed in John's mind with a thud

and thoughts of the war came crowding back in. 'George is the hero in the family,' he exclaimed, his face clouding over. 'What use can someone like me possibly be in a war?'

The lines on Ilonka's brow returned. She took the photograph from his hand and put it back carefully. 'But, John, think what you've done. While Georgie was off having adventures and winning football matches, you were busy studying. And look where that's taken you – to one of the best universities in the country. For all of Georgie's goals and trophies, he could never have done that.'

She picked up another photograph to prove her point. 'Look at you here. Even aged four you seemed to be trying hard to puzzle things out.'

John sighed. Maybe his mother was right. He formed big brainy glasses round his eyes with his fingers and a smile crept on to his face as she began to giggle. He looked out of the window where the dull day was trying to brighten.

'Come on, finish your breakfast or it'll be time for lunch,' Izidor said, and John returned obediently to his egg in the kitchen.

But as he dipped and nibbled, thoughts about war ambushed him again and he turned to Ilonka, who had followed him in.