

**THE BOY IN  
BLACK**

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# PROLOGUE

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It was cold that night. The frost swept in unexpectedly and settled gently over the lands. Father travelled into town, rather briskly. He refused to say what it was but demanded that we stay put in the house. We lived only a mile out of town, on a small commune with a number of other families. We heard distant noises coming from the town and anxiously stood up, peering through the window. I couldn't see anything as the low-lying frost impaired the nightscape. I turned to Mother and asked, 'What's happening, Mother?'

She looked at me and said gently, 'Something that has never stopped for our people.'

I was slightly confused but wary of what she meant. We had been taught, through family tradition and knowledge, of the history of our people – but sometimes it wasn't a history I wanted to hear. My younger sister, Edith, sat next to me on the window ledge. She swung her feet in the air and leaned in front of me on her elbow, watching my eyes squint.

'What is it, Johan?'

I broke eye contact with my reflection in the window and looked down at her.

‘I don’t know. Mother said nothing. She refused to talk about it.’

‘I want to see what is happening.’

‘Me too, Edith, but I don’t think it’s any good.’

Simultaneously, we turned to Mother, who sat with her hands placed neatly in her lap and her head turned to look out on the fields. Her lips were pursed as she continued to look through the window, her eyes still. I looked back at Edith.

‘I’m going to go and see what is happening,’ I whispered, still looking at Mother to make sure she didn’t hear. ‘You have to stay here.’

‘But I want to go with you,’ she demanded.

‘No, Edith. If something bad is happening, I don’t want anything bad to happen to you. Stay here, please.’

We looked at each other for a few moments before she replied, ‘Fine. But be safe.’

I smiled. ‘Of course I will.’

Mother went to the bathroom, and I used the opportunity to slip out unnoticed. I ran across the fields with the chill freezing my body as I ran. The frost was too thick, and as I came to a fence, I naïvely attempted to jump it, hooking my foot beneath the wooden beam, and violently hit my head on the other side of the fence. I moaned and staggered up, stumbling slightly as my feet tried to find a solid piece of ground. To begin with, I decided to walk, but adrenaline was coursing through my body, and I felt boundless energy. I decided to jog and headed for the town.

I stopped for a moment to catch my breath and continued on until the town’s buildings were visible. Smoke rose and mixed with the frost to create an uncertain haze that lingered in the air. I was careful now. The screaming and shouting grew louder, and it wasn’t until I walked slowly into the town’s centre, aware of my surroundings, that I saw the fire. Flames licked up into the air, towering above the buildings and embers flowed on into the darkness. It was then I realised the shops there had been ransacked. The shopfront windows that encased the mannequins in breathtaking dioramas for passers-by to admire, had been smashed, shattered into thousands of crystals which now paved the streets. Mrs Königsberg’s jewellery shop had been obliterated, and the dentistry run by Mr Kleberg was no longer standing. I

stopped and looked at the damage. Who would do this? Who would want to do this? I was bewildered. I looked for Father, but he was nowhere in sight.

‘Father!’ I screamed. ‘Father!’

No answer. Every person who was on the street was already preoccupied with the chaos that had occurred. Screams echoed through the air as people fled in all directions. Mothers held tightly to their children; fathers prepared to defend their families. Wide-eyed and panicked, their faces bore the unmistakable marks of fear. Frantic footsteps echoed against the backdrop of the chaos surrounding us. The air was thick with smoke, billowing towards the heavens from every corner. I wondered if the end-of-days were upon us. I ran up and down the street, frantically searching for Father, but he was not there.

I continued walking east until the road split into a T and I went left, walking for a few minutes before I saw the synagogue. It was a beautiful building, built from a mixture of clay and limestone bricks, graced with intricate carvings that was a sight of wonder. It stood thirty feet high into the sky in all of its magnificence. The masterpiece was a symbol of pride for the town, and for our own community, with its beige walls neatly blending into the town’s older buildings. Yet as I got to the synagogue, I saw the bright fire erupting from the building’s rooftop, which had partially collapsed. The wood glowed red as it struggled to keep intact, straining to hold the entire rooftop up.

It took only five seconds. Five seconds and the roof caved in. Five seconds and the entire structure had disintegrated. Only seconds before, five men raced out of the synagogue, flustered, and panting furiously. The roof had caved with a large bang, and the wood continued to crackle under the fiery heat. One of the five men I instantly recognised. *Father*. I began to race toward him but stopped in my tracks as two men approached him, each wearing the distinct uniform of the *Sturmabteilung*. As they approached Father, I thought they had come to help him. The people who did this should be punished for it. But it was Father who was punished. One officer, a man of large build, grabbed Father by his shoulders and threw him violently. Father spiralled as he fell, hitting the cold stone with such force I could hear the

crack on the ground as he hit it. I could hear the other officer yelling, above the thunderous crackling of the fire as it consumed the synagogue.

‘What’s the matter, old man? Having trouble getting up? Here, let me help you.’ He reached out his hand to Father, who refused to so much as touch the man.

The officer pulled back his arm with a clenched fist and smashed it into Father’s face. A swift blow to the left cheek, he had knocked Father to the ground once more. Blood flowed from Father’s mouth, down his chin and dripped onto his trousers. I wanted to run and help him, but I knew I would be of no use – that’s what my mind told me, anyway. Cowardice is for those who wish to live in darkness; I was in that darkness. It was my *father*. It was the man who raised me to be as courageous as the soldiers, to fight for my own freedom.

He would say to me, ‘No man can fight for your freedom, but you. As long as it is your candle, the fire will keep burning until *you* blow it out. And if a wind blows it out, as life often does, then you are tasked with relighting it, son.’

I couldn’t be sure, though. Did I leave Father there to be beaten up by the two soldiers, or did I intervene, only to have a high probability of getting beaten up myself?

I kept my feet planted on the ground and looked on from a distance. My lips trembled as I watched Father struggle to stay up. I couldn’t look away, with the small amount of hope that persistently remained in the back of my mind that, by some miracle, Father would get out of this without any more trouble. I prayed. I don’t often pray, only when Mother tells us to before we fall asleep – but I never do. Yet I found myself praying, hoping that this singular event would be exactly that – singular. Never recurring. *Please God, please. Please let him go. Don’t let those men hurt him. Make them go away. Please.*

And that was the moment that would change my life. I witnessed the small, slender man stand over my father and pull out a gun from beneath his jacket. With the barrel of the gun pressed against Father’s forehead, he yelled in his face. Father’s eyes squinted, and I saw him cry for the first time in my life. He looked up at the soldier and said, ‘God help you, Herr Oban. I forgive you.’

One shot. The sound echoed through the street, and for a moment everything seemed to black out. Nothing was real. I collapsed to the ground, and for a moment I thought I was Father, my head hitting the ground. My vision was blurred, reducing the two men to shadowy figures on a foreground of fiery destruction behind.

A few moments had passed, and I quickly stumbled to my feet. My head spun and I tripped, but nothing deterred me. A man tried to hold me back, but I screamed and shouted and fought my way through, and eventually he let me free. I ran to where Father lay and fell to my knees.

‘Father!’ I screamed. I put my hands on his shoulders and squeezed them. ‘Father! Please! Don’t be dead. Please don’t be dead!’ I shook him, but there was no answer.

His blood smeared onto my hands, still warm. I knew he was dead; I just didn’t want it to be true. I cried that night. I cried more than I had ever cried in my life. It wasn’t fair. My father was a doctor; he helped people. Why would someone take him from us? Mother said nothing. She cried, and so did Edith. We all did, but I didn’t let them see it. I didn’t deserve to cry. I was the coward who stood by and watched Father die. I did nothing. I let him die. And now his candle was extinguished.

At first, I didn’t fully understand what that night was, but as I grew older, I knew exactly what it was. Our people were the outcasts of society for most of history – I was accustomed to it since birth. If Father had ever seen the boys at school and their treatment of me, he would have intervened. He would have set things right... and yet I couldn’t pay him the same courtesy.

The morning light shone over the town – a wreck. Buildings had crumbled to piles of rubble, and those that stood were now windowless, the glass fragments raked up by shop owners. Each of the shops destroyed were owned by people in our community on the outer fields of town, and all went to the local synagogue.

They hated us, and we didn’t know why. Many more people were killed that night along with my father, and I could never let go of the image that haunted me – the moment of my father’s death. That night changed everything. They called it *Kristallnacht*.