

THE HINDENBURG LETTER

CHAPTER TEN

There was just time for Jake to check in at the hotel, brush his teeth, slap some bay rum on his face, and change shirts. Then he walked the two blocks to the White House, just beyond the Treasury Building.

A white-helmeted MP at the east gate found his name on the visitor list and passed him through. After he signed the official usher's book, press secretary Steve Early met him and they passed down a long corridor to an anteroom just outside the Oval Office. Early introduced him to Grace Tully, the president's private secretary.

Jake and Early talked for several minutes, then a haggard little man in a rumpled gray suit emerged. Jake recognized Harry Hopkins, the director of Lend-Lease and the president's top adviser.

Early introduced them and Hopkins said, "I've seen some of your wire stories. You and Dick Tregaskis wrote some good stuff from Guadalcanal. That scoop on Admiral Halsey caused quite a flap with the Navy. How the devil did you pull that off?"

Hopkins didn't wait for an answer. "The chief is ready for us," he said. "Let's go."

"Break a leg," Early said, and Jake gave him a little wave as Hopkins led the way into the Oval Office. Jake took off his hat. Only six days since getting Rolf's letter and look where he was now.

The office, its walls painted a soft yellow, was larger than he'd imagined. He saw tall fanlights above each window. Although he seldom got stage fright in the company of powerful men, he felt a twinge of uneasiness.

The president wheeled his chair from behind a big, cluttered desk and pushed himself forward to greet him, a gesture Jake found touching. The conveyance was more like a kitchen chair on wheels than a hospital wheelchair.

"Good to see you, Mr. Weaver," the president boomed in his hearty radio voice, extending a hand. Dark circles underscored the eyes on his famous face. The graying hair was thin, the eyebrows an untrimmed hedge. He wore a white shirt and a bow tie with blue polka dots.

"And you, sir," Jake said, taking the hand. Above slack, wasted legs, FDR's upper body looked strong and the handshake was a bone-crusher. "Please call me Jake, Mr. President. Mr. Weaver is my father."

"Ha ha, that's grand." The president's eyes twinkled behind the iconic pince-nez glasses. "Mr. Weaver is his father. I very much like that, don't you

Harry? Jake it is, then. Well, have a seat, Jake.” He rolled himself back behind the desk and picked up a fountain pen.

Jake sat in a guest chair in front of the desk and put his hat in his lap. Hopkins plopped down on a nearby sofa.

“I’ve read some of your stories. They’re quite good indeed,” the president intoned in his Harvard accent. “You seem to have a knack for digging out things our military would prefer that you hadn’t. A regular snoop. My old friend W.R. Hearst must be very proud of you.”

Old friend? Jake wondered. The president must have caught that, for he said, “Your employer has fought me on a lot of things, but he’s also backed us on a few. He’s much more my friend than that old devil Colonel McCormick.” The president shook his head in irritation. Jake knew the *Chicago Tribune*’s publisher hated the New Deal and everything FDR stood for.

“I was quite pleased that Mr. Hearst dropped his isolationist stance and got on the bandwagon after Pearl Harbor.”

“Didn’t everyone, Mr. President?”

That drew a presidential laugh. “Almost everyone at that, Jake.”

“In any event, Mr. Hearst sends his best regards, Mr. President.”

Which was a white lie. “He and I both thank you for agreeing to see me.”

“You’re quite welcome. Now, Steve Early has briefed me, Harry too, on your uncle. I’m very sorry to hear about that. You have the condolences of Mrs. Roosevelt and myself.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now about your going into Germany. Extremely dangerous. Right into the lair of that horrid madman, eh? Tell me about it.”

Jake did. He gave a concise airing of his story about Uncle Dieter and Rolf Becker. Then he stopped and narrowed his eyes.

“Now there’s something else you need to know, Mr. President. Sergei Prokofiev—”

“The Russian composer. Mrs. Roosevelt and I like his work very much indeed.”

“Yes, sir. He told me the Germans are developing a rocket bomb that may be capable of hitting London or even New York from a great altitude.”

“A rocket? That could reach New York? Good God, Harry, have you heard anything like that?” Hopkins sat up, tired eyes suddenly bright, and said, “No sir.”

“How does Prokofiev know this?”

“He saw a friend of his in Berlin, a music teacher, before the Germans invaded Russia. This man said that one of his pupils headed up the German rocket program. A man named von Braun, supposedly a young genius.”

“Harry, see what Army intelligence knows about this.” Hopkins

went to a small table across the room from the president's desk and picked up a phone.

"High altitude, you say? We've had an inkling of a radio-guided flying bomb, basically a pilotless airplane, but nothing along these lines."

"Prokofiev says it has gone fifteen miles high in tests and might be capable of going much higher. It would plunge down on a city almost from outer space." Jake worried that he was starting to sound like one of Hearst's over-dramatic news stories.

"My word, there would be no way to defend against such a thing." The president spun the fountain pen between his first and second fingers like a baton, then looked up at Hopkins, who was returning to the sofa. "Anything?" he asked.

"Not right offhand, Mr. President, but they'll get back to us."

The president placed a cigarette in a long holder and lit it with a kitchen match. When he clamped it in his mouth at a jaunty angle he looked exactly like his newsreel shots. "You're quite certain that you want to attempt this?" he asked Jake.

"You sound just like my fiancée, Mr. President, but yes, I do. I'm not going to let the bastards get away with this. Pardon my language, sir." What's the matter with me? Jake scolded himself, using city room vernacular in this place.

"A real vendetta, eh? Infiltrating Germany would be quite an undertaking." The president stopped and seemed to mull something over. At last he said, "But you could certainly do us a great service if you could learn more about this rocket bomb. And of course achieve your own ends as well. You'd need some good papers, very good papers."

Get papers for me? Jake sat dumfounded. He remembered Bill Stoneman's warning about FDR's guile.

"The British," the president continued, "might help us with those papers. They're better at that sort of thing than we are. We're setting up an OSS operation in Switzerland"—Jake knew about the Office of Strategic Services, America's new spy organization—"but it's quite embryonic. You'll have to go through Britain. You speak German, is that right?"

"Yes sir. My parents were born over there." He figured the president knew this.

"*Und ihr Freund, Herr Becker*, he could help you?"

"You speak German yourself, sir?"

"Very little I'm afraid. I took two years at Groton a very long time ago."

"Well, I think Rolf could help, sir. Naturally I'm not familiar with his present situation."

"Naturally . . . Well, if you can spy for Mr. Hearst you can certainly spy for your Uncle Sam," the president said with a hearty but surprising laugh. Jake didn't see anything funny about this.

"You would contact the British on my behalf, sir? And help me get into

Germany?”

“It’s certainly a possibility, Jake, especially if you can do all of us some good in there.” The president looked toward Hopkins. “Maybe he could even do something about Putzi’s letter, Harry. That could be most useful.”

“Maybe,” Hopkins said noncommittally.

Letter? Jake had no idea what they were talking about.

A buzzer sounded and the president looked at a brass nautical clock on his desk. “Oh my, the time does fly,” he said, flipping a toggle switch on a small black box. “Yes, Grace . . . Yes, I know my 4:30 is waiting. I’ll be with him in a moment.”

The president flipped the switch again and said, “I’m sorry, Mr. Weaver, I must see the secretary of commerce, but we need to talk more about this. Can you come back in an hour?” It was a command, of course.

Be a spy for the president? Jake felt dizzy. This was all moving so damn fast. “Of course, Mr. President.