

BOOK ONE: BELLY OF THE BEAST

*I have been accused of whitewashing the Nazi leadership
in my memoirs. Some people say I make them seem human.
But therein lies the problem. I saw these men up close.*

They were human.

*If we think of them only as monsters and demons,
we may lose sight of the fact that they were very much like
you and I. They had the same number of eyes, ears and limbs.*

*If we forget what humans are capable of,
we risk it happening all over again.*

— From the memoirs of Joseph (Katipo) St George

PROLOGUE

WANBOROUGH MANOR

Special Operations Executive (SOE) Training Centre
Surrey, England, 26th May 1941

THE IRISHMAN STOPS as the dog plants her paws in front of him and bares her teeth, jagged in the light of a reluctant moon. She has never bared her teeth at him before. Perhaps she can smell the blood on the knife.

Flannery steps to one side, off the white-pebbled path near where a broken cartwheel, choked by long weeds, slowly rots against the side of the barn. To the other side, an old hand pump drips slowly, constantly, each *plunk* juddering the reflection of wispy moonlight on the surface of the water in the trough below.

The dog moves with him, blocking his way.

“Good girl,” Flannery says softly.

Her lips open wider and she begins to snarl. In a moment she will bark and everything will be lost.

“Ssshhh, Grable,” he says. She is a beagle. Joe’s dog. Or she was. Now she belongs to Rosie, the horsey woman who lives in one of the cottages in the grounds of the old manor house.

The merest thought of Joe causes Flannery to clench his teeth. Everything had been going so well before Joe came along. MI5 had suspected nothing.

Flannery takes a step backwards, hoping to settle the dog. One bark will wake the inhabitants of the small village. One bark and everything will have been for nothing. He won’t get another chance. What he’ll get is a drop and a sudden stop at the end of a rope.

He takes a firm grip on the knife, his palm sweaty despite the cool night air.

“Good girl, Grable,” he says, holding out a hand for her to sniff so she will know it is him. She *knows* him. He is a friend.

She growls again. Is she simply being protective of her new pups? Or does the beagle really have some kind of sixth sense about people? It is as if she knows what he has just done.

Flannery is a bear of a man, thick-necked and broad-shouldered, although now in his forties and running to fat. But neither time nor weight has diminished his skills, honed to a fine edge training new recruits in Churchill's secret army.

When the dog draws in a breath, preparing to bark, Flannery is ready.

The car is waiting for him near the intersection of the main road to Guildford. It is dark. Its engine is off and it appears to be deserted, but a door opens as he approaches and a man in a dark suit emerges. He wears an armband with the banned blue and white lightning bolt of the BUF, the British Union of Fascists. Flannery's first impression of the man is that he is a weasel. He is short and thin, with a pointed snout and ears. His neck seems too long, with a bend at his Adam's apple.

The man looks around carefully, checking that they are not being watched, before snapping out a Nazi salute and a quiet, "Heil Hitler."

When Flannery does not return the salute, the man's paw darts into his jacket, and re-emerges with a pistol. "Who are you?" His voice is thin and reedy. His accent is South London.

"Put your gun away. I'm the man you are waiting for," Flannery assures him. "But don't be expecting any of that 'Heil Hitler' bollocks from me."

"Are you not a believer in the cause?" the man asks, but the pistol disappears back into his jacket.

"I may dance with the devil," Flannery says, "but that doesn't mean I have to kiss him goodnight."

1. Flak

Germany, 26th May 1941

THE YOUNG MAN SITS and shivers on a canvas and metal seat in a small compartment in the centre of the fuselage. He has only just turned fifteen, but this is not his first time in a bomber. Nor is it his first parachute drop. The last time, over France, he was nervous and a little scared. This time, over Germany, he is terrified.

Or is it the vibration of the four huge Rolls-Royce Merlin engines that is making his teeth rattle so? Perhaps it is the shaking of the airframe as the plane is batted around the sky by the shockwaves of German anti-aircraft fire. Or the clatter of falling shrapnel over the wings and fuselage.

The aircraft, which had looked so large and solid sitting on the airfield in England, now seems such a flimsy contraption clawing its way through the black-pocked air over Germany. The roar of the engines is kind of a comfort; a warm blanket of sound that has been a constant companion over the hours on the flight from Britain. They are part of a raid on oil refineries in a German town, the name of which Joe's frozen brain cannot recall. Marburg? Mosburg? It will not come to mind.

His aircraft is part of the raid, yet carries no bombs. This plane must be light, fast and manoeuvrable. The only thing it will drop over Germany this evening is Joe.

It is cold. Freezing. Without his gloves, his hands would stick to the metal of the seat. There is no heating in this part of the plane because of the open gun ports where the two heavy Browning machine guns protrude, the beam guns, one on each side of the fuselage.

The Brownings are silent. Rileigh and O'Connor, the two beam gunners, are seated, leaning on the walls beside their guns, apparently dozing. Easy for them; their flight suits are electrically heated. They are not worried about fighters. Not while there is flak. If the flak stops, then they will worry.

The air in the plane smells of cordite because the sky around them smells of cordite, the residue of thousands of flak bursts. Overlaid on that is the smell of

engine fumes, sucked in through the beam ports, and the hot greasy smell of the machine guns.

Those guns were busy during the crossing of the coast, seeing off the wolf pack of Messerschmitt fighters that came howling out of the setting sun. The floor is littered with shell casings, a cascade of brass that somehow missed the catcher bags and now rolls around with the movement of the aircraft.

The Messerschmitts had peeled off as the bombers had passed into Germany, leaving them to the anti-aircraft guns. The fighters had more pressing matters to deal with: a second wave of bombers already crossing the coast. This is a twilight raid. They will attack as the sun sets, with enough light to help them find their targets, then return home in the darkness with the cloak of protection it offers from enemy aircraft.

There is something strangely calming in the randomness of it all. In the helplessness. There is absolutely nothing Joe can do. Like so many other times in his life, he is no more than a passenger. He can only wait.

Another shell bursts close by, a thunderclap of sound, rocking the plane. If you can hear the flak, it is too close. This is too close. A jagged piece of red-hot shrapnel bursts through the skin of the aircraft not far from Joe's left knee, tearing a ragged hole, clanging off a girder on the opposite side of the fuselage and falling to the floor, smouldering.

Foster, the flight engineer, casually leans out from his station and tips tea from his thermos onto the jagged metal fragment. It hisses and cools. Foster is an American with a wry smile and a flop of hair over one eye, although that is currently hidden by his leather flight helmet.

Wind whistles eerily through the hole in the fuselage. Half a metre to the right and Joe would have no left knee. His mission would have been over before it ever started. His life would've probably been over too. His inner calm evaporates rapidly.

He twists around and peers out through the hole. The darkening sky is freckled by innumerable black puffs of smoke and sliced apart by searchlights. Joe has seen this picture before, but from the ground, staring at the night sky in London during the Blitz.

Below them and to the left is another Halifax bomber. It seems to be missing part of its tail.

More flak. More black puffs. More clattering of falling shrapnel. He doesn't hear those blasts, which means they are further away.

Joe closes his eyes and forces his thoughts out of the aircraft.

In his mind now is an image of his mother. He holds it there. Focusing on her face. Her hair. The gentle curve of her neck. This is not the female spy he followed through the streets of London, but the woman he knew as a child in Berlin. Before Kristallnacht. Before his father was arrested by the Gestapo.

This is how he sees her when he remembers her. Fussing over dishes in the sink. Tucking him into bed and hiding the latest issue of *Hutchinson's Adventure Story Magazine* so he wouldn't read it under the covers by torchlight.

This is the mother he loves. This is the woman he is prepared to risk everything to save. A few weeks earlier she returned to Berlin as a spy. But there has been no contact from her for many days. She has either gone into hiding or been arrested.

Joe volunteered to go into the heart of the Nazi spiderweb to try and find her. It is a job he is ideally suited for. Tall, blond, Aryan in looks, he grew up in Berlin and speaks German like a native. And who better to infiltrate a spiderweb than a spider? A katipo. That is his codename, taken from New Zealand's only venomous spider, a small, quiet, secretive creature that likes hiding in dark places.

"Ten minutes to drop zone."

The voice is Foster's.

Joe opens his eyes and gives him the thumbs up. Foster's station is close to Joe's seat in the centre of the aircraft. He cannot see the pilots; the cockpit is forward. Nor can he see the wireless operator, the navigator or the bombardier, right at the front of the aircraft. Even the rear gunner is hidden behind metal doors at the rear of the plane. Rileigh and Connor seem to be still asleep at their stations.

Except for the occasional glance from Foster, Joe might as well be alone. He likes Foster. The American had volunteered at a time when it was illegal for US citizens to be involved in the war. He travelled to Canada and obtained a fake Canadian passport that allowed him to travel to England, and within a few weeks he was part of a bomber crew.

Just in front of Foster's station is the pigeon cage in which a solitary pigeon sits on a perch, seemingly unconcerned by the flak, although her head does twitch around looking for unseen dangers. The pigeon does not have a name, officially. It is simply a homing pigeon, to carry a message if the plane is unable to return home. Assuming, of course, that the pigeon is still alive at that stage. This nameless pigeon is called Squirrel. Foster always names the pigeons, saying they are as much a part of the crew as anyone else. This one is named after a dog Foster had as a boy.

Squirrel stops twitching her head around and fixes her gaze on Joe. He waves and she turns her back on him. "Snob," he says.

Joe rouses himself. Ten minutes to go. Time to get his parachute on. It is too uncomfortable in the narrow fuselage to wear it for the whole journey. He is already wearing the harness, like a Victorian lady's corset, and he now clips the parachute to his chest while the plane bounces and jolts across the sky.

A large explosion sounds below and Joe glances down through the shrapnel hole to see the other Halifax bomber in flames. It began to dive, uncontrollably, and he looks desperately for parachutes, but before a single person emerges, there is another even greater explosion from the other aircraft; a huge white flash that sears his eyes; a shockwave that rams Joe's plane sideways. A fist of air punches him away from the opening. The payload of bombs has detonated. There will be no parachutes. He watches, horrified, as pieces of the aircraft – tiny scraps, no more – fall away into the distance behind them.

"Joe," It is Foster's voice again. "Hey buddy!" Joe looks up. Foster is leaning around the corner from his station. "Focus on your drop. Eight minutes."

Focus on your drop. Forget the sight of nine young men vaporised by their own bombs. That won't be easy. The flashbulb of the explosion has seared the image into his mind like a photograph.

Eight minutes! He must be ready.

"Joe! Five minutes."

Where have the last three minutes gone? They just seem to have disappeared. Has he really just been sitting there, frozen, his brain full of fog? He forces himself to concentrate, checks his parachute and makes his way past Rileigh and Connor to the parachute exit.

Again the plane is rocked by flak and he puts out a hand to steady himself, snatching it back quickly as a tiny hole appears in the skin of the plane nearby. More shrapnel. Just metal fragments, but large enough to have put a hole through his hand if he had not been lucky.

He pulls the pin on the parachute hatch and opens it. This is not a tunnel, like he jumped through over France. Just a hole in the bottom of the aircraft. But the drill is the same. Hands to his sides, so they don't hit the frame. Jump in the centre of the hole, so you don't 'damage the aircraft with your face', as his last jump-master used to say.

"Three minutes ..." Foster has come back to the rear, to count him down and to close the hatch after he has jumped.

He is staring at the ceiling of the aircraft, his eyes on a bundle of wires and cables that hang, twisted and sparking, from a broken pipe. He doesn't remember seeing that pipe get hit. But it is in ruins, and there is a galaxy of holes in the ceiling around it. One is large enough for him to see the sky through it. The ribs of the airframe seem hazy, and it takes him a moment to realise that the air is full of smoke.

Now he remembers a burst of light and a whooshing sound. A sledgehammer blow to his chest. The ceiling fades in and out of focus. He breathes in acrid air and coughs, a long hacking choke.

His chest? He remembers feeling as though he was kicked by a mule. Is he injured? Dying? He looks down and feels around. His parachute is in tatters, smouldering. He has been hit by a large piece of shrapnel, but his parachute has taken the blow. He feels dizzy and realises that the plane is spinning uncontrollably. He pushes himself up into a sitting position, a little surprised to find he is still intact.

Where Rileigh and Connor were sitting is now just a ragged hole. The flak must have burst just below them. The remaining fuselage there is on fire, and the flames are spreading.

There is flapping above him and he sees Squirrel flying in panicked circles, somehow freed from her cage, but apparently unharmed.

Where's Foster? Now Joe feels the weight across his legs. It is Foster's arm, and Joe is very relieved to find that it is still attached.

"Foster! Foster!" Joe shouts over the rushing of the wind through the gaping hole in the fuselage. Foster is wearing no parachute. There is a parachute stowage just behind them. He pushes Foster's arm off and stands, crouching in the wreckage of the ruined aircraft. He stumbles back to the stowage and takes two parachutes, hauling them back behind him. He pulls off his smouldering parachute and tosses it away down the parachute hatch, and clips on one of the new ones. Then he turns to Foster. The man is unconscious but alive. His face is blackened and bloody, but he is breathing.

"Foster! Foster!" Nothing is getting through. Joe rolls the man onto his back and clips the other parachute to his chest.

He tries to drag the man towards the parachute hatch, but he is heavy, far too heavy. He is stuck, his feet entangled in the wreckage.

Now there is movement from behind Joe. The metal door to the rear gunner's compartment is opening. Thank god! A man appears. Prentice, a small, wiry man, perfectly sized for the tiny rear gunner's turret.

"Prentice," Joe yells. "Help me!"

Prentice goes straight to the parachute stowage and snatches up a chute. He clips it on as he scurries forward, head bent against the whirlwind of gusting air and smoke driving in from the fiery wreckage that is the centre of the plane.

Prentice reaches him, pauses, glances at the entangled body of the flight engineer, then, without a word, leaps through the hatch, disappearing into the cool void. A moment later his parachute blooms into a white flower over the almost-dark of the countryside far below.

Joe does not waste his breath yelling after him. He crawls across to Foster's feet, wrenching at the twisted metal and cables that bind him.

"Foster!" he shouts. "Foster!"

Something gets through because Foster begins to struggle, jerking his leg against a curl of metal around his flight boot that is imprisoning him. Smoke swirls around Joe, making it difficult to see. The fire from the mid-section, fanned by the wind, reaches out long tentacles of flame, licking at his flight suit and his new parachute.

Still Foster is struggling, but that's making it worse. He is wedging the metal tighter and tighter into the leather of his boot. Joe leans towards Foster's face and shouts over the hurricane of noise, "Push the other way, push backwards."

Foster says nothing, but does as he is asked, loosening the grip. Joe wrenches at the twisted metal, grateful for the leather flight gloves which protect his fingers from the jagged edges. The metal is strong, bent into a C by the force of the explosion. Foster is sitting up now, he looks groggy, but otherwise uninjured.

"Get out of here!" he shouts. "Go!"

Joe shakes his head. Pressing his foot against a bulkhead frame, he braces himself and heaves on the metal. It gives a little, but not enough, and springs back as soon as he releases it. The smoke is thick and acrid. He is barely able to breathe, coughing, hacking and spitting.

"You're out of time!" Foster yells, and Joe knows it is true. The aircraft is plunging in a tight spiral. Soon they will be too low for parachutes.

He snatches up a length of broken wire, winding it around and around the claw that is ensnaring Foster's leg, then looping it around his shoulders. He braces himself again against the bulkhead and hauls on the wire, putting all the strength of his shoulders and legs into it. The curl of metal creaks, groans and bends, barely enough.

Foster pulls his leg free just as the metal springs back. He scrambles to his feet. "Thanks, buddy," he yells, snatching up the spare parachute.

There's a flutter of wings in front of Joe, and Squirrel lands on his arm, claws digging into the leather of his flight suit. He drops the wire and grasps the bird, clutching her to his chest as he dives down through the hatch. A hard slap of air hurls him away from the spinning, burning aircraft.

The ground is close – so very close!

He desperately yanks on his ripcord, and as always there is that moment of doubt before his parachute blossoms above him, slowing his fall with a sharp jolt. Below him, the plane is a Catherine wheel of flames, spinning to destruction.

He has not seen Foster emerge from the wreckage and watches in horror as the Halifax plunges in a spiral of smoke and flames followed by a thunderclap and a burst of light as it hits the ground.

He scans the sky around him and whoops with delight as he sees the white circle of Foster's parachute gliding away towards a river, glistening orange in the sunset.

Above him the roar of aircraft engines and the banging of flak begins to fade as the rest of the raiders continue towards their target ... *Moberg? Mossburg?*

He is glad there are no enemy fighters. German pilots, angered at the bombing of their homeland, have been known to machine-gun British aircrew in their parachutes. At the very least they will report the position of the parachutes and that will mean search parties.

Squirrel struggles against his grip and he extends his arm and releases her, watching her flutter off into the gathering darkness. Of all the crew, she is the one who will make it home.

Only after she has disappeared from sight do his eyes drop to the ground below, looking for landmarks.

Misburg! That was the name of the town, he finally remembers. But his own target is to the northeast of that, near a small town called Bissendorf. That is where his contact will be waiting for him. He is well past the river, which he thinks – hopes – is the Leine. A large, dark splotch on the countryside below could well be the Otternhagener Moor. He seems to be drifting in that direction.

Something is different, but it takes him a moment to realise what. A change in the sounds that surround him. Then he realises ...

The flak has stopped.