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The Madagaskar Plan

Written by Guy Saville

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

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The Madagaskar Plan

GUY SAVILLE

HODDER &
STOUGHTON

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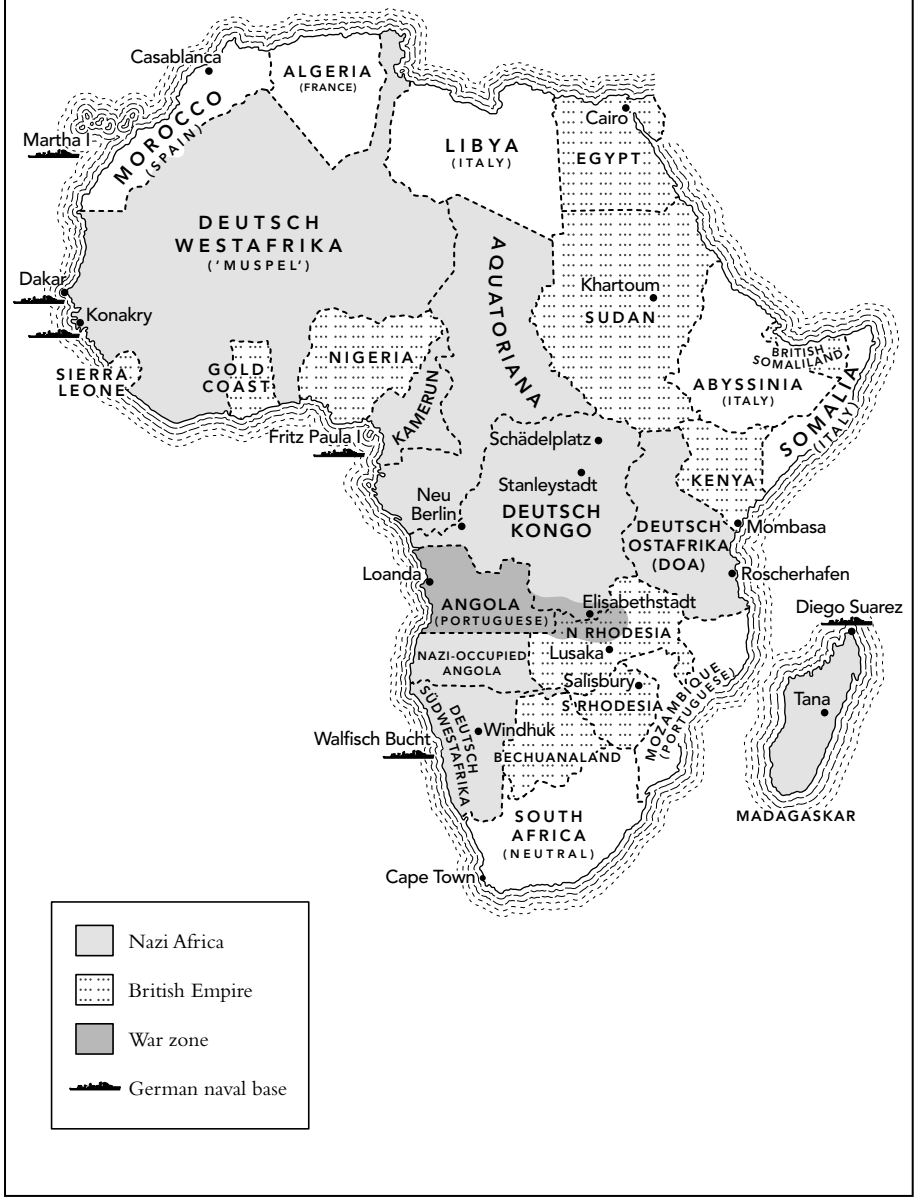
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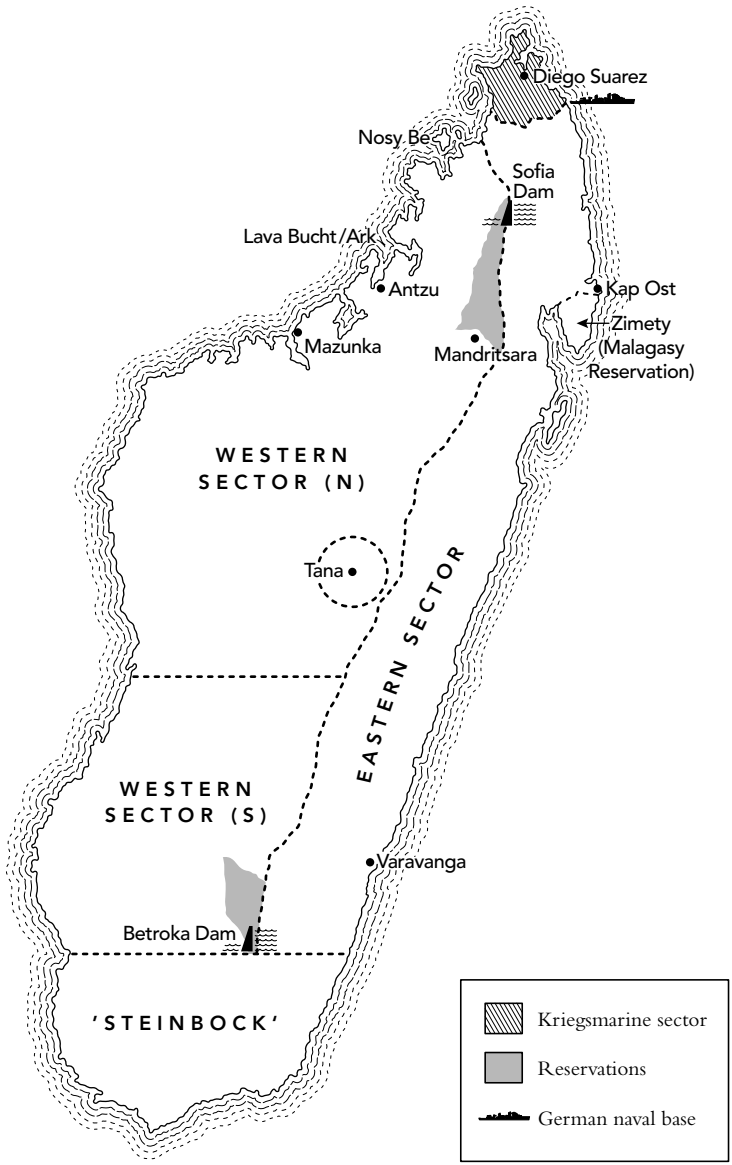
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AFRICA, 1953


Casablanca
ALGERIA
(FRANCE)
MOROCCO
(SPAIN)
Martha I.
LIBYA
(ITALY)
Cairo
EGYPT
DEUTSCH
WESTAFRIKA
('MUSPEL')
AQUATORIANA
Dakar
Konakry
Khartoum
SUDAN
SIERRA
LEONE
GOLD
COAST
NIGERIA
KAMERUN
BRITISH
SOMALILAND
ABYSSINIA
(ITALY)
SOMALIA
(ITALY)
Fritz Paula I.
Schädelplatz
Stanleystadt
KENYA
Neu
Berlin
DEUTSCH
KONGO
DEUTSCH
OSTAFRIKA
(DOA)
Mombasa
Loanda
Roscherhafen
ANGOLA
(PORTUGUESE)
Elisabethstadt
Diego Suarez
N RHODESIA
NAZI-OCCUPIED
ANGOLA
Lusaka
Salisbury
S RHODESIA
MOZAMBIQUE
(PORTUGUESE)
Tana
DEUTSCH
SÜDWESTAFRIKA
Walfisch Bucht
Windhuk
BECHUANALAND
MADAGASKAR
SOUTH
AFRICA
(NEUTRAL)
Cape Town
Nazi Africa
British Empire
War zone
German naval base

MADAGASKAR, 1953



Once again
to
my own Cole

Those with a detailed knowledge of northern Madagascar will notice I have taken certain liberties with the geography – this has been for the sake of the narrative. For the same reason, I have simplified the tussling array of organisations, departments and individuals the Nazis would have employed to run their 'Madagaskar Plan'. I hope experts in both fields will indulge this licence.

I hope the concept of the Jews will be completely extinguished through the possibility of a large emigration to Africa or some other colony

HEINRICH HIMMLER
Memorandum to Adolf Hitler, 25 May 1940

Despite the Führer's ideological misgivings, it is my belief that this weapon can deliver us the final victory in Africa

WALTER HOCHBURG
Top secret communiqué to Germania, 22 March 1953

The World 1940–52

For a few hours in May 1940, it was hoped that British forces at Dunkirk might escape. Then Hitler gave the order to destroy them.

The disaster that followed saw thousands of British troops killed and quarter of a million taken prisoner. Prime Minister Churchill resigned. He was succeeded by Lord Halifax, who judged the public mood of dread and sued for peace. In October that year, Britain and Germany came to terms, signing a non-aggression pact and creating the Council of New Europe. The occupied countries – France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway – were granted autonomy under right-wing governments and took their place alongside Italy, Spain and Portugal. Although weakened, Britain's empire continued to span the globe.

With his western borders secure, Hitler launched a surprise invasion of Russia in 1941; two years later the Soviet Union was no more. The Reich now extended from the Rhine to the Ural Mountains; its capital was renamed Germania. Those around the Führer began calling for the reacquisition of the colonies Germany had lost after the Versailles Treaty. 'On the day we've solidly organised Europe,' Hitler told an expectant SS audience in response, 'we shall look towards Africa.'

The armies of the Reich marched to the equator, conquering a vast swathe of land from the Sahara to the Belgian Congo. As this

new territory edged nearer the borders of the British Empire, Hitler and Halifax agreed further peace accords guaranteeing the two countries' mutual neutrality. The culmination was the Casablanca Conference of 1943 during which the continent was divided – Churchill said 'cleaved' – between the two powers. Britain would retain its interests in East Africa; Germany would take the west. Other negotiations granted Mussolini a small Italian empire while Portugal kept its colonies of Angola and Mozambique.

Throughout these upheavals the United States remained staunchly isolationist.

Germany's African empire was divided into six provinces. Gradually civilian and military administrations were replaced by SS governors, answerable to Himmler but semi-autonomous and with almost unlimited power. The most ambitious was the governor of Kongo, Walter Hochburg. Builder of gleaming new cities and an African autobahn network, Hochburg ruthlessly exploited the continent's natural resources to 'stiffen the sinews of Europe'. He was also responsible for the wholesale deportation of the black population to the Sahara, and a fate few dared to question.

Despite a decade of peace and prosperity, Hochburg remained restless: he wanted the swastika to fly over all of Africa. In 1952, he attacked Portuguese Angola and began preparing an invasion of British Northern Rhodesia. The Colonial Office in London, along with elements in Germania who feared Hochburg's growing power, decided to move against him. They arranged a botched assassination attempt to provoke Hochburg into invading Rhodesia prematurely, forcing him to fight on two fronts and overextend himself. Defeat would mean the end of his ambitions.

On 21 September 1952, even as the German army was bogged down in Angola, Hochburg ordered his panzers into Rhodesia. He assured Hitler of a swift victory . . .

Hampstead, London
4 October 1952, 01:15

THERE had been no news since the morning they parted. No telegrams, no letters, no breathless messengers arriving with the dawn. Not a word from Burton in five weeks and a day, only radio reports she didn't want to hear: war in Kongo and thousands slaughtered. She had struggled not to count every single hour.

Madeleine Cranley lay on her side, sheets wrapped around her, and tried to sleep. Her long dark hair spilled over the pillow. Inside she sensed the fluttering of the child she was carrying. She was five months now, the baby due in February. Whenever she ate with her husband she made a display of gorging herself, hoping the extra weight would disguise her belly. Her throat was constantly stuck with unwanted food: cakes and puddings and gravy churned with acid. Her jaw ached from grinding.

In the hallway the clock chimed the half-hour, then two o'clock. Madeleine flickered in and out of consciousness; at some point she reached over and switched off the light.

The tension in her face began to slacken, warmth enveloped her . . . and as dreams offered their respite she heard distant footsteps. She imagined they were Burton's. He had gone to Africa to kill the SS governor of Kongo, his heart unshakable with revenge; she'd pleaded with him not to. Now he was back . . . sliding into bed like he did on their rare nights together, his body cold and welcome, smelling of musk and woodsmoke. Before she relented

to his arms, she wanted him to know how furious she was with him, how he had driven her almost insane with worry. He whispered an apology – but she no longer needed it; to have him home was enough. They were going to spend the future together.

A guttering breath escaped her: Burton would never come here.

Her mind roamed over the other possibilities of the household. She didn't recognise the familiar pad of the servants, and it couldn't be her husband: he was away tonight on business. Nor did the footsteps belong to her daughter, Alice. They were too clodding, too cumbersome.

There was a stranger in the house.

Madeleine turned on the lamp and strained to hear. The house creaked quietly. Had she imagined the footsteps? For years after she'd arrived in Britain as a refugee, boots on stairs fractured her dreams.

She thought she'd heard them come from the floor above, pass her door and go down the main staircase. Thick soles muffled by carpet.

Madeleine untangled herself from the bedsheets and, mind still fuzzy, went to the landing. The light was on though the house should have been in darkness. She climbed the staircase, aware of the unwieldy weight of her stomach. There were two levels above her: at the very top the servants' quarters, below them the floor where guests stayed and Alice's room.

She opened the door as silently as possible in case she'd been dreaming all along. Her lungs tightened. Alice's bedside lamp was on, illuminating the tumble of her daughter's room – but the bed was empty. Madeleine slid her hand beneath the covers: the mattress was baby-warm.

'Elli?' It was her pet name for Alice. 'Elli?' For some reason she was whispering.

There was a connecting door to the playroom. Madeleine opened it: nothing but darkness and the glint of rocking horse eyes. Fog pressed against the window. Back in the bedroom she checked the wardrobe. Sometimes Alice would stow away beneath piles of blankets and teddy bears. It too was empty. She thought of the time Elli had gone missing on Burton's farm.

Don't worry, he'd said, *we'll find her*. His tone was so confident, so settling.

Madeleine returned to the floor below and hung over the balustrade. 'Elli?' she called.

The housekeeper, Mrs Anderson, appeared: black dress, hair in a tight black bun. She possessed a servility that made Madeleine tense, aware that as the mistress of the house she was more foreign than the Polish gardener.

'Have you seen Elli?'

Mrs Anderson let a rare smile shrink her lips. 'Alice,' she enunciated the syllables, 'is with us downstairs.'

'What's she doing?'

'Nothing you need concern yourself with, Mrs Cranley.'

'It's the middle of the night! My daughter should be in bed.'

'As should you.'

'What did you say?'

Another smile tautened Mrs Anderson's face, then she was gone.

Madeleine strode to her room to fetch dressing gown and slippers; she wanted her toes covered before confronting the housekeeper. She pushed through the door and stopped solid. Her arms clutched her belly.

On the bed was a suitcase. The battered suitcase she had fled Vienna with fourteen years earlier, after Anschluss when the Nazis took over the country.

'I thought I told you to throw this away. Yet Mrs Anderson informs me it's been hidden in the cellar since you moved in.'

It was her husband, Jared.

He was a senior civil servant at the Colonial Office and dressed in his uniform of charcoal-black pinstriped suit and waistcoat; the smell of the night lingered on the cloth: autumnal, damp, penetrating. Brilliantine darkened his blond hair. His eyes looked rheumy as if he had recently wept. He was packing the case.

Madeleine said, 'I thought you were away tonight.'

'I had some good news: rushed back to share it with you.'

'Is that why Elli's downstairs?'

'You really mustn't call her that. It sounds too German. People talk enough as it is.'

Jared continued to pack. There seemed no logic to the items he chose: summer dresses, woolly stockings, her favourite cardigan. He reached for a silk camisole, scrunching it in his fist. 'I don't remember buying this. It looks cheap.'

Madeleine recognised it as a gift from Burton. Heat prickled her cheeks. In the past month there had been plenty of such innocent provocations. At breakfast Jared had taken to reading aloud headlines from *The Times* – 'NAZIS BEATEN BACK TO KONGO BORDER'; 'SIEGE OF ELISABETHSTADT BEGINS' – and asking what she felt about so many soldiers being butchered in Africa. But he couldn't know. How could he sit there eating toast, sipping his Darjeeling, in the knowledge that across the table his wife was pregnant with another man's child? Exhaustion was making her paranoid.

She made her voice as sweet and light as sponge. 'Are we going somewhere?'

He ignored the question and buried the camisole deep in the case. Unsure what to do, Madeleine waited in silence for her husband to finish, hands continuing to protect her abdomen, her bare feet growing cold. Finally he threw in some bottles of perfume, snapped the lid shut and lifted the suitcase to test its weight.

'We don't want it too heavy.' He looked her in the eyes. 'Not in your condition.'

Madeleine felt the press of her bladder. She forced a laugh. 'What condition?'

Jared let the case drop and crossed the room until he was looming over her. She wanted to take a step back – but refused.

He reached for her pyjama top. She'd bought three new pairs recently, all a size too big with Empire lines to hide her waist. He teased the ends, then began to undo the buttons. His movements might have been seductive if it wasn't for the rawness of his eyes. His smooth, manicured hands encircled her stomach, only a thin barrier of skin separating his splayed fingers from her baby.

Madeleine couldn't help herself: she retreated.

In response he leaned forward as if to kiss her ear and whispered something. It was so soft, Madeleine could hardly catch it.

It sounded like, *I know*.

From somewhere the bitter tang of cigarettes. Madeleine took another step back and found herself against the door. The fingers ensnaring her belly pressed harder till the pressure rose into her ribcage. The baby kicked.

'Jared, please, you're hurting me.'

He spoke again: this time a declaration. His face was like cold wax, all the nonchalance of the previous weeks gone. 'I know about you and your lover—'

A rushing in her ears, simultaneously high-pitched, deafening, a low rumble. She needed to sit down.

'—the farm. The little life you were planning together. I've known since the spring.'

Madeleine shook her head.

'Everything I gave you,' he continued, 'and this is my return.'

For a long time she'd known this moment would come and had rehearsed her response. She wanted to recriminate him for the way he had shrunk her world even as it expanded to ball-gown dinners and hotel suites in the capitals of Europe. The way he told her not to eat as though she were a navvy, or his disapproval if she smiled too graciously at a doorman. *Everyone should know their place, Madeleine*. How she had spent years playing the part of a wife – gladly at first, sincerely – without believing his role as a husband. Madeleine felt no urge to justify, only explain. Burton wasn't the cause of their estrangement; he simply offered her the life she wanted. But now, seeing Jared's eyes ringed with tears, the remorse welled in her.

'It was never like that.' More than once the guilt had made her spurn Burton. She reached for her husband, grazing the dark fabric of his jacket. 'I'm sorry, Jared. I . . .'

He snatched his hand away, showed his back. His shoulders gave a slight judder. For a long moment neither spoke. Madeleine thought she heard someone behind the door, listening in on them; that hint of cigarettes again.

'I shall give you a choice,' said her husband. 'You can either leave tonight or,' he swallowed, his throat clicking as if the next words were rancid, 'or I'll forgive you everything. We can continue as before. A termination would be best, but if that's too much I'm prepared to raise the child as my own. No one need ever know.'

Madeleine found herself dumb.

'Well?'

'Jared, I . . . I . . .'

'Choose.' When she didn't reply he repeated himself; this time she heard something creep into his tone. Contempt, brutality.

She stepped forward and reached for the case. 'I need to get dressed.'

'You'd really choose him over all this?' He motioned to the room. Madeleine followed his hand, held open like an emperor's: the Spink & Edgar bed, linen from Peter Reed, wardrobes choked with this season's fashions, drawers that hid the diamond rings and pearls she'd never cared for. She thought of the draughty, bare rooms of the farmhouse and how comfortable she was there.

'I'm sorry, Jared. I love him.'

'Did you ever love me?'

'I can't remember any more.'

He removed the case from her grip, set it down. 'There's one other thing. Before you make your decision—'

'It's too late for that.'

He produced an envelope from his jacket and placed it in her hands. 'I told you I'd rushed home. I've been expecting this for weeks and couldn't wait to share it.'

The seal had been broken. There was a covering letter and a dozen typed pages of names.

'I don't understand,' said Madeleine.

It was a communiqué from the Admiralty about a British warship in the Gulf of Kamerun. HMS *Ibis*. Sunk, presumed torpedoed by Kriegsmarine, the German navy. The *Ibis*: it meant nothing to her and yet there was a stirring in Madeleine's gut that wasn't the baby. Thirty men had been pulled alive from the water. All other hands were lost.

She looked up at Jared.

'The second sheet,' he said. 'A list of the deceased.'

Madeleine turned to the page, scanned the names. It was at the bottom: Burton Cole.

Suddenly the whole world was sliding to one side, as if she were on the stricken ship herself. The papers tumbled from her hand, floating across Cranley's shoes. She struggled to breathe: each lungful shallow yet needing all her effort.

'Everything went wrong in Kongo,' said her husband, the tiniest shard of delight to his words. 'He had to flee – to Angola. And then a ship back home. Or so your lover thought.'

'Kongo.' She could barely speak. 'How do you know about Kongo?'

'Who do you think sent him there? Planned his reunion with Hochburg?'

'You?'

'Cole was the perfect tool for the job, though kept unawares about the Colonial Office. He snared Hochburg into our trap of invading Rhodesia, and once he'd served his purpose was left to die.'

She was shaking, almost doubled over, seeing the man who had been her husband for the first time. It was like that one occasion he had lashed out. A single blow to the stomach that put her on her knees; she couldn't even remember what she'd done. Afterwards Jared apologised for his lapse in control, swore it wouldn't happen again as he filled the house with enough lilies to make her nauseous. She never told Burton about it.

'It should make your decision easier.' His tone was business-like, the civil servant briefing his minister. 'I presume you'll be staying. I'm sure we can put this silly little affair behind us—'

She leapt at him, clawing his face. Her nails came away red.

Cranley shoved her back. Madeleine stumbled and fell; the baby bounced sickeningly inside her, like a stone.

Her husband stepped forward, treading on the lists of drowned sailors. His fingers bunched into a fist. She caught a glint of his wedding ring: it would break her front teeth.

'All the scorn I endured for you,' he said. 'Jared Cranley, the man who could have had *any* woman he desired, yet married a Jewish domestic. Did it for love.' He reached for his handkerchief,

let out a snort. 'I've heard it said I'm the most romantic man in London.'

With a sob, Madeleine stood up, grabbed the case and opened the door. She'd find Alice, flee to the farm.

'This is Mr Lyall,' said Cranley.

A man with a squashed nose and thick beard barred her way. He was dressed in a black suit that looked as if it had been slept in. The stench of cigarettes around him was enough to make her wince.

She tried to pass but he blocked her path. Tried again, this time swinging the case at him. The clasp came loose, showering the room in clothes. Madeleine shoved past—Then was on the floor, the small of her back stinging. She had no strength to stand up; she was crumbling inside with grief.

Lyall brandished a truncheon. He prodded it against her mouth.

'You always had a beautiful smile,' said Cranley. He looked at the garments strewn around the room. 'Forget the case,' he said to Lyall. 'I just want her gone.'

As Madeleine was yanked to her feet, she heard her pyjamas rip. 'What about Alice?' she asked.

'She'll have everything she needs: a beautiful home, a doting father. I know Mrs Anderson will make a first-rate governess.'

'Promise?'

'You might be a Jewish whore, but Alice is still my daughter.' He dabbed the blood on his cheek with the handkerchief. 'It would be better if there are no hysterics as you leave. I don't want her upset.'

'And me?'

His tone brokered no reasoning, no pleading. 'Better than you deserve.'

'Come on, Mrs Cranley,' said Lyall, gripping her arm.

He dragged her into the hallway. At the bottom of the stairs the front door was open to the fog outside. Waiting below, also in a black suit, was a podgy man pacing back and forth. Over his arm was one of Madeleine's fur coats; in his fist, a revolver.

'Where are you taking me?' she asked.

A memory shrieked in her mind: the time the Nazis came for her father in Vienna. The pounding on the door, the house swarming with uniforms and weapons. Her mother had asked the same question. *Just some forms to fill out*, soothed one of the Brownshirts. Papa returned two days later, his tie missing, shirt filthy, unable to stop shaking.

'It's all arranged,' said Lyall. His voice was like a pantomime dame's. 'Won't take long to get there.'

Madeleine dug her feet into the carpet. Made her legs rigid.

Lyall forced her to the edge of the staircase. 'My wife had a miscarriage once, silly old dear. Fell down some steps.'

She struggled a moment longer, then went limp and hugged her stomach. As Madeleine was led away, she twisted round for a final look at her husband.

Cranley was framed in the doorway of her room. He glanced at her for a second, then went back to examining the blood on his handkerchief. At his feet were the names of the dead.

Part One

BRITAIN

All that he held dear – hearth and family, belief
and belonging – had been taken from him

ELEANOR COLE
Letter to her sister, 1930

Chapter One

Schädelplatz, Deutsch Kongo
26 January 1953, 06:30

PANZER crews called it *Nashornstahl*: rhino-steel. It was supposed to be impregnable. A girder of it had been welded across the entrance.

There was a crackling boom, like thunder heard from within a storm cloud, and the door exploded. Shards of metal and flame flew down the corridor. Before the smoke cleared Belgian guerrillas poured through the barricade, kicking aside the mangled girder. Among the Europeans were black faces.

Oberstgruppenführer Walter Hochburg felt a shudder of incredulity. Then the fury swelled in him, his black eyes glittering.

No nigger, no breathing nigger, had ever set foot in the Schädelplatz, his secret headquarters. He raised his rifle above the sandbags – it was a BK44, the one Himmler had awarded him – and lashed the trigger. Waffen-SS troops fired alongside him.

More guerrillas surged into the passageway.

'Stand your ground,' roared Hochburg. His voice was a raw baritone.

On either side of him, men were retreating to the next redoubt. Hochburg followed with a slack stride, certain of his own invincibility, his rifle searching out dark skin. He reached the second wall of sandbags and dipped behind them to reload.

'Oberstgruppenführer!'

Before him was his new deputy, Gruppenführer Zelman: flat-faced, blond, unblinking. The buttons on his uniform were as

untarnished as virgin silver. He had emerged from a side passage.

'What news?' asked Hochburg.

Zelman huddled low. 'A thousand guerrillas, maybe more, including artillery. The main entrance and southern walls have been breached. We can't hold out much longer.'

'Where are my helicopters?'

'You must leave, Oberstgruppenführer. Immediately. Your bodyguard are waiting to escort you to Stanleystadt.' Stanleystadt: Kongo's great northern city.

'And have the blacks in our sanctum? Never.' There shouldn't be a single negroid within a thousand kilometres of the Schädelplatz. Hochburg slammed a fresh magazine into his BK44. 'Get a rifle in your hand and fight. You, the auxiliary staff, kitchen porters, every last man.'

'I didn't come to Africa to die, Oberstgruppenführer.'

'Then you have no right to be here.'

Not for the first time Hochburg regretted dismissing Kepplar, his former deputy. Whatever his failings, there was a man who would have relished defending the Schädelplatz. Zelman was a cousin of Heydrich's wife and had been assigned to him after the invasion of Rhodesia faltered. *To keep an eye on me*, Hochburg told him the day he arrived.

A grenade landed between them.

Zelman grabbed Hochburg and yanked him into the side passage. The blast turned the entrance into a cascade of bricks.

'I would have thrown it back,' said Hochburg as he got to his feet, swiping away the dust. When the attack woke him he had put on his black dress uniform, the material straining against the brawn of his shoulders; now it was floured and torn.

Zelman led the way through the stone corridors of the Schädelplatz, till they turned into the main thoroughfare. He stopped abruptly.

Hochburg had been here fifteen minutes earlier, demanding the base at Kondolele get his gunships airborne. There should have been sentries by the door: instead only the smell of the wind. He pushed his deputy to one side and stepped into the command

centre. The cloud-riddled dawn shone down on him, wands of orange and coral-pink light.

Hochburg felt a shifting inside himself. 'It can't be . . .' he said. It sounded like his jackboots were treading on snails.

The command centre had taken a direct hit. In the middle of the room the table-map of central Africa was broken in two; above it, jigsaw pieces of sky. The black triangles that represented units of the Waffen-SS lay scattered on the floor. Hochburg stooped to pick one up, rolled it in his fingers as if it were a divining stone. Bodies were strewn on the floor, cables sparked. Only the telex machines seemed unaffected: they continued the merry chatter of war. By now he should have been the master of Northern Rhodesia, its copper mines serving the Reich, its cities and dusty plateaux cleansed of the negroid threat. His panzers had invaded the previous year and found British forces waiting for them. The swift victory he'd promised became a protracted retreat, the British eventually crossing the border and encircling Elisabethstadt, Kongo's third city. A pendulum siege of attack and counter-attack had lasted ever since. With Hochburg's army engaged in the south, the remnants of the Belgian Force Publique took advantage of the situation and launched a full-scale guerrilla war in the north. The Belgians, the previous rulers of Kongo, had been fighting an insurgency since the swastika was raised over the colony a decade earlier; now they were emboldened.

A female radio operator was beseeching her mouthpiece. Hochburg buried the black triangle in his pocket and placed his hand on her shoulder. Her hair was thick with dust, the right side of her face burnt. 'Any word on the helicopters, Fräulein?'

'We lost the line to Kondolele, Oberstgruppenführer.'

'Reinforcements?'

'Stanleystadt reports a new offensive started against the city an hour before dawn. They can't spare any manpower.'

'You must leave,' said Zelman.

Hochburg scraped his palm over his bald scalp. 'No.'

'With respect, Oberstgruppenführer, if you're captured, they'll parade you in the streets of Lusaka—'

'You think I care?'

'Germania* might, especially when you stand before a negro court.'

Hochburg sighed. 'You would be more convincing, Zelman, if you weren't so desperate to save yourself.'

'You can't command a counteroffensive from here. Stanleystadt is your better hope.'

'This place is my home.'

'There are no helicopters, not enough men. It's already lost.'

The radio operator put up her hand to speak. 'The Schädelplatz is more than the walls around us. It is an ideal. A beacon for our hearts.' She was too shy to look at Hochburg. 'As long as you survive, Oberstgruppenführer, so will it.'

'The girl's right,' said Zelman. 'We don't have to die.'

Hochburg considered her words, unwilling to admit the truth. He patted her gently. 'There's nothing more you can do. Come with us, you'll be safer.'

'I shall stay, Herr Oberstgruppenführer. I'll keep trying to reach the helicopters.'

'You see, Zelman. Give me a battalion of girls and this war would already be won.'

He stormed from the room, his rifle held ready.

'Where are you going?' Zelman called after him.

Back in the passageways the lights flickered above Hochburg. There were sporadic snorts of gunfire; the shouts of Belgian guerrillas echoed along the walls. He was disappointed not to cross any as he made his way to his study.

The Leibwachen – his personal bodyguard – was waiting outside. He had dismissed them earlier as, goaded by Zelman, they fretted over his every move. All were dressed in dark combat fatigues with BK44 assault rifles. One held Fenris – his Rhodesian Ridgeback – on a leash. Hochburg cupped the dog's face in his hands, inhaled his gamey breath.

The French windows of the study had been blown inwards, showering the floor with glass. A spectral smoke clung to the air. 'Bring me some gasoline,' said Hochburg, casting his eyes over the

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* Capital of the Reich, formerly Berlin

walls of books. 'Then get down into the square and secure the area. Somebody carry the dog.'

He flopped down at his desk, unlocked a drawer and took out a piece of tightly bound sacking. Inside was a knife. There was a blink of silver as he withdrew it. This was the blade Burton had wanted to drive into his heart.

Burton Cole.

He was to blame for the death of Hochburg's great love: Eleanor. Burton's mother. She had chosen her son over him and in doing so condemned herself to a savage death. Hochburg would never forgive Burton. All these years on, his grief for Eleanor remained as raw as his need for retribution. His desire to watch her son burn – literally burn; to luxuriate in each crackling scream – quickened his blood more than ever. It was the itch of a phantom limb, beyond relief. Burton was dead: torpedoed and drowned off the coast of West Africa. Hochburg had issued the order himself. It was a decision he had come to lament.

As the war in Rhodesia spread back across the border to Kongo, he spent his nights imagining Burton's final seconds. The boy's panic as the ship began to list and fill with flames; the dilemma of surrendering himself to the fire or waves. A man would always throw himself overboard: the virulence of the human organism demanded it preserve itself, if only for a few minutes longer. Inevitably, Burton would breathe salt water: that was the moment Hochburg regretted.

He had been cheated of his final look into the boy's eyes, its exchange of triumph and failure. Then Burton would descend into the darkness and oblivion, a release Hochburg had been denied. He knew who suffered the most: Hochburg lived with the pain of losing Eleanor every day.

A Leibwache entered carrying a canister that sloshed with fuel. Behind him Zelman stumbled into the room. 'They've reached the command centre. We've only minutes to spare.'

'What happened to the radio operator?' asked Hochburg.

His deputy went to the portrait of the Führer and flicked the switch hidden in the frame, doing so with a familiarity that made Hochburg bristle. The painting swung open to reveal a secret

chamber. In the ground was a trapdoor that led to an underground passage out of the Schädelplatz.

'I'm not slinking out of here,' said Hochburg, sheathing the knife.

'Oberstgruppenführer,' implored Zelman. 'We must go now.' His voice was sucked into the passage.

Hochburg turned to the Leibwache with the petrol. 'The books,' he said. It may have been too late to save the Schädelplatz but his enemies would not make spoils of his precious volumes. He supervised the dousing of his library, then ordered Zelman to burn them; striking the match himself would be too heartbreaking.

He stepped to the veranda. Below, the square was empty except for his men creating a perimeter. Streaks of light blazed on the hallowed ground as the bombardment continued overhead. There was one final object he had to save.

The most prized thing of all.

Beneath his boots was an expanse of human crania. *Twenty thousand nigger skulls*, as Hochburg thrilled to tell visitors. This was the place that gave the Schädelplatz its name: the 'square of skulls', the ground cobbled with bone.

In the rosy dawn mist, he allowed himself to savour the square one final time. It was the fortress of his heart: a vast quadrangle, the perimeter covered by cloisters, with guard towers on each of the corners from which soldiers were firing into the jungle beyond. The northern wall was obscured in scaffolding where they were repairing the damage wrought by Burton and his team of assassins the year before. Burton had been hired by a cabal of Rhodesian industrialists and British intelligence; when he failed, Hochburg used this attempt on his life to justify his attack on Rhodesia. Flanked by Leibwachen, Hochburg ransacked the building-works for a tool, then strode into the centre of the square. Fenris bounded after him.

Hochburg raised the pickaxe above his head and brought it crashing down – once, twice – spitting mortar and chips of skull.

One of the guard towers vanished in a balloon of fire. There

was a second blast and a section of the wall was punched wide open. A tank rumbled into the square. Behind it came Belgian fighters, one of them carrying a banner of yellow stars against a peacock-blue background: the old flag of Belgian Congo and now a symbol of resistance. They wavered as they saw the ground.

'Where does a guerrilla army get a tank?' said Hochburg. It was an old British Crusader from the desert war against Rommel.

He redoubled his work, swinging the pickaxe with a fury, vigilant of the skull at the dead centre of the square. The tank swivelled in his direction, fired, the shot reducing his study to a smoking wound. More SS troops emerged on to the square.

Zelman appeared at his side, clutching a Luger that reeked of packing grease. 'Oberstgruppenführer, there's no time for this.'

Hochburg shoved him away. The Leibwachen were a corona of gunfire around them. The pickaxe struck the ground again – and the skull at the centre was free.

Fenris edged forward and sniffed as Hochburg carefully picked it up. He brushed flakes of cement from it, never believing it would be disturbed, and stared into the hollows of its eyes. After Eleanor had chosen Burton over Hochburg she'd fled into the jungle and been murdered by savages. Hochburg had hunted them down. The skull in his hand belonged to the first black he'd killed, a deed that saw the beginning of his mission to transform Africa. He had laid the square in Eleanor's memory.

His dreams, his ambitions for the continent weren't supposed to end like this.

Hochburg wrapped the skull in the sack he'd taken from his study. He would defeat these insurgents, drive them into the jungle till the trees dripped scarlet. Then raise a new Schädelplatz, grander, more awe-inspiring than anything before.

The square was being overrun by Belgians.

'My garden,' said Hochburg. 'That can be our escape.' He made a chivalrous gesture to his deputy. 'Show us the way, Gruppenführer.'

Zelman remained within the huddle of Leibwachen, unblinking.

Hochburg ran from the centre of the square, Fenris at his heels,

the Leibwachen struggling to keep pace. They reached the cloisters as another tank broke through the far wall. It trundled towards them, shielding more guerrillas, the Belgians concentrating their fire on the small band of Nazis beneath the colonnade. Hochburg's Leibwachen were falling around him. He fired his BK44.

'Save a bullet for yourself,' said Zelman. 'You mustn't be taken alive.'

Hochburg ignored him: his final rounds would be for blacks. He grabbed Fenris by the leash and raced towards the garden gate. Close behind he heard the slap of Zelman's boots.

The second Crusader was armed with a flame-thrower. A jet of orange and ebony roared through the quadrangle. Skulls gathered from all six provinces of German Africa were reduced to cinder.

Shielded by the cloisters, his lungs shaled, Hochburg reached the archway that led to the garden. It was his sanctuary. He tended it personally: dug the soil till his back ached, propagated every plant with his own fingers the way Eleanor had taught him.

Now it writhed in flames.

He barely registered the intensity of the heat. Fenris broke free of the lead and galloped through the foliage to where cultivated land and jungle merged. For a long moment Hochburg stood motionless, his jaw listing and feeble, then he chased after the dog into the inferno.