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The One Man

Written by Andrew Gross

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THE ONE MAN

ANDREW GROSS

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To my father-in-law, Nate Zorman, for the stories told and for those that still remain inside

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Recent reports both through the newspapers and through secret service, have given indications that the Germans may be in possession of a powerful new weapon which is expected to be ready between November and January [1944]. There seems to be considerable probability that this new weapon is tube alloy [i.e., uranium]. It is not necessary to describe the probable consequences which would result if this proves to be the case.

It is possible that the Germans will have, by the end of this year, enough material accumulated to make a large number of gadgets which they will release at the same time on England, Russia and this country. In this case, there would be little hope for counter-action. . . . This would place particularly Britain in an extremely serious position but there would be hope for counter-action from our side before the war is lost, provided our own tube alloy program is drastically accelerated in the next few weeks.

MANHATTAN PROJECT PHYSICISTS EDWARD TELLER
AND HANS BETHE TO ROBERT OPPENHEIMER
AUGUST 21, 1943

PROLOGUE

The private room is on the fourth floor of the Geriatric wing at the Edward Hines Jr. Veterans Administration Hospital outside Chicago, bent, old men shuffling down the hall in hospital gowns with nurses guiding them and portable IVs on their arms.

The woman steps in, in her mid-fifties but still young-looking, smartly put together, in a short, quilted Burberry jacket and olive cowl, her dark hair in a ponytail. She sees her father in a chair, looking smaller to her than she'd ever seen him before, frailer, even in the two months since the funeral. For the first time, she can see the bony lines of his cheeks coming through, yet still with that remarkable full head of hair—graying, but not yet white. He has a blanket draped over his lap, the television on. CNN. One thing you could always count on, even in the middle of a Bears game on Thanksgiving with all the grandkids around, was her dad asking if they could put on the news. "Just to hear what's happening! What's wrong with that?" But he's not watching this time, just staring out, blankly.

She notices his hand shaking. "Pop?"

The day nurse seated across from him puts down her book and stands up. "Look who's here!"

He barely turns, no longer hearing so well in his right ear. His daughter goes in and smiles to the nurse, a large black woman from St. Lucia, whom they hired to be with him pretty much full time.

When he finally catches sight of her, her father's face lights up in a happy smile. "Hey, pumpkin."

"I told you I was coming, Pop." She bends down beside him and gives him a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"I've been waiting for you," he says.

"You have?"

"Of course. What else is there to do here?"

Her eyes are drawn to the shelf next to his bed, to the things she put there on her last visit, a month ago.

The Northern Illinois Bar Association Man of the Year plaque that was on the wall in his office. The photo of him and her mom at the Great Wall in China. A shot of the thirty-eight-foot Hatteras he kept in Jupiter, Florida, which they had now put up for sale. Photos of the grandkids, her own boys, Luke and Jared, among them.

Mementos of a full and happy life.

"Greg said he'd be by a little later." Her husband. "He had some business to attend to." Business cleaning up a few issues related to the old house in Highland Park and some lingering matters connected to her mother's estate.

Her father looks up. "Business? Here?"

"Just some things, Pop . . . Not to worry yourself. We'll take care of them."

He just nods compliantly. "Okay." Even a year ago he would have put on his glasses and insisted on reviewing every document, every bill of sale.

She runs her hand affectionately through his still-thick hair. "So, ninety-two, huh . . . ? Still looking pretty dashing, Dad."

"For an old guy, not so bad." He shrugs with a bony grin. "But I'm not doing any marathons."

"Well, there's always next year, right?" She squeezes his arm. "So how *is* he doing?" she asks the nurse. "Behaving, I hope?"

"Oh, he always behaves." She laughs. "But the fact is he's not saying much these days, since his wife passed. He naps a lot. We take walks around the ward. He has some friends he likes to see.

Mostly he just sits like he is now. Watches the TV. He likes the news, of course. And baseball . . ."

"The truth is, he never said very much," the daughter admits, "unless it was about business. Or his Cubs. He loves his Cubs. For someone who didn't even know what baseball was when he came to this country. A hundred and seven years and counting, right, Pop?"

"I'm not giving up," he says with a grin.

"No, I bet you're not. Hey, you want to go for a walk with *me*?" She bends down next to him and takes his tremoring hand. "I'll tell you about Luke. He just got into Northwestern. Where you went, Pop. He's a smart kid. And he wrestles. Just like you did . . ."

A look of concern comes over her father's face. "Tell him to watch out for those farm boys from Michigan State. They're big. And they cheat . . ." he says. "You know they're . . ."

He makes a sound as if he wants to add something. Something important. But then he just nods and sits back, staring out. His eyes grow dim.

She brushes his cheek with her hand. "What are you always thinking about, Pop? I wish so much for once you could let me in."

"He's probably not thinking about very much, since . . ." the nurse says, not wanting to mention his wife. "I'm not sure he's following much of anything anymore."

"I can follow," he snaps back. "I can follow just fine." He turns to his daughter. "It's just that . . . I do forget things now from time to time. Where's Mom?" He glances around, as if expecting to see her in her chair. "Why isn't she here?"

"Mom's gone, Pop," the daughter says. "She died. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah, she died." He nods, continuing to just stare out. "Sometimes I get confused."

"He was always such a vibrant man," the daughter opines to the nurse, "though he always carried this kind of sadness with him we never fully understood. We always thought it had to do with losing his entire family back in Poland during the war. He never knew what

happened to them. We tried to trace them once, just to find out. They have records. But he never wanted to know. Right, Pop?"

Her father just nods, his left hand continuing to shake.

"Look, I have something to show you." From her tote, she takes out a plastic bag. Some things he likes. The *Economist* magazine. A few new pictures of the grandkids. A bar of Ghirardelli chocolate. "We found something . . . Cleaning out the house. We were going through a few of Mom's old things she had buried away. Up in the attic." She takes a cigar box out of the bag. "Look what we found . . ."

She opens the box. There are some old photos inside. One of her father and mother during WWII, receiving a medal from two high-ranking military men. An old passport and military papers. A small, creased, black-and-white photo of a pretty blond woman in a rowboat, the front rim of her white cap turned up. The opening page of a Mozart concerto torn in half, then taped back together. A polished white chess piece. A rook.

For a second, her father's eyes show some light.

"And then this . . ." She brings out a velvet pouch and takes something out from it.

It's a medal. A bronze cross with an eagle on it, attached to a blue and red ribbon. The pouch has some dust on it; it's clearly been tucked away in the box for a long time. She puts it in his palm. "It's not just any medal, Dad. It's the Distinguished Service Cross."

The old man stares at it for a second and then turns away. It's clear he's not happy to see it.

"They only give this for the most extreme acts of bravery. The boys looked it up. You would never talk about what it was like for you during the war. Back in Poland. Only that you were in the . . ."

She stops. Whenever the topic turned to the horrors of "the camps," her father would turn away or leave the room. For years he would never even wear short sleeves, and never showed anyone his number.

"Look . . ." She hands him the photo of him with the military officers. "We never ever saw this growing up. How is this possible? You were a hero."

"I wasn't a hero." He shakes his head. "You just don't know."

"Then tell me," the daughter says. "We've wanted to know for so long. Please."

He opens his mouth as if about to say something, finally, but then just shakes his head and stares off into space again.

"If you didn't do something important, then why did they give you that medal?" she asks. She shows him the photo of the pretty woman in the boat. "And who is this? Was she part of your family back there? In Poland?"

"No, not family . . ."

This time, her father takes up the torn music sheet and stares at it. There's a distant glimmer in his eyes. Maybe a smile, something buried back in time that has come alive again unexpectedly.

"A lot of them are like that," the nurse says. "They don't want to remember back then. They just keep it inside them forever until—"

"Dolly . . ." the father finally mutters.

"Dolly . . . ?" His daughter touches his arm.

"It was short for Doleczki. It meant dimples." The faintest smile comes across his face. "She played so beautifully back then."

"Who, Dad? Please, tell me who she is. And how you earned this." She wraps the medal in his palm. "There's no reason to keep it inside anymore."

Her father lets out a breath that feels as if it's been held inside him for a lifetime. He finally looks at his daughter. "You really want to know?"

"I do." She sits beside him. "We all do, Pop."

He nods. "Then maybe it *is* time." He looks at the photograph again. Memories walled in as in a tomb covered over by the sands of years and years. "Yes, I have a story. But if you want to know it all, it doesn't begin with her." He puts the photograph down. "It begins with two men. In a forest. In Poland."

"Two men . . ." his daughter says, trying to coax him on. "What were they doing?"

"They were running." The old man looks out, but this time his eyes are alive with memory. "Running for their lives . . ."

PART ONE

ONE

APRIL 1944

The barking of the dogs was closing in on them, not far behind now.

The two men clawed through the dense Polish forest at night, clinging to the banks of the Vistula, only miles from Slovakia. Their withered bodies cried out from exhaustion, on the edge of giving out. The clothing they wore was tattered and filthy; their ill-fitting clogs, useless in the thick woods, had long been tossed aside, and they stank, more like hunted animals than men.

But now the chase was finally over.

"Sie sind hier!" they heard the shouts in German behind them. *This way!*

For three days and nights they had buried themselves in the woodpiles outside the camp's perimeter wire. Camouflaging their scents from the dogs with a mixture of tobacco and kerosene. Hearing the guards' bootsteps go past, only inches away from being discovered and dragged back to the kind of death no man could easily contemplate, even in there.

Then, the third night, they clawed their way out under the cover of darkness. They traveled only at night, stealing whatever scraps of food they could find on the farms they came upon. Turnips. Raw potatoes. Squash. Which they gnawed at like starving animals. Whatever it was, it was better than the rancid swill they'd been kept barely alive on these past two years. They threw up, their bodies unaccustomed to

anything solid. Yesterday, Alfred had turned his ankle and now tried to carry on with a disabling limp.

But someone had spotted them. Only a couple of hundred yards behind, they heard the dogs, the shouts in German, growing louder.

"Hier entlang!" Over here!

"Alfred, come on, quick!" the younger one exhorted his friend. "We have to keep going."

"I can't. I can't." Suddenly the limping man tripped and tumbled down the embankment, his feet bloody and raw. He just sat there on the edge of exhaustion. "I'm done." They heard the shouts again, this time even closer. "What's the use? It's over." The resignation in his voice confirmed what they both knew in their hearts: that it was lost. That they were beaten. They had come all this way but now had only minutes before their pursuers would be upon them.

"Alfred, we have to keep moving," his friend urged him on. He ran down the slope and tried to lift his fellow escapee, who even in his weakened condition felt like a dead weight.

"Rudolf, I can't. It's no use." The injured man just sat there, spent. "You go on. *Here*—" He handed his friend the pouch he'd been carrying. The proof they needed to get out. Columns of names. Dates. Maps. Incontrovertible proof of the unspeakable crimes the world needed to see. "Go! I'll tell them I left you hours ago. You'll have some time."

"No." Rudolf lifted him up. "Did you not vow not to die back there in that hell, just to let yourself die here . . . ?"

He saw it in his friend's eyes. What he'd seen in hundreds of other sets of eyes back at the camp, when they'd given up for good. A thousand.

Sometimes death is just simpler than continuing to fight.

Alfred lay there, breathing heavily, almost smiling. "Now go."

From the woods, only yards away, they heard a click. The sound of a rifle being cocked.

They froze.

It's over, they both realized at once. They'd been found. Their hearts leaped up with fear.

Out of the darkness, two men stepped forward. Both dressed in civil-

ian garb, with rifles, their faces gritty and smeared with soot. It was clear they weren't soldiers. Maybe just local farmers. Maybe the very ones who had turned them in.

"Resistance?" Rudolf asked, a last ember of hope flickering in his eyes.

For a second, the two said nothing. One merely cocked his gun. Then the larger one, bearded, in a rumpled hunting cap, nodded.

"Then help us, please!" Rudolf pleaded in Polish. "We're from the camp."

"The camp?" The man looked at their striped uniforms without understanding.

"Look!" Rudolf held out his arms. He showed them the numbers burned into them. "Auschwitz."

The barking of the dogs was almost on them now. Only meters away. The man in the cap glanced toward the sound and nodded. "Take your friend. Follow me."