

PROLOGUE

A CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

Berlin, April 1945

PAUL Jaeger wiped his brow and adjusted his cap against the glare of the early morning sun. Today was his fifteenth birthday and there he was—huddled behind sandbags in a makeshift gun emplacement. The oversized uniform he wore sagged at his knees, and he had to roll up the sleeves of his tunic in order to grip his *Panzerfaust* anti-tank weapon. German soldiers further up the street opened fire when a Russian tank, flanked by Red Army foot soldiers, rumbled around the corner.

“Let them get closer,” said the captain, through clenched teeth.

Paul felt his stomach muscles tighten as the tank clanked steadily toward their woefully defended position, in what had once been one of Berlin's most fashionable neighbourhoods. The sidewalks were covered in rubble, and furniture and household effects were scattered all over a street pockmarked with shallow craters. In the distance, Paul could see a church, its dome shattered by the Red Army's artillery barrages. One tree was miraculously still standing, a stubborn and silent sentinel in the surrounding carnage. On the sidewalk in front of the Café Rosengarten, a vase of dead flowers stood on a table in defiance of the chaos.

Paul glanced at Jonas Krueger, whom he had known for only a few months. He didn't know the names of the other two boys. They had arrived the day before, after their previous unit had been destroyed. A man old enough to be Paul's grandfather was in charge of the artillery gun. Paul seriously doubted that the rusty obsolete piece would fire and he knew that, even if it did, they had very little ammunition.

"Closer," the captain hissed. "Not yet."

But it was too late. There was a flash from the muzzle of the Russian tank, followed by a loud boom. The makeshift gun emplacement erupted in a ball of fire, and Paul was thrown against a nearby doorway, like a rag doll. The air was thick with black smoke. When it began to clear, Paul could see the smouldering wreckage of the gun and a deep crater where the sandbags had been. His *Panzerfaust* was broken in two on the sidewalk, and the captain lay dead on a pile of bricks. There was no sign of the old man or the two young boys, and Paul realized with horror that they had been blown to bits. Soldiers desperately raced by him to take up new positions, finding what cover they could as the Russians closed in.

Paul huddled in the doorway, frozen with fear. Jonas staggered up to him, covered in dust but unhurt.

"Come on," said Jonas, "we can't help them now."

"They're dead," Paul murmured. "All dead."

"Get up!" Jonas barked. "Now!"

He pulled Paul to his feet, dragging him through the doorway into a ruined building as bullets whistled by. The two boys scrambled to a courtyard in the back and then made their way along rubble-filled boulevards and in and out of shattered buildings. Eventually, they stopped to rest in an abandoned warehouse, as the sounds of battle thundered relentlessly nearby.

“The Russians may not have completely encircled the city yet,” said Jonas, after he caught his breath. “We can still get out.”

“But what if we’re caught?” said Paul. “They shoot deserters, remember? Even ones as young as us.”

“We’ll get rid of our uniforms and blend in with the refugee women and children,” Jonas said. “Everyone’s trying to head west toward the American and British lines. After all the dreadful things that happened in the East, no one wants to be taken prisoner by the Russians.”

Paul shuddered as he remembered his mother’s stories of what had become of her cousin’s family in Silesia after the Red Army had struck.

“So what are we waiting for?” Paul said sharply. “Let’s go.”

Berlin was in chaos. Fires raged, explosions roared and gunfire rattled. Trees that had once lined picturesque avenues lay broken and charred. Women, holding the hands of small children and carrying suitcases, were frantically trying to escape the city. Scores of old people looked bewildered as they wandered aimlessly amid the turmoil. Dead bodies were everywhere—soldiers and civilians, men and women, young and old. Some were half-buried under piles of earth thrown up by shell blasts. Others simply lay atop the debris.

Jonas and Paul salvaged a couple of ill-fitting civilian jackets from some abandoned suitcases and discarded their uniforms. They’d already seen too many deserters dangling from lampposts, killed by SS execution squads. Jonas grabbed a flashlight from a dead soldier—they would need it once night fell. The boys then joined a column of refugees and made it safely out of the city. At

the edge of a forest, they headed out on their own, determined to get as far into the woods as possible.

The two boys stopped to rest by a small creek. Looking around, Paul noticed an opening, partially concealed with some tree branches and pieces of rough wood, in the slope just above them.

“I think that’s some kind of mine,” he said. “Let’s see what’s inside.”

They quickly climbed through the underbrush and pulled aside the branches. It was the entrance to an old mine. Without a moment’s hesitation, Paul and Jonas clambered in, and Jonas turned on the flashlight. The passageway snaked deeper into the mine and looked as if it would collapse at any moment. Some of the wooden supports had buckled. Small pebbles and pieces of crumbled rock covered the ground. The walls were damp, and water trickled down them every few feet.

The boys hurried down the passage, which eventually opened out into an enormous cavern. Jonas waved the flashlight around, and both he

and Paul were astonished by what they saw.

Scores of paintings were stacked against the mine walls, along with rolled-up carpets, tapestries and Greek and Roman statues. Wooden boxes and crates were piled everywhere—their half-open lids revealed sparkling necklaces, bracelets, gold and silver figurines and finely crafted clocks. Jonas picked out a blue crystal the size of his thumb. He held it up in the air and shone the flashlight directly at it.

“This is unusual,” he remarked. “It must be worth a lot.”

“Are you kidding? All this stuff is worth a fortune,” said Paul, turning around to look at another box of treasure.

As he stepped forward, there was an ominous click, which echoed throughout the cavern.

“Oh, my God,” Paul cried, as a thin wisp of smoke drifted up beside the paintings. “I must have tripped a wire!”

“What?” said Jonas.

“Booby trap! Run!” Paul shouted.

The boys sprinted along the passageway and

had just reached the entrance when the mine exploded behind them.

Paul awoke, lying on his side in the shallow creek at the bottom of the slope. He had a few minor cuts and bruises, but otherwise had escaped the blast unscathed. He rolled over and saw Jonas lying on his back, his eyes closed, with the blue stone cradled in his open palm.

“Jonas? Are you okay?” he asked cautiously.

But then Paul saw the huge gash, several inches long, running down the side of Jonas’ neck and knew that he was dead. Paul reached down, took the stone and ran, not thinking of where he was going.

“He’s coming around.”

Jonas didn’t recognize the voice. He felt someone roughly searching his pockets. It was a boy around his age with white-blond hair and cold grey eyes.

“Ask him about the stone,” someone said.

Jonas tried to sit up, but winced. He felt a

sharp pain in his neck.

“Don’t touch the bandage,” the boy told him. “You’ve lost a lot of blood. We found you just in time. My name is Carl, Carl von Wallenstein. Can you stand?”

“I think so,” said Jonas, grimacing. “What about my friend? Is he okay?”

“What friend?” Carl demanded.

Jonas decided he’d better not say anything else about Paul.

“Did you see a blue crystal stone anywhere?” a man interrupted. He was clad in civilian clothes but had the arrogant air of an SS officer.

“No,” said Jonas, shaking his head, “I didn’t.”

“Are you sure?” asked the man, crouching down. “It may have been on a necklace or another piece of jewelry. Are you positive that you didn’t see anything like that when you were in the mine?”

“No, I didn’t,” Jonas lied.

Over by the mine entrance, four men were nervously scanning the surrounding forest, their rifles at the ready. Jonas had no idea what had happened to the gem after the bomb had exploded.

"Perhaps in one of the crates?" the man pressed him.

"No," answered Jonas. "Is it valuable?"

"Valuable?" the man said. "That stone is part of the Mask of Kulkaan, the most powerful weapon the world has ever known. If we can collect all the pieces of the mask, the Crystalline Order will rule the world."

Just then, a man whistled softly twice.

"Russians. We have to leave. Can you walk?" Carl asked.

"I think so," said Jonas.

"Let's move out."

CHAPTER ONE

ROAD TRIP

The Present Day

"BUT why can't we come with you on the dig?" Erica pleaded.

"Yeah," Josh chimed in. "How come we can't go to Mexico too?"

Josh and Erica stood on the driveway of their home in Boston, frowning at their parents.

"We've been over this before," their dad, Brian, reminded them. "This isn't a holiday. This is an archaeological expedition. Your mom and I will be working around the clock at the ruins."

"You'll have a great trip with Granddad," their mother, Debbie, added. "And once you get to