

Prague Spring

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MYSTÈRE PRESS

MYSTÈRE PRESS, APRIL 2009

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ISBN 978-1-442-11987-1

Book design by Kevin Lien

CHAPTER ONE

San Francisco ~ Spring 1952

I watched from my second-story window as Feiertag left his apartment. I wanted to follow and sit at a table across from him at breakfast. To see him go through his routine one last time, pretending he was just another smiling émigré loyal to his newfound land of freedom under America's all-forgiving God. But exposing myself at the last minute would have been self-indulgence. This job had to be done right, requiring a discretion that had not been necessary with previous targets. I'd have to work like the *Kidon*, not the *Nokim*.

When we *Nokim* assassinated Nazis in Europe, we made no attempt to hide our tracks. We wanted the world to know we'd brought another mass murderer to justice. In Germany we'd disguise ourselves in German uniforms and drive right up to the house of the war criminal. I would ask the wife if her husband were home. Sometimes I'd say he was in danger and we'd come to warn him. Other times I'd simply make up a story about a bureaucratic snafu and say we needed him to come down to headquarters to complete some forms.

Then we took the criminal into the forest where we recited the list of his crimes. Each and every one claimed innocence. You've made a mistake, they'd say. They were not there when twenty Jews were shot and dumped in a ravine or gassed with exhaust in the back of a truck. They had not personally pulled the trigger and they would have done something to stop the murders if they could. Or they would have been killed themselves if they'd disobeyed orders. But that was no excuse. The SS death squads were a voluntary service.

We tied their hands behind their backs and blindfolded them. I put the barrel of a gun above their temples and executed them swiftly, without pain. It was more than they deserved, but it was part of our code. First, we didn't kill anybody without properly establishing their guilt. It was not enough to know they'd been part of the SS. The Haganah needed some evidence of their participation in actual crimes. Torture was also forbidden; we did not want to become sadists like them. After we executed the criminal, we left him by the side of the road, blindfolded with a bullet in his head. Our calling card.

But world politics had changed and I now worked for the Mossad, a more modern organization than the Haganah. They did not want the truth to be suspected. I would kill Feiertag their way—not because I felt such a loyalty to them—it was the only way that offered me the possibility of a future. If I botched this job, I'd have both the Mossad and the San Francisco police after me. Perhaps even the FBI. So it had to look like an accident. If nobody suspected that Feiertag had been murdered, the Mossad might ignore the incident.

I sat on the bed's lumpy mattress to wait for Feiertag's return. I'd kicked off the covers and top sheet during the night. The threadbare lower sheet was gathered under me, exposing the mattress's striped ticking. I wouldn't bother to straighten the bedding. I wasn't coming back. None of us was. And whoever moved into this dump would never guess it had once been a jump-site.

I'd run out of Top Cigarette Tobacco, so I rooted around the ashtray. It hadn't been emptied for days and all the best butts had been rolled by Mara. Mine hardly stayed together during a smoke and almost always fell apart when crushed out. Mara's fingers worked with the grace of dancers, bending and flexing to compress tobacco and stretch paper at the same time. I was impatient and tore the paper half the time. She said my hands were like animals waiting in a dark corner. "Good for ambushes, not rolling cigarettes." Her dimpled smile took the edge off her words.

I lay back on the bed naked except for my boxers. Feiertag wouldn't be back until eleven. I knew his routine. He'd return from breakfast, take off his suit and put on a bathrobe to wear around the apartment; then watch TV until two, when he'd nap.

Lighting the longest of the ashtray's crooked butts, I leaned my head against the wall and looked at the empty place next to me. Where would Mara be now? On the beach? No, it was evening in Haifa. In bed with somebody she'd met that day? She'd say it would be just like me to think she

could forget so easily. Besides, the Mossad probably hadn't let her go that quickly. They'd be grilling her about why I hadn't returned as planned.

Mara thought I hadn't warned her I was staying because I didn't love her. In a way I guess that was true. I didn't love anybody. I'm not sure that's why I hadn't confided in her, though. I told myself I was protecting her. But I didn't need to tell myself anything. Both Mara and I knew that people who led secret lives didn't share secrets. We didn't even know each other's last names.

"Always like new strangers in one another's arms," Mara said.

Normally her face was as expectant as an eager child's. But I didn't mind, really, when she looked vacant.

"Only I see your sadness," I said.

"That's because I'm not sad around anyone else." She tilted her head to one side like one of Modigliani's beautiful oval-faced girls with floating blue eyes.

We both had Aryan features. That's why we'd been chosen—to blend in with the enemy.

"I'm not going back with you," I told her our last morning together.

"They'll come after you, Simon." She propped herself on an elbow, exposing a small breast that was half pink nipple.

"If they want to kill me, let them," I said.

"But why?"

"The Mossad isn't interested in the *Nokim*," I said. "And I don't want to go back to Israel to hunt down Arabs."

She leaned in closer. "So let's just go back there and live our own lives. We can set up a home."

"I've never felt comfortable in Israel."

"And you feel at home here?" she asked.

"No, but I'd rather be damaged goods in a place where nobody expects you to belong."

Sunlight seeped through the weave of the apartment's burlap curtains. It was dawn already. Our plane was scheduled to leave that morning.

"You want to be left alone," Mara said, climbing over me to open the window. The sun reflected off rooftops through steaming dew, outlining her silhouette as she dropped her head to look at me under her arm. She still had the body of a girl, but the expression on her face was anything but girlish: *Is this all you ever want of me?*

I rolled away and Mara pressed up close behind me.

“I know we’re not children anymore,” she said. “And there’s nothing we can do to get back those lost years, but we’re both still young.”

“Speak for yourself,” I said.

She took her hands off me. I could still feel the close heat of her.

“No matter what I do or say, it’s like I’m always pouring salt on your wounds,” she whispered.

I fell back to sleep. When I awoke she was gone and I knew what I had to do. It had to be done fast. I might have three days to a week before they came after me. I wouldn’t wait that long. I’d do it as originally planned, Saturday, the day after tomorrow.

And now it was Saturday.

I slipped on my watch. 10:30 a.m. Still too early for Feiertag’s return. I’d been observing his apartment for over three months. The man was a remarkable creature of habit. He left each morning between nine and nine-thirty. Walked down Noe Street two blocks to Hill, which he took to Castro. He owned seven suits, three he’d brought over with him and four he’d bought here. He always wore the same suit on the same day of the week. I could have emerged from a month-long coma and known it was Tuesday because Feiertag was in the blue pin-striped double breasted. He had only one hat, though, a gray Homburg, which matched all his suits.

Every weekday he dropped off clothes at a cleaner on the corner of Hill and Castro. After leaving the dirty clothes, he’d go a half block up Castro to a small café run by a German couple. Breakfast was either a short stack or two eggs sunnyside up with a side of bacon. I didn’t bother to calculate, but I’d have bet his meals were also on a regular rotation. The important thing was that he took between twenty-five and thirty-five minutes to eat breakfast. The extra ten minutes were spent with the owners when they visited his table.

From the few snatches I caught of their conversations, it sounded like mere pleasantries passed in German. Aside from the common language, the owners shared very little history with Feiertag, at least nothing they’d dare talk about in public. Feiertag was a German from Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland and the couple was the genuine article from Berlin. What went unspoken was where they’d all stood during the war, opinions that would not be well received in their new country. If the couple were to return to Germany they might have gotten away with whispering these views. But if Feiertag went back to Czechoslovakia he would either be killed by his own countrymen or sent to Siberia by the Soviets.

Otherwise Feiertag felt perfectly safe to be himself in his new U.S. home. He didn't even try to hide his real identity. I'm sure he assumed the few people still tracking down Nazis were looking for men with SS tattoos on their arms (or the scars from their removal) and high-ranking German officials who could be identified by survivors. Feiertag wasn't even German. Besides, he'd left no Jews behind to act as witnesses against him.

I would not have known what Feiertag had done if I hadn't accidentally run into a childhood friend after the war. I was on covert assignment in Germany. The Haganah had sent me because I spoke several German dialects, including *Praguer Deutsch* and High German. My friend and I went to a café to catch up. He told me he'd survived the camps and was trying to help other survivors find homes and get restitution. Then he asked how I'd managed to get through the war years.

I'd escaped on the Auschwitz death march and then thought about returning home to Prague, but it was still occupied by the Germans. I'd have been a pariah to anyone who took me in. Even old friends who simply spoke to me would risk death for themselves and their families for not turning me in. I'd heard about a ragtag army of Jews who'd gathered in Lublin, Poland, and were marching across Europe. My friend laughed when I told him I was almost shot hailing this Jewish Brigade, wearing a German uniform I'd stolen off a dead soldier. I marched with the Lublin Group down to Northern Italy, which had been occupied by the British and Americans. There I was approached by the Haganah who asked me to work for them.

When I mentioned I was with the Haganah, my friend did not ask to hear any more about what I was doing. I shouldn't have even told him that much. It was just so good to see somebody from home. When we started talking about what had happened to mutual acquaintances, he told me how Mayor Feiertag had rounded up Sarah Möös with other Jews hiding in his town and burned them in the synagogue. Whatever innocence I had left was consumed by the mention of those flames that had extinguished my Sarah's girlish laughter.

I asked him where Feiertag was. He said the mayor had disappeared after the war in the expulsion of Czech Germans to Germany. He might have escaped through a ratline or possibly the Russians had taken care of him.

I didn't forget about Feiertag after that talk. Later, when I read in a newspaper that his daughter had married an American major she'd met in Munich, I decided to keep tabs on her. I thought she might eventually lead

me to her father. Feiertag's daughter was living with her husband in San Francisco when Feiertag joined them in 1950.

She now lived in Sausalito. Her father visited her and her children on Wednesdays and Sundays, taking a cab both ways. On Sundays he left home at three in the afternoon and didn't get back to his apartment until well after dinner, often as late as ten. On Wednesdays he also went for dinner, usually returning before nine. Sometimes when his daughter drove into the City to visit her husband, who was president of a San Francisco bank, she'd stop by and take her father to lunch.

Each weekday Feiertag would walk to a small office on Liberty Street where he edited a Czech-German anticommunist publication funded by an organization called the Captive Nations Committee, which was loosely tied to Radio Free Europe. Every now and then if the weather was nice he'd play hooky, walking the mile or so to Glen Canyon in Diamond Heights for a few games of chess. On Friday nights he might go to the opera. He liked Mozart and Wagner, but passed on Puccini and Verdi. All the time we observed him, Feiertag never went out on Saturday afternoons. We decided that would be our day.

For the first six weeks of the operation, Mara and I had a third person from the Mossad working with us. Even though he had been brought up in Israel, he was too young—perhaps a few years younger than me, 22 or 23—to have been part of the Haganah, which was transformed into the Mossad after Israel became a state. He referred to himself as a *Kidon*, the Mossad's name for assassins. Most *Kidon* were involved in the war with the Arabs. I still thought of myself as part of the *Nokim*. We killed only Nazis.

This *Kidon* went back to Israel for six weeks and was supposed to return to help Mara and me do the job. He would be posted on the street to spot and detain a possible intruder, while Mara ran upstairs to warn me. When the *Kidon* arrived in San Francisco, though, it was not to help us complete our assignment. He said the plan had been abandoned and we were to get out as soon as we could book passage.

Feiertag returned at exactly eleven that Saturday morning. I waited until 2:30 before crossing the street to his apartment. He lived in an Edwardian that had been turned into four apartments. I entered the middle of three doors off the front porch. The other two led to the downstairs units. I'd

previously tested the bare wooden stairs and knew where to step so they wouldn't creak, mostly on the outer edges. The German woman who owned the house had remodeled it on the cheap. That worked in my favor when I got to Feiertag's door. With a simple penknife I was able to silently pry back the lock's throw.

It was dark inside. Feiertag always kept the heavy drapes closed. But I'd broken into his flat several times before when he hadn't been home, and could've gotten around with my eyes closed. It was fourteen steps from the front door to his bed, if walked directly. I took nineteen, circling the edge of the living room, not taking the chance of being seen until I entered through the bedroom door. He was asleep. Four more paces to the head of the bed.

I stared down at him. Every now and then his upper lip fluttered with his outward breaths causing his pencil-thin moustache to do a little jitterbug. I'd never been able to establish his exact age. Finding birth records became next to impossible after the Sudeten Germans got kicked out of Czechoslovakia. I guessed he was somewhere in his mid-fifties. I felt at such peace I thought I could have remained poised, watching him forever. Feiertag opened his eyes and blinked several times as he focused on me. Then he lay utterly still, as if he'd been expecting my visit.

"Yes?" he said.

I took a .22 caliber Beretta out of my jacket pocket, standard issue for Mossad assassins. It was small and easily concealed, yet just as deadly as a .44 Magnum in the hands of a skilled assassin. I stepped away from the bed and motioned with my head for him to get up. When he was standing I moved within arm's reach, hoping he'd try something foolish and I'd have an excuse for breaking his nose. He kept his arms by his side, eyes lowered.

I took out a silencer and began to screw it onto the pistol as I recited his crimes: "Heydrich Feiertag, you stand before me accused of crimes against humanity. In July of 1944, acting in your official capacity as mayor, you burned innocent people to death in your town's synagogue. I am here to carry out your execution for the murders of Joshua Fried, Isaac Kovner, Sonia Weisbach, Martin Fischl, Erma Weiss, Otto and Herta Krauss, Jakob and Marta Pinsker, Frank Jaeger, Helen Möös and her seventeen-year-old daughter Sarah."

His eyes rose sympathetically to meet mine. "You're making a terrible mistake," he said with a timid smile. "Some people were killed in a synagogue in my town, yes, but it was the SS who committed that crime. I wanted to stop it, but what could I do?"

“Were you not one of the leaders of the Henleins, who invited the Germans and the SS into Czech territory?”

“The Germans, yes, but not the SS. I was as terrified of the SS as everyone else.”

I had finished putting the silencer on my pistol.

“And to prove your loyalty to them, you killed twelve Jews.”

Feiertag’s mouth tightened. “Of course the Jews blamed it on me. They would have preferred we become communists rather than reuniting with the Fatherland.”

“Reuniting with the Fatherland,” I repeated. It was one of Hitler’s favorite sayings, even though the Czech Sudetenland had never been part of Germany. “Why lie now? Wouldn’t you rather die with some dignity?”

Feiertag straightened, trying to muster all the courage and honor he could. He put his hands behind his back and lowered himself to his knees.

Picturing Sarah on her knees in the synagogue, succumbing to the smoke and fire, I lifted Feiertag off the floor and threw him against the wall. It was stupid of me. He made a loud thump that somebody could have heard.

“Strip,” I said. “Come on, take off all your clothes.”

He’d become confused.

“Now!”

He took off his robe and laid it on the bed, folding it lengthwise with the lapels touching.

I thought about putting a bullet in his knee or elbow, but that would have alerted the police. Ballistics would know it came through a silencer and he was killed by a professional. Besides, even though I was now acting on my own, I still felt as if I was part of the *Nokim*, and torture was against the avenger’s code.

In his clothes Feiertag had looked fit for a man his age. Naked, his skin was pale, beginning to sag off the bone. I prodded him with my gun into the bathroom and had him draw a bath. I told him he was going to get into the water and to make the temperature comfortable. When the tub was full he climbed in. It would have been much more satisfying to hold him under water while he thrashed for his life. But bruises on his skin and water in his lungs would have been evidence of foul play. I wanted nothing to suggest a suspicious death.

I closed the shower curtain so he wouldn’t see what I was doing and told him to be still, then waited just outside the bathroom door. When I heard the

shower curtain withdraw, I poked my head through the door. "My orders are to insure there's no undue suffering. But I'd just as soon do it the other way."

Feiertag shut the shower curtain again.

I tiptoed into the kitchen and unplugged the toaster. It was the smallest electrical appliance in the flat that would work. The main fuse would trip within seconds after I dropped it into the water, cutting power to the entire house, including the light over the staircase. It would take thirty seconds to dry the toaster and put it back in place. Then I'd climb down the stairs in the dark. While others in the apartment went out their back doors to check the fuses, I'd walk out the front unseen.

Feiertag's body would not be discovered for hours. Perhaps not even until his daughter missed him on Sunday afternoon. He might be dead a full day by the time anyone found him. There would be nothing to suggest that he hadn't simply had a heart attack while bathing. Nobody would connect his death to the fuse that had blown earlier.

I returned to the bathroom, set the toaster on a glass accessory shelf above the sink, plugged it in and clicked the handle into the locked *on* position. After waiting a few seconds for the heating elements in the bread slots to turn red, I pulled back the shower curtain. Though my body blocked the toaster from his view, Feiertag began sniffing the air with terror. I'd forgotten that burning-metal smell toasters make as they heat up.

Hurrying to grab the toaster before Feiertag became uncontrollable, I heard the front door unlock. At first I thought it came from across the hall, but realized the sound was far too loud. Feiertag heard it too. His eyes darted hopefully in that direction. I hesitated. If I had still worked for the Mossad I'd be under strict orders to abort. A Czech mayor who'd only killed a handful of Jews was not worth the wrath of the Americans.

"Grandpa," a boy's voice called out from the living room.

Only one set of footsteps had come through the front door. The boy was by himself. Why would he have come up alone? His mother might have dropped him off while looking for a parking space. Or maybe she'd given him the keys to the apartment and gone across the street to the small grocery for cigarettes. In either case, I'd have a minute or two.

Time enough to drop the toaster in the water and pull it out before the boy saw me. The fuse would blow and the apartment would go dark. I'd run past the boy, put the toaster back in the kitchen and get out the door. A six-year-old would be the only witness and he might not get a good look at my face. His mother would come up and find her father dead. In her grief, the

child's story might sound so confused that nobody would take it seriously. There was still a chance they'd think Feiertag had died of a heart attack.

"Grandpa?"

The boy stood in the bathroom doorway studying our tableau: his *Oppa* in a tub of water and a stranger holding a toaster above him. The child's eyes were filled with curiosity rather than fear.

I can still do this, I thought. Drop the toaster in the water. Everything goes dark. Put the toaster back in place and get away before Feiertag's daughter returns. The boy will be in shock, disoriented. His mother will be beside herself when she finds her father dead in the tub. She won't listen to the rantings of a small boy. She'll call for the ambulance and try to get the boy out of there as fast as possible. The police might never even get involved. And if they did, there was no connection between Feiertag and me. The Mossad had made sure of that. The landlord of my room across the street had never seen me. Somebody else had rented the place for me.

Yes, I could still do this, I thought, looking into the boy's large eyes. Perhaps he was expecting me to turn the toaster upside down, floating two slices of golden manna into grandpa's waiting hands. The child looked as though he were ready to applaud such a delightful outcome. Children that age can imagine almost anything, I thought, perhaps even death. But I knew firsthand that the terrible dread of it can only be planted in a child's mind by seeing the real thing with his own eyes.

I set the toaster back on the shelf above the sink and turned to look at Feiertag one last time. He gave me a small smile. Not a thank you, exactly. But a smile I knew, nonetheless. I'd given it to others who'd granted me another day of life.

I edged past the boy and out the open apartment door. Feiertag's daughter was coming up the stairs. Beautiful: tall, full-busted with a small waist and flowing blond hair. The perfect Aryan specimen of womanhood. Her eyes flitted my way as she passed me on the stairs. I didn't look back as I heard her run the rest of the way, calling out, "Martin? Martin? Dad? Is everything okay?"

I stood on the sidewalk in front of the apartment building, deciding whether to turn right or left. Feiertag's daughter would be discovering him in the bathtub with the toaster on the shelf above the sink. Either Feiertag would explain it to her or he'd make up some story. One thing I was sure of, though: he wouldn't call the police.