

CASS TELL

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The  
MUNICH  
SHIFT



Wings Series 0  
The Beginning

CASS TELL

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**THE  
MUNICH  
SHIFT**

Wings Series 0, The Beginning

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## An Introduction to the Wings Series

**The Munich Shift is an introduction to the Wings Series. The categories for these stories are Action/Adventure, and Christian Contemporary Fantasy.**

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Dedication  
To the Gathering



# 1

With a “*Guten Nachmittag,*” the server greets me, and I order coffee. The café bar in Munich is warm, an ideal place to wait for my train connection to Nuremberg. I chose a table in the back with a view of people coming and going. My small backpack and winter jacket are on the chair next to me. I departed Zurich at noon and it’s good to have the mid-afternoon break.

There are few people in the place, and that’s fine. I’m not the most social person. In fact, a court-judge once sent me to a quack psychologist who diagnosed me as “antisocial.” That’s a mental condition where there’s a lack of empathy, like being stone-cold to others' rights. The consequences can include irresponsibility, drug abuse, and imprisonment. I’ve never used drugs, and smart lawyers kept me out of jail. Irresponsibility is another matter.

The coffee is served, along with a capsule of cream and two bags of sugar. A thin cookie rests on the edge of the coffee dish. I put the cream and sugar on the table, preferring coffee black, but gladly eat the cookie.

While thinking about the trip to Nuremberg and the task before me, three men walk in. One wears a long black wool overcoat and black leather gloves. It’s the end of winter and cold outside. He removes his coat and gloves and takes a seat in a booth several tables away from me. The man is overweight but not with a beer belly. He wears a black suit, white shirt and dark tie, and expensive-looking black shoes. The suit appears to be tailor-made. He glances at me with a curious look.

I avoid eye contact and stare down at my hands, holding the cup of coffee. My goal is to keep a low profile while accomplishing this mission and for what comes after.

The other two men are large, wearing black leather jackets, and they don’t take them off, and I think I know why. They take a table adjacent to the man in the booth.

A minute later, another group of men enters the café bar. They dress differently than the first three men, two wearing dark ski jackets. One man

is older, and he wears a navy-blue woolen coat and lowcut hiking shoes, ideal for a grip on icy streets. He removes his jacket, revealing a V-necked sweater showing the collar of a white dress shirt. He takes a place in the booth on the opposite side of the man in the suit.

The other two men take a separate table. There are no friendly greetings with the men in the leather jackets, but only suspicious stares between the opposite pairs, like pit-bulls eyeing each other before a fight. I know those looks and am sure the four men are bodyguards. I once had a job like that before being promoted.

The two men in the booth speak softly, in English, which is surprising. I would have expected German. I catch a word or two.

“How many?” Says the man in the sweater.

“Fifty.” The other answers.

“And they are here?”

“Yes. In the warehouse.”

They whisper. I think they discuss price, and they nod in agreement.

“It will take several trips to move the merchandise.”

“I want them gone by the morning to make room for more.”

“Don’t worry.”

“Be there at seven-thirty tonight?” The man in the suit demands.

They discuss logistics. Something about the man in the suit triggers a memory, and then I recall where and when. He visited my ex-employers in California at least three times, maybe more. I try to remember his name but do not recollect his business. For lack of a better term, he’s a smuggler, but it’s more than that. He arranges transport around the world of anything from stolen goods to drugs. He is a human trafficker and an arms dealer, a dominant player in the world of international crime. My employers knew him to be ruthless, someone who treats human life like a speck of dust brushed off your sleeve. He is to be avoided.

After a few minutes of scouring through the jumbled database in my brain, I remember his name, Taulant Hoxha. He originates from Kosovo or Albania or Turkey, or some country over there.

Throughout their discussion, Taulant Hoxha kept glancing at me, but now he stares at me with curious eyes. I figure it’s a good time to pay for the coffee and leave. I reach in my back pocket, take out my wallet, and place some Euros on the table. Standing up, I pick up my jacket and backpack.

While doing that, Taulant Hoxha gets up from his place in the booth and walks over to me. One of his bodyguards moves to his side. The bodyguard is tall, about my size, but must weigh ten kilos more than me, perhaps weighing in at two hundred and fifty pounds, and it doesn't seem like fat.

Without fanfare, Hoxha stares at me says, "Do I know you?"

"Ah, I don't think so."

"Something is different, but I know your eyes."

It's true. In California, I had a military short-trimmed haircut and a three-week beard. Now my hair is longer, shaggy, and I am clean-shaven. I changed my look when I fled to Europe, and currently, it's jeans, a blue sweatshirt, and sneakers, rather than sports jacket and black slacks.

"I'm sorry, but I've never seen you," I say.

"You look familiar. Where are you from?" His voice is low and gravelly, and the Balkan accent makes him sound sinister.

"From Canada." That was slightly misleading because I've never visited Canada, although I carry a fake Canadian passport.

"Have you ever been to California?"

"No, sir." There goes another bald-faced lie, but I am a master at that, one of many tricks of survival.

"Are you sure you have never been there?"

"California is a dangerous place."

Hoxha stays quiet, as though contemplating what to ask next. The bodyguard takes on a mean stare like he has x-ray vision. I could do the same thing back to him, but it's not the time or place. I am at a disadvantage here, four large bodyguards against one lone traveler with a backpack.

Hoxha looks at his bodyguard and slightly nods his head in the direction of the booth, and they both leave without saying another word.

I feel relieved, put on my jacket, and carry my backpack to the front door of the café bar. Outside, I turn left toward the train station. While the encounter with Taulant Hoxha was unsettling, it could have degenerated into something worse. My purpose is to move on from Munich to Nuremberg, about an hour and forty minutes away by train.

I glance behind me, see movement, and my heart skips a beat. The large bodyguard walks in my direction, his eyes fixed on me, and he walks fast.

My pace quickens.

A Malak asked me to take on a crucial mission, a trip to Nuremberg to deliver an envelope, and then do the same thing in four other cities. Seeing Taulant Hoxha was the last thing expected, and it makes me nervous. The man is a world-class creep in every sense of the word, and now one of his goons follows me. I need to ditch the guy, disappear, and then catch the train going north.

Halfway down the street is a small alley, so I take it. Outrunning an aggressor on city streets is second nature to me, having become an expert in the shantytowns of Los Angeles. Only this isn't LA and I know little about Munich's layout. The alley is long, and I decide to hide behind a dumpster. I have no idea why he follows me, but one thing is sure. Under the leather coat of the bodyguard, I saw a bulge. He carries a gun, and I would be an easy target in the narrow alley. Hopefully, he didn't see me duck into the passage, and he continued down the main street.

I hear footsteps echoing off the walls of buildings, quick pat, pat, pats. It's sure he saw me turn into the alley. The sound of running gets closer and I cower down behind the dumpster. Then, the running stops.

He commands, "Come out."

I have no choice, so I rise and step to the side of the dumpster. He stands with his hands on his hips, slightly bent over, breathing heavily.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"Mr. Hoxha doesn't believe you, and he wants to ask you more questions. You must come with me."

Surprisingly, he hasn't drawn his gun, which means he thinks he can beat me in a one on one fight. He is a big guy and I'm sure he was well tested when hired for his current job. It's best to be cautious. While an experienced street fighter, I've had my share of losses. I think of another tactic, dirty, but hopefully, it will work.

I say, "Okay. Let's go." I take a couple of steps as though heading back to the main street, and when I get beside him, I unload with a blasting right hook that catches his chin. There's an art to hitting someone, but this time my blow's accuracy is a shocker.

The bodyguard's head toggles sideways, and his body follows, smacking the hard-damp asphalt with a thud. He's out cold, and that could last for seconds or for several minutes. I'm thinking of running, but curiosity gets to me, and I suddenly have a much more serious thought. Taulant Hoxha suspects he saw me in California, and if he contacts my ex-employers, they certainly will take an interest. For them, I am public enemy number one. After disappearing from Los Angeles, I came to Europe. Then, for the past three years I've carried haunting anxiety they will find me. They would put my head on a pole to be displayed in downtown LA.

I'm stuck with a dilemma knowing my safety rests on Hoxha. Somehow, I need to find out what he's thinking, but definitely don't want to go back to the café bar. Seeing him must be on my terms yet doing so means a deviation from my mission. The Malak said human lives depend on the contents of the letters I carry. At the same time, he said I could do anything necessary to defend myself. He also said something strange that I would discover special abilities to be used when needed. The Malak wasn't specific, and a lot of the things he said were downright weird.

I decide not to run but to question the bodyguard. Dragging him over to the wall beside the dumpster, I put him in a sitting position and begin gently slapping the side of his face with my hand. Well, maybe it's slightly more than gentle.

"Wake up, buddy," I say.

After a minute of speaking to him, he opens his eyes, and it takes a moment for him to realize where he is.

"What happened?" He asks.

"You took a nap."

He raises his hand to his jaw and proclaims, "You hit me."

"It was just a love tap," I say.

"Mr. Hoxha will not like this."

"I wouldn't worry too much about him. I have some questions."

He shakes his head. "I will not answer questions. You are a dead man."

I find that to be funny. Thugs tend to have minimal vocabulary when it comes to threats. After three years away from the game, I wonder if I can out-thug him. I look him in the eyes and assume a low, commanding Los Angeles street-talk voice. "Tell me why Taulant Hoxha wants to see me, and don't play around. Tell me now."

The bodyguard's eyes blink, and he stares across the alley as though he's sifting through a fog. He says, "Taulant didn't say much other than to bring you back."

"Why?"

"He thinks people in Los Angeles sent you." The bodyguard speaks in an even monotonous voice, as though in a trance. Is it the result of being knocked out?

"For what purpose did the people in California send me?"

"Mr. Hoxha thinks you are an assassin."

That was a revelation. I certainly did unpleasant things for my ex-employers, but hired killer was not one of them. "Does Taulant Hoxha have a problem with the LA group?"

"I think so, but he is trying to work it out."

"Is he on speaking terms with them?" I need to know if Hoxha will mention that he saw me in Munich.

"He is planning to go there next week."

That's terrible news. If my ex-employers know I am in Europe, they will send masses of people on a search. That will force me to move to a new location, and I like my current hideout. The Malak said to do whatever was necessary to defend myself.

I take a small notebook and pen from my backpack, hand it to the bodyguard, and say, "Write down where Hoxha is staying."

The bodyguard scribbles the address of a hotel."

"Now, write down the address of the shipment that he and the other man were talking about in the café bar."

He notes an address.

"What's the name of the man Hoxha was talking with?"

"Horst Schroeder."

"What does he do?"

"He buys merchandise and resells it."

"What is doing tonight at seven-thirty?"

"Moving workers."

The bodyguard doesn't need to say more. I overheard the discussion. There are at least fifty forced laborers. "Write down Horst Schroeder's address."

He obediently writes it down.

It is unreal how the bodyguard submissively does everything I ask. I have no more use for him. I reach under his coat, take his gun, put it in my backpack, and tell him, "Stand up." He didn't flinch when I took his weapon.

He gets on his feet, his right hand rubbing his chin. I take two steps back to give us space in case he decides to take a swing. Then I have an idea. I need to assess this bizarre thing that's going on.

"Get in the dumpster," I command.

He hesitates for a moment. Then, he obediently lifts the cover of the dumpster, shimmies up with two hands on the edge, raises a leg, and plops over.

"Now, get down, go to sleep, and don't come out until tomorrow morning."

His head disappears and there's a metallic clunk when I close the cover.

Picking up my backpack, I shake my head in wonder about what just happened. What thug anywhere would willingly give up his gun without a whimper and then jump into a stinky metal box? Are there rats in there with him? The world has gone crazy.

I head back to the main street, knowing there is a decision to be made. Do I continue to Nuremberg or somehow try to stop Taulant Hoxha from contacting the LA alliance?

All I know is that my life is finished unless I do something, but I don't have a clue what that means.

Life suddenly became complicated, and it's not a good feeling. For three years I've lived in relative tranquility at my place. Now, I've got to figure out what to do about a world-class crook who might radically change my lifestyle by turning me over to people viler than him.

One possibility is to walk into that café bar and use the gun in my backpack. With five well-aimed shots, it might be possible to pick off the three remaining bodyguards, as well as Taulant Hoxha and Horst Schroeder. The keyword here is 'might.' If I miss, the three bodyguards are undoubtedly expert marksmen, so the odds are not on my side.

A few years ago, I would have taken the risk, but there's something else affecting my logic. It has to do with my mandate. Gunning down five men may not be exactly defined as defending oneself, although that is open for debate. We live in a world where anything can be rationalized and justified. In any case, the men probably already left the café bar, so I need to figure out another way to understand where I stand with Hoxha.

The conversation between Hoxha and Schroeder disturbs me. In California, transactions like those were part of my business responsibilities. It was what I grew up with and all I ever knew, but things changed in the way I think and act. The last three years gave me time to reflect on life, on what is good, and what makes sense. I came to an understanding that I needed rescue from my destructive ways, and that led me to the Turning. Once that happened, things changed, which is not easy to describe, and I am still trying to figure it all out. But it's better than before and I feel more at peace.

The bodyguard said the warehouses hold people and weapons. That bothers me, for human trafficking and illegal arms sales lead to misery. Trafficked people get lured away from their homes with promises of a better life, but they end up in slave-like conditions. I wish I could do something, but those warehouses are likely to have an army of guards. Am I the right person to take this on?

I decide not to catch the next train to Nuremberg because this question about Taulant Hoxha needs resolution. But what do I do now? All I have are the addresses given to me by the bodyguard.

At a bookstore near the train station, I buy a map of Munich and a pocket-guide. The bookseller helps me find the three addresses on the map. Horst Schroeder's address is close by, as well as the hotel where Taulant Hoxha is staying. The warehouse is in an industrial zone on the edge of the city.

It's tough to know what to do next. At the café bar, did Hoxha share with Schroeder that I may be there as a hired killer? Maybe Schroeder has leverage over Hoxha and perhaps he could assist in keeping Hoxha from informing on me to the LA mob. That's certainly a lot of speculation, but there's not much else to go on. I'll start by trying to see Horst Schroeder, as hair-brained as it may seem.

I look at the map, and the address for Schroeder is close to something called Marienplatz. It seems to be a fifteen- or twenty-minute walk. As best as I can, I take streets that head toward this 'Platz,' although it isn't easy. In most European cities, the streets are not laid out in east to west and north to south grids, like in Los Angeles. Instead, they are constructed in confusing zig zags, at least in the old town city centers.

After ten minutes of walking, I wish I would have taken a bus or taxi. It's a chilly day at the end of winter, and a light drizzling rain mixes with snow flurries. There are icy patches on the sidewalk, so I must go with care. I pull the hood on my coat over my head, and I'm glad the coat is warm and weatherproof.

The buildings are a mix of old and new, most six or seven stories high. Finally, I arrive at Marienplatz and taking out the guidebook from the backpack, I discover that this has been the town square since 1158. On one side of the square behind some buildings is a large cathedral, and around the square are a couple of town hall buildings.

In the center is a tall column and at the top is a statue of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. The guidebook says it was erected in 1638 at the end of a thirty-year war with Sweden, and it honors Mary as the Queen of Heaven. I'll have to ask the Malak about that one. He knows about the realm on the other side, whereas I know next to nothing.

The guidebook says this is a busy square during warmer months with tourists visiting shops and outside restaurants, but since the latest virus, fewer people visit the city. Today, people are bundled in heavy coats and carrying umbrellas.

On the north side of the square is a magnificent building the length of a football field. At one of the main entrances, two Svengalis stand guard. Svengalis are brutes who have an open license to use any form of cruelty to conduct their job. You find them in many cities around the world. They are large, heavy men, all over two meters tall, and they terrify people. I had encounters with Svengalis a couple of times in California, and it is never a pleasant experience.

It turns out that the address for Horst Schroeder is in the same building that's guarded by the Svengalis. I look at the guidebook, and it says the name of the neogothic building is the *Neues Rathaus*, the New Town Hall. It houses the offices of the Mayor, city government, and administrative departments. The building's central spire is eighty-five meters, about two hundred and seventy feet, and the building has four hundred rooms. What is Horst Schroeder, a human trafficker doing here? I need to go in, but that means passing by the Svengalis.

I try to enter the building by taking a wide path around the Svengalis, but they glare at me with suspicious eyes. Then, one raises his hand and says, "Halt."

I'm quite sure what that means, so I stop and look at them.

He says something in German, so I say, "I'm sorry, but I don't speak German."

His eyes narrow, and he says, "What do you want? This is not a place for tourists."

I reply, "I need to speak with Horst Schroeder and was told he is in this building."

"Herr Schroeder? Why do you want to see him?"

"Business." What else could I say, as I'm not even sure of the reason?

The Svengalis look at each other, and then the one doing the questioning turns back to me. "What kind of business?"

"Human resources," I say.

He turns to the other Svengali and smiles. "Of course."

"Can you tell me how to find his office?"

The Svengali relaxes. "He has offices not far from the mayor."

"The mayor?"

"Yes. Horst Schroeder is an important man."

"Why is that?"

“He manages the economy of Munich and Bavaria.” The Svengali pauses, glares at me, and says, “You should know that.”

I smile. “It’s a test. How do I find his office?”

The Svengali hesitates, then says, “Go into the main hall, then take the long hallway on the left. Herr Schroeder’s offices are at the end.”

Before they can ask more questions, I walk into the main hall of the building. Svengalis tend to be slow thinkers, and I’m sure they will soon figure out that I am not into human resources or business. And when they do, they will certainly come looking for me.

Surely there must be other ways out of this massive building. Everyone should have an escape plan, and currently, I don’t have one.

My goal is to meet with Horst Schroeder and determine what he knows about Taulant Hoxha and what Hoxha knows about me. If Hoxha is not concerned about me, I can hop on the next train and head to Nuremberg. If there's any possibility Hoxha will mention me to the LA cartel when he travels there next week, then I need a plan, whatever that is.

I walk through a large entrance hall, a room reflecting the building's history, with large gold-trimmed arches and old paintings on the walls. Finding the hallway on the left, I take it and pass many rooms. Next to the doors are small signs with words in German, so when halfway down the hallway, I ask a man where to find the offices of Horst Schroeder? He points to the end.

At the end of the hallway is an oak door with a sign next to it. I don't understand the German words on the sign, so knock on the door, open it, and step into a room. It is a meeting room with a large wooden table in the middle, with sixteen chairs around it. Like the rest of the building, the ceiling consists of arches decorated with gold motifs. On one wall is a massive painting of a crowd of people dressed in Medieval clothing. The crowd is gathered around a woman in white apparel, wearing a golden crown while standing at the top of some steps. It seems the group is praising and worshipping the woman.

I say, with a loud voice, "Hello. Is anyone here?" My voice echoes in the open space.

A door opens on the side of the room and a man appears. He is one of Horst Schroeder's bodyguards from the café bar, and he says something in German.

I reply, "Do you speak English? I need to see Horst Schroeder."

"Why do you want to see him?"

How do I answer that question when I don't have a precise answer? I say, "It affects what transpired this morning, and I possess substantial evidence for his assessment."

The bodyguard looks puzzled and I don't blame him. "Just a moment," he says.

He leaves the room while I continue to inspect the painting and notice that the people carry old farm tools. Perhaps the image has to do with

workers and the economy, and that's why Horst Schroeder lucked out with getting this part of the building.

Several minutes later, the bodyguard comes back in the room and, with a deep voice, says, "Come with me."

I follow him into a small hallway. At the end, we go through a door and enter an office, again having an arched gold-trimmed ceiling and medieval paintings on the walls. Several computers are in the room, signaling that the building is not only about the past.

Horst Schroeder sits behind a shiny wooden desk. What catches my eye is the intricate carvings along the edge of the desk and on its legs. Two wooden visitor's chairs are on my side of the desk. The bodyguard stands by the door.

Schroeder says, "I understand you have information for me. First, who are you?"

My goal is not to share information but to find out what he knows. "Earlier, you were at a café bar with Taulant Hoxha. Did he share with you the reason for my presence in Munich?"

Schroeder's face is impassive. "You didn't answer my question. Who are you?"

"My name is Pax Vesper."

He seems perplexed. "That is a strange name."

"I know. My parents were hippies, and hippies give strange names." The truth is, I just made up that name, and I never knew my parents. Several different names are on my passports, which is not the name on my birth certificate. Someone found me abandoned in a trash heap as a baby, so my real name is a mystery. I now go by Wings, the name given to me by the Malak.

Schroeder smiles. "Are there are still hippies in your country?"

"More than you know. What did Hoxha tell you?"

"It was a private conversation."

"I meant, what did he tell you about me?"

"Hoxha said that a union of people in Los Angeles have a problem with him, which he wants to work out. He said you are a hitman sent by them. Is that true?"

I turn and glance at the bodyguard. He has a pistol in his hand pointed at me. Schroeder is taking no chances.

I say, “The LA group is angry with Hoxha. Do you have a problem with that?” The bodyguard is a concern. It’s a disturbing thing when the barrel of a gun is directed at your head.

Schroeder grins. “What people in Los Angeles do is okay with me, as long as they stay off my territory. Do we have an understanding?”

He’s telling me that he has no problem if the Los Angeles crooks eliminate Hoxha if done outside of Bavaria. I say, “I believe people in Los Angeles can agree to that.” I have no idea what they would agree to, for I haven’t been in Los Angeles for three years.

Schroeder says, “Good. Then we have an understanding.” He looks at the bodyguard, nods, and the bodyguard slips the gun into the holster behind his jacket.

Schroeder shuffles some papers on his desk as though the meeting has ended. I need to keep the conversation going and decide to play on his greed. “Have you thought of expanding your suppliers? Would you consider doing trade with my employers in California? They deal with similar merchandise as Hoxha and have a greater variety of goods. What are your needs?”

Schroeder pauses, scratches the side of his face, and says, “That might be interesting. Our greatest need is workers.”

“We can supply workers, but why do you require them.”

“Why must you know that?”

“To provide the right skill set.”

“Yes. That would be good. We require people to perform repetitive work. Before the virus, Munich and the surrounding areas were Germany's economic engine and the European Federation. We have many large and medium-sized factories, and they require cheap manpower.”

“How many resources do you need?”

“Thousands.”

“Is Taulant Hoxha able to supply them?”

“Not enough, and his prices are high.”

“My employers can beat his prices, and we can supply a superior product.”

I had enough information from Schroeder. He was looking to fill his factories with slave labor trafficked from economically poor countries. That angers me because I’ve seen the human misery caused by this. In California, shipping people in from other countries is a common practice.

Concerning my immediate issue with Taulant Hoxha, it seems he plans to visit the Los Angeles mob. While there, he will undoubtedly disclose that he saw me in Munich. If that happens, my life will become complicated.

Schroeder says, "If you can beat Hoxha's prices, then we can do business."

"Can you give me your business card, and then I'll have our trade specialists contact you."

Schroeder opens a drawer in his desk, takes out a business card, and hands it to me."

"Thank you," I say. "I now understand why you are important for the mayor of Munich."

Behind me, I hear the bodyguard laugh.

Schroeder smiles. "It's the other way around. The Mayor is important for me, but I can replace him at any time. He works for me."

"I got it." It means that Schroeder is the top dog in Bavaria.

It seems time to go. "Thank you," I say.

I get up and we don't shake hands, which since the virus is the new social convention. Schroeder nods to the bodyguard, who opens the door to the office. I pass the bodyguard and go into the larger meeting room, and the bodyguard follows.

I ask, "Is there a back door leading out of this place? I believe I'm being followed."

"Who follows you?"

"I think you might know." I want to avoid going past the Svengalis.

"Okay. This building is a maze. Turn left in the hallway and take the first door on the right. That leads through a storage room, and there is an exit door to an outside street."

I thank him and step into the hallway while thinking about how the world deteriorated after the virus when chaos overturned the existing political order. Now, in Bavaria, the supreme power is an evil human trafficker.

Going into the storage room, I find the exit door, open it, and step outside onto a pedestrian street. Looking to my left, I see a Svengali who seems like he was waiting there. I turn right, and there is another Svengali, the same one that I spoke with at the main entrance of the New Town Hall.

Both Svengalis look like broad-jawed hyenas ready to attack.

The Svengalis move in my direction, and that gives me a scare. These are big men, trained in hand to hand combat and the use of weapons. One question is why are they were waiting for me? It's unlikely Schroeder initiated this. He didn't seem hostile when I left his office. It might be that Taulant Hoxha is controlling these Svengalis, or the Mayor, or is it someone else? Maybe Horst Schroeder isn't at the top of the rat heap in Bavaria.

The other question is, how do I work my way through these two Svengalis?

They approach me and I say, "Hello. How are you two fellows doing?"

Neither smiles. The one that previously did the talking says, "You must come with us?"

"What for?"

"Interrogation."

"Why?"

"Someone wants information?"

"What kind?"

"To know why a hitman was sent to kill Taulant Hoxha."

That tells me that someone other than Horst Schroeder is behind the Svengalis. There is no way I will go with these men, for I know what their interrogation implies. They delight in torture. And I'm carrying five envelopes containing important information which has little to do with Munich, but if these Svengalis open the envelopes, then many people will be in danger. I'm sure I can outrun these overweight giants.

I say, "Sorry, boys, but I won't be going with you."

They look surprised, as though thinking, who would contradict a Svengali? The one who does the talking quickly reaches out and grabs my arm, and before the other one can take hold of my other arm, I smash my fist into the Svengali's ribs and sense a pop. He lets out a moan, 'oof,' releases his grip on my arm, and places his hands on his ribs.

The other Svengali moves toward me and tries to take hold of my arm, and I grab his wrist and twist it backward. It's not easy because his wrist is thick, like taking hold of a log. Somehow, I'm able to take advantage of his forward momentum, and that creates leverage. His wrist snaps and he lets out a loud painful, 'ugh.' He bends over and that exposes his face. I smash

my fist into his jaw with a quick right jab, a similar hit as with the bodyguard that ended up in the dumpster. The Svengali thumps to the ground.

The first Svengali straightens up, and it seems he has enough willpower to continue despite his injured ribs. He takes a swing at me, but I manage to duck under his massive fist, which is like a swinging sledgehammer. With a strong left hook, I hit him in the ribs again, and he exhales and drops to the ground. I've had a million street fights in Los Angeles, but this was the quickest one I've every experienced, and it's surprising when considering the size and abilities of these men.

One Svengali is out cold on the ground, and the other is next to the wall on his knees and breathing heavily. Now is my chance to get away, but I'm curious and ask the conscious Svengali, "How did you know I would come out the side door?"

"I will tell you nothing," he replies.

I can't waste time, and I'm angry when thinking of the interrogation methods they would have used. In a low voice, using rough street talk, I say, "I'll ask you one time, and you better answer. How did you know? And tell me now."

Something bizarre happens. His eyes flutter and then fix on something across the street, almost like he is in a trance. He says, "There is a hidden microphone in Horst Schroeder's office. We suspected you will not exit the building by the main entrance."

"So, someone heard my conversation with Schroeder?"

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

He hesitates, then, like being on truth serum, says, "The Teacher."

That was weird, and it triggers a question. "Is Horst Schroeder the top power in Munich?"

"No."

"Who is it?"

"The Teacher."

"Do you mean the Ersatz Teacher?"

"Yes."

"What interest does the Ersatz Teacher have in me?"

"He doesn't want to be called Ersatz Teacher."

"So, what's his interest with me."

“None, really. The Honorable Teacher just wants to track everything that Horst Schroeder does. Somehow your conversation with Schroeder made the Teacher interested.”

“How can I find this Teacher?”

“He has an office in the back of St. Peters Church.”

I had enough information from the Svengali. Then, I’m curious. What is this strange trance he seems to be in, as though under hypnotic power? I say, “Tap your head against the wall.”

Immediately he leans back and knocks his head into the wall of the building. It was more than a tap. Then, he bangs his head repeatedly, and he doesn’t stop.

I think it’s time to leave. It’s uncertain if these are the only two Svengalis looking for me.

Walking back to Marienplatz, I wonder what to do next. I should be on the train heading north to deliver an envelope, but something needs to be done first. Some people know about my presence in Europe, and that knowledge can't get back to California mobsters. It means I will be on the run for the rest of my life. Along with Taulant Hoxha and Horst Schroeder, the Ersatz Teacher of Munich just joined my list. It seems the only course of action is to meet with him to know where I stand.

The Svengali said the Ersatz Teacher could be found at St. Peter's Church, so I find it on my map. The guidebook says the church has been in Munich since the beginning of the city, having been destroyed and rebuilt several times. It is considered the center of the town and it is only a block away from Marienplatz. Its tall spire protrudes high above the surrounding buildings.

While walking to the church, I wonder how the Ersatz Teacher got into this mix. The Malak once explained to me that Ersatz Teachers moved in after the last virus when Fidelium congregations became weakened. They took over the role of the previous leaders and now proclaim a false message. The Malak called it a perversion, but I don't know much about that.

When I first came to Europe, I learned that European cities traditionally have two competing powers, the Mayors, and the Ersatz Teachers. That explains why the Ersatz Teacher of Munich is spying on Horst Schroeder because Schroeder controls the Mayor.

I don't really care who is spying on whom or which person holds power. My concern is keeping heinous people from California off my back. Although there is another thought niggling at my mind. Taulant Hoxha and Horst Schroeder are human traffickers. And Hoxha deals in the sale of arms. That brings misery to humans, and it bothers me. How does the Ersatz Teacher fit into this, if at all?

St. Peter's Church is a massive structure, and inside are gaudy Romanesque or Baroque statues. I'm certainly not an expert in art history. The abundance of gold trimmings on the walls and ceilings is striking. The place is ornate, and I wonder how religious leaders can extract so much wealth from poor peasants and merchants?

In the back of the church, a man sweeps the floor. Hoping he speaks a bit of English, I go up to him and say, “Do you know where I can find the Ersatz Teacher?”

He looks at me, smiles, and says, “*Ja, Ja,*” then motions with his hand to follow him.

We go outside and he points to a building on the side of the church. “*Sekretariat,*” he says.

“Office?” I ask.

“*Ja, Ja, office. Ersatzlehrer.*”

My German is limited, but I think ‘*lehrer*’ means teacher, and the man understood my request. I walk across the street to a modern building, which is unusual to find in a city's old town. In a past war, Munich was bombed, many buildings were destroyed, and newer ones were built.

A strange symbol is on the building's door, something like a star with a lightning bolt for lack of a better description. I open the door and go inside, and a receptionist sits behind a desk. She is young, wears a tight sweater, and has a liberal amount of makeup, not precisely what one would expect in a convent or monastery, or working for a religious leader.

I give her my best, harmless smile, which isn't easy, and ask, “Do you speak English? I'd like to see the Ersatz Teacher.”

She smiles back, white sparkling teeth illuminating the room. “Yes, you are in the right place. The Teacher is occupied. May I ask the reason for your request?”

I say, “My name is Pax Vesper, and it is an urgent and important matter.” I whisper, “It concerns Horst Schroeder's perverse plan, which the Ersatz Teacher must be concerned about.” Playing the two opposing teams against each other might work.

She says, “You are not to call him Ersatz Teacher, but Honorable Teacher. It shows more respect. Let me see if he is available.”

The receptionist picks up the phone, makes a call, and mumbles something in German, where I catch a word or two. She hangs up and says, “The Teacher will see you. Go into the office through that door.” She points to a door on the right.

“Thank you,” I say.

Walking toward the door, I realize my small backpack is slightly heavier than usual. It contains the gun I took from the bodyguard in the dumpster. It's weird to think that guy may still be sleeping or waiting in that stinky

metal box, or is he still there? I've seen some bizarre things in the last couple of hours, with the bodyguard jumping into the dumpster and the Svengali banging his head against the wall. It's beyond comprehension.

After knocking on the door, I walk inside, and a man sits behind a desk. He wears a black shirt with a white clerical collar. The room has medieval paintings on the walls that must be worth a lot. One is a young woman with a halo holding a baby. On another wall is a large image of an elephant sitting on a throne. The elephant wears a golden crown, and it has several arms and hands. On another wall is a painting of Buddha. I'm guessing the Ersatz Teacher covers all religions. There is a faint smell of incense. It's something the Malak told me about, a confusing mix of belief systems.

He stands, smiles, and says, "*Herzlich willkommen*," which means welcome in German.

I say, "*Vielen Dank*," thank you very much, knowing I am butchering the pronunciation and am probably messing up the grammar. Most of the German I know was learned from street signs and menus in restaurants.

"Shall we speak English?" He asks.

"Thank you for that," I say, understanding we don't have a choice unless it's in Spanish, which I learned on the streets of Los Angeles.

"Please take a seat, and how may I help you?"

He sits down in his leather-covered office chair, and I take a wooden chair across from him. He has dark wavy hair and dark penetrating eyes, a handsome man that could take the lead role in a romance movie.

"My name is Pax Vesper," I say, knowing he would have heard that name via the microphone planted in Horst Schroeder's office.

The Ersatz Teacher nods, giving nothing away.

I say, "I was told you are interested in Horst Schroeder's affairs."

"His affairs? Who told you that?"

"I had a conversation with one of the Svengalis working over at the New Town Hall."

He frowns. "We prefer to call them security guards."

"After I met with Schroeder, the Svengalis were waiting for me in an alley. We had a conversation, and one of them said, you wanted to interrogate me. Why is that?"

The Ersatz Teacher smiles. "Those security guards are full of imaginings. But now that you are here, perhaps we can exchange

information. I'm intrigued by why you are in Munich. Also, who are your employers, and do you have any business dealings with Horst Schroeder?"

"It seems Schroeder is an important man in this state, economically speaking."

"What is your reason for being here? Does it have anything to do with Taulant Hoxha?"

"What makes you think that?"

"An informant said a group in California has an interest in him."

"I'm sure many people have an interest in Taulant Hoxha, considering the line of business he is in."

"Were you sent to eliminate him?"

"My purpose is entirely different." That's the truth because my mission is to deliver an envelope to a person in Nuremberg. Running into Taulant Hoxha was pure chance. My objective is to stop him from telling people in California about my whereabouts.

He says, "I don't believe that."

"Because you heard something different?"

"What do you mean?"

"How do you think Horst Schroeder will react when he finds out you have a microphone hidden in his office. And I'm guessing you have listening devices installed in his car and living quarters. If he found that out, it could pose a problem for you."

The Ersatz Teacher's eyes narrow. "You are speculating."

"Not from what the Svengali told me, and by mentioning Taulant Hoxha and a hitman being after him, it shows you have firsthand information. Are you working with Hoxha?"

"Mister Hoxha is an acquaintance, and we are grateful for the generous contributions he makes to our parish."

"You mean the slave labor he supplies to your factories and the bribes he gives you from sales of illegal arms around the world?"

The Ersatz Teacher glares at me. "Mister Vesper, you are full of false accusations, and they are anything but harmless. For the sake of your health, I'd advise you to leave Munich and go back to California."

"How do you know I may have come from California?"

"It's an assumption."

"It's more than that. You listened to my conversation with Schroeder, and I'm guessing you have been speaking with Taulant Hoxha."

He smiles. "A person in my position naturally has a variety of information channels. I am legally bound to priest-worshiper secrecy rights, so am unable to disclose my sources, but there is a rumor that powerful individuals seek you. As I said, for the sake of your health, I'd advise you to leave our city immediately."

"Do you have connections with people in California?" I ask.

"California?"

"How much are you mixed up with Hoxha?"

"My concern is Munich and Bavaria. What Mr. Hoxha does outside of this territory is up to him."

I have my doubts about that. The only recourse I have at this point is to put some fear into the guy. He threatened my health. I can do the same.

"You just said your concern is Munich. I'd advise you to keep it that way, or the consequences could be grave."

He glares at me. "Are you threatening me?"

I stare back. "It's just an honest warning." Am I wise to threaten one of the most influential people in this state?

"I believe our meeting is finished," he declares.

"Stay out of my affairs," I assert. Standing up and taking my backpack, I say, "Thank you for your such an informative session."

"It wasn't informative."

"More than you know."

I leave the building and walk out onto the street, not sure about what just transpired. I learned something about the power relationships in this city, who controls the economy, and who owns the Svengalis. I'm sure the Ersatz Teacher has a broad information network. It seems the economy of the city is built on human trafficking and slave labor. And I found out that the Ersatz Teacher's religious activities are funded by illegal arms sales because he gladly receives money from Taulant Hoxha. The relationships are complex, with Taulant Hoxha being aligned with the Ersatz Teacher. Simultaneously, Horst Schroeder and Hoxha do business with each other, and they are not friends. Schroeder could care less if Hoxha is eliminated by a hitman if it takes place outside Bavaria.

But all that information does me no good, for it doesn't stop Hoxha from mentioning me when he visits California next week. I understand why the beasts in California want to find me because of what I did to them. They

need to make an example, and that's something I will do everything possible to avoid.

Walking toward Marienplatz, perplexed, I consider my next action. I certainly discovered things about this city, but none of that seems important. Of the three people, Hoxha, Schroeder, and the Ersatz Teacher, Hoxha poses the most significant threat. What can I do about him? Other than taking on the uninvited role of hitman and using the gun in my backpack, the options appear limited. But I was given a caution before taking on this mission. The Malak set boundaries. I can defend myself if attacked and I can do anything necessary to protect the Gathering.

Technically, it might be argued that silencing Hoxha is a form of self-defense, but that's stretching it. Currently, he believes I'm a hitman sent by people in California, which is the farthest thing from the truth. Talking with him looks like the only alternative. Maybe we can negotiate a deal. If he doesn't mention me in California, I will not fulfill the contract on his life, which he fantasized. My only reason for being in Munich was to catch a train to Nuremberg. Maybe I can convince Hoxha that our encounter at the café was by chance, that I'm not a hitman, and am in fact, running from the California mob. He would still turn me over to them, for that would help him gain their favor. Why has my life been endless occurrences of getting mixed up in weird stuff?

The idea of doing a deal with Hoxha seems stupid for a couple of reasons. First, if I am sitting in a room somewhere talking with Hoxha, what's to stop him from ordering one of his flunkies to blow out my brains. And second, even if he doesn't order my termination, in any circumstances, he is not a person to be trusted.

I decide to talk with him, but it must be on my terms.

Taking the map from my backpack, I find the address of the hotel where Hoxha is staying. It's not far from the train station, so I head in that direction. The sun is descending, and the temperature has gone from chilly to freezing.

Entering Marienplatz, four Svengalis and two other men stand in front of the New Town Hall. I recognize two of the Svengalis. One holds his wrist against his chest. He seems to be in pain. The other is covered with blood, as though someone poured a red can of paint on his head. His face

took quite a self-imposed whacking against the wall. Why he obeyed my order to do that is a mystery. The two Svengalis I met earlier seem to be explaining something to the other men.

I try to stay incognito, walking along the wall of a building, but the Svengali that was rubbing his jaw points at me. He says something, and the other men stare at me, and then four of them take off running in my direction. The two Svengalis I previously encountered stay still. It looks like the fight was taken out of them.

There are two choices, fight or flight. While I managed to neutralize the two Svengalis earlier in the day, taking on four men at once feels like an impossible task. Flight is the best choice, although I wish I knew the city better. Marienplatz is vast, and they are still on the other side, so that gives me a slight advantage.

Sprinting to the end of the building, I turn left down a pedestrian-only street. There are icy patches, and my sneakers are not ideal. At the end of the street, I glance back, and the four men race in my direction. This is no time to dawdle.

Then I luck out. About fifteen steps on my right are bus stops, and a couple of taxis are waiting beyond that. I dash to the first taxi in the row, open the back door, jump in and exclaim, "To the train station, fast, please. *Schnell.*"

The driver nods and starts the motor of the car and pulls away from the taxi stand. He looks in his rearview mirror, puts his foot on the gas, and we speed down the street. I turn around and see the four men racing after us as the taxi leaves them behind.

The driver exclaims, "*Svengalis, das ist nicht gut,*" which means, "Svengalis. That is not good."

"For sure," I say while looking out the back window. One of the men who is not a Svengali takes out his phone, presses the screen, and puts it to his ear.

"I may be in trouble," the driver says in English.

"Most likely," I confirm. "If they find and question you, just say I threatened you with a gun." For sure, that would fit my undeserved reputation as a hitman.

"I don't like Svengalis or the other two men."

"Did you recognize them?"

“Yes. The other two are pickpockets when tourists are here, and the rest of the time, they engage in all kinds of crime.”

“Do they work with the Svengalis?”

“Yes.”

“Who is their boss?”

“Taxi drivers hear all kinds of gossip.”

“Is it someone high up?”

“I can’t say.”

“Is it the mayor, Horst Schroeder, or the Ersatz Teacher?”

“It looks like you know our city well.”

“Which one?”

“Who has the biggest influence on the population.”

“The Ersatz Teacher.”

“Then, I can’t tell more. Did you say you want to go to the train station?”

“Yes.”

“I wouldn’t go there.”

“Why not?”

“Those two street criminals will quickly pass information through their network of contacts, and many people around the city could be looking for you. You must stay away from public places.”

If what he said is true, then I need to avoid the train station, and so much for taking a train to Nuremberg. Perhaps hitchhiking is an alternative, but something must first be accomplished. I take the map out of my backpack and quickly find Taulant Hoxha’s hotel address.

“Can you take me to Sophienstrasse?” I ask.

“That’s better than the train station. On Sophienstrasse is the botanical garden. Are you going there?”

“Not exactly.”

Sophienstrasse is a short street, a half a kilometer long, about five hundred and fifty yards. On the south side of the road is a large park, the botanical gardens. On the north-west side is a five-star hotel, far out of the price range of average citizens. It is where Taulant Hoxha is staying. I'm not sure he is there now but need to find out.

The taxi driver's name is Max, and I pay him for the ride. I ask him to wait for thirty minutes and pay him for the waiting time. Then, I take my backpack and head to the hotel. At the front of the hotel, a doorman stands in a brown uniform and a tall hat. He eyes me with suspicion. It's assumed that guests at this hotel typically don't wear sneakers, jeans, a simple winter coat, and carry a backpack.

Inside, there is a large entrance area with a white marble floor. One immediately sees that the hotel strives for the highest standards of comfort, décor, and luxury. It isn't the kind of place I usually stay at. My standard hotel is where the front desk clerk takes cash payments without formal registration.

This hotel has an information desk, where a dedicated person answers questions about the city and arranges tickets to concerts, restaurant reservations, and transportation. I walk up to the desk and ask a woman if I can call Taulant Hoxha, one of the hotel's guests. There is no way anyone here would give me his room number. I suspect he is staying in one of the exclusive suites at the top of the hotel. Those suites cost multiple times more than any place I typically stay.

The woman points to a phone at the end of the desk, and I go to it and pick up the receiver and put it to my ear. The phone rings ten times and I guess that Hoxha is not in his room. He could be anywhere, but then I remember his conversation with Horst Schroeder at the café bar earlier in the day. They agreed to meet at seven-thirty at a warehouse. The bodyguard in the dumpster had given me the address.

I thank the woman, walk out of the hotel, and go back to the taxi. Getting in, I ask Max to drive me to the warehouse.

Immediately, he recognizes the address. "It was once a car factory, but that was moved to another city.

"What's there now?"

“Many different factories and warehouses, everything from making clothing to assembling electronic equipment. From what I understand, there is also a factory that builds military equipment of some kind.”

“If it was a car factory, the place must be large,” I comment.

“It is huge, many buildings in an area at least a kilometer long and half a kilometer wide. Thousands of people work there.”

That raises the question of how to find Taulant Hoxha in all of that? There might be a place to start. I tell Max, “Please take me to the military factory,”

\* \* \*

Max drives fifteen minutes and we reach the road next to the factory complex. Indeed, it is enormous, with one large building after another pushed up against each other. I imagine parts going in one end and cars coming out the other, but now the products are different.

“Who owns this?” I ask.

“One family and they are one of the richest families in Europe.”

“They own all this?”

“They hold at least fifty percent, but they also have investments in companies across the European Federation.”

“How did they get so much wealth?” I ask.

“In the last big European war, they collaborated with the dictator, and he supplied forced workers.”

“Do you mean slave labor?”

“Yes.” Max stays quiet for a moment. “There is a rumor that this practice still exists, and that makes the rich people even richer.”

“Slave labor does exist,” I state.

“How do you know?”

“Max, I don’t want to pull you into this. Just get me to the arms factory, go on your way, and if anyone asks, tell them I pointed a gun at you.”

Max drives the taxi on a street that goes between a maze of buildings, and stops. “The arms factory is the one down there.” He points to a building a half a block away.

“Thanks,” I say. I pay for the ride and give him a generous tip.

He hands me a business card and says, “That’s my number. Call me anytime if you need a ride.”

I get out of the taxi and walk toward the large building. It is seven o'clock in the evening, and the night is dark and cold. I notice that the buildings have chain link fences around them. Knowing that Taulant Hoxha and Horst Schroeder are human traffickers, I wonder if the barriers are to keep people out or keep them in?

An entrance gate is in front of a closed parking area that leads to the factory, and a man is in a security hut. He is watching something on his phone. I knock on the window, and that startles him.

"Hello," I say. "Do you speak English?"

He slides the glass window open. "Yes. What do you want?" On his desk is a semiautomatic pistol.

"Is this Horst Schroeder's factory? I'm a bit early, but I have a meeting with him at eight o'clock."

"With Mr. Schroeder?"

"That's correct. My name is Pax Vesper."

He takes a piece of paper from his desk, looks at it, and says, "Your name is not on the list."

"And I need to see Taulant Hoxha. Where can I meet them?"

"They are in the warehouse at the back of the factory, but you can't go in there. It is restricted."

"I have a meeting with them."

The security guard squirms in his chair. "I said you are not allowed here. You will have to leave."

It looks like we are at an impasse. Then, I think of this strange thing that happened more than once today. Using the same tone of voice, speaking low and determined, I say, "You need to let me into the factory, now."

The man's eyes begin to blink, and he seems to go into some kind of trance. It's one of the weirdest things I've ever seen. He nods his head and says, "You need to go through the door on the right of the loading dock over there. He points toward the building.

I remember the bodyguard who went into the dumpster and the Svengali who pounded his head against the brick wall. "Get out of the hut and give me your weapon, now," I command.

He takes the pistol from off his desk and obediently exits the hut, leaving his winter coat hanging on a hook inside.

"Give me the weapon," I say.

He hands the gun to me. It's an Uzi semiautomatic pistol with a twenty-round magazine. I order him to give me his identity badge.

"Now, take a walk to Marienplatz."

Without hesitation, he starts walking down the street. It is over five kilometers to Munich's center and should take him an hour or two to get there. When he arrives, it's uncertain what he will do, but I'm sure his bosses will not be happy that he left his post.

The Malak said I have unique abilities for accomplishing this mission, and today I believe I discovered one of them. It feels unreal.

I pin the guard's identity badge to my coat, and carrying the automatic pistol, I walk across the parking area and go up steps next to the loading dock. I now have two weapons, the Uzi and the gun taken from the bodyguard in the dumpster. It's bizarre to think he may still be in it.

I go into the building and see several assembly lines with somber-looking men and women seated and bending over metal pieces. On one line, they put together landmines. On another, they construct mortars, simple, lightweight muzzle-loaded metal tubes used to launch explosive shells. I assume Schroeder runs the place, and Hoxha supplies the forced labor. Some hyper-rich family owns the factory.

Two guards walk around on the factory floor. They hold Uzi's, the same kind I am carrying. One of the guards looks suspiciously at me, and I smile and wave at him while continuing to the back of the factory. The identity badge on my jacket must be my free pass around the place.

At the back of the factory is a door, and I go through it and walk into a large warehouse. Boxes are stacked high and I assume they are parts used out on the assembly line. In one corner are boxes with warning signs on them, 'Danger, Explosives, TNT, RDX, Tetryl.'

A guard surveys two workers who load boxes onto a pallet-jack. The guard glares at me and yells something in German, and it could mean anything, but I'm guessing he's saying, "You don't belong here and you will be shot."

I raise my hands as though lost.

Then, I sense a swift movement behind me, and while turning, I see someone swinging a club. Before I can raise my hands, it strikes me on the side of my head and I see a sudden flash of bright white, and the world turns hollow.

Blinking my eyes, I raise my hand to the side of my head and feel a throbbing ache. It's not the first time I've been knocked out. It's never nice and at least I'm not bleeding.

The first thing I see is metal bars, and someone speaks. "Are you alright?"

Taking a deep breath, I say, "Yeah. I think so. It's only pain."

I'm lying on a hard concrete floor, so slowly sit up and see metal bars, and turning to my right is the man who spoke to me. Behind him are nine other men.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"This is like a holding cell, a jail," the man answers. He has dark brown eyes, jet black hair, and dark skin, as though from the Middle East, or maybe North Africa.

"Why are you here?" I ask.

"We paid smugglers to bring us to the European Federation. They promised us well-paying jobs but put us into terrible working conditions. When we complained, they put us in here."

"Do you know what they plan to do?"

"People who rebel end up disappearing and are replaced."

"Disappear to where?"

"We don't know."

I have a reasonably good idea of what happens. Troublemakers are permanently silenced. The choice is to work until you die or speak out and be removed. Looking around, we are enclosed by three gray concrete walls and thick iron bars making up the fourth side. A hallway runs along the side of the jail.

"What's your name," I ask.

"Adid."

"My name is Wings. Where are you from?"

"I am Berber from the Sahel." He pauses. "That name, Wings, means something. Are you a Malak?"

I smile. "I work with one." It took a guy from the Sahel desert to see the bigger picture. Before getting lost in that, I ask, "How long have you been working here?"

“Four months. Some of these men have been here longer.”

“How many people like you work in the factory?”

“At least two hundred, but there are hundreds more working in the factories in this area. When we are not working, we are kept in large, crowded rooms with mattresses on the floor. The food they give us is terrible. We work sixteen hours a day, seven days a week.”

The other men in the cell look at me with fear in their eyes. They are thin, and it's evident that their calorie intake has been less than their expended energy. From their physical features, they represent various of nationality backgrounds.

“Are there others around here?”

“Others?”

“Yes. Did a new shipment of people arrive?”

The man nods. “There are around fifty people through that door in a large waiting room. He points down the hallway on our left.”

“What's going to happen to them?” I already know the answer.

“They will be moved to other factories. It's what happened to us, and we see it all the time.”

At my side is my backpack. I lift it and realize the pistol is gone. I open my jacket and in the internal pocket, the five envelopes are still there.

“So, what's our plan?” I ask.

He looks at me, confused. “What do you mean?”

“Everyone needs an escape plan.”

“It is hopeless.” His face is drawn, and it seems he is running on fumes. The fact that this man and the others are in this holding cell tells me they are different from those hunkered down over long tables on the factory floor, which is vital to remember.

His feeling of hopelessness might be right. They are probably troublemakers, but their situation is different than mine. They will be threatened, beaten into submission, and then sent back to the production line. I am perceived as a more significant threat, a hired hitman sent from California, and therefore will be treated differently. There will be no production line for me. Before sending me to the nether world, they will question me, and it's not something to be joyfully anticipated.

I know that Taulant Hoxha and Horst Schroeder are planning to meet here at seven-thirty. At the café bar, they spoke of moving the merchandise, which means transporting the people in the next room to new factories.

Taulant Hoxha needs them out of there to make space for the next shipment of people. You could say he's in the transportation business. It's like the bus must be quickly emptied to be filled again and again. Human trafficking is a moneymaking business.

I stand up, stretch my shoulders, and roll my head back and forth. The pain in my head will pass. Now, there's something greater to think about, a new layer of complexity added to my previous dilemma. Besides keeping Taulant Hoxha from speaking with my ex-employers, there's these trafficked men and women forced into slave labor.

I turn to Adid and ask, "Do you want out of here, to be free?"

"Of course," he says.

"What about them?"

Several men answer, "yes," followed by a mumble of languages spoken as my question is translated from one to the other. Then, there are more yesses.

"Do you have a plan?" Adid asks.

"Well, sort of, but wait for my signal."

Indeed, I have a vague idea, but it depends on the forces against us and the opportunities as they appear. In fact, it isn't much of a plan at all, but I might as well stay positive with these guys and give them some hope, as false as it might be.

To our right, I hear a door open, and several men walk down the hallway. It is Taulant Hoxha, Horst Schroeder, and the Ersatz Teacher of Munich. It looks like the opposing parties found a good reason to forget their differences. Following them are two security guards carrying Uzi semiautomatic pistols.

They come to the jail door and Taulant Hoxha speaks to the guards, "Open it and bring him out." He points at me.

The security guard produces a large metal key, inserts it into the door lock, and a few seconds later, the door is opened. He points his Uzi at me and commands, "Out."

Picking up my backpack, I step out of the cell. The second guard hits me in the stomach with his fist, which takes the wind out of me. The one behind me pushes his foot into the back of my knees and I stumble to the ground.

Looking back into the cell, I see looks of horror on the faces of my fellow escapees. My vague plan of "getting out of here" has just taken a

wrong turn.

Hopelessness is the wrong word. It's more like despair, especially with two semiautomatic pistols pointed at both sides of my head. In front of me stands the three slippery eels, godfathers of their unique kingdoms, working together to advance their wealth and power. Taulant Hoxha stands in the middle and he grins like a child who just found a bowl of candy. Horst Schroeder is on his right and the Ersatz Teacher of Munich on his left. My life is in their hands, but I'll do my best to delay the inevitable.

"Well, look what we caught," Hoxha remarks. "What shall we do with him?"

The Ersatz Teacher says, "The California mob must learn not to enter our turf. We need to show them what happens when they do."

Schroeder replies, "I have places to put him to work. In one factory, we need sulfuric acid cleaned from a large tank."

That one doesn't appeal to me, so. I say, "Maybe we can come to an agreement." I have no idea what that could be, but I need to buy time.

"What kind of agreement?" Hoxha asks. "First, you come here as an assassin, and then you are making deals with Horst Schroeder that undermines my supply chain. You are fooling yourself to think there is any kind of deal."

"No, I'm serious," I say. The round holes of the two pistols close to my head are enough to make anyone serious.

"Let's hear what he has to offer," Schroeder says.

"Is he in any position to make an offer?" The Ersatz Teacher asks. "He is just a low-level surrogate from the California union, and I bet he has no decision making or negotiating power."

I peer up at the two goons holding the pistols. I slowly rise to my feet but stay bent over, keeping my hands on my knees. The blow to the stomach wasn't so bad, but I need them to think I'm weakened. Breathing heavily, I say, "We can make an agreement that will bring outstanding benefits to your respective organizations."

"Okay, tell us what you have to offer," Hoxha says.

The two guards on my right and left relax, the pistols dropping to their sides.

I say, "I'm thinking that what you are doing here is a horrible thing, and we can bring constructive changes."

Hoxha looks right and left at Schroeder and the Ersatz Teacher. They seem puzzled. "What do you mean?" Hoxha asks.

I suddenly have an idea triggered by remembering the bodyguard in the dumpster, the Svengali that pounded his head on the wall, and the guard now walking to Munich. I decide to test the unique power of persuasion. In a low, commanding, street-talk voice, I say, "I want you to do as I command. Release the men in this cell, now."

Something magical happens. The eyelids of Hoxha and Schroeder start to flutter. The two guards seem confused. Hoxha says to the guards, "Let them go."

The Ersatz Teacher stands frozen. He shakes his head, and his eyes open wide. He cries out, "No, stop. This hitman is casting a spell. Silence him."

The guard on my right wobbles on his feet and starts to raise his pistol. Out of instinct, I hit him with a striking blow to his chin. He staggers and drops his gun, and he flops to the floor. The guard on my left raises his Uzi and I grab his wrist with my left hand, and we struggle. He pulls the trigger on his gun, and a spray of bullets whiz past me, hitting the guard on the floor, creating an immediate bloody streak across the man's back.

The guard and I struggle over the Uzi, each trying to point it at the other man. He is strong, and the gun gets dangerously close to my head. I feel a burst of strength and bend his hands downward, twisting his right wrist, and something pops, and he cries out in pain, and the gun falls and clanks on the concrete floor. I hit him in the chin with my right fist, and its lights-out as he tumbles downward.

Hoxha and Schroeder stand spellbound, blinking their eyes, apparently coming out of a trance. The Ersatz Teacher takes a step back, as though he can't believe what he is seeing. He yells at Hoxha and Schroeder, "Get him." The Ersatz Teacher doesn't want to get involved in physical violence. His movie-star looks might get wrecked.

Hoxha and Schroeder move toward me. Hoxha is a wide, heavy man, and he bounces into me, his belly straining tight against his shirt. I punch him in the gut, like having your hand sink into soft rubber. He groans and drops to his knees.

I turn to face Schroeder but he is already being swarmed by a mass of brown bodies grabbing his arms and legs. The same is happening to the

Ersatz Teacher with an arm tightly locked around his neck. My jail-cell buddies enacted the plan that wasn't a plan.

A babel of languages rises in the hallway as my cellmates push Hoxha, Schroeder, and the Ersatz Teacher into the jail cell. Like ants working together to pull food into their nest, they heave the unconscious bodyguard into the cell. The other guard doesn't need to be moved, for he has already left this world to enter the other side.

Adid turns the key and our antagonists are locked in the cell. He puts the key in his pocket.

I reach down and pick up the two Uzi pistols and hand one to Adid. "Let's free the people in the next room."

Adid and I move down the hallway, our cellmates following us. The door in front of us opens, and a guard walks through it. He is probably responding to the gunshots and noise that just occurred. Adid raises his pistol and pulls the trigger, and the guard falls to the ground. It's evident that Adid knows how to use the thing.

We cautiously enter the large room, and at least fifty people are sitting on the ground. There are no more guards.

I yell out, "Follow us if you want to be free."

Again, quick translations are done, and fifty people quickly rise from the floor and rush toward us.

Adid and I lead the way back down the hallway, passing the jail cell. Schroeder, and the Ersatz Teacher look on in horror. Hoxha's eyes are narrow, his face grim, and teeth clenched. I notice a strange greenish-red haze floating above his head, as though evil emanates from his being. Am I imagining things?

We enter the factory and the two guards inside see the rush of people and drop their guns and run toward the exit.

I yell out, "It's time to be free. Move now."

My command is translated, and there is a moment of hesitation. The two hundred people on the factory floor join the fifty people who are with us. There is a mad rush toward the exit with the clanging noise of tools and weaponry parts falling to the ground. A large barrel of cleaning fluid is tipped on the floor in a corner, and someone has the sense to strike a match, and a flame wooshes into one corner of the room.

The entire crowd of people makes it outside, and I say to Adid, "Tell them to escape in any way they can. You are their leader."

Adid says, “Thank you, Wings. You saved our lives.”

“May the Highest One bless you,” I say.

The crowd moves south, with some of the workers scattering to other factories to spread the news to their friends. There are sounds of gunshots and people screaming, of massive open rebellion, and forced laborers pour out of buildings. They join the larger group. They are free. It feels like a warzone. I go north, heading toward Nuremberg, with a task of handing over an envelope.

It’s a dark, bone-cold evening, and it feels good to walk. When I am half a kilometer away from the arms factory, I turn around and see fire coming from its roof. Suddenly, there is a booming blast from boxes of explosives that shatters the building's entire roof and walls. Warehouses and factories around the building tumble, some catching on fire. It’s a high probability that every evil person in that jail cell was blown to smithereens.

I pick up my pace, wanting to find a restaurant or any other place where I can use a telephone.

My hotel room is narrow and cramped, where a single bed takes up much of the space. At least it has a bathroom with a shower, and the room is warm. My contact in Nuremberg helped find the place, and he arranged for a ride tomorrow to my next city, Prague.

The day was slightly out of the ordinary, and it gives much to think about. After taking care of some business in Zurich and an uneventful train ride to Munich, the rest of the day was crazy. Running into Taulant Hoxha in that café bar was an odd act of fate, although the Malak told me nothing happens by chance. Events in the world interweave, following a divine strategy, for a purposeful end is nearing. The Malak said my mission is a small but essential part of that plan. It is to protect the Gathering.

I consider the lives and accomplishments of Taulant Hoxha and Horst Schroeder. Those two arrogant men treated humans as objects, bringing nothing but misery. Like all despots, their destiny had a horrible ending. The Malak said a double-edged sword is against oppressors, inflicting vengeance. A sentence of punishment will be conducted against them.

The Ersatz Teacher of Munich was even worse than Hoxha and Schroeder. Projecting a façade of goodness and righteousness, he used his influence to mislead many. That raises the question of the strange power of suggestion I seem to have acquired. It was odd how, by saying a few words in a low tone of voice, a bodyguard jumped into a dumpster, and a Svengali beat his head against a wall. Yet, that hypnotic-like ability didn't work with the Ersatz Teacher. It tells me that the power of suggestion works some of the time, but not all the time. I need to find out more about this weird ability.

There's something else that puzzles me. During the day, I had physical combat with a number of people, including a bodyguard near a dumpster, two Svengalis at the New Town Hall, and two guards holding Uzi pistols. When it comes to fights, I'm fast and tough, but today, something seemed different. My strikes were far out of the ordinary, more accurate and powerful than before. But maybe the rush of adrenaline gave me an advantage, or I've gained experience, or I'm imagining things.

Something else was inexplicable, When Hoxha was in that jail cell, there was that strange greenish-red haze floating above his head, like

wickedness vaporizing from a soul. Was I hallucinating? Did someone slip me some magic-mushroom powder? Or is this another one of the freaky abilities the Malak talked about? If yes, then I don't have a clue in the world what to do with it.

The hectic day left me with questions. I never found out if Taulant Hoxha contacted my ex-employers in California. It's likely he did, for Hoxha was a wheeler-dealer, quick to act when he had information that gave him leverage. If my ex-employers know I am in Europe, there will be a hoard of thugs trying to find me.

After leaving the arms factory and after the explosion, I found a gas station. Then I called Max, the taxi driver. By that point, the entire industrial zone was in chaos, with fire trucks rushing to burning buildings and forced laborers fleeing from factories. Security guards who joined the rush were trapped and bludgeoned by hordes of workers.

I carry a sense of satisfaction, knowing those abused people are now free.

Max drove me to Nuremberg, and then things went smoothly. We arrived late in the evening and I met my contact at his office, where he and several people were still working. He gave me a unique password, Psalm 149:7, and I handed over the envelope. I'm not exactly sure what is in the envelopes, but still have four more to deliver. In each city, the contacts have different passwords, which I memorized. All I know is that the lives of millions of people rest on what's in them.

The Malak said I will be facing dangers along the way, claiming I am chosen because I have the skills and temperament for the job. I hope he knows what he's talking about.

I'm still not sure what to think about this mission. For the past three years, I found a place of relative safety, even some tranquility, but that was shattered in Munich. Munich was a shift in my mindset, that's for sure. Now, I must stay on guard, and if necessary, I will be the hunter rather than the hunted.

Above all things, I feel compelled to accomplish this bizarre mission, and it isn't because of my hardheadedness or super strong will. Two months ago, something happened. I found deliverance, Sozo, and made the Turning. The Malak said my life will change, not instantly, not one hundred percent, but over time in the right direction. That's the foundation of my motivation.

It's late and the night will be a short night. I rarely sleep soundly, like keeping an eye open, prepared for an attack. A plastic chair is propped under the door handle of my hotel room, but any large person the size of a Svengali can easily smash through that flimsy wooden door.

Tomorrow, I am up early, and I wonder if the Malak was honest with me. After seeing what happened today, I worry about the unknown dangers before me. And will I complete this mission?

Hopefully, Prague will be easier than Munich.



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# **First Chapter of The Prague Transit – Wings Series 1**

## The Prague Transit, Chapter 1

It seems they are following me, a man and a woman, and it began somewhere after leaving Prague Castle. I plan to cross the Vltava River on Charles Bridge, a pedestrian walkway popular with tourists, although I suspect there are few people on the bridge today. It's the end of winter and the day is chilly.

Are they trailing me or just scurrying along because of the cold? Instead of descending the hill to Charles Bridge, I take a left. A minute later, the couple turns in my direction, and the distance between us is closing. I keep a steady pace, and after a few blocks, I take the Manesuv Bridge across the river. They are closer now, walking with a purpose.

Rather than outrunning them, I'm curious, so slow my pace. Quickly, they approach me, and it feels like they want to walk through me rather than around me. It is anything but social distancing. Have people forgotten about the virus? My senses are on high alert, but it's been like that since leaving Nuremberg this morning.

The man is tall, broad, has a black beard, and wears a wool hat and thick brown coat. A strap is around his shoulder attached to something like a computer bag. The woman is small and dressed for winter. She takes two steps for every one of the man, sort of like a Jack Russell walking next to a Pit Bull. From her posture and aggressive strut, I sense she is the dangerous one.

When they are a few meters away, the woman looks at me with hard, aggressive eyes, and that distracts me. The man quickly reaches into his bag and pulls out something shiny. It's a long kitchen knife with a sharp point and one cutting edge.

When he is within stabbing distance, he stops, extends his arm, directing the knife at my stomach. The woman in an Eastern European accent says, "Come with us."

That's impossible, because of my mission. Reluctantly, I don't want to use my abilities, but that seems the only choice, much better than having a knife sunk between my ribs.

Without hesitating, I look at the man and, with a low, commanding voice, say, "Drop the knife and jump into the water, now." It doesn't always work.

The man blinks, and he suddenly has round, glazed eyes, and I am relieved. It's not pleasant to see, for I know what it means. He will do anything I command. The knife clinks to the ground, and without a pause, he climbs up on the bridge rail and jumps over the edge, his coat tail flying in the wind. It's a long way down. A passing tram makes a loud rumbling metallic noise, and it hides the splash. At least there wasn't the sound of a *thud* if he crashed on top of a passing barge.

I put my foot on the knife and ask the woman, "Who sent you?"

The cold stare in her eyes has now turned to a look of fear. "What have you done," she exclaims.

I wait for a second and ask again, "Who sent you?"

"Do you mean the directive to find you?"

"Yes. Who put out the contract on me?"

"Contract? I don't know what that is."

"Who gave the order to find me?"

"There was a decree to bring you in." She looks over the bridge and gasps. "You killed him."

"Who cares," I reply. "I didn't push him." In a way, I did, but that's not important. "Who gave the call?"

"The call?" She fixes her gaze on the river.

She is still not answering my question. "How many times do I have to ask? Who instructed you to find me?"

"I don't know. It just goes from person to person in our network. The reward is much."

She doesn't know anything, merely a street criminal like you find in every city in the world, mindlessly following the commands of others up the pyramid. I know all about that, for I was once a part of it. I'm guessing she's a pickpocket.

"What's your choice?" I ask.

"My choice? What is that?"

"I want you to quit following me and go away. You can do it one of two ways. The choice is whether you swim or run?"

She seems confused, but then she glances toward the river and understands. A gray look of panic emanates from her. "To run," she pleads.

"There, run," I say, pointing behind her toward Prague Castle.

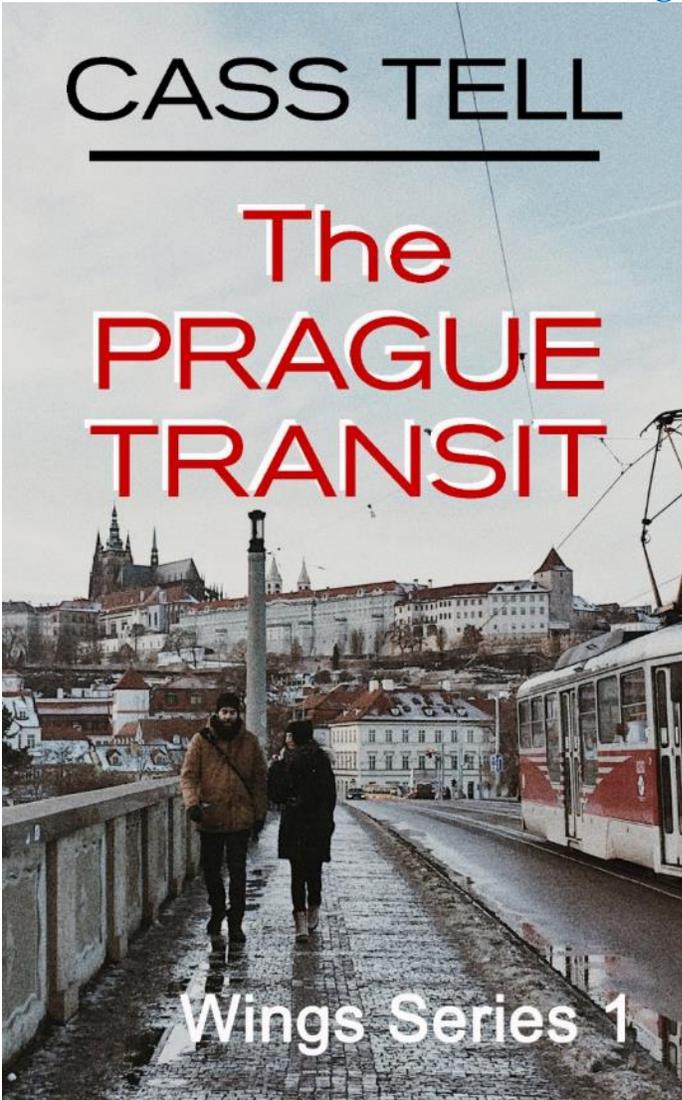
She isn't young, in her late thirties or early forties, but she takes off like a track star.

I reach down, take hold of the knife, and put it in my backpack. Far downstream, I see the man swimming for shore.

Picking up my pace, I head in my original direction. I'm late for the meeting.

\* \* \*

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Cass Tell is a full-time writer who splits his time between Spain and Switzerland. You can find out more about the author, his books, and information on upcoming Wings Series at [www.casstell.com](http://www.casstell.com).