

THE
METHUSELAH
PROJECT

A NOVEL

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Dedicated to Pam, my faithful cheerleader in so many projects

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Chapter 1

Friday, December 17, 1943

The skies over the Third Reich

Sitting in his cockpit, Captain Roger Greene scanned the heavens. He searched left to right, overhead, below, and behind. No sign of enemy aircraft. Just formation after formation of B-17s droning along below, plus his own umbrella of Thunderbolts providing escort cover.

Come on, you cowards. Come and defend your precious Fatherland. I dare you.

He glanced into the sun, then jerked his eyes from the blinding glare. When searching for enemy planes, he preferred his naked eyes, but his eyesight would surely suffer if he kept doing that. He probed the pocket of his flight jacket for the green aviators. Instead of sunglasses, his gloved thumb and forefinger fished up a ten-dollar bill.

Ten bucks? How the

Then he noticed the message printed along the edge in blue ink: "To my good buddy, Roger Greene. On loan until I bag the next German fighter! Walt."

Roger laughed and glanced to his right, where Walt Crippen piloted his own Thunderbolt in the wingman position. Walt, too, was performing visual sweeps.

Good old Walt. He'd have to do some fancy flying if he hoped to score another kill before Roger. He found his sunglasses, then slid the ten-spot back into the pocket.

A movement below snagged his attention. The forward element of bombers altered direction, banked to the right. Behind them, the others followed the lead planes. The Initial Point already? So far, this mission was a milk run.

One after the other, he and Walt and the rest of the squadron banked their fighters to starboard, maintaining position over the four-engine bombers plodding below.

Roger pitied the poor slobs manning the B-17s. Yeah, somebody had to fly them, but . . . With his gloved hand, he patted the instrument panel and spoke to his fighter. "You're more my style, baby. You take care of me, and I'll take good care of you."

Another peek into the sun. Nothing. How long could the blue yonder remain serene?

As if on cue, Colonel Chesley Peterson's voice crackled over the radio. "Say, boys, looks like the Huns have decided to come and play. Eleven o'clock level!"

Personal thoughts vanished. Roger cocked his head slightly left. Now he saw the same thing the group commander had spotted: black pinpoints approaching. Within seconds they became unmistakable—roughly fifty bandits.

Roger's pulse quickened. This was his element: fighter against fighter, pilot against pilot, his aviation skills pitted against the very best Nazi Germany could throw at him. Never did Roger feel more alive than in a cockpit. The risk of instant death only heightened the surge of adrenaline. At moments like this, he flew instinctively, as if the controls extended his own being. The thrill defied description. He'd given up trying to explain it to the British ground pounders in the pubs of North Essex.

Following Colonel Peterson's example, Roger banked to intercept the incoming horde head-on. The black specks he'd barely detected seconds ago rapidly swelled into distinct shapes with wings and red noses. Focke-Wulf 190s. Harder to shoot down than Messerschmitts, but they'd still go down.

Another fleeting glance to the right and slightly backward revealed Walt sticking where he should be, ready to keep enemies off Roger's tail.

His gloved finger flicked the guns' arming switch. He squinted toward the onrushing

planes. "I was born to fly. Were you guys?"

Whenever possible, Roger liked to hit the enemy from the high ground, diving out of the sun and pouncing on the Germans before they knew what hit them. The "zoom and boom." But at nineteen thousand pounds, a fully loaded P-47 Thunderbolt would never win awards for climbing. A Thunderbolt's redeeming quality was that its massive weight and eight .50-caliber machine guns made it a highly destructive force, especially in a dive. *No zoom and boom today, though. The Huns are swarming in from the same altitude.*

Like medieval knights on horseback charging each other with lances lowered, American and Luftwaffe fighters closed the gap at a combined air speed near eight hundred miles per hour. Roger focused on the FW 190 directly before him. To its right was another that should give Walt a clean shot. With both sides roaring head-on, split-second timing became critical.

Wait . . . Wait . . . Now!

No sooner had Roger depressed the trigger than he saw flashes from the edge of his opponent's wings. In the same instant he heard a series of rapid *wham-wham-whams*.

"I'm hit!" he blurted into his oxygen mask.

To his right, a puff of oil and smoke erupted from an enemy plane. It slumped and careened earthward.

"Blast!" Walt had just won back his ten bucks.

The sky became empty as the antagonists flashed past. Some of his rounds had scored, but his target had charged on, evidently intact. His Thunderbolt still operated normally, though, so Roger banked tightly to the left. No time to lose if he wanted to protect those B-17s. That was the bottom line: to keep the Flying Fortresses intact so they could demolish German industry.

Roger locked onto an FW 190 beginning its dive toward the Flying Fortresses.

"No you don't, Adolf!" He rammed the stick forward and closed the gap. When the distance closed to eight hundred yards, he chopped the throttle to avoid overshooting. Seconds later, his tracers and .50-caliber rounds bored into the Focke-Wulf.

Roger matched move for move as the enemy plane broke away. Its pilot twisted sharply, first left, then right, trying to shake him. Roger expected the German's next maneuver. It was one of the enemy's favorites, but also the least effective—the Focke-Wulf nosed over and sped toward mother earth with all the speed it could muster.

Roger rammed his fighter into a dive. Nice try, but no cigar. No light Hun fighter could outdive the weighty Thunderbolt.

"Stick like glue to the target until you polish him off," the colonel had admonished more than once. "Many a Hun has been lost because he wasn't followed down."

I'm not losing this guy.

The enemy plane twisted every which way, desperate to stay clear of Roger's sights. But as Roger continued to trigger the guns, his rounds penetrated the target. Dark smoke billowed from the Focke-Wulf, followed by an orange-black explosion. Metallic shards erupted everywhere.

Roger yanked back on the stick. Using his momentum, he clawed for altitude while dodging shrapnel. Immediately, remorse sickened his gut. Yes, he exulted in outflying another pilot. But the stark truth was that he'd just snuffed out a human being. That idiot Hitler . . . If not for him, these guys could be his friends, off flying air shows together instead of trying to blow each other to smithereens.

A swift look confirmed that Walt stuck tight, keeping Roger's six o'clock position clear. As Roger and his partner reclaimed altitude, he saw that, far from leaving the battle behind, they

were drawing nearer to the dogfight as Americans and Germans wove circles in efforts to gain the upper hand.

Jumping into the thick of it, Roger stitched rounds along a Focke-Wulf that raced past him.

In the distance he spotted a Messerschmitt 109 smoking and losing altitude, probably limping for home. Should he chase the injured enemy? It would add an easy seventeenth kill to his tally. But no. Forget him. Fight as a unit, not for glory. The injured plane posed no threat. He let it go. Other enemies still prowled for blood.

Roger spotted four more Me 109s ahead, cruising in a swept-back, line-abreast formation. Without looking down, he reached for the throttle, turbo, and prop levers in succession, yanking them all the way back to slow down. No good: he was still closing fast—way too fast.

He cut a sharp right turn, then swung around to come in behind the last Messerschmitt, the one in “tail-end Charlie” position.

He swore. Still closing too fast!

Maneuvering by instinct, Roger threw in several skids to avoid overshooting, then barrel-rolled and popped into position right on his target’s tail. He narrowed the range to about 250 yards and centered the needle and ball of the bank indicator. The moment the pip of his sights aligned on the enemy, he squeezed off a long burst.

Chunks of Messerschmitt erupted from the plane. The starboard wing separated, and the corpse of the aircraft crumpled earthward. The victim’s three companions pulled for the sky, a maneuver Roger’s heavy Thunderbolt couldn’t duplicate.

He had just spared a foe’s life. By sighting on the wing root instead of dead center on the cockpit, he’d permitted his opponent a chance to bail out. Had he been a fool? Would that pilot return to pepper him with lead someday?

“Hoosier, Hoosier!” Walt Crippen broke over the radio. “You just hit the hornets’ nest. I got one on my tail. Two more on yours. Get out of here!”

Tracers flashed over Roger’s left shoulder. Any enemy fighter could outbank a Thunderbolt from behind. He needed violent evasive action—now!

Before realizing he’d done it, Roger slammed the stick into one corner and put the rudder in the other. The result proved so instantaneous Roger’s brain couldn’t picture exactly what his plane had done, but for a few seconds at least, the tracers vanished.

Inexplicably, Walt’s *Beautiful Betsy* roared through his path. How had he and his wingman ended up in these positions? With no time for thinking, Roger seized one fact: An enemy plane must be on Walt’s tail. Forget evasive action!

Acting on a gamble, Roger responded before he saw his friend’s attacker. A barrage from his .50-caliber guns pierced the air. Then . . . there it was! The Me 109 hurtled straight through his stream of gunfire. The cockpit shattered. The plane tilted over and dropped from the sky.

“Gotcha!”

It was his luckiest shot ever. But now, two truths slammed home. The first was that his guns fell silent before he released the trigger switch. He was out of ammunition. Second, his own attackers were hot on his tail. Already he heard the staccato of jackhammers pummeling the Thunderbolt.

Roger jammed the stick forward, plunging earthward to outrace the two enemies. The altimeter registered only five thousand feet: not enough altitude for a speedy getaway. Worse, the P-47 responded sluggishly. Sure, he was born to fly, but even a top ace could be slaughtered if his aircraft didn’t perform. Rescuing Walt had come with a price tag.

“They’ve shot up my rudder. This can’t get any worse.”

As if to prove him wrong, the fighter’s engine began to cough. Steely claws of dread gripped Roger’s intestines and dug in. Nothing like this had ever happened to him. In past missions, he’d always been able to outthink and outmaneuver the enemy, but with the Thunderbolt’s damaged condition, he didn’t stand a chance of out flying any experienced pilot.

His frustration erupted: “God, why are You doing this?”

Roger pulled back on the stick. If he must die, it wasn’t going to be from auguring into the Third Reich. Slowly, far more lackadaisically than it should, the fighter managed to level out from the dive, but not before Roger’s prop was chopping through the tips of pine trees. The engine continued coughing. More tracers flashed past. Roger heard deadly rounds stabbing into his plane. As he feared, the dive had been too short to shake his pursuers.

Sweating, Roger slipped his plane up, down, left, right, hoping against hope that the two aggressors would run out of ammo before they could deliver the death blow. If only that would happen, maybe they would forfeit the chase and head home.

The hardy Thunderbolt absorbed more abuse. Roger couldn’t believe he remained airborne. But the clock was ticking. He might have only seconds of life. Just one German bullet through his skull . . .

“Crip!” he shouted over the radio. “I’m out of ammo. Rudder shot to pieces. These guys are clobbering the snot out of me. I’m not coming back. Tell ‘em I shot down at least two before they got me!”

Desperate, Roger coaxed his wounded aircraft into foolhardy maneuvers. He ducked it under a bridge. He brought it up to treetop level. He barely avoided clipping the roof of a farmhouse . . . Still, the mongrels nipped at his tail with their bullets. At this low level, he couldn’t even bail out. At least they weren’t using their 30 mm cannons. Must’ve used ‘em up.

Walt’s voice sounded over the radio. “Hoosier, where are you? I’ve lost you.”

“Don’t know. Just passed over a bridge. Railroad tracks. They’re . . .”

The fighter’s engine stopped wheezing and seized up. Whether the enemies had severed an oil line or what, he had no time to guess. With no engine, will power couldn’t keep his kite aloft. A Thunderbolt’s glide pattern was as efficient as a footlocker’s. He was going down, here and now.

Roger flashed past a road. Next he hurtled over a snow-covered field and dropped like a cannonball. No time for landing gear. Hydraulics were probably shot up anyway.

“Nose up! Come on, baby, nose up! Up!”

Gloating in their success, the two Me 109s thundered overhead. Roger dismissed them. He concentrated on the ground. The field was small, much shorter than a runway. Could he belly in without pulverizing himself against those trees?

“God, help!”

The fighter smacked the earth with teeth-rattling force. It bounced off its belly, thudded down again, then skidded across the field horrifyingly fast—straight toward the tree line.

“Come on, come on . . .” Wrestling with stick and rudder, Roger fought for control. If only he could point the nose between two tree trunks instead of straight into one . . . The plane would no longer obey. Colliding with the ground must have finished whatever damage the Messerschmitts had wreaked.

Like the final scene from a nightmare, the line of trees hurtled straight toward him. Into his mind’s eye sprang the image of his bloody carcass being pulled from crumpled metal.

Still clutching the stick out of sheer terror, Roger shut his eyes. “No!”

Chapter 2

Wednesday, July 9, 2014

Sandy Springs, Georgia

Katherine Mueller took a deep breath and sighted along her Glock 19 a final time. She tried to ignore the sweatiness of her palm on the grip. Squinting just enough to reduce the sun's afternoon glare, she squeezed the trigger, releasing her final round.

"Yes!" All fifteen bullets had thudded home in a tight pattern on the silhouette's heart. Jubilation welled inside her chest.

"Check that out, Uncle Kurt." Katherine holstered the weapon, pulled off the protective earmuffs, and turned to her uncle. A grin wide on his face rewarded her own. "It's the best I've ever done. Not bad for twenty-five yards, if I do say so myself."

"Yes, Katarina, I see. I'm proud of you," Uncle Kurt said, using the German version of her name as he usually did. His gold-capped incisor glistened in the sunlight. "Superb shooting. You are becoming a true markswoman."

His approval warmed her heart. "It's taken me long enough. Shooting doesn't come to me as naturally as it does to y'all."

His grin vanished, replaced by a wince. "Ach, Katarina. Must you use that expression? 'Y'all.' It sounds so uncouth."

She giggled and kissed him on the cheek. "It's y'all's fault. You're the one who decided to raise me in Georgia. I can speak Yankee, and I can speak Dixie, but this accent is the badge of a genuine Southern belle."

"All right. Have it your way. But going back to your marksmanship, I'm proud you never gave up. You persisted. That shows tenacity, a trait sadly lacking in many young people."

"Thanks." Admiring the bullet-ridden silhouette once more, she said, "I think I'll keep that target as a souvenir. It'll be a combination of trophy and personal challenge to beat next time."

"Splendid idea. I'm glad to see you taking the training so seriously. Your father would be proud, Katarina. And not only of your shooting."

The reference to her father mellowed Katherine's triumphant mood. She gazed into Uncle's steel-gray eyes. "Do you really think so? Or are you just saying that to make me happy? You know I want to live in a way that would honor them, but . . ."

Uncle Kurt laid his arm across her shoulders as they trudged across the private shooting range. "I mean every word of it. Frank loved all children, but he had high hopes for his only daughter. He wished to see you embrace the Heritage Organization and flourish in it. It would've meant so much to him to see your progress."

"What about Mother?" Katherine pried loose the thumbtacks holding the silhouette to the weathered plywood. "Mother was a member, too, wasn't she?"

Uncle Kurt's eyes flitted away, as if he'd noticed something among the live oaks behind the range. "Of course your mother was a member. Although Ruth worked as Frank's assistant, she was as brilliant as he was. And not just a scientist. She excelled in psychology and other studies, too. If Ruth talked less about our secret society, it was simply due to her wide range of interests." He smiled. "Your mother joked that each day was too short, that she couldn't learn all she wished unless she could conquer the habit of sleeping every night. Do you recall that?"

Katherine shook her head. "I don't remember many details. Mostly general things, like being held on a lap, getting cuddled, or holding hands while going for walks. If it weren't for the

photo album, I wouldn't even remember their faces."

Uncle Kurt paused and studied her. "You know, not until this moment did I realize how greatly you've come to resemble Ruth. Oh, you've always had the same beautiful caramel-colored hair, the same light sprinkle of freckles, and the same cute dimples when you smile. But now that you've outgrown your youthful pudginess and blossomed as a woman, I see the same high cheekbones, the same confidence in your stature. What are you, about five foot five?"

"Five foot six."

"About an inch taller than your mother. Blame me for giving too many vitamins."

"I wish I hadn't been so young when they died."

She rolled the paper target into a tube.

"I know." Uncle Kurt sighed as they walked back to his glistening black BMW. "So young. Such a pity—even if that fire gave me the best adopted daughter any man could ever want."

Katherine took her turn placing an affectionate arm around her uncle's shoulders. "What I don't understand is how such a sweet talker like you managed to stay single all his life. Surely plenty of women would've been interested in a suave European bachelor like yourself?"

He shrugged a gesture of helplessness. "I suppose fate decreed it. Fortunately, I've had my jewelry business and the organization to give my life meaning. Also, my wonderful niece shines her own unique ray of light into my life. You're like my private little sunbeam, Katarina."

She gave his shoulder a light shake. "Two compliments in two minutes? You're slathering it on extra thick. Either you want a favor, or you're getting sentimental."

Uncle Kurt laughed and opened her car door. "Neither. Can't an aging old man express fondness for a niece who has become more precious than a daughter?"

Katherine's memory clicked. "Wait. We're forgetting tradition." She pulled the Glock from its brown leather holster and offered it to her uncle.

He looked at the pistol but didn't accept it. "You've already taken the target down."

"The plywood is still nailed to the post. You can put a bullet through that. Come on, at least one shot. It's tradition!"

"Oh, all right." He accepted the Glock and sized up the distance.

"Wait, you don't have to do it from the parking lot. Let's walk back to the firing line."

"What, and waste an interesting challenge?" He glanced askance at the distant, bullet-riddled rectangle, then back to Katherine. Almost faster than she could blink, he swiveled, raised the Glock, and fired in one well-oiled motion. Bits of plywood burst from the rectangle.

He slid the weapon back into its holster. "Satisfied?"

She gave him a peck on the cheek. "Satisfied. I pity the poor burglar who ever tries to break into the Mueller home." She slid onto the BMW's black leather seat and let him shut the door behind her, just as he always did in his prim, gentlemanly fashion. While Uncle Kurt circled to his side of the car, Katherine glanced down and noticed a gray object protruding from beneath his seat. She reached for it and extracted a pair of heavy binoculars. She'd never seen them before. Why on earth would a dealer in fine jewels need binoculars?

As Uncle Kurt slipped into the driver's seat, she hefted her discovery. "These look mighty powerful. Don't tell me you've been peepin' at that curvaceous Mrs. Jansen across the street? I know she has a voluptuous figure, but really, Uncle."

For the slightest instant, her uncle's face went blank. Surely her joke hadn't struck the truth?

Just as quickly, Uncle Kurt recovered. "I'm planning a vacation. A hunting expedition to

Africa, actually, and I'll need some good binoculars. I hid those under there the day I bought them so no one would steal them. Guess I forgot about them.

"You're planning a trip to Africa and you didn't invite me?"

"Would you like to come? You can if you like. But I didn't think you would be interested. After all, I'm not planning to stay in a resort. This will be roughing it in the wilds. Mosquitoes. No showers or latrines." He started the engine and guided the vehicle down the gravel lane.

Katherine laughed. "You're right. I'd rather not rough it. Paris is more my speed. I wouldn't mind going back there."

"We'll do Paris another time. Or maybe Rio. I've never taken you there."

Katherine understood why he kept his car in low gear as it crept toward the road. Uncle wouldn't risk flinging rocks that might nick his beloved BMW's glossy finish. But did they really need to creep at this snail's pace? Just another patience-demanding eccentricity she had long ago stopped trying to change.

"Katherine, I've met a young man I'd like you to meet."

Red flags unfurled in her brain. *Here we go again.* She shut her eyes and slouched in the leather seat. "Not another nephrologist, I hope? Geoffrey bored me stiff with his up-close descriptions of polycystic kidney disease, renal failure, vascular disorders, and kidney excretions."

"Geoffrey is a brilliant physician. He can't resist talking about his specialty."

She opened her eyes and stared at him. "In the park? On a picnic? The man has absolutely no sense of normal social behavior, let alone romance."

Uncle Kurt braked at the asphalt road, made sure traffic was clear, then steered to the right, heading back toward Turner-McDonald Parkway. "They tell me his IQ score places him at nearly genius level. Why, if you two were to marry and have children, just imagine how extraordinary—"

"No way! Uncle, I love you, but no. Not Geoffrey. Not in a million years will that walking kidney encyclopedia get close to my ring finger. Just because he's a member of the Heritage Organization doesn't mean I have to fall in love with him."

"Most unfortunate. In that case, he'll probably want to return the .34-carat marquise diamond I sold him for the ring. Truly an exquisite stone."

Katherine bolted upright. "What?" Geoffrey Pullman had bought her an engagement ring after one so-called date? And her uncle had catered to this nonsense? "Tell me you're joking!"

Uncle Kurt pulled his eyes from the road long enough to grace her with a wry smile. "As you so colloquially phrase it—*Gotcha!*" He burst into laughter. "If only I had a video of you just now. You should've seen your face."

She delivered a playful punch to his shoulder. "You and your sense of humor. I'll get you back, you know."

"Yes, I realize. In the meantime, though, would you be willing to meet a different young gentleman?"

She groaned. Could she say anything at all to get him off her case? "Uncle, I'm not a little girl anymore. Honest. Can't you just let me meet men the normal way and choose my own husband?"

The mirth disappeared from his face. "You know, your mother and father's marriage was arranged by your grandfather, and they learned to love each other deeply. This has always been the way in our branch of the Mueller family. Your contrary spirit would grieve them."

Her parents. He'd slipped the knife through the one chink in her armor. Sigh. "He's not a kidney doctor?"

"No. He's a banker."

She let out a second groan. Not that she had anything against money. But any banker who impressed Uncle Kurt as potential husband material probably came equipped with a calculator instead of a soul. The guy would be as romantic as an amortization table. "I assume he's a member of the H.O.?"

"Of course."

"Doesn't the organization include any swashbuckling journalists or editors or ghostwriters you can introduce me to? With someone in the publishing business, at least we'd have something mutually interesting to chat about."

"The only males I know in publishing are in their fifties or sixties, and those are already married."

At least Uncle Matchmaker wasn't trying to hitch her to a retiree. "All right. I'll meet your banker. But, no promises!"

"No promises needed. Still, I believe Thaddeus will impress you."

"Thaddeus?" She studied his eyes, which remained fixed on the road. "That's his name? No joke?"

"No joke."

Katherine's stomach grew queasy, as if she'd eaten a greasy hamburger. If only Uncle's ideas of the perfect man for her could be more normal. But she'd promised. No getting out of it now. This conversation needed a new direction. "Uncle, I've been thinking. Do you suppose it's too soon for me to try for the next level? I mean, if I'm going to be in the H.O. at all, I don't want to spend my whole life as a piddly little *Kadett*. I'd rather move up."

"I'm pleased you want to rise. I hesitated to push you. I wished it to be your decision. Yes, if you continue to shoot as well as today, that portion of the testing will be simple to pass. Of course you'll need to prepare the academic and philosophical disciplines, plus hand-to-hand combat and field exercises, but those should prove no problem for a gifted and physically fit young woman. I can help train you, if you're committed."

Katherine stared straight ahead. The sunshine created a strobe-light effect as the BMW flashed through a living tunnel formed by the arching limbs of live oaks, magnolias, black walnuts, and dogwoods. She nodded. "I'm ready."

Katherine didn't voice her more private thoughts. *I'm ready for a lot of things. For life. For love. For some meaning to my existence.*

I wish he'd let me find my own husband, but who knows? Maybe the man of my dreams really is a member of the Heritage Organization, and I just haven't met him yet.