

## THE DEVIL'S BOOKKEEPERS 1: THE NOOSE

### CHAPTER 1

#### **Lodz Ghetto, Poland – December 10, 1940**

It was the Devil's signature on the note. Hands trembling, I hid it from Miriam, my young wife, in my coat pocket. We were relatively new to the ghetto, and I was afraid the summons meant we would be driven out of the barbed wire enclosed slum, as we had been chased from the city that surrounded it. Miriam's parents had given their daughter to me to protect, but there wasn't any safety for Jews in Europe, only uncertainty under Nazi occupation.

The thin soles of my shoes were little protection from the cobblestone gutters as I walked to the headquarters of the Jewish ghetto administration. I thought back to any actions, any statements I might have made that could have gotten me this unwanted attention. The rumors were that Chairman Rumkowski's spies were everywhere. Had one informed on me? Had a neighbor turned me in to curry favor? What would Miriam do if I were imprisoned? How would she manage if I were sent away? People disappeared, and nobody ever heard from them again.

The headquarters of Chairman Rumkowski, the Eldest of the Jews, was as run-down as the rest of the ghetto's buildings. The double doors had yellow Stars of David crudely painted across their rough wood surface. The star, a symbol of what was once the famous Jewish kingdom, was now used to brand us as undesirables by the Nazi regime.

There was a small crowd outside. Everyone wore yellow stars on their right rear shoulders and on the chests of their tattered coats. Some men were seeking work, any kind of

work. A few were there to protest the stream of decrees issued by the Chairman to enforce the occupier's rules. I steered clear of politics. Miriam had to be my first concern, my only concern.

Two guards in black caps, wearing thick coats with wide armbands, stared balefully at the crowd. Members of Rumkowski's Order Service, his personal police force, they were armed with thick black rubber clubs. Like all Jews, the police were forbidden to have other weapons by the Germans. They did not hesitate to use the clubs and were almost as feared as the Gestapo that were observing nearby.

"Identification?" A guard demanded.

"I've been summoned to see the Eldest of the Jews." I held up my letter, hoping my hands weren't shaking.

The Jewish policeman took it, examined the document, returned it, and said, "Pass."

I pressed between the burly guards, eyeing the black clubs.

"Your business?" Another policeman ordered in the lobby, which had an odor of rotting fish. Ah, what I would have given for a piece of fish, even partly rotten.

I handed him my summons. I felt nauseous. Nerves.

"The Archives." He shoved my documents toward me and pointed down the hall.

"Thank you, sir," I said.

He didn't respond.

I walked past a long row of closed doors, searching for the Archives. None of the people rushing through the hall smiled. None said hello. Some appeared dazed. In a way, we all were.

At the end of the hall, I spotted a cardboard sign. I wanted to leave but couldn't ignore the Chairman's summons. I knocked lightly on the door.

A tall man, with a clean-shaven face, shiny black hair, and slender build, greeted me. "I'm Henryk Neftalin, Deputy to the Chairman, The Eldest of the Jews. Please come in."

The room didn't look as if it was set up for interrogations. There were three half-empty shelving units along the walls. I was surprised to see books stacked in short, uneven, piles on the floor, with more on a desk near the far wall. "You have books?"

Neftalin smiled. "You may look at them. Books are my passion."

"I thought all books were confiscated by the Germans," I remarked, afraid to touch any lest they crumble to dust.

"We preserve what we can while they allow."

I didn't know what to say. I didn't understand why I was here.

Neftalin settled in his chair. "Please sit. I organized the Archives, or more formally, The Department of the Archives a year ago." He shoved several folders aside and then flipped one open. "I've studied your work registration. We are looking for someone who is highly organized and discreet."

"A job, sir?" I hadn't worked since being forced into the ghetto six months earlier. Miriam would be ecstatic.

Neftalin peered at me. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“I’m sorry, sir. What was the question?”

“Are you discreet? Are you someone we can trust?”

Strange question, I thought, squirming on the hard seat of the chair. “Oh, yes sir. I’m very trustworthy.”

Neftalin said, “Even if it means risking your life?”

Startled, I didn’t reply. Being five-foot-nine-inches tall, slender, losing my hair, and wearing thick eyeglasses, I’d never considered myself the heroic type. Neftalin, on the other hand, appeared athletic and surprisingly well-fed. I admired his tailored black suit. I pulled my shabby coat tighter around me and attempted to sit up taller.

“Your file says you are thirty-five and married. No children?”

“With God’s help, soon.” I included God in case he was religious.

Neftalin jotted something on the page. “Bernard Ostrowski, you are an engineer by trade?”

“Yes, sir. I design buildings, bridges, and roadways.”

“I know. It is why I selected you.” He pointed to a stack of papers on his desk. “There are others on my list who would kill for a position. An engineer struck me as someone with logic. Hopefully, you are as grounded as the edifices you design.”

“Is that what I will be doing?”

Neftalin frowned. “No. The Germans won’t allow us decent dwellings and roadways. No, our mission is different.” He leaned over his desk. “The Chairman believes this work is vital for the future of the Jewish way of life.”

I was about to ask what this task was, but there was a knock on the door, and a woman in a black skirt and jacket said, “The Chairman is ready for you.”

Neftalin bolted from his seat. “I think you’ll do. Now you must convince him.”

The way he sprang from his seat and tightened his tie drove home to me that my future rested on the next few minutes and the man many called the Devil.