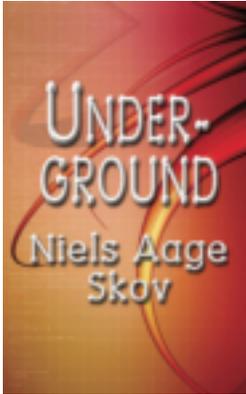


UNDER- GROUND

Niels Aage
Skov



Britain's SOE dispatches four novice operatives to persuade a Dutch scientist to join Einstein in the Manhattan Project. Their cat-and-mouse chase with Gestapo across Europe tests the courage and wits of the four, and inspires a love story.

Underground

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Niels Aage Skov

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UNDERGROUND

Courage in danger is half the battle.

- Plautus

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In the following narrative, background events and some of the story line are strictly authentic in time and place. The details of Abramek Blum's ordeal in escaping Gestapo's grasp are fictional, though enacted many times over during the years when the Nazis held sway in occupied Europe.

I am indebted to Professor Lorraine Hale Robinson, whose meticulous editing and thoughtful advice have enhanced the manuscript.

NIELS AAGE SKOV

I dedicate this book to Diane, my wife, muse, and critic whose perceptive and discerning overview has infused the writing process with enjoyment.

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Commando Order

From now on all men operating against German troops in so-called Commando raids...are to be slaughtered to the last man...whether they be soldiers in uniform, or saboteurs, with or without arms; and whether fighting or seeking to escape; and...whether they come into action from Ships and Aircraft, or whether they land by parachute.

Should individual members...such as agents, saboteurs etc., fall into the hands of the Armed Forces...they are to be instantly handed over to the S.D.

(Signed) A Hitler

HEADQUARTERS OF THE ARMY
SECRET

No. 551781/42G.K. Chefs W.F.St/Qu. F.H. Qu. 19/10/42

The enclosed Order from the Führer is forwarded in connection with destruction of enemy Terror and Sabotage-troops. This order is intended for Commanders only and is in no circumstances to fall into Enemy hands.

Chief of Staff of the Army

(Signed) Jodl

Note: After the war, German officers who carried out the illegal executions under the Commando Order were found guilty at the Nuremberg trials. The Commando Order was one of the specifications in the charge against Field Marshal Alfred Jodl, who was convicted and hanged.

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Chapter 9

Marek mounted the stairs to the second floor and arrived at the end of the hallway, still some forty feet from the Voigt office door, when Hagen and Wolff from the Amsterdam SD office walked briskly past him. Ahead he saw a young woman with a gun push a door open and fire two shots in rapid succession into the office, which must be his uncle's. In a fraction of a second Hagen and Wolff had their guns out, covering the last few feet in a dead run. Hagen rushed through the door and struck Liz from behind, sending her to the floor while her Browning bounced off the desk harmlessly and landed in a corner. Both SD men had their guns trained at Lund and Hansen before either could reach for theirs.

Marek slowed to a stop a few feet from the door and started digging for his well-concealed gun, while listening to the people inside. All the action from the time Liz pushed the door open had taken but seconds until Lund and Hansen again were at gunpoint.

"Hände hoch!" yelled Hagen, seeing both of them reaching for their guns. "Turn and put your hands on the wall. Erich, get their weapons!"

Wolff stuck his Walther in his belt and then expertly checked Hansen, extracting a Walther.

"Verdamt!" shouted Hagen at the sight of the weapon, *"Englische Agenten!"*

The words electrified Marek. If these were British agents, he would have to act *now*. He pulled back the slide on his Browning and slipped a round into the chamber. Then he gripped the small gun with both hands to steady his aim, stepped to the open door, and took in the scene in a quick

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glance. Hagen was covering Wolff who was starting to search Lund. He saw Marek out of the corner of his eye and started to swing toward him, but too late. Marek shot him through the temple. Wolff spun around and grasped the gun in his belt. When his hand closed around it, Marek fired twice, both shots aimed at the heart. Wolff staggered, lost his grip on the pistol and crashed to the floor.

Without lowering his gun, Marek looked at Lund and Hansen and asked in halting English, "Are you British agents?"

They hesitated. Liz in the meantime was getting up from the floor. She looked at Marek and smiled sweetly.

"We sure are."

x

At RSHA headquarters in Berlin SS Brigadeführer Werner Best knocked on the door to Himmler's office. When his knock was acknowledged with a curt "*Herein*," he entered, clicked his heels and saluted the Reichsführer with a "*Heil Hitler*." Himmler looked up from the document he was reading.

"What brings you here, Werner?"

"Herr Reichsführer, you may recall sending Lammers to Amsterdam to pick up a certain Aaldert Voigt, a Jew whose real name is Blum, and take him to Hechingen. I have just received a weekly report from our SD at the SS Zentrale in Amsterdam. It mentions that Voigt, alias Blum, has been taken to Transitlager Westerbork by our local *Mitarbeiter* on their own initiative."

Himmler frowned.

"Since when do we use local initiative in such important matters?"

"It is most unfortunate, Herr Reichsführer. I shall find out who is responsible and have Blum brought back. Maybe Lammers has already taken this step."

Himmler did not comment on this speculation. It just occurred to him that Blum might have been expedited from

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Westerbork onto Auschwitz, that Blum even might be gassed right now and beyond any retrieval. Not that he gave a damn about that rotten Jew, but it could make the SS look as if one hand didn't know what the other was doing.

"Listen, Werner, get in touch with Westerbork and tell them to have Aaldert Voigt alias Abramek Blum ready to be picked up and taken out for interrogation. If by any chance he has been put on a transport to Auschwitz, stop the train and dig him out."

"Jawohl, Herr Reichsführer."

"Keep on top of this matter, Werner, until it is resolved, and keep me informed. And make sure your people don't exercise that kind of initiative again."

Himmler laid a slight emphasis on "your people," just enough to remind Best who would be considered responsible, should the affair take a bad course.

"Certainly, Herr Reichsführer. I shall take immediate action."

He saluted and rushed back to his office suite, where his secretary looked up with surprise at his hurried arrival.

"Fräulein Thöne, get me the Westerbork Transitlager in Holland on the phone. Very urgent!"

He waited impatiently, his fingers drumming on the polished surface of his desk, while Giseline Thöne was speaking to the supervisor, trying to get the call through. After some discussion, she knocked on his door and reported.

"The connections to Holland are down, and they cannot estimate how long it will take."

"Then never mind the telephone, send the message by telegram."

She scurried out and came back, steno pad in hand. Best gathered his thoughts and dictated.

"Sturmbannführer Erich Deppner Transitlager Westerbork Stop Priority Stop Prisoner Aaldert Voigt alias Abramek Blum will be picked up for interrogation Stop Have the prisoner ready for departure immediately Stop Confirm that the prisoner is ready Stop Brigadeführer Werner Best Stop"

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He was pleased that the wording gave no hint of any mistake having been made. This should put things in order. As soon as the confirmation arrived, he would inform Himmler.

“Fräulein Thöne, take one more telegram.” Best leaned back in his chair, again phrasing his words with care.

“Agent Hagen Amsterdam SD Stop Report immediately on the unauthorized arrest and transfer of Voigt alias Blum to Westerbork Stop Brigadeführer Werner Best Stop”

x

Marek smiled back at Liz and lowered his gun.

“Then I go with you. My name is Marek.”

Avoiding a pool of blood, Lund stepped over two bodies, closed the door, turned and smiled at Marek.

“You have certainly earned our gratitude. Very impressive marksmanship.”

He turned toward Koenderink, who was standing behind the desk, “Are you Aaldert Voigt?”

Koenderink sat down heavily in the desk chair and took a deep breath. The action of the last two minutes had been too fast and furious to allow him time to think or guess at the identity of the people he was now facing. Marek’s question and the reply from Liz tended to raise more questions rather than clarify the situation. He looked at Lund and shook his head.

“No. Dr. Voigt was taken away by German police three days ago. I am Dr. Koenderink I am president of the university, and I gathered from this man’s telephone conversation in my office,” he pointed to the dead Lammers on the floor, “that Dr. Voigt was taken to Westerbork, which is a transit camp for Jews being transported east for resettlement.”

Lund thought for a moment. If the other side had decided to make use of Voigt in their research, they would have taken him to Germany. It made no sense to put him in a transit camp. He looked straight at Koenderink, trying to assess whether he could trust him.

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“Why would they send him to Westerbork?”

Koenderink met his gaze calmly.

“Who are you and why are you looking for Voigt?”

Lund weighed his words for only a few seconds before answering. There was no time for equivocation.

“As you heard, we are in fact British agents, and we have come to offer Voigt passage to England, if he wishes to go with us. Now, tell me why they would take him to Westerbork.”

Koenderink did not hesitate.

“I cannot be sure, of course, but I suspect that they have discovered Aaldert Voigt’s true identity. He is actually Jewish, and his real name is Blum.”

“Abramek Blum, and he is my uncle.”

The voice came from Marek, and they all turned toward him, but before the conversation could go further, Lund broke it off.

“Listen, this is not the time or place for discussion; we have to get out of here quickly. Hansen, take the IDs and other papers off these four,” he swept with a gesture the bodies on the floor, “Liz, put their weapons in your handbag. Marek, you’d better take one of the Walthers, the Browning is too small to rely on.”

He turned back to Koenderink.

“Is there anything else you can tell us that might be of help in getting to Voigt, I mean Blum?”

Koenderink shook his head.

“I cannot think of anything, but before you rush off, be aware that the car these two men came in is parked in front of the main entrance, and the driver is waiting there for them.”

Lund said, “And the car these guys came in is probably there as well, maybe also with a driver waiting.”

“I don’t think so,” Hansen cut in, jangling two keys on a key ring, “for these are car keys that one of them had in his pocket.”

“Let’s hope you’re right,” Lund said. “Now, Dr. Koenderink, it would help us greatly, if you can delay reporting to the authorities what has taken place here. Perhaps you can pretend confusion about our identities and say you believed us

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to be German SD and the dead bodies to be English agents. I'll leave it to your judgment, but we can use any delay you can provide before the SD spreads the alarm."

He held out his hand and Koenderink took it with a quiet "Good luck."

When they emerged from the office, half a dozen students had gathered down the hall by the stairway, attracted by the sound of the gunfire. As they approached, Lund waved a Walther at the crowd and hissed at them in German.

"German police, get out of this hallway."

The students scattered and fled.

The main entrance was separated from the street by an esplanade a hundred feet wide where students were coming and going. Lund stopped at the open doors in the entrance and looked toward the street curb where the Wanderer was parked with Ziegler in the driver's seat. Parked just behind it was an Opel without a driver in sight.

"Hansen and I will handle the driver and go in the black sedan. Liz, take the keys and check whether they are for the Opel. If so, you and Marek take that and follow us. If the keys don't fit, we all go together in the sedan. Hansen, you walk around to the driver's side and make sure he doesn't try to bolt and make a run for it. I'll get in next to the driver and talk with him. Let's go."

He walked with Hansen across the esplanade at an oblique angle, not aiming directly for the Wanderer. Ziegler was sitting relaxed, looking ahead through the windshield. When they were close enough, Hansen diverged, cut behind the Wanderer and opened the left front door. Ziegler turned in surprise and looked into the barrel of Hansen's gun. Simultaneously, Lund opened the right front door and slid into the seat next to Ziegler.

"Just put your hands on the steering wheel and sit still," Lund admonished, removing Ziegler's gun from its shoulder holster. Still speaking German, he continued, "Hop in the back, Hansen, and keep your gun trained on his neck. At the first sign of trouble, blow his brains out, as we did to his *Mitarbeiter*."

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As Hansen got into the back seat, Liz said through the open door, "The keys fit."

Lund acknowledged with a grin and addressed Ziegler again.

"Show me your ID."

Ziegler fished it out of his pocket and handed it over.

"Your name is Ziegler. Hm...Now listen, Ziegler, your two *Mitarbeiter* are dead, because they didn't follow my orders." He poked Ziegler in the ribs with the gun barrel. "Do you understand?"

Ziegler grunted. Lund went on.

"You will now drive us to Westerbork Transitlager, where I have some business to transact. Drive at normal speed. At the first hint of trouble, you die. *Verstanden?*"

He poked Ziegler again, this time receiving an actual answer.

"Ja."

"Alright, then. *Los!*"

His hand shaking, Ziegler started the engine and put the Wanderer in gear. As they moved away from the curb, the Opel followed.

x

Back in his office, President Koenderink slumped into the armchair at his desk. He sat motionless for several minutes, breathing deeply, trying to get his thoughts into an orderly pattern. The events of the last fifteen minutes were beyond anything in his experience. Actually beyond anybody's experience, he told himself. His next move would be critical: it could mean life or death for these young people—one of them an attractive young woman, looking like she could have been one of his students. And she had killed the two SD agents, swiftly and expertly. He reached for the telephone and dialed an Amsterdam number.

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"May I speak with Commissioner Brugh, please...Filip, this is Andries Koenderink. I need to talk with you. It is urgent. Can you come to my office?...No, it cannot wait, it is very urgent...Thank you..."

He went to a mahogany cabinet in the corner of the room and returned to his desk with a bottle of vintage port and two glasses. He sat down and poured himself a glass, emptied it in two gulps and leaned back in his chair with his eyes closed. He was still sitting like that when Police Commissioner Filip Brugh walked into his office more than a quarter of an hour later. Brugh and Koenderink had been close friends since their school days, and both were near retirement after long careers in their chosen fields. Brugh had risen to head the police department's Office for Internal Security, a counterpart to the Nazi SD but clean and respectable as befits any police agency in a democracy. Like Koenderink, he was tall and well proportioned, and he moved with the ease of a natural athlete. He walked across the office and sat down across from Koenderink, as the two shook hands.

"Andries, what has happened? This is a fine port, and you look like you need a glass."

"Truthfully, Filip, I already had one, and now we'll have one together."

He poured two glasses and for a moment they savored the fragrance and taste of the sweet wine. Koenderink leaned back in his chair, cleared his throat and slowly and carefully told his friend the events of the morning from the time Lammers had arrived in his office until his telephone call to Brugh.

"So you see, Filip, I want to give these young people the best chance to carry out their mission. It sounded like they might try to get Aaldert Voigt alias Abramek Blum out of Westerbork. Do you think that is possible? And what course of action should I take now?"

"First let me ask you a couple of questions. Can you think of any reason why the British want to get hold of Blum?"

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“No. I have been trying to think of a reason, but I can’t come up with anything.”

“What is Blum’s field of expertise?”

“He is a physicist, deals with physics on a mathematical basis, same as Albert Einstein.”

“Hmm...doesn’t tell me much. I remember Einstein went to America. And you say this Lammers from SD flew off the handle when he learned that Blum had been taken to Westerbork. It sounds to me as though the Germans have some plans of their own for Blum. Could it have something to do with military research?”

“If it does, I can’t imagine what or how.”

“Alright, now to your question about what to do. Andries, when Himmler’s henchmen find out that four SD agents have been killed and that you have witnessed the shootout, they will move heaven and earth to take revenge. The British agent’s suggestion that you delay reporting by pretending to be confused won’t fly. Not for two minutes. Particularly not if you delay enough for the killers to get away. They will get the true story out of you by torture, every word of it, just as you told it to me. You are going to have to go Underground, you and Eva both. That will save your life and, in the bargain, it will give the British agents the maximum time, as you wanted.”

Brugh did not add that his own life now was on the line together with Koenderinks. Under torture, Koenderink would divulge their meeting and discussion over vintage port. Koenderink was not a fool, and he suddenly realized the danger in which he had placed his friend.

“Filip, forgive me, I now see that I have put you in danger as well by rashly calling you.”

“That cannot be helped. Normal people cannot be expected to take the kind of precautions needed in the world Hitler is trying to create. Listen carefully, for we don’t want to make any mistakes. Is Blum’s office locked?”

“No, we lock the building at night, but we don’t usually lock faculty offices.”

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"Do you have a custodian or such with keys to those offices?"

"Yes."

"Call him and tell him to go immediately and lock Blum's office, but under no circumstances to open the door."

Koenderink made the call and looked at Brugh who was scratching notes to himself on a pad.

"What next?"

"I think we have one small piece of luck: it's years since I have visited you here, and the clerk and your secretary don't know me—I think."

"No, they are both relatively new, have been here less than four years."

"Good. Your secretary was not in the outer office, and I didn't give my name to the clerk, just marched right in. Isn't there another entrance to your suite?"

"Yes, it's behind that drapery, very old fashioned, a narrow passage I never use."

"Good, I'll leave that way. Now, what you have to do is walk out of here and not come back. Is there anything in your papers the SD should not get their hands on?"

"Nothing I can think of, but I'm not sure where to take Eva."

Koenderink was voicing the insistent problem faced by ordinary citizens forced to drop out of sight in countries under German occupation. In reality, the Underground was only a concept, not an actual place standing ready with succor for people pursued.

"I have a small beach cottage near Leiden. Here is the address; the key is on top of the window frame to the right of the front door. I will come down to see you there on Sunday. Now let's take a last sip and be on our way."

The two old friends emptied their glasses, got up and walked out, Koenderink through the front office, Brugh by the back exit.

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Magda Gruber, secretary in SD's Amsterdam office, read the telegram a second time. Hagen and Wolff's hasty departure this morning had given plenty of cause to worry. Magda had been Hagen's mistress for more than a year and took a proprietary interest in everything concerning him. There had been no word from Hagen or Wolff since their departure—in itself contrary to regulations—and now it was close to quitting time. She went down the hall and knocked on the door of Albrecht Meyer. He was with the Gestapo and a friend of Hagen's.

Meyer listened to Magda, read the telegram, and got up from his chair. "You say they went to the university, to the office of Voigt? You were right in telling me, Magda. I'd better look into it." He buzzed his partner on the intercom. "Hans, we're off to the university."

Only an hour later, a courier handed a telegram to Best's secretary, Giselinde Thöne. She read it, made a note in her log, and took it to Brigadeführer Best.

"This just arrived from Westerbork in reply to your telegram earlier today."

Best read it with satisfaction. Deppner had the prisoner ready to be picked up. Everything was in order. A small slipup by Hagen, just over-eager to perform. Still, a reprimand would be proper, to remind him always to communicate without delay.

Now he could tell Himmler that things were well in hand, had been so all along, in fact. He got up from his desk.

"Very good, Fräulein Thöne. I am now going in to see the Reichsführer."

x

Hansen said, "What it hangs on is our ability to play the roles of SD personnel to perfection, and I just don't think we can pull that off." He was summarizing a lengthy discussion he and Lund had carried on about how to extract Blum from the

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Westerbork camp. They were speaking their native Danish which conveniently kept Ziegler from understanding or even guessing about the subject of their deliberations. While they talked, the Wanderer, followed by the Opel, had covered most of the distance to Westerbork with Ziegler at the wheel, keenly aware of the gun in Hansen's hand pointed at his neck.

They rode in silence for a while, both turning over in their minds the formidable problem which no one had anticipated. Lund said, "Do you suppose we could scare this character into cooperating and help us getting Blum out?"

Hansen pondered the question. "It might be worth a try. He certainly knows their procedures. He would know whether SD can just walk in without further authorization and fetch one of the people. He'd know what to say."

Lund said, "We'll stop close to the camp and I'll tell him what to do. Watch him carefully then, and observe his reaction."

Half an hour later Lund ordered a stop about a mile from the camp entrance, the Opel pulling up close behind. Lund turned toward Ziegler, who was staring ahead with a glazed look.

"Alright, Ziegler, you have obeyed my orders so far. If you keep doing that, you will come out of this little affair alive. As I told you, your two *Mitarbeiter* disobeyed my instructions, so they died. Would you like to cooperate and save your life?"

Ziegler turned and for the first time looked into Lund's blue eyes that never wavered. "What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing very complicated." Lund said over his shoulder, "Hansen, call the others."

When Liz and Marek had crowded into the back seat with Hansen, Lund spoke slowly in German.

"Now, we will pick up Blum from the Westerbork camp down the road. Hansen will drive the Wanderer and I will sit in front with him. Ziegler will sit in the back next to Marek and will pretend to be in charge. Marek who is our finest marksman will be with him. I will use Lammers ID, Hansen will use Reinhart's ID, and Marek will use Wolff's ID. So, I am Lammers, you two are Reinhart and Wolff." He paused briefly. "When we get to

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the camp, Ziegler will order the guard on duty to find Blum, so that we can take him with us to Amsterdam. Ziegler, repeat my instructions.”

Ziegler fumbled for words. “Uh...I will tell them to release Blum to us.”

“Very good, Ziegler. Marek and I will be ready to kill you the instant we think you are forgetting your role. Is that clear?”

Ziegler nodded. Lund poked him in the ribs with his gun. “Speak up, I can’t hear you.” Ziegler said, “Yes, I understand.”

They left Liz with the Opel and drove the last distance to the camp entrance. Westerbork comprised several rows of barracks, wooden huts surrounded by a single barbed-wire fence. It was guarded less elaborately than the concentration camps, and the SS personnel was largely over-age draftees, men in their late fifties and older. The gate was opened by a sentry with a rifle slung over his shoulder. When Ziegler flashed his ID with the words, “*Deutsche Sicherheitspolizei*,” he waved them on to the guard hut, a slightly larger building with a drive-around in front, a short distance from the gate.

As they got out, Lund mumbled in Danish to Hansen, “Keep the engine running.”

Lund and Marek walked a step behind Ziegler, as they entered the front room, a large office with two doors in the back wall and the corporal of the duty watch, an old SS Unterscharführer, seated at a desk in the center. He carried a P38 pistol in a belt holster, and Lund judged him to be close to sixty. When Ziegler mentioned Blum, he came to attention.

“Oh yes, he is in there,” he pointed to one of the doors, “we have had him ready for you since the telegram came. I will inform the Sturmbannführer.” He picked up the telephone.

Ziegler stood perplexed for a moment, then walked over and opened the indicated door with Lund and Marek at his heels. The room was bare except for a small table with two chairs, hinting at its use for interrogation. On one of the chairs sat Abramek Blum. Before he could speak, Marek said in a low voice in Yiddish, “Be still, uncle.”

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"Come with us," Ziegler said hoarsely, turning around and addressing the Unterscharführer, "we will take him with us."

"Certainly, as your telegram informed us, but please wait a moment for the Sturmbannführer, he is on his way."

Ziegler was not a quick thinker. Sweat was running down his forehead as he looked inquiringly at Lund, who calmly said, "Of course. And we want to pay our respects to the Sturmbannführer." He turned to Marek, "Put the prisoner in the car and come back here."

Marek took his uncle by the arm and walked him outside to the Wanderer. He opened the back door and almost pushed his uncle inside with another admonition to be quiet. Just then, Sturmbannführer Dr. Erich Deppner arrived at a half jog, puffing heavily.

An alcoholic physician, Deppner had been employed in the extensive euthanasia program. The Nazis had designed the program to "purify" the national body by selecting for killing and disposal certain categories of "useless" people with whom the new German superstate did not wish to be encumbered. With the assistance of the medical profession, the SS collected thousands of citizens from hospitals and other institutions, taking them to be murdered and cremated. Deppner had recently been installed as camp commander at Westerbork and was eager to impress his superiors in Berlin.

They all gathered in the guard office, where Deppner shook hands with the visitors.

"As soon as I received the wire from Dr. Best, I had the prisoner prepared and ready for you. Will you be taking him to Berlin? He seems a rather ordinary specimen, hardly worth much attention. But of course, headquarters knows best. I have already informed Dr. Best of my actions."

At this moment, the other door in the back wall opened and two more SS guards appeared from what looked like a bunk room for off-duty guards. They both carried P38s, and this encouraged Ziegler to desperate action. He jumped on Marek and screamed, "*Englische Agenten*," at the top of his lungs.

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Marek easily twisted out of his grasp and in one continuous motion drew his Walther and fired, hitting Ziegler in the chest. It took the guard corporal and the two recent entrants a couple of seconds to react, more than enough for Lund to draw his gun and shoot the guard corporal while Marek took down the other two SS arrivals. Deppner, unarmed, dashed for the door, but Lund's bullet hit him, as he opened it, tumbling him across the threshold.

Marek ran to the bunk room door and checked inside.

"Nobody in there."

Lund said, "Let's get out of here."

Outside, they jumped in the car, and Hansen sped toward the entrance. The guard at the gate had heard the shots popping like distant firecrackers and was unslinging his rifle. Lund rolled the car window down and fired two shots in his direction, which made him jump out of the way as the Wanderer crashed through the gate and tore up the road with wire and debris trailing from the front bumper and the smashed headlights.

Hansen at the wheel grinned happily and said, "It's a good thing we brought two cars."