

# FREEDOM'S HAND

## PROLOGUE: LATE AUTUMN, 1943

The locomotive, belching foul smoke, pulled a train of mostly cattle cars across the dismal Polish landscape.

Inside one of the cars, Nathan Adler grimaced when the bony elbow of a teenaged boy jabbed him in the back. The boy, a couple of years younger than Nathan, had shifted his position again. This one needs more patience, Nathan thought, more consideration. Old Mr. Tauber had not fidgeted so!

But Mr. Tauber had been ill before their whole town was loaded onto the train and had not survived the first twenty-four hours. The body would have remained there throughout the journey, had the SS soldiers not dragged it off when they opened the doors to take money and watches.

*Cattle car.* A place for confining cattle, not human bodies and souls. But eighty or so bodies and souls were inside, occupying a space that would make fifty uncomfortable.

The boy continued to twist. Nathan thought of saying something, then changed his mind. What did it matter anyhow? Complaining voices were ignored here. As long as the boy did not trouble Mama and Miriam, as long as he could remain between them, Nathan would endure the discomfort.

Hanna and Miriam Adler slept, for the moment oblivious to the heaving mass around them. Nathan glanced at his sister, nearly four years old: Mama's *goldene maidel*. Nestled in her mother's arms, the golden girl looked peaceful. She had cried at the beginning, like most of the children. But now, at dusk on the third day, it was quiet in the car.

Anxiety shadowed Hanna Adler's face. She had fought sleep all along, afraid that by giving in she would not be able to protect her children. Nathan had chided her for this; after all, had he not been the man of the family since Papa's death two years ago? But finally, she had given in to the exhaustion.

Where were they going? Mr. Frankel—old learned Frankel—had an answer: an *arbeitslager*, a labor camp. A place to toil for the new god-devils and their Third Reich until this trouble was over, and they could go back to their homes.

But Nathan thought otherwise. He had heard . . . stories. Others in the town had heard them too. By choice, they told no one else.

Soon, in darkness, the blur of white and red lights along the track told of the approach to a station. The train slowed. Nathan sat up, jostling the boy, who muttered curses. Ignoring him, Nathan peered through cracks in the timbers at the variegated glow, which was soon distinguishable as individual lamps on poles. Wheels clattered; steam escaped. A dark unease gripped Nathan as the brakes squealed. The transport shuddered to a halt before brighter lights, and milling people.

Journey's end. Most were already rising to their feet and rummaging for belongings on the floor of the car. Nathan gently shook Mama and Miriam as the doors were flung open.

*"Heraus! Alles heraus! Los!"*

*"Schnell, Judische schwein! Mach schnell!"*

The words pierced like the bite of a rabid dog. Soldiers dragged people from the car. Mama and Miriam, now rigidly awake, stood with Nathan, who held tightly to an old suitcase they had managed to fill. Waiting reluctantly, they watched as a dozen men clambered into the car: emaciated things with dark, sunken eyes, dressed in poorly-fitting clothes resembling striped pajamas. Wooden shoes drummed on the floorboards as,

under the relentless urging of German overseers, they shoved the confused passengers toward the opening. The Adlers were caught in a wave that carried them to the edge.

*"Heraus! Schnell!"* The words pummeled the senses. Nathan leaped to the platform. Putting down the suitcase, he turned to assist his mother and sister. When they again stood together, the suitcase—all that had been left of their world—was gone.

Amid the frenetic activity surrounding him, Nathan noticed the station sign over the platform: AUSCHWITZ.

The Adlers were thrust into a ragged column. Up and down the platform, those who had already stood before their captors were being formed into longer, more orderly lines. One consisted of men; a second—smaller—of young women; the third and largest of the elderly, those in poor health . . . and children. Nathan's earlier uneasiness now strangled him.

Bright lights from a nearby *arbeitslager* lit the road that many followed toward manned watchtowers and high fences strung with barbed wire. The Adlers were confronted by a tall, smiling officer in SS gray. All along he had seemed less cruel than the others. He studied the tall, athletic Nathan carefully, often nodding.

*"Krafftig,"* he said in approval. *"Gut, gut."*

Hanna Adler stood stiffly as the officer faced her. Removing a glove, he touched her cheek. The hell of recent days could not diminish her comeliness. He was smiling when he lifted her long, tattered dress, but the smile faded when he saw her left leg, deformed from birth. He tapped the metal brace that had long encased it with his walking stick then turned away disgustedly.

Until then, Nathan had refused to believe that what was happening to others could happen to them. Ignoring the tiny Miriam, who clung to her mother's dress, the officer motioned for two soldiers. One grabbed Hanna's arm, hurting her, and dragged her toward the long column of those with no future.

*"Mama!"* Nathan cried. *"No, don't take her—!"*

He had gone only a step when other soldiers grabbed him. At first struggling, he was quickly subdued by a blow from the handle of the officer's stick on the side of the head. Buckling, he couldn't focus on Mama or Miriam, now at the end of the column and under the cold eye of a scowling SS woman.

*"Miriam!"* Hanna screamed. *"Nathan, please!"*

The girl, torn loose, had fallen. *"Mama! Mama!"* she sobbed.

*"Sei still, Jüdische bund!"* the woman snapped.

Hanna Adler was pulled from the column and forced to her knees. With barbaric cruelty the woman drove a heavy boot into her stomach. Gasping, she doubled over.

Miriam began to crawl, then rose to her feet. Blinded by tears she staggered aimlessly, her arms held out. The soldiers were amused.

*"Nathan?"* the child cried. *"Nathan!"*

*"Miriam?"* Nathan could see her now; Mama, too. *"In the name of God—!"*

Snarling German shepherd dogs, straining against their leashes, had kept the prisoners moving. As Miriam wandered too near some of them, one creature pulled free. The handler made no attempt to retrieve the dog. Its weight crushed the child before its jaws found her throat. Blood spattered the gray dust as it shook the limp body like a rag doll.

More blows fell on Nathan. They would not think of destroying him; a sturdy prisoner was valuable in an *arbeitslager*. Unable to will away the darkness, he did not see as two others from their train, under stinging orders, lifted Mama and rejoined the column on its march to oblivion.

## CHAPTER ONE: COLLECTION, 1994

“What’s wrong, Grandpa?”

The small girl looked even smaller in the middle of the king-sized bed. Peering out from beneath the covers she gazed sleepily at the old man, who sat erect in the other bed. Slivers of dawn penetrated the motel room from behind heavy red drapes. He didn’t think the girl could see his face; that was good.

“Grandpa?” she said again. “Were you calling me?”

“No, *schoenkeit*, it was just a dream. Go back to sleep. It’s not time to be up yet.”

Slumber found the girl easily, as it always did. Nathan Adler was relieved. The trembling had lessened but he still perspired, even in the air-conditioned room.

Ruthie had suffered the dreams too, until her death four years ago. Nathan had met Ruthie, who was a few years older, in a displaced persons’ camp after the liberation. She had been at Birkenau. All of her family—parents, two sisters, a young husband, an infant son—she had lost to the Nazis.

Their new life, first shared out of need, grew slowly into one of deep respect and love. Together, they worked hard to deal with the past. Unable to have children of their own because of the *experiments* done on Ruthie, they adopted Susan a decade after coming to America.

Susan had been a *mitsvab*, a blessing. And years later she would give them another: Heather, her daughter. Ruthie suggested that Susan and her husband, David Lowe, give the Hebrew name of Hanna to the child. Heather Miriam Lowe. Miriam for Nathan’s sister, Mama’s *goldene maidel*, alive in his heart, reborn in this tousle-haired girl, his granddaughter, whom he cherished.

Nathan glanced at his watch: twenty minutes to six. Back home, in suburban Chicago, he would be going out to jog. Nearing seventy, Nathan was nonetheless a robust man who looked ten years younger. But he wouldn’t leave Heather alone. And besides, he reasoned, in this hellhole Nevada or wherever they were it was too hot for running, or anything else.

Susan and David slept in the adjoining room. David had said that he wanted to start first thing in the morning for Lake Tahoe; but to David, “first thing” was at least an hour or more away.

David Lowe. The family’s name had been Loewenstein—a fine name, Nathan thought—which they had changed after coming over. And David was a fine man; a good husband and father, well-respected high school teacher. Even the discerning Ruthie had liked him. It had been David’s idea to have Nathan join them on this vacation. Never one to interfere in his children’s lives, he had come along with what some might have interpreted as reluctance. But inside, he was glad.

Crossing the room on carpeting that had once been thick, Nathan splashed cold water on his face to dispel the last effects of the nightmare. He would not risk going back to sleep again. Yesterday’s Salt Lake City newspaper lay on the table near the window. Drawing the drapes a few inches, Nathan gazed across alkali flats and low granite peaks at a sky that was a palette of colors swirling amid soft, billowing clouds; a desert dawn that could almost be heard.

Disdaining the newspaper, Nathan turned his chair and sat down to watch. At his age he had long since learned to make time for the wonders that God chose to share.

##

Bobby Rayford had seen lots of sunrises in his twenty years and couldn’t give a shit. He had sat up most of the night in his Ford pickup. Bleary-eyed, stiff, he swore irritably as he tried to stretch his long legs. At least he wasn’t hungry, despite his cadaverous appearance. He had loaded up on candy bars and Coke, and there was plenty left.

Across the road, the now familiar Town and Country station wagon with the Illinois plates, which he had first seen yesterday in Salt Lake City, was parked in front of room 107. Rayford could read the two bumper stickers on the old car from where he sat. One was for the Chicago Bears. Christ, the Bears! The other was what had first tipped him off: SAVE SOVIET JEWRY. It was weathered, torn; been on for a long time, he figured.

Turning the words over in his mind, Rayford's insides churned. *Save Soviet Jewry!* Imagine wanting to save Commie Jews, even if those bastards *weren't* Commies anymore. *Kill Soviet Jewry*, that was more like it. *Kill all damn Jewry!*

Jewry. Must mean "All the Jews together." Maybe there were other words like it. *Kill American Niggery*. That would make a good bumper sticker. Niggery. He'd have to tell that to Dooley Webber. But Dooley was so dumb he probably wouldn't get it. Never mind.

The bumper sticker hadn't been enough to convince Rayford. Hell, liberal Democrat sonofabitch Christians would support anything! He had to be sure.

He couldn't guess a thing about the woman—good-looking blond bitch—or the kid, who resembled her. But the old man for sure had one of the damn hawk-beaks; so did the other guy with the brown, curly hair. Still, Bobby Rayford knew there had to be no doubt whatever.

Later, he'd been able to glance inside the car after they parked it at the Mormon Shrine. Another clue: a dashboard ornament, one of those spinner things, the Jew star on one side, some damn squiggle on the other. Rayford was certain now, but he held off making the phone call. He knew they would want more.

The clincher had been a bold act. He'd actually sat in the next booth from them at a diner! They hadn't noticed him; their kind never would. The woman was the key. From the turquoise Jew star around her neck, from stuff they said—especially the old man—Bobby Rayford knew he had found what *they* wanted. The bus would be sent.

Contact had gone well. They believed him; he had even been congratulated.

When he phoned in again at night, after the family had stopped at the Calico Motel off northern Nevada's Interstate 80, Rayford was told the bus was on its way. It would be advised of his position and arrive by morning.

But Rayford was growing concerned. Almost six, and no sign of his support. The family might hit the road early. If he followed, and couldn't make connections, they might lose a day. Worse, they could order him to drop the whole thing . . .

Suddenly it was there, most of the way off the asphalt frontage road. It amazed him how quiet the damn thing was; they had good mechanics. An old, converted school bus, painted a dingy gray. Lettering on both sides: MORIAH BAPTIST CHURCH. Curtains covering the windows from inside; a couple of flower boxes. Nice touches. Fast as hell, although it never went more than the speed limit. That was a strict rule. Probably why it took so long to get here.

The bus let off a single passenger and pulled away even as the door was swinging shut with a pneumatic *whoosh*. Bobby Rayford sat up as the man walked toward him. Earl Smith. *Captain* Earl Smith. Tough sonofabitch.

They sure as hell wanted this one done right.

##

"What are you grinning about?"

Susan Lowe was not a morning person. Shaking off sleep, she looked at David. He sat against propped-up pillows, hands behind his head. No one, she thought, should look so happy this early!

David Lowe flashed a mouthful of teeth. "Now *that* is a grin. The expression in question was smug self-satisfaction. Please note the difference."

She sighed. "Excuse *me*. So what are you smuggling about?"

"Thinking about last night."

Now Susan smiled. "I might have known."

"It was even better than the night before."

"You say that every time."

"And every time I speak the truth," he told her in mock solemnity.

“Right,” she said with a groan. “Anyway, we’d better get up. Dad’s probably been at it for an hour already, fifty pushups and all.”

David grimaced as he climbed out of bed. “Almost twice as old as me and in better shape! Did I tell you he beat me at racquetball before we left?”

“No!” Susan exclaimed. “I’ll try not to rub it in. You know, it was great of you to ask him along.”

David shrugged. “Do you think he’s enjoying himself? He hasn’t said much.”

“He never does; but I know he is. Just being with Heather is enough for him.”

“Maybe we should have skipped all that Mormon stuff yesterday. I can just hear the conversation with his friends when we get back home: ‘Izzy, Jake, we saw the Mormon Tabernacle,’ and Izzy says, ‘That’s nice, did they sing good?’ I don’t know.”

“He’s fine, David; really. Come on, let’s get ready. I need a cup of coffee.”

##

Nathan Adler and his granddaughter were waiting in the lobby at 6:40 when Susan and David appeared from the inner court of the motel. Nathan had already taken care of the bill, according to their “agreement.” David would not argue with his father-in-law; he had tried before. Sooner or later, he would get even.

“Hi Mommy, Daddy,” Heather called.

“Morning, baby,” David replied.

Susan hugged her eight year old. “You didn’t give your grandfather problems or anything?” she asked.

“Of course not!” Heather looked up at the old man. “Did I, Grandpa?”

Stone-faced, Nathan exclaimed, “Such a terrible time from this little monster! I don’t want to be in the same room with her. *Oy!*”

Heather giggled. “Come on, Grandpa, you used that line yesterday.”

Nathan shrugged. “So who said I was original?”

Smiling, David said, “How about breakfast? We thought we’d eat here.”

“I’m hungry!” Heather exclaimed.

“It’s fine by me,” Nathan added.

Something bothered Susan. While David went on ahead with Heather, she took her father’s arm and walked slowly. “You look tired this morning, Dad,” she said. “Couldn’t you sleep?”

Nathan dismissed her concern with a wave. “I slept okay.”

“But you dreamt, didn’t you?”

He could never hide a thing from his daughter. “So what else is new?”

Susan nodded and kissed his cheek. There was nothing else to say. They walked into the adjoining coffee shop.

##

Bobby Rayford hadn’t gotten much conversation out of Earl Smith. He had guzzled some of the Cokes, eaten a couple of candy bars. For the past twenty minutes he’d stared across the road, hardly looking at Rayford, even while the younger man was making his report.

“Well, where are they, Corporal?” Smith asked peevishly.

Two other carloads of travelers had left the motel, but not Rayford’s targets. “They might be in the restaurant, sir,” he replied. “We can’t see the back tables.”

“What about them there?” Smith asked.

He pointed at a booth by the front window, where two people had just sat down. “Yeah, that’s them!” Rayford exclaimed. “The guy and the kid anyway.”

They continued to watch, until the booth was full. It was hard to see the woman clearly, but Smith—from Rayford’s long description—had a fair idea of what she looked like.

“They’re just starting,” Rayford muttered. “Guess we sit here more.”

“No reason not to get a cup of coffee,” Smith said, opening his door. “How about it, Corporal?”

“Yessir!” Rayford exclaimed.

##

*Never saw the sun shining so bright,  
Never saw things going so right,  
Noticing the days hurrying by,*

*When you're in love, my how they fly.*

The service was quick, the food passable in the Conestoga Coffee Shop. Heather, who ate enough for two children, enjoyed the wisecracking waitress and the loud music. Nathan Adler was ready to be somewhere else.

"That used to be a nice song," he said. "Who's that trying to sing it? Sounds like something's in his nose."

Susan grinned. "That's Willie Nelson, Dad."

"Who?"

"Willie Nelson; you know."

"Oh, yeah, with the beard and the *schemata* on his head. That's him?"

"I thought you liked Willie Nelson, Grandpa," Heather said.

The men passed their table as they were talking. One of them had a boyish face below a prematurely balding head; not tall, but stocky. The other was gaunt, wild-eyed, with unkempt hair. Both looked road-weary. Truck drivers, probably, Nathan thought. They commanded attention for barely a second as they continued to the take-out counter.

Someone had punched up Neil Diamond, which Nathan thought was much better. At least he didn't mess up nice old songs. It was 7:20, and he was almost done with breakfast. No hurry; cool in here. Who wanted to step outside into that blast furnace . . .

*Furnace. Mach schnell!*

"So you think something's wrong with the air conditioner?" he asked David.

"What? In here?" David replied.

"In the car, I mean in the car. Did you think it was working okay?"

"I thought it was fine," David said.

Nathan shrugged. "Must be me."

"Maybe it's because it *looks* so hot out there," Susan said. "It's no joke, seeing mirages."

"Mommy, what's a mirage?" Heather asked.

"It's when the heat makes you see things that aren't really there."

"Oh, so that's why." She smiled slyly.

"Why what? Did you see one?"

"Uh-huh. In the desert yesterday."

"What did you see?"

"Schwarzenegger."

"Arnold Schwarzenegger?" David said.

"Yeah! He was armed to the teeth, bandoleers and M-16s and everything! And there were these other guys, lots of them, trying to get him, but he was blowing them away, pitching grenades—!"

"Dad, what video did you rent last week?" Susan asked.

"A Disney comedy!" Nathan exclaimed. "I swear it was Disney!"

The two truck drivers left with their take-out bags.

"I can't wait to get to the lake," Susan said. "This heat! Is Tahoe and Vegas supposed to be like that too?"

David nodded. "Vegas, anyway. The infamous dry heat you hear about. 'So what if it's 115° in the shade? It's a *dry* heat; not like your humidity back east.'"

"Hot is hot," Susan muttered.

They spent five more minutes in the Conestoga Coffee Shop before returning to their rooms. Soon they were loading their bags in back of the wagon.

##

Earl Smith watched the family from an Arco station next to the Calico Motel. His fingers tightened around a flat cardboard sleeve that he held as he concentrated on the woman.

Susan was dressed in a halter top, shorts and sandals; enough tanned flesh to remind Smith that it had been three days since he'd last been entertained. *I want this bitch*, he thought.

Later, for that. This was work now. He walked briskly toward the family, putting on a smile. The kid—Rayford—had wanted this part. But he hardly could smile and looked crazy as hell. They probably would've refused; then Christ knows what he would've done.

Smith put a hand to the brim of a Dallas Cowboys cap as he neared. "Say, 'scuse me," he said. "You folks headin' back over to the interstate ramp?"

"Uh, yes," David replied.

"Damnedest thing," Smith said. "We just pulled outta here. Didn't even make it to the highway when the fan belt snapped! Got a new one. Think you can run me by? It's not that far, but it's hotter'n hell already. Oh, sorry, ma'am."

"Any objections?" David asked.

"No," Susan said. "We'll drop you off."

Smith helped put the last of the luggage in the car then climbed in back with the old man and the kid. Meaningless chatter concealed his tension as David eased the car onto the frontage road. At least this part wouldn't take long.

The frontage road paralleled the highway for a quarter-mile before turning onto another two-laner that intersected it. A hundred yards short of the turn, they saw the pickup with its hood open. The other man leaned idly against the truck. As David pulled off the asphalt, Rayford started around to his side of the car.

Glancing back at Smith, David said, "Well, it was a hot ride, but short."

"Much obliged," Smith replied, waiting for Rayford to get into position. "I, uh . . ."

"*Mommy!*" Heather suddenly cried as Smith wrapped a hand around her wrists.

Rayford thrust the bore of a Heckler & Koch double action auto pistol through the driver's open window and against the side of David's head. Susan twisted around to see what had happened. Nathan, also turning in his seat, faced the same weapon—their standard issue—in Smith's other hand.

"*My baby!*" Susan screamed. "*You're hurting my baby!*"

"Shut up, bitch," Smith told her. "Shut up and listen to me!"

"What is this?" David exclaimed. "You want money? Fine! Just don't hurt my—!"

Rayford pushed the gun harder against his head. "Captain told you to shut the hell up, didn't he?"

"I'll say everything once," Smith went on. "You, bitch, slide over to the middle. Old man, get up front next to her. Do it in five seconds or I hurt the girl!"

They did as they were told. Smith was satisfied.

"Now, we're going to take a ride. I stay in back with the kid. My friend here follows us."

Rayford concealed the gun in his shirt and hurried over to the pickup. He slammed the hood down and quickly climbed behind the wheel. As he started the vehicle, a large produce truck turned slowly onto the frontage road. David's hand went for the horn.

"Don't even think it, Curly," Smith warned.

They drove off, Rayford following. In a few seconds they were climbing the westbound on-ramp to Interstate 80.

##

David Lowe, the history teacher, knew about this part of the country. The highway followed the old route of early settlers and gold seekers: courageous people wagering their lives on a better future. Along a sluggish alkali river, across scalding sands and beds of serrated lava, many journeys went unfulfilled. The Black Rock Desert claimed them, and the Forty Mile Desert: the last forty miles to the Carson River, and the Sierras. Two days through Hell for those lucky enough to make it; for the rest, an eternity.

Its significance was ignored by those now riding on a different kind of journey.

"Listen, you punk!" Nathan Adler snapped, glaring at Earl Smith. "You son-of-a-bitch punk! Where the hell—!"

"*Mommy!*" Heather screamed as her arm was twisted.

The car began to swerve when David glanced over his shoulder. He caught the wheel. Her face drained of color, Susan cried, "Leave her alone! Please don't hurt her!"

"Turn around!" Smith snapped. "You too, old man. I'll tell this just one time: the kid's all right now, but I see any of your faces and I break a finger. I hear a sound, same thing. You nod if you understand that!"

They understood, too well; they would not test this madman again.

David saw the pickup in his rearview mirror. It remained far enough back and did not appear to be following the car. Occasionally other vehicles fell into place behind them but grew tired of the slow pace and soon sped by.

The interstate careened through granite ranges, a black ribbon across the stark whiteness of the region. David managed a glance at his watch: forty-five minutes since the motel.

But at an exit in the high desert, this part of the ride was suddenly over.

“Follow that road,” Smith said. “See the speed limit sign? You take it nice and slow; understand, Curly?”

Heather whimpered more loudly. Susan restrained herself as Nathan held her hand tightly. David nodded.

The narrow state route carried them toward the Seven Troughs range. Before reaching them, Smith indicated a turnoff. He had been watching for it but still nearly missed the obscure road. Dusted with sand, it blended into the surrounding alkali flats. Only the fresh tire marks before him allowed David to remain on the strip.

Behind, the pickup tailed close. No need for games now. Another turn; more miles of sand. Then, the bus loomed ahead. Smith nodded to himself.

The family saw the vehicle, and the half-dozen or so armed men near it. David sensed that the nightmare was only beginning.

They were hustled from the car before a blur of gun barrels, Smith shouting orders. Tiring of dragging the girl, he pushed her at Nathan. He held his granddaughter as they were forced to the rear of the bus, where two men stood at the emergency door.

“Search them!” Earl Smith snapped.

Wallets, jewelry, watches were taken. Working methodically, the grim-faced men were done in less than a minute. Smith waved an arm. The emergency door was pulled open. David and Susan Lowe, their daughter, and Nathan Adler were dragged up and flung inside with an urgency as unfathomable as all the preceding madness.

Abysmal darkness became their world as the door clanged shut with an insistence that echoed off distant granite facings, but in this desolation was heard only by those around the bus.