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The Lady from Zagreb

Written by Philip Kerr

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PHILIP KERR

THE LADY FROM ZAGREB

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This book is for Ivan Held,
without whose encouragement it
would never have existed.

‘And if you ask again whether there is any justice in the world, you’ll have to be satisfied with the reply: Not for the time being; at any rate, not up to this Friday.’

– Alfred Doblin

‘I had come to Yugoslavia to see what history meant in flesh and blood.’

– Rebecca West

‘. . . it was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice.’

– Joseph Conrad

PROLOGUE

French Riviera, 1956

Wolves are usually born with deep blue eyes. These lighten and then gradually fade to their adult colour, which is most often yellow. Huskies, on the other hand, have blue eyes and because of this, people think that there must be blue-eyed wolves, too, but, strictly speaking, there aren't any; if you ever meet a wolf with blue eyes, then it is very likely not a pure-blooded wolf but a hybrid. Dalia Dresner had the most strikingly blue eyes of any woman I ever saw; but I'll bet that there was a small part of her that was wolf.

Dresner had been a star of German cinema back in the thirties and forties, which was when I'd been involved with her, albeit briefly. She is almost forty now but even in unforgiving Technicolor she is still astonishingly beautiful, especially those slow-blinking, ray-gun blue eyes that looked as if they might have destroyed a few buildings with a careless glance or a particularly wide-eyed stare. They certainly managed to burn a hole through my heart.

Like the pain of parting, you never really forget the face of a woman you've loved, especially when it's the face of a woman the press had called the German Garbo. Not to

mention the way they make love; somehow that tends to remain in the memory, also. Perhaps this is just as well when the memory of making love is pretty much all you've got.

'Don't stop,' she would whimper on the few occasions when I was trying to please her in bed. As if I had any intention of stopping, ever; I'd happily have continued making love to Dalia until the end of time.

I was seeing her again in the Eden Cinema in La Ciotat, near Marseilles, reputed to be the world's oldest and possibly smallest cinema. It's where the Lumière brothers showed their first film, in 1895, and sits right on the seaside, facing a marina where lots of expensive boats and yachts are moored all year and just around the corner from the crummy flat I'd been living in since leaving Berlin. La Ciotat is an old fishing village enlivened by an important French naval shipbuilding yard – if you can use words like important in the same sentence as the French Navy. There's a nice beach and several hotels, in one of which I work.

I lit a cigarette and as I watched the film I tried to recall all of the circumstances that had led up to our first meeting. When was it exactly? 1942? 1943? Actually, I never thought Dalia looked much like Garbo. For me the actress she most resembled was Lauren Bacall. Germany's Garbo was Josef Goebbels's idea. He told me that the solitary Swede was one of Hitler's preferred actresses and *Camille* one of the Führer's favourite films. It's a little hard to think of Hitler having a favourite film, especially one that's as romantic as *Camille*, but Goebbels said that whenever the Führer saw this film there were tears in his eyes and he was glowing for hours afterwards. For Goebbels, I don't doubt that relaunching Dalia as German cinema's answer to Greta Garbo had been another way of currying favour with Hitler, and of course with Dalia

herself; Goebbels was always trying to make up to some actress or other. Not that I could blame him for trying to make up to Dalia Dresner. Lots of men did.

She'd spent much of her life living in Switzerland but she was born in Pula, Istria, which, after 1918 and the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, was ceded to Italy; but this peninsula was always a natural part of Yugoslavia – indeed all of Dalia's ancestors had been Croatian – and, in order to escape forced Italianization and the cultural suppression of Mussolini's fascists, she was taken to live in Zagreb from a very early age. Her real name was Sofia Branković.

After the war was over she'd decided to leave her home near Zurich and go back to Zagreb to find what remained, if anything, of her family. In 1947, she'd been arrested by the Yugoslavian government on suspicion of collaborating with the Nazis during the war, but Tito – who it was generally held was infatuated with her – intervened personally and arranged for Dalia's release from custody. Back in Germany she attempted a comeback career but circumstances stalled her return. Fortunately for Dalia she was offered work in Italy and appeared in several well-received films. When Cecil B. DeMille was looking to cast *Samson and Delilah* in 1949 he considered Dalia Dresner before choosing to cast the more politically acceptable Hedy Lamarr. Hedy was good – she was certainly very beautiful – but I strongly believe Dalia would have been convincing. Hedy played the part like a thirty-five-year-old schoolgirl. Dalia would have played it like the real thing. As a seductive woman with brains that were as big as Samson's muscles. By 1955 she was again working in German film when she won the Volpi Cup for best actress at the Venice Film Festival in a film called *The Devil's General*, where she played opposite Curd Jürgens. But it was the English who gave

Dalia her most successful roles and in particular, British Lion Films, which cast her in two films alongside Dirk Bogarde.

I got all of this information from the programme I bought in the Eden's tiny foyer before the film started, just so as I could bring myself up to date with the details of Dalia's life. Although less interesting than mine – and for the same reason – it also looked a lot more fun.

The film I was watching her in now was a comedy with Rex Harrison called, in French, *Le Mari Constant*. It was curious – hearing a voice that wasn't hers and speaking French, too. Dalia's German had always been layered with honey and cigarettes. Maybe the film worked in English but it didn't work in French, and I don't think it was anything to do with the fact that it was dubbed or that it brought a lump to my throat to see her again. It was just a bad film and, gradually, my eyes closed in the warm Riviera darkness, and it seemed like it was the summer of 1942 . . .