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The Ashes of Berlin

Written by Luke McCallin

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THE ASHES OF BERLIN

THE DIVIDED CITY

A GREGOR REINHARDT NOVEL

LUKE McCALLIN



NO EXIT PRESS

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To my wife, Barbara, and my children, Liliane and Julien

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Dramatis Personae

Main Characters

Reinhardt, Gregor	Kripo detective, assigned to Schöneberg; a former officer in the German Army
Bliemeister, Bruno	Assistant Chief of Police in the American Sector
Bochmann, Heinrich	Former executive officer of III./NJG64 (formerly IV./JG56)
Brauer, Rudolph	Former policeman; Reinhardt's best friend and former partner in Kripo
Carlsen	British agent, found murdered
Collingridge, David	American official in the US Occupation authorities
De Massigny, Armand	French lieutenant and archivist, working in the WAST
Endres	Professor of pathology at the Charité hospital complex
Ganz, Hugo	Veteran Kripo detective in Schöneberg; a man of few loyalties
Gareis	Former pilot in IV./JG56
Gieb	A prostitute
Haber	Former air force researcher and scientist
Jürgen	Former pilot in IV./JG56
Kausch	Former SS Sturmbannführer (major); a man with a past to hide

Lassen	Kripo detective in Hamburg
Leyser, Marius	Former Brandenburger (German commando)
Dr Lütjens	Former air force researcher and scientist
Margraff, Paul	Berlin's police president (chief of police), a German soldier captured at Stalingrad and now a Soviet collaborator
Markworth, James	British official in the UK Occupation authorities
Meissner, Hilde	Widow of Tomas Meissner, Reinhardt's former mentor
Neumann, Walter	Chief of police in Schöneberg
Noell, Andreas	Former pilot in IV./JG56
Noell, Theodor	Former air force researcher and scientist
Ochs	Superintendent of Noell's building
Reinhardt, Friedrich	Reinhardt's son, a former Soviet prisoner of war
Semrau	German official working in the WAST
Skokov	Major in the Soviet MGB (state security)
Stresemann	Allegedly Gieb's pimp
Stucker	Former pilot in IV./JG56
Tanneberger, Karl	Chief of detectives in Schöneberg
Uthmann	Tenant in Noell's building
Von Vollmer, Claus	Former commanding officer of III./NJG64 (formerly IV./JG56), now a businessman
Weber	Kripo detective; a surly young man with an unknown past, often seen with detectives Frohnau and Schmidt
Whelan, Harry	British official in the Allied Control Council
Zuleger	Former pilot in IV./JG56

Other Characters

(Elsewhere or Deceased Prior to This Story)

Albrecht, Fenski, Hauck, Meurer, Osterkamp, Prellberg, and Thurner	Former pilots in IV./JG56
Vukić, Suzana	A Yugoslav partisan

Organisations and Locations

Allied Control Council	The military-occupation governing body of the Allied Occupation Zones in Germany, comprised of representatives from the US, USSR, UK, and France, located in the Kammergericht building in the US Sector in Berlin
Berlin Document Center	Central repository of documents relating to the Nazi Party and Nazism, instrumental in the formulation of war crimes investigations and proceedings. Located in Zehlendorf in the US Sector
WASt	Wehrmacht Information Office for War Losses and PoWs: the central repository for information on German servicemen, as well as German and Allied prisoners of war. Located in Reinickendorf in the French Sector

Part One

How Happy the Dead

1

BERLIN, EARLY 1947

MONDAY

Reinhardt had come to prefer the nights.

The nights were when things felt cleaner, clearer. The nights were when his city could sometimes resemble something more than the shattered ruin it was. The nights were when he did not have to look down at the dust and grit that floured his shoes and trousers, the innards of his city turned out and spread wide for all to see. It was the days when Berlin emerged scarred and scorched into the light, when its people arose to chase their shadows through the day, wending their way from who knew where to who knew what beneath frowning escarpments of ruin and rubble which humped up and away in staggered mounds of wreckage, and through which the roads seemed to wind like the dried-out bottoms of riverbeds.

It was very early on a Monday morning when the call came in, a body in a stairwell in an apartment building in the American Sector of Berlin, down in Neukölln. These were bad hours by anyone's reckoning, the hours no one wanted, the hours married men were curled up asleep with their wives, the single men with their girls, when even drunks found a corner to sleep it off. They were the hours those on the chief's blacklist worked. They were the hours they gave the probationers – those too new to the force to manoeuvre themselves a better shift – or those too old but who had nowhere to go.

Reinhardt knew he was closer to the second category than to the first. But however those hours were counted by others, he considered them his best, when it was quiet and he could have the squad room all but to himself, or else wander the darkened streets and avenues,

winding his way past the avalanche slides of brick and debris, learning the new architecture the war had gouged across Berlin's façades. He and his city were strangers to each other, he knew. They had moved on in different ways, and these night hours – these *witching* hours, when he would sometimes chase the moon across the city's jagged skyline, spying it through the rents and fissures deep within buildings, watching the play of light and shadow in places it should never have been seen – were what he needed to rediscover it, what it was, and what had become of it.

All this, though, was in the back of his mind as the ambulance followed the dull glow of its headlights down a road swept clear along its middle, pocked and pitted with shell craters and tears in its surface, a suggestion of looming ruin to either side. He spotted the building up ahead, the fitful yellow beams of flashlights wobbling yolk-like in its entrance and casting the shadows of people up the walls and out into the street. He climbed stiffly out of the ambulance, switching on his own flashlight as he turned up the channel cleared between the rubble. He paused. He swung the flashlight at the entrance of a ruined building across the road. Hidden in the shadows, a pack of children watched with glittering eyes, vanishing from view when he held the light on them a moment longer.

An officer in his archaic uniform, complete with brass-fronted grey shako, watched as Reinhardt knocked the dust from his shoes in the building's entry, pocketing his flashlight.

'There we were about to send for the American MPs, but it looks like the Yanks have shown up anyway,' the young officer quipped.

'Which police station are you from?'

'Reuterstrasse,' said the policeman, his face clenching in suspicion.

'I'll speak to whoever's in charge here,' said Reinhardt, holding the younger officer's eyes as he took his hat off.

The officer's face darkened, but he cocked his head inside. 'Sergeant. *Sergeant!*'

A second officer pushed his way out of a crowd of people milling in the entrance. Reinhardt thought he recognised him, a man well

into middle age, tall, lanky, with old-fashioned sideburns – although if it was him, the man used to be a lot heftier and bulkier.

‘Cavalry’s here, Sarge,’ the young officer said. Reinhardt ignored him as the older officer threw his colleague a reproachful look.

‘Good morning, sir,’ he said. ‘What Officer Diechle means, sir, is we was about to call the Amis, I mean, the American Military Police. We didn’t know if anyone was coming out from Kripo at this hour.’

‘Well, some of us detectives are up and about,’ Reinhardt said, smiling, his voice soft. ‘Inspector Reinhardt, Schöneberg Kripo Division.’

‘Yes, sir. No offence at our surprise in seeing you, sir.’

‘And why’s that?’

‘Because they don’t usually stir themselves for what seem like accidents or open-and-shut cases,’ said Diechle. ‘‘Specially not at this hour.’

‘Who says it was either of those?’

‘He was drunk, he fell down the stairs,’ Diechle snorted. ‘That’s all it is.’

‘Show me what you’ve found. Sergeant Frunze, isn’t it?’ Reinhardt suddenly remembered the man’s name, feeling it slip onto his tongue from out of nowhere, it seemed. Something in the man’s appearance, those old-fashioned side-burns, the accent triggering a memory of a line of struggling, sweating policemen trying to hold apart a seething mass of Nazis and Communists, and Frunze reeling away with blood sheeting his cheeks but a brown-shirted thug caught under his arm, the lout’s face turning red inside the policeman’s armlock as Frunze calmly recited the man’s rights to him.

‘That it is, sir. Frunze. Very glad to see you remember, sir,’ he said, ignoring the way his younger colleague rolled his eyes. ‘This way, sir.’

‘Last time I saw you, you were up in one of the Tiergarten stations.’

‘Time’s moved on a bit, sir. You go where they send you these days,’ Frunze replied, a quick glance at Reinhardt. He could not tell what the glance might have meant, but an experienced officer like Frunze,

especially one his age, ought not to be running a night shift in a place like Neukölln. It had always been a rough neighbourhood. Left-wing, working class, where the cops had never been welcome, and Reinhardt did not think things had changed much as Frunze led him through the small crowd of people to the bottom of the stairs, over to where the body of a man lay, face up. The light in the entrance was a shifting mix of flashlights, candles, and lanterns held by the policemen and by the cluster of people – men, women, and children – to the side of the stairs. It made for a confusing play of shadows, but there was light enough for Reinhardt to see that the man's nose and mouth were a puffed and bruised welter of blood that fanned the bottom of his face and jaw and had soaked into the clothes on his left shoulder. There were scratches and lesions on his face, on his scalp, and on his hands, the skin of his knuckles stripped raw. Reinhardt's eyes were drawn back to the injuries around the nose and mouth, the wounds framed by black and blue discolourations that indicated he had received them some time before dying. If he got those falling down the stairs, Reinhardt thought, he would have lain here a good long time before dying and there was no pooling of blood, so far as he could see.

'Has forensics arrived, yet?'

'No, sir.'

'It should be Berthold coming. I called him before I left. Any identification on the body?'

'None, sir.'

'Keys? Money?'

'Nothing, sir.'

Reinhardt pulled on a thin pair of old leather gloves, then reached under the man's neck, lifting it gently. The head did not quite follow, slipping from side to side.

'Broken neck, sir?' asked Frunze.

'It would seem so. Anyone find a bottle?'

'No, sir,' Frunze sighed. 'But the man does smell of booze. I reckon he spilled a bit down the front of his clothes. But much as Diechle would like this to be open and shut, I've a feeling it's not.'

‘No. Probably not. Who found him, Sergeant?’ he asked, gently moving and pinching his way down the man’s arms, feeling the heft to the limbs.

‘The building’s superintendent. Or, what passes for one these days, sir. Here.’ Frunze indicated an elderly man in a threadbare dressing gown with a tangled rosette of iron-grey hair running around his head from ear to ear, a scarf bunched tight around his neck. ‘Name’s Ochs.’

‘Mr Ochs,’ Reinhardt addressed him as he knelt, his left knee stretching painfully as he did. ‘Tell me what you heard and saw,’ he said as he ran his fingers down the man’s clothes, reaching carefully under the collar of the overcoat. Some men, black marketers and criminals in particular, had been known to sew razor blades under the lapels, but there was nothing. Reinhardt felt the fabric of the man’s coat, his shirt, the tie knotted loosely beneath his chin.

‘Yes, sir. Well, it would have been about two o’clock in the morning. I heard a man calling for help, then I heard a terrible thumping. There was another cry, I think as the poor soul hit the bottom, then nothing. I came out of my rooms, just there,’ he said, pointing at a door ajar next to the entrance, ‘and found him.’

Reinhardt shone his flashlight at the stairs, the light glistening back from something wet about halfway up.

‘Have you seen him before?’ Ochs shook his head. ‘You’re sure? He’s not a tenant? Not a displaced person the municipality’s moved in recently?’ Ochs shook his head to all of it.

‘He’s no DP, sir,’ said Frunze. When Reinhardt encouraged him to go on, Frunze pointed at the man’s coat, at his shoes. ‘Look at that quality. You don’t find that in Berlin these days. If he’s a DP, he’s a well-off one.’

‘Thank you, Sergeant,’ said Reinhardt, watching Diechle out of the corner of his eye as the younger officer followed their discussion. The man was no displaced person, Reinhardt was sure. His clothes were too good, his fingernails too clean, his hair had been cut recently, and quite well. He had been well-fed, the weight of his limbs and the

texture of his skin testament to that. 'These other people,' he said to Ochs. 'The building's tenants?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Any of them hear or notice anything?' he asked both Ochs and Frunze.

'Nothing, sir,' answered the sergeant. 'One or two of them said they were awakened by the noise of the man falling. One of them says she thinks she might have seen him before, though.'

'Bring her, please,' he said to Frunze. 'Is everyone living in the building here, Ochs?'

'Not everyone, sir. There's some who work nights, and one person's away travelling.'

Frunze came forward escorting a woman carrying a young child, two more children in her wake. 'Madam,' said Reinhardt. 'You told the police you might have seen this man?'

'I think so. Once or twice. The last time maybe two days ago, each time on the stairs.'

'Did you say anything to each other?'

'Only a greeting. Nothing else.'

'Did you notice anything about him?'

'Like what?'

'Anything. Was he in a hurry? Did he seem worried?'

'Nothing. We just passed each other.'

'Thank you, madam. We'll have you all back to bed soon,' Reinhardt said, a small smile for the little boy with a tousled head of hair. 'Have you had a look around upstairs, Sergeant?'

'Not really, sir. We didn't want to mess anything up for the detectives.'

'Very well. We'll have a look now. Ochs, you come with me, please. Diechle, please tell the ambulance men to wait for Berthold before moving this body. And Diechle? There's some children outside, probably living homeless across the street. See if you can persuade one or two of them to talk to us. And Diechle,' he insisted, as the young officer's face darkened again. 'No rough stuff. Just ask them.'

Sweeping his flashlight from side to side across each step, Reinhardt started upstairs. He passed the first smears of blood he had seen from the bottom, about halfway up. At the top of the first flight, where the stairs turned tightly around and continued up, there was another spattering on the floor, a streak on the banister, as if a man had stood there, catching his breath, perhaps calling for help, swaying back and forth through his pain. Up to the first floor, his feet crunching in the dust and clots of plaster and rubble that salted the stairs, more stains, more smudges on the wood of the banister. There were two doors on the first-floor landing, and Ochs confirmed the tenants – the woman Reinhardt had talked to with her three young children, and an elderly couple – were downstairs.

Feeling like Hansel following the bread crumbs, Reinhardt continued upstairs to the second floor, the building's smell growing around him, a smell of people too closely packed together, of damp washing and bad food. At the second-floor landing, Ochs told him the tenants – a widow and another family – were also downstairs.

'All the ladies are on the first two floors. As for the third, the building's in a bit of a state, still. It's not been fully repaired, you'll see.'

On the third floor, the building took on a different register, the walls a labyrinthine scrawl of cracks and rents from the damage it had suffered, and the strains it must still be under. The corners of the stairs and landings were rounded with dust and plaster swept and pushed to the sides. A draught swirled down from somewhere up above. Only one apartment on the third floor was inhabited – a man away travelling – the other was boarded shut, war damage rendering the apartment uninhabitable, according to Ochs. The same was true of the two apartments above it, the little superintendent said, puffing behind Reinhardt with his dressing gown bunched in one fist to hold it clear of his slipped feet.

As the damage became worse, the building seemed to become malodorous, dark, a listening dark, a dark that seemed to shuffle quietly back away from him as if cautious, as if the structure was

sensitive to the harm men had wrought upon it. On the fourth floor, Ochs pointed to an apartment that was locked up, where the tenant – Mr Uthmann – worked nights on the railways. There was one floor remaining, and Reinhardt paused at the landing, looking at the door that stood ajar, moving slightly back and forth in the draught.

‘Who lives there?’

Ochs caught his breath leaning on the banister. ‘Mr Noell,’ he managed. ‘He lives alone.’

‘He’s not downstairs?’ asked Reinhardt, being careful to hide his own breathing. It was very short, and he felt dizzy with the effort of climbing the stairs.

‘No. He is out sometimes. I didn’t...’ Ochs puffed, ‘didn’t think his absence downstairs anything out of the ordinary.’

‘And the body downstairs is not this Noell?’

‘No.’

Reinhardt shone his flashlight across the floor, tracking its beam through the fallen plaster and rubble, not knowing if the scuffed pattern showed the tracks of anyone having passed through it all. ‘Well, let’s see if he knew your Mr Noell.’

Reinhardt drew his police baton, flicking it out to its full extension. With the lead ball at the tip, he pushed the door open. The first thing his light illuminated inside was a streak of blood on the wall, from about head height and down. He saw a light switch and turned it on, watching the room’s only bulb come fitfully to life.

One of the windows had glass in its frame, the other a mix of wood and cardboard, most of it from CARE packages, the aid parcels sent over from the United States, through which the wind slipped its insistent way. There was a sofa and an armchair that had seen better days. On a table made from a packing crate stood a bottle and one glass.

Reinhardt walked carefully through into the second room, past a small kitchen area, little more than an alcove with a sink and a hot plate, and into a bedroom with a bed with a pile of blankets

and pillows on it pushed up against the far wall next to a lopsided wooden cupboard with a cracked mirror on one of its doors.

There was a body on the floor. Arms and legs spread wide, face turned slackly to the ceiling.

‘Oh yes,’ said Ochs, as he peered over Reinhardt’s shoulder. ‘That’s Mr Noell.’