One Last Summer

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Extract

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Chapter 1

A train travelling west from Moscow into East Prussia
SATURDAY, 19 AUGUST 1939

My eighteenth birthday. No one can call me a child, or tell me that I'm too young for balls or parties ever again. Mama married Papa when she was eighteen, but she didn't have a career to think about, like me. I wonder why Greta didn't consider studying for a profession instead of becoming a BDM leader. All she ever does is organize group meetings for young girls and teach sewing and cookery – not that she is an expert chef or dressmaker.

No one is likely to propose to her now. She'll be twenty-seven this year, quite the old maid. She won't like having to make way for a sister who is every bit as eligible to receive the attentions of young men as herself.

Herr Schumacher mustered the entire orchestra to play the birthday song to me at six o'clock this morning. They blocked the corridor outside our carriage for twenty minutes. It was impossible to go up or down the train to the bathrooms or dining car, but no one seemed to mind, least of all the stewards. Afterwards I received birthday congratulations and presents from everyone, including roses and chocolates from Manfred and Georg, silly boys that they are, and I still have the most important ones waiting to be opened at home. I can't wait to see my birthday table set up next to Wilhelm and Paul's in the hall.

Hildegarde and Nina gave me this beautiful book, and Irena an elegant silver fountain pen embossed with roses. I've decided to use the book as a diary. When Greta discovered that I'd started one last year, she told me only important people keep diaries. Well, I consider myself important, and I know I'll be famous one day.

Herr Schumacher says I'm the most gifted member, not only of the musical section of the Allensteiner Hitler Youth but also of every other youth orchestra he's ever worked with. He insisted that I played a piano solo

as a finale to each concert as well as accompanying the Komsomol's star violinist. Now my mind is quite made up. When I complete my studies, I will become an international concert pianist.

My writing doesn't look as well as I'd like because the train shakes so. Hildegarde, Irena, Nina and I are sharing a carriage and, after the steward folded away the beds when my birthday concert finished this morning, everyone crammed in. They stayed for over an hour, even the boys. They're so juvenile compared with my brothers and their friends. Wilhelm and Paul would never have put violin resin in Herr Schumacher's tea, or crawled under the table in the dining car to paint his shoes with honey while he ate.

As Papa says, it was very clever of Mama to present him with me on the twins' birthday, so they can be twenty-one and I can be eighteen on the same day. Grown-up gentlemen and lady at last. What celebrations there will be tonight! And afterwards we'll have what's left of the summer together. I am so looking forward to going to Königsberg with Wilhelm and Paul in October. I was very lucky to have gained a place at the conservatory, especially as the quota of further education places for girls has been cut to 10 per cent. I don't care what anyone says, I think it's unfair, and I don't believe our Führer did it. I think it was one of his ministers and our Führer doesn't even know about it.

Poor Irena did not get into Königsberg or any other conservatory, and will have to work in her father's office. It will be dreadful to leave her behind in Allenstein. We have been best friends ever since I can remember, just like our fathers before us, and I can't imagine what it will be like only to see her in the holidays.

Although the twins will be in their third year of studies and I'll only be in my first, they've promised to introduce me to all their friends. Paul says the music conservatory isn't far from the university. I do hope Papa's found us lodgings together. What fun we'll have without Greta to stop us.

We left Moscow early yesterday morning and I'm beginning to think we'll never reach Allenstein. Nina says she feels as though this is hell and we're doomed to clank around the countryside cooped up on this train like cursed souls for all eternity. (Nina has always had a morbid imagination; perhaps her fixation on the clanking is down to her father's job as a train driver.)

Irena has asked me three times in the last ten minutes if I think Wilhelm

will meet me at the station. I wish she wouldn't make sheep's eyes at my brother every time she sees him. It's so embarrassing for the rest of us to watch.

We crossed the border at dawn. I was glad to be in dear, familiar East Prussian countryside after a whole month away, even at that time in the morning. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed the forests and lakes until we saw them through the windows. Everything – the people, the architecture, the streets in the towns and villages – looks so much more orderly and prosperous than in Russia.

I was sorry to leave Masha. I enjoyed living with the Beletskys in their Moscow apartment for the final week of our tour. No one else liked their Russian family half as much but I think Herr Schumacher arranged for me to have the best available accommodation. Masha and her brother, Alexander, who is white-blond, blue-eyed and very good-looking for a Russian, as well as being an excellent musician, came to the station to see me off. They gave me an amber necklace of enormous, polished, solid nuggets – some with insects in – as a parting gift. It is longer and more beautiful than anything Greta has.

I promised to treasure it and think of them every time I wear it. How envious Greta will be when she sees it. Will she be at Allenstein station? I hope not. I do expect Wilhelm and Paul to be there to meet me, though, and, if I'm lucky, they'll bring at least one (hopefully the special one) of their friends.

It feels as though I've been away for ever. I can't wait to feast my eyes on the dear, dear house and hug Papa, Mama and the twins …

'The doctor will see you now, Ms Datski.'

'Thank you.' Charlotte smiled at the nurse and closed the diary. The once-clean and pristine glossy pages had become fragile with age. She wrapped the book carefully in a silk scarf and gathered her shawl and handbag from the chair beside her. Ridiculous, really, to take a diary she hadn't opened in years into a doctor's waiting room. And strange how those few words had brought it all back: the rattling of the train; the smut-filled smoke from the funnel drifting past the window; the smell of cabbage and gravy wafting down the corridor from the dining car; her friends' faces, scrubbed, beaming, devoid of pain and experience; and herself, hopelessly naive, romantic and

pompous with all the arrogant superiority of youth. Was there anything left of that young girl in the old woman she'd become?

'How are you, Charlotte?' Dr David Andrews left his chair and walked out from behind his desk to greet her.

'I came here in the hope that you could answer that question for me, David.'

'Well, you certainly look as elegant and beautiful as ever.'

'No one my age can possibly be regarded as beautiful. As for elegant, you make me sound like an expensively decorated salon.'

He shook her hand and returned to his chair. To avoid meeting her gaze, he studied the painting on the wall behind her. It had been hung by the New York interior designer who had remodelled his office suite a year ago, but this was the first time he had really looked at the bland, pastel-shaded, impressionist scene of fuzzy children playing on sands. He decided he didn't like it.

'Well, David?' she prompted.

He cleared his throat and began speaking, conscious that his voice was brisker and colder than he'd intended. 'I'd suggest a second opinion. I know a good man in Boston and another in New York. I can arrange a consult in either city. You could combine a visit with a little shopping, or visit a gallery.'

'And these "good men" of yours would find it easier to tell me what you can't bring yourself to say?'

He forced himself to look into her eyes. Startlingly blue and disconcertingly clear. He would have found it easier to cope with hysterics. He could have prescribed tranquillizers for hysteria.

'How long do I have?'

'Most people ask what can be done.'

'I am not most people, David.'

'You never were.' No one in their eighties had the right to look the way Charlotte Datski did. It wasn't as though she even tried to look younger. Her hair was unashamedly silver without a hint of artificial colour or blue-rinse, her skin wrinkled, untouched by cosmetic surgery or face lifts, yet it didn't seem to matter. Her beauty came from some mysterious, inner glow that manifested itself in those magnificent eyes. Her figure – tall, slender and straight-backed – still retained the elasticity of youth, and her long, flowing clothes were

accentuated by amber beads and multi-coloured scarves that would have looked tawdry on anyone else, yet so right on her.

When his father had introduced them thirty years ago, he had known instinctively that Charlotte was an artist. She simply couldn't have been anything else. And although she was the same age as his mother, he had joined his father and half the men of their acquaintance in falling a little in love with her. But unlike most widows, Charlotte Datski cherished her unmarried state, apparently relishing the independence it gave her. Even the rumours of affairs had remained just that – rumours. If Charlotte had taken lovers, she had chosen wisely. None of the men in their circle had ever spoken of a relationship, consummated or otherwise.

'The truth, David.' She fingered the beads around her neck, but there was no sign of nervousness in the gesture.

'It might be cancer of the pancreas,' he began cautiously, 'but, as I said, you should seek a second opinion.'

'You think you've made a mistake?'

'No doctor can be one hundred per cent certain of a diagnosis, especially one like this,' he hedged.

'David, you're the genius in a family of gifted academics. I'll take your word for it.'

'Even so, it's far from straightforward. There's no sign of a tumour, which means it's invasive. In simplified terms, the cancer can be likened to a spider's web of cells that has spread throughout the organ. Surgery is out of the question, but that doesn't mean we can't offer treatment. Initial tests suggest it's slow-growing and that chemotherapy—'

'Will there be much pain?' she interrupted.

'In my experience of similar conditions in other patients, very little. You might lose weight.'

'I can afford to,' she commented wryly. 'How long do I have?' she repeated.

'I hate that question. Twenty years ago I told a nurse at this hospital that she had six months. I still blush every time I see her.' Her silence brought the realization that his remarks were both patronizing and fatuous. 'If the treatment's successful, years.'

'And if it's not?'

'It will be successful, Charlotte.'

'But if it's not?' she repeated stubbornly.

'Difficult to say: six months, a year perhaps. But I'll arrange for you to be admitted this week and we'll start the injections right away. It won't be pleasant but—'

'I can't come in tomorrow.'

'I understand. A diagnosis like this is a shock; you have arrangements to make.' He flicked through his diary. 'Shall we say Thursday morning?'

'No.'

'Charlotte, nothing takes precedence over this. We're talking about your life.'

'I have to go home.'

'It's five miles up the road,' he pointed out in exasperation.

'I was born in Eastern Europe.'

'As your doctor, I strongly caution you against making any trips until you've completed the treatment.'

'I may have left it too late as it is.'

'You don't seem to understand. You could die.'

'We're all going to do that, David,' she smiled. 'I know you're thinking of me and you mean well, but this is not the first time I've faced death. The experience made me strangely unafraid of the inevitable.'

'Are you telling me you *want* to die?' He forced himself to meet her steady gaze.

'Far from it. I love life. Every wonderful, colour-filled moment. But I've discovered there are worse things than coming to an end. Like dehumanizing pain and loss of dignity. I watched my husband die of cancer. Forgive my cynicism, but I believe he suffered more from the treatment meted out to him by well-meaning doctors than the disease itself. If he'd still owned a gun he would have shot himself months before they allowed him to drift into a coma.'

It was the first time David had heard Charlotte mention her late husband in all the years he'd known her. She'd lived in the States for decades and he knew of no one who'd met him. 'Treatments have progressed enormously in the last thirty years.'

'I don't doubt it.'

'You can't expect me to stand by and do nothing,' he pleaded.

'At my age, quality of life is more important than quantity.'

'You could have both.'

'You guarantee it?'

'No physician can offer guarantees,' he said uneasily, 'but I believe you have a better chance than most of beating this. You've enjoyed excellent health until now. You've taken care of yourself and, as the cancer didn't show up on your last routine check-up, we can take this as an early diagnosis. Everything is on our side.'

'Would I remain much the same as I am now, without chemotherapy?'

'You'd tire easily and sleep longer.'

'I wouldn't suffer pain?'

He gritted his teeth, not wanting to give her further excuse to avoid treatment. 'Nothing a few painkillers couldn't help you cope with,' he conceded reluctantly.

'I'll buy some. Thank you for your time and your honesty.' She picked up her shawl.

'My father would love to see you.' He followed her to the door. 'Please, dine with us this evening.'

'So your father can add his persuasive voice to yours? Thank you, but no, David.' She held out her hand and he took it. 'They say life is short, but from where I'm standing it seems long. Too long, when I think of all those I have loved and lost. I appreciate your understanding. A little more practice and you'll be able to add sympathetic to your other qualifications. Send your bill to my lawyer.'

'Isn't there anything that I can say to convince you to begin treatment?'

'Nothing. And as it's common knowledge that I'm a stubborn, impossible old woman, you've no reason to feel guilty. As soon as I can book a flight, I will leave for Europe. I've been planning this trip for years. You've just given me a reason not to delay any longer. You won't tell my grandson or anyone else about this?'

'Unfortunately, as you well know, I can't without your permission. We will see you again?' It was a plea more than a question.

She didn't answer. Kissing him lightly on the cheek, she murmured, 'That's for your father.'

He stood at his window and watched as she left the building,

her long black skirt and autumn-coloured scarves blowing in the breeze.

'Doctor Andrews?'

He turned to see his nurse in the doorway behind him. 'Shall I contact Boston or New York to arrange an appointment for Ms Datski?'

'No,' he answered abruptly.

'Then I'll phone admissions to arrange a bed?'

'No.'

'But—'

'Send in the next patient.'

'And Ms Datski?'

'Keep her file to hand, and hope that we need it.'

Charlotte drove home slowly, observing the speed limit for the first time in years. When she realized the irony of what she was doing, she laughed out loud. After receiving the news David had just given her, she should be careering recklessly into whatever time she had left, instead of crawling cautiously along in the slow lane. But she was going home for the first time in over sixty years and it suddenly seemed very important that she get there in one piece.

She stopped her car at the head of the private drive that meandered through the woods towards her New England clapboard house. The leaves of the bulbs she had planted when she had bought the place thirty-six years before were withering into the mulch beneath the trees. Every spring a carpet of daffodils, crocuses and bluebells spread colour down to the banks of the lake. Their end marked the advent of summer.

Opening her window, she checked her mailbox, taking time to breathe in the scent of the pinewoods and the lake beyond the house. Was it her imagination or could she smell the last of the cherry and apple blossom? Fragrances that reminded her of a country which no longer existed. But then, everything she had created here had been built and planted to that end, resulting in a flickering reflection, no more substantial than that of an image caught on the surface of a pond, of a home she had loved and been forced to abandon sixty years before.

Closing her mind to her memories, she took her mail and drove

on over the rough track towards the house. Leaving her car on the gravel driveway, she opened her front door and walked through to the kitchen. She filled the kettle before thinking better of the idea. There was a bottle of white wine in the fridge, and she carried it and her letters up the stairs to her studio.

It was her favourite room. Covering the whole of the first floor, one-third of the space had been given over to open deck; another third was glassed in like an English conservatory, leaving the wall in the remaining third to prop up her paintings. Glancing at the completed canvases she'd spread out that morning, she congratulated herself on a job well done, before opening the wine and curling into a wickerwork chair with her mail.

She dropped three unopened circulars into the bin before finding one she wanted to read – a large, fat envelope from her English granddaughter. After years of exchanging daily e-mails she was amazed Laura had consigned anything to the post. She cut it open with her thumbnail and extracted a file marked 'Grunwaldsee'. She opened it and a sheaf of photocopies dropped out. She unfolded them. There was no mistaking what they were: documents with passport-sized photographs overlaid with official stamps decorated with the eagle and swastika of the Third Reich. Images of her father, mother, her brothers Wilhelm and Paul, her sister Greta, and herself, impossibly young, stared up at her. All six locked into a past she had never entirely escaped.

Dear Oma,

This is the most difficult letter I've ever had to write. Please, don't ignore it, or the copies of the documents and the questions they raise, as I'm sure Aunt Greta and my father would do.

I came across the original of this file in the Berlin Document Center when I was researching a documentary – it doesn't matter what. I don't have to ask if you and Aunt Greta were members of the Nazi Party; these papers prove you were. I would like to know why you joined and more about your life in Grunwaldsee …

Charlotte shuddered and turned back to the photocopies. If she had suspected their existence she would have … what? Told Laura

and Claus about the past? Burdened them with secrets that haunted her?

. . . I am not asking just for myself but for the entire family, especially Claus's unborn child, because, in time, he or she will ask questions, just as I am doing now. No matter how father and Aunt Greta try to pretend that the war and Hitler are ancient history and of no consequence to generations born after the events, it simply isn't true. We deserve to know the truth and hear it first-hand, not stumble across it in a dusty file as I have done.

Please, Oma, I love you so much, and a part of that love is respect. I want to continue feeling that way about you and I won't until I hear your side of the story . . .

Charlotte glanced across at the canvases she had taken such pleasure in a moment before. Could she offer Laura the truth as an explanation that would bring a degree of understanding from her granddaughter? Forgiveness was too much to hope for. She had never been able to forgive herself for joining the National Socialist Party. As a result she had never left the past behind her. But the blame, guilt and regrets were entirely hers – not her grandchildren's. There had to be some way of making Laura see that much.

I love you so much, and a part of that love is respect.

Dropping the letter and photocopies into her lap, she picked up the telephone and, without even checking the time difference, dialled Laura's mobile; it was answered on the sixth ring.

'Laura, can you talk?'

'Yes.' Her granddaughter's voice was thick with sleep.

'I woke you?'

'No . . .'

'Please, don't lie to me, not even about small things. I received your letter. Are you still in Berlin?'

'Yes.'

'I'll be with you in a few days. I'll get a flight as soon as I can. I'm going home – to East Prussia,' she explained to the silence. 'And I'd like you to come with me, but I'll understand if you don't want to.'

'You'll tell me—'

'Everything,' Charlotte interrupted, 'but not on the telephone. Can you spare the time to accompany me?'

'Yes, of course.'

'I'll let you know when I'll be in Berlin. Before I see you, I need to talk to your father and to Uncle Erich.'

'When you see my parents, give them my love.'

'I will, but I intend to stay in England for only one day.'

'Oma . . .' there was only the slightest hesitation, 'thank you.'

'I love you.'

Charlotte hung up, then flicked through the directory before dialling a second time. The bookings and arrangements with her agent's office proved more straightforward than she'd expected. Suddenly she realized she had very little time to pack, sort through her possessions and plan what she was going to say to Erich and Jeremy. But lost in the past, she continued to sit and stare blindly out over the lake.

'Oma, you upstairs?'

Shaking herself from her reverie, Charlotte pushed the photocopies and Laura's letter beneath the cushion of her chair and composed herself. Claus always had been far too sensitive to her moods for her peace of mind.

'Up here, Claus,' she called in a voice she'd intended to sound light, but came out brittle. Forcing a smile, she relegated all thoughts of Laura's letter into the 'think about later' compartment of her mind, which she had filled to capacity with painful memories and problems over the years. Hopefully, there would be enough time left for her to deal with all of them.

Her grandson climbed the stairs, his massive, raw-boned clumsiness making her tremble for the safety of her paintings.

'I saw the car . . .' A frown furrowed his forehead as he lumbered towards her. 'Wine in the middle of the day? You celebrating, or drowning your sorrows?'

'Celebrating.'

'You don't have stomach ulcers?'

'Only very small ones,' she lied, clinging to the story she had woven around her symptoms.

'Are they going to operate?'

She shook her head. 'No operation, only a disgusting diet.'

'It can't be that disgusting if it includes wine.'

'You're clucking like an old hen.'

'I'll ring David and ask if wine's allowed,' he threatened.

'Today's the last day of my old diet, tomorrow the first of the new.'

'In that case, you'd better come to dinner tonight. Carolyn's cooking.'

'What time do you want me?'

He gave her a hard look. She had never agreed to dine with them so easily before. Usually an appointment had to be made two weeks in advance and then only after a certain amount of arguing and checking of diaries.

'Seven-thirty all right?'

'Fine.' She held up her glass. 'Want some wine?'

'I'll carve crooked chair legs all afternoon if I do.'

'Still making that dining set?'

'I enjoyed doing the table but twelve chairs are six too many. Who in their right mind wants to serve a dozen people a formal, sit-down meal in this day and age?'

'Someone who can afford a caterer and your hand-made furniture. There's coffee in the kitchen.'

'Beer?'

'In the fridge; help yourself.'

He returned with a can and no glass. Ripping open the top, he took the chair next to Charlotte's and propped his long legs on a table piled with magazines. 'This room is perfect. I feel so at home I have no qualms about making a mess, and the view is magnificent. Much better than ours. We're too close to the lake to get a wide perspective.'

'Move in while I'm away if you want. I've decided to pay a visit to East Prussia.'

'Poland,' he corrected.

'Part of it will always be East Prussia to me.'

'We'll go with you after Carolyn's had the baby.'

'The flight's booked. I'm leaving Boston tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow? But we were always going to make the trip together,

and we can hardly take Carolyn when she's eight months pregnant,' he complained.

'It would be too risky, even if the airline allowed her to fly.' Reaching for the wine bottle, she replenished her glass.

'Are you telling the truth about the ulcers?' He narrowed his eyes.

'You doubt your grandmother's veracity?'

'Only when it comes to her health and the cost of the presents she hands out on birthdays and Christmas.'

'Undergoing all those tests made me realize I'm mortal. I've no intention of dying just yet, but I'm not going to get any younger or stronger than I am now, and I want to see my home again before I have to be wheeled around it in a chair. I rang Laura, she's coming with me.'

'Two women on their own in Poland. Haven't you heard what's happening in the Eastern bloc? There's a breakdown of law and order. The Mafia—'

'That's Russia,' she interrupted impatiently, 'and everyone knows the press exaggerate.'

'At least stop off in Germany. Perhaps my father or brother could go with you . . .' His voice trailed off when he realized what he was suggesting.

'Do I need to remind you why you left Germany to come and live with me?'

'Perhaps not my father or brother,' he said ruefully, 'but there's Uncle Jeremy.'

'Claus, I may be old but I'm not senile. Both my sons would rather keep me at a three-thousand-mile distance, which suits me very well, as that is precisely where I prefer to keep them. And, of my four grandchildren, Erich is too strait-laced and Luke too young to put up with me. Which leaves you and Laura, and, as Carolyn's condition rules you out, Laura and I will have to manage as best we can without masculine protection. I'm sure we'll survive.'

'How is Laura?' he asked.

'Well,' she answered cautiously.

'Happy?'

'She sounded fine.'

'No sign of a man on the horizon?'

Charlotte shook her head. 'The curse of the happily married is wanting to match-make the world. Laura is a career woman.'

'Only until she finds the right man.'

'Perhaps.' Charlotte would never have admitted to Claus that the lack of one special person in Laura's life had also bothered her since Laura had turned thirty. She was inordinately proud of the cutting-edge, award-winning documentaries her granddaughter produced, which had been televised world-wide. But she couldn't help feeling that Laura's lifestyle of constant travelling and nights spent in hotel rooms had to be a lonely one.

'I wish there was some way that Carolyn and I could go with you.' Claus set his beer down beside his chair.

'You should have given the matter some thought eight months ago.'

'It was going to be our trip,' he protested, refusing to see any humour in the situation.

'But we never made it because I foolishly kept putting it off. I'll check out the country. If there's anything left worth seeing, you and Carolyn can go next year.'

'I suppose so.' He finished his beer and left his chair. 'Can I help?'

'All I have to do is cancel my appointments for the next month or so.'

'And pack,' he reminded her.

'A few clothes. I can manage. Take care of the house for me?'

'I will.' For an instant, he reminded her of his grandfather. Tall, blond, blue-eyed and impossibly good-looking, but then, a colonel in the Wehrmacht of the Third Reich would never have grown a beard and moustache, or dressed in sawdust-covered jeans and a tattered sweat-shirt, let alone loafers on bare feet. Physically alike, yet so different in character, temperament, attitude – and philosophy. 'Thank you.'

'For what?'

'Living with me in my dotage, and staying on after your marriage. Being here every day and caring.'

'And I suppose you've done nothing for us, like allowing us to build a house in your backyard and giving me the money to set up in business.'

'My motives were purely selfish. I needed someone to tend to me in cantankerous old age.'

'You'll never be old, Oma.'

'I'm growing older by the minute, and I need to make those calls and pack.'

'Seven-thirty,' he reminded. 'And don't go carrying any heavy suitcases downstairs.'

'The courier is coming tomorrow morning to pick up the paintings.'

'You've finished them?' Carolyn handed Charlotte a piece of cherry pie and a bowl of whipped cream.

'All forty-eight oils and twenty-four pen and ink sketches, and I never want to read or illustrate another of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales again.'

'I'd love to see them all hung next to one another.'

'That is in your hands. I've asked the publisher to send them to you, not the gallery, when he's done with them. You liked them so much, Carolyn, I thought they might make an acceptable christening gift.'

'Acceptable!' Carolyn reached across the table and grasped Charlotte's hand. 'I'm overwhelmed. They're going to look wonderful in the nursery. How can we ever thank you?'

'Great,' Claus broke in with mock indignation. 'Now my son will grow up surrounded by politically incorrect depictions of aristocratic castles and princesses, and scary, psychologically-damaging images of wicked witches and hobgoblins. Not to mention the heartless, icicle-firing Snow Queen.'

'Have I got news for you, sweetheart, the world is politically incorrect.' Carolyn rose from her chair and poured hot water on to herbal teabags.

'And the sooner he or she learns to cope with it, the better,' Charlotte agreed.

'She,' Carolyn divulged, savouring the effect her revelation had on her husband and Charlotte. 'I know I said I didn't want to know the baby's sex but I was looking at a baby catalogue and there were the sweetest little blue romper suits and pink dresses, and I couldn't make up my mind between them, so I telephoned the doctor.'

'Then we'll call her Charlotte.' Claus put his arm around his wife and dropped a kiss on her bump.

'Don't you think she deserves her own name?' Charlotte asked.

'Carolyn and I like Charlotte,' Claus smiled. 'We agreed on it months ago.'

'If you must use it, shorten it to Charlie,' Charlotte suggested. 'It's more suitable for an American girl.'

'Charlie,' Carolyn mused. 'Sounds like a tomboy's name.'

'I don't want a tomboy for a daughter,' Claus protested.

'Only a man could say that. Tomboys have much more fun than prim little girls in lace dresses. More tea?' Carolyn asked, as Charlotte left the table.

'No, thank you, dear. I need a good night's sleep before travelling.'

'Is Uncle Jeremy meeting you in London?' Claus fetched Charlotte's wrap.

'Samuel Goldberg. We have agent–client things to discuss and he offered to drive me to Jeremy's.'

'We'll take you to the airport,' Carolyn said decisively.

'Oh no you won't, I'll order a taxi,' Charlotte contradicted.

'I need to do some shopping. Baby things,' Carolyn protested gleefully, 'and it's not often I can persuade this one to leave his workshop to drive into the city.'

Charlotte looked at both of them. 'You really do need to shop?'

'You heard the boss.' Claus draped the wrap around his grandmother's shoulders. 'I'll walk you home.'

'You'd intrude on my thoughts, and your girls need you.' Charlotte kissed her grandson on the cheek and hugged Carolyn before leaving.

'Is she all right?' Carolyn asked, as Claus closed the door.

'I hope so. I think she's just preoccupied with the past now that she's finally decided to make this trip.'

'She must have loved your grandfather very much.'

'I'm not so sure. You've met my father and brother. They must have inherited their personalities from someone, and it sure as hell wasn't Charlotte.'

She patted her bulge. 'What will we do if this one turns out like them?'

'There's no chance of my daughter turning out anything other than perfect with you for a mother.' He pulled her down on to his lap and began to tickle her.

Charlotte heard Claus and Carolyn's laughter as she walked along the shore path that led from Claus's house to her own. Kicking off her shoes, she stepped into the lake and splashed through the sandy shallows, revelling in the feel of cold water on her stockinged feet.

The moon hung low, a huge, golden orb in an indigo night sky, the same moon that was shining down on her childhood home. A few more days and she'd be there. Everything was ready, the tickets waiting to be picked up at the departure desk, her cases packed, her papers stacked neatly in her safe. She'd redrafted her will when Claus had left Germany to join her six years before. The decisions she had made then still held. Would this trip make her feel any differently about the choices she had made in life? Why was she going? What was she hoping to find after all this time? And – most importantly of all – had she been right to ask Laura to accompany her?

She climbed the steps to her veranda and walked into her living room. Her diary was already packed in her hand luggage. She took it from the bag and unwrapped it. The words she'd written on the morning of her eighteenth birthday stared up at her from the page: *It feels as though I've been away for ever. I can't wait to feast my eyes on the dear, dear house and hug Papa, Mama and the twins …*

Greta didn't get a mention, even then. But what was the point of returning to Grunwaldsee now? There would be nothing left of the house but bricks and mortar, and, after decades of Communist neglect and misrule, decaying bricks and mortar at that. Or worse still, a burnt-out ruin, or a factory erected on the site. Wouldn't it be better to cling to her memories?

She delved into her bag again and brought out another book, a hardback, its jacket yellowing with age. She ran her hands over the title and illustration. *One Last Summer* by Peter Borodin. A picture of a substantial house, white, wooden, gleaming through a pine forest. Totally wrong, of course, but how could the American artist

who'd designed the jackets of the Stateside copies know what an East Prussian country mansion looked like?

As she opened the book, two sketches fell out. One was of Grunwaldsee as she had last seen it: a long, low, classically designed, eighteenth-century manor, the simplicity of its façade broken by a short, central flight of steps that swept up to a front door flanked by Corinthian columns. The second was of a young man drawn from memory. She stared at it for a long time. When she finally laid it aside, she knew why she had to go back.