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Opening Extract from...

Potsdam Station

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Franco's furniture

April 6 – 7

As they walked south towards Diedersdorf and the battalion command post, Paul Gehrts realised that he and his companion Gerhard Reheusser were grinning like idiots. The cloudless blue sky, warm sunshine and dust-free easterly breeze were responsible, banishing, if only for a few minutes, the grim anxiety that filled their waking hours. For the moment the occasional rattle of a distant machine-gun, the odd boom of a tank cannon or gun, could be ignored.

About five kilometres behind them, the Seelow Heights fell sharply away to the Oderbruch, the meadowlands which lay between the escarpment and the Oder river. Soon – in a few days, most likely – the men and tanks of the Red Army would storm across those meadows and throw themselves at the German defences. The Russians would die in their thousands, but thousands more would follow. It would only be a matter of time.

But a sunny day was a sunny day, with a power all its own.

The two men were approaching the first houses of the small town when they came upon a large group of soldiers spread out along the side of the road. Few looked older than fifteen, and one boy was actually passing round his army-issue bag of sweets, as if he were at a friend's birthday party. Most had their *Panzerfausts* lying beside them on the grass, and all looked exhausted – the disposable rocket-launchers were a crippling weight for all but the strongest children. Their troop leader, who was probably almost out of his teens, was examining a weeping blister on one of his charges' feet. As Paul and Gerhard walked past he looked up, and offered them a brief rueful smile.

Almost all of Diedersdorf's usual residents had left or been evacuated, and were now presumably clogging the roads leading westward, but the town was not being neglected – in the small central square an overzealous staff-sergeant was supervising another band of young recruits in sweeping the cobbles.

'The madness of the military mind,' Gerhard muttered, not for the first time.

As if to prove his point, a half-track drove across the square, sending eddies of dust in every direction. The sergeant endured a violent fit of coughing, then ordered his boys back to work.

The division mechanics had set up shop in the goods yard of the town station, close to where a large dug-out had been excavated in the railway embankment for the battalion command post. The corporal at the improvised desk in the goods shed groaned when he saw Paul's machine-gun. 'Don't tell me – it jams.'

'It does.'

'How often?'

'Too often for comfort.'

The corporal sighed. 'I'll get someone to have a look,' he said. 'Come back in an hour.'

Two bench seats from the nearby railway station had been left outside the battalion command post entrance, offering a place to wait and watch the war go by. The two of them had only been sitting there a few minutes when a captured Red Army jeep pulled up. A Wehrmacht major and two NCOs leapt out, shoved their manacled Russian prisoner onto the other seat, and disappeared into the dug-out. He looked like an ordinary rifleman, with dark dishevelled hair and vaguely Mongoloid features. He was wearing a blood-stained kaftan above badly frayed trousers and worse-worn boots. He sat there with his mouth slightly open, his eyes gazing blankly into space.

But he wasn't stupid. Catching Paul's look he returned it, and his eyes, once focused, seemed full of intelligence. 'Cigarette?' he asked.

That, at least, was one thing the Reich wasn't short of. Gerhard got up

and gave him one, placing it between the Russian's lips and offering a lighted match.

'*Spasibo.*'

'You're welcome, Ivan.'

'No, he fucking isn't,' another voice exploded behind them. It was one of the NCOs who had brought him in. He knocked the cigarette from the Russian's mouth, throwing sparks all over his face, and swung round on Gerhard. 'What the fuck do you think you're doing?'

'What I hope …'

'Shut the fuck up. And get out of my sight.' He turned away, grabbed the Russian under one arm and hustled him through the curtained door of the dug-out.

'Wonderful,' was all Gerhard said. He looked at the still-swaying curtain, as if contemplating pursuit.

'Let's try and find some hot water,' Paul suggested.

'I'm not going anywhere,' Gerhard told him. 'I'm not going to let a shit like that order me around.'

Paul shrugged and sat down again. There was no use arguing with Gerhard at times like this.

They'd been sitting in silence for about a quarter of an hour when shouting started inside. This went on for several more minutes, and culminated in a gunshot. A few moments later, there was another.

Gerhard leapt to his feet.

'Let's go and find that hot water,' Paul said quietly.

Gerhard spun round, anger in his eyes, but something in his friend's expression did the trick. He closed his eyes, breathed out heavily, and offered Paul a rueful smile. 'OK' he said. 'If we both take a bath, the war might stink a little less. Let's go and find one.'

But they were out of luck. The only hot water in town came complete with a queue, and was already brown. A drink proved easier to come by, but the quality was equally dire, and after scorching their throats with a single glass neither felt hungry for more. They went back to the workshop, but the mechanic still hadn't got round to checking the machine-gun. Rather

than return to their seat outside the command post, they pulled a couple of armchairs out of the empty house next door, and settled down to wait. Paul thought about checking the location of the nearest basement, but found he couldn't be bothered. The sun was still shining, and it looked like the Red Air Force was having an afternoon off. If worse came to worst, they could simply throw themselves into the dug-out across the yard.

Gerhard was devouring a cigarette, angrily sucking in smoke and flicking off ash while he wrestled with his inner demons. He was still pissed off about the Russian prisoner, Paul realised. Which might be admirable, but was unlikely to serve any useful purpose.

Paul had known him a long time. They'd been best friends at their first school, but Gerhard's father had moved his family to Hamburg when both were nine, and they'd only met up again two years ago, when both were drafted into the same *Flakhelfer* unit at the Zoo Bunker gun tower. Gerhard had persuaded Paul that pre-enlistment in the Wehrmacht made sense, partly because he wanted out of the *Flakhelfer*, partly to avoid SS recruitment. Paul had resisted for one reason – the girl he had just fallen in love with was one of those directing the neighbouring tower's searchlights. But after Madeleine's mounting took a direct hit he could hardly wait to get away. He and Gerhard had started their compulsory labour service together, and then been called up as seventeen-year-olds when the age limit was lowered early in 1944. They were still gunners, but now they were soldiers of the 20th Panzergrenadier Division.

They had been with their Pak-43 eighty-eight milimetre gun for almost a year, somehow surviving the collapse of Army Group Centre the previous summer and the winter battles in Poland. When they had left Berlin for their first *Ostfront* posting, Gerhard's mother had taken Paul aside and asked him to look after her son, but if anything he had looked after Paul. Gerhard's relentless negativity when it came to the war, the army and the Führer was sometimes irritating, but he never let it lessen his sense of duty toward his comrades. In fact, the one probably reinforced the other.

These days, Gerhard was the closest thing Paul had to family. His father John Russell had deserted him in 1941; his mother Ilse and stepfather

Matthias Gehrts had died in a car crash the previous year. His stepsisters were alive as far as he knew, but Paul hadn't seen them since their evacuation two years ago, and the relationship had never been really close. He hadn't spoken to his mother's brother Thomas since their argument about his father almost three years ago.

'Here he comes,' Gerhard interjected. A mechanic was walking towards them, the machine-gun over his shoulder.

'Is it fixed?' Paul asked.

The mechanic shrugged. 'Seems to be. I just a filed off a few micrometres. Give it a proper test in the woods – random gunfire this far behind the front makes people nervous.'

Paul hoisted the gun over his own shoulder. 'Thanks.'

'No problem.'

They walked back through Diedersdorf's empty streets. The young recruits on broom duty had vanished, but a Waffen-SS staff car was sitting in the otherwise empty square, and the Gruppenführer sitting in the back seat turned a surprisingly anxious pair of eyes in their direction.

'He's seen the future, and it's not looking black,' Gerhard joked.

The sweet-sucking youths had also moved on, and the road running north was empty. After about a kilometre they turned off into the trees, and followed the winding track to their position on the eastern edge of the wood. The unit's two cruciform-mounted 88mm anti-tank guns were dug in twenty metres apart, covering the distant Seelow-Diedersdorf road, which curved toward and across their line of vision. The first few Soviet tanks to bypass Seelow would certainly pay for their temerity, but those coming up behind them … well, their fate would depend on whether or not Paul's unit received another shipment of shells. They currently had nineteen, and two of those would be needed to destroy their own guns.

They'd been here for over two months, and the dug-out accommodation was as spacious as any Paul had known in his short military career, three steps leading down to a short tunnel, with a tiny command post on one side and a small room full of bunks on the other. The ceilings weren't exactly thick, but they were well-buttressed, and even a direct hit

should prove survivable. The half-tracks they needed to move the guns were parked a hundred metres away in the forest, and heavily camouflaged against a sighting from the air. They had fuel enough for sixty miles between them, which seemed unlikely to be enough. Then again, if no more shells were delivered, the guns would become effectively useless, and they could all ride back to Berlin in a single vehicle.

It had been a quiet day, Sergeant Utermann told them. The artillery barrage had been shorter than usual, and even less accurate – nothing had fallen within a hundred metres of their small clearing. There'd been no Soviet air raid, and three Messerschmitt 109s had appeared overhead, the first they'd seen for a week. Maybe things were looking up at last.

'And maybe Marlene Dietrich came home,' Gerhard added sarcastically, once they were out of earshot. Utermann was a decent man, but a bit of an idiot.

Out in the clearing Hannes and Neumaier were kicking the unit's football to and fro. Hannes had found it in a Diedersdorf garden the previous week, and had hardly stopped playing with it since.

'Shall we challenge them?' Gerhard asked.

'OK,' Paul agreed without much enthusiasm.

Greatcoats were found for posts, and two men from the other gun team cajoled into making it three-a-side. Paul had played a great deal as a child, and had loved watching his team Hertha. But the *Hitlerjugend* had turned the game into one more form of 'struggle', and he had always gone to the Plumpe stadium with his dad. A wave of anger accompanied that thought, and before he knew it he was almost breaking Neumaier's ankle with a reckless tackle.

'Sorry, sorry,' he said, offering the other boy his hand.

Neumaier gave him a look. 'What happens to you on a football pitch?'

'Sorry,' Paul said again.

Neumaier shook his head and smiled.

The light was starting to fade, but they played on, engrossed in moving the football across the broken forest floor – until the Soviet planes swept over the trees. They were Tupolevs, although right until the last moment

Paul was somehow expecting Sergeant Utermann's Messerschmitt 109s. Like everyone else he dived for the ground, instinctively clawing at the earthen floor as fire and wood exploded above him. He felt a sharp pain in his left leg, but nothing more.

A single bomb, he thought. Turning his head he could see a wood splinter about ten centimetres long protruding from the back of his calf. Without really thinking, he reached back and yanked it out. His luck was in – there was no sudden gush of arterial blood.

Two large trees were in flames on the western edge of the clearing, where Gerhard had gone to collect the ball. Paul counted the figures getting to their feet, and knew that one was missing. He scrambled to his own and rushed across to where his friend should be.

He found Gerhard lying on his back, a shard of wood driven deep into his throat, a bib of blood spread across his chest. Sinking to his knees, Paul thought he caught a flicker in the other's eyes, but they never moved again.

It seemed at first as if the DC-3 had landed in a forest clearing, but as the plane swung round John Russell caught sight of a long grey terminal building. The legend MOSCOW AIRPORT (VNUKOVO) was emblazoned across the façade in enormous Cyrillic letters, beneath an even larger hammer and sickle.

He had expected the Khodynka airfield, which he had last seen in August 1939, decked out with swastikas for the welcoming of Ribbentrop and the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. He had never heard of Vnukovo, and hoped it was closer to the city centre than it looked.

A wooden stairway on wheels was rolled out to meet the plane. It looked like something left over from the siege of Troy, and creaked alarmingly as the passengers stepped gingerly down to the tarmac. The sun was still above the tree line, and much warmer than Russell had anticipated. He joined the straggling procession towards the terminal building, a concrete edifice with all the architectural interest of a British pillbox. The constructivists would be turning in their graves, he thought, and they

wouldn't be alone. As Russell had discovered in 1939, trips to Stalin's Soviet Union were guaranteed to disappoint those like himself who had welcomed the original Revolution.

He joined the end of the queue, thinking that on this occasion a sense of ideological let-down was the least of his worries. First and foremost was the question of whether the Soviets had forgiven him for refusing their offer of hospitality at the end of 1941. After his escape from Germany – an escape which German comrades under Soviet orders had died to make possible – Stalin's representatives in Stockholm had done their best to persuade him that Moscow was an ideal place to sit out the war. They had even plucked his old contact Yevgeny Shchepkin out of the international ether in a vain attempt to talk him round.

He had explained to Shchepkin that he wasn't ungrateful, but that America had to be his first port of call. His mother and employer were there, and when it came to raising a hue and cry on behalf of Europe's Jews, the *New York Times* seemed a much better bet than *Pravda*.

What he hadn't told Shchepkin was how little he trusted the Soviets. He couldn't even work out why they were so keen to have him on board. Did they still see him and his rather unusual range of connections as a potential asset, to be kept in reserve for a relevant moment? Or did he know more about their networks and ways of operating that he was supposed to? If so, did they care? Would he receive the Order of Lenin or a one-way trip to the frozen north? It was impossible to tell. Dealing with Stalin's regime was like the English game of 'Battleships' which he and his son Paul had used to play – the only way you found out you were on the wrong square was by moving onto it, and having it blow up in your face.

The queue was moving at a snail's pace, the sun now winking through the pines. Almost all the arrivals were foreigners, most of them Balkan communists, come to lay gifts at Stalin's feet. There had been a couple of Argentinians sitting across from Russell, and their only topic of conversation had been the excellent shooting in Siberia. Diplomats presumably, but who the hell knew in the violently shuffled world of April 1945? As

far as Russell could tell, he was the only Western journalist seeking entry to Stalin's realm.

For all his apprehension, he was pleased to have got this far. It was seven days since his hurried departure from Rheims in north-east France, the location of the Western Allies' military HQ. He had left on the morning of March 29th, after receiving off-the-record confirmation that Eisenhower had written to Stalin on the previous day, promising the Red Army the sole rights to Berlin. If Russell was going to ride into his old home town on a tank, it would have to be on a Russian one.

A swift exchange of cables with his editor in San Francisco had given him sanction to switch his journalistic sphere of operations, and, more importantly, some sort of semi-official fig-leaf to cover up an essentially personal odyssey. Accompanying the Red Army into Hitler's capital would prove a wonderful scoop for any Western journalist, but that was not why Russell wanted to do it.

Just getting to Moscow had been complicated enough, involving, as it did, a great swing round the territories occupied by the Wehrmacht, an area which still stretched from northern Norway to northern Italy. Three trains had brought him to Marseilles, and a series of flights had carried him eastwards via a succession of cities – Rome, Belgrade and Bucharest – all with the unfortunate distinction of having been bombed by both sides. He had expected difficulties everywhere, but bribery had worked in Marseilles and Rome, and broad hints that he would put Tito on the cover of *Time* magazine had eased his entry into Belgrade and, by default, the wider area of Soviet control. The rest had been easy. Once you were in, you were in, and the authorities in Bucharest, Odessa and Kiev had waved him on with barely a glance at his passport or papers. No doubt the various immigration bureaucracies would recover their essential nastiness in due course, but for the moment everyone seemed too exhausted by the war to care.

Moscow, though, was likely to be different, and Russell was half expecting orders to leave on the next return flight. Or worse. But when his turn finally came he was let through with only the most cursory check of his documents. It was almost as if they were expecting him.

'Meester Russell,' a voice said, confirming as much. A youngish man with prematurely grey hair, piercing blue eyes and thin lips had appeared in front of him. One arm of his shiny civilian suit was hanging empty.

Russell wondered how many arms and legs had been detached from their bodies in the last five years. They weren't the sort of statistics that governments publicised, always assuming they bothered to collect them. 'Yes?' he replied politely.

'I am from Press Liaison,' the man said. 'You will come with me, please.'

Russell followed, half expecting a room somewhere in the bowels of the terminal building. Instead, he was led outside, to where an American single-decker bus was pumping thick clouds of black exhaust into the rapidly darkening sky. Those who had scurried for pole position in the terminal queue had been rewarded with a better-than-average shot at carbon monoxide poisoning.

The double seats all had one or more occupants, but the man from Press Liaison swiftly cleared the one at the front with a wave of his identity card. He ushered Russell into the window seat, and sat down beside him. 'My name Semyon Zakabluk,' he volunteered in English, as the driver clanked the bus into gear. 'You first time Moscow?'

'No,' Russell told him in reasonably fluent Russian. 'I was here in 1924, for the Party's Fifth Congress. And again in 1939, when the Pact was signed.'

'Ah,' Zakabluk said, probably for want of anything better. In 1924 Trotsky had been one of the country's leaders, and six years on from Ribbentrop's visit the Nazi-Soviet Pact was probably almost as unmentionable. 'And you speak Russian?' he asked with more than a hint of truculence.

'I try,' Russell said. He had devoted a considerable chunk of the last few years to learning the language, partly with such a visit in mind, but more because its sphere of use seemed certain to increase.

'Why have you come to Moscow?'

'To report on the victory of the Soviet people.'

'Ah.'

'You served in the Red Army?' Russell asked.

'Yes, of course. Until this –' Zakabluk shrugged what little remained of his left arm. 'A tank shell, in the Kursk battle. One minute I had two arms, then only one.' For a moment he looked sorry for himself, but only for a moment. 'Many friends were not so lucky,' he added.

Russell just nodded.

'You were too old for your army?'

'I was in the first war,' Russell said. 'A long time ago,' he added without thinking. Lately, with all the horrors he had seen in Normandy and the Ardennes, the memories of his own time in the trenches had become depressingly vivid.

The bus wheezed to a halt alongside a railway station platform. This was good news – Russell already felt as if several joints had been jolted from their sockets. The passengers trooped off the bus and into the Imperial-style carriages which were waiting to carry them to Moscow. Much to everyone's surprise, the train set off almost at once. The small locomotive signalled their departure with a triumphant blast of its whistle, and was soon hurrying through the silver birch forests that surrounded the Soviet capital. Night had fallen by the time they reached Moscow's Kiev station, and Russell had a fleeting glimpse of the red stars adorning the distant Kremlin as his companion hustled him towards the Metro.

Their train, which came almost immediately, was full of tired-looking faces and bodies in shabby oversized clothes. Like people all over Europe, Russell thought. If ever there was a time when people might understand what others were feeling, then surely it should be now, at the end of a terrible war against a wholly discredited foe. But even if they did, he didn't suppose it would make any difference. Their governments might still be talking like allies, but already they acted like future enemies.

Back in the open air, the familiar shape of the Metropol hotel was silhouetted against the night sky. They walked across Sverdlov Square and in through the main entrance.

'You must report to the Press Liaison office in the morning,' Zakabluk told Russell, after checking that his room was ready. 'At ten o'clock, yes?'

'Yes,' Russell agreed. 'Thank you.'

Zakabluk bowed slightly and turned on his heels. As he walked towards the door, he gave a slight nod to a man in one of the lobby chairs.

Russell smiled to himself, and took the lift up to the second floor. His room looked remarkably similar to the one he'd had in 1939. The Soviet security police, the NKVD, had supplied a naked woman with that one, but, for reasons both virtuous and pragmatic, he had declined to take up the offer.

Since his parting from Effi there been other opportunities, equally appealing on a physical level and much more free of political risk, but he had refused them all. Staying faithful seemed the least he could do, after saving himself – albeit with her encouragement – at her expense. He wondered if she had been faithful to him, and how he would react if she hadn't. At this moment in time, he just needed to know she was alive.

He stared out of the window at the empty square. It was only seven-thirty in the evening, but the city already seemed asleep. He had meant to check in at the American Embassy the moment he arrived, but tomorrow morning would do – he didn't think the NKVD would have gone through all the rigmarole of settling him into a hotel if they planned an early hours arrest.

Dinner, he decided, and made his way down to the cavernous, ornate restaurant room. A few Russians were dining at two of the tables, but otherwise it was empty. There was only one meal on the menu, and by the time it eventually arrived, he was drunk enough not to notice the taste.

The tram that limped to a halt at the stop on Schloss Strasse had at least one seriously damaged wheel, but Effi and her fellow would-be travellers were hardly spoilt for choice. The wide avenue stretched emptily away to both east and west, offering the sort of pre-industrial calm that earlier generations of Berliners had deemed lost for ever. Getting it back had, of course, proved rather costly – most of the grand terraced houses were now detached or semi-detached, and the fires ignited by the latest raid

were still smudging most of the sky with their smoke. It was almost four in the afternoon, and the city was making the most of the several hours' breathing space which the RAF and USAF usually allowed between one's departure and the other's arrival.

The tram started off, bumping noisily along the rails as it headed north towards the Schloss Brücke. Four out of five passengers were women, which Effi assumed was a fair reflection of the city's population in April 1945. Most of the children had been sent to the country, and most of the men had been sent into battle. Only those over forty-five remained in the battered city, and there were rumours that all under sixty would soon be marched to the various fronts. The Russians had been on the eastern bank of the Oder river – little more than sixty kilometres from Berlin – for almost three months now, and a resumption of their westerly progress was daily anticipated. The Americans, approaching the Elbe river, were not that much further away, but only wishful thinkers and supreme optimists expected them to reach Berlin ahead of the dreaded Red Army. Another month, Effi thought, maybe two. And then, one way or another, everything would change.

The tram was grinding its way around the bend into Alt Moabit, and she had a distant glimpse of the synagogue on Levetzowstrasse from which so many Jews had been sent to the east. Few of Effi's gentile acquaintances mentioned Berlin's Jews any more – it was almost as if they had never existed. Goebbels had even stopped blaming them for all the Reich's misfortunes.

The star-shaped Moabit prison loomed on the left, and the tram swung left onto Invalidenstrasse. Up ahead, smoke seemed to be rising through the shattered roof of Lehrter station, but it proved an illusion – as the road arched over the station throat she could see, across the Humboldt Harbour, several fires raging among the buildings of the Charité Hospital. The red-on-white crosses adorning the tiled roofs might just as well have been targets.

Five minutes later the tram reached Stettin station. Effi hurried in through the archway, half expecting the worst. If there were no trains to

the suburbs before the usual evening air raid, and she couldn't get out to the rendezvous point, then her fugitives would be left in limbo, and those who had risked life and limb bringing them out of Berlin would have to take them back. She offered a silent prayer to whatever gods were looking after the Reichsbahn and stared up at the still-functioning departure boards.

There were no announcements of delays or cancellations, and the next train for Frohnau was allegedly leaving in five minutes.

It left in fifteen, which was good enough. Given the almost non-stop bombing, it seemed amazing that so many things continued to work. According to Ali, the public library on Bismarckstrasse was still lending books, and when the wind was in the right direction they could smell the hops fermenting in Moabit's breweries. And the police showed no signs of loosening their grip. If anything, there seemed to be more of them, all scouring the streets for any male with four limbs who hadn't had his turn in the Wehrmacht's mincing machine.

As they pulled out past the freight yards Effi found herself re-living that night in December 1941, waiting for hours in the freezing boxcar, then rattling out of Berlin with bombs falling all around them. It seemed so long ago.

He seemed so long ago.

But assuming he was still alive, assuming he still loved her, assuming she could survive for however long the Russians were going to take … then maybe …

She looked round at her fellow-passengers. Again they were mostly women, all with that look of mental exhaustion that even the best-fed Berliners habitually wore on their faces. More than three years of shortages and almost two of regular bombings had worn the city out. Everyone wanted it over, everyone but Hitler and his desperate disciples. 'Gröfaz', as people sarcastically called him, an abbreviation of '*Grössler Feldherr aller Zeiten*', the 'greatest general of all time'.

The train was passing under the Ringbahn, and a decrepit-looking steam-engine was towing a rail-mounted flak gun along the elevated line,

pumping more smoke into an already sated sky. Several *Flakhelfer* were perched on the gun's mounting, and none of them looked older than fifteen. Two years ago Effi had seen John's son Paul in a *Flakhelfer* uniform, but he would be eighteen by now, and probably in the regular forces. If he was still alive.

She shook her head to dismiss the thought, and turned her attention to the here and now. Most of the other passengers were clasping newspapers, but no one was reading – the chronic shortage of toilet paper had obviously reached the suburbs. One woman caught Effi looking at her, and stared back, but Effi resisted the impulse to smile – her smile, as John had once told her, was her most recognisable feature. Not that she expected to be recognised, not any more. These days she always wore glasses, and the grey streaks in her frumpily cut black hair were depressingly authentic. Sitting and walking like a person fifteen years older than her actual age had become so ingrained over the last three years that she sometimes wondered if the process was reversible.

The train had stopped, and the view through the window of unbroken houses and trees was a reminder of the past. It was not representative, of course – the moment the train restarted more bombed-out buildings and charred trees swam into view, and a group of people could be seen gathered, heads bowed, around an improvised grave in someone's back garden. The damage was less widespread away from the city centre, but still considerable. If the Western Allies were targeting anything more precise than Berlin, then their aim was poor.

The light was fading by the time the train reached Frohnau. She resisted the impulse to hurry out of the terminus, and took her time walking across the mostly intact town square. The local Rathaus had lost an end wall to a bomb, but lights were burning in the rest of the building, and people were sitting, wrapped in their winter coats, outside the café restaurant next door. Most of their ersatz coffees looked untouched – maintaining the ritual was clearly more important than the actual drink. The familiar smell of kohlrabi soup drifted out of the open doorway.

There were no uniforms in sight. Effi headed up the street opposite the

station, as she and Ali had done on the previous Saturday. They had been carrying a picnic basket on that occasion, but today she was only toting a small bag of extra rations. If she was stopped, these were for an imaginary friend, the one who owned the abandoned lakeside cottage that they had stumbled across at the weekend. As explanations went it was rather thin, but much better than nothing.

There was no traffic, and little sign of life in the neat suburban houses that lined the road. Effi's watch told her it wasn't yet seven. She held it against her ear, and listened to a few reassuring ticks. The watch had only cost a few pfennigs in a rummage sale – it had probably been found in the rubble of somebody's home by a professional scavenger – and had seemed more appropriate to her current identity than the elegant Cartier which a lustful studio boss had given her several years earlier.

Back in the days when she was acting for a living, rather than for her life.

She smiled to herself and wondered, not for the first time, if she would ever act again. Would she want to? She really didn't know. It was hard to imagine what life would be like after the Nazis, after the war. So much seemed lost, and irretrievable.

The last houses were behind her now, trees leaning out to enclose the road. Effi had brought along a torch – a priceless treasure in 1945 Berlin – but hoped she wouldn't need to use it. The batteries were fading, and replacing them would probably take more time and effort than it was worth.

The hiker's trail left the road about half a kilometre into the wood, and she had covered around half that distance when she heard the approaching vehicle. The sound preceded the thin gleam of the slit-sealed headlamps, and Effi barely had time to get off the road before the dark shape of a truck rumbled by. She could see nothing of the driver, and no movement in the open rear, but it was worrying nevertheless – unofficial motor transport was rare these days. It might just be a farmer with access to petrol – someone had to be delivering the blue slop which passed for milk in Berlin – but it didn't seem very likely.

She made her way back to the road as the sound of the lorry faded. Had it been full of Gestapo, there was nothing she could have done. By this time all her co-conspirators would be in motion, beyond warning.

No other traffic disturbed her walk to the turn-off. She turned onto the hiker's trail, the last flashes of the setting sun splintering through the trees ahead. By the time she reached the lakeside the orange orb had vanished, and the sky was a kaleidoscope of reds. As Berliners were fond of remarking in their usual bittersweet way, blasted bricks made for wonderful sunsets.

The cottage sat a few metres back from the shore, and Effi used what light remained to check that nothing had changed since the weekend. The door was still half off its hinges, the windows mostly broken, and there was no indication that anyone had been making use of the mouldy chairs or bedding. A weekend retreat rather than a permanent home, the cottage had clearly been abandoned early in the war, its middle-class owners too busy or dead to make use of it.

She went back outside and sat on the rickety jetty. The lake stretched away like a sea of blood, darkening as the minutes went by. The sound of sirens carried faintly across the water, so faintly that she thought she might be imagining them, but then searchlight beams sprang into life, columns of cloudy white crossing over the distant city like giant pairs of scissors. A few minutes more, and they were joined by thinner beams of red and green, desperately swinging to and fro.

It was a quarter-past eight. She went back into the cottage, sat herself down on one of the upright chairs, crossed her arms on the table and rested her head upon them.

Somewhere out there an engine driver was waiting for the all-clear to sound. And when it did his train would jerk into motion, trundling its way around the north-eastern edge of the city, heading for the cutting which lay three kilometres north of where she was sitting. It was a freight train, and one of the covered vans was loaded with crates containing Spanish Embassy furniture. All the friendly embassies had been moved out of Berlin and away from the bombing in 1944, but their new

location, some fifty kilometres east of the capital, was in imminent danger of Russian occupation, and the Spanish had requested permission to ship their valuable furniture home through neutral Sweden. The criminal idiots at Ribbentrop's Foreign Office had decided that the threat to Franco's sideboards was more important than their own forces' chronic shortages of supplies, and had ordered the Reichsbahn to divert the necessary rolling stock from military duties.

Franco knew nothing of this, and nor, Effi suspected, did his ambassador. The shipment had been suggested by Erik Aslund, and organised by an attaché whose hatred of the Nazis stemmed from his devout Catholicism. It wasn't the first time Aslund had used a furniture shipment for his own ends, which centred around getting prospective victims of the Nazi regime to safety. Two years earlier, when the bombing first became serious, the Swedish Embassy had supposedly crated and shipped its own furniture home to Stockholm. Tables and chairs had been carried aboard at one end, Jews helped off at the other. The switch had been made in these woods, the furniture broken up and buried once the fugitives were on their way.

It was soon after that that Effi began working with Aslund. She had never found out what position he held at the Swedish Embassy, but assumed he had one. When she had eventually asked him, as a personal favour to her, to check whether an Anglo-American journalist named John Russell had arrived in Sweden around the end of 1941, it had taken him only a few days to come up with a positive answer.

She knew he had ties with at least two of the Swedish churches in Berlin, but he had never given her any other reason to think him religious. He was obviously a brave man, but she never got the feeling that he enjoyed taking risks – there was something irreducibly sensible about him which reminded her of Russell. He was younger than John, around thirty-five, and conventionally good-looking in the classic Nordic way. She had seen no evidence of a sense of humour, but given the sort of world they shared that was hardly surprising.

As far as she knew, Aslund had no idea of her own true identity. He

knew her as Frau von Freiwald, a gentile widow who was willing to shelter fugitive Jews for a few precious days and nights in her spacious Bismarckstrasse apartment. He also, as far as she knew, had no suspicion that Ali, far from being her aryan niece, was one of several thousand Jewish fugitives – or 'U-boats' – living illegally in Berlin. He had never offered any explanation of his involvement in dangerous anti-state activities, but perhaps he assumed that common decency needed none. He was a Swede, after all.

Outside, the natural light had vanished, but the night battle over Berlin was throwing moving shadows on the wall behind her, and she could just about hear the familiar medley of droning planes, anti-aircraft fire and exploding bombs. She felt her fists tightening with the usual anger – what possible purpose could so much death and destruction serve? The war was won and lost, and punishing the women of Berlin for the crimes their fathers, sons and brothers had committed elsewhere – many and terrible as these undoubtedly were – seemed like something her own despicable government would have done. For reasons that now escaped her, she had expected better of the British and Americans.

She laid her head back down and closed her eyes. She wondered how John felt about his country's bombing campaign, and the fact that most of the people he loved were among the millions on the receiving end. She remembered his outrage when the Luftwaffe had bombed the Spanish town of Guernica for Franco, and an argument not long after with his diplomat friend Doug Conway. 'The bombing of civilians is always, always, a war crime,' Russell had insisted at the dinner party in question. No one had agreed with him. He was being naive, Conway had said. They had the planes, they had the bombs, and they weren't going to let an inability to hit precision targets stand in the way of their use. 'No doubt about that,' John had agreed. 'But that won't make it less of a crime.'

She hoped he still felt that way, that the war hadn't changed him too much. That he would still recognise her.

She remembered a trip to the zoo with him and Paul. It had been one of those spring days when everything seemed right with the world, even

with the Nazis in power. Paul had only been about seven, so it must have been early in their love affair. The three of them had clambered aboard the same elephant, and clung to each other as it lumbered along the wide path between the iron cages …

She woke suddenly, thinking she'd heard a noise outside. There were no lights, no banging – it must have been an animal, perhaps a fox who frequented the cottage and had suddenly scented its human occupant. She hurriedly used her torch to check her watch. It was almost two o'clock. Another half-hour and she would have been late for the rendezvous. How could she have been so careless?

There were no moving shadows on the wall, no distant thunder – the air raid had ended. Outside the fires raised by the bombing were reflected in the clouds, casting the world in an orange glow. She selfishly hoped that her own building had been spared – finding new accommodation with her current identity papers shouldn't prove too difficult, but any contact with the authorities involved some sort of risk.

It was cold, and she could feel the damp of the cottage in her bones. She thought about using the outside toilet, but a memory of dense cobwebs persuaded her to squat down in the garden. She was almost forty years old, but spiders still frightened her more than the Gestapo.

She decided to get going. There were only two kilometres to walk, along an easy-to-follow path, but it would be prudent to reach her destination early, and give herself the chance of sizing up the situation from a distance.

Walking as quietly as she could, she followed the path around the northern shore of the lake and up into the woods. The rendezvous point was a designated picnic area close to, but above, the road from Frohnau to Bergfelde. As she and Ali had discovered at the weekend, it had several wooden benches and tables, along with a board bearing faded pictures of animal life and stern warnings against dropping litter. Engraved arrows on a plinth directed viewers towards prominent landmarks of the distant capital, and one recent visitor had brought the display up to date by scratching 'ruins of' in front of several names.

Effi approached the area with extreme caution. No lights were visible, which was as it should be. She thought she heard murmurs of conversation, but was far from sure.

She worked her way off the path and through the trees, grateful for the masking effect of a noisy breeze as she got closer to the edge of the clearing. Stopping, she thought she could make out several figures, some standing, some sitting at one of the picnic tables. Another few metres and she was sure. There were six of them.

They looked innocent enough, but that was the mistake tigers made about staked-out goats.

She told herself that the person or persons who had brought them would still be watching from hiding, if only to confirm her own arrival. She would not see them, and they would only see her from a distance – Aslund had a keen appreciation of cell structures and the security they provided. Which was why he wanted her to take the group from here to the train, to provide a cut-out between his organisation in the city and the railwaymen.

It was always possible that the initial escorts had been arrested en route, their places taken by Gestapo agents. If so, the latter would be close by, watching and waiting for Effi to reveal and condemn herself.

She forced herself to wait a little longer. As she strained ears and eyes for sign of any other watchers, one of the figures at the table suddenly got to his feet and stretched. 'I imagine many ways in which it would all end,' he said to his companions, 'but I never considered a midnight picnic.'

The other men laughed, removing Effi's suspicions. These men had not been brought by the Gestapo.

She took a deep breath and strode out of the trees. The six men, hardly surprisingly, all jumped at her sudden appearance.

'I am your guide,' she said softly. 'We have about two kilometres to walk, and I want you to follow me in single file. Move as quietly as you can. And please, no talking.'

They did as they were told.

She led them back down the path she had taken, turning off onto an-

other after two hundred metres. This new path led north, climbing into the trees and around the side of a low hill. Effi doubted whether the paths in this wood saw much traffic any more, but *Hitlerjugend* playing soldiers had infested all woods within easy reach of the capital until the end of 1942, and nature had not yet succeeded in erasing all proof of their perambulations. This path was still easy to follow.

An occasional noise, probably an animal evading their passage, broke through the constant swish of the wind in the trees, and Effi could feel the nervousness of those behind her. She had no idea how far they had already travelled, or how much they knew of where they were going. She remembered her own aborted flight from Germany three years earlier, and the sense of utter powerlessness she had felt in the hands of those trying to help her. All that waiting, all that tension.

It was easier in motion. She could hear the heavy breathing of the men behind her, could imagine the hope at war with the fear. A few more days and their fate would be decided – sanctuary in Sweden or some impromptu execution yard.

They walked steadily on through the rustling forest. A barely risen moon was soon ghosting the tops of the trees, and by the time they emerged above the cutting it was high enough to reflect off the receding rails. These stretched straight as arrows in both directions: south-east towards Berlin, north-west towards the Baltic coast.

She turned to the six fugitives, and saw them properly for the first time. Three were in their forties or older, all wearing the sort of suits and shirts with high collars which the old upper class favoured. Army politicals, Effi thought, potential victims of the never-ending hunt for anyone even remotely involved in the previous summer's plot to kill the Führer. The Reich might be on its last legs, but Hitler was determined that all his German enemies should die before he did.

The other three were younger, wearing cheaper, less formal clothes. Jews, Effi guessed, from the look of two of them. She realised with a shock that she recognised one man. A year or more ago, he had spent a night at the apartment.

His eyes told her the recognition was mutual, which boded anything but good. But there was nothing she could do about it now.

'I'm leaving you here,' she said, raising a hand to still the sudden alarm in six pairs of eyes. 'See the railwaymen's hut down there?' she added. 'Wait behind it. The train will stop, someone will come and get you, show you where to get on.'

'When is it due?' one man asked.

'Soon,' Effi told him. 'In the next half-hour.'

'When does it get light?' another voice asked.

'Not for another three hours,' one of his companions told him.

'OK, good luck,' Effi said, turning away.

'Thank you,' several voices murmured after her.

It felt wrong leaving them to fend for themselves, but Aslund had insisted that she retrace their steps as quickly as possible, and make sure they were not being followed. If they were, she was supposed to lead the pursuit off in a safe direction. Safe, that is, for everyone but herself.

With the pale light of the half-moon suffusing the trees, without her charges to worry about, she was able to walk much faster, and as her fears of meeting the enemy began to fade, so her progress through the forest began to feel almost exhilarating. She felt like bursting into song, but managed to restrain herself. There'd be plenty of time for singing when the war was over.

And then, somewhere up ahead, she heard the dog bark.

At this point the path was curving down from the crest of a low ridge. She scanned the darkness below, searching for lights or movement in the tangle of trees.

A second round of barking sounded different. Was there more than one dog, or was that just her imagination?

A light – maybe lights – flickered in the distance. They were several hundred metres away, she thought, though it was difficult to judge distance. Far enough in any case that she heard no voices or footfalls.

What should she do? If it was the Gestapo, then the dog or dogs would be following their scent. There was no way she could erase it, but she

could add another trail by moving away from the path. In fact that was all she could do – she certainly couldn't go forward or back. Without further thought, she left the path and hurried into the trees, moving as fast as she could across the broken slope. The ground beneath the trees was spongy enough to absorb the sound of her passage, and no more barks broke through the background swish of the breeze. When she stopped after several minutes and took a long look back, there was no sign of lights.

Had they simply gone on down the path? And if so, would they reach the cutting ahead of the train? She hadn't heard the latter, but it should have arrived by now.

It was out of her hands. 'Save yourself, Effi,' she murmured, and pressed on. A few minutes later she stumbled into a narrow ditch. There was water at the bottom – not much of it to be sure, but it was trickling down, and presumably in the direction of the lake. She followed it down the slope for what seemed an eternity, casting the occasional anxious glance back over her shoulder, but there was no sign of a pursuit. She began to hope she had imagined it. Could the lights and the barking have come from something as innocent as a woodsman and his dog? Did such people still exist in the Third Reich? It was possible. It often felt as if all normal life had been consumed by the war, but things kept popping up to prove the opposite.

She suddenly found herself on the path which ran around the lake, no more than a couple of hundred metres from the borrowed cottage. Paul would have been proud of her, she thought, remembering the boy's own joy at winning a *Hitlerjugend* orientation exercise on a pre-war weekend. She felt pretty proud of herself.

There were no indications that the cottage had received any visitors. She ate one of the rolls she'd brought with her, drank some of the water, and tried to decide on a course of action. It wasn't five o'clock yet, which meant another two hours of darkness. Should she stay or go? She had counted on returning to Berlin around 8 a.m. and hadn't bothered to note the time of the first train. If she walked back to Frohnau station now

she might find herself alone – and conspicuous – on an empty platform. Staying put for another couple of hours seemed, on balance, slightly less fraught with danger. She settled down to wait for dawn, wishing she knew whether or not the six men had caught their train. If they had, she should be safe for the night. If they hadn't, someone would soon be talking.

Once again, she found herself waking from an unexpected sleep. This time it was probably the sunlight that woke her – it was almost eight o'clock. She went outside to have a pee, only to hear the sound of male voices in the distance. And a barking dog. They were coming from the direction of Frohnau.

Should she run? If they were looking for her, then the station would be covered in any case. And the dogs would surely track her down if she went back into the woods. Her only hope was to bluff it out.

She needed to be sure of her facts. Hurrying back inside, she went straight to the drawer where she and Ali had found the letters. Two were addressed to Harald and Maria Widmann and bore Heidelberg postmarks. Inside both were a few dutiful lines from 'your loving son, Hartmut'. He was allegedly 'working hard', presumably at his studies. The third was a bill for boat repairs, addressed only to Herr Widmann.

She repeated the names out loud, then closed the drawer and took a quick look along the shelf of mouldering books. There were a couple by Karl May, and several books on birds and fishing.

The voices were outside the cottage now. She stood still, not wishing to gave away her presence, hoping they would walk on by.

No such luck. 'Check inside,' someone said.

She walked to the doorway and cried out 'Good morning', as if overjoyed to meet a posse of passing strangers. The man coming towards her, and two of those remaining on the lakeside path, were wearing light blue-grey *Bahnschutzpolizei* uniforms; the man in charge was wearing the long leather coat beloved of the Gestapo. He walked slowly towards her, enjoying each step.

'Is something wrong?' Effi asked innocently.

'Who are you, Madame? Where are your papers?'

Effi took them from her bag and passed them over.

'Erna von Freiwald,' he read aloud, with a slight, but unmistakable hint of disdain for the 'von.'

'Yes,' she agreed cheerfully.

'And what are you doing here, Frau von Freiwald?'

'Ah,' Effi said. 'This is slightly embarrassing.'

'Yes?'

'This cottage is owned by old friends of mine. My late husband and I used to visit them before the war. Rainer was a keen fisherman, like Harald. They used to spend whole nights out on the lake, and Maria and I would talk …'

'Your social life before the war does not interest me. What are you doing here now?'

'I came to see if I could stay here, away from the bombing. It's getting so bad in the city, and, well, I came up here last night. The train took forever, and I had trouble finding the cottage after all these years, and by the time I did it was too late to go back. So I stayed the night. I was just getting ready to leave when you arrived.'

'And where are the owners?'

'I don't know. Harald was always a bit secretive about what he did, so I imagine he's doing war work somewhere. I haven't seen them since 1940.'

'But you decided to take over their house?'

'I'm sure they wouldn't mind if they knew. I was only hoping to stay a few weeks. Until the miracle weapons are ready,' she added, hoping that she wasn't overdoing it, 'and the enemy has to stop bombing us.'

He looked at her, then started through her papers again. He doesn't believe me, she thought, but he doesn't know why, and he can't really bring himself to believe that a middle-aged woman is what he's looking for .

'Is there trouble in the area?' she asked. 'Has a foreign prisoner escaped from one of the camps?'

'That is not your concern,' he said sharply, and thrust out a hand with her papers. 'If you wish to live here, you must get the written

consent of the owners, and a residence permit from the local Party office. Understood?'

'Yes. Thank you.' She resisted the temptation to curtsy.

He took one more look at her and turned abruptly on his heels. The dog whined happily at the prospect of resuming its walk.

As the sound of their progress faded, Effi let her body sag against the door jamb, closed her eyes, and let her breath escape in an explosive sigh of relief.