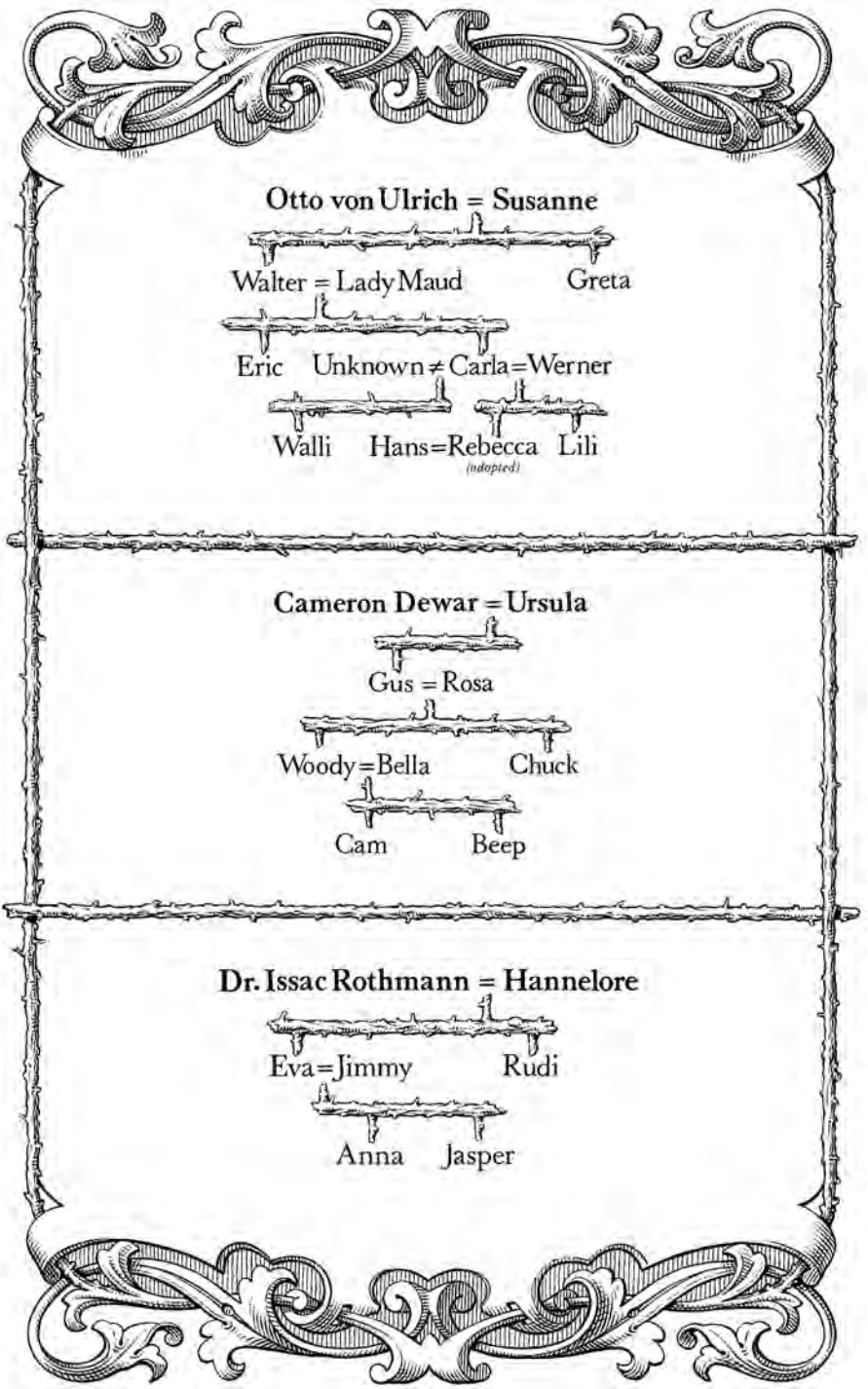
KEN FOLLETT

EDGE OF ETERNITY

MACMILLAN


The Families at the Beginning of
Edge of Eternity
Ma Peshkov
Grigori=Katerina≠Lev
Marga≠Lev=Olga
Ilya Dvorkin=Anya
Zoya=Volodya
Greg≠Jacky Jakes Williams
Lloyd=Daisy=Boy Fitzherbert
Dimka Tania
Kotya Galina
George
Evie Dave
8th Earl Fitzherbert
Walter=Lady Maud
Bea=Fitz≠Ethel Williams
Eric
Carla=Werner
Boy Fitzherbert
Lloyd Williams=Daisy
Rebecca (adopted)
Walli (father unknown)
Lili
Evie Dave
Dai Williams = Cara
Fitz≠Ethel=Bernie
Mildred=Billy
Lloyd=Daisy
Millie=Abie Avery
Enid Lillian
Evie Dave
Lenny


Otto von Ulrich = Susanne
Walter = Lady Maud
Greta
Eric
Unknown ≠ Carla = Werner
Walli
Hans = Rebecca
(adopted)
Lili
Cameron Dewar = Ursula
Gus = Rosa
Woody = Bella
Chuck
Cam
Beep
Dr. Issac Rothmann = Hannelore
Eva = Jimmy
Rudi
Anna
Jasper

Part One

WALL

1961

1

Rebecca Hoffmann was summoned by the secret police on a rainy Monday in 1961.

It began as an ordinary morning. Her husband drove her to work in his tan Trabant 500. The graceful old streets of central Berlin still had gaps from wartime bombing, except where new concrete buildings stood up like ill-matched false teeth. Hans was thinking about his job as he drove. 'The courts serve the judges, the lawyers, the police, the government – everyone except the victims of crime,' he said. 'This is to be expected in Western capitalist countries, but under Communism the courts ought surely to serve the people. My colleagues don't seem to realize that.' Hans worked for the Ministry of Justice.

'We've been married almost a year, and I've known you for two, but I've never met one of your colleagues,' Rebecca said.

'They would bore you,' he said immediately. 'They're all lawyers.'

'Any women among them?'

'No. Not in my section, anyway.' Hans's job was administration: appointing judges, scheduling trials, managing courthouses.

'I'd like to meet them, all the same.'

Hans was a strong man who had learned to rein himself in. Watching him, Rebecca saw in his eyes a familiar flash of anger at her insistence. He controlled it by an effort of will. 'I'll arrange something,' he said. 'Perhaps we'll all go to a bar one evening.'

Hans had been the first man Rebecca had met who matched up to her father. He was confident and authoritative, but he always listened to her. He had a good job – not many people had a car of their own in East Germany – and men who worked in the government were usually hard-line Communists, but Hans, surprisingly, shared Rebecca's political scepticism. Like her father he was tall, handsome and well dressed. He was the man she had been waiting for.

Only once during their courtship had she doubted him, briefly. They

had been in a minor car crash. It had been wholly the fault of the other driver, who had come out of a side street without stopping. Such things happened every day, but Hans had been mad with rage. Although the damage to the two cars was minimal, he had called the police, shown them his Department of Justice identity card, and had the other driver arrested for dangerous driving and taken off to jail.

Afterwards he had apologized to Rebecca for losing his temper. She had been scared by his vindictiveness, and had come close to ending their relationship. But he had explained that he had not been his normal self, due to pressure at work, and she had believed him. Her faith had been justified: he had never done such a thing again.

When they had been dating for a year, and sleeping together most weekends for six months, Rebecca wondered why he did not ask her to marry him. They were not kids: she had then been twenty-eight, he thirty-three. So she had proposed to him. He had been startled, but said yes.

Now he pulled up outside her school. It was a modern building, and well equipped: the Communists were serious about education. Outside the gates, five or six older boys were standing under a tree, smoking cigarettes. Ignoring their stares, Rebecca kissed Hans on the lips. Then she got out.

The boys greeted her politely, but she felt their yearning adolescent eyes on her figure as she splashed through the puddles in the school yard.

Rebecca came from a political family. Her grandfather had been a Social Democrat member of the Reichstag, the national parliament, until Hitler came to power. Her mother had been a city councillor, also for the Social Democrats, during East Berlin's brief post-war period of democracy. But East Germany was a Communist tyranny now, and Rebecca saw no point in engaging in politics. So she channelled her idealism into teaching, and hoped that the next generation would be less dogmatic, more compassionate, smarter.

In the staff room she checked the emergency timetable on the noticeboard. Most of her classes were doubled today, two groups of pupils crammed into one room. Her subject was Russian, but she also had to teach an English class. She did not speak English, though she had picked up a smattering from her British grandmother, Maud, still feisty at seventy.

This was the second time Rebecca had been asked to teach an English class, and she began to think about a text. The first time, she had used a leaflet handed out to American soldiers, telling them how to get on with Germans: the pupils had found it hilarious, and they had learned a lot too. Today perhaps she would write on the blackboard the words of a song

they knew, such as 'The Twist' – played all the time on American Forces Network radio – and get them to translate it into German. It would not be a conventional lesson, but it was the best she could do.

The school was desperately short of teachers because half the staff had emigrated to West Germany, where salaries were three hundred marks a month higher and people were free. The story was the same in most schools in East Germany. And it was not just teachers. Doctors could double their earnings by moving west. Rebecca's mother, Carla, was head of nursing at a large East Berlin hospital, and she was tearing her hair out at the scarcity of both nurses and doctors. The story was the same in industry and even the armed forces. It was a national crisis.

As Rebecca was scribbling the lyrics of 'The Twist' in a notebook, trying to remember the line about 'my little sis', the deputy head came into the staff room. Bernd Held was probably Rebecca's best friend outside her family. He was a slim, dark-haired man of forty, with a livid scar across his forehead where a shard of flying shrapnel had struck him while defending the Seelow Heights in the last days of the war. He taught physics, but he shared Rebecca's interest in Russian literature, and they ate their lunchtime sandwiches together a couple of times a week. 'Listen, everybody,' Bernd said. 'Bad news, I'm afraid. Anselm has left us.'

There was a murmur of surprise. Anselm Weber was the head teacher. He was a loyal Communist – heads had to be. But it seemed his principles had been overcome by the appeal of West German prosperity and liberty.

Bernd went on: 'I will be taking his place until a new head can be appointed.' Rebecca and every other teacher in the school knew that Bernd himself should have got the job, if ability had been what counted; but Bernd was ruled out because he would not join the Socialist Unity Party, the SED – the Communist Party in all but name.

For the same reason, Rebecca would never be a head teacher. Anselm had pleaded with her to join the party, but it was out of the question. For her it would be like checking herself into a lunatic asylum and pretending all the other inmates were sane.

As Bernd detailed the emergency arrangements, Rebecca wondered when the school would get its new head. A year from now? How long would this crisis go on? No one knew.

Before the first lesson she glanced into her pigeonhole, but it was empty. The mail had not yet arrived. Perhaps the postman had gone to West Germany, too.

The letter that would turn her life upside-down was still on its way.

She taught her first class, discussing the Russian poem 'The Bronze Horseman' with a large group of seventeen and eighteen year olds. This was a lesson she had given every year since she had started teaching. As always, she guided the pupils to the orthodox Soviet analysis, explaining that the conflict between personal interest and public duty was resolved, by Pushkin, in favour of the public.

At lunchtime she took her sandwich to the head's office and sat down across the big desk from Bernd. She looked at the shelf of cheap pottery busts: Marx, Lenin and East German Communist leader Walter Ulbricht. Bernd followed her gaze and smiled. 'Anselm is a sly one,' he said. 'For years he pretended to be a true believer, and now – zoom, he's off.'

'Aren't you tempted to leave?' Rebecca asked Bernd. 'You're divorced, no children – you have no ties.'

He looked around, as if wondering whether someone might be listening; then he shrugged. 'I've thought about it – who hasn't?' he said. 'How about you? Your father works in West Berlin anyway, doesn't he?'

'Yes. He has a factory making television sets. But my mother is determined to stay in the East. She says we must solve our problems, not run away from them.'

'I've met her. She's a tiger.'

'That's the truth. And the house we live in has been in her family for generations.'

'What about your husband?'

'He's dedicated to his job.'

'So I don't have to worry about losing you. Good.'

Rebecca said: 'Bernd –' Then she hesitated.

'Spit it out.'

'Can I ask you a personal question?'

'Of course.'

'You left your wife because she was having an affair.'

Bernd stiffened, but he answered: 'That's right.'

'How did you find out?'

Bernd winced, as if at a sudden pain.

'Do you mind me asking?' Rebecca said anxiously. 'Is it too personal?'

'I don't mind telling *you*,' he said. 'I confronted her, and she admitted it.'

'But what made you suspicious?'

'A lot of little things—'

Rebecca interrupted him. 'The phone rings, you pick it up, there's a silence for a few seconds, then the person at the other end hangs up.'

He nodded.

She went on: 'Your spouse tears a note up small and flushes the shreds down the toilet. At the weekend he's called to an unexpected meeting. In the evening he spends two hours writing something he won't show you.'

'Oh, dear,' said Bernd sadly. 'You're talking about Hans.'

'He's got a lover, hasn't he?' She put down her sandwich: she had no appetite. 'Tell me honestly what you think.'

'I'm so sorry.'

Bernd had kissed her once, four months ago, on the last day of the autumn term. They had been saying goodbye, and wishing one another a happy Christmas, and he had lightly grasped her arm, and bent his head, and kissed her lips. She had asked him not to do it again, ever, and said she would still like to be his friend; and when they had returned to school in January both had pretended it had never happened. He had even told her, a few weeks later, that he had a date with a widow his own age.

Rebecca did not want to encourage hopeless aspirations, but Bernd was the only person she could talk to, except for her family, and she did not want to worry them, not yet. 'I was so sure that Hans loved me,' she said, and tears came to her eyes. 'And I love him.'

'Perhaps he does love you. Some men just can't resist temptation.'

Rebecca did not know whether Hans found their sex life satisfactory. He never complained, but they made love only about once a week, which she believed to be infrequent for newly-weds. 'All I want is a family of my own, just like my mother's, in which everyone is loved and supported and protected,' she said. 'I thought I could have that with Hans.'

'Perhaps you still can,' said Bernd. 'An affair isn't necessarily the end of the marriage.'

'In the first year?'

'It's bad, I agree.'

'What should I do?'

'You must ask him about it. He may admit it, he may deny it; but he'll know that you know.'

'And then what?'

'What do you want? Would you divorce him?'

She shook her head. 'I would never leave. Marriage is a promise. You can't keep a promise only when it suits you. You have to keep it against your inclination. That's what it means.'

'I did the opposite. You must disapprove of me.'

'I don't judge you or anyone else. I'm just talking about myself. I love my husband and I want him to be faithful.'

Bernd's smile was admiring but regretful. 'I hope you get your wish.'

'You're a good friend.'

The bell rang for the first lesson of the afternoon. Rebecca stood up and put her sandwich back in its paper wrapping. She was not going to eat it, now or later, but she had a horror of throwing food away, like most people who had lived through the war. She touched her damp eyes with a handkerchief. 'Thank you for listening,' she said.

'I wasn't much comfort.'

'Yes, you were.' She went out.

As she approached the classroom for the English lesson, she realized she had not worked out the lyrics to 'The Twist'. However, she had been a teacher long enough to improvise. 'Who's heard a record called "The Twist"?' she asked loudly as she walked through the door.

They all had.

She went to the blackboard and picked up a stub of chalk. 'What are the words?'

They all began to shout at once.

On the board she wrote: 'Come on baby, let's do the Twist.' Then she said: 'What's that in German?'

For a while she forgot about her troubles.

She found the letter in her pigeonhole at the mid-afternoon break. She carried it with her into the staff room and made a cup of instant coffee before opening it. When she read it she dropped her coffee.

The single sheet of paper was headed: 'Ministry for State Security'. This was the official name for the secret police: the unofficial name was the Stasi. The letter came from a Sergeant Scholz, and it ordered her to present herself at his headquarters office for questioning.

Rebecca mopped up her spilled drink, apologized to her colleagues, pretended nothing was wrong, and went to the ladies' room, where she locked herself in a cubicle. She needed to think before confiding in anyone.

Everyone in East Germany knew about these letters, and everyone dreaded receiving one. It meant that she had done something wrong – perhaps something trivial, but it had come to the attention of the watchers. She knew, from what other people said, that there was no point protesting innocence. The police attitude would be that she must be guilty of something, else why would they want to question her? To suggest they

might have made a mistake was to insult their competence, which was another crime.

Looking again, she saw that her appointment was for five this afternoon.

What had she done? Her family was deeply suspect, of course. Her father, Werner, was a capitalist, with a factory that the East German government could not touch because it was in West Berlin. Her mother, Carla, was a well-known Social Democrat. Her grandmother, Maud, was the sister of an English earl.

However, the authorities had not bothered the family for a couple of years, and Rebecca had imagined that her marriage to an official in the Justice Ministry might have gained them a ticket of respectability. Obviously not.

Had she committed any crimes? She owned a copy of George Orwell's anti-Communist allegory *Animal Farm*, which was illegal. Her kid brother, Walli, who was fifteen, played the guitar and sang American protest songs such as 'This Land is Your Land'. Rebecca sometimes went to West Berlin to see exhibitions of abstract painting. Communists were as conservative about art as Victorian matrons.

Washing her hands, she glanced in the mirror. She did not *look* scared. She had a straight nose and a strong chin and intense brown eyes. Her unruly dark hair was sharply pulled back. She was tall and statuesque, and some people found her intimidating. She could face a classroom full of boisterous eighteen-year-olds and silence them with a word.

But she *was* scared. What frightened her was the knowledge that the Stasi could do anything. There were no real restraints on them: complaining about them was a crime in itself. And that reminded her of the Red Army at the end of the war. The Soviet soldiers had been free to rob, rape and murder Germans, and they had used their freedom in an orgy of unspeakable barbarism.

Rebecca's last class of the day was on the construction of the passive voice in Russian grammar, and it was a shambles, easily the worst lesson she had given since she qualified as a teacher. The pupils could not fail to know that something was wrong and, touchingly, they gave her an easy ride, even making helpful suggestions when she found herself lost for the right word. With their indulgence she got through it.

When school ended, Bernd was closeted in the head's office with officials from the Education Ministry, presumably discussing how to keep the school open with half the staff gone. Rebecca did not want to go to

Stasi headquarters without telling anyone, just in case they decided to keep her there, so she wrote him a note telling him of the summons.

Then she caught a bus through the wet streets to Normannen Strasse in the suburb of Lichtenberg.

The Stasi headquarters there was an ugly new office block. It was not finished, and there were bulldozers in the car park and scaffolding at one end. It showed a grim face in the rain, and would not look much more cheerful in sunshine.

When she went through the door she wondered if she would ever come out.

She crossed the vast atrium, presented her letter at a reception desk, and was escorted upstairs in an elevator. Her fear rose with the lift. She emerged into a corridor painted a nightmarish shade of mustard yellow. She was shown into a small bare room with a plastic-topped table and two uncomfortable chairs made of metal tubing. There was a pungent smell of paint. Her escort left.

She sat alone for five minutes, shaking. She wished she smoked: it might steady her. She struggled not to cry.

Sergeant Scholz came in. He was a little younger than Rebecca – about twenty-five, she guessed. He carried a thin file. He sat down, cleared his throat, opened the file and frowned. Rebecca thought he was trying to seem important, and she wondered whether this was his first interrogation.

'You are a teacher at Friedrich Engels Polytechnic Secondary School,' he said.

'Yes.'

'Where do you live?'

She answered him, but she was puzzled. Did the secret police not know her address? That might explain why the letter had come to her at school rather than at home.

She had to give the names and ages of her parents and grandparents. 'You're lying to me!' Scholz said triumphantly. 'You say your mother is thirty-nine and you are twenty-nine. How could she have given birth to you when she was ten years old?'

'I'm adopted,' Rebecca said, relieved to be able to give an innocent explanation. 'My real parents were killed at the end of the war, when our house suffered a direct hit.' She had been thirteen. Red Army shells were falling and the city was in ruins and she was alone, bewildered, terrified. A plump adolescent, she had been singled out for rape by a group of soldiers. She had been saved by Carla, who had offered herself instead.

Nevertheless, that terrifying experience had left Rebecca hesitant and nervous about sex. If Hans was dissatisfied, she felt sure it must be her fault.

She shuddered and tried to put the memory away. 'Carla Franck saved me from . . .' Just in time, Rebecca stopped herself. The Communists denied that Red Army soldiers had committed rape, even though every woman who had been in East Germany in 1945 knew the horrible truth. 'Carla saved me,' she said, skipping the contentious details. 'Later, she and Werner legally adopted me.'

Scholz was writing everything down. There could not be much in that file, Rebecca thought. But there must be something. If he knew little about her family, what was it that had attracted his interest?

'You are an English teacher,' he said.

'No, I'm not. I teach Russian.'

'You are lying again.'

'I'm not lying, and I have not lied previously,' she said crisply. She was surprised to find herself speaking to him in this challenging way. She was no longer as frightened as she had been. Perhaps this was foolhardy. He may be young and inexperienced, she told herself, but he still has the power to ruin my life. 'My degree is in Russian language and literature,' she went on, and she tried a friendly smile. 'I'm head of the department of Russian at my school. But half our teachers have gone to the West, and we have to improvise. So, in the past week, I have given two English lessons.'

'So, I was right! And in your lessons you poison the children's minds with American propaganda.'

'Oh, hell,' she groaned. 'Is this about the advice to American soldiers?'

He read from a sheet of notes. 'It says here: "Bear in mind that there is no freedom of speech in East Germany." Is that not American propaganda?'

'I explained to the pupils that Americans have a naive pre-Marxist concept of freedom,' she said. 'I suppose your informant failed to mention that.' She wondered who the snitch was. It must be a pupil, or perhaps a parent who had been told about the lesson. The Stasi had more spies than the Nazis.

'It also says: "When in East Berlin, do not ask police officers for directions. Unlike American policemen, they are not there to help you." What do you say to that?'

'Isn't it true?' Rebecca said. 'When you were a teenager, did you ever

ask a Vopo to tell you the way to a U-Bahn station?' The Vopos were the *Volkspolizei*, the East German police.

'Couldn't you find something more appropriate for teaching children?'

'Why don't you come to our school and give an English lesson?'

'I don't speak English!'

'Nor do I!' Rebecca shouted. She immediately regretted raising her voice. But Scholz was not angry. In fact, he seemed a little cowed. He was definitely inexperienced. But she should not get careless. 'Nor do I,' she said more quietly. 'So I'm making it up as I go along, and using whatever English-language materials come to hand.' It was time for some phoney humility, she thought. 'I've obviously made a mistake, and I'm very sorry, Sergeant.'

'You seem like an intelligent woman,' he said.

She narrowed her eyes. Was this a trap? 'Thank you for the compliment,' she said neutrally.

'We need intelligent people, especially women.'

Rebecca was mystified. 'What for?'

'To keep their eyes open, see what's happening, let us know when things are going wrong.'

Rebecca was flabbergasted. After a moment she said incredulously: 'Are you asking me to be a Stasi informant?'

'It's important, public-spirited work,' he said. 'And vital in schools, where young people's attitudes are formed.'

'I see that.' What Rebecca saw was that this young secret policeman had blundered. He had checked her out at her place of work, but he knew nothing about her notorious family. If Scholz had looked into Rebecca's background he would never have approached her.

She could imagine how it had happened. 'Hoffmann' was one of the commonest surnames, and 'Rebecca' was not unusual. A raw beginner could easily make the mistake of investigating the wrong Rebecca Hoffmann.

He went on: 'But the people who do this work must be completely honest and trustworthy.'

That was so paradoxical that she almost laughed. 'Honest and trustworthy?' she repeated. 'To spy on your friends?'

'Absolutely.' He seemed unaware of the irony. 'And there are advantages.' He lowered his voice. 'You would become one of us.'

'I don't know what to say.'

'You don't have to decide now. Go home and think about it. But don't discuss it with anyone. It must be secret, obviously.'

'Obviously.' She was beginning to feel relieved. Scholz would soon find out that she was unsuitable for his purpose, and he would withdraw his proposal. But at that point he could hardly go back to pretending that she was a propagandist for capitalist imperialism. Perhaps she might come out of this unscathed.

Scholz stood up, and Rebecca followed suit. Was it possible that her visit to Stasi headquarters could end so well? It seemed too good to be true.

He held the door for her politely then escorted her along the yellow corridor. A group of five or six Stasi men stood near the elevator doors, talking animatedly. One was startlingly familiar: a tall, broad-shouldered man with a slight stoop, wearing a light-grey flannel suit that Rebecca knew well. She stared at him uncomprehendingly as she walked up to the elevator.

It was her husband, Hans.

Why was he here? Her first frightened thought was that he, too, was under interrogation. But a moment later she realized, from the way they were all standing, that he was not being treated as a suspect.

What, then? Her heart pounded with fear, but what was she afraid of?

Perhaps his job at the Ministry of Justice brought him here from time to time, she thought. Then she heard one of the other men say to him: 'But, with all due respect, Lieutenant . . .' She did not hear the rest of the sentence. Lieutenant? Civil servants did not hold military ranks – unless they were in the police . . .

Then Hans saw Rebecca.

She watched the emotions cross his face: men were easy to read. At first he had the baffled frown of one who sees a familiar sight in an alien context, such as a turnip in a library. Then his eyes widened in shock as he accepted the reality of what he was seeing, and his mouth opened a fraction. But it was the next expression that struck her hardest: his cheeks darkened with shame and his eyes shifted away from her in an unmistakable look of guilt.

Rebecca was silent for a long moment, trying to take this in. Still not understanding what she was seeing, she said: 'Good afternoon, *Lieutenant* Hoffmann.'

Scholz looked puzzled and scared. 'Do you know the lieutenant?'

'Quite well,' she said, struggling to keep her composure as a dreadful suspicion began to dawn on her. 'I'm beginning to wonder whether he has had me under surveillance for some time.' But it was not possible – was it?

'Really?' said Scholz, stupidly.

Rebecca stared hard at Hans, watching for his reaction to her surmise, hoping he would laugh it off and immediately come out with the true, innocent explanation. His mouth was open, as if he were about to speak, but she could see that he was not intending to tell the truth: instead, she thought, he had the look of a man desperately trying to think of a story and failing to come up with something that would meet all the facts.

Scholz was on the brink of tears. 'I didn't know!'

Still watching Hans, Rebecca said: 'I am Hans's wife.'

Hans's face changed again, and as guilt turned to anger his face became a mask of fury. He spoke at last, but not to Rebecca. 'Shut your mouth, Scholz,' he said.

Then she knew, and her world crashed around her.

Scholz was too astonished to heed Hans's warning. He said to Rebecca: 'You're *that* Frau Hoffmann?'

Hans moved with the speed of rage. He lashed out with a meaty right fist and punched Scholz in the face. The young man staggered back, lips bleeding. 'You fucking fool,' Hans said. 'You've just undone two years of painstaking undercover work.'

Rebecca muttered to herself: 'The funny phone calls, the sudden meetings, the ripped-up notes . . .' Hans did not have a lover.

It was worse than that.

She was in a daze, but she knew this was the moment to find out the truth, while everyone was off-balance, before they began to tell lies and concoct cover stories. With an effort she stayed focussed. She said coolly: 'Did you marry me just to spy on me, Hans?'

He stared at her without answering.

Scholz turned and staggered away along the corridor. Hans turned to the other men and said: 'Go after him.' The elevator came and Rebecca stepped in just as Hans called out: 'Arrest the fool and throw him in a cell.' He turned to speak to Rebecca, but the elevator doors closed and she pressed the button for the ground floor.

She could hardly see through her tears as she crossed the atrium. No one spoke to her: doubtless it was commonplace to see people weeping here. She found her way across the rainswept car park to the bus stop.

Her marriage was a sham. She could hardly take it in. She had slept with Hans, loved him, and married him, and all the time he had been deceiving her. Infidelity might be considered a temporary lapse, but Hans

had been false to her from the start. He must have begun dating her in order to spy on her.

No doubt he had never intended actually to marry her. Originally, he had probably intended no more than a flirtation as a way of getting inside the house. The deception had worked too well. It must have come as a shock to him when she proposed marriage. Maybe he had been forced to make a decision: refuse her, and abandon the surveillance, or marry her and continue it. His bosses might even have ordered him to accept her. How could she have been so completely deceived?

A bus pulled up and she jumped on. She walked with lowered gaze to a seat near the back and covered her face with her hands.

She thought about their courtship. When she had raised the issues that had got in the way of her previous relationships – her feminism, her anti-Communism, her closeness to Carla – he had given all the right answers. She had believed that he and she were like-minded, almost miraculously so. It had never occurred to her that he was putting on an act.

The bus crawled through the landscape of old rubble and new concrete towards the central district of Mitte. Rebecca tried to think about her future but she could not. All she could do was run over the past in her mind. She remembered their wedding day, the honeymoon, and their year of marriage, seeing it all now as a play in which Hans had been performing. He had stolen two years from her, and it made her so angry that she stopped crying.

She recalled the evening when she had proposed. They had been strolling in the People's Park at Friedrichshain, and they had stopped in front of the old Fairytale Fountain to look at the carved stone turtles. She had worn a navy-blue dress, her best colour. Hans had a new tweed jacket: he managed to find good clothes even though East Germany was a fashion desert. With his arm around her, Rebecca had felt safe, protected, cherished. She wanted one man, for ever, and he was the man. 'Let's get married, Hans,' she had said with a smile, and he had kissed her and replied: 'What a wonderful idea.'

I was a fool, she thought furiously; a stupid fool.

One thing was explained. Hans had not wanted to have children yet. He had said he wanted to get another promotion and a home of their own first. He had not mentioned this before the wedding, and Rebecca had been surprised, given their ages: she was twenty-nine and he thirty-four. Now she knew the real reason.

By the time she got off the bus she was in a rage. She walked quickly through the wind and rain to the tall old town house where she lived. From the hall she could see, through the open door of the front room, her mother deep in conversation with Heinrich von Kessel, who had been a Social Democrat city councillor with her after the war. Rebecca walked quickly past without speaking. Her twelve-year-old sister, Lili, was doing homework at the kitchen table. She could hear the grand piano in the drawing room: her brother, Walli, was playing a blues. Rebecca went upstairs to the two rooms she and Hans shared.

The first thing she saw when she walked into the room was Hans's model. He had been working on this throughout their year of marriage. He was making a scale model of the Brandenburg Gate out of matchsticks and glue. Everyone he knew had to save their spent matches. The model was almost done, and stood on the small table in the middle of the room. He had made the central arch and its wings, and was working on the quadriga, the four-horse chariot on the top, which was much more difficult.

He must have been bored, Rebecca thought bitterly. No doubt the project was a way of passing the evenings he was obliged to spend with a woman he did not love. Their marriage was like the model, a flimsy copy of the real thing.

She went to the window and stared out at the rain. After a minute, a tan Trabant 500 pulled up at the kerb, and Hans got out.

How dare he come here now?

Rebecca flung open the window, heedless of the rain blowing in, and yelled: 'Go away!'

He stopped on the wet sidewalk and looked up.

Rebecca's eye lit on a pair of his shoes on the floor beside her. They had been hand-made by an old shoemaker Hans had found. She picked one up and threw it at him. It was a good shot and, although he dodged, it hit the top of his head.

'You mad cow!' he yelled.

Walli and Lili came into the room. They stood in the doorway, staring at their grown-up sister as if she had become a different person, which she probably had.

'You got married on the orders of the Stasi!' Rebecca shouted out of the window. 'Which of us is mad?' She threw the other shoe and missed.

Lili said in awestruck tones: 'What are you doing?'

Walli grinned and said: 'This is crazy, man.'

Outside, two passers-by stopped to watch, and a neighbour appeared

on a doorstep, gazing in fascination. Hans glared at them. He was proud, and it was agony for him to be made a fool of in public.

Rebecca looked around for something else to throw at him, and her gaze fell on the matchstick model of the Brandenburg Gate.

It stood on a plywood board. She picked it up. It was heavy, but she could manage.

Walli said: 'Oh, wow.'

Rebecca carried the model to the window.

Hans shouted: 'Don't you dare! That belongs to me!'

She rested the plywood base on the windowsill. 'You ruined my life, you Stasi bully!' she shouted.

One of the women bystanders laughed, a scornful, jeering cackle that rang out over the sound of the rain. Hans flushed with rage and looked around, trying to identify its source, but he could not. To be laughed at was the worst form of torture for him.

He roared: 'Put that model back, you bitch! I worked on it for a year!'

'That's how long I worked on our marriage,' Rebecca replied, and she lifted the model.

Hans yelled: 'I'm ordering you!'

Rebecca heaved the model through the window and let it go.

It turned over in mid-air, so that the board was uppermost and the quadriga below. It seemed to take a long time to drop, and Rebecca felt suspended in a moment of time. Then it hit the paved front yard with a sound like paper being crumpled. The model exploded and the matchsticks scatted outwards in a spray, then came down on the wet stones and stuck, forming a sunburst of destruction. The board lay flat, everything on it crushed to nothing.

Hans stared at it for a long moment, his mouth open in shock.

He recovered himself and pointed a finger up at Rebecca. 'You listen to me,' he said, and his voice was so cold that suddenly she felt afraid. 'You'll regret this, I tell you,' he said. 'You and your family. You'll regret it for the rest of your lives. And that's a promise.'

Then he got back into his car and drove away.

2

For breakfast, George Jakes's mother made him blueberry pancakes and bacon with grits on the side. 'If I eat all this I'll have to wrestle heavyweight,' he said. George weighed a hundred and seventy pounds and had been the welterweight star of the Harvard wrestling team.

'Eat hearty, and give up that wrestling,' she said. 'I didn't raise you to be a dumb jock.' She sat opposite him at the kitchen table and poured cornflakes into a dish.

George was not dumb, and she knew it. He was about to graduate from Harvard Law School. He had finished his final exams, and was as sure as he could be that he had passed. Now he was here at his mother's modest suburban home in Prince George's County, Maryland, outside Washington, DC. 'I want to stay fit,' he said. 'Maybe I'll coach a high-school wrestling team.'

'Now that would be worth doing.'

He looked at her fondly. Jacky Jakes had once been pretty, he knew: he had seen photographs of her as a teenager, when she had aspired to be a movie star. She still looked young: she had the kind of dark-chocolate-coloured skin that did not wrinkle. 'Good black don't crack,' the Negro women said. But the wide mouth that smiled so broadly in those old photos was now turned down at the corners in an expression of grim determination. She had never become an actress. Perhaps she had never had a chance: the few roles for Negro women generally went to light-skinned beauties. Anyway, her career had ended before it began when, at the age of sixteen, she had become pregnant with George. She had gained that careworn face raising him alone for the first decade of his life, working as a waitress and living in a tiny house at the back of Union Station, and drilling him in the need for hard work and education and respectability.

He said: 'I love you, Mom, but I'm still going on the Freedom Ride.'

She pressed her lips together disapprovingly. 'You're twenty-five years old,' she said. 'You please yourself.'

'No, I don't. Every important decision I've ever made, I've discussed with you. I probably always will.'

'You don't do what I say.'

'Not always. But you're still the smartest person I've ever met, and that includes everyone at Harvard.'

'Now you're just buttering me up,' she said, but she was pleased, he could tell.

'Mom, the Supreme Court has ruled that segregation on interstate buses and bus stations is unconstitutional – but those Southerners just defy the law. We have to do something!'

'How do you think it's going to help, this bus ride?'

'We're going to board here in Washington and travel south. We'll sit at the front, use the whites-only waiting rooms, and ask to be served in the whites-only diners; and when people object we're going to tell them that the law is on our side, and they are the criminals and troublemakers.'

'Son, I know you're *right*. You don't have to tell me that. I understand the Constitution. But what do you think will happen?'

'I guess we'll get arrested sooner or later. Then there'll be a trial, and we'll argue our case in front of the world.'

She shook her head. 'I sure hope you get off that easy.'

'What do you mean?'

'You grew up privileged,' she said. 'At least, you did after your white father came back into our lives when you were six years old. You don't know what the world is like for most coloured folk.'

'I wish you wouldn't say that.' George was stung: he got this accusation from black activists, and it annoyed him. 'Having a rich white grandfather pay for my education doesn't make me blind. I know what goes on.'

'Then maybe you know that getting arrested might be the least bad thing that could happen to you. What if things get rough?'

George knew she was right. The Freedom Riders might be risking worse than jail. But he wanted to reassure his mother. 'I've had lessons in passive resistance,' he said. All those chosen for the Freedom Ride were experienced civil rights activists, and they had been put through a special training programme that included role-playing exercises. 'A white man pretending to be a redneck called me nigger, pushed and shoved me, and dragged me out of the room by my heels – and I let him, even though I could have thrown him out the window with one arm.'

'Who was he?'

'A civil rights campaigner.'

'Not the real thing.'

'Of course not. He was acting a part.'

'Okay,' she said, and he knew from her tone that she meant the opposite.

'It's going to be all right, Mom.'

'I'm not saying any more. Are you going to eat those pancakes?'

'Look at me,' George said. 'Mohair suit, narrow tie, hair close-cropped, and shoes shined so bright I could use the toecaps for a shaving mirror.' He usually dressed smartly anyway, but the Riders had been instructed to look ultra-respectable.

'You look fine, except for that cauliflower ear.' George's right ear was deformed from wrestling.

'Who would want to hurt such a nice coloured boy?'

'You have no idea,' she said with sudden anger. 'Those Southern whites, they—' To his dismay, tears came to her eyes. 'Oh, God, I'm just so afraid they'll kill you.'

He reached across the table and took her hand. 'I'll be careful, Mom, I promise.'

She dried her eyes on her apron. George ate some bacon, to please her, but he had little appetite. He was more anxious than he pretended. His mother was not exaggerating. Some civil rights activists had argued against the Freedom Ride idea on the grounds that it would provoke violence.

'You're going to be a long time on that bus,' she said.

'Thirteen days, here to New Orleans. We're stopping every night for meetings and rallies.'

'What have you got to read?'

'The autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi.' George felt he ought to know more about Gandhi, whose philosophy had inspired the civil rights movement's non-violent protest tactics.

She took a book from on top of the refrigerator. 'You might find this a little more entertaining. It's a bestseller.'

They had always shared books. Her father had been a literature professor at a Negro college, and she had been a reader from childhood. When George was a boy he and his mother had read the Bobbsey Twins and the Hardy Boys together, even though all the heroes were white. Now they regularly passed each other books they had enjoyed. He looked at the volume in his hand. Its transparent plastic cover told him it was borrowed from the local public library. '*To Kill a Mockingbird*,' he read. 'This just won a Pulitzer Prize, didn't it?'

'And it's set in Alabama, where you're going.'

'Thanks.'

A few minutes later he kissed his mother goodbye, left the house with a small suitcase in his hand, and caught a bus to Washington. He got off at the downtown Greyhound station. A small group of civil rights activists had gathered in the coffee shop. George knew some of them from the training sessions. They were a mixture of black and white, male and female, old and young. As well as a dozen or so Riders, there were some organizers from the Congress of Racial Equality, a couple of journalists from the Negro press, and a few supporters. CORE had decided to split the group in two, and half would leave from the Trailways bus station across the street. There were no placards and no television cameras: it was all reassuringly low-key.

George greeted Joseph Hugo, a fellow law student, a white guy with prominent blue eyes. Together they had organized a boycott of the Woolworth's lunch counter in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Woolworth's was integrated in most states but segregated in the South, like the bus service. But Joe had a way of disappearing just before a confrontation, and George had him pegged as a well-meaning coward. 'Are you coming with us, Joe?' he asked, trying to keep the scepticism out of his voice.

Joe shook his head. 'I just came by to say good luck.' He smoked long mentholated cigarettes with white filter tips, and he was twitchily tapping one on the edge of a tin ashtray.

'Pity. You're from the South, aren't you?'

'Birmingham, Alabama.'

'They're going to call us outside agitators. It would have been useful to have a Southerner on the bus to prove them wrong.'

'I can't, I have stuff to do.'

George did not press Joe. He was scared enough himself. If he started to discuss the dangers he might talk himself out of going. He looked around the group. He was pleased to see John Lewis, a quietly impressive theology student who was a founding member of the Student Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee, the most radical of the civil rights groups.

Their leader called for attention and began a short statement to the press. While he was speaking George saw, slipping into the coffee shop, a tall white man of forty in a crumpled linen suit. He was handsome though heavy, his face showing the flush of a drinker. He looked like a bus passenger, and no one paid him any attention. He sat next to George and, putting one arm around his shoulders, gave him a brief hug.

This was Senator Greg Peshkov, George's father.

Their relationship was an open secret, known to Washington insiders but never publicly acknowledged. Greg was not the only politician to have such a secret. Senator Strom Thurmond had paid for the college education of a daughter of his family's maid: the girl was rumoured to be his child – which did not stop Thurmond being a rabid segregationist. When Greg had appeared, a total stranger to his six-year-old son, he had asked George to call him Uncle Greg, and they had never found a better euphemism.

Greg was selfish and unreliable but, in his own way, he cared for George. As a teenager George had gone through a long phase of anger with his father, but then he had come to accept him for what he was, figuring that half a father was better than none.

'George,' Greg said now in a low voice, 'I'm worried.'

'You and Mom too.'

'What did she say?'

'She thinks those Southern racists are going to kill us all.'

'I don't think that'll happen, but you could lose your job.'

'Has Mr Renshaw said something?'

'Heck, no, he doesn't know anything about this, yet. But he'll find out soon enough if you get arrested.'

Renshaw, who was from Buffalo, was a childhood friend of Greg's, and senior partner in a prestigious Washington law firm, Fawcett Renshaw. Last summer Greg had got George a vacation job as a law clerk at the firm and, as they both had hoped, the temporary post had led to the offer of a full-time job after graduation. It was a coup: George would be the first Negro to work there as anything other than a cleaner.

George said with a touch of irritation: 'The Freedom Riders are not law breakers. We're trying to get the law enforced. The segregationists are the criminals. I would have expected a lawyer such as Renshaw to understand that.'

'He understands it. But, all the same, he can't hire a man who has been in trouble with the police. Believe me, it would be the same if you were white.'

'But we're on the side of the law!'

'Life is unfair. Student days are over – welcome to the real world.'

The leader called out: 'Everybody, get your tickets and check your bags, please.'

George stood up.

Greg said: 'I can't talk you out of this, can I?'

He looked so forlorn that George longed to be able to give in, but he could not. 'No, I've made up my mind,' he said.

'Then please just try to be careful.'

George was touched. 'I'm lucky to have people who worry about me,' he said. 'I know that.'

Greg squeezed his arm and left quietly.

George stood in line with the others at the window and bought a ticket to New Orleans. He walked to the blue-and-grey bus and handed over his bag to be loaded in the luggage compartment. Painted on the side of the bus were a large greyhound and the slogan: IT'S SUCH A COMFORT TO TAKE THE BUS . . . AND LEAVE THE DRIVING TO US. George got on board.

An organizer directed him to a seat near the front. Others were told to sit in interracial pairs. The driver paid no attention to the Riders, and the regular passengers seemed no more than mildly curious. George opened the book his mother had given him and read the first line.

A moment later the organizer directed one of the women to sit next to George. He nodded to her, pleased. He had met her a couple of times before and liked her. Her name was Maria Summers. She was demurely dressed in a pale-grey cotton frock with a high neckline and a full skirt. She had skin the deep, dark colour of George's mother's, a cute flat nose, and lips that made him think about kissing. He knew she was at Chicago Law School, and like him was about to graduate, so they were probably the same age. He guessed she was not only smart but also determined: she would have to be, to get into Chicago Law with two strikes against her, being both female and black.

He closed his book as the driver started the engine and pulled away. Maria looked down and said: '*To Kill a Mockingbird*. I was in Montgomery, Alabama, last summer.'

Montgomery was the state capital. 'What were you doing there?' George said.

'My father's a lawyer, and he had a client who sued the state. I was working for Daddy during the vacation.'

'Did you win?'

'No. But don't let me keep you from reading.'

'Are you kidding? I can read any time. How often does a guy on a bus have a girl as pretty as you sit down next to him?'

'Oh, my,' she said. 'Someone warned me you were a smooth talker.'

'I'll tell you my secret, if you want.'

'Okay, what is it?'

'I'm sincere.'

She laughed.

He said: 'But please don't spread that around. It would spoil my reputation.'

The bus crossed the Potomac and headed into Virginia on Route 1. 'You're in the South, now, George,' said Maria. 'Are you scared yet?'

'You bet I am.'

'Me, too.'

The highway was a straight, narrow slash across miles of spring-green forest. They passed through small towns where the men had so little to do that they stopped to watch the bus go by. George did not look out of the window much. He learned that Maria had been brought up in a strict churchgoing family, her grandfather a preacher. George said he went to church mainly to please his mother, and Maria confessed that she was the same. They talked all the way to Fredericksburg, fifty miles along the route.

The Riders went quiet as the bus entered the small historic town where white supremacy still reigned. The Greyhound terminal was between two red-brick churches with white doors, but Christianity was not necessarily a good indication in the South. As the bus came to a halt, George saw the restrooms, and was surprised that there were no signs over the doors saying WHITES ONLY and COLORED ONLY.

The passengers got off the bus and stood blinking in the sunshine. Looking more closely, George saw light-coloured patches over the toilet doors, and deduced that the segregation signs had been removed recently.

The Riders put their plan into operation anyway. First, a white organizer went into the scruffy restroom at the back, clearly intended for Negroes. He came out unharmed, but that was the easier part. George had already volunteered to be the black person who defied the rules. 'Here goes,' he said to Maria, and he walked into the clean, freshly painted restroom that had undoubtedly just had its WHITES ONLY sign removed.

There was a young white man inside, combing his pompadour. He glanced at George in the mirror, but said nothing. George was too scared to pee, but he could not just walk out again, so he washed his hands. The young man left and an older man came in and entered a cubicle. George dried his hands on the roller towel. Then there was nothing else to do, so he went out.

The others were waiting. He shrugged and said: 'Nothing. Nobody tried to stop me, no one said anything.'

Maria said: 'I asked for a Coke at the counter and the waitress sold me one. I think someone here has decided to avoid trouble.'

'Is this how it's going to be, all the way to New Orleans?' said George. 'Will they just act as if nothing has happened? Then, when we've gone, impose segregation again? That would kind of cut the ground from under our feet!'

'Don't worry,' said Maria. 'I've met the people who run Alabama. Believe me, they're not that smart.'