

The Girl on the Cart

Berlin, 1920

Frieda Stengel woke from a dream filled with tiny kicks to find her nightdress and her bedding soaking wet.

It was past dawn but the coming of day had done little to relieve the darkness and gloom of the long freezing night that had preceded it. Her breath hung heavily in the dull light as she shook her husband awake.

‘Wolfgang,’ she whispered. ‘My waters have broken.’

He sat up in bed with a jolt.

‘Right!’ he said, staring about wildly, struggling to surface. ‘Good! Everything’s fine. We have a plan.’

‘I’m not in labour yet,’ Frieda said soothingly. ‘No pain. No cramps. But they’re on their way, that’s for sure.’

‘Keep calm,’ Wolfgang said, tumbling out of bed and tripping over the boots he’d left close at hand for just such an awakening. ‘We absolutely have a plan.’

Frieda was expecting twins and so had been guaranteed a place in a hospital for the delivery. The Berlin Buch medical school was several kilometres across the city from Friedrichshain, where they lived. As she struggled into her clothes Frieda could only hope that the babies were in no hurry.

Wolfgang took his wife’s arm and they groped their way down the five flights of stairs from their apartment to the street below. There was a lift but it was ancient and rickety and they had decided that the tiny iron

cage was not to be trusted for such a crucial journey.

‘Imagine if we got stuck and you had the babies between floors,’ Wolfgang joked. ‘It’s only licensed for three people! That bitch of a concierge would probably report us to the housing collective.’

The sky that lowered over the young couple as they stepped out on to the icy pavement was so dark and so grey that it might have been forged from iron in the furnaces of the famous Krupps foundry in Essen and then bolted above Berlin with rivets of steel. Berlin seemed always to be huddling beneath such gunmetal skies. The war winters and those that followed had been cruel indeed and as the wet and frozen early morning workers hurried past the young couple, bent low in the teeth of biting eastern winds, it was hard for Frieda and Wolfgang to remember that there had ever been any other season in Berlin but winter. That there had once been a time when every tree on Unter Den Linden had dazzled in garish bloom and up and down the Tiergarten old gentlemen had removed their jackets and girls had gone without stockings.

But spring and summer were a distant memory in that February of 1920, a dream of better times before the catastrophe of the Great War exploded over Germany. Now the skies seemed always to have been beaten out of cannons and to thunder as if just beyond the horizon in the fields of Belgium and France and across the endless Russian steppes real cannons still roared.

There were of course no taxis to be found even if they could have afforded one, and inevitably the trams were on one of their regular strikes. The Stengels had therefore arranged to borrow a hand cart from the local greengrocer.

Herr Sommer was waiting for them when they arrived

outside his shop, with the cart and a bouquet of carrots tied up with ribbons.

‘Pink and blue,’ Sommer said, ‘because Wolf assures me you’re going to have a boy and girl. An instant family, all the bother done with in one go.’

‘They’ll both be boys,’ Frieda replied firmly. ‘So watch out for trouble, they’ll be pinching your apples in a few years!’

‘If I have any apples,’ the grocer replied ruefully as Wolfgang began to push the cart away, slipping and clanking across the icy stones and cobbles.

Just then there was a burst of automatic gunfire somewhere in a nearby street, but they ignored it, as they also ignored the shouts and the screams that followed the clattering boots and the sound of breaking glass.

Gunfire, boots and breaking glass were just the sounds of the city to Wolfgang and Frieda, they didn’t really notice them any more. As commonplace in Berlin as the cry of the newspaper vendor, the bird song in the parks and the rattle of the trains on the elevated railway. Everybody ignored them, keeping their heads down, hurrying along, hoping not to be delayed in getting to whatever queue it was they were planning to join.

‘Fucking idiots,’ a one-legged veteran muttered as he scuttled past on his crutches.

‘You got that right,’ Wolfgang replied to the back of the man’s shaven head and little army cap.

The newspapers called these ongoing disturbances a ‘revolution’ but if it was a revolution it was of a peculiar German kind. Civic authority continued to function and business was still done. Kids still played on the pavements. Secretaries were at their typing machines by eight thirty. The police still checked the licence discs on parked cars,

even while their owners were in a nearby cellar kicking somebody to death or being kicked to death themselves.

Berlin simply carried on with its own affairs while Communist gangs and right-wing *Freikorps* militia killed each other during their lunch breaks.

Frieda and Wolfgang carried on too, or at least Wolfgang did, sweating over the cart handles, despite the cold, as he pushed his wife through the rubble-strewn streets, swearing and cursing his way around the occasional barricade until finally arriving before the splendid steps of the famous five-thousand-bed teaching hospital on Lindenberger Weg, the largest in all Europe.

Wolfgang pulled up his cart, drawing deep, painful breaths of freezing air, and took down Frieda's bag.

'Heavy enough, isn't it?' he gasped. 'Do you really need all these books?'

'I might be in for a while,' Frieda replied, sliding herself heavily over the tailboard and down on to the pavement, wincing as her swollen ankles took the weight. 'I need to get some work done.'

'Well, I'm with you on that, Fred,' Wolfgang agreed, treating himself to a smoke. 'You married a musician. A musician who at some point hopes to find himself living in the style to which he would like to become accustomed.'

'You're a *composer*, Wolf.' Frieda smiled. 'Not just a musician. I told my parents I was marrying the next Mendelssohn.'

'God help us, I hope not. Too many damn tunes. *Kaffee und Kuchen* music ain't for me, Freddy, you know that.'

'People like tunes. They *pay* for tunes.'

'Which is why I grabbed myself a nice clever girl when I had the chance. Every jazz man needs a besotted lady doctor to look after him.'

Wolfgang took Frieda around her huge waist and kissed her.

Frieda laughed, disengaging herself. 'I'm not besotted, I'm barely tolerating. And I'm not a doctor either. Not yet, there's the little matter of my final exams. And be careful with my books. They're all borrowed and they fine you if there's even a tiny crease in a page.'

Frieda was studying medicine at the University of Berlin. She even had a grant of sorts, a fact her deeply conservative parents still had difficulty believing.

'You mean they *pay* for your education? Even *women*?' her father had enquired incredulously.

'They have to, Pa. Most of the boys are dead.'

'But all the same. Women doctors?' her father replied, confusion reigning behind the solid, timeless certainty of his close-cropped Prussian moustache. 'Who would trust them?'

'Who will have a choice?' Frieda countered. 'It's called the twentieth century, Pa, you really ought to join some time, it's been going two decades already.'

'You're wrong,' her father said with sombre gravity, 'it began only recently, when his Imperial Highness abdicated. God only knows where or when it will end.'

Frieda's father was a policeman and her mother a proud housewife. He brought in the salary, she ran the home and raised the children. Their attitudes had been formed under the Kaiser, and the political and cultural earthquake of the post-war Weimar Republic had left them reeling. Neither of them understood a government which while unable to stop gunfights on the high streets concerned itself with sexual equality.

Or a son-in-law who was happy to begin a family despite not being able to afford to pay for a taxi to take his wife to the hospital.

‘I think if Papa saw you pushing his pregnant daughter to her confinement in a grocer’s cart, he’d take out his gun and shoot you,’ Frieda remarked as they laboured up the hospital steps together.

‘He nearly shot me for *getting* you pregnant,’ Wolfgang replied, searching in the pockets of his jacket for the hospital admission papers.

‘If you hadn’t married me he would have done.’

‘Right, this is it. We’re here.’

All around them sick, cold people crowded, bustling in and out of the great doors of the hospital.

‘I’ll come back this evening,’ Wolfgang said. ‘Make sure there’s three of you by then.’

Frieda gripped his hand.

‘My God, Wolf,’ she whispered, ‘when you put it like that . . . Today there’s just you and me, tomorrow there’ll be you, me . . . and our children.’

A gust of wind caused her to shiver. The harsh, rain-speckled chill penetrating her threadbare clothing. Once more Wolfgang folded her in his arms, no longer playfully but this time passionately, almost desperately. Two, small, cold people huddled together beneath the unforgiving granite columns of the enormous civic building.

Two young hearts beating together.

Two more, younger still, warm in Frieda’s belly.

Four hearts, joined by love in the harsh squalls of another, greater heart. One made of stone and iron. Berlin, heart of Germany.

‘That’s right,’ Wolfgang replied. ‘You, me and our children. The best and most beautiful thing that there ever was.’

And for once he spoke without smiling or trying to make a joke.

‘Yes, that ever was,’ said Frieda quietly.

‘Well then. Let’s get to it, Fred. It’s too bloody cold to be standing around being sippy.’

There was no question of Wolfgang waiting at the hospital. Very few expectant fathers in post-war Berlin had the leisure to hang about outside maternity wards waiting to hand out cigars in the traditional manner. Herr Sommer needed his cart back and Wolfgang, like everybody else in the city that terrible winter, needed to begin queuing.

‘There’s meat at Horst’s,’ he said, as he began to descend the steps to where he had left the cart. ‘Lamb and pork. I’m going to get some for you if I have to pawn my piano. You’ll need the iron if you’re going to feed our little son and daughter.’

‘Our little *sons*,’ Frieda replied. ‘It’ll be boys. I’m telling you, a woman knows. Paulus and Otto. Boys. Lucky, lucky boys.’

‘Why lucky?’ Wolfgang called back. ‘I mean, apart from having the most beautiful mum in the world?’

‘Because they’re *twins*. They’ve got each other, Wolf. This is a tough town in a tough world. But no matter how tough it gets – our boys will always have each other.’

Tea and Biscuits

London, 1956

Stone stared at the hessian-covered table in front of him. At the teacups and the biscuits and the block of yellow notepaper with the fountain pen on top. He focused on the black Bakelite telephone with its sharp angular edges and its

frayed, double-twisted, brown fabric cord. It must have dated from the early 1930s.

What had he been doing when that cord was new?

Fighting, no doubt. Or running in terror along some Berlin pavement looking for an alley to dodge down. He and his brother chasing each other's heels, two teenage boys in mortal fear for their lives.

Stone's eye followed the cord down off the table, across the slightly warped, ruby-coloured linoleum and into a large black box screwed to the skirting board. He fancied he could hear the box humming but it might have been the distant traffic on the Cromwell Road.

He shifted nervously in his seat. He had never quite got used to being interviewed in bare rooms by government officials. Even now he could not quite persuade himself that he was safe. Even now some part of him expected violence.

Except of course that this was England, they didn't do that sort of thing here. Some of Stone's more left-leaning acquaintances sneered when he said that. But then they had never had the misfortune to live in a country where sudden and absolute violence was the norm and not the exception.

Stone looked once more at his interrogators. A classic pair. One short and rather plump, balding, with an officious little soup stain of a moustache, his beady eyes flicking constantly at the biscuits. The other not much taller but thinner, standing in the corner of the bare windowless room, watching through slightly hooded eyes. It felt to Stone like he was in a scene from a movie. That he was being questioned by Peter Lorre while Humphrey Bogart looked on inscrutably, keeping his own counsel.

'You are travelling to Berlin in the hope of meeting up with your brother's widow.'

This was the second time the shorter man, Peter Lorre, had asked this question.

Or was it a statement? It was certainly true. But how did they know?

They had read Dagmar's letter. Obviously.

'*Presumed* widow,' Stone replied, evading the question. A lifetime's experience had taught him that it was usually wise to withhold any information from the authorities until forced to divulge it.

'You don't think your brother's dead?'

'There has never been any actual proof of it.'

'You mean a corpse?'

'I suppose so.'

'Your brother is certainly *presumed* dead,' Lorre replied, finally capitulating to the biscuit plate and choosing a shortbread finger. 'Killed by the Russians during the battle for Moscow in 1941.'

'That is what I was told,' Stone said, 'after the war, by the East German authorities.'

'Have you any reason to doubt it?'

'No. None at all. I've always hoped, that's all. My brother generally had a plan. He would have been a hard man to kill.'

'The Waffen SS tended to be made up of hard men to kill. At least until they started recruiting boys. Your brother joined in 1940, didn't he?'

Was there a hint of a sneer? Stone felt his anger rising. What right did this smug little man, munching on his shortbread finger, have to judge? He hadn't been where his brother had been. Where his mother and father had been. And Dagmar.

Again the guilt.

Survivor guilt, the shrinks called it.

‘My brother wasn’t a Nazi,’ Stone stated firmly.

‘Of course he wasn’t,’ Peter Lorre replied, and now the sneer was unmistakable. ‘None of them were Nazis, were they? Or so they all claim *now*. And the Waffen SS wasn’t really *proper* SS anyway, was it? They never ran the camps. You can’t blame *them*.’

‘My brother was married to a Jew,’ Stone said.

‘Yes, we know. Dagmar Stengel, née Fischer. You are travelling to Berlin to meet her. Is that not the case?’

Stone stared at the cups and saucers once more. He didn’t like telling them his business, but it was clearly a rhetorical question and he didn’t want to be caught in a lie.

‘Yes. Dagmar Fischer,’ he admitted.

‘Dagmar Stengel.’

‘I knew her as Dagmar Fischer. She married my brother after I left Germany.’

‘When did you last see Mrs Stengel?’

Stone drew deeply on his cigarette and closed his eyes. How often had he relived that moment? The whistling and shunting of the trains. The smell of her hair. The martial music on the loudspeakers that made it so hard to whisper the things he needed to say.

‘In 1939,’ he answered.

‘In Berlin?’

‘Yes. In Berlin.’

‘And after the war? Did you try to find her?’

‘Of course. I tried to find all my family.’

‘You were in Germany?’

‘Yes. With the army. I worked in the Displaced Persons camps, with the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. You know all this, it’s in my records.’

‘So,’ Peter Lorre observed through a mouth filled with biscuit, ‘well placed to look for an elusive Jewess?’

Elusive Jewess. Such a phrase. The little man clearly had no idea of the casual contempt and innate suspicion contained within it. ‘An *elusive Jewess*?’ Stone repeated. ‘What the hell do you mean by that?’

‘I mean Frau Stengel of course.’

‘Then bloody well say so.’

There was a moment’s silence.

‘Frau Stengel then?’ Lorre resumed. ‘You didn’t find her?’

‘No.’

‘What happened to her?’

‘I never found out.’

‘One more anonymous victim of the Holocaust?’

‘I presumed so.’

‘But you now think she survived?’

Stone paused for a moment, considering his reply.

‘I have recently allowed myself to *hope* that she did.’

‘And why would that be?’

Stone was trying very hard not to become angry. Getting angry never helped. Not with the sort of people who sat behind green hessian-covered tables with cups of tea and empty yellow notepads.

‘What is this about?’ Stone asked. ‘I don’t understand why you want to know, or why I should tell you for that matter.’

‘It’s very simple,’ the plump man replied, breaking a second biscuit in two and taking the larger half. ‘If you cooperate with us you’ll soon be on your way. If you don’t, then there’s any amount of red tape we can tie you up with pretty much indefinitely. You might not get to Berlin until the year 2000, by which time you will be a very old man and Berlin will long since have been reduced to a pile of smouldering radioactive rubble. So just be a sensible chap and answer our questions. Why do you now hope that Dagmar Stengel is alive?’

Stone shrugged. The supercilious little swine knew anyway.

‘Because she contacted me.’

‘Out of the blue?’

‘Yes. Out of the blue.’

‘After seventeen years?’

‘That’s right.’

‘And you’re sure it *was* Frau Stengel?’

That was the rub. He *was* sure. He was absolutely sure. The writing, the tone, and the memories the note contained. And yet . . .

‘She said she’d survived most of the war in Berlin as what they called a “submarine”,’ Stone replied, avoiding Lorre’s question. ‘But the Gestapo picked her up in June ’44 and shipped her to Birkenau. It seems she escaped.’

‘A rare feat indeed.’

‘Such things happened, rarely, but they happened. She says she got out during the *Sonderkommando* revolt at Crematorium IV and saw out the war fighting with Polish Partisans. After that, the Soviets put her back in a camp along with the rest of the surviving Polish resistance.’

‘Quite a story.’

But not impossible. Dagmar had been tough and resourceful for all her refined manners.

‘I can see you found it hard to credit,’ the plump man said, looking steadily at Stone. ‘Not surprising, after so long. However, I am here to tell you that the story is true. Or at least its conclusion is. Dagmar Stengel is alive and well and living in East Berlin.’

The surge of joy he felt was like the sudden, heady rush that sometimes overtook him in his dreams. When it was he and not his brother on the beach at Wannsee entwined in Dagmar Fischer’s rain-dappled arms.

‘How do you know?’ Stone asked, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

‘We know lots of things.’

Stone banged the table with his fist. The cups rattled. The ancient telephone receiver jumped in its cradle. This was his business, not theirs. His family. His life. How dare they act as if it was some game!

‘How do you know!’ he demanded. ‘Tell me!’

‘Sources,’ the plump man replied, ignoring Stone’s passion and idly succumbing to the other half of his second biscuit, ‘*confidential* sources.’

‘Are you MI6?’

‘MI6 does not exist, Mr Stengel.’

‘Stone! My name is Stone. It’s been Stone for fifteen bloody years!’

‘Yes, you changed it, didn’t you?’

Again a tiny sneer. This time not for the German who claimed not to have been a Nazi but for the sneaky Jew who had changed his name to hide his Jewey-ness. That was the Brits, they liked it both ways. Just because they’d saved the world for decency and fair play didn’t mean the bloody Yids could start getting above themselves.

‘I changed my name,’ Stone snapped, ‘because the army advised me to. The *British* army. If I’d been taken in action and they’d found out I was Jewish, I’d have been gassed.’

‘All right. Keep your shirt on,’ the little man said with a patronizing smirk. ‘We knew that.’

‘You know a bloody lot.’

‘We try to.’

‘Because you’re MI6,’ Stone said. ‘The Secret Service.’

‘Can’t tell you that, can we, Mr Stone? Then it wouldn’t be secret.’

Peter Lorre smiled and wiped his mouth, clearly pleased with his little joke.

Stone should have guessed it from the start. Just the layout of the room was proof enough. Bare, save for a table, tea, biscuits, paper and a phone. Not a book, not a pamphlet, not a memo. No chart on the wall, no waste-paper bin under the table, not even a paperclip. What normal office was ever like that? Even the police had posters on their walls.

And then there was the double act. The chatty one, the silent one. Classic, of course. Such a cliché. He really should have guessed. They were spooks all right.

And they said Dagmar was definitely alive.

Once more the surge of joy.

She'd survived. Berlin. The camps. The gulags. She'd survived them all.

And through all that dreadful darkness she had remembered him. He who had loved her.

He who still loved her.

Who would always love her.

Twins

Berlin, 1920

It turned out that Frieda was right, she was carrying two boys, but the labour was long and difficult and only one of them survived it, the other choked on a twisted cord.

'I'm sorry, Frau Stengel,' the doctor said. 'The second child is stillborn.'

Then they left her alone.