

ONE

6 April 1985

“Mum’s in trouble.”

Dieter fumbled with the receiver and struggled onto one elbow. The phone call had interrupted that awful recurring dream that he had experienced over so many years and it had once again left him feeling disorientated, unsettled and even worse, guilty. It was always the same.

“Who is this?” Dieter asked sleepily, his eyes gritty as he rubbed them blindly in the dark.

“It’s Otto...” Pause. “Your brother.” Dieter exhaled. He couldn’t remember when last they had spoken. “Jesus, Otto, do you know what time it is in Hong Kong?”

“I’m sorry, I know it’s early, but this is really serious.”

Through the Venetian blinds Dieter could see a filleted image of dawn shimmering across the water of Repulse Bay, where he had lived since the late 1960s. He loved Hong Kong: city of enterprise, and for him personally, city of escape.

“What’s wrong with Mum?” Dieter asked.

Otto sighed heavily. “Nothing wrong with Mum, per se.”

“What then?” Dieter said irritably.

Otto paused, as though mustering courage. “They found a body in the garden of our old house, Dieter.”

Dieter's skin felt clammy as a vision burst forth instantaneously from the vagueness of his dream, churning his stomach.

"A body?"

The sleeping figure under the duvet beside Dieter stirred, and in a low voice asked who it was. Dieter hastily covered the mouthpiece.

"Who's that?" Otto asked.

Dieter glared at his bed companion and pressed a finger against his lips.

"When did this happen?" Dieter asked.

"Mum's just phoned me."

"You're talking about a... a human body are you?"

"Yes, but I don't know the details. Mum's pretty shaken by it all... she didn't say much."

"But I don't understand... where was it found?" Dieter said.

"The big tree, remember it?"

"Uh-huh, the camelthorn."

"Mum said a storm blew it down, and the roots must have exposed... I don't know... bones."

Silence for a moment, just the sound of Dieter's breathing and a distant foghorn in the bay.

"Well, who is to say it has anything to do with Mum?" Dieter said emphatically. "I mean, it could have been there long before we arrived."

Otto rubbed his temples. He was sitting at his desk in Durham watching his children, Max and Karl, replenish the birdfeeders under the vigilant gaze of their mother, Sabine, as darkness enveloped the grounds of his riverside garden. The boys looked up and, seeing him through the window, waved animatedly.

Little Karl dropped the birdseed in his enthusiasm, spilling it all over the frosty grass.

“Mum and Dad built that house, Dieter, and planted the tree,” Otto said.

“What are you saying? It’s probably just a local Herero, been there for years before we even arrived.”

“God, I don’t know. It’s all such a shock.” Otto paused. “I’m really worried about Mum.”

“Do they know who it is – the body, I mean?” Dieter asked.

“I don’t think so, but Lüderitz isn’t a big town, so...”

“Yeah, maybe. What happens next?”

“Well, the police are investigating. Mum thinks they may want to interview us as well.”

“Us?”

“You, me and Ingrid.”

“Why?”

“I think we should fly out to support Mum,” Otto said.

“What, to Lüderitz? Christ, I haven’t been there for years.”

“Not since Dad’s funeral, actually.”

“That’s a cheap shot, Otto. I am very busy here, you know that – with the business I’ve built up and everything. I’m in the middle of a massive merger. I don’t have much idle time on my hands.”

“You mean, unlike me?” Otto finished, bristling. Silence amplified the static waves of interference on the phone line.

“You could at least call her, Dieter.”

Dieter sighed. “Yes, of course I will. What time is it in Lüderitz now?”

“Early evening. How are things?” Otto asked, to avoid another pause.

“Fine, fine. What about Sabine and the kids?”

Otto never went into detail. There was little point in telling him that Max was excelling on the piano and Karl had just started at school, because from one rare contact to another Dieter could never remember which child was Karl and which one was Max. Birthdays came and went unnoticed and Otto sometimes had to make a point of reminding them who Uncle Dieter was.

“They’re all well thank you. And... er... how about you?”

“Still single.”

“Not found the right girl yet?” Otto said.

Dieter snorted. “Not likely to, either.”

“I’ll phone Ingrid and tell her, if you prefer,” Otto said.

“Do what you like, Otto, but I won’t be calling her.”

“Have you two still not made peace?” Otto said, exasperated.

“Last time we spoke, years ago, she called me a parasite or something, living off the success of others.” Dieter made a guttural sound of disapproval. “The nerve – how many sugar daddy alimony settlements has she pocketed up to now?”

Otto was not in the mood for idle conversation and neither, it appeared, was Dieter. With the phone call terminated Otto sat in silent contemplation. He had always felt that his older brother dismissed his work as a general practitioner. It seemed to him that Dieter believed that his fortune had been forged out of determined hard work, whereas Otto was merely a public servant living off the state.

Otto heard his family entering the house, taking refuge from the biting cold outside, stamping their feet and removing coats, hats and scarves – familiar sounds of family life that cast his mind back to his childhood home in Lüderitz, and fragmented images from so many years ago.

How on earth could a body have lain buried beneath their feet all that time? To think that he and Dieter used to climb

that very tree, the desert-loving camelthorn, dig holes all around it, playing with their lead soldiers and building makeshift dams in the sandy soil. He shivered. How close might they unwittingly have been to a truly macabre discovery?

Then an uncomfortable thought entered his mind. Had Mother known as she watched them playing outside? What if it was not pride and contentment that they had seen on her face as she watched through the kitchen window while they dug holes and played? What if it had been anxiety, apprehension? Could they have known the difference at their young age? And what about Father? Well, he was hardly at home often enough to have even seen them.

There surely must be a rational explanation for all of this. Dieter was probably right: Lüderitz had existed for at least sixty years before their arrival and the body could have been there all along. It was in all probability a local Herero.

“Daddy!” came the shrill call of an enthusiastic youngster bounding up the stairs.

Otto glanced at his watch. It was nearly 8pm, still early afternoon in New York: plenty of time yet to call Ingrid. For now he would play with Karl and try to banish the worries from his mind.

A beaming young blonde boy sprinted into the room with a flash of his red and yellow striped socks, flinging himself into Otto’s arms.

“Did you feed the birds?” Otto asked.

“Yes. Mummy said they must be really hungry.”

Otto smiled and kissed Karl’s fair head. The warmth and love of his children constantly surprised him. It was not something he had been accustomed to in a family. He never understood why.

T W O

29 July 1945

Resembling a mythical sea serpent amidst the clinging fog, the rusting grey conning tower of U-977 broke through the mercurial waters off Lüderitz, followed soon after by the rounded bow. When the hatch opened it was as though a seal had been broken, allowing the salty sea air to rush into the malodorous metal tube, submerged for nearly sixty days since hastily leaving the North Sea.

Several bearded submariners wearing soiled blue denim Kriegsmarine jackets emerged onto the small deck of the conning tower and peered through the swirling fog. One of them began to send a coded message with a shuttered signal lamp. No-one spoke. Submariners were accustomed to maintaining prolonged silences, as if they had forsaken the art of idle conversation. The solitary sound of the bracing South Atlantic waters lapping against the grey hull, streaked with rust, remained unchallenged.

“There it is!” one of the men said, pointing to a flashing light dimly visible off the starboard bow.

“I see it. Did they use the password?”

“They did, Oberleutnant.”

“Signal for them to approach immediately and call the doctor from his bunk.”

“Yes, Oberleutnant.”

The commander peered over the waters surrounding his vessel with narrowed eyes, fidgety body language betraying his discomfort as his dirty fingers twiddled his unkempt beard. The flashing signal light drew closer until a small rowing boat began to emerge from the shadowy protection of the fog. Now the sound of water lapping against the submarine hull was joined by the rhythmical splash of oars.

A man wearing a black leather jacket and carrying a brown canvas holdall appeared on the conning tower.

He took a deep breath as he contemplated the approaching rowing boat. Then his searching eyes settled on the commander’s unwashed face as the two men squared up to each other. They shook hands firmly.

“Oberleutnant Schäffer, I am forever indebted to you.”

“Please, the war is over now. Call me Heinz,” Schäffer said.

The two men seemed oblivious to all around them.

“May God be with you in your new home, Doctor. Good luck.”

“Thank you, Heinz.” The doctor forced a little smile. “My friends call me Ernst.”

The two men stared into each other’s eyes as though letting go might signal the end of everything they knew in this world.

“I will admit Lüderitz looks a little foreboding at first appearances,” Ernst said.

“They don’t call it the Skeleton Coast for nothing,” Schäffer replied with a little chuckle.

“When do you expect to reach Argentina?”

“We should be there by mid–August, if the engines don’t fail again.”

The two men nodded to each other, still gripping each other's hand, afraid to let go, to break with the familiarity of the past and embrace the uncertainty of the unknown. By this time the rowing boat had drawn up to U-977 and bumped against its hull on the ocean swell. Three men in civilian clothing were huddled together in the wooden vessel, one holding aloft a shaded lamp that scattered halos in the swirling fog. Ernst clambered down the steel rungs of the ladder, his boots scraping on the metal. Schäffer tossed his canvas holdall down to him and raised a hand to wave.

"Where are you headed?" one of the men in the rowing boat shouted up to Schäffer.

"I cannot tell you," Schäffer yelled back. Then, in a softer voice, "Better that you don't know. Look after Dr Adermann, he is a good man."

"I wish you all a safe journey. Goodbye Heinz," Ernst shouted as he settled into the rowing boat.

Schäffer rested his arms on the metal railing and watched Ernst, sitting with the canvas bag in his lap, looking up somewhat mournfully at the faces not only of his companions of the past two months, but of a life he was leaving behind, forever. The small rowing boat began to move away as the oars sliced into the water.

"Goodbye Ernst."

Ernst waved. He looked so insignificant in the rowing boat. How things change, Schäffer thought to himself.