

September 1946

I

‘The Beast is here. I’ve seen him. Berti’s seen him. Dietmar’s seen him. With his black fur like a fancy lady’s coat. And those teeth like piano keys. We have to kill him. If we don’t, who will? The Tommies? The Yankees? The Russkies? The French? None of them will, because they’re too busy looking for other things. They want this and they want that. They’re like dogs fighting over a bone that’s got no meat on it. We have to do it ourselves. Get the Beast before he gets us. Then everything will be better.’

The boy Ozi readjusted his headgear as he led the others through the pulverized landscape of the Tommy-bombed city. He wore the English hard-helmet he’d stolen from the back of a truck near the Alster. Although it was not as stylish as the American or even the Russian helmets he had in his collection, it fitted him the best and helped him swear in English when he wore it, just like the Tommy sergeant he’d seen shouting at the prisoners at Hamburg’s Dammtor station: ‘Oi! Put your fucking hands up. Fucking up, I said! Where I can see them! Dumb bloody fucking Huns.’ Just for a moment those men had failed to raise their hands; not because they didn’t understand, but because they were too weak from lack of food. Dumb-Bloody-Fucking-Huns! Below the neck, Ozi’s clothes were a hybrid fashion of make-do invention where rags and riches jumbled together: the dressing gown of a dandy; the cardigan of an old maid; the collarless shirt of a grandfather; the rolled-up trousers of a storm trooper tied with the belt of a clerk’s necktie;

and the shoes, shredded at the toe, of a long-gone station-master.

The ferals – the whites of their eyes wide with fear and accentuated by dirty faces – followed their leader through the shattered scree. Weaving around the moraines of brick-rock, they came to a clearing where the conical rocket of a church spire lay on its side. Ozi raised a hand to halt the others and reached inside his dressing gown for his Luger. He sniffed the air:

‘He’s in here. I can smell him. Can you smell him?’

The ferals sniffed like twitchy rabbits. Ozi pressed up against the lopped-off spire and inched towards its open end, gun out, guiding him like a divining rod. He paused and tapped the cone with it, indicating that the Beast was probably within. And then: a flash of black as something bolted from inside out into the open. The ferals cowered but Ozi stepped out, took a wide stance, closed one eye, aimed and fired.

‘Die, Beast!’

The shot was muffled in the low, muggy atmosphere, and a tinkling, metallic ricochet threw back the message that he’d missed his target.

‘Did you hit him?’

Ozi lowered the gun and pushed it into his belt.

‘We’ll get him another day,’ he said. ‘Let’s look for some food.’

‘We’ve found a house for you, sir.’

Captain Wilkins stubbed out his cigarette and placed his yellowed finger on the map of Hamburg that was pinned to the wall behind his desk. He traced a line west from the pin-head marking their temporary headquarters, away from the bombed-out districts of Hammerbrook and St Georg, over

St Pauli and Altona, towards the old fishing suburb of Blankenese, where the Elbe veered up and debouched into the North Sea. The map – pulled from a pre-war German guidebook – failed to show that these conurbations were now a phantom city comprised only of ash and rubble.

‘It’s a bloody great palace by the river. Here.’ Wilkins’s finger circled the crook at the end of the Elbchaussee, the road running parallel to the great river. ‘I think it’ll be to your taste, sir.’

The word belonged to another world: a world of surplus and civil comfort. In the last few months, Lewis’s tastes had narrowed to a simple checklist of immediate and basic needs: 2,500 calories a day, tobacco, warmth. ‘A bloody great palace by the river’ suddenly seemed to him like the demand of a frivolous king.

‘Sir?’

Lewis had ‘gone off’ again; off into that unruly parliament inside his head, a place where, more and more, he found himself in hot debate with colleagues.

‘Isn’t there someone living in it already?’

Wilkins wasn’t sure how to respond. His CO was a man of excellent repute with an impeccable war record, but he seemed to have these quirks, a way of seeing things differently. The young captain resorted to reciting what he had read in the manual: ‘These people have little moral compass, sir. They are a danger to us and to themselves. They need to know who is in charge. They need leadership. A firm but fair hand.’

Lewis nodded and waved the captain on, saving his words. The cold and the calories had taught him to ration these.

‘The house belongs to a family called Lubert. Loo-bear-t. Hard “T”. The wife died in the bombings. Her family were bigwigs in the food trade. Connections with Blohm and Voss.’

They also owned a series of flour mills. Herr Lubert was an architect. He's not been cleared yet but we think he's a probable white or, at worst, an acceptable shade of grey; no obvious direct Nazi connections.'

'Bread.'

'Sir?'

Lewis had not eaten all day and had taken the short leap from 'flour mill' to bread without thinking; the bread he pictured in his head was suddenly more present, more real, than the captain standing at the map on the other side of the desk.

'Go on – the family.' Lewis made an effort to look as if he was listening, nodding and setting his jaw at an inquisitive tilt.

Wilkins continued: 'Lubert's wife died in '43. In the firestorm. One child – a daughter. Frieda, fifteen years old. They have some staff – a maid, a cook and a gardener. The gardener is a first-rate handyman – ex-Wehrmacht. The family have some relatives they can move in with. We can billet the staff, or you can take them on. They're clean enough.'

The process by which the soul-sifters of the Control Commission's Intelligence Branch assessed cleanliness was the *Fragebogen*, or questionnaire: 133 questions to determine the degree of a German citizen's collaboration with the regime. From this, they were categorized into three colour-coded groups – black, grey and white, with intermediate shades for clarity – and dispatched accordingly.

'They're expecting the requisition. It's just a matter of you viewing the place then turfing them out. I don't think you'll be disappointed, sir.'

'You think they will be disappointed, Captain?'

'They?'

‘The Luberts? When I turf them out.’

‘They’re not allowed the luxury of disappointment, sir. They’re Germans.’

‘Of course. How silly of me.’ Lewis left it there. Any more such questions and this efficient young officer with his shiny Sam Browne and perfect puttees would have him reported to Psychiatric.

He stepped from the overheated British Military Detachment Headquarters into the premature cold of a late-September day. He blew vapour and pulled on the kid gloves that Captain McLeod, the American cavalry officer, had given him in the town hall at Bremen the day the Allies had announced the division lines of the new Germany. ‘Looks like you get the bum deal,’ he had said, reading the directive. ‘The French get the wine, we get the view and you guys get the ruins.’

Lewis had lived among the ruins for so long now he had stopped noticing them. His uniform was fitting garb for a governor in this new, quadripartite Germany – a kind of internationalized mufti which, in the midst of post-war disorientation and re-regulation, passed without comment.

The American gloves were prized but it was his Russian-front sheepskin coat that gave him the most pleasure, its provenance traceable back via the American to a Luftwaffe lieutenant who had, in turn, taken it from a captured Red Army colonel. He’d be wearing it soon enough if this weather kept up.

It was a relief to get away from Wilkins. The young officer was one of the new brigade of civil servants that made up the Control Commission, Germany, a bloated force of clipboard men who saw themselves as the architects of the reconstruction. Few of these people had seen action – or even a German – and this allowed them to pronounce and

theorize their way to decisions with confidence. Wilkins would make major before long.

Lewis took a silver-plated cigarette case from his coat and opened it, catching the light from the sun on its clear, buffed surface. He polished it regularly. The case was the only material treasure he had with him, a parting gift from Rachael given to him at the gates of the last proper house he'd lived in – in Amersham, three years ago. 'Think of me when you smoke' was her instruction, and this he had tried to do, fifty, sixty times a day for three years; a little ritual to keep the flame of love alive. He lit a cigarette and thought about that flame. With distance and time it had been easy to make it seem hotter than it was. The remembrance of their love-making and of his wife's olive-smooth, curvy flesh had sustained him through the cold and lonely months (her flesh seemingly growing smoother and curvier as the war went by). But he had grown so comfortable with this imagined, ersatz version of his wife that the imminent prospect of actually touching and smelling her unsettled him.

A sleek black Mercedes 540K with a British pennant on the bonnet pulled up in front of the steps of the headquarters. The Union Jack at the wing mirror was the only thing that looked out of place. Despite its associations, Lewis liked this vehicle, its lines and the silky purr of its engine. It was appointed like an ocean-going liner, and the ultra-careful driving style of his driver – Herr Schroeder – added to the impression of it being like a ship. No amount of British insignia could de-Germanize this car, though. British military personnel were built for the bumbling, bulbous Austin 16, not these brute-beautiful, world-conquering machines.

Lewis walked down the steps and gave his driver a half-salute.

Schroeder, a reedy, unshaven man wearing a black cap and

cape, leapt from the driver's seat and walked briskly round to the rear passenger door. He bowed once in Lewis's direction and, with a flourish of his cape, opened the door.

'The front seat is fine, Herr Schroeder.'

Schroeder seemed agitated at Lewis's self-demotion. '*Nein*, Herr Kommandant.'

'Really. *Sehr gut*,' Lewis repeated.

'*Bitte*, Herr Oberst.'

Schroeder clunked the rear door shut and held up a hand, still not wanting Lewis to lift a finger.

Lewis stepped back, playing the game, but the German's deference depressed him: these were the motions of a defeated man clinging to patronage. Inside, Lewis handed Schroeder the scrap of paper on which Wilkins had scribbled the address of the house that was probably going to be his home for the foreseeable future. The driver squinted at it and nodded his approval of the destination.

Schroeder was forced to steer a weaving course between the bomb craters that pocked the cobbled road and the rivulets of people walking in dazed, languid fashion, going nowhere in particular, carrying the remnant objects of their old lives in parcels, sacks, crates and cartons, and a heavy, almost visible, disquiet. They were like a people thrown back to the evolutionary stage of nomadic gatherers.

The ghost of a tremendous noise hung over the scene. Something out of this world had undone this place and left an impossible jigsaw from which to reconstruct the old picture. There was no putting it back together again and there would be no going back to the old picture. This was *Stunde Null*. The Zero Hour. These people were starting from scratch and scratching a living from nothing. Two women pushed and pulled a horse cart stacked with furniture between them, while a man carrying a briefcase walked along as

though in search of the office where he once worked without even a glance at the fantastic destruction that lay all around him, as if this apocalyptic architecture were the natural state of things.

A smashed city stretched as far as the eye could see, the rubble reaching as high as the first floor of any building still standing. Hard to believe that this was once a place where people read newspapers, made cakes and thought about which pictures to hang on the walls of their front parlours. The facade of a church stood on one side of the road, with only sky for stained glass and the wind for a congregation. On the other side, apartment blocks – intact except for the fronts, which had been completely blown off, revealing the rooms and furniture within – stood like giant doll’s houses. In one of these rooms, oblivious to the elements and exposure to watching eyes, a woman stood lovingly brushing a young girl’s hair in front of a dressing table.

Further along the road, women and children stood around piles of rubble, scavenging for sustenance or looking to save fragments of their past. Black crosses marked the places where bodies lay waiting to be buried. And, everywhere, the strange pipe-chimneys of a subterranean city protruded from the ground, pouring black smoke into the sky.

‘Rabbits?’ Lewis asked, seeing creatures appear from unseen holes in the ground.

‘*Trümmerkinder!*’ Schroeder said, with a sudden anger. And Lewis saw that the bobbing creatures were ‘children of the rubble’ and that the car was drawing them out of their holes.

‘*Ungeziefer!*’ Schroeder spat with an unnecessary vehemence as three of the children – it was hard to tell if they were girls or boys – ran straight in front of the car. He gave them a warning toot but the approaching black bulk of the