

HAMMER TO FALL

Also by John Lawton

1963

Black Out

Old Flames

A Little White Death

Bluffing Mr. Churchill

Flesh Wounds

Second Violin

A Lily of the Field

Sweet Sunday

Then We Take Berlin

The Unfortunate Englishman

Friends and Traitors

JOHN LAWTON HAMMER TO FALL



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per

Marcia



You cannot fold a flood
And put it in a drawer,
Because the winds would find it out,
And tell your cedar floor.

—Emily Dickinson

I

Peanut Butter

§1

East Berlin: July or August 1948

Das Eishaus: The Egg-Cooling House, Osthafen

“So, Sadie says to Doris—”

“Doris? Что такое дорис?”

“Doris is just a name, Yuri. A woman’s name. Doris, Debbie, Diana . . . doesn’t matter. Just a fuckin’ name.”

“Da. Da. Еврейское имя?”

“What?”

Frank turned to Wilderness, the exasperation beginning to show in his face. Wilderness translated.

“He’s asking if it’s a Jewish name.”

“Oh. Right. Yeah. If you like. It’s a Jewish name. Anyway . . . Doris says to Sadie—”

“No,” said Wilderness. “Sadie was talking to Doris.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake. Who’s telling this gag? You or me? So . . . Sadie says to Doris, ‘My Hymie’s such a gentleman. Every week he brings me flowers.’ And Doris says, ‘Oh yeah, my Jake is such a putz, if he brings me flowers it can mean only one thing. I’ll be spending the night with my legs in the air!’ And Sadie says, ‘Oh, you don’t got a vase?’”

Frank laughed at his own joke. All but slapped his thighs. Wilderness managed a smile. He had heard it before. Three or four times, in fact, but Frank was never one to preface a gag with, “Stop me if I told you this one already.”

Yuri looked nonplussed.

The kid next to him, one of those string-bean youths they had nicknamed “Yuri’s Silents,” was smirking. He looked to be about the same age as Wilderness himself, but Wilderness was twenty going on thirty, and this kid was twenty going on twelve. He always looked nervous—scared shitless, as Frank would have it—and perhaps he, a mere corporal,

thought it only prudent not to laugh at a dirty joke his boss, a gilded NKVD major with shoulder boards as wide as landing strips, couldn't get.

Yuri got swiftly back to business.

"Sunday? One hundred pounds?"

Frank glanced quickly at Wilderness. Wilderness nodded.

"Sure. One hundred pounds of finest PX Java."

Yuri stuck out his hand. He liked to shake on every deal. Even though they'd been trading coffee, butter and anything else the Russians had on their shopping list for months now, he shook every time as though resealing a bond between them. Wilderness did not think Yuri trusted Frank Spoleto, but then he wasn't at all sure he trusted Frank either.

They were about halfway back to the jeep. Wilderness could see Swift Eddie at the wheel, deep in a Penguin paperback, oblivious to all around him. And he could hear footsteps running behind them.

He turned.

It was the "Silent." His great flat feet slapping down on the pock-marked tarmac.

"I am sorry. I mean not to surprise you."

He was a Kolya or a Kostya . . . one of those abundant Russian diminutives foisted onto children and rarely abandoned as adults. He had the look of an adolescent, features scarcely formed, his face dominated by bright blue eyes that seemed far too trusting to work for an NKVD rogue like Yuri. His Adam's apple bobbed above his collar. His long fingers disappeared into a pocket to produce . . . an empty jam jar.

Frank said, "What's on your mind, kid?"

"Can you get me this?"

Wilderness said, nipping in ahead of Frank, "Our deal is with Major Myshkin. We don't undercut him and we don't deal without him."

Frank rolled the jar in his hand, showed Wilderness the label.

"I don't think Yuri will give a damn about this, Joe."

The label read,

COUSIN KITTY'S GEORGIA PEANUT BUTTER

And then, egregiously,

YUM, YUMMY YUM YUMS

"Is true," said Kolya/Kostya. "The major will let me buy."

Wilderness shrugged. Who was he to stand in the way of a deal, however petty?

"Can you get it?" he said to Frank.

"Sure. If not this brand, then something like. If there's one kind of peanut butter coming out of Georgia, there must be fifty. If this is what he wants. I'll find something. God knows why he wants it. The stuff sticks to your teeth like Plasticine."

"Is . . . личное дело . . . personal, yes?"

"Whatever. Fifty cents a jar, OK. And greenbacks. Capisce? None of those Ostmarks you guys print like toilet paper. US dollars, right?"

"Of course," the kid grinned. "Grrrrinbaksy."

"How many jars?"

"Hundred."

"A hundred?"

"A hundred . . . to begin with."

"OK, kid, you got yourself a deal. Now shake on it, just like your Uncle Yuri, and me and my partner here will head back to civilisation."

They shook, and Kolya/Kostya said, "Major Myshkin not my uncle. I am Kostya—Konstantin Ilyich Zolotukhin."

As they climbed into the jeep, Frank had his moan.

"Do any of them have a sense of humour? 'Uncle' was just a tease. And Yuri . . . what in hell happened to him? It was as though I'd asked to fuck his grandmother."

"Maybe he doesn't like Jewish jokes."

"Never thought of that. Do you reckon he's Jewish? I mean, what kind of a name is Myshkin?"

"A Russian name," Wilderness replied. "And you can bet your last dollar it's not his real name. By the bye . . . how much does a jar of peanut butter cost back home?"

Frank's hand sliced the air, tipping an imaginary fried egg onto an imaginary plate.

"Around twelve cents."

"That's quite a markup."

"Markup from what? We steal the stuff. And how would the kid ever know the right price? He's going to hop on a plane to Shitcreek, New Jersey, and hit the local grocery store?"

"I meant. Fair play. That's all."

"Fair play. Jeezus. Joe, this is no time to grow a conscience. If he'll pay fifty cents then we collect fifty cents."

§2

The problem had always been their own people. The military police of the French, British and American occupying forces. The Reds left them alone. Wilderness assumed that they'd all been told by Yuri not to mess with his "*Schiebers*" . . . his smugglers. Since the airlift began, the MPs did not cross the line to East Berlin, but on occasion they were not past demanding the odd, random search—and on occasion producing papers showing they were in Intelligence cut no mustard and a half-hearted, odd, random search took place. None of them had ever thought to open the jerry cans mounted on the jeep—all packed with contraband.

There was no room in the cans for the peanut butter, so it sat in a sack in the footwell. So what if it got confiscated? The goods that mattered were the ones that passed for currency . . . cigarettes and coffee. And who among the English MPs would know what this stuff was? If needs be, Wilderness was prepared to swear it was bunion ointment or pile cream.

Come Sunday, they delivered the coffee.

Yuri paid up, in the usual manner, as though each dollar was flayed from his own back, and disappeared.

They were left alone with Kostya, who beamed with delight at his purchase, and paid without pain.

"I even got you the same brand," Frank threw in.

"Da. Most happy. Cousin Kitty. Most happy."

"To begin with, you said. A hundred jars to begin with."

Wilderness would not have offered to extend this deal. It could not be long before crossing West to East became a logistical impossibility. They had far bigger concerns than piddling amounts of peanut butter.

"I will . . . let you know."

"Kid, you sound just like a New York theatrical agent talking to a Forty-Second Street hoofer. 'Don't call us, we'll call you.'"

"At the club. I call at the club. At *Paradies Verlassen*."

"OK. But time and tide wait for no man, as Shakespeare says."

"Chaucer, you dimwit," Wilderness said as they left.

"Chaucer, schmaucer. I should care."

§3

Later that week, the *Schiebers* gathered at the *Paradies Verlassen* club, as they did three or four nights of seven. Wilderness thought they must look odd—odd to any onlooker. A bit like the enlisted version of the Three Stooges, none remotely resembling the other: Frank in his US Army olive green, Eddie in his Artillery khaki and Wilderness in RAF pale blue. One captain, one lance bombardier and one corporal who knew in his bones he'd never make officer. If they only had a Frenchman handy they'd be a representative cross-section of the occupying powers of West Berlin, but Frank had a thing against the French, and Wilderness knew from experience that the French would be the last to forgive and forget and hence would never make good *Schiebers*. Neither forgiving nor forgetting was essential to smuggling, which entailed trading with the likely next enemy and the certain last enemy, but a self-serving indifference to old wounds was. Occasionally they would add a splash of dirty-brown and a little brighter blue to the mix—the NKVD uniform of Yuri, Major Myshkin . . . all jackboots, epaulettes and red stars—but Yuri rationed his visits.

Tonight, the dirty-brown and blue was worn by a woman—her uniform far better tailored than the baggy sacks that Yuri wore. Wilderness caught sight of her across the room just she yanked on the cord of the *Rohrpoststation* and sent a note hurtling through the pneumatic tubes that crisscrossed the ceiling to land, half a minute later, in the net above his head. She waved, blew him a kiss that meant nothing.

Wilderness unfolded the note.

"That damn Tosca bitch?" said Frank, part statement part question, squirming in his chair to look across the room.

But Tosca had picked up her book and resumed reading, and Frank seemed to look right past her.

"Yes," Wilderness replied. "Seems she wants a bit of a chat."

"You kill me with phrases like that. The English art of understatement. When she rips off your balls with a bayonet, try understating that."

Wilderness, as with so many of Frank's moans, ignored this. He crossed the floor, past the man tinkling idly at the piano, to her table.

"Major Tosca."

"Corporal Holderness."

Whilst she was always "Major Tosca" to him, usually he was just "Wilderness" to her. Once in a while, he was Joe. If Tosca addressed him by his real name, let alone by his RAF rank, he was probably in trouble.

She beckoned to a waiter. Ordered two vodka martinis, and Wilderness (real name Holderness) sat, waiting to hear what was on her mind.

"You guys don't give up easy, do you?"

Wilderness loved her voice. New York. Raspy. Like grating nutmeg. There was much to love about Tosca. Everything Frank would fail to appreciate. Thirty, maybe thirty-five at the most, with eyes like conkers and tits like Jane Russell.

"Do we need to give up? The blockade isn't working. We both know that."

"Plenty of you *Schiebers* have given up."

"The ones who have given up are the ones your people have shot. And so far they've all been civilians. You don't shoot at uniforms."

"You got a good shield in Yuri."

"I know."

"It might not be as wide a shield as you imagine."

"Meaning?"

"You been going East more often than usual. You have a new deal, a new customer."

Wilderness said nothing.

"In short, you got Kostya."

"And he works for Yuri."

A brief silence as the waiter set glasses in front of them, and Tosca took a first sip of her martini.

"I'll miss these if they ever drag me back to Moscow. New York, London, Moscow. I have to ask myself. Am I on a losing streak?"

"Kostya," Wilderness prompted.

Tosca pushed a note across the table to him:

**Can you meet me Tuesday 7pm at the Café Orpheus
in Warschauer Straße opposite the station? K.**

"I don't mind playing the messenger for you. But make this the last time."

"I'm not happy about these deals to begin with, so . . . yes. We complete on this one and we're out."

"Good. I do not want Kostya hurt, so do not hurt Kostya. Do not *get* Kostya hurt. He's the son of my oldest friend. Besides, he's just a kid."

"I'm just a kid."

"No, Joe, you're not just a kid. You were born old. Make this the last time you sell anything to Kostya. The shit will hit the fan one day soon. I want Kostya kept clean. If he works for Yuri, OK. Yuri can bullshit his way out of anything. He's a survivor. And Spoleto? Do we any of us give a fuck what happens to Frank?"

"He's my partner. I care."

"Admirable. Don't let caring get you killed. Above all, don't let your caring get my Kostya killed. Capisce?"

"*Capisco.*"

§4

The Warschauer Straße U-Bahn station was just within the Soviet sector, a boundary defined at this point by the River Spree. It was the easternmost stop on a line that began out at Uhlandstraße and

crossed the river on the upper deck of the Oberbaumbrücke, a Victorian monstrosity, not unlike Tower Bridge in London, that had taken a pasting at the very end of the war—not from the Allies, but from the Wehrmacht, who had blown the central spans to slow down the Russian entry into Berlin. The lower deck was for vehicles and pedestrians, and had been the scene of a couple of shootings in the last few weeks.

They crossed without incident. They were less than two hundred yards from the Egg Palace and most, if not all the guards would be on Yuri's payroll.

There was no Café Orpheus.

They parked the jeep in front of the Café Unterwelt. A cultural slip of tongue or memory that made sense to Wilderness and Eddie but was wasted on Frank.

"I hope the kid doesn't turn out to be total fuck-up. Orpheus . . . Unterthing . . . who knows?"

The café was aptly named. A pit of a place lacking only brimstone and sulphur, presided over by man wearing a grubby vest and several layers of grease. He said nothing, just jerked his thumb in the direction of the back room.

Kostya was not alone. He stood up as they entered, gestured to the woman seated next to him, and said, "This is Major—"

Frank cut him short.

"Are we dealing with you or with some major we never met? What is this? Does your army have more majors than grunts? Everyone's a fucking major!"

"Со мной будете говорить."

"What did she say?"

Wilderness said, "Calm down. She says to deal with her."

The woman looked up. Dark-skinned, thick black hair falling in ringlets to her blue epaulettes, nut-brown eyes like Tosca, but sadder eyes, far, far sadder. She looked to be roughly the same age as Tosca but perhaps she had not worn so well. God alone knew what life she might have led—women like this had driven tanks from the Urals to Berlin only a couple of years ago. Women like this had taken Berlin and crushed the Nazis.

She had a jar of jam and a jar of Cousin Kitty in front of her, and was spreading what looked to be grape jelly and peanut butter onto a slice of black bread.

"Oh, God. That's just disgusting," Frank said.

"В один прекрасный день будет бозможно купить такую смесь в одной и той же банке."

Kostya translated. "The major says one day you will be able to buy grape jelly and peanut butter in one jar. Progress."

"Yeah, well it's disgusting. Like eating ice cream and meatballs off of the same plate."

Wilderness said, "Frank, shuttup and let them get to the point."

"The major asks this of you. We are wish to buy one thousand jars."

"Not possible," Wilderness said.

He felt Frank touch his arm, watched the major bite into her gooey feast.

"No so fast, kid. Could be doable, could be."

"Even if you can get hold of a thousand jars, we don't have enough hiding places in the jeep for a thousand jars of anything."

"Excuse us," said Frank, with an uncharacteristic show of good manners, and hustled Wilderness to a corner by the door.

"It's a cool five hundred, an easy five hundred. Are we going to turn down money like that? Who cares if we have to carry it out in the open? Our guys are lazy, the Reds don't give a shit and if we're caught, we throw 'em a few jars and carry on. It's not as if it's coffee. It's not the brown gold. It's sticky kids' stuff in a fucking jar. You think anyone's gonna start World War III over peanut butter?"

Wilderness said nothing for a few moments, looked back across the room, catching the major with a look of pure gastronomic delight on her face.

"OK. But that's it. No more irregular runs after this."

"Irregular?"

"We stick with coffee and butter. We stick with what we know pays and we deal only with Yuri."

"OK, OK."

Frank approached the table.

"One thousand it is. Fifty cents a jar. Five hundred dollars."

The major wiped her mouth on the back of one hand.

“Двадцать центов за банку.”

Wilderness said, “She’s offering twenty.”

“No way. I might go to forty-five.”

“Скидка для навала.”

“She wants a discount for bulk.”

“Are you kidding? This is bullshit.”

The major got to her feet.

“Twenty-five,” she said, suddenly no longer in need of an interpreter.

“Forty.”

“Thirty-five.”

“Done,” said Frank.

She spoke rapidly to Kostya, so rapidly Wilderness could not follow, but Kostya said simply, “Noon, Friday?”

Then she bustled past them before either Frank or Wilderness had answered.

“Well, I’ll be dipped in dogshit.”

“That would be justice,” said Wilderness.

“Kid, your buddy drives a hard bargain.”

“Buddy? What is *buddy*?”

“You know. Pal, chum . . . mate . . . fukkit . . . *tovarich*.”

“No, not my pal. Это моя мама.”

“What?”

“He said she’s not his buddy, she’s his mother.”

“I don’t fucking believe this.”

“Yes. Yes. My mother, Volga Vasilievna Zolotukhina.”

As Tosca had called her, “my oldest friend.”

“Volga?” Frank said.

“Da. Like the river.”

Frank rolled his eyes, a burlesque of incredulity.

“Would you believe I have an Aunt Mississippi?”

Kostya looked to Wilderness for help, baffled by Frank.

“Ignore him, Kostya. We’ll be here at noon on Friday.”

\$5

At noon on Friday, they pulled up by the Café Unterwelt. Eddie drove. Wilderness and Frank sat awkwardly with knees almost to their chins and their feet atop small mountains of jam jars. It felt ridiculous. It looked ridiculous. Wilderness was amazed they hadn't been stopped for the sheer fun of it.

They parked behind a Red Army half-track, purring diesel fumes into the summer sunshine. Two Silents stood by the rear doors. But these were not Yuri's Silents—young men with scarcely flesh on their bones, chosen for their brains, not their brawn—these were hulking bruisers, as tall as Wilderness or Frank and twice as wide. True to type, neither spoke, and the *Schiebers* made their way to the back room.

Major Zolotukhina was at the table, playing patience with a frayed deck of cards. Red Queen on black King. Black seven on red eight.

There was no sign of Kostya.

“Тысяча, да?”

“She wants to know if we got her the thousand jars.”

“I got nine hundred and thirty-six.”

“Не важно.”

Even Frank understood that—an easy carefreeness close to universal *de nada . . . di niente*.

Suddenly she shot to her feet, as rigidly to attention as a short, stout woman could be. She saluted. Fingertips touching the peak of her cap.

The *Schiebers* turned. A tall, slender figure had appeared silently in the doorway.

Wilderness could hear Frank revving up to say something and got in first.

“Just salute, you idiot. And hold until she returns it.”

Frank raised his hand, whispered, “What the fuck is this?”

“It . . . is a full-blown NKVD general.”

“Are we busted?”

The general was looking them up and down, assessing, deciding . . . hands clasped behind her back like a member of the British

royal family. Then she quickly returned the salute for all three of them, stepped past the men and spoke softly to Zolotukhina.

“Ты здесь пряталась, а?”

(So, this is where you’ve been hiding?)

Then they both grinned like schoolgirls and hugged as though they had not seen one another in months.

As she left, almost over her shoulder the general said, “Не опаздывай.” (Don’t be late.)

Momentarily Wilderness wondered, “Late for what?” but it didn’t matter. None of this mattered, they’d collect their money and go. And never come back.

Outside, Eddie stood with his hands in his pockets, conspicuously not helping the Silents load nine hundred and thirty-six jars of Cousin Kitty (smooth and crunchy) into the back of the half-track.

“I make that \$327.60,” said Frank. “Call it \$325 for easy.”

Wilderness translated and then translated Zolotukhina’s reply.

“She says Kostya holds the money. He’ll pay us this evening.”

“What? Does she think we’re fuckin’ dumb?”

“She says he’s having a tooth out right now, but he’ll be here at eight with our money.”

“And you believe her?”

Making a virtue out of necessity, Wilderness said, “Frank, you need to know who to trust.”

Frank let it go. Let Volga Zolotukhina go. Not that either of them could have stopped her. He was seething a little, but too many thoughts dogged his brain.

“So we come back one more time?”

“Yep.”

“And who was the top skirt?”

“You know, you’re wasted in Intelligence. That was Krasnaya. I’d bet money on it. Only female general in the NKVD.”

“Kras what?”

“Krasnaya. Short for Krasnaya Vdova—the Red Widow. Hero of the revolution. They all took noms de guerre. I think she began as Red Hammer . . . a name she is supposed to have adopted in exile in Switzerland over thirty years ago. She came back to Russia on the sealed train with Lenin and Krupskaya—”

“Krup who?”

“—But then her husband was killed in the civil war . . . so she’s been the Red Widow ever since. Krasnaya for short. There were posters she’s said to have posed for. That cartoon style of severity they call Socialist Realism . . . Delacroix made bold and simple . . . heroic, beautiful young woman . . . you know the sort of thing, billowing peasant skirt, red headscarf, unwavering steely gaze . . . machine gun on one arm . . . a baby on the other. They say the baby was really hers, too.”

“So did I just meet a piece of history in this pistol-packing momma?”

“Something like that.”

§6

All over England on a summer’s evening as warm and light as this one, men would be at their allotments lifting potatoes, brushing the caterpillars off brassicas, binding over the green tops of onions—many of them in an old battledress from the all-too-recent war. Khaki or blue. Retained, worn, not out of any prolonged sense of pride but out of a pragmatic sense of waste-not-want-not.

To see Germans still in threadbare Wehrmacht jackets was commonplace and never less than thought-provoking. Who could possibly wear it with any sense of pride? Who could possibly wear it without some sense of shame? Who in the country that was all “want” because it had been all “waste” would dream of throwing it away?

Three old soldiers sat in front of Café Unterwelt, sipping distastefully at acorn coffee and smoking God-knows-what in needle-thin roll-ups. One lacked an eye, one an arm and the third a leg. They were the lucky ones. The unlucky ones were still in Russia.

Wilderness always kept what he called his “bribe pack” of Woodbines in his pocket—two or three cigarettes passed around seemed to ease any negotiation and cost him nothing.

He put the packet on the battered tin table in front of the men. A hand reached out for them. No one spoke. No one looked at him.

But Frank spoke.

"You're wasting time and money on these bums, Joe. They don't know the meaning of gratitude. Fukkit, we should have shot the lot."

He pushed open the door of the café. Mercifully without another word.

The one-eyed man spoke.

"He's right, you know. We'd be better off dead. Tell him to come back and shoot me. But first let me smoke one of your English cigarettes. Most kind."

Wilderness wasn't sure if the man had smiled or smirked sarcastically. He followed Frank, drawn to the sudden outburst within.

Frank had Kostya up against the wall, body-slamming him into the plaster.

"Whaddya mean? Whaddya mean?"

Wilderness shouldered him aside.

"Frank, for crying out loud!"

Kostya slumped to the floor.

A trail of blood crept across his chin, but then Wilderness remembered he'd had a tooth out and Frank probably hadn't hit him—yet.

"He's trying to scam us. Says he hasn't got the money!"

Wilderness pulled Kostya to his feet.

"Is this true? Your mother says you hold the purse strings?"

"*Shto?*"

"That you keep the money for both of you."

"Тогда моя мать не сказала правды."

Frank erupted.

"In English, you sonovabitch!"

"He says his mother lied to us."

"All dollars I ever have I am give to you for first hundred jars. My mother keep other monies."

"OK. So where's your fuckin' mother now?"

Wilderness echoed Frank, used a softer tone, but still one of concern.

"Kostya, where is Volga now? Does she have our money?"

"My mother since three o'clock on road to Moscow. Her . . . подразделение . . ."

"Her unit," Wilderness prompted.

“Отозвано.”

“He says her unit’s been recalled to Moscow.”

Frank kicked over the table. “Shit, shit, shit.”

And Wilderness recalled Krasnaya’s last word to Volga Zolotukhina—“Don’t be late”—and in the mind’s eye he could see a mile-long column of tanks and half-tracks crawling across the dull plain that was Prussia.

“This comes out of your hide, kid.”

“No,” said Wilderness. “Take it out of my hide, or if you really feel you need to hurt someone there’s a bloke outside who’s already asked you to shoot him.”

“Three hundred bucks, Joe!”

“Peanuts, Frank. If you’re really that upset about it . . . take it out of the stash. Take it all out of my share and forget about it. Kostya hasn’t scammed you. His mother has.”

“What was it you said? I need to know who to trust? *I* need to know who to trust? It’s you who needs to know who to trust!”

Wilderness sincerely hoped that was Frank’s last word on the matter. His impulse was to walk out, take the jeep and leave Frank to find his way back west on the U-Bahn. But that would mean leaving him alone with Kostya.

Frank’s cap had fallen to the floor in the scuffle. Wilderness picked it up, knocked off the dust and handed it back to Frank. “Here. Take the jeep. I’ll find my own way back.”

Frank put his cap on, with a couple of overly demonstrative, fastidious adjustments. Then he feigned a lunge at Kostya, growling as he did so. Kostya fell back against the wall. Frank laughed and left.

Wilderness held out a hand to help Kostya up and, as he did so, heard Frank encounter the Wehrmacht veterans once more.

“Losers!”