

HITLER'S SECRET

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HITLER'S SECRET

RORY CLEMENTS

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For Sarah, with love

CHAPTER 1

The telephone had been ringing in Bormann's office all morning. Many prominent names of the greater German Reich wished to speak to the Führer and all calls had to go through Bormann. Hitler was back in Munich from the Wolfsschanze, his eastern headquarters, and it was a rare opportunity for his ministers to secure a private interview with him. The war against the Soviet Union was almost won and there was much to be discussed.

Each time the phone sounded, the efficient Bormann picked up the handset on the second ring. He spoke with exaggerated deference to the caller. *Of course, Herr Reichsmarschall Göring. Indeed, Herr General. I am at your service, Herr Doktor. Heil Hitler!* The only person with whom he was at all familiar was Himmler, the man he teasingly referred to as Uncle Heinrich.

The office stank of sweat, smoke and cologne. On the desk an ashtray overflowed with the detritus of a constant stream of cigarettes. Later, he would kick his secretary's pretty arse and tell her to clean the place up. She liked having her arse kicked. And fondled.

Sometimes he might put a caller or two through to the Führer. But not this morning. Himmler, Rommel, Goebbels, Ley, Rosenberg, Streicher . . . they could all go whistle. It made no difference to Martin Bormann how important they considered themselves; he told them all the same thing: the Führer was engaged with his chiefs of staff and could not be disturbed.

His chiefs of staff! Bormann laughed out loud at the thought, his shiny, round face stretched tight with amusement. Hitler was engaged in the far more important business of playing with the adorable German Shepherd puppy that Bormann had given him. Settling back in his leather chair, Bormann lit another cigarette. But

his good humour soon vanished and his brow darkened. He looked at his watch. He had something else on his mind, something that had to be resolved without delay. Smoke drifted from the cigarette dangling from his yellow fingers. The only time he didn't smoke was when he was asleep or in the presence of the Führer.

There was a knock. Heidi's face appeared around the heavy oak door.

'You have a visitor, Herr Bormann.'

'Otto Kalt?'

'Yes, sir.'

'No reply yet from Charlie Jung?'

'His butler told me he was in Switzerland, skiing or mountaineering.'

Charlie Jung. As elusive as smoke in fog.

'Well, find out the name of his hotel and get a message to him. I want him to call me as soon as possible.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And don't take no for an answer.' He lit another cigarette from the butt of the old one. 'Now give me two minutes, then send Kalt in. We are not to be disturbed.'

'Yes, sir. Would you like coffee?'

'No, Heidi. That is all.'

'Heil Hitler, Herr Bormann.'

Bormann opened the desk drawer and pulled out a photographic copy of a clear but slightly faded sheet of paper. It was titled *Taufschein und Geburtszeugnis* – Certificate of Baptism and Birth. He read it through carefully once more, memorising every last detail.

There was a knock at the door again.

'Enter.'

Otto Kalt was a small man with metal-rimmed spectacles and dark hair. He stood to attention, raised himself to his full height – no more than five and a half feet – and clicked his heels.

‘Heil Hitler!’ He shot his arm out in the fascist salute.

From behind his desk, Bormann waved at Kalt to approach. Kalt took two steps forward. No one could have looked less like the Nazis’ idealised Nordic Aryan than Otto Kalt. Not even Himmler was such a poor specimen.

Bormann was not much taller, but he was broad and powerful, with the build and demeanour of a hog and the cunning of a cur. He ran his hand through his thinning, slicked-back hair and nodded to Kalt.

He had known and used Otto Kalt, who was of a similar age – early forties – half his life. They had been together since the heady days of the early 1920s. Kalt came from a rural peasant family, but he had been a Party member since the very beginning and had risen to some wealth. He was useful to Bormann, for he was obedient and had the slyness and callous brutality of his breed; he would shed blood with no more flicker of emotion than if he were killing a pig, as he had shown in the forest outside Parchim when he had slit the throat of the treacherous Walther Kadow on Bormann’s orders. Kalt had always submitted to Bormann, obeying every command. Just as Bormann, in his turn, submitted to every desire of *his* master, the Führer.

Some said that Bormann was like a son to Hitler. Perhaps it was true. If so, then it was even more true that he was like a father to Otto Kalt.

Bormann’s loyalty to Hitler had been repaid with immense power and he was now Head of the Party Chancellery. Kalt in his turn had been repaid for *his* loyalty – with the means to purchase a large and splendid farm a little way east of Hamburg.

Pausing for effect, Bormann stubbed out his cigarette and pulled yet another from the box on his desk, picked up the gold, swastika-embossed lighter Himmler had given him for his fortieth the previous year, flicked the wheel and lit it. As an afterthought, he offered Kalt the packet.

'American,' he said.

'Thank you, Herr Reichsleiter,' Kalt said, taking one of the Luckies.

'Otto,' Bormann said, handing him the certificate. 'I have a small task for you. Read that carefully. Note every detail and then return it to me. It is the birth and baptism record of a 10-year-old girl. I want you to find her and dispose of her – and anyone who has ever been associated with her. It is best if the world never knows she existed. Leave no trace.'

'Yes, Herr Reichsleiter.'

'I cannot stress how important this task is. You have done many favours for me over the years and I have rewarded you well. But nothing – *nothing* – has been as crucial as this one thing. Succeed and I will double your land holding.

'I will not fail you, Herr Reichsleiter.' Kalt bowed his head.

'Good.'

Because if you do, thought Bormann, I am done for.

In the hour before first light, Father Peter Huber pulled back the duvet and gazed at the woman's sleep-warm body. She was on her back, her hair tangled across the pillow. Her eyes drifted open and she smiled at him hazily, as though not sure whether this was still part of her dream.

'Come back to bed, Peter.' Her voice was husky, soft and full of sleep.

'You know I can't.'

He knelt at the side of the bed as though about to pray, but instead he bent forward and kissed her pubic hair lightly, breathing in the intoxicating fumes. She rolled towards him and, as he stood up, she reached out and tried to fumble beneath his priest's robes.

'Let me kiss you there, too.'

‘Trudchen, you are bad.’

‘But that’s why you love me, Peter. And later, I will confess to the priest and will be forgiven my transgressions.’

‘I *am* the priest!’

‘And will you deal with me very harshly, Father? Will you make me say twelve Hail Marys?’

He laughed. ‘I have made you coffee. It’s in the kitchen.’

It was still dark and snowing gently when Father Huber opened the door. Trudchen’s house was a little way from the village of Braundorf, a fact which made these nightly visits possible. It was a pleasant, modest chalet, high up on the *Alm*, backed by the mountains, and from there he had a pleasant stroll through the meadow back home. In the short nights of summertime, he had to leave her far earlier than this, but with the long nights of late November, they had more time together. A small but welcome blessing.

The snow had come early this year, however, which could sometimes be a problem. His tracks would be all too visible to the village gossips. And so he had to listen to the forecasts carefully. Today, it was said, the snow would fall steadily, all through the night and late into the day, and so it was proving. That meant his footprints would be erased almost as soon as they appeared.

Unfortunately for him, that also meant that Father Huber did not see two other pairs of footprints in the snow.

The church of St Mary Magdalene was almost four hundred years old. With its onion dome and its ornate, gilt interior, full of statuary and images from the Gospels, it was typical of the older churches in this part of Austria, or the province of Ostmark as the country had been designated since the Anschluss three years earlier.

The first thing you came to, by the door, beneath a colourful wooden wall carving of the Virgin, was an old octagonal baptismal

font, deep enough to immerse a sizeable child. Then, ranged along the nave, came the rows of wooden pews, until, at last, you approached the high altar. For all its quaint charm, it was a small, simple church, perfectly fitting the needs of this little country community.

Father Huber entered, stamping the snow from his boots and removing his woollen hat, before lighting candles by the door and switching off his flashlight. The church had not yet been electrified so the only light came through windows or from candle flames. In the soft warm glow, he made his way down the nave and halted before the crucifix, made the sign of the Cross and knelt down to say a silent prayer, confessing his sins of the night, though in his heart he could not really believe his liaison with Trudchen was wrong. Yes, the Roman Church demanded chastity of its clergy. But that was a law made by men. How could love be a sin in the sight of God?

He heard a cough. His shoulders tensed; surely Frau Giesler the cleaner could not be here so early? He knew from the way she sometimes looked at him that she had her suspicions. He rose to his feet and turned around, his hands clasped to the cross he wore around his neck. No, it wasn't Frau Giesler, but a man – someone he did not recognise. Someone small and – he hated himself for even thinking it – rather insignificant looking. A traveller, perhaps.

'Grüss Gott. Can I help you, sir?'

'Father Huber?'

'Yes, that's me.'

'My name is Herr Kalt, sir. Otto Kalt. I am a lawyer. Please forgive the ungodly hour of my arrival – but I have been travelling many hours from Bremen and decided to push on rather than stopping the night at a hotel.'

The priest did not like this one bit. The man might seem to be of no consequence, but appearances could be horribly deceptive. Peter

Huber forced himself to adopt a welcoming smile and extended a hand.

‘And why, pray, would a lawyer wish to talk to a humble parish priest?’

Kalt took the hand and held it a few seconds without quite shaking it. His fingers were cold and limp.

‘Well, first of all, I can tell you it involves a great deal of money.’ He shivered. ‘Is there, perhaps, somewhere a little warmer we could talk?’

‘Of course. My house is next door. Let us go and have some coffee.’

‘Ah, thank you, Father. A cup of coffee would certainly go down very well.’

Even though Huber had spent the night with Trudchen, his kitchen was still warm from the previous day, for the blue-tiled *Kachelofen* wood-burning stove retained its heat long after the fire had died down. The priest sat in the corner seat and poured the coffee. Were his hands shaking? He was a slender man of average height, but in these parts where the men were strong from mountain herding and harvesting, he had the appearance of a weakling. Too much time with his head in books.

‘Now then, Herr Kalt, perhaps you would tell me what this is all about.’

‘Real coffee, Father? What luxury. I am honoured.’

‘I had it from before the war and keep it for special occasions.’

‘A little sugar, too, perhaps?’ He laughed although he had said nothing funny. ‘If you have such a thing.’

Sugar was not as rare as coffee, but it was still a precious commodity these days. Huber smiled and gave his visitor one spoonful and left the spoon in his cup for stirring.

‘Thank you. Now, Father, I am the bearer of great tidings for a young girl named Klara Wolf, who I am certain is known to you. A large bequest is due to her from a man of considerable wealth and importance, who died not long ago in Hamburg. Killed in a British air raid – can you believe that? And to think Reichsmarschall Göring said we could call him Mayer if ever a British airplane intruded on our territory! Anyway, little Klara is now a very rich girl.’

‘Klara? Klara Wolf? I am trying hard to think if I know this girl. The name does not seem familiar, Herr Kalt.’

‘Surely a good priest never forgets those he has baptised? Anyway, the name will come to you soon enough. The point is, you see, I require her present whereabouts – and you were the obvious man to come to.’

The hairs at the nape of Huber’s neck prickled. He shook his head slowly.

‘No, I am afraid not. Forgive me, sir, I fear your long journey has been wasted. Perhaps you should have called ahead.’

Kalt narrowed his small, beady eyes and smiled.

‘You baptised her here in this very village, ten years ago – 1931. Her mother, Angelica Wolf – a healthy, pretty young girl of peasant stock – was present, but I believe her father was absent on military duty.’

Huber shook his head again, this time more briskly, as though he had a nervous tic.

‘No, truly, I do not recall the name.’

He studied Kalt. This small man did not look like a lawyer, even with his round spectacles. But what exactly did a lawyer look like? Well-to-do, perhaps? Well fed? This man Kalt had no meat on his body, let alone fat, and his hands were rough and thick like a son of the land. In Huber’s eyes, he looked like a Gestapo officer, not

that he had ever seen one of that hated breed, to the best of his knowledge.

The visitor said nothing, merely stirred his coffee and kept his eyes fixed on the priest, waiting like a hyena.

‘What can I say, sir?’ Huber realised he was babbling, but he could not work out whether it was better to be silent or garrulous. ‘If there was such a person baptised here, she is not here now. I know every boy and girl in the village, you see. No, no one of that name. Never to my knowledge. Really, your time has been wasted, Herr Kalt.’

‘Oh, my time is nothing. I have all the time in the world. My instructions are to find her at all costs, given the importance of my mission. So I will be staying in the village for the foreseeable future, talking to everyone. Perhaps you would continue to rack your brains, Father. I am sure it will all come back to you in due course, for I have seen the baptism certificate and it is clear that you carried out the ceremony.’

Huber could feel his heart pumping, his lungs and throat constricting.

‘No, I am sure I would remember.’

‘Check the register. You’ll see I’m right. Ten years is not so long ago that you can have completely forgotten.’ He drank his coffee, rose from the table and held up his hand in farewell. ‘My thanks for your hospitality. The coffee was excellent. I will see you again soon, I am sure.’

And then he was gone.

For a full minute, Peter Huber was transfixed with terror and indecision. These past ten years he had feared this day would come, and now it had. What to do? Men like Kalt did not simply accept a denial, shrug their shoulders and go away empty-handed.

He could not deal with this alone. His hand trembled as he picked up the telephone and asked the operator for a number in Berlin – a number he had not called for years and had intended never to call again.

The phone seemed to ring for an age. He was about to hang up when it was answered.

‘Hello?’ A sleepy voice. Not yet dawn.

‘Frau Dietrich?’

‘Who is this, please? Do you know what time it is?’

‘Father Huber. You know, from Braundorf . . . Peter Huber.’

Silence.

‘Frau Dietrich, are you there?’

‘Peter, did you really give the operator this number?’ The woman’s voice was wide awake now, and incredulous. ‘And you just said my name!’

‘I didn’t know what to do. There is a man here, asking after Klara. He says he is a lawyer with a bequest for her. But I think he is Gestapo. I thought you needed to know.’

‘God in Heaven, Peter, how could you do such a thing – call me like this?’ He heard a deep groan. ‘Oh, Peter, it’s closing in now. You have to get out of there – fast. Don’t call me again.’

The line went dead.

Get out fast? How could he get out at all? It would be hard enough to leave the church and the village – but to abandon Trudchen was unthinkable and he could not ask her to go on the run with him; she knew nothing of this.

There was only one thing to be done: he had to pray.

Not even bothering to remove his slippers and put on his snow boots, he ran from his house to the church. As he opened the great doors, he knew he had made a terrible error. Two men were

waiting for him, standing by the ancient font. One of the men was Kalt. The other man, a great deal larger and bulkier, also looked like Gestapo; he had the coarseness of a bull and a face that appeared as though it had never once smiled. Even as Huber shrank back into the doorway, his eyes couldn't help straying to the font. Why was it full of water? He hadn't left it like that. There hadn't been a baptism for weeks, not since September when the little Lang boy had been brought here.

'Ah, Father Huber,' Kalt said. 'This is my colleague, Herr Brunner.'

Huber clasped his hands together and bowed his head, trying to maintain his habitual humility.

'Grüss Gott, Herr Brunner.'

The new man, Brunner, said nothing. Without a word, he manoeuvred himself behind the priest. Huber's neck swivelled from one man to another. He realised he was shaking uncontrollably.

'Herr Brunner is my assistant.'

'It is a pleasure to meet you both, but as I have already said, I cannot help you gentlemen.'

'We have a question for you,' Kalt continued. 'Could you please tell us the full name and address of the woman you called in Berlin not five minutes ago? We will have her details soon enough, but you could save us precious time.'

'Please, Herr Kalt, I know nothing of the girl you seek. Or any woman in Berlin.'

Hans Brunner grasped him by the nape of the neck and pushed his face down into the font. The water was deep enough to accommodate a man's head, and cold. Huber's arms flailed helplessly. Kalt grabbed his wrists and restrained them. Huber was struggling to hold in his breath, to keep his lungs from filling with water, but Brunner and Kalt were too strong for him. Together they held him there, mouth and nose submerged, for a full minute, before

wrenching him out again, as water sprayed across the ancient stone floor. Huber gasped for air. Brunner turned his nose up and his broad pig's nostrils flared.

'He stinks. I think the holy bastard's shat himself.'

Otto Kalt laughed. 'This is just wasting time. Finish him off. We'll find the woman in Berlin soon enough.'

Just under four minutes later, Father Peter Huber's body slid to the floor. He was dead, drowned in his own font. Brunner looked at the corpse dispassionately.

'Do you think we should search his house, too?'

Kalt looked at his partner with the forbearance of a kind and tolerant parent to an idiot son of whom little was expected.

'Yes, Hans, that would make a lot of sense. And we should search his woman's house, too, I think.'

'And what should we do with the woman?'

'Dispose of her, Hans. Turn her to ash.'

CHAPTER 2

The three engines droned. Thousands of feet below the Junkers trimotor transport plane, the rocky plains and hills of Spain were yellow and parched. The man in the third row gazed from the small porthole and tried to imagine what was to come in Berlin. His instructions had been brief: he was to go to Germany and collect a package. The order had come from on high, via a man named Bodie Cashbone.

A package. What sort of package?

‘I have no further details to give you at this stage.’ Bodie Cashbone had sat back and folded his meaty arms. ‘You’ll find out when you get there.’ He’d leant forward. ‘All I know is that it’s straightforward, but . . .’ He’d tailed off and shrugged.

Straightforward? How, in the late autumn of 1941 with Europe at war, could any secret mission to Germany be *straightforward*?

‘Why me?’ he had demanded. ‘I’ve never been to the country before. I speak the language well enough – but no one would take me for a German.’

‘You’re not meant to be a German. You are Mr Tomas Esser, an American citizen of German heritage, a sympathetic businessman. That should get you in to Germany, but it won’t help you if you’re caught. This is off the books. Washington will not own you.’

‘But they’ll know I’ve come from England. They’ll suspect me immediately.’

‘No, they’ll think you’ve travelled from America. It’s all been arranged.’

‘And how will I get out?’

‘You’ll have assistance. Failing that, I’m told you have a very big brain,’ Cashbone had said. ‘You’ll find a way.’

Ten days earlier Tom Wilde – the man now posing as Tomas Esser – had been in his rooms preparing a lecture on the Elizabethan world view for the handful of history undergraduates remaining in Cambridge. In the real world, history was happening – even Cambridge had been bombed – so what, he wondered, was the point in teaching it?

He pushed the papers away, stretched his arms and leant back. Rubbing his tired eyes, he got up and pulled back the blackouts. Outside it was daylight and he realised he'd lost track of time. From his window he looked out on the bleak and chilly scene of the old court, disfigured by a shed full of armaments at one end and a massive air raid shelter dug into the other. The only bright spot was the family of ducks that had taken up residence in the unsightly water tank that occupied much of the lawn in the centre of the court.

Yawning, Professor Wilde packed up his things, descended the staircase and came out into the crisp autumn air. As he crossed into the new court, he nodded to the master, who was emerging from the lodge with a couple of pinstriped men who looked as though they belonged to one of the ministries that had been evacuated here from London. And then he saw Scobie, the head porter, coming towards him.

'Morning, Scobie.'

'I was on my way to fetch you, Professor Wilde. Tried calling through, but the lines are down.'

'Something up?'

'Couple of visitors to see you, sir. Mr Eaton and an American gentleman named Cashbone. I've shown them through to the combination room.'

Eaton? He knew Philip Eaton well. He also knew that his arrival was never accompanied by good news. The urbane Mr Eaton was

a senior MI6 officer. He never made social calls, which meant he wanted something.

The name Cashbone, however, rang no bells.

‘Thank you, Scobie. Perhaps you’d organise some coffee?’

‘Of course, professor.’

Wilde changed direction. The combination room was next to the Hall. What in God’s name, he wondered, did Eaton want with him this time?

As he opened the solid oak door he saw that the ancient panelled room had only two occupants. They were standing by the central table near some upturned sherry glasses and were inspecting the contents of the betting book with evident amusement. Both men turned his way as he entered. Eaton smiled.

‘Wilde.’

‘Hello, Eaton.’

He looked a great deal healthier than the last time they’d met, when Eaton was battling to recover from a dreadful incident in which he was hit by a speeding van, losing his left arm and badly injuring his left leg. A lot of the colour had come back to his cheeks. But as he moved towards Wilde his lameness was still painfully obvious.

‘Let me introduce Bodie Cashbone, a compatriot of yours,’ Eaton said. ‘New military attaché at the US embassy. Attached to the COI. I don’t believe you’ve met.’

No, Wilde, thought, looking Cashbone over. Standing a head above Eaton and with the girth of a shire horse, he was not the sort of man you could easily forget. Clearly, the American visitor liked his T-bones big, but despite a double chin, he was curiously handsome for such a large man. His thick hair was well cut and he had warm brown eyes. Wilde guessed his age at mid-thirties, but it was hard to tell. And here in Cambridge, England, in the chilly month

of November, his glowing tan told the world he was newly arrived from warmer climes.

The newcomer's meaty paw shot out.

'Professor Wilde, it's my pleasure, sir.'

They shook hands. 'Likewise, Mr Cashbone.'

'I believe we have a friend in common – Jim Vanderberg. We spent some time together in the State Department before his London posting.'

'Ah, Jim? How is he? He said he'd write but the mail doesn't seem to be getting through these days.'

Jim Vanderberg was his oldest and closest friend but, since late 1939, he had been working at the depleted United States embassy in Berlin. The ambassador had been called home three years earlier in protest at the Jewish pogrom that had come to be known as *Kristallnacht* – the night of broken glass. Since then, a chargé d'affaires had been left in control and Vanderberg was one of the few senior men left there.

'He's fine. But, you know, they're under a lot of pressure. The peace between Germany and the US is hanging by a thread.'

He smiled, and that was all the small talk done with.

'Right then,' Wilde said. 'I'm pretty sure this isn't a courtesy call, so tell me – what can I do for you gentlemen?' His gaze shifted between the two visitors.

Eaton nodded. 'I'll leave this to Cashbone. I'm only here to make the introductions. You see, the Office of the COI has been working closely with us.'

'You know about the COI, I take it, Wilde?' Cashbone asked.

'The Co-ordinator of Information – Bill Donovan's intelligence outfit?'

'Yup, that's right. We collate information from the various agencies and report directly to the President. Well, a new COI office is

being set up in London, under the command of William Dwight Whitney. I'm part of the small team he's brought over with him.' He inclined his head. 'I'll cut to the chase – I'm here to recruit you, too, Wilde.'

Wilde found himself smiling. This all came as no surprise; in some ways he'd probably been waiting for it all his life. It was, after all, the reason he had been studying German so assiduously for the last two years. But he still wanted to be courted and convinced; he had learned that those who worked in intelligence were not always entirely trustworthy.

'Is this all above board, Eaton? Do they know I'm but a humble history professor?'

'They do. And you fit the bill. In America, Donovan's busy raiding Harvard and Princeton for their finest minds. Intellectuals are the order of the day.'

'And the British are OK with a foreign agency working here alongside them?'

'Astute as ever, Wilde,' Eaton said. 'Yes, some noses have been put out of joint, but Churchill's given the go-ahead, so that's the way it's going to be. We will co-operate. So what do you say?'

'Depends what's wanted of me. Also depends what Lydia has to say. I'm a father now, you know.'

'How are they?'

'Come along for lunch and find out for yourselves. Both of you.'

Eaton and Cashbone exchanged glances.

'We'd love to,' the American said.

Wilde managed four hours' sleep before Lydia woke him at noon with a cup of coffee.

'Your friends will be here soon, darling.'

'My friends? I never thought of Eaton as a friend.'

Lydia laughed. 'I think you love him and loathe him in equal measure. Get yourself shaved and dressed. You're about to have a job interview.'

'Not exactly. They've already offered me the job. I'll be interviewing them. Sorry, we'll be interviewing them – you and me.'

'If you insist.'

'Well, it's true.'

'Tom, darling, you have been gearing up for this for two years now. Do you think I didn't realise why you were putting so much bloody effort into your language training? What will you be doing – code-breaking?'

Wilde said nothing. What was there to say? She was only telling the truth.

'Where's Johnny?' he demanded.

'Morning nap. Just like you. In fact, he's becoming more like you every day. Head in the clouds, hair too long, does nothing around the house, loves a fight . . .'

Wilde laughed out loud. 'Who's he been fighting? He's nineteen months old!'

'Ripped poor teddy's ear off last night, and his eye is hanging by a thread. Come on – drink your coffee.'

Wilde swung his legs from the bed and rose to his full six feet. Lydia, dressed for warmth in a woollen skirt and an old fisherman's pullover, put her arms around him, her head against his bare chest, soaking up his warmth.

'Lydia? Are you crying?'

'You can't go, Tom. I can't bear you to go away. We need you, Johnny and I. Your undergraduates need you.'

'Oh, Lydia . . .'

‘I know, Tom. You have to go.’ She sniffed. ‘That’s why I can’t keep these bloody tears in. God, I hate crying.’

‘You had better explain exactly what you want from me,’ Wilde said at last, when the meal of lamb chops and sautéed potatoes was finished and the plates had been cleared away.

Lydia picked up Johnny, who’d already closed his eyes, to put him to bed.

‘I’ll let you boys get on with your secret talk,’ she said. ‘Don’t want the little woman hearing, do you? I might let slip a secret at the WI.’

‘Now hold on, Miss Morris,’ Eaton said. ‘You know it’s not like that. We need to hear exactly where you stand on all this.’

Wilde was grinning. ‘She’s having you on, Eaton. She doesn’t even belong to the bloody WI.’

Lydia blew them a kiss. ‘Don’t worry. I don’t really want to know what you’re planning. Whatever it is, you have my blessing. Just get my husband home safe.’

‘Husband? Have you two lovebirds finally tied the knot?’

Lydia looked to Wilde for guidance. He shrugged.

‘Not exactly . . . not in the legal sense,’ he said. ‘But it makes it easier to use those terms – husband, wife. English sensibilities, Eaton. You know about those.’

‘So, a common-law marriage?’

‘A magistrates’ court might put it like that, I suppose.’

‘Well, whatever you call it, you both look very happy – and your little boy is adorable.’

Wilde grinned. ‘I rather wanted to call him Horace – but Lydia had a veto on that. To tell the truth, I’m rather glad she did – the boy’s a Johnny through and through. Johnny Wilde . . . has a certain ring to it, I think.’

Cashbone nodded his approval. 'He's a swell kid, whatever his name.'

'Thank you,' Lydia said. 'But I repeat, keep Tom alive. His son needs a father.'

So now there were just the three of them. Eaton rose stiffly from the table and went to the window, looking out over the space where Wilde's house had once stood. Wilde and Lydia had been neighbours before they became lovers. And then his house had burned down. Now it was a vegetable patch.

'You didn't think of rebuilding it after the fire, then?'

'There was no point, Eaton. I already spent most of my time here in Lydia's house. Why rebuild when I had no intention of moving back next door?'

'So you just knocked it down, cleared away the rubble and turned it over to cabbages.'

'And carrots and potatoes – oh, and an Anderson shelter. But let's get back to my question, shall we? Mr Cashbone – you do the talking. Tell me what you want from me, and tell it straight.'

The flight seemed to go on for ever. They had already refuelled in Madrid. Next stop Barcelona, then Lyon, and finally Berlin, weather permitting. Stuttgart was a possible alternative, the pilot had announced. In which case, they would have to wait for another flight there or continue the last leg of their journey by train.

A blonde hostess in a Deutsche Lufthansa uniform with a swastika armband arrived at his side.

'Would you care for a drink, Herr Esser?'

'I don't suppose you have Scotch whisky?' Wilde said hopefully.

He couldn't help admiring the woman's figure and her fresh-faced good looks. For some reason he found himself thinking of

newspaper pictures he'd seen of Magda Goebbels, but this woman was younger and a great deal friendlier than he imagined the propaganda minister's wife would be.

'I'm sorry, no whisky – but we do have a fine cognac.'

'I'll have a shot of that, then. By the way, you speak good English, Fräulein.'

She had already switched languages for his benefit. In truth Wilde was a little put out. He had done a great deal of hard work getting his German up to a good standard. Initially, the tuition had come from a modern languages professor at Peterhouse, before he was called off to some intelligence outpost to do war work; after that, the professor's wife, who'd been born in Germany, had taken over, and in the last few days, Mrs Kemp had taken over from her. Wilde was rather pleased with the result; this air hostess seemed less impressed.

'Thank you, sir. It was required before the war, when I flew on the London route. It is good to practise it. You are American, are you not, Herr Esser?'

'Indeed I am, with German forebears.'

'From which part, sir?'

'My grandfather was an engineer in Krefeld. He moved to New York in 1895. He didn't intend the move to be permanent, but he met my grandmother, whose family was also of German stock – from Cologne. And then my father came along – and they stayed. I wish I had paid more attention to my German lessons at school.'

'Oh, don't worry about that, sir. You speak the language extremely well. Anyway, you'll be made very welcome in the new Germany.' She bowed her head – almost a curtsy – and gave him a warm smile. 'I will fetch your drink.'

When he had embarked, the hostess, her colleague and the pilots had all given the Heil Hitler salute, which he had forced himself to

return with feigned enthusiasm. But thankfully that had all stopped for the duration of the flight, and he was almost able to imagine himself on a peacetime plane journey.

The reality, however, was very different: he was flying in a Nazi-controlled airplane over fascist Spain towards occupied France, and then into the very heart of Hitler's Reich. His preparation for the mission had been crunched into ten exhausting days. Ten days of getting the cover story right, of getting used to the name Esser, of ensuring there were no British labels or laundry marks on any item of clothing, that his United States papers were in order. And what seemed like a hundred other tiny details which could catch him out.

Ten days in which he had grown a moustache and become accustomed to wearing spectacles all the time.

Cashbone didn't have the expertise to train him in tradecraft, so Eaton had brought in Britain's SOE to help. And if the training had been short, it had been correspondingly intensive. He'd felt as if he was on a dizzying roller coaster.

Going down to London after that lunch with Lydia, he had fondly imagined he would be taking control of an office, helping to build up the new COI organisation as Roosevelt and Bill Donovan desired. It had not occurred to him that he would be thrust straight into the field, on a mission involving extreme danger.

When he had expressed his reservations, Cashbone had been apologetic.

'Something's come up, I'm afraid. We have no one else to call on. The package is vital – it's a mission that could have a profound bearing on the course of the war. For the present I can't tell you any more than that.'

What could he do? He had always believed that one had to fight for peace and freedom, however contradictory that sounded. He

had missed the first war; he couldn't miss this one – and so he had said yes, without having any real idea of what he was letting himself in for. And then, for ten days solid, from before breakfast until late at night, he had worked on transforming himself into Tomas Esser, American businessman, opportunist and Nazi sympathiser.

From London, he had been driven back northwards to a safe house not far from Cambridge, where he had remained under the tutelage of a stern, matronly woman named Rosamund Kemp, who was employed by the SOE to teach agents the German language and German customs. She was in her forties, he guessed, tidy, with a keen, clever eye.

They had talked German all day every day; she had prepared German food for each meal. And she had called him by his new name. In the beginning he had found her rather forbidding, but he had quickly grown to respect and even like her.

'I'm not trying to make you seem German, Herr Esser. That would be impossible. But I want you to be at ease among Germans, so that you get the drift of what they are saying, especially when they think you won't.'

When he left she did not wish him good luck. She merely said, 'Hopefully, if all goes to plan, I will see you again in a week or two.'

He liked that.

Now that he was aboard the flight, he knew would not have long to wait until he put Mrs Kemp's tuition to the test.

The cognac arrived. Wilde inhaled its heady fumes, took a sip then knocked the rest back in one. He held the glass out for another, but then thought better of it and put his hand over the top. He would need a clear head. Death only required a single misstep.

His journey thus far had been circuitous. In America, he had been told, the real Tomas Esser had not been entirely co-operative

at first. It wasn't true that he was a Nazi sympathiser, but nor was he inclined to do anything to harm Germany or his company's potential for dealing with the regime.

In the end, under pressure from Roosevelt, via his close aide Bill Donovan, he had acceded to the COI's entreaties and handed over his passport. It was clear to the few people in the know about this mission that it would be better to use genuine papers rather than forgeries. The fact that Esser bore a passing resemblance to Wilde made this feasible.

One of the obvious differences was that Esser wore spectacles in his passport photograph, while Wilde wore them only for reading. In New York, a pair had been made up in Esser's frames with the lenses Wilde used in his research studies. He would wear them halfway down his nose so that he could peer over the top. Esser also had a thin moustache, so Wilde had had to grow one. Put side by side, the real Tomas Esser and the fake one would be easy to distinguish, but against a battered passport photo, Wilde was confident he could pass muster.

The real Tomas Esser, meanwhile, had been taken to a safe house in Vermont – again, unwillingly. There were too many Nazi spies in America for him to be allowed to roam free. All his secretary would be able to say was that her boss had left the office for a few days; and no, she was unable to say where he had gone or when he'd be back.

While the hapless Esser enjoyed an enforced furlough of fishing and long walks in New England, the copy of his spectacles, along with his actual passport, had been shipped to Horta in the Azores aboard the Clipper flying boat service. Wilde, meanwhile, had been taken to the islands by a fast Royal Navy corvette. It would have been preferable, perhaps, for him to travel to America and start his journey as Tomas Esser there, but time was of the

essence – and picking the flight up in the Azores instead had been a risk worth taking. The chances that Nazi agents were monitoring the passenger lists in Port Washington, New York, were surely minimal.

From the Azores, Wilde and his new accoutrements – glasses, papers, American clothes, a battered old suitcase belonging to Esser, toiletries from Saks Fifth Avenue and a new, shorter haircut – had joined the Pan Am craft for the last leg of the journey to the seaplane base on the Tagus river, close to the Portuguese capital, Lisbon.

For three days, he had stayed at the elegant Avenida Palace hotel, aware that he was being watched all the while by the German agents who crowded into its restaurant and bar. It was curious listening to – and mostly understanding – the stentorian babel of German voices. Even the laughter sounded Germanic. English and American voices were evident in other parts of the city, along with French, Spanish, and guttural sounds from Eastern Europe – tongues he could not identify. And Portuguese, too, of course. Their city, neutral territory in a Europe aflame, might have become occupied by half the world, seeking sanctuary, but it still belonged to them.

It was strangely unnerving to find himself in a country at peace.

Where Cambridge was grey, damp and rationed, Portugal was full of bright colours, delicious cooking smells and fine weather. And then a German diplomat named Anton Offenbach came to his hotel room, introduced himself and asked him about his plans to visit Berlin.

‘You know about me, then?’ Wilde instantly took the man to be a spy.

‘Of course, Herr Esser. You were expected – I saw your seaplane arrive at the Cabo Ruivo. How could we not know of you? Your visit is eagerly anticipated in Berlin. And on that subject, I have

been asked to convey to my superiors exactly what it is that you are offering. While of great interest, the various messages that have been passed to us from your office in New York have not been altogether clear, I believe.'

'I'm afraid that will have to wait until I'm there, Herr Offenbach. These are complex matters – not the sort of information to be transmitted down wires or by regular mail.'

'Not even the diplomatic bag from our Lisbon embassy? I assure you it is quite secure.'

'No, Herr Offenbach, not even that. And with all due respect, I don't even know for sure who you are. You could be an English or American spy for all I know. You certainly speak remarkably good English, and I'm told this town is full of secret agents.'

Offenbach smiled reassuringly. 'I studied modern languages at Oxford University, hence the English. Of course it did not harm my prospects of a position in the *Auswärtiges Amt*.'

Of course it didn't. Junker class. Same story everywhere in the world – upper-middle-class scions fast-tracked into important and safe roles in foreign ministries. Same story at the State Department in Washington and the FO in London. Seamless rise to the top and a long way from the front line. But Wilde had no intention of letting him off the hook.

'I only have your word for that.'

'I understand entirely. But what of you, Herr Esser – are *you* a spy?'

'Do I look like one?'

The man who called himself Offenbach laughed.

'If you must know, you look like one of my old professors at University College, though rather more muscular in build. Appearances clearly mean nothing. So be it. Your flight to Berlin leaves in the morning. Nine sharp.'

He did not mention that he would be on the same flight, a fact which rather threw Wilde the next morning when he boarded the plane and saw him a couple of rows in front. Offenbach turned, and they exchanged perfunctory salutes.

And that was all it had taken. How easy it seemed, entering the lion's cage.