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Written by Michael Ridpath

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MICHAEL RIDPATH
TRAITOR'S GATE



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Berlin

27 September 1938

Dearest Father,

By the time you receive this letter he will be dead. The newspapers will say that his assassin was an unknown German officer. It wasn't. It was me.

It is quite likely that I will also be dead. So I want to explain to you why I killed him.

When I was a boy you taught me that war is wrong. I listened to you then, but it was only when I had lived through eight months of hell in Spain that I knew what you meant. War is coming, and we have both seen how horrific modern war can be. Millions will die: this time it won't be just the young men; it will be the children, the women, the old, the innocent. I am an historian, trained to analyse economic and social causes for everything, but if ever in history there has lived an individual who through the force of his own will can destroy a continent, it is he. He is evil and he must be stopped: I am fortunate to be able to stop him.

I remember once we were on Yarmer Hill, overlooking Chilton Coombe, I was perhaps fourteen. You told me that my life would be a success if I left the world a better place than I found it. Well, I've tried to make a small difference over the last few years in Oxford, in Spain and now in Germany, and most of the time you and I have disagreed over my methods. But I hope, I pray, that in this last act I will have succeeded.

For all kinds of political reasons it is best that my identity be kept secret; I can trust you to do that. But I need you of all people to know what I have done.

Please give my love to Mamma and to Millie. I am sure they will understand. And to Charlotte and Reggie, of course.

In haste,

Your son,

Conrad

Prologue

July 1937

Thyme. Whenever Conrad smelled thyme, he thought of Spain. Not the Spain of matador and bull, of flamenco and guitar, of Goya and Velázquez, of castle and cathedral, but the Spain of death in the name of brotherly love.

In particular he thought of the sunrise at the beginning of his last week as a soldier, his nose brushing through the thyme as he crawled towards the crest of the ridge ahead of him. To his left, the metallic blue fingers of the dawn caressed the black humps that rolled towards Madrid thirty miles to the east. Behind him, in the distance to the north, loomed the heights of the Guadarrama Mountains, just distinguishable against the night. What lay ahead, over the crest of the next hill, Conrad had no idea. That was what he and his two comrades of the International Brigade had been ordered to discover.

Conrad had volunteered for the patrol. Dawn was his favourite time; the air was cool; tiny droplets of moisture hung on the leaves of the thyme and rosemary bushes; the hills were quiet, guile and cunning could keep you safe. The three of them, himself, David Griffiths, an old friend from Oxford, and Harry Reilly, a stocky stevedore from Liverpool, made a good team. Conrad was the best shot in the British Battalion, Harry was not much worse and David's eyesight and hearing were exceptional. They all looked after each other. Conrad

preferred operating against the enemy, the Fascists whom he had travelled a thousand miles to fight eight months previously, than worrying about the commissars, the secret police and the dogmatic generals on his own side.

They reached the crest of the hill. Below them lay a small valley, at the bottom of which ran a narrow ravine. A few yards beyond that stood an old stone chapel, and a cluster of ramshackle buildings, wreathed in a thin layer of mist hovering a few feet above the ground.

‘Any sign of life?’ Conrad whispered.

‘There are people moving about down there,’ David answered. He was holding one of the battalion’s few pairs of binoculars to his eyes. The son of a Methodist preacher in the Rhondda valley, he was a wiry man, strong for his size, with a nut-brown face and a restless energy. At Oxford the energy had been channelled towards the cause of international socialism; here it was concentrated on killing fascists.

‘Let’s go and take a closer look,’ said Conrad.

‘If we wait ten minutes, we’ll be able to see much better,’ said David.

It was true. The blue fingers to their left had turned to red, and the darkness of the valley was lightening to a bluish grey. The mist was lifting.

Then, to their amazement, a single bell tolled from the chapel.

‘Those are nuns,’ said David.

Sure enough, figures emerged from the buildings and made their way towards the chapel.

The Republican forces had advanced swiftly over the previous two days against lacklustre opposition, and these nuns, safe behind Nationalist lines for months, had been caught out.

‘No sign of the Fascists?’ Conrad asked.

Before David could answer, they heard the crack of a rifle, then another and another. Pieces of stone flew off the cross on the chapel roof. The nuns screamed and ran into what they presumed was the sanctuary of the chapel.

Conrad and his two comrades leaped to their feet and hurried down the hill, but the chapel was a quarter of a mile away across the small but steep ravine. A group of about a dozen soldiers appeared, all carrying rifles. They wore the ragged medley of dusty clothing that was the uniform of the Popular Army. They began to cheer and run towards the convent. Conrad could make out the words: '*Putas de Dios!*' – 'Whores of God!' The hatred of many of the Spanish Republican soldiers towards the Church and the priests and nuns who served it was legendary. For them, the institution was inextricably connected to the Nationalists and to the landlords who had taxed the peasantry for generations. The hatred the foreigners could understand; the way it was expressed they could not.

As Conrad reached the edge of the ravine, he paused. 'Wait!' he called to Harry and David, who were already scrambling down. 'Let's stay at the top. It'll take too long to get up the other side.'

The soldiers were already dragging the women out of the chapel. One of the nuns was pulled down on to the ground by three of the men. A fourth was unfastening his trousers.

'*Oye! Basta!*' Conrad shouted. He stood up and waved. The soldiers paused for a moment. Two of them waved back and then the man standing over the nun dropped his trousers.

'Fire over their heads,' said Conrad. He aimed his own rifle at the wall of the stone chapel a few feet above the group of soldiers and nuns and pressed the trigger. Three sharp cracks rent the air as the three rifles discharged, and the man with his trousers around his ankles crumpled.

Shocked, Conrad glanced at David, whose face was grim and determined. 'The bastard deserved it.'

The nuns screamed and the soldiers reached for their own rifles. Conrad took aim and fired, as did Harry and David. Three more of the soldiers fell, and then the rest ran. David nicked one on the shoulder as he ducked through the scrub.

There was trouble the next day. The Russian commissar from the Popular Army brigade the soldiers had belonged to paid a visit to his counterpart in the British Battalion. He was a short balding man with a tiny paunch and the hint of a double chin, which set him apart from the scrawny soldiers around him. The commissar of the British Battalion, who was British himself, told the Russian to piss off. But the visitor had brought with him a soldier nursing a shoulder wound. As they were leaving the British Battalion HQ, this soldier caught sight of Conrad and nudged his commissar.

The Republican offensive pressed on towards the village of Brunete, but the Fascists quickly put together a stiff resistance. Two days later Conrad found himself a few miles further on, his body pressed flat in a shallow indentation he and Harry had scraped into the hard-baked soil. Ahead was a low bump, which had just earned the nickname Mosquito Hill because of the bullets whining all around it. The previous day the British Battalion and the American Washington Battalion had thrown themselves in useless waves at the hill, ably defended by the Nationalists. The bodies lay in front of Conrad, scattered about the brown earth, already putrefying in the sun. Many of them had been his friends, his comrades.

The sun blazed, turning the ground in front of the hill into a nightmarish oven of death. There were shell-blasted scraps of thyme bushes even here, but in the middle of the day their

aroma was overwhelmed by the smell of rotting flesh and human excrement. The noise was overpowering: the relentless crash of shells from the Fascists' guns, interspersed with the crackle of small-arms fire and, in the all-too-brief moments of quiet, the buzzing of thousands of flies dancing from corpse to corpse.

Conrad was tired and he was thirsty. Everyone was thirsty. The streams shown on their maps had turned out to be dry, and the Republican Army's logistical capabilities were not up to bringing enough water to the front to slake the thirst of all its soldiers.

To their left, a Spanish Popular Army brigade was moving up to support yet another attack. It was the unit from which the soldiers who had tried to rape the nuns had come. Once they were in position, the order would be given for the British Battalion to attack again. These days it was always the International Brigades or the anarchist units who were thrown into the offensives, with the elite communist units held back from the worst of the fighting.

The order came to advance. Although Conrad was exhausted, as soon as he was on his feet adrenalin spurted through his veins and he ran, crouching low, dodging from left to right, Harry by his side, David slightly ahead and to the left. The Popular Army brigade had machine guns and they were spraying bullets in the general direction of the Nationalists on the hilltop.

Conrad threw himself down behind a small boulder and rested his rifle on it. He fought to control his breathing and his rapidly beating heart as he aimed at a head two hundred yards up the hill. The marksmanship of the average Republican soldier was appalling, not helped by their ancient weaponry, much of which dated from the previous century. But Conrad's rifle was a new German-made Mauser K98k that he had lifted

a few months before from a legless Fascist soldier groaning on the battlefield at the Jarama River, and Conrad knew how to use it. There was no wind, but he allowed for range, and pressed the trigger. The head jerked backwards and disappeared.

‘Come on!’ David, who was squatting down beside him, set off up the hill. He had covered barely five yards when he was hit. In the back. He was thrown forward and landed on his face. Conrad crawled over to his friend. The bullet had gone through the heart; David was dead. Conrad turned towards Harry to tell him to watch out, but he was too late. Harry was lying a few yards away, face pressed down against the hard earth, his back a bloody mess.

Conrad pulled himself to his feet and began a crouching run. He felt a bullet tear into his upper arm; there was a flash of pain and then numbness. That bullet too had come from behind. He turned and darted back towards the boulder, throwing himself down on the side facing the enemy. All around him the remaining soldiers from the British Battalion stormed the hill.

Conrad peered around the stone back towards the Popular Army brigade’s lines. Fear and adrenalin had turned to fury. If he had had his own machine gun he would have turned it on the Spanish brigade and blasted them to hell. Harry and David were two noble, brave men, who had given up their lives for Spain, to save Spain from fascism, and this was the thanks they had received.

But Conrad didn’t have a machine gun, only a rifle. And it wasn’t just the Republican Spanish who were firing. Nationalist machine guns were raking the hillside and their mortars were dropping shells around Conrad. Then, over the crash and crack of the battlefield, he heard the sound that the International Brigade had grown to dread. Aircraft engines.

Three aircraft, German Messerschmitts from the Condor Legion, flew low over the hill, strafing the attacking infantry; they had already knocked out all the Republican tanks. The Germans and Italians had won control of the skies over Brunete, which made the assault on Mosquito Hill even more foolhardy.

The attack faltered, and Conrad saw his comrades first dive to the ground and then try to make their way back to their own lines. Those that could move, that is. Many lay still on the mountainside, others groaned and screamed in pain and fear.

Conrad raised his head above the stone, preparing to sprint back down the hill. A rifle bullet ricocheted off the rock. In the midst of the battle, the Spanish brigade had a sniper zeroed in on him, someone with a rifle as good as his.

The Messerschmitts wheeled around for another run.

Stuck on the open flank of that hill, his face pressed against the hot earth, Conrad realized he had a choice of how he could die: a Nationalist machine gun from up the hill, a Republican sniper from below, a German aeroplane from the sky, or, if he was really lucky, one of the International Brigade's own machine-gun units lined up just behind the lines to catch any deserters. And if by some miracle the war didn't kill him, it would destroy his soul, just as it had destroyed the souls of so many of the men on both sides blasting away at each other all around him.

A few months before, while defending Madrid, Conrad would have been willing to die for the cause he believed in so passionately.

But no longer.

He had to get out of there. Not just from behind the boulder, but from Brunete, from Madrid, from Spain, from the whole damned war.

PART ONE

June 1938

One

It was still possible to have fun in Berlin, even in 1938. You could go out to a nightclub, you could drink champagne, speak of old times, drink more champagne, perhaps say more than you should. In more normal countries in more normal times the consequences of such a night might have been a sore head and apologies for the rash words of the night before. In Nazi Germany the consequence was death.

Conrad de Lancey was looking forward to the evening. He had arrived by train from the Hook of Holland that morning, dropped his things off at his hotel and spent the afternoon wandering from the former Imperial Palace past the grand buildings that lined Unter den Linden, through the Brandenburg Gate to the Tiergarten, where he had lost himself amongst the trees and ponds.

After a miserable year spent licking his wounds, he was glad to be out of England.

He had escaped from Mosquito Hill. Unable to go forward or back, he had run sideways, away from the Spanish brigade and towards the retreating Washington Battalion on his right. He had successfully mingled with the American walking wounded staggering back from the front. His luck held out when he managed to hitch a lift to Valencia with an outfit known as 'the Scottish Ambulance Unit', commanded by a formidable nurse wearing a voluminous tartan kilt. From there he stowed away

on a ship bound for Marseilles. A week later, his arm in a sling, he was back in Oxford.

He had hoped to return to his old life: his unfinished thesis, his pretty cottage in Manor Road and his beautiful wife. But he came home to find Veronica gone and everything changed. As autumn became winter, the cottage, which Veronica had professed 'divine' when she had moved in, and 'a pokey hovel' when she had moved out, had become a damp, chilly rebuke, a daily reminder of warmer, happier times.

When Veronica had first left him, Conrad had felt shocked, numb. After a couple of weeks the numbness had been replaced by a slow, burning anger. He had tried to ignore it, to pretend it wasn't there. Whenever his friends or his family tried to speak to him about her, he parried with finely honed banalities.

Spain hadn't helped – those memories of the rotting corpses of his comrades on Mosquito Hill, of the desperate faces of the bombed-out orphans of Madrid and above all of the cruel betrayal of the idealistic young workers by the commissars and the politicians which had led to bullets in the backs of Harry and David. A noble cause had been corrupted into a hell of violence, cruelty and death.

Back in Oxford, he tried to work on the thesis for his D.Phil., about Prussia's war with Denmark in 1864. This little war, which had comprised two campaigns of a few weeks each, had eaten up four years of his own life, and he was sick of it. Oxford was damp and miserable without Veronica. When one morning in December Conrad had spied an advertisement in *The Times* for a teacher at a prep school in the depths of Suffolk, on a whim he had applied.

He was there for the beginning of the Lent term in January, covering for a member of staff who had been badly injured in a car smash. He laid low for a term and a half, not seeing anyone,

his family, his friends and certainly not Veronica. He enjoyed teaching small boys French and Latin, and the isolation helped. But when the teacher he was covering for returned to school for the second half of the summer term, Conrad turned down the headmaster's offer of a permanent position.

For almost a year he had ignored all those issues that had been so important to him that he had risked his life for them: peace and war, socialism and fascism, the disaster that was engulfing Europe. But he had had enough of skulking in the lanes and water meadows of Suffolk. He decided it was time to face up to what was happening in the world.

So he bought a one-way ticket to Berlin.

It was a warm night, but unlike London, which had been shrouded in low grey cloud when Conrad had left Liverpool Street station the previous day, the air here was fresh and clean. Even at this hour the Kurfürstendamm was busy; tall blue-uniformed traffic policemen expertly marshalled the cars, trams and buses swishing along the street. It had only just got dark, and the pavements were alive with people flitting in and out of the pools of light emanating from the shop fronts, cafés, restaurants, cinemas and theatres. Many wore uniforms: greenish-grey for the army, brown for the Party functionaries and black for the SS. Many didn't. All of them had a sense of urgency, a sense of purpose.

Conrad paused under a street lamp to consult the note Joachim had sent to his hotel, including directions to the club. A young man, barely more than a boy, wearing a sharp suit and a thin moustache was leaning against an iron poster column a few feet away. He hissed something to Conrad under his breath. Conrad smiled politely and went back to his note. Just then a fashionably dressed lady approached, sniffing loudly. The youth smiled and the two disappeared. Clearly some transaction had

occurred or was about to occur, but Conrad wasn't entirely sure what it was.

With a jolt he noticed the advertisement revealed on the poster column, a grotesque caricature of a man with a beard and a hooked nose, holding out a handful of coins and grasping a map of Germany under his arm. It was advertising an exhibition called *Der Ewige Jude* – The Eternal Jew.

Conrad walked a few steps further along the Ku'damm and turned off along a side street. Within a few yards he came across an illuminated sign of a jolly-looking cockatoo. He descended the neon-lit stairs and plunged into a dark, warm atmosphere of smoke and alcohol, of music and chatter. The place was nearly full and, as Conrad scanned the crowd, he spotted Joachim at a table near the back. Conrad wound his way through the tables towards him and Joachim leaped to his feet, his face breaking into a broad grin as he held out his hand.

Conrad shook it warmly. His cousin was pudgier than when they had last met, and his slicked-back hair had thinned. He was dressed very properly in evening clothes, but his cheeks were shining and his white tie was slightly askew. Conrad noticed an open bottle of champagne on ice on the table, and he suspected it wasn't Joachim's first.

'I'm sorry I'm a little late,' said Conrad, in German.

'I've been here a while,' said Joachim, in English, with a grin. 'It is wonderful to be back in Berlin after freezing Moscow. I know these places are a bit tame, but there is enough of an atmosphere about them to remind me of the good old days.' Joachim's English was excellent, but his accent was unique: a mixture of Germanic precision and the affectation of a 1920s Oxford aesthete.

Conrad scanned the dance floor and was relieved to see that the couples dancing were of mixed sex. Conrad had visited the

notorious Eldorado Club in Berlin with Joachim in 1929 at the tender age of eighteen. To say that he had been shocked would be an understatement. 'I imagine the Nazis have closed all your favourite old haunts.'

'Many of them,' said Joachim. 'But there are still some interesting places to go. You just have to know where to look. Have a glass of bubbles, old man. It's filthy stuff these days, I'm afraid, but you get used to it after a couple of glasses.'

Joachim Mühlendorf was Conrad's cousin, a diplomat in Germany's embassy in Moscow who was on a week's leave in Berlin. He was one of the few people with whom Conrad still corresponded, if only on an irregular basis, and when he had heard that Conrad's move to Berlin coincided with his own leave, he had cabled Conrad insisting that they meet. Conrad was happy to agree: Joachim was always good company.

Conrad's mother came from Hamburg, and after the war the de Lanceys had often visited her family there. Of all the cousins, Conrad and Joachim had got on best together. This surprised their parents: Conrad was athletic and a keen shot, while Joachim was pale and had a perennial cold. But Joachim was a voracious reader and had a sharp intellect, and it was this that had interested the younger cousin. Their friendship grew when Joachim came to stay with Conrad's family in London for a few months after an unexplained difficulty during his last year at his Prussian boarding school.

Joachim poured Conrad a glass of champagne. 'What brings you to Berlin? I thought you had dedicated your life to educating the inky-fingered.'

'Not my life, just a term and a half,' said Conrad. 'I wanted to come here and see what's happening. And perhaps write about it.'

'Write about it?'

‘Yes. I did a couple of pieces for *Mercury* when I was in Spain, and they said they would be happy to take some more from Berlin.’ Conrad hesitated. ‘I also thought I’d try a novel.’

‘Oh, like that chap Isherwood. I met him once, you know. A charming man.’

‘Not exactly like him. It’s about an Englishman in Berlin in 1914. The coming of the last war.’

‘The war to end all wars?’

‘Yes, that one,’ said Conrad.

There was the other reason why Conrad was in Berlin, of course. And Joachim picked up on it.

‘I was sorry to hear about Veronica.’

Conrad shrugged.

‘It was such a shame I couldn’t come to your wedding. I’d just been posted to Moscow so I couldn’t get away. I would have loved to have met her. At one moment she sounded absolutely wonderful, the next a complete nightmare.’

Conrad smiled ruefully. ‘I suppose she is both.’ He was grateful for Joachim’s sympathy, but he didn’t want to talk about Veronica. At least not quite yet.

Joachim smiled in understanding. Then something caught his eye. He frowned and leaned forward. ‘Don’t look now, but there is a man behind your right shoulder staring at us. And I don’t think it’s because he wants to pick one of us up.’

Conrad didn’t look. ‘You think he’s Gestapo or something? I suppose that’s to be expected in Germany these days, isn’t it? I am a foreigner, after all.’

‘It’s worse in Russia,’ Joachim said. He stopped a passing waitress. ‘A packet of cigarettes, please.’

When the waitress returned a moment later, he passed her a generous tip. ‘Do you know that man over there, the one with the rabbit teeth? Is he a regular?’

The waitress looked up with the barest flick of her eyes. 'No, he hasn't been in before.' Then, understanding, she said: 'Don't worry, he can't overhear you. I have just served him: he's deaf.'

'Ah,' said Joachim. 'That's nice to know.'

Conrad looked around the club. The Kakadu was busy. A line of barmaids was frantically working at a large semi-circular bar to keep the customers supplied. Conrad smiled to himself as he noticed that they alternated between blonde and brunette, everything just so, everything in its proper pattern. A stunning blonde woman on the dance floor caught Conrad's attention. She was wearing a long figure-hugging evening gown with the rear cut away leaving her buttocks bare.

'I'm sure she'd dance with you if you asked her nicely,' Joachim said with a grin.

'Perhaps not this evening,' said Conrad. 'But it is a nice view.'

'I thought you'd like this place,' said Joachim. 'I met your friend here a couple of nights ago. Theo von Hertenberg.'

'I didn't know you were in touch with Theo!'

'I'm not really. That was the trouble. I've only met him through you, that time I visited you in Oxford, and then when you came to Berlin a couple of years later.'

Conrad smiled. 'I remember the Oxford visit and I'm sure Theo does. I will never forget you declaiming Goethe from my window in Front Quad. It was all I could do to stop you falling out.'

Joachim smiled. 'I was a little tight, wasn't I?'

'You were. You also weren't wearing very much.'

'It was a warm evening. I hope you didn't get into *too* much trouble on my account.'

Conrad had, but it was a long time ago. 'So why did you want to see Theo?'

'I had something I wanted to discuss with him, something

I'd heard in Moscow. Unfortunately, he brought a couple of girls along. Perfectly nice girls, but they rather got in the way of a frank discussion. Anyway, I seem to have offended him.'

'How?'

'I suppose I was a bit indiscreet. Hertenberg became quite huffy and more or less threw me out.'

'I'm sorry about that,' said Conrad.

Joachim shrugged. 'I *was* a little drunk. But I was speaking in English, and the girls didn't understand. I'm sure there was no one listening.'

'For all his enlightened ideas Theo is a Prussian at heart,' Conrad said. 'He disapproves of people behaving badly. He can't help it.'

Joachim leaned back in his chair. He carefully transferred the cigarettes from the packet the waitress had given him to a silver case engraved with the Mühlendorf family crest. The procedure complete, he offered one to Conrad before lighting one of his own.

'Do you trust him?' Joachim asked, looking closely at Conrad.

'Theo? Yes. Absolutely.' There was not a trace of doubt in Conrad's voice.

'Have you seen him recently?'

'Not for five years now. Not since I was over here in 1933. But we were very close at Oxford.' Theo was a Rhodes scholar, the first to arrive at Oxford from Germany since the war. Conrad and he had quickly become friends. It wasn't just that they shared a mixed heritage – Conrad's mother was German and Theo's grandmother American – nor that they both embraced the intellectual fashions of the time: the Labour Club, pacifism, home rule for India. They seemed to share the same view of the world, or at least they had seemed to then. Conrad was looking forward to seeing him in Berlin. Theo had always been a source

of good-natured sanity; it would be interesting to see what he made of the insanity all around him. Besides, a night on the town with Theo was always fun.

'You know he has joined the army now?' Joachim said.

Conrad nodded. 'I know: he wrote to me a couple of years ago and mentioned he had joined the reserves. It seems quite unlike him.'

'It might have been a ploy to avoid signing up for the Nazi Party,' Joachim said. 'I tried that dodge myself, but the reserves wouldn't have me.' He tapped his chest. 'It's my heart. I get these palpitations.'

'So what did you do?'

Joachim shrugged. 'I became a Party member. I had to if I wanted to become a diplomat.'

Conrad couldn't help showing his surprise. Joachim had been a convert to Marxism in the 1920s, several years before it was fashionable in England.

'Don't look so shocked,' said Joachim. 'It doesn't mean anything.'

'Of course it means something,' said Conrad. 'How can you be a member of such a vile organization, even if it is just for the convenience of your career? That's a terrible reason.'

'You're quite right, Conrad,' Joachim said. 'I am a morally corrupted individual who deserves every ounce of your disapproval. But the question is not am I a Nazi, but is Theo one?'

'I doubt it very much,' said Conrad. 'I haven't seen him for years, but he was my closest friend at the university. His views on right and wrong are deeply entrenched. I would be very surprised if he had become a Nazi, a genuine one.' Although when Conrad had spent a month in Berlin in the spring of 1933 just after the Nazis had come to power, Theo had seemed complacent about Hitler. To Conrad's disgust he had said that

someone had to bring order back to the country; it was just a pity the new Chancellor was so common and vulgar. As far as Conrad was concerned, the least of Hitler's sins was that he was 'common'. But Conrad couldn't conceive of Theo as a follower of the man.

'That's good to hear,' said Joachim. 'I had made up my mind in Moscow that Theo was the right person to speak to once I got here. After the other night, I thought perhaps I was wrong. But if I trust anyone, I trust you, and if you think he's all right...'

A group of three girls squeezed past their table. One of them, a tall brunette with a suggestive swing of her hips, paused to ask Conrad for a light. As he obliged, she murmured her thanks, dark eyes under long lashes briefly meeting his, and joined her friends at a table not too far away.

'I'm impressed. It's good to see married life hasn't dulled your talents,' Joachim said.

Conrad ignored him. 'Anyway, what did you want to talk to Theo about?'

'Have you heard of General von Fritsch?

'Yes. He was commander-in-chief of the army, wasn't he? Resigned a couple of months ago. Ill health or something?'

Joachim snorted. 'They accused him of being born on the seventeenth of May.'

Conrad frowned. 'I don't understand.'

'Seventeen five. Article 175 of the Penal Code.'

'Is that the one dealing with homosexuality?'

'The very same,' said Joachim. 'I know it well. But the Gestapo were framing him. They had an elaborate story about him picking up a male prostitute at the Potsdamer Station. There was a secret trial in March and von Fritsch was acquitted, but he resigned anyway. I understand that the army is still very upset about it.'

'I never heard about that.'

'Of course not,' said Joachim. 'But it caused quite a stir in the army, or so I am told.'

'And that's what you were talking to Theo about?'

'That. And something else I heard in Moscow, something even more interesting.'

Conrad raised his eyebrows.

'Oh, look, he's leaving,' said Joachim. The deaf man with the rabbit teeth was indeed on his way out of the club. 'I'm glad he's gone. Look, Conrad, are you planning to see Hertenberg over the next few days?'

Conrad nodded. 'I was intending to get in touch with him tomorrow, in fact.'

'Could you do that? And when you do, could you tell him I'm sorry about the other night and I really must speak to him before I go back to Moscow next week. Tell him I have some friends who can help him.'

'Help him do what?'

'He'll know what I mean. Please. It's terribly important.'

Conrad examined his cousin closely. He thought Joachim and Theo made unlikely conspirators, a view that seemed to be shared by Theo. But it clearly mattered to his cousin, and Theo could make up his own mind whether he wanted to speak to Joachim. 'All right,' he said. 'I will.'

'Thanks, old man.' He refilled Conrad's glass.

'Now. Tell me about Veronica. You said in your letters it was all a little unexpected.'

'That's an understatement.'

'You do have a tendency to understate these kind of things,' Joachim said.

Conrad smiled. 'I do, don't I?'

'It's all very well keeping a stiff upper lip, but if it was me who was walked out on, I would be furious.'

Conrad glanced at his cousin. He hadn't spoken to anyone properly about Veronica. He told himself and others when they asked that he didn't want to burden them. But Joachim had shared so many of his own confidences with Conrad when they were younger.

'Actually, it wasn't much fun,' he began.

Joachim was a good listener. Conrad must have been talking for ten minutes when he became aware of two shapes hovering over the table. Two men looked down at them, both wearing leather trench coats and gloves.

'Herr Mühlendorf?'

Joachim's eyes widened in fear when he recognized who they were. 'Y-yes?'

'My name is Kriminal Assistant Dressel of the Geheime Staatspolizei,' said one of the men. He had a hard, pinched face, close-cropped red hair and freckles. 'We would like you to accompany us.'

'Where to?'

'You will find out,' said Dressel. 'And you,' he said to Conrad.

'But I am a British citizen,' said Conrad.

'May I see your papers, please?' The Gestapo officer held out a gloved hand, his face impassive.

Conrad was aware of people at the neighbouring tables staring at them. The band was playing on resolutely, but aside from the music, the chatter in the club had died down to a murmur.

Conrad reached into the inside pocket of his dinner jacket and handed the man his passport. There was something immensely reassuring about the stiff blue document with its gold coat of arms and its demand on the inside page that His Britannic Majesty requested and required that foreigners keep their hands off his subjects.

Reassuring for Conrad, but not for Joachim. His cousin was sitting frozen at the table. There was still fear in his eyes, but also determination. Conrad saw his glance flick towards a door at the back of the club, only a few feet away. Despite their fearsome reputation, Conrad was pretty sure that the Gestapo would not risk harming him, a foreigner. But Joachim with his gossip about wayward generals? His best, his only chance of escape was in the next few seconds.

And it was up to Conrad to give him that chance.

The gloved fingers flicked through the pages clumsily. 'You speak German very well.'

'Thank you,' said Conrad, although it was more of an accusation than a compliment. Also he had only said a couple of words.

Dressel thought for a moment. 'You come with us.'

This was his chance. Conrad pulled himself to his feet, knocking over the chair behind him. 'I beg your pardon,' he said, drawing himself to his full height so that he looked down on the Gestapo officer. 'I will do no such thing.'

The man stared at Conrad. 'You look like a spy. You sound like a spy. You are coming with us.'

'This is outrageous!' said Conrad. 'I don't know what you think Herr Mühlendorf has done, but I can assure you he is a man of the utmost integrity. And as for myself, I am a British citizen! I demand...' He paused, shaking, switching up a gear from outraged Englishman to furious German. 'I demand that you contact my embassy at once! At once, do you hear!' He snatched his passport back from Dressel's fingers.

Dressel's colleague reached out and placed a glove on Conrad's sleeve. Conrad angrily shook it off. 'Take your filthy hands off me!' he shouted, and pushed the Gestapo officer hard in the chest so that he took a step backwards. Dressel grabbed Conrad's other arm and Conrad shoved him too. Conrad saw

out of the corner of his eye a pistol bearing down on his skull. He managed to duck so that it only caught him a glancing blow, but it was enough to send him to his knees.

He heard a bang, and he and the two Gestapo officers turned to see the back door to the club swing open. Joachim had gone.

‘After him!’ snapped Dressel, and the two men rushed for the door, leaving Conrad on his knees in a pool of spilled champagne.

Smiling, Conrad pulled himself to his feet. He touched his temple, which was wet with blood, but the dizziness in his brain was already clearing. He stumbled for the front entrance, the other patrons staring after him open-mouthed, the waiters making no attempt to stop him. He spilled out into the warm night air and climbed the steps to the street. A green van was parked directly outside the club and he could hear the sound of running feet to his left. Without looking that way he turned right and walked hurriedly down the street.

He had gone about ten yards when he heard the sound he was dreading: ‘Halt!’

He kept moving, but then there was a sharp crack and the whine of a bullet as it ricocheted off a lamp-post in front of him. The sound brought back the dusty battlefields of Spain. He stopped, turned and raised his hands.

Dressel ran up to him, panting and waving a pistol. ‘Now you are coming with me!’

He was handcuffed, shoved down the street and bundled into the back of the green van. Fifteen minutes later he was dragged out on to the pavement beside a grandiose grey Wilhelmine building. There was no sign advertising what lay within, but Conrad could see a number eight beside the imposing entrance.

It was 8 Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse, the headquarters of the Gestapo.